Archaeology and the Politics of Vision in a Post-Modern Context

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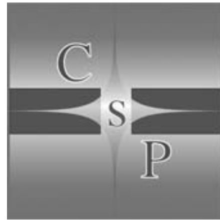
Edited by

Julian Thomas and Vítor Oliveira Jorge



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PREFACE

JULIAN THOMAS & VÍTOR OLIVEIRA JORGE

This book is the outcome of a one day working session which bore the same title, and which was held at the 2007 conference of the Theoretical Archaeology Group at the University of York. That session took place on a Sunday, the 16th of December 2007, at the Tempest Anderson Hall of the Yorkshire Museum.

First of all, we want to convey our thanks to our colleague from the University of Cambridge, Professor Colin Renfrew, for agreeing to take on the role of discussant for the session, and therefore to be one of the authors of this book, and to thank those who offered their papers to the volume (whether they were 'materially' present in York or not). We are also indebted to all the people involved in the organization of TAG 2007.

Archaeology is intimately connected to the modern regime of vision. A concern with optics was fundamental to the Scientific Revolution, and informed the moral theories of the Enlightenment. And from its inception, archaeology was concerned with practices of depiction and classification that were profoundly scopic in character. In the 19th century, with the invention of photography and then of the cinema, a certain cultural order - based in the centrality of "civilized" Europe and at the same time in the centrality of male, patriarchal power – reached its apogee. This had been grounded in the emergence of new class relations based on trade and the free circulation of commodities throughout the Earth, and in the ideology of progress and natural evolution.

To put reality at a distance, to observe, to see and to describe, to control and dominate all the planet, and at the same time to "bring it at home" under the form of the museum, the zoo, the international exhibition, the idealized "nature" – were indeed two faces of the same coin. The "consumption of places" by travel and tourism (J. Urry) and the creation of "place-myths" are intimately tied to this transformation of the subjectivity of modern people.

The "visual character" and also the desire for direct, sensorial experience of that consumption is obvious. The idealization of the "material" and the "visual", the notion that to a certain point the image replaced the idea, are widespread today. And both modernity and post-modernity are well-established notions too, in spite of the fact that the latter refuses be framed, self-defined, and has constant fluidity as one of its core characteristics.

But what is the role of archaeology in that changing context? Are we just one more kind of many workers in the machine of "heritage industry"? Is it still possible a reflexive, critical standpoint on a system that systematically divides rescue archaeology and academic research, melting at the same time the real and the virtual?

In this book, of course, the several contributors do not claim to have found any new means of redeeming a critical archaeology, nor do they offer, collectively or individually, an abstract programme for a cleansed and rejuvenated discipline. There can be no such thing today; the very enunciation of the "new" has become a problematic rhetorical move.

Instead, we have encouraged the presentation of case studies and individual “reflections” which, taking particular experiences as a point of departure, may connect them to different kinds of approach and method, dissolving the gap (sometimes so great that it sounds like a sort of abyss) between "philosophic" and trans-disciplinary discourses and more descriptive/narrative ones.

Indeed the suggested point of departure was to use an imaginative “scientific” method – perhaps we could name it a sort of anthropology, or sociology of our own practice – to look upon our common sense and the "take for granted" concepts that we use in everyday archaeology. Taking a debate on politics of sight and spectacle to focus in a more precise way our most current concepts and intuitions. Inside and outside archaeology.
The idea was no so much to apply or import to our field some ready-made concepts from other disciplines, but rather to think, from our experience of archaeologists, citizens of a world in rapid change, what may be our contribution to comprehend the human being in its subtlety. Doing so, not only we enrich our daily lives as persons, opening a dialogue with others, but also we avoid to project in the past functionalist and rationalist ideas and “meanings” that are specific to our present way of living. These projections are very difficult to overcome, because they are not only

imprinted in our spontaneous, common sense way of dwelling the world today, but also, as having an unconscious "substratum", they are considered by ourselves undeniable. Thus it is hard to search for creative paths that avoid two extremes: the illusion that we may be seeing the past in itself, as if we were outside history (the God's eye), re-presenting it, and the opposite illusion that we are inhibited to develop our knowledge just because of those circumstances. An equilibrium is needed between naïf optimism and its reverse. Archaeology needs to find its ways in a world peopled by images, images that are not only there, as objects, but that are also "inside" each one of us - in order to improve a better image of the present and of the past, beyond all basic, simplistic forms of representationism.

Each one of the authors in this volume try his/her own path to a different archaeology, capable of increasingly "exporting" its preoccupations and questions to other fields of knowledge. This diversity, far from being negative, is, in our opinion, absolutely crucial to the improvement of our very position as archaeologists in the stage of (post)modern debate and action in the social sciences and beyond.

As in any other field of activity today, everybody is looking at us and expecting our "word": let us try not to deceive them, and in particular the reader of this book. This idea has conducted us since the very moment when we decided to build the TAG session and its resulting "proceedings".

