

# Self-image, the long view and archaeological engagement with film: an animated case study

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## Abstract

Academic engagement with popular constructions of archaeology in film is often in the style of analysing the self-image of archaeologists and archaeology. Two distinctive types of this narcissistic approach are identified in the current literature: a negative and defensive approach and a positive and forgiving approach. Both of these approaches have yielded substantial insights about the public perception of archaeology and will undoubtedly continue to be fruitful avenues of inquiry. In this paper a third mode of engagement is outlined that is motivated by the unique ability of archaeology to provide a long-term view on things that matter to us now. The 2008 Pixar film *Wall-E* is used as a case study to show how this long-term view can relate to films that are not directly about archaeology. The case study of *Wall-E* shows that a counter-narcissistic approach can be an insightful and non-judgmental method of media analysis by decoding the popular appeal of an artwork and revealing new opportunities for archaeology to engage more productively with the film-watching public.

## Keywords

Archaeology; self-image; representation; film; public.

## Introduction

Why should archaeologists be interested in film? The purpose of studying representations of archaeology in film is usually stated as being to improve archaeologists' understanding of how the public perceive their work and to learn how to communicate more effectively with popular audiences (McGeough 2006). Crichton (1999) provocatively disputes that representations in film provide any insight into the attitudes of the wider society, observing that films of the 1950s were characterized by strong women in contradiction to the reality

for women in society at that time. Following from his conclusion that there is no correspondence between social reality and film reality, Crichton claims that there is no point in worrying about film portrayals. Archaeologists may be an exception to Crichton's argument because, as Russell (2002: 53) points out, the public rarely have an opportunity to assess objectively the representations of archaeology found in film. Russell observes that the professionals most frequently stereotyped in film are ones that the public routinely encounter in the real world, such as doctors, teachers, lawyers and police. This means that the damage of the unrealistic tropes associated with these professions in film is mitigated by the public's personal experience of these professionals at work.

Russell's claim about the special nature of archaeology resonates with contemporary social theory that emphasizes how real-world social contexts structure people's perceptions of the symbolic content of media messages (for example, familiarity with the experience of archaeology and familiarity with the real-work character of the archaeologist are rare in most social contexts) (Thompson 1995). Similarly, social theorists are concerned with media as a mechanism for reproduction of symbolic forms (Thompson 1995: 20). In this context Russell can be rephrased as stating that the rate and scale of reproduction of the film representations of archaeology far exceeds the rate at which the public experiences the 'original' or 'authentic' work of real-world archaeology. Accepting the need for archaeologists to be concerned with representations in film, this paper aims to review current modes of archaeological engagement with film and demonstrate a new approach based less on stereotypes and more on the unique ability of archaeology to take a long-term view on things that matter to us now. The method of this new approach is to survey the film for plot elements and themes that evoke a long-term view of the human condition in the minds of the viewers.

### **Archaeologists engaging with film: two types of narcissism**

With few exceptions, much of the archaeological literature discussing film and archaeology is narcissistic. By narcissistic I mean archaeologists being concerned with the image of their collective professional persona or their discipline as it appears in film. This narcissism can be divided into two types. First are contributions from those writing in a defensive mode who see representations of the discipline of archaeology and the character of the archaeologist in films as requiring defence against distortions of the diversity and integrity of real-world archaeologists. The Indiana Jones films have been an important focus of this type of commentary. For example, Pohl (1996: 574) and Lowenkopf (1996: 575) criticized the field methods of Jones in the first film in the series (*Raiders of the Lost Ark*, 1981) as if they were commenting on the work of another real-world archaeologist. More substantial commentary comes from Pyburn (2008) who claims that the adventures of Jones in the fourth Indiana Jones film (*Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, 2008) naturalize an elitist exoticism. Pyburn's reading of the film highlights a white Euro-American promoting the hegemony of colonial science in places that are economically dependent on the US and Europe. These are themes that have also been identified by Hall (2004) in a wide variety of other films containing archaeologists, especially films set in Egypt (cf. Lant 1992). A darker implication of this type of representation, according to Pyburn (2008: 203) is that it

90 becomes necessary for real-world archaeologists to inflate the significance of their data to meet Indiana Jones' hype (cf. Joyce and Preucel 2002). Since most of the work of real-world archaeologists illuminates aspects of quotidian prehistoric life, Pyburn worries that film representations tend to promote dishonesty and exaggeration by real-world archaeologists when they engage with the public.

