

100 DAYS IN RWANDA, 1994

Trauma Aesthetics and Humanist Ethics in an Age of Terror

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While we die with you watching
us all the time, you live, you
thrive ... Don't you get a feeling,
sometimes, that you're living off
our death?

Gil Courtemanche: *A Sunday at the
Pool in Kigali*

Write about horrors and you're
expected to make some sense of
them. What's it to be?

Andrew Miller: *The Optimists*

Ethics and aesthetics are one.
Wittgenstein

VIOLENCE, CREATIVITY, RESPONSIBILITY

When the New York resident and Australian theatre director Alison Summers was asked what she thought of two recently released Hollywood blockbusters on the 9/11 catastrophe, she replied: 'I would not see either film because I would be afraid of residual grief and distress being triggered. I believe I have achieved what is termed closure, but maybe it's old-fashioned blocking. I don't want to test myself in the middle of a cinema.'¹

The media also reported a very poor turnout for the release of *United 93* about the hijacked flight that crashed in a

Pennsylvania field. Responses of New Yorkers to Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center* were hostile and heated, with one viewer adding: 'What is untenable is the filmmaker's prerogative to selectively edit and frame reality.'² These facts critically signal issues of responsibility that artists and filmmakers bear towards victims of trauma in their creative representations of catastrophes. With the global immanence of terror and warfare in the post-Cold War period, trauma induced by gratuitous human violence has assumed world proportions and has intensified debates about artistic responsibility. As Susannah Radstone notes in her opening essay of the special debate on 'Trauma and Screen Studies' in the journal *Screen*, trauma has become a 'popular cultural script' much in need of 'contextualization' and 'analysis'.³ The complex relationship between extreme violence and assumption of responsibility by creative artists to represent such violence to the world is the key focus of this essay. It seeks to unravel this relationship through an exploration and analysis of creative works on the Rwanda genocide of 1994.

Debates about creative and artistic representations of gratuitous violence and evil are, of course, not new. They took on special urgency during and after the

Holocaust, beginning with Adorno's somber uptake on the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz. The debates have since ranged from exploring the power of singularising and mythologising the Holocaust through the creation of the exemplary victim of an unfathomable evil, to marking such exemplarity as loss of historical connectivity with other acts of genocide, especially those in relation to Cambodia in the 1970s and Rwanda in the 1990s. In other words they have traversed the gamut between the exceptional, the universal and the particular in human history, a gamut that also informs art and creativity. In recent years, graphic visual and textual representations of 9/11 and other human-induced global catastrophes have also raised deep ethical questions about artistic responsibility. Many of these are seen as akin to art that both 'entrances' one through the 'sublimity of destruction'⁴ and iconicises terror-inducing devastation as a sign of our precarious times.

This essay is a meditation on the ethics of creatively representing the Rwandan genocidal horror of 1994 in multiple media and the aesthetic and interpretive truths that mediate the political in each instance. I take as my case studies two creative depictions of the genocide — Gil Courtemanche's docu-fictional novel *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* (2000) and Terry George's much-acclaimed feature film *Hotel Rwanda* (2004). The issues I propose to confront in my analysis of these works are the following: What constitutes a trauma aesthetic? How does it mediate between a rhetoric of voyeurism and violation on the one hand and a rhetoric of vocalisation and cathartic redemption on the other? How do different media and genres negotiate it? I also wish

to explore the aesthetic and ethical dilemma of reading the Rwandan genocide as a *human act* rather than a specific case of ethno-political massacre within a colonial/postcolonial context in Central Africa. The dilemma arises from our retrospective knowledge of the way the Nazis deployed mystical and metaphysical rhetoric in talking about their version of 'man' and the 'human' that laid waste to all other ways of imagining the human.⁵ Further, I wish to converse with recent articulations on the 'common human' against the force of totalitarian and xenophobic representations in the writings of cultural theorists and philosophers such as Judith Butler, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.⁶ Do these enable us, I ask, to arrive at a middle point between mythologising the human out of the vicissitudes of worldly attachments and an extreme localising of the human to the detriment of global connectivity? Issues and questions such as these will inform my analysis of creative writing and film on the Rwandan genocide.

RWANDAN GENOCIDE: WORK OF DEATH, WORKS OF ART

In April 1994, when South Africa was celebrating the end of apartheid with the election of Nelson Mandela and the African National Congress to power, Rwanda, a tiny central African state was awash with the blood of one of its ethnic minorities, the Tutsis. In 100 days, from April to early July 1994, the country's Hutu paramilitary, *Interahamwe* ('We who strike together'), fattened and armed by its deceased president, Habyarimana, butchered about one million Tutsis. The world chose to look the other way. As the Reuters photo-

journalist Corinne Dufka put it in her address to the UCLA International Institute on the tenth anniversary of the genocide: '[T]here were thousands of journalists on the African continent during the genocide, but they were almost all in South Africa covering the elections.'⁷ The United States, already suffering from Somalia fatigue, refused to name the massacres 'genocide' for fear it would have to intervene once again in accordance with the Geneva Convention. The UN Peacekeeping force present in Rwanda at the time refused to exceed its brief — that of 'keeping peace' — and engage in armed conflict with the genocidal Hutu paramilitary. As the fictional UN General put it in Gil Courtemanche's novel, *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, 'I would like to protect civilians, but I do not want to risk losing soldiers, even one, without written authorisation. I am not here to save Rwandans. I'm here to respect the Arusha accord.'⁸

When Corinne Dufka implored her editors to allow her to cover the Rwandan massacres as well as the South African elections, they told her that the public had little appetite for seeing dead bodies in the morning newspaper. They finally allowed her to travel to Rwanda, though, after seeing a particular photograph that caught their interest. The photograph was not of the genocide, but of a massive exodus of refugees from Rwanda into neighbouring Tanzania. 'They finally said, "This looks impressive. You can go."' Dufka and her team chose a route to Rwanda from the southeast, passing through Tanzania and Burundi. Their assignment was to cover the refugee story. Dufka describes the gruesome tableau that lay before them:

There was a river that flowed between Tanzania and Rwanda. There was a large waterfall and there were bodies flowing over it. On the one hand there were refugees going into Tanzania and on the other hand we had these bloated bodies every couple of minutes flowing over this waterfall. It was horrific.

