From Tarzan to Avatar: the problem with 'the white man in the jungle'

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Steve Rose July 6, 2016

The wild man in the loin cloth is returning to our screens, along with new takes on King Kong and The Jungle Book. But films set in the rainforest still struggle to shake off racist tropes

Samuel L Jackson and Alexander Skarsgård in The Legend of Tarzan. Photograph: Allstar/Warner Bros

“The jungle consumes everything,” says a character in The Legend of Tarzan. “It preys on the old, the sick, the wounded. It preys on the weak – but never the strong.” And now, thanks to modern film-making technology, you can consume the jungle back, without having to get your hands dirty, or bitten off.

The Legend of Tarzan is the second time in a matter of months that Hollywood has taken us back to the jungle, after Disney’s reworking of The Jungle Book. One suspects this has less to do with a newfound interest in the tropics and everything to do with the awesome possibilities of special effects. Those fraught, dangerous location shoots with hours of laborious animal-wrangling are no longer necessary – you can do it all on a computer! And

there's more to come: Andy Serkis is developing his own "darker" motion-capture version of The Jungle Book. Before that, we've got a Tom Hiddleston-led Kong: Skull Island, which promises to take us deep into the giant ape's "treacherous, primordial" domain.

The problem with jungle films is that creaky old colonial myths literally come with the territory. Fuelled by the tales of explorers and adventure novelists, the jungle was the equivalent of outer space to the popular imagination of the late 19th and early 20th century. It was so exotic and alien, we had to borrow a foreign word to even describe it. The jungle was danger and excitement, it was disorderly and unfathomable. We still use the word in that sense, to describe the Calais migrants' camp, for example, or high-tempo 90s breakbeat music. The jungle was everything "civilisation" wasn't, though the people who actually lived there probably didn't see it that way.

That's not the ideal message for a modern global blockbuster so, along with the special effects, these stories have needed updating. Especially Tarzan – the creakiest old colonial myth of all. He's essentially a white-supremacist superhero. The implicit message is: "Put a white man in the jungle and he will rise to the top." In Edgar Rice Burroughs's racist-stereotype-filled fiction, Tarzan is not just king of the beasts, his superior Anglo-Saxon genes make him smarter, stronger and nobler than any native African he encounters. It's a narrative that plays out again and again in "white man in the jungle" stories, from Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness to Sam Worthington in Avatar.

To its credit, The Legend of Tarzan confronts its colonial legacy head-on. It is set in 1880s Congo, under the exploitative regime of Belgium's King Leopold II. Luckily, our decent, gentrified Lord Greystoke (played by Alexander Skarsgård) returns to free the enslaved nation from those nasty Belgians, aided by his tribal African buddies (who look up to him as their leader, of course) and a menagerie of CGI gorillas, lions, wildebeest and crocodiles.

Djimon Hounsou as Chief Mbonga in The Legend of Tarzan. Photograph: Allstar/Warner Bros

Never mind that Britain's own white-supremacist hero Cecil Rhodes was slicing off a huge flank of Africa for the empire around this time, or that the groundwork for the real-life Belgian Congo was laid by our very own Henry Morton Stanley. This rewriting of history takes some swallowing and the special effects don't help. No real animals seem to have been harmed – or even consulted – during the making of this movie. Despite being digital, Tarzan's simian buddies still manage to look like people in gorilla suits.

Jungle films have never really toed the ideological line of these colonial creation myths, however. They've always been more interested in getting bums on seats – and on screens, if possible. When pondering Tarzan's enduring screen popularity, the potential for depicting male beefcake cannot be discounted. Acting skills are a bonus for the role; a great physique is non-negotiable. As a result of such casting limitations, Tarzan was transformed from the cultivated leader of Burroughs's writings to a Neanderthal hunk, unburdened by reams of dialogue, challenging facial expressions or cumbersome garments.

Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan in Tarzan and His Mate (1934). Photograph: Allstar/MGM

Jungle movies are as much about westerners throwing off the trappings of their civilisation as putting them on to others. The Legend of Tarzan is tame. In 1934's Tarzan and His Mate, there's a scene where Johnny Weissmuller rips off Maureen O'Sullivan's skimpy dress and they have an extended skinny dip, captured in a rather lovely underwater sequence (which was snipped out by the censors before release). Jane wears next to nothing throughout the movie, she even sleeps naked with Tarzan. Like Mowgli and Baloo, they live a carefree Edenic existence: no work, no clothes, they're not even married. Forget about your worries and your strife. Not for nothing were Tarzan and Jane eventually saddled with "Boy" to create the semblance of a respectable family.

