

Me Tarzan, You Adam

How I Met the Ghosts of My Own Work in a Local Multiplex

By [Adam Hochschild](#)

Some time ago I wrote a book about one of the great crimes of the last 150 years: the conquest and exploitation of the Congo by King Leopold II of Belgium. When [King Leopold's Ghost: A Story of Greed, Terror and Heroism in Colonial Africa](#) was published, I thought I had found all the major characters in that brutal patch of history. But a few weeks ago I realized that I had left one out: Tarzan.

Let me explain. Although a documentary [film](#) based on my book did appear, I often imagined what Hollywood might do with such a story. It would, of course, have featured the avaricious King Leopold, who imposed a slave labor system on his colony to extract its vast wealth in ivory and wild rubber, with millions dying in the process. And it would surely have included the remarkable array of heroic figures who resisted or exposed his misdeeds. Among them were African rebel leaders like Chief Mulume Niama, who fought to the death trying to preserve the independence of his Sanga people; an Irishman, Roger Casement, whose exposure to the Congo made him realize that his own country was an exploited colony and who was later hanged by the British; two black Americans who courageously managed to get information to the outside world; and the Nigerian-born Hezekiah Andrew Shanu, a small businessman who secretly leaked documents to a British journalist and was hounded to death for doing so. Into the middle of this horror show, traveling up the Congo River as a steamboat officer in training, came a young seaman profoundly shocked by what he saw. When he finally got his impressions onto the page, he would produce the most widely read short novel in English, *Heart of Darkness*.

How could all of this not make a great film?

I found myself thinking about how to structure it and which actors might play what roles. Perhaps the filmmakers would offer me a bit part. At the very least, they would undoubtedly seek my advice. And so I pictured myself on location with the cast, a voice for good politics and historical accuracy, correcting a detail here, adding another there, making sure the film didn't stint in evoking the full brutality of that era. The movie, I was certain, would make viewers in multiplexes across the world realize at last that colonialism in Africa deserved to be ranked with Nazism and Soviet communism as one of the great totalitarian systems of modern times.

In case you hadn't noticed, that film has yet to be made. And so imagine my surprise, when, a few weeks ago, in a theater in a giant mall, I encountered two characters I had written about in *King Leopold's Ghost*. And who was onscreen with them? A veteran of nearly a century of movies -- silent and talking, in black and white as well as color, animated as well as live action (not to speak of TV shows and video games): Tarzan.

The Legend of Tarzan, an attempt to jumpstart that ancient, creaking franchise for the twenty-first century, has made the most modest of bows to changing times by inserting a little more politics and history than dozens of the ape man's previous adventures found necessary. It starts by informing us that, at the Berlin Conference of 1884-1885, the European powers began dividing up the colonial spoils of Africa, and that King Leopold II now holds the Congo as his privately owned colony.

Tarzan, however, is no longer in the jungle where he was born and where, after his parents' early deaths, he was raised by apes. Instead, married to Jane, he has taken over his ancestral title, Lord Greystoke, and has occupied his palatial manor in England. (Somewhere along the line he evidently took a crash course that brought him from "Me Tarzan, you Jane" to the manners and speech of a proper earl.)

But you won't be surprised to learn that Africa needs him badly. There's a diamond scandal, a slave labor system, and other skullduggery afoot in Leopold's Congo. A bold, sassy black American, George Washington Williams, persuades him to head back to the continent to investigate, and comes along as his sidekick. The villain of the story, Leopold's top dog in the Congo, scheming to steal those African diamonds, is Belgian Captain Léon Rom, who promptly kidnaps Tarzan and Jane. And from there the plot only thickens, even if it never deepens. Gorillas and crocodiles, cliff-leaping, heroic rescues, battles with man and beast abound, and in the movie's grand finale, Tarzan uses his friends, the lions, to mobilize thousands of wildebeest to storm out of the jungle and wreak havoc on the colony's capital, Boma.

With Jane watching admiringly, Tarzan and Williams then sink the steamboat on which the evil Rom is trying to spirit the diamonds away, while thousands of Africans lining the hills wave their spears and cheer their white savior. Tarzan and Jane soon have a baby, and seem destined to live happily ever after -- at least until *The Legend of Tarzan II* comes along.

History Provides the Characters, Tarzan the Vines

Both Williams and Rom were, in fact, perfectly real people and, although I wasn't the first to notice them, it's clear enough where Hollywood's scriptwriters found them. There's even [a photo](#) of Alexander Skarsgård, the muscular Swede who plays Tarzan, with a copy of *King Leopold's Ghost* in hand. Samuel L. Jackson, who plays Williams

with considerable brio, has told the press that the director, David Yates, [sent him the book](#) in preparation for his role.

A version of Batman in Africa was not quite the film I previewed so many times in my fantasies. Yet I have to admit that, despite the context, it was strangely satisfying to see those two historical figures brought more or less to life onscreen, even if to prop up the vine swinger created by novelist [Edgar Rice Burroughs](#) and played most famously by Johnny Weissmuller. [Williams](#), in particular, was a remarkable man. An American Civil War veteran, lawyer, journalist, historian, Baptist minister, and the first black member of the Ohio state legislature, he went to Africa expecting to find, in the benevolent colony that King Leopold II advertised to the world, a place where his fellow black Americans could get the skilled jobs denied them at home. Instead he discovered what he called “the Siberia of the African Continent” -- a hellhole of racism, land theft, and a spreading slave labor system enforced by the whip, gun, and chains.

