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Life of Things from the Perspective of Polish Systemic Transformation

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Abstract The main purpose of the paper is to present the “biography” of selected things which appear in autobiographical narrative interviews conducted within the project “Experiencing the Systemic Transformation Process in Poland. A Sociological Comparison on the Basis of Biographical Analysis.” The author discusses different social actions connected with things, for example, the migrations of things, emancipation through things, collecting things, and reconstructs the stages of life of such things as: notebooks, cassette, and video tapes. The considerations are mainly embedded in the context of the People’s Republic of Poland and the process of transformation of the 1990s. The sociology and anthropology of things are theoretical frames of the analysis.

Keywords Sociology and Anthropology of Things; Life of Things, People’s Republic of Poland; 1989 Breakthrough

Igor Kopytoff (2003) notes that things, just like people, have their biographies. “When building a biography of a specific thing, questions analogous to the questions about human biographies can be posed, for example, what are biographical possibilities, which

entail its status, time of existence, and the culture it belongs to? How do those possibilities manifest themselves?...Are the objects of different age, what are the stages of their life, and what do their culture determinants look like? How do things use up with age and what happens to the object when it stops being useful?” (Kopytoff 2003:251-252). The questions posed by the author—particularly relating to stages of life of things, their uses, and socio-cultural contexts where those processes take place—determine the structure of the paper which aims at analyzing the systemic transformation from the perspective of sociology and anthropology of things.

The article presents, first of all, stages of life of several things, which appear in autobiographical inter-

views conducted within the project “Experience of the Process of the Transformation in Poland. A Sociological Comparative Analysis Based on Biographical Perspective.”¹ Secondly, I discuss chosen aspects of the systemic transformation process in Poland in the context of the items described by the narrators. I refer to three interviews: with Szymon (born 1973, graduated from Higher School of Art and Design, academic teacher), Piotr (born 1975, engineer, corporate worker), and Michał (born 1982, majored in IT and econometrics, entrepreneur). The things in the interviews, for example, pieces of furniture, household appliances, and devices, are mentioned spontaneously (are not brought about by the interviewer’s questions), which points to the significance of those items in a biographical experience. Biographical memory is triggered by and focuses around things which change with time.

The text starts with a brief description on recognition of things from sociological and anthropological perspectives. The following part of the article deals with: (I) status and usage of things in the society of shortage economy and (II) technological devices as harbingers of the systemic change. Considerations on things are marked by three historical periods in the history of Polish society: late People’s Republic of Poland, 1989 breakthrough, and the modern era. It is not my intention, however, to carry out a classic interpretation and analysis of narrations in accordance with the principles formulated by Fritz Schütz, that is, to seek processual structures, reconstruct

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argumentative strategies, et cetera, but the applied theoretical categories were developed by sociology and anthropology of things, as well as sociology of media and communication.

Sociology and Anthropology of Things—Selected Aspects

A life cycle of a thing is typically made of three major stages: creation (invention, development, manufacturing), usage (determined by time, varied), disposal (no longer useful). This general pattern is applicable when things are treated as basically the same objects. However, when we look closely at specific objects—isolated items—it appears that the same thing can work differently in varied contexts to manifest its agency (Abriszewski 2010:XXI). They need new ways to “make them speak, that is, to make them suggest their description, create a blueprint for their usage by others—humans or nonhumans” (Akrich 1992 as cited in Latour 2010:112).

Things cannot tell their own biographies—they are written by people (Kopytoff 2003). The life of a thing—linked to an item, its body²—manifests itself by actions and their consequences. The fact that things live means that they trigger, determine, and authorize actions, enable or prevent them, encourage, allow and suggest, but also stop or forbid actions (Latour 2010:101). Things require individuals to “do something with them”; such demands are

² Although things are interwoven with a body, they are somehow slightly separate from it at the same time; they are movable—the body can move them or set them in motion (frequently by means of other tools); they are related to social activities resulting from them or facilitating their coming into existence (Krajewski 2013:21).

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effective if they bring about desired effects (Gibson 1977; Mitchell 2005 as cited in Krajewski 2013:69). It means that things are not outside the social order, but they are its integral part and actively participate in it as actors or actants (Latour 2010).

Building a biography of things by actors requires considering a number of factors resulting from their mutual relation; things can be used as carriers of meanings, requisites in status games, instruments in classifying others (see: Goffman 2008; 2011). “Things are useful in a number of ways: they enable us to do what we want and need, facilitate communication, and establish suitable conditions for expressing our cultural ties, as well as our individual self within the community” (Dant 2007:26). Individuals create unique cognitive and emotional interactions with things, use them idiosyncratically, present diverse attitudes to the material world (Krajewski 2013). What those individuals share is inability to live without things “because we entrust things with our identity, our society strengthens and embeds its principles and values underlying our culture in things and through things, we give things responsibility for our everyday lives” (Sierocki 2008:175). At the same time, things create secret space where everyday events freely take place (Rakowski 2008:55). Their existence is a “secret language” of culture (Pearce 1995:49); things are unnoticeable parts of our lives, even though they are frequently closer to us than people.

Functions of things which are significant for their uses—symbolic, economic, esthetic, technical (material objects as tools), emotive (evoking emotions by items), socio- and ideo-functions (communicating so-

cial or ideological meanings), can change, move, or appear simultaneously in different stages of life of material objects (Krajewski 2013:49). It is also applicable to status (roles) of things, which can be (giving only a few categories): a tool, decoration, souvenir, collector’s item, useful thing. Depending on their use there are items used daily, occasionally, or on special occasions, for personal use or shared with others. In terms of their esthetic-functional categories, objects can appear as handy, pretty or ugly, one- or multiuse, durable or short-lived (Krajewski 2013:80).

Possessing and using things is determined by culture (in law and customs), similarly to the importance given to things in specific conditions of the collective life. They are not assigned to things for good (though such cases are possible), but they are rather subject to changes resulting from both dynamics of social life (macro level processes) and circumstances of individual biographies (micro level). Categories and characteristics of things, complex meanings attributed to things and interactions with them are socially determined by local culture codes (Pearce 1995), just as uses of those items in given circumstances. Values attached to material goods can be varied in different historical and cultural contexts; “things often act as stimuli evoking purely behavioral reactions or items evoking memories” (Krajewski 2013:32). Further layers of culturally and socially created meanings result from their different uses; reevaluations in the perception of things are also related to changes of their status (Waszczyńska 2016). Let me look at a few things which appear in the narrators’ stories to highlight actions they triggered and how they changed in various social-cultural contexts.

