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## **Spaces, Places, and Institutions: Representations of Archaeological Museums in Popular Film**

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Spaces, Places, and Institutions:  
Representations of Archaeological Museums in Popular Film

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Representations of Archaeological Museums in Popular Film

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## Chapter 1 | Introduction

In the world of popular culture, consuming material through visual and auditory stimuli such as movies, TV, YouTube, and other social media, has increasingly become the avenue in which the public accesses entertainment and information. This visual culture can sometimes be the only way that people have access to gain knowledge about the world, whether they are actively seeking that information or if it is gained passively. As museums are also an avenue for both entertainment and information, the unique significance of their role and representation in popular media has often been overlooked.

There has been research done about films shown within museums and research about the development of visual spectating in museums (Griffiths, 2002) as well as the relationship between museums and developing technology like film and immersive technology such as VR/panorama/IMAX (Griffiths, 2008). Additionally, there has been some research done about how the field or occupation of archaeology is represented in film which emerged to critique films like *Indiana Jones* which grossly misrepresents the field of archaeology and the way archaeology is conducted today (Hall, 2004; Marwick, 2010). Marwick explains that “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” (Marwick, 2010, p. 394). Therefore, by studying representations of museums in film, this research will seek to grasp a better understanding of how archaeological and anthropological museums are being presented to the public and to what extent those representations reflect the academic and professional realities of museums and museum studies.

The space which has yet to be explored, which is the core of this research, is the representation of museums, specifically archaeological based museums, within popular cinema. Though there is a collection of internally-made films by museums which center around a “behind-the-scenes” perspective (*The New Rijksmuseum, The Great Museum, The City Louvre, National Gallery*), these are produced primarily documentary style focusing on art museums (Hoogendijk 2014; Holzhausen 2014; Philibert, 1990; Wiseman, 2014). Museums in general are often featured in film, yet they are more often art museums than any other type. This is a perspective which has also previously been researched (Oberhardt, 2001). The area which has yet to be explored is how anthropological, archaeological, and ethnographic museums are presented and represented in popular cinema, films specifically created for profit by filmmakers and intended to become successful in popular culture.

The reason archaeological and anthropological museums are the focus of this research is because apart from art museums, these are some of the only museums featured in films. In general, featured museums are often the older, more well-known, national historic museums, if they are explicitly named at all. Despite their popularity, children's museums, science museums, contemporary, and national park museums, etc. are much less likely to be seen in a popular film. The historic nature of archaeological museums, in both the accession of objects and the age of the institution, provides a base for this research to examine archaeology and museum studies through the lens of popular film.

Beyond physically visiting a museum or virtually accessing a museum's website, films are one of the most common avenues in popular culture where museums are seen by the public. So how are those films portraying museums? Are those portrayals factual, relevant, critical, or outlandish? This research will assess recent representations of museums in film through an archaeological and museum studies perspective. It is important for the field of archaeology and museum studies to gauge how popular media is representing their work and their role in society in order to better understand public perceptions about museums which can be largely formed through the consumption of popular media. This is especially poignant in a time when we are seeing the role of museums and their historic relationship to colonial power structures being increasingly questioned by those in academia and the general public. By analyzing films which heavily feature museums to see how or if they can compare to academic discussions about current issues and fields of study in archaeology and museum studies, this research will expand understandings about the interactive relationship between academic interests and popular cinema.

This research will be framed by two main questions. Firstly, how are archaeological, anthropological, and ethnographic-related museums presented in films? Then, going further into the relationship between cinema, archaeology, and museum studies, to what extent do films featuring archaeological/anthropological/ethnographic museums represent current topics and issues within archaeology and museum studies?

To answer these questions, I will be interpreting a variety of films. In addition to watching these films myself, I will also include reviews and criticisms about them from both public and academic audiences. I will analyze the dialogue, subtext, music, lighting, and the museum's relationship to the circumstances of the plot, all of which are purposeful choices to present a museum in a certain way. I will examine the visual/aesthetic aspects of how museums are presented in films as physical spaces. Beyond the basic aesthetics, I will observe if and how the museum is presented as a location/site/place and going further, if and

how it is presented as a cultural institution within society. To support my understandings and interpretations about the representations of museums in film, I will also assess the development of main topics and issues within literature and discourse analysis on film, museum studies, and archaeology.

For this qualitative examination of film, there are three different degrees, or dimensions, I have found in which museums are presented. Similar to Rectanus's theoretical "mobile mise-en-scène" structural argument (Rectanus, 2015), I have found three main realms of presentation. His version of these dimensions are explained firstly as "(1) aesthetic and curatorial strategies of audience engagement which draw on vocabularies of cinematic practice in order to create exhibition spaces or to stage events," in which I will explain the use of spaces and visual seeing (Rectanus, 2015, p. 46). The second dimension as "(2) implicit reference to shared (cinematic) experience embedded in visual culture," in which I will explain the importance of place and interactions within and with place (Rectanus, 2015, p. 46). And finally, the third dimension which I have framed as the museum as an institution, which Rectanus describes as "(3) the construction of meta-discourses (e.g., discourses on the museum itself) which engage audiences in processes of self-reflection and memory – both in terms of their interaction with the objects on display and with respect to their own awareness of how the viewing process creates cultural meaning" (Rectanus, 2015, p. 46). These three theoretical dimensions can exist both simultaneously and independently in a scene, a sequence, or as a theme running throughout, but they are all strategies of display, explanation, and representation by filmmakers for the public. In this research and in the context of film narratives, introducing a museum as a space is the precursor to addressing it as a place and addressing a museum as a place is the foundation to critiquing it as an institution.

For this research I have selected a variety of popular films mainly from the last twenty-five to thirty years which portray different time periods, countries, languages, and genres. The main reason for their selection for this research is that they feature an archaeological, anthropological, ethnographic, or natural history museum, that they are recently relative to modern history, and that they reflect attitudes towards museums. The films and associated museums I will examine in this research include:

- *On the Town* (1949) – Museum of Anthropological History, NYC, USA
- *Intersection* (1994) – Museum of Anthropology, Vancouver, BC Canada
- *The Relic* (1997) – Field Museum of Natural History, Chicago, USA
- *The Mummy* (1999) – Museum of Antiquities, Cairo, Egypt

- *Russian Ark* (2002) – Russian State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia
- *Night at the Museum* (2006) – Natural History Museum, NYC, USA
- *Night at the Museum 2: Battle of the Smithsonian* (2009) – Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C., USA
- *Museum Hours* (2012) – Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Austria
- *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb* (2014) – British Museum, London, England
- *Paddington* (2014) – Natural History Museum, South Kensington, England
- *Black Panther* (2018) – (fictitious) Museum of Great Britain, London, England
- *Museo* (2018) – National Museum of Anthropology, Mexico City, Mexico
- *The Dig* (2021) – British Museum, London, England

All together these works of popular cinema represent a range of different types of films based on subject matter, target audience, depictions of true stories, fantasy worlds and fictional characters, and even imagined museums. The corpus of films which portray elements of archaeology and elements of museums in general is quite large. In contrast, the number of films which portray specifically anthropological and archaeological museums is quite slim, however, they represent some of the most viewed and most popular films in recent years.

The order of this research will go as follows; in Chapter 2 I will look at and discern the most significant topics in museum studies through the development of the field of archaeology. Chapter 3 will analyze the relationships between audiences, cinema, and museums and the developments over the past seventy years, especially in the past twenty-five years. While considering advancements in technology and accessibility to popular cinema, I will examine how those relationships have shifted and continue to shift over time. Following this foundation, in Chapters 4-6 I will assess the selection of films and how museums are represented within them.

Chapter 4 will investigate how museums are presented as spaces, looking specifically at the aesthetics, visuals, and the area around and within the museum being represented. Chapter 5 will explore how museums are presented as places. This will be done by examining the museum as a specific place where things are happening, and by studying the interactions between the actors, the objects, and the place they are in. Finally, in Chapter 6 I will analyze how museums are presented as cultural institutions. This means that in these films there is an acknowledgement of the structure and system of the museum as an institution which has power, and I will examine if the film actively addresses or refers to topics in archaeology or



museum studies with an awareness of important issues and relevant history. Lastly, in Chapter 7 I will discuss the important consequences of these different levels and areas of representation and how this research can help museums and films learn from each other as representatives of the past, the public, and academia.

## **Chapter 2 | Topics in Museum Studies**

Museums are complex, multifaceted institutions. Traditionally they are associated with grand magnificent buildings, rooms, and spaces, places to display and preserve objects of national, cultural, and world history. Their locations, often in the center of cities and capitols, point to their important relation to the area's history and current day prominence. From the public's general perspective, museums can be fascinating, boring, infinite, magical, constant, and ever-changing. But where did museums come from? How did they develop into the spaces, places, and institutions we see and interact with today? The archaeological museum in particular has captivated curious individuals and masses for centuries, allowing the public to glimpse pieces of long-gone eras and ancient peoples. In order to discuss how museums are represented in film in the past and today, we first must look at how museums came into being. The examination of their development from individual collections into national institutions, gives way to the study of museums and the current issues which are discussed and debated nowadays.

### **2.1 The Development of Museums**

To comprehend the current state of museums in relation to this research, a summary of their history and development is needed to understand how and why they have evolved into the multifaceted and complex institutions we see today. Evidence of collecting is seen far back into human history, but the seeds of the modern museum, and especially archaeological museums, are tied to European imperialist and colonialist expansion. From early rooms of private collections, through their growth during the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and the Revolution to publicly accessible buildings, leading into the modern era, the Western "museum" as a concept has changed drastically since its conception as it continues to grapple with its past in order to sustain itself as an institution for the future.

Private collections curated by those of means, both monetarily and socially, had been around for some time before the period of the Renaissance further framed collecting and displaying as a popular "social activity and as an intellectual pursuit for individuals" (Simmons, 2016, p. 59). Wealthy Europeans of status found a hobby in collecting while "intellectuals" constructed systems of organization to "classify the influx of strange objects and unknown plants and animals arriving from the New World and other previously unexplored areas (Nieto Olarte, 2013), and a new spirit of creativity began to reshape art, literature, and music" (Simmons, 2016, p. 59). These classification systems were displayed in wardrobes and later entire rooms known as Curiosity Cabinets. The cabinets were a way to

store and display rare items in order to impress guests. In many ways this is still how museums today are seen in their most basic form.

In the transition away or beyond the Renaissance, “from this collecting, studying, and classifying, the modern museum arose in the years of the Enlightenment that followed, and with this change came the fragmentation of collections into such specializations as art, history, and science museums” (Simmons, 2016, p. 91). This division by subject is a particularly Western way of classifying knowledge. In the later exportation of the “museum” by the West, this system perpetuated a singular way of viewing the past in other areas of the world, especially formerly colonized areas. In the 1600s, the ways of thought during the Enlightenment and the scientific revolution further tried to create systems of classification by way of purposeful organization and display. Simmons (2016) quotes Moser (2006), in his argument that the “display of objects in collections became a “strategic practice that aimed to both import messages and create a visual effect” because “both the individual objects and the display as a whole functioned as sources of information, collections being intended to communicate on a number of levels” (Moser, 2006, p. 31)” (Simmons, 2016, p. 93). The growth of the industrial sector, scientific thought, and continued exploitation of rural environments and native peoples through colonial violence, boosted both the physical size of collections and the level of interest by the wealthy, and later the interest of the general public. By the 1700s, “there were two separate definitions of the word museum: one emphasizing the physical structure housing the collection, the other emphasizing the collection housed in the physical structure – but both centered around the idea of the association of objects and learning” (Simmons, 2016, p. 2). The collections in the Age of Enlightenment had grown beyond cabinets and rooms and eventually entire wings and buildings were reserved to house these still mostly private collections. It wasn’t until the late 1700s when mass public access was first allowed.

