

perspective, that he chooses to retrieve this fresh and tortured signifier from the iconographical reservoir of Black neonationalists, some of whom believe Tawana transcends her infamous circumstances and embodies the reality of racial violence in our times. Racial violence on every level is vicious now, but Tawana is not its best or most powerful symbol. Lee's invocation of Tawana captures the way in which many positive aspects of neonationalist thought are damaged by close asso-

ciation with ideas and symbols that hurt more than help. Yes, it is important to urge racial self-esteem, a vision for racial progress, the honoring of historical figures, and the creation of powerful culture, but not if the result is a new kind of bigotry. For this reason we must criticize Lee's proximity to Louis Farrakhan's ideological stances. Real transformation of our condition will come only as we explore the resources of progressive thought, social action, and cultural expression that

were provided by figures like King, X, Paul Robeson, W. E. B. Du Bois, Lorraine Hansberry, Pauli Murray, and Ida B. Wells. But we can't wallow in unimaginative mimesis. These people's crucial insights, cultural expressions, and transformative activities must inspire us to think critically and imaginatively about our condition, and help us generate profound and sophisticated responses to our own crises. Only then will we be able to do the right thing. □

FILM REVIEW

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade: Serial Mythmash

Harvey R. Greenberg

Steven Spielberg desperately wants to recreate ancient legends for enjoyment at the local sixplex. *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is the third installment of the wildly successful series about the indefatigable archaeologist Indiana Jones, and is Spielberg's latest attempt at Sunset Boulevard mythopoesis. Armed with courage, American know-how, and a bullwhip, Indy once again saves a revered icon of Western culture from despicable foreign plunderers. Spielberg wants Indy to appear as a bigger-than-life reinvention of a matinee serial hero from the forties, acting out a saga with overtones of Homeric, Oedipal, and Arthurian legend. Unfortunately, the director's special-effects wizardry cannot sustain the myth of Indy. Instead, Spielberg has produced a mythmash of exotic scenery, furious chases, and one-dimensional characters.

Like *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *The Last Crusade* is a "prequel"

to *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. A past has been invented for our hero, centered around Indy's chronic estrangement from his curmudgeon father. Professor Henry Jones's competitive and disapproving demeanor is briefly established during early scenes from Indy's adolescence. The father is revealed as a noted medievalist with a lifelong obsession with the Holy Grail. His wife died young, and he was so consumed with work, so neglectful and critical of Indy, that the boy left home at an early age.

The action flashes forward to 1938. A grown-up Indy returns from his latest perilous escapade to resume a quiet academic life. His first class is hardly over when an American tycoon (who turns out to be in secret league with the Nazis) commissions Indy to find the Grail. The tycoon says that he previously enlisted Indy's father for the same purpose after hearing that Professor Jones had discovered new evidence in Venice proving the Grail's existence. At first, Indy truculently resists becoming involved with his father's monomaniacal quest. Then he learns that the professor has mysteriously vanished. Indy receives the professor's notebooks in the mail, apparently posted on the

brink of his disappearance. Using the notebooks to complete Jones's Venetian research, Indy discovers that during the Crusades the Grail was hidden away in a mountain stronghold deep within Arabia Deserta.

Indy traces his father to an Austrian castle, where the Waffen SS has imprisoned him. The two escape, journey across Europe into the Middle East, and air their grievances as they fight off the pursuing Hun from motorcycle, zeppelin, airplane, and horseback. The chilly relationship between father and son gradually thaws. Professor Jones realizes the depth of his long-disavowed affection when he mistakenly believes Indy has been killed.

Good and Evil questors finally meet in the caverns of the desert peak. Indy survives a gauntlet of deadly challenges and enters the chamber where the Grail is enshrined, guarded by the same knight who placed it there centuries ago. The Nazis and their minions perish, but not before Professor Jones is mortally wounded. Indy uses the Grail's power to save his father, then returns the Grail to eternal rest with its chivalrous keeper. *The Last Crusade* ends with Jones Senior and Junior literally riding off into the sunset.

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★ ★ ★

The Saturday matinee serials of the forties have had a decisive influence upon the cinema of George Lucas and Steven Spielberg. (The present film, like its predecessors, was directed by Spielberg in close association with Lucas.) In *The Last Crusade*, Spielberg again naively embraces the serials' ingrained prejudices, which in turn are directly traceable to the blatant biases about race, ethnicity, and class found in the "penny dreadful" fiction devoured by middle- and upper-class boys earlier in the century.

