Chapter 7 / **Lost Cities, Exotic Travel and Digging up the World** / Historical feature films as a means of enhancing appreciation of our archaeological heritage / Nina Schücker and Jan van Helt

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Motion pictures dealing with historical, legendary or mythical topics are a popular component of everyday entertainment. Makers of these *feature films*[1] create impressive pictures of past landscapes and material culture, construct detailed scenarios of historical events and develop captivating character sketches of their protagonists. Their works are lively, atmospheric, and present intensely emotional stories, and they provide an easily accessible, understandable and entertaining interpretation of the past.

Motion pictures attract a much larger audience than, for example, exhibitions. Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004) reached an audience of 4.4 million viewers in Germany alone,[2] while the exhibition *Troy: Dream and Reality* (*Troia: Traum und Wirklichkeit*) drew about 850,000 visitors when it was presented in three German cities in 2001 – 2002. Historical content is attractive and, therefore, the commercial film industry invests large amounts of money in historical settings. While the curators of the exhibition *Imperium Romanum*, held in Karlsruhe and Stuttgart in 2005 – 2006, had a budget of 3.8 million euros at their disposal, it is estimated that Ridley Scott spent the equivalent of 128.8 million euros on *Gladiator* in 2000.[3] Despite their high production costs, films touching on the fields of archaeology and history can be very profitable, which explains why they are so numerous. As long as these films find an audience, archaeologists and historians will be faced with filmic interpretations of the past, regardless of whether they criticise them, ignore them, or use them to further the interests of their own disciplines. Without a doubt, the use of commercial success as a criterion to evaluate cultural activities should be critically examined for a number of reasons.[4] Nevertheless, the above comparisons illustrate the dimensions of the issue and provide a provocative starting point for this chapter, which will explore how historical feature film may contribute to a contemporary heritage revival in Europe.

Filmmakers are attracted not only to historical topics, but also to classical scholars. Thanks to its on-screen representatives their relatively small discipline is well known to the

Archaeology: Fiction and Reality presenting Wolfgang Petersen's *Troy* (2004) in October 2012 (E. Schneider, Deutsches Filminstitut (DIF e.V.) / Deutsches Filmmuseum).