Goods in the Economy of Shortage

With regard to time and culture in which the goods mentioned by the narrators exist, they refer to late years of the People’s Republic of Poland—it results from their teenage years back then. With reference to material goods this time can be described as dominated by two phenomena: permanent shortage of goods (both staple goods and durable goods) and their rationing (from 1976 to 1985) and, secondly, building strategies and practices which facilitated survival in such social-economic order, particularly creating informal nets of acquiring goods and exchanging goods and services.³ Initially, from 1976, the only product whose trade was regulated was sugar. “The scope of regulation started to extend in 1981 when it was regulated to trade meat, butter, wheat flour, groats, cereals and rice, washing powder, cigarettes, alcohol, chocolate and other sweets, soap and many articles for infants, such as semolina, powdered milk, washing powder Cypisek, cotton wool, baby soap and olives” (Fuszara 2004a:120). The list is not complete because, due to recurrent shortages, their substitutes were launched, that is, articles which were available for purchase instead of those stated on the cards (e.g., it was possible to buy sweets or cacao or coffee instead of cigarettes or alcohol—these articles were considered both prestigious and hard to come by). Other products were also subjected to regulation and they included: “oil, shoes, carpets, tropical fruits, stationery items—notebooks, drawing pads,

³ I refer to private and private-public markets for goods—developing informal networks of connections based on the social status of individuals, their professional status, social capital as values which facilitate mutual exchange of services and goods hardly available on the official market (see: Wedel 2007).

crayons, paper cutting pads, pencils, sharpeners, rubbers, modeling clay, paints and brushes...The situation began to change in 1983 when regulation of some articles was rescinded. Subsequently, trade of washing powder and soap, cigarettes and alcohol, sweets ceased to be regulated...Further changes took place in 1985 when regulation of trade of flour and grains products and fats were rescinded” (Fuszara 2004a:121).⁴

Lack of Goods

Considering the level of deprivation above it is not legitimate to argue that the presence of goods was silent (Pearce 1995). Interpreting this description backwards—lack of goods was noticeable in the narrators’ stories. There are references to shortages of one of the rationed goods in the interview with Szymon, that is, notebooks and the whole range of stationery items, and in another excerpt to lack of wallpaper:

N: Even now I have err some notebooks, ‘cause we used to keep supplies. ‘Cause when they delivered/ there was a delivery of goods to the stationer’s, and you had to buy notebooks or some other devices or school materials, then we bought as much of it as we could, not as much as we needed, but as much as

⁴ To ensure fair division of consumer staples, the authorities introduced the mechanism of regulation between 1976 and 1985 and in specific areas of the country and it embraced a range of grocery and industrial articles which entitled to do the shopping on the basis of rationing cards, stamps, and allocations. The regulation did not quite succeed, however, in realizing the “fair” distribution, there were malpractices concerning settlements of ration cards and fraudulent allocations (see: Zawistowski 2017:440-493); additionally, there were also multiple exemptions from the system because there were many categories of privileged people due to their profession, social function (see: Fuszara 2004b).

we possibly could get hold of. Therefore, I still have some notebooks, still blank, which I have kept since my primary school time, they are lying some place and they are nice. It'd be a pity to throw them away, it'd be even a pity to write in them now, 'cause they are, you know/ err I guess you can try to put them somewhere like Allegro and see if anybody takes an interest in it. Nevertheless, now they are souvenirs in a way we bought such notebooks, rubbers/ well, it's funny but now all products are Chinese err and they amount to shoddy quality, don't they/ I mean not only 'cause China produces almost everything. Electronic equipment and more and less advanced technologically. But, generally this flood of Chinese products is associated negatively. I remember that back then there were/ err there was a delivery of Chinese stationery materials, for example, and it was somehow attractive. Fragrant Chinese rubbers or some markers or some rulers or there were some 3D err gadgets and it was/ incredibly attractive. So it is incredibly changing, you know, its perception. I guess that back then err Chinese economy was functioning slightly differently, you know, but, but, but those Chinese products were delivered to Poland and they were a kind of wind from the world.

N: I remember when the Martial Law was announced, it was when we were wallpapering in our flat and my mum's friend and her husband came over. It was Sunday and I remember that they were wallpapering because they had little time so we were wallpapering. I remember that wallpaper, it was ugly and had a brown flowery pattern. The wall was wallpapered/ because you had no choice back

then, you know, quite simply. Previously there had been some bathroom wallpaper in the living room, tile pattern, as ugly as it gets, it was coming off the wall. My mum would say she would have to pull it down and they stuck a brown flowery one.

Let me point out a few aspects of the life of notebooks. They were hardly available on the market back then which illustrates severe shortages in the economy of the People's Republic of Poland. The demand could not be satisfied, but it also entailed a set of phenomena resulting from an imbalance of supply and demand. The consequences of restrictions on availability of goods⁵ result in, for example, longer consumption processes which consisted of several stages: looking for available goods (visiting many stores, searching information about deliveries to stores), wait time (long queues), unintentional substitutions (using substitute products), and resignation from purchase if obtaining a given product became too difficult or impossible (Mazurek 2010:19). Supply deficits were not merely an economic event, but also a social problem which reflected divergence between propaganda promises of satisfying people's needs and a real ineffective economic policy (Mazurek 2010:20-21).

⁵ This experience, obviously, did not befall all members of society equally. Another narrator, Michał, says:

N: My err grandfather/ my granddad was err a director of an energy plant for some energy area so err in the time of PRL I don't remem/ I can't remember that err it was such a bad time. I don't/ I can't recall, can't recall such err big, you know, problems or err shortage of (.) (*smacking lips*) / Heck then, I guess, it seems to me that err somehow we weren't suffering from a lack of something, but, you know, I mean, everybody err all people didn't have such various err various elements, different articles, which are also available nowadays

I: Hmm.

N: So what, what was available then my parents well, well I can't remember if there were, if there were any / any problems, but err it got stuck in my mind, you know, such pictures of those/ pictures of that time.

