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## **Historical Re-enactment in Poland: Between Faithfulness to History and the Imperative of Spectacularity**

*Abstract:* The article is the result of a research project devoted to Polish historical re-enactment groups which are becoming very popular and influential and can be seen as a part of the multi-sensory culture of the event. During ethnographic research, we raised the issue of the commercialisation of historical re-enactment and the alleged educational value of the related activities, deliberating whether it was possible to reconcile faithfulness to history with the demands of commercial events, the passion with the pursuit of profit, and teaching with entertainment. The research included the evaluational dimension and questions on the role of re-enactment in the cultural policy of the country. The findings indicated that the movement was ambiguous and multidimensional and that numerous answers existed to the question about the re-enactors' motivations essentially because the groups are divided into hobbyist re-enactors and commercial re-enactors. We found that re-enactment was effective in instilling historical knowledge, although not into the spectators, but into the re-enactors themselves. Re-enactment events usually failed to stimulate the spectators' interest in history. A considerable majority of these events remained intellectually passive, which caused any educational effect to be momentary and superficial.

*Keywords:* historical re-enactment, heritage tourism, living history, educational effectiveness, multi-sensory culture of event

### **Introduction**

Re-enactors are enthusiasts and hobbyists who spend their free time re-enacting the outfits, weapons, technologies and social activities of the old times and past historical events in accordance with their best scientific knowledge. Historical re-enactment is a type of active hobby that turns into lifestyle. The increasing number of re-enactors and the year-on-year increase in the re-enactment infrastructure in the form of hundreds of re-enactment events, 'sports-like' re-enactor leagues, or the re-enactment-related handicraft industry make one consider them to be a socio-cultural movement with its own objectives, its own language, and an emerging distinct system of values and norms.

After 1989, the year of social, political, and economic transformation in Eastern and Central Europe, the Polish people have experienced a strong domination of the consumption culture, which is responsible for the evolution of cultural behaviours. One aspect to consider is the sphere of the multi-sensory consumption of the popular culture or the so-called multi-sensory culture of the event, and the other focuses on the 'silent' activities

inside the virtual cultural sub-worlds. These new forms of participation in culture are becoming dominant in Poland (Szlendak & Olechnicki 2017: 11–30). The multi-sensory culture ‘packs’ cultural participation in mega-ceremonials, such as festivals, fairs, holidays of regions, and re-enactment events (historical re-enactment groups present their interests, artefacts, costumes, and skills on festivals attracting mainstream masses). The characteristics of the multi-sensory culture of the event include concentrated ‘eventness’, density of attractors, immediate sharing, evanescence of the experiences, seasonality, eventness, instantness, and strong links with commercial brand names, and cultural omnivorousness (Peterson & Kern 1996).

The Polish historical re-enactment movement was not born until the 1990s. Previously, in the times of the communist regime in Poland, there were occasional attempts to organise re-enactment events for propaganda reasons, and more rarely, as a tourist attraction. The first Polish association of this kind, the Sword and Crossbow Brotherhood (Bractwo Miecza i Kuszy) was registered in 1992. Since then, the movement has been developing exponentially and dynamically. Assuming the most conservative estimates, there might be at least several hundred groups (half of which are knight groups) whose activities engage approximately 100,000 people in Poland (Szlendak *et al.* 2012: 77–80). The unexpected aspect of this finding is that there is a very limited and incomplete body of literature, usually rather journalistic than scholarly. The scholarly body of literature is primarily fragmentary and deals not with the entire phenomenon but with its individual parts or dimensions. For example, Bogacki considered it a form of cultural tourism (2010); Pietrzyk-Jagielska analysed it in terms of the sociology of fashion (2015); Antoszevska wrote about the fantasy component in the re-enactment (2015); Olechnicki, Szlendak, and Karwacki examined the educational effect (2016); and Baraniecka-Olszewska explored the World War II re-enactment (2018). A more comprehensive approach was taken in a study by Szlendak *et al.* (2012).

Re-enactment groups arouse mixed, and often extreme, feelings. People with a pacifist attitude associate them with a dangerous war game, which is harmful in the educational dimension. Members of the feminist movement associate the re-enactment movement with an equally dangerous cultural niche, which enables the restoration of the past patriarchal male dominance (cf. Hunt 2008). The left side of the political scene perceive the re-enactors as the live media of the conservative national ideology. Numerous press releases and TV mentions, instead of attempting to understand this phenomenon, inform on re-enactment events almost exclusively as on entertainment, and sometimes, as a cheap sensation.

However, the re-enactment consists not only of performing historical war actions (although these are in fact key and the most important) but also of thousands of women involved in the re-enactment movement, and people of extreme views are a margin. Moreover, in spite of the fact that the summer holiday time commercial re-enactment events are supposed to provide the spectators mainly with entertainment, the movement has considerable potential to influence the Poles’ knowledge of their own history and the micro-history of the place that they live in. The result of the functioning of a re-enactment group or of participation in such a group may be obtaining historical knowledge and learning the characteristics and cultural patterns inherent to the people living in the past times, in the close and the distant space. The transfer of knowledge resulting from the activity of the group may be considered a staged history class (for people having contact with the group) and the contin-

uous education of those who form the group. Such alternative education by means of direct contact may be a supplement (in certain matters) or an alternative to historical education in educational institutions. Participating in re-enactment groups, people simultaneously build a unique cultural industry providing local communities and cultural institutions with means and resources, even in the area of mobilising and organising tourism (heritage tourism being built around historical re-enactment groups has been discussed by Crang (1996). What is highly essential for a country's cultural and historical policies is that owing to the growing movement of the re-enactment groups, the notions of the 'imagined community' and the history 'being made-up' are created (Coleman & Elsner 2004).

