

Staging the Practices of Heritage

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Staging the Practices of Heritage

Bill Gale

Raphael Samuel, *Theatres of Memory. Volume 1: Past and Present in Contemporary Culture* (New York: Verso 1994).

RAPHAEL SAMUEL begins the first volume of *Theatres of Memory* by sketching a contextual approach to the study of memory and history. He argues that memory, far from being a passive image bank of the past, is an active shaping force in the construction of people's lives and contingent upon historical conditions. As a dynamic force memory is dialectically related to history, itself inherently revisionist. History splinters what may have been presented as a whole and integrates what may have been divergent. Samuel views memory as an elemental object of history that is situated in the tension between integrating and displacing forces of history. He then organizes a series of essays concerned with history as an organic form of knowledge, and one whose sources go beyond real-life experience to draw from memory and myth, fantasy and desire, and the timeless past of "tradition."

This is a wide-ranging book concerned with how objects of history are being reinterpreted due to "changes in the environment, innovations in the technologies of retrieval, and democratizations in the production and dissemination of knowledge." (xi) Individual sections cover the reuse and reinterpretation of past building materials and decorations, what Samuel terms "retrochic"; resurrection of the past through heritage sites; heritage as a pedagogy and its relationship to academic history; photography and the visualization of history; and the dramatic presentation of history through cinema and theatre.

Throughout his examination of profuse examples of material culture Samuel addresses possibilities for the study of history to move beyond the limitations of presupposing the existence of an objectively verifiable body of knowledge. Such a move, he proposes, must recognize that the historian's gaze fabricates contexts in the course of making order from chaos. In this process historians are faced with

Bill Gale, "Staging the Practices of Heritage," *Labour/Le Travail*, 37 (Spring 1996), 289-99.

the opportunity to broaden the subject matter of history to include popular memory and myth, the written record, and the spoken word as they are inscribed in monuments and in current cultural artifacts that look to the past. Samuel proposes that a contextual history must pay attention to the dramatic staging and presentation of memory. The "playful" reinterpretation of images of the past in the popular culture of the present is, according to Samuel, an opening for historians to construct history as a "hybrid form of knowledge" that will stand as a political alternative to a single master narrative.

One of the dangers in seeing memory as an organic source of knowledge is that it may become the object of research rather than investigating how memory is historically constituted. I will examine this problem of constructing knowledge by discussing how images of the past can obscure the dominant ideologies behind their production. Reification of historical images and objects mystifies the way artifacts are used to construct a discourse of heritage in the present. Conversely, approaching social memory as a problematic leads toward viewing artifacts as social practices whose meaning is contingent upon the production of context and the consumption of images. This tension is particularly true in places that have experienced deindustrialization and are now attempting to reinterpret the value of industrial artifacts as images of heritage. Recognizing the politics of social memory depends on seeing its contingent nature: the way reinterpretation of images is embedded in the production of social relations and difference.

Samuel's conceptualization of the "art of memory" at first raises some interesting possibilities for approaching two critical issues: the tension between human agency and the historically specific structuring of society and the problem of accounting for the uniqueness of memory in the context of more general explanations of historical change. Unfortunately, Samuel proceeds to sit in apparent awe of the dazzling show that memory presents without doing much in the way of asking what it all means in the context of changing social relations. Memory, in the way Samuel conceptualizes it as something primitive in contrast to the self-conscious writing of history, becomes naturalized as instinctual and universal. Left unexamined is how memory is constructed as a social practice, for example, brick as a desirable "retro" building material contrasts with brick industrial structures devalued through capital disinvestment. The pertinent question becomes how might we demystify the naturalization of particular memories in order to reveal the possibilities for making our own social memories?¹ Artifacts, as images of memory, become Samuel's object of research and he draws our attention to the image's surface and

¹For a discussion of metaphors of nature and the "naturalization" of particular forms of social relations and approaches to knowledge see, David Demeritt, "The Nature of Metaphors in Cultural Geography and Environmental History," *Progress in Human Geography*, 18 (1994), 163-85, and Cindi Katz and Andrew Kirby, "In the Nature of Things: The Environment and Everyday Life," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series 16 (1991), 259-71.

its fragmented reflections. This approach avoids moving below the surface of particular representations of artifacts where we might view the social production of memory in historically and geographically specific contexts. Heritage, in particular, sits at the intersection of history and memory and ought to be interpreted in the context of dominant discourses which develop notions of legitimacy and authenticity through the objectification of memory and artifacts, and counter-discourses that expose the ways in which certain versions of memory acquire a natural status.

