Looking Down from the Dom Tower with a Romantic Gaze: A Visual Analysis of Postcards in the City of Utrecht

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Abstract
Postcards are a unique cultural text that can be used to develop an understanding of the role of visual images in the representation of a country, city or area. Postcards are intended to present a visual narrative of a specific place by shaping the viewer's gaze and providing symbols for consumption. Due to the city of Utrecht’s increasing number of tourists and investments, postcards from this location are analysed in this thesis to examine how they represent the city. The various images presented in the postcards are analysed through visual content and semiotic analysis drawn from John Urry’s theory of the tourist gaze. Important recurrent motifs are the cultural heritage, social space, nature and the romantic gaze. It is concluded that Utrecht is represented by postcards as a city with many cultural sights, and that it is depicted from a romantic perspective in a quiet and green environment.

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Introduction

“Perhaps no communications medium exemplifies twentieth century popular culture more accurately than the unpretentious postcard.”

(Kuhlken)

Postcards are easily available at any tourist destination, which is why Robert Kuhlken states that “postcards are an icon of a culture in a hurry”. Postcards can be considered to be one of the earliest forms of visual mass media (Crouch 23). During the mid-nineteenth century, plain cards were used for quick correspondence. This changed gradually, and until 1907, one side of a postcard was reserved for the address and the other side for the written text across the picture itself. In 1907, the law changed and permitted a divided back, with one half for the address and the other for the message (Kuhlken). The picture postcards soon became very popular, as it offered tourists a quick and inexpensive way to demonstrate their “tourist identity” (Yläne 99) to people back home and served as a “personal memento” (Markwick 417). Although other forms of visual communication have since become more popular, the production of picture postcards continues for the tourism market (Crouch 23). Anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards described the postcard as “a multi-faceted icon of the tourist experience” (200) because they provide the best-known method of spreading images of other cultures around the world. Postcards are interesting to analyse because of the insights that they offer about past and present discourses, a culture’s changes over time and the use of artistic expression in the photographs (Kuhlken). Postcards can be understood as unique cultural texts, because most photographs are taken by professionals with a purpose and ideology, which makes postcards stylised narratives that portray multiple meanings (Kürti 44).

Literature Review

The role of postcards has been studied in many ways. Postcards have been analysed according to their city or country of origin (Mellinger, Markwick, Kürti, Edwards) and in a more general way (Yläne, Hunter, Winiwarter). Tourism imagery has attracted increasing interest in recent research, mainly because of growing interest of researchers in semiotics and representations in visual content (Markwick 419).
Sociologist Martin Wayne Mellinger analysed this new way of observing in visual representations of African Americans. Mellinger studied photographic postcards from 1893 to 1917 and concluded that symbolic strategies were used in the postcards to form an image of black people as disparate (777). Mellinger mentioned the increase in “hegemonically-scripted discourses” (776) that produce identities for tourists and create the boundaries of their gaze. Central to this new way of seeing is the coloniser’s gaze upon the colonised (Mellinger 775). To understand how cultural identities are formed by tourism images, Edwards studied the representation of Australian aboriginals in a museum postcard collection. About the postcards characteristics Edwards writes: “these become metaphors or symbolic structures which reify culturally formed images as observed realities” (200). Sociologist William Cannon Hunter stated that postcards also convey the authentic characteristics of a destination with displayed simulations (354). Hunter performed a content analysis of postcards from 21 destinations to analyse the imagery of tourist destinations. Hunter described the power behind photographs in the promotion of destinations: “it could be said that their representational power functionally transforms a place into a destination – a commodity” (364).

Marion Markwick’s study of Malta analysed the symbolic meanings of 500 postcards and concluded that the image presented in the postcards enlarged the destination’s image (418). Markwick noted that the symbolic meaning in postcards encourages the “exoticism” and “authenticity” of a destination (417). The meanings of the images are not permanent: firstly, because the meaning is communicated by many layers and must be systematically unpacked to access the messages behind the images; and secondly, because the images in postcards may change in response to touristic motivations and desires (Markwick 430).

Another study that concerned the meaning behind postcards was conducted by László Kürti, who researched last century postcards from a small town, Lajosmizse, in Hungary. Kürti mentioned that postcards form useful “metastories” (44) by integrating cultural patterns into images. Postcards reveal an interwoven written and visual narrative about the transition of a space (Kürti 45). To understand the interspatiality of tourists, Virpi Ylänne analysed the messages that tourists wrote on touristic postcards. By sending postcards, tourists want to highlight their holiday, be remembered at home and incorporate the people at home in their holiday experience (Ylänne 124). Ylänne argued that the interspatial relationship is visible in holiday postcards. For example,
with the written words, “as you can see on the postcard, it’s a beautiful and amazing city” (Ylänne 106), the addressee is treated as co-present; the sender wants to share the tourist gaze. According to historian Verena Winiwarter, postcards work like “binoculars”, because they increase the visual capacity of the owners. “Postcard images stand on the verge between dream and reality” (194), which is why Winiwarter researched the discourse of nationalism in tourism postcards. Postcards maintain and create a myth of a place. The intention of postcards is to be part of the “destination’s appeal” (Winiwarter 195), not to promote that destination. The tourist gaze that is embodied by postcards functions as an essential visual narrative for nationalism (Winiwarter 204).

