HISTORY AND AFRICAN STUDIES SEMINAR

31 October 2007

Restoring Good Hope: art and archaeology in the digital age.

Jeff Guy
Justine Wintjes

This paper is based on our visual presentation 'Restoring Good Hope The Work of Art in the Age of Digital Reproduction'. It was given at the Campbell Collections as part of the series 'The Public Face of African Scholarship' on 24 October 2007. A short version of the presentation will be shown at the seminar.

Studying the archaeologist

Engraving and painting on rock is a global artistic tradition as old as humanity itself. In KwaZulu-Natal rock art is as rich as anywhere in the world and was created by the people who until two hundred years ago lived as hunter-gatherers in the region. But the paintings are especially vulnerable to the effects of natural degradation and human interference, and we consider here the vexed topic of their restoration.

The paper grew out of a graduate lecture course we gave at UKZN this year and our attempt to develop the course into a publishable form. As part of this project we considered building digitally a generic archaeological site in order to demonstrate the typical features of an excavation. We selected as a base-image a site that was, for long periods of time, particularly suitable for human use and habitation – the Good Hope rock shelter in the southern Drakensberg, a few kilometres from the road to the Sani Pass.

But once we began our research Good Hope seemed to make its own demands and establish its particular identity. Themes that to us had been incidental, now gained significance. Particularly disturbing was an absence. We knew that rock paintings at the site had been recorded for a century - but they were no longer there. The bare rock walls became a matter of increasing concern. Although we originally had no plans to include rock paintings in the virtual site, it now began to seem incomplete without them. We became increasingly interested in discovering just what had been painted in the Good Hope shelter.

Neither of us had wanted this. We were both of the opinion that whatever was happening in archaeological research generally in southern Africa, rock painting studies were over-subscribed. Also, we had both had uncomfortable personal experiences with rock painting: Wintjes with rock art management as an archaeologist attached to Amafa, the provincial heritage resource agency; and Guy while living in Lesotho, for many years a mecca for rock art enthusiasts. Both are familiar with the standard works on rock art and are aware of the extraordinary and growing interest in the subject, the considerable resources committed to rock art research, and the large and controversial nature of the published work on rock art. But until reading for this paper neither of us quite realised the degree of emotional intensity which the San, their history, and their paintings evoke – especially it would seem at this moment in South African history.

This phenomenon itself needs explaining: as E H Carr wrote – 'before you study the history study the historian.'[1] Historians are now inured to this: it is time that the adage was extended to the archaeologist, and especially to that branch of the discipline specialising in rock painting and the San.

---

[1] E.H.Carr, *What is History?* (Penguin, 1964), 44.

The demands of history
The visual presentation associated with this paper spends some time examining the transience and impermanence of rock painting. This is a consequence of the erosive geological landscape of the region, the friable nature of the rock on which the paintings were made, seepage of ground water through the rock wall, the pigment materials and the fact that the paintings are made in shelters and not caves. Moreover there is no evidence that the painters saw their work as permanent. As a result the painted images that survive have to be considered as remnants of a tradition always in a process of disappearing, over which new images were painted, only to disappear again. For this reason the urgency and anxiety that the deterioration of rock painting evokes seems in part at least the response of members of a culture which values and therefore demands permanence and possession in pictorial representation.

To add to this there is the obvious fact that with the destruction of the rock painting culture and economy, the paintings are no longer just deteriorating but becoming extinct. It is course invalid to equate a culture with a people (unless they are culturally defined), but this remains commonplace and much of the work on rock art is infused with mourning not only for a lost culture but an extinct people. This is an emotional and misleading response. It assumes that because the hunter-gathering economy and the rock painting tradition ceased to exist, the people who practised it ceased to exist as well. Many years ago Shula Marks's article in the *Journal of African History* warned against the conflation of race, culture and economy in Khoisan history generally[2], while John Wright's *Bushmen Raiders of the Drakensberg 1840-70,* (University of Natal Press, 1971*)* shows specifically that by the mid-nineteenth century significant numbers of people called Bushmen were mounted, fire-armed, stock-rustling traders. There is no doubt that there was an intensive effort to eradicate the Drakensberg San physically. We have evidence that this was in part successful. But we also have historical evidence attesting to the fact that the San changed their ways of life, and in so doing their unique presence, not the people themselves, disappeared from the historical record as well.

