

Published in: *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21 (2) (2015), pp.191-193

Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation: Enchanting the Past-Future by Russell Staiff, Ashgate, Farnham, 2014, 194pp. £60, ISBN 978-1-4094-5550-9

It was only a matter of time before critical heritage studies turned its attention to heritage interpretation and in *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation* Russell Staiff does so with aplomb. He argues that contemporary heritage interpretation has become a “stifling and restrictive” (p9) technocratic activity, dominated by a narrow focus on informal education which is orientated around achieving particular management objectives. But the existing interpretation model faces two significant challenges. First, the growth of digital technologies gives visitors access to a range of alternative interpretations of a heritage site. This both undermines the status of authorised narratives, and allows heritage tourists to author their own meanings from their visit. Second, new theorisations of the heritage encounter see the visitor not as a passive receiver of established knowledge but, instead, as a reflexive agent in dialogue with heritage places within an encounter which involves far more than simply informal education. Staiff argues that these developments mean that heritage interpretation has reached its limits: it is therefore time for a complete rethink. The various chapters of this book explore these ideas in what Staiff describes as a series of “interlocking meditations” (p25) about the relationships between heritage places and their visitors. Such an approach might, at first sight, look like academic self-indulgence but the freshness and originality of Staiff’s account makes it much more. This book, by turns stimulating, provocative, challenging, occasionally frustrating but always immensely readable should be an essential purchase for anybody interested in heritage interpretation.

Most books about heritage interpretation start with Freeman Tilden and Staiff does likewise. But there is no veneration of Tilden’s ideas here: Staiff comes not to praise but to bury. He argues that Tilden’s conception of interpretation is underpinned by the belief that behind or beyond the materiality of physical objects is a ‘hidden’ meaning which is known to the interpreter but not to the visitor. The role of the interpreter is to ‘reveal’ what is unknown (an approach which is itself underpinned by a hierarchical relationship between the expert interpreter and the ignorant visitor). Drawing on cultural theory Staiff argues that meaning does not lie within ‘things’ themselves but is something created by the viewer/visitor within a particular historical and cultural frame of reference. Furthermore, interpretation can be conceptualised as a form of representation and, like any representation, is capable of multiple readings, thereby leading to a plurality of meanings. Staiff goes on to question Tilden’s essentialist notions of ‘beauty’, the assumed dichotomy between art and science, and the determinism inherent in the belief that interpretation can produce some sort of change in the visitor. This is absorbing reading, although any set of ideas that is more than 50 years old is an easy target for criticism (and Staiff could, perhaps, have been more generous in situating Tilden’s thinking in its historical context).

The following chapters develop the critique (sometimes directly, sometimes tangentially) with reference to particular themes. Staiff insists on the complexity of the visitor’s encounter with a heritage place and argues that the dominant conception of interpretation as an educational/cognitive activity neglects the embodied, emotional and affective nature of the visitor’s experience. He then examines the importance of visual culture and argues that popular understandings of the past (the ‘visual repertoire’ of visitors) are strongly shaped by representations that they have encountered through, for example, film. These unauthorised understandings of history frequently collide with the scholarly emphasis on historical ‘truth’ which underpins much heritage interpretation.

One of the most interesting chapters considers the implications of digital media for heritage interpretation. Staiff argues that, before long, the majority of visitors to heritage places will arrive with a mobile device connected to the internet. This gives them the opportunity to search for additional information online (particularly the content that interests them) and take photographs (and

share them). In so doing they are becoming creators and sharers (rather than simply consumers) of meanings. Such practices lead to multiple interpretations of a heritage place, destabilising 'official' interpretations, and expanding the scope of unofficial heritages. Another theoretically sophisticated chapter examines the difficulties of communicating/interpreting across cultures (although its conclusions do not go far beyond identifying how problematic this can be). At the end of the book Staiff returns to the heritage encounter, arguing that much heritage interpretation simply fails to engage with experiences such as enchantment and wonderment. He argues that it is time for change and calls for a re-imagined heritage interpretation which is "a *platform* for negotiated meaning making; for non-linear and non-determined experiences; for facilitating choice and for being able to deal with the unauthorized, the non-conforming, the unpredicted, the subversive and the playful" (p 170).

Overall, this is an absorbing book: lucid, iconoclastic, wide-ranging (occasionally to the point where the relevance to heritage interpretation isn't always clear) and liberally illustrated with case studies from throughout the world. The critique of Tilden, and the chapter about digital media should be essential reading for any student of heritage interpretation. But while as a tourist Staiff is clearly exceptionally reflexive I found myself wondering if heritage interpretation as currently practiced – prosaic and technocratic though it may be – may actually be adequately meeting the needs of many heritage tourists. I also found myself asking for whom this book was written. Staiff claims that his aim is to initiate a conversation among the interpretation community. But while *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation* is a forensic critique of current practice, Staiff offers little in the way of a road map to interpreters about how they could do things differently (beyond pointing to the Museum of Old and New Art in Hobart, Australia as a possible model). Indeed, the author rather sidesteps the issue by stating that this book is not a heritage interpretation manual. So it will be left up to interpreters to work through these ideas and think about how to put them into practice. Whether they will choose to do so (and whether they have the necessary understanding of, and sympathy with, cultural theory) remains to be seen.

So who is likely to read *Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation*? It is probably too advanced for undergraduates, but it will be of more use to students taking postgraduate courses in heritage interpretation (although its approach may make it unpopular with course tutors!). It will be of especial interest to postgraduate researchers and academics interested in critical heritage studies and interpretation in particular. Will professional interpreters read this book? Maybe, although I suspect that it will take some time before they are convinced by its arguments and even longer before they work out how to 'reconfigure' heritage interpretation in the way that Staiff proposes. So it is difficult at this stage to judge what the wider impact of this book will be. On one hand it might become a mere footnote, admired within academia but misunderstood or ignored by the heritage profession. Alternatively, it may come to be recognised as a ground-breaking manifesto which transforms the theory and practice of heritage interpretation. I suspect that, given time, it could be the latter.

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