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# The Form and Content of Human Rights Film: Teaching Larysa Kondracki's *The Whistleblower*

by Sarah Hamblin

## The Emergence of Human Rights Film

The founding of the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival in 1988 firmly established film as a principle medium for human rights advocacy and as an avenue for the broad dissemination of the values and ideals of human rights discourse. Since then, activists and educators have turned with increasing frequency to both documentary and fiction films as a means of representing and promoting the urgency of human rights issues. Today, there are innumerable resources for the distribution and study of human rights cinema; the last two decades have seen the global expansion of a flourishing film festival network specializing in human rights, from community and college festivals to major international events, and the emergence of numerous online directories and databases of human rights films, many of which are accompanied by lesson plans, discussion guides, and links to related resources.

At the same time, since the commercial and critical success of *Hotel Rwanda* (George 2004), there has been a noticeable increase in mainstream cinematic engagements with a variety of human rights issues: war and genocide [*In the Land of Blood and Honey* (Jolie 2011) and *Machine Gun Preacher* (Forster 2011)]; oppressive political regimes [*Red Dust* (Hooper 2004), *The Last King of Scotland* (MacDonald 2006), and *The Kite Runner* (Forster 2007)]; global capitalism [*The Constant Gardener* (Meirelles 2005) and *Blood Diamond* (Zwick 2006)]; and human trafficking [*The Whistleblower* (Kondracki 2010) and *Sold* (Brown 2014)]. As Sonia Tascón argues, the increasing popularity of film as a means of engaging human rights issues signals both the dominance of visual culture in contemporary communication and the potential of the cinematic medium to foster knowledge of and investment in human rights around the world ("Considering Human Rights" 865). This increasing investment in visual culture and the concomitant prevalence of human rights-oriented films has, unsurprisingly, affected human rights curriculums. Documentaries and feature films are appearing with increasing frequency on high school and college syllabi and, following in the footsteps of major human rights organizations like Amnesty International, Witness, and Human Rights Watch, campus advocacy groups hold regular film screenings as one of their primary methods of engaging the larger student body in human rights-related activism.

***Such an emphasis on accuracy and truthfulness is bound up with a belief in the transformative potential of cinema: in exposing human rights violations film has the power to instigate action for change.***

Film, then, has emerged as a mainstay of human rights education due to its unique representational capacities. Indeed, as scholars like Sharon Sliwinski have shown, visuality has always been central to the formation of human rights awareness, and campaigns have long included evocative descriptions and detailed illustrations as a means of engaging their audience. This is because, as Safia Swimelar points out, rights are most clearly comprehensible when they are seen being violated (416). Or, as Peter Lucas puts it, human rights habitually "remain 'paper rights' or one-dimensional without concrete forms of presentation. It's always representation and the tradition of narrative that brings the themes of human rights to life" (109). Lucas highlights the narrative capacities of film to animate human rights; not only can it help engage audiences by particularizing and humanizing an abstract, universal right, it can, as Elizabeth Goldberg similarly argues, provide the necessary context for audiences to develop a deep understanding of the issue and to potentially act in response to it (12).

## Truth, Accuracy, and Content

The ability of a human rights film to foster this kind of concrete knowledge is predicated on the deep-seated assumption that it is grounded in truthfulness. Indeed, prevailing definitions of human rights film put forth by activists, festival programmers, and scholars all emphasize a film's capacity to deepen its audience's understanding of human rights issues, which is fundamentally tied to the supposition that the film, whether documentary or fiction, is realistic and historically accurate. In this vein, Human Rights Watch characterizes its festival programming as films that "bear witness to human rights violations" and "brin[g] to life human rights abuses through storytelling." Similarly, Daan Bronkhurst, Maria-Eugdnia Freitas (28), Bruni Burres (330), and David Lucas (111) all reference the reciprocal notions of accuracy and awareness in their discussions of the nature of human rights film. The Human Rights Film Network perhaps offers the clearest articulation of these essential traits, defining human rights cinema as "films that reflect, informs [sic] on and provide understanding of the actual state of past and present human rights violations, or the visions and aspirations concerning ways to redress those violations."

