

A JOURNEY ROUND MY FATHER: METHODOLOGICAL NOTES ON AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SENSIBILITY



This is a commentary on a recent post on this site – *A journey round my father* [Link]. It's about the features, concepts, tools and techniques of a reclaimed archaeological sensibility that help us connect with a complex world in flux.

Bjørnar (Olsen) was visiting in the Spring when my father took another fall at home in the UK that marked the beginning of his passing and I left for England. Here in California we were focused on a longstanding shared concern – the neglected difference between archaeology and history. This is far from an academic distinction. Bjørnar and I, with others, are convinced that the matters are profound, with wide scope, and take us into the character of our being in this troubled world of ours. Times for reevaluating our relationships with the past. It is so fitting that my return to the north-east of England to handle my father's death, his funeral, and the aftermath of the home that he left behind, clearly

affirmed to me the vitality of this distinction between the historical and the archaeological.

At his funeral I gave a graveside account of the outlines of his life. A kind of history. A kind of story. A twentieth-century life that witnessed war, class tensions, industrial decline in an outlying region of what was once an imperial nation state. A political economy encompassing the agencies of landed wealth, business interests, and an industrial working class – backdrop to the experiences of my parents adapting and finding their ways through home making, work, family life.

In such a history, one looks back with hindsight over life and times lived, over what is past. Summarizing, finding a story, making sense.

But there was so much more. Of course. Embodied in remains of everyday life. And what are we to do with them?



In contrast to such a history is an archaeology. My portfolio of images of my parents' house, annotated with memories my father shared with me in the last years

of his life [Link], offers a milieu of mediation, a habitat, a gathering of things tangible and intangible, a collocation of times. Archaeology is here and in-the-now conceived and operated as working with remains, as archaeology and not as an historiography that writes an account of times past.

Let me elaborate.

Archaeology is not history

"In small things forgotten" is the title of a book by James Deetz published in 1972. In it he makes the case for an historical archaeology, where the small items of everyday life can be used as evidence for writing history. He borrows the phrase from a 17th-century probate list where it appeared as a summary description attached to the valuation of some miscellaneous items once owned by the deceased. Left-overs of little value, not worth listing individually, thereby forgotten. For Deetz these things are historiographical treasures. While he may be taken for an advocate of a history of the everyday life of ordinary folk, small everyday items, forgettable (except for their probate value), are the means for Deetz to construct grand historical narratives. His historical archaeology delivers stories of everyday life swept up and left as debris in ever-so-familiar grand historical narratives of colonial America in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries – where the forces and structures of history impose themselves on ordinary folk and their everyday lives.

"In small things forgotten" is such a resonant phrase. Suggested is so much more than that intended by Deetz. Matters of memory, of the overlooked, of minutiae, of vital matter.



In their book *Persistent memories: Pyramiden – a Soviet mining town in the High Arctic* (Tapir/Fagbokforlaget 2010) Bjørnar Olsen, photographer Elin Andreassen, and Hein B. Bjerck present an archaeological encounter with the remains of a mining town in the High Arctic archipelago of Norwegian Svalbard. A remarkably abrupt abandonment in 1998 created a ghost town packed with everyday left-behinds. The book is an expression of a fieldwork visit made to Pyramiden in 2006.

Photographs of the abandoned site and buildings lapsing into ruin are accompanied by a textual commentary that delivers lapidary insights into the *actuality* of the past, the conjunction of enduring remains of the past with encounter now. In this, Pyramiden explores an archaeological sensibility by mobilizing Walter Benjamin's concept of dialectical image, refreshed and revitalized in this visit to a post-human margin, a northern edge [Link].

An historical narrative of Pyramiden might feature the mining company and matters of Soviet planning and investment. Such a history of the site is not what one experiences in an archaeological encounter. Encountering the ruin, the detritus of the ghost town, sketches a different face to the history of the Soviet Union here

in the north. This is so evident in Pyramiden's portfolio of photographs. Immanent in the architectures and everyday artifacts are the gaps in the conventional historiography. They do not refer us to a continuous narrative at all, but by remaining they bring to presence, they make tangible the mess, the noise, the discarded hopes of a past largely forgotten. This is a kind of Proustian untimely and involuntary memory that bears witness to what is usually left out of the grand narratives of history fabricated by those who would have us believe in order and coherence.