Dufka also gives a graphic description of her experience of visiting churches and schools where many Tutsis sought refuge and were massacred:

You could see the story of the chase in the ways the bodies fell. In one of them I remember seeing a dead mother and her two dead children. You could see she was trying to protect her children and you could see she was huddled over these children — they'd been dead for a number of weeks and you could see the machete marks on her body where the bone was shattered.⁹

The reason why Dufka could still see mounds of hacked bodies was the astonishing decision taken by the Tutsi-led Rwanda Patriotic Front (RPF), which took over the country soon after the genocide, to leave the corpses where they lay, between the church pews, beneath the school desks, in the yard outside. In the words of Michael Ignatieff, who witnessed the grim memorialisation a year later in the company of the then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, 'The survivors turned the church compound at Nyarubuye into the Yad Vashem of African genocide'.¹⁰ This is how Ignatieff describes the scene:

Stretched out on the floor are row upon row of dust-coloured skeletons in rags. A dirty light slants across femurs, ankles, hipbones, shoulderjoints, teeth, skulls. No flesh remains. There's no smell of putrefaction. The clothing has faded to the colour of ash. Boutros-Ghali shuts his eyes and quietly mutters, 'Everywhere we work, we are struggling against a culture of death.'¹¹

The decade since has witnessed a proliferation of creative representations of this meticulously choreographed genocide in multiple media — in fiction, memoirs, feature films, documentaries, performances and art exhibitions. Some of these creative works include Terry George's feature film *Hotel Rwanda*, Gil Courtemanche's docu-fiction *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, Andrew Miller's novel *The Optimists*, Veronique Tadjo's memoir *The Shadow of Imana: Travels in the Heart of Rwanda*, and many powerful documentaries. Two of the most memorable are the UN General Romeo Dallaire's *Shake Hands with the Devil*, and Michael Caton-Jones and David Belton's *Shooting Dogs*. There was also a sculpture exhibition at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the genocide, in which an artist from Ghana, Kofi Setordji, displayed his installation of wooden sculpture and terracotta masks marking the event. The exhibition later travelled to Kigali in April 2004.

In October 2005, the Sydney Opera House staged a Senegalese dance performance entitled *Fagaala* ('genocide' in Senegalese) choreographed by the acclaimed Senegalese performer Germaine Acogny

and the Japanese butoh master Kota Yamasaki. A leading performer in the African art world, Acogny was inspired to create this dance ensemble after reading a fictional account of the genocide by the Senegalese writer Boubacar Boris Diop. In contrast to the mediated, byte-sized coverage of the killings on television, Diop's novel *Murambi: The Book of Remains* 'humanised' the genocide for Acogny to such an extent that she could not rest till she, as an African creative artist, enacted this horror through dance and used her art to converse with the world. 'This fiction', she said, 'was more real than reality. I saw myself in the story. I was the killer and the victim. As a black African woman and artist, I took the responsibility to speak.'¹² Acogny here addresses a critical link between trauma aesthetics and humanist ethics that is the substance of this paper.

TRAUMA AESTHETIC: VOYEURISM, REDEMPTION AND INTERNATIONALISATION OF CONSCIENCE

It is useful, at the outset, to clarify the import of the term 'aesthetic' as it is deployed in this essay. The aesthetic, notes Jerrold Levinson in his introduction to the volume *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, is 'human-sensibility-indexed'.¹³ Thus, it connotes more than just beauty or form, more than art that merely mystifies/beautifies/orders the raw and grim chaos of human existence. Rather, the aesthetic in art, literature and film supplements and enhances aspects of human experience in ways that more 'real' experience simply cannot. To extend this slightly, the aesthetic is a category that

captures the density of phenomena irreducible to abstract reason, the realm of the affective and the somatic; it is also something that captures our finitude, something that orients us to the stark elemental truths of our 'species being' on this planet. To that extent it carries within it a powerful ethical charge and a commensurate responsibility to explore the 'human' in all its complexity, including gratuitous violence and evil. It is in this spirit that I invoke Wittgenstein in the epigraph to the essay — 'ethics and aesthetics are one'. Such a reading distances itself from notions of 'disinterestedness' in art and invests in an ethic of aesthetic engagement with multiple lifeworlds. At the same time it resists reducing such engagement to an instrumentalist/functionalist notion of art's role in radically transforming society.

To turn now to the concept of a 'trauma aesthetic'; in its most literal sense it connotes a creative uptake on human pain and suffering of extreme magnitude. Intertwined with this is the responsibility such an aesthetic carries of conveying both the immediacy and the truth of such suffering — to make some *sense* of senseless suffering — to diverse audiences that do not necessarily invest in a shared infrastructure of aesthetic values. What then are the parameters of its expressiveness and responsibility? I wish first to take this question up in the context of recent debates about the reception of creative works on the Rwandan mass killings and then go on to address it through a close reading of Gil Courtemanche's *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* and Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda*.

