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Heritage: Representation and Interpretation

AHAN7028

Coursework 1

1000 Word Commentary

Word Count: 1099

Pages: 8

The Ice Maiden: Representing the Past – An Autopsy

The focus of this commentary will be a critical analysis of part of National Geographic's Andes Expedition (1997), and will focus exclusively on their online interactive presentation 'Virtual Autopsy', in order to highlight the problematic nature of representing the past. This 'virtual autopsy' features 'The Ice Maiden', and documents an account of how her preserved remains came to be. Owing to this particular representation of the past being exhibited with little detailed information on 'The Ice Maiden', this critical analysis will be based solely on what is presented through the 'virtual autopsy', as it would be viewed by the public. Thereby, this report will offer a summation of the specific account that National Geographic presents, through the use of description and direct quotation, and will critique this particular representation of the past utilising relevant supporting arguments.

National Geographic's Andes Expedition: Searching for Inca Secrets (1997), presents an early online interactive tour dubbed 'Virtual Autopsy', which focusses on an adolescent female named 'The Ice Maiden'. Before the 'virtual autopsy' begins, there is a brief and surprisingly vague account of how 'The Ice Maiden' was discovered, and one that offers little evidence to support the rather grandiose claims it is making. Indeed, this opening prologue frames this interactive 'autopsy' in a rather curious way, introducing a somewhat fanciful narrative to this important archaeological discovery:

"Five centuries ago a teenage girl surrendered her life to the gods. Inca priests buried her, and she lay in peace atop Mount Ampato in Peru. Accidental immortality came to the ice

maiden in 1995, when anthropologist John Reinhard and his Peruvian assistant Miguel Zarate found her – stunningly preserved. [...] Now the tale unfolds further. You can review a virtual autopsy of the ice maiden and learn what killed her. [...].” (National Geographic, 1997).

Upon reading this opening monologue, the ‘autopsy’ then begins. The virtual tour consists of a series of interactive CT scans of the preserved remains of ‘The Ice Maiden’, and offers accompanying descriptions of the images. The ‘autopsy’ features five key areas of examination; DNA, posture, musculature and bones, head, and stomach. Whilst these descriptions do indeed provide insight and history to the discovery and the people involved, particularly in examining the DNA, nevertheless, it fails to escape the additional application of a rather contrived conjecture. Speculating on the ‘Ice Maiden’s’ posture at death, the description adds:

“Spine curved, knees bent, arms crossed over her chest—the ice maiden may have spent her last minutes of life kneeling. She may have been praying. Her head was bowed, making it a perfect target for a blow from above.” (ibid)

The following insightful descriptions on the ice maiden’s musculature and bones add further sentiment to this recount: *“The ice maiden—about 14 years old at her death—was a flawless gift to the gods”* (ibid). At this point a theme is emerging through this narrative, one which portrays the ‘Ice Maiden’ as a young, innocent female, giving character to her preserved remains. This is then exploited through being starkly contrasted with rather

macabre speculation on her death, reinforcing the narrative through which this discovery is being presented:

“She did not go gentle into that good night. The ice maiden’s skull bears evidence of violent death: a two-inch [...] fracture and a broken socket around her right eye. The injuries are “typical of someone who has been hit by a baseball bat,” observed radiologist Elliot K. Fishman. His conclusion: She was killed with a club. The blow caused a massive haemorrhage, which killed the ice maiden. Her skull filled with blood, shoving the brain to one side. [...]. Couldn’t the injury have happened after death, perhaps from a rock hitting the corpse? No, said Fishman. “Such intense bleeding could not have happened after death and the fracture would have looked different had something struck the frozen body.” The ice maiden was alive when her skull cracked.” (ibid).

