Boy, could they play guitar

Steve Harvey's version of Ziggy Stardust's demise went beyond tribute. It was art (the programme said). By Nick Coleman

'I left the show in a state of astonishment. The actor who played Ziggy was such a complete and convincing demented junkie that you had to wonder who was who. And it was all so...not real.'

Above all, I was moved by his resignation that if we all work together, by jove, something really may happen.

In 1839, the patron of the pageant, Archibald William, thirteenth Earl of Elgin, left his brand new Gothic Revival castle and, along with an audience of seven thousand, braved the rain to witness the Queen of Beauty, under a canopy of silk, and the King of the Tournament, attended by trumpeters and heralds, preside over a battle with long swords between eight gallant men who fought for the honour of the Queen. The pageant represented a distinctly nineteenth-century vision of the Middle Ages, which was part of a long tradition dating back to the medieval tournament. In the 1820s, on the wave of the Gothic Revival and the popularity of Walter Scott's novel Ivanhoe (1791) and the Waverley series of novels (1819-23), this tradition re-emerged in its modern form as a reinvention of the values of a class that, in the shadow of the dark satanic mills, was rapidly disappearing. In recent years the pageant has consolidated into the major pastime of hobbyists, historians, re-enactment societies that re-stage the famous battles of the past with varying degrees of authenticity. And over the course of the twentieth century the commodity of memory became increasingly industrialized. In 1920, the re-enactment of the pilgrims landing on Plymouth Rock attracted an audience of one hundred thousand, whilst the re-enactment of the settlers passage from Massachusetts to Marietta (1936-37) attracted two million. The memory industry has become increasingly professionalized and, in recent years,
we have seen the advent of 'living museums' in which actors dress in period costumes and take on the roles of figures of the past, moving through facsimiles of towns and villages like the robots in Westworld.¹

In Peter Watkins' Diary of an Unknown Soldier (1959), the trenches of the First World War are filmed in a cast member's back yard after a two-and-a-half metre plot had been dug up and hosed down with water, or again, in Watkins' Forgotten Faces (1956), the Hungarian Revolution is filmed in a cul-de-sac in Canterbury.² Although the technical prerequisites of cinema invite a change in the register of scale, such distortions also occur in historical re-enactments — where a dozen re-enactors might re-enact a battle that originally involved a thousand soldiers, where re-enactors improvise within the reduced space of a ruined castle — or in the performance by a tribute band — where a pub is translated, in the imagination of the audience at least, into Madison Square Gardens.

The pageant, in its nineteenth-century manifestation, was not so much about recalling the past but more about restructuring the past for the needs of the nineteenth-century audience — particularly for the pageant's initiators, the shaky ruling class — and perhaps it is understandable that they attempted to restage a set of values in which the principle agents of the nineteenth century, namely the industrial working class and the entrepreneurial middle class, did not exist. As the memory industry gathered steam, the past became something that could be customized and we increasingly see the creation of 'worlds' or 'zones' that are 'untimely'.³

But there is also, in re-enactment space and time, a distortion in scale: we repeatedly witness unforeseen expansions and contractions. In re-enacted newsews, model ships take on gigantic proportions, the boxing ring contracts whilst appearing to be actual size. In Peter Watkins' Diary of an Unknown Soldier (1959), the trenches of the First World War are filmed in a cast member's back yard after a two-and-a-half metre plot had been dug up and hosed down with water, or again, in Watkins' Forgotten Faces (1956), the Hungarian Revolution is filmed in a cul-de-sac in Canterbury. Although the technical prerequisites of cinema invite a change in the register of scale, such distortions also occur in historical re-enactments — where a dozen re-enactors might re-enact a battle that originally involved a thousand soldiers, where re-enactors improvise within the reduced space of a ruined castle — or in the performance by a tribute band — where a pub is translated, in the imagination of the audience at least, into Madison Square Gardens.

