

14 *Interpreting material culture*

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If one wishes to talk about paradigms in archaeology, where the term 'paradigm shift' means a fundamental change in the way in which archaeologists actually see the world of material culture, the decisive break occurs not in 1962 with the substitution of one form of empiricism for another (Binford 1962), but in 1982 with the appearance of *Symbolic and structural archaeology* (Hodder 1982a). This break involves, primarily, the conception of material culture as a signifying system in which the external physical attributes of artefacts and their relationships are not regarded as exhausting their meaning. This chapter briefly looks back at some of the assumptions involved in the 'structuralist' encounter in archaeology, then charts a course leading from structuralism to the post-structuralism of Derrida, Barthes and Foucault.¹ The change now occurring in archaeology is a move away from attempts to establish what basically amounted to the search for a methodology for assigning meaning to artefact patterning to a more fully self-reflexive position involving consideration of what is involved in the act of *writing the past*.

Saussure and the diacritical sign

Saussure, the father of contemporary linguistics, drew a fundamental distinction between *langue* and *parole*. *Langue* constitutes the system of codes, rules and norms structuring any particular language, whereas *parole* refers to the situated act of utilization of this system by an individual speaker (Saussure 1960). The object of linguistics was, according to Saussure, the *synchronic* analysis of *langue* as opposed to the *diachronic* analysis of specific changes in elements of languages through time. The essential building-block of *langue* on which linguistic analysis was to work was the diacritical linguistic sign consisting of a union of two facets or components, the 'signifier' and the 'signified'. The signifier is an audible utterance or a sound 'image' referring to a particular concept, the signified:

SIGN:	signifier	:	signified
	(acoustic image)		(concept)

A number of points may be noted about this conception of the linguistic sign. It exists in no direct relationship with reality, because the relationship between the signifier and the signified is entirely arbitrary, a matter of convention. The

arbitrariness involved here is directly analogous to that existing between words and things. In English we use the utterance 'dog' to refer to a class of creatures with four legs, whereas in other languages an equally arbitrary sound image (e.g. *chien*, *Hund*) may be used. The sign only gains meaning diacritically because the meaning is derived from the system in which it is constituted as different from other signs. In other words, 'dog' is only meaningful because it is not cat, rope or axe, and vice versa. Meaning therefore resides in a system of *relationships between signs* and not in the signs themselves. A sign considered in isolation would be meaningless. Furthermore, the meaning of a sign is not predetermined, but is a matter of cultural and historical convention. Consequently, it does not matter how a signifier appears, so long as it preserves its difference from other signifiers.

Saussure was not interested in actual speech or the social utilization of signs in encounters between individuals or groups, or both, but with the objective structures making such *parole* possible. This position had a number of consequences:

- (a) the study of linguistics moves from concrete manifestations of speech to unconscious rules and grammars;
- (b) an emphasis on relations between signs rather than the signs themselves;
- (c) a conception of signs forming part of an overarching system; and
- (d) an aim of determining principles underlying different linguistic systems.

From language to culture

Saussure regarded the study of linguistic systems as eventually forming part of a general science of signs – semiology. Language might then be regarded as one sign system among many which would have relative degrees of autonomy from each other. By the 1960s semiology or semiotics had, indeed, developed as a major intellectual field. It is difficult, and perhaps undesirable, to draw any clear distinction between structuralism and semiology, other than to say that the former constitutes a general method of enquiry, whereas the latter forms a field of study of particular sign systems, e.g. advertising, fashion and facial gestures. What both have in common is to use, modify or build on aspects of the linguistic theory outlined above in order to study areas of human culture other than language.

