

**Mythic Appetites: *The Last King of Scotland's* Heart of Darkness
In the Jubilee Year of African Independence**

by
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This essay provides a cultural-historical analysis of the fictional biopic, *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), starring acclaimed African American actor Forest Whitaker—who won an Oscar for his portrayal of Ugandan dictator Idi Amin. I examine how the Hollywood film industry continually feeds America's appetite for mythic stories set in exotic locales (in this case, Africa during the heady 1970s) while recycling narratives that reinforce its own "heart of darkness." Rather than summoning cultural-historical themes that educate, agitate, or illuminate the rich complexities of Afro-Diasporic peoples while exploding the myth of Africa as a site for exorcizing shame, fear and loathing, the film instead reinforces time-worn themes of an African madman who acclaims Western sensibilities (Amin extols the virtues of the Scottish people, and strikes up a problematic friendship with a Scottish physician) while slaughtering his own kinsmen in fits of paranoia. The fictional storyline, based on a novel, attempts to create multi-dimensional characterizations of Amin and the Ugandan people, while presenting the Scottish physician as the conscience of the world. We must ask, however, what is the significance of this bloody dictator's pseudo-biography airing in 2006—the year before Ghana, the first African colony to achieve independence, prepared to celebrate fifty years of nationhood?

Perhaps it's because there's a huge audience, and appetite, for such stories set in Africa, as Whitaker himself proclaimed in an interview: "There is a deep, mythical quality sometimes to the stories... They become like some mythic parable somebody would tell

or write in some book that children would read in a thousand years from now” (Germain 2006). But Whitaker was concerned with stories about African liberators such as Stephen Biko or Nelson Mandela, not Idi Amin, and there’s the rub: Why can’t Hollywood tell stories that are full of the richness and complexities of African liberation and independence that reflect global interactions, collaborations and transnational implications?

A film is not a history book, one might argue, and *Last King of Scotland* is a fictionalized story, not “real” history—but that’s not going to slake Hollywood’s appetite for mythic tragedy set in exotic Africa of the late-twentieth century. For that matter, *Last King* offers easy vindication for why Western intervention, and the thrust for “enlightenment,” are still forced on countries around the world, and that reality sits well within the hearts and minds of Western moviegoers. That reality is also very marketable.

According to Gabriel (1995) the purpose of Hollywood films is, first and foremost, to produce entertainment that will turn a profit. Movie genres—action, horror, romance, spectacle, mystery, “Westerns,” and thrillers—can organize audiences into consuming publics from which to maximize profits. Such Hollywood genres are particularly suited for films set in Africa because they can be marketed to viewers who will never set foot there. As Cameron (1994) notes, authenticity in such films is a manufactured commodity designed to buttress elements of action, plot, character and myth. If that’s all *The Last King of Scotland* represents then its appeal to certain audiences would be understandable, but there was a disproportionate receptiveness that exceeded all expectations—so much so that Whitaker was quickly promoted as an Oscar candidate, and won “Best Actor” the month before Ghana launched its jubilee year of independence.

The stunning success of *Last King* on global screens during the fiftieth year of African independence perhaps represents a paradigm shift in how films “based on real events” can affect audiences’ geopolitical sensibilities—and vice-versa. In many ways, the narrative logic of *Last King* appears to have attracted audiences seeking comprehension of a post-Cold War reality. But *Last King* also does something more: it propels a cultural ethos resurrected from the days of colonialism and empire, while updating twenty-first century impulses of Western imperialists (and former empires such as Great Britain) seeking justification for intervention around the world.

African nations, despite some fifty years of independence, are depicted as frontiers of the “wild-wild West” still in need of discipline and military intervention by Western authorities. In reality, Ghana—the first African colony to achieve independence—represented the epitome of African resistance to colonial and post-colonial oppression, but its continued political and economic problems typified all that has gone wrong in African countries since the age of independence. It’s a difficult story, but one which foregrounds Western collusion with unstable political regimes over five decades. This story, in fact, has yet to be told on film. Uganda, by contrast, is presented on film as a warped parody of Africans struggling for modernity and power—the most probable result of African despotism and nationalist tyranny arising out of native incompetence, brutality, or madness. This story is not unrelated to the British subversion and neocolonial meddling which brought the “monster” Amin to power in the first place.

Last King of Scotland, therefore, provides a unique vehicle for comprehending ways in which imperialism on film reinscribes powerful themes of the past, while setting the stage for new empires of the present. It’s only a film—based on reality, as the story

goes—but it propels a powerful narrative audiences of today cannot resist. What’s at stake, if it’s only a film or popular adaptation of reality? “Struggles over meaning” in popular culture “are also struggles over resources,” as Lipsitz (1990) reminds us: “They arbitrate what is permitted and what is forbidden; they help determine who will be included and who will be excluded; they influence who gets to speak and who gets silenced” (632). And in the realm of postcolonial filmic reality, dictators, criminals, smugglers and madmen get center stage while liberators and revolutionaries are silenced, and resources made scarce for films highlighting freedom and independence instead of paternalism and dependence. (Martin 1995).

Last King updates the spectacle of Hollywood in Africa, and recycles imperialist cultural logics to fit a changing, neoconservative post-Cold War reality. The questions of empire, intervention, and humanitarian assistance are elided, conflicted, and contradictory—giving rise to the political-cultural intrigue that drives *Last King*’s plotline, and which confounds attempts to combine history, biography and filmic reality. *Last King* appears to deftly maneuver between these three aspects under the guise of a traditional heart of darkness genre. It seems to attack British imperialism, while raising disturbing questions about post-independence Africa—but, as I shall demonstrate later, rather than refuting imperialist interventions, it instead provides rationale for using empire to settle old scores and align new political configurations.

