
Review Articles

Material Culture 10 Years On — Disciplinary Exodus and the Tin Commandments

Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present, by Lynn Meskell, 2004. Oxford: Berg; ISBN 1-85973-862-1 hardback, £55 & US\$99.95; ISBN 1-85973-867-2 paperback, £16.99 & US\$28.95; 248 pp., 30 ill.

Material Culture and Other Things: Post-disciplinary Studies in the 21st Century, edited by Fredrik Fahlander & Terje Oestigaard, 2004. (GOTARC Series C.) Göteborg: Department of Archaeology, University of Gothenburg; ISBN 91-85245-12-7, paperback, £11.50 & US\$20; 282 pp., 7 ill.

Thinking Through Material Culture: an Interdisciplinary Perspective, by Carl Knappett, 2005. Philadelphia (PA): University of Pennsylvania Press; ISBN 0-8122-3788-9 hardback, £32.50 & US\$49.95; 202 pp., 44 ill.

Patrick Laviolette

The past ten years have witnessed a burgeoning fascination in the study of human interactions with the material world. These three volumes objectify the flourishing international attention given to this interdisciplinary subject and conceptual approach. Indeed, it is an interesting time to take stock of recent developments in this sub, post or inter-discipline since it is now officially a decade old — at least as far as the formal launch of the *Journal of Material Culture* in 1996 is concerned. It is perhaps indicative of reaching this threshold that the calibre of contributions in this field should vary so considerably at present and has arguably hit a plateau. Perhaps this levelling off itself betrays a reluctance to foster dialogue between colleagues of intellectual initiatives that are no longer new and yet not quite endowed with the patina of age.

While waiting for this longer-term habitus to develop, many nascent spheres of enquiry run the risk of remaining liminal. I was at an anthropology conference only two years ago when someone said to me that surely materiality was not even a proper word. Our panel had that very word in the title so the comment was obviously testing the waters. The conversation that followed reminded me that the interest in engaging with a 'material culture' perspective is actually part of a process which allows for a different way of seeing, albeit one that is still marginal and often seen with a certain disdain by some within anthropology. Nonetheless, much has been said and learnt, much less seems novel or unimaginable. For instance, we now talk openly about the material culture of emotion and the hyper-materiality of information and communication technologies. Even the concepts of intangible heritage and immateriality have attained a certain cachet in the various specializations that influence, and are influenced by, material-culture studies. Don't get me wrong; some of the work in these areas is groundbreaking. Unfortunately, however, this is not always the case. A rather well-tested method in archaeology and material-culture studies is of course to examine absences instead of presences in our analyses of phenomena. This technique proves particularly apt in relation to the three texts reviewed here.

Simply put, Meskell's reflections in *Object Worlds* are solid. This work is a good piece of contemporary archaeology. Who knows, it might even prove to be a worthy companion for touring the British Museum? The average lay visitor, however, will probably not fully engage with it for that purpose; with its high academic level, it is unlikely to appeal to all but the most dedicated aficionado of Egyptology. Yet there is little doubt that it will also gain the interest of many students and academics concerned with the study of material culture. The volume begins with an extensive literature review of this proliferating area. This makes up most of the introduction and first two chapters. There is nothing earth shattering in her overview of these writings. Nevertheless Meskell provides an exhaustive survey which, although it perhaps over emphasizes the importance of a single figure, does account for the diversity of perspectives out there.

From the work of those looking at prehistory through to those interested in gift exchange or the concern for post-modern deconstruction, Meskell diligently lays out the intellectual building blocks for the foundation of an approach grounded in material culture.

The book really takes off in the third chapter when she enters into an analysis of her own empirical and archival material. The objective in this and the following chapter is to explore whether ancestral stelae and busts were themselves animistically vivacious or gateways through which deities and the dead travelled. Ultimately at issue in her questioning are of course deeper concerns with the nature of agency and the significant vestiges of Cartesian dualisms in art history, anthropology and archaeology. And it is here that one of the strengths of Meskell's text shines through – her engagement with theory is gradual and builds upon itself without too much effort. In this sense, the book approaches the style of a monograph which benefits from a complete read.

The two chapters that stand out as exceptions and could easily be read independently from the rest of the text are chapters 5 and 7 (the latter presents the book's conclusion). What are probably Meskell's most original insights occur in chapter 5, when she addresses the embodied and phenomenological considerations for the ways in which certain experiences of ancient Egypt have survived in, and have even transgressed, the material record. Her arguments here challenge traditional typologies regarding the death of the body and its efficacy to act upon social relations as well as wider cultural constructions. It is a welcome addition to a body of knowledge that has often overlooked the inherently sensuous facets of ancient Egypt's own fascination with corporeality. Particularly interesting in the penultimate chapter is the way Meskell highlights the subversive iconographical elements within what is often seen in the literature as an inherently omnipresent hegemony in the system of the Pharaoh ruling class. Again, it is pleasing to witness that her performative and metaphorical conceptualizations are well balanced with the presentation of convincing visual illustrations and rich descriptive material.

