

Aleksandra Kil

ORCID: 0000-0002-9750-3901

Media and values: Stanisław Pietraszko and culturological media studies^{*}

Abstract: The paper offers a media-studies-inflected interpretation of Stanisław Pietraszko's thought. Adopting the perspective of cultural mediology of the humanities, I analyze both Pietraszko's published writings and his notes from the as-yet unresearched archival collection of his index cards. My focus is on the nexus of communication and technology, a theme rarely discussed by Pietraszko and even more rarely addressed in the reception of his work. I propose a reading of Pietraszko's postcard-focused "Messages and values" as "Media and values," in doing which I seek to make contemporary interpretations of his ideas more nuanced. Although Pietraszko, who was indebted to the cybernetic theory of communication, wrote about "messages" rather than "media," he also explored the non-verbal properties of the carrier, which he believed to be replete with references to values. This encourages locating his article in the field of media-studies inquiry even though the very term "media" does not appear in the text at all. Given that Pietraszko's conception can be regarded as epitomizing the former stage in the development of cultural theory with its emphasis on relative autonomy, I note the anachronic quality of his thought vis-à-vis technology. At the same time, I point out the parallels between the study of singular and "gone/rendered-redundant" messages he proposed and the pursuits of today's media archaeology.

Keywords: cultural mediology of the humanities, index cards, media archaeology, singular media

Judging by the foci and attitudes of the currently resonant research trends and disciplinary discussions, a proposal to combine the study of media and culture into a hybrid of culturological media studies or media-studies-inflected culture studies¹ not only does not sound particularly innovative but may appear ingenuous

^{*} This paper is based on a chapter of my PhD dissertation titled *Od humanistyki cyfrowej do analogowej. Fiszki jako aparat poznania humanistycznego*; [From the Digital to the Analogue Humanities: Index Cards as a Humanistic Knowledge Apparatus], supervised by Professor Dorota Wolska and completed at the Institute of Cultural Studies, University of Wrocław, in July 2021.

¹ An important note on the translation of terminology is in order. The text revolves around the notion and discipline of what is called *kulturoznawstwo*, that is, the study/knowledge of culture, in Poland. Most (if not all) departments of *kulturoznawstwo* at Polish universities call themselves Cultural Studies Departments on their English websites, but cultural studies is not really a direct (in many sense not even a close) equivalent of *kulturoznawstwo*. Thematically, conceptually, and methodologically varied now, *kulturoznawstwo* is also not rendered adequately by culturology or

indeed. It has been more than ten years since Andrzej Gwóźdź noted the common curricular tendency at universities “to reflect on media from a perspective defined by the epistemic interest of culturology,” which in his view meant an inquiry into media technocultures with attention to the implications of that merger for both the media and culture.² However, in Stanisław Pietraszko’s thought, which emphasizes the ontologically conceived “relative autonomy” of culture within the entirety of the human world, the media–culture relations are far from evident.

In this paper, I look into this particular thematic concern of Pietraszko’s work to screen it for a possible encouragement for research on media that would be aligned with his project of the study of culture (*kulturoznawstwo*). To this end, I analyze his selected publications and also inspect his collection of index cards. I call my perspective “cultural mediology of the humanities” and define it as focused on artifacts accompanying research work in an attempt to demetaphorize the toolkit. By doing so, cultural mediology seeks to team up with what Bruno Latour dubs “the long trend to materialize non-material technologies” (which he traces back to Foucault’s *The Birth of the Clinic*).³ This situates my argument within the horizon of the materialist turn in media studies, which is sometimes identified with so-called German media theory and the philosophy of cultural techniques. These frameworks offer a comprehensive concept of the media that accommodates the paper index cards I investigate.

In trying to produce a systematic account of Pietraszko’s theory, index cards appear to be a considerable and still underutilized resource. They deserve attention for several reasons. Firstly, they help retrace Pietraszko’s transition from Polish studies to cultural studies (along with the budding and formation of a new approach and discipline) and encourage searching for the concepts he abandoned,

German *Kulturwissenschaft*. For its part, the term “culture studies” has not gained much traction in the English-speaking research community. For the sake of simplicity, this translation uses “the study of culture” or “cultural studies,” whereby readers are advised to remember that the term refers to Polish *kulturoznawstwo* rather than to cultural studies as understood in Anglo-American academia. For the related terminological debates, see: K. Łukasiewicz, “On the origins of Polish cultural studies,” transl. J. Ozimek, *Kultura Współczesna* 2020, no. 5, pp. 12–22.

² A. Gwóźdź, “Medioznawstwo — dyskurs czy paradygmat badań kulturoznawczych,” *Kultura Współczesna* 2007, no. 1, p. 82. See also A. Gwóźdź, “O pewnym możliwym aliansie, czyli w stronę medioznawstwa jako kulturoznawstwa,” *Kultura Współczesna* 2008, no. 2, pp. 204–213. Another important contribution in this respect is offered by the study of the intersections of technology and culture, which in Poland is mostly rooted in research on literary culture (and as such not necessarily institutionally affiliated with culturology). Because such explorations have been informed by a broader, anthropological understanding of culture with its once-central semiological approach, their ontological and methodological tenets have differed from Pietraszko’s model. See the work of Maryla Hopfinger, drawing on Stefan Żółkiewski’s research: M. Hopfinger, *Kultura współczesna — audiowizualność*, Warszawa 1985; M. Hopfinger, *Literatura i media po 1989 roku*, Warszawa 2010.

³ B. Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, New York–Oxford 2005, pp. 76–90.

reformulated and revised. Secondly, they unveil his reading pathways and inspiration sources. Thirdly, they offer concretizations, elaborations, and alternative ideas. Fourthly, the conciseness of Pietraszko's index cards makes them useful in teaching as clues amidst the dense mesh of his texts. Fifthly, they encourage re-reading Pietraszko's publication from new angles that promise new discoveries.

