

A FEW REMARKS ON VALUES AND SIGNS ON CITY WALLS

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The article contains a theoretical and methodological proposal on how to research and understand the visual aspects of urban space. First of all, the authors present the concept of linking signs and values. This idea was created and developed in the 1970s and 1980s on the ground of Polish cultural studies. Researchers propose to use it to describe the graphic phenomena on city walls. What is commonly considered to be manifestations of vandalism or irrelevant images, inscriptions, and scribbles are, in fact, strategies for the transmission of values that are important for social communities (norms, beliefs, ideas, worldviews etc.). The further part of the text presents a few examples from field studies conducted in several housing estates in Wrocław (Poland). The research was qualitative, and the material was recorded with photo and video cameras. The material was collected in the years 2020 and 2021, during the COVID-19 pandemic, which influenced its content.

Keywords: values, signs, symbols, culture, city, block housing estate.

НЕСКОЛЬКО ЗАМЕЧАНИЙ О ЦЕННОСТЯХ И ЗНАКАХ НА ГОРОДСКИХ СТЕНАХ

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Статья содержит теоретические и методологические предложения о том, как следует исследовать и понимать визуальные аспекты городского пространства. Представлена концепция смыслового сопряжения знаков

и ценностей. Эта идея возникла и развивалась в 1970–1980-х годах на основе изучения польской культуры. Авторы предлагают использовать её для описания графических феноменов на городских стенах. Те явления, которые обычно считаются проявлениями вандализма или неуместными картинками, надписями и каракулями, на самом деле работают как стратегии передачи ценностей (норм, убеждений, идей, мировоззрений и т. д.), важных с точки зрения городских сообществ и групп. Развитие этой темы в тексте статьи представлено через несколько примеров из полевых исследований, проведённых в некоторых жилых районах Вроцлава (Польша). Исследование было основано на качественных методах, весь материал записан на фото- и видеокамеры. Важно, что этот материал был собран в 2020–2021 годах, во время пандемии COVID-19, что определённым образом повлияло на его содержание.

Ключевые слова: ценности, знаки, символы, культура, город, блочный жилой массив.

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The below article concerning the analysis of visual and axiological components of the urban environment uses a research perspective strictly related to the history and development of research at the Wrocław Cultural Studies Facility that was founded in 1972 by Stanisław Pietraszko. Over the years, he developed his own original concept of culture that led to the conclusion that culture is an aspect of human life where values are the essential causative factors. At the early stage of his considerations, Pietraszko, fascinated mainly by Russian, American and French semioticians, believed that the axiological field is directly related to the world of signs, that is semiotics of human world. These concepts were formulated in the opposition to the then-dominant Marxists theories. The rumor has it that, during the classes, first Wrocław Cultural Studies students performed an experiment on building abstract models of “axems” – units that contain both values and symbols, that form the whole culture (Pietraszko’s focus was far from biology and computer science; however, this could potentially resemble axons – projections of neurons that transmit information to different neurons). The semiotic perspective was not sufficient for Pietraszko. On the one hand, from the functional and technical perspective, this perspective described culture as a communication tool; on the other hand, its understanding of signs allowed to find them in the nature (including animals); hence, the meaning of culture – as something specific to the humankind – seemed to be reduced.

Concepts taken from semiotics have reduced culture to cognitive aspects only (that is, communication), which did not allow to perceive it as a causative factor for human value-related behaviours. Hence, the concept of linking the world of values with the world of signs was born. Assuming that – because of its subjective nature – values and signs cannot exist in the same ontic space, Pietraszko finally rejected the “axiosemiotik” concept of culture – according to him, the latter is a human specific domain, that is impartial and reflected in behaviours and its material and physical effects (culture itself remains non-observable). However, some of the Wrocław researchers have revisited the “axiosemiotik” ideas, finding some axiological elements in the semiotic processes or acts of communication. This is visible in the works of Professor Stefan Bednarek and Professor Paweł Banaś. Published in 1992, *Aksjosemiotyka karty pocztowej* (*AxiOSEMIOTICS of Postcard*) and twelve years later *Aksjosemiotyka karty pocztowej II* focus on this subject in particular. According to the tradition of Wrocław Culture Studies, culture should be perceived as a “particular domain, irreducible to any other parts of human world, relatively autonomous, and seen from a unique perspective – the cultural studies perspective” [Bednarek 1999, 39].

