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Hollywood's Great White West Saves the Rest

Many American-made films which portray foreign countries and cultures are ripe with myths and stereotypes. Whilst their manifest objective may aim to cast a critical eye on the negative impacts of Western culture upon other countries, their latent messages are often steeped in western ideology with a reoccurring hegemonic theme – the West will save the day. Using Art Silverblatt's Keys to Media Literacy and the theories of Cultural Studies this paper will analyze several recent American historical dramas which portray African and Asian cultures including: *Amistad*, *Last King of Scotland*, *Blood Diamond*, and *The Last Samurai*. On the surface most of these films seem to champion the people and cultures of Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Japan and enlighten audiences about negative Western impacts on these societies; but assessed critically the characterization of each culture is often stereotypical and every film has an underlying hegemonic message that shines a beacon of favorable light on America and the great white knights of the West.

Comment [DF1]: Excellent, clear thesis

It is important to note that American-made motion pictures are not only created for, and viewed by, mainstream American audiences; they are a hot ticket item in foreign countries. In fact, according to the Motion Picture Association of America, overseas sales of American motion pictures account for more than half of all sales the film studios make every year (Boliek par. 4).

Hollywood motion pictures, whether intentionally or not, speak volumes about American viewpoints and opinions of other cultures. These viewpoints may impact how the United States is

viewed and regarded abroad. Films may also impact how Americans learn and relate to other cultures and minority ethnicities within the United States.

Comment [DF2]: Yes

American movies, especially historical dramas based on true events, are often used as teaching tools in American high school classrooms. A recent study conducted by professors at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and University of Connecticut ~~unveiled~~ revealed that 92.9 percent of surveyed teachers report using a portion of a Hollywood feature film at least once a week in their classrooms to help teach social studies and history (Stoddard 28).

Comment [DF3]: Good study-interesting results

The surveyed teachers stated they use films to bring history to life; and report that students are more motivated and score higher on tests when they watch history in feature films. (Stoddard 28).

However, many Hollywood films tend to fit historical events into generic and familiar storylines which are compacted, simplified and seasoned with hegemonic overtones that glamorize white Western civilization while downplaying the roles of minorities. Additionally, they often perpetuate myths and stereotypes about other cultures. Sometimes Hollywood takes so much liberty in its recounting of historical and social events that it may work to completely rewrite history altogether, as this paper will later examine with *The Last Samurai*.

Hollywood films also tend to be made for a broad general audience, so the history of the majority of this audience, traditionally white and middle class, is emphasized, and dramatic liberty is taken with the story to make it more engaging and understandable for that audience. The end result is an audience that learns much of what they know about the past from viewing simplified, “whitewashed” historical narratives that generally exclude or minimize the roles of marginalized peoples in the national story (Stoddard 28).

One of the films the study specifically emphasized, which was used by nearly half of the teachers surveyed, is *Amistad*. The story spotlights a true historical event about a group of West Africans’ who fought for freedom against the brutality of enslavement. Whereas the manifest objective of this film is well intentioned, the film follows the same tired pattern that portrays

marginalized groups of people as victims who play minor roles in their own story, while Western whites are the heroes who save the minorities.

Comment [DF4]: Excellent points

Director Steven Spielberg created the film *Amistad* based on an actual revolt in 1839 by West Africans onboard the Spanish slave ship *la Amistad* during the Middle Passage to America. The Africans whom originated in Sierra Leone were doomed for a horrific life in slavery. Shortly after they rebelled against their captors they were captured by the U.S. Navy and imprisoned. They awaited trial for murder.

Through dramatic lighting and sound, powerful camera angles, editing and graphic footage, the film successfully disturbs, haunts and ignites an emotional core with the audience. The horrors and brutality of the slave trade and the horrific journey of the Middle Passage are potent. But as the film progresses it focuses its attention not on slavery or the experience of African slaves, but rather the story of a white lawyer who defends the Africans. President Quincy Adams is another white protagonist who convinces the U.S. Supreme Court to grant the Africans freedom and transportation back to their homeland. “Despite its good intentions, *Amistad* is nevertheless a saga affirming the fundamental goodness of white American civilization” (Vera 56).

Comment [DF5]: Yes, it is; compare to Schindler’s List which focuses on a reluctantly heroic Nazi sympathizer who eventually sees the terrible error in his ways; however, the film never implies that the culture Schindler comes from is not evil through and through—no fundamental goodness in Nazi culture. This being said, *Amistad* does try to point out that there were white people in America who tried to live up to the Constitution. Sharon, you might be interested in reading *Founding Brothers*—Ben Franklin strongly opposed slavery and predicted that allowing it to exist in the newly formed U.S. would lead to disaster.

