

Black hawk down



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Analysis

It can be argued that Black Hawk Down is accurate in the sense of numbers and statistics. Yes, two Black Hawk helicopters were shot down 19 Americans were killed, 84 wounded, and an estimated 2000 Somalis were killed and even more wounded. Yes the street fighting was realistic, and yes, they were in Mogadishu that day to capture two top lieutenants in Aidid's government, and therefore from a military point of view, was a successful mission. But the film fails to retell the complexities of why the Americans are there in the first place. It is more a tool of American Hollywood propaganda than an accurate account of the Battle of Mogadishu.

In Black Hawk Down the American soldiers are shown in an overly heroic way. No doubt these men were very brave – struggling to survive with the odds so greatly against them. But the way they are portrayed and glorified is the patriotic nonsense one can expect from Hollywood. These soldiers are depicted without faults, and they can do no wrong. They are the ideal family men who constantly look after one another. Any facts that may contradict this, like their contribution to the Somali death toll before the battle (6-10,000 casualties in the summer of 1993 alone, two-thirds women and children) is conveniently left out. Their only shortcoming is the disastrous way the mission was handled – but there is no blame put on them for that in the movie.

The Battle of Mogadishu was clearly not a battle of “ good versus bad – as most things in life are. But the seeing the way the Somalis are portrayed – as evil, barbaric and mindless people, it is clear that the movie would certainly like us to think that this was the case. The American soldiers are established

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as the saviours of the Somalis, and it is these soldiers who are wrongfully attacked. By using dramatic camera shots, and clichéd Hollywood lines like “Nobody asks to be a hero, it just sometimes turns out that way...” help to drive home the themes of brotherhood and comradeship. By graphically showing the wounds and casualties of the American soldiers, the movie evokes sympathy and removes the blame for the catastrophe from the soldiers. They are portrayed as heroic and patriotic, but this portrayal is misleading.

The film begins with scenes of starving Somalis on the brink of death or already dead; the screen is tinted blue to heighten the feeling of sadness. They all live in dilapidated huts, and the whole situation seems desperate – children taking care of their dying parents. A sort “history” of American involvement is displayed on the screen: “Years of warfare among rival clans causes famine on a biblical scale” ... “Behind a force of 20, 000 U. S. Marines, food is delivered and order is restored.” – no mention of the US’s past involvement in selling arms to the dictators, or helping to stir up clan violence. The audience only knows what they are being told – the US troops are the good guys saving the day, not at all having anything to do with causing these atrocities. And after the audience is full of sorrow for the Somalis, a bright image of US military vehicle bringing food and supplies to Somalia. We are relieved that the Somalis are receiving the help they need, and we are subconsciously relieved that the blue tint is gone. So from the beginning of the movie we are made to see that the US military is the saviour – and we as the audience are therefore indebted to them. We also

now have sympathy for the soldiers – it is this sympathy that dominates the rest of the film.

Because the storyline of Black Hawk Down is just one big battle scene – there are no subplots to entertain a wider audience, the themes of comradeship are over emphasized (mostly in a clichéd way) to make it more appealing. The tagline of the film is “leave no man behind” – this is repeated about four times in the film, to the point where we can predict when it is coming. Similarly, we are flooded with messages of dedication and solidarity. Lines like “I think I was trained to make a difference” and “It’s what you do right now that makes the difference.” These kinds of lines are without a doubt used to emphasize the honour and comradeship between the soldiers, it rather detracts the human interaction of these characters by reducing them to clichéd statements of emotion or motivation. The line “make a difference” is both overused and ambiguous – what do the soldiers hope to make a difference in? This constant repetition of such dialogue is a demonstration of the filmmakers wish to portray the American soldiers as good and moral men. Also this simplicity and predictability of these lines could be intended for us to make an easy definition between good and evil, and hero and villain.

