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Filmmaking, Reconciliation & Peacebuilding in Rwanda: Challenges and Opportunities.

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SIT Study Abroad

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World Learning – SIT Study Abroad

Rwanda: Post Genocide Restoration and Peacebuilding Program

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**Filmmaking, Reconciliation & Peacebuilding in Rwanda: Challenges and
Opportunities.**

Kierran Petersen

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Abstract

The Rwandan filmmaking industry is in its infancy, only emerging after the 1994 genocide. Since then, a small group of pioneer filmmakers have simultaneously built a community structure with the capacity to train young filmmakers, showcased Rwandan talent and attempted to integrate cinema into Rwandan culture. This cinema-related development is also taking place in a post-genocide context, where national unity and reconciliation is on the forefront of national policy and individual consciousness. Film in Rwanda has played a role in moving the country past the genocide that decimated the population and destroyed the existing infrastructure and severed the social ties between all Rwandans. This essay identifies the emerging structure for the Rwandan filmmaking industry, while also measuring how influential cinema has been and can continue to be in the reconciliation process. Finally, it will outline recommendations for filmmakers who aim to contribute to the country's reconciliation and unity process.

Acknowledgements

To my American parents, but also to my family in general: Thank you for letting me come to this country in the first place, and for being a perfect support system for me when I was crying into my potato bananas. Thank you for understanding that this is just the first of many times that you'll hug me goodbye at airports. I promise to always come home.

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To Divin: I look forward to seeing you grow up, even if it's from the other side of the world. Bite little man, I'm going to miss you like crazy.

To SIT staff: Thank you for exposing me to a wealth of thoughts, people and experiences these past four months.

To the Filmmakers who agreed to be part of this research: Thank you so much for giving me your time. I look up to all of you more than you know, and I hope I have the privilege to work with you one day.

To the Island of Misfit Toys (weird cousin included): Guys. It's hard to put into words how glad I am to have lived with you all for this past month. Thanks for taking me on adventures and putting up with my slow spiral into malaria-medication-induced psychosis. We're such a stone-cold pack of weirdos, and I'm so proud.

To my fellow Rwanda 2K13-ers: Although I'm still really not cool with the whole hyena thing, I am going to miss the living daylights out of all of you. Except Anna. I still really hate Anna.

To Mayonnaise: This is not the end. I will come back for you.

List of Abbreviations

Rwanda Cinema Center - RCC

Rwanda Film Festival - RFF

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Chapter I: General Introduction

Traditional reconciliation and peacebuilding techniques tend to focus on dialogue, and the role it plays in bringing people together. This dialogue allows humans to connect with each other, allowing them to see past what divides them. The context of that dialogue, though, can fundamentally change how efficient and effective it is. Film is emerging as an effective peacebuilding and reconciliation tool because it allows for a unique amount of control over the context of this dialogue. Movies are a unique art form, because they easily allow people to relate to others. Anyone who has ever cried or laughed because of a movie has emotionally connected to it and related to a character. That connection, if used strategically, has the potential to foster understanding and empathy between at-odds groupings of people, create a prime environment for productive dialogue and allow people to look at themselves in a way that would be hard to achieve in other ways. Even on the other side of the camera, collaborative filmmaking is a way to empower people and create relationships between groups.

I.1. Research Problem

Filmmakers in Rwanda face a multitude of challenges including access to equipment, prohibitive laws about freedom of expression and difficulty reaching or engaging with the rural community. However, regardless of these challenges, the filmmaking community is thriving and garnering international attention.

Filmmaking in Rwanda also has a unique opportunity to be part of the restoration process after the genocide. The government has put unity and reconciliation at the forefront of its goals, and film has the potential to be a big part of those processes.

I.2. Research Questions

This research answered the following questions:

1. Given Rwanda's financial situation, historical context and leadership, what are the challenges facing filmmakers, and how can they be overcome?
2. How can filmmaking in Rwanda promote unity, reconciliation and peacebuilding in Rwanda's post-genocide society?

I.3. Research objectives

This research aimed to:

1. Identify various challenges faced by Rwandan filmmakers,
2. Explore the opportunities available for the Rwandan filmmaking industry to grow and improve,
3. Identify how filmmaking can be used strategically to promote Rwanda's unity, reconciliation and peacebuilding processes.

I.4. Research Purpose

The overall contribution of this report was two-fold. First, a full understanding of the structure of the Rwandan filmmaking community can be generalized to other developing countries. As in other sections of industry in Rwanda, film has made great strides in the last two decades. However, there are still many challenges facing Rwandan filmmakers. Understanding these common challenges is the first step to overcoming them, so my research can be the first step in developing best practices in that respect. My research also identified the role filmmaking plays in the country's post-genocide restoration and peacebuilding. The work I have done could inform a foreign filmmaker on how to effectively make a movie about Rwanda or perhaps in another post-conflict context.

I.5. Literature review

The existing literature on Rwandan filmmaking is very limited. Scholars have grappled with the movie 'Hotel Rwanda' – a feature film made in 2004 by an American director about what supposedly happened during the genocide in Hotel des Mille Collines – but have almost ignored the country's homegrown feature films or documentaries. Instead, much of my research focuses on African filmmaking or filmmaking that promotes dialogue or healing in some way. The lack of scholarship about Rwanda specifically did not surprise me because of how new film is to the country, but I was surprised that other countries in Africa weren't the focus of more research. Piotr A. Cieplak summed up this phenomenon neatly in his article "Alternative African Cinemas: a case study of Rwanda"

when he writes, “A significant proportion of African film studies focuses on the fact that films in Africa get made at all, giving the actual evaluation of the texts and the dynamic of spectatorship much less attention than they deserve” (Cieplak, 2010, p. 74). This diagnosis of the existing literature proved to be very true, limiting my research in some ways. However, this also allows me more room to choose my topic, because there is such a gap in scholarship.

