

Susanne Peters, Klaus Stierstorfer, Laurenz Volkmann (Eds.)

Guest Editor: Dirk Vanderbeke

Film

Part II

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Part II

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Martina Mittag

Terry George, *Hotel Rwanda* (2004)

Stereotypes abound when it comes to African cultures: Where the Americas, Australia, and – in the last decade – East Asia attract student interest for a variety of reasons, the African continent continues to be associated with common simplifications of AIDS, poverty and war. For individual countries like South Africa, these views might be mitigated somewhat through tourism and – recently – the World Cup, although these barely touch on complex historical and political phenomena. One way to raise student interest beyond the always-already known and help them develop a deeper understanding not only of inner-African conflict, but also of European complicity in African politics is the movie *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) about the 1994 Rwandan genocide in which almost one million people were killed. Directed by Terry George from a script he wrote with Keir Pearson, the film shows the true story of hotel manager Paul Rusesabagina who in the midst of horrific massacres saved over a thousand refugees from certain death while the international community closed its eyes. With many survivors of the genocide participating as actors, differentiation between fact and fiction is one of the central challenges for students, which could be met by intense research. With the humanitarian message at its centre, learning objectives go beyond broadening students' cultural horizons and studying diversity and prejudices to focus on a recognition of their role as global citizens.

Synopsis

In the midst of a smouldering conflict between the Hutu and Tutsi population of his country, Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle), hotel manager of the Belgian-owned luxury hotel Mille Collines in Kigali, is mostly concerned with the continuation of the hotel's four-star service for his predominantly European guests. But then Hutus start attacking their Tutsi neighbours with machetes and burn down their houses, and a large group of Tutsis asks for refuge at the hotel. Rusesabagina helps them and many others to come, orphans brought by the Red Cross, children of slaughtered parents, surviving victims, his own large family and their neighbours. He tries to protect his new guests by bribing the general of the Hutu militia with Scotch, beer and money and calling for European and United Nations assistance. Only slowly does he understand that no help is in sight and even the UN soldiers in the country – led by Canadian Colonel Oliver (Nick Nolte) – will not take up arms to put an end to the massacre. Nevertheless, he not only manages to survive along with his wife

Tatiana (Sophie Okonedo) and three children, but saves more than one thousand lives, most of the refugees he has sheltered.

Hotel Rwanda was nominated for multiple awards, including Academy Award nominations for Best Actor, Best Supporting Actress and Best Original Screenplay. The film also won a number of awards including those from the Berlin and Toronto International Film Festivals and Amnesty's "Enduring Spirit" Award. The real Paul Rusesabagina, his wife and other survivors of the massacre assisted film director Terry George's research in Rwanda, thus increasing authenticity and the humanitarian appeal of the film.

***Hotel Rwanda* in class**

A lesson series about *Hotel Rwanda* necessarily needs to start off with research on the historical and political background of the 1994 genocide. Helpful material can be found in the film's companion book, *Hotel Rwanda: Bringing the True Story of an African Hero to Film*, which includes articles chronicling the historical events and aftermath, a brief history and timeline, the story of the making of the film and the complete screenplay. There are also a number of relevant internet resources,¹ which students can consult during their research phase (see further reading and sources). Apart from focussing on immediate causes of the genocide in 1994, research must include the colonial roots of the conflict: Rwanda was part of German East Africa after the Helgoland-Sanzibar treaty of 1890; it was Belgium that accepted the League of Nations Mandate to govern Rwanda after World War I. and after 1945 remained administrative authority until Rwandan independence in 1962. Under Belgian rule ethnic identity cards were introduced for the three existing ethnic groups, emphasizing group identity while ignoring different cultures and languages. Belgian privileges to the Tutsi elite also contributed to increasing ethnic tension, which after the Hutu Revolution of 1959, the abolition of the Tutsi monarchy and the foundation of a republic continued between the two dominant groups, leading to severe losses and streams of Tutsi refugees to the neighbouring countries. After independence, Rwanda became a Hutu-dominated one-party state (with Belgian support), that suppressed any political opposition from the now-powerless Tutsi. Continuing violence shaped relations between these two groups through the following decades, sweeping over the borders and leading to a civil war situation that included the neighbouring countries of Burundi and Uganda. After the Arusha Accords were signed in 1993 to stop increased violence triggered by the Rwandan Patriotic Front's (RPF, a Tutsi-dominated rebel group) invasion from neighbouring Uganda, all plans of equal power to both groups were destroyed when the president of Burundi, a Hutu, was assassinated. The whole area was at war. The peacekeeping force sent by the UN, led by Lieu-

1 E.g. <<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/rwanda/etc/cron.html>> and <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/africa/3580247.stm>>.