

The genocide in Rwanda

Meaning-making through film

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Abstract: This article reviews four DVDs of recent films about the Rwandan massacres of 1994 and gives a summary of the history leading up to the violence. The author considers the inevitable bias of those who are in a position to write history, film as a tool for meaning-making, and the possible role of bereavement interventions in breaking vengeful cycles of violence.

Keywords: Rwanda, traumatic bereavement, film, meaning-making, cycle of violence

Editor's note: I spent two years living in Rwanda immediately after the genocide and heading up UNICEF's Trauma Recovery Programme, and it is hard not to be infuriated that so few of those who were in charge have been held accountable for the heinous atrocities they committed in that 100-day period between 6 April and 15 July 1994. The comments in this review about healing the survivors' grief and interrupting the cycle of violence are quite accurate. The least we westerners can do for the survivors is to provide a safe place for them to process their losses and grieve their loved ones' deaths in their own way, over time, in the presence of a caring person who can tolerate hearing their story in its rawest, unedited form. *Leila Gupta*

Much has been written in recent years about the ways in which bereaved people attempt to make sense of their loss by weaving it into a narrative of their lives. Sometimes this meaning-making is a highly creative endeavour which enables people to obtain a mature perspective on issues of life and death. At other times its consequences are destructive, as when it leads to the idealisation of the dead at the expense of those who survive, or to the hounding of people who are blamed unfairly for the death.

In the macrocosm of public death or disaster, the attempt at meaning-making is shared in narratives, myths and history. Film is but one of the media through which these narratives are created and it too can have constructive or destructive consequences.

Rwanda is a poor country in Africa, with no minerals or oil to attract richer countries. The genocide in April 1994 resulted in an estimated 800,000 deaths. These made little impact on the news in developed countries, vying as they were with the public trial of a famous boxer following the death of his wife. Even in the United Nations nobody seems to have taken the situation seriously. But ten years or so after the event four films about the genocide have now been released

and at least one more is in production. Each tells the story from a different point of view and each has added something to this reviewer's understanding of the awful events they portray. All have been made with the collaboration of the Rwandese authorities, but it is a truism that history is written by the victors and we need to be cautious in interpreting versions of events that are approved by one party in a conflict.

To make the films tolerable to a cinema audience, most of the horrors that took place are not seen, and those that are seen are viewed from a distance or only suggested. But what we do see is quite enough to discourage the tenderhearted viewer and, despite several prestigious awards, they may not get the viewing they deserve.

Hotel Rwanda

Perhaps the most successful, in cinematic terms, is *Hotel Rwanda*. This tells the story of Paul Rusesabagina, a Hutu hero who truly deserves to be remembered. Paul was promoted to manager of the Hotel Milles Colline, the best hotel in Kigali, shortly after the genocide broke out and the white managers left. The film is fascinating not only for the honest record it gives of the genocide, but also



Hotel Rwanda

Terry George (director)
Entertainment in Video,
2005
Run time 117 mins
£19.99



Shake Hands with the Devil

Peter Raymont (director)
Metrodome Distribution,
2005
Run time 90 mins
£19.99



Shooting Dogs

Michael Caton-Jones
(director)
Metrodome Distribution,
2005
Run time 110 mins
£19.99

for the skilful way in which Paul used his limited power to good effect. He lied, cheated, bribed, flattered and blackmailed the genocidal Hutus, and saved the lives of 1,268 people. He has rightly been christened Rwanda's Schindler.

One of the advantages of viewing *Hotel Rwanda* from a DVD is the opportunity to see the real-life Paul Rusesabagina, who is very much less glamorous than Don Cheadle, who plays him in the film, but all the more impressive for that. In fact I found his commentary on the film even more interesting than the film itself. Paul's wife is sensitively played by the well-known black actress, Sophie Okonedo, and the sturdy Nick Nolte, a white senior officer from the United Nations.

Shake Hands with the Devil

According to the *Hotel Rwanda* blurb, Nolte's character is a conflation of several UN officers, but he is obviously based on the most senior, Lieutenant General Romeo Dallaire. We meet General Dallaire in person in *Shake Hands with the Devil*, a documentary filmed in Rwanda and based on Dallaire's diary. It cleverly combines documentary footage taken during the course of the genocide with shots of the general's return visit ten years later. One feels humble and grateful to Dallaire for sharing memories that are still traumatic, as he revisits the places where he witnessed mass killings that he was powerless to prevent. He reports that, after returning home, he attempted suicide and received psychiatric treatment.

Dallaire made fruitless visits to the UN and wrote endless letters requesting that his force be strengthened. Instead the Belgians withdrew the cream of his 'peacekeepers'. This is not altogether surprising after ten of them were murdered and the Security Council refused to back them up, but their removal crippled an already inadequate force and broke Dallaire's heart. The Belgians had their headquarters in a school, the *Ecole Technique Officielle*, which became a refuge for several

thousand Tutsis, all of whom were murdered after the troops left. General Dallaire claims in the film that he would have sent other troops to replace the departing Belgians had he been told when they were leaving.

Dallaire acknowledges his ignorance of the political minefield in which he found himself and one cannot help but wonder whether a hotel manager who knows his customers, spends his life agreeing with them and massaging their egos, while cutting corners, concealing errors and managing a multi-cultural staff, would have made a better peacekeeper than a foreign Lieutenant General who only knew that Rwanda was 'somewhere in Africa'.

