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Messages and values[*]

The concept of message is associated with functionality, with the meaning of this word deriving from the name of a function.[1] Functionality is thus the *raison d'être* of the message, and the fulfilment of the function of transmission exhausts its nature.

Over the last thirty years, the concept of message has been particularly favoured in theoretical reflections on culture, as has the category of communication, in which many authors have come to see the functional essence of culture. However, during this same period, thinking on functionality itself in the theory of culture has become more complex. Some four decades ago, new conceptions began to emerge about the structure of the human universe that countered an integrative understanding of this universe as culture "in its broad sense," with views that emphasised its complexity, providing grounds for distinguishing separate "segments" within it, among which culture—viewed more narrowly—is understood as a sphere within the human world that is regulated by values, as opposed to civilisation, which is rooted in functionality.[2]

If we accept the legitimacy of such a vision, we can identify the message as a correlate or form of how the order of civilisation is realised; we will also be inclined to question whether the mechanical linking of the message with culture is justified. However, among the numerous forms of message there are some whose functioning as a means of conveying information is either problematic or not the sole or most important function, though the relation to values remains clear. An example of such a case is the postcard. Its special status seems to be worth considering both for its own sake, because of its intriguing place and role in people's lives, and as an interesting case concerning the relation between messages and values, demarking the more general subject of this paper.

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[*] Originally published as: S. Pietraszko, "Przekazy i wartości," [in:] S. Pietraszko, *Studia o kulturze*, Wrocław 1992, pp. 90–105.

[1] Translator's note: both the Polish *przekaz* and English "message" generally refer to the transmission of some form of communication, with the Polish rooted in a function through the verb *przekazać* ("powierzyć komuś coś, powtórzyć komuś jakąś informację"). See "Przekazać," [entry in:] *Słownik SJP*, https://sjp.pl/przekazać; while the English is derived through Old French (*message*) from the Latin noun *missus*: "a sending away, sending, dispatching." See "Message," [entry in:] *Online Etymological Dictionary*, https://www.etymonline.com/word/message.

[2] A.L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture*, Chicago–London 1952, pp. 152–169.

Functional essence of the message

We should begin by explaining at least some of the assumptions being made here, particularly those relating to the notion of the message and its function.

Although the term "message" in its single-word form does not formally pre-suppose any restrictions on the term's meaning, it is adopted here—in accordance with common practice in theoretical discourse in the sense of an "informational message"—because the term is most frequently used today in this somewhat narrower sense. Through this clarification, the functional nature of the message is revealed and highlighted, while at the same time, the function that makes it a message is specified. However, this does not prevent a message in general, or a certain type of message, from also fulfilling other functions. We are inclined to talk about these functions when we consider the various possibilities for the "functioning" of such a form of communication as a newspaper, which is commonly used as, among other things, a means of packaging, a material for plugging holes, or even an element of some forms of decoration. It is worth noting, however, that these are, firstly, as a rule secondary functions, and that, secondly, we are talking in this case not so much about the message as about its tangible, material correlate, which here is a number of printed sheets of paper, so that in fact we are talking about an object[3] capable of performing various functions, including the function of conveying information. However, if we talk about a newspaper as a message, we usually associate it with just this one function, which is newspaper's *raison d'être* as a message, i.e. with the function of conveying information. This is the primary function that defines the essence of the message, and thus of the newspaper as a message, regardless of whether the object that performs it has any other functions, in this case qualifying as secondary functions. A further step in this reasoning would be the claim that a message that does not fulfil its primary function is not functional, and therefore is not a message. Yet here there would be no basis to consider any object a message—if we want to avoid misusing the term—whose functionality is based on some other primary function, even though it may at the same time convey information as a secondary function, such as an apartment building that "informs" about how it performs its primary function in a specific time and place. In this case, of course, being a message is not a condition for acquiring the status of a functional object [*przedmiot*], since the apartment building already has such a status by virtue of its primary function, which is the

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[3] Editor's note: Pietraszko distinguishes between an object as something material, a tangible thing (*obiekt*), and an object that is the result of a certain conceptualization, such as a work of art or the subject of research (*przedmiot*). This distinction is lost in English, so in places where it seems particularly important, use of the terms *obiekt* (in the sense of "physical object") and *przedmiot* in the Polish original will be noted, e.g. functional object, signified object, valuable object, cultural object etc. This is particularly important in the case of *przedmiot*, which has been rendered in English as either "subject" and "object," based on the linguistic, rather than conceptual, context.

raison d'être of its existence, providing a means for satisfying a particular objective requirement of human existence.