Language becomes the paradigm for understanding all other aspects of social life. If language is an exchange of messages constituted in their difference, governed by an underlying system of codes and grammatical rules, then the move made by Lévi-Strauss is quite understandable. Marriage practices are analysed in terms of systems of underlying rules, such systems being variant realizations of a limited number of structural oppositions defined in their relational difference. Totemism is explained as a way of structuring the relationship be-

tween social groups (Lévi-Strauss 1969). If clan A traces descent from the iguana and clan B from the kangaroo, then this is merely a way of stating that the relation of clan A to clan B is analogous to that between the two species. So iguana and kangaroo are logical operators, concrete signs. Hence, one can deduce the canonical formula, archetypal of any structural analysis:

iguana : kangaroo :: clan A : clan B

To understand the meaning of 'iguana' and 'kangaroo' they must be situated within an overall structured system of signs. Lévi-Strauss' most ambitious project is the study of myth (1970, 1973), in which he aims to show that the seeming arbitrariness of myths is in fact only tenable in terms of a superficial surface reading of the narratives. Instead myths can be understood in terms of fundamental principles or laws operating at a deeper level. The consequence is that if the human mind can be shown to be determined even in its creation of myths, then *a fortiori* it will also be determined in other spheres. He isolates a number of fundamental oppositions such as male-female, culture-nature, day-night, raw-cooked, and others of a less obvious nature. In doing so Lévi-Strauss is analysing codes and the manner in which categories drawn from one area of experience can be related to those in other areas and used as logical tools for expressing relations. He does not ask so much what the codes are that account for the meaning that myths have in a particular culture, since he is interested in constructing a transcultural logic of myth. This means that myths are always, and primarily, signs of the logic of myth itself. Myths can be broken down into 'mythemes' which, like phonemes (the basic sound units of language), acquire meaning only when combined in particular ways. The rules governing the combinations constitute the true meaning of myth residing beneath the surface narrative, and ultimately to be related to universal mental operations. People do not so much make up myths, but rather myths think themselves through people.

Material culture and structure

Barthes, in *Mythologies* (1973), is not concerned with general structures, but with particular cultural practices. All such practices are endowed with signification, and this is a fundamental feature running throughout the entire gamut of social life from a wrestling match to eating steak and chips to hairstyles – the list is endless. There is no 'innocent' or transparent fact or event. All facts and events 'speak' to their culturally conditioned observers and participants. Culture is a kind of speech embodying messages coded in various forms and requiring decoding. Furthermore, the meaning of signification may be analogous for those who 'produce' and those who 'consume' the signs. At other times signs act asymmetrically, becoming ideological, linked to the maintenance of power.

Given the intellectual force and power of the general perspectives outlined above, it seems, in retrospect, almost inevitable that archaeologists would come

to reframe an understanding of their basic data – material culture – as constituting a meaningful significative system, the analysis of which should go far beyond a reductionist conception of it as merely constituting an extrasomatic means of adaptation, or as vaguely functioning in utilitarian or social terms. Such frameworks have no way of coping with variability or specific form. All that a functional argument can ever be expected to do is to rule on conditions of existence or non-existence. For example, ritual may exist because it performs the function of asserting social solidarity – but why any particular ritual? Such a question remains unanswered. Similarly, a consideration of economic practices must go far beyond simplistic accounts of how food resources might be obtained efficiently or inefficiently. The economy has a style, is part of a cultural and symbolic scheme. Of course, people eat to survive, but eating is a cultural practice. It involves a way of thinking and provides a medium for thought. This symbolic dimension is part of that which is to be explained. It might be said that the primary significance of material culture is not its pragmatic use-value, but its significative exchange value.

In archaeology the particular use of a structuralist or semiological perspective has not been concerned to analyse material culture in terms of the transcultural perspective of Lévi-Strauss. Rather, there has been a concern with historical and social specificity and context: particular rather than universal structures. Much of this work has been indelibly linked with Marxism, involving consideration, in particular, of ideology and power and dynamic processes of structuration or structural change. Here it is not the intention either to review or to analyse the strengths or shortcomings of this work, but rather to focus in a more abstract manner on archaeology as being a pursuit of sign systems.

If archaeology is anything, it is the study of material culture as a manifestation of structured symbolic practices meaningfully constituted and situated in relation to the social. This relationship is active, and not one of simple reflection. Material culture does not provide a mirror to society or a window through which we can see it. Rather, there are multiple transformations and relationships between different aspects of material culture and between material culture and society of, for example, parallelism, opposition, inversion, linearity and equivalence. In order to understand material culture we have to think in terms that go entirely beyond it, to go beneath the surface appearances to an underlying reality. This means that we are thinking in terms of relationships between things, rather than simply in terms of the things themselves. The meaning of the archaeological record is always irreducible to the elements which go to make up and compose that record, conceived as a system of points or units. Such a study involves a search for the structures, and the principles composing those structures, underlying the visible and the tangible. The principles governing the form, nature and content of material culture patterning are to be found at both the level of microrelations (e.g. a set of designs on a pot) and macrorelations (e.g. relations between settlement space and burial space). Such relations may be held to be irreducibly linked, each forming a part of the other. So each individual act of material culture production and use has to be regarded as a contextualized social act involving the relocation of signs along

axes defining the relationship between signs and other signs which reach out beyond themselves and towards others becoming amplified or subdued in specific contexts.

