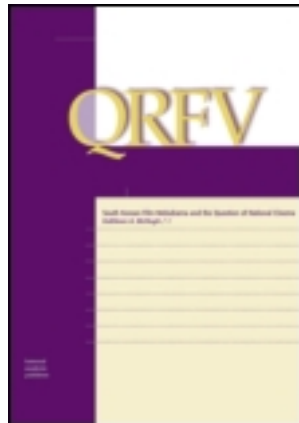


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Mr. Jones Goes to Washington: Myth and Religion in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

FRANK P. TOMASULO

What gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting . . . This is made clear through a comparison between myth and what appears to have largely replaced it in modern societies, namely, politics.

—Claude Lévi-Strauss¹

Myth is a people's cultural story, an attempt to express in narrative a people's own self-understanding. In contemporary society, where those "everlasting patterns" may be moribund, myth and religion often disguise, naturalize, or reify certain historically specific, crassly *political* ideas. Just as myth served to order the chaotic experience of life for our primitive forbears, so modern cultural objects like films can be seen to function as *social acts*, both concealing and revealing their production of social meaning and ideological rhetoric at the same time.

Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981), for example, can be shown to follow the epic mode of classical myth, the oedipal trajectory of primitive initiatory rites and rituals, and the religious

quests of legend and holy writ—however, the social end (as noted by Lévi-Strauss) is directed toward the political sphere: the justification and reflection of the damaged social fabric of an American society at a loss for *real life* superheroes in the advent of the humiliating loss of the Vietnam War, Marxist uprisings in Nicaragua and El Salvador, Middle East oil embargos, the year-long Iranian hostage situation, and, of course, the Watergate experience. It is perhaps no accident, then, that the film's principal locations are Southeast Asia, South America, the Middle East . . . and Washington, D.C. Indeed, the film's concerns with domination and exploitation (especially of Third World nations and nationals, women, and technology), the appropriation of religious artifacts (the quest is, after all, for the Lost Ark of the Covenant), and the adventures of the self-positing individualistic conqueror Indiana Jones put the film in the ideological position of spokesperson for the new Reagan administration's policies in the Middle East, Central and

South America, as well as the new regime's positions on women's rights, laissez-faire capitalism, CIA covert operations, the Moral Majority, and America's renewed stature in the world of nations. Like its British counterpart *Chariots of Fire* (also 1981), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* must harken back to a past era of national greatness and achievement in the international arena in order to restore and dynamize a cultural renewal in a nation beset with problems foreign and domestic, political and economic. Karl Marx's principle of "conjuring up the spirits of the past to their service" appears to be at work in both these films; they both borrow earlier, more heroic images of national life in order to "present the new scene in time-honored disguise."² So, rather than *reflecting* the culture it comes out of, *Raiders* all but *rewrites* the history of its epoch in order to create what Frederic Jameson calls a new "national allegory."³

The film can be shown to use its mythoreligious structuration to mask and efface its contemporary ramifications. Indiana Jones, the putative hero of *Raiders*, follows the classical narrative trajectory of the mythological hero as outlined by Joseph Campbell in his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Campbell's notion of the "Monomyth" involves a tripartite journey characterized by Separation, Trials and Victories of Initiation, and Return and Reintegration with Society. This structure is further broken down into a total of seventeen discrete narrative units.⁴ *Raiders of the Lost Ark* can be plotted, point by point, along the graph of this universal schema.

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder; fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won; the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow human beings. (Campbell, p. 30)

Although Campbell may be faulted for positing a trans-historical *mythos* with little varia-

tion in the morphology of his thousand-faced hero's adventures, the particular permutations used in *Raiders* may be accounted for in terms of the historical specificity of 1981 America. However, the underlying mythic *grid* mystifies the film's ideology and its politicocultural concerns: the crises of capitalism, religion, patriarchy, governmental authority, and militarism.

For instance, the very first diegetic image in the film is of a South American jungle mountaintop, centered in the frame according to the "laws" of Renaissance perspective. This fits rather neatly into Campbell's opening stage: "a fateful region of both treasure and danger . . . a distant land, a forest, a lofty mountaintop" (p. 58). However, this mountaintop has actually dissolved out of the prediegetic Paramount Pictures logos in an exact match on form. Thus, this rather unconventional opening inscribes within the narrative the visual imprint of American corporate capitalism. Paramount/Gulf & Western not only produces the jungle adventure to follow, it also dominates the landscape. Shortly thereafter, Indiana Jones appears on screen and eclipses our view of the mountain, thereby taking on, through a system of visual relays, the role of secondary enunciator of the corporate discourse. It is therefore not only the "brave" exploits (and exploitations) of Indiana Jones being depicted on screen; it is also the ideology of multinational corporate power and authority. Myth itself becomes commodified, through this appropriation to the ends of corporate capital.

Besides establishing the exotic locale, this first sequence also demonstrates "The Call to Adventure" and "Signs of the Vocation of the Hero." In this case, however, our hero's goal is *not* some beneficial, transhistorical mission such as bringing fire to mankind; rather, it is the outright robbery of native cultural and religious artifacts and treasures. This class theft and exploitation (Jones is seen bullwhipping the South American bearers) mark a return to

the values of gunboat diplomacy and “Manifest Destiny” for a nation which had just returned the Panama Canal (amidst considerable national debate).

