Reenactments Make History

by Megan Carrigy

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Megan Carrigy at the ZDOK documentary conference in Zurich, May 19, 2016

The reenactment has always been a mobile and adaptable form, travelling easily across media and institutional contexts. But until recently attempts to come to terms with the use of reenactment, particularly in film, television and other screen media have been quite scattered. In my own research into the use of reenactment in screen media I have worked to develop an understanding of the reenactment that can put both more recognised and less familiar forms in relationship with one another. Firstly, it is important to consider that in order for a reenactment to be recognised *as* a reenactment, it typically needs to foreground that it is performing an event that has already taken place. Part of this is about how reenactments work with existing accounts of events they depict: including news reports, police reports, coroner's reports, court transcripts, witness testimony, interviews, biographies, paintings, drawings, photographs and film and television footage. Details drawn from these different accounts are put to work as authenticating devices for reenactments, signalling their investment in, and claims to, historical accuracy.

The ways in which reenactments draw attention themselves as reenactments are often closely tied to the historical and cultural circumstances in which they were made. As consequence, their recognisability has sometimes been quite unreliable. What is recognised as acceptable for the reenactment has also continued to change over time. How can reenactments help us think about the mediated nature historical events? How can they help us consider the question

of whether the past can be separated from its representation? How can a reenactment produce an event with the capacity to *make* history? In thinking about these questions, I look first to the earliest film reenactments produced during the first decade of the cinema. This is one of the few areas where reenactment in film has been well documented and studied. This is partly because in its earliest forms in film the reenactment operated as a genre. In fact it was one of cinema's earliest genres.

The first popular reenactments of the cinema, particularly the American cinema, were films modelled on topical events, staged in the style of actuality footage. They first appeared in around in 1898 with the Spanish-American War. Film producers realised that they did not have to be on the battlefield with a camera to satisfy the popular demand for topical material about the war. This continued in the coverage of subsequent wars of the era To give you a sense of the style of these reenactments, I'll show you an example held in the LOC collection called 'Colonel Funston Swimming the Bagbag River' from 1899, produced by the Edison company about the Philippine American War. (https://www.loc.gov/item/99407593/) This is a reenactment of an incident in which an American soldier swam the Bagbag River despite the presence of enemy soldiers on the opposite shore.

Colonel Funston Swimming the Bagbag River (Thomas A. Edison, 1899)

Similar developments occurred in Europe. In France, Georges Méliès produced reconstructed scenes of the Greco-Turkish War as early as 1897, and in 1898 produced films of Spanish-American War for American audiences. In Britain, a number of producers were manufacturing footage of the Boer War, as was Thomas Edison in America, advertising them as 'Dramatic Representations of Current Events'. The filmmaking strategies of these reenactments included carefully staged events using lots of actors, props and extras but they were also often produced using miniature models on table-top and in bathtubs. An example of the miniature models is called 'Bombardment of Taku forts by the Allied fleets' (https://www.loc.gov/item/00694156/) showing battleships at war during the Boxer Rebellion 1900.

Bombardment of Taku forts by the Allied fleets (Edison Manufacturing Co., 1900)

In the American cinema, the attempt to meet the demand for topicality extended well beyond the end of the Spanish American War, to the representation of other wars but to 'staged' boxing matches, prison escapes, executions, murders, robberies, natural disasters and police apprehension of criminals. 'Execution of Czolgosz, with Panorama of Auburn Prison' (1901) (https://www.loc.gov/item/00694362/) was described by the Edison Company as 'a realistic imitation of the

Execution of Czolgosz, with panorama of Auburn Prison (Thomas A. Edison, 1901)

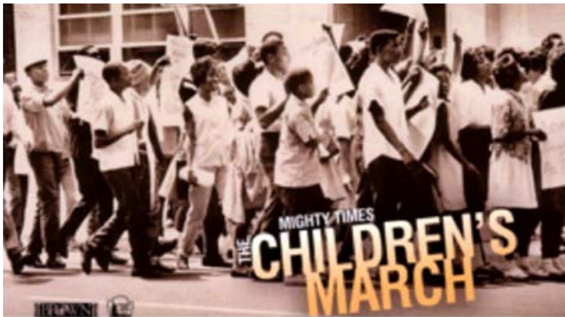
last scene in the electric chair'. (Musser, 1991, p. 162) This is a widely discussed example because it is a hybrid film consisting of the panorama filmed outside the prison on the day of the execution and the reenactment of the execution staged in a studio which are cut together.

