# New Aesthetics and Digital Archaeology

written by Jeremy Huggett | 08/11/2014

In 2011, James Bridle coined the term New Aesthetic to describe his curation of a series of images on Tumblr. This New Aesthetic was predicated on the discovery and revelation of images which are embedded in digital technologies and without which they could not exist. In the process they provide a reminder of the way technology insinuates into modern life, changing perceptions and understanding. One example familiar to archaeologists is satellite imagery:

> "Every satellite image posted is a meditation on the nature of mapping, that raises issues of perspective and power relationships, the privilege of the overhead view and the monopoly on technological agency which produces it." (Bridle 2013)

Archaeologists such as Julian Thomas have observed the potential implications of such technologically privileged views of landscapes, and, on a smaller scale, digital archaeologists are familiar with the way in which the tell-tale fingerprints of software tools such as ArcGIS and AutoCAD can frequently be identified in the maps and illustrations they are used to create. However, aspects such as these have largely remained un-investigated within archaeology.

A criticism of the New Aesthetic was that it can seem to be concerned largely with surface appearances, even if those images are created and influenced by digital tools. David Berry, for example, points to the way that the New Aesthetic – almost by definition – focuses on the visual, and suggests that non-visual computational processes involved in mediating this output, such as code and software, should also be included (2014, 152ff) so as to delve beneath surface appearance to reveal the modes of creation and manipulation. In the process, the ways in which digital technologies mediate their own relationships with the world can be examined. Indeed, James Bridle recognised that the New Aesthetic was far from superficial:

> "It is deeply engaged with the politics and politicisation of networked technology, and seeks to explore, catalogue, categorise, connect and interrogate these things. Where many seem to read only incoherence and illegibility, the New Aesthetic articulates the deep coherence and multiplicity of connections and influences of the network itself." (Bridle 2013).

So why is the New Aesthetic relevant to a consideration of Digital Archaeology? On the one hand, the idea that objects contain embedded within them representations of aspects of their socio-technical and economic circumstances of creation is not unfamiliar to archaeologists even if it is not something that has been widely considered within the realm of Digital Archaeology to date. However, the parallels go further. Bridle argues that the New Aesthetic is a response to a widespread public failure to engage fully with technology in its construction, operation and effect, and seeks to move the debate to a deeper level without which "we just loop over and over through the same fetishisations and reifications, while the real business of the world continues unexamined"

(Bridle 2013). Digital Archaeology over the years can be characterised as primarily concerned with exploring the practical uses of computer techniques and technologies and the computations that can be applied to different kinds of archaeological data in the pursuit of analysis. It has done so in an environment which has been largely uncritical, where the focus has lain in selecting and using tools, and any critique has been primarily restricted to debate surrounding the outputs (Huggett 2012a). This failure to have a meaningful dialogue about the intervening digital technologies and their influence on the outputs has left archaeologists open to accusations of technological fetishism (Huggett 2004), despite the fact that digital archaeologists work within a scientific discipline which – uniquely – is predicated upon an artefact rather than nature or culture: "The computer stands as the referent object to the discourse of Computer Science" (Poster 1990, 147). While Poster goes on to argue that the computer scientist cannot escape this dependent relationship with the computer, the same limitation does not need to apply to the digital archaeologist, who has by nature to understand both the workings of computing technologies and material culture.

## References


Berry, D.M. 2014. *Critical Theory and the Digital*. Bloomsbury Academic, London.

Bridle, J. 2013. 'The New Aesthetic and its Politics', http://booktwo.org/notebook/new-aesthetic-politics/

Huggett, J. 2004. 'Archaeology and the new technological fetishism'. *Archeologia e Calcolatori* 15, 81-92.

Huggett, J. 2012. 'What lies beneath: Lifting the lid on archaeological computing', in Crysanthi, A., Murietta Flores, P., and Papadopoulos, C. (eds.) *Thinking beyond the Tool: Archaeological computing and the interpretive process* (British Archaeological Reports International Series 2344). Oxford: Archeopress, 204-214.

Poster, M. 1990. *The Mode of Information: Poststructuralism and Social Context*. Cambridge: Polity.