

James Scorer\*

## ▷ “X” Never, Ever Marks the Spot: Latin American Lost Cities on Screen

If it's truth you're interested in, Dr. Tyree's philosophy class is right down the hall.

(Henry Jones Junior)

### Introduction

Towards the beginning of *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, 1989) Dr. Jones introduces the discipline of archaeology to his students: “Forget any ideas you got about lost cities [...] We do not follow maps to buried treasure and ‘X’ never, ever marks the spot”. The big joke, of course, is that “X” does turn out to mark the spot in a Venetian library. Constructed around the contrast between the bespectacled academic and Indy's exploits outside the classroom, Steven Spielberg's film franchise happily indulges in the mystery and adventure offered by seeking lost artefacts, evidenced most recently in Harrison Ford's quest for El Dorado in *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008). Indy is by no means the only Hollywood character that has gone in search of lost cities in the Americas: in *Secret of the Incas* (Jerry Hopper, 1954), Charlton Heston's character Harry Steele, a key inspiration for Indiana Jones, heads to Machu Picchu in search of lost Inca treasure; more recently, in *National Treasure: Book of Secrets* (John Turteltaub, 2007), Nicholas Cage's character Ben Gates finds the North American lost city of Cibola; and rumours continue to circulate about a possible replacement for Brad Pitt after he pulled out of a film based on David Grann's book *The Lost City of Z* (2009), which describes the efforts of British explorer Colonel Percy Harrison Fawcett to locate a lost city in the Amazon.

In this article I focus on the El Dorado myth in three feature films as a means of contrasting Hollywood's and Europe's cinematic encounter with Latin America. Beginning with the Indiana Jones series, a franchise which starts and concludes (for now, at least) with Latin America, I argue that the metatextual nature of *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, loaded with references to its own film world and other feature films, constructs a

---

\* James Scorer is Lecturer in Latin American Cultural Studies at the University of Manchester. His research interests include the urban imaginaries of Buenos Aires, urban cultures and architectures of Latin American cities, and the concept of loss (lost cities, peoples, etc.) in a Latin American context. He has published articles on, among other topics, new Argentine cinema (2010, 2011), Tintin's Latin American adventures (2008), and graphic biographies of Che Guevara (2010).

dialogue with itself as much as fallacious stereotypes. The same trait is evident in the second film discussed here, the DreamWorks animation *The Road to El Dorado* (Bibo Bergeron/Will Finn, 2000). In these two films Latin America is similarly not just a stereotype but rather allows Hollywood to fulfil itself, perhaps unsurprisingly given that Steven Spielberg was one of the co-founders of DreamWorks and remains a principal partner. As a means of throwing these two recent Hollywood productions into relief, in the final section I turn to the acclaimed *Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (Werner Herzog, 1972), where, unlike in the two other films, El Dorado is never discovered, lying elusively beyond the next bend in the river. The absence of a filmic El Dorado is a further indication of how the film constructs itself as lying outside the ideological framework of Hollywood and the US. Nevertheless, though Herzog's film is free of that particular cultural-political burden, it is still unable to escape its European colonial gaze.

In all three films El Dorado lies beyond the reach of the protagonists. The lost city always eludes the grasp of the explorers. But that ongoing loss is also a sleight of hand since each film, albeit in slightly different ways, indicates that the treasure – whether blessed or cursed – is always something other than what was being sought. In the first two films discussed here Latin America is never as important as the world of Hollywood itself. Though they construct uncomfortable and sometimes offensive notions of difference, that difference collapses into self-obsessed intertextuality. In Herzog's film, the El Dorado on display is also disturbing but for different reasons. Aguirre's act of rebellion against European rule – part of which is to declare El Dorado in the here and now – is simultaneously the re-instigation of a despotic colonial gaze, a recreation of tyrannical power mirrored by Herzog's own methods of film production.

### **The Lure of the Lost City**

The use of Machu Picchu, perhaps the most famous Latin American ruin, in Walter Salles' film *Los diarios de motocicleta* (2004) reveals how lost cities can be employed to construct visions of Latin America. In this case, the lost city contributes to the film's depiction of Ernesto's transformation into "Che". Early in the film the protagonists have to enter Chile pushing their broken-down motorbike, causing Ernesto to complain to Alberto: "dijiste que íbamos a entrar a Chile como conquistadores no aquí como un par de pelotudos". As the characters advance, however, moving from metropolitan Buenos Aires to Andean indigeneity, their social consciousness is awakened, and the film alludes to a lost mythic Latin American identity. In Cuzco, the "Heart of America", the physical continuity of Inca architecture contrasts with the crumbling Spanish walls in a material representation of the ongoing presence of pre-Columbian identity. In a series of shots strikingly similar to the opening scene of *Aguirre* discussed below, the characters here are not descending but climb to Machu Picchu, rising up above the maelstrom of the jungle and the dark quest for El Dorado. Arriving at the lost city restores the power of the vantage point to an indigenous Latin America. As the characters touch the ruins they turn a mythic Latin American past into a contemporary event: the stones breathe once again, turning the lost city into a tactile, spatial materialisation of the "united America" that the burgeoning "Che" calls for later in the film. *Los diarios de motocicleta* illustrates how lost cities offer a means of reaching back through a multi-layered history. Just as the

Spanish *conquistadores* built the cathedral in Cusco over the Temple of the Sun, lost cities are layered narratives. They are what Mary Louise Pratt (1992: 5) has called "contact zones", historicised and mutable sites of conflict, struggle and dialogue, reminders of loss and ruination but also of power and permanence, sites of both commonality and tension.