The focus on classification and scientific study played an important part in keeping collections out of reach from the public. Museums were not designed solely to present their collections to the masses, but rather to house objects, artifacts, and specimens for the purpose of study. In the same way that none of the objects in museums were designed or created to be placed in a museum, the structural institutional background of museums was designed in a way to hold and preserve items collected by and presented for the wealthy. For example, though the British Museum was founded in 1753 as a “new, national museum open to the public,” actual access was limited, restricted, and difficult to obtain (Simmons, 2016, p. 113). The Museum was founded in conjunction with acquisitions of library collections as “the

library was considered a fundamental research tool necessary to make full use of the collections” (Simmons, 2016, p. 113). In Europe, the French Revolution had a significant impact on museums being accessible to the public. The Louvre became open to the public in 1793 following the overthrowing of the monarchy and the belief that things which had previously been kept away in the privacy of royal buildings, should be available to the general public. However, this did not set an immediate precedent and it took time for museums to be more broadly publicly accessible across the rest of Europe (Simmons, 2016). The French Revolution and the opening of the Louvre aid in pointing to the inextricable connection between the museum as an institution and its use as a tool of national identity and politics.

Though museums have only relatively recently been officially defined as institutions, it is clear that they were “developed out of the erstwhile art and curiosity cabinets of the Renaissance and, since the eighteenth century, through the gradual opening of the princely picture galleries to the non-nobility – were a tool for nations to position and differentiate themselves in relation to others” (Meyer et al., 2013, p. 3). In his work *The Birth of the Museum*, Tony Bennett illustrates the complexity of how entities like museums are used as national institutional tools of control as he argues

The enlistment of the institutions and practices of high culture for governmental purposes was similarly aimed at producing a better economy of cultural power. As has been noted, festivals, royal entries, tournaments, theatrical performances and the like had all served as means (among other things) for the periodic – and hence intermittent and irregular – display of power before the populace” (Bennett, 1995, p. 23).

The way in which Western museums systematically curated items to showcase their perceptions of other cultures was for the purpose of maintaining their conceived superiority and power. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, museums were especially used to justify ideas of racism as evidenced by the exploitation of indigenous people and cultures in the Americas, Africa, Asia, and Australia through colonial violence for the purpose of national achievement. As Dan Hicks states, “the western anthropology museum *is* white infrastructure” (Hicks, 2021, p. 225). Any discussion about the history of museums, and specifically anthropological, archaeological, ethnographic, universal, and world culture museums, must acknowledge this past as it formed the foundation of the museums we have today.

In the past fifty years or so, the criticism of museums has continued to develop, especially with the advancement of museum studies as an academic discipline, and later, as this research will explore, the representation of museums within popular cinema. McClellan summarizes these more recent developments of museum criticism starting as an

early phase propelled by the intellectual and social ferment of the 1960s attacked museums as instruments of state authority and elite influence, and sought to open their doors to previously marginalized groups, including women. A subsequent phase of the 1980s and 1990s, building on the first, pioneered case studies of prominent institutions and postmodern artists whose work deliberately resisted the museum's aesthetic and taxonomic norms. Critics exposed museum practices and narratives as culturally constructed and questioned the representation (or absence) of non-Western traditions in Western museums" (McClellan, 2007, p. 566).

This awareness of the museum as worthy of public critique, since it is a "public" institution, and that the public have the right to voice their opinions about it in hopes that the museum hears them, is a reaction and instance which has gained more support in recent years. In the 1980s Thomas (2016) explains, "the museum might be where you took your child to see a dinosaur, but at worst it seemed a dinosaur itself, a bulky and cumbersome creature, devoid of vitality, if not actually extinct" (Thomas, 2016, p. 22). This idea that museums, as they were constructed, formed, and shaped by the events and decisions of the past, no longer served the needs of the current public, spurred much academic contemplation about the state of museums and what needed to change for them to be beneficial for society in the current time and in the future. Heritage and museum studies as an academic discipline became a central agent of the discussion surrounding museums "which embraced on the one hand technical guidance in fields such as museum education, cataloguing and conservation, and on the other critical theory focused on issues of representation and politics" (Thomas, 2016, p. 30).

Additional changes during the 1990s, as outlined by McClellan (2007), were due to "two rising problems that further complicated museum governance and public relations, namely commercialism and cultural property" (McClellan, 2007, p. 567). In response to changing financial situations, such as "escalating costs and decreasing government subsidies," priorities shifted and "fundraising and donor cultivation succeeded

connoisseurship as the primary criteria for new museum directors” (McClellan, 2007, p. 567). This is a theme often represented in the films of this era, the “poor” museum desperate for renewed funding and reliant on wealthy donors, a depiction which will be further discussed in Chapter 6.

Today, challenges are associated with the development of the digital age. The digitalization of collections either partially or in full has become more popular, especially in periods like the Covid-19 pandemic when museums were closed. In the midst of this digital era, “we find ourselves in a landscape filled not only with a newly created digital heritage, but also non-digital cultural heritage that has now been digitized and made openly available” (Grau et al., 2017, p. 14). Though we cannot know what this will mean for the future of museums, the impact of the current digital era should not be overlooked.

The concept of the museum has been in existence for centuries, with a history of collecting that goes back much farther. The fact that the general structure of museums has only slightly altered since their conception and has rather continued to grow and expand is proof that the public has wanted what museums have to offer. The development from private cabinets to entire building complexes mirrors the ever-steady interest over time. However, though museums remain popular for the general public, the increase in critique of the practices and structures of museums by the public has also increased with the development of stronger and faster dissemination and access to information. In this digital era, the spread of information will continue, leading to an unknown fate for the future of museums.

## **2.2 Current Significant Issues**

Building on this general overview of the development of museums, we can understand why certain topics in museum studies are more common, contested, and currently more pressing than others. In addition to the long-standing issues of object restitution and repatriation, provenance research, and more broadly, decolonization, the increased access to information spread digitally through popular culture and social media has made it easier and more accessible for the public to become aware of issues surrounding museums, and therefore think and speak critically about them.

Though at times it can seem as though institutions like the museum are resistant to change, holding tightly to their objects and pasts, Dine (2021) writes that “similar to popular culture, museum theory and practice are driven by and exert influence upon social, political, and cultural concerns. Many, but not all, museums are working toward equity and inclusion, though at times slowly with obvious and, through social media, well-broadcasted stumbles”

(Dine, 2021, p. 28). This is a reminder that museums have the power to influence and be influenced by the wants and needs of the public. While there is an ever-growing critical academic perspective in museum studies, despite it rarely leading to definitive action, McClellan reminds us that even though “museology has become a self-sustaining branch of academic study with strong debts to the leading lights of critical theory (Michel Foucault, Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, Pierre Bourdieu, Edward Said, etc.) [this] should not obscure the extent to which it has been motivated by a desire to bring about change in real-world museums” (McClellan, 2007, p. 566).

Much has been written about object repatriation and decolonization in museums, however, for the purpose of this research I will briefly discuss these issues as later I will examine to what extent these issues appear in popular film. To summarize these terms, according to the Oxford English dictionary, restitution is “the restoration of something lost or stolen to its proper owner”, while repatriation is the return of something to its country of origin (Oxford University Press, 2023). This is an important distinction because while stolen objects often came from individuals, there is very rarely a way to trace back the object to its original owner due to the lack of documentation and the often violent act of taking, so the discussion around the return of objects becomes a national, state-to-state issue. In the western world “for established European museums, repatriation problems mostly concern demands from former colonies that now want to control their cultural patrimony; for the newer American museums, troubles stem from postwar efforts to build collections quickly, which have led them into temptation to acquire undocumented objects that may have been looted and/or illicitly exported from their country of origin” (McClellan, 2007, p. 569). It is important to note that the many of the stolen objects in museums have been contentious and controversial for a long time, sometimes for as long as they have been in a museum’s possession.

Two of the most high-profile cases in the discussion around repatriation are that of the Parthenon marbles, more commonly called the Elgin marbles, and the case of the Benin Bronzes, of which includes nearly 10,000 looted objects from the Kingdom of Benin. These cases, well-known in the museum studies context, are becoming more generally known through their inclusion in popular culture media segments. As of April 2023, a 2022 segment on “Last Week Tonight with John Oliver” titled “Museums” had 8.3 million views of YouTube and uses the case studies of the Parthenon Marbles and the Benin Bronzes to explain issues like repatriation, provenance and holding museums accountable for their foundations built on slavery and colonialism (LastWeekTonight, 2022). Another issue

mentioned in that segment is the idea of storage and hoarding, discussed more specifically in Malcolm Gladwell's podcast, Revisionist History, in an episode titled "Dragon Psychology 101" (Gladwell, 2020). By relating the practice of museums hoarding objects, displaying only a select few while maintaining massive amounts of unseen, uncared for, and often unresearched objects in storage facilities, to the way that dragons hoard gold, Gladwell exposes the absurdity of how some museums refuse to engage in discussions about repatriating stolen or looted objects when they often don't even know everything that is stuffed away in storage, or have conducted any research on the object's history, provenance, or provenience.

I was in Holland on my book tour in Leiden. Out with a bunch of people at a bar... and this one guy, a philosopher said 'Oh, its like Smaug.' Smaug the dragon from The Hobbit who sits on a mountain of treasure. Smaug doesn't want to use his gold. He doesn't wear it out to dragon social events. He doesn't list his holdings on his annual dragon financial statement. He just wants to hoard it. And I'm like 'Oh my god. Smaug.' That explains everything" (Gladwell, 2020).

Though this is an imaginary association, the underlying issue comes through; as institutions formed, built, and maintained by systemic racism, colonialism, and imperialism, museums have been allowed to uphold damaging practices and ways of thinking about non-western cultures, communities, practices, people, and objects that no longer serve or represent the world outside its doors. Social media outlets like YouTube or podcasts and the popularity of these segments show that the public is becoming more aware of museum issues and will be more likely to join in the critique of museum practices in the future. Likewise, because these issues are becoming more well-known in popular culture, information segments and entertainment media may feel more compelled to openly address them.

The broader concept of decolonization is also commonly discussed in the context of museums. Though it is sometimes used as a buzzword to conflate museums with reform, the importance of decolonization should not be understated. Decolonization, in the context of this research, means the undoing of the ongoing colonial systems and practices that uphold the racist, sexist, and classist justifications for so-called western superiority from the period of imperial expansion until today. So much of the museum institution that we are familiar with was built upon colonial ideology and colonial-based wealth at the direct expense of



indigenous and enslaved peoples in Africa, Asia, Australia, and the Americas. Colonialism deeply impacted and continues to impact daily life around the world and consequently decolonization is not something that has an end goal. Decolonization is a process and thus, nothing affected by colonialism will ever be fully decolonized. Achille Mbembe states that “the decolonization of buildings and public spaces includes a change of those colonial names, iconography, ie., the economy of symbols whose function, all along, has been to induce and normalize particular states of humiliation based on white supremacist presuppositions.” (Mbembe, 2015, p. 6). While the idea of the “universal” museum has become a way of avoiding or minimalizing association with colonial-based museums, this is also a dangerous way of thinking. The problem with these universal museums is that they approach presenting other (usually non-western) cultures from a western standpoint. Mbembe argues that rather than universality, museums and other “universal” institutions should consider the idea of pluriversality. By rationalizing that “knowledge can only be thought of as universal if it is by definition pluriversal,” there is a way for museums to address their colonial past without trying to represent other cultures from their western perspective (Mbembe, 2015, p. 19).

