

The Restitution of Personhood: Exposing possibilities for transformation through human rights films

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Abstract

Film is a powerful medium, one made even more powerful through recent digital innovation. A growing number of international film festivals dedicated to the promotion of human rights and dignity regularly showcase implicit opportunities for transformation in contexts and countries where injustice has occurred. This paper asks how such films may be best used to advance social justice agendas including the use as social science text. It offers two contributions towards this endeavour. The first, the restitution of personhood, provides a theorised understanding of transformative action and shows how such an analytical framework might be useful in analysing the films' transformative and instructive messages. The restitution of personhood expands the conventional understanding of restitution as a legal remedy, and instead addresses the elements of personhood (dignity, memory, equality, opportunity, means and citizenship) amongst those dishonoured by injustice; considers how actors may be located in at least five positions in relation to injustice or resistance to injustice (as architects, implementers, beneficiaries, inheritors or those dishonoured); and how action to restore personhood operates in various domains of agency at individual, civic and institutional or structural levels. The second is a critical interrogative rubric, offered as a series of questions, to evaluate the potential and pitfalls of human rights' films to provoke social justice action. The paper begins by questioning the intended audience and desired effect of human rights films. It describes and applies the restitution of personhood analytical framework and the proposed critical interrogative framework to three films as case studies. 'Ezra' (2007) deals with child soldiers in Sierra Leone; 'My heart of darkness' (2010) concerns reconciliation between former enemy combatants in South Africa; and 'Kamenge Northern Quarters' (2010) showcases civic action in post-genocide Burundi.

Introduction

Film is a powerful medium, one made even more powerful through recent digital innovation. A growing number of international film festivals dedicated to the promotion of human rights and dignity regularly showcase implicit opportunities for transformation in contexts and countries in which conflict and injustice has occurred. Furthermore, when it comes to social justice, a key assumption is that knowledge itself produces action to ameliorate the injustice. This paper addresses both these central issues – the use of film as a social science text in understanding and acting against injustice and offers a theorised understanding of action for transformation using the lens of restitution (Swartz and Scott, 2013).

It begins by drawing attention to the numerous annual human rights and film festivals currently operating globally and asks questions regarding its intended audience and outcome. It then offers a theoretical notion that of the restitution of personhood, as a proposed outcome for human rights films and describes the three components of the restitution of personhood. These include (1) how restoring personhood may be understood in six areas, namely, dignity, memory, equality, opportunity, means and citizenship amongst those dishonoured by injustice; (2) how actors may be located in at least five positions, namely as architects or injustice or resistance to injustice, as implementers of either, as beneficiaries, inheritors or those dishonoured by injustice or resistance to injustice; and (3) how action to restore personhood operates at individual, civic and government-led (institutional or structural) level or in various domains of agency.

It describes three recent human rights films concerning Sierra Leone, South Africa and Burundi, and dealing with the topics of civil war and child soldiers, racially divided war, and genocide and

its aftermath. Using these three films as case studies it analyses two issues in keeping with the paper's intention. It asks how each film may be used as a social science text and how it may lead to the restitution of personhood. It concludes by offering a framework (in the form of a series of questions) that may be used to interrogate human rights and provoke social justice action.

Human Rights Film Festivals

Swimelar (2010, p. 1069) has the following to say about the efficacy of human rights films:

images and films are today's central ways we learn about and understand international human rights...Lord of War, Blood Diamonds, Constant Gardener, and Rendition). Film is increasingly relied upon to document, explain, expose, or complicate global human rights issues

human rights films can have a direct impact on politics. For example, Lisa F. Jackson's *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo*, which was part of the 2008 HRW festival, has been successful in raising global awareness about mass rape, having been screened in over fifty countries - It inspired a UN Security Council resolution, opened a US Senate hearing, and has been screened in the British House of Commons, the International Criminal Court and the US Department of State

Human rights film draw attention to new issues, offer credibility to a story, show the universality of an issue, and trigger a response from the audience especially if the story has a human face and is not overly complicated or political