Commenting on the proliferation of creative works in the decade since the

Rwanda killings, a journalist from *The Observer*, Jason Cowley, called such quick creative reproductions 'indecent', for they promoted 'atrocious tourism', especially when Rwanda had far from healed:

What is one to make of all this western interest in the unhappy central African state? Is there not something indecent in the haste with which non-African [artists] and film-makers are competing with each other to be the first with the ... news about the events of 1994? Is there not an element of atrocious tourism at work here — as well as a kind of stylized poetics of misery? After all it took the long perspective of many decades before novelists and Hollywood felt able to represent, in fiction, the Jewish Holocaust.¹⁴

Cowley goes on to weave into this ethical conundrum of a trauma aesthetic (the obscenity of art feeding off macabre killings) two contrasting scenarios that capture evocatively the dilemma of creative re-enactments attempting to simulate 'real' violence of horrific proportions. They both have to do with the subsequent filming of the genocide for a global audience. In the first, Terry George recounts why he chose to shoot *Hotel Rwanda* in Johannesburg rather than in Kigali: 'I was afraid of recreating those scenes of murder on the streets of Kigali.'¹⁵ George's stance of shying away from a graphic recreation is, as we discuss later, reflected in the aesthetic choices he makes in framing his film. Contrasted with this is the decision of filmmakers Michael Caton-Jones and David Belton to film their *Shooting Dogs* on the streets of Kigali. While this commit-

ment to a 'real' location is understandable, considering that the film is a documentary, a bystander and a resident of Kigali who occasionally witnessed the filming thought 'there was something indulgent and wrong about the circus of activity created by a western film crew in the midst of such dire poverty'. He added, 'Some of us felt upset about the filming of the scenes of violence and mayhem. Perhaps *Hotel Rwanda's* approach of having the violence in the background is the right one.'¹⁶ This contrast between subtle and graphic representations of the evil of genocide in art will be discussed in more detail later when I undertake a comparative analysis of the works of Courtemanche and Terry George. Such comparison will address both media and genre-related variations in representation of trauma.

I first wish to ask the following: do creative representations of the Rwandan massacre put non-Rwandan viewers in a position to stare, to look without consequences at sights from which, in practical life, we might turn away in horror? In other words, are these representations in turn both anaesthetising and voyeuristic? At the same time, can we not also argue that they bring home the importance of narrating and, hence, naming the evil from which the world had once turned away its face? That creativity after catastrophe can also be cathartic and redemptive? Rwanda's Minister for Culture, Joseph Habineza, when asked if these creative depictions troubled ordinary Rwandans, replied movingly:

In 1994, the world ran away from us. The world didn't want to know. These works, because they have a sense of history and a

powerful message, are coming out at the right time because the world is starting to forget what happened. And we don't want people ever to forget what happened in 1994. Will ordinary Rwandans see these films and read these books? Many probably won't. But they know they are out there, they know they've been made. That is a source of consolation — and it stops them feeling abandoned all over again.¹⁷

I do not think it is possible to resolve the ethical conundrum by settling for either the voyeurism argument or the redemption/catharsis argument. As Michael Ignatieff puts it in his discussion of the televisual and digital media's traffic in instant images of human suffering, such traffic can be seen as both 'promiscuous voyeurism' and 'internationalization of conscience'.¹⁸ But it also points to a truth that transcends both: a move towards an *actualisation* of a moral universal built on 'crime against humanity', where the interlocutor of the victim is a 'stranger' and not her/his kith and kin. Judith Butler in her Levinasian reading in her recent book, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, calls this the 'impingement by the Other's address ... a comportment towards the Other only after the Other has made a demand upon me, accused me of a failing, or asked me to assume a responsibility'.¹⁹

In other words, at the cusp of what has been a horrific century of wars and ethnic carnage and a new millennium that does not augur much better, a trauma aesthetic — media and artistic representations of extreme suffering — cannot but be intim-

ately entwined with a new kind of humanist ethic, a new kind of internationalism built on a shared dread of human capacity for evil coupled with a deep awareness of the ambiguities of sharing grief and loss across large swathes of devastated human-scapes. This is a sharing marked more by distance than propinquity, more by difference — racial, ethnic, national — than by sameness. At the same time it is also an acknowledgement of the globalisation of the impact of large-scale human suffering, no longer restricted, especially since 9/11, to the backwaters of the world — sub-Saharan Africa, Latin America and impoverished parts of Asia. To recognize the *global immanence* of human insecurity and dread amidst imminent terror is to recognise an important aspect of what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call ‘life in common’ — the coming together of ‘singularities’ that are not ‘incommunicable localities’ in this era of relentless conflict.²⁰ It is to acknowledge that trauma aesthetics in late modernity does more than simply feed off the misery of the less fortunate residing in distant parts of the world. Rather, such aesthetics seek to highlight the notion that the rights-bearing human has faced its most severe test ever in the latter half of the twentieth century and into the new millennium — when human beings have had to live through catastrophes that have destroyed entire social networks that define our moral universe. ‘The way stations on the road to this new internationalism’, writes Ignatieff, ‘are Armenia, Verdun, the Russian front, Auschwitz, Hiroshima, Vietnam, Cambodia, Lebanon, Rwanda and Bosnia.’²¹ Genocide, as Arthur Klinghoffer puts it in his book on Rwanda, is ‘the ultimate expression of absolute rightlessness’.²² Genocid-

al acts create victims who are bereft of kinship and social networks — refugees in particular. They thus make ‘an ethic of universal moral obligation among strangers a necessity for future life on the planet’.²³ The poignant words of the Rwandan Minister for Culture we heard earlier point precisely to the possibility of such an emergence of a new global ethic from the rubble of catastrophe wrought by the evil of Rwanda’s freefall into the insanity of ethnic carnage. For all this, though, it is important to be mindful that a trauma aesthetic embodying such a global ethic is not uniformly translatable across all creative media and genres. This is the burden of the explication of texts that follow.

