



Copyright © 2002 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi)
Vol 2(1): 37–52 [1469-6053(200202)2:1:37–52:020596]

Is what you see all you get?

Recognizing meaning in archaeology

ALEXANDER A. BAUER

Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania

ABSTRACT

Archaeologists wishing to interpret the meanings of artifacts, both symbolic and functional, have increasingly drawn from Saussure-inspired linguistic models as a way to ‘read’ the archaeological record. Such models, however, may not be appropriate for a number of reasons, and should be discarded in favor of a discourse-centered approach, which investigates meaning through practice, currently gaining popularity among American linguistic anthropologists. Using the semiotic theory developed by Charles Sanders Peirce, this article focuses on how people use and interpret material signs such as the artifacts we excavate and analyze to produce knowledge, and how those meanings shift across contexts. Specifically, the semiotic mediation of artifacts is examined in the present context of museum displays to illustrate how the interpretation of artifacts crucially depends on their recognition as meaningful signs by knowing agents.

KEYWORDS

discourse • entextualization • interpretation • material culture • meaning • museums • semiotics



■ INTRODUCTION


The interpretation of 'meaning' is one of the most fundamental of all archaeological endeavors, since the 'New Archaeology' archaeologists confronted the question of how we understand 'meaning' and construct the past (Binford, 1962; Watson et al., 1971). Whether or not we are explicitly addressing theoretical questions or frameworks, we are continually trying to understand the meanings of artifacts in order to make broader statements about the people who made them, the cultural traditions they are a part of and why they were made (Clarke, 1978). More recently, some postprocessual archaeologists have taken a critical view of interpretation (following Clifford and Marcus, 1986; Geertz, 1973) and have contended that we do not just passively 'uncover' past meanings but actively construct them in our present studies (Hodder, 1986; Leone et al., 1987; Shanks and Tilley, 1987; Yates, 1990). Such 'critical' analyses have focused on all aspects of archaeological practice, from the excavation (Hodder, 1997), through the interpretation and display (Leone et al., 1987; Leone and Preucel, 1992; Shanks and Tilley, 1987), to even the writing of site reports themselves (Hodder, 1989).


While these studies have examined how we interpret, talk about and present the past, it is sometimes difficult to evaluate or learn from them as a way to practice archaeology better, apart from making the simple, self-reflective acknowledgment that one's interpretation is tied to present concerns. Is there a way that we can account for and build upon the points raised by these critical studies to develop a more rigorous or holistic archaeology? Can we learn from the analyses of how we construct knowledge in the present to do a better job of constructing our interpretations of the past? It may be argued, in fact, that the manner in which people understand and interact with material objects such as artifacts in the present may be considered similar to the way people engaged with those same artifacts in the past. While the meanings we value certainly vary by contexts, the logical steps we take to understand those meanings may be considered the same, as they are a product of the way humans produce and understand signs, both linguistic and non-linguistic (Bauer and Preucel, 2000). Thus, taking inspiration from recent discourse studies in linguistic anthropology, a productive course of inquiry would be to focus on the way artifacts participate in the production of knowledge today in order to develop a better method of understanding how we construct our interpretations of meanings in the past.

In the present study, I use the semiotic theory developed by the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce to consider the ways people interpret material signs such as artifacts and the role these signs play in the production of knowledge. Following a brief assessment of the utility of this semiotic model to archaeology, I will be considering some important and relevant work done recently in the field of museum studies that focuses on

how people interpret the meanings of material signs such as artifacts. Analyses of museum displays, which are a present-day locus of semiotic mediation between artifacts (often the same artifacts that we excavate) and people, may help us better understand what exactly we do when we interpret the archaeological record. Furthermore, a semiotic analysis allows us to understand the importance of 'entextualization', the process by which we recognize meaningful patterns among co-occurring signs. This has serious implications for the practice of archaeology, for it not only shows that the context of experience (whether in a museum or in the field) shapes the patterns we see and therefore study, but it underscores the fact that our pre-conceived understandings also affect what patterns we look for and, more importantly, ignore.

■ TOWARDS A DISCOURSE-BASED ARCHAEOLOGY

The relationship of archaeology to linguistic anthropology in general and semiotics in particular has sometimes been difficult and has often been nonexistent (Preucel, forthcoming). Before the mid-1980s, models for one discipline were rarely considered applicable for the other (see Hymes, 1970), with a few notable exceptions (Deetz, 1967; Gardin, 1980). With the advent of postprocessual archaeology, some scholars became interested in linguistic models such as those developed by Ricoeur (1991 [1971]), and they wrote of hermeneutics as a way to 'read' the archaeological record as a 'text' (Hodder, 1986; Shanks and Tilley, 1987; Tilley, 1990; 1991). More recently, however, Hodder (1992a; Hodder et al., 1995) has turned away from linguistics and, following Maurice Bloch (1991), has criticized further use of language-based models because he considered that the ambiguity of meaning in material culture was much greater than that for words. While the word 'pot', he argued, is a 'signifier' for the 'signified' concept [],

an object  may be a 'signifier' for many different 'signifieds', therefore making its meaning virtually unknowable (Hodder, 1992a: 201ff.).

