One sunny day this summer I had escaped the holiday crowds and was sitting out on a small uninhabited island in the vast archipelago of the Swedish westcoast. Privacy and isolation is, however, a relative thing today, the stillness was disturbed by a small aeroplane, which crossed the blue skies above, tugging an advertisement behind. "EVERYBODY LOVES A POSTCARD", it said. This enthusiastic message was part of a campaign mounted by the Swedish post office, urging holiday makers not to forget their duties. Holiday greetings are big business.

I spent the rest of that sunny day wondering why people love postcards and what kinds of postcards they love.

The following pages will explore some aspects of a hundred-year old cultural institution, the holiday picture postcard, a rather neglected genre among the visual arts. I am interested in the postcard not only as a genre, with its own traditions, forms and expressions, but also as a medium of cultural communication and an arena of cultural confrontation. Why are some holiday postcards viewed as tasteless or vulgar by some people and why are they loved by others? How does the choice of postcards express one's cultural identity?

Collecting views

The picture postcard was invented during the later part of the 19th century. The novelty very rapidly developed into a booming industry and the first
decades of the 20th century became the golden age of the postcard. In 1903 a record of over six hundred millions were mailed (Bull 1963: p. 121). Exchanging and collecting postcards became a favourite hobby and addicts could subscribe to special magazines for collectors. In many attics one can still find old postcard albums from this period. The collector's mania may be difficult to understand for us who live exposed to all kinds of visual medias, but at the turn of the century amateur photography was still an exclusive (and expensive) hobby and photos were rare in the printed press. The postcard satisfied some of the hunger for pictures and became an important medium through which people learned to visualize the world. (In 1904 the average Swede mailed around a dozen of cards (1)). The picture postcard was not only a new pictorial genre, but also a novel form of cultural communication. Standard ways of formulating greetings and messages on the limited space available were created. This popular literary genre is still waiting for a more systematic cultural analysis.

The Swedish word for picture postcard is **vykort** (literally meaning a card with a view) and the term reflects the interests of the first waves of tourists during the 19th century. The urban bourgeoisie invaded the countryside in search of a special kind of nature. It was the wild, unspoilt and exotic landscape which attracted these pioneers. They also represented a new way of looking at the landscape, in terms of *views*. The expeditions out into nature by train, steam-boat or on foot were based upon the collection of beautiful sceneries. Planned footpaths, guidebook listings and sight-seeing platforms structured the enjoyment of the landscape: look, here is another beautiful view!

This new way of seeing was shaped by many factors. One important condition was the changed way of traveling. Als coaches and carriages were replaced by the railway compartment or the saloon of the steamers the perception of the landscape changed: you now experienced nature gliding past you as a panorama, as a scenery through the glass of the
railway window or the cabin. You learned to con­
centrate your eyes on the distant fields, not on
the rapidly passing foreground. From these new
observation posts the landscape looked rather like
a framed painting or a photograph (2).

For the urban tourists nature in some ways became
a collection of frozen images, a string of picture
postcards. The new techniques of cheap mass
reproduction made it possible to bring these views
back home from one's travels and share them with
friends. The postcard was born out of a new mode
of seeing and in turn came to structure this new
perception of the outside world. The selection of
suitable designs for postcards helped to define
and reinforce the idea of a beautiful, interesting
or exclusive view. The five-star views were not
only listed in the local guidebook, they could
also be bought in the souvenir shop as picture
postcards.
Tasteful and tasteless postcards

Looking back on my middle class childhood I remember that the postcards we mailed or received were firmly planted in this classic bourgeois tradition. They were views of beautiful, exotic or interesting places: aesthetical sceneries, landscape panoramas, romantic sunsets, historical monuments.

