

Analysing Images of Archaeology in Entertainment Media as a Means to Understanding and Meeting Public Expectations

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Abstract. Coming into contact with the public archaeologists often meet special expectations that laypersons have about archaeology which are often far from reality. That is why archaeology often has to disappoint hopes which people pin on it. This may cause disapproval and incomprehensibility which do not serve a productive dialogue between the science and the public. Archaeologists should try to become aware of the typical characteristics of public perception in order to use this knowledge when communicating with the public. One way to get an idea of the public image of archaeology is to analyse its representation in entertainment media because these form an essential source of information from which wide sections of the lay public gain their knowledge about archaeology.

1. Introduction

As every science archaeology is perceived and understood by the public in a specific way. Two sources have to be distinguished from which the science is publicly available.

On the one side the public gains information about archaeology from the discipline itself, which means that professionals step out of the academic sphere and bring their methods and results to the public. Museums, the Internet or popular scientific literature can be summarized under this category. Archaeological disciplines in different countries make different efforts in this respect depending on their self-perception. In Germany for example, until now professionals have seemed to have little interest in making the results of their research or insights into their everyday work accessible to the interested public.

Besides scientific means, here as in other countries entertainment media are the second major source by which archaeology is defined in the public mind. Obviously media commonly have an even stronger position in this context (Stern and Tode 2002: 71), especially where information through professionals is widely neglected.

But why should the academic world make the effort to become aware of public perceptions and how could it use this knowledge for itself and the public? This question can be easily answered in the case of archaeology. The science is, in regard to its contents as well as its methods and fields of interest, a highly popular discipline. Wide sections of the public are exceptionally fascinated by it and give it their undivided attention. In principle this fact is a great advantage that archaeology has compared to other sciences. It is a decisive prerequisite for public acknowledgement and support which every science has to seek. But it can only be used successfully if professionals and laypersons approach each other from the same starting points. In the archaeological science this is, although in several countries to a different degree, generally not the case.

As entertainment media reach the widest sections of the public, the majority of laypersons get their information about archaeology from them (Gowlett 1990). The archaeologist

himself has nearly no influence over this mechanism of transmission. Getting into contact with professionals, laypersons get insights into real practises, objects of interest and the capabilities of this science. However, they perceive them against the background of the notions and expectations that have been strengthened by media images. In the best case this reveals surprised ignorance but unfortunately, disillusionment and disappointment are a typical consequence which is highly counterproductive for gaining public support. Disappointed expectations are widely formed by media images of archaeology which are far from everyday practice but mediate largely false contents and distorting clichés. Examples will be given later in this text. While the strong public presence of archaeology is to be regarded as an advantage in principle, it becomes problematic in this respect.

In order to understand why misleading notions seem to prevail in public perception, images of archaeology have to be examined for their characteristics. This should also serve professionals as an impulse to reflect their own comments. Each time they approach the public they use a specific mode of expression and certain contents and means. So on the one hand a strategy must be found to impart scientific material in a comprehensible, illustrating and attractive way with a language suitable for the public. On the other hand every scientist should see himself as part of the public and as a recipient of media images. As such even professionals are to a special degree subject to the influence of clichés. It could even be questioned in how far images appear in their utterances unconsciously or if they are also used intentionally to meet public expectations and gain attention.

2. Media Analyses

In principle the analysis of images of archaeology in the media allows a differentiation of these images or complexes which, if identified as a basis of public associations, help to understand common expectations.

Approaching the subject in general, it becomes obvious that these images appear in an abundance of different forms. So it makes sense to restrict the focus in two aspects: the selection of types of media and the limitation of the examined spheres of archaeology. Media types can be distinguished as those that have a more or less clearly pedagogical character, like scientific TV documentaries or museum exhibitions, and those that widely use archaeology for entertainment and because of its media-effectiveness. The contents can also be separated into two categories. Archaeology is either shown indirectly through the objects of its research, as the reconstruction of antique and prehistoric life, or directly through the depiction of its practice, as a science.

Clear questions should be directed towards the selected material. Firstly, to recognize the simplification and selectivity within the images because the more simply they are structured the more easily they are remembered. Secondly, pointed research allows certain patterns of portrayal to be distinguished that explain why public notions are characterized by a relatively well defined catalogue of features. The more often these patterns are reproduced the stronger public perception is conditioned by them. Recurring clichés can be placed into direct context with common perceptions. This process will either directly help to find out in how far known associations result from media depictions or will form the basis to discover public notions that were previously unknown.

