

Swedish Television News Coverage and the Historical Media Memory of the Rwandan Genocide

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At approximately 8.20 pm on April 6, 1994, the plane carrying the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi, Juvenal Habyarimana and Cyprien Ntaryamira respectively, was shot down outside Kigali airport, killing all its passengers. Within an hour of the plane crash, roadblocks were set up in Rwanda's capital city, signaling the start of the fastest and most gruesome genocide in modern history, as some 800 000 people were butchered within the next hundred days, all while the Western world acted as bystanders.

This is a highly condensed but fairly accurate retelling of the historical events in Rwanda in 1994. Like all historical accounts seem to have, and perhaps even must have to become graspable, this genocide had a proper beginning and it had an end. But what does this basic or necessary form of narration of historical recollections constitute? What implications does it have on the creation of a (audiovisual) historical memory on a global scale? The Western Powers, USA, the former colonial powers France and Belgium, and especially the United Nations (UN), were subsequently subjected to severe criticism, as they stood by and even decreased instead of increased the UN peace keeping force, United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), already in place in Rwanda at the start of the genocide. A fair share of the blame has, furthermore, been put on Western media for not reporting in an accurate way on the genocide.¹ This view implies that a more accurate way of conveying news and information could have prevented the genocide as it, supposedly, would have created outbursts of moral indignation among the public and those in power, and ultimately, a more forceful intervention.

The aim of this article is not to, once more, criticize the media for failing to report on the genocide. In fact, the media coverage was, at the very start at least and when balanced against other coincident world events like the election in South Africa and the crisis in Bosnia, often both extremely swift and well informed, albeit from a predisposed colonial angle in the sense that the

coverage to a great extent depended on already pre-constituted conceptions of Africa as an immature continent pertaining to political, economic, and humanitarian issues.² The aim is rather to analyze how the historical memory of the Rwandan genocide came to be shaped, already from the beginning, as a bad western conscience. The mantra, “everybody knew, but didn’t do anything”, has, accordingly, become an important part of the western or global memory and is therefore also a recurrent theme in feature films and feature length documentaries such as *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *Ghosts of Rwanda* (2004). However, to get a fresh view on how this memory came to be shaped on both a national and transnational level, the main focus here is going to be on Swedish television news coverage of the genocide as it occurred, followed by a discussion of how the initial “national” reporting correlates to the audiovisual memory recreated in, predominantly, American films with global distribution and impact – thereby creating what can be perceived as a global historical media memory of the Rwandan genocide.

There are mainly three reasons that make the Swedish impetus interesting. First, Sweden does not have the same explicit colonial past as for example Belgium or France, and was accordingly not part of the European scramble for Africa at the end of the 19th century.³ Second, during the Cold War, Sweden situated itself as “the third alternative” in between USA and the Soviet Union and thus created a traditional self-image as the world’s conscience; giving support to countries and organizations in the “third world” such as Vietnam and ANC in South Africa. Third, since 1946 Sweden has been one of UN’s most dedicated advocates, even adjusting its foreign policy according to UN rules and regulations.⁴

The context of Swedish television

Swedish public television (SVT) broadcasts started with one single channel in 1956. Like most Western-European countries with state-owned television companies, SVT was modeled after the public service broadcasting agenda of the British BBC, that is, financed by licenses rather than by commercial advertisement spots. Already from the beginning SVT was guided by governmental principles and directives; television in Sweden was thus regulated when it came to the number of channels, airing time, and program content. The objective was, and still is, to transmit an even distributed programming of news, knowledge, and entertainment in an impartial way with the aim to improve society by informing its viewers.⁵ In some ways SVT resemble, for example, American PBS as both strive for impartial and strict adherence to objectivity and balance in all programs, but where the US federal government is prohibited from interfering or controlling what is broadcast on PBS, the

Swedish directives has had great influence on the programming on SVT, although direct government interference is prohibited. PBS was also founded as a counterweight to the three privately owned US networks, while SVT enjoyed a virtual monopoly in Sweden.

In 1969 SVT started a second channel. It would then take another 22 years until a third channel, the commercial advertisement-financed TV₄, was permitted to transmit on the terrestrial analogue net, the technique with the ability to reach all viewers in Sweden at the time. Even though a commercial entertainment satellite channel, TV₃, had started to transmit in Swedish from London in 1987, followed by a few cable-net based film and entertainment channels, SVT's near monopoly was firmly in place by 1994 – actually making Sweden the last country in Western-Europe to allow commercial television.⁶

When it comes to television news, SVT's *Rapport* (Report) is, and has been since it started in 1969, the most established and most viewed news program in Sweden, irrespective of audience category, with a prime time scheduling every evening at 7.30 pm. The commercial TV₄ initially placed its main news program, *Nyheter* (The News), on the same time slot, 7.30 pm, but after failing viewing numbers the program was soon moved up to 10 pm, where it still stayed in 1994. These are the two Swedish television news programs that will be the focus of this article, and the analysis will stretch over the first 30 days of *Rapport's* news coverage of the genocide in Rwanda – during which time the majority of the Rwandans were killed⁷ – but also include the first week of *Nyheter's* reporting for comparison. Accordingly, *Rapport* represents the well established credo of public service broadcasting, while *Nyheter* represented the only commercial alternative available in 1994 with a similar reach. Both news programs operated under the same governmental rules and regulation, which was to provide the viewers with “impartial objectivity” when it came to news reporting.⁸ However, TV_{4's} *Nyheter* was for many years seen as a mere light-weight contender in comparison to SVT's *Rapport*, an image which *Nyheter* played upon as they introduced a lighter frame of mind in the studio, always ending, and becoming a bit infamous for it, the program with a funny, down-to-earth piece of news. For example, on April 7 the funny news item was that all American Olympics had been invited to dinner to the White House, with the exception for Tonya Harding, the scandalous figure skater. *Nyheter's* leading story the same evening had been that chaos had broken out in a small Central-African nation-state named Rwanda.

