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INDIANA JONES: THE LAST HOLY GRAIL?

Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade

PRODUCER Robert Watts

DIRECTOR Steven Spielberg

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Kafka's fiction has been said to 'inherit the form of a traditional storytelling without its truth contents'¹ and in many ways this assessment also fits *Crusade*. Firstly, because while Harrison Ford says, quote, 'Read my lips', that it is definitely a 'last' for Indiana Jones, and it resembles the modern sense of a crusade, a lofty, glamorous and lunatic enterprise, the film is in fact a traditional storytelling, a version of the supreme mediaeval Christian romance, the Quest of the Holy Grail.

'Truth contents', in a time that would seem quite homely to Pontius Pilate, is less easily construed: but *Crusade* does display a love of spectacle, a lack of historicity, a superficiality and a shallowness which can be seen, perhaps as elements of postmodernism that occur, in Jameson's view, when art forms are commodified by mass-production.² This debasement is highlighted by the contrast with the film's overt fidelity to the paradigm of its traditional tale.

The paradigmatic Grail Quest is triggered by the fleeting appearance of a Grail, not necessarily Holy, or even literal, for one or more symbolic Grails can also motivate the Quest. The search proceeds by solving riddles and surviving ordeals; since it is in essence a selection test, this winnows out villains and failed Questers, while producing allies for the 'winner'. The Quest closes when the true Quester attains both literal and symbolic Grails, but the real Grail at once vanishes; only symbolic Grails can be kept.

The Grail has proved its literary fertility since the Christian and Celtic traditions of a miraculous vessel were conflated in the archtext, the 13th Century French *Quest of the Sangraal*. After the mediaeval crop, including *Parzival* and Malory, the Celtic sources proved a heady scholars' drink, and Weston's *From Ritual to Romance* in turn fertilised Eliot's *Waste Land*. As in many versions, *Crusade's* cup is the Christian Grail. But the associated symbolic Grails can vary greatly. In the *Sangraal*, to find the Grail is to find God. But in *Parzival* to achieve the Grail is to fulfil a Bildungsroman, while in *Morte d'Arthur* the Grail Quest is a crucial thematic unit, setting Galahad's success against the last attempt of the fated and fatal Lancelot to escape his sinful earthly love. In

Greeley's *Rite of Spring* (1987), the Grail is symbolised by a woman, while in Ben Sapis's *Quest* (1987), the female Quester wins self-knowledge and secular happiness. In *Crusade*, the Grail represents temporal power, 'the world', to the Nazis, and 'eternal (mortal) life' to the villain; but Indiana Jones' search for his kidnapped father is his main motive for the Quest.

Having thus made Henry Jones a symbolic Grail, *Crusade* faithfully displays him first in flashback before his kidnapping triggers the actual Quest. Also by the rules, the search is replete with riddles and ordeals, the latter bristling, in the best Spielberg manner, with fast and violent action and details of the gruesomest. Steam-trains, speed-boats, motorcycles, dirigibles, biplanes, sportscars, tanks, horses: Indiana Jones is chased with, on or by them all. Tombs, castles, crypts, he finds more secret stairways than a Gothic heroine, and battles Herculean quantities of desert, chasms, famous scenery, skeletons, cobwebs, dry ice, rats and dust. It reputedly cost \$20,000 for the upkeep of the Venetian rat-pack, while the cost of the Petra location shots must beggar the normal imagination's purse.

In the riddles, the ancient Grail motif of asking the right question degenerates, as in most modern versions, into attempts to find the right reply. At this too, assisted by his father's convenient 'Grail diary', Indiana Jones is a whizz. 'I must have been blind!' cries the woman doctor — presumably of archaeology — as Jones unearths a clue in a stained glass window she has worked under for weeks. Nor does the intrepid hero balk at transgressing his professional code for the riddle's sake. A professor of archaeology trampling through an unopened Christian crypt (under Venice, too), using thigh bones to beat off rats, pillaging sarcophagi for clues to a Quest 'marker' and fleeing the site in a fast motorboat, is an example to the sluggard Petries and Woolleys of the race.

