

The Postcard's Radical Openness

*A Philosophical Perspective of its Inception,
Impact, and Traits*

By

Mariluz Restrepo

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Inception, Impact, and Traits**

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... a threshold, a door, a becoming...
G. Deleuze

In memoriam
J.M. Restrepo-Millán, my father
Jean-Luc Nancy, my muse

To my daughters and grandchildren

Contents

List of Figures and Tables	xi
Acknowledgments	xvii
Methodology remarks	xviii
Aperture: Opening Up the Postcard	xx

Part I. (Politikos - Πολιτικός)

Coming Forth: “New Moves in an Old Game”	1
1. The Appearance of Postcards: Citizen-Government Wrestling	4
Postcard Traces.....	4
Postal Reforms and Open Mailing Cards.....	6
First Masterstroke: Pronouncing, a Performative Act.....	12
<i>The Austro-Hungarian Empire decrees correspondence cards</i>	
Further Approvals.....	15
The Postcard as Pharmakon, a Moral Dilemma.....	18
2. Restrictions and Concessions: Public-Private Gaming	22
Authorities Prescribe.....	22
Crossing National Borders.....	27
Second Masterstroke: Authorizing, Blurring Boundaries.....	31
<i>Germany approves privately produced postcards</i>	
The Coming of Illustrated Postcards.....	34
Reticence Persists.....	37
3. Common Practices Acknowledged	43
Pictures Take Over the Back of the Postcard.....	43
Third Masterstroke: Inverting, a Reasonable Turn.....	46
<i>Great Britain allows writing on the address side</i>	
The Divided-Back Picture Postcard, an Enormous Success.....	48
<i>Timeline and Postcard Samples</i>	53

Part II. (Tekhné - τέχνη)

The Postcard Trade: A Worldwide Picture Industry	61
4. A Mix of New Technologies and Craft	66
Photographic Innovations and Reproducibility.....	66

Printing Methods Improved	70
Real-Photo Postcards.....	78
Crafts/wo/manship.....	79
5. Global-Colonial-Local Endeavors.....	89
Disseminating to the ‘Wide-Wide World’	89
Transnational Firms and Local Producers.....	91
Photographers in the Trade.....	98
6. State-of-the-Art Management.....	102
Novel Marketing Strategies.....	102
Advanced Business Practices	110
<i>Postcard Samples</i>	116
 <u>Part III. (Aisthetiko - αισθητικός)</u>	
An Alluring Artifact: Emerging Sensitivities	125
7. Reception and Social Practices	130
Messaging: Social Networking	130
Picturing: Promoting Identities, Nation-Building, and Disgraces.....	133
Pastime: Exchanging, Collecting, Exhibiting.....	137
Love/Hate Reactions: Moral Dilemmas, More Pharmakon.....	143
8. A New Media for Artistic Expression	153
Postal Photography: The Inception of New Genres	153
Art Made Public: Visual Experimentation	159
A Source of Inspiration	166
9. Imprints of Cultural Aperture	169
Modernity Exceeded	169
Transgressing “Culture Industry”	171
Expanding Democratic and Cosmopolitan Modes.....	173
Revealing Femininity	175
Displaying Urban Character	178
People and Things Exposed	181
10. Sequels After 1914.....	184
<i>Postcard Samples</i>	191

Part IV. (Ethos - ἔθος)

Communicability: A Relational Ethics	199
11. Card-Work, An Interactive Multimedia (φρόνησις - <i>Phronēsis</i>)	202
A Unique Interface	202
A New Perceptive Space.....	204
An Expressive Writing Style	205
In-Between Image and Text.....	207
Signings on View	209
12. Pos(t)ing, Constructing Otherness (εὐνοία - <i>Eunoia</i>)	216
Intervention: Public-Private Entwined.....	216
Correspondence: An Act of Deference	218
Communication: Touching Each Other	222
13. Memorabilia, Ethics of Remembering (μνήμη – <i>Mnēmē</i>)	227
Representation: Open Records	227
Keeping and Archiving: Imag(in)ing.....	229
14. Openness, the Postcard’s Virtue (ἀρετή - <i>arête</i>)	235
Sense-Making	235
Opening of Truth: <i>Nuda Veritas, Vera Nuditas</i>	241
<i>G. Klimt’s “Nuda Veritas”</i>	249
Bibliography	250
References.....	250
Related Literature.....	263
About the Author	277

List of Figures and Tables

All the postcards are in the public domain. Unless otherwise noted, the postcards are from the J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection - BLAA (Bogotá, Colombia). The date included corresponds to when the postcard was either sent or received.

