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# Agency and Choice in Hotel Rwanda and Shooting Dogs

Luke Allen  
*Macalester College*

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Agency and Choice in *Hotel Rwanda* and *Shooting Dogs*

*Hotel Rwanda* and *Shooting Dogs* both portray the tragic events of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, but the two films place different levels of emphasis on the agency and responsibility of individuals. In this essay, I will look at the way they depict individual agency in relation to three main sets of actors. I will first address how the films portray the west's reaction to the genocide, paying particular attention to the different roles United Nations peacekeepers play. I will then examine the way individual victims, or people who are left in the space between victim and perpetrator, are shown. Finally, I will discuss the depictions of individuals responsible for the genocide, both in terms of its organization and its execution. I will examine these issues through the framework of how the films treat the possibility of individual agency and responsibility. I will conclude by arguing that, because of its more realistic and humane depiction of the role of individuals in the genocide, *Shooting Dogs* takes on both a more difficult and a more necessary task.

One important commonality between the two films is the presence of a charismatic United Nations commander who is generally able to do little to alter the situation despite his desire to intervene. In *Hotel Rwanda*, Colonel Oliver (whose character is loosely based on Romeo Dallaire) is unable to prevail upon his UN commanders to intervene by force. He commiserates with Paul and attempts to help the refugees in any way possible. In *Shooting Dogs*, Capitaine Charles Delon is similarly incapable of changing the UN mandate, and is forced to stand idly by as Interahamwe militiamen surround the school, ready to kill anyone who leaves. The two characters, however, differ in their ability to protect people outside of the protected enclaves (the hotel in *Hotel Rwanda* and the school in *Shooting Dogs*). In *Hotel Rwanda*, Colonel Oliver is surrounded by Interahamwe while transporting Tutsi refugees. He threatens

them with his gun and they subsequently clear off. In *Shooting Dogs*, Capitaine Delon makes no such threat—which he understands would have been impotent anyway—when Interahamwe murder several Tutsis who had attempted to flee the school. The two movies thus place these characters in different positions with regard to their ability to save the lives of individual Tutsi and Hutu refugees.

Capitaine Delon is perhaps uniquely paralyzed among the characters in the two movies. Unable to obtain a mandate to use force to intervene from the UN, he is left in the increasingly ludicrous position of “peace monitor” as he is forced to watch genocide occur. Unable to force the UN to act, he attempts to prevail upon the French commander to save Rwandan refugees. When the French commander insists “Je suis ici pour les Français,” (“I am here for the French”—that is to say, for the French refugees at the school), Delon insists: “Vous êtes personnellement responsable pour tous ces refuges!” (“You are personally responsible for all these refugees!”) This exchange highlights the dramatic conflict between military responsibility and moral imperative. Inevitably, the soldiers follow their orders to withdraw, and the vast majority of the refugees are killed.

There is little, if any, moral ambiguity of this type in *Hotel Rwanda*. Colonel Oliver aligns himself with the forces of good against the genocide, as does the president of Sabena, Mr. Tillens. The other westerners, who refuse to intervene, are racists (as Oliver would have it) and cowards (Tillens interpretation). While cowardice and racism certainly played a part in the west’s non-intervention during the genocide, this is ultimately a simplistic interpretation of events that reduces the roles of characters to moral absolutes (a recurring theme in the movie, as shall be shown). This is made possible by the way certain actors are placed in a position that does not require them to make distinctions between their moral and military duties. The contrast

between how the films position Colonel Oliver, who did not have to violate his mandate to protect the refugees in the trucks, and Capitaine Delon, who was ordered to abandon thousands of refugees, is striking.

The agency of Paul Rusesabagina, the protagonist of *Hotel Rwanda*, is even more notable. Paul is in some sense ideally suited to cope with the position he finds himself in. As the manager of a posh hotel, he has access to supplies and is able to provide for the refugees who come to the hotel. More importantly, he has connections to powerful people, both within Rwanda and abroad. These connections save him more than once: for instance, he is able to procure food and beer from an Interahamwe leader, George Rutaganda, in spite of the latter's knowledge of the presence of Tutsi refugees at the hotel. At one point, his connections take an almost absurd twist: when Hutu army men occupy his hotel, Paul calls the President of Sabena Airlines, who in turn calls the Office of the President of France, who in turn prevails upon the Hutu army commander to withdraw from the hotel. Through his connections, wit, and skilled negotiating, Paul is able to save the refugees from numerous potential catastrophes.

Like Colonel Oliver, Paul is never faced with a true moral dilemma. Tellingly, the terrible choice he faces early in the film also turns out to be a false one. When forced to decide between shooting the Tutsi refugees that have come to his hotel or being shot himself (which would not prevent the subsequent execution of the Tutsis as well), he opts for a third option: bribery. It is worth noting here that Paul's story relies from the beginning on his resources--without money, he would either not be a hero (for having committed murder) or he would be dead. This is not to belittle the accomplishments of Paul Rusesabagina; but it is important to note the degree to which his heroism was a result of his agency, which was itself dependent upon his circumstances.

This is in stark contrast to the way the protagonist of *Shooting Dogs*, Joe Connor, is portrayed. Joe is an English schoolteacher spending a year in Rwanda, and he knows little about the divisions within the country. When the genocide commences, all he can do is provide his bed frame and bookshelf as firewood for the refugees. When the French military makes clear they will take all Europeans onto their truck, which is bound for the airport, Joe attempts to give his spot to a Rwandan girl—Marie—and is promptly rebuffed. Joe is thus placed in a particularly difficult situation. Clearly he cannot stay, for he would eventually be killed by the hordes of Interahamwe outside the gates, and he can be of little use to the refugees inside the school; at the same time, to leave would be to abandon the people he had promised Marie he would help. Ultimately, Joe does leave, but his decision is mired by guilt and uncertainty. If Paul lives in a world of power and moral clarity, Joe lives in a world of impotence and moral ambiguity.

