Re-enactment for Nothing1 - A Recipe

Ingredients

- Experimental mood
- Love for inventive and dramatic techniques
- Fun in collective experiencing
- Courage to explore forms of knowing that are not listed in most of the methods books, and maybe never will be
- Some sense for experimental set-ups
- Embracement of purposelessness
- Willingness to waste your social scientific life

‘Find a way to introduce more clearly why you want to do a re-enactment’, I note down during the rehearsal. I am grateful for the opportunity to go through the planned experiment together with my colleagues, but right now they make me nervous. I have not thought too deeply about proper ways of legitimating the re-enactment. But in order to understand how this should be done, my colleagues wish to know what the purpose of the whole endeavour was. It does not seem to be an option to suggest that there has never been attributed a clearly predefined epistemic value to the experiment (at least not in the rationality of positivist experimental empiricism), or – even worse – that ‘re-enactment’ might just have promised to be fun.

I had become part of a research group devoted to researching contemporary reorganizations of industries. As a research group, we were in the process of developing a common understanding about what this research would be about, and so establishing field contacts in companies and industrial organizations of different kinds was high on our agenda. The whole team seemed to agree that classical expert interviews presented a promising way of staging ‘first encounters’ with industrial actors, typically CEOs of companies or representatives of industrial ‘meta-organizations’ such as labour unions etc. Many accepted our invitations. It turned out to be less trivial to get industrial actors enrolled in a more long-term engagement going beyond our ‘first encounters’, however. This was not very detrimental for us, because we were located in a place endlessly rich in industrial companies. Yet, it made us think about contemporary academia-industry relations and what we would consider as valuable research on, with, and against industries. Can the field of ‘industrial reorganization’ become a site of collaboration, in the #colleex sense of ‘an epistemic figure resulting from careful craft of articulating inventive shared modes of doing together with our companions in the field.’ Or is such an engagement limited to other fields of research? Do industries qualify as companions? And do we want them to qualify as such? Can the field of industrial-reorganization even become ‘a site for the construction of joint problematizations?’ (ibid.)

Our ‘first encounters’ with industrial actors can be understood as key sites for the exploration and negotiation of these questions. ‘This interview hour costs us 10.000 Euros,’ a leader of a management board would stress – we had better come up with something useful. More than expert interviews, our ‘first encounters’ were thus sites of negotiation, settlement of ‘deals’, ‘fitness-tests’ even.

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https://www.zenfornothing.net

Given this excess of understandings, it seems to make sense to think of our ‘first encounters’ as complex ‘fieldwork devices’ that ‘lead social lives’ in the way Law and Ruppert (2013) have envisaged. Following these authors, our ‘first encounters’ are (1) shaped by the nets in which they are actualized. We were learning that the industrial way of understanding academia-industry relations is often derived from their former experiences with engineers from the ‘Entrepreneurial’ Technical University, in which we – as a research group – are also based. Industrial actors want to enrol us as ‘partners’ who ideally help with the development of solutions, or as ‘spies’ who share knowledge derived from our contacts in other companies. Instead of reducing the ‘first encounter’ to an analytical tool, which helps us in developing representationally valid portraits of contemporary reorganizations of industries, we could get interested in it as a heterogeneous ‘social operator’ (Law and Ruppert 2013:280). Thus it seems to make sense to acknowledge the first encounters as something (2) opportunistically used by all the actors involved, and (3) formatting academia-industry relations, in the sense that they pave the way for what follows after a first meeting. Like in a Deleuzian machine, during a first encounter things happen that are not necessarily ‘written on the package’ (ibid:230), and that actualize us – the social scientists – as participants within dynamics that are hardly under our control, but rather ‘embed more or less uncertain and often implicit compromises.’ (ibid:232)

