

A Semiotic Response to Space in South Africa: Indigenous Rock Art and Colonial Travelogues as Marginal 'Writing on the Earth'?

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The notion of spatiality, examined in terms of the different ways in which people respond to the geographic space around them, is a central issue in current postcolonial studies. A variety of semiotic systems record these different forms of engagement with the land, thus linking culture and nature in ways that are inherently relational and contextual. In South Africa these semiotic formations are especially significant in the context of our history of colonisation, contested borders, and in the more recent *Apartheid* past, of urban migrations and forced removals of people from the land. As a semiotic response to space, these systems also merit special focus as regards the problematic issue of land (re)distribution.

To elaborate on this, and by way of example, I examine the way in which two 'marginal' semiotic systems, namely South African rock art and early colonial travel writing, engage with the land. Moving beyond the facile binary opposition of Europe versus Africa suggested by my choice of examples, I focus on the fact that, in spite of apparently opposing ways of relating to geographic space, both these seemingly marginal systems posit similar positions of *power vis-à-vis* the land. In the light of the ongoing debate on space appropriation, it seems important to examine to what extent power, as expressed by the constructed authority of the semiotic system, is of a contingent nature.

South Africa's early hunter-gatherers—I avoid the problematic Bushman / San nomenclature (cf. Chapman 1996:21f) as far as possible—were not a homogenous group, and some generalisation due to my particular focus will therefore inevitably occur. I also realise that to consider rock art only in terms of a semiotic system—as I am doing here—is in itself incomplete: Like all artwork it is neither mere representation, nor a mere grouping of signs and symbols (cf. Skotnes 1996:234).

To briefly illustrate one way in which South African rock art can be seen to relate to the land, I follow a mainstream approach in current research (Lewis-Williams et al 1989, and Parkington et al 1996), according to which the paintings express shamanistic engagement with nature, a practice central to the existence of this ancient

people. By its very nature shamanistic experience, induced for example by dancing or rhythmic clapping, was meant to impact on the land through rain-making activities, or when participating in the hunt through out-of-body experiences. Already in Bleek's (1968:331) research from the late nineteenth century there is reference to somatic movements (presentiments) named *'qwe'*, and which denote 'letters ... in their bodies'. Rock paintings can be seen as a kind of pictographic writing; a transcription of somatic power activated by the trance. In its simplest form the art takes the form of entoptics, (the geometrical zigzags, dots and grids seen in rock paintings), and in its most complex form as iconic hallucinations, (such as the depiction of geographical features, people and animals) (Lewis-Williams 1988:136).

On the other hand however, as shown inter alia by Skotnes (1995:327) and Lewis-Williams (1988:134), the boundary between 'this world' and 'the world of the spirit' does not figure in the Bushman perception of reality, and is a Western construct. The trance experience expressed through the rock art thus constitutes a bridge between nature and culture which transcends the difference between mental image and material landscape. Depictions of people and animals are for example often integrated with entoptic phenomena, thus combining representation of the observed landscape with forms which originate entirely in the mind, such as a giraffe with an entoptic 'grid' contained within its body.

Neuropsychological research (Siegel 1977) on altered states of consciousness has shown how ordinary perception of space and time falls away during trance states, an experience so overwhelming that it can be described only by way of metaphors. However, as subjects move into the deepest state of trance,

they stop making such comparisons and assert that things *are* indeed as they have described them. Brilliant white entoptic dots, for example, are no longer *like* stars; they *are* stars. Metaphor becomes empirical rather than comparative (Lewis-Williams 1988:136f).

