

# Filmmakers turn their attention to Africa—with limited results

Joanne Laurier

16 December 2006

*Blood Diamond*, directed by Edward Zwick, screenplay by Charles Leavitt; *The Last King of Scotland*, directed by Kevin Macdonald, screenplay by Jeremy Brock, based on the novel by Giles Foden

Mined in war zones and illegally sold to finance war efforts, “blood” or “conflict” diamonds became infamous for their role in the violent internal strife in Sierra Leone in the 1990s. The term in general refers to gems smuggled out of countries at war to purchase weaponry that kills and displaces millions of Africans. These “dirty diamonds” represent an estimated two-thirds of the world’s supply.

*Blood Diamond* by Edward Zwick (*Glory*, *The Siege*, *The Last Samurai*) is set in 1999 in Sierra Leone. Both the government of the impoverished West African country and the rebel forces of the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) carry out wanton killings.

Overrunning the countryside and ravaging its villages, the RUF creates an army by brainwashing kidnapped adolescent males and molding them into soldiers. During an RUF rampage, a Mende fisherman, Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), is captured by the rebels, his wife and two daughters carted away to an RUF detention camp in Guinea, and his son stolen for military indoctrination by the insurgents.

Solomon is spared dismemberment only to be sent as slave labor to a diamond mining camp run by the RUF in which captives are summarily shot for any attempt to keep a found stone. Sifting through the mud, Solomon comes across a giant diamond. In a risky undertaking, he hides the gem during the ruckus caused by a government troop attack on the rebels. After the raid, Solomon and the RUF’s ruthless Captain Poison (David Harewood) are taken prisoner.

Word about Solomon’s diamond circulates and eventually the fisherman finds himself indebted to an ex-Zimbabwean mercenary, Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), who calls himself a “Rhodesian” and smuggles diamonds to neighboring Liberia for Colonel Coetzee (Arnold Vosloo). For Archer, the coveted diamond means a ticket out of the war-torn country, while Solomon needs the stone to retrieve his family from the RUF. Solomon, however, soon realizes that a partnership with an operator like Archer is quite dicey.

To navigate the perilous, war-devastated terrain back to where the diamond is buried, Archer enlists the help of American photojournalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly), who is on the hunt for information about blood diamonds. She views Archer as a likely source. Although Archer is as amoral as Maddy is sanctimonious, an attraction develops that ultimately helps, after various twists and turns, bring blood diamonds into the international spotlight.

*Blood Diamond* brings important problems to light. It does so, however, with far too much of a conventional touch. While the film’s most intriguing scenes are those that deal with Sierra Leone and its political realities—particularly the relationship of the RUF to the rural population, its training methods and so forth—the movie’s weakest segments are those seemingly superimposed for their box office value.

Zwick explains in the film’s production notes that “[I]t has been my

belief that political awareness can be raised as much by entertainment as by rhetoric.” Rhetoric is not very useful under any circumstances, but one has the right to suspect that Zwick means to counterpose rather crude entertainment and any sort of social analysis or statement. Why should intriguing and delighting people and deeply engaging with the world be mutually exclusive? This unfortunate conception of Zwick’s helps explain his decision to infuse the harsh drama of social turmoil with a set of largely unconvincing relationships: that between Archer and Solomon and the even less delicately rendered one between Archer and Maddy.

While DiCaprio’s Danny is a relatively fleshed-out character, Hounsou is saddled with the abstract ‘Noble Native’ persona. Equally weak, if not weaker, is the artificial *raison d’être* for Maddy’s character, who always seems a fish out of water. Her main function as a plot device, by providing both a romantic intermission and a means of getting to the diamond (Archer and Solomon pretend to be members of the press convoy), obviously created an artistic stumbling-block for the talented Connelly.

In comparison to the significance of the subject matter, these flaws may seem minor. But such is their artistically disruptive character that the important story of Sierra Leone and its social complexities threatens, in Zwick’s hands, to be reduced to a commonplace morality tale. Scenes of the RUF’s brutality and the country’s abysmal poverty are striking, but too often treated as mere backdrop, with much of the film’s energy focused on an incongruous love story, as well as on the primitive, lackluster dynamic between the two male leads.