Pietraszko as a *ficheur*⁴

Besides manuscripts, notes, and letters, the archives left by scholars and artists sometimes also contain index cards, a research tool largely forgotten today. Opulent collections of (usually small) standard-sized cards crafted in conformity with a set of principles by eminent humanities scholars are sometimes put on display at museums (for example, the Centre Pompidou has exhibited Roland Barthes's index cards) or shown on TV (as has been the case with the index cards of Niklas Luhmann and Tymoteusz Karpowicz). Pietraszko, the founder of cultural studies in Wrocław, was also in the habit of producing index cards, which are now part of his legacy preserved by the Library of the Institute of Cultural Studies and Musicology, University of Wrocław (Fig. 1). Pietraszko's notes were usually undated (excepting those for lectures and tutorials). His first cards probably come from the 1950s, and the most recent date to be found in them is October of the academic year 2007/2008. The sheets are titled and stored in envelopes marked with (sometimes abbreviated) subject tags and placed in four boxes. Two of them are typical library catalogue boxes of pasteboard: the brown one contains cards on culturological themes, including those Pietraszko made toward the end of his academic career, and the blue one comprises more of the older envelopes on literary subjects. The other two are just shoeboxes. One of those holds records concerning Pietraszko's classes, "personal" envelopes of the staff, PhD candidates and MA students, and notes regarding the organization of the Institute, which he headed for 26 years. Each of the containers comprises several hundred horizontally arranged envelopes (their total number stands at 952, with the brown "culturological" box filled with 381 envelopes and 2218 cards). The entries are alphabetically arranged, but this principle is not rigorously observed. Besides the envelopes with the cards, the boxes also contain loosely inserted sheets and bunches held together by paperclips. Most likely, the original arrangement of the files has not been preserved anyway as the cards have been transferred and inspected on a number of occasions (including at the *Kierunek eksperymentalny/Experimental Course* exhibition celebrating the 40th anniversary of cultural studies in Wrocław, held at the WRO Art Center in October 2012).

⁴ I borrow this French term for a note-taking scholar from J.-F. Bert; see J.-F. Bert, *Une histoire de la fiche érudite*, Villeurbanne 2019, pp. 74–86.



Figure 1. Pietraszko's index card collection

Source: Library of the Institute of Cultural Studies and Musicology, University of Wrocław.

Photograph by Aleksandra Kil.

A theory of singular media

When going through Pietraszko's files, inspecting the envelopes and reading his notes, I wondered every now and then, posing a probabilistic riddle (somewhat reminiscent of Joanna Zylińska's speculations on what Foucault's blog would have been like if Foucault had had one)⁵: "What if Pietraszko had written about index cards?" Unlike Luhmann and Karpowicz (both of them ardent *ficheurs*), unlike Claude Lévi-Strauss, Umberto Eco and Charles Wright Mills, Pietraszko never discussed either his card-filled boxes or his research methods in general.⁶ Nor was he really absorbed in the issues of media and communication; his paper "Przekazy i wartości" (henceforth "Messages and values") offers the best, and basically the only, glimpse of such interests. First published in 1992, in *Aksjosemiotyka karty pocztowej* [The Axiosemiotics of the Postcard], an issue of *Prace Kulturoznawcze* edited by Paweł Banaś, the paper stemmed from a likewise titled symposium held by the Institute of Cultural Studies in May 1987 (paralleling the *Świat w formie 10x14* [A 10x14-Sized World] exhibition at Wrocław's National Museum). In 1992, the paper was also published in the volume of *Studia o kulturze* [Studies on

⁵ Cf. J. Zylińska, *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, Cambridge, MA–London 2009, p. 97.

⁶ There are no records of Pietraszko's public comments on his index cards. His students and colleagues whom I have interviewed have not mentioned any discussion on this theme either. For his part, Jan Pietraszko has told me that he believes that meticulous methods of data collection mattered a lot to his father, who recommended index cards to him as an aid in furthering his career as a psychology researcher.

Culture], which elucidated the key ideas of the research field Pietraszko was developing.⁷ To illustrate his major tenets, he used the postcard, which he considered a particular form of message. In this context, similarities between a postcard and an index card are worth investigating. The two hold quite close positions in the history of the standardization of paper as sibling formats made of a similar substance but having different functions (and likely, different potential axiosemiotic “fittings”). They took shape and cemented their standing as popular utility objects at a similar moment (towards the end of the 19th century), powered by the same office and library infrastructure. Index cards on the postcard (Fig. 2) are obviously different things than index cards on the index card. Nonetheless, I rely on the former, along with a close reading of the paper on messages and values, as guidelines that help piece together Pietraszko’s position on media-related phenomena.