Such an emphasis on accuracy and truthfulness is bound up with a belief in the transformative potential of cinema: in exposing human rights violations film has the power to instigate action for change. Human rights cinema is thus imbued with an evidentiary capacity that positions it as an indirect mode of witnessing. Indeed, the idea of witnessing is one of the founding logics of human rights activism, which explains the preference for documentary. While fiction films are not granted quite the same attestant power as documentaries (they are not used as legal evidence, for example), they are still held to a comparable standard of truthfulness, and their status as successful human rights films is evaluated according to their ability to raise informed awareness of an actually existing issue.

This consistent association of human rights film with accuracy and awareness has led human rights education to focus on filmic content. As Shohini Chaudhuri states, "post-screening panel discussions at human rights film festivals, for example, are dominated by the issues raised by a film, rather than its aesthetic concerns" (4). This preoccupation

with content extends into the classroom and, all too frequently, discussions of human rights films in high school and college are similarly limited to analyses of the issues raised by the narrative. Indeed, online lesson plans, like those provided by Amnesty International USA's Human Rights Education Program or the CCL Human Rights Film Awards, emphasize historical context and use films as case studies about particular atrocities or as opportunities to discuss more general human rights issues in relation to specific historical and/or geographical contexts. Within this framework, films are useful teaching aids to the extent that they help students identify certain rights and/or understand the contours of a particular historical case of human rights abuses.

*THE WHISTLEBLOWER* IMPLICATES CULTURES OF MISOGYNY IN BOTH THE US AND BOSNIA IN THE PERPETUATION OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

## The Power of Form

While the subject matter of human rights films is certainly a major component of human rights education, this singular focus overlooks the mutually constitutive relationship between form and content and fails to take account of the ways by which our understanding of a particular issue is fundamentally shaped by the stylistic and generic parameters of the film that represents it. While a focus on content may provide students with the opportunity to discuss the nature of rights or our legal and ethical obligations as individuals and nations, it elides issues of representation, assuming film to be a neutral conduit that channels the world as it is rather than an agent through which our understanding of the world is constructed, circulated, and reinforced. Recently, scholars like Tascón and Chaudhuri have drawn attention to this blind spot, arguing that the preoccupation with truth prohibits audiences from examining how the film is situated within (or perhaps against) a specific set of geopolitical power relations and cultural presuppositions. This presumption of truth thus normalizes a westernized worldview, obscuring its ideological foundations and the geopolitical structures that give human rights discourse its universality and function.

Our perceptions of the world are shaped as much by art and media as by our experiences, and many of our base assumptions are founded on the impressions we develop from literature and visual media. This is particularly the case with human rights education, where, as Swimelar demonstrates, the recent proliferation of documentaries, feature films, and festivals dedicated to human rights indicates the extent to which our understanding of and reaction to these issues is visually mediated (422). It is imperative, then, that we begin to interrogate the production of these images rather than treat them as neutral testimony. Instead, we must ask who is representing, what they are representing, and how they are doing so in order to understand how our normative perceptions are constructed. In short, as Chaudhuri calls for, we must bring the questions of film studies to bear on our discussions of human rights cinema and be open to the ways they may complicate some of our principal assumptions about human rights representation in relation to western privilege (4). In other words, to see how a film shapes rights—what they are; where, how, and by whom they are violated; who has the right to claim them and how they may be claimed; our response to their violation; our responsibility and ability to act on behalf of those whose rights have been violated; and our implication in this suffering to begin with— necessitates an engagement with both film form and film content and the ways by which the dictates of one impact our experience of the other.

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## Teaching Form and Content: *The Whistleblower*

To illustrate the importance of an engagement with the form as well as the content of human rights film, I'd like to explain my approach to teaching Larysa Kondracki's *The Whistleblower*. The film recounts the real-life experience of Kathy Bolkovac, a Nebraska police officer who applied for a six-month peacekeeping mission in Bosnia with a private military contractor in 1999. Once there, Kathy discovers that the peacekeeping forces are colluding with UN personnel and the local police to traffic Eastern European women as sex slaves. Kathy launches an investigation only to be met with bureaucratic obstacles, institutional resistance, blackmail, and threats of physical and sexual violence. Despite being fired, she succeeds in smuggling evidence out of the country and goes public, but, under the protection of diplomatic immunity, none of the peacekeepers or UN officials involved is indicted. Framing Kathy's investigation is the story of Raya, a young Ukrainian woman trafficked by her uncle. After enduring horrific physical, sexual, and emotional abuse, Raya is murdered when Kathy raids the bar where she is being held.