While this is certainly a strong criticism of one model used in linguistic studies, the Saussurean model of the sign, it does not follow that all models of the sign have the same limitations. Indeed, Peirce's semiotic, which has influenced much recent linguistic anthropological study, does not share the same perspective of the sign and in fact begins with the assumption that all signs, linguistic and otherwise, may relate to different kinds of meanings (the things or processes recognized as the 'Object' of the Sign) in a number of different ways (or 'modes') (for good summaries of Peirce, see Lee, 1997: 95–134; Parmentier, 1994: 3–44). While the Peircean frame allows for the multiplicity of meaning, it does not claim that multiple meanings may exist



in the same instance and from the same embodied position in a kind of interpretive 'free-for-all' (a position that has been criticized as a 'hyper-relativist' one [Trigger, 1989]). Rather, it suggests that knowledge is 'situated' (see Haraway, 1988) and that cognitions occur over time and in a chain of signification, so that each single idea or interpretation is a single segment in the stream of thought, which is locatable, and even measurable, as a 'text-in-context' (Silverstein and Urban, 1996). Peirce's model thus may provide a way to come to an accommodation between the measurable reality sought by processualists and the 'contextual' meanings interesting to postprocessualists (Bauer and Preucel, 2000).

Peirce developed his model of the sign in reaction to Cartesian dualism, suggesting that meaning cannot be separated into 'objective' and 'subjective' because our understanding of all signs is embedded in experience. For Peirce, a sign has three interrelated components, or modes, which are the Sign, the Object and the Interpretant. Since, at its most basic level, the sign has this triadic structure, signs can only be recognized as they are being interpreted. Such a view has formed the basis of contemporary discourse studies, where the signs' contexts of use are investigated in order to study the different meanings a sign may have (e.g. Keane, 1997; Lee, 1997; Lee and Urban, 1989; Parmentier, 1987; 1994; Singer, 1984; Tambiah, 1984; Urban, 1991). Even there, however, any 'regular' meaning of a word is not considered inherent but derived from a study of the patterning and use of such a word in practice.

In addition, the discourse-based approach has increased our awareness that some meanings are implicit 'truth claims', which are embedded in all discursive acts. Discussions on the metapragmatics of discourse have shown that statements about the world are as dependent on discursive practice to convey their meaning as they are on their denotational content (Foucault, 1970 [1966]). In other words, meaning is coded in the way something is said, and this meaning may complement or contradict the semantic meaning (e.g. in sarcasm). As a result, certain kinds of truth claims require certain kinds of discourse, and this has led to the identification of discourse 'genres', such as those used in legal or ceremonial practices (e.g. DuBois, 1986; Philips, 1993).

But what of material signs, such as artifacts? Can a similar approach be applied to material culture, and might such an endeavor help bridge the gap between our understanding of linguistic and material signs? Certainly dealing with objects presents some immediate difficulties, but, while confusing to deal with, they are not insurmountable. Indeed, examples of Peirce's influence on more 'materially-oriented' fields include Preziosi's (1979a; 1979b) 'architectonic' studies, Broadbent's (1980, 1994) work on architectural semiotics and Gottdeiner's (1995) study of shopping malls and other urban spaces. Because of the perduring nature of objects (as opposed to utterances), we often think of them as definable in space and time, separate

and outside of our experience of them. Well-worn existential arguments aside, this has resulted in our ascribing inherent 'meanings' to objects that archaeologists try to 'uncover'. In fact, it is an object's fact of survival that makes it unique and separable from linguistic signs. What Peirce's model helps us to recognize is that the meanings of signs, whether they be linguistic or material, are contingent upon experience and that this interlinked relation of 'what-we-know-as-a-sign' is the basic unit of analysis, i.e. a sign is not a sign outside the interpretive act. As in discourse studies in linguistics, more general meanings of an object can only be derived from a recognition of the patterned experience people have of that object, or the sum of these acts of interpretation. Thus when we interpret objects, we are in fact trying to identify the patterns of past peoples' engagements with those objects.

Peirce's model thus may be applicable to material culture for two reasons. First, Peirce's theory is a theory of knowledge, not just language, so that his concept of the 'Sign' refers to anything that is interpretable; language, like material culture, is only one particular kind of sign. Second, in Peirce's model, a sign consists of three components (Sign, Object and Interpretant) which shift their status as the semiotic process unfolds. All meaning is relational and mediative, and these meanings shift over time and between contexts. This aspect of the model thus allows it to deal with the great amount of ambiguity Hodder (1992a) attributes to material culture meaning.

