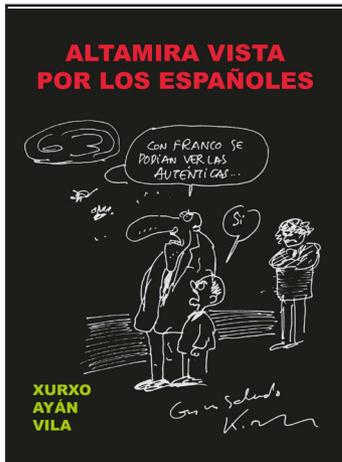


REVIEWS



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Altamira vista por los españoles

[by Xurxo Ayán Vila]

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First of all, a piece of advice: if you are interested in archaeology, history, anthropology, art, monuments, graffiti, heritage, cultural policy, and/or culture in general, or even if you are one of those people that love to gossip, then read this book! You will not regret it. If you do, you will find something that is not very common in specialized or mass market books: a host of anonymous voices through words written by everyday people who wanted to leave a mark of their visit to the emblematic place that is the Cave of Altamira by signing the cave's visitors' books. Xurxo Ayán restricts himself to putting order into the chaos by selecting hundreds of those voices, studying them and producing a "personal essay" without any pretence of being objective (Ayán 2015:14). However, in this "essay", starting with a specific case, he recreates basically the entire human universe involved around any process relating to heritage. Perhaps the only thing that was left out of this compendium is the point of view of heritage professionals. Indeed, our absence from the visitors' books reveals the way in which we perceive ourselves as visitors: different to the rest, even though perhaps some of us are there, camouflaged among the signatures, but probably not many.

Anyone who knows anything about Xurxo Ayán will know that he is not a scientist one can easily classify, but they will also know that one of his great qualities, apart from his immense capacity for work, is his instinct for focusing on the most interesting aspects of his research objects and his ability to present them, either orally or via his meticulous literary style. Yet another quality he possesses is his expertise in inserting himself as the protagonist of his own tales, thus achieving a closeness which captures the readers' attention, involving them in the story and diluting the role of the expert in their own field of study. Amazingly, the author achieves all of this without falling into the trap of vacuous narcissism.

In this book, Xurxo Ayán shows off all of these skills, with the aim of providing context and meaning to what, in any other way, would have been a mere compilation of voices. His personal involvement with the object of his work is what lends emotional depth to the result. All of this originated in what started out as a commissioned research project. The Project on the Social Value of Altamira (Barreiro et al. 2014) was carried out within the framework of the Research Program for Preventive Conservation and Access to the Cave of Altamira, financed by the Spanish Ministry of Education, Culture and Sport between 2012 and 2014. It was during the course of this research project that the opportunity arose to carry out a study of the visitors' books deposited in the Museum of Altamira. There was no doubt about who was the right person for the job and, as that person was Xurxo Ayán, we should have suspected that the result would go far beyond the writing of a mere technical report. This is not just an anecdote, but rather a reflection of the personal commitment with which Xurxo approaches any project in which he is involved.

In this case, he questions the controversial research programme (UCM 2014, 2016) from the inside and from a different kind of scientific principle, one which is typical of someone like Xurxo Ayán who does not only worry about looking after things but also people. With this in mind, the writer shares an ideal with the reader: that it is as important to have the largest possible number of people on your side when making such an important decision as the one to choose the best way of preserving the paintings (Ayán et al. 2015). To know what people think and say about Altamira is to apply this principle. It is for this reason that Ayán's work extends far beyond

the mere compilation of an entertaining anthology of comments made at the museum.

Several aspects of this book point towards the future of heritage management, in which the role of the public will not simply be to passively receive information produced by experts but to produce and make use of heritage processes themselves. In this future, heritage will not simply be a field of objects prone to being studied scientifically but one of a relationship in which society, in all of its heterogeneity, is built and revitalized. It will become a field in which energy, as well as matter, will intervene (unlike more static and essentialist views of heritage) and will be indiscernible, as is the case in modern physics, where one ends and the other begins.

Xurxo Ayán, without being a pioneer (as he himself admits), applies a concept of archaeology which considerably widens its conventional borders by examining written documents with an archaeologist's eye. He set himself the mission of "excavating documents" (Ayán 2015: 11) by understanding the visitors' books as "egodocuments", that is, tales told in the first person, giving an insight into alternative points of view rather than the hegemonic discourse. This approach has traced an initial line in which an authentic and radical multivocality can be observed. Ayán does not speak to us through the mouths of many people but it is this multiplicity that becomes apparent through spontaneous, natural and direct voices, as their owners probably never thought that anyone would ever bother to listen to them (Ayán 2015: 210).

