



# 2009 VIA Workshop Report

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**Visualisation in Context: An Interplay of Practice and Theory:  
Reflections on the Second VIA Workshop  
at the University of Southampton,  
22-23 October 2009**

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## Visualisation in Context: An Interplay of Practice and Theory: Reflections on the Second VIA Workshop

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22-23 October 2009

Organising Committee: Garry Gibbons, Professor Stephanie Moser and Sara Perry.  
Session Chairs: Professor Stephanie Moser, Dr Simon James, Professor Sam Smiles  
and Professor Matthew H Johnson.

## Sara Perry

Based on commentary from Workshop chairs and participants

October 2009 saw the coming together of the second Visualisation in Archaeology (VIA) workshop at the University of Southampton. This event stands as the annual convergence point for VIA, at which practitioners with both new and long-standing interests in the project convene to appraise the state of the visual field, while at once pressing at its boundaries and prospecting for its future. While the workshop sits within a larger programme of integrated academic enquiry, its salience is obvious when one considers the number of comparable gatherings organised in neighbouring disciplines in 2009 alone: anthropology,<sup>1</sup> sociology,<sup>2</sup> geography,<sup>3</sup> archival studies,<sup>4</sup> the history of science,<sup>5</sup> and the greater social scientific community<sup>6</sup> are among the many to have invested in visualisation-centred symposiums. What perhaps best distinguishes VIA from this fold, however, is its reflexive, participant-styled nature. Its thematic focuses are established via assessments from contributors; sessions prioritise discussion and on-the-ground interaction above one-way conference presentation; feedback is routinely and systematically collected; and the overall project is led by practitioner input and critique. The 2009 workshop speaks to the efficacy of such an approach, as participant evaluations typify it as having been uniquely democratic and intellectually galvanising in character. This sense of democracy and empowerment—arguably more obvious here than at the 2008 event—opened up a space for contributors to feel comfortable voicing strong perspectives on the conceptual and methodological future of VIA. The following

<sup>1</sup> Drawing the Social, University of Aberdeen, multiple workshops across 2008-2009.

<sup>2</sup> Appreciating the Views: How We're Looking at the Social and Visual Landscape, International Visual Sociology Association, 22-24 July 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Visuality/Materiality: Reviewing Theory, Method and Practice, Royal Institute for British Architects, 9-11 July 2009.

<sup>4</sup> The Visual Archive: The Moving Image and Memory, Open University, 28-29 May 2009.

<sup>5</sup> Visual Cognition in the History of Science, Budapest, Hungary, 28 July - 2 August 2009.

<sup>6</sup> 1<sup>st</sup> International Visual Methods Conference, University of Leeds, 15-17 September 2009.

document aims to examine these perspectives, summarising the outcomes of the 2009 workshop and, in turn, outlining a framework for 2010.

Based on review of 11 mid-conference feedback statements, 19 post-workshop assessments, and nearly 11 hours of audio recordings from the event, this report seeks to lay out the technical and epistemological implications of VIA's second workshop. Held over two days (22-23 October 2009), the event was structured around topical concerns which emerged through evaluation of our 2008 workshop (see Perry 2009); namely, the current state of pedagogy and critical proficiency in visual practice in (and beyond) archaeology; the impact of technologies on graphic communication and knowledge-making; the effects of digital media on visualising processes; and the real-world application of imagery in the performance of archaeological research. Although the success of these themes is open to question, the overall workshop garnered virtually universal praise for its organisation, direction, community-building, and constructive interchange. Indeed, in what clearly stands as testimony to the workshop's poignancy, a majority of commentators spoke of the unique—and unforeseen—capacity of VIA to embrace the whole of the archaeological population. In other words, despite an impression that the topic of visualisation implied a specialised and narrow community of practice, workshop contributors repeatedly remarked on the “broad thematic umbrella”<sup>7</sup> and “feeling of shared experience and engagement”<sup>8</sup> that it illuminated, arguably therefore enabling a reconceptualisation of the archaeological field. As per one participant, in grappling with “something as ubiquitous and negotiable as the concept of imagery” the event allowed an often fractured and unaligned discipline to unite and collectively rethink its dimensions.

