Excavation, Narration, and the Wild Man: Montage and Linearity in Representing Archaeology

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SUMMARY   *This article contrasts the way that archaeologists discuss the practice and experience of archaeology with each other to the way archaeology is represented to nonspecialist public audiences. I argue that the former is characterized by "montage," while the latter is typified by a radically opposed linear narrativity, suggesting that montage may offer a way of ameliorating many of the problems linked to popular (mis)conceptions of archaeology.* [archaeological representation, montage, storytelling, narrative, public engagement]

I confess: I am guilty of laughing when a stranger asks me where my bullwhip is once I tell them that I'm an archaeologist. Every time. I am a conspirator in constructing that destructive mythology of archaeology as adventure. I have cavalierly condoned the imagery of the intrepid that characterizes the nauseatingly popular conceptions—conception, really—of archaeology. What else can I do? This view is charismatic and crystallized in a way that would make any contradiction of their half-joke entirely ineffective and inescapably smug.

In trying to understand why every computer engineer, cab driver, and locksmith I meet asks me the same question about my career choice, why I can anticipate with near-perfect accuracy the introductory interaction I will have with all non-anthropologists, why these encounters are so predictably static and similar, perhaps it seems backwards to seek answers in a text composed of the strategic but unpredictable juxtaposition of dissimilar images and moments, such as Michael Taussig's *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man* (1987). And yet, Taussig's book offers a model of representation that contrasts distinctly with the way archaeology is represented to public communities—a model that archaeologists might use to ameliorate some of the consequences associated with the current state of popular archaeological representation and the imagery of the intrepid archaeologist.

Taussig moves beyond simply proffering or advancing the concept of Walter Benjamin's "montage" as a useful hermeneutic for ethnography. His book takes the form of montage as a particular epistemological experience and process, drawing upon historical texts; the words of consultants, images, sounds, synesthesia; as well as his own memory and judgment to write his understanding

of his five years of fieldwork in southwestern Colombia. Taussig's presentation of these materials is kaleidoscopic, shifting between timescapes and landscapes, between personages and persons, in order to make use of the principle of "montage"—as Stanley Mitchell defines it, "the ability to capture the infinite, sudden, or subterranean connections of dissimilars, as the major constitutive principle of the artistic imagination in the age of technology" (Taussig 1987:369). Benjamin (1999) valorized montage as a way of rendering the representation of history both graphic and productive—so that the project of historical materialism would not merely discuss history but consciously construct it and agentively reroute it.

While montage is unique in its sporadic and sensory presentation of contrasting moments, it is not unique in its power to mediate historical and social reality. Narrative and storytelling, generally speaking, have a history of powerfully shaping particular cultural experiences; Taussig (1987) examines specifically the circulation of terrifying stories during the colonization of the region and the articulation of this story-told world with the brutal colonial reality and the pervasive culture of terror.

Meanwhile, every time someone asks me what I was digging for, their language and their word choice sound to me like storylines spun through John Williams scores and "Kali ma!" Memorable lines and iconic scenes become dissociated from the bounds of the film so that an entire network of interrelated archetypes can be called to mind with the mention of a single line or the humming of the theme song. The varied images of the intrepid archaeologist, culled from movies, books, and other popular media, dissociate from their original wider context and find traction in real-life conversations. The sensational, exotic, and adventurous resonates with the reality of archaeology conducted in far-off places and unusual experiences; imaginary and true stories intertwine.

Still, it is somewhat misleading to characterize my own experience with the relationship between archaeology and narrative representation as montage, given the nature of the "funny-every-time" pantomime most archaeologists are adept at performing. This simple, expected ritual contrasts distinctly with Taussig's experience in southwest Colombia and his repeated digestion and regurgitation of *yagé*, his stories of sorcery and healing, and his appeals to varied recollections by men who were privy to horrific colonial oppression. His text is active, disorienting, and complex. My own experience with the structuring stories of archaeology—while perhaps often as distasteful as yagé—is mechanical, superficial, and simple. Each time, I must instantaneously decide: how can I acknowledge my familiarity with these references without becoming a guilty co-conspirator in cementing these archetypes? A chuckle generally suffices.

