Archive: Film Reviews, Portals Special Issue

Blood Diamond


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On the surface level, Edward Zwick's *Blood Diamond* (2006) is an adventure genre film, mixed with a pseudo-liberal 'message' film. But on a deeper level, it functions in much the same manner as earlier, colonialist texts such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in its depiction of Africa. *Blood Diamond* contains all the key generic characteristics of a Hollywood feature film. Set in Sierra Leone during the 1999 civil war, the film raises the issues of diamond smuggling and child soldiers through the stories of Soloman Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), whose village is attacked by rebel soldiers at the outset, and Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a mercenary and diamond smuggler. During an attempt to save his family, Vandy is captured by the rebels and taken as a slave to work in the diamond fields. During his labours, Vandy finds a particularly large stone, risks his life to take it out of the fields and buries it nearby shortly before being captured and imprisoned by government troops. Archer, likewise in prison for diamond smuggling, hears the incensed ranting and threats of rebel guard Captain Poison (David Harewood) about the stone. He arranges for Vandy's release from prison, and proceeds to threaten, manipulate and eventually bribe Vandy (with the lure of finding his family) to take him to the diamond.

Through his positioning as the sympathetic family man and victim of circumstance, Vandy is cast as the moral centre of the film, and indeed, his attempts to reclaim his son from rebel brainwashing form the film's most poignant moments. However, the true narrative of the film revolves around the noir-ish hero of white 'Rhodesian' Danny Archer, whose morally compromised nature is explained away by a painful childhood (and redeemed through his 'ultimate sacrifice'), and his sympathetic love interest, journalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly).

While the film functions well as an adventure/thriller, it is, however, clearly also a liberal 'message' film -- as is made abundantly clear by the exhortation at the end of the film that it is "up to the consumer to insist a diamond is conflict free." *Blood Diamond* also includes extended conversations between Archer and Bowen where the motives of these two different types of white characters are questioned, and their exploitative roles in Africa discussed. Whether this be Archer's overt smuggling and gun-running to both sides of the conflict, or Maddy's journalistic exploitation of war and human suffering in the name of a story, such critique stays firmly in the hands of the white characters. Bowen critiques Archer, who critiques her in turn. Vandy, who occupies one of only two main speaking roles allocated to African characters (the other being his somewhat psychotic R.U.F nemesis), is not given much of an opportunity to critique the actions of those around him.

The end of the film shows Vandy, clad in a very expensive looking suit, being introduced by an ambassador (the tellingly cast Stephen Collins, most famous for playing a kindly pastor in television series *7th Heaven*), who states, "The third world is not a world apart, and the witness you hear today speaks on its behalf. Let us hear that voice. Let us learn from it, and let us ignore it no more. Ladies and gentlemen: Mr. Soloman Vandy." The film then ends without allowing Vandy to make any sort of a statement -- in this, as in other parts of the film, we do not hear his voice, his perspective. One could argue that this is as an acknowledgement on the part of the filmmakers that they do not, indeed, have an authentically African or third-world voice in this film, and implore its audience to listen to other messages from Africa. However, the lack of knowingness displayed by the rest of the film would seem to negate such a reading, and regardless, where is one to find such a voice within our overwhelmingly white, overwhelmingly economically privileged western popular culture?
The exposé of the diamond trade that Blood Diamond presents does have an explicitly political purpose, but it doesn't ask its audience to undertake too much questioning of their own actions or those of their governments. The message not to buy diamonds from conflict zones seen at the end of the film allows the audience to feel good, to feel that they have 'helped' Africa by refusing to buy these products. When Archer questions whether Bowen is "exploiting [Vandy's] grief," Bowen describes her writing as "like one of those infomercials, little black babies with swollen bellies and flies in their eyes...I'm sick of writing about victims but its all I can fucking do...Because I need facts...People back home wouldn't buy a ring if they knew it cost someone else their hands." This speech positions the film Blood Diamond as offering just those facts that will be able to change the situation via boycott activism, eliding the very real problems created by colonialism. It is indeed the case that Blood Diamond itself functions in much the same way as a World Vision commercial does. Blood Diamond presents its audience with a vision of a world of suffering, complete with a happy ending, and an epilogue that offers its audience an opportunity to make some small gesture to help which will salve their consciences and allow them to think upon the subject, and world's inequities, no longer. While ascribing to these conventions of the genre was no doubt necessary in order to gain funding and audiences for this project, the effect remains the same. The audience's journey from recognition to 'action' is narratively encouraged by the redemption of the two white heroes (both played by well-known American actors) through their assistance in reuniting Vandy with his family and exposing the trade in 'blood diamonds.'

The film fails to acknowledge the role that colonialism, and the destruction of social structures and the pillaging of resources it undertakes, has played in creating this climate of unrest, violence and poverty. Indeed, it takes this lack of acknowledgement a step further, and through its Eurocentric (and at times explicitly colonialist) narrative, images and dialogue, it renders a portrait of Africa little different from earlier western depictions. A telling example of this can be seen in the repetition of the phrase "T.I.A.," which, as Philip French notes in The Observer, "means 'This Is Africa,' said with a resigned shrug, excusing everything, explaining nothing" (French, 2007). Utilised when negative, chaotic or incomprehensible things happen, this usage resonates strongly with the positioning of Africa in the west's racist cultural imagination as a place of chaos and irrationality, implying that there is something uniquely problematic and irredeemable about the place.