Objectivity indeed. The beguiling account ends with a look at the ‘Ice Maiden’s’ stomach contents and her ‘last meal’. Here, it is explained how the ice maiden ‘froze slowly’ from the ‘outside in’, which allowed for her partial decomposition. The ‘virtual autopsy’ concludes with: *“Pathologists surmised that her stomach was full at the time of death, a hypothesis supported by a stomach sample. The ice maiden ate a meal of vegetables—but no meat—some six to eight hours before dying.” (ibid).*

This particular representation of the past offers a unique opportunity to critically examine prevalent issues regarding heritage representation and interpretation. Evidently, it can be argued that National Geographic have failed to maintain critical objectivity in their presentation of ‘The Ice Maiden’, opting for perhaps a more abstract portrait, yet still

framed from a platform of recognised authority. This avenue of analytical commentary would not be the first time this particular reproach has been levelled at National Geographic, whereby questions of legitimacy have been called to attention. Writing in *Politics of the Past* (1990) on the subject of how National Geographic presents archaeology, Joan Gero and Dolores Root, highlight concerns regarding this very issue. Gero and Root (1990) describe how National Geographic has historically 'touted, exploited, and capitalised' on representations of the past, whilst concurrently reinforcing and legitimising dominant American ideologies. Indeed, they demonstrate how National Geographic has a notable history that parallels American expansionism and capitalist ideological doctrine, with the publication itself having political and elitist scholastic heritage (ibid, p20-22). Through this heritage, they argue, National Geographic sought to bridge the gap between the reader and the intellectual scholarly pursuit of geography and archaeology, by making information as broadly accessible as possible. Thus, this would see the introduction of non-technical language and pictorial illustrations, and a 'humanisation' of content within the publication, bound to the vested ideology of the present (ibid). This populist approach would come to dominate National Geographic's method in representing the past, despite being in juxtaposition to editorial guidelines bound to clarity, as this was a way of appealing to the largest amount of people, and naturally, generating profit (ibid).

This then, serves to illustrate how National Geographic as a publication has had divergent vested interests, not necessarily in line with presenting historical narratives factually and objectively. Thus, this exhibits how legitimacy becomes problematic regarding the factuality of the narratives being presented. Gero and Root (1990) argue that in this context,

National Geographic has a political function, representing the past in a way that legitimises the present (ibid). Similarly, this argument is supported through the work of Lutz and Collins (1993), whom agree that National Geographic validates Western values and doctrine through the proliferation of 'Western' vs. 'non-Western' 'otherness'. Writing in *Reading National Geographic* (1993), Lutz and Collins assert that due to the publications obvious highly stylised and editorialised presentations, it lies firmly within the manipulative nature of 'Mass Culture'. Here, they highlight how the Frankfurt School's notion of 'mass culture' propagates issues such as gender stereotypes, through the reflection of much broader Western values, and suggest that National Geographic's gender association has obvious orientation to the masculine, i.e. adventure, discovery, and science (Lutz & Collins 1993). What is of particular interest here, is the context of the 'virtual autopsy' and representations of the 'Ice Maiden'. As previously described, from the outset the language used in relation to the 'ice maiden' has gendered inference, even down to using the word 'maiden' and the moniker itself. This is very obviously contrasted to the masculine orientation of how the 'virtual autopsy' is being presented. It can be argued that the language used to describe how this 'maiden' was killed and the interactive CT images of her remains are presented with masculine appeal, seemingly supporting the notions of Lutz and Collins on gendered stereotypes being proliferated within 'mass culture'. This affirms the notion of Gero and Root that representing the past is bound to themes found in current ideological doctrine.

In conclusion, as has been presented in this report, representations of the past can become problematic with regard to exhibiting objective historical context. The legitimacy of representations of the past has to be called into question with regard to reinforcing and

propagating, however subtly, narratives that are firm reflections of their respective circumstance. The case of National Geographic and their 'Virtual Autopsy', serves to highlight this well, demonstrating how representations of the past may contain vested agendas, as well as aligning with and perpetuating various unjust narratives that permeate Western discourse.

Word Count: 1099

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