Blood Diamond: Global Hero and African Narrative in Contemporary Cinema

Jinke Li

London School of Economics and Political Science, Gender Institute, London

summer.brenda@qq.com

Abstract

The hero narratives and images of Africa in the contemporary global cinemas tend to be filled with the elements of dangers: the vast African savannah is full of vitality, but the danger is immediate; the western foreigners act as saviors and use the so-called "archetype" to narrate the story of saving the African people. This kind of heroic film with African background often carries negative values of cultural colonization, racial distinction, and feminine materialization. This article will analyse the film Blood Diamond to make a reflection on the issue of racial stereotype against the third world of Africa and feminine issues of subordination in transnational cinemas by deconstructing the film narrative and symbol image.

Keywords

African Hero Films, Contemporary Global Cinemas, Blood Diamond, Racial Stereotype, Feminine Subordination.

1. Introduction

Western film industries still take up a dominant position in global film production [1]. When western world launches transnational narratives, the representation of globalization in its films plays a pivotal role in broadcasting the image of "object". However, it is still a contested terrain as to whether western film masters can really narrate the transnational stories in a completely native sense. As Edward Said [2] in his book, *Culture and Imperialism*, "nations themselves are narrations", indicating that transnational narratives could exist with disadvantages in displaying local culture and national values. Meanwhile, in the process of representing "object", cultural imperialism and racism are likely to be existent in global cinemas. The white considers themselves objective existences and masters, who can judge alien continents [3].

In cinematic narratives of Africa, the "archetype" identifying the black and the white is widely used in transnational hero-narratives, such as "the white hero/hunter", "the white Queen", "the good/ignorant African" and "the dangerous Africa", which implicates the issues of racism and other inequalities. In the choice of research subjects, the author sets *Blood Diamond* as example to examine the representation of cinematic globalization

2. Blood Diamond

2.1 The white hero and his subsidiary partners

This film narrates how two groups appropriate the priceless pink diamond previously hidden near the RUF[1] diamond mine by the black fisherman Solomon Vandy. The protagonist is Danny Archer, a mercenary employed by the Western world, whose job is to smuggle diamonds. Another power to snatch the valueless diamond is the leader of RUF, Captain Poison. Solomon Vandy is firstly enslaved by RUF in the diamond mine, and then for saving his family, he is asked to help Archer to locate the diamond. Maddy Bowen serves as another main character in the story. She represents the power of justice and kindness to reveal the truth of illegal trade of diamond between Africa and the West. On

---

[1] RUF means Revolutionary United Front.

the other hand, she makes great efforts to help Archer and Solomon, with the former becoming a good person with human kindness and the latter getting freedom.

In terms of the establishing of characters, *Blood Diamond* tracks the classic model "archetypes" in cinematic Africa [4], with Archer as the white hunter, Solomon as the good African and Bowen as the white goddess. However, this mode tends to be kind of racism and sexism, because in this design, it seems that only the white hero Archer holds agency [5], although he is depicted as a native African in the film. Also, the role of women is portrayed with the typical female image from the male gaze, and "she" is simply in personality without the shadow of human nature, but only with kindness and loveliness.

In this film, the main actor Archer tends to own various personalities and changing attitudes. Compared with other roles, like Solomon, Poison and Bowen, Archer's personalities are diverse, which is embodied in his sleeping with prostitutes, and working on dark trade as a smuggler. However, in other aspects, as a victim in the backstory, Archer finally tells the truth to the journalist, Bowen, and also saves some refugees. However, another major role, the black Solomon is of old fashion in narrative: kind, ignorant person, waiting for the lead of the white man. Solomon even thinks lying as a cameraman is unmoral, so he is hesitated to cheat others about this for a while. This gap in establishing characters represents the ignorance of the status of the black part.

Furthermore, through the accents of the characters, it is noticeable that the African roles speak in the same accent of English, while the white characters communicate with others with different kinds of accents, and some can even be recognized by their social hierarchies from their first-class accent. Through sound accents, it seems that the film undermines characteristics of the black, while makes more emphasis on the white roles.

Mafe once claims that in *Blood Diamond*, the issue of the class in the group of the black has been shown in some ways by scripting Solomon's hope for future. However, there is a different view that this film still undermines the issue of hierarchy for the black group and the examples provided by Mafe in the writing cannot sufficiently support the facts. What people view class representation is usually by identifying his or her social status, but in *Blood Diamond*, the examples are only the dream of the black roles about social status, not the real status of the African roles.

Based on the analysis of the white/black characters, the positive image of the black is less significant than the role's subordinated function to the white [3]. Thus, even though Solomon plays an important role in the narrative, his function seems like the subsidiary of the white hero Archer. This film fails to comprehensively describe the civil war through superficially establishing the African roles.

What's more, women in this film remain subordinated and erased. First of all, the black women serve as the background for the film. In other words, they are of absence from the story. The director only portrayed the black women to show the cruelty of the Sierra Leone Civil War, thus nearly no detailed plots or characters are arranged for the presence of the black women. In comparison with the roles of the black women, the white woman, Bowen plays a certain role in the film. However, the establishing of the journalist Bowen is superficial and simple without too many changes. Beauty and kindness are embedded in Bowen's personality, reflecting the male gaze. Like the scene in a car, one of Bowen's male colleagues depicts Bowen like a tough girl in Afghanistan, but "she still looks so good, like hot". It can be seen that Bowen is sexualized in the screen by the male gaze.

