

THE ANXIOUS IMAGE

Rodney Browne

To visit a popular historic site is generic. The experience inevitably reads the same.

Some time later, after eventually figuring out the system, spending the obligatory lengthy wait in a queue and finally acquiring the necessary tickets, it was time to go forth to see one of the world's great historic sites.

Along with other late risers and bus tour groups who arrived en masse at mid morning we contributed to the surge that formed an army of sightseers advancing upon the summit

From the ticket entrance it is a trek of a few hundred metres to the main entry of the historic site. The pathway is congested with people pushing their way in and against the flow of earlier visitors who are now leaving, having been fatigued by what they had come for. You are surrounded by a multitude of languages, sometimes catching recognisable yet ambiguous passages from conversations about real estate and other equally incongruous discussions. Signage on people's clothing adds to the visual and audible noise that assails from all directions. However, now and again, it appears as though the text may have been conjured from another, more profound place as it beckons you, inscribed as it is on someone's back, "Go to the top".

Eventually you make your way through the historic entrance. Covered in scaffolding as these sites inevitably are, it is hard to get a complete impression of what it is you are entering. You have known pictures of these buildings since childhood and it takes some reconciling to align those remembered, serene, empty picture postcard images, with the crowded, noisy reconstruction site that is here before you.

As you emerge from the main entrance and scaffolding you look down to see the natural stone of the hilltop polished smooth like a floor of pink/grey marble by the more than one million feet that pass this way each year. Ahead you finally glimpse a portion of the object of your pilgrimage. There, emerging above the up-stretched forest of arms waving digital cameras is the...

In this case, it was the pediment of the Parthenon, the dominant structure of the Acropolis. This building, or at least its image, is perhaps the most iconic symbol of the Western world, representing as it does, the enduring legacy of the ancient Greeks with their significant contribution to modern science, philosophy, art, literature and political democracy.

However, none of this, nor the understanding that for almost three millennia, this site has had an enduring religious and cultural significance for the Greeks, seemed to be of consequence to the swarming, trampling mass of image makers (anxious to record their presence at this location) on their tightly scheduled passage to the next stop. Most of their time is spent jostling their way from one celebrated vantage point to another, attempting to replicate well-known images of the site or otherwise directing each other or their children, via the frame of the LCD screen, into a more favourable position against the famous backdrop. Having recorded the moment, they stop at random, oblivious to their surroundings and others in their vicinity, to contemplate the captured image - before moving on, to seek out the next potential image.

In the presence of so much anxiety to record, you have little opportunity to contemplate the significance of the location in which you are in. You are constantly made aware of both your own presence as an extra in this frenzied circus of image-making and of the pre-eminence of the made image over experience. As part of the performance, you must ritually step aside, to allow an image to be captured, or apologise for not having been quick enough to avoid becoming an inadvertent inclusion within it.

I am reminded of the commentary by Douglas Crimp in which he states that:

We only experience reality through the pictures we make of it. To an even greater extent our experience is governed by pictures in newspapers and magazines, on television and in the cinema. Next to these, first hand experience begins to retreat, to seem more and more trivial.¹





This phenomenon seems to have become increasingly extreme as people find it ever more necessary to confirm their existence through pictures. There seems to be little interest in contemplating the physical space, rather, attention is only lavished on the digital facsimile of the real space. Conditioning is so pervasive that only through the monitor does the experience seem genuine and gratifying. The structures themselves stand mute, unable to offer up enough to sustain the sensorial interest, or satisfy the epistemological yearning of the pilgrims. It seems necessary that in some way, the “*mental image*” brought to the space and attained from prolonged exposure to previously encountered pictures of the space, must find some realisation in concrete form. In this sense, there needs to be an artefact to represent that imagined or “*mental image*” which forms the intercession between “the thing represented” and “the image made.”² The pilgrim’s self-generated artefact (the recorded image), stands in for, and completes the sequence between “the thing represented”, the imagined “*mental image*” and the absent representation provided by the idealised image model, such as the postcard.

It is ironic that the ancient Greek’s concern for the aesthetic principle of mimesis which led to protracted designing, creating and building in order to reproduce nature with visual accuracy now forms a superficial backdrop for so many millions of impulsive and thoughtlessly recorded images.

The ancient Greek’s adoration of, and reverence for, enduring form, contrasts with the fleetingness and disposability of contemporary concerns for recording, or marking the presence of an individual. In some ways, it is understandable how an audience fed on the plethora of images of contemporary times, may find these still and silent spaces unrewarding. The perceived emptiness of the buildings and spaces as they are now – without all the accoutrements, colour and ceremonial significance that we understand were once there from academic and historical recordings – is lost to the casual viewer.

It was only as I was leaving the site and turned to face the Propylaea, the structure at the entrance to the Acropolis, that I realised – as I had done many years before when I stood at arms length staring into the eyes of an Albrecht Dürer self-portrait – that I was standing in the space of the creator. I was standing in the very same space where Pericles (Perikles), the man who was so instrumental in realising this wonder, must have stood and looked up at his creation. How many of the other notable figures of our cultural heritage must also have passed through this very same space.

Nonetheless the picture, the documented image, has become the means by which the taker can place themselves in the proximity of the creator or the gods. Would in fact, the ancient Greeks have understood the urge to create the concrete impression of one’s *mental image* in order to verify the sensation of an experience?

All digital stills taken at the Acropolis on Saturday 6 May 2006 by Rodney Browne.

- 1 Douglas Crimp, "The Photographic Activity of Postmodernism", *October* 15, Winter 1980, 91-101, and quoted by Linda Andre in "The Politics of Postmodern Photography", *Afterimage*, 13 (3), October 1985, 14.
- 2 David Summers discusses this where he states that: "In the long Western discussion of artistic representation, there are always three factors: the thing represented, the image made and a *mental* image. This third term, in being called an 'image' at all, is likened to a work of art made by the mind itself; it is a representation that must always be interposed between anything and its actual image." See *Real Space, World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (New York: Phaidon, 2003), 319-20. The 'image made' in this case would be derived from the manufactured image, remembered from travelogues, postcards, film etc., a 'mental image' of which the traveller carries.

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