

Cinematosophical Introduction to the Theory of Archaeology

Understanding Archaeology Through Cinema, Philosophy,
Literature and some Incongruous Extremes

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Curating and Interpreting Culture



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Foreword

A few years ago, in an "advanced topics" lecture at the Institute of Archaeology at the University of Zurich, we dealt with the issue of monetary value in prehistory. Since then, I have often wondered what money actually is. Ultimately, as we finally stated with Aleksander, in moments of doubt or uncertainty, we can take money simply as those things which we get rid of every day when we go shopping. Some people have more money, others have less money, but everyone goes shopping. After reading this book, I have to say that the same is true for archaeology. Actually, we all know what archaeology is and what we do as archaeologists every day. We do archaeology as we do shopping. But when we start to think about it, we will find that both shopping and archaeology are very strange phenomena, whose unconscious foundations are derived from history, psychology and ideology, and that only philosophy and art can be effective tools for their analysis.

Aleksander Dzbyński's book is not a textbook on archaeology. It is rather an essay on the sources and conditions of this discipline. It leads the reader from the beginnings of archaeology to the present, revealing to him deeper layers of archaeological theoretical thought, which for some will certainly be surprising. For example, we learn that the history of archaeology strikingly resembles the history of cinema; or that thanks to *The Magic Mountain* of Thomas Mann, we can better understand the culture-historical archaeologists of the time. We will also discover the basics of cybernetic thought in processual archaeology, which in turn allows us to ask questions about the relationship between archaeology and artificial intelligence. So, if you want to know how artificial intelligence might help us in understanding the past, you should read this book.

The theory of archaeology has not been a field willingly undertaken by researchers in recent years. It might seem that the enthusiasm for this type of research passed away with the resounding of the so-called post-processual current. At present, we observe a certain return to the sources of philosophical thinking, with reference to the original thoughts of philosophers such as Ludwig Wittgenstein, Martin Heidegger or Jürgen Habermas. Aleksander Dzbyński's book perfectly fits this trend. Moreover, it contains a serious implementation of popular culture into the theoretical text, which not only makes the text more attractive but also makes it more accessible to non-specialists.

The book does not contain any specific information or guidance on how archaeology should be practiced, but, by presenting an extremely broad spec-

trum of philosophical thought, it contains serious initial knowledge of the subject. We will be able to use this knowledge primarily to enrich ourselves, starting with the observation that simple explanations, both as archaeological explanations of the past as well as of archaeology itself, are never this simple.

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Preface

It took me some time to write this book. Should its beginning be the strange thought that came to my mind that theoretical issues of archaeology cannot be presented, especially to unprepared students, in the form of a textbook? Or perhaps its origin should be seen in the fact that the author himself has decided to explore some of the ways and paths of philosophical archaeological thought in order to investigate them more accurately, seeking not so much new, yet undiscovered truths but rather as a detective—intending to trace tracks and motifs and picking a personal picture of the puzzle pieces together, which will always be interpreted differently. Well, probably both versions are just as good.

Anyway, the first passages of this book were created about three years ago, and when I finished, it turned out that one chapter was missing! Amazed at the fact that I forgot about such an important issue, I made up for this lack quite quickly. And yet I've remained amazed to this day and, ultimately, I am not sure that everything I wanted to say had found its place in this text. It reminds me of my character—whenever I go on a trip, I never manage to take everything I have planned—there is always something I will forget. Fortunately, it is almost always something out of the things that are not crucial to the journey. Nevertheless, always something is left, even if it was to have been taken.

So if this book is a kind of a trip I went on some time ago, I almost certainly forgot about something in it. I'm only comforting myself that it must have been a small thing, or at most a few small things that do not have a great influence on the whole. I would be very pleased if the reader also treated this book as a trip and forgive me that in the luggage of the content these few minor items are missing. That's the way I am for you. In return for this generosity, I propose that you pay attention now to what is in the luggage and why it has been taken.

