

"OPERATION RESTORE HOPE": RECOLONIZING AFRICA
FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

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Television coverage of the crisis in Somalia subtends "the New World Order's" militation against the continued viability of a postcolonial Africa. At issue here is the way in which Fox TV's news documentary entitled *"Somalia Behind the Scenes"* is emblematic of American media's redeployment of 19th century colonialist discourse and iconography to create a popular nostalgia for and fetishization of a colonized Africa. By presenting this latest Africanist discourse exclusively in terms of Somalia being at war with itself, the news media effectively perpetuate an alarming but familiar construct of Africa as the "dark continent" for a new generation of initiates (in fact the terms "dark" and "darkness" are invoked four times in this program).

It seems, therefore, that the best way to theorize the relative ease with which such racialized coverage of America's military presence in Somalia, more altruistically known as "Operation Restore Hope," can proceed in the American press is to consider two things. First, it is important to note that American news organizations' coverage of Somalia to date has been almost identical to their coverage of urban riots and uprisings in the U. S. And then there is the fact that the news media rely on familiar narrative conventions as strategies of containment wherein they seek to conceal the heterogeneous and often schizophrenic¹ nature of texts that they construct as news. On the functional level, then, counter and/or aberrant readings of polysemous images and sounds from Somalia must be foreclosed on by hetero or homodiegetic narrators or extra or intradiegetic narration, all designed specifically to direct audience readings of these news texts. *Somalia Behind the Scenes* is one such example of a heterogeneous text. Dense with antinomies, it nevertheless circulates as a unitary and empiricist documentary that conveys the "real" Somalia, presented just as it is. This objectivist characterization of this documentary coverage issuing from Somalia serves to empty the polemical and ideological imperatives from the collective consciousness of those producing and consuming this television text. Presented in this depoliticized way, *"Somalia Behind the Scenes"* deflects attention from the fact that it is simply another instantiation of the never-ending Africanist discourse on racial otherness so familiar to American television and print media audiences.

What is so disconcerting about a documentary such as *"Somalia Behind the Scenes"* is that it signals a dangerous resurrection of the old

colonialist discourse marked by a mode of address to viewers that presupposes and foments a racialized view of Africa as the quintessence of "darkness" sorely in need of the civilizing light of "whiteness." To account for the media's predilection for representing any news from Africa in terms of racial and cultural exotica it is crucial that we consider two intersecting levels of narrative economy functioning in such contemporary Africanist texts as *"Somalia Behind the Scenes."* On one level is the inscription of viewers in this video text. Secondly, we need to understand the a priori socio-cultural stratifications that these narratives help create, validate, disseminate, and ultimately propagate.

A close analysis of *Somalia Behind the Scenes* reveals that this ostensibly objective news documentary contains a significant residue of Africanist discursivity that can be traced back to the strongest of all Africanist texts, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.² Furthermore, I contend that it is not unimportant that racist tropes permeate a documentary which is proffered as an exegetical text in the observational mode wherein photographic or aural authenticity of what is witnessed is taken for granted. Rather, it is the very construction of this program as a documentary that permits its viewers to interpret and accept its racialized representations of Somalia without introspection or reflection.³ Before we consider specific examples from the documentary it is useful to reference Nick Browne's theory of spectatorial inscription within a cinematic text. What is important in Browne's paradigm is that it enables us to apprehend the way viewers' readings of this videotext are directed so that they see Somalia as needing and indeed deserving America's military presence. As Browne cogently points out, the optical or literal position of the spectator/viewer in a filmic text, via the photographic apparatus, is less consequential than is his or her figurative position "as subject to the rhetoric of the film, [and as] reader or producer of the sense of the discourse."⁴ Moreover, Browne makes this insightful observation about the narrator/spectator axis that comprises the narrative act:

The spectator's place, the locus around which the spatial/temporal structures of presentation are organized, is a construction of the text which is ultimately the product of the narrator's disposition toward the tale. Such structures, which in shaping and presenting the action prompt a manner and indeed a path of reading, convey and are closely allied to the guiding moral commentary of the film.⁵

That Browne's concern here is with narrative exigencies as they pertain to a fictional film genre, the western, is understood. However, it is clear

that his exegesis constitutes a model from which we can draw conclusions and inferences about narratological expressivity in general, whether through film or television, fiction or documentary. For our purposes, Browne's model absolutely obtains because it posits convincingly just how it is that television news viewers are inscribed in ideologically slanted videotexts such as "*Somalia Behind The Scenes*."

