

FILM

## Filming the Unfilmable

The challenge of the genocide movie

By Katrina Onstad

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Don Cheadle as Paul Rusesabagina in *Hotel Rwanda*.  
Photo by Frank Connor. Courtesy United Artists

The recent, critically-acclaimed film *Hotel Rwanda* is based on a true story. The hero is a hotel manager named Paul Rusesabagina (played by Oscar-nominee Don Cheadle), a starched, politically polite businessman who turned a luxurious Belgian-owned hotel into a refuge for more than a thousand vulnerable Tutsis hiding from their bloodthirsty Hutu countrymen. In one scene, when the gruesome massacres that ended the lives of nearly a million Rwandans are well underway, Rusesabagina is shown at night, driving to get supplies with a colleague from the hotel. In the fog and darkness, it is unclear why the road beneath his jeep is covered with crevices and lumps. He steps out of the car and the mist parts to reveal a road covered in bodies ribboning into the distance: the cause of the bumping wheels.

*Hotel Rwanda* is a potent, moving depiction of an atrocity that only a decade ago went ignored by most of the world in both power corridors and private homes. But watching that scene, harrowing as it is, an astute filmgoer knows exactly what to expect. The strange, and perhaps dangerous, sensation one gets watching *Hotel Rwanda* is the unshock of the familiar; the specificity of what went on in Rwanda is, in a way, lost in the generic category “genocide film.” When the fog clears and the camera pulls back for the inevitable “reveal” – stacks of dead bodies – one recalls uncannily similar climactic moments in the 1984 film *The Killing Fields*, about Cambodian genocide, Roberto Benigni’s 1998 Holocaust film *Life is Beautiful*, and *Kundun*, Martin Scorsese’s 1997 depiction of the Chinese government’s atrocities in Tibet where the Dalai Lama, in a dream state, sees the bloodied bodies of Buddhist monks piled like laundry at his feet. Of course, such unimaginable moments have occurred, and are occurring, but do they lose their power when they become cinematic tropes, reducing horror to a plot point or a hero’s redemption? The danger of moviemaking is that it somehow levels genocide, and evil becomes as significant, or insignificant, as the predictable beats of a thriller or an epic weepie.

Famously, German philosopher Theodor Adorno remarked on the seeming impossibility of art after the Holocaust when he said: “To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.” Over and over in films with genocide as a subject, the complicated morality of making art out of atrocity sits anxiously next to the simple sentimentalism that defines Hollywood.

“These kinds of films always have to deal with an uneasy alchemy between atrocity and glamour, particularly in their marketing,” says director Atom Egoyan from his Toronto production office. Three years ago, Egoyan released a film called *Ararat* about Turkey’s murder and deportation of more than a million of its Armenian citizens in 1915. With an intricate framing device typical of his work, Egoyan used the background of a conventional historical drama to make a film that’s really about the complexities of making a film about genocide. Indeed, it seems almost like a direct response to, if not a refutation of, Adorno’s quote.

“As artists we can’t help but try and address the notion of commemoration. It’s part of our responsibility,” says Egoyan. “And yet I think we also have to address the complexity of it. You can’t just believe that it’s going to be a matter of solving something by showing it.”

Because the Armenian genocide is still hotly debated and denied by many Turks, *Ararat* was burdened with the peculiar difficulty of not only struggling to depict genocide, but also having to defend its very existence. The film received mixed to negative reviews, the poorest of Egoyan’s celebrated career.

“There are always going to be people who find that [a film about genocide] trivializes their pain, and they’re right,” says Egoyan. “It’s a perverse thing to say when we’re talking about genocide or atrocity, but one has to find a way of entertaining a viewer to engage with the drama, and that’s where it becomes unseemly. It was also my great challenge.”



**Christopher Plummer (left) and David Alpay in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*. Courtesy Alliance Atlantis**

The urge to entertain may account for the structural similarity between genocide movies, and that uncomfortable sensation that we’ve seen it all before.

“You have to choose a simple story. You need the hero. A happy ending helps, though if you’ve got the hero, you can get away with the unhappy ending,” says Samantha Power, author of the Pulitzer Prize-winning book *A Problem from Hell: America and the Age of Genocide*. But of course, by definition, genocide (defined by the UN as certain acts “committed with intent to destroy, in whole or in part, a national, ethnical, racial or religious group”) is the eradication of self, or selves, and therefore agency; it leaves almost no room for heroism.

“In a way, *Hotel Rwanda* had both the hero and the happy ending, which is really historically anomalous,” says Power. “That might be a problem, that people can come out of a Rwanda film and feel like: Wooh! Uplifting!”

Genocide in the movies is actually relatively new, at least in Hollywood. In fact, 80 per cent of films on the Holocaust have been produced in Europe. In her book, Power writes that the first American films after the Second World War didn’t mention the Holocaust at all, but were, instead, typical combat movies set on the front lines, or the domestic front when soldiers returned home. The 1959 film version of *The Diary of Anne Frank* elides reference to the Holocaust entirely. After test audiences recoiled, director George Stevens deleted his final scene, in which Frank is seen in a concentration camp uniform, and replaced the image with a more upbeat line, taken from the play: “In spite of everything, I still believe that people are really good at heart.” The 1961 film *Judgment at Nuremberg* shocked audiences by including documentary footage from concentration camps, but according to Power, not until the 1979 TV miniseries *Holocaust*, starring Meryl Streep, did an American fictional film actually attempt to represent the Holocaust in all its physical horror. The sheer scale of the imagery – thousands marching towards their deaths, gaunt, emaciated bodies in full view – was unprecedented for American audiences.

