

“THIS IS AFRICA”: AN ANALYSIS OF *BLOOD DIAMOND* IN THE LIGHT OF
GIORGIO AGAMBEN’S “STATE OF EXCEPTION”

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Abstract

Blood Diamond (2006) directed by Edward Zwick narrates the startling reality about diamond mining in Sierra Leone. An impoverished African country torn asunder by ceaseless war, Sierra Leone emerges in the film as the backdrop against which Western imperialist interests and the sadistic streak of the RUF militia collide to reduce human values to a bare minimum. The term “blood diamond” in the film’s title refers to diamonds that are extracted or transported from Africa through the use of violence which, at its lowest, takes the form of gruesome amputations, and at its highest, mutates into genocide and blood-curdling carnage. The present paper employs the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “state of exception” to conceptualise the atrocities represented in the film as the result of the temporary suspension of the law. In portraying a state of exception where human beings become equivalent in their expendability to the figure of “homo sacer” in Roman law, the film can be seen to curry favour with neither the black militants nor the white mercenaries. By portraying both of them as steeped in corruption, the film raises the question whether a peaceful society based on the normal operations of the law is possible in Sierra Leone.

Keywords: Homo sacer, state of exception, genocide, conflict diamond

Blood diamond (2006), an Oscar-nominated Hollywood blockbuster film, directed by Edward Zwick, focuses on the diamond trade and the racial violence it engendered in Sierra Leone. The title of the film points to the horrendous actions of the warlords and the international diamond trade in procuring ‘conflict Diamonds’ also known as blood Diamonds. The film portrays how the Sierra Leonean rebels, known as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF), use blood diamonds to finance and overthrow the incumbent government which they accuse of being corrupt and working against the interests of the people.

The film begins by narrating the story of a South African mercenary, Danny Archer (Leonardo DiCaprio), a white Zimbabwean by birth and diamond smuggler by profession, and Solomon Vandy (Djimou Hounsou), a Sierra Leonean fisherman belonging to the Mende tribe, who are united by sheer coincidence in a jail in Sierra Leone. Archer overhears an altercation between Solomon and an RUF rebel concerning a priceless pink diamond the former has extracted and possibly buried somewhere in the forest, unbeknownst to anyone else. Spared amputation on account of his physical strength and taken to the goldfields for mind-numbing toil when the RUF raided his village, Solomon emerges in the film as a broken man. He has also been separated from his wife, Jassie, elder son, Dia, two daughters, and a newborn and has no hope of seeing his family ever again.

Once Solomon is released from jail, he is approached by Archer who has his heart set on procuring the diamond and getting out of Africa which he calls a “godforsaken continent” (*Blood Diamond*). Archer has already arranged with his London contacts to pay him a sizeable amount for the diamond and set him up in a new life where his past as a smuggler will not come to haunt him anymore. Archer is not a run-

of-the-mill mercenary though it seems at the beginning of the movie that he will kill just about anyone to lay his hands on the diamond. Having seen his mother getting molested and killed and his father being decapitated and hung from a hook in the barn at the age of nine, Archer's belief in the positive attributes of human nature has long been extinguished. But that does not mean that he has closed himself off to others. Despite being a cynic who claims "God left this place [Africa] long ago" (*Blood Diamond*), Archer gives promise of harbouring beneath the indurated layers of his personality warm currents of love and friendship, which, however, wash over his tough exterior only fleetingly.

When Archer approaches Solomon about the stone, the latter readily denies its existence. But when Solomon finds that his son Dia has been abducted by the RUF and that his wife and daughters are in danger of getting raped any moment inside the refugee camp, he decides to barter his knowledge of the zone for a shot at being reunited with his family. He thus agrees, though half-heartedly, to help Archer. Joining them is the action-loving journalist Maddy Bowen (Jennifer Connelly), who has been pursuing Archer for some time for information linking the business magnate Van de Kaap to the blood diamond trade.

Someone who loves to live in a perpetual state of crisis, Maddy traverses downright hostile territory punctuated by RUF rebels wielding machine guns and machetes for the scoop she has been promised. She does not warm to Archer at first since she believes that he is only trying to find the diamond under the pretext of helping Solomon. But when Archer confronts her about her own motives for covering the story—about what difference it would make to the mutilated and murdered thousands and their families whether lines of sensational prose adorn the pages of Western magazines or not—she realizes that she will not be helping to ameliorate the situation unless she can blow the lid off the whole thing. When Archer too realizes that he has a moral obligation to expose the truth about "conflict diamonds", he gives Maddy a diary containing the secrets of the blood diamond trade. Asked whether Archer would call her once he is out of the continent, he replies that they would have hit it off nicely in another life. But this, sadly, is Africa. So, when Maddy leaves the war-torn zone, it is a slightly heartbroken Archer who continues the search with Solomon.

