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L2: Semester 1 / 2020-2021
Course: Colonial History of America

7. Of Jamestown and its Filmic Representation

Objectives

After this lecture, students should:

- ✓ be familiar the colony of Jamestown and its settlement
- ✓ be familiar with film studies by analyzing a movie about the colony of Jamestown
- ✓ be aware of the distance between the idealistic representation of the New World in cinema and real historical facts

Introduction

This lecture deals with the settlement of Jamestown colony by English colonists in 1607. A particular focus will be place on the relationship between English colonists and the Powhatan tribe.

1. Of Jamestown: Smith, Pocahontas and the Powhatan tribe

In April 1607 Englishmen aboard three ships sailed forty miles up the James River (named for the English king) in present-day Virginia (Named for Elizabeth I, the “Virgin Queen”) and settled upon just such a place. The uninhabited peninsula was a disaster. Indians ignored the peninsula because of its terrible soil and its brackish tidal water that led to debilitating disease. Despite these setbacks, the English built Jamestown, the first permanent English colony in the present-day United States. The English had not entered a wilderness but had arrived amid a people they called the Powhatan Confederacy. Powhatan as he called himself, led nearly 10,000 Algonquian-speaking Indians in the Chesapeake. They burned vast acreage to clear brush and create sprawling artificial park-like grasslands so that they could easily hunt deer, elk, and bison. The Powhatan raised corn, beans, squash, and possibly sunflowers, rotating acreage throughout the Chesapeake. Without plows, manure, or draft animals, the Powhatan achieved a remarkable number of calories cheaply and efficiently.

Jamestown was a profit-seeking venture backed by investors. The colonists were mostly gentlemen and proved entirely unprepared for the challenges ahead. They hoped for easy riches but found none. The peninsula’s location was poisonous and supplies from England were sporadic or spoiled. As John Smith later complained, they “Would rather starve than work.” And so they did. Disease and starvation ravaged the colonists. Fewer than half of the original colonists survived the first nine months.

John Smith, a yeoman's son and capable leader, took command of the crippled colony and promised, "He that will not work shall not eat." He navigated Indian diplomacy, claiming that he was captured and sentenced to death but Powhatan's daughter, Pocahontas, intervened to save his life. She would later marry another colonist, John Rolfe, and die in England. Powhatan kept the English alive that first winter. The Powhatan had welcomed the English and their manufactured goods. The Powhatan placed a high value on metal axe-heads, kettles, tools, and guns and eagerly traded furs and other abundant goods for them.



Pocahontas
Rebecca Rolfe

With 10,000 confederated natives and with food in abundance, the Indians had little to fear and much to gain from the isolated outpost of sick and dying Englishmen.

Despite reinforcements, the English continued to die. Four hundred settlers arrived in 1609 and the overwhelmed colony entered a desperate "starving time" in the winter of 1609-1610. Supplies were lost at sea. Relations with the Indians deteriorated and the colonists fought a kind of slow-burning guerrilla war with the Powhatan. Disaster loomed for the colony. The settlers ate everything they could, roaming the woods for nuts and berries. They boiled leather. They dug up graves to eat the corpses of their former neighbors.

Little improved over the next several years. By 1616, 80 percent of all English immigrants that arrived in Jamestown had perished. England's first American colony was a catastrophe. The colony was reorganized and in 1614 the marriage of Pocahontas to John Rolfe eased relations with the Powhatan, though the colony still limped along as a starving, commercially disastrous tragedy. The colonists were unable to find any profitable commodities and they still depended upon the Indians and sporadic shipments from England for food. But then tobacco saved Jamestown.

Soon the tobacco-growing colonists expanded beyond the bounds of Jamestown's deadly peninsula.

When it became clear that the English were not merely intent on maintaining a small trading post, but

sought a permanent ever-expanding colony, conflict with the Powhatan Confederacy became almost inevitable. Powhatan died in 1622 and was succeeded by his brother, Opechancanough, who promised to drive the land-hungry colonists back into the sea. He launched a surprise attack and in a single day (March 22, 1622) killed 347 colonists, or one-fourth of all the colonists in Virginia. The colonists retaliated and revisited the massacres upon Indian settlements many times over. The massacre freed the colonists to drive the Indians off their land.

English colonists brought to the New World particular visions of racial, cultural, and religious supremacy. Christianity, metallurgy, intensive agriculture, trans-Atlantic navigation, and even wheat all magnified the English sense of superiority. By 1650 over 15,000 colonists called Virginia home, and the colony began to turn a profit for the Crown.

2. Filming colonization: Terrence Malick's *The New World* (2005)

Film studies deals with various theoretical, historical, and critical approaches to the cinema. This field of research takes a series of critical approaches for the analysis of production, context, creation, and reception of movies. When analyzing a movie, we should take a critical look at the narrative structure, cultural context, characterization, mise-en-scene, cinematography, and sound of the motion picture. Also, a focus should be given to the reception of the movie by relying on reports written by film critics.

We will watch the movie of Terrence Malick *The New World* (2005). It is a historical romantic drama film that portrays the founding of Jamestown, Virginia, and is inspired by the historical figures Captain John Smith, Pocahontas of the Powhatan tribe, and English John Rolfe.

After viewing the movie, we should analyze it by focusing on the relationship between the colonizers and the Indian tribe.

- How are Indians depicted in the movie? Are they savages or civilized?
- What about the English colonizers?
- How does the film director represent the settlement of Jamestown?
- Does the movie provide an objective judgment about



the colonization of Jamestown?

- Are the historical events accurate and reliable?
- What about the performances of Collin Farrell, Q'orianka Kilcher, Christopher Plummer, and Christian Bale? Are they good actors? Did they convince you?
- What do you make of the film of Terrence Malick? Did you like watching it? Are there any parallels between the settlement of Jamestown and the colonization of Algeria?

When analyzing the movie, pay attention to the following points:

- Camera shots (long shot, dolly, tracking...etc)
- Light
- music of the film (diegetic or / and non-diegetic)
- Script (grammar, dialogues, words, accents...etc)
- cinematography, mise-en-scene and sequences
- reception of the movie, awards, Rotten Tomatoes, IMDb, internet viewers

Conclusion

Class discussion about the colony of Jamestown and the film of Terrence Malick *The New World*.