

Joshua T Bozeman

### **The Three Musketeers, in the Desert with Guns:**

#### ***Examining Three Kings as a Direct Adaptation of Gunga Din***

Though the 1999 David O. Russell film, *Three Kings* might not fit the precise definition of “adaptation” given by some scholars in the field of adaptation study, it acts, at minimum, as an adaptive appropriation of the 1939 film, *Gunga Din*. The film stands alone as a solid example of nineteen nineties war cinema, but it is planted firmly not only in the tradition of the earlier *Gunga Din*. The story, characters, and thematic elements so closely parallel the movie that there’s no way to get around the fact that it is, within at least the narrowest confines of the definition, an adaptation, and because of the age that *Three Kings* originates from, one could easily argue that, despite the rules of hierarchy outlined by Robert Stam (Hutcheon 4), the cinematic version takes on a superiority over the original (no doubt, currently seen as “dated”) version and the poem that precedes the original film. There is no such “iconophobia” to be found here. *Three Kings* acts as a conduit for much of the criticism of the original Iraq war, including whether or not the United States truly finished its moral responsibilities in that nation, and it does so by using the earlier film as its foundation.

In *Gunga Din*, the story follows a rebellious group of three soldiers in British-controlled India, fighting off a large group of “the others” in the form of native Indians, specifically the tribe of the Thugees, in order to find a treasure of gold, only to realize that some of “the others,” seen often as uncivilized and ignorant are, in fact, some of the smartest characters in the entire film. The film teaches us a lesson about the dangers of prejudice, and the British military is portrayed in a critical eye—not everything is black and white, but things often exist in shades of

gray. So too is the plot of *Three Kings*, where we follow the titular kings, three US military men in Iraq, post-Gulf War, as they try to find a treasure of gold. They run into “the others” in the form of Iraqi rebels, at first picturing them as “sand niggers” and “dune coons,” but eventually realizing that they are some of the smartest people they come into contact with. While Gates, Barlow, and Chief (the three kings played by Clooney, Wahlberg, and Ice Cube respectively) believe the Iraqis to be somewhat of a lesser people in the beginning of the film, their prejudices are soon put to rest. At one point, the leader of the group of Iraqi rebels explains that he went to business school in Bowling Green so he could open up a bunch of cafes that ended up being blown up by the Americans. That one instance of middle class slice of life immediately tells our characters that we are not all that different, and that often what we are fighting for, the values we hold dear, are one and the same. It also acts as a vehicle to critically examine the American government and its military. Things are often so confused, even the characters have trouble knowing what’s going on. “Are we shooting people or what?” asks Mark Wahlberg’s character in the very first line of the movie. This sentiment of confusion and chaos is prevalent throughout both films.

The two films take a critical stance on the sort of hegemony often put into place by world super powers, and both deal with common themes such as friendship, male masculinity, and the bonds of marriage. Wahlberg’s Barlow is basically MacChesney with fewer doubts about his marriage. Clooney fits snugly into the role patterned after Ballantine, and Ice Cube is a sort of composite of all three men. He’s religious and that belief- system brings him wisdom and peace, but he’s also a leader who never second guesses the group’s next move. The underlying friendships stay true to their roots, and the sense that there is no need for women is prevalent, despite the early scenes of Clooney bedding a young female reporter and a somewhat tertiary

subplot involving a second female reporter. Spike Jonze rounds at the *Kings* crew as a figure very much like the naïve, yet willing warrior, Din.

All of these various elements bring about only one conclusion—adaptation in action. Stam argues that often we consider a work an adaptation in that a work acts in “transmutation, metamorphosis...cannibalization...reinvisioning”(13). The switch from one medium to another often means a loss of much of the source hypertext, but also the constitution of various elements within the same medium, no doubt, lead us to the same conclusion (Stam and Raengo 25). After all, *Gunga Din*, as a film, is considered a solid adaptation of the poem by the same name, but few elements exist between the two outside of a weak bond of associations, most notably the name of the character of Din. In fact, the film works, in nearly every way it can not only to subvert the loose story of the poem, but it works also to break down the very core of the poem’s subtext and broader contextual undertones. Jerod Hollyfield notes this very phenomenon at work with this particular adaptation:

[the] film’s loose resemblance to its source material demonstrates a distinct break in the American valorization of British culture. *Gunga Din* completely dismantles Kipling’s poem, recreating it as an example of a distinctly American form: the seamless studio system product that led to Hollywood’s international dominance in cultural production. (22)

One must remember that the United States was only starting out as a world superpower around this time. Hollywood dominated the world’s movie culture soon after this, and part of the reason was that the British industry faced a partial shutdown during WWII. After its role in WWI, the U.S. became a superpower in an infant stage, but after its role in WWII, the country became a full-fledged, grown up superpower, much more comfortable with its status as such

(Weissenbacher 538). The production of *Gunga Din* was in this stage of infancy, which makes the cultural dominance over Great Britain that much more interesting. Hollyfield talks about the notion of a post-colonial force writing back to the imperial center much in the way American filmmakers took over a British work like *Gunga Din*: “Only in Hollywood’s imperial adventure epics could the industry pit its distinct modes of storytelling against the traditions of its former colonizer” (Hollyfield 26).

*Gunga Din*’s very essence is departure from the source material, and yet it is still considered a masterful adaptation of the original source text. In Kipling’s original poem, the narrator, an unnamed British soldier, tells his audience that Din would eventually see him in hell, presumably for his sins as an imperial colonizer, but the film version minimizes such dark overtones to replace it with a comical undertone of only slightly mocking imperialism. The film, though true to the theme of the source text, differs in a number of ways. For this reason alone, we should see *Three Kings* as an adaptation of the earlier *Gunga Din*. *Din* was shot with only minimal regard to the poem it’s based on, yet the aura of the original remains. The thematic elements ring true. The adaptation has something to say about imperialism right before the start of the world’s most terrible war, where “the others” come in the form of Nazi’s and their allies. A political statement is being made about the nature of occupying foreign lands in pursuit of empire. The same could easily be said of *Three Kings*. David O. Russell’s main concern probably wasn’t anti-imperialism. If that had been the impetus, it would have never been made. Though Hollywood often has a message, it is primarily as business. No one can deny that the film portrays nation-building in a negative light. In fact, David O. Russell reportedly wanted to release a fifth anniversary edition of the film accompanied by a documentary that would take a critical view of the, then current, war in Iraq. Warner Bros, the film’s U.S. distributor feared the

release would violate campaign finance laws so close to the 2004 election (Bernard). Russell clearly figured his movie made a sociopolitical statement. Both adaptations seek to make a statement about the world at the time they were created. Embracing the themes of one source to do something meaningful is the very reason we adapt at all.

In arguing the purpose and pleasure of adaptations, Linda Hutcheon notes that change is part of the essence of the experience:

Part of this pleasure, I want to argue, comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with piquancy of surprise. Recognition and remembrance are part of the pleasure (and risk) of experiencing adaptation, so too is change. Thematic and narrative persistence combines with material variation, with the result that adaptations are never simply reproductions that lose the Benjaminian aura. Rather, they carry that aura with them (Hutcheon 4).

*Three Kings* carries with it the aura of the original *Gunga Din*, as well as other war movies and buddy comedies, and there are significant structural changes in both the story and the characters, but the aura remains intact, both in the basic narrative points and the overall theme. If change is part of the pleasure of the adaptive process, than *Three Kings* is surely a delight. It takes elements of the earlier work, implants the narrative in the present day, adds in a bit of the current sociopolitical climate, and has something important to say about all of it. Perhaps the public is far too willing to follow behind a government's proclamations of a nation being "the enemy" and then going to war with it. Both films have basically the same message in the end, and subverting culture in some small way is part of that message. *Gunga Din* is an act of American filmmakers taking a truly British text and saying, "look at what we can do with your canonical texts." It was Hollywood's way of showing dominance, an act of hegemony in the

cultural world, which is ironic as the film itself deals heavily with these themes. *Three Kings* is a not-so-veiled attack on those who thought that the U.S. could go into Iraq in 1991 in order to protect the flow of oil while ignoring, in large part, the plight of the people there. Russell shot the film nearly a full decade after the events in the film took place, and that is significant. Certain cultural skirmishes and certain angers over past grievances do not soon die. Whether discussing the British rule of India or the American invasion of Iraq, there is always, in some part, a sense of distrust over the government and its military actions. Why not better protect the rights of the native Indians during British occupations, and why not do a better job of supporting and bolstering the uprising in Northern Iraq, mainly with the oppressed Kurds—these are two questions one naturally asks after watching *Three Kings*. Governments of democratic, peace-loving people often act in ways that we cannot fully support or even fully explain.

