

Violence, Cynicism and the Cinematic Spectacle of (Mis)Representing African Child Soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* and *Blood Diamond*

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Summary

The aim of this article is to explain why and with what ideological effect Western film directors depict the African child soldier as victim, reluctant recruit and unwilling participant in Africa's violent wars in *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001) and *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2007). Using Agamben's ideas of the "state of exception" (Agamben 2005) and the "paradox of sovereignty" (Agamben 1998), this article engages symbolical processes by which the formal rhetorical devices of the technology of audiovisual film texts "remediate an account vested in the perspective of only one party" (Potzsch 2011: 80-81). It will be demonstrated that within the narrative topoi of the films *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001) and *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2007), African child soldiers are symbolically constituted as enemy, the other, and as existing on the margin of "bare life" (Agamben 1998: 4) and whose value is not worth mourning for – simply, "ungrievable" (Butler 2010). However, this article argues differently and stresses that violence is not sui generis to Africa and to the African child soldier.

Opsomming

Die doel van hierdie artikel is om te verduidelik waarom en met watter ideologiese effek Westerse rolprentregisseurs die Afrika-kindersoldaat uitbeeld as 'n slagoffer, teësinnige rekrut en onwillige deelnemer aan Afrika se gewelddadige oorloë in die rolprente *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001) en *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2007). Deur gebruik te maak van Agamben se idees van die "toestand van uitsondering" ("state of exception") (Agamben 2005) en die "soewereiniteitsparadoks" ("paradox of sovereignty") (Agamben 1998), betrek hierdie artikel die simboliese prosesse waarby die formele retoriese middels van die tegnologie van oudiovisuele rolprent-tekste "die weergawe van wat aan die gesigspunt van slegs een party reg laat geskied" ("remediate an account vested in the perspective of only one party") (Potzsch 2011: 80-81). Daar sal aangetoon word dat kindersoldate in Afrika, binne die topoi van die rolprente *Black Hawk Down* (Scott 2001) en *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2007), simbolies gekonstitueer word as die vyand, die ander, en een wat bestaan op die grense van "net bestaan" ("*bare life*") (Agamben 1998: 4) en wie se waarde nie werd is om oor gerou te word nie – gewoonweg, "onbetreurbaar" ("*ungrievable*") (Butler 2010). Hierdie artikel redeneer egter anders en beklemtoon dat geweld nie sui generis rakende Afrika en kindersoldate in Afrika is nie.

Introduction: Benign Constructions of Images of the African Child Soldier as Victim

The website Peace Direct: Supporting Local Action Conflict (2013) estimates that there are approximately 14 countries in the world where the problem of child soldiering is endemic. Although there could be more, out of these 14 countries, 6 are in Africa. They include Central African Republic, Mali, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Rwanda, Chad, Somalia, and South Sudan. These African countries represent nearly 28% of child soldiering in the world. All of them have low gross domestic product (GDP), poor economies and political leadership with extremist ideological views fed by some versions of Islamic fundamentalism and genocidal mentalities. This poses a problem considering that African economies and political structures are too weak to deal with this situation. Child soldiering in Africa has been identified as one of the worst forms of child labour.

Child soldiers are also found in “armed forces which are currently not at war” (Grunfeld 2002: 273). In her book *The Impact of War on Children* (2007: ix), Graça Machel writes that child soldiering in Africa represents the “cynical exploitation of children as soldiers”. The author believes that the war situations are the most outstanding contexts in which children are exploited as soldiers and as sex slaves. Contexts that produce child soldiers differ, and motivations for becoming child soldiers also vary. While the exertion of force by adults on children to become soldiers is the most cynical form of recruitment “many child soldiers preferred war over peace” (Grunfeld 2002: 277). Furthermore, other critics suggest that young adults who “serve such forces or groups, moreover, may have joined while younger than eighteen” (Drumbi 2007: 11). This point is worth expanding on because the construction of the figure of the child soldier does not necessarily begin at the point where he is captured on camera wielding guns, hacking old men, women and vulnerable children. In the case of the Rwandan genocide in which children and young adults between the ages of 15 and 30 participated in “machetting” Tutsis, some Hutu moderates reveal that social ideologies that sediment as stereotypes over time and active political socialisation of children to view other children as cockroaches, begin at home and prepare Interahawe Hutu and youth militias in *Shooting Dogs* (1995) to accept the ideology of genocide without questioning.

Frames of War: African Child Soldiers, (Un)grievable Lives and the Problem of Sovereignty in States of Exception

Commenting on the political but misdirected agency of the youth who participated in the Rwanda genocide, Mamdani observed that among the killer youths, there were “those enthusiastic, those reluctant and those

coerced” (2001: 18). In critical analyses focusing on the presence of African child soldiers on the battlefield, there has been little attempt to identify the historical conditions that define any set of conditioning responses that the child soldier is faced with as a threat itself when he is either forcibly recruited, or willingly join the rank and file of the young soldiers. Agamben provides a window through which it can be possible to theorise the kind of society that produces child soldiers. For him, the context of a continuous civil war can manifest morbid symptoms. One such context that results in the violation of an individual or a group’s sense of freedom or self-sovereignty is the state of exception in society. According to Agamben,

[o]ne of the elements that make the state of exception so difficult to define is certainly its close relationship to civil war, insurrection, and resistance. Because civil war is the opposite of normal conditions, it lies in a zone of undecidability with respect to the state of exception, which is state power’s immediate response to the most extreme internal conflicts.