Looking at lost cities on screen, therefore, is to compare two "contact zones", since cinema itself "has always functioned as a mediator between different worlds" (King/López/Alvarado 1993: xix), not least in the long tradition of Hollywood and European films made about Latin America. Cinema is both the extension of a particular Western tradition of "visions" of Latin America and also a shift in that tradition, marking "the apogee of the historical trajectory that dispelled the discourse of the encounter's marvellous-unknown (based on the word and the tale) and demanded the centrality of vision and the ability to see" (King/López/Alvarado 1993: xix). It is especially appropriate, therefore, that the focus of this article should fall on El Dorado, since that myth in particular marks the beginning of the constant presence of lost cities in the imaginary of Latin America ever since the *conquistadores* first spoke of El Dorado in the sixteenth century. Rumours of a chief dusted with gold mutated into those of a lost city of gold and finally a land of golden cities, a paradisiacal kingdom of untold wealth. The recurring interest in El Dorado in the Western imaginary highlights that from the moment Latin America is found, something is lost. Just as a sense of wholeness is restored, another lack is introduced, emphasising how lost cities lie at the heart of the way Latin America is constructed by those who direct their gaze towards it.

### **The Man with the Hat**

*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1984) begins in a South American rainforest, the setting for an opening sequence that frames the character of Indiana Jones for the entire franchise. The film begins with a group of explorers, a mix of Europeans and South Americans, hacking their way through the jungle. In contrast to the local Peruvian who screams in panic at a statue that emerges from the undergrowth, the leader of the expedition, his face unidentifiable, calmly consults his map and leads the party on. We then see him – though only his torso is in the frame – find a poisoned dart stuck in a tree. After nonchalantly casting it aside two other members of the party rush to pick it up: Satipo (Alfred Molina), a local guide/porter, looks aghast at the thought of the "Hovitos" who are tracking the explorers. The party then reaches a lake, at which point one of the explorers attempts to pull a gun on the faceless leader, who quickly uses his bullwhip to remove the weapon. For the first time, the leader's face becomes visible: Indy steps forward out of the shadows, revealing himself. Indy and Satipo then enter an overgrown temple where, negotiating the booby traps, Indy reaches his goal: a golden idol. Taking the idol, however, triggers the temple's defence mechanisms and, whereas Indy had previously saved Satipo's life, the guide now abandons the Westerner to his fate. Negotiating the closing stone door, Indy discovers Satipo speared on the other side only for another booby trap to be set off: an enormous rolling boulder. The desperate Indy throws himself out of the entrance back into the jungle where he finds himself surrounded by the spears of the Hovitos.

What can we elicit about Latin America from this opening sequence? Some of the Latin Americans on display are tentative explorers of the jungle, ready to run in fear or betray their companions in the search for the idol. These Latin Americans are the opposite of the upstanding Indy, who negotiates the jungle fearlessly, attuned to the dangers of the temple and trusting of his treacherous guide. The other Latin Americans are indigenous forest dwellers, their painted bodies, primitive weapons and obscure tongue emphasising their other-worldly nature. Stuck in the ethnographic present and “denied the flux, change, and historical agency inseparable from the lives of ‘Westerners’” (Di Leonardo 1998: 13), these pre-modern Indians appear to require protection from modernity’s invasion into the jungle. Thus Dr. Jones the archaeologist takes it upon himself to remove their sacred object precisely to protect it from other traffickers in precious goods who have less “altruistic” goals at heart. What Indy wants, it seems, is to protect global knowledge, unaware that we might see through his act of protection and see it for the act of robbery that it is: “Jones’ Old-World adventurism likewise evokes ‘the White Man’s Burden’, a racialised and religiously-sanctioned justification for colonialism” (Morris 2006: 74).

Unsurprisingly *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (as well as the subsequent Indiana Jones films, particularly *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* [1984]) has been criticised for “perpetuating racial stereotypes and reinforcing old prejudices” (Freer 2001: 95). Spielberg’s classic defence against the accusation of stereotyping – “it’s only a movie” (quoted in Freer 2001: 95) – is only some kind of answer to such criticisms, not least since there is a troubling extra-diegetic context to these films. As Nigel Morris points out, the film was released precisely at a time when “the US government was embroiled in El Salvador and Nicaragua” (2006: 79), making Indy’s journey to Latin America rather loaded in political terms. However, Spielberg’s answer is also fair enough. Whilst the kind of Latin America put on display in such films should be analysed, to merely critique the simplistic and/or erroneous depictions of Latin America and its inhabitants is, as Jon Beasley-Murray (2005b) suggests, to miss the point, since the links between Latin America and the film industry, both of which are “defined by the self-reflexivity and variability of their performative affect”, allows Hollywood to incorporate Latin America and thus “think through an other’s body” (Beasley-Murray, 2005a). The observation makes Ian Freer’s suggestion that *Raiders of the Lost Ark* “is a movie about movies” (2001: 94) all the more significant: the light coming in through the temple wall, reminiscent of the beam of a cinema projector, is to be found deep in the Latin American jungle. Latin America is the place where cinema comes alive.

Freer (2001: 97-103) notes the various inter-filmic references in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* to, among other films, *The Masked Marvel* (Nazis), the various *Zorro* films (the whip-cracking hero), *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (the gruff hero), the James Bond franchise (the cool, wise-cracking hero), *Lawrence of Arabia* (Indy dressed as an Arab), and *Citizen Kane* (the Ark in the warehouse). Finding even greater intertextuality, Cal Meacham has noted that many key scenes in the Indiana Jones films, including the rolling boulder sequence in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, are directly influenced by two of Disney’s 1950 Uncle Scrooge comics, *The Prize of Pizarro* and *The Seven Cities of Cibola* (Meacham n.d.). Furthermore, the character of Indy bears a striking resemblance to the aforementioned Harry Steele in *Secret of the Incas*, and the first shot of the franchise, the Paramount mountain transposing into a South American mountain, epitomises the

very self-referentiality of the film. Thus we should be wary of scouring these films for an authentic object of study: despite telling his students that archaeology is the search for fact not truth, in *The Last Crusade* even Dr. Jones is forced to take his own leap of faith when searching for the holy grail, a leap cinematically loaded since he must believe in what he cannot see.

