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Embodying the abstract and incomplete with (re)-enactment

With this essay I want to explore the possibilities of (re-)enactment as a means of interaction. I put the “re” in re-enactment between brackets on purpose, because it is my opinion that the mechanism at work with re-enactment can also be used in other domains than history. To filter the potential of interactivity out of re-enactment I want to discuss what history is and how a re-enactment interacts with it. For this I will look at a 90's Hollywood blockbuster called “Saving Private Ryan” directed by Steven Spielberg and an artistic re-enactment by Rod Dickinson called “The Milgram Experiment”. Both works deal with the theme of the (im)morality of mankind. Once I have made clear what interactivity in the context of re-enactment means I want to theorize how this principle may apply to Karl Sims's “Evolving Virtual Creatures” a pseudo-scientific project that functions as a digital art work that also flirts with the theme the historical re-enactments in this text deal with.

In 1950 Doctor Wilder Penfield had come to the conclusion that the brain functions like a tape recorder. If we couldn't remember something it was due to a malfunctioning of the pathway to the memory, not the memory itself. His opinion became headline news and the idea of an absolute memory, comparable with the newest gadget of the time, which can be addressed through hypnosis is still popular to this day. Experiments done by Pierre Gloor and his colleagues in 1982 couldn't confirm the hypothesis of Penfield, but these outcomes were not published in the mass media and therefore the absolute memory myth remains.[i] Recently Jonathan Schooler found out that as soon as you have described a face you have a harder time recognizing it, when you see it again (Iacoboni, 182). This suggests that there is a decay of memory immediately when you try to call upon it. In this light the presence of an absolute memory has become rather unlikely. Nowadays scientists regard the brain as very dynamic with cycles of growth and decay and a complex dynamic between neurons and hormones. The brain is considered more akin to a piece of condensing rainforest than a hard disk.(NRC)

A lack of absolute memory entails the impossibility of certainty in history, but at the same time it's hard to question all of history. People denying the holocaust have a hard time to be taken seriously on this

point, but the conditions under which the holocaust took place are less certain and are therefore potentially subject to debate. In my opinion history acts like scientific discourse as described by Bruno Latour in the sense that it is a certainty and uncertainty at the same time. Latour writes that science is always in a place between scientific truth and things becoming scientific. On the one hand things are true because they are scientific. On the other hand things become scientific which makes them true. It is the discourse between different practising scientists which determines what is true for which scientific reasons. This “trueness” is not fixed and will change if the scientific discourse changes, making previously scientific reasons that once carried the truth suddenly invalid. History similarly is in between the state of being history and becoming history. There are facts we can't deny like the presence of camps and an administration for ethnic cleansing in WWII. But some things have to be filled in by the imagination and empathy of historians to create the complete picture of history. There is no way to know for sure how the soldiers psychologically reacted to the orders to commit mass homicide. It is historic discourse between historians that decides on this issue, but like scientific discourse historic discourse could be wrong. In some cases there is a controversy in the discourse. This is the case with the Hollywood film “Saving Private Ryan” which is contradicting the eye witness account of a WWII survivor.

Lieutenant colonel Dave Grossman wrote a book about killing in a military context called “On Killing”. According to the summary of this book in “A Time For Empathy” (WEAK I KNOW) there are only a few men with a killer instinct. “only one in five soldiers ever shut a gun in WWII. The other four were brave, faced grave dangers, have landed on beaches and saved comrades under hostile fire, but never fired a bullet.” (de Waal, 242). A scene in Spielberg's film, that re-enacts the Ohama Beach landing on 6th of June 1944, shows a completely different picture where everybody is shooting and the soldiers are all keen on killing Germans, even the ones that surrender and form no thread. The way the plot unfolds reveals the ideology of Spielberg to re-enact the battle in this way. Sparing a life is a weakness that can prelude your own death according to Spielberg. A German soldier spared half-way the film returns at the end as an uber-strong killing machine, who bare handedly kills one of the sympathetic characters. In the same end scene the heroic ammunition carrier described by Grossman is portrayed by Spielberg as a weakling who first insisted on sparing the Germans who surrender, but in the end redeems himself by shooting them. The different views on the WWII battlefields of Spielberg and Grossman are not compatible and since they contradict each other only one can be the true history.

The Spielberg version fits better with the popular idea that man is a killer-ape bound in the constant struggle of survival of the fittest. It is how a lot of people want the history to be probably including Grossman himself who has dedicated a lot of time to teaching soldiers a killer attitude.[ii] As long as a lot of people favour mankind to have a violent nature, for many “Saving Private Ryan” will contain a horrifically accurate re-enactment of a WWII battleground even if they go against the description given by someone who was there.

The re-enactment of the Ohama beach landing in “Saving Private Ryan” would probably not fall well with R.G. Collingwood, at least he would not call it a re-enactment. For him re-enactment is a means to deduce truth out of the interrogation of physical objects that have remained from history and the interpolations that are applied to these objects. He explains his theory by using an imaginary example where there is a document A that proves that Julius Caesar was in Rome at time X. There is another document B that suggests that at time Y Julius Caesar was in Gaul a place near Rome. By re-enacting the journey between Rome and Gaul and seeing if it can be done in the time difference between X and Y you can deduce that Julius Caesar is likely to have made that journey or not and whether he really could have been in those two cities at those two times.(QUOTED IN STEVE, 89). Jennifer Allen talks about re-enactment in a similar manner: “The re-enactment often searches for a lost totality. Take the re-enactment of a crime, where the pieces of a puzzle are put together through a careful re-staging of the misdeed.” (blz. 51). Even though our memories and history are not absolute and we suffer from holes in it; we can use re-enactment to fill in these gaps and correct any false assumptions.

