

Apocalypto: The Cinematic Logic of Genocide

by Juan Santos via rialator *Monday, Dec 18 2006, 8:39am*

international / social equality/unity / other press

Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* is not a mere adventure tale, it's not just another excruciatingly brutal portrayal of apocalyptic violence for its own sake, and the *Village Voice* is dead wrong when it says that unlike *Braveheart* and *The Passion of the Christ*, *Apocalypto* is "unburdened by nationalist or religious piety," — that it's "pure, amoral sensationalism."



Despite its extreme brutality *Apocalypto* isn't just Gibson's latest snuff film with a religious theme. The film is a morality play, and there are only two things one needs to remember to get a hint of the ugly moral intent behind Mel Gibson's depiction of the Maya.

The first is that, despite Gibson's vile portrayal of the Maya as a macabre cult of deranged killers straight out of *Apocalypse Now!*, there is no evidence that the Mayan people ever practiced widespread human sacrifice, and they certainly didn't target the innocent hunter-gatherers and horticulturalists Gibson chooses to portray as the victims of a Mayan death cult.

Gibson knows better. He studied the terrain in depth and had no practical limit to the funds he could expend on research. His portrayal is a conscious lie, one he uses to justify the premise that the Mayan city states collapsed because they deserved to collapse, and that they deserved to be replaced by a "superior" culture in the genocide known as the Conquest.

"A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within," is how Gibson puts it. In other words the Conquest was not genocide but a moral comeuppance; the civilization didn't fall, in the final analysis, from climate change or inadvertent soil depletion or even war - it was conquered in god's wrath against the forces of evil. And Gibson's made sure you see the ancient Maya as a force of profound evil.

Here's a taste of the standards Gibson used in conjuring his image of the Maya. The *LA Times* quotes

production designer Tom Sanders:

"We had an archeologist, Dr. Richard Hansen, onboard," said Sanders. "It was really fun to say, 'Is there any proof they didn't do this?' When he said, 'There is no proof they didn't do that,' that gives you some license to play." And "play" they did. Rex Reed calls the racist portrayal of the Maya Gibson's "huge cast of spear-carriers from the Oom-Gawah-Bwana School of Dramatic Art."

In a stunning interview with Chris Garcia of the Austin American Statesman, Julia Guernsey, an expert on Mayan culture at the University of Texas says of Gibson's agenda, "'We got the Jews last time (in 'The Passion of the Christ'), now we'll get the Maya.' And to highlight that point there's a lot of really offensive racial stereotyping. They're shown as these extremely barbaric people, when in fact, the Maya were a very sophisticated culture... I hate it. I despise it. I think it's despicable. It's offensive to Maya people. It's offensive to those of us who try to teach cultural sensitivity..."

The other hint you might need to remember is this. No matter what happens in this film, the Spanish don't show up at the end, at the collapse of the Mayan civilization, to "save" anything at all.

Hundreds of years would pass between the collapse of the Mayan city states and the American Holocaust. For the sake of empire the Spanish would sacrifice 95% of the population in Mexico, a horror they would achieve in a mere 100 years. Hitler's holocaust, with its 20 million dead, pales: the Conquest of the Americas by Europe would claim 100 million lives. There is no more savage genocide in the history of civilization.

But if you're looking for savagery, the holocaust against the Mayan people doesn't stop there. The most recent wave ended a mere decade ago. A quarter of a million innocent Maya were slaughtered in Guatemala by a death squad regime backed by the Gibson's cohorts on the Christian Right, including Ronald Reagan and apocalyptic fanatics like Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell. It's called "The Silent Holocaust" by those who know of it.

The Maya have suffered a modern apocalypse more brutal than anything in Gibson's sadistic imagination, more brutal than even he would dare bring to the screen. It's a tale he would refuse: its demons aren't "savage" Mayans in horror movie drag, they're Christian death squads backed by fundamentalist leaders using old school Spanish methods. A British anti-war organization writes:

"Working methodically across the Mayan region, the army and its paramilitary teams, including 'civil patrols' of forcibly conscripted local men, attacked 626 villages. Each community was rounded up, or seized when gathered already for a celebration or a market day. The villagers, if they didn't escape to become hunted refugees, were then brutally murdered; others were forced to watch, and sometimes to take part. Buildings were vandalised and demolished, and a 'scorched earth' policy applied: the killers destroyed crops, slaughtered livestock, fouled water supplies, and violated sacred places and cultural symbols.

"Children were often beaten against walls, or thrown alive into pits where the bodies of adults were later thrown; they were also tortured and raped. Victims of all ages often had their limbs amputated, or were impaled and left to die slowly. Others were doused in petrol and set alight, or disemboweled while still alive. Yet others were shot repeatedly, or tortured and shut up alone to die in pain. The wombs of pregnant women were cut open. Women were routinely raped while being tortured. Women - now widows - who lived could scarcely survive the trauma: The presence of sexual violence in the social memory of the communities has become a source of collective shame."