The transposition between mountains is followed by another shift: Indy walks in front of the camera, his head and shoulders making him a man-mountain. Indy is thus the continuation of both Hollywood and Latin American mountains, a character who is caught within – and who moves smoothly between – the franchise’s depiction of the clash between technological advancement and tradition.<sup>1</sup> He is equally at home using seaplanes and revolvers as he is a bullwhip within the pre-modern space of the Latin American jungle. His fedora, well-worn leather jacket and whip allow him to blend in far more successfully with the jungle environment than his arch-rival Belloq, who sports a white colonial-style suit and a pith helmet, in the style of the British colonial explorer. Unlike Belloq’s Dr. Livingstone figure, whose “corrupt European authority underscores Oedipal rivalry, paralleling young America’s rebellion against the Old World for what was desired as simultaneously the Virgin Land and the domain of bountiful (Mother) Nature” (Morris 2006: 77), Indy is able to blend in with the forest and enter into its heritage. His colonialism is suspect because he can move between the modern and the pre-modern. At once like the Indians, a fly stuck in amber (emerging from the lost temple he is covered in cobwebs), he is also able to climb aboard the seaplane and get the hell out, reminding us that it is, after all, Latin America which is stuck in the past.

Though *Raiders of the Lost Ark* promises a lost city, the temple in the Latin American jungle with which the film begins is more of a prelude to another lost city, the Egyptian city of Tanis, partially revealed later in the film. In the 2008 release *Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, however, we do finally get a Latin American lost city (of sorts): Dr. Jones heads to South America, still stuck in its ethnographic present of a jungle inhabited by vicious, bloodthirsty tribes in search of El Dorado. The pre-modern, physically and temporally endless jungle now hosts the struggle between capitalism and communism in the updated context of the 1950s, dominated by McCarthyism and the threat of nuclear war; Latin America, perhaps unwittingly, provides an all-too-appropriate locale for playing out a Cold War fantasy.

The El Dorado that the characters seek, however, turns out not to be a pre-Columbian city at all but rather the home of aliens, one of whose crystal skulls is missing, stolen by one of the original *conquistadores*. The original act of plunder, the Spanish conquest of the New World, is seen as the origin of the cosmic imbalance that the newly altruistic Indy, transformed from the policeman-plunderer to the policeman-philanthropist, is attempting to set right. Having successfully replaced the skull in the chamber where the crystal aliens sit on their thrones, the Russian military officer, Colonel Dr. Irina Spalko, who appears to symbolise a dastardly fusion of militarism with academic knowledge in her psychic warfare program, demands of the aliens that they tell her everything they

<sup>1</sup> Thus, Indy is capable of shooting a sword-wielding Arab with a pistol in *Raiders of the Lost Ark* but can also use a lance to unseat a motorcycle rider as if he were jousting in *The Last Crusade*. The films do tend to romanticise the ancient over the modern, however, as when Marcus Brody squirts ink into a Nazi’s eye in *The Last Crusade*, declaring that “the pen is mightier than the sword”.

know; as her brain overloads with knowledge, she implodes. As Indy helpfully points out: “their treasure wasn’t gold, it was knowledge. Knowledge was their treasure”.

In much the same way as the British agent Mac is furious about the lack of gold, then, one review of the film lamented the absence of the city: “We were promised an eldorado, and I was hoping for a giant gold city. It turns out the gold is a metaphor for knowledge” (Bradshaw 2008). The disappointment is revealing: the filmic space is precisely the one in which we can envision El Dorado; but here there is no city, just a meagre temple that turns out to be an alien spaceship. For that reason Indy variously calls El Dorado a story, a bedtime story and a legend, adding that “I almost died of typhus looking for it myself – I don’t think it exists”. He is, of course, proved wrong, but the franchise’s fusion of history and myth is also evident beyond the world of the film: the writer of the screenplay describes the foundations of Indiana Jones as, tellingly, “real legends” (DVD extras).

El Dorado is “just” a device for the filmmakers to reproduce the cinematic world of Indiana Jones and Hollywood. The film is layered with self-referentiality, this time with frequent irony: the Paramount mountain transposes into a prairie dog mound, the aging Harrison Ford jokes about his age catching up with him, and the father-son relationship in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* is here reversed, Indy being revealed as a father. The mother of his child is no less than Marion Ravenwood (Karen Allen), the character first seen in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, adding to an intertextual coherence that is already established through in-jokes, the continuity of costume and the general visual aesthetic, and other citations of the previous instalments, such as a brief glimpse of the Ark of Covenant in the warehouse or the statue of Marcus Brody at the University. The film also references a vast range of other Hollywood productions: some tiles in the temple depict ET and others CP30 and R2D2; the character Mutt Williams’ first appearance is a direct citation of Marlon Brando in *The Wild One*; he later swings through the jungle like Tarzan; the Spalcow character was partly inspired by Marlene Dietrich; and the warehouse at the start of the film is Area 51, not just evident in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, but also in *Independence Day*, which Spielberg saw during the conceptualisation of *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*. Indeed, the entire vision of the film was to recreate a 1950s B-movie, citing alien and exploitation films. As producer and storywriter George Lucas acknowledged in an interview that he wanted to take “the genre from the 1930s serials, action adventure serials, to the B-science fiction movies of the 50s” (DVD extras). The film is not just a film about Hollywood films, however, but also about the Hollywood world more generally: aside from the fact that the film reunited a production crew that had been involved in previous Indiana Jones movies or who had already worked with Spielberg, it is also telling that the diner is named “Arnie’s” after Spielberg’s father, and the student who asks Indy a question in the library is Tom Hanks’ son.

