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Unreviewed Mixed Matters Article:

Book Review: The Movement - Comments on the Booklet How to Organize a Historical Event involving Reenactment Groups

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I have happily noticed that there is a movement within the re-enactment scene - a move towards discussing re-enactment and living history on a meta-level. In 2014 I published my

festival guide *How to organize a historical event involving reenactment groups* (Aune Nilsen 2014). As a part of an EEA-grants project, we were asked to organize a re-enactment event in Transylvania. The Romanian hosts (Rasnov Municipality and Asociatia Mioritics) were eager to learn about all our best (and worst) practices. After years of doing Viking re-enactment and organising historical events, I felt that I had something to bring to the table. A booklet was born. The guide described the five phases of event organizing: preparatory phase, preliminary phase, moments before the war, war phase and aftershocks. It is written both from an organiser's viewpoint, and from a re-enactors viewpoint - perhaps in an attempt to deepen the understanding between the two. The guide is far from all-encompassing. First of all, I mainly focus on the Viking and medieval re-enactment scene and the market-festival setting. I realise that the guidelines given might not be suited for re-enactments of other time periods, or for other concepts. Secondly, I do not go into detail on funding and budget planning. However, I believe that the guide both describes and opens for dialogue about events, re-enactors and the re-enactment scene. Asking not only *what* and *why*, but also *how* and more importantly *who*. To further contribute to the meta-movement, I will add a few comments to my guide.

> I believe authenticity is a significant trait of the re-enactment and living history genre. All re-enactments and displays of living history I have encountered differ from theatre at a crucial point: Sensual Realism. Regardless of the level of fiction and theatricality, the actions of the artisan are authentic. Good re-enactors disseminate real action-born knowledge.

What defines re-enactment and living history?

As I believe that a clarification of terms and the contextualisation of matters is a good starting point for any investigation, this question marks the beginning of my guide (Aune Nilsen 2015:6-7). Talking to organisers, museum workers and re-enactors in Scandinavia, I have noted that they all have different answers to this question. They also use the terms interchangeably - referring to something as a re-enactment when there is no actual re-en*acting* involved, and to something as living history when there was no actual *living* involved. As an example, I refer to myself as a *re-enactor* when in fact I have never done a proper re-enactment of anything.

In my bachelor thesis in drama and theatre, *Historical Re-enactment - the hunt for authentic experiences in a seemingly theatrical world* (2012), I set out to uncover the *theatricality* of re-enactment and living history. My study concentrated on Viking and medieval re-enactment in Scandinavia where the most common conceptual frames for events are market and festival settings. When asking re-enactors for definitions of the terms, I learned that they do not regard their activities in living history or re-enactment as theatre orientated, or their actions as theatrical. The re-enactors in question were more eager to elaborate on their agenda for participation. They were in it for company, for their interest in history, heritage, costumes, sword-fighting, hands on experiments with the tools and

materials of the past and for the money. Although they used terms such as “interpretation” and “representation”, re-enactment and living history was not to be defined as theatre. For a student of theatre (me), this was contradictory. The motivation was clearly not *fiction*, but *reality*.

As an example of fiction-motivation, I can highlight the historical infotainment shows put on at *Stichting Foeks*and *Archeon*, the Netherlands, presented in the article *Putting on a Show - The How and Why of Historical Shows and Theatre in a Historical Setting or Theme-park*(2016). These shows demonstrate outspoken theatricality and a high level of performativity. Both the methods used to generate and disseminate the historical content are theatre-orientated: focusing on entertainment, spectatorship, costumes, props, cast and setting (Hogendoorn, 2015). In many ways, they resemble the re-enactment that the ancient Greeks and Romans infused into their dramatic cultures. I can also highlight the Memorial Service performed by Civil War re-enactors for St Paul's National Park site in New York, and other similar events in the US. These are detailed, scripted and rehearsed ceremonies.

What are the stylistic traits of the re-enactment and living history genre? Which of the three examples above is closer to a definition of re-enactment? In the many understandings of the genre, there is a variety in levels of performativity and theatricality, and a variety of agendas and motivations for participation and dissemination. This leads me to believe that the two terms – re-enactment and living history - are no longer sufficient in describing the huge phenomenon of *representing of the past*. Over the years, I have seen organisers fail to understand the re-enactor’s agenda. The organiser was waiting for the circus and instead they got the introverted artisans. The re-enactor thought his efforts were sufficient and then came the requirement of registration fee. I believe that a clarification and agreement on these terms - combined with awareness of the re-enactor’s agendas - will contribute towards building bridges between the host and the participants. It will make it possible for both parties to know what to expect and what to demand. Therefore, I encourage EXARC to make a list of stylistic traits, subgenres, and of purposes and areas of use that would be available online. This list should also include how the terms translate into other languages than English.

Funding and budget planning

Funding for the independent events which I have organised came from different sources, such as the local county municipality, sponsors, endowments, Ministry of Culture etc. Funding for museum events which I have organised came from the museum budget, in some cases supplemented with external founding. I dare say that by now I have a black belt in writing applications and lobbying for funding. Due to national and international differences, funding and budget planning are not included in my guide. Targeting international readers I saw no point in addressing these topics as each country has its own system for applying for funds. In addition, Norway is a ridiculously expensive country, so me telling you about our budget for, for example, food and commodities would probably just leave you puzzled. What I do try to

do in the guide is to sketch out some financial priorities supporting my idea (expenses for food, travel expenses, remuneration etc.). I realise that these priorities are also conditional. I would gladly share all my knowledge and strategies about funds and budgets. However, these topics are better suited for a lecture or workshopadapted to the context in question.

