

## BOOK REVIEW

# Review of *The Semiotics of Heritage Tourism*

*The Semiotics of Heritage Tourism*, Emma Waterton and Steve Watson. Bristol, Buffalo, Toronto: Channel View Publications, 152 pages, 2014, ISBN: 97811845414207

Colin Sterling\*

---

This slender volume from frequent collaborators Emma Waterton and Steve Watson (2010, 2012, 2013) successfully navigates and contributes towards a diverse terrain of heritage scholarship in its 152 pages. Across seven concise chapters readers are offered: an historical overview of semiotics and its relevance to heritage; an incisive critique of the commodification and marketing of the past; a revised appreciation of the crucial role photography has come to play in heritage tourism; a turn to affect and to embodied experience as the core focus of critical heritage studies. This final point is perhaps the most significant, providing an overarching structure for the study as a whole. As the authors state, the 'semiotic landscape' is here re-theorised to encompass 'the ways in which people encounter it sensually, through corporeal proximity' (p. 8). The recognition that heritage and tourism must be dealt with as *more than* just socially constructed phenomena (a theme both Waterton and Watson have previously tackled (Waterton 2009, 2010a, 2010b; Watson 2010)) thus underpins the conceptual and methodological approaches put forward here. It is no doubt telling that where this approach stumbles may be as instructive as where it succeeds.

It should be noted from the outset that this work represents first and foremost a *theoretical* provocation to heritage. Complex debates around semiotics, structuralism, post-structuralism and affect are - for the most part - deftly handled by Waterton and Watson. Perceptive engagements with de Saussure and Sanders Peirce are worth highlighting, along with a critical rethinking of marketing narratives and a sustained reconceptualisation of the 'semiotic landscape,' a phrase borrowed from Kress and van Leeuwen (2006). While never wilfully obscure, the language deployed by Waterton and Watson reflects these challenging themes. Take for example this passage on the touristic perception of heritage sites:

...a visitor's perception of any given heritage place or experience inevitably already entails responses to its representations, which will trigger a range of kinaesthetic senses and flows, that in turn act as entry points for the retrieval or (re)emergence of memories in a cycle of affective contagion. Importantly, while these particular moments occur *outside* of representational space - within sensations, feelings, atmospheres - they nonetheless unfold against or within the patterns of affordances circumscribed by their representations and materialities. (p. 76)

---

\* UCL, United Kingdom  
c.sterling@ucl.ac.uk

There is, I think, a problem here: not in the text itself, but in the title of the book. As the authors are at pains to make clear, the traditional concerns of semiotics can only take our conceptualisation of heritage and tourism so far. In drawing attention to the semiotic *landscape* as a 'complex imaginaria' (p. 37) of fleeting layers of meaning constantly reshaped through a feedback loop of representation and affect, Waterton and Watson make a timely contribution to the field, opening up new avenues of potentially fruitful research. Quite distinct from those tried and tested (perhaps formulaic) investigations based around the 'semiotics' of heritage tourism, what the authors of this volume advocate is a deeper engagement which looks 'beyond the discursive for meaning' and towards a semiotic that is 'embodied and experiential' (p. 120). This suggested line of inquiry does not jettison the representational dimensions of the semiotic entirely, but instead seeks to comprehend the dense back-and-forth between representations (visual, textual, symbolic) and 'sensations,' 'feelings' or 'atmospheres.' These ephemeral domains register a strikingly different focus for heritage, perhaps taking us closer to the 'mattering' of sites, objects, places and things, rather than simply their meaning (see Miller 1998; Edwards 2012).

In focusing on these issues Waterton and Watson follow a general affective turn in the humanities and social sciences (see Navaro-Yashin 2009; Gregg and Seigworth 2010). This shift away from the discursive or linguistic encompasses a series of critical realignments around the concepts of corporeality, encounter, contagion, action and interaction, intensity and - perhaps most noticeably in this particular volume - theories which emphasise 'more-than-representational' dynamics of the world. The aim here is to understand 'what actually happens in moments of encounter' across heritage and tourism (p. 27), an approach which centres 'doing,' 'performing,' 'framing,' 'producing,' and 'acting' as crucial points of enquiry

(p. 29). In reimagining what precisely heritage based research might study, this work will surely resonate with many scholars and practitioners (see Harrison 2013).

The general analytical framework put forward by Waterton and Watson does however demonstrate some shortcomings. For example, discussing the 'contours of intensity' that define heritage meaning *in place* (p. 109), the authors suggest that guidebooks or tourist maps work to signify these points by highlighting particular attractions: the more famous a heritage location, the more 'intense' its affects and the more prominent its position in tourist itineraries. Although quick to point out that it is what these attractions mean and the feelings and emotions that 'stick to' or 'slide away' (ibid) from them over time that is most important to understanding intensity, the authors then go on to argue that 'more shallow contours [of intensity] may simply be of personal, family or local interest, or remain resolutely the province of enthusiasts' (p. 112). Again, there is perhaps a problem with language here, for we might easily suggest that it is precisely these more localised, familial or personal sites that resonate most strongly with individuals, being *intensely affective* in a way grand tourist locations so often fail to achieve. From this perspective, the everyday, the unmapped, the hidden and the overlooked spaces of heritage may provide a more compelling base from which to examine affect than the fairly mainstream sites this volume covers.

