

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF TIME TRAVEL

EXPERIENCING THE PAST IN
THE 21ST CENTURY

Edited by

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ARCHAEOPRESS ARCHAEOLOGY

ARCHAEOPRESS PUBLISHING LTD
GORDON HOUSE
276 BANBURY ROAD
OXFORD OX2 7ED

www.archaeopress.com

ISBN 978 1 78491 500 1
ISBN 978 1 78491 501 8 (e-Pdf)

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Economic support for publishing this book has been received from
The Krapperup Foundation
The Hainska Foundation

Cover illustrations are taken from the different texts of the book. See List of Figures for information.

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Commentary

On Time Travelling and Cinema

Laia Colomer

Beside its basic entertainment aim, the fiction film industry could be interestingly analysed from a time travelling perspective, noticing the connection between the present and what we imagine of the past, and the future. The film industry is where imaginative worlds get real. Screenwriters know that they first need to build up a story because a great story is what makes a great film; then, they pitch a character because a compelling character can extend across a series of sequels; and finally, they define a world (in the past, the present or the future), since a world can support multiple stories, involving multiple characters across multiple landscapes. Yet, world-building is central to a great deal of any genre fiction plots because it is more interesting, for both the director and the audience, to build and explore worlds and stories than dealing with individuals (Borràs and Colomer 2008).

Many films take history, memory, archaeology or heritage as main elements in their plots, or include archaeologists or historians as their main characters. There are films interpreting history from a patriotic or critical view (e.g. *Battleship Potemkin*, Sergei M. Eisenstein [1925]; *The Battle of Algiers*, Gillo Pontecorvo [1966]). There are films where their humanistic stories are set in particularly relevant historical backgrounds (e.g. *Paths of Glory*, Stanley Kubrick [1957]; *Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, Werner Herzog [1972]). There are films that use the past to reflect on today's events, so time span gives freedom to the film director's voice (e.g. *Twelve Monkeys*, Terry Gilliam [1995]; *Agora*, Alejandro Amenábar [2009]). There are films where a particular future is the direct result of a conflict present (e.g. *The Planet of Apes*, Franklin J. Schaffner [1968] and Tim Burton [2001]; *Mad Max*, George Miller [1979]). Other films reveal how particular actions of the past conform to events in the present (e.g. *Peggy Sue Got Married*, Francis Ford Coppola [1986]; *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, Michel Gondry [2004]) or picture the future to change the present (e.g. *It Happened Tomorrow*, René Clair [1944]; *Time Lapse*, Bradley King [2014]). Further, there are films where people collect objects or experiences so they do not lose their roots and identities (e.g. *Everything Is Illuminated*, Liev Schreiber [2005]). There are films where time, memory and time travelling are the plots (e.g. *Memento*, Christopher Nolan [2000]; *The Infinite Man*, Hugh Sullivan [2014]). And there are films where collecting material culture turns out to be relevant for building sustainable futures (e.g. *Wall-e*, Andrew Stanton [2008]). No list of time travel films would be complete without, at least, featuring

the father of time travel fiction himself, H. G. Wells, and the films recreating his novel, *The Time Machine* (George Pal [1960] and Simon Wells [2002]). And, of course, there is the blockbuster *Back to the Future* I, II and III (Robert Zemeckis 1985, 1989, 1990).

What makes all of these films interesting here is that they act as a time travel experience for an audience seated comfortably in a cinema palace, and that all of them (no matter where they are set in time and place) talk either about the human condition or today's views. In this context, the papers written by Bodil Petersson and Dawid Kobiałka certainly provide imaginative examinations of fiction films as a time travel methodology. As these authors point out, more interestingly is the discussion about whether the image of the past portrayed in fictional films is rigorous enough; that is, analyzing to which extent these films portraying particular visions of the past, are actually referring to interested views of the present. This interest runs parallel to post-processual academic analysis on the use and abuse of archaeology and cultural heritage practices for the interest of political agendas (e.g. Harrison 2013; Smith 2006). Using fictional films as another materiality of this image of past history in contemporary time adds a new critical dimension in public archaeology (see also Hall 2004; Russell 2002).