Fashionable authenticity

The guide continues with my take on the term “authenticity”(Aune Nilsen 2014:8). Like the terms re-enactment and living history, this term can hold different meanings depending on who it is used by and in which setting. Nonetheless, it is a most dubious term, often used for the purpose of establishing or disproving validity and power. I have seen re-enactors use the term to assert themselves to other re-enactors, and I have seen museum staff wonder what re-enactors are so obsessed about, and vice versa.

When I was new in re-enactment, the term frightened me, as I did not know yet what authenticity should look like. After a few years, I cracked the code. I realised that (in Viking re-enactment) material authenticity is defined by good or poor choices in both interpretation *and* aesthetics. Meaning that an object’s “level of authenticity” is not only measured by the material quality of the replica, but also by how well it fits our perception of the past. This perception of course being coloured by the canons of aesthetics, based on modern ideas about, for example, modern fashion and our perception of the past. When I had figured this out, I looked pleasing and I could argue my case[1] .

I believe authenticity is a significant trait of the re-enactment and living history genre. All re-enactments and displays of living history I have encountered differ from theatre at a crucial point: Sensual Realism. Regardless of the level of fiction and theatricality, the actions of the artisan are authentic. Good re-enactors disseminate real action-born knowledge.

I believe that material authenticity is important in a historical event because it fosters all other forms of authenticity, like authentic actions and authentic atmospheres. The level of authenticity will in many cases determine both the public and the reenactor’s ability to immerse themselves in the experience. However, there is of course a balance to be found. When facilitating events, I tend to focus on what actions the re-enactors execute. Are their actions authentic in a way that fits our perception of the past? I don´t ask them to engage in fiction, to be in character or read lines - merely to consider and reflect upon their actions. In 2016, we organised the one-week event The Viking Way. To generate authentic actions we distributed camp work tasks that would normally be bestowed upon the organisers. As we were in the middle of the forest and had no modern equipment or tools, they were bound to solve tasks the Viking way - working together as a small community. The re-enactors acquired a deep understanding of the hard labour that amounted to everyday life for the Vikings. They disseminated and developed their action-born knowledge. The visiting public entered a working community where they could join the dots.

Conceptual frames

There are many examples of use of the re-enactment and living history genre in public orientated dissemination. Re-enactors can be engaged by a museum to do living history craft demos, re-enactors can come together to create a battle re-enactment like in Hastings in the UK, there can be markets and festivals with merchants and artisans and there can be historical infotainment shows. There are also events for re-enactors that are not publicly orientated, such as war games, period hiking and sailing expeditions and survival projects like *Alone in the Past* and *Seven in the Past* by Ratobor in Russia. In these projects, re-enactors focus on research and on improving their skills. As both organisers and re-enactors are asking "what´s in it for me?"; I believe that there is room for other audience-friendly concepts for re-enactment events.

I am eagerly awaiting the *Reconference* organised by the Russian re-enactment organisation Ratobor in Moscow, which is to be held in March 2017[2] . The programme will evolve around best practice in re-enactment event organisation. This young and enthusiastic crew of re-enactors and organisers have *"noticed how the format of re-enactment festivals is obsolete"*. They claim that it is no longer interesting to travel from one event to another, because they all have more or less the same concept, programme and content. I make the same observation in my article *The Viking Way,* written for Insights IMTAL Europe (Aune Nilsen 2017). In this article, I also encourage organisers to think outside the box when designing concepts for their events. The ingredients are all there, they just have to be assembled in new ways.

The meta-movement

In this article, I have made an attempt to elaborate on topics I believe should be addressed. The content of the terms "re-enactment", "living history" and "authenticity" has evolved and expanded. Their "authentic" definitions are no longer sufficient nor do they cover the diverse traits of the genres. I believe that a clarification and common understanding of key terms, motivations and agendas is a necessary contribution to the move towards understanding re-enactment and living history on a meta-level. Who are the reenactors and organisers, what are their agendas and goals, why are they involved or interested in re-enactment and how do they understand key terms.

About the author

Ingrid Galadriel Aune Nilsen holds a master´s degree in drama and theatre from the NTNU University in Trondheim. She is the founder of the re-enactment group Trondheim Vikinglag and the co-founder of the action, knowledge and experience bank Hands on History AS.

1 For further elaboration on this topic watch my PeckaKuca-talk «Sexy, practical or proper?» https://www.facebook.com/pg/PechaKuchaTrondheim/videos/?ref=page_internal

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Gallery Image

FIG 1. MIDSUMMER CELEBRATIONS. THE VIKING WAY. PHOTO: DANIEL SECARESCU

FIG 2. PERIOD HIKING. MAROBUD, CZECH REPUBLIC. PHOTO: MAROBUD

FIG 3. FASHIONABLE AUTHENTICITY. PHOTO: INGRID GALADRIEL

FIG 4. SEVEN IN THE PAST. RATOBOR, RUSSIA. PHOTO: ANDREW BOYKOV