- Fig. 1 The Austro-Hungarian Empire *Correspondenz-Karte*, first approved postcard, 1869
In The Postal Museum, London
<https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/highlights/postcards/>
- Fig. 2 Great Britain: First *post card*, 1870
In The Postal Museum, London
<https://www.postalmuseum.org/collections/highlights/postcards/>
- Fig. 3 French card to be sent by balloon, 1870-71
In https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Balloon_mail
- Fig. 4 France: First *carte postal*, 1872
In Cercle Philatélique Lexovien, <https://cpl14.fr/?p=8314>
- Fig. 5 United States: First *postal card*, 1872-73
In American Philatelic Society,
<https://stamps.org/news/c/start-collecting/cat/collecting-advice/post/collecting-coast-to-coast-april-2023>
- Fig. 6 *Lipman's Postal Card 1870-73*
In Petruslis ©2006-2020. *Metropolitan Postcard Club of New York City*
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220330075923/http://www.metropostcard.com>
- Fig. 7 Spain: First *tarjeta postal* 1873
In Sociedad Filatélica Numismática Guardesa, Zaragoza
https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Figura-2-Primera-tarjeta-postal-oficial-impresa-en-Espana-en-1873-Fuente-Sociedad_fig1_333823255

- Fig. 8 Italy: First *cartolina postale*, 1874
In https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartolina_postale
- Fig. 9 Spanish *reply-card*, 1894
In [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:MessageReplyCardsCubaCirca1890.jpg?uselang=en](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MessageReplyCardsCubaCirca1890.jpg?uselang=en)
- Fig. 10 United States *Private Mailing Card*, 1898
In Washington Crossing Card Collectors Club
<http://www.wc4postcards.org/postcardhistory.html>
- Fig. 11 *Léon Besnardeu's Souvenir Card* of the Army of Brittany, 1870-71
In https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Conlie_postcard.jpg
- Fig. 12 *August Schwartz's card*. 1870
In DW Lifestyle, <https://www.dw.com/en/instagram-19th-century-style-the-first-german-postcard/a-54200932>
- Fig. 13 *Petar Manojlovič's card*. Serbian language with Cyrillic script. 1871
In [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/
File:OldestAustrianPictPostcard.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:OldestAustrianPictPostcard.jpg)
- Fig. 14 *Cartes Libonis*, a Léon-Charles Libonis card, published by Neurdein for the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. 1889
In <http://www.leonc.fr/histoire/neurdein/neurdein.htm>
- Fig. 15 *Official Souvenir Card, Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, The Woman's Building*. Printed by the American Lithographic Co. of Charles W. Goldsmith. 1893.
In The Chicago Postcard Museum,
http://www.chicagopostcardmuseum.org/19th_century_rotunda_1893_worlds_columbian_exposition.html
- Fig. 16 Card with a picture covering almost all its back. *Bismarck Tunnel*. Hamburg Printed by Lith. u. Druck von Leo Kempner & Co. 1901
In <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:BismarckTunnel-poczt%C3%B3wka.jpg>
- Fig. 17 Card of the *Exposition Universelle 1900, Paris. Le petit palais, Le grand palais*
In <https://historicalbookworm.com/?p=1874>

- Fig. 18 *Dived-back* British postcard. State Series, Liverpool. 1913
[Front: photo of West End, Bulth Wells]
- Fig. 19 Fig. 19 *The Speedway, New York*. Detroit Publishing Co., Photostint card. no. 9332 (© 1905). 1912. Actual size (3.5 X 5.5 in. - 9 X 14 cm.), complying with the approved regulations.
- Fig. 20 Japanese woodcut (n.d.)
In Petrus ©2006-2020. Techniques
<https://web.archive.org/web/20220107162249/http://www.metropostcard.com/tech1-relief1.html>
- Fig. 21 Photoglob/Photochrom. Orell Fussli, no. 5305. *Zürich und die Alpen*. 1912
- Fig. 22 Phostint Card. Detroit Publishing Co., no. 6891. *St. Patrick's Cathedral, New York*. 1911
- Fig. 23 Photochromie. Purger & Co., no. 10203. *Salzburg mit Untersberg*. 1912
- Fig. 24 Silveresque. Valentine's Post Card, no. 215753. *London, Picadilly Circus*. 1912
- Fig. 25 Oilette. Raphael Tuck & Sons, no. 7236. *Aitken's Post. Bailey Guard Gate. Lucknow (India)*. 1912
- Fig. 26 Real Photo Post Card. H. Camburn. Photo Edwards. *The Old Inn, Speldhurst, Kent*. 1914
- Fig. 27 The Rotograph Co., no. 3016. *Columbia University, N. Y. City*. 1911
- Fig. 28 Nels. *Louvain. Rue de la Station*. 1912
- Fig. 29 Tipografia Commercial M.J. Ramalho, no. 30. *Pará (Brazil), Intendencia Municipal - San Miguel de Guamá*. 1911
- Fig. 30 Adolfo Conrads. *Parque Cousiño. Santiago, Chile*. 1912
- Fig. 31 Printed in Japan [Russo-Japanese War 1904-1905]. *Late General Nogi's letter on Copitulation of Port Arthur. c.1912*
- Fig. 32 Librăria F. Saraga. *Fașada Universităței (Bucarest)*. 1913
- Fig. 33 Godinho de Mattos-Papelaria Academica. *Coimbra (Portugal). Sé Velha*. 1912

