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Tomb Raider

Abstract

This is a review of *Tomb Raider* (2001).

Lady Lara Croft (Angelina Jolie), *Tomb Raider's* unflappable heroine, amuses herself by fighting elaborate robotic killing machines and soaring balletically from bungee cords in her magnificent family estate. But despite the fun of blasting the daylights out of her adversaries with her "trademark" double semi-automatic pistols, we soon learn that Lara is lonely. She hasn't yet gotten over the death of her beloved father (played by Jolie's real life father, Jon Voight); her sole companions, a nerdy computer programmer and the butler, offer little consolation despite their ability to provide violent entertainment for her. Croft's real adversary, a self-proclaimed "lawyer" named Manfred Powell, we soon learn is really an evilly ambitious leader of the Secret Society of the Illuminati, predictably out to control the world. Powell is after a time clock left to Lara by her father, which springs into action at a planetary alignment that takes place only once every 5,000 years. The clock is actually a key; it unlocks a sequence of events which will reveal the location of a triangular object of immeasurable power that somehow controls time. For the protection of the world, the triangle has been split into two parts. While Croft snags the first piece, Powell possesses the second. Croft can join forces with Powell, succumbing to the proverbial Dark Side, or she can steal the second half and then destroy the object to ensure the survival of the planet.

Like *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, *Tomb Raider* plays with religious esotericism: the predictable trope of the wisdom of the ancient Egyptians is present, but more

visible here is the "wisdom" of ancient Cambodia. Who knew that the 9th century CE ruins of Ankor Wat conceal an ancient booby-trapped temple of doom? Animated stone Buddhas hurling massive swords is hardly an expression of Buddhist non-violence, but like all religious imagery in this movie, they are included for effect rather than substance. Buddhist monks, for instance, are clearly on Lara's side, providing such monkish specialties as satellite phones and sexy saffron robes for Lara to relax in after a long day raiding ancient Cambodian temples for magical relics; they even dispense sage advice along with a magic tea that instantly heals her wounds. *Tomb Raider* provides a wonderful example of Orientalism, in which Buddhism, while a potent icon of cool, becomes entirely devoid of substance. On the other side of the Good vs. Evil equation, the Illuminati employ familiar Masonic-type images such as the triangle with a shining eye in the center, yet we never learn anything more about them other than that they're a secret society out to dominate the world from their deliciously luxurious headquarters in Venice.

Like most cinematic heroines of the past decade, Lara Croft as Savior of the World embodies vague Christ motifs. Here, though, these elements are largely derivative; we can detect shades of other female saviors, most notably Leeloo (Milla Jovovich) from *The Fifth Element* and Trinity (Carrie Ann Moss) from *The Matrix*. Like Trinity, Croft is beautiful and lethal, black-leather clad, and tight-

bodied; but where Trinity is almost androgynous, Croft's astonishingly large breasts manage to distract us even from the most beautiful slow-motion ultra-violence and computer animation. From the first scene, *Tomb Raider* revels in the eroticism of violence. But it's a redemptive violence too; as Croft sets out to meet her adversary, she sports blood in the shape of a cross on her cut-off tee shirt, turning it into both a Crusader's flag and a symbol of the crucifixion; she sheds redemptive blood in final scenes when she saves the life of a fellow (male) tomb raider by turning back time and altering the trajectory of a thrown spear with her bare hands, making blood drip from her palms as a sort of modern stigmata. Finally, she defiantly faces her adversary, who like Satan promises Croft power over the world and the particularly tempting opportunity to manipulate time. Yet here, Croft's preoccupation with her deceased father (paralleled by Jodie Foster in *Contact*) is troubling. The message emerges: what else would a female savior want to find in another dimension and another world but her dead father? Imagine a modern male messiah-figure like Neo in *The Matrix* going into another dimension to find his mommy, only to be admonished for not being able to let go of the past. This troubling trope reduces the potency of the heroine-savior; in the end, Croft is just another little girl who wants her daddy.