Manchester-Porto, 2008

CHAPTER ONE

ON THE OCULARCENTRISM OF ARCHAEOLOGY

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Introduction

Implicitly or explicitly, the phrase "the politics of vision" relates to Jean-Paul Sartre's observation that the relationship between the looker and the object of their gaze is an unequal one (Sartre 1969: 252). Necessarily, then, the complicated play of stares, glances and glimpses found in everyday life constitutes an elaborate political field. Fifteen years ago, I referred to a politics of vision in the course of developing a critique of landscape archaeology (Thomas 1993). My argument was that archaeology addressed space and place using a series of methods and technologies that were primarily visual and distanced: aerial photography, geographical information systems, or satellite imagery, for instance. These approaches produced an understanding of the land quite remote from that which would have characterised past communities, immersed and physically engaged in the landscape. The unequal, political relationship to which I alluded was that between modern, technocratic archaeologists and the past people in relation to whom they assumed a position of dominance and superior knowledge. Without suggesting that existing archaeological spatial technologies should be rejected, I proposed that they should be complemented by approaches which seek to recapture the human scale, and the experience of place. In this contribution, I want to expand on those arguments by addressing the subject-object relationship, and the privilege that has been afforded to vision in the western tradition, while considering their implications for the practice of archaeology.

The emergence of archaeology as a discipline has been intimately connected with the formation of the modern world, and its distinctive modes of understanding and intervention (Olsen 2001; Thomas 2004). Amongst the characteristic features of the modern West has been a privileging of the visual over the other senses, or ocularcentrism as it has been termed. The early modern period saw an escalation of the human capacity to apprehend the world visually, with the introduction of the microscope, the telescope, and the silver-backed looking-glass, and a growth of interest in the camera obscura, which harmonised with a growing emphasis on empirical observation in science (Shapin 1996: 65). The shared imperative of arts and sciences was to represent reality "as it really was", but this should actually be understood as a transformation of the way in which that reality was defined: as that which can be represented in a particular way. It is arguable that these developments have been decisive for the way that archaeology attempts to address the past. For ironically, although we study tangible material things, we do so principally through visual means: charts, diagrams, graphs, maps, drawings, photographs, and descriptions of appearance. Less often, as with the description of soils or pottery fabrics, are the tactile aspects of materials considered. It should be emphasised, however, that what we are discussing here is not simply the emergence of a cultural preference for one of the senses over the others, but a situation in which a particular and restricted conception of sight came to stand for an approved way of apprehending reality, in which observations of worldly entities are delivered to a disembodied consciousness in the form of information. In order to be rendered *as* information, the things of the world must necessarily take the form of self-contained gobbets of reality, which can readily and intelligibly be separable from their background or context. In other words, the world at large can no longer be conceived as an interwoven meshwork from out of which entities emerge in a comprehensible form: objects must now be understood as bounded and independent. In archaeological terms, we could say that the modern epoch has seen a reversal in the relationship between object and context, in which the latter has lost its primacy and come to be understood as a supplement.

This way of seeing, in which the mind acquires information though an ocular apparatus, amounts to the dominant mode of visuality in the modern world, in which the objective constructions of realist representation have become linked to the knowing subject of rationalist philosophy. It implies a distinction between a physical world of inert and isolated things that can be expressed in mathematical terms, and an inner world of thought and

meaning. Many authorities have argued that this removal of meaning from the public world, rendering it as an array of objects that are at the disposal of human subjects, is closely linked to the commodification of land and nature. However, opinion is divided: some hold that the representation of landscape as an assembly of isolated entities is a product of capitalism, while others imply that capitalism itself is but an offshoot of a more fundamental estrangement from the world (Cosgrove 1984; Heidegger 1977a). In this latter view the historical trajectory that we have to grasp is not simply that of the developing social relations of production, but of a metaphysics through which humanity separates itself from the natural world, and comes to recognise the latter purely and simply as a set of instruments and raw materials to be used in production.

Accordingly, the observation of material things as resources that are just "standing around", waiting to be used, comes to be accepted as the normal way that human beings apprehend their world, and is conceived as preparatory to physical engagement in the form of productive labour. This is the process of "enframing" (*Gestell*), a modern predicament in which material things come to be revealed to us primarily in instrumental terms. This leads to an impoverished relationship between people and their world, in which the more fundamental experience of being at home in one's surroundings has been sacrificed to mere acquisitiveness (Heidegger 1977a: 129). If one were to accept this view, the troubling corollary would be that archaeology itself, in imposing a modernist vision of subjects accessing objects throughout human history, is conspiring to the devouring of the past by a relentless nihilism. All history becomes the history of the increasingly efficient domination of nature, through processes of production and consumption. Arguably, the notion of "objectification" in contemporary material culture studies remains trapped in this same logic, with subject and object locked in a mutually-constituting dialectic (e.g. Miller 1987: 27; Tilley 2006). Subject and object are here given a transcendental status, rather than identified as the contingent outcome of historical processes – a view that we will discuss below.

