

# The Search for The Authentic: From Western Ideals to The Renaissance of “Slavicdom”

## 1. Commodity

*Born Originals, how comes it to pass that we die Copies?*

Edward Young

In August 2019, the renowned Italian fashion school Polimoda published an advertisement for undergraduate courses in design and management. Polimoda’s Facebook post read: “LAST CALL. One last chance to become what you are.” “Our undergraduate programs are one-of-a-kind”, it continued, “offering students the possibility to develop their skills, to expand their creativity and to receive detailed training from industry professionals #ApplyNow before it’s too late.” (www 1).

Echoing both Kierkegaard’s philosophical thought that each of us is to “become what one is”, as well as Oscar Wilde’s melodramatic exclamation to “be thyself”, the post suggests that an authentic personal identity can be achieved only through the artistic expression.

Being creative, it seems, is an essential condition of being your authentic self. It is hard not to think, however, about many ambiguities behind Polimoda's announcement, in which authenticity and self-realisation are equal to commodity. Authenticity is promised to you, as long as you, the recipient of the advertisement and the consumer, buy authenticity-generating product, namely the "one-of-a-kind" educational program. You "become who you [authentically] are" by spending and by consuming a variety of trainings, courses and master classes. The commodification of authenticity by Polimoda is so conspicuous that it even has an expiration date, as expressed in "#ApplyNow before it's too late."

In quite a similar manner, the idea of becoming "authentic self" is being taught, advised and sold by many companies and brands worldwide. In Poland, the product that promises the most "authentic lifestyle" is called "Slavicdom". For instance, in 2021 "Vogue Poland" published the article *Neo Slavicdom or a Return to the Roots* [*Nowa słowiańszczyzna, czyli powrót do korzeni*], which explored Slavic rituals, traditional handicrafts, herbs and astrology in reference to the Polish identity (www 2). Both Polimoda and Vogue Poland refer to the concept of authenticity as a characteristic that is rather acquired than innate to a human being. People need to discover how they can live authentically and it would appear that the best way to do it is through the consumption of "realness" provided by the industry.

In 1980's, Jean Baudrillard denounced the reality as one that is only a simulation. We are surrounded by signs and symbols, he claimed, which mask the fact that originals have long ceased to exist (Baudrillard 1994). According to Baudrillard, the very nature of simulation is in falsehood and fantasy, the qualities that in contemporary times we came to associate with virtual reality, social media and AI generated content.

Internet is perceived collectively as a multidimensional, yet integrated, territory which exists outside of our own, but of which we are constantly aware (Nelson 2001: 273-290). This other parallel reality is inhabited by both humans and software programs designed to talk and behave in a humanlike way. They are supplied with names and personalities, as well as with age, ethnic background and political views. For instance, the robot and self-proclaimed virtual influencer Miquela Sousa is a nineteen-year-old Brazilian-American model who advocates diversity, collaborates with luxury fashion brands and is now expanding her presence to Metaverse. Hatsune Miku is a software with a humanoid design, who also happens to be a pop star, while *Replika* is an AI generated “companion who cares” (www 3). With technological development, virtual influencers and chatbots acquire more and more of lifelike qualities. At the same time, people dehumanise themselves by gradually losing the will and ability to communicate and interact in person.

As AI-powered digital media have eliminated many fundamental oppositions of our social existence such as: real/virtual, human/artificial, uniformity/individuality, integrity/change, presence/absence, engagement/detachment, observer/co-participant, the line between reality and its representation is gradually vanishing. “Rapidly, we approach the final phase of the extension of man—the technological simulation of consciousness” (McLuhan 1994:3), writes Marshall McLuhan, foreshadowing contemporary anxiety, whether we can trust digital reality. Indeed, the real is no longer what it used to be when digital filters replace makeup, Tinder replaces a matchmaker, the robot Aibo replaces a pet animal and an avatar replaces self.

As signaled by Baudrillard, our perception of reality is now constantly interwoven with elements of uncertainty. The nineteenth century nightmares of machines replacing people, as seen in E.T.A. Hoffmann’s *The Sandman* (1817), Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*,

or the *Modern Prometheus* (1818), or Emile Zola's *Ladies' Paradise* (1883), resurface in pop culture in new forms. *Upload* and *The Peripheral* discuss the possibility of the human mind trapped in the artificial world; *Altered Carbon* touches upon the question of human mortality, body image and identity; *Westworld* dives into the fear of artificial intelligence becoming conscious, while reality show *Deep Fake Love* explores the consequences of living in a world manipulated with the deepfake technology. Anticipated by films like *Strange Days* (1995) and *Matrix* (1999), each of these productions present contemporary society as confused, disenchanted and in want of change. Each of them also refers to the accelerated shift towards highly charged simulacra of the Internet, which occurred in the early 2000s.