By naturalizing and objectifying memory and artifacts Samuel is unable to address effectively a critical conceptual issue raised in his early discussion of history and memory: coherence and difference. *Theatres of Memory* initially suggests that the power of history lies in its use of abstractions to synthesize classes of information. In contrast, it is primitive and concrete images which are the stuff of individual memories. By the end of the book Samuel approaches history as a hybrid form of knowledge whose subject matter includes not only chronicle and commentary but also ballad and song, legends and proverbs, riddles and puzzles. Lest this argument for the synthetic nature of history seem too "promiscuous" Samuel adds that the politics of history is an inescapable element in our discussion of historical knowledge. Yet, in taking up this last point we might inquire into the politics of Samuel's book. Its embrace of alternatives to a master narrative of history emphasizes a fragmented world represented through surfaces and appearances. In arguing for the importance of this world as a historical subject, what meaning does Samuel construct for the politically charged act of interpreting representations? Because this question is not explicitly raised by Samuel, images of history and memory all too easily become the object of research rather than treated as historical changes that are both condition and outcome of these images.

To realize a contextual approach to the construction of social memory it is critical to place history and memory in the context of an ongoing tension between a historically and geographically specific production of coherence and difference. For example, Raymond Williams shows that heritage and landscape may, through their images, represent settings for a stable or even moral society, but they also act as curtains which obscure the everyday struggles, achievements, and accidents of social relations.² The fragmentation or difference to which Williams refers is seen and remembered in the context of a historical reality that includes the practices and structures of social power. This is one example of a way of seeing what Stephen Daniels calls the duplicity of landscape: its redemptive and manipulative dimensions which in turn define the reality of describing and representing artifacts.³

While Samuel argues that memory is not a passive bank of images, he recognizes that image-conscious societies treat "memory places" as living links to

²Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (New York 1973).

³Stephen Daniels, "Marxism, Culture and the Duplicity of Landscape," in Richard Peet and Nigel Thrift, eds., *New Models in Geography* (London 1989), 196-220.

the past. There is an uneasy tension in Samuel's book between the "unofficial knowledge" present in popular memory and a historicization of certain landscapes into objects of study. By not examining the contradictory manner in which images are produced, and in turn construct notions of authenticity and heritage, memory and artifacts are made the object of research. This obscures rather than reveals the ways in which particular forms of social relations are embedded in memory and material culture. Dorothy Smith has argued that everyday life is not a phenomenon, but a problematic which expresses the contradictions of capitalist society.⁴ Likewise, memory places, or heritage landscapes, express the tension between direct lived experience and the social organization of everyday life. Samuel's emphasis on the intuitive dimension of memory too often relegates the material organization of experience to a contingent factor for re-working images of materiality. For example, in the section examining retrochic, decorative forms of artifacts become the object of research in a process whereby old materials are consumed in new ways, both functional and aesthetic. This retrofitting of materials raises many interesting questions concerning the mechanisms which connect material culture and the consumption of images. Unfortunately, little consideration is given to the social relations that are intertwined with material culture and which act as a context for the production of objects of retrochic. Whose labour fashions the household fittings that are then interpreted in "ironic and playful" ways? Do those workers also consume the products of their labours in an aesthetic manner that allows them to become self conscious regarding the value of their labour? Or, maybe pastiche is not an adequate explanation for the problematic of commodity fetishism: the appropriation of material relations between people and a concealed reality of the social relations between things.