In recent years, filmmakers have grown bolder, and their films more graphic. The 2001 film *The Grey Zone* is an unflinchingly violent depiction of an armed uprising at Auschwitz starring David Arquette. Despite good reviews, it drew almost no audience,

suggesting that though new technologies allow filmmakers to portray almost any event with accuracy – from mass murder to the White House exploding – such advances don't guarantee a stronger emotional impact; quite the opposite, in fact. Genocide can come to look like just another special effect, which is perhaps why a biographical figure, like Rusesabagina or Oscar Schindler, hero of Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List* (1993), is still most filmmakers' chosen entry point into atrocity. The hero plot is a way of making something singular out of an experience – mass death – that is incomprehensibly collective.

Ian Merkel, a programmer with the Vancouver Jewish Film Festival for the past seven years, says the festival almost never opens with a violent film for fear of alienating the audience. "We would never show a very horrific movie on opening night. If we show more than two or three Holocaust films during the Festival, our attendance drops," he says. "Maybe there's just so much violence on television and everywhere now that people are sick of it. They don't want that kind of gruesomeness in films, too."



**Lt General Romeo Dallaire at Bisesero Genocide Memorial, Rwanda. Photo by Peter Bregg / Maclean's**

Documentary filmmakers approaching genocide struggle with their own responsibilities around explicitness. Canadian director Peter Raymont, who made the documentary

Shake Hands With the Devil: The Journey of Romeo Dallaire (winner of the World Cinema Documentary Audience Award at Sundance last week) about the Canadian UN general's return to Rwanda a decade after losing the fight to stop the slaughter, recalls the gut-wrenching task of sifting through the massive archive of Rwandan massacre footage he'd accumulated. One of his editors was physically unable to watch a journalist's tape of citizens having their heads cut off by machetes, no matter that the images were shot through trees with a long lens. "These are people who are dead or injured and you haven't asked for permission to use that footage, so you wonder: Does it serve a greater purpose or not?" asks Raymont. "When does it become exploitative?"

For Raymont, decisions about what to show, and what to excise, are based purely on instinct, and on the need to hold an audience. "You don't want to desensitize viewers to horror and violence, and of course that can happen if the footage is too extreme. On the other hand, it's important to convey the horror and the evil. I guess the question for feature film directors is can people tolerate more if they know it's fictionalized as compared to real footage – real dead bodies as opposed to fictionalized dead bodies."

The delicate, subjective nature of our responses to genocide on film was never more apparent than with the release of *Life is Beautiful*. The comedy – or, as Benigni defended it, the "fable" – is the story of an Italian-Jewish father who harbours his young son in a concentration camp by pretending they're playing an elaborate game of make-believe with the Nazis. The film won a slew of awards, including a Best Actor Oscar for Benigni, though some audiences and critics reviled it. Wrote David Denby in the New Yorker: "I came out of the theater feeling ash gray, as if my soul had been mugged." Denby believed that the film pandered to an audience "exhausted by the Holocaust...sick to death of the subject's unending ability to disturb." He called it "a benign form of Holocaust denial."

"*Life is Beautiful* didn't give me the feeling it should have," says Merkel, getting at the itchiness many experienced watching the scene where the fog parts to reveal a pile of

dead bodies that looked like cartoon characters. “The images weren’t stark enough. I’ve never seen such clean looking Holocaust survivors.”

Perhaps for a film about genocide to succeed, then, we need a balance: audiences will accept, even embrace, the compromises that all movies ask of them – to simplify the world; to make heroes and villains out of perpetrators and victims who may be both, or neither – but they also require some nod to the unshowable reality of the situation. *The Pianist*, Roman Polanski’s 2002 film about a Jewish musician surviving the Warsaw ghetto, struck exactly that balance: Polanski portrayed the bloody, chewed corpses of Nazi victims, and at the same time, the awesome human resistance to becoming one of those. In contrast, Benigni’s film was all hero, and no horror.

And yet, perhaps any film about genocide, no matter how flawed, is an urgent one. To mark the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz, the National Post released a COMPAS survey saying that less than a quarter of Canadian respondents, 23%, knew how many Jews were killed by the Nazis. More alarmingly, nearly the same percentage was unable to say whether the Jews were at fault for the Holocaust.

Samantha Power, who has traveled the globe documenting atrocities past and present, is on her way to East Timor this winter. She finds questions around cinematic depictions of genocide academic, and a luxury. “I’m just pragmatic at this point. If you sentimentalize a tad but tell a largely true story and you get, what, 200 people or five million people to swallow the bitter pill of genocide for the first time, that’s enough for me,” she says. “*Hotel Rwanda* is particularly powerful because it’s not a black-and-white genocide from ancient history. It’s genocide shot in colour in the present day. If we have to choose the more palatable Trojan horse, I’ll take it. Maybe the next film will be about Darfour. It can’t come soon enough.”

*Katrina Onstad writes about the arts for CBC.ca*