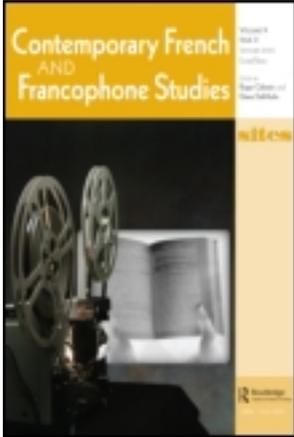


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THE PERTINENCE OF IMPERTINENT STORYTELLING IN GILBERT NDAHAYO'S DOCUMENTARY *RWANDA: BEYOND THE DEADLY PIT*

Alexandre Dauge-Roth

Alexandre Dauge-Roth: Your film *Rwanda: Beyond the Deadly Pit* (2010) represents a unique attempt to capture several seismic shifts that are both personal and collective. First there is the seism of the genocide of the Tutsis that took place in 1994, the death of your family, and your struggle with survival. Then a personal seism occurred when you engaged in filmmaking to negotiate the haunting legacy of the genocide and its ongoing aftermath. This crucial shift allowed you to craft your individual voice, a voice that is independent from some of the official accounts of genocide that you did not recognize. Finally, there is the seismic moment when you confront the killers of your family during a *gacaca*¹ trial and reflect on the current reunification process. In order to address these seismic moments at the heart and genealogy of *Beyond the Deadly Pit*—whose first version was entitled *Behind this Convent*—I would like to start with a proverb. When asked about the role cinema plays in your life, you often refer to the following Rwandan proverb: “ujya gukira indwara arabanza akayirata” (if one wants to be healed from his or her sickness, he or she must talk about it to the world). Could you comment on this sickness and the role filmmaking plays for you as you seek to bear witness to the past and, simultaneously, assert that you are not totally defined by it within the present?

Gilbert Ndahayo: Time does not help heal grief at all. My sorrow, instead of lessening over the days and years, increased. I nurtured the hope of finding relief, that the suffering would finally stop and I could start a new life. Hope is everything. To lose hope is to die a second time. The post-genocide reality in Rwanda was torturing me. I was constantly in chains. My mind was not free. My creative abilities were challenged by my sickness. Above all, there were these 153 dead people in my parents' backyard awaiting and demanding "for" their proper burial. What does it mean, then, to be alive, surviving the slaughter and living with the dead? The distance between death and life was very thin; I couldn't tell where I was. I had to get out of the graveyard and reclaim my life and my humanity.

To make an autobiographical film sounded impossible to me. I was always speechless whenever I met street children orphaned by the genocide. How would I go out there and say: "I am suffering?" What would I say in front of women who were raped, infected with HIV/AIDS, and left to a slow and bitter death? As I was trying to find ways in my head to tell this brutal tale, which sounded impossible to share, some windows within storytelling opened when I realized that one of our ancestors' sayings applied to me: "umugabo mbwa anyagirwana n'abandi ati natose" (a coward, with other people under the rain, always thinks he is the only one who gets wet). I realize it was not possible for me to tell a story about me only and that I should use our traditional devices of storytelling. At the same time, I was growing up in the digital era and therefore I should embrace technology and use a camera to talk to a larger audience where the story of Rwanda has not been told.

The question then was "what to say?", not "what not to tell and how to tell it?" Telling this story seemed suicidal. I have lost everything. What could be left to say after so much loss? What can people outside of us learn from inside of us? To resort to a third party to narrate my story, to examine the loss and the way forward and backward was not an option. I had to experience personally what happened to my parents in an artistic way. It had to be a personal journey. It is a personal trauma that only the owner can live and deal with. Unfortunately, I had no language for such memory. What is the language of the dead? In Rwanda's tradition, though, there is a language appropriate to speak to the dead; it is called "urukonjo." Mostly spoken during the traditional ceremony "kubandwa," "urukonjo" consists of insults referring to sex during the initiation phase of a young man to adulthood. I had to insult genocide and death of genocide: "rupfu we, uragapfa utabyaye" (death, may you die without giving birth to more death), or "rupfu we, uragapfa uragapfusha, urakavugwa ishyanga uragatsindwa," (death, may you die and yours die too; may you be spoken in exile and perish there). To tell a story required me to go throughout the stages of "kubandwa." One of the challenging stages in "kubandwa" is the practice of submission. In reference to "kubandwa," the storyteller is submissive to his story. He has to humiliate himself in front of the public during his quest for

every detail of the story and submit himself to an act of begging. In *Rwanda: Beyond the Deadly Pit*, I had to kneel down to learn how my parents were killed, without emotions and discomfort of being turned into a beggar to learn their fate. When I was filming, I found pain and anguish, honesty and truth; but above all, I found life beyond death and deadly journeys. As I captured on film victims who lost so many people and so much of their lives, I was helping others to see the past through my camera lens and confront the future.