Subject and Object

The notion that vision represents "the most noble of the senses" can be recognised as far back as the works of Plato, but the development of what has been described as "Cartesian perspectivalism" can be attributed to the eclipse between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries of a conception of the world as an integrated animate entity, structured according to meanings

that demanded interpretation, and imbued with the presence of the deity (Jay 1993a: 21). The world of the Greeks and the Renaissance had been one that was in constant motion towards its own fulfilment, and was continually emerging (Sheehan 2007: 204). In this dynamic world, everything was animate, and there was no distinction between mind and matter. In its place was substituted a world of mathematical regularities and extended matter, created by a transcendent and external God, who for some had left the scene entirely. Minds, qualities and meaning were now evicted from the physical world, leaving behind only lifeless matter, which behaved according to universal laws governing the causal relations between bodies (Collingwood 1945: 106). The independent, free-standing entities within such a world had a character that was compatible with the commodity form of market economics, and they were representable through the linear perspective of Italian and Flemish Early Modern painting. Perspective art portrays orthogonal space from the point of view of an observer, but this observer is fixed, disembodied, external to the image, and monocular. Leon Battista Alberti's construction of the "golden section" thus afforded greater realism, but at the expense of placing the viewer outside of the inhabited world, looking in (Jay 1993b: 116). A similar relationship of externality and simultaneous perception was established through cartography, facilitated by Mercator's projection in the sixteenth century (Harley 1988). We might suggest that both of these forms of graphical representation express or mirror the removal of consciousness from the world of social and material engagements.

As the physical and metaphysical worlds were cloven apart, perception and optics became major preoccupations in the west, for the senses were now understood as interceding between the two realms. In a way, the acquisition of information to be used by the mind through the activity of the eye was a new problem in the early modern age, an issue that would not previously have occurred to people. Descartes attempted to overcome the difficulties that this posed by building on the traditional division between worldly observation and mental speculation, claiming that the eye provides sensory stimuli to the brain, but only the soul actually *sees* (Jay 1993a: 71). The eye turns light into impulses, but the transformation of these into pictures is the work of the mind. In making this division, Descartes pulled apart two traditional aspects of light and vision: *lux*, the play of light and shade and the physical experience of observation, versus *lumen*, the geometric appreciation of linear form, which was paired with mental contemplation (Jay 1993a: 29). For Descartes the clarity of vision is only available to a thinking creature, and the content of the mind takes

the form of a set of images. Moreover, because God is not a deceiver, whatever can be clearly seen in the mind has the character of truth. Descartes" conception of vision is thus primarily concerned with the "inner sight" of the soul, where images are clarified and acquire coherence. In its separation from the world, and its character as a theatre of images, the inner realm of the mind appears to be predominantly visual: the other senses are of secondary importance here. Both Locke and Newton were sceptical of Descartes' rationalism, and sought to emphasise the reality of observational experience over the power of the intellect. None the less, they took forward the notion of the re-presentation of the phenomenal world in the mind's eye, so that vision becomes the sense that most closely harmonises with mental activity (Cassirer 1951: 43). Obviously, it is in this separation of thought from materiality that the division between subject and object is created, and with it the conviction that human beings as thinking subjects occupy the regal position of observing and giving meaning to the objects of the world, which are rendered as "nature". The "huge outbreak of dualisms" in the seventeenth century (Collingwood 1945: 100) was therefore internally linked: subject and object, culture and nature, mind and body were all split through the same process.

In turn, new force was given to Bacon's emphasis on experiment and observation, on the basis of Locke's argument that all of our ideas ultimately derive from experience (Atherton 1998: 50). On this account, the creation of new knowledge by empirical means was actually superior to established arguments handed down from the ancients, whose status as tradition now rendered them suspect (Jones 1961: 51). In this movement to create new knowledge from things, antiquarianism developed apace, but it brought with it the conviction that we learn about the past from objects that are categorically severed from human subjects (Trigger 1989: 61). Past and present are separated by an abyss, constituted by the inert quality of artefactual remains. It is arguable that archaeology has been bedevilled ever since by this categorical separation of dynamics and statics (e.g. Binford 1983: 19), which requires that artefacts acquire their privileged status through the application of human agency to formless, dead matter. Objects and subjects are not to be mixed up, and this requires that agency takes on the role of a vector running between them, animating substance and translating it from the realm of nature to that of culture (Thomas 2007). As a result, archaeology has often understood its mission to be the retrieval of agency from artefacts, which are none the less conceived as sutured entities, unconnected to either past or present.

