AUTHENTICITY WITHIN DIGITAL PERFORMANCE: A NEW FRAMEWORK TO UNDERSTAND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN AUDIENCE, VISION TECHNOLOGY AND SCENOGRAPHY

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INTRODUCTION

'Authenticity' is a polysemic word that has woven itself into the fabric of philosophies and cultures, along with studies of society, consumers and the arts, defying a unilateral definition in its application to understand either object or experience. From the Greek *authentikos* meaning 'original, genuine, principal', *authentes* meaning 'one acting on one's own authority' and *autos* referring to the 'self', explorations of authenticity have fluctuated with evolutions of religion, social responsibility, autonomy and agency.[1] Within performance fields,

authenticity is experiencing a resurgence in literature and audience demand, despite the paradox that emerges when considering that the authenticity of theatre that dates back to Plato's arguments on *mimesis* and imitation.[2] While a growing body of research and discussion is considering the authenticity of performance, performer and audience experience, little conversation has taken place in the fields of digital performance and scenography. There is no definition of authenticity in the context of digital performance. It is not yet clear how technology within scenographic environments influences the production or perception of authenticity, and with the ever-increasing access to technology shaping new works, this gap needs addressing to ensure that the form does not fall behind.

This article aims to define authenticity within the context of digital performance and to introduce an Authenticity Framework to inform our understanding of vision technology's impact on audience experience of digital performance's authenticity. This article stems from early findings in doctoral research into professional Australian performance companies' application of digital scenography throughout 2021 and 2022. This evidence-based doctorate seeks to understand how authenticity can inform the design of digital scenographies through enhancing creative practice and improving audience engagement. This article lays the foundation of this new approach to vision technology and allows for future mixed-method studies on Australian digital performance to expand our understanding of digital performance's authenticity. By establishing a discourse of

authenticity to understand and study audience experiences of vision technology, we aim to support designers in producing engaging digital performances. 'Authenticity' in the context of digital performance is defined herein as: the truthful and believable integration of technology within a performance – relative to the work's dramaturgical and scenographic intent – to aid in the audience's emotional engagement. It is critical to note that this definition will evolve as the research continues to be informed by evidence.

This discussion of authenticity centres on what we term 'vision technologies', referring to the visual components of what is commonly called 'AV' or 'audio-visual'. 'Vision' encompasses technology including projection, LED screens or panels, monitors and television, real-time camera feeds, motion-tracking and/or capture systems, as well as the use of mobile phone technology for showing visual media. Anecdotal discussions with Australian designers reveal divisions in the name for these types of technologies: some prefer 'video design', while others prefer 'projection' or 'new media', with many adjusting their terminology depending on content or systems. To avoid a drawn-out debate on naming, we adopt 'vision' as an umbrella term to enfold these technologies. Another key definition comes from Steve Dixon and Chris Salter's understandings on 'digital performance', referring to performances that cast technology in a key role in content, technique and aesthetics, consciously and intentionally entangling vision technology so that it becomes indistinguishable from the form and operation of the work.[3] And finally, the

term 'digital scenography' refers to the scenographic environment of these works, being 'innovative, influential projects where there is a measured, methodological attempt to elicit the specificities of digital technologies, challenge the space of performance, rupture the landscape of theatre and the perception of the audience, evoke new topical digital-cultural subjectivities, and push the boundaries of possibility in performance'.[4]

We begin this argument by reviewing existing discussions of authenticity within philosophy, culture and arts, weaving together key contributors to these fields to arrive at three core constructs – truthfulness, believability and emotional engagement – that aid in understanding vision technology's impact on audience perceptions of authenticity within digital performance. These three constructs are then refined through an examination of the audience demand for authenticity within the theatre-going experience. We argue the existing research has almost entirely excluded scenography and technology from audience studies of authenticity. Having established the audience demand for this valuable trait, the article then turns to consider the paradoxical relationship between theatre and authenticity. Unpacking a multitude of responses to the question of theatre's authenticity, we yet again reveal a lack of discussion or attempts at defining authenticity within the context of digital performance and scenography. In an attempt to address these absences, we present our definition of authenticity for digital performance alongside the new Authenticity Framework, before applying this framework to

the first-hand audience experience of two Australian digital per-formances: *Laser Beak Man* by Dead Puppet Society (2019), and *Wireless* by Lisa Wilson and Paul Charlier (2017). A brief reflective analysis is offered as an initial demonstration of how the Authenticity Framework can assist in understanding the impact of technology on the perception of digital performance's authenticity.