Three cases studies from South Africa, Sierra Leone and Burundi

Ezra

This film is a fictional remake of child soldiers in Sierra Leone. It tells the story of a boy kidnapped from school at the age of nine, trained to be part of a rebel group who then perpetrate acts of war and atrocities for over seven years. Eventually a Truth and Reconciliation Commission begins and a sixteen year old Ezra is brought forward by his surviving sister and a village elder to testify. Ezra is unable to tell his full story since he had been under the influence of drugs (given him by the rebel commander). The film is dramatic, poignant and highlights the complexities of actors, actions and consequences.

My heart of darkness

This film tells the story of four war veterans, from different sides, during apartheid South Africa's interventions in Namibia and Angola (1975-1992). The four men (Samuel Machado Amaru, Angolan fighting with the South Africans against Angolan FPLA; Patrick Johannes, Angolan soldier fighting against South Africa and the UNITRA group; Mario Mahonga, a member of the San group from Angola who was recruited both by South Africa and the Portuguese to fight against black Angolans; and Marius van Niekerk, white South African conscripted soldier now living in Sweden) are brought together by Van Niekerk twenty years after the war to discuss what happened to them during a war. At the heart of the film is Marius's efforts to obtain forgiveness and reconcile both with his erstwhile enemies and his family. The other three men are frank in their discussion about atrocities, emotions, forgiveness, culpability, the architects of the war and its effects. As a final act the four men go to Sammy's village and participate in a cleansing ceremony, and then rebuild Sammy's house, destroyed in the night by a storm - a fitting metaphor to what they were trying to do on their journey together back to the site of war.

Kamenge Northern Quarters

Kamenge tells the story of two main characters, Claudio Morano and Alexis Sinduhije. Claudio is a Catholic priest who runs a youth centre situated in Kamenge, Burundi on the border between Tutsi and Hutu quarters. The centre was started just prior to the civil war and continues to this day. It has an active programme ranging from sport to education and expects all participants to commit to non-violence and peace, and brings together youth who are both Tutsis and Hutus. Alexis is native Burundian journalist and aspiring politician who returns to Burundi from exile in France only to be imprisoned for attempting to expose the corruption and power-mongering in Burundian politics. The film spends more than half its time providing a contemporary history to the genocide in Burundi and the political landscape subsequent to it, showing how it has remained in a state of war since 1994.

Using a restitution lens, these three films showcase various elements of the restitution of personhood framework (Table 1).

Table 1 A summary of the elements of the restitution of personhood each film portrays				
	My heart of darkness	Kamenge Quarters	Northern	Ezra
Elements of personhood	Citizenship Memory Dignity Means Opportunity Equality	Citizenship Memory Dignity Means Opportunity Equality		Citizenship Memory Dignity Means Opportunity Equality
Positionalities of actors	Architects Implementers Inheritors Beneficiaries Dishonoured	Architects Implementers Inheritors Beneficiaries Dishonoured		Architects Implementers Inheritors Beneficiaries Dishonoured
Domains of action	Individual/interpersonal Community/civic Structural/institutional	Individual/interpersonal Community/civic Structural/institutional		Individual/interpersonal Community/civic Structural/institutional

Using human rights film as social science text and as possibilities to provoke action

Betsalel and Gibney (2008, p. 205) use three criteria upon which to evaluate a human rights film:

Illumination: did the film made us think significantly about human rights issues in a new and interesting way? ...*Truthfulness*: did the film allow for the complexity of human rights to emerge—or was the film didactic or even propagandistic? ...*Teachability*: would the film work in a human rights course or would it resonate with a general audience that wants to get a better understanding of human rights issues?

While others have offered various criteria through which to evaluate human rights films (such as Soni Tascon, 2012), Table 2 offers a framework through which a human rights documentary film may be analysed both as a vehicle for social activism and as evidence for required change.

