Relativism, Revisionism, Aboriginalism, and Emic/Etic Truth: The Case Study of Apocalypto

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Chapter 8
Relativism, Revisionism, Aboriginalism, and Emic/Etic Truth: The Case Study of *Apocalypto*

Richard D. Hansen

Abstract Popular film depictions of varied cultures, ranging from the Chinese, Africans, and Native Americans have repeatedly provided a variant perception of the culture. In works of fiction, this flaw cannot only provide us with entertainment, but with insights and motives in the ideological, social, or economic agendas of the authors and/or directors as well as those of the critics. Mel Gibson's Maya epic *Apocalypto* has provided an interesting case study depicting indigenous warfare, environmental degradation, and ritual violence, characteristics that have been derived from multidisciplinary research, ethnohistoric studies, and other historical and archaeological investigations. The film received extraordinary attention from the public, both as positive feedback and negative criticism from a wide range of observers. Thus, the elements of truth, public perception, relativism, revisionism, and emic/etic perspectives coalesced into a case where truth, fiction, and the virtues and vices of the authors and director of the film as well as those of critics were exposed. A fictional movie such as *Apocalypto* can provide entertainment and/or evoke moods and thoughts that usually extend beyond the "normal" as a work of art. In documentaries and academic publications and presentations, however, such flaws are much more serious, and provide distortions and misrepresentations of the "truth" that are (equally) perpetuated in literature and popular perceptions.

While certain criticisms of Hollywood portrayals of varied cultures can be justified, particular academic and social agendas equally use aboriginalism, relativism, and revisionism as an attempt to distort the past and manipulate academic and social fabric. Claims of "cultural or religious inequality" are flawed if and when they distort truth, as best determined by multidisciplinary scientific studies, involving a full range of scientific query and investigation, ethnography, ethnohistory, and extensive

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methodological procedure. A solution lies in a return to the philosophical foundations of science a la Peirce, Hempel, and Haack, among others, to organize and understand an objective truth as part of the ultimate goal in anthropological research.

Introduction

One of the more common struggles within anthropological disciplines is the concept of an emic interpretation (meaning the native or indigenous perceptions), as opposed to an etic interpretation (the perceptions of the observer) (Pike 1967). In some cases, a "revisionist" will ignore the facts and both the etic and emic interpretations and propose a popular perspective that is void of truth. Some more recent movements such as "aboriginalism" provides a perspective that "Indigenous societies and cultures possess qualities that are fundamentally different from those of non-Aboriginal peoples" (McGhee 2008:579). The avoidance of both the etic and emic perspectives will present serious flaws to an investigator and provides ample argument for a strong multidisciplinary approach to anthropological and archaeological research in the establishment of scientific "facts." One of the more interesting examples of this problem became apparent in the release of the blockbuster film, *Apocalypto*, directed by actor/director Mel Gibson and produced by Mel Gibson and Bruce Davey, with Executive Producers Ned Dowd and Vicki Christianson. The film spurred a chorus of criticisms and complaints from some critics and members of the academic and native communities, a curious reaction in view of the fact that the film is entirely a work of fiction. In other cases, extraordinary praise and complements came from both critics and academic and Native American communities. A special session was organized at the American Anthropological Association meetings in 2007 entitled "*Critiquing Apocalypto: An Anthropological Response to the Perpetuation of Inequality in Popular Media,*" which merited being termed a "Presidential Session" sponsored by the Archaeology Division and the Society for Humanistic Anthropology. The obvious glaring flaw is that one would have to assume that it must have been established previously, somehow, that the film was a "perpetuation of inequality." One of the organizers wrote "Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto* is one recent example within a history of cinematic spectacles to draw directly upon anthropological research yet drastically *misinform* its audience about the nature of indigenous culture" (Ardren 2007a; emphasis mine). Additional recent movies depicting the past, such as *Gladiator (*Ridley Scott, director). *Spartacus (*Stanley Kubrick, director), *Troy (*Wolfgang Peterson, Director), or Gibson's *Braveheart* and *Passion of the Christ* proved extraordinarily successful at the box office (*Gladiator*, *Braveheart*, *Passion of the Christ*), but had similar criticisms of "numerous historical inaccuracies and distortions of fact" from critics and academicians (e.g., Winkler and Martin 2004: Xi, 2007). The fascinating dichotomy of the historical truths and inaccuracies depicted in films and the emic and etic issues involved in popular movies representing the past, and in particular, the case of *Apocalypto*, has prompted a review of the issues of perception, relativism, revisionism, and truth

and demonstrates an important need to re-evaluate anthropological trends and interpretations. In this case, the concept of aboriginalism or "exceptionalism" may have been infused in the criticisms, where it is assumed that "Aboriginal individuals and groups…assume rights over their history that are not assumed by or available to non-Aboriginals" (McGhee 2008: 581). It is clear that many of the criticisms were a direct reflection of the disapproval of Gibson's previous behavior (Bunch 2006), as well as a standing resentment because of the film *Passion of the Christ*, a movie which seemed to serve as a "pebble in the shoe" for many liberal, atheist, and in particular, Jewish people. In other cases, the criticisms were valid observations of the license taken by Gibson and the film staff in different aspects of the film *Apocalypto,* much of which was done for aesthetic reasons or for story expediency. One of the more comprehensive summaries of the film, the issues, and interviews as well as a host of conflicting criticisms are found online with Flixster (http://www.flixster.com/actor/mel-gibson/mel-gibson-apocalypto).

Some of the quibbling may have been as simple as the disagreement as to whether the High Priest had a frown or a smile on his face when he extracted a human heart in *Apocalypto*. This is a benign discussion and a shallow argument. A far more serious issue however, is the posture that some scholars and Native Americans have taken, which denies that human sacrifice among the Maya even took place. Such positions fall into concepts of "revisionism," "aboriginalism," and "relativism" that signals a threat to truth and understanding of the human saga. This chapter will explore this dichotomy through an examination of the historical setting of *Apocalypto*, the acclaims and criticisms of the film, and explore in greater depth just one of the criticisms that the Maya were not practicing large-scale human sacrifice by the Late Postclassic period, and that depiction as such represented an "inequality," "racism," and "slander." The reality of the depicted sacrifice scenes in *Apocalypto,* as determined by ethnohistoric, ethnographic, iconographic, and archaeological data suggests that many of the critics may have subscribed to a revisionist/relativist/aboriginalist perspective which distorts the past and creates a philosophical dilemma that can be addressed by a return to a scientific model proposed by Peirce, Hempel, Haack, and others as a theoretical solution to the issue.

Historical Context

In August 2004, this author (Hansen) was requested to attend a series of meetings at the headquarters of Icon Productions in Santa Monica, California to discuss the ancient Maya. The interests of Mel Gibson, Farhad Safinia, and producer Stephen McEveety of Icon Productions were the perspectives of ancient Maya culture that were observed in the National Geographic film, "Dawn of the Maya" (National Geographic 2004). The meetings resulted in lengthy discussions on nearly every aspect of Maya civilization, chronologies, and societal evolution. This further evolved into several trips to the Maya area, particularly Tikal and the Mirador Basin of northern Guatemala, where Gibson asked questions, toured sites, engaged in

discussions with local Maya inhabitants and workers, and explored the environmental and cultural aspects of Maya civilization. His interest in the Preclassic societies of the Mirador Basin, the Classic cultures as portrayed at Tikal, Palenque, and Copan, and the Postclassic cultures of Mayapan, Tulum, and Iximche led him and associate Farhad Safinia to write the story line for a movie (see Padgett 2006a, b:60). In particular, he wanted a film to be a "chase scene" because it had the more "universal appeal" and was something that he had wanted to do for some time (Flixster 2006:10). A script was drafted by Gibson and Safinia, and research was implemented for setting and filming locations. Hotel facilities were reviewed in Guatemala, Belize, Costa Rica, and Mexico, with the final location selected in Veracruz, Mexico, because of adequate hotel space, ease of access, abundant industrial capability, and sufficient infrastructure for a movie of this nature.

