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GADGET MANIA AS A DIMENSION OF CONSUMER CULTURE

This is important what appears in your mind's eyes, and not what you can see and give name to ...

Zdzisław Beksiński

Introduction

The paper was inspired by the observation of children in a primary school, where kids run to and fro with various electronic devices in their hands. The interest in gadgets among children is the result of their observation of the behavior of adults, who compete against one another and buy now and again newer and better pieces of equipment. Children watch that rivalry and introduce it to their school life. In school corridors one can often hear such phrases as *I've got a better mobile*, or *My xbox is newer*, etc. Such a behavior results in an alarming conduct among schoolchildren; there are thefts and fights; the ones who are not adequately "equipped" experience a decrease in self-value, groups emerge consisting of the better and the worse, of the poorer and the richer. However, this is not the only aspect of the phenomenon because - since the earliest years we have been teaching children, apart from the artificial divisions, to assess the others by such attributes as appearance, bank account and skills of self-presentation; in other words, by the ability to create a façade, as the phenomenon was called by Goffman¹. Yet, the façade is not only the result of our endeavors as the majority of its elements are inherited from our predecessors or acquired in the process of socialization, which consequently creates the basis for our habitus (Bourdieu²). As it appears, the habitus plays an increasingly more significant role in today's world. Moreover,

¹ Façade – term coined by Erving Goffman to describe the way of creating one's image by an individual in the course of interaction, aiming at the manipulation of impressions experienced by the partner of the interaction. Façade includes three elements: decoration, individual's appearance and manners.

² *Habitus* is one of the key notion in the sociological theory of Pierre Bourdieu, although he was not the author of the term. It was mentioned – among others – by Durkheim and Weber, but in Bourdieu's works habitus became a core notion of the theory. This is how Jerzy Szacki reconstructs the notion of habitus: it is the result of the socializing influence that an individual is exposed to in his/her life; it is the effect of the internalization of social standards and values, i.e. the total amount of the acquired and preserved dispositions to perceive, evaluate and react to the world in accordance with the patterns that are defined in a particular environment (...) a multidimensional phenomenon that includes everything that an individual acquires while living in a particular place of social space, in a particular family, going to a particular school and having a particular company, etc.

this is how our supermarket / possessor identity³ shows, which is typical for the consumer culture.

The question arises then, whether globalization processes that are so specific in our times result in unification or, quite the contrary, they motivate us to distinguish ourselves from a homogeneous mass. With the aim to describe the issue, I will characterize briefly the notions of globalization, consumer society and culture uniformity carried out mainly by mass media and finally, I will describe the identity of contemporary man, with a special consideration of the identity of an owner, which shows in the cult of acquisition, i.e. in the gadget mania.

1. Globalization

Globalization processes can be defined with the consideration of several aspects, both economical, political, cultural and social ones. Different approaches generate multitude of definitions and mass media contribute to such situation as every day they discuss the issue. However, this is not the question of certain trends. Globalization is a fact resulting from the development of societies which is the consequence of technological advance.

One of the first scientists to write about globalization was an American sociologist Roland Robertson. His definition of globalization is as follows: “a set of processes that make the social world a single place” or “an objective process of the compression of the world and intensification of the consciousness of the world as a whole”⁴ But in what sense?

Most of the writers dealing with this subject distinguish four spheres where globalization processes take place. They are: the political sphere (the world systems, eg. UN, UNESCO, EU), military (e.g. NATO or all kind of hostilities or peace activities), economic and cultural one. In my opinion, the two latter ones cause changes in the two first ones.

Economic globalization, which started the whole process, means a free flow of capital, products, knowledge and people. Thus, it is a gradual process of the disappearance of economic barriers and a quality move into the mobility of manufacturing factors. Apart from that, additional resulting phenomena occur, such as the end of cold war, the issues of multiculturalism and polyethnicity, the pressure of postmaterialist values, the development of institutions, movements and communication systems that force global forms of life that result

³ Supermarket identity is based on the feeling of having freedom to choose and shape one's identity with the use of symbolic attributes; it is mentioned, among others, by E. Bielska, *Konteksty społeczeństwa globalnego a perspektywy tożsamości*, [in:] T. Bajkowski, K. Sawicki, *Tożsamość osobowa a tożsamości społeczne*, Trans Humana, Białystok 2001, p. 31.