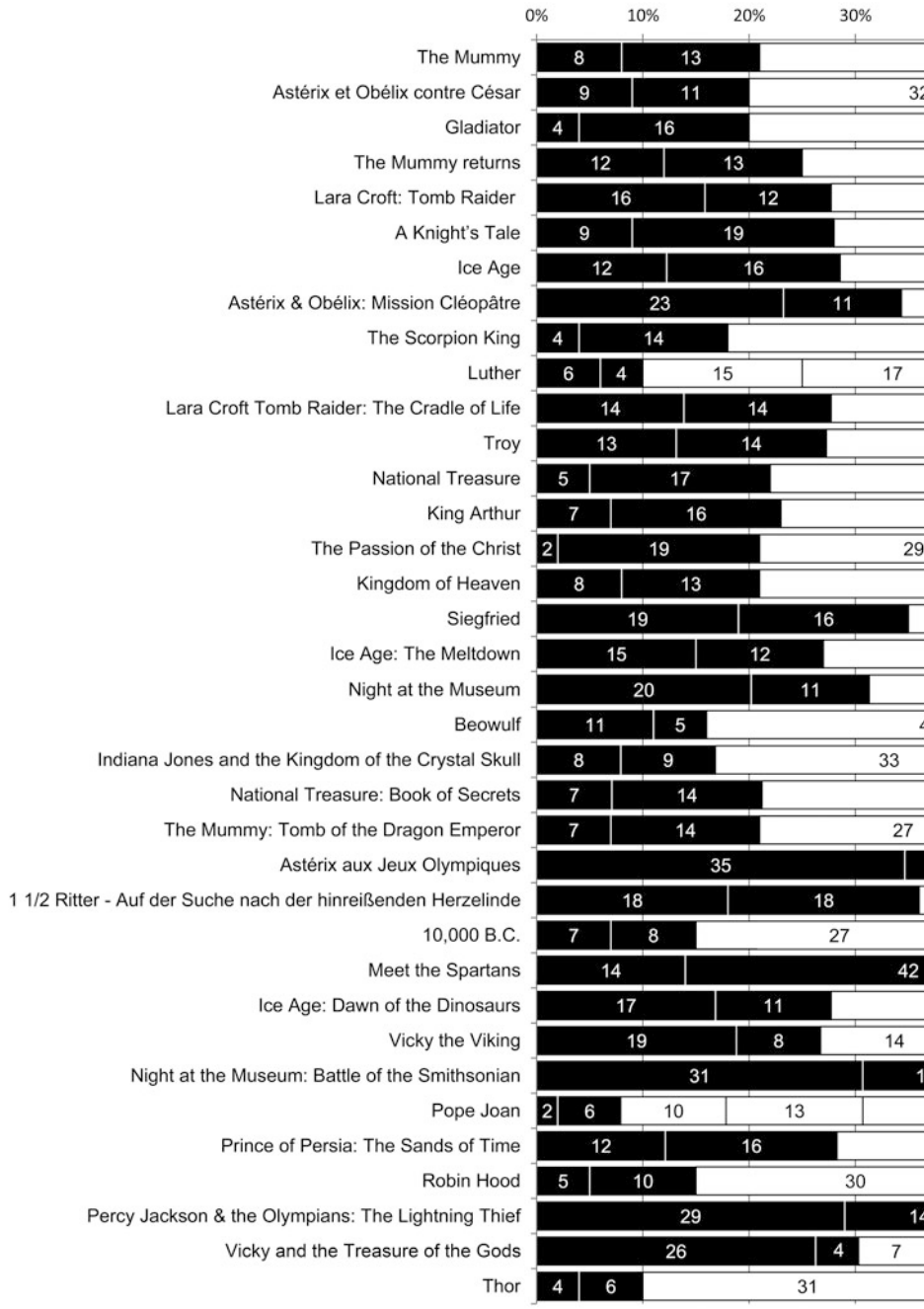
Archaeology: Fiction and Reality, "Larks' tongues. Wrens' livers. Chaffinch brains. Jaguars' earlobes ..."? Roman cooking accompanying Monty Python's *Life of Brian* (1979) (C. Goldstein, Deutsches Filminstitut (DIF e.V.) / Deutsches Filmmuseum).

public and regarded by it in a positive light. The film image of archaeologists – thanks, in particular, to the *Indiana Jones* sequels (1981, 1984, 1989, 2008) – is viewed critically by professionals for very understandable reasons: the adventures of Dr. Henry Walton Jones Jr. obviously do not reflect the everyday life of archaeologists, and they contradict contemporary professional ethics. In this respect, we should not forget that stereotyped thinking and cinematic exaggeration, which extends to the portrayal of all occupations, may be seen as standard procedure on the part of movie directors.[5]

By accepting, in a playful spirit, that there is a grain of truth in the *Indiana Jones* films, archaeologists may recognise their popular colleague as a kind of pro bono promoter, a valuable asset, which travel agencies, clothing manufacturers, and tobacco companies, among others, could only dream of having. Archaeology is a kind of brand;[6] that is an established fact that archaeologists simply have to deal with – but also can build on.

Archaeology: fiction and reality

This chapter is based on our experiences with a series of evening events entitled Archäologie: Fiktion und Wirklichkeit organised by the Roman-Germanic Commission of the German Archaeological Institute and the German Film Institute in Frankfurt am Main.[7] Each involves the screening of a motion picture that is set in prehistory, Roman or medieval times, or one in which a main character is professionally using archaeological methods and techniques. These films – several thousand of these exist altogether – belong to various genres such as drama, comedy, adventure, cartoons and live-action.[8] Our events take an interdisciplinary approach: short lectures present the archaeologists' as well as the film historians' points of view. The evenings are framed by presentations of a photo exhibition on the archaeological profession in contemporary Europe, on the one hand, and attractive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The Mummy
8
13
Astérix et Obélix contre César
9
11
32
Gladiator
4
16
The Mummy returns
12
13
Lara Croft: Tomb Raider
16
12
A Knight's Tale
9
19
Ice Age
12
16
Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre
23
11
The Scorpion King
4
14
Luther
6
4
15
17
Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life
14
14
Troy
13
14
National Treasure
5
17
King Arthur
7
16
The Passion of the Christ
2
19
29
Kingdom of Heaven
8
13
Siegfried
19
16
Ice Age: The Meltdown
15
12
Night at the Museum
20
11
Beowulf
11
5
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull
8
9
33
National Treasure: Book of Secrets
7
14
The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor
7
14
27
Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques
35
1 1/2 Ritter - Auf der Suche nach der hinreißenden Herzelinde
18
18
10,000 B.C.
7
8
27
Meet the Spartans
14
42
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs
17
11
Vicky the Viking
19
8
14
Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian
31
Pope Joan
2
6
10
13
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time
12
16
Robin Hood
5
10
30
Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief
29
Vicky and the Treasure of the Gods
26
4
7
Thor
4
6
31