(1998: 2)

The state of exception can be both internally and externally induced. However, the consequence of declaring a state of exception results in the creation of one situation: suspension of law. Agamben elaborates on this extraordinary measure that a political entity that is collapsing on itself has to take when it suspends law in the name of defending law and in this way situating itself outside law as it becomes the new law. When a society is faced with implosive crises that exceed its “normal capacity” to deal with them, the “system interiorizes what exceeds it through an interdiction and in this way “designates itself as exterior to itself” (1998: 18). Agamben could be describing the genocides of Somalia and Sierra Leone that are wrongly named as mere civil wars, when he suggests that “the exception that defines the structure of sovereignty is complex” (p. 18) in a stateless society at war against itself and external forces. This is so because in a failed one or one going through a chronology of decline of the centres of power

[w]hat is outside is included not simply by means of an interdiction or an internment, but rather by means of the suspension of the juridical order’s validity – by letting the juridical order, that is, withdraw from the exception, and abandon it. The exception does not subtract itself from the rule; rather, the rule, suspending itself, gives rise to the exception and maintaining itself in relation to the exception, first constitutes itself as a rule.

(1998: 18)

But the state of exception does not only work through the absented political dysfunctionality of the state. The state of exception is also a frame of war and as such in that context certain remediated forces produce narratives of which life is a life, and which life is not a life; which life is “grievable and

[which] ungrivable” (Butler 2010: xxii). The technologies of film that use camera lenses to frame war are themselves framed by larger discursive ideological formations. In the words of Butler, in film and genres of popular culture, the “regulation of violence is itself also violent, in some way, part of violence” (p. xiii) because

[a]lthough framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality. This means that the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-realizing and delegitimizing alternative versions of reality, discarded negatives of the official version.

(Butler 2010: xiii)

In addition, Butler observes that “precarity is distributed unequally or, at least, strategies to implement that unequal distribution are precisely what is at work in war and in the differential treatment of catastrophes such as famine and earthquakes” (p. xiii). Scherres accedes that between the West and Africa and within African countries prone to genocidal wars

[t]he distribution of contemporary mass violence shows a clear global trend: violent conflict is infrequent in the North and West but part of normality in the South and some areas of the East. Much of the violence in the South would not have occurred and acts of genocide would not have been committed without involvement of the North. Military intervention and northern complicity with state crimes in the South have not been an exception.

(Scherres 1999: 13)

In other words, interpreting *Black Hawk Down* and *Blood Diamond* requires a close understanding of the historical background of Somalia and Sierra Leone. Technologies of film language are capable of producing film narratives of the child soldier that do not necessarily have to grow in stature to approximate conventional historical accounts of genocide in Somalia and Sierra Leone. That is why, while commenting on Ridley Scott’s *Black Hawk Down*, Potzsch notes that this action movie “discursively constitutes the other – the enemy – as less than human” and this strategy is an “epistemological barrier that keeps the other incomprehensible, inaccessible, and ultimately ungrivable” (2011: 75). In a different context, Ashley Dawson argues that *Black Hawk Down* is a film primed to project Somalia as a “new Heart of darkness, stateless [and] vicious ... vanguard of anarchy” (2011: 177). And also, Sharon Dewar writing on *Blood Diamond*, argues that the film perpetuates the “trappings of Western Hegemonic viewpoints” in which it is implied that the “West must save Africa from Africans” (2007: 3). All these theoretical standpoints suggest that in analysing *Black Hawk Down* and *Blood Diamond* as paradigmatic films on the ambiguity of the image of

the African child soldier, we need to go beyond humanitarian interpretations that begin and stop at depicting these young but menacing soldiers as mere victims. We need also to ask hard questions about how the Western and white directors of the films have created works of art that constitute white characters and the West as humanitarian agency without whose presence in Africa black people would endlessly slit each other's throats.

***Black Hawk Down* and the Genocidal War in Somalia**

It is difficult to establish with certainty that the events depicted in the film *Black Hawk Down* are motivated by a lofty goal such as a liberation struggle or any recognisable democratic project intended to rescue the poor of Mogadishu from enervating starvation. One of the indices that reveal the cynical manipulation of the child soldier recruited in the armed militia led by Farah Aideded is that there is no background information that tells the audience the reasons why the civil war in which children are involved as soldiers is being fought. There is no allusion to the history of colonisation and postcolonial Somalia's entanglement with Cold War politics as partly responsible for the political mayhem in the country. Nor is there any allusion to "US's complicity in generating the very famine conditions that troops were purportedly dispatched to remedy" (Dawson 2011: 182). Nor is there any indication that the crisis that results in the state of exception in Somalia is a result of the contestations for political control by various Islamic groups. Without the creation of a political and historical context within which to explain how the "neo-liberal economic doctrines create precisely the conditions of instability and state failure that are conducive to the growth of extreme anti-American doctrines" (p. 181), the Somalia recreated in *Black Hawk Down* is meant to function as a space of "unparalleled spectacle of [senseless] urban violence" (p. 181).

