“We are entering a world shrouded in mystery where nothing is as it first might seem.”¹ These are the first words uttered by the narrator of “Maya: The Blood of Kings.” The voice is a familiar one: it is Sam Waterston of Law & Order fame. These words, however, are not the first sounds the viewer hears. Rather, as the picture begins, and along with the rolling of the initial film credits, the viewer hears an acoustic drum beat – boom, BOOM, boom BOOM – and the opening scene is dramatically, darkly lit. The light source is, we assume, just the two small but richly glowing fires burning in shallow vessels positioned against a wall, each one flanking the sides of a darkened corbelled passageway. It is unclear where this passage may be leading. As viewers, we have just been ushered into the suspenseful darkness of an as-yet-unknown world. But soon, the next scene, still dark and still barely illuminated by the glow of fire in the night, depicts scantily dressed men playing some sort of ball game. It looks like they are playing soccer. Again the narrator intones, “This is no ordinary contest. They played this game for their lives. More than a thousand years ago, the men who played and the crowds who watched would all vanish, leaving the arena and all their magnificent cities empty. Today, only mysteries remain.”²

So begins an educationally well-intentioned made-for-TV video production that is supposed to be a factual reporting of a people, place, and time, but turns out to be another misrepresentation or “distortion of indigenous identities.” It is also, therefore, an example of the intellectually debilitating effects “of the Eurocentric legacy,” an

awareness of which “is indispensable for comprehending not only contemporary media representations but even contemporary subjectivities.” Or, to put it another way, regarding Europeans or European culture as pre-eminent to the exclusion of the rest of the world is an attitude that is “[s]o embedded … in everyday life, so pervasive, that if often goes unnoticed.”

For well over 100 years, Euro-Americans have tried to explain and interpret indigenous cultures by various means – whether through visual representation in terms of painting, sculpture, and photography; representations in museum exhibitions; or through television and film. It is the representation of “the Other” in the media that concerns me here.

For the scope of this paper, since there is a very long and varied list from which to choose, I decided to limit the definition of “the media” to a selection of films made specifically for television plus two mainstream movies. In particular, I will discuss “Columbus and the Age of Discovery”, “Maya: the Blood of Kings”, and “Conquistadors”, and, continuing with the intertwining themes of discovery and conquest (with maybe even a little romance added for good measure), the made-in-Hollywood productions, “1492: The Conquest of Paradise” and Disney’s animated “Pocahontas”. These seemingly, if not ridiculously, arbitrary choices are really not that arbitrary after all: they are films I have used and/or made reference to in one way or another in some of the courses I teach.

The subjects of the first three productions fall into what cultural critic Raymond Williams called “Features and Documentaries” or “Education” – two of several television categories he defined and analyzed in his book, *Television: Technology and*
Cultural Form, while discussing programming or “the distribution of varying forms of television within different kinds of service.” Accordingly, “Columbus and the Age of Discovery” was produced for PBS while “Conquistadors,” a four-part series that also aired on PBS that was written and presented by Michael Wood, a popular English documentarian, was produced for BBC Television, and “Maya: the Blood of Kings,” after the eponymous 1986 exhibition of Pre-Columbian art, is one of several episodes from a Time-Life television series originally broadcast as “Lost Civilizations”. Other episodes in this series include, although are not limited to, “Africa: A History Denied”; “Inca: Secrets of the Ancestors”; and “Greece: A Moment of Excellence.”

Before going any further, I must say something about titles (and titling) since the very title of the latter is typical of the kind of Eurocentric nomenclature Ella Shohat and Robert Stam identified in their book, Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media, as indicative of a presumed “master narrative” that western civilization “begins” with the Greeks; that they are the high point against which all else is to be compared. Thus, even with what may otherwise seem to be simple yet catchy titles, a privileged Eurocentric discourse is put immediately into play. And not only is the discourse seemingly innocuously passed off as just phrasing for a title, but it is also one that wholeheartedly and repeatedly asserts itself in various guises throughout the productions I consider here, such as the narrative of Wood’s “Conquistadors.”