The main aim of our research was the exploration, analysis, and evaluation of the activity of historical re-enactment groups in Poland. We hoped to break the stereotypical convictions about re-enactors as harmless eccentrics; in particular, we wanted to offer a close look at their culture-building role. One can argue that re-enactment groups are exemplary of contemporary cultural activity and that being a member of such a group is most of all a new way of life. However, what is important is that the re-enactors are consumers and prosumers at the same time: this phenomenon has become a complex and rewarding cultural industry which generates various profits: economic, social, symbolic, and educational. We also pose the question on the broad sense of the educational value of the re-enactment activity and a better understanding of the multitude and the complexity of its participants' motivations. Does it make sense to use the re-enactment movement and support it at the level of the country's cultural policy and the local government's policy creation, as people participate so willingly in this fascinating group undertaking? How do re-enactment groups affect the citizens' historical knowledge and their social activity?

### Methodology

The project 'Re-enactment groups: Reconstruction of heritage and culture in action' was carried out in 2011–2012<sup>1</sup>. The field research into historical re-enactment groups was conducted in accordance with the paradigm of the ethnographic method. The methodology combined observation, visual methods, conversation methods, desk research, and Internet content analysis.

There were three aims posed in the research: 1) diagnosis, 2) documentation, and 3) evaluation.

- 1) The diagnosis was performed to generate the data estimations of the number of re-enactment events and organisations, number of their participants/members, their background (e.g. what social strata or professions they come from), the practice and calendar of such group activity, the description of a day in the life of a group member, and the costs and profits of the activity (on a broad scale: financial, time, energy, social, and educational), and to provide an outline of the history of re-enactment groups in Poland.
- 2) The realisation of the documentation aim meant the generation of the 'raw' data, the description of the respondents' statements by means of transcription, photographs, and

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<sup>1</sup> Thanks to the grant from the National Centre for Culture Poland, no. 45/11.

field notes from the course of the re-enactment events, the scale of the actors' involvement and the viewers' interest, as well as the broader cultural context of such events.

- 3) The evaluation aim was to answer the following question: is it worth conducting the cultural policy of the state to (financially, institutionally, and symbolically) strengthen the re-enactment movement? The evaluation process identified the multidimensional effects of the functioning of re-enactment groups for their members, for people in contact with the activity of the groups, for the local community in which the group functioned, and the cultural policy of the state. The evaluation survey considered apart from the members of the historical re-enactment groups, re-enactment event organisers and direct recipients of their activities (the viewers and apprentices) along with local institution representatives, local government authorities, as well as cultural and educational institutions.

The research procedure was the following: The researchers went to perform the field work in groups composed of at least three people. This among other things ensured mutual control. The researchers conducted detailed anthropological reconnaissance using the necessary devices. They were interested in a comprehensive documentation of the infrastructure, actors, and the course of the re-enactment events. At the end of the day spent on fieldwork, each researcher was obliged to write an operational note containing two types of data. Firstly, he/she had to pay attention to anything specific that had happened in the course of the fieldwork and to describe methodological and environmental circumstances and particular occurrences worth paying attention to in the course of analysing the data, along with the detailed characteristics of places where conversations with the respondents had taken place, or events which could have disturbed the course of the survey/conversations. Secondly, and this was the more important part of the operational note, the researchers had to include in it their own reflections on the event and the collected material, which would help the research team understand the interviews and events, and to sketch their own emotions and the emotions revealed by the surveyed people, their personal opinions revealed off the record, and other types of curiosities. The operational notes were used for the analysis and the interpretation of significance, just as the interview scripts and visual materials were.

If participation in events in any engaged role turned out to be necessary, the researchers were obliged to take part. At least one research team member was obliged to play social roles (games, competitions, etc.) to which the organisers invited the viewers. If it was necessary to shoot a bow or make a clay pot, the researchers did so, carefully writing down their impressions and photographing the activities and the results. Trained, three-person research teams went to the event location sufficiently early to be able to capture the preparations for the event. They were usually the last ones to leave the place. Within the research team, it was necessary to divide the responsibilities: one person followed the course of the event, the second focused on the viewers, and the third concentrated on the surroundings; however, in practice, with regard to organisational requirements and the specificity of particular events, the researchers had to swap roles or perform two roles simultaneously.

The research consisted of in-depth interviews (according to extended scenarios) with significant actors and organisers of the events, as well as key figures of the re-enactment groups. The interviews required the trained field researchers to skilfully use several interview scenarios depending on the characteristics and position of the person they interviewed.

Different sets of questions were directed at the re-enactment group members, the event organisers, and the local government representatives interested in using the potential of the re-enactment movement.

The research also used the unique and rarely used method, mainly because of its potentially ‘unobjective’ dimension, of field ethnographic research involving a survey of the ‘emotional effects’ and ‘impressions’ which cultural events generate in their participants ‘live on the spot’. The researchers conducted a ‘quality measurement’ of the events on the basis of the participants’ impressions, confronting these impressions with their own, written down in the operational notes. The main component of the research was a short interview with purposively selected participants (questioning) during or after the end of the event. Such a survey resembles the classic reporter’s method. Simple questions were also asked ‘on the spot’ to people ‘caught in the act’ of participating in the event during or just after the end of the re-enactment events. The aim was to 1) determine whether they liked the event and why, and 2) to compare the participants’ statements with the researchers’ own impressions recorded in their operational notes.

Re-enactment activities are primarily designed to be watched. For this particular reason, the basic research methods used in the project included visual research carried out by trained researchers who witnessed the activities of selected re-enactment groups by assuming various roles: those of the viewers, of the inquisitive observers of the ‘backstage’ and ‘behind the scenes’ activities of the historical re-enactment events, and of people ‘following’ the very participants, accompanying them during preparations, interactions with the viewers. and integration events within the community of re-enactors. The basic form of documentation was photography completed by short films.

The main aim of the visual research was to generate the ‘raw’ data, to show—by means of photographs, the film from the ‘field,’ and the field notes—the course of various re-enactment events, the scale of the actors’ engagement and activity, the quality and accuracy of the used outfits, weaponry, vehicles, accessories, the audience’s interest, the interactions between the public and the re-enactment actors, the commercial environment of the re-enactment events, as well as the broader organisational and socio-cultural context of such events.