Memory, though, is not simply determined as ideology in reproducing capitalist social relations. As a social practice, memory carries the contradictions of a social system geared to the rationalization of everyday life. Pierre Nora points to an acceleration of history that "confronts us with the brutal realization of the difference between real memory — social and unviolated, exemplified in but also retained as the secret of so-called primitive or archaic societies — and history, which is how our hopelessly forgotten modern societies, propelled by change, organize our past."⁵ Samuel builds on this dynamic to show that the irony and aesthetic playfulness of retrochic is a form of rebellion against modernism. In contrast to a concern with restoration of original detail, retrochic uses a parody of form to draw attention to "not an obsession with the past but an indifference to it." (95) In its absence of sentimentality, Samuel argues, retrochic abolishes the category differences between past and present, opening up a two-way traffic between them. Everyday inanimate objects become animated as retrochic "minis-

⁴Dorothy Smith, *The Everyday World as Problematic* (Boston 1987).

⁵Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire," *Representations*, 26 (1989), 8.

ters to the appetite for fantasy and desire.” (113) For Samuel retrochic becomes a way to retrieve the past when only traces comprise the documentary record. By seizing upon the role of artifacts to construct imagined pasts, he argues, retrochic may “prepare the way for a new family of alternative histories which take as their starting point the bric-a-brac of material culture, the flotsam and jetsam of everyday life.” (114)

Looking to the objects of everyday life also reveals that the relationship between memory and artifacts is embedded in the dynamics of social structures. Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross argue that as a problematic of social reproduction the everyday “harbors the possibility of its own transformation; it gives rise to desires which cannot be satisfied within a weekly cycle of production/consumption.”⁶ Like Samuel, they see in the midst of the utterly ordinary a space in which utopian and political aspirations can crystallize. But, where Samuel dismisses criticism that retrochic commodifies the past, Kaplan and Ross firmly root their analysis in the way dominant relations of production tirelessly and relentlessly reproduce themselves in the contradictions of lived experience. Instead of making their object of inquiry the morphology of the artifact, they focus on how collective subjects act in the midst of contradictory changes in form. Henri Lefebvre also focuses his critique of everyday life on making visible the reproduction of a functionalism in capitalist society which reconstructs diversity from homogenous forms. The ordinariness of everyday life, he argues, obscures “a legibility of forms, ordered by means of function, inscribed within structures.” Lefebvre recognizes that consumption is manipulated by producers, not workers, and that this control permeates everyday life. The ironic play of images that characterizes retrochic is part of the production of uniqueness and individuality, but is also present in the production of the most universal and most social of images. As Lefebvre argues, in the modern world production anticipates reproduction and the appearance of change may come from superimposing the impression of speed onto that of monotony.

Lefebvre was associated in the 1950s and 1960s with the Situationist International, a group of artists and activists that developed a consciously ideological view of everyday life in modern capitalism. They set out to explain a rupture of lived experience from the use value of labour and its products, to its commodification through association with exchange value, and finally to a “society of the spectacle” and the structuring of everyday life through appearances. This transformation is rooted in a process of reification in which “the image, severed from all reference, is the most recent form.”⁸ Reification as it is used in Marxist thought describes the

⁶Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross, “Introduction,” *Yale French Studies*, 73, Special Issue: Everyday Life (1987), 3.

⁷Henri Lefebvre, “The Everyday and Everydayness,” *Yale French Studies*, 73, Special Issue: Everyday Life (1987), 9.

⁸Edward Ball, “The Great Sideshow of the Situationist International,” *Yale French Studies*, 73, Special Issue: Everyday Life (1987), 28.

manifestation of ideas into material forms. In capitalism this has meant the translation of social practices into rational and functional categories that are used to organize social relations to meet the needs of capitalist commerce. Commodification is the process whereby the real social organization of work is expressed only as its value in the exchange of commodities. In the late capitalist age of images, as Edward Ball puts it, "the commodity used to be a material thing; now it is a spectacular event. One does not buy objects; one buys images connected to them."⁹

The critique of everyday life is important for how it develops a context for a description of artifacts and images. Samuel recognizes that images are fodder for the reinscription of commodities, but this insight is not situated in an understanding of the logic whereby objects are reified as images as human experience is translated into the form of products. Without this critique Samuel is at a disadvantage in trying to discover what is obscured in the appearance of objects, in particular the social organization of the production of objects. Retrochic and its objects and images remain an abstraction in need of a political context for explaining aesthetics. Furthermore, by placing everyday life as a critical moment in the reproduction of social relations it is possible to begin thinking about transforming our own social structures through the practices of everyday life. Samuel fails to see the tension between retrofitting as the reproduction of dominant social structures and the recoding of objects as a potential transformation of social relations. Without addressing how images obscure the reality of their own production Samuel focuses on the object as a thing and the potential for different readings of it.