However, what is not left to the imagination and is clear from the beginning of the film are pictures of dying Somali children, women and old men. Most are emaciated, underfed, and are waiting to die. Why Somalia is in the first instance economically poor and why its adult and its young population are reduced to poverty is not clear in the film. The impression represented in the initial stage of the film is that Somalis are poor because they are poor. This tautological representational strategy of Somali people by Ridley Scott, the director of the film, ensures that neither the history of colonialism nor the culture of bad governance that grew roots in post-independence Somalia and subsequently led to the fragmentation of Somalia in the 1990s is alluded to. Guns awash, their efficiency is tested by firing into the air with staggering disregard for the possible safety of the children and young adults around.

The Bakari market in the film that teems with guns of all kinds depicts Somalis as bloodthirsty. This “mendacious opening narrative” (Dawson 2011: 183) is supposed to represent Somalia as a paradigm of anarchy in which the message is that Africans are not simply “*behind*” the former imperial powers but rather “*beneath*” (Dawson 2011: 183) humanity. A society such as that of Mogadishu in the film that has suspended civil law and liberties is one in which the granary of guns is fuller than the granaries of grain and food. Thus the “bare life” (Agamben 1999: 4) that the Somalis live implies that they are better off dead than alive. In this situation, children are forced to become child soldiers. Grunfeld observes that child soldiers are socialised to prefer war and not peace. For the “lost” but gun-toting children of Mogadishu, the AK-47, rocket launcher and machine gun become symbols of raw power and authority that can be exercised arbitrarily on other Somali children, with impunity.

The gunning down of starving women, men and children at the Red Cross food distribution centre by Aideed’s lieutenants made up of child soldiers and young adults is constituted as the evil in the film; a continental aberration for which primitive and bestial Africa is measured as the foil against the progressive Western world. As Dawson argues about this shooting, “the film’s viewers observe and are encouraged to identify with the [US] soldiers’ frustration as they are informed by superiors that UN rules of engagement prevent them from intervening in the unfolding massacre” (2011: 182). The intended irony of this depiction of the dying masses is that it de-subjectifies and de-humanises the child soldiers and the murdered Somalis, and this renders the killing of Somalis not only acceptable but unproblematic to the international world viewers (Potsch 2011: 76). In this incident rationality is accorded to young white soldiers who are framed and shown to be in sympathy with the Somali masses but from a privileged position of a helicopter hunting down general Aideed.

The Framing of Islam, the Somali Child Soldier and Sharia Law as the Enemy of Western Democracy

Black Hawk Down is a film that manipulates and is also manipulated by extremist Islamic ideologies that seek to impose some versions of Sharia law forcefully on all citizens. This coercive ideology of Sharia law depicted in the film addresses the Western world for whom Somalia has chaotically descended into becoming a new haven and decentralised incubator of forced Islamisation, away from Afghanistan, the epicentre of world terrorism. The viewers of the film are left with one impression, that is that Islam sponsors terror and terrorism. *Black Hawk Down* also shows child soldiers fighting a senseless war. Atto, one of the businessmen in Mogadishu, boasts to General Garrison, an American soldier, that the US forces would never get General

Farah Aideed. Atto wants to monopolise violence when he says that the war in Somalia is “our war”. Furthermore, Atto says: “See, all this, it’s shaping tomorrow, a tomorrow without a lot of Arkansas white boys’ ideas in it”. This nativist bravado by Atto is depicted as empty rhetoric because firstly, the Islamist insurgents who mow down the Somalis at the Red Cross food distribution centre do so in the name of Aideed who depends on Western-donated food. Secondly, the battered walls of Mogadishu do not create hope that the war being waged by the Somali child soldiers is likely going to produce stability in the country.

Aideed himself tells a captured American soldier that in Somalia killing is negotiation. This contrasts the pain of young white soldiers that are individuated and humanised by their being shown as “dying heroic deaths while clutching photos of loved ones” (Dawson 2011: 179) back in the US. In *Black Hawk Down*, the Somali child soldiers and their young adult-led militias are depicted as aggressive, and a confused “enemy without a name, face or gaze of its own outside the constituted identity for them, which shows them as an ‘incomprehensible and deadly threat that has to be confined under the application of all means possible’” (Potzsch 2011: 85). In fact, the representation of the Somali hordes of poorly armed child- and young adult soldiers is primed to elicit revulsion in the viewers. Focussing Somali child soldiers is an intellectual strategy that achieves to show

[t]he position of the Somali man [that] appears undermined from the outset. He is constructed as a cold-blooded cynic, rather than the bearer of an alternative understanding regarding the situation in the country, who could provide access to the various rationalities behind Somali actions. [Instead] as Monbiot observes, “[t]he Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* speak only to condemn themselves”.

(Potzsch 2011: 82)

Apart from confronting the US forces, the Somali child soldiers occasionally fight among themselves for territorial control of an already battered city.

