Black Hawk Down: naked propaganda masquerading as entertainment

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Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* sets out to tell the story of a US military debacle. On October 3, 1993, Somali gunmen brought down two Black Hawk helicopters as American Special Forces tried to seize the warlord Farah Aideed. During a night of fighting 18 US soldiers died and 73 were wounded. One pilot was taken hostage and CNN showed scenes of American dead being paraded through the streets of Mogadishu. Within months the Clinton administration pulled US forces out of Somalia.

Actor Josh Hartnett, who plays Army Ranger Staff Sgt. Matt Eversmann in the film, expressed the hope that after seeing *Black Hawk Down*, "People will think twice about sending our troops on the ground into a land that we don't know anything about, to be slaughtered." Hartnett, however, seems to have been in a different film from the one that Ridley Scott was making.

The character of Scott's film is indicated by the welcome it got from an audience of right wing politicians and military top brass when it premiered in Washington. Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz declared *Black Hawk Down* to be a "powerful film." His fellow film enthusiasts included Vice President Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, Army Secretary Tom White, and Iran-Contra plotter Oliver North.

Unlike his earlier film *G.I. Jane*, *Black Hawk Down* received the full co-operation of the US military. The actors went through a period of intensive training at Fort Bragg and were, Scott proudly declared, "traumatised" by the time they arrived in Morocco for the start of filming.

To get that kind of co-operation Scott had to allow the military a veto over every aspect of the film. As a result, *Black Hawk Down* is not a genuine artistic exploration of the experience of US intervention in Somalia, but a blatant glorification of US militarism.

Scott does not seem to have had to compromise any artistic principles to achieve this result. Interviewed on BBC radio about *Black Hawk Down*, he repeatedly referred to the US army as a "militia"—as though America's professional army, maintained with the highest level of military spending in the world, could be compared to the 18th century volunteers who fought for American independence, or the union army that defeated the breakaway by the southern slave-holding states in the 19th century.

This was no mere slip of the tongue. When audience members at a discussion session prior to a special BAFTA screening in London politely questioned the film's attitude to US militarism, Scott rounded on the chairman BBC film critic, Andrew Collins, in the manner of an interrogator, demanding to know where he stood on American military intervention post-September 11.

Scott has made his name with films like *Blade Runner*, *Alien*, *Thelma and Louise* and *Gladiator*. If they did not tax the audience's intellect or artistic sensibility, they at least offered a reliable evening's entertainment due in part to their powerful visual imagery. *Black Hawk Down* uses many of the same visual techniques perfected in his earlier works, but with the difference that this is a film with a definite non-artistic agenda. Scott is not simply telling a story, he is propagandising for a particular political position. The film was finished before the September 11 attack on the World Trade Tower, but its spirit still reflects the increasingly reactionary outlook of a section of the American elite. It makes for a poor film, which fails even in its own terms as an example of the war or action genre.

All Scott's trademarks are there. Mogadishu did not provide an opportunity for rain—always a favourite image with Scott—but the aircraft hangar where the troops were billeted offers a suitably post-industrial setting. Helicopters and colourful swirls of smoke were available in plenty. But rather than producing evocative imagery, Scott's style has been reduced to a series of clichéd visual tricks.

At his best Scott narrates a story through visual imagery, using spectacular action scenes to rush the audience over the ever-present holes in the plot. In *Black Hawk Down* this technique fails. What some critics have praised as a vivid account of "the fog of war" is in fact a confusion of narrative.

This is in marked contrast to Mark Bowden's book *Black Hawk Down*,* on which the film is supposedly based. Bowden goes to considerable pains to track the events of the 15-hour battle through the streets of Mogadishu and make them clear to the reader.

He does this to a great extent by identifying the participants. We learn who they are, why they joined the army and about their families. Scott has carefully avoided this aspect of the book. Character is always pared down to a minimum in his films. While this may work with two women in a car, with a hundred or so men in a military convoy it presents problems. In *Black Hawk Down* character is so minimal that even having the soldiers' names on their helmets does little to distinguish one man from another.

Ironically one of the few soldiers to stand out is the character played by Ewan McGregor. Unfortunately it is not through McGregor's efforts that the character is made recognisable. Even the best actor would have had trouble bringing these characters to life because their dialogue is so limited, rarely extending beyond "f***" and "hu-ah."

"Hu-ah" is a word that appears to mean "yes" and can be delivered in one of two ways—with enthusiasm or without—according to circumstances. Even three years in drama school may not equip an actor to wring much of such limited vocalisation.

McGregor's character stands out because he was originally based on Specialist John Stebbins. When Stebbins was convicted of child molesting, the name had to be changed in an effort to protect the army's reputation. The new name, "Grimes" was grafted on later and is pronounced at every opportunity for no apparent reason other than to make clear that he is not Stebbins.