Cieplak’s article, in fact, is the closest thing to the type of research that I want to do. He argues that Rwandan filmmakers have devised an alternative system of development, which he says is socially oriented instead of the normal commercially orientated development (p. 88). He touches on the role film has played in the healing of the country after the 1994 genocide. In a country that has a strong oral history, he argues, movies are a relatively new and somewhat unusual medium for most people. However, given the nature of film, which engages people in a story or with a character without asking them to immediately respond, has seen enormous success in facilitating reconciliation or at least productive dialogue. Finally, he questions the sustainability of the Rwandan filmmaking industry, because of the heavy burden of responsibility on key players who essentially manage every relationship of the filmmaking process. There are also questions about the Rwandan Cinema Center (RCC), and its near-monopoly of the filmmaking process. The RCC dominates and doles out materials, actors, cameras and training for filmmakers. As the industry grows, he argues, this model may not be as realistic and that monopoly may prove to be problematic (p. 88).

Other articles give some insight about the film industries in other African countries. Krista Tuomi takes on South Africa in her article entitled “Organizational shift in the feature film industry: implications for South Africa. In South Africa, she writes, the film industry is relatively developed and profitable, generating 5.5 billion Rand annually (Tuomi, 2007, p. 69). Worldwide, Tuomi writes, there has been a shift away from the production house structure to more of a network structure, where large conglomerations are eating greater and greater shares of the total ownership of the movies being made. In South Africa however, the consolidation seems to be stunted by the industrial structure of the country. While there are large media conglomerates forming in South Africa, the

majority of production companies are still small. There are not many houses that can afford to own their own resources while also taking on distribution responsibilities (p.79). Martin Mhando and Laurian Kipeja write about the Tanzanian market in their article, entitled “Creative/Cultural industries financing in Africa: A Tanzanian film value chain study”. Their study identified a list of challenges facing filmmakers in Tanzania, including “lack of production facilities, poor market organization, inadequate rules and regulation, limited understanding of global markets, the problem of language, and lack of bargaining power and commercial relationships” (Mhando and Kipeja, 2010, p. 7). These challenges are many of the same challenges facing the Rwandan filmmaking community. These challenges act as barriers, preventing filmmakers in these two countries to effectively enter the global filmmaking community, forcing them to settle for smaller projects that are unlikely to travel across the border. Mhando and Kipeja write specifically about training in Tanzania, and how there are few formal institutions teaching filmmaking. As a result, most filmmakers are just people who are producing for the sake of producing, or are doing it because they are passionate about it. I could see the same situation arising in the Rwandan filmmaking community because of the lack of formal institutions. The RCC seems to be the only institution in Rwanda that offers formal film education.

The most well-known film industry in Africa right now is Nollywood, in Nigeria. Nollywood is the third-largest film industry in the world, behind Hollywood and Bollywood. However, the quality of the films coming out of Nollywood is constantly being called into question, especially considering how many movies Nollywood produces every year. While Hollywood produces about 630 films a year and Bollywood is responsible for about 800 generally shorter films, Nollywood pumps out up to 2,000 videos each year (Becker, 2011, p. 71). Patrick Ebewo gives a critical snapshot of Nollywood in his article, “The Emerging Video Film Industry in Nigeria: Challenges and Prospects”. Ebewo takes issue with many different parts of Nollywood, including its obsession with the occult and generally poor morals, its shallow representation of women and its poor composition, editing and performances. Film, he argues, is only made by unskilled entrepreneurs who are only interested in generating a profit, not by people who are interested in creating art (Ebewo, 2007, p. 52). This is interesting when put in terms

of Rwanda, because it's very possible that the Rwandan film industry, or at least a section of it, could one day look like Nollywood, and create films similar to Nollywood films. One of the most interesting sections of Nollywood is how profitable it is. Many other African film communities complain about how film is not profitable in their countries, mostly because of pirating. For Nollywood, however, piracy is both "essential to the legitimate video film industry and its greatest challenge" (Larkin, 2004, p. 290). Finally, one of the interesting things about the rise of Nollywood is where it originally came from, especially for this research, which concerns the origins of the Rwandan film industry. Becky Becker writes in her article "Nollywood: Film and Home Video, or the Death of Nigerian Theatre" that Nollywood films are very clearly linked to Nigeria's theatre tradition. Many of the movies even still stylistically look a lot like theatre, with few camera angles, minimal edits and many one-shot scenes. Because of the rise of film, along with other factors, Becker argues, theatre has taken a hit in contemporary Nigeria. Becker points to poverty, prohibitive night travel, road hazards and crime as some reasons why people would choose to watch movies as opposed to going out to a traditional theatre show (p. 74). However, there is also the issue of substance. Becker writes that theatre has lost the pulse of the Nigerian population, while films are touching on issues that are interesting and important to Nigerians. Nigerian movies tend to deal with the civil war experience in a way that encourages nationalism, mutual responsibility and national unity, which is something that Nigerians are looking for (p. 77). This is interesting to me in terms of Rwanda, because it means that film has a better chance of becoming part of the culture if it focuses on topics that Rwandans are interested in, like national unity and reconciliation. The Nigerian example is interesting because it is possible that the Rwandan film industry could one day have many characteristics of Nollywood.

Shifting to film's role in reconciliation and peacebuilding, Elana Shefrin's dissertation entitled "Remediating the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: The Use of Films to Facilitate Dialogue", offers interesting ideas about film's role in reconciliation and conflict resolution. Shefrin argues that the components of film are made up of a "complex combination of verbal and nonverbal cues" (Shefrin, 2007, p. 2), which include visual imagery, music, scripted or impromptu language and unintended or intended meaning

differs from traditional dialogue, which is made up of a less complex combination of cues. These cues come in the form of body language, word choice, and tone, among others. She also argues that film has a built in “cooling-off period”, which significantly strengthens the resulting dialogue, because it avoids the serious confrontational atmosphere that threatens productive dialogue. Finally, she formulates five best practices and six cautionary tales, the application of which she believes would lead to the most productive use of film to promote low-tension and productive dialogue.

