

Sonali Krishnan-Deem

ENGL 117B

14 April 2020

Dr. Gorman-DaRif

Black Hawk Down Perpetuates Islamophobia in an Already Uncertain Time

In 2001 there was a lot of fear, hatred, and confusion surrounding any person of color, and *Black Hawk Down* feeds into and adds to it. People are angry that there was an attack on the World Trade Centers in September and this movie was very successful because it fueled the anger many people had towards any practicing Muslim person. Philippa Winkler explains that Columbia Pictures rushed the film out after the terrorist attacks on 9/11 (Winkler, 415) because they knew that their film did not display the Somalian people in a positive light, so it would be received well by many patriotic Americans at the time. Mark Bowden, who was a screen writer for the film, wrote a book detailing the events of *Black Hawk Down*. He went to Mogadishu and spoke to two Somalians who were engaged in the combat (one of which looked after Michael Durant, the American pilot of Super 6-4 who was captured). This provided a 3-dimensional view of the battle rather than the very one-sided version that the movie is. An argument can be made here that it is difficult to show both sides in a film because of the time constraint, but there could have and *should have been* any footage that humanizes the Somalian people. Instead, the film is a Hollywood production and goes into excruciating and gory details about the harsh reality of war (as exemplified by the man getting his lower half blown off, another getting his finger shot off, and yet another depicting a soldier plunging his hand into another's leg to find the femoral

artery – and that barely scratches the surface) but again, there is no time or space made for the humanization of the enemy. This perpetuates a fear of another culture in a time that is already filled with nightmares of foreign attacks, and the incredibly popular film only deepens this feeling.

In the opening scene, a song is played, called “Hunger is the Weapon.” While the title is unknown, the song provides a general feeling that doesn’t sit well with the viewers. The camera then pans over relief camps and clear examples of famished people. This is to make the audience pity the Somalian people at the very beginning of the movie, and it gets the viewers on the side of the American soldiers because they’re there to help. More examples of this can be found scattered throughout the movie but do little more than contribute to the audience’s pity for the people. Viewers can then see a man wrapping/covering a body in the sand, then the camera transitions to another body wrapped and propped up on a cart, then to a screen that says “Years of warfare among rival clans causes famine on a biblical scale.” Looking at the word choice here, they say biblical, giving a Christian undertone. Why didn’t they say, “Years of warfare among rival clans causes famine that has killed hundreds (or another number)”? It would have had the same effect, but they needed to appeal to their Christian audiences, rather than another religion. This does not paint other religions in a good light, so why would the producers spend the time making it inclusive? Also, it wasn’t just years of warfare. It was that *in addition to* the fall of a dictator that the US *strongly* supported (because Somali is at a strategic point at the mouth of the Red Sea) that led to the power struggle that strengthened the clan warfare mentality and the inevitable and necessary involvement of the UN relief services and Peacekeepers. This is a very small explanation of the why the UN is there: to provide relief for the famine that happened after

the popular rising resulting in the fall of Major General Mohamed Siad Barre's dictatorship (*Black Hawk Down: The Untold Story*). None of these details are shared with viewers, so unless they knew that going into the film, they only know that it is a poor African country that is suffering, and that means they must need American Democracy. Finally, if viewers didn't get the hint of why the US was there, SGT Eversmann (who acts as the moral compass throughout the film) makes a comment in the beginning, saying "These people have no jobs, no food, no education" when talking to his fellow soldiers about why they're there. This makes Somalians out to be uncivilized while the Americans are there to help civilize them.

Before the Battle, there is an on-screen explanation reading: "Hawlwadig Road – Bakara Market; Aidid's Militia Stronghold." The song playing (called "Chant") is a little sinister, repetitive, and makes the viewers think that it is building up to something bad. It adds a tense air to an already tense movie. The market itself is chaotic and loud, people are out of focus as they pass the camera, so viewers keep seeing distractions but are sure to notice the gun in every single shot. At this point in the film, guns are not the focus during scenes with Americans, but with Somalians, viewers see them often and prominently, as if it's a part of the Somalian person. When people speak there are no subtitles so the viewers (a mostly English-speaking audience) are supposed to feel lost and a little bit alienated. This feeling of being in the dark allows viewers to drift towards seeing the Somalians in a negative light. They can't understand Somalians, but they are holding guns, so it is assumed that they are the bad guys. It adds an element of fear of the unknown.