Living in the economy of shortage (as opposed to shortages in the economy, see: Kornai 1985) called for inventing consumer strategies, which relied on "making supplies" (it did not apply only to stationery products, but virtually all kinds of goods: long- and short-lived). It showed foresight which made it necessary to buy whatever was available on the market in legally regulated quantities without much consideration for the current and real needs, thereby breaking the elementary mechanism of purchasing—need-realization-satisfying the need. (I leave aside the dominant, but by no means the only model existing in consumer societies: creating a need—purchase—disappointment—a new need, see, e.g., Bauman 2009). Such stocked articles were some form of material security (in case those products become unavailable on the market); they could also be used for exchange within informal social networks. Functionality of products, as well as their quality and esthetics (which is well illustrated by the statement on wallpaper), and their uses (bathroom wallpaper in the living room) were subordinate to their availability on the market. The thing that additionally draws attention in the narrator's statement are positive connotations linked with goods produced in China, which are currently associated with low-quality mass production. They also symbolize contacts with another culture through material objects. The life cycle of a product is related to the biographical memory of an individual which is visible in the way the article is perceived, its uses (desirable items vs. worthless things), and in assigning significance to them (attractive vs. shoddy), which result from biographical experiences and macro systemic transformations.

This excerpt illustrates a sentimental-nostalgic dimension of things—a network of meanings remembered from childhood/youth in particular. A notebook is an everyday use article which hardly ever deserves a mention. Notebooks, which would be a pity to get rid of, change from everyday use goods to symbolic items (which leads to suspension of their pragmatic function), and become collector's items. Loss of use value, whereas its primary function was actually never realized (after all, a notebook is for writing in it, so its rapid use due to its limited capacity makes it useless soon), paradoxically gave it an emotional function—the notebook became a keepsake. It is striking that it is a blank notebook which contains no content, and therefore it represents merely a potentiality. The value of a notebook usually stems from its contents written on its pages. As contents lose relevance, the medium become useless with the exception of contents of emotional or instrumental value (e.g., diary, memoirs), then it lasts a long time. Blank, unwritten pages saved the notebook from destruction and disappearance; passing time paradoxically enhanced its value. A used written notebook would probably be useless, waste paper (see: *Processing and Collecting Things* further in this article). Having gained a new status—a valuable item—it became an object for contemplation which brings back memories.

However, an intention to sell old notebooks on Allegro indicates another, different, commercial function of those goods. On the one hand, they are extraordinary, but, on the other hand, they could present market value (they could be sold or exchanged) which is applicable to ordinary goods (Kopytoff 2003:253). In the case in question, those categories

overlap—the owner expects that the market value attributable to this unique item will be the same to potential buyers. We also observe a process of fixing and negotiating the price (Latour 2010), which is influenced by the distance between culture where the article was created and the present day, when it gains new worth.

As regards actions triggered by notebooks which also illustrate their lifecycle, there are several stages: after being manufactured they were transported to retail outlets where clients bought them. Then they were being used to some degree (e.g., by Szymon) as originally intended. Each of those stages brings about human actions and interactions with the article (writing, buying, transporting); when the action is not taken, the product becomes an idle resource (notebooks lying around somewhere) and enters the transition period (to be discussed below).

Processing and Collecting Things

Olga Drenda defines late PRL as practically wasteless culture. “There were hardly any plastic carrier bags, so if you happened to see one, it probably came from Pewex or abroad and was reused many times. I found it very interesting to read statements about collections of packaging which had decorative functions in Polish flats, whereas abroad they were regarded as ordinary rubbish. It applies particularly to cigarette or drink packaging. There are collections of beer or fizzy drink cans in the photos from 1980s” (Drenda 2016:34). Speaking about waste we mean “all things (or substances) which we would like to have to dispose of. Becoming waste, things lose their useful function. Waste materials

are an amorphous mix of things, which have *de facto* ceased to be things” (Izdebska 2017:32). Analyzing lexical transformations of the terms “waste” and “rubbish,” Roch Sulima (2015:90) refers also to *Etymological Dictionary of the Polish Language* which says that “rubbish”—since the 15th century—has been a discarded thing, ruined, worthless, useless, refuse. Waste, on the other hand, suggests that rubbish has been objectified.

An institution which contributed to the minimalization of waste (although it was not its primary goal) were to buy-back recycling centers (also known as waste paper recycling centers) that Szymon speaks about. This institution was a middleman where the client could receive some goods (e.g., toilet paper) in exchange for their waste materials (see: Lipiński and Matys 2014) or a voucher to pay for goods in specific shops.

N: And my mum first worked in glassworks, and then changed for an office work err and then when there were, you know, when it was possible err (.) to set up a private business she franchised a waste paper recycling shop. It was a moment when there were/ err (.) now it's obvious, but now you look at it quite differently, but back then, eighty/nine/ninety/ it was the beginning of the '90s. '89, '90, it was also a feeling of some discomfort, my sister and me thought it was a shame. It seemed to us that a waste paper recycling shop or waste materials was the biggest shame, you know. And it was the time when it was possible to earn well on it. And err mum took over that shop with someone and they collected not even from those people/ you know/ it wasn't even retail amounts. Of course, they were bringing it, got toilet paper for it/ because

it was hardly available, there were vouchers, they got coupons/ I was often spending time there, I was going there as a child, as a teenage err during the holidays or something I would stay there and take this waste paper and write out some coupons in exchange for some kilos. And it was possible to go and use that voucher to buy tape cassettes or tights or something else. Some stores offered products available only in exchange for vouchers for waste materials. It was, you know, it was an affiliated shop. You either got toilet paper, which was/ one roll for some kilos. So it was, you know, an equivalent. Err and err it was also from companies. We received from companies some, you know, and delivered it to paper plant and simply it was just possible to maintain a family on it and earn.

If Szymon's notebooks had been used as originally intended, they could have ended in a waste paper recycling shop. Their biography would probably have ended on a landfill site or in an installation for processing waste materials—even if they had been bought for a keepsake or used for writing in as intended.

It seems that waste management is awkward and embarrassing to the narrator, because it belongs to another axiological-normative order. Waste are considered spoilt, frequently flawed (Douglas 2007), and therefore it is removed from a close area of human affairs (Thompson 1979). They belong to a separate territory and occupy margins of social human and individual life (trash bins are typically placed in dark places).

Both waste status and waste management deals remain unclear. The narrator admits that dealings

were profitable (though not always quite legal), but it was accompanied by stigma and negative emotions (apart from embarrassment he felt disgust—due to internalizing rules of order and cleanliness, see: Tokarska-Bakir 2007:27-31).