At the turn of millennium, Western society believed that the world entered the stage of politically and economically stable peaceful equilibrium. The future anticipated by Francis Fukuyama in the *The End of History?* was going to be safe, predictable, economically satisfying and culturally homogenous (Fukuyama 1989: 3-18). Fast forward to 2020s, the end of history is largely postponed. In more than 30 years since Fukuyama's essay, originally published in 1989, the history was marked by many chaotic and turbulent events. 2010s were notably a rough decade with media narrative dominated by stories such as refugee crisis, Brexit and suppression of pro-democracy protests in Hong Kong among others as well as devastating natural disasters such as the tsunami in Fukushima and the earthquake in Haiti.

If the first decade of the second millennium was tumultuous, entering the 2020s was exceptionally challenging due to pandemic-related restrictions. The enforced social isolation combined with uncertain future and economic crises caused significant psychological consequences with many experiencing anxiety,

depression, feelings of loneliness and loss of purpose. Amidst general uncertainty, people immersed themselves in the virtual world of the Internet, where most of social activities have been relocated, from working to leisure, from dating to medical appointments.

In *Understanding Media* Marshall McLuhan wrote that “all technologies are extensions of our physical and nervous systems to increase power and speed” (McLuhan 1994: 90). Thus, the telephone allows us to talk to anybody around the globe, while the electric bulb allows us to see in the dark, giving us superhuman powers in the perception of those living in the ancient times. However, those extensions do not come without price. In McLuhan’s understanding, every extension of a man inevitably leads to its counterpart, namely an “amputation.” If a car is an extension of human feet, it also serves as an “amputation”, because the more we use it, the weaker legs we have. Eventually, we would lose the ability to walk for a long time and become entirely dependent on mechanical vehicles. Similarly, the rise of the increasing role of the Internet in our lives has resulted in a growing demand for the product called “authenticity”.

In 2020s, we crave for authenticity. The isolation forced by the COVID pandemic stimulated the desire for the genuine human connection. In a search of more meaningful and genuine life, the consumers show growing interest in goods, which signal honesty and integrity as opposed to mass-produced, low quality and meaningless. With manufacturing jobs, disappearing products labelled as hand-crafted and organic appeal to the nostalgic longing for “better”, “simpler” and more “authentic” times. Documentaries are the fastest growing genre on streaming platforms, while the streets are dominated by anti-fashion trends such as normcore, leisurewear and gorpcore, all based on the idea of embracing the mundane and self-comfort. Finally, social media, generally perceived as the area of curated and performed identities, underwent seismic-shift change

from aesthetically perfected magazine editorial-like grids to the natural, unedited ones. Authenticity became a sought-after commodity quickly adopted by the global markets.

In contemporary marketing campaigns, fashion editorials and web magazine articles, authenticity is a common catchphrase. It is assigned to products (perfume Authentic by Abercrombie&Fitch, BeReal app), brands (Authentic Beauty Concept, Casual Authentic), campaigns (Be Real by Dove, Authentic Beauty by L'Occitane), people (Ed Sheeran, Paul Van Doren, the founder of Vans and the author of *Authentic: A Memoir by the Founder of Vans*) and experiences (private tours, home cooking with an Italian grandmother, Portugal farming experience, Scotch whiskey tasting). Day after day we are encouraged to embrace our genuine self, preferably by purchasing prepackaged, ready-to-apply authenticity-generating product that will fulfill our need for something honest and personal as opposed to the inauthentic and shallow reality of fake news, post-truths and alternative facts. But what exactly does it mean to be authentic in 2020s?

## 2. Emotional transparency

*To become a work of art is the object of living.*

Oscar Wilde

The word “authenticity” is close in meaning to genuineness, credibility and truthfulness. To say that something is authentic means that something is of unquestioned provenance. It is verified and legally recognised in terms of the authorship and the place of origin. But when it comes to human beings, to declare someone as an authentic person signifies that they are true to themselves and that they communicate it clearly.

As Brené Brown points out in her book *Dare to Lead*, what makes one authentic is the conscious choice of being real, being honest and being seen for what we are (Brown 2018). In other words, if we want to be seen as authentic “we must cultivate the courage to be imperfect – and vulnerable” (www 4). As Brown puts it, authenticity relates in the first place to the acknowledgment of our imperfections, and in the courage to openly talk about weaknesses and desires related to the above mentioned shortcomings (Brown 2018).

