

Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television



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Shawn Malley. *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Liverpool University Press, 2018. Hardcover. 232 pp. \$120. ISBN 9781786941190.

IN the epilogue to *Excavating the Future*, Shawn Malley's provocative and fastidiously researched monograph on archaeological motifs in several contemporary science fiction mainstays, the author updates us on the war on terror, a central backdrop to the fictional narratives he has scrutinized in the preceding chapters: "As I compose this on St. Patrick's Day of 2017, Iraqi and coalition forces are poised to recapture the city of Mosul, the last major ISIS stronghold in northeastern Iraq" (191). Malley's self-reflexive envoi is as striking for what it omits as for what it remarks; given his engagement with the geopolitical truths obscured by the hunt for authentic artifacts, it's surprising that he would not invoke the ongoing contest over truth and authenticity taking place just across the border from his academic post in Quebec.

As I compose this review, on the other side of the Canadian border, we have just buried the 41st U.S. president, amidst a deluge of favorable comparisons to the 45th. Before nostalgia for the first and second Bush administrations has a chance to overtake us, however, we would do well to follow Malley's scholarly trajectory: deriving a perspective on the present by assiduous scrutiny of the framing past.

Before Malley gets to the second Bush administration, his study takes us to the cradle of civilization, via the history and mythology surrounding Babylon. The human heritage associated with the ancient city and its Mesopotamian environs, as well as the threat to this heritage presented by the war on terror, implicates the stakes of preserving its artifacts for posterity. But this stewardship, a significant part of the U.S. mission after 9/11, is not without strategic value in the larger conflict between West and East. Malley unearths telling parallels between the war and preservation efforts mounted around the second Gulf invasion. Just as the Department of Defense issued a deck of cards featuring images of Iraqi "most wanted" in 2003, four years

later, DOD's "Legacy Resource Management Program issued its own deck of cards, this time representing archaeological sites in Iraq and Afghanistan [featuring] instructive slogans about the archaeologically rich terrain upon which soldiers are fighting and to which they should feel historically and culturally connected" (36).

Even more suggestive than the links between soldiering and stewardship in the theater of war are their contemporaneous representation in SF film and television. Central to this representation is the pursuit of ancient artifacts that do much more than drive the plot, according to Malley's introduction: "as a source of objectified temporality in SF, archaeology is a critical tool for unearthing the contradictions and fissures of political discourse displaced into imagined futures" (3), as well as "an important critical medium for teasing out ideological subttextures of historical representation within the genre" (7).

Malley culls from several fan favorites to make his points: *Stargate SG-1* (1997-2007), *Smallville* (2001-2011), and the rebooted version of *Battlestar Galactica* (2004-09). Other choices might seem more questionable—the SyFy channel original film *Manticore* (2005), the second installment of Michael Bay's *Transformers* reboot (2007), the pseudo-documentary series *Ancient Aliens* (2009-), and Ridley Scott's disappointing *Alien* prequel *Prometheus* (2012). More often than not, though, Malley makes these and other excavations of the future richer through his rigorous historical and theoretical framing. The titular monster in *Manticore* is unleashed by Iraqi insurgents in possession of a looted magic amulet. More than a topical creature feature, the film exposes the uncomfortable synergies between military occupation and the media, between hearts and minds and shock and awe: "Sanitizing the archaeological past of its association with dictatorship, the SF telefilm implicitly exonerates the destructive effects of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the West's invention of WMDs. Like the Iraqi extras in this film, the material remains of Mesopotamia play bit parts in cultural spectacles of propriety and control" (42). Malley observes a similar dynamic at work in *Transformers 2*, in which director Bay "repositions archaeological 'landmarks' separated by hundreds of kilometres into a single diegetic field" to represent a battle scene around the Great Pyramid at Giza (66). This aesthetic displacement is just another form of cinematic violence that resonates with the structural violence obscured by the spectacle. Observes Malley, "Tongue-clacking goat herders, whooping Bedouins with their camels, and ubiquitous squawking chickens are atmospheric and anachronistic extensions of

the pyramid, a monolithic Orientalist chronotopic threshold waiting activation by [hero] Sam [Witwicky], the Autobots, and the U.S. military” (67).

Malley’s reading of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) invites comparisons between 9/11 and its cataclysmic precursor in the American mind: the mushroom cloud. Malley discerns this parallel when archaeologist Jones witnesses a nuclear test in Nevada:

If in the moment the audience confuses Jones staring in awe at the detonation with our mediated ground-level views of the towers collapsing in inverted mushroom clouds, the ghostly apparition of the crystal skull is a crystal ball for a post-9/11 America experiencing resurgent Cold War anxieties in the form of nuclear brinkmanship with terrorist states like Iran, Pakistan and North Korea. (101)

The rebooted *BSG* and *Prometheus* gain depth, if not complete coherence, from Malley’s cybernetic reading. In the former, the Galactica itself is an artifact which preserves what remains of humanity after Cylons attack. The search for Earth that galvanizes the narrative is replete with excavations for other artifacts that serve as guides, not just to a new home planet, but to the intertwined destinies of humans and the enemy cyborgs they created. “In *BSG*,” notes Malley, “archaeological sites are places of assembly, contestation and ultimately critical reflection on the dangerous antagonisms and imperial politics that have brought humanity to the brink of extinction” (147). And by going into the intertextuality between *Prometheus* and the 1962 film *Lawrence of Arabia* (the archaeological classic that the cyborg David watches avidly as the crew of *Prometheus* sleeps), Malley makes a strong case that the film’s real plot is not about the human past but the cyborg future: “If *Prometheus* ultimately fails to break radically from the parasite of franchise mythology, the film does gesture towards a cyborg subjectivity beyond recycled myths of biological or mechanical reproduction” (185), adding that “[h]aving given birth to an alien life form herself, [Dr. Elizabeth Shaw, the sole human survivor at the film’s conclusion] is also a cyborg, suggesting a co-evolutionary future alongside [David] her artificial companion” (188).

Invoking such heavy-hitters as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard, and Homi Bhabha, *Excavating the Future* is best for scholars or advanced students already acquainted with a fair amount of theory. Nevertheless, Malley maps rich territory at the intersection of literature, media studies, history, and geopolitics.