

Politics and the Historical Film

Hotel Rwanda and the Form of Engagement

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In *The Politics of Aesthetics*, Jacques Rancière writes that “the logic of stories and the ability to act as historical agents go together” (Rancière 2006: 39). He thus posits a fundamental connection between aesthetic practices and politics. For him,

Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. (Rancière 2006: 39)

Literary narratives and political statements both describe and construct a version of reality. For Rancière, the political potential of aesthetics is a product not so much of the content of a particular art object, but rather of its form. The aesthetic realm, precisely because it is the site of formal innovation, is an arena in which new thoughts become thinkable and, as a result, new political meanings and horizons appear.

This chapter will consider the genre of the historical film in light of Rancière’s observations. I will suggest that the historical film has a distinct – though not always exploited – capacity to provoke political consciousness. In part, this potential results from the fact that historical films make truth claims. But the power of such films is also a product of the formal strategies they deploy. I have elsewhere described the ways in which certain historical films create prosthetic memories in their viewers (Landsberg 2004); that happens, in part, as an effect of the specific power of film to bring distant events near, to produce affect, to physically and psychologically engage audiences. And indeed, political engagement inevitably has an affective component – we are only truly engaged politically when we care about and feel affectively touched by the issues. But, for a film to awaken political consciousness, there must also be techniques and strategies at play – both formal

and narrative – that prevent overidentification with victims to the point of resignation. When what is being represented filmicly is an aspect of the historical past, the possibility emerges for viewers to engage deeply and critically, and quite possibly to embrace new political commitments, both in the present and in the future.

I would like to acknowledge right from the start that – to many readers – any consideration of the political potential of historical film is anathema. There is a tendency to think of history as properly impartial or objective, as a straightforward reflection of “what really happened.” But at least in the current generation of academic historians, there is an understanding that all histories, whether written or filmic, are interpretations, narrative constructions, and never simply transparent reflections of the past. Following Hayden White, Robert Rosenstone emphasizes: “Neither people nor nations live historical ‘stories’; narratives, that is, coherent stories with beginnings, middles and endings, are constructed by historians as part of their attempts to make sense of the past” (Rosenstone 1998: 35). This insight enables a consideration of the particular way in which any historical narrative works the past into meaning and opens up the possibility of analyzing the kind of ideological work that cinematic history might perform. However, most work devoted to uncovering ideology in historical films has tended to focus on those films that are ideologically conservative. Indeed, it is by now abundantly clear how ideologically inflected history can serve reactionary ends – particularly when it advances nationalistic and fascist agendas. There is also a precedent for explicitly political historical films on the left. Filmmakers from Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov to Ousmane Sembene and Patricio Guzmán have considered the filmic medium a tool for raising political consciousness and for promoting revolutionary ideas. But very little has been written on the ways in which representations of the past in mainstream cinema might stimulate political consciousness.

In the American context, historical films with a legible politics are often condemned for bias.¹ Indeed, concerns about manipulation are legitimate. And yet any good history – written or otherwise – has a point, makes an argument, emphasizes certain details and omits others. In the end, historical films that take seriously their obligation or responsibility to the past, maintaining fidelity to the larger truth of the events depicted,² are less easily reducible to propaganda. What I am interested in here is how traumas of the past can be represented in ways that might move individuals toward an orientation where they are more inclined to pursue social justice. Because the historical film can touch, shock, provoke viewers in a tactile, palpable way, it can communicate as a written monograph cannot. This is particularly true of historical films that are overtly political, addressing or *speaking to* viewers, compelling them to listen. To make the injustices of the past visible, audible, palpable can be a crucial step toward raising political consciousness.

It is worth taking a moment to discuss what might constitute politics, or the political, in film. First of all, on the macro level there is a politics to aesthetic forms, as Rancière describes. Within any given society there is what he calls a

“distribution of the sensible,” which “defines what is visible or not in a common space, endowed with a common language” (2006: 12–13). Rancière identifies “an ‘aesthetics’ at the core of politics.” Aesthetics, here, is

a delimitation of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, of speech and noise, that simultaneously determines the place and the stakes of politics as a form of experience. Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time. (Rancière 2006: 13)

It is thus first within the realm of the aesthetic, through “aesthetic practices,” that new formal arrangements in the social world become visible and thinkable. Second, film can immerse viewers experientially in a world that lies outside of their own lived experience and can, as a result, give them a stake in, or make them care about, a group of people, practices, or past events that they might not have other reason to care about. Third, film can challenge viewers’ own taken-for-granted subject position and worldview. Through narrative strategies and editing conventions, it can force viewers into a subject position that might be uncomfortable for them and thereby force them to question their own naturalized understandings of geopolitics and their own role in larger social dramas. Finally, there is a politics connected to reception. Perhaps the most powerful reason for taking the historical film seriously has to do with its broad reach. Unlike the historical monograph – or even the more popular trade-press history books – filmic depictions of the past have the potential to reach and influence an enormous audience. The cinema’s populist character is the grounds for its political efficacy.