Research Topic
At present, little research has been conducted into postcards from the Netherlands. To ensure the feasibility of this research, the destination should be a medium-sized city. Personal interest and an increasing number of tourists and investments make Utrecht a suitable choice of destination for this research. The number of visitors to Utrecht with at least one overnight stay in the city increased from 324,000 in 2012 to 460,000 in 2017, an increase of 42% (Factsheet Toerisme). In 2017, “Utrecht Marketing”, together with various partners, introduced a new city marketing strategy for Utrecht to strengthen the city’s competitiveness. Utrecht was branded as an inspiring, bright and welcoming city with the motto “live like a local” (Utrecht Marketing). Utrecht is the second ranked city (behind Amsterdam) with the most monuments in the Netherlands (Erfgoed Utrecht). The official tourism website of the city, created by Utrecht Marketing (www.visit-utrecht.com), generally focuses on the diversity of attractions in the city, with its museums, events, city tours, parks, art and hotspots.

An analysis of a representative sample of postcards can help to develop an understanding of the role of visual images in the representation of Utrecht and how visitors perceive and experience the city. Postcards are intended to present a visual narrative of a specific place by shaping the viewer’s gaze and providing symbols for consumption. From this information, the following research question arises: how do postcards represent the city of Utrecht? The sub-questions that can be utilised to answer the research question are as follows: what are the recurrent motives in the postcards;
what is omitted from the postcards and how can the denotative and connotative elements of the postcards be interpreted?

The primary sources – the postcards – were selected in April 2019 in the souvenir shops in the city of Utrecht. For this research, the three largest souvenir shops in the city were chosen: VVV Utrecht Informatie Centrum, Groeten uit Utrecht and Utrecht Souvenirs. To ensure the feasibility of this research, the number of postcards obtained from the shops was achievable. Photographs were taken of all the postcards that were sold in these stores and represented the city of Utrecht; postcards that represented the Netherlands in general were not included. In total, 160 postcards represented the city, and removing duplicates left 48 postcards to analyse. Secondary sources were found online at RuQuest and in the Radboud University Library.

Methodology
This thesis is an analysis of the various images presented in postcards of the city of Utrecht that are offered for sale in Utrecht’s souvenir shops. The aim of this analysis is to examine how the postcards represent the city of Utrecht. The method that was used to achieve this was visual content analysis in combination with visual semiotic analysis (Rose 51). The research method used in this analysis is based on the book, Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Materials, by sociologist Gillian Rose, and a previous example of visual research in tourism by Hunter, which focused on the identification of pictorial elements of photographs used for the promotion of tourist destinations.

Firstly, the frequency and types of denotive elements on the postcards were described. Rose stated that content analysis is based “on counting the frequency of certain visual elements in a clearly defined population of images, and then analysing those frequencies” (88). Thus, the key patterns in the postcards were identified. Secondly, the denotative and connotative elements and the relationships between these elements were identified. There are two types of connotative signs: metonymic and synecdochic. The metonymic sign “is something associated with something else, which then represents that something else” (Rose 121), while a synecdochic sign “is either a part of something standing in for a whole, or a whole standing in for a part” (Rose 121).

A visual semiotic analysis allows a researcher to explore an image in greater depth than by a descriptive analysis or a quantitative evaluation of the signs. It offers
tools for “taking an image apart and tracing how it works in relation to broader systems of meaning” (Rose 106). The visual semiotic analysis in this research was based on philosopher Roland Barthes’ theory of the “layering of meaning”. Barthes applied the notion of semiotics to popular culture. Denotation is the first layer and describes what (or who) is being depicted (Rose 121). Connotation is the second layer, of “the broader concepts, ideas and values which the represented people, places and things ‘stand for’, ‘are signs of’” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 96). Barthes called such connotative meaning “myths” (107).

The style and techniques of photography and artwork influence the connotation (Leeuwen and Jewitt 8). This study’s analysis was based on the framing, composition, salience and point of view. By analysing the framing, “the edges or boundaries of the pictures” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 80) were considered in the same way as the position of subjects inside these boundaries. The camera’s point of view was analysed because it creates “a meaning potential” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 135). With a high angle, the viewer looks “from a position of symbolic power”, and with a low angle, “something has some kind of symbolic power over you” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 135). The horizontal angle refers to the relation of “involvement or detachment from what is represented” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 135). Salience is used “to indicate that some elements can be made more eye-catching than others” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 150) by making a subject stand out from its surroundings. The composition relates to the arrangement of the subjects in the image (Leeuwen and Jewitt 138).