Also, more could have made of the callous British diamond brokers, who, as the film points out, horde the stones to limit supply, thereby fueling the conflict.

Zwick’s perceived need to commercialize his project annoyingly (and unnecessarily) works against the more conscious political and artistic elements in the film. The production notes contain something worth noting: While delving into the tragedy of blood diamonds, say the filmmakers, “a more far-reaching crisis began to resonate with them,” that is, the issue of child soldiers. This topic generates a degree of freshness and spontaneity that is overall lacking in the film. It unwinds as a genuine exploration rather than an imposition of formulae.

“It’s a remarkable thing when a movie tells you what it wants to be,” says Zwick. “While working on this film, the haunting theme of the child soldiers and the debasement of children took on a greater import. The exploitation or resources in the third world has inevitably been linked with the exploitation of children. [According to the film, there are currently 200,000 child soldiers in Africa.] There was a phrase I wrote on the outside cover of my script. It was the first thing I saw at the beginning of every shooting day. It read, ‘The child is a jewel.’”

The authenticity of these feelings comes across in the film, as well as a sense of commitment to important questions, even when the drama is at its most banal and awkward. “It is impossible to be in those places for any length of time and not be moved, even knowing that whatever we do won’t be enough,” said the director.

The entire cast and production team felt the same way, donating money and launching the “Blood Diamond Charity Fund” for the communities that welcomed them in the course of filming. The Fund’s goals involve digging wells, building roads and schools, delivering food and providing medical assistance.

The limitations of Zwick’s liberalism make themselves felt most strongly at the end of the film when Solomon testifies to an international gathering in 2002 on the Kimberly Process Certification Scheme, a self-regulating agreement between the nations that export diamonds and participating governments to prevent trade in conflict diamonds. *Blood Diamond’s* postscript asserts that Sierra Leone is at peace, an optimistic pronouncement given that the country—an ongoing source of inter-imperialist intrigue—is one of poorest on the planet.

“It is [the Africans] who carry the ‘Black man’s burden’ . . . What the partial occupation of his soil by the white man has failed to do; what the mapping out of European political ‘spheres of influence’ has failed to do; what the Maxim and the rifle, the slave gang, labour in the bowels of the earth and the lash, have failed to do; what imported measles, smallpox and syphilis have failed to do; whatever the overseas slave trade failed to do, the power of modern capitalistic exploitation, assisted by modern engines of destruction, may yet succeed in accomplishing” (E. D. Morel, *The Black Man’s Burden*, 1903).

How to understand a figure as complex as that of Idi Amin, the dictator who ruled Uganda from 1971 to 1979, and fled the country with the blood of thousands on his hands? An unstable megalomaniac, Amin bestowed upon himself various titles, such as “Conqueror of the British Empire” and “Lord of All the Beasts of the Earth and Fishes of the Sea.”

Director Kevin Macdonald has dramatized the 1998 novel, *The Last King of Scotland*—another of Amin’s self-proclaimed titles—in this part-fiction, part-factual movie of the same name. The British filmmaker’s first feature contains an outstanding performance by Forest Whitaker as Amin. James McAvoyn also stars as the young Scottish physician, Nicholas Garrigan (an invented character), who travels to Uganda in search of adventure, escaping the pressures of an austere Presbyterian family.

Uganda is on the brink of political change, Amin having overthrown the government of Milton Obote and declared himself president. Arriving in the country, Garrigan begins assisting in a rural mission. A mass rally in support of Amin impresses the physician, who is warned by co-worker, Sarah Merrit (Gillian Anderson), that “they cheered for Obote until they realized he had turned the country into his personal bank account.”

Garrigan soon catches Amin’s eye and becomes the president’s personal physician and political advisor, in no small part due to the fact that he is a Scot. Amin feels an affinity to all things Scottish because of the supposed anti-British inclinations of that population.

Having unique access to Amin, Garrigan is approached by the British Foreign Office to become its agent. Garrigan despises the former colonialists and denounces their attempted intervention. In contrast to his work at the mission, the physician enjoys a privileged existence in the country’s capital, Kampala, as much Amin’s playmate as a participant, as he sees it, in the country’s glorious rebirth.

