

In Africa, Diamonds Are Forever: From *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery* to *Blood Diamond*

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One of the central themes in *The Rose of Rhodesia* (1918) is the theft of a large diamond. This places the film in a long tradition of other films that feature diamonds in the plot. In the following I aim to examine the seductive power of diamonds for cinema, and track some of the narrative settings in which these gems are placed time and again. There are innumerable films that are obsessed with diamonds as an icon for wealth, luxury, success, even, in the form of an engagement ring, as a guarantee of a happy marriage. Theft of diamonds, diamond heists or capers – delving into my own archive of knowledge, a list from the National Archives of Pretoria, and googling the Internet for just a few minutes, I came up with the following titles: *The African Diamond Conspiracy* (1914), *Women Love Diamonds* (1927), *Desert Nights* (1929), *Diamond Jim* (1935), *Reckless* (1935), *Adventures in Diamonds* (1940), *Diamond Frontier* (1940), *Diamond City* (1949), *The Adventurers* (1950), *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), *Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend* (1953), *Leeu Van Punda Maria* (1954), *Diamond Safari* (1957), *Gevaarlike Spel* (1962), *Kimberley Jim* (1963), *Sanders* (1964), *Topkapi* (1964), *Mocambique* (1964), *Diamond Walkers* (1965), *No Diamonds for Ursula* (1967), *Jy Is My Liefeling* (1967), *Dark of the Sun* (1968), *A Twist of Sand* (1969), *Banana Beach* (1970), *The Hot Rock* (1972), *Spergebiedt Diamond Area #1* (1972), *Killer Force* (1974), *Diamonds* (1975), *Sell a Million* (1975), *Daan & Doors Oppie Diggins* (1975), *The Diamond Hunters* (1975), *Diamonds of Kilimanjaro* (1983), *Diamonds High* (1988), *Laser Mission* (1988), *River of Diamonds* (1988), *Oh Schucks Here Comes UNTAG* (1990), *Shadow Lake* (1999), *Diamond Men* (2000), *Snatch* (2000), *Diamonds and Rust* (2001), *Femme Fatale* (2002), *Foolproof* (2003), *After the Sunset* (2004), *Fool n Final* (2007), even the Gene Autry romp set in South Africa, with the deceptive title *Roundup Time in Texas* (1937)

features diamonds – I could have dug deeper and deeper into this mine, and come up with many more nuggets.

Why diamonds? Well, they represent wealth and luxury, they have an intrinsic allure, a mystique, even; I am blind to their beauty, but they do exert a fascination for a certain kind of person, it seems, perhaps – I hesitate to say this – especially for women. Part of their attraction is that they can be worn, setting off predominantly the female skin while flaunting wealth and success. An intoxicating blend of sex and the kind of power that money can buy – which is to say, most forms of power. They are also small enough to be hidden easily, swallowed, or even – as an acquaintance of mine who had tried it once confessed – concealed in the anal passage for smuggling purposes. (Not recommended.)

But probably the most powerful element in the allure of diamonds is the mythology that surrounds them – they have no intrinsic value whatsoever. And this is a mythology that has been created most intensively over the last century and a half, that is to say, since their discovery in South Africa, and which has fed on literature and Hollywood, and been bloated by advertising.

Seeing the films or reading the plot descriptions, what strikes me is the peculiar amorality surrounding diamonds; in many of the films there is little or no stigma attached to their theft, indeed, the culmination of the plot is often when the thief successfully gets away with his prize, against the odds. (The notable exception to this characteristic is when the plots are set in South Africa, where the theft of diamonds has always been taken very seriously indeed, in life and in fiction.) The kind of amorality I am talking about is by no means unique to diamonds – it applies to different treasure in other films. We might take just the one example of *Three Kings* from a multitude of choices. In *Three Kings* (1999, director David O. Russell), which is set at the time of the Gulf War, three American servicemen are out to loot Saddam Hussein's treasure-chest. There is a sense that precious metals have no real owner, that they are there for the grabbing. Or, if they have an owner, he has somehow forfeited the right to have them. *They belong to the bold and the unscrupulous.*