2.2 Narrative: who represents the voice of cinematic Africa?

In the final plot of the film, Solomon waits for the award by a conference speaker, who says: "the third world is not a world apart, and the witness you will hear today speaks on its behalf. Let us hear the voice of that world." However, it is ironical that Solomon's world is silenced without speaking voice in the film, because Solomon is silenced all the time during the final plot. Inspired by this plot, an interesting question can be considered as to where the voice of native African is.

In fact, the film is like what Spivak said, "the subaltern cannot speak" [6]. *Blood Diamond* is represented by the western subjectivity, not the authentic Africa. By this logic trajectory, the so-called

image of Africa in this film actually comes from the gaze of the West: what is watched by audiences is from the gaze of the western observers.

From the view of the westerners, Sierra Leone is full of chaos, presented by lots of plots scripting war-battles, dead bodies and low quality of African life. Actually, such depiction of Africa is a commonly seen stereotype, exerting negative impacts in terms of the image of Africa, because in audiences' minds, Africa is full of danger and chaos. Therefore, there could be different descriptions of Africa, but for the sake of interests, the authentic stories will be replaced by stereotypes [7].

In the films, most of the scenes that spectators can feel safe are somehow associated with the West, such as the Western soldiers, the saving helicopter, the cars of journalists, and the pub mainly catering for the white. Once, Solomon asks Bowen about whether the western worlds would come to save them if they read the news report. This plot implicates that in the view of Africans, they believe that the West is the god who can protect them.

2.3 Noir and film aesthetics

Blood Diamond is not a typical noir film [5]. Before the exploration, film genre and noir can be introduced firstly. The film term "noir" is defined as "dark film" by French film theorist [8]. After 1940s, it becomes a kind of film genre to screen the disillusion of the urban in the US. This genre focuses on criminal perspective or cold tone to narrate films, using the "dark/light" shooting style to display cinematic aesthetics.

Dan Flory [9] mentions the concept of noir Atlantic to define a collection of films associated with combating oppressions, and in Mafe's film article, she thinks the *Blood Diamond* fulfills the division of "noir Atlantic". However, this film is not similar with other classic noir films with a typical cold tone. *Blood Diamond* has great scenes of spectacular panoramas, and beautiful landscapes, which are contrary to the features of noir. In terms of the narrative of this film, theme expression and the shooting method of lighting utilization, however, *Blood Diamond* fulfills the features of noir genre, such as the establishing of the grey protagonist Archer, Chaos in Africa, the core of the narrative (dark desire for the diamond), and cold and dark lighting to depict the diamond mine and the black slaveries.

In terms of shooting strategies, the director accelerates the oppressed image of the people in Sierra Leone. Solomon is often shot from a high angle, which makes his image vulnerable. In most shots, Danny is shot with "low-angle, well-lit", reflecting his strength and heroic image. These camera strategies can bring about racist stereotype, as the white image seems "stronger" than the black counterpart.

In the context of cinematic Africa, the transnational films have limits through the "archetype" model. Among these films, since *Blood Diamond* has noir mark, it can make a difference in transcending the stereotypes. However, based on the analysis above, this paper thinks it does not change the racial stereotyping situation in the representation of Africa, as the black is still considered as a subordinated function to serve for the white hero in the narrative, the image of dangerous Africa is still the background and only the white hero can do something for dealing with the oppression suffered by the black.

3. Conclusion

Blood Diamond is a typical film, following the "archetype" models, although it can take advantage of noir elements, it still fails to transcend the racial stereotypes. The film has problems and disadvantages at the moment of the representation of the global cinema in terms of cinematic Africa.

First of all, the racial stereotypes exist as a great issue to superficially represent the images of whites and blacks, and this issue is exposed through the "archetype" models. Secondly, the representation of women is absent, subordinated and sexualized in these heroic films, which leads to the consideration of the female status, and poses a question of why women still have to lie in the secondary position in the film media. Further, the film selected chaos as the background to narrate the story, and it indicates

that a dangerous Africa can be an attractive stereotype for the Western gaze, but this negative image representation in international cinema could not be the real Africa.

Above, the current representation of globalization can be problematic in the global hero cinema, and what we can do is to transcend the racial and sexual stereotypes and embrace more comprehensive cultures when shooting films.

Bibliography

[1] Jin, Dal Yong. (2012). Transforming the global film industries: Horizontal integration and vertical concentration and neoliberal globalization. *the International Communication Gazette*, 74(5), 405-422.

[2] Said, Edward. (1993). *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.

[3] Shohat, Ella & Stam, Robert. (1994). *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media*. London and New York: Routledge.

[4] Cameron, Kennth. (1994). *Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White*. New York: Continuum.

[5] Mafe, Dana Adesola. (2011). (Mis) Imaging Africa in the New Millennium: The Constant Gardener and Blood Diamond. *Camera Obscura*, 25(3), 69-99.

[6] Spivak, Gayatri. (1988). Can the Subaltern Speak. In Cary Nelson, Lawrence Grossberg (Eds), *Marxism and the interpretation of culture* (pp. 271-313). Basingstoke: Macmillan Education.

[7] Neidhardt, Irit. (2010). Untold Stories. *Westminster Papers in Communication and Culture*, 7(2), 31-50.

[8] Telotte, J. P. (1989). *Voices in the dark: The narrative patterns of film noir*. University of Illinois Press.

[9] Flory, Dan. (2008). *Philosophy, Black Film, Film Noir*. University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press.