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Cinema, Supernatural Archaeology, and the Hidden Human Past

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Abstract
Close analysis of modern movies reveals — yet archaeologists and historians have failed to understand — that the dominant representation of archaeological research and ancient human culture in mainstream cinema involves explorations of supernatural objects and events. Cinematic archaeology tends to be mythic rather than realistic in focus. Movies frequently present images of the human past that are pseudoarchaeological in the sense that these films tell the same stories as 'alternative archaeology,' even though they may not make an explicit claim to the truthfulness of the events depicted. This pattern is documented through a review of films employing the ancient astronaut model in which visiting aliens changed human development in the past, and through an examination of the work of writer/director Roland Emmerich who has specialized in those films. The cinematic history of these narratives is long, demonstrating that cinema does not merely reproduce popular pseudoarchaeological research, it has also contributed to the growth of these stories.

Keywords
archaeology, cinema, Indiana Jones, ancient astronauts, pseudoarchaeology

Introduction

Pseudoarchaeological images of the human past are legion. They come in many forms, reflecting sacred and profane visions of the world, as well as both natural and supernatural processes. All share the proposition that academic/scientific archaeologists are unable or unwilling to recognize the processes that have shaped the human past and that there is a hidden history of humanity that is radically different from the one

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accepted by academic archaeology and history. Such alternative archaeological views, also termed pseudo-, cult-, or fantastic archaeology, are extremely popular. The hidden history advocated by alternative archaeology is accepted by more people than accept the inferences of scientific archaeology, a pattern that echoes the high frequency of religious and paranormal belief (see Cole 1980; Gray 1987; Harrold and Eve 1995; Whittle 2004). Indeed images of the purportedly-hidden past overlap with, and sometimes replicate, religious and profane popular mythologies. Scientific archaeologists have long criticised these constructions of the human past, often arguing that they lack logic and scholarly value, and that they knowingly misinterpret materials out of self-interest. To paraphrase John Lubbock (1872), these are stories where imagination has usurped the place of research. Pseudoarchaeologists often criticise academic archaeology on exactly the same grounds!

This paper explores images of the human past screened in cinemas, but it does not engage directly in the heated debates between academic and alternative archaeologists over who is correct and more reasoned; both sides have already published abundantly (e.g. Fagan 2006b; von Däniken 2009; Feder 2010; Kreisberg 2010). The clamour of pseudoarchaeological ideas delivered through text continues unabated, indeed publication of books supplying alternative history has intensified, but there has been little consideration of these visions within cinema (although see the excellent review by Hall 2004). To correct that situation a close analysis of modern movies will show that: i) as archaeologists and historians have failed to understand, the dominant representation of archaeological research and the development of human culture in mainstream cinema involves supernatural objects and events; ii) movies frequently present images of the human past that are pseudoarchaeological in the sense that they tell the same stories as alternative archaeology even though they may not make an explicit claim to the truthfulness of the events depicted; iii) the cinematic history of these narratives is deep, demonstrating that modern cinema not only reproduces popular pseudoarchaeological research, it has also contributed to the growth of these stories; and iv) these propositions provide new insights into cinematic depictions of the human past and the ways archaeologists have sought to employ the popularity of film for their own purposes.

These discussions expand on my earlier observations that archaeologists have frequently been presented in cinema as transgressive individuals who cross the boundary of socially appropriate behavior to interfere with the dangerous and still-potent realms of the past, and that their actions consequently threaten our beliefs and our physical well-being (Hiscock 2009). Films reviewed there, and here, focus on characters identified as archaeologists, explicitly or implied through their behavior, or feature clearly recognizable archaeological materials such as pyramids, graves, skulls, or ruins.

Films that view human history through the lens of ancient materials and archaeological investigations are often discussed as essentially plausible versions of archaeological research, with archaeologists as heroic figures working to save the world. The reading of archaeological cinema I offer below inverts such popular interpretations of these narratives. The rationale and value of this inversion is illustrated by re-readings of some of the most famous, well-loved, and least understood, recent movies dealing with archaeology.

