

Shooting Dogs

Reviewed by Catherine Simmons

In spring 1994, almost one million Rwandans were murdered in a well planned genocide that was initially overlooked by the western world. *Shooting Dogs*, a British-German co-production, part-financed by BBC Films, was directed by Michael Caton-Jones and looks at events that took place during those ‘100 days’. *Shooting Dogs* was inspired by producer David Belton’s own experiences covering the Rwandan genocide for BBC’s Newsnight in 1994. Filmed on location in Rwanda and using Rwandan extras, many of whom were genocide survivors, the film’s principal characters are based on people he met at that time. The main storyline is inspired by what happened at the Ecole Technique Officielle (ETO) in Kigali from 6 to 11 April 1994.

The school is a perceived safe haven due to the presence of Belgian United Nation (UN) peacekeepers stationed there. Civilians flock to the school sure that they will be safe behind the gates with the will and force of the UN in front of them. However, the troops’ mandate was limited to peacekeeping and the evacuation of expatriates, which meant that they failed to intervene in the massacre of thousands of Rwandans. In *Shooting Dogs*, a Catholic priest, Father Christopher (John Hurt) and a young idealistic English teacher, Joe (Hugh Dancy) have to decide whether to leave the Rwandans and save their own lives or to stay with the refugees. The story also hinges around Joe’s promise to one of his pupils, Marie, that they will be kept safe.

Shooting Dogs (released as *Beyond the Gates* in the United States) joins the films *Hotel Rwanda*, *Sometimes in April* and *100 Days* in addressing the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Each of these films presents a different view of the genocide, ranging from the retrospective of *Sometimes in April* to the exploration of individual motivation in *Hotel Rwanda*. *Shooting Dogs* also concentrates on a specific timeframe in the first few days of the genocide. Filmed with a modest \$6 million budget and visually stunning, the film avoids the traditional Hollywood treatment of storytelling (more evident in *Hotel Rwanda*) and employs a neo-documentary-style that unfolds slowly and yet adds to the weight of the narrative. The viewer knows that terrible things are going to happen, but like the characters in the film is powerless to control the pace of events and can only await the contagion of conflict that gripped the country. Like *Sometimes in April*, the fact that filming took place in Rwanda is a credit to the film-makers.

This film could bring up many issues for discussion in an educational context: what is historical truth? Is this the only way we can relate to the

Rwandan genocide? What role did the United Nations play in the genocide? How does this film encourage critical thinking? How many acts of murder does it take to make genocide? What do we feel and think when the character of the British journalist Rachel compares the difference between her experiences in Bosnia and Rwanda and says ‘...over here, they’re just dead Africans’?

These are complex questions that resonate with past events such as the Bosnian conflict, the Cambodian genocide and the Holocaust as well as current events, such as Darfur in Sudan. The very concept of genocide is horrific and incomprehensible and daunting as subject matter. How do you start to look at the issues underpinning the planned extermination of an entire ethnic group? Whether you have an in-depth knowledge of the events of 1994 or have never heard of the Rwandan genocide, this film will certainly act as a catalyst for discussion and critical thinking on many levels.

Shooting Dogs does not provide all the answers but, as with development education, can be used as a starting point that enables learners to begin engaging with these difficult issues that we often avoid because of their complexity and sensitivity. This film can be used as an entry point to many different themes ranging from the individual (the power of self-preservation and choice) to the global (the role and responsibilities of inter-governmental agencies like the UN).

It raises questions of historical truth and stereotyping – is it ‘true’ that all Rwandans were only either victims or perpetrators? Is it easier or more effective in development education practice to engage with a fictionalised ‘reality’ rather than actual documentary footage or testimony of the genocide? Due to its basis in historical events and documentary style of filming, it becomes difficult to remember that whilst *Shooting Dogs* is based on fact, the story is fictionalised on many levels. For example, UN troops were not ordered to shoot the dogs feeding on the bodies outside the school gate, and 2,500 people were not massacred at the school but instead led on a death march to be slaughtered by machete and dumped in gravel pits. While the film was not totally faithful to the facts of the ETO incident, it still retains the capacity and power to encourage and support further learning about the Rwandan genocide.

The film has been criticised, along with other recent productions on African themes and countries of using fictional white leading characters to tell an African story, implying that this is the only way Western audiences can relate to the subject. However, I think we should be wary of assuming that the presence of white characters is always a negative thing. We cannot erase the impact and attitudes of colonialism from the history and stories of Africa just as it should not be erased from this story of Rwanda.

Hotel Rwanda has been praised by Western audiences for telling a Rwandan story through a central Rwandan character. But the perception that this is automatically a good thing is challenged by some Rwandans who dispute the validity of events as portrayed in the film. Perhaps viewers will be more preoccupied by the truthfulness of the film and its sensitivity to the issues and countries portrayed than the race or gender of the leading characters. Films that support learning and spark our interest in the situations they portray, particularly issues that are sidelined by mainstream cinema, can be useful educational tools in the development sector.

Shooting Dogs (2006) [Film]. Caton-Jones, M. London: CrossDay Productions Ltd.

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