The scenes of the market *without* Americans in it are short and scattered throughout the film. There is no dialogue that viewers can understand until much later in the film – and that is

only when Somalians are speaking to or about an American specifically (because it's an American centered film). This detaches the audience from feeling anything towards Somalians. They can't understand them and see them as violent, so they are dehumanized in viewer's minds. This makes it so easy to see them mercilessly killed later in the film (aside from one or two people) and it also is why it's so hard to see an American killed. There is a relationship created and an opinion formed about each one of the soldiers based on what was heard and seen about them and their interactions with each other, so when one dies or gets hurt, viewer's feel something as if they were a friend or acquaintance. The only thing that humanizes Somalians in this part of the film is a comment made by Gen. Garrison shortly before the battle begins. He says to his men, "Bakara Market is the Wild West but be careful what you shoot at because people do live there."

During the Battle, the American soldiers are continuously portrayed as heroes and nothing less, the Somalian people are made out to be savages. There is no difference between good and bad – almost everyone gets shot all the same because everyone is a threat, despite the beginning of the film telling a completely different story. Every Somalian that shoots is only shown from the waist up and is portrayed in one of three ways: a cartoonish character who appears out of nowhere, only to shoot and then be shot/blown up and die quickly; a gang member that rides around in a jeep, yelling and laughing while they rain down on the soldiers with a barrage of bullets; or a leader wearing sunglasses and a dark outfit, shrouded in mystery and dangerous authority. These three characters are something to be feared, but also almost something to laugh at given how generic they are. It tells American audiences that while they are

a serious threat, the brave soldiers are able to handle them (for the most part, until the end of the film.

Further in the battle, the audience sees Super 6-1 go down and the iconic line is spoken, “Black Hawk Down!” Somalians are shown with a chaotic, handheld camera as they descend on the fallen helicopter in a frenzied mob. Viewers see glimpses of them after this, from the point of view of the American soldiers shooting at them – frantically, but calculated, while the Somalians are shooting back wildly almost as if they aren’t aiming.

Once Super 6-4 goes down, the producers chose to film an aerial shot of the fallen helicopter, then drift to the side where viewers again see a frenzied mob of Somalians rushing to the crash site. The camera zooms in on some people very quickly, not staying on one person for too long, and there is lots of tribal yelling and talking quickly in another language, but again no subtitles. This makes the audience feel scared and tense up for the duration of the panicked scene. There is a lot of focus on the two Delta Rangers that give their lives to try and help Michael Durant, the pilot that went down in Super 6-4’s crash. Watching these three men fight, all sound stops and each person is only seen in flashes between yelling Somalians. After a few moments the music playing at the beginning of the film during the famine begins, setting a somber and fateful tone. After the Delta Rangers are dead, even more Somalians swarm the helicopter, and its chaotic as viewers see Durant get beaten in flashes, until a Somalian leader comes and there are *finally* subtitles when he is saying Durant is going to be a prisoner of war for Aidid.

In the entire movie, the audience only sees two examples of Somalians being portrayed as actual people. An hour into the film, Yurek get separated from the rest of his Chalk, and while running from people shooting at him, he jumps into a schoolroom. There are students huddled around a teacher, all looking frightened, and he smiles and puts a finger to his lips signaling them to be quiet. He waves as he sneaks out the back door, then slipping on the dirt outside and narrowly missing a little boy who fires at him. While Yurek fell and escaped with his life, the little boy ended up shooting his father. He runs, crying, to his father and Yurek picks up his gun and aims, but thinks better of it and runs away. This is showing the humanity of the soldiers, reaffirming the idea that they are there to help, even though they have spent the last 25 minutes shooting at these people. It also makes the audience sympathize with the Somalians, because there are some that simply live in the enemy-held territory, and makes viewers feel bad that they seem to have enlisted child soldiers, further demonizing the Somalian people.

Overall, Black Hawk Down is a film that paints a mostly Muslim country in a poor light, adding fuel to the fire that is an already blooming Islamophobic culture in the United States.

Works Cited

Bowden, Mark. *Black Hawk down a Story of Modern War*. Atlantic Monthly Press, 1999.

Scott, Ridley, director. *Black Hawk Down*. Columbia Pictures, 2002.

Winkler, Philippa. “(Feminist) Activism Post 11 September: Protesting Black Hawk Down.”

International Feminist Journal of Politics, vol. 4, no. 3, 2002, pp. 415–430.,

doi:10.1080/1461674022000031517.