Historically, radical or leftist politics have usually been associated with avant-garde films, while mainstream dramatic cinema has tended to reinforce the status quo. But, as my list of criteria above suggests, different filmic strategies engage politics in different ways. The conventions of the dramatic film foster identification, and the immersive quality of this kind of film compels viewers to have a stake in what they see. Furthermore, such films tend to attract much larger audiences. The innovative or experimental film, on the other hand, works in part through alienation and distancing, shock and disidentification. Between the poles represented by these two genres are those films – many of which are independently produced – that draw on elements from both. Such films tend not to be wholesale rejections of Hollywood, but they are more self-reflective and critical, more willing to break from the conventions of classical Hollywood cinema through innovative formal devices that structure a different form of engagement. Later in this chapter I will consider Terry George’s *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) as an example of this sort of film. But first I will briefly examine the properties that enable the cinema to produce identification and connection on the one hand and distance and alienation on the other. Taken together, these contradictory effects have the potential to awaken political consciousness.

Identification and Bodily Engagement

When it comes to the historical film, there is reason to be skeptical of the use of affect, which is often regarded as an impediment to, or at least as a replacement for, cognition or intellectual work. Vanessa Agnew has described an “affective turn” in historical representation, an increasing interest and investment in experiential modes of engagement with the historical past (Agnew 2007). What worries her is that film viewers or participants in historical reenactments will misread the past by projecting their own contemporary responses backwards; the concern is that the experiential mode fosters an easy identification with the past, one that loses a sense of the past as a “foreign country.” And yet a large part of the power of the cinema derives precisely from its tactile, haptic, sensuous quality – from the fact that it addresses the body of the spectator, making her or him feel, and then think about, things he or she might not otherwise encounter.

The relationship between viewer and filmic text has long been of interest to film scholars, though the ways in which this relationship has been imagined and understood has changed rather dramatically over time. The notion that films affect the body of the spectator and thereby influence his or her thoughts dates back to cinema’s first decades. In 1916 Hugo Münsterberg authored a psychological study of film, which was concerned primarily with the power of this new medium to affect viewers; writes Münsterberg:

The intensity with which the plays take hold of the audience cannot remain without strong social effects. It has even been reported that sensory hallucinations and illusions have crept in; neurasthenic persons are especially inclined to experience touch or temperature or smell or sound impressions from what they see on the screen. The associations become as vivid as realities, because the mind is so completely given up to the moving pictures. (Münsterberg 1970: 95)

For Münsterberg, film’s power to shape consciousness derives from its sensuous and tactile mode of address; the sense experiences it generates in its spectators “become as vivid as realities.” German cultural critics of the early twentieth century, too, were acutely aware of the power of cinema to affect viewers in a bodily way. In the 1930s Walter Benjamin and Siegfried Kracauer began to theorize the experiential nature of the cinema. For Kracauer, film “seizes the ‘human being with skin and hair,’” as “the material elements that present themselves in film directly stimulate the *material layers* of the human being: his nerves, his senses, his entire *physiological substance*” (quoted in Hansen 1993: 458).

In part, these theorists are describing the ability of cinematic images to provoke a kind of mimetic response in viewers. In the words of anthropologist Michael Taussig, mimesis means “to get hold of something by means of its likeness,” which, for him, implies both “a copying or imitation, and a palpable, sensuous, connection between the very body of the perceiver and the perceived” (Taussig 1993: 21). Mimesis entails a “corporeal understanding” (ibid.). Certain

filmic strategies – specific techniques of both filming and editing – powerfully elicit mimesis and thus foster identification with a particular character or point of view. One such technique is the close-up. When the camera is trained on a person's face as it registers pleasure or pain or humiliation or anger, the viewer cannot but feel his or her own body respond in kind. Similarly, point-of-view shots force viewers to look at the world quite literally from another's perspective, the effect of which is to bring them into the action of the film and into the mental and emotional life of the protagonist. Cinema, in other words, enables its viewers to inhabit subject positions to which they have no "natural" connection. It offers spectators access to another's mind and motivations, and that other might have different life experiences, convictions, and commitments.

This can be a particularly powerful device in the case of the historical film, where the events depicted are supposed to have actually happened. Linking those in the audience with the characters in the film has the effect of immersing the former in historical events and in foreign political, social, and economic dynamics, of making them care about these things, and even of prompting them to feel that they have a stake in the events depicted. The cinema, then, might be imagined as a site in which people experience a particularly intense bodily encounter with lives and contexts at great temporal and spatial remove from their own lived experiences – which of course is central to the acquisition of prosthetic memories.

