Visual Anthropology

Seeing the Past: Visual Media in Archaeology

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ABSTRACT As digital media become increasingly affordable and accessible, visual representation in archaeology is expanding across several dimensions. In this essay, I examine some emerging forms of visual media in archaeology, including online documentaries, maps and photographs, hypermedia, experimental films, and peripatetic video. Visual media offer powerful opportunities for engagement with the public. In addition, archaeologists are finding new ways to use the visual in interpretation, analysis, and critique. Experimental visual works often are self-consciously reflexive, questioning and exposing the ways archaeological knowledge is constructed, represented, and disseminated. [Keywords: visual representation, images, film and video, documentary, hypermedia]

This is a timely moment to think critically about visual media and the construction of archaeological knowledge. As digital media proliferate in accessibility while decreasing in cost, and as use of the Internet continues to grow, scholarly and public forms of visual representation in archaeology are expanding exponentially. A public hunger for heritage is being met, in part, by popular visual media in the form of archaeology programming on the television and the Internet. In the United Kingdom, the long-running Channel 4 program *Time Team* has expanded into reality TV, complete with an interactive website and blogs (Piccini in press). In the United States, the Discovery Channel and the History Channel feed television viewers a steady—if at times nutritionally suspect—diet of archaeology documentaries. At least two academic departments—at the University of Bristol in the United Kingdom, and at Stanford University in the United States—have programs that are actively exploring and critically examining the role of the visual

in archaeology. These archaeologists and others are finding new ways to use visual media in interpretations, analyses, critiques, and public discourse.

In archaeology, as in any discipline, visual representations are integral to the production of knowledge and scholarly authority. The map, for example, is perhaps the most singularly useful item in any site report. Archaeological sites cannot move to the perceiving subject, but maps and images can, setting up an indexical connection between a viewer and an abstract, distant locale. These visual media are examples of what Bruno Latour (1986) termed "immutable mobiles": images and inscriptions that are easily reproduced and can widely travel. Yet immutable mobiles do not merely represent; they are used among scholars to challenge and critique the ways in which we think about the past. Of course, maps, photographs, films, and other media are never innocent (Shanks 1997). As Latour was well aware, images lend a rhetorical advantage to arguments precisely because their optical consistency lends to the appearance of objectivity and neutrality, yet they are always situated and highly selective. Through processes such as "coding" and "highlighting" (Goodwin 1994), visual representations encourage particular interpretations and perspectives while obscuring others. Images derive their power to persuade from this false transparency.

Given that visual media are elements of rhetoric, images and graphic media have great potential to challenge constructions of archaeological knowledge, on the one hand, and to help us do a better job of communicating our knowledge with an interested but uninitiated lay public, on the other hand. In this essay, I look at several emerging forms of visual archaeological knowledge. My purpose here

FIGURE 1. The author at Hovenweep National Monument, October 1989. (Photo by Ruth Van Dyke)

is not to present a comprehensive picture of the role of the visual in archaeology but, rather, to take the pulse of this moving target.

THE ARCHAEOLOGY DOCUMENTARY

Films and videos offer "a lively way into the past," as archaeologist Julian Richards puts it (Caveille 2004). As such, they are especially powerful tools for communicating with the public. Archaeological documentaries are widely accessible on cable television as well as online. Some of these films are geared toward entertainment and profit. As the highly popular U.K. program *Time Team* (Channel 4 2005) has led to reality television spinoffs such as *The Big Dig* and *The Big Roman Dig,* archaeology documentaries have become a niche market in the commodified world of television entertainment. Part of the explanation for this genre's appeal may be that, like other aspects of the burgeoning heritage industry, popular archaeology helps reify and consolidate bourgeois Euro-American class interests and identities (Leone 1999). At any rate, commercial archaeology programs have generated no small degree of concern, critique, and discus-

sion among archaeologists in Britain (Caveille 2004; Piccini 1996, in press).

Many archaeology documentaries on both sides of the Atlantic are made by archaeologists or nonprofit organizations for purposes of education and dissemination of information. A host of these can be viewed on the Archaeology Channel (Archaeological Legacy Institute 2005). The Archaeology Channel is an educational website developed by the Archaeology Legacy Institute (2005), a nonprofit organization based in the Northwest United States. The group's mission, as stated by founder Rick Pettigrew, is specifically to develop and provide more effective avenues of communication between archaeologists and amateurs, Native Americans, school children, and other sectors of the lay public. Some of the online videos are explicitly political, arguing that nonrenewable archaeological resources must be protected and Native American interests respected. A few videos, such as *Pathways to Archaeology* (Cabrillo College Archaeological Technology Program 2001), are expressly commercial.

