‘This is Africa’: Filmic Negotiations of Crime, Justice and Global Responsibility

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Abstract

Film is a significant medium through which Western audiences learn about crime and suffering occurring beyond their national borders. On this basis, this article critically reflects on the ‘knowledge’ of criminal violence in contemporary Africa provided by two recent films, Blood Diamond (2006) and Sometimes in April (2005). We argue that the films offer notably divergent understandings of the nature of violent conflict in post-colonial Africa, and of who is capable of bearing the responsibility to address its causes and legacy. While Blood Diamond adopts a conventional colonial narrative in which Africa, through the example of Sierra Leone, is portrayed as a place of disorder ultimately requiring the intervention of the West, Sometimes in April offers an alternative image of a more autonomous African nation, able to actively negotiate the challenges of the post-conflict and post-colonial environment.

Introduction

In recent years, fictional films based on factual events have become a central means for the West to learn about the violence, crime and human rights abuses experienced by others (Adhikari 2007). Often set in Africa, these films afford Western audiences a way of engaging with violence beyond their national borders. Given the role of films as significant sites of knowledge creation, this paper critically reflects on two recent films that focus on criminal violence in Africa: Blood Diamond (2006) and Sometimes in April (2005).

Following its release in Australia, Blood Diamond was hailed as a ‘confronting’ but ‘important’ ‘film with a conscience’ for its portrayal of child soldiers in Sierra Leone (Schembri 2007). On a global level, Amnesty International (2006) used the film as an educational resource for publicising the effects of the illegal diamond trade. In light of its public reception, we explore the particular image of criminal violence that Blood Diamond offers. To do so, we contrast this mainstream feature film with a smaller release product, Sometimes in April (2005), which also deals with an episode of extreme violence on the African continent: the 1994 Rwandan genocide.

Our comparison of these films is not based on notions of authenticity or accuracy. That is, we are not interested in whether the films accurately portray the events they depict. Rather, we are concerned with exploring the conditions upon which both violence and agency are imagined through these texts. We are interested in the way in which these films make it possible to know and understand contemporary crime and violence in Africa; who bears responsibility; and who has the agency or capacity to respond to such violence effectively. In analysing these films, we draw upon a rich body of post-colonial scholarship, which both charts (uncovers) and challenges (destabilises) the continuing influence of colonial ideas, images and discursive structures on contemporary understandings of the world and the relations between people within in it (Gandhi 1998; Orford 1999;
Shohat 1992). In the context of historical portrayals of Africa as a site of uncivilised and barbaric peoples and practices (Harrow 2005; Hawk 1992), post-colonial scholarship underscores and unsettles the ongoing influence of such depictions.

We argue that *Blood Diamond* adopts a conventional colonial narrative in which Africa, through the example of Sierra Leone, is portrayed as a place of disorder ultimately requiring the intervention of the West. In contrast, *Sometimes in April* offers an alternative image of a more autonomous African nation, able to actively negotiate the challenges of the post-conflict and post-colonial environment. Thus the more mainstream movie can be seen to repeat the problematic colonialist assumptions that it explicitly seeks to critique, while the smaller release product demonstrates alternative ways in which violence and agency can be imagined in post-colonial contexts.

**Imagining Criminal Violence**

*Blood Diamond* is an action film centred around the illegal diamond trade and civil war in Sierra Leone. It begins with Solomon, a local fisherman, and his son being kidnapped with his son by rebel forces. He is put to work in the diamond fields, while his son is trained as a child soldier. When Solomon escapes from the fields, smuggling out a precious pink diamond, he is determined to rescue his son. Danny – a white Zimbabwean former mercenary – insists on helping Solomon in exchange for the diamond. In their journey, they are joined by Maddy, a white, female, American photojournalist seeking to expose the harsh realities of the diamond trade. As she and Danny fall in love, she becomes the catalyst for Danny’s transformation from a self-interested survivor of colonialism to self-sacrificing hero.

*Sometimes in April* also focuses on three central characters: Augustin, Martine and Honoré. A drama set in the wake of the 1994 Rwandan genocide, *Sometimes in April* traces the experiences of these characters before, during and after the violence through a series of extended flashbacks. The film predominantly focuses on Augustin’s struggle to come to terms with the loss of his wife and three children to the genocide. His personal journey is intertwined with that of Martine, his current partner who is pregnant with their child, and Honoré, his brother who is standing trial for inciting genocidal violence as a radio personality.