⁴ R. Robertson, *Globality, Global Culture and Images of World Order*, [in:] H. H. Haferkamp, N. J. Smelser (ed.), *Social Change and Modernity*, California University Press, Berkeley 1992, p. 395.

in the spread of uncertainty and the expansion of postmodernity⁵. All of them are also the result of the fact that contemporary societies are increasingly dependent on each other in many aspects. The latest example is the “silicon revolution” in Egypt, which caused chaos on the world markets, including tourist industry, and was the topic of several meetings of politicians.

The cultural dimension of globalization shows in the progress of unification/uniformization within the area of culture in the broad sense of the word. First of all, it refers to the language, which following other processes has the tendency to unify. At present, English has become the global, universal language. Moreover, the same trend can be observed as regards material and non-material culture (acculturation), consumption, fashion and styles of life. All over the world people read the same books, cry or laugh while watching the same films, eat at the McDonald's, listen to the songs of the same artists and follow their way of dressing, living and leisure. Practically in every place in the world we may feel at home. Such proximity and compression of the world is well presented by an Ikea's TV commercial where a child walking along the beach in Poland throws a stone over the Baltic sea and hits a Swede cycling along “his” beach⁶.

It is obvious that globalization processes have an influence on us at every moment and every place in the world. In my opinion, Piotr Sztompka's definition takes into consideration all components of this phenomenon: “globalization is a process of concentration and intensification of relations and dependencies between human societies that are economical, financial, political, military, cultural and ideological in nature, which results in the uniformization of the world in all these aspects and is reflected by the creation of social bonds of solidarity and identity above the local and national scale”⁷.

To sum up, I will quote the somehow ironical comment that was written after the death of princess Diana, which in a non-scientific, yet relevant way, defines globalization: “ an English princess with her Egyptian lover had a car crash in a French tunnel while going in a German car with a Dutch engine, driven by a Belgian that had drank some Scotch whisky, being followed by an Italian paparazzi on a Japanese motorcycle. An American doctor tried to save her using Brazilian medicine. And that text was written by a Filipino using Bill Gates' technology”⁸.

⁵ W. Szymański, *Globalizacja, wyzwania i zagrożenia*, Difin, Warszawa 2001, p. 179.

⁶ Ikea's commercial on TVP 1 in January 2011.

⁷ P. Sztompka, *Socjologia. Analiza społeczeństwa*, Znak, Warszawa 2003, p. 598.

⁸ <http://www.kaila.pl/humor/absurdy.htm> (01.07.2013).

2. Globalization of culture

Scientists were fairly quick to realize that it is the culture which is the most significant of the spheres of globalization. Anthropologists (e.g. B. Malinowski, A.R. Radcliffe-Brown) wrote earlier about the clash of primitive cultures with the culture of the West, which frequently resulted in conflicts. At present the process is more peaceful, however it does not mean that controversies are non-existent, e.g. the domination of American culture, called the Americanization or McDonaldization of the world. There are various opinions, either praising or criticizing the phenomenon. The advantages of cultural amalgamation – among other things - are: a mobile exchange of opinion, a rapid transfer of technological innovations, the access to the so called “high culture” or the reduction of differences between the most developed and underdeveloped countries. However, there are several negative consequences, such as massification, commercialization and unification of culture, which leads to its degrading with the aim to satisfy the most primitive tastes (the so called new barbarism). Zygmunt Bauman calls the contemporary culture a “consumers’ co-operative”⁹, having in mind its liquidity and the supply and demand aspect (the demand does not necessarily drive the supply; at present, when there is a product, i.e. the supply, the demand for it is generated by means of raising artificial need among individuals)

In contemporary times, a significant role in the homogenization of culture is played by mass media. As it was mentioned earlier, they contribute to the compression of spacetime. The increasing accessibility of the global space and the co-existence of phenomena that more and more are becoming media phenomena result in the fact that our ideas about time and space are distorted. In the media remote places seem to be easily and quickly approachable – it is enough to change the channel. Apart from eliminating the spacetime, media cause the domination of the mediated experience over a direct one; face to face contacts are replaced by interface to interface ones. The appearance of the Internet, described as the result of the convergence of modern media, played here a substantial role. The Internet, thanks to its inherent interactivity does not only create the representation of the world but, first of all, generates a completely new environment of human activity – the virtual reality. The whole process moves us away from our local environment and man, due to the telematization of his/her individual experience, leaves the previous cultural framework.