Theory

This thesis takes into account theories on the destination’s visual image and how tourists view the places to which they travel. The analysis is therefore framed and guided by sociologist, John Urry’s theory in The Tourist Gaze. Another field of research that is connected to Urry’s theory is city branding.

In the 1960s, Urry applied the concept of “gazing” – developed by French philosopher, Michel Foucault – to the tourism industry, in his first edition of The Tourist Gaze. Urry described how people gaze upon places “through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education” (1). Gazing is more than only seeing; it includes, among other things, the connection between “signs and their referents” (Urry 12). Gazing at a particular spot is
framed by “cultural styles, circulating images and texts of this and other places, as well as personal experiences and memories” (Urry 12). It is through these frames that the tourist sees the place and gives it meaning. The tourist gaze is attracted by characteristics in the urban landscape in a different way to the everyday experience (Urry 2). This gaze is regularly captured, for example, in films, postcards and photographs (Urry 4). Urry wrote that “these enable the gaze to be reproduced, recaptured and redistributed over time and across space” (4). Based on travel discourses, tourists read the destination by the signifiers of preestablished signs (Urry 11). Urry described how gazing is also “capturing signs photographically” (12), which is a key notion in this study, because postcards are a visual medium. Urry wrote that “photographers turn a blind eye to certain features and shine a beautiful light upon others” (165), and as an example, Urry mentioned the “authentic orient” (165) in the captured signs in Western travel photography. “Photographs are thus the outcome of an active signifying practice in which photographers select, structure and shape what is going to be taken and how” (Urry 165), especially in the endeavour to create “idealised images” (Urry 165) that sociologist Rob Shields called “place-myths” (Shields 61).

Urry described different forms of gazing. The two most commonly used forms are the “romantic gaze” and the “collective gaze” (Urry 19). The romantic gaze “requires considerable cultural capital” (Urry 100) in a desolate scene and is focused on the “solitude, privacy and a personal, semispiritual relationship with the object of the gaze” (Urry 19). In contrast, Urry mentioned that the collective gaze “involves conviviality” (19), and other people are essential for the “liveliness” (19) in a place.

The visual representation of a city is becoming increasingly relevant for tourists and the tourism industry (Hospers 28). Gert-Jan Hospers stated that tourists – and especially those in cities – gaze at a particular feature, such as a famous church (28), and that “The theory of the tourist gaze suggests how important it is to identify urban signs that can be photographed, multiplied and distributed” (Hospers 32). Hospers mentioned three categories of city image carriers: hallmark events, built environments and famous personalities (29). In particular, landmarks work as image carriers for the built environment, because landmarks are easy to remember and recognise (Hospers 29).
Chapter 1: Sorting Visual Data

In this chapter, the 48 unique postcards are sorted inductively according to the denotative sign elements represented on them. This chapter answers the sub-question: ‘What are the recurrent motives in the postcards?’

The sorting is used to divide the postcards into categories and subtypes based on the objects and subjects in the pictures. First, the postcards are sorted according to the objects that they depict, with distinctions made in terms of style, light, frequency of elements, nature and vehicles. Subsequently, the postcards are sorted according to the people represented in the pictures, with distinction made in their activity.

The postcards can be divided in two main categories: postcards with cityscapes and postcards with one cultural sight or object. All but two of the postcards depict the city centre of Utrecht; the exceptions depict an area outside Utrecht’s city centre and Amsterdam. From one postcard the place cannot be determined. The most frequently represented subject in the pictures is a cityscape, on 41 postcards. The cityscapes generally expose streets with cultural heritage and terraces. The postcards with one cultural sight or object depict twice a bicycle, a mill, the city hall, the Utrecht University Hall and twice the Dom Church. Significantly more postcards contain a photograph (41) instead of a painting (7). Most pictures were taken in daylight (35) on a clear, sunny day with a blue sky. The pictures that were taken at night (13) all depict twilight, enhanced by the street lighting. The most prominent signs in the cityscapes category are the canal (27), the Dom Tower (22), and one of the bridges in the city (20). There is always a combination of at least two of these three signs. The Dom Tower, which is currently part of a Protestant church, is the only religious building depicted among the postcards.

Nature is featured on most of the postcards (42) in the form of green trees. Most of the vehicles depicted on the postcards are bicycles (31), followed by sloops (12) and pedal boats (5). Cars are not depicted in the images. Furthermore, the train station – the largest in the Netherlands – is not depicted, although two postcards show a small detail of the train transportation. In total, there are only two postcards that depict a modern building, namely the new city hall next to the central train station, built in 2014. Among the cityscapes postcards, 24 depict people and 17 do not. Of the postcards with one cultural sight or object, four pictures contain people and three do not. Most people in the pictures are walking (18) or on a terrace (15), followed by in sitting in a boat (11), or cycling (5).
Chapter 2: Visual Semiotic Analysis

This chapter presents a semiotic analysis of the pictures on the postcards and will answer the sub-questions: ‘How can the denotative and connotative elements of the postcards be interpreted?’ and ‘What is omitted from the postcards?’