The American soldiers all have their specific identities, and their portrayal is made extremely personal compared to that of the Somalis. We have the “bad boy” the “underdog” and the “rookie” to name a few, and just to make sure we know who is who, the soldiers have their names written on their helmets (which was not done in reality). We see that these soldiers are people like us – they watch television, play chess and do things any one of us

would do. Most of all they are devoted family men. One soldier, after being severed in half, in his last words says: “ Tell my girls I’ll be okay.” And another one on his deathbed “ Tell my parents that I fought well today, that I fought hard” – even in death he is seeking his family’s approval. This use of the soldiers having families makes our experience of these characters a much more personal one.

The Americans only shoot militia, not one innocent man, woman or child is shot. However, we all know that this cannot be the case as in most urban conflicts; civilians are almost the highest casualties. Soldiers from that day have been quoted as saying “ we fired on crowds and eventually at anyone and anything they saw.”

With these family members in mind, the horrific and graphic way in which the American casualties are displayed only reinforces our sympathy for the plight that the soldiers are in – most of the gore and blood in the movie belongs to Americans, not Somalis – a severed thumb attached only by a thread, a white detached arm that is picked up off the ground, a stomach pierced by a missile, a soldier severed in half, are all examples of American casualties. Thus the Americans are portrayed as the “ good guys”, while the Somalis as the “ bad guys” who inflict these casualties.

With the “ good guy” established, it seems natural to have the opposite – the “ bad guy”. Enter the Somalis. Dressed all in black with shadowed sinister faces, accompanied by dark techno music they are the epitome of evil. We are unable to differentiate between one Somali and the next, and there are

no names given to them. Their actions seem to be motivated by nothing more than the thirst for the blood of white men, Americans in particular.

Even before the fighting starts, in the market place scenes, the camera does not focus on one Somali. They have no personalities, and their everyday lives are trivialized. The Somalis are therefore on the periphery of a movie set in Somalia. Even the extras do not resemble Somalis, but rather any black people.

Another point is that the militia become indistinguishable from the citizens of Mogadishu. Even though the military officials in the movie say that those holding weapons are part of the militia. There is another scene when a general says: “The whole city is gonna come down on them.” At this point the distinction between citizenry and the militia is lost – we know believe that the entire city is engaged in the conflict, which we therefore assume are all sided with Aidid. But there were reports that many of the Somalis were not part of Aidid’s militia but rather people who thought their homes were under attack and were therefore protecting their homes.

The Somalis are depicted as a pack of rabid animals – snarling at fallen soldiers, shooting at a corpse and fast moving hands grabbing at the fallen helicopter all convey an unexplained sense of hostility. Somalis appear like packs of animals with the use of aerial camera angles showing swarming bodies. There is nothing of Somali culture in the movie, and they are not given a voice. The Americans “ affectionately” refer to the Somalis as “ skinnies”.

We are told that thousands of Somalis were killed, but every time a Somali is shot, it is clean, and he (or she) conveniently falls away from the camera. There is no blood or gore like the American injuries. There are no innocent women or children killed, and in this way Black Hawk Down does not let us see the full scope of the devastation of the thousands of Somali deaths. This only allows for the interpretation of the Somalis as the “ bad guys”.

The US government had been involved in the making of Black Hawk Down since it first started being written, and the creators had the full co-operation and approval of the military because of the pro-American bias of the movie. The producer Jerry Bruckheimer has been quoted as saying to the Army vice chief of staff: “ General, I’m going to make a movie that you and your Army will be proud of.” The creators were allowed full use of military equipment and training, as well as dozens of actual soldiers for extras. But, the military, to ensure precision, monitored the filming daily. Special task teams were set up to provide the moviemakers with specific military advice. Helicopters and Humvees were also loaned to them. It seems appropriate that a film endorsed by the US military, will have the views of the US military. And not surprisingly has had an overwhelmingly positive response from the military; Former Vice President Dick Cheney and Former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld and were among those pleased at the screening of the movie, and Army Secretary Thomas White gave the film a “ thumbs up”