Image, recto, verso, context. Approaching Deltiology as a method

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Postcards, as an early and very "viral" form of social media, captivate for many reasons.[1] Their persistent appeal could stem from a peculiar configuration: an intendedly ephemeral short message medium,[2] mass-produced for narrowly defined communicational purposes turns when used into a unique multimodal[3] carrier of social traces, history, stories, i.e. social text. Not least, collecting postcards is an easy and wholesome hobby. In contrast, the research practice known as *delitology* achieved only scattered scholarly attraction so far.[4] The term "deltiology", which some collectors considered to be rather snobbish, arguably traces back

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1   Pyne, Lydia, *Postcards: The Rise and Fall of the World's First Social Network*, London, Reaktion Books, 2021.

2   Gillen, Julia, "Writing Edwardian postcards", *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 2013/17; p. 488–521. DOI: 10.1111/josl.12045.

3   Gugganig, Mascha; Schor, Sophie, "Multimodal Ethnography in/of/as Postcards", *American Anthropologist*, 122/3, 2020; p. 691–697. DOI: 10.1111/aman.13435; Gillen, *op.cit.*; Kaden, Ben, "My Dear Mother" Multimodalität als Herausforderung bei der Auseinandersetzung mit Ansichtskarten, *retraceblog*, 01.11.2021, https://retraceblog.wordpress.com/2021/11/01/my-dear-mother-multimodalitat-als-herausforderung-bei-der-auseinandersetzung-mit-ansichtskarten/ (02.03.2023); Pyne, *op.cit.*

4   As of February, Google Scholar has just about 240 articles that somehow mention "deltiology". The somehow related field of "Philately" lists about 12600. However, "deltiology" itself is a niche term. There are more publications research somehow involving postcards.

to a Randall Rhoades of Ashland, Ohio, and was proposed around 1930.[5] The German equivalent is the undisputed, yet also not very common term *Philokartie*, and apparently rooted in the French special journal „Le Philocartiste".[6] Here, the semblance to philately is obvious. Often researchers seem to prefer "postcard research" instead of "deltiology". Such in terminological indecision might further hint towards a lack of scholarly consolidation. Yet, it appears a number of studies try to push in this direction. At disciplinary margins, postcards seem to find niches across cultural,[7] geographical,[8] regional,[9] historical,[10] and media

5   Smaridge, Norah, "Would You Pay $150 for a Postcard?", *New York Times*, May 16, 1976; p. 95.

6   Formely known as *La Cartophilie Illustrée* the journal relaunched as *Le Philo-cartiste. Moniteur des collectionneurs de cartes postales illustrées* in August 1903. See: Carline, Richard, *Pictures in the Post*, London, Gordon Fraser, 1971; p. 124.

7   Kaden, Ben, "Kinoarchitektur im Spiegel der DDR-Philokartie", in: Plaul, Marcus; Haumann, Anna-Rosa; Kröger, Kathleen (eds.), *Kino in der DDR. Perspektiven auf ein alltagsgeschichtliches Phänomen*, Baden-Baden, Nomos, 2022; p. 51–88; Baldwin, Brooke, "On the Verso: Postcard Messages as a Key to Popular Prejudices", *The Journal of Popular Culture* 22/3, 1988; p. 15–28. DOI: 10.1111/j.0022-3840.1988.2203.

8   Arreola, Daniel D.; Burkhart, Nick, "Photographic Postcards and Visual Urban Landscape", *Urban Geography*, 31/7, 2013; p. 885–904, DOI: 10.2747/0272-3638.31.7.885.

9   For example, the cultural geographer Daniel D. Arreola published quite a number of books on the depiction of the Mexican American borderlands in vintage postcards. Arreola, Daniel D., *Postcards from the Baja California border portraying townscape and place, 1900s-1950s*, Tucson, University of Arizona Press, 2021; Ibid., *Postcards from the Río Bravo Border: Picturing the Place, Placing the Pictures*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2021.

10   Wilson, Kenneth, *Snapshots and short notes: images and messages of early twentieth-century photo postcards*, Denton, University of North Texas Press, 2020; Burns, Peter M., "Six postcards from Arabia: A visual discourse of colonial travels in the Orient", *Tourist Studies*, 2004/3; p. 187–303. DOI: 10.1177/1468797604057327.

studies,[11] and ethnographic research[12] or sometimes simply descriptive auto-ethnographic rediscoveries of their joys and potentials.[13] Each of those attempts is worthwhile and interesting. Yet, the scattering over time and disciplines once more empirically underlines a marginality of postcard studies, which probably comes for a reason. At first glimpse, postcards appear just somehow overlooked, still easy to handle.

Fig. 47: Mumbai, in the 1960s. The words "Finlays Fabrics" and "Congress" emerge from this urban view and suggest the economic and political reality of Independent India.

But when the actual handling starts, everything turns out to be more complicated than imagined. Or as Jan-Ola Östman puts it, postcards appear as a "paradoxical phenomenon, does not fit nicely into the tradi-

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11   Östman, Jan-Ola, "The postcard as media", *Text & Talk*, 2004/3; p. 423–442. DOI: 10.1515/text.2004.017; Cure, Monica, *Picturing the postcard: a new media crisis at the turn of the century*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2018; Meikle, Jeffrey, *Postcard America: Curt Teich and the Imaging of a Nation, 1931–1950*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2016.