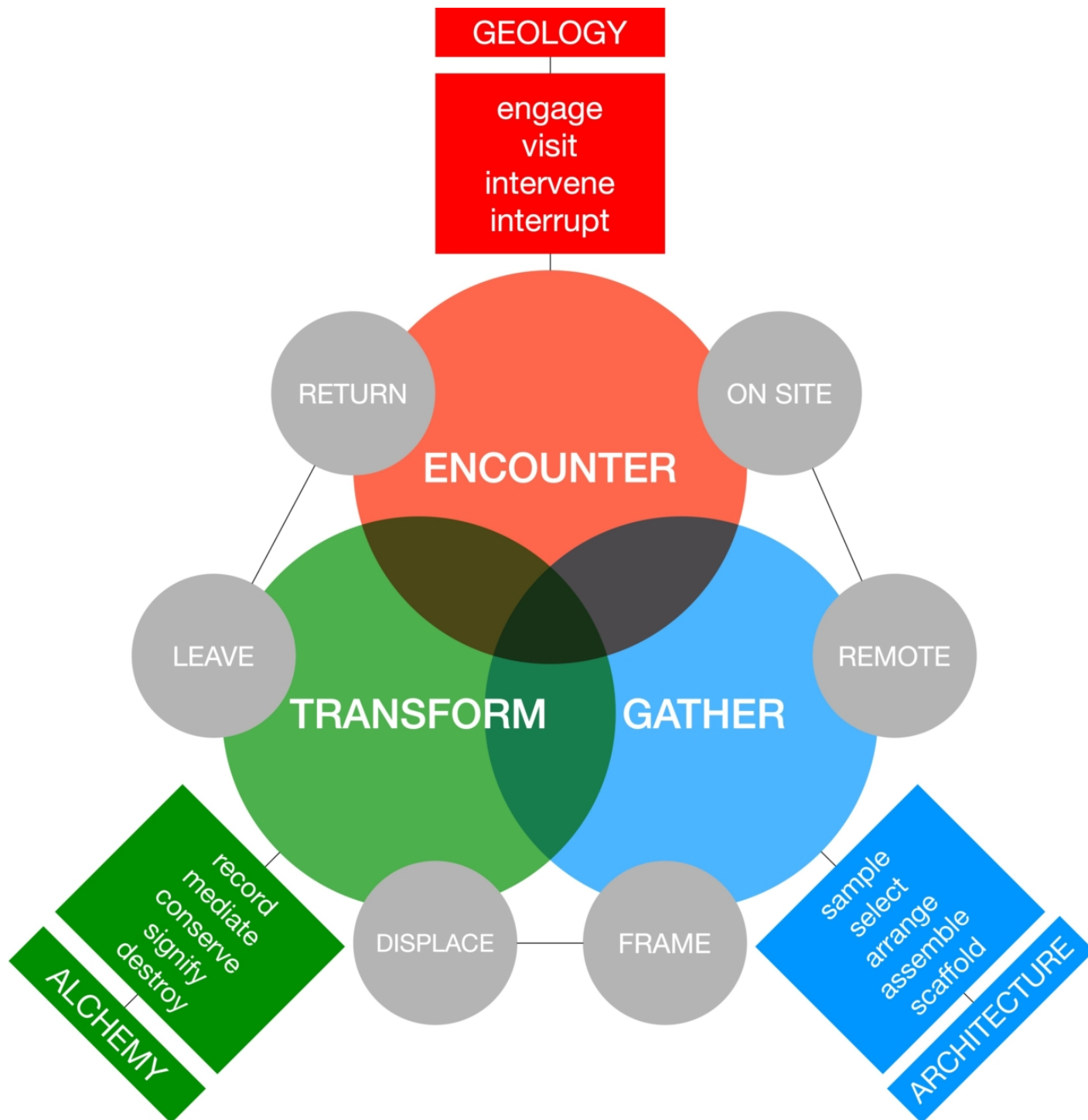
My father's home. A *saturated space* rather than a ruin, perhaps. Tidy scenographies of artifacts, photos, and activities: cooking and dining, answering calls, listening to music, drinking wine (English ale began disagreeing with him a decade back), watching movies, reading historical novels, model making, recollecting, attending to his health and wellbeing. He was constantly curating, changing things, moving them round, as focus came and went. Commonplaces.

