

Transformation through human rights films

In an increasingly digital age, films have the potential to promote human rights activism that could transform society. A key question to ask is, how do we decide on the scientific value of these films? **Sharlene Swartz** explores whether film can serve a similar purpose to, for example, a qualitative interview with a key informant or an ethnographic case study, to bring about social change.



Film can persuade, educate, entertain, inform and is relied on to 'document, explain, expose, or complicate global human rights issues' according to US political scientist, Safia Swimelar.

Think for example of blockbuster films such as *Lord of War*, *Blood Diamond* and *Constant Gardener*, which dealt with the topics of nefarious arms dealing, exploitative resource extraction and the immoral aspects of the pharmaceutical industry in developing countries.

In South Africa, as elsewhere in the world, there are increasing numbers of human rights films being produced that are showcased at documentary film festivals, on television channels, over the internet and, in the case of big-budget productions, in cinemas.

Topics showcased in recent films (according to an analysis of the South African-based Tri-Continental Film Festival over the past 10 years) include human trafficking, political violence, environmental change, religious freedom and sexual choice.

The question does however need to be asked, how do those responsible decide which films are worth broadcasting or using in educational or research contexts?

Cases studies from South Africa, Sierra Leone and Burundi

This article describes three recent films set in various African contexts. *Ezra* (2007) tells the fictional story of a child soldier in Sierra Leone during the civil war in the 1990s. The film follows Ezra, who was kidnapped at the age of nine by one faction of the civil war, and details some of the atrocities he was involved in, including the role of drug use in war. It culminates in his experience at the subsequent Truth and Reconciliation Commission, convened when he was 16. The film is dramatic, poignant and highlights the complexities of actors, actions and consequences.

My Heart of Darkness (2010) narrates the story of four war veterans, from various sides of the conflict during apartheid South Africa's border wars (in Namibia and Angola) between 1975 and 1992. The story focuses on the men's reunion – an initiative taken by a white former South African conscript in an effort to deal with his demons, and find forgiveness and reconciliation. The film offers a frank and nuanced discussion of war atrocities, human emotion and culpability.

Kamenge Northern Quarters (2010) showcases civic action in post-genocide Burundi and relates two stories. The first is of a Catholic priest who runs a youth centre situated in Kamenge, Burundi, on the border between former Tutsi and Hutu zones. The second story is of a Burundian journalist and aspiring politician who returns to Burundi from exile in France only to be imprisoned for drawing attention to alleged corruption and power-mongering in Burundian politics. The film also offers a detailed historical perspective on the genocide in Burundi and the political landscape following it.

A way to evaluate human rights films

We offer a rubric through which human rights films might be evaluated under five main headings:

1. *Perspective, content and form*

What is this film about? What point of view does it take? What does it defend, advance or omit? Who are those wronged, and who are portrayed as those able to make it right? Who is given power? Who is left powerless?

2. Provenance of filmmaker

What are the background and politics of its creator (writer, director, producer, funder)? Is the filmmaker local to the context portrayed or foreign? What difference does this make? How does the personal location and milieu (time of writing, political events, culture) of the filmmaker affect our understanding and interpretation of the film?

3. Audience and representation

Who is the intended audience for the film? What is its stated intention? What response does it evoke in the viewer?

4. Theory of change and theoretical lens

How does the film position actors (as architects, implementers, inheritors, dishonoured, beneficiaries of injustice or resistance to injustice)? How does it address the elements of personhood (dignity, memory, belonging and opportunity)? In what domains (individual, communal, institutional) does it suggest action?

5. Authority and film as social science text

What other literature supports or contradicts its basic argument? What weight or authority ought to be given to this film as social science text, as educational material, as provocation to activism?

Film is an important component of humanities research.

Assessing the films according to this rubric

While these questions are complex and answering them in detail is beyond the scope of this review, a synopsis of answers reveals valuable insights. All three films are contemporary accounts of events less than 20 years' old. As such they offer immediate histories from specific vantage points.

My Heart of Darkness and *Ezra* do well to locate themselves historically and address issues of power. Only *Ezra* is produced by an African (although a Nigerian rather than someone from Sierra Leone); the others are European produced and funded. This is especially apparent in *Kamenge Northern Quarters*, where only one story, that of external agents, is told rather than the more complex features of the genocide and political transition that followed.

Both *My Heart of Darkness* and *Ezra* invite an audience response through offering nuanced accounts. Not so with *Kamenge*, which focuses almost solely on a critique of the current Burundian government. *Ezra* depicts a complicated location of actors, while *My Heart of Darkness* and *Kamenge* use mainly binary categories of good and bad, right and wrong in their story-telling. The latter two also depict how change could happen at the interpersonal and communal level, while *Ezra*'s focus is on structural change (through the truth commission it describes).

From a theory-of-change point of view, all three films address issues of dignity and memory, but only *Kamenge*

addresses the socioeconomic impact of injustice (opportunity) as well as the current political effects of past injustice (belonging).

As social science texts, *My heart of darkness* and *Ezra* perform relatively well. However, the same cannot be said for *Kamenge*. Many of the reasons are to be found in the earlier analysis, which points to the usefulness of such an interrogative framework. As a catalyst for social activism, all three make a worthwhile contribution.

Figure 1 provides an evaluation of these five elements and how each film fared using a basic metric of 'good' (thumbs up), 'not so good' (thumbs down) and 'so-so' (a pointing finger).

Figure 1: Summary of the elements against which the human rights films were assessed.

	My Heart of Darkness	Kamenge Northern Quarters	Ezra
Perspective, content and form	😊	😞	😊
Provenance of filmmaker	😞	😞	😊
Audience and representation	😐	😞	😊
Theory of change and theoretical lens	😊	😊	😐
Authority and film as social science text	😐	😞	😐

Conclusion

This article highlights the need for further research in this area. Film is an important component of humanities research and studies on human rights films, such as this one, bring together the humanities and social sciences with critical application for everyday social transformation.

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Outcomes of such research offer active engagement and practical educational opportunities for youth in schools, film festival goers and the general public who might encounter these films through mass broadcast. A key additional recommendation that emerged from a discussion at the World Social Science Forum 2013 was that such an evaluative framework would be useful for filmmakers to ensure that the films they produced realised their maximum potential for transformative impact. ■

Author: Professor Sharlene Swartz, director, Human and Social Development research programme, HSRC.