The reworking of the El Dorado myth and the absence of a city of gold, however, is a reminder that a Latin American reality is not at stake here: Latin America – and here El Dorado – sets Hollywood’s imagination free, and that imaginary world highlights the precarious boundaries between the real and the mythic at every opportunity. For that reason, Spielberg et al. feel themselves free to play fast and loose with their Latin American history and myth, placing the Iguazu waterfalls in the Peruvian jungle, mixing in the Nazca lines with El Dorado, fusing Mayan and Aztec and transporting them from Mesoamerica to South America and inserting Indy into Latin American history (“I rode

with Pancho Villa”). As a real space Latin America means little in the film; but as a cinematic device, a mythic space that provides the basis of the drama, it is more important than the filmmakers themselves are even aware.

### Animation, Colour and El Dorado

In *The Road to El Dorado*, unlike *The Kingdom of the Crystal Skull*, El Dorado is very much evident: there is a city and plenty of gold. The story relates the journey of two hapless buddies, Miguel and Tulio, who accidentally find themselves on a ship to the New World with Cortés. Escaping from the evil *conquistador* they eventually find El Dorado where they are taken for gods and live a brief life of luxury before being forced to leave, simultaneously closing the door to the city of gold forever. The critical reception of the film varied from the tepid to the incensed. Stephen Hunter’s damning review in the *Washington Post*, entitled “Genocide in Toon”, called the work “high-end, tone-deaf, color-saturated”, attacking it for the way it “glosses over the more complex issues in search of the vaudeville values of goofiness, wackiness and hellzapoppin’ fun” (Hunter 2000).

The anger stirred up by the film is particularly evident in the attacks of the Mexica Movement, which describes itself as “Not Hispanic, Not Latino”. The movement accused the film of presenting “our people as stupid, as whores, as savages” and of making it look “as if the Spaniards came to save our lives in 1519” (Mexica Movement n.d.). They published an open letter to Steven Spielberg, accusing his company of being racist:

You would not accept this as a “complete fantasy/fairy tale” that is “not based on any historical fact or reality” and that it is without “political overtones of any kind” – as your DREAMWORKS head of marketing wrote to us in her letter in reference to ROAD TO EL DORADO (Mexica Movement n.d.).

Going to see *The Road to El Dorado* for a history lesson is as irrational as DreamWorks’ contrary claim that the film is not based on any historical fact. On the contrary, the film’s official website goes to great pains to stress the authenticity established by the filmmakers’ research trips to the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico led by Dr. John Pohl of UCLA: “With a joint doctorate in archaeology and film production, Dr. Pohl was eminently qualified to guide the filmmakers in their quest to be faithful to the Indian civilizations of what is today Mexico and Central America” (DVD extras). The stamp of authority provided by the academic is tempered by a quote from the director Don Paul, who reminds us that we should “keep in mind that [the film is] set in a mythological place. A lot of the design was inspired by the Mayan civilization and other cultures, but it’s not meant to be an exact reflection of any one culture” (DVD extras).

The educative potential of a children’s animation means that we note the dangers of a Disney production that constructs worrying visions of Latin identity for a child audience in a country rife with inequality for Latins. Indeed, Manuel Martín-Rodríguez has suggested that Disney and Spielberg have replaced the academic institution. His concern is that film presents “the *reel* experience as a *real* one” (2003: 297), where that reel creates “the fiction of a *mall*ticultural coexistence of difference” (2003: 296). As Martín-

Rodríguez suggests, the introduction of difference (or, better, indifference) stems from Disney's and DreamWorks' need to adapt to the changing nature of the target audience in a globalised world, one reason why the lead characters speak Spanish with English language accents:

Simple stereotypes are no longer acceptable, and the studios have responded with creating ambivalent pictures in which a high dose of cultural idiosyncrasy meets with a familiar, reassuring context that reinforces mainstream values and incorporates those foreign elements into nonthreatening conventional formulas (Martín-Rodríguez 2003: 295).

Arguing that the film collapses the multi-cultural identity of the US as a means of constructing an archetypal (North) American child, he suggests that in the film "difference is portrayed as a thing of the past, a museum piece of sorts that the ethnographical movie offers the viewer for his voyeuristic consumption" (296). But I am not so sure that the film is simply a "visual equivalent of the xenophobic 'go back to where you came from'" (Martín-Rodríguez 2003: 288). The danger of the film is certainly indifference to difference and the erasure of, in this case, a Latin American past, symbolised by the manner in which El Dorado is shut off forever. But the equal risk is that by locating Latino/Hispanic identity within the Maya/Aztec past, as Martín-Rodríguez does when he criticises the film for failing "to make any connections between early Mexicans and their descendents today" (2003: 288), he simply reproduces what he critiques. Such an argument makes an erroneous claim to an authentic past, an identity preserved whole, lost like El Dorado somewhere in the American jungle.

Moreover, however, we should ask whether the El Dorado in the film is also depicting something other than Latin America. The sequence director's suggestion on the DVD extras that "You won't buy a ticket to this film, you buy a passport" purports to Latin American authenticity when placed alongside Jeffrey Katzenberg's statement on the film website that he wanted "to take the audience someplace they've never been before. [...] It's a world that once was...but maybe if we could find that waterfall and make our way through it, we'd find that El Dorado is still there and waiting for us". Yet at the same time, the film's production designer Christian Schellewald's description of the research trip to Latin America appears to suggest that such a Latin America does exist and that it is impossible to recreate in film: "Standing on top of a pyramid in the middle of a rainforest, you see this eternal jungle, this enormous green ocean. It was breathtaking. That's something you can't see in pictures, and can't understand unless you've seen it for yourself. That's why we went". It becomes clear that buying that passport, a somewhat uncomfortable metaphor for those desperate to cross the Rio Grande, will not take you anywhere other than Hollywood.

