*Movie Review Essay*

# Of Hollywood and History: The Columbus Movies of '92

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Christopher Columbus: The Discovery (1992). Produced by Alexander and Ilya Salkind. Directed by John Glen. Distributed by Warner Brothers.

1492: Conquest of Paradise (1992). Produced by Ridley Scott and Alain Goldman. Directed by Ridley Scott. Distributed in the United States and Canada by Paramount Pictures.

The Quincentenary has come and gone, leaving a bitter taste in the mouths of many. With all the Columbus criticism, however, have American opinions of Columbus changed? According to an Associated Press survey of 1001 adults conducted in early October 1992, they have not; Columbus's reputation remains much the same. That is to say, two out of every three of those surveyed still view Columbus as a hero, while the only two motives on which a majority of the respondents could agree were curiosity and a sense of adventure. Myths and legends die hard, but even when they are challenged the results can be disorienting, as witnessed by the two Columbus movies of 1992.

The first to be released, and more disappointing, was *Christopher Columbus: The Discovery*. Produced by Alexander and Ilya Salkind, in collaboration with Quinto Centenario Spain, at a cost of $45 million, this pop-history has proved to be a critical failure and box office disaster. Pieced together by director John Glen from a screenplay by Mario Puzo, and reworked by John Briley and Cary Bates,

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*Christopher Columbus* remains disjointed and wanting in either direction or purpose, except to entertain.

The problems that plague *Christopher Columbus* reflect the changing fortunes of the Quincentenary itself, and Ilya Salkind's response to those changes. In 1985 Ilya Salkind set out to mark the anniversary with a film that would present the genius of Columbus' dream and its realization against nearly insurmountable odds. Soon, however, many challenged that image of Columbus, and Salkind proved reluctant to get involved in the controversy that followed. Instead, he resolved to make a quite different movie, a movie he described as "an adventure picture . . . a kind of Robin Hood. A picture for the public, for children. Everything up, up at the end. No politics. Nothing heavy." And, that's what you get!

Also troubling *Christopher Columbus* is a cast that fails to live up to its top billing. George Corraface's Columbus has been compared by "kinder and gentler" critics to cinema swashbucklers of the past; others have described him as "a Hollywood hustler with a cocky, lounge-lizard grin." That he has a way with women is a quality not missed by Rachel Ward's Queen Isabella, characterized by critics as "a bright eyed Jesus Freak with hormones raging under her breastplate." As King Ferdinand, Tom Selleck is a caricature of Tom Selleck, while the best that can be said of Marlon Brando's $5 million, five minute performance as the grand inquisitor Torquemada is that he resisted what must have been a great temptation to overdo it. (Brando, by the way, has demanded that his name be removed from the credits because the film portrays Columbus as "insipid, bland, false, and idiotic," rather than as a villain. True enough!)

Though crediting Spanish historians Juan Gil and Consuelo Varels, and despite some considerable success in replicating props and costumes, *Christopher Columbus* is historically problematic both in its overall message and in its specifics, both large and small. To begin with, and perhaps most importantly, by focusing on only one brief period in the mariner's life, albeit the most dramatic period, the film presents a story that is not only truncated but that also serves to perpetuate the myth of Columbus triumphant.

Though prefaced by brief scenes on the island of Chios and in Portugal, *Christopher Columbus* opens in earnest on the eve of Columbus's at-long-last successful petition of Ferdinand and Isabella and ends with his return to Spain from what he and most others believe is the Orient. Absent are references to the crucial events of his life thereafter—his failure to find Cathay, his ineptitude as governor, his enslavement of Native Americans, and his return from a later voyage in chains, for example—all of which presage his nearly obscure and somewhat tragic death.

Other inaccuracies are more subtle, playful even, but at times still disturbing. It is no doubt comforting, and perhaps harmless, for the audience to have repeated for them tales of their childhood such as that where the Queen proclaims that she so shares in Columbus' dream that she will pawn the crown jewels, if necessary, to support it. An element of drama is created by suggesting that only Columbus

knows the wind patterns of the Atlantic, a secret he keeps to himself until he employs it in his ocean crossing of 1492. Tension is provided by adding to the story of Columbus' first voyage the presence of a Portuguese spy whose mission is to sabotage the enterprise. And, some may be moved to the edge of their seats during the movie's rendering of the October 10th mutiny, of which we know very little, but to which is added Columbus's offer of his head—literally—to the crew should they not sight land in three days.

Is there anything to be gained, however, or does it cause harm, to continue to portray inaccurately the confrontation between Columbus and his opposition at the Spanish court as a secular morality play between the forces of clear-headed renaissance rationalism and the dark superstitious, even malevolent, forces of the church, to the point of having Columbus questioned in a most threatening manner by Torquemada himself? Enough!