In addition, rather than simply reinvigorating Joseph Conrad’s heart of darkness storyline (Marlow, a Britisher, goes to Africa in search of the elusive Kurtz who has left civilization behind and gone native/savage), *Last King* focuses on a Scotsman who goes to Africa and discovers the eccentric, charismatic, but violent Idi Amin—a fellow post-

colonial subject who shares his distaste for the meddling British imperialists. The film updates the story with twentieth-century protagonists challenging neocolonialism.

Further, by casting an American Black actor as Idi Amin, *Last King* raises unsettling issues about Black identity, Afro-Diasporic sentiment, and racial ventriloquism that harks back to Hollywood's days of Blackface minstrelsy—only this time portrayed by an African American actor (Saxton 1990). The need to create an international film exploring issues of British imperialism, African independence, and what might be called Afro-Diasporic identification, help create a cultural product heralded as “The Emperor Jones in Africa”—linking *Last King* with the 1920s Eugene O'Neill play which starred Paul Robeson as a savage Caribbean dictator. The resurrection of racial regimes to unite a fictive white imaginary through film is a daunting yet still powerful project, as Robinson (2007) explored in his research on films in pre-World War II America. He provides compelling evidence of the utility of film as a venue for bolstering regimes of race before 1945 and the modern quest for African Independence. In this context *Last King of Scotland* is a test case for revitalizing race concerns against the backdrop of post-Cold War neoconservatism. These thematic elements—postcolonial subjectivity and global Afro-Diasporic identification in the neocon moment—are major concerns that this essay will address.

I will also compare the narrative devices of *Last King* with traditional “Hollywood in Africa” literary and cultural genres (particularly Conrad's “Heart of Darkness”—an obvious choice), assessing how African American actors such as Whitaker, Paul Robeson and Charles Gilpin before him portrayed savage Black men on the international stage.

Finally, I will review the historical significance of African independence, particularly the story of Kwame Nkrumah and Ghana—how Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanist struggle against Western imperialism represents a complex narrative of Afro-Diasporic freedom and the problematic quest for leadership in postcolonial Africa. While Nkrumah was a popular leader who became increasingly paranoid and autocratic, he did not slaughter his people, and was ultimately deposed by a CIA-inspired coup (Rahman 2007). By assessing how Hollywood-driven cultural-historical themes obscure the obvious richness and complexity of postcolonial Africa, this essay will present a paradigm for evaluating African-centered films that can explode the tragic/mythic cycle of stories currently en vogue and on screen.

My analysis builds on the work of such theorists as Cameron (1994), whose history of filmic archetypes and the imperialist imaginary of Africa contextualizes much of what follows; the critical analyses of Shohat and Stam (1994) in their far-reaching dissection of Eurocentrism and its continued influence on filmic and cultural production; the exposition of blackface minstrelsy discussed by Saxton (1990), Chude-Sokei (2006), Robinson (2007), and others; and my own cultural-historical readings of filmic narrative in the age of neoconservatism, and the continued salience of dual consciousness and double articulation as advanced by Du Bois (1903) and Massey (1994).

“Eighty Percent Fiction...”—Dictators & Liberators in the Jubilee Year of African Independence

In a crucial scene from *The Last King of Scotland*, one of Idi Amin’s wives has an affair with a white Scotsman, gets pregnant, and is subsequently killed, hacked to pieces, and then has her limbs sewn back onto her fractured body (the arms are sewn where the

legs should go, the legs sewn onto the shoulders, etc.), creating a very gruesome visual montage—one that lingers in the mind long after the film is over. But the scene is emblematic of both the success and the failure of the film as fictionalized reality. As Whitaker himself discusses in one of the “behind-the-scenes” interviews appearing on *The Last King of Scotland* DVD, the scene was contrived, and plays fast and loose with the facts: 1) One of Idi Amin’s wives *did* have an affair, but not with a white man; 2) She was brutally hacked to death but under different circumstances, not as the film depicted it; and 3) Her limbs were sewn back onto her body correctly, so that it could be dressed for burial—not as a grotesque reassemblage.

So, if this film was “inspired by true events,” then why were these changes made in the storyline, and to what effect? This film, and this scene, typifies what happens when Africa is depicted by Hollywood—it represents a type of reality, but it is a gruesome, distorted one, much like the body of Amin’s late wife; and one must ask: “Why is it necessary to hack off pieces of African reality and stitch them back together into grotesque mosaics?” In many ways, this *reassemblage* demonstrates how Hollywood’s sense of history is used to reinforce mass conceptions of Africa. In fact, the scriptwriters and film producers can be well-intentioned—it doesn’t matter; the story still has to be adjusted to fit Western expectations, as noted by Giles Foden, the author of the novel on which the film is based.

Foden, who conducted extensive interviews with Ugandans familiar with Amin, said his novel “was eighty percent fiction, but 100 percent the truth!” (*Last King* DVD). The story is more important than the facts, but how do the facts of postcolonial independence in Africa wind up on the screen, whetting appetites for fictionalized

savagery, madness, and Western predilections to intervene? In many ways, the recent slew of films on Africa provides contradictory means of interpreting history and myths on the dark continent. As Cameron (1994) noted, even though films on Africa have historically reflected literary constructions of myths masquerading as the truth, moviegoers are willing to accept these mythic visions as authentic, particularly when they provide comforting distance between savage Africa and themselves. In recent years, his observation has been validated, and films produced during this jubilee period of African independence are no exception.

