

CONFERENCE REVIEWS

“Envisioning the Past: Constructing Knowledge through Pictorial Traditions of Representation”, University of Southampton, 10th-12th November 2000

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“Envisioning the Past: Constructing Knowledge Through Pictorial Traditions of Representation” brought together archaeologists, art historians, museum curators, historians, artists and illustrators from around the world to explore the role of visual culture in our envisions of the past. Structured into seven untitled sessions over two days, the conference provided a productive forum for exploring how potential interpretative issues relating to visual representations in archaeology can contribute to current archaeological enquiry.

The conference, while offering no thematic structure, did produce striking evidence for the different genres of visual representation archaeologists utilise to communicate the past. I will approach this review by focusing on a number of the recurring themes that emerged: archaeology and photography; computer imagery and graphic illustrations; public archaeology; gender and children.

Archaeology and Photography: the Photograph as Testament

Three papers in particular focused on the relationship between photographic imagery and archaeological interpretation. These papers raised a number of thought-provoking interpretative issues relevant to current archaeological enquiry, including authenticity, consciousness and duality.

Hamilakis presented images of the Parthenon and the Acropolis created by the French commercial photographer Felix Bonfils to illustrate how the then new technique of photography shaped attitudes towards classical antiquity in the West. By deliberately making the size of a structure indiscernible and often omitting the surrounding landscape Bonfils images, according to Hamilakis, were intentionally composed to authentically depict an image not of what a place was becoming, but of what it had been.

Bohrer who focused on Freud’s experience of split consciousness during his 1904 visit to the Acropolis touched upon the psychological aspects of visual representation. Bohrer discussed how Freud related the incident as if two people were experiencing the site at the same time; firstly his schoolboy anticipation and desire to visit the Acropolis based on textbook photographs, and secondly, his disappointment when these desires were not fulfilled. Based on Freud’s experience, Bohrer stressed how photography has proven not to be another tool of pre-existent archaeological enquiry, but rather the framework of a fundamental interpretative paradigm. Moreover, he commented that our assumptions of objecthood and presence are transformed by photography, in a way that makes the archaeological site a repertoire of images rather than merely of objects.

Bateman discussed how excavation photography falls into two definite categories; formal photography of the archaeological record demanded by archaeological convention, or the explicitly social photography of the digger's snapshot, representing part of the social negotiations of excavations. Bateman commented on how this duality helps to create and define relations between people, things and places in both the social and physical landscapes of excavation. By blurring the boundaries between these two categories, Bateman emphasised how photography offers additional ways to present the actions and practices of archaeology, making it possible to gain wider understandings of archaeology as a social product.

Virtual Archaeology: Computer Imagery and Graphic Illustration

Presentations and discussions of the various forms of media through which visual representations are created raised a number of broad-ranging interpretative issues including ideology, objectivity, ethnocentricity and iconography.

Owen considered the theme of ideology in his critique of H. G. Beyen's visual reconstructions of ancient Roman *scaenae frons*. Owen discussed how Beyen's work dependent on textual sources and his own visual reconstructions of theatre sets, challenged the varied influences Beyen used to visually create 'reality'. Privateer used discourses from Rousseau's *The Noble Savage* and imagery from Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* to argue that traditional western discourse and art constructs human origins in terms of violent aggressive competitions. These discourses are, according to Privateer, grounded in the ideological assumptions of 17th and 18th century capitalism.

The application of computer-generated imagery was challenged by Gillings who questioned how our own definitions of visual representation as a form of mimetic representation strive to replicate an objective external reality and an accuracy that can be measured and quantified. Why is it then that visual representation models are disappointing and fail to live up to their hype? Gillings emphasised how visual representations are hyperreal constructs and manufactured intensities that cannot depict the associated engagement and meanings people assign to. From an alternative approach Earl indicated that accuracy of the past is an ambiguous truth. Rather worryingly, he brought to our attention the fact that as little archaeological evidence as possible is preferred by graphic designers in their creation of 'realistic' archaeological computer models. In dealing with the concept of the authentic experience, both Gillings and Earl raised questions as to what concepts of the body we are adopting in these virtual experiences of the created world.

Green's entertaining presentation indicated that digital entertainment plays a fundamental role in the construction of popular misconceptions of archaeology and the past. Moreover, that adventure games such as Tomb Raider are drawn from popular archaeological constructions, such as colonialism, romanticism and archaeological iconography. Likewise, Porr related to a popular computer game in which the objective is to lead one's own civilisation through history to gain dominance over rivalling cultures. Both papers highlighted how the emulation of being and dwelling in the past through interactive computer games is intimately tied in with ethnocentric and racist attitudes.

Visual jokes were touched upon by Hodgson who discussed how cartoons act as social barometers, recording the interests and concerns of society. Stripping down the visual image to its essential core, Hodgson argued how cartoons are created through the use of memorable and influential stereotypes and icons. Tied in with the political and economic climate at the time of their creation, cartoons say more about the political and economic climate at the time they were created rather than an accurate archaeological past.

Presenting Knowledge: Visual Representation and Public Archaeology

Interpretative issues relating to visual representations within museums, public art and journalism highlighted the problematic and often complex issues relevant to presenting archaeology for public display.