"*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" opens with visuals of a woman steering a mule-drawn, makeshift buggy that looks ancient. This image then gives way to a dissolve of a close-up on an African American soldier who opens the narrative diegesis thus: "Somalia here is basically like a land out of time."⁶ As the visage of the African American soldier fades into a jungle scene an interesting juxtaposition takes place. The African American male is visibly fused with the jungle scene and an interesting bit of dialectical symbolism registers. Immediately after the former and latter images converge, the scene changes to one of action wherein armed white soldiers and camera-toting reporters are shown charging into the dark of night. What is significant about this narrative enonce at the beginning of the program is that it is uttered by an African American soldier commenting on his initial reactions to being on Somalian soil, and more importantly, that it recalls a similar instance of discourse uttered by Marlowe in *Heart of Darkness* when he finally encounters the African outpost responsible for the demise of his alter-ego, Kurtz:

Going up that river was like travelling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings.⁷

Marlowe continues:

We were wanderers on a prehistoric earth, on an earth that wore the aspect of an unknown planet. We could have fancied ourselves the first of men taking possession of an accursed inheritance.⁸

What is insidious about the opening scene in "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*," described above, is that by having a familiar Africanist trope enunciated by a uniformed African American soldier two acts of displacement occur. This scene functions effectively to ameliorate charges of a racist codification of Somalia in terms of African primitivism because it is a black man who speaks this Africanism. No matter who speaks it, once again racist articulations of contemporary Africa with the tropes of primitivism, racial and cultural stasis are

recirculated and given currency. It should not be surprising that the quote is lifted out of a lengthier interview with the African American soldier in which his comments are clearly in answer to a direct question about the devastation Somalia has sustained as a result of the civil war, heavily subsidized by the Soviet Union and America.⁹ In that context, his comments suggesting that Somalia appears as a land out of touch with contemporary times ("a land out of time") are not so easily appropriated for Africanist discursivity. Moreover, as Roland Barthes points out, there is no better way to deflect charges of colonialism than to show a uniformed African American soldier zealously serving his so-called oppressors.¹⁰

The ensuing montage sequence juxtaposes images of a white soldier at a checkpoint, armored tanks rolling into Mogadishu or some major Somali city, emaciated children barely able to sit upright, women in traditional attire, a youth wearing a bullet vest and carrying a rifle on his shoulder, and crying babies with flies buzzing about their faces. Ultimately the segment culminates in a close-up shot of a white soldier who orders these disparate images for us as he fulfills his important role as the scene's homodiegetic narrator: "I've seen Vietnam, I been through Beirut, um Desert Storm, in 22 years, this is about the worst I've seen."¹¹ Moreover, such incantations are in keeping with colonialist representations of Africa as always the site of untold horrors and Africa as always the locus of the worst case scenario one will ever encounter on the entire globe. If we were to substitute for the white soldier's narration recounted above an almost identical descriptive passage in *Heart of Darkness* where Marlowe describes one of his many worst case scenarios, this contemporary colonialist narrative would not be interrupted or upset in the least. Consider this:

They were dying slowly—it was very clear. . . they were nothing earthly now—nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom . . . and all about others were scattered in every pose of contorted collapse, as in some picture of a massacre or pestilence. . . . While I stood horror-struck . . . big flies buzzed fiendishly.¹²

I am struck by the amazing parallel this narrative enonce makes to the visual images that comprised the above montage segment. The problem is that there are too many such parallels between this 1993 television documentary on Somalia and Conrad's 1899 fictional representation of an imaginary African locale.

While there are several instances of visual and aural disunity or heterogeneity that surface in "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" a couple