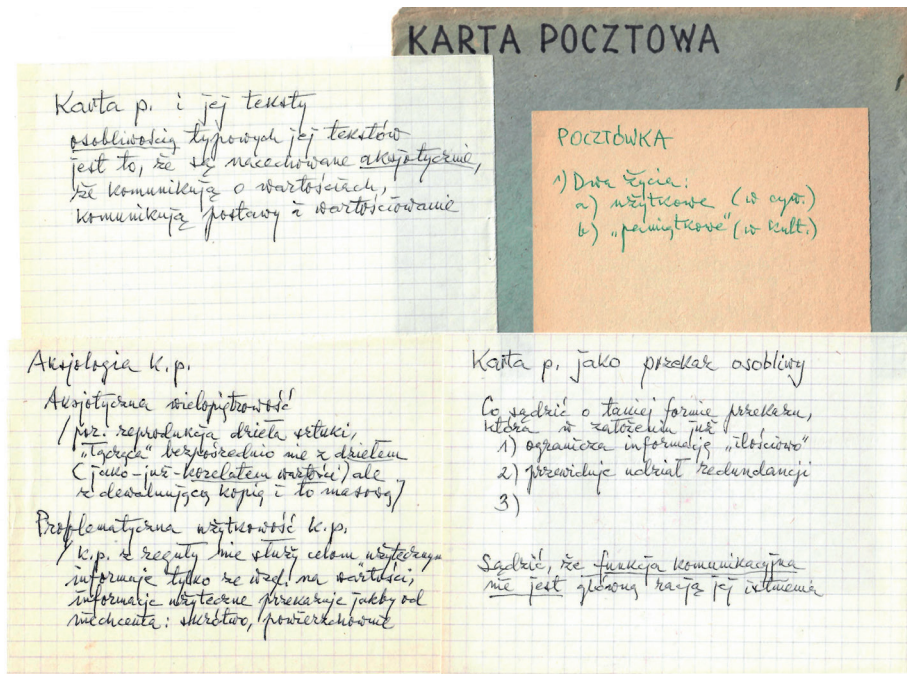


Figure 2. Stanisław Pietraszko, index cards from the “Postcard” envelope

Source: Library of the Institute of Cultural Studies and Musicology,
University of Wrocław. Scan by Jacek Małczyński.

⁷ See S. Pietraszko, “Przekazy i wartości,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Studia o kulturze*, Wrocław 1992, pp. 90–105; S. Pietraszko, “Przekazy i wartości,” *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 3, 1992 (*Aksjosemiotyka karty pocztowej*, ed. P. Banaś), pp. 29–47. Henceforth, I refer to an English translation of this text published in this volume: S. Pietraszko, “Messages and values,” transl. T. Anessi, *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 26, 2022, no. 4, providing parenthetical citations with the relevant page numbers.

Is “Messages and values” actually a text on the media? Can it provide a point of departure or an inspiration for a media-studies inquiry? A post-McLuhan and post-Kittler inquiry that foregrounds the technological factor but steers clear of the charge of determinism? An inquiry that embraces the notions of media archaeology and develops in a symbiosis with, if not as a part of, the digital humanities? Can the eponymous “messages” be replaced with “media” (carriers, transmitters)? Pietraszko rather considers the former and explains that he means informational messages, but he interchangeably uses terms such as “a means of transmission” or “a means of conveying information.” He makes a distinction between the message and the medium, as in his discussion of the newspaper, he refers to the printed sheets (which can be used to wrap things or to plug cracks) as “a material correlate” of the message (p. 104). Yet when he analyzes the postcard, he regards, albeit not explicitly, the properties of the means of transmission—a conventionally shaped and sized small piece of cardboard—as integral to the object and relevant to its special nature. This raises the questions of whether it is at all warranted to set the message apart from the medium. As explained by Raymond Williams in his discussion of the notion of the media in his *Keywords*, modern science and philosophy no longer separate a thought or a sense from its expression, especially in conceptualizations of language.⁸ The split into the medium and the message appears to be relevant, perhaps even originary, in media studies. In Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement that “the medium is the message,” the means of communication and communicated content must be distinguishable from each other; otherwise, the claim would be a tautology even though it argues that, rather than being just a passive container for a message, the medium actively contributes to the message. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the medium is entirely dissolved in the message.

Renaming Pietraszko’s paper as “Media and values” in all probability contravenes his intentions. This device serves me as an updated and updating reading of the classic, which does not negate the spirit of his theory. Rather, it is designed to bring to light the elements that have remained unarticulated clearly in the reception of his thought. In superficial interpretations of Pietraszko’s writings, communication and information technologies are firmly linked to the order of civilization (functionality, utility, and effectiveness) rather than of culture. In orthodox accounts, the theory of culture developed in Wrocław at best devotes little attention to the media and at worst altogether dismisses them as a pertinent subject of study. However, one does not really need to read “Messages and values” against the grain to realize that the aim of the paper is different. If Pietraszko introduces fastidious discriminations and voices reservations (such as that culture is not communication), he also argues that some messages can have a cultural status ascribed to them in some respects. By doing so, he indirectly implies that it is possible to study the media from a culturological perspective. However, the very structure of “Mes-

⁸ R. Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York 1983, p. 203.

sages and values” does not help arrive at this conclusion. The first paragraph of the paper quite authoritatively insists on a narrow definition of the message, without gesturing at a possibility of expanding or intercepting it in a culturological manner (which in Pietraszko’s terminology means a manner focused on values in their non-utilitarian sense): “Functionality is [...] the *raison d’être* of the message, and the fulfilment of the function of transmission exhausts its nature” (p. 103). It is only in the following parts of the paper that some modifications are added to mitigate the initially rigorous vision and to channel the final conclusion that the postcard is an attractive focus in the study of relations between messages and values. Despite this, Pietraszko basically insists that messages must not be by default associated with culture (and reaffirms that the “message” is not a concept of the theory of value).

To consider the media in a culturological fashion is, in Pietraszko’s view, a challenge, a project; he explicitly states that “for the theory of culture [the relation of messages and values] is a problem” (p. 111), where a problem has a dual meaning of a topic under scrutiny and something troubling.

The fact that, having multiple messages to select from, Pietraszko chooses to analyze those he deems singular is the first harbinger of a possibility of the culturological study of the media in his argumentation. The singularity of these messages lies in that the informational function is not dominant in them or appears problematic—limited in advance, so to speak. The postcard, which Pietraszko contrasts with the letter, represents such a message. The postcard seems to him to be communicatively less effective than the letter, but even the letter (particularly the private letter) is, in his view, associated with values. Pietraszko observes that a purely informational message would be difficult to find, that it is at best an ideal type, an analytical construct. This indicates that every medium can be examined for its non-functional aspects, and that it is in this surplus that links to values can be identified. As Pietraszko states, information noise sparks “axiomatic suspicion” (p. 112).

