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Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, Juliane Tomann

Authenticity

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Vanessa Agnew, Juliane Tomann
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Concerned with uncovering fundamental truths, essences, and origins, authenticity is a key concept in disciplines ranging from philosophy, anthropology, and music to psychology and law. Yet, it is in the practice and theorization of reenactment that authenticity holds the greatest sway. Lacking the markers of corroboration enjoyed by traditional historiography, reenactment adopts authenticity as both its subject matter and its object of inquiry. Reenactment seeks to advance historical understanding through an authentic simulation of past objects, events, practices, and experiences, yet its epistemological claims rest on the selfsame assertion of authenticity. This puts a troubling circularity at the heart of reenactment’s authenticity imperative. As a form of social practice and an emerging academic field, reenactment calls for a method that integrates inductive and deductive approaches, even as it latterly upholds the critical potential of embodied and affective knowledge predicated on the authenticity of the (individual) performing subject (body and embodiment; performance and performativity; emotion). Authenticity will thus pose fundamental challenges for the future of reenactment studies (introduction) as the field comes to articulate falsifiable criteria for the production of historical meaning and the evidence upon which this might be based.

As a discourse of self-referentiality, authenticity implies internal coherence (things or people are true to themselves) and/or fidelity to some other original thing or being (Varga and Guignon, 2017). In both cases, the discrepancy between what that thing is or was, and what it appears or professes to be, narrows as authenticity attempts to conceal or eliminate the mimetic principle underscoring all reenactment (mimesis). This helps explain why authenticity is a vital mechanism within reenactment, which depends on closing the spatiotemporal distance between the past and present (Phillips, 2015) for constructing what reenactors and their audiences perceive to be powerful historical experiences.

The discourse of authenticity has historically distinguished between subjects and objects, encapsulating elements of authorship, authority, credibility, and accreditation. A four-part typology proposed by Bruner (1994) identifies, in the first instance, authenticity that relies on verisimilitude. Such an understanding is prevalent among museum professionals, whose aim is to produce historic sites that are convincing because of their “mimetic credibility” (1994, p. 399). The second understanding also encompasses the nature of a copy and its appearance as “true in substance, or real.” The New Salem Historic Site, for example, seems credible not only to present-day visitors; it also aims to conform to the (assumed) expectations of a person from the
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1830s (p. 399). A third notion of authenticity asserts that a reproduction cannot, by definition, be authentic, while the fourth involves questions of power: copies are authentic if they can be certified as such. The latter shifts the focus from the original object, event, process, or experience to the question of who is authorized to determine the version of history that will be accepted as correct or authentic. Under this perspective, both the original and copy are “continually being constructed in an endless process of production and reproduction” (p. 400).

The history of the discourse can thus be seen as a contest between authenticity as a hermetic attribute of a thing or person, and authenticity as a negotiable attribute, reliant on an external imprimatur. While postmodern interventions call into question the status of origins and even the ontological status of the past itself, many elevate the perceiving and performing self to the position of arbiter of knowledge. We will find that reenactment draws on various understandings of the term, resorting to assertions of verisimilitude and mimetic credibility in relation to objects and sites, and (self-)accreditation in relation to experiences.

The authenticity of objects concerns the relationship between the original and copy (or counterfeit) and is assessed and arbitrated by experts in the field, who inquire into a thing’s status as genuine, true, trustworthy, or reliably documented (MATERIALIZATION OF THE PAST). Consequently, authentication is a “process, by which something—a role, product, site, object or event—is confirmed as ‘original’, ‘genuine’, ‘real’ or ‘trustworthy’” (Cohen and Cohen, 2012, p. 1296). This makes authenticity central to fields which seek to establish by empirical means the authorship, origin, genesis, and provenance of texts, compositions, paintings, artifacts, and other aspects of tangible and intangible cultural heritage. The term authenticity is commonly used to describe a superlative quality, something that is more genuine, real, or true than anything with which it might be compared and is thus associated with the metaphysical. Reenactors and their audiences, in contrast, measure a reenactment’s achievements—whether knowledge, emotion, or credibility—in terms of degrees of authenticity, establishing authenticity as a relative property. A less authentic reenactment might, for example, be characterized by ill-informed and unserious participants dressed in anachronistic costumes; authentic reenactments, in contrast, by hardcore reenactors pursuing a high degree of fidelity to past modes of dress, speech, and behavior (AMATEURISM AND EXPERTISE; AUTHENTICITY PRACTICES).

