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Encoding and Decoding the People

Circuits of Communication at a Local Heritage Museum

■ *Bella Dicks*



ABSTRACT

■ This article notes the 'vernacular aesthetic' at work in the new breed of experience-centred heritage museums, which foreground and celebrate the ordinary lives of 'the people'. It seeks to understand how constructs of 'the people' are produced at such museums. Many existing treatments of heritage museums have analysed them as symptoms of totalizing trends, rather than coming to terms with how they work as sites of cultural communication. By drawing on Stuart Hall's theory of encoding/decoding, the article presents a linked analysis of the encoding and decoding of 'the people' at a heritage museum in South Wales. It discusses how this museum was set up, through particular relations of production and frameworks of knowledge, and shows how the heritage texts are the negotiated and hybrid outcome of the conflicts that shaped encoding. It then traces the circuit of communication through to a visitor study, which asked visitors what impressions of 'the people then' they had formed during their visit. A particular concern was to explore how visitors positioned their present lives in relation to the past, and how popular mythologies of 'community' are deployed in this process. ■

Key Words communication, cultural display, encoding/decoding, heritage, museums.

This article is an attempt to understand heritage as a cultural communicative practice. It focuses on heritage museums of 'the people', i.e. the new breed of locality-based, living history 'experience' museums

Bella Dicks is lecturer in sociology at the Cardiff School of Social Sciences Studies, Cardiff University, Glamorgan Building, King Edward VII Ave., Cardiff CF10 3WT, UK. [email: dicksb@cardiff.ac.uk]

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which have been springing up all over Europe in the last two decades. These museums celebrate the history of 'ordinary people' — their work, localities, lifestyles and popular culture — rather than the history of elites or elite knowledge. They are part of what we could term a 'vernacularizing turn' in urban cultural display. Traditionally, artefacts and buildings have been judged worthy of preservation and display on the basis that they possess the aura of age, scientific or aesthetic importance and state or elite patrimony (see Bennett, 1995). Increasingly, however, and particularly since the 1970s, there has been a 'vernacular aesthetic' at work (Urry, 1995), which has impelled the public display of everyday life: the situated, grounded and 'authentic' stories of ordinary lives lived in particular localities.

In heritage display, this has been manifest in a fascination with 'living history', and the backstairs, quotidian aspects of working people's lives (Urry, 1990; Rojek, 1995). In particular, it has resulted in a new attention to making people more visible in heritage display. What Hywel Francis, a Welsh historian, condemned in 1981 as heritage's preoccupation with the 'puffing machines of the Industrial and Maritime Museum' has largely been supplanted by a new enthusiasm for live costumed demonstrators, tableaux vivants, dioramas and audiovisuals. In the current museological emphasis on a full interpretation of the past, exhibitions aspire to be 'inclusive' and 'people-centred' (Vergo, 1989). It is a significant development, but one which has not been fully appreciated in the critical reception which has greeted the so-called 'heritagization' of Europe.

Heritage critiques have been particularly vociferous in the UK (see, for example, Hewison, 1987; Wright, 1985, 1991; Walsh, 1992; Corner and Harvey, 1991a; cf. Samuel, 1994, for a robust defence of heritage). They have been launched from a variety of perspectives, but have mostly been directed at the nostalgia and backward-looking retreatism that the heritage boom allegedly reveals. Such analyses have failed, consequently, fully to register the cultural-communicative aspects of heritage. By this I mean that, in favour of dwelling on the inadequacy of the heritage museum's historiographical functions, they have neglected the ways in which these museums, in different ways, mobilize discourses that have particular cultural currency in the late 20th century — discourses of local identity, belonging, place, environment and, above all, constructs of people and community (see Massey, 1995; Massey and Jess, 1995; Bird et al., 1993).

Some recent discussions of heritage and museums have begun to recognize the importance of this vernacular aesthetic (Bennett, 1995;

Macdonald, 1997). Macdonald suggests that heritage offers the potential for local cultural and social appropriation, and that therefore heritage 'can be a way of telling the people's story, and of helping to make sure that it will be heard' (Macdonald, 1997: 175). This assessment contrasts with the more gloomy judgements of other critics, who have noted the vernacular presumptions of the new heritage and concluded that it merely offers the middle-class spectator a voyeuristic and compromised vision of 'the people's humble contribution to history' (see Bommers and Wright, 1982; McGuigan, 1996).