For example, in the first of the four episodes, Wood verbally sketches a portrait of Hernán Cortés, a man Wood considers “the first of the great conquistadors” and one who is thus “the hero of … [the] story – if a hero can be someone who caused the fall

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of worlds.” Wood then moves on to describing Cortes’s advance on the Aztec city of Tenochtitlan. He tells us that “the Aztec gods weren’t like the Christian ones; they were more like the gods of the ancient Greeks – capricious, willful, mercurial, cruel.” Later, in the denouement of this same episode, Wood recounts the last days of the siege on Tenochtitlan and Emperor Cuauhtémoc’s surrender and says that he “found the Aztec version of this story as powerful and moving as Homer’s Iliad, the tale of Troy. The Aztecs accept their fate without a trace of self-pity.” It is as if this reflexivity on the part of Wood is an attempt to validate the efforts of the Aztecs and elevate them, with their braziers of human hearts and temple walls encrusted with dried blood, to a level on par with the great heroes of the Trojan War and thus something we – those of us steeped in the myths and legends of Western civilization – can appreciate. But is this educational? Or rather, how might it not be educational? The problem, as I see it, is that it presupposes, if not actually reinforces, a binary of Classical/civilized and primitive/savage (or good versus bad). Where is the opportunity to consider a historical people and place in some semblance of its own context?

Speaking of “Western civilization” or things of the Western persuasion, the same Raymond Williams who looked at the medium of television and saw it as yet another cultural form, a decade later added this term “western” to the revised edition of his Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society. Williams recognized the “complex history” of the term but he also found “the problem of defining Western civilization … [to be] considerably more difficult than it is often made to appear.”

Difficult, indeed, since we can trace the creation of what one scholar referred to as the

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4 See Raymond Williams, Television: Technology and Cultural Form (London, 1974), 77-80.
5 Raymond Williams, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (New York, 1985), 334.
“exotic histories” or new narratives about the non-European as beginning in the eighteenth century. By the twentieth century many aesthetic traditions – both European and non – had become significantly disconnected from the societies in which they had originally evolved and new styles emerged, sometimes as a means of resisting total cultural assimilation. Still, as art historian Deborah Root observed, the older styles had already stylistically asserted themselves, “… with Western galleries, museums, and private collectors influencing the production of aesthetic objects. Film became a new medium for the old colonial tale, and many people’s ideas of what cultures other than their own were like came from the movies…. This construction of exoticism further promotes a notion of expertise and of the professionals who are believed to be qualified to elucidate different cultures.”

Thus, for me, at least, it is specifically because of these notions of “expertise” and belief in qualified “professionals” that I have sought to draw attention to these media productions that purport to “elucidate different cultures” or relate stories of heroic individuals and epic conquests, but instead continue to propagate a Eurocentric legacy steeped in the lure of the exotic and fascination with the primitive “Other”. And in the arena of media representation, PBS (or even Hollywood) may be well-intentioned in its efforts to reflect “enlightened” and multicultural sympathies, but it is also a site to be seriously contested for there have been a number of programs, including some of the very programs mentioned here, that while attempting to present non-Western cultures and/or aesthetics, end up reinforcing negative stereotypes about the barbarity or passivity of the peoples being showcased. Indeed, we see this carried

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Deborah Root, Cannibal Culture: Art, Appropriation, and the Commodification of Difference (Boulder, 1998), 32-34.
out repeatedly on the big screen, such as when Ridley Scott’s Columbus reveals an admiration for the “simple” way of life and “honesty” of faith of the native peoples he has just encountered for whom, he later tells Queen Isabella, “Nature is their God.”

Part of the mainstream viability of these productions has to do with timing, which, as they say, is everything. Consider the production dates, such as 1991 – the year “Columbus and the Age of Discovery” was produced – and 1992 – which is when Ridley Scott’s “1492” premiered – since 1991 heralded the upcoming 500th anniversary – in 1992 – of Columbus’s first voyage to the New World and the resulting conquest of “the Other”. In fact, preparations for officially observing such a historically significant event were announced in Spain in the early 1980s. Writing in the winter of 1992, Oscar Vázquez observed, “there is scarcely an aspect of the visual cultures on either side of the Atlantic unaffected by the significance and events of 1992. From the advertising campaigns of the multinational corporations to more regional efforts in historically important centers such as Seville or Genoa, the mass marketing of commodities through the lure of Columbus imagery has saturated the media and inundated a consuming public.”

This interest in Columbus and conquest continues to resonate after all these years because Columbus is not only a “seminal figure” in the history of colonialism but also because the story of his voyages are told and retold to generations of grade-school children. In that sense, the story (or myth) of Columbus is thoroughly culturally embedded. (Who among those of us who went to grade-schools in the United States does not remember, “In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue” or that his three ships

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were called the Nina, the Pinta, and the Santa Maria?) “For many children in North America and elsewhere, the tale of Columbus is totemic; it introduces them to the concepts of ‘discovery’ and the ‘New World,’ but also to the idea of history itself.”