The story of independence has its own mythic arc (a type of Third World romanticism of 1960s revolutionary movements, not only in Africa but in Latin America and Asia), competing with the more prevalent mythos of reinscribed savagery dooming such “revolutionary” movements to failure. Even as Hollywood strove to capitalize on the 1960s and ’70s as an era of social and political change, films on Africa rarely promoted stories that challenged the savage paradigm. *Cry Freedom* (1987), *A Dry White Season* (1989), and *Cry the Beloved Country* (1995) were notable exceptions, according to Cameron—perhaps because of their focus on the apartheid regime. Their limited success depended upon their catering to the “dominant,” Eurocentric audience:

The Eurocentrism of audiences can ... inflect cinematic production. Here the dominant audience, whose ideological assumptions must be respected if a film is to be successful, or even made at all, exerts a kind of indirect hegemony. ‘Universal’ becomes a codeword for palatable to the Western spectator as the ‘spoiled child’ of the apparatus. [These films] betray traces of ‘representational adjustments’ as the

values of radical liberation struggle are watered down for a predominantly liberal American audience (Shohat and Stam 1994, 186-187).

As the twentieth century ended, and George W. Bush rose to prominence through his war on terrorism, predominantly liberal American audiences had to compete with neoconservative trends in culture and politics. Still, in terms of history and popular culture, 2006-07 was a big year for audiences interested in Africa. Ghana kicked off fifty years of independence and major film studios released several movies set on the African continent, exploring themes ranging from civil war and blood diamonds, gun-running and Western mercenaries, exploring the thug world of a South African “tsotsi,” and bringing to life one of Africa’s most notorious figures: Idi Amin.

No one was surprised to see Whitaker nominated for an Oscar for his portrayal of Amin, or that the film was embraced and widely distributed after Whitaker’s selection as best actor. But what was rather surprising was how Hollywood regurgitated the tired storyline of African savagery and postcolonial thuggery mediated through the eyes of a Western protagonist of questionable moral background. As detailed by Cameron (1994) there is a long history of Hollywood portraying flawed Africans who are almost always balanced by European/American actors who contemplate the absurdity of the human condition—leaving observers free to wash their hands of the whole of Africa. Paraphrasing Leonardo DiCaprio’s character in *Blood Diamond*, in Africa normal rules don’t apply: “‘Ah, T.I.A.—This Is Africa’—what can one do?” while failing to acknowledge his own sordid involvement in the violent imaginary of Africa.

In assessing “Hollywood films” I’m using a loose definition that includes film productions that are international in scope but which follow the Hollywood film genre:

large-scale productions and distribution networks, Americo-centric themes, high production values and high-tech special effects, explosions, gadgetry or chase scenes, and cast members who play to an audience that is decidedly Western, or reflective of Western sensibilities (Shohat and Stam 1994). *Last King of Scotland* is a co-production between U.S. and British film companies but uses Hollywood conventions to propel its story.

Recent films such as *Blood Diamond*, *The Lord of War* (with Nicholas Cage as an arms smuggler), and *Shooter* (featuring “Marky Mark” Wahlberg as a paid assassin who uncovers a plot to kill an African leader), each depend upon the centrality of political turmoil in Africa. Hollywood fails to contextualize the politics behind the turmoil, but at least these films—for better or worse—acknowledge the continuing importance of Africa in regional and world affairs. Africa is once again on everyone’s political radar screen and the cinematic silver screen, and I suggest that the changing geopolitical arena is part of the reason—but there’s more.

Producers recognize Africa as a locale that global audiences find irresistible, exotic, and disturbing. Other parts of the world are developing, and their portrayal in Hollywood films seems to be evolving as well—I’m thinking of Mira Nair’s wonderful films which bridge the divide between Bollywood and Hollywood, with full-bodied cultural vehicles set in India and targeted to Western and Asian-diaspora markets. Nair’s *Mississippi Masala* (1991), for example, incorporates political history and transnational concerns to help illuminate an unlikely romance between an African American (Denzel Washington) and an African immigrant (Sarita Choudhury) from Uganda. The immigrant happens to be of East Indian heritage, and she—along with her family—were expelled by Idi Amin. In contrast, Hollywood’s treatment of African peoples is still generally one-dimensional:

Africans are objects of history and Western intrigue; they provide the backdrop for romance or heroic conflict between Western protagonists; or they appear as savage combatants or tribal victims fated to genocidal destruction (Cameron 1994).

I would argue that the current trend was set in motion by *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), which is framed as a problematic story of genocide and the bravery of a single man. The film proved that a sizeable audience exists for stories that transport us to beautiful, exotic, but wild and dangerous Africa. The journey is designed to uncover the horrors, challenges, and demonstrations of humanity's evil and reluctance to embrace goodness. *Hotel Rwanda* is a romance story between African protagonists, but it is also a horror story. It provides catharsis for the horrors of mankind as well as the ability of goodness to triumph if *individuals* only take a stand. The context of individual bravery is that evil succeeds because good people *fail* to act. Clearly, the moral of the story is targeted to Western audiences and strokes the rugged individualist tendencies within the American ethos. This romance/horror film prepares the way for other films that ultimately resurrect imperialist-colonial stories recycled for the current age—the heart of darkness genre is just one of these paradigms. In the next section, I will explain why.

White Voyeurism & Consuming Publics

[You whites think]: 'I will go to Africa to see the natives!' We are not a game! We are real!

—Idi Amin speaking to Nick Garrigan, *The Last King of Scotland*

In many ways, *Hotel Rwanda* and *Constant Gardener* (2005)—which shifts the romantic prism from African characters to flawed Anglo protagonists while making a stirring argument against unscrupulous AIDS experimentation by pharmaceutical companies in Africa—clearly connect with audiences that might be described as post-Civil

Rights viewers earnestly concerned with righting wrongs manifested by postcolonial imperialists of the modern age. These viewers see themselves as politically progressive (or perhaps just post-modern!), committed to anti-racism, or who affirmed their solidarity to independence struggles by standing against apartheid, against greedy corporations who exploited colonial Africa, and who now feel a level of responsibility for what happens on the continent today.