As with any film genre, archaeological documentaries conform to a series of conventions that dictate structure, editing, images, and sound (Nichols 1991:26–32). These include voiceover narration, interviews, and the use of "montage codes" to establish authority and elide contradictions in the material (Piccini in press). *In the Shadow of the Volcano* (Center for Desert Archaeology 2002) is a typical example. The film begins with vaguely exotic music, evoking the romantic and culturally distant past. Still and moving images are shown of past and present archaeological sites and landscapes. Archaeologists are depicted at work, but from an objectifying distance. Information is provided in voiceovers presented in the authority-laden tones of an unidentified, deep-voiced, male narrator. Montages of maps, sites, landscapes, and workers are cut with interviews with subtitled archaeological authorities. These interviews tend to be conducted in nonfield settings, in offices or labs, against backdrops of shelves heavily laden with books or artifacts. The interviews have the laudable effect of revealing that archaeological knowledge is constructed by individuals, and that those individuals do not always agree. At the same time, however, the interview montage format reifies a hierarchy for the production of archaeological knowledge. Anonymous workers gather "raw" data in the "dirty" field, whereas pedigreed authorities present "cooked" interpretations in the "clean" office and lab.

In many archaeology documentaries, moving, graphic reconstructions provide novel ways to think about the past, taking archaeologists and lay viewers alike beyond the limitations of what is actually there in the ground, and what can be two-dimensionally depicted. Computerized special effects collapse time, creating an imagined past spatial fabric that overlies the contemporary experience for an especially potent delivery of spatially situated ideas. Examples of expository documentaries that use computerized reconstructions, time-lapse photography, and other special effects to good advantage include *The Mystery of Chaco Canyon*

(Solstice Project 1999) and *The Secret of Stonehenge* (Bragard 1998). Both of these films are shown regularly on the Discovery Channel, and their factual contents reflect facets of current academic archaeological interpretations. Both are carefully tailored for popular appeal, with Hollywood film star narrators (Robert Redford and Mark Hamill, respectively) and titles drawn straight from Nancy Drew, following the notion that archaeology's popular appeal lies in its recovery of a romanticized, shadowy unknown.

Small-scale archaeology documentaries generally are made by local, independent filmmakers at the request of museums, parks, or other nonprofit organizations. It may be quite difficult to discern who is responsible for the material presented, and budget limitations may pose constraints on creativity. For *In the Shadow of the Volcano,* professional archaeologists collaborated closely with the filmmaker and contributed the factual content, but the format of the film, including its adherence to the formulaic conventions of the genre, was determined by the filmmaker (Mark Elson, personal communication, October 28, 2005). Archaeological films clearly have tremendous potential for enhancing and improving communication with the public—an arena that has long been difficult for many professionals to negotiate. The growth of increasingly affordable and accessible digital media can only expand these possibilities. However, films communicate information to the viewer through format as well as narrative. When we uncritically adopt genre conventions, we may be unintentionally reifying and communicating ideas such as the exotic "otherness" of the past, or the separation of archaeological labor and interpretation. Archaeologists should make sure to be critically engaged with the structure, as well as the content, of our documentaries.

MAPS AND PHOTOGRAPHS

Maps are top-down, two-dimensional depictions of architecture and landscape that can carry rich information. At the same time, however, maps constrain and order interpretations of archaeological sites, and they convert complex, embodied spatial experiences into sterile measurements and abstractions. Maps neutralize landscapes, reducing them to containers, and leaving the meaningful and experiential aspects of space unexplored (Thomas 1993; Tilley 1994:7–11). Recent technological advances in the manipulation of spatial information, such as geographic information systems (GISs), generally do little to address this problem; rather, GIS-based analyses often continue to objectify and neutralize space, merely in a more complicated way than a two-dimensional map.