Thus the film's El Dorado (here relocated from South to Central America) is not really Latin American at all but Hollywood. The film makes its own sacred origin explicit: the image of the DreamWorks crescent moon is evident in the sky above the *conquistadores'* ship, and the company's logo of the fisherman seated in the moon is reproduced in the priest Tzekel-Khan's sacred book. The film references *Jaws*, *The Lion King*, and *Planet of the Apes* (IMDB, "Movie Connections for *The Road to El Dorado*"), as well as relying heavily on *The Man Who Would be King* (John Huston, 1975) (Felperin n.d.). The directors refer to Cortés having "an Orson Welles kind of voice", a huge wave being



“done way before *Perfect Storm*”, the horse Altivo being “a bit of a Buster Keaton character”, the boat sequence near the end being inspired by *The River Wild*, and the film concluding with “a kind of Indiana Jones sunset shot” (DVD extras). Indeed, the first inspiration for Tulio and Miguel is acknowledged to have been Joey and Chandler from the sitcom *Friends*, and those buddies are only surpassed by the recognition of the Bob Hope-Bing Crosby *Road to...* series in the title itself.

The Hollywood nature of El Dorado in the film is evident in the city’s association not with gold or riches but colour and animation, the images saturated by colour, dance and what could almost be taken for drug-infused psychedelia. The opening sequence, which locates us within the legend of El Dorado, is loaded with bright colours and Mesoamerican shapes. When in El Dorado, there is another musical sequence with the colour and designs from the opening sequence accompanied by singing and a big brass band playing jazz, followed later by another magical sequence of colours and shapes accompanying the evil high priest. The film’s website stresses that when the characters arrive in El Dorado “the palette explodes with vivid colors and bold graphic shapes” and “we see every color of the rainbow” (DVD extras).

Again, we should be attuned to the cinematic politics on display: the filmic citation of buddy movies is a reminder that Latin America was an acknowledged “Hope-Crosby haunt, especially during World War II when Hollywood was encouraged by the US government to forge stronger cultural links with the neighbouring continent” (Felperin n.d.).<sup>2</sup> Similarly, as Jean Franco reminds us: “the very term ‘animation’ suggests the breathing of life into the inanimate and the almost mythic power that this implies” (2002: 26). But once again Hollywood uses the Latin American lost city to act out its own fantasies, revelling (like Indy) in its ability to fuse the pre-modern with the very modern medium of cinema. Except that it is unaware of how Latin America itself disrupts that cinematic colonialism: it is Latin America that breathes life into Hollywood.

## Madness in the Jungle

A very different kind of El Dorado to the lost city evident in *The Road to El Dorado* is established right from the start of *Aguirre*: the film states directly that the Indians invented the legend. With that knowledge framing what follows, the viewer is constantly aware of the fabricated, ephemeral and impossible quest of the *conquistadores* and, above all, of Aguirre himself. Moreover, Herzog has acknowledged that the story about the lost book he claimed was the source for the film was itself a fabrication (DVD, Director’s Commentary). Some studies have probed the ways in which Herzog’s Aguirre compares both to original sources and to other cultural constructions of this infamous figure of sixteenth-century Latin America. For a film that foregrounds untruth from the very beginning, however, the tricky business of veracity quickly becomes entangled in the jungle vines that permeate it. Hence, when the explorers see a ship up a tree one *conquistador* states that the ship “is in your imagination” while Aguirre himself is indignant: “We’ll get that ship! It is real! We’ll sail to the Atlantic with it”. Soon after, an arrow hits

<sup>2</sup> The Internet Movie Database suggests that at one point the reflections of Miguel and Tulio in the water become the figure of Hope and Crosby (IMDB, “*The Road to El Dorado*: Trivia”).

the slave: “That arrow is real”, he says, before adding: “This arrow can’t harm me”. The film’s intention is not to ask whether Aguirre really did this, nor whether the film world is internally consistent (Herzog suggests that the viewer “should not ask” why Ursúa’s wife walks into jungle suddenly wearing a different dress (DVD, Director’s Commentary)), but rather to explore the very construction of what is perceived as real. And yet Herzog makes frequent references to the very material, physical nature of the filming process itself: at one point during his stay in the jungle “hundreds of fire ants rained down on me”, he says (DVD, Director’s Commentary). And, in an apparent rebuke of Hollywood, “You can’t create jungle in a studio”. The jungle, then, is like El Dorado: it is real but it is also unreal, beyond the realms of reality even in its very reality. The themes of landscape, madness and rebellion are, then, all intertwined with the quest for El Dorado, the archetypal trope of the unreal.

The significance of nature in *Aguirre* is evident from the very first scene: from far away, the camera tracks a thin line of bodies descending the Andes through the mist. The indistinct figures gradually descend to the jungle floor, and the distant gaze of the camera, the all-seeing, fixed view of god-like vision, is gradually replaced by an intimate, tactile gaze: for the rest of the film the camera is at arm’s length from the characters, typified by the spots of water on the lens during the rapids sequence or when, while directing, Herzog reaches out to steady the sedan chair that is about to tip over into the mud. As Lutz Koepnick explains, the beginning of the film represents “the crumbling of colonial power through the loss of imperial vista points”, not least because “the jungle provides no access to sublime positions” (1993: 143). The descent is one from heaven into hell: from Huayna Picchu and the heights of the lost city of Machu Picchu to the entangled myth of El Dorado.<sup>3</sup>

After the descent the film’s landscape is made up of the Amazon jungle and the rivers that run through it. From the very beginning the characters are in conflict, sometimes literally, with the nature that surrounds them: soon after the descent they are seen fighting the branches that fall in their path. Ursúa’s claim that “the Indians are everywhere; the whole area is full of them” may be true – but except for one brief occasion on the riverbank Indians remain invisible. Not simply camouflaged by the foliage, the Indians are as one with the jungle, such that death at their hand often occurs beyond the frame, as when one of the party is whisked up into the jungle canopy in a booby trap: the camera remains focused on the jungle floor, and only the dripping blood indicates his fate. Aguirre’s men perceive the invisible Indians “as mere extensions of the prehistoric forest”, such that they “fire randomly at the trees, only in order to bear testimony to the blind spot that clouds the center of their colonial gaze” (Koepnick 1993: 141). Both jungle and river are personified by Herzog in his director’s commentary: the jungle reacts, he says, and the rapids are an example of “furious nature”. Nature becomes as much of a protagonist as Aguirre himself, the two involved in some titanic struggle for supremacy.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Taussig’s comments on the Colombian explorer Joaquín Rocha are a reminder of the link between the search for gold and the descent into a hellish underworld: “From the imagining of the treasure hidden in the bosom of the wilderness he was led ineluctably to the image of treasure hidden in hell – and of the lonely descent a man makes into the underworld for it. And we who come after him see this as figurative speech, this moralized, sexualized Dantean topography of going down and into the bosom of solitude, treasure, and wildness” (1987: 76).

