RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK (1981)

A homage to rather than a spoof of the Saturday matinee serials of the 1930s, Raiders of the Lost Ark brought producer George Lucas (hot from Star Wars) together with director Steven Spielberg, for a movie combining excitement, special effects, and adventure, all played with a wry sense of humor. Harrison Ford, in the role that suited him best in all his career, stars as Indiana Jones, a tweed-wearing professor of archaeology by day, who spends the rest of his time scouring the globe for treasures and artifacts—like the Lost Ark of the Covenant (the gold chest in which Moses supposedly stored the stone tablets inscribed with the Ten Commandments). Unfortunately, the Nazis are after it too, having heard that any army who carries the ark before it is indestructible.

With his trademark fedora, bullwhip, and rumpled clothes, Indy outruns a speeding boulder in a booby-trapped cavern, escapes from a pit of snakes, dodges sinister bandits in an African market, and hangs underneath a moving truck in a nail-biting chase through the desert. These are only some of the movie’s impressive set pieces. Our dashing hero is no Superman, though, getting beaten and bashed up at every turn. Raiders works on many levels, not only thanks to Ford’s superb performance and Spielberg’s skill at piling on the action and excitement, but also because Lawrence Kasdan (working from an outline by Lucas) delivers a script that is more than just an old-fashioned adventure. His hero is a complicated, less-than-perfect guy who walks the fine line between being a thief of priceless artifacts and protector of them. The villains—especially Indy’s archaeological rival, Belloq (Paul Freeman)—aren’t really that much different from the hero, except in their motivation (greed as opposed to historic preservation). The heroine, Marion (Karen Allen) isn’t your archetypal girl-in-distress either, but doesn’t need the hero at all. Raiders is a perfect package of adventure, humor, effects, escapism, and terrific performances that has been imitated (but never equaled) in films like The Mummy (1999). It was followed by two sequels in the 80’s, and, after a terrific performances that has been imitated (but never equaled) in films like The Mummy (1999).

THE BOAT (1981)

Director Wolfgang Petersen’s 1981 World War II drama Das Boot was nominated for six Academy Awards, a “mission impossible” for any foreign film. Capturing in authentic claustrophobic detail the sights and, most notably, the sounds of underwater warfare, the film sidelines issues of nationalism to focus on the dangerous task of manning a submarine in war-torn waters.

Following a single mission to hunt down Allied ships in the North Atlantic, the action takes place mostly in the filthy, mold-ridden stench of the cramped U-66 submarine. In charge is Captain-Lieutenant Henrich Lehmann-Willenbrock, a veteran submariner at the age of 30. Blue-eyed leading man Jürgen Prochnow, until then unknown outside Germany, tempers the captain’s expected ironclad professionalism with subtle, believable humanity. Although he acts as he must—letting enemy sailors drown rather than picking up prisoners, barking for clear reports even as his vessel sinks far below its depth capacity as the cabin rivets pop like gunfire—he is not without heart. The emotional truth of the terrible events lies between the lines of his daily diary entries. Prochnow, later embraced by Hollywood with appearances in The English Patient, and others, so embodies the captain that it is unimaginable to think that both Robert Redford and Paul Newman were slated for this vital role when the film was a German-American concern. Within the superb supporting cast, Herbert Grönemeyer, now a well-known German rock musician, plays Lieutenant Werner, a character drawn from Lothar-Gunter Buchheim, the war correspondent upon whose best-selling 1973 memoirs the script for Das Boot was based. Much of the nerve-shattering realism of Das Boot is due to the three scale-model U-boats built for the production. Taking up a large portion of the film’s $14 million budget, they were later used in Raiders of the Lost Ark. As much a sonic as a visual experience, the entire film was shot silent; it was impossible to record live in the submarine interiors. The subtitled version is considered definitive, with all German and English dialogue added later—many of the German actors dubbing their own voices for the spoken English version.