Indiana Jones and the magical artefacts: Powerful objects in popular media and their dangerous connotations

GABRIELLA PRICE

Abstract

Popular media is pervaded by magical artefacts. They drive the narratives of films, television shows, and streaming series, enhance their plots, inform the actions of their characters, and provide the viewer with an entertaining and engaging story. However, constant inclusion of these mystical objects proves dangerous to real-world material culture, whether intentional or not. This essay explores how seemingly innocent fictional objects can harm the discipline of archaeology and damage real artefacts through the narratives they tell. Firstly, I detail the tropes involving these artefacts: the lost object, legitimising power through an object, and the need to destroy an object on religious grounds. Secondly, I discuss the impact of mass media on the interpretation of magical artefacts by archaeologists and curators, and how these narratives can harm archaeology as a discipline. Ultimately, I demonstrate how the uses of magical artefacts in popular media have notable ramifications for vulnerable communities across the globe, and the responsibilities we have—as either archaeologists, creators of entertainment, or consumers of popular media—to consider how cultural groups will be affected by the stereotypes and magical objects we attribute to them.

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Magical artefacts have long been at the heart of popular media and the basis of a wide range of iconic movies, ranging from the *Indiana Jones* series (1981–2023)—which features the Golden Idol, the staff of Ra, the Ark of the Covenant, the Sankara Stones, Coronado's Crucifix, the Holy Grail, the Crystal Skull, and, most recently, the Dial of Destiny—to the Amulet of Pazuzu in *The Exorcist* (1973). These objects often act as a 'MacGuffin'—an object that drives the narrative—providing incentive for the main characters' actions (McGeough 2006:177). The 'MacGuffin' is a term coined by Alfred Hitchcock to describe the object desired by all the central characters. These objects—such as the microfilm in *North by Northwest* (1959) or $40,000 of stolen money in *Psycho* (1960)—draw the main characters together and set the antagonists against the protagonists (McGeough 2006:177). However, Hitchcock was quick to point out that the actual object has no importance to the viewer; therefore, it is the importance of the object to the characters that is meaningful to the viewer (Walker 2019). In this way, magical artefacts are not necessarily significant because of their features, or even their powers, but because of what they make the characters do. The underlying narratives conveyed by these artefacts are, however, problematic when the objects are associated with harmful archaeological perspectives that carry real consequences for both material and intangible culture across the globe. In this essay, I explore how magical artefacts in media are used to create harmful narratives. I survey some of the tropes regarding magical objects in popular culture, such as the lost object, the legitimisation of authority by an object, and the necessity of object destruction. I also discuss how archaeological interpretation has been influenced by the tropes found in popular media, as demonstrated in museums. Consequently, this analysis reveals the harm caused by the film industry in creating and developing magical artefacts that not only impact the plots, but how archaeology is practised in the modern world. This will highlight the injustices served to a wide range of cultural groups already affected by modern racism, and therefore will highlight the need for more care to be taken when including a magical object in a film, and when buying into narratives about certain ethnic and cultural groups.

Perhaps the most obvious dangerous magical object trope is 'the lost object'. This trope is seen, for example, in *The Mask* (1994), in which put-upon Stanley (Jim Carrey) gains supernatural powers when he uncovers a magical mask associated with the Norse god Loki. Moreover, films such as *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) imply that magical artefacts not only exist, but that their excavation will reveal hidden secrets about supernatural presence on Earth (McGeough 2006:188). This trope also forms the basis of many pseudo-scientific 'documentary' series and stems from distrust of professional archaeology. For example, Rossi's (2019) experience at *AlienCon*—a convention for fans of the History Channel program *Ancient Aliens* (2009–ongoing), including a range of presentations about the supposed extraterrestrial origins of notable monuments—revealed this distrust through several interactions with guests at the convention. It became obvious there was a common belief that archaeologists were hiding proof of the existence of aliens. Similarly, actress Megan Fox, while promoting *Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen* (2009)—a film, interestingly, about a secret conflict with aliens trying to rob the Great Pyramid at Giza—expressed that she wanted to participate in archaeological research to access its supposed 'secrets' (Malley 2018:59). These beliefs motivate a 'treasure hunting' culture that results in illegal excavations, causing considerable damage to cultural artefacts and sites, undermining the importance of contextual analysis in archaeology (Brodie and Renfrew 2005).