The remainder of this document probes such processes, examining from both a logistical and an intellectual standpoint the unities and conflicts at the heart of the 2009 VIA workshop. It is grounded in the feedback of 90% of the presenters, 100% of the chairs, more than half of the event's spectators, and the majority of its organisers—and as such represents a comparatively rigorous review of the proceedings. In the end, it seeks to summarise the thematic threads of the event, draw attention to undercurrents of contention which may be impacting on the productivity and influence of the VIA project, and ultimately, sketch out an organisational strategy to help guide VIA into both its final workshop in 2010 and international conference in 2011.

## Planning, Timing, Location, Audience: Technicalities of the Workshop

As indicated above, VIA's 2009 workshop was devised to target specific topical matters that had presented themselves through the previous year's dialogue. The entire event, in fact, aimed to respond to some of the perceived limitations of our 2008 workshop, while maintaining those qualities which former contributors saw as potent and unparalleled for an academic conference. This meant that we sought to cultivate thematic solidarity, to provide greater time for discussion (and less for conventional lecturing), and to continue to nurture diversity in the workshop's demography while also tightening the total number of delegates. The call for papers yielded 14 presentations and more than 30 participants representing archaeology, history of art, photography, illustration, the fine arts, and computer science across the UK, Cyprus, Greece, South Africa, Canada and the United States. More so than in 2008, the final programme was pared down to allow an intimate yet representative body of contributors. Our success in

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<sup>7</sup> Feedback from Stephen, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Feedback from Beale, 2009.

achieving such a constituency was attested to by myriad compliments on the diversity and balance of the delegates. To borrow from one commentator, the workshop offered a view onto the “contemporary professional landscape,” populated, that is, *not* by a singular archaeological type, but by both methodological and theoretical experts, practitioners and scholars, and junior and senior specialists from inside and outside the discipline.

In endeavouring to achieve greater intimacy at the workshop, we worked to reduce the number of formal paper presentations by exactly 1/3 of the total from our 2008 event. A subsidiary objective of scaling back the numbers in this way was to alleviate some of the pressure of crowding in our relatively small seminar room. But owing to a variety of unexpected attendees, such downsizing had little effect, and thus the most common criticism made by commentators following the workshop concerned the uncomfortably congested nature of the room. In spite of the critique, it was not uncommon for participants—in the same breath—to suggest that much of VIA’s distinctive, collegiate character is fostered by these close encounters in conversational environments. Thus in changing its format by, for instance, enlarging the workshop venue, we would risk losing what contributors Webmoor and Voutounos have called its “boardroom” or “think-tank” feel. It is only with reservations, then, that participants have suggested altering the physical layout of the workshop.

The 2009 workshop’s format was essentially identical to 2008, with four sessions, multiple papers (of 15 to 20 minutes each) delivered per session, and upwards of five hours of chaired discussion spread across the two day event. Outside the formal proceedings, attendees were fed and lodged together in the vein of a practical residency. As per last year, it was this residential style of the workshop which drew the most acclaim. Nearly 100% of the event’s evaluations cited its intensiveness and concerted togetherness as critical to its success. While many felt that the 2009 workshop was well-paced, having achieved a prime balance of discussion and presentation—as well as ‘official’ and relaxed engagement—a not insignificant number indicated that they wanted *more* time with one another. Prompting such sentiment was both a feeling of disappointment over the curtailment of the workshop’s second day of discussions owing to various delegates’ schedules, and a sense that many of the more weighty philosophical matters issuing from the event were not adequately addressed within the available timeframe. Underlying some of these assessments was also a concern that international participants were at the biggest loss here in having travelled to an event which was unexpectedly truncated—both in terms of time and intellectual content.

Perhaps adding to such concern was the transience of participants at the workshop, as compared to last year. This predicament presented itself in the late arrival, early departure and itinerant attendance of various contributors, which (although unavoidable in many cases) was arguably more noticeable than in 2008 owing to the smaller number of formal speakers. Commentators remarked on the importance of an ‘ethic’ of full participation to the success of VIA events. Indeed, it might be reasoned that the transitoriness of this year’s body of delegates was implicated in the overwhelming perception (as detailed below) of insufficient theoretical engagement at the workshop. In other words, less time together as a complete group perhaps manifested itself in less conceptual cohesion and development. Various participants also indicated that some of the presentations did not offer adequate context or detail, and some, too, suggested that the workshop would have benefited from *more* presentations overall. I suspect, again, that such sentiments have arisen partly out of the impression that the workshop’s content was slightly philosophically ‘light’. As per various commentators, in the future

workshop chairs could perhaps alleviate these problems by inserting clear discussion points into the conversation, summarising and following up on the repercussions of session themes, and explicitly directing attention to theoretical issues.

