**Topic**

Mel Gibson's film *Apocalypto* at one level seems to be a highly "ethnographic" film about ancient Mayan societies. It has caused intense controversy over its depiction of the Maya and their demise.

Discuss the main elements of this controversy and give your own opinion of the extent to which the film can be considered "ethnographic".

**Essay**

Striving to capture 'life-as-is', an ethnographic study of 'other' cultures concerns in-depth research and interpretation of social practices, values and relations, perceived through the cultural and subjective specificites of an observing or participating team. Gibson’s *Apocalypto*, then, can only be considered ethnographic to the extent that the production presents the veneer of Late-classical Mayan life in costuming, set-ornamentation, and the directorial choice of Yucatan dialogue, spoken by mostly native Central American actors. This veneer, comprising a temporal pastiche of Mayan Era’s in the film’s mis-en-scene, distorts historical accuracy with excessive attention to violence and sacrifice, neglecting Mayan architectural, cultural and scientific achievements. The familiar tropes of early Anthropological study are reinforced by the conventions of the Hollywood narrative; the savage elites wallowing in the excesses of a corrupted and violent civilisation, preying upon the noble savages attuned to nature are binary stereotypes in a Colonial discourse, and it is the white European’s burden to bring redemption and salvation to the barbaric New World.
Apocalypto’s production design and dialectical rigour absorbs the audience into the film’s world, however this veneer of authenticity belies the film’s many historical inaccuracies and artistic licenses. While this controversy is largely unnoticeable to the layman while so much blood and action are thrown about, the myriad of inconsistencies form a grossly distorted composite of Mayan life and culture. Chief among these distortions is temporal; Andrea Stone, a Mayanist scholar, notes the production detailing is compositied from about 1700 years of Mayan history, borrowing elements from the later Aztec culture (Stone, 2007) and twisting religious, architectural and political elements to reinforce ethnographic stereotypes. Judging by the predominant costume and set design, Stone estimates the film is set during the 9th century Classical era, but by this time even the most remote communities had progressed from a hunter–gatherer society as depicted in the first Act (Stone, 2007). Skimpy jungle dress, sticks through noses and crowded ramshackle huts are hallmarks of stereotypical primitive societies, not the complex agricultural settlements that subsisted in rural areas of the Yucatan. These fabrications are used to contrast the noble, nature-attuned, existence of the ‘desirable’ native (Spence, 2007) with the corrupt decadence of the manipulative ruling elite atop the sprawling, chaotic city of Act Two.
As Gibson guides audience identification with the ‘harmonious’ primitivism of jungle-dwellers, set against the one-dimensional savagery of the ‘civilised’ city inhabitants, cultural misrepresentations to reinforce this dichotomy abound. Most Mayan labour was voluntary as part of civic duty, there is no evidence of slave-trading blocks, and within the city itself, civic planning was highly developed, not the chaotic thronging about the pyramids base, and most Mayans had good knowledge of astronomical cycles, and would not be dumbfounded by the solar eclipse (Aimers, Graham, 2007). The elites are portrayed as a corrupt, decadent priesthood, manipulating the masses stupefied by blood and chanting to extend their political power, as if knowledge of celestial cycles were privileged tools of manipulation and not deeply ingrained in every aspect of Mayan culture and society. This self-indulgent abuse of power by the leering elites provides Gibson ample justification for the corruption and downfall of the Mayan civilisation, coupled with the excesses of human sacrifice and violence portrayed in the film. Reasons for the eventual abandonment of the city-states are still a mystery to academics, though popular opinion holds that drought, excessive stucco production and massive deforestation where leading causes. (Stone, 2007)
As the captives first approach the city outskirts, we are reminded of the opening quote of by Will Durant, the forest clearing heralds the central premise of the film’s controversy: “A great civilisation is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within,” the implication being the bloodthirsty violence and corruption of the elites have destroyed the ‘innocence’ of a once great people and land, through mass subjugation and forced labour, though inter-state warfare is never mentioned. Interestingly the environmental impact of stucco production in mass-deforestation serves only as a transitional scene, as the film’s young oracle prophesies the more immediate doom of “the one”. Progressing further towards the proverbial ‘heart of darkness’, sewerage trickles between squalid shacks as the underclass of subjugated labourers, malnourished and bone-white from stucco production, provide a stark counter-point to the ruling elite of the frenzied city-state. Andrea Stone notes that Mayan civilisation underwent multiple eras of rises and collapses, (Stone, 2007) reflecting the cyclical nature endemic within their cosmology and kairiological sense of time. The implication that the Mayans simply self-destructed, due to corruption, material excess and wanton bloodletting, before the Spanish conquistadors and missionaries arrived to subjugate the natives, represents an ‘imperialist nostalgia’ for simplistic Colonial discourse (Gonzales, 2008).
Perhaps the most immediate controversy the film presents is the unrelenting brutality of perpetrated violence, both for its own sake for plot set-pieces of shock effect, and to undermine the sacrificial rituals as a mere barbaric practice of ‘civilised’ savages. Without speculating on Gibson’s personal attraction to overt bloodletting, the laughably gruesome scene of decapitated heads and accompanying bodies tumbling down the ziggurat’s steps are more akin to Aztec practices, though decapitation in Mayan society was typical (Stone, 2007).

While bloodletting and animal sacrifice were more common, the assembly-line style sacrifice and accompanying mass grave – shown as Jaguar Paw makes his escape [why is there a frame insert of Waldo here?] – is pure fabrication, meant to denote mass, arbitrary killings of a bloodthirsty elite, simply to satiate the masses in a sham appeasement of Kulkulcan to bolster their waning power. This disproportionate idolatry of violence is also perpetrated against the innocent Jaguar Paw by the savage elite warriors; he is captured, bludgeoned, starved, exhausted, shot twice with arrows, survives a jaguar attack, and quicksand. The imposition of the action-hero’s remarkable constitution on Jaguar Paw reinforces the notion of the ‘ethnographic spectacle’ (Spence, 2007), we are privileged this view of pre-columbian Yucatan because our protagonist can suffer the burden of savage brutality the New World represents.
The most subtle, yet controversial, justification of Apocalypto’s heady violence and cultural misrepresentation comes with the arrival of the Spanish Conquistadors and missionaries, the ‘saving grace’ of a corrupted empire on the brink of collapse lies within Christian Colonialism. Yell makes a pertinent argument in linking the young Cassandra’s prophesy with the Spanish arrival; “for the one he takes you to will cancel the sky... And end your world...” The prophesy not only describes the physical events of the film, but at an allegorical level refers to the collapse of Mayan civilisation. “He’s with us now.” could either refer to Jaguar Paw in the literal sense, or perhaps Christ in the metaphysical sense as the transformative power of redemption (Yelle, 2011). Indeed Jaguar Paw himself serves as a ‘native’ Christ–head, pure, innocent and having been seemingly dead and resurrected numerous times throughout the film, (Arrow wound as the Spear of Mercy) his newborn son ‘baptised’ in rainwater, he returns to the forest to “seek a new beginning.” Gibson’s justification of the conquering Spanish is that Christianity disrupts the economy of blood sacrifice upon which the Mayan civilisation apparently depends (Yelle, 2011), this simplistic Colonial discourse of primitive savagery overshadows the myriad advancements of Mayan culture. Apocalypto can only be considered ethnographic in the visual and aural presentation that Hollywood’s is so adept at, but like other ‘ethnographic’ films, serves as a vehicle to reinforce the filmmaker’s, and mainstream audience’s, pre–conceived notions of the ‘other'.
References