Kondracki's film is a popular choice among human rights educators for teaching about sex trafficking partly because the detective-thriller format and casting of high-

profile actors (Rachel Weisz, Vanessa Redgrave, David Strathairn, Benedict Cumberbatch) make the film appealing to students, but mainly because, although technically fiction, it is based closely on actual historical events. Indeed, everything that happens in the film is taken either from Kathy's own experiences or from the extensive research that Kondracki and her scriptwriter compiled in the two years they spent interviewing NGOs, human rights lawyers, and victims of sex trafficking in Europe; even some lines of dialogue are taken directly from the recordings that Bolkovac made and her interview with BBC's *HARDtalk*. By aligning its narrative so closely with historical events (Bolkovac and Madeleine Rees, then head of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in Bosnia, proofed the scripts), *The Whistleblower* meets the key human rights film criterion of accuracy in service of raising awareness, and it paints a harrowing picture of the brutality of human trafficking and the moral bankruptcy of the UN and various NGOs. However, while at the level of content the film succeeds in helping students understand the history of this particular human rights scandal, the problems of diplomatic immunity, and the human rights abuses associated with sex trafficking more generally, its generic and stylistic characteristics betray certain ideological preconceptions that impact the kind of awareness the film seeks to raise, which complicates any straightforward acceptance of the reality it presents.

## The Whistleblower Day One: Content

I currently teach at a large research institution with an incredibly diverse student body and a sizeable international population. As such, my students tend to be globally aware and already interested in human rights issues. At the same time, I typically teach *The Whistleblower* either in a "Women and Film" class or as part of an introductory course focused on representations of human rights, so the students I teach come to the film prepared to discuss it within the context of human rights. To this end, they are typically quite adept at engaging the film's content, but analyzing its form poses some challenges. In order to best explore this tension, I like to split discussion of *The Whistleblower* over two days. In preparation for our first class, which focuses on unpacking the complex international network that enables sex trafficking, I ask students to do some background reading. In order to comprehend the factual, historical basis of the film, students read excerpts from Bolkovac's memoir and an interview with the director that explains her research methods and the source material for the film's content. To help students understand the historical context and some of the issues that the film alludes to, I also assign a handout about the cultural and economic history of the Yugoslav Wars and a short reading about sex workers and the American military, as well as two fact sheets about diplomatic immunity and UN involvement in sexual abuse.

We begin our first day discussion by exploring the very concept of human rights, and I ask students to identify the rights at stake in *The Whistleblower*, as well as what makes what we've watched a question of human rights rather than criminal activity. This is a surprisingly difficult question for students to answer, as they take human rights to be self-evident and transcendental concepts rather than historically constructed legal designations. I explain to students how the rights laid out in the UN Declaration evolved over the last few hundred years in response to shifting definitions of the self, revolutions in systems of government, and changing relationships to religious authority. My aim here is to challenge their assumptions about the universality of rights as well as to establish the critical approach that will frame our discussion for the next two days.


THE MONITORING FUNCTION OF THE UN AS WELL AS THE BUREAUCRACY OF INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES ARE SIMILARLY CONNECTED TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING.

After this initial philosophical inquiry, I ask students to explain what *The Whistleblower* is trying to do as a human rights film. The course context and my students' general investment in human rights issues make this a fairly straightforward question, and based on their readings and viewing experience, they quickly state that the film is trying to raise awareness of the UN scandal and give audiences a sense of how human trafficking works, as well as the horrific experiences the women go through (Kondracki says as much in her interview). From here, I ask students to first identify the various groups involved in trafficking in order to understand the extent of this criminal network as it extends across international borders. This is also fairly straightforward as the film clearly lays out the different players and their roles, and we talk about how the film makes it relatively easy for the audience to comprehend how such an elaborate operation functions. From here, I ask my students to try to identify the economic conditions and cultural attitudes that facilitate human trafficking. This is a much more challenging question, so I ask students to look at the principle groups we've identified as being involved in trafficking— the trafficked women, the johns, the criminals who run the operation, and the corporations and institutions that ostensibly support it—and to use the film and the readings to think about how and why each becomes embroiled in it.

