

1492: Conquest of Paradise

Dir. Ridley Scott, 1992

Brief synopsis:

This movie depicts dramatized events of actual occurrences in world history.

Christopher Columbus (Gerald Depardieu) is shown to be a radical dreamer. The story begins with him speaking with his son about the shape of the earth—which is *round*. Columbus is then given an opportunity to speak at a conference at the University of Salamanca, where he is mocked and his request for a voyage westward denied.

He eventually speaks with her royal highness, the Queen of Spain, Isabella. She finally agrees to fund his voyage, despite the very negative attitudes of her constituents. Columbus sets sail on the 3rd of August, 1492 from the Port of Palos, and heads westward toward “Asia.” There is a near mutiny, because Columbus had lied about the distance of the voyage; it would end up being about twice the length he had promulgated. The crew pulls it together and finally hits land on the 12th of October 1492. They meet very hostile natives, with which they become allies. Columbus decides to leave a group of 39 men to establish a fort, called, “La Navidad,” while the rest of his men return to Spain to bring back more.

When the crew returns for the second time, however, the men are found dead, void of flesh and organs. The Spanish establish a colony, but it doesn’t last long; a war breaks loose and many men die. Columbus is then replaced by Don Francisco de Bobadilla, on charges of having gone against the crown. He is imprisoned in Spain, but the queen allows him to take another voyage, with specific instructions not to return to “The New World,” as it was “...a

disaster.” The story ends with Columbus’ son, Fernando, writing a biography about the life of his father.

Christopher Columbus wasn’t given credit for having found anything of importance, but Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian, was said to have found the mainland (what is now known as the United States).

Critique:

I found this movie to be both inspiring and incredibly historically accurate. I paid close attention to dates, which were correct. In the movie, Christopher Columbus is shown to be very courageous, despite oppression by monarchic rulers. This is endorsed and validated by the *Judaic Treasures of the Library of Congress* (Karp). One very important aspect of this movie which was contrary to my previous education, was the fact that Columbus was not trying to prove that the world was round (Vizenor 8). Everyone who lived during that time, who was educated, knew very well that the earth was round. This had been scientifically proven by Greek geographer and philosopher, Aristotle (Vizenor 8).

Christopher Columbus was actually a Genoese sailor in the employ of Spain (Walton 23). Although there is absolutely no mention in the story that he had spoken with either the King or Queen of Italy about his subsequent voyages, he had done so, and was turned down. Columbus was a Catholic and approached the monarch of Spain at the time; namely, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, proposing that he would be the one to convert the natives to Christianity. He

added that Spain would then have rights to rule over those people. As is shown in the movie, Columbus was taught to read and write by the Catholic monks with whom he stayed (Flint).

In the movie, it shows that he wants to head west so he can find a new all-water trade route to Asia (Flint). He wanted to find spices and jewels and gold. Through his voyages, (there were four in total), he "...opened the way for European exploration, exploitation, and colonization of the Americas (Flint).

The first place where Columbus and his crew landed was at Guanahani Island on the 12th of October 1492 [This is now recognized in the United States as "Columbus Day."]. Handlin endorses this fact in her work, "Discovering Columbus" (Handlin 2). Columbus does decide to leave exactly 39 men on the island to establish a fort, which is referred to as, "La Navidad" (Flint). It is depicted in the film that Columbus and his men were engaged in the Genocide of the natives of that and other islands. Handlin validates this fact (Handlin 2). He was said to have been "...appointed by God to be the finder of these lands" (Handlin 4).

The film also includes that Columbus was hot-headed; he didn't like to have to answer to anyone. Flint attests to this in her report, Christopher Columbus (Flint). Furthermore, the movie states that Columbus had not found much gold, save the few morsels the natives gave him as tokens of their submission. This is also authenticated by Flint (Flint).

