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### “Blood Diamond and The Empire in Africa: Diamonds Are Forever”

In movies, as on CNN, Africa comes to us cloaked in genre, whether as action-adventure, thriller, moral melodrama or the full-court tragedy of a continent under siege from poverty, disease, corruption and all-around postcolonial chaos. (For black comedy, unless you count *The Last King of Scotland*, you'd have to reach back a quarter of a century to the home-grown *The Gods Must Be Crazy*.) *Blood Diamond*, Edward Zwick's gripping new film about the civil war that raged in diamond-rich, dirt-poor Sierra Leone throughout the 1990s, is all of the above, trimmed with the usual Hollywood love story. There's no use griping about the superfluous white-on-white romance that generates so much dead space in Zwick's movie, for without it *Blood Diamond* would never have been made. Which would be a pity, for as liberal hand-wringing goes, it's a winner.

The movie's subject is the international trade in “conflict diamonds,” gems bought and sold illegally and plowed back into funding arms that continually refueled the bloody war between Sierra Leone's government and the Revolutionary United Front. *Blood Diamond* doesn't have much that's good to say for either of these bodies, but Zwick and screenwriter Charles Leavitt reserve their most righteous fury for the international diamond industry, which played a prominent part in diverting the export of diamonds through Liberia after the United Nations slapped an embargo on Sierra Leone. It's no surprise, then, that the De Beers company, which shows up in the movie thinly disguised as a smug fat cat played by Michael Sheen (last seen as a smug Tony Blair in *The Queen*), has struck back with the full force of the Sitrick and Company PR agency — not to deny its complicity in the war, but to whine that the movie fails to note that its corporate crimes are now safely tucked away in history.

As always when it comes to the plundering of Africa's rich resources, in *Blood Diamond* there are enough interested parties vying over the country's booty to make your head spin and periodically bog Leavitt's serviceable dialogue down in tortured exposition. For dramatic purposes, the movie pares them down in due course to a struggle between two polar, morally resonant figures unwillingly thrown together in a journey through the fiery hell of the civil war. For Solomon Vandy (Djimon Hounsou), a fisherman captured by the RUF and forced into slave labor harvesting the gems, the priceless pink diamond he buried while on the job becomes a bargaining chip for the return of his scattered family, especially his son Dia (Kagiso Kuypers), now a child soldier in the revolutionary movement. But Solomon is up against Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a Zimbabwean mercenary turned gem smuggler whose clients span the globe and who wants to trade the diamond for a ticket out of the country and into a plush life in the West.

A painfully weak Jennifer Connelly, wildly miscast as a pushy but idealistic American journalist, sticks around just long enough to flutter her eyelashes at Danny while offering sisterly hugs to Solomon, before a merciful plot twist puts this sorry excuse for *Christiane Amanpour* on a plane back home. Solomon and Danny are no less stock Hollywood figures — the poor but honest native and the deracinated white who gives protection in return for a moral compass — but the two actors flesh them out beautifully, with Hounsou's wordless intensity point-counterpointing DiCaprio's gabby explosiveness. Wrapping himself around a Southern Africa accent without apparent strain, DiCaprio seems weightier, less of the overgrown boy he was even as Howard Hughes in *The Aviator*. For all Danny's shiftiness, he feels like a man with a history behind him, however troubled, and capable of change. Coming together under duress, Danny and Solomon drive home Zwick's point that people are complicated, but action makes the man.

In the end, though, it's not the moral messaging but *Blood Diamond*'s visceral action sequences that speak most eloquently to the chaos of civil war. Rubbing our noses in the ghost towns inhabited by amputees, the smoldering corpses and the camps where little boys train for mass murder, Zwick forces us to confront the appalling arbitrariness of life for innocents caught up in a civil war they don't understand and against which they are powerless to defend themselves. Ever the good liberal, Zwick demonstrates, whether he realizes it or not, the utter helplessness of fair-minded liberalism to comprehend total societal collapse, or to imagine any solution beyond the individual rescue.

Zwick has his naysayers, and not only in the diamond business. Cannily timed by lefty distributor Cinema Libre Studio to coincide with the release of *Blood Diamond* comes Philippe Diaz's *The Empire in Africa*, a documentary (narrated by singer Richie Havens) that claims to present Sierra Leone's civil war in a radically different light. More accurately, it shifts the emphasis and fills out the picture. Where Zwick fingers diamond moguls and the rebels as the chief culprits, Diaz rushes to the defense of the RUF, which he sees as betrayed by a puppet government put in place by a United Nations (with the support of Nigerian mercenary troops) bent on squeezing the rebels with food and weapon embargoes. That two such different perspectives both rely heavily on the video archives of documentarian Sorious Samura, whose all but unbearably graphic images of torture, amputation and execution punctuate the talking heads in *The Empire in Africa*, is testimony both to the power of editing to relativize truth and to the incomprehensible tangle of warring interests that is much of Africa today. It's possible that Diaz's sympathy for the RUF is symptomatic of a lingering tendency on the left to sanctify anything that calls itself a revolutionary front. Certainly, while briefly conceding the RUF's involvement in atrocities, most of the brutality he shows is perpetrated by United Nations peacekeepers. Whether you believe the coda of *Blood Diamond*, which tells us that today Sierra Leone is at peace, or that of *The Empire in Africa*, which ends by ranking the country as one of the poorest in the world, the real tragedy of Sierra Leone, and of much of continental Africa, is that both can be true — but only for so long.

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