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Philipps Universität Marburg

Authority, accessibility and antagonism

Embodied historiographies towards a democratic urban praxis

Pablo Santacana López (Berlin)

Our conception of the past is built upon the many references that populate our urban environments: from street names to monuments and memorials, from the documents filed in city archives to the artworks exhibited in local museums[1]. Historical referents therefore occupy a predominant position in public spaces, and by extension in our collective memory. Such referents are intended to build social cohesion among the communities inhabiting those spaces, but while urban populations diversify and develop, historical representations in cities continue to portray the same privileged elite "holding the power to inscribe" [Weidenmuller et al. 2015: 434]. Built in stone and bronze, these memorials resist erosion by time or social change. A counterpoint is offered by the performative and embodied practices relating to the historical remembrance of the past that are increasingly appearing in the urban space [Cook 2004], and which have a capacity to mutate that allows them to adapt the inherited historiography for the ever-changing present. The following text considers such embodied practices of remembering as embedded in the discourse of critical spatial practice, and highlights how collective bodies and communities are reasserting historical representations of the past by performing them in historical settings and heritage sites. More specifically, this paper will look at the reconfiguration of established understandings of authenticity, accessibility and antagonism performed by such practices of remembering, focusing on a widely acclaimed example of historical reenactment, Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* [2001].

'Embodied practices of remembering' is an umbrella term that refers to historical festivals, mediaeval fairs, battle reenactments, or living dioramas that relate to our common past through their performance in the present, shifting between mediating historical discourses and de facto "doing history"[2]. All these practices are linked both by "their combined use of different medial forms" [Agnew 2004: 327] and their confrontation of traditionally distinct categories such as academic historians and military enthusiasts, or cosplay communities and tourist audiences. Immersing the participant in a mediated past, such practices make use of sensuousness and affect to produce and disseminate knowledge, playing with specific relationships between times [past-present] and spaces [urban-rural[3]]. Of all these practices, reenactments are the most common. The term 'reenactment' refers to the community activity of restaging a specific historical event, to revive the past in a physical or virtual form that engages with a contested arena of history, memory, and truth. For Cristina Baldacci, the reenactment presents "an archive of movements, experiences, and forms with a strong symbolic charge" [Baldacci 2019: 62] that "challenge the traditional modalities of conservation, representation, and circulation of knowledge". The word reenactment combines the notion of enacting, understood both as staging [theatrical performativity] and as promulgating [legal performativity], with the prefix *re-*, which indicates "the return to a previous state, a change of direction, a reinforcement or the repetition of an action" [Bénichou 2016: 2, own translation]. This reinforcement by repetition allows the reenactment to stabilise collective memories through a materiality that is intrinsically processual and temporary. Reenactments therefore do not require particular resources or institutional validation to be carried out and performed. That is why reenactments and, more broadly, embodied practices of remembering, enable reenactors to produce criticism and rewrite alternative narratives of the past without subordinating themselves to power structures. Criticisms are produced in situ; as reenactments are mainly carried out in locations directly connected with the historical events they

revisit (either directly, as they take place in the same location, or indirectly, as they occur on a reconstruction of the location) and with and by communities connected with the reenacted events (many even explicitly identifying the reenactment's historical protagonists as their ancestors[4]). Due to these two aspects (operating locally and reacting critically), reenactments can be characterized as critical spatial practices.

Jane Rendell defines critical spatial practices as "those projects that both critique the sites into which they intervene as well as the disciplinary procedures through which they operate". Reenactments break disciplinary borders, too, as they combine and counteract "traditionally distinct categories such as academic historian and television personality, weekend reenactor and historical advisor" [Agnew 2004: 327].

Located "between theory and practice, between public and private, and between art and architecture" [Rendell 2006: 11], those practices bring together the spatial theories defined by Henry Lefebvre in *The production of space* [Lefebvre 1991] and Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life* [Certeau and Rendall 1980], as ones in which routines, rituals and actions of signifying the space by occupying it are employed to find "new methods for offering resistance to the technocratic and neo-liberal rhetoric producing public space [...]" [Slager 2016: 1]. Reenactments can be understood as one of those critical spatial methods, as they offer a mode of resignifying the space that, even if it can be commodified and directed towards commerce-oriented activities[5], derives primarily from the impulse to reassert a past that has been invisibilized in the contemporary public space[6]. Reenactments moreover share with other critical spatial practices an anti-disciplinary approach to accessing the past, an ambiguity that has been described as "a breakdown of traditionally distinct categories such as academic historian and television personality, weekend reenactor and historical advisor" [Agnew 2004: 327].

