

Hotel Rwanda



BACKGROUND TO THE STORY

There are two major ethnic groups in Rwanda, the Hutu and the Tutsi. Tension between these has been a feature of Rwandan life for generations even though they speak the same language, follow the same traditions and live in the same areas. When the country was colonised by the Belgians in 1916 they claimed that the Tutsi were superior to the Hutu based on the idea that their skins were lighter and their features more European. The Belgians made the Tutsi the ruling class, giving them better jobs, housing and educational opportunities and charging them with keeping the Hutu 'in their place'.

Not surprisingly, resentment amongst the Hutu built up and in 1959 20,000 Tutsi were killed in a series of riots. Many fled to neighbouring Uganda where the children of these refugees formed the Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). Their aim was to overthrow the President of Rwanda, Juvenal Habyarimana and return to their homeland. A peace settlement between the President and the RPF was supposed to bring a halt to the unrest but it was ineffective.

In April 1994 the President's plane was shot down, sparking a campaign of violence in which over 800,000 Rwandans were killed in the space of 100 days. Although it is still unclear to this day who was responsible for his assassination, the presidential guard retaliated by murdering members of the political opposition and the Hutu seized their opportunity to redress years of repression. Tutsi people were slaughtered by the thousand, hunted out of their homes, killed with guns or machetes and left to die on the road. An unofficial militia group called the Interahamwe ('those who attack together') were responsible for much of the violence but soldiers and police officers were also to blame. Hutu civilians were forced to murder their neighbours and children were not spared in an insane effort to wipe out the next Tutsi generation.

Although news reports of the slaughter reached the West via the TV crews covering the unstable political situation before the outbreak, little was done to help the Tutsi. Whilst foreign governments evacuated their nationals they did not send military help to Rwanda, and the United Nations peace-keeping force stationed there at the time of the outbreak were ordered to remain neutral. The UN withdrew their forces after ten soldiers were killed.

In July the Tutsi-led rebel RPF captured Kigali, the Rwandan capital and the government collapsed. Over two million Hutu fled to the Democratic Republic of Congo and UN troops arrived with aid workers to help restore order and provide basic services. Many of those responsible for the massacre have still not been brought to justice.

TELLING THE STORY

Terry George, the director of *Hotel Rwanda*, stated that he made the film as 'a message for peace'. He believed that even though Western media reported what was taking place in Rwanda between April and July of 1994, many people were not really aware of the brutality and scale of events or even if they were, could not imagine exactly what this meant in human terms. He also felt that it was important to point out the lack of support from the West for the Rwandans going through this crisis.

It is true that news reportage of what is happening in a small country thousands of miles away can seem irrelevant to our daily lives here in the UK. It is also sadly true that we have perhaps become conditioned to hearing about violence through the media and that it no longer has the impact that it once had. Stop for a moment and think about the following:

- Before you saw the film or read the background information in this guide, did you know about the Rwandan genocide? Did your parents?
- Would the news from Rwanda have had more effect on us if it had been taking place in a state in the USA? How about if it had happened in Scotland?
- Why do you think the West did little to intervene? Are you surprised by the neutrality of the UN forces stationed there?

Hotel Rwanda is a powerful and moving film about the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. Terry George could have chosen to make a documentary about what happened but instead he focused on the story of Paul Rusesabagina, manager at the Belgian-owned Mille Collines hotel in the capital, Kigali. Paul risked his own life and that of his family to shelter Tutsi refugees in the hotel, protecting them by whatever means possible from the rebel troops as the violence in the city escalated to mass murder of anyone who did not support the warring militia. Thanks to Paul's heroism, over 1000 Tutsis were saved.

- What are the typical features of a documentary film? Does Hotel Rwanda make use of any of these?
- What do we gain by learning about the story of the genocide through the way it affected Paul and his family?
- Do we lose anything by seeing the story in this way?
- What actual violence do you see? How do you feel about the way in which it is presented? Does it effectively convey what is happening at the time?
- Paul has been compared to Oskar Schindler, the factory owner in 'Schindler's List' who saved many Jewish people from certain death at the hands of the Nazis. In what ways are their stories similar or different?

A TRUE STORY

The publicity for Hotel Rwanda states that it is 'a true story.' Whilst there is no doubt in factual terms that this is the case and that Paul Rusesabagina was involved from the very start in the making of the film, the film is not a day by day account of what happened during the three month period. It is a representation of what took place, featuring events chosen by filmmaker Terry George in collaboration with Paul and the scriptwriters. Decisions are then made as to how to film these events – what exactly to show, where to put the camera so as to present the audience with a certain viewpoint, what sound to include or add to create a certain atmosphere and so forth.

- Can you think of a scene in the film where Paul is not on screen? What effect does this have on our perception of events and the part he plays in them?
- Think of the scene where Paul does not know what has happened to his son Roger. How does the fact that we see the action from his viewpoint build the suspense?
- Think of the scene where Paul has arranged a romantic supper for his wife on the roof. Their view of the stars is interrupted by gunfire traces and he talks to her of the necessity for suicide from this very roof if the soldiers come for their family – is this just a coincidence? What other scenes in the film do you think may not have taken place exactly as we see them on screen?
- Think of the scene where Paul desperately tries to find enough money to pay the rebel soldiers for the lives of his family, friends and neighbours. Where do we view the action from? Are we Paul? Are we one of the crowd on the ground? Or are we elsewhere? Why was this decision made by the filmmaker?
- What events in the 100 days may have been edited out?