And I want to put this into a much wider context that I find painfully relevant today, although it has existed throughout human history, and that is the struggle for the world's resources, which now, in a particularly savage way, are up for grabs. To take one example, the Iraq war. This is about a natural resource even more corrupting than diamonds, namely, oil. Oil and diamonds have this in common: their control brings immense wealth and immense power. But from the purely cosmetic and practical point of view, diamonds have it over oil. You cannot wear, you cannot flaunt, oil. One cannot imagine Marilyn Monroe singing "*Oil is a Girl's Best Friend*". And we cannot ignore the sexual appeal of diamonds, which in the films is very manifest. The man with the biggest diamond to offer, however he obtained it, will get the girl.

For my interpretation you can take as a subtext that diamonds may serve as a convenient metaphor for the struggle for control of the world's resources, which is now especially acute in Africa. In fact, the film *Blood Diamond* (2006) ends with this macrocosmic view.

It is astonishing how many films set in Africa – and this is true from earliest times – are about the control of African land, although this is usually obscured by a main text about white heroism and black savagery. When it is white against black, as so often – *De Voortrekkers* (1916), *Symbol of Sacrifice* (1918), *They Built a Nation* (1938), *King Solomon's Mines* (numerous versions), *Untamed* (1955), *Zulu* (1964), *The Gods Must Be Crazy* (1980), *Shaka Zulu* (1986), and even the apparently innocuous *Out of Africa* (1985) – the covert text is, Who should own this land? And the answer is always: the whites. Look at the scene in *Out of Africa* where the two lovers overfly the landscape of Kenya, filled with game, offering a superabundance, a veritable Garden of Eden, for these godlike creatures in their flying machine looking down upon it all. Never any sense that this land has been stolen. In its most blatant form, the superiority of the white race is inherent in the Tarzan stories, set in a vague – and again, Edenic – central Africa - where a primitive white man is invariably smarter than the indigenous blacks. And where even the gorillas are more sympathetic than the human inhabitants. In other words, these films

all reflect and justify in some way or other a racist ideology, an imperial ethos. They do it mostly by demonizing the inhabitants of the land that is being plundered, an echo of the centres of white power where these films were made.

Some historical background. From 1869 on, diamonds were mined at Kimberley in southern Africa. This was in the land of the Griqua and Tswana peoples, and uncomfortably close to the Boer Republic of the Transvaal – so the British annexed the territory in 1871; that is to say, they stole it from the people who had lived there for centuries, in order to pre-empt possible annexation on the part of the Boers. Discovery of diamonds drew to Africa, besides adventurers and the scum of the earth, mine technicians and managers from Europe, America, and Australia, the skilled workers. The sweat labour came from Africans. Also, it brought entrepreneurs, would-be capitalists out to make a killing. The mines of South Africa – diamonds, then gold and then almost every kind of industrial mineral – became critically important to Britain, and to the British Empire, which was facing increasing competition from France, Germany, and the newly upstart United States.

Rhodes of Africa (dir. Berthold Viertel, 1936) has a re-enactment of the opening up of the diamond mines to prospectors, who under the British flag race to grab parcels of land for development. The sequence offers an ersatz experience of that moment that saw the beginning of the transformation of southern Africa from an economy based on primitive agriculture into one based on mining. The Kimberley mines were for a long period the richest known diamond deposits in the world. In the eyes of many, South Africa was synonymous with diamonds. Playing upon this international appeal, the first recorded feature film made in South Africa was about diamonds. Like the slightly later *The Rose of Rhodesia* and *Blood Diamond* ninety years later, the plot revolves around a single fabulously large diamond. This earliest film was called *The Star of the South* (aka *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery*). Made in 1910, it is unfortunately a lost film. But we do have a contemporary description, quoted in Thelma Gutsche's *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa, 1895-1940*:

The first South African Drama, produced entirely in South Africa by the Springbok Film Co., “*The Star of the South*”

Synopsis

On the banks of the Vaal River, a Hottentot discovers a big diamond.

Two diggers down on their luck buy it for four shillings.

