

Review of several films on archaeology

In general these films were marked by what I refer to as the THREE NO's. No life, no science, no process. On the whole they tend to be better or worse tours of various ruins and artifacts. There is little sense that what matters here is that these finds tell us what life was like for our ancestors, the struggles they went through for humanity to get where it has gotten. For example one film on Mesopotamia puts a picture of an arch on the screen and says that the Mesopotamians invented the arch. That's all; no mention of the process involved in going from whatever preceded the arch to the development of the breakthrough; no sense of the problems that people faced that the arch addressed; no sense really of why the arch was even an important development. Fundamentally these films underestimate the interest in the viewer in understanding, from a scientific point of view, how humankind has developed. Frequent references are made to religion, but not one film tried to explain the function of religion in the various societies, how it developed etc. Neither of the films on earliest man dealt with the question of the driving forces behind physical evolution; just one followed another, da da, da da. The movies cried out for some kind of reenactment of what day to day life must have been like in the various periods. The one crude diorama shone like a bright star in a dull sky. (In general they all tended to waste the visuals. Even the dramatic shots tended toward the cheap (sunsets and the like) rather than emphasizing the subject matter).

Dr. Leakey and the Dawn of Man NGS 1968 26 minutes

Leakey speaks pointing at rock, his voice is unintelligible and the visual is boring. points up the value of a good narrator. Animation or more explicit shot would have helped illustrate his point much better.

for me, the weaving of the story of Leakey's perseverance with that of the big story of man's evolution, was rather unsuccessful. Leakey's story is dramatic and should be told but as done here it tended to detract from what is fundamentally a much bigger and more important story.

it was quite sparse in the science department

shows the argon dating - but visuals not very illustrative shows re-creation of face from skull - quite interesting (possibly because it hinted that what this was about was real people)

From Homo Erectus to Neanderthal Films Inc. 1972 20 minutes

flashy beginning, flash back via still frames from present to prehistoric times

interesting description of how broad interdisciplinary knowledge is necessary for breakthroughs (eg. the link between sea shells and animal claws at one site depended on the insights of an oceanographer/biologist to come up with key to understanding)

somewhat confusing in terms of the purpose of the film. seems to be going backwards in time - only touching on highlights

some good historical footage (Peking man)

would like more science in film (also part of the MGM In Search of the Lost World series)

Fossils - Exploring the Past EBEC 1978 17 minutes

defines what a fossil is and shows a seemingly barren hillside- how bad a use of visuals can you get

whtn it really gets to cataloging various types of fossils it's not bad - although it would be good to have more examples and have it be more systematic, really explain the relevant significant factors of each, how they relate to each other and to the big picture

Civilization of Ancient America Films Inc. 1972 22 minutes
(from the MGM documentary series, In Search of the Lost World)

ruins used mainly as a backdrop for narration; calls on experts, puts them on screen to talk; but their way of talking is so poor compared to narrator (EG Marshall) - it doesn't add anything for me - perhaps the one valid use of these experts would be if you put two of them on the screen to argue over a key question

Olmec statuary very dramatic -- perhaps would have been good to link this with other finds

much talk of religion -- would be interesting to go into origins of religion a little bit - from a scientific point of view

no sense of what life was like at all - all buildings, no people to speak of

no sense of what hunting is all about - either how difficult it really was or fact that no society actually ever survived mainly by hunting

Buried Cities - Pompeii and Herculaneum Intl Film Bur 1962 14 min

very old; although not that different in content from some more modern ones

very surface, shallow treatment - 'here people are digging.' 'here are the reconstructed ruins.' 'blah, blah, blah.' It's lifeless

mosaics look interesting - would be wonderful to have a freeze frame of them so that they could be studied, not just freeze frame, but shots from different angles etc. so that they could be studied in context

how was the life in these towns different than ours, why are we interested in seeing this. it's amazing, but here is an incredibly well-preserved window into our past, but this film does almost nothing to help us look through

Ancient Mesopotamia (revised edition) Coronet 1976 10 minutes

only film so far (except Leakey) to place things geographically at beginning (via [animated] map)

development of agriculture tossed off quite briefly- no indication of process of development

cheapo stuff on wheel (showing its importance by showing shots of contemporary wheels) - would have been far better to talk about what led to development of wheel, the process,

same for arch - better to show steps in development - what problem was it solving

Hammurabi code of laws - stone is shown, but no indication of what the laws were all about, how they fit into the scheme of things in terms of the development of human society

Lost World of the Maya BBC 1972 36 minutes

diorama makes a stab at showing what it was like when...

much greater attempt to discuss society itself - however visuals become a backdrop for narration

says that life was "order and authority/ patience and preoccupation" but doesn't explain why this was so

nice graphic discussion of hieroglyphics - really tries to show what they mean etc.

Lost World of the Maya contd.

very unclear explanation of why the Mayan's were so obsessed with time. just keeps saying that they were, no attempt to explain why that might have developed etc.

no explanation of the social forces that contributed to being conquered by Toltec

no explanation of purpose of sacrifice (and religion)

interesting attempt to describe a sacrificial procession in words (with modern day boy walking alone, supposedly as the intended victim in the ancient ceremony)