In an attempt to present how one could analyse the visual and axiological components of an urban area – following Stanisław Pietraszko – we will assume that the semiotic human activity consisting of “marking” the world is related to something that can be described as existential necessity, on the one hand, and as an equally common human’s axiological orientation, on the other. The theoretical thought developed by Wrocław Cultural Studies researchers contains the relation of transmissions, that is a relation between communication features (“transmission of information”) being part of the civilisational order and values, understood as a unique kind of impartial and objectified factors in human existence, that possess a cultural status. Building on these considerations, we aim to show that they can result in a new cultural interpretation of visual signs and cause a better understanding of those manifestations in the urban area, that is on walls, parts of railway embankments, in tunnels, and most of all on outer walls of urban buildings. The subjects of our research are writings and graphic forms placed on various city facilities. For decades, they have been the point of interests of humanistic and social disciplines (also in Poland: Sulima 2000; Biskupski 2008; Grębowiec 2008; Petrucci 2010), but they have been analysed mainly from the perspective of philology and art criticism (cultural anthropology as well). There was (and still is) a lack of studies that would connect visual interference on walls with the everyday life of members of communities,

describe and interpret its forms and messages in the said axiosemiotic perspective. We believe that a development of research tools is required. These tools should enable to perceive walls and facades as cultural phenomena – places where culture manifests itself as both signs and values.

Between 2015 and 2018, we conducted a research on the issues of visual phenomena in the urban areas in Poland, Russia, and Ukraine. Based on this work, we concluded that there is a need for change in the way how we understand the visual organisation of space. The perspective developed by visual studies requires a broader understanding of the order of values. By doing this, we should be able to integrate the perspective from the critical theories, cultural communication, history of art, and anthropology. This multidimensional approach that combines several research methods should become more consistent due to axiosemiotics. We must stress that scientific literature describing the formation of the urban iconosphere is not free from terminological inaccuracies. There is a lack of theoretical precision – agreements on the semantic scope of concepts and on how particular ideas correspond to each other. Researchers hitherto were focusing on the visuals (techniques, aesthetics etc.) or content (politics, for example). We require a deeper dive exploration of the axiological component of the urban iconosphere that will be relevant to the questions raised today by representatives of material studies, without forgetting about ideas developed within the so-called iconic turn (formed under the influence of Gottfried Boehme and Hans Belting, on the one hand, and W. J. Thomas Mitchell, Nicholas Mirzoeff or David Freeberg, on the other).

Therefore, we rely on the humanities tenet whereby culture relates to the semiotic (information, sign, meaning) and axiological (values) area, and at the same time makes the subject of the research out of the visual order (image, vision, sight). The core task should be to consider possibilities and methods of studying culture through the phenomenon of walls as objects having visual components on which values appear. Writings and graphic forms can be described as – following Pietraszko – observable correlations of culture. The theory of the wall as a subject of cultural studies will be confronted with the results of an exploration carried out in Wrocław housing estates neighbourhoods.

From the perspective of cultural and communication studies, a wall – apart from the primary function to form the space and protect residents – is a space of placing messages. These could be announcements, prohibitions, warrants, slogans, writings, paintings, and all other “notes” intended to spread the idea or standards to regulate the actions

of community members (not only ethical, but also social, aesthetic etc.). Those standards are rooted in the value systems.

One can risk a statement that technically damaged and underfunded facilities have the most additive and attractive surfaces that can be used for creative expression and all kinds of visual interference (more likely to be written on than new buildings). Big blocks of flats made of concrete slabs (*Plattenbau*), due to visibility, are becoming a sort of a modern agora – an element of the public space used to express ideas or beliefs in the form of slogans and symbols. In this case, we deal with the realisation of ethical and aesthetic values and also with manifestations: of identity or of memory (general references to the past).