It is worth noting here that the functionality of human products and behaviours, which is a constitutive and characteristic feature of the civilisational order, has its "measure" in the historical and cumulative development of civilisation itself. Taking the last example further, we could say that in the course of and as a result of this development, earlier forms of housing became inadequate in relation to the more refined requirements of the human user (in view of—as we like to say—his higher level of civilisation), that is, that their functionality declined. The development of civilisation is even capable of "making-redundant" hitherto functional objects, that is, depriving them of their functionality, as it becomes possible for new objects to fulfil their functions more effectively. These "redundant" objects are sometimes preserved or their production even continued, though they do not serve their original functions. When they are no longer necessary, they sometimes turn out to be needed, i.e. to meet needs shaped by the order of a given culture, in relation to which these objects are correlates of values relevant to that culture. An old paraffin lamp may thus exist in a new way in the world of man if it loses its status as a functional object—and thus its place in the order of civilisation—acquiring instead the status of a valuable object within a specific order of culture.

The dual effects of redundancy

In supporting the previously discussed thesis on the functional nature of the informational message, one cannot fail to notice a certain peculiarity in this respect. It consists in the almost regular, almost—one could say—obligatory, albeit in a very different degree and form, presence in the message of a specific "excess," visible both in its content and means of articulation. This "excess" needs to be placed in inverted commas because of the uncertainty about whether speaking here about excess without inverted commas is justified in relation to each case of this kind, and also because of the vagueness of the criterion of a default "measure," which is necessary, after all, to determine and (should one choose to) define any "excess." It is common, however, to regard something as "excess" in communication if its informational content proves to be greater than necessary.

In linguistics and semiology, this phenomenon is referred to as redundancy. Its causative factor is considered to be the "tendency to a costly diffusion of messages," supposedly in an effort to make them more explicit and defend the integrity of the information conveyed.[4] We can assume that a measure of this diffusion is tacitly assuming optimal functionality as the norm for the message, while using as a measure of the "costliness" of its diffusion the reduction in the message's

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[4] M. Porębski, *Sztuka a informacja*, Kraków 1986, p. 32.

functionality caused by this "excess" in relation to its optimal level. It is therefore a means of impoverishing a message. In this conception of redundancy, however, excess proves to be beneficial to the message, precisely in relation to the function of conveying information, which redundancy in some way weakens.

Let us note that such an understanding of redundancy and its function in relation to the message, justified on the grounds of information theory and expressing its epistemic interests, is incompatible with other theoretical options. For it is only from such a theoretical perspective, one which limits interest in the message to the function of conveying information, that we can talk about the complicating of its form beyond the measure of the generally accepted standard as unnecessary "excess," because it is non-functional "wordiness," unnecessary ballast. However, in the light of this theory, popular belief about the lack of need for such "excess" likewise needs to be clearly labelled as erroneous, since redundancy is recognised here as being indispensable to the message as a means for optimising its functioning. Finally, only such a theory can justify ignoring the hypothesis put forward outside of it that what we call redundancy, and which in information theory is considered only a means supporting the functioning of the message, has in fact its own reason for being present here, as well as having another role to play within an object that also performs the functions of a message; therefore, these redundant features, even while remaining in service to the primary function of the message, also have their own relevance, one that is relatively independent of this function, arising from completely different references and causal factors. An example of this dual nature of the phenomenon called redundancy is its place within the message conveyed by an artistic work; that which here in the message is redundant, and therefore excess, can be a very important constitutive component of a completely different object [*przedmiot*], one existing as part of the object itself, and this object [*przedmiot*] is the work of art.

In the concept of redundancy cited here, perhaps what raises the greatest doubt is that which is considered certain and—somewhat paradoxical in light of the recognition of this phenomenon as "excess"—the assumption that redundancy has a clear functionality in relation to its parent messages, in which it supposedly appears only "in order to provide them with the highest possible degree of precorrectivity." This conception is not in fact weakened by the view expressed further on that it plays a "fundamental role" in redundancy.[5] After all, the readily apparent irreducibility of the phenomenon of redundancy and the specificities of its "behaviour" within a message are reinforced by the conviction, common outside of information theory, that this phenomenon has its own distinct role and possesses characteristic causal features. One might even say that it has its own characteristic functions. However, we will not make this claim here. The point is that these "behaviours" and the effects of the phenomenon known as redundancy not only have

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[5] Ibid., pp. 32, 40–41.

sources and causal factors other than those from which it derives its functionality, they also have a different scope and character than fulfilling a function through which objectively necessary goals are realised.

Thus, the dual nature of so-called redundancy should be recognised and respected in its study. 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 realisation of the primary function of the message. They can also—simultaneously as well—play a non-instrumental and more independent role, comparable to what Roman Jakobson called the "poetic function," which he regarded as a very special function, because it is oriented towards the message itself.