List of Figures and Tables

- Fig. 34 Edit. E. Ragozino. Galleria Umberto. Napoli, no. 2723. *La Piazza Medina (Napoli)*. 1912
- Fig. 35. Edition Grand Bazar Anspach, no. 42. *Grand Bazar du Boulevard Anspach (Brussels)*. 1912
- Fig. 36 United Fruit Company. *Vapor de la United Fruit Company tomando banano (Santa Marta, Colombia)*. 1913
- Fig. 37 New Zealand Tourist Department. F.T. Series, no. 2237 A. *Mangapapa Falls, Lake Waikaremoana*. 1911
- Fig. 38 Latapi y Bert. *Jalapa-Ver. Mex. Parque Juárez*. 1912
- Fig. 39 D. Macropolo & Co. *Calcutta. The Market New Extension*. 1912
- Fig. 40 Turco Egyptian Tobacco Store. *Hongkong. Praya West*. 1912
- Fig. 41 F. Frith & Co. Ltd., 64108. *Oxford. University College Quad (Founded A.D. 872)*. n.d.
- Fig. 42 ND Phot (Neurdein Frères), no. 1216. *Paris. Vue prise de la Galerie des Tours Notre -Dame*. 1912
- Fig. 43 Lucien Lévy – LL, no. 31. *Alger. L'Escalier de la Pécherie et le Boulevard de la République*. 1913
- Fig. 44 Le Giletta Frères, no. 40. *Nice. Les Blanchisseuses du Paillon et le Pont Vieux*. 1911
- Fig. 45 Hauser and Menet, no. 14. *Madrid. Calle de Alcalá*. c.1912
- Fig. 46 G. R. Lambert & Co. Ltd. *A Road in British Malaya*. c.1912
- Fig. 47 A.W.A. Plâté. *Golf Caddy, Ceylon*. 1910
- Fig. 48 Arnold Holtz. *Abyssinian Troops (Ethiopia)*. c.1912
- Fig. 49 J. G. Moudy, no. 10. *Djibouti. Place Lagarde -Maison Ghaleb*. 1912
- Fig. 50 Foto Strobach, no. 82/182 72410. *Calle Zabala, Montevideo*. 1913
- Fig. 51 Lehnert & Landrock, no.18. *[Morocco]*. 1914
- Fig. 52 I.L. Maduro Jr. *Caissons, Center Wall, Miraflores Locks. Panamá Canal*. 1913
- Fig. 53 Raphael Tuck & Sons, "Our Belles", no. 2727. *Brooklyn Belles. Greater New York, Brooklyn Bridge*. 1911

- Fig. 54 Publisher trademarks
- Fig. 55 *Berlín. Teatro Real de Espectáculos*
Advertisement: *Pertussin, catarro, tos, asma. Alivio inmediato. c.1913*
- Fig. 56 Postcard back exemplifying 'printed matter' crossing out Post Card, sender's stamp, numbers on the postcard in relation to the total amount sent, and 'Post Card' in many languages. 1912
- Fig. 57 Charles Bernhoeft, no. 3437. *Luxembourg. Vu Prise du Fort Thüngen.* 1911
- Fig. 58 ELD (Ernest Le Deley), no. 4388. *Paris. Le Louvre.* 1912
- Fig. 59 Collection Générale Fortier, no. 341. *Afrique Occidentale. Soudan. Marchands de sel en barres dans le Macina.* 1913
- Fig. 60 Charles Kerry, series 97. © Sidney. *Aboriginal Mia Mia.* 1912
- Fig. 61 Maison Robert Schlèber. *Niger. Blanchisseuses (Mali).* 1914
- Fig. 62 L.H. Valette (photographer), no. 1851; publisher ACK. *Roquería de penguinos antárticos. Islas Orcadas, República Argentina.* 1913
- Fig. 63 Librería Alsina. *San José. Costa Rica. Foyer del Teatro Nacional.* 1915
- Fig. 64 L. Angelin, no. 100. *Reunion. Procession Indoue pendant les Fêtes du Pougle. c.1912*
- Fig. 65 Wilson's, no. 301. *Carretón criollo. Cuban Cart.* 1912
- Fig. 66 Photographer N. D. L., no. 1. *Paris. Inondations de Janvier 1910.* 1911
- Fig. 67 E. L. D (Ernest Le Deley). *Catastrophe du "Liberté" - Les épaves, Toulon. (Sept. 25, 1911).* 1911
- Fig. 68 *Recepção á chegada do vapor "Lisboa" ao Lobito (Angola).* 1912
- Fig. 69 Imprimeries Réunis . *Fêtes d' Aviation, Nancy-Jarville, 7 et 8 Avril 1912. 1. - Un Coin de l'Aérodrome.* 1911
- Fig. 70 Edition Priamos. *Antwerp, Titan and cranes on the new dock.* 1912
- Fig. 71 Collection Générale Fortier, no. 2111. *Afrique Occidentale. Sénégal, Dakar, Construction du Bassin du Radoub. c.1908*
- Fig. 72 Lucien Stoltz (artist). L.L. (Lucien Levy), no. 23. *Salon [de Paris] 1908. Les Bouquinistes quai Montebello.* 1912