Blockbusters Demonstrate the Transnatural Image of Archaeology in Cinema

Two blockbuster franchises are viewed by the public and archaeologists alike as presenting iconic images of archaeological adventure in modern cinema. Together the Indiana Jones and Lara Croft movies brought to the screen star power of Harrison Ford, Sean Connery, Karen Allen, Angelina Jolie, and others; directorial and scripting elegance from the likes of Spielberg, Lucas, de Bont, and Kasdan; as well as high production values resulting in visually stunning and popular movies. As a character Indiana Jones has been popularly adopted as an archetypal hero, and his name has become synonymous with adventuring/daring in popular culture. Jones was ranked by American Film Institute jurors as one of the top two heroic characters in the history of American cinema[1] and by *Time* magazine as one of the greatest of fictional characters. Harrison Ford was elected to the board of the Archaeological

[1] http://www.afi.com/100Years/handv.aspx

Institute of America, and was subsequently presented with the Institute's Bandelier Award for the positive contribution to archaeology represented by his acting the Indiana Jones part. While the first of the Lara Croft films was not critically well-received, it is, in terms of attendance, the most successful film with a female protagonist and has advanced the connection initially embedded in the computer games of tomb-raiding Croft with archaeological adventuring. Together these films have shaped popular perceptions of and enthusiasm for films with archaeological themes. But what of the messages about archaeology offered by these films?

Typical readings of these movies portray them as stories of adventure and romance, in which archaeologists are suave but unscrupulous swashbucklers who seek out treasures. In these plots archaeologists travel to remote places in search of remarkable, highly-prized, ancient objects, and are obliged to solve puzzles, avoid traps, evade the object's owners, and outwit competing treasure-hunters to succeed. Rather like the pirate films of earlier generations, the search for treasure is often simply understood as a mechanism driving the narrative towards quests and romances, and so these films are invariably labelled as belong to the adventure/action genre. In this reading, the archaeological activities depicted may be considered exaggerated, dramatized, and romanticized, but they are also seen as fundamentally honest images of the work of archaeologists.

Many of these qualities are said to be epitomized by the initial Indiana Jones film *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. Often the plot is discussed in terms of only natural action/events (e.g. Combs 1981; Shohat 2000; Gresh and Weinberg 2008). Indiana Jones is often described as an archaeology lecturer who seeks out rare ancient items for his university museum, and in this film he races his archrival, archaeologist Rene Belloq, to find a biblical relic before the archetypal antagonist Nazis are able to acquire it. Where the opening of the Ark is mentioned it may be referred to only as an act of 'summoning its powers' to annihilate the Nazis; a mechanism treated as unsurprising and of minimal consequence for understanding the narrative (e.g. Combs 1981). This profane reading of *Raiders* as Saturday matinee adventure has been adopted readily by archaeologists who argue that films with archaeologists as characters, and in particular the Indiana Jones films, are a positive force

for their discipline, enthusing the populace about the idea of archaeology and helping recruit students to university courses. Holtorf (2008), for instance, claims that any unreality in the Jones adventures is merely a 'little license' taken by film makers who constructed a character that expresses the spirit of archaeological research and discovery.

A nationalistic adventure to prevent the Nazis misusing objects and people is actually a much better description of earlier films such as *Bitter Victory* (1957) or *Pimpernel Smith* (1941) than it is of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. For instance, in his masterpiece *Pimpernel Smith* Leslie Howard cleverly reworked his *Scarlet Pimpernel* (1934), portraying a professor of archaeology from Cambridge University, Horatio Smith, who is using his archaeological fieldwork in pre-war Germany as a cover to assist him in liberating imprisoned Jewish intellectuals. This narrative is full of heroism, risk, and tension, as the archaeologist outwits archetypically nasty and incompetent Nazis, but it takes place in a purely natural world. It would be easy to claim that the fictional world of Horatio Smith was a template for the race against Nazis represented in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* or *Last Crusade*, or for that matter to accept the public claims by George Lucas that those films are based on matinee serial adventures, and yet Jones does not inhabit the natural world of Smith.

The world(s) of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, and indeed all of the Jones and Croft films, are supernatural. Each film presents a search for archaeological objects that channel or manipulate extraordinary, transnatural powers that operated in the human past and which remain potent (Hiscock 2009). Spielberg's Old Testament / Masoretic vision in *Raiders* has archaeologists Indiana Jones and Rene Belloq competing to possess and exploit the power of the Ark of the Covenant, a container that emanates damaging supernatural forces and which could also be opened and its powers evoked/released by people who have knowledge of the magic that resides in or passes through the object. At the end of the film Belloq enacts a Hebrew ritual to harness the Ark's powers, releasing but not controlling seraphim-like entities who kill all those viewing them. Reinforcing the message that archaeologists act like wizards in a magical world, Jones saves himself and Marion, the heroine, from the scopophilic danger by revealing his knowledge that they must close their eyes. Release of the Ark's power is the key event in this narrative and the

culmination of the competition between the archaeologists; it also makes explicit the supernatural image of the world, and of the archaeological relics, being offered to audiences.