Like its modern cousins, *Crusade* prefers to choose the true Quester at the very last. When heroes and villains foregather at the Canyon of the Crescent Moon, heavily disguised as Petra, there is some pretty juggling of tradition, form and ideology, as Spielberg tries to reconcile the mediaeval spiritually perfect knight with the thriller's demand for a best-of-the-brawlers hero, and the current trend toward non-violence. He solves it by having the villain shoot Henry Jones. Thus Indiana is forced to action for the purest of motives, to save his father by winning the Grail's 'water of eternal life'; which gives him the spotlight, but shows that violence is forced upon him, and allots the villain the blame.

The final riddle, a charming variant on the Purloined Letter, is a plethora of Grails, and in the modern manner, the villain fails less through sin than ignorance. As in *Quest*, though Sapis's verisimilitude is

far better, he 'doesn't know what it looks like' and chooses an ornate fake. His death allows Spielberg to repeat his spectacular aging-to-death sequence from *Raiders* (a motif utilised in that earlier box-office smash, *She*). Indiana is then free to achieve both symbolic and actual Grails, and Spielberg faces the core motif, the ban on permanent possession of the Grail itself.

Perhaps, in Levi-Strauss's terms, this myth explains there is no such thing as eternal mortal life. Thus in the *Sangraal*, to eat from the Grail is to see God, achieve the symbolic Grail, but also, like Galahad, to die. Greeley evades the problem by keeping his Grail, as a woman, in symbolic form. Sapir's successful heroine paints her Roman bowl into an ashtray in *Quest*, nations seeking world dominance would kill any individual who held the Grail. Spielberg literally and metaphorically tips his ambivalent female villain over the edge: when she snatches the Grail the floor opens, and in trying to reach the fallen Grail she slips through Indiana's fingers into the abyss. Obeying his father, Indiana 'lets go' the Grail and is saved. Thus Spielberg retains the traditional heart of the story, letting the hero keep the symbolic Grail, while the real one is instantly lost.

Beyond this narrative fidelity, the hero's slash-and-burn archaeology is off-set, for the less pedantic, by a strong parodic humour, applied to both visual and verbal clichés, such as the memorable 'spoke in the wheel' scene, or the cry of the elated academic whose colleague has just squirted a fountain pen in a soldier's eye: 'The pen is mightier than the sword!'. But this élan also highlights the debasement of the commodified story's 'truth contents', most clearly in the hollowing of the spiritual values purveyed by the original *Quest*.

The mediaeval romances place heavy emphasis on the Quester's spiritual purity, which for everyone but Galahad entails penitence. Bors and Perceval, the other successful Questers, approach the Grail with fear and trembling after immense physical and spiritual effort, while the grief and futile repentance of failed Questers are graphically detailed, especially for the flower of earthly chivalry, Lancelot. In *Crusade* spiritual purification is reduced to the key for one of the final riddles: 'only the penitent man may pass'. And the only time Indiana Jones spends on his knees is when he ducks to escape the booby trap.

The process is repeated when 'treading in the footsteps of God' means to spell out his name by stepping on lettered stones above an oubliette, while as a final insult to the Christian romancers, God's name turns out to be Jehovah, spelt with an 'I'. But the crudest example is in the travesty of the Grail itself.

Although the *Sangraal* romancer delights in allegorising his smallest detail, nowhere does he suggest that the Grail offers anything but

spiritual life. In fact, his story makes clear that to eat from the Grail produces mortal death. Spielberg, however, presents the Grail as the fountain of *mortal* life; and in a scene of complete overkill has Henry Jones first drink from the Grail, and then shows its water healing the actual wound. The Grail has been conflated with the wishful thinking of Ponce de Leon, and probably with the modern obsession with eternal youth; all trace of the Christian 'water of eternal life', the multi-level, spiritual significance is lost. And the values of the symbolic Grails, such as earthly love, moral purity, self-discovery, have been eroded too.