Both films depict criminal violence in contemporary Africa; yet they offer contrasting ‘knowledge’ of ‘African’ violence and ‘African’ and ‘Western’ responsibility for such violence. These differences are traceable through their divergent depictions of race, gender and the connections between place, violence and history. As Western cinematic products, both films rely on a shorthand encoding of images, sound and narrative through which they communicate complex ideas to conversant Western audiences within the limited duration of a feature film. This ever shifting code, developed in concert with broader Western popular discourses, attaches meaning to images of raced and sexed bodies, to the configurations of landscape and the movement of characters. In this article, we examine moments within each film that exemplify the way this coding makes possible different ‘knowledge’ about violence in contemporary Africa.

**Spatialising Violence: Configurations of Post-colonial Africa**

While the annexing and exploitation of land characterise colonisation, discourses of Western colonialism have read the colonised landscape through European understandings of land use and appropriation. This is epitomised by Locke’s assertion of a pre-colonised American ‘wasteland’ in opposition to a tilled and hedged field in Dorset (Locke 2003:s37). Through such a contrast, the ‘civilisation’ of England is verified by land-based productivity, which is documented by the patterns such production leaves in the soil. The colonised other is thus rendered ‘uncivilised’, the ‘savage present’ of Europe’s pre-civilised past (Waswo 1996:755). As ‘savage’ or ‘primitive’ in the present, the colonised are also ahistorical, unchanging, static. Not only is this ascription encoded in images of land and soil, but is naturalised through its location in the ‘nature’.

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Twice in *Blood Diamond*, Danny is shown grasping a handful of red earth. In the first instance, the colour is explained as mythically derived, according to the Shona, from ‘all the blood that’s been spilled in the fighting over the land’. The second instance is Danny’s final gesture, when he dies clutching the earth that is literally mixed with his own blood. Although the first handful is taken in South Africa, the last is held in Sierra Leone. On one level, the gesture indicates both Danny’s connection to the land despite his European heritage and the complexity of this connection in the post-colonial aftermath. However, on another level, this gesture is about life in Africa; it serves to pathologise Sierra Leonean land as a place of endemic violence. While the mythic quality of the soil’s colour suggests an absence of ‘fact’ in the explanation, within the discourse of colonial adventure which indulges in the exotic mysticism of the other’s knowledge (Dyer 1997), the explanation of the soil’s colour suggests a history of violence on the African continent that stretches back to time immemorial.

This implication is reinforced by a refrain employed in the film: ‘This is Africa’. Danny first invokes this refrain as a flirtatiously cynical admonition of Maddy’s earnest Western desire to ‘make a difference’ to violence and suffering in Africa. After a monologue about the difficulty of achieving peace and security in post-colonial Africa, Danny shrugs and addresses the black barman, ‘But …TIA right?’ The barman agrees, and Danny translates for Maddy: ‘This is Africa’. The refrain, with the repeated gesture, has a double significance: it frames Sierra Leone as the scene of intractable conflict, as well as generalising the conditions of life in Sierra Leone to the African continent as a whole. In a move characteristic of colonial discourse (Said 1978), Africa – as a continent – is homogenised as a site of violence. While the repetition of Danny’s handful of soil in two different nations extends the attribution of pathologised violence from one African nation to a generalised ‘Africa’; his rhetorical refrain more literally reads the conflict in Sierra Leone as a symbol of a broader state of conflict in contemporary Africa. The epilogue performs the same homogenisation stating, with the frank ‘truth’ of white words against a black screen, that although Solomon and his family have been rescued, the use of child soldiers and diamond trafficking still continues throughout Africa. The film thus finishes with the same attribution of ceaseless, generalised violence across the whole African continent.

*Sometimes in April* offers a different depiction of crime and its connection to time and space. It focuses on the local and the specific, resisting the imperative to generalise. Physically and discursively set and filmed in the Rwandan nation, *Sometimes in April* is a Rwandan story before it is an African one. Moreover, it focuses on a particular moment in Rwandan history: the genocide that occurred between April and July in 1994. The flashbacks offer images of Rwandan life before, during and after the genocide. This figuring of time is crucial in framing the genocide as an event that is temporally bounded, rather than constant and continual.

