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Embodied Simulations of Pasts: The Past as Present to WWII Reenactors and Living Historians

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Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's *The Presence of the Past* was a scientific breakthrough for public history and for historical research. The two historians revealed 'the *presence* of the past – its ubiquity and its connection to current-day concerns'¹ to ordinary Americans and developed the term 'popular historymaking'. In line with Raphael Samuel's famous idea about thinking of history as an 'activity rather than a profession',² 'popular historymaking' stresses the fact that not only historians are historymakers – ordinary people are too. Rosenzweig and Thelen showed how Americans, through their ancestors, engage with and feel connected with pasts. In this way personal and national stories are intertwined. For good reasons *The Presence of the Past* has been an inspiration to many and has resulted in similar examinations of Australians' and Canadians' engagement with their pasts. These examinations have also highlighted the presence – not the distance – of pasts in contemporary contexts.³

In theoretical terms the Danish historian Bernard Eric Jensen has dedicated most of his more than forty years of work to develop a philosophical understanding of historical consciousness.⁴ For Jensen historical consciousness is a term that grasps the fundamental characteristic of being human living *with* and *in* time. People continuously establish coherence between interpretations of the past, understanding of the presence and expectations for the future. Thus, the past is always present as memories and the future is always present as expectations. The past is usable to people as lived experience. This, Jensen argues, is what makes pasts present to people.⁵

These examples of both empirical and theoretical works have shown us that pasts are present and lively to people and not distant, unfamiliar or a 'foreign country' to quote the historian David Lowenthal.⁶ The research explores how people think of pasts and how pasts on a reflexive level are present and usable for them. This is fundamental knowledge within public

history. But what the research does not reveal, is how pasts are also physically present to people and that this also has an effect on how people interpret, use and reflect on pasts.

In this article, I focus on the presence of pasts to ordinary people. But I will turn the perspective from how pasts are present in an existential way as lived experiences and ways of thinking in everyday life to how pasts are present in its materiality and embodiment – and how this also cause reflections of pasts. In this sense, the article extends the work published in volume 23 of *Public History Review*. Grounded in ‘new materialism’, this special issue was dedicated to ‘emerging new approaches to heritage, archaeology and collecting practices, which move away from human-centred world ordering, to explore the embodied, affective experience of material and social worlds.’⁷

Analysing two different kinds of re-enactments done in Denmark, I will examine how pasts are present to World War II reenactors and living historians in open-air museums communicating life and work in Denmark in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I focus, firstly, on the material space in which they do their simulations of pasts. Secondly, I look at the things they use to simulate the pasts. Thirdly, I consider their embodiments and their bodies’ movements, senses, habits and performances in their simulations of pasts.⁸ The article concludes with a discussion of how the reenactors and the living historians reflect on pasts in their embodied simulations of pasts. I analyse two types of re-enactment⁹ not only because these pasts differ in terms of content. That the pasts become present through space, things and body differently in the two types of re-enactment is an argument for saying that if there are such differences even just within re-enactment there is a lot yet to be explored as to how the ‘material world’ activates reflections on pasts.

My approach to studying World War II reenactors and living historians is interdisciplinary and inspired by concepts from many different research fields but mainly from Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s body phenomenology, Jensen’s understanding of historical consciousness, the ‘new materiality’ turn and from re-enactment studies. I use this multiple approach to understand how the past is present in a material and embodied sense to people and how people due to their simulations of pasts interpret and reflect on simulated pasts.

Simulations as Materialisations of Pasts

Many studies of re-enactment and living history emerge from the folklorist Jay Anderson’s publications in the 1980s.¹⁰ So does mine. Anderson was enthusiastic about attempts to ‘simulate life in another time’¹¹ focusing on the realistic and authentic experiences with pasts. In the 1980s others were already more critical regarding the question of authenticity.¹² And authenticity has remained a central discussion within re-enactment studies since then. It has had the most attention of all topics within the field.¹³