With a few notable recent exceptions (see, for example, Fyfe and Ross, 1996), what tends to characterize these debates is a lack of new research into how visitors actually interact with the various genres of exhibition that characterize different heritage centres. This reflects a wider failure to examine how the meanings produced through the construction of exhibitions can be linked through to their 'consumption' by actual visitors. Critical theoretical discussions of heritage are in fact often informed by an underlying and unexamined 'effects model' of communication, in which heritage texts are assumed to inculcate a particular understanding of the past (see Lumley, 1994). Such a perspective sees the heritage text as a simple industrialized product, whose commodified relations of production produce commodified messages transmitted to passive visitors.

This article adopts a more social model of communication, which is alert to the political, economic and cultural contexts and practices of both production and consumption. Such a model is drawn from Stuart Hall's pioneering encoding/decoding theory of televisual communication developed in the 1970s and 1980s (Hall, 1973, 1980; Morley, 1992). This communicative framework allows us to see the connections between heritage and other mediations of history, such as television. Although we should not underplay the specificity of museological forms of cultural display, this article is concerned to draw out the useful parallels between heritage and other sites of public communication — primarily as a corrective to those critiques of heritage that single it out as possessing especially potent or worrying historiographical functions. While heritage may claim to represent the past more directly than film or television, through offering a more authentic, embodied and 'live' encounter with history, many of its communicative strategies (such as the ubiquitous audiovisual show) are shared with other visual media. Understanding heritage as a communicative circuit of encoding and decoding allows us to interrogate these authenticating claims. In particular, we can ask whether it merely summons up 'the people' as an inert or picturesque

image, short-circuiting the ability of history to connect with the present, or whether it can offer us a people whose lives and concerns we can understand.

Encoding

The Rhondda Heritage Park interprets the history of the former coal-mining communities of the Rhondda Valleys in South Wales, now economically impoverished after the virtual closure of the deep mine industry in Wales. It comprises the buildings of a former Victorian colliery which closed in 1983, shortly before the year-long national Miners' Strike.¹ When the colliery closed, the local authority — the Rhondda Borough Council — determined to preserve the buildings as a heritage museum, to tell 'the story of the people of the Rhondda'. Finally opened to the public in 1988, it presents three audiovisual shows, along with a walk-through tour into a simulated underground experience, guided by an ex-miner. All the exhibits are set within the impressive stone-built colliery buildings which stand around the now clean and cobbled pit yard.

Like many other heritage museums of the past two decades, the Rhondda Heritage Park was set up, funded and managed under an entrepreneurial model of development (see Corner and Harvey, 1991b). In 1980s Britain, current Conservative government urban-planning policy was directed at encouraging (some might say forcing) local authorities to stop depending on regional aid from central government, and instead to think of their local areas as independent and competitive centres. Thus, local authorities were charged with the task of regenerating their own failing economies. This was to be done through setting up place-marketing schemes and 'partnerships' with the private sector to lure in new leisure-oriented service industries, with the aim of attracting tourist spending and inward investment (see Harvey, 1989). In the 1980s, heritage was the 'big new idea' that was to assist in achieving this aim.

This entrepreneurial model ensured that the Rhondda Heritage Park was conceived as a flagship project: one that was to be designed by the UK's foremost heritage and leisure development professionals.² These were brought in from England, rather than located from within Wales or the local area. This meant that it was the professional expertise of heritage interpretation that was favoured over any home-grown, specialized or situated knowledge of local history. These professional consultants were equally at home turning Dover's heritage into 'The White Cliffs

Experience' as they were turning 'the Rhondda' into the Heritage Park. They thought of the typical visitor as a blank screen waiting to be filled with exciting images, stories and scenes. The visitor's attention would not, therefore, be captured by close historical detail; it would require instead the activation of recognizable tropes and familiar narratives, such as the construct of 'the traditional mining community',³ delivered through a visually and aurally arresting series of audiovisual shows (see Heritage Projects Ltd, 1990).

