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The postcard and its “short circuit”

To put it succinctly, the main idea of Stanisław Pietraszko’s “Messages and values” is that no message (or, more precisely, no object that serves as a message) is ever a pure message in the sense of being entirely subservient to its informational function, since it always carries an “excess,” a certain redundant “prolixity” which (against semiology’s prevalent notions) need not be in the least geared to optimizing the cognitive process. On the contrary, in terms of communication, this property can be regarded as a troublesome information overload, or “noise.” However, it is this very “noise” that Pietraszko identifies as a fundamental, “axi-osemiotic” aspect of the message, namely, as a “correlate of culture,” which is the proper subject of his research as a culture scholar.

This is undoubtedly a spot-on idea. So much so, that it is, so to speak, recursively applicable to Pietraszko’s paper as such. When read more than thirty years after its publication, the paper reveals its own redundancy: a distinctive “excess” that accompanies the “message” and stands as a methodological and historical correlate of a certain academic culture. Without a doubt, this intellectual idiom deserves a dedicated study of its own.

Nevertheless, what is of main interest to me is the fact that, in “Messages and values,” Pietraszko chose the postcard—specifically, the illustrated postcard, which he calls “iconic”—to illustrate “richly varied means of combining axiotic forms with the informational function.”¹ This does not mean that Pietraszko’s paper epitomizes Postcard Studies or at least outlines or proposes a related project. Pietraszko should be taken seriously when he explains that “[t]he scope of the exemplifying role of the postcard is limited here by the scope of the topic of this text,”² which suggests that his argument is an analytical exercise where the postcard is treated as an epistemically productive and, at the same time, handy object. Therefore, Pietraszko’s paper will be of little use to those interested simply in how

¹ S. Pietraszko, “Messages and values,” transl. T. Anessi, *Prace Kulturoznawcze* 26, 2022, no. 4, p. 112.

² *Ibid.*, p. 113.

that particular development unfolded in the history of communication or, more generally, in the history of cultural practices related to the post. Even though Pietraszko himself insists that “we should not forget about the historical variability and development of this form of transmission,”³ he uses the convenient and grossly simplifying term of the “modern-day postcard.”

To a visual culture researcher who also studies the history of postal practices, the intellectual experiment that Pietraszko conducts over a handful of pages of his paper makes sense in a rather different way. Specifically, most research on postcards focuses, in broad lines, either on their recto side or on their verso side. As a result, the knowledge of postcards is more often than not produced as a subdiscipline of the history of literature (theory of the letter, correspondence of eminent people, etc.) or of the history of art. The third option involves a reductive approach to postcards as visual archives helpful to historians, social scientists, and regional researchers.

Meanwhile, Pietraszko emphatically states that: “Everything that comprises the iconicity of the postcard, however, is not encompassed within the notion of information transfer.”⁴ Besides, he underscores that while the “postcard icon” has “relative autonomy,” it is an integral component of a larger whole; hence, what also matters is the “positioning of the icon within the structure of the postcard, and especially the peculiar interaction between it and the verbal text.”⁵ This insight is absolutely pivotal to the cultural-studies account of this issue. Drawing on this, I would point out that the two sides of the postcard (recto/verso) are paradoxically interrelated, being “an unnecessary excess” and “a correlate of culture” to each other. Identified here on the level of basic research, this short circuit opens up a space for further, genuinely cultural explorations of postcards—for studies going beyond their editorial or aesthetic aspects and pondering first and foremost the practical social context in which postcards were functionally embedded (stressing their “post-” component as bound up with the time before their historical “becoming-redundant,” to use Pietraszko’s pithy coinage). Notably, the postcard differed from a range of other illustrated printed matter in that, even when already off the printing press, the postcard remained merely a “half-product” and needed further (private, official, technical) operations representing salient “correlates of culture” in the daily life of a postally networked society.

This is, I believe, what Pietraszko’s observations imply, even if he does not articulate such implications directly.

Translated by Patrycja Poniatowska

³ Ibid., p. 115.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

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