Axiotic references of a message

It should be noted at the outset that the "behaviour" of the phenomenon of redundancy is comparable to the "poetic function" only to a certain extent. This is because, firstly, it has been assumed here that function is understood as instrumental action, realising necessary aims, and yet even an authentic poetic work, which otherwise would also be a message, does not fulfil such a condition. Secondly, so-called redundancy only seems to "point to itself"; in reality, it tends to concern the viewer's attitude much more than conceptual and logical cognition, whose results are expressible in linguistic categories, namely, to values situated in the structural order of culture.

A consideration of the consequences of the links between messages and values noted here may require us to recall the circumstances in which values, with which culture has almost always been associated in theoretical thinking, began to appear to be both inseparable from culture and problematic in its study. The long tradition of taking into account the axiotic aspect of culture was interrupted for a time by the expansion of linguistic and semiological thought into the theory of culture. As a consequence of the new concepts of culture originating from these sources, the axiotic problematic began to disappear from the theory of culture. In the 1970s, however, attempts began to appear to rehabilitate and resuscitate this problematic, for example, in the form of the concept of the "axiosemiotic sphere," which competed and polemised with the semiological notion of culture as a semiotic system.[6] However, questioning the semiological paradigm in theory of culture need not be tantamount to giving up everything that semiology has been able to contribute to this theory. In spite of the decreasing attractiveness of the semiological approach, the concept of the "signing nature" of culture has not been abandoned

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[6] S. Pietraszko, "O sferze aksjosemiotycznej," [in:] *Problemy teoretyczne i metodologiczne badań stylu życia*, ed. A. Siciński, Warszawa 1980, pp. 53–73.

in the theory of culture, and the essence of culture has continued to be readily seen in the communicative function ascribed to it. However, semiological and communicative concepts were not very compatible with thinking about culture through this revived axiotic reflection.

The situation in theory of culture today is characterised by the co-presence within it of semiological and axiological concepts, which are essentially distanced from each other, leading to incoherence in theories. The difficulty of achieving such coherence is—it would seem—mainly due to the methodological incommensurability of these two types of problematics. The axiotic aspect of culture is still seen and described most often in terms of common thinking, while its semioticity is a much better specified subject of study, as a subject of scientific knowledge understood in its contemporary sense, conceptualised and formulated by a discipline at a relatively high methodological level. And what is particularly important here—in a semiological perspective, as has been repeatedly observed, there is no place for categories of value. The index of terms in a representative French encyclopaedic dictionary of linguistics, for example, mentions only "linguistic value" (*valeur linguistique*).[7] Considering the axiotic (value-based) nature of culture as its *differentiam specificam*, which is a well-known position in theoretical tradition, the axiotic character of behaviour and things is at the same time considered an indicator of their relation to culture. However, the scope of the notion of value adopted here is more modest than that which is commonly accepted, because while it respects the more general assumptions about the epistemic importance of distinguishing what is separate and specific, one notices a significant difference between values and various "value-like" qualities, the specificity of which is apparent and sometimes finds expression in describing them as "material," "utilitarian" or "practical" values. However, the refusal to call these qualities values is not only about words. It is about distinguishing in words between a whole class of "value-like" qualities and values which do not meet the criteria for value identity. For although they too (or their material or behavioural correlates) are sometimes the objects of evaluation, they are evaluated for completely different reasons than values (or correlates of them). They are the final effects or merely predictable goals of behaviours or processes caused and controlled by objective necessities.[8] Their common nature, which does not have a single name of its own, is described by such words as "functionality," "usefulness" and "utility," and which at one time Western sociologists defined with the word "efficiency."[9]

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[7] O. Ducrot, T. Todorov, *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du language*, Paris 1972, p. 467.

[8] Editor's note: Pietraszko consistently distinguished three orders and associated each with different causal factors: civilizational (living according to benefits), social (living according to duties) and cultural (living according to values).

[9] R.M. MacIver, *Society: A Textbook of Sociology*, New York 1937, pp. 272–281; L.A. Mc-Clung, "Levels of culture as levels of social generalization," *American Sociological Review* 4, 1945, p. 487.

The category of efficiency first appeared in theoretical discussions in the 1930s as a synthetic expression denoting the horizons for the goals of civilisation as well as its most important property, distinguishing it from culture, the horizon for which is values. It both actualises[10] them and provides a means for their existence, while for man—culture is a means by which to search for values, realise them and embrace them. This is sometimes labelled the function of culture, but this term does not suit our purposes here. A theoretical understanding of function that would account for its distinguishing features, would need to take into account its origins in objective causal foundations, which determines its "programme," defining the most effective (often used interchangeably with the term "functional") means of achieving an objectively necessary goal. This nature of functionality, like the evolution of these goals—leading to the optimisation of the means for their fulfilment, and operating according to the rules of cumulative development—are the represented properties of the order of civilisation. The order of culture does not change according to such rules—it changes in other ways.[11] When the so-called functionalists claimed that culture is functional because it serves to satisfy needs, they were right only insofar as that in the vast sphere they called "culture," which correlated with the domain of the entire human universe, and thus also included civilisation and the social order, was indeed largely founded on functionality. It should be noted, however, that in their overly broad concept of needs, they in fact linked the objective requirements of existence, which are the source of functional behaviour, with specific causal factors of behaviour shaped by culture, for which restricting the concept of needs seems justified for various reasons. It is only by identifying these two different types of causal factors that they can claim that everything gravitates towards the same end, since it is subject to the same causal determination.

