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MaryEllen Higgins, ed. *Hollywood's Africa after 1994.* Athens: Ohio University Press, 2012. vi + 274 pp. $28.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8214-2015-7.

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Hollywood's Difficult Life with Africa

In *The Onion*'s 2008 spoof titled "U.S. Shocked Andorra Not in Africa," a State Department official takes heat from a television journalist trying to get to the bottom of why the U.S. government sent Andorra three billion dollars in aid. The official, taking no guff, simply explains that the government assumed Andorra to be a "war-torn African region" in need of humanitarian help. A State Department map of Africa flashes on the screen. It shows four regions: Congo, Mumbambu, South Africa, and an unnamed area full of question marks. The official tells the journalist the State Department thought the unidentified region had to be Andorra. "An honest mistake," he says. "They are way across the ocean somewhere. Their lives must be very, very difficult."[1]

I like showing this clip in classes because as students roll with the puns they start to see that the absurdity of the story reflects an uncomfortable truth. Indeed, as survey after survey and study after study tell us, Americans in general do not know very much about Africa, African countries, or African peoples. This my students grasp. They enjoy being gently mocked about it. But very few of them, even after I have prodded them, appreciate the most cutting part of the satire: its mockery of the idea that the lives of Africans are very, very difficult, and that people in Africa surely need help from an external agent riding a white horse, perhaps *our* help.[2] This assumption is so commonplace, so thick in American culture, that challenging it requires more than anything *The Onion* could contrive. It requires hard thinking about our own biases. More important, it requires some of what most Americans acknowledge they do not have: actual knowledge of Africa.

Most of us have learned not to expect our students to have any inherent skepticism about the basket-case bias. Neediness has been Africa's central quality in American popular culture for generations. Students are like most Americans; they have bought the line that Africans are in a bad way, which only Americans, Canadians, Europeans, or Australians can fix. But why? Why have the media unremittingly portrayed Africa as the ultimate arena for do-gooders delivering their goods? Why have we and our cultural production industries not made any progress at all?

MaryEllen Higgins's edited volume *Hollywood's Africa after 1994* goes a long way to addressing continuity and change in popular culture depictions of Africa and Africans, especially in movies. Higgins's book is not so interested in rehashing well-worn stereotypes of Africa as a strange and dangerous place and Africans as unknowable primordial peoples. These images were blunt and bold in Hollywood movies of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s, and they have not entirely disappeared, but there is not much new to say about them. Rather, the main theme of this book and of each of the fifteen separate essays it contains is the various ways contemporary Hollywood productions have dusted off these hackneyed, dehumanizing imperial images and prettied and polished them into shiny post-apartheid, post-Rwandan genocide films where Africans have become human but outsiders still are required to save the day. In addressing this theme, the book excels. As is always the case in edited volumes, some of the essays are more successful or compelling than others, but on the whole, the book is full of insightful and smart observations about Hollywood's needs; filmgoers' assumed preferences; the way they feed off each other; and how the world, including but not only Africa, pays a price for it all.

Concentrating on the period since 1994, an era of burgeoning human rights advocacy, star-studded humanitarianism, new democracies, and armed interventions, Higgins and the other essayists really are asking whether the updated stereotypes and updated paternalism of today's Hollywood Africa is much different or any better than the Hollywood Africa of most of the twentieth cen-

tury. In Higgins's introduction and the chapters that follow, the authors mostly explore big-budget, big celebrity, and award-winning Hollywood movies, though a few chapters are about independent films and documentaries or integrate them into broader analyses that include Hollywood movies. The essayists concentrate largely on films that try to tell compelling and sympathetic stories about persons or peoples in Africa who have suffered dispossession, exploitation, disenfranchisement, or worse. Inevitably, and laudably I suppose, Hollywood films produced since 1994 have been more than willing to lay some of the blame–in some cases most or all of the blame–for this suffering on outsiders, particularly on colonialism. This is a kind of progress. Yet most of the films analyzed in the volume cannot seem to resist falling back on the assumption that the solutions to problems in Africa also will come from the likes of noble and dashing do-gooders from elsewhere.

These are human rights films, Higgins says, or they are billed overtly or indirectly as such. Hollywood productions such as *The Constant Gardener* (2005), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *The Last King of Scotland* (2006), *Lord of War* (2005), *Tears of the Sun* (2003), *Hotel Rwanda* (2004), *Black Hawk Down* (2001), and *District 9* (2009), and documentaries such as *Shake Hands with the Devil* (2004) and *The Devil Came on Horseback* (2007) are the work of filmmakers attempting to break with old stereotypes, trying to tell stories of postcolonial Africa in ways that lay bare inequities of power and wealth, trying to treat Africans as players in their own lives. They acknowledge, sometimes with a subtle nod, sometimes with heavy-handed moralizing, the complicity of outsiders in the recycling of African pain and travesty. These human rights-inspired films try to say something useful, important, and honest about the relationship between Africa and the West (or North), but they do not hold up, at least not for an entire film. The point of view, the voice, the narrative authority, the agency: it is all about outsiders, the hardships, desires, and needs of outsiders as they rush to the aid of Africa. The experiences of Africans in most of these films are there to be seen superficially, but African characters tend to be stuck in some half-realized netherworld: their lives on film are partial lives; they are stock; they lack nuance. Rather than live according to (or up against) the familial, societal, political, and economic logics of their place (as all real people do), they live to give meaning to their non-African interlocutors. Filmmakers seem to lack access to the fullness of African character potential, or perhaps they do not try to achieve it because they are certain their audiences do not want or will not understand it.