Gibson hasn't told the story of the hunted refugees fleeing Christian death squads a decade ago. His ancient hunters are nothing more than figments of his imagination, racist stereotypes of ancient Mayans who existed nowhere but in his own delirium tremens. They are his own demons chasing his imaginary hero / victim / alter ego, Jaguar Paw, through a "savage" jungle.

The framework of the story is deeply embedded in Gibson's extreme right wing religious and political views. He casts Mayan priests and leaders as demonically malevolent at a time when interest is growing world wide in Mayan politics - the Zaptistas - and in Mayan spirituality and prophecy. The subtext of the film and its social context involve the Mayan prophecies of the end of an age of destruction, and the beginning of another around 2012 C.E., an age that can lead to harmony between humanity and the Earth.

The biblical counter-vision is of a righteous world-destruction carried out by a vengeful god who destroys all living creatures, a vision embedded in the Apocalypse of Saint John, the Book of Revelations, which was the inspiration for the film's title.

The Maya who survived the killing in Guatemala and elsewhere kept their spiritual traditions alive - including their prophecies of the end of this age - despite 500 years of intensive efforts to eradicate them. Right wing Christians see hell-driven New Age plots at every turn, and understand attacking other culture's spiritual traditions not as cultural genocide but as legitimate "spiritual warfare" at a time of approaching apocalypse.

Gibson brought Apocalypso to life on the propaganda front of a spiritual war, a deadly serious culture war between those who would protect and defend the Earth's ability to live and those on the Christian Right who want to "bring on" Armageddon.

The larger stakes are the future of life on planet Earth in a time when the industrial civilization of the West is seen by many as on the brink of collapse and when the world's most respected scientists see Earth as on the verge of ecological destruction, a sentiment that is deeply shared by the living Mayan wisdom keepers whose indigenous spiritual tradition Gibson has chosen to paint as evil.

The survivors of the most recent wave of genocide haven't seen Apocalypso yet - no Maya has, not even those who had the bit parts Gibson reserved for them, or who worked as extras and maids.

One can't help but wonder how Apocalypso will play to Guatemalan audiences, but one thing is a sure bet: Mayans will be deeply disturbed to see their culture portrayed as a madhouse of killing, while those who supported the death squad regime of the Christian fascist Efraín Ríos Montt will take solace: their view of the Maya as subhuman will be "justified" by the film, and so will their genocidal reign of terror.

Racist stereotypes, after all, serve one function and one function only - they serve as a story, a script that justifies the use of violence against a targeted group, whether the weapons of the oppressor are the sword and cannon, the gas chamber, the M16, a lynch mob's rope, or a camera.

One viewer understood and embraced Gibson's intent in its entirety, saying Apocalypso:

"Pretty much precisely describes the whole point of the civilizations of such "noble savages" as the Mayans, if you ask us. There isn't one, there wasn't one, and there never will be one. Those bloodthirsty mongrels and many others before and after them were brutal, savage, cruel and entirely without redeeming qualities, and the best thing that ever happened to this planet was when they were wiped out, never to be heard of again.

"In fact, we owe the Spanish Conquistadores an eternal debt of gratitude for having wiped that blood-curdlingly bestial, brutal blight upon humanity off the face of the planet because, had they not done it, we would have had to do so ourselves."

The son of a Holocaust denier, Gibson defended his father in a 2004 interview, and, in the wake of his recent drunken tirades against Jews, Gibson can ill afford charges of propagating racism against Indians. The film's PR campaign has carefully skirted potential opposition and negative exposure. Despite that effort Mayan activists who've seen nothing more than the film's trailer denounced the film the day before it opened.

Ignacio Ochoa, director of the Nahual Foundation, said "Gibson replays, in glorious, big budget Technicolor, an offensive and racist notion that Maya people were brutal to one another long before the arrival of Europeans and thus they deserved, in fact needed, rescue."

The Indians who've seen the film itself have been a carefully chosen crew; Apocalypto, for all its epic pretensions, premiered in an Oklahoma casino, and certainly not for an audience of American Indian Movement activists. The initial Latino audience was chosen just as carefully. A Beverly Hills-based PR man arranged screenings of the film for the Los Angeles Latin Business Association - not for Mexican and Central American migrants who know the Maya, not for indigenous minded Chican@s, and certainly not for LA's substantial community of Mayan refugees.

The Latin Business Association obligingly gave Gibson their "Visionary" Award. But it's too late for Gibson to hide behind such contrived honors. Even the LA Times pointedly noted, "it's one thing to acknowledge a work's... merits and quite another to proclaim Gibson a 'visionary,' especially at a time when the immigration debate has reminded Latinos that virulent racism is only a few drinks away."

Genocide is even closer than that. Ask the Spanish. Ask the death squads. Ask Mel, behind the camera or behind a small glass. It's just a shot away.

Juan Santos is a Los Angeles based writer and editor. His essays from 2006 can be found at:

<http://the-fourth-world.blogspot.com/>

<http://la.indymedia.org/news/2006/12/190264.php>

Cleaves Alternative News. <http://cleaves.lingama.net/news/story-364.html>