ACHIM SAUPE

ANALYSING AUTHENTICATION AND AUTHORISATION PROCESSES IN CULTURAL HERITAGE AND THE MUSEUM

Our contemporary culture is characterised by an intense striving for authenticity – a phenomenon which began to assume new potency in the last third of the 20th century. In practical terms this manifests itself, for example, in the value attached to »authentic objects« in museums, collections and archives, and to »authentic places« – be they historic buildings, urban architectural ensembles or memorial sites as ostensibly direct embodiments of history. This desire for historical authenticity and past »reality« goes hand in hand with an attachment to a longing to experience history »first-hand« – evident in the degree of public attention accorded to eyewitness accounts of historic events. Ultimately, this is all bound up with a desire for things regarded as »genuine«, with a wish to reconstruct, preserve and experience that which is »true« and »original«.

Despite their critical questioning of claims to authenticity and ideas about what is authentic, scholars, museums and memorial sites likewise contribute in important ways to the construction of historical authenticity. Somehow, the notion of authenticity has even taken its place alongside the traditional category of truth in the way in which scholarly findings are reflected on, albeit without sufficient consideration of its potential or of the problems that it may pose[1].

In this article, I will focus on the attribution of authenticity in relation to heritage, tourism and memory studies, before going on to address some aspects of the way in which it is discussed in the museum. Furthermore, I argue that museum specialists, historians and other cultural scientists should study processes of authentication in order to better understand the appreciation and valorisation of historic sites and cultural artefacts in museums and elsewhere.

AUTHENTICITY AND CULTURAL HERITAGE

As David Lowenthal remarked, the »heritage crusade« of recent decades is linked to an authenticity craze[2]. Authenticity in heritage has been sought, tested, praised and criticised from the perspectives of different disciplines, in art, architecture, anthropology, archaeology, tourism, heritage and museum studies, and memory studies. But there was a lack of theoretical contributions and historiographical studies, and this was one of the reasons for establishing the Leibniz Research Alliance Historical Authenticity (www.leibniz-historische-authentizitaet.de/en).

At first glance, authenticity is a positive value and a »good thing«, something »consumers really want«, as James H. Gilmore and B. Joseph Pine suggest in the title of their book about the value of authenticity when it comes to selling products[3]. By contrast, but also to a certain extent complementarily, Andrew Potter asks in his 2010 book »The Authenticity Hoax«: »Why the ›Real‹ Things We Seek Don't Make Us Happy«[4]. From a historian's perspective, where we often deal with violent and traumatic pasts and their representations through first-person narratives, testimonies and memorial sites, Potter's question is a bit odd: Why should »real things« make us happy anyway? But both book titles show us that authenticity is a label and is used as a branding technique, not only for commercial products, but also for museums, historic sites and entire

urban quarters. One of the numerous examples is the campaign »AuthentiCity« in Birmingham[5], and, of course, the whole authenticity discourse of the UNESCO world heritage programme[6].

Some scholars, in particular those in the field of tourism studies, believe that any profitable discussion of authenticity has reached its end. As early as the 1970s, Dean MacCannell stressed that the tourist's desire to look behind the scenes, their desire for authenticity and authentic experiences, was ultimately creating »staged authenticity«[7]. Other researchers on tourism have emphasised that the concept of »authentic cultures« is outdated – after all, cultures are constantly renewing themselves by re-evaluating and reinventing traditions in manifold ways[8]. Furthermore, John Urry and Maxine Feifer argue that the »post-tourist«[9] is aware of the game with authenticity at tourist sites.