There are, obviously, particular circumstances in motion when it comes to how genocide is circulated as a media event in a transnational context. The first thing to point out is that genocide in reality is a highly unusual event and, consequently, a “live” news item with hardly any points of previous reference. This means that most journalists, in the TV-studio or out on the

field, are without any expert knowledge of genocide and therefore easily fall back on the handy use of third world stereotypes, as the case was in Rwanda, where most journalists reported on the massacres as ongoing “chaos” and “civil war”.⁹ Sociologist Stanley Cohen has, furthermore, argued that the mass media, especially television, almost have a monopoly in creating cultural images of suffering and atrocities. Cohen identifies several formal elements in this imagery, for example, that the use of negative imagery in news of suffering from “third world” countries – starving children, war victims, refugee camps – as the “normal” state results in a cultural (and eventually personal) denial in the West that simply alienates rather than engages people in front of their TV-sets.¹⁰ At the same time the cultural belief in visual images, and that they can have a visceral impact, continues to be strong:

Sophisticated technology can spread images of live atrocities around the world in minutes. But self-evident truth will not be self-evidently accepted. However informative, reliable and convincing they are, accounts of atrocities and suffering do little to undermine overt forms of denial. Humanitarian organizations are living relics of Enlightenment faith in the power of knowledge: *if only people knew, they would act*.¹¹

It should be noted here that denial is a cognitive mechanism that necessitate what Cohen calls the *denial paradox*: in other words, that the denial in itself – We didn’t know – in fact reveals that the person/organization/country actually did know what they denied, otherwise it would not be necessary to deny anything.¹² In view of this, Cohen dismisses several traditional rationalizations of denial, such as the psychoanalytical defense mechanism of the unconscious and the thesis about compassion fatigue, due to information overload and desensitization.¹³ In its place he distinguishes several more precise basics of denial relevant for my purposes: 1. The use of euphemisms as a way to reallocate an event to another class of events, 2. Moral distance, as repetition of images of suffering increases their remoteness, 3. The Chad rule, “no one wants to hear about Chad”, as whole zones of the world is overlooked as they are not seen as newsworthy, leading to 4. Ethnic amnesia, as Western media, for example, ignored or simply “forgot” genocidal massacres in Burundi and Rwanda commenced before 1994.¹⁴

Finally, Cohen argues for the perspective that denial, in the sense of shutting out awareness of others’ suffering, in fact should be seen as the normal state of affairs and not as an abnormal condition as it, according to Cohen, “is quite abnormal to know or care very much about the problems of distant places”.¹⁵ “The empirical problem is not to uncover yet more evidence of denial, but to discover the conditions under which information is acknowledged and acted upon”.¹⁶

The first week

The critique of the international news coverage of the Rwandan genocide can be divided into three main arguments: 1. There were only a few journalists in place in Rwanda and their news pieces were rarely picked up according to the “Chad Rule”,¹⁷ 2. The initial reporting’s of the genocide were grossly inaccurate,¹⁸ 3. There were very few TV-images from the genocide and as a result nothing to make attention-grabbing TV off.¹⁹

These objections do, by and large, correspond with how Swedish television news programs handled the events in Rwanda at the outset of the genocide, were it not for the first week’s speedy and well informed coverage. Starting on April 7 and all through to April 12, both *Rapport* and *Nyheterna* reported on the events in Rwanda at a comparatively fair length every evening, with segments of two to four minutes. *Rapport* had, furthermore, Rwanda as its leading story on 8, 10 and 12 April, while Rwanda represented the top news item at *Nyheterna* on 7 and 8 April.

On the first day, the reporting on both programs is a bit sketchy when it comes to the latest information. The viewers are informed that fighting has broken out; that the presidents of Rwanda and Burundi have died in a plane crash (*Nyheterna*) or that the plane has been shot down (*Rapport*); and that the prime minister and three unarmed Belgian UN-observers have been killed. While *Nyheterna* puts some emphasis on the UN involvement, showing a brief clip from a conference where UN-spokesman Fred Eckhard informs on the Belgians fate, and then mentions that several UN-observers are still uncounted for, *Rapport* leaps directly into a historical explanation: “This is how it has been in Rwanda for thirty years: power struggles and ethnic cleansing with extremely brutal elements”.²⁰ Over a sequence of archive footage – images of a gathering of threadbare-looking Rwandans; molested corpses on a street and corpses floating by in a river; and a lone soldier looking out over a river – the reporter states that this disorder has produced three million refugees and that hundreds of thousands of people have been killed over the years. We then get to know that peace negotiations were held until yesterday between the “two great native-populations, the majority Hutus with about 85 per cent of the population and Tutsi, with 15 per cent”, and in addition that, “The antagonism between the two peoples are of ancient date; the minority Tutsi has by tradition had the most power, and the old colonial power, Belgium [illustrated with archive footage in black and white of Rwandan soldiers and the final lowering of the Belgian flag in 1962] aggravated the situation by favoring the Tutsis according to the colonial concept, divide and conquer”. The reporter then goes on and draws a parallel to the recent massacres in Burundi – more images of corpses in rivers and images from refugee camps – and finish the segment with the prediction that the murders of the

two presidents could have unimaginable consequences, “the future can even become more bloodier than the past”.

