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The Role of Othering in the *Hotel Rwanda* Portrayal of the 1994 Genocide

The story of the Rwandan Genocide has at its root the perpetual tension of East vs. West, Heroes vs. Villains, an ultimately, Them vs. Us. Colonialism is, at is core, a sociopolitical policy justified through stigmatization of another culture, labelling and stereotyping a group of people to the point where they become a representation of "otherness" to the dominant culture (McCordic, 2012). A major criticism of George's gaze in the film Hotel Rwanda, is that Paul is marginalized and depicted as other, thereby minimizing his status as a hero. However, I argue that by us validating this criticism, we, too, are subscribing to the subconscious idea of otherness. We are buying into the Western way of thinking either/or rather both/and. Paul is a study in contradictions in that he is both Hutu and Tutsi, and yet he rises above the temptation to partition his community into Right/Wrong. I believe George was acutely aware of the failure of the Western world to empathize and understand the tragedy of the Rwandan genocide. To shed light on our moral failure to intercede, I believe George intentionally depicts the Rwandans as Other, including Paul.

The level of awareness in today's society regarding international events is an issue many filmmakers decide to address; however, this naturally becomes a short-sighted view into another culture and often fails to respect the people as individuals, only seeing them as 'other'. In western filmmaking it is easy to misrepresent other cultures, in fact, storylines often rely on the

use of cultural stereotypes to give identity to the characters in contradiction with what is presented as the 'other'. The film *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) tells the story of the extreme bravery of a Rwandan man Paul Rusesabagina, played by Don Cheadle, amidst the tragedy of the Rwandan Genocide of 1994 that saw almost one million civilians brutally murdered in just one hundred days. Director of the film, Terry George, presents the complex reality of the economic division of the Hutu and Tutsi, and the social and political repercussions that transpired when that division was exploited. During the Belgian colonization of Rwanda following World War I, the colonizers assumed the Tutsi were more Caucasian because of their lighter skin and thinner noses and therefore were meant to rule over the Hutu. The Belgians gave the Tutsi privileges such as western-style education and granted them power over the Hutu, enforcing Belgian rule. Made to carry around identity cards, the conflict between the two groups eventually escalated to Hutu militias chopping up Tutsi bodies with machetes. *Hotel Rwanda* follows the experience of Hutu Paul Rusesabagina as he works to protect his Tutsi wife and family during the dangerous time following President Habyarimana's assassination and the beginning of genocide. Paul's job as manager of the H*ô*tel des Mille-Collines challenges him to try to save them all, as he heroically opens his doors in protection for those who escaped the machetes of the *Interahamwe* militia.

Paul is able to use his skill as a hotel manager to thwart the Interahamwe's goal to exterminate the entire Tutsi population. Paul uses his personal and professional connections to courageously save more than 1,200 Hutu and Tutsi refugees from their horrific fate. Raised by a father who provided for both the Hutu and Tutsi in need and married to a Tutsi wife, Tatiana, Paul does not hesitate to see the humanity and worth in a person, regardless of their tribe. As his goal to protect his Tutsi family expands first to his neighborhood, and then his entire hotel,

Paul's heroism is the main focus of the film. While this the film is often criticized for presenting an oversimplified portrayal of Rwandans, it is important to realize that the director, Terry George, approaches the story of the genocide as a biopic. In a Masterclass promo he speaks about the importance of flawed characters, and how filmmaking to him is about telling the story of an ordinary person that through challenging a particular evil manages to find a greatness within themselves, as they triumph over evil (Creative, 2018a). The film focuses then on Paul's deep feelings and concerns as he tries to save the nameless victims of this postcolonial catastrophe. The rare attempt to portray human tragedy on both a communal and intimate level is not only a harrowing task, but a near impossible one to successfully achieve. Because of this, the film fails to recognize victims as citizens and individuals. In placing so much emphasis on Paul's heroism, the focus is never on the victims or the killers, themselves, as Paul is the only fully developed character. Some are critical of the film for this reason, however, George did not fail to capture the magnitude of the impact of the genocide; in order to tell the compelling story of one man, he cannot tell the story of each. By focusing on Paul's story and showing his human flaws, George is able to get the audience to empathize with Paul's character early on in the film.