These ideas found their way into Heritage Studies. For example, Helaine Silverman writes in the 2015 »Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research«[10]: »Authenticity remains one of the most important multi-sectoral domains of concern in heritage studies and heritage practice. Its key venue is tourism […] *Contemporary authenticity is the new authenticity.* Old debates about whether tourists were being duped need to be replaced with incisive analyses of authenticity as this is expressed through discourse, debate, economic and political policy, performance, resistance, negotiation and assertions about heritage. […] Contemporary authenticity refers to the dynamism of social life, in contrast to the fixity of behaviour implied by terms such as ›authentic experience‹. […] Contemporary authenticity works from the premise that society generates new contexts in which human beings produce meaningful acts and objects without necessarily bringing the past ›faithfully‹ into the present. In this social constructivist view, current performances and consumptions of identity and place are as valid as those historically legitimated. Contemporary authenticity generates and enables new spaces and forms of human interaction and creativity. Thus, far from being kitsch, inappropriately labelled postmodern, or demeaned as a simulacrum, contemporary authenticity is a vital force driving much national and local culture and cultural entrepreneurship today«[11].

For traditional historians this might be a radical standpoint. H. Silverman follows the British geographers and heritage researchers J. E. Tunbridge and G. J. Ashworth, who wrote a couple of years ago in their book »Dissonant Heritage« that different interpretations of the term authenticity are one of the most frequent sources of heritage conflicts. For Tunbridge and Ashworth, historians and custodians generally understand authenticity to mean a »fixed truth«, the genuineness of a »historical original«, which possesses authenticity and therefore has an inherent value[12]. By contrast, heritage planners and tourist providers define authenticity in relation to the needs of the consumer. In practice the two opinions overlap, not only because many actors in the heritage sector studied history or related disciplines. But Tunbridge and Ashworth point to the fact that conflicts about competing definitions of authenticity usually take the form of mutual accusations of trivialisation or elitism. When tourist providers commodify heritage and create »theme parks«, historians and custodians usually perceive these attractions as »inauthentic« or »Disney-like«[13].

OBJECT- AND SUBJECT-RELATED AUTHENTICITIES

Even if these different definitions of authenticity by heritage researchers are ideal types in the Max Weberian sense, I would contend that no serious historian believes in »fixed truths« anymore. But it is of course still worth knowing whether claims of authenticity – be they related to traditions or personal experiences of extreme events – are correct and why they were made. My aim here is to bridge the gap between the »new« and the »old« authenticity (Silverman), between »heritage professionals« and »historians«, and between »contemporary« and »historical« authenticity.

Authenticity is a buzzword, compelling, enigmatic, a kind of catch-all concept. To date, most researchers have adopted a critical distance to this much used term and have distinguished between two forms: subject-related authenticity (in the sense of personal credibility, being true to oneself, trustworthy, honest) and object-related authenticity (in the sense of materially genuine, empirically true, and authorised by an author or artist, etc.)[14]. Although there is a strong desire for authenticity in the public sphere, from a scholarly perspective the idea of the authentic, of authentic memory or authentic historical records remains fictitious. Most scholars tend to emphasise that attributions of authenticity are a construct: »Authentic memory does not exist«, Hanno Loewy and Bernhard Moltmann categorically stated[15]. Historians usually highlight the contrast between »genuine« records of history and »constructed« memories and narratives that have been transformed through reception and transfer processes and are therefore no longer viewed as »authentic«. But of course they do not want to relinquish efforts to achieve historical authentication – be they those by art historians to distinguish between genuine works of art and forgeries, by preservers of historic monuments or material objects of the past to draw as precise a dividing line as possible between original substance and reconstruction, or by those historians and literary scholars who discovered that the Swiss author Benjamin Wilkomirski was not the child who survived the Holocaust he pretended to be, but the musician Bruno Dösseker.