Table 2 A framework for employing human rights films as a catalyst for social justice action	
Perspective, content and form	
1.	What is this film about? What perspective does it take?
2.	What are its strengths and weaknesses?
3.	What are the key human rights issues it raises? What does it defend? What agenda does it advance? What does it omit? What prejudices or blind spots does it contain?

4. What vision of the world does it offer? Whose point of view does it embrace?
5. Are there alternative points of view? What are the sources of alternative points of view?

Provenance of film-maker

6. What are the background and politics of its creator (writer, director, producer)? Is the filmmaker a local actor or an external, foreign actor? What difference does this make?
7. Who is given power? Who is left powerlessness?
8. How does the personal subjectivity and milieu (time of writing, political events, culture) of the author affect our understanding and interpretation of the text?

Audience and representation

9. Who is its intended audience? Local or international? Race, class, gender, geography?
10. What is its stated intention? (To provoke, persuade, inform, defend, educate?)
11. What response does it evoke in the viewer?

Theory of change and theoretical lens

12. How does the film position actors (architects, implementers, inheritors, dishonoured, beneficiaries)?
13. How does it address the elements of personhood (dignity, memory, equality, opportunity, means and citizenship)?
14. In what domains (individual, communal, structural/institutional) does it suggest action?

Authority and film as social science text

15. What academic literature supports or refutes its basic argument?
16. What weight or authority ought to be given to this film as social science text (or evidence)? How might this be similar or different to an interview?
17. What weight should be given to this film as a catalyst for activism?

Perspective, content and form

The first consideration to be given concerns the perspective content and form the film takes. What is this film about, what are its strengths and weaknesses (not necessarily technical but which may include technical kudos). Questions such as what are the key human rights issues it raises, defends, omits and what arguments are advanced? Key is the question regarding point of view: whose is it, are there alternative points of view, and what are the sources of alternative points of view?

Provenance of filmmaker

Human rights films as a catalyst for social justice activism requires more than a story to inform, educate, defend or advocate. It requires a theory of social action to be imbedded, or if not embedded, overlaid on the film in order to guarantee, or at least make action more likely. A notion such as the restitution or personhood works well as a theoretical framework through which action might be taken. Agreeably others are possible, and this paper would welcome engagement with other possible lenses through which to promote activism using human rights firms.

If the audience of an intended film is outside of the context, as it invariably is, how might the response to the film differ when viewed by those involved in the story as an integral actor? How might the filmmakers own positionality affect the film? In *My heart of darkness* how does the filmmakers own stance as an apartheid era soldier affect his point of view? In *Ezra* how might those who have been child soldiers repose to the filmmaker's foreign-ness, what has been captured and what distorted? In *Kamenge Northern Quarters* – the film revolves around the role of both external and internal agents (the Italian NGO) and Alexis Sinduhije to make its point? How do external agent, foreign filmmakers affect the effectiveness of the film as a vehicle for social activism?

Audience and representation

With regards to the problematic of intended audiences and representation, this is a more complicated endeavour. From the little data available of the demographic profiles of those who watch documentary films, especially those who attend Human Rights Films festivals – it would appear to be a classed, raced and geographically privileged audience. From what we know of social movements, especially those that operate at grassroots levels, human rights films could possibly miss the audience most ideally located from which to act. However if action occurs at multiple domains of agency – then documentary film may be best placed to influence institutional or structural change if it reaches change agents in large institution and governments. Even if clips of these documentaries were made available on mobile and internet platforms – to what extent are they likely to reach enough people in order to persuade or galvanise them to action?

Theory of change and theoretical lens

While this paper has demonstrated how the notion of the restitution of personhood is a useful theoretical lens through which to view human rights films, alternative theories of change through which film can be viewed are obviously possible. Why for example, why a better vehicle for social activism not be a social movement based on community action, or possible volunteer engagement in contexts of social injustice (sometimes also called social activism tourism when done by international volunteers). What this paper has done is offered one lens that ostensibly deepens engagement with film (and works against passive viewership or even edutainment). It also offers a framework, as a series of questions that may be used to engage audiences in human rights films.

