

Film on African catastrophe conceals more than it reveals

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Hotel Rwanda, directed by Terry George, written by Keir Pearson and Terry George

Hotel Rwanda aims to tell the story, through the experience of the manager of a luxury hotel in the Rwandan capital of Kigali, of the horrific genocide that took the lives of as many as 1 million people, mostly Tutsi, who were slaughtered by Hutu militias in the central African country within a three-month period in 1994.

Don Cheadle plays the role of Paul Rusesabagina, the Hutu manager of the Belgian-owned Hotel des Milles Collines. Rusesabagina leads a relatively privileged life, but he is married to a Tutsi, and is both personally threatened and politically horrified by the nationalist frenzy, in which Hutu radio announcers call for the crushing of the “Tutsi cockroaches.” He later escaped the slaughter with his family, and lives in Belgium today. Rusesabagina is the central character in this story, and he assisted director and screenwriter Terry George with the screenplay.

The job of hotel manager brings Rusesabagina into contact with the local ruling elite as well as European officials and businessmen. He uses his first-hand knowledge and connections to save his family, and also to shelter about 1,200 refugees, mostly Tutsis, along with Hutus who oppose the ethnic killing. These people have been lucky enough to find refuge in the hotel, where they await their fate under conditions of severe overcrowding, limited supplies and above all overwhelming fear, while the genocide continues just outside.

The film traces the development of the genocide over a number of weeks. The signal for the attacks is the radio’s call to “cut down the tall trees,” announced after the plane carrying Rwandan President Juvenal Habyarimana is shot down as he is returning from

Tanzania, where he has signed a peace agreement with the rebel Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF).

The parties responsible for downing the President’s plane have never been determined, and it is possible that Hutu ethnic extremists may have taken the opportunity to remove him while also providing a convenient excuse for launching the mass killing.

Over the next days and weeks there are, not unexpectedly, a number of very narrow escapes, both for Rusesabagina as well as his “guests.” In the end, a combination of quick thinking and tactical maneuvers by the hotel manager, along with sheer good luck, enable him to prevail.

There are a number of scenes that ring true. Rusesabagina buys time by bribing a powerful Hutu general with liquor, Cuban cigars and cash. At the most desperate moment, as the general is about to unleash the Hutu militia in the hotel, the manager gambles that this military gangster can be intimidated by the threat of possible war crimes trials. Rusesabagina warns him that he will not be around to testify for the general if he is killed.

A film on the subject of the Rwandan events cannot simply deal with the subject as a tale of horror and suspense, however, with a happy ending for some 1,200 people, including the central character. Here is where *Hotel Rwanda* falls far short. Despite apparently good intentions on the part of director and co-screenwriter Terry George, the film’s approach omits far too much, and consequently leaves a misleading impression.

George has made several films dealing with the conflict in Northern Ireland, including *In the Name of the Father* (1993), based on the true story of man falsely convicted in connection with an IRA bombing who spent 14 years in prison. *Hotel Rwanda* also deals

with the legacy of imperialism and colonialism, and the film alludes to imperialism's role. There is brief mention of the role of Belgium as the colonial ruler a century ago, in pitting Tutsi against Hutu and installing the minority Tutsi in power.

More than allusions are required, however. In fact, mere allusions can be quite misleading. At one point, for instance, UN peacekeeper Col. Oliver (Nick Nolte) bitterly explains to Rusesabagina that the genocide will not be stopped because the Western powers are not interested in Africa. The supposed indifference is ascribed to racism.

In fact, the rival imperialist powers were not simply "indifferent" to the Rwandan tragedy. They were and are indifferent when it comes to the misery and suffering of the African masses, but they have also intervened for their own geopolitical advantage. Revelations after the 1994 genocide showed how the rival powers, principally France and the United States, jockeyed for advantage in the midst of the carnage, backing the Hutu government or the Tutsi-dominated Rwandan Patriotic Front, and thus contributing to the genocide.

Above all, the horrific events of 1994 cannot be understood apart from the history of Rwanda and of sub-Saharan Africa as a whole. That does not mean that the film must deal at length with this whole history; that would be virtually impossible. Nevertheless, ways can be found, within the framework of the documentary style adopted by the filmmaker, to trace the origins of the disaster that led to the murder of perhaps 10 percent of the country's 8 million population. The role of growing poverty, of imperialism, of the neo-colonial exploitation that has made a mockery of African "independence" in the nearly half-century since formal ties were cut with the former European rulers—all of this could and needs to be brought home. Only in this context can the growth of ethnic tensions and their utilization by the rival military-based cliques be understood.

In this film of two hours, however, only a few minutes are devoted to dialogue that draws out some of the root causes of the tragedy. These are lost in the accumulated images of fear and killing. The performances, particularly by Cheadle and Nolte, are fine, but they do not redeem the film. The viewer is left with the impression that the events of 1994 represent an

outbreak of "insanity," as one character declares. The only thing that can be done is to try to save as many lives as possible, and Rusesabagina becomes the symbol of this dedication.

To the extent that it discusses responsibility for the Rwandan genocide, moreover, *Hotel Rwanda* suggests that "we are all guilty." A Western television journalist, played by Joaquin Phoenix, tells Rusesabagina that television footage of the slaughter won't lead to any aid. "If people see this footage, they'll say, 'Oh my God, that's terrible,' and they'll go on eating their dinners," he declares.

This dialogue, implying that all members of society are equally guilty, merely feeds the conception that pressure should be applied on the great powers to put a stop to conditions for which they themselves are responsible. There is no substitute for the full historical truth in dealing with subjects like the Rwandan genocide.



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