Referring to the thesis of no-waste and considering limitations of this analogy it can be assumed that PRL represented a common *zero waste/no waste* policy. It aims at minimizing waste or eliminating it completely from households, practicing moderate consumption of available resources. Today most of the time it is an element of the life of the new middle-class—focusing on conscious consumption, ecology, and healthy food, et cetera. Back then it resulted from life necessity, it was not a question of choice. Recycling resources (e.g., multi-use milk bottles) did not only limit amounts of waste, but also created a closed circulation of goods. This mechanism enabled to turn useless things into functional and even worthy articles, such as paper (not only toilet paper). It allowed to reduce useless things in their intended use by recycling and further use. Economic and effective management of scarce or hardly available products resulted in resourceful strategies. Vegetable and fruit pickles, sewing, fixing clothes, needlework, DIY—which are currently treated as, for example, minimal or zero-waste lifestyle⁶—were quite common skills then.

The status of plastic carrier bags from East Germany or received in packages from abroad should be

⁶ The lifestyles above illustrate deconsumption based on two principles: *reduce* (intentional reduction of one's consumption and assets), *reuse* (another use of products), *repair* (fixing articles or their new use), *recycle* (recycling products), *redistribute* (exchange, sale, or giving away redundant things), see: Wilczak 2016.

also noted. There were very few of them and they were used not only to carry the shopping, but they had luxury value perception, privileged access to unavailable goods and a requisite impressing others (Goffman 2008:34-36). As Marek Krajewski (2013:181) noted, “plastic carrier bags have plenty of uses, which consumers discover and make carrier bags substitute other unavailable goods...Carrier bags are equivalent to modernity and western lifestyle in many social circles,” which accounts for their virus popularity. Since they were used multiple times, carefully stored, there were not too many of them (as they are considered a major threat to the natural environment today).

Reducing waste did not only stem from deficits in the economy, but there was a popular fashion in the 1980s among young people, especially boys, to collect things, which were regarded as redundant or had other uses in the West. Renata Tańczuk (2013) notes that the very essence of collecting is gathering items which are attributed with value, thereby transforming objects of everyday use into objects endowed with meaning. Such an object is “freed” from its original references and is included in the context created by the collector (its value in use is replaced by aesthetic value). “The items gathered in a collection have been excluded from ordinary consumption, have become objects of aesthetic experience, which means that belonging to a collection, they will not be used, but will be admired. Moreover, when becoming part of a collection, their value in use becomes secondary or even invalidated” (Tańczuk 2013:107). Jean Baudrillard (1996) proposed a system of objects in relation to their functions and divided things into those which are used and possessed. Szymon says:

N: there was an exchange of those addresses, you had lots of addresses, Western addresses, of different Western companies, firms from various countries, you sent the so-called requests to those addresses. The requests were in an informal language, prepared in English with four or five words. Perhaps four, five is too few, but let's say I don't know several, up to ten simple words, which said: send me, please, some prospectuses, stickers, anything. And you wrote it down on a postcard and, of course, you spent all pocket money or money you earned from selling some, I don't know, bottles, waste paper, anything, you spent it on sending postcards to different places. And I find it astounding that, of course, from the perspective of time when I think about it, that those companies were sending back.

I: They did? That's interesting.

N: They did. Those companies were sending envelopes with prospectuses, stickers, tags, letters to our home address. Well, I think now that it was err it was, I guess, their marketing maturity/ as if they were predicting some time. I think that in the '80s, it was, of course, still communism and socialist, and so on. But, for those Western companies it could be a potential market for their product in the future, even far in the future. So when we got Coca Cola stickers, we were over the moon. We were putting those stickers everywhere, or other brands, or, for example, from other firms. I remember that my biggest my kind of / treasure/ first of all, it was ridiculous that you were taking those addresses and sent them. You were sometimes sending those requests just about anywhere, to any company. So I remember that I got from UEFA or some companies from Switzerland. For example, some chocolate producers from Switzerland and they were sending color labels. Of course, it's all rubbish

now, but in the '80s this label err of a Western chocolate was precious, or, or, or some, err I don't know a sticker or whatever or a poster. Another type of print, there were some printed materials with some, I don't know, golden elements, letters. Everything was very colorful, glossy, err as I say now every chocolate bar is wrapped like that, but back then when it was totally different from everyday life, you know, when an envelope arrived, when an envelope arrived in the postbox/ a postman brought an envelope from the West we were extremely happy. I remember I got some stickers from Hong-Kong. And it's the farthest place which I keep thinking about/ So there was, in fact, such an element and I even don't know where I keep it, I've lost it. Because in the meantime, we were moving a few times so, so all those treasures/ and they were my incredible treasures, got lost somewhere, but it doesn't matter, because I was putting them from one place to another in my memory. I remember them, Korea, not Korea, but Hong-Kong, from Hong-Kong some colorful/ and it's some memory, because as I say we have it all around every day. Every silly chocolate bar wrapper or tea packaging is also well-printed, designed, better or worse. But, back then when you received some colorful brochures or chocolate packaging or Lego stickers or err...anything then it was a really big day. And incredible emotions were associated with it. And it was lasting through all my primary school (.) it was. Err perhaps more about the fifth, sixth grade, because primary school had eight grades then. And it, it lasted. And it was an attraction, when we received something, we brought it to school and boasted of it before one another.

Szymon's statement illustrates successive stages of life of things when they differ in their uses,

move between social-cultural contexts, where they acquire different status and meaning. Importantly, one object (e.g., label) can be categorized as waste-paper or sentimental fetish or a collector's item. It is the user who decides value and the use of an object—they specify social practices about it, considering “parameters” (potential) of that object. Things such as prospectuses, brochures, stickers, labels, which were primarily used for marketing-advertising purposes in capitalistic economic reality, represented cognitive (extending his knowledge) and emotional values (evoking ecstatic responses). They were used differently from their intended use; they served as decorations, helped to personalize space, facilitated identification on the basis of items collections.

Perception of Szymon's artifacts as potential items of private collections was influenced by their value which was unachievable in socialist economy and their prior experience with consumer culture (packaging after products unavailable in Poland). Although they did not present any (recognizable) esthetic value and practical functions, they were regarded as worthy. These collections signified that their owner had access to unique products, which raised his/her status in social circles. These goods were also used in interactive practices of building ME (Goffman 2011). Using those items for collecting extended their lives; before they became waste products, they went through multiply stages of use. And although they were eventually dematerialized (“vanished”), they remained in the same place each time the narrator moved house and thus became a durable item in the narrator's biographical memory.