12   Gugganig; Schor, *op.cit.*

13   Pyne, *op.cit.*

tional categories that scholars have devised as tools to get a better handle on social phenomena."[14]

They are, as Mascha Gugganig and Sophie Schor write, "an open system, with its various material and discursive dimensions." Yet, "[p]laying with these dimensions bears much potential for creating new methodical approaches, and potentially new genres." Which is exactly what I will exemplify in this article.

Postcards and visual urban research

I choose the research angle of visual urban research as it is probably the most prone field for sourcing postcards as material. To state the obvious:" Postcard imagery holds great promise as a resource for urban researchers."[15] When it comes to reaching a broader audience the depiction, perception, and visual interpretation of urban space has a lot of charm, as, for instance, three volumes by Ulrich Brinkmann alone exemplify.[16] Other examples showcase particular collections.[17] In many

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14   Östman, *op.cit.*; p. 437.

15   Arreola; Burkhart; *op.cit.* The field of tourism might appear equally relatable to postcard studies. See: Modlin, Arnold E., "A market or "a relic of barbarism?" Toward a more inclusive analysis of social memory on postcards", in: Hanna, Stephen P.; Potter, Amy E.; *et al.* (eds.), *Social Memory and Heritage Tourism Methodologies*, London, Routledge, 2015; p. 170–188; Milman, Ady, "Postcards as representation of a destination image: The case of Berlin", *Journal of Vacation Marketing*, 2011/2; p. 157–170. DOI: 10.1177/1356766711435975.

16   Brinkmann, Ulrich, *Achtung vor dem Blumenkübel! Die Fußgängerzonen als Element des Städtebaus: Ansichtspostkarten in Ost- und Westdeutschland 1949 bis 1989*, Berlin, DOM, 2020; Ibid., *Matera moderna: Postkarten aus der Zeit des italienischen Wirtschaftswunders*, Berlin, DOM, 2022; Ibid., *Vorsicht auf dem Wendehammer! Die Straße als Element des Städtebaus: Ansichtspostkarten in der DDR und Bundesrepublik 1949 bis 1989*, Berlin, DOM, 2023.

17   Kramer, Thomas, *New York auf Postkarten. Die Sammlung Andreas Adam*, Zürich, Scheidegger & Spiess, 2010; Wagener, Wolfgang; Erganian, Leslie, *NEW WEST*, Munich, Hirmer, 2019.

cases, though not all, locality marks the collection's focus. Thus, displaying particular places all through the yesteryears using postcards can be potentially presented in countless iterations.[18] An interesting variation of the genre comes from the sociologist Renaud Epstein,[19] who specializes in cards depicting so-called "Zones à urbaniser en priorité"[20] and managed to build a large followership at his dedicated "Un jour, une ZUP, une carte postale"-Twitter-channel.[21] The appeal, undeniably, works. A rare, early, and more deltiological approach stems from the architect Alvin Boyarsky, whose "Chicago à la Carte" was published as a "florilegium" in a reader compiled in his memory.[22] His son Nicholas Boyarsky endeavored to extend his father's 1970s ideas towards a "deltiology of practice."[23] in order to use the medium to deliberate about built environments.[24]

Most of the books include essays or short texts to contextualize the material and elaborate on postcards and postcard history. Many state a perceived general disregard towards the potentials of the medium and accordingly mirror the introduction notes of many scholarly papers, once again, rediscovering the medium. Alas, few of these texts propose systematic insights into a methodology of postcard research. It seems

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18   Schröter, Erasmus, *Bild der Heimat. Die Echt-Foto-Postkarten aus der DDR*, Berlin, Schwarzkopf und Schwarzkopf, 2002; Długosz, Mikolaj, *Latem w mieście: Summer in the city*, Warszawa, Fundacja Nowej Kultury Bęc Zmiana, 2016; Schlatter, Beat, *Postcards*, Basel, Christoph Merian Verlag, 2020; Thomson, David, *Dry Hole*, London, Mörel, 2022.

19   Epstein, Renaud, *On est bien arrivés: un tour de France des grands ensembles*, Paris, Le Nouvel Attila, 2022.

20   Bancilhon, Philippe; Monnier, Gérard, *Les années ZUP. Architectures de la croissance: 1960–1973*, Paris, Picard, 2002.

21   URL: https://twitter.com/renaud_epstein.

22   Boyarsky, Nicholas, *Serious Play. A Deltiology of Practice*, Melbourne, RMIT University, 2016. https://researchrepository.rmit.edu.au/esploro/outputs/doctoral /Serious-play-A-deltiology-of-practice/9921863895001341.

23   *Ibid*.