In fact, Samuel sees retrochic as a democratization of the act of consumption, "untroubled by the cult of authenticity" and "able to cross lightly across boundaries." (112) Surely, Samuel is not referring to class boundaries because that mark of difference is nowhere to be seen in his characterization of retrochic as something which abolishes the category differences between past and present. By hinging the reinvention of the past to a reworking of objects in their ornamental form, Samuel fails to chip away the facade of retrochic to discover what is covered over as well as reworked. Connecting the past and present by posing reinvention in favour of authenticity constructs a false dichotomy. The real issue is to explain the ways in which we construct interpretations of the past, especially those ways that naturalize a linear historical progression from past to present. Reinvention of images alone is not enough because it neglects to explain the language and images we use to describe the past and intervene in the present. When Samuel defines memory as a dynamic process he means that while it reveals links between the past and present memory also obscures: it can appear to stay the same, but is actually chameleon-like. Samuel cites the revival of brick building material as an example of a double coding of artifacts which points simultaneously to the past and the future. He acknowledges that a refurbishing of brick paves the way for marketing images of traditional and local life when there exists a broader context to brick buildings. Yet,

⁹Ball, "The Great Sideshow," 28.

in only pointing out the difference in appearance constituted by double-coding Samuel fails to move beyond a concern with ornamental form to discover how social difference is constituted through the production of form and appearance.

Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach point out that social memory includes the desire to associate industrial buildings with both good and bad elements of the experience of industrial work life.¹⁰ The two are inseparable, they argue, in constituting one's lifeworld and a sense of place. Extending this logic, the heritage of bricks does not stop at a recoding of vernacular culture through gentrification and consumption. The history of bricks is constituted in the production of different codes for the symbolic and material side of bricks. A retrochic reading of bricks is inseparable from the social relations of a brickyard where bricks originate. The danger in Samuel's reading of bricks as images is evident in Kathleen Stewart's warning regarding a nostalgia that reifies artifacts and images as the action of individual choice and freedom of the self. In contrast, she argues, there is another way of seeing material culture as practices that are contingent and about viewpoint. The coding of bricks emanates from particular viewpoints, producing different and contingent images. A self-conscious reading of images acknowledges the position of the viewer and avoids what Stewart terms the experience of images as "completed material substances — the full maturity of the process of mystifying social relations as things." Falling into this trap is an unconscious acceptance of the "systems and rules already inscribed in the objects arranged on the cultural landscape; order and power do not have to be imposed, or authored, but *are already embodied in the very order of objects as they are presented* [emphasis mine]." Avoiding the trap means recognizing the contingent nature of social memory. As Stewart points out, images of nostalgia are attached to social practices and it is by interpreting these contingent situations that we construct meaning for images.¹¹

Hareven and Langenbach's argument concerning the inseparability of experience leads us to see that the meaning of images is tied to different experiences in the production and consumption of artifacts and images. Paraphrasing Stewart, merely to read what is inscribed on the cultural landscape ignores the way images and their meaning are produced in the practices of people in their cultural landscapes. As part of the institutionalization of memory associated with industrial landscapes artifacts come to represent a particular cultural heritage. Heritage is itself a problematic constituted in the contested meanings of industrial culture. Images of industrial heritage may play with the retrofitting of industrial materials, freeze certain readings of history in exhibitions of artifacts, or intervene in the present and future practices of constituting our own cultural landscapes. It is the

¹⁰Tamara Hareven and Randolph Langenbach, "Living Places, Work Places and Historical Identity," in David Lowenthal and Marcus Binney, eds., *Our Past Before Us: Why Do We Save It?* (London 1981), 109-23.

¹¹Kathleen Stewart, "Nostalgia — A Polemic," in George Marcus, ed., *Rereading Cultural Anthropology* (Durham 1992), 252-66.

possibility of the latter which is critical to developing a critique of the social memory of industrial culture.