However, it is also the interconnected relation between past, present and future established in the film that marks it as a post-colonial rather than colonial narrative. That is, although the film portrays an afterwards to genocide, it also acknowledges the way in which this episode frustrates any simple distinction between the past and the present. Rather, at both the start and the end of the film, the main character Augustin explains how the beginning of the rainy season in April each year marks the anniversary of the genocide and a period of painful remembrance and reflection for those who survived. In a similar vein, through documentary and fictionalised images of the colonial encounter in its opening sequence, the film also draws attention to the lasting impact of Belgian colonisation. Thus, if post-colonialism is understood as a perspective that seeks to acknowledge, critique and destabilise the way in which past discourses of colonialism continue to influence current life (Gandhi 1998; Shohat 1992), *Sometimes in April* constitutes a post-colonial film in its recognition of the continuing legacy of both colonial and genocidal violence, which demand tackling, and yet are not easy to overcome.

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3 It is conventional to describe the Rwandan genocide as an event occurring between 6 April 1994 and mid-July 1994. However, following Adelman (2005:31), we acknowledge the artificiality of implying that such a complex historical occurrence could be confined to such a restrictive and limited time-frame. Rather we invoke this conventional shorthand here to highlight the difference between *Sometimes in April*, which focuses on a particular event of suffering, and *Blood Diamond*, which presents suffering as an eternal state of affairs in Africa.
Heroism and Agency in the Post-Colony

Both *Sometimes in April* and *Blood Diamond* also engage with questions of agency and responsibility raised by the criminal violence that they depict. In *Blood Diamond*, agency and responsibility are located in the West, being visualised, in particular, through the white, western male body. As epitomised by Hobbes’ *Leviathan* (1996), the capacity to govern and the propensity for agency in the West has been imagined in the form of a white male body (Duncanson 2000:280; Duncanson 2008:126-7). In western cinema, bodies are encoded in raced and gendered terms: while white women’s bodies function as the passive object of a masculine cinematic gaze (Mulvey 1989), white male bodies, as controllers of the gaze, signify the capacity to act (Berger 1972). In this way, white male bodies are imbued with the potential for agency and play the heroic roles; they convey autonomy and self-determination. In the context of colonial relations, they symbolise the capacity to establish and ‘maintain empire’ (Dyer 1997: 196). Orford (1999) has revealed how contemporary justifications of external military intervention rely on a similar image of a white, male hero able to save passive, non-western victims from harm (see also Douzinas 2007).

*Blood Diamond* repeats this pattern, with Danny embodying western heroism, even from his antagonistic narrative beginnings. He leads the action; he handles guns; he makes decisions; he pursues the object of desire (the diamond; Maddy). In one critical moment, Solomon’s body is contrastingly coded as ‘native’ (Hall 1997). Free from the rebels but held in the prison where he meets Danny, Solomon is shown standing naked in darkness and howling like an animal. Instantly he is uncivilised and ‘animalistic’; unclothed and without language. Further than this, although the light illuminates his musculature and the camera angle accentuates his height to suggest masculinity, shadows obscure his genitals: he is emasculated. He becomes the passive victim of Africa requiring the intervention of Danny, who ultimately sacrifices his life to save Solomon and his son. Meanwhile, in a broader sense, the West and western individuals in general are also positioned as actors who can solve the violence in Sierra Leone through both their ethical consumption of diamonds and the international regulation of the diamond market. Consistent with broader modes of representing Africa (Hawk 1992), the West is afforded the agency to respond to ‘Africa’s’ contemporary problems.

*Sometimes in April* instead focuses on the struggle of the Rwandan nation and its people to face up to the horrors of the past and to collectively chart a new future. The film appears primarily concerned with the intricacies of individual agency, foregrounding the continuities between complicity and resistance in times of genocide, during which people can simultaneously be victims, bystanders and potential perpetrators (Des Forges 1999:593). Rather than assuming the role of the heroic saviour (Orford 1999), in this film the West is portrayed as culpably absent and present in the face of the genocide: culpably absent to the extent that western countries were disinterested in intervening to halt the genocide; and culpably present to the extent that certain neo-colonial powers were complicit with the genocidal regime. It is in this historical context that the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, established by the United Nations, is framed as a self-interested gesture motivated by western guilt, while the real challenge that constitutes the film’s focus is how individual Rwandans and the nation as a whole address their country’s painful past and move forward.