***Black Hawk Down* and the American Ideology of War on Terror**

The Somali child soldier in *Black Hawk Down* is also constructed, spoken and authorised by the American imperial ideology that found succour in Bush’s war on terror. In the film are also white youths not described as child soldiers although in reality they are. America uses child soldiers because in Africa the definition includes young white recruits in the American army. The involvement of the Americans in Somalia has nothing to do with the humanitarian gesture of freeing the child soldiers used by Aideed. American interests as depicted in the film appear to be based on the notion that all

forms and versions of Islam are prone to violence. White soldiers in the film are given parts that attempt to construct Americans as caring people. The commander tells his young white soldiers to shoot with care because at the Bakari market there are people, but in the same breath he uses one black youth to spy on the whereabouts of Farah Aideed.

However, there is great concern that the Black Hawk, then one of America's newest helicopter gunships was downed by a band of militia using less sophisticated weapons. Furthermore, the mineral wealth of Somalia, the recently discovered oil deposits and the strategic waterways of Somalia are also possible reasons why America is involved in Somalia using young white adult soldiers to kill Somali child soldiers. The cynical representation of Somali child soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* occurs in the context of ameliorating the shame of an international power defeated by a ragtag army of child soldiers of Mogadishu. However, as Dawson (2011) argues, the representation of American soldiers as weakened by the barbarity of Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* recalls the Vietnam Syndrome in which images of American soldiers are humanised and their lives rendered grievable.

***Blood Diamond* and the State of Exception**

Like *Black Hawk Down*, the context of *Blood Diamond* is one in which laws have been suspended. Anything can happen. The Revolutionary United Front (RUF) rebels descend on ordinary citizens with ferocity. The rebel army burns, loots, kills women and children and abduct young boys who are then used as soldiers. There is no historical context that is established and on which the motives of the war have been elaborated. It is as if violence is sui generis to Africans. The cynicism of the context of *Blood Diamond* is announced by the cryptic and yet aggressive names that the young child soldiers have assumed. One calls himself "Master of Disaster", another is "See Me No More". A state of lawlessness without responsibility to anyone is captured in Agamben's formulation. He says: Confronted with an excess, the system interiorises what exceeds it through an interdiction and in this way "designates itself as exterior to itself" (1998: 18). In *Blood Diamond*, the rebels confront a ragtag of the country's army. The "national" is assisted in its sorties on rebel positions by mercenaries hired from South Africa and former Rhodesia. Because the rebels cannot always match the air power of the government, they prey on ordinary citizens who are then forced to mine alluvial diamonds which the rebels then use to finance their war. Faced with a war against the government forces and a war against ordinary people, the child soldiers often suspend the accepted laws of engagement. Not only do they burn children and women alive in the villages and leave a trail of

carnage and destruction, but often this destruction and human evil are displayed as spectacular.

While commanding the enslaved villagers to mine diamonds in the river, the commander of the rebels sees a youth attempting to hide a diamond nugget he has stumbled upon in his mouth. He orders him to hand over the diamond and shoots him, at point blank, in front of all the enslaved diamond diggers to send the message that no one should dare benefit from the blood diamonds except the commanders. This depiction of the rebels and child soldiers shows them as devoid of humaneness and compassion. On another occasion in the film, one of the youths who refuse to join the RUF is asked whether he likes the “long sleeve or the short sleeve”: This is a euphemism for the practice of cutting off the hands of victims of the RUF. This portrayal of the child soldiers and their excesses delegitimises the political cause for which they are fighting. This characterisation of the rebel child soldier is a form of systemic violence; it constitutes the rebels as the other of both the government soldiers and the white characters in the film.

The visual, verbal and aural narratives created by Edward Zwick, the director of the film, represent the rebel as the enemy and less human. This Holger Potzsch describes as an “epistemological barrier that keeps the other [as] incomprehensible, inaccessible, and ultimately ungrievable” (2011: 75) while rendering the killing of the so-called enemy as “humanly possible and acceptable” (p. 78). When the South African mercenaries and the Sierra Leone forces mow down the rebel army ostensibly made up of child soldiers, the audience has been prepared to view this killing as justified. “The deployment of a particular visual [and verbal] rhetoric thus desubjectivises the enemy and renders the killing of it unproblematic” (p. 78). The refusal to individuate the child soldiers’ views – such as Dia’s view that his father is an “enemy, and [a] traitor” – denies the African child soldiers any forms of rationality which are made readily available to white characters in the film.

But the context of Sierra Leone as state of exception is confirmed and also acted out by white characters that use Sierra Leone in particular and the African continent in general as a space of abjection. Not only have the white South African mercenaries led by Colonel Coetzee suspended their own civilised values depicted as the monopoly of Cape Town with its clean suburban homes; once the mercenaries are in Sierra Leone, they participate in the indiscriminate killings of villagers and rebel child soldiers in order to fulfil their dream of amassing blood diamonds. Danny describes himself as a “soldier of fortune” when the white journalist Mandy asks him whether or not he is another “cynic” and explains in Sierra Leone whites have embraced the culture of “bling bang” while in America life is all about “bling bling”. “Bang” suggests violence, considered inherent in Africa, while “bling” suggests pleasure. Furthermore, Danny concretises the white philosophy of white characters in three letters, TIA, which means “This is Africa”, a place