Supernatural forces are central to all of the other films in the Jones and Croft franchises, facilitating the magical events that underpin the ancient lives being investigated and/or mediated through archaeological materials. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) has an Indian priest employing magical stones to enable him to enslave local workers and to maintain life in sacrificed humans who have had their hearts removed. The supernatural world of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) has a New Testament origin with clear reference to Arthurian legends (Aronstein 1995). In this story Jones reaches into a magical cave guarded by a still living medieval knight and identifies the chalice of Christ with which he cures his father's mortal wound. While *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) is arguably a science fiction story, its depictions of reanimated alien skulls with paranormal mental powers is simply a supernatural mechanism. In the other franchise *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) has a planetary alignment creating conditions in which the person possessing an artifact from Atlantis can control time, while the sequel *Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life* (2003) has the heroine discovering Pandora's box, the source of all life on earth. While novelty is produced by referencing different mythologies in each film, all of them are unambiguously set in a fictional universe where supernatural phenomena are potent, and in such magical places fantastical pseudoarchaeological images of the past are more likely to take root than prosaic scientific images of ancient humans.

Archaeologists View Cinema

Curiously archaeologists have rarely discussed the obviously supernatural universe inhabited by their big-screen counterparts. Archaeologists such as Cole (1980), Harrold and Eve (1995), Fagan (2006b), and Feder (2010) have been determined in their repeated condemnation of the human past described in pseudoarchaeological texts, in books and magazines. They have argued that stories of early civilizations such as Atlantis, of God's creation of humanity only six millennia ago, or of

anatomically modern humans living millions or billions of years ago, and of aliens founding ancient civilizations, are all spurious in logic and evidence. Yet the response of archaeologists to nearly identical stories about the past presented or 'advocated' in cinema has been quite different.

This difference certainly reveals the textual rather than visual focus of many archaeologists, who are seduced by the powerful imagery of film. While they 'critique' books claiming alien visitation they seem to seek 'entertainment' from movies with the same narrative. This different treatment also indicates that it is not the stories themselves but the claim for their truthfulness which has most disturbed archaeologists. Debates between Holtorf (2005) and Fagan and Feder (2006) over whether there is legitimacy for any expression of alternative archaeology touch upon the question of what element of pseudoarchaeology is objectionable to professionals, but the issue is complicated by occasional statements from pseudoarchaeologists that they see themselves outside an academic framework and advocating historical possibilities rather than claiming to scientifically test theories (see Hancock 2002, cited in Fagan 2006a:27). Such statements blur the distinction between 'non-fictional' alternative archaeology and fictional archaeology in literature and cinema, raising questions about how and why archaeologists maintain dissimilar reactions to historical stories presented in different ways.[2]

Commentaries on cinema by archaeologists expose a range of predispositions, ranging from enthusiasm for the screen representations to frustration. On the one hand, some archaeologists embrace cinematic characters such as Indiana Jones, and encourage other professionals to do the same. For instance, Holtorf (2008) argued that Hollywood depicts the spirit of archaeology and that the discipline has much to gain from characters like Indiana Jones because "Public enthusiasm for the films attracts many bright young students to the field, as well as creating goodwill and occasionally providing fund-raising opportunities." Holtorf's argument was based on the generous notion that Lucas and Spielberg wanted to "capture what archaeology is like," and that

[2] In another context I have explored the theoretical complexities that arise when archaeologists elect to support some versions of unscientific alternative history while opposing others, a situation that might arise in the case of cinema (Hiscock 1996).

they were capable of doing so, but his interpretation does not explicitly recognize the religious and pseudoarchaeological perspective that underpins these cinematic narratives. In fact his argument that archaeology is a 'brand' implies that there is a benefit from almost any publicity (Holtorf 2007).

Another response from archaeologists is to be hopeful, even enthusiastic, about movie representations, but simultaneously annoyed by their lack of accuracy. This view also presupposes that Hollywood is aiming to present realistic, if romanticized, images of archaeology and archaeological practice, echoing the arguments of historians such as Robert Rosenstone (2006), who sought to legitimize cinematic representations by claiming that film is a new medium for delivering history and a valid form of historical analysis. Nevertheless movie representations of the early human past consistently fail to deliver academically satisfactory expositions, and so archaeologists and historians have repeatedly criticised Hollywood's 'mistakes,' with some researchers suggesting that all might be well if Hollywood simply hired enough archaeologists as advisors! Volumes such as the one compiled by Schablitsky (2007) have focused on how to refine/improve Hollywood's depictions.