Taking into account the directive of the most complex sample possible, the decision was to study and analyse nine re-enactment events:

- XXXV Wielki Turniej Rycerski (The XXXV Great Knights’ Tournament ) in Golub-Dobrzyń (the Kuyavian-Pomeranian voivodeship).
- Strefa Militarna (The Military Zone)—convent of re-enactment groups and historical military vehicles, in Podrzecze near Gostyń and Piaski (the Wielkopolskie voivodeship).
- III Zjazd Wojów Wczesnośredniowiecznych: Dźwięki Wojny, Rezerwat archeologiczny (The III Convent of Early-Medieval Warriors: Sounds of War, Archaeological Reserve) „Kaliski Gród Piastów” (The Kalish’s Castle of Piasts) in Kalisz-Zawodzie (the Wielkopolskie voivodeship).
- Bitwa pod Grunwaldem (The Battle of Grunwald), in Grunwald (the Warmia-Mazuria voivodeship).
- Wielki Teatr Historii — Malbork — Zwycięstwo historii (The Great Theatre of History—Malbork—The Victory of History), in Malbork (the Pomeranian voivodeship).

- Walkiria 2011 (Valkyria 2011), in Kętrzyn and Gierłoż (the Warmia-Mazuria voivodeship).
- II Zlot Grup Rekonstrukcji Historycznych Odyseja Historyczna. Epizod II (The 2<sup>nd</sup> Convent of Historical Reenactment Groups Historical Odyssey Episode II), Park in Leszczynek near Kutno (the Łódź voivodeship).
- Festiwal Słowian i Wikingów 2011 (The Slavs and Vikings Festival 2011), in Wolin (the West-Pomeranian voivodeship).
- Fotograficzna gra miejska Klisza 1944 (The Photographic City Game ‘Film’ 1944 ), in Warszawa (the Mazovian voivodeship).

In all, during the events, 14 researchers spent 27 days in the field, conducting 77 in-depth interviews with re-enactors and event organisers and 103 on-site interviews with the spectators and taking 84 ethnographic notes. In the visual part, the project document base contained approximately 15,000 photographs and several tens of video recordings. Additionally, from 2013–2016, several field observations and in-depth interviews with influential re-enactors were conducted to verify the original findings and investigate the development of Polish re-enactment groups.

### **Hobbyist Re-enactors Versus Commercial Re-enactors**

The re-enactors’ motivations are complex and multiple: fascination with history and military, willingness to escape the routine and dullness of everyday life, respect for the spirit of patriotism and love for cultural heritage (sometimes a local one), building new relations and enriching the social capital, pursuit of extreme experiences, showing-off and ‘promoting’ oneself, and pursuing an economic motive. The motivations are not separate; it often happens that a re-enactor mentions several motivations for joining the group (cf. *Szlendak et al. 2012: 13–22*).

One of the theoreticians and researchers of new social movements, Alberto Melucci, presented an interesting point of view indicating that an essential element in characterizing some new collective actors is the orientation towards ‘regressive utopia’ which is sometimes strongly tinged with the axiological component (*Melucci 1980: 221–222*). Such transgressions are partial and temporary, but in the case of the historical re-enactment group movement, even fragmentary and temporal experiences seem to give a holistic sense to the undertakings of the people involved in them: they become the most important part of their lives, also the everyday ones. The contemporary mega-market of the culture of consumption has introduced the possibility of immersing in the selected historical era to a degree which enables one to build one’s ‘alternative’ identity. Being active in the re-enactment movement is not only immersion in the heritage or committing oneself fully to history or entertainment as an escape from the present moment, which for certain reasons is painful or boring. Such an interpretation, frequent among the educated who come across warriors, Vikings, or Wehrmacht soldiers walking down the streets of today’s towns, is only partially true. It would be more accurate to say that the restoration of the past is a way to immerse in culture ‘in general’ and a lifestyle which successfully and creatively connects what seems to belong to the past with what is absolutely new. It is a way of participating in today’s

culture, in the culture which is definitely alive. This is not only a living culture but also a regressive utopia in action.

A historical re-enactment event is different from another historical re-enactment event in that the commercial culture of the festival is interwoven with the idealistic pursuit of historical faithfulness and authenticity. The differences primarily pertain to the role assigned to the very historical re-enactment and the attention to authenticity. The market forces revealed in the consumption culture attempt to appropriate almost all resources. History is becoming both their livelihood and their victim, sharing this fate with many other spheres of life and the world of values: the same happens to art, science, education, and even religion (Ritzer 1999).

The most general division of historical re-enactment groups is the division into hobbyist-re-enactors, i.e. the orthodox ones aiming at ‘autotelic’ objectives, and commercial re-enactors driven by material profits. The former group is primarily composed of enthusiasts, people for whom the potential financial profits are a side effect (an extra bonus) of their activity oriented, most of all, at preserving tradition and personal role models, teaching respect and discipline, and caring about the transfer of historical knowledge (Mynarski, Królikowska, & Graczykowska 2010; Kalshoven 2015). The latter group undertakes commercial activities and is mostly interested in remuneration and organising an attractive event.

A good example of such a division is the different treatment of the ‘camp’ or ‘village’ by the re-enactors during re-enactment events. The orthodox re-enactors build their common camp or village and often function in them 24 h a day; these premises are not closed for visitors at a particular time, which may loosen the re-enactment standards. Such a continuous common experience which strengthens the inner integration of a group also promotes the phenomenon referred to as a bridging discourse, i.e. active adjusting to the group’s norms and, at the same time, co-constructing them (cf. Decker 2010). During re-enactment events, some participants try to live as though they were actually transferred from a different time. Even if they use some modern things, they are really concerned about hiding everything that is contemporary or unsuitable for the reality of the times away from the camera and the visitors.

In the commercial re-enactors’ version, the camp is inhabited by them only during the hours when the visitors come, ‘at a spare moment’; they usually have no time or intention to integrate with other re-enactors. Their priority is to ‘tick off’ as many events as possible and to make as much money as they can—or at least this is the picture noticeable in the opinions of some hobbyist re-enactors, who have been interviewed and do not perceive this as a big problem, but consider it an inevitable phenomenon resulting from general commercialisation and the huge financial requirements of this hobby from the participants.