Magical artefacts in media can also harmfully echo the use of material culture to justify authority in the real world, especially when it comes to land rights. In a cinematic context, these are objects that only function in the hands of certain people, typically due to their supposed moral superiority. The mythical sword Excalibur—as seen in British lore and dramatised in *The Sword in the Stone* (1963), *Excalibur* (1981), *First Knight* (1995), *King Arthur* (2004), and *King Arthur: Legend of the Sword* (2017)—is a noteworthy example of this, as the sword chooses who it believes to be the rightful King of England. Similarly, Thor's Hammer Mjølnir—as seen in the *Thor* franchise (2011–2023) and *The Avengers* series (2012–2019)—is only able to be wielded by those deemed worthy. This materialisation of legitimacy, particularly regarding the right to power, is extremely problematic when applied to real-world conflicts. The Balkans, particularly Romania and Croatia, have seen violent conflict over ethnicity and rights to land which culminate in the same material source of legitimation (Kaiser 1996). Archaeology in these regions has been used and manipulated in often destructive ways to ensure that the ethnic majority can prove their right to rule. Romania, in particular, has used the archaeological record to claim a million-year-long habitation of their land (Kaiser 1996:115). Furthermore, the archaeological record in Croatia has been significantly damaged due to the destruction of cultural heritage in attempts to undermine the legitimacy of rival ethnic groups (Kaiser 1996). It is important to note that these regions also feature magical artefacts in their films. *Kingdom in the Clouds (Tinerete Fara Batrînete)* (1968) includes a magical horn and feather which aid the protagonist in his quest to enter the Kingdom of Youth, while *Black Gruya and the Stone of Wisdom* (2007) deals with in-fighting between Serbian lords during a Turkish invasion through a magical rock. Of course, the media is hardly responsible for causing such conflicts, many of which have occurred as the result of longstanding ethnic tensions and previous nationalist movements, such as in late nineteenth-century Romania (Kaiser 1996:118). However, by echoing this material legitimation within film, objects are reinforced as a primary means of proving one's right to power. In this way, archaeology has been employed by those in power as a tool to ensure their authority, and it is unethical to celebrate these usages of material culture within popular media.

Just as these items can be questionably used to support authority over land, fictional magical objects can also perpetuate questionable ideas of the 'protection' of the artefacts themselves. Television programs such as *Warehouse 13* (2009–2014) portray colonial institutions, such as the US Government, as the primary protectors of magical cultural objects deemed 'too dangerous' for their return to their places of origin. *Night at the Museum: Secret of the Tomb* (2014) is similar in that the powerful Egyptian tablet at the centre of the plot is looked after and protected primarily by Larry Daley (Ben Stiller)—a white (although Jewish) American man, not an Egyptian—and later the British Museum. This translates poorly to the real world, where today, alongside other questionably acquired objects, the British Museum controversially holds the Parthenon Marbles (Herman 2023). These narratives reflect historical incidents such as the British takeover of the Buddha's tooth cult in Sri Lanka in order to secure cultural power over subdued Sri Lankan communities (Strong 2010). Although eventually the cult was returned to Sri Lankan communities, the Buddha's tooth became so associated with British colonialism and oppression that the cult has never been able to regain its cultural significance (Strong 2010). To replicate

such damaging acts within popular film is ignorant and fosters a Euro-centric sentiment of superiority that has historically been seen with museums such as the British Museum (Boelhower 2023). Excuses for the 'dangers' of returning cultural objects to their communities have been seen time and time again within museum contexts and from archaeologists themselves, using the same narratives popularised through mass media.

