

## Chapter 14

# Imagined Archaeologies: Stereotypes and Myths in Cinema, From Indiana Jones to Arturo Frantini

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### **ABSTRACT**

*Indiana Jones and Lara Croft, but also Sharon Golban and Arturo Frantini, are characters narrating the multi-faceted job of the archaeologist, a great appeal to the public since the beginning of the cinema. The chapter understands the origins of this fascination, outlining the evolution of the character and his difficult relation with archaeologists in flesh and bones. A new typology of film archaeologists is proposed. Treasure hunters, academic researchers or field workers, cinema codified stereotypes that especially in the last 30 years have been analyzed, contested, or approved by scholars. Among quests, precious objects to be rescued, and characters loved by the great public, archaeology in cinema is sometimes in the background, but continues to have a prominent place in popular culture. Archaeologists should deal with this phenomenon to better understand the reception (or sometimes the distortion) of their work by the public.*

### **ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE SILVER SCREEN: AN OLD STORY**

*We cannot escape media; it is all around us, permeating the*

*practices through which our intelligibility of the world transpires.*

*We cannot stop this mediation: it has no off switch; it lives and feeds*

*upon our own necessity to communicate; we cannot escape media.*

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(Brittain & Clack, 2007, p. 15)

The appeal of the archaeology on the general public has deep roots: *popular culture archaeology is as old as archaeology itself, if not older* (Moschenska, 2017, p. 153, about the birth of the connection between archaeology and popular culture, with further bibliography). Finding ancient objects is something having an ancestral fascination till the antiquity: forms of collecting were in use in Roman times.

During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the use of grand tour starts spreading. European upper classes are involved as travelers as well as targets of the enthusiastic reports about monumental ruins still visible in the Roman countryside.

Narratives about lost civilizations and exotic countries will have a stronger and stronger impact on the public during 1800s, growing together with the interest for archaeological studies, thanks to the increasing number of extra-European expeditions. A leading role in the construction of the western collective imagination is played by reports and objects arriving from Egypt, especially after the great mission conducted by Napoleon in 1798, having a great echo in France as well as in England.

Often the members of the expeditions themselves contributed in the creation of an idea of archaeology as a discipline connected with a geographic and chronological “elsewhere”. This thanks to reports describing the visited places as full of perils and wonders (McGeough, 2006, p. 174).<sup>1</sup>

Popular culture during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by those fabulous, exotic and also macabre findings. All this elements actually occur in painting, drama and literature of the period; in all of these forms of art that world of fantastic discoveries can be found, made by archaeologists still being somewhat more similar to an adventurer interested in the bare recovery of ancient objects, than to a methodic scientist devoted to the study of ancient civilizations and their material culture.

This imaginative background greatly influenced cinema, even at the first stages of its development (Hall, 2004, p. 160, with bibliography): not surprisingly, the first archaeologist of the history of cinema is an Egyptologist: Lord Evendal. He is the protagonist of a (unfortunately lost) movie dating back to 1911; no much information is available, anyway the plot was based on a popular novel, part of the Egyptomania vogue (Bellu, 2017, p. 4).

So, this is the birth of a successful trend linking fictional archaeologists to the Egyptian world: exactly thanks to the influence of pre-cinematic art, and above all of popular literature, archaeological films show well shaped characteristics. Archaeologists on silver screen are charming, closer to adventurers than to scientists. Effective digs are entirely conducted by local workers; at the core of the narrative there is the quest for a single object, often endowed with supernatural powers. All elements can be found, after two decades, in *The mummy*, dating back to 1932, a blockbuster that finally define the genre, giving birth to a plenty of sequel and remake right up to the present days (Hall, 2004, p. 161).<sup>2</sup>

So the stylistic features regarding archaeology and the work of the archaeologist are already codified at the beginning of the development of popular cinema. At that moment, the study of antiquities is still a young discipline, deeply influenced by art history, with a lack of method regarding excavation techniques as well as for the analysis of findings. Furthermore, it is not a real profession, being abode of elites and upper class.<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the influx of the 19<sup>th</sup> century popular literature, cinematic archaeologists are already old at birth, because they incorporate features deriving from romantic old-style adventurers, treasure-hunters with an evident lack of interest for scholarly precision and accuracy in the research activities.

As stated below, these features will occur constantly in cinematic depiction of the archaeologists and of archaeology, being the basis for the creation of the quintessential archaeologist, Indiana Jones: after

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