Topographic Vision: Exploring how aerial photography and computer-generated imagery can be used to better communicate archaeological narrative to a lay audience

“It may be a dangerous delusion if the process of ‘drawing back’ results in a loss of human awareness…” (Macdonald, 2004, p.53)

The Issues: From Material to Virtual

When aerial photography emerged as a method for archaeological discovery in the mid 20th century it stemmed from a tradition of wartime reconnaissance and cartography (see Hauser, 2007, p. 154). While the revealing power of the aerial view remains much celebrated, it’s tendency to reduce landscape and built environment into a “comprehensive” (Macdonald’s term, 2004, p. 53) whole can result in a representation that is both unhelpfully privileged and distant from lived experience (see Thomas, 1993, pp. 15-27).

Instead, a synthesis of real (gathered) and unreal (computer-generated) imagery may provide an environment for interpretative narrative that retains a fidelity to a real world environment. Such a juxtaposition of elements is common to visual-effects film-making. Drawing from the knowledge embedded in established image-making practices ranging from aerial archaeology, cartoony photorealism and visual-effects it is hoped that a visual language, or toolkit for storytelling, can be triangulated. To be effective this must be both eloquent and appropriate for the task of disseminating the visible remains of built heritage, and communicating research narratives to a lay audience.

The Methodology: Learning by Doing

This research is concerned with how the creative use of aerial photography and CGI can be used to enhance public engagement with built heritage. This process involves the experience of both image-makers and participants. Molloy has highlighted the importance of studying images “within the context of their production”, encouraging a discourse that includes both “artists and spectators” (1997, pp. 5-6). With this in mind a practice-based research model will set out to investigate the knowledge embedded in the process of image making, while a qualitative enquiry will consider the how the artefacts of this practice are received by end users and stakeholders. This will include the perspectives of archaeologists and heritage professionals as well as a lay audience.

The Outcome: Theory into Practice

Case studies will be designed to pose a range of challenges in representing heritage sites for a public audience. Aerial photography will be conducted from a kite suspended camera (e.g. above and left) as well as from light aircraft (e.g. right). This gathered imagery will be used to inform computer-generated outcomes that aim to make meaning and narrative visible amongst the remains of built heritage. These outcomes may take a variety of forms but will focus on time-based content incorporating both gathered and interpretative elements, such as in the still frames below from the short film “Jarkhal”.

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Contact

www.topofly.com - k.a.baxter@dundee.ac.uk - 07794795655

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