

# THE PERFORMANCE OF AUTHENTICITY

*Writer* ANNEKE SMELIK



From *Topshop* to *Britain's Next Top Model*, the ideology of individualism has been one of the chief driving forces of the contemporary fashion industry. On the high street, however, the individual remains as elusive as ever. In the endless quest to indicate our personalities through our clothing, what role are we really performing - and what effect is this performance having on us?

<sup>1</sup> Lipovetsky, Gilles (1994) *The Empire of Fashion, Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University. p. 46

<sup>2</sup> You can find their photos on [www.exactitudes.com](http://www.exactitudes.com)

<sup>3</sup> Lipovetsky, Gilles (1994) *The Empire of Fashion, Dressing Modern Democracy*. Princeton: Princeton University. p. 127

<sup>4</sup> For Heidegger authenticity means 'being-in-the-world', while Sartre and De Beauvoir deny the possibility of authenticity because there is no fixed human nature or essence; see Protevi, John (ed) (2005) *The Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*. Edinburgh University Press pp. 43-44 and p. 195

Authenticity is fashionable today. It is important to present oneself as an individual who stands out from the crowd. One of the major forms of expressing our unique personality is the way in which we dress. As French fashion sociologist Gilles Lipovetsky writes: 'Fashion ... is the corollary ... of the desire to assert one's own personality ...'<sup>1</sup> Yet, if we look at the hundreds of photo series from the internationally renowned artwork *Exactitudes*® by Ari Versluis and Ellie Uyttenbroek we see that, on the street, people dress almost identically.<sup>2</sup> This artwork of typology makes us realise that there is very little originality in dressing: rather than being a distinctive individual we are part of a social group or fashion tribe. From these photos we see the peculiar paradox of the contemporary desire for authenticity and creativity, and the clothing practice of conformation and standardisation.

Lipovetsky claims that in the modern age, fashion has blended elements of individualism and conformity. He relates this to the democratisation of the 1960s, when the distinctive dimension of class lost its importance. Today we are less bound by social categories such as class, gender, age and religion. Therefore we are more liberated than ever to choose what to wear. Yet, we actually do not strive for much individualist authenticity in the way we dress. As Lipovetsky laments, 'Everything goes, and yet the streets look drab, devoid of originality for the most part.'<sup>3</sup> In my view, authenticity has become the holy grail of fashion. Authenticity is nowadays constructed and performed, and it has therefore become an illusion that can no longer be true or genuine. Like the Prada and Louis Vuitton bags on street markets, it is an 'authentic fake'. Instead of looking at the social theory of class, we might examine contemporary media culture in order to understand why authenticity is essentially fake.

The word 'authenticity' means real, valid, faithful, genuine. Its etymological roots are Greek, *authentikos*, referring to a first cause or origin, for example a written letter or an original artwork. However, the desire for authenticity is a modern phenomenon. It relates to modernisation with its rise of mass production of consumer goods and confection clothes for the new masses in the cities. The gain of modernisation is freedom of choice in the private and public realm. But this resulted simultaneously in the loss of tight communities, homemade products and age-old traditions. Consequently, people yearn for that which they have lost: the authentic.

In philosophy the notion of authenticity is related to existentialism.<sup>4</sup> Authenticity is understood as the way in which the conscious self remains true and loyal to itself. Not that authenticity is easy to

achieve, as alienation is the price to pay for freedom in the eyes of the existentialists. Modern man may be free, but lives in a state of alienation. It was typical of the revolutionary 1960s to blame capitalism for alienating workers from their work, men and women from their bodies, modern man from nature, and everyone from his or her self. Authenticity was one of the ways to counter alienation. Hippies or other groups within countercultures looked for an authentic life of sexual and social freedom, loose from the false reign of consumer society - although their Indian dresses, Afghan coats and Levi jeans were mass-produced and cost a pretty penny.

To make love under the starry sky with unkempt hair has long been replaced by hygienic sex in the city. Backpacking in wild nature or faraway countries has been swapped for the speedy life of scoring naughty sex, the latest It bag, a Brazilian wax, a snuff of cocaine, and Botox: all in one week. The quest for authenticity has not diminished in postmodern times. In fact, it has become even stronger in the current 'experience economy' as management gurus Joseph Pine and James Gilmore call it.<sup>5</sup> They claim that in wealthy western economies basic needs are catered for, allowing people to achieve a certain level of safety and satisfaction. With leisure time and income on the increase, people look for experiences to fill the void. An instant or novel experience induces a sense of the real and authentic.