These viewers want to *do* something, and they want to support films that purport to educate, activate and—in Paolo Freire’s (1970) terms—“consciencize” and mobilize a collective to change the world. The movie industry does not differentiate, however, between conscientious viewers and those who are simply voyeurs—both audiences can be mobilized at the same time to purchase tickets and watch the latest depiction of Africa on film. If they are motivated by humanitarian impulses, so much the better, because a new level of films can be developed to tap this sentiment. I believe Hollywood will produce more films of the “humanitarian” variety, but which focus on the fictive narrative of Islam and Orientalism, as typified by *Traitor* (2008), starring Don Cheadle as a “rogue” agent, or George Clooney’s *Syriana* (2005)—but that’s a topic for another book: Peter J. Bloom (2008) develops this idea as part of his analysis of French colonial documentaries.

And that’s where *The Last King of Scotland* fits in. It investigates the horrors and madness of an African tyrant, unleashed in 1970s postcolonial Uganda. It portrays the quirky relationship between a happy-go-lucky Scottish physician who serendipitously is befriended by Idi Amin, and it recycles a heart of darkness vs. civilizing Western modernity theme with intriguing twists that make it suitable for the twenty-first century.

The film is lusciously photographed, the soundtrack and imagery of Uganda and its people are quite beautiful and engaging, and the comic relationship between Amin and his newfound physician (the fictional Dr. Nicholas Garrigan) is both amusing and disturbing. It is disturbing because of the atrocities that we know are occurring just off-screen. It is also problematic because of its depiction of African culture and African peoples as being essentially superstitious and violent, inherently incapable of self-rule. The villagers are depicted as beholden to witchdoctors or fanatical political leaders, while European doctors and diplomats labor as saints struggling to save the people from a savage destiny. The saintly European physicians working in the villages are reminiscent of those depicted in *The Nun's Story* (1959)—also based on a “true” story, which shows how enduring the stereotypes and myths remain. The growing violence of Amin’s regime is seemingly rationalized by Garrigan: “This is Africa—you must meet violence with violence, or you’re dead!” But it is not clear how or why violence is necessary or endemic, except that Amin is understood to be violently unstable because of his increasing paranoia. As the promotional trailer declares, he is “Charming, Magnetic, Murderous...”

We are drawn to the story by the careful attention to character development and slow uncovering of human frailty and flaws of character that will ultimately lead to tragedy. Unlike *Hotel Rwanda*, however, which focuses on African American actor Don Cheadle’s portrayal of Rwandan hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina, who saves the lives of more than 900 ethnic Tutsi during the 1994 genocidal campaign by Hutu extremists, *The Last King of Scotland* is seen through the eyes of the Scottish physician, who recounts the story of growing enamored with Amin before ultimately discovering the “horror” beneath the dictator’s veneer of eccentric male camaraderie, buffoonery, and brutality.

This “Heart of Darkness” theme (popularized by Conrad in his early-20th century novel) projects the “Imperialist Gaze” that fascinates both European and American audiences. *Last King of Scotland*, similarly, is based on a novel, but this book interweaves historical information derived from interviews with Ugandan residents, British officials, mercenaries, and one of Amin’s ex-wives. The *Last King* novel is successful because readers identify with Garrigan as he comes to the painful realization that Amin is a likeable but very dangerous madman. The 2006 movie is successful because Amin and Garrigan are an unlikely pair of postcolonial subjects, set in Africa on the brink of disaster, and because the old clichés of African incompetence, brutality and tragicomedy set in exotic time/space are still powerful. Ironically, the director, Kevin Macdonald, insisted that the film was “simply about a Scotsman and a Ugandan,” and not about the politics of Uganda, neocolonialism, or the legacy of British imperialism. There are numerous websites which explain how Macdonald—a documentary filmmaker—became enraptured with the novel and with the actors who became the stars of his film. In particular, Macdonald rejected the idea that there was any heart of darkness theme, and instead said he wanted to portray a more human side to Amin:

They (Ugandans) didn’t want a two-dimensional image of Amin presented... this semi-mythical figure who was a big star of the media, in a way, in the mid-Seventies. He was always seen as the man who ate his archbishop’s liver and the man who was a cannibal and the man who tortured and killed so many people. But there was another side to him. There was an optimistic side of the man, who is trying to do something good for his country, before he was brought low by his own

character flaws and by his paranoia. So the only concern was to show a rounded human being (Rebort 2006).

Macdonald's attempt to humanize Amin quite possibly may have succeeded if he had developed the storyline focusing on Amin's Ugandan supporters, but instead he poses a fictional character—Garrigan—who journeys “up the river” to discover the horror within not only Amin, but within himself as well. In an early scene, Garrigan sits in his room in Scotland, and—bored out of his mind—spins a globe, points his finger, and declares “First place I land, I go....” to select a country for adventure. Ironically, the first country he chooses at random is Canada; after a pause he spins the globe again, and selects Uganda—which is a humorous dig at British imperialism, and a commentary on this white Scotsman who evidently felt that Canada could not provide much adventure. In the next scene, he disembarks in Uganda, and begins his quest into deepest, darkest Africa where he uncovers both the seductive attraction and the danger of power and privilege under Amin's regime.

This Heart of Darkness paradigm—traveling to Africa to uncover the savage evil which lurks within the heart of mankind, held in check by Western civilization—has enduring appeal to Westerners and imperialist voyeurs across the globe and it is, quite simply, a powerful trope central to numerous Hollywood films (Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*, set in the jungles of Viet Nam, being one of the most successful of this genre).

