

Gender Representation on Postcards of the Inter-war Era

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Abstract

Using the examples of postcards from the inter-war era of the 20th century, it will be shown how media culture participates in building and maintaining social order by defining gender roles. Several of the most representative examples of French provenance, which belong to the collection of postcards of the National Museum of Leskovac have been singled out. Media culture is inseparable from visuality, since, based on a given visual expression, it creates a framework within which the recipient of media content will perceive, interpret and form an opinion. Gender representations on postcards of the inter-war era are precious testimonies of patriarchal ideology and women's subordination that is represented as natural, although it is a cultural construct. Gender discrimination is a phenomenon that still exists today. Even though the status of women in European societies has undergone a radical change during the past century, the inequality still exists on the basis of their economic and social status. The article seeks to encourage research on the same or similar topic in order to find the roots of gender dichotomy and to understand it so that we can work towards its eradication.

Keywords: media culture, gender, inter-war era, postcard

Introduction

The term "media" should be understood as a mediating factor in communication and an essential structural element of every communication situation, as well as a combination of natural and artificial conditions through which communication is achieved. (Radojković & Miletić, 2005: 95). Media culture includes traditional media (radio, television, film, music) and printed media (magazines, newspapers, comics, books, postcards) (Ljajić, 2020). Media culture is inseparable from visuality, since, based on a given visual expression, it creates a framework within which the recipient of media content will perceive, interpret and form an opinion (Osmančević, 2021: 184). Representations of media culture, as stated by Kellner, show who has power and who does not, who is allowed to use force and violence, and who is not (Kellner, 2004: 5-6). Along with other socialization elements, the media play a significant role in the development of gender roles, but also in the creation and maintenance of gender stereotypes (Penezić, Šunjić, 2013).

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Printing is the oldest mass media which, besides verbal messages, conveys iconic messages, often combined to create new meanings. This possibility was created by the advent of photography, whose invention spurred the development of printed media (Vujović, 2021). The communicative power of photography is one of the reasons for its widespread prevalence (Vujović, 2021: 9). The postcard industry directly emerged from the technique of photographic reproduction in the second half of the 19th century, thus it can be considered as its subcategory (Đurić, 2013: 775 – 776). (Đurić, 2013: 775). A postcard is an illustrated correspondence card: it is a picture (photo, drawing, etc.) printed on cardboard, intended for mailing, without an envelope, usually in the 14 x 9 cm format with an illustration on the front and the text of the correspondence and address of the recipient on the back (Милорадовић, 2014). As a new media for a new market, the emergence of postcards enabled photographers and publishers to express their originality and creativity. Mass media provide the basis for shaping individuals' identities and contribute to shaping dominant perceptions of the world and highest values, with photography being one of the most effective means (Đurić, 2013).

According to the content of the obverse, the following typology of postcards is mentioned in our literature: topographic postcards, postcards with scenes and events, portrait postcards with figures of famous personalities, statesmen, actors, artists, etc, advertising and propaganda postcards, postcards featuring reproductions of works of art and other (Ниношевић, 2022). As Đurić points out, the function of the postcard as a medium will be realized when its back is inscribed with a personal message (Đurić, 2013). That is the reason why these printed media, apart from being a museum or collector's item, can also be viewed as part of the corpus of new visual mass media (Пепаћ, 2013: 76). Therefore, a postcard can be considered a form of mass media, in the context of being widely used as a means of communication and information distribution worldwide.

In literature, postcards are mostly analyzed in the context of local histories, given that the obverse usually features the landmarks of cities, therefore, representation of gender on postcards is not a frequent topic of research. For now, the most comprehensive publication that deals with similar topics is from the author A. Drago, who exhibited postcards with illustrations or photographs of women from the 19th century to the 40s of the 20th century. I also highlight the paper of A. Grgov that deals with the postcards of the first half of the 20th century in the context of representation of gender differences.

The research questions from which I start in this paper are: “What do postcards reveal about gender relations in the inter-war period of the 20th century?” and: “How media culture, with the help of visual expression, participates in the construction and maintenance of social order?”

In this paper, Cartwright & Sturken's representation theory, as well as the research of Vujović and Mulvey on the representation of women in the media, will be used as a theoretical framework. Using the qualitative content analysis, it will describe each postcard in the paper in the context of time and space. Through semiological analysis it will be seen which elements are involved in the creation of

meaning in one image and how the systems of representation function in creating meanings. Goffman's combination of frame and semiotic analysis will also be applied in order to understand how the body language in the picture is related to the stereotypical image of a woman.