List of Figures and Tables

- Fig. 73 John Fulleylove (artist). A. & C. Black, no. 9. *Queen's College Gateway, Oxford*. 1913
- Fig. 74 John Innes (artist). W. G. Macfarlane, "Troilens" Indiana Series. *Indian Pony Race (USA)*. 1914
- Fig. 75 Bruno Richter (artist). *Tanger et la rade, vue de la Casba [Morocco]*. 1912
- Fig. 76 Karl R. Bremer (publisher). No. 5348. *Schloß Rheinstein, Baviera*. 1913
- Fig. 77 V. J. Petroff (artist). NCM, no.92. *Plaisirs d'hiver (Russia)*. 1912
- Fig. 78 *Dante Alighieri, Giotto*. Barguello Palace, Florence. AGM, no. 1018. 1912
- Fig. 79 *La Vierge, l'Enfant Jesus et Sainte Anne*, Leonardo Da Vinci. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Stengel & Co., no. 29883. 1912
- Fig. 80 *Statue in Wood* (Period 2500 b.c.). Cairo Museum, Egypt. L.L. [Lucien Levy], no. 54. 1912
- Fig. 81 *Don Quixote*. V. Panissa (artist). Ambos Mundos/Imp. Vda. de L. Tasso (Spain), no. 1. c.1910
- Fig. 82 *Nuda Veritas* 1988 (illustration for *Ver Sacrum*) & *Nuda Veritas* 1989 (for the Secession fifth exhibition, 1899-1900). Gustav Klimt
- Fig. 83 Title page Part I. Undivided-Back Postcard. 1912. (Front: *Cairo, Arabic Law School*. Max H. Rudmann)
- Fig. 84 Title page Part II. *Port Said. Rue du Commerce*. Lichtenstern & Harari, no. 112. 1913
- Fig. 85 Title page Part III. *Magdeburg. Breite Weg*. Von W.Klautzsch, no. 1207. 1912
- Fig. 86 Title page Part IV. *Wein. Mariahilferstrasse*. S.M.D. Modiano, 13761. 1913

Table 1. Amounts of postcards sold once approved

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Methodology remarks

The word '*postcard*' –written as one word– is the choice employed unless other forms are part of quotes, or when there is a need to place the words 'post card' and 'postal card' as historical/geographical references. The expression 'cards-to-post' is my choice to explicitly convey what the phrase implies.

Historic information is the result of my gathering and weaving from many sources and corroborating data with primary ones when available; consequently, only quoted or paraphrased texts from a specific source are cited and, when appropriate, available links to more detailed information are added.

Exact *dates* are included if they are part of a quote, if they coincide in at least two trustworthy sources, or if they correspond to patent registrations; otherwise, *c.* [*circa*] is placed before the date.

Definitions and etymologies are the result of recomposing from my research in the following dictionaries:

- Breve Diccionario Etimológico de la Lengua Castellana*, Corominas (Gredos, 1990)
- Diccionario de la Real Academia Española* (RAE, 2017 ff.)
- Diccionario Etimológico Indoeuropeo de la Lengua Española*, Roberts and Pastor (Alianza, 1997)
- Oxford Dictionary of Word Origins*. (2010)
- Raíces griegas y latinas*. Tomás Cadavid Restrepo (1942)
- Roget's Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases*. (Spottiswoode, Ballantyne & Co. Ltd., 1910)
- The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000)
- Totius Latinitatis Lexicon*. 4 Vol. Ægidii Forcellini (1805)
- Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language*. (1926)

Biographical data was taken from *Encyclopedia Britannica* unless otherwise specified.

Emphasized words in quotes are from the source unless otherwise noted.

Translations into English from texts in other languages are mine, and those are included in square brackets.

Postcard samples. This book is not focused on a postcard collection; however, to illustrate some of the ideas exposed, it mostly uses the *J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection* (Bogotá, Colombia) composed of 2,250 postcards from 69 countries and 28 colonies, most of them dated from 1903 to 1922. In 2020, my daughters and I donated the collection to the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango – BLAA (Banco de la República, Bogotá, Colombia). In the book, it is referred to as J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection-BLAA (Bogotá, Colombia).

The *postcard samples* are numbered consecutively, and the corresponding number is placed in parentheses within the text. Postcards are smaller than the actual size unless otherwise indicated. The sources of postcards not belonging to the J.M. Restrepo-Millán Collection-BLAA are included in the List of Figures.