Authority of film as social science text

Finally, this paper asks questions regarding the weight of film as scientific data versus other forms of social science data such as an interview, or focus group or survey questionnaire. While this area requires further consideration, it might be enough to evaluate the weight to be ascribed to a film through the other areas of interrogation contained in Table 2. In this way, a spurious film may be ascribed similar weighting to a poor interview or one that is deeply inscribed in a particular point of view.

Conclusion

From this discursive exercise, i.e. selecting three human rights films from recent film festivals and examining them for both their context and usefulness as a social science text, a number of tentative conclusions emerge. These concern activism outcomes of human rights films, the problematic of intended audiences and representation and finally alternative theories of change through which films can be viewed.

References

Films

- My heart of darkness – Sweden/Germany, 2010, 93 mins, directed by Staffan Julén and Marius van Niekerk)
Kamenge Northern Quarters (Italy/ Spain, 2010, 59 mins, French, Italian and Kirundi with English subtitles directed by Manu Gerosa and Salva Muñoz)
Ezra (France, 2007, 105 mins. subtitle, directed by Newton Aduaka).

Articles

- Betsalel, K., & Gibney, M. (2008). Human Rights Watch 2007 Traveling Film Festival. [Article]. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 30(1), 205-208.
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- Tascon, S. (2012). Considering Human Rights Films, Representation, and Ethics: Whose Face? [Article]. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 34(3), 864-883.

Biosketch

Sharlene Swartz (PhD) is a director in the Human and Social Development research programme of the Human Sciences Research Council and an adjunct Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Cape Town, South Africa. Her research interest lies in the area of youth marginalization, inequalities and social values, on which topics she has authored or edited six books including *Ikasi: The moral ecology of South Africa's township youth*. She is currently working on a book entitled *Doing Sorry: The Restitution of personhood in South Africa*. She is a nationally rated South African and chairs The Restitution Foundation, an NGO concerned with social justice.



The restitution of personhood: Exposing possibilities for transformation through human rights films

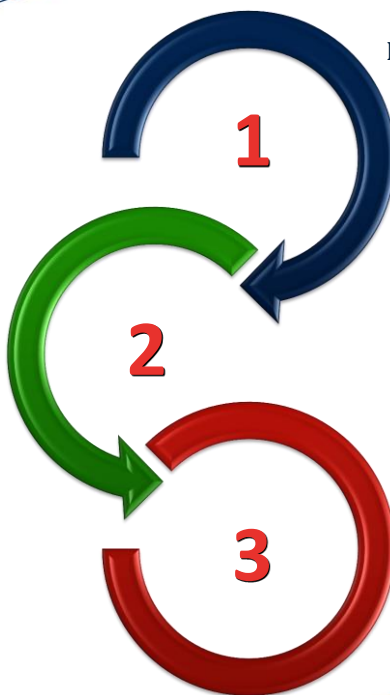
Prof. Sharlene Swartz
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13 October 2013



Social science that makes a difference



The restitution
of personhood as
an analytical
framework



Human rights films
as a vehicle for
social
transformation

**Aims of this
presentation**

Interrogative
criteria for
evaluating film
as social science
text



1

Human rights films as a vehicle for social transformation

1. “Images and films are today’s central ways we learn about and understand international human rights... *Lord of War, Blood Diamonds, Constant Gardener*... Film is increasingly relied upon to document, explain, expose, or complicate global human rights issues... they draw attention to new issues, offer credibility to a story, show the universality of an issue”.
2. “Human rights films can have a direct impact on politics. E.g. *The Greatest Silence: Rape in the Congo*, inspired a UN Security Council resolution, opened a US Senate hearing, and has been screened in the British House of commons, the International Criminal Court and the US Department of State”.
3. “Human rights film... trigger a response from the audience especially if the story has a human face and is not overly complicated or political” (Swimelar, 2010, p. 1069)