For me the most central question in Anderson’s work is not that of realistic and authentic experiences with pasts, but around his emphasis on ‘simulation’ in living history. Using the word ‘simulation’ stresses that pasts are not *re-done/re-enacted/re-lived* because pasts can’t be reproduced. But they can be imitated and simulated. I lean on this understanding of living history and re-enactment and combine it with two other re-enactment scholars’ understandings: Vanessa Agnew and Rebecca Schneider. They both stress the role of the body in the simulation. Agnew understands re-enactment as a ‘*body-based discourse* in which the past is reanimated through physical and psychological experience’ (my emphasis).¹⁴ Schneider describes it as ‘an intense, *embodied inquiry* into temporal repetition, temporal recurrence’ (my emphasis).¹⁵ That leads to my understanding of re-enactment and living history as something

where the body is simulating, imitating, activating, interpreting and doing pasts. In that sense both re-enactment and living history are about simulating pasts. My differentiation between the two is pragmatic and a question of terminology. I speak of 're-enactment' and 'reenactors' when I refer to the activity or the people simulating World War II at re-enactment events held at museums; and 'living history' or 'living historians' when I refer to the activity or people simulating work and life in Denmark in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in open-air museums.

Although many re-enactment scholars agree that the material body plays an essential role in re-enactment, research placing the body in centre of attention is rather limited. Schneider has done it from a theatre and performance studies perspective. Her book is an example of a study of the performing bodies within re-enactment studies. She is preoccupied with how re-enactment 'troubles linear temporality'.¹⁶ So her focus on bodies and time is not an examination of how bodies *perceive* past times.

As a historian and performance studies scholar Katherine Johnson bridges the two fields as she is concerned with how pasts can be performed and experienced in re-enactment.¹⁷ Leaning on theory from theatre and performance studies and philosophers Judith Butler and Merleau-Ponty, she is interested in how reenactors connect with and understand pasts. Analysing her fieldwork where she took part in re-enactments as a reenactor she concludes: 'while my experience through my body will never be quite the same as a medieval woman's experience through her body, this style of re-enactment does seem to evoke an embodied, experiential *relation* to those past bodies, utilizing bodily experience as a unique way of knowing.'¹⁸

Drawing especially on Merleau-Ponty, I also understand the body as more than biology – as a perceiving body that gives access to a cultural world.¹⁹ For Merleau-Ponty, humans perceive phenomena through movements and senses. He is concerned with breaking down the Cartesian opposition between body and mind. I am puzzled with the same dualism in my attempt to combine historical consciousness in Jensen's understanding of the notion with embodied history-making practices when reenactors and living historians simulate pasts. I wish to examine how historical consciousness and the pasts presence also have an embodied and material dimension and how the embodied simulations activate reflections on pasts.

Merleau-Ponty's body phenomenology is of an earlier date. He died in 1961 leaving an unfinished book manuscript which criticised his own former work for not escaping 'the claws of dualism'.²⁰ It focuses on the question of body and mind. 'New materialism' leaves out the mind but widens the understanding of physicality to more materialities than bodies and focuses on how different phenomena materialise. Re-enactment scholars such as Mads Daugbjerg and Mark Auslander have focused on things in re-enactment and shown how materiality is valued and plays a significant role in re-enactment.²¹ The processes of materialisation often involves many actors and elements and can turn the attention to how bodies, things and spaces connect and entangle.²² But none of them question neither the role of body and space nor in depth what engaging with materiality in re-enactment means to the reenactors' perception of pasts.

Daugbjerg and Auslander are both anthropologists which is probably why reenactors' perceptions of pasts are not as an important question in their analysis as it is to me as a historian and public historian. Combining body phenomenology with a focus on materiality such as things and space besides the body, gives me tools to examine not only the embodied perceptions of pasts but the entanglements of space, things and body in the reenactors and the living historians' simulations of pasts. Thus, I can examine how they materialise pasts and

experience them as present and how this makes them reflect on pasts. I understand this as an embodied and material dimension of historical consciousness.

The Material Space: A Mobile Museum or a Museum Scenography

The material spaces the reenactors and the living historians do their simulations of pasts within constitute the physical settings for their embodied experiences with pasts: their doings are simply determined – not only, but also – by the physical space they are in. That means the spaces they are physically placed in and move around within are of great importance when they simulate pasts.