This dichotomy of agency is not limited to the protagonists, although they perhaps represent it best. In *Hotel Rwanda*, Paul implores his employees to phone any important friends abroad they might have to tell them about the situation and say goodbye. This collective reach-out has its intended effect: many of the refugee families are granted exit visas. It is not entirely clear how this happens; Colonel Oliver merely remarks, “Congratulations, your calls have worked.” Here, individuals can control their own fate, and the process by which things happen is secondary to the film. By contrast, all the refugees ask of Capitaine Delon in *Shooting Dogs* is that they be shot by his men before they leave to save them from a more painful death—and they are even denied this.

To add a level of nuance to this binary view of agency, the presence of Christopher in *Shooting Dogs* indicates that not everyone is powerless in the face of such trauma, but that heroism bears great costs. Christopher spends the bulk of the film becoming increasingly

antagonistic towards the Interahamwe and increasingly cynical about his own faith in the face of such atrocity. As the UN prepares to leave, however, he suddenly springs into action, loading a truck with Tutsi children and smuggling them out of the school. Eventually, Christopher is murdered at an Interahamwe roadblock as he attempts to buy time for the children to run into the forest and flee, but his efforts successfully save at least one life (Marie's). In some sense, Christopher contradicts the experiences of Joe and Paul. He is able to save lives in the face of mass murder, which Joe is not; he is not, however, able to save his own life, which Paul is. The viewer of *Shooting Dogs* is under no illusions as to the ability of most people to save lives in the face of genocide without giving one's own. The film thus raises a moral self-examination that simply is not prompted by *Hotel Rwanda*. We shall return to this subject shortly.

Perhaps the most apparent contrast between the two movies is their treatment of the perpetrators of the genocide, which is similar in some respects but diverges on key points. Both movies provide hints to the diligent planning and coordination that preceded the genocide. At the beginning of *Hotel Rwanda*, Paul visits George Rutaganda to procure supplies for the hotel; while he is at the warehouse, a crate full of Chinese-manufactured machetes falls off a forklift and spills onto the floor. This is not merely a foreshadowing of things to come (although it does serve that purpose), but is also indicative of the meticulous planning that the highest-up perpetrators of the genocide participated in. Similarly, towards the beginning of *Shooting Dogs* Christopher lends out some hurdles to a government official; these are then used as roadblocks at Interahamwe checkpoints. Neither film is ambiguous in its depiction of these planners of genocide: they are both cruel, cold, and calculating.

The two films differ greatly, however, when it comes to their depiction of individual participants in the genocide. In *Hotel Rwanda*, the individuals who commit murder are hardly

worthy of mention. None of them are named or shown up close; the hotel employee who tells RTLM (a rabidly anti-Tutsi radio station responsible for much of the hatred and fear that incited the genocide) the whereabouts of a convoy of Tutsi refugees is the closest thing the viewer gets to an individual perpetrator of the genocide, and he is depicted as malicious and cruel. It is easy to depict murderers as inhuman, and *Hotel Rwanda* does precisely that.

*Shooting Dogs* takes a much different approach to the individual perpetrators through its depiction of Francois. The viewer meets Francois early in the film as he accompanies Joe around Kigali, and he is generally affable and pleasant. The introduction of Francois' family further encourages the viewer to identify with him. It is only after the president is killed that Francois becomes agitated about the violence and tension in Rwanda. Francois articulates his fear succinctly: "If they can shoot our president, no Hutu is safe." Later, Joe sees Francois at a roadblock, wielding a blood-stained machete. The viewer is thus able to see Francois' transition from cheerful family man to militant murderer. In spite of this, his humanity is maintained throughout the film: Francois' fears, while exaggerated, are at least examined. Thus, at least one perpetrator, alongside many victims, is accorded humanity by the film.

There is a tendency, when confronted with an event as horrific as the Rwandan genocide, towards a form of simplicity and absolutism, and *Hotel Rwanda* indulges in this through its depiction of a strong hero who triumphs over the forces of hatred and evil. The historical, political and sociopolitical complexity of the events that transpired in Rwanda in 1994 makes this approach inappropriate. The diverse motivations of different actors--be they western states, perpetrators, or victims and survivors--is a crucial element of why things happened the way they did. What is therefore necessary is a film that acknowledges the singular horror of the event and at the same time the humanity of the people who perpetrated it; the possibilities for heroism and

the difficulties in transcending such difficult circumstances; and the normative need for intervention and the practical difficulties that prevented it from happening.

Needless to say, *Shooting Dogs* does not fulfill this function perfectly—far from it. Its treatment of the west’s racism with regards to Rwanda, for instance, often falls prey to the same heavy-handedness that plagues *Hotel Rwanda*. The point of this analysis, however, is not to provide a rubric for evaluating the objective merits of the film insofar as it portrays events in a certain way, but rather in how it instigates, rather than shuts off, dialogue about a difficult topic. *Shooting Dogs* is willing to investigate the diversity of motivation, beliefs, and agency individuals have in the face of genocide, and therefore it ultimately succeeds where *Hotel Rwanda* fails—in instigating a true dialogue about the causes and events of the Rwandan genocide.