Mel Gibson's Apocalypto: a painful experience

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Apocalypto, directed by Mel Gibson, written by Farhad Safinia

What are we to make of Mel Gibson's extremely violent *Apocalypto*? It seems less an artistic event than a social-psychological phenomenon.

The drama unfolds in the last days of the Mayan civilization in Central America, as imagined by Gibson and his screenwriter, Farhad Safinia, on the eve of the arrival of the Spanish. A peaceful village is ransacked and burned to the ground by a group of warriors, its inhabitants killed or carried off as captives. One young man, Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood), manages to hide his pregnant wife and child in a well before he too is captured and taken away.

After a terrifying journey, the warriors and their captives arrive in a large Mayan city in an area suffering from drought and plague. In the main temple the prisoners are to be sacrificed in an effort to appease the angry gods. After a natural miracle barely saves Jaguar Paw from this fate, he manages to flee, wounded, into the jungle. The fearsome warriors give chase. Will he evade them? Will he reach his wife and family in time to save them?

What does Gibson wish to tell us with his film? He explains to interviewers, perhaps not disingenuously, that the genesis of the film was merely the desire to create an exciting and sensational chase scene. And that does contain visually audacious and exciting moments. However, the events and details that have grown up, so to speak, around this central story inevitably reveal the director's attitude toward the world.

Two elements dominate the film: violence and the fear of violence. We remember the slit throats, severed heads, cut-out hearts, impaled body parts, as well as the pit of corpses, a face chewed by a panther, a spear through the back and so on, but, equally, the looks of terror on the faces of the various victims. In fact, the latter are the more powerful images. The camera may occasionally shy away from some of the goriest details, but it lingers lovingly on the awful expressions. Often, before we witness terrible things, we see them registered in frightened eyes and gaping mouths. Even the arrival of the Spanish is first captured in the amazed and fearful glances of the Mayans.

Gibson told an interviewer from *Entertainment Weekly*, "We're all afraid. That's something I've been finding out more recently—how racked by fear we are as a society. It all comes back to that. If you watch the news you're going to be terrified," and that "using fear" is "what this film is about."

Apocalypto conveys a sense that to gaze at the world honestly is to gaze at it with horror. And helplessness. Because, for the most part, none of the foreboding or forewarning does any of the characters any good. They stare into the face of unspeakable savagery as it bears down on them and they can do nothing. Only Jaguar Paw, at home in his natural habitat and determined to save his family, is able to produce a different result. (Interestingly, he summons up his nerve and decides to take the offensive against his pursuers when his back is turned to the camera, when he is *not* looking his tormentors in the face.) According to the logic of the film, one would hardly blame the individual who rejected human society and, with his wife and children, headed for the forest's deepest recesses.

There are various, mostly unpleasant, aspects to *Apocalypto*'s outlook as it presents itself to an audience. The film offers up hostility to cities, to large masses of people, and advances or implies a type of eco-survivalist misanthropy. The scenes in the capital represent an infernal vision, not one with fire and brimstone, but hell as a dry, dusty, chalky place, a polluted, desiccated wasteland—Gehenna or something like it, populated by soulless, demented men and women who cheer as one when human heads come rolling down the temple steps. The city and its inhabitants are entirely unredeemable. It would be best apparently if the place were razed to the ground, its population exterminated and a new beginning made.

Gibson's film begins with a citation from historian Will Durant in a title: "A great civilization is not conquered from without until it has destroyed itself from within."

It seems clear that Gibson has the present situation in mind. The film's production notes cite his comment that "one of the things that just kept coming up as we were writing is that many of the things that happened right before the fall of the Mayan civilization are occurring in our society now. It was important for me to make that parallel because you see these cycles repeating themselves over and over again. People think that modern man is so enlightened, but we're susceptible to the same forces—and we are also capable of the same heroism and transcendence."

And this from screenwriter Farhad Safinia: "We discovered that what archeologists and anthropologists believe is that the daunting problems faced by the Maya are extraordinarily similar to those faced today by our own civilization, especially when it comes to widespread environmental degradation, excessive consumption and political corruption."

These vague, ahistorical ruminations are not at all the same thing as a critique of or a protest against contemporary society—although it would probably be a mistake to pigeon-hole Gibson too quickly. He has not won friends on the political right by his recent comments critical of George W. Bush and the war in Iraq. At a screening in Austin, Texas, in September he drew parallels between the dysfunctional Mayan civilization and the current political situation in the US. "The precursors to a civilization that's going under are the same, time and time again," he observed. "What's human sacrifice if not sending guys off to Iraq for no reason?"

About his own political orientation, Gibson says, "I've always been very independent about the way I see things. Everyone always presumes I'm a Republican. I'm not. I couldn't vote for either one of those guys in the last election. I looked at the pair of them and was like, 'What do you want to do—get punched or get kicked?' It was a terrible choice to have to make. So I found somebody else on the ballot who was an independent who I liked the sound of. I can't even remember his name." It would be interesting to know whether this forgotten individual was a left-wing or, more likely, an extreme right-wing candidate.

If Gibson feels that Western civilization or American society is on its last legs, how does he account for this circumstance? Presumably 'apocalyptic' religious conceptions (premonitions of 'the end of days')

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combine in the filmmaker's thinking with the unscientific notion that every society's development proceeds through some universal and pre-determined cycle of birth, life and death.