BUILDING THE AUTHENTICITY FRAMEWORK: IDENTIFYING THE CONSTRUCTS OF AUTHENTICITY WITHIN PHILOSOPHY, CULTURE AND THE ARTS

TRUTHFULNESS

The thing is to find a truth which is truth for me, to find the idea for which I am willing to live and die. (Søren Kierkegaard)[5]

The origins of authenticity in modern Western thought arguably began with Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's examination of faith and truthfulness. Authenticity in these early writings was tied to the search for one's own truth – 'become what one is', Kierkegaard argued – in order to live a rich, religious life.[6] Kierkegaard's notion

of one's truth laid the groundwork for the evolution of authenticity beyond religious association. Charted in Charles Guignon's *On Being Authentic*, 'authenticity' developed against a backdrop of centuries of religious reform, the rise of science and the scientific method, and the notion of society as a man-made construct. Modern authenticity, Guignon suggests, is the 'personal concern with achieving self-realisation and personal fulfillment through getting in touch with one's own inner self'.[7] Authenticity is an ideal; there is something inherently 'right' about pursuing an authentic self.[8] Philosophy's valuing of authenticity supports the privileging of and desire for authenticity within other disciplines, including art and culture. In visual art, authenticity is synonymous with originality, essential for ensuring status, prestige and wealth.[9] The importance of truth remains, as seen in aesthetics and philosophy scholar Theodore Grayck's note on authenticity and art:

> Broadly understood, a work of art possesses authenticity when it is 'true' to its authorial and/or cultural origins by reflecting beliefs and values held by its creator and/or creator's community. However, different eras, artforms, and critical traditions emphasize distinct relationships between art and its sociohistorical origins, so prominent species of authenticity display considerable variety.[10]

Following Grayck, authenticity is still tied to 'truth' – not to religious truth, as Heidegger proposed, but rather to a state or process

of being true *to* something, be it a quality or characteristic. This thread is mirrored in cultural and discourse studies, such as Theo Van Leeuwen's examination of authentic talk. Van Leeuwen offers three definitions of authenticity: first, something may be called authentic because it is '"genuine", because its origin or authorship are not in question, and it is not an imitation or a "copy"'; second, authenticity can be synonymous with authority, in that an object or experience may be deemed authentic through a genuine signature, stamp or seal of approval; third, something may be considered authentic 'because it is thought to be true to the essence of something, to a revealed truth, a deeply felt sentiment'.[11] Given the presence of 'truth' and 'truth-fulness' in all stages of authenticity's evolution and across multiple disciplines, we argue that it is the first construct to adopt in defining authenticity within digital performance.

BELIEVABILITY

The second construct, believability, stems from cultural theorists Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess's consideration of authenticity as motivation and aesthetic experience. The authors suggest that authenticity 'refers to the condition or quality of realness. When we say that something is authentic, we mean that we find it genuine, the real thing, and not false, counterfeit, or an imitation'.[12] A key aspect of this definition is this notion of 'finding' something to be genuine or real: authenticity can stem from an experience by the individual or group, as well as or instead of being an inherent quality of the object itself. We argue that

there must be an aspect of believability to this experience: if the object or experience were not believable, then it could not be considered as real, genuine or authentic. As will be shown, the disciplines of audience research, theatre and performance studies further support the use of believability as an authenticity construct.

EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Finally, the experience of emotional engagement is tied to the experience of authenticity. Sociologist and emotions studies academic E. Doyle McCarthy argues that emotions are a key tool with which people search for and discover authenticity, while sociologists Ralph Turner and Jerald Schutte suggest that people may be better equipped to *describe feelings* of authenticity as opposed to *classifying* what makes something authentic.[13] Turner and Schutte's method for examining what they call the 'true-self' asks participants to reflect on situations and memories that led to an experience of 'self-feeling' or authenticity.[14] The researchers recognise the difficulty of asking participants to accept a relatively stable or global definition of an idea as complex as authenticity, and therefore focus on the participant's *feelings* of experiences.[15] Feelings are privileged over more cognitive approaches, demonstrating that emotional engagement with a situation is an indicator of experiencing authenticity. As with believability, emotional engagement is further reinforced within the discussion of audience demand for authenticity.

CONSUMERS, AUDIENCES AND AUTHENTICITY

> The search for authenticity is one of the main drivers for building relationships and retaining audiences in cultural organizations. (Ruth Rentschler and Jennifer Radbourne)[16]

Consumer demand for authentic experiences is demonstrated time and again in the existing literature across marketing, consumer and tourism research, where the authenticity of experience is shown to increase consumer drive for products and experiences.[17] As appears to be the case in every discipline, definitions of authenticity are varied. While similar terms to those already found in philosophy, culture and art re-emerge – for example, 'genuineness' and 'truth' – tourism research in particular provides an interesting departure from essentialist notions of 'real' verses 'fake' in the authenticity discourse.[18] This field offers an interesting example for authenticity within theatre as it touches on the paradox of artificial, curated environments – the museum, for example – in producing authentic experiences. Seminal tourism scholar Dean MacCannell, who introduced 'authenticity' to tourism studies, proffered the notion of 'staged authenticity' to refer to the careful curation of the sought-after 'backstage' space of the tourist experience: that which is real, that which is beyond the 'normal' tourist experience, is carefully designed to appear genuine to enhance the authenticity of the consumer experience.[19] As theatre scholar Valerie Pye noted in her consideration of the staged authen-