Residential buildings due to their functionality – as it has already been stressed – belong to the modern civilisation. Building walls, however, provide surfaces for visual realisations – they become cultural drivers that reveal residents' needs, desires, or beliefs (they also contain agitation and ideological manifestations). Therefore, we must ask about the role that surfaces and writings, pictures, stickers, and posters placed on them have in the axiosemiotic sphere. We consider walls to be human products accelerating or aggregating the presence of messages and values related to them. To decode them, apart from axiological and semiotic aspects, the visual aspect is essential. One can say that in the analysed behaviours and their material results, values are somehow updated in the human world and placed in physical and social areas. The categories of the physical and the social are not introduced by accident. We perceive interventions on walls in the spirit of what was written by the Slovenian scholar Mitja Velikonja in the introduction to his work *Post-socialist political graffiti in the Balkans and Central Europe*:

Graffiti can either confirm or problematise the current situation, be a part of a critical or an affirmative visual ideology. <...> They are of the affirmative kind if they are represented only as new fine arts, if they serve as an apology for the social inertia of their authors, and if the inherently political gesture of the graffiti is depoliticised through a mediation of their illegality, publicness, aesthetic disruption, and ideological dissensus. In contrast, they are critical if they remain on external walls and not between four walls, if they destroy aesthetic harmony and the political illusion around them in a Brecht-like manner, if they provoke people into participation, into an aesthetic and ethical awakening. If they are "against apathy" <...>. This is what happens with autonomous graffiti creativity or, as I call it, "the emancipation of aesthetics" ("aesthetic regime of the arts" in Rancière's terms) or its usefulness or "the aesthetics of emancipation" ("ethical regime") [Velikonja 2019, 21].

We state that, what is commonly taken as an act of vandalism or irrelevant scribbles, is, in fact, a part of an urban strategy to create a community. Street art – in its broadest understanding as a set of various aesthetics realised on the urban walls (e.g., writings, graffiti, murals, posters, stickers, scratched slogans) – is analysed from the perspective of visual interference that becomes a sphere of manifesting values that are essential to the forming of an identity (often by referring to the past and quasi-legislating the so-called collective memory). What is also important, street art is one of the most common forms of humanising common areas. We understand this as an act of transformation of a particular place by its users to make it less alien/more own. This process seems to be especially important in neighbourhoods consisting of big blocks of flats. Images created anonymously with a spray paint are targeted to use the communication capability of walls. Building walls are used to spread images and slogans that are rooted in the value systems (often contradictory); hence, the mentioned “humanisation” brings us closer to the “understanding of the scale of needs of residents, quality of life and living, value of natural and historical environment, value of social interactions and creation of local urban communities, more than any concepts so far” [Borowik 2003, 55]. In Wrocław, like in other cities, we can observe a variety of spatial plans tied to the specific strategies of urban aesthetics. Two most important ones are under the power of the authorities – the “flagship” spaces that dominate mainly in the central areas of the city, or the recreational spaces, and those that are driven by the economic interests (developers). The main goal of the visual organisation of the latter is limited to profits. In both examples of urban areas, we can observe several forms of visual resistance, in most cases low-cost writings and symbols. We can consider them to be the opposition against the mainstream city theme (images and stories created by the authorities or wealth). In most cases, they are created by members of marginalised groups (due to the gender, race, ethnicity, social class, religion, or subculture etc.) who struggle for visibility in the city. There is also another kind of strategy fallen into processes of creation of urban aesthetics and related to the mentioned before “humanisation”, “settling in” or “taking over/adapting” of the space. In this case, elements of the “bottom up” urban aesthetics are created on every available resource, including apartment block surfaces, garages, dumpsters, benches, tunnels leading to backyards, parts of carpet hangers, backs of traffic lights, staircase handrails, electric boxes, sanitary rooms, intercoms, and other elements of housing infrastructure.

