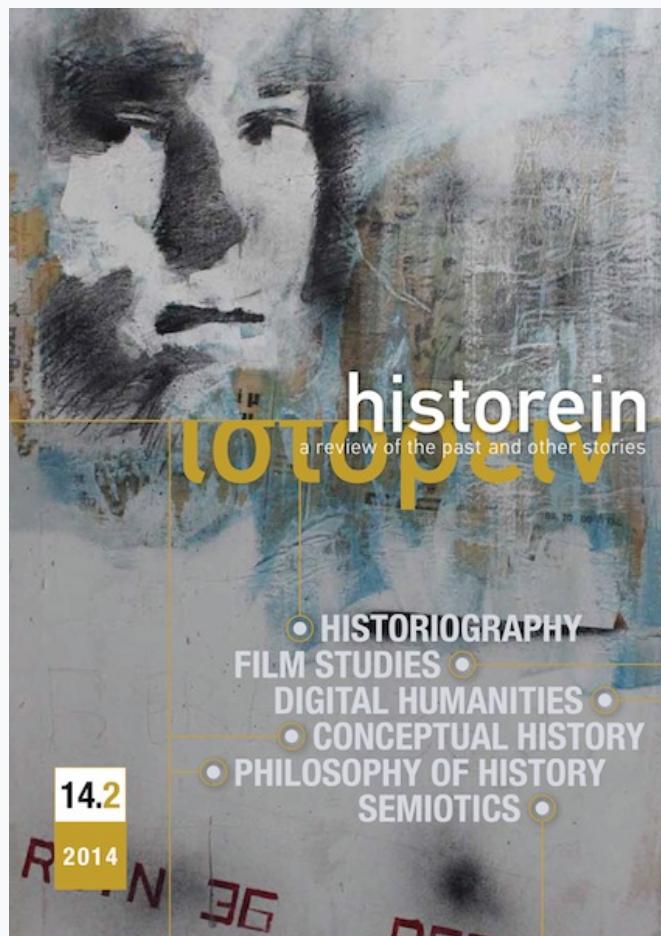


Historein

Vol 14, No 2 (2014)

Historein 14/2 (2014)



Review of Yannis Hamilakis's Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect; Alfredo Gonzàles-Ruibal (ed), Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity

Dimitris Plantzos

doi: [10.12681/historein.289](https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.289)

Copyright © 2015, Dimitris Plantzos



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

To cite this article:

Plantzos, D. (2014). Review of Yannis Hamilakis's Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect; Alfredo Gonzàles-Ruibal (ed), Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity. *Historein*, 14(2), 124–127. <https://doi.org/10.12681/historein.289>

Yannis Hamilakis

Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 255 pp.

and

Alfredo González-Ruibal (ed.)

Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity

London and New York, Routledge, 2013. 375 pp.

by Dimitris Plantzos

University of Athens

Archaeology is an inherently modern episteme, in the sense that it combines a fundamentally modern approach to the notion of the past and its value with an emphasis on what may be seen as some of modernity's central ethical and epistemological concerns: value-free thinking, Cartesian logic, strictly positivist methodology, and rigorous verification protocols at work in the trench, the lab and the library.¹ As such, archaeology may be seen to follow the modern predicament, especially in an age when "it is generally agreed that there is a dark side to modernity that has to be faced, examined and challenged" (*Reclaiming Archaeology*, 3). Alfredo González-Ruibal's edited volume *Reclaiming Archaeology: Beyond the Tropes of Modernity* thus embarks on a multi-leveled and thoroughly ambitious task: not only to rescue archaeology as an epistemological

apparatus from the grasp of its emotionally repressed and detached modern self, but also to "reclaim" (in a sense: "decolonise") archaeological metaphors from the hands of some of modernity's most eminent thinkers such as Benjamin and Freud, or even some of its fiercest critics – from Foucault, Barthes and Derrida to Agamben and Žižek. Sensing that "the modern master-trope of archaeology as a science that is concerned (obsessed even) with a remote past disconnected with the present is losing ground", the editor invites his authors to propose "a new philosophical archaeology" that could be seen to be "more in accordance with the nature of the discipline" (22). To that end, he invites an impressively diverse group of eminent authorities worldwide in order to discuss a wide range of topics – from materiality and temporality to aspects of method and the challenges posed by the emergent heritage discourse. The result is an important collection of thought-provoking essays, constituting a counter-modern archaeology of sorts, a rather undisciplined discipline deeply engaged with its chosen subject rather trying to formulate it top-bottom while at the same time pretending its discourse is thoroughly detached, "scientific", "objective", and – needless to add – *modern*.