As the development process wore on, the local press began to circulate hostile articles, suggesting that a 'Disney-style' model was driving the consultants' interpretative approach and that the project was an expensive white elephant (see, for example, *Rhondda Leader*, 1 August 1991; *South Wales Echo*, 2 October 1991). The project was becoming intensely controversial: large amounts of public money were being spent on something that had only limited local support. Local councillors, many of whom were themselves ex-miners, and all of whom lived in the area, were themselves divided over the project's credibility. As the Park failed to become a self-financing success and continued to depend on public money, these local councillors were watching its development closely. As a result, the project became overtly politicized within the local public sphere, and its claim to authenticity became the battleground for local party-political power struggles.

To survive, the venture had to be seen to be more rooted in the locality. Thus, consultants were instructed to work alongside a locally respected labour historian to write the audiovisual scripts and to provide a locally authenticated historiographical input. This historian was Dai Smith, Tonyandy-born⁴ and an eminent documentor of the South Wales miners' political struggles. His writing belongs to a tradition of socialist historiography which deploys tropes and mythic narratives not to position the past as other, but to claim it as inspiration for working-class politics today (see Smith, 1998). The consultants and the historian had to sit down together and work out scripts for three audiovisual shows which would satisfy their respective interpretative agendas: the consultants' creative treatments based on 'thrills and spills', and the historian's detailed and socialist-driven historical narrative.

The result is three narratives that resist easy classification. The first show⁵ is narrated by the famous Welsh actor, Glyn Houston, who assumes the persona of Bryn Rees, a former safety officer from Lewis Merthyr Colliery. 'Bryn' describes how the Rhondda's coal industry became so central to Britain's imperial and trading fortunes, and how rapidly social conditions in the Rhondda changed as the industry

mushroomed up and down the Valleys. He focuses in particular on the trade union leader A.J. Cook, the industrial agitation of the 1920s and the hunger marches of the 1930s. Even Tonypandy is mentioned. From a first-person perspective, Bryn tells of 'our' struggles for jobs and pay, and the conditions of work that 'we' faced, and he reappears in the third audiovisual to describe the life and times of 'our' colliery. The second show uses the voice of Neil Kinnock, the erstwhile leader of the British Labour Party,⁶ and describes the social and cultural life of the Rhondda during the coal boom.

There is considerable reliance in these texts on the trope of 'the traditional mining community' to explain the social fabric of the Valleys. This trope emphasizes the essential unity of 'the local way of life', based on a synergy between work and home, the danger and hardship of mining, the arduous and never-ending nature of women's domestic work, the constant battles against dust and disease, and the values of solidarity, tradition, activism, mutual aid and moral respectability (see Dicks, 1997a). These narratives of 'the Rhondda' thereby construct an 'it' from the collection of different towns and villages in the Rhondda (which actually comprises two separate valleys, called the Rhondda Fach and the Rhondda Fawr) and attribute to this community-identity a coherent set of 'human' values. Above all, the texts draw a discursive and iconic boundary around the 'Rhondda people', marking them out as unique.

The texts do play on familiar and hackneyed images of 'the traditional mining community'. Yet there is also an insistent narrative voice which tries to forestall any cosy image of historical closure by giving community a utopian inflection. This trope is focused on community activism: the Rhondda as a community which reveals 'its best values of neighbourliness, resilience, the will to survive, together'. It insists on the dynamism and energy of the Rhondda, which 'for at least two generations . . . was one of the most vibrant places on earth', and celebrates the ongoing relevance of its history: 'if we have eyes to see and can still listen to the buzz of its history, the drama of the Rhondda will still inspire and still proclaim the vision of its human world'.⁷

Embedded in a narrative which has celebrated the Rhondda's struggles to overcome hardship, this utopian vision can be read as an invitation to continued community activism. This particular trope of community, which emphasizes its utopian potential, is one that has for decades provided a significant rallying cry for collective political mobilization in the South Wales mining valleys (see Rees, 1997), and has frequently figured in socialist-humanist, labourist and communitarian political imaginations (Kamenka, 1982). The Rhondda heritage texts

deploy this trope within a narrative that conveys a considerable amount of local historical detail and which records and celebrates the political and cultural achievements of 'ordinary people'. The result is a hybrid text, which insists on the continued vibrancy of local community activism and which touches on wider issues of class solidarity and gender divisions, yet also squeezes these into the territorialized imagined community of 'the Rhondda'.