Nyheter's first segment on Rwanda is more spacious when it comes to explanations. Here the three key words: “chaos”, “anarchy” and “tribes” are consistently used as shorthand's for what is going on, thus evocating a primordial rationalization of events. The crisis is also, more or less, historically described as a civil war between two tribes that has ranged on and off since the independence. The illustrations used are similar in type as in *Rapport*: archival footage of corpses, soldiers, the countryside, and also a panorama-view of what seems to be an endless line of refugees. Moreover, *Nyheter* uses what probably is the most recurrent archival footage to illustrate “Africa”, namely images of ordinary Africans, that is, not refugees, walking along a red dusty road carrying necessities. As a way to fill the lack of historical background and explanation *Nyheter* employs two elements which differentiate them from *Rapport* on this initial day: First they make a telephone interview with a Swedish missionary stationed in Rwanda, who report that there has been gunfire since the same morning and that, “something has, so to speak, lingered in the air for a long time here in Rwanda, though nobody imagined that it would lead to this”. Second, and more importantly, is the use of a commentator or “studio expert” of foreign affairs, whom is interviewed. Here the presentation shifts from an expository mode to an interactive mode as the female studio-anchor rotate her chair to face the male expert. The studio light is dimmed and shot/reverse shot is used to create a more intimate atmosphere, although the TV4-logo is always visible behind both participants as they discusses the situation, mostly reiterating what has already been said and shown in the reportage. Then the following fatalistic and foresighted exchange occurs:

Studio-Anchor: Ministers, members of parliament and UN-personal are murdered. What will the UN do now?

Expert: Yes, it seems as if UN-soldiers still patrols some parts of the capital city, but nobody knows if they have any control over the situation, and since UN-personal is both killed and threatened, the UN should reasonably consider an intervention. However, it is not impossible that the UN finds the situation to be so hopeless that they decide to evacuate their personnel.

SA: There is essentially a slaughter going on, and if people continue to kill each other in this way: how long can this go on before the world has to intervene?

E: Yes, this has been going on for a long time as we said, tens of thousands of people have died and no-one in the world around really have cared about it. What is happening now could perhaps change this view in some way, but the risk is obviously great that *we* simply let this continue; letting them beat each other to death and turn our backs once more.



Explaining the genocide. *Nyheternas* (The News) “studio expert” gives a fatalistic view of the genocide.

Even though nobody really seemed to know what was going on at this stage, the creation of the historical media memory of the genocide in Rwanda starts here, just 24 hours into the carnage. And it starts out as a bad western conscience over an already abandoned Africa. The archival footage that illustrates the two news segments, and the research done, reveal a somewhat ambitious approach towards the events in remote Rwanda. So far, Swedish television news programs do not suffer from ethnic amnesia, but rather from predisposed colonial discourses that plainly recreates Africa as otherness; hardly not even as part of the us and them dichotomy. The euphemisms used, particularly by *Nyheterna*, reinforce the view on the situation in Rwanda as a lost cause. What is more, the illustrative images do not promote engagement in the Enlightenment way, that is, that the faith in the power of knowledge promotes action, but instead the opposite just because they are embedded in this predisposed colonial context – with its near automatic negative representations of black Africans – of which Sweden undeniably always has been a part of.²¹

The rest of the first week’s reporting follows a similar stylistic pattern, with news segments that opens with a map of Africa where the tiny dots of Rwanda and Burundi are, always together, enlarged while the news-caster announces the latest developments. After that the reportage itself begins, which is intertwined with telephone interviews with “eyewitnesses” and essentially illustrated with the exact same archive footage as the first day. However, as early as April 8 (*Nyheterna*) and April 9 (*Rapport*), the story of Rwanda both



Locating the genocide. *Nyheternas* (The News) map over Africa with Rwanda and Burundi marked as tiny dots.

multiplies into stories and is skewed. This change is largely caused by the imprecise information available, not least the lack of current TV-images. The question is if it is the lack of images that changes the story, or does the story change dependently on the available images?

The events in Rwanda continue to be presented as a story of civil war and relentless violence, even though the estimated death tolls reported rises rapidly from hundreds, to thousands, and then to tens of thousands within three days—a figure that do not change during the coming month. When these numbers and the euphemisms used in connection with them – “orgies of murder”, “blood orgies”, “bloodbath” – are not associated with genocide *per se*, the account of what is happening becomes quite dubious. First, it reinforces the primordial perspective as both news programs maintain that the events in Rwanda are caused by “tribal quarrels” of ancient date. Second, this out-of control “anarchy” connotes the colonial narrative of savages against civilization – with the unspoken threat that this could turn from a black on black situation to a black on white affair – which is envisioned by the fact that African victims are just quantified, whereas “civilized” victims such as nuns, priests, aid workers, and UN-soldiers are individualized. This selective individualization alters the story of Rwanda and it quickly turns into a very Eurocentric one, where the center of attention now is on the efforts of “saving” white expatriates – turning the genocide into a mere backdrop for the rest of the first week. This is also reverberated by the only news footage that is added between April 8 and April 10, namely a mix of images of Belgian paratroopers, trucks and airplanes that takes off, and one day later, images of white expatriates at Kigali Airport, waiting to be lifted out of Rwanda.

