

**Gunnar Olsson**

## UNTITLED

Deep down a movie is a map, picture and story merged into an imagination designed to tell me not only where I am, but whence I came and to where I should go. A powerfilled play with the cartographic primitives of fix-points, scales and projection screens, the latter including the film itself, that chemical emulsion without which no light would be caught. For someone who has spent years wondering how we find our way in the unknown, producing a commentary on Michael Caton-Jones's horror movie *Shooting Dogs* should be straight-forward. A week at the most.

How wrong I was! For in hindsight it now turns out that these pages are among the most difficult I ever penned, perhaps because I firmly believe that whoever wants to change the world is obliged to first understand it. Once that has been said, though, I conclude that the reality of the Rwanda genocide may well lie beyond comprehension, outside the limits of any reasonable mode of reason, cartographic reason included. To be precise, the intellectual tools which in the past have served me so well seem no longer up to the task. Lost in a world without bearings the maps are torn to pieces, the compass spins around, life itself a game of Russian roulette. The truth of the truth is in fact that no matter how much I would like it to be otherwise, the world is as it is. Atrocities beyond atrocities, over 800,000 innocent men, women, children and elders brutally slaughtered in a hundred days.

And yet I cannot abandon the hope that if I could somehow understand why I do not understand, then when it happens again I might be a little better prepared. And since Ludwig Wittgenstein was correct when he argued that a philosophical problem has the form "I don't know my way about", I now wonder whether by redefining the primitives of cartographical reason we might in the future be just a little less likely to sacrifice our neighbor for what (s)he is not. As always an interplay of point, line and plane, but now performed on a distinctly different level of abstraction. If so, a dream come true: a novel mode of thought-and-action capable of doing to the social sciences what genetics did to Hippocrates and quantum physics to Isaac Newton.

Thus, and as argued elsewhere (*Abysmal: A Critique of Cartographic Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), there is much to indicate that in the

emerging world of globalization the fix-points of conventional reason are evaporating into nothing at all; that in our attempts of charting the unknown, the threads which were once woven into stable coordinate nets of longitudes and latitudes are collapsing into a hopelessly tangled skein; that the screening *mappa* onto which the invisible images are projected is not the flat canvas of Renaissance perspective, but a rhizomatic napkin sometimes reminiscent of a Tintoretto curtain fluttering in the wind, sometimes a Deleuzian piece of sharply folded origami. Everything hidden in the crevices, nothing visible on the surface. High time, therefore, to acknowledge that the geometry of today's world is neither flat nor round, but a betwixed figure of vastly different complexity.

If this abstract conception of reality is correct, then it is not surprising that we sometimes get lost. Not, however, because we are all mad (although that happens too), but because our navigational tools have become seriously outdated. And in spite of (indeed *because of*) recent changes in information technology Kigali is not New York, not even Paris or Brussels. Yet there was an undeniable relation between the (non)talks conducted in the latter capitals, on the one hand, and the hacking crowd at the Ecole Technique Officielle, on the other.

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In my alternative mappings of the Rwanda genocide (a struggle influenced, but by no means determined, by repeated viewings of *Shooting Dogs*), the pronoun 'we' gradually emerged as the **fix-point** of fix-points. This quintessential expression of togetherness is of course itself the outcome of a triangulation which involves also the 'I' and the 'you', the latter sometimes elevated into the Eternal Thou of Martin Buber's God, sometimes degraded into the Insulting Thou by which some masters address their inferiors. It cannot be said more clearly: it is in the intricate play of socialization that the 'I' and the 'thou' reach out for each other, identities and differences simultaneously preserved and transcended in the process. Hegelian dialectics when it works, for it is through the rhetorical coupling of the two tautologies 'I am I' and 'you are you' that the political 'we' eventually springs forth.

And for that very reason of politics and religion, the conception of togetherness may on some occasions be ecstatically liberating, on some other mortally

repressive; since already Aristotle observed that dialectics and rhetorics are each other's twin sister, it comes as no surprise that their joint off-spring sometimes grow up to be real bastards. The examples abound, including the case of the Hutu-run propaganda machine which in April 1994 hammered home the message that even though the Tutsis may look like human beings, they are in actuality nothing but slimy cockroaches. Easy to recognize as well, for the way to disaster had been well paved by the Belgians (colonial rulers between 1918 and 1961), who saw to it that the identity cards issued to every Rwandan specified not merely the holder's name, sex and age, but ethnicity as well. All with the Vatican-blessed purpose of guaranteeing that also in the future the Tutsis would be selected for the highest positions in education, politics and business. Yet another instance of Sophoclean tragedy, yet another illustration of the poorly understood relations between the concepts of intentionality and final outcome.