Pietraszko calls this surplus redundancy. Redundancy is a term sourced from the lexicon of semiology, linguistics, and information theory and is understood in these disciplines as an element of the message that is irrelevant to the fulfilment of communicative function. Interestingly, in information, redundancy is ambivalent as, on the one hand, “prolixity” reduces the optimal functionality of the message, but on the other, it enhances its vividness. Pietraszko emphasizes that in the theory of culture, this ballast is always a good thing since it makes the means of transmission a subject of interest for cultural studies. Pietraszko is aware that “surplus” is a troublesome notion even within information theory itself (he puts it in inverted commas), because it requires defining “measure.” In his discussion of redundancy, he draws on Mieczysław Porębski’s *Sztuka a informacja* [Art and Information] (which presumably prompted him to consider artworks to be particular forms of message).⁹ Pietraszko’s understanding of communication as

⁹ Porębski states that: “We have had ample opportunity to see that in works such as Shakespeare’s dramas, Picasso’s paintings and even common postcards, we encounter information chan-

conveyance of information is aligned with the cybernetic approach to communication, which is sometimes called transmissive or telegraphic. Cybernetics is considered one of the major research traditions of communicology, primarily associated with the work of mathematicians Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver in the 1940s. It is also the source of the notions of information noise and of redundancy, whose non-instrumental aspects are compared to Roman Jakobson's poetic function by Pietraszko. Outlined by Jakobson in his "Linguistics and poetics" (1960), the well-known model of literary communication (where the poetic function is characterized as set toward the message as such) is a rather obvious application of Shannon's chart from 1949.¹⁰ The fact that Pietraszko was acquainted with cybernetic concepts and writings is corroborated by his index cards; for example, his collection includes notes from French science journalist Pierre de Latil's *La pensée artificielle. Introduction à la cybernétique* [Thinking by Machine: A Study of Cybernetics], which was published in Polish in 1958. Latil's book was among the first publications to introduce these themes to the general public by offering intelligible explanations of theories developed by neurologists and mathematicians (therein Norbert Wiener), which sent ripples through other sciences as well. The idea of feedback, to which Latil devoted a lot of attention, gained particular traction (which Pietraszko did not fail to note).

Besides redundancy, Pietraszko avails himself of the term "making/becoming-redundant" (losing functionality) in order to define the cultural dimension of the message. Sometimes when objects "are no longer necessary, they [...] turn out to be needed," so a "functional object" that has become redundant may morph into a "valuable object" (p. 105). Pietraszko insists that the message may refer to values in different ways: by informing about them (itself remaining basically a transmission of information) and by actualizing them. In the latter case, we call the message a "carrier of values" or their "objective concretisation" (p. 110). How are values actualized by the postcard? Pietraszko's note in an index card states that the postcard is "axiotically multilayered." The complexity of the object itself and the variety of its kinds breed multiple forms of axioticity. A considerable po-

nels of vast, almost unimaginable power and capacity." M. Porębski, *Sztuka a informacja*, Warszawa 1986, p. 24 (the first version of the study appeared as *Sztuka i informacja* in 1962).

¹⁰ For the model of literary communication, see R. Jakobson, "Linguistics and poetics" (Chapter 7), [in:] R. Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, eds. K. Pomorska, S. Rudy, Cambridge, MA–London 1987, pp. 66, 71. On Jakobson's inspirations from the mathematical (cryptographic) theory of communication and the links between structuralism and cybernetics, see B.D. Geoghegan, "From information theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the cybernetic apparatus," *Critical Inquiry* 38, 2011, no. 1, pp. 96–126. It may have been the cybernetic tradition that made Pietraszko's understanding of communication so profoundly functionalist and at odds with the culturological perspective. At the same time, his paper is a polemic against semiological concepts of culture, and the postcard is explored in it as a particular sign (one defective from the viewpoint of semiotics), as a symbol or an axiotic sign that concretizes values rather than only signifying them.

tential inheres, for example, in the language layer, which tends to be replete with emotions rather than filled with raw facts:

Communicating emotional states rather than facts, evoking moods and expressing desires, operates with abridgments, ellipsis, understatements, places of “indeterminacy” that invite completion; it is usually laconic, so it is not an example of verbal “excess.” Its most essential form of “excess” comes in what is an effect of a text stepping beyond the horizon of informational accessibility. (p. 116)

Pietraszko perceives the text of a postcard as something more than an effective and dependable means of communication. In fact, he explores not only the text as a stand-alone entity, since its features, such as brevity, are closely linked to the text-delimiting format. He also notes the lack of an envelope as fundamental to the postcard and its essential visual component, that is, “a postcard icon,” whose diversities and complex relations to the textual part are not reducible to the communicative function. An axiomatic load can also be generated by material properties of the media, which Pietraszko implies when observing that:

An object [...] can contain other references to values and rely on *other-than-textual* means to make such references. It may even provide information about values by means other than its verbal text, though it can also not only provide information about values, but also actualize them *in its material form* by making them its properties, with which it interacts with the object relatively independently of the receipt of information. (p. 112; emphasis mine)

Redundancy related to the loss of the status of a functional object can be understood in terms of a temporal sequence. This entails a diachronic or biographical approach, and Pietraszko indeed talks about the postcard’s “life after life” (p. 119). In somewhat simplified terms, this consists of two separate but logically correlated stages. Initially, a message—a (new) medium valued and used mainly because of its effectiveness, speed, and dependability—belongs to the order of civilization. Subsequently, “having done its service in the order of civilization,” the object loses its functionality (being ousted by more recent and more effective means) and, from that moment on, plays other, primarily non-instrumental, roles. Pietraszko’s example of the postcard perfectly illustrates this line of reasoning: his note on the card says that the postcard has two lives: a “utilitarian” one in civilization and a “commemorative” one in culture. This depiction may concern both the entire postcard “species” as well as its individual specimens.