As the movie conveys, Columbus was very bold and fascinated with the natives. He mentions that they were, "...as naked as the day God had put them on the earth" (Depardieu). Confirming this, Gerald Vizenor notes that in Columbus' diary, he writes, "...Indians whose testicles hang down to the ground..." and, "...these marvels served as one of the principal signs

of [“]otherness[“] and hence functioned not only as a source of fascination, but of authentication” (qtd. in Vizenor).

This film is one of the most historically accurate reflections across which I have ever come. Despite the fact that the part of Christopher Columbus (an Italian) was played by Gerald Depardieu, who is a Frenchman, I have researched these events in world history and stand to sustain both its historical validity and academic soundness.

Application to class:

This movie presents an audio-visual representation of the events leading up to and comprising Columbus’ founding of what he called, “San Salvador.” It is incredibly historically accurate, and includes happenings that we have discussed in class, such as Columbus speaking with King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, who eventually funded his four voyages. We learned in class that Columbus was not trying to prove that the world was round, as most educated people of the time supported just that philosophy. It named Columbus’ three ships which he took on his first voyage: the Niña, Pinta, and the Santa María. This too we had learned.

One of the most striking and applicable philosophies of the film which applied directly to that which we had discussed in class was that Christopher Columbus sailed for glory, gold, and God. While studying chapter 9 of our text, we learned about the motives and desires of early explorers and mariners. They wanted to be honored, rich (with gold and other precious items), and to spread the word of God to those who would otherwise die not having heard the “Truth.”

I enjoyed this movie because it was dramatic, but also because it followed basically the same timeline as did we, in class, while studying the travels of Christopher Columbus. Finally, as we had also been taught, Columbus grossly underestimated the circumference of the earth. He thought that India was a mere 750 leagues west (on the 28th parallel) of the Canary Islands. Aristotle, on the other hand, had guessed that the circumference was around 25,000 knots—it is actually 24,000 knots. This was especially astounding considering that neither had the privilege of ever having used satellite pictures of the earth to truly understand global perspectives of relative distance of remote lands.

Works Cited:

1492: Conquest of Paradise. Dir. Ridley Scott. Perf. Gerald Depardieu. 1992.

Flint, Valerie. Christopher Columbus. 1995. 23 January 2011

<http://www.answers.com/main/source_info_frames.jsp?sourceURL=http://www.italian-american.com/columbus.htm&imageURL=http://content.answcdn.com/main/content/img/webpics/Christopher_Columbus.jpg&imgSrcURL=http://www.italian-american.com/columbus.jpg&flavor=A>.

Handlin, Lilian. "Discovering Columbus." 1993. EbscoHost. 23 January 2011

<<http://web.ebscohost.com.dbprox.slcc.edu/ehost/detail?hid=13&sid=a412307a-2cb7-458d-9a16-504f4a97c77c%40sessionmgr12&vid=8&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=ahl&AN=9302190584>>.

Karp, Abraham J. Jewish Virtual Library. 2011. 23 January 2011

<<http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/loc/loc12a.html>>.

Schuman, Howard, Schwartz, Barry, D'Arcy, Hannah. "Elite Revisionists and Popular Beliefs." 2005. EbscoHost. 23

January 2011 <<http://web.ebscohost.com.dbprox.slcc.edu/ehost/detail?hid=13&sid=a412307a-2cb7-458d-9a16-504f4a97c77c%40sessionmgr12&vid=7&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=ahl&AN=16406461>>.

Vizenor, Gerald. "Christopher Columbus: Lost havens in the ruins of representation." 1992. EbscoHost. 23

January 2011 <<http://web.ebscohost.com.dbprox.slcc.edu/ehost/detail?hid=13&sid=aaaaa719-039c-4569-82d7-2335c5f2f940%40sessionmgr15&vid=1&bdata=JnNpdGU9ZWhvc3QtbGl2ZQ%3d%3d#db=ahl&AN=9305145094>>.

Walton, Gary M., Rockoff, Hugh. History of the American Economy-eleventh edition. Canada: South-Western, Cengage Learning, 2010.