It is also interesting to note the concern that participants have expressed over the obvious lack of diversity in presentation format at the workshop. Virtually every talk over the past two years at VIA has been projected through PowerPoint, with little use of any alternative or additional performance aids, e.g., flipcharts, whiteboards, handouts, poster displays, etc. This critique recalls a similar remark from 2008 by a participant who implied that VIA delegates—while obviously invested in critical visual work—dedicated very little attention to their own visual products (i.e., their conference presentations) and the effects of those products on their audiences. Morgan and Webmoor, contributors to both the 2008 & 2009 workshops, pointed to the constraining impacts that presentation format can have on viewers and on subject matter, including the fact that our favouring of data projection at the workshop naturally thus privileges digital modes of communication and understanding above other modes. Arguably, too, some of the perceived inadequacies in the theoretical content of the workshop (described further below) might have been born of—or heightened by—neglect of these embedded matters of physical visual display.

## Thematic Trends and Tensions

### (i) *In search of thematic consistency*

As previously noted, the 2009 workshop was structured around issues which revealed themselves as priority concerns at our 2008 event. The topical focuses of that latter workshop were purposefully left vague in order to attract a wide-ranging delegation of scholars to our first VIA gathering. However, such vagueness was cause for concern in follow-up evaluation, as participants objected to an apparent lack of cohesion amongst presentations. In 2009 we sought to address such concern by offering thematic concentration, including detailed session outlines with key talking points for potential contributors. But the results of this thematic focusing were mixed: while some of the chairs and a minority of the participants described the 2009 workshop as more (and better) controlled in terms of its subject matter, many felt that it was rather too homogeneous and specific. Moreover, various contributors suggested that the session themes were essentially invisible, playing a negligible role in the discussion periods and attracting little acknowledgement from either speakers or chairs. Other commentators indicated that even where the themes were apparent within sessions, they did not always match the focus of the paper presentations—a predicament which, as workshop participant Wintjes observed, perhaps adversely impacted on audience perception of speakers' intentions. Ultimately, multiple participants recommended a return to the original open-ended format of the event, arguing that discussion periods were best where "thematic symbiosis"<sup>9</sup> was *less* evident. But, as workshop chair Moser framed it, based on two years' experience, it seems probable now that no matter how one sorts the programme, there is always likely to be overlap and complications.

It is important to note, too, that despite the fact that the 2009 themes were directly linked to recommendations from foregoing delegates, when the call-for-papers (CFP) was issued, approximately 50% of its respondents sought *not* to pierce key identified issues like enskilmment and the impacts of technologies and digital media on

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<sup>9</sup> Feedback from Wintjes, 2009.

visualisation, but rather to focus on individual case studies. In other words, a near-majority of speakers applied, in the first instance, for our “(Inter)Play of Practice and Theory: Case Studies” session. There are a variety of reasons why this prejudice might have presented itself, ranging from the technical to the philosophical. Among others, it is likely that the short period of circulation for the CFP impacted on the diversity of potential contributions, making it impossible for practitioners to craft highly targeted abstracts for the workshop. In the same vein, our still-growing distribution list may have curtailed the scope of our audience. Perhaps, as well, the very reason why the themes of skill, and technological and digital impact were foregrounded by delegates in 2008 relates to the fact that a gap exists in the knowledge base which has yet to be adequately filled by research. In such a case, one would expect only a few papers at the 2009 workshop to attend to these issues. So too is it possible that our “case study” session was so non-prescriptive as to allow absorption of virtually any project. Participants, in this sense, would not have to pin themselves down to a theme, as the aim was ostensibly to examine the mechanics of a particular piece of research.

