From Predator to Prey

Do you fancy heart-stopping action, uncensored fighting and adrenalin filled chases? Mel Gibson’s 2006 epic film Apocalypto has it all, a personal favourite that reaches into Mayan times to give the viewer a clear gory view of the lifestyle and culture of this once fascinating tribe. This film, with its historical accuracy, gory detail and fast paced plot is guaranteed to keep you on the edge of your seat in suspense and cold blooded anticipation.

Apocalypto is set in Pre-Columbian Mayan time, and begins with a fast paced Tapir hunt. Zero Wolf (Rauol Trujillo) and raiders from a rival tribe, pillage a village, home to a self-sufficient tribe. They kidnap the adults not before Jaguar Paw (Rudy Youngblood) smuggles his wife Seven (Dalia Hernandez) and child Turtles Run down a well. The raiders take the prisoners to a large Mayan city. But can Jaguar Paw escape and save his family?

Mel Gibson effectively uses camera work to build anticipation and showcase perspectives in the film. In the beginning, Gibson showcases a fast-paced Tapir hunt in the jungle. A tracking shot is used on the animal to display the pace and anticipation of the chase. Gibson also uses a point of view shot as a climax to the anticipation built by other camera work. This is evident when the Tapir sets off a hinge trap, the viewer is placed in the animals shoes and sees a screen full of spikes coming towards them. These techniques set the pace for the rest of the movie. In addition, the director extensively utilises over shoulder shots and spider cam to portray Jaguar Paws perspective during the film. Gibson uses this when Jaguar Paw is near the waterfall; the combination of both techniques shows his fear and the enormity and size of the waterfall adding the suspense and anticipation of the film.

In an epic film like this, make up was important in portraying the era and brutality on which the film is based on and Aldo Signoretti, the makeup leader, did well to incorporate these ideas. At the beginning of the film, Gibson effectively uses make up in the form of a man holding his beating heart and saying “run” as a precursor for the rest of the film. This is effective as it allows the viewer to predict what his warning meant and what Jaguar Paw will do. Make up also effectively displays the change of Jaguar Paw throughout the film. When running through the jungle, he jumps in a tar pit and emerges on the other side covered in black with only the whites of his eyes contrasting the black tar. This is tremendously important as Jaguar Paw is able to overcome his fear in the jungle just like a Jaguar, which the viewer sees him as, covered in tar. This is effective as the viewer can liken him to the animal, which ties in to his name – Jaguar Paw.

Gibson extensively uses soundtrack, with help from composer James Horner to emphasise the changing moods throughout the film. This is evident during the Tapir hunt at the beginning of the film. Gibson uses percussion, throat singing and ominous music to display the primal era and suspense in which the film is based on. As the hunt draws closer to its climax, the music heightens in tempo and loudness. When the Tapir is suddenly caught in the trap, the soundtrack is silent and all the viewer hears are the cheers from the hunters. This is effective as it builds suspense and anticipation and then the climactic silence breaks this, allowing the viewer to be fully drawn into the scene and the aggressive mood of the hunt can be conveyed. Contrary to the pace and aggression of the hunt, the scene in the village after, is laced with a more upbeat and happy soundtrack. This is heard when Jaguar Paws son, Turtles Run, plays around with a monkey, a more bubbly and lively soundtrack is played in this scene. Gibson uses this effectively as he is able to shift the mood of the film away from the aggression of the hunt to the lively, family atmosphere, created in the village. This lets the viewer see the other side of the hunters with their families.

From captivating camera work to award winning makeup and soundtrack, Apocalypto is an eight out of ten visually stunning 139 minute long film that is a must see for mature audiences that follows one man’s quest for freedom.