To get at the meaning of artifacts, then, perhaps archaeologists should follow a discourse-based approach and focus on how material objects convey knowledge through our experience of them. The archaeological record we interpret gives us clues as to how these artifacts were used and, therefore, held meaning for the people who used them. More important, however, is the fact that the objects that have been excavated and analyzed by researchers and others are now being used again, and in new contexts. If archaeologists want to understand how people in the past constructed knowledge about the world through material culture, it may then be easier to begin in a 'critical' mode and consider how people's (including archaeologists') experience of the same objects in the present shape our understanding of both past and present worlds.

■ THE GLASS CASE AS A LOOKING-GLASS: CONSTRUCTED KNOWLEDGE IN CONSTRUCTED SPACE

Archaeologists interpret objects within two related interactional frames: one that looks backwards, getting at meaning in the past, and one that looks forward, at how we interact with objects today and how they hold meaning for us in the present. These two areas of interpretation are intimately related, however, and postprocessualists have even argued that this dichotomy is a



false one, as interpretation of the past is constituted in present archaeological practice. Hodder (1992b: 178) wrote 'interpretation is neither in the past nor the present. Rather it mediates between the two'. Since past fact and present practice are not in opposition to each other but are embedded within each other, the problem of 'meanings' in the past is necessarily also one of 'methods' in the present. The fact remains that we will not be able to understand 'meanings' in the past until we understand more fully the theoretical processes of knowledge construction archaeologists use in the present, as well as how these questions relate to each other (Bauer and Preucel, 2000). Thus, since our understanding of the past is inextricably bound to present theories and concerns, an examination of how we construct knowledge within one of these frames will illuminate how we do so in the other.

With this in mind, let us examine how such meanings are conveyed in one specific arena, that of the museum display, in order to understand more fully how meanings of objects are constructed and communicated across contexts, in the past and in the present. Museum exhibitions present an unusual opportunity for studying interpretation since meanings are conveyed to the viewer using the same semiotic processes as those operative in any spatial context, such as an archaeological site. By taking apart the processes through which knowledge is conveyed to the museum-goer in these displays, we may be able to develop a better way to interpret objects when we encounter them in their archaeological context. The meanings of objects at an archaeological site are not only interpreted individually, but indexically through the spatio-temporal arrangement of the artifacts in a given context. Similarly, displays in museums convey knowledge about objects through their arrangement in a room or display (Baxandall, 1991). An intermediate case would be an 'open air' museum or site that is open to the public, which purports to merely 're-present' the same arrangement (with the amount of modification ranging from cleaning to reconstruction) that was encountered during the excavation (but see Shanks and Tilley, 1987: 77–9).

Museum displays are a good starting point for developing a discourse-based approach to archaeological interpretation for a number of reasons. First, much critical analysis has been done on the topic (Ames, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1995; Karp et al., 1992; Karp and Lavine, 1991; Kavanagh, 1991; Merriman, 1991; Pearce, 1992; 1994), and thus the present discussion may be able to build on this scholarship. What these analyses have not done, and did not intend to do, is either use a discourse-centered approach based on Peirce's semiotic (but see Hooper-Greenhill, 1991; Pearce, 1994 [1990]; Strong, 1997) or relate present issues to our problem of identifying 'meaning' in the past. Indeed most discussions of museum displays begin and end with museum displays, often dealing with themes of institutionalized hegemony and narrative 'voices' (e.g. Baxandall, 1991). This view is reductionist because it ignores the fact that 'consumers' of culture have the ability to appropriate the culture they consume and create new cultural forms (Gottdeiner, 1995: 181–2).

It is my intention to look beyond this and consider how the observers of displays construct their understandings of what they are seeing. Shanks and Tilley (1987: 95), while still conceiving of exhibits as 'power-laden', shifted the parameters somewhat by suggesting that artifacts are 'fields of contention,' whose significance varies according to how they are embedded in social practice. If, as Gottdeiner (1995: 182) claimed, consumers (such as visitors to a museum) do not just receive cultural knowledge, but play an active role in the creation of new knowledge, then social practice may not be limited to the curation of the exhibit, but also the museum-goer's experience of it, each instance of which has the capability to generate new and different meanings (see also Hooper-Greenhill, 1991; Pearce, 1994 [1990]). Thus the exhibition presents a unique arena for new meanings to be generated, as each visitor may represent a new instance of social action.

Some attempts have been made that go beyond issues of power and hegemony to investigate the way displays make statements about how we regard objects and the people who made them. In a recent study that builds upon the semiotic theories of Saussure and Barthes, Pearce (1994 [1990]) looked at the 'dynamics of viewing' and how objects in museums have the capacity to convey multiple messages to the viewer. This capacity, she said, is due in part to the many kinds of responses viewers might have and part to the fact that meanings may change or accrue with time and as circumstances change. The interpretation of objects is 'dynamic' because of the active role of the viewer. Pearce (1994 [1990]: 26) wrote '[t]he object only takes on life or significance when the viewer carries out his realization, and this is dependent partly upon his disposition and experience, and partly upon the content of the object which works upon him. It is this interplay which creates meaning'.