Until recently this interpretation has had minimal impact on the more popular historical studies of the San. Profusely illustrated books on rock art, situated in remote and scenically beautiful contexts, promoting a romantic vision of an extinct people who lived in harmony with nature continue to be published, and these ideas are promoted by guides to school groups and tourists. But there is undoubtedly also a greater awareness of the relative autonomy of culture, language and economy, and a wariness about the use of racial stereotypes.

---

[2] Shula Marks, 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History,* 13, 1 (1972)

But the emotional intensity around whatever word is chosen to depict 'Bushmen' and their culture and history increases. Some of the reasons for this can be found in the promotional activities of the heritage and tourism industry and the demands of the global tourist seeking the traces of extinct native peoples. Local inhabitants are claiming access to sites and information on the grounds that they have ancestral claims. But we would argue that the amount of attention being paid to Bushman studies, and the emotion that surrounds them, is more significant than access and commercialisation, and that the apparent 'extinction' of a 'people' liberates the liberal conscience: no longer a living threat, the 'extinct Bushmen' can safely become the recipients of an emotionally-charged romantic humanitarian nostalgia; contemporary South Africans can pay their debt to the horrors of the South African past without fear that the cheque will bounce.

Claiming the Country
These trends coalesce in the recent book *Claim to the Country*[3] – an assertion which in no way denies the fact that it is an imaginative and beautiful book, which comes, incredibly, with a DVD of the Bleek-Lloyd archive of San stories collected in the nineteenth century.[4] But this fascinating and important publication is also suffused with a quite extraordinary romantic nostalgia - a nostalgia for the Bleeks and their family, for the San people they interviewed, for lives well-spent and lives of suffering and courage, largely forgotten for over a century, and now revived and remembered in intimate detail. Historians are often attracted to the archival collections with which they have to become so familiar – the intimacy of holding and reading the personal letters of those much admired, or despised, and long dead; the capacity of original documents to place one in close proximity to great events long past; the power that hindsight gives over those who recorded their lives and their feelings, the desire for an impossible sharing with those who wrote the records, and which can infuse primary sources which such tragic irony.

But never has intimacy with the sources been so explicitly promoted – it is indeed called a 'love affair' in the opening sentence. This historiographical nostalgia is taken to extraordinary extremes. The dedication takes the form of a memorial to the nineteenth-century dead and the way in which they died and spreads over twelve pages. The cover is a reproduction of the marbled Victorian notebooks of the time. The documents are reproduced, not just as text, but text on images of the original foxed, worn, torn paper. We are presented with an archival trolley loaded with the very boxes, files and albums in which the Bleek-Lloyd collection was stored. The original research notes, photographs, transcriptions and translations, and marginal notes, are interleaved with the editor/author's writing. The major part of the archive has

---

[3] Pippa Skotnes, *Claim to the Country. The Archive of Lucy Lloyd and Wilhelm Bleek*, (Jacana and Ohio University Press, 2007)
[4] Pippa Skotnes, *The Digital Bleek and Lloyd*, 2007

been burnt onto a DVD and appended to the book. The claim is made that the Bleek and Lloyd archive is not just a record of extraordinary scholarship, nor is it only a record of the lives and imagination of the /Xam and !Kun whose words were transcribed – the archive is their 'claim to the country'.

It was and is of course crucially important to preserve and curate these indescribably invaluable records from the past. The physical violence against the San has to be documented and remembered as one of the vile features not just of South African history but the history of the emerging dominance of the west. Equally important, the disappearing traces of San rock painting and engraving have to be identified and recorded. In *Claim to the Country,* a number of authorities deal with various aspects of San studies including rock art, but most of the articles stand at something of a distance from the book as a whole, which, like much of the recent work on the San, their history and their culture, is so charged with nostalgia and regret that its emotional intensity demands an explanation.