A more cogent framework for understanding these films is found in the idea that Hollywood makes films for entertainment and profit, not primarily to convey some sense of historical events, and consequently movies typically embody contemporary stereotypes and mythologies. By re-expressing and exploring the mythology of popular culture, Hollywood creates films which audiences see as both familiar and relevant. In cinemas this process situates archaeological activities in supernatural worlds, and hence we can best grasp meaning by analyzing the mythic qualities or themes visible on screen (see also Noble 2007; Hiscock 2008). It is possible to interpret the Indiana Jones and Lara Croft narratives already encountered in terms of themes found in religious texts and particularly in the Hebrew/Christian scriptures. For example, in each film there is an extended search to possess hidden archaeological objects, with subsequent revelation of the supernatural powers associated with those objects: the Ark in *Raiders*, the Holy Grail in *Last Crusade*, the Triangle of Light in *Tomb Raider*, and so on. Often these quests require the archaeologist character to solve chains of encoded challenges before the revelation is achieved, hence in *Raiders* it is

necessary to obtain the headpiece to the staff of Ra, reconstruct the staff, find the map-room at Tanis, and use the staff to find the Well of Souls so that the Ark can be acquired. Such quests are sometimes driven by prophecy about forthcoming events, such as when Croft receives dreams and visions in *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*. The quest for these relics is commonly aided by ancient (or at least secret) wisdom, as shown in the 'challenges' faced at the grail temple in *Last Crusade*. Elements of redemption, salvation, obedience and faith are explored in each film, and near the end of each movie there is the threat of an apocalyptic end of earth or end of humanity or end of civilization. Furthermore, each story involves the archaeologist in a quest for, then a recognition of (as a revelation), and subsequent obedience or opposition to creator beings/forces. Those beings or forces ultimately pass judgment on the archaeologists and, by implication, on the section of humanity being represented/protected by them. These thematic frameworks clearly reveal the inherently religious concerns of the plots of Hollywood films; often echoed in the dialogue, such as in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* when the character of the elder Henry Jones says "the quest for the grail is not archaeology, it's a race against evil...," a clever line that encapsulates the story.

These thematic concerns are present in many well-known films, suggesting a common mythic tradition underlying Hollywood filmmaking when it deals with ancient humans and archaeology. While some narratives have Biblical inspiration, such as with *Raiders* or *Last Crusade*, and others clearly draw on non-Christian/New Age mythological sources, as in *Temple of Doom* or *Tomb Raider*, the same themes are present. Intriguingly, identical thematic concerns are also seen in plots which are categorized as science-fiction but which deal with ancient humans and archaeology. Such films are clearly quasi-religious, certainly supernatural, depictions of the world and the narratives they present parallel alternative archaeological stories of the human past. This can be illustrated through a discussion of films positing extra-terrestrial visitations.

Extra-Terrestrial Mythologies

Undoubtedly the most persistent mythology about ancient humans to have emerged in the twentieth century is the idea that aliens had once

come to earth and shaped, perhaps controlled, the development of human biological and cultural evolution. It is a proposition that posits: We are ourselves only because of alien intervention. Ancient aliens are typically argued to have been seen by ancient humans as 'gods,' descended from the heavens and possessing inconceivable powers, and perhaps responsible for the emergence of religion amongst humans. Consequently the mythology of extra-terrestrial visitation intersects with, and frequently evokes, other religious stories. Of course if aliens were visiting during prehistory and responsible for the emergence and operation of early civilizations, this would be expected to leave distinctive archaeological evidence. This notion underpins the attempts by authors such as Eric von Däniken (1968) to use archaeological materials as indicators of the reality of ancient alien astronauts.

In recent years Hollywood has played on the alien astronaut theme in a variety of ways. Perhaps most well known is the last of the Lucas/Spielberg archaeology epics, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, which was released in 2008. The film's central storyline is the search for an ancient skull made of crystal, with Indiana and others eventually obtaining the skull and then reuniting it with twelve others in what appears to be an ancient temple. When brought together, the crystal skulls become animated and are revealed to be aliens (or the skeletons of aliens) and the temple revealed to be built on top of the aliens' flying saucer. These aliens represent a highly advanced ancient culture, a species with paranormal powers that came to earth to study early human antiquities, a proposition that converts alien astronauts into alien archaeologists thereby complementing the films archaeological flavor. The culmination of the plot sees the aliens telepathically transfer information to a Soviet agent who is killed by the strain, and the aliens then fly off in their saucer. This narrative is virtually identical to pseudoarchaeological literature, which has long believed crystal skulls to be ancient artifacts that bestow paranormal powers (e.g. Morton and Thomas 2002; Webb-De Sisto 2002), and has increasingly discussed them as connected to alien visitation and/or an early Atlantean civilization (e.g. Childress and Mehler 2008; Coppens and von Däniken 2011). In *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* director Spielberg, story creator Lucas, and scriptwriter David Koepp reproduce the connections between ancient cultures, archaeological evidence and ancient aliens

that Erich von Däniken had presented in his *Chariots of the Gods?* (1968). The Nazca lines as signals to alien 'gods,' the idea that head-binding is an attempt to make human heads imitate those of the aliens, the claim that crystal skulls were made by a technology more advanced than that of modern humans; all these narrative elements come directly from von Däniken and have simply been visually re-imagined by Spielberg.