This approach towards authenticity understood as emotional transparency originates in the Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophical thought and in the subsequent Romanticist movement. In the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, Jean-Jacques Rousseau claims that before the development of the arts and sciences, people’s habits were simple but natural. The individuality of each person was clear as all men acted without any pretense. This has changed, however, with the advancement of modernity, which made people inauthentic. In Rousseau’s opinion, in technologically advanced societies, natural displays of emotion and spontaneity are stifled by strict social rules and the demand for constant politeness. Confronted with the expectations of the society “one does not dare to appear as what one is” (www 5). One becomes inauthentic.

In 1754, Rousseau publishes *A Discourse Upon the Origin and the Foundation of the Inequality Among Mankind*, in which he returns to the theme of alienating the modern world versus the idealistic “state of nature”. In his imagination, people used to live harmoniously and self-sustainably back in times when the earth was “left to its own natural fertility and covered with immense woods, that no hatchet ever disfigured” (www 6). This has changed, however, when people discovered the value of private property. As a result, they started to compare each other in terms of wealth, power and prestige. What’s worse, says Rousseau, the advance of technology,

such as metallurgy and agriculture, gave people powers to produce more and to possess more. In consequence, the amount of goods that we possess determines the social position we hold. The science, claims Rousseau, “have civilized men, and ruined mankind” (www 6). As a humankind, we have lost our natural ways of living self-confidently. Instead, we focused on building up personal wealth through which we read people and are read by others. For Rousseau, the modern society, with its fixation on the status and riches, became the primary source of inequalities among people. These inequalities, which only deepen with time, have made individuals feel alienated from their true inner selves sacrificed on the altars of good manners and prestige.

Rousseau, aware of the fact that the humankind’s return to the “state of nature” is impossible, resolves that the best way to regain inner harmony is to become completely transparent with the rest of the society. As a result, he writes *Confessions*, his biography and the history of his mind and soul:

I mean to present my fellow-mortals with a man in all the integrity of nature; and this man shall be myself.

I know my heart, and have studied mankind; I am not made like any one I have been acquainted with, perhaps like no one in existence; if not better, I at least claim originality. [...]

I will present myself before the sovereign judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I. With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood (www 7).

In Rousseauian terms, what defines a human as an individual and makes him authentic in the generally deceptive society is his feelings. Therefore, the faithful description of facts is neither relevant nor required. As Rousseau states, he might omit, alter or forget some details. He might even “occupy a void” with his imagination. He could not, however, be wrong about what he felt in a given moment. His feelings were true and as such he is a truthful and authentic person.

*Confessions* played a pivotal role in shifting art world’s focus from the Enlightenment’s logic of reason towards emotion and self-expression. Rousseau’s willingness to share all of his inner turmoil with the rest of the world paved the way for Romanticism, of which Charles Baudelaire wrote that it “is precisely situated neither in choice of subject nor in exact truth, but in a way of feeling” (Baudelaire 2021: 43). As a consequence, the majority of artistic movements subsequent to Romanticism, such as Impressionism, Expressionism, Abstractionism, Modernism and Post-Modernism, shifted the art world’s focus further and further to expressing emotions and ideas, rather than mirroring the reality.

Rousseau’s legacy continues to influence our culture till this day, from the contemporary fascination with “showing up authentically” to oversharing in the social media the immense popularity of self-discovery classes. Especially the social media are Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s dream of returning to the “state of nature” come true, with many users openly sharing most banal and private aspects of their lives. Nonetheless, the idea of authenticity in the era of the Internet contains a contradiction: seemingly, it is enough to dispose of perfectionism and embrace one’s own unedited self, and yet authenticity is best obtained through the consumption of products and designs.

In the interview following launch of the campaign *Made by You*, Geoff Cottrill, the Chief Marketing Officer of Converse at that time,

states: “We all want to be our true, authentic self in the world. The research we’ve done around the world [tells us that] the number-one reason why people buy our product is because it allows them to be them” (www 8).

*Made by You* was a customer-inspired campaign that featured close-ups of Chuck Taylor All-Star shoes signed by their owners. Each pair belonged to an actual individual, either a celebrity or a regular person. Each was worn, damaged or customised in a unique way. *Made by You* presented Converse shoes as a metaphorical self-portraits of its users. By equating celebrity artists to regular people, and commercial products to artworks, the campaign implied that each person is both unique and creative. It promises that you are only one step away from becoming your authentic self and from unleashing your creative potential. You are only required to purchase the brand new Chuck Taylor All-Star shoes.