Vision and temporality

From Descartes onwards, the overcoming of tradition and superstition was associated with the exercise of free will on the part of an autonomous individual, who chooses to make use of rational method and systematic doubt (Schouls 1989: 39). The objectivity of the viewer is connected with their disengagement from social and affective relations, expressed very effectively in the position of the viewer who looks into the world from a position of exteriority. The superiority of vision supposedly lies in its detachment, remoteness and ability to disaggregate entities, while sound immerses and personalises, and touch is altogether too intimate. The cultivated subject is thus a spectator, rather than a person enmeshed in reality by appetites and desires (de Bolla 1996: 70). Equally, a number of authorities maintained that vision can serve as a means of ensuring peaceable and responsible conduct. Whether it is the fear of being watched by God, or the awareness of conducting one's business in the eyes of other citizens (as Adam Smith suggested in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments*), the gaze was understood as having a disciplining, civilizing and normalising effect (de Bolla 1996: 74; Jay 1986: 177). The autonomy of the subject in relation to the world is made possible by the division of mind and body, so that the former becomes a hermetic space of speculation and reflection. However, more recent commentators have pointed out that distance does not of itself ensure objectivity. Sartre's discussion of the gaze (mentioned above) dwelt on the way that looking transforms another person into an object. The space between the viewer and the viewed is that within which desire is generated, so that the relationship between ostensibly distanced entities can be one of yearning and attraction. Similarly, Laura Mulvey (1975) discussed visual pleasure in the context of the cinema, noting the gendered character of a visual experience in which men gaze on the bodies of women, who do not look back. So while the dispassionate gaze of the scientist was at one time seen as the paradigm of objectivity, its close relationship with the gaze of the voyeur is a source of some discomfort. Moreover, the identification of disengaged modern practices of looking with the *flâneur*, the listless male wanderer who idly strolls the streets of the metropolis in search of stimulation, committing himself to nothing, does some damage to the notion of the ethical scopic subject (Pollock 1988: 67).

Another important consequence of the separation of physical reality from the mental realm of meaning was a change in the conception of truth, as our discussion of Descartes has already hinted. The split between subject

and object facilitated the consolidation of a correspondence theory of truth, in which a true apprehension of reality is guaranteed by the harmonising of what is seen by the bodily eye and the inner eye, surveying the contents of the mind (Heidegger 1977b: 168). Truth, reality, and objectivity are therefore all construed in primarily visual terms. Archaeology inherits this emphasis on methodological rigor, distanced objectivity, and clarity of vision and exposition, but at the cost of creating a past that is difficult to understand as inhabited or embodied. It is widely recognised that this is unsatisfactory, but it is hard to see how we can reinstate a sense of human involvement in a past that has already been constructed in profoundly ocularcentric terms. To make things worse, some recent 'post-processual' archaeologies have argued that the discipline's focus on objectivity should be overcome by embracing subjectivism. Of course, this merely succeeds in reinforcing the object-subject dichotomy, which actually needs to be transcended.

One of the reasons why archaeology produces accounts of the past that seem remote from human experience is that modern ocularcentrism rests on a conception of vision that is at once atomistic and detemporalising (Jay 1993a: 25). The picture of the mind as a store of images and the world as composed of independent entities promotes the view that visual perception is the conscious capture of distinct, unambiguous, and bounded pieces of information, analogous with the input of data into a computer. In fact, we could say that computing and artificial intelligence studies in recent years have served to reinforce the belief that human beings routinely internalise atomised information (Dreyfus 1992: 208). Yet the other effect of the dominance of Cartesian perspectivalism is to promote the idea that vision represents a simultaneous mode of perception, revealing a totality in an instant. The most perfect view is not only distanced, but elevated, and while modern thought is fixated with causal relations, these are expressed not in narrative terms but in the connections between autonomous entities, as in a blueprint. In maintaining the priority of the analytical separation between objects, abstract curiosity replaces wonder as the appropriate reaction to visual spectacle. In archaeology the elevated view is familiar in the forms of aerial photography and distribution maps. In each case the implicit belief is that seeing cultural remains laid out beneath one clarifies their significance, while being in the midst of things brings chaos. This may not always be the case.

As Michel Foucault (1970: 75) has demonstrated, the scientific outcome of the marriage of atomism and detemporalisation was the classificatory grid,

and in archaeology this still manifests itself in the form of typology. Here, characteristically, objects are removed from their context and monuments from their topography, rendering them susceptible to simultaneous viewing. We are all familiar with corpuses of artefacts, lined up across the page according to similarity and difference of external form, and thereby amenable to comparison. But this only serves to reinforce their atomisation, and the sense in which they stand over against us as independent entities, or as the finished products of human labour. It is conceivable that vision is effectively prioritised in archaeology because it appears to make objects available to perception simultaneously, independently of movement. We see things without any obvious action on the part of either object or subject, and we may be less comfortable with touching, tasting or hearing the traces of the past because the dynamics with which they are legitimately associated are locked in the past, not the present. Looking is less obviously a "doing". Where we separate the other senses from the visual, they seem to lack authenticity in addressing the past. This is another aspect of the problem of imagining that artefacts should contain the essence of their own significance, rather than pointing to the absences of past human beings.