In the 1970s the scholarship on cinematic spectatorship, influenced as it was by Louis Althusser on the one hand and by Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan on the other, conceptualized the cinema as an ideological apparatus,³ treating spectatorship as a process of ideological interpellation. Some recent film theory has posited a more fluid form of spectatorship, where the viewer moves in and out of identifications with different characters and scenarios even over the course of a single film.⁴ In part, this scholarship has sought to afford viewers more agency. At the same time scholars have also paid increased attention to the experiential, sensuous nature of the viewer's engagement with the image.⁵

Some scholars have challenged the very notion of spectatorship, in particular its inherent privileging of the visual, and have emphasized instead – like their predecessors Münsterberg and Kracauer – the multisensuous engagement that the filmic text invites. Scholars such as Laura Marks have become interested in the cinema's tactile mode of address: "film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole" (Marks 2000: 145). Similarly, Jennifer Barker insists that "meaning and significance emerge in and are articulated through the fleshy, muscular, and visceral engagement that occurs between films and viewers' bodies" (Barker 2009: 4), that film "comes close to us, and that it literally occupies our sphere" (2).⁶

Nevertheless, writes Barker, "we do not 'lose ourselves' in the film, so much as we exist – emerge, really – in the contact between our body and the film's body" (19). In other words, we engage with films deeply, but we do so as ourselves. We can be brought into a film, *but not necessarily through identification with the characters*. At certain moments the film speaks to us in our own bodies – we

are touched, moved, perplexed; but not simply through a mimetic encounter with a character. And what emerges, I think, can be a kind of political consciousness, the awakening of a commitment to the plight of another body – a commitment mediated by affect. To engage in this way, though, depends upon the film's ability to draw the viewer into the historical past, to immerse him or her in its logics, no matter how foreign they seem; and this is predicated in large part on the film's ability to affectively engage viewers.

What I hope to emphasize here is that there is a difference between touching the spectator and bringing him or her into a kind of seamless, immersive identification with a character on the screen. The danger of the dramatic film as a vehicle for history is precisely its virtuosic capacity to lure viewers into a deep identification with the characters and events of the past, fostering an illusory sense that one truly understands another person's position, or knows how the past felt to those who lived then. In this intense identification – what I would call overidentification – the viewer is not challenged. The viewer, here, gets to try out being someone else without having to grapple with, or even to understand, the distance that separates him or her from that other person. In other words identification alone is quite easy and does not necessarily produce cognition and new thought. In fact historical films have often induced viewers to identify with the victims in a way that produces resignation and incapacitation rather than politicization. As I will suggest below, films that deploy formal and narrative strategies that force the viewer out of an all-too-easy identification and back into his or her own body – outside of, and yet connected to, the constructed diegetic world – are the ones most able to avoid the pitfalls of immersive identification.

Staging Encounters

I would like to propose that, even within a narrative film, there can be powerful moments of interruption that break the illusion, prompt questions and critiques, and compel self-evaluation.⁷ I see the potential for the production of political consciousness in these moments of interruption. In these moments, an encounter between viewer and film occurs. These encounters are in excess of the narrative, disrupt its flow, and detour simple, immersive identification. Often they shock or provoke the viewer in a bodily way. Gilles Deleuze has argued that a sensuous encounter can be a productive catalyst to new thought. In "The image of thought" he suggests that recognition blocks new thought and promotes complacency. If you recognize something in the world, there is no need to think. However, in a sensuous encounter,

Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter [. . .] It may be grasped in a range of affective tones [. . .] In whichever tone, its primary characteristic is that it can only be sensed. In this sense it is opposed to recognition. (Deleuze 1994: 138)

The encounter that can only be sensed can be a critical first step toward the production of new knowledge or critical political consciousness.

At times, these encounters are triggered sensuously but demand cognitive processing, snapping the viewer out of the narrative and forcing him or her to make sense of what he or she is seeing or being made to feel by the film. Sometimes interruptions happen at the level of the sensible and take the form of shock, perplexing the senses and provoking cognitive processing. Because these encounters are in some way in excess of the narrative, they cannot simply be assimilated into the narrative's forward movement. At other times they force the viewer to recognize his or her own position as viewer or listener (as opposed to active participant). Sometimes there is a direct solicitation to the viewer, literally a call from within the film, asking for help. These encounters work by positioning us beyond the frame of the film, as if the film were speaking to us directly. We are meant to listen, and, as listeners, we are no longer quite part of the diegetic world. We are in our own bodies and our own space – but these have been altered by our bodily engagement within the diegesis. We are no longer simply identifying with characters in the film, but we are returned to ourselves, forced to confront what we have experienced in the other, more narrative, moments of the film.

It is not incidental that I have been focusing on aural encounters. Because the visual can too easily lead to complacent recognition, sound might prove a more effective provocation to new thoughts. What I described earlier as the problem of identification is analogous to Deleuze's critique of recognition: that no thought is required, that nothing is provoked or perplexed. As we "watch" a film, things we cannot see but can only sense in other ways are less likely to be immediately recognized. Often we must work to discern them and to understand what they might mean.