The interviews, mostly conducted by telephone, which both *Rapport* and *Nyheterna* televise on a daily basis, add to the Eurocentric perspective as the interviewees consist of Swedes and Americans. These interviews are used as “live” eyewitnesses that in actuality replace the severe lack of actual facts, thereby involuntarily enhancing the colonial perspective on the information given. The interviews are short and edited, but collectively they nevertheless communicate a similar story; one of anarchy and ruthless killings which, as they seem to be lacking in discrimination, are experienced as a threat to the expatriates. An American interviewed at Kigali airport: “There was a Rwandan tank that pulled up beside a guy on the road, I don’t know if he was a thief or the wrong tribe, but he was begging on his hands and knees beside the road and they shot him in the head three times” (*Rapport* April 10). A Swedish missionary: “[T]his last night has been worse, with firing close by our house; it feels worrying, and then one starts to think about what could happen if *they* broke through the walls and threatened us” (*Nyheterna* 8 April).

The only exception to this are two very short statements made by RPF

(Rwandese Patriotic Front) representatives that *Nyheterna* chose to televise, probably as a way to differentiate itself from SVT. In the first a Paul Dusaida advises French troops, there to evacuate expatriates, not to intervene in the conflict – a warning which in the context presented take the function of yet another threat against Europeans. The second is made by general secretary Theogele Rudasingwa, who explains that RPF does not accept the new, hastily put together interim government, which they see as a violation against the Arusha Peace Agreement – something which the Swedish studio-reporter then misinterprets since he draws the conclusion that it is the Peace Agreement in itself that is the cause for the conflict in the first place.

It should not come as any surprise that the presence (and eventual evacuation) of twelve Swedish missionaries in Rwandan added a national spice to the reporting that keeps the interest alive in the wake of the “Chad rule”. *Nyheterna* even tried to make something of the fact that the Swedish consul had gone missing for a few hours, but on the whole the Swedes are used as neutral and surprisingly unaware bystanders to a Rwanda gone berserk. Swedish missionary Leif Angnestrand, who had lived in the country for fifteen years, blames the “bloodbath” on the fact that the Western world has forced democracy on Rwanda: “So now *they* have formed several smaller political parties and this have triggered that tribal thinking enters the picture; regionalism enters, and dependently of where one lives in the country and what clan one belongs to, these things slips into party structures even if this is not allowed” (*Rapport* 11 April). The information given here is, naturally, subjective and very limited. At the same time, though, it is precisely this closeness that makes these interviews work as smaller pieces within the larger, colonial story.

A number of TV-journalists came in on the planes that brought in French and Belgian paratroopers during these days, and most of the media also left with the same planes for safety reasons after April 12.²² These journalists travelled across Kigali on trucks that assembled expatriates and for a couple of days a window opened for a new – and what was to become emblematic – kind of TV-footage of the genocide as journalists filmed numerous corpses lying on the side of the road from the platforms of these moving trucks. On April 11 and 12 *Rapport* also aired, warning its viewers ahead, the now well-known footage by British cameraman Nick Hughes of people being killed in the street, filmed in extreme long-shot.²³

The arrival of new and “live” footage could potentially have had the ability to change the story, and perhaps even reverse the focus to the ongoing genocide. However, by now the Eurocentric perspective has already created a vast moral distance that not even Nick Hughes’s revealing film can change. In the edited context in which this new footage is shown, the images do not denote genocide, but instead just alienating savagery. Over the montage: 1. Running



Emblematic footage of the Rwandan genocide: corpses lying on the side of a road in Kigali.

and shouting French soldiers in Kigali, 2. the Nick Hughes film, 3. a French soldier who aims his weapon at an unseen threat from a jeep in high speed, the Swedish reporter announces:

It is dangerous in Kigali, dead dangerous. Aid workers in Rwanda's capital city claim that ten thousand have been beaten to death in five days, that is, two thousand every day. Most of them have, as shown here, been hacked to death. The nervousness of the French paratroopers is understandable. They are now escorting the expatriates out of the bloodbath.

And on April 12, these words guide the Hughes-images: "The ongoing civil war in Rwanda has, here and there, turned into genuine slaughter. Some speak of thousands of dead".

That same day the evacuation of expatriates ended. As the Force Commander of the UN troops, Romero Dallaire, stated: "I mark April 12 as the day the world moved from disinterest in Rwanda to the abandonment of Rwandans to their fate. The swift evacuation of the foreign nationals was the signal for the *génocidaires* to move toward the apocalypse".²⁴ Symptomatically, on this evening *Rapport* devotes most of the time of the news segment on Rwanda to talk with the twelve evacuated Swedish missionaries, who now turn out to be in Nairobi, Kenya. On the question of how it feels to leave colleges behind, one of the missionaries answers:

When the situation becomes this impossible, so even if one wants to help them, perhaps psychological or in some other way, you really don't help them. As a foreigner you can cause trouble for them, and in all wars foreigners do not come up with something good, just uncertainty. And since we are

talking about dark skinned people [said with an uncertain smile], and we are white; they aren't able to hide us, and we cannot hide them, without this being noticed.