ticity of Shakespeare's Globe, MacCannell breaks authenticity into subjective and objective binaries: subjective in relation to the tourist's experience, objective in relation to the site or attraction.[20] MacCannell essentially suggested that there were two forms of authenticity: perceived and real. Like Pye, we align our understanding more with MacCannell's contemporary, Erik Cohen, who instead suggests that authenticity is a concept that is socially constructed and therefore negotiable.[21] Repurposing an earlier quote from Vannini and Burgess, if 'we' (the individual or the collective audience) 'find something' (agree on an experience or object quality) to be genuine and real, we in effect construct its authenticity. This is vastly different from the notion of an object possessing authenticity by right or trait. The notion of a negotiable, socially constructed authenticity allows us to step beyond essentialist notions of a 'real' or absolute form of 'truth', to a more postmodern understanding of multiple realities and truths existing concurrently within a performance experience.

Turning to the context of theatre and performance audiences, there is a wealth of research demonstrating demand for authentic experiences. Evidence-based research from leaders in this space – Jennifer Radbourne, Katya Johanson, Hilary Glow and Tabitha White – indicates that authenticity of experience informs an audience's engagement and connection. First seen in 'The Audience Experience: Measuring Quality in the Performing Arts' (2009), Radbourne, Johanson, Glow and White studied the experience of Australian audiences in various live performances, later proposing

a new Arts Audience Experience Index (AAEI) composed of four quality indicators: knowledge transfer or learning, risk management, collective engagement and, crucially for this research, authenticity.[22] Authenticity is understand by the researchers as 'a form of truth within the performing arts event', linked first to the truthfulness of 'what is offered': the technical standards of the performance, and the faithfulness of the performance to the original text/score. Authenticity is further associated with the audience's 'emotional perception' of the work.[23] Finally, the authors link the audience's perception of the 'quality' of the production with their perception of authenticity. Radbourne et al. determined that the greater the perception of authenticity, the greater the audience enjoyment. Radbourne, Glow and Johanson soon expanded their definition of authenticity in 'Measuring the Intrinsic Benefits of Arts Attendance' to include believability, drawing on consumer and tourism research similar to those referenced above.[24]

While authenticity is shown to be critical in audience engagement, Radbourne et al.'s 'Measuring the Intrinsic Benefits of Arts Attendance' does not measure the impact of scenography or technology on the audience's perception of authenticity. So too is this the case in further applications of the AAEI by the original researchers and others – notably Au, Ho and Chan's empirical application of the Index across multiple Hong Kong performances. Au et al. expand Radbourne et al.'s definition in proposing that another aspect of authenticity is the audience's perception of the work as

being emotionally resonate.[25] Indeed, authenticity is proposed as being 'mainly an emotional component' of the performing arts experience.[26] While the addition of emotional resonance to our understanding of authenticity is crucial, Au et al. – like Radbourne et al. – fail to consider the authenticity of design or technology within performance.

To date, one empirical study does speak to this gap, although it leaves room for more extensive discussion. 'Flow within Theatrical Consumption: The Relevance of Authenticity' by Aykol, Aksatan and İpek examines authenticity of the act of performance, the venue and the design. The researchers asked: is the performance perceived as expected? Were changes made to the original work? Are the performers perceived as true to their characters and their selves? Is the space unique? Is it true to itself? Does it perform its role as expected?[27] Believability and emotional impact emerge once more as key to building authenticity within a performance-going experience. Rarely seen in other studies, Aykol et al. touch briefly on performance design, asking their audience to score their perception of the accuracy of costumes and the stage decor as being appropriate for the play in question.[28] This is the first hint that researchers suspect the importance of design in audience perceptions of authenticity. Yet, authenticity here is only measured on whether the design stays true to the playwright's original intentions and does not address any digital aspects of the design.

THE PARADOX OF THEATRE AND AUTHENTICITY

> Theatre has in the twentieth century been the one place
> that had the highest chance of being perceived as real
> precisely because it so obviously carried the signs of its own
> fakeness. (Daniel Schulze)[29]

This article set out to define 'authenticity' in the digital performance.
As such, we must now consider: what does it mean for theatre itself to
be authentic? How do theatre and performance navigate the tension
between artifice and truth, and – to appropriate MacCannell's term –
how can the staged authenticity of the theatre be truly authentic? The
following examines a variety of perspectives on this paradox – many
of which helpfully strengthen our three constructs of authenticity. In
so doing, we unearth a lack of consideration of digital performance
in the existing literature.