Regarding absences, the work does have one perplexing and significant lacuna, a complete lack of reference to the Orientalist project. Indeed, Said's (1978) work is not cited once and there are not many references made to the research of local Egyptian scholars. This is not the criticism of a pedant as such. It is an especially important issue in the context of Egypt, which is at the heart of Said's critique of Western representation. Puzzlingly, such obvious connections are discussed in comparisons with Indian visual

culture, for example, in the case of a stolen Shiva that is returned to India through an English court decision, as well as in the extensive discussion of the notion of authenticity through the act of replication and the market for producing fake artefacts. So why completely bypass the opportunity to address the subjects of the colonial pillaging of antiquarian capital, the ownership of heritage or cultural property rights? It would be good to clarify whether archaeologists' own representation, as in this book itself, still find uncomfortably close resonances with an Orientalist ethos. The political implications of such issues are considerable and merit serious discussion.

The second volume is a collection of essays by Swedish archaeologists edited by Fahlander and Oestigaard. *Material Culture and Other Things* is an odd compilation. It starts with a wide-reaching and convincing introduction that promises much. The next chapter by Oestigaard is heavily reliant on direct citations from the literature however; probably a quarter of the chapter consists of quotations. Unfortunately the idea of offering a primer overview of the field does not seem to have been the author's intent since even the longer uses of other people's material are formatted as text rather than indented as is the norm for direct citations. In different ways, much of the remainder of the volume follows suit, leaving the reader puzzled about what is original here. For instance, Forslund's chapter offers principally a literature review with an unusual prevalence of references from personal communications via email.

One of the robust arguments the collection does make is to present a controversial isolationist view of archaeology, which appears in several papers, though this is also at odds with other chapters. Normack's piece 'Discontinuous Maya Identities', raises some valid criticisms against the colonial and imperialist legacies of the anthropological project. But it is dubious whether it is feasible or desirable to agree with his aim of dropping the notion of culture altogether and of barricading off archaeology from all contact with other conceptual or disciplinary influences that might have an impure past. Surely this is to throw out the baby with the bathwater? Additionally, many eyebrows will be raised by statements such as 'materiality is used to form people's identities, but the past is gone and we can never get a complete understanding of it' (p. 149). Does not the very process of a material-culture approach suggest that the past is far from gone? It is embedded in the very materiality of things as well as the material and imaginative identities formed through them. Furthermore, why should we feel defeated by an inability to give a 'complete understand-

ing' of anything — past or present, physical or social? One does not need to be Bourdieu (1977) to accept that social phenomena are messy. People, things and the relationships between them are indeed more complicated than anything that could reasonably approach a full level of understanding.

In a more amusing style, Fahlander's article follows in the same vein. His point about the role that creative fiction has in contributing to archaeological knowledge is compelling. Yet again, he draws from this an isolationist moral, arguing that archaeology should segregate itself from anthropology. Ultimately, this is unconvincing, as the two disciplines share so much in interests and methods. As the theoretical battles over material culture rage, it seems foolish to make war on one's brothers in arms.

Kyvik and Johannesen's succinct and readable pieces seem more balanced, philosophically grounded and hence persuasive. Kyvik makes the crucial epistemological point about how the past is an active terrain for political manipulation, whereby the control over it by elite groups legitimizes ideologies of domination. In their own way, both authors remind us that material culture is intrinsically tangled up with our individual and collective memories (cf. Buchli 2004). Cornell's paper on 'Social Identity, the Body and Power' is also nicely crafted around an historical description of a woman marrying a dead body to legitimize her son into a genealogical lineage. This paper about the inalienability of the economy of death examines the imagery and iconography of the body in an interesting range of cross-disciplinary ways. It would work particularly well in a teaching collection alongside Meskell's fifth chapter on embodiment discussed above.

As a collection, the volume is not particularly well integrated either, reading like a compilation of essays by people who share little other than membership of the same department (with two exceptions). Indeed, the discrepancy of perspectives is striking. In some cases the authors are arguing for completely different visions of what the future study of archaeology and material culture should involve, as Kristiansen hints at in his concluding chapter. It is nevertheless unclear what Kristiansen means by stating that the articles exemplify a 'post-disciplinary' perspective, unless by post-disciplinary he means a series of fragmented and sometimes opposing views. Obviously it is not uncommon for edited volumes to represent heterogeneous approaches. But it is only alluded to in the conclusion that the intention of providing a diversity of perspectives has also resulted in the presentation of somewhat antagonistic epistemological positions.