where anything that can go wrong in the life of humans is confirmed. In the film, Danny further creates the justification of suspended moral economy of human behaviour by stating that in Sierra Leone “God left this place a long time ago”. Once exploitation of the minerals of Sierra Leone is sanctioned by the absence of the metaphysics of God’s spiritualising and humanising gift of life, it is easy for white characters to behave as if they too are caught in the vortex of the state of exception. According to Potzsch, white characters are represented in the film as having lives that are “valuable and worthy of grief” (2011: 77). In the film, the white characters die as a result of the fight with other whites over the struggle to control the largest diamond that Solomon has found and hidden. As a narrative technique, rendering whites as grievable lives means devaluing rebel soldiers’ lives as ungrievable (Butler 2010). More significantly, *Blood Diamond* is also a paradigm of the state of exception representing a “portrait of the fear of the imperial overreach and failure” (Dawson 2011: 178) to completely domesticate both the resources and the violence that are in Sierra Leone.

Grievable and Ungrievable Lives in *Blood Diamond*

In *Blood Diamond*, Colonel Coetzee announces his mission in Sierra Leone as assisting the collapsing government that is being overrun by the RUF rebels. When it becomes obvious that the rebels are indeed near defeating the government forces, arrangements are made to move “non-military personnel” in order to allow the alliance of the mercenaries and government forces to snuff out the rebels. Non-military personnel is a euphemism for whites, and in the film, they are very conspicuous; where they are at leisure there is no war; where they meet to dance there are no incidences of the rebel RUF child soldiers firing rocket-propelled grenades. When the white characters are being evacuated there are no incidents of bloodshed. In short, the lives of white characters in the film are depicted as grievable. Butler (2010) says media in general and film in particular use frames of war to produce and project to the audience whose life is a life and whose life is effectively transformed into an instrument, a target, or number, or is effaced with only a trace remaining, or none at all.

In *Blood Diamond*, the lives of white characters are humanised; even when they are the ones who buy “blood diamonds” in the film, it is the whites in Washington who voice concern over the deaths of people in Sierra Leone. The lives of whites are therefore grievable, and as Butler conceives this phenomenon, the precarious condition of whites is related to a lofty ideal to save Africans from butchering and completely annihilating themselves. This depiction of whites as godsend saviours is projected despite the fact that whites are in fact the very people whose demand for diamonds fuels the war in Sierra Leone. One of the delegates raises the moral bar in which

whiteness is equated to humaneness whereas blackness is equalled to bestiality, brutality and violence. In his skewed opinion, the white delegate says that every time resources like oil and diamonds are discovered in Africa, it has led to fratricidal wars. Such a distorted view is based on a conviction that natural resources are a curse to Africans, and that when they discover minerals of value they need the economic and political guidance of white people. This is the essence of how the film narrative constitutes white lives as grievable, and as Butler frames this idea, as “life is grievable, that it be grieved if it were lost” (Butler 2010: 15).

In *Blood Diamond*, the film frame transforms the image into a political site of ambivalence. This is true in the depiction of the child soldier. Right from the beginning of the film, the child soldiers disturb the physical peace and spiritual cosmos of Solomon Vandy and his son Dia. The two are talking about Dia’s dream of becoming a doctor if he passes mathematics and chemistry. This narrative is rudely interrupted by the appearance of the RUF forces made up predominantly of child soldiers. Their recruitment methods involve instigating fear in the locals; they senselessly shoot women, children, take girls as sexual slaves and young boys of different ages as soldiers and slaves to mine diamonds in dingy rivers. One of the local RUF militia who abducted Dia teaches the young soldiers to be cruel and lets them practise target shooting on real people and tells the now hordes of child soldiers: “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”. The child soldiers are introduced to a culture of violence; they kill, are killed and made to sing a strain that confirms them as transformed young zombies: “We shed blood”. The net effect is that the new vocation of the child soldier is bloodshed. The historical motivation for this war they are forced to participate in is not revealed. It is as if Sierra Leone were a new heart of darkness; Young Dia is made a captain; he can kill with impunity and for that he is rewarded with food, guns, and drugs.

On another occasion in the film, Danny, the soldier of fortune, is looking for Commander Zero, one of the leaders of the local militia. When he finally gets to him, Commander Zero gives away precious diamonds to Danny and tells him that he could have all the diamonds in exchange for new guns. What is telling here, is Commander Zero’s ideological emptiness that is revealed when he says to Danny: “I do not know what do to with them”. Here, the director produces, deploys and reinforces an epistemological barrier in which the narrative is created in such a way that it constructs black people as not in need of their natural resources. Commander Zero’s statement not only justifies the white characters’ theft of African resources, but it also renders it unproblematic and ungrievable when African lives are lost during the process of looting African resources.

Later in the film, an old man appears and tells Danny and Solomon that the RUF forces are in the next village. And when the close-up of this next village comes onto the screen one sees human carnage of unparalleled proportions. The child soldiers have gone on the rampage and in an unprovoked mission killed and maimed women and girls. There are several ways of interpreting the depiction of the killed women and children. Firstly, by not attaching a motive for the killing of the villagers, Zwick manages to portray the child soldier as worse than a menace; he is inhuman, he brutally kills his own kind in cold blood for no apparent reason. Secondly, the images of dead women and children are intended to evoke strong emotions that would force the international world to fight against the rebels. Thirdly, because the killing occurs when white armed characters are off screen, it is conveyed that white characters could have saved the dead. And finally, the harvest of dead women and children occasioned by the child soldiers reveals the worthlessness of the lives of Africans. Ungrievability is linked to black lives. According to Butler, frames of war allocate differential levels of precarity to humanity so that when black lives are recognised by whites as well as the producer's recognition through framing, black and African people's lives are portrayed as lives that would never have been lived, because they are "sustained by no regard, no testimony, and ungrieved when lost" (Butler 2010: 15).