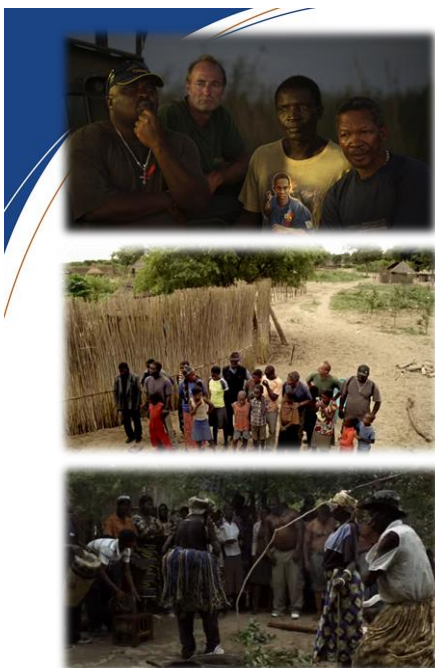


Three films



Tricontinental Human Rights Film Festival





My heart of darkness

Sweden/Germany, 2010, 93 mins, English, directed by Staffan Julén and Marius van Niekerk

- South Africa/
Angola/Mocambique
- Journeying together
- Going back
- Telling stories
- Becoming known
- Understanding
- Forgiving
- Healing
- Cleansing ceremony
- Building a house

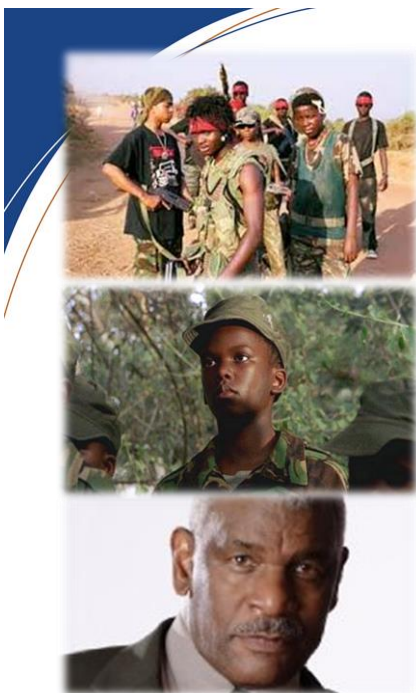


Kamenge Northern Quarters

Italy/ Spain, 2010, 59 mins. English subtitles directed by Manu Gerosa and Salva Muñoz

- Burundi
- Genocide over but violence continues
- Alexis – personal journey of individual agency
- Claudio – Catholic priest
- Mainly boys' interactions at the Centre
- Political power
- Government corruption and greed
- Crime and political violence





Ezra

France, 2007, 105 mins. subtitles, directed by Newton Aduaka

- Sierra Leone
- Blame
- Truth and Reconciliation Commission
- Memory
- Exploitation
- Family
- War
- Greed and corruption
- Mental illness
- Complexity



2

The restitution of personhood as an analytical framework

1. Social injustice occurs globally, but rife in the African context.
2. A consequence of slavery, racism, greed, colonialism, globalisation, religious and ethnic conflict...
3. Results in inequality, poverty, violence and the associated loss of humanity (or personhood)
4. Restitution – ‘paying back or making right’ as a response
5. Traditionally addressed structurally and through institutions (land, TRCs, affirmative action)
6. Requires individual and community responses
7. Focuses on the *social and interpersonal aspects of change* – everyday acts of restitution by everyday people (incl. through human rights films)



(Re)Defining restitution

FROM

“Restoring things to how they were before the
injustice was perpetrated”