Thus, the overlocality and the synthesis of the whole world are becoming an element of every individual’s contemporary identity. In the post-modern concepts, the identity is

⁹ Z. Bauman, *Ponowoczesność jako źródło cierpień*, Sic!, Warszawa 2000, pp. 181-199.

perceived as a dynamic structure, made of accidental elements that are frequently independent of one another, and multiplying itself in a way whose logics can be hard to grasp. It turns out that the achievement of a relative stability does not offer the security; quite the contrary, it may pose a danger to an individual. The projection of oneself as of a person with a defined knowledge, having a particular job, or enjoying a stable place in the social hierarchy makes normal functioning impossible in the situation that requires the ability to transform and change the role quickly. The stability of self-image may mean failure or rejection. Thus, it is the change that is the source of power. As a result, an individual in the post-modern world is in a permanent state of uncertainty and the desire to reduce it, which can be achieved by putting the surrounding space into order.

3. Gadget mania

Since ancient times man has been collecting objects he produced. This was done for religious, cognitive and aesthetic reasons. The existence among products of some value helped in gaining and emphasizing one's prestige and it was a manifestation of power. "In the Western culture collecting things is one of the practices that shows the development of the owner's identity. The collections show some wider cultural rules; particularly they show the preference to epistemology and to objects for their axiological and aesthetical reasons. (...) Collecting various objects – especially the unusual and rare ones – is a kind of taking interest in the world; more precisely, it is a way to alleviate the feeling of unfamiliarity and uncertainty that we feel towards the phenomenon that are non-existent in our environment and a method to fulfill our cognitive needs. Collecting may be treated as a particular description of the world – different from the one carried out by a language, but existing in relation to it"¹⁰ However, apart from collecting unusual and rare objects, which helps in taming the world (the alleviation of the feeling of strangeness and uncertainty), man collects a huge amount of various things that cannot be practically applied; they are objects that, in fact, do not have any functions¹¹. In present times they are *gadgets*, i.e. small and usually useless things that for years were treated in Poland as luxury goods. The meaning of the word has been modified from a pejorative to a neutral one, as we have become "a consumer society, and the world

¹⁰ A. Wiczorkiewicz, *O funkcji i retoryce wypowiedzi muzealnej*, Pejzaż muzealny, PSL- Konteksty, nr 1-2, 1996.

¹¹ The phenomenon was known in the Ancient Times – e.g. attic vases were gadgets: in theory they had a functional role but in practice they were so valuable that nobody used them as containers. In the Middle Ages the role of gadgets was played by richly ornamented prayer books - too precious to pray from. In the 15th century it was the Venetian glass, in the 18th the porcelain and in the 19th cigarette cases whose design followed the looks of gold nuggets.

turned abruptly from the acceptance of ascetics and austerity to the hedonist and consumption model”¹²

Traditional societies have been replaced by the enclaves of styles of life determined mainly by the consumption of goods. This has both an individual and social dimension, or even a global one, as media disseminate them in the most remote places in the world. As a result, all people have a chance to get acquainted with the multitude of styles, fashions and trends, which in the past was accessible only for the elite. Consequently, people can make choices, which is certainly a positive aspect of contemporary times. However, whether the choice is a conscious emphasis of one’s individuality or a thoughtless multiplication of some patterns remains an issue to be discussed,

Purchasing and acquiring products became an import element of our culture, and gadgets, apart from their functional use, give us some prestige, they help to control the world, to put it into some order and to determine our social status. According to the researchers of the phenomena (e.g. Podemski, Waszyńska), a substantial number of people possess gadgets because they bring them luck and protect against danger – in other words they provide security in the changing and increasingly complicated world. What is more, they may constitute a measure to show off, to present oneself in a particular way and to stand out from the crowd. Such a role can be played by a luxurious watch, a handbag or even a mobile phone. Carefully selected gadgets may often enable gaining high ranks in a social group and may also decide on the social group membership. “Every culture has its own gadgets that play the role of identity cards. Brokers wear red braces, football fans wear scarves in the colors of their favorite teams, skinheads shave their heads off and punks have their hairstyle”¹³.

