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Narcissism, Counter-Culture and Lifestyle. Towards a Critical Cultural Studies

Summary. The aim of the article is to show the way in which the technologically mediated culture of consumption determines what we call lifestyle in the perspective of the critical cultural studies paradigm. Contemporary consumption, based as it is on the counter-cultural ideas which appeal to difference, creativity and lifestyle, solves the central problem of consumerism – supplying a constant stream of novelty in a situation where things are losing just this quality. Lifestyle has become a life strategy, the framework for interpreting consumer choice suggests that freely made decisions concerning symbolic and aesthetic pleasures provide a sense of fulfilment in a successful and varied lifestyle. Culture is increasingly perceived through the prism of who we should be, and what we should have, in order to achieve by means of these an illusory goal, namely that of identity.

Keywords: cultural studies, counter-culture, lifestyle, narcissism.

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Cultural studies is a rather mysterious field. As the name suggests, it focuses on the analysis of culture, but with culture being understood in numerous ways, only some of which sit happily with the anthropological understanding of culture. At the outset, it will be fruitful to grapple with the issue raised in Umberto Eco's essay *Does*

Counter-culture exist? In this thought-provoking text, which is open to multiple interpretations, the Italian semiotician tackled the proliferation of meanings connected with the notions of culture and counter-culture. "If the word culture indicates the possession of a stock of knowledge," he writes, "then clearly the term counter-culture can mean one of only two things: either the lack of any such stock of knowledge, or the possession of another knowledge".¹ And the same can be said of subcultures. Eco continues: "When one thinks of counter-culture today, one is obviously alluding to class cultures, to youth culture as opposed to 'academic' culture". This is, therefore, an issue concerning domains of competence and knowledge, and concerning "cultures with their own ethical code, to subordinate cultures, and to the practical manifestations of outsider groups which are opposed to the theoretical assertions of the dominant groups".² This leads Eco to formulate to three main concepts of what culture should be, and what it is in actual fact.

The aesthetic concept, given its fullest expression by Matthew Arnold³, locates culture in a sphere far removed from politics, economics or any practical activity. This is in stark contrast to the current trends of 'cultural capital', which define culture as useful, as constituting a technique. According to the aesthetic definition, culture is completely useless! What's more, culture is not accessible to all, as it demands effort and is a status symbol that differentiates the spiritually and educationally privileged from those who are mired in the junk of pop culture. From this perspective, counter-culture constitutes a political or civic challenge to the elitist cult of the useless. Thus "[it] is counter-cultural to propound a popular or primitive art, or to emphasize the value of political and economic discussion in humanistic contexts. In this sense the student revolt of '68 – which introduced into universities the problems of the working class, political issues, respect for instinctive and 'untamed' creativity – was undoubtedly an expression of counter-culture. However, it remained so only inasmuch as it opposed the dominant philosophy of the humanities faculties".⁴ Emerging at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, *cultural studies* trained

¹ U. Eco, *Apocalypse Postponed*, London 1994, p. 115; in the considerations of this section I refer in part to my essay *U źródeł buntu. Lata sześćdziesiąte w cyklu śmierci i zmartwychwstania*, in *Oblicza buntu. Praktyki i teorie sprzeciwu w kulturze współczesnej*, eds. W. Kuligowski, A. Pomieciński, Poznań 2012, pp. 45–68.

² *Ibidem*, p. 115.

³ V. W. J. Burszta, *Świat jako więzienie kultury*, Warszawa 2008.

⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 118; today's work from anarchist circles, published primarily by the publishing house AK, confirm this diagnosis brilliantly; V. A. J. Nocella, S. Best, P. McLaren eds., *Academic Repression. Reflections from The Academic-Industrial Complex*, Edinburgh 2010.

its guns on the elite definition of culture, by appraising popular culture, subcultures and the counter-culture.

The second concept of culture – the ethical – stresses that to be ‘cultural’ means to be set against the bestiality, ignorance and idolatry of the masses. This does not necessarily entail privileging the humanities: culture is accessible to all who desire to gain knowledge, regardless of whether they are artists, engineers or postal workers. Such knowledge is, however, not practical, but rather theoretical, and hence a car mechanic is not automatically a cultured person. Anything that opposes this conception is stigmatized as simply ignorant and evil. Counter-culture in this conception is “the undiscerning pseudo-culture of mass man, slave to his myths and rituals”⁵

In answer to such reasoning, actually emerging counter-culture stands in opposition to the ethical concept of culture because in various ways it limits the dimensions of human being in the world, assuming that only its preferred mode of being has any legitimacy. Hence the homeless, the stateless, terrorists, as well as groups practicing sexual abstinence, etc. can all be classed as counter-cultures. All of them reject the system of power and attempts at forced integration. The ideology of multiculturalism belongs to this trend – the doctrine that requires all minorities to be preserved, starting with ethnic minorities, with their unique cultural patterns and lifestyles.

Thus we finally come to the anthropological definition of culture, which in contrast to the previous definitions has an apparently neutral character. The classic understanding conceives of culture as a whole way of life, as first defined by Edward B. Taylor in the 19th century. Put simply, the idea here is that people living in collectivities have different cultures, but experience shows that, as Eco writes, “a group may live according to its own cultural model without knowing it”⁶. There are only cases in which a culture ‘reveals itself’, is subjected to the reflection of metalanguage: “1) when confronted with a critical analysis that demonstrates the way it functions, or 2) when a competing model arises (either from within the culture or from outside). [...] Those cultures whose experience of other, different cultures has not been traumatic do not identify themselves” on a meta-cultural level (as a distinct culture) “but as the model of humanity pure and simple”⁷. Here the matter is straightforward – anything from beyond the borders of their world is ‘barbaric’ and therefore non-culture.

