

RECENSÃO/REVIEW

Aesthetics and Rock Art. HEYD, Thomas & John CLEGG (eds.), Aldershot, Ashgate Publishing Co, 2005. (HB edition, 28+316 p.)

When Henri Breuil drew a parallel between Altamira and the Sistine Chapel he was valuing more than the symbolic role of the space, he was looking at the newborn rock art as... art. And he did so, being an artist as well as an archaeologist, from an aesthetic perspective, recognising such "capacity" in prehistoric people, largely a denial of the evolutionary Hegelian approach to aesthetics.

Ever since, and despite the rationalisation of the subject, the aesthetic dimension of rock art is a recurrent topic, but also a neglected one.

This new and challenging book is the matured result of a decade of thoughts and discussions, as one of the editors, John Clegg, states in his Preface. The title enlightens the purpose of the effort: to look at rock art from an aesthetic perspective. An approach that found in Portugal, in the International Rock Art Congress of Vila Real organised in 1998 by Mila Simões Abreu, one of its basic steps.

The contributions were grouped into three parts. The first part, with five contributions, deals with theoretical issues related to the role of aesthetics in the study of rock art. The second part, with another six contributions, deals with the factors from which such an aesthetic approach derive. The last five papers are focused on the relevance of the cultural backgrounds and cross-cultural approaches as applied to specific case studies. This threefold clear structure is largely benefited by the quality of the editing, as the readers will find once consulting the table of contents, the list of tables and figures and the useful index in the end. The authors and editors have been careful enough to avoid selecting figures that would loose too much information once published in black and white, even if, in a rock art publication, and particularly on art, one would welcome some coloured prints.

In a sense, the topic of the book meets wider considerations in the field of science and knowledge that became increasingly debated in the last decade, concerning the achievements and limitations of rational thought when compared to emotional behaviour (see for instance António Damásio's *The feeling of what happens: body and emotion in the making of consciousness*, New York, Harcourt Brace, 1999). As Jean Clottes mentions in his foreword, "how do aesthetics help us better understand rock art and the people who created it,(...) and how does it inform our decisions about preserving or replicating the art?" (p. xix). In fact, bringing aesthetics into the field of rock art and archaeological research, a domain for long

shared by neo-positivists and art critics alone, imposes a journey that leads to a plurality of perspectives, as the third part of the book suggests.

John Clegg, questioning the possibility of having a non-biased global understanding of the contextual cultural frame from which other peoples' rock art is produced, and stressing the limitations of formal analysis, one could say archaeography, sets the pace of the book by using the aesthetic criteria as a "third way" (p. xxvii), in which one senses the actualism (i.e., the tendency to approach past realities from contemporary epistemological perspectives) of the editor. This avenue, that, as one should not forget, was pursued since the very beginnings of rock art studies, is to be found in the crossroad of archaeology, art history, philosophy and anthropology, involving a complex set of categories that are often insufficiently known by rock art researchers. Thomas Heyd, in his introductory paper, reviews the main concepts and the historiography of the aesthetic approach to rock art, and namely the positivist arguments against the use of the term art itself, and stresses that such an approach derives from sensitive, and not purely rational, cognition. We couldn't agree more with the editor, when he presents aesthetics as "the study of attentiveness to our perceptual world", a sort of relativization of oneself accepting the plurality of points of view, and focusing in the rock marks' qualities in themselves.

The leads followed are numerous. To start with, the "tension" between past context and contemporary aesthetics, when approaching prehistoric art (chapter by P. Lamarque, p. 21), a sort of re-enactment of the tension between history and anthropology driven approaches. The author convincingly argues for the crucial relevance of aesthetics in dealing with *intentional* objects (e.g. works of art – see p. 27), even if we could not follow his view that not all intentional objects (e.g. "the Catholic host, a dollar bill and a basketball") are aesthetic ones, in case one perceives aesthetics as part of the sensitive behaviour of humans.

Thomas Heyd (p. 37-49) briefly reviews the debate on whether we are entitled to use the term art to qualify material expressions of societies that evolved with no relation to modern European ones, in which the concept and term generated. He stands in favour of an aesthetic assessment of rock art based on a contextual reading of its manifestations, stressing its link to a *place*, as opposed to portable art. Largely, Heyd's paper also builds from an actualist perspective, when opposing rock art to portable art (based on the de-contextualisation of the later in museums, i.e., in another cultural context), or when looking for the significance of prehistoric rock art. The author remarks that sites like *Chauvet* cave dismiss the preconception of an evolution from simple to complex, noticing that "a great range of skill has characterized the human condition for a much longer period than we may have thought possible" (p. 46).

Heyd's interesting assumption of rock art as a means to approach the appropriation of past landscape as a place, curiously does not consider its archaeological context as of greater relevance (even if it mentions ethnographic contexts), an avenue that might have led him to discuss aesthetics in so-called "functional" objects. This archaeological dimension, within anthropology, is the topic of Howard Murphy's paper (p. 51-60). He starts by stating that a certain set of concepts seem to be applicable to modern humans and "Indeed, the fact that they *can* be applied cross-culturally becomes part of our definition of fully modern humans"(p. 51), to then discuss whether aesthetics fall into this broader category or should be understood in a more restricted cultural time-frame. In order to do so, Murphy separates the concepts of art and aesthetics, linking the later to the sensitive dimension, approaching the debate on the articulation of cognitive and emotional knowledge: "Aesthetic motivations are integral to the

production of form" (p. 54) and, thus, whereas art and aesthetics are separated, the later tends to merge with function and meaning, becoming a proper archaeological variable.