There many answers to the question of theatre's claim
to authenticity. More essentialist views relate authenticity to the
'original': for example, Jonas Barish argued in his 1994 article 'Is
There Authenticity in Theatrical Performance?' that the answer to
our question is, simply, no. The authenticity of historical works, spe-
cifically Shakespeare, are dependent on our ability to 'recreate what
the play might have looked like to its first audiences'.[30] This historical
accuracy was impossible to achieve, Barish argued, as we simply
do not know enough about the 'original' work, making authentic

stagings impossible. Fortunately, understandings of theatrical authenticity have evolved beyond a connection to historical accuracy. For example, in his seminal work *Liveness* – which relies heavily on Walter Benjamin's notions of 'authenticity' and 'aura' in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility' – Philip Auslander argues that while authenticity may indeed relate to the 'original' item/performance, the spectator can still be perfectly capable of experiencing authenticity within performance.[31] A focus on the authenticity of experience as compared to object authenticity is a familiar notion within the theatre debate.

At the other end of the authenticity debate, cultural theorist Jeffrey Alexander removes any need for 'originality' or historical verification. Alexander proposes that the act of performing becomes authentic simply through its enaction, in which 'symbols and signs become one': 'Script, direction, actor, background culture, *mise-en-scène*, audience, means of symbolic production – all these separate elements of performance become indivisible and invisible. The mere action of performing accomplishes the performance's intended effect.'[32] Gordon McDougall adds further nuance by arguing that theatre has a peculiar access to a reality that transcends the real – *specifically* because of its paradoxical relationship to time, space and reality,

> theatre can help us arrive at a condition which feels more truthful than these apparent contradictions in reality. Through the creation of dual perception within a space

which is outside normal perceptions of time and conscious reality-testing, theatre images identify pathways towards more conscious living.[33]

Others argue that theatre is authentic when it offers a connection for its audiences to genuine, valuable experiences, as seen in the works of Wong and Bundy on the importance of authentic stories – that is, those based in the lived experiences of their child participants – being incorporated into theatre-making; and Ben Walmsey's consideration of authenticity of co-creation in theatre.[34]

Authenticity in theatre is still linked to truth, as Radbourne et al. suggested previously.[35] Not one fixed truth, however, and the qualities that make one performance authentic may impinge on the authenticity of another. Drawing again on Cohen, a negotiable authenticity can exist in myriad forms within all types of performance because it is socially constructed by the individual or the collective audience. As Auslander suggests on the topic: 'what is considered authentic in the context of one subgenre is not necessarily seen that way in another'. Or to quote Aykol et al., authenticity is in 'the eye of the beholder'.[36] Authenticity within the context of a Brechtian staging of *Mother Courage* may be vastly different to a work of Robert Lepage. The flexibility of authenticity is one of its most powerful traits.

Theatre's authenticity is often considered in relation to that of the performer, as in the arguments of Radbourne et al., and Moulard et al.[37] Henderson and Gabora define authentic performance as 'the

ability to be genuine, to accurately reflect who one really is, and to be true to the situation one is in'.[38] Echoing the second of our three constructs, authenticity is related to the believability of the performance, in that an authentic performance feels 'natural' while an 'inauthentic performance feels faked, forced or imitative'.[39]

Finally, Daniel Schulze's recent *Authenticity in Contemporary Theatre and Performance: Make It Real* offers an essential lens to tie various notions of authenticity together. In a thorough examination of the works of Baudrillard, Funk, Straub and others, Schulze argues there is a 'hunger for authentic experience [present] in many areas of cultural production, not just in art, literature and television but also in everyday practices'.[40] He suggests that authenticity has been a 'major factor in theatre and the performing arts for the past decade or so', and is now sought after within the performing arts.[41] This is in response to the 'fakeness' of society, whereby 'the perceived superficiality and fakeness of contemporary culture leads to an increased wish for genuine experience, or some sort of reality that is perceived as not fake – in a word: authentic'.[42] Schulze resists defining authenticity within theatre, but does link authenticity to the familiar experience of *truth* and *realness* as identified in our three constructs above. Despite his extensive investigation of the subject, Schulze's text does not address the authenticity of scenography or digital performance. He does, however, address the paradox, as seen in the quote that opened this section. Theatre is unique in that it can straddle the paradoxical divide, being simultaneously both real and fake:

> The phenomenon of authenticity must be conceived of as a paradox that is both marked and unmarked and, through this mechanism, gains its efficacy. It embodies both the fake and the original and thus voids these dichotomies. It is – precisely because of its position in an ontological limbo – the only entity that can sew together the fragments of deconstruction.[43]

The existing arguments of Schulze and others on authenticity and theatre further strengthen the relevance of the three constructs identified earlier – truthfulness, believability and emotional engagement – as tools for studying and understanding authenticity within digital performance. What is lacking from the existing debate is a clear answer to the question: what does it mean for digital scenography to be authentic in the eyes of the spectator? And does the presence of technology impact the perception of the authenticity of the performance itself? Very few consider this, and those who do fail to offer a definition or framework to understand authenticity. The most common inclusion of authenticity within digital performance occurs when authors draw on Benjamin's 'aura' argument in relation to liveness and presence. The unique existence of the 'aura' in time and space, and the loss of authenticity in reproduction, has been used by seminal digital performance authors, including Dixon, to analyse the application and perception of technology onstage.[44] Discussion of the authentic and inauthentic also appears in Ladley's examination of

