



Industrial Engineering Journal

ISSN: 0970-2555

Volume : 49, Issue 9, September : 2020

### **The Role of Popular Media in the Creation of Cultural Self**

**Nisanth TV**, Assistant Professor of English, CKGM Govt. College, Perambra, Kerala, 673525  
**tvnisanth@gmail.com**

*Abstract: the cultural self is expressed through cultural choices made by individuals in various circumstances. Traditionally such choices are related to the idea of the 'good' which in turn reflects the moralistic and religious concerns shared in society. After the consumerist turn in the twentieth century, this pattern is broken by the intervention of the popular media that created its own aesthetic principles. This paper presents a brief discussion of this pattern and its function in society in creating a new cultural self.*

The term self, with its original association with religion and psychology, usually discussed with individual concerns. It is also informed by the Humanistic psychology originated in 1950s. Since the term culture indicates a collective, merging of these two terms may create semantic frictions. In the wake of modernity, the term got extended to include discussions of identity formation which is essentially cultural. Since the cultural pattern in the context of modernity is highly mediated the self occupies a position in cultural discourse as an expression of identity that one seeks to fulfil through cultural choices.

These choices are usually the result of moral questions encountered in daily life, which are the derivation of what is beautiful is good too. In the introduction to *On Beauty* Umberto Eco writes, "'Beautiful'- together with 'graceful' and 'pretty' or 'sublime', 'marvellous', 'superb' and similar expressions- is an adjective that we often employ to indicate something that we like. In this sense, it seems that what is beautiful is the same as what is good and in fact, in various historical periods there was a close link between the Beautiful and the Good"(8). Apart from this



semantic association, it is a common cultural knowledge to find links between the beautiful and the good, let alone the questions on the parameters of beauty.

The entry of mass media broke the religious-moral-ethical pattern which was used to decide on the goodness of objects offered as choices to express oneself in a cultural environment. When the media is globalized there is a collage effect that renders information and lifestyle choices juxtaposed to force the consumer of the new to choose a particular lifestyle without being conscious of it. In the experience of high modernity, these choices are not choices but preferences enforced through cultural compulsion for displaying a particular status. The technological mediation of experience in modernity, thus, takes on the formation of identity and consequently, the expressed self gets alienated from the individual. The institutional status of artistic consumption and production vanishes; art becomes one more branch of commodity production (Jameson 24). And Benjamin writes, "One might subsume the eliminated element in the term "aura" and go on to say: that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art. This is symptomatic process whose significance points beyond the realm of art. One might generalize by saying: the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition" (221).

Alienation of the self, expressed in cultural choices is intensified by consumerism and mass media. Appadurai writes:

Electronic media give a new twist to the environment within which the modern and the global often appear as flip sides of the same coin. Always carrying the sense of distance between viewer and event, these media nevertheless compel the transformation of everyday discourse. At the same time, they are resources for experiments with self-making in all sorts of societies, for all sorts of persons. They allow scripts for possible



lives to be imbricated with the glamour of film stars and fantastic film plots and yet also to be tied to the plausibility of news shows, documentaries, and other black-and-white forms of telemediation and printed text. Because of the sheer multiplicity of the forms in which they appear (cinema, television, computers, and telephones) and because of the rapid way in which they move through daily life routines, electronic media provide resources for self-imagining as an everyday social project (3).

In a culture of consumption, artificial needs are created by the media to control the choices of the individual and create a lifestyle. According to Giddens, "A lifestyle can be defined as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity"(81). Consumer culture questions essentialist interpretations of self by bringing life into the hedonistic tangents of the market deleting the ethical dilemmas of moralistic tradition. "It is the use of goods to express one's social identity and to distinguish oneself from others, in a world in which traditional social bonds and class boundaries are weakening, which has been the proper field of sociological consumption studies" (Gronow5). In this setting of consumerist culture, the self is experienced not as a result of agency and will but only as a reflection of activities chosen from a list of what is offered by the market and media.

