

Peacemaking in the world of film

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Why is peacemaking such an apparent rarity in the world of film? From the first days of cinema, filmmakers have delighted in offering viewers moving images of conflict and violence. The torrential cascade of cinematic violence is hard to avoid: from boxing fights to violent train robberies, from fencing duels to dramatic executions, from shoot-outs to exploding helicopters. Whether creating cinematic comedies or tragedies, fantasies or histories, filmmakers have found violence an irresistible topic for their craft.

Violence is found in almost every film genre and is put to use in many different ways. Its ubiquity partly explains why there is so much research in the area of violence and film, investigating particularly whether watching violent movies makes viewers more aggressive. Questions about the effects of violent film often dominate research agendas, debates and discussions. Far rarer is consideration of how films represent, challenge and celebrate peacemaking. Given the number of recent and ongoing actual conflicts, as well as blatant, hidden and structural violence, the topic of cinematic peacemaking merits careful consideration.

In this article, my aim is to investigate different aspects of peacemaking in the world of film, through a series of case-studies. I have already highlighted one important question: Why is peacemaking so rarely explicitly explored in film? A range of other related questions are also pertinent to this subject. When peacemaking is represented, how is it portrayed? How is the move from conflict to reconciliation depicted in different cultural contexts? To what extent can violence or conflict in films help to promote peace?

In other words, can showing violence be used to promote peace, or is the use of violence always counter-productive, celebrating the very phenomenon that filmmakers intend to critique? How and why do some filmmakers express the cry for peace? How do audiences interact with films which portray a move from conflict to reconciliation? How far do cinematic portrayals of peacemaking differ from traditional theological or religious understandings of how reconciliation can be achieved?

This cluster of questions represents the tip of a research iceberg, still largely unfathomed. In order to explore some of these questions I analyse three feature films and three documentaries. We turn first to one of the most famous anti-war films of all time.

All Quiet on the Western Front (1930)

Based on the best-selling 1929 story by Erich Maria Remarque *All Quiet on the Western Front* tells the story of a young German schoolboy, called Paul Bäumer, and his friends who are inspired by their schoolmaster to save the Fatherland by joining the Kaiser's army. The muddy reality of the trenches soon dispels his romantic illusions. In one particularly memorable encounter in no-man's land, Paul (played by Lewis Ayres) stabs a French soldier to death. Trapped in the same small shell-hole, as Paul watches him die he tries to alleviate his enemy's suffering by moistening his parched lips with water. Discovering a pocket photograph of the wife and child of the man he has just slain further traumatises Paul.

Directed by Lewis Milestone, the 'talkie' version was a far from 'quiet' account of life at the front. Produced only three years after *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first movie with synchronous music, dialogue and sound effects, *All Quiet on the Western Front's* portrayal of life in the trenches impressed many reviewers: 'When shells demolish these underground quarters, the shrieks of fear, coupled with the rat-tat-tat of machine guns, the bang-ziz of the trench mortars and the whining of shells, it tells the story of the terrors of fighting better than anything so far has done in animated photography coupled with the microphone.'¹

As the only survivor from his group, Paul returns home to find the same schoolmaster exhorting a new set of pupils to join up. Unable to convince them of the madness of enlisting, he returns to the Front to train new soldiers. The last moments of the film show Paul putting his head over the trench to catch a butterfly, only to be shot by a sniper. Like many other anti-war films, and the original novel, *All Quiet on the Western Front* promotes peace through showing the seeming futility and tragic realities of war.

This was a common rhetorical pattern found in other popular anti-war films produced at this time, especially the British *Journey's End* (1930), the German *Westfront 1918* (1930) and the French *Wooden Crosses* (1931). While *All Quiet on the Western Front* was initially banned in some countries, it received a powerful endorsement from a *Variety* critic: 'The League of Nations could make no better investment than to buy up the master print, reproduce it in every language, to be shown in every nation every year until the word war is taken out of dictionaries'.

Belief in the power of film to promote peace rests on a similar assumption as the belief that film has the power to promote violence. The contested conviction that cinema can contribute to changes in behaviour, even encouraging more peaceful forms of action, is not only found in interpretations of anti-war films, but also in biopics and dramas.