In his book *The Brutish Museums*, Dan Hicks examines the case of the Benin Bronzes in another exploration of decolonization. In this deep dive into a period of colonial violence, looting, and as he calls it, democide, Hicks uncovers the reality that it was not just one event, but a series of ongoing events of imperial violence, for the purpose of perpetuating white supremacy, that persists today in the form of those stolen objects. Those objects which were then dispersed around the world and are still prominently displayed as “representative” of “African art.” Not only does this have negative impacts on the source communities, but also on audiences who see those objects in museums as the museums are explicitly taking the stance that it is acceptable for a western museum to display a stolen object and attempt to frame themselves as the expert and rightful caretaker. For Hicks, there is only one way for these institutions to answer the call for the decolonization of museums,

But these institutions have an immense task to change themselves, dismantle, repurpose, re-imagine, disaggregate. The crucial first task, I suggest, is to understand and take action on every object that was violently taken within the collection. Anthropology museums will only be able properly to fulfil their central, crucial function – to bring a sense of other ways of seeing, knowing, living, and making into the Euro-American consciousness, including an awareness of the universal importance of material culture in human lives –

when nothing in their collection is present against the will the others. A major programme of returns, in which every departure is marked by a new creative act by an artist or designer, is the essential next step, hand-in-hand with transforming anthropology museums into sites of remembrance and conscience for the human lives, environments, and cultures destroyed by European colonialism, past, present, and future” (Hicks, 2021, p. 228).

With the growing access to information through social media and the digitalization of records, photographs, and other sources, the awareness of these issues spreads faster than ever before.

Though it is promising that there are more and more discussions about museum issues and topics through areas of study like museum studies, standing up to powerful institutions is another story. Debate within museum studies and across disciplines is growing but the extent to which it leads to real change in museums is low. McClellan writes that like in the past, “museum studies will follow, and help to define, whatever new issues arise in the years to come. Analysis and critique are vital to museums as to any social institution and should be viewed as the legitimate prerogative of all who care about their future” (McClellan, 2007, p. 569-570). However, he notes that there should be more engagement by museum professionals in discussions about museum studies, an argument also recognized and addressed by Hicks. This is significant because “a failure to engage in debate with their critics leaves the field one-sided and risks allowing the crucial work museums do to go unappreciated” (McClellan, 2007, p. 570). Museums are meaningful cultural institutions in society and for them to remain modern, museum professionals must be willing to address issues head-on, rather than continuing to ignore or disregard criticisms which intend to reshape them into institutions which acknowledge their complex pasts in order to confront their current problematic issues, and work to make museums more respectful and sustainable for the future.

## Chapter 3 | Cinema History and Archaeology

Cinema has developed in stages, firstly silent cinema, then with the introduction of sound technology, the period of sound cinema, followed by modern cinema, and the current period, which I consider to be the time of streaming cinema. The advancement of the industry through these stages has paved the way for the kinds and scale of films we see today. While not everyone is a film fanatic, film is everywhere as a source of entertainment, storytelling, dissemination of information, and artistic expression. One thing to note is that in the context of this research, cinema refers to the physical theater and the film industry at large, while film refers to either collective or individual movies.

### 3.1 The Development of Cinema

On the surface, the similarities between the cinema and the museum are easily discernable. They both exist for public visitation and largely involve an audience viewing something which has been presented. Visitors have expectations that they will be entertained, and that they may learn something or walk away with a new perspective. Though some museum and movie experiences are much more lighthearted, intended to simply amuse, others go significantly deeper, attempting to have a profound impact on their visitors. The development of museums started before the beginning of cinema, however, they have both undergone substantial technological, societal, and cultural changes since their beginnings. As the previous chapter has provided an overview of the development of museums, a summary of the development of cinema is necessary to understand and frame the analysis of the films to follow. In his book *The Oxford History of World Cinema*, Nowell-Smith's comment on the need for a review of this history of cinema, also makes a point about the history of museums, as he says

No understanding of films is possible without understanding the cinema, and no understanding of the cinema is possible without recognizing that it – more than any other art, and principally because of its enormous popularity – has constantly been at the mercy of forces beyond its control, while also having the power to influence history in its turn” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. xix).

Both the cinema and the museum have been used as tools for political gain and national identity on the world's stage. Yet, once those presentations and narratives are public, the institutions lose some control over how messages will be perceived. For example, though the

“museum” has historically claimed to be a neutral space, it is inextricably tied to its damaging colonial past.

The origins of modern cinema began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Largely accredited to the French and Americans, who initiated the exportation and development of cinema around the world, this founding period was centered around “silent” cinema (Nowell-Smith, 1996). The subsequent success of the American market in particular is due to the looming conflicts of World War I and II in Europe. The Americans achieved their place at the center of the cinematic industry by “protecting their own market and pursuing a vigorous export policy,” and later, “during the war, while Europe languished, the American cinema continued to develop, pioneering new techniques as well as consolidating industrial control” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. 3). After World War I, markets around the world continued to develop cinema as an art form, catering to the various cultural needs of audiences outside of the Hollywood influence. Outside of the mainstream market, filmmakers experimented with different artistic styles and more avant-garde aesthetics. The period of “Silent Cinema” existed from its beginning around 1895 until after World War I and the invention of sound technology around 1930.

The invention of sound technology in association with cinema was revolutionary. It began with the premiere of *The Jazz Singer* in New York on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1927, in which a sound disk was synchronized with the mouths of actors and the motions of the film (Nowell-Smith, 1996). This technological advancement was extremely impactful for the future and popularity of the cinema as an industry. As an art form which previously was primarily visual, the cinema gained new acclaim as scripts, writing, dialogue, music, and singing became much more important for success in the newfound era of “Sound Cinema.” Nowell-Smith explains the significance of this change in the way that,

Sound affected film form and the structure of the industry in equal measure... Playwrights and script-writers assumed a new importance. An entirely new genre, the musical film, came into being. The integration of music on to the sound-track brought massive redundancies among theatre musicians but it also meant that exhibition conditions became standardized since the film was now the same wherever it was shown. Visual styles became cramped by the inflexible new technology. Hollywood suffered a temporary set-back in overseas markets because audiences demanded dialogue in their own language. Since in the early years of sound all dialogue had to be recorded

live, the practice grew up in making films in multilingual versions, with different actors, until the institution of dubbing in the mid-1930s made it superfluous” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. 207).

In addition to sound technology, the introduction of color and widescreen formats further developed cinema’s popularity and artistic opportunity. Color, though introduced in the 1930s, did not become mainstream until after World War II because it was both expensive and complicated (Nowell-Smith, 1996). In some ways, during this tumultuous time, cinema became an escape for the public. Elsaesser argues that “this would be cinema’s allegorical truth for the first half of the twentieth century: moving pictures envisaged as the necessary compensation for the rigors of the industrial labour process, but also as a machine for self-display and self-representation” (Elsaesser, 2019, p. 128). Through the difficulties of massive societal changes, the experience of the cinema provided the public with a way to imagine different worlds, different possibilities, and different futures. The appreciation for this industry is seen through its persistence through the war and continued technological advancements. After World War II, widescreen formats were further developed in the 1950s partially to compete with the rising popularity of television (Nowell-Smith, 1996). The period of “Sound Cinema” is split into two parts as World War II halted, disrupted, and distorted the world and in response, industries like cinema had to change and adapt to adhere to the needs of the public.

World War II had a significant impact on the cinematic market not only in the mainstream but also other national markets. The mainstream industry was running at peak performance up until the War and took some time to redevelop following the destruction and reorganization of world powers, markets, and regimes. For example, “in east central Europe and in China the cinema revived rapidly after the devastation of war, but it was also subject to bureaucratic control by the newly installed Communist regimes” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. 207). In India, following the struggle for independence from British colonization, the cinema industry became central for creating works for the Indian public, bolstering and reforming national identity, which transformed into the mega-industry that is Bollywood.

The period which Nowell-Smith calls “Modern Cinema” came into being around the 1960s when “the traditional fully integrated system, with the same company controlling all aspects of a film’s progress, from conception to production to distribution to exhibition, had definitely become obsolete” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. 463). Like many areas of culture and society, the cinema industry also played a part in both influencing and being affected by the

issues of the 60s and 70s including feminism and the Civil Rights Movement. The cinema became, more than ever, a place for expression and artistic freedom as it “spoke more directly to these mainly young audiences than did any of the more traditional art forms” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. 463). Although Hollywood and the broader cinema industry can both reflect and project popular opinions, it is important to recognize that “Hollywood makes films for entertainment and profit, not primarily to convey some sense of historical events” (Hiscock, 2012, p. 163). So, while films of the 60s and 70s seemed to “speak” specifically to young people, who were great drivers of change during that period, this does not mean that Hollywood or the cinema industry explicitly stood for or supported their movements of social and political change, merely that audiences appreciated what they were being shown in the cinema.

The tool of reflection in cinema is used a method to promote success, popularity, and profit of films “by re-expressing and exploring the mythology of popular culture, Hollywood creates films which audiences see as both familiar and relevant” (Hiscock, 2012, p. 163). This point is central to why this research is important. While cinema and films can reflect how museums are generally seen by the public, in turn they can also project long-held stereotypes, perspectives, and histories, which are no longer accurate or beneficial to supporting public awareness of the issues and important topics within museum studies today. Bowles contributes to this argument by relaying that “the belief that films are sociohistorical symptoms of some kind has animated a parallel discussion of film texts among traditional historians, albeit one focused more narrowly on whether or not popular movies represent trustworthy or untrustworthy accounts of the past” (Bowles, 2001, p. 855). She notes that one historian, Peter Miskell, argued that “films are inaccurate. They distort the past. They fictionalize, trivialize, and romanticize people, events, and movements. They falsify history,” meanwhile, “rather less openly, he suggests, historians object to history films because these representations of the past are out of their control, but reach far wider audiences than historians do” (Bowles, 2001, p. 855). There is clearly a separation between the extent to which those in the realm of western academia care to influence the represented issues within film, and the extent to which films care to reflect up-to-date perspectives and topics within academia.

While we are still experiencing a time of modern cinema, a more apt title for the period we are currently in is “Streaming Cinema.” In addition to the developments of VHS tapes and DVDs, which are practically already outdated, the public no longer has to physically visit a cinema to access films. Streaming services have quickly become the most

popular avenue for audiences to access films and shows. These services not only present the most recently produced films, they hold a massive collection of films, going back to sound and silent cinema. These streaming services, in essence, are museums of their own, holding and preserving pieces to be accessible for the public for the foreseeable future. In comparison to recent decades, the public has faster access to an increasingly wider array of films, not only from their own country, but from around the world, in different languages, and from different industries. This period of mass digitalization also reflects changes in digitalization of museum collections.

### **3.2 Cinema and Archaeology**

Though there has not been much research about how museums are represented in films, there have been various examinations of how archaeology is represented in film due to the popularity of films like the *Indiana Jones* series, the *Lara Croft* movies, and others in the action/adventure, semi-fantasy genre. As I will be examining films featuring archaeological and anthropological museums, it is pertinent to first review how archaeology as a field is represented in film. By looking through the frame of film as a product of public archaeology, it is clear that some of the most popular movies people associate with archaeology misrepresent it as a field and a profession. In understanding how archaeology is portrayed in film, we can develop a better analysis of why archaeological museums are portrayed the way they are.

