

Indiana Jones and the search for entertainment

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Veteran director Steven Spielberg and producer George Lucas have teamed up for yet another installment in their popular *Indiana Jones* franchise. In bringing their iconic adventurer back to the screen after a 19-year absence, the duo have gone out of their way to make the latest chapter, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, an action-packed blockbuster in every sense of the term.

The movie careens from one adventurous setting and one action sequence to another with hardly any stops in between. Like most blockbusters, it makes a lot of noise and provides more than enough “busy work” for the eyes. That it is also a very slight film should come as no surprise to anyone; the *Jones* movies were never intended to be anything more.

The original *Jones* films, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), were major landmarks in Hollywood’s movement to “pure entertainment” and blockbuster moviemaking which began in the mid-1970s. The films found large audiences and for a number of reasons. There are, after all, moments of genuine comedy and exciting action sequences in the early *Jones* films. The archaeologist superhero protects historical artifacts from the Nazis in the first film and leads a rebellion of child-slaves in the second.

This explains at least a part of the character’s popularity. None of this, however, is treated with any seriousness. The *Jones* films, like Spielberg’s earlier blockbuster *Jaws* or Lucas’s *Star Wars*, are escapist distractions, the sort of movies Robin Wood once described as “children’s films conceived and marketed largely for adults.” They are formulaic, reassuring and thin. Their impact on the film industry has largely been a negative one. The emergence of the “blockbuster”

had a good deal to do with a new, more selfish and conformist mood that developed in Hollywood and within wider social layers as the radicalization of the late 1960s and early 1970s subsided.

The first *Indiana Jones* movies, set in the 1930s, were, like Lucas’s *Star Wars* series, an attempt at creating feature-length big-budget versions of the serials that used to accompany feature films in the 1930s and 1940s (e.g., *Flash Gordon Conquers The Universe*, *The New Adventures of Tarzan*). Of course, the deliberate recreation of admittedly trivial entertainment is never entirely ‘innocent.’ One is tempted to ask: isn’t there something better you could be doing?

The first films in the *Jones* and *Star Wars* series were considered by many to be spoofs or send-ups of those earlier serials, though it has become increasingly clear that Lucas at least has begun to take the projects (and himself) more seriously, along with more than a few critics who ought to know better.

Having set the new film in the 1950s, in part to accommodate the age of its star, Harrison Ford, the filmmakers also found it necessary to update their source of inspiration. Lucas discussed the method behind the latest film with *Entertainment Weekly*: “The idea was to take the genre of Saturday-matinee serials, which were popular in the ’30s and ’40s, and say, ‘What kind of B movie was popular in the ’50s, like those B movie serials were popular in the ’40s?’ And use that as the overall uber-genre. We wouldn’t do it as a Saturday-matinee serial. We’d do it as a B movie from the ’50s.”

It’s difficult to say if this approach would make for interesting results under different conditions. It might. A proper parody of such films, including the Cold War hysteria found in so many of them, might offer some

possibilities. But while there is clearly a tongue-in-cheek attitude at work in *Crystal Skull*—one certainly hopes, at least, that the filmmakers aren't serious when they have their characters survive three spills over three consecutive waterfalls during a chase sequence—the filmmakers ultimately are too uncritical toward such works to provide any serious laughs at their expense.

The plot of the new *Indiana Jones*, to the extent that it matters at all, concerns a “crystal skull” with mysterious origins. It must first be found using the crude, hand-drawn maps and riddles of a deranged archaeologist played by John Hurt and then returned to its rightful place in the mythical city of El Dorado. Why returning the skull to El Dorado is of such urgent necessity is never adequately explained. It appears it is simply “the right thing to do.”

With the new work, even more so than in the earlier sequels, it is clear the filmmakers have done their best to cater to their audience's expectations. The film has more than its share of familiar features. As always, there are the treks through booby-trapped underground caverns, the mandatory example of Jones's fear of snakes, the hat that never falls off and so on. For *Crystal Skull*, the filmmakers have even brought back fan-favorite Karen Allen who reprises her role from the *Raiders of the Lost Ark* as Jones's love interest Marion Ravenwood. Allen, however, is given very little to do in the new film.

The bulk of creative thinking engaged in the project, as is the case with all blockbuster films of this kind, went into the action sequences. Most interactions between characters, when they aren't sword fighting or swinging through the jungle on vines like Tarzan, are fatally banal or clichéd. This action for action's sake approach doesn't add up to much. Films like this, designed as a thrill ride or rollercoaster, tend to become tedious rather quickly. Ultimately one still needs a story of some depth and insight—to see something recognizably *human* in the work—for it to matter. Action, as it turns out, is only as interesting as the stakes involved.

Spielberg's direction, on the whole, is not up to his usual standards (whatever one thinks of the lightweight stories found in much of his work, at the very least he tends to tell them well). He is perhaps too limited by the expectations placed on the franchise and by trying to make the new film “match” the others. There is very

little here in terms of acting or camera work that carries dramatic weight. This is a step backward for the director whose recent films *Munich*, *War of the Worlds* and *Catch Me If You Can* have all had something serious to offer either in part or in whole.

Perhaps most problematic of all in *Crystal Skull* is the choice of villain. In two of the earlier *Jones* films, both set in the 1930s, the hero fought against the Nazis. Now, with his adventures taking place in the 1950s, the filmmakers set their hero against the Soviets. While the film as a whole is a series of nods to the silly conventions of 1950s B-movies—*Crystal Skull* features space aliens, mushroom clouds, killer ants, etc.—this nod to their anticommunism feels too often like a nod of affirmation. Suffice it to say, when Jones tells a Russian who has just punched him in the face to “Drop dead, comrade,” it strikes one as remarkably sincere.

Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull is yet another bad blockbuster from Hollywood, a comic-strip movie no more or less memorable than the rest. Steven Spielberg and George Lucas were pioneers in this territory when they began their careers in the mid-1970s. It's a testament to the sharp decline in Hollywood filmmaking since that time that their *Indiana Jones* adventure is now just one among dozens and dozens more to be released this year and the next.



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