figure 1
Top films involving archaeology and history in Germany 1999–2011.
Age groups.
Audience figures in %.
* data age 0-9: 2000-2002 only;
** data age 50-59: until 2001: 50+; age 60+: since 2001
(C. Goldstein, Deutsches Filminstitut / Deutsches Filmmuseum, 2012).

special events, such as Roman cooking, presentations of original finds.

We present our own project and explore the opportunities that historical motion pictures offer to archaeologists. What is the composition of the audience for historical feature films? Do these films reach different audiences than other public outreach events traditionally organised by archaeological groups? Do they raise interest in the discipline and its research subjects or are they merely entertaining and without any longer-lasting impact? Can they be used as means to support heritage issues and, in the long term, to enhance public awareness of archaeological concerns?

Movie audiences and archaeology audiences

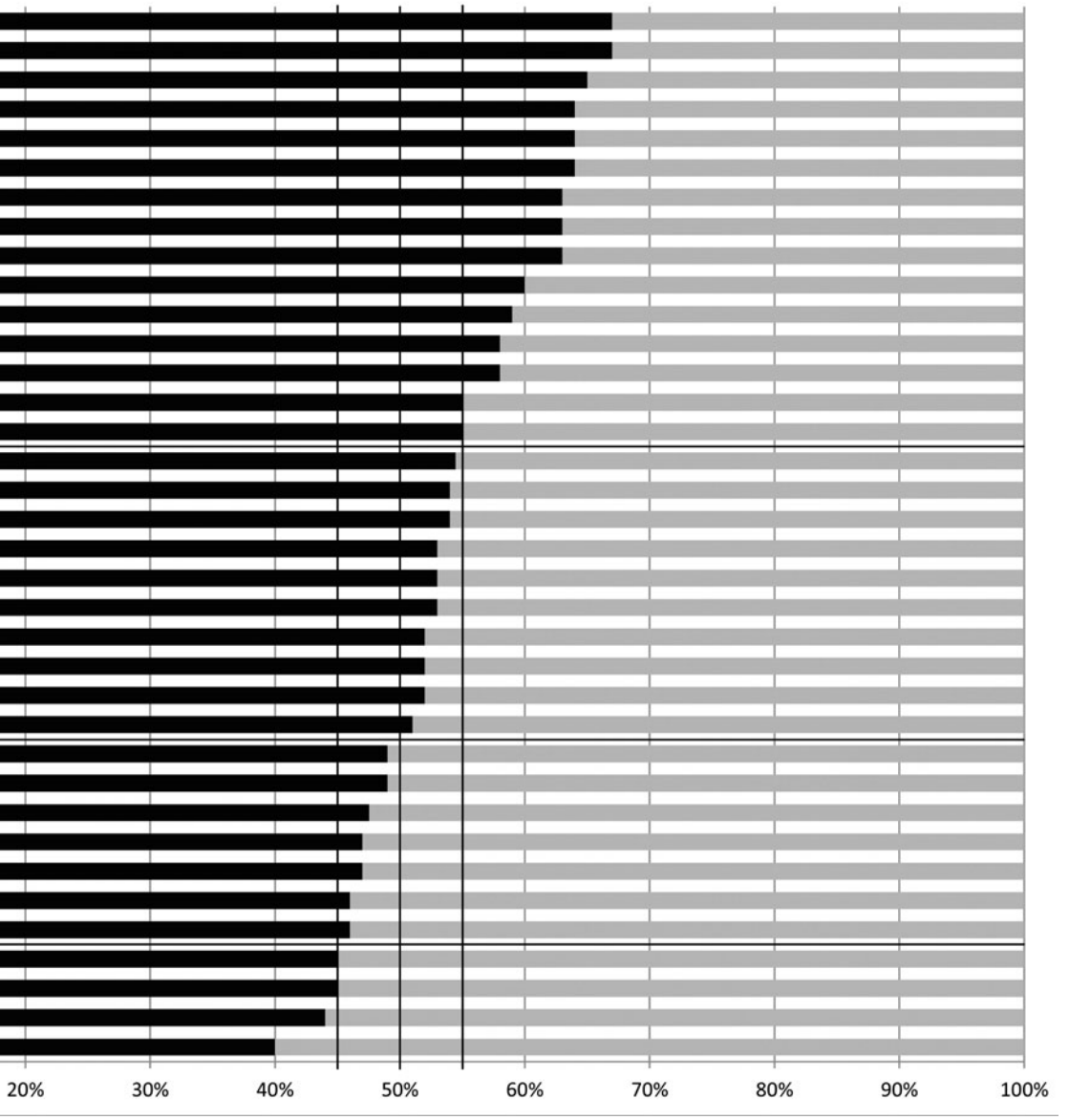
Within the far-reaching and widely disseminated entertainment media, historical feature films play an important role, not only because of high movie attendance but also by virtue of their many possible distribution channels, such as Blu-Ray and DVD, internet streaming, and TV broadcasts.[9] Taking Germany as an example, statistics show that almost half of all movie audiences are younger than 30 years old. In 2011, the German Federal Film Board (Filmförderungsanstalt) recorded sales of 128 million movie admissions. Half of the tickets were sold for very successful blockbusters, each of them reaching at least one million visitors; and every fourth ticket was sold for a top 10 film. The 20 to 29 age group made up the largest sector of the audience (26 %), followed by young people from 10 to 19 years old (23 %). The 30 to 39 age group accounted for 16 %, and the 40 to 49 age group for 17 %. The age group from 20 to 29 must also be seen as the most active one, representing 34 % of spectators who attend more than seven film showings per year.[10] In contrast, "archaeological audiences" tend to be in their advanced years (this is true in general for members of historical and antiquarian associations, the readerships of popular archaeological magazines, and visitors to historical