As a result, Pearce considered the role of the curator in mediating this dialectical process through the museum exhibit. On one hand, a curator must recognize the 'social consensus of meaning' that provides a context for each museum-goer's interpretation of displayed objects, but also that 'each presentation of an object is a selective narrative, and the curator is engaging in a rhetorical act of persuasion, which has an uncertain outcome' (Pearce, 1994 [1990]: 27). She thus highlighted how the context of presentation and observation affects the meanings we give to objects. Similarly, a recent exhibition (and its catalogue) created by the Center for African Art in New York City, *ART/artifact*, was focused primarily on how the context of display leads us to categorize some objects as 'art' and others as 'artifacts' (Danto, 1988; Vogel, 1988). By confronting issues about the perception of objects, and, by association, their makers, this exhibit was able to go beyond the exhibit itself to challenge the viewer, showing us how our interpretation of the world is linked to our experience of it. This exhibit is discussed in more detail below.

Aside from the rich scholarship that already exists on the topic, museum displays are also ideal for the present study because of the way they



resemble the archaeological record itself. When we experience museum displays, we construct knowledge in a non-linear fashion similar to the way that we interpret archaeological data in a 'field' situation. Meanings of artifacts in a display case often convey meaning through their proximity to other objects, to which they are presumably related, either functionally or culturally. An exhibit produces knowledge through this indexicality (to use Peirce's term), which is itself analogous (or 'iconic') of the arrangement encountered by archaeologists in the field. Thus while meaning may be conveyed through indexicality, it is because of this iconic relationship that museum displays may help us to understand how we interpret the archaeological record.¹

In either case, there is a three-part process of semiosis that is operative, with the artifact, or 'sign', at the center (Figure 1, below). In this position of mediation, artifacts interact with two different kinds of 'knower': they are used by the 'curator-knower' to convey specific interpretations and knowledge to the museum-goer or visitor, who becomes a different 'knower' by going through the exhibit. Thus, in the museum display situation, 'knower 1' is the curator, whose knowledge is presumably based on previous interactions with the same or similar objects, and who has decontextualized and recontextualized the text-artifact in the creation of the display. 'Knower 2' then is the museum visitor whose knowledge of these artifacts is constructed while experiencing the display (see also the 'new communication model' proposed by Hooper-Greenhill, 1991: 59). This chain of semiosis is analogous to the 'field' situation, where the scientist shifts places from being 'knower 1' to being 'knower 2'. In this case, 'knower 1' may be thought of as some past actor whose activity resulted in the artifact's context at the site, to be encountered by the 'archaeologist-knower', whose knowledge is constructed through experience much like that of the museum visitor in the previous scenario.

The ability of 'knowers' to identify meaningful linkages among objects in a display (or, therefore, in the field) is dependent upon a process termed 'entextualization', which may be defined as seeing some order of signs that is differentiable from its surround (see Silverstein and Urban, 1996). On a fundamental level, this is how we understand that two pots in a display case are linked together in the telling of the past, while the glass case itself is not meaningful in this regard and is merely 'noise' to be factored out. Since contexts shift with respect to the focus of inquiry, however, the glass case would cease being 'noise' and would enter our consciousness ('present-at-hand' in Heidegger (1962 [1927]: 97ff.) if it were broken (or, more to the point, if we

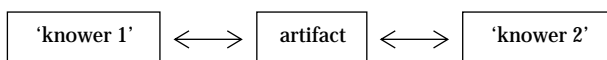


Figure 1 Three-part semiosis process

were interested in how the exhibit was curated, and not the ancient history of the objects themselves). In this case, the connection between those same pots may itself become the 'noise' to be factored out. This also relates to the modes and scales of inquiry, so that what is meaningful for interpretation (entextualizable) varies with the values and social context of the interpreter (Bauer and Preucel, 2000). Thus, entextualization is the process by which we recognize signs such as 'text-artifacts' as separable, decontextualizable and recontextualizable.

Of course, the processes of entextualization operative as an archaeologist digs a site are different from those as visitors attend a museum exhibit. In the latter case, the exhibit has been created with pre-fabricated conditions of entextualization, such as a highly structured arrangement of elements and indexical symbols such as labels (see Strong, 1997). In exhibits, 'curator-knowers' decontextualize artifacts from their excavated contexts and recontextualize them in the display itself, in order to make a statement about the past to the visitors, who will themselves become 'knowers' as they interact with the exhibit. At a site, on the other hand, archaeologists are in the position of 'visitor', and are interested in identifying the different possible patterns of entextualization a given artifact may fit into – patterns that are not pre-fabricated in the previous sense, but rather need to be recognized and deciphered. Basic concerns regard how an artifact relates to the site as well as other co-occurring signs, and whether these recognizable (entextualizable) and extant patterns of co-occurrence may be related to patterns of co-occurrence in the *lived* experience at some time of the past.

