Theory and Practice of Authenticity in Global Cultural Production

While in academia the notion of authenticity has been increasingly discredited, it thrives as a label within popular discourses and for the marketing of cultural artefacts. Considering both practice and theory of cultural production, this project analyzes the paradoxical status of authenticity as well as its role for the construction of collective identities in a globalizing world of ever-increasing cultural flux.

On a very basic level, the label of the authentic suggests that a cultural product or artefact truthfully reflects the context from which it originates. Depending on the applied context, the emphasis might lie on the expression and reflection of an artist’s unique creativity, a culture’s supposedly exclusive traits, or a collective’s shared experience.

Whereas cultural critics from the Antiquity up to the first half of the twentieth century mainly endorsed the validity of authenticity, more recent approaches within the humanities have tended to be rather suspicious or downright dismissive of the concept. Especially feminist, deconstructivist, and postcolonial debates point out that the label of the authentic always is predicated on, and to some extent serves to mask, the construction of social realities often reflecting hegemonial discourses and ideologies, which, in turn are informed by notions of purity and impurity, self and other.

Involved subprojects (A/B/C) range from an examination of recent debates about how concepts of community need to be revised in a globalized world, an analysis of a Cornish folk music revival, and a discussion of the importance of authenticity for the branding of emerging art worlds in the Greater Middle East. The subprojects are bound together by the desire to respond to the following questions: 1) Under what conditions, by whom, and for whom is the concept of ‘authenticity’ deployed, rejected, or debated, and who profits from it? 2) How can we explain the lasting power of authenticity in cultural practice? 3) How do notions of authenticity differ regarding objects, subjects, and collectives? 4) How can a cross-disciplinary methodology be devised through which to analyze the social function of the notion of ‘authenticity’ in both theoretical and pragmatic terms?

The project contributes to a profound understanding of how contemporary discourses which revolve around ‘authenticity’ are crucial to a nation of an almost mythical allure to immigrants such as Switzerland. Through public lectures and workshops, the projects aims at initiating a critical discourse on authenticity which sheds light on how the promises and dangers inherent to the notion need to be taken into account in discussions of how collective identities are constructed, perpetuated, suppressed, or excluded in today’s world.

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Subproject A:
A Post-Authentic Society? Toward a Metonymic Poetics of Community

Most traditional understandings of what constitutes a community are grounded in the notion of an “authentic” culture and identity shared by members welcomed into a particular communal circle. Such an application of authenticity goes hand in hand with a “metaphoric” conception of community which presupposes that members of a community share a third – i.e. things like values, world views, traditions, histories, and, most often, language – which asserts the alleged alikeness and linkedness between community members. However, such a metaphoric conceptualization has become increasingly problematic. Globalization and its effects – such as increased migration, mobility, and diaspora – have undermined fixed, local communities and made porous the borders not only of the national state, but also of the conceptual line between society and community. Some of the more recent contributions to philosophy and social theory have reacted to these developments by trying to define what could be called a ‘post-identitarian’ community. They mostly revolve around the idea of contingency and present communities that are a result of pure spatial contiguity brought about by a highly mobile and glocalized world. Subproject A approaches the need for a reconceptualization of contemporary communities both by discussing recent theoretical contributions and an examination of European and North-American (post-)modernist literary fiction. Drawing from theorizations by philosophers such as Maurice Blanchot, Jean-Luc Nancy, Giorgio Agamben, the subproject attempts to think of “post-identitarian” societies through the lens provided by the notion of “metonymy.” Likewise considering recent contributions to postcolonial (e.g. Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak) and feminist studies (e.g. Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Donna Haraway), which try to transcend notions of authenticity and promote concepts such as “hybridity,” “mimicry,” “splitness,” “processuality,” and “mixture,” the subproject makes use of “metonymy” as an alternative trope through which contemporary, constantly shifting communities can be best perceived. DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECT I (Ryan Kopaitich) examines how philosophy, specifically theories of language and ontology, serve as the groundwork for a dialectic of community that each individual must negotiate in a post-identitarian society. These theoretical ruminations are accompanied by readings of European and US-American postmodernist literary fiction. DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROJECT II (Viola Marchi) offers an innovative discussion of novel poetics of community anticipated in recent philosophical as well as literary works.