The statistical description of the types and frequency of the denotative signs identified in Chapter 1 provide the structure for this chapter. The denotative signs from Chapter 1 are analysed in more depth in this chapter to establish the meaning. Subsequently, to gain further insight into the visual narratives of the postcards, the “second meaning is then superimposed” (Leeuwen and Jewitt 97), which is the connotative. The connotative elements are analysed based on the circulation of signs, visual style, and techniques. Within this analysis, certain postcards are selected to serve as examples. The other postcards are in the Attachment.

Because most postcards are in the category cityscapes, the focus is more on these postcards. Some postcards in the category one cultural sight or object are analysed in section 2.11.
2.1 Point of View
Most pictures are depicted at an eye-level point of view (for example, Postcard 1). The eye-level point of view connotes a sense of equality and involvement between the viewer and the subjects (Leeuwen and Jewitt 136). Pictures with an eye-level view might signify the “true view” that a visitor would see when looking at the city from a street or a bridge. Only a small part of the city is visible, which can imply that the city is small. Three postcards display pictures that were taken from a high-angle point of view. These postcards present a panoramic overview of the city (for example, Postcard 2). In Postcard 2, the viewer looks down at the city – except for the Dom Tower – from a symbolic position of power (Leeuwen and Jewitt 135). The streets and canal probably continue outside the frame, which implies that the city is larger than the pictures depict. The photographic composition of Postcard 2 is based on the golden ratio, with the Dom Tower on the left. The golden ratio helps to present an organic and natural composition to the viewer and draws the viewer’s attention to the tower (Visser 69). The Dom Tower is the only tall building visible and matches the point of view at which the picture is taken. This implies that the Dom Tower is a powerful symbol at the connotative level.

![Image of Postcard 1](image1.png)
![Image of Postcard 2](image2.png)
2.2 Perspective

Two types of perspective are commonly used in the pictures to create depth: perspective that is created by overlapping elements is used eight times, and linear perspective with a vanishing point is used seven times. One of the bridges in the city of Utrecht is frequently used to create perspective in the pictures, as can be seen in Postcard 3. The bridge creates depth by overlapping the canal, street, and buildings behind it.

The canal and the Dom Tower play an important role in the linear perspectives in the images. The Dom Tower is used as the vanishing point in Postcard 4. All of the lines in this photograph direct the viewer’s eye towards the Dom Tower, signifying that the tower is the centre of the city and again connoting its power. In Postcard 5, the canal is used as the main line towards the vanishing point. Everything in this picture seems to be visually balanced and might therefore present a framed, aesthetically pleasing version of the reality. One side of the picture shows the street and houses, the other side green trees, while the upper part shows the blue sky with some clouds and the lower part the canal. This signifies a harmonious city. The representation of the city centre is further discussed in section 2.9.
2.3 Vehicles

The most frequently depicted vehicles in the pictures are bicycles, depicted on 27 postcards. Large numbers of bicycles are mostly parked against fences on the streets, as can be seen on Postcards 6 and 7. The bicycle on Postcard 6 with the vibrant blue colour is a highly salient object, implying that the bicycle is the carrier of the picture’s meaning (Leeuwen and Jewitt 150). The postcards’ repeated depiction of bicycles can signify that the bicycle is a symbol of the city and therefore a metonymic sign, meaning that it refers to the city (Rose 121). The implication that it is possible for one to navigate the city with a non-electric vehicle connotes that the city is sustainable and small. The bicycles also signify the Dutch identity, as further described in section 2.10.

Postcard 7 also presents an image of the city as sustainable and small in its depiction of the bicycles on the left and the boat on the canal. This image is reinforced by the lack of cars or public transportation. The salient green, yellow, and blue colours signify the sun and nature together with the green trees and canal. The view with a naked eye would be different because it would lack the saturated colours. The terrace with people and the people on the boats signify social and recreational spaces. The overall picture is framed by typical Dutch canal houses, which implies the cultural heritage in the city. In summary, Postcard 7, similar to Postcard 5, portrays the combination of space of heritage, natural, and social spaces in the city.
2.4 The Dom Tower

As already mentioned in Chapter 1, the Dom Tower is the most depicted building on the postcards. The tower, which was completed in 1382, is 112 metres tall and thus the tallest church tower in the Netherlands (Erfgoed Utrecht). The tower is depicted in the middle of the picture on 10 postcards and at the side of the picture in the 12 other postcards. Sometimes the tower is partially hidden, as can be seen in Postcard 10, although it is visible from almost every point in the city, as it is the city's highest point. Postcards 8 and 9 place the tower in the middle of the composition, as it is the centre of the city. The Dom Tower is the central monument and it can therefore connote Utrecht’s pride and power. Postcards 8 and 9 depict the same location in the city, with the Bakkerbrug, canal, wharf, and the tower.

