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BLOOD DIAMOND

The sociopolitical thriller *Blood Diamond* brings the chaos and brutality of the Sierra Leone civil war not only to the big screen but also the home front. With violent action, suspense, adventure and romance it has all the makings of a blockbuster. While the movie is full of dynamic characters, the real star of the film is the sparkling gem adorning many filmgoers' fingers. The movie aims to leave the audience with the burning question "Is there blood on *my* hands?" Using the theory of Cultural Studies this paper will thoroughly analyze the meaning, messages and perspectives of the film *Blood Diamond*.

The 2006 film by Director Edward Zwick takes place in Sierra Leone in 1999 where brutal rebel forces called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) have ravaged the country. It begins in a small fishing village where Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou) and his family come under rebel attack. The RUF brutally and ruthlessly slaughter many of the village's men, women and children and indiscriminately, even joyfully, chop off peoples' hands so they are unable to vote in upcoming government elections. Solomon is separated from his wife and children and taken as a slave to work the rebel-controlled alluvial diamond fields.

The rebels use the diamonds to trade for weapons, which help fund the war. While working the diamond fields, Solomon finds a rare pink diamond "the size of a bird egg." Realizing it must be incredibly valuable he hides the diamond just moments before government troops attack the rebel mining camp. But a cold-blooded rebel named Captain Poison sees the diamond and knows Solomon has hidden it. Both men and the rest of the rebels and slaves are taken to prison in Freetown.

While in prison Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a white Rhodesian, learns of the pink diamond when he overhears the rebel captain and Solomon arguing about its existence.

Archer is an ex-mercenary and current diamond smuggler who trades weapons for diamonds with RUF commanders. After obtaining the "conflict" diamonds – so called because they fund conflicts – he smuggles them to Liberia where they are sold or more easily transported to buyers in South Africa, London and elsewhere. While posing as a *National Geographic Magazine* reporter covering a story on nomadic goat herders, Archer attempts to smuggle diamonds across the border by implanting them into a goat's nape. Government army officers stop the caravan, interrogate Archer and find the diamonds. Archer attempts to bribe the soldiers to no avail and is taken to prison.

Having lost his diamond cache, Archer is now in debt to South African mercenary Colonel Coetzee (Arnold Vosloo) who provided the weapons used for bartering for diamonds. The smuggling chain leads from Archer to Coetzee, to a well-known diamond company executive named Van De Kaap. Archer is desperate for the means to pay off his debt and leave Africa. After overhearing the heated argument regarding the pink diamond, he is determined to have it for himself. He pays for Solomon's bail and offers to help him find his family in exchange for the diamond.

Enter attractive American journalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly) whom Archer meets at a bar. Maddy has her suspicions that major diamond companies are involved in the illegal diamond trade, but she can't prove it. She needs Archer to provide information on record. Archer offers to give her the information if she helps him find Solomon's family and the pink diamond.

Meanwhile unbeknownst to Solomon, his young preteen son has been kidnapped and forced to become a murderous RUF boy soldier. Through brainwashing, brutality, fear and drugs the RUF make the young boys commit horrific acts of murder and violence upon innocent civilians. Captain Poison, who somehow manages to get out of prison, is now mentoring Solomon's son to become a murderer just like him. Child soldiers are portrayed proudly saying "I'm a baby killer" and "I'm the master of disaster" to the approving grins of rebel captains.

There are many scenes and sequences of chaos, death and destruction at the hands of the ruthless, demonized rebel forces throughout the film. At one point Archer, Solomon and Maddy visit a refugee camp in Guinea where a million Sierra Leone civilians are being held after fleeing for their lives. In a classic Hollywood moment, Solomon easily spots his wife (among the million people) and learns the RUF took their son.

Maddy comments about the lack of American media coverage. "This is what a million people looks like. An entire country made homeless. You *may* catch a minute of this on CNN between sports and weather," she notes. Similar thought-provoking dialogue is peppered throughout the film, such as the comment of an elderly villager, "Let's hope they don't discover oil here, or we'll have real problems." Archer remarks about all wars being for ivory, gold, diamonds, oil and other natural resources. "We thought we were fighting communism, but it is all about who gets what," he said. Maddy is certain "people back home wouldn't buy a ring if they knew it cost someone their hand."