95 A related effect can be seen in tourist management at archaeological sites. The 2001 film *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* was partially filmed among the World Heritage Site of Angkor in Cambodia. The film has had substantially reconfigured the tourist encounter of the ancient Khmer monuments. Winter (2002: 334) describes how local guides incorporate *Tomb Raider* stories and routes into their tours around Angkor. This presents a spatial narrative of the monuments that is in competition with the more academically informed routes  
100 planned for tourists by the World Monument Fund and the Authority for the Protection and Safeguarding of the Angkor Region who manage the site. In this case it is the real-world heritage operators who coordinate tourists' experiences with archaeology that have been corrupted by the film representations, rather than the dishonest archaeologists of Pyburn.

105 Baxter (2002: 16) makes related observation about the dishonesty of film representations in her discussion of the reactions of college students taking her class on archaeology in film. She describes how the improbably potent and able character of the archaeologist presented in films leaves her students feeling alienated from archaeology as a field of study, that they could never be archaeologists and that archaeology is inaccessible to the lay public. One insight into the cause of this reaction is suggested by Membury (2002) in his  
110 survey of films containing archaeologists from the 1920s to the 1980s. Membury argues that the typical archaeologist in film reflects composites of real-world archaeologists – but only those of 150-odd years ago. These anachronisms add charm and drama to the films at the expense of the audience's ability to identify with the character, but this alienating effect supports Gale's (2002: 6) claim that archaeologists are victims of 'media imperialism' (Giddens 1993) where the public definition of archaeology is driven by mass media.

115 The second type of narcissism that characterizes much writing by archaeologists about film representations is more forgiving, celebratory and approving of representations of archaeology in film. Commentary in this mode frequently includes a classification system of the ways that the character of the archaeologist has been portrayed in film. The most prolific commentator of this type is Holtorf (2007) who in his survey of archaeology in  
120 popular media identified four prominent representations of archaeologists. These include the archaeologist as an adventurer, as a detective, as someone who makes profound revelations and someone who is a caretaker of ancient sites and objects. Russell (2002) similarly identifies five stock archaeologist characters common in film: adventurers and eccentrics, explorers of unknown lands, officers and gentlemen, nutty professors and tomb-raiders. These typologies are notable for the positive frame that they cast around film representations of archaeologists. The typologists note that the types or tropes they identify are not realistic and do not take themselves seriously (cf. Gowlett 1990; Holtorf  
125 2007: 103), which contrasts with the negative analysis of these stereotypes offered by those writing in defensive mode (cf. Baxter 2002: 16–17).

130 There are two likely reasons why these typologies are so positive. First, these representations create a lot of attention and goodwill for archaeology in the real world,

providing real-world archaeologists with a point of engagement with the public and often with the concrete result of increasing undergraduate enrolments (Holtorf 2008: 26). Second, and more subtly, the identification and exegesis of positive archaeologist characters in film is frequently combined with a nostalgic auto-historiography. The film characters are described in terms of the historical real-world archaeologists that they most closely represent or invoke (cf. especially Membury 2002; Russell 2002). In this way, the film characters of archaeologists become synecdoches where the whole discipline of archaeology, at a given moment in history, is represented by the film character. An example of this comes from Bintliff's (1993) critique of post-processual archaeology. Bintliff (1993: 99) argues that, despite post-processualism's claims to deconstruct establishment dominance structures, it has actually resulted in abuses of realities in the cause of blatant political propaganda. Identifying himself as an 'unregenerate positivist', Bintliff ends his paper with a strong endorsement of Indiana Jones' claim that 'archaeology is about facts; if you want the truth, go next-door to the Philosophy Department!' Bintliff thus identifies himself with Jones as a representative of empirical, positivist archaeologists, and in doing so he appropriates the popular appeal of Indiana Jones for processual archaeology. This appropriation, along with Bintliff's (1993: 98–9) attribution of the Nietzschean concept of the Dionysian tradition (associated with chaos, orgiastic passion and romance) to post-processualism almost makes post-processualism a metaphor for Jones' most significant enemies in the film *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), the Nazis.