Jones’s encounters with the Frenchman Belloq, however, do not feature this sort of racist exploitation; rather, sheer competition between nation-states is reified here and naturalized as primal. If America can’t or won’t exploit native cultures, someone else will. In mythological terms, Belloq serves a dual role: he is both the Bad Father and the *Doppelgänger*. As a bad father, his initial dialogue with our hero exemplifies the position of power (especially with regard to the Mother) noted by Freud in the family romance: “Again we see there is nothing you can possess which I cannot take away.” The contest over the gold female fertility figure here is transferred later to a power struggle over both Marion Ravenwood and the Ark.

The snake discovered in the rescue plane can be seen as a mere foreshadowing device—to acquaint us with Indiana’s fear of reptiles—but, on another level, the incident draws us into a whole series of imbricated allusions to serpents in mythology and religion which further the patriarchal-oedipal thrust of the narrative. The published screenplay notes that Jones “screams like a girl and jerks his knees up to his chest” on seeing the snake between his legs. It is his later ability to successfully confront the serpents which marks the touchstone of his newly acquired manhood (defined, in the film’s terms, by possession of the girl and the grail).

When United States Army Intelligence asks Jones to find the Ark, he initially “refuses the call,” thus fulfilling the second phase of the Monomyth. His reasoning is significant: “I don’t believe in magic, a lot of superstitious hocus-pocus . . .” This initial *denial* of the power of God’s icons contrasts with his later acceptance of the Ark’s authority, thus putting Jones in the contemporary religious context of

the “born again” believer. It is of further note that, far from being “mumbo-jumbo,” the Ark is desired less for its spiritual significance than for its military capability (“An army which carries the Ark before it is invincible”). The Ark itself seems also to have qualities comparable in many ways to modern nuclear weapons (“leveling mountains and laying waste to entire regions”), and the race to obtain it between America and the Nazis (read “communists” in today’s climate) is, in many ways, homologous to the race for nuclear superiority championed by the current administration.

The stained glass windows of the lecture hall inscribe a visual imprint of religiosity over the proceedings in this scene, which is furthered by the lesson on Hebraic lore. In addition, the theme of paternity is introduced with reference to the Absent Father, Abner Ravenwood—Jones’s former mentor, with whom he’s had “a falling out.” Ravenwood is linked to the Nazis (another Bad Father?); yet, as Absent *Doppelgänger* too, both Indiana and Ravenwood seek the same goal: the phallic staff of Ra, which points the way to God’s Word. Thus, not only paternity, but patriarchy as well, is intimately connected with the quest for domination, God, and the girl. Indiana realizes that he must supplant the Bad Father. Indeed, it is this insight which convinces Jones to abandon his college career for the thrill and glory of adventuresome exploits in the Middle East. He’ll be able to “be all that he can be” with the Army. The effect of this decision on the film’s target audience of adolescent, draft-age males is hard to calculate, but the ideology is apparent.

In Nepal, the introduction of the primary female character, Marion Ravenwood, establishes her as a pants-wearing, hard-drinking entrepreneur who is able to compete with men at their own games: drinking, gambling, and fighting. Once Indiana Jones enters the scene, however, the narrative thrust of the story shifts to getting her out of pants and

into a dress. By setting the film in the bygone days of 1936, the broken “unity” of 1981 America can be elided in favor of a nostalgia for the collective unity of a prewar America unfettered by considerations of contemporary feminism.

The thing to keep in mind about this film is that it is only a movie. *Raiders* is not a statement of its times.

—Steven Spielberg⁵

The confrontation with Marion serves to establish her drinking abilities (another repeated plot device), but it also fulfills the mythological plot function of “The Supernatural Aid”; in this case, the prized medallion is obtained (Figure 1). Yet, although film director Spielberg denies any sociohistorical relevance to *Raiders*, it is worth noting that the emblem embossed on the medallion exactly duplicates the Great Seal of the United States: the pyramid capped by a light-radiating eye. This emblem is, of course, found on the back of the American dollar, along with the inscription *Annuit Coeptis* (He has favored our undertaking). It carries an explicitly religious message (hence the phrase “the Almighty Dollar”). The linking of God and Money through ancient symbols—in the film as well as in real-life finance—has certain ideological ramifications. God is on our side not only in terms of the American national project (“our undertaking”), but also in terms of our economic and financial system: capitalism. The fact that, in the film, a symbol used on American currency functions to lead the way to God reveals the hidden ideological agenda of *Raider’s* discourse.

During this same scene, the two Americans vanquish their Southeast Asian and German attackers and become partners in the process, forsaking their long-standing personal feud. Again, the contemporary ideology is apparent: Americans, threatened by the Third World and a re-industrialized Western Europe (the *Deutschemark’s* increasing importance over

the American dollar on international currency exchanges), should put aside their differences and join together against the common foe. It is noteworthy that the Indiana-Marion relationship is reestablished as an *economic* reunion, rather than as a *romantic* one (Marion: “Until I get back my \$5000 . . . I’m your goddamned partner”).