While Shefrin’s article points out the potential of cinema to promote productive dialogue, Antonio Traverso and Tomas Crowder-Taraborrelli’s article entitled “Political Documentary Cinema in the Southern Cone” points out some proven successes documentary film has had in promoting dialogue in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. They write that documentary film has “not only enriched public debate in these three countries but also transformed the genre into a tool of political activism, social denunciation, and even judicial prosecution of perpetrators of genocidal atrocities” (Traverso and Crowder-Taraborrelli, 2013, p. 3). While this article focuses on only documentary film, it has concrete examples of how and when film has been successful in promoting important dialogue and social change.

Heather LaMarre and Kristin D. Landreville’s study entitled “When is Fiction as Good as Fact? Comparing the Influence of Documentary and Historical Reenactment Films on Engagement, Affect, Issue Interest, and Learning” compares the effect of showing documentary films and feature films to audiences and measuring how much they learned, how engaged they were with the subject matter, and how interested they are in the topic. She opens with a discussion of her opposing hypotheses, arguing both sides of the argument. On one hand, she writes, documentary films should be more engaging and encourage more learning because the film is seen as “more real”, leading the audience to be less critical of the facts. However, on the other hand, the dramatic storytelling of a feature film could also lead an audience to be less critical of the facts, and the tendency of feature films to engage audiences more emotionally could lead to greater engagement and issue learning (Lamarre and Landreville, 2009, pp. 541-2). From her experiment she concludes that documentaries produce an equal or stronger guilt and disgust reaction than

feature films, and thus elicited a stronger emotional response (pp. 549-50). Guilt and disgust were important to measure because the movies were about the 1994 genocide, and the test subjects were all American. By measuring guilt, Lamarre and Landreville could measure how well an audience connected emotionally to a film.

Martin Mhando and Keyan G. Tomaselli's paper entitled "Film and Trauma: Africa Speaks to Itself through Truth and Reconciliation Films" examines how African films relate to African culture, while also considering the industry's relationship to history and memory. They write that film allows the audience to feel like they participated in whatever event is being chronicled. This article is interested to me in the Rwandan context because most Rwandans do not need a film to feel like they were part of the genocide. Most of them actually were there, so films about 1994 take on a different form than films about earlier conflicts. Later in their article they write about how film can also be a form of memorialization. They write: "What is necessary and important and indeed required by the victims is a facility whereby they can reconstruct the trauma in a form through which they can negotiate the various meanings derived from the catastrophe, and to be able to express it and convey meanings from and about it" (Mhando and Tomaselli, 2009, 34). When Rwandan films are put in this context, films that contribute to the country's reconciliation and peacebuilding efforts will be the ones that put the genocide in the past tense for the sake of deriving meaning from the chaos. Using this analysis, films that tell the bare-bones story of the genocide, ending with the RPF's occupation of Kigali, are not effectively aiding the reconciliation and unity process in the country. Mhando and Tomaselli also write about the function of cinema in Africa. They write that African films tend to cross boundaries in African society such as gender, race and class. Instead, they argue, film is more of a community discourse, and very representative of the real culture of a country.

Chapter II. Research methodology

This research was conducted through a series of 11 interviews with various players in the Rwandan filmmaking community. This report focused almost entirely on qualitative research.

II.1. Research Design

This study was mostly explorative, because it was on a topic that hasn't really been reviewed in depth. Rwanda's burgeoning film community hasn't attracted much scholarly attention yet, so close to no area-specific research has been done. While other scholars have covered elements of my research, such as reconciliation and film worldwide, filmmaking in Africa, or film representations of Rwanda, my research charted new territory.

Because of the nature of my topic, my research was almost entirely qualitative. The film industry in Rwanda is so small that trying to standardize information through a quantitative research design would have been all but useless. However, I did not use an exclusively qualitative approach, so the official approach was mixed.

II.2. Data Sources

I relied almost entirely on interview transcripts from the 11 subjects I talked to. All of the interviews I conducted were about an hour, the longest interview taking about 90 minutes, so I was able to get all of the information I wanted.

The other small part of my research included what I observed from participant's reactions to my questions, as well as the demographic makeup of my interviewees. This information is limited, and makes up a small fraction of the data I gleaned. The majority of my information came from the filmmakers and other stakeholders that I interviewed.

II.3. Data Collection Techniques

Interviews with knowledgeable members of the Rwandan filmmaking community were the crux of my research. After reaching out to key players in the community, I scheduled meetings with them. Each interview took about one hour, with the shortest interview lasting 50 minutes and the longest lasting 90 minutes. I did not try to time these interviews, as I wanted my interview subjects to feel comfortable speaking at length if they wanted to and vice versa. None of my interviews felt like they dragged, but there were two interviews that I had to rush through questions because my interview subject had somewhere to be or had to return to work. Almost all of my interviews occurred at the offices or workspaces of my interview subjects, which I think was very important for making them feel at ease, while also giving me a chance to observe what their offices looked like. This also proved interesting because many filmmakers aren't making films full time. Instead, they were working at other jobs or are doing contract filmmaking work for clients. When my interviews were not at their offices, we met in coffee shops or restaurants.

One of the strengths I brought to this research was my extensive experience with interviewing. Multiple classes I've taken in university have armed me with a wealth of interviewing tips and techniques that proved helpful when interviewing these filmmakers, some of which proved to be strong personalities and difficult interview subjects. Also, jobs that I have held in the past required me to interview a variety of people, from students to presidential nominees. These skills definitely helped me to get almost all of the information I wanted from these filmmakers.

I had other strengths as well, which I didn't expect to be as advantageous as they ended up being. For instance, all of the filmmakers that I talked to were much more willing to talk to me after I told them that I was an aspiring filmmaker. Many of the filmmakers would simplify what they were saying and would avoid technical terms until I told them that I was studying filmmaking. After they knew that, the conversations went much differently, and I was able to get much more interesting information and detail from them. Another strength that I knew existed, but I did not expect to be as helpful as it was, was that everyone spoke English. I was worried that I would run into a dead end in my

research if I found an important filmmaker who had a lot to say, but didn't speak my language. That never happened, so all of the words of the filmmakers in my research was their own words, and I never had to worry about any meaning being lost in translation.