### **A counter-narcissistic engagement with film**

The potential of these two types of narcissism to produce insightful and provocative commentary on archaeology in film is far from exhausted, and I do not intend to replace or diminish them here. However there is another conceptual framework to be profitably explored, which could be called a counter-narcissistic approach. This approach has little in common with rejecting or endorsing the image that archaeologists see of themselves in film. Instead it identifies the unique conceptual tools that archaeology provides for thinking about the human experience and explores how films invoke the use of these tools in the viewing public. The post-narcissistic approach starts with Rathje's definition of archaeology as 'a focus on the interaction between material culture and human behaviour, regardless of time or space' (1979: 2, 1981: 52). This definition recognizes archaeology's special interest in objects as instruments of behaviour, sometimes meaningfully constituted, but whose value is not dependent on a remote time depth or exotic geographic origin. The counter-narcissistic approach is motivated by Michael Shanks' claim that archaeologists are uniquely equipped to take a long-term view on things that matter to us now, such as progress and social change, senses of identity and memory, senses of place and belonging (Bailey 2006). Following from these two key attributes of the counter-narcissistic approach, the method of this approach is to interpret the relationships of material culture and behaviour portrayed in film in the context of a long-term view, and similarly to explore intersections of film representations of things that matter to us now and their analogues in long-term view.

**A case study**

180 The generalized nature of the counter-narcissistic approach does not require a film to  
contain an obvious archaeologist character or any of the usual stereotypical archae-  
185 ological devices (i.e. tombs, treasure, museums, excavations). As a demonstration of how  
this approach creates new opportunities for public engagement with archaeology, the  
example of the 2008 animated film *Wall-E* is used here as a case study. The treatment of  
three issues in this film, relating to the relationship of material culture, memory and  
identity, agriculture and social change and biological evolutionary transitions, is used here  
to show how this film demonstrates the evocation of a long-term view in the minds of the  
viewers.

190 In brief, *Wall-E* is the story of a mechanical goat robot, the last functioning robot  
designed to clean up a rubbish-infested and uninhabited earth of the future. Humans have  
abandoned earth because of the waste and now live in a spaceship. The robot, after whom  
the film is named, falls in love with another robot named Eve and follows her out to the  
space ship. After a series of adventures, Wall-E eventually assists in the re-colonization of  
195 earth by humans. The first thirty minutes, roughly one third of the film, exclusively  
features the two robots with almost no dialogue. This allows character development for  
Wall-E and he is presented as sentient and emotional, with an obsession for memory and  
nostalgia. Wall-E is shown to be fascinated by the human artefacts that he exists to dispose  
of. He attempts to determine the behaviours associated with the objects he encounters by  
200 using them, usually with comical consequences because, although the objects Wall-E  
encounters are exotic to him, they are quotidian items familiar to the audience. In the  
course of his work he collects and classifies artefacts methodically. In one scene he briefly  
faces the typological dilemma of classifying a spork as either a fork or spoon (he gives up  
and places it half way between his fork and spoon collections). His nostalgic interest in  
205 the human past is further demonstrated by his attachment to repeated viewings of the 1969  
film *Hello Dolly!* Knowing just these few details about Wall-E is already enough to suggest  
that he possesses some attributes of a generic archaeologist, though he is clearly not meant  
to be perceived in any of the common tropes used for archaeologists in film. Instead the  
film-viewers themselves are drawn into the role of archaeologist. In the absence of any  
210 dialogue, viewers must decode and interpret the world that Wall-E inhabits by observing  
the material objects that surround him.