As Indiana Jones reaches the next stage of his monomythical journey, his travels are charted on a map: India, Iran, Iraq, Baghdad, Jordan, Palestine, and finally, Cairo. This phase marks “The Crossing of the First Threshold” and, appropriately, the hero is given a warning (from Sallah, his Egyptian friend): “The Ark . . . is something that man was not meant to disturb. Death has always surrounded it. It is not of this earth.” In contemporary terms, the warm, smiling, and gregarious Sallah, who is friendly and cooperative to American interests in the Middle East, can be construed as a figure closely resembling the recently assassinated Egyptian President Anwar Sadat (Figure 2). Likewise, in even more striking fashion, the hero himself—Indiana Jones—can be seen to represent and stand in for another world figure. Just as Eisenstein’s *Alexander Nevsky* and *Ivan the Terrible* have been seen as paeans to the rule of Josef Stalin, so Spielberg’s *Raiders of the Lost Ark* can likewise be seen as a disguised tribute to a ruler who represents certain real, tangible social myths and religious ideals. This other actor-adventurer, coincidentally, was seen wearing the exact same costume as Harrison Ford (leather jacket, brimmed felt hat, three days’ growth) in a 1952 anti-communist potboiler, *Hong Kong* (also a Paramount release). This was none other than the current president of the United States, Ronald Reagan (Figure 3).

In the streets of Cairo, Marion (who had seemed so self-sufficient in Nepal) gradually changes roles to that of a lady-in-distress (Maid Marion?). Indeed, she is reduced to beating off an attacker with a frying pan during

one scuffle, whereas before she had killed men with guns. Marion's physical jeopardy is treated throughout this scene in comic fashion. As the Arabs carry her off, she shouts, "You can't do this to me! I'm an American!" Though comic in intent, this line of dialogue speaks to the spoken (and often unspoken) feelings of many Americans (especially those who supported Reagan) that Middle East interests (Iran, Libya, PLO, OPEC, etc.) have been carting away our possessions and holding America hostage.

Just before this incident, Jones had watched a threatening display of swordsmanship by an Arab with an immense scimitar, before calmly and nonchalantly shooting the man dead. On the mythological plane, this might be seen as a phallic duel won by the initiate as part of his rites of passage into adulthood; on the contemporary political level, however, this scene reenacts in symbolic form the anti-Arab sentiments of a large portion of the American public. Although America's superior technology and firepower did *not* win the day during the Iranian situation (indeed, the rescue mission was a military and technological fiasco), America *can* win the day in the movies. Certainly, audiences laugh at this incident because of inherent comic structures—the contrast between the Arab's elaborate gesticulations and the matter-of-fact efficiency of Jones's draw, the parody of Western iconography, etc.—but also at stake appears to be a nervous recognition of a wished-for state of affairs in the real world. If an Arab had calmly shot Jones while Jones was elaborately brandishing his whip, for instance, the race reversal would mitigate against American laughter.

After Marion's apparent death in the exploding truck, Indy confronts his nemesis and *Doppelgänger*, Belloq, in a Cairo cafe. The French dupe of the Nazis (a figure analogous, in contemporary world politics, to Francois Mitterand, socialist leader of France) explicitly states his "double" relationship to Jones: "You

and I are very much alike . . . I am a shadowy reflection of you." As the Bad Father, it is interesting to note that Belloq's calculations on the location of the Well of Souls are inaccurate because "his staff is too long." The Freudian overtones are unmistakable here.

As Indiana Jones reaches the "Belly of the Whale" step in the Tanis dig, he forsakes Marion's rescue in order to pursue the Ark. Although she tempts him with their first diegetic kiss, he is more concerned with finding the Ark than he is with love and sexuality, so he leaves her tied up in Belloq's tent. These are the same priorities enunciated by the Moral Majority and the New Right: God and Country take precedence over women's "liberation."

During the wine-drinking seduction episode which follows, Marion attempts to use her "feminine wiles" to escape from Belloq's grasp—a far cry from the woman established in Nepal. The rhetoric here is just as blatant as elsewhere: when the chips are down, women should rely on their sexuality (if they can't rely on a man). During this scene, even the editing strategies manifest the ideology of the religious right. During the attempted seduction of Marion by Belloq, Spielberg frequently cuts away from the sexual advances in the tent to the religious mission of Jones in the cavern. This is, of course, traditional Hollywood "cold shower" editing in the custom of Cecil B. DeMille et al., which allows the movie to garner a PG rating, but it also functions to check and chastise any erotic impulses aroused in its audience with recurring injections of religion.

When Indy is trapped by the Nazis in the womblike interior of the Well of Souls (analogous to Campbell's "Belly of the Whale"), Belloq repeats his earlier boast about their competition: "So, once again, Jones, what was briefly yours is now mine." Here, the reference is explicitly to Marion, who has been treated as a possession throughout the film.

