

Modernism/modernity - an archaeological glossary

Categories : [archaeological imagination](#), [archaeological sensibility](#)

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Winding up the paper with Bill Rathje and [David Platt on the perfume of garbage](#).

Here is something I wrote for the introduction to the special issue of [Modernism/Modernity](#).

We have outlined what may be called the duplicity of the archaeological object and have tracked aspects of some archaeological modernisms that work upon this duplicity, playing the fragment against context in relation to epistemology, temporality and emancipation. We will amplify our illustration of three archaeological moments with a glossary. Many of the terms here are tropes - in particular, narrative scenarios, character types and metaphors.

surfaces - depths

The archaeological matrix, sometimes called the archaeological record, is considered as an amalgam of layers. The concept of stratigraphy is used to decode this amalgam.

In this decoding, the archaeologist digs down to find meaning. But digging stratigraphically is impossible without the concept of horizontal surface interface - edges, moments of discontinuity when one layer becomes another. The establishment of such surface discontinuity is the focus of much archaeological excavation. And, of course, it involves sideways movement across a surface, planning features such as walls and pits, as one goes.

This is not simply to map the spatial coordinates of a 3-D matrix - the phases perhaps of a ruined building. There is no comprehensible past down there to be discovered in some kind of 3-D form - for archaeology depends upon tying layers to date (there is no innate chronology to sediment), choices of what to distinguish, upon defining the interfaces between and across layers. The concept of interface is thus a supplement to the stratigraphy - an immaterial concept external to layering, but essential to it.

the academic

Applies systems of knowledge, and builds synthetic arrangements recounting the past as narrative, as causal chain, system, whatever.

origins - continuity

Much archaeology is a quest for contemporary origins (this is where and when we come from) and is thus premised upon a continuity between past and present.

(dis)continuity - shock

Of course there is a particular and material continuity that lends extraordinary force to notions of genealogical continuity - the materiality of the past has survived, ruined and decayed, but nevertheless present to the archaeologist.

The materiality of loss, however, the experience that so much is gone, that so little remains as inheritance, is simultaneously the ground for radical discontinuity. The implications are threefold. First: The waste and loss that may be the real story of history means that ideas of sociocultural continuity (of community, identity, technology, progress) may be quite literally groundless. Second: The fragments of history attest to massive lacunae, and assembling the pieces as a narrative can only occur locally, if at all. Third: Radical historical discontinuity throws suspicion on accounts and narratives that depend upon notions of sociocultural and biological similarity that transcend history (notions, for example, of universal human values). Radical discontinuity may thus mean a shock of radical difference.

difference - primitivism

Evolutionary schemes play upon a past that is different from the present in being at an earlier, more primitive stage. Here discontinuity is explicitly and intimately tied to grand metanarratives of historical continuity.

authenticity - aura

Depth and origin are often equated with authenticity.

An authentic artifact find may be considered to possess aura. And aura, of course, may involve a sense of distance and difference.

The grounds for authenticity and aura are material - the piece of the past has survived and its materiality is witness to this survival, its metonymical bridging of time and making good of loss.

the amateur (archaeologist/antiquarian)

Hooked on the aura of the past.

the scavenger

Recycling bits of the past otherwise discarded, making them live again, finding value where there was none perceived.

embodiment - document

The material past is encountered unspoken, and is ultimately ineffable (but see mute-ability). Here is a profound question that can only be resolved as fatally flawed translation - how are we to document the past on the basis of its fragmentary material remains? We can only interminably scribble on the ruins which always hold back more than ever could be said or pictured.

Encountering the archaeological past is distinctively sensory?embodied. Just like memory, we feel as much as rationally decode the past. This is associated with its ineffability - it is often only felt. Reactions may range from fascination through disgust to veneration of the sacred.

the fieldworker

Engages with archaeological places, and decontextualizes site and artifact, rips them from their setting, for there are only ever fragments, and choices must be made, of what elicits attention, of what to record, of what to conserve.

topography - topology

Ruins in the land - this is one of the sites of archaeology. It may be conceived as "the field".

Sites may be represented as coordinates - spatial grid reference. They may be described topographically. More accurately, and with Michel Serres, their representation requires a topology that can deal with the palimpsest that is landscape - the percolating time that folds together the many fragmentary traces of pasts present in any one place.

temporality - actuality

Four archaeological temporalities:

The moment (for example, of origin, or of discovery) arrested/captured.

Date - the application of chronometry.

Ruin and decay - a continuity from past through present.