If we are (archaeologically) attentive, we will find no historical narrative here. What sense would it make to disentangle the wonder-ful assemblage he created, curated, cared for? To sort things into date and sequence – and then what? He loved history, explorations of times distant and close, familiar and strange. Yet, like most of us, he was less an historian and more of a *temporalist* in his collage and montage – katachrestic association, sometimes surreal: marlin spike, cat ornament, holiday photo in Cyprus, a box of medical prescriptions, historical novels, an old miner's lamp. Fragments remain and prompt, as we look again and forge new associations, articulations. Mingled milieux. An apophenia that looks beyond illusory identification into creative association – dialectical image.

An archaeological sensibility challenges the rationalization of historical narrative that abstracts and reduces the textures and polyphony of everyday experience to a particular plot of characters and agencies. Such narrative typically naturalizes the interests and perspectives of those who author and support the narrative. This is a commodification or an alienation of historical experience. One can feel excluded and alienated from such histories. My parents did. I do. Through interruption, juxtaposition, montage, disruption of temporal continuity, just as I found in my father's home, an archaeological sensibility and imagination can manifest the inalienable agency of the overlooked and forgotten. And evoke, inspire.

This is something of what I have attempted in this itinerary around my father.

Archaeology before-history, pre-history, more-than-history.



The archaeological field. This diagram conveys the three key components of an archaeological sensibility. It is discussed at length in a paper I wrote about the archaeological imagination [Link].

Archaeological times – memory and actuality

For Laurent Olivier (in *Le Sombre Abîme du Temps: Mémoire et archéologie*, Seuil 2008), archaeology is memory practice. Walter Benjamin took this view in his opposition to what he called historicism. Archaeologists work with what remains. In contrast, the historicism of historiography would have us focus upon what happened in the past. What Benjamin identified as historicism is concerned with the past that happened-as-it-did. So conceived, the past is a transcendent origin, a past-for-all-time, unchanging (how can one possibly change the past?!)

As a species of memory archaeology strikes up connections between past and present. Something found, a site, a room visited, might prompt response, reflection, action in the now and perhaps for the future (one might wish to record and preserve, for example, or change a course of action in the wake of an encounter, a re-collection, or choose what to discard and let go). In archaeology there is no static baseline, no fundament, no fixed and unchanging origin, such as the past, no continuities, nor universal stories of progress from past to present, except those that we fabricate. There are but ever-changing remains. A feature of remains is non-identity – an archaeological find, a memory object is NOT the past, not what it was, has been (or is). The archaeology of things involves discontinuity and actuality – past-present articulations.