Since the characters are ill-defined, it is impossible to engage with any of them. When parts of their anatomy are blasted to a bloody pulp, this has an emotional impact equivalent to the deaths of the virtual figures in a computer game. The result is a profoundly dehumanising and dehumanised film.

A number of reviewers have suggested that the film is racist. Certainly the soldiers shown in the film are almost uniformly white. This absence of black faces on the American side is not in itself an indication of racism,

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however, but is merely an accurate picture of the Delta Force and Rangers. There were only two African-Americans among the Rangers stationed in Mogadishu. In this respect the film merely reflects the racially exclusive nature of the elite units of the US army.

What does leave a nasty taste in one's mouth is Scott's treatment of the one African-American soldier in the film, Specialist Kurth, played by Gabriel Casseus. This character's role is merely to grin amiably, like the minor black characters such as servants in old Hollywood films.

But the most appalling aspect of Scott's film is his depiction of the Somalis as an undifferentiated, screaming horde. Not only does Bowden's book tell us about the American participants on October 3; he has gone to some lengths to interview Somalis who were there that day. We learn about their backgrounds, what they witnessed and what they did just as we do about the Americans.

Scott's attitude is very different. The role of the Somalis in the film is to die in anonymous waves like the Hollywood Indians of old westerns. The film is shot entirely from the point of view of the American soldiers. We do not learn about the vastly disproportionate number of Somalis killed and injured on October 3.

For example, when a helicopter comes down the whole descent and eventual crash is depicted in intricate detail, except for the child who was crushed in the house it destroyed. Since Bowden had already got this material together Scott's omission is deliberate.

Throughout the film no Somali character is shown in a positive light. Only two are differentiated from the mass. One is Osman Atto, a Somali businessman, and Aideed's financier, whose sole function in the film, is to sit glowering over a glass of tea in an atmospherically lit room.

The other is an unnamed gunman played by a large black man in a black bandanna. Who this character is remains obscure. If he was meant to be Aideed, a short, middle aged man, grey haired and balding, it was a poor representation. No such person features in Bowden's book. He is Scott's own invention and he has created a character that has little to do with Mogadishu. It is the stereotype of a violent black gang leader, who could have been slotted into an equally stereotyped vision of an inner city anywhere in the world.

The primary value of Scott's film for the military and political leaders is ideological. *Black Hawk Down* is an exercise in the manipulation of mass consciousness. Scott is attempting to change the public perception of what happened in Mogadishu on October 3, 1993.

At the time it was widely understood as a humiliating defeat for the US military. The few seconds of film CNN screened showing the mutilated body of an American soldier being dragged through the streets shocked the US public, who could not understand why these young Americans had been sent to Mogadishu.

CNN had 40 minutes of film from a Somali stringer. It showed only 30 seconds and of that only 2.5 seconds included the dead soldier. So powerful was this image, however, which was of a very different kind to the slick Hollywood depiction of death and injury shown by Scott, that it made the use of ground troops on this scale politically impossible for almost a decade.

It is noticeable that although Scott uses images suggestive of military videos taken from spy planes and helicopters—the entire action that day was filmed, making it what must be the most thoroughly recorded battle in history—he does not show the mutilation of the soldier or attempt to reproduce the imagery of news footage.

Instead Scott shows us alternative images of US soldiers who, although wounded, are heroic until the very moment they are killed. He is attempting to create a new memory that will overcome the widespread hostility to American soldiers being killed on imperialist missions abroad.

The filmmakers, the right wing politicians and the US military who backed it hope that for those who see *Black Hawk Down* the sanitised, choreographed violence of Scott's film will become the image of the October 1993 incident they remember.

What then really happened in Mogadishu and what is Scott's film hiding?

To begin at the beginning, why were the American forces in Somalia? According to Scott's film they were there as part of the UN mission and their role was to get food aid through to the starving. This was not the case. The famine was already over by the time US troops arrived. Bowden's book *Black Hawk Down* and the book *Me Against My Brother*, by another American journalist, Scott Peterson,** both make this clear. Neither of them is anti-American or left-wing in their political sympathies.

Peterson points out that the number of famine deaths had peaked in October to November 1991. President George Bush did not launch Operation Restore Hope until December 1992. In any case the 30,000 combat troops, attack helicopters and warships that Bush despatched were scarcely suitable for an aid mission.

A scene at the beginning of the film suggests that the UN prevented US troops from protecting aid convoys. Again this is untrue. The mission was handed over to UN control in May 1993, but effectively the US remained in the driving seat. Although 23 nations participated in the UN operation, political and military control was in American hands throughout. US Admiral Jonathan Howe was in charge of the whole operation. His staff and all the most senior military officials were American.