They entrust it to Dick Grangeway for delivery to the Standard Bank of South Africa in London.

The arrangement is overheard by Elias Wolaston and Big Macduff, two desperate characters who determine to obtain possession of the diamond.

Dick and his wife Kate, and other successful diggers, leave for the coast by ox-wagon.

Elias and Macduff arrive at Abrahamson’s store in advance and interview Lokoko, chief of a marauding tribe of Kaffirs, who agrees to assist for one third of the loot.

Dick’s camp is surprised by the Kaffirs.

Kate escapes, taking the diamond with her and runs in search of assistance.

The Mounted Police to the rescue.

The plot synopsis reveals that *The Star of the South* has some of the same ingredients as *The Rose of Rhodesia* – a large diamond, renegade whites, blacks in a form of insurrection, a heroine who is critical to the action. Another element that would become familiar is the obtaining of the diamond from an African for a very low price – the African typically “does not know its value”. (As Africans did not “know the value” of the gold and other minerals that lay under their feet, which made it only natural – indeed, imperative - to steal it from them.)

After *The Star of the South* there came a spate of South African films featuring diamonds as an ingredient in the plot. Besides *The Rose of Rhodesia* are recorded *The African Diamond Conspiracy* (1914), *A Story of the Rand* (1916), *Gloria* (1916), *Prester John* (1919), to name just a few. And that was just South Africa in the silent era.

The diamond theme was quickly picked up overseas. *The Kaffir's Gratitude* (produced by David Horsley for Centaur Film Company) was an American silent film made in 1916. We may note that the “kaffir” of the title never has any other name. He is an idealisation, the black servant who serves his master faithfully when his master, John, is the victim of a dastardly plot. A white crook has discovered diamonds on Melbourne’s land, and changes the boundary line, so that the diamonds seem to be on his land. The “faithful kaffir” discovers the change, and is instrumental in saving his master’s diamonds. In a synchronous, but separate, plot, he helps to save the honour of his master’s wife. Thus the film exploits what will become a familiar conflation of diamonds and sex, which is even more prominent in *Sins of Rosanne* (1920), where the sins are theft and sex. This story is set in Kimberley, but again, it was filmed in the United States. It is the story of a woman captivated by diamonds, who becomes an accomplice with a black worker in a diamond theft. (It includes a prison camp-like depiction of the mine compound that gives some intimation of actual mine conditions.)

In the undercurrent of diamonds-equals-sex, Rosanne’s white accomplice Ravenal gives her the black diamond she covets, intimating that she can pay him off with sex. Rosanne is a woman literally entranced by diamonds. When her black miner accomplice is discovered, and she is told the game is up, she exclaims: “It can’t end! I *must* have diamonds! I can’t live without them!” But as an attractive woman, she escapes punishment for her crimes.

The mid-‘thirties offer a particularly rich vein for films about specifically South African diamonds. I can only conjecture as to the reasons for this. It was a period when the British Empire was still at a peak, when writers like H. Rider Haggard and John Buchan (both of whom had experience in South Africa, and engineered diamonds into their books) enjoyed enormous popularity – the latter was, I think, the most popular writer in the English-speaking world at that time – but it was also the height of the Depression, when get-rich-quick dreams were in many people’s minds, and diamonds offered a glittering escape from the harsh reality of everyday life.

The Gaumont-British film *Rhodes of Africa*, directed by Bertold Viertel, dates from the Depression years. (The film is based on a biography of the empire-builder Cecil Rhodes by South African writer Sarah Gertrude Millin, published in 1933.) Apart from the disastrous choice of the American actor Walter Huston to play Rhodes, the film is a sympathetic portrait of one of Britain's most ruthless imperial freebooters. Early in the film there is a sanitised version of the mad rush to stake out claims. A little later, we are introduced to Cecil Rhodes, at his dig in the Big Hole at Kimberley, at that time the world's deepest open-cast mine. Of course, most of the actual digging was done by Africans. The sequence at the Big Hole ends with the seizing of an African worker who has swallowed a diamond in order to steal it. In the film, an element of humour is injected with the production of a bottle of castor oil that the native will be forced to swallow, so that he can excrete the diamond. But in a much softer interpretation, it typifies the relationship between management and the workers they exploited so outrageously.