24   Boyarsky, Nicholas, "The Ephemeral Imagination. The Postcard and Construction of Urban Memory", *CANDIDE*, 2021/12; p. 73–85.

safe to say, that a methodological examination of an integrated deltio-
logical method for architectural and urban studies so far remains largely
cursory. Even where a certain wish to go deeper is stated, postcard im-
ages are mostly used to source images and to illustrate. Sometimes
they are utilized as scholarly proof. Only rarely they are considered as
a medium with singular qualities beyond a specific use case. Except, of
course, the studies focus deeper on postcards themselves.[25] Does this
matter? In many cases, I'm inclined to say, it does not. An interesting
study such as the one presented by Sangeeta and Ratnesh Mathur with
their comprehensive and deeply researched presentation of Indian post-
cards before 1947,[26] probably wouldn't gain anything in an additional
reflection about a deltiological methodology.

*Fig. 48: Mumbai. This rare representation of the Esso
building (now Petrol House) shows a projection of
the building completed in 1956. The collage technique
evokes the practices of the interwar European avant-
gardes.*

25   Meikle, Jeffrey, *Postcard America, op.cit.*

26   Mathur, Sangeeta; Mathur, Rathnesh, *Picturesque India: A Journey in Early Picture
      Postcards (1896–1947)*, New Delhi, Niyhogi Books, 2018.

The impressive volume basically tells the story of India's modern-
ization and industrialization while compiling a trove of information re-
garding the postcard production history of India. It does what it does
and is in itself a seminal work both, for the postcard history of India and
the history of postcards in India. Still, for my text, I want to take a dif-
ferent route.

Collecting images

Image programs and pictorial languages of picture postcards are ex-
tremely varied and in this a blessing and a curse. Postcard imagery
documents phenomena relevant to social or cultural history in aston-
ishing ramifications and breadth of motifs. There is hardly anything
depictable that wasn't depicted on a postcard. Postcard images are
"snippets that offer a cultural history that can't be found through other
media and material culture."[27] But at the same instant they are almost
impossible to overview in total. There is no comprehensive catalog
for picture postcards and even the highly specified topical lists some
collectors for certain topics are usually riddled with omissions. While
extensive lists index about every type and variation of postage stamp
that ever circulated, and even those that did not, no equivalent for post-
cards exists. Every postcard publicly indexed is one that more or less as
fortuitously as by chance landed in an inventory of a collector willing to
do so.[28]

Pictures on postcards were in demand as collector's items from the
start and accordingly discussed and admired in clubs and magazines.[29]
They sold well, so many publishers and even individuals put out enor-

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27   Pyne; *op.cit.*

28   Judging by the online index collect there are suprisingly few collectors who
     actually are, at least publicly. https://colnect.com/de/postcards.

29   Cure, *op.cit.*; especially p. 157ff.; Carline, *op.cit.*; p. 63–72.

mous numbers and variations.[30] Ubiquitous availability, low barriers to entry, comparatively little space, and the infinite variety of motifs and thus starting points for thematic collections popularized collecting postcards as a hobby.[31] In addition, growing into diachronic testimonies of certain views and places over time,[32] postcards function perfectly as low-threshold tokens for nostalgia.[33] Knowing they were produced and handled in specific past timeframes gives them a particular aura. A postcard depicting a place in a certain moment often means, that the object at hand once actually might have been present at this place and around this time. Legible postmarks count as definite proof. In this regard, postcards are tangible time capsules. Postcards with urban and architectural motifs dominate throughout and in typological specifity,[34] but are particularly common, where places, spaces, and buildings were considered a special feature of the locality, i.e. usually new and/or more representative buildings. With the early 20th century's postcard boom, the need for broad marketing and therefore broad geographical coverage arose.[35] Often, the particular representative entity of a place, as in many cases came down to the church, market, court, post office, library, or simply a generic view down the main street. Messages were also diverse, yet often limited in expression by the constraints of mediality and social convention.[36] In earlier days, writing postcards was somehow controversial and innovative, particularly because of the quasi-public character of the medium.[37] For different and understandable reasons most collectors

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30   See for instance on the "Postcard Mania" starting in the USA around 1898. Meikle, *op.cit.*; p. 14–16.

31   Kearns, Seamus, "Collecting Picture Postcards", *Dublin Historical Record*, 2001/2; p. 139–144.

32   Arreola; Burkhart; *op.cit.*

33   Martinovic, Dimitrije, *The Skin of Nostalgia: A Reflection on the Artifice of Postcards, Structuralist Filmmaking, and Home Movies*, Toronto, York University, 2014. http://hdl.handle.net/10315/30249.

34   For example: Kaden, 2022; *op.cit.*

35   Meikle; *op.cit.*

36   Cure, *op.cit.*

37   *Ibid.*; Östman (*op.cit.*) also describes a "public-private gradience".

did and do not emphasize collecting by the message. Reading the communication of strangers feels intrusive and offers from a collector's perspective, little value. It is also difficult to mold an interesting angle for a topical collection and any public display would feel more offensive than impressive. Images prevail with the exception of persons that tap into postal history for stamps and postmarks. Understandably, many collectors exclusively prioritized the motif.

Fig. 49: Mumbai's Marine Drive waterfront boulevard is one of the most reproduced postcard motifs of India. Comparing the views allows us to see the changes in the urban landscape from the 1940s to the present day.

