



BOOK REVIEW:

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

*James Hamby*

Malley, Shawn. *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television*. Liverpool UP, 2018. ISBN 978-1786941190.

Shawn Malley's *Excavating the Future: Archaeology and Geopolitics in Contemporary North American Science Fiction Film and Television* comes at a critical time in international relations, Western identity, and humanity's development of technologies with uncertain futures. The book's ambitious goal of connecting North American popular culture, Western neocolonialism, artificial intelligence, humanity's first steps into space, and the socio-political nature of archaeology produces an insightful take on how contemporary SF reproduces ideals of power and hegemony also found in places such as America's aggressive military policy towards the Middle East and the insidious ways it has often found tacit support through archaeology. Though archaeology is a field that, like many other disciplines in the academy, asserts its independence and objectivity, it has throughout its history been used as an instrument of power by warring (and especially colonial) powers. This, Malley asserts, has been particularly true of American adventurism in the Middle East in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The goal of Malley's study is to examine "how archaeology bequeaths to SFFTV [science fiction film and television] a critical vocabulary with which to speak about the past" (13). Malley is largely successful in accomplishing his stated aims, and his able demonstration of how colonial ideology filters into North American popular culture is truly disturbing in its

suggestion of ubiquitous propaganda. However, at times Malley needs to more strongly connect the disparate elements of his argument to demonstrate the underlying forces that shape these narratives and prove that these connections do in fact exist. Nevertheless, Malley's study provides valuable commentary on the ways in which geopolitics shape popular narratives.

*Excavating the Future* fits neatly into post-colonial literary interpretation. While its examinations of power between coloniser and colonised may be nothing new, its discussion of neo-colonialism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century pointedly demonstrates that the wrongs of colonial conquest that took place in the past are not over. Furthermore, its focus on archaeology underscores the idea that historical narratives are always being constructed and reconstructed from the remains of the past, from artefacts of unknown or dubious origins whose meanings are imposed upon them by those with the most power.

The work begins with an introduction to the depiction of human evolution in Stanley Kubrick's film *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The film's iconic opening shows apes transforming into a more humanlike state – with weapons and aggression – upon encountering alien technology. Malley argues that the opening scene “conflates the birth of human culture with the birth of archaeology, the invention of material culture with the advent of ideology” (11). Because so much SF, like *2001: A Space Odyssey*, tries to express the complexity of human evolution and to speculate on what may come next, Malley claims that archaeology is a frequent motif in SF as well as a “scientific touchstone and visual field for imagining humanity's progression” (2). With this articulation of the role of archaeology in SFFTV, the act of “digging up the past buried in the future” (1), as Malley puts it, later becomes a means of placing American military intervention in the Middle East on a progressive continuum in which America brings order and civilisation to barbarians in the desert. Malley then divides the book into three sections of two to three chapters each. Every chapter features an analysis of either a television series or a film and describes how the “archaeological mise-en-scenes” they contain constitute the “dreams of progress sustaining globalist politics” (18). In looking at contemporary events in the frames of mythologised timelines, audiences must question the consequences of the decisions that society chooses to make.

The first section of the book, “Battling Babylon: Military SFFTV and the War on Terror”, contains chapters on *Manticore*, *Stargate SG-1*, and *Transformers 2: Revenge of the Fallen*. The chapter on *Transformers 2* offers the best articulation of Malley's argument for how geopolitics drive popular narratives. In discussing the collaboration between Hollywood and the Pentagon's liaison office in Los Angeles for the entertainment industry, Malley notes that this department's ostensible purpose is to assist in creating accurate depictions of the US armed forces, but that its true mission, according to Phil Strub, chief of the liaison office, is to ensure that the military is never depicted negatively (63). Each of these three opening chapters also shows how SFFTV dramas set in the Middle East typically avoid “politics by fostering sympathy with the travails and triumphs of the individual protagonists” (32). These works thus view the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East as backgrounds for heroes' journeys rather than as reckless colonial aggression. Indeed, as Malley states, these films evade “direct geopolitical debate by privileging action-adventure, special effects, espionage narratives”, and other titillating Hollywood blockbuster elements (32). Rife with orientalist tropes, imperialistic self-

congratulations, and fetishised heroism, these narratives set America's invasions within the long history of the Middle East in a position of paramount importance. The connection Malley draws between Hollywood and the Pentagon is an intriguing, tangible bit of evidence that underscores his argument. However, Malley regrettably does not extend this connection, or any other like it, to the other sections of the book, nor does he really explore it thoroughly in this section. For instance, how much influence does this office have? What happens when films portray the American military negatively? These tantalising questions remain unanswered.