What has been missing from the discussion thus far is the issue of semiotics, which is considered to be part of the theory of culture, and which here could signal a return to the interrupted main theme, that is, the notion of message. It is therefore worth clarifying.

Let us begin with the end, that is, with the message. It is impossible to further resist expressing the conviction that "message" is not a conceptual category in theory of culture. Rather, it is one of the basic terms in information and communication theory. Culture, however, is neither communication nor information. 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. Limiting oneself in a consideration of this object only to these properties is a reduction, justified here by a epistemic interest that falls outside the study of culture; however, there is no justifica-

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[10] Translator's note: Pietraszko uses the word *uobecnienie*, which literally means "making something present" and can have religious connotations.

[11] Cf. A.L. Kroeber, *The Nature of Culture.*

tion for identifying culture with information on the grounds that a specific object, identified as a correlate of culture, also performs to some extent an informational function, which is therefore imputed to culture. Unless, when speaking of culture, one is thinking of civilisation, in relation to which the concepts of function and functioning seem appropriate.

It should be first said that semioticity is not a category from theory of culture, though this statement requires certain qualifications. Semioticity is a conceptual category from semiology, and as such it represents a kind of reductive approach from within this discipline to culture, which semiology treats as a system of signs. In the theory of these systems, like in the theory of information and communication, the distinctiveness of culture does not arouse interest, while its distinctive features can be of interest primarily in its negative aspect—as a source of complications in signifying, as a factor disrupting the informational function.

One cannot fail to notice, however, that alongside cases of consistently reducing the sphere of culture to the scope of semiology, there are also cases of its selective adoption by the theory of culture and conceptual adaptation by it of certain semiological categories. They are sometimes introduced here not so much as elements of a semiological stance, but as names or concepts indicating their usefulness as surrogates to describe poorly recognised aspects of culture, introduced into the theory of culture in place of new authorial theoretical categories still "under construction." These seem to be the reasons for adapting to this theory the concept of the sign character of culture, as well as the continued vitality of this concept.

Both the sign and signification are understood differently in the various fields and positions into which semiology has become divided. What the signifying nature of culture entails depends on which theory of culture one's understanding of culture derives. From the point of view adopted here, the signifying nature of culture is a general property of culture, in which the relational nature of culture, in the etymological sense of the word, is expressed, consisting in referencing its correlates to higher-level sources of their new quality and greater validity they possess. "The system of reference" specific to culture is the order of values. Its peculiar relationality is thus expressed not in all signification, but only in that kind for which signs can correspond to particular conditions posed by values as a signified object [*przedmiot*], and is essentially irreducible to conceptual-logical categories. A sign of this kind—let us call it axiotic—is already, in a sense, limited from the outset in its role as signifier. From a semiological point of view this is a defective sign. At the same time, however, it nevertheless is one—or to be more precise, the object that performs the function of a sign here—is capable of performing other roles apart from signifying. It not only signifies value, but also actualises it. It is not only a sign, but also a valuable object [*przedmiot*].

For this kind of sign—which is not only a sign of value, its semiotic equivalent, but is also a carrier of value or even its objective concretisation—a separate name seems to be necessary as an expression of its essential difference from

all other signs. Due to correspondences in its nature, it could be named a 'symbol,' but only in a non-semiological sense, referring to that current of traditional humanistic thought for which a symbol was usually something more than a sign and was associated almost obligatorily with the order of values. A symbol interpreted in this way would have the ability to become its own conceptual category in the theory of culture and play a leading role in it as an essential element of the concept of culture in culture studies.[12]

This concept, despite its ambiguous generality and the usual inconsistencies in the phase of "difficult beginnings," we try to use today as a hypothesis indicating the likely core components of a certain structure of culture. Thus, when we ask about the axiosemiotics of specific behaviours or creations, we are in fact asking about their cultural status, assuming that the causal factor in this status is the hypothetical relations constituting the order of culture, described as axiosemiotic. This is a question for the study of culture, not a semiological one, although the concept in question grew out of a dialogue with semiological treatments of culture.