Gandhi (1982)

Gandhi (directed by Richard Attenborough) invites the viewer into a cinematic world very different from All Quiet on the Western Front. Through dramatic scenes it offers a sharp contrast between the violence of the police and the non-violence (ahimsa) of Gandhi, both in Durban and later in India. Some even claim that Gandhi, which was frequently shown, had a considerable impact on audiences in Lithuania prior to the peaceful 1991 revolution.²

Part of the power of film is its ability to show audiences what happened or might have happened, turning abstract ideas such as Satyagraha (the force of truth to resist tyranny non-violently) into concrete images, and turning words into actions that can be imitated. Even if it lacks immediate human presence, film can show people trying to build lasting peace through non-violent resistance.

In Gandhi this is enacted through both words and actions. First, words, consider the scene set at the Imperial Theatre in Johannesburg, where Gandhi (played by Ben Kingsley) attempts to persuade his listeners, angry at new identity pass legislation, to embrace the way of non-violence:

'I am asking you to fight, to fight against their anger, not to provoke it. We will not strike a blow, but we will receive them. And through our pain we will make them see their injustice, and it will hurt as all fighting hurts. But we cannot lose. We cannot. They may torture my body, break my bones, even kill me. Then, they will have my dead body, not my obedience!'

While Gandhi did not make such a stirring speech at this theatre, it does reflect his actual desire to bring a just peace through non-violent resistance.

Second, actions. In an even more memorable scene Attenborough depicts Gandhi defying the instructions of the South African police and putting identity pass after pass into a fire. The leader of the police is enraged, battering Gandhi's arms and head with his baton. Even though Gandhi collapses, crumpled and bloodied on the dusty ground, with one shaking hand he still manages to drop the last pass into the burning grate. In the film, this brutal beating is witnessed by a Western journalist and makes the headlines; though in reality Gandhi was never beaten for burning passes. Irrespective of their historical veracity, these two scenes demonstrate the complexity of portraying a protagonist with a clear aversion to using violence and with a vision for peaceful practices.

It is almost impossible to show an individual standing up against the injustices of a segregated South Africa or the carnage of the First World War without depicting some of the violence which they are trying to challenge. The danger here, recognized by many filmmakers, is that in the desire to interrogate such violence, filmmakers can unintentionally end up celebrating conflict through showing violent forms of action.

Shooting Dogs (2005)

What happens when peacemaking between opposing groups fails and when those responsible for keeping the peace are powerless? These are some of the questions which recent films about the 1994 Rwandan genocide tackle. The inability of the peace-keepers to actually keep the peace and prevent thousands of people losing their lives is reflected in films such as *Shooting Dogs* (Michael Caton-Jones, 2005), *Sometimes in April* (Raoul Peck, 2005), *Hotel Rwanda* (Terry George, 2004), and *100 Days* (Nick Hughes, 2000).

Shooting Dogs is based upon the true story of a large group of Tutsis who sought refuge in a Kigali secondary school (Ecole Technique Officielle), which was briefly protected by UN peace-keeping troops. Once the Belgian soldiers withdrew, leaving the group defenceless, nearly all of the 2500 men, women and children were massacred by the waiting militia or interahamwe.

In contrast to other films about the Rwandan genocide, *Shooting Dogs* makes one of the central characters a white priest, played by John Hurt. The result is that many of the theological questions which are latent in other films about the Rwandan genocide are brought into the foreground. So too are questions about whether non-violence is an effective form of peacemaking in the face of unconstrained violence.

For instance, in one scene Father Christopher is stopped and confronted at a road-block by a drunk and enraged former pupil. Instead of fighting or running away, he embodies a peaceful response by affirming: 'When I look into your eyes, the only feeling I have is love.' Unlike in *Hotel Rwanda* where the protagonist Paul Rusesabagina (played by Don Cheadle) acts like a Rwandan Oscar Schindler, providing a safe haven for endangered Rwandans, Father Christopher's actions operate at several different levels.

Peacemaking for this priest is partly about being present with those who suffer and performing the liturgies of the church, along with welcoming hundreds of strangers into his school, trying to organise their protection, cajoling the UN peacekeepers to help and then, when all else fails, losing his own life as he attempts to help several children to escape. Such scenes provoke other questions about how peacefulness can be expressed and what kinds of love and peace can be embodied in a place overrun by killing?