Generally speaking, my students are able to discuss six overlapping factors that the film presents as contributing to the existence of sex trafficking: desperate economic conditions that prompt people to take risks, to engage in criminal behavior, and to maintain the illusion of deniability that their actions aren't that bad or that

dangerous; misogynistic attitudes and accepted domestic violence that combine with ethnic, religious, and racial intolerance to further objectify and victimize women; the historical relationship between western military forces and sex workers that institutionalizes the objectification and abuse of women; the dehumanizing effects of war, wherein the ethical treatment of humans gives way to a culture of violence and self-interest; the logic of non-intervention that similarly dehumanizes those who suffer so that peacekeepers are less compelled to intervene, distancing themselves from any abuses they witness so they are less likely to feel responsibility to report corruption; and the bureaucratic structures of international law that make prosecuting international crimes almost impossible, protect peacekeepers through diplomatic immunity, restrict the rights of trafficked women by classifying them as illegal immigrants, and allow NGOs to profit from such instability.

At the end of our discussion, we return to the question that began the class, and I ask students whether they feel *The Whistleblower* succeeds in helping its audience develop an accurate and sufficiently complex understanding of human trafficking. The answer has, so far at least, always been a resounding yes; students comment on how shocked they are to learn how immunity has been used to absolve criminal behavior and that an institution like the United Nations would be complicit in such human rights abuses. At the same time, students also often remark on the way the film implicates Americans, which challenges the frequent assumption that human rights abuses are perpetuated by others elsewhere.

***I often find myself emphasizing how we are at least now aware of what actually needs to occur before meaningful change can be realized and that developing this knowledge is a necessary first step towards effective action, but I'm not convinced that this is of any comfort to these students.***

*The Whistleblower* makes it relatively easy for students to perceive the complex array of factors that combine to enable sex trafficking, and in mapping out these various forces I'm always happy that most of them move away from the "few bad apples" defense towards an awareness of the structural conditions that enable such abuses. However, there are always a number of students who are dismayed by the film's lack of resolution (either legal or moral), and they express their frustration with this emphasis on a complex system over individual culpability as they struggle to imagine how anything could ever change given the historical, cultural, legal, political, and economic scope of the problem. I frequently encounter this issue when teaching about structural oppression as students wrestle with the difference between punishment and prevention and the limits of the former in relation to meaningful social change. I often find myself emphasizing how we are at least now aware of what actually needs to occur before meaningful change can be realized and that developing this knowledge is a necessary first step towards effective action, but I'm not convinced that this is of any comfort to these students. I see helping students develop this kind of structural awareness as one of the key learning goals of my class, but I also worry that a repeated emphasis on how complex things are can push students towards apathy as they become increasingly convinced of the impossibility of change.

Rather than dwelling in the difficulty of imagining change in light of structural oppression, I try to steer the conversation back to an analysis of the film by returning us to the goals of *The Whistleblower* and reminding the class that the film is invested in teaching us about the realities of human trafficking, not developing international policy to combat it. Once we've reaffirmed this goal, I ask my students to consider the nature of the "reality" that the film produces. The class turns to their reading about the Yugoslav Wars to focus on the consequences of the NATO bombings and Clinton's doctrine of humanitarian intervention, and we discuss how these military campaigns conspired to produce the desperate economic conditions that *The Whistleblower* indicts as partly responsible for the emergence of human trafficking in the region. Here, I ask students to think about what it means that the film elides this historical context and how its absence impacts our ability to identify with Kathy as the western moral crusader. Going back to the interview with Kondracki, I also draw attention to the fact that certain details were omitted or cut down because they did not ring true to western test audiences. Kondracki states that her research uncovered much worse atrocities than the film represents, but these events could not be "decently or believably" shown in the film (West 10), their inclusion coming across to audiences as "terrible writing" (13). By highlighting these omissions and rewrites, I encourage students to think about how cinematic conventions actually come to define what we consider to be realistic. By looking at historical omissions and viewer expectations, I push my students to begin questioning the human rights assumption that film acts as an objective recorder of reality, and we focus instead on how such films operate as the very means by which our sense of reality is constructed and our normative perceptions reinforced.