In some ways, it should be comforting to recognize the impossibility of fitting Taussig's hermeneutic lens to grasp the role of narration in archaeological representation, given the gruesome material he uses to build this lens, particularly in the first portion of the text. He relates stories of native people doused in kerosene and set on fire, messages sent by colonizers to indicate their domination over the territory, along with parallel and complementary stories of native people eating each other alive (Taussig 1987). Here I find a further—and

somewhat disquieting—source of the difficulty with utilizing Taussig's framework to understand the fictive reality of archaeology: in the network of relationships that constitute archaeology, it is the archaeologists who have an enduring connotation of being the colonizers, of arriving as newcomers and commandeering a land physically and intellectually as our own. This role upends Taussig's perspective; whereas he looks at the narrative realities impacting and being reinvented by indigenous groups, instead I want to examine the narrative realities affecting and being deployed by archaeological researchers.

A familiar story: I met my partner for the first time at O'Hare International Airport in Chicago, leaving for my first archaeological excavation in Kenya. After we had passed through the security line together, I felt that we had bared enough of ourselves to each other that at this point I could ask him a personal question.

"This one tree," Jon answered, when I asked him what his favorite part of the archaeological excavation had been the previous year. He had been already to the region in Kenya where we were going to dig, whereas my most intimate experience with archaeology was the Post-It notes I placed on too many pages of James Deetz's *In Small Things Forgotten* (1996). I wanted to know what to expect from the world I would be entering after the 10-hour flight. I needed a story.

Jon transported me and the other students on the research team to the routine of setting trowel to loam in that early kind of timid sunlight wedded to the smell and the feeling and the thought of dew—and a particular tree at the site that seemed to share in the bathing, basking ritual of getting down to business.

Three years and three months later, Michael Shanks is showing slides to a room of Stanford undergraduates, promoting his field school at Binchester, and whether through the magic of filters or Adobe Photoshop or the misbehaving projector, his photographs take on a desaturated, acid tone highlighting the storm clouds and grassy hills of the Northern British landscape in such an otherworldly way that Adam, who has just presented his slides on the field school at Çatalhöyük, whispers to me, "Is there a way to make rural Turkey look that cool?"

Describing the vistas and views we experience when we conduct archaeological research is one of the most prevalent indulgences shared within the archaeological community. We love inviting each other into the sensory experience of the places in which we entrench ourselves, competing to see who has the best food, the best climate, the best adopted stray cats. Sense of place and vision of place have been central to the ever-growing literature on visualization in archaeology (e.g. Evans and Daly 2006; Frischer and Dakouri-Hild 2008; Llobera 2011; Molyneaux 1997; van Dyke 2006). Adam's question to me is perhaps most ironic because of the direct and intensive focus on questions about visualization at Çatalhöyük; Stephanie Moser (2001) has investigated and critiqued the visual conventions for archaeological representation, while others such as Ruth Tringham (2009; 2004) have experimented with the use of technologies like Second Life—an interactive 3D virtual world—and other virtual platforms for representing the full visual experience of life at Çatalhöyük, specifically. The University of Southampton continues to develop new kinds of visuals to make Çatalhöyük accessible to diverse audiences, managing a website appropriately named the "Çatalhöyük Visual Assemblage" that aggregates this

varied imagery. The research team at Çatalhöyük is also currently working to integrate 3D documentation more and more seamlessly into its recording and publication. This work at Çatalhöyük serves as a specific example of the wider ongoing attempt in archaeology to make clear the importance of a sense of place and to communicate this through innovative visualization. Informally and verbally, archaeologists do this frequently through our alluring and engaging descriptions of archaeological sites. In this way, we become intimately and inextricably affiliated with "our" sites. Where we work is mapped onto who we are, much as Taussig's shamans of the highlands become associated with a tropology of cleansing but the lowlanders with wildness (1987:379).

By contrast, the protagonists of the narratives in media about archaeology that are most widely consumed by diverse publics today are entirely decontextualized (see Holtorf 2007). In case Indiana Jones wasn't enough of a Renaissance scholar by the end of the original trilogy, having worked in Egypt, Jordan, and India, he becomes an expert in multiple dead languages of South America in time for the fourth movie (Spielberg 2008). In the *Stargate SG-1* series, Daniel Jones's role as the resident archaeologist is to render unfamiliar planets familiar and navigable by virtue of his expertise with other worlds, generally speaking (Wright 1997–2007). The most widely known narratives of archaeology leave no room for vivid and highly focused microlevel descriptions of the sights and smells archaeologists utilize in the project of contextualizing our identities to each other—the imagined life of the popular fictional archaeologist is too fast-paced and too comprehensive to allow a sensory experience that thorough and personal.