TO

The act of ‘paying back’ for wrongs previously
committed

AND

The act of ‘making right’ symbolically or materially

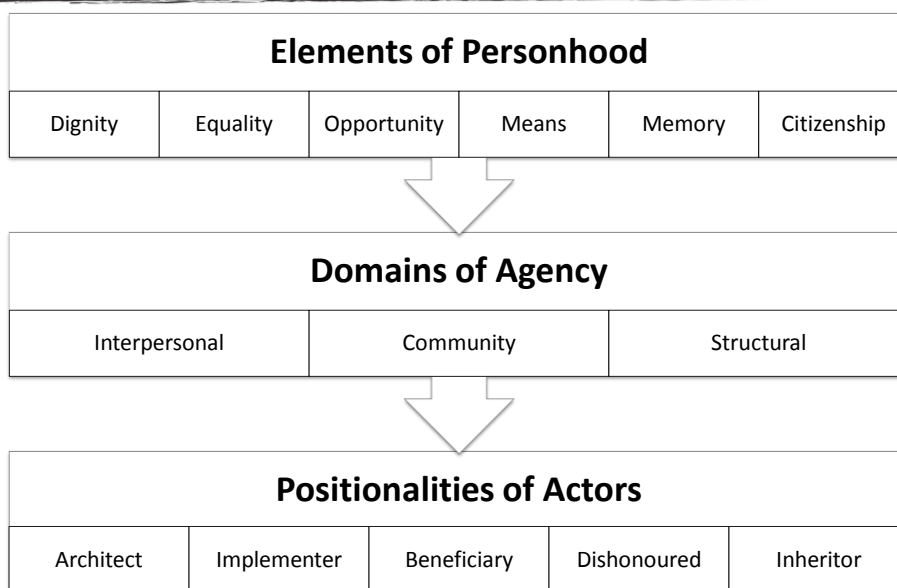
INCLUDES

Philosophical, emotional, theological, psychological,
physical and economic elements.

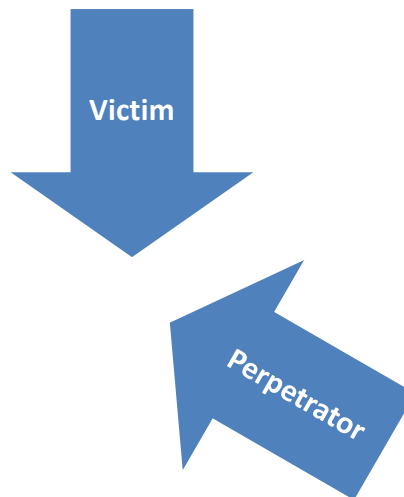
INTRODUCES

The notion of ‘personhood’