Public archaeology can have many outlets, and subsections (Moshenska, 2017), but for the purpose of this research, films are a matter of public archaeology in the form of popular archaeology or media archaeology because films represent “the communication of archaeological research to the public through accessible and user-friendly media,” rather than other presentations of archaeology found in museums and cultural heritage projects, which are focused more on education and science than on entertainment (Moshenska, 2017, p. 9). Hall claims that there has not yet been an example in film of the reality of the field of archaeology or as a profession, which further distances the public from understanding it (Hall, 2004). In this way, public archaeologists have failed to properly communicate the work in their field to the world and popular films have continued to perpetuate outdated and unrealistic expectations.

Although not included in this research, archaeology documentaries are popular in a “niche market” but, as Dyke argues, “part of the explanation for this genre’s appeal may be that, like other aspects of the burgeoning heritage industry, popular archaeology helps reify

and consolidate bourgeois Euro-American class interests and identities” (Dyke, 2006, p. 371). This is clear in the way that the majority of archaeology documentaries fuel antiquated ideas of exoticism, perpetuating racial stereotypes from the stance of western superiority. As such, I will not be examining archaeology documentaries as part of this research.

Whether members of the public are deeply or vaguely interested in archaeology, they inevitably interact with it on some level, and it is therefore imperative to examine what is being presented and shown. In his overview about archaeology in film, Hall (2004) explains that as a profession, archaeology is often misrepresented. Oftentimes, professions depicted in film are those which are most recognizable to the public, i.e., “doctors, teachers, lawyers and police” and the stereotypes they embody are based on the public’s interactions with them (Marwick, 2010, p. 395). However, the general public does not interact with archaeology or archaeologists at the same frequency that they do with teachers or doctors. McGeough explains how this results in a misperception of the field at large because

Within popular film, there appears to be significant confusion about how archaeology is structured as a profession. Audiences are given a variety of messages about the actual organization of archaeological work, and the relationship between archaeologists and public institutions (museums, universities, and government agencies). There is further confusion about where funding comes from and how archaeologists are financially compensated for their work. Films confuse the general public about what archaeologists do, who they do it for, and how archaeologists are able to make a living” (McGeough, 2006, p. 175).

The most common association for people when they hear “archaeology” and “movies” is *Indiana Jones*. Since 1981 and the first installment of the adventures of Dr. Jones in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Indiana Jones has become a representation of archaeology for the public. The subsequent release and popularity of the Indiana Jones sequels has perpetuated this mischaracterization of archaeology.

In-depth analysis of the Indiana Jones films and the extent to which they represent archaeology is an area which has already been examined (Hall, 2004; McGeough, 2006). In the context of this research, some of the most important points they make are that firstly, though it is reasonable that Indiana Jones works at a college and has a connection to



academia, what is amiss is that “Indy’s archaeological adventures are funded directly by the museum; antiquities are bought directly from Indy, and his teaching responsibilities can be dropped at a moment’s notice” (Spielberg, 1981; McGeough, 2006, p. 175). Furthermore,

In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, Dr Jones returns of the Shiva Stones to the village from which it was stolen, on the basis that if he did not do so it would only sit in a museum gathering dust with other rocks. Allowing that this is a veiled admission that the items should not go to a foreign museum, nevertheless this support for culture in the community is, in effect, misleadingly set against the alternative of museum storage” (Hall, 2004, p. 164).

However, Hall also argues that this circumstance “does accurately reflect a perception in the popular consciousness that the objects in storage are being deliberately concealed from view, and also raises the question of museums as dead places, where treasures are merely hoarded” (Hall, 2004, p. 164-165). The connection between archaeology and museums is clearly present in these films, but their interdependent relationship and the processes by which artifacts are excavated, collected, and curated to end up in museum collections are either entirely omitted or grossly misconstrued, leaving space for further misconceptions of this relationship.

Archaeology is further misrepresented in the popular *Lara Croft* films where “archaeology is graphically equated with looting and site destruction... and a very ready client relationship with auction houses” (Hall, 2004, p. 165). McGeough remarks that because of films and depictions of archaeology like this, “it is no wonder that in outreach settings, public audiences are surprised to find out that archaeologists are not allowed to keep that they find” (McGeough, 2006, p. 175). While part of this can be attributed to the dramatization by filmmakers for entertainment value, fault also lies in the failure of proper science communication by archaeologists and public/popular archaeology to explain the field, their work, and the processes and practices of their profession. Hiscock summarizes this misrepresentation of archaeology in film by stating that

i) as archaeologists and historians have failed to understand, the dominant representation of archaeological research and the development of human culture in mainstream cinema involves supernatural objects and events;

- ii) movies frequently present images of the human past that are pseudoarchaeological in the sense that they tell the same stories as alternative archaeology even though they may not make an explicit claim to the truthfulness of the events depicted;
- iii) the cinematic history of these narratives is deep, demonstrating that modern cinema not only reproduces popular pseudoarchaeological research, it has also contributed to the growth of these stories; and
- iv) these propositions provide new insights into cinematic depictions of the human past and the ways archaeologists have sought to employ the popularity of film for their own purposes” (Hiscock, 2012, p. 157).

Though this summary is focused on representations of archaeology in cinema, Hiscock’s points can easily be related to issues of museum representation in film. As will be discussed more in length later, the consistency of the “supernatural” in archaeological films, and “magical” artifacts in museums is a massively popular cinematic trope, one that is continuously reused and emphasized. In his research of archaeology in film, Hall points out that “the cinematic image of archaeology fluctuates between the poles of the positive pursuit of hidden knowledge (this dispelling ignorance) and the negative rape of the sacred and indigenous” (Hall, 2004, p. 171). The “anti-establishment” pursuit of hidden knowledge emphasizes the way in which the public feels excluded from archaeology in reality, finding it only accessible through cinematic rebels who are willing and able to undermine the privileged authority (Hall, 2004). The other significant point made by Hiscock (2012) and reiterated by Hall is that

The other major drawback is cinema’s sense of authenticity. Most of the films in question are not concerned with giving precise lessons in historical, archaeological or scientific fact. It is certainly true though that many of them claim to achieve a look that is authentic but this is a narrow meaning of authenticity, one essentially to do with persuaded believability (Hall, 2004, p. 172-173).

Films about artifacts and archaeology are not required to present factual representations, however, when nearly every film on the subject perpetuates “inauthentic” or skewed perspectives, an overall misinterpretation about archaeology or museums gets carried into

reality by the public. This brings us back to the purpose of this research. By examining how archaeological museums are presented in film, we can better understand the public's perception towards museums and whether or not the realities of museum studies and current topics are being appropriately conveyed in those films, or if there is no reliable and honest representation in existence.

## Chapter 4 | The Aesthetics of Museum Space

Even though there are so many different kinds of museums, the ones which are most often featured in film are the older, more well-known museums situated in large cities. The aesthetics of “the museum” as a concept, in conjunction with the tourist’s gaze, portray these institutions as beautiful structures with grand interiors. The complexity of visuality and seeing, which are vital to these older museums which offer little interaction for visitors beyond the sense of sight, are doubly relayed through the visuals offered by film. The interactions between sight and sound, and sound and silence, are also prevalent in scenes within museums. Together, all of these aesthetic choices reflect and project the experiences and interactions that the public has had with museums, and how museums are visually seen. This chapter explores the concept of space within museums, meaning the abstract, multidimensional physical space that is being represented. This is separate from the concept of place, which will be explored in the next chapter.

### 4.1 The Idealized Museum Aesthetic

One of the most idyllic museum aesthetic films is *Russian Ark*, a 2002 film by Russian filmmaker Alexander Sokurov (Sokurov, 2002). The film is one continuous shot, following an unseen narrator and others throughout the Russian State Hermitage Museum. The narrator is lead throughout the museum by his companion, a diplomat with many opinions about the building, the people, and Russia. The representation of the building and the visuals of its spaces promote imagery of the “elite museum building” and an aesthetically “ideological perspective” (Louagie, 1996; Schmidt, 2016). The idealized western museum aesthetic is not a “movie misrepresentation”, as Louagie argues, since “most museums look like nineteenth century castles because they were built during the nineteenth century” (Louagie, 1996, p. 42).

Not only is *Russian Ark* unique for its storytelling approach, but the use of the continuous shot throughout the entire length of the film allows for an immersive experience of the Hermitage. The film transitions between different time periods, as you walk with the narrator from elegant 19<sup>th</sup> century parties in ballrooms into modern day exhibition spaces (see Figure 1), complete with tourists admiring pieces and experts debating their meaning. The connection between the visual aesthetics, history, and memory are heavily intertwined in this film. Schmidt comments on the prospect of this connection in that “as museums and the objects contained within function as national lieux de memoires, then the museum film acts as a doubled site of memory through its cinematic representation of a material space”

(Schmidt, 2016, p. 29-30). Seeing objects and pieces of historical value through the museum space which contains and protects the memory of those objects, through the lens of film compiles complex layers of seeing. “Furthermore,” Schmidt writes, “it spans both individual and collective memory through the ritual of cinema going versus the individual interpretation of the film by each viewer (further mediated through the vision of the director of the film)” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 29-30). The choice of visuals and representations of visuals of museums in films does not simply exist within the confines of the film. The imagery in association with memory can have a powerful influence, as Louagie notes that “several visitor study surveys say that many people have an image of museums that have been constructed by movies that they have seen” (Louagie, 1996, p. 41). Not all cinema-goers are museum-goers and vice versa. For cinema-goers, the representation of museums predominantly shows idealized western museums, perpetuating aesthetics that are not true of the diverse reality of museums.



*Figure 1. The narrator is led by his companion into a modern museum gallery. (Sokurov, A., 2002, Russian Ark, 18:01 min).*

#### **4.2 Establishing Visuals**

In this review of archaeological museums in popular film, one recognizable pattern is that to introduce the museum to the audience there is an initial frame or shot of the front of the building (See Figure 2). The scenes outside usually show bustling crowds and groups of



*Figure 2. Establishing front shot of museum. (Hymans, P., 1997, The Relic, 9:58 min).*

school children which situates both the physical space and size of the building within the greater city, as well as the space in which the audience is about to enter. Jacobs (2009) discusses the “tourist gaze” in the way that these frames are included because “as famous tourist attractions, museums are often part of establishing shots as well as montage sequences, which situate the story in a particular city” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 298). Often, the audience is then immediately taken inside to the magnificent entrance hall, complete with high ceilings, moody lighting, and the reverberating echoes of grandeur (See Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Grand main hall visual. (Hymans, P., 1997, The Relic, 24:40 min).*

This chain of shots, from the exterior to the main hall, and further inside, reflects the experience of a tourist visit. This approach is repeated in the presentation of the pieces within

the museum, often showing pieces in quick succession like snapshots without offering any information such as what it is, where it came from, and if or how it fits within an exhibition. Most notably seen in *Museo* (Ruizpalacios, 2018), *Museum Hours* (Cohen, 2012), and *Intersection* (Rydell, 1994), the rapid visual turnover of individual pieces without contextualization in many ways “mimics the superficiality of the tourist visit” which contributes to the “construction of a visually glorious but topographically nonsensical” portrayal of museums and their contents (Jacobs, 2009, p. 299). Though there is sometimes a featured piece which characters in the film discuss more in depth, like in *Museum Hours*, for the most part, the museum is being used as a setting rather than featuring the objects as subjects.