Graphic elements, colors, design made them objects from another order than everyday use things. It can be said that “contact” with those goods was making the day in everyday life. The narrator defines them as “treasures,” ergo something attributed with high value (emotional and material), which requires special treatment (efforts and care), is (most of the time) unreachable to others, and (frequently) remains mysterious. Szymon, when speaking about his “treasures,” describes them as “extraordinary” (to amplify their significance), which indicates a different attitude to goods, which he admits are quite “ordinary” in terms of their availability today, transience, failure to evoke emotions and aesthetic experiences. Those previously desirable objects regained their intended functions in the capitalist economic system and, additionally, they became commonplace and plain.

Actions mentioned by Szymon prove diffusion processes in the core-periphery configuration (using globalization terminology). It is of interest that an impulse came from a peripheral culture representative. The narrator demonstrated his entrepreneurial spirit while acquiring goods—he used one category of goods (with PRL background) to gain access to other goods representing Western culture. Cashing in on redundant belongings, waste paper and bottles, he was “investing” in media of exchange (stamps and postcards) initiating processes of transfer of goods between varied cultural contexts. The uses of goods described above—differing substantially from the uses in their culture of origin—illustrate mechanisms of including objects into existing culture (in this case, it was prestigious functions of items) and their reinterpretation in accordance with local culture principles (Linton 2007).

Goods as Medium of Transformation

The case related by Szymon shows that the organization of life described above did not result in closure or lack of cultural contacts. Family or friends living in the West provided access to its assortment of goods by sending packages with deficit products in Poland such as: coffee, chocolate, sweets, household chemicals, or clothes. In addition, the second half of the 1980s brought about intense economic emigration, both short- and long-term, legal and illegal. “Large scale and dynamic migration in the last decade of PRL, especially in 1980-1982 and 1987-1989, signified major political, economic, and social changes. Increasing emigration at the end of that decade might have contributed to the final ‘collapse of etatism,’ which determined Polish living conditions for the previous forty years” (Stola 2015:55). Comparing household goods in terms of durable goods in two time intervals (per hundred households) we note that “there were 24 passenger cars in 1965 while 20 cars in 1985. Radio sets respectively: 1965—77 pcs., 1985—110 pcs., TV sets: 1965—27 pcs., 1985—90 pcs., washing machines: 1965—45 pcs., 1985—75 pcs., refrigerators: 1965—9 pcs., 1985—80 pcs.” (Kulesza 1990:81). In spite of their rising popularity, the summary does not include articles such as tourist equipment, tape recorders, record players, hi-fi, camera films, projectors, slides, kitchen and other household devices, stocks of books, gramophone records, et cetera (Kulesza 1990:81). Foreign trips and proliferation of technological appliances show potential for modernization of goods, including attempts of individuals to differ in terms of possessions.

Migrations of Things

The movement of elements of culture—material and nonmaterial goods—was a consequence of liberal-

ization of passport policy (1987-1988) and a collapsing economic system (see: Stola 2015). Trips to other people’s republics (particularly East Germany) became more common; Yugoslavia and Hungary were popular destinations, too. Those trips had different purposes, but their commercial aspect—a covert function of such declared tourist travels—was among major goals. Michał (1st excerpt) and Szymon (2nd excerpt concerns trips in the 1990s) speak about their parents’ foreign trips:

N: Then, in 1987, 1988, more or less, when we moved to [a town in south-east Poland]. Patents got a flat then./ And from that time

I: Hmm.

N: So I remember that all dad’s trips: to Turkey, Turkey, Bulgaria, Russia/ the former ones err opportunities to trade

I: (laughing)

N: abroad. They were also buying, I don’t know what they were buying. Still/ no, I remember that there were here/ in Poland they were buying, I guess, some (*smacking lips*) err calendars

I: Hmm.

N: and took those calendars to Bulgaria. They sold those calendars in Bulgaria and bought something, I don’t remember what. Then to Turkey, jeans and turbo chewing gums in Turkey.

I: (laughing)

N: And then to Poland. So he took trips like that (.)

I: And there were cosmetics in Hungary, too.

N: Oh. Cosmetics were also somewhere/ where were those cosmetics from? / No, those cosmetics were, they were Soviet, I remember. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes.

I: Well, my dad/

N: Russian, Russian cosmetics, yes.

I: (laughing) My dad used to go to Hungary and Czechoslovakia, too. (laughing)

N: So we, we, Hungary, no. Hungary, Czechoslovakia, no. The route was to the Soviet Union, Bulgaria, Turkey. It went it went that way.

N: So it was extremely poor everywhere and somehow people were getting by. Err I remember a little when I wasn’t admitted to [a large city in Poland] and I was getting about and somehow err there was a time when my mum started to travel to trade, it was the time when people were travelling abroad, Hungary, Turkey, and so on. Italy, so it was that/ from time to time she would leave her work, take time off to earn some extra because she was working and err and err to earn extra they were travelling to deal something small. So there was a time when, when, when Polish people started going abroad. I mean, they had travelled abroad before, to Hungary and so on, and brought some grocery products err food. Then there was also Turkey, some sweaters, some clothes, they went and brought back, and so on.

Travel destinations (apart from Turkey, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, Italy mentioned above) differed depending on the area of living (Michał—south-east Poland, Szymon—central Poland). Different products/goods were traded in each country. It was essential—to make the trip financially successful—to know what assortment was in demand in a given country. TV sets were often brought from the Soviet Union, watches, video players, and cameras from West Germany, clothing and cosmetics from Turkey (Lesiakowski 2015).

Circulation of goods in designated directions, regulation of this process by a set of rules and principles somewhat remind the tribal kula (see: Malinowski 1987). A major difference is that the transactions above were of commercial character (absent in the kula), and did not lead to creating lasting bonds between partners.

Referring to biographical experiences connected with a camp in East Germany, Piotr speaks about assortment of products available in shops there (this comparison does not always show advantage of foreign range of goods).

N: Well, at first sight, grocery stores were better stocked there. At least I wasn't too interested in other stores as a young man, perhaps I wanted to buy some tapes, too, and (.) they were of miserable quality compared to those you could buy in Pewex. But, they were available, I mean, it was cheaper and there was one more thing that err I mean cocoa was available there. I mean, stores were well stocked. It was also possible to buy film for the camera, also black and white. It wasn't so easily available here towards the end of the 1990s.