Whatever the explanation, multiple evaluations of the 2009 workshop alluded to the overabundance of specific case studies. Accompanying such comments—and standing as perhaps the most common philosophical critique of the event—was the impression that the workshop lacked theoretical depth. Contributors remarked on the unduly ‘practical’ nature of the papers, and their often chiefly descriptive or empirical tone. One commentator suspected that, in attempting to account for so many technical details, various speakers were losing sight of the larger intellectual picture. Another suggested that the workshops were still struggling to locate a rigorous theoretical core, overwhelmed as they were by more and more data, and yet comparatively few methods for interpreting that data. Multiple delegates perceived the workshop discussion sessions themselves to be inordinately practice-heavy, and one even suggested that such an imbalance was to be expected given VIA’s purported focus on practical engagement. This feedback mirrors that provided at the 2008 workshop, wherein commentators regretted the lack of epistemological consequence across the event overall. In both years, reviewers felt frustrated at the dearth of theoretical clarity behind the dialogue, and were left questioning the intent of several of the approaches.

Arguably, some of this frustration was born of the heavily individualised programme, which (as expressed above) was populated by a large number of case studies. Such focus on the independent project likely diverted attention away from the larger implications of presenters’ work, in turn detracting from general philosophical fluorescence at the 2009 workshop. Reinforcing this situation was the impression, variously articulated by contributors Démou, Earl and Johnson, that digital media were the subject of exceptional and yet often uncritical consideration. Problematically, as noted by delegates, the theoretical scrutiny to which digital technologies have been submitted in the general academic literature has rarely been engaged by practitioners at VIA workshops. This relatively naïve treatment of digital matters was first observed at the 2008 event, and seems to have re-manifested itself in 2009. At issue is archaeologists’ and other VIA participants’ lack of citation of the penetrative scholarship on, for example, virtual reality, cyborg studies or critical geographical information systems (e.g. see, among many others, Boler 2007; Earl and Wheatley 2001; Gray 1995; Wickstead 2009), leading some to suspect unawareness of its existence. One commentator implied that the workshop programme perhaps actually nurtured a kind of blind endorsement of digital approaches given their apparent privileging in two of the event’s four sessions—“Toward A Virtual Archaeology?” and “Mapping the Effects of Digital Technology on Visualising Process.” Others, however, suggested that analogue technologies were equally guilty of drawing in such blind support, resulting in a

resurrection of hackneyed debates over the analogue-digital divide. As multiple delegates argued, it is now imperative to drop these polemical debates in favour of attending *judiciously* to the full scope of available media. Otherwise, we risk being left behind—both theoretically and methodologically—not only by the larger academic and professional communities, but by the technology itself.

(ii) *Identifying underlying themes*

Notwithstanding critiques of the thematic consistency and philosophical weight of the 2009 workshop, it is hardly the case that the event went without meaningful or resonant conversation. Evaluations of the workshop pinpointed a variety of issues which reverberated intellectually with participants, but which perhaps did not always see sufficient interrogation or whose interrogation was cut short by time constraints. Among these issues, virtually every speaker grappled with the possibilities and limitations of different graphic forms, and as per workshop chair Moser, several papers (e.g., by Beale, Johnson, Stephen, Wintjes) were clear to challenge the typical—but false—dichotomy that is often built up between the form and content of visual representation. Multiple presentations, therefore, looked at the embedded and indivisible nature of knowledge formation in the context of visualisation. And some sought to unravel the epistemological process by which such knowledge-making actually manifests and transforms itself—in turn testifying to the utility of visual media as research tools (e.g., Giles, Johnson, Middleton, Wintjes). Contributors touched on the economic and ontological imperatives of the visual (e.g., Webmoor), and addressed its filtering through and activation by contemporary and shifting forms of logic (e.g., Middleton, Morgan, Read/Smith, Wintjes). Assorted delegates spoke of the promise of visualisation to challenge the seemingly objective nature of our practice—to expose what workshop contributor Smith called the “creative ambiguity” and “imaginative dissonance” behind archaeological knowledge production—and in so doing, to open up spaces for cognitive freedom and experimentation (e.g., Anderson, Cochrane, Démou, Read/Smith). At the same time, in the face of such freedom, others addressed the need to distinguish between rigorous and loose approaches, and pointed to the potential for visual technologies to enable archaeologists to assert their interpretative authority whilst still allowing individual flexibility (e.g., Morgan, Webmoor).