⁵ Ibidem, p.118.

⁶ Ibidem, p.119.

⁷ Ibidem, pp. 119–120.

Eco elaborates further: "In this context, there are no counter-cultures, *just other cultural models*. At most, a counter-culture might be identified as "an alternative model which the dominant culture is unable to absorb. Imperial Rome saw just such a phenomenon with the penetration of Christianity"⁸ As we know, the latter absorbed the pagan model, creating one of the two Western orthodoxies, as Irving Kristol writes. For Kristol, the mechanism which gives birth to movements and counter-cultural awareness is essentially simple and boils down to negating an orthodoxy existing at a specific time and place and replacing it with a new vision of the world, which in turn inevitably takes on the shape of a new orthodoxy.⁹ In the history of Western civilization there have only been two such orthodoxies: Christianity and rationalist humanism, thanks to which reality will never look the same again. However, the challenges that counter-cultures pose for orthodoxy take various forms in different periods, although they do have common forms of experience. One of these forms is alienation. From a counter-cultural perspective, to be alienated entails living an inauthentic life, which is corrosive for human sensitivity, a life which demands a radical transformation – of both the cultural context and for the experiencing subject, in equal measure. Secondly, alienation leads to protest against the orthodoxy that caused it, and this protest takes a community form.

It would seem that Kristol evaluates the mechanism for transforming a counter-culture into an orthodoxy, by isolating its two forms – a lasting and beneficial transformation of one orthodoxy into another (the 'replacement' of Greek-Roman rationalism with Christianity, and the latter with enlightenment rationalism); and revolutionary movements, which ended in disaster (Marxism, the 1960s counter-culture) and changed our lives for the worse, undermining the "citadel of orthodoxy", such as, for example, the traditional model of the family. Orthodoxy is a pillar of normally functioning society, providing individuals with a kind of gyroscope to create a frame of reference, so they know how to behave in everyday situations, as well as in more problematic ones. Orthodoxy provides discipline, and without discipline the normal functioning of society is unthinkable. "Orthodoxies have known forever that virtue is a practical, existential discipline, not simply a matter of faith, and definitely not an application of abstract doctrine to behavior"¹⁰

The difference between the counter-cultures of modernism and postmodernism (which started in the second half of the 20th century) consists in their completely different visions of "the culture of opposition". The poets and painters from 1865 to

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ I. Kristol, *Neoconservatism. The Autobiography of an Idea*, Chicago 1999, p. 162.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 145.

1965 wanted to replace religion with art, with a similarly intense spiritual energy, while the ethos of today's counter culture is more like a carnival. That which is expressed through postmodernist slogans is cynical, nihilist and opposes both Culture (with a big 'C') and Art (with a big 'A'). At this point we have to make a long and important digression.

Eco is correct to observe that the anthropological conception of culture is the most difficult to accept, for obvious reasons. First and foremost, it undermines the aesthetic and ethical understanding of culture, as it asserts that there are different ways of getting along in the world, and the way proposed by European culture is just one among many. Secondly, the anthropological conception is accused of stretching too far: behold all these groups which categorically define themselves as unique – they can apparently all have their own culture. However, this is precisely the state of affairs in complex societies – we have to deal with dominant cultures and their alternatives, which are often peripheral models. To acknowledge this fact does not necessarily entail acceptance of, for example, terrorist cultures. What is identified here is only a certain mechanism and relation between that which constitute the trends of the dominant culture, and that which can – but does not have to – constitute the model for an alternative counter-culture.

The anthropological study of culture cannot surrender the concept of value. Eco suggests distinguishing, from a formal point of view, three different types of culture from the perspective of value. The first of these are self-sufficient cultures (such as liberal bourgeois culture), the second are self-destructive (such as Nazi culture), and the third is parasitical (or dependent).¹¹ With regard to the latter, Eco provides the example of “drug culture”, which is sometimes associated with counter-cultures. He writes: “Those hippies who artificially recreate an idealized culture of the past in which to live can only do so thanks to the existence of General Motors or the Pentagon, which allow them to languish on the periphery of their model of repressive tolerance”.¹² The same is happening today in many dependent culture trends, which, in expressing their opposition to value systems are completely dependent on the dominant model of culture, being in a parasitical relationship with it.

It is evident that whenever we begin to put some order into the extensive semantic field of the concept of culture, there can only be one conclusion: there is a multiplicity of cultures, but in order for any one of them to survive, the culture must have the ability to recognize its own norms and values. Furthermore, it needs to be able to criticize itself, and this criticism of its own cultural model and the visions of life pro-

¹¹ U. Eco, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 123.

posed by other models leads us to the fourth definition of culture. It feeds on the anthropological conception of culture, but at a higher metalinguistic level. Thus, this is culture as a critical definition of the dominant culture and a critical acknowledgement of the emerging counter-culture. According to Eco, "When Marx wrote *Das Kapital*, he was creating culture in this fourth sense"¹³. But what does that mean? Eco has no doubt: "This fourth sense of 'culture' is always, and in a positive sense, 'counter-culture'. Counter-culture is thus the active critique or transformation of the existing social, scientific or aesthetic paradigm. It is religious reform"¹⁴. The point here is that although the dominant culture tolerates parasitical counter-cultures (indeed it even makes this ability to tolerate into a value!), it is unable to accept critical manifestations which bring it into question. We are dealing with a counter-culture when those who change the culture in which they live are critically conscious of what they are doing and are able "to elaborate a theory of their own deviation from the dominant model, offering a model that is capable of sustaining itself"¹⁵.