### **4.3 Visuality and Seeing**

The concept of visuality as well as seeing and being seen is ever present in the way museums are presented as spaces. Building from the concept of “civic seeing” outlined by Tony Bennett (Bennett, 1995), Rectanus has discussed how then “civic seeing is inextricably bound to a politics of space and how we critically engage our lived spaces through acts of viewing, seeing, and experiencing” (Rectanus, 2015, p. 58). The relationships between viewing, seeing, experiencing, and knowing are complex theoretical concepts. Rectanus shapes this relationship by explaining that similarly to museums,

Cinema and visual culture provide a medial space not only for musealization but also for projects that interrogate the interrelations between seeing and knowing. Moreover, seeing can be distorted or manipulated by the media and contexts in which we see, and through the complex process of seeing and interpreting, or making sense of what we see or assume we see. Nor can we always attribute certainty to what we see even if we are conscious of these issues. The notion of refracted memory is informed by the complex process of seeing both in terms of its potential for discovery and creative memory-making and its ambiguities, disjunctions, and blurring of boundaries which limit the certainty of seeing and knowing. Both museal and cinematic practices make us aware of the fluidity and uncertainty of these boundaries through their aesthetics and objects of inquiry” (Rectanus, 2015, p. 58).



More concretely, seeing is an integral part of museum and cinematic culture. However, the ability to trust that which we are seeing is not as concrete. Audiences are being shown a particular narrative, so the combination of seeing something and connecting it to one's own previous knowledge and the pairing or discrepancy between seeing and knowing is not identical across individuals and audiences. The aesthetics of a museum space shown in a film are purposefully visually stimulating and often project a particular narrative. The visuals that the space constructs for the audience to see and grasp, are the base for knowing and understanding what comes next in the film's narrative.

#### 4.4. Cinematic Devices

While heist films are usually located in art museums, *Museo* (Ruizpalacios, 2018) tells the true story, albeit embellished, of the 1985 robbery of the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City. This film undoubtedly touches on all three dimensions of representation of which place and institution will be discussed later. The museum building is unique in that it does not adhere to the western idealized shape and layout seen in other museums and films. The filmmakers played with portraying the space and scale of different areas of the museum and especially with lighting. During the scene when the two thieves break in and steal the objects, the lighting, sounds, and visuals within the exhibition space are the driving factors, rather than dialogue or plot. The haphazard waving of flashlight light around the fixed lights from display cases helps to divide the two worlds: the fixed museum and the lively individuals (See Figure 4). Through the use of lighting alone, the nocturnal



Figure 4. Nocturnal heist scene lit by cases and flashlights. (Ruizpalacios, A., 2018, *Museo*, 35:43 min).



museum space thus becomes “a strange and mysterious place filled with secrets and uncanny powers” turning the usually busy public space into a space of “privacy and intimacy” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 305). Auditory sounds of camera snapshots from earlier in the title sequence which showcased museum pieces are reused, yet, rather than showing the pieces, the snapshots show the emptied out display cases. Cinematic devices such as repetition, playing with positive and negative space, and daytime versus nighttime all converge to present the museum as a divided space. It is through the character’s eyes and the camera’s lens that the audience enters the museum space and consumes the aesthetic qualities portrayed. Once the visual parameters of the space are established, the narrative may or may not dive further into interactions with the place, as sometimes the representation of a museum space is simply for superficial purposes.



*Figure 5. Johan and Anne discuss a piece while inadvertently mimicking it. (Cohen, J., 2012, Museum Hours, 36:38 min).*

*Museum Hours* (Cohen, 2012), a film which takes place in Vienna, relies heavily on the “life imitates art” and “art imitates life” trope within the setting of the Kunsthistorisches Museum (See Figure 5). The film introduces Anne, a Canadian tourist, and Johan, an Austrian security guard at the museum, as he offers to show her around the museum and Vienna while she is there for a few weeks. They both have an appreciation for art and enjoy engaging in discussions about art, culture, the museum, and the city. For Johan, the visitors themselves become part of the museum, as things to be viewed, examined, admired or

judged. This perspective is then enhanced by the film's audience viewing, examining, admiring, and judging the characters and film itself. This added layer of seeing emphasizes the device of the tourist's gaze in films with representations of museums. To articulate this point, Schmidt writes that

The focus on the gaze itself remains emphasized throughout the museum films. Images of the patrons are juxtaposed with the images of the figures in the paintings, oftentimes featured in a reversal of the normal Hollywood sequence of subject reaction and then reveal of the object of the gaze. The museum sequences first feature a shot a shot of the piece, and then one of the human subject gazing at the particular artwork. Therefore, through this reversal, the faces themselves then become the portraiture. The spectators in the museum, as they gaze at the works, then in turn become the object of the gaze of the viewer. These onscreen spectators function as a sort of avatar for those in the audience, which may desire to visit the particular museums featured within these films, or nostalgically remember a previous visit” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 35).

There are indeed many layers to constructing a museum space in film, and in addition to juxtapositions between the people and the museum pieces, the filmmakers rely on the juxtaposition of different spaces and visuals to draw parallels between life and art. A cold, grey, and bleak atmosphere of Vienna is juxtaposed with the warmth and richness of color within the interior of the museum. The use of juxtaposition to compare the aesthetics of the museum is also seen in *The Relic* (Hyams, 1997), in which scenes of a decadent and extravagant fundraising gala in the museum cut to scenes of the dark and gritty underground tunnels that run beneath it.

The switching between these aesthetics are emphasized by the accompanying sounds of the scenes. Auditory aesthetics in the construction of a museal space are often the quiet shuffling of steps and low whispers of visitors. In *Museum Hours*, the guard Johan enjoys the peaceful quietness of the museum and watches as visitors listen to individual audio tours. He also listens along during a group tour which prompts integrated discussions about the art, and the artists. Museums are generally quiet places, aiding visitors in focusing on seeing, rather than being distracted by their other senses. The auditory aesthetics are utilized in *Museo* for dramatization. The filmmakers utilized both moments of the loud soundtrack and moments of

silence to magnify the intensity of the heist scene, once again employing juxtaposition as a comparison device.

#### **4.5 An Unwelcoming Tomb**

Another juxtaposition in *Museum Hours* is the comparison between the museum and the hospital. While this contrast is due in part to circumstances of the plot, as Anne had traveled from Canada to Austria to visit her distant relative who is in a coma, the comparison is relevant to critiques of museum atmospheres. Jacobs describes how this association has been perpetuated in popular culture because,

In the anti-museum discourse, it is repeatedly stated that museums freeze, suffocate, sterilize, kill, or bury art works. Also in this perspective, museums are interpreted as places of death. This dimension is enhanced by the architectural references to sacral and sepulchral architecture, which are emphatically visualized in cinema. In popular culture, however, this association remained intact when classical forms have been exchanged for the modernist ‘white cube’, which combines the solemn character and sacral silence of the Greek temple with the smooth floors, white walls, and big glass surfaces of the clinic. Popular culture embraces the clinical and sterile image of the museum as much as that of the museum as a tomb” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 311-312).

This representation is implicitly referred to in *Paddington* (King, 2014), in which the director of taxidermy of the Natural History Museum in London is the explicit villain of the film. She lures Paddington, the bear, through the museum, or as she calls it, a “cathedral of knowledge” because she wants to add him to the collection (King, 2014). Paddington very soon sees the museum as it is represented, dark, cold, and full of dead things, becoming a tomb-like space. As this is the place of power of the villain in the film, there is a clear reason why the museum is being presented as a dark and deathly space, but this representation is one that persists. The perception of the museum being an unwelcoming space is one that is sometimes reflected in real world experiences of museum-goers. The next chapter will look further into how museums are represented as places of death.

The aesthetics of the museums represented in recent popular film do not show a wide range of museum spaces in their current state. Rather, the archaeological museums are dependent on the use of juxtaposition by filmmakers to present the spaces as multi-dimensional. This duality is seen continuously throughout these films, including but not limited to, historic and contemporary, public and private, light and dark, sound and silence, nighttime and daytime, full and empty displays, warm and cold, and especially, the viewer in comparison to that which is being seen. These juxtapositions ultimately contribute to a narrative of distinctive separation. The museums in these films are represented not as being complete entities, but as divided, spaces that are only complete when compared against a different aspect of itself.

## Chapter 5 | Museums as Places

In the next dimension, once the aesthetics of a space are introduced, museums are portrayed as things to be interacted with, not only observed. While some films use the museum simply as a background setting, this chapter will examine the instances when the museum as a setting becomes relevant to the overall development of the film. Characters may refer to the accessibility of objects and the idea of ownership, and they may physically touch the objects and interact with them in a way normal museum-goers are unable to. Some films present different, and generally unseen capacities of the museum, such as places of work for scientists, conservators, or security guards. Place is portrayed as especially important in allusions of the museum as the precipice between life and death, becoming a place that embodies and prolongs memory.

### 5.1 Accessibility and Ownership

While the dimension of space focuses on visibility, the dimension of place focuses on materiality, bringing to the forefront the relationship between humans and the way they interact with material culture. In museums, visitors are often limited in their interactions because, “in contrast to the emphasis on materiality as part of the nature of the museum experience, though the observer does remain in the presence of the object, very rarely does the interaction amount to more than the gaze with objects framed or encased in glass” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 36). Schmidt argues that representations of museums in films “provides mobility to the viewer to access objects they might not have the opportunity of viewing, whether through the inability to travel to the museum or even approach the objects more closely” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 35). The ease of accessibility for audiences is therefore sometimes greater through mediums like film than through in-person visits. The less accessible something is, the less people are willing to overcome the obstacles in the way of accessing it.

There are interesting connections between accessibility and the idea of ownership when it comes to museum objects in films. In Oberhardt’s examination of art museums in film, which is in many ways comparable to this research, he notes that,

In cinema space, everybody owns the Elgin marbles or the old masters or a Picasso. We are not hostile towards characters who own, make, steal, or view art in movies, because in those dream spaces, in the privacy of our own heads, we see ourselves in equal terms. We are hostile towards characters such as the

Joker in Batman who are destructive towards art and the art museum. His desecration of the art museum is experienced as a personal assault on our property. He is marked as evil and the audience joins forces with the good characters to rally against him” (Oberhardt, 2001, p. 75).

Many perspectives in archaeology promote the idea that the objects and sites of the past are world heritage, belonging to and being for the people. Oberhardt’s point insinuates that people care less about who holds these objects and more about the object’s preservation and protection from those who would damage it. Yet, since objects are theoretically owned by everyone, therefore there is the understanding that they should be equally accessible for everyone. This point comes up in *Museum Hours* when the main character, the security guard Johan, reminisces about a young colleague, and says,

We got to wondering how museum began. He looked it up and was pleasantly surprised to report that because of the French Revolution the Louvre opened as it was considered to be one of the first truly public art museums with the idea that art should be accessible to the people, not just tied up in the private rooms of the rich” (Cohen, 2012).

This short segment of the film reflects on both the history of the modern museum and its ties to accessibility for public, rather than private use. The segment then goes on to compare the museums to the cinema as Johan says, “He was also unhappy about the cost of museum admission. I agreed it would be nicer if it was free, but he was a big fan of movies and I had to remind him they cost as much and he never complained about that” (Cohen, 2012). Johan situates the museum and the cinema on equal levels in terms of their accessibility based on ticket price and suggests that one would get the same joy out of visiting either place. The representation of museum objects in the cinema could be “seen as a de commodification of the museum pieces in an effort to render them accessible to a larger group of people” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 34). With the rising availability of films through streaming services and other means, the virtual accessibility of cinema is in many ways more accessible than a museum visit. Therefore, “the museum film itself then could become the new museum destination” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 52).