The figurative script on the rock is therefore neither the representation of perceived reality nor merely a symbol of ineffable somatic trance energy. Through its shape, colour, texture and context it is claimed to have a life of its own, and constitutes the irreducible *complement* of so-called *n/um* power activated during trance. One is reminded of Derrida's '*originary* metaphor' (Derrida 1981:218); its very 'beingness' preventing it from merely representing that which cannot be materially expressed. Therefore, the rock painting cannot be said to *describe* the spirit world, it *is* that world. To corroborate this, the sacred songs recorded by Bleek and Lloyd in the nineteenth century show the ancient click languages to be practically stripped of adjectives. Critics suggest that this is the result of the close correspondence perceived between word

(sign) and thing, which philosophically reflects the indivisibility (or one-ness) of the real and the mythic (cf. Chapman 1996:25). For the shaman artist then, the rock art does not merely translate shamanistic experience, but integrates and contains both the real world and the world of the spirit; the physical landscape as well as the mental experience of that space.

To decipher a one-to-one relationship between visual sign and mental concept is therefore severely limiting. Literally inscribed into or on to the landscape, the rock art embodies a single process through which the signifier and signified are so interpenetrated that they become merged, and the dichotomy of subject (the artist), and object (depicted image), similarly dissolves. As generally accepted in contemporary art and literary theory, but now referring to ancient African art practice in particular, anthropologists claim that

there is no division between object and its beholder; it can no longer be taken for granted that art—as object, music, or theatre—is separate from the person who experiences it (Forster 1993:30).

In similar fashion, a shamanistic reading of the rock art would specifically insist on the physicality of the surrounding space being integrated into the semiotic practice. Not only does this refer to the land literally becoming the medium, (on account of the natural plant dye and antelope blood applied as colour pigment), but also that shapes and irregularities in the rock surface participate in the signifying process. A shamanistic reading would also foreground the spatial relationship between the rock surface and the viewer as being an essential component of meaning. For example, rock paintings are often found high up on the ceiling of caves, or in places where the geographic position of the rock face forces the viewer to lie on his or her side or back. The composition of the work—often consistent and thus suggestive of conventions as regards ‘orientation and organisation’ (Parkington et al 1996:231)—does not always relate spatially to a viewer’s normal standing position. Similarly, the sometimes circular compositions defy gravity and disorientate the viewer; a disorientation understood as being part of the paintings’ shamanistic content. Any attempt therefore to re-orientate these paintings according to Western notions of framing, as is often the case when reproducing them for publication or research purposes, deprives them of an essential facet of their meaning (cf. Skotnes 1995:323).

To sum up this first example of the way in which a seemingly marginal semiotic system engages with space, the rock art can be said to intertwine organically with the land: the rock face itself, the spatial relationship between the viewer and the painting, as well as the composition, all participate in a signifying process which complements or correlates with the shaman’s altered state of consciousness. Space (the land-

scape and all it contains, including the rock surface) and the subject that stands in relation to that space (the shaman artist or viewer) are irrevocably linked in a reciprocal relationship, and can be read as essential components of the signifying practice itself. Thus by its very nature the rock art mirrors but also transcends the blurred boundaries between subject and object normally associated with contemporary literary theory: As a semiotic response to the landscape it seems to speak from *within* the space with which it is engaged. However, in spite of the semiotic symbiosis of nature and culture suggested by this holistic intermingling of signifying features, the rock art nevertheless represents a position of power vis-à-vis the land, a notion to which I will return in my closing argument.

My second example of the way in which an equally 'marginal' semiotic system elucidates engagement with geographic space is the travel writing of the early colonial travellers to South Africa. The rather vague notion of 'space' to be explored, rapidly lead to its appropriation through language; the landscape (re)main(ed) alien, impenetrable, until a language (was) found in which to win it, speak it, represent it' (Coetzee 1988:7). Through naming, classifying, mapping, and also through the practice of sketching or painting, the new land was fixed into a European grid of knowledge and control. Although most of these early travellers were official delegates to South Africa or were on missions to the East, some were just passers-by or hunter-explorers. All their writing however, was set to gain the approval and admiration of a specific audience, namely their peers or employers in Europe. As testified by the multiple editions and cross translations of the period, the conviction with which these texts present themselves as the master discourse became the measure of their success. In seeming contrast then, to the way in which the rock art speaks from *within* the land with which it is engaged, early colonial travel writing apparently appropriates it from *without*: a notion widely expounded by theorists such as Said, Spivak, Fanon and many others. For the sake of my closing argument I will briefly elaborate on this by way of specific examples.

