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Memory Work

**Keynote: Engaging the Recent Past: Public, Political, Post-Medieval Archaeology
Society for Post-Medieval Archaeology
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“The recent past is a tangible past – a past which saw the emergence and development of modern society, a past which merges seamlessly with the contemporary world, a past which cannot be divided from the present. In engaging with this past we inevitably engage with questions surrounding the nature of our own society and the role of archaeology in the present day”.

Engaging the Recent Past: Public, Political, Post-Medieval Archaeology

The framing statement for this conference juxtaposes past and present through the medium of “tangibility”. In what follows, I will stretch this further by exploring what can be called “memory work” in the context of our digital age, with the help of Walter Benjamin and Walt Disney. And engaging the recent past must involve politics, taking a position on issues that matter.

Here are some words and phrases from the titles of presentations to be given at this conference:

Voyeurs; making memories; divided identities; negotiation of tradition; progress and modernity; portraying the past; creating the future; “I remember those!”; affirmation of identities; remembering; forgetting.

Concepts of remembering, portraying and visualizing, personalizing as identity, and projecting into imagined futures are part of our contemporary lexicon of virtualization. They became established from the early 1990s, which Manuel Castells

has usefully delineated as the beginning of the “Information Age”, and are now omnipresent through all forms of communication.

But here, also, is a paradox: the more the capacity for advanced digital reproduction and representation, the more interest there seems to be in the material revelations of archaeology. This interest could be illustrated in many ways, through television coverage, or the frequency of stories in national newspapers. The key to unravelling this paradox lies in the relationship between image and object – in unpacking further that key word, “tangibility”.

This is where Walter Benjamin’s work is useful.

Some seventy-five years ago Benjamin wrote that:

“the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced. Since the historical testimony rests on the authenticity, the former, too, is jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter. And what is really jeopardized when the historical testimony is affected is the authority of the object”.

At this time – 1936 – new printing technologies were allowing the mass reproduction of good copies of paintings. Benjamin’s point was that such mass reproduction broke the unique link between an original object and its context – its “historical testimony”. This, he argued, would fatally undermine the authenticity of the original itself. Benjamin was anticipating a key aspect of modernist culture and aesthetics, whether in print journalism, television or popular film.

But today, the inverse of Benjamin’s dilemma seems to apply. In our digital age, and in contrast to modernism, there is no original image, but rather endless simulacra. A simple icon for the new technology of reproduction is the digital camera, which mimics the now-redundant technology of film through devices such as ISO settings, but which generates no original negative to be copied. This, along with hundreds of

other devices, serves to draw a clear line between the world in which we live and work today, and the world which Benjamin saw emerging in the 1930s.

The fascination with the material objects produced by archaeology seems to be that they anchor the infinite reproduction of simulacra to one-of-a-kind objects. Were Walter Benjamin writing today, he might see the problem as the other way round. He might say that the mass reproduction of digital images denies the possibility of authenticity without the “historical testimony” that comes from anchoring the image to “a thing”.

I want to expand on this by an account of a field trip to post-medieval Disney World.¹

Visiting Disney World’s Animal Kingdom Lodge a few years ago, I was struck by the apparent inconsistency of a conventional museum inside a high temple of simulation. African art works were displayed in the lobby and other public areas on freestanding plinths, with uncluttered Perspex cases and boutique lighting, and minimal, quite traditional labels:

“Initiation mask, Pende People, Democratic Republic of Congo”; “Feathered Hat, Cameroon”; “Male and female couple, Lobi People, Ivory Coast”.

The centrepiece was a giant Ijele headdress with an interpretative display that recounted its making and use in standard, ethnographic style:

“The Igbo people of Nigeria enact their traditions and beliefs through the arts of dance and music. Masks are central to their celebration of history, spirit being and scenes of daily village life. The grandest of these ‘masquerades’ is Ijele, a giant structure that incarnates the spirits of Igbo ancestors ...”.