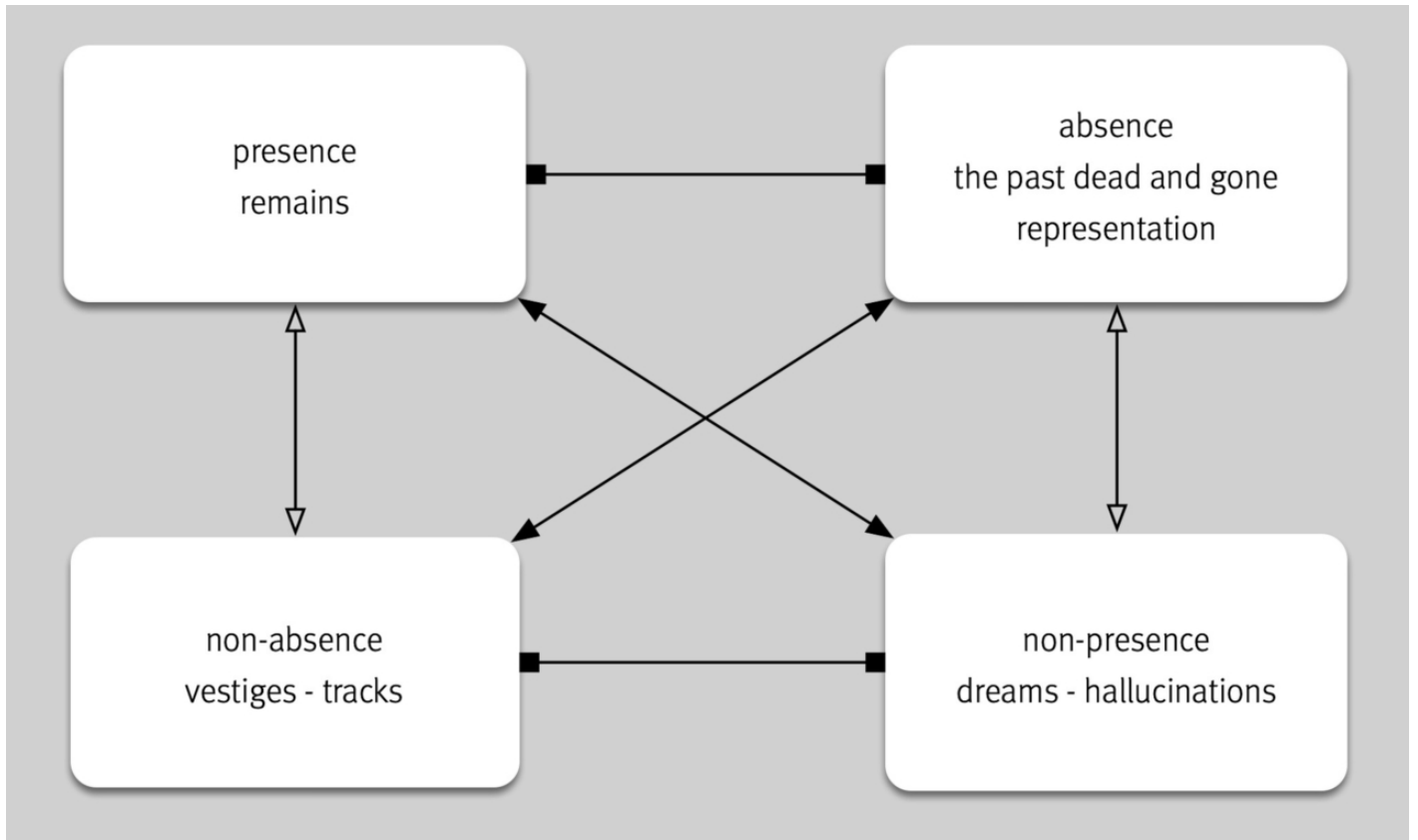


While the past is immanent in remains, in archaeological things, it is active, dynamic, and vital. Features of the actuality of archaeology, its character as memory, are hauntings, returns of what may have been repressed, forgotten, overlooked – past-present articulations.

My father's house – a haunted place.

Let me expand on this critical distinction between history and archaeology.

Archaeology is actually a specific future-oriented way of working through things. This is, perhaps, counter intuitive: typically archaeology is associated with study of the past, like history. But we can follow Ewa Domanska and consider how archaeology can only act upon the past as a contemporary (and therefore future-oriented) project that aims to recover, conserve, preserve what is in the process of being lost through decay, neglect, abandonment. What was I to do with what my father left behind?



Phantasmatic realities.

Consider this diagram which aims to summarize the dynamics of presence-absence in an archaeological sensibility. Begin with a pair of opposites: the remains of the past in the present, and the absent past to which they refer; call them positive and negative terms. Add to these their contradictions, the non-present (a negation of the positive) and the non-absent (a negation of the negative). Consider what these different terms are in relation to each other.

The absent past may imply that it is non-present, but these are not the same thing. The material reality of the past, the primary positive term in the diagram, consists of remains or traces in the present. The absent past to which they refer takes the form, typically, of the representations of the past that we construct on the basis of these traces; these might be catalogs and descriptions of the remains, or models and narratives.

In contradiction to material traces are non-present forms, conjectures or hallucinations that have no material reality or basis; clearly these are not the same as representations of the past, though they may appear to be. In the bottom left of the diagram is found the contradictory term of an absent represented past,

the non-absent past, *implied* by presence, but not the same. A vital feature of the archaeological past is not that it is absent or non-present, but that it is non-absent.

What is this? How can the past be non-absent?

A footprint is a mark on the present that has lingered, made in the past. The non-absent past is the impression made by the past on the present: the Latin term is *vestigium*, vestige; in Greek *ichnos*, track. The non-absent past is actually very familiar; it is the past that comes back to haunt. It is Freud's notion of the uncanny:

Uncanny is in reality nothing foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression. This reference to the fact of repression enables us furthermore to understand Schelling's definition of the uncanny as something which ought to have been kept concealed but which has nevertheless come to light. (Freud, 2003 [1919], 148, translation amended)

The non-absent is ghost-like, a sign left by somebody or something that was once present, but has passed and is gone, lost: a phantasm. This archaeological or phantasmatic reality (as Ewa Domanska calls it) is one rooted in future legacy. The footprint or vestige is not like a trace, a material presence; the vestige will haunt, when it is found in the future and then witnesses the passing over of what is no more. Its time or temporality, therefore, is neither purely of the past nor the present, nor the re-presented past; it is the past-as-it-interrupts-the-present. The Greek term for such time is *kairos*—the moment of discovery or opportunity, when the past flashes up in the present and prompts reaction. Another term for this kind of time is *actuality*.