Other Hollywood films reference the same set of pseudoarchaeological notions, each finding original ways to connect purported alien impacts in human history with archaeological research and evidence. A few examples illustrate the repetition of this theme in movie plots. In *A Genesis Found* (2010) archaeologists excavating at Moundville, Alabama, uncover proof of the ancient astronaut hypothesis in the form of an extra-terrestrial skeleton. A different revelation is provided in *Stonehenge Apocalypse* (2010), as the famous megalith is shown to be part of buried ancient alien machinery capable of transforming our planet and destroying humanity. The machine is triggered by archaeological excavations under Stonehenge, initiating cataclysmic eruptions at archaeological ruins around the world — including the Giza pyramids — co-ordinated by the device at Stonehenge that was created by "our predecessors on the planet." Twentieth Century Fox's *AVP: Alien vs. Predator* (2004) has the earth as a place where alien species carried out ritual battles. The language of the aliens and the ancient structure housing these events in the Antarctic are the templates for later languages and archaeological pyramids across the globe. The influence of this alien architecture and culture on early human civilizations is diagnosed by an archaeologist accompanying the team sent to explore the discovery, whose presence is not necessary to propel the narrative action but who lends authenticity to the suggested antiquity and impact of aliens. Sometimes archaeological evidence for ancient extra-terrestrial visits is found beyond Earth, as in *Doom* (2005), Universal Picture's version of the computer game of the same name. Interestingly archaeology and archaeologists were not a key constituent of the game series, but the film script by David Callaham and Wesley Strick gave them prominence in providing rationale for the narrative arc, an illustration of the popularity within Hollywood of archaeology as a connector of aliens and earth's past. When the film begins there is new trouble in a

research facility on Mars. Humans are able to travel to Mars through an ancient alien teleporter discovered by archaeological excavations in Area 51. Archaeologists had continued their exploration on Mars, uncovering the ruins of an alien civilization, complete with skeletons. However some unspecified disaster struck the archaeological work, killing the leaders of the archaeological research team. The film takes place as soldier John Grimm and his sister Samantha Grimm, the children of the lead archaeologists, battle transfigured human-monsters who have been infected with alien genetics. A final example is *Stargate* (1994), made/distributed by Le Studio Canal+/MGM, directed and co-written by Roland Emmerich, which depicts an alien who had once enslaved Earth and had shaped human civilization threatening humanity again, after an archaeologist opens a matter-transporter and journeys to a distant planet where the alien astronaut still lives. This movie resonates with religious references: an immortal alien who is worshipped as a god, and who has the power to resurrect the dead, determines the codes of behaviour that are acceptable for his human subjects. The 'alien as ancient god' imagery in *Stargate* is clearly inspired by the works of von Däniken. *Stargate* was a substantial commercial success, generating popular spin-off television series, and is discussed later in this paper.

These movies, along with many others, have employed the story of aliens visiting earth in the past and creating significant archaeological objects. This idea has become so popular among movie makers that it rivals or exceeds the production of epics about humans encountering aliens in space. Furthermore, even classic space epics also contain narratives of alien intervention on earth, although these elements have rarely been discussed. For instance, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968, MGM) is often characterized only in terms of its last act, as an interplanetary space voyage. Yet the first act illustrates the effect on hominid evolution of alien objects, and the second act illustrates archaeological excavations on the moon to uncover another alien artifact. The story explicitly connects evolutionary change in humans and ancient alien visitation, but pre-dates the ancient astronaut movement initiated by von Däniken (1968) and Kolosimo (1968). It is likely that *2001* was one of the fictions influencing Eric von Däniken. Arthur Clarke had published "The Sentinel," the story on which *2001* was based, in 1948, and announcements about the planned Kubrick film had been

occurring since the mid-1960s. Clearly the source of Kubrick's and Clarke's narrative is not found in the pseudoscientific literature of von Däniken but rather in earlier inspirations.