My desire to perform a re-enactment of our ‘first encounters’ was loosely connected to the hope to find in it a technique for exploring the ‘social lives’ of our first encounters; a technique of sharing them with peers, but also of playing with them, of living through them, of fictionalizing and reimagining them. Due to its experimental and artificial nature, the re-enactment might end up being the opposite of a promising means for extracting knowledge. It does not show the sort of qualities that are epistemically valued in the mainstream of contemporary social sciences, such as representational validity. This does not mean that it would necessarily be useless, of course. In fact, it resonates with a broader interest in ‘post qualitative methods’ that ‘move away from the positivist experimentation aimed at proving or falsifying hypotheses in favour of experimentation as a material-semiotic-affective staging of events and/or provocations that “make things happen”, and in doing so question, provoke, interrupt us, and what exceeds current understanding.’ (Gherardi 2019:753) And yet, I remember going to the #colleex workshop (at which the re-enactment was performed) with the fear that people would laugh about it and that they wouldn’t be up for participating in it etc. So, to me, the performance of a re-enactment showed a potentially much higher level of vulnerability than the presentation of ‘results’ at a conference, for instance. Without a workshop encouraging experiments, such as the first #colleex workshop, I might have never have done this.

Related Re-enactments

‘Re-enactment for nothing. Should this be allowed?’ one of my team mates asks when discussing one of the drafts of this paper together with the group. As anticipated by Geissler and Kelly (2016), re-enactment ‘prompts considerable epistemic unease.’ Broadly understood as an artistic technique to replicate historical events, it has mostly been the educational (for ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’, or as ‘vehicle for historical inquiry’, e.g. Agnew 2004, 335) and entertainment features of re-enactment that have been highlighted. Agnew identifies a boom of re-enactment as popular method practicing ‘living history’ (2004:327). More recently, re-enactment has attracted the attention of scholars who are concerned with the making and unmaking of futures. Redesigned as ‘pre-enactment,’ in this mode, the technique ‘sets out to experiments with fictitious time(s) and space(s)’ (Adam et al. 2019).
In film, re-enactment has been deployed to problematize the separation of the genres of fiction and non-fiction. In Francis Alý’s short movie ‘re-enactment’ (2002), the act of purchasing a gun in Mexico City is presented alongside its (seemingly identical) re-enactment, ‘questioning the concept of authenticity’ and illuminating ‘how media can distort and dramatize the immediate reality of a moment.’ The same holds for ‘Close-up’ (1990) directed by Abbas Kiarostami. By means of re-enactment (including the appearance of the Abbas himself as movie director), the frequently used attribute ‘based on a real story’ is taken much further than the audience could have expected. The deliberate mash-up of fiction and non-fiction shots leaves the audience continuously puzzled about what is ‘real’ and stimulates a reconsideration of (every) film as merger of fiction and non-fiction on multiple levels.

The twists social scientists and artists have added to re-enactment more recently are especially inspiring for the re-enactment presented here. For example, the critical stance towards the epistemological hope that ‘experience furthers historical understanding’ is shared by Geissler and Kelly (2016), as is the idea that rather than ‘provid[ing] an historical account of the past ‘as it really was’, re-enactment could be thought of as a ‘framework to interrogate the conditions of historical eventualities, the promiscuous and hence fertile trade between past and present, and our place within’ (ibid, 920). Their celebration of re-enactment as ‘mingling of scholarship, sentiment, evidence and inventiveness’ (ibid.) resonates with a renaissance of ‘pre-positivist’ modes of experimentation (see e.g. Blackman 2014, Lezaun et al 2013) that ‘take us back to a time in when transdisciplinary enquiry and experimentation was commonplace, indeed institutionalized, and where concepts travelled across borders and boundaries blurring the lines between art, science and culture’ (Blackman 2014, p. 379). In similar ways, McKenzie and Ferguson (2018) highlight the potential of re-enactment as ‘creative arts research’ that opens up space for findings that are not very likely to be anticipated.