Hence, the lack of this text's cohesion is markedly problematic. Given that the authors argue for such disparate views, a structure that presented some space for dialogue between the authors would have made the whole a more stimulating contribution (cf. Ingold 1996). It would have equally been interesting to include international voices, especially by those archaeologists who have explored more reflexive forms of writing.

Finally we come to Knappett's *Thinking Through Material Culture*. The author's objective in this book is to demonstrate that even the most trivial artefacts are ingrained within the very humanity of how we know and do things. The piece attempts to put forth a relational perspective on materiality and human agents, as a means of characterizing their interdependencies. His main thesis is to advocate the codependency between mind and matter, perception and practice. To highlight the networks of meaning that derive from our relationships with objects, Knappett uses examples that range from his original research on ancient Aegean cups to Lego motorbike models. Generally he claims that, even though material culture constitutes the foundation of archaeology, the discipline has barely considered the ways in which materiality is fundamental to human cognition and the construction of meaning.

This is a work which will appear controversial to many in material-culture studies from the moment they open its attractive cover. How one reads the book really depends upon what intellectual landscape it is situated in. For example, Knappett's primary critique is that dualistic thought has hindered the social sciences. Within certain landscapes of theory, such as 'cognitive processual' archaeology, this may be a novel and striking thesis. Yet in a broader purview, there are relatively few scholars who have any real qualms with accepting or even exploring existential, phenomenological, poetic, post-modern, symbolic or the many other types of non-Descartian modes of being-in and understanding the world. Indeed, a critique of Cartesian dualities forms part of the general *zeitgeist* of social theory in the first decade of the twenty-first century. To someone not situated in Knappett's particular theoretical environment, hence, the author here seems something of a 'rebel without a cause'. It would therefore help if the book's theoretical breadth was broadened. In this sense, with the exception of his excellent coverage of the French '*Matière à Penser*' school and actor network theory, some of the most significant thinkers in material-culture studies over the past decade are completely passed over (most egregiously, the London group along with the impact that the *Journal of Material Culture* has had on the field

since its inception 10 years ago).

Taking Knappett's project on its own terms, one must sympathize with the difficult interdisciplinary task that he has set out for himself. One must nonetheless question, however, whether he successfully accomplishes this goal. At times, he appears his own worse enemy in straying from the interdisciplinary path and providing what largely appears to be a conventional cognitive archaeology point of view (unless perhaps the extended examination of his own coffee cup is a sophisticated, auto-ethnographic illusory pastiche). Moreover, some significant details are inaccurate. For instance, Lakoff & Johnson have written extensively on metaphor since the last work cited, which dates to the late 1980s; discussion of works such as *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999) would qualify claims to innovation regarding the relationship between mind, body and materiality. Similarly, Knappett's criticism that Tilley relies almost solely 'for his cognitive slant on the work of just two cognitive psychologists' (p. 103) overlooks the influence not only of Lakoff (a cognitive linguist) but also of non-cognitive theorists such as Fernandez (1991), Game & Metcalfe (1996) and many others on Tilley's work. On a more positive note, the best chapter in this volume comes from Knappett's own empirical research on Minoan cups in Bronze Age Crete (ch. 7). As an encapsulated case study, this is not exhaustively situated in a socio-historical context, so its treatment is largely descriptive. For example, he mentions the relevance of graves in symbolically charging objects involved in burial assemblages, but more detail would have been helpful. Still, he convincingly makes the case for how Middle Bronze Age ceramic vessels have come to stand for 'Minoaness'. What is interesting is that it is in this grounded archaeological case study that Knappett's promised interdisciplinary perspective is materialized. It is here that he is finally able to chronicle the ways in which the cups exhibit consistencies in variation that reflect a comprehensive cycle of other Minoan transformations in relation to wider issues involving production and consumption.

Among the general patterns to emerge from seeing these three texts together, the most obvious is how they are trying to re-appropriate material-culture studies back into the realm of archaeology. While the general claim is surely accepted that we are in a post or inter-disciplinary era, where material-culture studies can exist everywhere, Knappett and Fahlander & Oestigaard in fact make explicit claims that archaeology is the privileged home for this approach and conceptual focus, stipulating that 'it is important to put even more stress on archaeology as *the* discipline which studies material culture or the structuring agency

of materiality in general' (Fahlander & Oestigaard, p. 10), or 'of all the disciplines, it is archaeology that needs material culture most' (Knappett, p. 1). Such claims for the primacy of archaeology seems to be a discipline-promoting rhetorical strategy; most art historians, architects or consumer designers would be correct in questioning this. Yet without doubt an increasing interest in explicitly theorizing material culture in archaeology is to be encouraged. Indeed, as Meskell's book in particular shows, the results can be illuminating. But the point is that at this post-interdisciplinary crossroads, we should be lenient about the intellectual possession of what is becoming known as a rejuvenated interest in the cultural understanding of human-material relationships.

