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Session « *Friend or Foe - Reconstructions as means of site interpretation* »

Titre de la communication : Rock Art cave and replica: what kind of heritage experience?

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The aim of this presentation is to discuss the role of the experience in the heritage process in the case of rock art replica, with a focus on the processes of reception by the visitors. Our purpose is based on ten years of research in the Ardeche region when we explore the links between the Chauvet-Pont d’Arc Cave and its replica, “Chauvet 2 – Ardèche”.

For these decorated caves, the combined challenges of conservation and regional development has led to the fabrication of replicas that bridge the domains of archaeology and tourism. They allow visitors to experience the simulated materiality of rock art sites that are closed to the public.

What happens when the challenges of conservation coupled with the challenges of presenting it to the public, are addressed through the creation of a replica that is presented as entirely faithful and which becomes the place where the visitor can experience “heritage”? In other words, to what extent does the replica, because of what it enables the visitor to experience, assume the function, or even status, of heritage?

After discussing shortly the role of authenticity and experience in the heritage process, an analysis of the characteristics of the replica highlights the emphasis placed on the emotional realm. We then discuss how the replica is received by the visitors and the possibilities for transferring the heritage values of the original cave to the replica.

Heritage, authenticity, experience and materiality: a brief overview of theoretical approaches

Far from being objective, authenticity is a highly contingent notion based on a set of perceptions and emotions through which an object or site obtains a symbolic power extending beyond the simple criterion of antiquity. Restored monuments, archaeological objects in museum displays, and artworks are examples of this process.

Though objects and artworks are presented as authentic, they have often been subject to complex chemical treatments that enable them to be presented to the public without damage through time.

The perception of their authenticity is related more to a negotiation between the individuals and the context of the display rather than to the intrinsic material properties of the object displayed, or its antiquity.

This discussion of authenticity leads us to address the role played by experience in the heritage-making processes.

Recent heritage research challenging the notion of authenticity suggests that particular material properties of historical objects are important to how people experience and negotiate authenticity. In particular, aging, patina and material decay are significant elements in the experience of authenticity, creating a diffuse sense of 'pastness'. The feelings transmitted by these visual signs of age participate in the construction of a relationship to time and form a significant element in the replication of archaeological places where the ambiance, created through material devices, is designed to make the visitors experience the depths of time.

When applied to the domain of rock art, the challenge is to consider the extent to which a visit to a decorated cave replica succeeds in enabling visitors to experience the heritage values of the original Palaeolithic art. And at the same time, to what extent does the quality of this experience lead to an extension of this 'heritagity' from the original to the copy?

The characteristic of the replica

Initially called "the Cavern of the Pont d'Arc" then renamed "Cave Chauvet 2 – Ardèche" in February 2019 the replica is located two kilometres from the original Chauvet-Pont d'Arc Cave. This site is composed of several buildings: a welcome center, boutique, restaurant, an event center with shows and other events concerning Prehistory, an educational area for young visitors, the replica itself and an interpretation center called the "Aurignacian Gallery".

Three years after its opening, 1.8 million people have visited the site. While some of these visitors are tourists already present in the region, the Agency for Touristic Development in Ardèche estimates that since its opening, the Cave Chauvet 2 has attracted 300,000 additional tourists, and has generated 80 million euros of revenue for the region.

In the words of the director of the Office of Tourism of the Vallon-Pont-d'Arc, "The image of the Ardèche is in the process of evolving and we are becoming a heritage and cultural destination that counts" (interview realized during a television show 'Un jour en Auvergne-Rhone-Alpes', 22/03/2018).

The creation of a replica forcibly requires a set of choices: the location where it is to be built, the nature of the building, the types of materials and techniques that will be used and, above all, the choice of the rock art site that the actors wish to present. Replica is a discourse in action and in the context of rock art caves, a materialization of the contemporary perception of caves and why they are meaningful.

Reproduction of the entire Chauvet Cave (8400m²) would have required the procurement of a very large site within an environment limited by touristic pressures and natural heritage protection requirements. Added to this, the cost of building an exact life-sized accurate facsimile would have been prohibitive. The project leaders therefore decided that not all of the parietal, archaeological, palaeontological and geomorphological objects from Chauvet Cave would be represented.

Eighty-two 'pieces' were therefore selected. These pieces were reproduced at full-scale and rearranged in the replica while respecting the order of the succession of the panels in the original cave.

The restitution of Chauvet Cave thus borrows from the principles of a facsimile and of an anamorphosis. It is a facsimile in the sense that the selected parietal, archaeological and paleontological objects are represented at full scale with millimetric precision using digital 3D

recording and modern materials. It is anamorphosis in that the replica consists of a contraction of the 8,400 m² of the cave into the 3,000 m² of the restitution.