Furthermore, various papers confronted the capacity (and, in some cases, the incapacity) of graphic media to engage and immerse its audiences on corporeal and sensorial levels (e.g., Giles, Johnson, Voutounos), and workshop chair Moser pushed on the boundaries of such conversation by suggesting that, in contrast to common perception (but as implied by Giles and Johnson), these immersive experiences have deep genealogies, recurring across time and space alongside the emergence of novel technologies and ways-of-seeing. Moreover, multiple presentations looked to explore the research effects and theoretical significance of implicating individuals directly in the creation, analysis, and display of visual media (e.g., Anderson, Cochrane, Démou, Morgan). Each of these papers, then, grappled with the on-the-ground intellectual consequences of imposing upon, and feeding off, people’s perceptions. In this way, they began to bring to the fore issues of individual proficiency in interpreting visual media, in addition to individual expertise in producing such media. Several speakers broached the topic of craft skill and general skilful visual creation (e.g., Brown, Johnson, Middleton, Read/Smith, Stephen)—a theme which culminated in extended discussion (stimulated, in particular, by the presentation of Read/Smith) over the degree of visual competency (or visual ‘literacy’) amongst archaeological and wider communities. As indicated by workshop chair James, undervaluation of visual representation (which is evidenced by the virtual nonexistence of pedagogical or benchmarking standards for archaeological

visualisation), has left practitioners poorly equipped both to comprehend and manage visual media, and to appreciate the persistent loss of skilled visual capacity within the archaeological sector. Indeed, the consequences—highlighted by James, Read/Smith and other discussants—of such inexpertise are substantial: poor product quality, technical obsolescence, a perniciously deficient understanding of the power and impact of visualisation on knowledge formation, and thus, in the end, substandard archaeology and archaeologists.

(iii) *Persistent instabilities*

Yet even as contributors to the 2009 workshop came together over these matters, various evaluators expressed discomfort over what they saw as a continued naivety of practice at the event, manifest in assorted implicit and explicit comments about the innocence of processes of looking. In other words, several contributors observed a tendency within the workshop environment to treat visualisation as a neutral affair, unburdened by relations of power and interest. For these commentators, dialogue at the workshop often found itself at unproductive cross-purposes, as practitioners underestimated or overlooked the potential for imagery—and, moreover, for our language about imagery—to provoke and perturb its audiences. As per participants Giles, Johnson, Kirkpatrick, and Morgan, such neglect actually hinted at a bigger gap in the knowledge base around ethical conduct in presenting, educating about, and dealing with the fallout of visual media. In other words, disrupting the proceedings was a sense that professionals had been left with no guiding hand around issues of responsible visualisation, and no accountability for audience response to such visualisation. In the latter respect, the 2009 workshop recalled one of the major points of unease evident at the 2008 event—namely, the lack of attention to audience reception of visual media and, inevitably then, a lack of engagement with reception theory. As implied at the 2009 workshop, so much investment has been made at the creation end of the visualisation process that by the time visual products are released to public (and specialist) viewers, those products often seem to be essentially abandoned. Practitioners are arguably relinquishing control over graphic media—i.e., not following-up on or answering for such media—at precisely the moment when they have their most profound effects, and when consideration of ‘impact’ is becoming increasingly significant to stakeholder bodies.

Interestingly, in seeking to explain this trend towards devolution of responsibility, focus was drawn by several contributors to the nature of the term visualisation itself, and its usefulness in accounting for what is, in fact, a much more extensive commitment than ocular engagement alone. As participant Isaksen suggested, ‘visualisation’ may be an expression which actually shuts out participation and interaction, implying passivity and one-way transaction. Indeed, what seemed to be left unattended in some papers at the 2009 workshop was the larger *performance* of visualisation: how it was being framed verbally, by gesture and lighting, sound, audience reaction—the overall temporality (after Ingold 1993) of the presentation. At issue, then, was neglect of the multiple layers of demonstration at work in the visual, and whether ‘visualisation’ as a steering concept was actually curtailing deeper understanding of the issues.

