H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kristi M. Wilson, Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli, eds. *Film and Genocide.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. x + 266 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-28564-7.

Reviewed by Rebecca Jinks (Royal Holloway, University of London)
Published on H-Memory (January, 2013)
Commissioned by Catherine Baker

Although much has been written about Holocaust films, and some literature exists around films about genocides other than the Holocaust, few have brought these films (and indeed literature) into conversation with each other to discuss the bigger and comparative question of how genocide is represented in film. Kristi M. Wilson and Tomás F. Crowder-Taraborrelli attempt just that with their collection *Film and Genocide*, and as such are making an important contribution to a new subfield of genocide studies, along with the summer 2010 special issue of the journal *Shofar*, edited by Lawrence Baron, and the forthcoming volume *Holocaust Intersections: Genocide and Visual Culture at the New Millennium*, edited by Axel Bangert, Robert S. C. Gordon, and Libby Saxton. *Film and Genocide* does not explicitly explore the fascinating "intersections" between cinematic portrayals of the Holocaust and other genocides (in the manner of Michael Rothberg's *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* [2009]), like many of the essays in the other two collections. *Film and Genocide*'s broader concern with the cinema of genocide, rather than the Holocaust as an orienting device, sets it apart in this nascent field.

The editors have opted for a relatively broad and inclusive definition of "genocide," since they feel that such a definition "best represents the type of dialogue and debate already at play in many films and theoretical discussions about the topic" (p. 11). The collection ranges from chapters on films about Rwanda, Armenia, the Holocaust, and Australia's Stolen Generations to chapters on Chile, North America, and the fire and atomic bombings of Japan. As Wilson and Crowder-Taraborrelli write in their introduction, whilst there are often debates over how far the United Nations Genocide Convention's (quite narrow) definition can be applied, "filmmakers are in a unique position to push the limits of this application. The medium of film has the ability to conjure up images that call to mind the dimensions of atrocities committed (including genocide). Thus, film operates well as a vehicle for mourning and remembrance" (p. 15). The majority of the contributions are indeed quite closely concerned with the important, albeit obvious, work of analyzing these conjured images of atrocity, and with the films' "common preoccupation with questions of what to show, how to show it, and how much is too much to show"–pursuing, in particular, questions of ethical spectatorship, trauma, narrative, and visual documentation (p. 6).

A particular strength of the volume is the mix of films covered, which range from the well-known (*Schindler's List* [1993], *Shoah* [1985], *Hotel Rwanda* [2004]) to the more obscure (*The Portraitist* [2005], *Salvador Allende* [2004]), and the unseen (GI amateur documentary films of the liberated concentration camps); and from those made during or immediately after the events in question (*The Stranger* [1946], *Compañero presidente* [1971]) to those made many years after (*Ararat* [2001], *Rabbit-Proof Fence* [2002]). Thus, while not aiming to be comprehensive–there is no mention of Roland Joffé's famous *The Killing Fields* (1984), Rithy Panh's works, or any films about the break-up of the former Yugoslavia–the volume suggests valuable interconnections and differences between films intended for very different audiences.

Film and Genocide is divided into four sections. Part 1, "Atrocities, Spectatorship, and Memory," brings together such concerns as voyeurism, ethical and pedagogical spectatorship, and the way films engage with the lingering impact of genocide on communities. Sophia Wood's chapter, "Film and Atrocity: The Holocaust as Spectacle," discusses the place of visual records of the Holocaust as "aids" to memory and as "integral" to the ways in which the Holocaust is remembered (pp. 21, 23). She begins with a summary of many of the debates that have dominated discussions of atrocity images–do such images anaesthetize, is viewing them voyeuristic, what is the ethical viewing position to adopt–but without adding to the substance of these debates, or moving

them past their tendency toward ahistorical generalization and conjecture (do such images always anaesthetize, or are some generations, or cultures, or individuals, more "anesthetized" than others? Is viewing such images always voyeuristic, or might there be viewing contexts or certain representations which undo or resist that?). She then discusses how and how far the Holocaust is maintained (and sanitized) as a "spectacle" through an analysis of *Schindler's List*, *Shoah*, *Night and Fog* (1955), and *Life Is Beautiful* (1998). Her argument that "the testimony of those who survived the Holocaust can reanimate this 'human waste"' and thereby mitigate the distancing effects of atrocity images is more interesting, but this question is only picked up in relation to *Shoah* (and cursorily with *Night and Fog*) (p. 25). In the end, it is subordinated to her overarching and rather standard argument that "the actual and re-created scenes that make up our memory are at best gratuitous and at worst indecent. The public gaze levelled at the Holocaust should be continually, critically appraised" (p. 42).