2.1 An Example

In the following I present excerpts of the results of a study in order to demonstrate how such an analysis can be carried out. I want to emphasise that this study only represents one perspective and approach, many other forms of examination are equally applicable. The following results go back to a student-project that was organised in the winter semester 2002/2003 at the “Lehrstuhl für Ur- und Frühgeschichte” at Humboldt-Universität, Berlin. It served to create an exhibition titled “Indy, Lara and Hercule – How the Media Influence the Popular Notion of Archaeologists” which was presented at the University in March 2003 (for details see Felder et al. 2003: 161f.).

As an introduction, the thematic limitations of our work should be named. Two decisions were essential: the exclusive examination of representations of archaeology as a science and the work with types of media that have a pure entertainment function.

By personal experiences we asserted that the romantic and idealistic notions people project onto archaeologists are founded on a fascination for the goals of archaeology, the objects themselves and the methods of the science, which corresponds only to a limited degree with archaeological reality. If one wants to find out the sources of public opinions about archaeologists and their work it makes sense to deal with the clichés of science rather than with clichés of reconstructed (pre-)historic worlds. The latter better help to identify prevailing ethnic, cultural and social topoi.

The decision to work with media lacking any popular scientific endeavour is firstly based on the fact that entertainment media also reach sections of the public that do

not have a strong personal interest in archaeology. Connotations and images of archaeological contents and practises are transported into public consciousness in a less perceivable mode if archaeology is presented and received as a feature that appears superficially unimportant for a story. The more subtle this transmission, the more effectively clichés seem to be strengthened, especially with regard to their constant repetition. Secondly the image of archaeology is inevitably distorted if it is presented selectively and functionalised for dramaturgical purposes and media effectiveness. This happens in entertainment media to a much stronger degree, and so distorted notions can be traced back to distorted productions. In particular, we examined movies, videogames and novels. This selection represents three types of media which can be clearly distinguished from one another by the different sensory perception and involvement of the recipient they all imply. The mode of perception forms one of the factors that have an impact on the presented contents and the means by which they are designed and shown.

In already existing works about the same matter it becomes clear that there are many different criteria to classify images of archaeology. In one section of the exhibition we focused on the archaeologist in his portrayal as a professional and a personality. In this way, we could identify a range of recurring stereotypes that each have special characteristics and sometimes have connections with each other. Besides this another part of the work dealt with the question of how and under which selective criteria aspects of method and theoretical principles of gaining knowledge within archaeological research are used. Very often archaeological modes of thinking and procedure resemble the dramaturgical course of a plot through the connotations they imply. That means that archaeology in many cases has a metaphorical function within a genre or a plot although these need not necessarily have an archaeological background.

The latter refers to the different position archaeology takes within a plot or a genre. Either it is the clearly selected object of a plot, which deals with archaeological matter or an archaeologist as the protagonist or at least as a major member of the cast. In this case, it is possible to directly investigate the portrayal and interpretation of archaeology in each respective example. Distortions that were necessitated by the entertaining character of the product can be quite easily identified.

As soon as archaeology serves as a metaphor (Stern and Tode 2002: 71) or has a special function within a plot or a genre different questions have to be asked. The dramaturgical function of archaeology has to be identified and the characteristics that make the science applicable for that purpose must be clarified. The aim is rather to discover general attributes of the science with regard to scientific questions and techniques, which are reflected in its dramaturgical application, than to identify falsifications. Firstly such general features have an equally strong influence over public perceptions, secondly they can be used within the scientific discourse itself as an opportunity to reflect the self-perception and principles of knowledge-theory. The following statements will exclusively be illustrated by examples taken from movies because within the exhibition project this type of media formed my special field of examination.

Types of archaeologists. The appearance of archaeologists in media products was investigated under different criteria like professional skills, personal attitude, traits of character and lacking or firm principles, clothing, age and gender. Most of the types have to be seen in a close context with a genre or a special course of action. Sometimes it is difficult to delimit them from each other because their characteristics overlap.

Two connotations of archaeology that can be traced back to media images seem to take a major position in the public perception of the science.

Firstly, archaeology is associated with adventure. People often believe archaeologists to work in exotic places far away from home where they have to make their way through inaccessible terrain and permanently face exciting events far from a normal working day in a bureau till they find the final treasure (Stern and Tode 2002: 75, 79). Indiana Jones, the hero of the famous movie trilogy of the 80s (see film list below) is a well-known idol for these beliefs (Baxter 2002: 16). In the way archaeological work is shown in these films the science is consciously set in contrast with the rather unexciting everyday life at university and emphasises the scientist's passionate love for facing adventures and finding treasures. As the prototype of The Adventurer, Indiana Jones has influenced the public image of archaeology in a very strong way, especially among younger people, with regard to settings, scientific aims, the attitude towards objects and methods of research, as well as physical demands of archaeological work and suitable working clothes (DeBoer 1999 and Baxter 2002). He also became an idol for other characters that have a more or less close connection to archaeology, as the go-getter Rick O'Connell who watches over the archaeologist Evelyn in "The Mummy" (1999).