Shooting Dogs

The plight of the refugees in the *Ecole Technique Officielle* is the central topic of another film, *Shooting Dogs*, directed by Michael Caton-Jones. I attended the premiere of this film, which was shown in aid of the Medical Foundation for Victims of Torture, whose very existence reminds us that man's inhumanity to man is not confined to Rwanda. Here the events are seen through the eyes of a young filmmaker who is working for the BBC (played by Hugh Dancy). This enables a western audience to understand the conflict as it is explained to him. One of his informants is a Catholic priest, beautifully played by John Hurt, whose ravaged face reflects the destruction he encounters.

The film has been criticised for misrepresenting events: no BBC camera crew was sent to Rwanda and no Catholic priest sacrificed his life to remain with the victims of the massacre at the *Ecole*. However, these are minor quibbles and do not detract from the importance of the questions raised by this film. How can we privileged members of the United Nations justify the behaviour of our representatives? The UN troops were our troops and our governments showed incredible indifference to the suffering of our fellow human beings.



Sometimes in April
Raoul Peck (director)
Warner Home Video, 2006
Run time 140 mins
£7.99

Sometimes in April

While the three films reviewed above tell the story from the outside looking in, Raoul Peck's film *Sometimes in April* tells it from the inside looking out, from the point of view of a Hutu, Augustin (played by Idris Elba), who is married to a Tutsi wife, and is a father of three. His brother, Honoré, is a journalist who has helped to stir up hatred by broadcasting anti-Tutsi propaganda on the radio. Raoul Peck, who wrote and directed the film in Rwanda, and used many Rwandese in his cast, is himself acquainted with persecution, having been brought up in Haiti under the dictatorship of Papa Doc.

The narrative cuts back and forth between the events of April 1994 and the international tribunal, ten years later, when Honoré is on trial for genocide. The film ranges widely, covering many of the more notable events and sparing us little. It is rather too long (two hours and 20 minutes) to be bearable, and it is sometimes hard to follow the connecting threads; but the same could be said of the genocide, and the film brings home the helplessness and remorseless fear that must have permeated the whole community during the six weeks until the invading Tutsi army brought the killing to an end. Idris Elba, as Augustin, remains in a state of helpless desperation throughout, but it is the Rwandan women, notably Michelle Rugana and Ester Uweziye, who put feeling into the film and, paradoxically, make it more bearable. Debra Winger has a small part as the perplexed American senator Prudence Bushnell. This film is the only one to show the awful consequences of families divided against themselves and to acknowledge that the victorious Tutsi army also committed atrocities.

Discussion

All of these films point the finger of blame at the Belgian colonists and the indifference of the west but, however badly we may have behaved, there is more to it than that. History may be written by

the victors, but films, books and newspapers are no longer the only sources of historical narrative. Since the films came out, Paul Rusesabagina, now famous and living in Belgium, has appeared on YouTube and written on the internet accusing General Kagame of being responsible for four million deaths, including those of ten members of his own family (<http://taylor-report.com/articles/index.php?id=28>). I visited Rwanda a year after the massacres and felt lost and outraged. Since then I have been trying to make sense of it all, including writing a short paper on the subject (Parkes, 1996).

When the Germans arrived in Rwanda in 1894 the country was already being ruled by the Tutsi (Watusi), proud warriors who had dominated the Hutu majority for many years. The Belgians replaced the Germans after WW1 and maintained stability by supporting the ruling party. They regarded the Tutsis as a 'superior race' and used the methods of 'cultural anthropometry' to distinguish them from the 'inferior' Hutus and Twa pygmies – the third of Rwanda's ethnic groups – on their identity cards. Only after these methods had been discredited, following their use by Adolf Hitler, did the Belgians reconsider their policy.

The wave of African nationalism that arose in the 1950s triggered Hutu discontent and in 1963 Belgium decided to permit democratic elections. Thereafter it was the Hutu majority who held power. Many of the Tutsi warriors left or were driven out, to fight as mercenaries in the surrounding countries until, after a succession of massacres of Tutsis by Hutus, each of which precipitated another tide of refugees, their numbers had swollen to the point where they became strong enough to attempt a come-back. The invasion of 1990 by General Kagame's Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF) ended with a stand-off, with the UN brokering an uneasy truce. During the next few years both sides were held responsible for selective massacres of the other.

When President Habyarimana put his signature to the Arusha Accord in 1993, which divided power between Hutus and Tutsis, his

opponents mobilised for a 'final solution,' the president was assassinated (either by Hutu or Tutsi extremists), and the Hutu 'third force' was unleashed. The resulting genocide did nothing to stop the resulting Tutsi invasion that, in a few weeks, conquered most of the country. Many of the Hutu forces joined the two million refugees who poured out of Rwanda, thereby exporting the struggle to the surrounding countries, where it continues to this day.

The tragic narrative seems doomed to continue and we must ask ourselves what we can do to break this cycle of violence. As we have seen, violence begets violence and an important factor in perpetuating the cycle is the reaction to man-made traumatic bereavements and other losses, which so often lead to acts of vengeance. Those

who attended the International Conference on Bereavement in Contemporary Society in London in June 2005 will remember the standing ovation given to Leila Gupta, head of UNICEF's Trauma Recovery Programme in Rwanda, and the moving workshop led by her Rwandese colleague, Eugenie Mukanohele. They have engaged with the problems of grief and anger, which are natural reactions to traumatic loss, and, by promoting discussion and stimulating creativity, have attempted to break the cycle. Is it possible that the lessons that we learn from helping bereaved people can contribute to solve the wider problems of racial hatred and genocide? ■

Parkes CM (1996). Genocide in Rwanda: personal reflections. *Mortality* 1(1) 95–110.



Rwandan refugees in Goma, Zaire, 1994 ©Tuen Voeten