Embodied practices of remembering deal with the physical memory of a certain territory and are carried out by local inhabitants pursuing the resignification of their collective past, and a new rewriting of history. From an architectural perspective, such practices resonate with an interest in a phenomenological approach to the experience of space described by Jorge-Otero-Pailos as the historical turn in architecture [Otero-Pailos 2010], or the historization of architecture. Otero-Pailos defined this concept by considering how various writers have described the assimilation of history through the physical experience of architecture, from the use of "Genius Loci" to characterize the historical identity of a place [Norberg-Schulz 1980] to the analysis of a critical regionalism representing a place's history [Frampton 2007]. In contrast to this conception of the historization of architecture, embodied practices of remembering propose a spatialization of history where historical narratives are transferred to a spatial, experiential and immersive setting. This change of perspective shifts the focus from the question of how to change the meaning of the space through its relation with its past, to how to change the meaning of the past through its spatialization in the present. Thus, embodied practices of remembering such as reenactments generate new accounts of the past that are able to perpetuate, modify or challenge historical narratives; spatialized narrative models [Baker, n.d.] that represent per se a form of historiography. Through the restaging of collective memories, reenactments resignify both time [as historiographical practice] and space [as critical spatial practice].

One of the most often cited examples of reenactment was initiated by the artist Jeremy Deller in 1999. To realize a commission from the private art organisation *Artangel*, Deller decided to work with an event that had fascinated him since seeing television coverage of it as a child[7]: In June 1984, miners of the industrial region of Orgreave went on strike and formed picket lines to protest the closure of coal mines ordered by the Conservative government under Margaret Thatcher.

Footage of the protest broadcast by the BBC showed the miners provoking the police forces sent to control the situation, who responded with what has been claimed to be the most violent police repression in British industrial history[8], resulting in a pitched battle in which 95 picketers were

arrested on charges of riot and violent disorder[9]. The television footage of the clash was edited by the public broadcasting company to make it appear as if the miners had provoked the police by throwing rocks, causing them to strike back in self-defence[10]. The bias was confirmed by the BBC in 1991, when they issued a public apology for misleading the audience – including the young Jeremy Deller[11]. The artist's idea was to restage the event bringing the miners' perspective into focus. For this purpose, Deller organised a reenactment of the fight in the original location and hired ex-miners who had witnessed the original event to participate. He also engaged a series of Professional Reenactment Associations, who were provided with new research material to counter the BBC footage of the battle. After 3 years of preparations, the restaging finally took place in 2001, and involved over 800 reenactors, some of whom were professionals and some miners [Costello 2021].

Fig. 1: Satellite image of the area on which, according to photo documentations, *The Battle of Orgreave* happened in 1984 and on which its reenactment in 2001 took place.

The event resonated through a series of works that documented the entire process of producing the reenactment[12], including a book [*The English Civil War Part II Personal accounts of the 1984-85 miners' strike,* Cornerhouse, London, 2002], an exhibit [*The Battle of Orgreave Archive* (An Injury to One is an Injury to All), 2001, Tate Modern London[13]] and a video documentary directed by Mikki Figgis for Channel 4 [*The Battle of Orgreave*, 2001]. Multiplied in all these media, the work served to recirculate images of a contested past [the misrepresented fight] and its reenactment, which instead of serving the cause of nostalgia actually modified the historical record. The mediatization of the miner's narrative started with the reenactment itself, when the suppressed memories of the miners were converted into a social gathering that took the form of a reenactment festival, including a brass band, food stands and children activities[14]. The decision to locate this festivity in the battle's original location also helped to resignify the landscape through the experience of the reenacted past, now narrated from the victim's perspective. *The Battle of Orgreave* is thus to be read as a critical spatial practice using collective memory as material to resignify space and claim present injustices, making more accessible the process of

experiencing history by rearticulating it as an artistic action in the streets, outside the white cube of the gallery or the black box of the theatre. For curator Cautemoch Medina, envisioning reenactments as a method of providing **accessibility** to history is key to understanding their success. In his words:

"As wax museums or *period rooms* lose their power to convince, and as movies revive the past in an increasingly improbable manner, the past has to be made just as accessible as the beaches of the most remote Pacific islands." [Deller 2015: 111]

It is from this need for experientiality that Deller's rewriting of history and the public acceptance of reenactments and embodied practices of remembering derives. Medina has written extensively about the work of Jeremy Deller and pointed out another important aspect of his work and the potential of similar embodied practices. Citing comments and reviews on reenactment websites and blogs, Medina noted how participants became immersed in the restaging and were not able to perceive the artistic context of the event detached from the political message[15]. The participants' loss of perspective in Deller's reenactment (a key feature of immersive experiences [Beugnet and Hibberd 2021]) contrasts with the social outreach that the reenactment actually achieved. In fact, *The Battle of Orgreave* did change the public's perspective on the event as it reopened the debate about police impunity. Still today, *The Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign* is fighting for an investigation into the police actions against the miners (*BBC News* 2018). At its rallies, the organization shows public screenings of Figgi's and Deller's film[16], which is now commonly and misleadingly interchanged with the original 1984 footage. For the *Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign*, this confusion becomes productive as it questions which images are from the 1984 biased BBC documentation and which are images of the re-enactment by Jeremy Deller portraying the miner's perspective. In this way an even more crucial question is implicitly raised: Who holds **authority** to narrate such images? Who is authorised to write history? Acting outside the museum or the academy, these practices have the capacity to confront what the archaeologist Laurajane Smith has defined as authorised heritage discourse (Smith 2009). As an artist-initiated project, *The Battle of Orgreave* presents a special case within the category of historical re-enactments, in which local history is more commonly restaged by civic associations or re-enactment societies, whose interpretive authority[17] is not validated on the same level as that of artists, who are legitimated by their supporting institutions to portray the past. But in all cases, the direct embodied experience of the participants in the re-enactment – whether audience or actors – produces a further level of authority by the very act of witnessing. As art critic Katie Kitamura has stated, by repetition, *The Battle of Orgreave* marked a form of "closure, control, and categorization" of the past, that by its embodied representation, legitimised it, in line with Deller's aim to inscribe the miners' experience in the authorised discourse of British history[18].