In the "Road of Trials" segment, many of the

tests of our hero's mettle literally occur on roads as Indiana tries to commandeer the truck bearing the Ark. Jones's trials—pulling himself under the truck, tagging along on a lengthy submarine voyage, riding on an Arabian stallion—invoke many images of Hollywood's Golden Age: *Stagecoach*, *The Sheik*, etc. In addition, other "intertextual allusions" to *The Ten Commandments*, *The Exorcist*, *Casablanca*, *Citizen Kane*, and the action serials serve not in the interests of deconstructive critique of film genres, but rather provide that sense of the familiar and commonplace so necessary for reactionary popular culture. Likewise, Jones's "self-reflexive" remark about his plans—"I'm making this up as I go along"—tries to inculcate and foster a sense of shared participation and spontaneity in what is basically an assembly-line production.

Aboard the tramp steamer, Indiana and Marion act out the "Meeting with the Goddess" phase. According to Campbell, this represents the bliss of infancy regained. Appropriately, Jones falls asleep during the kissing of his wounds. The waiting bride who applies healing balm to the hero's wounds is a familiar figure in myth and legend, and the "mystical marriage" of our hero and heroine turns Marion into another familiar figure, the Lady of the House of Sleep. This next step is the final test of the hero's ability to win the boon of love (in the film, a secondary boon to that of the Ark). Unfortunately, just as Indy's rites of passage appear to be completed, he is forced to return both the Ark and Marion to the Germans. The "Woman as Temptress" stage before atonement and apotheosis occurs during the aforementioned kissing scene.

One of the major steps in Campbell's structure is significantly altered in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*. The "Atonement with the Father" here takes place on a more subtle level—that of Indy's spiritual rebirth into the fold of God. On the deserted island, Jones refuses to bazooka the Ark into extinction when given

the opportunity to do so by Belloq. All he had apparently wanted was Marion ("All I want is the girl"), but this would have meant, in psychomythological terms, a preference for the mother and the breast over the father and the phallus. The transfer of affections from mother to father is a central point of all "rites of passage" cycles, from infantile dependence on the mother's breast to grown-up responsibility epitomized by the father's phallus. In *Raiders*, with the absence or death of one human father (Ravenwood) and the inadequate representation of another (Belloq), the supreme patriarch—God—is invoked.

Jones's reconciliation to the phallus is symbolized by his being tied to the lamp pole. Just as Christ was nailed to the cross and Odysseus lashed to the mast, so our cinematic hero is linked and bound to the symbolic phallus. Interestingly enough, Marion is also lashed to the pole, so the Tree of Life becomes also, in this permutation, the Family Tree as well. The couple is thus constituted in the presence of God and, with the very next cut, with the blessing of the State as well. The entire "Return" portion of the classical pattern is compressed into a few minutes of screen time. Indeed, the shock cut from the couple tied to the pole to the establishing shot of Washington, D.C., marks the "Magic Flight" and "Rescue from Without" stages, in addition to the more obvious "Crossing of the Great Threshold" (Figures 4 and 5).

Despite its quickness, the hard cut from one phallic icon (the lamp pole) to another (the Washington Monument in the nation's capital) serves to posit Jones as a world-historical individual who rescues and returns the boon, the holy grail, God's Word, to its rightful home: America. He is thus allied on the allegorical level with untold mythic and religious heroes, but also, more importantly, with American political figures like George Washington ("Father of his Country") and the newly installed chief executive, Ronald Reagan, who

received considerable electoral support from the Moral Majority.

Joseph Campbell has noted that the return of the hero to the world of common day contains a certain baffling inconsistency between the wisdom brought back from the spiritual world and the reality principles needed to function in the day-to-day world. As Campbell points out, "good people are at a loss to comprehend" (p. 216). Thus, Jones says of the government bureaucrats: "They don't know what they've got there." The bureaucrats store the Ark in an anonymous warehouse, where it will no doubt be ready for the anticipated *Raiders* sequel. Nonetheless, the cut between the two worlds makes the point that God's Word is in Washington, D.C., that it is linked to male domination and phallic power, and that the political bureaucrats have taken it out of American life and put it in cold storage. This is precisely the 1980 campaign rhetoric of the New Right and the Moral Majority, who saw in the candidacy of Ronald Reagan a return to basic religious principles and ideals.

It is interesting to note that while earlier bourgeois classes rejected religion as a moral fetter to the cutthroat competition necessary for the accumulation of capital, in the Reagan era the ideology of the dominant classes has taken on a religious form in order to stem the legitimation crisis endemic to the current social order. Nietzsche's Zarathustra proclaimed the death of all the gods; *Raiders of the Lost Ark* proclaims their rebirth. God is alive and well, the film seems to be saying; He divides his time between living in Washington . . . and Hollywood.