Postcard 8 presents a photograph that was taken at twilight, as is evident from the sky and street lighting. The Dom Tower is framed as the primary image in the city. The reflection of the city in the canal, together with the lighting, signifies a dream-like place, which is consistent with the fact that no people are depicted in the photograph. The composition and details are roughly the same on Postcards 8 and 9. The tower is stably depicted with the same amount of space around it on both postcards. Both pictures contain trees, a terrace, bicycles, and houses. However, Postcard 9 is not a realistic representation of the city but a painting that was probably inspired by the style of Vincent van Gogh, with the spiral effect in the sun. Warm colours, like red, orange and purple, are used to represent a summer day in the city. Postcard 8 does not depict any people, and Postcard 9 only depicts two people, which signifies a quiet city.

The rendering of the tower on the postcards demonstrates why Utrecht’s nickname is the “Domcity”; the Dom Tower is the city’s most iconic cultural attraction. The tower is at a connotative level the synecdochical sign of Utrecht as a whole (Rose 121). An iconic attraction is a tool for branding a city, as it increases the “local appeal” to visitors and serves as a recognised symbol of the city’s heritage (Weidenfeld 1).

The Dom Tower signifies the heritage and history of Utrecht, recalling the time when the church held power. Because no other religious signs are depicted on the postcards, Utrecht portrays itself as a Christian city. The Dom Tower is never depicted alone, but always in combination with social spaces, canal houses, trees, and sometimes the canal or people. This therefore signifies that the city offers more than heritage but also contains nature and places in which to socialise; it is a city for a wide range of
people and has much to offer. This representation of the city is also visible in the previously described postcards.
2.5 The Canal and Bridges

The Oudegracht canal is depicted 27 times on the postcards. The two-kilometre-long canal crosses the entire city centre from north to south (Erfgoed Utrecht). A unique aspect of Utrecht’s canals is the wharves and the wharf cellars next to the canals. The cellars were used as storage spaces and as passages into the houses (Erfgoed Utrecht). Currently, the wharves and traditional cellars are refurbished in a suitable heritage style for restaurants and cafés, as can be seen on many postcards (for example, Postcard 11).

Postcard 11 is a stylised painting of the Oudegracht, the Bakkerbrug, and the Dom Tower. Many activities are taking place on and around the canal: terraces on the wharves are bustling with people and musical notes have been drawn. The outdoor activities, colours, and clear sky signify that this represents the city in the summer. The painting consists of many small details: at the top of a building, the Dutch flag is waving, signifying that this is a Dutch city. The painting is framed by the trees, which again makes this painting a combination of cultural heritage, social space, and nature.

In contrast, Postcard 12 is a photograph of another part of the Oudegracht and depicts the Kalisbrug without any people at twilight. Due to the lack of people and social space, the city is presented as an empty place, which signifies a city that is not crowded. The picture is aesthetically interesting because of the golden ratio used, which places the elements in the photograph in proportion to each other (Vissers 69). The reflection in the canal creates more perspective and, in combination with the high contrast and emptiness, reinforces the mysterious character of the city during the evening. The photograph is consistent with Urry’s argument that the power of a professional photograph is not to be a “substitute” for the city but to attract visitors to the destination (167), which he described as “idealised images” (Urry 165). Like the Dom Tower, the canal functions as an “image carrier” for the city (Hopers 30), because visitors will remember and recognise the canal as a sign.

On 20 postcards, one of the bridges in the city is depicted. The bridges create perspective in the pictures. In total, the Oudegracht has 16 arch bridges (Erfgoed Utrecht), of which the Bakkerbrug, with two arches, is the most depicted bridge on the postcards. The Bakkerbrug affords a view of the canal, canal houses, and the Dom Tower, as can be seen on Postcards 8, 9, and 11. At a connotative level, the canals and bridges together imply connection and accessibility in the city.
Postcard 11

Postcard 12

Utrecht
2.6 Nature
Almost all of the postcards depict trees among buildings and canals, thus presenting nature in a controlled environment. These postcards represent a city where visitors can enjoy urban life while also being surrounded by nature in a quiet and sustainable place. None of the postcards depict only nature or any nature reserves in and around the city, such as the city’s botanical garden or parks.

