

Jigalong, Rwanda, Ararat: Film and Human Cultural Security

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This paper consists of three sections.

- In the first section, I will briefly indicate the contributions films can make to the dialogue on human cultural security, as exemplified in the Australian film *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, the UK/Italy/South Africa co-production *Hotel Rwanda*, and the Canada/France co-production *Ararat*.
- In the second, I will allude to the constraints that such films dealing with human security issues can encounter within the Hollywood system and its powerful global reach
- In the third, I will suggest an alternative to that Hollywood system as a possible way of taking advantage of the contributions film can make to human cultural security.

I the contribution of film to the dialogue on HS

Rabbit-Proof Fence, *Hotel Rwanda*, *Ararat*; what do these films have to say about Human Security?

The first two display many of the characteristics of the Hollywood film: they have high-calibre acting and production values, and strong, straightforward narrative lines that hold the viewers' attention. The central characters quickly trigger an empathetic bond with the viewers as they struggle with the central problem they face.



In *Rabbit-Proof Fence*, that problem is the plight of three Aboriginal girls who are forcibly taken from their family and homes in a reservation in Jigalong, Australia, and put into a resettlement camp at Moore River, 1500 miles away. The regimen at this camp is meant to train the “Aboriginal” out of them, to be replaced by dominant White values. This process, so the legislation of time argued, will thereby make them suitable for civilized society – or in the words of A.O Neville, the camp supervisor, that “will save them from themselves”.

The camp steadily strips the three girls of all the things that represented their Aboriginal cultural security: landscape, customs, home, family, and even that most basic cultural foundation: language, for they are forbidden to speak anything but English. They escape, and make a miraculous journey back through over 1500 miles of arid outback country to their home, eluding the increasingly frantic attempts of their captors to find them.

Appearing in 2002, at a time when the Oz government was attempting to come up with some legislation to address the plight of the Aboriginals, the film caused a sensation in Australia, because it portrayed in powerful cinematic language the genocidal brutality of

the resettlement law. For many Australians it was the first time they experienced the brutality of their own government's legislation through the empathy with the young girls that the film summoned up in viewers; Whites found themselves vicariously suffering under their own race laws. To any sensitive Canadian viewer with any awareness of our own country's equally barbaric residential schooling legislation for our First Nations people the fit is all too exact and unsettling.



The film Hotel Rwanda shares many of the strengths of Rabbit-Proof Fence. It too has a strong straightforward narrative line easily followed by the general public, and a gripping performance by Don Cheadle in the lead role as Paul Rusesabagina, the hotel manager who manages to save over 1200 Tutsis and moderate Hutus from the genocide that is engulfing the city all around them

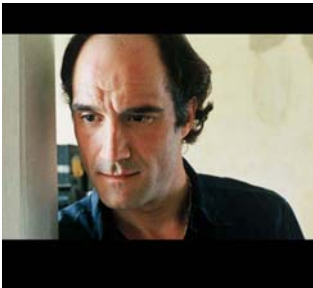
The horrors of the slaughter in Rwanda, are portrayed in a very muted fashion so the public is not repelled by the magnitude of them; for the most part we see them from afar, or after the fact. What does it do for our awareness of Human Security? Through Cheadle's portrayal it raises our understanding of the event, at an intellectual as well as an emotional level, and leads us to draw relevant parallels, as did Rabbit-Proof Fence. For instance, when I saw this recently at a special screening for POL students at U of T, in the discussion afterwards they quickly raised the question about the similarity of events in Rwanda to current ones in Darfur in the Sudan.

Atom Egoyan's film Ararat is a film about a film about the Armenian genocide in Turkey in 1917. Even this capsule summary tips us off that Ararat is the least "Hollywood" of the three films I have mentioned, in that it does NOT have a straightforward, linear narrative line. Ararat demands of its viewers that they follow the several interconnected levels of narrative and relationships running through it:

- the history of the Armenian genocide itself;
- the fictional narrative of the characters in the film within the film;
- the interrelationships of the actors in the film within the film;
- and finally, the off-off screen personal lives of the actors and crew of the film.



The film character Raffi, for instance, is played by David Alpay, a U of T student who originally auditioned as an extra for the film. Alpay was a spectacular find for Egoyan, because he embodied just what Egoyan was looking for in his casting search: the young innocent enmeshed in the politics of the historical situation. In addition, Alpay is himself of Armenian descent, so is for Egoyan a kind of cinematic Doppelgänger.