Due to its playful nature, re-enactment seems suited for the provocation of alternative realities and surprises. ‘[Re-enactment] indulges the twin passions of work and play, which are generally divorced from each other. It licenses dressing up, pretending and improvising, casting oneself as the protagonist of one’s own research, and getting others to play along’ (Vanessa Agnew 2004:327). Yet, re-enactment is not solely play. And it is definitely not only the re-play or pre-play of one single happening in the past (or the future). There is a whole range of ‘frame games’ (see e.g. Bateson 1955) going on that cannot even remotely be controlled by the experimenters. Put differently, re-enactment seems especially intriguing (in the double sense of alluring and scheming), because more than a play with reality, it is an intermixing and intermingling of realities. As in the case of ‘re-enacting first encounters’, it certainly was foremost (supposed to be) a way to play with and make apparent realities of academia-industry relations. But there were so many more realities at play. Some of them were anticipated by us, such as the play with(in) disciplinary universes, some of them were rather unforeseen. The discussions of the re-enactment might have been expected to have a pedagogical touch, as there is a long tradition of ‘theatre for/of change’ (e.g. Boal 1955, Mienczakowski 1997) in anthropology (though as a non-anthropologist I was not so familiar with it). The freshest surprises, however, came out of other rather unpredictable elements, such as the fact that the re-enactment at the #colleeex workshop was performed on/under a tree (see Fig. 3).

In the end, I was less interested in re-enactment as a pedagogical tool, at least in the narrow sense of figuring out the ‘right’ way of performing first encounters, or as a way to learn to better control negotiations with industrial actors. I was interested in witnessing our first encounters

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3 https://francisalyss.com/re-enactment/
re-enacted by others, because I wanted to understand what this feels like and what it brings about - without necessarily drawing too many conclusions on what should have been done differently. If ‘re-enactment for nothing’ wanted to achieve anything, then it was to bring about alternative realities, ways of relating to industrial actors or staging first encounters. If anything, it was ‘performance as research’ (Arlander et al 2017), a pedagogy of the possible as integral to the inquiry process; using re-enactment in a way in which the ‘object of inquiry’ is not ‘the industry’, but the relations between industry and academia that are imaginable and (re-)producible in first encounters.

Experimental Set-Up
My colleague Melpomeni Antonakaki (see acknowledgments) and I designed and carried out ‘Re-enacting First Encounters’ as a semi-fictional interactive play that problematizes (social)science-industry relations. Workshop participants (most of them anthropologists) were invited to assume either the role of an industrial actor or that of a social scientist of the research group ‘re-organizing industries’, both of whom negotiate potential modes of engagement and collaboration in the course of a ‘first encounter’ that is staged as an expert interview. The ‘re-enactors’ were provided with scripts (see Fig. 1) consisting of descriptions of industrial actors (e.g. branch and position), plus short (2-page) anonymized transcript sequences of first encounters that actually took place (interviews, meetings). What followed was a re-enactment of a ‘first encounter’ - witnessed by other participants and the experimenters. The players were instructed to follow the provided script and afterwards keep the conversation of the first encounter going by improvisation. The improvisation phase was then followed by a short discussion, which included all workshop participants.

The script for the re-enactment contained sequences taken from actual ‘first encounters’. We never tried to exactly rebuild every single detail of an encounter, however. We cut down interview scenes and remixed them with others. We did so in order not to risk potentially disclosing the identity of ‘original’ interview-partners, but also for dramaturgical reasons. We hoped that such a trade-off between ‘promiscuous drama’ and ‘non-fictional elements’ could be the basis for a provocation for potential re-imaginations of academia-industry relations. The improvisation would engage the ‘re-enactors’ themselves as designers of academia-industry relations, and explicitly encourage them to ‘take action’, instead of merely ‘re-enacting’ an encounter scene. The experiment was framed as intimate and interactive introduction into our research group and the work we pursue (as a form of ‘extended peer-review’) as well as a device to explore the ‘social lives’ (Law and Ruppert 2013) of our first encounters.