Gender representations on postcards of the inter-war era are precious testimonies of patriarchal ideology and women's subordination that is represented as natural, although it is a cultural construct. Gender bias is a phenomenon that still exists today. Even though the status of women in European societies has undergone a radical change during the past century, the inequality still exists in many ways: women experience discrimination in regard to their economic situation and also must deal with inequities in their social lives, such as being harassed or abused, or even, tragically, in assaults and crimes targeting women.³ In 2021, several tens of thousands of people participated in gatherings across France on International Women's Day condemning the inequality faced by women, which has been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic. At these gatherings, predominantly attended by women, issues such as the gender pay gap, discrimination, as well as sexual and sexist violence were addressed.⁴ During the past period, research has been conducted in Serbia that addressed issues of gender equality, which indicate that women in our society continue to be in significantly disadvantaged positions compared to men, and occurrences such as gender-based violence and gender-sensitive language are still common. Support for these claims is provided by the results of a public opinion survey conducted by CeSID in 2013 for the needs of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality. The survey results, conducted on a representative sample of 1200 citizens in Serbia, showed that the majority of respondents perceive the society we live in as discriminatory (Ćopić, 2016). Through this paper, my aim is to encourage research on the same or similar topic in order to find the roots of gender dichotomy and to understand it so that efforts can be made towards its eradication.

Socio-historical context of the inter-war era

The word feminism first appeared at the beginning of the 19th century in France, in which it is written that feminism is "a doctrine whose subject is the expansion of the rights and role of women in society" (Аритоновић, 2009). From that time the organized women's struggle for equality began (Zaharijević 2008: 389). The so-called suffrage movements in Great Britain and the USA spread to other countries, gaining a global character (Zaharijević, 2008). In that first phase of the struggle for gender equality the aspirations of the first feminists were limited to the struggle to equalize with men in terms of access to social resources and positions, whether on the political or social level (Brašnjić&Ševo, 2019: 223). The end of the First World War in 1918 left numerous consequences in the field of social, political, economic and cultural awareness of the entire world. According to Todić, women partly managed to get some

³ Source: <https://www.bbc.com/serbian/lat/svet-66487073>

⁴ Source: <https://www.danas.rs/svet/u-francuskoj-skupovi-zena-protiv-nejednakosti>

formal rights and freedoms and became more equal with men, which was certainly influenced by the awakened awareness of their own significant role during the war, when, in addition to the physical, they were also exposed to enormous psychological pressure regarding preserving one's own honour (Тодић, 2008: 145).

As in other European countries, the struggle for the emancipation of women in Serbia began in the second half of the 19th century. It was the period when the first women's associations were founded, whose goal was to fight for political and legal equality. In the time of Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the inter-war era, the Serbian Civil Code from 1844 was still in force, according to which a woman was completely subordinate to a man. By concluding the marriage, she lost her general business capacity and became equal to a minor. At the congresses jurists demanded legal equality for women, especially in inheritance law, which was not answered until World War II. The process of the struggle for gender equality included education and employment of women, changes in demographic patterns and models of relations between the sexes, and after an arduous struggle, the political equality of women (Аритоновић, 2009).

Simultaneously with women's struggle for equal rights, the European post-war propaganda worked to push women out of all spheres of public life: state policy used various types of media to maintain the established order. Post-war politics made it clear to women who gained the right to vote that this right belonged to them because they were the mothers or wives of fallen heroes. In Germany, women who did not want to leave their jobs after the war were publicly condemned, while in Italy they were identified with prostitutes. There have been cases of termination of work privileges for women, due to alleged incompetence, as well as glorification of the role of mother and wife at the state level. In France, the "Family Medal" was established in 1920, which was awarded to mothers, and in Germany, 1934 was declared the "Year of the Housewife." In America, the model of the "new modern woman", tied to the house and the household, was promoted, stemming from the consumerist culture (Zaharijević, 2008). In this regard, I can conclude that media culture of the inter-war era was a powerful tool of state policy and propagated the moral values that were determined and imposed by the official policy.

Theoretical framework

Representation means using language and images to create meaning about the world around us. We use words to understand, describe and define the world as we see it, and for the same purpose we use images. This process is achieved through systems of representation, such as language and visual media, which have rules and conventions of their own organization. Only we can see the material world and create the meanings of a specific cultural context, and through systems of representation. That means that language and systems of representation do not reflect the existing reality as much as they construct it and mediate our understanding of reality (Cartwright & Sturken, 2001). According to Vujović, media representation is always a construction, because it is sent from a certain position of power in society and with a certain ideological implication, therefore the representation of women in the media cannot be a realistic reflection of them (Vujović, 2016: 98).