It would seem that from its very beginning cultural studies sympathized with this last understanding of culture, but – as Jacques Derrida would say – it could not meet its own requirements, seeing as "we cannot utter a single destructive proposition which has not already slipped into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest"¹⁶. A good example of this is John Fiske's *Understanding Popular Culture*.¹⁷ This book reveals that the conceptual apparatus and theoretical background which stood behind the written works in the poetics of cultural studies, and which in fact bolstered us – beings immersed in the world of pop culture – really refers to our inability to change the *status quo*. This book is a kind of textbook of topics that cultural studies has engaged with since the 1950s. Today, however, there is growing awareness that the deeper knowledge gained, and the participation in the never-ending strategy games and tactics of avoidance, really served the very thing that they attacked. Historically speaking, the circle of sense is closed, as folk culture returns, understood as communal ownership of the content in circulation. The present relevance of Fiske's book – despite everything – lies in the fact that it predicted everything that we wrestle with today, as creators and recipients of the unlimited content in the digital age. And the working class, at least in the

¹³ Ibidem, p. 124

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 124.

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 124.

¹⁶ J. Derrida, *Struktura, znak i gra w dyskursie nauk humanistycznych*, transl. M. Adamczyk, „Pamiętnik Literacki” 1986, no. 2, p. 254.

¹⁷ J. Fiske, *Zrozumieć kulturę popularną*, transl. K. Sawicka, Kraków 2010.

sense meant by Fiske, simply does not exist. At the same time, pop culture continues its narratives, and, in the words of Clifford Geertz, its textbooks always appear a little to late, when the procession has already passed.

In the last few years there has been growing reluctance to undertake textbook interpretation in cultural studies, and there is a clearly expressed demand for this branch of knowledge to be renewed, by giving it a more theoretical and disciplined character. Cultural studies has once again become politicized, now being a voice in opposition to the neoliberal vision of society, in which the market is king. We will only mention three important works from this trend. The first is the collection of essays in *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, edited by Paul Smith, while the other two are critically and politically engaged works of cultural study: *Why Voice Matters. Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism* by Nick Couldry and *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense* by Lawrence Grossberg.¹⁸ The common thread running through these works is their distancing themselves from the optimistic view of popular culture as a sphere of freedom which needs to be nurtured, through establishing a space that escapes market mechanisms; now there is rather a return to the project of Raymond Williams' cultural studies¹⁹, meaning that the task of this discipline is above all to broaden the vision of democracy as much as possible, but not on the basis of promoting cultural populism, rather through building critical reflection on the threat to freedom from market fundamentalism. Cultural studies thereby become critical studies of the neoliberal discourse on culture, and reflection on pop culture recedes into the background. It is noteworthy that in these books neither Fiske's name nor his books are mentioned.

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Let us then grapple with some issues associated with this idea of a renewal in cultural studies, by giving them a more critical character (in Eco's sense of the word). We shall start with counter-culture and its progressive commodification. The great project of determining lifestyle and its now inextricable connection with the aesthetic and technological aspects of cultural consumption, obliges us to give at least a pre-

¹⁸ P. Smith eds., *The Renewal of Cultural Studies*, Temple University Press, Philadelphia 2011; N. Couldry, *Why Voice Matters. Culture and Politics After Neoliberalism*, London 2011; L. Grossberg, *Cultural Studies in the Future Tense*, Durham and London 2010.

¹⁹ This refers in particular to the late text of Williams: *The Future of Cultural Studies*, in: *Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists*, Verso, London 1989, pp. 151–162.

liminary answer to the question concerning the connection of this understanding of lifestyle with the traditional psychological and sociological understanding. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the concept of *life-style* was first employed by Alfred Adler in 1929, in reference to individual character traits acquired in early childhood – traits which govern reactions and behavior. Up until the 1970s, 'life-style' primarily had psychological connotations and the word was hyphenated.²⁰ In the market research conducted in the United States in the 1970s, *life-style* changed to the now familiar *lifestyle*, and was only used in reference to consumer habits. In fact, the term 'life-style' combines two concepts which require critical reflection on the ways in which they can be combined. The problem is how *life* depends on the *styles* imposed upon it by the dominant group. The compound form *lifestyle* naturalizes this concept and deprives it of social context. Herbert Marcuse has also pointed out the magical-hypnotic effect of similar compounds.²¹ It is no coincidence that *lifestyle* made a permanent home for itself in the interpretation of consumerism just after the time of the counter-culture, which was for the most part consumed as a cultural product and reduced to similar autonomous signs. We will have more to say on this issue.

The issue of the counter-culture today is first and foremost an argument which has been taking place in the USA, but also currently in other countries, with 'the culture wars' understood as a conflict of values. Guy Sorman, an astute observer of reality overseas, is correct when he writes: "One can guess that in this battle that there is a clash of myths which are far more important than reality. In the war over the breast²², it is not so much two Americas that are fighting, as the real America with the America that no longer exists – the supposedly innocent America of the 1950s. For conservatives, the future consists of precisely this restored past, in the re-discovered time when majorettes were virgins and footballers were not pumped up on steroids. Yet for liberals the future is now, with all that entails. Conservatives are optimists and idealists; after the ideological battle, the United States will renew itself. Liberals are sceptics who adapt to the evolution of society".²³ As the former US president Bill Clinton succinctly put it – if you like something from the 60s, you must

²⁰ Moreover the concept was in general absent from most compendiums of the middle of the last century; it is not it, for example, in *The World Book Encyclopaedia Dictionary* of 1963.

²¹ V. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Boston 1991; concerning Marcuse's considerations on the so-called 'Happy Consciousness'

²² A reference to Janet Jackson's uncovered breast on CBS televisions, which millions of Americans witnessed while waiting for the start of the Superbowl in 2004.