While the ‘original’ first encounters usually take place in one of our ‘wintergardens’ of the university building (see Fig. 2), the ‘re-enactments’ discussed above were performed in the ‘Tropical Botanic Garden’ in Lisbon (see Fig. 3). ‘How can these two gardens be compared?’ one of my colleagues asked. Actually, they have little in common other than the word ‘garden’ in the name. One is a pale and grey conference room in a faceless and posh industrial city of the European north. The other is a beautifully colourful and lively, yet seemingly widely neglected manifestation of colonial realities in a touristic and gentrified place in the European south. Rather than fixing clear relations between the one and the other, we were embracing the potential irritation and ambiguity caused by relocating the first encounter from the winter garden to the ‘tropical’ one.

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5 see e.g. Meyer and Jepperson (2005) for the difference between enacting and taking action...
Interview-Sequence 2: SOC

Introduction:
The following script is a short excerpt taken out of an expert-interview session between a social scientist and a business person. Your role is exactly that of the social scientist from the research group ‘reorganizing industries’, designated below as SOC. Your counterpart plays the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of a transnational machine engineering company, which currently employs a workforce of around 1800 people in 20 countries.

Imagine that the conversation below is part of a longer session which has already gone through the characteristics and challenges of the aforementioned company regarding digital innovation etc., and has just shifted from talking about the company towards negotiating how members of the research group can get granted access to corporate grounds for conducting ethnography-inspired organizational research. The terms of this negotiation are somehow set throughout this script, which furthermore – as you will soon realize – has been cut short and exhibits no ‘the end’ or final conclusions. Thus, the re-enactment remains open to intervention or improvisation on behalf of participants or audience.

Please re-enact the scene and continue the conversation after the script has ended.

Script:
CEO: My question would be, how we – as company – can benefit from your know-how in organizational social science? I mean, it actually sounds somehow interesting. But when it comes to the real added value, I am not sure to be honest.

SOC: Okay, I see. I mean, we could also just come here at first, so we can learn something.

CEO: Yes, sure. Would be a shame, if we all learned something.

SOC: For us it would not be a problem, if you also learned something, OK? I mean, we get that you are only going to do that together with us, in case you also benefit from it in some way, that is absolutely understandable.

CEO: We can bring you along to the negotiations with the employee representatives. (Laughing) That would be fun.

SOC: Well, we will need to think about that. Basically, there are different formats one can think of.

CEO: Are you performing so-called technology assessment as well? I mean, at some point you need to understand what this digitization means?

SOC: mhm

CEO: ...for the change of the company, the society and the interaction between the technicians and other groups.

SOC: mhm

Fig. 1: Excerpt of one of the interview scenes that were re-enacted plus instructions that were provided for the ‘re-enactors’ (in this case the ‘re-enactor’ of the social scientist)
Fig. 2: The ‘Wintergarden’ - Meeting Place of our ‘Original’ First Encounters

Fig. 3: The ‘Tropical Botanic Garden of Lisbon’ – Location of the Re-enactment of First Encounters

Re-enacting First Encounters – Impressions from the Experiment in Lisbon

JI: [00:23:15] Happy ending. (Laugh) {applause}

I was incredibly surprised that the re-enactment ‘worked out’ so well. Participants volunteered as ‘re-enactors’ of first encounters, and they also improvised – all of them – in astonishingly sophisticated ways. The setting under a massive tree – with many options to sit, but without a table and chairs – required negotiations about seating between the re-enacting interviewee and interviewer. It was exactly this aspect that turned out to be inspiring for thinking about future first encounters, because it hinted at the power that lies in the material arrangements of interview situations. While I must have been aware of many different ways in which interviews can be conducted (e.g. ‘walking interviews’), I was somehow taking for granted that our first
encounters meant gathering around a table. ‘You are in the upper position from the beginning, starting from high ground,’ one impersonator of a social scientist jokes with a re-enactor of an ‘industrial’ actor, referring to the place where the ‘industrial actor’ chose to sit under the tree. This would not be the last joke during the performances about the evils of industry and – more broadly – the asymmetries between industry and academia. At the same time, I also had the feeling that people really enjoyed playing industrial actors, or – as it was mostly interpreted – being the ‘bad guys.’ One re-enactor reported:

‘I tried to act like a bad boy. Reflecting on how this is gendered, I tried to behave like a man would act. I tried to act as ignorant of social science as possible. Because I know that’s real. They always accept something to profit from when they deal with social scientists. They expect some kind of delivery, some kind of knowledge delivery.’

