Encounter, Engagement, and Exchange

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Among their many intellectual achievements, the ancient Maya civilization invented, by 250 A.D. at the very latest—and likely hundreds of years earlier—a fully functional, phonetic writing system capable of expressing human speech. Scribes recorded sophisticated texts containing religious, astronomical, and almost certainly historical, literary, and even medical content—in other words, an entire system of human thought—in bark-paper books called codices. Of the many thousands of Maya codices that must once have existed, only four remain. Time, a humid climate, and the zealous, destructive tendencies of one 16th-century Spanish friar, Diego de Landa, conspired to ensure the destruction of the rest. As a librarian and longtime student of pre-Columbian Mesoamerica, I have often wondered about the nature of ancient Maya libraries. Were scribes, many of whom now appear to have been blood relatives of Maya royalty, responsible for safeguarding the codices, as seems likely? Or were a separate group of specialists—the librarians—responsible? Maya codices were not particularly fragile. If properly cared for, they could have lasted for decades, even centuries. It is intriguing, then, to think about where Maya codices might have been housed, and by what system cataloged and shelved.

It would be naive to expect these and other “burning” questions to be addressed in Mel Gibson’s Apocalypto. After all, the film is a fictionalized Hollywood epic, not a PBS documentary. (For a good, recent example of the latter, I recommend Nova’s Cracking the Maya Code.) Neither Gibson nor anyone else associated with the film claim complete historical accuracy. According to the film’s official website, Apocalypto tells the story of “young Jaguar Paw [who] is captured and taken to the great Mayan City, where he faces a harrowing end. Driven by his love for his wife and son, he makes an adrenaline-soaked, heart-racing escape to rescue them and ultimately save his way of life.” Apocalypto’s simple narrative is divided into three sections of roughly equal length. The first third is set in and around Jaguar Paw’s jungle village, which is brutally attacked by what can only be described as a bloodthirsty gang of warriors from a nearby Maya city. In the second third, Jaguar Paw and his remaining villagers are marched off to the decadent city
to be subjected to all manner of unpleasantness. And in the final third, Jaguar Paw, who miraculously escapes his fate, is chased ceaselessly back through the jungle to the site of his wrecked village, where his pregnant wife and young son await rescue.

I suspect that scholars—and here I am referring specifically to those who have devoted their entire academic careers to the subject—were secretly thrilled to find out that a major feature film about the ancient Maya would be made. Discounting *Kings of the Sun*, made in 1963 and starring Yul Brynner and George Chakiris, and *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, made in 1969 and starring Christopher Plummer as the Inca emperor Atahualpa, *Apocalypto* is the first Hollywood epic to treat any ancient New World civilization. (As an aside, it is hard to fathom why this should be the case, since the clash of worlds we call the Conquest makes Russell Crowe’s tour of the Coliseum look like a walk in the park.) Certainly *Apocalypto*’s high production values, including especially its extraordinary yet somewhat flawed costuming, are a great enticement. For most in the academic community, however, it is fair to say that *Apocalypto* turned out to be an enticement with very little substance. The fundamental disappointment I have found in reading the academic reviews does not involve the film’s numerous and rather egregious historical inaccuracies per se. It is what those inaccuracies ostensibly convey about the nature of the ancient Maya that troubles many. I feel compelled, nonetheless, to take just a few minutes to look at some of the more troubling historical misses:

1. The film’s first major historical error involves the absurd Yanomamo-like portrayal of the village Maya as hunter-gatherers, unaware of the presence of a grand city less than a day’s march away. During the period under consideration, that is to say during the Late Classic Period, the primary-growth forest depicted in the film likely would not have existed due to deforestation. In addition, the Maya of this time were fully dedicated farmers, not hunters. At a mere day’s march away from the urban center, such farmers would not have been sacrificial captives but rather peasants or citizens, if you will, of the state to which they are being led.

2. The second important way Gibson gets it wrong is the conflation, throughout the film, of Pre-Classic, Classic, and post-Classic imagery from widely varying geographical locations, particularly during the city sequences.

3. The third and perhaps most disturbing historical inaccuracy involves the highly problematic depiction of human bodies strewn Holocaust-like in an open pit as Jaguar Paw escapes the city. The problem? No archeological, art historical, or epigraphic evidence exists to support the belief that such an event occurred. As many academic reviewers have pointed out, would you dump dead bodies next to your maize fields?
4. The fourth, and in my view most bizarre (telling?), inaccuracy involves the anachronistic, *deus ex machina*-like appearance of Conquistadors at the end of the film. Recall that the events depicted in *Apocalypto* clearly reference the Classic Period, not the Post-Classic. The Spanish did not appear in Yucatan until 700 years after the Classic Period ended.