The resignation expressed by the missionaries, in no doubt genuine when it comes to the worry felt for their Rwandan colleges, do nevertheless reinforce the overall and determine notion that nothing can be done.

The long and winding road to call it genocide

After April 12 the story of Rwanda completely fades away in Sweden television news. Over the following three and a half weeks, from April 13 to May 5, *Rapport* only returns on six occasions to the developments in Rwanda, of which three consist of brief news announcements, averaging nineteen seconds. As has been noticed elsewhere, this media silence can partly be explained by the competition with other world events, such as the concurrent crisis in Bosnia and the election in South Africa.²⁵ Bosnia was also heavily featured in *Rapport* over the two subsequent weeks, being the top story on eight occasions, whereas the reporting on the election in South Africa reached a peak by the end of April, representing the lead story on four occasions. Nevertheless, Sweden, being a small country, has traditionally had a more balanced proportion between domestic and international news, with a distribution of 60/40 or even 50/50 per cent – shown by the fact that *Rapport* featured international news as its lead story on seventeen out of thirty days in the concurrent period – while, in comparison, USA had a distribution of 73/27 per cent in the same period.²⁶ Hence, a more durable reason for the decline must be found elsewhere.

When *Rapport* returns to Rwanda on April 19, the news segment is more incoherent than before, most certainly because the previous uniting link, the Eurocentric interest, now is gone. Left is only the ongoing slaughter, still disguised as an irrational and bloody civil war that the UN is powerless to do something about. The segment is mostly illustrated with footage of soldiers from the RGF (Rwandese Government Forces) firing mortars and standing guard, and sheering RPF soldiers waving their Kalashnikovs in the air. Shown is also new footage of piles of dead bodies on the side of a road, again taken from a moving vehicle.

In an effort to explain this, viewers get to know that most of the dead “probably belongs to the minority people, Tutsis”. This vague identification of the victims is in fact the definition of genocide. However, in the adjacent context this does not serve as an unambiguous definition since, holding on to the rule of impartiality, *Rapport* then lets the accused Hutu side answer, airing a short interview with the prime minister for the (illegal) interim

government, Jean Kambanda: “I believe that the government represents the people and that the people are now in control over the country”. The Swedish voice-over: “But the problem is that the government is not supported by the whole country. The Tutsi rebels, who represented the traditional noble class, the feudal lords, and the elite within the army, are now trying to take back their past positions”. In other words, to explain the mass killings Swedish public television actually uses textbook Hutu hate propaganda.

The segment ends on the note that the West is powerless in the face of this immense irrationalism, illustrated with footage of humiliated and enraged Belgian UN-soldiers slicing and tearing up a blue beret with an army knife. The last images are of fleeing refugees, while the voice over concludes: “there will probably not be peace until the two peoples are separated for good”.

This powerlessness of the West thus becomes a form of denial that blurs the line between the past and the present.²⁷ Even though the atrocities do take place in the present, the explanation is exclusively placed in the past, making it both irrational and unattainable for a “western” solution, i.e. democracy, capitalism or UN-peace keeping. This powerlessness also affects the news reporting as it, seemingly, becomes hard trying to explain this savage irrationalism where western standard solutions do not apply.²⁸ Consequently, the repetition of images of forever multiplying piles of dead bodies does not only increase the moral distance between the West and the rest, it also represents poor news in the sense that it avoids or are unable to put these images in a comprehensible narrative structure.

Without this necessary narrative logic, *Rapport* thus leave the events in Rwanda behind for two full weeks, with the exception of the mentioned news announcements that briefly inform of a growing refugee problem. When *Rapport* returns to Rwanda on May 3 and 5, the story is in the midst of changing. The focus is still on the “impetuous” killings in the “civil war”, but within the segment the focus soon shifts to the gigantic crisis which rapidly is building up on the boarder to Tanzania with 250 000 refugees. With abundant footage of Red Cross refugee camp sites and a telephone interview with a Swedish aid worker, this in fact represents the long awaited moment that finally sets the events in Rwanda on a familiar track, thus making it graspable to Swedish viewers. Images of two children fighting over a sack of flour in a refugee camp are explained by the fact that they are “mortal enemies at home and therefore have a hard time sharing food with each other”. Even footage of corpses floating by in the border river between Rwanda and Tanzania is interpreted within the refugee paradigm, as the corpses are the result of the unexplainable killings which now is polluting the drinking water for the refugees.

This development in Swedish television news follow a similar pattern of how western media handled the Rwandan genocide, even though the shift

from an unexplainable genocide to a familiar African refugee problem seems to come much earlier here, already at the beginning of May. According to other accounts of western media, the main shift in the Rwandan story did not occur until after the civil war ended on July 18 – when the world’s attention turned to the refugee catastrophe in Goma, Zaire, where 2 000 000 Rwandans, mostly Hutus, had escaped.²⁹ Hence, this should be understood as a transition period where the refugee problem is used to explain the genocide and vice versa.

