

16/MUSIC

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



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Review of Ian Forsythe and Jane Pollard's *A Rock 'n' Roll Suicide*, in: *The Independent*, 1998.

TWEEDLEDUM AND TWEDELEDEE RESOLVED TO HAVE A BATTLE

Steve Rushton

In 1839, the patron of the pageant, Archibald William, thirteenth Earl of Eglington, 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 1830s, 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 the 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 hobbyist historians, re-enactment societies that restage 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 Mariatta (1936-37) attracted two million. The memory industry has become increasingly professionalized and, in recent years,

1. Schwartz, Hillel. *The Culture of the Copy, Striking Likeness, Unreasonable Facsimiles*. New York: Zone Books, 1996, pp. 269-276.

2. Schwartz, pp. 269-276.

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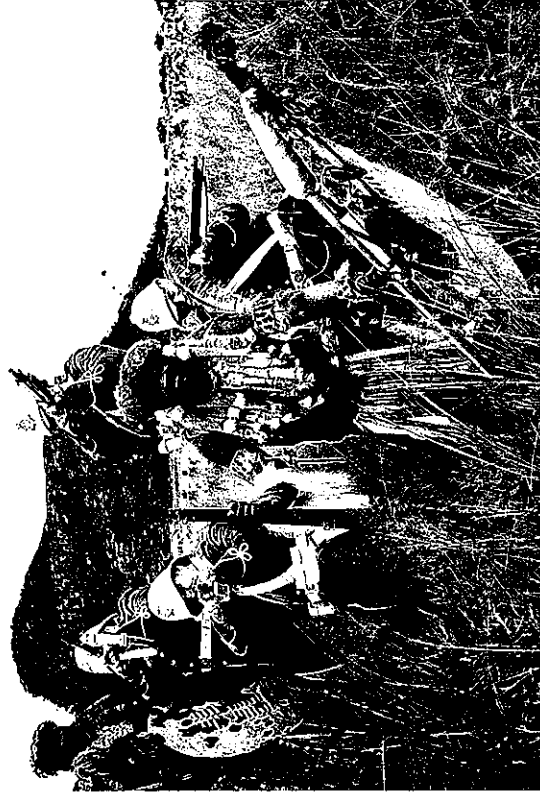
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we have seen the advent of 'living museums' in which actors dress in period costumes and take on the roles of figures of the past, moving through facsimiles of towns and villages like the robots in Westworld.³

3. *Westworld*, dir. Michael Crichton, 1973. Westworld is a futuristic theme park populated by robots who are there to serve the fantasies of visitors. The park has three areas: Westworld (a wild west theme park), Medieval world and Romanworld. Predictably, the robots contract a computer virus and start to kill the humans.



Contemporary Zulus pose with re-enactors on the occasion of the 125th anniversary of the Battle of Isandhlwana, South Africa, 2004

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.'

But there is also, in re-enactment space and time, a distortion in scale: we repeatedly witness unforeseen expansions and contractions. In re-enacted newsreels, 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 backyard after a two-and-a-half metre plot had been dug up and hosed down with water,⁴ or again, in Watkins' *Forgotten Faces* (1956), the Hungarian Revolution is filmed in a cul-de-sac in Canterbury.⁵ 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'⁶ 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 mediatized world, that this is objectively possible. This desire is perhaps most evident in Jeremy Deller's *The Battle of Orgreave* (2002), which attempts to create a literal representation of a political event – the confrontation between the police and striking