For me this filling of a gap happened when I saw the Rod Dickonsons re-enactment of the scientific experiment called “Obedience To Authority” designed by Stanley Milgram. In the experiment it was investigated if people would keep obeying authority even if it meant that they would mortally wound somebody. By faking a learning environment it was investigated whether the research subjects that were the teacher would keep disciplining their fake students who would act out that they are hurt. A major problem with the set up of the experiment is that the pain is acted out through the medium of a tape recorder. This never occurred to me when I was reading about the experiment, but it was immediately evident in the re-enactment. Milgram probably decided for this way of doing the experiment to make sure that the students would always act the same and that they would not be a variable in the experiment. However using a tape recorder means a total block of non-audial signals

like face expressions and other body language. The biological system that triggers empathy for another person is triggered mostly by facial expression. This is even so much so that people without a face get the feeling that they are no longer a part of society at all. (de Waal, blz. …). In the book that Milgram wrote he states that whenever immediacy is increased less people are willing to obey authority. When the participants have to touch the person they are hurting only 30% will go all the way by virtually killing the other person. This number is much closer to the 20% of people being willing to kill somebody in the WWII, even tough platoon sergeants repeatedly order the other 80% to start shooting as well. The killer-ape mentality that most people suppose to have is again doubtful.

[STANFORD PRISON]

The principle that Jennifer Allen is writing about, that re-enactment fills in a gap in our perception, doesn't only apply to history. In my previous essay I talked about how programming languages like C++ are designed to capture reality in a digital representation. The world literally gets translated in numbers (digits). [MORE?] This means that a system necessarily leaves out a lot of details. By enacting the representation that is inside the computer there is an opportunity to critically analyse how the world is perceived and represented by the creators of the system. For any system to work properly in a reality where humans are involved, people have to adjust their behaviour to the system. In my previous essay I explained that such systems have a “grammar of action” or in other words a limited amount of options to interact in order to force the adaptation of people. The limitations result from the work process that the designers go through. In an enactment there is a change to revisit these design choices and fully investigate their meaning and consequences on our behaviour when dealing with the system.

Katherine Hayles describes Karl Sims “Evolving Virtual Creatures” as follows: “Yearning for the light, the creatures struggle after it. In water they grow tails ans learn undulate like snakes. On land, they clump along, relegated by fate and biology to rectangular shapes joined together with moveable hinges. They show extraordinary ingenuity in making the most of these limitations, crawling, hopping, jumping, always toward the light.” (chptr 8). The piece Hayles describes is about virtual creatures that, through the digital simulation of evolution, get to move and act in a virtual space. These actions are not scripted by Karl Sims, but the behaviour like patterns emerge from his simulation of evolution. As I in

the previous paragraph described, this necessarily is a reduced version of evolution. In the beginning a diverse group of creatures is created and then fitness criteria determine which creatures reproduce. (blz 195). The use of language is revealing here. Karl Sims uses “fitness” which according to Hayles means: “[fitness is] determined according to how successful the creatures are in reaching various goals – following a light three-dimensional space, and time”. However Darwin talked a principle of adaptation instead of survival of the fittest, this phrase was coined by Herbert Spencer a contemporary of Darwin (de Waal, blz. 40). The difference between survival of the fittest and adaptation is that in the first it is all right to kill and oppress the weak, since it is a law of nature that only the strong deserve to live, while adapting to your environment is an act that takes others much more into account by itself. At the heart of its design “Evolving Virtual Creatures” displays the signifiers of an ideology that justifies a killer-ape mentality. This could be a non-intended meaning by Karl Sims, but it seems otherwise since as soon as Karl Sims succeeded in making these creatures walk he set the simulation up in such a way that they would compete with each other. “the successful survive”[iii] according to a description found on internet. In such an environment it is no problem to thrive at the expense of another. Yet as we have seen this killer-ape idea needs to be questioned since it is not as plausible as many assume. We need to remember that Karl Sims made this environment and that life doesn't necessarily rely completely on a survival of the fittest mechanism. It is striking that after fifteen years this simulation of evolution has not come up with a way to make a creature walk on two or four legs gracefully. The re-enactment of this simulation, and seeing the imperfect movements done in real life together with others, has the potential to reopen the discourse around its design and its doubtful propositions.

[HAYLES ON THE RELATION BETWEEN MATERIALITY AND VIRTUALLITY?]

(Re)-enactment is a way to embody that which has no body in order to interrogate and maybe even re-interpolate that which is being acted out. In this sense (re)-enactment is a way to interact with the bodiless history, but also the virtual systems that surround us more and more. This essay focused on the theme of mankind's morality and the assumed lack thereof ending with an example that few ever heard of, but Facebook and its notion of friend could just as easily be staged together maybe with historical idea's of friendship. I wonder which discourse may come from that. Regardless of any outcome the important thing is that we don't take every abstraction for granted and critically analyse them, be it in history or (computer) science. (Re)-enactment is a suitable means to this end in my opinion.

i http://archief.nrc.nl/?modus=l&text=geheugen+hersenen&hit=16&set=2
ii http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dave_Grossman_%28author%29
iii http://www.archive.org/details/sims_evolved_virtual_creatures_1994