The second and third parts of the book branch out in their thematic concerns. "Part 2: of Artefacts and Ancient Aliens" features chapters on the History Channel series *Ancient Aliens* (2009-present), *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), and *Smallville* (2001-11), all of which consider humanity's evolutionary trajectory and question if we are on a path towards self-destruction (74). Malley points out that the first season of *Ancient Aliens* promotes an apocalyptic vision of current events (88). In this narrative framework he sees an attempt to address the faults of "an age whose information technologies are themselves symptomatic of heightened global crisis" (94). As with the globalist narratives examined in the first part of Malley's study, the SF works discussed in Part 2 create mythologised timelines in which we may view ourselves. Likewise, "Part 3: Cyborg Sites: The Case of *A. I. Artificial Intelligence*" examines SFFTV set in the distant future that looks backwards at human development, causing audiences to reflect on our place in time on the cusp of posthumanism. Malley grounds his discussion of cyborgs by first analysing a cyborg's existential crisis in Steven Spielberg's *A. I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) and then examining the human-cyborg continuum in *Battlestar Galactica* (2003-09) and *Prometheus* (2012). Malley argues that in all of these stories cyborgs "embark on existential journeys through archaeological investigations of their origins in human technology, excavations that expose the material conditions of the cyborg birth to politics of simulation in which we are constantly remaking and unmaking ourselves" (144). In contrast to the first section of Malley's work in which the SFFTV examined promotes a positive and uncritical interpretation of the current geopolitical situation, the works of this final section are largely pessimistic, questioning global capitalism and cultural hegemony, and their audiences are left with great doubt as to the direction in which we are moving. As Malley declares in his introduction, archaeology not only lends SF "materials for recognizable futures, but it also injects challenging questions about the ideological motivations" these constructions have for audiences (18). Just as the tracing of the human story through archaeology in SF narratives can serve the purposes of power, so too, Malley suggests, can these stories critique it.

While this work is well-researched and thought-provoking, there are some arguments in further need of fleshing out. As mentioned above, Malley's discussion of the US military's Hollywood liaison office is intriguing and could be developed further. Also, the thread of geopolitics that was so prominent in the first section recedes noticeably in the remaining two sections, only coming up here and there, and even then the works discussed seem to lack the same social commentary contained in that first section. Nevertheless, Malley does succeed in identifying the politicised ways in which archaeology is used in SFFTV, creating *mise-en-scènes* that either support or question hegemonic

power. As mentioned above, this book's ambition lies more in tying together so many different threads rather than saying anything new about the nature of power. Yet the focus on archaeology – a field frequently supposed to be based on artefacts (and thus hard facts) but really built upon interpretation (as in other social sciences) – underscores the tenuous nature of humanity's relationship with its own past. The present imagining the future looking back on its past creates a powerful prism through which to view ourselves – including our geopolitics and our relationship with technology – with just enough displacement to allow for objectivity and criticism.

This volume should prove to be of interest not only to SF scholars but to film, television, and general popular-culture scholars as well. Moreover, this is a timely study as endemic war in the Middle East and our relationship with technologies that may transform or destroy us are ever-present in our political and social debates. Not only does this study convey SF's enormous potential for social influence and criticism, but it also captures the zeitgeist of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, when we are poised at a unique time in history for unthinkable change, and possibly for self-destruction. *Excavating the Future* challenges its readers to think about the shape of humanity's trajectory through time, especially about how the future will look back on our world today.

*Biography:* James Hamby is the Associate Director of the Writing Center at Middle Tennessee State University where he also teaches courses in composition and literature, including *Victorian Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale*. His dissertation, *David Copperfield: Victorian Hero* examines archetypal tropes in Dickens's most autobiographical novel. He is also the Book Reviews Associate Editor for *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*.