

## The small person in front of the flashing billboards

By Jasna Frangovska - 08/02/2012



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How many New Years can a world survive before it crashes into a recession? We ask ourselves this question right before the most commercialised of all holidays, facing the year in which the world recession which has gripped the Western hemisphere for the past two years is about to officially knock on our doors. Senka Anastasova, Ph.D. in Philosophy from the Sts. Cyril and Methodius University from Skopje, Media Culture Analyst and Head of the Center for Humanistic Research, says that holidays represent a glamorous festivity of the consumer society that we all live in – culturally, economically and

politically.

**Jasna Frangovska: What do the Christmas and New Year holidays say about consumerism?**

**Senka Anastasova:** We live in a period of automated consumer democracy, of fast-moving consumer capitalism. All issues must be resolved on the spot, now, immediately. We consume consumeristic desires, as Zygmunt Bauman puts it succinctly, or rather we experience desires that demand to be grafted onto other desires. There is a joke on this subject, that is in fact not a joke. It happens in one of the many megamalls that operate today. A whole queue of people are lined before the cash register, holding bags in their hands. In the background you can hear the constant playing of a recorded message saying: "Repeat after me: We are free, we are free". As midnight is fast approaching, the shopping spree reaches panic levels. This type of disorder only gets more emphasised during times of inflation. In these types of situations, it is necessary to confront not only the rigid economic discourses, but also the cultural, economic, and political philosophy of neoliberalism. People have the need to express their freedom and creativity through the consumption and using of goods. However, the voice of the machine irritatingly expresses and reveals the profit-based corporative policies of this time of the year. Unfortunately, in the given context its message is that people are only free when they shop.

**J: Ironically, then, New Year and Christmas would be the pinnacle of achieving this kind of "freedom"?**

**S:** The perspective is warped. These past days, simultaneously with the world premiere of the animated feature "Arthur Christmas", several protest debates were started in the US aimed at discrediting the credibility of the figure of Santa Claus. The main motto of the discussions is: "Santa Claus brings more gifts to the rich, rather than to the poor children". Well, does anyone have the audacity to tell these "poor" excluded children about the new market conditions for the Clauses? What are they to do? Hire their own private chocolate managers? Balloon agents? PR teams for toys?

**J: How does consumerism as a social phenomenon impacts the political environment?**

**S:** Chomsky talks about a so-called moderate democracy which is related to the ideological and cultural concepts of the consumer industry. Even though consumerism is not anything new, especially in the US, it became for the first time not only an economic but also a dominant social and cultural phenomenon in

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America and Western Europe starting 40 years ago with the market expansion. Thus, the explosion of the neoliberal market ideology ushered in the current new era which serves as the paradigm for consumer capitalism. The emphasis has been put on the ideology of regular consumption, which puts both you and me in the same spot. We are all potential buyers, the spotlight is on us from an ideological point of view. Take, for example, the government's marketing campaigns in Macedonia: "Knowledge is power and strength"; or the series of ads "Buy Macedonian products". What are we talking about here? A tautological trick, a marketing syntagm, following a set of standards or "hijacking" potential customers for the purpose of confirming the prototype of the ideal of the "national" consumer? It's quite obvious to see that the idea behind this is to create "pseudo-communities" of buyers which are relied on to affirm the sense of belonging in the name of the promotion of certain ideological value systems.

Communication now is terribly controlled, directed, precisely coded. Is this kind of discourse just an introduction to the creation of the "ideal" profile of an enlightened citizen – consumer for whom the late capitalist system simply yearns. What, then, to do with the offal? It is quite clear that capitalism by itself is dynamic in essence, so it doesn't take it long to find ways to multiply its capital and to turn consumption to its own benefit. But, it also faces certain tough atavistic reptile tails. I know some dear people to me who are not enamored being set up on such a "date".

