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COMMENTS ON MICHAEL SHANKS' ARTICLE "THE LIFE OF AN ARTIFACT"

In this article Michael Shanks seeks to cover various issues relevant to archaeology. He is, however, careful not to involve archaeological artifacts in a dialogue with his thinking. Artifacts constitute no argumentative resistance; they are illustrations. In fact, the presence of artifacts has no role in his argumentation, except for introducing some relaxing spaces for the eyes to rest on in an otherwise confusing text. Furthermore, the text is written in such a way that the reader suspects that Shanks believes that he has discovered new problems in archaeology – namely a research field that should focus on the life histories of artifacts. But these are the news of yesterday. Two memos: taphonomy and source criticism. Shanks makes a plea for pathology, decay, ruin, and life-cycles of both artifacts and humans: "Litter creates". These problems have been widely discussed in archaeological texts taking the taphonomical histories of sites into serious consideration. Peeled off its Shanksist jargon, his text says nothing different from what has been discussed in archaeology for the past 25 to 30 years by Binford and many others. The life histories of artifacts and sites are taphonomical histories. And taphonomy is an old branch of archaeology.

Shanks questions the boundaries between Things (artifacts) and Us (humans). He concludes that Things, just like humans can do work, e.g. the bookshelves in his room hold up his books and allow them to remain in order. Of course things can do work. That is probably the main reason why humans began to create artifacts in the first place. Shanks, however, sees deep epistemological consequences in this viewpoint on the life of artifacts: "In a world of no essential difference between people and things, the social and the technical,

the arts and sciences are united or symmetrical in that they all deal with *mixtures* of people and things". Shanks maintains that accepting this symmetry threatens to dissolve the problems of methodology and to dissolve the problems of methodology is the aim of Shanks' text. Problems of methodology have not been central to Shanks' earlier work. Perhaps his relatively meagre interest in methodology is connected with his low interest in the concrete complexity of assemblages of artefacts, sites and monuments. I have no problem understanding this: Shanks' theoretical studies on Greek vases have not necessarily led to a devoted interest in methodological questions. Theory, not methodology, has been Shanks' field of interest. Shanks' insights into theory are widely known, and very much appreciated by many archaeologists, myself included. His insights into problems of methodology are for obvious reasons less known. He has never before taken an interest in developing new methods as a consequence of his theoretical thinking. And now, when he has taken an interest in archaeological methodology, his aim not unexpectedly is not to solve problems of methodology but to dissolve them.

Shanks discusses the following fundamental question: Do we induce life into artifacts or are the artifacts themselves "alive" ? Shanks says both yes and no. Especially his argument concerning the aura of moon rock vs. earth rock is brilliantly inconsistent: "Aura is not a quality which people bring to something" vs. "Moon rock has an aura. It may be objected that this is something I read into the rock, something which is not an attribute of the rock. If I were to find out that it was not in fact from the moon its aura would dissipate immediately and it would become just a mundane piece of rock." The cardinal question is: What generates different forms of aura? Shanks answers: "It is the life histories of the two pieces of rock".

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The life history of the moon rock is enmeshed in a narrative of a famous passage in the history of wo/mankind. On this I think Shanks and I agree. Without the knowledge that the moon rock is from the moon, the rock has no aura. I wish to go one step further: Without knowledge of the narrative of the passage to the moon, the rock has no aura; the narrative induces an aura to the moon rock. An aura is brought to the moon rock by people. A rock is a rock is a rock. But a rock enmeshed in a narrative.... I find that Shanks' text is rather unclear on the point of how aura is generated. He might want to answer that aura is not generated, it just is. What do you really mean, Michael Shanks? And please, don't come with any of the "death-of-the-author" stuff, that the writer does not exist or has no responsibility to defend his texts, that one cannot really mean anything etc. etc. Could you please explain yourself?

I do occasionally read texts written by Shanks. However, I do it more seldom and with less joy than before 1992. In reading his texts something peculiar began to happen around 1992; the letters, sentences and finally the material text itself became more and more blurred in a palimpsest way by a picture of a male butterfly swimmer. Slowly the cover of an old Boom Town Rats album started to emerge; an album released in October 1979 called "The Fine Art of Surfacing". The front cover shows a forceful butterfly swimmer with excellent technique. As a (very) former specialist in the 200-metre butterfly stroke, I know that this style of swimming demands force, top condition, coordinated technique and exceptional stamina. It is then and only then you can keep pace and flow elegantly through the water, skimming the surface, making it look light and easy. Watching a well-trained butterfly swimmer is just like magic. Being one is even better.

Michael Shanks used to be the absolute master of the fine art of surfacing in the race of archaeology.

Being a good master of butterfly archaeology calls for youthful ambition, energy, endurance, and an angry attitude. Anger becomes young men. Shanks had an attitude in the eighties. Together with Christopher Tilley he surfed the waters, strokes ahead of the rest of us. After 1990 something happened. Shanks' book «Experiencing the Past: On the Character of Archaeology» (1992) was a huge disappointment. Had he lost it? Shanks insisted on sticking to his old speciality, butterfly archaeology, in 1992 even with an un-PC taint of sexist language. From 1992 onwards I have found him struggling to keep pace with the shadow of an angry young man. It is quite painful to watch an old hero struggling to keep his head above water just after 25 metres, especially when you know that another 175 metres remain. The ideas presented by Shanks in this article are no longer written elegantly; they are just personally jargonized old news covered by other well-known branches of archaeology. He makes a variety of excursions leading nowhere, e.g. to light bulbs, artificial intelligence, bookshelves, floppy discs, the non-expert issue, and Skara Brae. He takes the reader to several places and the distances between them are immense and unbridged. Because of the inconsistencies in the text, and analogies with floppy discs and modern machines, it is not possible to grasp the relevance of his ideas for archaeology or the study of material culture before the age of modern machinery. This is a sad moment in the research history of archaeology.

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