Researching images (and messages)

As for research, there are also hints of deltiology as a form of hobbyist research, now called citizen science. A 1975 article in the New York Times quotes a collector named Dorothy Bloodgood as emphasizing: "Collecting postcards is a study of history and geography".[38] Unlike philately, it was only able to establish itself to a limited extent during the 20th

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38   Jailer, Mildred, "Yesterday's Postcards Are Today's New Treasures", *New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1975; p. 82.

century. To this day, it is regularly rediscovered and more than less as a curiosity.[39] This partly resonates with Östman's assessments of "postcard[s] as a marginal, marginalized, and marginalizable phenomenon in society at large" that "looked down upon, frowned upon, and talked about pejoratively ",[40] though personally, I wouldn't agree completely. Often, I experience quite the opposite. Then again, nowadays the postcard's role might be so diminished, that we are already past any point of judgment and most people do not care at all, while those who do, differentiate more.

While topological postcards are of obvious relevancy for visual urban studies, messages can be too.[41] Of course, the field's deltiologists covet a certain type of message, i.e. scribbled perceptions of places. However, while such notes are not exactly rare, they are seldom detailed. In fact, it is very challenging to compile a workable corpus for an analysis that goes beyond anecdotal musings with the length of a tweet. Generally, postcards are very easy to collect. At least up to a certain moment in postal history, they accumulated almost inevitably on shelves or fridges. Some specimens are harder to find, but if one is not too picky, the nature of a batch product leaves enough copies out there to amass an exhaustive collection very fast with comparably low investment. Vendors describe postcards based on the imprinted descriptions; hence it is easy to search (online) for particular places or motifs. It becomes more difficult, though, if one is looking for a specific style, photographer, or year since that information is often lacking. It gets impossible in regard to messages. Any of those entered my collection purely by coincidence. Any indexing, order, and selection by messages start subsequently after acqui-

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39   Smaridge, *op.cit.*; Correal, Annie, *The Postcard People Carry On*, *New York Times*, Jan. 27, 2018, Section MB; p. 1. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/26/nyregio n/postcard-people.html; Evelyn, Freja, "A collector was 'bitten by the postcard bug' 80 years ago; see some of his favorites", *The Picture Show: PHOTO STORIES FROM NPR*. Jan. 9, 2023. https://www.npr.org/sections/pictureshow/2023/01/o 9/1133372930/postcard-collector-donald-brown-amassed-hundreds-of-thousa nds-over-eight-decades.

40   Östman; *op.cit.*

41   Boyarski; *op.cit.*

sition and can only draw from the given material. Thus, there are plenty of misses and significantly fewer hits in looking for interesting text-image-relations. But from time to time there are. Nicholas Boyarsky provides some examples.[42] I will do too below.

Postcards as social media

Whenever there is a message on a picture postcard, two things emerge. First, relations between image and text. An image is either referenced or it is not. Both states are relational. Second, there are social traces. In terms of the unique features of picture postcards, neither the image nor the message alone suffices. Being fixed to the same material object in a literal double-sidedness is the crucial quality as well as the intentional mailability of picture postcards. Thus, this is what any deltiological method will center around.

Social (texts)

The *social* is as inherent to any form of deltiological study. Other than letters, which split into notepaper and envelope, posted postcards always come with their message and most of the times a variety of processing marks attached. Hence, they can be read as social as well as technical. For our cause, the technical turns out to be advantageous. Due to the requirement of being mailable, recto and verso of postcards are mostly standardized and provide a fixed frame for any variability. Object-wise, those standards make postcards easy to use, collect, handle, store, digitize, and possibly engage with. Even when leaving any message related narrative out, a postcard is already a social object. It is intended to be seen, bought, used, and received by a person. A mailed postcard is inevitably a social and extremely personal artifact: "Sending the

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42   *Ibid.*

postcard is about representing yourself in a particular social and geo-graphic space."[43] Given the inherently social, the deltiological method would aim to define, extract, compare, and analyze those social quali-ties of a postcard. Alternatively, one could speak of *reading* the different layers as social text. As with all professional reading and even more with the usual limitations on background information regarding the persons originally involved, reading means contextualizing: How does what I get from a card, relate to something else and what does it mean, or what can I deduct from it? Thus, a postcard's different peculiarities—image, imprints, publisher information, dates, message narrative, addressing, writtenness,[44] postal marks, possibly material blemishes and damages, annotations, collecting specific property markings—can be used as an-alytical points for reference.

Contexts

To read postcards scholarly, those particularities would need to be set in relation to the larger contexts. Since those are extensive, deltiology connects to a wide range of research topics, as the many though scat-tered attempts in different fields emphasize. Differentiating the specific technical, mediological, visual, and social qualities of picture post-cards allows for determining certain analyzable basic features as well as additional technical, economical, and social context settings of the medium.[45] Such a deltiological baseline makes postcards approachable in a more structured and systematic way, as there are now reliable refer-ence features. For instance, drawing from well-defined basic properties of pictures on postcards a comparative picture analysis of postcard photography could provide insights into different, socially shaped ways of seeing and depicting. And it would allow the question of whether

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43   Jason, Farman quoted in: Pyne, *op.cit.*; p. 38.