Ideas of ancient astronauts have long been presented in literary and cinematic science fiction. The notion of aliens visiting earth was present throughout the twentieth century, attaining popular attention with Percival Lowell's (1895) book on *Mars*, inspiring the seminal H.G. Wells story *War of the Worlds* (1898). Ideas of space travel, alien civilizations far more advanced than our own, extinction of grand alien cultures, and the potential for those alien civilizations to endanger our own were devices that flowed through a number of science-fiction movies and were, in the 1950s, associated with renewed interest in space travel and the dangers of technology and science. One of the seminal films was Robert Wise's *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), based on the 1940 story by Harry Bates of a Christ-like alien astronaut coming to warn humans to end their militaristic ways, on threat of global extinction.[3] Extinctions of ancient civilizations, aliens, and archaeological ruins are explored further in subsequent films such as *Forbidden Planet* (1956). However, the genre classic is *Quatermass and the Pit*. This was first released on British television, transmitted live by the BBC in six episodes during December 1958 and January 1959. A faithful remake of the same title was released by Hammer Films in 1967. In both scripts revolutionary writer Nigel Kneale developed a story in which Martians were faced with a deteriorating ecosystem and sought a way to escape to Earth. These aliens were not able to survive in our atmosphere and so instead they visited earth five million years ago and kidnapped apes. These ancestral apes were biologically 'altered,' providing them with 'new faculties' and 'high intelligence,' and then returned to earth for release. The altered apes were our ancestors; they evolved into large-brained, intelligent humans, and this evolution was directed by ongoing paranormal influences as a way for the Martians to continue their violent culture. Furthermore, the paranormal power of the Martians is responsible for historical human visions of the devil and

[3] Klaatu the alien is persecuted for his message of peace and is eventually killed, but he is resurrected in his cave-like saucer and emerges for a short time to spread the word he has brought from the heavens, before returning there.

belief in the supernatural. This understanding is gradually revealed throughout the series/film as archaeologists who are clearing an extension of the London underground discover unaltered apes below a crashed Martian spacecraft but evolved hominids in and above the spaceship.

These mid-twentieth-century films show formative steps in the development of a filmic tradition dealing with aliens, archaeology and the human past. Later films dealing with the ancient astronaut idea clearly echo, or in some cases copy, themes and narratives of these movies half a century earlier. Hence recent cinema is not simply repeating an idea found in pseudoarchaeological literature; moviemakers have long been instrumental in creating powerful, alluring stories about a hidden human past. Fictional human history as explored powerfully and influentially in cinema and movies represents a semi-independent dialogue about ancient astronauts, a dialogue that in many ways duplicates the arguments espoused within the alternative archaeological literature. Furthermore, in these cinematic narratives biblical and alien astronaut themes have been constantly intertwined for more than half a century. The entanglement of biblical and pseudoarchaeological concepts in film making can be seen in the work of Roland Emmerich.

A Case Study of Roland Emmerich: The Role of the Auteur as Pseudo-Archaeologist

As a Hollywood auteur and Germany's most commercially successful director, Roland Emmerich (1955–) has specialized in end-of-civilization narratives, using mechanisms as diverse as alien invasion (*The High Crusade, Stargate, Independence Day, 10,000 BC*), mutated monsters (*Godzilla, Eight Legged Freaks*), and catastrophic climate change (*The Day After Tomorrow, 2012*). His penchant for alternative history is also visible in his *Anonymous*, which describes how Shakespeare's works were written by someone else. A significant number of his films make reference to archaeological research and/or the operation of iconic ancient societies, and deliver quasi-religious messages of pseudoarchaeology to unsuspecting audiences across the world.

Emmerich's second substantial commercial success (after *Universal Soldier*), came in 1994 with *Stargate*, the first Hollywood (MGM) film