STRANGE AFFILIATIONS, AESTHETIC CONFIGURATIONS: COURTEMANCHE’S REDEEMED KIGALI

The ethic of hospitality from strangers arising from a breakdown of more immediate socio-moral networks is captured with a devastatingly visceral edge in Gil Courtemanche’s *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*. In the Rwanda of 1994 of which he writes, no local inhabitant can take it for granted that he or she will not be hacked to death at any moment by a relative or a friend or a neighbour. In Courtemanche’s complex portrayal of Rwandan multi-ethnicity, the rhetoric of symbolically and semantically asserted Otherness — he’s dark, squat and thick-lipped and so he’s a Hutu; she’s tall, slim and light-skinned, so she’s a Tutsi — is by no means clearly demarcated either by spatial arrangements or by physiognomy. Only some stereotypes circulate with a myopic stubbornness that is

lethal. Thus Tutsis are cockroaches from which Rwanda needs to be cleansed. The only redeeming relationships seem to be between a few foreign aid workers/journalists and their circle of friends from among the native population of Kigali. The horrors of the genocide as a shared sense of the precariousness of life at the end of the millennium are narrated through conversations among them — virtual strangers bonded in both extreme fear and fragile hope.

One of the most powerful aspects of the novel is the highlighting of a comparative global perspective from which the Rwandan killings can be understood. Rhetorically this works not so much through providing a substantive political context to the genocide, as through graphic comparative details of the very aesthetics of warfare and genocide. The Rwandan massacres, Lando, a Tutsi friend tells the French-Canadian narrator Valcourt, are not fit for hi-tech television, which is more comfortable with the 'clean' wars of Americans and their precision bombing. This is war that the rest of the world will find hard to stomach on television because of its gruesome excesses:

We're going to rape, cut throats, chop, butcher. We're going to cut open women's bellies before the eyes of their husbands, then mutilate the husbands before the wives die of loss of blood, to make sure they see each other die. And while they're dying, coming to their last breath, we'll rape their daughters, not just once but ten times, twenty times. And the virgins will be raped by soldiers with AIDS ... With machetes, knives and clubs

we'll do better than the Americans with their smart bombs. (p.60)

Elsewhere, Methode, another Tutsi friend of the narrator, dying of AIDS with only a week or two to live, has been reading voraciously on the Nazi Holocaust and pondering the fate of Jews and Tutsis. His contemplation on the differences in *culture* and *style* of each of the genocides is a grim reminder of the extent to which human civilisation has mastered the art of killing in all its various genres:

The world had known the scientific Holocaust, cold, technological, a terrifying masterpiece of efficiency and organization. A monstrosity of Western civilization ... Here it would be the barbarian Holocaust, the cataclysm of the poor, the triumph of machete and club. Already in the province of Bugesera, corpses were afloat on Lake Mugesera, drifting towards the Kagera, the legendary source of the Nile. This was the way to send the Tutsis back to where they came from, to Egypt — as loudly declared by Monsieur Leon, who owned a fine house in Quebec and here was behaving like a little Hitler. (p.39)

The novel's title is an ironic uptake on the lives of privileged diplomats, journalists and UN workers based in the Rwandan capital, who insulate themselves from the spiral of interethnic killing outside to sit by the pool in the only luxury hotel in the city, the Mille Collines, also the setting of the film *Hotel Rwanda*. The satire directed at the insulated white community in Rwanda is scathing:

This is how the Whites at the hotel, instant minor gods, hear and figure Africa. Close enough to talk about it, even to write about it. But at the same time so isolated with their portable computers in their antiseptic rooms, and in their air-conditioned Toyotas, so surrounded by the little Blacks trying to be like Whites that they think black is the smell of the perfumes and cheap ointments sold in the Nairobi duty-free shop. (p.42)

The novel is self-consciously marked as docu-fiction by the author, a French Canadian journalist, who witnessed and reported on the genocide. Courtemanche was in Rwanda at the time to make a documentary on the HIV epidemic in Kigali which had affected almost one-third of that city's population. Tied to this harbinger of death were the rumblings of an ominous ethnic feud that was just waiting to manifest its volcanic fury. Courtemanche's razor-sharp yet deeply empathetic pen creatively transfigures this near-apocalyptic tableau of horror into a searing poetic document of life at the edge of time and sanity.

'We have come to the end of time, eaten away by two cancers, hatred and AIDS. We are a little like the Earth's last children', says Raphael, (p.10) one of Valcourt's Rwandan friends. The highlight of the novel is the juxtaposition of unsparing details of the genocide — too confronting, might I say, even pornographic at times, in its twin depiction of brutal rapes and the shameful might of machetes as they cut through flesh and bone — with a narrative of love, care and bonding between Valcourt and his hapless Rwandan friends.

It is the stuff of great art since time immemorial; the epic battle between *eros* and *thanatos*, life and death, creation and destruction.

