

“It Ain’t No Man”: The Colonial Iconography of *Predator*



BY Alex Adams, We Are The Mutants PUBLISHED December 3, 2020

URL <https://wearethemutants.com/2020/12/03/it-aint-no-man-the-colonial-iconography-of-predator/>

1987’s *Predator* pits Arnold Schwarzenegger against a fearsome extraterrestrial creature that hunts men for sport. One of the great 1980s action blockbusters, it is memorable for its muscle-flexing machismo, its tight, quotable dialogue, and its magisterial practical effects. Its enduring allure, though, comes most of all from its creative rearticulation of colonial imagery in a Cold War context. For as well as being a tremendously enjoyable sci-fi horror romp, *Predator* is also a novel engagement with the iconography, aesthetics, and politics associated with Cold War-era military interventions in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and elsewhere.

1980s action films are known for the bombastic ways in which they echo, amplify, and disseminate a particular Cold War militarism that served, intentionally or otherwise, as a sort of informal PR discourse for Reagan’s international interventionism. Swaggering, cigar-chomping, opportunistic movie producers like Joel Silver, Jerry Bruckheimer, and Dino De Laurentiis churned out smash after vivid smash in the Reagan years: noisy, sweaty, and uncouth adventure stories regularly chock full of beefcake bodybuilders such as Dolph Lundgren, Jesse “The Body” Ventura, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and, of course, the two heaviest hitters, Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone. *Predator*’s director, John McTiernan, would go on to make the iconic *Die Hard*—in which Bruce Willis has a towering-inferno punch-up with sneering Eurotrash terrorists—in 1988, and he adapted Tom

Clancy's debut novel *The Hunt for Red October* in 1990. As entertaining as they are reactionary, these movies overflow with expertly choreographed violence, sassy one-liners, and muscular anti-Soviet ideology.

A [biography of Schwarzenegger](#) claims that *Predator* began life as an industry joke rooted in Cold War politics. After Stallone's Rocky Balboa symbolically won the Cold War by defeating the coldly murderous Ivan Drago in 1985's *Rocky IV*, he would have to fight an alien if they wanted to make *Rocky V*. The clash of terrestrial empires finally settled, there would be nowhere for him to go but space, nobody for him to punch but Martians. Writers Jim and John Thomas [had been working on just such a script since 1983](#), an interplanetary rumble in the jungle set where the Cold War was hot: in the opaque world of proxy wars, irregular combat, and covert operations. Stallone's shark-jumping patriotic symbolism meant that the Thomas Brothers' script's time had come.



Fighting the Cold War without embracing mutual nuclear annihilation meant fighting or funding grimy counterinsurgency wars in Korea, Vietnam, Nicaragua, the Congo, Laos, and elsewhere, and these wars had a profound and multifaceted influence on popular culture. Viscid rainforest undergrowth supplanted World War trenches as the default setting for combat scenes; enemies no longer stood before you on the battlefield, but picked you off with sadistic traps; a greater focus than ever was placed on the permanently deranging effects of warfare on the human psyche. The astuteness of the Thomas brothers' jungle setting in *Predator* is that it fuses a hostile encounter with a technologically advanced alien civilization with pre-existing mythologies of first contact that had gained new currency in the wake of these wars, in which American troops were sent to countries on the other side of the planet to endure unimaginable conditions fighting utterly unfamiliar populations. Though 2010's *Predators* would retroactively specify that the first film was set in Guatemala, nobody in *Predator* names their exact location, and this vagueness allows the story to be set in a firmly imaginary "otherland" where anything can happen. A rich tapestry of colonial iconography, *Predator* is a fable about a near-indestructible alien that sloshily and freely synthesizes the aesthetics of colonial war movies, dark fantasies about the cannibals in the shadows, and Conradian imagery about the inscrutable danger of the uncivilized places on the map.

Invasion is the thematic and formal core of *Predator*, a war movie invaded by science fiction horror. Dutch (Schwarzenegger, at his absolute peak) and his team of battle-hardened troops are hoodwinked by Dillon (Carl Weathers) into doing CIA dirty work behind enemy lines, attacking an enemy encampment and preventing the Soviets from launching a coup. As they make their escape, the group still smarting from their betrayal and fraying under the stress of the heat and the “badass bush” that “makes Cambodia look like Kansas,” the alien hunter strikes.

Sapient, sophisticated, and near-indestructible, the predator is a tremendously evocative creature, evocative enough for *Predator* to sire a franchise including three sequels, two *Alien Vs. Predator* crossover movies, and a rich gamut of print fiction, video games, comics, and graphic novels. There is some great stuff here (and if you want a controversial hot take, I will claim 2004’s *Alien Vs. Predator* as the only sequel really worth a watch, because it at least has a sense of fun and is ambitious in scope), but in general the sequels and spin-offs all suffer from the same problem faced by any number of sci-fi franchises: slow death by over-explanation. Over the course of the series, the increasingly elaborate lore explains the predators’ technology, their language, their species variation and, most often, the specifics of the predators’ hunter-warrior culture, examining their abductions of “elite” humans to be tracked for sport, their attempts to hybridize with humans, and, perhaps silliest of all, their history as the original [ancient astronauts](#) who colonized the Earth. In the process, the creature’s mystique is buried under a barrage of precision that only serves to make it less interesting. But the original is compelling in a way that its offspring are not because, like the best monster movies, it is built around ambiguity, mystery, and suggestion.