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The Last Crusade shows that Spielberg the adult still shares an uncritical receptivity toward this sort of bias. Moreover, he is now hawking this prejudice to the audience. It was more pardonable in the youngsters. (Memory from my World War II childhood: in front of Philadelphia's Renel theater, my seven-year-old buddies and I debate how many "Jap" soldiers are worth one American trooper. The going rate before we see *Wake Island* is four to one; afterward, we realize how shamefully we have shortchanged American valor. No doubt about it—one Marine is worth ten craven little sadists!)

The typical serial propelled its white-bread hero into a series of near-lethal confrontations with a variety of villainous "others." Westerns, crime and spy capers, space operas, and various adventures in exotic climes constituted the most popular serial genres. Spy and "jungle" serials were especially riddled with racial and ethnic slurs. The Anglo-Saxon hero's nemesis in the spy serial was often a mad master-

mind of frankly alien race like Fu Manchu, apotheosis of the Yellow Peril, bent on world domination. Or he came from a dubious Balkan, crypto-Semitic heritage—for example, Bela Lugosi's Dr. Boroff, known as "Master Spy and Munitions Overlord" in the serial *SOS Coastguard*.

In the adventure and jungle serials the archvillain was an unprincipled prince, leader of a death cult, or less frequently a shady Western entrepreneur after buried treasure or mineral rights. His henchmen were drawn from the lower classes or the criminal underworld. In the adventure genre, they were of basest mixed blood, a Kiplingesque stew of half-castes. Less toxic but no less demeaning Orientalist caricatures included helpless villagers, comic servants, capering pickaninnies, and the hero's selflessly dedicated "native" assistant.

Viewers sensitive to these stereotypes were especially offended by *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, which managed to reprise virtually every repellent distortion of the jungle serial. Third World people were represented by a squalid tribe totally dependent upon a white adventurer for rescue, jeweled nabobs dining on monkey brains, and treacherous thugs who flourished after the British departed the Raj. A ditzzy blonde heroine consistently got in Indy's way, meanwhile outscreeching Fay Wray.

In *The Last Crusade*, Spielberg has cannily retreated to safer ground, once more making Nazis the nasties. Nazi evil is now generic, curiously drained of historical reference, as in some postwar German school textbooks. "I hate those guys!" is Indy's sole political appraisal of his enemies. Ironically, the apostles of race hatred themselves are portrayed as racial stereotypes, appearing as the megalomaniacal, leering, criminal masterminds of the serials. (A similar shift in serial villains away from the Dr. Boroffs and Fu Manchus to the Nazis and Japanese occurred during World War II.)

The covert racism of the serials can be seen also in the Nazis' hirelings—a corrupt sultan and his feckless soldiers. "Good" stereotypes include Sallah, Indy's paunchy Arab buddy from *Raiders*, and the murderous, but noble, brotherhood of the Cruciform Sword, a band of Arab Christians who

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have protected the Grail against violation for two millennia.

It's life eternal, not the ideology of the Master Race, that appeals to the turncoat American magnate. He is the jungle serial's tainted, white venture capitalist, and he fits in well with the current Hollywood penchant for portraying Big Business as a target for viewer hatred as uncontroversial as Hitler and Qaddafi.

A brief love interest is supplied by a film-noirishly duplicitous art historian who shares Indy's passion for the Grail sans patriotism. She first beds father, then son, to get the Grail. Consistent with the sexist patriarchal sensibility that fashioned the serials (and still informs much feature fare today), women are depicted in the Indy pictures as shrill mascots or spider ladies. Either way, the companionable misogyny of the prepubescent gang prevails; it's implied that men do better alone or in safe male company.

★ ★ ★

A supertechnological invention, often a laser-like death ray, was a Saturday serial mainstay. Like the *Star Wars* cycle, the analogous Force of the *Indy* movies is spiritual rather than scientific. It sizzles out of a fabled holy artifact. In *The Last Crusade*, it's the Grail; in *Raiders*, it's the Ark of the Covenant. Spielberg assumes that Indy has every right to pilfer archaeological objects from their native cultures and put them where they rightfully belong—in *Western museums*. After all, doesn't Indy track down these relics at entertainingly terrifying risk, for the benefit of Science? Doesn't he snatch these revered icons from the Powers of Darkness for the good of Western Civilization?

The screenplay implies that possession of the Grail will grant immortality

to Hitler and his cohorts, making a ten-thousand-year Reich a reality. According to ten-year-old-boy logic, this makes sense, but it doesn't say much for the Deity's common sense. In the current dubious Gospel According to Spielberg, a transcendent Godhead's power is insultingly wedded to Its symbolic representation, not vice versa. Whoever owns the Grail or Ark has God in his or her pocket, and God has no more to say on the subject than does a genie in a jug.