This is not to say that the tragedy of postcolonial Africa is solely due to imperialist meddling from Westerners. Idi Amin was not a misunderstood African nationalist who was punished by the West because he dared to stand up to Britain and Western colonialists—he was put into power by the British who helped overthrow the government of Milton Obote, who had grown increasingly independent and resistant to British economic priorities.

Amin, installed after a military coup, demonstrated he understood the power of violence and coercion all too well. In real life and in the film, Amin was erratic and unpredictable, which was why the British diplomats portrayed in *Last King of Scotland* tried to recruit Garrigan to spy on Amin, and later, to attempt to poison him. The diplomats first try to build Anglo solidarity with Garrigan, but they are rejected. Garrigan, like Amin, has nothing but disgust and contempt for the meddling British: “I’m not British,” he exclaims at one point. “I’m Scottish!” As a victim of British imperialism, he thinks his postcolonial status exempts him from Western excess, but his own behavior in Uganda (trying to seduce the wife of a friend, sleeping with Amin’s wife, and dismissing allegations of Amin’s political assassinations while enjoying luxury and gifts from Amin) betrays his own moral bankruptcy.

Later, when he realizes that Amin will never let him leave Uganda, he pitifully begs the British to help him, but the stakes have been raised. “You’re his white monkey! You must earn your passage...” the lead diplomat/spy declares, and suggests that Garrigan poison Amin in exchange for help. This scenario allows viewers to consider that the British colonialists may have been bad, but Amin’s neocolonialist thuggery is worse—viewers might ask: Can Western intervention through assassination of a brutal dictator be justified?

The Oedipal conflict between Amin and Garrigan also figures prominently in the drama. Garrigan leaves his father in Scotland and becomes like a son to Amin, who boasts: “I am the father of this nation!” In response, Garrigan blurts: “You are a child! That’s what makes you so f---ing scary!” This intriguing mix of psychological, literary and filmic conflict perhaps adds to the film’s appeal. Indeed, one of the film’s strengths is the manner in which it combines genres: It is a “Cowboys in Africa Western”—there are

numerous references to American cowboy culture (even at one point, Amin dresses up in cowboy hat, rides a horse and lassoes a member of his cabinet; later, semi-nude African women dressed in cowboy hats and boots dance and gyrate around a fire while distorted rock guitar music wails on the soundtrack); and the film constantly juxtaposes primitive vs. modern life, using several visual cues and plot sequences highlighting the collision of white and black worlds. The film perhaps serves as a cautionary tale of the corrupting influence of Western culture and modernity—that Africans were simply not ready for independence—but it also questions the motives of Western protagonists as well.

This story could have been told through the eyes of the Ugandan people, however, who grew fearful and distrustful of him; instead, Garrigan’s fixation on power, influence, and intrigue in exotic Africa provide the basis for a “thriller”—as asserted by the filmmaker, Macdonald—in which viewers sit on the edge of their seats hoping to see if Garrigan will succeed in either poisoning Amin or escaping the Ugandan’s deadly grip.

And, in accepting that this thriller film is driven by the questionable motives of a Western protagonist, viewers come to realize that Hollywood has chosen the easy way out again, instead of following the example posed by *Hotel Rwanda* (also “based on true events” rearranged to affect Western sensibilities), and striving to tell the story through African eyes. *Hotel Rwanda* demonstrated that moviegoers will pay to watch sensitive, complex portrayals of African humanity in the midst of horrific circumstances and political turmoil. The film demonstrates that Hollywood could afford new paradigms that are not based on humanity’s heart of darkness. Producers and scriptwriters wouldn’t even have to throw out all the old clichés—they could still produce romances, thrillers, or even “Westerns,” but not with European characters as the main protagonists. In the final section

I will suggest a new African-centered filmic paradigm for Hollywood, but first I'd like to finish discussing the strange appeal of *Last King*, and why it was embraced by the Academy Awards, to say nothing of European readers and filmgoers who loved the novel on which the film is based.

Last King is attractive because it references so many genres: in addition to being a Western with a heart of darkness theme, it is also an adventure/travelogue film; it is a male-bonding film with Oedipal conflicts (Cameron 1994); it is a horror movie, with intimations of the human nature of monstrous evil; and it is, in the words of the filmmaker, a “thriller” with spy intrigue and future indications of an anti-terrorist genre—finding justification for interventions by the West. There is much to be gained by enfolding these different genres into one movie.

First, there is the utility of continually uncovering the Imperialist “heart of darkness”—the film and the novel provide justification for placing Africa in a quarantine while denying economic trade until its rulers prove themselves amenable to democracy (however one defines that!)

Second, there's the colonial/imperial logic that savage Africa can only be civilized under the auspices of Western authorities (the World Bank, the United Nations, if not direct intervention by the last superpower—the United States).

Third, there is the collective colonial guilt that must be continually assuaged for past wrongdoing. One would think that colonial guilt would dissipate after several decades, but Western relations with the rest of the world are still closely tied to the color line, which has yet to be eroded, and so, the West vs. The Rest dialectic still produces conflict, shame, and remorse for continued asymmetrical power relations (Gabriel 1995).

And lastly, such films provide justification for going after “madmen” in other parts of the world, just as Saddam Hussein was removed from power through the pre-emptive U.S. military invasion of Iraq. The post-911 geopolitical and discursive landscape reflects post-Cold War aesthetics that affirmed and rationalized Bush-Cheney’s “Neo-con” political agenda—just as the Western/Frontier trope of the Last Cold War Cowboy, Ronald Reagan, helped cement and rationalize his heroic struggle against the “Evil Empire” (Russia and Communism).

By the end of the film, most viewers are uncomfortable with Garrigan’s self-righteous indignation, and they find it nearly impossible to admire Amin despite Forest Whitaker’s noble effort to portray his comic, affable attributes. Ultimately, Whitaker’s attempt to humanize Amin is undermined by his blackface make-up; even though he has terrific vocal coaching, is effective in his mannerisms and jocular vitality, and embodies Amin’s explosive temper exceptionally well.