Participants were also sharing their impressions on how we were doing as social scientists of industrial change. One of them said:

‘The interesting thing for me is that this is not like a social scientific interview, in a way need you reject the instinct to be social scientist in that moment and become a kind of a marketing company for a service you are offering. For example at the beginning of the first re-enactment I was thinking that for social scientists they were talking way too much. They can’t know what the [interviewee] wants, when they are talking so much during an interview. And then I thought no, they are doing exactly what they should be doing in this moment.’

While harmonious endings in which the industrial actor and the social scientists come up with some sort of agreement were not intended, all of the re-enactors came up with such an agreement in their improvisations. The happy ending was also the end of the respective re-enacted scene and followed by applause. I still do not know what to think about this. It reminds me of a dialogue that is used as an opener in an article I have come across recently. It is entitled ‘can a drawing be rehearsed, or, there is no bowing in performance art’ (Platz 2018) and introduced as ‘[a] backstage dialogue with M – circus performer and life model – after the first performance; and it goes as follows:

M: We need to acknowledge the audience.
B: Sorry?
M: They want to be able to recognise the performance.
B: How do you mean?
M: We should do a curtain call and take a proper bow.
B: I don’t think so. I mean it isn’t really theatre.
M: It is not fair to just walk off the stage. We should bow…
B: But…
M: It gives them a chance to express themselves.
B: But – there’s no bowing in performance art…
M: We should bow.

I suppose what I want to suggest is that experimenting with performance calls for the reproduction of what – following the participants’ and experimenters’ beliefs – makes a proper performance. As in the case of the re-enactment of first encounters, this was creating a harmonious ending and acknowledging the performance with applause. But it also seemed to come naturally to us to follow up the performance with a discussion, which is maybe rather unusual in a more classical play. This exemplifies how many options there are for the manipulations of re-enactments at the interface of play and the process of enquiry, but also the arrangement of everyday interview situations.
Unsurprisingly, there is also a whole list of things that did not go so well, maybe because of my lack of experience with re-enactments. For instance, we (as experimenters) started a discussion with the participants on whether the re-enactment should be introduced or whether we should directly jump into the performance directly in the re-enactment, instead of just preparing one introduction to the experiment. Also the fact that we were not really steering the discussion, but mostly collecting thoughts, must have been confusing for the participants. But the non-steering and non-controlling was also very productive in the sense of being an explorative purposeless experimenting on a process (namely the expert interview) that is usually very standardized and normalized. Yet, of course, the re-enactment is also a show, in which participants want to be entertained and want to be able to make sense of it - to a certain extent. Thus, the purposelessness needs to be tamed a bit. In the course of the re-enactment with social scientists, I developed a desire to carry out a sort of ‘counter experiment’, in which the re-enactment would be performed with/by industrial actors. As regards the actual the re-enactment with the workshop participants, I benefitted from their generosity and their openness to challenging performances in which there is no clear solution, ending, right way etc. It was social scientists trying to sympathize with a peer’s research situations; a sort of peer review.

**Potential Powers of Re-enactment**

We were very lucky to have passionate and fearless ‘re-enactors’ – all of them improvising without hesitation. They actualized the Machiavellian manager and the fork-tongued researcher who smuggles herself into the well-protected boundaries of a company by using the language of their ‘counterparts’ and speaking to their hopes and fears. The re-enactment provoked the explication of (hidden) presumptions about contemporary industry-social science relations, and functions as an inventory of the prevalent ideas about their realities and complexities. This is one of the more obvious powers of the re-enactment.