Iconic brands such as Converse have always been drawing on authenticity. Patagonia with campaigns such as *Because Denim is Filthy Business*, relies on the eco-activism and the fight with climate changes, Converse borrows from the counterculture movements and teenage angst, while Harley Davidson draws from the image of free-wheeling bikers. By borrowing from the existing cultural references, brands offer an illusion that they are rooted in real people’s lives. Authenticity is celebrated by brands which use customer’s penchant for genuineness as a compelling incentive to buy. The nail polish brand NeoNail, local fashion label Bialcon, Doritos, Anna Lewandowska, Redmi Note, Oriflame and the Polish city of Gliwice, all invite to free self-expressiveness, provided that you shop for the branded product. The product that is a vehicle of authenticity promises to lend you its aura of uniqueness.

Perhaps the brand that took the concept of the everyday realness furthest is the ONOMICHI DENIM PROJECT, the Japanese denim

manufacturer based in the city of Onomichi. The idea behind the product appears simple: the ONOMICHI DENIM PROJECT produces denim pants, which are given away to people of different occupations, such as citrus farmers, fishermen, painters or carpenters, all of whom live in the area. In return, they are expected to wear ONOMICHI trousers to work. After a year, the naturally-aged pants are collected by the company, professionally washed and tagged with a premium price.

"The extraordinary appeal of the most successful cultural products has been due to their mythic qualities - the brand becomes a symbol, the material embodiment of a myth" (Hoult 2004:8). writes Douglas Holt in *How Brands Become Icons: the Principles of Cultural Branding*. "So as customers drink, drive, or wear the product, they experience a bit of myth" (Hoult 2004:8). The belief in the talismanic aspect of certain objects is an universal tendency of the human mind. In the essentially secular post-postmodern societies, the symbolic meaning of an object is removed from the religious sphere and transferred into the personal one. Mythical-ritual behaviors of wearing a bear's claw to take over the animal's strength has been replaced with a secular-ritual act of purchasing goods which appeals to the consumer's identity. The purchase ritual regenerates reality and, for a time being, the individual feels satisfaction with being authentically themselves. But as every ritual needs to be cyclically repeated, similarly, the self needs to be reaffirmed continuously by an act of shopping. In marketing campaigns, authenticity is presented as something aspirational, desirable and within your reach. However, it is always simulacra of authenticity that is sold, not the authenticity itself.

Guy Debord in *The Society of the Spectacle* writes that "in societies dominated by modern conditions of production, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation" (Debord 1983:7). In other

words, everything including “authenticity” is just a masquerade, the mediated spectacle of realness in which we participate more or less consciously. Little wonder that the idea of buying authenticity-inducing product such as “workwear” appeals especially to those who never actually needed to work physically. From infamous DHL t-shirt by Vetementes to ID badges at Prada to Anya Hindmarch’s high visibility jackets, luxury fashion appropriated working class uniforms for a long time. On the one hand, it is perceived as homage or nostalgia for simpler times. On the other hand, it is criticised as an ironic parody and kitsch at best, and exploitation of socially weaker classes at worst. In this setting, ONOMICHI DENIM PROJECT is a particularly interesting case as it allows the wearer to be both commercial and socially engaged.

ONOMICHI DENIM PROJECT pants are made by the tight local community. Each pair is unique as the ageing process is achieved by real people making real work and, as such, it is a process that cannot be recreated on a mass scale. In addition, the description used by the brand for promotional purposes refers to powerful markers of authenticity such as “Japanese craftsmanship”, “passion and commitment”, “local community”, “workers” and “everyone’s unique story” (www 9). With the purchase, the consumer not only gets to embody the worker and to have a part of their life, but also to externalise the working man’s ethos expressed in the company’s motto: “giving your best at work is cool.” What’s more, through the string of cultural associations, denim itself speaks of individualism, even when it is mass produced. ONOMICHI DENIM PROJECT captures the desire to stand out from the crowd authentically as an anti-trend slow fashion consumer, local community supporter, Japanese craftsmanship connoisseur and simply put avant-garde individual. Finally, it offers to equip customer’s identity in all these things, as always, for a price.

### 3. Creativity

*This is a mighty song, a creator-song,  
This song is force and power,  
This song is immortality!  
I feel immortality, I create immortality,  
And you, God, what more could you do?*  
Adam Mickiewicz

*Get inspired by the next generation of artists,  
athletes, musicians and creators. Create Now. Create Next.*  
Converse advertisement campaign, 2022

While Rousseau laid the foundation for the modern obsession with authenticity as emotional transparency, Oscar Wilde was the one who further linked it to creativity. In 1891, he wrote a radical anti-capitalist piece titled *The Soul of Man under Socialism* in which he remodels Rousseauian ideal of returning to the “state of nature”. Wilde proposes that in order to become authentic, people should abandon capitalism and devote their life to pursue art.