Scott considered how images of Africa function in human evolution exhibits today echo the teleological assumptions and racial hierarchies of 19th century museum anthropology. Through her exploration of interpretations of evolutionary timelines and perceptions of African evolutionary heritage, Scott's work probed the unpredictable parameters of variation in public opinion and offered insight into the conceptions that govern the ways diverse museum audiences understand human evolution exhibits. Podgorny and Ramirez-Rozzis raised similar issues in their analysis of how changing representations of *Megatherium* illustrate different traditions in exhibiting nature and extinct animals.

De Grooth structured her presentation around plans to create a new archaeological facility in Maastricht where she faces a major challenge in dealing with conflicting interpretations of the objects on display. The course of her paper led her to open discussion on how we can best involve the audience in an evaluation of these different views. One evaluation from Dowson, emphasised that images in museum displays and reconstructions consistently underpin a heterosexual construction of humanity, in conjunction with stereotypical concepts of the family unit.

Within the realm of public art Wyke explored the fascist appropriation of Caesar by Mussolini. Wyke demonstrated how the process of envisioning Rome was a mode of public ritual or performance, bringing a politically charged past into the everyday life of modern Italians. Noting how the process of visualising ancient Rome concerned not just the display of a material heritage, Wyke argued that visualisation was tied in with the experience of memory and consuming passion. Champion also touched upon the theme of memory in his discussion of the political significance of Layton's pictures created for the New Royal Exchange in Bank. Themed around subjects of ancient commerce and trade and exchange between Phoenicians and Ancient Britons on the coast of Cornwall, Champion illustrated how the paintings, created at the same time as Forestier's depictions of the Glastonbury Lake Village, changed previous preconceptions of the 'savage Briton'.

The influential role of journalism, in particular the work of *The Illustrated London News* was discussed by Phillips who argued that publishing images of Iron Age round houses portrayed a past which is saying 'these people were just like us'. The role of these images therefore, was to give people confidence in the future by refer-

ring to a civilised past. Moreover, Montserrat detailed how multivalent images of ancient Egypt through reportage and visualisations of archaeological digs in *The Illustrated London News* created an epiphany between the ancient and the modern world.

Visualising Gender and Children

Consideration of the theoretical challenges gendered representations create appeared consistently through the conference. Gifford-Gonzalez's thought-provoking presentation focused on the recent BBC TV documentary *Apeman*. Interspersed with video extracts from the programme, Gifford-Gonzalez argued that *Apeman* depicts iconographic racist and ethnocentric representations of Neanderthals. It is viewed according to Gifford-Gonzalez through a 'thicket of gazes' in which the viewer sees the world a) through the gaze of an uncivilised Neanderthal girl; b) through the predatory gaze of a young black civilised male on the female Neanderthal; c) through the gaze of the viewer with inherent contextual and situated ideologies, and finally d) through the gaze of the documentary makers revealing the uneasy role Neanderthals play in modern portrayals of difference and dominance.

Pratt touched upon the influence the introduction of the Catholic religion by missionaries had on early European perceptions of Native American people. Pratt argued that the created images became amalgamated with investigations into a distant European past, portraying ethnocentric visualisations constructed to signify primitive and ancient origins. Likewise, Dickson emphasised that images in a New Zealand school journal which deliberately contrived to exclude Maori women, should be considered as a visual language that communicates a wider and historical cultural context representative of the time of illustration or publication. These issues, relevant to present day representations were present in Koepke's presentation of his own illustrations of Native American settlement. Koepke's images depicting activities within specific gender divisions, were challenged by a number of the audience and provoked active discussion.

The concept of 'family' was raised by Dowson's highly personal presentation, in which he challenged purely heterosexual approaches and depictions of the past. Dowson argued that our reconstructions of the past abound with perfect images of the family, legitimising heterosexual hegemony, drawing upon conservative attitudes and beliefs. Similarly, Phillips pointed out that Forestier's images of the interiors of round houses depicting civilised Iron Age extended families, emulate contemporary Victorian paintings that were intimately linked to the social and political context in which they were created.

Children were present in Galanidou's examination of how visual representations in children's books represent the social life, gender roles and labour division practices of early humans. Emphasising how supposedly educational representations contain many inaccuracies, Galanidou argued how these visual representations offer a limited range of iconographic themes that claim to recreate the past, but in fact create a past that echoes and serves modern Western stereotypes.

Summary

Professor Alain Schnapps' keynote presentation argued that archaeological representations depict physical and metaphysical relationships between nature and culture, past and present. Moreover, Schnapp brought to light how images of the past represent a way of ordering the world and are an attempt to create self-identification with the past. Schnapps' point of reference is influential in that it raises important issues as to the potential roles of the interpreter, the creator and the viewer within visual representations of the past.

The range and quality of the papers successfully illustrated how the fusion of visual representation and archaeology as a mode of communication raises important questions relevant to current archaeological discourses. As a member of the audience I felt that the structuring the conference into thematic sessions would have facilitated the development of the complex interpretative issues raised throughout the conference. The conference, however, did successfully highlight the theoretical potency of visual representation by addressing ways in which knowledge about the past is constructed.