This theme was already mentioned in *The Diamond Fields of South Africa*, written by the British novelist Anthony Trollop in 1870, and so very early on in the history of diamonds in South Africa. Here is the section relating to the honesty of black workers:

It need hardly be said that . . . the greatest care is necessary to prevent stealing, and that no care will prevent it. The Kafirs are the great thieves, – to such an extent of superexcellence that white superintendence is spoken of as being the only safeguard. The honesty of the white man may perhaps be indifferent, but such as it is it has to be used at every point to prevent, as far as it may be prevented, the systematized stealing in which the Kafirs take an individual and national pride. The Kafirs are not only most willing but most astute thieves, feeling a glory in their theft, and thinking that every stone stolen from a white man is a duty done to their chief and their tribe. . . . They come to the Fields instructed by their chiefs to steal diamonds, and they obey the orders like loyal subjects.

Note that this is also part of the plot of *The Rose of Rhodesia*. But note also that it is a mirror-image of the actions of white colonialists, whose “duty to their chief and tribe”

was presented as loyalty to Queen and country, and who had no compunction whatsoever in seizing a country's riches. In a revealing scene in *Rhodes of Africa*, the Matabele chief Lobengula realizes he has been cheated out of his land, and inadvertently betrayed his own people.

Back to Trollop: "The opportunities for stealing are of hourly occurrence and are of such a nature as to make prevention impossible... and the Kafirs know well where to dispose of their plunder, though of course *for but a small proportion of its value.*" (My italics.)

The sting is in the tail. What is not enlarged on here is the real danger, that of selling the stolen diamonds at a lower rate, which meant that the diamond producers could not keep full control of the market price. Rhodes's stated ambition was to make his De Beers "the richest, the greatest, and the most powerful company the world has ever seen." At its height (and under different names), for most of the last century, it not only either directly owned or controlled all the diamond mines in southern Africa and other parts of the world, but also owned diamond trading companies in England, Portugal, Israel, Belgium, Holland, and Switzerland.

Rhodes's imperialist ambition was inextricably intertwined with his business ruthlessness. In the film, there is a scene where his megalomania is given free reign before the board of directors of De Beers. Speaking of diamonds, he says, "We control the world's supply!" Standing before a map of Africa, he then goes on to lay out his plan for control of Africa's resources before a sceptical board: "Our business is concerned with anything and everything in the continent of Africa!"

Just as it is depicted in the film, Rhodes's expansionist vision was imperialist, with an ideology supported by massive wealth and of course completely devoid of scruples. What I want to draw to your attention here is how companies even more than countries have been responsible for the rabid exploitation of Africa. Often, as with the creation of Rhodesia, the country that bore Rhodes's name - companies have been forerunners of colonisation. When we get to the ebttide of colonialism in Africa, in the second half of

the last century, we see no such decline in interest from private corporations, certainly the opposite. This is what *Blood Diamond* depicts rather well, and almost uniquely. At the same time, what we have not seen shown in any fiction film to my knowledge is how some countries, today no less than in the past, put their military at the disposal of certain companies, most notoriously where oil is in question.

There have been at least seven film versions with the title *King Solomon's Mines*, all of them based more or less faithfully on H. Rider Haggard's novel *King Solomon's Mines*, written in 1885. The perennial popularity of the novel for cinema lies in its mix of exotic locale, intrepid white adventurers proving their racial superiority, lost treasure, evil witch doctor, and mythology of "the tribal African". These elements exist in films to this day.

Haggard, who would become an extremely popular writer of adventure fiction during the Victorian era, had spent much of his early career as an administrator in Natal Province in South Africa. He was in South Africa at the time of the Kimberley Big Hole frenzy. In the film version from 1937, directed by Robert Stevenson, the depiction of the Big Hole that appears early in the film is similar to that in *Rhodes of Rhodesia*, and sets the theme of the quest for diamonds.