Such an analysis is undeniably difficult, but it does at least have the merit of trying to capture the sheer complexity of what we are trying to understand. Several points require emphasis.

(a) Material culture is a framing and communicative medium involved in social practice. It can be used for transforming, storing or preserving social information. It also forms a symbolic medium for social practice, acting dialectically in relation to that practice. It can be regarded as a kind of text, a silent form of writing and discourse; quite literally, a channel of reified and objectified expression.

(b) Although material culture may be produced by individuals, it is always a social production. This is because it does not seem to be at all fruitful to pursue a view of the human subject as endowed with unique capacities and attributes, as the source of social relations, font of meaning, knowledge and action. As Foucault (1974) pointed out, this 'liberal' humanist view of humanity is largely an 18th century creation. In regarding material culture as socially produced, an emphasis is being placed on the constructedness of human meaning as a product of shared systems of signification. The individual does not so much construct material culture or language, but is rather constructed through them.

Structure and archaeological analysis

An underlying assumption of much structuralist work in archaeology has been that such studies either have discovered the real structures generating the observed variability in the archaeological record, or at the very least, are working painfully towards this end. The questions become: what are the signs at work? How can we recognize them? How do they differ? How did they operate in a past life-world? This involves a search for recurrent associated elements in relation to their contextual patterning. The meaning of the past is something that the archaeologist does not have but wants to work towards by means of an analysis going 'beneath' the materials to reveal the underlying principles at work, principles which may be held to be not only structuring the observed archaeological materials, but also implicated in the overall structuration of the social order.

The problem has always been the precise assignation of meaning. For example, a formal analysis of pottery decoration (e.g. Hodder 1982b, Tilley 1984) is not concerned with the actual perceived designs, whether a triangle or a zig-zag line, but with the differences between these designs, which may then be recoded in various ways – for example, in terms of horizontal and vertical distinctions, or alphabetically. How far does such an analysis take us? The structure so arrived at remains a simulacrum (almost Platonic!) of the design

sequence, something previously invisible. A paradox is involved here. On the one hand, analysis becomes a form of repetition. We are not told anything about the pot design which is not already there in it. On the other hand, the implication of the analysis is that something new has indeed been produced. The archaeologist has discovered the inner essence residing in the object, in this case the pot design, but what is the meaning of this 'recovery'?

Several strategies may be utilized. Meaning may be established by linking the pot design structure to other structures in the overall material culture patterning, e.g. refuse disposal and burial practices, such that these different structural aspects of the material culture can be regarded as being transformations of each other. The same basic structure may then be held to 'generate' how people are buried, how they design their pots, organize their disposal of refuse and the use of space in settlements. Ultimately, general overarching structuring principles (principles which structure structures) may be recognized. In the case of Hodder's (1982c) study of the Nuba these are:

pure-impure: cattle-pig: male-female: clean-dirty: life-death

So pure is to impure as cattle is to pig, and so on – all very neat.

Another way of assigning meaning, this time in a 'purely' archaeological study, involves a more abstract double-edged conceptual strategy. First, again, different types of material culture are analysed in terms of structural oppositions (usually entirely abstract), e.g. left-right and bounded-unbounded, in different contexts such as settlement and burial. So pot designs may be analysed in terms of boundedness and the treatment of human body parts (Tilley 1984). Secondly, a conceptual link is then drawn between boundedness in body parts and boundedness in pot designs and, through time, the archaeological record can be examined to see whether such an 'expression' of boundedness intensifies or decreases. The abstracted reconceptualized 'data' may then have its assigned meaning further mobilized by the introduction of social concepts such as contradiction, power and ideology.

