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A Note on *Jumanji*

Parents have a different experience of cinema going from the childless or 'child free': instead of the Art-Deco bar of the local art house, the cavernous spaces of the multiplex and a sense of having been magically transported to the United States as kids in baseball caps and clutching giant cartons of popcorn surge around the foyer. The film is likely to be Hollywood as well, and while in my academic teaching life the term 'Hollywood' conjures up dark visions of film noir, critically deconstructed Westerns and Hitchcockian degeneration, on my visits to the Holloway Odeon in North London it means over-the-top technology combined with reassuring comedy. *Jurassic Park* may have been an exception (though one that I thankfully missed), but *The Mask* and *Jumanji* offer high-octane energy, thrills and spills and everything coming out right in the end.

The *Jumanji* formula is familiar enough: there is a threat from without to the American Way of Life. The anti-communist science-fiction movies of the fifties were an earlier version; in films such as *The Thing From Another World* and *Them*, Americans were faced with life-threatening alien forces in the shape of giant ants or Martian vegetables feeding on human blood, physical metaphors that stood for the mental and spiritual threat of left-wing ideology. But although the perceived *real* threat (of communism) was represented by a fictional horror, the threat was still fictionally represented as real, and *The Thing From Another World* closed with the famous line, 'watch the skies'—permanent vigilance was needed to thwart the Reds.[1]

In *Jumanji*, by contrast, reality has disappeared. To understand this regressive move from fictional reality to fictional fiction, it is necessary to rehearse the plot—itself surprisingly complex and sophisticated for a movie aimed primarily at children. The story begins in 1969. A little boy, the son of a successful shoe manufacturer, is being bullied at school. His dad cannot communicate with him and does not understand his situation. Although they live in a wonderful New England colonial house, the child is unhappy. He unearths a mysterious board game, Jumanji, and he and his girlfriend—who seems strangely to be rather old for this relationship—begin to play. With every throw the game brings a new terror from the jungle—giant ants, a roaming tiger and monster creepers

[1] Peter Biskind, *Seeing is Believing: How Hollywood Taught Us to Stop Worrying and Love the Fifties*, London 1983, ch. 3.

which throttle everything in sight—and soon it has whisked the boy himself off into what is presumably the jungle. He simply disappears.

The story moves forward to the 1990s. Now idyllic small-town America presents a sorry picture. The shoe factory has closed down; after the disappearance of his son, the industrialist put all his energy and money into finding him, and, having failed, died more or less of a broken heart. There are homeless men on the street, huddled round fires lit in oil cans. There are graffiti, there is poverty and despair.

At this juncture, two new child protagonists appear. Orphans, whose parents have been killed in a car crash, they are being cared for by an oh-so-chic but brittle career-woman aunt. All three arrive at the former home of the shoe manufacturer and his family, and move into the run-down but still habitable mansion. The aunt is too busy to look after her charges properly, so, to amuse themselves, they explore the house. Lo and behold, in the attic they come upon the board game: Jumanji is about to wreak havoc again. Soon not just the house but the whole town has been set in uproar as herds of elephants and rhinos stampede through the streets, causing riots and looting, while a mischievous hoard of monkeys wreaks havoc on a smaller scale. The mansion is being destroyed by killer creepers and there is a tiger in the main bedroom.

But playing the game has also brought back the original little boy, now a thirty-something with a beard and staring eyes. Clad in what look like combat fatigues—a subliminal reference here to Vietnam vets?—he has survived all these years in the jungle red in tooth and claw. Soon they have tracked down his former girlfriend, still living in the town, and the four of them desperately dice against Jumanji in an effort to finish the game and thus end its reign of terror.

The story avoids any obvious racism in that the only human summoned up from the jungle by the game is not a black 'savage' but a white Edwardian trigger-happy game hunter, and the only black character in the story is a benevolent cop. On the other hand, the whole representation of the 'jungle' could not be more reminiscent of 'darkest Africa', and the contrast between the plagues of insects, creepers and dangerous animals and the leafy autumn suburbs of New England is stark.

The quartet of two adults and two children do manage to finish the game, but—it has all been a dream after all. We are back in 1969, all's right with the world (no mention of Vietnam now) and father and son are reconciled.