Samuel believes the value of heritage is in its resistance to the rationalization that characterizes much of modernity. He describes numerous instances of public support for displaying the artifacts of national and local cultural practices, for example resurrecting vernacular styles and establishing living history museums. These moments of social memory represent an alternative to a more elitist presentation of the big events of history. They are parts of a public history that is due to the efforts of "amateur" historians and collectors. The landscape of heritage, for Samuel, seems to appear as a text that can be read for inscriptions that provide the basis for a progressive reinvention of the past. But, heritage is a discourse that is used to connect the past to the present in particular ways. And the language of heritage is embedded in relations and structures of social power that produce landscapes.¹² For example, locally dependent capital may use notions of heritage to distinguish itself from mobile capital and the association of ethnicity or race with heritage excludes as well as includes. To separate the text of a landscape from its production may ignore the ways in which images of heritage are situated in a context of dominant and marginalized memories of the past.

Samuel's populist reading of heritage is one that appears to subsume difference within the changing forms of a reinvented past. Invoking an industrial metaphor, Samuel states that everything is grist to the heritage mill. But, a mill not only grinds grain, it also produces and reproduces specific sets of social relations. The process of reinventing the past is inseparable from the reality of unequal social relations and their landscapes of power.¹³ Heritage may be, in Samuel's words, a term capacious enough to accommodate wildly discrepant meanings, but he avoids viewing its images in the context of dominant and marginalized identities. Samuel reads in the text of heritage a flowering of traditional images reworked in the service of a grassroots, non-academic response to an increasingly sterile society. This is a hopeful image for what it reveals about people's resiliency in the face of brutal circumstances. Not discussed by Samuel is what metaphors of heritage can tell us about the conflicting interests that lie behind the production of images. As enframing devices, metaphors are ideological and what we gain from them can only be partial knowledge. This knowledge must be situated in a dynamic social space where it can be recognized that images are the product of social practices.

¹²For a critique of landscape as text see Don Mitchell, "Landscape and Surplus Value: The Making of the Ordinary in Brentwood, CA," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 12 (1994), 7-30. For a discussion of the ideological nature of heritage see Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-modern World* (New York 1992).

¹³See Sharon Zukin, *Landscapes of Power* (Berkeley 1991).

In trying to understand the documentary coal mining landscapes of a deindustrialized Pennsylvania, James Abrams reveals heritage to be a discursive field.¹⁴ He situates the heritage discourse in the aftermath of social transformation and argues that it functions as an act of cultural redefinition and repair. He recognizes his own role as a cultural repair worker employed by a state that does not acknowledge the ways in which cultural conservation is determined by the interests of capital. Abrams is aware that the mirror image of heritage discourse is the social rage that is so much a part of deindustrialization. As John Urry notes, the worse the industrial experience, the more authentic the resulting attraction;¹⁵ exhibiting a representation of lived experiences can create violently opposed identity claims at the sites of industrial heritage. A common metaphor for constructing coherence in the landscape is ecology and its assumptions concerning an evolution of the vernacular landscape. Historical change can then be attributed to a natural process of adaptation.¹⁶ What is missing in this historical progression is a recognition of how the ecological metaphor helps to naturalize a shift from industrialized to deindustrialized landscapes. Bob West shows how the portrayal of historical subjects at the industrial heritage site of Ironbridge Gorge becomes separated from a social context of class and gender struggles.¹⁷ He notes that an objectification of the artifact has led to museum displays that inhibit any questioning of the meaning of technological innovations for society. The institutionalization of heritage through the production of certain memories and images, particularly by the state, is a move to insure stability. At the same time images of heritage act as a barometer for levels of cultural transformation instead of creating coherence.

For example, Abrams takes us to a Pennsylvania tavern that memorializes images of miners and their labour while catering their business to the town elite. This particular reinvention of the past is evidence that "a setting evoking the essential historical nature of labor does not convey the pressing relevance of labor to current economic or cultural realities."¹⁸ E.P. Thompson once noted the disjunc-

¹⁴James Abrams, "Lost Frames of Reference: Sightings of History and Memory in Pennsylvania's Documentary Landscape," in Mary Hufford, ed., *Conserving Culture: A New Discourse on Heritage* (Urbana 1994), 24-38.