However, I did run into some roadblocks and limitations, which have absolutely weakened my project. For instance, I was unable to interview some very important people due to time, difficulty communicating with them, or because they did not want to meet with me. The most obvious instance of this is Eric Kabera, who I was unable to meet with because he was too busy. Kabera is widely understood to be the father of the Rwandan filmmaking community, so not being able to talk to him was a big blow to the credibility of my project. I also was unable to interview a female filmmaker, mostly due to logistics with the three women I was in contact with. While I think that the filmmaking community in Rwanda is overwhelmingly male, I think that my project would be stronger with a female voice in it. Finally, there was one filmmaker who had a drastically different opinion of the role film has played in the national reconciliation and unity process. I emailed back and forth with him a few times, but he declined my request to interview him. I think it would've been interesting to have a very different point of view, since so much of what I heard was homogenous or at least close to what everyone else was saying.

Another unforeseen limitation, which weakened my project, was the lack of access to the actual films. Originally, my research involved watching the movies from all of the filmmakers I was interviewing, but that proved to be either prohibitively expensive or plainly impossible to do. Many of the films that I wanted to watch were movies that had been made specifically for film festivals, so they are impossible to find on DVD anywhere. Some were on YouTube so I watched them there, and I also watched all the movies that I could at the various NGOs or other organizations that have movies in storage, but that only ended up being four movies total. Other movies were prohibitively expensive. The biggest problem with this limitation is that I had a lot of information about filmmaking in Rwanda and some characteristics of Rwandan movies, but that information was incomplete without actually watching the movies and judging their quality and characteristics for myself.

II.4. Issues of Reliability and Validity

I avoided many potential reliability and validity problems due to the nature of my research topic. For instance, since filmmakers in Rwanda are generally young and have achieved some level of education, they all spoke English. Many of them have even attended school since English became one of the national languages, and many of them travel overseas. This ended up being a huge help as I forged ahead in my research. I never needed to rely on a translator, and therefore minimized the uncertainty that goes along with any translation.

I made my research as credible as possibly by talking to a wide range of Rwandan filmmakers. With the exception of a few people, I think I talked to almost all of the major players in the filmmaking community, while also managing to talk to wide range of different types of filmmakers, from people who make films for festivals to people who work as filmmakers for hire for clients across the country. I spoke to new filmmakers and people who have been involved since the very beginning of Rwandan cinema, which I think definitely aided my research. I think the wide range of experiences from the filmmakers I interviewed makes the information I got more credible. No one filmmaker's experience dominates my picture of the community as a whole. Because of the different types of people I interviewed I was able to emphasize links between what the filmmakers said and used that to gain an accurate picture of the industry. This also proved helpful when talking about their opinions of film's impact on unity and reconciliation, because I got a range of responses. These different opinions allowed me to come up with a balanced view of the reality of film's role in reconciliation and unity, and I was happy with that result.

II.5. Sampling Techniques

I chose to use snowball sampling as my way of reaching the filmmaking community in Rwanda. This method was the only logical way to conduct this research, because of how the community itself operates. While some filmmakers could afford to have a dedicated online presence to present their work, many could not. This was symptomatic of one of the main challenges facing the filmmaking community: funds. Snowball sampling was the only way to reach these filmmakers.

Fortunately, the group I was trying to reach was not that large, and very well connected. Filmmaking worldwide is a profession that cannot exist without networking, and in Rwanda that was definitely the case. The community is incredibly connected in Rwanda because the director of one movie likely acted in another movie. In another movie they may have been a writer or camera operator. Rwandan filmmakers over their career do almost every single job on set, so filmmakers all know each other. This was one of the easiest parts of my research. After each interview I would ask my interview subject if there was anyone I should reach out to, or if they had the contact information for anyone on my list. After almost every interview I got two or more contacts, which was very helpful.

In terms of sampling, I originally aimed to just talk to directors, producers and writers. However, after talking to a few different filmmakers I realized that those distinctions were all but meaningless, because of the nature of Rwandan filmmaking described above. I ended up talking to two people who are not technically currently filmmakers, but are major players in the industry. Romeo Umulisa has not made a movie in years, but is the director of the Rwanda Film Festival and works heavily with the RCC. Dr. Peter Saban, the director of the Goethe-Institut in Kigali is not a filmmaker, but almost every single filmmaker that I spoke to mentioned the Goethe-Institut and insisted that I reach out to them.

My research included interviewing the filmmakers or major stakeholders listed below:

- Romeo Umulisa – Rwanda Film Festival: Festival and Art Director
- Marcel Mutsindashyaka – Umbrella Cinema Promoters: Founder
- John Kwezi – Almond Tree Films Rwanda: Manager
- Edouard Bamporiki – Almond Tree Films Member, Actor, Director, Writer
- Yves Montand Niyongobo – Almond Tree Films Member, Actor, Writer, Director, Producer
- Ishmael Ntihakabose – Cineduc Rwanda: Founder, Writer, Director, Producer
- Jimmy Victor Uwizeye – Hard Touch Creation: Production Manager; Independent Filmmaker
- Dr. Peter Stepan – Goethe-Institut Kigali: Director

- Allan Karakire – Independent Documentary Filmmaker
- Jerome Mugabo – TV10/Radio10 Rwanda, Actor, Independent Filmmaker
- Joel Karakezi – Writer, Director, Producer

II.6. Ethical Considerations

This project did not run into many ethical problems or even ethical grey areas, but there were some issues that I had to be sensitive about, mostly because of the parts of my research that concerned Rwanda's freedom of speech limits. I assured all of my interview subjects that I could ensure them confidentially if they wanted it, but none of my interview subjects felt it was necessary. Originally I worried that the filmmakers wouldn't want to be quoted if they were speaking critically of the government or about any issues they had run into, but the filmmakers felt comfortable speaking candidly about their experiences. I also think that my project was a source of free press for some of the filmmakers, so that may have been a consideration in their minds, although I promised them nothing in return for allowing me to interview them.