Apart from the death that springs anonymously from its shadows, the jungle’s main weapon is the prevention of movement. The film is weighed down with stasis, symbolised by the miniature sloth that Aguirre gives his daughter. Early on in the trip downriver one raft becomes stuck in an eddy, circling endlessly. From the opposite bank the other members of the party watch. “We must try and do something, Aguirre”, one says, but there is no sense of urgency, and they remain seated. By the latter half of the film the raft appears to have stopped altogether, circling once again in the river’s internal eddies. The film is, as Herzog suggests in his commentary, about “a huge movement that comes to a standstill”. Indeed, the direction of the raft on the river is not always clear, as Herzog adds: “We lose sense of direction”. The jungle, then, which is “a part of their inner landscapes” and in which “fevered dreams [...] somehow take over the fantasy of these people” (DVD, Director’s Commentary), generates a physical, geographic and motionless lack of direction that is mirrored by a lack of mental direction: the growing madness of the ever-circling minds, particularly that of the protagonist, Aguirre.

The lack of movement is reflected by the silence that hangs over the characters. Just as motion in the film becomes “an elemental sign of life” and stasis a sign of “entrapment and death” (Rogers 2004: 82), the explorers are equally all too aware that silence prefigures death. The motionless silence of the jungle will be what traps the explorers: as one of the indigenous guides says, “I am also sorry for you because I know there is no escape from the jungle”. The Indians are not only invisible, however, they also cannot be heard. Hence Aguirre’s cry “Fire! Make some noise, quickly”: the fear of silence can only be overcome by demonstrating their presence, their difference from the jungle that threatens to subsume them. His demand to the Indian accompanying the party that he play his pipes is an attempt to “free the temporal dimension of the static forest, to shatter its inert, photographic flatness and bring it to life” (Rogers 2004: 83).

Thus, although Aguirre spends much of the film motionless, as the story progresses both his movement and noise increases. Even if the final scene of the film, in which the camera repeatedly encircles the drifting raft, now overrun with monkeys, is seen as an example of a lack of direction and, hence, of Aguirre being trapped in his own madness and delusion; in comparison to much of the rest of the film the scene is noteworthy precisely for its movement.<sup>4</sup> The camera is ceaseless and Aguirre, who has recently attempted to rouse his followers into movement, walks constantly around the raft casting off the flurry of monkeys. Thus Aguirre’s final speech rages defiantly against the endless power that surrounds him: “we’ll stage history”, he says, “I, the wrath of God, will marry my own daughter and with her I will found the purest dynasty the world has ever seen. Together we shall rule this entire continent”. In that sense, Aguirre’s frequent staring throughout the film is not simply inaction or silence but rather visual defiance of both his superior and the jungle surrounding him, and it is rebellion, the very characteristic that attracted Herzog to the historical figure of Aguirre (Cronin 2002: 77) that lies at the heart of *The Wrath of God*.

The act of rebellion reveals the duplicitous nature of the jungle, similar to the forest in the Western imagination:

<sup>4</sup> Herzog intensifies Aguirre’s madness with constant reminders of Kinski’s apparent evil insanity: there is “something fiendish about him, something of great demonic intensity”, he says at one point in the director’s commentary.

If forests appear in our religions as places of profanity, they also appear as sacred. If they have typically been considered places of lawlessness, they have also provided havens for those who took up the cause of justice and fought the law's corruption. If they evoke association of danger and abandon in our minds, they also evoke scenes of enchantment (Harrison 1992: x).

Indeed, as Robert Harrison adds, "the forest appears as a place where the logic of distinction goes astray" (1992: x), a point reflected by Herzog in *My Best Fiend* when he states that he loves the jungle "against my better judgement". Or when Herzog states that, on the one hand, "a jungle is just another forest, that is all. It is the myth of the travel agencies that they are dangerous places, full of hazards" (Cronin 2002: 86), and, on the other, that in the jungle he sees "fornication and asphyxiation and choking and fighting for survival" (*My Best Fiend*).<sup>5</sup> Both Aguirre and Herzog struggle with and against the jungle, a metaphor for the colonial/cinematic authority that overburdens them. But the jungle is also the space where they can construct rebellion, a space of outlaw (Harrison 1992: 63) that allows them to strike at the very heart of colonial/cinematic power.

Lope de Aguirre was one of the first Latin American rebels to declare independence from Spain, making the declaration of mutiny a key scene in the film since it symbolises the need to represent the legality of illegality and the claim to sovereignty that can be made by enacting the power of sovereignty. Aguirre is well aware of the symbolic nature of rule when the new king, Fernando de Guzmán, complains about his new throne: "What is a throne, but a plank covered with velvet, Your Majesty", Aguirre says wryly. The trial of Ursúa, furthermore, is a literal enactment of the claim to legality that has already been declared. The power of the word, then, of the declaration, is evident throughout the film: Pizarro writes and signs a document to declare his intention to the Council of the Indies; he sends Brother Gaspar de Carvajal on the expedition to "send the word of God to the pagans"; the "Word of God" becomes ironic when an Indian later puts the Bible to his ear and declares that "it doesn't talk"; the Indian guide tells us that he was a prince called Runo Rimac, which means "he who speaks"; and Aguirre speaks when he is ordered to keep silent. The extent of recording through words, furthermore, is so predominant that "it soon becomes unclear which comes first, the event or its reported account" (Rogers 2004: 86).