## Thinking Ahead to 2010 and Beyond

(i) *Structure*

Owing to concerns over the substance of some of the dialogue at the 2009 workshop, the sessions’ limited thematic impact and shortage of time—and considering that such

concerns replicated many of those expressed at the 2008 event—it seems important now to rethink the structure and subject matter of these workshops. This rethinking of approach was a key recommendation of 2009 delegates, with Démou, Earl, Johnson, Smiles, Smith, and Wilson all suggesting comparable or complementary means of restyling the workshop, and a majority of commentators proposing compatible topical focuses. Based on that feedback, and given the weaknesses—both epistemological and logistical—of previous thematic groupings, it seems now prudent to eliminate such groupings altogether and invite specific individuals to present on selected issues. In this sense, speakers would essentially deliver ‘position papers’ whose intent would be to delve deeply into an identified analytical matter. The upshot here would be the positive move away from idiosyncratic case studies and papers lionising specific technologies—both of which have arguably predominated at VIA workshops—towards focused conceptual explorations. Moreover, this approach would provide the intellectual foundation for a rigorous academic publication which, as noted by several commentators, is still urgently lacking from VIA’s repertoire. Indeed, there is a common sentiment that the absence of such an output (and of intermediary publications on previous workshops) may be curbing greater disciplinary cognisance and purchase of VIA. For many, long-term scholarly solidification of the subject depends upon this kind of textual investment.<sup>10</sup>

Organising the next workshop around ‘position’ pieces would also offer the opportunity to direct invitations to key practitioners, thereby allowing us to avoid general calls-for-papers which might manifest in submissions that are only tangentially related to the topics of interest. Especially as VIA is entering its third year and has, throughout, been accumulating a core understanding of the position of visualisation today, this reconfiguration would provide some necessary control over the conversation in order to extend such understanding. There thus seems little reason to leave the workshop up to chance enrolment when we are aware of clear matters which demand further scrutiny. Focused papers, too, could then stand as the scaffolding for specific sessions at the VIA international conference which would again be open to general participation. They would also, as Webmoor has recommended, allow VIA to broaden its disciplinary reach, targeting speakers from outside the field of archaeology (e.g., geography, history and philosophy of science, science and technology studies, etc.) who have been similarly active in elaborating the visualisation knowledge base.

It is worth noting, as well, that a significant number of commentators on the 2009 workshop were keen to push on the format of future events by loosening time constraints even further (i.e., turning sessions into more fluid and intensive half-day ‘laboratories’—less paper-based and more deliberation-oriented—managed closely by chairs) and integrating coffee and lunch breaks directly into the discussion periods. These recommendations echo comments from 2008, and speak to the need (and desire) for VIA to better capitalise on the time available at its events. There was also an obvious interest in seeing deliverables laid out for workshop chairs, including anticipated directions and goals for sessions. Recalling some of the critique above, multiple delegates felt that the discussion periods occasionally lost their way, getting co-opted by the minutiae of individual projects and, in so doing, neglecting the bigger picture. Directives for chairs, it was argued, could assist in guiding the dialogue towards more weighty issues of where and how to move forward.

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<sup>10</sup> In a comparable recommendation, commentators indicated that the overall currency and relevance of VIA could better be cultivated by uploading presenters’ papers to the project website immediately following—or in tandem with—the workshop, live-streaming the presentations, and contemplating means to extend the event beyond English-speaking audiences.

(ii) *Concentration areas*

As underlined by the majority of commentators on the 2009 workshop, future events must begin to take advantage of the capital already invested in VIA. Rather than continue to privilege new and independent projects, therefore, this would mean using the epistemological and ontological issues already exposed by previous workshop participants as the foundations for deeper thinking about the visual—that is, for interrogating the process of visualisation itself. In this sense, as Johnson has noted, we would be looking to revisit and deconstruct past debates and taken-for-granted—abandoning novel case studies in favour of scrutiny of vernacular practice.

Importantly, delegates have generally converged on the key topics that they see as meriting such scrutiny. Perhaps foremost among these is the issue of **visualisation as research**—what workshop participant Stephen calls the intellectual productivity of the “working image,” or what others (i.e., Beale, James, Moser, Smiles) describe as the ability for visual representation to drive enquiry and shape/resolve archaeological problems. Significantly, the conceptual concern here is *not* the display or final production of an image, but visualisation as the articulation of academic study—that is (following workshop chair Smiles’ observations), its implication in delineating new lines of research, in rethinking our datasets, and in mediating archaeological information. What is at stake, then, are the theoretical repercussions (now and in the future) of visual research practice for the general discipline of archaeology.