Similarly, Elias Koteas, who plays a Turkish official in the film within the film, is of Greek descent, so his relationship with his on-stage persona adds a historical complexity.

This complex set of narrative boxes-within-boxes in the film has admittedly caused many critics difficulty with the film – precisely because it does deviate from the full-speed-ahead kind of Hollywood linear narrative. But it is just that complexity that provides for the determined and patient viewer the power of the film. You struggle with Raffi to sort out these multiple intersections between past and present, and between relationships on and off-screen. In the process, you participate in the intellectual and emotional tug-of-war involved in living with history, and in trying to fathom the challenges of human security, whether in Armenian culture in early 20th century Turkey, or in the multicultural of early 21st Century Canada.

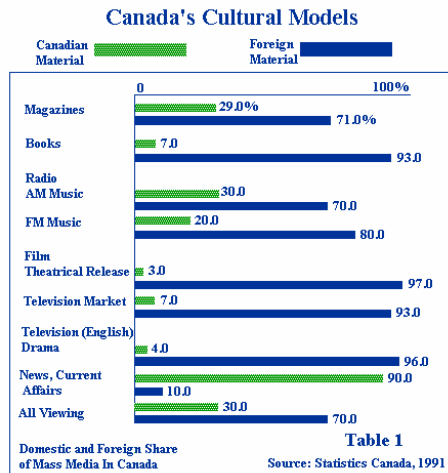
About this film Egoyan has said:

"My original impulse was to tell a straightforward historical story, but ... in the end, I want the film to be about the stories parents tell their children, how small moments of misunderstanding create huge generational riffs. ... You want people to know what happened, but also what continues to happen.... If you tell the truth, the trauma gets passed on. I want to create a fantasy of how that cycle might be broken—the healing which can occur when someone invests themselves in someone else's history in an emotional, responsible way."

It is exactly this last point – “the healing which can occur when someone invests themselves in someone else's history in an emotional, responsible way.” – that is the opportunity that film can present in the pursuit of human cultural security.

II The Constraints of the Hollywood System

All the films I have mentioned fell sufficiently within the Hollywood kind of film that they received wide general distribution here in Canada and elsewhere, even though the subject matter may have been close to being too “edgy” for the “entertainment industry”, as Hollywood bills itself.



But for films that transgress those bounds, the chances of success are daunting. In Canada Hollywood controls the classic vertical structure that ensures its stranglehold on film as a mass media: it makes the films, it distributes the films, it controls the theatres that show the films: or in the language of the business: the means of production, distribution, and exhibition. The result is that around 95% of the films seen in Canada are from Hollywood; and that huge percentage is little different for screens in Germany or in Britain.

So effective and global is this practice that other countries with aspirations to sharing in the “business of movies” even try to trade on the name of Hollywood. We speak of Toronto as being “Hollywood North”; India’s cinema in Bombay is “Bollywood”; and most recently, Nigeria’s film industry is being called “Nollywood”

III An Alternative to Hollywood

In Canada we have been complaining about this domination of the indigenous Canadian film industry by Hollywood since at least 1920, if not earlier. But it is unrealistic to expect anything to change. So in the spirit of Stephen Clarkson’s call for an alternate model, rather than the simple negativity of Anti-Americanism, I would like to propose that we look elsewhere for an effective forum for films that could serve in the cause of promoting human cultural security.

That forum, I believe, could be in the many Human Rights Film Festivals that have sprung up in the last few years. The two organizations that have been promoting such festivals for the last several years have been, not surprisingly, the two major human rights organizations: Amnesty International, and Human Rights Watch. Here is a list of just some of the festivals as noted by Amnesty International:

- [3 Continents Film Festival \(Asia, Africa, Americas\)](#)
- [Derhumalc \(Argentina\)](#)
- [One World \(Czech Republic\)](#)
- [\(A\)lliance Cine' \(France\):](#)
- [Perspective \(Germany\)](#)
- [Human Rights Nights \(Italy\)](#)
- [Amnesty International Film Festival \(Netherlands\)](#)
- [Human Rights in Film \(Poland\)](#)
- [Stalker \(Russia\)](#)
- [Seoul Human Rights Film Festival \(South Korea\)](#)
- [International Film Festival of Human Rights \(Spain\)](#)
- [International Film Festival on Human Rights \(Switzerland\)](#)
- [Human Rights Watch International Film Festival \(UK/USA\)](#)