The book consists of 8 chapters presenting a set of characteristic philosophical attitudes relevant to archaeology. These 8 chapters do not exhaust the subject of course, but I had to make a choice that was dictated by the fact that they are well-trodden paths, they are known and fixed in archaeology to such an extent that every researcher and lover of this field of study can find their place here. However, it may well be said that their origin, deeply rooted in the theory of archaeology, allows us and perhaps even compels us to tell stories about them and to navigate these paths in different ways, to the extent that some of them can be described as sublime or even incongruous. Let us reflect on this for a moment.

First of all, one might notice that this is a reference to the work of the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek. They would probably be right. Referring to him, I was even going to give this book the title *The Pervert's Introduction to the Theory of Archaeology*... but ultimately I did not. Following the trail of Žižek, it was also possible to choose a more subdued title, such as *Awry Look at the Theory of Archaeology* or something in this manner. Such a title would also be a reference to this philosopher and besides it would meet expectations regarding terminological correctness. Why did I not choose this title either?

Let us start with the original version. The word “perversion” has two basic meanings: 1) deviation of mental responses to impulses, especially in the sexual sphere, and 2) conduct that violates applicable conventions to induce strong sensations or shock.

To be fair, there will be a little about sex in the book, although in chapter III even the word “sex” will appear and in chapter V, I will purposefully mention the men with lust for the wrong women. It will be clear, however, that my purpose was to induce strong reactions and impressions from the reader—mostly positive ones, because I tried to include here a certain dose of humor. Naturally, the sense of humor is quite an individual thing, so I cannot guarantee that everyone will be happy through the whole work of mine. Following in the footsteps of the so defined “perversion”, one must also admit that I could have violated the binding conventions of writing about archaeology, and some parts of this book may have even been considered shocking, particularly by the readers less resistant to unconventional perspectives. Finally, heading for the end, I would say that the alternative of *Awry Look at the Theory of Archaeology* would not be completely wrong, but the synonyms associated with it are also related to the “contrary” or “unfortunate” understanding, but that's not what I meant. Finally, the word “perversion” seemed to be a more accurate view of what I wanted to say here... but it is not always that what is the most accurate is also the most appropriate. In order to meet expectations as to the correctness of a text aspiring to be academic proper, another interpretation has been proposed—it is this one which you can see on the cover. So it is a compromise, which I liked, I must admit, from the very beginning. However, having known now all this story, the reader can also decide whether this compromise we have meet, is appealing? If you ask me, I would be particularly interested in the question whether changing the title to a more subtle version will cause some content to cease to be shocking? Well, we'll see.

Thinking of the title is always some kind of personal PR. I will refer here to the case of the philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer, which we will discuss on the following pages. Initially, he intended to title his greatest work *Verstehen und Geschehen*. [Understanding and Events] is, as everyone admits, not a catchy title. On the other hand, the *Truth and Method*, as he finally called his

work, is something else. Such a title has the power, intrigues and attracts attention. However, you can ask now if today it would still be up to date? Today no one is interested in the truth, and there are so many methods that students get lost in the methodological excess.

In the case of Gadamer, a marketing approach based on the mentioned “awry look” was applied. How to understand it? The modern interpreters say that in the title of his work one should read, to put it briefly and emphatically, a characteristic kind of winking [chapter VIII]: Gadamer winks with one eye to the reader while saying the word “Truth” and with the other—when uttering the word “Method” [However, eventually he meant *Verstehen und Geschehen*]. Some didn’t notice this wink and read the title of his work verbatim as a manifesto of the philosopher who draws the fundamental divide between either the truth or the method—*quid pro quo*. So when reading them straight out, they got it wrong!