²³ G. Sorman, *Made in USA. Spojrzenie na cywilizację amerykańską*, transl. W. Nowicki, Warszawa, 2005, p. 44.

be a democrat; if you condemn everything indiscriminately, you must be a conservative. The most recent publications draw attention to the fact that during the many years of attempts to analyze and judge the course and consequences of the youth revolts in the 1960s, two “myths of the counter-culture” have been perpetuated. The first emerged forty years ago and is held onto today as a nostalgic vision of the times which sowed the seeds for the current image of capitalist culture. This myth is both romantic and political, both an artistic rebellion against the standardization of post-war capitalism, against the homogenizing machinery of the culture industry, and against the authority of “grey flannel suits”.²⁴ The advocates of this vision are indeed aware of how much was not achieved, but at the same time they argue that it was worth fighting for, as not all the counter-culture values were stolen and appropriated by mainstream culture. The “spirit” of the rebellion survived, since *the revolution will not be televised*.

The proponents of the second counter-cultural myth, i.e. those who had no qualms about insisting that from the very beginning the idea of revolt contained the seeds of its own disaster, based their reasoning on the conviction that the ideas of the counter-culture were susceptible to co-optation by corporate culture. Capitalism was able to exploit the revolution, and due to its appropriation of counter-cultural slogans was able to prepare its mature contemporary form – the flexible, consumerist capitalism based on the sale of attractive lifestyles. Indeed, if we consider the reality from the second half of the 1960s, we will see what the Coca-Cola and Pepsi campaigns looked like (Fruitutopia vs. “choose a lifestyle”), how adverts for Nike shoes featured texts from William Burroughs, the songs of the Beatles or other musical icons, how peace symbols could be seen on Reynolds cigarettes (not to mention the famous Volkswagen advert). Somewhat later, the campaigns of Apple, IBM and Microsoft employed similar techniques – it was always about breaking the rules, finding yourself, individual choice etc.

The advocates of the negative myth of the counter-culture fail to take into consideration in their version of those times the fact that this co-optation – and co-optation is definitely what we are dealing with here – was only possible because such huge changes had taken place since the 1950s in the world of business (chiefly American), and in the consumerist habits of the middle class. Recent studies consequently suggest shifting the focus away from research on the counter-culture as such, to the hitherto ignored history of business and corporatism. The significance of the 1960s cannot be understood without taking into account the enthusiasm of the ordinary representatives of the middle class and the new generation of manag-

²⁴ V. E. A. Swingrover, *The Counterculture Reader*, New York 2004.

ers had for the counter-culture. It is worth mentioning two important books at this point. The first being the now legendary work of Thomas Frank, *The Conquest of Cool. Business Culture, Counterculture and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*²⁵, and the second being I.E. Chiapello's *Le nouvel esprit du capitalisme* (1999), which has been translated into English.²⁶ The considerations contained in these books are worth summarizing in the context of two later positions on a similar theme, both with regard to the counter-culture and in the broader perspective of the "global culture industry". By this I mean the interesting book written by two Canadian philosophers – Joseph Heath and Andrew Potter's *Nation of Rebels. Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*²⁷ and the recently published *Global Culture Industry: The Mediation of Things* by Scott Lash and Celia Lury. All of these works deal with the two myths of the counter-culture and also, in parallel, the stereotypical image of corporate business culture during the youth counter-culture.

The new spirit of capitalism, in the view of Boltanski and Chiapello, was born at the moment when management specialists adapted the language of the counter-culture as a way of articulating social criticism. Thanks to this adaptation (or co-optation) the corporate representatives could claim that the real problem with capitalism lay in its authoritarianism and conformism (and not economic exploitation). The authors indicate two ways in which the language of the counter-culture was able to contribute to the formation of a new spirit of capitalist economy. The first came from artistic critiques of capitalism, while the second lay in the mass recruitment of former representatives of the counter-culture, in the 1970s and early 1980s, who settled down into advertising, marketing and management. Artistic critique of the economy, which emphasized self-development, creativity, more flexible work (with no clear separation of work and leisure time), innovation and subjectivity led to the creation of the foundations of corporate culture that we are familiar with in the reality of the 21st century. These authors argue that the majority of artist-critics of capitalism, who appeared around 1968, became successfully incorporated into the spheres of business and the service industry; for example, the libertarian counter-culture subjectivity proved very useful for the New Economy.

Thomas Frank arrives at similar conclusions in his book, though his justifications are somewhat different. While Boltanski and Chiapello supported their arguments with careful study of literature on the subject of management (as well as

²⁵ T. Frank, *The Conquest of Cool. Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism*, Chicago 1997.

²⁶ The English translation is entitled *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, London 2007.

²⁷ J. Heath, A. Potter, *Nation of Rebels. Why Counterculture Became Consumer Culture*, New York 2004

dozens of interviews with representatives from this line of work), Frank makes use of market analysis and advertisements. As a result, we get a kind of documentary record of how American advertising exploited the youth counter-culture of the 1960s, transforming expressions of dissent into signifiers with useful market-value. With regard to the fact that the reorientation of the ideals of the advertising industry had already taken place in the 1950s (which Frank documents in detail), the adoption of counter-culture rhetoric into advertising took place almost in parallel with the appearance of the original phenomenon on the social, political and artistic-aesthetic stages. Non-conformism became a standard persuasive practice, the official capitalist style for promoting "differences", and not – as in the framework of the classic culture industry described by Adorno and Horkheimer – an argument in favor of unification, standardization and pseudo-individualization. As early as the 1960s, the differentiation of offers and segmentation of the consumer market resonated strongly with the phenomenon of 'hip-consumerism' (which Norman Mailer had predicted in *The White Negro*, in 1957!). In other words: at the very moment when counter-cultures appeared on the scene in America and Europe, advertising practices were already part of it, and found fertile ground in the newly conceived principles of the capitalist economy.