In what I call the diachronic view, redundancy may correspond to obsolescence, a notion eagerly discussed in media studies.¹¹ Pietraszko scrutinizes the postcard as an object that has ceased to be a fast, effective, and cheap means of sharing short pieces of information, mainly because other means of transmission have appeared and outstripped it in these respects (the paper was published in 1992; the first Polish e-mail was sent two years before, and in that very year the

¹¹ Cf. *The Routledge Companion to Media Technology and Obsolescence*, ed. M.J.P. Wolf, New York 2018.

world's first text message was sent, and pagers appeared in Poland). Pietraszko observes that, if nothing else, the conventionalization and depletion of postcard texts bespeak the onset of a new stage—the second life—of this form of communication. The media that have fallen into oblivion, been put on a shelf, and are resurrected in novel (artistic and collector) contexts lie at the core of media archaeology. The field investigates the processes of becoming-redundant and is also fascinated by bizarre transmissions and transmitters. So much so that Siegfried Zielinski asserts: “this anarchaeology of media is a collection of curiosities,” by which he means “finds from the rich history of seeing, hearing, and combining using technical means: things in which something sparks or glitters—their bioluminescence—and also points beyond the meaning or function of their immediate context of origin.”¹² “If so, why is the postcard not dying out but rather manifesting heightened vitality?” (p. 116), Pietraszko asks in a passage that sounds like a quotation from a contemporary media archaeologist. It appears that archaeology would make a perfect companion in the quest undertaken by cultural studies.

However, an attentive reading of “Messages and values” suggests that redundancy can also be understood in a different way, synchronically, so to speak. In this model, message is only rendered-redundant in a certain aspect, as the symbolic (the axiosemiotic) coexists with the informative in an object. Pietraszko calls it “a surplus of roles” that a text fulfils along with, but not instead of, its informational function. He reasons, for example, that:

Phenomena described as informational “prolixity” may be a functional factor in various messages, *as well as in one and the same message*, and as such can support the realization of the primary function of the message. They can also—*simultaneously as well*—play a non-instrumental and more independent role. (p. 107; emphasis mine)

The point is that a certain object, for example a certain behaviour, which, due to its essential relations to the order of culture is identified as a correlate of culture, can *at the same time* have properties justifying its identification as an informational message from the viewpoint of information theory. (p. 109; emphasis mine)

The postcard example again proves instructive. As a vehicle for information, the postcard is intrinsically problematic. Pietraszko addresses “deviations” of its cursory, axiotically marked messages and its visual layer, which can interfere with the purely informational effect of the whole (p. 118). What is a nuisance to communicative effectiveness is a lure to a culture researcher. It is not that the nature or condition of the message itself determines which of the narrowly conceived theories—of culture or of information—is better suited for analyzing this message; rather, various disciplines examine the same object in their different ways each and make it their subject of study, each illuminating its disparate, albeit inter-

¹² S. Zielinski, *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, transl. G. Custance, Cambridge, MA–London 2006, p. 34.

dependent and coexisting, aspects. Pietraszko believes that such a reduction is justified by the epistemic interest; disciplines investigate different objects: a functional object and a valuable object (respectively, the message as information and the message as a symbol, or, in other words, an actualization of values). The synchronic model of redundancy is not directly associated with the obsolescence of the medium. It extends the culturological perspective so as to accommodate new media as well. As already noted, Pietraszko insists that the message can “actualize [values] in its material form, making them its properties, with which it interacts with the object *relatively independently* of the receipt of information” [emphasis mine]. An intriguing issue is how an empirically given message as a correlate of culture comes to embody something that is unique to culture itself, that is, a relative autonomy of the axiotic surplus, constrained, as it is, by heteronomies (in this case, by civilization-bound informativity). Since the links between utility and symbolism in a message are captivating and not predefined, Pietraszko insists that they should be considered in an idiographic mode: “the nature and scope [of interdependencies of the informational function and axiomaticity in an object] could only be grasped through a very penetrating analytical case study” (p. 117). To capture the core of this interrelatedness, such a study should be comprehensive and designed to yield a holistic view: “it is only in the context of an object as a whole that the presence of a multifarious potential of functionality can be identified in it, along with its non-functional aspects” (p. 113). In designing such a case study and attending to the informational quality of the message, one should not be afraid of being accused of marshaling “non-culturological” procedures. More than that, the functionality of a medium should be explored not only as an ordinary “background” against which other properties, ones more appealing to a culture researcher, will emerge, but as a factor that in one way or another (not specified by the Pietraszko and only conjectured) is formative of the very axiomaticity of the message: “even if made-redundant through a loss of functionality, the informational quality present in an object that assumes a symbolic nature is not indifferent in relation to the formation of this symbolicity” (p. 118).

Pietraszko’s paper is akin to a preliminary research project proposal which he tentatively imagined rather than implemented (he neither revisited the theme later nor undertook any detailed case studies). It can be construed as an encouragement for engaging with some challenges integral to such a project, particularly those concerning the synchronic meaning of redundancy (the diachronic model appears to be more clearly depicted in the paper, and the media-archaeological lens additionally helps situate it in today’s research landscape). One of these challenges would entail defining “surplus,” that is, determining what it is in a given case that transcends the medium’s purely informational function. Another challenge would involve establishing how the functional coexists with the axiotic in a message, and how this affects the message as a whole.