Furthermore, the romanticized archaeologist's expertise with these numerous and diverse worlds only makes sense given that his engagement with each one is bounded and linear, sculpted around the posing and subsequent solution of a single problem. His glimpses, though fleeting, are structured in a linear way that might even be called pedagogical in the way that they engender clear and uncomplicated understanding. Approximately 90 minutes after awakening a vengeful Imhotep, Evelyn reads from the book of Amun-Ra, and *The Mummy* becomes mortal; the problem is solved (Sommers 1999). Lara Croft destroys the Triangle of Light rather than use it for selfish purposes, and her nemesis, too, is vanquished (West 2001). Agatha Christie's detective novels set on archaeological sites, such as *Death on the Nile* (1937), may be the clearest example of the unswerving, bounded, and directed narrative arc, with a clear problem posed at the beginning and an unquestionable end once the culprit is fingered. The message is clear: questions about the past have singular, simple answers that, when found, demand no further inquiry.

Still, Christie and the many directors of Hollywood who have contributed iconic characters and scenes to the archetypical linear narrative of the archaeological expedition may perhaps be excused, as they have not made the same ethical commitments to the past, to cultural heritage, and to descendant or stakeholder communities as have professional and academic archaeologists (although Christie was married to one!). If archaeologists had simply remained silent on the matter until now, the solution would be obvious: create alternate popular texts that demythologize the character of the archaeologist. Let's tell them what we really do.

In fact, however, many archaeologists have attempted to do just this. One of the earliest—and perhaps most disheartening—examples is C.W. Ceram's 1968 *Gods, Graves, and Scholars*, which, despite the scholars named in the title, describes the early expeditions of archaeologists like Austen Henry Layard and Paul-Emile Botta as intrepid explorers and treasure-hunters in the Middle East. More recent attempts to depict the complexities and confusions of archaeological research have not demonstrated this level of complicity, but their impact is limited by their publication in academic journals to which few members of the public have access (e.g. Beaudry 1998; Bender et al. 1997; Flannery 1982; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1998). Choosing alternate publication venues is not the simple solution it might seem; popular writing crafted for a wide public audience is often sidelined by the academic community as frivolous, nonscholarly works that have little bearing on one's scholarship or standing as an academic archaeologist, creating an understandable disincentive to write in this genre (Fagan 2006; Gear and Gear 2003; Wilkinson 2007; see for example Praetzellis 2000, 2003; Willey 1995). Moreover, the publications that have been uniquely successful at achieving wide dissemination without resorting to sensationalizing or exoticizing the archaeological endeavor (e.g. Koff 2005; Thomas 2001; Yadin 1998) tend to appeal to a limited sector of the public for whom history itself is a hobby. They do little to appeal to the same audience settling in for vicarious indulgence in National Geographic's *Diggers* or SpikeTV's *American Diggers* each week.

Perhaps the answer is to change our writing, to conform the time scale of our stories to the narrative structure that makes sense to the most people. How would I do this? How could I make my research and epistemological process appear so clear, predictable, and complete? Would I begin with my arrival on site? I would discount, then, my identification and delineation of the site, as well as the presumed months of research and negotiation I've performed in acquiring the expertise and permission to excavate. Similarly, choosing an archetypical denouement leaves little room for anticipating future field seasons, or the results of ongoing labwork. Instead:

> The looting incident seemed to be Faysif's fall from grace in Willie's eyes. He hasn't come to visit us since he saw the five pits, the perfect flagstone floors violently overturned and the cigarette butts left as mocking forensic evidence. Instead, he asks me every day if I'm going to close Faysif and come back to the main site yet, and every day I promise him we will.

> Today, we found the surface layer we expected to find in the room off the Early Roman caravan station courtyard—but as we removed the last four centimeters of sand, we found what seemed to be the top of a very thin Roman wall in the center of the room, embedded in what we had already started calling the "floor." I called Willie. He came to the site, stood with his hands on his hips and sighed a lot. He asked what I thought, then tried to find a coin to flip to determine whether we should leave or keep excavating. I feigned scholarly shock at letting the disembodied head of King Hussein bin Talal decide whether we would attempt to understand the wall in the floor, so Willie decided the answer would be better found in the stones of a nearby standing wall, which he began dismantling, then immediately gave up, finding nothing but further confusion.