Public domain. All of the postcards included as well as the two reproductions of G. Klimt's *Nuda Veritas* (1898 & 1899) are in the public domain because their copyright has expired, complying with the following directives:

- "U.S. Copyright law is complicated and nuanced, but as a rule of thumb it is safe to assume that works created and published in the United States before 1923 are in the public domain." (http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/copy_and_perms.pdf)
- In Australia and the European Union "copyright extends for the life of the author plus 70 years." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Copyright_Duration_Directive)
- "A few countries have copyright terms longer than 70 years: Mexico has 100 years, Colombia has 80 years, and Guatemala and Samoa have 75 years, Russia has 74 years for some authors." (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_domain)

Aperture: Opening Up the Postcard

The postcard, a seemingly irrelevant small rectangle of thin cardboard carrier of visual and written missives, has captivated young and old, women and men, the opulent and the humble in almost every corner of the Earth since the last decades of the 19th century. Although today the postcard may seem rather *démodé* to some people, it still makes part of our lives. Who hasn't sent a postcard, kept one as a souvenir, or admired some from years past? Who hasn't referred to the postcard size as a generic format, or described a view to be 'like a postcard' because it seemed almost too perfect to be real? It could be that the postcard is taken for granted, or it may be that its somehow irresistible qualities become an intriguing and inspiring bait calling for possible responses that may lead to unsuspected ways of grasping some of our particular modes of being in the world.

From the last decade of the 19th century until the First World War, the postcard was the most popular, inexpensive, and efficient medium of communication, as well as a precious artifact, cared for, displayed, and exchanged by millions of people. Postcards depicting every imaginable topic were available in most countries including the colonies of Western imperial nations. They were not only used as greetings when traveling, but also to send get-well wishes, congratulations, and invitations, and to transmit business requests, invoices, and advertisements. Furthermore, postcards were employed to commemorate special occasions and to register accidents and natural disasters such as shipwrecks, plane crashes, fires, floods, and earthquakes. They were displayed on shop windows as decorations, exhibited in waiting areas for the enjoyment of clients and visitors, included as tokens in merchandise boxes, given as rewards in schools, and used as part of fundraising campaigns. Postcards were carefully preserved in albums, shared with families and friends, and exchanged worldwide. Collecting postcards became a gratifying pastime, giving way to collector clubs, magazines, and national and international exhibitions. Every month, millions of postcards were published, sold, posted, and kept by numerous people around the world. For example, in Germany, in Great Britain, and in the United States, mailed

postcards reached a billion per year, as it was registered in the official postal data of the time. Postcards impregnated everyday life at the turn of the 20th century, giving form to novel modes of communication and entertainment. They reached people everywhere, both exposing and influencing their ways of feeling, thinking, and acting; a global phenomenon indeed, somewhat comparable to the multiple uses of contemporary networking.

The overwhelming attraction and massive use of postcards during the last years of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century –known as its Golden Age– certainly makes us ponder their enchantment, beyond what may be depicted on them. Postcards had been in the back of my mind for years suspecting somehow that there was much more in them than just nice views of a variety of places, objects, activities, and people from around the world. A small English oak inlaid chest containing numerous white envelopes, each marked with a country's name and filled with postcards had been in my home ever since I can remember. My father –a prominent Colombian scholar who died when I was a child– exchanged postcards when he was a teenager during the first decades of the 20th century, as he claimed, “to broaden my horizons closed-in by the mountains surrounding Bogotá.” Over the years, I browsed through his collection of more than two thousand postcards, dating from 1903 to 1922, with pictures referring to 693 locations from 97 countries of which 28 were from the Western colonies. This is one of those few collections kept intact from the time of the postcard's Golden Age.¹ Although many times I had used the postcards for different projects, shared them with my two daughters, and even thought about making a mural to exhibit a few of them, only recently did the time come to look closely into them from a philosophical stance, not to analyze the collection but rather to use it as a research corpus to better comprehend what the postcard is and its implications.

What brought me close to the postcard was not just the interest in what it portrays through pictures and words –which has been done profusely and, certainly, is quite interesting and instructive– but, most significantly, my keen

1 The J.M. Restrepo-Millán Postcard Collection is now housed at the Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango - BLAA (Bogotá, Colombia) to whom our family donated it in 2020. Postcards from this collection inspire and illustrate topics in the book.

desire is to look deep inside the postcard to see what this double-sided open card entails. Further than reviewing what the postcard shows, my interest is focused on the search for a better comprehension of what the postcard is as such, how it does what it does, and how it has affected our existence. Inspired by the Mexican writer, Carlos Fuentes, I have adapted two questions he posed about the significance and effect of literature² to guide my quest: What does the postcard expose that had not been exposed in any other way? and What has been the contribution of the postcard that no other medium has done? In other words: What is entailed in a postcard, how does it perform, and what has been its specific impact on our human ways of being in the world? Hence, this book is centered on studying, from a holistic perspective, the postcard's particular way of being and performing, a particular ontology that opens up what is constitutively implicated in such a seemingly trivial artifact.