215 Wall-E's curiosity about material culture and behaviour and his obsession with memory  
and the past are in stark contrast to the way humans are depicted in the film. People live in  
a city in a spaceship and are consumed with eating, shopping and socializing at a frantic  
pace. No one seems to work; instead, a variety of robots tend to their needs. In the film  
people appear to have no memory of their origins on earth and no curiosity about their  
past. At a climactic moment later in the film the human captain of the spaceship is seen  
learning about earth and human history from data stored in the ship's computer. This  
learning moment is a turning point in the plot when the human characters end their  
220 ahistorical existence and are inspired to escape from the comfortable captivity of the  
robots and return to earth. There is a poignant irony that the machines depicted in the film  
embody more memory and emotion about the past than the humans who (mostly) control  
them. Archaeologists are accustomed to arguing that artefacts and architecture reference

social memory among past cultures (cf. Van Dyke and Alcock 2003). In *Wall-E* the totality of human memory is similarly stored in the architecture (i.e. the omnipresent spaceship computer). 225

The identification in *Wall-E* of the stark contrast of the rich memories embedded in artefacts and architecture compared to the absence of memory in the humans has parallels in the real world that archaeology is uniquely qualified to explore. The Cold War period of political and military tension following the Second World War is a recent example. This is a period of interest to archaeologists because it was a period of rapid technological, architectural and social change that was simultaneously shrouded in secrecy and deception (Johnson 2002; Schofield 2002; Whorton 2002). For example, although historical records of Britain's heavy anti-aircraft gun-sites document women employed in combat roles (Pile 1949), archaeological work uniquely reveals the positive reception these soldiers were given by the military administration. Schofield (2002: 147) describes how artillery installations staffed by women had distinctive building layouts with a centrally heated concrete command post, more space per person and more bathrooms. Whorton's (2002) survey of the locations, architecture and technology of US aircraft early-warning radar networks reveals important technical accomplishments, particularly in the construction of facilities in permafrost environments, as well as shifts in the geopolitical interests of the US from a European stage for conflict with Russia to a global nuclear stand-off. Although traces of documentation of these details of the Cold War may exist in some secure archive, the inaccessibility of these records makes the extant material culture record essential for contributing to the human memory of this period and shaping the identity of the people who count these objects and structures as part of their cultural heritage. 230  
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There are also elements of *Wall-E* that evoke archaeological contributions on more universal details of the human experience in the past. An important object in the film is a small plant that Wall-E finds and which becomes the trigger for the return of the humans to earth. The culminating scene of the human re-occupation of earth is when the captain of the spaceship transplants the small plant into the ground with great celebration, explaining to his passengers that he is farming, and that now that they live on earth they are all going to be farming for food instead of consuming the manufactured food produced by the spaceship. The film thus presents farming as a major step in the process of becoming human. The archaeological record does not support the adoption of agriculture as a positive experience for everyone involved as it is depicted in the film (cf. the catalogue of pathologies that increase for many early agricultural populations documented in Cohen and Armelagos (1984)). However, there is no doubt that it was a major transformative event for many prehistoric societies. In most parts of the world the earliest intensive agriculture is associated with archaeological signs of social complexity and inequality such as surplus production and storage, new and more permanent forms of domestic housing arrangements and division of labour (Price 1995; Shenk et al. 2010). While many viewers of the film may not be aware of the specifics of prehistoric social changes associated with agriculture (and communicating these provides a good opportunity for archaeological engagement with the film-watching public), most probably accept that agriculture was a necessary precursor for our modern industrial society, which the people in *Wall-E* are apparently descended from some 700 years ago. The re-discovery of agriculture by the *Wall-E* humans as they return to re-inhabit the earth is an act of redefining and affirming 250  
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270 their identity as humans through re-living and re-enacting a crucial moment in the history and evolution of industrial society.