Trips to East Germany and other state-controlled economy countries, which did not suffer such severe shortages, brought substantial effects in private consumption. Commercial tourism was generating private import of goods to the country, which later found their way to resale shops. The effect was that private foreign trade was thereby legalized and the assortment of available goods in domestic shops became broader (Mazurek 2010). Thanks to tourist trade attractive products were appearing on the market and other complementary initiatives were developing in unofficial channels of production and distribution. Stola (2015) even writes about an explosion

of new forms of entrepreneurship and resourcefulness. Owing to articles brought from East Germany, Polish households boasted of new equipment and devices. "There were toasters, cameras—households were upgrading. Products from East Germany were just a sample of a better, consumer world of the West; they were made more carefully and became available for purchase on the Polish market, not only seen in advertising catalogues" (Mazurek 2010:123). They were also usually cheaper so it was possible to sell them at a profit (Kochanowski 2010). As a result, individuals raised their material status, but also gained prestige in social and family networks. Therefore, goods brought people together and contributed to the transformation (Abriszewski 2008; Latour 2010).

Emancipation through Things

In their interviews, the narrators refer to radio and television, which played a significant role in their processes of socialization, and cassette and video tapes. The media and data carriers above enable looking at the systemic transformation of the late 1980s and early 1990s not only from a perspective of technological inventions, but also through the development of private entrepreneurship. Both of these phenomena were characterized by liberation of individuals from patterns of behavior imposed by socialism. Szymon and Piotr speak about the impact of radio and television on their lives:

N: there were two channels on TV, we had black and white TV set, old and damaged Ametyst.⁷ The picture

⁷ TV sets appeared in Poland in the '50s. "The first batch of 80 'Leningrad' TV sets was imported to Warsaw in 1953 while in 1955 about 10000 pieces were available on the market. They were

in Channel 1 was quite all right, but the picture of Channel 2 was hardly working and it was necessary to wave an aerial to see anything, there were days when nothing was working in Channel 2. But, there were days when the picture was a little better, but poor picture was usual. As a rule, the picture was poor. (.) So, for example, some program starts at some time in the afternoon, there were programs/ err there were fewer news bulletins so they were more accessible.

N: It seems to me that I was largely influenced by TV in the '80s, but also by the radio. But, perhaps it was (.) well, it is difficult to say to what degree. The radio was a contact, some contact with the foreign world when it comes to music. (.) And there were some things on the radio which came from abroad, from behind the western border. Err there were fewer such things on TV.

The media work as a monopoly in a monocentric political system: the state-owned television controlled both TV channels (Channel I was available nationwide from 1958, Channel II from 1970⁸), the state-owned radio offered four channels,⁹ launched over

imported from USSR and East Germany ('Rubens' cost 4600 zł a piece). The production of 'Wisła' (4000 zł), the first Polish TV set, was launched at the turn of 1955 and 1956. It was modeled on the Soviet set 'Avangarda,' which was no longer in production on account of its too tiny screen. For this reason, production of a more updated brand 'Belweder' was launched in 1957. Since January 1957 TV sets had to be registered (subscription fee was 40 zł), there were 21000 pieces" (Kozieł 2001:266).

⁸ The first experimental program was broadcast in 1952; TV programs were available twice a week in 1955 and the first nationwide channel was launched in 1958. Channel 1 of Public TV had a reduced air time in 1981 whilst Channel 2 was suspended altogether then and restored in 1982 in limited available air time (Kozieł 2001:315-316).

⁹ It was broadcast nationwide in 1945 and local radio stations were also set up in Cracow, Katowice, Poznan, Bydgoszcz, Gdansk, Lodz, Szczecin, Torun, and Wroclaw. In 1949

ten plus years. This organization of the media system that was realizing political goals of the ruling party called into question the credibility of news broadcasting—it raised antipathy and resistance ("it is difficult to assess the credibility of the news on TV and on the radio" [Piotr]).

The development of video tape players and VHS cassettes in the late 1980s and "video boom" between 1988 and 1992 marked a crucial event in the existing structure of the media system because it created new socio-cultural practices. The new technological inventions extended access to Western popular culture contents, which was severely limited in PRL. Piotr says:

N: I don't know, it seems that VHS were generally important in the late '80s and there were films on them, which I hadn't seen. But, for example, my sister was delighted. *Dirty Dancing* is something I still don't understand. And (.) this dance is so completely strange to me and so on. I know that some people are moved by it even today. When my wife met with my sister (.) some time ago they recalled it and all, but it, really, for me doesn't matter at all. I know there was such a phenomenon. For me, tape cassettes were more important, and they suddenly disappeared. It was probably sometime in the middle of the '90s when I started studying at the university. And (.) I was listening to music recorded on those cassettes, there was a lot of music which could be classified as Polish rock music from that time. Err there were many

Channel II (broadcast 24 hours from 1962). Channel III started broadcasting in 1958 on short waves and became available nationwide in 1962. Channel IV started broadcasting in 1976. The state-owned radio station was a monopolist until 1989, but it was possible to listen to programs broadcast for Poland by radio stations from the West: Radio Free Europe, BBC, Voice of America (Grzelewska 2001:246-260).

bands back then such as Maanam err Lombard err Budka Suflera, Lady Pank. (.) I hope not to overlook any band, but all those tape cassettes were recorded by someone, it was absolute piracy, 'cause, I don't know, I don't know at all what you had to do to get ahold of a real vinyl record. But, such things were really happening. And you could erase and copy music on those cassettes as much as you wanted. (.) it, you could play it afterwards. It was possible to swap those cassettes, exchange, listen to them together or alone through headphones. There was such a contraption as the radio and tape player, it was licensed by Grundig. Err my wife recalls Kasprzak, it was probably the same inside, I guess, but it had better design outside. And those cassettes fit there. (.) so, I guess, everyone was listening to those recordings on those tape cassettes. They were getting used up, let's say. I could point at the shops in [a large city in Poland] where they were located back then, where such tape cassettes were available, but I don't know if it is relevant. I mean, they mattered a lot back then. Err (.) oh, several days ago I heard there was a day of the shop, a day of the vinyl record shop. It's strange it could be celebrated now, 'cause everybody buys music pieces on iTunes today. So, so (.) it was needed, some effort, it was necessary to go to some shop, which was a private enterprise, that was the name for a little business then. And you could buy some cassette there, it was a little better quality than your own recordings. It was probably also a pirate tape, but it didn't matter then. I guess it didn't. I mean, I couldn't buy any other cassette but pirated ones, and nothing else was available.