The orthodox re-enactors are very concerned about different details: they not only use artefacts and outfits from the old times, but they also, obviously, wear appropriate glasses, and get tattooed if necessary; even their beards and haircuts must be suited to particular times. It seems that caring about the level of re-enactment does not exclude entertainment and commercial aims; however, a negative relation has emerged. This is the reason why some re-enactors are against connecting re-enactment events with festivals in which the dominant orientation is towards amusement and entertainment. Hence, there is a negative

attitude to ‘commercial knights’ (the orthodox ones refer to such re-enactors as ‘pretenders’ or ‘knighties’) who, most of all, ‘make money’; these knights are criticised for their lack of historical faithfulness, for the poor quality of their equipment and outfits, and for making up ‘coloured up’ stories. In a group where its members value re-enactment and historical accuracy the most, the aspects of primary importance are passion and satisfaction, transmission of historical knowledge, and dissemination of culture irrespective of the costs—the most essential aspect is the historical re-enactment itself. Spectacularity or providing entertainment loses its priority status. Making money from one’s passion is perceived rather negatively, and such an activity is treated as a necessary evil at most.

Pot boiling and kitsch have their own, quite a prominent position on the map of re-enactment events, but they are not the biggest threat to the idea of historical accuracy. Plastic shields, colourful outfits, and different unsuitable historical elements may be easily noticed, and, paradoxically, the fact that they exist becomes a point of reference owing to which we can appreciate the hobbyist re-enactors’ effort. The re-enactors perform in the convenient context of a lack of re-enactment quality control (apart from, naturally, other re-enactors whose opinions may always be devalued as the opinions of competition, though). At best, the spectators make references to the pictures of the historical period that they remember from films, and not to expert opinions. In fact, nobody but historians—specialists in the material culture of particular periods—is authorised here to be objective, and in many cases, it is difficult even for historians to definitely ‘approve of’ a re-enactment attempt as accurate or reject one as inauthentic, as there are insufficient historical sources. Both historians and re-enactors invoke various historical testimonies, accounts, chronicles, and reports which are an interpretation of historical facts and not actual historical events. However, the constructivist nature of history is not surprising for the orthodox re-enactors: in most cases, they can substantiate their choices without appealing to axioms. However, for the ‘knighties’ and the viewers, a historically improper mace in the warrior’s hands is not at all a problem. It is much worse when the mace is not sufficiently attractive and inconspicuous; then, one can forget about spectacularity and commercial success.

### **Commercialisation of Historical Re-enactment**

Let us now look at the influence of the commercialisation and the orientation towards spectacularity on historical accuracy. Consider the example of the re-enactment of the Battle of Grunwald, one of the largest and oldest historical re-enactment events in Poland. The style of this event is a historical-commercial hodgepodge. Most of all, the presence of the sponsor brands is visible everywhere (Kompania Piwowarska [a Polish brewing company] and its brand—Tyskie, and Coca Cola). The omnipresent, several-meters-long flags of sponsors make the entire event rather festival-like and absurd. Sponsors are obviously visible during all re-enactment events. In the case of drink/food producers, their products are also provided, and in the case of companies from other industries (banks, hotels, etc.), in form of banners, posters, and advertisements in the event brochure. The receipts from sponsors are an important source of financing for re-enactment events, similar to the funds from the local authorities.



In Grunwald, because of the accumulation and the gigantic sizes of advertisements, the viewers might get the impression that the entire event was just an addition to the commercial messages that dominated the space and that they were bombarded by the attendants by means of various media and from all sides. The stands of patrons, sponsors, and institutions were located around the central square where the monument is placed. Among them, there were for example *Gazeta Olsztyńska* (Olsztyn's Daily), the Polish Radio, the Ostródzki Powiat, and the Polish Army. The Polish Army was very visible (among other things because of the military vehicles). At the stand, they presented promotion and information materials (leaflets, brochures, and booklets) for the candidates to the National Reserve Forces who would be interested in professional military service. Along the wide avenue leading to the scene of the performance, there were booths and stalls. The researchers in field observed that the entire trading 'network' consisted of several hundred small stalls with various, more or less, country-fair products. The most popular were accessories which formed the 'toolbox' of a small knight: wooden swords, shields, Teutonic knights' coats, helmets, and soft clubs. At the stalls, there were also elements of football fan equipment (white and red caps, scarves, and T-shirts, as the battle could be watched like a match, supporting 'ours'), works made of wicker, handicrafts (for example, jewellery made of glass or with precious stones), garden plaster mini-figures (snails, geese, and other domestic animals), as well as various souvenirs with no particular use. In several places, there were large food zones with stands from which one could buy grilled food, chips, dumplings, bread with lard, knuckles, *oscyпки* (smoked cheese made from salted sheep milk), *obwarzanki* (small ring-shaped buns) and other examples of traditional Polish food, colourful lollipops, jellies sold in meters, and obviously, the *Tyskie* beer.

In a separate zone, opposite to this one, there were camps of re-enactors-participants (according to the estimates, 4,000 participants, more than a thousand of whom took part in the battle). Next to the campsite, there was another commercial zone (also accessible to the spectators) which had the form of a medieval fair. There were stalls with 'old times' goods where one could buy elements of armoury (for example, handmade bows), linen underwear and clothing, accessories (leather sacs, jewellery, and headgear), and herbs. Also, among others, a woodcarver, a blacksmith, and a saddler had their stands there. All the merchants and craftspeople wore historic clothing, although full outfits were worn only rarely, and apart from this, these costumes gave the impression of the instrumental preying on stereotypes (a merchant dressed as a monk at the stall with liqueurs, etc.). In one of the avenues, there was a man in a medieval outfit with a big wooden box in front of him which contained an even larger live python. Those more courageous could have a photograph taken with the python for an affordable charge of PLN 5 (about 1 euro). The less courageous had the chance to be photographed with a falcon and its owner.