In *King Solomon's Mines*, a group of white adventurers looking for the lost treasure of King Solomon make their way into the unexplored territory of the Kukuana. There, they are confronted by the witch Gagool – need I point out the name's echoing of the word "gargoyle", a symbol of ugliness and evil? – who is the guardian of the lost treasure, and who is therefore their enemy. Eventually, Gagool leads them to the cave where the treasure is hidden, but is killed in the process of entombing them there. Of course, the adventurers will prevail, and win the diamonds.

But, attention: aren't these diamonds on Kukuana land? Wasn't Gagool the custodian of this treasure? This trove clearly belongs to the Kukuana, yet the whites assume they can pillage it, making themselves rich and powerful. And we, the audience, in accepting this without question become co-conspirators.

A couple of elements are already in play here that are intended to distance the Kukuana from ownership:

First of all, this treasure came to be not through discovery and skill on the part of Africans, but, it is conjectured, through Phoenicians who oversaw the mines for King Solomon. And both the Phoenicians and the Israelite King Solomon were of a higher race. And since neither King Solomon nor the Phoenicians exist any longer, no-one properly owns them.

But also, Ignosi, the true Kukuana chief, does not value the diamonds. He contemptuously promises them to the adventurers, “since you white men are so fond of toys and money”.

This is a subtle subversion of Kukuana rights, and we may see in that a reflection - a reflection that dazzles – of the treatment of African rights in the real South Africa – indeed, of all of sub-Saharan Africa; and in the exploits of this group of adventurers a reflection of the freebooters (we may even call them mercenaries) who joined Cecil Rhodes in grabbing the territory that became Rhodesia. I refer you back to the Lobengula episode, where the chief finds that he has been cheated of the mineral rights on his land.

Enter Hollywood

The following is taken from *Hollywood's Diamonds*, by Michael Montgomery: “As De Beers aggressively marketed diamonds as symbols of romance and adventure, the cartel found an early ally in Hollywood. The promise of the diamond came to full fruition on the silver screen, where luminescence enticed the sparkling gem. In the late 1930s, De Beers hired the N.W. Ayer advertising agency to boost diamonds' appeal among American consumers. It was not an opportune moment, as a worldwide depression starkly reduced demand for luxury goods, including diamonds”

(<http://americanradioworks.publicradio.org/features/diamonds/hollywood.html>). Edward Jay Epstein, in his *The Diamond Mind* (chapter 13), quotes an Ayer proposal: “Motion pictures seldom include scenes showing the selection or purchase of an engagement ring to a girl. It would be our plan to contact scenario writers and directors and arrange for such scenes in suitable productions.” It was probably no coincidence that in 1936, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced a 10-minute short, *The Jonker Diamond*, directed by Jacques Tourneur. (At that time, before the screening of the main feature, cinemas would show a number of short films.) This short was a re-enactment of the actual discovery of a fabulous diamond, and fed into the diamond mythology. Here is a description: “Jacobus Jonker spent 18 miserable years beginning in 1905 in a South African 'diamond rush' looking for the magnificent gem that would insure his fortune. Jonker was rewarded on the eve of his retirement from diamond hunting, when his son discovered a 726-karat diamond. The mega-gem was eventually purchased by famed New York jeweler Harry Winston and cut by renowned diamond cutter La Zarre Kaplan into an array of gorgeous gems, a detailed, tension-fraught process dramatized in *The Jonker Diamond*.”

The jeweler Harry Winston mentioned above would himself become an important link between the diamond industry and Hollywood that lasts up to the present. In 1999, Whoopi Goldberg hosted the 1999 Oscars outfitted in more than forty million dollars worth of diamond jewelry, on loan from The House of Harry Winston. (In December, 2008, the Harry Winston jewelry store in Paris was subjected to an audacious heist that will surely be the basis for a Hollywood script. No doubt Harry Winston will be happy to lend his location and his wares to such a production.)