Why, then, did the film need an African American in blackface to play Amin? Whitaker’s portrayal was sincere—he worked hard to capture Amin’s crowd appeal and physicality, while demonstrating why he ruled for nearly a decade. On a certain level, *Last King* is not just about imperialism, it is part minstrel show and racial ventriloquism as well. Whitaker’s recognizable star appeal lends credence to an otherwise mundane heart of darkness narrative. A native African *could* have played the role, but the film’s depiction of Amin as an eccentric buffoon echoes black caricatures from nineteenth-century American theater and early twentieth-century film (Chude-Sokei 2006; Stewart 1998).

For example, Charles Gilpin and Paul Robeson, talented Black actors from the 1920s, were both cast in Eugene O’Neill’s play “The Emperor Jones,” based on Haiti’s

President Sam, a bloody tyrant who briefly held power in 1915 (Delson 2008). “Emperor Jones” relies on themes from an early imperialist project: A blood-thirsty Black tyrant (Brutus Jones) destroys a fledgling Black republic while ruling with superstition and brutality over his countrymen. Gilpin originated the role in the 1920s, and fought with O’Neill over the stereotypical rendering of Jones. Although he did not have to put on blackface for the role (a common-enough practice during the early days of theatre and Hollywood), he bitterly resisted the buffoonery inherent in the Emperor Jones character.

Robeson took over the stage play after O’Neill fired Gilpin, and later portrayed Emperor Jones on film. He felt he could accommodate the character’s childish behavior and evince a more believable, complex figure. Audiences, however, disagreed whether Brutus Jones was anything other than a gross caricature of a flawed Black leader. Still, Robeson’s portrayal helped catapult him to international fame, and he reprised the role on tour in Europe during the 1930s (Delson 2008; Stewart 1998; Dorinson and Pencak 2002).

Acknowledging the continuing appeal of O’Neill’s play, the bookjacket for the 1998 *Last King of Scotland* novel describes the Idi Amin story as an “*Emperor Jones in Africa*,” while the 2006 film lures audiences anticipating Whitaker’s genius at portraying powerful Black icons—including those with questionable pedigree. African savagery is one thing, but combined with eccentric buffoonery and minstrel blackface, it must have seemed irresistible to film producers—such stereotypical caricatures have proven successful in attracting viewers to Hollywood movies. According to Chude-Sokei, one of the legacies of minstrelsy and racial ventriloquism is that it is also a recognizable vehicle for African American actors to scaffold their relationship within the African diaspora while

allowing others to measure their own status within society. In writing about the leading minstrel performer at the turn of the century, Bert Williams, Chude-Sokei notes:

For this comedic performer, blackface masquerade was as much a means of negotiating relationships between and among diaspora blacks in Harlem as it was an attempt to erase the internationally projected racist fiction of the ‘stage Negro’ (or ‘darky’) from within the conventions of popular performance, from behind a mask produced and maintained by competitive projections and denials of black subjectivity. ... Williams’s minstrelsy maps out yet another pan-Africanist sensibility... (9).

It is interesting that Whitaker darkened his skin to get in character as an African leader, and that “blacking up” as Idi Amin perhaps aided the authentication process—as did putting on the uniform, or learning to speak Kiswahili. Also, the use of blackface provided an opportunity to embody an ironic deconstruction of the objectified racial subject.

Blackface buffoonery subordinates Black humanity, but it also allows the performer to mediate between the audience and the character. In the nineteenth century, the purpose of minstrelsy was to defuse serious matters without denying them (Saxton 1990, 173).

“Blackface minstrelsy was ‘timeless,’ it was close to nature; it created a sense of ‘what was left behind...’” In many ways blackface allowed Whitaker to critique perceptions of Africans, and to put his own spin on African-Diasporic identity. In a way, he became “more African than the Africans.” He never tried to imitate Amin directly, but to capture the essence of a powerful African leader who may have been deranged or paranoid because of the political conflicts of the era.

Is blackface minstrelsy a useful way to assess Whitaker's performance? According to Saxton, in addition to evoking a sense of the "timeless," minstrelsy succeeded because it exploited and suppressed African elements even as it borrowed from African culture—rhythms, dance patterns, music, language, etc., that were transformed by nineteenth century Americans. Above all, minstrelsy was always political—it provided a rationale for defending slavery and, later, Jim Crow (Saxton 170). In *Last King*, Whitaker's blackfaced, costumed figure of Amin builds on well-worn media caricatures of the dictator as madman, while constructing an Afro-Diasporic identification with Blackness that is deeply rooted in cultural idioms of Uganda and Africa in general—he learned Kiswahili, met with Ugandan families, familiarized himself with the country's history, and embodied an Africa that Blacks might recognize and learn from (*Last King* DVD).

But there's more to this minstrel show than meets the eye: clearly, Whitaker is a proven Hollywood star, and would draw audiences regardless of his performance or skintone. Whitaker appeared in Oliver Stone's Viet Nam epic *Platoon* (1986), portrayed troubled jazz artist Charlie Parker in *Bird* (1988), a film directed by Clint Eastwood, came to fame as a Black Britisher captured as a hostage by the IRA in *The Crying Game* (1992), and later directed the popular film *Waiting to Exhale* (1995). Having Whitaker's name on the marquee helped ensure that U.S. audiences would give *Last King* a shot—something that would not be guaranteed if a more capable African actor held the title role. So, in some ways, the Hollywood production opened the door for Whitaker to perform as an African, and, if Chude-Sokei's thesis holds up, allowed Whitaker to extend the legacy of an "emergent diaspora sensibility that was in fact dependent on artifice, impersonation..." (13)—ideas that were earlier embraced by Robeson, who insisted on playing a flawed role

because he felt he could humanize it. Whitaker, similarly, felt compelled to go to Africa, and to portray a more human side to an African leader:

I was given this unbelievable amazing opportunity as an African-American, because I'd never been to the African continent. To go there and... for it to be my job to understand what it's like to be African... (Guillén 2006).