If one delves deeper into the topics at hand here, we get some fairly deep subtext as well as a great deal of context of the history of the two time periods. Both movies might seem like well written and competently shot action flicks and little else, but under the surface, and in a few instances right out in the open, there are important sentiments to be found throughout. For example, one must ask himself what purpose the original adaptation of the poem served at all. Well, the poem is inherently British, but one could say it also belongs properly to the canon of India as well. Rudyard Kipling, though a British national, was born in, and spent his first few years as a child in India. His stories often came back to India, and that's significant. One could almost say that Kipling was, in one way, an Indian writer who should fit nicely in the canon of Indian literature. So, it is surprising that the film version of *Din* wasn't shot by a British production company with an all British crew, but was rather a product of Hollywood and the entrenched studio system that allowed the United States to dominate culturally for decades. The

writer was an American, the director an American, the production locations were all near Hollywood; this was as Hollywood a film as one can find, and taking a work from the British canon and subverting it to the point it's transformed into a screwball comedy was an act of cultural imperialism.

Despite its pedigree as screwball comedy for the masses, *Gunga Din* served another purpose. It worked ultimately as a classic example of empire cinema, and the inherent nature of this Hollywood-created film was that it was a cultural break between Great Britain and the United States. Empire cinema's very purpose is to subvert. It looks critically at the nature of colony and colonizer, and this was the moment when the United States finally started to overtake its former colonizer, not only militarily and economically but also culturally with the rise of the Hollywood studio system. This was pre-war Hollywood, and many of the film's conventions were progressive in a lot of ways. The Indian rulers are seen, for the most part, as benevolent men who care for the well being of the people, which was a rarity in Hollywood films up to this point. Hollywood often portrayed Indians as backward savages. One could say that the final scene depicting the posthumous promotion of Din from water boy to British soldier was a hint at anti-imperialism itself. It also served to humanize "the others" here, making sure to equate perhaps not the values of "the others" with Americans and the British, but at least showing that both groups of people believed their values to be worthy of protection. Jaher and Kling discuss the progressive nature of *Gunga Din*'s view of the Indian people:

Despite its empire film roots, it uniquely foreshadowed the more nuanced view of imperialism and racism that would take hold after the war. The Thug leader may be evil, but he equals British soldiers in courage and dedication to his country, as

shown in his impassioned speech before hurling himself in a viper pit to prevent capture. (38)

The basic nature of the two films matches so closely that there's no way not to see one as an adaptation of the other. Julie Sanders, in her text on adaptation, notes that appropriation is not technically adaptation, but from her own definition, we see that *Three Kings* is so closely tied to the nature of *Gunga Din* that it fits her own sense of what defines adaptation. She informs us that "citation is different than adaptation, which constitutes a more sustained engagement with a single text or source than the more glancing act of allusion or quotation, even citation allows" (4).

There is an abundance of anti-hegemonic feeling running through both of these films. The plots consistently oppose the Machiavellian idea that "might makes right." Tracing back to the theory that physical power, in some way, gives a right to rule over another person or a group of people, *Gunga Din* disposes of this notion by giving our characters emotional depth. When our three heroes defeat the admittedly exaggerated Thugees, in praise of Din, the general explains that, though he's not an actual member of the British military, "if ever a man deserve the rank of soldier, it is he." In the span of two hours, which is where the unique nature of the cinema comes into play, the three soldiers went from disparaging Din and his fellow Indians as backward and uncivilized, to praising him as one of their own. In *Three Kings* we oppose the notion of might makes right through the same type of progression. In the film's opening, we see the US military men casually calling every Iraqi a "towel head," despite knowing next to nothing about them or their culture. By film's end, however, they are standing shoulder to shoulder with the Iraqis, now realizing them as their equals, understanding that what the Iraqis want in life is



basically the same as what any American wants—safety for his family, freedom, and the ability to do business and live life as he so chooses.