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Exploring Human:Ape Relationships Through Time

The Metaphysics of Apes: Negotiating the Animal–Human Boundary, by Raymond Corbey, 2005.

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press;

ISBN 0-521-83683-2 hardback, £40 & US\$65;

ISBN 0-521-54533-1 paperback, £14.99 & US\$23.99;
x + 227 pp., 8 ills.

Steven Mithen

This book deals with the on-going struggle to define the relationship between humans and other animals, especially the great apes. Are we just another unique species? Or does the possession of language, symbolism, self-awareness or some other trait, or collection of traits, set us apart as being fundamentally different from all other species? Raymond Corbey traces the history of answers to this question from the mid-seventeenth century to the present day, providing a fascinating insight into the history of thought, and revealing how the defining features of humans have been continually re-cast whenever human uniqueness was endangered by new data. It is a relatively short book for such a big subject, structured in seven broadly chronologically arranged chapters, with the penultimate three focusing on the recent history and current disputes within the disciplines of archaeology, anthropology and philosophy.

The first chapter provides an general overview of human attitudes to animals in general and especially to apes and monkeys, to provide the basic infrastructure for study that follows. Corbey effortlessly moves from one discipline to another, as much at ease discussing the portrayal of apes in popular culture as he is when explaining the history of fossil discoveries, defining metaphysics or discussing anthropological theory. Chapter Two, *Crafting the Primate Order*, was of greatest interest to me as it discussed the initial response of Europeans to the first specimens of apes brought back from the Tropics in the seventeenth century. Nicholas Tulp of Amsterdam and Edward Tyson of London undertook the first anatomical descriptions, with Tyson making the first dissection of what was probably a juvenile bonobo, which he termed a ‘pyg-mie’. Their work constituted a mix of acute scientific observation and the accommodation of ideas from myth, folk-lore and Christianity, concluding that the Orang-Outang — as all such apes were called — con-

stituted another link in the ‘Great Chain of Being’, one intermediate between monkeys and humans with each species having an immutable essence. Just as remains the case today, attention was paid to language as a defining feature of humanity, with Tyson deciding in 1699 that even though his dissected ape’s larynx and pharynx were morphologically similar to those of a modern human, they were mere ‘pipes and vessels’, never intended by the Creator to enhance rational speech. This chapter proceeds to discuss Linnaeus, who boldly classified apes and humans in the same anatomical order and even placed the Orang-Outang — *Homo sylvestris Orang Outang* — in the same genus as *Homo*, and then the reactions against this by academics such as de Buffon and Blumenbach, who stressed habits and behaviour over mere morphology and hence excluded apes from the human family. Corbey goes on to discuss the views of Petrus Camper who decided that the facial angle, the angle formed between a line running from the upper teeth to the forehead and one from the nose base to the ear hole, was physical evidence of a gradation in nature: the smaller the angle the lower the creature stood in the hierarchy of nature. (Caucasian humans have, of course, the largest angle of all.) Camper was another who insisted that speech was the unique attribute of humans. This view was challenged by James Burnett, alias Lord Monboddo, in the 1770s who argued that the vocal organs of Orang-Outangs had been designed for speech and pointed to examples of feral or so-called ‘wolf-children’ who were speechless but were nevertheless categorized as human.

As Corbey makes clear at the end of this fascinating chapter, by the end of the eighteenth century almost all of the key themes in the debate about human–ape relationships that would be aired up to the present day had arisen. In his next chapter, Corbey’s concern is with the nineteenth century when attention moved from mere kinship between apes and humans to actual descent, and how this could be reconciled — if at all — with human uniqueness. The focus is, of course, on the writings of Darwin, Lyell, Huxley and Owen, with Corbey quoting liberally from their works to illustrate their own individual wrestles with the human–animal boundary. Much of this will be familiar to many readers and I was more interested with the latter part of this chapter, that principally dealt with the views of Sigmund Freud, who believed that everything which befell our prehistoric ancestors would have left a trace within the deep layers of our psyche, and Max Scheler, who argued that the rational, self-conscious human mind is fundamentally different from that of all other animals and sets us apart from the natural world.

Corbey's fourth chapter deals with the history of discovery of hominin fossils and the debates that have taken place over which to designate as *Homo*, comparing Philip Tobias's agonizing over *Homo habilis* with that of Edward Tyson's over his 'pygmie'. As with other chapters, a great deal of ground is covered in a few pages as Corbey moves from cladistics to the Binford–Isaac debates, and then to distinctions between ecological and cultural adaptation, and once again to the potential significance of language. He concludes that archaeologists, just like physical anthropologists, have had a tendency towards 'all or nothing' conceptualizations of humanness, and have often been guilty of double standards in the interpretation of their data so that boundaries between animal-like ancients and fully human modern hominins can be constructed.