There is, thus, an ambivalence about the particular community imaginary secured for 'Rhondda people' at the Rhondda Heritage Park. We could see this as a tension between an anthropological construct of community, which exoticizes community and locates it temporally and spatially as a 'vanishing other', and a political discourse of the 'good community', which imagines it as a resource for future-oriented collective action, protest and self-provisioning (see Dicks, 1999). Although the narrative loudly appropriates the second discourse, it also summons up echoes of the first in its determined elaboration of the uniqueness and moral unity of the Rhondda, and in the equivalence it posits between 'the people' and 'their' environment, through underlining the common patterns of their work, lifestyles and social life.

Decoding

The question then arises of how the 'people of the Rhondda' are in turn imagined by visitors — whether they are seen as temporally, spatially and socially removed from the lives and concerns of visitors in the 1990s, or whether, conversely, visitors find ways into their story which produce historical understanding and insight. With the stock criticisms in mind — that heritage merely offers dead history and encourages us to view 'the people then' as a vanishing other — I offer some insights from a visitor study carried out by the author at the museum in question. This visitor research is based on semi-structured interviews carried out with 20 visitor groups (comprising 45 individuals in total). Visitors were asked briefly to say what they already knew about the Rhondda before they started their visit, and then they were interviewed again at length immediately after they had finished it.⁸ They were asked to recount what they had seen and heard, and to describe how they would now characterize the Rhondda, the people who lived there and the history of the area.

In the pre-visit interview, 12 of the 20 groups offered the unprompted comment that 'community' or 'friendliness' summed up their idea of the Rhondda — with nine groups producing statements equivalent to 'the people are very friendly', and five to 'it's a close-knit

community'. This confirms that the trope of community as a Rhondda-specific commonplace is already embedded in the majority of visitors' cultural repertoires before the visit commences.⁹ After the visit, all visitors interviewed used the term 'community' in describing the 'people of the Rhondda'. In fact, they configured this through a particular discourse of community that could be termed the 'it was hard, but ...' discourse. In this discourse, the ready acknowledgement of the past's difficulty and harshness is linked to an observation of the compensatory or palliative effects of local structures of mutual aid. It was most commonly expressed in the statement that 'They had a hard life, but they were a close-knit community.' Community is seen as a special attribute of those people then, a quality that existed in the particular conditions of the past and which enabled them to overcome the particular challenges of that time. In this very general sense, most visitors read the Rhondda as other, i.e. as an identity removed both temporally and culturally from visitors' own lives.

However, if all visitors felt that community marked Rhondda people out as special, there is still the more significant question of how visitors judged the nature of the action that the community took. In fact, without exception, visitors decoded the historical efforts of the people to improve their 'lot' as the story of a 'struggle for justice': i.e. a legitimate cause. At first sight, this reading seems consistent with a discourse of the 'good community', in that it appears to celebrate and legitimate working-class activism. However, it is the question of how visitors locate this story in relation to the present that is really at stake here. Indeed, this narrative might also be framed as the community of the 'vanishing other', where people's struggles figure merely as narrative events in the special way of life that was led back in the 'foreign country' of the past. Historical understanding is not only a question of messages about the past, but of how the past is framed in relation to the present.

In fact, visitors were divided as to the present-day relevance of the people's 'struggle for justice'. The most widely expressed framing is that 'things are different now' (nine out of the 20 groups), suggesting that Rhondda people's concerns are alien to visitors' own lives. A significant minority (six groups), however, framed the story in terms of explicit parallels between 'then' and 'now'. Five groups were more ambivalent, in varying ways — one of which was that they questioned the wider validity of the stories presented. We thus have three differing articulations of past–present relations: an alien framing, a parallel and an ambivalent one. Mrs Rose's account¹⁰ offers a good example of the first. Interviewed with her husband, she describes the Rhondda's history as follows:

What I picked up was that the gentry were making money out of the poor old working class of the mines. That came across to me when I watched it. The big wigs, and Lord Bute, or whatever his name was. Built all these houses off the backs of the workers. I know it's an awful thing to say, but that came across to me. Whereas the miners were living in squalor, the upper class were living in luxury, where they could afford to build Castell Coch and all these places.

