

Using Film as a Tool for Teaching and Discussing Genocide

Michalczyk, John J. and Raymond G. Helmick, eds. (2013). *Through a Lens Darkly: Films of Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, and Atrocities*. New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 283 pages., \$136.32, hardback and \$37.95, paperback. ISBN-13 978-1433122941.

Reviewed by LISA K. PENNINGTON (lisakp@vt.edu)
Virginia Tech, School of Education, Blacksburg, VA 24061

In today's media fueled society, the public commonly bases its historical knowledge around television and popular film, such as *Boardwalk Empire* and *Monuments Men*, that present history in engaging ways. Social studies teachers often use film in attempts to increase student interest and curriculum relevance. Given the number of historical movies, filmic reviews help direct educators to suitable classroom resources. John J. Michalczyk and Raymond G. Helmick's edited volume of filmic reviews, *Through a Lens Darkly: Films of Genocide, Ethnic Cleansing, and Atrocities*, is useful for secondary educators who teach genocide and other mass atrocities. In this review, I will scrutinize those essays that are most suitable for teachers covering genocide, particularly those that highlight topics that would lead to important class discussions.

Each of the text's nine sections covers a mass atrocity and contains at least three chapters. While the first chapter in each section is a background essay providing historical context, the remaining chapters describe films or documentaries about the atrocity to provide various perspectives.

The editors believe film is "a medium of unparalleled power" and that "used with passion, conviction, and honesty, it can be among the most significant forces to educate the public" (p. xvi). Stoddard and Marcus (2010) agree, stating that film is beneficial in classrooms because such media "serve a larger role as historical sources for the public at large" and it is, in fact, such media where the public learns history (p. 84).

The book also confronts the idea of "the burden of historical representation" (Stoddard and Marcus, 2006). Shohat and Stam describe this concept as what transpires when audiences view a marginalized or underrepresented group on film and internalize "how people view the world and the groups that are represented, even if they know the film's portrayal isn't accurate" (as cited in Stoddard and Marcus, 2006, p. 27). In order to challenge the burden of historical representation, films should develop "complex characters and rich personal stories that challenge traditional historical and film narratives" (Stoddard and Marcus, 2006, p. 27). *Through A Lens Darkly* offers educators a baseline to meet this challenge, highlighting marginalized groups and contributing to the resource base for mass atrocities often overlooked in schools.

The first section entitled "Trail of Tears: Cleansing the Land of the Indian 'Problem'" examines the genocide of Native Americans in North America. Jordan Jennings briefly describes atrocities affecting the indigenous population before highlighting ongoing questions over land use and culture, citing a case from the early 2000's involving a Washington state tribe who met

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resistance when they tried to recommence their whaling traditions (p. 6). Discussing recent conflicts is important, since past actions against Native Americans are not often connected to present day living conditions or ongoing stereotypes, as evidenced by current conflicts over the Washington Redskins.

Nancy Lynch Street's *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* summarizes the film and cites historical inaccuracies and omissions. Street clearly refers to the actions committed against Native Americans as genocide and believes the genocide continues today, visible in the desolate conditions and lack of systems to provide education, health care, jobs, and basic necessities on reservations. According to Barton and Levstik, (2004) students "need experience considering the intersection of historic injustices and contemporary concerns" (p. 100), and Street provides teachers with ideas to accomplish this.

The section on the Armenian genocide begins with a background essay by Dirkran M. Kaligian. Kaligian provides context for educators, details the horrors faced by the Armenians, and describes Turkish denial and the pressure Turkey places on those who seek to recognize the Armenian genocide. In 2007 Turkey successfully pressured President Bush to prevent a Congressional vote to recognize the genocide by threatening to ban the United States from using Turkish airspace (p. 36). The inclusion of denial is important as more countries currently acknowledge the actions against the Armenians as genocide and Turkey continues to oppugn recognition.

Paul Bookbinder's essay on the 1987 documentary *Everyone's Not Here* provides a good description of a film suitable for classroom use. Bookbinder summarizes the documentary and describes events contemporary to the release of the film. This includes the frustration of Armenians at having their history ignored and subsequent organization of terrorist groups, part of an effort to have Armenian history recognized. The essay outlines changes since the release of the film, briefly mentioning Turkish denial and the slow but growing recognition of the genocide.