he wrote as well as directed. In *Stargate* Emmerich presented the story of a maverick archaeologist who has the linguistic skills to decipher the glyphs on an alien matter transporter that was abandoned on earth during the Egyptian Old Kingdom period. Voyaging through this transporter, the Stargate, with U.S. soldiers, archaeologist character Daniel Jackson discovers an alien who had enslaved early dynastic Egypt, as well as the descendants of ancient Egyptians kidnapped by the alien, and then leads a rebellion to free the humans from alien control. The film contains a set of obviously religious images and metaphors, particularly reworkings of the Horus mythology and includes the remarkable image of the archaeologist taking on a Horus-like role in resurrecting humans and killing the elder Set-like alien. Yet the images of Egyptian cosmology are revealed to hide aliens and alien technology. The plot explicitly links past alien visitation to earth, the notion that the human past was shaped by these alien space-travellers, the manifestation of this hidden history in archaeological objects, and the role of (alternative?) archaeologists in recognising or hiding this alien history. The message is subtly hidden within the narrative adventure but is purely pseudoarchaeological in nature. In fact *Stargate* is an homage to the pseudoarchaeological theories of Erich von Däniken, and Emmerich has publically acknowledged his belief in the ancient astronaut theory advanced by von Däniken and others.[4] Viewers see this throughout the film, as the treatment of Jackson by sceptical, scientific archaeologists depicts how they are constrained by convention and incapable of recognizing the unexpected hidden history of humans, whereas alternative researchers advocating avant-garde ideas such as alien intervention in ancient history are shown to be correct. This message is reinforced by scenes that show that conventional archaeological interpretations have been wrong, such as the revelation that archaeological sites like the Egyptian pyramids are far older than archaeologists have thought; a proposition that underpins a good deal of pseudoarchaeological literature referencing Atlantis and other early, hidden civilizations (e.g. Peet 2005; Kreisberg 2010).

This final element is the inspiration for a more recent Emmerich film. In writing and directing *10,000 BC* (2008) Emmerich synthesised

[4] Emmerich in an interview on the *Stargate* Ultimate Edition DVD.

a number of his favorite fictional themes, drawing inspiration from alternative archaeological ideas. The narrative begins by following a group of late Palaeolithic mammoth-hunters in northern Eurasia, bringing to the audience all the filmic associations of dramas set in the Stone Age, such as *One Million Years BC*. However these scenes also evoke prophecy and dream, signalling Emmerich's concern with the paranormal which had formed the basis of his early film *Making Contact*. The plot is then redirected into a mission to liberate kidnapped members of the tribe, eventually bringing the central characters to Egypt, where they observe the pyramids being built 12,000 years ago, at a time often discussed in pseudoarchaeological books for high early civilization. In a clear reference to his own *Stargate*, the pyramid construction is directed by a mysterious figure called "The Almighty," said to be the last survivor of his kind, and the hero leads an insurrection of repressed people to free his wife. And yet this narrative is not a prequel to *Stargate* as much as an exploration of the same themes of hidden history signified in the pyramids but misunderstood by modern archaeologists and Egyptologists.

A variant of these interests is manifested in Emmerich's latest movie *2012*, which employs references to Mayan prophecy and the Mesoamerican calendar to explain a catastrophic subsidence and flooding that is rapidly threatening to end humanity. The script gradually builds an impression that escape will be achieved via spaceships, in a trope of 1950s science-fiction films, but in the end Emmerich employs a far earlier literary device as he turns to the same solution to a deluge that Noah employed. The film's main character Jackson Curtis, an author who wrote a book *Farewell Atlantis*,[5] discovers that the wealthy and powerful have secretly constructed a number of arks in the Himalayas. As the biblical-scale flood reaches this high point a tidal wave covers the globe and drowns all except those who have faith in their vessels and a new covenant with the emerging land. Biblical references abound, both in the images of boat constructions and in the moral qualities necessary

[5] It is worth acknowledging Emmerich's self-reference in building his narrative. For instance, the name Jackson is a clear reference to the character of Daniel Jackson from *Stargate*, while the book written by the character in *2012, Farewell Atlantis*, is a description of Emmerich's earliest film about global catastrophes: *The Noah's Ark Principle*.

to board the arks and be saved. However while *2012* is loaded with Christian imagery we cannot read Emmerich's screenplay simply as an updated version of the Noah's Ark story. While the survival of passengers on the arks suggests that earlier stories of humans surviving global deluges on similar vessels are plausible, there is no divine context to the plot. Emmerich presents humans as surviving a natural catastrophe by their own means, symbolized by the severing of Michelangelo's image of God and Adam as Emmerich simulates the collapse of the Sistine Chapel. And yet the global deluge is so unnatural in scale that readers could be forgiven for seeing the narrative as an allegory of the biblical story of Noah. Perhaps the ambiguity of these multiple visual cues is purposeful, but in any case the biblical references within *2012* are not merely appeals to American Christian values, they reflect Emmerich's own commitment to pseudoarchaeological beliefs. From his first German film *The Noah's Ark Principle* (*Das Arche Noah Prinzip*) in 1984, Emmerich has consistently written screenplays with narratives that spring from and parallel unconventional, unscientific arguments for human existence and the human past. His plots centre on ideas that the human past was shaped by significant environmental disasters and alien interventions, stories reflecting and explicitly associated with propositions advanced by writers of pseudoarchaeology, and in turn implicitly referencing cinema that inspired those pseudoarchaeological stories. Of course the Hollywood system expects profits, which Emmerich has consistently created with his use of cutting-edge special effects, but the choice of these particular plots reflects his connection to and enthusiasm for alternative history/archaeology. His movies are loaded with pseudoarchaeological concepts, reinforcing the public's predisposition and appetite for fantastical history. This implies that powerful individual director/writers have the capacity to pursue pseudoarchaeological themes, and that Hollywood studios do not object to such profitable fictions.