But more significant to the present argument is the disaggregation of the senses. Here, we can usefully refer to Molyneux's problem, as discussed in his *Dioptrica Nova* of 1692. Molyneux speculates whether a man who had been blind for all of his life, and who was then restored to sight, would be able to recognise the objects which he had formerly only felt, heard or touched. The question is whether there is some internal basis for integrating and creating equivalences between the deliverances of the senses. But this integration is apparently only mental, and what the argument reveals is the way that the senses are understood as separate but equivalent means of conveying information across the boundary between the outer world of substance and the inner world of the mind (Ingold 2000: 266). It is the notion that such a boundary exists at all that is the fatal weakness of Cartesiansism.

Questioning vision

A series of developments over the past century and a half have begun to erode Cartesian perspectivism, but it is arguable that they have only been partially assimilated by archaeology. Firstly, Brentano and Husserl drew attention to directed intentionality: the way that we do not blankly look out at the world, but focus our attention on first one thing and then another

(Jacquette 2004: 99). This means that vision, like the other senses, is diachronic and narrative in character, rather than "taking it all in" as a picture. This impression was enhanced by Merleau-Ponty and others, pointing to the binocular character of human sight, which allows the appreciation of depth and distance, but primarily through movement and immersion in the visual field rather than disengagement (Ingold 2000: 262). These arguments have been fully appreciated by phenomenological archaeologies, which concentrate on the sequential and exploratory character of the experience of landscape and architecture (Tilley 2008: 272). However, these approaches generally remain predominantly visual. More worryingly, attempts to incorporate the other senses into an experiential archaeology often appear contrived and gimmicky. This is again because the senses are conceived in modular terms, and because we struggle to imagine the auditory or tactile dimensions of prehistoric life, and the non-geometric character of the spaces that they permeated.

A further development lay in the setting aside of the mind-body dichotomy, so that looking comes to be recognised as a form of action in the world, instead of the generation of mental representations. Rather than a pure consciousness connected to a body, we now understand ourselves as embedded in the world through our practical involvements, and through our concern. Our attention is directed to things because we care about them, so that far from being dispassionate observers, things are revealed to us through our projects and our preoccupations (Heidegger 1996: 178). Since there is no disembodied space for the mind to occupy, we can no longer conceive of truth as a correspondence between object and image, and we might instead consider the importance of a way of looking that allows things to reveal themselves as they actually are. This requires, of course, that we should understand "looking" as more than a mechanical process of sensory perception. Overcoming the instrumentalised gaze of the modern west is a matter of our attunement to the world. Admittedly, this sounds somewhat mystical, but the point is that what we "see" is as much a question of our qualitative attitude to our surroundings as the mere acquisition of information.

Recognising that there are multiple ways of looking, rather than just an automatic transfer of data into the brain, draws our attention to inconspicuousness: the way that we can see without explicitly noting or objectifying. Much of the time our visual activity involves no more than finding our way about without bumping into things, yet when we return to a place that we have already frequented we find it familiar without having

constructed explicit mental models of its component entities. In Freudian terms much of our activity is unconscious rather than conscious. However, this need not mean that it is to be located in a particular area of the mind. Freud's "topographic" theory of the mind was a rather literal way of dealing with the issue of unconscious thought within an epistemological or representational conception of mental activity. This demands that the mind be a space of some kind, a container within which thoughts are held, although this subsumes an unconscious whose contents are not directly accessible to consciousness (Freud 1935: 11; Spence 1987: 17). But we might say instead that the inexplicit, unconsidered, non-discursive aspects of existence are a fundamental aspect of the way that we *are* in the world. Indeed, they form a background or pre-understanding that has priority over, and is the precondition of, any explicit observation that we make (Taylor 1993; Wrathall 2000).

Conclusion

Finding our way around in the world, in a state of circumspection or inconspicuous familiarity, negotiating spaces and handling objects, drawing on and recreating our everyday coping skills, is a multi-sensory activity. If we stand back from our surroundings, attending to them in an explicit and analytical way, we can distinguish things that we see from things that we hear. But our more fundamental engagement with the world, which provides the scaffolding on which these discrete observations are built, is one in which the senses are not separated at all, and form aspects of a unified experience. Ocularcentrism, the valorisation of one sense over the others, is based on taking one of the ways that we have of relating to the world, and identifying it as the paradigm of all sensory experience. The challenge that archaeology faces is not simply that of complementing its existing focus on the visual with a consideration of the other senses. On the contrary, we need to develop adequate conceptual tools for addressing modes of existence in which the visual is immersed in a more holistic form of dwelling.