¹⁵John Urry, "Culture Change and Contemporary Holiday-making," *Theory, Culture and Society*, 5 (1988), 35-55.

¹⁶The ecological metaphor for explaining landscape transformation has a long history in the geography literature, particularly in the work of Carl Sauer. For examples of how it is used in the heritage discourse, see Michael Hough, "Heritage as Process," *Association for Preservation Technology Communique*, 24:4 (1993), 1-7, and William Tishler, "The Landscape: An Emerging Preservation Resource," *Association for Preservation Technology*, 9:4 (1979), 9-25.

¹⁷Bob West, "The Making of the English Working Past: A Critical View of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum," in Robert Lumely, ed., *The Museum Time-machine* (New York 1988), 36-62.

¹⁸Abrams, "Lost Frames of Reference," 28.

ture between a discourse that celebrated labour as part of a national myth and the expression by miners that the nation should share in what is properly a universal suffering. John Berger has addressed the same heritage in a poetic discourse of justice and injustice that finds an outlet in violent revenge against the "pitiless" by the "pitiful." Berger's rage is somewhat resolved by substituting the redemptive and expressive qualities of art "because it makes sense of what life's brutalities cannot, a sense that unites us for it is inseparable from justice at last."¹⁹ The moral approaches of Thompson and Berger raise the possibility of establishing a discourse of heritage that keeps justice and memory in constant tension. Abrams argues that the coherence of heritage desired by the state is challenged by identity claims that undermine the transformation of spectres of class and gender oppression into spectacles of consumption. Resistance takes the form of inscriptions that fragment the finished order and reopen cultural forms to history. In one sense this resistance establishes the possibility of another order within diversity by asserting authenticity as something which is true to the interplay of order and disruption.²⁰ Abrams cites examples of vernacular museums that actively oppose the interpretation of struggles in the coal fields presented in official venues. It is in the tension between cultural objectification and unruly histories that current identities and landscapes are being constituted in Pennsylvania.

This struggle over representation of identity is tied to the technology and the forms of preservation and heritage, something of great interest to Samuel. Abrams points out that it is in the techniques of preservation that space is framed and frozen as text to be manipulated in playful ways. But, as David Harvey shows, space is socially produced in a contradictory process of coherence and transformation.²¹ Rather than being frozen, social space is continually produced and reproduced in everyday life and is a key context for the constitution of identity. Raymond Williams illustrates this difference in a description of a Welsh folk museum that keeps its images "just beyond the horizon of everyday life."²² Abrams terms this sort of documentary landscape one where monumental time is staged on sets that are consistent with the scenes to be acted out. Aside from simply the theatrical allusions, it is just this sort of social memory that Samuel celebrates. Whereas Samuel accepts these texts as popular inscriptions on the landscape, Abrams recognizes that in these representations "people become actors, objects of memory, spectators to their own history, or categories."²³

As technology and artifact the grist mill invoked by Samuel is both a condition and a consequence of the complex social relations that go into creating a mill,

¹⁹ John Berger, "Miners," in *Keeping a Rendezvous* (New York 1991), 9 and E.P. Thompson, "A Special Case," *New Society* (24 February 1972).

²⁰ This point is developed by Michael Shanks in *Experiencing the Past* (New York 1994).

²¹ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Cambridge 1989).

²² Cited in Abrams, "Lost Frames of Reference," 28.

²³ Abrams, "Lost Frames of Reference," 28.

operating it as a workplace, abandoning it to decay or re-use, and preserving it as an image of heritage. By contextualizing the artifact in this way I want to address the need to see the images of heritage as a discourse which is contingent upon the experiences of everyday life. As we have seen, everyday life is itself a dynamic space where objects and their forms must be interpreted in the context of dominant and marginal cultures. This association of artifact with social relations and social power is critical for examining the ways in which we connect the past and the present. The discourse of heritage is about the politics of social memory and the possibilities for constructing our own interpretations of heritage in the face of institutionalized discourses that separate and obscure the contingent nature of social memory. A democratization of heritage such as Samuel proposes will depend first on recognizing how, in the late 20th century, the past is seen as a collection of images and surfaces. Only then can we begin to ask what it means to use theatrical metaphors and ironic and playful images in the construction of identity and heritage.

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