Tarzan's animal sex appeal has rarely been done justice since, but it's always been there. Bo Derek and Miles O'Keeffe took it into softcore realms in the absurd 1980s Tarzan And Jane, Hugh Hudson's Greystoke politely cuts away when Christopher Lambert starts making ape noises in Andie MacDowell's boudoir. Even Disney's cartoon Tarzan curiously lifts up Jane's petticoats when he first encounters her. Rumours were widely circulated that The Legend of Tarzan was to feature a raunchy animalistic sex scene, and that Margot Robbie actually punched and bruised Alexander Skarsgård filming it. If anything really happened, it has been consigned to the cutting-room floor. All we get is a few "mating calls" and a chaste, perfume-ad snog – then cut to the morning after.

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> The jungle was still messing with white men's minds as they set about making films about how it messed with their minds

Those primitive urges the jungle unleashes often manifest themselves not as a carefree return to nature but as scenery-chewing madness. Even in colonial times, there were those who recognised how the jungle said more about "us" than "them". Not least Heart of Darkness, in which a journey to the interior of "the dark continent" also hones in on the savagery of rogue colonial commander Kurtz and the evil inside all men. (Conrad's real-life inspiration for Kurtz, by the way, was a Belgian commissioner named Léon Rom – who's also the moustache-twirling baddie of Legend of Tarzan, played by Christoph Waltz).

Christoph Waltz as Captain Rom in The Legend of Tarzan (2016). Photograph: Allstar/WARNER BROS.

Orson Welles's debut feature was to be an adaptation of Heart of Darkness. Welles had written a script (which made allusions to Hitler). He planned to shoot and narrate it from the point of view of Marlow – the river boat captain in search of Kurtz. He'd play both Marlow and Kurtz. "I think I'm made for Conrad," he once said. But the studio got cold feet about the budget – and a planned interracial romance element – and pulled the plug. We got Citizen Kane out of it so we can't complain.

The jungle was still messing with white men's minds in the 1970s and 80s, even as they set out to make films highlighting how the jungle messed with white men's minds. Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now was more successful in transposing Conrad on to the big screen,

and on to the Vietnam war, but not without a struggle. Coppola gave us one of greatest war movies ever and one the greatest “making of” documentaries ever: Hearts Of Darkness, which details Coppola’s parallel descent into Kurtz-like megalomania off screen, brought on by logistical nightmares, tropical weather, his wayward cast and his own delusions of grandeur. “There were too many of us, we had access to too much equipment, too much money, and little by little we went insane,” says Coppola. So much for Kipling’s “law of the jungle”.

Sam Bottoms in Apocalypse Now (1979). Photograph: Allstar/MIRAMAX/Sportsphoto Ltd./Allstar