The irony of naming geographic features which already had indigenous names was often missed by the colonial travellers, as when the French missionary Arbousset (1836:113f) mentions that the mountain his party has designated on their map as *Mont aux Sources*, is called *Pofung* by the 'natives'. Theorists such as Said (1978) and Viswanathan (1989) draw on such examples to show how colonial texts create and naturalise 'knowledge' of both the colonising self and the colonised *other*—in this case, the land. In this regard Carl Linnaeus' system of classification, published as *The System of Nature* in 1750, was an effective instrument in taming the 'other': every plant, animal or mineral encountered, could hereby be placed in a hierarchy and given a Latin name, a process which suggested order and control over the new land. Even the unfamiliar southern sky was submitted to a similar procedure when the French Jesuit astronomer L'Abbé de Lacaille classified close on 10 000 planets during a stay

at the Cape from 1751 to 1753. The effect of this on navigation and the associated imperial impulse is self-evident. (For a fuller account of the naming practices and other related points on early European travellers to South Africa, see Sienaert & Stiebel 1996:91-101).

The mapping of terrain by the colonists is often singled out as a form of graphic control over the blank and potentially threatening landscape, a semiotic activity which further enhances the sense of power evoked through naming and classifying. Politically motivated, mapping is never a neutral activity:

A map ... is an instrument of power / knowledge. The mapper, in mapping, simultaneously exercises power over the charted terrain and gains enormous empowerment through having assimilated it as a field of knowledge (Penn 1992:22f).

In conjunction with mapping, the description of landscape or space in colonial travelogues is considered to reveal the strangely disembodied, passive gaze of what Pratt (1992:7) calls 'the seeing man': the European (male) subject of travel writing 'whose imperial eyes look out and possess'. Postcolonial theorists stress the way in which the landscape is physicalised and given female features, or seen from an elevated position such as a hill-top which, in conjunction with clichéd phrases such as 'the opening up of Africa' (compare Livingstone 1875:189), suggest a subject-position of power *vis-à-vis* the new land. To consolidate this view, critics have, for example, highlighted the way in which many typically African features were specifically seen in terms of economic development. Thus Livingstone (1875:729) writes of the grasslands in Natal, that 'every acre of good land ... may be made to produce an average of two tons of hay', and Barrow (as quoted in Pratt 1992:61) refers to a swamp 'that by one single drain might be converted into a very beautiful meadow'. This compulsion for 'improvement' or economic development is considered so striking a feature of colonial writing that Pratt (1985:126) calls it the 'reverie convention', thus once again foregrounding the confidence and implied authority of the colonial subject.

Considered equally symptomatic of this superior attitude is the way in which illustrations of the period subscribe to the aesthetic conventions of Europe and seem to ignore the reality of the African landscape. As potentially threatening subject the land thus appear tamed and is made harmless by viewing it through the familiar European lens. This refers particularly to water-colours or engravings made on the travellers' return to Europe, and which were often based on verbal descriptions or basic sketches brought from the colonies. A case in point would be engravings depicting the Khoi in the classic pose of Greek sculptures (cf. Tachard, 1688:74f) during the Neo-Classical period in European art. In verbal descriptions of landscape too, the visitors see what their European frame of reference has taught them to expect; the authority of the seer

remains unchallenged. Colour, for example, is defined by its absence, as when Burchell (in Coetzee 1988:42) stipulates: 'In Africa we look in vain for those mellow beautiful tints with which the sun of autumn dyes the forests of England ...'.

Although Said (1993) amongst others has now retreated from the binarist paradigm often associated with postcolonialism, the way in which the land is presented in the early travelogues certainly provokes a reading which presents the relationship between 'centre' and 'margin' as a binary opposition by which the European *self* has appropriated, misrepresented and disempowered the African *other*.