This is what I experienced in the return to my father's house after his leaving, my

parent's house, whence I had left in 1977.



Times emergent

In historiography, time is typically conceived as container, filled with things, events. In contrast, our (archaeological) experiences of things *engender* time itself.

In the rooms of the house left by my father, the gathering of things now prompts. A model-in-the-making and yet to be realized, a care-worn garden with an old vine in a shattered glasshouse, a calendar of anticipated events on the wall, records kept of prescribed medicines, photos of moments spanning decades and many places, curated cared-for memorabilia, upcycled ship's parts, a standard lamp of style circa 1960s, CDs and DVDs ranging in date of manufacture from the 90s to the present, in music and film from medieval to contemporary 2024. And more.

I return, and the gathering of things, not unfamiliar to me over the years, and offering many items that connect with my own memories, prompts engagement. That might suggest scenarios – holidays and trips to see us in California; old photos of

friends I do not recognize. Time is only incidentally evident here as sequential date (immersed in his home, I actually cared not about exact dates). Instead there is *mélange*, fluid and bubbling, percolating, intermingling specific temporalities. The ephemeral receipt, the heirloom clock – these are horizons of discontinuous actualities, then AND now. This next to that. And with reference to what? His memories, their associations. My mother's too, now long gone 25 years since. They are more than he ever made of them; they are not just traces and vestiges of other experiences but things that hold their own pastness and possibilities, potentials and futurity. What becomes of what was.

In this they are more-than-human memory; they are transgressive, unlimited, uncontained. The gathering is irreducible to definitive attribution. It's an archive of sorts, testament to accumulation and duration, overflowing with potential, if one chooses to pay attention and seek the associations. Vital and animated. And it is fragile, fragmentary, only ever temporary. This is not a past-for-all-time. Nothing lasts in the end. The gathering will disperse, be dispersed – family members have made their choices and have already taken things away; there will be gifts to charity, house clearance, recycling, landfill.

There's always more

More-than-history. More-than-human. More to say.

Through the archaeological imagination we see into the life of things.

In *Archaeology at Home: notes on things, life and time* (2022), Hein B. Bjerck writes of archaeology in a contemporary past, an auto-archaeology of three homes and their remains, things and people gathered, as I have been describing.

A highlight of his book, for me, is a glossary list of the humans and non-humans in his book (page xix- xxiv):

Alma Charlotte Liseth (1906–1997), the wife of Nils, my maternal grandfather.

Alpinist, not asked much about what he really saw along the track.

Among Wizards and Cannibals, the title of a book Siv gave her fiance Rolf for Christmas in 1952.

Animal Planet, a TV channel that my father cherished watching.

Animate vs. inanimate, living vs. non-living entities.

Anna and Abraham Terdal, former owners of the farm with our family cabin.

ANT, Actor-Network Theory, demonstrating the active intermingling of humans and non-humans.

...

Ball-shaped lamp that Karl Ove Knausgård suddenly noticed on his desk as he returned from Denmark.

Bananas, the seven spotless bananas that my father left when he passed.

...

What a gathering! So heterogeneous, and so comforting in its unexpected familiarity. And indeed surreal – this is reminiscent of Daniel Spoerri's *Anecdoted Topography of Chance*, an archaeological exploration of things on his desk, compiled first in 1966, and later re-anecdoted. There is no end to it.

Hein has much to say about such assemblages.

In this book, I will elaborate on three case studies. They are all related to homes that have been near and dear to me, homes that at present are disrupted and abandoned; they are silenced thing-regimes left by

their people. 'Homes' are thing-regimes that rule over and are ruled by humans, a special and very common human-thing collective – 'homes' are 'machines'. (page 28-29)

Bjerck wants to call these gatherings 'machines'. He takes this from Levi Bryant, a philosopher who debates ontology, the being of humans and things. Machines are indeed assemblings of discrete parts. But to me this is a poor metaphor because it sidesteps the delicate provisional, dynamic, fragile, incomplete, accidental, incidental character of that gathering in my father's house.

A machine? No way! My father's (re)collection was way too complex.