As we suggested above, these attempts at historical resuscitation can be seen as an ideological manifestation of deep social and personal tensions perhaps best explained in terms of contemporary South African anxieties and the demands made by South African history. But it is possible to suggest other less immediate explanations, especially insofar as rock art is concerned. The realisation that ultimately everything is impermanent only intensifies the human need to create permanence. Religious belief asserts eternity: cultural commitment seeks (impossibly) to preserve tradition. And it is not just the desire to impede the process of change and decay, which includes of course our own mortality: it is also because art is an artefact which expresses the creative life of another and in so doing invites the empathetic observer to participate in that act of creation. Remoteness in time and place, we would suggest, only intensifies our curiosity and our desire to participate. Furthermore, disappearance means we lose these communicative links, which in turn diminishes our own capacity to participate in the creative life of others.

However, it is now being suggested that digitization of images makes it possible to restore these lost links. And this is certainly implied in *Claim to the Country.* It is not just the images of text in *The Digital Bleek and Lloyd.* It is impossible to conceive of a book being produced in this form without the assistance of the digitized image and text in the layout, the images of paper on material paper itself, the scanned copies with their additions, the digitally produced pastiche of research transcriptions, notes, editor's interpolations, historical and contemporary photographs. It is a book produced by the artistic imagination working with computing power: digitization used by editor/author/artist to bring the reader/observer in the closest proximity to the materiality of the archive itself.

Mechanical and digital reproduction
We can now return to our original theme, and explore further the application of digitization to an important remnant of San culture – rock painting.

In the western tradition, protection and preservation of the creative heritage is conventionally pursued by removing works of art from their original context to places of safety – from the palace, the courtyard, and the cathedral for which they were carved and painted, and which in so many ways defined their artistic form, to the museum, the art gallery, under constant surveillance, in a controlled environment. An analogous process was practised in South Africa with regard to rock paintings, and the museums of KwaZulu-Natal contain a number of painted blocks of sandstone chiselled and prised from the rock, well-preserved in some senses, destroyed in others. The obvious disadvantages of such methods were offset by those who copied the paintings manually, either directly or by tracing. In the nineteenth century the camera and the photograph became the dominant mode of reproduction of visual images generally, and developments in visual technology have long been applied to rock paintings.

A number of research institutions and museums in South Africa now have important collections of rock painting copies, manual and photographic. Some of these have been recorded more than once over the past century, and attest to gradual deterioration to the point of disappearance. SARADA (South African Rock Art Digital Archive) is a project that is currently digitizing and centralizing official and private collections of historical rock art records into one database. These include large collections of colour sides which are now themselves following the example of their originals and undergoing a process of deterioration thereby demanding urgent digitization.[5]

For the Drakensberg, the best known records are the product of manual and mechanical reproduction in combination, through a process of tracing, photography, colouring and re-photographing as in Patricia Vinnicombe's *People of the Eland*[6] and Harold Pager's *Ndedema*[7]. Innovative, painstaking, costly in time and material resources, they produced records which are deservedly much admired – but it must never be forgotten that these tracings and colour plates are not representations in the sense of accurate replications. To achieve this is impossible – leaving aside the disparities in individual colour sensitivity and visual acuity, the paintings themselves change not just in time but according to the angle and the daily lighting conditions under which they are viewed. The results can be both scientifically informative and aesthetically pleasing – but they are not reproductions of the original: at best we might call them indications of what once existed.

[5] www.sarada.co.za
[6] Patricial Vinnicombe, *The People of the Eland*, (University of Natal Press, 1976)
[7] Harold Pager, *Ndedema* (Academia, 1971)

For Walter Benjamin the photograph (like the cinema and the phonograph) were examples of the revolutionary manifestations of (what was translated as) the 'Age of Mechanical Reproduction', and in his essay 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' he suggested another level of significance to the study of the photograph. For, while photography allows the production of limitless numbers of copies thereby liberating the original by making it widely accessible in so doing it also liberates it from its historical and its living context. The photograph can reproduce the original work of art with great accuracy – but in the process it loses its 'aura':

> Even the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.[8]