One of the significant things about these reenactments is that during the cinema's first decade, they were part of era in which distinctions between categories such as newsreel, documentary, drama and reproduction were quite fluid. Historians and theorists of the early American cinema have shown that the emphasis on dramatising topical events during this time presented no problem for existing standards of authenticity. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (1990, p. 162) argues that the 'newsreels' of the Spanish-American war show that almost from its beginning cinema was impacted by the question of the "boundaries of fact and fiction, truth and falsehood, in history". He proposes that these films were not falsifying historical record because the idea of "authenticity of the filmed record was not yet in place".

While there was flexibility in this period about the kinds of film that could be considered to be records of a real event, it is not the case that the status of such representations was never questioned. But the debate about whether reenactment films were fakes or not was quite minimal and marginal in relation to the phenomenon. Mostly reenactment films, whether they depicted war, executions, robberies or natural disasters, advertised themselves as dramatic representations of current events.

Charles Musser (1991) and David Levy (1982) argue that between 1907 and 1909, reliance on the spectator's familiarity with an existing story was becoming outdated as filmmakers became more and more skilled at communicating narrative and the reenactment genre began decline. Camera equipment had also become lightweight enough to more easily access to newsworthy events.

Now no longer its own genre, the film reenactment continues mostly as a practice within a variety of film and television genres (for example the biopic, docudrama, the historical film and reality television). Reenactments are typically woven into the world of a film and work in relationship with other narrative strategies. The reenactment has never fitted comfortably on *either* side of cinema's now primary generic distinction, between fiction and documentary. It continues to exist in both and has also played an important role in the development of hybrid narrative forms.



Mighty Times: The Children's March (Bobby Houston, 2004)

Now, if documentaries use reenactment, it is generally agreed amongst industry members and critics, that its use must be clearly signalled as such. In 2005 we saw major controversy around the Academy Award-winning short documentary *Mighty Times: The Children's March* (2004), directed by Bobby Houston and Robert Hudson. The debate focused on whether audiences were provided with enough information to be able to distinguish reenacted scenes from archive footage. (Morris, 2008) The filmmakers had recreated scenes of the 1963 children's civil rights protest in Birmingham, Alabama, using period props and costumes, vintage cameras, distressed film stock and more than 700 extras. The filmmakers and their financier HBO assured the Academy that every version of the film except the one sent to the Academy clearly signalled the reenacted scenes by the use of sprocket holes and an HBO-mandated disclosure statement about the reenactments. But the controversy prompted the Academy to look again at their definition for the category, which says that a documentary 'may be photographed in actual occurrence, or may employ partial reenactment, stock footage, stills, animation, stop-motion or other techniques, as long as the emphasis is on fact and not on fiction'. Frieda Lee Mock, the Executive Committee Chairwoman of the Academy's documentary branch, warned that while the definition remains unchanged, "the failure to disclose their use of reenactments called into question the nature of reality implied by the use of the term documentary". (Cited Lacher, 2005)

A number of scholars of documentary film and television have focussed on how and why the reenactment has undergone *multiple* marginalisations and resurgences in status and currency. I will talk briefly about the scholarship of Brian Winston, Jonathan Kahana and Bill Nichols. These scholars have argued that it was the first decades of sound documentary, from the mid-1930s to the1950s, which marked 'the classic period of reenactment' in documentary. The filmmakers of this era, were 'heirs', as Winston (1999, p. 164) describes it, "to a tradition of re-enactment" that included "*Nanook's* building of the igloo"; "Grierson's construction of the trawler's cabins"; and "the earliest days of the cinema".

It is widely agreed that, from the late 1950s and the rise of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema the reenactment lost currency as a form of documentary representation. The techniques of observational became considered the 'most' documentary of styles and the reenactment came to look more and more 'inauthentic'. The expectation set up by *cinéma vérité* that documentary filmmaking should capture the un-staged, un-rehearsed event is one that the reenactment was unable to meet. Winston (1999, p. 160) argues that reenactment did continue, "even more hidden than it had been" within the style of Direct Cinema and cinema verite.

Jonathan Kahana (2009, pp. 46-7) describes the current popularity of the reenactment in documentary filmmaking as a "comeback", a "return of techniques of historical restaging that had once been quite common in documentary

and social realist films". However Kahana and Nichols (2008) each argue that, while the reenactment has re-emerged in a vital role in documentary, the prejudice against the reenactment that came with the rise of *cinéma vérité* has continued. Because of this Kahana (2009, p. 47) argues, there has been "relatively few critical resources" to draw on "to explain the critical and aesthetic power of re-enactment", making the reenactment "one important but largely overlooked branch of the documentary tradition". For this reason, these and other scholars have in recent years made reenactment in documentary the focus of new discussion. And we can see this conference as part of this turn to reenactment.