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CHAPTER TWO

TRANSCENDING AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE VISUAL: SOME SPHERES OF IMPLICATED DISCOURSE IN PAST MATERIAL CULTURE

KEITH RAY

Introduction

The visible and the visual in culture have been privileged in archaeology. This is an inevitable consequence of the physicality of the objects, places and landscapes that form its arena of inquiry. Arguably, however, this 'automatic' primacy of the visual is a consequence also of the condition of modernity that has determined the very nature of archaeological discourse (Thomas, 2004). In this way, a close connection might be seen to exist between rationalism, 'visualism' and a post-Enlightenment concern with surfaces and appearances (Schouls, 1989). In other words, in the contemporary West since at least the eighteenth century we have been culturally and philosophically 'programmed' to experience the world in both a compartmentalised and primarily a *visual* way.

This does not mean that the visual dimension of material culture should be neglected in archaeological thought and studies. On the contrary, research that explores past materiality through analyses of the visual aspects of material culture (for instance through an engagement with art, representation and figuration) are an essential component of the interpretive project (see for example, Miller, 1982, 94-120; Shanks, 1992; Bailey, 2005). What it does mean, nonetheless, is that we need to develop an awareness of, and a language to support the study of, other dimensions of cultural experience. These other dimensions do not exist as reified forms, but rather they represent means of articulation for dialogue between

people that extends beyond the verbal. The term ‘dialogue’ itself however privileges speech and inevitably neglects materiality (see below). I choose instead, therefore, to express these cognitive fields and social exchanges rather as belonging to ‘discourse’ in the sense of a flow of thought, interaction and communication. Discourse between human beings is again multi-dimensional, and so I have termed the different forms involved distinct ‘spheres’ of discourse.

So while the visual comprises one such sphere, and while it is in many senses a primary one, it co-exists with others. Early on in this chapter, I outline something of the breadth of these co-existing spheres of discourse within which the material is not only immersed but is also often determinative. However, the prime focus here is upon an exploration of just four such spheres, which I have termed the *tangible*, the *substantial*, the *literary-material* and the *invisible*. These refer, respectively, to the tactile qualities of surfaces, to an awareness of and play upon what items or structures are made of, to the cross-referential nature of some literature and material culture, and to the relation between the seen/unseen, tangible/intangible, material/spiritual ‘worlds’. None of these spheres of discourse is *directly* accessible through past material culture and residues. However, each of the spheres is *implicated* in the characteristics of the artefacts and the nature of the residues that archaeologists routinely encounter (see below). In some contexts they are called into presence by deliberate material and visual referencing, and it is this that makes them amenable to interpretive study. The chapter provides both an exegesis and an amplification of the key propositions set out above, with brief exemplification in reference to diverse contexts and materials.

Implicated discourse

We are accustomed to an understanding and a registering of discourse as a verbal or linguistic phenomenon with an oral and/or literary output. As such, our most obvious material ‘evidence’ for discourse is the printed or recorded word. We are also habituated to the idea that discourse concerns the production of (intellectual) knowledge. In this context, discourse has been characterised narrowly as the flow of communication, of opinion, and of debate within self-limiting and self-referential knowledge communities (Bourdieu, 2000). In whatever context it occurs, nonetheless discourse rarely constitutes neutral ‘communication’. Rather, it is purposeful, motivated, and directional. As such, it can be seen as chronically engaged within social strategies and negotiations.

In considering the diversity of discourse practice, it is therefore important to recognise not only the existence of discourse and its operation, but also to understand exactly *how* it operates. For instance, a key feature of verbal and literary discourse is the deployment of rhetoric to achieve a variety of effects. It may even be the case that rhetoric has a yet more fundamental role in the embedding of discourse in social interaction. In some philosophical views, metaphor for instance is seen as fundamental to both thought and language (Lackoff and Johnson, 1980), while Gerard Genette offered an insightful view of how rhetoric works when he noted that it serves 'to make us take notice of the (very) existence of discourse' (Genette, 1966, 103, cited in Bourdieu, 2003, 171).

'Every picture tells a story', or so the saying goes. But can one exist without the other? It can reasonably be proposed that, while rhetoric provides a cue to the operation of tropic conventions in verbal/literary discourse, other cues exist within discourse that is conducted non-verbally. Moreover, I propose that while a distinction can clearly be made between discourse and social action that is signalled through speech and writing on the one hand, and the object and material world on the other, these domains are cross-referential. By this I mean that communication in the non-verbal domain is predicated upon the existence of speech discourse and literary culture, while the latter makes continual reference to, and cannot exist without, an object world that grounds such discourse in the world of action.

