

Expert: 'Apocalypto' is an insult to Maya culture

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As we stagger out of Mel Gibson's Maya historical thriller "Apocalypto," Julia Guernsey is visibly shaken. She's upset and not a little angry. She barely can contain her disgust, but she also can barely speak. I'm a little worried.

Guernsey is an assistant professor in the Department of Art and Art History at the University of Texas. Given her emphasis on pre-Columbian Mesoamerican art and culture, we invited Guernsey along to the preview last week so she could illuminate where Gibson got his history right and where he got it wrong.

The upshot: Boy, did he ever get it wrong.

Caution: The following interview with Guernsey contains spoilers.

You looked truly disturbed after the movie.

My first reaction was to the extraordinary, gratuitous violence. And the ending with the arrival of the Spanish (conquistadors) underscored the film's message that this culture is doomed because of its own brutality. The implied message is that it's Christianity that saves these brutal savages. I think that's part of Gibson's agenda, sort of, "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.

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Yet he goes out of his way in the first third of the movie to depict how peaceful and human at least some of them are.

Yes, they're shown as wonderful but ignorant. They're wonderful and they get along great and they've got this rip-roaring humor, but they don't know what's going on a-day-and-a-half's walk away, where this massive city, this metropolis, is being constructed. They haven't gotten wind of that

because they are in their forest, the forest of their fathers, the forest of their sons. I can feel my heart beating faster talking about this.

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You just hate this movie.

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 and alternative world views that might not match our own 21st-century Western ones but are nonetheless valid.

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What were you hoping for going into the movie?

I thought it would highlight some of the achievements of the Maya, but none of them is presented. They show some buildings but they don't talk about them. You get glimpses of some art, but it's overwhelmed by the nonstop violence.

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What are inaccuracies you noticed?

For one thing, the characters walk through a tunnel-like space and it's covered in wall murals. I'm nitpicking and it would mean nothing to most people, but it's a reconstruction of some murals that were just discovered in the past few years. They're from the site of San Bartolo in the Maya region (of Guatemala). Some pieces of it are copied exactly from the mural, but part of it is this gory scene of an individual holding a severed human head with blood flowing out of it. That's not in the mural! That's just Gibson on his violence kick. Plus, the murals are Late Pre-Classic, dating to about 100 B.C., making it very problematic that these people were walking through murals dating from 100 B.C. and then we have the arrival of the Spanish, which was in the 16th century. That's like 1,700 years apart.

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Couldn't they just be walking through an ancient area?

You could argue that, except that the film presents an inaccurate

hodgepodge of architecture. Some of it looked like Tikal Classic Maya, 800 A.D. Some looked Puuc, which is closer to 1000 or 1100 A.D. These are very different regions. It's like the difference between Texas and Delaware. It also looked like they were borrowing from El Mirador, this Pre-Classic metropolis that flourished around the year 0 A.D. It would be as though somebody did a movie on our American culture and they had Madonna and Marilyn Monroe riding in a car together, or they had a meeting of George Bush, Teddy Roosevelt and George Washington because why not condense a couple hundred or a couple thousand years? We would be appalled. We take our culture seriously. We demand historical specificity, something completely lacking here. Gibson had a responsibility to know better. He was consulting experts who should have told him.

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Were the sacrificial pyramid/temples really like they are in the movie?

We have accounts from the Aztecs of such things; it shows up in their mythology. And we have some images from the Maya that suggest that that kind of sacrifice did take place and that they probably did roll the bodies down (the pyramid). Now, the guys in the movie at the bottom catching the bodies with nets? That is crazy. We have no evidence for that. Another thing that was so funny was all that crazy, wild dancing with women's breasts flapping. I was just reading hours before I saw the movie with you a 400-page textbook dedicated to Maya dance, and it talked about how women played no major public role in these ceremonies but much more subtle roles.

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Was the depiction of sacrifice ? lining victims up as if they're in a ticket queue in front of a hysterical public crowd ? accurate? That was startling.

We have evidence to suggest that there were group sacrifices. But it would probably have been done as a pious act with solemnity. Some of it was probably public spectacle. But I'm suspect of the women gyrating and going into some kind of trance state, as, let's not forget, the world's fastest-ever solar eclipse is taking place.

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Did it bother you that the movie completely ignores the ancient Maya inventions and achievements, such as urban planning, writing,

mathematics, astronomy and art?

I did hope they would dwell on their achievements. There's this noble savage, 19th-century idea of barbaric savages, and it was like Gibson was rooted in that. All of these advances we've made in understanding their culture were completely forgotten. I think Mel Gibson is the worst thing that's happened to indigenous populations since the arrival of the Spanish. I say that in jest, but what is scary is that people will leave the movie thinking that because the characters were speaking Mayan there is an air of authenticity.

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What about the garb and elaborate ornamentation they wear in the movie, including bones in their noses?

Some of that is based on images we have that are probably more or less accurate. But again, they played it up in a way to make them seem somehow subhuman. So the costuming just played into the idea of them as real savages, rather than what it was for the Maya, which was an aesthetic display of beauty, just as we take care of our clothing and appearance. The whole thing was wrong. I was looking at the film's trailer, which says, "No one can outrun their destiny." And I thought, "You better run. You better outrun this movie."