These sensuously provoked encounters can be alienating, in the tradition of Eisenstein and Vertov. For them, part of the power of the cinema was its ability to disrupt reality visually – to draw the world differently, to break through reified consciousness by de-naturalizing the world. Each one, albeit differently, sought "[t]he sensory exploration of the world through film" – to put it in Vertov's words (Vertov 1984: 14). However, mainstream narrative films do not rely on montage or other non-continuity techniques. For these films to work in the way I see them working, they cannot simply operate through alienation and shock – they also rely on the other power of cinema, the one I described first: the power to draw viewers in and make them care. This oscillation between putting viewers in emotional and physical proximity to others and then returning them to their own bodies and minds is the dynamic that fosters the kind of political engagement I am imaging here.

Reaching through the Phone

The 2004 film *Hotel Rwanda* begins to engage precisely the dynamics I am interested in exploring. Through subtle sensuous interruptions to the narrative, interruptions

that occur not on the visual, but on the aural or haptic register, the film positions its viewers to process and bring into intelligibility the historical narrative and its political ramifications. The film engages the audience's body, but not in the service of a facile identification with onscreen characters. There are ways in which the film actively grabs us, not to bring us into the story so much as to position us as listeners who will then feel an obligation to act. I will ultimately argue that *Hotel Rwanda* might be read as an attempt to construct something like a public sphere of listeners.

Ariella Azoulay has called for a "civil contract of photography [. . .] an attempt to anchor spectatorship in civic duty toward the photographed persons who haven't stopped being there, toward dispossessed citizens who in turn enable the rethinking of the concept and practice of citizenship" (Azoulay 2008: 16). Obviously, the ontology of filmic representation is different from that of photography: in its use of actors and in its reliance on the logic of re-creation, the historical film lacks the photograph's indexical link to the past. Nevertheless, the idea that a bond of commitment and common citizenship might be activated by either direct solicitation or mimetic engagement with the bodies on the screen is worth considering. The structure of a film might inaugurate, in the Rancièrian sense, a different political configuration, engaging a type of citizenship that is not explicitly national.

Hotel Rwanda professes to tell the "true story" of Paul Rusesabagina, a Hutu manager of a fancy Belgian-owned hotel in Kigali. Set in 1994, the film dramatizes the story of Rusesabagina's housing of over 1,268 Tutsi refugees in the hotel at a time when they were being hunted down and killed by Hutu militias. Rusesabagina has a personal reason for caring about the plight of the Tutsis, as his wife is one of them. The film is not just the story of Rusesabagina's humanity, but also of the western world's failure in the face of a humanitarian crisis. The film thus appeals to the viewer *not* as a national subject but as a caring humanitarian, a citizen of the world. In many ways *Hotel Rwanda* is a formulaic film, which borrows heavily from Hollywood and, in particular, from *Schindler's List*. Nevertheless, there is a politics to the form the film takes. I will focus on the particular ways in which the film engages, speaks to, challenges, and provokes its viewers, and in the process attempts to construct something like a public sphere of listeners.

Over the course of the film, both Paul Rusesabagina and the film's viewers become politicized. At the start he avoids politics: in the film's first scene he is dismissing his friend's suggestion that he attend a Hutu rally. "I will try my best, George, but these days I have no time for rallies and politics." Here Paul eschews politics in favor of business, focusing on what he takes to be the matter at hand: placing his beer order. Yet, as the film progresses, both Paul and the film's viewers will come to care about, and have a stake in, the plight of the Tutsis and to feel both complicit in the genocide and committed to political redress.

The film's project is political in the Rancièrian sense: it aims to add the Tutsis to what can be seen and said, to make them visible, and to give them recognition.

The film achieves this goal in very conventional ways. Viewers are introduced to Paul's family – his Tutsi wife and their children, his Tutsi brother- and sister-in-law and their children – in a scene where he returns to the tranquil domestic sphere after work, chocolates in hand. Some children are jumping rope, others peacefully coloring on the floor. This domestic scene is meant to bridge our distance from this family in Kigali, to make its members seem familiar, and as a result to foster identification with them. The blissful domestic sphere, however, is threatened later that evening: one of the children comes in to announce that there are soldiers in the street. Their Tutsi neighbor, Victor, is being brutalized and ultimately taken away. Through point-of-view shots, which heighten viewer identification with the Rusesabagina family and the Tutsi perspective more generally, the film solicits viewer investment in the dispossession that is taking place. For Paul, though, at this early stage in the film, this is about family, not politics. His wife cannot understand why he refuses to help Victor. But, as Paul explains, "family is all that matters." He does not yet have a political investment in the Tutsis' cause.