When it comes to the visual representation of women in the media, Mulvey states that the pleasure of viewing in a world governed by gender imbalance is set as a split between active/masculine and passive/feminine. Namely, the male gaze projects its fantasy onto a female figure that is styled in accordance with it. In their traditionally exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously viewed and exposed, their appearance coded for a strong visual and erotic effect, so it can be said that they connote spectatorship. Mulvey believes that the difference between the sexes controls, that is, constructs images and representations, and observation itself is an act of fetishization, based on erotic and sadistic instincts (Mulvey, 2008).

Methodology

The content analyzed in this paper comes from different parts of Europe, mostly from France, and belongs to the collection of postcards of the National Museum in Leskovac. Out of a total of 461 postcards that the Collection contains, 28 are photographs of married couples, women alone and family photographs, the six most representative postcards are analyzed in the paper. The rest are simply repetition of the similar motifs.

In this paper, qualitative content analysis will be applied, which is a method of researching media material, various documents, written, audio or visual records and other forms of oral or written communication between people. The goal of this method is to describe, classify the content of certain forms of communication and, by relating it to the socio-demographic, biographical, cultural and other characteristics of the author of the document, as well as those to whom they are intended, to explain or understand it in the context of time and space in to whom it was created (Branković, 2009: 89).

Semiotic analysis will also be applied in this paper, considering that semiotics is linked with meaning, or the ways in which representation, in the broad sense (language, images, objects) generates meanings or the processes by which we comprehend or attribute meaning (Curtin, 2016). Barthes claims that in every process of marking there are two systems: the level of denotation and the level of connotation. Denotation refers to the descriptive level of meaning, literal, while connotation leads to social, historical and cultural aspects. Barthes also distinguishes three members in each semiological system, which are in a mutually dependent relation: sign, signifier and signified. Signifier is the physical form of the sign as we perceive it through our senses (sound, written word or image) and a signified is the meaning we associate with the sign. An image (or word) and its meaning together (signifier and signified) constitute a sign (Barthes, 1968). A sign is anything that provides meaning, such as a written or spoken word, a sign, or a myth. Barthes sees myth as the phenomenon of shifting connotative meaning into denotative meaning because it is influenced by beliefs in a society (Ishar & Irawan, 2023). Barthes also defines myth as depoliticized, ideological speech, which distorts reality. Its main role is to turn what is individual and manufactured into general, natural and eternal (Barthes, 1968).

Additionally, Erving Goffman's methodology will be applied in this paper – the combination of frame and semiotic analysis, applied in the book *Gender*

Advertisements. Goffman analyzed gender representation and gender roles through next categories: relative size, which refers to male superiority, usually expressed in photographs through the size and height of the male figure in relation to the female; female touch, indicating that the women in the advertisements most often touch the advertising product or their own body, as a precious object; ranking by function, which means that the men in the photos are most often shown as superior, the ones who give instructions, and the women are in the role of serving; ritualization of subordination – men are shown in advertising photos with an upright body and raised head, and women in a subordinate position; and permitted withdrawal, referring to the depiction of women as psychologically absent from the social situation they are in, looking away from others as a sign of shyness. They are also free to express their emotions, to smile more expressively than a man (Goffman, 1979).

Results

In the first two photos (fig. 1 and fig. 2) young married couples are shown. Taking into account Barthe's division into three members in the semiological system, a signifier would be a married couple, a signified, in this case, would be the happiness of the newlyweds, while a sign would be a combination of the previous two members - a married couple means happiness. The denotative or literal meaning of this picture would be a photo of a happy newlywed couple, and its connotative meaning indicates that happiness is associated with the marriage of a heterosexual couple. Based on Goffman's methodology, women in both photos are subordinated: male superiority is visibly emphasized by the protectiveness over the woman, which is particularly visible in the second photo, where the man touches the woman's chin, like a child. In both photos, a woman is hugging a man and clinging to him, whereas he shows his willingness to care for both of them. Both women openly express their emotions, they are smiling, unlike their partners who have serious expressions on their faces.