deserve comment here. In a group shot where two Somali men are foregrounded the extradiegetic narrator informs us that "these two men made their own peace offering. On the day that the Marines arrived they turned over a plastic bag full of machine gun rounds to the first Americans they could find."¹³ Of course the close-up on the bag and one of the men's hands reaching into the bag to display the rounds revealed that the bag was half-empty. Given the magnitude of weapons imported into Somalia, and the stated rationale for the American military presence in that region, it was not insignificant that this visual image of a paltry showing of machine gun rounds needed to be enhanced. With the help of the authority of the omniscient, extradiegetic narrator viewers could make the necessary transference whereby what they heard would take precedence over what they saw at that instance. The other example where images and sound were open-ended and capable of engendering multiple readings is found in the scene that runs after a commercial. Here shots of people in and around the marketplace are featured. Men are shown walking in the street with guns. Then there is a cut to a different shot of a market or casbah. Two young boys walk into the frame. One holds up a large knife and the other, lagging behind, holds up a round piece of fruit. Since the two boys are walking together toward a quite visible marketplace, and one holds up a fruit and the other a knife, it would seem that the boy with the knife needed it for carving, fruit, meat or grain. This reading is as plausible as the more polemical one proffered by the extradiegetic narrator. His reading says that the young man is brandishing a knife and that the mere fact that the boy has possession of this culinary looking knife, therefore, is proof of the ever present violence in Somalia. This particular scene with narrative polemics provides an apt segue to our investigation of the increasing similarity in the way news organizations cover news from Africa and news of African American urban areas. Central to this construction of sameness in news coverage of these vastly different news events is the deployment of a racialized tropology that immediately conflates the signified with the signifier in the minds of viewers.

I have argued elsewhere¹⁴ that television news media regularly overdetermine representations of African American males as excessively violent, as chronically undereducated, and as social pariahs. We see that same paradigmatic grid being laid over the young men of Somalia. Bill Nichols's work on the functions of ethnographic films is pertinent and helps explain the television media's penchant for emplotting its news with biased images of African Americans. His comments also help to demystify television news personnel's investment in reifying this country's racial discourse for an American mass audience dependent on television for its image of self and other:¹⁵

Most often ethnographic films attempt to explain or describe some aspect of another culture to members of the film maker's own culture within a context informed to a varying extent by traditional anthropological and ethnographic concerns and concepts and perpetuating most of their political limitations: ideology is a word seldom used in studies of other cultures, and considerations of who defines culture and how (where do We draw the line around Them?) or, even more, of the ideological implications of representing one culture to another receive scant attention.¹⁶

Perhaps the reason scant attention is paid to the ideological implications of biased representations of African Americans in American news reporting and now Africans in American news documentaries, i.e. *"Somalia Behind the Scenes,"* is that mainstream audiences, primarily European Americans (and those "others" who enjoy what Cornel West terms "white skin privilege") believe that news programs provide factual and objective information about crime and criminality. Consequently, the great racial, social and cultural divides proffered by the media continue to exaggerate and further mystify the political constructedness of race and class in Anglo-American society. It is important for our project that we recognize how this racial and cultural constructedness got heightened for political purposes during the original colonial episode. Only by acknowledging that trace elements and residues still exist and color our nation's racial imaginary can we resist and circumvent the emergence of a reinvigorated Africanist discourse that has the same potential for devastation as did the colonialist discourse of the nineteenth century.

Bill Nichols entreats us not to be lulled into a false sense of cinematic veracity because a work bears the documentary label. For Nichols it is important for viewers to understand that

documentaries are fictions with plots, characters, situations, and events like any other. They offer introductory lacks, challenges, or dilemmas; they build heightened tensions and dramatically rising conflicts, and they terminate with resolution and closure. They do all this with reference to a "reality" that is a construct....¹⁷

In *"Somalia Behind the Scenes"* we see the news media attempt to construct tropologically "Operation Restore Hope" and Somali youths and Somalia's distinct culture just as it did last year's riots and urban

disintegration in South Central Los Angeles. James Ridgeway's *Village Voice* article predates the airing of "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" by more than a month but his ironic commentary on America's reaction to "Operation Restore Hope" anticipates my concern about this documentary's tendency to conflate American riot discursivity and news from Somalia as if they were somehow interchangeable. Ridgeway proceeds thus:

Just as we blamed the Iraqi people for being so benighted as to accept the moral equivalent of Hitler for a leader, we are now blaming the Somalis for allowing teenage anarchy to starve thousands of innocent people, many of them little children. In the minds of the American people, these gun-toting, khat-chomping, food-thieving teens are like a thousand little Saddams, waiting to be popped by clean-shaven Marines from San Diego. We can now do to these little [bleep] what we wanted to do to the Crips and Bloods last spring. No Miranda here.¹⁸

The narrative trajectory of this news documentary lays stress on established racial tropes such as "armed gangs", "Khat, a drug blamed for this country's social ills", "to understand Somalia you have to understand the gun," and "the children . . . a lost generation." Clearly such highly charged signification strategically placed in the narrative without the counterbalance of historical references to Western complicity in Somalia's civil war or to the colonial legacy that continues to impede Somalia's socio-economic self-sufficiency constitutes a socially symbolic act of narrative disinformation in the case of "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*."