44   Gillen; *op.cit.*

45   Prochaska, David, "Thinking Postcards", *Visual Resources: An International Journal of Documentation*, 2011; p. 383–99, DOI: 10.1080/01973762.2001.9658604.

there was (and is) a specific form of "postcard photography".[46] Hence, I suggest distinguishing *material qualities* and *contextual qualities* which both constitute picture postcards as research objects. A deltiological method, or in the end maybe just *deltiology*, would engage with identifying, understanding, describing, and refining those categories in order to link them to topical research questions, which do not necessarily have to center picture postcards. From a sociological or linguistical perspective, one could for instance compare messaging patterns of different forms of written personal communication to those extracted from postcards.[47] From a visual urban research perspective, comparing how particular buildings are depicted diachronically could pose a crucial research question.[48] In short: given fixed points of reference, postcards, especially used ones, bear a rich potential for research. They are both image and communication archives. Nevertheless, there are drawbacks: diversity in motifs and specimens and sheer quantity make a definite assessment of the potential difficult if not impossible. Even worse, any used postcard is an exclusive object. Studying postcards almost always turns into a lesson in contingency. Fortunately, as I will describe below, digitization might come to rescue.

Applied deltiological city scaping: every building on the Karl-Marx-Allee

For text-image relations on postcards, there are two possibilities: an explicit relation exists. Or it doesn't. If there is one, for visual urban research, a strong and elaborately written connection to the image is cov-

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46   See for instance: Nicholas Boyarsky's study of Walker Evans' photography in relation to postcards. Boyarski, *op.cit.* Walker Evans was in fact himself an avid postcard collector; see: Rosenheim, Jeff, *Walker Evans and the picture postcard*, Göttingen, Steidl, 2009. There is also a whole chapter on "Researching Postcard Photographers" in: Bogdan, Robert; Weseloh, Todd, *Real Photo Postcard Guide: The People's Photograpy*, New York, Syracuse University Press, 2006; p. 195–20.

47   Gillen; *op.cit.*

48   Arreola, Burkhart; *op.cit.*

eted. In real life, it is surprisingly rare. Many relational statements are simple, and often more tacit than not: *This is where I am right now*. Yet, there are intriguing pieces. Reading those, potentials for deeper analysis becomes evident. In a presentation called, with a nod to artist Ed Ruscha, "Every Building in the Karl-Marx-Allee" I spoke on deltiology as a form of "visual urban research".[49] I argued that postcards are visual media AND memory media AND media objects at the same time, in fact with the same object. Such a triplet of states allows a threefold and often interwoven reading. First, a postcard can be read visually, including the whole methodological scope of Bildwissenschaft,[50] visual studies, and even art history. Picture postcard photography conceptionally oscillates between vernacular, documentary, and sometimes even artistic photography, making it an apt research object for photography theories between, well, Barthes[51] and Bourdieu.[52]

Reading the image

Collected according to certain criteria for instance a single street, postcards can serve as a diachronic research corpus on the presentation and perception of architecture, urban space, and the experience of place over time. For "Every Building on the Karl-Marx-Allee" I attempted to assemble a line-up of postcards depicting every newly built edifice of Berlin's grand socialist boulevard. Karl-Marx-Allee was constructed starting in the early 1950s in two construction phases each characterized by a specific socialist style of architectural aesthetics: the so-called National Tradition and the Ostmoderne.

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49   Kaden, Ben, "Every Building on the Karl-Marx-Allee. Ansichtskarten als Quellen zur Architekturgeschichte der DDR", Berlin, Digitaler Dialog "Auf dem Weg zum Welterbe", Sep. 9, 2021.

50   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bildwissenschaft (02.03.2023).

51   Barthes, Roland, *Camera lucida. Reflections on photography* (1980), New York, Hill and Wang, 2010.

52   Boltanski, Luc; Bourdieu, Pierre; Castel, Robert, *Eine illegitime Kunst: die sozialen Gebrauchsweisen der Fotografie*, Hamburg, Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 2014.

*Fig. 50: Picture postcard, circa 1955 Berlin Stalinallee*
Liz.-Nr. A 110/55.

Ironically and not as planned, two rather pedestrian prefab blocks appeared later. Therefore, the street pretty much summarizes the architectural history of the GDR from the 1950s to the late 1970s. Given a name change after ten years from Stalinallee to Karl-Marx-Allee, it also onomastically opens up a door to the drifts and struggles of the place-related commemorative culture of the GDR. To this day, the boulevard, as shown on the postcard, succeeds in being impressive in its narrative. Even if one does not know any details, the impetus of representation is obvious. The space is wide open, the buildings shine, and are well proportioned. Greenery gives a placid atmosphere, mirrored in the strolls of the passers-by. Unexpected for such a metropolitan setting, no car traffic is in sight.