While prosperity may explain contemporary consumerism, it does not explain why people yearn so much for the real and the authentic. We need media theory to understand the contemporary desire for authenticity. Both in postmodern theory and in media studies the idea of a 'society of the spectacle' has become widely accepted. Though the phrase was coined by the French Marxist Guy Debord in the 1960s to initially condemn the mass media, the term has a much wider meaning in today's society. It has become one of the organising principles of our economy, society, and everyday life, says media theorist Douglas Kellner.<sup>6</sup> If we turn to fashion, we see that the originally silent and rather stiff fashion défilés of the couturiers became a veritable spectacle using music, media, dance and theatre in the 1980s. Thierry Mugler was the first to turn the presentation of a new collection into a show, performance or happening.<sup>7</sup> It quickly became the new standard among couturiers, with artistic designers such as John Galliano, Hussein Chalayan, Viktor & Rolf, and the late Alexander McQueen following suit. Fashion scholars Caroline Evans and Ginger Gregg Duncan have

<sup>5</sup> Pine, Joseph and Gilmore, James (1999) *The Experience Economy: Work is Theatre & Every Business a Stage*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press.

<sup>6</sup> Kellner, Douglas 'Media Culture and the Triumph of the Spectacle'. In: King, Geoff (ed.) (2005) *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'Reality' TV and Beyond*. Bristol: Intellect, pp. 23-36.

<sup>7</sup> Saillard, Olivier (2009) *Histoire idéale de la mode contemporaine*. Paris: Éditions Textuel, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> Evans, Caroline (2006) *Fashion at the Edge: Spectacle, Modernity and Deathliness*. London & New Haven: Yale University Press. Gregg Duggan, Ginger. 'The greatest show on earth. A look at contemporary fashion shows and their relationship to performance art' in: Teunissen, Jose and Brand, Jan (eds.) (2006) *The Power of Fashion. About Design and Meaning*. Arnhem: Terra en ArtEZPress, pp. 222-243.

<sup>9</sup> King, Geoff (ed.) (2005) *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to 'Reality' TV and Beyond*. Bristol: Intellect.

<sup>10</sup> Baudrillard, Jean (1983) *Simulations*. New York: Semiotext(e) p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Gilmore, James and Pine, Joseph (2007) *Authenticity. What Consumers Really Want*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press

described the fashion show as a spectacle, but, with the contemporary glitter and glamour of the fashion world, more aspects of fashion have become 'spectacularised'.<sup>8</sup> Just think of the spectacular fashion shoots in leading magazines, influential TV-series and films like *Sex and the City*, or engaging reality TV-shows like *Britain's Next Top Model*.

While the spectacle was first related to the realm of fiction, in the last decade, in the areas of fashion, theme parks and the like, the spectacle has also entered the media. This means that the real on television, be it news or reality shows, is often spiced up for easier consumption. Examples are the sensationalist coverage of disasters or the fictionalisation of reality shows. Media scholar Geoff King introduced the notion of the 'spectacle of the real' to refer to the conjunction of spectacle and reality.<sup>9</sup> Reality or performance, true or untrue, original or copy, street fashion or fashion show: the different strands of fact and fiction become entangled in a Gordian knot.

When 'the real is no longer what it used to be, nostalgia assumes its full meaning,' as the French philosopher of postmodern society, Jean Baudrillard, asserts.<sup>10</sup> Nostalgia for the real, or the authentic, is the result of modern mass media turning everything, including reality, into a spectacle. Viewers simply yearn for what is lost: the real. The quest for authenticity can be understood as a resistance to regimes of representation that turn each image into a spectacle or performance. But there is a paradox at work here. As Gilmore and Pine have argued, people crave real experiences: they want the authentic thing. In their latest book *Authenticity*, they illustrate the contradictions of the experience economy: in an increasingly unreal world, consumers desire something real, original, genuine, sincere – in a word, the authentic – but they have to pay a lot of money to have it organised or produced for them.<sup>11</sup> The public may seek what Gilmore and Pine call the 'really real', but in a media culture of the spectacle, the real and the authentic are lost objects never to be retrieved from the 'lost and found' department.