In "Documenting the Holocaust in Orson Welles's *The Stranger*," Jennifer L. Barker revisits what is regarded as the director's least "Wellesian" film, released in 1946. Barker contextualizes the film ably, and her analysis focuses on the showing of some original Holocaust footage as a film within a film. In *The Stranger*, this causes one of the main characters, Mary, to confront the Nazi atrocities and eventually, upon realizing that her new husband was deeply involved in them, to make the decision to kill him. "This film-within-a-film functions as a pedagogical tactic, a way of instructing Mary, and by extension, the audience, in a nonpassive form of spectatorship," argues Barker (p. 47); the film's emphasis is not only on how to watch such footage, but also on advocating action in the name of social justice and responsibility. Barker therefore makes an interesting contribution to discussions of both how films might encourage an "ethical spectatorship" among audiences and how documentary footage functions within such films.

Michael J. Lazzara's chapter "Remembering Revolution after Ruin and Genocide: Recent Chilean Documentary Films and the Writing of History" is an excellent portrait of the evolution (and revisiting) of the memories of and documentary responses to events in Chile in the 1960s and 1970s. Lazzara opens with a measured defense of using the word "genocide" to describe the killings under Augusto Pinochet, and a brief discussion of the impact of this past on society and, in particular, activist documentary makers. He then explores Patricio Guzmán's 2004 documentary *Salvador Allende* and Carmen Castillo's *Calle Santa Fe* (2008), along with the reception of the rerelease of Miguel Littín's *Compañero presidente* (1971) in present-day Chile. Taken together, he writes, the films "show how Chilean filmmakers of the revolutionary generation and Chilean society as a whole are using film as a medium through which to *struggle* with the memory of the revolutionary past and to ask important questions about the repercussions that the past can have for politics in the present" (p. 70, emphasis original).

Georgiana Banita's "'The Power to Imagine': Genocide, Exile, and Ethical Memory in Atom Egoyan's *Ararat*" ably introduces readers to Egoyan's relatively complicated film, discussing its evocation of the multiple layers of memory (and denial) that form the Armenian diaspora's relationship with its past in the present. Her particular contribution to the scholarship on this film is her attention to the different mediums at play (Maxim Gorky's photograph, his painting, and the film within a film) in both *Ararat* and diasporic memory: "the switch from the photographic image to the painting and to film codifies the shift from authentication to representation and, as such, the transition from direct memory to a form of ethical recall. This recall draws its sharpness not from faithfulness to an event but rather from the desire to have lived it" among the descendants of survivors, she argues (p. 102).

Part 2, "Coloniality and Postcoloniality," draws together essays on films about genocide in North America, Australia, and Rwanda (in other regards, the essays are quite different). The first half of Paul R. Bartrop's "Massacre and the Movies: *Soldier Blue* and the Sand Creek Massacre of 1864" relates the history of European colonization of North America and the massacre itself, before moving on to Ralph Nelsen's controversial and explicit feature film. As he argues, "*Soldier Blue*, within the context of the Vietnam War, was thus a movie that held up a mirror to U.S. society and showed that genocidal massacre was not only possible but had already happened on U.S. soil in the past" (p. 116). *Soldier Blue*, he shows, shattered the established conventions of portraying good Americans and bad Indians, and raises the question of how extremely violent scenes actually work in overturning those conventions.

Donna-Lee Freize's "The Other in Genocide: Responsibility and Benevolence in *Rabbit-Proof Fence*" applies Emmanuel Levinas's political theory of responsibility to Philip Noyce's 2002 film, distinguishing between dutiful responsibility–the supposedly benevolent policy of removing so-called half-caste children from their families in order to "breed out the colour" through eventual inter-

marriage with whites–and ethical responsibility (p. 123). As Freize notes, the film shows not mass murder but, quite carefully, a case of genocide enacted through a policy of biological absorption. Her use of Levinas serves to underscore the well-known difference between the moral world of perpetrators, which justifies and necessitates violence, and more ethical human relationships.

In "Genres of 'Yet An Other Genocide': Cinematic Representations of Rwanda," Madeline Hron very usefully divides the extant spectrum of films about the genocide into three categories: "retrospective" accounts (most blockbuster feature films), which attempt transparently to portray the genocide; "post-genocide documentaries," which are concerned with the *gacaca* justice process and life in the aftermath; and the few "interpenetrative" films, which splice past with present in an attempt to show the terror of genocide and its lingering terror for survivors (p. 135). Hron's analysis is sensitive to Western viewing positions (and the portrayal of Western involvement in the genocide), and the range of films she considers is impressive. Throughout the chapter, she identifies exceptions to the otherwise generic patterns of representation, but closes by wondering whether, given the adoption of representational techniques from Holocaust movies, disaster films, and Hollywood films about Africa, "this canon of 'Rwanda films' has become the generic means of formulating 'yet another genocide' and thus the continued, disappointing failure of Western media and human rights interventionism" (p. 151).