The analysed empirical body of evidence was collected during the period of several last months (autumn 2020 and spring and summer 2021)

in twelve Wrocław neighbourhoods that are known for the modernistic block architecture from the period of the Polish People's Republic (PRL). We managed to document the objects on over one thousand photographs. Wrocław, destroyed at the end of World War II, was suffering from significant housing shortage. "Those housing estates offered standardised, theoretically accessible for everybody, and well equipped and also modern (for the time) flats, which, among other socialist countries, made them a true showcase of socialism and material manifestation of the regime's idea of egalitarianism" [Szafrńska 2016, 11]. After 1989 the perception of housing estates has changed – hardly anyone dreamed about possessing a flat in prefabricated tower blocks. As Andrzej Jawlowski writes, for middle and younger generations "housing estates are mass, forcibly produced architecture. Ugly designs, low standards, bad realisation <...> housing estates are bad, residents do not care about common property, so there is no surprise that the housing estates areas are in worse condition, more devastated" [Jawlowski 2010, 119]. Nowadays, the advantages of this PRL's housing legacy are being discovered. This is how Beata Chomatowska, an author of the book *Betonia* (the title derives from the word "beton", concrete) describes it: "I am not saying that every neighbourhood created in that era is an oasis and that every new developer's realisation is a nightmare; however, when we compare the new buildings <...> with the housing estate from the seventies that was created according to the plan we can be surprised. It suddenly turns out that between the tower blocks we are still able to breath" [Pawłowski 2019].

As we have already stated, because of warfare ("Festung Breslau"), the vast majority of pre-war architecture was totally damaged. The south-west districts, in fact, vanished. The areas between Stare Miasto (Old Town) and the Maslice district became desolated and filled with ruins, where later big block housing estates were built, like Szczepin, Gadow Mały, Popowice, Osiedle Kosmonautów. Going south, we can find Kuzniki, Nowy Dwór or Muchobór Mały and Muchobór Wielki. Housing estates were raised along Powstańców Śląskich Street or on the Gaj area. Also, in the northern part of city that was saved from the warfare, similar estates were built, like Rozanka, Karłowice, Jan III Sobieski estate or Krzywoustego. First material selection was made based on initial content categorisation. Of course, some current themes appeared – related to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, anti-abortion law riots, gender and sexual orientation equality matters, historical and national pride references, along with football clubs' slogans, religious themes, poetry, love confessions or with drugs and addictions. All of this relates to the process of "humanisation" or "settling in" of the space by residents. It is also a reflection of fight for values.



Fig. 1. Ironic writing "Never there will be a summer like that".
Photo: © Grzegorz Soboń, Wrocław, 2021

Because of the specific time when the research was conducted, we have observed concerns about the return of the pre-pandemic world. This was made with references to many cultural texts. Among others, quotes from popular songs were used. We can refer the ironic writing "Never there will be a summer like that" connected with the pictorial representation of the virus (Fig. 1) to this category. It was a quote from a poem and a song of the popular Polish band Świetliki, led by the poet and singer Marcin Świetlicki. "Filandia", as this is the official title of the mentioned song, was performed with a guest appearance of the popular actor Bogusław Linda. The perversity of this writing is based on the fact that the actor sings in a sentimental (and humorous) way that "A cigarette will never have a taste like that, and vodka will never be as cold and nutritious. Never there will be girls pretty like those such tasty cookies. Our national team will never achieve results like that. Never again. Never will we have such a cold meat, such Coca-Cola, such mustard, and such milk. Never there will be a summer like that." Over time, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more politically driven writings began to appear, like: "fight virus", "fuck covid 19" or "where is the flu?"



Fig. 2. Example of a message of a radical political group.
Photo: © Grzegorz Soboń, Wrocław, 2021

As we have already stated, walls are filled with various manifestos that prove the identification with the particular area – housing estate, district, city, region or country. The same can be observed in Wrocław. The mentioned content is often related to terms of admiration, for instance of local sport clubs. In case of Wrocław housing estates, this is mainly about the colors of the football club WKS enriched with Lower Silesian and Polish coats of arms. The imaging of national history is connected with the region that after World War II was incorporated into Poland. This is meant to expose own identity, subjectivity, presence and being part of the community. The area of old Breslau often includes the memory of the Warsaw Uprising (1944). When analysing the virtual content from the walls, memory is understood as a part of the process of establishing what is worth of commemoration, especially what is important for the nation (but also what shall be forgotten – silenced). Visual interference can act as the “order of remembering” about big achievements of the sons and daughters of the nation but also as the repressive erasure or cancellation, for example, of the collective heritage of the Polish People’s Republic (1944–1989). Housing estates like Gadowa