The question posed in this text about the relationship between messages and values is also a question about cultural status, and especially about the cultural status of messages, though one formulated more simply with the intention of addressing the question a bit more broadly. It is for the same reason that the word "message" was introduced into the title, though it is not a term from theory of culture. More important than this for the present text, however, is its "domestication" in everyday language, which has made "message" a popular collective name for a wide class of different means of conveying information, and there are reasons to consider the problem—because for the theory of culture it is a problem—of the relationship between these means to culture.

So what is a message from the point of view of theory of culture? In a theoretical sense, it is defined in terms of categories, where it is a term because of its function, which, however, is not so important for the theory of culture, and which therefore excludes the message defined in this way as being beyond its field of vision. Only by defining messages from a colloquial point of view—as observable objects—is it possible to notice that the function they fulfil of conveying information does not exhaust the possibility of a more complete, multilateral characterisation of an object that is a message. Thus, the message as an issue in the theory of information or communication cannot be an issue in the theory of culture, though it can possibly be an aspect of an object conveying information that is neither informational or communicative, whose properties determine the cultural status of this object. A researcher of culture may make this aspect of the object the subject of his research, just as researchers of information, communication etc.

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[12] Editor's note: We deliberately use the term "culture studies" in place of the widespread "cultural studies" to draw attention to the distinctiveness of Polish cultural studies (*kulturoznawstwo*) from British and American cultural studies.

make objects of study out of other aspects of the same object. For a researcher of culture, objects that are messages are therefore worthy of attention only to the extent to which they actualise properties that can be the basis for interpreting such objects as correlates of culture. We look for such properties in human behaviour and creations when we study their axiosemiotics.

The most important path in this search is the axiotic aspects of these objects, i.e. their relation to values. This does not mean, however, that any association with values is the right path. It is true that we are inclined to grant a cultural status to every object that can be interpreted as a message of values, but not every message that "talks" about values can be legitimately considered a message of values. It should be noted that many messages in their various types merely inform about values, that is, they convey not values but only information about them. They are messages of information, not messages of values. We would be unjustified in granting cultural status to such messages, or more precisely, to objects fulfilling the function of conveying information. However, they are granted a civilisational status because information is undoubtedly a significant and important factor in the existence and development of civilisation.

When we talk about informational messages as a whole class of means of conveyance, we should be aware that it would be difficult to point to some type of object as a message that fully corresponds to the ideal type of a "pure" informational message, that is, one that only realises its functional essence and is free of the so-called "noise" that generally arouses axiotic suspicion. Even the letter, a medium quite clearly functionalised, is most likely limited to its informational function only in an official letter, while in a private letter, for example, the informational function and the element of redundancy are usually in competition with one another, with the latter generally not carrying out its assigned pre-corrective role in relation to the message, pushing the text's functionality into the background and exposing itself as its most important layer, though this importance no longer concerns its informational aspect. It is this layer that constitutes the most signalled domain of axioticity in the message, because it actualises itself in the very language that conveys the information, and yet an object such as a letter, even in its simplest form, 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 actualise them in its material form by making them its properties, with which it interacts with the object relatively independently of the receipt of information.

The axiotic aspects of an object that is an informational message are undoubtedly enriched when it is more complex, syncretic, and composed of different materials. This is evidenced, for example, by works of art, which, after all, also belong to the class of messages. This view on the complicated but also richly varied means of combining axiotic forms with the informational function is illustrated particularly vividly by the postcard. It is a singular object among media, combin-

ing highly diverse functions, roles and statuses. The multiplicity of its types, genres and varieties allows us to get to recognise various forms of axioticity within one type of message. It also seems to be a characteristic example of the unique status in the human world not only of means of transmission, but also of other objects situated on the borderline between the orders of civilisation and culture.

Example of the postcard

The scope of the exemplifying role of the postcard is limited here by the scope of the topic of this text, considering the slightly broader interpretation of this topic presented earlier. Therefore, as we are interested here in the postcard as an example of the relationship between message and values, we will likewise take up the issue of its cultural status.

In colloquial terms, a postcard is a form of correspondence; from the point of view of information theory, it is a means of conveying information. From both points of view, it is thus established that the essence of the postcard is reduced to the function of conveying information.

The cultural researcher will not, of course, deny that the postcard has such a function, but this property does not yet make the postcard the subject of his research—a cultural object [*przedmiot*]. We will therefore not be dealing with all the ways the postcard fulfils this function.

In order to explain whether and to what extent the study of culture may also find the postcard a subject of interest, we will first turn our attention to the postcard as an observable object. We will do so not only because distinguishing culture from its empirically recognisable physical manifestations does not mean they are not important for the study of culture itself, as they seem to be necessary in research on it. An important reason for this is that 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.