Postcard 13 is an edited photograph of the Oudegracht with a man cycling and two people walking. The central positioning of the lamppost creates a symmetrical composition. The canal and the trees are only depicted on the right side of the photo, while the street is depicted on the left. The photograph has a full-frame fisheye effect, causing the houses, which serve as the picture’s framing, to flow in a curved line. The clouds have a painted effect, which makes them more apparent, and the green colour of the trees and the canal seems to have been saturated more than the other colours. The painting, *Starry Night*, by Vincent van Gogh, could have been the inspiration for the painting effect of the clouds, like in Postcard 9. The nature in the city is promoted in a creative way, and this postcard therefore implies the importance of trees in the city. At a connotative level, the presence of nature in the city promotes the city as young, healthy, and lively.
2.7 People
Twenty-eight postcards portray couples, small groups, and solo travellers. The skin colour of all the people in the pictures is white, which represents Utrecht unrealistically as a racially homogeneous city. The age of the people ranges from young adult and middle-aged to elderly and only one postcard depicts children. The number of men and women in the images is approximately equal. The people in the pictures could be local residents, as they do not necessarily display any signs of being tourists.

The postcards do not show any close-up images of the people. Most pictures were taken within public distance of the people, which means that the torsos of a group of people are visible (Kress and Leeuwen 129). The long shots suggest social distance; the subjects in these pictures are not inviting the viewer to interact but rather to observe them from a distance (Leeuwen and Jewitt 96). This might signify that the cityscapes themselves, rather than the people, are the main subjects in these pictures. Most people in the images are acting in the same way, by walking or sitting on a terrace, which increases “generalisation” to the viewer (Leeuwen and Jewitt 96). The depiction of people walking implies a small city where everything is at a short distance. The people sitting on a terrace signify social space in a relaxed atmosphere during the summer.

The 17 postcards without people signify a quiet city that has not yet been discovered by visitors. When the people are depicted on the postcards these pictures only show a few people, which implies that the city is not overcrowded and can be explored without being surrounded by many other tourists. The destination is not excessively popular, and therefore the city is promoted as “authentic”. The juxtaposition of the past (cityscapes) and the present (people and their recreation) connotes continuity, where the preservation of cultural heritage is important. At a connotative level, this may indicate the localness in the city's identity.
2.8 Paintings

Seven of the 48 postcards are paintings. Postcards 11, 14, and 20 are in the same style and made by the Dutch painter Guus van Eck. These three paintings are colourful and hide many details. Many people are depicted in all three works, creating an energetic feeling. The paintings are in high pigment with a soft appearance, and the artist has indicated the direction and details with lines. Postcard 15 is an expressionistic cityscape made by visual artist Jeroen Quirijns. The Dom Tower is central in the painting, and the streets are formed around the tower. Quirijns’s style can be inspired by the work *View of Cagnes* by Chaim Soutine. This can be seen in the colours used, which suggest a serene atmosphere, and the swirling brushwork, which gives a deformed effect.

The paintings create an artistic view of the city. They recreate the gaze in a new artwork and are therefore an addition to the photographs. Urry notes that a painting can be a different representation of a place and becomes a part of the everyday aestheticisation (Urry 84). At a connotative level, the paintings can reinforce the aesthetic value of the city. Even if the real-life representation differs from the painting, the painting will stay in the visitor’s mind, and a particular construction can thus improve the landscape’s myth (Urry 179).
2.9 Cultural Heritage City Centre

Urry mentioned that the “signs and their referents” (12) determine people’s gaze. The signs in the postcards are mostly inside the city centre; other parts of the city are removed. The cultural heritage together, in particular consisting of the Dom Tower, canals, bridges, and canal houses, generates a picturesque framing of the city centre. The definition of picturesque is “attractive in appearance, especially in an old-fashioned way” (“Picturesque”). Urry links the picturesque framing with the romantic gaze, a frame without any signs of modernity (174). The cultural heritage depicted on the postcards acts as historical signs and connotes the historical position in the Middle Ages that was not destroyed during the Second World War. It describes the story of cultural survival and heritage.

The postcards imply that the “place-myth” (Shields 61) of the city centre’s representation in the romantic gaze is reproduced over and over again. Shields described how this “place-myth” is a result of stereotyping, even if this is not the reality (60). Urry adds that “commercial tourist photographs arouse desires by ‘staging’ geographies that thrill and seduce the eye” (74). The “thrilling” and “seduction” of the visitor’s eyes in Utrecht’s city centre imply a romantic view of the harmonious signs on the postcards. The fact that only a few or no people are depicted on the postcard is consistent with Urry’s description of the romantic gaze (19). The romantic gaze is associated with the words “privacy” and “personal” or gazing with “significant others” (Urry 19). Because of the passing of time, the city’s centre is attractive and idyllic to the viewer’s eye. This is intensified by the lack of modern signs and paintings and postcards in twilight.

The focus on a human-made centre with cultural heritage is a European phenomenon. The city centre is built around a tower, and the bridges and canals signify connection. This is all part of a romanticism view, just like cities such as Venice, Bruges, and Prague. The city connotes itself therefore as a European city, although there are also many typical Dutch signs in the postcards, and these are discussed in the next section.
2.10 “Dutchness”
Sarah Dellmann described typically Dutch qualities in visual attractions with qualifiers such as “authentic”, “quaint”, and “picturesque” (27). These qualifiers conform to the visual representation of Utrecht in the postcards. Firstly, “Dutchness” in the postcards is symbolised by the canal. Canals play a prominent part in Dutch city planning, including in Utrecht, because 26% of all Dutch territory lies below sea level. Another typical Dutch sign in the postcards is the canal houses. They are recognisable because they are often slim and tall with widely varying facades and styles.