As odd as it may now seem to us, the coming into public existence of the postcard was a deeply controversial issue that required years of political activism, proposals, debates, and lobbying in various countries before these special cards were pronounced to exist. Its open format to be posted unenveloped was a concern to many because it challenged social and moral protocols of privacy and decency. Additionally, it appeared to be a risky innovation that did not seem profitable for the postal departments. While civilian advocates found them to be beneficial, especially to the common people, the cultural transformations in communication modes and writing practices that the postcard could bring about were not seen with good eyes by most governments. A double-face logic appears to be rooted in the postcard's constitution and its way of being.

Austria was the first country to officially authorize, in 1869, what was named as 'Correspondence Card' for the exclusive use of the postal offices. Although various countries soon followed the Austrian example, several others were reticent to approve these postal cards. The first cards were not as we know

2 Carlos Fuentes, in the conclusion to *Valiente mundo nuevo: épica, utopía y mito en la novela hispanoamericana*, (1990). [Brave New World: Epic, Utopia, and Myth in the Hispanic American Novel], poses the following questions: "¿Qué puede decir la literatura que no puede decirse de ninguna otra manera? Y ¿qué aporta la literatura que ningún otro medio puede aportar?" (286) [What can literature say that cannot be said any other way? And, what is the contribution of literature that no other medium can do?]

them today, for they had no pictures: the front was reserved for the address and a pre-printed stamp, and the back was left blank to be used for brief written messages. These cards-to-post seemed to have been long awaited by the people: wherever authorized, their success was immediate. Yet, decades of discussions had to take place before postcards were of common use worldwide. Years passed before their private production was authorized, and many years more elapsed before the card was turned into a picture postcard with the format we know today: the front for the picture and the back split in half, leaving the left side for the message and the right side for the address and the stamp. The postcard was the result of a public-private wrestling that contributed to blur the boundaries between these two realms.

The political dimension involved in the constitution and evolving of the postcard is accounted for in Part I. (*Politikos* - Πολιτικός) COMING FORTH: "NEW MOVES IN AN OLD GAME". It is not merely a reconstruction of chronological facts nor is it centered in one country or another but, most relevantly, it is a thorough reading into some of the postcard's stories and variations to reflect on their political and ethical implications that may shed light on our present. It is a type of philosophical archeology that, as Giorgio Agamben explains:

"Rather than searching for the origins, it focuses on the moment of arising ... not to restore a previous stage, but to decompose, displace, and ultimately bypass it to go back not to its content but to the modalities, circumstances and moments in which the split, by means of repression, constituted it as origin." (2009, 102 & 103)

The arising of the postcard, as I see it, borrowing J-F. Lyotard's terminology in *Just Gaming* (1989), was a 'game' with three masterstrokes that changed the rules of the game and, by doing so, inaugurated a novel mode of communication and also contributed to redefining State-private relations. This gaming between civil initiatives and the power of the State reveals a common silent thread that involved pronouncing, controlling, and making concessions by official authorities, which were compelled by private initiatives.

The authorization to privately produce postcards meant the end of the official monopoly and the growth of the graphic industry that found postcard production to be a lucrative business. The postcard trade, comprising transnational firms as well as local entrepreneurs, became a major economic sector with national and international impact. By adding pictures to the cards, reproducing them massively, and selling them globally, the postcard trade made of the postcard a picture industry. Postcards were sold in department stores, hotels, cafés, bookstores, tobacco stands, and in almost any corner store; postcards were even carried from place to place by postmen who had them ready to be written and immediately mailed. Never before had so many topics been pictured and made easily available to most everyone around the globe. The trade encompassed artistic production and crafts/wo/manship, technological reproducibility, sophisticated capitalist business practices, and merchandising methods.

Part II. (*Tekhné* - τέχνη), THE POSTCARD TRADE: A WORLDWIDE PICTURE INDUSTRY looks at the postcard from a technical point of view in its Greek sense of “know-how,” of practical doings, closely related to craft and art. It examines the peculiarities of the postcard trade –its know-how– with a novel approach that helps bring to light the immense influence of postcards by pointing out how the production of picture postcards involved art, technicity, and business which contributed to inform other ways of doing things. The reproduction of images on postcards, whether pictorial work or photography, was made possible by the emerging photomechanical techniques and, in turn, postcards are accountable for inducing technical innovations to make their production more efficient and, additionally, to enhance their quality. The postcard’s complex worldwide distribution networks and persuasive sales strategies backed by innovative business practices are precursors of modern management and marketing processes.

