

Indie Movement

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great grandson of A L and Theodora Kroeber). Ted is just back from Sundance and he tells me that *Little Miss Sunshine* was the darling of the festival, and was sold to Fox Searchlight for \$10.5 million, the largest sale ever made at Sundance. I said I was in touch with the producers, Albert Berger and Ron Yerxa. He said, "Berger and Yerxa, they're the gold standard. They're who I want to be when I grow up."

Indie producers perform most of the functions of traditional producers, bringing together the script, the people and the money that are the basic ingredients of making a film. But they differ from traditional producers in important ways. For die-hard indie filmmakers, who do not take any money at all from studios, there is always a question of where the money will come from, and the producers have much more work to do in raising the financing for the film.

More substantively, independent producers are much more clearly on the side of the filmmakers in the indie context than in the studio context. Within the studio framework, producers are in effect part of management, or at least ambiguously positioned between management (the executives, "the suits") and the director. In the independent filmmaking context, by contrast, they are not answerable to executives above them, and are clearly part of the filmmaker's team. This is true even in the case of a company like Berger and Yerxa's Bona Fide Productions which, like many independent production companies today, does a lot of work via deals with studios; they remain, nonetheless, a structurally independent company, and they bring their projects to studios more as part of the creative team of the film. A corollary of this point, in turn, is that independent producers often have more creative input into the filmmaking process than traditional producers. ■

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MEDIA CORNERS

THE RECEPTION OF A HOLLYWOOD FILM AND A BOLLYWOOD ACTRESS

Media—including film and television—has become an important site of anthropological study. At the same time, the relationships between media, culture and society are put in question, as they are by contributors to this issue of AN. Following

are two commentaries on the reception of a Hollywood film, *Apocalypto*, by various communities, including one from the Yucatán. Also included is a discussion on how controversy concerning a Bollywood actress' treatment in a British television program both revealed and minimized forms of inequality and racism.

Apocalypto in Cobá

ROBEY CALLAHAN

In early March 2007, a Cobá school-teacher guest-taught a class of 22 second-graders in one of the local primary schools. The special topic for the day was "The Art of the Maya." The class began thus:

T(eacher): *Today we're talking about the art of the Maya. Do you know who the Maya are?*

M(any children): *Yes.*

C(hild)1: *They are made of stone.*

T: *Stone.*

C2: *Yes, they are made of stone. They are men.*

T: *Where?*

C3: *In the jungle.*

T: *Jungle. What more do you know of the Maya?*

C4: *The Maya kill.*

T: *They kill?*

C5: *No!*

M: *Yes!*

C5: *Yes, yes, they kill.*

C6: *They kill people.*

M: *They kill!*

C7: *They also kill animals.*

T: *I believe you saw the film *Apocalypto*. Is that right?*

M: *(about half raise their hands and shout): Yes!*

T: *Well, that film was a film about the Maya. But today we're talking about part of the life of the Maya.*

The teacher then shifted to discussing some books and artifacts he had brought with him, and the children later made drawings and clay representations of a range of more or less traditional (and contemporary) Maya household items.

If gross receipts are anything to go by, the film-going public has clearly found Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* worth its time and money. And yet few Mayanist anthropologists (not to mention Latino and Chicano groups and Maya activists) have had kind words to say about it. But how was the movie received

in the Yucatán? While conducting fieldwork in the village of Cobá, Quintana Roo, México, I endeavored to learn what locals thought about the film.

Identifying With the Language

The modern-day Yucatecan village of Cobá is situated right next to the ruins of the ancient city of Cobá, a Classic Maya site with few rivals. More than 30 years of growing archaeological and tourist interest in the site have transformed the economy of Cobá—the-village from one based predominantly on corn-farming to one centered around meeting the various needs of the ever-increasing numbers of outside visitors. While this has led to greater knowledge of the archaeological past among residents (local tourist guides especially know quite a bit about the ancient history of the region), there is no strong sense here of a politicized "Maya" identity. However, Yucatec Maya, the spoken language used in *Apocalypto*, remains the first language of most villagers.

Before *Apocalypto*, no one in Cobá had ever seen a film or television program done exclusively in Yucatec Maya. Many do not speak the more prestigious national language (Spanish) with a comfortable degree of fluency and so often feel inferior in the presence of those who do. Furthermore, some Maya activists in the region promote a "purified" version of Yucatec Maya, stripped of Spanish loanwords and replete with resurrected vocabulary, regional variants and "authentic" neologisms no one in Cobá uses and few even know; many locals are thus made to feel that they cannot even speak their own language "properly."

The actors in *Apocalypto*, with some exceptions—the old one-armed storyteller and the diseased girl who channels the omens, for example—are at times difficult for those in Cobá to understand. Some here think this

is because Gibson is using the "purified" version of Yucatec Maya in the film, although the occasional appearance of "b'e'òoráa," a Maya-Spanish hybrid for "now," might, for some more astute language purists, argue against this. While others are aware of this linguistic-"purity" issue, they also point to the more banal problem of bad pronunciation, such as when some actors fail to distinguish between *k* and *k'*.

Still, Gibson's use of a (usually) comprehensible version of the native language remains a definite "plus" for people here. It gives locals an undeniable feeling of pride.

The Violence and Accuracy Issues

The sensitive Western reader may be shocked by the second-graders' comments above, but such exposure to graphic violence is common in Cobá. The news media routinely provide explicit images of the mutilated bodies of murder and accident victims, and parents rarely censor their children's contact with violent images more generally. Indeed, while many here find *Apocalypto* to be violent, few find it excessively so. One man simply shrugs his shoulders and says, "All films are violent." Local responses,



Cobá second-graders representing the art of the Maya. Photo courtesy Rubén Alfonso Amaro Chan

however, do split fairly consistently along gender lines: men and boys tend to find the brutality in *Apocalypto* exciting; women and girls tend to be put off by it.