It often happens, however, that understanding something directly is rather a misunderstanding. Aren’t we creatures culturally programmed for distorting interpretations which contort the image we can see? And how often does it turn out that distorted interpretations mean a better understanding of the problem, better insight into the matter? In order to understand something better sometimes we need to close or squint the eye in a specific way: we narrow the field of vision, the light falling on the retina breaks down, creating a slightly hazy image, but allowing for a better focus on what matters. Sometimes, too, in order to understand something properly, we must perceive the closed eye of our interlocutor, who gives us signs, signals something. In the case of Gadamer’s work, one had to “read” the closed eye of the author. In my case, I recommend that the readers themselves squint the eye, both while reading some passages of the book and in the case of the word “incongruous” in its title [remembering about the compromise that has been obtained in this way]—it is ultimately up to you what content you will remember and appreciate, which will become for you important personally, and which immediately will sink into oblivion. Here is what I can say about the specific character of my book.

Last but not least, the close relationship with what I have said so far has an illustrative layer: cinema and literature. This choice is as simple as the title and structure of this book. *Cinematosophical* means above all a combination of cinema and philosophy, but also suggests the perspective of fantasy [being in the original version a certain perversion]. This is a direct reference to Žižek, who claims that fantasy is the perspective from which everything can be seen better. To understand this, we need to make another provocation and ask ourselves: aren’t we doing archaeology precisely because it seems to fulfil the conditions of our fantasies? For each archaeologist those conditions are a little different: discovering something spectacular and very old, being a respected

and admired scientist, taking part in intellectual discussions of immeasurably important matters, participating in exotic expeditions to the end of the world, participating in international research projects, being an expert, and many others. Rarely do we admit to them publicly claiming that we were always interested in this or that, and archaeology gave us the best opportunity to explore the subject. Regardless of what we say publicly, our fantasies—consciously or not—always affect what we do in life. However, we must remember that they are also a potential source of our troubles. And that, among other things, are the themes for cinema and literature.

It was Charlie Chaplin who showed that with true genius in one of his masterpieces. *City Lights* is one of Chaplin's last silent films, where the character is a peculiar tramp. He falls in love with a beautiful, blind florist by whom he is mistakenly identified as a millionaire. He accepts this game of semblance, helps her financially, and in the path of numerous vicissitudes, typical of the comedy of mistakes, he even manages to arrange big money to pay for her eye surgery but he is caught and goes to jail. After serving the sentence, he finds his love, followed by the moment of truth—when the hands meet, the girl recognizes him. On her face, the question appears: “Is this the millionaire who saved my eyes?” “Here I am”, Charlie replies. The End! This is probably the most unfriendly way to end the movie. We do not know what will happen next. Will the girl accept her benefactor as he is?

Equaling archaeologist with a beautiful girl with flowers—isn't it too much? No, if we exclude the differences [especially the external ones] and pay attention to significant similarities. The archaeologist, as suggested by Chaplin's film, is blind at first. Being in this state sometimes, it seems to him that the artefacts he collects and studies tell him wonderful stories about the past, that he participates in intellectual discussions about matters of great importance, etc., and at other times, that the field he deals with is very unique. And it helps him understand the reality surrounding him. In the meantime, if you want to start seeing, archaeology itself is not enough. Its explanatory abilities end in the most interesting moment, exactly as in *City Lights*. Therefore, to understand what archaeologists do, not only do we need archaeology—we certainly need philosophy, but we also need cinema. Only in the cinema can we obtain this key dimension, which we are not ready to face in our day-to-day work as researchers, or we cannot see it in principle. So if you want to find which is

more real than archaeology itself, then you have to look at the cinematographic fiction.¹

In conclusion, I would say that the book you hold in your hand is an introduction to archaeology, but it is certainly not a textbook. This is a book about archaeology, but not only. It is about what is important in archaeology, although the book itself is silent about it. Finally, it is a book for archaeologists, but also for those who do not deal with it professionally and want to know what archaeology really is. The plan looks as follows:

In chapter I, which is a kind of introduction, we will deal with Hegel's philosophy, wondering why it is important for archaeology. We will discuss culture-historical archaeology, and at last, I will familiarize you with a slightly perverted interpretation of Hegel's works, which came out from the pen of his greatest commentator—Alexandre Kojève. The main works to which we refer are: *The Magic Mountain* [Thomas Mann] and *2001: A Space Odyssey* [Stanley Kubrick].