## 5.2 Physical Interaction

Another aspect of the attraction of audiences to museum films is the physical touching of objects, something which is not allowed except in certain rare circumstances. While nearly everyone can enjoy the visual aspect which is central to museums, the physical grounding of place through interaction with objects is not incorporated very often. Films which show characters touching objects in any capacity, whether they are disrespecting, appreciating, stealing, or conserving an object, satisfies the urge of museum goers to touch the objects by seeing others do so. Louagie's survey of museums in American film reported that "most movie characters were respectful of the museum's code of ethics and its elite image. They did not touch the artifacts, they spoke in hushed voices and they wore appropriate clothing. But there were those cases when the rules were broken" (Louagie, 1996, p. 46). An instance where the rules are broken in an egregious way is in the 1949 film *On the Town* (Kelly and Donen, 1949). The characters in this film stop by the Museum of Anthropological History in New York City to perform the musical number "Prehistoric Man." This scene clearly makes no attempt at historical accuracy, focusing on humor and entertainment, but with a 21<sup>st</sup> century view the scene presents disrespectful use and touching of the museum pieces overlaying deeply racist undertones as the white American characters dress in the display pieces while dancing, singing, and using the exhibit's drums (See Figure 6).



Figure 6. Characters dressing in display pieces during the "Prehistoric Man" number. (Kelly, G. and Donan, S. 1949. *On The Town*. 24:09 min).

However, in more recent films, objects are touched and interacted with in other ways. In *Russian Ark* we follow the narrator's interaction with a blind woman feeling a marble

statue, which reminds audiences that there is more than one way to appreciate art beyond the limitations of sight (Sokurov, 2002). The importance of place and interaction with objects comes to the forefront in the *Night at the Museum* films (Levy, 2006; Levy, 2009; Levy, 2014). In these urban fantasy films, the objects within the museum come to life at night and return to their static position by the morning. In the first film there is a direct contrast from the beginning scenes where staff members chastise visitors for touching the exhibit pieces, to the multifaceted physical and social interactions that happen between the main character, a security guard named Larry, and the objects which become characters at night (Levy, 2006). These films invoke questions about the agency of objects, their authentic-ness, and the boundaries of the museum. Within the building the object characters are protected, but if they leave the building and don't return by morning, they are in danger of turning to dust. While this is a fantasy film, the rhetoric of objects only being safe within the confines of the museum is relevant to topics in museum studies and the discussions about how objects should be cared for, and who should get to care for them. This idea is also prevalent in *Museo* (Ruizpalacios, 2018). In the beginning of the film the main character Juan is chastised for touching an object without gloves during an internship at the museum. Later, after he and his partner steal from the museum, Juan continuously touches and feels the objects, free from the judgement and rules of museum etiquette. *The Relic* (Hyams, 1997), a thriller film about a monster based on a South American artifact wreaking havoc as it roams around killing people in the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, shows scenes of a conservator handling and working on the artifact. The audience knows that the artifact is a depiction of the monster roaming around, but as the conservator gets closer to completing their work, the closer the tension of the film gets to revealing the complete visual of the monster which is in congruence with the reveal of the complete visual of the artifact.

### **5.3 Museum Jobs**

In terms of how museums operate, there are several representations of different occupations within the museum. Most notably is the job of security. This can be seen in both *Museum Hours* and the *Night at the Museum* films where the main character is a museum security guard. The villains in the first *Night at the Museum* film are former security guards who attempt to steal from the museum. In *Museo* we see guards walking through the exhibits at night, but they are not being thorough in checking that the spaces are clear and protected. *The Relic* further presents security guards as being bad at their jobs, with one smoking a joint while on duty, the head of security is hated by other staff members, and by the end of the film



all of the security guards get killed. Even in the short museum scene in *Black Panther*, there is a representation of the security guards racially profiling the character Eric Killmonger. While these representations say more about how security guards or police are perceived generally, it is notable how security is present in some capacity in most of the museum films in this review, which may be due to the fact that on any museum visit, the staff which visitors encounter or see are usually the ticket/admission agents and the security guards. Though visitors may be aware that there are other occupations within and associated with museums, the visibility of those other positions are much less present.

#### **5.4 Places Within the Museum**

The other positions that are represented in the films in this review are associated with different physical areas of the museum building, such as science labs, libraries, and archives. A science lab is represented in *The Relic* because the main character is an evolutionary biologist at the museum. She explains to the detective investigating the death of one of the security guards as they walk through a storage area, that the museum has around three million specimens, but the exhibition areas only show about two percent of what the museum owns (Hyams, 1997). This is a fairly accurate representation of how the majority of most museum's collections are in storage and not on display. The idea of storage in museums is presented as "accommodating valuable, exotic, and strange objects" and "treasure chambers dominated by spiritual and atavistic powers" (Jacobs, 2009, p. 308). The association films make with museums and storage being dark, musty, and mysterious is one that has persisted over time and can be seen in *The Relic* and *The Mummy*, and of course in the *Indiana Jones* films.

In *The Mummy* we see a representation of a library as part of the Museum of Antiquities in Cairo. The character Evelyn states that she is employed there on the basis that she thinks she is the only one who can code and categorize the library, yet the curator responds that, "I put up with you because your father and mother were our finest patrons" (Sommers, 2001). The connection between museums, funding, and colonialism will be discussed later in Chapter 6. Apart from this representation of the library, the archives are more commonly depicted. In *Night at the Museum 2: Battle of the Smithsonian*, some of the objects are being transferred into "deep" storage as part of the federal archives of the Smithsonian institution (Levy, 2009). Similar to the depiction of the archive in *Paddington*, the archives are referred to and represented as being underground, secret, secure, and restricted, seemingly purposefully withholding information from the main characters. This is a trope present for museums and archives which is potentially damaging, but one that should

not be taken lightly. If audiences feel or are made to feel as though there are secrets in these places that are being hidden from them, they will be more skeptical, leading to an untrustworthy relationship. The archives being a 'secret' area showing up as a repeated occurrence in films may be the outcome of museums being restrictive about their accessibility in the past, which has resulted in a perpetuation of the perception of classism and elitism in museums more broadly. Negative perceptions of elitism in museums will be discussed further in Chapter 6 in the way museum experts are perceived as holding or withholding knowledge.

### **5.5 Life and Death**

In relation to the spatial representation of museums as tomb-like spaces, there is a strong correlation to them being represented as places containing, comparing, and contrasting life and death. The building itself contributes to this theme both in the aesthetics as outlined in Chapter 4, and because “the funerary associations of the museum are enhanced by its architectural typology” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 311). Jacobs explains that this is because as “national or civic monuments that commemorate and conserve the past, museum buildings are destined to last for eternity” in a similar way to how objects within museums are there to protect them for as long as possible (Jacobs, 2009, p. 311). Narratives of life, death, and immortality are heavily present in films featuring archaeological museums. In part this is because

Films featuring mummies and wax figures foster the popular association of museums with death. Archaeological museums, after all, display artefacts of strange and extinct cultures, which are represented by objects that relate to complex death rituals and life in the hereafter: tombs, mummies, death masks, funeral monuments, sarcophagi, sacrificial objects, etc. Furthermore in the popular imagination, museums themselves are presented as tombs or sterile environments characterized by a sepulchral silence and solemnity” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 308-309).

Associations, and oftentimes obsessions or fetishizations, with Egyptology are more prevalent in archaeological films than museum films, though there is a common overlap between them. In *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb*, the characters travel to the British Museum and the mummy character, Ahkmenrah, is reunited with his parents as they

were separated during the division of excavation materials (Levy, 2014). This storyline makes a poignant example, and perhaps an unintended post-colonial critique, of archaeological practice and power relations, about how the places where objects end up are sometimes due to arbitrary decisions between excavating parties. Objects which were found together and contextually belong together are dispersed, usually never to be rightfully reunited again.

Overall, the *Night at the Museum* films directly focus on the idea of objects being dead or alive. Though it is fictional and fantasy-based, the films bring attention to the agency of objects and their social lives. The films allow audiences to imagine what it would be like to walk around a museum and interact with objects, insinuating that this is a strategy to make museums more exciting. Furthermore, the object characters in the films have the ability to interact with each other outside of the temporal and spatial limitations of their context, for example, Atilla the Hun having a conversation with a Moai statue from Rapa Nui (Levy, 2006). The museum then becomes a place of immortality for these objects, transcending even the finality of death.

## **5.6 Preservation of Memory**

In addition to the museum as a place of life and death, the museum also gets represented as a place which holds and preserves memory. This is possible because “the museum film parallels the ritual of museum and cinema going, designed to give an international public access to sites of memory, otherwise prohibited through time, distance, or cost” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 35-36). This is especially present in *Russian Ark* which touches on themes of both time and memory in the way that

Storing national treasures and embodying collective memories, museums encompass entire histories... This is clearly the subject of *Russian Ark* (Alexander Sokurov, 2002), which was entirely shot in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg. The Hermitage was built in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a Winter Palace but serves as a museum since 1946. In several ways, Sokurov’s film presents the museum as a sediment of history by means of his particular way of dealing with diegetic time. While the film is notoriously shot as a single take, history seems compressed since we are guided through the building by a timeless ghost-like character.” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 310).

Museums are places in which objects from different time periods are gathered in one area, making time a confusing concept in the context of the present. Though there are chronological labels for objects, the fact that they are all under one roof seemingly makes time superfluous. Films like *Russian Ark* where the narrative follows a single path weaving through the past and present, reflects the experience of museum-goers as they travel through different rooms and time periods of objects. Time and memory converge because “this evidence of the past appears in the presence of material objects and monuments as sites of collective memory, as well as placing an emphasis on the past having a presence in the present” (Schmidt, 2016, p. 28).

The physicality of place is represented in many different ways in films about museums. Interactions between characters and the museum are grounded through experiences that go beyond the sense of sight. Increased accessibility in comparison to an in-person museum visit is shown through access to different areas of the museum, and depictions of occupations not normally witnessed by visitors. By representing museums as places where life and death exist on a parallel plane, these films surpass the limitations and restrictions of reality mainly through the genre of fantasy. By utilizing the entertainment value of the supernatural, archaeological museum films are represented as places which contain the possibility of eternal memory of the history of the world and the people who have existed within it.

## Chapter 6 | The Museum Institution and Public Critique

In 2022 the International Council of Museums approved a new definition of museum which is as follows:

A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage. Open to the public, accessible and inclusive, museums foster diversity and sustainability. They operate and communicate ethically, professionally and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection and knowledge sharing.” (International Council of Museums, 2022).

The term institution can have both positive and negative connotations and while traditionally, museums wanted to be considered neutral, their historical role and involvement in society and politics has ensured that neutrality is impossible. In this review of museums in film I have found that the way in which museums are framed as institutions are through storylines such as the museum needing funding and patrons, being a place that holds knowledge, references to colonialism and its historic relationship with museums, and the connection between the institution and the subject of value and ownership of objects. These themes and discourses on the museum itself represent a deeper awareness of the role of museums in society, how they came to be, and the issues associated with them that remain unresolved in the public’s eye. While this level of understanding could be seen as too complex for the regular cinema-going public, in reality, underestimating the public’s awareness would be unwise, since even a five-minute scene in a museum setting, like that from *Black Panther*, can garner major attention and establish a space for discussion about the state of museums, showing that it is the public who may be the key to generating real change.

### 6.1 Financial Concerns

Despite the definition of being not-for-profit, the topic of finances in relation to museums is commonly referred to in museum films. This is portrayed in several ways. Firstly, there is a trope that the museum is losing money and needs financial support to continue. In *Night at the Museum* it is an unexpected publicity stunt at the end of the film which helps to bring in new and returning crowds (Levy, 2006). This is repurposed in *Night at the Museum 2: Battle of the Smithsonian* where the museum must close for progress to

update and make new interactive exhibits with technology and the film again ends with a new innovation about how to increase the number of visitors (Levy, 2009). Besides regular visitors, these films also use scenes of high society functions to enhance both the stylistic aesthetics of the museum as well as to emphasize the level of wealth gained from these types of events. Thematically, “since art and museums seem to be created as means of social prestige in the first place, cinema loves to present museums as privileged environments” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 303). There is clearly a distinction made between the everyday museum visitor and the wealthy, upper-class museum benefactor, relating to historic differentiations between public versus private access.