As we have seen, a media culture of the spectacle generates a nostalgic desire for the authentic. This is also true for the world of fashion; many commercials, from Levi's and Diesel to Burberry and Tommy Hilfiger, use terms like 'authentic', 'vintage' or 'original'. But how is the authentic fabricated? In fashion, the authentic is often sought and found in a noble past of cultural heritage. Cultural memories of an – imagined – past can help to create an aura of authenticity and therefore many

fashion designers probe an earlier period for inspiration. Rather than understanding this mining of the past as a mere postmodern mixing of styles, silhouettes, patterns and materials, the wilful allusions to a national past are part and parcel of creating a sense of authenticity.

Almost all designers partake in this process of creatively using cultural memory, but a Dutch example works well here: the fashion exhibition 'Blown by the wind' in 2009.<sup>12</sup> This exhibition was set up in the Zuiderzee Museum, situated in a small fisherman's village, which collects Dutch heritage objects and costumes. The exhibition plays heavily on the Dutch heritage of the struggle against the sea, mediating elements of tradition and folklore as an attractive spectacle. Objects, materials, silhouettes, and images refer to the wind, sea, dykes, the coolness of the Dutch sky, and the straight lines of the Dutch landscape. There are also references to the harshness of Dutch Calvinism with its emphasis on black and sober clothes, but also to the colours used by Dutch painters such as Van Gogh and Breitner, and to specific Dutch icons like Vermeer's *Girl with the pearl earring*.

Dutch designers were asked to design clothes based on folkloristic patterns, techniques, colours, clothes and jewellery from specific regions of The Netherlands. Some of these images from the past had already entered Dutch high fashion, such as the re-use of patterns and materials from Dutch traditional costumes in Viktor & Rolf's fashion collection of Spring/Summer 2007, of which the most stunning examples were wooden clogs with high heels.<sup>13</sup> Klavers van Engelen reworked the 'millstone' collar, traditionally made of folds of white fine lace and worn by Dutch rich burghers in the seventeenth century, by placing the folds in the middle of a dress or on top of a T-shirt. Francisco van Benthem and Alexander van Slobbe used the shape of traditional wide fisherman's pants or farmer's prints to create new silhouettes for men's wear.

These examples show how fashion performs the past by delving into the archives as well as stereotypes of a nation. Cultural memory helps in transferring and migrating visual motifs from the past to the present. The rich heritage of the past thus offers an illusion of authenticity to products and designs. This is possible because cultural memory is not a static or given truth, but a dynamic phenomenon. Individuals, as well as a culture as a whole, reshape cultural memory according to recent insights, needs and desires. By remembering, we form an idea of our

<sup>12</sup> The formal English title was 'Gone with the wind', but because I am unhappy with the specific and inopportune connotations in American English, I have used a literal translation of the Dutch.

<sup>13</sup>



Clogs by Victor & Rolf. *Gone with the Wind* exhibition. Photo by Erik and Petra Hesmerg. Courtesy of Zuiderzee Museum, Netherlands.

<sup>14</sup> Plate, Liedeke and Smelik, Anneke (eds) (2009) *Technologies of Memory in the Arts*. Basingstoke: Palgrave/Macmillan, pp. 1-12.

<sup>15</sup> See for example: Bauman, Zygmunt (2000) *Liquid modernity*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 83; Barker, Chris (2008) *Cultural Studies. Theory and Practice*. London: Sage (3rd ed.)

<sup>16</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt (2005) *Liquid life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 16, emphasis in original.

<sup>17</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt (2005) *Liquid life* pp. 23-24; see also Lipovetsky, Gilles (2005) *Hypermodern Times*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

self and shape a sense of our identity. Cultural memory is not cast and settled forever in a certain form: on the contrary, it is continually subject to negotiations and renegotiations.<sup>14</sup> Because this understanding of cultural memory points to a past that is perpetually 'in the making', fashion with its fast turnover plays a pivotal role. Fashion is one of the many ways in which cultural memory becomes embodied.