> I took the last measurements I needed for the final report, and we drove away.

This is how I told archaeology to myself in my personal research journal from the summer of 2010, when I was working on a Roman-era excavation with the Bir Madhkur project. The "end" of my time at Khirbet-es-Faysif wasn't marked by some kind of narrative hinge point, a moment of elucidation that would allow for a comfortable resolution of the plot. It was characterized by dialogue and chance, feelings both personal and academic, as well as questions that continued to layer and proliferate as we approached ever closer to the moment when we left the site in our rearview mirror.

Moreover, although this is only one excerpt from the wider context of my journal, any passage selected would by default involve a degree of *in medias res*, beginning with the action already speeding underfoot. Although Taussig doesn't use the term explicitly, it seems that *in medias res* is a critical aspect of the montage project. Excerpts he quotes open with lines such as "The Indian had been traveling with two others along the Arara river when" or "Three enormous Indians painted in red, their mouths full of coca bulging their cheeks, advanced to greet us, hitting us on the back as a form of welcome" (Taussig 1987:83,104). And Taussig's own ethnographic recollection of taking yagé, after a perfunctory and necessary mention of actually drinking the liquid, begins: "Then the *feo* (ugly). My body is distorting and I'm very frightened, limbs stretch out and become detached" (Taussig 1987:141). Taussig's text ends with an invitation to the spirit of Marlene to comment on the book and on the assembled history of good and evil (1987:473). Montage involves a dropping in and trailing out of narrative instances, sensory images, and vividly attuned moments. This is exactly how we are most comfortable describing archaeology to ourselves and to other archaeologists, but we do not object when consumer culture demands that the archaeological research stories be packaged into a resolution-motivated narrative progression that belies the fragmented and unfinished nature of the epistemic experience.

Can we imagine what would happen if the romanticized archaeologist *didn't* know what the wall in the floor means? Or if he tried to leave without jig-sawing every puzzle or sphinxing every riddle? Without being more dramatic than the material I am examining warrants, our archaeo-protagonist would probably die. It is only through correctly solving subsequent and repeated conundrums that the team in *National Treasure* escapes the labyrinthine passageways where they find themselves trapped at the climax of the film (Turteltaub 2004). Movies like *The Exorcist* and *The Omen* capitalize on the mysterious, unanswered questions in archaeology to motivate atmospheres of horror, suspense, and terror (Friedkin 1973, Donner 1976). In *Timeline*, a mishap in the excavation procedure at Castelgard causes archaeologist Edward Johnston to be sent back in time to the 14th century, foisting the obligation on his graduate students to save his life (Crichton 1999).

This is my attempt at characterizing my own mistakes in archaeology in the same way:

> I have condemned generations of future archaeologist to an endless search for that which does not exist. They will rifle endlessly and ever more desperately, through our catalogs of ceramic sherds. Those wretched future Sisyphean researchers have surely already exhausted all digital archives in their thoroughness and their hunger to locate what precisely ceramic sherds #1100–2000 were. Because I was too proud to use a

calculator when assigning reference numbers to our diagnostic sherds, because I was essentially somnambulant, well-intentioned fingers will bleed from the fruitless pursuit of the ceramic correspondences of these arbitrary codes. No one will ever know that ceramic sherd #1493 does not exist, that the number was never assigned; they will instead tragically and dramatically wither until they perish in the hunt for it.

Casting the real-life mistakes of the archaeological process as life threatening cannot read as anything but satire. In fact, bantering about accidentally wasting time and resources chiseling through bedrock, or trading tales of petrified poo (accidentally catalogued as a "figurine") is usually one of the clearest ways to identify a conversation between archaeologists. When we tell each other stories about the field, we relate our mistakes and confusions as natural, funny, and lighthearted—the diametric opposite to how they are portrayed in sensationalized media about the archaeological process.

When archaeologists speak to one another, we are transparent—even proud—about the difficulty of our process; the description of struggle, too, seems like an integral element to Taussig's realization of montage. He begins some of his chapters with phrases such as "I am trying to reproduce a mode of perception—a way of seeing through a way of talking—figuring the world through dialogue that comes alive with sudden transformative force in the crannies of everyday life's pauses and juxtapositions" or "I want to run wildness and its mediations together with topographies of magical zones, following the threads of what I found most general and interconnected" (Taussig 1987:209,221). "I am trying" and "I want to"—he states his goals as ongoing, unfinished projects; he doesn't presume their success. Taussig allows his audience to view his storytelling as a continuing process, about which even he harbors doubts. His presentation of montage involves an undermining of his own authority, which seems functionally similar to archaeologists' flippant anecdotes of folly.

