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'You can't diddle with the truth'

In 1993, the US lost one chopper and the lives of 18 marines in a catastrophic mission in Somalia. Gladiator director **Ridley Scott** tells Giles Foden how he turned it into a movie

**Giles Foden**

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"The best stories," says Ridley Scott, leaning back and pulling on his cigar, "come out of the truth. I myself look more and more to things based on actual events." But establishing the truth as it concerns the American intervention in Somalia in 1993 is no easy matter. Even for a film-maker with such classics as *Blade Runner* and *Alien* under his belt, in choosing to make a movie in which US servicemen are torn to pieces by an African mob, Scott set himself a monumental task. One thing he was certain of from the outset: "When it's so recent and so vivid, you can't diddle around with it, you can't romanticise it."

Black Hawk Down**Release:** 2001**Country:** USA**Cert (UK):** 15**Runtime:** 146 mins**Directors:** Ridley Scott**Cast:** Eric Bana, Ewan McGregor, Ewen Bremner, Jason Isaacs, Josh Hartnett, Ridley Scott, Tom Sizemore[More on this film](#)

Black Hawk Down is based on a book of the same name by journalist Mark Bowden. It meticulously documents a mission to pick up lieutenants of Somali warlord Mohamed Farrah Aideed, in the course of which a Black Hawk helicopter is "downed" and 18 US soldiers are killed.

Before seeing it, and knowing certain details of its production, one might not think this film able to portray such events faithfully. It was made, under tight security, in Rabat, Morocco. The African actors were mainly not Somali. "I had a lot come up from Congo," says Scott. "I couldn't get as many Somalians as I wanted."

You could get Scott himself wrong, too. On the surface, as he sits in state at Claridge's, you wouldn't think this was a person who could have problems getting what he wanted. But for all his wealth and power - the Hartlepool-born 63-year-old still owns the world's largest commercials production house - he is polite and humble in person.

The crux of *Black Hawk Down* concerns the correct response to "rogue states" in a new

world order. Scott says he didn't set out with an agenda one way or the other. "Oliver [Stone] gets into a lot of trouble with that sort of thing, as in JFK and Salvador. I would make a film with a political point of view if I agreed with it, and even, perhaps, if I didn't. But with this one I don't think there were any answers, only questions...It asks the audience: what do you think, what would you do?"

The answer, for Scott himself, is to concentrate on craft. "That's my job, it's what I do...putting the audience actually in the scene, in the delivery and on the receiving end. Making them feel it."

The new film, brought forward as a consequence of September 11, has an acute bearing on the campaign in Afghanistan - for which, Scott says, Somalia was "like a dress rehearsal". A more sinister link has also become apparent: it is now clear that Osama bin Laden and officials of Iraqi intelligence - one promising "another Vietnam" - helped to plan the ambush.

How authentic can a film of this nature be, with such a pressure of reality behind it? Does being so close to the event make it more genuine or less? Is - I ask a man who, in Blade Runner, uniquely dismantled that key postmodern concept, replication - genuineness the point, anyhow?

"Well, I went into it wanting to be as accurate as possible. I always do. It was the same with Gladiator. We thought: what was Rome really like? It was a metropolis of a million people in those days, incredibly multinational. With this we knew we had to do it without gilding."

The "we" here must include producer Jerry Bruckheimer, whose Pearl Harbor, directed by Ridley's brother Tony, is generally agreed to have presented a very Americanised view of history.

Black Hawk Down's success lies in its drawing attention to the whole notion of representation. The action switches between the helicopters themselves, the screens of the Joint Operations Centre (JOC), and men on the ground in vehicles. The JOC is able "to watch the whole thing like a football game", says Scott. "You have the P3, which is the spotter plane circling above at 5,000 feet, relaying back pictures to JOC of a semi hi-tech reproduction; below that you've got four Black Hawks circling, which are all taking pictures."

The teams on the ground get lost under fire in Mogadishu's narrow streets, as directions are relayed to them by the helicopters. "The Black Hawks are orbiting in a pattern, clockwise or anti-clockwise, and they can't diverge from this or they will fly into each other."

This, in his view, "was the real juice of the film", the place where plot enacted theme - theme being the complexities of intervention in a country like Somalia. "It was like a three-layer chess game."

Citing *Three Kings* and the new *Behind Enemy Lines* (about a pilot shot down over Bosnia), I ask him what changes are happening in film now that it is increasingly depicting recent history. His answer again turns to craft: "I think movie-making has just become more expert in the face of these subjects, with different cameras and different techniques: they demand a more detailed way of looking at things."

It is, he argues, "a matter of procedure" - what modern soldiers do, how they react to certain situations, what machines and weapons they use.

Technology entrances him, but he won't offer a politics of it, or a theory of film based upon it. The thing itself is all. Ask him about the helicopter as the symbol of American militarism, and he will compare the heavier 'copters used in Vietnam with the more manoeuvrable Black Hawk. He's like a carpenter discussing a piece of furniture. It's not the ideas that count, but the wood, and how the wood is tooled.

Giles Foden's new novel, *Zanzibar*, is published by Faber in September. *Black Hawk Down* is released on January 18.

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