




Archaeology on Trial: Response to Julian Thomas

Robert Harrison

I am sure that Julian Thomas's forthcoming book, *Archaeology and Modernity*, is a fine and interesting study, but the "abbreviated" version of its argument which he offers in the present essay is, to this reader at least, a bewildering story of diverse phenomena—Renaissance humanism, British empiricism, Cartesian foundationalism, Newtonianism, "social physics," Cuvier's comparative anatomy, the rise of the nation-state, the advent of the museum, the introduction of World War One military technologies, and much else besides—the concatenation of which somehow accounts for the distinctively "modern" character of archaeology. Modern means bad. It means atomization, reification and disworlding serial classification. Perhaps that explains why the concatenation in question works, in this "countermodern" telling, more according to pre-Enlightenment principles of sympathy, correspondence, and analogy than to the principles of causality, typology, and rationalization that Saint Foucault associated with the epistemic ruptures of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Given the original sin through which archaeology came into being as a discipline—the sin of modern objectivism—it is guilty of reifying bygone human beings and using them "as raw material for creating narrative processes." This is not good, for by "reduc[ing] them [the people] to the atoms of a social system, or to rational foraging organisms, we subject them to a totalizing logic." Thomas has a logic of his own—whether totalizing or not is not for me say—that leads him to infer that "this kind of totalizing is close in spirit to totalitarianism." What else could it be, given that it's modern? Conclusion: "If we find ourselves willing to organize the lives of

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36 people according to grand conceptual schemes” (as if Thomas’s essay were not an exercise in grand conceptualization) “we are that much more likely to find it acceptable to do the same to people in the present.” Beware, then, of archaeologists!

I suppose part of the privilege (or license) of being “countermodern” is that one can have it all ways: modernity atomizes, and thereby totalizes. Modernity analyses, hence synthesizes. Modernity disworlds, decontextualizes, renders the continuous discrete, yet at the same time it integrates the diverse in grand conceptual schemes. The countermodern tribunal does not acquit, it only condemns, for the terms of its indictments change freely, though not randomly.

The most interesting part of Thomas’s essay, from this reader’s point of view, is the section on “Depth and Surface.” While most of the essay seeks to show how archaeology devolved from a host of theoretical, practical, social, and ideological forces we associate with modernity, here Thomas gives archaeology some active agency in the story: “Archaeology was integral to the development of this ‘depth thinking,’” he writes, alluding to the “depth models” (Jameson) that are the hallmarks of modern thinking (the relationship between speech and grammar in linguistics, infrastructure and superstructure in Marxism, authenticity and inauthenticity in existentialism, the conscious and the unconscious in psychoanalysis, etc.). That the excavations of archaeology may have provided (at the very least) the metaphorical basis for these depth models is a suggestion one hopes Thomas develops more substantially in *Archaeology and Modernity*. Another thought-provoking suggestion in this section has to do with how “the uncovering and recovery of hidden deposits and artifacts is sometimes held in higher esteem than the interpretation and appreciation of ancient things that are already fully visible.” The reasons for this devaluation of the visible in favor of the hidden and buried belong to the dark underworld of modernity’s will to truth. That will to truth takes the form—much exacerbated of late—of delving into the transphenomenal depths of the phenomenon in order to bring to light what is shrouded in darkness, to wrest from concealment that which, for reasons of its own, does not belong by nature to the world of appearances. Much of contemporary science digs through the humus of the natural world, of the body, of the biotic itself, in order to uncover the underlying components of their elemental constitution. There is more here than just a vague analogy between archaeology, science, and a will to truth that forces both nature and history to yield the secrets that lie buried in their depths. It is this unearthing of the earth that more than anything else calls for thought today.