Thus, the post-modern consumption shifts the centre of gravity from the fulfillment of one’s needs to the symbolic character of goods consumed. A handbag does not serve the purpose of keeping things in it but it shows one’s status; a car is not a means of transport but it also is becoming an element of the image that is being built for years. Consumer culture has nearly become a creator of our identities. Style and fashion create our image and personality. People follow the trends that are disseminated by media, which results in the homogenization. “The identity of an individual is modified by a more individualized and liquid identification related to a particular life style that is based on a set of consumer goods and a set of images shown by mass-media; it is a style typical for film stars, people known from advertising, TV-personalities and fictitious characters appearing in media. The processes

¹² A. Niezgodna, *Chorzy na fiubździu*, „Polityka” nr 49 (2481), pp. 84-87.

¹³ P. Gajdziński, *Świat gadżetów. Kosztowne drobiazgi*, „Rzeczpospolita” 1999, No 26.

of self-identification depend increasingly on the acquisition of the attributes of consumer goods.”¹⁴ As a result the globalization and mass culture are perceived as threats to the uniqueness of particular cultures, traditions and the identity of individuals. The anxieties seem to be rather exaggerated, which is pointed out by Manuell Castells who considers the identity as a process of identification with the elements of reality. It turns out, that there is a very strong feeling of distinctness from other groups and individuals among societies that take an active part in the globalization process. In reaction to the threat of the lack of individuality and to the uniformity, an image is being created of a non-conformist or of an individual who is worth noticing. There is a simple logic behind it – without distinctive groups or individuals, there would be no transfer of information and the intermingling of cultures; consequently, the process of globalization would stop. Thus, instead of a complete integration, individuals and groups approach one another, co-operate closely, yet they maintain their integrity. The seemingly contrasting natures, the identity and globalization - while fighting - can reach compromises.

As a result of the practices of consumer culture, the symbols are closely related to the adequate style of life. Social groups differ from one another thanks to a selective acquisition of the aspects of other cultures, without taking into consideration the historical, economical or political contexts. Genuine artists, architects and writers are not needed anymore. People usurp the features characteristic for intellectuals in order to consume the status related to the life of an intellectual. They behave like artists to consume the mysticism related to their creativity. Post-modern “actors are poseurs who assume their superiority over the ones they pretend to be. Due to the fact that such behavior of individuals is simulated, in time the simulations constitute the whole symbolic reality”¹⁵.

4. Examples

The Internet is a place where such simulation is clearly visible. Due to its virtual character, we can instantly create the desired identity, even if it has nothing to do with the real one (NK, Facebook, etc.) On the other hand, there is a substantial amount of tips how to distinguish oneself from the rest. For example, on a dating portal (mirabella.pl) we learn what women are desired by men....

Present yourself

¹⁴ R. G. Dunn, *Identity Crises, a Social Critique of Postmodernism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis 1998, s. 67.

¹⁵ A. E. Gare, *Postmodernism and the Environmental Crisis*, Routledge, London 1995, pp. 32-33.

Despite the fact that every guy is different and likes different things, there are some elements of the image that may be helpful in being successful— although they do not guarantee a success.

You will not distinguish yourself if you are wearing Lee jeans because every fifth girl wears them. You have two alternatives: either buy Versace jeans or find something else that will distinguish you positively.

Be different

Get rid of things that half of the town is wearing. If you can't afford a change of clothes, look at the accessories that will make you stylish: a cap, unique frameworks to your glasses, an unusual watch or ear-rings.

Basic gadgets

Guys like gadgets and they pay attention to the ones that women use. It only depends on you if they are going to treat you as a fan of good sound with a fashionable iPod or as an intellectualist with an ambitious book in your hands.

Be careful and avoid accessories that will make you a laughing stock, a tabloid in your handbag or – alas – a mascot.

Avoid exaggeration

To end with, a few tips that you should absolutely avoid while trying to be different. First of all, all your actions should suit your age and social position. There is nothing more embarrassing than a woman in her forties that has an image of a punk¹⁶.