exhibitions).[11] We could go so far as to say that movies generally attract precisely the age group that is underrepresented at traditional archaeological public outreach events.

The younger age of movie audiences is confirmed for the subgroup of feature films dealing with archaeological and historical topics. In the years 1999–2011 that subgroup included no less than 36 top films in Germany (figure 1–3), which, altogether, reached more than 93 million spectators, and the audiences of these films consisted mainly of members of the 20 to 39 age group. A few films were aimed specifically at younger cinemagoers (e.g. *Meet the Spartians* (2008) and *Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques* (2008)), but none appealed to all ages; only the film *Luther* (2003) and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004) clearly attracted older spectators. The main audience consisted of men (up to 67 %), which might be due, among other reasons, to a dominance of action-oriented films offering a large dose of computer-generated special effects. Other films were seen by men and women in equal proportions. Only a few appealed to a predominantly female audience. These included *Pope Joan* (2009, 60 %) and the *Vicky* sequels (2009, 2011), with children's films obviously attracting women (55 %) as accompanying adults.[12] We cannot say that the determining factor in attendance at these films is their connection to archaeology and history. It is more reasonable to consider them in a broader context of popular fantasy and science fiction blockbusters, for stellar casts, special effects, music, and exciting and action-packed adventures all attract people, promising enjoyable entertainment and immersion in another world. Moreover, advertising and the social factor – the wish to do something together with friends – also play key roles in determining cinema attendance.

It is, therefore, not primarily interest in history and archaeology that attracts people to historical feature films. Still, for various reasons audiences are attracted to films involving archaeological subjects. More generally speaking, films do bring archaeological and historical topics to the attention of society as a whole. These films create extensive publicity, which is

figure 2
Top films involving archaeology and history in Germany 1999 – 2011. Male and female audiences. Audience figures in %.