In true Hollywood style no movie is complete without sex *and* violence so Maddy is an exceptionally beautiful white American woman who falls for the good-looking, yet morally-challenged white African Archer. Sexual tension lingers between them throughout the film.

The movie is riddled with illogical and unrealistic scenarios, such as Archer finding his moral compass after meeting and falling for the highly principled Maddy. Solomon finds and saves his brainwashed son from the rebels, and Archer and Solomon retrieve the infamous pink diamond. The good guys (Archer and company, as well as government forces) kill many bad guys: rebels and mercenaries. Maddy is safely transported out of the country and Solomon can now be reunited with his family. Archer, who is suffering from a fatal bullet wound, helps Solomon escape with the diamond and instructs him to locate Maddy so she can tell the world about conflict diamonds.

In the end, Solomon and Maddy unveil the Van De Kaap diamond company's role in purchasing conflict diamonds. The United States urges UN decision makers to enact policies that prevent conflict diamonds from reaching Western companies and consumers.

The intentions and manifest objective of the film is noble. Its primary message, based on true events, is aimed at stirring emotions and raising American awareness about how Western consumerism contributes to horrific conflict in some nations. For this effort the film should be applauded. However, when analyzing the film from a critical cultural standpoint the film falters in several regards. For instance, rather than simply urging awareness and consumer action the latent messages of the film may inadvertently perpetuate the trappings of Western hegemonic viewpoints – the West must save Africa from Africans – which are contributing factors to many post-colonial African nations suffering today.

Based on the film's message the "bad guys" are clearly and unarguably the rebel forces. The "good guys" are the government soldiers under attack. The dehumanization of the RUF throughout the film is extensive. There doesn't appear to be any motivation for the rebels' fight other than bloodthirsty lust for murder and destruction. In many scenes the rebels are reveling in the blood bath like monsters. One particular scene of rebels dancing around a huge fire seems to symbolize hell and them as devils. Conversely the government soldiers are often portrayed as clean cut, helpful, rational and incorruptible.

But is this depiction historically and culturally correct? Or is this demonized view of political rebellion simply the viewpoint of colonialists and foreigners who wish to maintain Western-influenced control of the nation so they may continue to prosper from Sierra Leone's precious resources rather than allow the impoverished Sierra Leone citizens to prosper themselves?

According to Sierra Leone's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the lead up to violence was almost inevitable given the gross corruption and greed of the government who personally prospered from the diamond trade while leaving the country's people in desperate poverty:

...It was years of bad governance, endemic corruption and the denial of basic human rights that created the deplorable conditions that made conflict inevitable.... By the start of the conflict, the nation had been stripped of its dignity; institutional collapse reduced the vast majority of people into a state of deprivation. Government accountability was non-existent. (10)

A documentary of Sierra Leone's struggles, released the same month as *Blood Diamond* tells a different viewpoint of the conflict than the mainstream blockbuster. *The Empire in Africa* reports the rebels were fighting to end exploitation and reclaim the richness of their country from foreign corporations. The documentary's director contends "the international community waged the war on Sierra Leone with bombs, executions, rigged elections and manipulation of the international media."

The worst part was that most of these killings and tortures were not done by the rebels but by the Sierra Leone army, the (Economic Community of West African States Monitoring) peacekeepers and other forces loyal to the government with only a very small portion attributable to the rebels. (Diaz)

A best-selling memoir *A Long Way Gone* by Ishmael Beah released this year tells the true account of a boy soldier in Sierra Leone during the civil war who was forced into service not by the rebels, but by the government. At the age of twelve Beah's parents and siblings were murdered by rebels. He fled for his life, but instead of finding safety he was drafted into the Sierra Leone army where he was doped up on lethal drugs and forced to become a boy soldier who "kills everything that moves." (Beah)

