Disney, DreamWorks, and Settler Colonialism: A Critical Comparison of *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* and *The Road to El Dorado*

There is no shortage of racist, sexist, or otherwise problematic children’s media – including movies produced in the 21st century. Though Disney’s *Pocahontas* has often received scholarly attention and criticism, there are several other animated films that are equally troubling. DreamWorks’ *The Road to El Dorado* andDisney’s *Atlantis: The Lost Empire* hit theatres in 2000 and 2001 respectively, and both films rely significantly on outdated, racist tropes to form their plots and characterization. While neither film was a major box office success for either studio, since their release both films have gained a cult following and are often described by fans as underrated or hidden gems. As such, it is important to take an in-depth look at the portrayal of colonialism in these films.

Although created by competing studios, *Atlantis* and *El Dorado* are quite similar. Conceptually, both films put a colonial spin on ancient myths – the former adapted from Plato’s myth about Atlantis and the latter from the Latin American myths of the City of Gold. The basic plot of *El Dorado* follows white Spaniards, Tulio and Miguel, who end up on a quest to ‘discover’ the fabled City of Gold. Upon arriving at El Dorado, they are mistaken for gods, showered with gold, and seduced by Chel, the Indigenous romantic interest. In *Atlantis*, it is white American Milo Thatch who is on a mission to complete his late grandfather’s dream of discovering the lost city of Atlantis. He is shocked to find out that Atlantis is still inhabited and becomes enamoured with Princess Kidagakash or Kida. Neither Milo nor Tulio and Miguel are valued members in their previous societies, however, they soon become honoured guests in the Indigenous societies they infiltrate. This sends a message that even the lowest of white society is more dignified and valuable than the highest of Indigenous societies.

Significantly, the reliance in these films on interracial love or lust to heal the intergenerational trauma of colonial violence is highly concerning. Kida and Chel are examples of more pop culture representations of Indigenous women that are trapped in what Reyna Green calls “the Pocahontas Perplex” (2012). Kida is the “celluloid princess” half of the virgin-whore paradox, while Chel represents the “sexualized maiden” (Marubbio 2012, 76). In either case, the women are valued for their attractiveness to white men and their willingness to help those men achieve their goals. As the “sexualized maiden” Chel is an object of lust to both Tulio and Miguel and is incredibly sexualized given the film’s intended young audience. While Chel does exert some agency and helps Tulio and Miguel so that she can achieve her goal of leaving the city, she has to play the role of temptress as well as cultural interpreter to be valued by the main characters. Kida is sexualized to a lesser extent than Chel, as her value is more tied to innocence and naïveté than sex appeal. She is to be a tantalizing, exotic, woman-child that relies on Milo’s intellect to learn to read her own language and the history of her own people. Both Kida and Chel are defined by their relationship to white men more than anything else.

Lastly, both films differentiate between ‘good’ colonizers and ‘bad’ colonizers, seeking to absolve white settler guilt. It is Commander Rourke and Cortez who are evil, inflict violence against the Indigenous populations, and are ultimately defeated giving the films a happy ending. The ‘good’ Europeans, Milo or Tulio and Miguel, get to play hero, defeat evil, protect infantilised Indigenous peoples, and end up with everything they wanted. The neatly packaged endings work to suggest that colonialism was inevitable and is a dead issue. This erases historic as well as ongoing colonial violence and brutality. It seeks to remove any present responsibility for inequalities created by colonialism and leaves Indigenous peoples hidden away in the past, out of sight and out of mind.

Works Cited:

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