As an empirically knowable object, the postcard can be researched by media studies and cultural studies the way Pietraszko proposed. Employing it in investigations of the media is reminiscent of object theorizing envisioned by Mieke Bal in her preposterous history.¹³ The postcard also boasts some potential as a general concept of the medium. In Sybille Krämer's philosophy of the media, communication can be described by formulating what she dubs the postal principle (*Postalisches Prinzip*). Krämer examines the postcard, sending mail to multiple addressees, and the very fact of deliverability of messages to look into the nature of the sign, and the constitution of the subject. The messenger is another of her key metaphors. Similar motifs surface in Régis Debray's mediology as he evokes the figure of an angel as an emblematic messenger (and Christ as a mediator) in Judeo-Christian tradition. Of course, in Greek mythology the role of gods' messenger was attributed to Hermes, and this metaphor is mobilized for media studies by Alexander Galloway in *Excommunication*.¹⁴

Technology: Between civilization and culture

"McLuhan is wrong."

S. Pietraszko, from an index card in the "Technology" envelope

Pietraszko was interested in the postcard because it straddled the line between culture and civilization. He addressed this contact zone in other studies as well, mostly as a secondary issue signaled in passing in his discussions of, for example, literary culture. Pietraszko's publications as a rule do not deal explicitly with themes of technology. This makes the search for such clues in his card files an even more thought-provoking enterprise. The brown library box contains an envelope titled "Technology," inserted between "Taylor" and "Teleology." The envelope comprises notes dated to November 1975 (presumably compiled for a talk at Wrocław's Technical University) (Fig. 3) and devoted to the culture-technology relationship, where Pietraszko attempts to define technical culture as a particular way of life with its own unique object (scope) and subject. He observes that "technology threatening culture is nothing else than one culture threatening another." In fact, culture affects technology more powerfully than the other way round since "technology [is] always an upshot of culture." Pietraszko polemicizes with Mar-

¹³ See M. Bal, *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago–London 1999, p. 5.

¹⁴ On Krämer's Derrida-inspired concept, see J.P. Hudzik, *Wykłady z filozofii mediów. Podstawy nauk o komunikowaniu*, Warszawa 2017, pp. 129–133. See also R. Debray, *Wprowadzenie do mediologii*, transl. A. Kapciak, Warszawa 2010, p. 141; A.R. Galloway, E. Thacker, M. Wark, *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Chicago–London 2013.

shall McLuhan's claims: "McLuhan is wrong; technical means are not primary." Pietraszko was probably among the early Polish readers of McLuhan, whose texts were discussed and partly translated in Poland toward the end of the 1960s.¹⁵

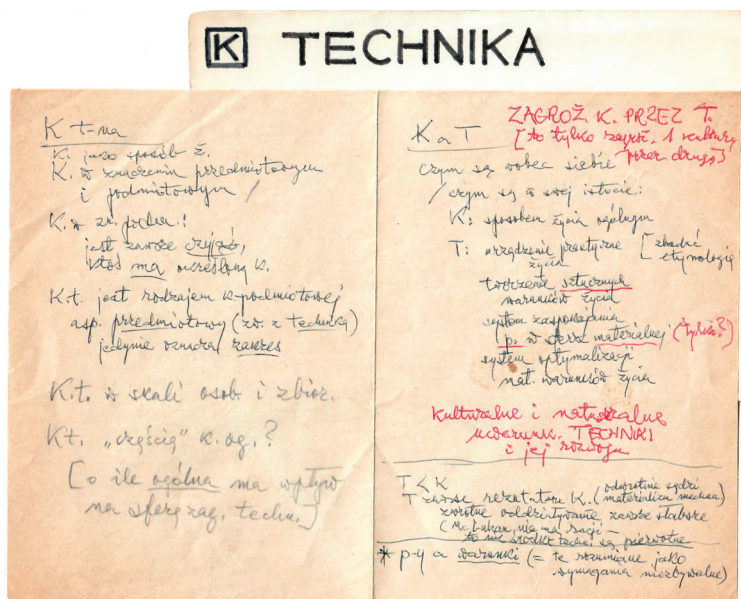


Figure 3. S. Pietraszko, a card on technical culture from the "Technology" envelope

Source: Library of the Institute of Cultural Studies and Musicology,
University of Wrocław. Scan by Aleksandra Kil.

The cultural dimension of technology was also approached by Pietraszko in "Problematyka kulturoznawcza w badaniach miasta przemysłowego" [Culturological themes in industrial city research] (1989), where, somewhat against the essential distinction, he stated that not all things technical must automatically be categorized as bound to civilization. To mark off culture and civilization was not easy, and to classify their correlates (behaviors and products) was even more troublesome, as they tended "to be civilizational or cultural not as wholes or in all respects, but with regard to their dominant properties."¹⁶ Pietraszko went on to

¹⁵ The "TV" envelope in Pietraszko's files comprises a card with a bibliographic entry for McLuhan's text on television published in two parts in issues 9 and 10 of *Życie Literackie* in 1968. The first Polish commentators of McLuhan's work included K. Jakubowicz, K.T. Toeplitz, M. Czerwiński, A. Kłoskowska and J. Lalewicz; see K. Kukielko-Rogozińska, "Naukowiec czy artysta? Polskie interpretacje poglądów Marshalla McLuhana," *Kultura Popularna* 2013, no. 3, pp. 160–172.