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Subproject B:  
Musical Modes of Authenticity

Ethnomusicology has a longstanding tradition of recognizing “authenticity” as a crucial yet highly contradictory buzzword within various contemporary musical contexts. Examinations of the concept range from the construction of “authentic” musical traditions within the national movements of the nineteenth and twentieth century, the individualistic employment of the term within blues, jazz or rock and folk music movements towards the usage within the different realms of migrant contexts and its iconization within the western-global world music spheres. However, while the issue of authenticity is prominent within ethnomusicological and popular music literature, subproject B’s research on tropes of authenticity that systematically combine practical knowledge with a theoretical reflection constitutes a novelty. Profiting from the interdisciplinary setting of the over-all project, the subproject adapts the shared research questions as follows:

⎯ How is the notion of “authenticity” constructed within a specific musical context? Can “musical authenticity” be defined at all? Are there central, recurring – and culture-transgressing – core elements and reference points? How far do these differ or overlap with other forms of art?

⎯ How does the trope of authenticity affect the performance and perception of music which is a time-based and, thus, a highly flexible art form – e.g. within a national context and the music industry? And what is the impact of the various authenticity concepts on the changing social usage of music?

⎯ How are notions of musical authenticity altered, translated, and challenged within the context of changing socio-political spheres of the modern globalized context?

⎯ Which role does music play within broader communal authentification processes? Is the perception of “authentic music” indicative of a majority-minority dichotomy, e.g. in a migrant context?

⎯ To what extent does the concept of musical authenticity become instrumentalized – and to what means?

As the concept of authenticity has also become a central issue within numerous music revival movements that emerged after the Second World War, subproject B primarily analyzes the pragmatic relevance and utility of the concept within two specific national music revival contexts. DOCTORAL PROJECT I (Lea Hagmann) is concerned with how notions of authenticity play out in the contemporary folk music revival in Cornwall (GB). The affiliated DOCTORAL PROJECT II (Theresa Beyer) takes a look at discussions centering on Swiss folk music, especially gendered “authentic” appearances.

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Subproject C: Authenticity and Hybridity in Culture, Art and Architecture of the Greater Middle East

The past decade has witnessed the fast-paced creation of new art centres in the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf Nations, which are mainly (Dubai, Abu Dhabi) or partly (Doha, Qatar) modelled on Western traditions. Subproject C examines the ways in which this cloning, transplanting or "translating" of Western education and art institutions and museums (e.g. Abu Dhabi: Sorbonne, New York University, Louvre, Uffizi, Guggenheim) highlights the paradoxical nature of "authenticity" when it occurs in a society largely unaffected by Western definitions of civilisation and art – even though the elite of these societies has been educated in the West. Furthermore, it uncovers how these adoptive processes are modelled on tactics developed by today's global cultural consumer and brand capitalism. Thus, within the context of creative economies, the brand culture of the corporate, economic realm has expanded to encompass the cultural realm to the extent that these previously distinct domains today are becoming increasingly indistinguishable. Examining this phenomenon within an interdisciplinary framework (at the intersection of postcolonial, poststructuralist and visual culture studies and critique as well as translation studies) allows examining to what extent “authenticity is strategically used by Western institutions, yet radically destabilized in a different, non-Western environment.” To exemplify the heuristic force (and possible limitations) of the key concept of cultural translation theorized by Homi K. Bhabha in The Location of Culture, we will also consider Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses as the first novel that centrally thematizes and enacts the transformations that result from these global processes, and reveals “authenticity” as a construct.

Subproject C seeks to document this tension as symptomatic of cultural globalization at large. Specifically, the project will provide answers to the following questions:

- How does the actual cultural transfer from West to East and East to West take place and what role does the aesthetic-ethical category of “authenticity” play within this process?
- What comes to the fore through the transmission or “translation” of one culture to the other?
- What role do museums play in this process, as institutions relying on branding strategies through corporate design and identity (in architecture, collection profiles, display forms and so on)?
- What are the consequences of such an exchange for both the artifacts and the importing and exporting cultures respectively?
- How are these exchanges staged, sold, and legitimized?

The doctoral project (by MA Jasmin Chanine) will particularly focus on how the aforementioned states of the Greater Middle East develop different cultural and economic strategies in positioning themselves in the emerging art scenes in the Islamic world. It analyzes the consequences of these emerging art scenes for the social and cultural development of the region and its local communities, and what impact this increasingly visible cultural space has in the West.

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