My early summers were mostly spent in a small seaside resort, an old village invaded mainly by other middle class families during the holidays. Down at the beach you could however, meet other kinds of people, mainly textile workers and their families who came down for the weekend or camped during their short vacation. Although class and class differences were taboo in middle class conversations, it was clear that two class cultures or styles of holiday making were confronted on the beach. The working class parties seemed much less restrained or controlled in their holiday behaviour, with their loud laughs, battery radios and voluptuous ladies sun-bathing in pink underwear.

In the local souvenir shops you could find postcards which in some ways mirrored this other type of holiday life. The pictures fascinated me, I thought them both funny and a bit daring too. They were certainly not the type of boring cards the mailman brought us at home. These cards were painted in bright colours and rather crude styles and depicted people having a good time, drinking, eating, fooling around, laying in the sun, swimming and flirting. They often portrayed holiday-makers in comic or embarrassing situations. It was only much later I realized that these fascinating postcards were part of a Western cultural tradition: the comic holiday postcard.

So far relatively few attempts have been made to analyze this genre of popular culture. An early exception is George Orwell's essay from 1942 on "the penny or twopenny postcards with their endless succession of fat women in tight bathing-dresses" (Orwell 1942/68: p. 183).
Orwell's discussion of the comic postcard is filled with ambivalence. On the one hand his middle class taste is offended by them:

"Your first impression is of overwhelming vulgarity. This is quite apart from the ever-present obscenity, and apart also from the hideousness of the colours. They have an utter lowness of mental atmosphere which comes out not only in the nature of the jokes but, even more, in the grotesque, staring, blatant quality of the drawings. The designs, like those of a child, are full of heavy lines and empty spaces, and all the figures in them, every gesture and attitude, are deliberately ugly, the faces grinning and vacuous, the women monstrously parodied, with bottoms like Hottentots".

On the other hand he is able to see the postcards as a cultural phenomenon which represents a different kind of humour and a different culture than his own. His analysis of their main themes and hidden messages is full of insights into the British working class culture of the 1930's.
Orwell starts by exploring the main themes of these holiday cards. The favourite topic is the sex joke, which is built up around themes like nakedness, nudist camos, illegitimate babies, old maids and newlywed couples - all of these are ipso facto funny, he states. The messages found in these sex jokes are, for example: Every man is plotting seduction and every woman is plotting marriage. Sex-appeal vanishes at about the age of twentyfive.

Another favourite is the home joke, dominated by fat, aggressive wives and hen-pecked husbands. The militant mother-in-law belongs to this category. Other types of stock jokes include drunkenness, teetotalism, public lavatories, chamber pots and the kilted Scotsman. Again these themes are ipso facto funny, the mere mention of them is enough to raise a laugh.

Orwell goes on to point out that the pictures rarely are erotic or pornographic. They are obscene and obscene in a very moral way. In many way the jokes represent the world of the "respectable working class" rather than that of the "roughs" or the "social climbers". The jokes to a great extent mirror a working-class world view and morality, in which marriage, for example stands as a central institution. Promiscuity is not a popular theme. The secrecies of illicit love or prostitution belong to the world of a totally different tradition, the "French" postcard.

Furthermore, the comic postcards mirror working-class experiences of the 1930's. The fact that there is no transition stage between the young (and beautiful) honeymoon couple and the glamourless middle-aged cat-and-dog couple reflects both the working-class outlook that youth and adventure ends with marriage and the fact that the working-class tend to age much faster than middle class people, for whom the cult of eternal youth and slimness is important (3).

The comic postcard is interesting, argues Orwell, because it belongs to an old and mainly oral tradition or working class humour and wit, a
HE'S A KARATE EXPERT—CHOPS WOOD WITH HIS BARE HANDS!

BLIMEY—I THINK HE'S CHOPPED SOMETHING ELSE THIS TIME!!
tradition in which the double entendre is extremely important, the play with words and images.