On May 5, *Rapport’s* well-known studio-anchor warns sensitive viewers before that evening’s reportage on Rwanda begins. Over the footage of people standing on a bridge, looking at mutilated and bloated corpses floating by in a river, and images of a huge accumulation of corpses at a creek, the reporter announces: “From the bridge overlooking the Alcagera river between Tanzania and Rwanda one has a good view of the consequences of the genocide that is taking place in Rwanda. Sometimes the onlookers can count one corpse every minute, and survivors say that most of the victims come from the minority group, Tutsi”. This is the first time that SVT’s *Rapport* uses the word genocide to characterize the events in Rwanda as genocide.

Over a period of a month, Swedish television news program oscillated between extensive coverage of the Rwandan genocide followed by long periods of total silence. The colonial frame of interpretation of events was strong, as was the Eurocentric perspective on the events during the first week. This division contributed to the creation of a moral distance, which already from the start was formed as a bad conscience in the face of what seemed to be an unexplainable or unsolvable crisis. The use of different TV-images to describe or to explain the genocide also reflects this confusion, as these often were used to rationalize murky, colonial ideas – such as that irrational tribalism governed the genocide – which in turn contributed to a strong sense of rational western denial.



Emblematic footage of corpses floating in the river between Rwanda and Tanzania.

The creation of a historical media memory on a global scale

One of the most influential ways to create a historical memory in a modern media society is to produce a film or a TV-series. The potential to write or to rewrite history; to attract attention to a forgotten historic event and thus create public awareness is enormous; shown, for example by the huge impact that the TV-miniseries *Holocaust* (1978, NBC) had when it aired in USA and Europe.³⁰ Increasingly, these creations of cinematic history also take place on a transnational level, with the recycling of images that easily bounces over geographical boundaries, time periods, and in between audiovisual media.

The Rwandan genocide is, after the Holocaust, the most recreated genocide on film. As early as June 27 BBC aired the TV-documentary *Journey into Darkness* (1994), which since then has been followed by several dozens of documentaries and at least six feature films, of which threefold Academy Award nominee *Hotel Rwanda* probably is the most internationally renowned and celebrated example.³¹

A just question then is why Rwanda has spawned so many audiovisual recollections when other modern-day genocides, for example the Cambodian or the East Timorese genocides, have not. I believe that the main answer to this can be found in the bad western conscience that Rwanda generated and which was, as we have seen, shaped as such very early on via television news programs. Significantly, this was a result of the digital media technology that came into prominence in the 90s – where the same emblematical images were simultaneously broadcast all over the western world. This can be exemplified by the fact that, to my knowledge, not a single Swedish TV-team entered Rwanda during the genocide. All footage of the genocide used in Swedish television news was purchased from international news agencies, such as Associated Press and Reuters TV News, which provided these images to other countries as well.

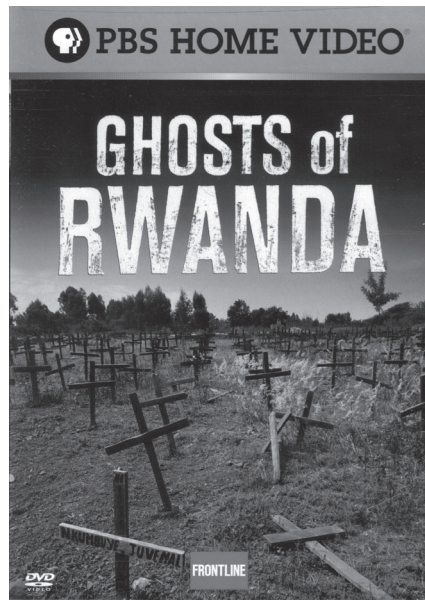
However, the transformation of a bad western conscience to a historical memory of western guilt is more complicated. Feature films and especially documentaries draw on the same representative, and by now archival, images that were televised as news in the spring of 1994. But the narrative coherence, in which these images now figure, is no longer the same.

The main difference is that television news is a genre that per definition mediates reality and “now-ness”, and like reality itself it usually does not have a narrative end since the world inevitably moves on – even though news programs can, of course, create an artificial end by simply dropping the story. However, when the events in Rwanda are presented as fiction the narrative structure and the time limit of the film in question necessitate that the story will have both a beginning and an end. These fictitious elements are in work

whether it is a historical drama film or a historical documentary. Not in the sense that these audiovisual recreations of history have the intent to fabricate lies, but in the sense that they unavoidably must construct and rearrange the Rwandan story according to certain logics, of which western guilt seems to be essential.

While there had been several documentaries and at least one feature film made before, *Hotel Rwanda* is the quintessential film on the Rwandan genocide and the theme of western guilt, on equal footing in importance with *Holocaust* and *Schindler's List* (1993) when it came to archetypical dramatizations of the Holocaust. Albeit celebrated, *Hotel Rwanda* has also been subjected to devastating criticism, as a film without a serious effort to explain the genocide; that shies away from explicit violence; and that advocates a happy and upbeat ending which “strikes a false note [...] because it actively encourages uninformed viewers to conclude that with the RPF about to capture Kigali, the genocide will soon come to an end”.³²

It is harder to appoint an as influential counterpart in the documentary genre, often perceived as a more “truthful” genre but with less impact. At the moment two similar films tie this position: *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire* (2004), a film, though, that has only been screened at film festivals and on the art house circuit. The other film is *Ghosts of Rwanda*, produced as part of the highly regarded *Frontline*-series and first aired nationally in the U.S. on the PBS networks on April 1, 2004, thus making it more widespread.³³



DVD cover of PBS's *Ghosts of Rwanda*.

