Reconstructing Angkor

Dr. Ashley Thompson, School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies, University of Leeds

Abstract

Culture itself, writes Jacques Derrida, in *Monolingualism of the Other*, that which we call culture is always, by definition, universally, originarily, colonial. Etymologically, to begin with, there is an essential coloniality of culture. *Monolingualism of the Other* calls into question the critical project of Post-colonial Studies insofar as the affirmation of an essential coloniality of culture questions the very possibility of speaking of a post-colonial state or time in historical terms. Yet, far from dictating, in ethical or political terms, a relativist impotence, or worse, a reactionary force, this law of colonial culture provides the basis from which we can hope to gauge the unbearable violence of the expropriating hegemony commonly called colonisation. It is in light of such a ‘prudent and differentiated universalization’ of ‘coloniality’ that I aim to deepen understandings of what I will call the perpetual reconstruction of Angkor. Always already lost, Angkor is to be forever saved. It is the quintessential embodiment of heritage: transmitted to ‘us’ before we are ‘ourselves,’ it is never simply ‘ours’; ‘we’ are fated to re-appropriate it from the beginning and thereafter. The paper will explore these formulations by examining a series of historical examples of reconstruction at and of Angkor.

Biographical information

Ashley Thompson lectures in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies of the University of Leeds and is a specialist in Cambodian cultural history. The Cambodian case is informed by forays into the larger Asian context, with a view to theorising Asian politico-cultural formations. Her work also explores avenues for comparison of ‘Eastern’ and ‘Western’ metaphysical traditions, and the limits of the comparative endeavour. Objects of analysis include Hindu and Buddhist sculpture, ritual and literary practices and texts, as well as other forms of fine and performing arts. She is currently involved in a Cambodian production of Hélène Cixous' epic play, *The Terrible but Unfinished Story of Norodom Sihanouk King of Cambodia*, which will tour Europe in 2011 and the United States in 2013. Her monograph *Engendering the Buddhist State: Reconstructions of Cambodian History* is to appear with Routledge (Critical Buddhist Studies) in 2012.
Select publications


‘Lost and Found: the stupa, the four-faced Buddha and the seat of royal power in Middle Cambodia,’ in Proceedings of the 7th International Conference of the European Association of Southeast Asian Archaeologists, Berlin, 1998, Centre for Southeast Asian Studies, University of Hull, 2000.


