

# FILM REVIEW

**Violaine Baraduc and Alexandre Westphal, dir. *À Mots Couverts*.** 2015. 88 minutes. French and Kinyarwanda (with English subtitles). France. Les films de l'embellie. No price reported.

After the 1994 genocide (LC), the new Rwandan government embarked on an ambitious program of justice, unity, and reconciliation. In *À Mots Couverts* (released in English as *Shades of True*), directors Violaine Baraduc and Alexandre Westphal offer a striking alternative look into how a group of female genocide perpetrators make sense of their lives in post-genocide Rwanda. Produced in partnership with Télévision France, this documentary focuses on a group of women incarcerated in Kigali's Central Prison. *À Mots Couverts*, released in 2015, is one of few foreign films about the genocide that is available for purchase in Rwanda (at Ikerezi bookstore in Kigali's Kacyiru neighborhood). In its layered investigation into how a genocide's perpetrators understand and articulate their actions twenty years later, this documentary is a must-see.

As the film notes, there are currently 2200 women in Rwandan prisons for crimes related to the genocide. In *À Mots Couverts*, we meet eight of them. The women interviewed range in age and had various roles during the genocide—some killed people directly, others were involved with the Habyarimana government party and army, while others were charged with planning the genocide and inciting others to participate. Although female participation is a well-established and researched aspect of the genocide, this documentary is perhaps the first to delve explicitly into the question of female participation with the women themselves at the forefront, as they ask and answer questions about their lives before and during 1994.

At first glance, *À Mots Couverts* appears to be a straightforward investigation of female participation in the genocide. It is quickly clear, however, that at the heart of this exploration are questions of guilt, responsibility, stereotypes surrounding gender and violence, tenuous family dynamics, and the relationship between past and present in Rwanda after the genocide. This film also reflects the growing trend among academics of producing creative work alongside their research—Baraduc is also an anthropologist, whose dissertation is concerned with similar questions of female participation in the genocide and strategies of post-genocide reconstruction.

Throughout the film, the women are interviewed as a group as well as on their own. In interviews with one of the prisoners, Mukawamariya Immaculée, and her son Jerome, we witness the generational tensions between those who participated in the genocide and those who may have witnessed directly or have heard about their parent's actions. Throughout the film, the camera and the filmmakers (whom Immaculée refers to as "these people") become vehicles for the mother and son to send each other messages: Immaculée asks her son to consider forgiving her, Jerome implores his mother to be honest. While never in the same room together, voiceovers from one are played over footage of the other staring into the camera or at their feet, listening.

The footage in the prison is surreal—shots of the women laughing, praying, and farming outside are interspersed with detailed descriptions of horrific violence. In one scene, drawing on the prison floor in white chalk, Immaculée outlines a blueprint for a parish complex and marks where people were killed and buried as she describes her actions and movements in April 1994. *À Mots Couverts* defies the now-common trope of the redemptive post-genocide narrative, and the end result is highly unsettling and affective. Unlike other génocidaires in the public eye (in other documentaries, government events, and memorial site exhibitions), these women are not demonstrably remorseful or apologetic for their actions. They are very frank about their support for Habyarimana's government, the hatred and jealousy they felt as Hutu women towards Tutsi women before the genocide, and they comfortably slip into old official narratives when discussing the role of historical antagonism (either real or perceived) in sowing longstanding "hatred in their hearts." Yet, in stressing the planned nature of the genocide and the presence of women at the highest levels of said planning, most of the interviewees argue that even though they killed people, they should not be the ones held responsible for the genocide as they did not play the *biggest* part—they were not organizers, and they did not incite people to kill.

Among the interviewees is Valerie Bemeriki, the infamous voice of the Hutu Power radio station, RTL (Radio Télévision Libre Des Mille Collines). Her presence complicates this question of responsibility when the women begin discussing what motivated their actions during the genocide. Bemeriki pled guilty to planning the genocide, inciting violence, and complicity in several murders. Shifting from Kinyarwanda to French, she asks to speak to the filmmakers separately. In perhaps the most memorable and chilling portion of the film, Bemeriki asks the filmmakers directly: "When does defense become lawful? Someone wants to kill you...you are going to defend yourself, right?" Is Bemeriki simply explaining the rationale behind her actions of the past, or does she continue to believe she acted lawfully in the context of a civil war? In this remarkable piece of testimony, the filmmakers leave the question of past action and present thought open, unanswered, and painfully unresolved.

*À Mots Couverts* is not a story of redemption, nor is it one of forgiveness. The lack of overt filmmaker intervention and refusal to pursue a single

narrative makes the film both refreshingly honest and uncomfortable. In delving into deeper questions of perpetrator motivations and desires rather than simply their actions, we see cracks in the current Rwandan state's emphasis on reeducation, reconciliation, and national unity. *À Mots Couverts* shows women unhappy with their present circumstances but not necessarily repentant or remorseful for past actions. Filled with electrifying testimony and near-unprecedented access, this documentary is essential viewing for those interested in how we understand guilt and forgiveness in the face of extreme violence.

Alison MacAulay  
University of Toronto  
Toronto, Canada

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[alisonc.macaulay@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:alisonc.macaulay@mail.utoronto.ca)