In contrast to the harmful ideas surrounding 'protection' of magical artefacts, another of the most dangerous media tropes for magical objects is the necessity of destruction, which can cause a devastating loss of cultural heritage. Films such as *The Mask*, *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (2001–2003), *The Lost Medallion: The Adventures of Billy Stone* (2013), and *Black Adam* (2022) all culminate in the destruction of the magical artefact at the centre of the plot. The magical objects featured in these films typically bring misfortune and destruction to the protagonist's world, and their destruction seeks to prevent what is usually some sort of Armageddon. These objects replicate longstanding perspectives of magic as the antithesis of religion. In ancient Greece and Rome, clear distinctions were made between religion—which contained beliefs that were condoned by authoritative figures—and magic, which was seen as fraudulent and misguided (Carlà-Uhink and Berti 2015:3). Years later, in the 1500s, this is embodied by the supposed destruction of the Buddha's tooth by the Catholic Portuguese Viceroy of Goa, Don Constantino da Bragança in 1561 (Strong 2010). The justification for this action was that the tooth was a 'relic of the devil (reliquia do demonio)' and therefore it would be sinful to protect it (Strong 2010:187). This is especially impertinent when research by Franklin Fearing (1947), which examined the effects of racist film in increasing racial prejudice within viewers, is considered. More recent research has confirmed Fearing's conclusions that these films have a notable impact on the views of audience members (Kubrak 2020). While the destruction of the Buddha's tooth occurred long prior to the creation of film, and despite the lack of significant incidents of destruction occurring due to mainstream media, it is problematic to continue to cement and glorify these ideas of destroying 'devil-possessed' objects into popular thought through cinema.

This destruction often takes the form of religious iconoclasm. Disney's animated *The Princess and the Frog* (2009), through its criticism of the materiality of African voodooism, represents Protestant Christian iconoclasm (Pérez 2021). Dr Facilier (voiced by Keith David), whose drums, masks, statues, and other African cultural objects are given magical agency, is seen as the antagonist. However, Mama Odie (Jenifer Lewis), another voodoo practitioner, disregards the agency of material culture and instead takes a Protestant-esque stance of disdain for such objects. She is the individual who coaches and leads the protagonist, Tiana (Anika Noni Rose), on a path away from materiality (Pérez 2021). Clashes between forms of voodooism have been prevalent in African and Caribbean countries for decades, and so to rekindle this conflict within a film targeted at children is distasteful at best and, potentially, violently divisive at worst (Pérez 2021). Like Protestant Christianity, Islam is a fundamentally iconoclastic religion, and certain strains of Islam take this belief to the extreme. Islamic communities such as the Swati people hold the belief that the destruction of idols will earn good favour with God, while their preservation will warrant His ire (Khan and De Nardi 2022). One video of the destruction of a perfectly preserved Buddha statue in 2020 in the Takht Bhaie region of Pakistan ends with the men commenting 'congratulations to all, our hearts were strong, that's why we were able to break it' (Khan and De Nardi 2022:13). Although motivated by religion, this celebration of destruction of cultural heritage is a common theme in popular media, and its applications in the real world expose the issues with this trope. By elevating those who destroy 'evil' artefacts to 'hero' status, as in *The Lost Medallion: The Adventures of Billy Stone*, popular media promotes and encourages destructive acts against cultural artefacts. Furthermore, normalising this destruction poses a risk to the integrity of the archaeological process of preserving important artefacts, if the objects at risk of being destroyed even make it to the archaeologist in the first place.

On a more extreme level, the recent participation of IS (Islamic State) in the destruction of archaeological sites such as those in Palmyra in 2015 has had devastating effects for the preservation of these areas (Flood 2016). The extremist Islamic regime has targeted and destroyed artefacts and sites associated with Christian, Yazidi, and both Shi'i and Sunni Muslims that are perceived to 'worship' idols (Flood 2016:116). These events also occurred in March 2001 with the dynamiting of the Bamiyan Buddhas that was filmed and carried out by al-Qaeda, another extremist Islamic group (Flood 2016).