The equation of consumerism is the equation of middle-class social order. Eagleton in his book, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* compares the absolute power of feudalism and the *aestheticised* power of the bourgeois order of a society. "It is at one with the body's spontaneous impulses, entwined with sensibility and the affections, lived out in unreflective custom. Power is now inscribed in the minutiae of subjective experience, and the fissure between abstract duty and



pleasurable inclination is accordingly healed”(20). He continues with the Hegalian notion of aesthetics that registers a departure from the Kantian paradigm. For him the law becomes the custom and any violation of it will question the self. In the order of consumerism, aestheticisation is a compulsory choice offered by the system to attain power, rejecting the agency of the self in making that choice. For example, the mass media can substitute the reality with a more powerful illusion of reality which obliterates even the remote chance of another choice. The technological mediation of such a reality not only questions the agency of the consumer but erases the authorship too. That means the authorship on both sides (production and consumption) is negated. So the aesthetics of commodity takes the self away from the individual into the play of significations since the individual consumer is forced to find the cultural expressions in a plethora of choices offered through mediation for the aestheticisation of everyday life for immediate pleasure. Defining the everyday life Henry Lefebvre writes:

The situation of every day per se has become increasingly serious . It is true that technology is penetrating it much more than it did twenty years ago, and it is impossible to ignore the importance of domestic science , for example; but we also know that technology and domestic science have not eliminated the most trivial aspects of every day life; by reducing the time spent doing tedious chores technology raises very clearly the problem of available free time. Rather than transforming the every day in to a higher creative activity, it has created a vacuum. (3)

The techno aesthetics of mass media which coincides with consumerism reduces the aesthetic experience to immediate stimulation of senses against the Kantian canon of disinterested contemplation, or the romantic idea of emotional evocation. In the background of



Consumerism and Globalization, the cultural self can be detected in a set of choices made by the consumer which is informed by an aesthetics created through the mass mediation of objects and ideas. The self is more of a sort of enforced burden than a choice or selection because there is an uncontrollable inflow of all sorts of aestheticised signs and images into the domain of everyday life through mass media. Vekitesh and Meamber in their study of the consumer as an aesthetic subject say, "Our study shows that aesthetic experiences serve to foster the constitution of consumer identities. The relation of aesthetic experiences to the self was apparent in the stories consumers shared about themselves and the construction of meaning in their lives" (63). In other words, the loneliness of the consumer is a delusional experience. His self is also a result of his embedded nature in the social pattern. The functioning of this pattern may vary from the former centuries because of the inevitable changes in economic patterns. In the present, as Maffesoli argues, what happens is not elimination but a refashioning of the pattern of social integrity. Due to our persistent chase of dehumanization, the existence of this network has been forgotten (72). But the principle of operation of these ties has changed and is better understood in terms of popular media aesthetics.

## Reference

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of

Minnesota Press, 1996. Vol. 1 of *Public Worlds*.

Benjamin, Walter. "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

*Illuminations*, Schocken Books, 2007, 217-252.

Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Blackwell, 2004.

Eco, Umberto. *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*. Secker & Warburg, 2004.



Industrial Engineering Journal

ISSN: 0970-2555

Volume : 49, Issue 9, September : 2020

Giddens, Anthony. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Polity Press, 2006.

Gronow, Jukka. *The Sociology of Taste*. Routledge, 2001.

Jameson, Fredric. *Signatures of the Visible*. Routledge, 2007.

Lefebvre, Henri. *Critique of Everyday Life*. Verso, 2014.

Maffesoli, Michel. *The Time of the Tribes : The Decline of Individualism in Mass Society*. Sage Publications, 1988.

Venkatesh, Alladi and Laurie Meamber. "The Aesthetics of Consumption and the Consumer as an Aesthetic Object" . *Consumption Markets & Culture*. Vol. 11, No. 1, March, 2008, pp. 45-70. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/247522896>.

.....