In chapter II, we will look at the sources of scientific archaeology and examine its relationship to the phenomenon of artificial intelligence. We will recall, among others, such characters as: Thomas Hobbes, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, René Descartes, Norbert Wiener and Allan Turing. We will tackle the problem of time and Chinese room. I will mention here such works as: *Metropolis* [Fritz Lang], *Blade Runner* [Ridley Scott], *2001: A Space Odyssey* [again] and *Ex Machina* [Alex Garland].

In chapter III, the discussion will concern archaeological facts, theories and paradigms. Our main philosophical guide will be Ludwig Wittgenstein. In addition to him, we will also discuss the ideas of Thomas Kuhn, Ludwik Fleck, Paul Feyerabend, Willard V.O. Quine and Kurt Gödel. The works which will create the background of our discussion will include: *Witness* [Peter Weir], *The Man in the High Castle* [Philip K. Dick], *Sexmission* [Juliusz Machulski], *The Big Short* [Adam McKay], and *Small Time Crooks* [Woody Allen].

Chapter IV deals with issues of appearance, ideology, and paradox. We include characters such as Charles Marx, Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Levi-Strauss, Pierre Bourdieu and Michel Foucault. In order to illustrate the main points of this chapter, I will refer, among others, to the following films: *The Great Beauty* [Paolo Sorrentino], *They Live* [John Carpenter] and *The Quack* [Jerzy Hoffman].

¹ Paraphrased words of Slavoj Žižek from Sophie Fiennes's film: *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* (2006).

In chapter V, we will consider whether material culture is the text [and if so to what extent] and we will discuss the main postulates of post-processual archaeology. We will refer to Hans-Georg Gadamer and Michel Foucault's methods, and we will discuss Umberto Eco and Jaques Derrida from scratch again. We will get back to *The Man in the High Castle* and for the first time we will investigate the archaeological relevance of *Lost Highway* [David Lynch], *The Process* [Franz Kafka], *Finnegans Wake* [James Joyce], *The Athenian Murders* [José Carlos Somoza] *The Player* [Robert Altman] and *Matrix* [Andy and Larry Wachowski]. We will also get acquainted with the archaeological version of the idea of the artist and philosopher—Marcel Duchamp.

In chapter VI, I discuss two contemporary philosophers: Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty and the problem of communication and rationalization in archaeology. There will also be a little on chess, math, economics and metaphors. For illustrative purposes we will recall the following works: *12 Angry Men*, *The Verdict* [Sidney Lumet], *Justice est faite* [André Cayatte], *A Few Good Men* [Rob Reiner], *Frankenstein* [Mary Shelley], *Alien: Resurrection* [Jean-Pierre Jeunet] *The Green Mile* [Frank Darabont] and *Blow-Up* [Michelangelo Antonioni].

Chapter VII is devoted to existential philosophy. The central point of reference will be the figure of Martin Heidegger, but I also put some references here to the problems more loosely connected with the thought of this philosopher. We will cover Witold Gombrowicz's writing which is little-known for English readers, and then return to the universal message of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Matrix*. In addition, I will mention *Tron* [Steven Lisberger], *The Sheltering Sky* [Bernardo Bertolucci] and *Blue Velvet* [David Lynch].

Chapter VIII is a kind of summary of the entire book. We will primarily consider whether the attitudes and methods of detective work are not the ones best defined by what is commonly referred to as archaeology. In this perspective, we will discuss works such as *Footnote* [Joseph Cedar], *Murder in Mesopotamia* [Agatha Christie], *The Man Who Was Thursday* [Gilbert K. Chesterton], *Children of Men* [Alfonso Cuarón], *Amateur* [Krzysztof Kieslowski] and *Indiana Jones* [Steven Spielberg]. This chapter finishes with a pretty criminal summary based on the film *Zodiac* [David Fincher].

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