20%
30%
40%
50%
60%
70%
80%
90%
100%

	respective year	FSK	start	audience	male %	female %
The Mummy	1999	12	03.06.1999	4,900,000	53	47
Astérix et Obélix contre César	1999	6	18.03.1999	3,600,000	64	36
Gladiator	2000	12 / 16	25.05.2000	3,400,000	65	35
The Mummy returns	2001	12	17.06.2001	4,100,000	63	37
Lara Croft: Tomb Raider	2001	12	28.06.2001	2,500,000	67	33
A Knight's Tale	2001	12	06.09.2001	1,400,000	46	54
Ice Age	2002	0	21.03.2002	7,100,000	51	49
Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre	2002	6	07.03.2002	1,600,000	49	51
The Scorpion King	2002	16	25.04.2002	0,980,000	64	36
Luther	2003	12	30.10.2003	2,300,000	48	53
Lara Croft Tomb Raider: The Cradle of Life	2003	12	14.08.2003	1,000,000	60	40
Troy	2004	12 / 16	13.05.2004	4,429,985	54	46
National Treasure	2004	12	25.11.2004	1,599,403	55	46
King Arthur	2004	12 / 16	19.08.2004	1,514,497	55	45
The Passion of the Christ	2004	16	18.03.2004	1,351,113	53	47
Kingdom of Heaven	2005	12 / 16	05.05.2005	1,950,354	54	46
Siegfried	2005	6	28.07.2005	1,321,443	49	51
Ice Age: The Meltdown	2006	0	06.04.2006	8,732,937	47	53
Night at the Museum	2006 / 2007	6	28.12.2006	3,122,678	52	48
Beowulf	2007	12	15.11.2007	572,493	59	41
Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull	2008	12	22.05.2008	2,847,930	63	37
National Treasure: Book of Secrets	2008	12	24.01.2008	1,771,200	55	45
The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor	2008	12	07.08.2008	1,674,475	53	47
Astérix aux Jeux Olympiques	2008	6	31.01.2008	1,564,993	58	42
1 1/2 Ritter - Auf der Suche nach der hinreißenden Herzelinde	2008	6	18.12.2008	1,078,800	52	48
10,000 B.C.	2008	12	06.03.2008	876,223	67	33
Meet the Spartans	2008	12	28.02.2008	723,917	64	36
Ice Age: Dawn of the Dinosaurs	2009	0	01.07.2009	8,705,891	47	53
Vicky the Viking	2009	0	09.09.2009	4,891,161	45	55
Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian	2009	6	21.05.2009	2,369,843	52	48
Pope Joan	2009	12	22.10.2009	2,339,213	40	60
Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time	2010	12	20.05.2010	1,610,233	46	54
Robin Hood	2010	12	13.05.2010	1,484,491	63	37
Percy Jackson & the Olympians: The Lightning Thief	2010	12	11.02.2010	905,625	44	56
Vicky and the Treasure of the Gods	2011	0	29.09.2011	1,743,795	45	55
Thor	2011	12	28.04.2011	1,120,843	58	42
Total / average				93,183,536	54.4	45.6

directed not only at movie theater audiences but also to a much broader public thanks to the overall promotion strategies employed. Such publicity includes poster advertising, related Internet & TV documentaries, press background reports, etc.[13] The attractiveness of historical motion pictures and their significant presence in today's media naturally raises the question of their "quality". From an archaeological point of view, this question is often considered in terms of such matters as the accuracy of settings, costumes and props, but scholarly reconstructions are not primary considerations when it comes to filmmaking. Therefore the question of "quality" has to take into account both archaeological and cinematic perceptions, including historical correctness and consistency along with artistic merit, dramatic effectiveness and the requirements of film production.[14]

Images of the past

Due to their success with broad audiences, historical feature films play an important role in constructing the popular image of the past, an image which is really a stand-alone picture of history, separated from and in addition to the one constructed by academic research. This is particularly true for the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages, the periods which filmmakers are most interested in and which are the best known to the audience thanks to history courses taught in school.[15]

