

## Recommended Citation

Naas, James (2015) "Comparative Film Review: "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," "The Mummy," and "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider"," *Spectrum*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 9.

Available at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/spectrum/vol5/iss1/9>

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## Spectrum

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Volume 5  
Issue 1 *Fall 2015*

Article 9

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11-1-2015

## Comparative Film Review: "Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull," "The Mummy," and "Lara Croft: Tomb Raider"

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## Chapter 8

### Comparative Film Review: *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, *The Mummy*, and *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*

James Naas

Many segments of the American population, regardless of age, gender, ethnic background or education, form their impressions of archaeology and the role of archaeologists from blockbuster movies. These perceptions usually involve middle aged, Caucasian men battling fiercely over exotic artifacts that can end mankind when they have fallen into the wrong hands. These generic images characterize the protagonists from the wildly popular films *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, *The Mummy*, and (with the exception of her sex) *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, each combining to make US\$1,477,272,779.00 in gross sales worldwide (Box Office Mojo 2015). Despite their popularity, however, these films barely represent the field of archaeology and are giving the public false and incomplete pictures of what being an archaeologist entails. The goal of this essay, thus, is to examine how accurately these films portray archaeologists and to explore pop culture images of archaeology via the existing evidence: scenes from these films, references from film reviews, and examples from academic literature.

#### **Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull**

A recent installment of one of the more influential movie franchises on the field of archaeology, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, does justice to some aspects of archaeology although it is certainly not comprehensive in its portrayal of the field. The film was

set in the 1950s with the focus on an aging Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford) who's been out of the limelight for a while and (apparently) raring for a new adventure. This movie begins with the kidnapping of Indiana Jones by Russian soldiers. The leader of this group, Ukrainian KGB agent, Irina Spalko, uses telepathy to seek out artifacts that have paranormal powers for warfare. This film portrays an unrealistic version of archaeology, one that involves dangerous weapons, state held military intelligence secrets, international spies, and many ulterior motives. Additionally, perhaps more seriously, the film gives credence to the fringe theory of pseudo-scholar Erick von Daniken, who claims "that our human ancestors were too dumb to have, all by themselves, using their own abilities, intelligence, and labor, produced the admittedly spectacular works of engineering, architecture, mathematics, astronomy, botany, and zoology in the archaeological record" (Feder 2014, 231). At the end of the film, viewers are led to believe that the development of some, and maybe many, great civilizations was dependent on benevolent extraterrestrial guidance. This segment of the film is particularly damaging for mainstream archaeologists and anthropologists who, in the absence of extraterrestrial visits to Earth, operate on the premise that human beings are inherently creative, inventive, and intelligent beings that are capable of many amazing feats, such as building pyramids or mapping the cosmos.

Educating the public about the true role of an archaeologist is clearly not the goal of this movie, or any others in the franchise; however, this is not to say that this movie does nothing for the field of archaeology. In many ways Indiana Jones, is actually a pretty capable and clever archaeologist. First, he displays vast and detailed knowledge of ancient cultures. When sent a letter from an old archaeologist friend including a passage of impenetrable looking pictographs, Indy quickly deciphers the text and notes they are part of an ancient South American language. While investigating remains in a crypt in Nazca, Peru, Indy notes that the practice of binding

skulls to produce an elongated effect was undertaken as a sign of respect to the Nazca gods. Secondly, Indy periodically reinforces some of the ethical concerns of archaeologists, first and foremost, to study the past for posterity's sake rather than for personal gain or to make a profit. While in the crypt Indy plucked a knife from the mummified remains of a Spanish Conquistador, previously before entering, his son, read aloud a warning that "grave robbers will be shot." Indy replies, "Good thing we're not grave robbers!" The inclusion of this scene is important because it connects with the audience - yes, we all want to find invaluable buried treasure! – it then reminds us that there are serious consequences for pilfering artifacts and tampering with the dead. Indy's own moment of weakness of taking the knife, but then placing it back, shows that even professionals are sometimes tempted, but must abide by the ethical rules of archaeology.