The mid-1950s card depicts the so-called Block-C with the penthouse the architect, Richard Paulick, designed for himself in the upper left corner.[53] The block was finished just a few years before and was one of the most ambitious and showy living quarters in East Berlin of the

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53   Barz, Andreas; Dolff-Bonekämper, Gabi, "Das Haus auf dem Haus", in: Flierl, Thomas (ed.), *Bauhaus, Shanghai, Stalinallee, Ha-Neu: der Lebensweg des Architekten Richard Paulick 1903–1979*, Berlin, Lukas Verlag, 2020.

time. Tenants were either rewarded for outstanding achievements or luckily winning a raffle. The perspective leads eastbound down to the still-under-construction left tower of Frankfurter Tor, a major ensemble of GDR architecture designed by Hermann Henselmann and alluding to the churches at Berlin's historically central square Gendarmenmarkt, at the same time already expressing slight changes in the architectural idiom compared to the earlier planning. The prominent streetlamps were designed specifically for the street, also by Richard Paulick.[54]

Fig. 51: Embassy of BRD in New Delhi (1962), whose construction (1954–62) began at the same time as the Stalinallee in East Berlin was being built.
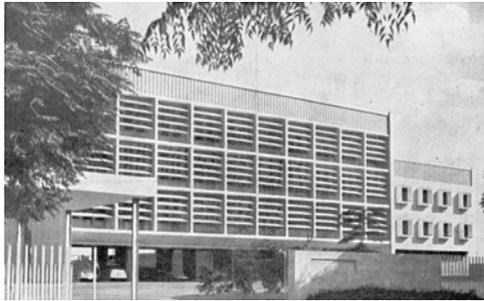
The street space visible cuts out the traffic and reminds us, how the boulevard actually has the width of two large streets combined. The image thus shows and condenses the architectural state of the GDR in the 1950s into a thick, yet easily decipherable pictorial text.

54   Oberpichler, Anja W., *Die Straßenbeleuchtung am Strausberger Platz und im II. Bauabschnitt der Karl-Marx-Allee zwischen Strausberger Platz und Alexanderplatz*, Berlin, Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung und Umwelt, 2014.

Reading the message

Fig. 52: Reverse side of the Stalinallee postcard (Fig. 50).

Turning the card even further charges the object with history. We are missing the backstory, but we still find a lot of information in the hand-written message on the back of the used but not mailed postcard. It reads like a descriptive memo, possibly for later presentation, and is arguably written by an American visitor, who could freely explore the eastern part of Berlin following the Four Power Agreement. From the sound of the message, however, it seems to be a recollection of facts provided during an official tour. The person notes almost as if adding an elaborate cap-tion: "A row of New apartments on the Stalinallee. We went [into] three of them. They are extremely roomy and we would call them 4 Room apts but here they call them 2 Room apts, They rent to outstanding workers & their families [...]" Data and place are added: 8th of October 1955 in East Berlin. The date itself is significant, as October 7th was a national holi-day to celebrate, in this case, the sixth anniversary of the GDR. In fact, the local Berliner Zeitung published an article on this day, that appears

to echo the message written on the postcard in highlighting the quality of the new apartments.[55]

Reading the object

The real-photo postcard is in very good material condition and has the size of a photo print any studio could produce. Accordingly, the sloppily stamped information "ECHTE FOTOGRAFIE – HANDABZUG" reveals, that this particular card was actually produced in a photo lab and hence probably in a small batch. There is no information regarding a publisher. The card might have been made just for the occasion. Seeing the division and information on the back stamped and not printed supports this assumption. The quality of the print itself is good and sharp except for some blurry spots in the corner. There is an additional stamp in the upper left corner above the message showing an assigned licensing number. Even a more informal card such as this needed to be registered in the GDR. It also captions the card with the locality: *Berlin*, *Stalinallee*. Another visible property refers to what Julia Gillen introduced as "writtenness"[56] and "regulation of space".[57] Here, the handwriting is somehow idiosyncratic but still easy to read. Given the motif, place, setting, and message, the fact that it is written in English makes it stand out. It unnecessarily respects the division and the address field, only to digress at the bottom, which suggests a spontaneous scribbling. The provenance of the object could offer some additional clues. Unfortunately, I only remember that

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55   Ke. [Berliner Zeitung], 1955.

56   She references Theresa Lillis' seven aspects of writing: "inscription, acts of mark-making; semiotic practice, the use of symbols appropriated through cultural-historical understandings; materiality, according to technological resources available; multimodality, both in the graphic design of the message and relation to the picture; mobility across time and space; a range of social and communicative functions; instantiations of social practice.". Lillis, Theresa, *The Sociolinguistics of Writing*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2013.

57   Gillen; *op.cit.*

the card was sold online by a vendor in the USA. Hence, at least it is verifiable that the card made it from Berlin to the USA.

But: not every message on the Karl-Marx-Allee (collecting contingency)

While it turns out to be surprisingly easy to visually reconceptualize both sides of an urban boulevard using picture postcards, the example might be a double exception. Firstly, not every street or place was documented that extensive, so the approach fits best for the showcases of urbanism or tourist hotspots. Secondly, as described, the specificity of postcards not solely lies in the image.[58] Yet, it is about potentially using the card for communication. As said above, messages expressively referencing the image are comparably infrequent. But that's not all. Most of those are also undiscoverable and inaccessible, hidden in private collections or overlooked in storage. No one else can own this particular specimen, neatly tucked away in my private black box labelled "Berlin-Friedrichshain". When compiling corpora using customary channels of acquisitions, vendors, online retailers, flea markets, in regard to messages one has to still rely on chance findings. As postcards were intendedly short-lived and in fact often vanished, one mostly has to deal with a motley stack of more or less accidental survivors, dispersed even further by collectors picking and leaving certain cards. Hence, corpora will necessarily remain fragmentary. While online shops index by motif, messages are almost never seen as something of interest. And even if they were, there are no agreements on how to index. Empirically, even in plentiful collections, many messages may turn out to be rather redundant birthday wishes and holiday greetings with an odd gem here or there. Since postcards are necessarily semi-public,[59] most people stuck to letters for their more personal and elaborate correspondence.