Two recent exhibits which have to some extent broken down the divide between the 'curator-knower' and the 'visitor-knower' by focusing on the process of 'knowing' itself are *ART/artifact*, an exhibit at New York City's Center for African Art about how people define and therefore regard African art, and *Stonehenge Belongs to You and Me*, a travelling exhibit centering on the multiple ways people interpret and feel culturally connected to the famous Stonehenge monument in southern England. By focusing on one stage of the semiotic chain described above that is operative in most museums, these exhibits act metadiscursively to raise our awareness about how interpretation, and therefore 'knowing', is culturally as well as individually bound. As analogues to 'sites', they have interesting implications for the practice of archaeology in the field.

Museum displays, the labels and the discussions within them all act metadiscursively to tell visitors how to regard the objects they are viewing. Indeed the very fact that objects are in a museum conditions how we are to 'see' those objects (MacGaffey, 1998: 225–7). Building on the importance of context to meaning in displays, the exhibit *ART/artifact* was about 'the ways western outsiders have regarded African art and material culture over the past half century', according to its curator, Susan Vogel (1988: 11). Just



as a pile of old tires may be transformed into 'art' when labeled and placed within the space of a museum (Alan Kaprow's *Yard* at the Whitney Museum of American Art, 1961), so an African stool displayed in a gallery is transformed from 'artifact' to 'art' (Vogel, 1988: 11–12; see also Gell, 1996). Taking a critical approach to context and meaning, the exhibit featured installations that mimicked some of the ways in which African material culture has been viewed by Western audiences: an avant-garde art gallery, where objects were placed in pools of light with a minimum of contextualizing information, such as titles or cultural affiliation; a 1905 'curiosity room', where they were displayed alongside zoological specimens; a natural-history museum, where the objects were used as didactic tools to illustrate aspects of African culture (see discussion in Vogel, 1991).

By problematizing how presentation shapes interpretation, *ART/artifact* went beyond the normal discursive formation of 'knower 1-object-knower 2' to become a metadiscursive exhibit about both the text-artifacts as well as how we define and understand such artifacts. It highlighted the role of 'knower 1' in museums – usually the curator of an exhibit – that usually goes unacknowledged, as if it were a transcendental voice of authority, rather than an individual with an individual point of view (see Gurian, 1991: 187). In addition, this exhibit showed how much our interpretation of objects depends on the mental linkages and larger patterns we see among objects and their contexts. As such, it acted metadiscursively to point out how all participants of culture, individuals and institutions alike, engage in processes of entextualization.

While *ART/artifact* focused on the processes of entextualization operative in exhibiting objects, thereby bringing the 'curator-knower' in line with the 'visitor-knower', the travelling exhibition *Stonehenge Belongs to You and Me* focused attention in the opposite direction: on the entextualization process operative when archaeologists interpret artifacts in their 'field' context. This exhibit made a point of representing the interpretations of Stonehenge held by 'excluded', 'unofficial' and 'marginal' groups, so that opposing interpretations were presented alongside each other (Bender, 1998). Like other 'critical' studies of museums, it problematized the hegemonic power embedded in such displays, but as an exhibit, it transcended purely academic discourse about the role of museums to make this usually unacknowledged role transparent to the 'public' (those visiting the exhibit).

Like *ART/artifact*, *Stonehenge* raised our awareness about how interpretations of objects are constrained by their physical contexts as well as by the mental contexts of the interpreters themselves. Bender wrote that much of the exhibit focused on 'how the past is used over and over again, how there are different pasts at different times, and different pasts for different people' (Bender, 1998: 154). It highlighted to the visitor how each person's understanding of the past is negotiated and articulated through present practice.

But the exhibition did not end there, simply satisfied as a post-modern didactic tool. Rather, the visitor could also shape the future ‘tellings’ of the exhibit: comment boards and other interactive displays allowed for the ‘visitor-knower’ to play the role of ‘curator-knower’, and over time these comments, as well as other responses, were themselves incorporated into the body of the exhibit (Bender, 1998: 167ff., and Figures 38–41).

■ IMPLICATIONS

Peircean semiotics may provide a productive way to investigate meanings in archaeology and how we construct our interpretations of those meanings. Developed as a critique of Kantian transcendentalism, in which ‘subjects’ and ‘objects’ are timeless constructs, Peirce’s model suggests that different meanings may be interpreted from multiple, time-bound, embodied positions, each of which are particular and locatable. But while the Peircean frame does allow for the multiplicity of meaning – one of the goals of many postprocessualist theorists – this is not meant to suggest that multiple meanings exist from the same embodied position in time and space. In this sense, ‘reality’ does exist, but as an intersubjective regularity between the Interpretant and the Sign-Object relation it is referring to. In other words, Peirce’s position may be most closely aligned with Haraway’s (1988) notion of ‘situated knowledge’.