Reenactment’s authenticity imperative also applies to the historic sites, landscapes, and buildings used for the theatrical, filmic, novelistic, artistic, or museal restagings of the past, and such places are often considered a kind of ne plus ultra of historical fidelity. The Hungarian national exhibit at the Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum in Oświęcim, Poland, is a case in point. The exhibition designer, László Rajk, seeks to draw the visitor into a reenactive experience. “The building itself is the objective reality,” he stresses, for “It bears testimony to all the horrors that happened there and [to] everything that followed” (2013, n.p.). Foregoing the use of the depersonalized historical objects—human hair, suitcases, clothing, tallits (prayer shawls), spectacles, and other personal effects—that are on display elsewhere at Auschwitz, Rajk’s exhibition depends only on replicas rendered in glass and steel, for example, of a cattle car that transported people to the death camps. Visitors’ shadows—their “ghost images”—are cast upon historical footage of the death marches or of people awaiting selection. Webcams installed at Birkenau capture additional ghost images from the ruined crematorium, selection ramp, and barracks for projection into the museum. Thus, he says, though the distinction between the past and present is preserved in a space of remembrance, meditation, and reflection, “visitors become part of the past themselves, for a moment” (2013, n.p.).

Yet, even at Auschwitz, doubt is cast on the capacity of the site’s “objective reality”—its authenticity—to adequately convey the historical record within a museological context. Walls in the entryway to the Hungarian exhibition have been treated with a special preparation of
linseed and bitumen, the dank smell of which is the first thing to confront visitors as they descend into the subterranean space. This smell, Rajk reports, is intended to convey an impression of “aging” and a “perception of the past” (quoted in Scandura, 2010), and so elicit concomitant affective responses in the visitor. Elsewhere, historic footage of Nazi selections for the crematoria is projected onto a screen, along with an accompanying soundtrack of a pounding heartbeat, a sonic device that generates a sympathetic somatosensory response in the visitor. Historic sites are often assumed to convey forms of historical knowledge that cannot be replicated or faked, with the ontology of the place assuming an epistemological function (Agnew, 2009). The Auschwitz exhibition’s “aged” walls and its other somatosensory effects reinforce the point, however, that authenticity is a delicate artifice. Authenticity does not assert itself, but it can be facilitated by smoke and mirrors and by the affective and intellectual responses of accrediting reenactors and observers (Figure 3.1).

Figure 3.1 The permanent Hungarian exhibition, The Citizen Betrayed, Block 18, Auschwitz-Birkenau State Museum, in which the wall covering of the entryway has been specially treated to smell “aged.” Source: László Rajk.
If the authenticity of objects and places has been established as fundamentally constructed and mutable within reenactment, we might consider authenticity’s other pole—that of the subject. As the heritor of notions of authenticity dating to the emergence of the modern individual in the 18th century, contemporary reenactment prioritizes the subject’s perception and immediacy of experience. The authentic experience—whether of wild nature, a traditional way of life, an exotic ritual, or edgy band—appears spontaneous and unmediated; it promises deep engagement, un tarnished by the dictates of commerce or the demands of a fickle subject. Its uniqueness generates powerful emotions, and these are assumed to yield higher insights. The authentic *historical* experience encapsulates all of these properties, but also appears to spring directly from the past. Reenactors experiencing “period rush,” for instance, may be convinced that their immersive experience is tantamount to what was actually lived and felt in the past. Such “authentic historical” experience is, however, orchestrated by the structuring *narrative* and the *mise-en-scène* of the reenactment itself, making staging a precondition for the assertion of authenticity, as well as authenticity’s occult mechanism.