This point of view can now however be challenged. W J T Mitchell, in our reading the most challenging writer on visuality today, put forward the view that perhaps the extraordinary capacity of modern computer technology and the flexibility it gives to the artist to manipulate the image digitally, allows the aura to be restored, so that the copy can now be more real than the original:

> … if aura means recovering the original vitality, literally, the 'breath' of life of the original, then the digital copy can come closer to looking and sounding like the original than the original itself.[9]

Those who have experienced ('read' seems the wrong word) *Claim to the Country* could well argue this point of view. The meticulous and imaginative effort that has been applied in order to reproduce the foxing, the scuffing, the frayed edge of the old paper, the research transcripts of the interviews, the storage boxes, the very materiality of the archive restores the 'original vitality' of the archive itself, and with it the claim to the country. For the moment we suspend judgement on whether in fact this has been done.

Restoring Good Hope
Now, the visual presentation out of which this paper originated situates itself in this debate – can digital reproduction create a new reality, more real than the real, more original than the original? In the paper we apply this question to the digitization of rock painting – can digitization restore the paintings which once existed in the Good Hope rock shelter, but do so no longer?

---

[8] Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', *Illuminations* Part II, 1937.
[9] W.J..T Mitchell, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Biocybernetic Reproduction', *What Do Pictures Want?,* University of Chicago, 2005. We have drawn heavily, but with reservations and conservatively, on this chapter, using the author's insights into digitization but, perhaps misleadingly, not following him into the postpostmodern digitized world of biocybernetics.

[At this stage a presentation – a short version of the long illustrated lecture on which this paper is based – will demonstrate how digitized images can be manipulated to give different views of the rock shelter and the rock wall on which the pictures were painted, and how different copies of paintings made over the past hundred years can be made into a composite one which can then be restored digitally to the rock wall.]

Good Hope is situated on a bioenvironmental divide, on the margins of sour and mixed veld near a major topographical cleavage, running up to the escarpment which in modern times has been used to build a road over what is now called Sani Pass. From the very earliest eras this route would have been used by antelope moving with the changing seasons to and from different grazing environments. They were followed by predators, eventually by human predators, who would have made use of the well-situated shelter as a place of protection and centre from which to hunt. Good Hope has undoubtedly been used for an immense period of time, but when it was excavated in 1971 the lower level of human occupation was dated to 8000 years and the shelter has been occupied intermittently since then.[10] During the last 200 years the hunters became raiders and the militia that followed them into the mountains also used Good Hope as a shelter. Since then traders, smugglers, hikers and tourists have all made use of Good Hope.

Its situation near a major line of communication has not benefited Good Hope's paintings. They have to all intents and purposes disappeared, their place taken by the mindless scratching and graffiti of visitors. But equally its relative proximity means that it is relatively well known and was one of the first sites to be photographed. Then, in the 1950s and 1960s Patricia Vinnicombe did a number of tracings there and researchers, from the Natal Museum especially, left site records. We therefore have a range of records spread over a hundred years, written and visual, in private and specialist collections.[11]

We collected these images, tried to decode the site reports, visited Good Hope shelter, photographed the rock panels, and began to match up the often very indistinct remnants of the paintings where we could find them, with the highly variable historical record. It was painstaking work, needing practice, and the widest variety of images possible, from different viewpoints and in different lights. A composite picture was then made and hooked onto paint remnants, warped to follow the contours of the rock, and granulated to embed

[10] J.C.H.Cable, K. Scott and P.L.Carter, 'Excavations at Good Hope Shelter, Underberg District, Natal', *Annals of the Natal Museum,* 24, 1 (1980)
[11] For our research we made use of the SARADA data base on the records in the Natal Museum, as well as Patricia Vinnicombe's work, and were greatly assisted by Rob Guy's own photographic collection.

it in the rock surface. None of this is direct: there is a continual process of interpretation, reassessment and reinterpretation as is demonstrated in the visual presentation.