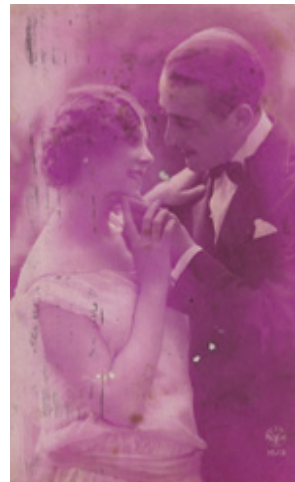
In the next two photos (fig. 3 and fig. 4) heterosexual families with children are shown. In the third photo (fig. 3), a signifier, according to Barthe's semiotic principles, would be a mother, a father and a daughter learning to play the piano. The happiness of family life would be a signified, and a sign - a young married couple with a child symbolizes tranquility and happiness, since the woman in the photo has a satisfied and happy expression on her face. According to Goffman's methodology, male superiority is emphasized in this case as well. His larger figure compared to a woman's is associated with authority. As in the previous photo, the woman in this photo expresses her emotions more freely than the man, she has a cheerful expression on her face while looking at her daughter. The denotative or descriptive meaning of the photo is that it depicts a young married couple with their daughter learning to play an instrument, while its connotative meaning is the pleasure and happiness which is associated with married life, and represented as natural. In the fourth photo (fig. 4) a seven-member family is presented. The father's gaze is directed towards the mother and conveys seriousness and partly authoritativeness. The woman's face

is radiant, facing the camera, while the gaze is directed upwards, as a sign of shyness and modesty. Manual addition of colours contributes to the complete impression of happiness and satisfaction in life in a multi-member family, which would also be its connotative meaning. In both photos (fig. 3 and 4) the man is represented as more dominant, authority and protector of his family. In each photo (fig. 1, 2, 3 and 4) women are viewed and exposed, they turn away or lower their head from another person or situation, which, according to Goffman, is a sign of subordination. Further, they seem psychologically absent from the social situation in which they find themselves, disoriented and dependent on men who have a serious, protective attitude (Goffman, 1979).

Fig. 1⁵



Fig. 2⁶



In addition, the representation of women on the previous four postcards is completely in line with the traditional representation of women in visual culture throughout history: according to Miletić, the Venus of Willendorf, a symbol of fertility and motherhood, had a ritual purpose, and all female figures dated from antiquity to the Middle Ages had the status of deities, which is why they were not depicted as doing something, but as they were, and maternal love, as the only true love of a woman, basically marked the culture of Europe (Miletić, 2008: 296 - 298). Based on this, I can conclude that gender representation has not changed significantly over the centuries and that women are traditionally associated with the role of a spouse and mother, which is linked with principles of media culture of the inter-war era. Post-war propaganda worked to push women out of all spheres of public life: state policy

⁵ Issue by the „EKO“, Made in France; photography; 8, 5 x 13, 7 cm; around 20s; from Leskovac to Prokuplje; NML, I – R/432

⁶ Issue by the „Noer“, No 1613, Made in France; purple toned photography; 8, 5 x 13, 7 cm; 23. 13. 1928 (illegible stamp); to Prokuplje; NML, I – R/433

used various types of media to maintain the established order.

Fig. 3⁷



Fig. 4⁸



While in the previous postcard obverse the woman is shown as a future mother or already a mother, in the last two postcards the woman is in the role of a seductress, and her character is objectified. The fifth picture (fig. 5), in which there is a short-haired girl with a slightly provocative smile, is somewhat different from the previous representations of women as mothers and spouses, which can lead to the conclusion that the women of the inter-war era managed to fight for their long-awaited freedom. However, a deeper analysis indicates that the girl's character is objectified, eroticized, in order to represent female sexuality. Applying the principle of Barthe's semiological system, the girl in the photo would be a signifier, the passion is a signified, and a sign – the girl represents passion. Also, the girl connotes passion, and the impression itself is enhanced by manually adding colors to the photo, which highlights her sensuality. Goffman's categorization can also be applied here, in the part where he mentions touching one's own body as a precious and delicate object, as a typical representation of women in the media.

All five photos (fig. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5) prove Laura Mulvey's thesis, which confirms the passivity of "woman as an image" and the activity of man as an observer. In this regard, gender difference controls and constructs images and representations. Connotative meaning is shifted into denotative meaning because it is influenced by beliefs in a society. Something that is manufactured is turned into general, natural and eternal, according to Barthe's thesis (Barthes, 1968).

