

Thinking about Columbus in Bethlehem (6)

The Bethlehem Gadfly Columbus monument September 11, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts on the Columbus monument* 

What right had the first discoverers of America to land, and take possession

of a country, without asking the consent of its inhabitants, or yielding them an adequate compensation for their territory?"

Washington Irving's "gigantic question"

1492 Conquest of Paradise
dir. Ridley Scott, 1992

see the first contact scene, min. 47:00 – 53:40

VIDEO UNAVAILABLE

Unfortunately, the English language version of this 1992 Ridley Scott film "1492 Conquest of Paradise" is not available for free on YouTube. But, fortunately, there is little dialogue in the scene Gadfly would like you to watch. But here is that dialogue. Note especially Columbus enacting the ritual of possession and signing the Notary's book in the Latin form of his name: "Christ bearer."

Columbus: There!

Sailor: Land Ho!

Columbus: By the grace of God, in the name of the gracious majesties of Castilla and Aragon, by all the powers vested in me I claim this island and name it San Salvador.

The Gadfly seminar is almost over.

Let's jump from John Vanderlyn in 1847 to premier filmmaker Ridley Scott's epic 1992 film to celebrate the quincentennial of Columbus's "discovery" of America.

In this film and in especially the short scene of the discovery moment (mins. 47-53:40), we see the hard, pervasive work of systemic racism in play again.

Scott focuses on the weary almost defeated Columbus, the man who has given all for his dream of a successful westward voyage. We pity him. Our heart aches for him. He has worn himself near death on his impossible quest. But land is close. The impossible achievement is near. As the sailor in the background methodically chants the ever lessening depth of water as the shore approaches, Columbus is aroused — can it finally be true? — till he triumphantly utters as if to himself, “There!” And on cue the fog parts and the New Edenic World magically appears as if by some miracle — “Land Ho!” The incredible dream is dream no more but glorious reality. Columbus, however, is subdued not ecstatic — his demeanor dramatically contrasted to that of his crew — humbled by his own achievement, and his first act on shore is to kneel as if to give thanks to God who is the real power in his success.

This is all Ridley Scott’s creation, mind you, there is nothing in the sources on which to base this characterization of Columbus. Scott is telling us how we should view Columbus as he slow motions our hero to shore. Columbus’s first act is an act of adoration and thanks. He’s without doubt a good guy. And Scott even characterizes Columbus with a sense of reluctance as he enacts his absurd role in the absurd ritual of possession (we almost think such an act is normal!), signifying in signing his name as “Christ bearer” that he is an instrument of a Divine Plan (soak in the Vangelis music that coats the whole process with supernatural tones!).

This is amazing stuff! But what is most amazing is that Scott consciously and candidly violates historical fact by showing the beach empty. The New World, this Eden, exists for our taking. Not one of the “innumerable” Taino that the real Columbus describes, some of whom were literally present at touchdown, are there. Why? It would seem obvious that Scott did not feel he could bring off a scene of such arrogant possession-taking by Columbus literally in front of Indigenous people for modern audiences. It would show racism at the very moment of our birth. And we couldn’t take that. So he falsifies. Creating a false image of

an empty land that we might legitimately have a right to fill up.
Imprinting our minds with a racially palatable untruth. Fake news.

So such at this moment is the definitive cultural image of the founding of our nation.

This is an example of how the cultural machinery to suppress people of color works in the construction of our history.