The nail-biting moment in the film arrives when Solomon infiltrates the RUF camp where Dia is trained to become a rebel. Unfortunately for Solomon, he is exposed by his own son who calls him a "traitor". The audience comes to understand that, following his indoctrination by the RUF, Dia has been forced to commit several heinous offences that in turn have warped his conscience. Though Solomon's appeal to his son to recollect his proud ancestry and the tranquil scenes from his past life prevents the situation from turning into a patricidal bloodbath, Archer gets hit when Captain Coetzee's forces swoop down on the rebels. Though Solomon and his son survive, Archer is badly wounded. He prepares to give up his life on top of the gorge where the plane that is supposed to get him out of Sierra Leone is awaiting his arrival. As a final act of selflessness, he hands over the diamond to Solomon and asks him to board the plane. Before Archer bleeds to death, he also has a temporary reunion with Maddy when he calls her on the phone. Realizing that Archer's life is ebbing away, Maddy promises to send someone to help him. But a resolute Archer tells her that he is exactly where he should be and that he does not desire to be rescued. He bleeds to death, lending the colour of his valour to the soil which has been incarnadined by countless battles. Having reached London, Solomon now helps Maddy expose the insidious workings of the diamond trade. The film ends at the point where Solomon is called in to a meeting attended by world leaders to testify against the puppeteers of the blood diamond business.

Zwick keeps the action very fluid by depicting constant clashes between the RUF and the government. By reminding the spectators that they are witnessing the grizzly spectacle of a nation being torn asunder by internecine warfare, the director turns the very act of spectation into an activity loaded

with moral implications. The action of the film can be seen to work on two levels: on the one hand, it depicts the quest of Solomon to free his son Dia from the clutches of the RUF rebels and on the other, it depicts the mindless violence perpetrated by the RUF rebels in Sierra Leone in the name of saving the land from invaders and building a nationalist ethos. The abuse of children like Dia, who are abducted from their families and corralled into training camps where they are brainwashed to become cold-blooded killing machines benumbed by alcohol and drugs, is portrayed with great efficacy in the film. The transformation of Dia from a very docile child who loves soccer and his studies into a remorseless killer is portrayed with such spine-chilling potency that the audience at once feels a visceral reaction building up in them to the indoctrinating effect of ideologies. From a dreamy-eyed child who does not mind walking four miles to school, Dia transforms into a dispassionate militant behind whose stony stare swirls the storm of a pent-up cry for help.

Although the RUF emerges in the film as the ultimate villains, a deeper reading of the film will uncover the fact that their vile comes only second to the irremediable moral culpability of rich and powerful global diamond companies that make huge profits off the back of the poor Africans. When we consider the fact that the events on which the film is based are real, we cannot help pondering what is so wrong with the moral compass of the West that it still believes the Africans are expendable. The film does not play coy when it comes to confessing that the war between the RUF and the government is actually financed by the West. It is white mercenaries who supply the RUF with ammunition in return for diamonds. The diamonds are then smuggled across the border into Liberia from where they are exported to London. Once they get to London, they are mixed with other diamonds and rendered indistinct. So, when the diamonds reach markets in Asia, they are no more than precious stones; their violent genealogy has been completely obscured. What this essentially means is that the conflict diamonds mined by the poor hostages under duress is sold for millions by diamond companies without a drop of blood soiling their reputation. The existence of these companies, it seems, depends on perpetuating a state of war in the heart of Africa and keying up the demand for guns so that more and more diamonds keep flowing in.

Quite early in the film, we learn a sobering truth about diamond mining in Africa. “When a substance is found, the locals die” (*Blood Diamond*). It is not only diamond mining that has fuelled the avarice of the Western companies that have covertly financed the war in Sierra Leone but also other raw materials like coltan and ivory. The exploitation of Africa and its people has a long and troubled history, starting with King Leopold II of Belgium who cut off the hand of every hundredth slave for keeping the indigenous population in line. The film prompts a retrospection of the Imperialist enterprise at the beginning when the raiding RUF rebels start chopping off the hands of the captured fishermen as retribution for voting the present government into power. The examination of violence the film activates is very raw and blood-curdling. By cutting off the very instruments with which the fishermen exercised their franchise, the rebels are extirpating the roots of democracy from the land. The act of amputation also establishes links with the same imperialist practice followed by Leopold II. Finally, it demonstrates how history repeats itself in varying patterns. As Solomon Vandy confesses to Archer later, it is understandable why the white man wants to depredate the land, but there is no logical explanation for why black brothers fight each other to death. The film thus communicates the idea that violence and repression continue to reproduce themselves even when the actors change. It is the canvass of human nature with its indelible brush strokes of savage urges that remains unchanged.

