

Against Gandalf the Grey: an Archaeology of the Surface

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Archaeology has been for many years identified with its own method, that of excavation. It is the way the public sees archaeology and many archaeologists think of themselves too (e.g. Holtorf 2007). However, Rodney Harrison recently pointed out the crucial role of the surface in archaeological thinking (Harrison 2011, in press).

Metaphors are never just metaphors, so to speak. They shape and drive our thinking. A metaphor of archaeology-as-excavation is one of such tropes. It presupposes the idea of a distant and buried in the soil past (e.g. Thomas 2004). Harrison claims that there are different ways of thinking of archaeology. The Australian archaeologist proposes as an alternative a metaphor of archaeology-as-surface-survey. This allows the so-called an archaeology of the contemporary past (e.g. Buchi, Lucas 2001) to become a creative engagement with the present and only subsequently as a consideration of the intervention of traces of the past within it (Harrison 2011, 141).

I am totally for the archaeology in and of the present proposed by Harrison. This is the reason why I would like to add in this place some examples of such archaeological focus on the surface, what I call surface investigations (Kobińska in press).



Figure 1: Surface investigations

What does it mean when one says, especially to a young student, that your reading and work are superficial? It is basically pejorative phrase describing that a work does not follow scientific rigorous (e.g. Binford 2009, XV-XVI). It can be said that it is the basic presupposition of scientific critique as such. Critique as deep reading, deeper understanding is, as it were, a procedure of excavation, of discovering hidden contradictions, presuppositions, etc., of an analysed text.

Of course, there are situations where deep reading is needed. Nonetheless, it is not a solution to every problem with which one is confronted in archaeology and science in general. That is

why a bit of the good old superficial reading is sometimes required. Understanding does not always demand contextual analysis (but see Hodder 1986). There are situations where the only way to grasp the problem is to be ahistorical and acontextual. That is why, the so-called superficial reading, and what archaeologists call surface investigations, should be rehabilitated. In what follows, I will discuss three examples of such attention to the surface.

There is the well-known joke about a worker suspected of stealing things from a factory. When labour time was over, he rolled every time a wheelbarrow in front of him. The wheelbarrow was always meticulously checked and nothing was found inside it. Finally guards got the point. It was the wheelbarrows themselves which were taken away by the worker, not any deeply hidden things.

No less importantly, the same paradox is operative in Peter Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring* (2001). Recall the moment when Frodo and his friends have to withdraw from the plan to pass the mountains of Caradhras. Then they decided to go through the mines of Moria. There is a crucial scene when the fellowship stands in front of the wall to the mines and tries to open the magic door:

Gimli: The walls... of Moria. Dwarf doors are invisible when closed.

Gandalf: Yes, Gimli, their own masters cannot find them if their secrets are forgotten.

Legolas: Why doesn't that surprise me?

Gandalf: Well, let's see. Ithildin. It mirrors only starlight and moonlight. It reads, "The Doors of Durin, Lord of Moria. - Speak, friend, and enter."

Merry: What do you suppose that means?

Gandalf: It's simple. If you are a friend, you speak the password and the doors will open.

Then Gandalf tries for a while to open the door, at it is known, without success. He even desperately complains about the inefficiency of his long studies of the ancient scrolls: I once knew every spell in all the tongues of Elves...Men and Orcs.

The last fragment of the scene is especially important and thought-provoking:

Gandalf: Oh, it's useless.

Frodo: It's a riddle. "Speak 'friend' and enter." What's the Elvish word for "friend"?

Gandalf: Mellon.

And the door opens itself.

Gandalf who stands for embodiment of knowledge, wisdom, critical thinking, which he possessed due to the long years of studies of the ancient secret scrolls, is useless. He tried to understand things too deeply. It was Frodo who got the point: it was enough to say a word 'friend' in the Elvish and the door will be opened. To put it poetically, being superficial sometimes means to be truly a deep thinker. Is this scene not a perfect analogy of

archaeology? For example, the subject of the history of archaeology is usually left to the older, more experienced archaeologists who simply know more, and more deeply about the history of their own discipline, they are like Gandalf the Grey. However, what they miss is precisely the position of young, uneducated Frodo: sometimes the very visibility and simplicity of a truth is the reason why one misses the point (see note 1 below). The lesson of it is the following: let us (sometimes) not be too deep thinkers.

Last but not least, in a homologous way one should read detectives stories. It was Edgar Allan Poe who in his fascinating stories about C. Auguste Dupin most clearly pointed out this paradox. For instance, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* Dupin has to discover who murdered two ladies: Madame L'Espanaye and her daughter. The case seems very complicated and Dupin offers his help to a local police. As always in such stories, the private detective is a metaphor of rational, scientific reasoning. It is worth quoting in detail how Dupin compares the police's (common sense) thinking with his own (Poe 2004, 12):

Vidocq [a typical policeman – D. K.], for example, was a good guesser, and a persevering man. But, without educated thought, he erred continually by the very intensity of his investigations. He impaired his vision by holding the object too close. He might see, perhaps, one or two points with unusual clearness, but in doing so he lost sight of the matter as a whole. Thus, there is such a thing as being too profound. Truth is not always in a well. In fact, as regards the more important knowledge, I do believe that it is invariably superficial. The depth lies in the valleys where we seek for it, and not upon the mountain-tops where it is found.

In other words, those who are too deep, contextual in their reasoning fail to grasp the point. Very often the very visibility of a truth is the cause of why it is so hard to conceptualise. Deep thinking, deeper understanding (e.g. Shanks 1996, 5), it may be claimed, is (sometimes) the domain of common sense, not truly scientific (private detective's) discourse. Accordingly, the time has come to think of archaeology not only as excavations, but also as surface investigations.

Notes

1) Worth highlighting apropos Jackson's *The Lord of the Rings* is that typical pseudo-intellectual clichés do not work here. It has been often claimed that Hollywood vulgarises great books, etc. This time the film is in some interpretations better than the original book. One of them is the scene in front of the wall to Moria. In John Ronald Reuel Tolkien's book (2005) it is still Gandalf, the educated wizard, who after some failed attempts gets the point of a riddle. In Jackson's screening of the book, it is uneducated young hobbit who is smarter than the wizard. Of course, Jackson's vision is much more subversive and interesting from a theoretical point of view

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