## The Whistleblower Day Two: Form

Despite our discussion of the film's omissions, at the end of our first class, my students are all generally in agreement that *The Whistleblower* is a successful human rights film that presents an intricate and accurate representation of the various layers of corruption, complicity, and profiteering that permit human trafficking. My goal for our second class is to further complicate this position by examining the extent to which the film's generic and narrative structures unwittingly position the film within a colonial power dynamic. To prepare students for this discussion, I assign a few pages from Tascón's *Human Rights Film Festivals* where she discusses the humanitarian gaze and sections from Elizabeth Goldberg's *Beyond Terror* where she defines the genre of counterhistorical drama.

***I pose a series of questions that prompt students to consider how The Whistleblower operates as a counterhistorical drama and the degree to which it reproduces the colonial logic that Goldberg associates with it.***

We begin our second class by reminding ourselves of the aims of *The Whistleblower* that we began with, and I set up the focus of our discussion as exploring whether the desire to teach audiences about the UN scandal and the way that trafficking works conflicts with the desire to give voice to the experiences of trafficked women. We then turn to Goldberg, and I ask my students to summarize her definition of counterhistorical drama. Goldberg explains this genre as consisting of films that tell stories of historical violence through the narrative conventions of war films, adventure, romance, suspense, and courtroom drama. Goldberg argues that these films present "a counternarrative to an official version of history or to a perceived silence surrounding a historical event," and that they typically incorporate elements of the bildungsroman where audiences are directed to identify with a white, western protagonist working in a foreign environment whose struggle drives the narrative (29). This dynamic is problematic for Goldberg for the ways in which it positions the struggles of other people as the backdrop for the protagonist's personal growth and utilizes the violence of this struggle as "an element of adventure emplotment to heighten audience suspense for [the protagonist's] safety and well-being, rather than […] as witness to the material conditions they signify" (34). For Goldberg, the issue with counterhistorical dramas isn't their fidelity to history but the ways in which their narrative logic reaffirms the hegemony of a white, western point of view.

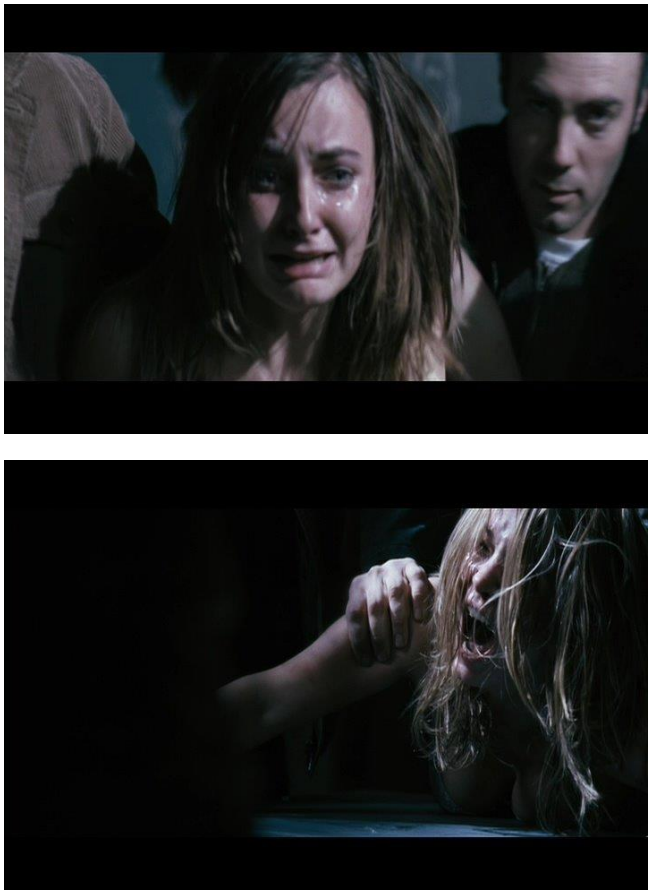
Once we've established the contours of counterhistorical drama and the problems attendant to its generic formula, I pose a series of questions that prompt students to consider how *The Whistleblower* operates as a counterhistorical drama and the degree to which it reproduces the colonial logic that Goldberg associates with it. My initial questions ask students to consider the dual storylines and how much the desire to highlight the involvement of the UN and the peacekeepers draws our narrative attention away from the experiences of the trafficked women: Is the inclusion of Raya's story enough to give voice to the victims of trafficking, or does *The Whistleblower* remain primarily about a white, western protagonist? To help explore this issue, I prompt students to think about the title of the film and its casting, as well as how the detective tropes it employs align our point of view and experience with Kathy. I also encourage students to consider Kathy's backstory and the ways in which her failed marriage and fears of being a bad mother impact her response to the abuses she witnesses: to what degree does the narrative become a bildungsroman about Kathy's journey to be a better wife and mother?

