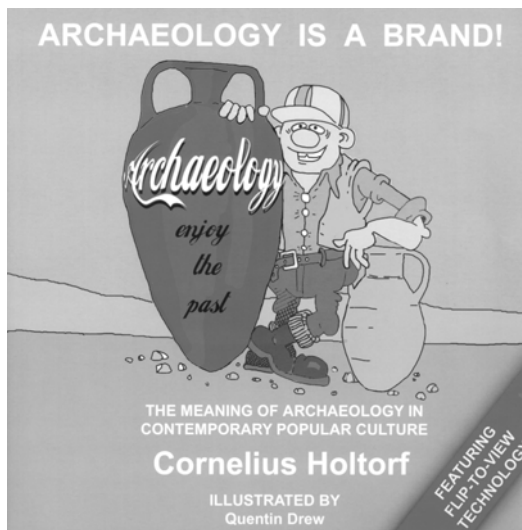


Cornelius Holtorf: *Archaeology is a Brand! The meaning of archaeology in contemporary popular culture*. Archaeopress. Oxford. 2007



ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE POST-STRUCTURAL WORLD.

I was quite reluctant to review the book of Cornelius Holtorf as the title indicated me that it would be more focused on popular culture than on archaeology. However, on the second glance it turned out that the author was set to discuss the meaning of archaeology by examining its meaning in the contemporary popular culture, and this point of view made the work interesting. The book gives a very revealing picture of post-modernism in archaeology.

For Holtorf, archaeology in popular culture means every context but scientific where the word archaeology is used in public. But, when scientific archaeology also gets its meaning in the service of popular culture, all that is left is popular archaeology in the last instance.

The source material for the book is gathered from those expressions of popular culture –films, books, computer games etc. – where the word ‘archaeology’ is mentioned. The author examines publications from Great Britain, Germany, Sweden and also sporadically from the United States.

He also pleads to existing questionnaires, but has not made any of his own. Instead, he has interviewed archaeologists involved in the popularisation of archaeology.

Archaeology seems to be a very trendy affair in the ‘Big World’ today. Holtorf sees its presence everywhere and regards it as one of the most appealing themes of our age. He presents convincing statistics to back up his arguments. For example, the Jorvik Viking centre in York has received nearly 14 million paying visitors since its opening in 1984, and the entrance of school groups has been restricted to one in every 13 minutes. The adventures of Indiana Jones have been seen by 10,000,000 Britons. All three ‘Indy-flicks’ had been seen by 60 % of the respondents taking part in a survey in the U.S. in 1994. Archaeological TV documents have also gained high ratings. In Britain, an archaeological documentary series ‘Time Team’ has got 15–20 % share of the total audience, and thereby managed to beat otherwise popular reality shows like ‘Big Brother’. British archaeological documentaries have also inspired ordinary people to dig test pits in their gardens. ‘Frozen in Heaven’, a TV-documentary on Inca mummies in the Andes has been seen by over 5 million viewers, and books of Erich von Däniken have sold over 65 million copies worldwide.

Holtorf points out that the image of archaeology and archaeologists is very positive in the present day popular culture. While archaeologists are mainly presented as heroes, the image of other scientists is often gloomier: they are often killers or murder victims. The author suggests that the positive image as well as the popularity of archaeology pertains to the funding of the archaeological studies. This belief is not based on any studies. I fail to see how archaeology could have profited from the popularity of Indiana Jones movies or von Däniken’s books. But the producers of entertainment-oriented Indiana Jones movies have made millions just like Erich von Däniken with his forged ‘theories’.

Archaeology is not especially popular from the Finnish perspective. Indiana Jones movies have surely been seen by many and their DVD-editions have sold well; and while quite many archaeologi-

cal programs have been shown on TV in the place of the Sunday afternoon history document by the Finnish Broadcasting Company (YLE), the position of archaeology in the Finnish society is still quite marginal.

In the title of his book Holtorf declares that archaeology is a brand. I would have liked to see some kind of attempt to analyse the concept 'brand'. In this book the concept is used in different way than it is used, for example, in Naomi Klein's book 'No Logo', to which he occasionally refers. The basic meaning of the term brand is a brand of some trade mark. When speaking of archaeology as a discipline, there is no such thing. But, perhaps, the conception of the word 'brand' has nowadays expanded so much that it comprises virtually everything.

But there are bigger problems in Holtorf's account. The author is driven on very strange kind of conceptions, when he does not make any difference between different kinds of popular culture. For him, a serious popular scientific program produced by the Discovery Channel, a computer game, and Indiana Jones movies are all on the same footing.

Holtorf thinks that many archaeologists would like too see the public image of archaeology to be more accurate. By wishing such thing, the archaeologists do not seem to understand the role of the media, which is more interested in presenting drama than the truth. The aim of the media is not to depict scientific realities 'but to turn something what is referentially unreal into something that seems real.'