It is significant to remark that I am contrasting the narratives in pop culture with the informal, casual, and—importantly, oral—discourse between archaeologists. That publication format that serves as a keystone to the discipline, the technical excavation report, is certainly not montage, certainly nothing Taussig would find inspiring. Some scholarly articles and books by archaeologists like Bender et al. (1997), Carmel Schrire (1995), and Michael Shanks (2004) have experimented with capitalizing on the performative, evocative, and kaleidoscopic qualities of the writing techniques advanced by Benjamin. Others have employed forms even more nontraditional and potentially engaging, such as plays (e.g. Bapty 1990; Praetzellis and Praetzellis 1998), murder mysteries (Praetzellis 2000, 2003), imagined journals (e.g. Beaudry 1998; Schrire 1995), and fictive narratives about the past (e.g. Edmonds 1999; Flannery 1976; Gear and Gear 2003; Spector 1993). Still, the method of montage as modeled by Taussig snaps most satisfactorily to the dialogical encounters between archaeologists; this is where we thread ourselves into the places we work, where we tell stories of problems without beginnings or endings, where our descriptions are simultaneously vivid, emotional, complex, and piecemeal.

Furthermore, although experimental writing is an undeniable presence in the corpus of archaeological discourse, the stories most widely consumed by modern public audiences, however, are still marked by a substantial adherence

to linear narrativity. Accordingly, it should hardly be surprising that members of the public—when confronted with narratives that resemble archaeological experiences more closely both in form and content—are stricken with what Taussig calls "epistemic murk," where a confusing and unstable reality is generated from a confounding meshing of truth and illusion (1987:121). The problem does not, however, lie with these people, with their propensity to generate conceptions of reality from the stories they hear. As Taussig says, "all societies live by fictions taken as real" (1987:121). He distinguishes the problems of representation that generate cultures of terror; I have here delineated the problems of representation that generate, perhaps, a culture of the intrepid archaeological researcher. The movement away from intimate sensory and contextual description, the bounded and predictable narrative arc, and the life-threatening characterization of mistakes all contrast with the way that archaeologists tell archaeology to one another. Within the in-group, we are collectors like Benjamin and Taussig, we are artists of montage.

How, then, do we relate this to a wider audience? An issue I have not examined here at any length is the disparity in media; no archaeologist can be expected to produce a Hollywood blockbuster film, which by its very nature draws a wider audience than even the most popular books. With new technology, however, archaeologists are faced with an almost overwhelming amount of newfound opportunities to reach varied potential interest groups (Evans and Daly 2006; Kansa et al. 2011; Tringham 2004). The Internet gives us the chance to reach a global audience and not just those with particular cable television channels or the means and desire to sit in specific movie theatres. Archaeologists are now able to present different kinds of multimedia to public audiences at the same time, on a single interactive screen—stories, photos, qualitative description, videos, quantitative data, maps, songs, etc.—and, what is more, we can even do this as the research process is ongoing. This, perhaps, is the way to convey how fragmentary archaeological research necessarily is—to allow members of the public to follow artifacts and interpretations as they move from excavation to lab to "collection." Furthermore, many new database platforms enable comments, contributions, and postings by public users, permitting real-time dialogue between archaeologists and members of the public that is instantaneously published. If the conversations archaeologists hold with each other serve as promising models of montage, surely we can and should attempt to recreate this with non-archaeologists as well.

This is not to say we should give up on intervening in other media. On the contrary—critiquing representations created of us, but not by us, is extremely important, and praising appropriately complex or critical depictions is equally so. But if we do not offer an alternative experience for those who will never participate in an excavation or handle artifacts for themselves, we are passively allowing a particular narrative mediation to produce an epistemic murk among nonspecialists, the very people whose taxes, donations, and enthusiasm we depend upon to support our projects—and whose misunderstanding of the discipline we lament and condemn. When we give up on finding new languages and new media by which represent ourselves, we easily fall into the trap of being complicit in—and even encouraging—this culture of the intrepid. A chuckle generally suffices.

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