Similarly, photographs are constructed, conceptual frameworks. Photographs may provide "I was there" documentation to support an argument, or they may be used to inventory features or artifacts. They are "immutable mobiles" that stand in for something that is absent. Photographs also can juxtapose the present with the remembered past, evoking emotions of nostalgia and romanticism. Even more so than maps, photographs provide an illusion of objectivity and accuracy, but there is always an eye be-
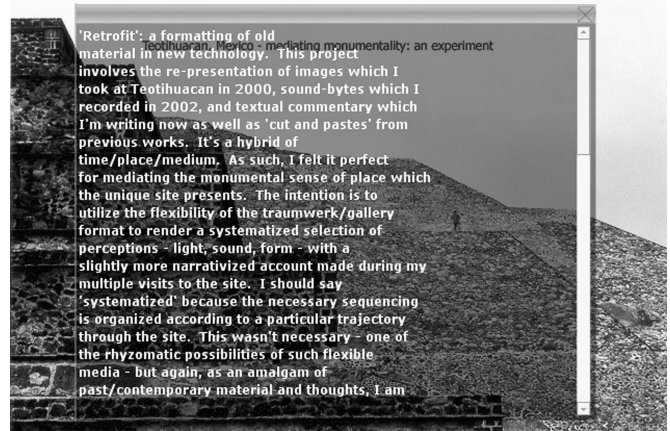

FIGURE 2. The Teotihuacán hypermedia project (Webmoor 2005b) juxtaposes narrative over images of the site's monumental spaces. (Image courtesy of Timothy Webmoor)

hind the camera, and a hand on the development process, that directs what a viewer sees (Shanks 1997). None of this is news. Joan Gero and Dolores Root (1990), for example, have deconstructed the social and political messages contained in National Geographic archaeological photographs.

Timothy Webmoor (2005a), a doctoral student at Stanford, attempts to expand beyond the limitations of both maps and images, with investigations into Rene Millon's (1973) map of Teotihuacán. Map reading requires tacking back and forth between the imagined space of the map and the real space of the body, as a map reader reflexively attempts to reconcile his or her position both on the map and in real space (Gell 1985). The two-way communication between photographer and viewer relies on both *studium,* a learned interpretive structure that allows the viewer to make sense of the image, and *punctum,* elusive elements that "prick" the viewer to make an image poignant or meaningful (Barthes 1981). Images offer a different kind of situated embodiment within a landscape, a vertical, viewer-oriented perspective that is unavailable through the two-dimensional space of maps. Webmoor advocates the juxtaposition of both maps and images to bring the viewer inside the spatial experience. At Webmoor's (2005b) online experimental site, viewers can look at photographs of places in Teotihuacán, juxtapose narrative over the images, listen to an audio track of ambient sounds recorded during a site visit, and submit thoughts and comments (see Figure 2). The viewer negotiates his or her own path through the hypermedia, combining form, light, scale, sound, and narrative.

At a conceptual level, Webmoor's work makes excellent critical points about the constraining powers of maps and images. By pushing beyond the traditional uses of these media, Webmoor encourages us to question our usual interpretations, potentially inspiring us to invent or recognize new meanings. His experimental Teotihuacán project works less well for me, however. The textual overlays are meant to enhance the dimensionality of the images, but in practice, they obscure and distract. The juxtaposition of narrative on
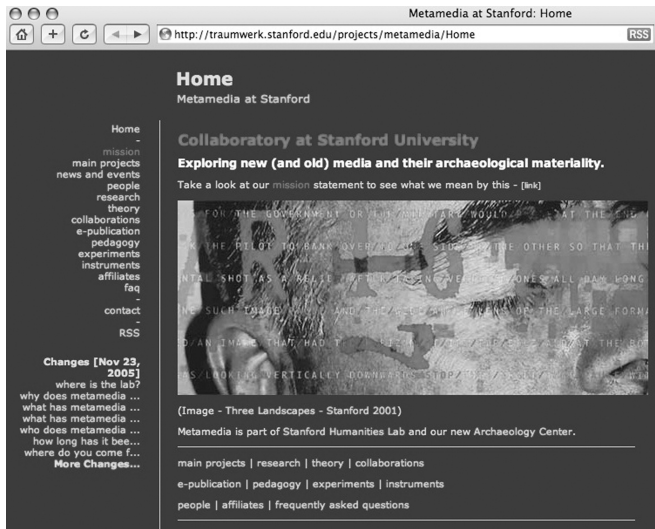
FIGURE 3. The Metamedia home page. (Image courtesy of Michael Shanks and Christopher Witmore)

top of image does not provide a moment of punctum but, rather, an additional layer of studium.