The perfect hotel manager, before the genocide Paul had trained for this job in Belgium and Switzerland to become well-versed in the level of elegant service expected by his European guests. However, Terry George explains, that this is both his greatest strength and greatest weakness as the story begins. His European training taught him how to be skillful in bartering and pleasing people but it also developed in him a superiority complex over the rest of the Rwandans (Austin, 2015). When first we meet Paul, he is buying a case of Cuban cigars with which to grease his business dealings with the Rwandan and foreign elite who congregate at his hotel. Always wearing a suit and tie, he presents a European demeanor and level of refinement which begins his character development but also helps the western audience to empathize with him, despite his ethnicity and cultural otherness. Introduced as a man without politics, Paul is equally friendly with UN's Colonel Oliver as he is with the top figures of the Rwandan army and the Interahamwe militia themselves. As a known Tutsi sympathizer, because of his wife and mother, Paul is able to win over any person that comes into the hotel, no matter if they are his enemy or friend. However, the way Paul looks down upon other Rwandan's is hard to miss, he argues with his employee Gregoire, as he has taken a hotel room of his own, something Paul does not see as being meant for his use. After reviewing the film's script, I believe the turning point in Paul's perceived connection to European respect, takes place in his conversation with Coronel Oliver in the hotel bar.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu0BzCq49cc

Just after the arrival of a large fleet of UN soldiers to help save everyone, Paul and the Rwandans are overjoyed with relief, even reaching out and hugging the stoic soldiers as they stand emotionless with guns. The good-hearted Coronel Oliver runs out to speak to them, before retreating to the bar, defeated. There he tells Paul that he should spit in his face, he makes it clear

to Paul why the West won't do anything to help stop the killings. "We think you're dirt, Paul," he explains sadly, "You're black. You're not even a nigger. You're an *African*" (Pearson, 2004). He tells Paul that even though he is the smartest of them all, he is nothing but a distant statistic to them, as he tells him that the soldiers aren't going to help stop the slaughter. Only there to evacuate their diplomats, businessmen and journalists, the soldiers left the Rwandans to die, thousands to be killed strategically every 20 minutes, by the cruel and dull blade of a machete. This is the moment where Paul realizes that those he sees as his allies, the very people who inspire him and upon whom he relies on for help, are in no way his friend or ally. They are alone. Paul watches the soldiers drive off with the rescued Westerners, as the rain pours down drenching Paul. Someone offers Paul an umbrella, but he does not take it, as it is too late. This symbolic scene shows Paul's personal crisis and experience of reality, as he no longer knows where he belongs, or what he is to do.

Momberg, in her study of *Hotel Rwanda*, talks about the importance of Paul's second cleansing, which takes place in a shower scene after witnessing the massacred bodies paving the

streets. Up to this point in the story Paul has acted purposefully to make his hotel, full of refugees, still look like a well-managed and tidy business. It seems now that the very foundation of his beliefs has been shattered, as the audiences looks at a man in pure anguish, stripping away the cultured outer layers, reminding of him of his true identity as a non-Westerner. As explained in *A Dictionary of Symbols*, "Immersion in water signifies a return to the pre-formal state, with a sense of death and annihilation on the one hand, but of rebirth and regeneration on the other, since immersion intensifies the life-force" (Cirlot, 2001). After being left behind by the people he had trusted, and after witnessing the atrocity of his own people killing one another, he experiences an intense spiritual crisis. Gasping on the floor of the shower, covered in blood that is not his own, his second immersion in fluids seems to awaken his mind to rediscover the importance of his communal Rwandan roots. Following Paul's intense scene in the bathroom, Paul's social values no longer show the same individual perspective as before, instead he extends himself to encompass those who have been displaced (Momberg, 2016). Going as far as to blackmail General Bizimungu of the Rwandan Armed Forces, using his bartering skills to threaten the General that if he refuses to help them, that Paul would make sure he would be tried as a war criminal of the genocide. Paul no longer wears his European suit and tie, as his integrity is now realized in his ability to protect others, as he works to become the help that they can no longer wait for.