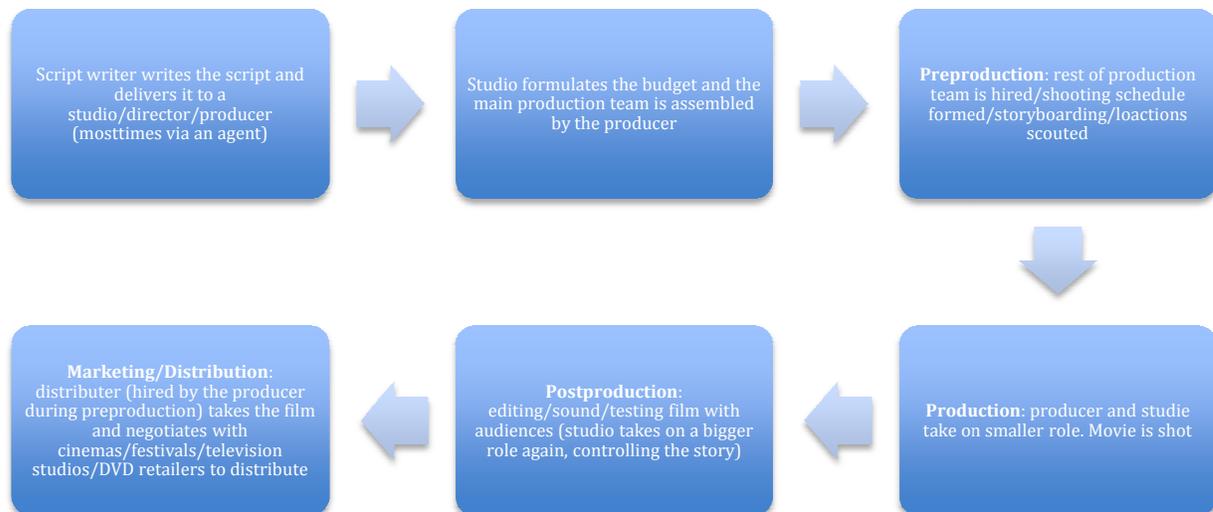
There were no other ethical considerations or problems that I ran into. I made sure that all of my interview subjects were fully aware of what my research was before each interview, I asked them if it was acceptable for me to use their name in my presentation and I made sure they understood that they didn't have to answer anything that they didn't want to answer. I gave them a chance to ask me any questions they had before the interview. After each interview, I would ask if there was anything I didn't give them a chance to talk about that they wanted to say, and I also allowed another opportunity for them to ask me anything. Many of the filmmakers took these opportunities to get a greater understanding of my background and did not ask me about my research, but I still think that they helped me to avoid any unexpected ethical problems.

Chapter III. Presentation, Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

III.1. General Overview of Rwandan Film Community

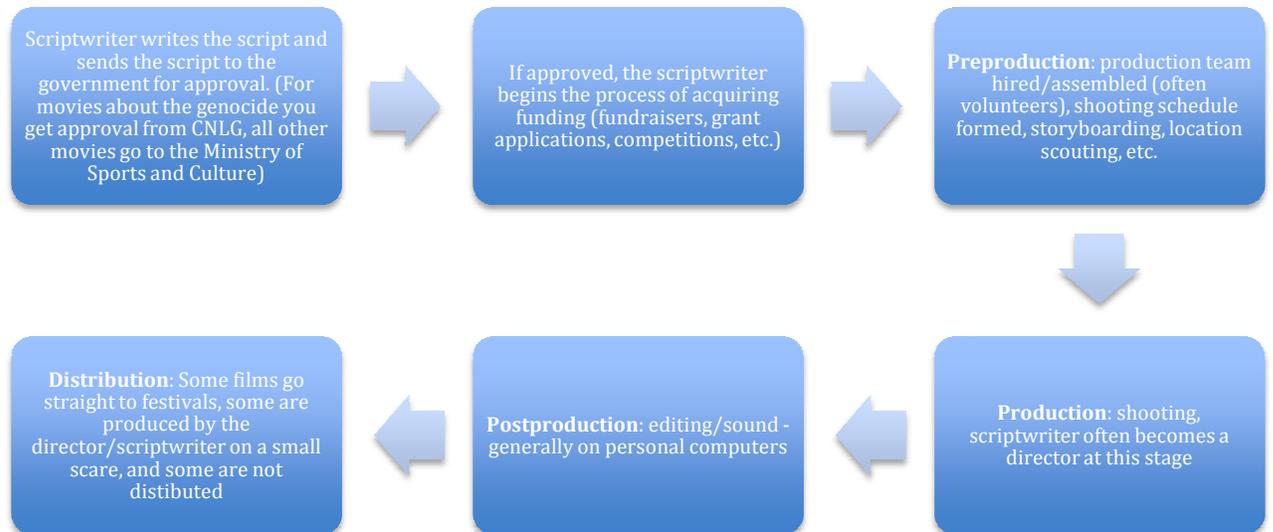
The filmmaking industry, while still small, has begun to develop a structure. This structure does not match what other countries with more developed film industries. Films made in more developed film industries tend to loosely follow the procedure outline in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Filmmaking Process in Typical Developed Film Industries



However, in the Rwandan filmmaking industry, the filmmaking process is very different, mostly because the community itself is so small that the director often happens to play the role of producer, writer, agent, editor and distributor. In Rwanda, the process of making a film tends to look more like what is shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Filmmaking Process in Rwandan Film Industry