Well, maybe, in a way. Let me qualify this dismissal of Hein and Levi. Lewis Mumford's account of the evolution of the abstract machinic assemblage of administrative bureaucratic apparatuses comes to mind. I talk about these megamachines in my Stanford class about design, in my case study of ancient Egyptian pyramids, how they were built by regimes of hierarchical and bureaucratic management that could organize thousands of disciplined workers into coordinated and directed application of corporeal competence and energy, and yes, in association with things, with tools, techniques and materialities, of stone and timber.

Here a machine is a particular *reduction* and *rationalization* of complex messy relationships between people and things to predictable manageable processes. A *regime*, yes, of command and control.

My father curated an archive, but it was never reducible to this kind of *hierarchical* machinic regime (the rule of priesthood, of church and state). That encounter of a return to his home was *heterarchical*!

A journey around my father – methodological notes

I have been outlining an archaeological sensibility and imagination – its premises, concepts, dispositions.

So how are we to act? How might such a sensibility guide action? When one returns and asks – what am I to do with all these things? What might be a methodology in these archaeological encounters?

I have called it a journey, an itinerary. Wayfinding together, co-presencing. The (old Greek) etymology of method is *meta-hodos*. *Hodos* is road, path, way. *Meta*, preposition with or after, expresses accompaniment and togetherness, participation or proximity, and transfer or sequence. A journey with and round my father, exploring, navigating. Where we might attempt a map, a deep map as Mike Pearson, Cliff McLucas and I called them in our theatre/archaeology. While we need to be mindful that maps always fail as models of what they seek to represent, we can well appreciate that our encounters with the archaeology of things need aids to navigation.

So my journey through the house left by my father was not about deciphering the stories behind all these things, constructing a coherent history. It was, is about the movements of thoughts, slow and fast association, flickering experiences, sharp and blurred, full and fragmented, evanescent and long-lasting, conflicts and sympathies, advances and retreats, obstacles faced and overcome. The return and encounter comes down to things, the forms of their accumulation and connection, their modes of transformation, the discontinuities that articulate them.

What do others hold forth as the methodology of such encounter, such journeys in an archaeological sensibility?

Bjørnar, Elin, and Hein offer dialectical images in an itinerant field encounter, and in a genre of documentary photography with commentary. I explored this powerful methodology as counterpoint to another itinerary with Mike Pearson through the north of England [Link].

Hein offers descriptive anecdotes and reportage in a contemporary and personalized setting of a kind of auto-archaeology.

Tilley used a transcendental phenomenology conveyed indirectly and elliptically (he never directly describes), to feel his way into affinities between past and present [Link].

Póra Pétursdóttir is attentive, in a meditative way, to the strangeness of things.

Her study of abandonment of the Storage House in the herring works at Eyri on Iceland's Westfjord peninsula is very instructive (Things out-of-hand: the aesthetics of abandonment. In Bjørnar Olsen & Þóra Pétursdóttir eds. *Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*. Routledge 2014.)

She describes her encounters with abandonment via

“... a reclaimed ‘primitive’ perception grounded in direct encounters with the world in its ownness, rather than mediated or disciplined through abstraction or contextualization. Thus, it is also a project committed to restore to things their integrity by seeing and respecting ‘their own native ways’ of manifesting (showing) themselves. These receptive delineations for how to approach things may very well recall what is sometimes condemned as naïve empiricism. But it is precisely because of that relation that this approach also clings to an attitude that is attentive to the surface of things themselves, and which leaves room for wonder and affection.” (page 345)

For Þóra, abandonment is a condition that lets things be, in their own way for-themselves and out-of-hand. In other words, abandonment ceases to be abandonment to instead become, with reference to Heidegger's concept of *Gelassenheit*, a way of releasing things or letting them be.

Things in my father's house, now released, let go, for *his* last time, but not theirs.

Her aim is to realize not Heidegger's quality of something being present-at-hand, but being what Þóra calls out-of-hand. Presence-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) is a mode

of familiarity with things that comes when our encounters and engagement are interrupted through, for example, malfunction, breakdown, or loss. The dishwasher doesn't work and we notice it, where we normally take it for granted. When this happens, Heidegger argues, the thing itself, its role, as well as the complexity of the operation or act of doing, is, so to speak, forced to mind. We are driven to consider, fix, replace and relearn (page 346).