All of which brings us back to El Dorado since the film declares El Dorado to exist: when Carvajal declares near the end of the film that "El Dorado hasn't been more than an illusion" he forgets that he is already a citizen of El Dorado. As part of the rebellion Guzmán is declared more than once "Emperor of El Dorado", and when he spares Ursúa's life he declares that "he forfeits all rights as a citizen of El Dorado". But unlike the desperate explorers who declare hopefully that "El Dorado might be only a few days away", it is only Aguirre who recognises that they have already reached their destina-

<sup>5</sup> Herzog's keenness to stress his own ease with the jungle ("As a Bavarian I have an affinity for the fertility of the jungle, the fever dreams and the physical exuberance of things down there" (Cronin 2002: 86)) goes hand in hand with his various reminders of how his best f(r)iend, Kinski, was completely ill at ease in the jungle. "Mosquitoes were not allowed in [Kinski's] jungle, nor was rain", Herzog states, before adding that, whilst everyone else slept in barns and tents, the actor "moved into the one single hotel in Machu Picchu" (Cronin 2002: 89).

tion: “Even if this land only consists of trees and water we will conquer it! [...] My men measure riches in gold. It is more. It is power and fame. I despise them for it”. It is not quite true that “Spanish civilization’s organized attempt to deal with the (extensive) margins of their world and subordinate its value (El Dorado) to their needs, subsequently fails” (Benelli 1986: 97), precisely because Aguirre has declared himself no longer Spanish. Rather it is within this “marginal” space that Aguirre becomes the “anchoring centre” (Benelli 1986: 100) around which the camera circles. The circling camera can not only be read as representative of his “foundering quest” (Benelli 1986: 96) or the river as “a dead end” (Benelli 1986: 98), however, but rather of entirety and wholeness: the quest completed. Thus Herzog’s deliberate shot of the blazing sun is a reminder that Aguirre is already in El Dorado: El Dorado, like rebellion, is simply wherever you declare it to be, in much the same way that the Requerimiento tells us that to declare Latin America is to create it.

Of course, one is left wondering what kind of El Dorado Aguirre has created in the South American jungle. As a space that goes beyond what the camera can possibly frame, the jungle is the force that teases out the subconscious desires of the characters.<sup>6</sup> As Herzog states: “The jungle is really all about our dreams, our deepest emotions, our nightmares. It is not just a location, it is a state of mind. It has almost human qualities. It is a vital part of the characters’ inner landscapes” (Cronin 2002: 81). It is the “the abyss itself” (Prager 2007: 31), the dark heart of both the individual and collective project of colonialism: “the protagonist is clearly an extreme and maniacal symptom of violent colonial ideology” (Prager 2007: 39).<sup>7</sup> As Koepnick highlights, Aguirre follows Alexander von Humboldt in envisioning a cleared space within the jungle, seeing in El Dorado “an imagined space removed from natural terrors, yet emptied of native populations and traces of their history: a phantasmagorical image of Eden transplanted into the tropical rain forest” (1993: 139). Except that Aguirre precisely replaces his own system of terror in place of the natural terror. Thus comparisons can be made between Aguirre’s “struggle to impose order through terror” (Minta 1993: 145) and the project of death and terror that Roger Casement documented in the Peruvian jungle at the beginning of the twentieth century. As Michael Taussig so powerfully argues, “the image of stark oppression and of otherness in the primeval jungle comes forth as the colonially intensified metaphor for the great space of terror and cruelty” (1987: 75). The savagery that Aguirre and his followers perceive in the jungle produces terror and cruelty, reminding us of how El Dorado often emerges not during attempts to construct the notion of an uninhabited land but rather of terror itself.

In that sense, the very process of filming – a sort of frontier filming rather than frontier capitalism – can be seen as the insertion of colonial terror into the jungle. Critics such as Thomas Elsaesser have pointed out that in Herzog’s films the production process is often “the real event”; appropriately Elsaesser adds “for a cinema that is infatuated with the reality of its own making” (1993: 130). During the filming of *Fitzcarraldo*, for exam-

<sup>6</sup> That “the forests encouraged dispersion, independence, lawlessness, polygamy, and even incest between father and daughter, mother and son” (Harrison 1992: 6) is suggestive of the way in which the forest draws out that subconscious – and why Aguirre ends the film by declaring that he is going to create a new dynasty with his daughter.

<sup>7</sup> Herzog has stated, furthermore, that his characters “all emerge from the darkness” (Cronin 2002: 68).

ple, an Indian extra died because of an extravagant set piece demanded by Herzog, and local Indian tribes threatened the film company. As Elsaesser suggests, it is as if “Herzog turns himself into the instrument of this society, its terrible jester, in order to simulate the conditions he sets out to document” (1993: 132), a view shared by Koepnick who argues that the process of filming *Fitzcarraldo* “repeats Fitzcarraldo’s colonialist procedures of ordering space” (1993: 137). It is in that vein that Herzog refers to the fear of the Indians during the making of *Aguirre* – not, he adds somewhat smugly, that they were fearful of Kinski’s ranting and raving but rather, in an ironic twist of the fear of Aguirre’s companions, they were frightened of Herzog’s own silence in the face of that rage.

### Locating El Dorado

What Columbus found when he landed in the New World was not what he was looking for. If Latin America is built around a failed quest, therefore, El Dorado is an especially apt Latin American myth because, as the indigenous populations always indicated to the *conquistadores*, El Dorado is always “over there”, over the mountain, further on down the trail or river. Lying beyond any cartographic project, El Dorado introduces an un-discoverable non-place into the New World from the moment of its perceived discovery. It seems that Dr. Jones was right after all: El Dorado, like Latin America, always lies beyond our grasp and, in that sense, is a site where “X” never quite marks the spot.