Peirce’s model has been influential in contemporary linguistic anthropology, where discourse studies have focused on the process of entextualization, or the ability to recognize meaningful patterns of co-occurring signs as ‘texts’ that are differentiable from their surround (Silverstein and Urban, 1996). What I have tried to show here is that, for material culture as well, all participants of culture engage in entextualization, and that our ability to make interpretations and understand meanings – in other words, to ‘know’ – is contingent upon the patterns of entextualization we recognize and use. As Pearce (1994 [1990]: 26) noted, ‘[t]he message or meaning which the object offers is always incomplete and each viewer fills in the gaps in his own way’. Museum displays thus provide an interesting locus where these processes of entextualization are operationalized and therefore may be examined. They also provide an iconic analogy with the ‘site’ context where archaeologists engage with the ongoing process of interpretation. If we understand better the way interpretation is shaped by context in the museum setting, we may use this information to understand better the way our interpretations in the field are conditioned and limited by our ability to ‘know’.

So what can this tell us about the practice of archaeology? Even in as highly constructed a situation as a museum display, where intentionality is



obviously an important factor, new meanings may be generated at the stage between the object and visitor (see Hooper-Greenhill, 1991). As the Stonehenge exhibit illustrates, in less obviously 'constructed' situations such as a site, where 'intentionality' is one of many factors, or simply irrelevant (see DuBois, 1993),² there is the possibility for many and various interpretations to emerge. Each person entextualizes differently and congruencies among interpretations depend on numerous factors, e.g. two anthropologists educated at American universities might see many similarities because the patterns they look for are similar. As Bender (1998: 1) noted when she questioned her own way of 'seeing' landscapes, '[i]t took a while to recognize that not just the landscape, but my reaction, my desire to unpack a sequence of events, was quite culturally specific'.

Thus one implication of this is that we should be conscious of the 'situatedness' of the interpreter when considering their analysis or presentation (see Haraway, 1988). Moreover, this variation in perception suggests that it would be valuable to have numerous interpreters on hand, ideally each of whom would have a different perspective from which to recognize patterns of meaning (a suggestion already made by Hodder, 1997). As in discourse studies in linguistic anthropology, a regular or generalized 'meaning' is derived from the patterned experience of many people, with many individual experiences. Our understandings of past meanings too may be derived from the general patterning of individual experiences (e.g. Tarlow [1999] does this very thing in her recent interpretation of burial practices on the Orkney Islands). Furthermore, on a methodological level, archaeological interpretation may be derived (and usually is, over the long term of scholarly inquiry) from the patterned response of different archaeologists.

More importantly, however, we must develop a clearer understanding of the role that entextualization plays in the interpretation of meaning. All archaeologists recognize that patterns on the ground shape our understanding of the past; just as important is the converse notion that our understanding of the past affects what patterns we recognize on the ground: our entextualization means that signs that do not 'fit' a pattern we are open to seeing are filtered out of our perception as 'noise'. The implication then is for us to consciously look for new patterns among signs such as artifacts and space and to be aware of our tendency not to recognize that which we do not know to a certain degree already. One way to do this is through metadiscursive practices, like those operative in the museum displays discussed above, so that we are constantly aware of our actions as interpreters. In addition, we should consciously look for new ways in which artifact-signs may convey meaning. Only if we recognize the patterns of entextualization we use in our interpretations can we see our limitations as interpreters; only if we look for new patterns can we hope to move beyond them.

Notes

This article arises out of an ongoing research project with Robert W. Preucel of the University of Pennsylvania on semiotics and archaeology. Many of the ideas explored here are the direct result of the discussions and debates we have had over the past couple of years, and I owe him the greatest thanks for being the enthusiastic sage and kind teacher he is. This article has also benefited from insights and direction from Asif Agha, who suggested that I examine museum displays in the first place as part of his seminar 'Knowledge and the Knower' at the University of Pennsylvania. Some of this discussion also can be traced back to a class I took with Wyatt MacGaffey in my first year at Haverford College, and which has stayed with me ever since. I am grateful to him for creating such a memorable class (and letting me take it). Finally, I owe many thanks to Lynn Meskell, whose advice and encouragement has enabled me to more fully develop the article as a whole, and who has given me the opportunity to present my ideas here.

