

Film Review: *Coexist*

Coexist (2010; Director: Adam Mazo) is a 40-minute documentary film and educational curriculum for young adult audiences that examines how survivors of the 1994 Rwandan genocide manage to reestablish relations and live side by side with their former abusers. The idea is to get young people talking about the causes and outcomes of an extreme case of "othering" in a country far away from their daily experience so they can reflect more deeply on their own behavior as victims, bystanders and perpetrators of bullying and other forms of violence. A 7-minute introductory video and a helpful Dialogue and Action Guide provide historical background and ideas for structured discussions before and after the film, and suggest ways to teach skills that promote peace, compassion, and reconciliation.

The first short video serves as an excellent introduction for both students and teachers. A brief history of the causes of the conflict, its progression, and its horrific outcome is co-narrated by Professor Tim Longman, Director of African Studies at Boston University, and Rwandan journalist Sam Nshimiyimana, whose beautiful African French is translated into easy-to-read English subtitles. Footage of the actual genocide, including roadblocks manned by machete-wielding guards, dead bodies lining the roadsides, and photos of murdered babies and young children vividly depict the personal nature of the conflict while the narrators coolly explain why neighbor slaughtered neighbor, husbands murdered their wives, and pastors sold out their flock.

The conflict began in the German and Belgian colonial period, when the authorities, applying the "scientific" racism of the day, separated the supposedly inferior Hutu from the more "European-like" Tutsi, despite the similarity of the two groups in language, culture, ability, and physical appearance. Racial myths were incorporated into school lessons (we see compelling pictures of sweet, vulnerable school children absorbing these teachings), and as Tutsi were accorded economic and social privilege, resentment grew. After Independence, Hutus took power and turned the tables on their oppressors. Thousands of Tutsi were slaughtered or fled the country, and in the uneasy peace that followed, the government turned its attention to development. But when an economic crisis hit the country in the 1980s, Hutu political leaders attempted to regain their popularity through a campaign of scapegoating of the remaining Tutsi population. When an army of exiled Tutsi invaded the country, the up-close-and-personal maiming and murder of up to 700,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutus quickly followed.

This history lesson sets the stage for *Coexist*, which focuses on the aftermath of the genocide. The new, Tutsi government, intent on returning the country to normalcy as quickly as possible, encourages people to forgive each other, and, if this proves impossible, to at least tolerate their former oppressors. This film centers on five victims and three perpetrators who tell their stories in interview clips that are remarkable for their candor, clarity, and genuine feeling. We learn that some of the victims have found peace by forgiving their tormentors, while others still suffer from grief, emotional isolation, and suspicion sixteen years after the genocide. Likewise, Hutu perpetrators reveal different attitudes and explanations for their past actions. Some blame the government for its "brainwashing" and incitement of violence. Others stress the fear that drove them to protect themselves by participating in mass atrocities. In a brief, compelling clip, a former petty official now serving a life sen-

tence, accepts responsibility for goading the people in his district to massacre the outcasts. Both victims and perpetrators mention the difficulty of facing what happened, and some critique the current government's efforts to compel people to accept unity and reconciliation – an eerie echo, I thought, of the propaganda that sparked the genocide itself.

Yet the video clearly shows that despite Rwanda's flaws, the country provides a notable model for other societies dealing with the aftermath of ethnic or religious upheaval, when people must continue to live together after a spate of extreme violence. In Rwanda, reeducation camps for perpetrators have reformed 60,000 prisoners, allowing them to return to their former neighborhoods. Healing workshops prepare the community for their return, promoting testimony by both sides and modeling forgiveness and acceptance. A Youth Healing Center works with young people who have lost their parents to the tragedy, and promotes psychological health through song and dance, conversation and reflection. These young people are the link between a distant atrocity and the U.S. students watching the film. The Rwandan youth are open and forthright with the sympathetic interviewers, and skilled in their interactions with each other. They could be the students in our own classrooms; indeed, the film emphasizes that under different conditions, it could have been U.S. teachers and students who were swept up in such unfathomable events.

Overall, I found the package of videos and written materials to be a marvelous, creative effort at promoting reflection about peace and conflict. I did find the film confusing in spots; the filmmaker relies on interview clips to provide the story thread, and skips back and forth among the characters, all of whom have different backgrounds and perspectives. More narration would provide the "glue" that this complex story needs. I also wanted to know more about what went on in the healing workshops. What activities do participants engage in? What happens when hostile feelings are reawakened? How effective is the dialogue over the long term?

After field tests of the film, Learning Director for the project, Mishy Lesser, said, "We've been astonished at the response from youth, especially those who live in neighborhoods with a high incidence of violence. The discussions have been substantial and the youth are very interested in understanding how genocide comes about and what can be done to prevent the escalation of violence. They also seemed intrigued by the conversation about victims, perpetrators, bystanders, and are, thus far, willing to examine their own experiences with these roles."

COEXIST will be screened at the PJSA Annual Conference, where viewers will be able to discuss the significance of this interesting film to our work. For info: www.coexistdocumentary.org.

— Helen Fox