The living historians discussed here volunteer at three different open-air museums in Denmark. Two of the museums show living and working conditions in Danish country-life culture mainly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The third demonstrates everyday life in towns in the same period in an open-air museum. The living historians' volunteer work all consists of simulating different work, primarily old handicraft, while talking to museum visitors about the former work and life. They are not necessarily dressed up to look like people from the period – some are, some are not. Some produce wooden tools for farming in a wood workshop; others imitate the production of bricks in a brickyard; produce barrels and vats in a cooperage; maintain mills to grind flour; brew beer in an old brewery; repair radios or mopeds; or do old needlework. All of this work takes place in the museums' original buildings or workshops matching the work the volunteering living historians do.

That means the living historians all step into different museum scenography designed by museum curators. The scenography exhibits a very limited slice of a certain past – often workshops or buildings from the nineteenth century. These rooms or buildings – not the open-air museum as a whole – frame the living historians' embodied history-making practices. The living historians only use either one room or one building matching the former work practice they do. They use the rooms or buildings actively. It is not supposed to only *look* like they are working in the spaces – they *do* the former work, using the furnishings and equipment in the space. Using the rooms and buildings actively and on a regular basis make the living historians appropriate the spaces to an extent where they feel at home in the museum scenography. Their embodied perception of pasts relies on the spaces because the rooms and buildings define what kind of past practices they imitate. They use the space not to *be* in the past but to *do* the past.

The World War II reenactors' space is quite different than the living historians' space. Coming to a re-enactment event before it opens to visitors, the reenactors establish their own space on the outside ground of the museum hosting the event, almost like a mobile or travelling museum, as the re-enactment scholar Stephen Gapps has suggested.²³ In this sense, the reenactors are the curators and therefore they also feel at home in their space. In opposition to the living historians the World War II reenactors' space consists of multiple spaces or what you could call scenes:

- They build up displays that most often look like a military camp behind the frontline – either sleeping areas or camp offices.
- They use the surrounding areas with trees, bushes, grass and paths to march, do drills, simulate battles or explosions.
- If there are buildings – for instances houses or bunkers – they sometimes use these in their simulations of war in the 1940s. A building can be turned into a café where

German soldiers hang out amongst visitors at the event. In the back of the shop Danish resisters might be producing fake identification cards. A room in a bunker can be turned into a military camp office.

The reenactors portray soldiers – German, British, American or Russian soldiers or Danish volunteering soldiers in Waffen SS – or Danish resisters. Their simulations of World War II mostly consist of them being dressed up hanging out, moving around or just *being* in the different spaces. Sometimes they perform short theatrical situations such as exchanging fire, blowing up rail tracks or making arrests. A general might make inspections in the military camp. The re-enactment groups are self-organised and therefore decide themselves what spaces they will create and the content of their simulations as long as the museums hosting the event approve of it.

The World War II reenactors' space is a greater slice of the simulated past because it consists of multiple spaces. For the reenactors embodied perception of the past this space has the effect that the bodies are *brought into* a past military space. The space contains several spaces the reenactors move around almost like actors in a movie set with different stages, though the display of the particular re-enactment group is their primary stage. Unlike the living historians, the reenactors are supposed to *look* like there are in the 1940s in order to make this space livelier. Their space is about *being* in the war.

The Look, Sense and the Handling of Things

Because the living historians and the reenactors simulate different pasts the things they use in their simulations are obviously different. But the attention turned towards things in the new materialism is not about what things *are* but what they *do*.²⁴ Things do differently and have different impacts for the reenactors and living historians because their embodied use of them is different and they use materialities in their simulations for different purposes. They do have something in common: things used in their simulations of pasts are tried out, utilised and learned physically and through their bodies. The reenactors and the living historians also share the idea of valuing originals and reproductions used in the simulations differently.