Ghosts of Rwanda is well crafted and quickly paced, using conventional stylistic devices such as talking heads, stills, archival footage, maps, and landscape footage of Rwanda taken ten years after the genocide. Furthermore, it is chronologically organized according to two parallel storylines. The first one tracks the events month by month: opening briefly in August 1993 and then dwelling thoroughly on the genocide in April and May 1994. However, the end or the outcome of the genocide is severely blurred by the second, interwoven storyline – which looks back and comments on the events from the year 2004 from an extremely Eurocentric perspective. The film therefore tilts towards a seemingly endless parade of talking heads – mostly western world leaders – who try to explain (or explain away) why mainly USA and the UN did not prevent the genocide. The result is not so much a film about the Rwandan genocide in itself as it is an elegy over the complete failure of the western world. Rightly, the documentary should perhaps have been called “Haunted by the Ghosts of Rwanda”.

The strong presence of the western guilt theme leads, once again, to the creation of moral distance, but this time on two different levels that reinforces each other. First on the original geographical/economical/cultural level, that underlines the remoteness between the West and the rest. The second level concerns time, which here creates distance through the use of history as something that has an ending. Accordingly, in *Ghosts of Rwanda* the ending is formed as “happy” since it continually promotes the apologetic lead score of, “We were wrong, but it will never ever happen again”. This is underlined by the fact that the actual ending of the film solely focuses on the western talking heads. It is also emphasized on the second chronological level where only a few Rwandans, among them one victim and one perpetrator, are featured in the middle of these numerous talking heads.

The logic of this narrative and thematic approach leads to, and is a part of, a western culture of denial towards the sufferings of the “third world” as it conveniently rearranges and thus obscures what really happened after the genocide officially ended in mid July.³⁴ After the massive aid campaign in Goma, the world community withdrew and returned to their non-intervention policy. As a result the region of Central-Africa was gravely destabilized with two wars, several coup d'états, and continued refugee problems. It is estimated that an additional 4 000 000 human beings have died because of the wars, starvation, diseases, and genocidal massacres between 1994 and 2003.³⁵

Even if *Ghosts of Rwanda* admirably avoids using tribal and other ancient explanations, mostly due to the attentiveness on the Eurocentric guilt trip, it nevertheless strengthens a skewed, primordial perspective on the genocide as something irrational and essentially unexplainable. This somewhat peculiar

viewpoint, in a film supposed to be about the Rwandan genocide, is the result of the film's shallow handling of the historical context. With the exception of a hastily delivered account on the Belgian influence of the ethnic division between Hutus and Tutsis, *Ghosts of Rwanda* shows no effort to convey any justifiable explanations to the audience, that is, political, economic, historical, or even "racial" explanations. This shallowness instead prompts the slippery use of that word for all seasons – evil – to explain the genocide. But, of course, evil does not explain anything at all. Implicitly, however, it conveniently performs its duty to legitimize the lacking western attitude towards Rwanda.

While many American films that convey global cinematic history have a seemingly distinct American perspective on things, this view is simultaneously, nonetheless, intertwined with the world at large. *Ghosts of Rwanda* has, for example, not been bought by a Swedish television company and has, accordingly, not been televised in Sweden. Even so, *Ghosts of Rwanda*, *Hotel Rwanda*, and all other films of the Rwandan genocide, are a part of a new, encompassing audiovisual transnationalism where historical media memories are created on a global scale.³⁶

Images thus bounce between the national and the international, and the main assumption is that these images have the ability to obtain new meanings according to specific cultural frames and experiences on a national level, and that is true, but the same images have also the capability to generate coherence on a transnational level.³⁷ This can be observed by the fact that the Nick Hughes's "live" footage of the genocide, shown as news all around the world in April 1994, was used in a restaged scene in *Hotel Rwanda*. Furthermore, to create documentary "now-ness", *Ghosts of Rwanda* makes use of what I have called the emblematic images of the Rwandan genocide: Sequences filmed from a moving truck of corpses lying by the side of a road; bloated bodies that floats in a river; and the Hughes footage. Totally *Ghosts of Rwanda* utilizes seven of these sequences of archival footage of the actual genocide.³⁸ To make my point crystal clear about the transnational impact, the *exact same* seven sequences were aired as part of the news programming in Swedish television in April and early May 1994. In other words, the basis for today's transnational preconception of the Rwandan genocide as a world memory can be traced back to April 7, 1994, when this process started and immediately was shaped as a bad western conscience. The historical media memory in itself thus became part of a western culture of denial pertaining to the Rwandan genocide.