Despite the fact that this is a mainstream dramatic film in the dramatic tradition, there are powerful interruptions in the narrative in which encounters of different kinds occur. These interruptions are often aural, or caused by the disjuncture between visual and aural information. I want to argue further that these aural interruptions work to reposition the viewer as listener, as receiver of historical evidence. The strategy begins at the very beginning of the film – which opens with a black screen. The accompanying noise on the soundtrack is unclear at first, and then gradually discernible as static. Someone, it seems, is turning a radio dial. When finally a station is tuned in, we hear, as diegetic voice-over: "We will squash their infestation." We hear after that this is Hutu Power Radio RTLM (Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines), a radio station that played a key role in the Rwandan genocide, railing against the Tutsis. The audience is being asked, first and foremost, to listen – and to process or make sense intellectually of what is heard.

Hotel Rwanda mobilizes and engages our senses – beyond the visual – as a prompt toward cognition. Rather than inundate viewers with graphic depictions of violence, the film opts instead for disembodied voices on the radio that force us to think, to figure out what we are hearing and what it means. The film addresses us sensuously, to draw us in and make us care, but also to make us think. The director might have chosen to overwhelm audiences with graphic depictions of the brutal massacres of Tutsis, but for the most part rejected that strategy. In fact there are ways in which the film thwarts our voyeuristic impulses, offering instead something like a sensuous provocation. In part, this might be pragmatic – images have lost their ability to shock. As Barbie Zelizer and others have suggested, people have become so accustomed to images of atrocity that these have little lasting effect (Zelizer 1998). The film seems to recognize that, in a media-saturated world, images alone are no longer powerful enough to catalyze action. To put this in Deleuzian terms, sight more than the other senses operates on the principle of recognition and is thus least likely to provoke cognition or new thought.

In a particularly powerful scene later in the film, viewers are forced into an encounter that is destabilizing precisely because it does not occur primarily on the visual register. In this scene, Paul and his employee Gregoire have left the hotel to procure more supplies from the corrupt and evil Hutu, George Rutugundas. It is a dangerous mission. Through their car windows they see chaos on the streets, buildings burning. Upon arriving, they learn from George that all supplies and food are now double the price. Nevertheless, they buy what they can. Following George's suggestion, they take the river route back. The visual field is quite dark, obscured by fog. Viewers are positioned as if they were in the backseat of the car, sitting behind Paul and Gregoire (see Figure 1.1). We hear the loud thumping noise of the tires going over bumps, and through the shakiness of the camera we feel in our own bodies the van's jerkiness. Paul and Gregoire are confused, and Paul asks: "Gregoire, what is going on? . . . You've driven off the road . . . Stop the car, stop the car." Like them, we feel the unevenness of the road, but we don't know what caused it. When the car stops, Paul opens the door and literally falls to the ground. Through dense fog, we can just barely make out piles of dead bodies around him. At that moment, the film provokes – largely on the sensory register – a traumatic encounter that, I would argue, forces the viewer to process intellectually the situation. Paul reels back in horror, gasping, slowly realizing that the bumps in the road were actually bodies under the tires. We are aware of the dead bodies, but, because of the darkness and fog, we can only see their outlines, no gratuitous blood or mutilation (see Figure 1.2). We see Paul's visceral reaction: his body crumples, he gags. The scene is profoundly disturbing, but not so much because of what we see. The bumping of the camera as the van literally drives over the dead bodies implicates both Rusesabagina and us, for we are with him in the car that runs over the dead Tutsis. Forcing us to feel this through a somatic engagement, the film pushes us to consider our own complicity in these deaths.



Figure 1.1 In the car, seated behind Paul and Gregoire. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). Produced and directed by Terry George. United Artists and Lions Gate Films



Figure 1.2 Barely discernible bodies in the road. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). Produced and directed by Terry George. United Artists and Lions Gate Films

While the scene might be read as a haptic provocation to thought, most of the film's other encounters happen on the aural register, and, like the example I began with, they are catalyzed by radio or news broadcasts that viewers hear but do not see. That the narrative flow is interrupted by radio or television broadcasts puts viewers in the position of Rwandans listening to the radio, but it also, simultaneously, snaps them out of the filmic narrative. In other words, we hear these reports like the Rwandans in their cars and homes, but also as ourselves, as part of the actually existing international community listening to these unfolding events that are happening – or have happened – so far away. The eruption of the radio tears through the fictional veneer, as if something like the “real” were breaking through, as if we were actually hearing it as news, as it was happening.