One cannot view either of the two films without discussing the notion of naming conventions. While in *Three Kings* our heroes toss about racist terms while dancing in listening to rap music, in *Gunga Din*, we have a low key attitude of racism and denigration. In fact, the British army often saw the Indian people as animals. In his text on colonial India and cinema, Prem Chowdhry reminds us of this vision of the Indian people:

In this loyalty, he [Din] was equated with the unquestioning, dumb, animal-like quality portrayed in the film by a female elephant called Annie. Indeed, *Gunga Din*—the bhishti, ‘appropriately pronounced as beastie,’ as a US critic was to point out—was closely identified with this animal. Such metaphors were used frequently by British officers to describe Indians in the army (169).

In *Three Kings*, things are even more graphic with the opening of the film containing several instances of racist language. Some critics argue that the racism is even more heightened by the fact that Clooney’s character acts as a white messiah figure who saves what are portrayed as often helpless and hapless people of color (Bonilla-Silva and Doane 124). The portrayal of such stereotypes as racist American soldiers and Iraqis needing to be saved actually works to disprove both notions. The American soldiers were, like much of the American public at the time, unaware of the situation on the ground, the lives of the Iraqi people, and the cultural relics they would come into contact with. Very much like the three men in *Gunga Din*, a change occurs in all of them. No longer is the gold the most important thing to them, but rather friendship as well as simple decency, to each other and “the others” whom they originally saw as incompatible with their way of life. “The others,” as they were seen at first, are no longer viewed that way. In both

films, there is a progression in that we see the others as ourselves. That is the overriding theme in both movies, and it is the one that ties them together more closely than any other.

*Gunga Din* may have been progressive in its themes of anti-imperialism and the attempt at showing “the others” as more like ourselves, but racial problems still lingered in this production. For one, the character of Din was played by a Jewish actor caked in brown makeup, and his mannerisms are consistently silly. He is portrayed as heroic, but he is also seen as far less intelligent than our protagonists and without much culture to bolster him. The British soldiers in the film do have the same progressive mindset as the filmmakers themselves though as their feelings toward Din evolve, even as Din’s own view of himself as an Indian lower than the British stays intact. “As Din evolves, especially in Cutter's view, from servant to soldier, Cutter evolves from affable condescension to absolute admiration, esteeming a bhisti in defiance of every hierarchy. Din, still acting from native servitude, responds, ‘Thank you. Sahib’—the deferential term (meaning "employer" or "master") used to address a European” (Jaher and Kling 42).

The various definitions used by adaptation theorists and many of the terms used to describe the works discussed are sometimes at odds with each other. Appropriations, adaptations, quotations, it is, in many ways, a chaos of sorts. *Three Kings* fits clearly into the category of adaptation, even if it is not specifically referred to in such terms in any broad sense. The two films follow too closely a similar trajectory for the one to be called an appropriation of the earlier film. An appropriation, more often than not, is accompanied by a sense of subversion, the idea of dismantling, in some way, the original. This is not the case here. The latter is an embrace of the former, matching the themes and, loosely, the plot points, of the original, never critical of any of the elements of the former, never attempting to subvert or dismantle *Gunga Din* in any way.

*Three Kings* is, on every level, a companion to *Gunga Din*; and seen in the light of theory, it is, in fact, an adaptation in the truest sense of the word.

## Works Cited

- Bernard, Mark. "Balancing Threat and Power: Re-evaluating Three Kings as National Security Cinema." *The Projector Film and Media Journal* (2010). Web.
- Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo and Ashley W. Doane. *White Out: The Continuing Significance of Racism*. Psychology Press, 2003. Print.
- Chowdhry, Prem. *Colonial India and the Making of Empire Cinema: Image, Ideology and Identity*. Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.
- Hollyfield, Jerod Ra'Del. "Framing Empire: Victorian Literature, Hollywood International, and Postcolonial Film Adaptation." May 2011. Electronic.
- Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2012. Print.
- Jaher, Frederic Cople and Blair B. Kling. "Hollywood's India: The Meaning Of RKO's Gunga Din." *Film and History* (2008): 33-44. Electronic.
- Sanders, Julie. *Adaptation and Appropriation*. Taylor & Francis, 2005. Print.
- Stam, Robert and Alessandra Raengo. *Literature and Film: A Guide to the Theory and Practice of Film Adaptation*. John Wiley & Sons, 2004. Print.
- Weissenbacher, Manfred. *Sources of Power: How Energy Forges Human History*. ABC-CLIO, 2009. Print.