Cassette tapes and tape players (Grundig and Kasprzak, which the narrator regards as reliable and long-lasting in another unquoted excerpt) occupy an

important part in the narrator's biographical memory. They provide some context for considering other factors in the media perception; first and foremost, a wide variety of the media reception situations—an individual can use the media on his/her own or use this opportunity to build social relations. The media also offer social functions such as integration or entertainment. Piotr discusses benefits and gratification gained thanks to definite media choices, for example, making/maintaining social contacts, emphasizing specific lifestyles, opportunities for emotional release, deriving cultural satisfaction (see: McQuail 2008; Maigret 2012). In addition, this excerpt illustrates privatization of the media reception, thanks to possible ways to record the picture or sound and reproduce them many times afterwards (it was possible to record/copy, etc.). Secondly, there was an aspect of creating social networks and circles around preferred kinds of music, bands, or musicians, which was further strengthened by exchange of cassette tapes here. It was of crucial significance in the political system in question, as it made it possible to free oneself from official cultural contents and the state-controlled media. Although the recorded pieces often came from the state-owned radio stations, creating personal music compilations was an act of individual reception practices, which were treated as subversive actions. Piotr enumerates several names of bands from the 1980s—Maanam, Lombard, Budka Suflera, Lady Pank—whose music contested and opposed the existing system. Listening to independent rock music from pirated cassette tapes was a generational experience of youths coming of age in the 1980s.

Looking at the life of things, Piotr says that cassette tapes “got tired”; it resulted from their multiple uses which led to a lower quality of recorded sound. Using

this formula the narrator defines a not-so-obvious psycho-physical state of this medium (more or less consciously). The resulting stage was when cassette tapes “got lost” and were replaced by CDs and then dematerialized in favor of digital sound recording symbolized by iTunes. It is interesting that exploitation does not apply to vinyl records which have not lost their vitality and have become desirable collector's items.

VHS cassettes did not play a significant role in Piotr's biographical experience, whereas Michał recalls them in the context of “very nice aesthetics of the 1990s and first VHSs.” We should note several phenomena stemming from growing popularity of video players in the 1990s.

Grzegorz Fortuna (2013) identifies three areas where changes resulting from the appearance of video were noticed. From an economic and political perspective, the video market was one of the first to be ruled by the forces of supply and demand (the government had no control of its development), from a cultural and social perspective, it was the time of the varied offer which was not provided by other mass media, and which shaped the taste and attitude of many participants of cultural life. “With the benefit of hindsight, an objective value of those objects is not too high, however, they carry great sentimental value. They remind of an intriguing period: budding capitalism, adventure of looking for desired titles on the shelves in the rental store, and the first film fascinations” (Fortuna 2013:43). By that means, viewers gained access to the medium which let them become independent of political authorities and film critics power who decided which films entered the cinema and television distribution (Fili-

ciak 2013). Films on VHS cassettes presented a variety of film genres and varied artistic levels—most of the time they were popular Western productions.

Taking into consideration the original cost of purchase, video players signified a high social status¹⁰ and ensured material and social distinction. “Video players were status symbols to Polish people, but first and foremost, they were a source of contact with Western popular culture, a source of escapist pleasures, but also realization of modernization discourse and aspirations related to consumption. Nevertheless, in 1985, when the number of video players in Poland was estimated to be nearing half a million, there were merely ten films in official distribution...A steady supply of new film titles was provided by informal social networks—professional to some extent and somewhat community-based” (Filiciak 2011:72).

An informal market for cultural goods such as cassette tapes and VHS cassettes shows a scale of piracy then, but also growing entrepreneurship. “Illegal video cassette rental shops or stalls were usually in private houses and were not easy to find, so to be admitted it was necessary to know somebody who knew the owner—it was working completely underground and beyond the state control. Besides private houses, vid-

¹⁰ “At the beginning of the 1980s video players were exotic and hardly available in Poland. Branded video players, available in Pewex and Baltona, cost from 800 to 1000 dollars in 1981. Although their prices were gradually decreasing (in 1985 Panasonic, Sanyo, or NEC video player was available for 430-500 dollars), but those amounts were still much beyond the financial reach of average Polish people, who earned from 30 to 50 dollars a month. They would have to spend their yearly earnings to buy a video player” (Fortuna 2013:28). As a result, a substantial number of video players available in Poland between 1980 and 1982 were smuggled from abroad. They were in the possession of wealthy or enterprising individuals, whereas legally purchased sets were mainly at schools or in state institutions.

eo cassette rental shops were often located in garages, bazaar stalls, or car trunks, from which cassettes were rented or sold on the local fair. There was still another popular method of distribution in the countryside and little towns which looked like the travelling cinema—the TV set and video cassette recorder owner arrived in some place and placed a TV screen in the back of the van and played a film to the viewers for a small fee” (Fortuna 2013:30). At first, VHS cassettes were available in unofficial video rental shops, fairs offering illegal films, or paid recording services on a blank cassette bought from Pewex or Baltona (Fortuna 2013:30). The Baltona store also offered original American films on cassettes, but “if somebody did not particularly care about an original edition—it was available in the car trunk sale from some enterprising man on the nearest bazaar,¹¹ typically recorded on two blank 180-minute tapes. The films were usually recorded from satellite TV with Polish dialogues or they were copied from foreign cassettes brought from foreign trips by relatives or friends” (Drenda 2016:121). Video rental shops were legalized in 1988 and then the market stabilized. In the early 1990s, the first private television stations¹²

¹¹ “Cassette stalls became popular in the 1990s. They are often in photos from 1989, 1990, 1991: Niewiadów caravans changed into a makeshift grocery store or small restaurant car offering toasted cheese sandwiches and pizza...They served ice-cream and fast food of late PRL—toasted cheese sandwiches and Polish versions of hot dogs, bread rolls with mushrooms...Then street sides were occupied by K67 kiosks—a tidy modular creation designed by a Slovenian Saša J. Mächtig” (Drenda 2016:109). They were an alternative to makeshift stalls, looked modern, esthetic, and tasteful, they are used for different purposes, for example, newsagent’s, kebab bar, janitor’s booth. The objects where private enterprises were developing appeared in Michał’s narration.