The footage has been used as propaganda by these regimes to make such acts seem 'heroic' and to incite terror among those whose culture is being destroyed (Flood 2016). In terms of IS, however, the events of 2015 are not isolated, as other acts—such as the destruction of a collection on display in the Mosul Museum—also formed part of the IS campaign of cultural annihilation. For the Mosul Museum incident in particular, the video of the event is paired with text claiming that the objects were 'extracted from the earth by "the worshippers of devils"' (Flood 2016:122). Flood (2016) even highlights the inclusion of 'Hollywood filmic conventions … [and] … sample clips' in these propaganda videos. Here the tropes of magical artefacts are linked directly with harmful views of cultural objects. It is clear that continuing to create films centred around 'devil-possessed' objects risks the manipulation of these forms of popular media by extremist organisations interested in fuelling anti-archaeological campaigns of destruction.

As indicated, these tropes not only affect these cultural communities and political participants: the field of archaeology itself has been influenced—for better or worse—by the portrayal of magical artefacts in popular fiction. This is most obvious in museums, where interpretation of artefacts on display forms the basis for how the public perceives them (Johanson and Jonuks 2018). MacCauley's *Motel of the Mysteries* (1979) is a good representation of how the media influences archaeology, presenting a satirical outline of the hypothetical archaeological analysis of a twentieth-century motel in the distant apocalyptic future. Although MacCauley appears to mock the ritualised interpretation of cultural objects, his criticism demonstrates a key issue with archaeological interpretation. To its target audience—average North Americans—the book is amusing. It presents interpretations of objects well known to these readers, which are markedly wrong. The same interpretations would not necessarily be amusing to a foreign reader who has never seen these objects. For them, the descriptions appear to be scientific and trustworthy. In this way, this book points out how—particularly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—foreign cultural objects have been interpreted and presented differently to local objects. While this is not universally true, MacCauley points out how sensationalising foreign objects, as films have done countless times, changes how they are viewed by both archaeologists and the public.

As Johanson and Jonuks (2018:201) highlight in reference to Estonian collections of 'magical' objects, 'the interpretation of magic is much more convenient to apply to cultural, temporal or spatial "strangers" than one's own people'. In the US, for example, archaeological research on magic or magical artefacts tends to focus on Africa, rather than on magical objects found in the US (Johanson and Jonuks 2018:201). When it comes to local magical objects, these objects become more ambiguous and are given mundane labels. A key example of this is a disk displayed at Viljandi Museum, Estonia, that is labelled as a spindle whorl even though unknown symbols are inscribed on the converse side of the disk. These ideas can be linked to the media's, and archaeology's, obsession with progress, and the advancement of the Western world. In the media, both amateur archaeological programs such as *Ancient Aliens* and fictional films such as *Stargate* (1994) and *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008) target colonised regions such as Egypt and South America with their analyses of magical artefacts, which serve to explain the 'evolution' of these countries in a way which portrays them as less sophisticated than their Western counterparts and entirely dependent on extraterrestrial intervention (Johanson and Jonuks 2018:209). In this way, magical artefacts in the media popularise and normalise a racially prejudiced narrative: Western society is far more advanced than our foreign counterparts. Therefore, it is crucial that we, as archaeologists, consider how popular media has influenced our interpretations and perspectives on non-Western cultures.

Magical artefacts in film rarely shed positive light on the cultures to which they belong. Their depictions popularise narratives of distrust, material legitimation, and destruction. They target vulnerable communities in their attacks on material culture. There are exceptions, but they are outnumbered by popular stories which feed and in turn feed upon these tropes. As shown in this essay, Hollywood's portrayal of magical artefacts has consequences for cultural heritage across the globe. Archaeological research has been used and manipulated to serve this agenda. In short: archaeologists should not rely on lazy tropes for interpretation, while creators of media should carefully consider how they portray both non-Western cultures and magical objects. However, as members of our communities we should also take responsibility for what we consume and how it can affect cultural groups who have less voice

on a global scale. If we simply pass these tropes off as entertainment, we risk real irreversible damage to worldwide cultural heritage.

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