Wilde begins with the declaration that the biggest advantage coming from Socialism is the fact that it would relieve us from the “sordid necessity of living for others” (www 10). Machines, he continues, would take on all kinds of dull and unpleasant labor and private property would cease to exist. Eventually, people liberated from the “tyranny of want”, by which Wilde means private property, could realise themselves through the artistic self-expression. “»Know thyself« was written over the portal of the antique world”, he writes, “over the portal of the new world, »Be thyself« shall be written” (www 10). In Wilde’s opinion, it does not even matter whether the resulting work of art is good or bad. Art, he claims, cannot be done for any other

purpose than to please its creator. The moment in which an individual takes into consideration the public and its taste, is also the moment in which they cease to be an artist and morph into a “craftsman, an honest or a dishonest tradesman” (www 10).

What Wilde does in *The Soul of Man under Socialism* is incredibly audacious as, with his views on art, he obliterates the long established relationship between the artist and the public. According to Wilde, art does not have to exist in any other context than the self-realisation. When in 1973 German contemporary artist and activist Joseph Beuys discusses his catchphrase “Every man is an artist”, he simply echoes the two hundred years of thought of progressive individualism touted by Wilde. Moreover, in the process of the growing cult of artist’s persona, the artwork itself gradually becomes irrelevant.

When in 1917 Marcel Duchamp, under the pseudonym of Richard Mutt, submitted a porcelain urinal as a sculpture for an art exhibition, he provided a subversive and radical explanation of his action. Duchamp claimed that it does not matter whether he made the object or not. In his opinion, it did not also matter that the object itself was an ordinary commodity. What matters, he claimed, is that he, an artist, chose it and gave it a new meaning. By the simple action of choosing and naming the object as a work of art, Duchamp created a new reality, in which the artist’s persona is more important than the artwork. From that moment on, to be an artist is to be a brand.

In decades that followed, Duchamp’s self-celebration became a mass phenomenon. It led to what Robert Bellah and Charles Taylor call “expressive individualism” (Bellah 1996, Taylor 2007). “Expressive individualism” is understood as the self-oriented lifestyle, which gained the momentum in 1950’s. According to Taylor, this cultural shift had many causes such as increased mobility, nuclearisation of families, dissolving ties between individuals and local communities, rise of teenagers as new self-conscious social group, growing division

between public and private spheres as well as deepening secularisation. But one of the most significant factors was consumer revolution.

After the hardships of World War Two, people were more than eager to spend money. Inspired by television advertisements, they began to communicate their tastes with goods that would match their desired lifestyles. As Taylor points out, this is the very moment in the contemporary culture in which we observe on a mass scale the emergence of authenticity understood as embracing one's own personality and projecting it to the world outside (Taylor 2007: 474–475).

With Rousseau's dissolution of the objective truth as a foundation for understanding the world and Wilde's obsession with treating life as artwork, the self in present times is in a constant state of flux. Hence, it can be molded, reconstructed and reinvented anew, until it fits one's own image of their inner persona, much in a way that human avatars in *The Matrix* movie are made.

As recent studies show, many youth perceive cyberspace as the “only place they can truly be themselves” (www 11), and so the association with *The Matrix* comes quite naturally. In the Wachowski siblings' movie, people's appearance was created within the brain of each human and broadcasted to the virtual world of Matrix. Thus, the outward presence of a person was perceived as a “digital projection of mental self” (Wachowski, Wachowski 1999). Likewise, in the contemporary society, each individual broadcast their image to the Internet through social media. This image, however, is essentially performative because always curated. It is manipulated technologically, through the choice of photoshooting medium such as digital or analogue cameras; aesthetically, through the choice of photography's angle, filters, lights and settings; and contextually through the choice of captions and hashtags. It is exactly in this ambiguous intersection of private and public, self and

reflection, where people resort to fashioning their lives into personal works of art.

#### 4. Nonconformity

*I create my own definition of myself. I have always been a nonconformist [...] while everyone was wearing uniforms, I had a Mohawk or a yellow hoodie.*

Interview with a rapper and a “freethinker” Piotr “Vienio” Więclawski  
(Zwierciadło magazine, 13.03.2019).

*Subaru is a brand for individualists.*

Interview with Witold Rogalski, the President of Subaru Import Polska  
(Menadżer Floty magazine, 2/2016).