To put it more bluntly, although the number of African lives in *Blood Diamond* are visible in death, they are not made to create outrage. Their deaths confirm that they would not have lived anyway. In other words, one of the narrative techniques that *Blood Diamond* uses to create an epistemological barrier between black and white characters is to invoke the concept of "grievable and ungrievable lives" (Butler 2010: xxii). In *Blood Diamond*, the state of exception that is sustained on suspending normal law results in the existence of a society stranded in the "no-man's land between public law and political fact" (Agamben 2005: 1). In the Sierra Leone society depicted in the film, the conduct of rebels, of government forces and their mercenary backers create a "state of exception [which] appears as the legal form of what cannot have legal form" (p. 1). Compounding the undermining of the notion of sovereignty is the framing of European lives as grievable and of the rebel/African lives as ungrievable or not worthy mourning over. These forms of representing rebel and child soldiers and those that they kill encourage the representation of Africans through the frame of self-denouncement and immolation.

***Blood Diamond* and the Politics of African Self-Immolation**

The film *Blood Diamond* uses yet another rhetorical narrative as an epistemological barrier to cast further aspersions on the African child

soldier. Not only is the RUF depicted as without an alternative and redemptive political programme to restore Sierra Leone to a position of possible prosperity and democracy, but whenever the black characters in general and the rebel child soldiers specifically are given space to voice their views, these are framed in narrow concerns. At worst the African characters only speak to condemn themselves and at most speak to justify European intervention in African affairs. For example, the grand vision that Solomon has at the beginning when he encourages his son Dia to become a medical doctor, is made to pale as soon as Solomon is reunited with his family in Europe and then agrees to exchange the diamond nugget for cash. A narrative that initially promised assuming national dimensions and working toward achieving national solutions to the problem of war, murder, and genocide in Sierra Leone, is compromised by capital and attenuated into a family drama. The words of self-condemnation that are put in the mouths of the rebel child soldiers of the RUF and their commanders are sinister. The words damn RUF's cause because they prove the supposed inhumanity of blacks. Rebel leaders have power to decide who should die and who live, and when they do decide on who should die, the leaders carry out or force child soldiers to perform the most dastard and raw forms of killing; axing off hands so that the people would not use hands to vote a government of their choice into power. Solomon pretends to be neutral in a situation in which his country is engulfed in a war of genocide. For him, it is enough to pronounce that he is not a "rebel".

Historically, the rebels had an identifiable cause because they were fighting a neocolonial government determined to monopolise diamonds and sell them to international mercenaries at the expense of the development of the rural and urban areas. It took Danny to remind Solomon that without his (Danny's) assistance, he was just another "black man in Africa". From this shock, Solomon is cowed into submission and he utters the worst words of self-condemnation in which the African continent is also immolated by an act of linguistic and ideological collateral damage. Convinced that there is nothing that he can do with Danny's intervention and assistance, Solomon wishes that the white man had not left Africa. In his own words: "I know some good people who say something is wrong with us inside our black skin: that we were better off when the white man ruled, but my son is good" (*BD*). This self-denial allows Danny to further depreciate the images of Africa, Sierra Leone and rebels when he says Africa is a "bang-bang continent" ruled by leaders who refuse to get out of Africa when they are old. According to Danny, the soldier of fortune, the black "government bangs, and rebels are worse" (*BD*). The picture created of child soldiers as wallowing in self-abnegation is meant to elevate white characters to the pedestal of humanitarian saviours. In this film space, African characters are pictured as subhumans whose lives do not count for much and are therefore ungrievable when these lives are lost.

The depth of self-laceration is also embraced by the rebel child soldiers. Firstly, as argued by Sharon Dewar, “[t]here doesn’t appear to be any motivation for the rebels’ fight other than bloodthirsty, lust for murder and destruction. In many scenes the rebels are reveling in the blood bath like monsters” (2007: 3). The blood that is spilt is not of soldiers of fortunes or mercenaries but of Sierra Leone people. The immediate suggestion is that Europeans should save Africa from itself. Beyond this distorted view of African history as articulated in *Blood Diamond*, the rebels further alienate themselves from African audiences who want to see a prosperous Sierra Leone country. In the film, rebels kill women and children in cold blood, decapitate government soldiers they hold prisoner, thereby flouting international rules of engagement in war. Furthermore, the hideous names such as “Dead Body”, “Master of Disaster” and “See Me No More” that child soldiers give themselves imply their association with evil, murder and atrocity. What is confirmed in these acts of self-abnegation is that the future generation of African leaders are no better than the old, and therefore, when they are mowed down by mercenary helicopter gunfire, there is no need of white people to account for their spilling of African blood since, if these youths were left, they would have done something worse.