The picture postcard’s extraordinary success at the turn of the 20th century is not only indebted to the trade’s strategies, but also to how people perceived these open cards, appropriated them, and responded by broadening their communication scope and introducing new uses that have contributed to their unique attraction, even today. Postcards appealed to many, not just

tourists, as it has often been simplified. They were amply used to establish contact with others, whether for personal or business matters; they were employed in a variety of ways such as invitations, gifts, and decorations; they were part of advertising and propaganda campaigns; and they were kept as souvenirs and made into a favorite pastime when collected, exchanged, and exhibited. Moreover, they inspired the work of writers and artists by using them or emulating their style, as it still happens today. Postcards were publicly praised for being an educational device, for expanding interchange, and for picturing the world for the future. Concurrently, they were harshly mocked and criticized for their omnipresence which could hinder personal relations as well as cultural and moral values. This is comparable to the long-existing concerns related to other communication technologies such as what occurred with the appearance of writing, more recently with radio and television, and, presently, with social media and artificial intelligence, among others.

The picture postcard gave way to the explosion of a variety of pictorial styles, the liberation of art forms, and the valuing of national and regional topics. The postcard became an ideal medium for photographers. Photography, which had been mainly of portraits, expanded to portraying anything available that could be of interest to the innumerable postcard users. The picture postcard popularized photography and prompted the advent of photographic genres, such as tourist-travel photography, documentary photography, and photojournalism.

The ways of perceiving and the sensitivity of the time that influenced the postcard's alluring reception, which also may help explain their continuous attraction, are addressed in Part III. (*Aisthētikos* - αισθητικός) AN ALLURING ARTIFACT: EMERGING SENSITIVITIES. An aesthetic perspective, understood in its archaic sense of perceiving, led to my attentive inspection of the reception of the postcard manifested in its multiple uses and the reactions prompted by social practices, as well as looking into certain postcard features that uniquely exceeded their own time.

On the one hand, the postcard's perception, translated into everyday practices, counteracted the strategic commercial procedures by reconfiguring the postcard into a multilayered artifact of symbolic relevance, not merely a

consumer good nor a simple and efficient vehicle with pictures to send brief messages. On the other hand, the postcard reflects sensitivities of the time while transgressing them, what I qualify as a postmodern manifestation –in Lyotard’s sense–, not only being exponents of modernity, as postcards have commonly been described. The need for the users to intervene the card for it to become what it was intended to be –a picture card to be posted– implies the direct involvement of its users in its sense-making process. This exigency of intervention differentiates the postcard from other communication media, which only recently has found its continuity in the various digital formats that compel users to participate in the configuration of messages. The postcard’s variety of uses traversed class, ethnicity, age, and gender barriers and its ability to reach groups normally not involved in social interchange exemplify new modes of democratization now echoed in contemporary issues of inclusion. The involvement of women as postcard users, collectors, and workers in the trade was prominent. The evolving urban character –with increased public spaces, new mobility patterns, more leisure time, and public exposure of people and things– is ingrained in the postcard’s configuration and uses. Those nascent sensitivities exposed by the postcard add to understanding its desirability and magnetism that have been kept alive with different intensities throughout its adjustments over time.

While the first three parts of this book refer to an extensive approach to the postcard by studying its characteristics and contributions referred to external factors, Part IV. (Ethos - ἔθος) COMMUNICABILITY: A RELATIONAL ETHICS presents an intensive examination of the postcard as such, of its constituent traits that define its communicative character, which metaphorically may be understood as its *ethos*. A meticulous analysis of what is entailed in the card itself, in their being posted, and in keeping and collecting them discloses the postcard’s communicability. This double-sided open card is a unique form of interactive multimedia intrinsically combining mass-produced pictures with personal hand-written missives that, in their co-relation, enrich each other, intersecting the public and the private spheres. The card format inaugurated a perceptive space, opening the way to other forms of looking and to new pictorial and writing styles; and, because the card is open, what is consigned on it, covering it, is also exposed, open to everyone’s view. Posting the card

requires choosing and addressing it; that is, having someone in mind to make contact, not necessarily expecting an answer. Sending a postcard may be seen as a goodwill response to the other's existence, what I suggest to be an act of deference, an ethical-rhetorical gesture posing an open attitude toward the other. When received, the postcard, puts the gap between the sender and the addressee into play, placing them 'in relation' while 'relating' stories to which both can 'relate', stories that remain open to infinite significations. Through postcards memories are recalled, and when those are collected, they become valuable records, a type of archive that images past events for viewers-readers to inhabit them imaginatively, opening the way to multiple interpretations.