At the war re-enactment events, I immediately got the impression that things and equipment matter. I noticed how the reenactors often show visitors things and tell stories about them – what were they used for, how were they made, how it feels to carry the things around and use them and whether they are originals or copies. The reenactors also often show things to other reenactors and discuss them. I was overwhelmed by the quantity and volume of things brought to the events – tents, camp beds, blankets, tables, typewriters, stamps, chairs, footstools, oil lamps, maps, canteens, cups, camp cooking equipment, bags, boxes, weapons, spades, cigarette packs, chocolate, play cards, service records, shaving kits, sewing kits, bandages, whistles, glasses, flags, bikes, motorcycles, jeeps and bigger vehicles and of course at least one if not several uniforms consisting of everything from military underwear next to one's skin to shirts, belts, jackets, capes, boots, helmets and other headgear. These materials are used to construct the spaces. When they arrive at the events, they change into their uniforms and build up their mobile museum with all their stuff and materialise the war. The past partly becomes present in this materialisation process.

Continuously collecting things is a part of the war re-enactment hobby; this underlines the importance of materiality in this hobby. At some events, you'll find stands where reenactors and visitors can buy equipment and books. But most of the things the reenactors use (reproductions and originals) are bought online. 'It's a huge industry',²⁵ one reenactor told

me. A few reenactors make things themselves. I met one who had sewed his police uniform and made his handgun²⁶ – both things he uses to portray a Danish resister. Another proudly showed me his homemade cigarette packs. He portrays an American soldier and told me in detail about the process of making the cigarette packs at home before going to the re-enactment event. He had found the design of American Lucky Strike cigarettes from the 1940s, printed it out, folded it, covered it in foil and closed it the way cigarette packs were sealed in the 1940s. But before doing this he filled his homemade pack with contemporary non-filter cigarettes from a Danish brand that are the same size as American Lucky Strike cigarettes were in the 1940s.²⁷

The *look* of things is of great importance to the reenactors. One explained to me how buttons are supposed to look by making fun of other reenactors: ‘Some will say: “Uh that scrapes off the paint”, yes but they [soldiers] did that, they scratched on everything. It’s perfectly normal that the painting gets more mat and that one has to get use to that now it looks worn – no it looks normal.’²⁸ The reenactors explained how they purposely scratch their new helmets because they look too new and shiny. ‘If it looks right, it works’,²⁹ one said about the canteen he used. Reenactors use materialities for themselves to look like soldiers or resisters from the war and they use materialities for their space they build up to look like settings from the 1940s.

The living historians neither buy or home make the things they use in their simulations of past. They use the things and the buildings collected by the museums. ‘Old things. I’m interested in old things’,³⁰ said Peter, who is a living historian in a bike and moped repair shop from the 1970s. For many volunteer living historians their engagement with the past in open-air museums has to do with their interest in old things such as tools for handicraft and farming, buildings, vehicles or radios or how the things are produced, used or repaired.

The *functionality* and the active use of old things is of much greater importance to the living historians than the look of old things. The living historians’ historymaking practices are structured around producing or repairing a product. The tools and the material they use in these processes are the important things the living historians surround themselves with. It is not the tool in itself or the product that can be produced using this tool that is interesting to the living historians. It is the process the thing brings along – the entangled practices between materiality and body. The functionality of old material culture. The question of how a tool has been physically handled and used in the past is what makes the past present to the living historians.

During an interview in a woodwork shop with two living historians, I pointed at a plane hanging on the wall and asked if they also used this in order to find out if it was a part of the museum scenography or if they also used this like I saw them using other tools by the work station in the middle of the room. They both responded ‘yes’. One continued after thinking for a bit: ‘As a matter of fact, we use all the tools’. Later in the interview he returned to talking about the tools, explaining that they are all characteristic of the period. He found it ‘fascinating to try out all the tools like they were’.³¹ What is attractive for the living historians is to use objects by hand in order to know how they work and have been used in the past. As one of them said: ‘When I can show it to you ... Then I know how it works.’³²

It would not be fair to say that the reenactors are only preoccupied with the look of things and collecting things. They also *use* the things more actively like the living historians, but for different purposes. The attractive functionality of things for the reenactors are not specifically knowing how to handle them, but to *sense* materialities used in World War II with the whole

body. The body can smell, freeze, sweat, taste and feel if something is wet or heavy. On the sensing body they carry uniforms, boots, weapon and other equipment and due to the bodily senses of this. These things are of great importance to the reenactors. One of them explained how it feels to wear a uniform:

Even though it's uncomfortable to be soaking wet of rain when we're out in a uniform and find out how heavy a thing like that actually is when it's wet through, and how little it actually warms you up in reality because you use all of your body heat to try to dry this piece of rubbish ... then you freeze terribly, but it must have been like that for those soldiers.³³

The reenactors easily elaborated on their senses of the things in their interviews. The uniforms are 'heavier than normal clothes',³⁴ smell of 'wet wool and smoke',³⁵ wearing it during summer makes you 'sweat like crazy'.³⁶ Similar to the uniforms, wearing military hobnailed boots also open up a landscape of senses to the reenactors: they 'weigh a little more and act differently than modern hiking boots',³⁷ 'try walking far in them and feel how it hurts your feet' and 'Slippery cobblestones, right? Then you skate around wearing these!'.³⁸ But the sense most often connected to boots was sound. Several reenactors highlighted the sounds of wearing military boots. The sound differs depending on weather the reenactor is walking by himself, with others or marching and depending on the surface of the ground.³⁹

The living historians barely talked about sensing things. I asked some about braided rush shoes some of them were wearing and how they the shoes felt. Two women responded: 'It's fine',⁴⁰ 'Yeah it's okay'.⁴¹ They did not unfold the more complex landscape of senses revealed to me by the reenactors. Sensing the past through materialities is not how the past become present to the living historians. This and the importance of the authentic look of things are the differences when it comes to the role of materialities between the living historians and the reenactors. On the other hand, they both use things from the past to make pasts present. Both also believe that original things produce a different presence to the past than reproductions.

Copies can be *used* authentically in the eyes of the living historians and *sensed* authentically in the eyes of the WWII. Originals can also do this. But they can also create an experience of *presence* as discussed by literary theorist Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht. Original things make a connection to the context they originate from.⁴² Some living historians and reenactors indicated that original things they use are relics from the past – a sort of witnesses to the times they simulate and wish to understand. One reenactor said about a canteen: 'then you can sit and talk about it and wonder if this has been East or if it was just here in Denmark or in Normandy or where ever it was – different frontlines right?'⁴³ This is very similar to how a living historian spoke about the plane he used to produce barrels and vats. To him it had great meaning:

just to think of how many people who have had this in their hands, standing and sweating ... That, I think is intriguing, having a hold of a tool that has a history rather than going to buy one ... I think this gives me something different right? It's difficult to explain ... In 2015 you can still use something produced more than 100 years ago.⁴⁴

Using original materials make both the reenactors and living historians imagine the hands of the past that the things have been through and what the things have 'experienced'. This sheds light on the fact that materialities do not only have a pragmatic significance when simulating pasts but also an affective importance due to the special presence of pasts. Using things can be

functional, sensuous and affective and this is three different ways pasts become present in their embodied simulation.

The Body: A Medium to Enter or Preserve Pasts

The reenactors' and living historians' simulations of pasts are a process of entanglements of space, things and body where pasts materialise and become present to them. But this embodied procurement of pasts also happens through the movements and postures they do with their bodies and when they use their bodies to try out and experiment with pasts.

For the living historians, the important movements in the simulations of pasts happens through the hands. They produce, repair and maintain things as was done in the past with their hands. Several of them stressed their use of hands. One spoke of his 'interest in history and using ... [he stopped mid-sentence] ... I have to see with my fingers as well'.⁴⁵ Another similarly spoke of learning through praxis: 'Yes, using your hands you learn how it [a mill] works'; 'hands on, right? ... You know, you see with your eyes but also with your hands. You can stand here and look at that one [pointing at a mill] and that gives you no feeling at all, but you can try touching it and then you get a feeling of things'.⁴⁶

It gives them satisfaction and pride to excel at these skilled trades from the past – and also to preserve them. One said:

... it does gives me something, how to put it ... satisfaction of ... [he straightened his back and hit himself on the chest with a clenched fist] ... [I] know this tool, it gives me a result. It is satisfactory [meaning satisfying], a professional satisfactory one can say, yes.⁴⁷

They experiment with their hands to know more about producing and creating in the past or to know more about using a specific tool. They practice so the movements become embed like habits and knowledge in their bodies. Sociologist Paul Connerton⁴⁸ argues: 'Habit is a knowledge and a remembering in the hands and in the body; and in the cultivation of habit it is our body which "understands"'.⁴⁹ Several times, the living historians expressed how their embodied historymaking practices had become a habit and knowledge. A woman who replicated nineteenth-century ribbon making practices explained: 'In the beginning one might think a lot about it but then it becomes a habit'.⁵⁰ Others mentioned how they had 'gotten use to' the smell of soldering and how they 'know ... by heart' how to screw on old mopeds.⁵¹

The reenactors also experiment with the past in their simulations but their primary aim is not to gain knowledge about how something was done in the past or to handle things from the past. Rather, they experiment to reflect on how something must have *felt* for people in the past. They capture a position with their body when they do drill or go on guard duty, do specific movements and feel the equipment on their skin. One of them said in an interview:

At last, if one should be a bit philosophical about it, then I guess you could say that it is a kind of historical research on your own body ... When we do drills in that way you use to do it, then I guess it is history you to a degree try to process with the body.⁵²

The reenactors want to sense the past as something different than the presence. This is unlike the living historians who want to embed the past as a recognizable habit in the body. This contradiction shows how pasts can be present and exist both as something different and as something recognisable.

When reenactors and living historians simulate pasts the function of the body is to perceive history although it happens in different ways. This is consistent with Merleau-Ponty's ideas. The look of the body and its performativity, which Judith Butler among others has theorized, also have different meanings in the different situations. The living historians are not necessarily dressed up as past people – some are, some are not. They don't perform to be culturally recognized as past people but as their present selves as mediators at the museum. Performance is important because it mediates and communicates the past with their bodies. As one of them said:

I think we use ourselves as history. I find it easier to communicate ... when I can show it to you instead of: 'well I have read something about it might be done like this and this', right? I know this is how it works ... [He turns around with his hands out to the sides as a presentation of the body and says:] ... well, I guess we use ourselves in that sense that we're almost an accessory.⁵³

The body is important to the living historians because it is a medium to communicate and preserve a past.

The reenactors on the other hand use their body to play with identities in their re-enactment. Several of them play with the idea of 'being someone else'.⁵⁴ Others play with identity in terms of being themselves 'born at another time'.⁵⁵ It is important though to be culturally recognized as the past people they imitate and perform – and not as their present selves. Convincing performances contribute to creating a past space that has to look like what they understand to be an authentic representation. Thus, their bodies are both used to create a past material space and to enter a certain past. The body is the medium to entering another time because of the embodied simulations.

Reflections on Past and Present

Rosenzweig and Thelen, empirically, and Jensen, theoretically, have shown how pasts are present to ordinary people. They have shown us how people think of pasts and how they use pasts for identity purposes among other things. The past is present because it gives people roots. My examination of the two different types of simulations of pasts show how pasts' presence is also a process of people using their bodies and things to materialise pasts in ways that are meaningful to them. Comparison is a well-known methodological tool but it is not a prevalent analytical strategy within re-enactment studies. In this case comparing differences and similarities of two types of simulations of pasts make it possible to go deeper into the reenactors' and living historians' experiences with pasts by comparing how they make pasts presence using spaces, things and their bodies. It also broadens our understanding of how their embodied historymaking practices make them reflect on pasts.

The embodied simulations make the World War II reenactors reflect on how it was to be an actor in war. They strive to gain knowledge about the life of soldiers. But at the same time, they experience limits to their reflections on this. Several of them indicated that they were not able to obtain an authentic physical and psychological experience of being in war. Neither do the reenactors wish to reflect on what some of them called 'the explicit evil', 'the ugly side' or 'the darker sides'.⁵⁶ This alludes to the Nazi ideological universe and genocide.