Historical feature films, which are often screen adaptations of historical novels,[16] present fictional stories taking place in the past. History can be adapted and made to serve merely as background for the story. Filmmakers have to make sure that a motion picture will be understandable by everyone, including those without any historical knowledge, through the use of widely known elements. With respect to the use of historical references, the design of a motion picture set plays a significant part in conveying views of the past, since it determines place, time and background. The look of a film serves

figure 3
Top films involving archaeology and history in Germany 1999–2011. Audience figures.
Data based on a Top 50-ranking (except 1999 / 2000 = Top 30; 2001 = Top 40; 2011 = Top 75).

as a frame for the story, but, of course, it can never be an exact copy of the past. Besides providing a setting for the story, production design disposes of distinct narrative qualities capable of supporting a film's content and message. Following Charles and Mirella Joana Affrons' classification of films with differing decorative and narrative characteristics, we may say that the set's function as embellishment is most important in the case of historical feature films. Flamboyant scenery with impressive royal palaces, glittering treasure rooms and hundreds of bowing servants is not meant to be an accurate reflection of history; it should be seen, rather, as a highly elaborated artistic version of the past. In *Troy* (2004), the city needed to be depicted as an ancient metropolis in accord with the expectations of a contemporary audience, meaning it had to be significantly bigger than archaeological research suggests it was. In historical motion pictures size does matter: it is a metaphor of power. The idea of magnifying the scale of what is being depicted is not new to filmmaking. One of the earliest long feature productions, David Llewelyn Wark Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916), became famous for its extensive use of highly embellished settings, costumes and props. The development of such iconographic standards has a long tradition in historical feature films, and some of them can even be traced back to historical paintings. For filmmakers, it is crucial to meet the audiences' expectations, which are a composite of familiar facts, previous knowledge and anticipated images of the past.[17]

Movie pictures should surely be as accurate as possible, but when evaluating historical correctness and authenticity, one must take into account whether these qualities were actually being sought, or if liberties were deliberately being taken. The film industry is an economic sector which requires financial reward (despite the high levels of film subsidies in Europe), and attendance figures are a key criterion in evaluating success. Accordingly, filmmakers have to follow guidelines different from those employed by archaeological and historical scholars, and from their point of view, historical accuracy is of secondary importance to the story's coherence and artistic

merits. Motion pictures need characters that the audience can identify and empathize with, such as the young rebel Achilles in *Troy* (2004); and the story needs to be reduced to feature-length and to use a manageable number of protagonists. Lastly, the overall impression the movie makes has to conform to modern notions of aesthetics.

Through their visual expressiveness, historical motion pictures stimulate the imagination; and their intensity may result in a presentation of events that is not supported by scientific and scholarly findings, as occurs, for example, when modern ways of thinking are directly transported into the past, or when sets are embellished in order to create astonishing, overwhelming images of the past. Transparently incorrect details, such as locating Sparta's harbour on steep cliffs in *Troy* (2004), may be accepted by the audience simply because of their impressive effect on the big screen.[18]

Moreover, this tendency is reinforced by the fact that filmmakers consistently employ a variety of stylistic devices which suggest a high level of accuracy, such as references to historical sources, as well as providing precise information on location and time in the opening credits. We may assume that the majority of viewers are aware that they are watching fictional accounts, but motion pictures can be so impressive that their representations are easily accepted as facts. Reliable figures on how spectators evaluate the accuracy of historical feature films do not exist – and, for all we know, may differ from film to film.[19]

Archaeology and film

The relationship between archaeology and film, both of which underwent rapid development beginning in the late nineteenth century, has been widely examined. Today, several film festivals across Europe are dedicated to archaeological topics, and motion pictures are analysed as sources for studies on the popular reception of the ancient and prehistoric worlds and the

way historians and archaeologists are presented to and seen by the public.[20]

In principle, archaeology and film have a lot in common. In very general terms, motion pictures and archaeology both have the same goal: the presentation of the many aspects of everyday human life, including beliefs and ideas, and social, cultural and economic structures. Films and archaeology represent the accumulated knowledge and techniques of highly diverse and interdisciplinary professions with quite different dimensions. For one thing, archaeology is by far the junior partner in terms of economic power, number of employees and presence in daily life. And while both are fields composed of professionals, from the consumer's point of view they are primarily sources of entertainment and play a role in leisure activities. Each has its specific attractions, and each enables people to escape from reality and immerse themselves in another, more fascinating setting.

