

Historical Re-enactment as an Avenue for Teaching Adults History

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers how dramatizations of historical periods and events are effective in teaching adult audiences about history. Historic re-enactment provides a way around the “survey and memorize” that often characterize history by letting us test “what might have been”. The analysis considers live theatre, sound-and-light shows, motion picture features, and made-for-television productions. All of these combine fiction, entertainment, and emotional involvement to communicate historic information. The portrayal of historical events may also spark social change, for example increasing understanding and improving race relations. Historic authenticity is not always achieved (consider Christmas plays!) but precision in the recreation of detail is often valued. Unquestionably, historic monuments are legitimate commemorations, and re-enactments, being more open-ended and contextual, are found to also be legitimate historiographic devices.

Keywords: dramatization, historiography, re-enactment

1. FRAMING THE ISSUE

I will argue that re-enactment, including dramatization, is a valid form of historiography, by which adults audiences can learn about the past. In the past history had its place in education because subject knowledge helped distinguish the educated from those less so. History's study also presents a storehouse of information about how people and societies behave. Social scientists' theories about human behaviour depend on either historical information or artificially created experiments to determine how people react. Aspects of society like wars or missionary activities cannot be reconstructed as precise experiments, so history is our laboratory. Data from the past must serve as the evidence to figure out why people behave as they do in societal settings. Too often, studying history has involved surveying and memorizing. Historical re-enactment may provide a way around this! It lets us test “what might have been” in a structured and controllable manner. History can be seen as an art form and its re-enactment adds an element of entertainment to its study by promoting human understanding and prompting thoughts about human experiences in other times and places. Such dramatization goes beyond the exploits of heroes and villains, looking at the courage, diligence, and constructive protest shown by ordinary people. Re-enactment also promotes cognitive involvement by teaching the need for assessing arguments and by building the ability to assess conflicting interpretations. When audiences become emotionally involved in re-enacted scenes because something about them captures the fancy, there is also a rounding of their intellectual lives through

exposure to, and more importantly, contemplation of, human and social behaviour. Historical re-enactment used for teaching adults about history may include live or filmed performances such as television shows or series and documentary motion pictures, or entertainment venues such as *son-et-lumière* productions. A strength shared by all of these is their strength for communicating historic information by including elements of fiction and entertainment, but it is unclear whether the interest that these vehicles generate offsets their characteristic loss of historic accuracy.

2. THE EVIDENCE

2.1 Live re-enactment.

Because of their interest and knowledge, as well as their stock of costumes and accessories, re-enactors are often employed in history films as “extras”. Apart from their availability as low-cost resources, they have a passion for authenticity which serves television and film makers. The latter depend on their actors to have already done some of the research for them. Agnew (2007) found that historical enactments can be used as mechanisms for reconciling contemporary economic and social conditions, for example re-enactments of the Nazi period leading to the initiation of questions in post unification Germany about understanding of race-relations and historical inquiry.

Gapps (2009) found that many actors researched and tried to portray specific historical people rather than generic character types. Many of them saw themselves as “mobile monuments”. In creating (and continually updating or upgrading) the weapons, tools, and costumes that they used, they constantly strived for more accurate recreation and presentations of historic fact. Visitors to some re-enactments may not be able to distinguish serious history buffs from “relaxation and fellowship” re-enactors. Among themselves, the buffs understand that authenticity is worth striving for but never attainable. Gapps (2009) noted the pride that many actors take in the level of detail they bring to their impersonations, such things as the way their clothing is hand-stitched and lined, or the tinder and flint they carry for starting fires. In addition to any learning impact for audiences, this focus on ever-refining understanding promotes learning by re-enactors as historical “scholars” and researchers. Actors want their accessories to look and feel as they might have for the characters being recreated, for example without a patina of age. Authenticity is an accepted competency standard for re-creative history work, but this relies on a feeling of ‘authenticity’ that has to be shared by the historians and their audiences. Objects which historians view as authentic may not be seen by viewers as historical or even important to their new learning (Gapps, 2009). The continuous striving for authenticity presents them with a moving target, a condition unmatched for more conventional historiographers. Gapps (2009) offers the observation that during the centenary of the American Civil War re-enactors began to define less authentic re-enactors as ‘farbs’ – purportedly an abbreviation of “far be it for me to tell them what they are doing wrong” (p. 309).. This lack of attention to detail may be acceptable in some circumstances because historic authenticity is not always expected in religious pageants, for example. Because of their legitimate role in teaching and commemorating religious beliefs, these should also be seen as a legitimate part of adult education if their roles are social learning or fundraising. I have participated in a re-enactment of the inter-clan cattle thievery that used to occur near my ancestral home in northern Britain. This event was socially-oriented, had a purpose of supporting a children’s charity, but also furthered participants’ knowledge of their cultural history through the eloquent speeches and toasts made before refreshments along the trail and rivalry in historical knowledge competitions after the event. My most recent experience of a re-enactment in Valetta, Malta, portrayed highlights of that country’s history. This show stressed entertainment and dramatization rather than accuracy or authenticity. I was acutely aware of this because of my familiarity with Malta’s history through