Therefore, as one can observe during re-enactment events, even those managed by re-enactors with passion, the entertainment and commercial values of the event dominate all the other aspects. Irrespective of the views of the spectators and the re-enactors themselves, re-enactment practices must be accepted with the benefit of inventory, which results from the fact that historical re-enactment groups' events are surrounded by a complex of accompanying events which are connected to the event theme to a smaller or no degree. In this case, we observed that both the new models of cultural participation, namely the multi-

sensory culture of the event and the escape into alternative cultural sub-worlds, were not altogether antagonistic; strong connections were observed between them (transfers of people, capital, and ideas) at various levels. A considerable part of the activity by the devotees of historical re-enactment occurs as an activity in an appropriate cultural sub-world where the participants meet similar enthusiasts on an everyday basis, exchange knowledge, discuss, or organise, but in the season of big open-air events, they come with their offer to the outside world, with their shows adding to the attractiveness of both the events which are thematically aimed at the re-enactment activity and the other events. This allows them to, among other things, commercially change the direction of their previously 'quiet' work, and the profits from this activity are in most part invested to develop their passions (Szlendak & Olechnicki 2017: 29).

The activity of re-enactment groups seems to experience a threat, which may be identified as the immanent though apparently insignificant conflict between re-enactment faithfulness, which to a large extent, has contributed to the success of such initiatives, and the needs of the contemporary cultural industry (i.e. the entertainment industry), oriented towards ludic values, evoking strong impressions and emotions and intensifying the stimuli attacking the audience's imagination to the maximum, to put it briefly, towards a show. The objectives of the re-enactors and the entertainment industry are concurrent to a limited extent; however, at a certain moment, the commercial objectives begin to dominate and the autotelic ideas of the culture in action are reduced to money-making.

The described conflict is inevitable, because everyone (including the participants of these activities themselves) wants to make some money or get a profit, not necessarily in the economic sense (it could be political profit as well), from the activity of the re-enactment groups. For political decision-makers in Poland, the participation in organising various entertainment events, festivals, open-air concerts, etc. has become the basic means of communicating with the voter base, the opportunity to present oneself as a politician open to people and their needs, a local administrator who is willing to spend money on the games. Historical re-enactment groups make intensive use of all the advantages that they can achieve by referring to the positively associated interest in history. Their activity is promoted and supported by cultural institutions and the local and central governments because of the assumption that learning history through historical re-enactment, through 'living history,' is simply the better and more effective way of achieving educational, upbringing, and patriotic aims. This ideology of re-enactment is less important for economic entities and businesses, which achieve their primary aims by engaging in re-enactment events. Historical re-enactment groups are used as a form of advertising for building a company's image, etc.

### **Variety of Educational Effects**

One of the main objectives of investigations into re-enactment groups has been the assessment of their educational potential, the questions about which, obviously, have often been asked in the studies on historical re-enactment (e.g. Goodacre & Baldwin 2002). The assumption underlying the evaluation profiled in such a manner has naturally resulted from

the conviction that history 'provided in a lively manner and live,' without the stiffness typical of schools or the academic ostentation, not boring, will be better acquirable by students and the fundamentals of historical knowledge will be instilled more effectively with the help of a re-enactor presenting the history 'by means of himself.' It is easier to learn something by touching it oneself, not indirectly from books which today's junior high school and high school students want to read and trust to a lesser and lesser degree. The academic- and school-style teaching is 'dry'; it does not allow for feeling the old times' techniques, life, flavours, and tastes oneself. Without this multi-sense gunfire of information, it is impossible today to teach history to people accustomed to attacks on all of their senses in cultural areas out of school. It can be assumed that students (or more broadly, young people) acquire historical knowledge more effectively when they can try on armour, mould a pot, cut the air with a sword, or shoot a single-shot firearm.

The analysis of the research material does not allow for drawing any firm conclusions on whether the activities by historical re-enactment groups are actually executing educational and upbringing aims, but it provides certain evidence and indications. Looking at the photographs and watching the films from the events, we can infer that their role is that of entertainment and amusement and, at times, of an adventure for both the participants (re-enactors) and the spectators (the entertaining role as a defining one for re-enactment was elaborated upon by Agnew (2004)). The living history in these groups' activities must primarily be a good show. The requirements connected with spectacularity usually outweigh the requirements of historical truth and authenticity, even if, from the point of view of the activities of particular participants, there is no agreement with respect to halfway measures, conventionality, and lack of authenticity. From the spectators' perspective, faithfulness to historical role models is not an important value, for example because of the fact that during most re-enactments, because of the distance, it is impossible to distinguish between the seemingly professionally manufactured products. Even if it is possible to have a closer look at these artefacts, for example while looking at dioramas ('live' paintings or layouts presenting for example a single air defence action station or a control station in a fortification system), there are few people who possess the appropriate competence necessary to evaluate their historical accuracy. For the spectators, organisers, and sponsors, it is spectacularity and entertainment that matter. Here, history becomes amusement, a virtual reality computer game. In fact, there is no use of asking questions about the educational and aesthetic values of the material culture re-enacted or collected by the historical re-enactment groups, as the only thing that counts for the viewers is the attractiveness of the show. The issue of kitsch and authenticity is highly significant for some of the re-enactors, but it fails to influence the reception of the shows. Attractive history is history being made up, history with 'a boost' in the form of a redundant message, a mixture of eras and styles, open to everything which attracts the client and fills up the organisers' pockets.

It is typical of the re-enactment events to 'tune up' and 'push' the spectacularity 'to the maximum.' It is not enough for the audience to see a real historical tank. It is only when the tank shows its power to destroy in practice, for example crashing a car (as part of a tank crash show), that the spectators will be fully satisfied. In a Hollywood production, a plane crashing because of a lack of fuel explodes as if it were stuffed with TNT. Similar things happen during re-enactment events which are subject to a similar rule of increasing

the artificial density and intensifying attractions even against logic (historical or otherwise) and against good intentions and righteousness of the message which could have underlain the organisation of a particular performance.