Is, however, such a "reclaimed" archaeology possible or even relevant? Yannis Hamilakis, one of the contributors to *Reclaiming Archaeology*, embarks on such a quest of his own: his *Archaeology and the Senses* endeavours to restore sensory experience into a discipline that has learned – and systematically taught its audience – to confine its agenda to the visualisation of culture. Hamilakis bases his analysis on what he recognises as the "fundamental paradox at the heart of modernist archaeology":

the fact that whereas archaeology, as a modern epistemological apparatus, “relies primarily on the sense of autonomous and disembodied vision”, it is an inherently “physical” endeavour, coming, by definition, in “embodied interaction with things and environments” (*Senses*, 9). Based on this “tension”, as he calls it, Hamilakis explores a range of alternative archaeologies that might be possible, necessary even, in order to comprehend past cultures (and, eventually, our own) through their material remains.

A thorough survey of the way western modernity classified and perceived the senses in the last five centuries or so brings Hamilakis to the distinction between the dominant sort of western, distant, “scientific”, “exhibitionary” archaeology privileging vision as a value-free mode of cultural reception and a number of alternative, “premodern” *archaeologies*, focusing on sensorial intimacy and cultural memory. This is a perfectly workable scheme; one has to allow, however, for a certain degree of contamination between those two seemingly independent traditions: what Hamilakis presents as “premodern” archaeologies may in fact be seen to carry certain modern affectations, such as the recognition of antiquity for what it was in the first place, while on the other hand some of our “modern” archaeological attitudes may in fact be found to clash with their own modernist premises. What seems to be emerging from Hamilakis’ exciting exploration is that there are, in fact, certain sides embedded in western modernity that have managed to escape our detached readings for far too long; and this makes *Archaeology and the Senses* a valuable study of cultural thinking – and a very enjoyable one to read at the same time.

So far, however, the author has set a rather easy task for himself: arguing that “modernist archaeology wanted to tame time, to colonise the faraway places, and to prove the antiquity and material truths of the nation” (56) will not cause as much a stir as it did in the 1990s, especially since Hamilakis himself has worked on this topic, producing admirable results.² The remaining chapters of his book attempt to “recapture sensorial and affective experience” as a means to produce a present archaeology, one devoted to “flows” rather than merely “things”. The author observes, correctly, that multisensoriality was a discovery of the late twentieth century, one however that was promoted and manipulated as a top-down commodity, mostly by the market – from the commoditisation of leisure and pleasure to the “experience economy”. Hamilakis is right when he observes that we have long gone past the Cartesian five-senses canon in order to embrace a multisensorial universe; can this new “archaeology of the senses”, however, modify our views on the past?

Chapters five and six are where all this comes into place, through the skilful handling and elucidating presentation of a very appropriate case study: Bronze Age Crete. As case studies go, this one is particularly fitting, and not only because Hamilakis remains, among other things, an expert in the archaeology of prehistoric Crete. More to the point, Bronze Age (aka “Minoan”) Crete has been the focus of much modern attention – be that as the cradle of European civilisation or as a splendid overture to first-millennium Greece, not to mention as an aesthetic precursor to modernity itself. Convincing that these misreadings of Crete are due to the corporeality inherent in modernist

archaeology, Hamilakis surveys the archaeological evidence regarding two major fields in “Minoan” archaeology: burial customs and the question of the much admired “Minoan palaces”. Hamilakis’ discussion of burial customs in Bronze Age Crete enables him to tackle several issues modernist archaeology seems fascinated with: cultural and racial continuity (or not), the emergence of individualism and the construction of personhood, collective memory and forgetting. He produces a fact-based, culturally sensitive and theoretically subtle reading which, although at first might not seem groundbreaking, is in fact exactly that. Stating that “the burial arena was a fundamental space for sociality in the Early and the first part of the Middle Bronze Age” and that people in those eras were able to “produce their own sense of historicity and genealogical depth through their material and sensorial engagement with corpses, bones, and things” (159) effects the long-awaited reversal of standard modernist hierarchies, whereby what archaeologists usually refer to as “period” or “culture” shape the people living in them and not vice versa. Hamilakis’ reading of “corpses, bones, and things” allows Cretan scholars to revisit the materiality of their own finds, enabling the interplay between our time and the times we study beyond the confines of a strictly corporeal landscape.