The Restitution of Personhood



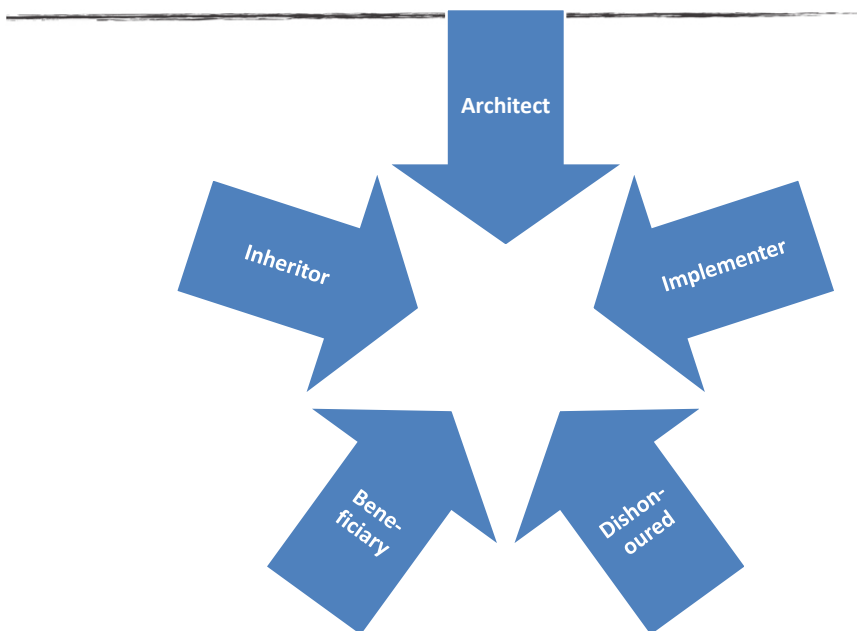
Positionalities of actors



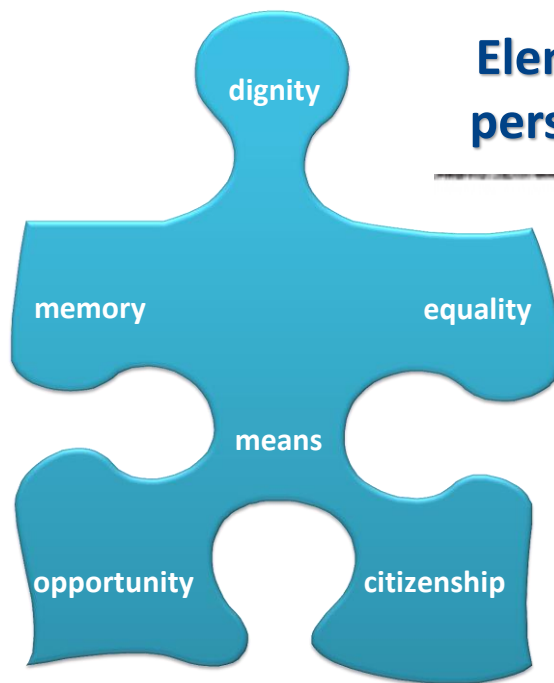
Positionalities of actors



Positionalities of actors



Elements of personhood



Domains of agency

SELECTED EXAMPLES OF RESTITUTION		
Individual	Civic	Structural
Apologies between individuals [dignity]	National centres of remembrance [memory]	Law of Historical Memory – Spain, 1997 [memory]
Voluntary limitation to children’s inheritance [means]	Physically reintegrating racially divided churches [equality, citizenship]	Broad-based black economic empowerment [opportunity, equality, means]
Reading to impoverished children[opportunity]	Teaching about Black Consciousness and black history [equality, dignity]	Housing, youth employment, health subsidies [means, dignity]
Learning indigenous languages [citizenship]	Corporate social responsibility [dignity, opportunity]	Solidarity tax at reunification - Germany, 1992 [means, opportunity]

Seeing these films through a restitutionary lens

A summary of the elements of the restitution of personhood each film portrays			
	My heart of darkness	Kamenge Northern Quarters	Ezra
Elements of personhood	Citizenship Memory Dignity Means Opportunity Equality	Citizenship Memory Dignity Means Opportunity Equality	Citizenship Memory Dignity Means Opportunity Equality
Positionalities of actors	Architects Implementers Inheritors Beneficiaries Dishonoured	Architects Implementers Inheritors Beneficiaries Dishonoured	Architects Implementers Inheritors Beneficiaries Dishonoured
Domains of action	Indiv/interpersonal Community/civic Struc/institutional	Indiv/interpersonal Community/civic Struc/institutional	Indiv/interpersonal Community/civic Struc/institutional

3

Interrogative criteria for evaluating film as social science text

Drawing on:

1. Tascon (2012)

- Ethics
- Visuality and truth
- Postcolonial conceptuality
- Producers and (re)producers

2. Betsalel and Gibney (2008)

- Illumination
- Truthfulness
- Teachability

3. My own work in interrogating the use of fictional narrative as social science text



A tentative framework for interrogating human rights films as a catalyst for social justice action

Perspective, content and form

1. What is this film about? What perspective does it take?
2. What are its strengths and weaknesses?
3. What are the key issues it raises? What does it defend, advance or omit?
4. What prejudices or blind spots does it contain? What vision of the world does it offer?
5. Whose point of view does it embrace? Are there alternative points of view? What are the sources of alternative points of view?
6. Who are those wronged, and who are portrayed as those able to make it right? Who is given power? Who is left powerlessness?