In terms of the signs of Amsterdam in the postcards, one picture depicts the Amsterdam canal (Postcard 16), and two postcards have a banner with the Amsterdam city symbol on it (for example, Postcard 17). Postcard 16 is a photograph of a bicycle that is being used as a planter placed on a bridge over the Keizersgracht in Amsterdam, with the name “Utrecht” on top. The Keizersgracht is broader than the canals in Utrecht, and there are many boats along the wharf, which is forbidden in the city centre of Utrecht. On the left side of the picture, an Amsterdam tram is visible. Because of the high colour saturation, the focus in the photograph is on the pink details on the bicycle and flowers. Another postcard that depicts a bicycle is Postcard 18. It is unclear where this photograph was taken, as it does not depict any city-specific features. The bicycle is covered with toy ducklings, and is therefore probably not for cycling, but a sign for, in this case, Utrecht. Both postcards use the bicycle as a metonymic sign (Rose 121). The bicycle can be associated with Dutch streets, and with the name “Utrecht” on top, the bicycles on the postcards refer to the city of Utrecht without explicitly showing the city.

In summary, some of the postcards use Dutch qualifiers and Amsterdam signs and symbols. Crouch noted that viewers make a connection with a destination when they look at a postcard or other image (5). In this case, a photograph or symbol of Amsterdam – and therefore, “Dutchness” – can be connected with the city of Utrecht. As Hospers stated, “both tourists and attractions are manipulated: the gaze falls upon exactly those features of a place that are already anticipated” (28). A picture of a bicycle or canals has already been anticipated by the viewer, and the postcards thus reinforce the Dutch stereotype and the way in which visitors think about the Dutch city’s identity.
2.11 Exceptions

The exceptions in the postcards in general do not depict the city centre as described in section 2.9. Most exceptions are in the category one cultural sight or object, and they therefore focus on one specific element of the city. This can be modern architecture, a mill, or the Utrecht University Hall.

Two postcards show signs of modernity. Both pictures depict the new city office open from 2014. These two postcards are also the only two postcards that show a sign of the central train station, which is next to the city office. Although these signs are quite small, in Postcard 19, it is the symbol of the Nederlandse Spoorwegen, and in Postcard 20, it is a drawing of a train under the name Utrecht. The renovated station in Utrecht opened in 2016 and is the most important junction in the train network in the Netherlands and therefore also the largest and busiest train station in the Netherlands.

Postcard 19 is a photograph taken from the Jaarbeursplein. The focus is on the city office, the white sculpture with structural diagonals behind a composite facade. This photograph is in high contrast with all the other photographs of the city. Postcard 20 is a painting of a combination of modern architecture and cultural heritage. It signifies a modernised city that also places importance on the preservation of heritage. Most postcards do not depict any sign of modernity or the train station, despite its connotations of regeneration and connection, probably because this does not reinforce the historical character the city wants to depict for a romantic gaze.

Postcard 21 depicts the wood sawmill De Ster, built in 1739 and located in the neighbourhood Lombok, just outside the city centre. The reflection in the water creates more depth in the picture and enhances the presence of nature in the form of the canal. The picture does not show the city, and if the viewer does not know about this sawmill in the city, it could also be a picture of a sawmill outside the city.

Postcard 22 depicts a statue of Jan van Nassau (1559-1606) that was unveiled in 1883 on the Dom square. Van Nassau was a younger brother of Willem van Oranje, and he played an important role in the creation of the Union of Utrecht. It is the only statue displayed on the postcards. Next to the statue, the Utrecht University Hall from 1891 is depicted. This is the main building of the University of Utrecht. At a connotation level, Utrecht communicates pride about its position in the academic and historical world. Postcards 22 and 14 are the only two postcards depicting the statue and the Utrecht
University Hall, which may be because most visitors will probably recognise the signs in the cityscapes around the canal more.
2.12 The Signs Not Framed
In this section, the signs that are not framed are described in greater depth. The signs not depicted can be infinite, and this section therefore only considers the official tourism website mentioned in the Research Topic section, and the three categories of the built environment, hallmark events and famous personalities that Hospers described as the “urban image carriers” (29).

While the built environment is clearly presented by the postcards that depict cityscapes and landmarks, categories that are not represented on the postcards are hallmark events and famous personalities. Visitors “direct their gaze to hallmark events” in a city (Hospers 30). In Utrecht, this could be Open Monuments Day or Utrecht Canal Pride, for example. Visitors may also visit a city because “they associate it with a personality” (Hospers 30); for example, in Utrecht, this might be Dick Bruna, the creator of “Nijntje” (“Miffy”), who was born in Utrecht, or designer and architect Gerrit Rietveld, a member of the Dutch art movement, “De Stijl” (“The Style”).