Orwell points out that the comic postcard is the only medium in which really "low" humour is considered to be printable. For him, the pictures express the Sancho Panza view of life and he concludes:

"It will not do to condemn them on the ground that they are vulgar and ugly. That is exactly what they are meant to be. Their whole meaning and virtue is their unredeemed lowness, not only in the sense of obscenity, but lowness of outlook in every direction whatever. The slightest hint of 'higher' influences would ruin them utterly. They stand for the worm's-eye view of life, for the music-hall world where marriage is a dirty joke or a comic disaster, where the rent is always behind and the clothes are always up the spout, where the lawyer is always a crook and the Scotsman always a miser, where the newlyweds make fools of themselves on the hideous beds of seaside lodging houses and the drunken, red-nosed husbands roll home at four in the morning to meet the linen-nightgowned wives who wait for them behind the front door, poker in hand. Their existence, the fact that people want them is symptomatically important. Like the music halls, they are a sort of saturnalia, a harmless rebellion against virtue" (1942: p. 194).

The uses of vulgarity

So far George Orwell's analysis from the 1940's. I think discussion can be carried a step further by arguing that the comic postcards also are part of a rather subtle cultural warfare.

We have to ask ourselves why so many middle class observers found (and still are finding) these pictures so vulgar. The concept of vulgarity is a key concept in middle class discourse, in the same way is, for example, niceness. Vulgarity stands as the very antipole to good middle class manners, style and morals. A glance in a standard book of synonyms will provide this impressive list:

VULGAR: in bad taste, unrefined, gutter, coarse
indecorous, ribald, gross, unpresentable, contra bonos mores, ungraceful, ugly, dowdy, slovenly, dirty, ungenteel, low, plebeian, uncourtly, uncivil, ill-bred, underbred, ungentlemanly, wild, unkempt, uncombed, untamed, unlicked, unpolished, uncouth, incondite, heavy, rude, awkward... etc.

In short, it is very much a word of un- and non- and thus an excellent symbolic inversion of middle class virtues. This dialectic can be illustrated as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The comic postcard stands for:</th>
<th>As opposed to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- A lack of humour or a low humour</td>
<td>- A sophisticated humour, high class wit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Something tasteless and course</td>
<td>- Something tasteful and refined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A total lack of artistic and aesthetical qualities</td>
<td>- Objects of art and beauty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The broad, unrestrained horselaugh or guffaw</td>
<td>- The controlled, pearling laughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Vulgar (loud, glaring) colours and crude drawings</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- A childish, primitive or immature mentality</td>
<td>- A mature, highly developed mentality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the cards are not only vulgar in their style and form, they also treat topics which are extremely vulgar or sometimes even taboo in respectable middle-class circles.

First of all they are so dominated by bodies: fat, ugly, swelling bodies and broad backsides, as well as vulgar forms of bodily contact, the slapping of backs, the pinching of behinds, unrestrained kissing and hugging. Secondly they draw attention to other bodily functions, like gluttonous overeating, getting smashing drunk, and even worse they depict people in frantic search of W.C.'s or chamber pots. So many activities which should be carried out in privacy are done here in the wrong places, at the wrong times, in the wrong combinations. The use of the body also demonstrates lack of moderation. There are too many loud laughs and big gestures. All these activities are marked by their lack of restraint, self-control or self-disciplin, and thus represent mortal sins in middle
class behaviour.

In some ways the topics of the comic postcards can be seen as attacks on a dominant culture, ridiculing its basic values and moral ideas. They represent the kind of guerilla warfare of parody and sniggering which often is typical of a subordinate culture fighting back. On the other hand the cards also express alternative cultural ideas. Take the favourite topic of fat ladies in bathing suits: here it is not a simple question of getting
a joke out of fatness or breaking a middle class taboo. These fat ladies by the sea are often depicted as having a good time. They are not hiding their "vulgar" bodies and do not seem very embarrassed at them. Just like the bald headed men floating on the water with their big bellies these ladies are enjoying life.

Hedonism or self-improvement?