The postcard as an object presents itself to us in various forms, determined by the diversity of its external, observable features. Its most important feature seems to be the text written on it, as it is present in all its variants, even if limited—in extremely "economical" cases—to the address itself. The verbal text of a postcard seems to be an indispensable minimum condition—but also a sufficient one—for it to fulfil the function of an informational message. But already here doubts and reservations begin to appear. The quoted characteristics of the postcard indicate its similarity to (some) other means of conveying information, but they do not indicate its specific features. For example, they do not distinguish it from a letter. In turn, what distinguishes it externally from a letter does not seem to concern their common functional essence. What distinguishes a postcard from a letter, namely the

public availability of the verbal text, which is handed over to the addressee without an envelope, does not diminish the informational functionality of this means of conveying information, nor does it result from the fact that the volume of the text is usually smaller than in a letter, limited by the traditional dimensions of a postcard, though one can assume that in a text limited in this way the informational function will be realised in a slightly different manner. This is the case at least for the post-card in its simplest variety, which is limited to the verbal text, and therefore can only be regarded as a special form of "letter message."

In the modern world, however, the postcard is not so much a piece of paper with a characteristic format and a sparse verbal text, as an iconic "furnishing" of it, one generally considered to be a characteristic and representative component of the card. We would not call this iconic component a page or an illustrative "part" of a postcard, as it is rare that a photograph or reproduction of a painting actually illustrates the information given in the verbal text. Over time, through the inspiration of semiology the postcard icon came to be called a text, but—as opposed to a verbal text—it is an iconic one. This has the following implications: an icon likewise—though differently than a text composed of the signs of a natural language—contains information, and thus serves in its conveyance. Such an interpretation of a postcard icon, reducing it to the function of a specific means of conveying information, seems unjustified, and recognising the genre identity of a postcard may lead to our overlooking specific and very important features of this particular form of message.

This interpretation raises objections not only to seeing in the iconic "layer" of the postcard the function of conveying information, but also to suggesting that such a function is inherent in all iconicity, and that the essence of the iconic postcard is therefore exhausted in this function. It is a well-known fact that an icon of a certain type, oriented towards visually representing reality with maximum fidelity, is by definition already an informational message via its functioning independently in this respect of the intentions of both the "sender" and the "recipient." What is worth emphasising here is that this functioning has an objective basis, so it is not the same as the seemingly objective capacity of a similar effect of something that is in fact merely a human conception of the supposed disposition of phenomena independent of man to specific causal behaviours, a disposition imputed by man to phenomena as a consequence of his functionalising almost everything around him. An example of such an arbitrary functionalising is both imputing a fixed causative capacity to some events in the order of nature, and the attribution of a specific educational in-fluence to an abstract painting composition.

A reproduction of such a composition and an autonomous decorative motif—lacking ties to any current in the artistic tradition and comprising a fairly com-mon variety of postcard icon—are both cases of iconicity whose informational functionality seems at least problematic. In the modern-day postcard—because we should not forget about the historical variability and development of this form

of transmission—perhaps even more interesting in this respect is a naturalistic type of icon. Its evolution is characterised, it seems, not so much by freeing itself from the principle of representational 'faithfulness' to the visible world, as by an indifference to the traditional informational duties of postcard iconicity. From the tradition of the naturalistic icon often only single motifs, isolated from their natural context, remain, and even in a veristic approach, these motifs in the postcard icon usually do not comprise a clearly intelligible "text." The traditional informational functionality of the iconic side of the postcard assumes a particular form of internal functionality—in service to roles that lie outside the postcard's cognitive and informational functions. The informational functionality thereby weakens, but does not disappear entirely, because the icon still "informs," directly or indirectly, about such aspects as the painting of which it is a reproduction, if even this work is "only" an abstract composition. Everything that comprises the iconicity of the postcard, however, is not encompassed within the notion of information transfer, just as the icon—considered as a sign structure—is not merely a sign referencing reality.

In characterising the "behaviours" of the postcard icon, we cannot forget that although it has relative autonomy, it is also an integral component of a larger whole, participating in its "behaviours." This positioning of the icon within the structure of the postcard, and especially the peculiar interaction between it and the verbal text, may result in thrusting onto the iconic component of the postcard the informational function realised by the text, and may even lead to the creation of new information, in the conveyance of which all the components of the postcard will participate. The icon's location within the structure of a postcard may also have completely different results. A naturalistic icon, combined accidentally (or on purpose) with a text which is informatively weak, enigmatic or even distant in terms of content, may lose its independent informational function, or at least be radically limited. To a lesser extent, the icon may also weaken the informational potential of the verbal layer of the postcard, and thus of the postcard's overall message.