While archaeologists may disagree as to where the human–animal boundary can be drawn, their disputes seem relatively trivial compared to those in ethnology, the subject of Corbey's next chapter. Here we find the diametric opposition between biological approaches to human behaviour, such as human socio-biology or behavioural ecology, and those of cultural anthropology. Corbey illustrates these by discussing approaches to conflict and violence in human society, an issue for which he describes are 'baffling divergences' depending upon the approach being taken.

The penultimate sixth chapter discusses research between the 1960s and the present day on non-human primates. This concentrates on the impact of field studies, such by Goodall and Fossey, and stresses the new emphasis placed on sociality and cognition. Corbey examines the role of anthropomorphism when interpreting ape behaviour, the significance of tool-using by chimpanzees and of language experiments, and finally addresses the vexed question of human and ape rights. Corbey describes the Great Ape Project, that involved the 'Declaration of the Rights of Great Apes', as a step in coming to terms with the moral implications of Darwinism. He reflects that Lord Monboddo, who had wanted to include apes within the human family, may have been right, not because of some form of metaphysical essence possessed by these species but because scientists now view apes as individuals with their own personalities who are situated in their own social and historical contexts.

In his final chapter, Corbey draws on some aspects of recent philosophy to make sense of the debates about the human–animal boundary that have been covered in his book. In particular, he cites the value of the 'internal realism' of the American philosopher Hilary Putnam, a pluralist theory of knowledge: any view about the world can only be evaluated in the context of the sets

of rules and assumptions of the discourse from which their view emanates. As such, Corbey argues, Putnam's theory of knowledge helps us make sense of the divergent views of Linnaeus and Blumenbach, Monboddo and Camper, Huxley and Owen, gradists and cladists, and the various schools in the reconstruction of the origin of language. It may indeed do so, but it does not seem to provide us with a steer for the future beyond encouraging tolerance of those views with which we may vehemently disagree.

The Metaphysics of Apes, contains a wealth of information and ideas, reflecting Raymond Corbey's extensive knowledge of anthropology, archaeology and philosophy. The connections he draws between on-going debates regarding human identity and those of the seventeenth century are fascinating. While the book is very well written, its subject matter and interdisciplinary scope make some of the text a challenging read, but one that is extremely rewarding. It should be essential reading for anyone working in the field of human evolution, especially for those bold enough to declare a view on the relationship between human and other animals.

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Rethinking the Mesolithic: Are We There Yet?

Mesolithic Studies at the Beginning of the 21st Century, edited by Nicky Milner & Peter Woodman, 2005. Oxford: Oxbow Books; ISBN 1-84217-200-X paperback, £28 & US\$60; viii+224 pp., 6 tables, 83 figs.

Rick J. Schulting

Mesolithic studies are currently going through something of a renaissance. This is apparent, for example, in the great increase in the number of papers at the two most recent 'Mesolithic in Europe' conferences (Stockholm in 2000 [Larsson *et al.* 2003] and Belfast

in 2005). One reason for this new interest, at least in some parts of Europe, has been a desire to give greater consideration to theoretical trends of the last few decades, seen most strongly in Neolithic studies, and in particular in the influence of what are broadly classed as post-processual approaches. Some Mesolithic scholars (though certainly not all) feel that their field of study is in danger of being marginalized if they do not participate more explicitly in this discourse, hence the recent appearance of a number of papers and volumes attempting to do just this (e.g. Conneller 2000). To some extent, the present volume continues this trend, with all the papers at least making reference to post-processual approaches.

Limited space here precludes a discussion of the fourteen contributions in any detail. Some of the volume's varied themes include histories of research, settlement and mobility, seasonality, agency, critiques of concepts and terminology, gender, agency, emotion, music and the persistence of cultural traditions. There is a strong thread of criticism of past approaches, befitting the agenda of the Theoretical Archaeology Group session on which the volume is in part based. Seasonality and mobility studies in particular are criticized as having been rather simplistically and uncritically applied. As regards seasonality, what debate there has been, has been primarily methodological – as the classic case of Star Carr shows – though, without this issue being resolved, any further interpretation rests on a house of cards. But, aside from this, Milner argues here for a more nuanced, socially and culturally embedded approach to seasonality and to consumption in general. The study of feasting is one possibility that Milner offers cautiously (rightly so, lest it become another bandwagon), and it is also noteworthy as an area of research that engages both processual and post-processual camps (e.g. Dietler & Hayden 2001).