**J: Then, what is the value in such conditions of social packages, one other regular fixture of the holidays? Is this just another beautiful image to sell?**

**S:** This concerns a wider context of discussion. On the macro-level here, in our post-transitional country, we are undergoing a process of degradation of public institutions (education, health care, culture), their reduction to minuscule silent enterprises, with wide gaping mouths in shock, finally bringing them to the status of insolvency and utter bankruptcy. On the other hand, the pre-holiday dynamics help usher in the so-called diffuse spectacle of heaving rhythms, (non)-competitive products and the quasi-term and conditions of the elite corporations who are trying to reach out to the impoverished society for the purpose of turning (any kind of) profit. During this period, the cameras are sniffing out the "high and mighty" who come out of their offices with leather furniture, chewing on Mentos, to hand out wearing latex gloves social packages tied with red ribbons to the same people that they have made poor not long ago. With golden teeth sparkling in the spotlight. With their mustache, brimming with pride. Well practiced acts of generosity. These days we are witness to the doubling of the profit of the advertising industry. All New Year adds do is to generate the desire to shop. We buy products for their symbolical value (rather than for their use). We buy symbols and signs. The world is tamed into a prosthetic illusion. We believe intimately in the concepts that are being sold to us. Advertisements have become an imaginary space, bedrooms for the public fantasy where dreams are taken, designed and sold. Legitimate market strategy though this is, it still leaves a plethora of other issues hanging in the air.

**J: Are we spending for the holidays money that we don't have for things we don't need?**

**S:** In the hysterical rush of the sales everything matters, everything is urgent, fast and un-believ-ab-le. This is a time of shopping alarms and fluorescent figures. The small person in front of the giant flashing billboards. Faced with the market rollercoaster. Worldwide, the old supermarkets are closing down. We are becoming part of the hyper-hyper-post-markets. One click – one purchase. Reversibly, we are turned into the exhausted creatures of the new age. Every New Year, stampedes of shoppers are charging to buy gifts. In Skopje, services, discounts, sales, 1 for 2 packages are offered, mass-products of dubious worth. Yet, we buy obediently, without even thinking. Just look at all the people trembling in their winter coats, recycled ladies wearing cheap lipstick, the flower girl in front of the supermarket, a one-woman-enterprise. Sssshhhh. No one complain. Not a word. Bite your lips. Keep quiet. Everyone must try to be a responsible and conscientious seller/buyer, to the best of his/her abilities, without thinking what might await around the corner.

**J: How do the holiday decorations cover up the weaknesses of modern society?**

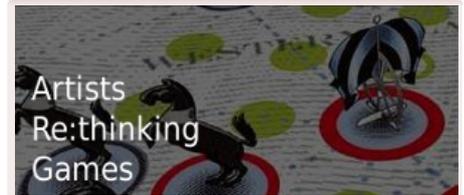
**S:** Decoration, by definition, aims at being likable. Decorating represents compensation, but the problem is not in the decoration itself, but in the excess of cheap products with poor quality which create substitutes, a phantasm of values. The commercial kitsch aims to attract the consumer with its extreme assertiveness and tackiness. The final end is always to manipulate. A "faker's" slap in the face. The bad product always trivialises the beautiful. However, the consumer knows how to resist, at least occasionally. It may sound contradictory, but I believe that in this recession decline there is still a sophisticated consumer population which has maintained their ability to make aesthetic-based choices. With refined habits. And nerve.

**J: How many "New Years" (as a consumer concept) do a recession make?**

**S:** Ah. Depends on how many "subjective" times of consumption do you experience. "Coffee, tea?" – you ask. We are constantly involved in the ultimate consumer process, shop till you drop. The consumer euphoria just intensifies the recession, but the clock will strike one last time and this whole bubble will burst and the maddening rhythm will slow down. I am curious what shall happen to the "European" consumer in the coming months. We are witnessing the continuous deterioration of the IMF concept, the rapid worsening of the financial markets, the destabilisation of the EU. There are several possible outcomes in the future. We will see how low can the ship sink without going under. This is a time when everyone should find one's own lifeboat.



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