Contemporary capitalism is entirely different to its earlier form, which was characterized by the ideas of bureaucracy, corporations and rigid organization. The 'new economy' is derived from the counter-culture, but not as a parasite to the 'authenticity' of the counter-culture, but to a large degree they are two phenomena in a symbiotic relationship – a host and a (flexible) organism which adapts to the circumstances. The paradox lies in the fact that the standard slogans of the counter-culture have been transformed into the main ideology of the new system of flexible capitalism. The themes of the counter-culture's battle, namely opposition and freedom became key terms for the ideology of consumerism, however not because business specialists adopted them cynically, but rather because the values of the counter-culture 'resonated' with their own ideals. On this basis, the slogans "Give peace a chance" and its travesty "Give peace a cheque" are in now way contradictory.

The books of Heath and Potter, and Lash and Lury, continue this line of argument, by demonstrating that contemporary consumption, based as it is on the counter-cultural ideas which appeal to difference, creativity and lifestyle, solves the central problem of consumerism – supplying a constant stream of novelty in a situation where things are losing (ever more quickly) just this quality. The emphasis on the individual and their self-determination with regard to market offers, results in the conviction that the consumer is an individual who is able to assert their identity

above all by means of the things they decide to buy and show off their possession of. In one of her earlier works, Celia Lury dubbed this kind of cultural participation 'prosthetic culture'. The point here is that today identity has been 'thingfied'; the global culture industry is based on the mediation of objects, and does not refer to cultural representation. The transition to such a system, which begun in the 1960s, involved several important intermediate stages – from identity to difference, from goods to brands, and from representation to things.

Hence, it is no coincidence that research on the 'sociology of objects' or the 'cultural biography of things' is increasing in popularity, and sometimes intuitively 'grasps' decisive moments in the history of cultural consumption. Janusz Barański's *The World of Things. An Anthropological Outline* contains an overview of the most important research traditions and his own fascinating research proposal. The 'metacultural novelties' of Greg Urban and Albert Borgmann's pragmatic idea of a 'paradigm instrument' are also worthy of mention.²⁸

Today we have at our disposal an inexhaustible richness when it comes to lifestyle definitions, chiefly from the literature which promotes the idea of lifestyle as a value bound up with a particular 'idea' for the creation of a self-image. All of these definitions identify 'lifestyle' with a reflective, biographical project of building identity and self-presentation, based on the symbolic consumption of material goods, particularly from the areas of culture, services and an extensive array of commercialized experiences (travel adventures, extreme sports, body treatments). Lifestyle has become a life strategy, the framework for interpreting consumer choice suggests that freely made decisions concerning symbolic and aesthetic pleasures provide a sense of fulfillment in a successful and varied lifestyle. The fundamental principle underpinning *lifestyle* demands not just that we choose in order to live, but that we demonstrate the style of that life. 'I buy, therefore I am' entails that the type and quality of purchased items allows us to categorize people according to a criteria of consumer preferences, despite the fact that these people need not have any common characteristics beyond the purchase – employment, political convictions and sexual preferences do not play an unconditional role in the list of factors which determine lifestyle.

Anthony Giddens holds that lifestyle has become a necessity in the circumstances of late modernity, and this idea seems somewhat trivial, since it is most often associated with superficial consumerism. However, a closer look reveals that "there

²⁸ On this topic v. W. J. Burszta, "Paradygmat przyrzędu" jako doświadczenie, in *Nowoczesność jako doświadczenie. Dyscypliny – paradygmaty – dyskursy*, A. Zeidler-Janiszewska, R. Nycz eds., Warszawa 2008, pp. 44–58.

is something much more fundamental going on than such a conception suggests: in conditions of high modernity, we all not only follow lifestyles, but in an important sense are forced to do so – we have no choice but to choose²⁹

Giddens acknowledges that the idea of lifestyle is mainly associated with consumption, as it remains to a large extent under the control of the individual, particularly if you compare it with the world of work, though work is also not entirely removed from the realm of choice. However, it would be difficult to analyze the reality which the unemployed are forced to live in, in terms of their lifestyle! Zygmunt Bauman is right to describe the unemployed as “defective consumers” who fell to the wayside of lifestyle and found themselves on the sidelines of social stratification. They are just left with *life*, and this cannot be stylized and fitted with identification marks. As Charles Taylor aptly wrote, today we attempt to build life, based on the ever-expanding options available on the market of new goods and services – from washing machines to organized leisure – or based on the freer individual lifestyle, which became popular thanks to these expanding options. In turn, Borgmann would argue that the paradigm tool is the basic matrix of thinking. Just as lifestyles change, for the first time in the history of consumption of Western society appliances and gadgets (technological objects) are thrown away in bulk, but not because they cannot be fixed or renewed, etc., but rather because these are disposable items. Zygmunt Bauman, Jeremy Rifkin and Benjamin Barber draw attention to this in their numerous works. Companies that continue to worry about the durability and reliability of their products tend to end up getting into trouble.³⁰

All these processes cannot be understood without reference to one more idea, namely that of narcissism, which is inextricably tied up with lifestyle today. Today, in the 21st century, there is a widespread view that the existence of personality is inextricable from presenting it for public approval; it must be touted and consumed by the greatest number of people possible, and at the same time it must be exposed to the needs of the constantly changing external world. Richard Sennett, Anthony Giddens, Zygmunt Bauman, Charles Taylor, Jeffrey Alexander, Michel Maffesoli, Jean Baudrillard, Thomas Frank, Luc Boltansky and Guy Sorman – all address this topic in their own unique styles, from various points of view. This is in fact an acknowledgment and proclamation of the ultimate triumph of the ideology of consumerism and the consumerist lifestyle in the evolving reality of capitalism. This – what the intellectuals warned us about as they observed the birth of the Moloch called mass culture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries – has come into be-

²⁹ A. Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity Self and Society*, Cambridge 2008 p. 81.