This is precisely why I began to reexamine some of these entertaining and/or “educational” programs. Then, and perhaps especially now in videocassette and DVD distribution, these filmic attempts to recreate history are also creating, revising, “legitimating or interrogating hegemonic memories and assumptions.” These “hegemonic memories and assumptions” are not only rooted in some mythic notion of the “West” (as opposed to an orientalized “East”) that has been constructed within the triangulated boundaries formed by exoticism, primitivism, and racism but they also represent a type of ideological domination upheld – either consciously or unconsciously – by the media. Since hegemony is achieved through the “negotiation between competing social, political and ideological forces through which power is contested, shifted or reformed,” then representation is vitally important to that negotiation – especially media representations where the definition of what is “real” is a source of conflict and negotiation itself.

Consider poor Pocahontas, who represents a sort of double-whammy of Otherness in that she is both a “she” and native, about which much has already been written elsewhere – good and not so good. Criticism and controversy momentarily aside, Disney’s version of “Pocahontas” is something to which a parent can reasonably feel comfortable about taking his or her child to see that presumably offers a

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8 Shohat and Stam, 62.
9 ibid.
wholesome story about the “strong friendship” that develops between a pretty, copper-colored (and shapely) native girl (with long, thick, well-coiffed black hair) and a handsome blond, blue-eyed white captain while tensions mount between their two very different cultures. And it was wildly popular. (One reviewer even commented that at the venue she chose to go to, the movie was playing on three of six screens and the line waiting to get in never seemed to decrease.) Yet, here is where the “real” is very much a source of conflict, quite literally, since this story, as well as to varying degrees the others I examined, is used for its entertainment value, not because of any actual basis in truth – even if it were a true story. And that is the catch: Disney’s “Pocahontas” is not really a true story, at least not as it is presented in the film, which is historically very inaccurate (historical accuracy was something that was apparently not intended), but it was to be as well-intended as any of the Time-Life episodes from the “Lost Civilizations” series or the stories from “Conquistadors,” the sum total of which is not only supposed to be about conquest, heroism, and greed, but also about the changes that took place in how we see the world, history and civilization, justice and human rights. Disney purposely intended “Pocahontas” to be a politically-correct presentation of a “Romeo and Juliet” type of story featuring a Native American heroine as a means of addressing the criticisms from various ethnic groups over racial stereotyping found in previous productions, such as “Aladdin,” where Arab-American groups protested against certain imagery and lyrics, or “The Lion King” in which African-Americans saw the hyenas as “thinly disguised black and Hispanic characters who seemed to be living in a jungle equivalent of an inner-city ghetto.”

“Pocahontas,” however, is also an example of how various biased tropes – such

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11 Edgerton and Jackson
as the virginal landscape or romantic Indian princess – are trotted out and presented as truth and this, in turn, is what makes the film dangerously problematic since, like the Columbus myth, “Pocahontas” likewise introduces viewers – namely, children – to the notion of discovery and the New World, as well as to the idea of history. Yet Disney’s version of the story is barely a half-truth, and to return to a point discussed earlier, while Disney may have made an effort to reflect “enlightened” and multicultural sympathies, or at least not quite so offensive, by hiring Native Americans as both actors and consultants (in particular, the characters of Pocahontas and her father, Powhatan, are voiced by Irene Bedard and Russell Means, both Native Americans), they still ended up reinforcing certain stereotypes about Native Americans – for example, as seen in the beginning of the movie, that for all their peaceful agricultural practices, natives are still hostile. (In the opening scenes of the film, the males of the village return victorious after having been at war with another group.)

In trying to wrap up my argument into a nice, tidy verbalized package, I realize that I am back to where this paper began in that, after all is said and done, I am just scratching at a deeply etched surface of how the construction and use of Eurocentric narratives are so thoroughly incorporated in our visual cultural practices that it is little wonder that they do, in fact, often go unnoticed. There is one thing – a recurring theme, if you will – that has asserted itself in all of the productions I considered, and that is the notion of the existence of some mythic master narrative about common origins. I feel it is therefore fitting that, in closing, I should refer again to the insightful scholarship of Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, who observed that “this narrative of origins is itself specular and narcissistic: Europe looks in the mirror and is dazzled by
its own beauty." Western civilization is thus able to breathe a collective sigh of relief at the familiar sight, since, after all, it is the culture into which all others have been introduced as some distant manifestation of its earlier, primitive self.

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12 Shohat and Stam, 56.