In both these and other studies, a notion of 'context' and 'wholeness' is invoked, into which the material culture fitted as meaningful code. This whole may, or may not, be conceived as a fissured or contradictory totality. The archaeologist stands outside this whole, his or her gaze directed towards its internal structuring. A commentary is then produced, bringing order to the superficial chaos of the external appearances and forms of the artefacts. What is happening is the enclosure of the enigmatic (interpreted) object within the interpretative theory's pre-existent system, which then further comments on it.

The metacritical sign and polysemy

More comments on these commentaries are now required. First, is the notion of the diacritical sign one which can be sustained? If the meaning of a sign is just a matter of difference from other signs, then this conception can be pressed further until it breaches Saussure's notion of language forming a closed and stable

synchronic system. This is because if a sign is what it is by virtue of its differences from all other signs, then each sign must be made up of a vast and never-ending network of differences from other signs. The outcome of such a line of reasoning is that there can be no clear symmetrical unity between one signifier and one signified. Meaning is then to be related to a potentially endless play of signifiers, and signifiers keep on changing into signifieds, and vice versa. So, the signifier and the signified become conceptually split (Derrida 1976, 1978). We arrive at what might be termed the metacritical sign. The meaning of the metacritical sign is never transparently present in it, but is a matter of what the sign is not. So meaning is both present and absent – to state this more simply, meaning is dispersed along chains of signifiers. Another piece of willed and deliberate obfuscation? Perhaps, but no more so than to mention a minimax satisficer strategy, ringing a dulcet tone of clarity in the attuned economic archaeological ear. The corollary to the position just taken is quite simple – the meaning of material culture can never be objectified or exactly pinned down. Its meaning always, to some extent, evades the analyst.

Considering the concept of polysemy may clarify this further. An object, any object, has no ultimate or unitary meaning that can be held to exhaust it. Rather, any object has multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings. The meanings depend on a whole host of factors. One appropriate example is the safety-pin in contemporary Britain (Hodder 1985: 14) which, according to who wears it – an infant, a grandmother or a 'punk', changes its meaning. However, this is only part of the story. The meaning also changes according to the context in which the interpretation takes place (a kitchen or an underground station), who is carrying out the interpretation (to various people the safety pin may mean aggression, pity, children or bondage); and why they are bothering to interpret it in the first place. This last point is an appropriate cue to draw the archaeologist into the text.

From reading the past to writing the past

The previous section left the intrepid archaeologist grappling with the notion of meaning not being so much present in the artefact but absent, and being faced with a situation in which the notion of any unitary meaning residing in the past to which our analyses might strive to reach – whether by producing a structural simulacrum or by any other means – as a dangerous chimera. Meaning therefore becomes indeterminate and problematic. What is to be done, if anything? On one point we can at least be certain, the archaeological pursuit of signs is no easy business.

One possible escape route might be to renounce linguistic imperialism and develop a theory of the meaning of material culture not based on linguistic analogies. We might strongly assert that what material culture communicates is totally different from language. For example, it would require a vast number of material objects to 'say', in a material form, even the simplest sentence. If someone makes a statement and you do not understand what they mean, there

is the possibility that a Socratic dialogue may bring illumination. Such dialogue is not possible with a pot! On the other hand, a stress can be made on the fact that material culture acts in multidimensional channels as a non-verbal mode of communication. In this respect its meanings could be held to be more complicated than those conveyed in speech. We could say that material culture is a material language with its own meaning product tied to production and consumption. Endless permutations of such arguments could be produced, but none of them can escape language. Thinking about material culture inevitably involves its transformation into linguistic concepts. However much we might try to escape from language, we are trapped in its prison house. So, although it might appear a laudable aim to escape a linguistic frame, this is an impossibility. There can be no meaningfully constituted non-linguistic semiological system.

The detour of attempting to embrace a radically non-linguistic analogy for the interpretation of material culture has apparently failed, leading us back once more to the archaeologist. Undecidability then, ambivalence: a free play of meaning? The 'structuralist', 'contextualist' or 'dialectical-structuralist' encounter as it has appeared in archaeology seems to be too important to be abandoned. In favour of what? The fact that such an enterprise leads inexorably towards its own critique and extension may be a sign of its vitality. A notion of metacritical and polysemous signs leads us to the margins of such an approach and our better understanding of it as an active interpretative exercise creating a past in a present which must renounce either finality or the notion that in the future we will be producing better, truer or more-precise accommodations to the truth of the past – whatever that might be.