Wickham-Jones and Conneller deal in different ways with the problem of settlement mobility, largely through lithic studies. This is an important debate if we are to understand the scale of Mesolithic societies, and how they moved across, utilized, and understood their environment. While critical of much of the largely processualist-inspired site typological approach as it has been applied to the Mesolithic in northern England, Conneller takes care to note that Binford (1978) in his influential research is actually very nuanced in his discussion of different site types, and the overlap between them. Subsequent applications have tended to simplify this down to base camp vs hunting camp, as well as ignoring many of the originally mooted cautions.

A number of other contributions also raise concerns over the restrictive use of typologies, whether relating to the notion of 'complex hunter-gatherers' (Warren), lithic-'type' artefacts (Woodman) or the terms 'Mesolithic' and 'Neolithic' themselves (Borić). Borić discusses the Mesolithic–Neolithic transition in the Iron Gates, taking scholars to task for their unquestioning and dichotomizing views of 'hunter-gatherer' and 'farmer' identities. Warren questions the continued utility of the concept of 'complex hunter-gatherers', noting that this can lead to a simple pigeon-holing exercise rather than an improved understanding. The same could of course be said for many typologies, when poorly used as ends in themselves, though this does not invariably justify their discard. In my own view, they should be treated as heuristic tools with which to explore variability at the large scale (reducing a complex data set in order to be able to pose limited, but nonetheless potentially interesting, questions); and it is no doubt partly because Warren favours working at the small scale that he finds no value in a tool designed to work in a cross-cultural (in this case) comparative context. While the recent trend towards detailed analysis of the more local scale is welcome it should complement and not replace research at the larger scale. Otherwise we run the risk of being able to say more and more about less and less. But Warren's point about using terms such as 'complexity' too glibly (what kind of complexity, how measured?) is well taken.

Papers by Sternke, Pugsley and to some extent Janik take different approaches to gender, through lithics in the former case and burials in the others. Sternke's paper echoes a strong theme in recent lithic studies, namely the need to consider the social contexts in which technology operates. The case study presented, dealing with varying skill levels apparent in Danish Mesolithic flint assemblages, may not convince all readers, though in this it shares difficulties found in other related studies (e.g. Dobres 1995). It is nevertheless a promising approach that attempts to understand the range of variability represented in lithic assemblages in different ways. Pugsley advocates the investigation of patterning in Mesolithic burial practices as a means to investigating past 'sexualities', though it is not clear from her brief contribution exactly how this is to be done, nor what body of theory would inform the validity of the resulting interpretation. Janik in many ways presents a richer account, dealing with presentations of the body seen through ornaments in burials at the large cemetery of Zvejnieki in Latvia, and self-representations seen in Neolithic figurines.

Papers by Fewster, Hofmann and Morley address what some would see as more ephemeral aspects of the archaeological record, agency, emotion, and music, respectively (though Morley is able to provide a list of Mesolithic musical instruments, making the valid point that music did not cease at the end of the Palaeolithic and only begin again with the Neolithic). Hofmann takes a new look at the polarized debate (violence vs respectful ritual) over the interpretation of the famous 'skull nests' of Ofnet in southern Germany. Rejecting both approaches as limiting, she asks whether, in a (failed) effort to be 'objective', we are missing out on the very thing that makes sites such as these so intriguing and powerful in our imaginations in the first place: their emotional impact.

At the risk of introducing my own bias, what is noticeably absent from the volume (apart from a mention of some aspects by Wickham-Jones) is a discussion of recent biochemical approaches to human and animal bone and to ceramics that is surely set to be one of the most promising avenues of Mesolithic research for the beginning of the twenty-first century, providing insights into a number of the key themes of the volume, including, most obviously, seasonality, mobility, and gender, as well as other themes ranging from population genetics to the specific uses of Ertebølle pottery. The kinds of questions that we can pose are influenced not only by theory but also by methodological advances; the two impact upon one another.

Post-processual approaches are not necessarily in and of themselves superior to other approaches, as often seems to be implied (not just in this volume). Neolithic researchers are now eschewing an earlier reading of material culture as essentially arbitrary 'text' and are re-engaging with its materiality. Post-processual approaches have emphasized culture at the expense of the environment — cries of determinism still resound in some circles at the mere mention of the word. Yet current environmental approaches are far more nuanced, and we ignore the information they provide at our peril (the debate on the siting and inter-visibility of Neolithic monuments providing one obvious example: Chapman & Geary 2000; Fleming 2005). While Mesolithic studies can justifiably be called to task for at times simplistic views of human–environment interactions, they are perhaps also well placed to take advantage of new ways of looking at the environment that are emerging.