Within the structure of the postcard, the most active carrier of information is undoubtedly the verbal text, but even in terms of this function, it would seem it displays deviations that are not accidental in nature. The last few decades have brought forth visible symptoms of a deepening crisis in the postcard's function as an informational message. Such symptoms include the progressive conventionalisation of the text, its impoverishment not only in form but also in content, its quantitative reduction, and even the tendency for private handwritten communication to disappear altogether. These transformations of the textual layer of the postcard can be seen as a symptom of the schematisation of forms embodying the contemporary collective consciousness or as an effect of the unification of contemporary modes of communication. In the conventionalisation of the language of postcard correspondence we can also see a symptom of "making-redundant" this form of communication in the face of competition from new, increasingly efficient

means of communication. If so, why is the postcard not dying out, but rather manifesting heightened vitality? One can speculate that the crisis in the card's informational function does not extend to its other, hitherto secondary roles, for which it may even prove beneficial. In any case, the crisis of its functionality has led to the "weakening" of the postcard as a means of transmission, making it unnecessary for civilisation. The postcard is thus leaving the order of civilisation. Is there any reason to claim that it is now finding a new place within the order of culture?

When looking for an answer, we should first of all remember that, functioning from its beginnings as a means of transmission, the postcard usually performed this function in a rather particular manner. Placing so-called "noise" above the information itself is not a unique phenomenon in the history of the postcard's written text. Sharing with other forms of communication a tolerant attitude to redundancy, the postcard text tended to refer to it in a particularly privileged fashion, even in times when civilisation still imposed serious communication roles on the postcard. It might seem risky to see such a privileged form of redundancy in this form of communication, one which strictly limits the volume of the written text. But if we agree that redundancy is not only an "excess" of roles played by the text, understood as going beyond the informational function, which is *de rigueur* for the postcard as a message—then we should also agree that redundancy is a characteristic property of the text of such a card. Redundancy—as has already been mentioned above—in its "redundant" essence, as a means of going beyond the norm, which is here informational functionality, remains a negation, or at least a violation, of functionality.

What, then, would be the role of the verbal text here if it loses its function of conveying information? Redundant stylistics replaces the communicative and economical stylistics of optimal functionality in the text of the postcard, not so much under competitive pressures from new means of transmission, which provide informational functionality to a degree unattainable for the postcard, but, above all, because what the text is trying to approximate and actualise here cannot be grasped in informational terms. The singularity of the postcard as a message is therefore a consequence of the singularity of its matter and object of reference. It is a feature of its genre, one that is probably as old as the postcard itself. The typical style of a postcard text, 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.

In such a role the text in a syncretic postcard, combining word and image, meets the icon, which in its references to reality often, and even more often than a verbal text, performs the semiotic relation in a nontypical and original way. One can even say that the semiotic relation, i.e. the signification that takes place

in a sign reference, becomes secondary here, because—firstly—both the direct sign reference and any similar reference in the verbal text are in relation to the syncretic message merely components of the overall semiotic relation, which is the final "goal" of such a message; secondly—the complex but also general character of this final "signified" object [*przedmiot*], which prevents its unambiguous identification as a sign (in a narrower understanding of the sign), yields a representation of this object that is inadequate and epistemically sterile; thirdly and finally—everything that seems here to realise the semiotic relation—and through it likewise the function of the informational message—is in fact subordinated here to another relation, namely the axiosemiotic one. Not every reference to a value is such a relation—one such negative example is a sign reference representing an attempt to "signify" a value or—from another point of view—inform about one— but it is especially the concretisation of a value in a particular thing or behaviour, in particular icons or texts or in their combinations, whose most important role is to actualise these values. We are referring here to a role, not a function, in order to distinguish the objective status (of course, on the basis of the code in force within a given communicative community) of the informational function from the role of a subject defined as valuable by culture, which by concretising the value actualises it and allows it to be shared, though this valence is not universally obligatory; it is thus merely a role that does not determine effects and consequences, and not a function whose essence is expressed in the need to achieve a specific effect.

In many objects that perform the function of an informational message, especially those that are at the same time—or even primarily—works of art, we can observe not only the concomitance of this function with the role of actualising values, but also the inseparability of these two aspects of the object's "behaviour." They are not the same thing, however, as they are realised in completely different references from the object, though there are undoubtedly multiple mutual dependencies whose nature and scope could only be grasped through a very penetrating analytical case study. In the semiological option, which is not interested in the axiotic element, the occurrence of special types of "signs" in such objects is observed, and even some axiotic entanglements between them, though they are usually treated merely as a variety of sign, so also as a means of performing the function of marking alone. However, we are accepting here the point of view of those, although today they are few in number, who insist on considering the differences between these particular "signs" to be critical, and even focus on distinguishing them as symbols, a name reserved especially for them, from signs in general. Following the suggestion of Paul Tillich's concept, Leszek Kołakowski, who wrote that, unlike other signs, a symbol "comes to be regarded as a representative of something that, in principle, cannot be represented otherwise, and of which the symbol is not simply a sign, but a participant, or an incarnation."[13]

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[13] L. Kołakowski, *Kultura i fetysze. Zbiór rozpraw*, Warszawa 1967, p. 240.