Where we seek to probe the capacities of the graphic product itself, the issue of **visual conveyance** has particular salience, as highlighted by contributors Kirkpatrick, Smith, Webmoor and Wilson. Of interest here are the precise means by which images communicate ideas, knowledge, emotion, etc.; what draws people (both the producer and the consumer) to imagery and how that imagery itself works to target its audiences; how visual codes vary in terms of their definition and interpretation; how different media impact on processes of conveyance; and how visualisers themselves—their motivations, enthusiasm, imagination, directives and related concerns—affect the pictorial output.

Extending out from such discourse around the fundamentals of visual communication is a necessary corollary conversation, as noted by Giles, Kirkpatrick and Morgan, about **ethics and responsibility in visual practice**. Amongst the archaeological sector, critical attention has still to be turned towards the moral obligations of image-makers and the ramifications of visualisation on different audiences. In our own graphic work, we should seek to query issues of transparency and straightforwardness: how clearly must we demarcate gaps in knowledge and fabrications? How forthcoming must we be about the visual (and other) devices we have employed or the audiences we wish to engage? Indeed, what is our accountability for the creation of pictures and for others’ interpretations of those pictures? As Kirkpatrick frames it, the matter in question is the application of “social consequence” to visualisation processes: what are those consequences, who is responsible for any associated fallout, and what is at stake if we flout them?

Arguably, understanding the ethical implications of visualisation (not to mention its communicative capacities) demands a parallel understanding of viewers’ reactions to graphic media. At issue here is **visual reception**, meaning how audiences respond to the visual; how they witness, use and assimilate pictorial materials. Concern, in this instance, is directed at the beholder of the image and, likewise, the beholder of the beholder (i.e., researchers who aim to see what others see). As reception analysis gets

increasingly elaborated in cognate fields (e.g., Perse 2001; Schroder et al. 2003), archaeologists must now face questions about if and how they too are applying such analysis and what its results may mean for the archaeological visual record.

At an ontological level, as broached by workshop contributors Perry and Webmoor, we are similarly confronted by questions over archaeological **visual economies**. Imagery, in this respect, is profoundly linked to professional agendas, legitimacy and funding; to on-the-ground practices of recording and reporting; to external support and internal integrity. There is a clear space now open for practitioners to probe these processes—that is, to scrutinise how visualisation is interacting with our disciplinary edifices and artefacts.

Moreover, as evidenced across both the 2008 and 2009 workshops, there is also a blatant need for archaeologists to situate themselves in **histories of visualisation** or, as per workshop chair Smiles, to put history in “explicit dialogue with the present.” Of interest here, however, is not only the history of representational techniques, but the history of academic visualisation enquiry itself. How has such enquiry manifested over time?; how have visualisation processes shifted or languished?; and how do chronic—but mostly unsupported—assumptions about the novelty of archaeological graphic practice today impact upon that very practice?

The persistence of such assumptions brings us back, then, to fundamental problems of **visual competency** in and beyond archaeology—i.e., as Gibbons, Giles, James, Middleton, Morgan, Perry, and Read/Smith touch upon, the extent of practitioner skill in *critically* making, interpreting, circulating and contextualising graphic media. While commentators on the 2009 workshop are divided over the practicality of attempting to reshape existing visualisers’ skillsets, they are generally united in arguing that VIA is well-positioned to outline evidence-based standards and pedagogical guidelines for new generations of professionals. There is a sense, therefore, that VIA’s greatest impact could perhaps be made in articulating the first solid structure for disciplinary visual literacy.

### (iii) *Final notes*

It is important to reiterate that although the aforementioned issues have repeatedly presented themselves at VIA workshops, their full and rigorous exploration seems often to have been curtailed by their confinement within independent, time-limited case studies. As the VIA project moves forward, the overwhelming recommendation for its development has been to *give time first* to exploring these overarching conceptual concerns. In doing so, and in specifically inviting key stakeholders to debate and thicken the dialogue at the forthcoming 2010 workshop, VIA stands both to solidify the intellectual foundations of visual enquiry in archaeology, and to expose its practical components. What is critical is that by investing now in such conceptual deliberation, we can prepare ourselves for a future—including the 2011 international conference—at which new, independent case studies might actually be situated within an epistemological framework articulated by the VIA project itself.

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