Part 3, "Visual Documentation and Genocide," opens with coeditor Wilson's "The Specter of Genocide in Errol Morris's *The Fog of War*." Wilson considers how the film portrays issues of responsibility and morality, and how it deploys images of the bombing of Japan to undermine or counterpose the self-confident testimony of Robert S. McNamara. As she argues, through prompting McNamara to look back and offer some sort of rationale for his involvement in these bombing campaigns, the "ethic of personal responsibility clashes with the rhetoric of avoidance that has so far long characterized mainstream historical accounts of the end of the war" (p. 159). The film invokes and makes connections between different episodes of U.S. military violence, attempting to overhaul the comforting national narrative of World War II heroism in favor of a history of a more complex U.S. relationship with war crimes and genocide.

Marsha Orgeron's chapter, "GIs Documenting Genocide: Amateur Films of World War II Concentration Camps," takes a noteworthy look at a very different set of films, an "important alternative source of knowledge about the camps [which] can be considered a unique type of home movie as well as a horrific visual souvenir of the war" (p. 172). These films give an intimate sense of how GIs experienced, and wanted to show and remember, the liberated camps. Increasingly, these films are being donated to archives and placed online, and as such their reach is shifting from the limited sphere of the family home and community viewings into the wider public sphere of memory.

In "Through the Open Society Archives to *The Portraitist*: Film's Impulse toward Death and Witness," Stephen Cooper describes a few weeks of his research in journalistic style, beginning with his few days sampling the Open Society Archives' (OSA) rich collection of films on human rights, and moving on to his meeting with Irek Dobrowolski and Wilhelm Brasse, respectively the director and the main focus of Dobrowolski's 2005 film *The Portraitist*. Cooper discusses the place of the photographs of Auschwitz prisoners taken by Brasse (a prisoner himself) in public memory, Brasse's own memories, and the ways in which Dobrowolski tries to defamiliarize some of the images that have become so familiar to us.

Part 4, "Interviews," is a welcome innovation in the book, consisting of interviews with three of the film directors considered earlier in the book: Greg Barker, who directed the 2004 *Frontline* documentary *Ghosts of Rwanda*, interviewed by Richard O'Connell; Nick Hughes, a journalist who made the first feature film about the Rwandan genocide, *100 Days* (2001), interviewed by Piotr A. Cieplak; and Irek Dobrowolski, interviewed by Cooper. The interviews are valuable in that they bring out the directors' reflections on the process of research for the films, on their decisions about how to frame violence and best tell the story, and on how they saw their films as negotiating with memories of the genocides.

All in all, the essays in *Film and Genocide* encourage the reader to think comparatively about how films have visualized atrocity, how these visualizations might interact with public and personal memories, and how these films negotiate the need to relate the wider history with the filmic preference for focusing on individual human experiences. They offer concrete examples and ways of thinking about how films (and stills from them or used in them) have constructed, entered, shaped, or countered and reframed memory, whether public or semi-private, national or individual. Crucially, the majority of the films under discussion sought (at the time of their production) to self-consciously *intervene* in memory, to contest and reshape it, and as such the collection allows readers to think about the different strategies films have employed,

more or less effectively, to reframe memory.

The editors do anticipate that their collection "might risk losing some strength because of its wide historical breadth" (p. 15). I would suggest that the problem is perhaps not so much the historical breadth of genocides "covered," but rather that relatively few of the contributors engage with the question of how the films depict genocide, as "the intent to destroy, in whole or in part" a particular group, as opposed to *atrocity* or *mass murder*. The majority of the contributors' select focus on the visualization of atrocity perhaps obscures a more interesting question, namely, of how films might counter the equation of genocide with mass murder in the (Western) public mind–which would be perhaps initially best approached through a consideration of how films portray the perpetrators and their worldviews. Nevertheless, *Film and Genocide* makes a valuable contribution to a new and important field of research, which takes a comparative approach not just to the history of genocide but also to its representation.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Rebecca Jinks. Review of Wilson, Kristi M.; Crowder-Taraborrelli, Tomás F., eds., *Film and Genocide*. H-Memory, H-Net Reviews. January, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36578

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.