The Armenian essays raise relevant points on the definition of genocide. Students may not realize the term was not coined until the 1940's by Raphael Lemkin, who worked ceaselessly to have genocide recognized as a crime. The 1948 United Nations Convention on Genocide defined the term, and scholars have since created multiple definitions. This presents an opportunity for debate by allowing students to examine the actions against the Armenians, the many definitions of genocide, and the longstanding position of Turkish denial.

With over 500 films covering the Holocaust (p. xix), this is unsurprisingly the longest section in the text. Perhaps because readers are most familiar with the Holocaust, the background essay by Michalczyk does not provide straightforward history, as do most other introductory essays. Rather, it focuses on the importance of film and the Holocaust, from Goebbels' use of film as propaganda to documentaries of atrocities. The remainder details eleven Holocaust films, providing historical context and brief but useful synopses. *Schindler's List* and *The Pianist* appear in Michalczyk's essay, among more obscure films. However, the remaining essays mostly avoid more popular Holocaust films.

The Holocaust essays are variably useful, but all suggest films that are likely not on an educator's list. The first essay, also by Michalczyk, examines the oldest film in the section, 1955's *Night and Fog*. At twenty-five minutes, it could easily be shown in its entirety. Michalczyk provides

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historical context and contemporary criticisms, such as the lack of the word “Jew” anywhere in the film. The criticisms lead into arguments of the “Jewishness” (pg. 99) of the Holocaust and the Holocaust uniqueness factor, providing opportunities for discussions regarding victims and how traumatic events are remembered. Michalczyk’s essay is valuable for summarizing the film and generating discussion topics.

Michael Resler’s essay on 2009’s *Saviors in the Night* examines the idea of rescuers, focusing on German resistors who saved Jewish lives. This film aids in dispelling the misconception that all Germans wished the destruction of the Jews. Resler provides an excellent synopsis and raises interesting questions about ideas of heroism and difficult choices. The family central to the film hides a neighbor and her daughter, but refuses the father who looks “too Jewish” (p. 138). Their son is a soldier in the German army, placing them in the difficult position of doing what they think is right, which conflicts with their loyalties to their son. Resler’s essay aids in conveying the complexities of the situation and shows that people’s decisions were often difficult to make and understand.

The subsequent essays examine alternative angles to present to students. Melanie Murphy’s essay on the 1991 documentary *The Architecture of Doom* provides a synopsis of the film and its focus on Hitler’s artistic endeavors, from his artistic background to the looting of wartime Europe’s art. This film lends itself to discussions of cultural genocide and the concept of total war, leading to ideas of victimhood and how an entire culture was at risk, not solely members of its population. The second essay, “Amen, the Catholic Church, and the Holocaust” by Kevin P. Spicer, decries the Catholic Church’s role during the Holocaust. Spicer provides a good synopsis, including information on important individuals, which is helpful when prepping students for a screening. Spicer describes the film as “less about the shortcomings of the pope and more about the failure of Christianity to act in the face of the Holocaust” (p. 122). These essays could begin a discussion of overlooked perspectives of the Holocaust, such as the role of the bystander, or the aesthetic focus outlined in Murphy’s essay.

The Last Letter personalizes the Holocaust for students, offering an alternative to the more commonly used *Diary of Anne Frank*. Diana Elise Araujo details the film, which focuses on a Jewish mother writing a farewell letter to her son as she awaits deportation (p. 132). Not quite documentary and not quite film (p. 134), Araujo discusses some of the cinematic elements to this unique piece, which would prepare students to view a film in an unfamiliar style. At only 62 minutes, *The Last Letter* could be juxtaposed with first hand accounts to help students connect with the victims and shown in its entirety without encompassing too much time.

The final essay in the Holocaust section revolves around French complicity. Michalczyk examines *The Roundup* and *Sarah’s Key*, both from 2010. After a brief explanation of the French resistance myth and slow acceptance of the reality of collaboration, Michalczyk thoroughly describes the films and their historical background. *The Roundup* is based on the story of Joseph Weismann and details Weismann’s capture and incarceration in the Velodrome d’Hiver in Paris. Like several other films in this section, *The Roundup* could be used to introduce different perspectives, as bystanders and resistors are shown. *Sarah’s Key* focuses on a similar topic, following Sarah as she and her family are evicted, sent to the Vel d’Hiv and then deported. This film weaves in the present day, as a reporter writing about the roundup uncovers Sarah’s story and the connection between Sarah and her in-laws, who ultimately inhabited the apartment

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where Sarah lived. With pertinent background information and brief analysis, this essay could help design a lesson incorporating either film.