Peacemaking in documentaries

Up to this point I have suggested that several feature films not only act as valuable catalysts for provoking questions about peacemaking, but also depict and even model actions intended to bring peace in a violent world. They can function as witnesses to peacemaking. This can also be seen in documentary films, to which I now turn. My first of three examples is *War Photographer* (2001), a documentary produced by the Swiss filmmaker Christian Frei. It follows the work of James Nachtwey, a respected American photo-journalist, in a series of locations famous for their lack of peace, including Kosovo and Palestine.

Nachtwey is clear about his own life-time's mission, for him 'trauma needs a witness... We must look at it. We are required to do what we can about it. If we don't who will?' This belief has taken him to photograph victims, perpetrators and bystanders in some of the most dangerous locations in the world. A shy man of few words, Nachtwey's philosophy is best reflected through his powerful pictures: a weeping mother in Kosovo, an angry youth on the West-Bank or an impoverished family living by the railway tracks in Indonesia.

This neatly edited documentary shows how Nachtwey sees photography as the opposite to war, a process which can contribute to negotiating for peace, even a way to end war. This account of photojournalism appears over-optimistic, but it does raise the important question of whether showing the impact of violence or peacemaking practices, photographs and documentaries can contribute to making peace.

This appears to be the unstated objective of another documentary entitled *Long Night's Journey into Day* (Deborah Hoffman and Frances Reid, 1995). Unlike *War Photographer* there is no single protagonist upon whom the spotlight is focused, instead there are four stories which emerged out of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The first is about the 1993 killing of an American student during a riot in Cape Town. The second story is an account of the disappearance and murder in 1985 of two teachers and their friends by South African security forces.

Next is bombing in Durban in which three white women died in 1996. In the fourth and final story viewers are taken to Guguletu township, near Cape Town, for a detailed description of a shootout in 1986 where local police killed seven young men. Part of the power of this documentary is that it does not end with the violence and its immediate consequences; instead, it explores how different people respond to hearing the truth about the killing of their nearest and dearest. Forgiveness, reconciliation and peacemaking are shown to be complex, painful and slow processes.

This is made even clearer in our third example, a more recent British documentary, *The Imam and the Pastor* (Alan Channer, 2006) which depicts the surprising friendship between a Christian pastor and a Muslim preacher in Nigeria. Through this documentary their story of reconciliation and peacemaking has become increasingly famous. Imam Muhammad Ashafa and Pastor James Wuye were initially drawn to the fundamentalist wings of their faiths. Both men were passionate advocates of Islam, on the one hand, and of Christianity, on the other.

In both the 1980s and 1990s, tension between the Muslim and Christian communities in Nigeria regularly exploded into violent bloodshed, with hundreds being killed along with churches and mosques being burnt to the ground. As leaders of opposing militia groups, Ashafa and Wuye suffered personal losses through the fighting, in the town of Zangon Kataf in 1992 – Ashafa lost several close family members, while Wuye lost his right hand.

Relying on their personal testimonies the documentary tells their journey out of violence towards friendship and reconciliation, which has led them to work together for peace. While not ignoring their religious differences this documentary shows how their respective faiths enrich their desire to act as peacemakers.

Conclusions

In this article I have used specific examples to highlight how films from all around the world, both fictional and non-fictional, can contribute to processes of peacemaking. The camera and the eye are naturally drawn to violent action, and peacemaking practices are often hard to portray dramatically. It is not surprising, therefore, how relatively rare the depiction of peace or peacemaking is within most films.

Even though it is a comparative rarity, my hope is that through the individual films emerging out of Africa, Asia, Europe and North America it has become clear how many films do in fact celebrate different kinds of peace. Even if they cannot themselves break the cycle of violence they can at least highlight the endless waste resorting to the gun, the machete or the bomb, and they can also demonstrate the difficulties and opportunities that are available to peacemakers on every continent.

Notes

1. Mordaunt Hall, New York Times, March 15, 1930, and in *The New York Times Film Reviews: A One Volume Selection: 1913-1970*, (NYTFR), pp.106-107.

2. Wink, Walter (1992). *Engaging the Powers: Discernment and Resistance in a World of Domination* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, p.237.

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