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Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull

Abstract

This is a review of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008).

Director Steven Spielberg and executive producer George Lucas' *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* is the third sequel to their 1981 box office sensation and Best Picture Oscar nominee *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The film arrives to no small measure of expectation: smarter, sleeker, and more winningly self-deprecating than any of Lucas' *Star Wars* films, the previous three entries in the *Indy* saga also boast some of the most iconic moments in Spielberg's rightfully celebrated career. The passage of time has certainly not diminished the rousing and technically dazzling *Raiders*, which remains a consummate American pop masterpiece. 1984's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* is politically incorrect and appallingly violent, but also visually enthralling and excitingly risky cinema. 1989's *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* provided Spielberg the auteur an opportunity to further explore one of the prevalent themes in his oeuvre, that of estrangement from father, and he came through with a very rare action picture that is both rich in wit and tremendously affecting. In the pantheon of Hollywood blockbusters, these three films loom large, leaving a lot for further adventures to live up to.

Set twenty years after the previous installment, the new film opens in Nevada in 1957 with the Red Army storming the secret U.S. military installation code-named "Area 51." Once inside, Col. Dr. Irina Spalko (Cate Blanchett) demands that two hostages, decorated WWII hero-cum-archaeologist Indiana Jones

(Harrison Ford) and his OSS confederate George “Mac” MacHale (Ray Winstone), locate a crate containing the remains of a body retrieved from a crash site near Roswell, New Mexico. Indy reluctantly leads the Soviets to the crate and then manages a daring escape, during which Mac is revealed as a turncoat. Because of his long association with Mac, the good Dr. Jones finds himself blacklisted and dismissed from his teaching post at Marshall College along with the loyal Dean Charles Stanforth (Jim Broadbent). At this point, a young greaser named Mutt Williams (Shia LaBeouf) presents himself as the son of Indy’s estranged former fiancé Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen). He informs Indy that both Marion and the long-missing Dr. Harold “Ox” Oxley (John Hurt) have been kidnapped by Spalko and her cadre, now in South America trying to find Akator, the mythical lost city of gold more popularly known as “El Dorado.” Ox, though, has left clues for Indy and Mutt that will lead them to the Crystal Skull of Akator, an otherworldly relic indispensable to unlocking the mysterious power of the city. Thus the race is on to save family and friends, beat the Russians, mend fences, and restore the good name of Indiana Jones.

Of its predecessors, *Crystal Skull* proves to be most like *Temple of Doom*, which is to say an incredibly mixed bag. Ford’s aged-to-perfection Indy is an absolutely wonderful creation—worth the price of admission alone—but most of the rest is “sound and fury, signifying nothing.” But has that always been the case

with the *Indy* films? In the lead up to the film's release, both *The Washington Post* and *USA Today* ran features mulling over whether or not the saga was actually "about" anything. It's a loaded question, but a compelling one nonetheless, especially considering all the images of and conversations about religion in these films. For the most part, though, religion is used in the *Indy* films as a way of raising the stakes for the audience: the religious symbols and ideas tap into things familiar and often sacred to the viewer. (It helps the filmmakers get away with murder in these narratives, as it allows for a kind of emotional shorthand.) Lucas and Spielberg are also clearly interested in mining what titillating supernatural and occult elements they can for their protagonist to interact with. (It is worth noting, though, that as works of fantasy, the films frequently fictionalize elements of authentic religious traditions.) All of this definitely helps the films whip up a lot of excitement and urgency. In *Raiders*, museum curator Marcus Brody (Denholm Elliott) says of Indy's expedition to find the Ark of Covenant, "It's not something to be taken lightly. No one knows its secrets. It's like nothing you've ever gone after before." Such is the case with all of Indy's pursuits.

Still, the series is not without its more intriguing uses and invocations of religion. *Temple of Doom* terrifies with villain Mola Ram (Amrish Puri)'s threat of religious persecution. "We will overrun the Muslims and force their Allah to bow to Kali," the Thuggee high priest tells Indy. "Then the Hebrew God will fall. And

finally, the Christian God will be cast down and forgotten.” Underscoring the importance of Christian virtues on their mission to find the Holy Grail in *The Last Crusade*, Indy’s father (Sean Connery) slaps his son for taking the Lord’s name in vain, saying, “The quest for the Grail is not archaeology. It’s a race against evil.” Interestingly, *Crystal Skull* departs from the other films by eschewing any tangible connection with a real religion in favor of science fiction elements and central antiquities that have been written off by modern scientists as archaeological frauds.

But we still have not answered the question “Are the *Indy* films about anything?” Despite all the religious content, they are, of course, mostly about Lucas and Spielberg having fun in the style of the Saturday matinee serials of yesteryear. It is a retrogressive kind of fun, though, to be sure: the old serials reveled in xenophobia, exoticism, colonialism, and other unfortunate qualities that often carry over into the *Indy* series’ sense of “adventure.” Perhaps the most egregious example of this sort of thing occurs in *Crystal Skull*: a plot thread has to do with extraterrestrials teaching the Nazca people how to farm, build pyramids, and make other technological developments. This is no doubt based on actual pseudo-scientific theories one might criticize as grossly Eurocentric at best and racist at worst, what with their suggestion that “saucer-men from Mars” must have taught non-white civilizations how to build irrigation systems and do long division if colonizing Europeans didn’t do it. Considering that even James Bond and Batman

have had to reflect on their politics and go through postmodern “reboots”, it’s kind of a shame that Indy has ossified like the artifacts he’s chasing. Of course, such a criticism might miss the point: the old-fashioned style, with its vulgar worldview and protagonist “of his time,” are part of the series’ enduring appeal. “Same old, same old,” Indy mutters at one point, summing up *Crystal Skull* in more ways than one.

To be fair, though, there is a very positive theme across the four Indy films about humbling oneself. Indy always starts out in pursuit of “fortune and glory,” but gives that up out of his respect for and faith in things bigger than just himself. In *Raiders*, what obsesses Indy about the Ark of Covenant is that it is, as rival archaeologist René Belloq (Paul Freeman) says, “a transmitter – a radio for speaking to God.” Ever humble before God, however, Indy and Marion shut their eyes and ears to the full power of the Ark – an act that also saves their lives. Similarly, in *Temple of Doom*, Indy returns the Śiva lingam, that would make him famous, to the tiny Indian village that desperately needs it to survive. In *The Last Crusade*, he leaves the Grail behind, realizing that it is not “a prize” and that his “illuminating” journey with his father is far more important. By the time we get to *Crystal Skull*, the older, wiser, war-weary Indy is much more invested in people’s lives and their pursuits of knowledge than he is in “fortune and glory.” (“Someone might get hurt,” he frets during a signature chase sequence.) And though he’s

identified as a Christian, our trigger-happy social scientist is also something of a religious pluralist: he warns his student to take “folklore” seriously in *Raiders*, summons the help of Śiva to subdue Mola Ram in *Temple of Doom*, and chides Mutt for passing judgment on non-European depictions of “what God looks like” in *Crystal Skull*. If the films are “about” anything, they’re about developing reverence—and there are certainly worse things for films to be about. One moment in *Crystal Skull* perfectly encapsulates the message of the whole series: from her perch on the throne of Akator, Spalko hisses, “Belief, Dr. Jones, is a gift you have yet to receive.” “Oh, I believe, sister,” he replies. “That’s why I’m down here.”