Moreover, the heroes in *Sometimes in April* are neither male nor western. To the contrary, it is Rwandan women who engage in the acts of heroism resisting the genocide. Augustin, a former soldier, allows himself to be swept along in the violence. In contrast, his wife, captured and held in a rape camp, sacrifices her life by pulling a grenade pin, enabling the women imprisoned with her to escape. Meanwhile, it is Augustin’s daughter, with her school friends, who refuse to distinguish themselves from their Tutsi friends in order to facilitate their murder by the genocidaires: an act that costs most of their lives. Female, black and occasionally collective, heroism in *Sometimes in April* is wrested from colonial configurations of power, allowing an imagining of agency to be held and exercised by independent African nations.

However, the contrast between their respective approaches to agency and responsibility is starkest in each film’s conclusion.
Endings: Testimony as Agency

The films finish with parallel scenes in which a central character is about to testify to the violence and suffering they have witnessed. In *Sometimes in April*, the scene shows Martine at a gacaca tribunal, a local Rwandan court established to hear cases relating to the genocide. It begins with a camera shot that follows a man speaking Kinyarwanda. He gestures to a row of men—the accused genocidaires, before asking the crowd sitting on the ground of the open-air court whether anyone can provide eyewitness evidence against the men. Off screen there is the strong, clear voice of a woman stating one word. The heads of the officials turn. The camera cuts back to a distant shot of the crowd and Martine steps into the centre of the frame looking just beyond the camera. She states, in Kinyarwanda, that she is Martine. And then, in English, continues ‘I was there; I am a survivor’. Martine, a Rwandan woman, is afforded the capacity to speak: to testify to the crime and suffering she has experienced. More than this, she is given the film’s last spoken words. Together with the audience’s knowledge of the male child she is carrying, this moment symbolises a future for Rwanda of addressing the 1994 violence and surviving as an independent African nation.

In *Blood Diamond*, subtitles announce the venue of the final scene as an actual conference held in South Africa. The camera pans over the imposingly colonial architecture and impeccably dressed ‘international’ audience. As Solomon is invited into the room, the speaker foreshadows his presence with the sentiment that the ‘Third World’ ‘must now be heard’. ‘African’ singing begins as Solomon walks through the audience and the sound of clapping swells as they rise to a standing ovation. The clapping underscores the importance of Solomon’s presence and potential testimony. Yet, ultimately, the sound of clapping takes the place of Solomon’s testimony, as the camera zooms in for a headshot of Solomon, the screen fades to black before Solomon ever speaks. Positioned as the subaltern, the ‘voice of the Third World’, to borrow Spivak’s words, Solomon ‘cannot speak’, he can only be spoken ‘of’ and ‘for’ (Spivak 1988:308, 271, 295).

Thus, while both films reference the colonial relation, they negotiate it in different ways. Even though *Blood Diamond* is consciously set in post-colonial Africa, the film ultimately relies on the colonial relation to make sense of the world and the connections between people within it. It fails to transcend colonial discursive structures in its depiction of the problem of African disorder and the solution of a renewed Western interventionism (Orford 1999). In contrast, *Sometimes in April* adopts a more reflexive approach to the past, acknowledging both the violence of colonialism and its ongoing legacy; we are told at the start of the film that colonialism ‘was never about civilisation’ but ‘always about greed, arrogance and power’. *Sometimes in April*, therefore, provides an understanding of both the past and the implication of past colonial actors in the contemporary violence in Rwanda (Des Forges 1999; Mamdani 2001; Melvurn 2000). Meanwhile, the challenge of addressing the harmful impact of both the genocide and colonialism is situated locally, with the Rwandan nation and people.

The differences between the films suggest particular patterns of acceptable representations of violence in Africa at different levels of cinematic production and consumption. That is, in order to gain funding and engage a broad mainstream audience with its challenge to Western ignorance about the diamond trade and child soldiers, *Blood Diamond* engages familiar colonial narratives. Meanwhile, for a smaller release film like *Sometimes in April*, there is greater scope to present a different story.

Our aim in this article was to tease out alternative ways of knowing and understanding contemporary violence and suffering in Africa that two different film products offer. Our analytical intervention (see Bhabha 1994:171-74) is designed to not only draw attention to the nature and effects of the narratives offered by each, but also to emphasise the alternative possibilities that exist for filmic engagements with crime and violence beyond our borders. We have argued that to follow coded patterns of Western cinematic traditions potentially repeats not only the stories justifying colonial rule and particular forms of international intervention, but limits possibilities for imagining otherwise. In this way, the production and consumption of entertainment has material implications for the relations of power between ‘Third’ and ‘First’ World nations.
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