Several terms here suggest that the framework of knowledge drawn upon envisages an old social order based on an exploitative upper class/working class division: the 'poor old' working class are oppressed by the 'gentry' and the 'big wigs' — both labels with old-fashioned connotations. The comment, 'I know it's an awful thing to say', suggests that to identify class inequality is a rather extreme, and not usually justifiable, act. Nevertheless, this account does conform to the predominant reading, i.e. of the people's 'struggle for justice'. Later on in the same interview, however, the following exchange takes place:

Mr Rose: Well, let's put it this way, I suppose in the days that they did go through, they deserved more. They just outdid themselves in the end, didn't they? I don't know whether they got too greedy or whether they just thought they could get coal cheaper from abroad, I don't really know that. But, years ago, the strikes were necessary, weren't they? Like you say about working a 12-hour day for nothing. But towards the end I thought they did get beyond . . .

Bella: What did the Park tell you about that type of issue?

Mrs Rose: . . . I think, to me it seemed that the early struggles of the miners were more, more legitimate . . .

Mr Rose: More desperate . . .

Mrs Rose: More desperate than the later miners. Obviously they did stick together, and you still get that very friendly approach up this way, but I don't think the struggle up to the '50s and '60s . . . I think modern day mining is not the same. To me it's not the same as your going back 50 years ago and, you know, beyond that. Modern-day mining isn't in the same class is it?

Bella: Did the Park tell you much about modern-day mining and . . .

Mrs Rose: No, no, not really . . .

Mr Rose: Not as much as I thought, it was mostly the older . . .

Mrs Rose: I think it was the olde worlde type.

Mr Rose: He explained that they did do it with machinery . . .

Mrs Rose: Obviously, people aren't interested in that. I mean people want to know the heritage part of it and what happened 50, 100 years ago down the mines. I don't think I'd be interested really in the modern.

Here, we can see that the narrative of the struggle for justice is reconfigured through a distinction between deserving and undeserving causes. 'Modern-day mining' is sharply distinguished from mining in the past, and this is offered as an explanation as to why modern miners' struggles are less 'legitimate'. In addition, there is a clear preference stated for stories about mining in the past — 'the heritage part of it'. The message is that heritage is rightfully preoccupied with the past, which has little to tell us about the present. Just audible beneath the exchange is an implicit condemnation of the 1984/5 Miners' Strike, when the miners became too 'greedy'.

The second 'parallel' framing does not position the past as an 'other' which is finished and complete. Instead, specific points of comparison and contrast are drawn between the past and the present, so that 'the people then' are brought into the visitors' explanatory framework for understanding their own lives. Here is an exchange between Mr and Mrs Hardcastle:

Mr Hardcastle: It portrayed it as a boom town and it was great, but when you saw how they lived, it wasn't that good, like. The conditions underground. They valued the animals more than the humans. It made me more sympathetic to the miners, miners' causes and all that. Not so much the money, but the closing down of it, and the better conditions.

Bella: Really? What were your views on that before then?

Mrs Hardcastle: I don't know really, because it didn't interest you really, it was just what you saw on the news.

Mr Hardcastle: Yes, [the television] brought you the violence of it, you just saw the picket lines. . . . All you ever heard is they're just striking for more money, more money, like. You don't get to hear about better conditions. . . .

[Here, Mr Hardcastle mentions some friends who have recently joined him in the factory where he works, and who used to be miners.]

Mr Hardcastle: Although it was all really dirty and everything, they said there's a better camaraderie, I suppose, between each worker, whereas in our place if there'd be any action there'd be no union between the workers. It's a modern factory. It's just different, like. . . . That's what Stuart was saying — if another job comes up, he'll go [back to mining]. He's working in a Japanese factory where they don't think about the workers. You know it all looks glossy on the telly, but it's rubbish really. . . . There's better unity in the mines, than our, than this type of factory I'm working in. Because, if somebody got sacked tomorrow, for whatever reason, people would just say, 'oh, too bad', like. But, in the mines, I hear it's more like if you got the sack, then they'd all get together. You know striking's not always the answer, but they get things sorted don't they? It's a very selfish type of

attitude in our factory. Everybody's out for their own. They don't care about other people. It's clean, our place. It's warm and everything, but it's just a dead-end type of job.