From the Congo, he wrote an extraordinary “[open letter](#)” to Leopold, published in European and American newspapers and quoted briefly at the end of the movie. It was the first comprehensive exposé of a colony that would soon become the subject of a worldwide human rights campaign. Sadly, he died of tuberculosis on his way home from Africa before he could write the Congo book for which he had gathered so much material. As *New York Times* film critic Manohla Dargis [observed](#), “Williams deserves a grand cinematic adventure of his own.”

By contrast, [in real life](#) as in the film (where he is played with panache by Christoph Waltz), Léon Rom was a consummate villain. An officer in the private army Leopold used to control the territory, Rom is elevated onscreen to a position vastly more important than any he ever held. Nonetheless, he was an appropriate choice to represent that ruthless regime. A British explorer once observed the severed heads of 21 Africans placed as a border around the garden of Rom’s house. He also kept a gallows permanently erected in front of the nearby headquarters from which he directed the post of Stanley Falls. Rom appears to have crossed paths briefly with Joseph Conrad and to have been one of the models for Mr. Kurtz, the head-collecting central figure of *Heart of Darkness*.

The Legend of Tarzan is essentially a superhero movie, Spiderman in Africa (even if you know that the footage of African landscapes was blended by computer with actors on a sound stage in England). Skarsgård (or his double or his electronic avatar) swoops through the jungle on hanging vines in classic Tarzan style. Also classic, alas, is the making of yet another movie about Africa whose hero and heroine are white. No Africans speak more than a few lines and, when they do, it’s usually to voice praise or friendship for Tarzan or Jane. From *The African Queen* to *Out of Africa*, that’s nothing new for Hollywood.

Nonetheless, there are, at odd moments, a few authentic touches of the real Congo: the railway cars of elephant tusks bound for the coast and shipment to Europe (the first great natural resource to be plundered); Leopold's private army, the much-hated *Force Publique*; and African slave laborers in chains -- Tarzan frees them, of course.

While some small details are reasonably accurate, from the design of a steamboat to the fact that white Congo officials like Rom indeed did favor white suits, you won't be shocked to learn that the film takes liberties with history. Of course, all novels and films do that, but *The Legend of Tarzan* does so in a curious way: it brings Leopold's rapacious regime to a spectacular halt in 1890, the year in which it's set -- thank you, Tarzan! That, however, was the moment when the worst of the horror the king had unleashed was just getting underway.

It was in 1890 that workers started constructing a railroad around the long stretch of rapids near the Congo River's mouth; Joseph Conrad sailed to Africa on the ship that carried the first batch of rails and ties. Eight years later, that vast construction project, now finished, would accelerate the transport of soldiers, arms, disassembled steamboats, and other supplies that would turn much of the inland territory's population into slave laborers. Leopold was by then hungry for another natural resource: rubber. Millions of Congolese would die to satisfy his lust for wealth.

Tarzan in Vietnam

Here's the good news: I think I'm finally getting the hang of Hollywood-style filmmaking. Tarzan's remarkable foresight in vanquishing the Belgian evildoers before the worst of Leopold's reign of terror opens the door for his future films, which I've started to plan -- and this time, on the film set, I expect one of those canvas-backed chairs with my name on it. Naturally, our hero wouldn't stop historical catastrophes before they begin -- there's no drama in that -- but always in their early stages.

For example, I just published a book [about the Spanish Civil War](#), another perfect place and time for Tarzan to work his wonders. In the fall of 1936, he could swing his way through the plane and acacia trees of Madrid's grand boulevards to mobilize the animals in that city's zoo and deal a stunning defeat to Generalissimo Francisco Franco's attacking Nationalist troops. Sent fleeing at that early moment, Franco's soldiers would, of course, lose the war, leaving the Spanish Republic triumphant and the Generalissimo's long, grim dictatorship excised from history.

In World War II, soon after Hitler and Stalin had divided Eastern Europe between them, Tarzan could have a twofer if he stormed down from the Carpathian mountains in late 1939, leading a vast pack of that region's legendary wolves. He could deal smashing blows to both armies, and then, just as he freed slaves in the Congo, throw

open the gates of concentration camps in both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. And why stop there? If, after all this, the Japanese still had the temerity to attack Pearl Harbor, Tarzan could surely mobilize the dolphins, sharks, and whales of the Pacific Ocean to cripple the Japanese fleet as easily as he sunk Léon Rom's steamboat in a Congo harbor.

In Vietnam -- if Tarzan made it there before the defoliant [Agent Orange](#) denuded its jungles -- there would be vines aplenty to swing from and water buffalo he could enlist to help rout the foreign armies, first French, then American, before they got a foothold in the country.

Some more recent wartime interventions might, however, be problematic. In whose favor, for example, should he intervene in Iraq in 2003? Saddam Hussein or the invading troops of George W. Bush? Far better to unleash him on targets closer to home: Wall Street bankers, hedge-fund managers, select Supreme Court justices, a certain New York real estate mogul. And how about global warming? Around the world, coal-fired power plants, fracking rigs, and tar sands mining pits await destruction by Tarzan and his thundering herd of elephants.

If *The Legend of Tarzan* turns out to have the usual set of sequels, take note, David Yates: since you obviously took some characters and events from my book for the first installment, I'm expecting you to come to me for more ideas. All I ask in return is that Tarzan teach me to swing from the nearest vines in any studio of your choice, and let me pick the next battle to win.