³⁰ V. P. Stasiak, *Raz, a dobre*, „Polityka” 2006, no. 51/52.

ing before our very eyes, and there is little hope that the process of commodifying human identity can be stopped or even slowed down. Nevertheless, Erich Fromm did express such a hope, and it is worth recalling his views at this point, so as to once again experience not so much *déjà vu* as *déjà lu*. His *The Revolution of Hope*, a renowned counter-cultural work of dissent starts as follows: "A specter is stalking in our midst whom only a few see with clarity. It is not the old ghost of communism or fascism. It is a new specter: a completely mechanized society, devoted to maximal material output and consumption, directed by computers; and in this social process, man himself is being transformed into a part of the total machine, well fed and entertained, yet passive, unalive, and with little feeling. With the victory of the new society, individualism and privacy will have disappeared; feelings towards others will be engineered by psychological conditioning and other devices, or drugs which also serve a new kind of introspective experience".³¹ Despite the somewhat archaic wording, already in 1968 Fromm had noticed the "corrosion of character" that Sennett would later refer to, and he had outlined the conditions which would be conducive to the development of the "culture of narcissism" that Lash would later focus on. This eminent psychologist proposed, moreover, a closer look at the specific processes that bring about changes in concepts, such as those which occurred with the term 'identity' – such a fashionable word today. Referring to the common understanding of ego, rather than the Freudian one, Fromm clearly states that the concept of 'I' is different to the concept of 'ego' because the experience of my ego is the experience of myself as an object of possession. A person who is said to have a 'bloated' or 'huge ego' (such as today's narcissist) looks upon themselves as a thing, and the person's social role is another instance of being a thing. Nowadays, the identity of the ego is commonly mistaken for with the identity of 'I', or personality. I would say this is the whole point, since only such a shift of meaning allows identity to exist as such a highly-valued commodity; and this is similar to what happened with the concept of lifestyle, as was previously mentioned.

The experience of the ego and the identity of the ego are therefore based on the idea of possession. Fromm writes: "I *have* 'me' as I have all other things which this 'me' owns. Identify of 'I' or self refers to the category of being and not having. I am 'I' only to the extent to which I am alive, interested, related, active, and to which I have achieved an integration between my appearance – to others and/or to myself – and the core of my personality".³² The language which we use, which is often copied directly from adverts or self-help books, also clearly reflects this difference.

³¹ E. Fromm, *Rewolucja nadziei. Ku uczłowieczonej technologii*, transl. H. Adamska, Poznań 2000, p. 23.

³² E. Fromm, *op.cit.*, p. 115.

Whereas in the past we might have once simply said 'I'm sad', today that is equivalent to saying 'I have a problem'; the question 'Who am I?' leads to reflection on 'How can I change my identity?'; similarly, issues connected with openness and sincerity have turned into 'I will be more assertive'. Should we then be surprised by the fact that individuals who have been programmed with this focus on the ego then entrust their egos – which have been bloated since childhood (behavior) and kept in a constant state of excitement (consumerism) – to experts for guidance on the next size up? The time that passed since Fromm's diagnosis, and since Lash's celebrated *Culture of Narcissism*, has only consolidated and scripted further installments of the ego's experience of these long-established trends.

I have the distinct impression that, in contradiction of its own ideals and principles, contemporary sociology – via its leading experts – only confirms and in fact legitimizes the ideology of imperialist consumerism, without the hope that sustained Fromm (the humanization of technological society) and to a lesser degree Herbert Marcuse (revolution). And today there seems to be little hope, since the expectations of the ever-growing factions of society all seem to be directed towards the identity of the ego, which has no serious rival other than various fundamentalisms and nationalist sentiments (which can anyhow be reconciled with consumerism). The contemporary narcissist described by Lash and Rosen has little or nothing in common with the idea of Narcissus-Orpheus, which was so beautifully evoked by Marcuse in his *One-Dimensional Man*. While the latter was supposed to give up consuming and competing for the sake of an integral existentialist position, today's narcissist, drowning in the ideology of consumerism, participates in a constant battle to ensure that their family has "better and more", and the competition of others forces them to maintain their status, lifestyle and objective identity based on the fetishisation of things. It is worth devoting a few words to this topic, to broaden the context a little.

In the situation wherein the majority of traditional social ties and forms (the family, marriage, direct socialization, tradition) are in a state of deep atrophy, their place has been taken by secondary institutions and abstract systems, and this has an influence on the individual's '*curriculum vitae*'. The costs of individualization are serious, however, as the abstract systems function differently from the traditional forms; while traditional forms are said to restrict identity by rigidly assigning individuals to the trajectories of possible choices, the abstract systems turn an individual and their life into a plaything of fashion, relationships, economic indicators and markets. As Ulrich Beck writes: "In this way, individualized private existence becomes more and more distinctly and openly dependent relations and conditions that completely

elude her (i.e. The unit - W.J.B.) intervention".³³ Thus the institutionalized biography is born, a consequence of which is that the whole rhythm of life – (which is marked out less and less by the traditional *rites de passage*), with the rhythm of time and time management overlapping with one another – is even replaced by institutional forms (education, work, retirement). The outcome of this is that the freedom of choice and individualized biographies, which are so highly-valued by the majority of people, are in fact determined by the market in all fields of life. Individualization condemns people to external control and external standardization.³⁴ At this point it is fitting to conclude that any similarities with the diagnoses of David Riesman from fifty years ago are by no means coincidental.³⁵