In their introduction, Milner & Woodman (p. 7) reflect that processual approaches 'have not answered all our questions'. One response to this might be that it would be disappointing if all our questions *were* so

easily answered (for one thing, it would imply that they were not very interesting or challenging questions). This does not mean that the questions were not worth asking, and indeed many of them still warrant continued investigation (the range of questions considered by researchers working within a processual framework — and this too comprises diverse approaches — has also been expanding, e.g. Enloe (2003) on recognizing sharing through detailed analysis of faunal assemblages at the Upper Palaeolithic sites of Pincevent and Verberie). What post-processualism offers is an expansion in the range of questions being posed — never a bad thing. Whether it will be any better at providing convincing answers remains to be seen.

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The Power of Art

Aesthetics and Rock Art, edited by Thomas Heyd & John Clegg, 2005. Aldershot: Ashgate; ISBN 0-7546-3924-X hardback, £55 & US\$99.95; xxviii+316 pp., 1 table, 106 figs.

Robin Skeates

Stimulated by a recent rekindling of interest in aesthetics and visual culture in the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology, this volume focuses attention on the aesthetics of rock art. In doing so, it raises some old and new questions. What is meant by 'aesthetics' and 'art'? Is aesthetics a cross-cultural category? What can an aesthetics perspective contribute to the study, understanding and contemporary management of rock art; and can rock-art studies broaden the scope of philosophical aesthetics? Varied answers are provided by the seventeen contributors, drawing upon their expertise in archaeology, anthropology, art history, psychology and religious studies and upon their work on the rock art of four continents.

Problems with defining 'aesthetics' and 'art' are infamous, and while some of the contributors evidently struggle with these terms, others offer clarity. Heyd, Lamarque, Morphy, Domeris, Morales and Ouzman critically explore their use, and emphasize the dangers of applying conceptions of aesthetics and art across cultures based on the Western modernist tradition, characterized by a particular elitist discourse about the visual appreciation of beauty and fine art. Most would agree, however, that the continued use of these terms is inevitable, and that broad definitions are required. Domeris helpfully reminds us that the term 'aesthetics' comes from the Greek *aesthesis*, meaning 'sensation' or 'perception'. It is from this etymology, via Kant, that Morphy provides his valuable anthropological definition of aesthetics as 'the effect of the physical properties of objects on the senses, and the qualitative evaluation of those properties' (p. 53). Disappointingly, few of the contributors fully explore this multi-sensory and cultural perspective on aesthetics in their archaeological case studies, a notable exception being Ouzman's chapter on the non-visual perceptual dimensions of San rock engravings. He argues that certain of these were hammered, rubbed, cut and flaked, for the purposes of: producing trance-inducing repetitive percussive sound and stinging tactile sensations; shamanic touching of spiritually powerful images and rocks; and possessing pieces of

potent places. Instead, the contributors advocate one or a combination of three established approaches to rock art and aesthetics, whilst also acknowledging their limitations.

The 'formal approach' still dominates rock-art studies, and is the approach with which many of the contributors feel most comfortable. It characteristically involves the detailed quantitative recording of archaeological data relating to artistic materials, forms, production techniques and styles, and their patterning over space and time. However, stimulated by the theme of aesthetics, all of the contributors also extend this approach to describe a wide variety of qualitative perceptual qualities of rock art. These include the physical properties and relations of the rock surface and markings, their setting, the composition and reworking of design elements, and light effects. Ogawa, for example, describes the correspondence between the shape of the natural rock surface and the outlines of depicted animals in the French Palaeolithic cave of Fonte-de-Gaume. Eastham identifies the use of 'regressed angular' projection in representations of animals at La Grèze and Cosquer in France and Wangewangen in Australia. Nash also notes the aesthetically pleasing qualities of historic Pallava script and images inscribed on stones from Western Java. Some contributors also consider these aesthetic qualities in terms of artistic choices, intentionality and skill. Coles, for example, celebrates the aesthetic impact of the landscape settings and artistry of Bronze Age rock carvings in Scandinavia. However, a serious criticism that can be levelled at such formal studies is their reluctance to move beyond 'objective' description to the interpretation of meanings and values, which some of the contributors write off as lost and unknowable.