5. The fifth inaccuracy involves the fixation of the Maya elite on heart sacrifice. In reality, the heart extraction technique used so salaciously by Gibson in *Apocalypto* belongs to a cultural complex that likely originated in the Post-Classic Mexican Highlands—that is to say, with the progenitors of the Aztec Empire—not with the Lowland Maya. For those who might be unfamiliar with the historical sequence of ancient Mesoamerica, this would be somewhat like attributing the mass slaughter of gladiatorial combat to Classical Athens rather than Imperial Rome. It is beyond question that the Maya nobility were prone to violent displays. Indeed, such ritualized acts of violence are hallmarks of many states, ancient and modern, the world over.

The bottom line is that in Hollywood, historical half-truths can be and almost always are written off as “artistic license.” Merely pointing out historical inaccuracies is therefore an insufficient critique. University of Miami anthropologist Traci Ardren, in a review for *Archaeology Online*, gets at the deeper problem with *Apocalypto*: “Gibson’s efforts at authenticity of location and language might, for some viewers, mask his blatantly colonial message that the Maya needed saving because they were rotten at the core. Using the decline of Classic urbanism as his backdrop, Gibson communicates that there was absolutely nothing redeemable about Maya culture, especially elite culture which is depicted as a disgusting feast of blood and excess.” As Ardren points out, this message plays directly into a longstanding trope that has been used to subjugate the Maya for centuries. A corollary of this trope can be seen in the West’s longstanding desire to explain away the inestimable cultural loss that resulted from the destruction of New World societies. One need not fret too much about the passing of a people already decadent and, as depicted in the film, quite literally dying. Of course our contemporary understanding of Classic Maya civilization as revealed through a century of anthropology, art history, and epigraphy, and which has made tremendous strides in the last thirty years especially, provides an entirely different and far more nuanced picture than Gibson cared to promote in the film.

Evidence that the academic community’s concerns are justified can be found in mainstream reviews of *Apocalypto*. To cite but two of many examples, Rebecca Murray on About.com pans the film for its “exploitative, over-the-top, and nauseatingly pointless display of bloodshed,” yet later states, “apparently Gibson and company did their homework and by most accounts represent well
that time in history and the culture of the Mayans.” Or this from Sonny Bunch of the conservative *Weekly Standard:* “It is specious for professional historians and grievance groups alike to argue that *Apocalypto* is a wanton desecration of the memories of the Mayan people. While it may be an inconvenient fact that the Mayans were skilled at the art of human cruelty, it is, nevertheless, a fact.” While Bunch may be stating a “fact,” it is also beside the point. The ancient Maya civilization was one of the greatest and most accomplished in all antiquity. The Maya, as mentioned, invented a complete writing system recorded in books and maintained in libraries; the Maya invented positional numeration, including the concept of zero; they created high art whose aesthetic power continues to awe and inspire; they supported a population of millions in an environment ill-suited to traditional methods of agricultural intensification; and many other tremendous accomplishments besides. Perhaps Dr. Kathryn Lehman, a Latin American Studies scholar in New Zealand, has already asked the most important questions about *Apocalypto:* “All films are historically inaccurate. What we should ask [our] students is why now? What is happening to Maya and indigenous people today that prompts someone to represent them in this way? And most importantly: who benefits by this representation?” The answer to these questions will require more thought and discussion, but it is certainly worth exploring the relationship between the representation of indigenous peoples in films such as *Apocalypto,* on the one hand, and for example the contemporary Maya Renaissance in Guatemala, on the other. We might also profit by asking questions about our own role as academics and educators in informing popular representations of the Maya and other indigenous peoples of the Western Hemisphere.

**NOTES**

1. In an interview for *Variety* that appeared on 10/30/2005, well before the film was released, Gibson discussed the question of historical accuracy: “A lot of this, the storylines I just made up, and then oddly, when I checked it out with historians and archaeologists, it’s not that far from wrong” (“The Flyin’ Mayan: Gibson Talks About Upcoming ‘Apocalypto’ ”).

2. Besides Ardren, other academics who have commented on *Apocalypto* include Vanderbilt’s art historian Annabeth Headrick; a team of three archaeologists from SUNY Albany; John Hawks, anthropologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison; Zachary Hruby of U.C. Riverside; Gabriela Erandi Rico, at the time of the film’s release a Mexican graduate student in Ethnic Studies at U.C. Berkeley; Annette Kolodny, professor emerita of American literature at the University of Arizona; and art historian Andrea Stone of the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.


4. Benjamin Keen’s 1971 *The Aztec Image in Western Thought* chronicles the West’s 500-year on-again, off-again (fickle) fascination with the better-known Aztec civilization.