Another characteristic that makes archaeology so fascinating in the eyes of the public might be the work with occult phenomena. Because of his or her interest in ancient pagan rites and death cults the archaeologist gets into contact with spheres of lost worlds that hold the ominous and the threatening. Because of its chthonic character, archaeological fieldwork can be associated with the motif of the disturbance of subterranean forces and of the peace of the dead (Day 1997: 21). Especially in movies, this connection is expressed by archaeologist figures which take part in plots that deal with a curse that is set free or with the awakening of forces and divinities that have waited under the earth's surface for thousands of years. Archaeologists are "despoilers of ancient tombs" and thus become "doom-bringers" (Russell 2002: 44f.). They are the only suitable professionals to carry out this intervention (Day 1997: 15f.). Above all, this aspect is significant with regard to the necessities of dramaturgy because the archaeologist is the decisive initiator of the action. As such he need not necessarily take further part in the story which, for example, is very obvious in the horror film "The Exorcist – The Version You've Never Seen" (2000).

The exorcism in this movie that is aimed to get the babylonian demon Bazuzu out of the body of a little girl, also reflects the opposition of pagan cults with Christianity. This complex is also frequently connected with archaeologists in horror plots. They bring along the disastrous confrontation of the religions by exercising their profession. Another good example is "Lair of the White Worm" (1988). Besides, the subject is not pure

fiction. As part of the real archaeological focus this topic also seems to be very attractive for the interested public, maybe because phenomena like this do not become publicly available if not through the work of archaeologists.

In the case of archaeological horror scenarios the first use of this topos of disturbance in movies can directly be traced back to a historical sensation of archaeological research, the discovery of the tomb of Tut-Anch-Amun by Howard Carter in 1922 and the legend of a curse that was set free by this discovery (Russell 2002: 44f.). Only ten years later the Universal studios produced "The Mummy" (1932) as the first popular horror movie of this kind. The large range of remakes and sequels of the mummy-motif are a proof for its media-effectiveness and popularity, which was already expressed in the sensational effect of the real events. If one takes a look at some movie examples he/she will sometimes discover a detailed copy of the background story and of the historical photographic documentation of the open tomb (Day 1997: 19, 60, 166). In this respect "The Awakening" (1980) is a very good example.

The two sections presented above only form a small selection of stylisations, there are even more implications in connection with the described types themselves. I also want to mention the examination of the portrayal of female archaeologists which formed another part of the project presented here. The complex will not be explained in detail in this text (see Baxter 2002: 17; Felder et al. 2003: 174–177). The significance of the approach to this subject should nevertheless be emphasised, especially because fictive archaeologists are mostly male (Baxter 2002: 16). Besides gaining general knowledge about the perception of gender within archaeological science and research it reveals criteria for the use of female archaeologist figures which are necessitated by genre-specific or dramaturgical demands, and their specific characteristics. Questions of the compatibility of professional duties with family life, female emotionality and self-conscious sensuality have to be asked. An impulse for the examination of images of archaeology with regards to male and female figures was given by the increasing appearance of strong, skilled women like the archaeologist Lara Croft, the heroine of the famous videogame series "Tomb Raider" (1996–2003), which is one of the first self-confident independent super-heroines even with regard to general media role models apart from an archaeological context. The complexity of this subject should be a reason to foster its analysis.

Methods and knowledge-theory. Apart from the professional archaeologist, archaeology as a science and archaeological proceedings are used in the media because of scientific questions and methods that are, in a more or less general sense, equally typical for specific genres and their characteristic topics and plots. If these are also constituted by a science, recognising parallels is especially significant for the discourse of science-theory within the archaeological discipline itself.

In the following the subject Archaeology and Science Fiction is discussed in short. Numerous productions, especially movies, show Science Fiction scenarios in which either archaeologists are major members of the cast and use their

professional skills in connection with space research, techniques comparable to archaeological methods are used by astronauts and space researchers, or events which give answers to questions equally relevant to the archaeological science. Sometimes these three aspects are combined. In this place only a few of the numerous implications of this complex are described (for further examples see Felder et al. 2003: 168–170).