[This film] not only hijacks the stories of African Americans by telling them through white characters but also fails to raise larger issues about slavery and race in U.S. history...*Amistad* illustrates both the good and bad of what is occurring currently in Hollywood. The good is evidenced by big budget films that include groups of non-white characters who are fairly well-developed and whose narratives make attempts at raising some social awareness of the history of slavery and historical racial oppression in the U.S. Conversely, these films also represent, to some degree, an extension of the status quo as the overall narratives align with traditional film storylines through following “white savior” characters who want to lead the black characters to freedom, respect, and manhood (Stoddard 32 -3).

Nine years after *Amistad* splashed the silver screen, modern day Sierra Leone came into the spotlight in 2006. Director Edward Zwick’s 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?"

The film takes place in Sierra Leone in 1999 where brutal rebel forces called the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) have ravaged the country. The premise of the film is that the RUF brutally and ruthlessly slaughtered thousands of innocent people for apparently no reason other than to gain control of the country's rich alluvial diamond fields. The diamonds were traded for weapons, which helped fuel the war.

The protagonists in this film are black African Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), white African Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio) and white American Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly). Vandy's family comes under rebel attack and he is taken as a slave to mine the diamond fields. His preteen son is drafted into the rebel army as a boy soldier. Archer is an ex-mercenary and current diamond smuggler who starts out ethically challenged but finds his moral compass in the end. Bowen is a journalist determined to break the story to the world that huge diamond corporations are involved in the illegal diamond trade which is fueling the bloodshed and warfare.

There are many scenes and sequences of chaos, death and destruction at the hands of the ruthless, demonized rebel forces throughout the film. Thought-provoking dialogue aimed at making the audience more socially aware is peppered throughout the story. Film characters note the lack of American media coverage about the atrocities in Africa. It also makes clear that many atrocities are committed by outsiders to control natural resources such as oil, diamonds and gold

and that the West either intentionally or unintentionally supports this blood shed through apathy and blind consumerism.

At the end of the film the white African becomes the tragic hero and the white American delivers the message to the West so they can save the day. Black African Vandy, although a hero, acts more like a prop. The West rescues him and his family and transplants them to safety in London.

The 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. Most notably the film falls into the same pervasive Hollywood trap that perpetuates the hegemonic ideology that the West must save Africa from Africans.

Comment [DF6]: good

The film also represents the history of Sierra Leone's civil conflict through a western-influenced bias. The dehumanization of the RUF throughout the film is extensive, whereas the government soldiers are often portrayed as clean cut, helpful, rational and incorruptible. The director's take on history is clearly that the rebels were bad and the government was good.

But after critical review of historical documentation, the civil war was not so cut and dry. The government was grossly corrupt, denied its citizens basic human rights and left most of the country's civilians in total deprivation (Sierra Leone 18). Some reports even suggest the government soldiers and peacekeepers who were loyal to the government committed the majority of war crimes (Empire in Africa). The rebellion ignited as a stand against the corrupt government that made a few individuals very wealthy and allowed Western interests to prosper from the country's rich natural resources, while the majority of Sierra Leone's citizens starved.

Although *Blood Diamond* tells a powerful, thought-provoking and provocative tale based on true events aimed at raising social awareness about the West's role in contributing to atrocities in Africa, in the end it is the white Westerners who save the black man and Africa.

Other recent movies depicting Africa fall into the same trap. For instance the award-winning film *The Last King of Scotland* released in 2006 by Director Kevin MacDonal is a thriller aimed at educating the audience about true horrific events that took place in Uganda under the rule of vicious dictator Idi Amin (Forest Whitaker) during the 1970s. The protagonist of the film, and the perspective from which the entire story is told, is a completely fictionalized Western character – a Scottish doctor named Nicholas Garrigan (James McAvoy) who becomes Amin's personal physician.

Garrigan, a recent medical school graduate, travels to Uganda for adventure and to find a sense of purpose by bringing much needed medical care to the country's impoverished people. Garrigan doesn't like or trust the local British officials whom he views as racist imperialists as they attempt to warn him to be careful around Amin. He immediately becomes naively attracted to Amin's charisma and opulent lifestyle.

But as Garrigan's character develops he soon discovers Amin's brutality, violence, oppressive and murderous regime. Garrigan attempts, and fails, to assassinate Amin. Amin is determined to torture and take Garrigan's life.

In the end, Garrigan is rescued by a black Ugandan medical colleague who sacrifices his own life to save Garrigan's (because apparently Garrigan's life is more valuable than his own). The black doctor begs Garrigan to promise to tell the world what Amin's regime is doing in Uganda, because the world will believe him (read: because he is white). And so the generic African storyline rears its ugly head again – Western white men will save Africa from Africans.