The interpretation of the meaning and significance of material culture is a contemporary activity. The meaning of the past does not reside in the past, but belongs in the present. Similarly, the primary event of archaeology is the event of excavation or writing, not the event of the past. Consequently, the archaeologist is not so much reading the signs of the past as writing these signs into the present: constructing discourses which should be both meaningful to the present and playing an active role in shaping the present's future. Here an irony crops up. Archaeologists write, but many do not feel they should be writing! At best such textual production may be regarded as a transparent resource, a mere medium for expression. However, writing always transforms. The process of writing the past in the present needs to become part of that which is to be understood in archaeology. The ultimate aim of much contemporary archaeological discourse is to put an end to writing, to get the story right. Empiricism inexorably encourages such a futile goal. To the contrary, there will be no correct stories of the past that are not themselves a product of a politics of truth. There can only be better or worse re-presentations of history: his [*sic*] story.

What is important is the development of a truly self-reflexive archaeological discourse, aware of itself as discourse and systematically refusing the usual imperative of producing yet another methodology for grasping the past's meaning. Archaeological discourses are, by and large, framed in specific institutional settings and transmitted and disseminated through definite forms of media in which archaeological knowledge is located. Such discourses have their bases in

forms of pedagogy imposing 'a will to truth'. As yet there is no true alternative discourse in archaeology. A crucial act in creating one will be the disruption of the discursive authority of the texts we have to hand at present. This will involve an awareness of the politics of discourse and the power structures in which it is embedded. This requires consideration of what kind of past we want in the present and why we produce the past in one manner rather than another.²

The general position being taken in this chapter suggests that material culture can be regarded as providing a multidimensional 'text' from which the archaeologist can construct his or her texts: not, therefore, an entirely free process. The text that the archaeologist writes will consist, in part, of a tissue of 'quotations' drawn from the material record and meaningfully activated in fresh constellations in relation to a particular argumentative frame of reference. The assignation of the meaning of the quotations drawn from the archaeological record requires a self-reflexive problematic.

We might set up a chain of signifiers to help us to understand the process of writing the past. First we might put interest. We are interested in interpreting some aspect of the archaeological record, making it meaningful for ourselves and others. However, this interest is at the outset dependent on our values (why we are carrying out this activity in the first place). These values are, in turn, dependent on our politics and our morality, which relate more generally to the sociopolitical context in which we find ourselves situated and positioned as agents. The chain we actually end up with is: positioned subject – politics, morality – values – interests – meanings – text.

The meaning of the past has to be inserted into the present through the medium of the text. So there is no meaning outside the text (conceived broadly to include film, etc.). This *meaning* has to be argued for and against. The act of writing always presupposes a politics of the present, and such writing is a form of power. It cannot escape power. Any kind of writing about the past is inevitably simultaneously a domestication of the difference of the past, an imposition of order. Writing the past is not an innocent and disinterested reading of an autonomous past produced as image. Writing the past is drawing it into the present, re-inscribing it into the face of the present.

This text is a pastiche or montage, a material production built on other texts, an extended footnote which, if anything interesting has been said, may become incorporated into another text. A formal conclusion is out of keeping with the spirit in which it is written. It will suffice to mention that in ending this contribution I wonder whether I should be saying what I have said. I would like to be looking over your shoulder and saying 'No, no – I didn't exactly mean it to be interpreted like *that*!'.

Notes

- 1 These authors are names for problems rather than formalized doctrines, and this is precisely their interest. Both Foucault and Barthes, in their early work, have been labelled structuralists. Both have renounced the structuralist enterprise. Post-

structuralism is characteristically a term not amenable to any rigid definition. It is simply a term applied to work without any unitary core that is temporally removed from a structuralist position. Those interested might look at Barthes (1974, 1977), Foucault (1972, 1984), Derrida (1976, 1981) and Sturrock (1979).

- 2 Aspects of post-structuralism, discourse, textuality, power, ideology and politics in relation to archaeology are discussed in detail in *Re-constructing archaeology and Social theory and archaeology* (Shanks & Tilley 1987a,b).

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