Not forgeries or fakes, but public representations of the past have led Eva Maria Pirker and Mark Rüdiger – who are interested in the manifold ways in which popular discourse on history creates »authenticity fictions« (»Authentizitätsfiktionen«) – to differentiate between »witness« and »experiential« or »affective« authenticity, between first-hand or eyewitness authenticity and authenticity as a mode of emotionalised reception[16]. The past experience of witnesses, valued as an authentic impression of their life stories, on the one hand, and, on the other, the experienced authenticity of people visiting museums, heritage or memorial sites, or reading historical novels and watching films about history, though very different, are still the same side of a coin: both are expressions of subject-related authenticity. And the ascendancy of the term »authenticity« in history, heritage and elsewhere in the last four decades seems deeply bound to the recognition of these subjective dimensions. This can be explained historically. Since the 1970s, processes of individualisation and social pluralisation have given rise to new ideas about »self« and »own« as distinct from »other«. These have not only had an impact on notions of identity and authenticity, but have also changed the way in which we use objects and places to appropriate the past. The sensory appeal of historical remains, relics and traces of the past as well as our empathy for »living« and »embodied«, personal and emotional history increasingly determine how much attention is given to a past event or epoch.

This is particularly true of testimonies and the appropriation of the past through testimonies. As Sara Jones has argued, testimonies that are presented and mediated on television and at memorial sites can often be described as given by witnesses of »experience« rather than of »truth«[17]. And at memorial sites and museums and other sites of historical interest, these different aspects of authenticity are combined: »complementary authenticities« of place and witness authenticity create »an extremely powerful combination of emotion, cognition and empathy, which might lead to the sense that not only does one know ›what happened‹ but also ›what it was like‹. […] The reader, visitor or viewer is invited through processes of identification and the creation of complementary authenticities to feel themselves part of the mediated remembering community constructed in the witnessing text«[18].

THE MUSEUM

The issue of the authenticity of objects has been frequently discussed in museum studies. German cultural studies expert Gottfried Korff regards the specific materiality of objects and their »quality of sensuous and

emotional appeal« as facilitating an emotional link to the past. In an increasingly media-driven world, Korff argues, the museum is one of the few places where it is possible to directly encounter what has been passed down to us via »relic authenticity« and the »contrasting fascination of the authentic«.[19]

By contrast, constructivist approaches have often tried to demystify the authenticity phenomenon of the museum. It has been remarked critically that »authenticity is not about factuality or reality. It is about authority«[20]. According to this viewpoint, authenticity is a culturally specific product and is attributed to things largely independently of their material substance or object biography. Furthermore, authenticity in museums has been described as a »rhetorical mode« which is generated within the framework of exhibitions by a »pact«[21] or a »collaborative hallucination« between visitors, exhibition makers and institutions[22].

In the current debate about the value and attribution of authenticity there are also approaches which try to build a bridge between these different concepts. For Siân Jones and Thomas Yarrow, specialists in the fields of archaeology and social anthropology, »authenticity is neither a subjective, discursive construction nor a latent property of historic monuments waiting to be preserved. Rather it is a property that emerges through specific interactions between people and things«[23]. Jones' and Yarrow's conceptualisation of authenticity as an effect that arises from the interaction of individuals or groups with artefacts and things within places and environments that are relevant to their own historical self-understanding is very convincing. But it is not so much a »property« as an attribution or ascription as part of a process of »doing« and »practising history«, or as an effect that arises when people address and confront their past. And in the case of cultural institutions like museums, memorial sites and other heritage sites, we must bear in mind that they authenticate and authorise objects, artefacts and places as authentic. These authentication processes are multi-layered: they are based on scientific practices, on the arrangement of displayed objects, on the way in which historic places and sites are preserved, transformed and shaped, on the creation of a specific atmosphere[24] which enables people and visitors to reflect on their past, authenticity and identity, and last but not least, on cultural and societal values (**fig. 1**).

HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY AS AN ANALYTICAL TOOL:
ANALYSING AUTHENTICATION PROCESSES

Returning to the difference between subject- and object-related attributions of authenticity, my own argument is double-pronged: Firstly, our interest in identifying something as »true« or »original« or in pointing out that something is authentic in relation to a certain period of time, epoch or style of behaviour and thinking, and our interest in the subjective dimensions of what is told and how it is told, cannot be separated and should not be seen as competing with one another. Even if it might be difficult, for example, to identify whether parts of narrations and statements by witnesses and others about the past are true or false, are told from a very personal point of view, or refer to different layers of time than asserted, the idea of true and false, of authentic and inauthentic, remains indispensable. This also enables us to explain why claims to authenticity have such a powerful cultural impact. It is because they link the authenticity ascribed to historical objects, places, records and narratives with the subjective experience both of the individuals who produced, inhabited, told and used them in the past, and of our desires as recipients to obtain a vivid impression of the past.

My second argument is that the attribution of authenticity in the field of history, heritage, and culture is always related to stories that are and were told about the past. Attributions of authenticity, of genuineness, of originality and uniqueness have to take into account samples from a comparable series of narratives,

Fig. 1 The results of processes and practices of (historical) authentication and authorisation at the »Berlin Wall Memorial« Bernauer Straße: **1** Jumping from East to West – viewing from West to East 1961/2019. – **2** Schwedter Straße. From 1961 to 1989 – and in 2019 (»F*CK AfD«). – **3** Contemporary and historical authenticities. – **4** Memorialisation and Musealisation. – **5** The wall as a listed building. Monument protection and its »past value« (after Alois Riegl). – (1-5 Photos A. Saupe, 2019).

arguments, events (or objects). Without any reflection on these alternative, possible stories, the attribution of authenticity would not make any sense at all. The term »contemporary authenticity«, cited above, is therefore misleading, even if we insist on a »presentist« approach to our past in general[25].

How, then, should we deal with the complex phenomenon of historical authenticity? Rather than simply attributing authenticity, or even taking it as an essence of things, it is preferable to examine authenticity primarily in terms of communicational structures, i.e. to ask to whom and when authenticity is attributed, as well as how and why. In this context, it is worth remembering Helmut Lethen's sceptical words: »It is impossible to clarify what is authentic«. He therefore concluded that it is only possible to analyse the »effects of the authentic«[26]. We can therefore analyse, firstly, attributions of authenticity and claims to authenticity in different discourses as political and cultural arguments. Here we can ask whether and why authenticity is so characteristic of contemporary societies and examine the impact that perceptions of authenticity tied to particular epochs have on how the past is approached. We can also ask to what extent the societal search for self-reassurance associated with the desire for authenticity is connected to nostalgia, and whether the desire for historical authenticity is a global and transnational phenomenon or if there are regional and group-specific characteristics. Secondly, we can study cultural conflicts as conflicts over authenticity, identity and belonging: Claims to authenticity often have an instrumental character and are strategies designed to further political, economic and social goals in various national, regional and transnational contexts. Here authority and authorisation largely determine what historical subjects and societies choose to perceive as »their« history or cultural heritage. Working on this premise, we can examine the conflicting nature of claims to authenticity in a number of contexts – for example in the establishment of research paradigms, in collective identity, or in the presentation of exhibitions. Thirdly, we can examine academic and scientific authentication processes in dealing with history and historical remains. Ascribing authenticity is a mode of generating evidence based on scholarly methods and practices, well-rehearsed rhetoric and socially anchored authentication rituals. We can therefore consider how scholarly styles of thinking, institutional and social frameworks and the practices and techniques employed by museums, archives, conservators and restorers concerned with cultural objects have influenced validation strategies over the course of history. Fourthly, we can study narratives and rhetorics of authentication and the media production of the authentic and its »mediated immediacy«. We might reflect here on how media and media formats influence the perception and generation of historical authenticity and evidence, from print to photography, from radio to television, or from the copy to a virtual reconstruction. And, last but not least, we should not forget classical source criticism in an age of »fake news«.

Notes

1) For a history of the concept in relation to historiography and cultural heritage, see my article Saupe 2016. – See also Lindholm 2008.

2) Lowenthal 1998.