The anarchy prevailing in the film can be explained using Giorgio Agamben’s concept of “state of exception”. Agamben invokes the concept of “homo sacer” in order to lay bare the unique set of circumstances that constitutes a state of exception. “Homo sacer” refers to a figure in archaic Roman law

who, on account of having been banned from society following a crime, could be killed with complete impunity. Agamben contends that the “homo sacer”, in being constituted as an exception to the law that makes homicide culpable, is reduced to “bare life” (71). Agamben clarifies that a state of exception differs from a state of nature in that no law exists in the latter case. But in a state of exception, though the law is not non-existent or defunct, it still does not apply on account of the exclusionary provisions coded into it. Agamben sees instances of such states of exception littered throughout history, from the Nazi concentration camps where millions of people were incarcerated in squalid conditions and at least half of them were gassed to human rights violations in impoverished Third World nations. Agamben also makes the contentious claim that public authorities in contemporary liberal democracies have started to enforce greater curbs on its citizenry by invoking, whenever peace seems to be tenuous, the state of exception. This is done ostensibly to thresh out political problems and regain balance; however, the real motivations are the government’s latent desire to expand and legitimise the rule by force.

Agamben considers the law of exception as a bridge between lawfulness and anarchy. He says that since the state of exception attempts to encompass elements of lawlessness within the law, it constructs a liminal zone in which the human being is completely given up to the operations of the law. Agamben presents two ways in which a state of exception can come into force—commissarial and sovereign dictatorship. In a commissarial dictatorship, the law is temporarily suspended so that it can be implemented at a later time when political unrest is brought under control. On the other hand, in a sovereign dictatorship, there is no single moment when the law is suspended for the only law that operates is the sovereign decision itself.

It can be seen that the state of exception countenanced in *Blood Diamond* conforms to a commissarial-dictatorship type. The film presents an all-out war between the government and the RUF. The government officials are portrayed as rather inept and cowardly in the face of RUF violence which takes myriad forms ranging from abducting able-bodied men to work in gold mines to gruesome mutilation, murder, and pogrom. Although it seems that the RUF are staging a coup, it becomes evident soon that the rebels also lack direction. They are more like killing robots who cannot desist from spilling blood than an organised army. It cannot be said that they love their country either. Captain Poison’s confession that he wants to make it rich and get out of the hellhole that Sierra Leone is forever is perhaps emblematic of the mindset of every RUF rebel who can think for himself. The only thing that keeps them fighting is the absence of a better alternative.

Archer and Bowen represent two diametrically opposed sides of the diamond business. Whereas Archer has been emotionally hardened by the atrocities that diamond mining has brought in its wake and believes that they are part of the harsh African way of life, Bowen’s attitude hints at the possibility of reform. Though Archer sees through the Capitalist pretensions and fantasies that fuel the diamond business, he thinks that the efforts of any single individual will be a cry in the wilderness since the business is bankrolled by multibillionaires who will, despite any incriminating evidence about the blood they help to spill, emerge victorious at the end of the day. Bowen, however, argues that once European and American women come to know about the violence that lie hidden behind the coruscating diamonds that turn their wedding ceremonies into gala events, they will encourage their spouses not to buy them. Unlike Archer who has lost his belief in the power of words to reform people, Bowen still believes that people can be persuaded to see the truth and act on the courage of their convictions provided you can reach out to them. For that, she believes, sincerity and probity are important. The self-deprecation with which she goes on to delete her initial report on the crisis in Sierra Leone proves her commitment to journalism. She would like to reveal the truth about the West’s involvement in the trade of conflict diamonds, but she lacks the necessary evidence to back up her accusations. When she tells Archer that

no one would want to buy blood diamonds anymore once they understand the inhumanity that lurks behind the business, he decides to give up sensitive information about Van de Kaap and his associates. Archer's resipiscence must be read against the backdrop of his general abhorrence to the affectations of middle-class American girls who want a storybook wedding replete with diamond rings and sparkling champagne.