It is doubtful that these historical elisions or "lacks" are incidental in such Africanist texts as this. In fact, the political and ideological function that such narrative texts as this one serve needs to be considered. For example, when this documentary presents armed American troops in Somalia as making the ultimate sacrifice for moral and humanitarian reasons alone, it effectively occludes the political and economic imperatives that provide a more plausible motivation for America's armed presence in that African nation. In this way, military and media strategists can de-emphasize the significant role that the discovery of oil¹⁹ in Somalia plays in America's "recolonizing" tactics—better known to us as "the new world order."²⁰ To proceed with our textual analysis of "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" we need to define the terms of the remainder of this exegesis. Accordingly, it is crucial that we dislodge the term "neocolonialism" from its perch of

critical primacy whenever post-Independence African nations are discussed. The problem is that the term "neocolonialism" as a conceptual framework for understanding this latest permutation of Western imperialism in Africa vis-a-vis Somalia is demonstrably inadequate because it de-emphasizes the magnitude of this historic moment. Rather, it seems that a better way to examine contemporary events in Somalia and America's subsequent media representations of those events is to think in terms of America's "recolonizing" impulses where Africa is concerned.

Descriptively, "recolonizing" is more apt than is "neocolonialism" because Webster's dictionary defines "neocolonialism" as "the economic and political policies by which a great power *indirectly* maintains or extends its influence over other areas or people."²¹ The fact is that the American influence in Somalia at present is not as indirect as the neocolonialism model maintains. More accurately then, America's imposition of military might in Somalia is direct, forceful and too often lethal.²² In contrast, the dictionary reveals that "recolonize," a term subsumed under the "re" prefix, is denotative of a concept of return; "again: anew (retell) back: backward (recall)." Insofar as we need to be clear about the terms of our debate, the choice seems clear. As our analysis has suggested, at the heart of Fox's *"Somalia Behind the Scenes"* narratological structure is a colonialist retelling or recalling of the myth of Africa as the "dark continent." Again, this documentary found several separate occasions to work "dark" or "darkness" into its narrative.

Put in the service of a nascent capitalism, the original colonial discourse in the 18th and 19th centuries facilitated Europe's carving up of Africa for Western empire building. Just as Western literature justified and rationalized Europe's belligerence in Africa for the amassing of cheap human labor, gold, diamonds, and the like, all under the guise of bringing civilization to the savages, so do America's contemporary media, especially television and newspapers, generate mass support for the 21st century's re-articulation of the "white man's burden" reinvented as "Operation Restore Hope."

The uneasy realization in all this is that America's military and political strategists relied on and were not disappointed in the media's ability to make palatable to its citizenry such an otherwise theoretically offensive military maneuver. It is not only that the American masses have become hardened or cynical to such unwarranted displays of military aggression in the wake of Grenada, Panama, and Iraq. Something else is operating here. That something else appears to be the fact that such displays of military might when visited upon non-Western (non-white) nations and peoples do not elicit moral outrage as did

similar Nazi and Fascist military acts against European nations in World War II. The obvious question then becomes, "why is this the case?" I would argue that the answer can be found at the point of intersection between the two levels of narrative discourse under discussion here. Since television news viewers are inscribed in contemporary news stories about Africa and the Third World in much the same way as were readers of 18th and 19th century literature, it should not be surprising that American audiences respond within the limits imposed²³ by the rhetoric of an ideological text. This becomes especially true when readers or viewers are constructed as historical subjects already familiar with the texts or the messages in question. Compare the presumed ironic recalling of Jules Feiffer's cartoon editorial published just last year:

Somalia suffers. And where are Somalia's leaders? Nowhere. Somalia suffers. And where are its African neighbors? Nowhere. Somalia suffers. And where is African American leadership? Nowhere. Somalia suffers. And who responds? George Bush. The White Man's Burden.²⁴

and the following stanzas from Kipling's canonized poem "The White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands":

Take up the White Man's burden-, The savage wars of peace-,
Fill full the mouth of Famine, And Bid the sickness cease; And
when your goal is nearest, The end for others sought, Watch
Sloth and heathen Folly, Bring all your hope to nought...²⁵

As Kipling's subtitle announces, there is an important ideological as well as aesthetic and artistic dimension that inform this instance of poetic narrative enonce. Because of its explicitly racist significations and characterizations this poem provides a fitting example of how such works, in order to be understood and enjoyed, require that readers hold or adopt similar racist thinking.²⁶ Clearly, the level of distanciation provided by representations of a savage and dehumanized other, an alterity with whom readers can in no way identify, as depicted in "The White Man's Burden," serves to desensitize a nation to the real human suffering that it inflicts on its articulated other as enemy. The ideological and political expediency engendered by racist literary modes of address as in "The White Man's Burden" becomes evident and undeniable when this poem is contextualized in terms of the Spanish American War at the turn of the century when America took possession of the Philippines. So that by making a direct reference to the Philippine

Islands in what equates with the poem's introduction, Kipling clearly is naming the Philippine peoples as the savage other.