In this way, when working from the material world as instantiated in a given time and place in archaeologically examined residues, we can sometimes infer both the operation of various kinds of non-verbal discourse and the existence of the 'parallel' verbal or literary discourses with which they articulated. The degree to which we can establish the terms of such discourse will, as with verbal or literary 'evidence' itself, depend upon the complexity and correlations that it is possible plausibly to establish. As with all cultural forms there is never absolute interpretive closure regarding the meaning-content of such exchanges, only the opportunity to explore the probabilities. What is important here is that in many cases we can demonstrate the general nature of the implicated discourse, and its referents. This is so especially where the material domain offers deliberate instances of representation of complex relations, as for instance we shall note in reference to the carving on the end of the basalt sarcophagus of Amenhotep II from the Egyptian 'New Kingdom' period (Figure 2. 1).

Locating the spheres of discourse

To reprise, a primary sphere of discourse implicated in the material world is therefore the visual. The main thesis of this chapter is accordingly that there are further spheres of non-verbal discourse that are also implicated within the material world, and that extend the discourse field beyond the visual. Four such spheres are located in this chapter, but first it may be helpful to explore some key questions concerning representation and reference in and through past material culture.

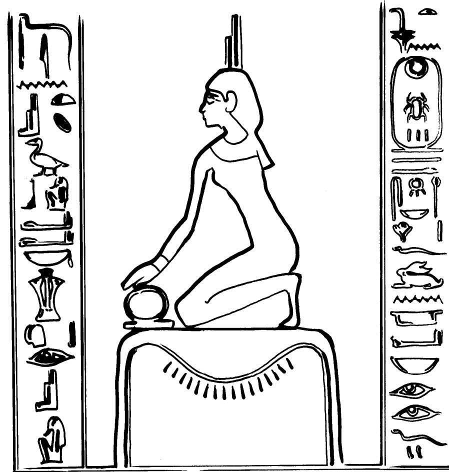

Figure 2.1: *Carving on the end of the basalt sarcophagus of Amenhotep II. Thebes, Egypt, 1400BCE. After Wilkinson, 1994, Figure 57. Drawn by Tim Hoverd.*

A significant thesis concerning representation that has considerable implications for the way in which we as archaeologists envisage materiality and its role in discourse was put forward by Douglass Bailey in his recent volume *Prehistoric Figurines: Representation and corporeality in the Neolithic*. This is that the figurines that are so plentiful at Neolithic sites in south-eastern Europe are not representations *of* people or states of being so much as representations *for* the construction of those states and thereby the identity of those people (2005, 130). Drawing upon representation theory in photography (Tagg, 1988), and deploying the

concept of regimes of truth (Foucault, 1977), he demonstrates that the work of understanding that we need to perform in the present to realise something of the complexity of the social geography of those distant pasts is fundamentally a contextualising enterprise. What are the conditions for the negotiation of identity that these figurines were used to address and to develop? How were they thought through, and in what historical circumstances? In doing this work, Bailey considered not only the forms of representation, but what we might term their qualities or attributes. These qualities are several, but two of them are at one and the same time physical, corporeal and conceptual. These two are the clearly associated qualities or attributes of *scale* and of *manipulability* (Bailey, 2005, 83-4; 181-96).

Figurines were made and used by people in the Neolithic of south-eastern Europe as tools for exploring the development and transformation of identities: individually, inter-personally and in terms of collective traditions. The miniature scale of representation of the figurines allowed individuals to manipulate them: to see them in the round, to objectify them, and to re-contextualise them in intricate physical relation to one another. As John Chapman (2000) has shown, this could also extend to an enacted physical dissolution of figurines from complete produced objects to deliberately fragmented and distributed pieces or items. In these terms, the fragmented objects could stand as proxy for the web of connections experienced and engaged with by individuals in the societies concerned: for ‘physically distributed fragments’ read ‘relationally distributed personhood’. Put another way, people and their identities were *presenced* in diverse contexts through symbolic dissolution and subsequent physical distribution (cf. Ray, 1988, 2000).

Although Bailey’s focus is upon the appearance of these figurines, and their visual referents, in his understanding of scale (specifically, miniaturism) and manipulability as key attributes, he is investigating a materiality that extends beyond the visual. In his discussion of the paradoxes of representation evinced for instance by the two sets of six identical fourth millennium BC figurines unearthed at Cucuteni in Romania (Figure 2.2), Bailey notes that a focus among prehistorians upon what the figurines represent (male/female beings, or a ritual dance, or a sacrifice made before the dissolution of the house they were contained within) has obscured what they were used for, as representations, as miniatures, and as forms capable of manipulation (Bailey, 2005, 179-80). He goes on to propose that:

> "If we accept that what-you-see-is-*not*-what-you-get, and that there is no one-to-one connection between represented reality and actual reality, then any attempt to read Neolithic identities from Neolithic figurines is precarious at best. More accurate, and more exciting I suggest, is an approach to figurines that views them as potent tools within the contemporary political struggles running through Neolithic households and villages. The ways that the human form is represented and the ways that those representations are used, displayed, disseminated, controlled and…killed become the critical actions and props of social engagement." (Bailey, 2005, 186).