Short of a new plot for the Tarzan series, by now a very tired genre, a British company that had bought out the Tarzan franchise naturally turned to diamonds for *Tarzan's Greatest Adventure* (dir. John Guillermin, 1959). A young Sean Connery plays one of the villains. In his next diamond film, Connery would play the agent James Bond. This film was *Diamonds Are Forever* (dir. Guy Hamilton, 1971). Early on, a British Government minister describes what is happening in the diamond world, over a montage showing a diamond mine and its workings:

Eighty percent of the world's diamonds come from mines in South Africa. Most are dug out of shards of diamond-bearing clay of depths of up to two thousand feet. The whole process from start to finish operates under an airtight security system – it's an essential precaution. Even though the industry prides itself on the loyalty and devotion of its workers. . . . Naturally the security measures tend to ensure that loyalty. . . .

This speech is ironic because it occurs while showing a montage of a diamond mine and its workings, with black miners secreting diamonds they have found, which they later pass on to a white fence. In words that echo Trollop of a hundred years previously, the Minister continues: "Of course, no security system is perfect, we have always accepted a percentage of smuggling, but over the past two years, despite our precautions, it's gone on alarmingly." Huge quantities of South African diamonds are being stolen but have not been sold on the market. The Minister suspects that the stones may be released in order to depress prices, or stockpiled as a permanent form of blackmail. Bond's mission is to assume the identity of a professional diamond smuggler in order to find out who the smugglers are.

Of course, this part of the plot is just a hook to enter into a typical Bond tale of merry mayhem, but let us take a look at it. The government in question is of course the British government, Bond being a British agent. But why is the British government concerned about protecting a South African cartel? This is a question that of course is never raised. The audience is expected to accept this as a reasonable act on the part of British Secret Service, to send their star agent out to protect the diamond industry. (It should be observed that the De Beers cartel has historically always proven perfectly capable of protecting itself.) Underlying is a kind of unstated truth that it may be naïve to point out – that capitalist governments protect capitalist interests.

Although at that time Ian Fleming's book was published in 1951 the United Kingdom had a Labour government, Britain was still very much a colonial power, especially in Africa. Britain's relationship with South Africa was very cosy, with enormous financial interests

in that country. There were sentimental bonds of kith-and-kin, much of South Africa's moneyed class was equally at home in London or Cape Town, many of them held British passports. The word *apartheid* had just been coined, and its policies were just beginning to be executed, but there was as yet little protest in Britain against the obvious racism that existed in South Africa.

In the twenty years between the publication of the book and the release of the film, much of that would change. Britain had divested itself of all of its African colonies, the United Nations routinely condemned the system of apartheid, and South Africa had withdrawn from the Commonwealth. But what had significantly not changed was British commercial interest in South Africa. Britain was still South Africa's biggest investor. While there was a substantial British anti-apartheid movement, the government was now Conservative once again, and as well-disposed as ever towards its wealthy brethren – often literally brethren – in South Africa. The author Ian Fleming identified with this Conservative position.

But *Diamonds Are Forever* defies the kind of analysis that I have just offered. It exists in that eternal never-never land of Hollywood which ignores uncomfortable realities like racism and offers instead a plot driven by adventure, with heavy emphasis on technical gimmicks, the suave and the glamorous – in short, a James Bond movie. A familiar Hollywood genre. Should we bother to take it seriously?

I have this nagging reservation about the kind of perversion of the truth that presents a British-South African diamond cartel as our friends who need to be protected, and which therefore presents a subtle – perhaps unconscious, but no less subversive for that – propagandising for the South African regime, making its interests somehow the same as ours.

There are many other diamond plots that I am overlooking, but I want to jump forward thirty-five years to *Blood Diamond* (dir. Edward Zwick) . In the years since *Diamonds Are Forever*, the diamond industry, from the De Beers point of view, had faced a number

of crises revolving around massive new sources of diamonds coming onto the world market. The quintessential capitalist company De Beers was able to strike a deal with Soviet Russia that gave De Beers control of the flood of Russian diamonds. In the 1980s, the price of diamonds dropped precipitously, to such an extent that it threatened the economy of Israel. An even greater threat was a tsunami of diamonds from Australia, which De Beers tried to control through secret deals. But when these were exposed, there was a massive backlash, which carried with it the accusation that De Beers, as a South African-based company, was supporting apartheid. Which was undoubtedly true, as it paid taxes to the South African regime, to mention the most obvious form of support – without going into egregious questions of labour conditions. Added to this was failure to gain control of Zaire’s now immense production, and the whole industry seemed on the verge of chaos.