Like Latin America itself (Mignolo 2005: 2), El Dorado is an invention – but it is no less real for that: quests for the lost city contributed to the trade in raw materials and bodies which would come to transform the global economy, suggesting that the true “value” of El Dorado was not bullion but what it allowed people to imagine. In that sense, despite his rebellious mode of production and his antagonistic filmic gaze, Herzog in fact shares with Hollywood an obsession with the world of making films. Certainly, unlike Spielberg or Bergeron and Finn who perpetuate the world of Hollywood, Herzog does try to use film production to make a conscious cultural intervention. But by drawing on a shared set of mythic and cinematic contact zones, all these films have in common an El Dorado that provides a fertile source for motion pictures that value adventure, discovery and leaps of faith: all their cinematic worlds are thus animated by Latin America.

### Bibliography

- Beasley-Murray, Jon (2005a): “Malleability”. In: *Projections. What Latin America Tells Us at the Movies*. In: <<http://www.screened.blogspot.com/2005/11/malleability.html>> (31.08.2011).
- (2005b): “Insularity?”. In: *Projections. What Latin America Tells Us at the Movies*, <<http://www.screened.blogspot.com/2005/11/insularity.html>> (31.08.2011).
- Benelli, Dana (1986): “The Cosmos and its Discontents”. In: Corrigan, Timothy (ed.): *The Films of Werner Herzog. Between Mirage and History*. New York/London: Methuen, pp. 89-103.
- Bradshaw, Peter (2008): “Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull”. In: <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2008/may/19/actionandadventure.thriller>> (31.08.2011).
- Cronin, Paul (ed.) (2002): *Herzog on Herzog*. London: Faber and Faber.
- Di Leonardo, Micaela (1998): *Exotics at Home. Anthropologies, Others, American Modernity*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

- Elsaesser, Thomas (1993): “Hyper-, Retro- or Counter-Cinema: European Cinema and Third Cinema between Hollywood and Art Cinema”. In: King, John/López, Ana M./Alvarado, Manuel (eds.): *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*. London: British Film Institute, pp. 119-135.
- Felperin, Leslie (n.d.): “*The Road to El Dorado*”. In: <<http://www.bfi.org.uk/sightandsound/review/483>> (31.08.2011).
- Franco, Jean (2002): *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City. Latin America in the Cold War*. Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard University Press.
- Freer, Ian (2001): *The Complete Spielberg*. London: Virgin Books.
- Grann, David (2009): *The Lost City of Z. A Tale of Deadly Obsession in the Amazon*. London: Simon and Schuster.
- Harrison, Robert Pogue (1992): *Forests. The Shadow of Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Hunter, Stephen (2000): “‘Road to El Dorado’: Genocide in Toon”. In: *Washington Post*, 31 march, <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2000/03/30/AR2005062901342.html>> (31.08.2011).
- IMDB (n. d.): “Movie Connections for *The Road to El Dorado*”. In: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0138749/movieconnections>> (31.08.2011).
- (n. d.): “*The Road to El Dorado*: Trivia”. In: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0138749/trivia>> (31.08.2011).
- King, John/López, Ana M./Alvarado, Manuel (1993): “General Introduction”. In: King, John/López, Ana M./Alvarado, Manuel (eds.): *Mediating Two Worlds. Cinematic Encounters in the Americas*. London: British Film Institute, pp. xvii-xxi.
- Koepnick, Lutz P. (1993): “Colonial Forestry: Sylvan Politics in Werner Herzog’s *Aguirre and Fitzcarraldo*”. In: *New German Critique*, 60, pp. 133-159.
- Martin-Rodriguez, Manuel M. (2003): “Reel Origins: Multiculturalism, History, and the American Children’s Movie”. In: Levander, Caroline Field/Singley, Carol J. (eds.): *The American Child. A Cultural Studies Reader*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 280-302.
- Meacham, Cal (n. d.): “Only the Penitent Duck Shall Pass”. In: <[http://www.teemings.net/series\\_1/issue05/penitent.html](http://www.teemings.net/series_1/issue05/penitent.html)> (31.08.2011).
- Mexica Movement (n. d.): “Letter and Actions Against the Racism of Eddie Olmos, Salma Hayek, and Steven Spielberg”. In: <<http://www.mexica-movement.org/timexihcah/racism.htm>> (31.08.2011).
- Mignolo, Walter D. (2005): *The Idea of Latin America*. Malden, MA/Oxford: Blackwell.
- Minta, Stephen (1993): *Aguirre. The Re-Creation of a Sixteenth-Century Journey Across South America*. London: Jonathan Cape.
- Morris, Nigel (2006): *The Cinema of Steven Spielberg. Empire of Light*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Prager, Brad (2007): *The Cinema of Werner Herzog. Aesthetic Ecstasy and Truth*. London: Wallflower Press.
- Pratt, Mary Louise (1992): *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London/New York: Routledge.
- Rogers, Holly (2004): “Fitzcarraldo’s Search for Aguirre: Music and Text in the Amazonian Films of Werner Herzog”. In: *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 129, 1, pp. 77-99.
- Taussig, Michael (1987): *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man. A Study in Terror and Healing*. Chicago/London: The University of Chicago Press.

**Filmography**

- Aguirre, The Wrath of God* (Werner Herzog, 1972)  
*Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (Steven Spielberg, 2008)  
*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (Steven Spielberg, 1989)  
*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (Steven Spielberg, 1984)  
*Los diarios de motocicleta* (Walter Salles, 2004)  
*My Best Fiend* (Werner Herzog, 1999)  
*National Treasure: Book of Secrets* (John Turteltaub, 2007)  
*Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981)  
*Secret of the Incas* (Jerry Hopper, 1954)  
*The Road to El Dorado* (Bibo Bergeron and Will Finn, 2000)