The End of the Dream

Unexpectedly, that is not the end of the film. We move forward to the present once more. But this is a different present from the grimly realistic deindustrialization we glimpsed earlier. The shoe factory is flourishing, now headed by the son, with his father and mother, alive and well, gazing on benignly. They are hosting a wonderful Christmas party with happy workers, champagne, Christmas tree and all the traditional trappings. In the middle of it all a new employee arrives with his family: the

children are the boy and girl we previously saw orphaned and in charge of the glamorous aunt, icon of eighties 'feminist' success (that is, unmarried). 'We're thinking of taking off on our own for a week's motoring vacation,' say the parents. 'No! No! don't do it', gasps their employer to be, 'we need you right away.' And thus the parents do not die in a car crash, the children do not become orphans and instead we have the double vision of intact, happy nuclear families in the nineties. The little boy of 1969 has married his childhood sweetheart and has children of his own, while the orphans are not orphans after all.

The film is exciting, well made, has brilliant special effects and is never *too* frightening. Carried along by its rampaging energy, the audience cheers and laughs at the mayhem, knowing that a story this infectious can never have a tragic ending. But the undeniable enjoyment could easily obscure some rather alarming features of the plot-line. At first glance, the story does have similarities both to the sci-fi movies of the fifties and to, say, the *Hellraiser* series. It is also not too hard critically to reinterpret the film just as we might reinterpret older examples of genre films such as noir or sci-fi. In the case of *Jumanji*, jungle predators can stand for the threat of the global economy—a real threat from without to the American economy and thus to the way of life within. The subliminal references to the Vietnam War are also potentially relevant. It is true that beneath the manic energy lurks the danger of homicidal Nature unleashed, and we could read the film as metaphor in a variety of ways: the threat of AIDS, the poison of racism are all vaguely alluded to, albeit displaced onto monkeys (isn't there a rumour that it was monkeys who gave us AIDS?) and creepers, and even if the only mad dog is an Englishman in a pith helmet, he is nevertheless a madman on the loose with a gun.

What is different is that in this film the whole story is a dream, and the film itself the crudest possible piece of wish fulfilment. The 'story' of *Jumanji* tells Americans that all the bad things they thought had happened in their country have not really happened after all. The family has not disintegrated; deindustrialization has not occurred; the cities are not dangerous wastelands; there are no street people; there are no too-chic career women; there is no racism; and no Vietnam. Even the real dangers of the global economy dissipate on waking. It may seem throughout the film that the protagonists are imperilled by primitive black magic and the savage jungle, but—and this is the point—none of it actually happened. This is total denial.

The difference between *Jumanji* and even the recent *The Mask* is simply its step back into a new level of fantasy. We do not need to 'watch the skies' after all. Life is reduced to a board game. In *The Thing From Another World* personnel at the Arctic base were actually killed by the Thing; there was no bringing them back to life at the end of the movie. We might now despise or laugh at the anti-communist paranoia, but it was a serious fear seriously—even if also ludicrously—presented. By contrast, the astonishment of *Jumanji* rests in its miraculous combination of

ultra-sophistication and total infantilism: there is no reality principle at all, only pleasurable wish fulfilment. In *The Mask*, the hero, who has triumphed through the magical agency of the mask he found, chooses in the end to renounce its help and return to reality; in *Jumanji* no such option is available.

Postmodern cultural studies notwithstanding, we still tend to perceive entertainment as 'just entertainment', and none of the many reviews of *Jumanji* that I read went beyond an appreciation of its technological feats. But surely I cannot be alone in feeling that, as a message from the foremost manufacturers of ideology, the idea that the contemporary world situation is on a par with a game of snakes and ladders, and moreover just a bad dream, is alarming. Indeed, the Victorian snakes-and-ladders board I had as a child was full of moral seriousness—pictures of childish bad behaviour followed by punishment as well as good behaviour rewarded. *Jumanji* has no truck with any of that. Life is just a bowl of sweeties, at the very most a rough and tumble sport in which neither defeat nor victory has consequences. Reality is only fantasy—as postmodernists often suggest—and life, after all, is only a simulation or a dream.