In the interviews, the re-enactors themselves presented two mutually incompatible opinions on the educational effectiveness of their activities. When asked directly, they claimed that by playing knights or soldiers, they teach something, but in contrast, a few sentences later, they are convinced that the recipients, particularly young people, during the shows only amuse themselves and that their performance does not have any serious educational effects. When the researchers pointed out the inconsistency of the re-enactors, the re-enactors maintained that their performances indeed have an educational effect but on 'special' individuals who are predisposed to the re-enactment, on individuals interested in history or archaeology, and on the young people fascinated with the past. During the re-enactment events, many people get interested in history but, at the same time, get 'infected' with the re-enactment. According to many interviewed re-enactors, it is difficult to get interested in history when somebody is not reading, and then, a lesson conducted by a re-enactment group is necessary. Some re-enactors are certain that they engage not in a 'serious' educational process, but in edutainment, particularly emotional and sentimental pop-education. A young person, they believe, will never look into a book—it is obvious that 300 pages full of text are scary—and here, they can see tanks and knights live and can make some pots and shoot using old weapons. Therefore, re-enactment is the promotion of historical knowledge without a forced readership. The older the re-enactors are, the fewer are the illusions they have with respect to the young recipients' unwillingness to read. According to one of the members of the Polish Military Science Foundation (Fundacja Wojskowości Polskiej), such pop-education unfortunately is a 'picture history for illiterates.' While talking to the re-enactors, one may get the impression that they aim at encouraging the recipients to classic education, i.e. get in touch with the written word, by means of sentimental pop-education. The direct contact with the re-enactment group, the equipment, the uniforms, and the re-enacted battle is a stimulus for developing further interest. The question here is that, as the older re-enactors vividly describe it, there must be 'a boom, blast, and smoke' and then, possibly, something will start.

One ought to bear in mind that the audience of such events is not homogenous (hence, the expectation that their reactions are going to be alike is not realistic). One of the re-enactors characterised the recipients of his performances as follows: *They are different people. Often quite accidental. Like it is here now. They are mainly tourists who are here totally by accident. They have noticed that something is going on: people in uniforms are running around—they have come to see it out of curiosity. Or they are people who are—so to speak—connoisseurs of this type of events. They are interested, they monitor the calendar to know when such events take place. They try to travel to watch them if they can. For real, this is a very broad spectrum of recipients. I think that men are more interested in this type of activity. Personally, when I look at the spectators who watch us I notice women, men as well as entire families. Small children. The elderly who have witnessed this history. They could personally touch it. Hence, the spectrum of recipients is immense.* Based on ethnographic observation, a typology of the re-enactment event recipients may be constructed. In general, among the recipients, there are the following: 1) accidental tourists, 2) connoisseurs and not

accidental tourists (they follow one event after another fascinated by the topic; their number is increasing), 3) entire nuclear families with small children, 4) male half-re-enactors (who, for example, have a son who is a squire or a page-boy in a knight brotherhood and travel together to re-enact), 5) uninterested women who are there 'though they wish they weren't' and look after their children, 6) local journalists who lack topics to write about or take photographs of during the summer holidays, 7) post-battle searchers (a type of recipient who after the battle enters the field to pick up the remaining things, for example bullet shells 'to bring luck,' 8) people at the edge of retirement who manifest nostalgia for what they did not experience, 9) young men, often drunk, showing their torsos and showing off in front of the 'screeching' girls who accompany them), and 10) members of fan communities, a type of 'fan' following his/her brotherhood from one event to another.

### **Syncretism, 'Dirty History,' and Re-enactment Gnosis**

In order to cover its entertainment and commercial 'face,' historical re-enactment uses a fig leaf in the form of references to 'history.' However, historical re-enactment is history with humour, presented without any stress, in the form of cultural pap which does not demand any serious reflection, and is aimed at the widest possible circle of recipients. Obviously, the spectacularity does not have to mean simplification and vulgarisation of the subject matter. However, spectacularity and orientation towards the masses mean the necessity to obtain relatively easy reception, references to visual clichés and stereotypes, exaggerations, and giving colour to things. In fact, historical re-enactment is not limited to a particular age or topic, as the rule of spectacularity is welcomed by many types of historical combinations, or a historical mix: the early Slavs and Vikings, Romans and Celts, samurais, Roman legionaries, trappers, Slavic warriors, Teutonic Knights, heavy-armour knights, colourful musketeers, and all types of armies of the 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup>, and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, all of them can meet at the same time and in the same place. This is a real mishmash, a historical mixture of everything, and with respect to the educational quality, a mixture that is rather unpredictable and possibly dangerous. After such a show, we wonder what remains in the memories of the spectators, particularly children. This unintentional historical re-enactment syncretism has an obvious entertainment quality, which in this case, however, may also be quite confusing for the unprepared recipients, particularly in the context of the participants' educational authority coming from their declared faithfulness to historical truth.

Interestingly, it happens that during the performances or events, the re-enactors are approached by historians hiding among the audience and tell the history of the places they currently reside in. In contrast, the re-enactors tell the same stories to other, less-educated viewers. Moreover, they are very ashamed if when asked by the audience, they fail to know something about this piece of history. The re-enactors are also approached by teachers of history who often feel embarrassed but not because of a lack of knowledge or knowledge which is shallower than the re-enactors.' The point to note is that the historical knowledge that the re-enactors 'sell' is politically incorrect, and at the same time, highly interesting, as it pertains to the 'dirty everyday life' which is not discussed during history classes at school. West argued that creating living history shows gives the re-enactors a type of af-

fective authority in interpreting history, which is often inconsistent with the commonly accepted findings (West 2014; Agnew 2007). Such history in the re-enactment version does not consist of dates and names of the subsequent kings, but of the ‘fleshy’ mythological trivia, historical gossip, and stories filled with scandal, violence, and blood. Therefore, if history were taught in the way that the re-enactors speak about it during the performances, it is not an educational alternative to the form and practice of historical transmission at school. Admittedly, it has to be stated that history in the re-enactment version also contains some positive elements which the school transmissions in Poland clearly lack: micro-stories, elements of extended social history, and details of the past everyday life which enable people to understand it.