In conclusion, Georg Lukács (not George Lucas) should be quoted: "Every work, through the style of its language, its groupings of images and ideas, feelings and moods, evokes events and thoughts capable of mobilizing us for or against something."⁶ Contemporary film theory and criticism now allow us to see behind the instant gratifications and Skinner-

ian response mechanisms built into a film's form. We can see that a film like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* affirms the existing norms of cinematic intelligibility and therefore that its repetitions reinforce recognition, a process which is desublimating and destructive to the imaginative processes on which art traditionally relies. *Raiders* aspires to the political status of Muzak, yet it provides, in so doing, the background hum for corporate power. Through what Adorno and Horkheimer called "the predominance of the effect," thrill-a-minute films like this turn everything—love, war, religion, myth, exploitation, and death—into disposable spectacle. Frederic Jameson's recent chapter title is appropriate to this sort of spectacle: "The Epic as Cliche, the Cliche as Epic."⁷

Furthermore, by relying on a structure borrowed from our mythological past, a transhistorical ideology is put into place which masks and denies the *actual* problems of an age by transporting them into a timeless *unreality*, where the socially conditioned real world becomes a cosmic, unconditioned one. Although it has always been the function of myth and religion to supply the symbols and icons which carry the human spirit forward, films like *Raiders of the Lost Ark* attempt the reverse; they enhance and cement the status quo.

Frank P. Tomasulo is Assistant Professor of Cinema at Ithaca College. He wishes to thank his colleague Patricia Zimmermann and his student Smith Ragsdale for their suggestions and encouragement on this article.

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NOTES

1. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Structural Anthropology*, translated by Claire Jacobson and Brooke Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), p. 209.

2. Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), p. 15.

3. Frederic Jameson, *Fables of Aggression: Wyndham Lewis, the Modernist as Fascist* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), p. 87.

4. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 36-37.

5. Press kit, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Paramount Pictures, 1982), p. 12.

6. Georg Lukács on Stalin's "Marxism and Questions of Language," quoted in Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics*, translated by Helen Lane (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), p. 29.