Actuality - a return of what is no longer the same. The nonarbitrary conjunction of presents: the past's present, the instant of archaeological excavation or discovery, and the time of viewing, reading, recollection.

systematics - loss

The archaeologist faces a mound of debris. One way of making good the loss inherent in the fragment is to define categories and classify. Writing catalogs.

Or, in choosing a systematics that eschews the construction of a coherent historical narrative (inadequately based upon scattered archaeological fragments), archaeologists may instead approximate an artifactual cladistics.

the museologist

Managing the archives. May be a scribe, writing inventories and catalogs.

mute-ability

Archaeologists may think they can read the traces of the past - the mute stones speaking through the work of the archaeologist.

This translation or representation is one of many metamorphic processes that are the subject of archaeological interest. Rot and decay. Restoration. And also everyday discard turned into history.

the manager

Managing the inventories, site access, access to the archives.

ruin - entropy

The loss that is at the heart of the archaeological project - history as ruin - is a precisely modernist experience of the twentieth century. How can we hold on to the mass of information and detail, the lives descending into chaos?

horror - abjection

There is horror not only in the metamorphic processes of decay that apply to our own materiality. But also in the entropy that is history - the tendency to misunderstand (so much is missing), the drift into formlessness. Then there is the sickening loss that is the horror of history - the wasted lives. So much thrown away.

A forensic horror too, as at the scene of a crime- the chance find of a finger bone or tooth (or, so often now, the mass grave of anonymous victims) attesting to . . .

symptomatic logic - forensics

At a scene of crime anything might be relevant. The archaeological site is cognate with the crime scene. The tiny fragment may be significant and provide a clue to some deeper meaning or knowledge. The fragment or trace is here conceived as a kind of clue or symptom.

In a symptomatic logic superficial and isolated finds, events and observations are linked to underlying process. A symptom may lead to medical diagnosis. An archaeological find may track the migration of an ethnic group.

forensics - anthropometrics

The desire is for some kind of control over the incidental details, a system that might lead to identification. Just as Francis Galton and Alphonse Bertillon, and a nineteenth-century will to knowledge, codified and cataloged fingerprints and ears, the shape of eyebrows in a forensic anthropology, a physiognomic science of character, race and conformity, so too did, do, archaeologists collect skulls and flint tools, measuring and comparing in a systematization of ancient race and cultural industry.

the connoisseur

Their esoteric knowledge is based upon tying apparently incidental detail to the authority of the catalog. In such attribution of item to class the connoisseur judges quality and value.

the collector

Recontextualizing fragments. The collection is always more than an account of the past and more than the sum of its parts. It is rooted in heterogeneous association. The collector is fascinated by the life of an artifact - its journey through making, use, discard, recovery, re-collection.

re-collection

It is not only that archaeologists gather fragments and build collections. Like memory, the work of archaeology is re-collection - the reinsertion of pieces of the past into a form that carries significance in the present, carried forward from the past. As in memory, the (archaeological) traces of the past do not constitute a timeline or linear account. They resonate with a present experienced moment; this is what precipitates their reemergence, their recollection. This is actuality.

absence and negativity

It is not that the archaeological past is absent. It is more precisely not present. Or, we might say the trace means the past is absent in its presence. Archaeology is a dynamic of presence and absence.

In this dynamic, all historical culture is residual. There is a negativity represented by the loss of the past, its absence. This negativity is the only condition for knowledge of the past - waste and garbage are the condition of historical insight and knowledge.

agent and artifact

What is the distinction between the history of human agents and the history of material traces? Between people and tools? People and artifacts have, we may say, been intertwined for as long as there have been modern humans. We have always been cyborgs, material agents, embodied agents, materially located agents, people conceivable as things, artifacts playing active roles in society and history.

Material culture, the subject of archaeology and a new interdisciplinary field (material culture studies) that also includes anthropology, sociology, economics, design, and art history, is thus something of a tautology - because human history (of culture) has always been material, in the social fabric, in the materiality of human agents.

Archaeology thus, potentially, merges with natural history, as it did in its antiquarian beginnings, as chorography mingled topography with writing on nature, with speculation on field monuments, with philological focus upon place names, with an interest in old things found, in the animal and plant species of a landscape.

To what extent is the individual agent lost in the tide of history? Is archaeology best understood as the evolution of species of tools? Are overarching structures (social, cultural, biological) the real subject of deep human time?

the legislator

Policing the past - determining what should be kept and protected.

I should add **the uncanny** and **trauma**.