Understanding this drama of misplaced concreteness is in my mind to understand the taboo-laden mechanisms through which the original 'thou' is turned into a derivative 'it'. Demolished in the process is not merely the 'you' of the victims, but the 'I' of the perpetrators, the former a swarm of insects, the latter a group of sanitary workers, final solutions foremost on their mind. Since in that universe of graspable things there are no humans, there can be no 'we', hence no togetherness, either. Instead there is the othering of the Other, a ritual in which individual differences are sacrificed on the altar of collective identity, purifying smoke rising to heaven. The reified deified as the concrete 'thou' is strangled by an abstract 'them', the 'I' crucified and resurrected as the mob of 'us'. The gates to hell wide open, for just as making inferences from form to process is bad geography, so reasoning from group membership to individual behavior is deplorable ethics, the very key to genocide. It speaks in his favor that Marx himself objected to being called a marxist.

In the movie these transfigurations are embodied in François, the Hutu driver seemingly so loyal to his superiors. When the signal comes, however, this person is no longer the same, readily betraying those who trusted him, proudly parading his bloodied machete. It is no excuse, but perhaps an explanation, that he might never have felt in control before, that it is in the company of the dancing drunkards that for the first time in life he experiences the orgiastic pleasures of togetherness. He who

was so warm and helpful, how cold and monstrous now. As he wipes off the blood on his trousers, he is no longer a slave.

Given these scenes it would be strange if I did not get lost. For how could I ever hope to map a reality which hops capriciously about, how could I possibly grasp a world whose major fix-point lies in the togetherness of the 'we', that most slippery of personal pronouns. Therefore, whenever I hear a power-holder utter that two-letter word, I ready my gun. Just in case and just in time.

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Here, as elsewhere, the unfixing of fix-points is governed by the mapmaker's **scale**, a translation function which in this particular case specifies how individual human beings are first separated from their original selves and then transformed either into responsible actors or into roaming thugs, the latter predictably unpredictable. No longer the singular relations of you and me, instead the collectivized things of us and them. It follows that the scale of the genocide map becomes one with the invisible sight-lines which in the same acts of triangulation both stabilize and destabilize the pronouns. Dialectics at the fringes of politics, anarchic ambiguity threatening at one extreme, repressive certainty at the other.

The antidote against both overreactions is courage, a social serum extracted from the notion of togetherness itself. To act courageously is consequently to act with integrity, to do what everyone knows is right even though no one has the right to expect it: defending the deviant from the normal, the normal from the deviant; openly admitting that there can be no difference without identity, no identity without difference. Not politics as usual, merely people as people. Never utilitarian deliberations around common goods or shared characteristics, always the recognition that you are you.

Not so easy, though, for regardless of whether I commit myself to an absolute or a conditional conception of obligation, I will eventually end up in predicament, the ethical counterpart of logical paradox. Damned if I do and damned if I don't; despised by my likes, butchered by the others. In both instances I am inevitably robbed of my own uniqueness, for regardless of how duty is defined, it is lodged in a spider's web of spies, sanctions and sanctities. Disaster in the making, for whereas the status quo of absolute obligation is so strong that it tears the moral fabric asunder, the flexibility of

conditional obligation is so weak that it lets anything go. Both outcomes obviously to be avoided and that explains why deontic logic normally includes an axiom to the effect that promising the forbidden is itself forbidden.

Whether François' conversion has anything to do with duty is doubtful. The same can obviously not be said about Father Christopher (the old priest with years in Africa) or Joe Connor (the young teacher who came to Rwanda because he wanted to make a difference), the former steeped in the religiosity of absolute obligation, the latter in the do-goodness of latter-day colonialism. Although both characters are full of Hollywood courage it is Christ-opher who in the end sacrifices himself, unclear whether in desperation or with the hope of saving his flock. Joe, on the other hand, wavers back and forth between the promise to the school girl Marie that he will stay and the realization that if he does, he too will be smothered as a cockroach. The difference is profound, for when the priest is shot to death, his face is calm, his arms stretched out as if he were nailed to a cross. But when the teacher is pulled onto the truck to be taken to the airport with the withdrawing platoon, then his tears blind him, his entire existence in a nonpenetrable haze.