An elaborate set depicting a Maya Postclassic period city was built to accommodate the story. Gibson and his award winning set production engineer, Thomas E. Sanders, built the entire set on an area of about 40 acres (35 ha) on a sugar cane farm bordering a small section of forest behind a hill near the small town of Boqueron, located about 40 miles to the west of Veracruz. A common misconception is that the film used computer graphics to depict the city, which was entirely untrue. Hansen was brought in for consultations and observation on two separate occasions during the middle and termination of the construction of the ancient cityscape. The site selected was, interestingly enough, an ancient village site, as detected by numerous Preclassic figurine and ceramic fragments found in the area. The basic idea was to construct a Postclassic city, complete with pyramids, structures with columns, outset stairways, causeways, and residence structures (Figs. 8.1–8.4). Indeed, the degree of detail in the city was extraordinary. Site designer Tom Sanders was quoted as saying that the film was "the hardest set he had ever worked on" (Padgett 2006a, b:61; personal communication to Hansen 2006), a revealing comment considering the extraordinary sets that Sanders has created and worked on (e.g., *Saving Private Ryan*, *Hook*, *Jurassic Park 3, Superman*, *Braveheart*, *Dracula*). Corn processing facilities, cacao preparation areas, basketry and mat production areas, cotton processing and weaving areas, tropical fruit, bean, and chile production areas, hide tanneries, textile dyeing vats, wood working shops, butcher shops, markets, ceramic and figurine manufacturing, sweat baths, monuments, and residences were all prepared with maximum detail (Figs. 8.5–8.9). Corn husks, iguana skins, mats, turtle shells, ceramic bowls, cooking pots, storage vessels, gourds, baskets, mats, hammocks, ropes, wooden artifacts, lithic waste flakes, grinding stones, feathers, and dogs, ducks, and turkeys were all present within the extensive residential zone (Figs. 8.10–8.14). Existent Ceiba trees, the sacred trees of the Maya, were left standing and incorporated within the city as part of the props (Fig. 8.15). The entire set was extraordinary in detail and represented a authentic reproduction seldom, if ever, provided on film sets. For an anthropologist, it was a time machine, because the elements, both organic and nonorganic included in the set were all characteristic of urban and village Maya societies, both past and present (Figs. 8.16–8.19). However, since part of the story had to involve opulence and splendor, Gibson chose to have a small portion of the reconstructed city, which was the primary plaza and

Fig. 8.1 General view of the cityscape of Apocalypto, near Veracruz Mexico (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.2 Cityscape designer Thomas Sanders in front of some of his creations for the movie Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.3 Postclassic architecture near one of the streets of the city (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.4 The Tzompantli and Postclassic period architecture near the main plaza on the movie set. Note the *vertical poles* similar to that detected at Chichen Itza (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.5 Market scene in the Postclassic city set of Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.6 Postclassic period architecture near the market in the cityscape of Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.7 Postclassic period architecture with drying chile pods in the city scape (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.8 Postclassic period butcher shop in city scape of Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.9 Ceramic production area in the cityscape of Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.10 Residential area with basketry and mat production materials (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.11 Domestic refuse near one of the residence structures in the cityscape of Apocalypto. (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.12 Domestic materials consisting of crocodile hides, armadillo skins, turtle shells, and ceramics with a stone mortar and pestle (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.13 Domestic materials in a residence construction (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.14 Domestic refuse outside a residence in the Apocalypto cityscape (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.15 Ceiba tree, the sacred tree of the Maya, left in situ in the city scape of Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

flanking structures, remain in the Classic period style since they generally were larger structures than those of the Postclassic period (Fig. 8.20). A compromise was reached with the Classic period structures showing age with evidence of deterioration and decay on the buildings. In fact, to accommodate the "reality" of the setting, several of the larger Classic period structures were undergoing "remodeling" into architecture more characteristic of the Postclassic period (Figs. 8.21 and 8.22). Even though the entire city was fictitious, the idea was to replicate the situation like that found at sites such as Cobá, Oxtankah, or Ichpaatun in Quintana Roo, Mexico (Boot 2007), where large, earlier Classic and early Postclassic period structures were surrounded by a later Postclassic city. Yet, the primary buildings of the main plaza were designed to more closely resemble Tikal (Guatemala) because of the obvious manifestations of splendor and cultural achievement. Therefore, some of the primary examples of art and architecture were cobbled together as general, generic Maya images. Chenes and Puuc art were selected on the facades of temples, primarily due to "artistic license," since it was the most glaringly opulent Yucatecan Maya-related art, and only a minor detail in Gibson's mind, in comparison to the story that was to be unfolded (Figs. 8.23 and 8.24). Since the story was set in sixteenth-century coastal Yucatan, the language needed to be Yucatec to provide linguistic authenticity

Fig. 8.16 Bird cages, fowl preparation near a domestic residence in the Apocalypto cityscape (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.17 Residential materials outside of a residence construction at Apocalypto (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.18 Domestic productions outside of a residence construction in the *Apocalypto* cityscape (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.19 Corn preparation area in the *Apocalypto* cityscape (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.20 The Central Plaza of the *Apocalypto* cityscape. Not the remodeling and construction underway on the weathered building on the left (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.21 The damaged and weathered structure in the Central Plaza of the *Apocalypto* cityscape undergoing remodeling and construction with more Postclassic architecture forms burying the Classic period building (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.22 Construction of a Postclassic period structure with a large mound of lime in the foreground (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

Fig. 8.23 Puuc art that adorned the upper structure of a building in the Apocalypto cityscape (Photo: R.D. Hnasen)

Fig. 8.24 Puuc art on a structure in the primary plaza of the cityscape (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

and a realistic context. It was difficult to conceive of a Maya warrior shouting, in English, "Come on Joe, let's go get him!"

Costumes, ornaments, and props were produced in warehouses and workshops in Veracruz supervised by property master Richard (Rick) Young, costume designer Mayes C. Rubeo (*Avatar*), armourer Simon Atherton, (*Gladiator, Saving Private Ryan, Robin Hood, Clash of the Titans*), and a large and diverse staff of outstanding artists, hair, and makeup designers (http://www.visualhollywood.com/movies/apocalypto/credits.php). Extraordinary attention to detail of tattoos, jewelry, textiles, headdresses, banners, shields, weapons, and ceramics was based on images, monuments, ceramics, and murals from archaeological contexts (Figs. 8.25 and 8.26).

Filming was initially conducted in the Catemaco region to the south of Veracruz where a section of primal, original rainforest could still be found for the hunting camp scenes. Gibson employed cutting-edge digital camera technology consisting of Panavision's Genesis system, providing extraordinary capability for specific scenes, and he worked with Oscar-award winning cinematographer Dean Semler (*Dances with Wolves*) to produce the visual effects he wanted. Actors were, for the most part, selected by Gibson and nearly all had no previous film experience (exceptions were Raoul Trujillo {*Black Robe*, *The New World*} and Mayra Sérbulo) (Padgett 2006a, b). Gibson's coaching was exceptional because the actors were credible with no previous experience.

Fig. 8.25 The author with property master Rick Young and staff with Maya banners (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

As noted earlier, the film was to be produced in Yucatec Maya, since the story was to have taken place in the general vicinity of eastern Quintana Roo, location of the first Spanish contacts by shipwrecked sailors Valdivia, Gerónimo de Aguilar and Gonzalo de Guerrero (1511), and later ship bound contact by Francisco Hernandez de Córdoba (1517) and Juan de Grijalva (1518). It was the relatively small amounts of gold and turquoise objects found among the Maya, a result of trade and contact with the Aztecs, that led to further exploration and organization of the conquest of the Aztecs in 1519 under Hernan Cortés. Furthermore, the Spanish friar, Diego de Landa explains that the Mexica had garrisons in Tabasco and Xicalango, and that the Cocom "brought the Mexican people into Mayapan" and other areas of the Yucatan Peninsula (Landa 1941: 32–36) which would explain the widespread influence that Aztec culture had on the Maya in the Yucatan area.