personal reading and my learning was cultivated by what I already knew. I would likely have learned much less, had I been an historical novice or not already had an active interest in the subject matter.

2.2 Sound-and-light Shows.

These shows gain meaning from the contexts into which audiences can place them. I have had the opportunity to see a variety of *son et lumière* performances while travelling. The first of these presented the highlights of classical Grecian history, staged in the Parthenon and Acropolis of Athens. This was a commercial venture staged for tourists' entertainment. Enjoyable as it may have been, it was not memorable for having been informative about Greek history. My recollection is of comparing the theatrics against my knowledge from high school studies of Latin (and some Greek language) and of ancient history. I saw a second show, a summary of parliamentary history, some time later on Ottawa's Parliament Hill. This show was also intended for tourist consumption, but was also scripted to be informative. The experience was "made" for me by being seated next to a retired civil servant who had been a long-time worker in the office of a cabinet minister under two governments. Her partisan and personal anecdotes added a dimension and interest which were could not have been created through the show being staged. Similar to my experience in Athens, my mental schemata for this performance were anchored in my past university studies of history and political science, as well as a past personal acquaintance with another former cabinet minister of another political party. My learning through these events was grounded in my past knowledge and extended through dialogue with another viewer. This would not have happened, had I not already had a level of threshold knowledge.

2.3 Motion Pictures.

Re-enactments have emotional impact which can result in learning taking place to the extent that they are based in reality, and therefore create interest. Comparisons of the documentary film *The Triumph of Evil* with historical re-enactment (*Hotel Rwanda*) by LaMarre and Landreville (2009) found that the suspense and drama of fiction generated more viewer interest than documentary evidence. The level of interest developed for documentaries depends on their apparent external reality, whereas fiction depends on unreality to create and maintain interest. While story telling is the essence of both, documentaries are rooted in nonfiction and films often develop from fiction. The former often aim to promote "pleasurable learning" by recording, revealing, or preserving the past; persuading or promoting; or analyzing and expressing (LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Both fictional and factual narratives can draw people into their story lines, leading to higher issue interest and learning. Fictional films also build more emotional connection with their use of close-up shots, faster-paced in editing, and dramatic music. The narrative engagement may be higher for fictional films because of the diversion and entertainment orientation that they offer (LaMarre & Landreville, 2009). Viewers who become engrossed in the narrative tend to have stronger story-consistent beliefs and to be less critical of the narrative flow than those who do not (Green & Brock, 2000, 2002) because critical evaluation is inconsistent with narrative engagement (Green et al., 2004).

2.4 Television Productions.

Agnew (2007) has suggested that the portrayal of historical events on television may contribute to social change, for example, by connecting portrayals of a colonial and imperial past with indigenous and non-indigenous rapprochement (*The Ship*, 2002). Television, equally with movies and live re-enactment, may be more effective than traditional forms of historiography because of its affective appeal. These re-enactments and dramatizations concern themselves with audiences' psychological or physical experiences more than authentic events, processes or structures. Popular television reality shows often spin themselves