Both fields are influenced by a variety of factors such as social framework, financial and technical possibilities, and either artistic or academic canons of interpretation. Films and archaeology are cultural products, reflecting and affecting their respective environments. Through their visuality, film and archaeology both facilitate easy access to their respective topics. Both are powerful tools for education and the construction of identity and values – but also for constructing interpretations. Clearly, they are also vulnerable to equally powerful misuse for propaganda purposes.[21]

Nevertheless, there are significant differences between them: cinematic illustration techniques can reach much farther than archaeological ones, since films narrate individual actions and characters and focus on emotions, ideas and motivations. Archaeological methods, techniques and sources, however, will never be able to capture or reconstruct these. Films have to present their stories just at the point where archaeologists and historians have to give up for lack of sources. This is also true in the case of material culture, in other words, in the archaeological domain. A film has to depict it and cannot leave

it to the individual viewer's imagination. In *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), for example, the Holy Grail needs a visual equivalent; it must be present on the big screen – even if we have no archaeological evidence for this vessel.

While scientists keep their distance when looking at the past, filmmakers deliberately try to overcome this time gap. Film has to go beyond academically proven assessments: its stories and settings have to be coherent, complete and focused, whereas archaeologists respect the limitations of their sources, explaining them in references and notes. Films present what scholars are not able – and will never dare – to reconstruct and, consequently, what museums will never be able show the public.[22]

Some ways in which films can enhance heritage revival

Archaeological institutions consider the dissemination of information to the public to be an important part of their work. Accordingly they are interested in movie audiences since they are already aware of a specific topic, as opposed to the general audience they normally target. At best, the larger audiences question the content and raise questions which can be answered in a format familiar to archaeologists. Nevertheless, archaeology should make special provision for persons who are attending such films – taking into account that they are most likely not to possess much knowledge of archaeology and that, therefore, appropriate presentation and advertising are needed. The success of documentaries broadcast in connection with historical feature films indicates a certain willingness among audiences to absorb further information.[23]

There are several archaeologists and historians who are concerned with the film on an academic level, yet only a few cooperative ventures exist between cinema and archaeology.[24] In our own case, the conditions for co-operation were quite obviously already in place. The Frankfurt Film Museum provided a well-established art house theatre for 130 persons,

while generous initial funding was available through the co-operative project called Archaeology in Contemporary Europe, which was financed by the Culture Program of the European Commission during the period 2007–2013.

Collaborations such as ours could – and should – be established in other cities, between archaeological bodies, on the one hand, and art house or university cinemas, as well as local movie theatres, on the other. And we could also think about collaborating with commercial movie theaters on the occasion of the release of a historical blockbuster. In general, the starting point must be a positive attitude towards the other discipline and a respect for its specific characteristics: dismissing a film with complaints about wrongly reconstructed helmets, for example, is hardly constructive. As a survey among the delegates of the German Conference of Classical Philologists showed, this positive assessment does exist: 64 % thought that the film *Gladiator* (2000) was worth seeing.[25]

An audience of millions can be reached by motion pictures, and archaeologists should not miss this opportunity to disseminate knowledge of their discipline. Visits to exhibitions and lectures require a conscious decision; TV documentaries might be viewed on the basis of conscious choice or by chance as a result of channel-hopping. Movie-going is a choice in favor of pure entertainment, often made by young adults who might never respond to archaeology's traditional public relations efforts. Questions such as: "Was that really the case?"; "Did they already have …?"; or even "How is history presented and why?"[26] may arise with the release of each historical blockbuster.

"Ideas about lost cities, exotic travel and digging up the world" – as Dr. Henry Walton Jones Jr. himself describes the popular image of the discipline in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) – can help to create an awareness of historical, legendary or mythical topics. Thus, archaeologists and historians should use historical feature films as "Trojan Horses" not only to inform and enlighten but also to enhance awareness and appreciation of our archaeological heritage.

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