

1 <http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2007/02/apocalypto.html>

2 **February 7, 2007 | Commentary**

3 **'Apocalypto' a distorted view of Maya history**

4 *Mel Gibson's latest film, Apocalypto, tells a story set in pre-Columbian Central*
 5 *America, with the Mayan Empire in decline. Villagers who survived a savage attack*
 6 *are taken by their captors through the jungle to the central Mayan city. Among the*
 7 *villagers is Jaguar Paw, who has hidden his wife and child from the attackers with a*
 8 *promise that he will return for them. Although the film has been nominated for three*
 9 *Academy Awards - in makeup, sound editing and sound mixing - it has received*
 10 *mixed reviews from critics and scholars.*

11 *The following editorial was written by Mary Weismantel, professor of*
 12 *anthropology, and Cynthia Robin, associate professor of anthropology. It originally*
 13 *appeared Dec. 17, 2006, in the Chicago Tribune.*

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15 The promotion for Mel Gibson's new film, "Apocalypto," points out
 16 all of its realistic touches: It was shot on location in Mexico, it stars
 17 Native American actors and its dialogue is not in English but Yucatec
 18 Maya.

19 Movie reviewers, however, have noted the film's inaccuracies,
 20 though at the same time they have granted the director considerable
 21 latitude with a common plea from the movie world: It's just
 22 entertainment.

23 The inaccuracies have sparked protests by Native Americans - in the
 24 United States, Mexico and Guatemala - as well as by researchers who
 25 study the ancient Maya, all outraged by the film's portrayal of the
 26 Maya as violent and depraved.

27 True, a movie is a fictional account that, in most cases, places the
 28 drama ahead of the historical verisimilitude. But the distorted story of
 29 the Maya is likely the only exposure a generation of moviegoers will
 30 get to the ancient civilization, and the film does the Maya a disservice.

31 As researchers who have spent our lives studying and teaching about
 32 the Maya, we cannot help but be disappointed, and even outraged, by
 33 the movie. Consider all the violence in the movie; though the Maya
 34 practiced warfare and treated their prisoners harshly, the depiction of
 35 wall paintings of blue-painted and decapitated prisoners is just wrong.

36 Stereotypes of bloodthirsty savagery and moral degeneracy have
 37 been used to vilify indigenous peoples for 500 years - by every
 38 government that has sought to justify the denial of civil rights to native
 39 peoples.

40 During the first 200 years after the Spanish conquest of the New

41 World - beginning in the 1500s - an estimated 75 million indigenous
 42 people were killed. But the genocide of Maya peoples is not merely a
 43 thing of the past. Some 200,000 Maya were killed in Guatemala's 36-
 44 year civil war, which ended only a decade ago.

45 These "entertaining" images affect ordinary people too. Native
 46 Americans - like African-Americans, gays and lesbians - are at
 47 constant risk of hate crimes.

48 The ancient Maya were a great civilization. They had important
 49 inventions and made many advances, such as in higher mathematics.
 50 They figured out the concept of zero, for instance, putting them in the
 51 same league as the Chinese and Arabs.

52 Gibson's film comes at an exciting time for the native peoples of the
 53 Americas. Indigenous political movements across North and South
 54 America are fighting for civil rights and cultural recognition, not
 55 unlike African-Americans in the 1960s.

56 These movements take pride in their ancient civilizations. But
 57 participants of white backlash movements, some of which have ties to
 58 neo-Nazis, love to talk about how those ancient civilizations were
 59 degenerate, disgusting and violent.

60 Gibson's film portrays the ancient Maya not only as bloodthirsty and
 61 immoral but utterly evil. Having Americans and Mexicans of native
 62 heritage play such roles and speak in a language still spoken by more
 63 than 700,000 Yucatec Maya in Mexico, Guatemala and Belize sends a
 64 dangerous message by asking them to portray their own ancestors as
 65 evil.

66 The U.S., Mexico and Guatemala are predominantly Christian
 67 nations but have a vibrant religious pluralism. Native Americans are
 68 predominantly Christian but find inspiration in their ancestors'
 69 traditions.

70 Many others seek out these traditions as well. Tourists travel to
 71 Maya sites such as Chichen Itza, read books about Maya calendric
 72 systems and even attend ceremonies led by modern-day Maya
 73 shamans. They find inspiration in great religious traditions that deserve
 74 a better representation than they receive in "Apocalypto."