The living historians do not express any limits in their reflections on pasts activated by their embodied simulations. It is worth noting that even though they simulate a very limited part of a certain past – a work practice – they reflect on the past in much broader terms. Their

simulations make them reflect on past lived lives. As one of them said: ‘... how did people make what I’m standing and doing craftsman-like. Another thing is ..., how did people live back then.’⁵⁷ Others told me their simulations activated ideas on what people ate and drank in the past, their living conditions or how and for what the things the living historians produce were used in the past. They also often reflected on how people worked hard in the past and how a similar job is carried out today. This shows how the embodied simulations of past do not only create room for reflection on the *past* but also on the *present*.

Due to the fact the living historians are imitating a past work, it might be a reasonable assumption that their doings make them reflect on how a similar work is done today but the living historians also reflect on the coherence between past and present in other ways. Doing their simulations of past work, they felt connected with what they perceived as better values. One said that the work he did in the wood workshop in the open-air museum made him think of ‘values in ... the old Danish societies.’ Asked what values he was thinking of, he responded: respect for different work, helping each other and that people have become ‘too much of individualists’ today’.⁵⁸ Another living historian felt connected with a plainer life where ‘things can be done simpler’ whereas now where ‘everything happens so obscenely fast’.⁵⁹ One was reminded of how today is about ‘discarding’ instead of ‘repairing’ like in the past.⁶⁰ These conclusions corresponds with what the historian Anette Warring has found when she researched Iron Age reenactors. ‘The Iron Age’ she has written, ‘constitute a reservoir, a room for experience and values, they wish to live in accordance with.’⁶¹ The same thing happens when living historians imitate nineteenth and twentieth-century work. Their imitations of pasts make them reflect on values and on how they believe their personal values were shared by more people in the past than in the present where they seem to be lost for the majority.

Previous research on re-enactment has shown how it can be fruitful to focus on whether the purpose of a specific type of reenactment is about learning *about* a past and leaning *from* a past from the perspective of the reenactors.⁶² My findings follow in line with these results as the reenactors mainly wish to learn *about* a past whereas the living historians find the past useful to *learn from*. This difference corresponds with what Jensen on the one hand calls ‘an antiquarian interest in past’ and on the other hand a ‘pragmatic interest in past’.⁶³ Jensen describes the antiquarian interest as a pure fascination in a past itself, whereas he describes the pragmatic interest as a use of past almost like a storeroom of lived and usable experiences.

Jensen uses the distinction between antiquarian and pragmatic interest in pasts in his development of historical consciousness as a theoretical concept to consider how people think of pasts and find them useful. The analysis of the reenactors and living historians shows a close connection between body and mind; it shows how simulating pasts is both an embodied use of pasts with the purpose of materializing pasts but also a use that activates reflections on pasts. There is much to be explored about an embodied dimension of people’s historical consciousness. How are these embodied historymaking practices part of people’s overall interpretations of pasts? And in what ways do they supplement and challenge the way people think of pasts?

Endnotes

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8. The article's empirical data consists of observations and interviews with WWII reenactors and living historians in open-air museums conducted in Denmark. Most of the 34 interviewees between 24 and 80 years old are male (5 women). All are anonymised. Thanks to all for their kind participation. The fieldwork done amongst the WWII reenactors happened 26 April 2014 at the Home Guard's farm by Karup; 23 and 24 May 2014 at The Bunker Museum in Silkeborg; 4-6 July 2014 at the Bunker Museum Hanstholm; 6 September 2014 at The Garderhøj Fortress. The fieldwork done amongst the living historians in open-air museums happened 11 October 2015 at the Funen Village; 13 October 2015 at the Funen Village; 28 October 2015 at The Old Town; 2 November at Old Denmark - Open Air Museum; 3 November 2015 at The Old Town; 4 November 2015 at The Old Town; 17 November 2015 at The Old Town.
9. I understand both World War II re-enactment and living history as re-enactments as they are both activities where pasts are simulated and as such re-enacted. My definition of re-enactment leaning on other re-enactment scholars will be unfolded more in depth in the following section.
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