Heidegger's theories in the context of telematic performance; Vincent et al.'s analysis of *faux*-interactivity in Australian Dance Theatre's *Multiverse*; Hibino's consideration of Hirata Oriza's android theatre and his careful oscillation between fakery and authenticity; and Newell, Edwards and Cairns' exploration of liveness of synthetic speech in human–machine interaction in performance.[45] Lastly, Somdahl-Sands and Finn go so far as to propose that this current age of 'increasingly mediated performance' necessitates a re-examination of the 'core assumptions' that define authenticity. However, while their argument offers an interesting attempt to break down the binary of the authenticity of live and mediated film/internet performance – again grounded in Benjamin's notion of the 'aura' and 'authenticity' – Somdahl-Sands and Finn, and the others listed here, stop short at offering a new definition of authenticity within digital performance that could aid in this 'age' of mediated works.[46]

DEFINING AUTHENTICITY WITHIN DIGITAL PERFORMANCE

Through this review of the literature, we have sought to establish the power of authenticity within the audience experience across the fields of theatre and performance, arguing that despite a clear increase in demand for authenticity, existing conversations do not consider the authenticity of digital performance. With its heavy reliance on technology as a key storytelling and design device, digital

performance offers a unique experience for audiences and its place within the authenticity debate should be discussed. Using this review as a catalyst, we define 'authenticity' in the context of digital performances as the truthful and believable integration of technology within a performance work – relative to the performance's dramaturgical and scenographic intent – to aid in the audience's emotional engagement. The three constructs as identified throughout our review – truthfulness, believability and emotional engagement – form the base of what we now call the Authenticity Framework, acting as useful tools to study audience perceptions of the authenticity of digital performance. While these constructs may trouble some as essentialist notions, Schulze argues that 'the theatre's and audiences' hunger for authenticity are but one expression of a culture that is almost desperately in search of essentialist concepts, of which authenticity is only one'.[47] Furthermore, regardless of the debate and theatre's paradoxical relationship to the notion of authenticity, for audiences, Schulze suggests, it simply may not matter.[48]

THE AUTHENTICITY FRAMEWORK

Truthfulness: the truthful application of vision technology within the context of the directorial, dramaturgical and scenographic intent of the work. This truthfulness can relate to the application of technology as being true to the 'essence' of the performance's original script or score;[49] whether the technical system is 'up to

technical standards';[50] and whether its use is 'faithful to the script'[51] or, we argue, to the director/ choreographer's intention for the work/ adaptation of the text. Analysing the vision's truthfulness therefore begins with considering whether its application aligns with the stated truth of the creative concept, as well as the quality of the technology (its design and its technical standards).

Believability: the capacity of the vision technology to 'achieve believability, meaning and representation'.[52] Does the use of vision technology in the performance – whether as a scene-setting device, an interactive co-performer, or any other application – feel natural and genuine, or does it feel fake or forced?[53] This analysis centres on the audience member's perception that the technology feels like an inherent piece of the work, as well as on the perception of believable interactions between the technology, performers, and other physical/ aural/ olfactory/ tactile components of the performance environment.

Emotional engagement: the ability of the vision technology to evoke an emotional response within the audience. Does integrating vision technology increase the audience's emotional engagement? Does the use of technology as design or as a storytelling device make the work emotionally resonant for the audience?[54] Does the technology produce an emotional impact or outcome for the audience?[55] This analysis queries the ways in which technology affects individual perception, and whether this increases or decreases the audience's feelings of engagement with or emotional responses to the piece.

A summary of the compiled literary sources supporting the Authenticity Framework constructs of truthfulness, believability and emotional engagement is given in the following table:

Authenticity Construct	Supporting literature/existing empirical research
Truthfulness	Radbourne et al. "The Audience Experience: Measuring Quality in the Performing Arts" (20) – "A form of truth within the performing arts event"
	Radbourne et al. "The Audience Experience: Measuring Quality in the Performing Arts" (20) – Relates to the "authenticity of what is offered: is the performance up to technical standards? Does the audience believe the play is by the playwright whose name is on the program? Is the music performance faithful to the score?"
	Au et al. (2016, p. 29) – "One aspect of authenticity is the presentation of the performance, for example, how far the performance is faithful to the script"
	Van Leeuwen (393) – "Finally, something can be called 'authentic' because it is thought to be true to the essence of something"
	Newell et al. (224) – "Truthfulness"
Believability	Radbourne et al. "Measuring the Intrinsic Benefits of Arts Attendance" (365) – "Capacity to achieve believability, meaning and representation"
	Vannini and Burgess (104) – "In general, authenticity refers to the condition or quality of realness. When we say that something is authentic, we mean that we find it genuine, the real thing, and not false, counterfeit, or an imitation."
	Vincent et al. – realness
	Auslander – realness
	Aykol et al. – believability
	Henderson and Gabora (2524) – "Thus an authentic performance is one that seems natural… while an inauthentic performance feels faked, forced, or imitative"
Emotional Engagement	Radbourne et al. "The Audience Experience: Measuring Quality in the Performing Arts" (20) – "The second component to authenticity in performing arts is the audience's emotional perception"
	Au et al. (29, 41) – "Emotionally resonating"; authenticity is "mainly an emotional component".
	Henderson and Gabora; Turner and Schutte – Relates to "feelings" of authentic experiences, not dependent upon the participant being able to articulate exactly why they are authentic
	McCarthy (242) – emotions are some of the most important ways that modern persons search for and discover their authenticity: their sense of who they really are
	Aykol et al. – emotional impact/outcomes