The messianic role that whites are forced to play is contrasted with the menacing and aggressive posture of the rebels’ commanders even when they have been captured. In one instance in the film, one rebel commander who wants the diamond that Solomon has hidden, promises to come back for Solomon to hurt him by raping his wife in front of him, slitting Solomon’s throat and taking Solomon’s daughters as his concubines. This conviction from the rebel leader that African problems are only solved through violence forces Danny to conclude THIS IS AFRICA, a pedestrian philosophical statement based on the view, according to Danny, that no one can “change something” because in Africa “people kill each other as a way of life. It has been like that”. In this statement, Sierra Leone, and Africa by extension, have been constituted into Europe’s foil, and Western countries can measure how far they have developed or moved away from primitive culture against the failed project of modernity in Africa. *Blood Diamond* is a narrative that privileges the suffering of Africans at the hands of Africans and white mercenaries. The preoccupation with the spectacle of excessive violence undercuts the possibility to “locate the forces and actors that create unequal power structures and the dynamics of exploitation” (Esbenshade 2008: 454) the African comes across daily. In this way, Edward Zwick fails to use his film to actually scrutinise the diamond industry itself and not the destroyed lives, the displaced and terrorised civilians from diamond-producing countries. This “failure” by the director is willed because it achieves the impact of projecting Africans as just slightly above wild animals in terms of behaviour. Zizek (2008) points out that genres such as film are occasionally made popular because their appeal comes from the embedded systemic

violence in the metaphors, images and discursive language of dramatisation. *Blood Diamond* is a nostalgic film whose template of what Africa should be as opposed to what Africa is, is provided by imperialising novels such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1906). The nostalgic image of an African as atavistic is one that renders African lives ungrivable to Europeans.

African Child Soldier, Western Humanitarianism and the Compromise of Sovereignty in *Blood Diamond*

The precarity of African lives in the camps controlled by RUF rebels reflects that these lives are physical spaces of pain for both the child soldiers and the village hostages they keep. Ideologically, the camps in the forests underline the lasting crisis of Sierra Leone in which ordinary life is reduced to "bare life" (Agamben 1998: 171). The dense forests of Sierra Leone, inhospitable when it rains, the lack of food, and the death threats to child soldiers from rebel commanders further accentuate the situation in the camps as one in which the distinction between law and disorder is dissolved. In the words of Agamben, in existence in the camps of a country gripped in the throes of civil war everything is possible. For, "whoever entered the camp moved in a zone of indistinction between outside and inside, exception and rule, licit and illicit, in which the very concepts of subjective right and juridical protection no longer made sense" (1998: 170).

Once the zone of indistinction is calibrated as that of Africans as it is in *Blood Diamond*, the loss of life in this space is not or should not be grieved for. *Blood Diamond* makes a remarkable distinction between the humanity of the child soldier always in doubt and the self-assuredness not only of white characters in Sierra Leone but also those in European capitals. Chaos is ascribed to hordes of black youths and child soldiers in the African space who chant "we shed blood", and this is critically contrasted by the sobriety, the businesslike atmosphere of the G8 meeting in New York in which rationality is accorded to Europeans. In the film, it is Europeans, more than African victims, that are also perpetrators, who show concern over the exploitation of African resources. For example, one white delegate mourns more than the bereaved Sierra Leoneans that throughout history, whenever a resource such as oil is found in Africa, that resource becomes a curse rather than a blessing. The message of the G8 members is that Africans are at best children unaware of the potential of their continent and at worst brutes who would slit each other's throats senselessly even when they end up losing the diamonds to European merchants such as the one who offers Solomon more than two million pounds.

The differential treatment of whites and African blacks in the film recalls Butler's view on how frames of war operate, that is, that images framed by

or framing war and peace go beyond exhibiting reality since they participate in a “strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality” (2010: xiii). In *Blood Diamond*, white characters are individuated against the cacophony produced in the camps occupied by the child soldiers and their unruly leaders. In the film, the child soldiers play hip hop music during or after orgies of killing other Africans. This is a worrying link because hip hop is not African by origin. Its roots in African American ghettos incriminate the whole black race on earth as guilt of violence is presumed to be as deep as their dark melanin. In contrast, in the film when Danny speaks to a white man from South Africa, the dialogue is slow and sober as they enquire after the welfare of each other’s family, children and company. This act of re-humanising South African and former Rhodesian mercenaries who have been in Angola, pillaging oil fields, and now are in Sierra Leone, is meant to underline the fact that their lives count as *a* life that is grievable, should it get lost in the dense foliage of Sierra Leone.

In fact, the presence of mercenaries in the Sierra Leone war is elevated to a humanitarian gesture because white characters speak of their mission in the country in terms that suggest that they are helping a legitimate government to stave off the advances of the RUF that the film’s rhetorical narratives have constituted as the enemy. The figure of white characters in Africa as a site of ambivalent human agency is expressed by Danny, to Mandy, the white journalist who agrees that both are using Solomon Vandy for their own reckless interests. Danny further reveals that if he were to get the big diamond that he is looking for, he would never come back to Africa. For him, what counts is fortune born out of fighting in mercenary wars. He has fought in Rhodesia and Angola and is an unreformed racist who prefers the name Rhodesia to the name Zimbabwe. Through this reference to the imperial war that was defeated by black nationalists, another narrative is intimated which is that the diamonds of Zimbabwe (not yet found at the time of production of the film) could be another site for the exploitation of African resources in future.