Most of this interest in reenactment has come almost entirely from the field of documentary studies and has focused mostly on non-fiction. In my own research I have been interested in the dispersal of the reenactment across fiction and non-fiction genres. Central to this has been my interest, as I said at the beginning of my talk, in how reenactments are recognised as reenactments across historical and cultural contexts. And this has led me to focus on how reenactments work with existing accounts of events they depict.

Storming the Winter Palace (Nikolai Evreinov, 1920)

With this in mind I'll turn now to Sergei Eisenstein's film *October* or *Ten Days That Shook the World,* commissioned for the tenth anniversary the October Revolution in Russia in 1927. A number of film scholars and historians (including James von Geldern, Richard Taylor, David Bordwell, Irina Bibikova and Susan Buck-Morss) have pointed out that the famous storming of the Winter Palace sequence in *October* was heavily influenced by a mass spectacle theatre event called *The Storming of the Winter Palace* staged in the Winter Palace Square in Petrograd (now St Petersburg) on 7 November 1920 as a central event in the city's celebrations for the third anniversary of the October Revolution.

The mass spectacle played out in the very location of the actual storming three years earlier. The style of *The Storming of the Winter Palace* performance showed many of the innovations pioneered in the many mass spectacles that took place in Russia during 1920. This includes an emphasis on mass participation; fluid borders between performers and audiences; the incorporation of the surrounding environment; and large scale productions. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fLihunxEzwE) One of the things that was unique about *The Storming of the Winter Palace* was that it was the first mass spectacle to be filmed in full and it lasted only 90 minutes while other mass spectacles had lasted up to four hours. Sections of the filmed spectacle were also screened around the country reaching a larger audience. It has even been the case that the *Storming of the Winter Palace* documentation has

subsequently taken on the referential ambivalence of historical documentation we have tended to associate with *October.* Its technical innovations, inspired by cinematic montage, were designed to enable its filming by reducing the need for lengthy set changes. The spectacle made use 150 searchlights to organise time and space. The fifty windows of the first floor of the Winter Palace were also lit up to show different moments of the battle that took place inside its walls, inspired by the ability in film to cut quickly from one scene to another.

October (Sergei Eisenstein, 1928)

Eisenstein was not in Petrograd in October 1917 for the original storming of the Palace, nor in November 1920 for the commemorative mass spectacle. But he is reported to have worked with the documentation of the mass spectacle, including the film, photographs, design sketches and artists impressions of the production, while researching his film *October.* (Taylor, 2002, p. 11; Barna, 1973, p. 117) What is more, many of the participants in the storming of the Palace in his film had played in *The Storming of the Winter Palace* spectacle and had stormed the Winter Palace in 1917. The best known person to have played in every version was Nikolai Podvoisky. He had been one of the people in charge of the occupation of the Palace in 1917; was a historical consultant and performer in *The Storming of the Winter Palace* spectacle; and was employed by Eisenstein as a historical consultant and as a performer.

So I am interested here is the idea that Eisenstein's cinematic storming sequence in *October* is not so much a reenactment of the historical event as it is a reenactment of the mass spectacle's reenactment. By all accounts, the theatrical reenactment of the storming was more 'eventful' than the historical event. The Palace Square was peaceful on the actual day of the Revolution in 1917. The storming occurred the day after power had been seized. And minimal blood was shed. The Commanders waited until the majority of troops defending the Palace had surrendered, before entering. (Vol Geldern, 1993, pp. 1-2) The mass spectacle staged a storming that was much larger in scale and, as Irina Bibikova (1990, p. 122) describes, "far more dramatic (and more damaging to the building) than the original event". In both the mass spectacle the thousands of extras outnumbered the actual attackers who seized the Palace in 1917.

The mass spectacle was a landmark event of 1920 in and of itself, and was instrumental in popularising the idea that the 1917 storming of the Winter Palace was a climatic historical moment of the October Revolution. It created what James von Geldern (1993, p. 200) describes as "a dynamic centre for the Revolution, the moment of creation essential to any foundation myth". So the mass spectacle was as a central reference point for audiences of Eisenstein's film *October*'s in 1927 Russia.