After that, Ayán traces a second line, identifying himself with the idea of open, citizen science and, more specifically, with public archaeology. This is a concept which, in my opinion, poses significant challenges when it comes to conceptualizing heritage processes. Is it possible to determine the limits of scientific practice, or to separate it from heritage processes? And, if so, where are those limits? In the people participating in the process? In this case, when we are speaking of open or citizen science, is what experts do considered to be science and what citizens do not? Is what citizens do something different to science? Is it not true that, in heritage processes, many other values intervene apart from the regulated production of knowledge, which is the defining characteristic of scientific practice?

With this digression, I hope to show that Xurxo Ayán's work points towards what is, in my opinion, one of the most pressing theoretical lines of debate relating to cultural heritage as a research problem. This third line is the multidimensionality of heritage processes, which also serves as a framework for Ayán's work. The different comments selected are grouped together in chapters, in accordance with the heritage values or dimensions to which they principally refer (the comments often touch on very different aspects and any way of ordering them inevitably implies some form of simplification).

According to Ayán, these different dimensions of heritage have to do with, for instance, Altamira's relationship with the supposed spiritual and earthly roots (the foundation of a popular cosmogony) of our "civilization" (the spiritual culture of Altamira). They also have to do with personal experiences in relation to this place, which can be detected via a kind of emotional archaeology, focusing on the experience of the landscape (the sentimental culture of Altamira). In addition, Xurxo Ayán, as we have already mentioned, examines himself and his own perception of Altamira as a place of personal and family experiences, as he states in the prologue, thereby making himself one of the voices, with the same legitimacy to explain the place Altamira occupies in his own life story.

The cognitive or informative value of Altamira, its role as a document, which enables us to construct historical knowledge, is also one of the axes of the plot (the archaeological culture of Altamira). As previously mentioned, the principle of open, citizen science is shown by making these voices heard as they demand and present their own view of the historical role of the people who inhabited the cave in the Paleolithic Age. It is the view of history held by those who do not make a living from it, albeit only out of scientific curiosity, which should interest us.

The second part of the book reveals the people's need to express their opinion about what Altamira means, socially, nowadays and on different levels. One section groups together comments referring to the way in which Altamira is presented to the public as a heritage device (the museum culture of Altamira). Here, opinions arise regarding the museum's discourse, the uniqueness

of Altamira as an extremely fragile site which is inaccessible to the public and, particularly, about the replica of the cave. These opinions are extremely illustrative and educational and must be taken into account in any decision making process regarding access to the cave, although they may not have statistical validity.

Another section tackles the partisan use of the symbolic capital of the site (the political culture of Altamira), considering the changes in its political use since Franco's times. At that moment, Altamira was a symbol of Spanish identity that lasted until the Spain of the autonomous regions, in which a shift towards Cantabrian identity occurred causing tensions that greatly affected the preservation of the site. All of this leads to the question: Who should manage the cave and why?

The last section (from the times of the Prestige disaster to the economic crisis) has a different slant, presenting comments concerning current affairs (the Prestige, the war in Iraq, historic memory, the crisis, etc.). Heritage matters move out of the spotlight and become the tool ("a good kaleidoscope", Ayán 2015: 193) through which it is possible to discover the visitors' perceptions of the current affairs of the day.

To sum up, under the appearance of an innocent, and often amusing, book, Xurxo Ayán hides a well-conceived and precisely produced artefact that has the aim of helping to undermine the foundations of the hegemonic discourses around cultural heritage; discourses that aim to monopolize the legitimacy to say what heritage is, what it is not and how it must be dealt with. Additionally, these discourses are also forgetting that heritage is essentially a political process in which everyone, both experts and non-experts, have something to say. Even if it is only for this reason, the effort made by JAS Arqueología Editorial with this beautifully-produced edition must be appreciated as it constitutes a breath of fresh air into Spain's archaeological literature.

A last memory

I cannot end this review without mentioning its own background, which is in line with the emotional archaeology defended by Ayán.

Many of us have our histories intertwined with Altamira. My own personal history is one of failure, of a family holiday at the beginning of the 1980s, which ended in front of a closed gate. I was never able to get into Altamira, but having the opportunity to take part in the aforementioned project enabled me to experience one of the most rewarding professional experiences I have ever had the opportunity to be involved in, at a particularly difficult time for me personally and with such great colleagues. Amongst them was J.A. Lasheras, who recently passed away, whose character and wisdom come to my mind whenever I think of Altamira. Although he read the manuscript, I think he would have enjoyed the finished book so much.

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