THE ARCHAEOLOGICAL IMAGINATION



Some years ago back in Lampeter Julian Thomas and I used to talk about something we called the archaeological imagination. We were close to a host of superb human geographers in the next corridor who were reshaping their field (Chris Philo, Ulf Stroymeyer, Catherine Nash, Ian Cook, Tim Cresswell, Hester Parr, Miles Ogborn, Joe Painter, Paul Cloke and more) and one of their colleagues, Derek Gregory (British Columbia, Vancouver) was publishing his book called Geographical Imaginations. Like some other archaeologists, we saw very strong connections between geography and archaeology. And of course we were all very familiar with Wright Mills's Sociological Imagination from 1959.

(Have a look at the 2002 meetings of the Association of American Geographers – [Link] [Link] [Link])

The notion of an archaeological imagination has become well established – a hard fought success for us. It appears as a main theme in Clive Gamble's excellent book from Routledge – Archaeology: The Basics.

So what is the archaeological imagination?

The point is a simple one – archaeology is not just an academic discipline producing knowledge of the past. Archaeology is part of a range of values, aspirations, desires, dreams, attitudes, stories that share an archaeological character. Ideas that digging deeply into something establishes authenticity; a fascination with ruin and morbidity; locating senses of identity in remains of the past; connecting collection with place in the pursuit of historical meaning; notions of the sacred aura of the artifact; attitudes towards garbage and leftovers; the uncanny sense of presence found in material remains; stories of deep origin, and the cyclical rise and fall of cultures.

The archaeological imagination takes us into the heart of the modern condition and its relationship with the past.



From Alain Schnapp's Discovery of the Past

David Lowenthal had gathered a fascinating compendium in his 1985 book The Past is a Foreign Country.

Julian has done a great job of exploring some of the philosphical aspects of the archaeological imagination, particularly in his studies of Heidegger [Link], and now in his new and first rate book on archaeology and modernity – [Link] Barbara Bender, Sue Hamilton and Chris Tilley have explored the archaeological imagination wonderfully in their excavations at Leskernick. There is much more – Ruth Tringham's work out of Berkeley, Carmel Schrire in her research in South Africa. Gavin Lucas is pursuing the archaeological imagination in his fieldwork, and Ian Hodder here at Stanford has always been a great and active supporter of projects that pursue the edges of the archaeological. Cornelius Holtorf, another great colleague of mine at Lampeter, now in Sweden, is about to round off so much of this work with his fabulous forthcoming book on archaeology and popular culture.

And me? Well, since ReConstructing Archaeology, written with Chris Tilley back in the 80s, I have been plotting my own track through matters archaeological. From Adorno and Horkheimer's ruined histories, Benjamin's fragmented re-collections, to recent explorations at Stanford with Bill Rathje and David Platt [Link] I have always thought that my 1991 Experiencing the Past, seen by many as a heinous attack on the foundations of archaeological knowledge, was actually a useful summary of the archaeological imagination. Mike Pearson clarified a lot of my thinking on what we saw as a critical romanticism and poetics at the heart of the archaeological project in our Theatre/Archaeology [Link] [Link]. The remains of all this interest are scattered through this blog and my website, never mind numerous articles, books and conference sessions.

I am sounding defensive. Feeling a need to set the record straight. Why?

I got sent an invitation to a book launch in London for Jennifer Wallace's recently published Digging the Dirt: The Archaeological Imagination. The book is not yet out in the US. I ordered a copy from the UK and read it this evening.

It is a good read. Covers the themes I have just outlined in a lively way with lots of references to literature and some history of archaeology. She has clearly come across our work – Hodder, Rathje, Tilley and myself get mention in the section on further reading, and sometimes in the main text. One side of me is delighted that our work has reached beyond archaeology.

But for the most part Jennifer has chosen to ignore twenty years of analysis of the

archaeological imagination, the archaeological condition.

I wonder why.

Maybe because her book is a literary reading of “the archaeological imagination”. Yet she liberally discusses archaeological history (totally omitting Alain Schnapp’s marvellous and standard book Discovery of the Past), excavations, and what she sees as current trends in the discipline.

Maybe she just hasn’t done her homework, reading what has come before her.

Maybe her publisher, Duckworth, didn’t want footnotes or bibliography – they often look to a cross-over market between academic research and broader interest.

Maybe it doesn’t matter – it’s only the ideas that count. Cornelius is always telling me to lighten up.

Am I getting to be an old reactionary shouting out the standards of scholarship? That you should always recognize the work of others. Perhaps I would simply have celebrated the book’s effort to cross disciplines – a very difficult task – if it wasn’t for an email sent round my department by Maud Gleason recently. She was calling for standards of citation and referencing to be reasserted and upheld in academia, because, like many, she is witnessing a growth in selective, thin and downright false citation – saying (or rather not saying) where your ideas have come from. The matter is really not one of standards for the sake of standards. Maud got me thinking about academic community.

Shoddy research and scholarship often hides behind the publisher’s desire to have a clean read without all the distraction of saying where your ideas come from. The pressure upon academics to deliver publication is considerable and I am suspicious that a lot of what Jennifer discusses is too familiar to be the result of convergent thinking – her coming from literary studies and the reception of classical heritage. And it does look good to appear to be the one with the insight to pull together the big picture.

There is a profound danger in the celebration of the individual that this sloppy work represents. This is what bothers me. The intellectual freedoms of academia depend upon us being a group of colleagues with standards, and principally

standards that refuse to have our efforts divided. Say where your ideas come from because linking them with others makes them stronger and lends them impact. Plagiarism is a threat becasue it divides; it hides the connections between people and their ideas. (Though I am not accusing Jennifer of plagiarism.) All too many people want to promote division and dissent because it weakens the power of ideas to change – ideas become simply the possession or opinion of one detached academic.

Jennifer Wallace – you should have connected your work with the efforts of others that you clearly know of. Because these are not just entertaining stories. They go to the heart of the contemporary world's sense of history, of identity, of direction. They matter.

The power of independent research and criticism lies not in the abilities of an individual, but in the collective effort, collegiality, and democracy, the community of scholarship that alone can give force.

How about that for an enlightenment ideal!