HYPERMEDIA AND EXPERIMENTAL VIDEO

Webmoor's work is an example of montage, "the cutting and reassembling of fragments of meanings, images, things, quotations, and borrowings, to create new juxtapositions" (Shanks 1997:84). Webmoor is a doctoral student at Stanford, where a great deal of innovative visual archaeology is percolating under the influences and direction of Michael Shanks. Shanks has been in the forefront of archaeological critique for nearly two decades now, and his "Metamedia: A Collaboratory at Stanford University (2005)" website is home to interrelated projects that question the ways in which archaeological knowledge is constructed, represented, and disseminated (see Figure 3). The projects on the website are hypermedia: Visitors create their own courses of navigation within the multiple links among texts, sounds, and images. There are many parallel and intersecting routes through the site, and links provide a minimum of information about which routes to take; site visitors must simply explore.

Meaning is always constructed by a subject. As visitors to the Metamedia website navigate through the hypermedia, they must make decisions about what to examine next and which dimensions of the site to visit (or not). This process quietly seduces visitors into a state of critical self-awareness, as they realize they are actively engaged in the construction of meanings through the juxtaposition of the materials they choose to read and view. The Metamedia site is a wiki, a web-based authoring environment that encourages and allows collaborations and visitor contributions. One drawback to the approach taken by the designers of Metamedia is that navigating the website can be confusing. An overload of sensory information includes images, films, narratives, and blogs linked and cross-linked by buttons that are sometimes unlabeled. As I accessed the

site frequently between October 29 and November 8, 2005, pages and content seemed to be constantly shifting. The labyrinthine site is designed to be experiential, which encourages exploration, but this makes it difficult to locate or revisit specific pages.

One of the many interesting projects on Metamedia is "Three Landscapes" (McLucas et al. 2001), a "collaboratory" that explores Monte Polizzo in Sicily, an 18th-century estate in Wales, and the San Andreas fault. In a "video diary" about Monte Polizzo, Clifford McLucas and Michael Shanks (1999) walk the viewer across the site while engaging in monologues that slyly critique traditional Classical archaeological interpretations. The video provides a rich experiential sense of the site and its contexts—steep terrain, spectacular views, an interesting moment in the Mediterranean past, and a postmodern archaeology struggling to break free of a hidebound romantic, modernist framework. The video contains moments of barbed wit (as in McLucas's description of an "acropolis" made of sugar), but I cannot imagine that any of the (mercifully anonymous) Classical archaeologists whom McLucas and Shanks pillory would feel particularly comfortable watching it. But comfort is not the point. Shanks and company seek to illuminate, unsettle, and challenge the ways in which archaeologists produce knowledge; in this, "Three Landscapes" and other Metamedia projects are quite successful.

VIDEO AND PHENOMENOLOGY

Many archaeologists experimenting with the use of video are also working, explicitly or otherwise, within a phenomenological framework as they attempt to deconstruct or explore spatial relationships between human bodies and archaeological spaces. Experiencing space involves more than the visual; it involves a complicated web of bodily perceptions. In *The House of Hermogenes* (Foundation of the Hellenic World 2002), one of the more interesting videos available on the Archaeology Channel, the viewer walks through a computerized graphic reconstruction of the second-century B.C.E. Greek city of Priene. The viewer experiences the city entirely through the eyes and ears of Hermogenes—hearing what he hears, including ambient background noise, conversations, and footsteps. This wonderfully creative rendering communicates the same kinds of information that a standard documentary might, while avoiding the separation of subject and object and the authoritative posturing common to that genre.

Some experimental work is explicitly inspired by video artists such as Gordon Matta-Clark (Walker 2003), whose projects sliced through constructed spaces and explored perceptions such as gravity and vertigo. As archaeologists think about aesthetic and emotional responses to the past, archaeology has blurred into art (Hamilakis et al. 2001). Much of this work is site specific or situational and therefore not accessible to viewers. For example, Angela Piccini's *Guttersnipe: A Micro Road Movie* (2003) was presented at the Contemporary and Historic Archaeology in Theory meetings, but it has a live soundtrack and does not exist without

FIGURE 4. Julian Richards is projected onto a sarsen stone in the title sequence for *Ephemera,* available on the Archaeology Channel. (*Ephemera* image courtesy of Sean Caveille; the Archaeology Channel screen capture courtesy of Richard Pettigrew)

an audience. Sean Caveille's (2004) *Ephemera,* which can be seen on the Archaeology Channel, creates a sense of dislocation as talking heads from British television archaeology are projected onto a sarsen stone, juxtaposing narrative with images of past and present (see Figure 4). Ashish Avikunthak's *Performing Death* (2002) was shown in Douglass Bailey and Michael Shanks's "Creative Heresies" session at the meetings of the European Association of Archaeologists on September 28, 2002. Droning music, fragmentary images, and whirling, blurred, handheld camera work induce a trancelike feeling of vertigo meant to evoke the disorientations of 18th-century British imperial power in Calcutta.