The language training came under the tutelage of Hilario Chi Canul, a native monolingual Yucatecan Maya speaker who eventually learned Spanish at age 14, and who was the Mexican National Champion of Indigenous Maya Oratory in 2007. Dr. Barbara MacLeod (U of Texas, Austin) provided additional postfilming language assistance overdubbing and off-camera lines (see http://www.jonesreport.com/articles/121206_anthropologist_apocalypto.html). Eastern Yucatan was also selected because it would have been the source of origin for the first contact disease

Fig. 8.26 Exquisite detail went into the placement of jade ornaments and headdress constructions by a talented and dedicated team in Veracruz, Mexico (Photo: R.D. Hansen)

in the continental New World (Small Pox), a point that Gibson wanted to make with a diseased little girl (Aquetzali Garcia) in the film. Set production and filming began in September 2005, and extended through June of 2006, with additional shoots in Costa Rica and England during June and July. Since the shooting was not done on a controlled set, it was subject to extremely rugged weather conditions, including extensive heat, humidity, and copious amounts of rain, which delayed the entire film about 3–4 months. Film editing was under the direction of Gibson and John Wright (*Hunt for Red October, Speed, Passion of the Christ*)

Apocalypto: Reactions

Upon its release in December 2006, *Apocalypto* was immediately declared by numerous critics as one of the most outstanding films of its genre and the "most artistically brilliant film" (e.g., Finke 2010; see also Bunch 2006; Berardinelli 2006; McCarthy 2006; Souter 2006; Baumgarten 2006; King 2007). Film critic Christopher Jacobs (2006) noted that "'*Apocalypto*' is not only a well-made film, an interesting anthropological artifact, and food for philosophical–political speculation, but is itself a revelation heralding the end of an era in motion picture

production" (Jacobs 2006; see http://www.und.edu/instruct/cjacobs/Reviews.htm#apocalypto). Talk show hosts Alex Jones and Paul Watson called it the "most powerful film of all time" (Jones and Watson 2006). The film quickly climbed to No. 1 at the box office the first week of its release on December 2006, beating out "Happy Feet," "The Holiday," "Casino Royale," and "Blood Diamond." Similar responses were obtained in Europe and Asia, where the film remained at No. 1 for more than 4 weeks. The film established the UK box office record for the biggest opening weekend for a foreign language film, and reportedly earned $120.6 million (Finke 2010). Gibson received the Trustee Award from First Americans in the Arts (FAITA) and the Latino Business Associations Chairman's Visionary Award. The film won the Dallas-Fort Worth Critics Association Award, the Central Ohio Film Critics Association (FOFCA), and the Phoenix Film Critics Society Award for Best Cinematography. The film was ultimately nominated for three Academy Awards in Makeup, Sound Editing, and Sound Mixing. According to several insiders to the movie industry, the film should also have been nominated for Academy Awards for Costume Design, Cinematography, Foreign-Language Film, and Supporting Actor, but Gibson's unfortunate statements earlier in 2006 damaged his chances for such nominations (personal communication to Hansen, Feb. 2007; personal communication to Hansen, Mar. 2007; see also Finke 2010). It was nominated in the foreign language category for a Golden Globe Award. The film was also nominated for *Best Direction* and *Best International Film* in the Academy of Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Horror Films. It was nominated as the *Outstanding Achievement in Cinematography in Theatrical Releases* by the American Society of Cinematographers as well as *Best Film not in the English Language* by the British Academy of Film and Television (BAFTA).

In spite of the laudatory recognition of the film, many negative criticisms of the film were forthcoming from members of the academic community, and much of this was conveyed to the press. *New York Times* writer Mark McGuire noted negative comments from anthropologists and professors at SUNY Albany in an article entitled "*Apocalypto*' a pack of inaccuracies" (McGuire 2006). A letter was written to the monthly bulletin of the Society for American Archaeology ("SAA Archaeological Record") noting that the film had "technical inaccuracies and distortions in its portrayal of the pre-Contact Maya." "Anyone who cares about the past should be alarmed" and "*Apocalypto* will have set back, by several decades at least, archaeologists' efforts to foster a more informed view of earlier cultures" (Lohse 2007:3). Harvard scholar David Carrasco, professor of religious history at Harvard was reported to have claimed that "Gibson has made the Maya into 'slashers' and their society a hypermasculine fantasy" (Miller 2006:14), a curious interpretation of the film in light of late Postclassic society throughout Mesoamerica. Archaeologist Traci Ardren (University of Miami) spoke out against the film and was quoted extensively throughout U.S. press releases that *Apocalypto* represented "pornography" (Ardren 2006). Ardren and others had somehow assumed that the story dealt with the Late Classic Maya and the collapse in the ninth century, as one of the criticisms was that the "Spanish arrived over 300 years after the last Maya city was abandoned" (?) (Ardren ibid: 2; interrogative mine). Maya cities along the coastal areas

were fully occupied when the Spanish arrived, with hundreds and in several cases, thousands of buildings recorded for several observed sites. However, in a conflicting argument, Ardren noted that she was aware that the "Maya practiced brutal violence upon one another" and that she had "studied child sacrifice during the Classic period" (ibid). Her fallacious supposition that it was Gibson's intent to infuse his personal religion was evident in the arrival of the Spanish, which suggested to her that Gibson meant "the end is near and the savior has come" and that "Gibson's efforts…mask his blatantly colonial message that the Maya needed saving because they were rotten at the core" (ibid). The obvious fallacy here is that her position is based entirely on unsupported assertions. She also implied that Gibson was stating that "there was absolutely nothing redeemable about Maya culture" since there was "no mention….made of the achievements in science and art, the profound spirituality and connection to agricultural cycles, or the engineering feats of Maya cities" (Ardren 2006:2). Such an odd theoretical position is dealt with by several film critics below (see Bunch 2006). While her criticisms were toned down in the special Presidential Session of the American Anthropological Association meeting in Washington, D.C., Ardren noted that:

> Aquetzali, (the diseased little girl with the prophetic statements) with her Hollywood lesions and Lacandon inspired styling, encapsulates the big budget manipulation of cultural history and fact that has disturbed so much of the academic and activist communities while simultaneously enthralling so much of the movie-going public (Ardren 2007b:1).

The obvious questions here are, how does the diseased little girl encapsulate a "big budget manipulation of cultural history and fact"? How does this disturb academic and activist communities? The little girl had Small Pox, a reality of death brought by the Spanish to Latin America. And, the Lacandon inspired styling was totally intentional, seeing how the Lacandon are Yucatecan Maya speakers who migrated very late in Maya history to the interior heartland.

Other criticisms ranged from the presence of a blue and gold macaw ("wasn't a scarlet macaw within reach of a multi-million dollar budget?"), the use of the eclipse ("fastest eclipse in history"), and slavery ("While the Maya engaged in slavery, the film's sister vision of massive subjugated labor is shockingly unfamiliar") (Stone 2007:2–3). These criticisms are curious. The blue and gold macaw was purposely incorporated to display the opulence and extensive trade networks of the Postclassic Maya, who had trading networks as far south as Honduras, Nicaragua, and Costa Rica. The eclipse episode would have been disastrous if the audience would have been forced to sit through an entire eclipse time cycle. It is clear from the film that the elite were acutely aware of the solar event, which in reality, they most likely were. I questioned numerous colleagues (Ph.D. level scholars) about when the next eclipse was to occur, and no one could answer, much less a Postclassic populous in a 1511 fictional Maya city. As for slavery, extensive raiding and slave systems existed throughout Mesoamerica during the late Postclassic period. Landa notes that the Cocom leadership "oppressed the poor and made many slaves" (Landa 1941:32,35; see also Antonio Chi 1582:230–232), and that Cocom rulership "made slaves" and "made slaves of the poorer people" (ibid:36), although the practice apparently extended to much earlier periods.

Another curious criticism was the charge that Gibson was using his religious views (i.e., Catholicism) as the "savior" and the "salvation" of the Maya with the arrival of the Spanish (e.g., McAnany and Gallareta 2010:142). Such arguments indicate an inherent personal prejudice against Gibson. In reality, the Spanish arrival to collect supplies represented a future devastating blow to the Maya, not their salvation, and Gibson and Farhad were fully aware of this (see Maca and McLeod 2007 discussion below). In reality, in addition to a metaphorical "New Beginning," the segment was designed to provide an avenue for a future sequel, should it be desired, and to explain the separation of Yucatecan speakers into the interior forest to form the Lacandon societies in the sierras of northwestern Guatemala and Chiapas which would have occurred around this time.

An even more vehement opposition was voiced by Dr. Julia Gurnsey (University of Texas, Austin) who was "visibly shaken….upset, and not a little angry" (Garcia 2006). According to the interview conducted by the Austin Statesman, she noted: "I hate it. I despise it. I think it's despicable. It's offensive to Maya people. It's offensive to those of us to try to teach cultural sensitivity and alternative world views that might not match our own twenty-first-century Western ones but are nonetheless valid" (Garcia 2006). While Gurnsey was totally entitled to her opinion, she was not entitled to change the facts (elaborated below) which characterize the late Postclassic Maya societies of coastal Yucatan.

Perhaps one of the more comprehensive criticisms and one that seemed to reflect a majority of the academic resistance was in the March/April 2007 *Archaeology* magazine which featured an article entitled "*Betraying the Maya: Who does the violence in Apocalypto really hurt*?" A renowned Maya scholar and colleague noted that the film was "crafted with devotion to detail but with disdain for historical coherence or substance" and that the "film is a big lie about the savagery of the civilization created by the pre-Columbian Maya" (Freidel 2007). In addition he adds, "Allegory and artistic freedom are well and good, except when they *slanderously misrepresent an entire civilization*" (emphasis, mine). In view of the wide public dissemination of these criticisms, it is perhaps worthwhile to explore Freidel's arguments and compare them to the archaeological, ethnohistoric, ethnographic, and epigraphic facts.