In contrast with this celebration of authenticity – of the originality of the artefact – the rest of Animal Kingdom Lodge is pure simulation, Disney at its best. The effect is

¹ I have published the Animal Kingdom Lodge example as “The reappearance of the authentic”. 70-101 in Ivan Karp, Corinne A. Kratz, Lynn Szwaja and Tomas Ybarra-Frausto (eds.) *Museum Frictions: Public Cultures/Global Transformations*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2006.

created by condensing and concentrating the details from a range of sources into a simulacrum – an artifice that mimics authenticity by combining details from its sources while disclaiming to be a copy of any particular original. Animal Kingdom Lodge draws on detailed study of a set of East Africa’s best safari lodges as well as of other sources, such as the “Shaka Zulu” footprint for the semi-circular kraal of guest rooms. The whole thing is exaggerated through scale, with a massive four-story lobby, scaled-up carvings and the dark interior, pools of light, the flickering firelight of the firepits and the suggestion of distant storms. Faint African rhythms and digital cicadas evoke the savannah, and ethics are provided by association with conservation. Guests are asked to “assist the animal care staff in maintaining the health and safety of the animals” so that the Lodge is “a safe and magical place for everyone and every creature”.

As a simulacrum, Animal Kingdom Lodge aspires to be better than the originals that inspired it and the guest is treated as an intelligent participant in the simulation. Consequently, the resort to the conventional museum display and ethnographic focus on the inherent qualities of the object is counter-intuitive.

Back to Walter Benjamin. Writing in 1936, Benjamin was acutely conscious of the gathering momentum of mass, popular culture and the contradiction between the desirability of democratic access to artistic production on the one hand, and the consequences of commodification for works of art, on the other. But today, the easy availability of near-perfect copies of art works is taken for granted, and major genres of artistic production are enabled and inspired by this mass market. The question now is this: why the stubborn saliency of original objects at a time when the mass reproduction of copies seems unexceptionable?

Benjamin’s argument hinged on the proposition that an original work of art has an “aura”. This is founded in its uniqueness, “its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”, and is reinforced by the trace of its history, by “the changes which it may have suffered in physical condition over the years”, and changes in ownership that constitute its history. Together, position in time and space and the patina of “trace” constitute authenticity, and authenticity is beyond reproducibility: “the authenticity of a thing is the essence of all that is transmissible

from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced”. Consequently, the “authority of the object” is jeopardized by reproduction – “that which withers in the age of mechanical reproduction is the aura of the work of art”.

Benjamin was interested in photography, and particularly film, because this was a newly-emerged mass art form that could be reproduced without recourse to an original. Here, his argument was that the “aura” of film-as-art was externalized as the cult of the movie star, who became a sort of vulgar, auratic “original”. This anticipates post-modern theorists of hyperreality and the simulacrum. Here, and particularly in the voluminous field of Disney criticism, it is often assumed that hyperreality renders originality obsolete, that themed entertainment and simulation catches the participant up in a world in which signifier and signified can be decoupled through artifice.

There is, though, a catch in this formulation. For if we are indeed caught up in a self-referential spiral of hyperreality in which simulations refer only to one another then how can any economic value be generated? Why, if all is simulation, is the Walt Disney Company a successful multinational company which converts its fantasies to brand-name products that sell at a high premium?

This, I want to suggest, is the key to the importance of authentic artefacts in the lobby of the Animal Kingdom Lodge. Caught up in a vortex where simulation generates the mass production of commodities, which in turn fuel the consumer-led demand for ever-innovative simulation, how can the entrepreneurs of the experience economy anchor their themed environments in ways that will make them memorable, valued and worth paying for at a premium? One solution is to put the aura back on the work of art, to reverse, for a very specific set of objects, the trend that Benjamin identified in his investigation of authenticity and reproduction.

In a now-classic argument, Arjun Appadurai has provided a useful set of conceptual tools for showing how the aura of an object can be established. Appadurai explores the conditions under which things (“economic objects”) circulate in different regimes of value. He shows how objects have social lives – life histories – during which they

move in or out of “commodity situations”, defined as circumstances in which an object’s “exchangeability (past, present, or future) for some other thing is its socially relevant feature”. In some situations, objects can be “enclaved”, or removed from circulation as commodities. Practices such as enclaving and diversion interrupt the circulation of an object as a commodity, either raising its value because of its scarcity, or else removing it from circulation completely, making it - literally - invaluable. This can be described as “neo-sumptuary” regulation of value, in that it mimics aspects of pre-modern economies in which rare and valued objects, whether liveried coachmen and parasols in seventeenth century Dutch Indonesia or the consumption of marzipan in the Doge’s Venice, were subjected to regulation in law to protect their role as marks of status.

We can now understand why the impresarios of simulation are drawn to the authentic, whether period artefact, a work of art, a rare ethnographic specimen, a building or, indeed, any archaeological object. The authentic object - diverted from circulation as a commodity, enclaved, serves to anchor the simulacrum, arresting the endless process of production and consumption that drives down the value of experiences, undermining the foundations of the experience economy.