off. Agnew (2007) cites the UK Channel 4 show *1900 House* (1999) giving rise to *1940s House* (2001), which led to *Edwardian Country House* (2002), *Frontier House* (2003), *Regency House Party* (2004), *Outback House* (2005), and *Texas Ranch House* (2006). Not to be outdone, German television had *Das Schwarzwald Haus 1902* (The Black Forest House; 2002), *Abenteuer 1900: Leben im Gutshaus* (Adventure 1900: Life in the Manor House; 2004), and *Abenteuer 1927: Sommerfrische* (Adventure 1927: Summer Resort; 2005) (Agnew, 2007, pp. 303-304). The similarity of themes and structural components may have compromised historical and geographic specificity, with Edwardian Britain becoming hard to distinguish from northeastern Germany in the 1920s (Agnew, 2007). Doubt about the validity of such television presentations as historiographic ventures may be raised if their contact and impact is seen as more psychological than historical because they can become valued mostly for their entertainment value. The German productions presented the challenges of living under “historical” conditions without late twentieth century domestic conveniences. They portrayed social and class differences in an attempt to raise larger questions for audiences: “How do I deal with the fact that the scullery maid has to work ten, twelve, fourteen hours while everyone upstairs enjoys a banquet with music?”, (Production Notes, *Abenteuer 1900*, cited in Agnew, 2007, p. 305). It was left to viewers to reconcile matters of apparent bourgeois privilege and morality for themselves. This is where the learning, if there is any, takes place (Agnew, 2007). The German experience with debates in the 1990’s about what form a Holocaust memorial should take has also shown that affective history can be used to break public taboos about the past. A desire to document and commemorate an event had to be balanced against the avoidance of sensationalizing, diminishing, misrepresenting, or symbolically repeating it. An affective, but non-representational, solution was found in the construction of a field of stone plinths above an underground museum (Agnew, 2007).

3. How Re-enactments Teach History

3.1 Live Performance

Historic re-enactments often do not strive for thematic accuracy, but often focus on the recreation of precision in detail. The squeak of harness and clanking of armour go beyond static museum displays and recreations to leave us feeling that we are a part of the (recreated) past. Whether there has been multi-sensory appeal is seen as a test of how successful re-enactments have been. This constant striving for greater accuracy gives re-enactment an advantage over written historiography because of the seemingly never-ending quest for incremental knowledge about historical situations or conditions. The actors are always building their own knowledge, and the message presented for audiences is subject to change to reflect changing and updated perspectives on the past. On the other hand, the moving target of perfection may force a compromise of accuracy to achieve “believability”.

3.2 Filmed Media

Fictional films often create more engagement with their plot than documentaries do, but often don’t promote critical evaluation. Intuitively, audience interest can be expected to lead to informal learning. Documentaries are also often shorter than fictional films, giving viewers less time to learn. Consequentially, their impact on learning through contemplation and meaning-making may be less than that of documentaries. Reference by Agnew (2007) to television being used to promote attitudinal change suggests that historical re-enactment may have both social and political uses in promoting learning.

4. Looking Forward

There is little question that most historic monuments also have “legitimacy” as commemorative devices. Re-enactments, which are more open-ended and contextual, therefore also have legitimacy as

historiographic devices. Their effectiveness in communicating lasting lessons, however, may depend on a combination of emotional arousal, interest, or narrative engagement achieved (affective differences). Gapps' (2009) proposition that German television shows helped viewers "come to terms with" the Holocaust/Nazi period suggests that film or television may play a role in overcoming contemporary sensitivities/restrictions/social taboos about other topics like Stalinism or racism/colonialism in southern Africa. Gapps (2009) cautions, however, that some things (like scenes of slavery) should remain "untouchable". Recreations often present colonial history as balanced and enjoyable. "The trauma in black and white historical relations resists representation – without some acknowledgement, some mourning, the past and present fuse and the possibility of change is foreclosed. Thoughtful re-performances, rather than old minstrelsy, might well assist here" (Gapps, 2009, p. 406).

The re-enactment of historical events or conditions is not new. One of the foundations of historical thought is dramatization and sentimentalization of the past (Agnew, 2007). Re-enactment allows history to be viewed as unfinished business. Performing the past lets both actors and audiences contemplate how things might have been different. Further to these conclusions about historiography, I hope to spur consideration of theories of pedagogy and how textbooks and other teaching materials are created and produced.

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