Drawing no doubt on Soloman Vandy's name, French has cast an allusion of the film as a kind of King Solomon's Mines, but it is another British novel of the period that this filmic text draws on and mirrors -- Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness -- and, despite the significant temporal discrepancy between the release dates of these two texts, Blood Diamond displays many of the racist flaws that Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe noted in its predecessor in his essay "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness" (first published 1977). For example, with its prototypically affirmative Hollywood structure, and focus on an individual who escapes to a world of peace and designer suits, it sets up a dichotomy between Africa and 'civilized' London in much the same way as Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness projects the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization, a place where man's vaunted intelligence and refinement are finally mocked by triumphant beastiality" (Achebe, 1977).

Visually too, Africa is portrayed in this film as the chaotic, fevered Heart of Darkness of Joseph Conrad's imaginings. No attempt is made to explain the internal political struggles of Sierra Leone, which are instead depicted as a "mindless frenzy" (Achebe, 1977), a meaningless mass of violence and bloodshed. Archer asserts that "People here [in Africa] kill each other as a way of life. It's always been like that," and while Bowen counters that "not all Africans kill each other as a way of life," much of this film precisely depicts Africans killing one another, rendering it more in keeping with Archer's view than Bowen's. Soloman Vandy himself is one of the few black men in this film who escape being generally visually depicted as violent and animalistic, though this too unravels into "triumphant beastiality." Although he is in many ways the moral centre of the film, Vandy lacks power and often subjectivity, and is shuttled from white character to white character who offer to help him. He is "just another black man in Africa" as Archer puts it. Vandy is set up as a
counterpoint to the brutal Captain Poison, and it is telling that while Poison rhetoricises about their nation, and hates the white man, Vandy, the 'good black man' sends his son to school to learn English, hoping that one day he will become a doctor. The African nationalist is thus the demonised one, while the positive African character is a colonial mimic man, seeking for his child to learn the language of the colonisers in order to attain social advancement.

Vandy's determined placidity is broken in the latter half of the film with a scene in which he confronts his tormentor, Captain Poison, and the two fight in hand-to-hand combat. Vandy's outburst of rage is well-justified, but the manner in which this is presented is significant. The breaking of his composure forms a dramatic peak of the film, and the two wrestle in the mud, screaming, and with the psychotic expressions on their faces framed in close ups. Vandy in the end bludgeons Poison to death with a shovel. Although this is the only man Vandy kills, unlike Archer who shoots a great number of people throughout the course of the film, the distancing effected by the use of a gun, rather than the force necessitated by the use of a shovel, further renders this scene as visually animalistic, as it had from its opening close up on Vandy's face, teeth bared, eyes red, displaying all the markers of 'savagery' that one can see in Conrad's depictions of Africans.

Other examples of the colonialist mentality of the film can be seen in the dialogue during discussions of Africa. After having told Bowen of the gruesome deaths of his parents at the hands of what we assume to be Robert Mugabe's men, Danny Archer refers to Africa as a "godforsaken continent," proclaiming that "Sometimes I wonder if God will ever forgive us for what we have done to each other. Then I look around and I realise: God left this place a long time ago." This statement, which featured prominently in the trailer for the film, certainly conveys the desolation and hopelessness of the situation, but it also hearkens back to the representation of Africa as the 'heathen' place it was considered in the colonialist, missionary imagination, and could further be read to imply that this 'God' who was indeed present and is now gone, was associated with white control and 'civilization.' This vision of Africa as a hellish heart of darkness is explicitly stated by Captain Poison when he says to Vandy "you think I am a devil, but only because I have lived in hell. I want to get out. You will help me, or your family will die!" These sorts of colonialist messages are further implicated by the presentation of Danny Archer as the 'true' African who can never leave the continent. Early in the film, Archer is told by another white man that "this red earth, it's in our skin…This is home. You'll never leave Africa." And indeed, while Soloman Vandy and his family happily escape to England, and Poison is willing to kill in order to "get out," Archer cannot leave, affirming that "I'm exactly where I'm supposed to be," as he lies dying. As the music rises and we see a shot of his blood dribbling into the soil, he rubs it between his hands - the 'authentic' African who cannot exist outside Africa.

The most disturbing, explicitly colonialist and racist message of the film, however, is placed in the mouth of the African protagonist Soloman Vandy. He says to Archer "I understand why people want diamonds, but how can my own people do this to each other? I know good people who say there is something wrong with us, besides our black skin, that we were better off when the white men ruled." It is this statement that echoes across the film, acting as a justification of and incitement to colonialism, disavowing the role colonialism has played in creating Africa's problems, and proclaiming that Africans are childlike or savage beings that need white masters to rule over them in order to stop them from killing one another: a chilling message from a contemporary Hollywood feature film, and a reflection of how much western societies' attitudes have cycled back to the colonialist mentalities of time past.

References


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