The 'informed approach', by contrast, engages in interpretation by focusing on the varied cultural contexts, traditions and discourses within which rock art is embedded, including the intentions of its makers and the perceptions of its audiences, both in the past and the present. Heyd and Morphy note a variety of methods that can be used to contextualize rock art. Ethnographic accounts and immediate post-colonial records, where available, can guide and ground interpretations of indigenous values. The contextual approach of archaeology promotes the identification of associations between different elements and levels of rich archaeological data sets across space and time, and the use of hypotheses to interrogate their meanings and values with reference to broader cultural and historical processes, such as boundary and identity formation. Using this approach, Stone, for example,

examines the intellectual and aesthetic impact of artistically modified stalagmites in Mesoamerican caves, arguing convincingly that they were perceived as spiritually powerful 'found' natural objects while also suggesting that their crude grotesque style represents an intentional alternative to the refined style of contemporary Classic Maya elite art. Reconstructions and re-enactments can also help archaeologists explore how rock art may have been produced and experienced. Eikelkamp, for example, details her experimental ethnographic study of the production of the Ernabella style of abstract line patterns drawn by contemporary Pitjantjatjara women in Australia's Western Desert and interprets its reproduction as an individually and culturally constrained artistic process.

Advocates and opponents of the informed approach also recognize the distance between 'us' and 'them', the cultural and aesthetic bias of the contemporary Western analyst, heritage manager and art curator, and the offence that this appropriation may cause to members of indigenous groups. Skotnes, for example, highlights the aesthetic importance of the form of the rock face, its orientation and the position of the viewer for San painters, a relationship which, she claims, has been overlooked by scholars who have approached it from the perspective of the modern Western art world. Eastham cautions against the archaeological identification of the use of perspective at rock-art sites and criticizes the distortion of their original images through drawn and photographic reproduction and the bias of different researchers' ways of seeing. Wilken also charts and theorizes the displacement of visitors' aesthetic engagements with Lascaux's Palaeolithic art by modern 'hyperreal' and 'virtual' representations, whilst also questioning the concept of the 'authentic' 'original' artwork. These examples encourage a degree of interpretative caution, but also form an integral part of a truly contextual archaeological approach to rock art.

The 'cross-cultural approach' to aesthetics rests, instead, upon the assumption that, despite diverse personal and cultural values, there is a fundamental universality in human perception. Lamarque and Morphy, in particular, argue that, although aesthetics is mediated by culture, it is also a trans-cultural phenomenon, part of the shared biology of fully modern humans, which extends back to the Upper Palaeolithic. It should belong, then, to a meta-language of socio-cultural and psychological analysis. Clegg provides a good example, emphasizing the universality of aspects of optical illusion in art, including ambiguous figures produced by figure-ground reversal and dazzle effects

produced by tricks of light which, he suggests, were intentionally exploited in the distant past, particularly in religious and consciousness-altering contexts. Deręgowski also speculates that the bodies of human beings and felines, characterized by perceptually less stable typical contours than equines and bovines, are inherently more difficult to portray naturalistically by means of a line, and that this explains their relatively infrequent appearance in Palaeolithic art.

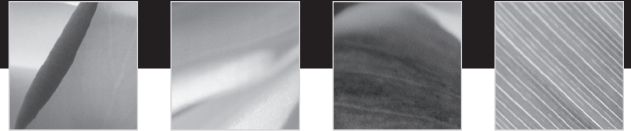
Over all, the book offers something of a mixed bag. There are at least five good papers, which genuinely attempt to tackle the difficult but important topic of aesthetics and rock art. Together, they make a strong case for the study of aesthetics to be taken seriously by researchers seeking a full-bodied understanding of the production and reception of rock art, and offer suggestions and examples of how this might be done in practice. But there is limited consensus, and a pervasive sense of caution, as many feel obliged to address and legitimize their undertaking to a traditionally sceptical rock-art studies audience (as opposed to a more receptive audience of anthropological or 'interpretative' archaeologists). Furthermore, a number of the contributors seem significantly less engaged with the topic. These problems may stem, in part, from the fact that the chapters were, originally, either presented as papers at two rock-art congresses or, in the case of four, published in other contexts some years previously. This highlights the need for fresh case studies of aesthetics and rock art, fully informed by the key concepts and approaches advocated in the first part of this book.

One theme, in particular, which might be explored further in the future, is that of power. As some of the contributors note, visually powerful art-forms can be perceived to be imbued by supernatural potency, particularly when their effect on the senses is that of an overwhelming 'anaesthetic' (e.g. Clottes, Coles, Skotnes, Stone, Ouzman). Furthermore, differential access to this power can be exploited by various people, ranging from artists to curators, as part of culturally diverse political strategies. The great potential of studying aesthetics and rock art is, then, to sense the power of art, both in the past and today.

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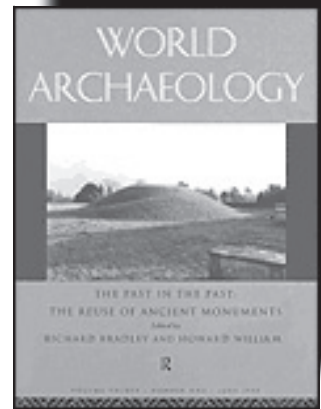
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