In addition to Indy's lesson, the film excels at generating public interest in archaeology, as past episodes have also done, by playing up, the thrill factor of finding unknown cultures or historical ruins. As archaeologists Cornelius Holtorf has noted, people are attracted to "the finding of things, the smell of the site, the bossily-arranged lines of pegs, the sexual excitement of new people in the trench, the 'abroadness' of the places. In this sense, there probably is a bit of an adventurer and a bit of an Indiana Jones in every archaeologist" (Holtorf 2008, 2). Thus, while this movie franchise has had an undeniably large and not altogether accurate impact on the public's view of archaeology the franchise has also had a real hand in shaping the field today, primarily by attracting students to academic programs.

### **The Mummy**

Much like Indiana Jones, *The Mummy*, and its sequel, *The Mummy Returns* have also been widely popular among the public while fostering a number of divergent understandings of Egyptology (and archaeology). The high priest Imhotep is awakened and threatens to end

civilization because of a curse placed upon him during his mummification. Plagues descend upon Egypt and Rick and Eva must battle Imhotep after their original intent was to uncover his tomb. The lead male Rick O'Connell (played by Brandon Fraser), is not an archaeologist, but rather a cross between a looter and an adventurer. The lead female role, Evelyn Carnahan (Rachel Weiss), is a British, Caucasian female librarian, looking to make a name for herself in the field.

While archaeological fieldwork is portrayed in this film, viewers are led to believe that guns, ammunition, and swords are crucial components of the archaeologist's tool kit. Rick, admittedly not an archaeologist, carries all of these weapons with him while on expedition because, as he explains to Evelyn, he knows that "something is out there, under the sand, in one word, *EVIL*" (emphasis added; *The Mummy* 1999). Uncritical viewers might come away with an implicit understanding that archaeology and archaeological fieldwork are dangerous pursuits. Another downfall of *The Mummy* is that it portrays a dated, 1920's version of archaeology, as was practiced during the British colonial occupation of Egypt. Excavations are shown in which teams of local Egyptian men use simple tools: ropes, maps, and shovels. Modern-day archaeological excavation tools (such as trowels, surveying equipment and other high-tech tools) were left out, perhaps intentionally to set the scene.

*The Mummy* also plays up the mystery and suspense associated with curses. Here, a curse is placed on anyone who disturbs the eternal slumber of the high priest Imhotep (played by Arnold Vosloo). The idea of curses befalling archaeologists and gravediggers gained wide popularity in the 1920's, after the discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922 by Howard Carter. Egyptologist David P. Silverman notes "less than a year after the discovery, Lord Carnarvon, the financial backer and aristocrat funding the excavation, passed away" (Silverman 1987, 60). Strangely, "all the lights in Cairo were reported to have gone out at the precise

moment at which the Lord's favorite dog passed away at Highclere Castle" (Silverman 1987, 60). These misfortunes, along, with other seemingly related deaths were attributed to the Curse of the Pharaoh, but it turned out that Carnarvon's real cause of death was an infected mosquito bite and power outages were common occurrences (Silverman 1987, 60). Thus, while *The Mummy* does little to adequately portray the field of archaeology, it does service to Egyptology. For example, the backstory of the illicit relationship between high priest Imhotep and Anck Su Namun (the favored consort of Seti I) is described in detail, along with the series of events that led up to Imhotep's untimely and painful demise by flesh-eating beetles in the city of Hamunaptra. Focusing on Evelyn and Rick's team, they arrive at Hamunaptra and encounter a long-forgotten subterranean chamber, both Evelyn and her brother Jonathan display detailed knowledge of Egyptology. Evelyn figures out how to use a system of mirrors to illuminate an underground chamber, which Jonathan quips must have been an Ancient Egyptian's mummification chamber based on the artifacts still present. Even Rick O'Connell shows some expertise in Egyptology, commenting that Hamunaptra is made of pure gold, to which Evelyn replies "you know your history" (*The Mummy* 1999). Rick is clear throughout regarding his financial motive for joining the expedition, a motive that could pose as a drawback of the movie, as it suggests to the audience that treasure is waiting to be found and then sold. But, like the Indiana Jones franchise, *The Mummy* succeeds in driving interest in Egyptology and that is welcomed publicity for archaeologists.