But is this film about Africa? *The Last King of Scotland* is set in Africa, but it is about the heart of prototypical Westerners; to be exact, its success is an ironic commentary about the heart of darkness at the center of the Hollywood dream machine. Colonial nostalgia still sells tickets, and it sells even better if the audience can put themselves above the flawed characters and reflect upon what they can do *now* to combat evil and savagery that yet endures in the heart of men across the Atlantic. Africa is merely the backdrop. But it is an enduring backdrop, and for this reason, we have not seen the last of films such as *The Last King of Scotland*. But we can hope for better.

A Paradigm for Assessing African-Centered Films

...[T]his fine country... had lived up so well to the memory of Sir Seretse Khama, that great statesman, who had stood with such dignity on that night when the new flag had been unfurled and Botswana had come into existence. ...[Mma Ramotswa] had imagined that the world had been watching Botswana on that night and had shared the feelings of her people. Now she knew that this was never true, that nobody had been at all interested, except a few perhaps, and that the world had never paid much attention to places like Botswana, where everything went so well and where people did not squabble and fight... (McCall Smith 2006, 220).

What other stories can Hollywood tell about Africa? Stories that call upon narratives already provided by history—stories that require what Massey (1994) calls a “double-articulation” of time and space to connect us to the myriad of African nations with specific politics and distinct cultures. Stories that require an “extroverted history” of our global connection to Africa. Stories that embrace our collective “Afro-Diasporic” consciousness (Chude-Sokei 2006). There is richness that abounds in telling these complex stories, and in intelligently critiquing what’s being produced. But, as McCall Smith’s “No. 1 Ladies Detective Agency” investigator, Precious Ramotswe, declares, “the world had never paid much attention” to stories of Africa that did not focus on squabbling natives. There are alternatives to such stories, such as those contained in McCall Smith’s charming, nostalgic detective series set in Botswana. But nostalgia is not the only way to frame kind-hearted, complex stories about Africa; there are other ways, a few of which I will discuss below. [INSERT CHART]

1) Audiences can learn to cultivate their “Afro-Diasporic” consciousness—we all share a history of Africa’s destiny that was stolen and subverted through slavery, colonialism, and post-colonial consequences. It is a consciousness that can appeal both to Blacks and Whites, especially since the Human Genome Project provides proof that there is only one race of human beings. For Blacks: it will require not just another reworking of Alex Haley’s *Roots* story. I’m thinking here of Henry Louis Gates’s remarkable TV series (*African American Lives*) about the African roots of Black celebrities including Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg, Chris Tucker, Quincy Jones, Morgan Freeman, Don Cheadle, and Maya Angelou.

It's remarkable because it depends so much on an archaic view of race as biology and DNA, rather than race as culture, society, and politics. Even though genetic scientists have already concluded that *all* human beings can be traced back to Africa, and that all humans come from the same "tribe," Gates's TV series resurrects a genetic-based sense of racial essentialism. (At one point he declares, based on analysis of his DNA: "I'm fifty percent European... I guess I'm not Black!", and then goes to a pub in Ireland to tell its inhabitants that he has more in common with Ireland than with Africa). Based on genetic and historical analysis, everyone should recognize their African ancestors, not just the dark-skinned Americans who are the descendants of slaves.

2) For Blacks and Whites, an Afro-Diasporic consciousness would place us at the center of the storyline—not as heroes or villains, but as complex human beings who are capable of doing good or bad. This turns the heart of darkness inside out—there is no evil lurking within, held in check by civilization; no essential badness to humanity but the human capacity for making choices. Under what circumstances do we choose goodness to confront evil? Not just when it is in our interests to do so, but when the greater glory of mankind stands to benefit. These themes currently exist in Hollywood genre film—so why not articulate them in films set in Africa too?

3) What is required is a sense of "double articulation," or as W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) defined it: "dual consciousness"—to embrace the tension between being an American and African at the same time. (Du Bois wrote in the language of the time: the tension between being "Negro" and American). This is also partly what Massey (1994) called double articulation: to elevate the historical connections between local and global communities—that the interrelation between local and global is never static or essential; it

is always changing, being renegotiated through the *stories* that we tell about ourselves and about the geographical spaces and historical places we call home. And that's why it does matter what films say about the essential nature of mankind and civilization—particularly the mankind found in Africa in comparison to the rest of the world.

4) Finally, added to the above concerns, we must cultivate an “extroverted history” of ourselves (Massey 1994). One that goes beyond the formulaic themes that Hollywood loves to regurgitate over and over. It's okay to use specific genres to tell history, but we ourselves can afford histories that exceed conventions and racial regimes (Robinson 2007), especially those filmic regimes that reinforce the status quo and seemingly justify military intervention around the world.

Learning From History: “Forward Ever, Backward Never!”

As Malcolm X stated: “*Of all our studies, history is best prepared to reward our research.*” And in that regard, Hollywood wouldn't have to dig very far to uncover historical dramas to eclipse the tragicomic allure of films such as *Last King of Scotland*. How about the story of Ghana—the first African colony to achieve independence? Imagine: the story focuses on an African minister, Francis Kwame Nkrumah, touted at a young age as having almost mystical qualities; sent to the United States to be schooled; trained at an Historically Black College—Lincoln University; mentored by luminaries such as W.E.B. Du Bois, C.L.R. James, and George Padmore; sent to Britain for graduate schooling, where he joins other young African student leaders: Jomo Kenyatta, Nnamdi Azikiwe, and others who would return to Africa after World War II to lead their countries to independence—Idi Amin's story pales in comparison!