¹⁶ S. Pietraszko, "Problematyka kulturoznawcza w badaniach miasta przemysłowego," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura. Studia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Wrocław 2012, p. 224.

specify that technical artifacts and operations could bring one “in touch with values” and on occasion “satisfaction from participating in the unfolding of technology’s internal progress, or at least ludic experiences.” Consequently, they might surpass utility as the core of civilization. Nevertheless, Pietraszko deemed such occurrences “exceptions to the rule,” which only corroborated the general notion that the relations of technology and culture were “remote and only indirect.”¹⁷

The ascription of the media to the order of culture, which is a standard part of popular knowledge (and is expressed in the claim that “the telephone is culture, too”), would be questionable to Pietraszko. In his theory, he made sure that civilization and culture were clearly set apart as distinct and distinctive spheres, each having its own unique axiology, dynamic, and major fields of performance (for civilization, accordingly, utility and functionality; cumulative development; the economy, technology, and science, the humanities excluding). Pietraszko thought of civilization as “a way of life guided by benefit and utility.”¹⁸ In his comprehensive vision of the human universe, civilization was culture’s closest sphere of heteronomy (closer than the order of society, which Pietraszko identified with obligations). In a paper titled “Kultura literacka” [Literary culture] (1992), Pietraszko pondered the validity of the eponymous notion and drew a distinction between “chresotelic” civilization and “axiotelic” culture in order to sort out the field and lay the groundwork for culturological inquiry into literary life. In criticizing the concept of “pre-literate culture” as focused on the discreteness of form and technology, he stated that “literary culture” would make sense to him as a term that operated like a “(photographic) blow-up” by “pointing to and amplifying the distinctive axioticity of the object it named.”¹⁹ Had Pietraszko contemplated the notion of digital culture, would it have shared the fate of “pre-literate culture”? If, by way of experiment, we replaced the eponymous “literary culture” with “digital culture”²⁰ across Pietraszko’s paper, I believe that the general effect would overlap with conclusions of his paper on the postcard (insistence on the fundamental distinctiveness of communication and culture, with a reservation that, in some cases or under certain circumstances, the form of medial mediation has an axiotic potential). Digital culture would be understood as a zoom-in, a piece of heuristic fiction, though it might also prove useful from the viewpoint of the ontology of culture (which was quite a relevant thing for an “objectivist” that Pietraszko was).

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 225.

¹⁸ S. Pietraszko, “Program przedmiotu teoria kultury. Treści programowe,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 365.

¹⁹ S. Pietraszko, “Kultura literacka,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura*, p. 160. In this paper, Pietraszko polemicalizes with Żółkiewski, who distinguished between the style and the type of culture (with oral culture, print culture, and audio-visual culture classifiable as the latter).

²⁰ Of course, these terms cannot be considered simple equivalents (after all, we do talk about literary culture in the digital age). I do not seek to comment on the compass of these notions; my point is simply to offer an interpretive device that, by default, requires ignoring nuances.

In “Kultura literacka,” Pietraszko also foregrounded “the objective mechanisms and predetermined and determining processes at work in the sphere of the technical means of communication.”²¹ This mode of reasoning is barely acceptable today. Pietraszko’s index cards from 1976 appear to be more in sync with recent thought and, in particular, with the archaeology of the media, which promotes non-teleological visions of the development of technology. “ $T < K$ ” could be construed as undercutting these “predetermined and determining” mechanisms and implying the potential agentive role of culture in the realm of technology. This invites the question whether current transformations and tendencies enable us to re-conceptualize the relationships of the spheres Pietraszko discussed and to discern more “exceptions.” The subchapter on “Technology and/or culture: Telling the difference” in Debray’s study of mediology features a table in which the two are contrastively juxtaposed. Yet Debray also elucidates that this grid was valid from the 19th to the 20th century and speculates:

It may happen that the 21st century will change the order of the left and right columns. If this happened, we would transition into a world where accelerating changes, regarded as factors of peace and harmonization, would be considered good in and of themselves (and “progressive,” too), into a world where promoting the coexistence of incompatibilities and coupling differences would be considered better (and “progressive,” too).²²

Without dismissing Pietraszko’s insights, today we might be less circumspect of talking about, for example, digital culture, for no other reason than the fact that the ways in which technology functions in our everyday lives are not limited to utility alone. Indeed, the media can easily be acknowledged as increasingly geared to achieving non-necessary aims, instead of responding to existential needs. Reflection on the relevance of technologies to the humanities also stands as testimony to profound changes in our understanding of utilitarian instrumentality. The tale of the humanistic toolbox defies any easy incorporation into the narrative of cumulative development. The debates around the digital humanities make us realize that, even at the very heart of changes, the new generation of tools does not entail making progress, asking better questions, or offering answers more effectively.

In this paper, I have interpreted selected themes in the writings by Pietraszko which I believe may illumine the issues of media and technology, but which are seldom examined in his texts and even more rarely addressed in the study of his work as a whole (notably, Pietraszko made sure that the study of communication

²¹ S. Pietraszko, “Kultura literacka,” p. 162.

²² R. Debray, *Wprowadzenie do mediologii*, p. 71.

was part of the curriculum of the cultural studies degree program that he was developing). I have presented a close-reading analysis of Pietraszko's "Messages and values," in which he discusses the postcard to explore his central question concerning the cultural status of the means of information transmission. Although Pietraszko, who was clearly indebted to cybernetic communication theory, wrote about "messages" and "transmissions" rather than about "media" or "transmitters," his scrutiny also covered the non-verbal properties of the carrier, which he deemed to be replete with references to values. This encourages locating Pietraszko's paper in the field of media-studies research (*mutatis mutandis*), although the term "media" as such does not appear in his text altogether. In my view, the study of messages "gone/rendered-redundant" that Pietraszko proposes is analogous to the purposes of the archaeology of the media. Though selective and unorthodox, my reading of Pietraszko's texts is driven by a particular cognitive interest anchored in my mediological perspective. In order to draw on Pietraszko's work in today's media research, one should not so much critically revise or update it as rather interpret the impulses and suggestions it offers somewhat against the general gist of his thought. One should also remember the conjuncture in which Pietraszko was developing his theory; notably, that conjuncture included a different configuration of the epistemological field (marked by a revival of the autonomist concepts of and approaches to culture) and different power relations in the academic field (marked by a struggle for the status of a separate degree program and, later, of an independent discipline). These circumstances could have affected the "compartmentalized" vision of the human universe (the fragmentation of the human world into distinct spheres or orders: of nature, society, civilization, and culture), which informed Pietraszko's concept of culture. Theorizing in this manner is apparently less viable today, as the contemporary (post)humanities revel in highlighting networks, permeable boundaries, and entanglements with heteronomies of culture, rather than guarding its perimeters. The autonomy of culture must thus be historicized.²³