This resolves the paradox with which I began. Simulation depends on “reinjecting realness” – on the close connection between hyperreality and the “hysteria” of commodity production and marketing. The “museum effect” is achieved by withdrawing selected artefacts out of circulation as commodities, thus creating a destination with added value. Similarly, in a world in which identities are claimed and disputed by communities who may be far removed from the homelands with which they identify, cultural property may be endlessly reproduced through digital and other media. To retain value, the simulacra of identity need to be anchored by cultural treasures. The dependence of an enclaved object on an authentic history gives particular saliency to archaeological material. Archaeological collections are a vast pool of potential “new originals” which can appeal to both exoticism and to the politics of identity fuelled by the diasporas of the network society.

This diversion to Florida, via Walter Benjamin’s Europe of a century ago, shows how the “memory work” of our virtual age explains, at least in part, the continuing

popularity and enthusiasm for the material things with which we work at the same time that exponential advances in digital reproduction dispense with the concept of the unique and the original. Again this is evident in the strap lines for papers at this conference. “Virtual” words such as voyeur, identity, portrayal, remembering and forgetting are juxtaposed with hard, tangible nouns: “the façades of Kanturk Castle”, “the highland village”, “Loch Croispol School”, “human remains”, the M74, “street lamps, flowerpots and nightclubs”, “Prestongrange”, “Knockaloe Internment Camp”.

We remain reassuringly anchored to objects and places, but perhaps uneasy? We are, perhaps less than happy to have Disney World’s Animal Kingdom Lodge as a proxy for post-medieval archaeological practice, however much we may secretly enjoy the theme park experience? And if not the Animal Kingdom, then the example could be one of a growing number of simulated experiences with an authentic archaeological anchor.

Dealing with this uneasiness requires a critical stance, a position – in other words, politics. This still seems an issue with which much of professional archaeology is uncomfortable. But politics is evident all around us. At this conference, Donald Adamson will talk about the image of the Highlander as a victim, Claire Corkill about British internment of prisoners on the Isle of Man, and Sinéad Quirke on the misrepresentation of Irish history as a series of constant rebellions against the English. At a more systemic level, Alastair Becket and Olivia Lelong’s work has been on the social and political history of rural education in Scotland from the 1760s to the present. Emma Dwyer will talk about London the destruction of community memory as a result of development in London, and Audrey Horning about colonialism and archaeology in Northern Ireland.

Analyses such as these are inherently political, and I would argue that any interpretation of the past that takes a stand, whether in terms of colonialism, gender or economic and social marginalization is inherently political. And yet many seem to find this objectionable, in some way a violation against truth and objectivity. This was famously the case back in the mid-1980s, where the South African question led to an international rift in archaeology and the formation of the World Archaeological Congress. And while apartheid was the extreme case, there seems to me no reason

why post-medieval archaeology in Europe should be any more exempt from politics than the Southern African Iron Age, which I was working on at the time. Conversely, as I've shown through my excursion to Animal Kingdom Lodge, not to insist on the politics of archaeological practice is to become an entertainer, providing the sumptuary treasures that give commercial value to the simulacrum.

Perhaps this prospect lies behind Jim Symonds call for a bolder politics. "Should we embrace", he asks, "the healthy simile of a large tent, with its connotations of a comforting communality? Or should we aspire to move beyond discussions between peer groups in flimsily partitioned compartments and venture beyond the large tent? ... I contend that we need to radically rethink our aims and methods and defy public expectations of our discipline by constructing ever more challenging and inclusive forms of engagement with post-medieval and contemporary material life".

What would it be like for post-medieval archaeology to embrace the recent past outside the big tent? There are certainly some challenges worth taking on. Here's one, the recent call by Niall Ferguson for a new four year history syllabus for British schools that focuses on "the west and the world". Such a syllabus, Ferguson believes, should address the "big question" of how in AD 1500 "the small warring kingdoms of Europe, which looked so feeble compared with the Ming or Ottoman empires, got to be so powerful". Such a syllabus was "bound to be Eurocentric ... because the world was Eurocentric." This proposal was publicly endorsed by Michael Gove, Secretary of State for Education, at the Hay Festival this year.

Now, we know that centralized state projects to re-write the national history syllabus are invariably problematic and usually reinforce the marginalization of already marginalized groups of people. But what is most striking here is the almost complete silence, the absence of public debate and reaction. If the big tent is the current consensus, then life outside the big tent must be taking on issues such as these, taking our understanding of the ways in which archaeology and history is used and abused, and applying these analytical tools to the mainstream of our contemporary world.

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