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58   Though there can be something as specific research on photography for postcards, see for instance Bogdan; Weseloh; *op.cit.*

59   Östman; *op.cit.*

However, "all messages have the potential to provide insight into how the cards were used and about the people who used them."[60] But extracting and contextualizing such insights, however, remains challenging, as even detailed and intriguing texts often lack sufficient context information to draw substantive conclusions. In many cases, there is a lot of guesswork involved. Therefore, the short messages somehow mirror properties of the images: They are curt starting points for contextualization, fragments, and snippets of the actual settings. This is not necessarily a bad thing. But it demands a different epistemological approach, one that is accepting and managing this kind of incompleteness and contingency. Yet, the question remains: how to operationalize a deltiological method?

Image, message, object—reading is fundamental

Above, I suggested a kind of semiotic approach based on three paths of reading: the image, the message, and the object. In short, to read the image means to analyze the picture, its object, style, composition, technique, and anything that is shown and how it is depicted. Particular details can be inventoried, described, and analyzed separately. Context can be added. For presentations, I often magnify sections of interest.[61] Reading the message, therefore, focuses on the content of the message and its contextualization. It means analyzing any object-related properties and, if possible, contexts as well. However, scholarly reading always needs a lens, usually cut by particular research interests. In a very original and specific paper Nicholas Boyarski, for instance, accesses the role of picture postcards in regard to the "construction of urban memory."[62] He identifies underlying "themes and questions"

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60   Bogdan; Weseloh; *op.cit.*
61   For an example see: https://benkaden.tumblr.com/post/706148230587645952/ ansichtskarte-berlin-stalinallee-t-89058-rnr (02.03.2023).
62   Boyarski; *op.cit.*

regarding "collecting and reading of the postcard", all of which refer to discourses[63]:

1. "the discourses between the individual and the city"
2. "[the discourses] between the formal and the informal"
3. "[the discourses] between the sedentary and the nomadic"
4. "[the discourses] between urbanism and micro-urbanism".

Östman also pointed out the potentiality and the challenges of postcards for discourse analysis itself.[64] While postcards appear very promising at first, they are actually hard to operationalize. In fact, they turn out being difficult to categorize and to address with the established scholarly "tools of analysis". Defining particular topical categories, as Boyarski did, appears at least to be a basic step, while of course leaving the problem of contingency. Now, in terms of conceptualizing multimodality, another variable could be introduced to integrate the social dimension even further. As the proposed deltiological method tends to be a semiotic examination aimed to uncover the form, semantics, and maybe intentions related to postcards, one could argue within this constellation image captions and addresses fulfill a somewhat similar role. While captions refer to what is depicted, any address refers to a person involved. Even when on postcards sender's addresses are uncommon, receiver's addresses are in most cases present and can reveal much information, especially when analyzed in relation to the message. With a corpus large enough, there could be a chance for modeling social networks down to an interpersonal level using this data.[65]

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63   *Ibid.*; p. 85.
64   Östman, *op.cit.*; p. 438.
65   Privacy rules, of course, apply.

Legal limitations

Obviously, privacy law and research ethics raise important issues that limit such an approach and need to be cleared first. But to begin with, for instance, place-to-place analysis and the nature and changes in mail traffic could be already addressed. For images, copyright can be equally complicated. Images are copyrightable works. At the same time, empirically today most vintage postcards would count under orphan works.[66] Therefore, copyright clearance in itself would in many cases come down already to deltiological research. Some legal regimes provide different exceptions for research such as fair use, or fair dealing, but to varying degrees, thus complicating things even further. This also affects any expectations towards mass digitization and datafication for building relevant corpora and opening them up for scholarly or even public use. If in doubt, the motto in research might be: tell, don't show. Yet, it does not apply to the body of public domain postcards. As with many source materials for digital research, we probably need to accept a moving time wall and start with the very vintages.

Digitization (Postcards as digital research material)

As used postcards are unique by nature, in pre-digital times building an encroaching corpus seemed nearly impossible. Contingency dominated. Findability was an issue. Image-based collection building was less complicated since there were copies available. For message analysis there is no way around going big data, i.e. amassing a preferably large corpus in order to then narrow it down again to a sample of relevant specimens. In digital research environments, postcard research might be reshuffled. Picture postcards can be mass digitized and indexed and turned into structured data sets representing collections accessible. searchable, and reusable. Of course, any digitized postcard becomes its own separate object and any tactile information must be coded as a quality of the

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66   https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orphan_work (02.03.2023).