REPRESENTATIONS OF DIFFERENT GROUPS

The way in which the filmmaker chooses to represent different groups of people in Hotel Rwanda affects the way in which we view their role in the story. The clothes they wear, the props they carry, the colour of their skin and hair, the way they speak and exactly what actions we see them performing are all carefully thought out and all contribute to our opinion of each group.

NON-RWANDANS

Consider for instance the non-Rwandan people staying in the hotel. Many of these are very white-skinned, with blond hair and very western clothes. We see them drinking cocktails in the bar even several days after the violence has begun and later, hassling at the reception for service. One of the most memorable images in the whole film is when we pan along the coach windows in the rain; their faces are on the whole expressionless. The last frame then shows a woman with a small dog in her arms and a man taking a photo.

- What is it about seeing the dog that is particularly shocking?
- How do you feel about the man taking the photo?
- Why do you think their faces look like they do, in the coach shot?
- Why is it disturbing to see them drinking cocktails in the bar at this time? What else would you have done?
- Would you have got on that coach? – be honest!

RWANDANS

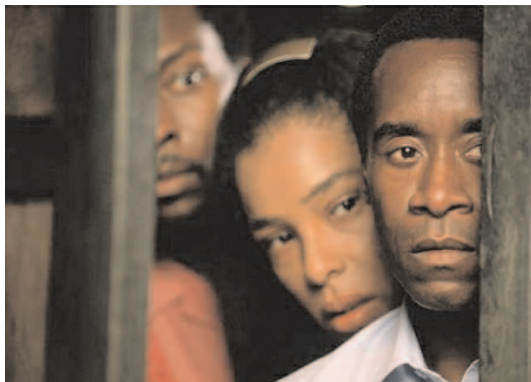
There is a brief period at the beginning of the film when we see the Hutu and the Tutsi living and working together as normal. Filmmaker Terry George uses this opportunity to make the point that the physical and cultural differences between the two races are superficial and that ethnic identity is not an issue for many Rwandans at this time. Paul is himself Hutu whilst his wife Tatiana is Tutsi and the way that both of them are seen as noble and courageous human beings is comment enough. Other scenes confirm that the divide is superficial – as the BBC journalists sit drinking at the hotel bar at the start of the conflict they ask two girls whether they are Hutu or Tutsi. The fact that they have exactly the same features and are clearly friends but are one of each race emphasises the ridiculous nature of the division. As the film progresses we see the Tutsi and the Hutu represented very differently.

Terry George is also clear to point out that although Rwanda is a third world country, Paul and his family lived a very western existence in terms of the way they dressed, where they lived and how they conducted their lives. This undoubtedly helps a western audience to identify with this family and therefore engage more fully in the horror they experienced.

a) TUTSI

The main Tutsi characters we see are those of Paul's wife, their children, family, friends and neighbours.

- How are they presented as victims by the events we see?
- Look at these two images. How does the way in which the camera has been positioned and the distance of the shot affect our view of what is happening and the way we see the Tutsi?



b) HUTU

We get to know several Hutu characters in a little detail and see many in the background as militia.

- Think about Gregoire, the hotel worker who moves into the presidential suite after the first uprising. What do we see him doing with his time? How does this make us feel about the Hutu?
- George Rutaganda is the businessman Paul goes to see at the very beginning of the film. How do his actions at this point represent him as a Hutu? Does this change throughout the film?
- Paul is of course the main Hutu character. Does he redress the balance in terms of Hutu character?

- What image of the Hutu are we given by seeing them as militia? Consider their clothes, hair, what props they carry and what noise they make.

UNITED NATIONS SOLDIERS

We see very little of any UN soldiers other than Nick Nolte, who plays their commanding officer, Colonel Oliver and so we must base our opinions on him.

- Do you like Colonel Oliver? Explain your answer.
- What exactly do we see him doing in the film?
- Why do you think the UN troops are wearing pale blue flack jackets?

MAINTAINING THE FAÇADE

Most of the action in the film takes place in the international Belgian-run hotel Mille Collines. Paul's strategy is to maintain the façade that the hotel is operating normally with regular guests in order that the rebels will not enter the building and seize the refugees. He refers to it in one conversation as 'an oasis of calm' – the audience alone can see the irony in this.

- What is the atmosphere within the hotel reception? And in the rooms, corridors and garden beyond?
- What do we see happening in the streets and houses outside the hotel?
- How does the appearance of the hotel minibus help maintain the façade?
- How is sound used to reflect the difference in atmosphere between the interior and exterior of the hotel?
- Paul himself is always immaculately dressed, usually in a white shirt, tie and jacket. On what occasions do we see him lose his composure and how does this affect his appearance?
- How is the weather used to reflect the mood of events throughout the film?

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