Bodil Petersson's article is an example of how futuristic films could also be used to understand how we visualise our present and address our future. Here, it is not the past that mirrors the present but the future. The future is constructed upon our views of the present by selecting certain current elements and performances that we acknowledge as relevant. However, what makes Petersson's article more interesting is that she does this hermeneutic exercise following archaeological principles of context and material analysis. Both the production's context and the film's props are used to interpret what kind of present Kevin Costner's *Waterworld* (1995) portrays, a production that in the 1990s aimed to come across with an ethical-ecological message about global climate change. By focussing on the film's props, objects introduced as coming from the past, that is the 1990s (i.e. a rear-view window, dirt in a jar, ski boots, crayons and images in an old *National Geographic* magazine), Petersson takes the film's props as synonymous with "material culture", that is the archaeological materiality of a present meaningful for a particular future. Semiotically, the message is clear; interpreting this materiality, the main characters understand their past and their present, while the audience acknowledges that the way ecologically the earth is managed today will address us to an apocalyptic future. Accordingly, Petersson's chapter moves interestingly from being a cinematography review to an archaeological material culture review of a Hollywood film. Material culture and the context are used thus to understand the past, the present and the future, both by the characters and the audiences.

Following this operation, I would like to add that Kevin Costner's *Waterworld* might allow us to exercise another analysis, now regarding heritage practice. Petersson shortly notices how the props included in the film are "relics of a past" in a watery world. Precisely, most of these objects are debris that become treasures in this future world. As most of today's archaeological objects, Mariner's treasures have lost their original meaning but gain new significances, either because of new uses by society or a new symbolical context. In this sense, it would be possible to step further and see Mariner as a treasure hunter of contemporary relics in a future world. Following this argument then, the film director is like a museum curator, selecting those relics/props that contain sufficient emotional and ideological connotations to deliver the ecological message to an audience from the 1990s. From a time travelling perspective on heritage practice itself, the film may also be taken as an example of Western notions of cultural heritage and traditional museology, specifically on both the art of recovering collective memory and object's collection management, and its significance today in delivering messages to society (after Pearce 1993; Hooper-Greenhill 2000).

David Kobiałka's chapter provides us with a Lacanian analysis on the relation between film industry and archaeology, particularly the tweeted relationship between reality and illusion. His main argument is that fiction could not exist without reality, but also reality could not exist without fiction. Indeed, fiction literature, theatre and cinema are the perfect arena for imagined scenarios, either of the past, the present or the future. These imagined scenarios are always designed from the present time, its experience, perceptions and expectations. And accordingly, no imagination is fully invented from nothing. Our imaginaries grow up from our reality, both from its more dark ghosts and our positive wishes to change. The film industry is, more than any other fictional media, a case study for this tweeted relationship between reality and illusion because films provide concrete, powerful and likely images of these imaginaries. It is in this film creative process that the references to our present are strongly evident to all of us. The *Star Wars* saga, for example, portrays military strategies and equipment that resemble more the epics of WW II than any society technologically centuries ahead from us. If the film would have been produced today, the screenwriters may have imagined that future war scenario resembling the clean, even opaque, war encounters facilitated today by military drones. Unless, of course, they still want to add the patina of glory, loyalty and companion that men used to like to add in war action films.

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned several examples of how the past and the future are set in films aiming for different goals, from political to entertainment. This is not a new issue to add neither to film studies nor public archaeology. However, what Petersson and Kobiałka have added is an archaeological review on film's materiality and the validity of any scientific falsity. Equally important

for the time travel is that this fictional world (either set in the past or in the future) does not picture the present, but it represents this present according to our own interests, agendas or perceptions of our current debates. As Petersson points out, it exists as an unbroken line between the interpretation of the past, our perceptions of today events and our projections of the future. And in this process, archaeologists, heritage managers, film-makers and film art designers operate similarly; they interpret the past and design the future according to what they perceive is relevant to our present. We may draw a parallel line between the history of academic archaeology and a critical history of cinema, assuming that both archaeology and cinema operate according to present times. There is a similar path between, on one hand, the decision process on which historical topics are chosen in the film industry, how their plots are focused and what ideological meaning portrays the stories on scene, and, on the other hand, how traditional, processual and post-processual archaeologies define their research topics, interpret data, and give relevant meaning to particular issues. For example, we can 'sequentially travel' from classic films portraying the Bible as *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (George Stevens 1965), encounter after processual versions of the Bible in *Jesus Christ Superstar* (Norman Jewison 1973) or *Monty Python's Life of Brian* (Terry Jones 1979) and finally experience a post-modern interpretation of the Book with *The Last Temptation of Christ* (Martin Scorsese 1988). Or we can exemplify the inclusion of an indigenous perspective in archaeology and heritage studies by confronting how the same event is portrayed differently in films such as *They Died with Their Boots On* (Raoul Walsh 1941) and *Little Big Man* (Arthur Penn 1970). This parallelism, which is nothing other than evidence of how far human creativity and inquiry is contextually defined, is what makes fiction films interesting for the time travelling methodology and the public archaeology in general.

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