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Hollywood's Multifaceted Cause du Jour

By [MARC SANTORA](#)

IN 1938 a memo sent to Harry Oppenheimer, whose family founded the De Beers diamond cartel, outlined a bold new advertising strategy: "Motion pictures seldom include scenes showing the selection or purchase of an engagement ring to a girl. It would be our plan to contact scenario writers and directors and arrange for such scenes."

Ever since then, from [Marilyn Monroe's](#) baubles to J. Lo's rock, the diamond industry has used the reflected luster of celebrity to sell its wares, a shrewd marketing campaign that has helped to create a luxury business worth more than \$60 billion a year.

Diamonds are love. Diamonds are a girl's best friend. Diamonds are forever.

Diamonds, obviously, are much more than that. They are big business. They are hardly rare. And they have been used to finance some of the most brutal warfare of the last two decades.

It is those diamonds in particular — known as conflict diamonds — that have become a fashionable concern among entertainment figures, with stars ranging from [Leonardo DiCaprio](#) to Kanye West to Raekwon from the hip-hop collective Wu-Tang Clan speaking out about the need for consumer vigilance.

Just as the power of the entertainment industry was harnessed to create a desire, it has now been turned around to spotlight the high cost of that desire.

Next week the Warner Brothers film "[Blood Diamond](#)" will open in theaters across the country. Starring Mr. DiCaprio, [Jennifer Connelly](#) and [Djimon Hounsou](#), the tale is set against the backdrop of the chaos and carnage of the civil war that raged in the West African nation of Sierra Leone from 1991 until 2002. It was a war fought for control over the country's sizable diamond industry and paid for by the illegal export of its products.

Sierra Leone is also the backdrop for “Bling: A Planet Rock,” a VH1 documentary scheduled for broadcast in February in which hip-hop stars are seen visiting Sierra Leone and speaking out about the issue. Another documentary, “Blood Diamonds,” to be shown on the History Channel on Dec. 23, looks back at the history of conflict diamonds, again highlighting West Africa.

Finally, Sierra Leone’s Refugee All-Stars, a band made up of musicians who fled the fighting, has just released its first album and is making its first tour of the United States, including an appearance on the [Oprah Winfrey](#) show.

The diamond industry, well aware of the power of Hollywood image making, has taken notice. Through organizations like the World Diamond Council and the Diamond Information Center, the world’s largest diamond merchants have begun a multimillion-dollar marketing campaign to offset any bad publicity.

The industry has enlisted some powerful allies, receiving help from no less a moral authority than [Nelson Mandela](#), whose native South Africa is one of the world’s largest diamond producers. He sent a letter to Alan F. Horn, the president of Warner Brothers, and the director [Edward Zwick](#), saying it would be “deeply regrettable” if “Blood Diamond” led to the “destabilization of African diamond producing countries.”

Sally Morrison, a spokeswoman for the Diamond Information Center, said that when it came to that movie, the industry was worried “that this story would not be placed in a historical context.”

The campaign began in September as an effort to “educate both consumers and the trade about important diamond-related issues,” according to the World Diamond Council. In addition to placing full-page advertisements in 10 major newspapers, the diamond industry created a Web site, diamondfacts.org. Among other things, the industry stresses that under a 2003 agreement called the Kimberly Process, the major diamond merchants pledged to ensure that all diamonds entering the marketplace are monitored and verified.

In addition, Ms. Morrison said, diamond merchants have done their own outreach, contacting a range of people in Hollywood, from publicists to stylists, to help them understand the issues involved and the work that has been done to eliminate conflict diamonds from the marketplace. And she noted that they have worked with celebrities to show how diamond mining can help local economies in Africa. The impresario [Russell Simmons](#), who started his own line of diamond-encrusted jewelry two years ago, is currently on an industry-organized trip to South Africa and

Botswana to see how mining can have a positive impact. A similar trip was organized for the actress [Ashley Judd](#) last February.

The entertainment world's focus on conflict diamonds, and on Sierra Leone in particular, is in part deliberate and in part coincidental. But by far the project that is attracting the most attention is the coming Leonardo DiCaprio movie.

Alex Yearsley, whose work with the nonprofit human rights organization Global Witness first helped spotlight the issue more than a decade ago, said that throughout much of the 1990s, when the worst abuses and atrocities were occurring, it was hard to get anyone to notice. "The diamond industry plays an enormous role in the geopolitics of the region," Mr. Yearsley said.

Even the war in Sierra Leone, notorious for its brutality and the systematic severing of people's limbs by rebel soldiers, did not gain worldwide attention until the capital, Freetown, fell in 1999. As the war reached its climax, a script circulated in Hollywood that Mr. Zwick, the director of "Blood Diamond," said involved the hunt for a diamond but was "in the vein of an Indiana Jones movie."