It is visible from the comments of ordinary forum users that gadgets are very important, e.g. the subtitles to the photos of the actress Marta Żumda-Trzebiatowska on the Interia.pl: *no make-up or expensive clothes (2011-01-13 ~żmudny temat)* or the singer Kaya(www.onet.pl): *Wow! So modern, great dress and shoes on bare feet, so fashionable. (4,luty ~fika). (4,luty ~fika).* The names of the websites themselves testify to the significance of the gadgets and refer to the wardrobe, lives of celebrities, the clothes (www.szafiarki.pl, www.mojeciuchy.pl,

And one more dimension of the gadget mania. The photo below was taken at a sale in a shop in Spain. The shop owners announced that they would give free clothes to anybody who

¹⁶ <http://www.mirabella.pl/> Jakich kobiet pragną mężczyźni (what women do men like)

would come to the shop on the first day of the sale dressed only in his/her underwear. The result was unbelievable, crowds of customers (including men) took the chance to gain something.

Photo 1. Sale in a shop in Spain



Source: AFP PHOTO/RAFA RIV AS.

For some people shopping and visiting shopping malls became both a favorite leisure activity and a method of showing one's social status: *I buy, therefore I am* – one could paraphrase the words of the great philosopher. In UK, USA and several other countries in the world the 26th of December is the Boxing Day, which traditionally was the day when servants were given small presents (in boxes). For the past dozen or more years that day is the first day of the after-Xmas sales, which cannot be missed by any customer. The New York's *Luxury Institute* even published a rating of present day luxurious consumers:

Aspiring consumers

They have not achieved the desired level of luxury. They care a lot to show the brand and believe that being surrounded by luxurious goods is the best way to show their possessions and social status to everyone and everywhere.

Cocoons

They are concentrated on their homes and private lives. They spend most of the money on very expensive and luxurious products related to the household.

Butterflies

The mostly engaged group that emerged from the Cocoon phase and is beginning to consume their wealth also out of their house. They search for new experiences and have a less materialistic attitude to life although they spend on luxury almost as much as the consumers from the top group.

X-Fluents

Extremely rich consumers, who – among the listed groups - spend the most on luxury, especially on pleasures and maintaining the high standard of life¹⁷.

Summary

The trends in consumer culture were not influenced significantly by the recent economic crisis. Tomasz Zgliczyński-Cuber describes that phenomenon as the „secret hand-shake”: anybody, who is functioning in business and wants to run business on international scale must be surrounded by particular objects. If it does not happen, the business circles will not treat such a person seriously. No crisis whatsoever permits for giving up certain standards; quite the contrary, while the recession affects consecutive fortunes, we must convince the others that it does not refer to us. Moreover, the crisis will be over some day and the life with the subscription in the aSmall World portal, a Vertu mobile and a Louis Vuitton briefcase on the back seat of a Bentley is give such a pleasure”¹⁸. Such an attitude passes on to the “ordinary” customers, who hunt for bargains that will enable them to stand out of the crowd and be “branded” as someone exceptional. And this is the reason of the popularity of gadgets, especially the most expensive ones: a Patek Philippe wristwatch for 50 thousand zlotys, an 18 carat gold necklace with a natural pearl worth 32.5 thousand zlotys or a platinum Montblanc fountain pen for over 28 thousand zlotys.

¹⁷ <http://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Luksus-w-opalach-1895657.html> (accessed: 01.07.2013.).

¹⁸ <http://www.bankier.pl/wiadomosc/Luksus-w-opalach-1895657.html> (accessed: 01.07.2013.).

To conclude, let me quote Wiesław Godzic: „consumer goods are not a simple answer to the needs, they create a liquid network of meaningful elements. Thus, products are signs in the de Saussure’s sense of the word: their significance is arbitrary and determined by their place in the system of meaningful elements. Consequently, consumption is not a consumption of values, it is a consumption of signs”¹⁹ – and gadgets have recently become the “signs” and the element of non-verbal – symbolic - communication with the world.

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Abstract

Globalization is a term applied to describe several processes in various areas of our lives. Its main aspect is the world’s homogenization in all possible fields. However, does the unification not include the need to emphasize individuality and distinctiveness? The paper presents the phenomenon of gadget mania, which consists in presenting ourselves to the others as separate actors in a globalized world, and which is at the same time the example of further expansion of consumer culture.

¹⁹ W. Godzic, *Oglądanie i inne przyjemności kultury popularnej*, Universitas, Kraków 1996.