Kigali's mystique and menace are entwined in stunning metaphors: the stomach-churning sounds of the genocide outside the hotel precinct are described as 'a mortuary symphony against a picture postcard background'. (p.144) Valcourt is entranced by the Kigali landscape, 'the hills sculpted by thousands of gardens, the mists caressing the valley floors' (p.18). But the menace of machetes at nightfall brings fear to the soul: 'the market's cheerful, noisy anarchy had ceased, the way the birds in a forest fall silent when a predator creeps near'. (p.79) The morning after, 'life wakens as if a whole city were emerging from a coma, astonished to be alive even as it counts its dead'. (p.41) The aftermath of a night of mass killing is figuratively transposed onto the busy world of scavenging birds and animals:

The canine cacophony yielded progressively to the human cacophony. The buzzards took flight in search of the fresh refuse produced by the night. When the buzzards had flown over the city at length and staked out their territory, the jackdaws left the lower branches of the eucalyptus trees around the hotel garden to go and make do, humbly as befits an inferior and obedient race, with places the buzzards had scorned. The croaking of all the city's ravens was drowned out by horrid clumpings of French boots as a squad of presidential guardsmen jogged around the hotel. (p.98)

Also powerful are depictions of disavowal of responsibility on the part of former colonial powers for the history that led to the ethnic divide and the subsequent genocide. Much easier for them to primordialise these Africans: 'A red haired Belgian, who had been teaching philosophy since the university's foundation in 1963, laughed and said, "They like to kill each other at regular intervals. It's like the menstrual cycle; a lot of blood flows, then everything returns to normal."' (p.189)

I wish to explore the poetic power of these depictions of extreme human suffering from the point of view of some recent criticism of the 'dark lyricism' — a kind of stylised and highly figurative poetics of extreme violence and human suffering — found in the works of J. M. Coetzee, especially in his novel *Elizabeth Costello*. Coetzee is, of course, the artist *par excellence* of minimalism and austerity. Much lauded for the diamond-hard, cutting brilliance of his bare narratives of the brutality of apartheid in South Africa, Coetzee, not surprisingly, takes exception to graphic descriptions of gratuitous human violence in the lyric metaphors such as one finds in *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*. Elizabeth Costello, in the eponymous novel, asserts: 'To save our humanity, certain things that we may want to see must remain off-stage.' (p.169). In the same novel Coetzee applauds the minimalist realism of Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* for its courage to stick to 'bare' facts in the face of enormous desolation:

Robinson Crusoe, cast up on the beach, looks around for his ship-mates. But there are none. 'I never saw them afterwards, or any sign of them', says he, 'except three of

their hats, one cap, and two shoes that were not fellows.' Two shoes, not fellows: by not being fellows, the shoes have ceased to be footwear and become proofs of death, torn by the foaming seas of the feet of drowning men and tossed ashore. No large words, no despair, just hats and caps and shoes. (p.4)

What Coetzee asserts in his criticism of dark lyricism is the foremost responsibility of the artist to recognise and acknowledge the absolute material essence of the body in pain and not transmute the materiality of that pain into figurative language. The figurative, in reaching for points of comparison with other phenomena, leaches the suffering body of its singularity and dishonours it. Coetzee's warning is, of course, salutary in the context of poetic clichés and deliberate artistic attempts to titillate the sadistic among us through excessive depictions of gratuitous and mindless violence. Both trivialise human suffering and to that extent are obscene.

But can one not also say that Coetzee's uncompromising aesthetic opposition to all figuration of human suffering and bodily violation comes in the way of communicating pain across human difference? The figurative and metaphorical in language is, after all, the site of human claiming and marking of this world, of naming 'things' in terms of something else — in the final analysis the very possibility of human communicability. What happens then to the ethical responsibilities of a trauma aesthetic? Should they be articulated only in terms of the impossibility of figuring pain, of an aesthetics of bareness and silence? Won't such fidelity and re-

spect toward the singularity of the suffering body be ultimately achieved at the expense of its eventual isolation from a global ethic of caring and responsibility invoked earlier in this essay? In reading the following account of the violated body of Valcourt's wife, Gentille, do we as readers commit yet another violation as voyeurs or are we compelled to witness the unimaginable and assume a responsibility that will forever be haunted by Gentille's violated, withered corporeality? Or do we do both? Gentille pleads with her husband to forget her:

I'm not the Gentille you loved and that you think you still love ... I'm not a woman any more. Don't you smell the sickness? ... I don't have breasts any more. My skin's dry and tight like an old drum. I can only see with one eye. I probably have AIDS ... my mouth is full of sores that keep me from eating sometimes, and when I eat, my stomach won't hold anything. I'm not a woman anymore. Do you understand what they've done to me? I'm not human anymore. I'm a body that's decomposing, an ugly thing I don't want you to see. If I left with you I'd be even sadder than I am now because I see in your eyes as you look away that what you really love is your memory of me ... Go now and leave the country. I'm dead.
(p.247)

Her husband respects her wishes, but does not leave the country. Instead, he resists the reinstated Tutsi government's thirst for revenge and provides legal defence to innocent Hutus accused of genocide. He

and a Swedish Red Cross worker adopt a Hutu girl whose parents have been accused of participating in the genocide. They name her Gentille, thus signalling both a connection and a rupture with genocidal Rwanda — both an assumption of global responsibility for the genocide and an invocation of a humanist ethics that seek to break the cycle of revenge and retribution.

The tableau that endures in *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali* is that of the poignancy of uncanny, unpredictable affiliations between strangers in the midst of horrific human suffering induced by a colonially engineered absurd filiative ethnoses and ethos.²⁴ The novel's poetic rendering of extreme human truths amidst a landscape of terror and beauty enhances rather than detracts from the moral power of such shared suffering, a mode of sharing that Coetzee would reject. Valcourt's prospective father-in-law, Jean Damascene, captures both the absurdity and poignancy of this tableau in his embrace of Valcourt, the French-Canadian in love with his Hutu-Tutsi daughter, Gentille, as his true son:

My son, today we have closed the circle of history and absurdity. The head of the *interahamwes*, who have sworn to cut the throats of all Tutsis and send them all the way to Egypt by the Kagera river, is a Tutsi. He's an uncle of Gentille's. The Head of the Tutsi rebel army is a Hutu and he's also an uncle of Gentille's ... Both want to kill Gentille who doesn't belong to either side. Gentille is like the fruit of the red earth of this hill, a mysterious mix of all the seeds and

all the toil of this country. Son you're going to marry a country they want to kill, one that could be simply Rwandan if it had the chance, the country of a thousand hills, which all of us, nameless and heedless of origin, have built like patient, obstinate fools ... if you are crazy enough to embrace this hill, its consuming madness and its most beautiful daughter, I shall love you more than my own sons. (pp.192–3)