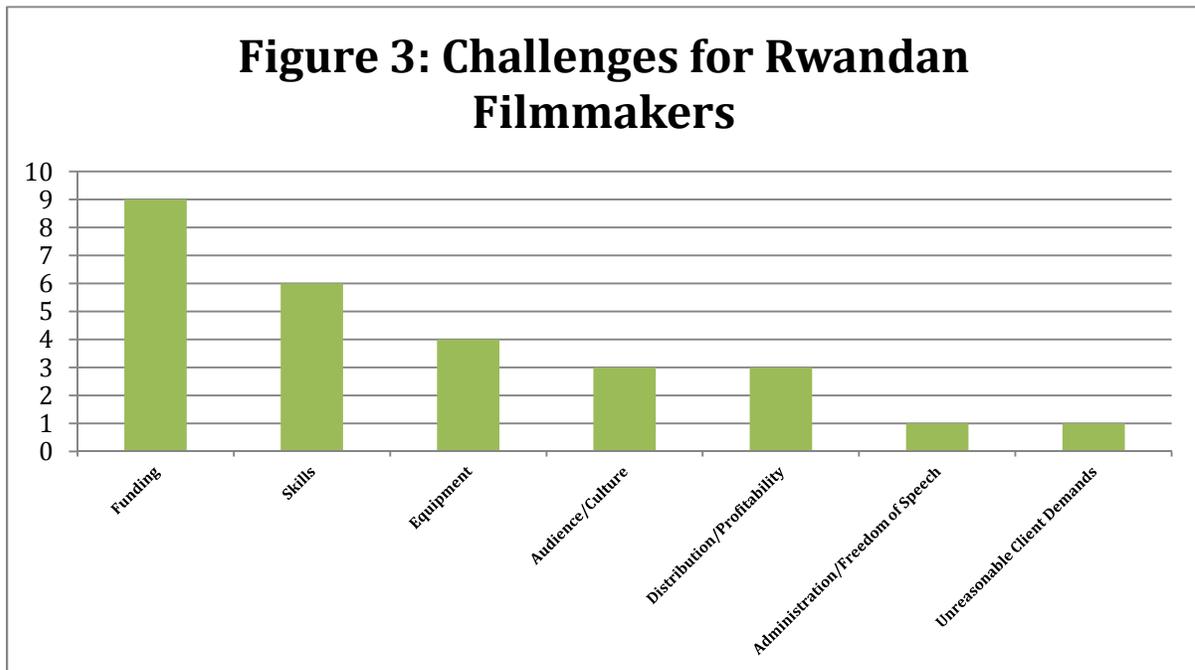


This process is, of course, not always the way that movies are made in Rwanda, but it covers many of the main differences between the two film industries

III.2. Challenges facing Rwandan Filmmakers

Data

Each filmmaker interviewed was asked about the biggest challenges facing them during the filmmaking process. Figure 3 illustrates the responses to that question.



When asked to explain those challenges, how they overcame them and how these challenges relate to the Rwandan filmmaking community in general, respondents had a range of answers

- Romeo Umulisi
 - *Funding*: Many filmmakers get funding from NGOs and other similar organizations, but that funding from these sources tends to control the story, generally making it more educational. In the future there will likely be more entertainment films made as other funding sources arise. Some filmmakers are starting to use product placement and other tricks to try and raise money.
 - *Skills*: It used to be a bigger problem in the past. Today, it is possible to see the results of some of the trainings. As the film industry becomes more international, the competition will force Rwandans to develop more skills.
 - *Audience/Culture*: “Film is not yet a culture here”. Rwandans don’t understand film. Also, hosting the Rwanda Film Festival is difficult because audiences don’t tell you what they like and what they don’t like. “It’s the hardest audience you can ever imagine”. One way to get people to

understand film is to incorporate elements that people recognize (ex: Rwandans respond well to music in their commercials, incorporating music with film is a way to engage people).

- *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: There is a “moral duty” that is more restrictive than any laws. It’s just too raw still, people need to talk about the genocide in a certain way right now, and that way does not conflict with how the government allows people to talk about it. There are also more and more movies being made here that do not talk about the genocide, so many issues of freedom of speech are avoided that way.

- Marcel Mutsindashyaka

- *Audience/Culture*: People sometimes want his organization to pay for them to be in movies or agree to be interviewed, because they don’t understand how filmmaking works on a basic level. Rwandans are also not very receptive to be in movies or watch Rwandan movies.
- *Distribution/Profitability*: Shorter movies that can be put online are far easier for Rwandans to watch. Films need to be short because people have a short attention span and their Internet speed won’t allow them to stream an hour long movie without having to pause it.
- *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: You don’t make a movie that would lead to people being separated; he has never personally run into any problems with freedom of speech.

- John Kwezi

- *Funding*: Educational movies are much easier to get funded, while cultural or entertainment movies are harder to make.
- *Skills*: Outsiders need to come in and train Rwandans, and his organization encourages people who have been trained to train others.
- *Audience/Culture*: Combats the fact that film is not part of Rwanda’s culture by integrating parts of traditional culture into the movies he makes (ex: showing traditional dancing). Also, convincing businesses and individuals to invest in filmmaking will play a role in getting Rwandans to understand film more.

- *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: Agrees with his government and the story they use to talk about the genocide. Doesn't want to turn back to the type of divisionism that caused the genocide, so he wouldn't want to make a movie about that. Avoids problems with freedom of speech.
- Edouard Bamporiki
 - *Funding*: He generally funds his movies with his own money, or he gets funding from individuals or organizations in the U.S. Filmmakers are "beggars", usually settling for lower quality equipment, cast and crew because they can't afford otherwise
 - *Skills*: Believes that the key to quality filmmaking in Rwanda is the development of quality organizations like Almond Tree, RCC and Kwetu because it would create friendly competition.
 - *Equipment*: Good equipment is very expensive, and since it's hard to get funding in the first place filmmakers settle for low-quality materials.
 - *Audience/Culture*: The first movies that Rwandans watched were religious films, pornography, Jackie Chan action movies or movies about war. After the genocide, films were about the genocide. That background makes people think about films in a specific way and creates a sense of distrust. The culture is slowly accepting filmmaking though, by making the camera a part of everyday life (ex: filming weddings, other ceremonies)
- Yves Montand Niyongobo
 - *Funding*: The government will not fund homegrown Rwandan movies, but is likely to help fund a foreign filmmaker's project because it is a way to market the country. The government will pay for a film if it lines up with what they are doing (ex: if the government is running a campaign about gender-based violence, they will fund a movie against gender-based violence). He funds his movies by winning grants from outside the country.
 - *Distribution/Profitability*: Distribution is the biggest problem, but he thinks that it is tied to the culture. There are lots of African filmmakers but no African cinema. He meets distributors at festivals and they agree to

distribute it, but that is unusual and lucky. There is no mechanism that allows filmmaking to be sustainable in Rwanda. Also, Rwandans don't have televisions in their homes, so that makes it hard to distribute effectively. The RFF is the only way that movies are being screened in Rwanda that targets normal Rwandans; everything else is screened for westerners or rich Rwandans.