- 1 While it is true that museum exhibits are constructed by curators with a specific agenda in mind, which is arguably different from the 'field' situation where the location of objects may be the result of various natural and cultural processes, this does not undermine the fact that the semiotic mediation between viewer and viewed is fundamentally the same. Moreover, as Binford (1981) pointed out in his debate on the 'Pompeii premise' with Schiffer (1976; 1985), it may be a mistake to privilege certain phases or kinds of actions over others in our attempts to interpret the past. In this respect, we should not regard the movement of objects by a curatorial team any differently than we do the movement of those same objects by some later occupants of a site (who disturb its earlier layers). In either case, however, one is problematizing the intentions of some past user or agent, a question that is beyond the scope of this article, which is about how context shapes interpretation.
- 2 While some archaeologists have focused on this problem of 'intentionality' (see contributions in Hodder et al., 1995), it may not be a significant or even appropriate one for the discipline. Indeed, DuBois (1993) pointed out that intentionality may not always be relevant even in contemporary discourse studies, since the importance or relevance of intentionality does not vary by society or culture, but by discourse genre. This view may support processualist claims that archaeological inquiries, which focus on longer-term social processes, may not be able to uncover 'intentions' that do not result in otherwise perceptible social action.

References

- Ames, M. (1991) *Cannibal Tours and Glass Boxes: The Anthropology of Museums*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press.
- Bauer, A.A. and R.W. Preucel (2000) *The Meaning of Meaning: A Semiotic Approach to Archaeological Interpretation*. Paper presented at the European Association of Archaeologists, Lisbon.
- Baxandall, M. (1991) 'Exhibiting Intention: Some Preconditions of the Visual Display of Culturally Purposeful Objects', in I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (eds)



- Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, pp. 33–41. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Bender, B. (1998) *Stonehenge: Making Space*. Oxford: Berg.
- Binford, L.R. (1962) 'Archaeology as Anthropology', *American Antiquity* 28: 217–25.
- Binford, L.R. (1981) 'Behavioral Archaeology and the "Pompeii Premise"', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 37: 195–208.
- Bloch, M. (1991) 'Language, Anthropology and Cognitive Science', *Man* 26: 183–98.
- Broadbent, G. (1980) 'Architects and their Symbols', *Built Environment* 6: 10–28.
- Broadbent, G. (1994) 'Recent Developments in Architectural Semiotics', *Semiotica* 101(1/2): 73–101.
- Clarke, D.L. (1978) *Analytical Archaeology*, 2nd edn. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Clifford, J. and G.E. Marcus, eds (1986) *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Danto, A.C. (1988) 'Artifact and Art', in *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, pp. 18–32. New York: Center for African Art.
- Deetz, J. (1967) *Invitation to Archaeology*. New York: Anchor Books.
- DuBois, J.W. (1986) 'Self-evidence as Ritual Speech', in W. Chafe and J. Nichols (eds) *Evidentiality: The Linguistic Coding of Epistemology*, pp. 313–36. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- DuBois, J.W. (1993) 'Meaning without Intentions: Lessons from Divination', in J. Hill and J.T. Irvine (eds) *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*, pp. 48–71. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Foucault, M. (1970 [1966]) *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Gardin, J.-C. (1980) *Archaeological Constructs*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Geertz, C. (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gell, A. (1996) 'Vogel's Net: Traps as Artifacts and Artworks as Traps', *Journal of Material Culture* 1: 15–38.
- Gottdeiner, M. (1995) *Postmodern Semiotics: Material Culture and the Forms of Postmodern Life*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Gurian, E.H. (1991) 'Noodling Around with Exhibition Opportunities', in I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (eds) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, pp. 176–90. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Haraway, D. (1988) 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies* 14: 575–99.
- Heidegger, M. (1962 [1927]) *Being and Time* (trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson). San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row.
- Hodder, I. (1986) *Reading the Past: Current Approaches to Interpretation in Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hodder, I. (1989) 'Writing Archaeology: Site Reports in Context', *Antiquity* 63: 268–74.
- Hodder, I. (1992a) 'Material Practice, Symbolism and Ideology', in I. Hodder (ed.) *Theory and Practice in Archaeology*, pp. 201–12. London: Routledge.
- Hodder, I. (1992b) *Theory and Practice in Archaeology*. London: Routledge.
- Hodder, I. (1997) 'Always Momentary, Fluid and Flexible: Toward a Reflexive Excavation Methodology', *Antiquity* 71: 692–700.