While local tourist guides feel the film is good for tourism, they question the accuracy of the sacrifices (and express their doubts to tourists who ask), holding that the Maya who built the ancient city of Cobá did not perform human sacrifices, at least not with such exaggerated enthusiasm. This is the only key thing they would change about the film, if given the chance.

COMMENTARY

There is, however, a tendency here for people, and not just second-graders, to take most films and television programs more or less at face value and not to distinguish strongly between fictional and factual accounts (a tendency also at least implicit, rightly or wrongly, in many Western and other external representation-focused critiques of *Apocalypto*). Thus, Jaguar Paw, the movie's protagonist, is often seen as (having been) a real person. Indeed, the overall look and feel of the film, and in particular the facial features and skin tones of most of the actors (including the ones who speak Yucatec Maya poorly), are often praised for being true, even if there remain some doubts about other story elements among more knowledgeable locals.

A Paradoxical Modern Message

What is clearly more important than the accuracy issue, however, is what people here take to be the film's core message. Cobá villagers (and the modern Maya of Yucatán generally) share Gibson's apparent view that the family is the most significant element of society. This is no fleeting affectation, but something of great sensual and conceptual profundity. Here, outside forces pale into insignificance as Jaguar Paw leads his family, and Cobá viewers, away from the unnamed Maya city, away from the Spaniards' boats, and back into the jungle—back to that central cultural truth.

Even granting the appeal of the story itself, there remains in the modern village of Cobá a great gulf between who people imagine themselves to be and who they imagine the ancient Maya are/were. Many here are uncomfortable applying the term "Maya" to themselves (though it is what they call their native language). Some refer to the very poor and more traditional as "very Maya."

This gulf is especially felt in terms of local conceptions of space. *Apocalypto* portrays the Maya living "in the jungle" (significant as the classroom discussion from above suggests). The pyramids in the film are also "in the jungle" in the eyes of locals. (Today, one finds such ruins in the archaeological zone—not in the village). The Maya live/lived "in the jungle"

(the prototypical "wild" space in contemporary conceptions), and modern Cobá people live in the village. Is there, then, a contradiction between such conceptions and the appeal of Jaguar Paw's escape, with his family, into the jungle? Not at the level of gut reaction.

When, however, I discuss matters of representation with locals, people respond variously with puzzlement ("the film is about the *Maya* [not

seem interested in finding out what ordinary Maya have to say. Surely it is our duty as anthropologists to bring in the voices of the people we study.

The views from Cobá matter, or at least they should. They may not make comfortable reading for some, but the fact remains that the only outsiders who get the thumbs up here are anthropologists and



The views from Cobá . . . may not make comfortable reading for some, but the fact remains that the only outsiders who get the thumbs up here are anthropologists and Gibson himself.

us]), indifference (except, for some, with regard to the accuracy issue) and deference (for anthropologists in general, who are much respected here, and for Gibson, whose *Apocalypto* puts people here "on the map"). Clearly, then, this sense of disconnection between past and present is by no means complete. Even if, for many, this sense of disconnection is somewhat akin to the way the English may view the various builders of Stonehenge, there still seems to be something at stake.

While *Apocalypto* continues to occasion many high-media debates over representation, few critics

Gibson himself. Perhaps, though, these views will, if taken seriously, provide some relief for those who are troubled by the film. For other Mayanists out there, what do the voices of the ordinary people where you work tell you? ☐

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Gibson's *Apocalypto* as an Act Against the Maya

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TULANE U

Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* has added insult to injury. The problem with this film is that it goes to great strides to appear accurate, and in so doing endangers recent advances the Maya have made to overcome some of the still-felt consequences of conquest and colonization.

It has taken over 500 years for Westerners to realize the damage the colonization impulse perpetuated in the indigenous peoples of the Americas—a realization destroyed by watching a few hours of a film that goes to great lengths to portray the

Maya as a barbarian people in need of saving. That message could not be clearer with the appearance of the Spanish conquerors at the end of the film.

At the recent premier of the film in Mexico City, Gibson brushed off criticism of his representation of Maya as savages by claiming that these critics did not do their homework. However, Mayanists and Maya as well as other Native American groups have rejected the film on the grounds that it goes too far in representing the Maya as savages.

In a December 12 issue of the *Washington Post*, David Stuart (U Texas-Austin) characterized Gibson's portrayal of the Maya as a civilization so evil that deserved to die while

Jorge Miguel Cocom Pech, a Maya writer, said in a January 15 issue of *La Jornada* that Gibson owes the Maya an apology. Even Richard Hansen, an archaeologist of the Maya area who helped in the production of the film, expressed some reservations about how the Maya are portrayed, quoted by the *Washington Post* on December 9 as saying that the film gives the impression that the Maya are frequently sadistic.

Accuracy vs Selective Focus

The issue here is not whether the film is accurate or not at different levels ranging from the language used to the geography and historic accuracies. We already know Gibson hired scholars who study the Classic

Maya to represent an accurate view of the Maya in his film. Minor flaws on technical issues are not even part of the accuracy with which Gibson represents the Maya.

Rather, it is what Gibson chose to focus on. The Maya civilization produced some of the greatest scientific advances not just in the New World, but in all of humanity as well, such as the mathematical concept of zero, a calendar system and a logophonetic writing system.

COMMENTARY

Gibson chose instead to focus on violence at a time when images of violent Maya were used to justify the systematic attempt at extermination of Maya peoples as late as the 1980s in Guatemala. Because

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