With its combination of the characteristics of a facsimile (the scale of the panels and objects represented) and an anamorphosis (the scale of the cave), the Chauvet Cave replica permits the regional actors to present it as “a perfect reconstitution of the Chauvet-Pont d’Arc Cave” (SMERGC 2012, 5).

An immersive scenographic experience

Experience and emotion were at the heart of this restitution project. The goal is to plunge visitors “deep into immemorial time ...” and to make them feel “the same emotion that is experienced when standing in front of the masterpieces of our Aurignacian ancestors ...”

To encourage “the connection with the ancestors”, several devices have been used. First, the feeling of visiting a real cave is enhanced by the choice of the site location in the karstic plateau, and the semi-buried construction of the building. Though the replica is contained in a contemporary looking building, the visitor descends a ramp that creates the impression of going underground.

Then, a particular care was taken in the reconstruction of the endo-karstic environment. New techniques were developed of casting, using resins and colorants, and for creating the effects of moisture on the walls, brilliance of the floors and the transparency of draperies so as to reconstruct a form of authenticity.

Through an immersive scenography and the manipulation of humidity and temperature, as well the restitution of the smells of clay and wet rocks, “the replica seeks to guarantee an authentic touristic experience that will permit the visitors to see and live the original” (interview with the President of SMERGC, le 22/03/2013).

The role of the guides

During the summers of 2016 and 2017, we joined visits with tourist groups (14 visits with French groups; 8 with English groups). While the fact of visiting a replica is addressed in the last chamber before entering, it is never mentioned once inside, and the guides describe the panels and karstic environment as if they were the originals. The objective is clear:

to do what is necessary to make the magic happen (...). At the beginning of the visit, before entering into the replica, I advise the guides to tell the visitors that they are about to enter into a replica, in order not to lie to them, but after, I also advise them not to address this question again so that the charm can operate (interview with the Head of cultural, educational and scientific activities of the replica, 06/05/2016).

Inside, the illusion becomes a reality. The illusion is of the visitors walking in the shoes of the discoverers and observing the works created by the Aurignacians. For example, in front of the Panel of Horses, Station 9, visitors are told (see figure 6):

On the left, the Panel of the Horses with these four magnificent horses, here, what is remarkable is that each horse has a different expression and they even succeeded at

rendering the breath of the horse by scraping with a flint tool. It's remarkable when we think of the tools they had that they were such masters at drawing, it's amazing They already had the whole drawing in their head before they began to make it. And look how they managed to make each horse with a different expression, it's so remarkable! ... and notice the life-like nature of these head-to-head rhinoceroses on this wall for 36,000 years. (French visit on August 6, 2016, 10:20)

Reality and limits in the transfer of heritage

Methods

To explore the operational dimensions of the devices used in the replica, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 70 individuals (60 Francophones and 10 Anglophones). Face-to-face interviews were undertaken. Lasting 20 to 30 minutes, the interviews were conducted immediately after the visit to the replica and consisted of alternating open and closed questions on the following topics: 1) motivations for coming to the Ardèche; 2) number of visits to the region; 3) activities undertaken; 4) interest in visiting the replica; 5) previous visits to decorated sites or replicas; 6) feelings when visiting the replica, and; 7) satisfaction relative to virtual replicas. As people with different backgrounds and worldviews can be expected to react differently, our objective was to obtain the most diverse range of responses possible and we sought to diversify our visitor profiles according to four main categories: age, gender, nationality and group composition.

Results and discussion

Visitor motivations for visiting the replica can be grouped into five overlapping categories:

- 1) opportunity: "we're on vacation in the region, very close, and it was a good activity for a day" (FR_6)
- 2) interest in archaeology/history and culture: "That's a part of origins, I'm fascinated by history and by prehistory, thus yes, that is one of the subjects which interests me a lot, the history of humanity in a general way" (EN_3);
- 3) education: "the children see that in school, so we came to see it in person" (FR_41);
- 4) interest in caves and cave paintings: "Out of curiosity too, we wanted to see what it's really like to see the cave paintings in person, and to be in an ambiance a little like that" (FR_32);
- 5) interest in the replica: "to see the performance, see what they were able to do, it's apparently very well preserved, to see what we can reproduce identically, it's true that it's a performance and it's interesting to see that" (FR_29).

The majority (80%, 56 persons) said that at one point or another, they felt like they were in a real cave.