The film's conclusion is a key element of this discussion. I ask students to think about the use of Raya's story as a frame narrative and the decision to flashback at the end of the film to the night where Raya makes the decision to travel with her friend. Knowing at the end of the film that this choice, made reluctantly and against her mother's wishes, is the action that leads to her being trafficked, raped, tortured, and murdered renders this flashback to a happy time intensely tragic, but does this attempt to provoke an emotional response end up narratively assigning blame to Raya? Does it prompt us to


KATHY SEES PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE TRAFFICKED WOMEN BEING ABUSED. WHENEVER SHE MAKES A KEY DISCOVERY THE AUDIENCE SHARES A POINT OF VIEW SHOT WITH HER.

think that if she just hadn't given into her friend and had instead listened to her mother, none of this would have happened? And if so, does this narrative device undermine the structural critique that the film's content is at pains to communicate by reducing the systematic problem of trafficking to the individual consequences of one bad decision? Here, I prompt students to consider how the Hollywood preference for individual protagonists eclipses the systematic nature of human rights violations by focusing on individual rather than collective experiences and thus presenting these abuses as isolated incidents rather than structural problems. At the same time, I propose the idea that Kathy's inability to deliver justice for these women actually highlights the inability of the individual to incite change, thus highlighting the inadequacy of the Hollywood convention of an individual protagonist with whom we can identify to respond to the ethical demands of human rights advocacy. In its reliance on these conventions, does *The Whistleblower* undermine its investment in educating its audience about the

structural and systemic issues that allow human trafficking to persist?



THE TRAFFICKED WOMEN ARE FORCED TO WATCH AS RAYA IS BRUTALLY RAPED AS PUNISHMENT FOR TALKING TO KATHY. WHILE THE AUDIENCE IS SIMILARLY POSITIONED TO WITNESS THIS ACT OF VIOLENCE, THEY DO NOT SHARE A POINT OF VIEW SHOT WITH ANY OF THE CHARACTERS

I also ask students to consider the divergent conclusions to each of the three storylines. That Kathy manages to escape Bosnia to expose the scandal and start a new life with Jan contrasts significantly with Raya's murder and with the unresolved nature of the scandal. Does the traditional narrative closure assigned to Kathy's story privilege her subject position and, as Goldberg argues of counterhistorical drama, reaffirm her identity as safe and separate from the ongoing, irresolvable struggles of the trafficked women who have disappeared and whose families cannot find justice? In prioritizing Kathy's story and granting her safety and happiness back in the Netherlands, does *The Whistleblower* reiterate the importance of the western individual over the suffering of others and thus reaffirm "an identity politics that mirrors the general global distribution of safety and harm from a human rights perspective" (Goldberg 32)?

Building on these questions of narrative priority, I then ask students to analyze the generic structures that organize the film's detective and thriller elements in relation to its presentation of the violence of human trafficking. Here, I prompt students to discuss the extent to which the violence that we witness functions as testimony to the events themselves, thus giving voice to the experiences of trafficked women, and the extent to which it serves to drive Kathy's story, inspiring her ethical development and providing the dramatic backdrop that makes us fear for her safety. Does the violence that the film alludes to stand on its own or is it primarily significant for the ways in which it relates to Kathy? Here, I push students to really think carefully about how Kathy's character organizes the narrative and how Raya's storyline and the violence associated with it intersect with this primary plotline.