The foregoing helps us to historicize "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" in a tradition of viewer inscription "in-the-text" that is a continuation of such practices ushered in with literary modernism. "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" is constructed more as a commercial fundraiser for capitalist relief organizations or as an apologia for the international mercenaries who trade on human misery and despair than as a serious journalistic treatise on this crucial and historic moment of our time. What this documentary lacks is historicity, contextualization and truth value. Perhaps the reason this text resonates with *Heart of Darkness* for me is that Conrad's literary texts seem to address if not identify the fictional construction of Africa that "*Somalia Behind the Scenes*" is at once grounded in and intent on eliding.

Finally, therefore, it seems that the incredible seductiveness of America's contemporary representation of a "darkest Africa" in need of America's civilizing light and humanitarianism can be linked to America's anxiety over the twin threats of multiculturalism and economic recession. (After all, Europe can trace some of its most horrific historic moments to episodes of domestic ills.) Internationally, we see that Europe and Japan rival America for technological and economic primacy in the post-Bush-Reagan era while internally America is confronted with a racial and cultural pluralism that threatens its Eurocentric socio-cultural hegemony. These destabilizing factors present late twentieth century America with formidable challenges not unlike those faced by the English empire in the 1890s²⁷ when *Heart of Darkness* was first published.

NOTES

¹Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), pp. 52-56.

²Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 170.

³Bill Nichols, *Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 107.

⁴Nick Browne, "The Spectator-In-The-Text: Stagecoach," in *Movie and Methods*, Vol 2, Ed. Bill Nichols (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 468-469.

⁵Browne p. 471.

- ⁶Unnamed Soldier, "Somalia Behind the Scenes," Fox News Special, Channel 11 News. Los Angeles, California, Jan. 1993.
- ⁷Joseph Conrad, "Heart of Darkness": A Case Study in Contemporary Criticism, Ed. Ross C. Murfin (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989), p. 148.
- ⁸*Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ⁹Doug Ireland, "So Maul Ya?" *The Village Voice*, Dec. 1992, p. 8.
- ¹⁰Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1957), p. 116.
- ¹¹Fox News Special, "Somalia Behind the Scenes," Channel 11 News, Los Angeles, California, Jan. 1993.
- ¹²Conrad, *Op. Cit.*, p. 32.
- ¹³"Somalia Behind the Scenes," Fox Channel 11, Jan. 1993.
- ¹⁴Anna Everett, "From Watts to South Central, Los Angeles: The Anatomy of Racial Politics in Riot Documentaries." Paper del. SCS, 1993.
- ¹⁵Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1983), p. 12.
- ¹⁶Bill Nichols, *Ideology and the Image* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981), p. 238.
- ¹⁷Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), p. 107.
- ¹⁸James Ridgeway, "Bay of Piglets," *The Village Voice*, Dec. 1992, p. 31.
- ¹⁹Mark Fineman, "The Oil Factor in Somalia," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 January 1993, A1.
- ²⁰Ridgeway, "Bay of Piglets," *Op. Cit.*, p. 31.
- ²¹Merriam Webster, *New Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Company, 1977), p. 769.
- ²²Associated Press, "3 Marines Hurt in Clash with Somali Snipers," *Los Angeles Times*, 26 Feb. 1993, A1.
- ²³Wolfgang Iser, *The Implied Reader* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), pp. 282-287.
- ²⁴Jules Feiffer, "Feiffer" (Cartoon), *Village Voice*, Dec. 1992, p. 5.
- ²⁵Rudyard Kipling, "The White Man's Burden," in *The Portable Kipling*, Ed. Irving Howe (New York: Viking Press, 1982), pp. 602-03.
- ²⁶Aldon Nielsen, *Reading Race* (Athens: Georgia University Press, 1988); Patrick Brantlinger, "Victorians and Africans: The Genealogy of the Myth of the Dark Continent," in *Race, Writing, and Difference*, Ed. Henry L. Gates (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1985), pp. 185-222.