The controversy over the picture post cards mirrors a cultural confrontation between two traditions of holiday making. As working-class people developed a life of leisure and started to visit the countryside and the sea during day-excursions, weekends and holidays, many middle class observers, both in Sweden and England, complained about the new intruders' lack of manners. A whole genre, from journalism to cartoons, was developed in which the holiday mores of these common people were caricatured with varying degrees of irony or contempt. The following English account from the early 20th century of "the people of the day excursions" is a good example of this middle class genre:

"The excursion trains used to vomit forth, at Easter and in Whitsun week, throngs of the millhands of the period, cads and their flames, tawdry, blowzy, noisy, drunken; the women with dress that aped 'the fashion', and pyramids of artificial flowers on their heads; the men as grotesque and hideous in their own way; tearing through woods and fields like swarms of devastating locusts, and dragging the fern and hawthorn boughs they had torn down in the dust, ending the lovely spring day in pot-houses, drinking gin and bitters, or heavy ales by the quart, and tumbling pellmell into the night train, roaring music-hall choruses; sodden, tipsy, yelling, loathsome creatures, such as make a monkey look a king, and the newt seem an angel beside humanity - exact semblance and emblem of the vulgarity of the age (...) vulgarity likely to live and multiply, and increase in power and in extent" (after Bailey 1978: p. 104).

Similar stereotypes survive today, although usually less openly stated. There is a persisting element of self-control and self-improvement in middle
class ideals of holiday-making. A good holiday should broaden your view, improve your health, give you new and valuable experiences. From that standpoint much of working class leisure can be seen as a lack of planning, over-indulgence, passivity or a laissez-faire mentality. The middle class accusations may sound like this:

"Your holidays demonstrate a lack of taste and culture. You indulge in cheap pleasures and buy vulgar souvenirs. You show no restraint or moderation in your holiday behaviour, you over-eat, you drink too much. You are far too passive, dozing in the hammock, drinking beer or just fooling around down by the beach. You live beyond your means, squandering money on the wrong things...

We, on the other hand, have higher ambitions for our holidays. We want to see new sights, learn about history and other cultures. We search for the genuine and the authentic. Even during the holidays we live a richer life than you, our holiday experiences are of a higher quality..."

In this way the sophisticated cultural gourmet distances himself from the holiday gourmands of the common people. There is, of course, no easy fit between these two stereotypes and class background. My argument is that the different attitudes to holiday-making have developed out of different social settings and material experiences. Your holiday dreams and expectations are shaped by your everyday life.

The working-class tradition of a hedonistic view of holidays has a long tradition with peasant roots. Holidays should be the time of the big spree or fling when you allow yourself all the things which are scarce in everyday life, like the luxuries of over-eating, drinking, doing nothing and enjoying a total freedom from the surveillance and the clocking in at work.

The holiday comic postcard is one of many cultural expressions of this hedonistic attitude to life, just as the middle class criticisms of the genre tell us about different values and a clash between life-styles.
This kind of cultural confrontation can be analyzed in many other spheres of life and has to do, among other things, with the increasing tendency for class conflicts in the 20th century to be acted out in metaphorical forms, sometimes in rather surprising cultural arenas. Pierre Bourdieu has discussed some aspects of this cultural warfare in his study of middle class handling of taste and tastelessness (Bourdieu 1979), but it is important to remember that vulgarity is a double-sided weapon. "Being vulgar" can also be a deliberate way of "épaté le bourgeoisie", of hitting back at the dominant culture and its ideas about propriety, moral and civilized behaviour.

Notes

1. For a general discussion of the history of the picture postcard see Staff 1966. Lena Johanessson (1978) has discussed the genre in her work on massproduced pictures, other Swedish studies include Strosova 1973, Larsson 1979 and Nyman 1984.
3. Cf. Richard Hoggart's classic study of working class culture (1957/1977), where he discusses the humour of the picture postcards as part of a traditional working-class culture. See also Greene 1976.

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