According to the criticism, the fallacy was that Gibson did not show the tiered society that Maya civilization represented and "the public deserves a more accurate and sophisticated view of the pre-Columbian Maya, and Gibson ….had the resources, advisors, and talent to have provided it" (Freidel 2007:39; see also Ardren 2006). "Courtiers, craftsmen, warriors, and merchants – the usual professions of urban life – have been documented archaeologically and pictorially in the Classic Maya record" (Freidel 2007:38). According to Freidel, *Apocalypto* degraded the cultural accomplishments and intellectual achievements of the Maya:

> The Classic Maya wrote history, scripture, and poetry that contain knowledge of the human condition and spirit, as well as wisdom that compares favorably with that of ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, and other hearths of civilization. Finally, the accuracy of modern depictions of the ancient Maya matters deeply and personally to those of us who care about the millions of people who speak a Mayan language…. (Freidel 2007:41).

A similar criticism was posted by two other scholars (McAnany and Gallareta 2010:142):

> In 2007, movie producer/director Mel Gibson "treated" audiences to a *spectacularly inaccurate* portrayal of ancient Maya civilization (emphasis mine). Called *Apocalypto*, Maya rulers and priests were depicted as blood-thirsty savages, Maya farmers as hunters and gatherers, and a Spanish galleon drifting somewhere off the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula seemed the only salvation available to the Comanche and Yaqui actor, Rudy Youngblood, and his brave young wife and two children.

It is easy to lament with Freidel and others the lack of additional examples of Maya achievements in *Apocalypto*, such as ballgames, written scripts, dances, theater, and extensive trade networks. The sophistication of the cityscape, the economic and social activities visible in the film, the elaborate architecture, and the prognostication of the eclipse in *Apocalypto* implied an extraordinary cultural complexity. The extensive detail built into the cityscape at Veracruz would have allowed a greater insight into the economic, social, and political sophistication of the Maya, and it is unfortunate that more of the art, architecture, and the detailed cultural remains did not see more film time.

Another criticism of some merit refers to the murals that were similar to the Preclassic Maya murals of San Bartolo, Peten, Guatemala which were incorporated into the scene, entirely at the whims of the director and the set designer to accommodate the story line. The use of this art was met with resistance by this author because of the obvious chronological disparity and because there were better Postclassic examples from Chichen Itza. The art, however, was selected for aesthetic reasons because it could be portrayed as large enough and explicit enough to mesh with the story. Furthermore, at the time of filming, it was unsure as to whether any images of the murals would be even used or incorporated into the film after editing. The mural moved the film along by allowing the prisoners to realize their fate without additional scenes of conversation.

Additional questions posed by Freidel included phrases like "Were Classic Maya cities the dens of iniquity Gibson envisions?" and "Were city dwellers the bloodthirsty predators Gibson portrays?" (Freidel 2007:38). He further claims "Direct predation and slaughter of ordinary people is a reality in some times and places, but it is a slander when attributed to the ancient Maya." With all respect to the need for cultural sensitivity, the arguments posed by Freidel are entirely *subjective* and unfounded according to the ethnohistoric and archaeological record. Perhaps it would have been useful to have asked the same questions to Capitan Valdivia and the sailors who were with Gonzalo Guerrero and Jeronimo de Aguilar when, after their shipwreck and landing on an Akumal beach in 1511, they were sacrificed and eaten (Cervantes de Salazar 1941:236; Landa 1941:8). Would it have been "slanderous" to accuse the Maya of slaughter when referring to members of the Francisco Mirones y Lezcano expedition into the interior of Yucatan who were sacrificed via heart extractions (Scholes and Adams 1991). A similar fate fell upon the Spanish priests, Fray Cristobal de Prada and Jacinto de Vargas, on the island of the Itza in Peten, Guatemala (Cano 1697/1984:17) as well as Friar Domingo de Vico and his associates in Acalan (Villagutierre 1701/1983: 49). Direct captive predation slaughter and

Fig. 8.27 Wall fresco on the Temple of the Warriors, Chichen Itza, Mexico showing a major raid on a village near the sea. Note that elite and commoner structures are being assaulted, with both male and female captives stripped and captured (after Morris et al. 1931: Plate 139)

sacrifice were inflicted on the occupants of the ravaged villages recorded in murals on the walls of the Temple of the Jaguar and the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza (Miller 1977; Morris et al. 1931) (Figs. 8.27–8.31). Furthermore, the *Apocalypto* story takes place in 1511–1518, the proto-Historic period, not the Classic Maya period 600–700 years previous, a detail that seems to have escaped many of the critics. Freidel commented that the film "juxtaposes ideas about social and political failure from the ninth century crisis" or "collapse " with the "decadence" of the Postclassic period, and that the "term 'decadent' is no longer used to describe that period (Postclassic) by Maya archaeologists" (Freidel 2007:39). It is partially true that the film juxtaposes ideas about the ninth-century Lowland Maya collapse, but it also includes ideas associated with the Preclassic "collapse" documented in the Mirador Basin of northern Guatemala (see Hansen et al. 2002; Schreiner 2000a, b, 2001, 2002). Such perceptions are timeless, particularly since many of the same ills are currently ongoing in many areas of the Maya heartland today.

Freidel noted incorrectly that "Apocalypto is wrong from the opening shot of an idealized rainforest hamlet" because he has assumed there were no broad areas in the Maya heartland where a small hunting society could have existed. He based this perspective on his surveys on the island of Cozumel, where "the entire landscape was defined by stone walls" (Freidel 2007: 39). He suggests that along the entire coast of the Yucatan peninsula "the Spanish encountered people living in towns" (ibid) and that "Gibson's hunter-gatherers are pure fantasy" (ibid). This fallacious argument belies the fact that there *were* vast sections of rainforest in the interior of the Yucatan shelf that had absolutely no human intervention since about A.D. 840

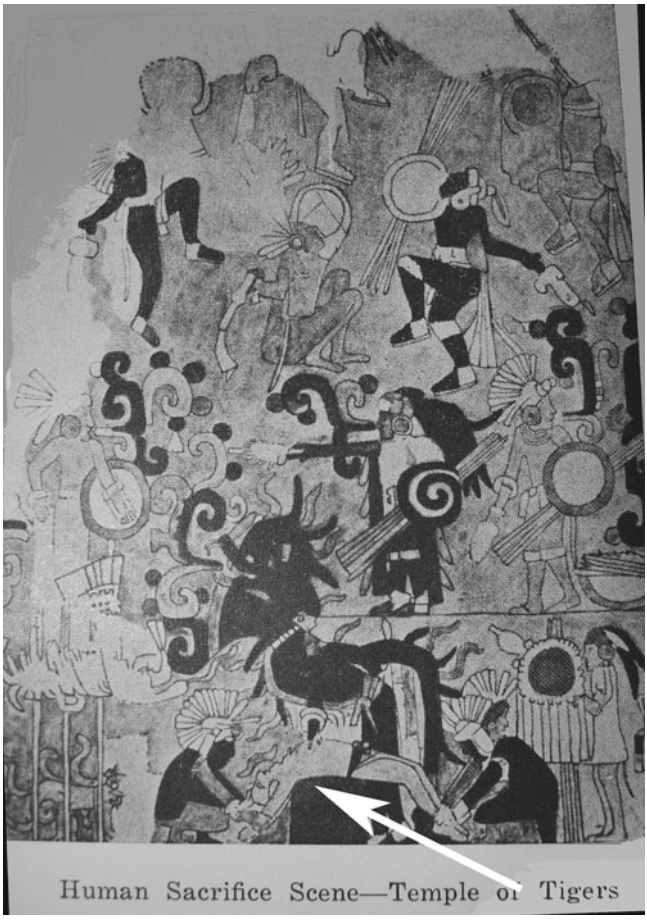

Fig. 8.28 Wall painting in the Temple of the Jaguars showing the heart extraction of a captive (After Morris et al. 1931)

(Wahl 2000, 2005; Wahl et al. 2005, 2006, 2007). Landa notes that the exploration of Hernan Cortes into the interior of Tabasco, Campeche, and Peten in 1524 indicated vast vacant areas of forest (Cortés 1986:372) and subsequent colonial documents such as Avendaño y Loyola testify as to the complete isolation and total abandonment of vast sections with absolutely no human presence (Avendaño y Loyola 1987: 16, 56, 59–64). Landa notes that the inhabitants ("tribes") "wandered around in the uninhabited parts of Yucatan for 40 years" (Landa 1941:30–31) and that they engaged in "hunting in companies of 50, more or less, and when they reach the town, they make their presents to their lord and distribute the rest as among friends" (ibid: 97). A similar situation occurred with the migration of Canek's society from the area of Mayapan to Lake Peten Itza where the populations wandered "for many years in the wilderness" (Villagutierre Soto-Mayor 1701/1983: 24).