FIGURE 1: A TABLE SHOWING THE COMPILED LITERARY SOURCES SUPPORTING THE AUTHENTICITY FRAMEWORK CONSTRUCTS OF TRUTHFULNESS, BELIEVABILITY, AND EMOTIONAL ENGAGEMENT.

FIGURE 2: DEAD PUPPET SOCIETY'S *LASER BEAK MAN* (2019). NOTE THE INTEGRATION OF THE BODIES BETWEEN THE LAYERED SCREENS, THE MATCHING AESTHETIC OF THE PHYSICAL PUPPET, AND THE DIGITAL SCENOGRAPHY. PHOTOGRAPH: DEAN HANSEN, 2019.

APPLYING THE AUTHENTICITY FRAMEWORK

A mixed-method study is in progress to test the value of this new definition within digital performance as well as the effectiveness of the Authenticity Framework. As an interim demonstration, the following is an analysis of personal experiences of the first author as an audience member in *Laser Beak Man* by Dead Puppet Society (2019 season) and *Wireless* by Lisa Wilson and Paul Charlier (2017). The intention is to demonstrate how truthfulness, believability and emotional engagement may be perceived within digital performance, using the questions listed above as a guide for reflection. First-person is used to highlight the reflective, subjective nature of these perceptions, and I (Rixon) begin with a short summary of the works in question.

LASER BEAK MAN
BY DEAD PUPPET SOCIETY (2019 SEASON)

Part-puppet show, part-rock concert, *Laser Beak Man* is the work of leading Australian visual puppet theatre company, Dead Puppet Society, and brings to life the artwork of Tim Sharp. The scenography is composed entirely of LED screens and pre-rendered content, relying on heavily rehearsed interactions between puppets, drone-flown objects, human puppeteers, and a live band led by Ball Park Music's Sam Cromack. The LED screens offer near-complete coverage of the proscenium arch opening, with the central two surfaces staggered to create a walkway through which the puppeteers are obscured, creating a 'ground' upon which the puppets can stand. The work blends the themes of climate change, greed, capitalism and friendship with a classical superhero narrative. While Sharp's visual style may suggest that the work is geared towards younger audiences, *Laser Beak Man* is marketed to all ages.

WIRELESS *BY LISA WILSON AND PAUL CHARLIER (2017)*

FIGURE 3: PRE-RENDERED CONTENT OF JOSHUA THOMSON IS MAPPED ON TO A MOVING SET PIECE, AND THEN ECHOED IN THE PROJECTION UPSTAGE, PRESENTED IN TILES TO GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF SURVEILLANCE FOOTAGE. PHOTOGRAPH: DYLAN EVANS, 2017.

Wireless is the result of a collaboration between choreographer Lisa Wilson and composer/ software designer Paul Charlier. Described by the creators as an intermedia dance-theatre work, the piece weaves projection – both pre-rendered as well as in real time via feeds from cameras and smartphones – mobile phone interactivity with sound, and projection mapping on to physical sets. Wilson and Charlier suggest that *Wireless* employs 'untethered people and untethered

technology' – including tracking technology – 'to go inside and re-present something dark and fragile inside each individual – loss of trust'.[56] The dancers explore notions of disconnected trust as they hold firm to their ever-present smartphones.

THE CONSTRUCTS IN ACTION

Truthfulness: We have argued that vision technology is truthful when its use serves the essence of the total work. As I sat in the darkened theatre watching *Laser Beak Man*, with its intense visual aesthetic and complex puppetry, I felt immersed in the magical world of the play, in large part due to the vision technology. The performance's scenographic environment is established almost solely by the immense LED screens, working in tandem with the matching aesthetic of the physical puppets. The careful use of Sharp's original art work in creating the settings felt – in my experience – right. By sticking to the artist's aesthetic, by making the work come off the canvas and on to the screen and, in doing so, creating a three-dimensional world that the puppet-characters could inhabit, the vision technology – I felt – stayed true to the essence of what *Laser Beak Man* intended: bringing Sharp's imagination to life (see Figure 1). Truthfulness can also relate to a perception of vision technology's quality. This does not ask an expert judgement of the system but rather a feeling of stability, of technology doing what it's meant to do. *Laser Beak Man*'s LED technology never glitched or wavered in its

precise presentation of locations or scenes. No obvious errors broke me out of the work. I could stay immersed in the suspended reality of the piece, following the journey of these characters. Despite the scale of the technology in the work, everything served a single purpose – world-building – and for this outcome, it felt truthful.