A storyteller is also someone who is engaged in the quest of a language and signs to express values of a given culture and even, shall I say, of “the culture of the dead” as in “urukonjo.” There is nothing as cruel as being unable to tell your own story in your own words or images. In Hollywood, historical events are presented in order to convey the events as entertainment for a mass audience and to satisfy the box-office. In the process of making my film, I was only interested in making peace with the dead through the traditional process called “igihango” (a pact sealed in blood). But how would people who had not lived and survived the genocide be compelled to relate to such an experience? It is almost impossible to find words to tell this kind of suffering. There is no language to talk about it, and when there’s a language to talk about it, there are no words. It wasn’t until September 11, 2001 that I was able to start to search for ways to talk about my experiences. I drew a connection between the images of people in the windows of the World Trade Center and the images of my family thrown in pits. 9/11 opened up a part of me filled with remembrance of unanswered questions. People cannot compare their pain; nonetheless, they can learn from each other’s grief. People can learn from fear and despair and, most of all, they can learn from each other’s hope.

To go back to the proverb—“if you want to be healed from your sickness, you must talk about it to the world”—it is to be understood in many ways. First, I want to put forward the traditional aspect of telling a tale and the philosophy that surrounds storytelling in Rwanda. For this genocide to have happened, the tradition must have been broken. The same Rwandan brothers must have been “sick” to the point where one would wake up, grab a Rwandan object such as a machete in the morning to go to the neighbor next door and proceed to butcher him and his entire family. Second, who is the patient here? Is it the filmmaker? Is it the survivor? Is it the survivor-filmmaker since the survivor and the filmmaker are the same person? Or is the perpetrator sick? How did the world allow these crimes against humanity? Was the world sick, too? The proverb refers to a sick person invited to find a cure, and to larger extent a new existence. Since there is nothing to be done—genocide is a historical event that cannot be undone—the sick are invited to explore unknown possibilities of moving forward. Is that possible? Can art, in this case film, help in this quest? When one talks about one’s illness, there is some relief, in the way the doctor (the viewer) treats (responds to) the patient’s illness (society’s illness): that is the issue raised in the story. Finally, I refer to this proverb as a

way to remain faithful to the way Rwandans used to start telling their stories: “Ngucire umugani. Nkubambuze umugano. N’uzava i Kantarange, Azasange ubukombe bw’umugani, Bumanitse ku muganda w’inzu.” (Let me tell you a tale. Let me wake up with a bamboo stick. If you still feel far away, you will find yourself in the valley of tales. A story that ties the central pillar of my hut.)

The genocide against the Tutsis in Rwanda has broken the tradition in many ways. Can cinema help to heal? Can storytelling help to heal? For it to happen, there must be a listener or viewer who willingly accepts to undertake the noble task of witnessing the genocide through the eyes of those who survived. But more importantly, it is the reaction to these new emotions that one faces that matters. This transformation is not immediately possible, but in the long run there is need to find ways and languages to make “never again” a reality. That is when the sick (world) will be cured through the eradication of prejudices, racial discriminations, and religious intolerance that feed social dynamics of hatred capable of culminating in genocide.

A.D-R.: *Rwanda: Beyond the Deadly Pit* is the result of a long process, since you worked on this film for many years in the editing phase. Could you describe the narrative structure you finally adopted and its intended impact on the viewers?

G.N.: Pre-production is the most important phase for any film as it helps the filmmaker to visualize his film before shooting it. During pre-production, important decisions are made: which people to interview, which locations to shoot, assembling of a team, equipment purchase, rental or borrowing, budgeting, etc. Surprisingly, I jumped right into the production on April 1, 2006, with only \$50 as a budget, six DV tapes, a Sony Handycam camcorder, and a tripod. The decision to film was spontaneous, in the knowledge that the story might not be complete and turn out disappointing in the editing stage. I was forced to capture a unique moment, record the series of actions that accompany the burial of victims of genocide in a memorial site: the exhumation of the dead, the washing of the bones and their drying, for example. I recorded that specific moment as I lived it, without a pre-meditated script. Every film is made differently; my challenge was to tell a story with no plot, no preliminary research, no budget. Not even a preestablished language to speak with and for the dead. The first events I shot were activities meant to honor the remains of people who lived in Niboyi village and perished in the deadly pit. The camera is placed frontally in a medium close-up establishing shot, a position that records all actions within the camera frame and allows the audience to experience this unique moment as a theater audience would, sitting front row center. The nuns and the neighbors wash the bones in front of the camera. They tentatively exhume the memories and dress the psychic wounds. The second camera is handheld, thus moving the audience into the scenario of “honoring the dead.” It was a long, tedious week of filming. The second shoot