Another Avikunthak film, *Rummaging for Pasts: Excavating Sicily, Digging Bombay* (2001), juxtaposes interviews with excavators at Monte Polizzo, Sicily, against found footage of 1970s middle-class Indian family events in Bombay. At Monte Polizzo, scholars expound on their research issues and students discuss their social concerns. Although the excavators explain that they are attempting to reconstruct past ethnic interactions and relationships, the social and political interests of both the professionals and the students are clearly situated in the present. Images of Indian rituals and dancing play out against this narrative. The format resembles a documentary, but the unexpected combinations of images, sounds, and information are disorienting and lay bare the processes by which we assemble meaning. For a Euro-American viewer unfamiliar with Indian culture, the juxtapositions of archaeological and Indian footage evoke the unbridgeable chasm that separates the material remains of the present from a complicated, lively, but ultimately unknowable past. In liner notes, Avikunthak explains the Indian footage was unearthed at a Bombay flea market, thus representing an interest in social memory parallel to the archaeologists' activities at Monte Polizzo and creating connections, rather than disjunctures, between two disparate

times and places. The Indian footage signifies the filmmaker's personal engagement with the transnational nature of the Monte Polizzo project (personal communication, November 9, 2005).

For these films, and for most of the experimental works discussed here, the primary aims are critique and exploration. Experimental films and hypermedia projects conflate art and archaeology in interesting ways. They expose and question the structures that inform the production of archaeological knowledge, and they encourage us to create new meanings outside the usual boundaries. These are positive and healthy directions for archaeology. A danger, however, is that it is at times difficult for the uninitiated to grasp the relevance of these works to the craft in which most of us are engaged. If these works are art for art's sake, that is all well and good. If the experimenters are attempting a dialogue with mainstream archaeology, however, some of this discourse may be too insular and obscure to capture much attention. The critiques will miss their mark, and the critics will find themselves talking mostly to each other.

Christopher Witmore's (2004) peripatetic video experiments not only push at the boundaries of archaeology and art, they also suggest some accessible and potentially constructive directions for mainstream archaeology. Witmore's work is inspired in part by the site-specific media art of Janet Cardiff. His work is profoundly phenomenological: He is interested in the ways that sensual engagements with space mediate between present and past. Witmore has constructed a series of audiovisual walks through archaeological places, primarily on the Greek landscape. A participant plays Witmore's walk on a handheld video camera and listen to sounds Witmore recorded, while moving at the same pace and looking at the same spaces. The audio track coaches the participant to "turn right" or "proceed through the doorway." The peripatetic video juxtaposes the participant's own experiences with the sights and sounds of the filmmaker's experiences in the same space. Witmore folds the present into the past, combining multiple layers of experience and meaning that are tied to bodily experiences of place and time.

As Witmore himself suggests, peripatetic video has tremendous potential for enhancing connections between archaeologists and the public, creating "new levels of intimacy between archaeologists and their audience" (2004:68). For example, an excavation could be filmed while in progress. Later, visitors to the backfilled, stabilized, or even demolished site could walk the same ground, experiencing the excavation through peripatetic video. The video could incorporate computerized graphic reconstructions of the site, easing tensions over the appropriateness of physical reconstruction.

Both experimental and more traditional media offer tremendous opportunities for archaeologists. They can assist us in critical self-reflection, challenging, changing, and expanding our visions of the past. Perhaps more than any other venue, audiovisual media can help us improve our communication and engagement with the public. We

should strive for greater critical self-awareness as we pursue these ends, however. Like texts, visual media are fabricated, and the naive use of genre conventions may send messages that we do not intend. But the technology is here: Audiovisual equipment grows less expensive and more accessible every day. I encourage my colleagues to think about the possibilities.

NOTE

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