In the apotheosis of Gentile as an aspired Rwanda, all-embracing in its numerous ethnic mixings and strange foreign affiliations, there is an ethic of interconnectivity that transcends the current post-genocidal political rhetoric of Rwandan nationalism, one invested in an unlearning of ethnicity and an impossible embrace of the abstract human. Humanism, the novel suggests, is not a commitment to abstract entities denuded of traces of belonging. It is, rather, the acknowledgement of the enmeshment of man in his particular affiliations and recognition of both the possibilities and dangers of such affiliations. It is this recognition of mutual vulnerability that is also the possibility of an ethic of caring and hospitality. Judith Butler gives it a name. She calls it our 'new humanism' of 'common corporeal vulnerability'.²⁵ Contiguous with this notion of 'corporeality' is Hardt and Negri's recent theorising on the 'common' as the 'flesh of the multitude' that links and expands social being, producing and performing it in 'excess of every traditional political-economic measure of value'.²⁶ This new social corporeality conceived in terms of a 'flesh-like' continuum rather than as racially and sexually marked difference is resistant to

a logic of identity and segregation. It is the complete antithesis of the abstracted 'mass man' of totalitarianism so powerfully theorised by Hannah Arendt. It is, thus, a powerful and enabling conception for an ethics of non-violent and transcultural relationality in an age of terror.

HOSPITALITY IN THE MIDST OF TERROR: AESTHETIC DISTANCE AND ETHICAL ENGAGEMENT IN HOTEL RWANDA

Media theorist and trauma scholar Janet Walker notes that 'alongside mass-mediated public debates on the history and meaning of various catastrophes, the 1980s and 1990s have seen the development of a *trauma cinema*'.²⁷ Terry George's *Hotel Rwanda* is one example of such cinema. Before I go on to situate this 'trauma' film in terms of the typology of reception based on film types and aesthetics suggested by Ann Kaplan,²⁸ I propose to explore a different creative representation in it of the motif that recurs throughout this essay of hospitality in the midst of apocalyptic terror. This would help me effectively link the aesthetic and the ethical in discussing the film.

In *Hotel Rwanda*, 'hospitality' is marked in literal terms by making the hotel, Des Mille Collines, the main site of action and refuge, and the hotel manager its protagonist. The film recreates the heroism of a real-life figure, Paul Rusesabagina, the manager of the luxury hotel. In the manner of a latter-day Oskar Schindler, Rusesabagina, a Hutu, managed to save not only his family (his wife was Tutsi), but also 1,268 other Tutsis by providing them refuge in the hotel, despite

the UN peacekeeping forces' temporary abandonment of the complex.

Interestingly, both Gil Courtemanche and Terry George in their respective works use the hotel as a distancing device from the madness of genocide, but in very different ways. For Courtemanche, as we saw, the hotel with its poolside shenanigans marked the site of western apathy to and distance from massacres on the streets of Kigali. It is contrasted with the genuine engagement and empathy of the protagonist with the suffering of his Rwandan friends. Courtemanche's aesthetic investment lies in narrating the *full* horror of what happened, in not sparing the reader/interlocutor any detail of the monstrous reality of the genocide. In contrast, Terry George in *Hotel Rwanda* makes the Hotel the site of compassion and hospitality, even as he uses it aesthetically as a framing device to spare the reader graphic details of the massacres. Each time, he offers the viewer just a glimpse of the killings on the streets before quickly moving the camera back to the Hotel and to Rusesabagina's anxious visage contemplating yet another strategy to protect the hapless Tutsis seeking refuge there.

Paul Rusesabagina, played by actor Don Cheadle, is portrayed as a typical upwardly mobile Hutu Rwandan with social and political connections in the highest places. The *Interahamwe* leader, George Rutagunda, treats him like a friend and the Hutu General Bizimundu, who led the massacres, is wary of attacking Paul and his Hotel for fear of Paul's high connections. During the genocide Paul, with great presence of mind, exploits these connections, once even managing to reach the French Presidential office through his

Belgian boss in Brussels. He bribes and cajoles Hutu authorities with aplomb and amazing *savoir faire* to save the Tutsi refugees hiding in his hotel. Initially Rusesabagina keeps up the business-as-usual front for his rich international clientele with great composure. Later, meeting menace with steel nerves and deft calculation, he handles the *Interahamwe* leaders on terms they understand — bribes and threats — even as he seeks favours from them to feed the refugees. Towards the end of the 100 days, when there are signs of the return of Tutsi rebels, he even threatens to give evidence against General Bizimundu as a war criminal. He shows that hospitality and caring in times of terror is more about ensuring survival through resourcefulness, prudence and cunning than about just being conventionally right and resorting to foolhardy heroics.

Don Cheadle plays the role of hotelier and *savoir/saviour* with a minimum of histrionics. His understated style brilliantly enacts with minimum fuss the power of the ordinary to do extraordinary things under duress. Cheadle's acting style is very much part of the aesthetic repertoire adopted by Terry George in making the film. 'Less is more' appears to be the guiding principle for the director. As we saw earlier, George shot the bulk of his film in Johannesburg for fear that recreating the horror on the very same streets would be disrespectful to Kigali's healing process. This sensitivity guides his choice of frames through which he narrates for the world the 100-day shame of Rwanda. Throughout the film the viewer sees the massacres through the eyes of Paul, who himself witnesses everything only through multifarious frames — windows, the back-

gate of his home, the Hotel lobby, car windows and, on one occasion, a television screen. And yet, he is hardly a bystander, constantly working, plotting and strategising to save his family and the refugees.