Fig. 8.29 Fragment of fresco on the north wall of the Temple of the Warriors showing naked male and female captives, painted blue, with the male showing a cavity in the chest from heart extraction. (modified after Morris et al. (1931): Plate 144a)

The *Mexica* term for the hunters and hunting camps in tropical forests was *amiztequihuaque*, and *amiztlatoque* (see Carrasco 1971:359), suggesting that hunters enjoyed a certain status or class in much the same fashion as the merchants. Gibson's portrayal of small hunting hamlets in the middle of an unpopulated jungle is therefore far more realistic and probable during the Late Postclassic period than the alternative proposed by Freidel.

Freidel notes that "While the ancient Maya had their shortcomings (??), including the organized violence typical of civilized people (??), they were remarkable in their achievements, and not just the brutal monsters depicted by Gibson" (Freidel 2007:39) (interrogatives mine). The dichotomy of these statements is striking: it is precisely the "shortcomings" that Gibson was using as his metaphor for society, and the "organized violence" is a subjective comment of societies whose level of "civilization" may have begun to deteriorate (Collier 1999; Stewart et al. 2001; Collier et al. 2003; Skaperdas 2009). Freidel also suggests that, based on artistic representations from sites such as Yaxchilan, Tikal, and Piedras Negras and hieroglyphic texts from Dos Pilas, Uaxactun, Yaxuna, and Waka-Peru, the elite were not predators of common people or peasants (ibid: 40). This is a flawed perspective perhaps based on a perceived notion of Late Classic societies, not the terminal Postclassic period represented in *Apocalypto* (see below). This small detail seems to have escaped many of the critics, despite the presence of smallpox on one of the characters and the presence of architecture in the cityscape that was obviously Postclassic period architecture. The Maya had long been subjected to or had adopted Toltec practices (skull racks), at least by about AD 1000 if not earlier, and had direct contact and

Fig. 8.30 Fragment of a fresco from the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza showing a prostrate captive with legs doubled, and a perforation in the chest cavity from heart extraction (modified after Morris et al. (1931): Plate 144b)

influence from the Aztec societies (human sacrifice, use of Tlaloc figures, human consumption, trade, exchange). The shocking element of these criticisms is that they totally disregard the numerous colonial documents and writings of Spanish observers, not to mention the vast examples of archaeological data that support the perceptions that Gibson portrayed in the film.

Criticisms asserted that the film was a racist depiction. Yet a TMZ poll (http://www.tmz.com/2007/03/23/mel-goes-ballistic-f-you) conducted on line on March 29, 2007 had 79,395 responses to the question "Is *Apocalypto* racist?" of which 75% (59,546) replied negatively that it was NOT racist. If such a large proportion of the viewing population did not think *Apocalypto* was racist, why did so many prominent academicians proclaim that it was?

As with any film of a historical nature, some of the criticisms of *Apocalypto* have merit. However, many, indeed most of the criticisms do not. As noted earlier, the film was a piece of fiction, a story, and Gibson was within his right to tell the story as he saw fit, particularly if it adhered to the ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archaeological facts. It may be useful, therefore, to examine the criticisms in light of an anthropological approach and evaluate the merits of them. While there were many criticisms that would merit ample discussion in this chapter, a review of some of the major complaints, such as the level and degree of violence portrayed in the movie, requires further examination in light of multidisciplinary data because it has relevance to anthropological discourse.

Fig. 8.31 Fragments of wall frescoes from Area 19 of the Temple of the Warriors at Chichen Itza showing a captive strewn over a sacrificial stone in preparation for a heart sacrifice (modified after Morris et al. 1931: Plate 145)

Maya Human Sacrifice and Warfare Behavior

The level of sacrifice depicted in *Apocalypto* was based almost entirely on ethnohistoric data and archaeological interpretation, which coincides with the contextual cultural behavior noted in terminal Postclassic and proto-Historic Mesoamerica. Aztec influence, well established as a major protagonist of human sacrifices, had penetrated much of the Maya region through elaborate trade and exchange systems as well as outright Mexican settlements in the Yucatecan heartland, a concept blamed on the Cocom family (Landa 1941:32–39; see Squier Note 66 in de Palacio and

Diego de 1576; Bray 1977; Finamore and Houston 2010:177). Outright migrations of Nahuatl-speaking occupants also occurred in the Highlands of Guatemala, and in El Salvador and Honduras. The Spaniards encountered widespread sacrifice among the major linguistic groups outside the *Mexica* homeland, including the Totonac and Maya areas. For example, the Totonac culture at Cempoala and Gulf Coast region practiced extensive human sacrifice (Diaz de Castillo 1965:102–103), although they occasionally blamed the misdeeds on the Aztecs. At Quiahuitztlan on the eastern Gulf Coast, the "fat Cacique" complained that "every year, many of their sons and daughters were demanded of them for sacrifice" and that the Aztec "tax-gatherers carried off their wives and daughters if they were handsome, and ravished them" (Diaz de Castillo 1965:90). Bernal Diaz de Castillo noted the situation with respect to the towns near the coast:

> When Pedro de Alvarado reached these towns …….he found in the *cues* bodies of men and boys who had been sacrificed, and the walls and altars stained with blood and the hearts placed as offerings before the Idols. He also found the stones on which the sacrifices were made and the stone knives with which to open the chest so as to take out the heart……he found most of the bodies without arms or legs….that they had been carried off to be eaten… I will not say any more of the number of sacrifices, although we found the same thing in every town we afterwards entered (Diaz de Castillo 1965:85).

The Spanish did not have to enter deep into Aztec territory to detect the practice of human sacrifices, but rather, such behavior occurred on, or near the coast which would have had contact with the Lowland Maya. On another occasion, Diaz de Castillo notes that Cortes and his small army

> "slept in another small town" (near the Gulf Coast), where also many sacrifices had been made, but as many readers will be tired of hearing of the great number of Indian men and women whom we found sacrificed in all the towns and roads we passed (ibid:86–87).

The unusual numbers of sacrifices in Postclassic Mesoamerica were noted by Duran (1994), who recorded that, during Aztec coronation ceremonies, the

> ….captives were brought out. All of them were sacrificed in honor of his coronation (a painful ceremony), and it was a pathetic thing to see these wretches as victims of Motecuhzoma. …I am not exaggerating; there were days in which two thousand, three thousand, five thousand, or eight thousand men were sacrificed. Their flesh was eaten…… (Duran 1994:407).

The widespread Mesoamerican sacrificial practices (Aztec, Totonac, Mixtec, Zapotec, Maya) were duly recorded by Spanish observers such as Cortés, Sahagun, Duran, Torquemada, Tapia, Diaz de Castillo, Mirones y Lezcano, Avendaño y Loyala, Cárdenas y Valencia, Cervantes de Salazar, Bernardo Casanova, Villagutierre Soto-Mayor, Cogolludo, and Garcia de Palacios at sites such as the Mexican and Guatemalan Highlands, the Totonac Lowlands (i.e., Cempoala) of the Gulf Coast of Mexico, the Yucatecan Coast (i.e., Landa 1941; Herrera 1601/1941; Cervantes de Salazar 1941) or the interior heartland region (Cano 1697/1984; Scholes and Adams 1991; Avendaño y Loyola 1987; Cogolludo 1688/2008; Villagutierre Soto-Mayor 1701/1983), showing a broad geographical and chronological consistency in the ritual behavior. The Italian translator and publisher Calvo noted, in his newsletter of 1521–1522 that the initial contact at Cozumel by Cortes observed

> "…men and people wearing fine-woven cloth and of every color, who practice numerous excellent arts such as gold-and silver smithery and European-style jewelry making, in honor of the idols they adore and to whom they sacrifice humans, cutting open their chests and pulling out their hearts which they offer to them" (the idols)….and that they (the Spanish) "cast them down (the idols) and put in place of them the image of our Lord and the Virgin Mary with the Cross, which they held in great veneration, and they themselves cleaned the temple where human blood from the sacrifices had fallen" (Calvo 1985: 11).

Human sacrifices by the Maya were frequently engaged in times of famine and plagues (Landa 1941:54) or "some misfortune" (ibid: 115), a point illustrated in *Apocalypto*. The defensive posture of wells, plazas, and residential patterns was so that the Maya could avoid being "captured, sold, and sacrificed" (Herrera 1601/1941:217), and that the "number of people sacrificed was great"(ibid).