Reinaldo Morales (pp. 61-74) follows similar concerns and, after reviewing the debate on the applicability of the concept of art to pre-modern societies, he demonstrates how, to a large extent, such debate is biased by a notion of art as detached from other dimensions and restricted to form and aesthetics. Particularly useful are the references to the existence, or not, of equivalent terms in various societies. If R. Morales suggests, then, a polisemic understanding of the word *art*, William R. Dromeris (p. 75-85) proposes a plurality of aesthetics, not only related to form and sense, but also to function, symbolism and communication. Building from an assessment of the San art, the author questions the clash between the concepts of art and artefact, as we know an issue with highly polemic implications (see, for instance, the programme to re-organise the *Musée de l'Homme* in Paris and the controversy concerning the *Arts Premiers* exhibition at the *Musée du Louvre*).

After this first set of *programmatic* chapters, that provide some theoretical insights into the book's topic, the second part enters the field of the methodology of aesthetic assessment of rock art contexts. This section is less systematic, but with no lesser interest, since in fact it develops a series of enlightening *strategies* to interrogate rock art components, from perception to imagination. The authors dominantly follow a psychological approach, which one could wish, yet, to be complemented with the consideration of possible social factors.

The paper by Michael Eastham (p. 89-115) focus on the approach to perspectival projection in two Palaeolithic sites (*La Grèze* and *Cosquer* in France) and an ongoing aboriginal site in the Northern Territories of Australia (*Wangewangen*). The author discusses whether, or not, the so-called *twisted perspective*, recognised in all three, should be regarded, from a technical point of view, as an earlier stage of full scientific perspective. He convincingly demonstrates how the type of projection depends more upon the judgement about visual stimuli than from specific technical skills. In such an approach, aesthetics is embedded in intention.

Also concerned with perspective, J.B. Derogowski (p. 131-142) argues that twisted perspective results from a wish to portrait the recognisable (perceived) outlined contours of animals, and that humans are more difficult to draw because their salient traits are lesser, requiring a multiple perspective depiction, in order to be recognisable, including "a profile of the head, a front view of the torso and side view of his legs with his feet being drawn either in side view or as seen from above" (p. 135). The argument is well presented, although one would hardly accept that the dominance of certain species (horses, bovines) over others (felines, humans) in Palaeolithic art is due to the easiness of depicting them, as the "easy", and rare, depictions of fish seem to suggest. Relating perspective and imagination, the chapter by Ute Eickelkamp (p. 143-158) deals with the concept and genesis of the Ernabella style, stressing the sense of visual balance as its main determinant.

Two other chapters deal with the relations between depictions and external constraints. Masaru Ogawa (p. 117-129) discusses the integration between rock art depictions and surface rock relief, an aspect long recognised in many rock art contexts. He suggests that, contrary to the modern artists, Palaeolithic artists were guided by the physical support of their intended representations, rather than imposing these on the former. Although this might be seen as a dangerous generalisation, it certainly deals with a major aspect in many contexts, as the ones

presented in the chapter. John Clegg's contribution (p. 159-176) offers a global assessment of the relations between aesthetics and consciousness, focusing on optical effects and their possible inducing factors.

A Portuguese popular poet, "Aleixo", wrote that "For a lie to be credible, it must be mixed with some truth". Rowan Wilken (p. 176-189) closes the second part of the book with a chapter dealing with the role of replicas in the understanding of rock art originals, and to what extent these replicas, following Andy Warhol's perception, may become more "real" than the original past remains. The issue is challenging, and it obviously crosses current debates on communication and information society, having the interest to show how the understanding of the "objective truth" by archaeologists may, in fact, be quite detached from a social perception based on an appropriation approach, the private ownership of casts being an expression of this. The author discusses the case of Lascaux and its several material and virtual replicas, and it would have been useful to cross these thoughts with other expressions of contemporary pop cultural appropriation (e.g. shops in Museums, tourists in haste, running from one monument to another and trying to photograph themselves using those monuments as a scenario,...). The paper would also benefit from a possible discussion on the expansion of a new concept of Heritage as a product.

The last part presents some case studies, all dealing with the contemporary reappraisal of rock art. John Coles (pp. 193-200) stresses the readability of Swedish Bronze age art for current visitors, despite their lack of contextual historical knowledge, arguing that senses rather than reason guide such an approach. The art of the San is discussed by Pippa Skotnes (pp. 201-213, focusing in the relation between form and meaning) and by Sven Ouzman (253-269, who raises a most neglected dimension that should be co-related to rock art: non visual, e.g. sound, levels of its assimilation). The anthropization of natural features, stalagmites, is the topic discussed by Andrea Stone (215-233), whereas George Nash (235-251) proposes a valorisation of the rock art dimension of epigraphic remains in Java.

All these papers share the fact that they propose, beyond aesthetics, a plurality of readings of rock art, which for the prehistorian mainly offer a measure for the limitations of its own historical contextual approach.

Launched a few month before the III Symposium on Aesthetics and Rock Art, to be held in Lisbon in the context of the XV Congress of the International Union for Prehistoric and Protohistoric Sciences (UISPP, 4-9th September 2006), this book is, as a whole, a sound contribution, to be read and debated.

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