7. Jameson, *op. cit.*, pp. 62-80.

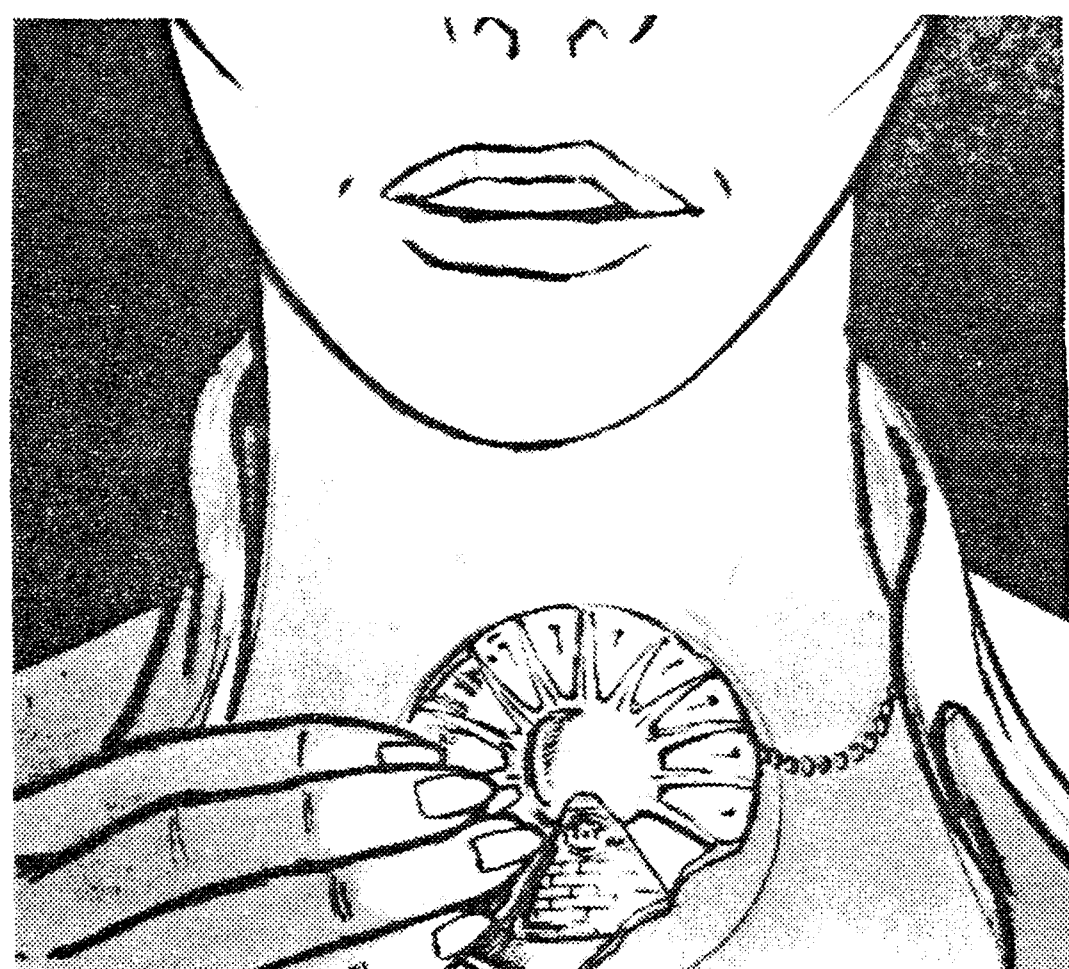


Figure 1

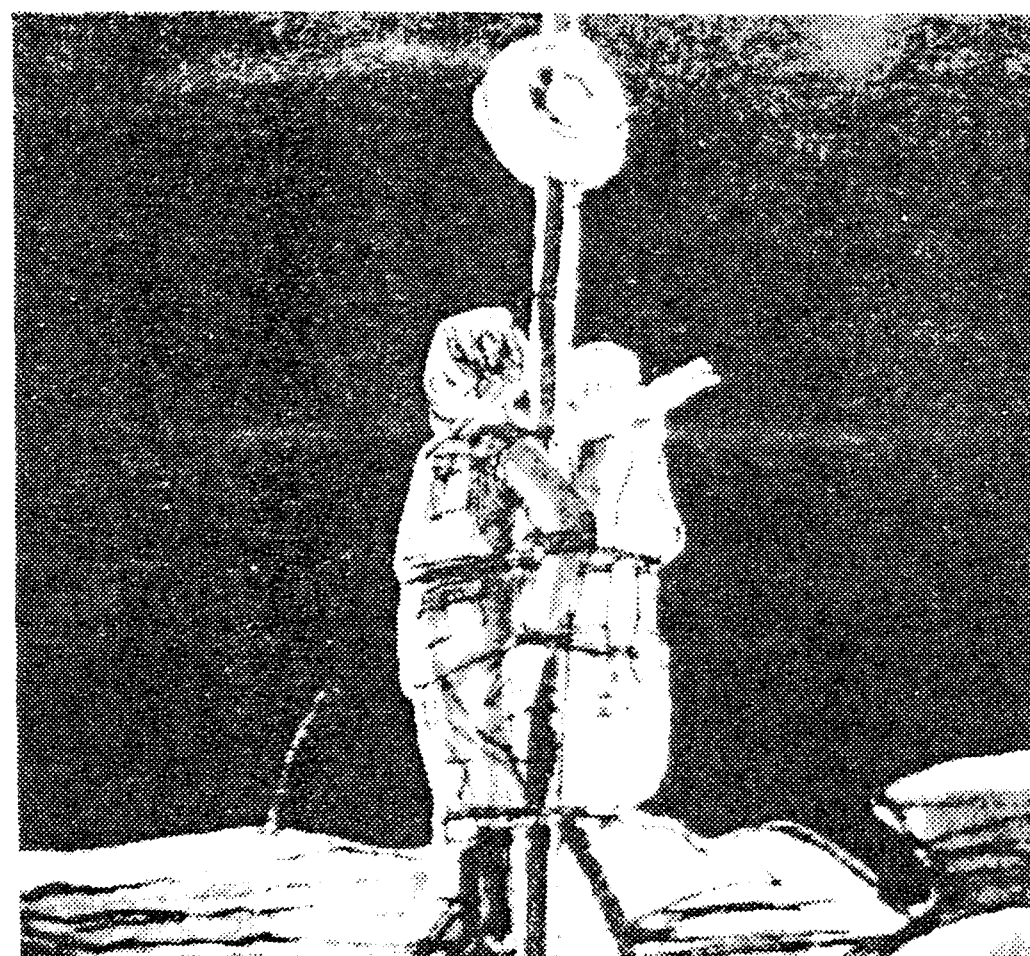