Five years later, in the last scene of the movie, Joe is once again teaching teenagers, this time in Christopher's old school in England. During a choir rehearsal Marie turns up, telling him that in her mind he has never left her and that she has one question only: "Why did you leave us, why did thou forsake me?" Golgatha relived, hints of reconciliation when Joe responds "I was afraid to die."

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Finally the *mappa* itself, the third and arguably most fundamental primitive of mapmaking, the cartographer's version of Plato's cave wall, the painter's canvas, the white screen of the movie house. By no coincidence the Latin term *mappa* means 'napkin' or 'tablecloth', just as *charta* means 'parchment' or 'leaf of paper', in both instances an explicit reference to the plane on which the surveyor's fix-points and sight-lines are leaving their traces, the very materiality which makes a map a map. In my mind the mappa is so crucial because it is one with the taken-for-granted, that deafening echo which at the same time constitutes and captures whatever we notice and understand. When-, where- and however I ask, it is the mappa that responds.

And so peculiarly structured is the taken-for-granted that even though it is thoroughly soaked in culture, not even the closest relatives react to the same situation in exactly the same way. On the contrary, for when pushed to the limit of limits some individuals find refuge in their inner selves, some other in an anonymous collective. At the former extreme lurks suicide, invariably desperate, at the latter mass murder, to varying degrees always political. It is significant that of all the intoxicated berserks only François comes with a face.

The United Nations involvement in Rwanda provides an almost perfect illustration of these alternative dramas, both of them with the Canadian General Roméo Dallaire as lead character. It was this man who in October 1993 was appointed force commander of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Rwanda (UNAMIR), a country which as far as he knew was "somewhere in Africa". The civil war that for two years had ravaged the country had come to a pause and Dallaire's mission was to keep the two sides apart and thereby prepare the way to lasting peace. The well defined chapter-six mandate was to monitor, not to interfere. Clearcut at the beginning, drastically inadequate at the end.

Shortly after his arrival in Kigali, Dallaire was leaked information first about the location of four major weapon caches, then about a series of cabinet meetings in which the ministers had openly discussed and laid plans for the genocide which was to come. Having verified the intelligence reports he cabled New York for more troops and for permission to intervene, in his professional judgement the only way to stop the pending bloodbath. Both requests were promptly turned down.

The stage was set and on April 6 1994 President Juvénal Habyarimana was killed when his plane was shot down, unclear by whom. At any rate this was the signal which most Rwandans had been waiting for and within hours the moderate leaders were rounded up and brutally assassinated, Prime Minister Agathe Uwilingiyimana the most prominent among them. Not only she, however, but along with her the ten Belgian soldiers who General Dallaire had dispatched to protect her.

What then happened was exactly what the instigators had intended: Belgium swiftly withdrew its entire battalion, white lives too precious to risk. With the likelihood of international intervention thus minimized the militias were free to proceed; to switch on the radio; to distribute the machine guns, clubs and machetes; to set up the roadblocks; to open the beer. And four days later the Security Council was

on the verge of reducing the UNAMIR contingent to 260 men. A force commander's nightmare.

Despite all political and bureaucratic obstacles Dallaire refused to abandon his duties, his courage saving the lives of an estimated 20,000. All at a most severe price, however, for not only did the Belgian press hold him personally responsible for the death of their countrymen, but he himself was eventually diagnosed as such a severe case of post-traumatic stress disorder that he was medically released from the armed forces, the rank of Lieutenant General bestowed as consolation. Broken, disillusioned, suicidal, yet eventually able to tell his story in a most remarkable book (*Shake Hands with the Devil: The Failure of Humanity in Rwanda*. Toronto: Random House of Canada, 2003). With the retired soldier as guide the reader is there made to see with her own eyes the molested corpses, maggots creeping out of their nostrils; smell with her own nose the unbearable stench of death; hear with her own ears the buzzing sound of meat-eating flies. Everything laid out in the open, including the names of those powerful individuals (Bill Clinton, Boutros Boutros-Gali and Kofi Annan included) who through their excuses turned 800,000 black Africans into a swarm of despicable insects. A remarkable case of ontological transformation, from beginning to end the result of meticulous calculation.

