

Reconciling Anthropology with Graphic Design: Postcards from Bilbao, London and Oslo

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Olga Neva, Research Assistant, Department of Anthropology, UCL

This project was intended to illustrate how Visual Culture can be analysed through a combination of anthropological and graphic design approaches; understanding the social dynamics where images have been created; and the logics of production and consumption of images, as well as various approaches to formal design and its cultural context. The analysis is based upon contemporary postcards of Bilbao, London and Oslo. The research covers processes where graphic design is involved, such as the design logics of representation in each city, and the production and consumption of postcards. The method incorporated formal analysis and other techniques that derive from graphic design itself.

Analysis revealed that the internal design elements differ from place to place. The contemporary market in postcards is totally controlled by private local producers and distributors and in the case of London by foreign companies. Some attempts by the state to control the images can be discerned in Oslo, and some regulations apply to the postcard design system in Bilbao, but in general city authorities do not concern themselves with this industry. Overall, the bigger the city the less the attempt to control either production or the visual politics of place. Oslo being a small city tries to control their images by having “official Oslo Products”; Bilbao has made various efforts to create a consistent visual identity for the city, but the postcards produced do not correspond with the visual identity manuals they have created; and London the biggest of the three has no attempt at control at all, as evident of the visuals. This is manifested in the role of the shield used as a motif by the production company, the depiction of Londoners, the Monarchy, architectural, governmental

and other subjects. Evident also is a lack of design found in the saturation of space with the use of as many images as possible to represent the encounter and the idea of experiencing everything, especially in London. When selecting postcards, people seem to prefer those which were photography based and with a traditional aesthetic based on harmony and rhythm. That is they preferred the designed postcards of Oslo to the relatively haphazard cramming together of images found in London. The point of this study, however, was not to judge any aesthetic value of postcards. Rather it was to demonstrate how graphic design can be a valuable tool when analyzing material culture, including some understanding of the thinking of the graphic designer and their influence on visual culture.

I am hoping to continue my research on how to link anthropology with the graphic design industry, seeing the industry both as a potential subject of study and trying to find approaches which link the perspectives of both. I was wondering if there is anyone else out there with similar interests or who knows of other attempts to create this bridge between graphic design and anthropology.