The only occasion on which he actually stumbles over masses of butchered corpses along the river road — undoubtedly the most searing and poetic scene in the film — is shot through a hazy and misty frame that both evokes the twilight horror of his rendezvous with Rutagunda and shields the corpses from the voyeurism of the viewer. Before dawn, Paul goes to meet Rutagunda to request food supplies. Rutagunda obliges but warns him of the imminent death of the Tutsis sheltering in the Hotel. He even asks Paul to hand them over in exchange for the lives of his wife and children. When he does not get a straight response, he tells the driver with quiet menace to take the 'river road', for the way would be 'clear' there. Only when Paul and his driver encounter thousands of Tutsi corpses on the 'river road', do they confront the full horror of Rutagunda's advice.

Terry George recreates Paul's horror for the viewer by means of short, sharp and subtle cinematic devices. On hearing Paul's agonised stifled groan, the viewer has a shadowy glimpse of row upon row of huddled corpses extending to the horizon. The camera then quickly pans to Paul and his driver in their four-wheeler trying to reverse out of that road even as the auditorium is awash with the sound of wheels bumping over dead bodies. Few creative evocations of man's voracious appetite to kill have been more powerfully depicted than this one. The audience ex-

periences a *frisson* straight from hell even as the horrific details are visually veiled from it. Terry George persists with his aesthetic stance of protecting the massed from the gaze of the living when, after a strained moment of silence, Paul warns his driver: 'You will tell no one about what we saw on this road. No one.'

Arguably, in recreating the genocide on screen, the maker of *Hotel Rwanda* invests neither in Coetzee's minimalist aesthetics nor in Courtemanche's full-frontal, searing poeticism. Adopting the former would have meant sacrificing the film's global reach, for how, except through cinematic figuration of extreme suffering and pain, could he have hoped to communicate to the world that another Rwanda should not happen? Again, as Samuel Beckett's plays demonstrate, minimalism is hardly conducive to a portrayal of the heroic. For the world, Rusesabagina is Rwanda's Schindler and Terry George intends to portray him as such. Coetzee's protagonists are heartbreakingly frail, failed humans caught up in a hostile world without redemption. It is also arguable that what Courtemanche could create through the genre of the novel — putting into graphic words and figurative language the kind of pain and violence that humans would be hard put to imagine in reality — Terry George could not risk with a feature film without allowing the representation to slide into the gratuitous and even sado-masochistic pornography. The visual medium, and especially the feature film with its heightened cinematic effects, engages all the senses with an immediacy that words on a page cannot approximate. That is why its apprehension of reality is more immediately confronting than that of a novel.

As the ethnographic film-maker David McDougall notes in *The Corporeal Image: Film, Ethnography and the Senses*, 'all films and not only "gross" genres are potentially disturbing to the corporeal equanimity of the viewer'.²⁹ In an extended discussion on the concept of *photogenie* — that which highlights the film as a technological phenomenon so that a film, far from presenting reality, actually presents us with a strange apparition, a photochemical imprint on the world — MacDougall retrieves the notion of the 'oneiric' to discuss tensions that beset the viewing body. The 'oneiric' is a perspective 'suspended somewhere between privilege and paralysis, with all the power to see but an incapacity to act'. This, says McDougall, may be the reason why people feel so disturbed when they see certain kinds of images — especially ones of extreme bodily violence. He adds: 'People who have witnessed disturbing events often report that they find it much more disturbing when they see them on film. The mechanical vision of the camera is more inhuman, more unrelenting.'³⁰

Further, what may just about be bearable in the documentary genre may be totally unacceptable in a feature film melodrama, for the latter carries much more of a burden to intervene creatively and transfigure reality for the audience rather than simply documenting it. It will indeed be a daunting ethico-aesthetic challenge to make Courtemanche's novel into a film — an attempt that is apparently already under way. Would *Hotel Rwanda* possibly have been as compelling a feature film if Rusesabagina had not kept his hotel business, an avocation whose demands of diplomacy and cool under fire helped him become a successful saviour? Did his feat

help make the movie 'watchable', a movie of such a horrific event that might have otherwise defied dramatisation except in gratuitous terms? Does it sanitise the genocide even as it humanises it, so that even while the film asserts the ethical imperative of hospitality towards strangers in dire need till the very end — the film's last spoken words are 'there's always room' — its generic/aesthetic investment is in making the trauma 'bearable' for the viewer rather than trying to get a measure of its real horror?

Hotel Rwanda arguably falls into the category identified by Ann Kaplan as 'melodrama', a genre that 'seals over traumatic ruptures'³¹ and ends with 'comforting closure or cure'.³² In the context of trauma films, Kaplan identifies three other types of representation and viewership: a) the gratuitous and the horrific, from which the spectator recoils in distress and terror; b) the routine television-like images of catastrophe around the world, against which the viewer is placed as a voyeur; and c) the powerful political scripts on trauma made by 'independent' filmmakers, where the viewer is addressed as a 'witness' and is entreated to intervene.³³

While Terry George's representation can be clearly distinguished from the 'gratuitous' and the 'routine-like', I would argue that *Hotel Rwanda* goes beyond the conventions of melodrama. Its aesthetic 'distancing' in portraying the full horror of the genocide is not merely to make the trauma 'bearable' for the viewer and provide 'closure', but also to acknowledge the limits to aesthetic representation of the precariousness and terror of life at the end of the millennium. To that extent, it respects and affirms the corporeal vulnerab-

ility that appears to have become the face of the 'human' in these late modern times. This is the burden of Judith Butler's argument in *Precarious Life: the Powers of Mourning and Violence* in accounting for the dehumanising nature of much contemporary media representations of warfare and violence. She says that such representations make no allowance for the mutual vulnerability of all humans, that they are often brandished as triumphalist icons either of US supremacy or of other radically fundamentalist and dehumanising worldviews.³⁴ When Paul Rusesabagina commands his chauffeur 'not to tell anyone' of the carnage they encounter on the river road, it is precisely this new kind of humanist ethics that he invokes; an ethics that has the full measure of the horror and also the acuity to take a step back from narrating it all. This is a different ethic from the one that argues for the intractability and unrepresentability of trauma. It advocates a meaningful return to referentiality that respects and acknowledges our collective precariousness.