In the ancient world, there was a firm belief in the concept of cosmic order, or the “great chain of Being” in which every man has their place. One of the greatest examples of this idea was represented by the sentence “gnothi seauton” (know thyself), which was carved over the entrance to the Delphi oracle. This seemingly simple sentence indicated the need of understanding one’s own inner self, understanding the nature of things in general, and of knowing one’s place within the social matrix. “Know yourself” meant equally, “mind what you ask oracle about” as well as “know your rank as you are *not* equal to the gods”.

This traditional idea of cosmic order was overturned in modern times, when people started to be understood as individuals rather than as members of a group, who occupy pre-designated positions within the rigid structure of the society. However, despite this “individuation revolution” (Taylor 2007) which started back in the eighteenth century, it was very common till 1950’s that your fathers’

way was also your way. Occupation, lifestyle, habits, attitudes, tastes and moral standards were passed from one generation to another. Yet, with the technological development, postmodern youth were offered an array of alternative lifestyles. They were given working and living mobility to an extent never seen in previous generations. With the newly obtained feeling of freedom and powerful spending power at hand, young generation attempted to live the way they wanted, not the way their parents did. As a result, the world exploded with political and cultural movements centered around self-expression and non-conformism. This is also the moment in which the disdain for mass culture became the dominating attitude of authenticity-seeking people as well as authenticity-inducing brands. From hippies of 1960s to metal subcultures of 1980s, from early 2000s antiglobalists to modern day eco-activists, countercultural stance is perceived as the axis of authentic life.

Mass, as the term itself indicates, plays to the lowest common denominator. It is often defined as both trivial and trivialising, shallow and manipulative industrial project as opposed to intellectual and original. The distinction between the high culture and the mass culture has been popularised by Dwight Macdonald. In *A Theory of Mass Culture*, he refers to the mainstream art as “kitsch”, “parasitic, cancerous growth on High Culture”(Macdonald 1978: 168). Mainstream, he says, is a product designed solely for mass consumption “like chewing gum” (Macdonald 1978: 168). As Macdonald notes, mass culture emerged in the eighteen century as a result of industrialisation, which allowed fast and cheap production of books, music and pictures. Mass culture is fabricated by the industry, and it exists solely for two reasons: the profit and the power to influence the masses. Hence, an individual who wishes to appear both authentic and relatable is expected to do so by taking oppositional stance towards the mainstream. In 2020s, it is obtained by growing one’s

own food, rejecting fashion trends and consuming “niche” products and services. Paradoxically, the greater the aversion to mass culture, the more products on the market offer the opportunity to be yourself by rejecting traditional values. From movie hits like *The Wild One* or the *Fight Club* to advertisement campaigns such as Apple’s *Think different* or Adobe’s 2023 creative trend *Real is Radical*, individualism is manifested through the language of counterculture movements. In a reference to Thorstein Veblen’s theory of bourgeois class’s “conspicuous consumption”, Andrew Potter coins the term “conspicuous authenticity” (Potter 2017: 135–142), which denotes an act of choosing products and services that will simultaneously make us appear authentic and let us feel better than the rest of society. Rampant individualism is driving rampant consumerism.

Concept of authenticity is, therefore, rigged with many contradictions. When opposed to “shallow” mass-culture, “authenticity” is perceived as “deep” and “intellectual”. The idea of being authentic is about inner integrity, and yet, it is continuously calling for a self-transformative change:

In order for people, whatever their class, to survive in modern society, their personalities must take on the fluid and open form of this society. Modern men and women must learn to yearn for change: not merely to be open to changes in their personal and social lives, but positively demand them, actively to seek them out and carry them through. They must learn [...] to delight in mobility, to thrive on renewal, to look forward to future developments in their conditions of life and their relations with their fellow men (Berman 1983: 95-96).

The search for the authentic self, combined with constant hunger for cultural novelty, desire for a transformation as well as rejection of the Western mass culture have led to the increased interest in re-discovering one’s own roots. In Poland, this interesting phenomenon took the form of the search for mythical Slavicdom.

## 5. Provenance

*Once upon a time people were born into communities and had  
to find their individuality. Today people are born individuals  
and have to find their communities.*  
k-hole trendbook

*Our sweetest existence is relative and collective and our true self is  
not entirely in us. Such is man's constitution in this life that he never  
succeeds in truly enjoying himself without the help of other people.*  
Jean-Jacques Rousseau

The discussion on Slavic identity is of specific nature, as it rests on the intersection of the mutually exclusive ideas of belonging and not belonging to Europe. As Roumiana Deltcheva puts it:

Geographically within Europe, yet culturally excluded from it, the countries of Central and East Europe are still in a process of defining their identity based on a double binary opposition: by consciously differentiating themselves from the former center of Soviet political power, and equally strongly attempting to integrate themselves with the Western center of cultural legitimization (Deltcheva 2002: 149-168).