4. <http://www.mnsi.net/~pwatkins/diary.htm>

5. <http://www.mnsi.net/~pwatkins/forgottenFaces.htm>

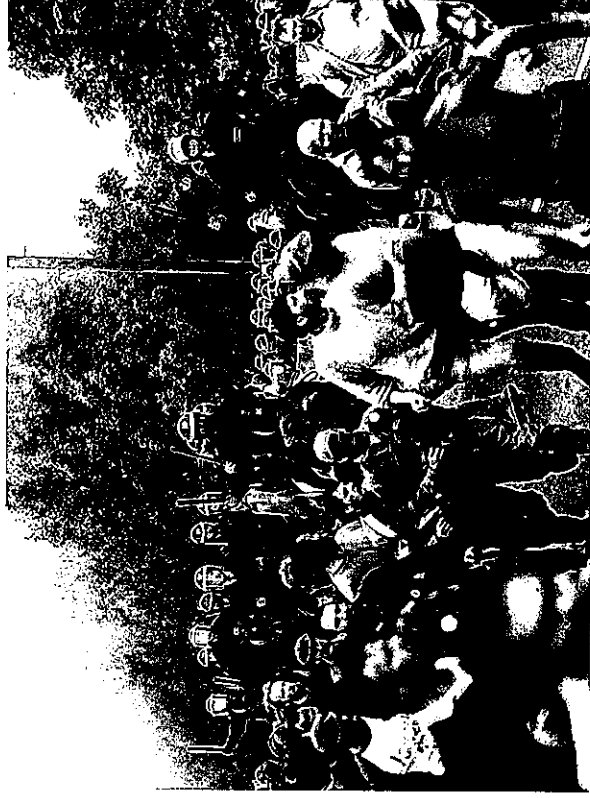
6. Martine Kopsa in an article about art and re-enactment suggests it is a new movement. See *Kennedy Magazine*, August pp. 86-

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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 a 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 problematizes 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 1972, 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 suggestible an entire 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



Jeremy Deller, *The Battle of Orgreave*, 2002

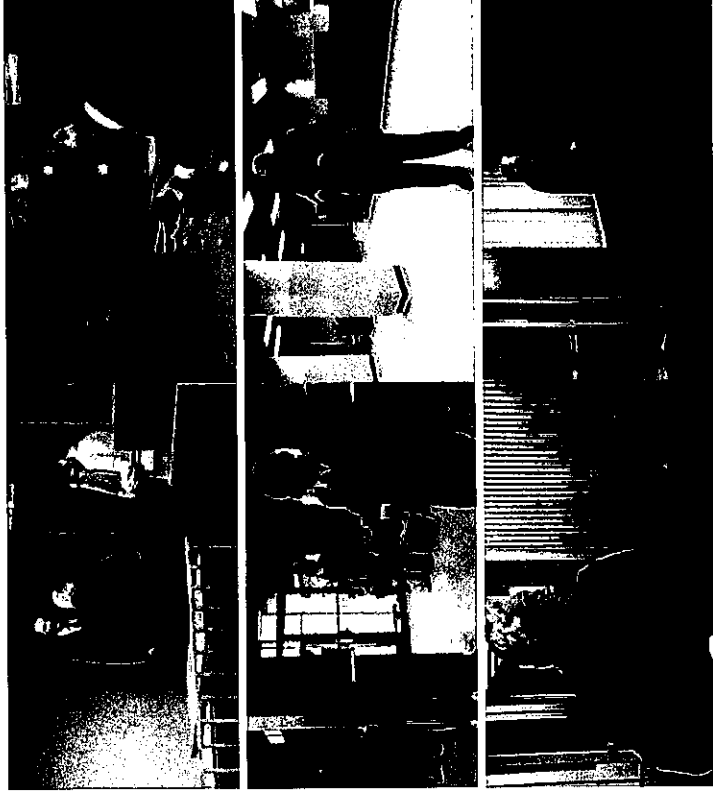
attention towards the bizarre echo chamber that is constructed when the Hollywood circus sets up its tent in Krakow. For Jane Pollard and Iain Forsyth, the re-enactment by tribute bands explores our relationship with seminal moments in the short history of rock 'n' roll, and their emphasis would seem 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 become 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,

and other, artworks? I would encourage an understanding of re-enactment as an element within a wider cultural field, which incorporates the copy in its manifold manifestations.⁷ I would suggest that their relationship rests not in their similarity within the context of art but, rather, in their differences within a broader cultural field.

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

Swartz posits a complex and rich interweaving of the multifarious elements that make up the culture of the copy, from war games, war simulations, pageants, historical re-enactments, model villages, automata, re-staged news events, living museums, the human fascination with the mimicry of parrots, wax figures, shop window mannequins, twins (conjoined and otherwise), photocopy machines, all of which, for Schwartz, form an intertextual matrix.



Pierre Huyghe, *The Third Memory*, 2000, stills from two-screen projection



Ian Forsythe and Jane Pollard, *A Rock 'n' Roll Suicide*, 1998

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.⁸ 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, at 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

8. The idea of the MacGuffin was utilized by Alfred Hitchcock. See Truffaut, François, *Hitchcock, Revised Edition*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1983, p. 127.

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