Nkrumah leads Gold Coast/Ghana to independence in March 1957, calls for African Unity and the destruction of colonialism and imperialism, and immediately develops a model for African independence: socially, politically, and economically. He also cultivates a charismatic, mystical following, but he is not a bloodthirsty tyrant who enriches himself by stealing his nation's wealth.

He was soon opposed by the West, and fell victim to Cold War intrigue. He was the subject of assassination attempts, and a CIA-backed coup removed him from office in 1966. This is a story we need to see on film! Perhaps starring Don Cheadle, with cameos by Denzel Washington as the African American ambassador, Franklin Williams, who conspires with White House staffer Bill Moyers (portrayed with customary arrogance by Tom Cruise) to orchestrate a coup to topple Nkrumah. What a story! There is romance (Nkrumah's wife could be played by *Hotel Rwanda*'s Sophie Okonedo), political intrigue, Cold War spy drama with "Mission Impossible" plotting and scheming, and a flawed, epic hero at the center of it all: Kwame Nkrumah. Why not tell this story? Why is Idi Amin more widely known than Nkrumah after fifty years of African Independence?

Is it because most observers think African governments after independence have gone awry? There are exceptions, but they do not receive much attention. The media often portray Africa as dominated by corrupt, incompetent rulers who immerse their countries in bloody conflict. Well, without historical context that might seem the reality, but there's another popular interpretation that Americans are familiar with, but fail to apply to independence dramas set in Africa. As the story goes: thirteen American colonies declare themselves independent of Britain in 1776, and four-score-and-seven-years later, in the 1860s, this fledgling country fights a bloody, fratricidal war—brother against brother—that

results in over 600,000 deaths in little over four years. Shortly after America's very own "Civil War"—fueled not by blood diamonds, but by slavery, cotton, and tobacco—for nearly 100 more years, U.S. rulers commit genocide against Indians, condone racial terrorism and violence against African Americans, and engage in ethnic cleansing and discrimination against every new immigrant group within their borders. In the story of African independence, it is called tribal or ethnic warfare of savage, uncivilized people, but applied to the popular history of U.S. independence, in today's terms we would call it "policing our borders." Clearly, independence dramas are tragic, bloody and mythic—Africa does not have a monopoly on post-independence savagery.

Where does that leave moviegoers? We go to the movies to be entertained, not to be politically educated, many will protest. And *Last King of Scotland* is simply about the relationship between a Ugandan and a Scotsman—according to the film's director. There's nothing political or historical about it, even though it is "inspired by true events." What's so entertaining about a "charming, murderous" dictator and his Scottish sidekick?

Perhaps viewers can be enticed by alternative stories to those currently en vogue. Perhaps producers and audiences will, together, exorcise Hollywood's heart of darkness, and insist upon stories that acknowledge humanity's Afro-Diasporic heritage; stories that rely upon extroverted histories exceeding narrow, localized or patriotic interests; and stories recognizing human beings with fully articulated identities that are complex and which extend beyond static racial boundaries. And ultimately, film audiences can learn to reject films based on guilt-tripping or racist projection of the evil within.

I think we can begin to do this, and begin to embrace heroic yet humble stories that can stir the heart, as typified by the novels of McCall Smith, whose ruminations on

Botswana and southern Africa cannot be ignored, even as they depict an idealized narrative of African culture and identity. It is a simple narrative that is complicated by modernity and a postcolonial world order that obscures the poignant realities of everyday Africans:

‘Will you go back to your village one day?’ she asked... And Mma Ramotswe replied, ‘I shall go back. Yes, one of these days I shall go back.’

And in her mind’s eye she saw the winding paths of Mochudi, and the cattle pens, and the small walled-off plot of ground where a modest stone bore the inscription [of her father] *Obed Ramotswe*. And beside the stone there were wild flowers growing, small flowers of such beauty and perfection that they broke the heart. They broke the heart (McCall Smith 2006, 227).

These are important contributions to the narratives that inscribe Africa, even as they threaten to replace savage themes with “picturesque pleasures,” as noted in an advertisement for McCall Smith’s 2008 novel:

Smith’s big-hearted Botswana stories... [allow] his readers to escape into a world of simple, picturesque pleasures and upstanding virtues (*The New York Times Book Review*, quoted inside book flap, McCall Smith 2008).

Still, as a narrative paradigm for Africa of the twenty-first century, it may influence the emergence of a new filmic language that can affirm humanity in the complex relationships of Africans grappling with the joys, challenges and contradictions of independence and postcolonialism. And compared to that, blackfaced imitations of bloody dictators will not appear to be so interesting after all.

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CHART

Paradigm for Assessing African-Centered Films

- Avoid “Heart of Darkness” Themes but Recognize Other Cinematic Tropes that Respect the Humanity of Afro-Diasporic Peoples
- Acknowledge Humanity’s Afro-Diasporic Heritage
- Tell “Extroverted Histories” Beyond Narrow Political Interests of “the West”
- Portray Fully Articulated Human Beings (not savage counterparts to “civilized” people)

LIST OF IMAGES:

WHITAKER IN BLACK-FACE AS IDI AMIN

PAUL ROBESON AS “EMPEROR JONES” (1933)

(Photograph by Edward Steichen)

IDI AMIN (FOREST WHITAKER) & NICHOLAS GARRIGAN (JAMES MCAVOY)

GHANA 50TH ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION

KWAME NKRUMAH

Pan-Africanist Leader, Ghana’s First Prime Minister