As might be expected, in an ensemble of social scientists, the discussions after the performances mostly remained within the familiar frames of peer review. The participants in the experiment seemed to make sense of the re-enactment mostly as an opportunity to give advice, with regard to our interview techniques, for instance. In this sense, the re-enactment is also a painful activity. As Agnew notes, ‘of course, [re-enactment] also calls for discomfort and enforced self-growth. But, like the cold nose atop the counterpane, which Melville says measures the warmth of the bed, the pain only sharpens the pleasure. […] suffering also makes for a better story’ (2004, p. 327). The experimental re-enactment of first encounters proved to be embarrassing and uncomfortable for us experimenters, since the re-enactors gained insights into the everyday challenges of establishing relations to a field. It can be seen as an intimate introduction into one’s research. The re-enactment is shedding light on issues that in most publications would most certainly be cut out as ‘noise’. This holds, for instance, for interview scenes in which we struggle with finding a convincing argument for the value of a potential collaboration between social scientists and industries and the occasionally rather desperate attempts to come up with reasons for having social scientists ‘inside’ of industries.

Taking seriously that within a re-enactment we learn more about the re-enactment than about the ‘original event’, one might notice that in the discussions following the performance pieces, participants mostly adopted an advisory style commenting on how to fix situations that apparently did not go so well in the original. ‘What was the real ending?’ one participant asked in the discussion. I am astonished at the obsession with the separation between fiction and reality, and had the feeling that participants were almost disappointed when it turned out that the scripts were manipulated in order to make them ‘performable’ in the timeframe of the workshop.
Participants provided us with rich ideas about how to fix our first encounters (e.g. in the sense of optimizing the argumentation lines). I was interested in rethinking the first encounter as a performance that – as a matter of course - is staged and framed in a specific way, while it could be done otherwise. I was intrigued that the performed improvisations had all led to a diplomatic ending in which social scientists and industrial actors agreed on future collaborations although this was not forced by the script. In the scripts, we actually put the re-enactors in rather disharmonious and tricky situations. Yet, they managed to negotiate collaboration agreements. Why could this be achieved in the re-enactments? There are loads of explanations for this. But what fascinated me the most relates to the materiality of the space where we performed the re-enactment. As a contrast to the wintergarden (see Fig. 2), where we usually meet interview partners around a conference table, in the botanical garden (see Fig. 3) the re-enactors were sitting next to each other on massive tree roots. Whilst this might seem ridiculously obvious, for me it had not been. It directed me to the disruptive powers of re-enactment. In Geissler and Kelly’s work, ‘re-enacting early post-colonial science as events unfolding in the present disrupts straightforward narratives about the promises and shortfalls of scientific progress, raising provocative questions about the sentiments and stakes of research.’ (2016: 912) In the case of the industrial company first encounters, the disruptive power went beyond the discursive level and problematized the bodily and scenographic arrangements of our first encounters. Certainly, in our education, we all received methods training on how to mimic a detached, interested scientific expert in an interview (don’t fold your arms! etc.). We might, however, have many more options for arranging first encounters, which we usually do not consider. These options might be less about seeking to perform epistemic authority and expertise, and more about carefully crafting a first encounter in which something like a joint problematization can happen.

And this leads to another potential power of re-enactment: its emancipatory gesture. ‘Paradoxically, it is the very a-historicity of re-enactment that is the precondition for its engagement with historical subject matter,’ Agnew (2004: 328) highlights. As in the case of our first encounters, the re-enactment inspires to rethink the stage settings we consider as appropriate when we meet industrial actors, but also the roles we (almost) automatically assume. First encounters don’t have to be reduced to performances of expertise and discursive gestures of mutual valuation. The re-enactment reveals the impressive dynamics of our field work devices and make us question the effort that is often put into measures of controlling a research situation. It provokes for experimental play with the genres of meeting others beyond rhetorical strategies. In this sense, ‘re-enactment for nothing’ has not changed the realities of social scientists researching industries, but it has offered different ones.

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Literature


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