The sixth section groups several events under the title “Ethnic Cleansing.” Like the essays on Armenia, this section presents opportunity for discussions centered on terminology and international responsibility. After the UN defined genocide in 1948, countries that ratified the Convention were bound to prevent genocide. When conflict erupted in Bosnia and then Rwanda, the international community sought a means to avoid involvement. They chose to refer to events as “ethnic cleansing” rather than genocide, freeing them from any commitment to become involved in the affairs of other nations (p. 177). Helmick’s essay contains the history of the term and his use of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict provides a clear example of ethnic cleansing.

Three of the film essays in this section focus on Bosnia. The first, by Cynthia Simmons, examines *Snow*, a 2008 film that explores “an easily forgotten or ignored segment of Bosnian society-rural women survivors of ethnic cleansing” (p. 187). From 1992-1995, Bosniak enclaves were the focus of ethnic cleansing, and today many of these societies are composed almost entirely of women, since the men were targeted during the atrocities. Simmons’ description of the film is helpful in deciding whether it is appropriate, but offers little historical background. However, the next essay, which covers the PBS documentary *Srebrenica: Graves Cry Out*, provides that information. While *Srebrenica* outlines the atrocities, *Snow* examines the aftermath of the mass killings. Michalczyk makes connections to the tribunals presently occurring to try perpetrators, which aids in helping students see the long-term repercussions of these events. The final film about Bosnia, *Sarajevo Ground Zero*, is composed of footage taken during the atrocities by filmmakers experiencing the events. Trevor Laurence Jockims clearly explains how and why the film was made, as well as international response once it was completed. The major networks passed on the film, and it received one airing on Cinemax in 1994. Jockims points out that 1994 saw the release of *Schindler’s List* and renewed promises that “never again” would such events occur (p. 199). This parallel leads to discussions on how the media influences the way events are documented and again highlights international responsibility, since the film was a cry for help from within the war zone. Jockims explains that the 53-minute documentary includes “harrowing footage,” but clips could present students with footage from a unique perspective. The final sections focus on conflicts in Africa. Section seven examines the 1994 genocide in Rwanda. The introductory essay by John H. Stanfield II is unfortunately spotty and links the genocide explicitly to Belgian colonial rule, which corresponds with the government-approved narrative taught in Rwanda today (Buckley-Zistel, 2009). He mentions incidents between the Hutu and Tutsi in the 1960’s and 1970’s, but provides no historical background or connection to the genocide. The conclusion mentions the “unsung heroes” who risked their lives to save others, offering Paul Rusesabagina and *Hotel Rwanda* as an example. While Rusesabagina did shelter approximately 1200 Tutsi during the genocide, allegations against Rusesabagina, charging that he extorted money from those he sheltered, are omitted. This criticism is not meant to discount Rusesabagina, but merely a reminder that when dealing with historical films these issues should be addressed.

Zine Magubane analyzes *Hotel Rwanda*, making several valid points about the film and its goals. Magubane briefly discusses the role of Blacks in film as passive and unable to advance a story. Even in movies that supposedly depict African or African American plot lines, the protagonist is

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often a White person. *Hotel Rwanda* however, tackles the burden of historical representation and “deliberately set[s] out to reverse this trend by portraying Africans as active agents in resisting genocide and the West as passive onlookers” (p. 220). Magubane analyzes the film’s successes, mainly criticisms of the international community for standing by while violence unfolded. He balances the essay by discussing the film’s shortcomings, in this instance the history that led to the genocide. Magubane also avoids more recent news surrounding Rusesabagina, though a teacher could easily incorporate that information as a discussion piece after viewing the film, perhaps in the vein of Barton and Levstik’s heroes vs. heroic actions (Barton and Levstik, 2004, p. 102-106).

Another essay by Michalczyk focuses on the *gacaca* courts in post-genocidal Rwanda. *In the Tall Grass* (2006) could help students examine how a post-genocidal society handles the healing process. Michalczyk explains the *gacaca* courts were reinstated to handle the overabundance of genocide cases. He offers two points of view on the *gacaca*-one of which is supportive of the role the courts have in the healing process, and another which questions whether these courts actually hinder the healing process due to bias and the victims and perpetrators living in close proximity. This controversy lends itself to discussion on the aftermath of genocide, and the films in this section would provide excellent supplemental material for a unit on Rwanda, particularly if the films were paired to showcase the genocide and healing process.