Early on, the film *Blood Diamond*’s dramatic argument is sketched in a montage – reminiscent of the earlier Bond movie – that intercuts a meeting of the G8, the economically most powerful countries in the world (here, apparently, concerned with the destabilizing effect of conflict diamonds on a number of African countries) with scenes of the desperate conditions for slave diamond workers in Sierra Leone. Here is an extract:

First speaker: “Throughout the history of Africa, whenever a substance of value is found the locals die, in great number and in misery. Now, this was true of ivory, rubber, gold and oil, it is now true of diamonds.”

(Cut to scene on a Sierra Leone river bank, where dozens of Africans, many of them children, are sifting for diamonds. The voice continues over this scene.)

“According to a devastating report by Global Witness, these stones are being used to purchase arms and finance civil war.”

(Cut back to G8. Speaker continues on camera.)

“We must act to prohibit the direct or indirect import of all rough diamonds from conflict zones.”

(Cut back to river scene, then back to G8.)

Second speaker: “May I remind you that the US is responsible for two-thirds of all diamond purchases worldwide, and I don’t anticipate that demand diminishing.

Third speaker: “We must remember that these stones comprise only a small percentage of the legitimate diamond industry, whose trade is crucial to many emerging nations.”

(Cut to black rebel leader on riverbank.)

Rebel leader, addressing the workers: “The Freetown government and their white masters have raped your land to feed their greed. RUF (*Revolutionary United Front*) has freed you from both slave and master here.”

(Return to G8 scene.)

Third speaker: “It’s true that conflict stones account for only 15% of the market, but in a multi-billion dollar a year industry, that means that hundreds of millions of dollars are available for weapons in these conflict zones.

(Return to riverbank scene, where the RUF leader continues his rant. Return to G8.)

Third speaker: “And we are joined today by members of that diamond industry who whole-heartedly endorse your proposal. I hope you’ll join me in endorsing their presence here. Mr. Van derKaap, and Mr. Simmons.”

(Return to river bank, where RUF leader executes a worker who has tried to secrete a diamond.)

As we come out of the powerful contrasting montage, the precise role of Van derKaap and Simmons, which is left hanging at the end of this scene, will be revealed during the course of the film as being essential to the shedding of blood in the search for and marketing of diamonds.

I want to say at once that I find this a fascinating film, which, although it breaks new ground in its geopolitical analysis expressed in a popular film, still clings to many of the elements we find in the earlier films. That is to say, it is clearly an adventure film; as in many, if not all, of the earlier films, there is a woman, a love interest, somehow involved with the diamond, in the tradition we have seen of winning the diamond = winning the woman; as with the lost *Prester John* and the extant *The Rose of Rhodesia*, there is a native uprising financed by diamonds (although in the earlier films the uprising is not

realized); there are rogue whites who are willing to steal or smuggle the diamonds; also, as with the earlier films, it is whites who own, win, or somehow manipulate diamonds.

At the same time, it is an adventure film with an important, if also relatively impotent, message: that dealing in conflict diamonds is a lethal business. I say impotent, because the ultimate punch, which comes as a text at the film's end: "But illegal diamonds are still finding their way to market. It is up to the consumer to insist that a diamond is conflict free," places the onus on the viewer/customer, who clearly has no way of ensuring if what he or she buys is truly conflict free, other than by demanding to see a piece of paper which may be completely valueless.

Fresh elements include the representation of the mercenaries, who are mostly whites, and who are presented as ruthless thugs, out to grab a fortune. The soldier of fortune Danny Archer (played by Leonardo DiCaprio), who is the central character, describes the role that his South African colonel has assumed: "You sell the rebels the weapons, and the government (of Sierra Leone) hires you when they use them." Everywhere in Africa – and beyond - the mercenaries profit from anarchy, even when it is they who create it.