Not only will the West save Uganda, but this storyline reinforces the idea that Garrigan's initial mistrust of the British was unfounded and misguided. The colonialists are the good guys – the African rulers are always the bad guys.

Hollywood perpetuates stereotypes that all of Africa is a land of chaos and turmoil overrun by warlords and entrenched in disease. The pervasive hegemonic ideology that Africa must be saved by the West is damaging to the future success of all post-colonial African nations striving for self-determination.

Comment [DF7]: Excellent point

African writer Uzodinma Iweala begs Americans to “Stop trying to ‘Save’ Africa.” Whether it is the “Save Darfur” campaign or the “Keep a Child Alive/ I AM AFRICA” ad campaigns, Iweala contends that no matter how well intentioned they may be they promote the stereotype of Africa as a black hole of disease and death. He expresses concern that the media only focus on the continent's corrupt leaders, warlords, “tribal” conflicts, child laborers and women disfigured by abuse and genital mutilation (Iweala, par. 8).

Every time a Hollywood director shoots a film about Africa that features a Western protagonist, I shake my head – because Africans, real people though we may be, are used as props in the West's fantasy of itself. And not only do such depictions tend to ignore the West's prominent role in creating many of the unfortunate situations on the continent, they also ignore the incredible work Africans have done and continue to do to fix those problems (Iweala, par. 10). There is no African, myself included, who does not appreciate the help of the wider world, but we do question whether aid is genuine or given in the spirit of affirming one's cultural superiority (Iweala, par.9).

Hollywood films tend to propagate the stereotypes of Africans as one of two extremes – evil murderous villains, or helpless victims in need of Western saviors. The ideology the media uses to depict Asia is quite different, yet equally stereotypical.

Comment [DF8]: Another excellent point

Asia is often romanticized in films as “exotic” and “unusual,” and Asian people typically fall into only a select few stereotypical labels: geek or scientist, kung fu fighter/ samurai, mythical, otherworldly philosopher or seductive Geisha girl.

“Orientalism is a total mis-seeing of the other through a veil of interpretations of reality which are relatively impenetrable and resistant to change. It is a form of ethnocentrism which has evolved into cultural myth, invariant in its imaginings, and imperialistic in its aims.” (Rosen, par. 1)

A romantic version of Orientalism paints a picture of Japan whose sophisticated culture with its indigenous traditions are in close harmony with nature (a myth popular in Japan, as well, it might be added); tiny bonsai trees, exotic geisha girls in kimono, manicured rock gardens, the unfathomable mysteries of Zen Buddhism (Rosen, par. 5).

The film *The Last Samurai* (2003) created and co-written by the same director as *Blood Diamond* -- Director Edward Zwick – highlighted and perpetuated nearly every one of these romanticized stereotypes of Japanese culture. Additionally it further accentuated the lore of the noble, mythical samurai warrior and exaggerated the commonplace of ritual suicide (Schultz, par.11).

The Last Samurai is set in 1870s Japan at a time when Japan was struggling with its identity between maintaining traditional ways and becoming more westernized. But this struggle wasn't simply due to Japan's allure and fascination with the West as the film may lead viewers to believe.

To put it in historical context, Japan had been successfully isolated by choice for 200 years. Japan was eventually forced to open its ports to foreigners in 1853 when an American fleet steamed into Japanese waters with cannons aimed and ready to fire (Shultz, par. 4). The presence of Westerners in Japan created a crisis. It set into motion the Meiji Rebellion. Some factions, such as the samurai, wanted to fight and expel the foreigners; while others feared

aggression may end to defeat and possible colonization. Leaders chose to study Western ways, and strengthen themselves so they could compete economically and militarily (Shultz. Par. 10).

The premise of the film *The Last Samurai* focuses on protagonist American Civil War Capt. Nathan Algren (Tom Cruise). Algren was a member of Col. Custer's Calvary at Little Big Horn. He is tortured and haunted by memories of the horrific massacre that he and others committed against Native Americans, and he turns to alcohol to numb and quiet his nightmares. He has become cynical about the Army and feels there is nothing honorable about warfare.

Nonetheless Algren is recruited and commissioned by Japanese businessman Mr. Omura to train Japan's first Westernized army to fight with modern rifles, cannons and other weaponry. Algren accepts the assignment mainly due to the exorbitant pay offered.

Against Algren's better judgment, Omura forces the inexperienced army to go into battle prematurely against rebel samurai forces who have gained control of his railroad investment. The army is slaughtered. Algren fights and kills several samurai but is eventually taken prisoner by their leader Katsumoto (Ken Watanabe). He is taken to a remote, idyllic village and treated as a guest rather than a prisoner.