Precisely because of their associations with high culture and upper-class values, museums are highly in demand for all kinds of elegant society events... Demonstrating the museum’s function as a tool of social distinction, these scenes also remind us of the role that emerging museums played in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere (see Bennett 1995, 25-33)” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 303).

These types of events are seen in *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb*, *The Relic*, and *Intersection*. The event which takes place in *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb* is to support the opening of a new exhibit with wealthy celebrities and the mayor in attendance (Levy, 2014). A mayor is also in attendance at the opening of the exhibit in *The Relic*, further making a connection to the relationship between museums and the cities they are located in via political involvement. *The Relic* makes a point of emphasizing the museum’s obsession with the money-making opportunities at the gala, as they care far more about putting on the event than the murder of multiple staff members in their building in addition to a murderous monster on the loose (Hyams, 1997). The staff of the museum are also warned not to be too strict or unkind to the schoolchildren visiting the museum because, as Dr. Margo Green, the evolutionary biologist notes, “they’re our future benefactors” (Hyams, 1997). This returns to the point of museums not only needing more visitors, but needing repeating visitors, so appeasing them and providing an enjoyable experience is essential for their life-long financial support. In *Intersection*, the main character, an architect, gives a speech during a reception for the trustees at the Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, Canada. He concludes his speech by saying “Walk around and enjoy, you paid for it!” (Rydell, 1994). Even though he is not

part of the museum staff, he just designed the building, there is still an emphasis on appeasing the benefactors.

The other relation between museums in film and finances is that in film “museums represent big money and one of their main functions in to serve as targets for burglary” (Jacobs, 2009, p. 304). Though this is more prevalent for films about art museums and jewelry heists, *Museo* provides a real-life example of an archaeological museum robbery. The film even makes a point to say that after the robbery there was an influx of visitors who wanted to see the empty cases (Ruizpalacios, 2018). This is interesting to note that the controversy of the robbery garnered more attention than the objects themselves, which calls attention to the role that the media can play in museum attendance and popularity. These institutions sometimes don’t realize how much the world outside their doors has changed and ignoring or disregarding things like social media, cinema, and other forms of popular culture could be detrimental to their future.

## **6.2 Knowledge and Experts**

Because of their purpose, long-standing histories, and place in society, museums are considered to be places which hold knowledge. The institution is structured to communicate that they employ experts and the experts interpret the collected knowledge to share with the public. The museum represents empirical authority and professionalism, which can sometimes be interpreted by the public as gatekeeping or snobbery, and it is becoming more common for the public to question whether the experts are correct and if their interpretations should be always accepted or blindly followed. As mentioned earlier, there is an undercurrent in archaeological and museum films of the pursuit of hidden knowledge through the undermining the privileged authority (Hall, 2004). *The Dig* (Stone, 2021), a film about the story of the Sutton Hoo archaeological dig in England, led by amateur archaeologist Basil Brown, makes a point to portray the “expert” from the British Museum as a snobbish and pompous figure who “attempts to bigfoot Brown, commandeering his work site and dismissing his expertise, when word of the dig leaks out” (O’Sullivan, 2021). The museum figure being dismissive of Brown because he was not an “official” archaeologist and was not affiliated with a museum or prestigious institution reflects how members of the public who are interested in archaeology non-professionally are looked down upon by the experts, regardless of their experience and practical and/or theoretical knowledge. This concept is also seen in *Russian Ark* during the scene in which the narrator enters a room depicting a modern-day museum gallery of the Hermitage. The “experts” discuss their interpretations as absolutes

while the narrator's companion is more upset that paintings from different eras and styles are displayed next to each other (Sokurov, 2002). Knowledge, fact, and information can sometimes be overlooked and disregarded in favor of interpretation. Though some level of interpretation is needed for artifacts, objects, or art, they should never be taken in absolutes since interpretation is always subjective.

### 6.3 Colonialism

Representations of colonialism, its historical relationship with, and continued affect upon museums, is arguably one of the more significant topics in museum studies history. However, in film, there are far more subtle, non-explicit references to colonialism than outright mentions. These references could even be considered as attempting to be positive, and only with a critical post-colonial analysis can we see the underlying and unintended truth of the representation of colonialism. In *Night at the Museum*, the guard Larry's task each evening is to lock up and secure the exhibits so when they 'come alive' they do not run free and cause havoc in the museum. In the exhibit of miniature civilizations, Larry locks up the Maya civilization, but allows the white, western colonizer civilizations, a Roman army and a group of American cowboys, to roam free as long as they promise to behave well (Levy, 2006). The army general and main cowboy become beloved supporting characters in the film and the sequels, allowing the film to side-step direct colonial associations. Christopher Columbus is also a character who comes alive, though his role in the film is insignificant. However, it should be noted that a production company called 1492 Pictures produced, and therefore helped fund, all three *Night at the Museum* films. Though the company does not have actual ties to colonialism, the namesake adds to the pattern of subtle colonial references in museum films, and the film industry.

In *Paddington*, the film starts with an English explorer in Peru who finds a family of bears and teaches them about London and British mannerisms (King, 2014). When Paddington Bear travels to London, he is prejudiced upon arrival because of his Peruvian background, in a thinly veiled mimicry of the immigration experience faced by people of formerly colonized areas. The UK has a long history with Peru and yet, the subtle references to colonialism and immigration experiences still feel "rather Eurocentric and paternalistic... premised on exoticism, rather than a relationship of mutual cultural exchange" (Gurmendi, 2020). We later find out that the villain who wants to stuff Paddington at the Natural History Museum is the explorer's daughter who is trying to complete her father's collection for the museum, reflecting a subtle goal of unfinished colonial domination. The institution and its



staff have a direct, and yet never explicitly mentioned, connection to colonialism and colonial museum collection practices.

As mentioned before, in *Intersection*, an architect named Vincent Eastman, makes a speech at the benefactor reception at the newly designed museum building. In his speech he alludes to the damage that colonialism in North America caused Indigenous people of the Pacific northwest, but never actually acknowledges them. He states,

We stole their land. We decimated their culture. We offered them welfare in exchange. We wanted to do a building here that would celebrate, that would reassure them – and us, too, I think – of the greatness of that culture. You know when I started thinking about this project... I really wanted to get into the minds of the people who lived here, uh try anyhow. I wanted to feel their relationship with nature, this extraordinary feeling of divinity that they had with everything around them, the whole natural world as a divine church” (Rydell, 1994).

Though it is important that he is mentioning the damage caused to Indigenous people, his purpose was not to apologize or inspire the repatriation of objects or land, but rather to appropriate Indigenous people’s connection with nature to conflate himself as the creator of a divine space, supported by the museum institution and its wealthy benefactors. There is no mention of actual Nations, cultures, people, or even that it is Indigenous or First Nation people, using instead the language of “us” and “them.” This short section of the film held in the actual Museum of Anthropology in Vancouver, reinforces the normalcy of the appropriation of Indigenous people by institutions, the people who work for the institutions, and how the history of violent colonial practices is still present, and referenced for personal gain by colonizing entities even through something like a speech in a film.

#### **6.4 Value and Ownership**

The most explicit references to the museum as an institution in this review are in *Museo* and *Black Panther*. In part this is because the films place a focus on specific objects, their intrinsic and monetary value, and the rights of ownership. In *Museo*, the objects are Maya artifacts, most notably the jade death mask of Pakal the Great, which were actually stolen and later returned to the National Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City (Ruizpalacios, 2018). The day after Juan and his partner Wilson rob the museum, they

experience almost immediate regret and confusion of their moral compasses in response to the public's reaction. They see a TV report which proclaims the robbery as an "act of shameful, unpatriotic theft," calling the thieves "enemies of their past and heritage" (Ruizpalacios, 2018). The pair are very aware of the value of the objects but the more they think about it, they have trouble coming to terms with the conflicting comparison between cultural value and monetary value, especially for Juan since,

In his rather unfocused thinking, robbing the museum – which was a scandal, and a national embarrassment when it happened – is going to be a revolutionary act of reappropriation although, Juan, despite indications otherwise, has no intention of returning the relics to their places of origin. He wants to sell them. Which becomes a problem, given that they're priceless" (Anderson, 2018).

While they originally are set on selling the objects, they are soon faced with the question of ownership. They meet with an English black-market collector, but they don't think he should be allowed to buy them because "they'll end up in the fucking British Museum!" (Ruizpalacios, 2018). At first the pair think that they have a better claim than the National Museum of Anthropology because these objects should be in the hands of the people, but the influx of guilt when considering selling it to a foreign buyer also feels wrong, leading to general confusion about the rights of ownership. Eventually Juan decides to give the objects back to the Museum believing that this is the only thing left to do since the objects are so high profile to be sold on the black market that "they might as well be worthless" (Ruizpalacios, 2018). However, Juan does leave one object, a piece of jade jewelry at the Palenque ruins for the ancient king Pakal. Wilson remarks that, "I don't know if it was an offering, or a way of apologizing, or some sort of reparation" (Ruizpalacios, 2018). There is a sort of peace gained by Juan in returning this object to its origin place near the tomb of Pakal, when he knows that the other objects will never be able to go "home." This relates both to the idea of the institution of the museum having ownership of cultural heritage objects when no objects in archaeological museums were ever meant to end up there. *Museo* shows little respect for the museum as an institution, but rather begrudging acceptance that besides reburying objects at their place of origin, or selling them between private parties, the museum is really the best place for their long-term preservation and public access to cultural heritage.

## 6.5 Explicit Critique

The 2018 Marvel Comics film *Black Panther* also features the robbery of a museum, and though the scene is rather short, its significance for the museum world and popularity amongst the public initiated many discussions about colonialism in museums, demographics of museum staff, object repatriation, and the future of museums. An in-depth analysis of the representation of museums in *Black Panther* has been written by Susan Dine (Dine, 2021), so in this review, in addition to discussing the scene, I will illuminate upon some of her points in how they fit into the broader representation of archaeological museums. The scene makes unsubtle references to real world examples starting with the front shot of the museum building, the “Museum of Great Britain”, a fictional stand-in for the British Museum (Coogler, 2018). The character Eric Killmonger meets with a museum “expert” as he asks about objects in a display case. She responds curtly with time periods and cultures/peoples of origin for the objects until

Killmonger asks about what appears to be a mining tool. She describes it as an object from the Benin culture and he corrects her: “It was taken by British soldiers in Benin but it’s from Wakanda and it’s made out of vibranium. Don’t trip, I’mma take it off your hands for you” (Coogler and Cole n.d.: 16). Disturbed, the curator informs Killmonger that the objects are not for sale. Killmonger’s colonial reference that follows is assuredly not benign. Rather, it is a confrontation of history in a modern setting. “How do you think your ancestors got these? You think they paid a fair price? Or did they take it like they took everything else?” He calls out the curator—indeed, the universal museum type—on the problematic histories of objects collected from colonized areas by colonizing countries and their institutions. Viewers again see the thematic thread—the pervasive impacts of colonialism and power imbalances” (Dine, 2021, p. 22).

This direct reference to objects taken from Benin by the British, despite the tool being a fictional object and Wakanda being a fictional place, is a powerful association since the case of the Benin Bronzes is such a high-profile example of colonial violence as mentioned earlier and examined by Dan Hicks (Hicks, 2021). In the film, the people of Wakanda “remained isolated and in control of their peoples, lands, and resources” and were “untouched by the colonizing white European countries” (Dine, 2021, p. 20). A major theme of the film is the

comparison of Wakandans to “non-Wakandan Africans and those of African descent” who faced and continue to face the real-life devastating horrors of colonialism and the Transatlantic Slave Trade (Dine, 2021). While *Museo* focuses more on questions of the value of objects and the rights of museum ownership today and in the future, *Black Panther* looks at how the past, and the historic relationship between colonialism and museum institutions, affects current retention and highlights some of the most pressing issues within museum studies during the present.