In one scene, after Paul departs from the hotel at night, there is a cut to him in his car. He is surrounded by darkness. Eerie, scratching sounds emanate from the radio. Because these sounds are disembodied, they have no visual corollary; viewers must actively attempt to decipher and discern. He reaches down to tune in a station. As the camera follows Paul's hand to the dial, in close-up, it seems to call attention to the radio and to signal its significance. The noises coming through are still unintelligible; neither he nor we can make sense of them. There is no possibility of recognition. Instead there is a startling crash of glass outside the car. Paul is nervous, on edge, disturbed by the rioting on the streets. His house is dark, too, as the power has been turned off. With his flashlight he moves from room to room, from empty bed to empty bed, until he finds all the neighbors crowded into a single room. There are rumors that a Tutsi rebel assassinated the president. The next day the Tutsis in his neighborhood are listening to a handheld radio: “Listen to me good people of Rwanda, terrible news, horrible news. Our great president is murdered by the Tutsi cockroaches . . . They shot his plane from the sky . . . We

must cut the tall trees. Cut the tall trees now!” That was the code Paul had been warned about, which would instigate the Hutu militias to go after the Tutsis.

The radio newscasts foreground the issue of mediation precisely in the way these unfolding events were mediated – both to the people of Rwanda in 1994 and to the rest of the world. In particular, the film consistently draws attention to the mediation through which the characters gradually come to apprehend the horror of the situation. In one scene, Paul visits newsman David Fleming (David O’Hara) in his hotel room; David needs Paul to fix his air conditioner. We hear the sound of a videocassette being rewound, foregrounding once again the mediated nature of what we are about to see. The videocassette is a filmed interview of the UN Peacekeeping Force with Colonel Oliver (Nick Nolte). First we see a shot of the small television set through which the video is playing. Then there is a cut to Paul, who looks up from his task, listening to the words spoken by Colonel Oliver: “The elements in the government are following the example of what happened in the Americas and Somalia. I think they intend to intimidate us, trying to attack us and hope that the West will pull all its troops out.” “Do you think they’ll succeed?” the interviewer asks. “No, they won’t. The UN is here to stay.” Here, early on in the film, our expectations of the role of the West are confirmed: the UN peacekeeping force will remain. Nevertheless, we are positioned by the film not as active participants in the drama, but as part of an international media audience, and part of a public sphere of listeners.

As I have suggested, information about the Hutu massacres of Tutsis often come as interruptions to the narrative flow, and they are usually mediated – either through the radio or through a television newscast. In these moments the film carefully avoids any visual shock. In one scene early on, before anyone is aware of the scale of the massacre taking place, the cameraman, Jack Daghish (Joaquin Phoenix), bursts into the room designated as news headquarters at the hotel. His superior, David Fleming, begins to reprimand him for disobeying protocol and shooting footage outside of the hotel, exclaiming: “What the hell do you think you’re doing? I’m responsible for the safety of this crew.” There is a close-up of the VCR player as Jack inserts the videotape (see Figure 1.3). “What is this?” David asks. Before we see any images, we hear little noises, which we eventually understand to be the sound of women crying, and voices yelling. But they sound small, far away, as they would on a TV set at low volume. Furthermore, the TV set is tiny, with a screen not more than 10 inches – not meant to gratify the viewer’s curiosity. This is not at all an immersive experience. Nevertheless, the sounds pique Paul’s interest. We see him looking at the screen before we see it ourselves. He stands up. Then we see the small screen at which he is staring. It is a scene of a village; many bodies are lying on the ground, others are swinging machetes and dancing (see Figure 1.4). While the scene is ultimately legible as one of massacre, the way in which it is presented prevents us from getting too close, prevents any kind of voyeuristic engagement. It is not a scene that we are *in* as anything but distant viewers. Because the massacre is shot from long view – and shown



Figure 1.3 Inserting the videotape of the massacre. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). Produced and directed by Terry George. United Artists and Lions Gate Films



Figure 1.4 Massacre mediated through tiny screen. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). Produced and directed by Terry George. United Artists and Lions Gate Films

on a small screen – there are no gory details. We are not in a position to be overwhelmed by these images. Rather, the scene emphasizes the way in which the event is being mediated, hailing us as distant observers, not as participants. As receivers of this “news,” we are asked to join a public sphere of mutual obligation. This is not a tragedy we are living, but one that we must know about and act upon. Yet, because years have passed since these events happened, this more of a retrospective public sphere, but one that might nevertheless be on call, or ready to act when the next event of this kind occurs.

The film itself registers that violent images alone are not enough to move viewers into action. The film must employ other strategies to force them to think

and to compel them to act. The film underscores this point when, later that evening, Paul sees Jack Daghish in the dining room; Jack jumps up to apologize for his insensitivity in allowing Paul to see the massacre footage in the hotel room:

- JACK: Listen, sorry about earlier – if I had known you were in there I wouldn't have . . .
- PAUL: I am glad that you have shot this footage and that the world will see it. It is the only way we have a chance that people might intervene.
- JACK: And if no one intervenes it is still a good thing to show.
- PAUL: How can they not intervene when they witness such atrocities?
- JACK: I think if people see this footage, they'll say, "Oh my God that's horrible," and go on eating their dinners. What the hell do I know?