Yet is that so? Does any archaeologist really bother about the image of archaeology in the adventures of Indiana Jones? It is not our concern. It is not a matter of archaeologists to advise the scriptwriters of entertainment business. They do their job, we do ours. Do surgeons bother how they are depicted in the 'Green Wing'? But this attitude is only valid in the context of pure entertainment. If the scriptwriters of 'Time Team' or other archaeological documentaries are putting out inaccurate or even false information, the situation is quite different. Documentaries and entertainment are two different things, even though the word 'archaeology' would be included in them both. In entertainment archaeology is only a peripheral part of the scenes; in documentaries archaeology is essential for the content. Popular

culture is a different realm and has a different set of rules than science. Science has to deal with the real truth, or else, it is false and that is against our ethics.

Holtorf presents three models of science and society, which are the educational model, public-relations model, and democratic model. Here I will only consider the latter. According to the democratic model, 'grass root' interests in archaeology should be encouraged and cultivated, and archaeologists should accept mature adults' conceptions of the past and archaeology; it is not the task of archaeologists to 'police' the past or decide which images are false.

On theoretical level, unfortunately, Holtorf has little idea of how the sciences and democracy work, and the same goes to the only philosopher he cites, namely Paul Feyerabend. If a 'truly democratic model' had prevailed in the past, the sun would be considered to orbit a flat earth, stone axes would be regarded as thunderbolts, and so on. If such ideas were emotionally satisfactory, they would mean the death of reason. In this false picture of democracy, there would be a circle of layman round a surgeon and a patient voting how the surgeon should operate.

In practise, there is no problem with people having archaeology as a hobby. Take an example from Finland. Pekka Kivikäs began to work with and publish Stone Age rock paintings in the 1980s. Archaeologists did not appreciate his first book, but today he is considered one of our forefront rock-art researchers, and it is not possible to publish anything about Finnish rock paintings without citing his works, which have been written without formal education in archaeology.

But what about fake popular archaeology, like that of Erich von Däniken? Von Däniken presents his ideas as if they were scientific. It sounds harmless. People get what they want. But that is not all. There was, in the beginning of the 20th century, a German linguistic who became an amateur archaeologist and created his own prehistory of the German people and of the Aryans on the basis of Count de Gobineau's racism. The ideology of Gustav Kossina was widely accepted and formed a part of the ideology of Nazism. The application of the democratic model resulted in this case in millions of dead Jews and other people. I do not claim, of course, that any archaeologist living at the time could have prevented that. My point is

simply that the work of amateur archaeologists can be disastrous in certain historical situations.

Holtorf does not present the democratic model as the only possible one. However, in last part of the book, where he is making a synthesis, Holtorf says that ‘most of the professional archaeology is not in the business of education but in storytelling’ and ‘It is a legitimate concern at the end of the book that archaeology may have little else to offer for people other than temporary escapes from the “real” world.’ So, knowledge has no value for Holtorf. And yet there are many ‘lay people’ who regard knowledge as valuable and popular culture mainly as rubbish.

Post-structuralism created an archaeology without prehistoric reality, without metaphysical dimension, and that always produces an implicit epistemology (Muurimäki 1995; cf. Holtorf 1998). In Holtorf’s account, the assumed need for popular culture has taken the place of the intransitive dimension of the science, the vanished prehistoric reality which is the real subject matter of archaeology.

In Holtorf’s presentation, archaeology is creeping on stomach in front of popular culture. Instead of being spineless worshippers of popular culture, however, we should be proud of our profession and the knowledge we have. Even if the ultimate truth is only in the horizon all the time, we are nonetheless making progress in solving the problems which society and our data bring forth. Furthermore, sciences do not passively take orders from the rest of society, but also tell society what to order, which is important; sciences reproduce and transform society. The interests of archaeology are created in the intersection of the interests of society on the one hand and the interests internal to archaeology on the other. It is not always society that tells science what the problems are, but they are often first recognized in a scientific context, and passed on to society for solutions. Without scientific activity nobody would know that the climate is now warming. However, the problem cannot be resolved within sciences, but requires action of all the societies in the world

Indiana Jones and Lara Croft mean nothing to archaeology. People are clever enough to understand that such characters are only for entertainment and have little to do with archaeology. Holtorf underrates people when he thinks that the public takes these characters seriously.

That much about the argument of Holtorf. The book was written very nicely and fluently, with an easily understandable style, and without jargon so peculiar to post-structuralism. The caricatures and cartoons emphasize the impression of easiness. But when I had read about a half of the book, it broke into two pieces. Now that this review is being written, the book is literally a pack of loose pages. Is that to be understood as some kind of inbuilt pro-active material metaphor?

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