The passion for ‘scandalous historical detail’ typical of the re-enactors leads to the situation that their knowledge is frequently highly specialist, very in-depth, demanding weeks, months, or even years of appropriate individually undertaken studies. It is in fact a type of gnosis for people from outside the movement, and, in particular, it is revealed using the hermetic ‘slang,’ a mixture of strict scientific terminology with the socio-dialect of re-enactment used within particular re-enactment interest fields. This is illustrated by an anecdote about scientific competition among the members of the movement told by one of the ‘Vikings’: *Once we had this initiative of The Circle of Knowledge. It was a competition organized yearly in which the organizer found ten very difficult questions. They were really extremely detailed. I remember that for example one of them referred to the punishment which was effective in Gotland if a man touched a woman—another man’s wife—on her elbow.[...] It was included in one of the codes of legal procedures—of Gotland, since they had this codification, it was possible to be found, but the questions were really hard and often obtaining the answers to the ten questions took about two weeks. However, in the meantime, somebody has looked through a couple of books or at least a couple of articles and learnt something.*

### **Does the Audience Learn Anything?**

The historical knowledge of people taking part in commercial re-enactment events is not particularly deep, as revealed by observations and interviews with the spectators conducted in the field. Thus, can the audience, or at least part of it, actually learn anything from the re-enactment events? First of all, re-enactment groups inspire only those young people whose imagination has already been stirred up, and not by history lessons at school but by computer games and films, to acquire historical knowledge. The fascination with re-enactment groups and events is not connected with the historical message received during formal education, but with individual media education. This is the reason why re-enactors believe that the audience’s knowledge of the past times is ‘Hollywood knowledge’ and that it is their task to ‘correct’ this knowledge during the re-enactment shows. They are only mere entertainment, treated as such by the participants. They are something like a 3D technology film with fighting and juggling acts in three dimensions, to be enjoyed while drinking beer. Most of all, a majority of the spectators only watch the re-enactors, as visitors to the zoo watch the animals. Just like the visitors do not learn anything about the zoo animals by

watching them from behind the fence, the spectators do not learn anything about the ancient Slavs by vacantly staring at the re-enactors' performing in the camps. Here is an excerpt from a researcher's notes: *Answering the question on whether the spectators can learn anything here, [the reenactors] said that if somebody asks then they will learn something, but walking around and watching is only 'pictures,' so if somebody is not willing to get any information, they won't learn anything.* Certainly, the audience benefits considerably if the event scripts involve professional narration.

Re-enactors have a higher estimate of the educational effectiveness of the undertakings which involve the participation of an announcer vividly and skilfully narrating the historical details of the watched show. One of the re-enactors, when asked about which form of acquiring knowledge by young people is better—books, the Internet, or re-enactment—replied as follows: *the reenactment is only supposed to be a support. If the youth viewed our reenactment as the basis, they would in a sense get a somehow distorted picture, you know, as the people here who take part in the performance, they get up after it, get into their cars and go home. This is the reason why the announcer is so important in the show; somebody who informs about what is happening during the performance; they are the ones who talk about the context, and we are those who are supposed to help. Then, for sure it is easier to get interested in something.*

Very often, this type of pop-education is used by schools which invite historical re-enactment groups for special occasions, for example Children's Day. Schools also make many reservations for lessons conducted by re-enactors, or—even more interestingly—teachers attend courses conducted by re-enactors to learn how to teach the old techniques. The only problem that schools present involves the fact that they do not pay the re-enactors and many attractive educational activities are conducted informally. However, the materials and resources used in the lessons, for example clay, are expensive. Furthermore, re-enactors going to schools often decide not to claim remuneration as authors, but they cannot cover the costs of materials to activate children from their own financial resources. Schools and local authorities maintaining them should take this into account while planning their annual budgets. The level of many re-enactment groups is so high that the curricula could risk the introduction of sentimental education through the activities of re-enactment groups, but on the condition that the common 'announcer's' layer of re-enactment lessons be established.

Pop-education by means of the Internet is effective, at least in the plan for recruitment to historical re-enactment groups. The Internet is the basic channel of distribution of all knowledge on re-enactment. Without the YouTube channel, there would not exist any re-enactment group. This is the tool that the re-enactors should be grateful to for popularising this phenomenon and for the year-on-year increase in recruitment. An average video with the recorded re-enacted *bohurts* (realistic fights between re-enactors) has several thousand viewers, and the most popular films of this kind reach several hundred thousand views.

The re-enactors have observed that because of the uncontrolled proliferation of re-enactment events, often of poor historical quality, there has been a considerable decrease in the confidence of the re-enactors as a source of knowledge of history. As one of the leaders of the Walhalla Brotherhood said, *"This is visible when we visit schools to offer giving some lessons. It is paid, as we go to Toruń, to Bydgoszcz with these lessons, even for petrol. The teachers must collect PLN 1.5, PLN 2 per student, which is absolutely not a problem.*

*But the thing is that you have to convince the head teacher or the culture teacher that it's worth. As these people see poor level events and view them more like a fun fair attraction than a history lesson, they don't trust us that we can teach something really valuable."* It may be claimed that the re-enactment movement has been a victim of its own success: the larger the number of re-enactment events at every opportunity, the lesser is the confidence, because the share of the 'non-historical' or quasi-historical re-enactment increases (cheap money crowds out good money).

All these aspects contribute to the fact that the events which were supposed to be aimed at historical re-enactment have lost their original sense and character. Instead, we get to a supermarket of history where everything has been mixed and put on the same shelf. The events that could and should be a lesson of history have become the background for having another glass of beer, some grilled sausages, and popcorn in open-air surroundings. The pursuit of historical accuracy and any type of educational value is overridden by commercialisation in its cheapest, most popular version and the pursuit to maximise spectacularity.