This scene might also be read as a moment of encounter for the viewer, forcing us out of our identification with the protagonist Paul. We cannot help but recognize our own position as the one Jack describes: people desensitized to the suffering of others, inured to the sensationalism of the media, complacent in our sense that someone else will help. The viewer here must confront Jack's critique: that being aware of other people's suffering does not necessarily translate into helping them or into taking action.

The film's strategy, I think, is to make the viewers aware of their responsibility even at a distance, even though the events might be mediated. The film's strategy forces viewers to listen rather than over-exposing them to graphic images of atrocity. A scene that I find to be emblematic of this element on the film's agenda – positioning viewers to learn how to listen to these Tutsi voices and how to respond to them – follows an exchange between Paul and Mr. Tillins (Jean Reno), the president of the hotel's parent company Sabena, in Belgium. Mr. Tillins tells Paul that he asked the French to rescue the refugees in the hotel, but they refused. He says: "I pleaded with the French and Belgians to go back and get you all. I'm afraid this is not going to happen, they are cowards, Paul. Rwanda is not worth a single vote to any of them, the French, the British, the Americans. I am sorry, Paul."

The point here is that the nations of the world will not help. If there will be aid, it will not come through national channels: it will be the work of a multitude of concerned individuals. The subsequent call for help, as dramatized by the film, is an individual address from one person to another – a spoken plea over the phone. There is a cut to Paul addressing his people:

There will be no rescue. No intervention force. We can only save ourselves. Many of you know influential people abroad. You must call these people. You must tell them what will happen to us. Say goodbye. But when you say good bye say it as though you are reaching through the phone and holding their hand. Let them know that if they let go of that hand you will die.

The speech begins as a direct address to the Tutsis in the room and then becomes a voice-over to images of the Tutsis in his hotel on the telephone. He is asking them to turn their own situation into what Ariella Azoulay calls “emergency claims” – to call on the world to bring about political redress.

In his book *Cinema and Sentiment*, Charles Affron (1982) describes the political use of voice in Frank Capra’s *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (1939). Writes Affron:

Mr. Smith and other films that exploit this political space of aural presence ought to be distinguished from those narrative films, I suppose most narrative films, where utterance is of a private, intimate nature. The audience that witnesses the film *Mr. Smith* is provided with a set of surrogate audiences within the film itself, groups at public occasions that indicate the political aspects of audition. (Affron 1982: 120)

Utterance in *Hotel Rwanda*, too, is public and political. This is not voyeurism but legitimate witnessing, as, in Affron’s words, “[w]e are supposed to hear what happens in a democratic forum” (ibid.). Rather than foster the illusion that we are agents in the story – Tutsi or Hutu – we are outside the story. We do not simply identify with Tutsis or with Paul, though we are brought close to them and encouraged to care. We are asked to listen, and, in accepting that position, we join a larger public sphere of listeners.

Luc Boltanski’s book *Distant Suffering* is interested in this question:

[W]hen confronted with suffering all moral demands converge on the single imperative of action. Commitment is commitment to action, the intention to act and orientation towards a horizon of action, But what form can this commitment take when those called upon to act are thousands of miles away from the person suffering, comfortably installed in front of the television set? (Boltanski 1993: xv)

It is precisely this dilemma and dynamic that *Hotel Rwanda* engages.

In the film, the “reaching through the phone” moment, I think, underscores the film’s insistence that we must care and respond; but we know, too, that it is not our tragedy and that we are not allowed to occupy the position of the victims. The call for help, as dramatized by the film – the reaching out to the world – is literally mediated by the telephone (see Figure 1.5). As listener, we are brought into a contract: we must respond, we must act. The phone as mediator here posits a distance between the Rwandans and the rest of the world – and, by extension, between the Rwandans and us, the viewers. This layer of mediation, of distance, is crucial in the development of political consciousness. We are positioned as listeners, as part of an international community of those at a distance who have been asked to listen. We have a relationship of obligation to these others precisely because they can speak to us, precisely because – despite our geographic and cultural difference from them – they are literally asking us for help. We are addressed in our own bodies, not just through identification with the main characters in the film.



Figure 1.5 Reaching through the phone. *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). Produced and directed by Terry George. United Artists and Lions Gate Films

In an essay entitled “Communication and signification: Voice in the cinema,” M. Madhava Prasad (n.d.) explores the relationship between voice and image in Indian cinema. Prasad explains that “speech can also function as a presentative, rather than a represented, element.” To read speech as presentative, “we must learn to distinguish signification as that which is exhausted in the communication that speech and its hearing effects, from the readability of the material body of speech – voice – as a bearer of meaning.” This sort of listening has political ramifications: “The spectator who listens is a spectator who attends to the desiring communication, to the speaker’s want-to-say. Cinema has not been very encouraging to such a stance, it prefers to let speech come through clear and loud.” While we are not literally straining to hear what the characters are saying – as is the case in the Mani Ratham films Prasad analyzes – we are straining in a more abstract sense to hear what the Tutsis are saying, trying to hear what we have not been able to see of these events in Rwanda – hearing in a way that compels us to respond.