In addition to the transformative role of agriculture appropriated by *Wall-E*, other evolutionary issues feature prominently. The physical attributes of humans in *Wall-E* in particular provide a rich vein for the counter-narcissistic approach. The human population shown in the film are depicted as obese and with substantial bone mass loss due to generations of living in a reduced gravity environment. The obesity and absence of bone, combined with the abundance of serving robots leaves the humans in *Wall-E* immobile and passive, transporting themselves around lying on reclining hover-chairs without exerting any physical effort. We do not see the humans walk until a poignant scene when the captain of the spaceship struggles with the autopilot to gain control of the vessel. In his conflict with the autopilot robot, the captain falls off his hover-chair and draws himself to his feet and takes a few unsteady steps, becoming the first human in centuries to walk. The scene is accompanied by the iconic *Einleitung* theme from Richard Strauss' tone poem *Also sprach Zarathustra*. This choice of music immediately links this *Wall-E* scene to the 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* and its 'Dawn of Man' scenes where primates discover tool use, weapons and meat eating as a result of an alien intervention. This reference to *2001: A Space Odyssey* makes it clear that the captain's teetering steps in *Wall-E* are intended to signal a major evolutionary transition in the condition of humans aboard the spaceship. In the broader context of real-world human evolution, obligate bipedalism is similarly considered one of the most significant adaptations to occur within the hominin lineage (Harcourt-Smith and Aiello 2004). Bipedalism was predicted by Darwin (1981 [1871]: 142) to be a defining feature of the earliest hominins, marking a critical divergence of the human lineage from the other apes. Although more recent work suggests that bipedalism was less of an innovation than an exploitation of existing primate locomotion (Thorpe et al. 2007) and there is uncertainty about the exact scenario that led to bipedalism (Hunt 1994), its status as a watershed moment in human evolution remains undisputed.

The prominence of both agriculture and bipedalism as evolutionary transitions in the film draws the viewer into consideration of a very long-term view of the human condition. The message of the film appears to be that the envelopment by technology that the humans in *Wall-E* experience paradoxically results in physical and cultural devolution. In escaping the coddled existence provided by the abundance of robots and technology, the humans have to re-evolve by re-discovering agriculture and bipedalism. Archaeology is uniquely positioned to show exactly how momentous these discoveries were in the real world and thus add richness and context to their depiction in the film. While archaeologists typically refrain from speculating about the future of human evolution, there are some informal attempts to answer the question that *Wall-E* leaves with viewers about what the future of human evolution holds. Ian Tattersall, an anthropologist at New York's American Museum of Natural History, claims that the high level of population mixing in the modern world resulting from individual mobility and travel has a homogenizing effect, making fixation of any evolutionary novelties in the human population highly improbable (Owen 2009). Steve Jones, a genetics professor at University College London, similarly claims that since the Second World War people with weak genes who would otherwise have been unlikely to live long enough to reproduce are now insulated from selective pressures by

improvements in medical technology (cf. McKie 2002; Ward 2001). Jones further observes that an important source of genetic mutations that add selectable variation is old men because of the increased likelihood of producing malformed sperm. So the reduction in the number of older fathers, Jones claims, results in less variation introduced into the gene pool and decreasing mutation rates (Lipsett 2008). The views of these two scholars suggest that the future presented in *Wall-E* of a stagnation and even regression of human evolution may not be too far-fetched.

## Conclusion

This paper has analysed some prevailing modes of archaeologists writing about archaeology in film and classified them into a negative and defensive type of narcissism and a positive and forgiving type. A third form of engagement with representations of archaeology in film has been described, one which is motivated by the special tools that archaeology provides for thinking about the long-term relationships people have with each other and the things around them. The method of this third form is to identify plot elements and themes in the film that orient the viewers' minds towards a perspective focused on the long term of the human condition and major transitions in the process of becoming human. The recognition of the uniqueness of the long-term view that archaeology provides is not a new observation among archaeologists, but demonstrations of the value of a long-term view outside academic archaeology are rare. By using the film *Wall-E* as a case study I have shown how this approach adds richness and texture to the film, as well as providing extensive opportunities for archaeological engagement with the film-watching public.

Returning to Crichton's (1999: 1463) view that there is no correspondence between social reality and film reality, he asks: if scientists should be unconcerned with their representation in film, what then should scientists be concerned about? His answer is what really matters is not the image, but the reality. Crichton calls for working scientists with major reputations and major accomplishments to appear regularly on the media and act as real-world examples, demonstrating what a scientist is and explaining what science is about. In answering this call I have described a method for archaeologists to engage with popular film in a way that demonstrates to the film-watching public what archaeology is about. But what is the public good of archaeologists talking and writing about films in this way? The main benefit will be a greatly expanded appreciation of the symbolic, informational and aesthetic values that archaeology contributes to society (Carver 1996; Lipe 1984) and a broader audience for the stories that archaeologists tell that, among their other functions, enrich people's social identities and contribute happiness, meaning and inspiration to their lives (Holtorf 2007: 144).

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