Despite the integration of all available sources into one final layered image, it cannot be assumed that it necessarily reflects the 'original'. Indeed we have little idea of what the original image looked like. As in all rock art we can only see what has survived the consequences of time in a continually eroding environment. So in this sense it is as original a version as exists. Of course there might be arguments on the capacity of the digital artist to interpret the images – but, even here, because the 'final' image is malleable and layered, it can always be changed to take account of new ideas. In fact one can create a range of images – images best suited to satisfy the demands of a range of different critics, or purpose-designed images best suited to their own audience - an academic paper or a tourist brochure for example.

It is conventional for rock art studies to remove and isolate the images, smoothing them on to the pages of books and journals, causing them to lose their granularity and embeddedness in the rock, and indeed in the world. One of the advantages of the digital processing outlined above is that such images can be 'unbounded' by returning them digitally to their place in the shelter, and seen in context. At the time of writing this paper, we have restored about fifteen different groups to the rock walls of Good Hope. Again, once this has been done, the composite image can be manipulated for different purposes: the close-up for detail; the longer perspective for the wider view and context; and our favourite, the shelter as a gallery where different perspectives can work towards making the image, rather than the observer, the dominant feature.

It is this flexibility that makes Mitchell's arguments seem significant to us. We are increasingly of the opinion that digitization allows us to create images that get closer to the living context than a hard copy image in a book, even when the book itself has used digital layout and production techniques as imaginatively as *Claim to the Country* does. It is of course a contradictory process – approaching closer to creating the aura but never quite arriving – with the realization that its distant presence presupposes its existence. Mitchell points to other contradictory aspects of digitization which separate it from 'mere' mechanical reproduction and which, we believe, can be adapted to the digitization of rock art. For example, the simultaneous proximity and distance of the digital artist, examining the very grains of the pigmented rock on a screen on a different continent, or reading the scratches of a pen on 13000 pages of text made a century and a half ago on a disc that fits in the palm of the hand. The immediacy of what has passed and is distant creates a disturbing sense of non-existent reality.

It is the open-endedness, the freedom, the always unresolved nature of digitized images which makes working with them a continually creative process. Nonetheless we feel that with all its strengths and achievements, based as they are on the application of digital techniques, *Claim to the Country* fails to create the immediacy, the living breath, the aura if you like, of the archive. It is too fixed, too permanent in format and too dominated by immediate concerns. For what it does create in its visual reproduction of the archive is the aura of living in South Africa today – the context of living with an unacceptable past with which we have to come to terms.

To understand the art we must understand the artist.

Restoration and return

Another example of the San past at work in the present can be found in the book *My Heart Stands in the Hill* by archaeologist Janette Deacon and photographer Craig Foster.[12] Like *Claim to the Country* it deals with the San and manipulates the image in order to treat the subject of rock art. *My Heart Stands in the Hill*, provides us with breathtaking contemporary images of remote landscapes and details of the natural world. These are juxtaposed with historical texts and images from the Bleek-Lloyd archive to create a highly atmospheric, nostalgically-charged visual narrative. This narrative is structured around the idea of 'return', to the place that the /Xam Bushmen came from, the deep regions of the South African interior, where they believed they went when they died.

The imaging techniques used are only peripherally digital. Although the results certainly evoke computer-assisted imaging they were deliberately and primarily 'mechanical ' (film cameras, slide projectors and artificial lighting). Nineteenth century archive photographs of the /Xam were shot on 35mm film, and the processed slides were then taken 'back' to the landscape the Bushmen had lived in before being imprisoned in Cape Town. A small mobile studio including a generator allowed the slides to be projected onto elements of this remote landscape and re-photographed. The result is a series of eerie and evocative 'mixes' of images, black and white with colour, nineteenth with twentieth century, imprisonment with open country, indoors with outdoors, rock engravings with photographs, faces with rocks, faces with trees, faces with water. The authors state specifically that images virtually indistinguishable from these 'could have been done artificially by computer, but the significance for us was literally to re-unite them' (p. 145).

