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By Jeannette Catsoulis
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A forest of talking heads and pointing fingers, [“The Empire in Africa”](#) is a noble but failed attempt to explicate the tragedy of the 11-year civil war in Sierra Leone. Filmed in 2002 during the final months of the conflict, the movie (which is being released on the same day as the Sierra Leone-based thriller “Blood Diamond”) is a head-spinning litany of coups and insurgencies, bombings and executions, rampaging militias and civilian torment.

One after another, indignant interviewees — including businessmen, soldiers, politicians and government officials — offer theories and assign blame, while the sick and the maimed stare silently into the camera. Everyone, it seems, is culpable (“You change the driver, the vehicle is still the same,” says one civilian), but the director, Philippe Diaz, blames the international community and its determination to retain control of the country’s mineral wealth. Unfortunately, his clear sympathy for the rebels of the Revolutionary United Front — whose commander, Mike Lamin, is granted plenty of screen time — only undermines the film’s objectivity and further muddies the discourse.

In the end, all that is clear is the suffering, and we watch in horror as civilians are gunned down before our eyes and mutilated corpses pile up in the streets. It’s left to Sylvie Brunel, a relief worker with Action Against Hunger, to state the obvious: that there are countries outside international law “where it is unclear who is responsible” for atrocities. To that extent, “The Empire in Africa” gets it right.

THE EMPIRE IN AFRICA

Opens today in New York, Los Angeles and Madison, Wisc.

Produced, directed and edited by Philippe Diaz; in French, English and local dialects, with English subtitles; narrated by Richie Havens; directors of photography, Henri Rossier and Mr. Diaz; music by Abdul Kamara; released by Cinema Libre Studio. In Manhattan at the Cinema Village, 22 East 12th Street, Greenwich Village. Running time: 87 minutes. This film is not rated.

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