

## Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation

**Staiff, Russell, Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation. Enchanting the Past-Future. Surrey Ashgate, 2014, 194 pages. Hardcover: ISBN 978-1-4094-5550-9. Ebook: PDF 978-1-4094-5551-6.**

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‘Those who do not expect the unexpected will not find it...’ (Staiff, 2014: 1)

There have been quite a few reviews of Staiff’s new book published in heritage and museum journals this year. However, this book challenges traditional approaches to heritage interpretation to such an extent that it should be valued from the tourism innovation viewpoint as well. Russell Staiff suggests that the ‘digital revolution’ has changed forever the way that people interact with their environment and that a new approach to heritage interpretation is needed. Nevertheless, this book ‘is not a heritage interpretation manual [...] it is not about effective communication techniques or how tourists and visitors learn things at heritage places’ (p. 3). Rooting itself in cultural and representation studies it rather broadens our conceptual understanding of heritage interpretation to more fully recognize it as a process of meaning-making.

The book is structured thematically into eight main chapters framed as a series of ‘interlocking mediations’ (p. 25): (1) Anecdotes and observations; (2) Tilden: beyond resurrection; (3) The somatic and the aesthetic: embodied heritage experiences; (4) Visual cultures: imagining and knowing through looking; (5) Narratives and narrativity: the story is the thing; (6) Digital media and social networking; (7) Conversing across cultures; (8) Enchantment, wonder, and other raptures: imaginings outside didacticism.

In the first chapter, the author immediately draws attention to the advent of digital technologies vis à vis heritage interpretation. Through his first question, regarding whether or not digital media is changing heritage interpretation, Staiff reveals a series of heritage tourism-related issues. To mention a few: the heritage experience and its relationship to the tourism experience; the way heritage interpretation is knitted into tourism as visual culture; the problems as-

sociated with cross-culture translation; and the heritage interpretation and tourism promotion practices associated with digital media. Through his observations and anecdotes, the author argues that the transition has been made from conceptualizing interpretation as an education activity to defining it as a communication process. He claims that 'heritage interpretation orthodoxy' (p.9) has reached its limits with digital technologies and advances in thinking about the heritage/tourist experience (p. 10). The author's personal observations and anecdotes provide food for thought in terms of how heritage is all about the reasons tourists feel attached to places, sites, and objects, and also how digital technologies have altered the creation of organic destination images (e.g. Venice, sites in Thailand). The growth of digital technologies gives visitors access to a range of alternative interpretations of a heritage site. 'Heritage becomes a dynamic entity, not a stable category [...] Heritage is something we do, rather than something that is' (p. 2). All heritage sites, even completely unknown to a tourist, already carry certain expectations and ideas about what it is he/she may find at the end of the trip, claims the author. 'Russell Staiff's book has provoked so many thoughts relating to heritage interpretation and we are only at page 17,' quipped Engelman (2015). We can also view the first chapter as being thought-provoking for the field of tourism studies, especially in terms of communication technologies and communication theories.

Although Staiff criticizes the information-processing approach to interpretation, he, being an art historian, stays firmly within communication theories, advocating the semiotic traditions of communication as the process of sharing meanings (see Griffin et al., 2015; Silverman, 1995). What is genuinely fresh in Staiff's 'new theorisations of the heritage encounter' (Duncan, 2015) is that the author sees 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' (Duncan, 2015). In further chapters, Staiff explores these ideas about the relationships between heritage places and their visitors. His main questions are: why is a consideration of where meaning resides, inside or outside material objects, so important to heritage interpretation, why is meaning-making as a representational system im-

portant to heritage interpretation, and why is didacticism so difficult in a system characterized by flux and constant shifts in meaning.

Most books about heritage interpretation start with Freeman Tilden, and Staiff does likewise. However, 'Staiff comes not to praise but to bury' Tilden's conception (Duncan, 2015). He criticized Tilden's belief that there is a 'hidden' meaning behind the materiality of physical objects, which is known to the interpreter but not to the visitor. Rejecting the cybernetic (so-called 'technical') tradition of communication in heritage interpretation, Staiff argues that meaning does not lie in objects themselves but is co-created by the interpreter and visitor within a particular historical and cultural frame of reference. Furthermore, interpretation can be conceptualized as 'the system of representations' (p. 31). Like any other form of representation, interpretation is capable of multiple readings. Staiff then examines the importance and dynamics of aesthetic and visual culture. He argues that popular understandings of the past are strongly shaped by representations that are encountered through film, art, news and other organic or induced sources of information. The interaction of visitors from this standpoint illustrates Staiff's phenomenological perspective on heritage experience.

The following chapter considers the centrality of narrative construction to heritage interpretation. The characteristics of the narrative concept are identified, as are some of the areas of debate that they raise, such as which narrative is told and by whom. 'However, what Staiff only hints at is the impact of (consciously or unconsciously) manipulating narratives in the heritage context, and this is certainly an area worthy of further investigation' (Woodham, 2015). In my opinion, tourism studies would also benefit from the clearer distinction between manipulating and differentiating narratives for different segments of visitors.

One of the most interesting chapters considers innovations in communications technology. Staiff argues that nowadays the majority of visitors to heritage sites arrives with a mobile device connected to the internet. This gives them the opportunity to search for additional information online and take photos or videos. By doing so, visitors are becoming co-creators and sharers of meanings about heritage sites.

Another theoretically sophisticated and tourism-related chapter examines the difficulties of communicating heritage across cultures. The centre of Staiff's argumentation is not only the phrase 'lost in translation' (an expression commonly used to indicate aspects of cross-cultural communication), but also the very idea of what translation is about. One of the deepest theoretical issues of this chapter is the author's questioning the ethics of empowering the cultural position of the target visitor through translation. 'There is probably value in not translating/mediating cultural differences in a number of heritage/visitor circumstances', summarizes the author (p. 154). This issue should be further investigated for the entire field of international tourism.

At the end of the book, the author returns to the heritage encounter, arguing that heritage interpretation frequently fails to engage with experiences such as enchantment and wonderment. Staiff finally argues that it is time for change and calls 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; for imagination, creativity, and newly performed responses [...] for co-authored experiences and meaning-making' (p. 170).

Re-imagining Heritage Interpretation is a lucid, thought-provoking, challenging reconceptualization of heritage interpretation as a cultural phenomenon, which makes a refreshing contribution to the body of literature in the area of heritage interpretation and heritage tourism in general. This book will be of special interest to postgraduate students and academics interested in heritage studies, heritage tourism, and interpretation. Although other reviewers point to its lack of practical value, I think the book will also be valuable to practitioners, especially tourism and heritage interpretation managers, who wish to reflect on their own practice and contribute to innovations in heritage interpretation.

## References

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