

RECOUNTING MATTERS

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In 1889 Lewis Carroll published *Sylvie and Bruno*, in which a “proto-nerd” character called “Mein Herr” explains the pitfalls of creating too precise a map

Mein Herr: “What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?”

Sylvie: “About six inches to the mile.”

“Only six inches!” exclaimed Mein Herr. “We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!”

“Have you used it much?” I enquired.

“It has never been spread out, yet,” said Mein Herr: “the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well.”¹

In reality, too, techniques of representation have gone through innumerable “improvements,” as attempts at precision continue to produce progressive information and communication tools. The momentum of modernity requires that we track history from the closest possible observation point, preferably with the observer in the middle of the event itself, reporting its unfolding in real-time. As a matter of fact, this closeness often “blocks out the sun” as we come to lack any critical distance on the matters reported, and we end up taking for “real” what effectively is a blurred compilation of fragments.

In contrast to an idea of history that celebrates either its media of communication (in modern

times) or the absence of historical forms of representation (where there are few and far images or written records), a theatrical approach to recounting history “compresses” time. Theater can be a tool to comprehend reality through re-enactments of specific moments, in particular places; it gives life to past, present, or future events by scripting them. Re-enactment has already been massively mediatized (sourcing its material from media or personal narratives), but it does not, in this sense, provide a spurious image of the event, since it leaves open to the viewer the possibility to go back to the original narrative and “de-compress” the story.

Instead of an archaeological space (or time) reconstruction, the re-enactment embeds a desire of repeating *ad infinitum* the map of the territory. The event or the story re-enactment follows is already “closed”, since it has already happened, so it allows its re-opening for further individual and collective speculation, in which each repetition is as significant as it is different. •

ENDNOTES

- 1 My thanks to Peter Nowogrodzki for pointing out this passage in his text “On Exactitude in Science,” in Alfredo Cramerotti (ed.), *The Blind*, Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2014.