It seems essential however, to avoid this trap of postcolonial indignation which would in my examples of semiotic response to space translate as an opposition between the seemingly non-aggressive and holistic stance of the rock art, and the explicit authority and domination of space in the travel-writers' accounts. The fact is that both these 'marginal' semiotic systems express control of the landscape. In spite of the holistic way in which the rock art seems to speak from *within* the space with which it is engaged, it nevertheless implicitly aims to control the land through, for example, the shaman artist's rain-making activities and out-of-body participation in the hunt. This notion of control can be extended to the semiotic practice of tracking: the hunter identifies and traces his quarry by scanning the earth in a way reminiscent of the coloniser's so-called appropriating gaze. The Bushman literally 'reads' what is 'written' or 'depicted' in the sand, (cf. Reuning & Wortley 1973:30,74), and relies on his scanning and creative ability to accurately judge distance and anticipate the whereabouts of his prey (Liebenberg 1990:45). In a similar fashion the colonist, for example, scrutinises geographic features to mentally project future economic development of the land. The dominance implied by the colonial travellers' naming and mapping activities is more explicit, but the semiotic practice of both groups clearly represent positions of power in the way they engage with the land: Only when brought into conflict would one become the dominant mode. As such they constitute a kind of 'writing on the earth' (Van der Watt 1993:23) which to this day has left clear ideological traces. In the context of the postcolonial and ongoing issue of space appropriation—which includes the navigation of *cultural* space—they therefore illustrate how historical shifts in power formations inevitably 're-draw, re-name and re-inscribe the land to match the day' (Sienaert and Stiebel 1996:100).

Problematising the notion of marginality, as in these examples of indigenous rock art and colonial travel writing, should also caution against the facile juxtaposition of literatures within a multicultural society such as South Africa. Even if our position in history denies us an objective theoretical base through which to reconstruct voices from the past, we can neither speak *only* on behalf of the pre-historic shaman or the colonial travel writer, nor allow the textually embedded 'voice' of the *other*, (in this case the *land*), to be effaced or ignored.

Nor can the problematic *self-other*, (or *centre-marginal*), contention be side-stepped by focusing, as I have done here, on semiotic systems which on the surface avoid the possibility of sustained dialogue by engaging an *other* which by its very nature as landscape seems inherently silent. Even if that was the case, and it is not, the notion of alterity would simply be transferred to the difference of response to African space. Any postcolonial practice which ignores this dynamic, would disregard the polyphony of discourse in general, and ironically recreate precisely the self-referential authority claimed by colonial power. As a dangerously reactionary reading then, such practice would simply promote cultural separatism.

What the above suggestive exercise of Africa versus Europe then attempts to highlight is that in spite of surface appearances, both semiotic systems under scrutiny posit identical positions of power *vis-à-vis* the land, albeit by different means. Moreover, as exemplified by constant shifts of socio-political power, the *centre* which underpins the system also has to be seen as a contingent construction, which like the semiotic systems to which it pertains, always remains relational and contextual.

Does this then, in the context of cultural, political and societal flux, paralyse the individual as an agent of intervention? By subscribing to the analogy whereby Rorty (1991:218) compares 'distinctions between cultures, theories, or discourses' as differing 'grammars', one can respond that, similar to the way in which people are able to learn the grammar of a foreign language—or even acquire total proficiency in such a language—it must be possible for one culture to actually understand and creatively engage with another.

Only when keeping in mind that all discourse is inscribed and informed by a multitude of voices, can the binary opposition of *central* versus *marginal* collapse and reveal the positive, defamiliarising effect of juxtaposing culturally different semiotic systems. Such juxtaposition demands that oppositional and antagonistic elements be negotiated, (and not negated), and that a space be created for cultural 'translation and hybridity' (Ching-Liang Low 1993:187).

Critical awareness of the way in which these past semiotic systems bridge the nature-culture divide creates precisely such a space, and allows the *self—other* dialectic to be constructively re-explored. The notion of *marginal* versus *central* falls away as the contingent quality of power is revealed by the constructed authority of semiotic systems in general—a process which not only dislocates obsolete subject-object relationships, but also suggests common denominators for significant cross-cultural understanding.

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