⁷ Made in France; photography; 8, 6 x 13, 5 cm; 10. 11. 1934 (illegible stamp); to Leskovac; NML, I – R/435

⁸ Issue by the „Lola Paris 27“, Made in France; hand coloured photography; 8, 7 x 13, 9 cm; 1932; from Prokuplje to Leskovac; NML, I – R/444

Fig. 5⁹



The girl in picture 6, who, dressed according to the latest fashion of the inter-war era, is about to put a letter in the mailbox. Although the glint in her eyes and the showing of her ankles could indicate boldness, her attitude suggests a child's shyness, with a hint of mischievousness, while her hunched shoulders and pushed posture reveal subordination and insecurity. Unlike the men who are shown in every photo with a domineering and protective attitude, this photo is also evidence of the woman's "permissive withdrawal". As in the previous photo, here we can also notice Goffman's "ritual touching": the girl touches her own body, pulling her dress up to highlight the ankle, proving Goffman's thesis about the self-touching of the body as a precious object, as one of the most common representations of women in advertising photographs (Goffman, 1979).

Fig. 6¹⁰



⁹ Issue by the „DEDE Paris 1530“, Made in France; hand coloured photography; 8, 6 x 13, 5 cm; 1920 (illegible stamp); to Leskovac; NML, I – R/436

¹⁰ Photography; 8, 5 x 13, 3 cm; inter-war era; unused; NML, I – R/257

Conclusion

The research results showed that gender representations on postcards of the inter-war era testify to the need of the inter-war politics to preserve the typical patriarchal idea of women. After the first results of feminist activism, it used all means available to displace women from all spheres of public life. This printed media are precious testimonies of patriarchal ideology and women subordination that is represented as natural, although it is a cultural construct. Connotative meaning is shifted into denotative meaning because it is influenced by beliefs in a society. Male superiority is visibly emphasized by the protectiveness over the woman. The figure of the man in the obverse of the postcards is taller, his facial expression is serious, he does not show emotions, unlike the woman, who is more facially expressive. In their traditionally exhibitionist role, women are simultaneously viewed and exposed, represented as absent, disoriented and dependent on men or in the role of a seductress, and her character is objectified.

Barthes claims that there is nothing “innocent” in culture, nothing that is not determined by the context and the interpreter. Cultural products and practices are always ideologically constructed in order to present artificial creations as given by nature and maintain the bourgeois social order (Barthes, 2008). That is why the subject matter in these postcards is presented as a universal truth, something given by nature, but it is actually a cultural construct, given by convention.

Along with other socialization elements, the media play a significant role in the development of gender roles, but also in the creation and maintenance of gender stereotypes. Media culture, with the help of visual expression, creates a framework within which the recipient of media content will perceive, interpret and form an opinion. Thus, it participates in the construction and maintenance of social order. Images are great tools to perceive the maintained order because they contain signifiers that produce meanings. Therefore, through visual expression, cultural positions are presented as natural and not as a cultural construct. Media representation is always a construction, because it is sent from a certain position of power in society, therefore the representation of women in media cannot be a realistic reflection of her. Media culture shapes our view of the world, and in order to be able to see with our own, not “media” eyes, we need an understanding of how they do it.

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Rodna reprezentacija na razglednicama međuratnog doba

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Apstrakt

Na primeru razglednica međuratnog doba 20. veka, pokazaćemo kako medijska kultura učestvuje u izgradnji i održavanju društvenog poretka definisanjem rodних uloga. Izdvojili smo nekoliko najreprezentativnijih primera francuske provenijencije koji pripadaju zbirci razglednica Narodnog muzeja u Leskovcu. Medijska kultura je neodvojiva od vizuelnosti, jer na osnovu datog vizuelnog izraza stvara okvir u

kome će primalac medijskog sadržaja percipirati, interpretirati i formirati mišljenje. Rodna reprezentacija na razglednicama međuratnog doba dragocena su svedočanstva patrijarhalne ideologije i subordinacije žena koja je predstavljena kao prirodna, iako je kulturni konstrukt. Rodna diskriminacija je pojava koja je danas izraženija u nekim delovima sveta, kao npr. u slučaju Avganistana, gde su obnovom talibanske vlasti 2021. godine, žene izgubile osnovna prava. Premda se status žena u evropskim društvima radikalno promenio tokom prošlog veka, nejednakost i dalje postoji na njihovog ekonomskog i socijalnog statusa. Ovim radom želimo da podstaknemo istraživanja na istu ili sličnu temu u cilju otkrivanja korena rodne dihotomije kako bismo je razumeli i mogli raditi na njenom iskorenjivanju.

Ključne reči: medijska kultura, rod, međuratno doba, razglednica.

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