It is worth noting that theoretical conceptions of the symbol have appeared recently that go even further in justifying its separateness.[14]

Admittedly, when looking for examples of a symbol fitting the above-mentioned meaning, Kołakowski limited himself to the commonly distinguished fields of religion and art, in which the axiotic character of symbolicity is most obvious; nevertheless, considering the role played by similar "sign" structures in actualising values, one can view the scope of symbolicity's presence to be wider, taking into account, of course, the diversity expressed by symbolic forms and structures in the various "materials" in which they appear.

The postcard is situated within such an understanding of symbolicity, though it clearly plays here a limited role in actualising values. It is above all a syncretic card with an icon that either has only a symbolic character or is a key component of the symbolic structure of the card as a whole, and a factor in its overall symbolicity. In the latter case, the icon itself may express nothing of a symbolic nature; it may be characterised by a naturalistic "literalness"; it may be just an ordinary photograph; it may even be maximally reduced in its plasticity, and limited, for example, to a mere decorative motif. It is sufficient that it contains at least a minimal form of indispensable symbolicity, particularly its relational role, the observable substrate of the symbol. Because the symbol itself may in this case be a common expression of the mutual relations of all the components within the card's structure. Such an expression may also be produced in the interaction of the basic components present on the card, i.e. the icon and the verbal text, even if each of them performs only an informational function. Incidentally, we can express the supposition (because I am unaware of any relevant research in this area) that 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, just as we can see informational aspects in the symbol's role in actualising values. Looking from yet another point of view, we could say that this sphere of probable, though not readily clear interactions between the sign and value references in a postcard is most likely likewise a sphere of those hypothetical axiosemiotic relations in which we are inclined to see a specific form of structurality in culture and in which we might also see the basic "material" of symbolicity in its previously presented understanding.

At this point we can formulate a conclusion based on the last section of my considerations, because it is probably clear enough anyway. The postcard originated as an informational message functioning within the order of civilisation, but over time it has acquired an increasingly distinct cultural status. Its premises have long been contained within it: in various deviations of the informational function it performs, in the specific nature of the information privileged within it, and in the axiotic aspects of both the content it carries and the anticipated reactions of its recipients. As the development of civilisation made its informational function

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[14] See S. Buda, "Osoba i kultura," *Studia Filozoficzne* 2, 1986, pp. 81–94.

redundant, its new role crystallized, the role of not only signifying or representing values, but also actualising them. The basic signifying nature of the card's components, in accordance with the "functional" transformation taking place, was transformed into symbolicity. In this way, we can now directly answer the question posed earlier: the postcard, having done its service in the order of civilisation, finds for itself a new place in the human universe—a place in the order of culture.

In such a brief and general conclusion there is obviously no room for recalling various otherwise important distinctions and qualifications. It can be assumed that this outline of the evolution of the postcard will be read with an awareness that it outlines only a general trend in its development, which has been, and continues to be expressed in only a part—and probably a small part—of the massive and myriad production of postcards, as well as in the extensive practice of postcard correspondence. However, among the issues which this short essay has tried to raise, at least one requires a separate footnote. We have mentioned here several times the process—caused by the development of civilisation—of making the postcard redundant as a means of transmission, and its replacement by new, more efficient means of realising this function. This process, which has occurred over time and encompassed an entire genus, can be generally divided into two stages: an initial one, when the postcard was still a message, and a later one, when as a consequence of having lost its functionality it was transformed into a cultural object [*przedmiot*]. It should be noted, however, that a similar process of being made-redundant has also taken place in the case of the single postcard, with similar consequences. Here, however, the *caesura* is more pronounced, because this becoming-redundant is itself more evident. A postcard which has completed its full functional cycle, i.e. the route of the message from the sender to the addressee, has definitively ended its existence and functioning in the civilisational order. When it is preserved, it has a chance for a completely new form of existence, perhaps one of much greater significance, in the order of culture, where the full potential of its axiotic references may be activated. Most often it will be merely a souvenir, which does not mean, however, that it will only be an informational message from the past. It will also be, however, not infrequently a subject which by means of its symbolic relation actualises a value—and not only for individuals in relation to their private motives.

However, this individual "life after life" of a postcard does not really belong either to its "biography" or even more so to the genre history of this card. In fact, it constitutes material for a completely separate subject of interest—as a stage in the postcard's manifold participation in culture, a role which for an individual postcard only begins in earnest at the end of its functional existence. It is precisely this new existence that could be a particularly attractive subject of interest for culture studies.

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