The case of Sierra Leone as a state of exception is reinforced by both white and black characters. Whereas white mercenaries use Sierra Leone as a space of objection by capitalizing on the chaos and playing the rebels against the local population, the black characters ranging from RUF rebels like Captain Poison to government officials and soldiers suspend all laws to fight an all-out battle. The white South African mercenaries led by Colonel Coetzee have forsaken their civilized values and attributes with the sole aim of amassing blood diamonds. They kill an indiscriminate number of villagers as well as RUF rebels, most of them children. They express no qualms when it comes to emptying bullets into the foreheads of just about anyone who dares to stand against them. When Archer seems to have sabotaged their mission of finding the "pink diamond", they spare no effort in hunting him down. When Greg Campbell writes in his book *Blood Diamonds* that "the developed countries were willing to put Sierra Leone's rescue in the hands of a less

effective security force—one that was prone to flagrant corruption, bribery, savagery, and a disdain for human rights" (54), it seems as though he is referring to Coetzee's army.

Blood Diamond humanises the lives of white characters even as it depicts black people as expendable. The white mercenaries in Sierra Leone are tinged with precarity while the Black civilians are shown as living the life they at least partly deserve. Though the film does not make explicit value judgments about the complicity of the Blacks in their own suffering, there are snide implications that they fared better under colonial rule. When Archer tells Solomon that, without him, the latter is just another black man in Africa, he is foregrounding the white man's historical role as a saviour to the black masses. Such a statement coming from a person like Archer who says has fought side by side with black brothers against the Whites should make us ponder the deep-rootedness of the colonial mindset. It can also be argued that in the context of the film what Archer says is true since it is his western connections to the diamond business that will eventually have to come to Solomon's rescue. At one point in the film, Solomon himself expresses doubt regarding whether a dark interior lurks behind the Black man's dark exterior. It is obvious that Solomon is persuaded to make such an observation on account of the pogrom and calamitous violence he sees around him.

In a movie like *Blood Diamond* where neither the RUF rebels nor the government officials have any redeeming qualities, it becomes difficult to subvert the argument of white messianism. This problem is compounded when we consider the fact that it is only international communities like the UNICEF that are really doing anything to ameliorate the plight of the people. Perhaps, the only indigenous exception to this is Benjamin Kapanay, a teacher who has dedicated his life to helping rescued children overcome the deleterious effects of RUF's brainwashing. Benjamin, who believes that human beings are inherently good, has to pay the price for his idealism when he is shot at by a small boy for trying to circumvent an RUF check post. Considering the fact that the only relatable Black characters the film provides are Solomon's family and Benjamin, the spectator is forced to take sides, at least temporarily, with the white mercenaries. However, the film does not let this favourable depiction of whites adumbrate their larger role in ratcheting up the demand for diamonds and thereby keeping the war alive in Sierra Leone.

The horrifying nature of the state of exception is embodied in all its gory detail by the child soldiers including Solomon Vandy's son Dia. Soon after their recruitment, the abducted children are indoctrinated by the RUF soldiers. The militia tells them: "Your parents are weak ... they are fishermen

and farmers You are heroes and not children any more. You are men. Nobody gave you respect but with the gun you are somebody” (*Blood Diamond*). The peace-loving nature of the local community is equated to pusillanimity by the RUF rebels. By labelling the patriarchs of the community an emasculated lot, the RUF creates a feeling in the impressionable minds of abducted children that they have to transcend their ethnic limitations to be acknowledged as full-fledged men. For this, the RUF gives them lurid names like “Dead Body”, “Master of Disaster” and “See Me No More”. Having turned the children against their own heritage, the RUF rebels try to promote a culture of toxic masculinity in which children who murder the most number of innocent people in raids and persecutions are given honours and titles. Also by plying them with alcohol and drugs after shooting sprees, the RUF ensures that the children do not have any time for moralistic retrospection.

To conclude, it can be said that the state of exception prevailing in the film feeds into an endless loop of violence whose whimsical side is captured by Archer in the gnomic statement ‘THIS IS AFICA.’ Archer’s bland philosophical statement that hints at the near impossibility of effecting any change in Africa is emblematic of the nefarious activities of both the RUF rebels and Western countries in undermining peace works. This statement also reflects how Africa is constructed as a foil to the civilised West, thus reinforcing the long history of cultural stereotyping and discrimination that has characterised the Occidental attitude to marginalised communities. By reducing the children to subhuman beings, the film captures the mindless brutality and genocidal violence that have transformed Sierra Leone into a state of exception where the rule of law is suspended indefinitely. But the film does not altogether deprive us of hope. There is an implication that one day Solomon Vandy’s vision of a peaceful Africa might be realised. In this context it is worth citing Marx’s declaration that “the absolutely desperate state of affairs in the society in which I live fills me with hope” (qtd. in Agamben 10) It is exactly at the point where pessimism reigns supreme that a prospect of change begins to flicker in the distance.

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