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Building Reenactment Studies

Martin Bernátek

Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb and Juliane Tomann (eds.). *The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies: Key Terms in the Field*. London/New York: Routledge, 2020. 286 pp. ISBN 978-1-03-208425-1.

Reenactment has been one of the widely discussed phenomena in Humanities during the last decade. American Civil War battle reconstructions, living history productions in open air museums, historical reality TV series and recreations of canonical modernist dance choreographies or performance art pieces provoke questions that address relations between memory, representation of history, power, emotions, and aesthetics.

Along with the growing interest, related research issues emerged and have changed, just as the pre-understanding of what reenactments are and how they function. The overzealous academic look at historical reconstructions as amateur white male hobby aimed at unattainable historical authenticity has been transformed towards more interpretative and analytical research. Also, initial explorations of emerging practices of appropriation of historical and archival material in contemporary art has been transformed into an established field that attracts artists, curators, and scholars.

That shift can be located on the intersection of earlier manoeuvres in Humanities and Social Sciences labeled as the affective turn with reconsideration of affect, sensations and bodily experience, and the archival turn with critical reexamination of the status of archive, its materiality and

normativity. As they were already a global phenomenon, the genealogy of which may be traced back to ancient Roman *naumachiae*, historical and artistic reenactments foreground somatic, mediated, experiential, and affective aspects of cultural forms and social interactions related to the past – and their research, too. Because such a complex object of study could be approached from various perspectives, reenactment as a cultural form as well as a method of inquiry already attracted the attention of historians, experimental archeologists, Theatre, Dance and Performance Studies scholars, musicologists, or religionists.

The Routledge Handbook of Reenactment Studies, published in 2020 (and issued in paperback in 2021), is one of the recent scholarly responses to the diversity of questions surrounding reenactments, and its editors have the ambition to provide a comprehensive overview of key concepts of its study. Vanessa Agnew, Jonathan Lamb, and Juliane Tomann share long-term interest in topics surrounding historical reenactments and especially Agnew significantly animates what has been constituted as Reenactment Studies, and to which the *Handbook* strongly contributes.

The volume has a form of a glossary and contains a general introduction to Reenactment Studies – its main features, field

of inquiry, and future development – as well as 47 entries. Among the wide range of authors from Europe, Australia, and North America, a background in history dominates and determines the focus and selection of examples but I do not want to say that the scope of the book is narrowed to strictly historical perspective. Diverse approaches are represented by a broad spectrum of authors such as art curators like Inke Arns (151–155, 198–201) theatre scholars like Ulf Otto (111–114) or architect Fabrizio Gallanti (79–83). Various entries also refer to affective turns in Humanities and emphasise an anthropological, emic, and analytical approach to reenactment and its performative aspects. Yet, for example, references to Collingwood and his *The Idea of History* made by multiple authors (see 59–61, 122, 135–136, 172, 190), or recurring themes of authenticity, accuracy, and status of evidence of the past signalise that historical perspective and so-called historical reenactments occupy a significant part of imagination and conceptualisation of reenactments as such. Because of this plurality, the volume is far from establishing a set of fixed methods or authoritative explanation of the reenactment. It performs the entanglement of various aspects in such a complex cultural form and shows how difficult it could be to handle essentially relational phenomena such as reenactments, where linkage, translation or even tension between pretext and performance, is its structuring principle.

Similar engagement with reenactments can be seen in contemporary dance and relatively newly constituted Dance Studies. Already broadly cited writings of Performance Studies scholars like Diana Taylor (2003) and Rebecca Schneider (2011)

along with recent publications from art theory indicate, that the emerging field of Reenactment Studies is even richer and more diverse than the *Handbook* suggests: Collective volumes like *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment*, edited by Mark Franko (2017), *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, edited by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini (2022), and the conference (2020) and forthcoming eponymous publication *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools*, organised and edited by Baldacci with Susanne Franco (BALDACCINI and FRANCO [forthcoming]) shows that there is a very vivid interest in studying reenactments in contemporary performing arts, too. The shift from history and museology to Performance Studies and emphasis on body is, according to the editors of the *Handbook*, one of the key findings in their introductory overview of the field (7).

Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann describe future challenges of the new discipline in their introduction but in fact those tasks have been already discussed in individual entries of the *Handbook*. At least one of these ‘future challenges’ has already been met. In entries like Authenticity, Conjecture, or Representation reenactments are not understood only in their relation to the past but also how the past and future are subjects of imaginative manipulation (8). Additionally, mechanisms of generating emotional response in different media of reenactments are discussed in entries like Mediality, Battle, Suffering, and Trauma. Thus, the *Handbook* could be understood as a form of performative act in the field of academic production. Besides this performative gesture – here are Reenactment Studies – the book and its editors

established a construction and vectors of orientation that mark its current and future studies.