This idea that it is possible in a sense to resurrect the physical presence of a person by projecting his photographic portrait onto his putative place of origin is essential to the making of *My Heart Stands in the Hill*. This process was

---

[12] J. Deacon and C. Foster, *My Heart Stands in the Hill* (Struik, 2005)

considered by the authors to be a return, with greater meaning than if equally convincing images had been produced by digital means away from the site. And Wintjes, who has had first-hand experience of just these projections, is convinced of their dramatic effect.[13] But nonetheless she believes it remains a kind of theatre evoking an emotional response, convincing perhaps, but only for the moment. Thus the slide image of a weary-looking elderly man projected onto a tree aloe illustrates the return of 'Tsoinxa, an old man from Van Wyksvlei' to his former landscape. The text which refers to this composite picture, in our opinion, says it all: Tsoinxa 'was in a pitiable state when his photograph was taken by Dorothea Bleek, but this projection restores some of his former stature'.[14]

We obviously don't agree with Deacon and Foster in their opinion that computer enhanced images are more 'artificial' than 'mechanical' methods. Nonetheless we also use 'return', but in a different sense – in the context of restoration. Nowadays restoration is a controversial word seen to imply an invasive process which can irreversibly change the authenticity of the iconic 'work of art'. This does not apply to digital restoration as we describe it above. The fabric of the painting remains untouched and intact, and the process is always reversible. We therefore quite deliberately use the word restoration in two senses. Firstly to mean repair – the process of digital restoration we have described 'repairs' the damaged remnants of paint left on the walls by incorporating earlier and more complete copies. Secondly we use restoration in the sense of 'return' – uniting the different and disparate historical images by returning them to their place of origin. We do not, therefore, use 'restore' to mean the return of the spirits of the exiled dead to their place of origin. Our meaning is less ambitious and more prosaic: the return of the image to the rock face from which it has disappeared.

Digital imaging as historical research
In this final section we want to draw some parallels between the research we are doing on this project and more conventional documentary historical research.

Embarking on a research project the historian identifies the topic and the sources on which it will be based. These can be categorised as primary (created in the process of the historical events themselves) and secondary (created by subsequent commentators and historians). The historian studies, internalises, contextualises these sources, selects, interprets and synthesises them to produce the finished piece of history.

The rock art researcher, using digital techniques follows the same processes. Images of existing paintings are made and stored. But, as in the SARADA

---

[13] At Mapungubwe in September 2005.
[14] Deacon and Foster, *My Heart Stands in the Hill,* 168-9

project, older collections are added to more recent ones, thus giving a range of images which can be used to mark the process of change. These are all then stabilised digitally, and made available to other researchers on a database. A visual archive is created.

Up to this point the process can be compared with that of the compiler of records, the presentation of primary sources as printed or published documents. But the historian is more than the organiser of sources: the historian selects from these documents and interprets them. This, we want to suggest, can be compared with the stage we have reached in this project. The sources have been identified, selected, interpreted to a degree, and contextualised. In this case, the interpretation involves sufficient restoration of the deteriorated images to identify their physical provenance: the contextualisation involves their digital restoration to their place of origin.

At all the stages mentioned so far, conventional historical and digital research run in parallel. The same would be so if this research was carried further. Subsequent investigation of the rock art could involve comparative study and familiarisation with other shelters to see if the Good Hope paintings suggest a particular style or content. Just as digitization allows us to embed the images into the shelter, it also allows the shelter to be embedded into the wider landscape, and considered alongside other features of that landscape. A digital artist with the knowledge and the capacity, could also find ways to repair seriously damaged paintings, even perhaps to suggest what was to be found in paintings that have now disappeared. This would then be followed by interpretation – an area of rock art studies which the last few decades has been particularly rich, influential, and as a result controversial.

So, we would suggest, that despite the apparently obvious difference between using text and images as sources, the processes of historical reconstruction are very similar in both cases: documentation; synthesis; contextualisation; selection; interpretation; theorization; presentation; – all in interaction. But this process presupposes that the visual sources are processed digitally. It might be possible to imagine such a research process based on hard images – but only after digital imaging has shown the way – and even then the practical problems would be so immense as to make it impossible. It is the manoeuvrability, the malleability, of the digitised image which allows it to be bent, broken and reassembled: it is digitization which gives the image the flexibility which allows those with the skills and practice to mould it in new ways – as the writer does with words – in both cases closer to and more distant from the original.