Algren stays in the home of one of the men he killed, and is nursed back to health by his victim's widow. Everyone he encounters is polite, humble, gentle and noble. Algren spends the winter in the village. His fascination and respect for the samurai intensifies. He learns to speak their language and learns their traditional way of the warrior, called Bushido.

When spring arrives, the samurai rebels escort Algren back to Tokyo. The gentle and noble warriors are harassed by garish Westernized policemen. New laws disallowed samurai to wear swords or traditional hair styles. Katsumoto tried to reason and reach agreement with the empirical

leaders, but they had turned against the samurai way of life. Eventually the marginalization of the samurai and the modernization of Japan led to the final samurai rebellion.

The samurai fight their battles with traditional bows, arrows and swords. They refuse to adopt the modern weaponry. Algren, still tortured by the massacre of the Native Americans, chooses to fight on the side of the idealized samurai who are portrayed as poetic and mythical heroes. But in the end, the tragic heroes are savagely mowed down by the soulless modern Gatling guns provided by Americans, and Japan officially ends its mythical days of noble samurai warriors. Katsumoto kills himself rather than be disgraced by the defeat.

In the end, Algren presents Katsumoto's sword to the Emperor and implores him to honor his people, history and tradition by not signing a treaty with the Americans for exclusive rights to provide weaponry. The Emperor is so emotionally moved by the American he refuses to sign the contract and instead is determined to reunite Japan as one nation.

While the undertones of this film may demonize the Western military and the negative impacts Western culture has had on Eastern culture, perhaps more negative is the abundant stereotypical characterizations of the Japanese people and society. Not only is the movie drenched in Western ideologies of spellbinding and enchanting "Orientalism," but the very premise of a white American man saving Japan's traditional way of life, and imploring the Emperor to honor his own heritage is arrogant and ethnocentric to say the very least.

The most relentless myth espoused within this film is that of the samurai as legendary, philosophical, loyal, soulful warriors. Historically, "they were an elitist and (for two centuries) an idle class that spent more time drinking and gambling than cutting down enemies on the battlefield" (Lovgren, par. 2).

Although samurai did value cultural artfulness, and many did live by Bushido, “many samurai fought Meiji modernization not for altruistic reasons but because it challenged their status as the privileged warrior caste. Meiji reformers proposed the radical idea that all men were essentially equal, and any commoner could be taught to fight. Not a message samurai liked hearing” (Shultz, par. 13).

A Harvard professor of Japanese history said that Japan wanted “to get rid of a non-productive class of samurai and replace it with an effective fighting force. It [wanted] to stand up as an independent nation and not be pushed around by Britain or the United States” (Lovgren, par. 9).

Despite the fact that the samurai fought against modernization, the notion that they were against modern weaponry and only fought with traditional weapons is also a myth. According to historians, by the Meiji era samurai fought with cannons and guns and other western munitions. Rejecting modern weapons “is a romantic notion, but it is not really true. By the 1870s, the remaining samurai rebels had run out of ammunition for cannon and guns, so they used only their swords and arrows by default” (Shultz, par. 15).

As for the historical accuracy of an American fighting with the samurai, or even training the Japanese Army, according to historians that is also utter fiction. Japan’s primary Western advisors were German and French (Shultz, par. 8).

Although the film wears all the dressings of a historical epic based on true events, much of it is fictionalized by Americans in order to hijack another culture’s history and insert ourselves into their stories. The film’s samurai rebel leader Katsumoto is loosely based on the real samurai leader Takamori Saigo (Lovgren, par. 10). The last stand of the samurai portrayed in the film is loosely based on the real Satsuma Rebellion. The actual rebellion, however, was fought by Japanese soldiers and samurai alone without the help of Western white knights.

Comment [DF9]: Good

In an interview with National Geographic News, Director Edward Zwick made no apologies for embracing idealism over reality in his movie. “It’s as important to celebrate what’s poetic and idealized as it is to understand the reality,” Zwick said. “We’re inspired by the mythologizing of the samurai as heroes” (Lovgren, par. 6).

Historical accuracy aside, an audience’s impression of a group is still shaped by how characters from the group are portrayed (Stoddard 27).

In conclusion, despite America’s strive to become a more multicultural society, Hollywood feature films continue to act as a conduit that further perpetuates cultural clichés.

Whilst the manifest objective of some films may spotlight the negative impacts Western influence has had on other cultures, too often the heroes and protagonists are those very same Western whites. In the end, the West always saves the day.

Perhaps more disturbing is that many secondary school teachers frequently use these feature films as teaching tools. This grants these slanted historical depictions credence and further perpetuates the already pervasive hegemonic ideology of heroic white society, and continues the marginalization of other cultures and people.

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Comment [DF10]: Yes

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