Giddens, Beck and Bauman all draw attention to an important factor – maybe the most important factor – influencing the unprecedented culture of choice individuals are faced with today. This is mediated experience, also known as mediated consciousness or telepresence. To quote Giddens: "The collage effect of television and newspapers gives specific form to the juxtaposition of settings and potential lifestyle choices. On the other hand, the influence of the mass media is plainly not all in the direction of diversification and fragmentation. The media offer access to settings with which the individual may never personally come into contact but at the same time some boundaries between settings that were previously separate are overcome [...] As a result, the traditional connection between 'physical setting' and 'social situation' has become undermined; mediated social situations construct new communalities – and differences – between pre-constituted forms of social experience".³⁶ Life plans, which today have become the thoughtfully organized content of identity trajectories often including elements of mediated experience, have become "the horizon of the imagination", and this in turn creates a narcissistic need to keep up with all the trends that are considered obligatory. The boundary between Dilthey's lived experiences (*Erlebnis*) and mediated experiences is blurred, entailing

³³ U. Beck, *Spółczesność ryzyka. W drodze do innej nowoczesności*, transl. S. Cieśla, Warszawa 2002, p. 197.

³⁴ Ibidem, p. 198.

³⁵ V. D. Riesman, *Samotny tłum*, transl. J. Strzelecki, Warszawa 1996. At this point, the inevitable question arises of whether the times of the counter-culture were not the last period in Western civilization, when there was a real chance to oppose the machinery of capitalist culture, to resist even in the form of construction of the myth of the identity of the young person as an internal subject equipped with the ability to construct a coherent autobiographical narrative.

³⁶ A. Giddens, *Nowoczesność i tożsamość. „Ja” i społeczeństwo w epoce późnej nowoczesności*, transl. A. Szulżycka, Warszawa 2001, pp.117–118.

that the latter claims a similar status for itself, although it is acquired in a different way – through indirect interaction and quasi-interaction.

Contemporary children and teenagers – in Beck's view – are no longer familiar with the context of their parents' and grandparents' lives, and thus the time frame of their perception is narrowing all the time. In the most extreme case, "history shrinks to the eternal present".³⁷ The reference point here is their own life, but life perceived through the prism of television, which presents a multitude of lifestyles, ideals, icons and events that strengthen the conviction that the world is only what is happening now. This is just one phenomenon that I am merely hinting at here. The second is a reduction of the areas in which joint activities stimulate individual biographies; the media exert pressure on individuals to create their own life histories, first and foremost in those areas which are a product of external relations. In the words of Giddens, it is a question of abstract systems and mediated experience. We must not allow ourselves to drown in a reality that we cannot change in any way, but which we can "tame". Biographies become "self-reflective", and develop into "construction kits of biographical combination possibilities", signifying nothing other than the transition from "normal biography" to "a biography of choice". For themselves and their children to the same extent. Due to the facilitation of media, individuals lead a double socio-spatial existence; they are "here and now" and "there", but such a double location indicates a schizophrenic structure. Telepresence thus kills real connections with others and detaches us from people of flesh and blood, indeed it even deprives the present generation of the ability to distinguish media fictions and mythologies from that which is tangible, but which is recoiled from because it offers resistance. For this there are therapists, textbooks and wide range of "survival programs" in an environment characterized by constant competition between uncertain narcissists.

Kenneth Gergen goes even further in his cultural pessimism, as he holds that postmodern culture has finally lost its belief in direct experience and is so saturated with meaning that identity will start (or has already started) to "dissolve".³⁸ Everything is too much, everything is happening too quickly³⁹, everything is temporary, too many things are happening simultaneously. The effect of this excess is the numb-

³⁷ U. Beck, op. cit., p. 202.

³⁸ K. Gergen, *The Saturated Self: Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life*, New York 1991.

³⁹ See the balanced, typically anthropological analysis of the effect of speed on the patterns of life in post-modern society in the book by the Norwegian researcher T. H. Eriksena, *Tyrania chwili. Szybko i wolno płynący czas w erze informacji*, trans. G. Sokół, Warszawa 2003; a parallel reading of Gergen and Eriksen would enable the reader to form an opinion on where the analysis becomes a value judgment.

ness and paralysis of identity which is overloaded with disparate and conflicting requirements – “the process of social saturation is producing a profound change in our ways of understanding the self”.⁴⁰ We are ceasing to be consistent thinkers and deeply sentient individuals, and are becoming a collection of uncoordinated babblers trying to capture our fragmented selves.

Postmodernism offers an excess of possibilities⁴¹ concerning who we can be, hence identity “has no respite”, as it is permanently under construction (well, makeshift construction), it will never achieve a completed form, and at the same time can never appeal to the certainty of experience. That which has hardly just been formed and has started to be taken for granted, is almost immediately subject to an alternative meaning, which encourages the revision of “temporary certainties”.⁴²

The prevalence of the “technology of social saturation” (traditional and electronic media, fast transport, computers, email, different languages of identity, mobile phones) means that we consume countless potential determinants of our ‘selves’, among which none is privileged and all of them give the impression of being equally “authentic” as they compete to be the one that we will use when constructing our biographies. This is the world of “multifrenia” in the conditions of post-modern reality, inside which it is almost impossible to perceive your life as a harmonious biographical narrative. “The fully saturated self becomes no self at all”, Gergen concludes.⁴³ Here, perhaps, lies the main source of anxiety for today’s narcissists, who seek success in a situation wherein any kind of long-term planning is very dangerous.