Hollywood's Africa does offer readers some important analyses of a few films that try to engage Africa in ways that expose Hollywood's dominant, but limiting, framing of Africa. *Ezra* (2007) is a bright contrast to *Blood Diamond*, though in the United States it tends to be shown in art houses and college campuses. And *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1995), *Dangerous Ground* (1997), *Red Dust* (2004), *Catch a Fire* (2006), and *Invictus* (2009) manage to portray South Africa's complicated racial history in a manner that does not end up making apartheid politics look like Hollywood's version of the American civil rights movement.

Countering Hollywood's "Africa talk" is hard, and Higgins's book is an important contribution, an updating in many ways, to our thinking about representations of Africa (p. 9). Scholars and advanced students in African studies, media studies, postcolonial studies, and international studies will find a lot to learn from it and to like about it. The chapters are theoretically ranging and accessible. Though several of the same films appear in multiple chapters, the authors theorize and examine them from different angles, giving us a fuller perspective on a film than any one author could do. Most valuable in *Hollywood's Africa* is how it illustrates an underlying tension in human rights films set in Africa: the way they seem to take on, even challenge, the messy politics of the day, yet almost always fall back to the standard tropes about Africa and our engagement with it.

Whatever the intent of Hollywood's post-1994 human rights films, they seem often to get caught up in what Nigerian author C. P. Eze calls "Brand Africa" (p. 91), the projection of a monolithic continent that can only be seen through the opaque lens of poverty, instability, disease, illiteracy, and corruption.[3] But Hollywood is not the only culture industry to embrace "Brand Africa." And here is my call (this is no criticism of the book but is offered because the essays provide a good starting point for this discussion and future work): scholars interested in the representation of Africa and Africans should look carefully across media for how celebrities, policymakers, filmmakers, social philanthropists, nongovernment organizations, international organizations, journalists, and others set the agenda and the tone for human rights advocacy and humanitarian intervention in Africa.

There is a continuity, even a seamlessness to the appeals, images, attitudes, and desires manufactured about Africa at the box office, on television (especially soft news venues and HBO), at retail stores, in novels and memoirs, in advertising, on YouTube, on Facebook, and on music videos. Stars from *Blood Diamond* and *Invic-*

tus have their Africa-based charities. Kibera, an impoverished neighborhood near Nairobi, where parts of *The Constant Gardener* were filmed, is now a destination tourism site. A murderous general turned preacher in Liberia uses his Facebook page and Vice Guide's online documentary to cash in infamy for fame.[4] Transferring his humanitarian credibility, *Hotel Rwanda* star Don Cheadle moves on to save Darfur, writing a book (*Not on Our Watch: The Mission to End Genocide in Darfur and Beyond* [2007]) with journalist John Prendergast and making a documentary (*Darfur Now* [2007]) in which Prendergast was also involved. Ishmael Beah, former Sierra Leonean child soldier and now UNICEF ambassador, writes a memoir of his experiences (*A Long Way Gone: Memoirs of a Boy Soldier* [2008]), stars with American hip hop artists in a documentary about the illicit diamond trade (*Bling: A Planet Rock* [2007]), and poses for a clothing ad with a machine gun propped against the wall behind him. What does this saturated, overlapping media environment mean for any understanding of Africa, let alone any useful action in partnership with Africans? That is a question I think *Hollywood's Africa* points us to. Really, can any of us become human rights activists or even agents for humanitarianism by going to a movie, wearing the right clothes, following the Twitter feed of our favorite singer, or going online and clicking a button to donate money to Africans because their lives must be very, very difficult?

Notes

[1]. See "U.S. Shocked Andorra Not in Africa," *The Onion*, YouTube video, 2:04, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3q_iqrvnC_4, posted February 19, 2008 (accessed July 15, 2013). For a similar *Onion* take on American knowledge of Africa, see "In the Know: Situation in Nigeria Seems Pretty Complex," *The Onion*, YouTube video, 2:41, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pwom49awRKg, posted January 17, 2008.

[2]. On this point, see Teju Cole's excellent March 2012 *Atlantic* piece, "The White-Savior Industrial Complex," *The Atlantic* (March 2012), http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/03/the-white-savior-industrial-complex/254843/ (accessed March 15, 2012).

[3]. C. P. Eze, *Don't Africa Me: "Their" Geo-Branding War, "Our" Trade, Tourism Wounds, and Winning Like China* (n.p.: Expertz, self-published, 2008).

[4]. Geraldine O'Mahony and Jo Ellen Fair, "From Lords of War to Leaders in Society: How Former Liberian Warlords Used Media to Reframe Themselves," *Media, War, and Conflict* 5, no. 1 (2012): 1-14. See also, "The Vice Guide Travel to Liberia," *Top Documentary Films*, http://topdocumentaryfilms.com/vice-guide-travel-liberia/, posted 2010 (accessed July 9, 2011).

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