

An archaeology of Skyfall

by DAWID KOBIALKA on APRIL 9, 2013 in ARCHAEOLOGY



James Bond playing James Bond? Skyfall reflects upon its own past.

Archaeology as practiced by anthropologists is no longer only about prehistoric societies. As the world becomes increasingly preoccupied with preserving cultural heritage for future generations, archaeologists are increasingly shifting their attention from mummies and pottery to contemporary phenomena. Cultural heritage that is worth preserving could be almost anything: from Stonehenge, through to the pyramids in Egypt, to places where Star Wars or The Lord of the Rings were filmed. Even such places as the ruins of Nazi factories or Soviet war infrastructure are fragments of our history and can say something significant about our past. In fact, blockbuster films can be just as valid a topic for anthropological investigation.

Without any doubt, Hollywood's films are a medium which allows us to reflect upon social and cultural changes through time. The films Being John Malkovich (1999), directed by Spike Jonze, and Steven Soderbergh's Ocean's Twelve (2004) touch upon contemporary issues of cultural heritage by including references to past processes of filmmaking. However, there is a fundamental difference between the two films. Being John Malkovich is about a mysterious door that leads into John Malkovich's head, his consciousness. By entering this door, different people see and experience the world as being John Malkovich. This is why the American actor plays himself.

The beauty of the film rests on the idea that an actor, John Malkovich, is not aware that he plays himself in a film. It is as if the film presents Malkovich's day-to-day reality. Things look quite different in Ocean's Twelve. The crucial motif is a scene where the heroes must steal a golden egg from a museum. Julia Roberts, the famous Hollywood actress, plays herself, a famous Hollywood actress. In the film, she is reproached by others that she does not look like the true Julia Roberts (she has a different accent than the real Julia Roberts, and so

on). The paradox of the scene hinges on the fact that the reproach is fully reasonable in another way: there is something deeply false about Julia Roberts playing herself.

The same can be said about the most recent James Bond film, *Skyfall* (2012), directed by Sam Mendes. What is the cause of its astonishing success and countless positive reviews? Is it because the film is no longer simply another film about the adventures of James Bond, but rather a reflexive film about the cultural heritage of this famous British agent? It is as if James Bond is an endangered animal or an archaeological site that has to be preserved for the good of the coming generations.

Recall how many things in *Skyfall* refer to previous James Bond films. The film's establishing scene takes place in Istanbul, the very same city where *From Russia with Love* (1963) and *The World is not Enough* (1999) were shot. It is the same with Macau. Macau was also used as a place of James Bond's missions in *The Man with the Golden Gun* (1974). The story goes on. The famous grey Aston Martin DB5 that James Bond was driving in *Goldfinger* (1964) makes another appearance in *Skyfall*. Daniel Craig (James Bond) also uses a special pistol that only responds to his palm print. This motif, as every devotee of James Bond films knows very well, was already used in *Licence to Kill* (1989). There are also many other reflexive motifs that appear throughout the film.

It seems that, in making *Skyfall*, Sam Mendes treated James Bond as cultural heritage worth preserving. Although fascinating and enjoyed by many, the film is no longer the true James Bond. Or, more precisely, *Skyfall* can be criticised in the very same way as Julia Roberts is reproached in *Ocean's Twelve*. James Bond does not look like James Bond, although he is him. By the same token, the reflexive James Bond is being too true, too Bondian so to speak, and ultimately comes across as a fake. Paradoxically as it sounds, instead of simply playing himself, James Bond plays playing himself in *Skyfall*. My critical point is very simple: James Bond does not have to reflexively play himself to be cultural heritage. The films are *already* cultural heritage.

Why are increasingly more things being labelled as cultural heritage? There is certainly growing recognition that even most ordinary things and places have their own historic and cultural value. The paradox encountered here is the same as with *Skyfall*. Of course, even Nazi factories in Poland are cultural heritage. However, when day-to-day and ordinary things and places come to be seen as cultural heritage that is worth protecting, they lose their sense of uniqueness. When everything is preserved as cultural heritage, there is no cultural heritage at all.

Most of the things we view as cultural heritage were created without any reflection upon their own cultural value. James Bond is cultural heritage because the first directors of the films simply wanted to make a good film. The ruins of Nazi factories in Poland are cultural heritage because the factories were erected at a particular historical moment as places where things could be produced. This is why I argue that only things that are made non-reflexively — without their creators stopping to think of their future preservation — can become cultural heritage in the future.

The underlying paradox is that those who wish to preserve cultural heritage for the coming generations actually destroy what cultural heritage is really about. In the same vein, ruins are ruins because nobody cared about them and did not want to preserve them for the generations to follow. For this reason, we need *less* rather than more preservation of cultural heritage. Focusing on production of value, rather than preservation of contemporary culture, will mean more cultural heritage for everybody. That is to say, it is good when James Bond is not too Bondian.

- See more at: <http://popanth.com/article/an-archaeology-of-skyfall/#sthash.hyh7dT12.IUS1bwpB.dpuf>