The museums and city tours represented on the official tourism website of the city of Utrecht are also not shown on the postcards. For example, the Rietveld Schröderhuis, the Central Museum and the Miffy Museum are not represented. This may be to increase the romantic gaze, revealing a city where a visitor will not be overcrowded by other visitors or modernity. The same applies to the absence of electric vehicles and the train station, which has already been discussed in this chapter.
Conclusion

This thesis answers the following research question: “How do postcards represent the city of Utrecht?” The introduction describes how postcards can be understood as unique cultural texts. For example, they portray multiple meanings with their visual narratives (Kürti 44) and provide insight into past and present discourses (Kuhlken). Postcards convey messages by their characteristics and therefore are a way to shape the viewer’s gaze (Ylänne 106). No prior study has analysed postcards from Utrecht, and because of its increasing number of tourists and investments, the city of Utrecht was chosen for this research. A representative sample of 48 postcards was analysed to develop an understanding of how postcards represent Utrecht.

This research demonstrates that the postcards frame Utrecht with characteristic icons. The most recurrent category in the pictures is an image of the cityscape (41 postcards), and the others include one cultural sight or object. Visual content analysis was conducted, and revealed that the cityscapes of Utrecht showcase the Dom Tower, the city’s canal and historical city bridges. Another recurrent motif is trees (depicted on 42 postcards), and the most frequently depicted vehicle on the postcards is the bicycle (31).

The different signs convey a number of denotative and connotative meanings. The Dom Tower – the only religious sign – is the most depicted and central building. At a connotative level, it is the synecdochical sign of the city, and it implies pride and power. Like the tower, the canal and bridges also function as “image carriers” (Hopers 30) for the city. The trees in the pictures promote the city’s image as liveable and sustainable. The sustainable image is also depicted through the many bicycles in the city, which also implies that the city is small. Depicting people at a long distance or not at all communicates that the city is not overcrowded and that the main subject is the cityscape itself.

The postcards in general are focused on the city centre’s nature, cultural heritage and social space. The city centre connotes historical authenticity through the “romantic gaze”. The romantic gaze is a vision of a place without any signs of modernity and is focused on privacy and the appreciation of a magnificent landscape (Urry 174). Because the focus is on the city centre and cultural heritage, the city signifies a European city. However, there are also specifically Dutch symbols in the postcards, such as the canal
and the bicycles. In this case, a photograph or symbol of Amsterdam – and therefore the Netherlands – can be connected to the city of Utrecht.

Most of the postcards do not depict any sign of modernity, probably because this does not reinforce the historical and romantic character that the city wants to depict. Elements that are omitted from the postcards include electric vehicles, the train station (except for two small signs), museums and events. This is also consistent with the image of a quiet, small city through a romantic gaze.

In conclusion, Utrecht is represented by postcards as a city with many cultural sights, and is depicted from a romantic perspective in a quiet and green environment. Therefore, the city is represented as a harmonious and idyllic place that is focused on the built environment. While the postcards differ, a number of themes recur and construct a narrative of Utrecht. Cultural heritage is particularly important within the representation of Utrecht and is emphasised more than modernity. The postcards represent the diversity of attractions in the city by depicting heritage sites and places to socialise. The symbols consist of European and Dutch images; therefore, the postcards do not represent a unique identity.

The methods that were used to analyse the postcards were visual content and semiotic analysis. Through content analysis, the key patterns in the postcards were identified. This method is useful as a descriptive tool, and therefore it served as a starting point for the semiotic analysis. However, categorising the content analysis was difficult because of the small number of postcards and because of the few differences between them. In future research, more postcards could be sampled, which allow content analysis to be more effectively applied as a method. To gain sufficient insight into the meaning of the postcards, it was important to conduct a semiotic analysis. The second layer of meaning, the connotation, was analysed in order to describe how the postcards represent the city.

This research was framed and guided by Urry’s theory as described in his book, *The Tourist Gaze*, in combination with city branding. Urry described how tourists look at a destination by the signifiers of preestablished signs (11). This insight was helpful in this research because it explains how the gaze of visitors is formed. The tourist gaze is strongly related to semiotic analysis, because visitors can read landscapes as signifiers of certain meanings.
This research is limited because it only focused on the content of the postcards, and this content may be interpreted differently by researchers from different backgrounds. Due to the scope of this research, an analysis over a longer time period – which could have produced a more interesting result – was not possible. Because this research only concerned content, potential follow-up research could consider the origin, distribution and financing of the postcards. It would also be relevant to compare the representations of the city in the postcards with representations of the city in other formats, such as on the official tourist website or on an Instagram page, or with another city.
van Aggelen 31

Bibliography


Attachments

All other postcards are arbitrarily ordered.