Marginally more successful at the box office and among the critics has been *1492: Conquest of Paradise*. Here, the intent is clear; it is to do what Salkind originally set out to do, to create a lavishly romantic epic, but an epic that reflects rather than avoids the concerns of 1992. *1492* is a three country co-production of England, France and Spain, and at a cost of over $50 million it is the most expensive European production ever. It is a Ridley Scott and Alain Goldman production, directed by Ridley Scott (who was supposed to direct *Christopher Columbus*) from a script prepared by Roselyne Bosch, formerly a writer for Paris's *Le Point* magazine.

Both Bosch's and Scott's theses are clear. Bosch's Columbus is a rebel who pushed the limits of his time, not just geographically, but also socially and politically. Scott's Columbus is more complex. In some ways, he is a visionary and a man of conscience, or, as Scott has put it, "a bright light emerging from a dark age, a man looking for a renaissance." In other respects, he is inextricably mired in his time and, given that imaginative landscape, unprepared to deal with what he finds in what to him is truly a new world. Disaster is inevitable, both for Columbus and the people he encounters. These two views, of course, are not mutually exclusive, and both are reflected in the movie.

Bosch's and Scott's Columbus is a man obsessed with an idea that has taken him his entire adult life to realize. He is daring and courageous, but he is opposed in his enterprise at every step of the way by those who reject the self-taught mapmaker's geography and mathematics, by those who resent the Genoan's pretensions to Spanish title and nobility, and by those who envy the upstart's success. Still, he succeeds, only to have his equally dominant ambition hand his critics the sword with which they cut him down. If measured by its ability to convey this message alone, the film would be a success.

In *1492*, Columbus represents both the western ideal of the triumph of heroic individualism and that long line of colonial oppressors to follow who are guilty of raping the environment and enslaving the native population. The subtitle, "Conquest of Paradise," however, is not to be taken literally, as neither Columbus nor the Old and New Worlds are so clearly defined. In *1492*, Columbus may be

a hustler, but he is also a utopian who learns the hard way. Fifteenth-century Europe is brutal, but it is not hell, and the Western Hemisphere is lovely, but it is not paradise.

When questioned as to his intent upon arriving on the island he would call San Salvador, Columbus replies: "I want a new world." Later, more fully realizing what he is facing, he adds: "Nobody ever said this would be easy." Columbus is seeking an earthly paradise, and, given the lush tropical environment into which he stumbles, there is no reason to doubt that he has found it. Columbus describes the gentle and loving Tainos he first encounters as "a people without wickedness . . . very gentle and ignorant of evil," but then he meets the warlike, brutal and cannibalistic Caribs. In response to the Tainos, he resolves to use love rather than force; in response to the Caribs he has no choice but to match their barbarity. "This is not how I imagined it to be," he is forced to confess.

Much like *Christopher Columbus, 1492* has a cast of stars, and they fare little better. The French actor Gerard Depardieu plays Columbus, and though normally an excellent actor, his limited ability to correctly pronounce English proves to be an insurmountable handicap. One critic has compared his pronunciation to "Bela Lugosi reading a cue card," a problem all the worse for a role that is reduced to

**Christopher Columbus and Friends. Above, left to right: George Corraface as Columbus, Marlon Brando as Torquemada, Rachel Ward as Isabella, Tom Selleck as Ferdinand in "Christopher Columbus—The Discovery." © Warner Brothers. Opposite, Gerard Depardieu encounters Bercelio Moya as Utapan (second from left), and other Indians in "1492: Conquest of Paradise." © Paramount.**

depending on a series of more-or-less philosophical one liners. Upon his arrival in the New World, for example, Columbus gazes in awe (as does the audience) and comments: "I think we have returned to Eden.... No one will ever again see it as we have." Later, upon observing the destruction he has unleashed, he concludes: "Heaven and hell can be earthly, we carry them wherever we go." The lines are bad enough; that they can barely be discerned makes them impossible.

Beyond that Depardieu appears and reappears in scenes or melodramatic vignettes that have a notable absence of continuity. Typical is an overly long and overwrought scene in which Native Americans, Spaniards and even horses are rallied by Columbus to lift a magnificently large bell into the steeple of the New World's first cathedral, which, we are told, is to be at the center of a city designed on a plan by Leonardo da Vinci. Depardieu's Columbus just doesn't seem to have a clue as to what he is all about. The problem probably lies with director Ridley Scott, but it doesn't help when during one of the most dramatic scenes in the movie, as Columbus sets foot on the shores of the New World, Depardieu's thoughts were, to quote him directly: "I though of Gen. Schwartzkopf ending the Gulf War, the violence of childbirth, death and God. I was in a state of communion."

If Rachel Ward can be criticized for acting as if she were spurred on by raging hormones, Sigourney Weaver stands accused of acting as if her hormones were nonexistent. Weaver's Isabella is a woman of physical stature. At times she has a sense of humor, but, overall, there is nothing to match the historical record of a queen whose determination and statecraft helped forge a nation. As one critic put it: Weaver "immobile in her frozen fan of hair and iron-stiff brocade, looks [and acts] like the Bride of Frankenstein after finishing school." Maybe so, especially when among her few memorable lines is that wherein she responds,

mostly tongue-in cheek, to news that Columbus had considered becoming a monk with: "It would be a pity."