While the visual is inevitably privileged in material culture, the human discourses that the material domain is bound up with (and contribute to the formation of) implicate a variety of further spheres: not just of the senses but of cognition and meaning, and above all, action. To look at it another way, figurines were produced to facilitate thought and action through visual depiction and within a frame of reference to self and others (ibid., 196). However, the discourses concerned were not only articulated through the visual in culture: a shared tradition of speech for instance must have featured strongly within the communicative and strategic process. A key consideration here is how many spheres of discourse are in operation in any one context, and how do they relate to one another. Does it indeed matter to identify them? The answer I propose here is, yes: because they each reflect a dimension of the complexity of past cultural life and the conditions affecting its descent.

Ever present but not always privileged

The visual is a polyvalent sphere of discourse, widely implicated and widely drawn upon in the negotiation of meaning and practice in and through material culture. However, while the visual dimension is present it is not necessarily always privileged in the conduct of a variety of cross-referential and co-implicated discourses that extend beyond both the visual *and* the verbal.

Along with an obvious and always central visual dimension, material culture has tactile properties, for instance. Other physical senses can be implicated in its existence: it often has an olefactory presence, and sound, too, can sometimes be considered as integral to it. Other properties include its composite potential: that is, its capacity to link individual and separate items into conjoint and greater wholes. In the opposite direction, there is its partibility: again, as expressed for instance through fragmentation, but

also through replication and duplication. Further qualities include relative portability, and even its capacity for recycling or re-incorporation.

Moving onto a more abstract plane, there are the capacities of material culture to effect allusion, evocation or transformation through manipulations of form or through embellishment. There are moreover referential qualities within and beyond these again, that involve the deliberate choreography of scale, of distance, and of time (Ray, 1988).

In this chapter, while acknowledging the multiple spheres of human discourse implicated within and beyond the verbal and the visual that are bound up in the production, manipulation, movement and disposal of material culture and the built environment, I want to explore just four contrasting discursive spheres, each of which engages with the visual but is not necessarily predicated upon it. These are considered briefly here firstly to provide examples of the complexity of use of the material domain in the construction and negotiation of meaning and reference, and then to demonstrate the potential for investigating the deliberate use of material culture to establish or to reinforce strategies of social and historical action. These four spheres are, as identified above, the *tangible*, the *substantial*, the *literary-material* and the *invisible*.

A tactile sphere of discourse

The *tangible* concerns the capacity to be touched and felt, and the importance of surfaces and texture to the amplification and contextualisation of reference. Is there a language or a grammar of touch and 'touchability'? Not only are there literary analogues for the scope of touch, but in historical terms this tactile sphere is inevitably both contextually specific and structurally contingent. The very manipulability of the south-eastern European Neolithic figurines for instance specifies a tactile dimension: their handling was a dimension of the experience of having, holding, placing and replacing them within and between the locations of their use. Not only their locations of use, either, but the timings of their use are pertinent here. For instance, in the darker recesses of the buildings occupied by their users, as well as at night, touch was inevitably privileged over sight.

Even the physical dissolution of the figurines had a tangible dimension. Their fragmentation implies a physicality of action: the tactile act of breaking encompassed a physical manipulation. The *touchability* of the

figurines was in these terms such a pervasively present attribute that, to put it another way, their seeing can be understood to have comprised but one element in their wider being.

Moreover, it is possible to consider directly the relation between touching and seeing and the interplay between these discursive spheres in discussing the social psychology of representation and control evinced by the figurines (Bailey, 2005, 201-2). There is, further, perhaps a sexualised relation between the desire for seeing and that for touching that it is possible to express in the manipulation of the bodily forms in materialised miniature in the figurines themselves. In turn these represented and touchable corporeal forms had the potential to stand as proxy for the relation between seeing and *not* touching actual bodies and real persons in lived social discourse.

It is even possible that the attributes of items have been determined not only by how they were to be seen, but also how they were to be touched. Returning for an example to the Cucuteni figurines (Figure, 2.2), the absences that Bailey noted (developed arms, facial features) on some of the figurines may have had purposeful reasons in the contexts in which they were handled, or inserted, while paradoxically they may have deliberately contributed to the sense of representational 'incompleteness' visually.

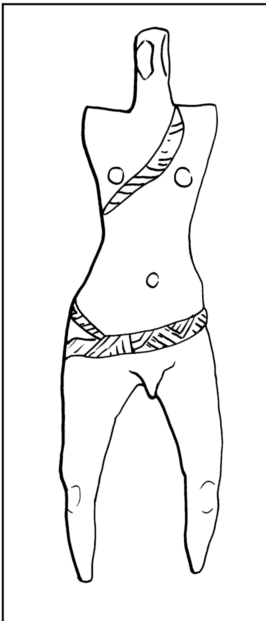

Figure 2.2: *Cucuteni figure from Dumesti, Romania, c.4000BCE. Height c.20cm. After Bailey, 2005, Figure 5.1. Drawn by Tim Hoverd.*