Earlier Mexican influences, such as the Toltec presence at Chichen Itza apparently also had a profound influence on sacrificial conduct at an even earlier point in the Postclassic period in the Maya area. The Toltec/Toltec influences are believed to be associated with the *Tzompantli* skull racks in stone in the Great Plaza at Chichen Itza and other sites such as Uxmal. Cano notes the extraction of the hearts of Fray Christobal de Prada and Fray Jacintho de Vargas by the high priest "Cuin Kenek" (Cano 1697/1984:17).

The rituals enacted in the sacrificial executions of Father Diego Delgado, Don Cristobal Na (the chieftain of Tipu who had been converted to Christianity), and 13 Spanish soldiers involved the extraction of hearts and offerings to "idols" as well as the placement of all heads on poles (Tzompantli?) on a small hill near the city (Villagutierre 1701/1983: 92). Cogolludo notes the sacrifice, decapitation, and placement of heads on stakes (*Tzompantli*) in the village of Chemax (Cogolludo 1688/2008: 359; see also page 24, 47).

Furthermore, writings by Cervantes de Salazar noted that the Maya from Cozumel had a "great fear" of those along the coast because "they were at war with those of that coast" (Cervantes de Salazar 1941:233), indicating a constant and consistent state of warfare among the coastal Maya of Yucatan during the late Postclassic-Proto-Historic periods. In addition, some of the extraordinary exploits of Jeronimo de Aguilar were because of his valor on the battlefield against foes entrenched in enduring "hatreds" among the coastal and interior Maya (ibid:237–238). The constant state of warfare was also noted by Landa (1941:41–42) in which more than 150,000 men died in battle, and created a scenario of conflict, revenge, and hatred that worked to the advantage of the Spaniards (ibid). Such warfare involved stealth attacks and brutal treatment of captives:

> Guided by a tall banner, they went out in great silence from the town and thus they marched to attack their enemies, with loud cries and with great cruelties, when they fell upon them unprepared….After the victory they took the jaws off the dead bodies and with the flesh cleaned off, they put them on their arms. In their wars they made great offerings of the spoils, and if they made a prisoner of some distinguished man, they sacrificed him immediately, not wishing to leave any one alive who might injure them afterwards. The rest of the people remained captive in the power of those who had taken them (Landa 1941:123).

The stealth attacks were visible in the village scenes of *Apocalypto* in minute detail, including the wearing of human mandibles as trophies by the dominant leader

of the warring band. The fictitious city in *Apocalypto* had a *Tzompantli* with vertical poles as that depicted in Chichen Itza (see Eberl 2001: 318) and as described by the Spanish. The Aztec *Tzompantli* clearly had the perforations on the parietal side of the skull so that the skulls were displayed horizontally. The practice of heart extraction has been explicitly defined by Diego de Landa and numerous other Spanish observers. According to the accounts, a victim was often stripped naked, anointed with a blue color, and either tied to poles and shot with arrows (a scene that had been edited out and not included in *Apocalypto*), or taken to place of sacrifice (temple), seized by four *Chacs*, and suffered a heart extraction, throwing the decapitated head and body down the steps of the temple (Landa 1941: 117–123; see also the Florentine Codex, p. 58) precisely as depicted in the film. However, the level of violence according to ethnohistoric accounts included the fact that the body was recovered at the base of the steps and flayed, with the skin worn by the naked priest with dancing in great solemnity (Landa 1941:120; Herrera 1601/1941: 219), which was a scene NOT depicted in the film. Furthermore, the exaggerated body pit discovered by the escaping Jaguar Paw in *Apocalypto* is likely to not have existed because, according to Landa, Duran, and other observers, the victims were eaten (Landa 1941: 120; see also Lopez-Medel 1612: L. 227), another scene NOT depicted in *Apocalypto*. However, if mass quantifies of victims were sacrificed similar to Duran's account of the Aztecs, it is entirely possible that such a pit could have existed due to the excess of human flesh that was not consumed.

Lopez-Medel (1612) (1941: 222) notes that "Those compelled (for sacrifice) were captives and men taken in the wars they made against other pueblos, whom they kept in prisons and in cages for this purpose, fattening them." The jawbones on arms were equally depicted in *Apocalypto*, indicating the level of butchery that accompanied Postclassic warfare. The removal and display of human jawbones is also a pan-Mesoamerican feat which dates as early as the Early Classic, based on burials in highland Teotihuacan and the Lowland Maya Mirador Basin site of Tintal (Tintal Burial 1) (Hansen et al. 2006). Lopez-Medel also notes that Maya "sacrifices….were so many in number" (Lopez-Medel (1612/1941: 222).

Freidel purports that the Maya were not predators of common people or peasants. However, Villagutierre records that villages were attacked with some regularity in the sixteenth century:

> In 1552 the cruel and barbarous Lacandones, not content with the raids they had made every year on Spanish and Christian Indian villages in the province of Chiapas, which were closest to them, robbing, killing, taking their wives and children captive in order to sacrifice them to their idols, and having already destroyed 14 villages, continued their customary raids from two villages farthest away in the mountains….and at night attacked two other villages….. They killed and captured many people and sacrificed the children on the church altars, at the foot of the cross, taking out their hearts and smearing the holy images venerated in the temples with the blood. When all this was done, they destroyed and burned the villages, taking with them the men and women as captives….. (Villagutierre 1701/1983:44)

The extraordinary detail in the murals from Chichen Itza confirms Villagutierre's observations and suggests that common people and peasants as well as entire villages were targets for pillage, destruction, sacrifices, and captives (Morris 1931: Plates 139–147; Miller 1977). The extraordinary detail in the murals in the Temple of the

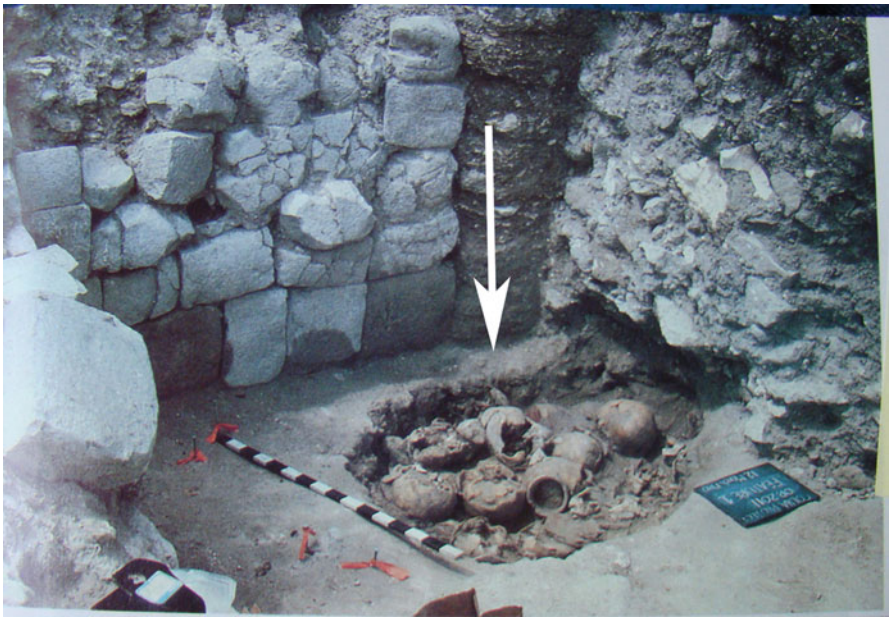

Fig. 8.32 The Colha skull pit at the base of a building at the site (modified, after Hester et al. 1983)

Warriors shows the assault on a village with elite and commoner residences under siege (Figs. 8.27 and 8.28), with the heart extractions and slaughter of male and female captives who had been smeared with blue paint prior to heart extraction at the village (Morris et al. 1931: Plate 144; see Figs. 8.29 and 8.30) and the depictions of more formal heart extractions from captives in a temple complex (ibid: Plate 145; see Fig. 8.31).

The antiquity and geographical extent of Maya human sacrifices is ubiquitous throughout the Maya Lowlands. Explicit images of human captives and heart extraction sacrifices were found in graffiti on Classic period architecture (post occupational?) at Tikal (Orrego and Larios 1983: 169, 172). Excavations at the Maya site of Colha, Belize, revealed an extraordinary pit dating to the Terminal Late Classic period (ca. AD 800–900) which had been placed at the base of a structure (Operation 2011) that yielded 30 decapitated skulls, of which 10 were from children (Mock 1994; Massey 1994; Hester et al. 1983:49–53; see Figs. 8.32 and 8.33). In addition, the bodies of 20 people had been recovered at the base of the nearby pyramid staircase (Operation 2012; Hester et al. 1983:51).