Sammanfattning

Syftet med artikeln har varit att analysera folkmordet i Rwanda som en global mediehändelse, både på en nationell och på en transnationell nivå. På den nationella nivån har fokus legat på att undersöka hur folkmordet rapporterades och konstruerades i svenska tv-nyheter under den första månaden som detta pågick. På den transnationella nivån har därefter den svenska tv-rapporteringen relaterats till hur ett audiovisuellt historiskt medieminne skapades globalt via produktionen av en rad internationella spel- och dokumentärfilmer med folkmordet som tema. Exakt samma emblematiske bilder som förekom i de initiala tv-sändningarna kom här att återanvändas, men inplacerade i en ny förklarande kontext. En viktig slutsats är därför att dagens transnationellt baserade uppfattning om folkmordet i Rwanda kan spåras tillbaka till den 7 april 1994, då denna process påbörjades och omedelbart utformades som ett dåligt västerländskt samvete. Det historiska medieminnet utgör med andra ord en del av en västerländsk kultur som har bortrationa- liserat den konkreta bakgrunden till folkmordet i Rwanda och istället ersatt denna med en apologetisk och eurocentrisk historieskrivning.

Keywords: Rwandan genocide, Swedish television news, historical media memory, culture of denial, ethnic amnesia, colonialism, eurocentric

Notes

- 1 Jo Ellen Fair and Lisa Parks, "Africa on Camera: Television News Coverage and Aerial Imaging of Rwanda Refugees", *Africa Today* 2001:2, pp. 35–57. Linda Melvern, *Att förräda ett folk. Västmakterna och folkmordet i Rwanda*, Stockholm 2003, p. 159.
- 2 Allen Thompson (ed.), *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, London and Ann Arbor, MI 2007, passim.
- 3 Sweden did have a brief colonial past, with three short-lived colonies: The Swedish Gold Coast (Ghana) 1649–58, 1660–63; New Sweden (at the Delaware River) 1638–55; and Saint-Barthelme (Caribbean) 1785–1878.
- 4 Swedish Parliament 2009, <http://regeringen.se/sb/d/2558/a/13844>.
- 5 Stig Hadenius and Lennart Weibull, *Massmedier. En bok om press, radio och TV*, Stockholm 2005, pp. 165, 176.
- 6 Hadenius and Weibull, p. 234, 241.
- 7 Linda Melvern, "Missing the Issue; the Media and the Rwandan Genocide", in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, p. 199.
- 8 Hadenius and Weibull, p. 216.
- 9 Anne Chaon, "Who Failed in Rwanda, Journalists or the Media?", in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, p. 162.
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- 11 Cohen, pp. 185 (italics in original).
- 12 Cohen, pp. 5–6.

- 13 Cohen, pp. 187–191.
- 14 Cohen, pp. 8, 137, 173, 194.
- 15 Cohen, p. 160.
- 16 Cohen, p. 249.
- 17 Mark Doyle, “Reporting the Genocide”, in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, pp. 145–159. Lindsay Hilsum, “Reporting Rwanda: the Media and the Aid Agencies”, in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, pp. 167–187.
- 18 Melvern, pp. 198–210.
- 19 Nick Hughes, “Exhibit 467: The Genocide Through a Lens”, in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, pp. 231–234. Tom Giles, “Media Failure over Rwanda’s Genocide”, in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, pp. 235–237.
- 20 All quotes from Swedish to English have been translated by the author of this article. Spoken Swedish in interviews and such has been transcribed to written English.
- 21 Tommy Gustafsson, “The Visual Re-creation of Black People in a ‘White’ Country: Oscar Micheaux and Swedish Film Culture in the 1920s”, *Cinema Journal* 2008:4, pp. 30–49.
- 22 Chaon, p. 162.
- 23 Hughes, pp. 232–233.
- 24 Romeo Dallaire (with Brent Beardsley), *Shake Hands with the Devil. The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*, New York 2005, p. 291.
- 25 Chaon, p. 162. Hilsum, p. 173.
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- 27 Cohen, p. 117.
- 28 Melissa Wall, “An Analysis of News Magazine Coverage of the Rwanda Crisis in the United States”, in *The Media and the Rwanda Genocide*, (ed.) Thompson, pp. 262–263.
- 29 Fair and Parks, p. 36. Hilsum, p. 173.
- 30 Robert Brent “Toplin”, *Reel History. In Defense of Hollywood*, Lawrence 2002, pp. 188–196.
- 31 Tommy Gustafsson, “The Last Dog in Rwanda: Swedish Educational Films and Film Teaching Guides on the History of Genocide”, in *Regional Aesthetics: Locating Swedish Media*, (eds.) Erik Hedling, Olof Hedling and Mats Jönsson, Stockholm 2010.
- 32 Mohamed Adhikari, “Hotel Rwanda: too much heroism, too little history – or horror?”, in *Black and White in Colour: Africa’s History on Screen*, (eds.) Vivian Bickford-Smith and Richard Mendelsohn, Athens, OH 2006, pp. 290–291.
- 33 Neither *Shake Hands with the Devil: The Journey of Roméo Dallaire* or *Ghosts of Rwanda* has been televised in Sweden.
- 34 Cohen, pp. 288–290.
- 35 Dallaire, pp. 518–519.
- 36 Elisabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, “General Introduction”, in *Transnational Cinema. The Reader*, (eds.) Elisabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, London and New York 2006, pp. 1–3.
- 37 Andrew Higson, “The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema”, in *Transnational Cinema. The Film Reader* (eds.) Elisabeth Ezra and Terry Rowden, London and New York 2006, p. 17.
- 38 In *Ghosts of Rwanda* this lack of footage is mainly compensated by the use of photographs, showing piles of dead bodies, and some footage of decaying corpses taken after the genocide.