As Mr. Zwick and his colleagues began to research the issue more deeply, he said, they were horrified by what they were learning. "It is like a pebble thrown into the pond," he said. "The ripples start to spread as they go out further." He said he decided instead to "tell many of the truths" of the war through a fictional movie, and brought in Mr. Yearsley and other experts on the diamond trade and the war as consultants. But Mr. Zwick said it was only when Mr. DiCaprio agreed to star that they got the green light for a big-budget movie.

Several other projects got under way following the end of the war in Sierra Leone, including the VH1 special. Its trailer shows graphic images of conflict — children with limbs lopped off, a dead man on the ground with his heart ripped out — juxtaposed with Western singers and rappers ostentatiously displaying their diamonds. (Last year Kanye West released the single "Diamonds Are Forever" but remade it as "Diamonds From Sierra Leone" after learning of the damage caused by the diamond trade.)

But the documentary, which was made in partnership with the [United Nations](#) Development Project, does not dwell on the past. Instead, according to its director, Raquel Cepeda, the goal is to help countries like Sierra Leone realize more profits from their natural resources.

“I am successful if I can get a rapper to talk about conflict-free diamonds,” Ms. Cepeda said in an interview. “We want to make social consciousness a cool thing to do when they are buying their diamonds.”

To that end, she organized a tour of Sierra Leone with the reggaetón star Tego Calderón; Raekwon of Wu-Tang Clan; and the rapper Paul Wall, a designer of the diamond tooth caps fashionable among some rap stars. (The rapper Nas has also become involved with the issue, helping score the soundtrack for “Blood Diamond.”)

Where the VH1 movie focuses on the future, the History Channel documentary “Blood Diamonds” examines the historical role diamonds have played in fueling wars in West Africa and Angola. Like all those involved in the various projects, Bill Brummel, the executive producer of the film, said his goal was not to get people to boycott diamonds but to make them aware of the “high human cost” of conflict diamonds.

That cost has been especially high in Sierra Leone, where many displaced people are even now fearful of returning to their homes, which the Refugee All-Stars are trying to encourage them to do. The band’s infectiously hopeful music and powerfully personal lyrics caught the attention of Joe Perry of Aerosmith after he saw a 2002 documentary about the band. His interest helped bring the musicians to the United States, where they have opened for Aerosmith.

“I believe that buying the diamonds illegally will cause trouble, and that is why Sierra Leone has been destroyed,” Reuben Koroma, the All-Stars’ lead singer and organizing force, said in an interview. “But if these diamonds are bought legally, and the profits were used for the benefit for the nation, I think Sierra Leone would be very well off.” Part of the problem, in Sierra Leone in particular, is that very little of the profit finds its way back to the people. The government officially gets a 3 percent commission on the rough stones, but since a diamond that sells for \$5,000 in America typically comes from a rough stone worth about \$500, that commission amounts to about \$15.

With all the focus on Sierra Leone and the worst aspects of the diamond trade, industry representatives recently approached the president of Sierra Leone, Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, and asked him to speak out about the benefits of the diamond trade. He complained about how little his country still benefits from the stones and refused to cooperate, according to the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Service.

Rosalind Kainyah, the director of public affairs in America for De Beers Group, the world's leading diamond merchant, said her industry was focused on the future and empowering Africans, though "in hindsight," she acknowledged, "there could have been an earlier drive for a solution" to the problem of conflict diamonds.

The intense lobbying effort illustrates what an awkward moment it is for an industry that has so carefully cultivated its Hollywood image. As Edward Jay Epstein noted in 1982 in his book "The Rise and Fall of Diamonds," De Beers's advertising agency, N. W. Ayer, bragged in a 1940 report to its client that after "a long series of conferences with Paramount officials, capped by your own efforts," it had "succeeded in changing the title of a film from 'Diamonds Are Dangerous' to 'Adventures in Diamonds.' "

The report also noted that the agency had gotten a scene inserted into the movie "[Skylark](#)" depicting [Claudette Colbert](#) selecting a diamond bracelet, and that in another film, "That Uncertain Feeling," [Merle Oberon](#) wore \$40,000 worth of diamond jewelry.

In 1948 an Ayer copywriter came up with the slogan "A diamond is forever." And by the time Marilyn Monroe performed "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" in "[Gentlemen Prefer Blondes](#)" five years later, the popular image of the diamond as the ultimate luxury item was set.

Now, all these years later, the entertainment world is turning the tables, trying to highlight the hidden costs behind that glittery image while getting audiences to recognize that, as Mr. Zwick put it, "Every time you put down your credit card, you are endorsing the way a corporation deals with the way it gets a resource from somewhere else."