The US troops sent to Mogadishu were not intended to help the aid effort. Among the Rangers were members of the secret Delta force, a fact that in deference to the military Scott never spells out. The presence of General Garrison in Mogadishu was kept secret because his military background in special operations would have made it all too clear that the purposes of the task force was not humanitarian. Garrison had commanded the Phoenix Program, whose task was to kill Vietnamese village leaders who were thought to be sympathetic to the Viet Cong. Since then he had conducted covert operations all over the world.

In the weeks leading up to October 3, the Rangers had earned themselves the enmity of the civilian population of Mogadishu. Three times a day Black Hawks would harass the city's residents flying along the streets below roof level before soaring back up to hundreds of feet in the air. This activity was popular with the Rangers who told Bowden it was like riding a roller coaster. Sometimes they would hover low over flimsy shacks blowing them apart, or over a crowded market place tearing people's clothes from their bodies or even ripping babies out of their mothers' arms, in a practice the pilots called "rotor washing."

Even before October 3 the US military were casually brutal about the number of dead and injured among the Somalis, whom they referred to contemptuously as "Sammys" or "Skinnies." They regularly lobbed mortar shells into the city from the UN compound. They hit hospitals and homes killing an unknown number of civilians. No attempt was even made to count the number of casualties when troops opened fire on crowds.

The single action that did more than any other to cement Somali hostility and to unite the different clan factions in Mogadishu against the Americans was the massacre of a meeting of Habr Gedir clan elders on July 12, 1993. They had convened their meeting to discuss peace proposals Admiral Howe had put to them the previous day. Cobra gunships armed with TOW missiles and 20 mm cannons attacked the house, with ground troops finishing off the wounded.

When the mission on October 3 went wrong the US troops found themselves in a situation that was largely of their own making. Bowden is very candid about the extent of civilian casualties on October 3. He describes how the American troops opened fire on civilians as they put it "mowing down whole crowds of Sammies," laughing when they blew a woman apart. He also admits that they took women and children hostage. Scott's film does not show the hostages and pays no attention to civilian casualties.

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Nor does Scott admit, as Bowden does, that the Rangers went to pieces under fire and that their discipline broke down. The average age of the Rangers was 19, with many almost fresh off the high school football pitch having never been under fire before. Bowden notes that one of soldiers joined the army because his wife was pregnant and he needed a better-paid job with a health plan. Scott never demonstrates this amount of interest in his characters. He is concerned only to manufacture a glorious event out of a military debacle. He does not want his audience to dwell on the tragedy of these wasted lives. He certainly does not want us to ask who was responsible for getting these young men killed and maimed.

Why did these young men die? To answer that Scott would have had to examine the background to the US intervention in Somalia. This is the most glaring omission in the film. There is no hint of America's long-term involvement in the area and its role in creating the tragic situation in Somalia through its support for the vicious dictator Siad Barre.

The US had supported Siad Barre since the mid-1970s. Until then Somalia had been a Soviet ally. When neighbouring Ethiopia overthrew Emperor Hailie Selassie, the Soviet Union shifted its support to the new Ethiopian regime. The US government took the opportunity to form an alliance with Somalia, pouring millions of pounds worth of sophisticated weaponry into this backward country, because it offered a base on the strategically important sea lanes leading into the Middle East.

Siad Barre exacerbated clan rivalries and was responsible for causing famine by devastating the farming districts. During the late 1970s and 1980s Somalia became the largest recipient of aid in Africa, but most of this money went on military spending. By the late 1980s Somalia was awash with arms.

When rebellion broke out in the late 1980s, the US backed Siad Barre as he ruthlessly suppressed opposition. In 1988 he razed the city of Hargiesa to the ground in an attempt to destroy the rival Isaaq clan. In these years every young Somali learned to use an assault rifle.

In 1991 Siad Barre was overthrown. A unit of US Marines had to be diverted from the Gulf to evacuate the US embassy, which was by then the largest in sub-Saharan Africa. The American landing a year later was an attempt to recover this strategic base on the Horn of Africa and to consolidate the Middle Eastern gains that the US had made in the Gulf War.

This bloody intervention proved unsuccessful at the time, but the present US administration has shown that it is eager to complete Bush senior's unfinished business in the Middle East. Somalia is on the list of targets in the "war against terror". While it may be lower down the list than Iraq, a repeat visit can be expected.

For all its superficiality, Scott's film takes on a sombre meaning in this context. Film is the most deceptive of media, because it conveys the illusion of reality so strongly. It shows us what we think we can see or, ideally, what a good director thinks and sees in his mind's eye. If he does his job well that is how we think we see the world thereafter. Scott has been employed like a political hack to make a world audience think differently and lay the ghosts, Somali and American, of October 3, 1993.

* Mark Bowden, *Black Hawk Down*, Bantam Press, 1999

** Scott Peterson, *Me Against My Brother*, Routledge, 2001

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