### **Lara Croft: Tomb Raider**

The third film considered here *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider*, strays from the previous two films in its scope and archaeological content. Lara Croft is an American, Caucasian, adventurer whose goal it is to preserve human history. However, rather than preserving artifacts and relics in

a museum, that can be accessed for educational purposes by the public, Croft ‘preserves’ them in her home. As in *The Mummy*, a terrible curse is evoked involving an old Croft family clock, which turns out to be a key needed to unlock a dangerous mechanism that could destroy civilization. Croft’s goal then is to keep this key out of the hands of the Illuminati, an underground group of scholars who want to use the mechanism for ultimate control. Lara Croft is portrayed as very experienced in the fields of martial arts and looting, or as the film suggests, rescuing invaluable antiquities from their resting places so that they can be better protected and preserved. Croft is also adept at deciphering riddles and codes, much like her male counterpart, Indiana Jones. While no archaeological fieldwork is portrayed in this film, firearms are used throughout; danger and adventure are also emphasized, where stone statues come to life and must be fought in hand-to-hand combat by Croft.

In a film review from *Archaeology Magazine*, Mark Rose notes “the only person identified in the film as an archaeologist, other than Croft, works for an auction house, apparently supplying it with looted artifacts” (Rose 2001, 2). This scene reinforces the widely held misconception that buying and selling objects of archaeological or cultural value is legal, which it is not. If Croft were a true archaeologist, she would follow The Society for American Archaeology’s Eight Principles of Ethical Archaeology, particularly principle three, which states that, “the commercialization of archaeological objects—as commodities to be exploited for personal enjoyment or profit—results in the destruction of archaeological sites and of contextual information that is essential to understanding the archaeological record” (Society for American Archaeology 1996, 2). This film received a poor review in terms portraying archaeology, “supplying only the ‘backdrop’ to the rest of the action-driven film” (Rose 2001, 2). Perhaps the movie’s sole merit that Lara Croft, like Evelyn Carnahan in *The Mummy*, is breaking the male



gender barrier (see below), which may be attracting more women to the field (although this has not been adequately studied).

### **Discussion and Implications of Status: *Gender, Race and Ethnicity, and Politics***

The three films discussed above have generated interest among the American population for archaeological topics, but these films have also mislead the public about what archaeology really is; the misconceptions go beyond the day-to-day work of archaeologists and how they go about their business. The false impressions are multidimensional and, to a degree, institutional issues, but they also reflect gendered, racial, ethnic and political stereotypes of American culture at large.

#### *Gender*

Indiana Jones is clearly the archetypal archaeologist for the majority of the American public, yet as archaeologist Cornelius Holtorf contends, “the portrayal of archaeologists in mainstream popular culture as primarily white, male, heterosexual, ‘able-bodied’ individuals serves to alienate experiences, identities and individuals that do not conform to this model of the ‘ideal archaeologist’” (Holtorf 2008, 2). Archaeology has long been dominated by men, “reiterating the sexual bias that makes exploration and discovery unambiguously man’s work in a man’s world” (Gero and Root 1990, 33). Further in Gero and Root’s longitudinal analysis of *National Geographic*, they examine “74 articles in which the gender of the archaeologist could be identified, only two articles featured female archaeologists, with another five recognizing females as co-partners with males” (Gero and Root 1990, 33). Although in recent years the number of men versus women has come into balance. A 2012–2013 Archaeology Labor Market Survey conducted for the United Kingdom revealed that women constituted 46% of professionals within the field, while males constituted 54% (Aitchison and Rocks-Macqueen, 2013). These

numbers show an improvement from a similar study conducted in 2007–2008, at which time the ratio was 41% women to 59% male. Similar studies have been conducted for the American contingent of archaeologists, indicating that female archaeologists are less likely to have tenure-track jobs, are paid less than their male counterparts, and publish in peer-reviewed journals at a fraction of the pace of men (in 2014, only 29% of articles in scholarly journals were written by women; Bardolph 2014; Zeder 1997).