- *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: He has had some issues with the government because they didn't understand his movie, thought that he was being revisionist. The government just doesn't understand filmmaking and the role it could play, they are suspicious of it.
- Ishmael Ntihabose
 - *Audience/Culture*: His friends and family assumed that he wanted to be an actor when he told them that he wanted to be a filmmaker. Rwandans don't understand filmmaking on a basic level.
 - *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: The upper levels of the government are helpful with getting permission to shoot, but the local governments are harder to deal with. When filmmakers try to negotiate at the district level the government officials can slow down the process. There needs to be a film commissioner or some kind of organization that makes rules about filmmaking in Rwanda. In terms of freedom of speech: "Everything is open". He's never been prevented from making a movie before. The government would only stop production for a movie that is very controversial, such as pornography.
- Jimmy Victor Uwizeye
 - *Funding*: The government gives money to foreigners to make films in Rwanda, not to actual Rwandans. They gave money for *Africa United*, which Eric Kabera was involved in, but that's the only exception and there were a lot of foreigners who worked on that movie as well.
 - *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: The government wants to know how much money filmmakers make so that they can tax them, but they don't really do anything to help. They have a responsibility to help more, but

they don't. However, the government doesn't get in the way or prevent people from making movies almost ever. No one wants to make the types of movie that would get him or her in trouble with the government anyway.

- Dr. Peter Stepan

- *Funding*: No one has the money to make films here, but more successful filmmakers who have the money tend to make fiction films.
- *Audience/Culture*: The culture is starting to accept filmmaking, evidenced by the number of people who show up to their workshops and screenings. Rwandans also don't understand films, so because it's not part of their culture they don't like complex films with complicated editing. As time goes on and film becomes part of the culture Rwandans' taste in movies will become more complex.
- *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: The government's restrictions on freedom are definitely an issue for filmmakers. The issue of ethnicity is huge, and he talks to filmmakers all the time who run into issues. In terms of shooting approval, it's much easier for Rwandan filmmakers to get approval when they go through the Goethe-Institut. Rwandans, including the government, do not respect artists. There is no space for art, and artists are instead told to go to hotels to show their work.

- Allan Karakire

- *Audience/Culture*: Rwandans do watch films, but they normally don't watch Rwandan films. Instead, almost every neighborhood, especially lower income neighborhoods, there are screenings of American movies badly dubbed over in Kinyarwanda.
- *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: The government does censor people, but there is a fair amount of self-censorship. People in the media don't really want to get political because of the role the media played coming up to the genocide. Also, the government is doing a lot of very good things, so it looks petty to be the person criticizing one of the few things that government is doing wrong.

- *Unreasonable Client Demand*: This challenge is in terms of funding and story. When he did work for the government they wanted him to make a very positive movie and he had to struggle with them to get them to agree to make a more balanced story. Clients also try to get too much out a tiny budget: “They want a miracle for pennies”. This challenge only applies to filmmakers who are taking contract work, not independent filmmakers.
- Jerome Mugabo
 - *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: He wants to make more political movies, but many of them can’t get made in Rwanda, or at least can’t get made in Rwanda right now. There are lots of stories in the politics of this country, but those stories aren’t being made. He’s also heard of filmmakers being imprisoned for shooting a movie for three to four days, but he has never run into any problems personally. The government also has had the idea of filmmaking tainted by *Hotel Rwanda*. It was so incorrect that the government is touchy about filmmaking in Rwanda, and they don’t trust it.
- Joel Karakezi
 - *Funding*: There are many grants out there for international filmmakers, but many of them have requirements such as having a European producer.
 - *Equipment*: It was challenging even getting in touch with people he was partnering with overseas. He had to be creative about how to ensure that he stayed online and in contact with people.
 - *Audience/Culture*: Rwandans have a better understanding of fiction movies as compared to documentaries. Storytelling is definitely part of Rwandan culture, so film fits in relatively well to the existing culture. Also, film does well because people can still watch movies if they’re illiterate.
 - *Administration/Freedom of Speech*: The government needs to structure the future of Rwandan cinema by creating a commission that makes rules, helps filmmakers find funding or doles out funding itself and sets a standard for distribution.

Analysis

Funding was one of the few things that always came up when talking about challenges facing Rwandan filmmakers. Every filmmaker interviewed named funding or budgetary concerns in general. As Allan Karakire said, “Getting funding here is impossible”. Filmmakers end up settling for lower quality equipment, actors and crew members as result of the funding crunch, and the quality of the movies made suffers as a result.

Many filmmakers talked about how they reach out to foreign funding agents such as NGOs or production companies to cover the cost of making their project, but they lose control over the actual story being made. As a result, there is a flood of educational movies being made, because those are the stories that can get funded. The filmmaking industry in Rwanda is not yet known for making entertaining movies because those movies would be too expensive and have a lesser chance of getting funded.

There is another source of funding which is not available to Rwandan filmmakers: the government. The government, while offering logistical support in the form of police officers to help shoot scenes in public, does nothing for filmmakers in the form of funds. Many filmmakers see this as a lack of interest on the government’s part in promoting cinema. Dr. Peter Stepan expressed frustration about how the government pours funds into other cultural items such as Amahoro Stadium, but artists, including filmmakers, are marginalized and left without creative space. However, some of the filmmakers spoke about how the government is willing to fund foreign projects, for various reasons. Perhaps having foreign filmmakers make movies about Rwanda or just in Rwanda is a good way to market the country, or maybe the government trusts the skills of foreign filmmakers more than the skills of Rwandan filmmakers and doesn’t want to take a risk. Either way, it seems that the government’s obsession with developing foreign investment and building ties with foreign entities extends into filmmaking. This fosters some resentment among Rwandan filmmakers, who feel that their projects are just as worthy as any to receive financial aid.