Figure 4

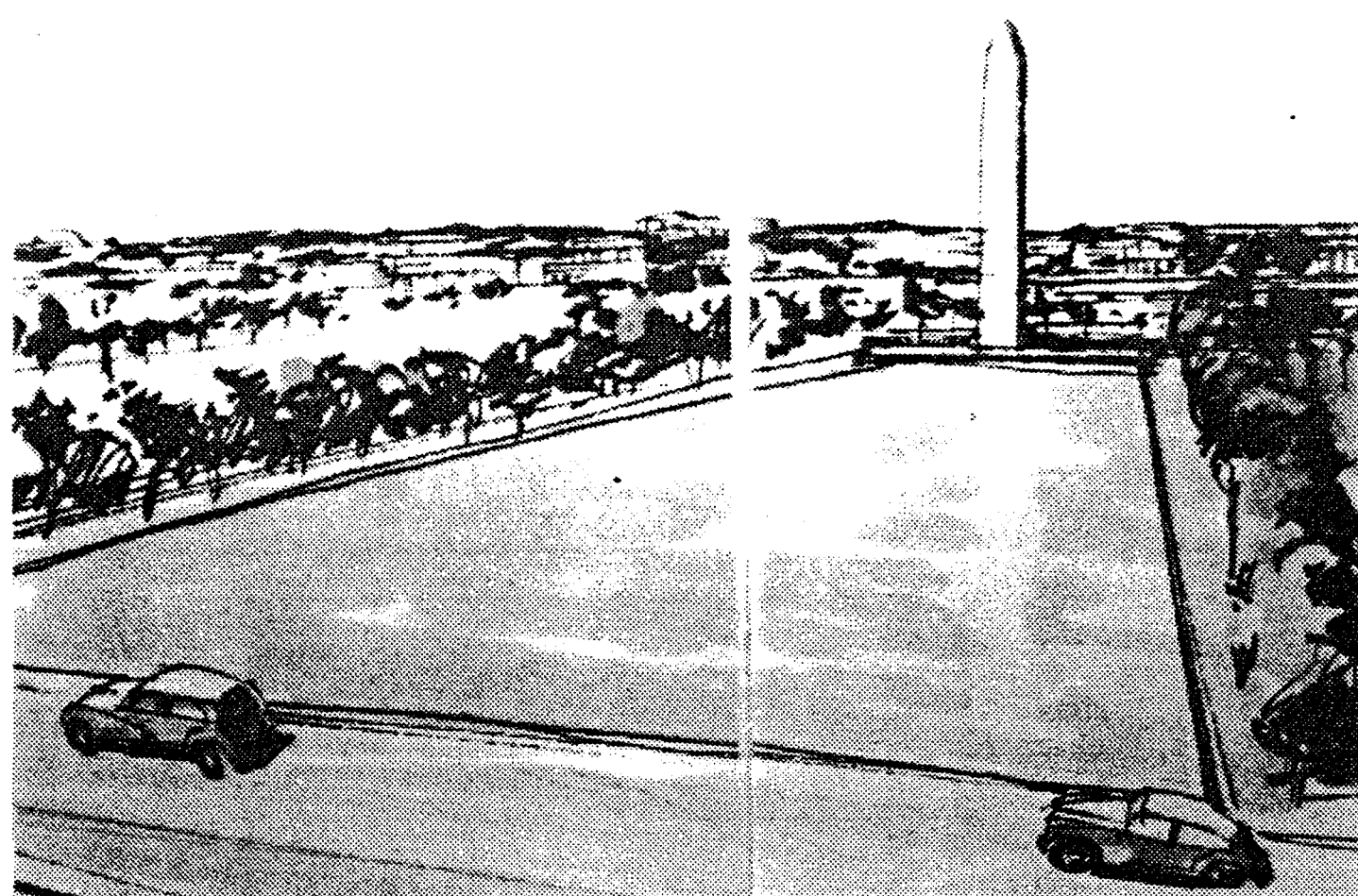


Figure 5

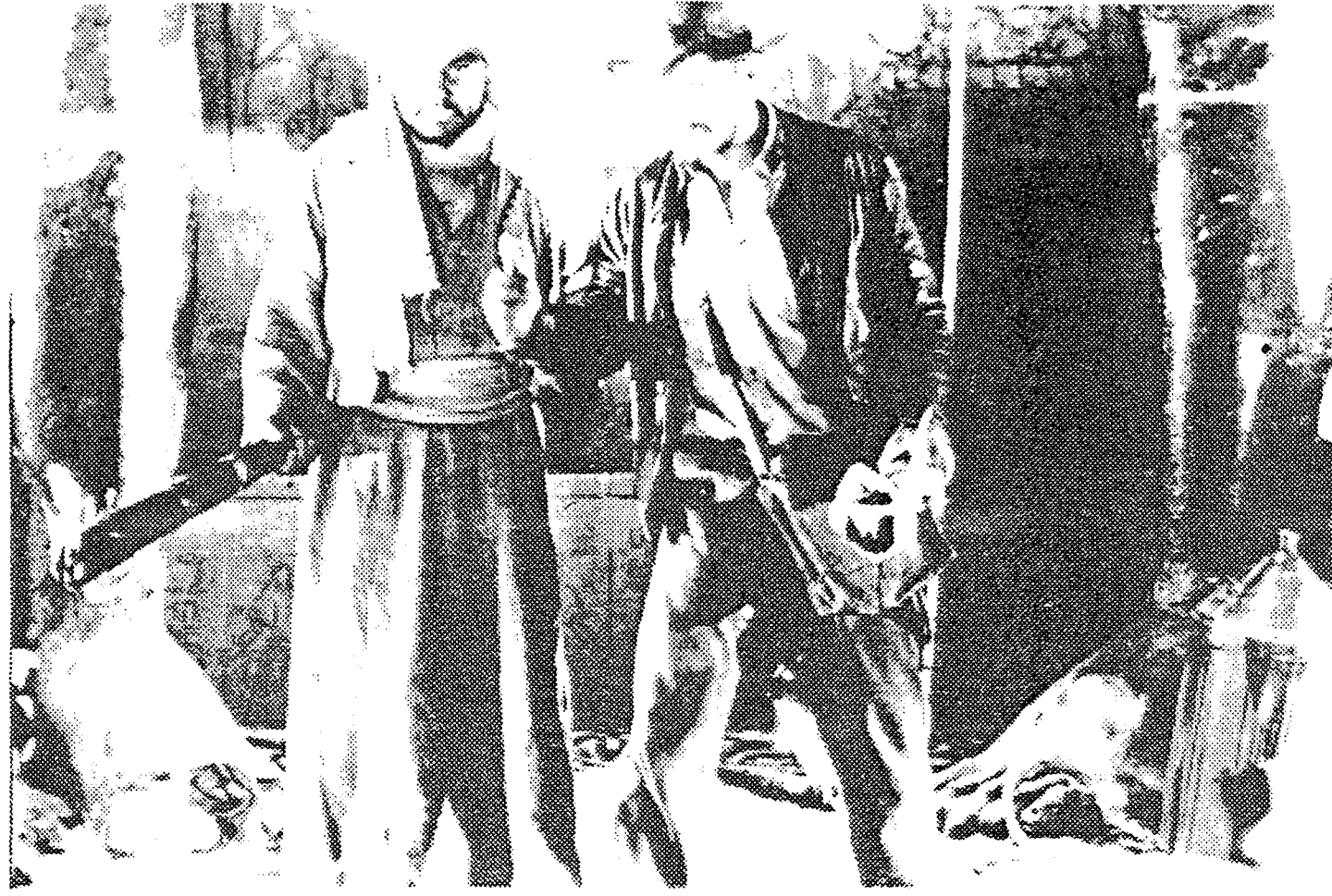