In this account, life in the Rhondda is not consigned to the past. The discussion turns on a comparison between Mr Hardcastle's factory work and the work of his friends, who left mining to join him in the factory. The Rhondda is held to be a place of camaraderie and unity; these values are located in present-day mining too, which is explicitly compared with the speaker's own experience of work. In fact, mining and factory work are discussed in terms of two axes of comparison: the unity/non-unity axis and the dirty/clean axis. This means that there is no simple assertion that 'things are better now', as there is a more multifaceted identification of both differences and similarities between past and present.

It is clear that it is Mr Hardcastle's immersion in a work culture where ex-miners talk about mining in relation to the factory that helps to open up this type of engagement with the heritage under discussion, whereas his wife stays largely silent during this part of the interview. This suggests that both class and gender may have a bearing on the ways in which visitors negotiate with the narratives presented. It is striking that in four out of the six accounts that articulate this second reading, it is spelled out in most detail by working-class males, suggesting that a shared male working-class experience of insecure work provides a ready bridge between the present and the past.¹¹

An example of the more ambivalent framing is offered by Mr and Mrs Graham:

Mr Graham: I thought the feel of the whole thing was very sort of that the community had been exploited, sort of downtrodden working class. They had a terribly tough time working out all this valuable coal, and not being rewarded properly for it. . . . Yes, a story of exploitation and mass action, community feeling.

Bella: Mass action? Can you explain a bit more what . . .

Mr Graham: Well, about the strikes. They went on for a year and that sort of thing, but the strongest theme was the fact that they all did it together. So it was a community, when they all went marching, and then very soon after the Arthur Scargill strikes, they all closed down. . . .

Bella: How do you think that story came across really?

Mrs Graham: I don't think it's particularly biased, really. You'll [to husband] probably disagree violently. I mean I think obviously they were trying to sort of show that the workers were exploited, but I didn't think that it was overdone. You know I'm amazed at how they put up with it for so long.

Bella: [to Mr Graham] What would be your view on that?

Mr Graham: I think that's the way that the community here would view it. We had a look through the newspaper, and it had a list of the local councils, and it had 19 Labour and four Plaid Cymru I think, and so it sort of reflects the whole feeling. So this would be an authentic view, and they wouldn't want anyone else's view of it. That's the way they see it, and it's not wrong. I wouldn't argue with their interpretation, but I can see that other people would have put the history of coal in a different way. Yes, people from different viewpoints . . .

Mrs Graham: If the mine-owners had written the script. [laughter]

Here, there is a very interesting negotiation of the struggle for justice narrative. Firstly, the coal-owners vs miners division is decoded as the story of the 'downtrodden working class'. This is an appellation which constructs the working class as an 'other' and as victims rather than activists. Historical change is seen simplistically as the substitution of one type of mass experience ('they all went marching') with another ('they all closed down'). Second, this 'mass experience' is explicitly attributed to local Rhondda Labour Party hegemony, so that its wider relevance is thrown into question and is only considered authentic for 'them', i.e. the Rhondda people. There is a clear political disagreement visible in this exchange, with Mrs Graham appearing to be more convinced of the legitimacy of the Rhondda's people's cause than her husband. All in all, there is a rather sophisticated argument about how local 'bias' might or might not be at work in the encoding of the narratives.

Discussion

Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication allows us to specify the conditions, processes and practices that make up the circuit of communication I have been describing. We have seen how, in the heritage museum discussed, various locally and centrally determined social relations introduced certain tensions into the encoding process. We saw, therefore, that 'production, here, constructs the message' (Hall, 1980: 257). However, as Hall further points out, 'institutional-societal relations' are not directly productive of textual discourse. Although there is no room here to offer a rigorous account of the narrative and semiotic strategies through which encoding yields meaningful discourse (see Dicks, 1997b), I have tried to show how different constructs of community, determined 'elsewhere' and not created by the encoders, echo and reverberate throughout the audiovisual shows.