The narrative about Eastern and Central Europe, in which the West is cited as the point of reference, is a common occurrence in regard with the post-Soviet countries. Within this discourse, Eastern and Central Europe are disempowered and exoticised as somehow inferior, less civilised and less wise marginal “other”. An example of this kind of stereotyping taken to the extreme is presented in *Borat*, the film that purports to be a documentary. *Borat* is aimed to be a comedy that exposes racism and indifference in United States, but it is doing so by the racist portrayal of Asian and East-Central European countries. The

main character claims to be from Kazakhstan, but he speaks Polish. His views are outdated and offensive. He lives in a poor village which implies bad economy and the low level of education. Ultimately, *Borat* and its stereotypical Easternness that is both crude and artificial, do not represent any specific country or culture, but some strange amalgam of post-Soviet images as envisioned by the West.

In response to this sense of cultural segregation, some researchers introduced the postcolonial theory to the Eastern and Central European countries. In the *Uncanny Slavdom*, Polish researcher Maria Janion proposes that the contemporary Polish culture is under the long-term trauma of being colonised, not by West *per se*, but by Christianity. In Janion's approach, the baptism of Poland and the subsequent assimilation of the Latin culture created particular kind of void in the Polish national soul. This loss of Slavic heritage that happened over a thousand years ago is, in Janion's perception, the source of problems with the Polish identity and of difficulties in finding place within contemporary Europe (Janion 2022).

Janion weaves her narrative by seeking the traces of pagan elements in the Polish literature of Romanticism. However, Romantic art with its sensibility towards nature, folkloric and pagan, should be viewed in the broader context of the aesthetic movement that emerged as the antithesis of Enlightenment rather than the revival of the lost Slavic soul. Pre-Christian and supernatural was in many ways a manifestation of Rousseauian search for identity outside the established norms and conventions. Therefore, Romantic idealisation of the Slavic heritage can be perceived either as a by-product of the dominant trend in European art, or as the nostalgic yet naive metaphor for the imagined Slavic utopia.

Two centuries after Romanticism, the search for the lost Slavic heritage gained the momentum as the idea of authenticity started to be closely related to identity politics. As Sonia Kruks notes:

What makes identity politics a significant departure from earlier, pre-identarian forms of the politics of recognition is its demand for recognition on the basis of the very grounds on which recognition has previously been denied: it is *qua* women, *qua* blacks, *qua* lesbians that groups demand recognition. The demand is not for inclusion within the fold of “universal humankind” on the basis of shared human attributes; nor is it for respect “in spite of” one’s differences. Rather, what is demanded is respect for oneself *as* different (Kruks 2001:85).

Identity politics is rooted in specific ethnic, racial and cultural differences, and as such coincides with the growing demand for authenticity that is radically different from the mainstream. Henceforth, authenticity rests on the “epistemology of provenance” (Kruks) as well as the transparency of the experience and its originality. These three elements combined with the disenchantment with Western mass culture are at the heart of the growing interest in the Slavic heritage.

In 1993, Andrzej Sapkowski published an essay titled *Piróg, or There Is No Gold in the Grey Mountains* [*Piróg, albo nie ma złota w Szarych Górach*] (Sapkowski 1993: 65-72) in “Nowa Fantastyka”, in which he criticises the idea of Slavic fantasy. The axis around which Sapkowski builds his argument, and which is later echoed by Maria Janion in her narrative, is that due to Christianisation, there are no traces left of Slavic archetypes in the Polish cultural memory. Therefore, Slavic tropes used in literature are stereotype-ridden, surface-level linguistic embellishments applied to narratives copied from Western mythology. For Sapkowski, the lack of innate Slavic context within the Polish identity results in Polish Slavic fantasy appearing unnatural and forced “splatter-gore-fuck-and-puke” genre for “hardcore” fans only.