The alphabetical order of the entries and cross-references in text are only explicit organising principles of the topics discussed in the volume. Such a flat structure with overlapping terms is typical for handbooks and gives readers a freedom. However, more authoritative composition may provide a clearer idea of the current state of research and how the editors and the collective of authors perceive it. *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Reenactment* may be recalled as a good example of such a structure, where individual contributors' reports are organised into nine parts dedicated, for example, to archive, to the global circulation of knowledge or politics, and editor Mark Franko's introduction (FRANKO 2017: 4–6) is included. In the *Oxford Handbook*, Franko provides a brief historical overview of dance reenactments, something that I would appreciate in the *Handbook* under the review.

Among a variety of terms used, some of them are more abstract and conceptual such as Corroboration, and Sublime, other contributions discuss specific cultural practices such as Historically Informed Performance, Hajj, Pageant, or Pilgrimage. Some entries link reenactment-specific perspective with broader concepts such as Narrative, Experience, or Performance and Performativity. The reader will also find texts that present relatively new phenomena such as Forensic Architecture or Dark Tourism under the umbrella of Reenactment Studies; or may come across references to VR technologies, TV series, or digital culture in entries on Documentary, Games, or Practices of Reenactment.

The transmedial perspective on reenactments could be expanded not only in this *Handbook*. For example, an entry on Simulation could fill this under-researched domain but could also provide an inspiring dialogue among Humanities and hard sciences.

The entry on Indignity and recurring attention towards the relations between reenactment, colonialism, and nationalism throughout the volume is one of the key gestures performed by the book and the collective of authors that helps to make clear the various groupings of state-power and social dominance present in some forms of reenactment as well as the hegemonic and anti-hegemonic functions of reenactments as a whole. Again, individual entry on nationalism and patriotism and reenactment, or reflection of Orientalism in relation to global tourism and reenactment, may emphasise this theme.

I feel awkward writing this in 2022 but from the perspective of a relatively culturally and ethnically homogenous country such as the Czech Republic – at least compared to the so-called settler states, or countries with colonial pasts – such a gesture inspires the rethinking of one's own histories. Reflection on indigeneity and reenactment, that also touches the issue of constructing the image of the Other, also foregrounds the intertwining of politics and aesthetics in cultural forms. It also reveals how ideological the separation between 'only' historical concerns, and actual social processes, that is proclaimed by many battle reenactors or museum institutions. Radu Jude's black comedy *I Do Not Care If We Go Down in History as Barbarians* (2018) provides such a meta-reflection on those complicated power relations especially in Eastern Europe.

The book contains terms related more to mimetic aspect of reenactment (Mimesis, Realism, Evidence, Production of Historical Meaning, etc.) next to terms useful for the analysis of formal aspects and mediality of reenactments (Gesture, Role-play, Ritual, etc.), and terms that address the aesthetical and psychological impact of reenactment performances on its participants (Emotion, Mitzvah and Memorialization, Experience, etc.). Such grouping, in my opinion, is not necessary for the *Handbook* to fulfil its main mission, but on the other hand, it may provide more sophisticated insight into the issue. In such a way, topics related more to the general understanding of reenactment as a medium of history, and more dramaturgical issues related to reenactment performances and their structural components may be highlighted.

I respect typical editorial dilemmas about what to include and how to keep coherence of entries without its homogenisation, and the *Handbook* is not an encyclopedia, either. But some entries and authors are more, or less successful in bridging the term to reenactment practice and providing insight into the concept as well as perspectives of its application.

From a Theatre Studies perspective, particularly the entry on Gesture (94–96), written by Jonathan Lamb, there is neither conceptualisation of the term with relevant literature, nor a useful summary of how to study reenactments through the prism of gesture. The entry is, in fact, a micro case study or rather meditation on the Joshua Oppenheimer film *The Act of Killing* (2012) that restages various events from the era of mass killings, targeting communists and other groups, during General Suharto's military coup and establishment of 'New Order' in Indonesia. Although Lamb

focuses on a very relevant example that also enforces the transmedial perspective on reenactment, he is concerned more with the interpretation of the film than with providing clear understanding of gesture and opening his remarks to more general application in Reenactment Studies.