One of these issues, not directly mentioned in the film but reflected upon due to a staffing situation at the Brooklyn Museum, is the topic of museum staff demographics. In 2018, the same year as the release of *Black Panther*, the Brooklyn Museum hired a new, white, curator of African art (Russo, 2018). Due in part to the timing of the film coming out, there was an influx of public opinion about the hire in addition to critical examinations of the state of museums today. Dine explains the significance of the scene from *Black Panther* in relation to this issue in that

In addition to calling out museums’ problematic roots in colonialism, this relatively short scene references a variety of issues in the museum field. One such issue is the ethnic makeup of museum employees, specifically the general racial homogeneity of certain careers. The employees in the gallery, four security officers and the curator, are white-presenting, in contrast to the museum-goers, who display a range of racial identities. These characters are shown to be powerholders, either physical or intellectual, at the museum...The choice to cast the museum employees shown in the galleries in *Black Panther* as all white highlights the inequity inherent in the field when it comes to underrepresented groups accessing the training and opportunities that would afford them upper-level positions in these institutions. The film not only reflects the racial imbalances in museum employment, but further reveals intellectuals as potential gatekeepers of knowledge. In *Black Panther*, the curator’s dismissal of Killmonger’s knowledge about the hammer hints at how institutional training can be used to discredit source community experts who are often cultural insiders, if academic outsiders, especially with regard to museum objects acquired during colonial encounters” (Dine, 2021, p. 24).

The resulting discussions about this scene and the issues it shed light on, highlights some of the structural institutional inequalities in historic archaeological museums. This representation of a museum in a film which was wildly popular and successful, and the subsequent public interest, “indicate[s] the topics’ pervasiveness among society, encompassing even the average US movie-goer, who may or may not also be a museum-goer” (Dine, 2021, p. 23-24). The film’s blatant critique of the reality of museums set an example for the public, allowing them to get involved in the critique and reflect on how they perceive museums as institutions.

Part of the significance of this film and the reactions to it are centered around the lack of actual change when it comes to museums in terms of decolonization, repatriation, and acknowledgement of colonial associations of the past and its effects on the present. The issues voiced in *Black Panther* are in response to real-life experiences in museums, especially experiences of marginalized communities. Dine points out that “the reactions to the movie and Killmonger’s character indicate that a large part of the general public no longer views institutions through rose-colored lenses but acknowledges their often problematic, complicated histories and systems—in fact, actively critiques them and yearns for progress” (Dine, 2021, p. 26). People want their opinions and critiques not only to be heard, but to be addressed, and in response, “museums have had difficulty reckoning with problematic histories because the norms of the institution do not offer a framework, vocabulary, or alternative to dealing with their colonial present” (Dine, 2021, p. 25-26). The inconsistency between the increase of various dialogues, bolstered by “the keen interest of the public in issues of cultural heritage, colonial pasts, and ethical collecting practices,” is unequal to the response by institutions to implement real change, despite many in the museum community discussing the importance of progress (Dine, 2021, p. 27). Dialogue between museums, communities, and other invested parties, is necessary for voices and opinions to be heard. However, the museum institution is theoretically, physically, and structurally created to last, meaning it can be highly resistant to any kind of change, which means those dialogues which are meant to result in action, tend to get indefinitely stuck within the dialogue stage, leading to many frustrations, and a state of stagnation.

*Black Panther* is unique in that it explicitly touches on many topics, calling out the museum institution and expressing the “desire for more progress in making museums welcoming to all communities” (Dine, 2021, p. 28). The emergence of these kinds of critiques, especially in extremely popular recent films, has not been acknowledged by the museum community as a resource to examine how the public, both filmmakers and film

viewers, have come to accept this stereotypical representation of the museum institution as a reflection of what they see in real life. Museums need to be able to listen to this kind of publicized critique and be willing to engage in dialogue where the ultimate goal is action and real change.

These films which have representations of archaeological, anthropological, or natural history museums that address, refer, or allude to museums as institutions, do so in a limited number of ways. Though the ways in which they are referenced as relating to institutional practices is easily discernable, the understated and underlying currents of dissatisfaction with museum institutions has come closer to the surface in more recent popular film. The representation of the museum as an institution is most commonly characterized by the topic of finances and the need for funding from wealthy benefactors, using a gala or high-society event for the fancy aesthetics, and a visual difference between regular, semi-insignificant museum visitors and the important patrons. Another distinction is made between arrogant museum experts who represent the institution, and the normal museum visitor who may or may not have knowledge about an item or subject but is always assumed by the expert to be ignorant and unqualified to have a significant opinion. Subtle references to colonialism are used more as support for other topics and plots than as a subject worthy of discussing openly in relation to the museum institution. More recently, however, the topics of value and ownership in relation to museums and their place as institutions in society, have become more popular not just in the museum world, but among the regular public through social media, and popular films like *Museo* and *Black Panther*. The stance of these films to explicitly comment on these topics demonstrates a shift in the public and in creators who wish to make their opinions on museums and institutions known. Unless the dialogues which spurned those critiques and the resulting dialogues in response to those critiques are met with real change, the voices speaking out against the state of the museum institution will continue to get louder.

## Chapter 7 | Conclusions

Museum professionals, and those who research and study archaeology and museums, can benefit from viewing films which feature museums because the films provide perceptions and various perspectives on museums and can therefore help them to realize if there are issues with interactive communication. Clearly there is a disparity between the way films represent museums and the way museums would prefer to be perceived. This research has shown that the stereotypes and representations of museums as grand places with mysterious dark rooms full of secret treasure and knowledge, accessed only by pretentious curators and barely decent security guards, is not just something that appeared extemporaneously in film, but that it actually reflects the long-held understandings and experiences that people are conditioned through popular culture to accept about museums. The pervasiveness of certain stereotypes, because of and despite the current state of museums, illustrate the power of films to perpetuate museums as one-dimensional, conventional, and even cliché institutions. Likewise, the failure of public archaeology and museums to realize that there is space for them to work to improve these representations, shows that developments in both film and museums are at an impasse.

The questions which prompted this research were: how are archaeological, anthropological, and ethnographic-related museums presented in films?; and to what extent do films featuring archaeological/anthropological/ethnographic museums represent current topics and issues within archaeology and museum studies?

To answer these questions, I have examined the development and growth of museums over time to understand their roots and periods of advancement, as they progressed from private collections to public institutions, and have become the establishments they are today due in part to the will of people wanting and deserving access to knowledge and cultural heritage. By reviewing the development of cinema over the past century I have shown how world history has impacted the popular film industry and in turn how cinema has been exported around the world and had a significant impact on storytelling, distribution of information, and the representation of different ways of life. Together, museums and film have the power to help, and hinder, each other's popularity, ability to communicate fact and fiction, and their ability to bring about real change in the world by inspiring publics.

I have discussed the importance of visuality, a concept vital to both museums and cinema. The cinema space and museum space project appealing visuals to entice, entertain, and retain audiences. Nowadays, cinema and museums are so intertwined that one can go to a cinema and see a museum or go to a museum and see a film. The accessibility of seeing a

museum through the visuals shown in a film can even substitute a tourist visit to the museum itself. The aesthetics represented in film to some degree reflect the reality of aesthetic spaces of museums, but the representation of museums in cinema predominantly shows idealized western museums, failing to represent the full scale of diverse and new kinds of museums, relying on older, more familiar, and perpetuated stereotypes.

Films provide a place where the usual rules of museums do not have to be followed. By proxy, audiences have a unique avenue to access objects via the character's interactions with them. Through films, audiences get to interact with objects which are theoretically owned by the public since they are considered cultural or world heritage, but are usually kept out of accessible reach. Audiences have the opportunity to explore the places within the museum which are normally closed off to the public, and which are largely considered to be secret, restricted, or private. Archaeological museums, which hold items of long-dead people and cultures, come alive and are invigorated with new life, honoring the memory of the past through the fictional abilities of cinema.

Museums in films are subject to financial difficulties, relying on wealthy benefactors to keep their doors open. As institutions they are represented as places whose purpose is to hold and protect knowledge, but the individuals in charge care far more about funding than anything else. Films may imperceptibly show the inherent historical connection to colonialism in relation to collecting practices, but it is rare for a film to explicitly confront the institution of the museum for its past and present associations with objects taken through instances of colonial violence. Questions around ownership and value are also rare except in cases of theft of the museum, though in the films which represent this, the audience is not necessarily convinced to support the institution's rights of retention, rather than the thief's.

Based on my review of these films, they do represent, to a small extent, some of the current topics and issues within archaeology and museum studies. More commonly, however, films use museums as backdrops, for their aesthetic purposes and as background places for the scenery of semi-unrelated plots and development of characters. Though there are true representations of certain museums, very rarely do these films make a point to address the history and significance of the museum as a public cultural institution within society in relation to the current issues and topics associated with archaeological museums. Additionally, many of the films do not address the museum specifically as being archaeological or anthropological. Rather, there are art museums, which may happen to have art historical objects, and natural history museums, which may happen to have anthropological or imitative ethnographic material objects. This further confuses the public as



to what constitutes archaeological material and blurs the representational image of museums into a singular entity.

Further research could explore the differences in representation of museums in film by type, comparing for example, archaeological museums versus art museums. Another aspect to analyze would be reactions from different individuals, members of the public, students of archaeology, students of heritage and museum studies, and museum professionals as they watch these films to ascertain whether they perceive the museums and the representations differently. Science communication is an extremely important part of fields like archaeology, and this research shows that there is a potential to improve communication for a comprehensive, sincere and transparent representation of museums in popular film, reflecting the distinct uniqueness and diversity of the archaeological museum.

Cinema has the power to affect and impact the mindset of people towards cultural institutions. Because of this impact on the audience, cinematic representations of museums can have a positive, negative, or neutral effect on the museum industry. Cinema is oftentimes considered just a part or product of culture when it should also be considered cultural heritage. Studying perceptions of cultural institutions like museums through cinema, reminds us that the two industries are intertwined, and that they have the power to influence, and be influenced by each other. This power should not be taken for granted, as they ought to be working together for positive change and representation for the future.

## **Abstract**

Cinema has become a major industry, especially in the past few years with the development of technology and the popularity of streaming services. Films depict representations of all walks of life, people, places, and institutions. Cinema can have a significant effect on the public's attitude and understandings of cultural institutions like museums, since not all cinema-goers are museum-goers. Likewise, science communication, or lack thereof, effects the extent of the public's understandings of archaeology, often leading to inaccuracies of the reality of archaeology and archaeological museums in media like cinema.

Popular films which depict museums are common, but films which specifically represent archaeological or anthropological museums are rarer. Examinations of the historical development of museums and cinema, and their relationships with the field of archaeology, sets up a dynamic background for the state of museums, current museum studies discourse, and museum representation today. By analyzing how a selection of recent popular films portray museums through the categories of space and aesthetics, place and physicality, and institutional structures, there are various patterns, and reproduced stereotypes of representation that are seen throughout the selection of films. Detailed and thorough observations of the settings, dialogue, visuals, sounds, lighting, plot, characters, and themes, reveal many similarities. These patterns and stereotypes have a valuable capacity to be examined by museum professionals to ascertain how their professions and institutions are being portrayed and whether there is work to be done to improve communication with the public and creators of popular media for better awareness, dialogue that leads to positive change, and a sustainable future for museums.

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