This appears chiefly in the hero's personal relationships — if the word applies to a character whose interaction with fellow humans is limited to hitting them on (with kisses, for a female) or in (with fists, for a male) the mouth. In this, like its predecessor *Raiders*, *Crusade* is heavily masculinist, but toward women it is a good deal more reactionary. The sole female character is beautiful, educated, and presumably Indiana Jones' academic equal. But she is presented either as a puppet who spends most of her time in the classic passive female role, being jerked after the hero by the wrist, or as the 'masterful woman' who seduces both Joneses, and, most perfidiously, is a Nazi agent. Here *Crusade* draws on the period's version of the 'seductive Other'; a close ancestor is the lethal blonde neo-Nazi in *The Quiller Memorandum*, first of a series whose hero might be called the budget James Bond. In *Crusade* however, the figure is ambiguous; she steals the 'Grail diary', but weeps at the Nazis' book-burning, gives the villain the wrong Grail, but cannot renounce it herself. The film appears to oscillate between dislike for and lip service to the influence of feminism. The relationship with Indiana is never realised, partly through this 'type-staining', but chiefly thanks to the influence of *Crusade*'s overwhelmingly patriarchal symbolic Grail.

To win brings the lovers who are Sapir and Greeley's 'Grail figures' secular happiness, self-discovery, and for Sapir's Quester, intellectual, moral and emotional maturity. Spielberg's 'Grail figure', on the other hand, is the hero's father: where Greeley and Sapir's Questers found their own families, Spielberg's hero first saves his father and is then saved by him, a child's dependence reinforced. One cannot help wondering if this is ideological shorthand for 'Close the patriarchy! Fathers are enough!' Certainly, in the light of his recent films, to cast Connery as Henry Jones is to present Richard Dyer's 'perfect fit'³ of star and role as a potent signifier of reassuring masculinity. Yet if the film's project is to celebrate this father-figure, then it subverts itself. For though the relationship withstands the woman's divisive threat, though it motivates the hero's Quest, though it saves both men's lives, it affords the hero no sort of spiritual or emotional development. And this failure is shown to be chiefly on the father's part.

This is more disconcerting because the film does try to develop the relationship: but the one in-depth dialogue the action permits ends with Henry voicing the classic cry of non-communication: 'What do you want to talk about?' Henry actually mourns his failure when he thinks Indiana is dead in the falling tank, yet when his son reappears Henry promptly drops him, literally, in the dust as he rushes off to renew the Quest. It is meant to be funny: but it is a startling exposure of the potent male signifier's inadequacy, one that recurs throughout the film. The father is shown as weak — Indiana has to rescue him from the Nazis — dependent — Indiana has to restore him to life — indifferent to Indiana's attempt to establish rapport during the scene in the dirigible, and in this case, totally insensitive to the son's needs. With telling if unintentional symbolism his most effective action is a prohibition. He saves Indiana by ordering him to 'let go' the Grail.

Nowhere is this failure of the central relationship clearer than at the traditional audit of winnings after the Quest. Sapir spells out that his Quester had 'won herself'.⁴ Greeley exalts the desired woman. But in *Crusade* neither father nor son makes the obvious answer to the question 'What did you find?' Henry says cryptically 'Illumination'. And we never hear Indiana's reply. Perhaps Spielberg thought the answer was clear, and succumbed to masculinist inarticulacy. Or else, aware that this is really the 'last' Crusade, he shirked the implication that both Joneses have won 'eternal life'. Or perhaps Indiana Jones found nothing. Perhaps the film's attempt to celebrate the patriarchy only reveals the inadequacy of the masculinist stereotype. Or perhaps this aridity is a symptom of the consumer society: perhaps Jameson is right, and commodification has hollowed all 'truth content' out of the Holy Grail.

NOTES

- ¹ Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, July-August 1985, 70, citing Walter Benjamin.
- ² Fredric Jameson, 'Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism', *New Left Review*, 148, 1984, 56-60.
- ³ Richard Dyer, 'Stars as Signs', *Popular Television and Film*, edited Tony Bennett, Susan Boyd-Bowman, Colin Mercer and Janet Woollacott, British Film Institute, London, 1981, 263-4.
- ⁴ Richard Ben Sapir, *Quest*, Futura, 1987, 495.