Photography is afforded a privileged position in much of Waterton and Watson's analysis. As the authors state: 'For us [...] the photograph is emblematic of the embodied nature of the touristic experience and is affective to the extent that it is produced in moments of engagement that are less than expressive and at the same time more than representational' (p. 5). This is a welcome re-orientation of photography within heritage based research, but it also raises a number of conceptual and methodological issues.

Why, for example, do so many tourist photographers seek to ignore or marginalise fellow tourists in their images if the presence of such groups and individuals is 'one of the clearest demonstrations of the dynamic interrelationship of the body, memory and the visual in the semiotic environment of heritage studies' (p. 83)? More substantially, what can a traditional concern with the surface of the image in photographic analysis really tell us about the embodied experiences which form the focus of this enquiry, especially in the age of digital manipulation?

The sustained engagement with photography carried out here looks to touristic images shared on Flickr for methodological clarity, breaking down two sets of pictures from Bamburgh Castle and Cordoba into 'reflective,' 'affective' and 'immersive' categories. Waterton and Watson analyse the content of the images and the comments that surround them to conclude that 'memory and affect are woven through acts of remembering as we look across familiar photographs - triggering responses in our bodies or transporting us, imaginatively' (p. 97). Of concern here is the fact that the authors reach this observation without discussing aesthetics, materiality, technologies of production or means of dissemination and, at times, by reducing their analysis to percentages. Quite apart from the selective nature of Flickr photography (it is surely unsurprising that the authors locate few 'immersive' images of personal memorial significance on such a public platform), this methodology seems counterproductive to the overarching interest in affect, a problem drawn out by the use of comments as data. As Massumi suggests, affect and emotion are not direct synonyms, they 'follow different logics and pertain to different orders' (2002: 27). In its intensity of sensation affect is pre-discursive. Through the 'sociolinguistic fixing' of experience (i.e. comments on Flickr) affect becomes emotion: 'it is intensity owned and recognised' (ibid: 28). This work demonstrates, I think, that to understand the complex interconnections of photography,

heritage, memory and affect, we require a different set of methods and approaches, not just a different analytical framework.

This ties in to a wider methodological dilemma that Waterton and Watson do not shy away from, although the 'conundrum' of what new research tools and techniques are needed to adequately confront the 'affective domain' goes unresolved in this volume (p. 121–2). Describing themselves as 'agnostic' on these issues, the authors argue that an expansion of current ethnographic methods might be more useful than wholly new research strategies. Crucially, large-scale surveys or questionnaires are seen as inadequate in gauging the fully embodied experience of heritage, and instead the volume concludes with a call to continue and build upon inherently subjective or collaborative projects such as auto-ethnography, autophotography, video journals and performative ethnography *in addition to* critical deconstruction and discourse analysis. Some might argue this lack of clarity reflects a poorly worked through topic or frame of research, but I would prefer to see the veritable smorgasbord of methodologies put forward here as a recognition of the fluid, ephemeral, evocative and *personal* nature of contemporary heritage. Indeed, this echoes the broad fields of interest Waterton and Watson draw on throughout this work, and will likely influence in years to come.

While many of the particular analyses put forward here will benefit from more rigorous interrogation and explication, the timely and provocative contribution made by Waterton and Watson to the general re-theorisation of heritage and tourism will doubtless find this concise volume a place on most reading lists and bibliographies across the discipline.

## References

- Edwards, E** 2012 Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 41: 221–234. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092611-145708>

- Gregg, M** and **Seigworth, G J** (eds.) 2010 *The Affect Theory Reader*. Durham and London: Duke University Press
- Guattari, F** 1996 Ritornellos and existential affects. In Genosko, G (ed.) *The Guattari reader/Pierre Félix Guattari*. Oxford: Blackwell. pp. 158–71
- Harrison, R** 2013 *Heritage: Critical Approaches*. London: Routledge. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199602001.013.021>
- Kress, G** and **Leeuwen, T** 2006 *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge
- Massumi, B** 2002 *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/9780822383574>
- Miller, D** 1998 *Material Cultures: Why Some Things Matter*. London: University College London Press
- Navaro-Yashin, Y** 2009 Affective spaces, melancholic objects: ruination and the production of anthropological knowledge. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 15: 1–18
- Waterton, E** 2009 Sightings of sites: Picturing heritage, power and exclusion. *Journal of Heritage Tourism* 4(1): 37–56. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17438730802221117>
- Waterton, E** 2010a Branding the past: The visual imagery of England's heritage. In: Waterton, E and Watson, S (eds) *Culture, Heritage and Representation: Perspectives on Visuality and the Past*. Farnham: Ashgate. pp. 155–172
- Waterton, E** 2010b *Policy, Politics and the Discourses of Heritage in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1057/9780230292383>
- Waterton, E** and **Watson, S** 2010 (eds) *Culture, Heritage and Representation: Perspectives on Visuality and the Past*. Farnham: Ashgate
- Waterton, E** and **Watson, S** 2013 Framing theory: Towards a critical imagination in heritage studies. *International Journal of Heritage Studies* 19(6): 546–561. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2013.779295>
- Watson, S** 2010 Constructing Rhodes: Heritage tourism and Visuality. In: Waterton, E and Watson, S (eds) *Culture, Heritage and Representation: Perspectives on Visuality and the Past*. Farnham: Ashgate. pp 249–270

**How to cite this article:** Sterling, C 2014 Review of *The Semiotics of Heritage Tourism*. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 24(1): 8, pp. 1-4, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/pia.457>

**Published:** 1 May 2014

**Copyright:** © 2014 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported License (CC-BY 3.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>.

**]**u[ *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press

**OPEN ACCESS** 