The penultimate section examines the conflict in Sudan. Though Secretary of State Colin Powell dubbed the actions in Darfur genocide in 2004 (State Department Memo), little international action has taken place. In the opening essay, “Making Sense of Sudan’s Conflicts”, Nada Mustafa Ali outlines the complex causes that contribute to the conflicts, beginning with the country’s history of slavery, colonial domination, and struggles for control by different factions after independence. With roots of the conflict found in the country’s history, economic, religious, and political struggles, Ali’s essay provides enough information within six pages to give students the basic background.

Both film essays are brief and show two distinctive angles to the Sudan conflict. The first essay, “No Heaven on Earth: *Lost Boys of Sudan*” by Ajak Mabior briefly summarizes the history of the Lost Boys and their treacherous journey. The documentary follows two Lost Boys from their departure from a Kenyan refugee camp through their first year of resettlement in the United States. Like the films about Rwanda, *Lost Boys of Sudan* would facilitate discussion on the aftermath of conflict, international response, and the difficulties refugees face. In following the boys, the film also allows students to compare American ideas of race, culture, and abundance to that of the Lost Boys, who come from widespread poverty where skin color is not an issue.

The second film *The Devil Came on Horseback* focuses on former Marine Captain Brian Steidle, who fights to have events in Sudan recognized by the international community. Through his description of the film, Michalczyk provides background on the Janjaweed, which would help students to understand exactly what Steidle was fighting to have the international community recognize. The focus on this American activist could help students understand the position of people who risk their lives to help others. The films together would make an interesting pairing, and juxtapose the effects and the failure of international intervention.

The final section examines the ongoing conflict in the Congo. Like several other essays in the text, the background essay by Willy Moka-Mubelo mentions topics that would contribute to meaningful discussion such as the effects of colonialism and non-existent global response to

Corresponding author email: lisakp@vt.edu

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mass atrocity. Moka-Mubelo centers the essay on the exploitation of the Congo's natural resources and focuses on Belgian colonial rule, before briefly mentioning the continuing abuse of natural resources. The history is useful as context, but it is unfortunate that the current exploitation is not explored in more detail to help students understand the lasting impacts of colonialism and internal struggles that arose with independence. Moka-Mubelo only mentions in the last paragraph the invasions of Congo by Rwanda and Uganda, but provides little in the way of reason, connecting the invasions only to the desire of the international community to control the Congo's natural resources. Though this essay does not focus on Rwanda, a teacher could make connections between the invasion of the Congo by Rwanda and the perpetrators of that genocide hiding in the area, as part of the aftermath of genocide and its contributions to the region's instability.

Many essays in *Through A Lens Darkly* provide useful context or ideas for classroom discussion. A handful of essays however, are likely not helpful to educators for various reasons. Some films, like *Ararat*, include "horrific scenes of carnage and sexual violence" (pg. 46), which makes it improbable for student viewing. Other essays, such as Rebecca Nedostup's essay on *City of Life and Death (Nanjing! Nanjing!)*, focuses on cinematic elements and explores ideas of victimhood and voice that are likely to be ignored in the classroom, due to complexity or time constraints. Some essays cover a film such as Claude Lanzmann's nine-hour *Shoah*, which is too lengthy for classroom use. Each essay has its merits and intriguing points, but from a practitioner standpoint they are inapplicable to the classroom.

The essays in *Through a Lens Darkly* tackle the history and visual representation of genocide. Though not specifically written as an aid for educators, the majority of the essays are useful for historical context and background on the genocides represented, removing some of the workload from educators who may need to brush up on these topics. Most film essays provide a good synopsis, allowing teachers to decide whether it would be appropriate for their classes. The most useful parts of the essays are ideas about key concepts in the films, leading to ideas for using the films as a springboard for discussion of interesting yet difficult topics. Using films to start these discussions allows students a reference point and the teacher a starting point when introducing the film, debriefing after a viewing, or designing a viewing guide.

The multiple essays are brief and readable. The text does not have to be read sequentially, and educators could refer only to relevant sections. By referencing *Through A Lens Darkly*, educators are presented with lesser-known film options for these important topics. Incorporating films in general, and these films in particular, can raise student interest in the topic, heighten relevancy, and create more meaning (Russell, 2009, p. 2). The essays create opportunities for discussion that would allow students to examine events from a variety of perspectives and engage in critical analysis and inquiry. For secondary teachers facing a dearth of materials in genocide related topics, *Through A Lens Darkly* is an excellent place to begin resource building.

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