

Rinse. Wash. Repeat. The Last King of Scotland: A Film Interrogation

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The Last King of Scotland is a film directed by Kevin MacDonald based on the book of the same name written by Giles Foden. It depicts the relationship between a young doctor from Scotland, Nicholas Garrigan, played by James McAvoy and General Idi Amin, played by Forrest Whitaker who gives a tour de force performance as the Ugandan dictator that ruled Uganda from 1971 until 1979. Post-British colonial era Uganda provides the backdrop for the story as the film takes the audience on an exhilaratingly gruesome journey as experienced by Dr. Garrigan, traversing the Claymore mine field that is Amin's paranoia-inflicted psyche as Uganda's newly seated ruler. MacDonald attempts to provide historical context throughout the film by way of his introduction of the British "overseer" Agent Nigel Stone and by imposing the patriarchal underpinnings of the colonial state through Garrigan's relationships with Amin and Garrigan's father. However, MacDonald ultimately abandons those attempts in favor of popular narratives about Africa that have been reinforced throughout time in film. In his book *Mistaking Africa* Curtis Keim describes the use of Africa in cinema as "Real Africa" (67). According to Keim, movies are one of the central ways by which we learn stereotypes about Africa. Using Keim's definitions for "Troubled Africa" and "Self-Definition," this paper investigates how the director collateralizes his attempts to provide historical context to the audience by using ubiquitous stereotypes about Africa that have been formed by Eurocentric attitudes towards the continent such as Africa being rife with violence and political unrest. Specifically, the relationships of Dr. Garrigan with his father, Agent Stone and Amin are analyzed to detect the director's attempts at providing historical context while unearthing the stereotypical tropes about Africa embedded in the film, which consequently reduces the *Last King of Scotland* to one of a long list of films that misrepresent a holistic perception Africa.[1]

While it is curious that *The Last King of Scotland* (which presents itself as being about the Ugandan dictator Idi Amin) is told through the perspective of the obviously egomaniacal Scotsman Dr. Nicholas Garrigan, the act of centralizing Garrigan, who is also the prominent white character in the film, is purposeful. Stephen Hunter of the *Washington Post* writes, "MacDonald has decided we need a pair of Western Eyes through which...to see the brains

behind the Western eyes grow and change, as a barometer of Amin's evil." (Hunter) MacDonald designates Garrigan as the *de facto* narrator to create apologist historical context to achieve what Paul C. Taylor calls "moral gentrification" in his article *The Last King of Scotland or the Last N****r on Earth: The Ethics of Race on Film*. Moral gentrification in the case of the *Last King of Scotland* is a method for white Europeans to redefine themselves or make sense of their role in colonialism which present uncomfortable images of the past. The use of Garrigan as the vessel by which the audience experiences Africa as well as the enigmatic and unstable Amin provides a connection with the audience by serving to legitimize a perception of Africa that is familiar to audiences.

The *Last King of Scotland* begins by showing Dr. Nicholas Garrigan celebrating his recent graduation from medical school with classmates and loved ones in Scotland. The scene between Nicholas Garrigan and his family and specifically his interaction with his father, serves as an allegory of the oppressive disposition of the post-colonial state. At 1:35 in the movie Garrigan's father proposes a toast in recognition of his son's graduation from medical school, but disparages Nicholas' degree stating, "not quite as good a degree as mine but a fine one nonetheless (1:49)." (Based on his comments, Garrigan's father is presumably a surgeon which is generally regarded in a higher esteem than a general practitioner.) He ends the toast hoping to have a "long future together" with Garrigan. This scene is a metaphor for the relationship between the oppressed and the oppressor in post-colonial Africa and touches on elements of Neo-colonialism. Garrigan represents the decolonized state, teeming with optimism of the future and proud of accomplishing independence (graduation) while Garrigan's father represents the oppressor subjugating young Garrigan, first to a state of inferiority then subsequently tying Nicholas' achievement and progression into the professional or "legitimate" world with his own prosperity. After having his future ostensibly determined for him by his father, Nicholas erupts in a fit of frustration, picks up a globe, spins it on its axis and says, "first place you land you go (2:37)." Destination. Uganda.

Dr. Garrigan's arrival in Uganda is the point at which MacDonald begins to use a heavy hand with spoon-feeding the audience popular axioms about Africa that Keim identifies as the "Real Africa." "Real Africa" encompasses the recognizable perceptions about Africa that have been formed by the media and literature and inform the audiences' "knowledge" about Africa. This maneuver levies irreparable damage to any thoughtful attempts to evoke an unadulterated picture of the continent. Garrigan, always guided by self-interest states, "I still want to make a difference you know...have fun too

though, have adventure, do something different (10:44).” This sets up Africa as a backdrop for a “coming of age” story and subsequently serves a dual purpose as a cautionary tale about the inevitable dangers of the African continent. Keim would articulate this tactic as typical in the film industry’s portrayals of Africa that inform much of our knowledge about Africa (24).