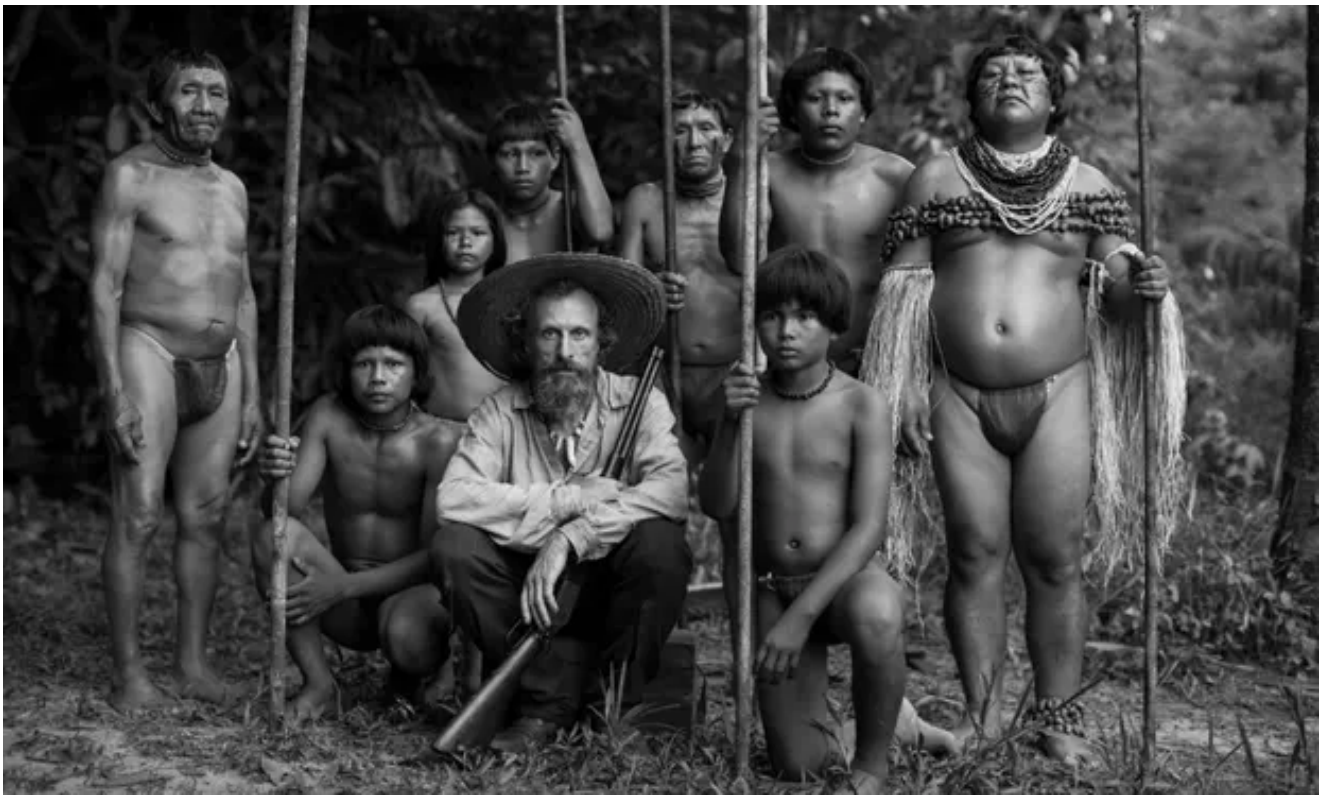
Werner Herzog might have been able to warn Coppola off a jungle shoot, having undergone similar experiences making Aguirre, Wrath of God and later Fitzcarraldo –in both of which difficult locations, difficult personalities (chiefly leading man Klaus Kinski) and Herzog’s masochistic obsession with virtually unfilmable stories all lead to a collective madness.

Samuel L Jackson: ‘I was a drug addict but I showed up on time and hit my marks’

But, demented as they are, Herzog’s jungle films were a bracing affront to the imperialist nonsense that had gone before. The revisionism continued through the 1980s. Roland Joffe’s The Mission told another tale of European “civilisation” bringing more harm than good to godless Amazonians, albeit in a more restrained fashion. The Mosquito Coast gave us a modern-day attempt, with obsessive inventor Harrison Ford rejecting American consumer society to establish his own jungle utopia. He’s a white guy in a jungle -- what could go wrong? And even the Italian cannibal movies of the era, racist and gory though they often

were, regularly pointed the finger back at the savagery of the white man.

What's missing from all these movies is the point of view of the people who actually live in the jungle – or rainforest, to use a less loaded word. Too often they are treated as exotic set-dressing, given nothing to do but stare threateningly at their European interlopers, do their manual labour for them and die by their weaponry – and if they get a single line of dialogue they're lucky. The Legend of Tarzan does little to rectify this.



Embrace of the Serpent, directed by Ciro Guerra.

Thankfully, world cinema is starting to offer alternatives. In the films of Thailand's Apichatpong Weerasethakul, jungles are strange and mysterious, but serenely captivating and generally benign. They're steeped in both Buddhist folklore and modern history, and could be populated by strange spirits, reincarnated royals, or perhaps simply rural nurses on their lunch break.

> Embrace of the Serpent views the 'white man in the jungle' experience from the point of view of an indigenous shaman

The recent, Colombian-made Embrace of the Serpent, meanwhile, viewed the whole "white man in the jungle" experience from the point of view of an indigenous shaman Karamakate, who guides two different explorers up the Amazon, 30 years apart. The film is like a reverse Heart of Darkness. Karamakate observes his guests' materialism, their duplicity, their destructiveness and, of course, their madness, as he travels through a landscape ravaged by their interventions – not least an upriver Christian mission that's devolved into a messianic cult with a Kurtz-like leader.

Karamakate has his own concerns – his lost tribal identity and the lack of successors on to whom he can pass his traditional knowledge. Embrace of the Serpent incorporates Amazonian storytelling and symbolism to hallucinogenic effect, but it's not just another

jungle head-trip, it's also a defence of a culture on the verge of extinction. Its indigenous hero already knows what generations of intrepid western explorers and film-makers failed to grasp: it's not the jungle that's alien and threatening and "other"; it's them.

> This article was corrected on 6 July 2016. It originally named the director of The Mission as Hugh Hudson, rather than Roland Joffe.