respective data object too. Data modeling in general is not exactly trivial, though the tangible constraints of the medium can be utilized for these steps very well. Modeling multimodality, i.e. the different levels of relationships embedded in the original as well as the new modes resulting from digital specifics is a different story. The same goes for linking data elements across all objects contained in a corpus. Suddenly, deltiology enters the sphere of big data analytics and digital humanities. One simple yet convincing presentation is provided by the Austrian National Library. A project called AKON[67] explores ways of presenting the 75.000 topographical picture postcards in the library's holdings.[68] The available solution uses georeferences to map the respective cards onto a zoomable world map.[69] Unfortunately, additional non-topographical information is only sparsely indexed. Nevertheless, AKON already demonstrates the potential of digital deltiology. Given a yet-to-be-developed standardized deltiological metadata scheme, one can easily imagine the value of integrating several collections in such a presentation, enabling multilayered explorability. Of course, we are still talking about the images and some formal properties such as publisher or year of production. But this again would prepare a starting point for further steps of integrating the more social properties of picture postcards as well. To go even further and connect with current trends, features to encode and annotate the various written, pictorial, and social texts can be included. If open for citizen research, it would neatly loop back to deltiology as a field of passionate engagement for nearly anyone, just as it was at the height of the "postcard mania".

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67   "Ansichtskarten online"; https://akon.onb.ac.at/ (02.03.2023).

68   Müller, Christa; Mokre, Jan; Hintersonnleitner, Michael, "AKON – Ansichtskarten online", in: *Bibliothek – Forschung und Praxis*, 2017/42; DOI: 10.1515/bfp-2017-0031.

69   https://akon.onb.ac.at/#center=eurypzpgxczb&zoom=3 (02.03.2023).

Summary

So if there was something such as a deltiological method, what could it be like?

Following my previous remarks, I propose a three-tier outline:

1. a bare-bone frame that defines the unique qualities of the medium postcard (and hence makes a method deltiological).
2. a set of applications that stem from a particular angle or research question and link those to the specifics of postcards.
3. topical analysis that necessarily breaches into other fields and is hence per se interdisciplinary.

Any of these can be broken down into separate elements, that can be read semiotically and contextualized. Given the specifics of a postcard, reading embraces the image, the message, and the object as an object. Since such a reading needs a defined scope in order to lead somewhere, a particular field of research provides the definition. Visual urban research is only one example. Myriads of other topical scopes are imaginable, too. In fact, as postcards probably depict every topical phenomenon from celebrities to war photography, they can be image-wise utilized for every thinkable topic. Message analysis might be more constrained given the limitations of the medium. Yet, there is a huge variety of forms of expression as well. There are not only waves of popularity of the medium but also shifts in usage patterns. Any deltiological research should contextualize those, too. The challenge remains to identify or built a conclusive corpus of material and develop research tools to explore it. In most cases, research will follow an already existing collection. In a perfect world, the collection would be digitized and datafied following open research standards to link it to other collections. While any postcard itself is a unique object, making postcards available and reusable in suitable cultural data infrastructures could update this mediological revolution of the 19th century into the 21st. And, not least, it could rekindle postcard passions and inspire new forms of re-materialization, too.

Coda: Happy New Year 1966

Fig. 53/54: Left: National Physical Laboratory, New Delhi (1956). Produced by the Advertising Branch, Ministry of I. & B.Govt. of India and issued by the Tourist Traffic Branch Ministry of Transport, Printed in India by the Times of India Press, Bombay. Right: Reverse side of the National Physical Laboratory postcard (Fig. 53).
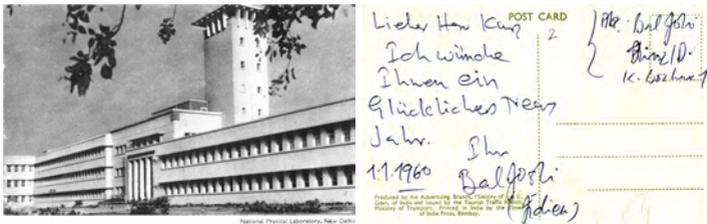
Looking at this postcard, there is at the same time vast and very little information. This paradoxical occurrence is not rare when it comes to cultural artifacts. As we have seen, the standardization of the medium helps extract a defined set of data from any given card. We have precisely one image and one message. Alas, in this case, we are again missing postal data. Though we get a sender's address, sadly this one is rather difficult to decipher. Personal communication comes with the idiosyncratic patterns of handwriting, an obstacle for OCR, and an ambivalence from the stance of deltiological ethics: Illegibility protects privacy. This postcard was never intended to persist for 60+ years and to serve as data for digitally mediated research. It is always a tense issue of how deep one might intrude into the usually personal communication. One may argue, postcards are not letters, hence by default open to read and people used them accordingly. Still, one comes across messages of endearment, grief, anger, or despair, that were never intended to enter a digitized corpus. And, of course, people usually regarded postcards as ephemeral, unaware of digital humanities research and suchlike reexamining communications a century later.

Scholarly curiosity is one thing. But deltiology also needs an informed yet empathic sensitivity on what to include in making material re-readable. When it comes to postcard images stemming from amateur and vernacular photography, the same applies to the pictures. Even if it is frustrating for research, public deltiology, which includes citizen research as well as artistic processing, needs to balance case by case what to include, what to show, and what to make reusable. A "happy new year", however, should be fine with everyone.

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