It can be inferred from an analysis of the spectators' statements that a historical re-enactment, most of all, constitutes a form of entertainment and a way of spending leisure time, which fits into the pattern of a multi-sensory cultural event, and its function as a form of education and source of knowledge is very limited. The audience learns very little, treats historical authenticity without much regard, and devours close combat, raiding tanks, cavalry charge, and loud explosions. One of the spectators when asked what he learnt from the re-enactment of the Battle of Grunwald replied that he managed to memorise the date on which it took place (in Poland, knowledge of this date is perceived as elementary school information), and the other spectators expressed their dissatisfaction that the battle ends every year in the same way and that it would be more fun if at least one time Teutonic Knights would prevail! (Olechnicki, Szlendak, & Karwacki 2016: 77–78).

The situation of staging evokes strong emotions in both the spectators and the re-enactors. Historical performances are as realistic as theatrical staging or a film set—we do know that everything is happening is not for real, but the emotions generated by the situation acted out are often authentic. One may and has to ask about the purpose of acting out such events which in accordance with historical truth are difficult to consider to be anything but dreadful and cruel (it is not accidental that a considerable majority of historical re-enactments are references to battle scenes). The question here is whether the educational sensitisation, or rather the neutralisation of the real sense of war and fighting, desensitisation, playing war while dressing up and using historical weapons, is most of all a form of exciting entertainment, relaxation, or hobby? Maybe an extreme one, but is it still a hobby? One may argue that the performances are supposed to explicitly highlight the evil and cruelty of war; however, if one observes the behaviours of the participants and the spectators, this is not the case. Nobody suffers, nobody is sad, and there is no reflection or sensitisation; on the contrary, everybody is having great fun. The resemblance between the performances and computer games (though more perfect ones) is striking. 'The wounded' and 'the killed' soon get up and go for lunch. History becomes a pretext for the organisation of an anti-historical show, as, despite the attention to detail and the accuracy of the re-enactment, the most important aspects of history are not re-enacted, and the seriousness and the tragedy of war are overlooked.



## Conclusions

Our study has indicated that historical re-enactment has most of all a strong self-educational and self-animation dimension. Re-enactment is a type of cultural self-animation; it inspires the re-enactors themselves to take action in the field of culture. Arkadiusz Karwacki is convinced that the re-enactment groups play an important role in educating their members, particularly the younger ones. Certainly, there is a differentiation of the axio-normative orders which reflexes the norms and values important for a particular historical entity, but most groups have a defined code of behaviour. There is also a differentiation in the level of regulation and social control within a group, and in general, members are expected to show consistency between the characteristics of a played role and their everyday behaviour. However, even if they often fail to do so, one cannot be an ‘unbuttoned’ knight and expect that such deviance will be forgiven (Olechnicki, Szlendak, & Karwacki 2016: 187–188). The re-enactors encourage one another, in a very effective manner, to organise cultural undertakings and learn a lot by doing so. Their knowledge of historical facts is frequently comparable to that of professional academic historians or archaeologists. However, their vast knowledge and animated enthusiasm fail to translate into cultural animation and historical knowledge of the spectators watching them act in re-enactment events. Historical education based on re-enactment is a failure, as re-enacting during events attended by spectators is a multi-sensory performance (cf. Schneider 2011), typical of all commercial or semi-commercial events, which involves the festivisation of the structure and form of the message.

While analysing the collected research material, we found that the antinomy of historicity and spectacularity, possibly still not noticed or perhaps unwillingly noticed by re-enactment enthusiasts, was returning like a boomerang. ‘Turning up’ the entertaining nature of the event, which is largely a necessity as the spectators get used to the stimuli and still demand something more, must lead to a conflict with historical values. Historical re-enactment has already lost its novelty value, and even though, there is probably no effect of surfeit yet, we are approaching this moment fast, and then, the choice between historicity and spectacularity will become even more difficult. We do not intend to argue that a well-re-enacted event cannot be involving and attractive in itself, as it obviously can; however, the requirements of multi-sensory pop-culture events will always promote values other than those which the most engaged re-enactors are concerned about. The actors in the show use such means of expression which enable them to reach the average spectator—it is not their fault that ‘there was a boom, there was a bang’ is an attractor which might involve the spectators more deeply. The open-air mass show is not a place for subtlety, for exposing the details or presenting the viewers with a broader historical context. The announcers who could complete this task adjust themselves to the rules of the game and try to entertain the spectators at all costs too, and if they dare to offer a more serious narration, they are often rewarded with whistling and rude comments. Still, the spectators mostly remain intellectually passive, which makes any educational effect momentary and superficial.

To some extent, it is comforting that the re-enactors have a relatively high awareness of the constructivist nature of history, which means that members of the re-enactment movement fully realise the importance of individual or group interpretations for the assessment

of historical events and they are perfectly aware of the subjectivity of historical dress accuracy or the elements of ‘historical’ behaviour. This awareness is also important in understanding the re-enactors’ resilience with respect to historical policy and their relatively slight engagement into politicians’ attempts to influence the changes in the collective memory of the Poles even if their activity seems to be an ideal tool for such an undertaking. The high awareness of the constructivist nature of history arguably derives from the fact that the re-enactors come from the educated middle class, and as they read a lot, they are aware of the interpretation differences among the authors of historical or archaeological works. In their activities, it is common to deal with a plurality of interpretations and points of view, being different on the same topic, for example the shape of a tunic. Therefore, although they wish to be as accurate as possible with respect to the ‘historical truth,’ they are perfectly aware that this ‘truth’ is socially constructed, produced here and now, and is reached strenuously by activating imagination and developing it out of the numerous opinions of the many participants of the debate. Perhaps, one of the stimuli for such considerations is the numerous controversies and discussions which have arisen in the recent years around some performances referring to the events of the XX century history of Poland (massacres of Poles in Volhynia and Eastern Galicia or decommissioning of the Będzin ghetto), as alive historical memory finds it harder to accept the use of human tragedies as a breeding ground for a festival performance, even if its banners contain the term ‘living history’.

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