It is not the urban Western capital, or South Africa’s Cape Town that works as the surrogate of civilisation where the white men’s loot from Sierra Leone is enjoyed in the lavish homes and clean yards in contradistinction to the dirty roads of Sierra Leone, the ramshackled cars, and the monotony of villages made out of tents, of which the Tassin camp in New Guinea is the second largest in the continent since it carries nearly 2 million displaced Africans. The irony here is that the very Western buyers of African diamonds are the ones who send to the frontiers of disorder and chaos their own white buyers that operate as humanitarian agents with pretended African interests at heart. The film ends with Solomon Vandy as a celebrity in London after having sold his diamond nugget, and without a promise to come back to Sierra Leone to fight and restore the order which he finds and enjoys in London. In elevating the white characters to the position of

humanitarian agents, the film uncannily reveals “the gap between the Global Humanitarian Discourse and the local understandings and experiences of young people’s military recruitment in Sierra Leone” (Lee 2009: 1). In that discourse African child soldiers have become a “moral and emotional issue” (p. 2) and yet, none of the purveyors of this language of humanitarianism believe in what they say. Because the image of the child soldier drawn out in the film is one of victim and perpetrator, the child soldier is an ideological site of contesting values.

Child soldiers suffer and are vulnerable in global politics, most of which they do not understand. But the proliferation of child soldiers in Africa is also enigmatic in that it may ironically point to the fact that some child soldiers have chosen to be that which they have become. Furthermore, it is not clear in research on child soldiers, particularly in the medium of the moving image, the extent to which the spectacularisation of the child soldier with an AK-47 has encouraged more children to become child soldiers. The downside of the cynical depiction of the child soldier as needing moral rehabilitation that global humanitarian agents based in the West can give has also glamourised the child figure. In short, in *Blood Diamond*, Edward Zwick has produced a film sustained by binaries in which African life is bare life under a state of exception whereas European life is stable, rationalist and motivated by altruist humanitarian concerns. The images of child soldiers and their errant leaders have been denied historical motives for waging war, and consequently, when they die in the film, their numbers are meant to reveal life that is ungrievable. On the other hand, white mercenaries in Sierra Leone have been depicted as saviours to a beleaguered legitimate government when in fact both the government and the mercenaries survived because of the lasting crisis in Sierra Leone. White characters in Sierra Leone and in Europe, Antwerp and India, where the blood diamonds are sold, provide a ready market. That these characters are humanised in ways that show that their lives would be grievable should they die in Sierra Leone is part of the cynicism of representing the child soldier in the film *Blood Diamond* that this article has been attempting to deconstruct.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore the contradictory modes through which the images of African child soldiers have been represented in *Black Hawk Down* and *Blood Diamond*. It was demonstrated that in order to sustain the images of African child soldiers as subhuman, the two films do not recreate the contexts of genocide and civil war within which Somalia and Sierra Leone could be described and explained as existing in states of exception in which normal law is suspended in ways that make it possible for different forms of atrocities by the governments, child soldiers and white

characters to occur. The article uses Agamben's idea of the paradox of sovereignty to reveal how lawlessness in both Somalia and Sierra Leone is a product of the disregard for civilised law. The article also employs Butler's idea of frames of war in which it was demonstrated that camera frames of war are themselves overdetermined by the ideologies behind them. It is revealed that the framing of genocide in Somalia and Sierra Leone as depicted in *Black Hawk Down* and *Blood Diamond* respectively, brought out how the directors of the films confirm African lives as worthless and therefore ungrievable, while the lives of white characters are portrayed as worth mourning over when they are lost.

In particular, *Black Hawk Down* presents a picture of Islamic movements led by child soldiers as having had no ideological frameworks with which to rescue their communities from the cycles of violence. The American soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* are presented as humanitarian agents willing to restore the humanity of Somalis even if it means through force. On the other hand, *Blood Diamond* further deepens the portrayal of violence by African child soldiers as *sui generis*. African hordes of child soldiers are depicted as revelling in the killing of unarmed and innocent African people.

The two films represent the lives of Africans and the African child soldier in simplistic ways that are meant to confirm the African space in Somalia and Sierra Leone as a paradigm of failed states and a foil for Europe represented as regenerated. Both films minimise the scale of violence in Somalia and Sierra Leone by implicitly describing these structural and systemic forms of violence as symptomatic of societies caught up in the grip of inexorable civil wars. The truth is that the levels of violence and the methods used to commit these physical as well as systemic and embedded forms of violence fit the description of genocide. Neither *Black Hawk Down* nor *Blood Diamond* complicates the agency of child soldiers in Africa as observed by Mamdani's insightful analysis of the Rwandan genocide in which most child soldiers and young adults are enthusiastic to kill, while others are reluctant and sometimes coerced to kill against their wish.

In short, in *Black Hawk Down* and *Blood Diamond* the young adult soldiers are depicted as having achieved the negative feat of passing to a new and younger generation of African child soldiers the "gift" of self-destruction.

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