Belligerently oblivious, Dr. Garrigan’s lack of global awareness bespeaks his self-absorbedness and simultaneously depicts Keim’s assertion of the “Troubled Africa (68).” “Troubled Africa” is the perception that Africa is riddled with violence, unrest, plagued with coups and poverty. While riding on a bus into the town where he has accepted a position as a doctor, Garrigan notices armed soldiers patrolling on tanks through the Ugandan roads. He asks a young Ugandan woman sitting next to him about the soldiers and is informed that a military coup installing Idi Amin as ruler of Uganda has taken place that day. “Troubled Africa” represents what are seemingly the only news bites we are fed about Africa even though they only paint part of the African picture, as not all of Africa is troubled. (Keim 68) Later in the movie, Garrigan aggressively affirms the “Troubled Africa” narrative while arguing with Agent Stone over Amin’s implication in the murders of opposition to Amin’s regime by stating, “this is Africa, you meet violence with violence. Anything else and you’re dead.” (1:02.13) A closer look at Garrigan’s relationship with Agent Stone bears consideration for its relation to the common uses of Africa in film.

MacDonald attempts to provide historical context by cultivating conflict between Garrigan and the lurking British interloper Agent Nigel Stone. Stone is a nefarious character, clandestine in orchestrating “deals” and pulling the strings to execute the coup that helped Amin gain power. The first time the audience is introduced to Agent Stone is when Dr. Garrigan goes to Amin’s personal tailor. Stealthily appearing from out of the shadows of the dimly lit tailor’s shop, Stone attempts to engage Garrigan as an equal; two Europeans in a land of savages who only understand their place in the human pecking order through messages meted out through violence (27:32). Stone’s comments harken back to the application of indirect rule by Great Britain over its African colonies. Famously articulated by Frederick Lugard, indirect rule was the method that the British employed to establish administrative control of its African holdings. The indirect rule doctrine actively supported the utility of violence by the British as a means to impose their will on the native African population (Lugard). Stone serves as an antagonist to Garrigan and represents the omnipresent symbol of British colonialism in Africa throughout the film. It is made abundantly clear from their interactions that Garrigan detests everything Stone stands for. During the interaction at the tailor, Garrigan is quick to distinguish himself as a Scotsman, therefore separating himself from

the deeds of the British government during colonialism. Based on Keim, “Self-Definition” is a characteristic of Garrigan’s relationship with Stone in that Garrigan mitigates his imperfections by comparing himself favorably to Stone (10). In this manner, MacDonald submits that Garrigan is a form of progress within the white race from colonizer to empathizer which is an idea supported by Taylor’s assertion that Africa serves as an ancillary aspect in film while its utility is to help define whiteness within the construct of moral gentrification (Taylor). “Self-Definition” is a continued theme in Garrigan’s relationship with Amin.

On some level, Amin represents a lateral move from one oppressive patriarch (elder Dr. Garrigan) to another for Garrigan. Amin affirms as much telling Garrigan, “I am the father of this nation...and you have most grossly offended your father (1:41:15).” Enduring the peaks and valleys of Amin’s mercurial, larger than life persona, Garrigan is initially wooed by Amin’s charisma but later is squeamishly intimidated during his interactions with Amin. After Amin confronts Garrigan about his affair with Kay, one of Amin’s wives, he is unabashed in his indictments of Garrigan and by extension colonial rule stating that Garrigan is “just like all the other British...just here to fuck and to take away (1:08:00).” MacDonald enlists Garrigan’s character as the voice of reason in the milieu of Amin’s madness and paranoia. Here we see Keim’s articulation of “Self-Definition” fused with evolutionism as MacDonald defines Garrigan’s existence as a counterpoint to Amin while subjecting Amin and all Africans to the image of the savage native who is child-like, incapable of “progress,” and eminently dangerous when equipped with power and authority. Garrigan encapsulates this analysis at the crescendo of the Garrigan/Amin dynamic, when he, clinging to his life after being tortured, shouts at Amin, “You are a child, that’s what makes you so fucking scary.” (1:45:21). A review of the depth of Garrigan’s relationships with his father, Amin and Agent Stone unearth MacDonald’s use of Garrigan to present themes of “Troubled Africa,” “Self-Definition,” evolutionism and the specter of British colonial rule.

Movies provide audiences with an instance of escapism. Some films stimulate the need for escapism by presenting stories of obvious fiction such as academies for prepubescent wizardry or dashing covert operatives wielding innovative gadgets to triumph over insurmountable odds. However, film not only stimulates our senses, but can also inform our knowledge about a given subject. The genre *The Last King of Scotland* is categorized under is biography/history/drama. While there are moments of heightened drama and speckles of historical context, the movie is much closer to a psychological thriller than historical timepiece. MacDonald manipulates the escapist nature

of the movie by making a commitment to the audience stating that the film is inspired by real people and real events but fails to provide context. By doing this MacDonald transforms the audience's experience to a *fait accompli* about the stereotypical perceptions of Africa and despite efforts to do otherwise, delivers little more than a retread of the same old narrative. Rinse. Wash. Repeat.

Works Cited

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[1] The list of movies that misrepresent Africa and Africans is extensive. Please see: Last King of Scotland, Invictus, Hotel Rwanda, Black Hawk Down, Blood Diamond, Beasts of No Nation, Zulu, The Power of One, The Gods must be Crazy, Out of Africa, Congo, Tarzan