* * *

It's apparent that the quest for the Grail is meant as a metaphor for the arduous odyssey toward reconciliation undertaken by its two heroes. Alienation of father from son has been a well-spring of myth from the *Oedipus* plays to *Death of a Salesman*. George Lucas studied with the late myth critic Joseph Campbell and credits him for influencing the *Star Wars* cycle, which focused upon Luke Skywalker's troubled paternity. Spielberg mines the same territory in *The Last Crusade*, with the same grandiose designs and mediocre results seen in *Return of the Jedi*.

Campbell's work is elegant, complex; Lucas and Spielberg fancy a quote from Frank Capra profound. Like Lucas, Spielberg cribs a few "high" concepts from Campbell—The Return of the King, The Hero's Testing for Worthiness—and drapes them over the armature of popular entertainment. Perhaps the serial format is too fragile to carry heavy symbolic baggage. Certainly other standard Hollywood fare has plumbed myth artfully, intentionally or otherwise. (The Jungian psychoanalyst John Beebe has written persuasively on the artist's unconscious ability to channel collective themes.) One recalls Hitchcock's poignant re-staging of the Tristan and Isolde saga in *Vertigo* or the doppelgänger motif in *Strangers on a Train*, and the Oedipal undertones energizing Howard Hawks's classic western, *Red River*.

Myth is deeply, subtly embedded in such films; a viewer needn't know anything about archetypes to find pleasure in them. But Spielberg doesn't

have Hitchcock's literacy or intellectual power, or Hawks's talent for realizing strong characterization through vivid action. Ultimately, he's limited by a remarkable but facile visual sense. Bellowed out in hectic, unevocative clashes between cardboard antagonists, the mythic elements of Indy's story are rendered meaningless. One feels bathos instead of pathos as Indy/Parsifal administers balm from the Grail to Professor Jones, wounded Amfortas-like. Professor Jones's instantaneous recovery possesses the emotional resonance of a Ben-Gay commercial.

* * *

As *The Last Crusade* opens, young Indy stumbles upon a dig, steals a priceless cross, and is pursued across a desert by renegade archaeologists. This is assured filmmaking, worthy of Hawks and reminiscent of the exuberant opening of *Raiders*. During the exhilarating chase, Spielberg deftly establishes the origins of Indy's iconography—whip, hat, chin scar, snake phobia. But once Father and Grail are introduced, *The Last Crusade* curiously loses power. The director becomes bound up in the very conventions of the adolescent adventure film he is striving to transcend.

A cliffhanger ending, then a week's wait for the outcome, were integral to the small enjoyments of the Saturday serial. Attempting to exceed the frissons of the earlier Indy films, Spielberg piles one unbelievable cliffhanger and its resolution upon another, virtually without pause, past the point of satiation. It's action porn—too many chocolate chips. John Williams's score is a symphonic blare, relentlessly repeating Indy's theme to the point of nausea.

Harrison Ford and Sean Connery play themselves playing their roles, megastars in megastance. An encounter between an aging James Bond and a wise-guy young American, heir to the Bond tradition, might be appealing in other hands. (Indeed, a case could be made that Spielberg wants to outstrip the Bond films as well as the serials here.) Ford and Connery hurl vapid epigrams about their disappointment in each other across the generation

gap, and Connery spouts New Age blather about the Necessity for Every Man to Find His Own Grail of Inner Spiritual Truth. Ultimately, one couldn't care less about Henry Jones's resurrection through Indy's love. The platitudes of the Boy Scout manual ring infinitely more sincere.

* * *

A hollow gigantism pervades *The Last Crusade* and many pictures like it today. Aiming to repeat earlier blockbuster successes, filmmakers are busily birthing a succession of empty clones. The plots of these McMovies seem to exist only to set the scene for outbreaks of special-effect-ridden violence. Dialogue is minimal, banal; the characters are stripped down to cartoon-like stock figures.

The heroes of action-film sequels demonstrate the grossest symptoms of narcissistic personality disorder: morbid egotism, exhibitionism, a resolute lack of empathy, and a flagrant disregard for the general welfare—mandated, of course, by a perilous mission undertaken for the "common good." See *Raiders* again, and you'll find that Indy appears far more insensitive and violent now than eight years ago. The same may be said about America under the Great Communicator's amiably ruthless reign.

It's clear that Spielberg hoped to go beyond mere profit in concluding the *Indy* cycle. The personal Grail he has sought for years is the transformation of middle- or lowbrow culture material, often culled from juvenile pulp fiction or cinema, into something infinitely finer: accessible epic, a pop version of that fusion of story, sight, and sound that Wagner called *Gesamtkunstwerk* ("total work of art"). *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is well on its way to being one of the most lucrative films of all time. But instead of a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Spielberg has furnished an unwitting testament to the intellectual impoverishment and puerile self-inflation that pervades cinema today. □