The filmmaker does not trouble himself to attain an accurate historical picture. Shocking images are easier to create. Gibson's narrative makes no particular sense. How is it that one portion of the Mayan population lives in harmony while another murders and enslaves without batting an eyelid? Is it the very advance of civilization into the cities that has turned people into monsters? One should not insist on too precise an answer, it will not be forthcoming.

The director's thoughts and feelings are very confused, to say the least. In place of the real motives behind the actions of the various social players in his films, Gibson provides, first, rapid movement, and, second, brutality.

Of the speed of the action, he explains, "If you notice, the film practically doesn't stop moving, and so the entire style in which I wanted to have it happen was completely and utterly kinetic. I don't think we ever put a camera on a stick, so either it was hand-held, flying along on a cable, driving along, or somebody was holding it and running." In fact, the film's time scheme is deliberately skewed; once Jaguar Paw begins his journey homeward, although the march *to* the city took more than one day and night, he never stops moving until he reaches the remains of his native village.

The frenzy and brutality of the action obscure the essentially static, 'timeless' character of Gibson's social and historical view. If humanity has always been the same and its social forms have always undergone the same processes, whether one chooses the Mayan civilization or fourteenth century Scotland as one's setting is an entirely arbitrary matter.

It is worth noting, if only in passing, that Gibson's view of the Mayans as bloodthirsty, wanton savages is disputed by historians and anthropologists who point to the Central American civilization's great advances in mathematics, science, writing, art, architecture and engineering. Moreover, while human sacrifice was apparently practiced, the accounts left by Spanish soldiers and priests of mass deaths have been challenged as self-serving and grossly exaggerated.

Traci Ardren, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Miami, rejects the "offensive and racist notion that Maya people were brutal to one another long before the arrival of Europeans and thus they deserve, in fact they needed, rescue. This same idea was used for 500 years to justify the subjugation of Maya people ... Maya intellectuals have demonstrated convincingly that such ideas were manipulated by the Guatemalan army to justify the genocidal civil war of the 1970-1990s."

Atrocity and brutality become ends in themselves, critic Georg Lukács noted years ago, when the artist can only give a weak presentation "of what is the chief issue—the social development of man." Lukács noted that inhumanity and cruelty become substitutes for the "lost greatness of real history." Moreover, these qualities, as well as the choice of an exotic locale, stem from the morbid longing of modern men and women "to escape from the suffocating narrowness of everyday life."

This latter point seems entirely *à propos*. Gibson responds with paranoia, disgust and boredom to both the political elite and the Hollywood establishment, but his sentiments find a fairly noxious and fantasized outlet.

There is also the matter of personal psychological difficulty. His films and behavior, including his recent anti-Semitic rant, indicate an unstable personality. Burdened with a dreadful father, a Holocaust denier and member of a traditionalist Catholic splinter group who described the reformist Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as "a Masonic plot backed by the Jews," Gibson obviously battles his own devils. The image of a nearly naked man scourged, beaten almost to death and tortured while restrained or crucified (in *Apocalypto*, Jaguar Paw and his fellow captives are attached Christlike to heavy poles they carry through the jungle and over mountain passes) recurs in the director's films. He seems to be infatuated with the need to receive pain as a means, presumably, of morally cleansing oneself. This is by no means healthy.

Gibson has talents, even as a director, although too many of the performances in *Apocalypto* are caricatures of hulking, leering, monstrous evil. He is obviously endowed with demonic energy. The construction of a miniature Mayan city, carried out with great attention to physical detail, involved a vast labor. Money does not seem to be his primary interest.

One goes to one of Gibson's films with a certain dread. It is not, however, that feeling aroused by a monumental work of art, works that radiate with depth and demand an almost unbearable amount from the reader or viewer, Dreiser's *An American Tragedy*, Döblin's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* or *King Lear*, for example, but the sheer animal dread associated with watching a gruesome horror film. In fact, there is an overlap here, which does not speak well of Gibson.

At the same time, however, there is a good deal of cant, and superficiality, in the more self-righteous attacks on *Apocalypto*. Individual critics certainly have the right to deplore the bloody 'pornography' of Gibson's film, its sensationalism, its gratuitous and relentless violence—there is much to condemn and, anyway, the director has made many enemies. However, one needs to ask: how many of these same critics heaped praise, for example, on Quentin Tarantino's *Kill Bill* or Martin Scorsese's *The Departed*?

People fool themselves in various ways. Tarantino is absolved because his fashionably cynical films are considered cartoonish forays into 'black comedy' and Scorsese's violence is forgiven on account of its supposed textured and poetic quality. In reality, the films by Tarantino, Scorsese and Gibson are points on the same disoriented and debased continuum. Interestingly, in one of his interviews, Gibson mentions that "Martin Scorsese sent me the script from the last film he did, *The Departed* [in a vain effort to obtain Gibson's services as an actor]. I thought it was fantastic." In turn, one reviewer noted that Scorsese's latest work contained "scenes of cruelty and violence that Tarantino himself would be proud to rip off."

The difference is that Gibson goes overboard. Out of control, something of a loose and quasi-independent cannon (he has self-financed the last two films), Gibson is less able and has less need to restrain himself. He is like the professional football player, for example, who crosses over the fine line between the systematic, controlled thuggishness encouraged by the sport's authorities and media and the 'extracurricular,' even criminal activity that brings moralizing and punishment down upon his head.

Gibson makes people nervous in part because he takes the obscene fascination with violence, which pervades the film and entertainment industry, to such absurd heights that the entire phenomenon threatens to become visible and called into question. That, however, is not convoluted reason enough to praise his new film, which is largely a painful experience.

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