This gender imbalance is reinforced by what we see in the media. In the previously described films, the majority of the characters were men, and of the women only one was an educated archaeologist (Evelyn Carnahan), although it is made clear that she has not yet “made her mark” within the field (*The Mummy* 1999). Evelyn attributes this to her lack of fieldwork experience, as Indiana Jones reminds viewers “if you want to be a good archaeologist, you have to get out of the library” (*Indiana Jones* 2008). Throughout the film, Evelyn is the only female participating in the Egyptology research and derisive comments are made every so often about her gender. For example, when a rival archaeologist quips, “they are led by a woman. What would a woman know?” (*The Mummy* 1999). Similar sentiments are reflected and reinforced in widely read journals such as *National Geographic*. In their journals “the naked eye of the camera often shows the occasional female participant in archaeology...often merely observing what is being pointed out to her and never engaged in the frenzied physical action characteristic of males doing ‘proper’ archaeology” (Gero and Root 1990, 33). Perhaps not surprising, then, the American public has been left with a strong impression that only highly educated, Caucasian males can become archaeologists. These gendered messages seem to be impacting the types of students attracted to archaeology as well. After watching *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, viewers “consistently stated that [the movie] left them feeling alienated from

archaeology as a discipline, that archaeology was an inaccessible discipline to the lay public, and that they themselves probably could never be archaeologists” (Holtorf 2008, 3). Additionally, female characters in all of these films are sexualized. Evelyn is depicted as the courageous and clever, yet beguiling budding Egyptologist; Lara Croft is the fearless, gun-toting, curvaceous and well-endowed fiend out to save precious artifacts; and even the aging Marion Redwood (Indy’s first love interest) is shown to be plucky, witty, and beautiful in her later years. Needless to say, these depictions do not help the female characters build credibility as educated scholars. Another highly sexualized and objectified character in *The Mummy* is the pharaoh’s mistress. She wears only skin paint on her upper torso, and heavy facial makeup, as many assume was a ubiquitous Egyptian practice. Similar sexualized and objectified depictions of foreign women have repeatedly glossed the pages of *National Geographic* magazine, which Solometo and Moss (2013) state has had a detrimental impact on women. “The effect is to support the belief that black and foreign women are “exuberant and excessive in their sexuality”...there is a communication between the lightness of a woman’s skin, her degree of “civilization,” and her amount of sexual restraint” (Solometo and Moss 2013, 137). Even today minority women are portrayed as overly sexual and irresponsible in the media, helping to perpetuate stereotypes and false beliefs among the general public.

### *Race and Ethnicity*

A number of racial undertones are also present in the three films. In *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, the tomb of Spanish Conquistador Orellana is protected by what appear to be native Peruvian men dressed in skins and feathers, a perfect caricature of the primitive individual. These dark-skinned men scream and shout at Indy and his companion,

reinforcing their savageness. Later in the film Amazonian warriors are encountered, “noble savages” who have been tamed by extraterrestrial visitors.

Cliché images of foreigners are most extreme in *The Mummy*. Many Egyptians are depicted, and their accents, accurate or not, are nonetheless pronounced and markedly different from Rick’s American and Evelyn’s British English. When Rick is put in jail for stealing, his Egyptian jailor is shown to be dirty, unscrupulous, and cheating. These general characteristics seem to extend to the when the jailor was a part of Evelyn’s excavation team, removing golden scarabs from ruins and overall being a harsh character. In another scene, Egyptian workers are made to open a tomb that is knowingly rigged and are sprayed with acid. This is blatant disregard for worker safety and implies that American and British lives are worth more than Egyptian ones.

In *Lara Croft*, Cambodian and Siberian nationals are portrayed. Cambodian excavation teams were working for the Illuminati, therefore were cast in a bad light, being paid off by the antagonists. These Cambodians (all men) are shown doing manual labor, in the form of destroying an ancient temple. This image echoes that foreigners cannot be trusted to protect their own heritage. Another example of possible Western subservience was when one of the only Cambodian woman in the film was giving an Illuminati member a back massage. This example shows an enduring theme in *National Geographic* and Archaeological work, that “Westerners have greater sexual license among non-Western, primitive, or ancient women” (Solometo and Moss 2013, 139). The only favorable depiction of foreigners was of Buddhist monks, who offered Lara a phone to call home and tea to heal her wounds. Siberians were also shown in the film, depicted as the quintessential village Eskimo, wearing heavy fur clothes, owning sled dogs, with a distinctly ‘native’ look. This depiction seems well aligned with current Westernized

fascinations with some isolated aspects of Asian cultures, such as Buddhism, yoga, meditation, and far off societies.