Unlike *Laser Beak Man*, *Wireless* set out to directly question society's relationship with smartphones and other technology. As such, the heavy use of both visible technology (projection, camera feeds, devices) and invisible technology (video effects responding in apparent real-time) in the work was dramaturgically essential. Vision technology became co-performer, responding to and triggering responses in the performers. Its presence was essential, and in that sense truthful to the intention of the work. Regarding the sticky question of quality, I did not experience the same sense of ease with the vision technology as in *Laser Beak Man*; rather, I was frequently asking myself: 'Is vision working the way it should be right now?' In the Dead Puppet Society work, I knew what technology was meant to do, so I could easily discern if it was being true to its purpose. In the case of *Wireless*, this sense was hampered by unclear interactivity and a disconnect from performer movements and system responses. While the vision never appeared to falter, as an audience member I was quite simply never sure. This sparks an interesting point on perceptions of truthfulness – even though I didn't know if the vision was being true to its purpose, another audience member might well have perfectly perceived the interaction, or even have been quite

relaxed in a state of unknowing. The unique, individual perception of authenticity is both essential to understanding audience response to vision technology and yet another reason why we seek to understand more about these constructs through larger, evidence-based studies.
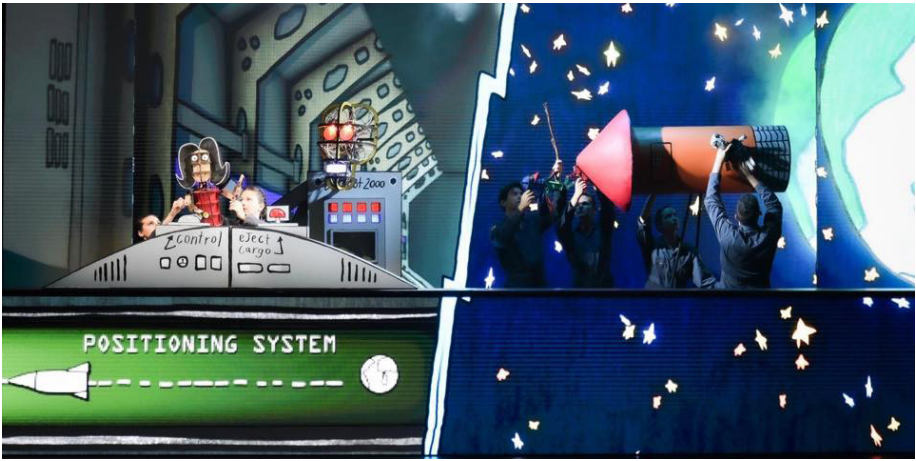

FIGURE 4: *LASER BEAK MAN* TRANSITIONS, IN WHICH VISION IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE CINEMATIC NATURE OF THE PRODUCTION, WITH STAR WIPES AND HARD CUTS BETWEEN SCENES. PHOTOGRAPH: DEAN HANSEN, 2019.

Believability: *Laser Beak Man*'s complete reliance on vision technology to create the world of the work felt so genuine in my experience perhaps due to the genre: a puppet performance, set in a fictional world with superheroes and villains, offers the ideal setting for heavily stylised digital scenography. Staging this piece in a naturalistic setting may have felt disingenuous. In tandem with precision puppeteering, *Laser Beak Man* seamlessly shifts from action sequence to

intimate exchange, from walking to flying, from the city to the ocean island. The transitions are effortless and realistic (at least in accordance with the established aesthetic). The two worlds, physical and digital, were in perfect harmony, and it was impossible to separate *Laser Beak Man* from its digital surrounds – performance and technology appear completely enmeshed. The interaction between the live body, puppet body and the vision was the key to the work's believability for my experience: cinematic transitions in the digital content were timed perfectively with performer movements. For example, as seen in Figure 3, front and rear LED content would split and 'wipe' across the space, transitioning from one world to another. The performers' carefully rehearsed movements were in perfect sync, never rupturing the believability of the locations created by the LED walls.

 Wireless required a completely different type of experience from its vision technology. Pre-recorded bodies were projection-mapped on to the shifting physical scenery, interacting with the live body in a carefully choreographed interplay between the animate and inanimate (Figure 4). In these moments, I became lost in differentiating between the digital and physical bodies. I believed, if only for split moments at a time, that the digital bodies were real. Working with digital simulations of the human body poses more of a challenge to believability, particularly when compared to the stylised art of *Laser Beak Man*. Yet while I was aware of the 'otherness' of the pre-recorded body, it was easy to suspend my disbelief as *Wireless* had intentionally asked me to consider the interactions between

body and machine as part of my induction into the work (via the programme notes, advertising, etc). Wilson and Charlier's creative intent for *Wireless* meant that vision was an inherent and expected part of the work: its inclusion felt utterly natural and genuine to me. There were some problematic interactions between technology and performer that broke my belief at times, which I shall share in my final consideration of the works' emotional engagement.