As the films stands, much like Spielberg's *Schindler's list*, it tells the story of the small percentage of people that survived a genocide, and not about the $3/4^{th}$ of Tutsi population that were killed. In an interview with director Terry George, he talks about the importance of making this story a universal one, because as he explains it truthfully, "Nobody gave a shit about Rwanda when it happened" the world only turned their heads away (Austin, 2015). The

government-trained Hutu militia's attempt to exterminate all the Tutsi remaining in Rwanda was appallingly met with very little opposition from outside powers. What makes this incident so damning to the overall impact of western influence, is the simple fact that the ethnic division that tore Rwandans apart, and led them to start killing each other, was introduced and enforced by the west, founded on Belgium colonialism. It was the colonizers who exploited slight physical differences between the tribes and partitioned the people into artificial castes, that they themselves, had not previously recognized, being a western concept. They also introduced the concept of inherited, permanent, documented social classification into a culture where previously, social standing was actually fluid. This artificial social construct pitting Rwandans against each other that led to the death of almost a million people was simply regarded as not the West's problem. Though it would have been simple to only tell the story for the purpose of shaming the West for standing by, watching innocents be hacked to death, George felt that it was vital for people to understand what had happened and highlight the atrocity of seeing the victims as other. George wanted the Western audience to maybe react differently to a similar event in the future.

The film has met with much criticism for not telling the true story. But I argue that role of the filmmaker is not to tell the true story. According to Brecht's paradox, known as the Alienation Effect, in order to give an audience freedom of interpretation, there is a need for distancing the film from reality (Mboti, 2010). This illustrates Bazan's concept, as presented in *The Ontology of the Photographic Image* that the painter can only paint the world the way they see it. The film represents reality in a certain way so as to compel the audience to notice certain things and to miss others. As Shohat and Stom explain in their book *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, ""Reality" is not self-evidently given, and "truth" is not immediately "seizable" by the camera.

We must distinguish furthermore between realism as a goal and realism as a style or constellation of strategies aimed at producing an illusionist "reality effect"" (Shohat, 2014). George's ability to tell the story frankly was understandably hindered by not only the horribleness of the truth, but also the West's blame for it. Instead of intending the film as an attack on the Western thinking, George simply wanted to slowly tune our thinking, as he re-opened the eyes of West to the travesty of the genocide.

George is trying to draw our attention to the binary splitting caused by colonization, that resulted in the Rwandan tribal violence. To do this he must force us to see our own tendency to rely on these clichés, to categorize people. To do this, though he uses Paul's character to develop empathy in the Western audience, but he does not do it completely or so efficiently, thereby allowing Paul to paradoxically be a symbol of Otherness. Allowing Paul to remain both a symbol of Otherness and a path to empathy with the western audience, heightens our awareness of our tendency to think in binary terms, Paul can be both. In fact, Paul's characters comes to represent Otherness but also the solution to bridge the cultural divide. The director attempts to make us see the influence of our Western, binary minds, in our chosen blindness to the genocide as it happened, but in order to do that he still has to make us feel comfortable talking about it.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5tz8013avVU

In this scene from the film, the reporter, Jack Daglish, played by Joaquin Phoenix, is forced to leave the hotel after falling for a beautiful Tutsi woman. His response to having to leave someone he cares about to be killed, just because the color of their skin, defines a pivotal moment in the film. As the women begs for him to stay with her, she tells him that she will be chopped up in the streets, Jack's guilt compels him to give her all his money, desperate to do anything to change the situation. As he walks through the rain, to the bus, a Rwandan hotel

worker runs out behind him with an umbrella, and in what has always been my favorite line of the film, he response “Jesus Christ I’m so ashamed” (Pearson, 2004). As he walks away from the innocent Rwandans left for death, his character’s shame and anguish are what George wants Western audiences to understand and experience, so as to prevent them from making the same mistake again.

After analysis of this postcolonial film, it is hard to deny how alienated the audience remains from the victims of the genocide. Because of the film’s success, much of the West was awoken to the ghastly atrocities that occurred only a decade before the film’s release in 2004. After being nominated for three Oscars, the film also won a number of awards from the Berlin and Toronto International Film Festivals. The film even got the company *Starbucks* involved in Rwanda, as well as served to directly benefit the campaign in Darfur (Creative, 2018b). The film was loved by Rwandans, and after a private screening of the film with President Kagame and his parliament, Terry George can attest to how happy they were with the film. George uses the story of Paul’s experience through the genocide, to allow the West to see how dangerous binary thinking is and how potentially tragic to minimize our fellow man as a flat “other”.

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