Figure 2

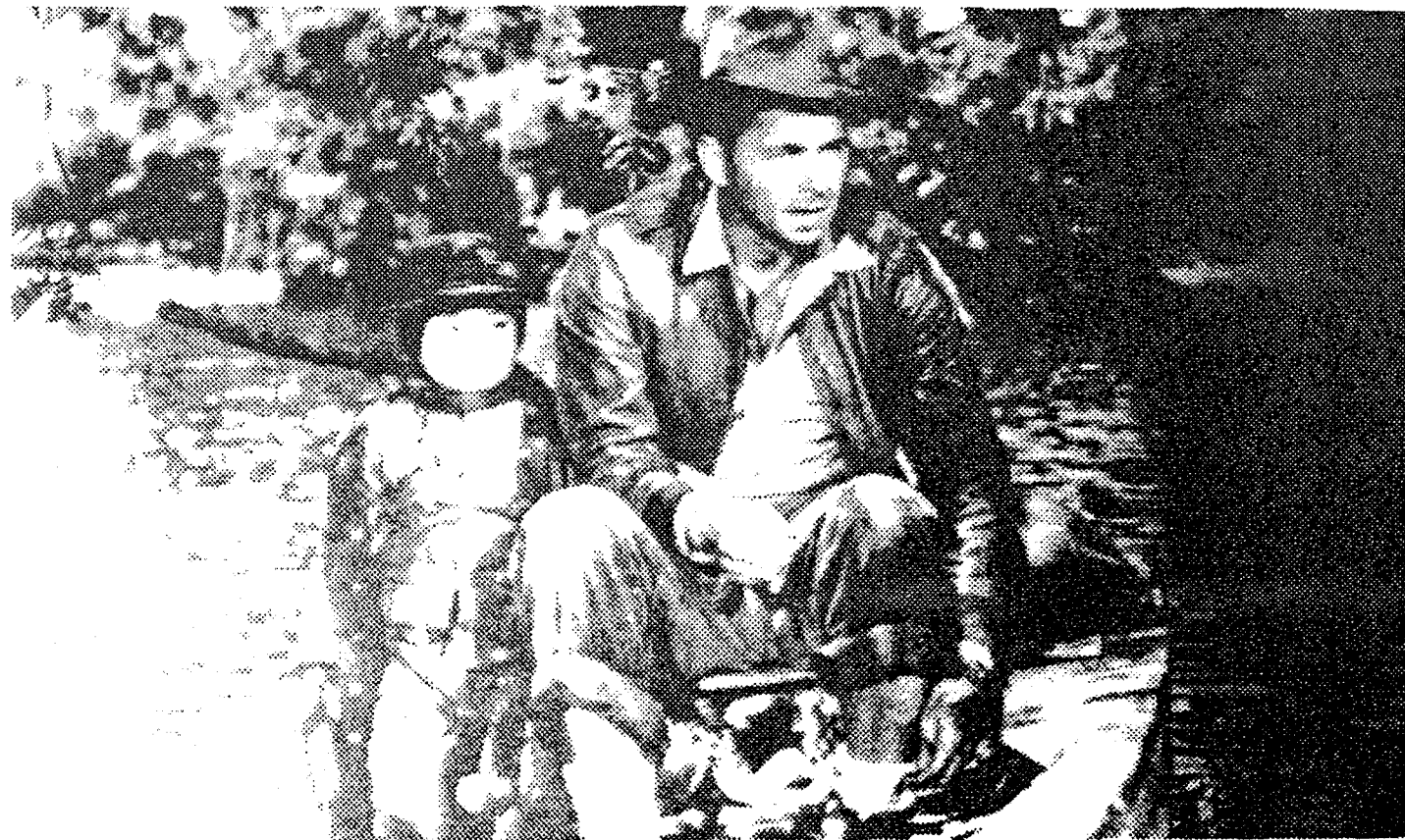


Figure 3

Figures 1-5, © Lucasfilm Ltd. (LFL) 1981.