But for twenty-first-century audiences of *October* around the world the storming of the palace in his film is typically thought of in relation to the 1917 historical event. The energy and scale of the mass spectacle, taken up in *October* is now usually understood without reference to that mass spectacle. What is more, Eisenstein's film sequence has frequently been misread and circulated as archival footage, giving it a new historical status over time. Excerpts from the sequence, and even still images, have as Richard Taylor (2002, p. 76) describes "become textbook images, 'quoted' as documents in other films and displayed in exhibitions devoted to the history of the Revolution". Alan Rosenthal (1999, p. 11 n. 2) gives the example of opening of *Stalin* (1993, Ivan Passer), where "unidentified footage from Eisenstein's *October* is freely mixed with genuine archive material". (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTv9iZJvx1Q) As David Bordwell (1993, pp. 80-2) describes it, Eisenstein film has turned "the small detachment that invaded the Winter Palace" into "a crowd of thousands" for all time. So while the mass spectacle is not well known outside Russia, the images from Eiseinstein's storming have effectively 'become history'.

Stalin (Ivan Passer, 1993)

How can a reenactment produce an event with the capacity to *make* history? In the case of the mass spectacle, it is reported that about 100,000 spectators, about a quarter of the entire population of Petrograd in 1920, turned up to watch the 2,000 performers in the mass spectacle. (Blackson, 2007, p. 36) Spectators were placed in the middle of the action and as the Palace was stormed, they joined in the attack, "melting" as Richard Stites (1989, p. 96) describes it, "into the performance". In 1920 members of the government had called for precisely this kind of engagement with Russian audiences, arguing that "In order to acquire a sense of self the masses must outwardly manifest themselves and this is possible only when [in Robespierre's words] they become 'a spectacle unto themselves'". (Anatoli Lunacharski quoted in Taylor, 2002, p. 9) Simultaneously participants in and witnesses to the reenactment of the storming of the Winter Palace, spectators became this 'spectacle unto themselves'. By taking history into their own hands, the spectators of the mass spectacle participated in creating the storming of the Winter Palace as a dynamic centre for the Revolution, they shaped the Revolution "as they celebrated it". (Geldern, p. 45) According to philosopher Gilles Deleuze, as Paul Patton (2010, p. 84) argues, the revolutionary event condenses "the singular points of a given structure" into a "sublime occasion". The mass spectacle became that sublime occasion, not only re-mediating an historical event as a revolutionary event, but constituting itself as that revolutionary event.

The Storming of the Winter Palace was the climax to a year of intense theatrical activity in Russia's streets, engaging directly with the energies of a new society. But the mass spectacle declined in popularity after 1920 and cinema took over as the pre-eminent medium for collective identification. Like the mass spectacle,

the storming of the Winter Palace in Eisenstein's *October* gave the mass form and helped spectators to become enthusiastic post-Revolutionary citizens who understood, embraced and fostered the energy and ideology of their emerging reality. In contrast, *October*'s ability to reenact the revolutionary energy of the mass is built on the visual rhythms of Eisenstein's montage principles, rather than the theatrical activation of city streets.

During the storming sequence in *October,* we see people streaming cross the Palace Square, shown from multiple camera angles. Their running bodies move at different speeds and rhythms accented by the editing. Bodies surge away from, across and even towards the camera, building up momentum with the alternating rhythms within and between shots. As "the great director of the crowd and the great controller of its rhythms through montage" Eisenstein created what Susan Buck-Morss (2000, p. 147), describes as an "experience of the mass that became the reference point for future meaning". Buck-Morss goes as far as to argue that "the revolutionary mass, was a phenomenon that needed the cinema world to be perceived" because "Cinema creates an imagined space where a mass body exists that can exist nowhere else".

One of the central reasons why Buck-Morss (1994, p. 51) champions Eisenstein's representation of the revolutionary mass is because she believes that "[n]o reality could stand the intensity of the mass shown in cinema". The intensity produced by the cinema is available to the spectator without risk of real physical harm. She argues that the cinema spectator can be "bombarded by physical and psychic shock, but feel no pain". And this argument could also be made for the mass spectacle which enables the spectator to experience revolutionary energy without danger.

October and *The Storming of the Winter Palace* mass spectacle were more intense than the historical event and this facilitated spectator's identification with the historical event. And the historical event itself was ultimately enacted in the process. Collectively these two reenactments re-mediated the historical event into a properly 'revolutionary' event, blurring the boundaries between the historical event and its representation. Eisenstein's film did much more than simply reenact the much larger and more dramatic storming of the Palace popularised by the mass spectacle. Eisenstein's film reenacts a revolutionary energy first *enacted* by the mass spectacle and not present in the historical event. *October* and the mass spectacle do not only reenact the storming of the Winter Palace, they effectively enact it. In doing so both reenactments changed not only the way in which the historical event was understood, but, also effectively the historical event itself. The relationship between these two reenactments therefore draws attention to the fundamentally mediated nature of the historical event, raising the question of whether the past can be separated from its representation.

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