Provenance of film-maker

7. What are the background and politics of its creator (writer, director, producer, funder)? Is the filmmaker local or foreign? What difference does this make?
8. How does the personal subjectivity and milieu (time of writing, political events, culture) of the filmmaker affect our understanding and interpretation of the film?

Audience and representation

9. Who is its intended audience? Local or international? Race, class, gender, geography?
10. What is its stated intention? (To provoke, persuade, inform, defend, educate?)
11. What response does it evoke in the viewer?
















Theory of change and theoretical lens

12. How does the film position actors (architects, implementers, inheritors, dishonoured, beneficiaries)?
13. How does it address the elements of personhood (dignity, memory, equality, opportunity, means and citizenship)?
14. In what domains (individual, communal, structural/institutional) does it suggest action?

Authority and film as social science text

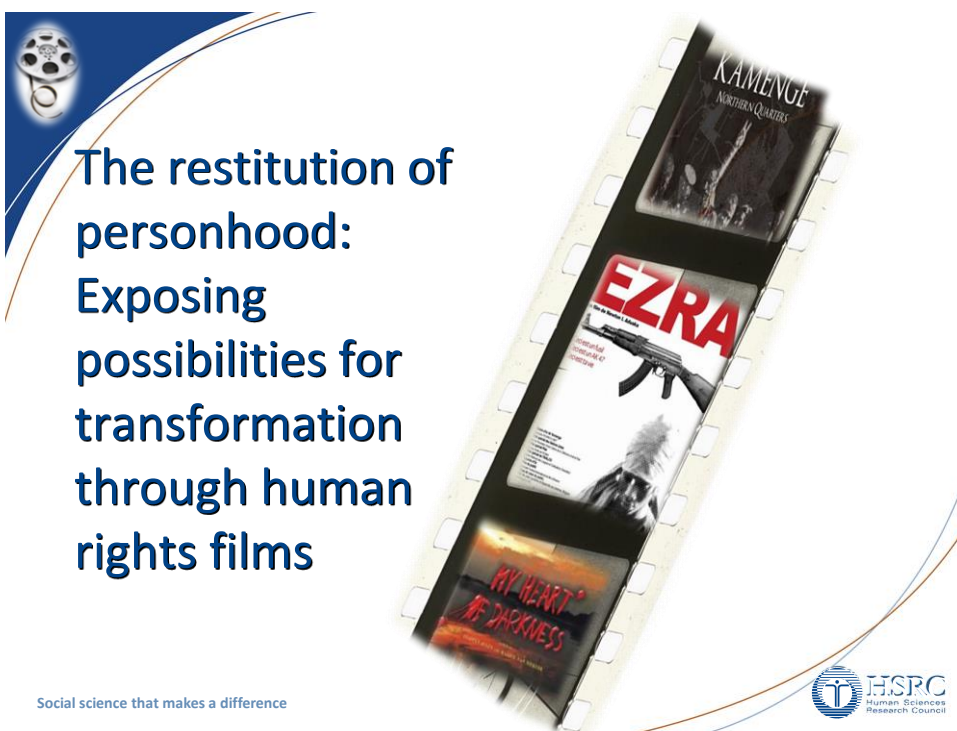
15. What academic literature supports or refutes its basic argument?
16. What weight or authority ought to be given to this film as social science text (or evidence)? How might this be similar or different to an interview?
17. What weight should be given to this film as a catalyst for activism?

How do our three films fare through this lens?

	My Heart of Darkness	Kamenge Northern Quarters	Ezra
Perspective, content and form			
Provenance of film-maker			
Audience and representation			
Theory of change and theoretical lens			
Authority and film as social science text			

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- Betsalel, K., & Gibney, M. (2008). Human Rights Watch 2007 Traveling Film Festival. *Human Rights Quarterly*, 30(1), 205-208.
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