date (April 8–9, 2006, and May 12–13, 2007) records commemoration processions in two separate stadiums, how survivors struggle with words to describe an ordeal, the fate of their loved ones, humility and heroism in genocide, pre-genocide and post-genocide life. The camera frames survivors in close-ups, providing faces to their voices. I designed the shots to assign each survivor a specific camera angle—either profile or frontal—depending on the momentum and the intimate feeling of the survivor narrating his or her stories. Four other shoot dates occurred respectively in 2007 and 2008 to complete the documentary by providing insight into post-genocide realities and its aftermath.

My ambition was to create a modern documentary that runs from beginning to end without any narration, without any reenactments as in written scenarios. The challenge then was to decide in post-production (2008–2009) on the order of the scenes. As I was editing the many voices and layers of the footage, one question lead to another, building knowledge about the topic, revealing opposing views and their respective credibility. Each sequence of the film is constructed in response to a question. The story of the film is known; what needs to be preserved is the feel and the tension of footage and, at the same time, the attempt to bring all the characters out of their shadow. The end result became more of a journey of discovering answers to unasked questions through camera setups and angles. In Rwanda's post-genocide reality, as it is also visible in *Rwanda: Beyond the Deadly Pit*, there are different versions of the truth and many dramas. Therefore the necessity to invent a structure that keeps the dramatic storyline alive and accommodates the various facets of the truth is necessary. *Cinéma-vérité* has been a guiding principle in the making of the film. The editing stage allowed me to manipulate and rearrange the story, thus creating new work from the photography. I used the simple method of editing where one shot ends and the next begins: one testimony is intercut with another. All the video transitions are simple cuts in which one shot changes instantly to the next thanks to cross-fade effects. Cross fades made the story sequences feel more relaxed especially and conveyed the passing time and changing of location. The real story is to connect the shots, to allow the story to progress through the dialogue of different voices, and avoid jump cuts.

There is no doubt that in the future I will look back at the film itself and the footage and say, "Hell, I did it." I will look at the invisible result, the one that can be neither measured nor captured with the lens of any camera. Filming and editing my own work has rewarded me with knowledge about death and life. There was too much death, sadness, and darkness inside of me. Now, I can see clearly. I used film to try to heal myself. Nonetheless, *Rwanda: Beyond the Deadly Pit* does not propose any solution. The camera is and was limited to filmic realities of the time. The lens cannot go back into the past and change the ordeal and other historical events.

Note

- 1 Aware that it could take close to a century to judge all of the suspects, the new regime decided to remedy this politically explosive situation by reviving and revising in 1996 the *gacaca*, a traditional judicial forum based on public confession during local hearings led by elders called *Inyangamugayo*—which means in Kinyarwanda “uncorrupted” or literally “those who hate evil.” The *gacaca* jurisdictions as defined by the 1996, 2001, and 2004 organic laws differ from the traditional *gacaca* since they have been given the competence to judge murders and crimes of genocide—which was not at all the case in the past socio-historical function of the *gacaca*.

Gilbert Ndahayo is a survivor of the 1994 genocide in Rwanda, who is drawn to explore the healing powers of storytelling. As a history major at Kigali Institute of Education, he is involved with the burgeoning Rwanda film society. His career in cinema began in 2005 with *Scars of My Days*, an adventure docu-drama film about HIV/AIDS and two young villagers who decide to move to Kigali to earn a living. His short films, *Scars of My Days*, *The Graduation Day*, and *Dirty Wine*, have been shown at European and American film festivals. *Rwanda: Beyond The Deadly Pit*—nominated for Best Documentary feature film at the Los Angeles Pan African Film Festival 2010—is the third in a series filmed over the course of three years documenting the genocide from a judicial and a cinematographic perspective. Ndahayo received The Vivian G. Prins Fellowship for Artists at Risk and migrated to the United States in 2008. Currently, he is pursuing a Masters in Fine Arts at Columbia University's film program.

Alexandre Dauge-Roth is Associate Professor of French at Bates College who has published numerous articles on the representation of the genocide of the Tutsis in literature, testimony, and film. His recent book, *Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsis in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History* (2010), was published in the series “After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France.”