One of the seminal, and most controversial, theoretical moves Hall makes in his article is the concept of the text's 'preferred' reading/

meaning. This refers to the ideological framing of the communication process: the metaphor of the circuit allows Hall to avoid a reductionist position that locates the origins of this framing solely in production. I do not, here, enter complex debates around this issue which are well summarized elsewhere (Wren-Lewis, 1983; Morley, 1992; Hall, 1994; Tudor, 1995; Nightingale, 1996). What does seem important to hold onto, however, is the understanding that there is some specifiable level of determination, or, better, articulation, between the three linked 'moments' of encoding, text and decoding. In other words, what visitors carry away with them in terms of an understanding of 'the Rhondda' at the end of their visit is in some way related to the conditions under which the Rhondda Heritage Park came into being. We have seen that the prevarication in the text between a pat, anthropological evocation of community and the appropriation of a humanist voice of collective action reflects the divided and uneasy conditions of production within which encoding took place. This leaves the texts open to equally divided decodings.

Although, at one level, we have identified a preferred reading — that the people's collective action constituted a 'struggle for justice' — we have also seen that the ideological framing of this very general reading varies considerably. The 20 visitor groups related in quite different ways to the stories presented. While a large proportion viewed the Rhondda as a place and people which are both socially and temporally 'other', a significant grouping drew on frameworks of knowledge that brought 'the people then' into relations of equivalence and comparability with their own lives. This suggests an active and questioning engagement with history. Even those whose readings 'othered' the Rhondda at least left the Park with a clear impression of the hardship of early mining, which rather undermines the claim that heritage romanticizes the past. However, it does reflect a tendency to pick up on the tropes and figures of community as a people belonging to a place in time (the vanishing other), rather than to 'hear' the message about the ongoing march of history and local activism (the good community).

What I have tried to show in the case study is that mythic constructions of 'the people' become embroiled at all levels in the circuit of heritage communication. In this respect, heritage is no different from other genres of public communication (and need not be singled out as peculiarly damaging or worrying). Both encoding and decoding are part of a discursive realm which classifies collectivities in codified ways (e.g. through the construct of community/non-community). There is no interpretative closure 'within' the text that ties the meaning of 'the

people' to one inflection of community or the other. Instead, it is through the visitors' interactions with the texts that a (necessarily contingent) closure is effected.

Thus, the 'preferring' that the text accomplishes is relatively open, 'subject to more active transformations' in the interface with the visitor (Hall, 1980: 134). As we saw, visitors arrived at the Park with varying kinds of preconstituted image of 'the Rhondda', which were organized around prevalent tropes of the 'mining community': friendliness, togetherness, closeness, etc. These tropes organize the meanings of heritage both within and 'outside' the texts in question, but they do not necessarily foreclose the possibility of a critical reflection on past–present relations. It is how the boundaries of community are envisaged that is important: whether these are seen as temporally and anthropologically closed, or whether they are conceived as more open and porous. As we saw, encoding organized the texts around both: professional exhibitionary discourse deploying its nostalgic tropes of community, while professional historical discourse preferring to emphasize a different kind of trope, in the 'ongoing march of history'.

In this sense, we can see that negotiated meanings are not aspects of decoding alone, as the encoding/decoding model has it. Rather, there is a negotiation, or prevarication, in the texts, established through their conditions of production. The question then becomes one of how visitors negotiate with the negotiation. It would be misleading, in this sense, to label the three framings identified in this article as dominant, oppositional or negotiated readings, as in Hall's article. There is no single preferred reading that reflects a hegemonic worldview, and which is passed directly from text to reader. Rather, the three seem to be indicative of different forms of self/other identification: in the first, visitors hear only the tropic discourse that turns community into an 'other'; in the second, they heed the utopian call to enter community and view it as 'self'; and in the third they remain 'on the fence' so to speak — neither inside nor out. Such identifications seem to confirm those views of encoding/decoding which suggest that all readings are negotiations (e.g. Morley, 1992). They are less the outcome of decisive decodings, as of relations of relevance/irrelevance — between readers' own social positionings and interpretative frameworks, on the one hand, and the text's negotiations of the differently accented relations of encoding on the other.