POSTSCRIPT

If there is one central thesis that has emerged from the above examination of the link between trauma aesthetic and humanist ethic in late modernity it is this: such an aesthetic is workable only to the extent that it maintains a balance between a redemptive evocation of human singularity in extreme pain, and respect for civic pluralism/discrepant affiliations rather than sectarian and identitarian ends. As we saw from our analysis of the two creative works, there are generic variations in maintaining this balance. Whether they ultimately succeed in 'making sense' of

the horror of the Rwandan genocide depends as much on their aesthetic sensitivity to their respective genres and media as on their avowed moral commitment to tell the story of Rwanda to the wider world. What is definitely not ethically and aesthetically viable in this age of shared terror is silence.

ENDNOTES

¹ Cited in Gary Maddox's 'Time to Face the Pain', *The Sydney Morning Herald*, Weekend Edition, 19–20 August 2006.

² Cited in Sharon Verghis' 'Not Another Terrorist Movie', *SMH*, op. cit.

³ Susannah Radstone, 'Trauma and Screen Studies: Opening the Debate', *Screen* 42(2), 2001, p.189.

⁴ See Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, London: Verso, 2004, p.149

⁵ See Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism*.

⁶ Butler op.cit.; Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Multitude*, New York: Penguin Press, 2004.

⁷ Cited in a report by Anson Musselman on Corinne Dufka's address to the UCLA International Institute entitled, 'Remembering Rwanda: Ten Years After the Massacres'. See <http://www.international.ucla.edu/article.asp?parentid=11069>; downloaded 1 December 2005.

⁸ Gil Courtemanche, *A Sunday at the Pool in Kigali*, Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2003, p.109. The Arusha Accord was a pact on power-sharing agreements signed in Arusha (Tanzania) by the Hutu-dominated Rwandan Government and the Tutsi-led Rwandan Patriotic Front (RPF). The signing took place in two stages, on 30 October 1992 and 9 January 1993. But the agreement did not include power sharing with the Hutu extremist *Coalition pour la Defense de la Republique* (CDR). Further, the cabinet's role was enhanced, while that of the President was cut down. It entitled President Habyarimana to stay in office till the transition to a coalition government fully materialised. The power-sharing clause of the Arusha Accord was, not surprisingly, strongly opposed by Hutu extremists, including members of Habyarimana's entourage. See Arthur Jay Klinghoffer's *The International Dimension of Genocide in Rwanda*, NYU Press, 1998, for complete details of the Accord and its failure which led to the genocide.

⁹ All Dufka quotes can be found on the UCLA International Institute website cited in Note 7.

¹⁰ Michael Ignatieff, *The Warrior's Honour: Ethnic War and the Modern Conscience*, NY: Henry Holt & Company, 1998, p.76.

¹¹ Ibid., p.75.

¹² Cited in 'Art from Genocide — Two paths to Understanding', by Jennifer de Poyen, *San Diego Union Tribune*, 30 October 2005, <http://www.genocideintervention.net/about/press/coverage/index.php/archives/89>, downloaded 29 May 2006

¹³ *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, p.8.

¹⁴ Jason Cowley, 'Rebirth of a Nation', *The Observer*, 27 February 2005, <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,1425995,00.html>.

¹⁵ Cited in *The Observer*, 27 February 2005

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *The Observer*, 27 February 2005, cited in Jason Cawley's article 'The Rebirth of a Nation', <http://observer.guardian.co.uk/review/story/0,6903,1425995,00.html>.

¹⁸ Ignatieff, op. cit., p.10

¹⁹ Butler, op. cit., pp.129–30.

²⁰ Hardt and Negri, op. cit., Preface, p.xi, p.128.

²¹ Ignatieff, op. cit., pp.18–9.

²² Klinghoffer, op. cit., p.132.

²³ Ignatieff, op. cit., p.20.

²⁴ For political and ethno-social details of how Belgian colonialists in Rwanda conceptually engineered a racial divide between Hutus and Tutsis, see Christopher Taylor's 'The Hamitic Hypothesis in Rwanda and Burundi', in his *Sacrifice as Terror: The Rwandan Genocide of 1994*, Oxford: Berg, 1999. See also Klinghoffer, op.cit.; and Christian Scherrer's *Genocide and Crisis in Central Africa*, London: Praeger, 2002.

²⁵ Butler, op. cit., p.42.

²⁶ Hardt and Negri, op. cit., p.192.

²⁷ Janet Walker, 'Trauma Cinema: False Memories and True Experience', *Screen*, 42(2), 2001, p.214.

²⁸ Ann Kaplan, 'Melodrama, Cinema and Trauma', *Screen*, 42(2), 2001, p.204.

²⁹ New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005, p.16.

³⁰ Ibid., pp.17–8.

³¹ Kaplan, op.cit., p.203.

³² Ibid., p.204.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Butler, op. cit., p.143.