In some ways, what I am suggesting is reminiscent of Ariella Azoulay’s idea of a civil contract of photography (Azoulay 2008: 16). She is arguing for a public sphere where solidarity exists among all the governed and is not connected to national sovereignty (17). She describes something like a “civil space in which photographers, photographed subjects, and spectators share a recognition that what they are witnessing is intolerable” (18). Out of this civil space emerges what she calls an “ethics of spectatorship”: “The spectator is called to take part, to move from the addressee’s position to the addresser’s position to take responsibility for the sense of such photographs by addressing them even further, turning them into signals of emergency, signals of danger or warning – transforming them into emergency claims” (169). In the case of a historical film like *Hotel Rwanda*, we are

asked to hear the voices of Rwandans. The emergency claims lodged here, though, are *voiced*, aural, similar in nature to the democratic speech that Affron describes.

Notice that, despite the fact that the scene foregrounds the mediation – with images of the Tutsis on the phone – Paul quite literally urges them to *touch* the foreigners to whom they are speaking: “when you say good bye, say it as though you are reaching through the phone and holding their hand. Let them know that if they let go of that hand you will die.” Paul is suggesting that, to get foreigners – and the West in particular – to commit to help, they must be touched, they must be grabbed, they must be made to feel something. But, importantly, in this film the audience is not made to feel *like* the Tutsis, not positioned simply to identify with, or wallow in, their pain. We are positioned to listen to them: our own individual bodies are addressed. Politics, as I have suggested, is premised on *feeling* connected to a people, or a cause, or a nation. But to mobilize those political commitments we must feel ourselves, too.

Part of the purpose of this essay is to suggest the power of an historical film to structure a viewer’s engagement with a traumatic past in order to catalyze or awaken his or her political consciousness. Because historical films represent “real” events, they are read with different expectations from those of fictional dramatic films, predisposing viewers to open themselves more to the narratives in play. I hope to have emphasized that form itself has political ramifications, bringing into visibility and speech new possible political configurations. The sensuous, tactile mode of address, as I hope I have shown, does not always lead to easy identification, but can in fact be a provocation to new thought. It is possible to be brought into the world of the film not entirely as characters, but as ourselves, as listeners – and as ourselves, as potential political agents. The public sphere of listeners imagined here is non-national, it is a mass-mediated public sphere. Filmic history, transmitted in this way, has the potential to do more than entertain, more even than educate: it can politicize its audience, mobilizing the traumas of the past to condition political engagement in the future.

Notes

- 1 Oliver Stone’s films produce precisely this kind of reaction.
- 2 Robert Rosenstone makes the point that many Hollywood images are both invented *and* true; see Rosenstone 1998: 128. Natalie Zemon Davis suggests that imagined events that make a point are fine as long as the construction is visible and explained (Davis 2000: 11).
- 3 “Apparatus theory” refers to a body of work initiated in the 1970s by French film theorists such as Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Baudry. They claimed that ideology was disseminated not only in the filmic representations, but also through the act of cinematic viewing itself. While the particulars of their arguments differ, they shared a belief that the cinema was first an apparatus for the positioning of the spectator as subject. See Metz 1986, and also Baudry 1986.

- 4 Contemporary film theory has contested the notion that the spectator is locked into a single and largely passive viewing position, arguing instead for a model of spectatorship where viewers move in and out of identifications with different characters, in part as a result of cinematic devices and in part as a result of their own pre-existing subject positions. See for example Hansen 1986, Williams 1995, Berenstein 1995, and Clover 1992.
- 5 Some recent work on cinematic spectatorship has again focused on the bodily aspect of spectatorship. Eschewing psychoanalytic models of spectatorship, these theorists have moved toward more phenomenological and cognitive–perceptual models. A key tenet of this approach is the conviction that affect matters. In the words of film theorist Carl Plantinga: “The viewer’s affective experience in part determines meaning, and a lack of attention to, or an inability to understand, affective experience could well lead one to misunderstand and mischaracterize the thematic workings of a film, and perhaps even to misunderstand the story itself” (Plantinga 2009: 3). Plantinga calls “affective mimicry” the spectator’s response to human forms; it “depends on the fact that viewers *see* the bodies of film actors/ characters and *hear* their voices” (120). See also Sobchack 2004.
- 6 In her groundbreaking work on the phenomenology of film, Vivian Sobchack has suggested that the film text has a body apart from what is actually being depicted and that we, as viewers, engage with that materiality (Sobchack 1991).
- 7 Film scholars have long debated the relationship, in film, between narrative and spectacle, and the dynamic I am describing is somewhat analogous. See for example Crafton 2007.

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