Such dramatic evidence over a vast area of the Maya Lowlands indicates that human sacrifice and human heart extractions were a widespread and common occurrence. The heavily fortified Postclassic sites of Mayapan, Tulum, Ichpaatun, Oxtankab, Tayasal, Muralla de Leon (Rice and Rice 1981), and three walled Terminal Classic sites of Chacchob, Cuca, and Dzonot Ake (Webster 1980) in the

Fig. 8.33 The Colha skull pit at the base of the most prominent building at the site. Note the vertebrate still attached to the skull, indicating that decapitation had probably taken place while the victim was alive (Modified, after Hestor et al. 1983)

Lowlands as well as the heavily fortified Highland Maya sites of Iximche, Mixco Viejo, Rabinal, and Cumarcaj indicate the defensive postures of late Maya centers, a concept clearly in line with the social and political conditions of conflict and wars that Gibson was suggesting in *Apocalypto*.

One of the more outstanding reviews of *Apocalypto* was written by Sonny Bunch (2006), an assistant editor at The Weekly Standard who noted the criticisms from academicians, and pointed out that the facts demonstrated either a complete distortion of reality, or a disturbing incompetence by the academic critics. While the complete version of the review can be seen at (http://www.weeklystandard.com/Content/Public/Articles/000/000/013/075khpyy.asp), some of the more salient points of his arguments were that almost all critics mentioned Gibson's alleged anti-Semitic statement and that the film did not inform adequately about the cultural achievements of the ancient Maya. Bunch notes that:

> *….This is a strange criticism. If you were interested in boning up on calendars, hieroglyphics, and pyramids you could simply watch a middle-school film strip. And who complained that in Gladiator, Ridley Scott showed epic battle scenes and vicious gladiatorial combat instead of teaching us how the aqueducts were built?* (emphasis mine)

Bunch also confronts the critics that suggest that the film portrayed

> "….an offensive and racist notion that Maya people were brutal to one another long before the arrival of Europeans….." Newsweek reports that "although a few Mayan murals do

> illustrate the capture and even torture of prisoners, none depicts decapitation" as a mural in a trailer for the film does. "That is wrong". It's just plain wrong, "the magazine quotes Harvard professor William Fash as saying. Karl Taube, a professor of anthropology at UC Riverside, complained to the Washington Post about the portrayal of slaves building the Mayan pyramids. "We have no evidence of large numbers of slaves," he told the paper.
>
> Even the mere arrival, at the end of the film, of Spanish explorers has been lambasted as culturally insensitive….. Here's Gurnsey, again, providing a questionable interpretation of the film's final minutes: "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. "*But none of these complaints holds up particularly well under scrutiny. After all, while it may not mesh well with their post-conquest victimology, the Mayans did partake of bloody human sacrifice.*" (emphasis mine)

While there may be some that might question the validity of the Spanish observations, the fact that the ethnohistoric observations match so seamlessly with the archaeological data from both earlier and later periods indicate that such doubts are highly unlikely. The Maya had vast areas of forest without populations, small hunting groups and camps, chronic warfare and insidious attacks on enemies and sacrificial victims. Captives were exploited as slaves throughout Mesoamerica. One of the best comprehensive studies of human sacrifice in the Maya/Mesoamerica area was published by Ruben G. Mendoza (Mendoza 2007; see also Chacon and Dye 2007; Chacon and Mendoza 2007). Warriors wore the jawbones of slain foes, captured male and female captives, and engaged in exotic trade systems ranging from the Gulf Coast to Costa Rica. A detailed stucco panel at the site of Tonina, Chiapas, Mexico shows a decapitated sacrificial victim clasped in the hand of the Ak Ok Cimi, a death deity. Another stucco panel depicts a decapitated head on a leaf-covered *Tzompantli.* Sacrificial rituals included painting the sacrificial victims blue, erecting *tzompantli*s where human heads were skewered, sacrificing human victims on the "cues" or temples with heart extractions. Victims were decapitated, with the bodies rolled down the staircase and subsequently flayed and butchered (not depicted in the film). Priests and nobility were acutely aware of solar and celestial phenomena such as eclipses, which were celebrated with sacrifices during plagues, famine, or other misfortune.

Apocalypto and Revisionism/Relativism/Aboriginalism

It would be difficult to assert that all the scholars who spoke out against *Apocalypto* were ignorant or incompetent, but why did they make claims that were fallacious or inaccurate in the face of overwhelming data? Why was the response so vehement when many of the issues and situations portrayed in the film were accurate? It is likely that much of the resistance was created by Gibson's anti-Semitic statement during an arrest about 6 months previous to the release of the film. In some cases, the opposition to *Apocalypto* may have been simple ignorance. However, it is also implied that scholars wittingly or unwittingly may have ascribed to a "revisionist"

and/or "relativist/aboriginalist" perspective, concepts which can fall under the title of "neo-pragmatism" (see Buchler 1955:251–289; Haack 1998; Rorty 1982, 1991). A "revisionist" or "sham-reasoning" view may either represent an antithesis of truth or a decorative reasoning of truth, or the clarification and establishment of it (Haack 1997a, 1998; Peirce 1886: in Hartshorne and Weiss, Vol. I, pp. 57–59; McPherson 2003). In some cases, revisionist perspectives ignore the vast amounts of data that have accumulated over periods of time, and seek to promote that which is ideologically expedient or politically "correct" or convenient within the bounds of "language" (e.g., Rorty 1982; McPherson 2003). While it is entirely possible that additional data may help establish a more accurate perspective based on additional information, often added by new technologies, the dangers and damage that a revisionist/relativist perspective can cause, if incorrect, is that it also has the potential to ultimately deceive and distort the reality of the human existence and defy truth. Such a position is "not to find out how things really are, but to advance (oneself) by making a case for some proposition to the truth-value of which he is indifferent" (Haack 1997a:2). It also suggests that "reasoning" can be mainly "decorative" and result in a "rapid deterioration of intellectual vigor" (Peirce I: 57–58, in Hartshorne et al. 1931–1958; see Haack 1998:32). In other cases, a certain movement purports that "indigenous rights should always trump scientific inquiry" (Gillespie 2004:174, citing Zimmerman et al. 2003). Such positions defy the establishment of truth and seek for an unqualified political correctness that is both unwarranted and dangerous to the realities of the human saga. On a more subtle note, it can lull a society into an intellectual complacency, generating a moral and intellectual failure to acknowledge or improve on mistakes or violations of accepted values of universal human rights.

Perhaps a more viable alternative would be to return to the values of truth in science as determined by vigorous methodological procedure and evaluation via a multitude of multidisciplinary approaches. A solution lies in a return to the philosophical foundations of science such as that proposed by Peirce, Hempel, Haack, and others to organize and understand truth and valid objective reasoning as part of the ultimate goal. As Josh Billings noted more than a century ago, "As scarce as truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand" (Shaw 1865; Cited in Haack 1997b:241).

Charles Peirce, arguably the "greatest of American philosophers" (Haack 1997a:1) has been credited, along with William James as the creator of "pragmatism" in scientific reasoning (ibid). Peirce had been strongly influenced by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1996) (1781, 1787) and the earlier scientists such as Copernicus, Kepler, and Galileo (Peirce 1877, cited in Buchler 1955:6). He wrote that he had also been profoundly influenced by the Scottish theologian John Duns Scotus (1265–1308). Peirce noted that one can "opine that there is such a thing as Truth," meaning that "you mean that something is SO….whether you or I, or anybody thinks it is so or not….The essence of the opinion is that there is something that is SO, no matter if there be an overwhelming vote against it" (Peirce 1898(2):135). He also noted that, in order to determine the veracity of a subject, one would have to "find out the right method of thinking and…follow it out" so

that "truth can be nothing more nor less than the last result to which the following out of this method would ultimately carry us" (Peirce 1898 (5):553). The importance of a multidisciplinary approach is such that as "we push our archaeological and other studies, the more strongly will that conclusion force itself on our minds forever-or would do so, if study were to go on forever…." (Peirce 1898 (5):565–566). The result would "ultimately yield permanent, rational agreement among all inquirers, however various their beliefs at the outset" (Brunning and Forster 1997a, b:8; Buchler 1955; Hempel 1965:141). Therefore, the purpose of science was to "look the truth in the face, whether doing so be conducive to the interests of society or not" (Peirce 1901:300).