Beyond this presence-to-mind of something, Póra points to the out-of-hand, a mode of being of things separated from human engagement, and realized in meditative thinking, an attitude that is open to the mystery of things and their surroundings (page 347). This is an empirics, an indulgence in otherness, out-of-handness, via attention to physical surfaces, to 'presence effects' (Gumbrecht) and the sensations and 'involuntary memories' (Benjamin) they provoke on encounter (page 348).

She presents this discussion in academic style, albeit first-person, and with her case supported by orthodox apparatus of scholarship. Elsewhere she has also used photography in documentary mode.

All these approaches mention the significance of attending to things, even seeking sympathy or empathy, though none employ these concepts. Clear also is a reflexive and self-oriented auto-ethnography or auto-archaeology.

Let me add to these methodological insights. I take a broad view of methodology, as indicated above. Most useful and pragmatic, for me, is to associate method with research project management in modes of knowledge production, especially informed by principles of performance design and rhetoric. This is quite a mouthful and too much to detail here, so let me instead point some directions.

It began for me with immanent critique and the non-identity thinking of Benjamin's and Adorno's dialectic. Back in 1987 Tilley and I proposed an archaeology conscious of being active and motivated engagement with past things, employing a range of quantitative and qualitative methodologies – pattern finding, sensemaking, socio-cultural modeling. A simple point: archaeologists are part of what they seek to understand.

Things came into more focus in my book *Experiencing the Past* (1991) where I described archaeology as an expanded cultural field and proposed a rhizomatic

method to complement rationalist and reductive methodologies – free-flowing following-connections in an empirical field. A chapter in my report on ten years research into ceramic making in the early Greek city state (*Art and the early Greek state*, 1998) laid out this rhizomatic methodology of where to start and how to follow the kind of relational and associative, dynamic and changing mélange such as in this journey round my father. What I said above about navigating the saturated space of his home applied here too – slow and fast association, flickering experiences, sharp and blurred, full and fragmented, evanescent and long-lasting, conflicts and sympathies, advances and retreats, obstacles faced and overcome This was how I approached a classic question in Mediterranean archaeology concerning the city states in the first millennium BCE. This is not just about archaeologies of the contemporary – my father would love the connections between the colliery villages of Northumberland and the grand stories of ancient Corinth and Athens.

In *Experiencing the Past* (and elaborated later in a paper written with Randy McGuire for the journal *American Antiquity*) I proposed archaeology as a mode of cultural production that crafts the past, working on remains. This was when I started drawing on science studies, beyond the sociology of knowledge, as an anthropological and sociological dissection of knowledge engineering, located, situated in the now.

Let me end these comments with work in progress.

In our program of theatre/archaeology, Mike Pearson and I offered performance design as a model, a pragmatics, *modus operandi* and rigorous methodology for working with remains, and with explicit attention to (re)mediation (under our definition of theatre/archaeology as the rearticulation of remains as real-time event). We presented our work in papers in the 90s [Link], in a book in 2000 [Link] and in a retrospective essay written in 2013 [Link]. A final work, almost complete when he died in 2022, is soon to appear under the title *Theatre/archaeology: performing remains*. Performance design encompasses dramaturgy, scenography, choreography, and compositional mix, all of which involve methods, tools, techniques, pragmatics. We make explicit the components of rhetoric, conceived as a praxis of media ecology – sourcing and research, composition, production values, stylistics, delivery, scripting and documentation.

An archaeological sensibility. So what?

Taking things seriously – this is how one might express this exploration of an archaeological sensibility that is more-than-history, more-than-the past.

There is common and evident contemporary concern with where we are in history – matters of change, conflict and crisis, climate and environment, and the kind of framing of human history that comes with the concept of the Anthropocene. With an archaeological sensibility comes a unique handle on these concerns, one that gives appropriate acknowledgement to the material and immaterial, to different times and places, to the intimate details of our lifeworld. What is at stake is the very way that we engage with things.

Acknowledgements

I think it so important to acknowledge the vital energy of work done in the archaeology of the contemporary since the pioneering work presented in Richard Gould and Mike Schiffer's edited collection *Modern Material Culture: The Archaeology of Us* (1981). Forty years after and I am much influenced by the archaeologies of Bjørnar Olsen, Þóra Pétursdóttir, Tim Flohr Sørensen, Laurent Olivier, Christine Finn, Alfredo González-Ruibal, Chris Witmore, and there are many more in this extraordinary network of thought leaders.