Garrigan’s illusions start to dissipate when his passport is confiscated and one of Amin’s wives, with whom he is having an affair, is murdered in a depraved manner. Further, the British show him photos of hordes of gruesomely slaughtered victims. In fact, the entire political opposition has been wiped out. Garrigan now wants out of Uganda and away from Amin’s murderous insanity. His opportunity to flee presents itself in June-July 1976 during the famous incident when members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Germany’s Baader-Meinhof group hijack an Air France plane, landing it at Uganda’s Entebbe airport. (The hostage-taking ended in an Israeli raid, which resulted in the deaths of 20 Ugandan soldiers and the hostage-takers.)

As a political thriller, *The Last King of Scotland* has a certain merit,

although it generally avoids delving into the more profound political and historical issues surrounding Amin. Befuddled by the Ugandan president as a historical personality, the filmmakers rely on patching together a psychological profile, filling in the gaps with scenes of gratuitous violence. It is difficult to get an in-depth picture, first of all, when the spectator is parachuted into the middle of events without an historical explanation or context.

In an undeveloped and incomplete manner, the film shows certain important details, such as Amin’s populist rhetoric and his vague, erratic anti-British views—views, however, that do not prevent him from properly crediting his ex-masters with his political ascendancy. Also depicted is Amin’s heinous expulsion of some 35,000 Asians in the space of three months in 1972, a plan that came to him in a dream.

*The Last King of Scotland* explains Amin by way of the liberal, ahistorical nostrum that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Further, it dangerously flirts with the idea that the British rule may have been preferable to that of the African dictator. (From its description in the production notes as a film “startlingly resonant with today’s world,” one might conclude that the filmmakers have fallen, or half-fallen, for the argument that the Iraqis are incapable of governing themselves.)

In fact, the earlier colonial regime and Amin’s are different sides of the same imperialist coin. In the first place, Amin was a product of the British colonial army, serving in Somalia and Uganda and participating in the bloody suppression of the Mau Mau in Kenya in 1952. He had a reputation as a brutal interrogator of prisoners. Amin’s name apparently appeared on a list of those who performed best against the Mau Mau and he was promoted in 1954 to the highest possible rank for a black African in the colonial army. Throughout the 1950s and early 1960s, up to the eve of Ugandan independence, he participated in the suppression of various tribal and popular revolts. In short, Amin learned his thuggishness and penchant for violence from the British.

Amin’s seizure of power in Uganda was welcomed by the Foreign Office in London, who described him as “A splendid type and a good football player.” As a ruler—apart from his more obvious eccentricities and particular blood-thirstiness, which may have been helped along by syphilis—Amin shared many characteristics with other bourgeois-nationalist leaders in the colonial or former colonial countries in the 1970s: fearful of the masses below, demagogically denouncing ‘foreign imperialist interference’ and attempting to maneuver between the Western powers, on the one hand, and the Soviet Union, on the other.

Rather than going into these historical facts and truly making something of them, Macdonald preferred to see his project as toying with the idea of “[w]hat happens to someone who starts with good intentions and ends up becoming a blood thirsty individual?”

And so the film begins by depicting Amin’s charm and desire to modernize Uganda, then heats up into a graphic depiction of his violence, including the hoisting of Garrigan on hooks for wife poaching.

The production notes liken the film to a “shocking ride into the darkest realm on earth: the human heart.”

In reality, it is not the human heart that is inevitably dark, but the consequences of full-blooded imperialism. Again, this from Morel: “To reduce all the varied and picturesque and stimulating episodes in savage life to a dull routine of endless toil for uncomprehended ends, to dislocate social ties and disrupt social institutions; to stifle nascent desires and crush mental development; to graft upon primitive passions the annihilating evils of scientific slavery, and the bestial imaginings of civilized man, unrestrained by convention or law; in fine, to kill the soul in a people—this is a crime which transcends physical murder.”

Whitaker’s remarkable performance aside, the film does little to contribute to an understanding of Amin as a historical or sociological phenomenon. In fact, it tends to add to the general confusion on this score.



To contact the WSWS and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://wsws.org/contact)**