Such pragmatism formed in the late 1800s as a response to "antiscience" or "nominalist" movements which continue to the present day in scientific philosophy dressed as "relativism" or negative "revisionism." The role of revisionism is based on the premise that "There is no single, eternal, and immutable 'truth' about past events and their meaning. The unending quest of historians for understanding the past – that is, 'revisionism' – is what makes history vital and meaningful" (McPherson 2003).

In many cases, further revision of historical information can clarify or enhance the knowledge of the past. In other cases, the revision of history was designed to promote certain agendas or to ease or "whitewash" the uncomfortable aspects of events and actions so that "evil must be forgotten, distorted, skimmed over" and "history loses its value as an incentive and…paints perfect men and noble nations, but it does not tell the truth" (Du Bois 1935, cited in Williams 2005:10–11). A positive example of revisionism deals with the new data showing the precocious development of the Preclassic Maya in the Mirador Basin of northern Guatemala, a concept which fundamentally changed the understanding of the developmental and evolutionary history of the ancient Maya (e.g., Dahlin 1984; Hansen 1984, 2001, 2005; Matheny 1987). Another example is the understanding of royal marriage arrangements in ancient Egypt, such as the incestual relationship of Tutankhamun's mother, as determined through DNA (Hawass 2010). A negative example of revisionism is the movement to deny that the Holocaust existed in Europe in World War II (e.g., Barnes 1968, 1969; Hoggan 1969; see Lipstadt 1994).

The "science" of historical revisionism infers that further studies would lead to the same fundamental premise, regardless of the personal opinions or perspectives. In this sense, an objective "absolute truth" is the ultimate goal or "ideal," a la Peirce and Hempel, so that infinite, multidisciplinary studies or new technologies would lead to the same conclusions, "independent of individual opinion or preference" (Hempel 1965:141), a concept which had previously been eloquently espoused by Peirce (Vol. 8: 12, see Delaney 1993:46). In this sense, "truth is a property-and a property which, unlike justification or probability on present evidence, depends on more than the present memory and experience of the speaker" and is "the one insight of 'realism' that we should not jettison" (Putnam 1990:32). The quest for truth then becomes a refining process, an improvement on previously established precepts that were correct. A fundamental "truth" that has to be substantially altered because of new information from increasing multidisciplinary data or new technologies was

never true in the first place, and, in this sense, can be discarded with a revision that can be justified with an eye always on the original premise that was corrected. The process becomes one of refining accuracy and an identification with a continuing community and probability (Sellars 1970:102).

Some of the more radical oppositions to the concept of the Peircean realism have been voiced by Richard Rorty and Donald Davidson (Rorty 1982, 1989, 1991, 1992; Davidson 1986) who have been dubbed "neo-pragmatists" and "relativists" (Haack 1998:31). Rorty has been one of the most influential forces in the "relativistic" thought, in which he notes that he does "not have much use for notions like… 'objective truth'" (Rorty 1992:141) because "science is no more than the handmaiden of technology" (Rorty 1989: 3–4), or the "human world, the world according to conceptual and linguistic conditions" (Hausman 1997:198). According to Rorty, "truth is made because truth belongs to sentences and 'Where there are no sentences, there is no truth'" (ibid:202). In like manner, Davidson's position is that "what gives truth value is the cumulative mass of accepted beliefs that serve as backing for individual sentences when these are consistent with that mass of beliefs" (Hausman 1997:206). This would create what Rorty has referred to as a "seesaw" meaning that one "would never know when we were at the end of inquiry" (Rorty 1989:11, 1991:131).

The response to such a position was posited by Peirce, however, who saw the entire issue as a perspective of hope, "…more than a purely intellectual conception of possibility…..(but)…that there is an actual, concrete state to be expected" (Hausman 1997:219). The refinement of intellectual knowledge, however, begs the need for a multidisciplinary approach, and, in the case of ancient societies, the combined and coordinated efforts of linguistics, ethnohistory, ethnography, archaeology, and the sociocultural and biological anthropology so as to cover a broader range of the emic and etic perspectives of the society. Such refining "truths," when built line upon line and precept upon precept, lead one to arrive at the same conclusions regardless of the personal differences of opinion or biases that were inherent in the observer.

The film *Apocalypto* is a fictional film which told the story of a chase scene, utilizing certain components of the Postclassic Maya cultural behavior as the setting for the drama which was unfolded.

Perhaps the most accurate critique of the film was penned by Allan Maca and Kevin McLeod (2007) at the Presidential Session on *Apocalypto* at the American Anthropological Association Meeting in Washington, D.C. From their perception, "Gibson's (scenes are) vital to his larger purposes regarding the exploration of death, consciousness, and transformation" (Maca and McLeod 2007: 4). In essence, Maca and McLeod grasped the enormous metaphors that Gibson was knitting into the film. As Maca and McLeod (2007) note:

> Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*, while it may seem on the surface to be another mindless, violent action epic, with the Maya as unwitting casualties, actually sets out to achieve similar goals: an exploration of consciousness and of modern man's need for renewal and transformation. Like most films involving or based on native culture yet made by non-natives, *Apocalypto* is a grandiose and intricately nuanced commentary on white society. Because the hero and the villains are indigenous, however, the film also seeks to explore the basis of our humanity, regardless of race and ethnicity. The artistic devices Gibson uses to communicate his ideas

> draw heavily on tropes, symbols, and plotlines developed by earlier masters; but he also clearly develops and adopts themes and symbolic vehicles that are basic to myth and ritual.

Gibson utilized graphic scenes to visualize contemporary society and the hypocrisy that permeates the issues: the jungle = higher state of consciousness and peace, a societal refuge and environmental neutrality; "Sacrifices = bloody conflict/soldiers in the Middle East"; Body Pit = "Nothing (small)compared to the daily abortion rate in the U.S"; Jaguar Paw escape = "the valiant human spirit in the face of unfavorable odds, the freedom from tyranny and social oppression"; environmental degradation near the city = "conspicuous consumption of resources and the contemporary destruction of the environment"; the pit where Jaguar Paw's family was kept = "struggles , challenges, and obstacles of the contemporary family."

The strategy of joining the past to a critique of the present has been used repeatedly in films for decades. Wolfgang Petersen, the director of *Troy* (2004) is reported to have stated:

> "Look at the present! What the Iliad says about humans and wars is, simply, still true. Power-hungry Agamemnons who want to create a new world order- that is absolutely current. … Of course, we didn't start saying: Let's make a movie about American politics, but (we started) with Homer's epic. But while we were working on it we realized that the parallels to the things that were happening out there were obvious" (Kniebe 2004; cited in Winkler 2007:8)

A certain level of allegory and metaphor permeated nearly all aspects of the film *Apocalypto*. As Maca and McLeod (2007:2) note:

> Contrary to what some have concluded about this film, *Apocalypto* does NOT promote, celebrate or otherwise glorify the Spanish or Christianity; it is quite the opposite really. What is celebrated repeatedly is the jungle, a metaphor for peace, the higher mind and a more evolved consciousness. The jungle is a refuge… a place of understanding.....where true creation and novelty may unfold…….
>
> The leading writers and directors intentionally play with symbols and meanings as a way to innovate. Not all film makers can do this very well. However, *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979), directed by Stanley Kubrick and Francis Ford Coppola, respectively, are two films that set new models……Both are, explicitly and implicitly, antiwar, anti-US imperialism, and anti-colonialism and focus on the evolution of human consciousness…… These two films are at the center of the visual and philosophical mission of Mel Gibson's *Apocalypto*…..

One of the more interesting concepts that the data on human sacrifice in the Maya/Mesoamerica area has demonstrated is that the Maya were not radically different from anybody else and that they were consistent with the rest of humanity. The story, metaphorically, could be applied to almost any ancient society in the world. The Maya achieved extraordinary accomplishments comparable with Greeks, Romans, Mesopotamians, Egyptians, and Chinese, and they were no less brutal. But the consciousness of the story was far more profound than a "blood and gore flick." The story was Gibson's and Safinia's to tell and, as Maca and McLeod astutely note,

> …… we can't help but wonder if the use of the trap in Apocalypto, as a vehicle for awareness, doesn't also extend to our participation in Mel Gibson's mission, such that all of us……may have been lured to exactly the space and place of discussion that he intended…. this creates discomfort even to contemplate….. (ibid: 6).

Apocalypto will be judged in time as a cinema masterpiece, not only in its superb execution of film production, but also as an allegorical reference to the present. The criticisms, which were both accurate and fallacious, will continue to surround this film due to its unique story, the extraordinary setting, the allegorical and metaphorical references, and the various levels of awareness that are inherent in the film regarding the human saga. We are all a part of it.

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