“SEEING THE PAST” – ARCHAEOLOGY CONFERENCE AT STANFORD



I wound up a fine conference at Stanford today – Seeing the Past – Building knowledge of the past through acts of seeing. Congratulations to the organizers – Stacey Camp, Sarah Levin-Richardson and Lela Urquhart.

All the papers are on line and available for comment – [Link]. It is a high quality collection and worth a look – not least for what it shows of some cutting edge thought in academic archaeology.

There were papers that explored visual culture in the past – Celtic coins, sex scenes at Pompeii, the Mausoleam of the emperor Augustus, Greek drinking parties. Criticism of the distorting uses of imagery in archaeology, how ways of seeing direct attention to certain aspects of the past rather than others – aerial photography, for example, or simply a predisposition to look rather than use all

available senses in exploring the past (Ruth Tringham was at her best on an immersive exploration of that amazing early farming settlement at Catal Hoyuk in Turkey).

My points?

Work on the irony at the heart of our seeing the past. That we can never see what happened – it is gone. Yet it is all round us to see – in its remains and in what it has become for us now. This is a classic "undecidable", in Derrida's sense – [Link]

So put to one side the usual distinction between the real past and its representation, the authentic past and its secondary representation. This is not the way I see images of the past at all.

Photos, drawings and diagrams aren't so much representations of our archaeological data – pots, sites, any other kind of facts – so much as acts of inscription – ways we deal with the past. The are part of the way we engage with the past and others who have an interest – colleagues, or anyone else with an interest in the archaeological past.

Key term – intermedia – this referes to the fungibility that we are so familiar with now as one traditional medium merges into another – because a medium is no longer to be defined by its material or substance – paint, film, magnetic tape. My iPod deals in sound, radio programs, voice memos, snapshots, lecture presentations, calendar items, my address book. All can be interchanged and combined because of digital computation.

Key term – mixed realities. Rather than separate reality and representation, think of how we live in a world of subtle gradations from the hard reality of mortality through to wild unrealized utopias – and there are all sorts of inscriptions along the way.





Working on the fungibility of image and text – here an experiment in layout and typography dealing with the deep mapping of three archaeological encounters in Wales UK, Sicily and California – a Visual Primer for the Three Landscapes Project (Stanford 2001 -).

Key term – sensorium. By this I mean that we should treat sight as part of a particular array of all the senses (this is what I mean by sensorium). A way of seeing is connected with ways of hearing, touching, feeling. Nowadays we tend to value rich photographic verisimilitude and are less attuned to the subtle difference of feel of material surfaces, for example. What then of past soundscapes (a new area of interest and research in archaeology)? Or the smell of the past? – archaeologists have researched the olfactory cityscape of Novgorod (tanning factories within the city walls stinking out the whole place). Chris Witmore did a great presentation on ancient and modern Greek soundscapes.

Key term – manifestation. It's not just cause and effect or making sense of an ancient temple that matter. Simply manifesting the past to people is a good thing – letting them experience what is left of the past in all its richness.

An exhortation. Too many talk about what's wrong with imagery and representation in archaeology. Cut down on talking about seeing and get on with the looking and

imaging. Practice as the best form of critique.

An example of good practice – architects like Daniel Libeskind who have pioneered new ways of seeing building, embodied in the way they draw and plan as well as the buildings themselves. Architectural drawing here not as a "representation" but as a crucial part of architectural practice – from visionary beginnings though concept definition, persuasion of client, through engineering calculation to the logistics of building. None of these plans, diagrams, renderings are simply "representation".

A few traditional aphorisms and gestures.

Adorno – the best magnifying glass is a splinter in the eye. [Link]

Bertold Brecht's gesture of verfremdung – interrupting the illusion of a theatrical performance – stopping the flow of "representation" and the storyline with comments directly engaging the audience.

Walter Benjamin reflecting on the Nazi expertise in new mass media – political progress is now intimately and inextricably intertwined with technical facility. If we want to reach out to people with enlightening stories of the archaeological past we have to go one better than Disney. [Link]

Seeing the past? I want archaeologists to help us all to see it freshly. Not as another hackneyed image.

And I think these are some ways of achieving that goal.