TV Advocacy For Cultural Heritage: Harnessing New Forms of Support

Judith Harris (January 25, 2013)



Thursday 24 January 2012 16.00-19.30, British School Rome. A discussion of television’s role in advocacy for cultural heritage. Organised in partnership with Heritage/RAI with a panel of speakers representing Italian and international media and heritage sectors.

Little sets the imagination on fire, and invites an appreciation of heritage, so much as well-wrought fictive recreations of antiquity. Some films are amazingly accurate, such as Kubrick's Spartacus, and at an Oxford conference on archaeology, a segment was shown. For this reason the American Institute of Archaeology has compiled a list of nearly ninety such films, with many of them reviewed; you can find the list on line at their site.

A problem for TV documentary makers - and for the BBC I produced a half-hour documentary on Pompeii - is that sites are difficult to photograph. Stones are just that - stony and hence static. The people interviewed can break this stasis, but this means the over-use of what TV professionals call, disparagingly, "talking heads." TV needs drama, but drama is expensive, and I've seen the same

footage of sandal-clad ancient Roman feet marching through many a docudrama; costs have to be cut somewhere.

But it is useful to bear in mind that the media interact, as they always have. In 1834, Edward Bulwer-Lytton published his novel The Last Days of Pompeii, which was inspired by his seeing, on exhibit in Milan, Russian artist Karl Briullov's gigantic painting of Vesuvius erupting. From the dawn of cinema through a century of remakes the novel inspired movies.

But some of these movies fostered the image of Pompeii as a Sodom and Gomorrah compound of spectacle, violent death, and sex. Thanks to this image, the longest visitors' line is outside the tiny brothel of Pompeii, whose wall paintings are therefore at risk in the same way as were the neolithic cave paintings of Altamira. Its image helped make Pompeii a cash cow, to which visitors flock no matter how poorly maintained the site, or how little they are helped to see and understand it. To combat this, an Imax-type theater at Pompeii with a well-made reconstruction could help.

Media images endanger other heritage sites. The Return of the Mummy and Indiana Jones adventure archaeology do no favors to archeology. Then there is the reality TV series American Digger, entering its second season next week on the National Geographic Channel. In it a former professional wrestler and his team research and then dig for such buried historical artifacts as Civil War Relics. American academics protest that treasure-hunt shows like this glamourize and "encourage looting." The producers respond that their digs are all on private property and, anyway, the buried material would just go on rotting underground. A 2d cable TV show is being developed along the same lines.

For today's meeting, via email I asked two distinguished American archaeologists, John R. Clarke of the University of Texas and John Dobbins of the University of Virginia, for comments. Dr. Clark, co-director of The Oplontis Project, replied that TV tends to over-emphasize drama and dressing actors in 'ancient' costumes, to react to an (invisible) volcano. Rather than entrust a docudrama to actors and producers, the expert should have control, choosing speakers and locations, he suggests.

In "Cellar of Skeletons," Mary Beard presented one version for the BBC, but, in a second version, distributed worldwide including to the US, "Full explanations were cut into stupid, brief, sound and video bytes, making even intelligent archaeologists and scholars say what seemed obvious or even stupid." An "wildly gesticulating" actor was hired to mouth Clarke's words even as historical accuracy went by the wayside: "In one such film, a a man mixes cement with his bare hands. Never mind that, as is known, quicklime burns the skin."

One of the most successful of all archaeology broadcasts, the BBC Channel 4 series Time Team, ran for 20 years but is now being phased out after its production costs soared and its audience sank from 2.5 to 1.5 million. Among the causes of the demise, says one of its regular experts, Mick Aston, was the dumbing down of the show and its reduction in archaeological content.

On the bright side, Dr. John Dobbins, who directs the Pompeii Forum Project, praises the 100 local societies of the Archaeological Institute of America in the US and Canada, for encouraging layman's interest in all aspects of archaeology. Besides producing Archaeology magazine, the AIA organizes a traveling lecturer program and encourages cultural tourism, important because,he says, "individuals learning to appreciate the material remains of earlier times will have a broadened and more fulfilling view of the world and its history," On the Internet the AIA, by the way, lists 80-plus archaeology movies, many with reviews by archaeologists.

Graphic reconstructions of monuments are improving, thanks to academics like Bernard Frischer of the University of Virginia. His "Tour Through Ancient Rome in 320 CE," posted by Past Horizons Archaeology TV, has been seen by 27,000 viewers. The free internet lectures called TED talks (short for Technology, Entertainment, Design) include innovative short videos on the ancient world, such as Ray Laurence's brilliant animated feature, "A Glimpse of teenage life in ancient Rome." Created in 1990 by the private, non-profit Sapling Foundation of California, TED Talks have a viewing public of over 500 million. One such talk was on the Elgin Marbles; another was a lecture by Metropolitan Museum of Art director Thomas P. Campbell on "The importance of preserving cultural artifacts."

Not least, the Internet offers a stunning variety of archaeology sites with specific content aimed at children and younger students. Some are interactive, like the one allowing a child to unwrap a mummy. To see this new type of production and its variety, and to see what attracts the most viewers, make these a useful tool for other media. They are available for free, without actors, without hand-churned cement, and without dumbing down.

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