To the critic of cartographic reason the reality which was thrown onto the field commander's mappa was drastically different from what was captured by the screening screens of the international establishment, the two canvases prepared through socialization processes that have very little in common; whereas the lonely soldier has been taught to save as many concrete lives as possible (always too few), the words of the wheeler-dealers are squarely aimed at the abstract issue of reelection. While the concept of absolute obligation forms the taken-for-granted of the former, conditional obligations are constitutive of the latter.

Such is the reality of reality. In the movie some of Dallaire's predicaments are personified by Captain Charles Delon, who with his platoon is standing guard at the Ecole Technique Officielle. Gathered behind the walls of the school grounds is a large crowd of Tutsis later joined by a group of Europeans, the latter soon evacuated by a French convoy. Captain Delon is facing exactly the same problems as General Dallaire, because in their role as UN peacekeepers both are operating under the same mandate of observing rather than intervening, of never shooting unless they are

themselves attacked. When Father Christopher in desperation tells him to grow up and fuck the mandate, the young officer responds that fifty years ago, in the town of Mechelen, his grandparents had saved the lives of thirty Jews, something he had always been proud of. And then, in a perverted form of self-defence, he orders his men to shoot the wild dogs who are eating the dead corpses and therefore causing a potential health problem. As a soldier, what else could he do.

Somewhat similar dilemmas are faced by Rachel, the British TV reporter, who is convinced that if she could share her pictures and interviews with the outside world, then the atrocities would be stopped. At the same time she remembers that when she had done the same type of work in Bosnia – “Great, the best job I ever did” – she was crying every day, recognizing her own mom in the raped women. Ashamed she then notices that in this land-locked land of black Africa, her eyes are dry. Yet both she and Joe fully understand the rhetorical power of images, indeed that “if you film us, no one can touch us.” Her photographer retorts that in this case the pictures are too strong for the networks to show. True enough, yet some of Dallaire’s words (p. 462) are even more gruesome than any of Caton-Jones’s images: “The Interahamwe made a habit of of killing young Tutsi children, in front of their parents, by first cutting off one arm, then the other. They would then gash the neck with a machete to bleed the child slowly to death but, while they were still alive, they would cut off the private parts and throw them at the faces of the terrified parents, who would then be murdered with slightly greater dispatch.”

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Pictures are images, images stir imaginations. Words are the stuff of language, naming the name of the game of translation, the master key to the *wunderkammer* of understanding. And as that treasure chest is opened up, it is wise always to remember firstly that imagination is defined as the uniquely human ability to make the absent present and the present absent, secondly that knowledge is an exercise in translation, a magic performance in which the trustworthy declare that something is something else and are believed when they do it. In my interpretation Rwanda provides an exceptional illustration of how these threads of epistemology and ontology are woven together into a net of categorization and naming, an intellectual tool for capturing the

world. Crooks and heroes pulled to the surface, courage and cowardice floundering on the analyst's couch.

In that context of power it must be noted that the term 'genocide' itself is a novel invention. Indeed it was first coined in 1943 by the Polish-Jewish scholar Raphael Lemkin, who in the wake of the Holocaust got it accepted by the UN General Assembly, which in December 1948 adopted a convention that made "the deliberate and systematic destruction of a racial, religious, political, or ethnic group" an international crime. Initially only two of the permanent members of the Security Council (France and the Republic of China, i.e. Taiwan) were parties to the treaty, but since 1988 it has been ratified by all five, the United States the last to follow suit. It is telling that in my own copy of *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (© Oxford University Press, 1971) the term is not included.

And since that which does not have a name in a sense does not exist, the US government went to extremes not to classify the Rwanda events as a genocide. The reason is, of course, that if that label had been used, then the international community would have been legally obliged to intervene. General Dallaire's dilemma from the other side.

A long decade later the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda at Arusha is in constant session. So far nineteen trials have been finished and twenty five persons been convicted. Twenty-five! All of them in retribution for their inciting words, in essence for playing foul in the political game of ontological transformations. None for personally tearing the unborn child from its mother's womb.

And thus it returns, the godly question as impossible to answer as not to pose: What does it mean to be human?

*Gunnar Olsson*