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76 *Mary Weismantel has published two books about contemporary indigenous*
 77 *peoples of South America. Cynthia Robin is an archeologist of the ancient*
 78 *Maya.*

1 <http://www.lansinglowdown.com/index.php/article/480>

2 'Apocalypto' teaches violent history lesson

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3 Published on December 06, 2006.

4 By Roger Moore

5 The Orlando Sentinel

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7 (MCT) Mel Gibson's "Apocalypto" passes the only movie test that's
8 important. It's the "I'd pay to see that" test.

9 Gibson's latest history lesson is a parable about ignorance,
10 environmental degradation, senseless sacrifice and religious fanaticism.
11 He's made a big film about the collapse of Mayan civilization, but he's
12 talking about our own.

13 Knowing as much as we know about Gibson's beliefs, the movie feels
14 like strained Catholic prophecy. The way he depicts the Mayans - savage,
15 superstitious and doomed - he suggests that maybe Catholic Spain did
16 them a favor by enslaving and wiping them out to - ahem - convert them.

17 "Apocalypto" begins with a lengthy peek at the jungle world of a tribe
18 of hunter-gatherers.

19 A chance encounter with other primitives is a warning. They're
20 fleeing because their lands were "ravaged." Jaguar Paw (Rudy
21 Youngblood) wants to know by whom, where and when. But his "wise"
22 father, Flint Sky (Morris Birdyellowhead) counsels, keeping what they've
23 seen to themselves.

24 The Maya, we see, are in decline. Plague, deforestation, war,
25 pestilence and over-population have made them frantic to sacrifice more
26 and more captives to the gods they are sure they have lost favor with.

27 Gibson, an actor-director with a lengthy rap sheet of sado-masochistic
28 violence, spares no grisly image - from still-beating hearts snatched from
29 victims to sucking chest wounds, impalings and a graphic jaguar mauling.

30 For all its texture (the actors speak Yucatec Maya, with subtitles) and
31 "message," "Apocalypto" is a stunningly simple picture. Gibson cuts, in
32 classic cliffhanger style, between Jaguar Paw's quest and his wife and
33 child's struggle to stay alive long enough to be rescued.

34 At least if mainstream Hollywood ever really does turn its back on
35 him, Gibson will always have a job doing "Hostel" and "Saw" sequels.

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37 Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

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38 <http://www.cinematical.com/2006/12/11/what-apocalypto-got-wrong-a-whole-lot/>

39 What Apocalypto Got Wrong: A Whole Lot

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41 by Scott Weinberg Dec 11th 2006 // 8:31PM

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43 While I (unlike Mr. James Rocchi) managed to enjoy Mel Gibson's
44 Apocalpyto as a piece of exotic-yet-semi-standard action/adventure
45 epic lunacy, I didn't give the flick much thought where "historical
46 accuracy" was concerned. My default position is this: Filmmakers
47 make stuff up all the time, and if you think the phrase "based on actual
48 events" means you're getting even half of the straight facts, well, you
49 might be a little bit gullible. If someone had cornered me and asked
50 "How accurate do you think Apocalypto was, as far as the ancient
51 Mayan culture goes?" I'd have said "Hmph, I dunno. Semi-accurate?"

52 Well, now it sure looks like I'm the gullible one, because according
53 to one University of Texas professor, Mel Gibson's Apocalypto is a
54 big fat pack of Apoca-lip service. Based upon what I just read in this
55 excellent interview piece by Chris Garcia, UT art history professor
56 Julia Guernsey is ... well, she's pretty pissed off.

57 "I hate it. I despise it. I think it's despicable," is what the prof had
58 to say regarding the film's lack of historical accuracy before going on
59 to explain where Mel Gibson deviated from reality -- and why. Murals,
60 human sacrifices, geography, cultural attitudes, hell, even the basic
61 timeline has been monkeyed with to no end: "It would be as though
62 somebody did a movie on our American culture and they had
63 Madonna and Marilyn Monroe riding in a car together, or they had a
64 meeting of George Bush, Teddy Roosevelt and George Washington
65 because why not condense a couple hundred or a couple thousand
66 years?" Yowch.

67 Ms. Guernsey seems to make a whole lot of fascinating points here,
68 and her main irritant is a particularly valid one: "What is scary is that
69 people will leave the movie thinking that because the characters were
70 speaking Mayan there is an air of authenticity."

71 That last quote leads me to believe that maybe, hey, I did nail this
72 movie when I first saw it. I called it "a harsh and intense action flick
73 with a splash of exotic paint to make it seem deeper." Needless to say,
74 history professors will not be placing Apocalypto on their syllabi
75 anytime real soon.