Cultural memory has a material as well as an immaterial dimension: Viktor & Rolf's Dutch clogs with high heels are both a material, wooden, token of Dutch tradition, but at the same time they conjure up ideological images of 'Dutchness'. The creative and commercial use of heritage in fashion can thus serve the interests of the present. As an example the exhibition 'Blown by the wind', not only invokes a heroic past of the Dutch struggle against the sea, but also contributes to a heated debate about Dutch identity at a time when it is perceived to be under threat from globalisation and multicultural society. The manufacturing of authenticity by way of cultural memory is thus part of an ideological process in the interests of a certain ideology: for example, nationalism. The important point here is that fashion does not merely represent the past, but explicitly engages cultural memory as an image, performance or spectacle. The authentic feel of a certain colour, pattern, or material from the past is, in effect, quite phony. The paradox of contemporary fashion is therefore that authenticity can no longer be real and genuine, but is always already mediated and manufactured for a social practice of self-representation.

It is widely accepted that identity in our postmodern age is fluid, flexible and fragmented.<sup>15</sup> Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman has pointed to the paradox of contemporary 'liquid' modernity, where "To be an individual means to be like everyone else in the crowd."<sup>16</sup> Bauman, like Lipovetsky in his book *Hypermodern Times*, argues that individuality can only be constructed through consumption: "The logic of consumerism is geared to the needs of men and women struggling to construct, preserve and refresh their individuality..."<sup>17</sup> Consuming things, whether it is food, education, gadgets, technologies, accessories or clothes, allows people to perform their 'liquid' identity. Our identity, clothed in fashionable dress, is therefore like karaoke: borrowed and copied. The credo 'I shop, therefore I am' sums up the predicament of contemporary individuals. Consuming, shopping and dressing all help to construct and perform an identity; a sense of the 'real me'.

Our agency thus lies in the ways in which we construct our individual self, partly through dressing. This is not a passive consumption, nor are we mere dupes of consumer society. Fashion scholars Joanne Entwistle and Elizabeth Wilson accentuate the role of human agency.<sup>18</sup> The body is not a submissive object to be draped in accordance with the dictates of the social or cultural field, but dressing is an active embodied practice. We can therefore recognize the bodily practice of dressing as a performance of identity. A theatrical or media performance, like a fashion show or fashion shoot, is the living expression of cultural tradition and national heritage. The cultural past is just one of the shops in the mall which constructs a bit more of an 'authentic' self. In a postmodern view, the notion of performance can be extended to identity. Individual identity is no longer seen as a fixed truth or unchanging essence, but rather as a performance. Philosopher Judith Butler understands identity as an embodied practice that needs to be reinvented on a daily basis, even in its complex aspects such as gender or ethnicity.<sup>19</sup> Every day we perform who we are, as if in a constant dress rehearsal, shifting among different roles such as teacher, colleague, mother, friend, lover, etcetera. As dressing happens on the body, fashion is an important way of performing identity in its many facets. If we comprehend liquid identity as the performance of a dress rehearsal, the 'real me' is consequently a mere illusion and authenticity a sheer chimera.

At this point we need to return to the paradox that is central to this argument the tension between performance and authenticity. The more unreal and unoriginal the society of the spectacle becomes, the more we demand realness and originality. If everything has become a performance, even our own sense of self, we react by yearning for something authentic. We desperately want life to be 'really real' - including the way we perform our identities by dressing up. We may want to, as Bauman puts it, '...unpack the ideal of 'individuality' as *authenticity*, as 'being true to myself', being the 'real me'', but, sadly this is an impossible task to fulfil.<sup>20</sup> We thus find ourselves back at the paradox of Exactitudes: the more we are trying to be ourselves, the more we look like everyone else. Any quest for authenticity, either by fashion designers, or by individual subjects, will always be revoked by the spectacle of fashion, because it is embedded in the liquid modernity in which we live. Authenticity is therefore, paradoxically, a mere performance. As such, authenticity has become the holy grail of today's fashion; and like the holy grail, always sought, never to be found.

<sup>18</sup> Entwistle, Joanna and Wilson, Elizabeth (eds.) (2003), *Body Dressing*. Oxford/New York: Berg

<sup>19</sup> Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble*. London: Routledge; and Butler, Judith (1993) *Bodies that Matter. On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>20</sup> Bauman, Zygmunt (2005) *Liquid life*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 17. emphasis in original.