Another poorly performed, but interesting, role is that of Adrian de Moxica, played by Michael Wincott. De Moxica was one of those Spaniards of noble birth who resented Columbus' authority as governor of Hispaniola. In *1492*, De Moxica dresses in black, sports long black hair, and speaks with a readily recognizable evil tone of voice. He refuses to work and lies around in a hammock smoking cigars, drinking wine and sleeping with the Native American women. Wherever possible, he challenges Columbus' authority, and finally he leads an unsuccessful rebellion. De Moxica represents the evils of the Old World, with which not only the Native Americans but Columbus must deal, and although in the end he commits suicide in order to avoid the humiliation of being captured by Columbus (actually, Columbus captured and hanged him), we know that the New World is not rid of what he represents. De Moxica and others like him help bring about Columbus' fall from grace and the conquest of what paradise does exist in the New World.

An even more interesting character, well presented by Armand Assante, is Sanchez, treasurer to the queen. Sanchez is an actual historical figure, but we know next to nothing about him. In the movie, however, Sanchez is central. Initially, we see him persuading the Queen to accept Columbus' proposal, when nearly all of her other advisors warn against it. He recognizes Columbus as a dreamer, and he realizes that such people have a place at court. Later, however, after Columbus has returned triumphantly from his first voyage, though he continues to secretly admire Columbus for having realized his dream, Sanchez does what he must do, not only as a member of the Spanish nobility, but also as one who must protect the crown from the resentment Columbus has generated among the nobility. He supports Columbus' opponents. Sanchez is, as he describes himself, the "guiding force of reason of state." Columbus, the dreamer and the outsider, is no match for that.

As with *Christopher Columbus*, *1492* experiences a number of historical problems, and, as in the previous case, they range from the minor and inconsequential to the disturbing. Once again, one might be tempted to attribute to artistic license a scene in which Columbus is in prison, when he was never so confined. One might chalk it up to the mysteries of modern math when Columbus, who arrives in the New World with three ships, is (temporarily) abandoned by one and runs one aground, nevertheless leaves La Navidad with three ships! Those familiar with Columbus's bitter petitioning of the crown to have restored those titles, rights and privileges denied him, but to which he believed he was entitled, will be a bit disconcerted to hear that Columbus really did not care about such things. And those conversant with Columbus' discoveries after 1492 will be nearly as unpleasantly surprised as Columbus to learn that Amerigo Vespucci discovered the South American mainland, not Columbus!

As in *Christopher Columbus*, in *1492* we are once again provided with the image of an enlightened Columbus battling the forces of darkness. We are also

told, however, that he was a bald-faced liar, or as Scott has put it, a "grand liar." In his confession, offered on the eve of his first departure, Columbus admits that he entirely and intentionally fabricated the figures he had presented at court concerning the distance to the Orient, figures, he implies, that had persuaded others to grant him his commission. The actual mileage, Columbus allows, may be twice as great, or more!

There is no evidence to support such a conclusion. First, in his obsession with his Enterprise of the Indies, Columbus made mistakes—big mistakes. He may have been deluded, but there is no reason to doubt that he believed Japan lay some 2400 miles to the west. Second, it is important to realize that no one at the Spanish court believed him anyway. Acceptance of his proposal was not related to his having persuaded anyone that his figures were right. And finally, if indeed he was lying, we must accept as well the conclusion that he was suicidal, for no one, not even Columbus, believed that ships and crews of the day could successfully traverse such an expanse of ocean.

As already noted, *1492* is a visually gorgeous, beautifully photographed movie (cinematography by Adrian Biddle), shot in Spain and Costa Rica. Vangelis' sound track is impressive, as are the movie's special effects. The movie has been compared in its opening to *Chariots of Fire*, in its ending to *Apocalypse Now*, and in several intervening scenes to *The Mission*. Much of the time, however, these "portentously pumped up images and sounds," as they have been labeled, are a bit too much. Neither the photography nor the soundtrack ever recede, and they never cease to overpower both the characters and the story.

The most common criticism made against *1492* in the popular press, however, is that it is too long. It lasts two and one-half hours. The problem may be that if a movie were to be faithful to the story of Columbus, even two and one-half hours is insufficient. *Christopher Columbus* saves an hour and retains some unity and coherence by dealing only with Columbus' first voyage. But, it leaves the audience with only a partial view of the man and what he accomplished or failed to accomplish. *1492*, to quote Paul Harvey, tells "the rest of the story," namely of the decline and fall of the Admiral of the Ocean Sea. Following Columbus' triumphant return from his first voyage, which takes nearly one and one-half hours, the movie runs quickly through a series of set-backs, disasters and defeats. It is too much in too little time, however, and the result is a hopelessly incoherent muddle. In sum, the adventures of Christopher Columbus' voyage of discovery, that is his first voyage, may be meat for Hollywood, but not if it is combined with what follows. Unfortunately, "the rest of the story" must be told, if people are to really understand the triumph and tragedy of Christopher Columbus.