Numerous documentation of the civil conflict states the country was split into various factions all of which engaged in systematic war crimes. On some occasions individuals served as soldiers "fighting" the rebels during the day and looting with them at night. This phenomenon was common enough the term "sobel" (a combination of "soldier" and "rebel") was coined. (Perriello)

To give the *Blood Diamond* director credit, the complex issues surrounding the conflict many have been too difficult to digest and convey to an entertainment-seeking audience. Perhaps he needed to create a definitive "bad guy" and "good guy" to appeal to audiences while still conveying the important message about multi-billion dollar corporations exploiting a nation for their resources. The film also raised awareness about the recruiting and brainwashing of young boys. The United Nations estimates there are 300,000 boy soldiers worldwide, most of them in Africa. (Harsch)

Nonetheless, the film portrayed a recurring theme that is troubling in its hegemonic viewpoint – the West must save Africa from Africans otherwise they will kill each other for no

reason; life was better when whites ruled the country. This pervasive idea was subtly presented several times throughout the film.

“I know people – white people – without me you’re just another black man in Africa,” says Archer to Solomon. Archer says to Maddy, “Will God ever forgive us for what we have done to each other? Then I look around and realize God left this place a long time ago.” It is hard for the critical viewer not to think the reference to God leaving Africa was in fact referring to the colonialists withdrawing from Africa and relinquishing power to Africans.

Later in the film in a heart-to-heart moment between Archer and Solomon, Solomon says “I know some good people who say something is wrong with us inside our black skin; that we were better off when white man ruled, but my son is good....” Archer says, “I’ll get your son back.” And so the plot goes – Africa is godless and in chaos and the white man will restore order for the Africans. The plot of an American journalist and American politician convincing the international community to take action against conflict diamonds and help save Sierra Leone from self-implosion further emphasizes this point.

To complicate matters, the film not only demonizes the rebels as mindless murdering savages that must be stopped by Western intervention, but also at the same time perpetuates the demonization of rap music. In nearly every scene portraying the rebel forces there is rap music blasting from trucks and camps. It is pervasive and sometimes non-sensible. In one completely illogical scene not only is rap music blaring, but also a rap video is playing on a television screen in a remote RUF tented mining camp. I would speculate that access to satellite television in this remote jungle camp was highly unlikely.

The demonizing of rap music by hegemonic America is nothing new; it has long been attacked as a culprit for crime and violence. Rap music and hip hop has become a cultural emblem for America’s black city kids, of which it is estimated only a small percentage participate in street crimes; yet rap has become a silver bullet for politicians determined to scapegoat it as a major source of violence rather than addressing and transforming the unjust situations that mold the lives of poor people. (Rose)

The more public opinion, political leaders, and policymakers criminalize hip hop as the cultural example of a criminal way of thinking, the more imaginary black monsters will surface.... In the face of daunting economic and social conditions that are felt most severely by the young people they represent, rappers are cast as the perpetrators. (Rose)

Whether the film's director intended to demonize rap music is not clear. Perhaps the demonization of rap is already so pervasive in our hegemonic culture that it seemed a natural fit to attribute it to the rebels he was intentionally trying to portray as monsters. Perception can become reality and the repeated association of horrific criminals with rap music perpetuates a stereotype that negatively impacts not only rappers, but America's black youth. When the media correlate criminals with rap music, it is natural for the public to associate rap music only with criminals. In doing so, the film may not only demonize the rebels, but also America's black urban youths.

In conclusion, the film *Blood Diamond* tells a powerful, thought-provoking and provocative tale based on true events that aims to denounce huge diamond corporations for their role in knowingly perpetuating a bloody civil war. Repeated messaging throughout the film works to drive the message home that Americans should become more aware of their role in contributing to atrocities in Africa. Unfortunately while the filmmakers' intentions seem pure in championing Africa, they may be unintentionally hurting Africa by perpetuating hegemonic viewpoints which could hinder the future success of post-colonial African nations striving for self-determination.

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