One may say that the postcard's main quality, its excellence, is a radical openness that exposes the aperture of truth. Truth was a concern of certain art movements at the time of the postcard's Golden Age, which decades later finds ontological grounding in Heidegger's discussion of *aletheia* — unconcealedness. To conclude this book without ever closing it, but rather leaving the way open to continue caring for these very special cards, the last section shows the postcard's unique form of openness in relation to "Nuda Veritas," two artworks by Gustav Klimt from 1898 and 1899, which I find exemplary of the uncovering of truth. Both in the postcard and in Klimt's paintings, fundamental veiling-unveiling, that is, concealment-unconcealment is manifested by *vera nuditas* exposing *nuda veritas*: impossible nudity, infinite open sense.

The postcard, an official inexpensive and efficient open card to send brief messages; a picture postcard industry prompted by commercial strategies; a multilayered product reconfigured by its users; an exponent of nascent sensitivities; a traverser of gender, race, age, class distinctions, and public-private realms; an archive of diverse ways of looking, feeling, and living; a sparkler of memories and imagination; an interactive multimedia artifact; a response to another's existence; a text-image storyteller... the postcard is both an opener of newness and an open mode of endless possibilities of making sense of our being in the world. Through its practical and unpretentious way, the postcard's radical openness makes patent the aperture of truth.

Aperture: Opening Up the Postcard

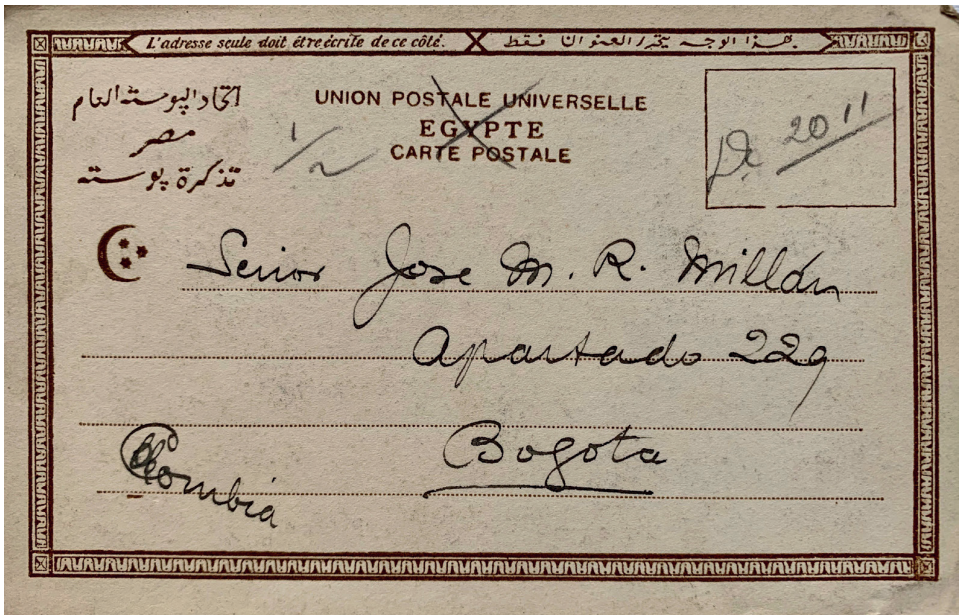
This book is an opening up of the postcard exposing its aperture, hoping it may bring to others the delight, insights, and wonder that it has given me.

Part I.

Politikos - Πολιτικός

COMING FORTH:

“NEW MOVES IN AN OLD GAME”



Undivided-Back Postcard. 1912

The postcard's double-sidedness mirrors what was at stake in its formation and evolution as it reflects the processes that had to take place for these cards to be acknowledged, authorized, and used massively. On the one side, the optimistic prospects of innovation and change that cards-to-post could bring about; and on the other, the fear over those very changes with their negative outcomes; and in between –in being two– the co-habitation of both sides embedded in its configuration. The appearance of the postcard, its coming-to-existence –its becoming– was a motive of strenuous political discussions; it was a controversial issue that required the advocacy and creativity of citizens in various countries for the postcard to be officially constituted and instituted. Decades of political activism took place for the postcard to be approved worldwide; then, to be privately produced; and yet later to be transformed into cards with pictures, as we still know them today.

After several unsuccessful design intents and failed proposals for the official acceptance of postal open cards, finally in 1869, The Austro-Hungarian Empire decreed the birth of the correspondence card –*Correspondenz Karte*. These cards, ready to write on them and be posted, had a pre-printed stamp with ample space for the address on the front, and their backs were left blank for users to inscribe a brief message. Although several countries soon followed the Austrian example, others were reticent to consent to cards being mailed without envelopes and, even when authorized as a product of the post offices, their private production was not yet allowed.

The coming-to-be of the postcard during the second half of the 19th century and its overwhelming admittance into everyday life at the beginning of the 20th century were the outcome of disputes between control and innovation, of disagreements between conventionalism and libertarianism, of arguments favoring either resistance to change or consenting to take risks. It was a political struggle, a game of power between States and citizens, a quarrel between government and industry in which service and profit, practicality and set social manners, efficiency and pleasure, obedience and imagination were put into play. This game was, above all, a game to establish the rules of