3) Gilmore/Pine 2007.

4) Potter 2010, 6.

5) Wesener 2014.

6) See for example: Labadi 2010; Falser 2012.

7) MacCannell 1973; 1976.

8) Crick 1989.

9) Feifer 1985.

10) Silverman 2015, 69-88.

11) Silverman 2015, 84-85. She also gives an interesting example: »For instance, the Inti Raymi celebration in Cuzco, Peru is an invented tradition based on an ancient Inca festival, and it has had a series of scripts since 1944. That ›inauthenticity‹ is irrelevant. What is important is the role Inti Raymi plays today among various sectors of the local population, among tourists, and in national tourism policy – and with what repercussions for all of these.«

12) Tunbridge/Ashworth 1996.

13) Tunbridge/Ashworth 1996, 265. – See also Frank 2017.

14) Knaller/Müller 2005. – For an adaption of the concept of »subjective« or »existential« authenticity in tourism, see for example: Steiner/Reisinger 2006.

15) »Um es gleich vorweg zu nehmen: Authentische Erinnerung gibt es nicht. Die Rede beschwört vielmehr einen zählebigen Mythos.« (Loewy/Moltmann 1996, 7).

16) Pirker et al. 2010.

17) Jones 2014.

18) Jones 2014, 189. See also p. 43: »Complementary authenticities are an effective method of involving the recipient not only cognitively but also affectively in the past events narrated in and by the memorial medium and are, therefore, of political significance.«

19) Korff 2002, 141.

20) Crew/Sims 1991, 163.

21) Baur 2009, 30-31.

22) Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 167.

23) Jones 2009; 2010.

24) Kerz 2017.

25) For the historicisation of this presentist view on history, see Hartog 2015.

26) Lethen 1996, 209.

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Zusammenfassung / Summary

Zur Analyse von Authentisierungs- und Autorisierungsprozessen im Umgang mit dem kulturellen Erbe und im Museum

Der Beitrag analysiert zeitgenössische akademische Diskurse über die Zuschreibung von Authentizität in Bezug auf Kulturerbe, Geschichtstourismus, Erinnerungskultur und Museum. Er unterscheidet zwischen objekt- und subjektbezogenen Authentizitätszuschreibungen und schlägt vor, dass Authentizitätsbehauptungen im kulturellen Raum hauptsächlich als Argumente in größeren politischen, gesellschaftlichen und historischen Kontexten zu interpretieren sind. Aussagen über Authentizität und wissenschaftliche Praxen der Authentisierung können insofern als Beglaubigungsstrategien verstanden werden. Dies gilt sowohl für Restaurierungs- und Rekonstruktionsbemühungen als auch in Bezug auf das Selbstverständnis von Individuen und größeren sozialen Gruppen. Insofern betont der Beitrag, dass ExpertInnen in Museen, HistorikerInnen und KulturwissenschaftlerInnen Prozesse der Authentisierung und Autorisierung untersuchen sollten, um ein besseres Verständnis für die Wertschätzung und die Inwertsetzung von historischen Stätten und kulturellen Artefakten in Museen und anderen kulturellen Einrichtungen zu erlangen.

Analysing Authentication and Authorisation Processes in Cultural Heritage and the Museum

The article analyses current academic discourses about the attribution of authenticity in relation to cultural heritage, history tourism, memory culture and the museum. It distinguishes between object- and subject-related attributions of authenticity and proposes that claims to authenticity in the cultural sphere must be mainly interpreted as arguments in broader political, societal and historical contexts. Claims to authenticity and practices of authentication, be they related to the preservation and reconstruction of cultural heritage or to the self-understanding of individuals and entire social groups, can therefore be understood as parts of validation processes. Therefore, the contribution argues that museum specialists, historians and other cultural scientists should study processes of authentication and authorisation in order to better understand the appreciation and valorisation of historic sites and cultural artefacts in museums and other cultural institutions.