And If further evidence is necessary of the spread of these festivals, then note the itinerary of the AI traveling film festival for this year within Canada:

AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL Travelling Film Festival (Canada) 2004/2005 Film Festivals and Film Nights

**UBC Human Rights Film Night –
Oct. 28
Vancouver – Nov. 3-7
Victoria – Nov. 19-21
Kelowna – Nov. 26
Kamloops – Dec. 10
Gabriola Island – Dec. 10**

**Abbotsford – Jan. 24-25
Kelowna – Jan. 28
Castlegar – Feb. 24
Nelson – Feb. 25 & 26
Kelowna – Feb. 25
Chilliwack – Feb. 28
Gabriola Island - March 4**

Tour of Northern BC

Prince Rupert - March 7, Kitimat - March 8, Terrace - March 9,
Hazelton - March 10, Houston - March 11, Smithers - March 12,
Prince George - March 14

**St. John's, Nfld - March 7-25
Kelowna - March 25
Vernon - March 29
Duncan - April 21
Gabriola Island - April 22**

**Saltspring Island - April 23
Thornbury, Ontario – April 23
Oakville, Ontario - April 23
Kelowna - April 29
Kelowna - May 29**

**Toronto - June 12
Ayfer Ergun's AGAINST MY WILL
Preceded by the short AI film FOR MY GRANDCHILDREN'S CHILDREN
7 pm, Camera Bar, 1028 Queen Street West**

Of the function of its festivals, Amnesty International says the following:

Few artistic media have the power to reach across cultures, languages, and even time itself to influence millions of people in the language of our daily lives. Film has such power. Each year dozens of talented filmmakers work against long odds, short finances, and threatening politics to bring to the screen powerful stories of human struggle, sacrifice, and triumph. Some documentary filmmakers have risked their very lives so that we may be moved by far-off stories that, once told, seem very much closer to home. The Amnesty International Film Festival is dedicated to bringing these stories to our communities so that our colleagues, neighbors, and friends can see for themselves the full-range of challenges facing people in every part of the world.

This proliferation of such HUMAN RIGHTS festivals has of course not gone unnoticed. Mr. Daan Bronkhorst, of the Amnesty International film Festival in the Netherlands has written on this phenomenon (Bronkhorst: *The Human Rights Film: Reflections on Its History, Principles and Practice*. Amnesty International film Festival. Amsterdam, 2003). He notes that

feature films have been of enormous importance in making a large public aware of Human Rights violations and political violence in “far-off” countries – the public of these films may be a hundred times more numerous than that of books or in-depth newspaper articles on the subject. ...The effect that we can expect of a good human rights film is that it broadens the consumer’s understanding (both in the intellectual and emotional meaning of the word) of human rights issues.

Festivals of course showcase their films in a context that enhances their impact. They not only promote the production of such films by guaranteeing a venue for them, but they also promote the broader discussion of the films by bringing together “film professionals, human rights experts and activists, politicians, writers and journalists, and other opinion makers.” (Bronkhorst, p. 2)

One recent and promising result of all this festival activity has been the recent establishment of “The Human Rights Film Network (HUMAN RIGHTSFN)” which was officially created on April 18th in Czech Republic at the “One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival”.

So the festivals are there, and the network to coordinate their activities is there. This situation presents a viable alternative to the Hollywood mass media system, since it provides alternate distribution and exhibition facilities, along with marketing and advertising possibilities via the Internet, among other possibilities.

If we think of the Canadian situation, we can look to the coordinated funding, distribution and showing of the riveting documentary *Shake Hands with the Devil: the Journey of Romeo D’Allaire*, by Peter Raymont. This film was produced in association with The

Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, and with funding by the Rogers Documentary Fund, The Canadian Film or Video Tax Credit, and The Canadian Television Fund.

Perhaps other collective ventures are possible involving the CBC, the NFB, the Canadian Film Development Corporation, maybe even the Federal government's involvement in the Human Security Network.

Professor von Bredow has commented that "We are now in need of practical suggestions how to implement the common culture of cultural differences.

The cultural sector itself is asked to respond to the challenge. The long list of problems human security has to deal with ... can be more successfully tackled when people in the cultural sector with their special talents contribute to focus our minds on these problems. It could help to raise the level of public awareness for the need to push the agenda of human security.

I conclude by suggesting that we could consider involvement in this area of cinematic activity as one of these responses to this challenge.