FIGURE 5: GABRIEL COMERFORD (CENTRE) AND STORM HELMORE (LEFT, PRE-RECORDED) IN *WIRELESS* (2019). PHOTO: DYLAN EVANS

FIGURE 6: DPS PROJECTION DESIGNER JUSTIN HARRISON WORKED IN PARTNERSHIP WITH ARTIST TIM SHARP TO CREATE NEW CONTENT FOR *LASER BEAK MAN* BASED ON SHARP'S EXISTING SERIES OF ART WORKS. NOTE THE HAND-DRAWN QUALITY OF THE GRAPHICS BY SHARP. PHOTOGRAPH: DEAN HANSEN.

Emotional engagement: This construct asks: did the vision technology evoke an emotional response within the audience? Is the use of technology resonating emotionally? Without the visual world created by the LED technology in *Laser Beak Man*, I simply could not have understood the plight of the central characters; I could not have gone with them on their journey of personal discovery and friendship. While physical sets could perhaps have substituted for locations, the sense of magic created by the vision technology – its effortless transitions from one place to another; the use of special effects; the ability to zoom our perspective in and out – heightened my connection to the work. Through the vision technology, *Laser Beak*

Man established a digital world that made me invest in the story of a collection of inanimate objects. I felt their losses and their triumphs. I lost sight of reality, and I feel that this was an excellent indication of my emotional engagement.

My engagement with *Wireless*, however, was hindered by a lack of clarity concerning the system's interactivity. Various bits of information told me as an audience member that these interactions were occurring in real time: descriptions of the piece discuss tracking technology; the dancers moved their devices in a manner that suggested gyroscopic and accelerometer responses; and Charlier himself was placed at the front of the seating, behind a console, indicating that there was a human feedback loop providing input for the piece. Despite all of this, my engagement with the work was frequently disrupted because I was unsure of whether the movement that I was watching – the phone moving to and fro, and the performer activating the buttons on their device (Figure 6) – was genuinely triggering a response. Unlike *Laser Beak Man*, where the relationship between digital scenography and live performer was clear, *Wireless* left me uncertain about whether the system interactivity was authentic. Going back to the previous construct for a moment, I wasn't quite sure what to believe. Even in quiet moments, when dancer Gabriel Comerford slowly moved his device around his body, I was unsure about how exactly the soundscapes were responding to his movements. This may have been intentional, but as the work was centered on our relationship to mobile devices, this lack of clarity

between cause and effect drew me out time and again, and ultimately left me feeling less engaged with the experience.

FIGURE 7: DANCER GABRIEL COMERFORD MANIPULATING SOUND VIA HIS PHONE IN *WIRELESS*. PHOTOGRAPH: DYLAN EVANS, 2017.

CONCLUSION

This article has put forward a definition of 'authenticity' within the context of digital performance, seeking to expand the existing conversation to this vibrant form of live performance. Through a detailed review of the existing literature in philosophy, culture, sociology, arts, tourism, consumer studies and theatre, authenticity's value

to performance and the audience became clear. The Authenticity Framework, drawing on the constructs of truthfulness, believability and emotional engagement, can act as useful means to understand the perception of authenticity of digital performance. While this article is limited to case studies of live performances, we argue that the concepts we have outlined could equally apply to online, virtual or Zoom theatre.

Another question emerges from this discussion: beyond the *experience* of authenticity of digital performance, what does it mean for the inanimate technological *object* to possess authenticity? Many disciplines have considered the authenticity of the inorganic/inanimate, specifically the discussions in visual arts and music from the likes of Benjamin, Foucault, Frith and Auslander. This body of literature offers perfect precedent to inform how the authenticity of the vision technology can be described. There are also exciting possibilities in the adoption of new materialism into scenographic practice, as seen in Joslin McKinney's writing, and object agency may lay the foundation for a rich discussion on vision technology's authenticity.[57] Further discussion is needed here.

The Authenticity Framework is not intended merely as a lens for understanding extant works. Our aim is to better understand how technology impacts audience perceptions of authenticity, and to produce a framework that can be adopted by practitioners in the creation of their works to increase audience engagement. Therefore, the Framework must mature to strengthen its usefulness for digital

performance-makers. Rixon's mixed-method study of multiple Australian digital performances is in progress to address this need, and the resulting data will allow the Framework to not only analyse audience experience but aid in the creation of authentic digital scenography.[58] Both sides of the performance-making 'equation' are being studied – the process of the creative team, and the audience reception – to understand authenticity within digital performance and the creative practices that result in meaningful engagement with digital performance. Future publications will offer insight into real-world audience experience as well as the creative processes employed to generate authentic digital performance. This ongoing research will lead to an evidence-based Authenticity Framework for use in the creation of new digital scenographies.

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