As a re-enactment, *The Battle of Orgreave* operated as a critical spatial practice, resignifying the spatial setting of the original clash in the outskirts of Orgreave (fig. 1) by reactivating the memories of what happened there in 1984 and involving its participants and neighbours. The re-enactment reformulated Orgreave's significance as a "place of memory"[19] for the communities involved both in the 1984 clash, and in the clash's re-enactment in 2001.

Rendering history tangible, popular and artistic re-enactments such as *The Battle of Orgreave* hold the power to authenticate narratives and consolidate memories. Being performed in public spaces and in front of – and by – public audiences, such practices are touched by an **antagonism**[20] that is present in the problematization of the sources used to build our memory of the past, the resemblance of past events with present conflict, and the resignification of those events for their commemoration in the future. In this way, re-enactments are not only a form of intervention or appropriation, but also a mode of constructing public space, a public space that Rosalyn Deutsche has defined as "a social space structured by conflicts. With this recognition, a democratic spatial politics begins." [Deutsche 1996: xxiv]

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Picture Credit

Google Earth Image Caption, *53.380319, -1.365562*, Orgreave, UK, Captured on 9-13-2018: https://earth.google.com/web/@53.38011493,-1.36411376,39.07166668a,1011.90904895d,35y,213.38405988h,0t,0rç, accessed February 2023.

[1] Such spaces are defined by French historian Pierre Nora as "Lieux de mémoire": "the ultimate embodiments of a memorial consciousness that has barely survived in a historical age that calls out for memory because it has abandoned it" [Nora 1989: 12].

[2] For a wider description of the term "doing history" see [Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 2019].

[3] Situated in peri urban spaces, in relation to the dichotomy urban-non urban.

[4] "[…] the motivation of reenactors to perform past events is often deeply rooted in a need to preserve memory. This ranges from remembering ancestors and their communities to the commemoration of specific historical events, including battles, encampments, massacres, and disasters." [Agnew, Lamb, and Tomann 2019: 138]

[5] See: [McCalman and Pickering 2010: 114–18].

[6] "[…] reenactment claims to give voice to marginalised positions […]" [Agnew 2004: 327].

[7] "The image of this pursuit stuck in my mind and for years I wanted to find out what exactly happened on that day with a view to re-enacting or commemorating it in some way." [Deller 2002: 7]

[8] "The strike became the site of an ideological contest between left- and right-wing politics, a contest between the older, working-class socialism embodied by the NUM president Arthur Scargill and the new entrepreneurialism promoted by Margaret Thatcher." [Correia 2006: 24] Also: "Almost mediaeval in its choreography, it was at various stages a siege, a battle, a chase, a rout and, finally, a brutal example of legalised state violence." (ibid)

[9] [Hunt 2006]

[10] The Battle of Orgreave has been defined as "a defining and ghastly moment" that "changed, forever, the conduct of industrial relations and how this country functions as an economy and as a democracy" [Stewart 2016: unpag.]. See also: [Hendy 2009].

[11] The admissions are contained in documents released by the BBC in response to an FOI request and are revealed in [Williams 2014].

[12] "Rather than servicing a single function or speaking the language of a single discourse, *The Battle of Orgreave* was relentlessly proliferating" [Kitamura 2010: 39].

[13] For more info: https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/deller-the-battle-of-orgreave-archive-an-injury-to-one-is-an-injury-to-all-t12185

[14] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents", Artforum, [February 2006], 182. Cited in: [Nilsen Lorentzen, n.d.].

[15] "[…] this non-political recreation of the worst clash of the 1984 Miners' strike [...] seemed exceptionally real, not just to the re-enactors, but also to the audience of predominantly local people, many of whom said the hairs stood up at the back of their necks".
On: http://www.montacute.net/histrenact/societies/wwii/articles/orgreave.htm

[16] “The South Heaton Labour Party branch in Newcastle are screening the Mike Figgis / Jeremy Deller film ’The Battle of Orgreave’”. On: https://otjc.org.uk/tag/film/

[17] For further reading on interpretive authority and epistemic justice, see: https://i-p-e-r.org/Justice

[18] “[a desire for] the reenactment of *The Battle of Orgreave* to become part of the lineage of decisive battles in English History” [Deller 2002: 90].

[19] “Place of memory” refers here to the already cited concept of “Lieux de Mémoire” by Pierre Nora [Nora 1989].

[20] This statement is articulated following Oliver Marchart’s parallel between public space and public sphere, which appears “wherever the routines, institutions and identities of our social world are touched by antagonism” [Marchart 2019].