Five main elements contributed to the feeling of an authentic experience:

- 1) the decor: "the draperies and concretions are so well done that you forget you're in a copy" (FR_4);
- 2) the ambiance: "We're plunged into a natural environment, we have all the sensations, the temperature, the obscurity, and then it's true that all they were able to do millions of years ago is really impressive, it's touching" (FR_2);

- 3) the details represented: “when we saw that human footprint, I think that was impressive, that really moved me, and the little hand with the little finger. That shows that they were here. And the bear claw marks too; it’s impressive to imagine that these people and the bears lived in the same place” (FR_26);
- 4) the discourse and knowledge of the guide: “I completely got loose from the fact that it was a false cave. And I really think the guide played a big role, she put us in the shoes of the discoverers before we entered into the cave, and I saw it completely” (EN_5);
- 5) the audio headset system: “the headset really helps us to get into it. It isolates us and it also makes it easier to concentrate and look more closely at what there is to see, to forget the other groups” (FR_11).

For the 20% (14 persons) that did not feel like they were in a real cave, these limits were linked to two main factors inherent in the characteristics of the replica and how it is visited. Firstly, as a fault in the atmosphere. This problem was cited both by those who had never visited caves and by those who had. These contrasting results underline the individual aspects of the experience, showing that perceptions depend on past personal experiences and sensitivities as well as the amount of time between these past experiences and the current visit.

The second factor was the timing of the visits: the presence of other groups is occasionally cited due to the rapid rotation within the replica (a change of station every 5 minutes), a rhythm that is presented as a factor that affects the experience of authenticity. As FR_3 said:

when I looked at the reproductions, I really forgot where I was. But at the same time, we don’t spend enough time in front of the panels. The panel at the end is really frustrating, we don’t have time to see the details before the other group arrives and we’re pushed out. If they increased the time spent in front of each panel, we would be able to absorb this whole atmosphere.

The predisposition of individuals to imagine their experience as being in the real cave also seems to influence the quality of their experience. As FR_60 said:

I went [into the replica] with this idea in mind, that this was a real cave; you could say that I was well prepared! I’m really impressed because it looks like these drawings were just made, even though they are several thousands of years old. And then what I liked is all these people who made these drawings without having the originals in front of them. It’s just observation, and I really admire that they were capable of making them. In 36,000 years, we really haven’t invented anything.

The degree of falseness, however, does not seem to play a major role, and knowing that one is visiting a false cave does not exclude the feeling of an authentic visit:

I knew I was going to visit a fake. And when we know we’re going to visit a replica, it’s difficult to believe we’re in a real cave. But that doesn’t mean we can’t appreciate the visit and let ourselves play the game ... The magic works, there’s no problem, we really believed. I knew that it was reproduced and that we weren’t in the cave, but the magic worked, it’s fascinating. The precision of the drawings, the atmosphere, we really believed we were there (FR_27).

We analyzed our interviews to consider the question of whether visitors to the replica talked of something amounting to an authentic ‘heritage experience’. We therefore focused on the lexical fields of wonderment, emotion and feeling, connection to past, as well as dialogs that described the replica as if it were the real cave, the genuine article. We used these as spoken markers of an authentic ‘heritage experience’.

Overall, we found that the feeling of being in an underground environment, the materiality of the replica, and the sensitivities and past experiences of the individuals combined to provide 93% of the persons interviewed with an authentic ‘heritage experience’, regardless of whether they had the impression of visiting a real cave (65 persons out of 70).

These interview responses underscore the central role occupied by materiality in the experience of authenticity. On this topic, 96% of the individuals interviewed (67 persons) indicated their preference for a material replica over a virtual one: “It’s because we move around, because our body is engaged in the replica that we have the impression of visiting the original. We have to walk through the middle of something to feel the atmosphere” (FR_47); “I’ve already had the experience of virtual reality headsets, and it’s not very detailed. A replica that we can walk through enables us to better understand things. It’s concrete, real, even if we can’t touch it, it’s still a reality, which helps us to understand the volumes, the movements, which isn’t possible with the virtual” (FR_40).

Conclusions and future perspectives

Our analysis of the perceptions of the visitors attests to the ability of the Cave of Chauvet 2 to promote ‘a sense of authenticity’.

Experienced as being authentic, the replica forges a relationship between the public and the world of their origins, thus confirming its heritage function. As the replica is a place where visitors may have a heritage experience, linked to a feeling of authenticity, the results of our public survey confirm an extension of heritagity between the original and the replica.

Our analysis of the relationships between the Chauvet-Pont d’Arc Cave and its replica demonstrates that there is a dissociation in the triptych ‘authenticity, antiquity and heritage-making’ and shows the need to approach heritage-making processes today from the angle of experience and feeling.

Comparative studies at other decorated cave replicas (e.g. Lascaux II, IV, Altamira, Edainberri), as well as public surveys of visitors at caves still open to the public (e.g. Pech Merle, Font de Gaume and Rouffignac) can extend this discussion, allowing a more detailed exploration of the role of emotion and experience in the heritage-making process. This will offer up new knowledge about the reception of the real and the replica and whether a real cave can serve all experiential purposes just because it’s the real thing.

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