- Hodder, I., M. Shanks, A. Alexandri, V. Buchli, J. Carman, J. Last and G. Lucas, eds (1995) *Interpreting Archaeology: Finding Meaning in the Past*. London: Routledge.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1991) 'A New Communication Model for Museums', in G. Kavanagh (ed.) *Museum Languages: Objects and Texts*, pp. 47–61. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E., ed. (1995) *Museum, Media, Message*. London: Routledge.
- Hymes, D. (1970) 'Linguistic Models in Archaeology', in *Archéologie et Calculateurs: Problèmes Sémiologique et Mathématiques*, pp. 91–120. Paris: CNRS.
- Karp, I., M. Kreamer and S.D. Lavine, eds (1992) *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Karp, I. and S.D. Lavine, eds (1991) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Kavanagh, G., ed. (1991) *Museum Languages: Objects and Texts*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Keane, W. (1997) *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in an Indonesian Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lee, B. (1997) *Talking Heads: Language, Metalanguage, and the Semiotics of Subjectivity*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Lee, B. and G. Urban, eds (1989) *Semiotics, Self, and Society*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Leone, M.P., P.B. Potter and P. Shackel (1987) 'Toward a Critical Archaeology', *Current Anthropology* 28: 283–302.
- Leone, M.P. and R.W. Preucel (1992) 'Archaeology in a Democratic Society: A Critical Theory Approach', in L. Wandsnider (ed.) *Quandaries and Quests: Visions for Archaeology's Future*, pp. 115–35. Southern Illinois University at Carbondale Occasional Paper. vol. 20. Carbondale, IL: Center for Archaeological Investigations.
- MacGaffey, W. (1998) '“Magic, or as we usually say, Art”: A Framework for Comparing European and African Art', in E. Schildkrout and C.A. Keim (eds) *The Scramble for Art in Central Africa*, pp. 217–35. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Merriman, N. (1991) *Beyond the Glass Case: The Past, the Heritage and the Public in Britain*. Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Parmentier, R.J. (1987) *The Sacred Remains: Myth, History, and Polity in Belau*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Parmentier, R.J. (1994) *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Pearce, S.M. (1992) *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution.
- Pearce, S.M. (1994 [1990]) 'Objects as Meaning: Or Narrating the Past', in S.M. Pearce (ed.) *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, pp. 19–29. London: Routledge.
- Pearce, S.M., ed. (1994) *Interpreting Objects and Collections*. London: Routledge.
- Phillips, S.U. (1993) 'Evidentiary Standards for American Trials: Just the Facts', in J.H. Hill and J.T. Irvine (eds) *Responsibility and Evidence in Oral Discourse*, pp. 248–59. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Preucel, R.W. (forthcoming) *Archaeological Semiotics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Preziosi, D. (1979a) *Architecture, Language and Meaning*. Berlin: Mouton.



- Preziosi, D. (1979b) *The Semiotics of the Built Environment*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Ricoeur, P. (1991 [1971]) 'The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as Text', in K. Blamey and J.B. Thompson (eds and trans.) *From Text to Action: Essays in Hermeneutics 2*, pp. 144–67. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press.
- Schiffer, M.B. (1976) *Behavioral Archaeology*. New York: Academic Press.
- Schiffer, M.B. (1985) 'Is There a "Pompeii Premise" in Archaeology?', *Journal of Anthropological Research* 41: 18–41.
- Shanks, M. and C. Tilley (1987) *Re-Constructing Archaeology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Silverstein, M. and G. Urban (1996) 'The Natural History of Discourse', in M. Silverstein and G. Urban (eds) *Natural Histories of Discourse*, pp. 1–17. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Singer, M. (1984) *Man's Glassy Essence: Explorations in Semiotic Anthropology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Strong, P.T. (1997) 'Exclusive Labels: Indexing the National "We" in Commemorative and Oppositional Exhibitions', *Museum Anthropology* 21: 42–56.
- Tambiah, S.J. (1984) *The Buddhist Saints of the Forest and the Cult of Amulets*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Tarlow, S. (1999) *Bereavement and Commemoration: An Archaeology of Mortality*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tilley, C., ed. (1990) *Reading Material Culture*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Tilley, C. (1991) *Material Culture and Text: The Art of Ambiguity*. London: Routledge.
- Trigger, B.G. (1989) 'Hyperrelativism, Responsibility, and the Social Sciences', *Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology* 26: 776–97.
- Urban, G. (1991) *A Discourse-Centered Approach to Culture*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press.
- Vogel, S. (1988) 'Introduction', in *ART/artifact: African Art in Anthropology Collections*, pp. 11–17. New York: Center for African Art.
- Vogel, S. (1991) 'Always True to the Object, in Our Fashion', in I. Karp and S.D. Lavine (eds) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, pp. 191–204. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.
- Watson, P.J., S.A. LeBlanc and C.L. Redman (1971) *Explanation in Archaeology: An Explicitly Scientific Approach*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Yates, T. (1990) 'Archaeology Through the Looking-Glass', in I. Bapty and T. Yates (eds) *Archaeology after Structuralism*, pp. 154–202. London: Routledge.

ALEXANDER A. BAUER is a doctoral student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania, conducting research on maritime trade and communication in the prehistoric Black Sea region. His research interests include prehistoric trade and the epistemology of archaeology, and he is currently working on developing a semiotic approach to archaeological interpretation.
[email: bauer2@sas.upenn.edu]