Since the discovery – in effect the invention – of “Minoan” Crete, its so-called “palaces” have attracted the most of our interpretative attention. Seen as precursors to the modernist state, its fixation with hierarchy and order, and its demand for control and surveillance, those puzzling structures have long been admired – not least for what has been seen and praised as their fine sewage system. Hamilakis carefully interweaves a more down-to-earth, almost empiricist reasoning (how many palaces can one fit in the space of a few acres, what pur-

pose could they possibly fulfil, and how on earth – literally – could all be accommodated in such a small distance from one another) with a rigorous reappraisal of archaeological as well as anthropological evidence. Although he is wise not to present us with a new, “postmodernist” reading of the palatial phenomenon, Hamilakis convincingly argues that it was the result of hitherto unrecognised sensorial modalities leading to a “process of monumentalisation and objectification” (190), one that proved imperceptible to our modernist archaeological apparatus. His final urge, though unvoiced, is to turn our scholarly attentions to “sensorial flows and assemblages” rather than sticking with an essentialist, seemingly value-free, though in fact deeply biased approach to a culture that had no interest in creating a meaningful, and rather anachronistic, reflection of our own.

The ultimate question posed by Hamilakis’ exciting new book centres therefore on our ability to forge a sort of “post-” or rather *un*-modern breed of archaeology, multisensory as well as multimodal, an “undisciplined discipline” as he calls it, which would enable new, more satisfactory and convincing – though not necessarily “true” – readings (“feelings”?) of a past we may now accept as value-laden, mediated and affective. More to the point, Hamilakis’ task in this book is to argue that this kind of archaeology is long overdue, and in fact our discipline’s only hope of survival in a fast-becoming sensorial world. Some questions remain unanswered, however, perhaps inevitably owing to the avidly multidisciplinary and highly experimental nature of the project. Whereas, for example, the author intercepts his “strictly scholarly” text with accounts of a more personal nature – diary excerpts that, it would seem, suggest a “from within” approach to our receptions of and dealings with the past, distant as well as recent – these still read as the insights of a knowledgeable man, a pro-

fessor and a westerner, coming to terms with his own experiences of late modernity. This is not necessarily a bad thing, especially since this particular professor seems to be deeply aware of the inconsistencies inherent in his project; the question remains, however: how can we possibly, in our conscious effort to reverse the power flow embedded in our scholarly thinking, “silence” the voice of authority in our own writings?

This is no mere conundrum: in *Reclaiming Archaeology* (181–194), Hamilakis and archaeologist and performance artist Efthimis Theou present their groundbreaking work at the site of Koutroulou Magoula in central Greece. Employing ideas and practices developed by archaeological ethnography (a subdiscipline they significantly enrich with their own work), the two scholars have developed a multilevelled project based on public participation, continuous and defiantly antihierarchical interplay between “experts” and “laymen”, and performance. As we read their theoretically informed text, and browse through the black-and-white photos showing people – locals, visiting artists and archaeologists, performers and spectators alternating in their roles – participating in the event Hamilakis and Theou staged at Koutroulou Magoula in the summer of 2011, we know we can only have a second-hand, and heavily mediated, “knowledge” of what went on that evening; you had to be there, as the saying goes. Archaeologies of the senses seem particularly ephemeral and strongly defiant of documentation and communication. “Reclaiming archaeology is not only a matter of producing counter-discourses . . . It is also a matter of producing new spaces or enacting diverse times,” say Hamilakis and Theou (192). As the two books presented here argue, this is precisely where the strength of such archaeologies lies; and it seems that, for the moment, we have to take their word for it.

NOTES

- 1 See Julian Thomas, *Archaeology and Modernity* (London: Routledge, 2004), and for a recent survey, Dimitris Plantzos, “Archaeology After The End of History,” *Historein* 12 (2012): 68–78.
- 2 Yannis Hamilakis, *The Nation and its Ruins. Antiquity, Archaeology, and National Imagination in Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).