Where contemporary artists relate to all this, given that many have increasingly utilized the element of re-enactment in their work in recent years, is a complex issue. I would resist any temptation to describe the work by these artists as collectively representing a genre or 'movement'⁴ and would avoid the tendency to corral all artists working with an element of re-enactment into their own 'artworld living museum'. In fact, on close inspection, works by artists who deal with re-enactment as an aspect of their work tell very different stories, utilize distinct and varied methods, and seem to promise varying results. Some of the work made in recent years may, nevertheless, be seen as an attenuation of the anxiety displayed by historical re-enactment groups — the desire to feed the hunger for some connection with the past and to provide an embodied continuity with the people of the past, and the belief, in an increasingly mediated world, that this is objectively possible. This desire is perhaps most evident in Jeremy Deller’s The Battle of Orgreave (2001), which attempts to create a literal representation of a political event — the confrontation between the police and striking
miners in England in 1984. The Battle of Orgreave, in the laudable and dubious tradition of the documentary, is an attempt to "tell the truth," to give voice to those who have been deprived of the opportunity to tell their own story — to "put the record straight." Deller's piece makes a clear reference to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of re-enacting historic battles which might itself be understood as a manifestation of England's everyday popular culture (an activity, like fly-fishing, stamp collecting and crown-green bowling, that is ubiquitously English but goes largely unnoticed and holds little interest for the voracious eye of the mass media).
Others take a more reflexive view on what distortions and resonances develop when we attempt to copy time. For Pierre Huyghe perhaps the interest is in observing how an event, and indeed our memory of it, is anything but static. Huyghe proletarizes the assumption that it is possible to make an objective recreation of an event. The Third Memory (2000) is a two-channel installation that recalls a bank robbery and siege which took place in New York in 1971, and which subsequently provided the subject matter for Sidney Lumet's film Dog Day Afternoon (1975). In The Third Memory, the robbery's main protagonist, John Wojtowicz, recalls the events of the robbery through the filter of Lumet's film. Huyghe's piece demonstrates how the memory of an event is mediated by its subsequent re-presentation and makes apparent how fluid and suggestive an entity memory is.
The curious feedback between the past and its reproduction is also explored in Omer Fast's Spielberg's List (2003), a two-channel installation that shows footage of the replica of Auschwitz that was built a short distance from the real Auschwitz for the film Schindler's List. The film shows interviews with individuals who might be extras in Schindler's List or perhaps genuine Auschwitz survivors. Here again the past folds into the present, as our memory of Auschwitz is mediated by our memories of the film and from the reports of the individuals who appeared in it. Here the morally loaded subject avoids moralizing and redirects our attention towards the bizarre echo chamber that is constructed when the Hollywood circus sets up its tent in Krakow.
For Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth, the re-enactment by tribute bands explores our relationship with seminal moments in the short history of rock 'n' roll, and their emphasis would seem to be on evocations of the pleasures of seeing the band as if the audience were at the original event. In the performance by a tribute band, typically in a small venue, the audience becomes more than mere spectators as they also "play" the original fans. In the reduced space of re-enactment the fans extend their arms to the star's Doppelgänger. Although there is nothing to stop the fans from touching the star, there nevertheless remains an invisible barrier of imaginary security guards and fences between the fans and their idol. In this way the audience and the performers become partners in a dance around invisible props.
The assertion that these artists' projects represent a movement disguises a more subtle question and begs a subtle answer. What common feature draws our attention when we look at these,
The subject of the historical re-enactment, the re-enactment as an art project, and restaged news footage, is the mediation of memory; how memory is an entity which is continuously being restructured— not only by filmmakers and re-enactors but also by us personally, as mediating and mediated subjects. It also tells us something about the varied nature of these re-constructions (be it the collective dance of the tribute band and its audience, the re-staging of the past by a filmmaker, or the domestication of slaughter by historical re-enactors). Rather than being a form of representation à la mode, or (within the art context) a form of Duchampian appropriation of time, re-enactment is closer to a frame for varied critical approaches to the manipulation and restructuring of memory.

Re-enactment now takes on the character of a MacGuffin. The MacGuffin is an object in a story that is devoid of meaning, but the protagonists in the story believe it has significance and it propels the narrative forward. Many stories cannot be told without the MacGuffin, which is paradoxically central and absent. Similarly, as first appearing to be a subject in itself, re-enactment turns out to be the agent of memory and experience. The issue then becomes not what re-enactment is but what re-enactment does—what is its effect in each particular case? If we acknowledge these differences rather than assuming a generalized answer or template in all cases— which would effectively kick it back into the confined space of the tautological and instrumental discourses of 'art as art'—I think it is possible to ask ourselves...
Tweedledum and Tweedleder
resolved to have a battle

to what degree re-enactment is an element, among many others, which structures memory, and to ask to what degree it provides us with varied forms of critique of the mechanisms through which memory is structured.
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