One of the original aims of this research was to discover the extent of the government’s interference in filmmaking because of the country’s freedom of speech restrictions. However, that topic was much less of an issue than originally assumed. Filmmakers in

Rwanda, for the most part, aren't being prevented from telling stories that challenge the government or tell the story of the genocide in a different way than the government's pre-approved narrative. Instead, Rwandan filmmakers don't want to make those stories in the first place. For many, the story is too raw still. The truth is not that filmmakers are being prevented from telling their stories, the truth is that no filmmakers are trying to make movies that would come close to being controversial.

III.3. Future of Rwandan Filmmaking

Data

When asked about the future of Rwandan filmmaking:

- John Kwezi: "We are ready to compete with [the international filmmaking community] according to what we have"
- Edouard Bamporiki: The filmmaking community is growing in size, getting better quality equipment, more people are coming to screening and the public's reaction is getting better all the time.
- Ishmael Ntihabose: The Rwandan filmmaking community is improving, but without a concrete vision or direction. "No one even knows what's going on". There is not enough communication or unity in the filmmaking community.
- Dr. Peter Stepan: "It's the most dynamic art in this country. It's the most dynamic creative sector". Sees Rwandan filmmakers working hard and making a difference.
- Allan Karakire: In ten years, the Rwandan filmmaking community will be "safe and happy".

Analysis

The future of Rwandan filmmaking is very bright. There are lots of filmmakers right now in Rwanda who are making interesting and creative stories. More and more young men and women are getting interested in filmmaking, and there are beginning to be places that allow them to learn necessary skills from talented people. In the next five to ten years,

Rwandan filmmakers will develop a style that will be recognizably Rwandan, and the country films will be known for being of good quality.

III.4. Film's Role in Rwandan Reconciliation and Unity

Data

When asked about film's role in Rwanda's reconciliation and unity process:

- Romeo Umulisa: Movies about the genocide inherently force you to look at divisions at every step of the way. With documentaries, filmmakers are going to ask people who were perpetrators a certain set of questions and survivors another set. That inherently divides people. With fiction, casting becomes an issue. There is an inherent divide when you decide that someone looks more like a survivor and someone else looks more like a member of the Interahamwe. Movies that are entertainment and move away from the topic of the genocide probably do more to encourage unity and reconciliation.
- Marcel Mutsindashyaka: Movies about life after the genocide do the most to promote unity and reconciliation. The best films are the ones that look at the entire story and talk about where Rwanda has come from and what was or is being done to rebuild.
- Edouard Bamporiki: A good way to promote reconciliation is to make movies where reconciliation occurs, but also write characters that the audience can connect to and relate to. When they watch that character reconcile with someone it can allow them to think about solving their problem in the same way. There are no movies being made right now in Rwanda that don't have something to do with the genocide. Even the act of making a movie can be part of the reconciliation and unity process, although sometimes 'acting out' genocide can be traumatizing.
- Yves Montand Niyongobo: Movies about the genocide keep the memory alive, which is good, but there are some movies that leave you feeling angry at the perpetrators, and that is a kind of divisionism. Instead, movies should promote Rwandan values of unity and solidarity if they want to contribute to the unity and reconciliation process.

- Ishmael Ntihakase: Not all the films or workshops out there are helping with th unity and reconciliation efforts. The best movies are “transitional films”, that show Rwanda’s journey from dark past to bright future.
- Jimmy Victor Uwizeye: The ideal movie needs to give both sides a voice and focus on post-genocide Rwanda. There needs to be reconciliation shown on the screen in order to “clear up dark thoughts”.
- Allan Karakire: The idea movie would promote unity and reconciliation by showing social situations in Rwanda today, not just focus on the genocide.
- Jerome Mugabo: Documentaries are really helpful in the reconciliation and unity process because they show the truth. People are still very traumautized so acting out genocide can be too much for people. In the next couple of year, there might be more fiction films about the genocide because people may have enough distance at that point.

Analysis

Rwandans are moving away from films about the genocide, but films definitely are playing a role in the country’s reconciliation and unity efforts. Most of the respondents spoke about how movies that are aiming to promote reconciliation and unity need to show the entire story. A film that is just about the story of the genocide is not enough. There needs to be some kind of meaning taken from the story of the genocide, not just blind violence and hatred.

However, there is another way to look at film’s relationship with unity and reconciliation. Even if a movie is not about the genocide specifically, or the production was not intended to promote unity or reconciliation, the act of getting a production team assembled and making a movie with no thought put toward the ethnicities of any of your peers is a form of unity and reconciliation. When asked about that aspect of reconciliation, many respondents made a point of saying that there is unity that goes along with making a movie, it is not universal to filmmaking. Just living life in Rwanda achieves the same kind of unity and reconciliation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Rwandan filmmakers face many challenges, some of which are very specific to the Rwandan context, but most of which are very universal. Because the industry itself is so new there is no existing structure to support their work, and the government is more interested in supporting foreign filmmakers than the up-and-coming homegrown talent. As a result, Rwandan filmmakers have had to take matters into their own hands, creating their own structure and their own rules. The government has yet to catch up to them.

Film has played a role in Rwanda's reconciliation and unity efforts, but it could play a bigger role in the future. Film has the power to connect audiences to characters and stories that may help them to reflect on their own experiences. However, not every movie made in Rwanda helps in the unity and reconciliation effort. Movies should encourage positive Rwandan values and try to derive meaning from the genocide, not just force people to relive whatever horror they witnessed.

After conducting this research, three recommendations arise:

- The government should create a film commission to support filmmakers and create a formal structure. However, that structure should be close to the structure that filmmakers have already begun to build in Rwanda.
- Filmmakers in Rwanda should begin demanding aid from their government with their work, as well as demand loosened restrictions in terms of subject matter. While films about the genocide should still be put under some scrutiny, because the country needs to be very careful about controlling the genocide narrative, other stories about modern day Rwanda are not being told because the government has a chokehold over what is deemed to be 'inappropriate'.
- Filmmakers should continue to grapple with the story of the genocide, but try to ensure that their stories are actually helping the country's reconciliation and unity efforts, not just rehashing the same story and possibly traumatizing their Rwandan audience.

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