Thirty years on from Sapkowski’s essay, Slavic folklore and mythology revived by digital crowds created trickle-up effect, which

culminated in massification and commodification of the movement. The result is Slavic culture used as an umbrella term for highly diversified works, including Cleo and Donatan's *We, The Slavs* [My Słowianie], short movie series produced by Allegro and titled *Polish Legends* [Legendy Polskie], graphic art by Hanna Dola, local fashion brand Slavia Polska, folk metal music, Slavic witchcraft guidebooks, Slavic fantasy, but also handcrafted goods, fashion and jewellery, herbal incents, ceramic mugs and many more. What all these works have in common is the threefold message of being different, being creative and being authentic, all expressed through the idealisation of primordial Slavdom. Thus an article in "Vogue Poland" titled *Kupala Night – The Magic of Desire* [Noc Kupaty – magia pożądania] reads: "We [the Slavs] should be proud that pre-Christian celebrations of summer solstice was Slavic domain" (www 12). The statement is quickly followed by an explanation on how the Catholic Church erased traces of pagan rites of prehistoric matriarchy, whilst the next sentence focuses already on rituals linked with the solstice celebrations. Interestingly, the article about Slavic customs and heritage is embellished with references from Western imagery: still from American-Sweden horror movie *Midsommar*, illustration by John Gillbert to William Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* and Christian scene of *Annunciation to the Shepherds* from French *Book of Hours* by Charles d'Angoulême.

"Vogue Poland"'s article appears to celebrate Slavdom while involuntarily exposing the emptiness of the term. A brief look at the Slavic folklore/culture/traditions related articles of the past couple of years confirm that the concept of Slavdom is largely used like a cultural prop and magical fetish. Fashion and lifestyle magazine "Elle Poland", as one example, presents the article *Slavic Rituals. Magic Rites, Recipes & Spells of Our Ancestors* [Słowiańskie obrzędy, magiczne rytuały, przepisy i zaklęcia miłosne naszych przodków] in which "you can learn

the secrets of Slavic magic that will bring you closer to your roots” (www 13). It also guides the reader to the article *Slavic Methods to Stay Healthy* [*Słowiańskie sposoby na zdrowie*] (www 14) that introduces “Slavic gymnastics” and “herbal magic”. These “Slavic health also guarantee the “firm return to your [Slavic] roots” and promise that “you will better understand your body so that you will become powerful goddess”. While information and lifestyle website “na:Temat.pl” presents “one of the most popular Slavic ritual[s]” (www 15), which is supposed to attract good energy thanks to chanting spells and burning a candle. It is worth noting that Slavicdom is routinely presented in the context of the reader’s cultural roots; something that is supposed to remind about the place they are coming from, ground them in the reality and give meaning to their life. At the same time, these roots are reduced to the array of magical spells and self-care rituals.

Mirosław Białous in the *Religion of the Proto-Slavs* addresses the “Slavic beliefs” as something born in the imagination of Slavicdom advocates rather than in the actual religion. Białous emphasises the difficulties in analysing Slavic religion due to the lack of historical materials to the point that many theories related to religious rites remain hypothetical (Białous 2016: 145–152). As noted by Białous, Sapkowski and Janion, and as proven by the illustration choice for “Vogue Poland”’s *Kupala Night – The Magic of Desire* article, the source material regarding Slavic cultural memory in Poland is scarce and largely supplanted by Christianity. Hence, the representation of Slavic culture gravitates toward mythical dreamland where people lived in harmony with the world of nature, knew magic and were protected by some undefined, yet very powerful gods.

Digital micro-communities centered around the Slavic culture strive to reconstruct, revive and/or reinvent old customs basing on folktales and available ethnographic studies. They exchange knowledge, ideas and practices from motanka dolls creation to Slavic

weddings. In addition, contemporary approach to identity politics demands the return to a time before the perceived oppression, colonial or religious, which result in the rise of neo-pagan rituals such as celebrations of Kupala Night or in the use of old religious symbols representing Slavic gods in fashion and body art. But the achieved Slaviness is as much authentic as inauthentic. Authentic in a genuine interest of digital crowds in their ethnic and historical roots. Inauthentic in a sense that the Slavdom is imagined and idealised in a way characteristic to the Romantic period. While “Slavic culture” is widely discussed and celebrated in the media, we should acknowledge that its content is very much a “work in progress.” The search for the authenticity continues.

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## **Abstract**

# **The Search for The Authentic: From Western Ideals to The Renaissance of “Slavicdom”**

The article explores the notion of authenticity in contemporary culture, taking into account references from philosophy, pop culture as well as from branding. Starting from Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s philosophical thought and Romanticism’s obsession with individualism, the idea of authenticity is intertwined with emotional openness, creative self-expression and non-conformity understood as the rejection of the mainstream culture. In 21<sup>st</sup> century, however, authenticity was turned into a commodity, something that can be bought, acquired or performed. The article aims to deconstruct the contemporary idea of authenticity and to analyse how it influences society and shapes trends such as rediscovering one’s roots on example of emerging “Slavic” community in Poland.