The entry on Play, written by Robbert-Jan Adriaansen (178–182), is a good example of a productive fusion of brief introduction into a cultural theory of play and its implication for Reenactment Studies. Adriaansen starts traditionally by referring to Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Eugen Fink, and Hans-Georg Gadamer, but expands his perspective by evoking the employment of the concept of play in Game Studies. Then he continues discussing the relation between representation and simulation as two poles of the same continuum, rather than strictly opposed concepts. After such a conceptualisation, Adriaansen proposes four ways of how the concept of play may be used to study reenactment and how it leads to the study of specific mechanisms and rules structuring reenactment performances, and how for example aleatoric, improvised parts enforce the impression of reenactors and their experience.

Although the book does not present any explicit typology of reenactment, various authors distinguish between historical and artistic reenactments, which are appreciated from critical stance against the representation of history and often give voice to underrepresented social groups or events. Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (2001) – and a related documentary by Mike Figgis – is the most famous example, also broadly cited in the book (17, 50–51, 114, 134, 154–155, 171). This reenactment (and documentary) of violent repression of picketing miners by British police forces

in South Yorkshire in 1984 featured original participants as well as a group of reenactors to reveal injustice and misinterpretation of this iconic event from 1980s Thatcherism by government and media.

As Stéphanie Benzaquen-Gautier points out in her entry on Art (16–19), artistic reenactment could also have the affirmative and performative agency in relation to historical events, such as the case of *The Storming of the Winter Palace* staged by Nikolai Evreinov in 1920. Reenactment thus can be studied not as productions that show ‘how it was’ but rather as creative and often critical reflections between liveness and medial techniques of remembrance (16). Thus, questions concerning the power over construction of canon of general history – as well as art history – are foregrounded by reenactments. Here Benzaquen-Gautier refers to *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005) by Marina Abramović as one of the most known and also ambivalent examples. As an example of de-westernising of art history canon, she mentions the recreation of Allan Kaprow’s *Baggage* (1972) by Otobong Nkanga. She displaced and transported packaged sand, that Kaprow and his colleagues originally moved around different places in the USA, between Belgium and Nigeria (2007–2008) (19).

I believe that the convergence of studying of historical and artistic reenactment as well as expanding the scope towards digital games and audiovisual cultural forms, already, but not explicitly presented by the *Handbook*, is going to further enrich and transform the field of Reenactment Studies. Not only will it bring new examples and approaches but may also inspire different methodologies to converge.

Here, Theatre and Performances Studies could have much to say, as is mani-

festated in the volume in the entry on Performance and Performativity by Catherine Johnson (169–173). She not only states that performance is obviously fundamental to reenactment, since it means to perform again (169), but also points out how reenactments can be seen as embodied archives and embodied histories, and as a mode of research.

The focus on corporeal cultural techniques, to ongoing reflections on the relation between theatre, history, and memory and to performance analysis, Theatre and Performance Studies could contribute in various ways to Reenactment Studies, as has been already manifested by a number of scholars such as Otto (ROSELT and OTTO 2012), Susanne Foellmer (2020a, b), or Dorota Sajewska (2019).

Reenactment Studies, its fusion of practices and conceptual framing of its field of study, can also lead to reconsideration of the original principles of Theatre Studies from a praxeological perspective. Namely a reconstruction of historical production as proposed by Max Herrmann and other proponents of German *Theaterwissenschaft*, could be revisited and maybe reinvented as up to date research tools. Also dialogue between theatre makers and scholars – that was part of Herrmann’s vision, too, and is manifested in Czech history by collaboration between the Prague Linguistic Circle members like Petr Bogatyrev, and avant-garde director E. F. Burian – could be foregrounded and interpreted from the perspective of reenactments. Finally, Nikolai Evreinov, another founding person of Theatre Studies, can serve here as a good example. The *Handbook* refers mostly to his mass spectacle *The Storming of the Winter Palace*. However, already before WWI, Evreinov had experimented with the artistic reconstruction of

historical theatrical forms in Starinnyj teatr [Ancient Theatre] in Saint Petersburg, see (LUKANITSCHewa 2009).

Reenactments and its current state of research as manifested by *The Handbook of Reenactment Studies* and other above-mentioned publications opens diverse perspectives on corporeal cultural practices and cultural and artistic performances related to history, memory, and archive. But those possibilities are not one-directional or conjunctured application of existing schemes. The constitution of the new field has potential in transforming and re-evaluating existing scholarship. Relational phenomena such as reenactments foreground dialogue, self-reflection, and entanglement between research object and research method, and between the study of mediality of culture and the mediality of academic disciplines. Its research, as presented in the *Handbook*, is therefore one of the many exciting challenges in contemporary Humanities.

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