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

²³ Tomasz Majewski has addressed the historical enmeshment of the theoretical underpinnings of the discipline, noting that concepts primarily related to modern culture and forged in the political realities of the Polish People's Republic (including Pietraszko's theory) are poorly applicable in the current "post-autonomous stage," which is "commodified and pervaded by technologies and expert discourses." T. Majewski, "Kulturoznawstwo wobec kryzysu/ów. O dyscyplinowaniu dyscypliny," [in:] *Kulturoznawstwo polskie. Przeszłość, przestrzeń, perspektywy*, eds. P.J. Fereński, A. Gomółka, M. Wójcicka, M. Zdrodowska, Gdańsk 2018, p. 297. An urgent reconsideration of the division into the symbolic and the technical-utilitarian spheres has also been championed by Mirosław Filiciak, citing Anna Zeidler-Janiszewska's proposal of culturological research into science (inspired by Kmita); see M. Filiciak, "Przeprojektowanie, przeprogramowanie. O jednej z możliwych ścieżek rozwoju badań kultury," *Kultura Współczesna* 2018, no. 100 (special issue), pp. 105–115.

Bibliography

- Bal M., *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*, Chicago–London 1999.
- Bert J.-F., *Une histoire de la fiche érudite*, Villeurbanne 2019.
- Debray R., *Wprowadzenie do mediologii*, transl. A. Kapciak, Warszawa 2010.
- Filiciak M., “Przeprojektowanie, przeprogramowanie. O jednej z możliwych ścieżek rozwoju badań kultury,” 2018, no. 100 (special issue), pp. 105–115.
- Galloway A.R., Thacker E., Wark M., *Excommunication: Three Inquiries in Media and Mediation*, Chicago–London 2013.
- Geoghegan B.D., “From information theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the cybernetic apparatus,” *Critical Inquiry* 38, 2011, no. 1, pp. 96–126.
- Gwóźdź A., “Medioznawstwo — dyskurs czy paradygmat badań kulturoznawczych,” *Kultura Współczesna* 2007, no. 1, pp. 80–92.
- Gwóźdź A., “O pewnym możliwym aliansie, czyli w stronę medioznawstwa jako kulturoznawstwa,” *Kultura Współczesna* 2008, no. 2, pp. 204–213.
- Hopfinger M., *Kultura współczesna — audiowizualność*, Warszawa 1985.
- Hopfinger M., *Literatura i media po 1989 roku*, Warszawa 2010.
- Hudzik J.P., *Wykłady z filozofii mediów. Podstawy nauk o komunikowaniu*, Warszawa 2017.
- Jakobson R., *Language in Literature*, eds. K. Pomorska, S. Rudy, Cambridge, MA–London 1987.
- Kukielko-Rogocińska K., “Naukowiec czy artysta? Polskie interpretacje poglądów Marshalla McLuhana,” *Kultura Popularna* 2013, no. 3, pp. 160–172.
- Latour B., *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory*, New York–Oxford 2005.
- Łukasiewicz K., “On the origins of Polish cultural studies,” transl. J. Ozimek, *Kultura Współczesna* 2020, no. 5, pp. 12–22.
- Majewski T., “Kulturoznawstwo wobec kryzysu/ów. O dyscyplinowaniu dyscypliny,” [in:] *Kulturoznawstwo polskie. Przeszość, przestrzeń, perspektywy*, eds. P.J. Fereński, A. Gomółka, M. Wójcicka, M. Zdrodowska, Gdańsk 2018, pp. 287–302.
- Pietraszko S., “Kultura literacka,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura. Studia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Wrocław 2012, pp. 146–164.
- Pietraszko S., “Messages and values,” transl. T. Anessi, *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 26, 2022, no. 4, pp. 103–116.
- Pietraszko S., “Problematyka kulturoznawcza w badaniach miasta przemysłowego,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura. Studia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Wrocław 2012, pp. 215–235.
- Pietraszko S., “Program przedmiotu teoria kultury. Treści programowe,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Kultura. Studia teoretyczne i metodologiczne*, Wrocław 2012, pp. 363–365.
- Pietraszko S., “Przekazy i wartości,” [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Studia o kulturze*, Wrocław 1992, pp. 90–105.
- Pietraszko S., “Przekazy i wartości,” *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 3, 1992 (*Aksjosemiotyka karty pocztowej*, ed. P. Banaś), pp. 29–47.
- Porębski M., *Sztuka a informacja*, Warszawa 1986.
- The Routledge Companion to Media Technology and Obsolescence*, ed. M.J.P. Wolf, New York 2018.
- Williams R., *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, New York 1983.
- Zielinski S., *Deep Time of the Media: Toward an Archaeology of Hearing and Seeing by Technical Means*, transl. G. Custance, Cambridge, MA–London 2006.
- Zylinska J., *Bioethics in the Age of New Media*, Cambridge, MA–London 2009.

Aleksandra Kil — obtained a PhD in Cultural Studies from the University of Wrocław in 2021. Her dissertation on index cards as an intellectual technology in the analogue humanities has won a range of distinctions: 2nd Prize in the 10th Inka Brodzka-Wald Competition for the best PhD dissertation in the contemporary humanities, 3rd Prize in the National Centre for Culture's competition for PhD dissertation in culture sciences and the Outstanding PhD Dissertation Award of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers. A grantee of the Polish-US Fulbright Commission at the New York University and the University of California, Santa Barbara. She has published, among others, in *Teksty Drugie* and *Digital Humanities Quarterly*.