### *Politics*

Political agendas are depicted both overly and covertly in these three films. In *Indiana Jones*, American nationalism is promoted through the depiction of an American (Indy) using his superior intellect to fight against the Russians (in his other films, he has done the same against Nazi Germans). American viewers are reminded of American history, in which we overcame evil during WWII and the Cold War. In the latest of Indy's films, the Russians are shown to be untrustworthy and ruthless killers. In the first scene, they are shown shooting several American soldiers at the main gate of the military warehouse in what amounts to a disguised ambush. Throughout the rest of the film, Indy and his companions, are constantly being chased by Irina Spalko and her Soviet division, and repeat images are given to remind the viewer of how invasive the 'Red Scare' was in the 1950's. Fleeing some undercover Soviets, Indy rides a motorcycle through a gang of students protesting Communist Ideologies. Irina Spalko herself highlights the threat of Russians at this time, citing the words of Indy's mentor and atomic bomb designer Julius Oppenheimer in reference of the skull she had in her possession "Now I have become death, the destroyer of worlds" (*Indiana Jones* 2008). In actuality, the quote was from the Hindu Bible as Indy tells her, but Irina took it as nuclear intimidation. Gero and Root (1990) have written that other forms of media have also been used to reinforce national policies and sentiments, noting that American leaders used National Geographic posters and films "at the service of society, promoting America, democracy, and internationalism through exploration, expansion, and imperialism" (Gero and Root 1990, 24).

While the media may cast archaeologists as polarized and politically charged figures, there are, in fact, guidelines that all archaeologists must abide by in order to maintain the integrity of their profession. These guidelines have been formulated into a set of Eight Principles of Archaeology by the Society for American Archaeology (or SAA). Principle one is Stewardship: archaeologists should be caretakers of irreplaceable materials from the past and advocate for funding and support of preservation (SAA 1996, 2). Principle two is Accountability: archaeologists must work with the general public and educate them on research being done in order to create good rapport and promote preservation (SAA 1996, 2). Principle three is Commercialization: buying, selling and keeping objects for profit or enjoyment contributes to the destructions and loss of past human cultures (SAA 1996, 2). Principle four is Education and Public Outreach: archaeologists should educate and promote contributions of archaeology, and should involve minority ethnic, religious and cultural groups (SAA 1996, 2). Principle five is Intellectual Property: all archaeological research and documents must be disseminated to the public to support stewardship and outreach (SAA 1996, 2). Principle six is Public Reporting and Publications: every artifact recovered and document generated by archaeological research should be accessible to the public and kept for permanent reference in a safe location. (SAA 1996, 2). Principle seven, Records and Preservations: entails that records and collections should be preserved for future knowledge and use (SAA 1996, 2). Lastly, Principle eight is Training and Resources: archaeologists that are allowed to conduct research should have adequate experience to ensure safe, ethical, and sustainable work (SAA 1996, 2).

These guidelines outline an ethical approach to the field, and envision a path for the profession, one that is viable in both its research legacy and commitment to past and present cultures. Unfortunately, none of these guidelines are clearly incorporated into any popular media

involving archaeological topics, a fact that has undoubtedly led to the many misconceptions held by the general public about the field of archaeology and archaeologists themselves. Guns and dynamite are part of few archaeological tool kits, and fighting and looting would never be condoned under ethical archaeological fieldwork. The primary benefits of these three films are their incredible ability to generate public interest in Archaeology, and showcase female contributions with Evelyn Carnahan's devotion to hard work, scholarship, and stewardship approach to antiquities and ancient sites. This is the message that should be emphasized in the media, one that depicts archaeology as a science for preserving the past and fostering humanity's present and future.

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