This generous inexactness allows the predator to reflect an abundance of meanings, slippery and overlapping, unencumbered by all that goofy backstory. He is suggestively mammalian, slimily crocodilian, part gorilla, part crustacean chameleon, with insectoid mandibles and infrared vision. Most of all, though, the predator aesthetic draws on a rich and layered archive of colonial depictions of the “uncivilizable savage”: his loincloth, dreadlocks, and his collection of skulls; his fearsome blades, exposed skin, and his symbiotic intimacy with the jungle; his incomprehensible clicking language, his animalistic posture, and his thirst for barbaric violence. The final Cold War enemy is

not only an alien; he is, simultaneously, the prehuman savage of colonial nightmare. Neither the alien nor the savage, to recall the joke about how *Predator* the film came to be, inhabit the same planet as the Reagan-era action hero.

The horrifying allure of the predator is sustained, in part, by the Grand Guignol spectacle of the ways it kills. The creature commits forms of gruesome murder that echo the irregular combat tactics and war crimes that were attributed to the guerrilla forces the U.S. military faced in its small dirty wars. One by one, the soldiers are picked off by the unconventional tactics of an unseen enemy who hides in the trees, like the faceless Vietminh fighters of so many American-made Vietnam movies. The predator desecrates his victims after death in chilling ways, flaying them, ripping out spines, and making trophies of skulls in ways that recall the mutilatory obscenities committed by the cannibal tribes in exploitation flicks like *Cannibal Holocaust* (1980) or *Cannibal Ferox* (1981).

And yet, it is not only FX maestro Stan Winston's creature design that reinterprets colonial iconography. Thematically, the movie rearticulates ideas central to many Vietnam movies and the military fiction of writers like Robert Elford (*Devil's Guard*) or Jean Lartéguy (*The Centurions*). War is a furnace, a state of brutal nature in which masculinity is tested; fighting against unconventional guerrilla forces is like fighting the jungle itself; the hero must "go native," or become one with the wilderness, in order to defeat the primeval savagery of one's adversary.



At the film's climax, Dutch, the sole survivor, slathers himself in mud to hide from the predator's infrared vision, becoming a primal, torch-wielding warrior, to fight his fearless enemy on something approaching an equal footing. The scene pulpily recalls the climax of *Apocalypse Now* (1979), in which Willard rises from the steaming swamp to murder Colonel Kurtz, the elite soldier driven mad by the jungle and transformed into an exterminationist demigod by his exposure to the myriad foulnesses of war. An essay on the meanings of Joseph Conrad's Kurtz as filtered through Francis Ford Coppola's operatic depiction of hell on earth could go on forever; suffice it to say that Kurtz is a shady, uncertain vessel into whom has rushed the murderous soul of colonial war, slavery, and exploitation. Reading the predator as an incarnation of Kurtz allows us to read

Schwarzenegger's confrontation with the monster as yet another form of essentialism: in fighting the savage, we are fighting against the immortal, devilish soul of war itself. Such a confrontation is not only primeval; it is permanent, eternal.

And yet, *Predator* is also tethered very directly to its specifically nuclear context. In the film's closing moments, the predator initiates a colossal explosion, a mushroom cloud pinpointing the site of its demise. Knowing that Dutch has defeated it, the beast detonates himself, cackling a monstrously polyvocal laugh. This is a clear invocation of the political fear that "savages" will gain nuclear weapons, and that they will be self-destructively insane—or simply spitefully reckless—enough to actually use them. This abundance of signification, in which the predator is a volatile enough image to represent at once an alien, a cannibal, a guerrilla adversary, "[the demon who makes trophies of man](#)," and a rogue nuclear state, is what makes the antagonist such an attractive and compelling monstrosity.

Intriguingly, in an unexpected coda that attests to the elasticity of popular cultural meaning, *Predator* has also exerted an influence over the post-9/11 war on terror. What, after all, do we call the unmanned aircraft that can kill silently, from a distance, and that can detect human body heat in order to track and destroy its targets? It is tempting to speculate about the naming of the [Predator drone](#). Perhaps, like the naming of the NSA's machine-learning surveillance program [SKYNET](#), it is more than just further evidence that popular culture and political discourse are irretrievably fused. What can it mean for the self-image of the U.S. when its own military names its technological innovations after monstrous sci-fi villains?

[Alex Adams](#) is a cultural critic and writer based in North East England. His most recent book, [How to Justify Torture](#), was published by [Repeater Books](#) in 2019. He loves dogs.