Locating the source of visitor identifications in straightforward class, gender or other relations is not convincing (see endnote 11), though further work is needed on how these provide points of entry into particular identifications. In terms of encoding, we can see that not only

are heritage museums not directly reflective of dominant class interests but neither do they offer an unambiguous set of identifications. This is contra Bourdieu and Darbel (1991), who, in their classic but now outdated study of European art museums conducted in the 1960s, concluded that this dominant worldview was structured into the very codes through which the museum communicates. The new vernacular heritage centres, I would argue, require of the visitor quite different kinds of cultural capital.

Thus, it should not be assumed that the vernacular aesthetic is simply appropriated by dominant regimes of meaning. The heritage museum, by its very definition, seeks to display the everyday life of place and people. Thus, its encoders have to sojourn into the spatially and temporally distinct, and frequently divided, social body of the locality. The outcome of this negotiation between locally based knowledge and professional, exhibitionary knowledge cannot be assumed in advance, or simply read off from a reading of the texts. Instead, it will be necessary to examine how visitors then resolve the texts' narrative prevarications into the categories and distinctions through which they map their own experiences and life-worlds. Further research is certainly needed here to enhance our very limited knowledge of how both visitors and non-visitors make sense of the past (Urry, 1996). The study of heritage as social communication can make a significant contribution to this.

Notes

1. The miners' eventual defeat at the end of the strike signalled the virtual end of deep coal-mining in the UK. In South Wales, once at the heart of Britain's coal trade, just one deep mine survives, alongside a few private drift mines and open-cast mines.
2. This, necessarily truncated, account of the Park's development is based on data collected over a two-year period from interviews with consultants, local authority officers, agency officers, councillors, local enthusiasts, curators and historians, and from minutes of planning meetings, public documents and consultants' reports. These are not directly cited here due to lack of space (but see Dicks, 1997b).
3. This construct is a familiar and enduring one in British popular culture, initially consecrated by films such as John Ford's *How Green was My Valley*, and associated with a tradition of 'gritty working-class realism' in film and television.
4. The 'legend of Tonypandy' (Smith, 1998) holds a particular place in the mythology of Rhondda political activism: it was the site of mass

- demonstrations in 1910, in which Winston Churchill allegedly sent in armed troops to break up looting and rioting.
5. My analysis of encoding is based on the three audiovisual slide shows, which give a full elaboration of 'the story' of the Rhondda, as opposed to the other communicative sites within the museum. Each is staged, with lighting, slides, voice-overs, soundscapes and illuminated dioramas, in different buildings of the old colliery.
 6. Neil Kinnock never succeeded in gaining office, as he resigned after the third successive Labour Party defeat in 1992. At the time of the Rhondda Heritage Park's construction, however, it seemed likely that he might become the next prime minister. Persuading him to narrate the script was considered quite a publicity coup at the time.
 7. From the fan-house audiovisual.
 8. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed, and analysed using a model of discourse analysis that identifies the cultural distinctions underpinning visitors' accounts (see Fairclough, 1992; Alasuutari, 1995).
 9. Of the eight groups who did not make this assertion, seven offered no knowledge of the Rhondda, other than that 'coal-mining comes to mind'. These seven groups are interesting, in that they are ostensibly the most akin to the 'blank slate' visitor-type, upon which heritage texts can most readily 'write' their version of history.
 10. There is space here to cite just one extract from the interview material, selected as exemplary of each positioning. All names have been changed.
 11. There is no evidence in the complete interview sample of a straightforward class effect, nor of gender. In the first reading, three groups belonged to social class C1 and the other six groups were C2, D and E. In the second, one group was A, one C1 and the other four were C2, D and E. The ambivalent readings were also mixed: with two from social class B, two C1s and an E. Although, as stated, there is some indication that male working-class occupation might be a factor, we need to be very careful here, since other working-class males produced the first reading (one of which, as a chimney sweep, had been closely connected to the coal industry for decades). The other potentially significant factor is local residence: having local links might plausibly result in less of a tendency to position local people/local past as an 'other'. However, there is no evidence of a local/non-local effect. Half (three of the six) the Reading 1 groups lived locally (i.e. in Mid Glamorgan), while only one of the Reading 2 group did.

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