PREHISTORY AND PERFORMANCE – AN EXPERIMENT IN SITE SPECIFICS



In Göteborg this week I have been returning to the work of arts company Brith Gof – site specific performance. And theatre/archaeology – the rearticulation of fragments of the past as real time event. The context is my argument that the heritage industry is just that – work performed on what is left of the past. And

that contemporary art is a cultural laboratory probing the real and the imaginary.

I’ve been presenting again Brith Gof’s piece from 1995, *Tri Bywyd* (*Three Lives*), as a kind of critical heritage practice in the arts. Rooted in evidences of three deaths, the work brought two fragmentary narratives to a third hosting scenario, a ruined farmstead in a forest plantation above Lampeter in west Wales. The performance was an intervention in what is still now a contested landscape (the upland farms were compulsorily purchased in the mid twentieth century, the local community dispossessed, to make way for a state-owned conifer plantation). The stories brought to the place were of Sarah Jacob, the mid-nineteenth century “Fasting Girl of Wales”, and Lynette White, murdered in Cardiff docklands in 1988. Host, ghosts and visitors. The performance avoided narrative, had no script or dramatic text, offered instead a mobilization of themes in a conspicuously designed architecture that intersected the ruin as a venue for sound, performance, enactment, spectacle. Site specific – engaging with a specific locale.



Johan Ling saw this as offering something of a provocative reflection on his researches into the rock art of Bohuslän. He has been working on the prehistoric panels centered on the world heritage site of Tanum. His argument is that the panels of carvings, of ships and warriors, are designed locales, expressive gestures in a bronze age society of mobile warrior retinues, between land and sea. (See also my earlier piece on this landscape, with Mark Johnson – [Link])





So, at Johan’s instigation, we set up a forced juxtaposition of Tri Bywyd and Tanum for an experimental presentation in Göteborg this last Monday – *katachresis* – to use the rhetorical term (see my essay called Three Rooms – [Link]). Two bodies of unconnected work that, in the friction of juxtaposition, generate insight that may well not have come without the arbitrary articulation.

Interventions, engagements in performative (heightened, gestural, loaded) practice with land, rock, forest, sea, memory, traces. Centrifugal and centripetal forces pulling wider milieus into focus, and offering extension out from particular charged locales – from ruined farm and community out to oppressive state agencies and back again, from a rock surface overlooking an inlet to experiences across the whole of prehistoric Europe – the world of itinerant, raiding, exploring warrior

retinues captured in cosmopolitical codes – the depictions of ships, heroes, armor, shields, weaponry, pulled together in shared experience of mobility and encounter in the search for metals, in the circulation of charged artifacts, swords and amber.

The presentation can be found on my wiki website – [Link].