Cinema, Archaeology, and Mythic Imperatives

The Hollywood film industry operates in response to a number of well-understood economic principles (Epstein 2006). It is now an elaborate business involving not only box office receipts but television spin-offs,

DVD sales, and merchandising. In an environment in which cinema competes with home entertainment technologies, free television, and computer games, movie marketing strategies are critically important for selling a product with what amounts to a short shelf-life. While a few movie series have built a 'brand' following that enhances audience recruitment (e.g. *Star Wars, Indiana Jones, Harry Potter*), this is rare and marketing campaigns are normally built on other foundations. In a sense the purpose of film marketing is to 'create' an audience, and this process often plays on existing interests and beliefs. This is a context in which playing to genre stereotypes and making multiple visual or narrative references to well-known movies or beliefs/stories in popular culture helps to position movies for favorable reception. Films dealing with hidden human history revealed through fictional archaeological discoveries are positioned to appeal to an extremely large existing potential audience: people familiar with, perhaps even persuaded by, pseudoarchaeological notions of alien and supernatural pasts. And yet the frequency and commercial success of pseudoarchaeological themes in Hollywood films is not simply an opportunistic response to the existence of an interest group focussed on alternative archaeology. As already discussed, a tradition within cinema helped construct and spread ideas about alternative pasts, and helped update supernatural imagery for modern audiences, and so filmmakers can be considered producers as well as consumers of such ideas.

Of course the images of ancient human life in these movies are usually understood to be fictions, whereas alternative researchers claim to be presenting plausible, possibly true, stories of the human past based on research into the evidence. But the importance or sharpness of such distinctions is not clear. Indeed the factualness of pseudoarchaeological claims is the matter in dispute, and the goal of action/horror cinematography is often to make events appear realistic. Cinema audiences receive visually-powerful fictionalized narratives that subtly and forcefully deliver stories that offer the same image of the human past as stories offered in the guise of pseudoarchaeological research. These movies have the capacity to deliver ideas about the human past without having to persuade the audience to accept dubious evidence, unlike pseudoscientific books or documentaries. Furthermore, audiences viewing many of these movies can be not only enormous but also receptive.

Since audiences can feel they are being 'entertained' rather than having their world view challenged, these films can be effective in providing the public with impressions of the past.

Film's capacity for rich visual imagery and frequent audio cues, as well as its ability to be read on multiple levels, allows it to be seen as a simulation or metaphor for reality. Consequently movies have the capacity to influence their audiences, including both academic and alternative archaeologists. Some pseudoarchaeological arguments may have originated in science-fictional narratives, including cinematic ones, and certainly alternative archaeologists recognize the similarity of their hidden histories with those presented in cinemas. Prominent pseudoarchaeologists such as Richard Hoagland and Joseph Farrell (2011) even cite films, particularly those by George Lucas, as evidence of their theories, on the grounds that the films are so accurate Lucas must have been privy to secret government information about real alien activities. And yet at the same time academic, scientific archaeologists interpret the same films as presenting a romanticized version of themselves and their approach to the past. Academic archaeologists across the globe have even referred to Indiana Jones as iconic motif of archaeological research and recruiting pinup for the discipline. The multivalence and visual power of filmic representations of archaeology mean that both academic and alternative archaeologists have read these films as offering something positive to their endeavours.

The impact of filmic representations on public ideas about the past is ill-defined. While there is no doubt of the far higher public awareness of filmic than real archaeologists and archaeology, how that translates into understandings of the human past is unknown. This paper has argued that fictional images of the human past offered by Hollywood films are immediately persuasive and accessible to people without archaeological training. It is therefore worth emphasising that narratives presented in these films have been consistently mystical and unscientific in nature. These movies are frequently narratives of supernatural powers threatening the end of the world (literally or metaphorically) and they may well be popular partly because they appeal to religiosity among the populace. This conclusion applies to many alternative archaeologies and hidden histories, whether they are shown as entertainment on the big screen or presented as non-fictional research in

books. Such stories depict a human past in ways that principally reflect mythic imperatives rather than archaeological evidence.

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