Although the archaeological perspective has (till now) directed its interests towards the past while space research works with or even in the future, the scientific subjects of both sciences are comparable to a special degree. The discovery and research of foreign cultures and the illumination of sections of the history of mankind and culture itself, as a main field of archaeological interest, are also the aims of space researchers and space expeditions in Science Fiction stories – they simply differ with regard to the aspect of space-time-distance (Kempen 1994: 207). In a special sense professionals of both disciplines undertake time travels, although at first glance they seem to take different directions. But in both cases the scientific results can sometimes answer questions of where mankind and cultures have come from and where they will go. At last, in fiction as well as in the results of some pseudo scientific projects (v. Däniken 1998), terrestrial and alien spheres literally overlap where the offspring of mankind or terrestrial civilizations is traced back to the impact of alien intelligence. Expressive examples are “2001: A Space Odyssey” (1968), “Planet of the Apes” (1968) and the Science Fiction TV series “Star Trek – The Next Generation” (1987–1994).

Besides, the depiction of methods and scientific aims of archaeology need not necessarily be connected with a special genre or sujet. It is presented very subtle in many media productions and thus has a decisive influence over public opinions about archaeological working procedures. Two main features should be mentioned in this context. They do not reflect reality in an unlimited sense but with reservation they have to be seen as small elements of archaeological research. So the mere use of these elements is less problematic than its exclusiveness because people with little knowledge about real archaeological practises project these few attributes onto archaeology as a whole.

Firstly, the destructive character of archaeological fieldwork is used in a very exaggerated form necessitated by dramaturgical demands. Painstaking documentation and careful procedure are not compatible with the speed of action scenes. Especially adventure and action stories show archaeologists at work destroying every structure that hinders them from finally finding the long-desired object. At the same time this proceeding is a consequence of the prevailing portrayal of archaeological work as a treasure hunt (Baxter 2002: 16; Stern and Tode 2002: 75). Fictive archaeologists almost always passionately search for valuable and/or mystical objects and neglect any surroundings. Indiana Jones and Lara Croft are typical representatives for this method. Although real archaeologists can also find valuable objects people are often disillusioned when they have to realize that finding treasures does not belong to an archaeologist’s everyday life and they also cannot imagine the great care archaeologists spend on small details which seem of no importance for the lay public.

3. Prospect

Analyses like the one presented above are not aimed at the rigorous fight against entertainment and the restriction of the output of media images of archaeology. People should furthermore go out and get entertained, especially because some may get in touch with archaeology through the media for the first time (Gowlett 1990). The knowledge about the public perception of archaeology that is gained by approaching the characteristics of archaeology images rather offers archaeologists the opportunity to use it as a basis for planning and producing alternative public sources of information. These should be regarded as additional informing. If laypersons are not given any support in learning something about archaeological reality on the one hand and in recognizing the lack of realism and the distortions of media images of archaeology on the other hand, they will inevitably project false impressions onto the real science.

This also implies that the public should also get the opportunity to be informed about the results of media analyses like the one presented above. Furthermore, those people which want to know more about archaeology but miss information beyond TV documentaries and largely conventional exhibitions, should be considered.

As a conclusion, I want to illustrate the specific aspects of our German perspective in this respect. In contrast with Mediterranean countries, for example, in Germany cultural heritage and the work of prehistoric and historic archaeology are, apart from Middle Age relicts or open air reconstructions, invisible. The interest in the own past and in cultural phenomena only plays a minor role in collective consciousness because the past and cultures, as they are subjects of archaeological science, are not present in everyday life. Our ground monuments are widely incomprehensible for laypersons in the form archaeologists find them, so they must carefully be prepared and explained in a language comprehensible for wide sections of the public.

For example, by offering them insights into real archaeological fieldwork, methods of documentation and analysis and at the same time maintaining the fascinating element of the subject. Furthermore there should be made more efforts to create lives and worlds on the basis of archaeological findings because that is what archaeology really can offer the public without necessarily showing merely speculative images. The latter could be a reason why scientific reconstructions seem to be considered with a certain kind of fear or distrust by sections of the academic world.

But they are less problematic if producers reveal the foundation, opportunities and limitations of them instead of pretending to reflect irrefutable facts. They should serve as an illustration not only for professionals but also for the public. Further keywords in connection with the demanded strengthened approach of archaeological science towards the public are public relations during excavations, a general reformation of archaeological exhibitions and more applications of modern media based on current trends.

This refers especially to youth culture because we should above all have the endeavour to approach future archaeologists, supporters and fans.

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