Thus, while reenactment quests after authenticity and acknowledges that, ultimately, the historical referent—the past itself—can never be attained or sufficiently well represented, reenactment lacks a mechanism for defining authenticity in affirmative terms. Instead, reenactors often negotiate among themselves, and in dialogue with their audiences, as to what constitutes an authentic representation of the past. Stephen Gapps points out that this process of negotiation serves an important social function within reenactment groups (*practices of authenticity*). At the same time, the negotiation of authenticity highlights the constructedness of historical representation itself. While original objects are generally deemed authentic, this status is often reserved for replicas in reenactment, not historical objects per se. What is authentic is that which appears to most closely approximate something irrecuperable from the past—not old and genuine objects, which would appear anachronistic within the context of the reenactment, but things that create the appearance of temporal coherence and, to use comedian Stephen Colbert’s term, “truthiness” (“Truthiness,” 2005). Reenactment’s historical *mise-en-scène* must convey the appearance of being true, real, and genuine.

Reenactment’s authenticity imperative belies a prevailing skepticism among reenactors and their audiences about institutional authority and transmitted knowledge. In the unstable world of untruths, rumors, and conspiracy theories, we find a correlative embrace of what might be called “reliable” knowledge. “Authentic” reenactments lay bare originary processes—the sourcing of materials, acquisition of manufacturing skills, manufacturing processes, and the proper handling of things. *Living history* displays and historical reality television shows, for example, foreground the manufacturing of stone tools, techniques for navigating with a logline and sextant, or the codes for properly handling cutlery at a manor house dining table. In so doing, reenactments recover modes of being, doing, and making that have either been forgotten or inadequately transmitted. At the same time, we can think of this emphasis on the authentic as a defense against radical relativism and the fickle perceptions, feelings, and bodily experiences of individual subjects. What can be known about the past is reduced to the haptic and embodied, and to what can be made, manipulated, and tested by reenactors and, by extension, their audiences. Authenticity in reenactment is that which seems beyond interpretation and simply is—a source of experience and knowledge available to all.

Reenactment’s authenticity imperative demands that the reenactor testifies to a genuine experience. On the one hand, this arises from the circumstances orchestrated by the reenactment itself: the reenactor testifies to the fog of war, hunger, cold, bewilderment, or technical mastery, experiences that seem directly correlated to historical ones. On the other hand, the reenactor testifies to something about his or her inner life. Consequently, there emerges a
potential conflict between the expression of the true self and historical experience. Such tension is often resolved through the confession. Testifying to acute suffering and/or other powerful emotions takes the form, in the case of historical reality television, of pieces-to-camera. While the very setup of television reenactments like The Ship, a 2002 documentary on Captain Cook’s 1768 Endeavour voyage along the northeast coast of Australia, would seem to obviate the need for confessional moments, the piece-to-camera is a common structuring device. Participants in the BBC reenactment address the camera with their fears of going aloft and complaints about the salty diet, communal sleeping, and ablution arrangements. Breaking with their historical personages, reenactors affect an intimacy by directly addressing the audience. Such confessional moments, with the reenactor often in a state of costumed dishabille and secluded in a liminal space such as a toilet or washroom, profess to reveal the true state of the reenactor’s inner self. This voicing of the contemporary self—the expression of physical hardship, discord, and mental disarray—is followed by introspection and revelation. By peeling away the “mask” imposed by the reenactment, the confessional moment posits the journey into the past as risky to the self, yet ultimately rewarding. By asserting itself via these confessional moments, the present acts as a warrant for the reenacted past. What makes the reenactment appear to be “true” history, then, is the spontaneous herniation of the authentic present in an otherwise contested and potentially unreliable account of the past.

Reenactment’s confession, proffered in the form of a pact with the viewer or reader, constitutes part of its appeal: audiences and readers enjoy the asides that break the theatrical or novelistic fourth wall and filmic outtakes that supplement the final cut. Metalepsis, this mixing up the world of the telling with the world of the told, returns us to the troubling circularity at the heart of reenactment. It acts as the warrant for the authenticity, and hence historical reliability, of reenactment. In the Collingwoodian sense, the metaleptic confession “pegs down” the reenactor’s imaginative facility not to the interpretation of historical sources, but to his or her own authority (1999, p. 154). Yet we might inquire into the implications of elevating the authentic to a defining feature of historical reenactment. What, we must ask, are the implications of a form of historical representation predicated on an ever-asserted, psychologized, and embodied self that secures a pact with the viewer or reader, but which, because of its ultimate grounding in the apparently real and true, brooks no interrogation?

Further reading