or Krzywoustego (named after a Polish duke who between the 11th and 12th centuries fought against Germans and the Czech) becomes a stage for competitive or even combating ideas. Some cultural studies researchers have the opinion that those are representatives of social forces that believe to be the spokespeople of the one and only truth about life and society. They are not visual creators, but rather distributors of the truth that they want to have the exclusive right on. A good example are messages of radical political groups, often filled with symbols (Fig. 2). Images are overwritten to soften messages of the other side. This is a form of negation of what is false and harmful. Walls are areas of a fight for the monopoly for the truth and for people's hearts and minds (power, hegemony etc.).



Fig. 3–4. Anti-abortion views.
Photos: © Grzegorz Soboń, Wrocław, 2021

Slightly different values are realised and different references to the universal truth are visible in signs and images related to the All-Poland Women's Strike (Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet). These protests were performed in a form of marches that blocked the main streets in Wrocław and other main cities in Poland in the autumn of 2020. Resistance against a new law implemented by the government that almost fully prohibits abortion continued on the walls: "Woman's hell", "Enough!" "Choice not Prohibition!", "Our streets, our wombs". The writings were accompanied with the sign of a distinctive lightning that expresses anger, wrath, power, energy, and resistance. Interestingly, "pro-life" organisations showed their resistance with changing "Enough" into "Enough of abortion" and adding a ground symbol to the lightning. Over time, the ground image became an autonomic symbol, placed on walls in the

form of stickers showing anti-abortion views (Fig. 3–4). Another theme that was widely observed on the walls was the homophobia of the Polish Government. After several declarations of politicians who discriminated same-sex relationships (“those are not people, it’s ideology”), walls were filled with the content from both people accepting same-sex relationships and their opponents. The rainbow symbol was embedded into the Marian iconography and the umbrella associated with the women’s strike, including LGBTQ+ supporters, is meant to protect from the rainbow (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The rainbow symbol and the umbrella.
Photo: © Grzegorz Soboń, Wrocław, 2021

This brief and only exemplary review of the visual interference – meant to show the axiosemiotic capability of the analysis – will be concluded with an overview of a certain type of manifestations that can relate to something that, following the Israeli sociologist Eva Illouz, may be described as an act related to the free market of love [Illouz 2016]. Based on our research, and also considering the statistical information about suicides in Poland (mainly among young males), for many of the less prosperous residents of the already mentioned Wrocław housing estates, mainly for those growing up in troubled families (economic

issues, conflicts, drugs, violence), often ending their education at the compulsory schooling level, without a stable source of income and with no professional perspective, often affected by various addictions, love becomes one of the most important, superior values. A romantic relationship is – unlike the political or business world – the only truth relationship. Even superficial sexism or machismo does not cover the faith in romantic feelings combined with sexual fulfillment. Raw, modernist walls become the surface of residents' romantic confessions, often combined with expressions of hope. House walls are filled with not only simple symbols like “M + B = heart”, or specific love confessions (“I love you Jessica”), but also with images that simply affirm love (Fig. 6). In Wrocław areas, this is still mainly limited to straight relationships; however, emerging, mainly due to the ideological struggles, rainbow flags can change this situation.



Fig. 6. Images that simply affirm love.
Photo: © Grzegorz Soboń, Wrocław, 2021

This article and the examples presented are only a minor contribution to the deeper problem and broader analysis of visual materials available on urban walls. For the creators of the mentioned images, the interference on the walls is more than an aesthetic factor. It is about the series

of values that are reflected and realised in their actions. In this case, it is not about enriching existing objects with a new functionality, for example purely communicative. The message is important because of values that are associated with it. Walls, as physical objects, are subjects of researchers' interests only in their "secondary functions" (like for ornithologists, chiropterologists or bryologists). Walls are surfaces for signs placed by residents. Those signs are correlated with values – they update them. Those various forms of visual interferences clearly point at the emerging values. Researchers can treat them as casual factors for the human behaviour, as correlates within objects that are effects of mentioned behaviours, and lastly as "indicative" signs and images that refer to values.

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