N: Err that time some 1989 when err there was certain economic freedom it was starting to look like that. There were those buses with err bus-bars or, or caravans err with bars inside (.) It was that those, those, those sausages ord-/ ordered from those buses on some fairs or some err some public feasts. Well, it terribly got stuck in my mind, you know.

¹² Polsat TV has been a licensed broadcaster since 1993 (Polsat Channel 2 was launched in 1997), TVN (formerly known as TV Wisła) began broadcasting nationwide in 1997, RTL7 has been

started broadcasting and the media offer became more diversified, which decreased popularity of video cassettes.

Apart from watching and sharing films on VHS cassettes it was possible to use them differently in the post-transformation media system (see: Mikułowski-Pomorski 2008). It became common practice to record films from TV channels and play them later on (another aspect of becoming less dependent on fixed hours of television programs). It was also possible to video everyday life, for example, family events (TV channels held competitions for funny videos sent in by viewers in the 1990s). Accordingly, collections of VHS cassettes became a sign of the times.

Concluding Remarks. Ambiguity of Things

Transformation processes can be used to classify changeability of things and a variety of their categorization. I am speaking about things-waste materials and things-treasures, which appeared above in the context of processes of change and collecting items. It is difficult to define a strict criteria for the usefulness of a thing or lack thereof. A thing is useful if it is practically used, but also a thing which is useful and needed for various purposes (functions of material things). Within the framework of culturally constructed and socially regulated meanings, things go through three stages: they are goods, waste, and keepsake. The uses do not always change to the same degree. Those stages can overlap depending on individual attitude and mindset. It is clearly demonstrated in Michał’s interview:

working since 1996 (Świdorski 2002). Radio Zet, RMF FM, and Radio Maryja received radio licenses to broadcast nationwide in 1993 (Dobek-Ostrowska 2002).

N: Err so it was (*smacking lips*) hmm it was like at first (.) there were hmm/ at first we wanted to run a store here in [a big city in Poland] with (.) different crappy things, you know/ I mean, actually, they weren’t rubbish, kind of “precious rubbish,” because it was very

I: Hmm.

N: It’s very/ for somebody those things/ those things are just rubbish, for another person, they are treasures.

I: Rare things.

N: Rare things. We wanted to run a little store like that in [a big city in Poland]

I: Hmm.

N: Err with things gathered from the market a little big, a little from err from the family loft. Such things which err you remember from childhood.

I: Hmm.

N: For example err some err fairy tales err such fairy tales for (.) a projector, fit for a projector/ What was the brand’s name of those projectors?

I: Err (*thinking*)

N: Projector Jacek and projector, I guess

I: Ania.

N: Ania, that’s right.

I: I know. I have Ania. (*laughing*) Ania.

N: Yes, that’s right. Ania, I guess/ but probably there was also Jacek, I guess. Yes. Err or some err old post stamps, packaging hmm, posters, old car models, something that brings back childhood memories...Or err there were also mainly pictures. All kinds of book covers, which everybody used to have then, because everybody had the same books. It’s kind of scary, you know, how deep it was inside me.

I: Hmm.

N: Even these days I have those flashbacks and all the time, we, I mean, we, I mean [name of the shop]

want to use in our err in our products because this is something which is not available now, but back in the past err it was available and for me, it was hmm err what? Important, joyful, it wasn’t sad at all. So err I guess that is about it what I wanted to say about/ about (*laughing*) such memories

I: Hmm.

N: And using those memories today.

The narrator’s story focuses on two systems and rules for action aiming at opening a rubbish shop. It is not an obvious combination of words as the shop is typically associated with needed/desirable goods, whereas rubbish (in most cases) lacks these attributes. It may also be noticed in the ways of acquiring those articles: the market and attic work differently—the market is associated with cash transactions, money, while the attic stores things which are out of use to some degree: periodically, redundant, outdated, even though they can potentially be used later in the future. The attic also stores things whose life is in limbo before it is decided whether they are still needed or could be scrapped, and the attic is their repository (see: Thompson 1979). An article in the attic can “return” to its former functions, acquire/gain new ones (e.g., as a component of a new product, be renovated), or become completely useless.

This redefinition—an ongoing process of cultural changes of value of things: rubbish vs. treasures—occurs due to a variety of factors: market forces, changing aesthetic tastes of individuals, trendy lifestyles (Smolarek 2013:74-75). Articles, which have their origins in PRL, may be classified as useless and therefore “rubbish,” or they may be signif-

icant as they have sentimental value (“treasures”). Accordingly, neither of these definitions eliminates their potential commercial value (“taking advantage of memories”). The redefinition is illustrated by the popularity of items produced in PRL. Many pieces of furniture (e.g., armchairs) or electronic goods (e.g., record players) have revived and become fashionable today. They are valued for their design, functionality, durability, and reliability—they are not only indicative of a *vintage* lifestyle, but they also present an autotelic symbolic value. Popularity of those goods and devices is also related to their independence of politics and focus on their aesthetic dimensions (as explained by Michał¹³), economic aspects, and making those artifacts elements of folklore. Including them in the capitalist system triggers a range of actions which change their meaning, status, uses, and functions to mark another/new stage in their biographies.

¹³ Michał speaks about bringing together objects of different eras and origins—he points to his household furniture which comprises items made in the ‘60s and ‘70s and modern industrial productions. It should be observed that he distances himself from PRL politics and focuses only on esthetic and sentimental aspects of articles.

I: (laughing) Well, but if we, for example (.) / visited you at home, then you also have this, I mean, does it look like N: Yes.

I: a variety of items?

N: Hmm.

I: Does it look like that?

N: Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Well, err (.) well, then, doesn't it. So we have err p-posters, old Polish posters on the walls, err they are everywhere. I have a glass case with packages. I just like old Polish packages very much.

I: Hmm.

N: So it is arranged err hmm in this style / the furniture is also old, from the ‘60s and ‘70s, so it is set / arranged in a mixed style, a little old, a few Ikea pieces.

I: So, am I right that although you cut off those political and historical, let's say, events, you are still aware of what those things are connected with and their history/

N: You know what? Well, well, whether you want it or not, but it isn't a topic we talk about.

I: Well, it's clear. But, still/

N: We're only and exclusively into their aesthetic dimensions.

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