The mercenary is a figure that has come into prominence particularly in Africa in the post-colonial era, with the collapse of a strong central authority in many of the former colonial territories. In the last thirty years or so, mercenaries have been involved in arms smuggling, stealing as well as the policing of Africa's rich natural resources, overthrowing governments, trying to take over countries – most recently, the example of Sir Mark Thatcher, son of law-and-order former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. I'll go over the details of the latter very quickly with you, because I think it has an even better tale than *Blood Diamond*.

The notorious Sir Mark, as you may recall, was arrested in Cape Town in 2004 for involvement in a plot to overthrow the government of Equatorial Guinea, and install a puppet dictator. To accomplish this, Sir Mark had invested money with Simon Mann, who ran a South African euphemistically called "security company", Executive

Outcomes. In fact, they were mercenaries, and Simon Mann (who had already grabbed a chunk of Angola's diamonds) was out to grab Equatorial Guinea's rich oil deposits.

Post-apartheid South Africa has very strict laws against mercenaries. When the plot was discovered, Thatcher was arrested, and was faced with a nine-year jail sentence in South Africa. His indulgent mother, Baroness Thatcher, put up bail of three hundred thousand dollars. After a plea bargain, Mark Thatcher got off with a fine of five hundred thousand dollars, thus avoiding time in an African jail. His less well-connected partner Simon Mann received a sentence of 34 years jail in a court in Equatorial Guinea. Mark Thatcher was expelled from South Africa, and may not even travel to the United States, for earlier shady dealings.

The problem is, the Thatcher story has what passes in Africa for a happy ending, and that is not the usual outcome. Mercenaries – the “dogs of war” – continue to create mayhem throughout sub-Saharan Africa. And they are now the second-largest alien force in Iraq; everywhere they go, they are outside any law. So their depiction in *Blood Diamond* is certainly close to accurate. For mercenaries, Africa is an immense playground, where force is the only law.

The spotlight that *Blood Diamond* directs onto the rogue diamond company Van derKaa, is a novelty, but one that is a diversion. The Van derKaa company is described in the words of the central character Danny Archer: “Technically speaking they are not financing the war, but they're creating a situation where it pays to keep it going”. The Van derKaa company does this by buying the conflict diamonds to keep them from flooding the market, in this way offering a market to the rebels who rely on the diamonds to finance their rebellion, and at the same time building up their own stock of diamonds to be released at company discretion when prices are higher.

So a fictitious company is the villain of the piece, thus avoiding all discussion of the role of the De Beers cartel, and also thereby probably avoiding a lawsuit. There is even a whitewashing of De Beers when, at the end, an international gathering hears these words:

“The natural resources of a country are the sovereign property of its people, they are not ours to steal or exploit in the name of our comfort or our corruption or our consumerism. . . .” Whitewashing, because this pious utterance takes place in what appears to be De Beers headquarters in Kimberley, so the speaker who intones it may even be supposed to be a De Beers representative. De Beers, after all, played the major role in drafting the Kimberley Process, which mandates the international certification of diamonds. This was not pure philanthropy: De Beers – precisely like the fictitious Van derKaap company – has everything to gain by keeping conflict diamonds off the market.

Let me return at the end to an observation with which I began, about the amorality of diamonds. The question that is never raised is, To whom does the blood diamond of the film’s title rightfully belong? Does it belong to the government of Sierra Leone? It certainly doesn’t belong to the rebels. Does it belong to De Beers, which had an agreement with the government of Sierra Leone on diamonds? Hardly. De Beers is never mentioned. It clearly should not belong to the mercenaries, not even to Danny Archer, who kills and dies for it.

In the film’s comforting ethical universe, it belongs to the African Solomon Vandy, who steals (liberates?) it from the rebels, who are themselves thieves, and goes through immense trials on its behalf. His ownership is established by his courage – as ever, diamonds are won by the bold and the brave; by his laudable intentions – he wants to use it for the good of his family; and because – and this is absolutely new in cinema, I believe – he is an African. Remember the pious, and in the real world always ignored, proclamation from the Kimberley scene in *Blood Diamond*: “The natural resources of a country are the sovereign property of its people. . . .”

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