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Imagining Privilege

Abstract:

This paper discusses the film "*Blood Diamond*" directed by Edward Zwick and its representation of race and privilege in postcolonial Africa. The film's presentation of humanitarian and social issues suggests systematic racism and inequality in this setting. This essay argues that the film's imagination of Africa within the contextual frame of the diamond trade provides a cinematic canvas of "blackness" that is itself privileged. The characterizations of the leads are constructed to fill this canvas with the ethnocentric solutions that "whiteness" can offer. The racial designations within this African representation serve to reinforce the film's creation and manipulation of privilege.

Keywords: postcolonialism, cultural studies, racism.

As a political thriller set in Sierra Leone, Africa, Blood Diamond, chooses to negotiate the politics of that space and culture while exploring its main topic of economic exploitation. The film is not so much about Africa as it is about white people in Africa and their actions. African bodies are often relegated to the margins of the story and the frame, present only to stereotypically reinforce images of the "Dark Continent." African minds are present yet absent through their contextualization as static within the chaotic, kinetic reality that is black bodies characterized. There is violence in this silence as African actions and agency seem to exist in a space void of any awareness. They seem to spring out of the "bestial" and "savage" with no recognition of the implicit collusions required to politicize their space. Whites are always present, navigating the world of Africa with more ease than the "natives." Africa seems a construct of their supposedly civilizing presence and continued exploitation.

Blood Diamond indirectly highlights the privilege of being white, male and European by juxtaposing it with what it imagines to be black, male and African. Women, specifically African women are essentially erased from the Africa portrayed with no character to represent their agency. They are absent, out of sight, out of frame and out of mind. In this Africa, black bodies are objects in the way of the protagonist's development. The film begins with the ruthless raid of Solomon Vandy's (Djimon Hounsou) village by the Revolutionary United Front rebels who commit brutal acts of violence. Though their violence is presented realistically their characters are rendered in a gleefully cartoonish manner by the camera. The following scene is a conference in Belgium, where people in expensive suits professionally discuss the issues related to the diamond trade.

The contrast between the visceral edge of the first scene and the sanitized urgency of the second establish the film's expectations of the world it portrays. Africa is wild, pathological and

desperate while the European influence is stable, distanced and of course rational if not passionate. The protagonist's journey can be interpreted contextually as an attempt to negotiate these two worlds and integrate them. Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), the protagonist, seeks to negotiate his identity and contends with this binary approach to race, class and issues of nationalism in the Africa he inhabits as his colonial presence defines the continent for the Western viewer.

An inexplicable mélange of accents displaces the Sierra Leone of This Africa and contextualizes it as The Africa, land of black bodies and white interests. No distinct identities are afforded to any but the whites in this Africa with no boundaries save for those established by the Europeans. All others are consciously designated black bodies, a mass of loose half-formed identities representing barriers to the "civilized." This is emphasized through the film's frequent use of the acronym T.I.A. to represent hopelessness and resignation to the conflicts of this land. This is Africa, or more accurately T.I.E.A. This is Europe's Africa because in numerous ways this imagined Africa ready for presentation is regulated, controlled, shaped and created by whites, Europeans and European interests.

Nowhere is this more evident than in Danny Archer's characterization as a clever mercenary who navigates this Africa with an intelligence, courage and strength apparently unattainable to the multitude of Africans he objectifies, exploits and murders. Solomon Vandy's characterization however consists entirely of indignant looks of outrage and intense dignified outbursts of emotion. In this Africa, the Africans are screaming, hurting each other, or part of the vibrant scenery that is the colored background to Danny's machinations. This stereotypical presentation of Africa offers a storyline built upon the invalidity of African agency, as the film's

imagination of Africa within the contextual frame of the diamond trade provides a cinematic canvas of "blackness" splattered with white solutions that is itself privileged.

Many filmmakers recognize the powerful cultural imperialism of Hollywood and participate in storytelling that is promoted as counterhegemonic. However, these narratives often engage a dualistic tradition of Hollywood storytelling. Narratives meant to be subversive in one respect are often reactionary in another and overtly or covertly reinforce thematic appropriations of Western domination. Anti-racist storylines often feature sexist or homophobic representations that challenge the subversive potential of a film. Nameless and faceless blacks are often sprinkled into the plot as representatives of the transgressive, at the edge or beyond the normative realm of whiteness.

Normalizing whiteness in a land of black bodies requires an exclusive, extensively unequal command and distribution of power. This involves a supposedly natural exclusion on the basis of race, sex and factors relating to the biological and cultural predispositions of others. The camera readily recognizes white males but is a stranger to all others emphasizing their distance and making their presence irregular on screen.

Solomon Vandy says in the film, "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." This colonial dismissal of African exploitation authenticated by the writer's and director's use of the African character serves as an example of the interrelated power structures that come to reinvent and reinforce standards such as the 'master' narrative. In order to redefine these standards and create a space for inclusion these structures must be questioned and critically re-evaluated. The space of the marginal and marginalized requires a resistant politicization to emphasize inclusive agency, and to increase visibility as a contest to exclusive white normativity.