The question to be asked now is how does the above outline relate to the situation of Polish society, after much delayed capitalist development and being plunged straight into the phase of flexible capitalism. Is the diagnosis mentioned at the start of this sketch of scholars a little premature – as was said not long ago – when it comes

⁴⁰ K. Gergen, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁴¹ Not everyone, of course, but the aspirations of even the most marginalized are also heading in this direction, i.e. to make, consume and represent a lifestyle similar to that which is given to those who most benefit from the charms of globalization. Globalization is, after all, also a production of “human waste”, “defective consumers”, etc.; the gates after a consumer paradise are not closed to today’s underclass, but for now it remains “licking ice cream through the shop window”. V. Z. Bauman, *Życie na przemiał*, trans. T. Kunz, Kraków 2004. There is fascinating research on the consciousness of “excluded” groups of people, initiated at the time by Pierre Bourdieu, carried out in different parts of the world.

⁴² That this formulation is an oxymoron is obvious, but the point is that a subject who understands things in this way is assured that at every moment of their biography, “it is certain”, that they can handle everything and make the choice that will be adequate for the situation.

⁴³ K. Gergen, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

to the reality of an economy and society in the period of transformation? Ultimately, in my view the answer lies in just this level of the imagination, and thus in models of participation in culture which are encouraged with the help of media messages. These messages are identical in all realities – they all say that the experience of the ego is the most important thing, that only from this can subjective identity be built. The opportunities for achieving similar models for life are increasing all the time, and they are constantly spoken and written about. The peasantry has been entirely forgotten, even in the humanities, and is known today as ‘agricultural producers’. Although this group is constantly shrinking, it still constitutes, including small-town communities, a sizeable percentage of the population. It is the completely “silent” segment of society, which can only observe how the media-generated mythology of capitalism and individual success is built, leaving behind all those who live at a standstill on the outskirts of urban agglomerations. The worlds of Warsaw and other big Polish cities already resemble the reality described by Lash and Giddens, and the views on narcissistic personality apply to them more and more. These realities hide others, ones which are defensive and do not fit easily into the mainstream lifestyle. A very interesting problem for me is this: what does the representative of an important company – wearing designer clothing, sitting in a black SUV, living in the suburbs or Warsaw, with a flexible job which entails being permanently on-call, and thus already suffering from a lack of family time – have in common with a person of the same age living in the east of Poland, who is not forced to choose a lifestyle, but is rather focused on simple survival. If we asked the latter what he sees in the mirror of his life, would he not say, like the Old Believers, that the “mirror is damned”?

The time for some conclusions has come. Culture is increasingly perceived through the prism of who we should be (lifestyle, look), and what we should have (technological gadgets), in order to achieve by means of these an illusory goal, namely that of identity. But this identity has a tendency to “dissolve into thin air”. In his famous book from over fifty years ago, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, Erving Goffman performed a vivisection of the role that individuals play in their social relations. The American sociologist postulated that an individual who enters into direct contact with other individuals has many reasons to try to control the impression they create on others. To achieve this aim, the individual uses numerous techniques resembling those employed in the theatrical arts. The ability to create an impression on people consists of two types of symbolic activity, which are, in principle, fundamentally different – the impression communicated and that which is received. The first type of activity involves communicating in the narrow and traditional sense of the word “communication”, whereas the second type covers a wide

range of behavior which others can treat as being characteristic for a particular person. It would seem that the skillset associated with second type of activity is especially valued these days, as it works for both communicating and revealing "the self". To "create an impression" or "effect" is the first, basic step on the road to entering the next headings in the institutional biography of the individual. The model for similar biographies assigns three main elements – education, work and retirement – around which is built the system for evaluating what a successful life is.

Anthropology, despite its variety of versions and forms, expresses one fundamental idea, namely that none of us can escape the dictates of culture. It has to be made clear, however, that the issue here is not the traditional understanding of culture as an anthropological category, but rather the way in which the technologically mediated culture of consumption determines what we call lifestyle. And this is why for a long time now it has seemed to me that the most adequate definition of culture was formulated by the musician, composer and producer Brian Eno, in his *A Year with Swollen Appendices*. For Eno, culture is "is everything we don't have to do", and thus "we have to eat, but we don't need to have 'cuisine', BigMacs or Tournedos Rossini. We have to protect ourselves from the cold, but we don't have to think about the weather when we decide whether to put on Levis or something from Yves Saint-Laurent".⁴⁴ Culture then is "all those other things" that we decide to do, but without which we would survive as a species. For Eno, culture is a compulsive functional activity, which is based on "stylistic" choice. Human activity creates an extensive functional-stylistic continuum, which ranges from fashion and food, to art and religion. Music, the plastic arts and construction, and our everyday being – all this is a question of intentional choice. Eno adds, however, that while an individual's choices were never autonomous, today, when almost completely freed of traditional social restrictions, the individual is overwhelmed by the economic system of capitalism, and has become the the target of the culture industry, yet this is entirely different to the reality described by Adorno and the Frankfurt school. I would even say that Eno's definition of culture needs to be reversed, meaning that culture (in the sense of the ideology of consumerism) is precisely an obligation – you MUST construct your own life; in other words it is the necessity of choosing your identity signifiers, which to a great extent lead to the "designer branding" and "gadgetization" of life. Such a fate was also met by the counter-culture⁴⁵.

⁴⁴ B. Eno, *A Year with Swollen Appendices*, London 1996, p. 317.

⁴⁵ I write about these problems in more detail in the book *Fifty years later. Critical essays about hope*, which will be published by Oficyna Wydawnicza Volumen in Warsaw.

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