Finally, I ask students if they think the form and style of *The Whistleblower* affirm the humanitarian gaze. Tascón defines this gaze as a system of looking that reaffirms geopolitical power relations by naturalizing the oppositions of helper/victim, benefactor/supplicant, and watcher/watched (*Human Rights* 35). Here, I ask students to consider not only the narrative structures that we've talked about so far, but also the way that the camera is used to establish a system of looking that maps onto the power relations that Tascón identifies. To this end, we rewatch the scene in the bar where Kathy first discovers the photographs of sexual abuse and the room where the women are kept, and we talk about how the scene uses a point-of-view shot to align us with Kathy as she uncovers the evidence that prompts her investigation. My students are usually quick to point out that this scene intentionally puts us in Kathy's position so that we witness the abuse as she does and will thus stand against it as she does too. I ask students to interrogate this familiar human rights logic and to think about the power relations embedded in these structures of looking: what does it mean that we only share point-of-view shots with Kathy? How does the omniscient camerawork in the rest of the film position us in relation to knowledge? How do these systems of looking objectify certain people and structure the agency of others? For Goldberg, this narrative point of view privileges the western observer/participant, "resulting in the illusion that there is no story—no historic event—unless it is witnessed, shaped, and experienced by western agents" (32), while for Tascón the humanitarian gaze perpetuates the cultural and political superiority of the west as benefactor to the perpetually suffering other (*Human Rights* 204). I ask my class to explore how the familiar narrative and stylistic conventions exemplified by *The Whistleblower* perpetuate this privileged viewing position, and the extent to which it reaffirms our superiority as global actors and universal adjudicators.

The focus of our discussion on the second day thus moves away from a judgment about the film based on its historical accuracy to an analysis of the degree to which its presentation of that historical reality is embedded in and reaffirms colonial power relations and to what extent the implication of the west in this human rights abuse is undermined by our identification with Kathy as the white savior. Although I have my own ideas about the film and ask students pointed questions that challenge them to complicate their interpretations, the answers are not straightforward. Indeed, *The Whistleblower* is so productive to talk about in relation to human rights representation precisely because it isn't a textbook example of a

counterhistorical drama, and there are myriad ways by which it attempts to mitigate the humanitarian gaze. As such, I find that discussion of this film particularly does not come to an easy resolution; for some students, the film reinforces the hegemonic perspective of western privilege, while for others its indictment of the UN includes Kathy as one of its agents and thus undermines her privileged position. Others still argue that Kathy really does not develop in the mode of a traditional bildungsroman—she is an ethically motivated character from the start and the conclusion of the film highlights her failure rather than her growth.

***My goal in drawing attention to the ways by which human rights film may be imbricated in colonial power structures isn't to provide a moral critique of human rights cinema.***

The film makes room for all these various interpretations, and I encourage students to disagree with each other as they develop their own analyses. As much as possible, I urge them to explore the complexity of the film and to avoid reducing it to either a positive or negative value judgment. This is difficult, and my students are often eager to reject *The Whistleblower* as a failed human rights film by this point. To some extent, the structure of my lesson plan encourages students to do this as we move from a discussion of content to a critique of form, but I try hard to remind the class that the formal issues we've debated are best understood as part of the ethical dilemma inherent in the very project of speaking about the suffering of others. Indeed, the last few times I've taught this film, a number of students have wanted to dismiss the issue of form entirely, arguing that you have to have this kind of protagonist and narrative structure if you want a western audience to watch this kind of film. I try to explain how this response is actually consistent with the humanitarian gaze and push these students to look back at the Tascón reading where she explains how the ability of the audience to look away is the very mark of western privilege—we must be appealed to and appeased in order to take an interest in the suffering of others. But the fact that this is a privileged position only underscores its importance, and these students are right to claim that if the film seeks a large western audience to help get its message out in this commercial climate it will inevitably require capitulating to the Hollywood trope of the individual, white, proactive protagonist. If the choice is between a flawed representation with an audience and a more ideologically consistent presentation that no one watches, which is preferable given the aim of human rights film to prompt awareness and action? There is no easy answer to this question, so what I try to encourage instead is not an evaluative judgment of the film as a success or failure, but a deeper awareness of the values and power relations fundamentally embedded in human rights representation that, at the same time, does not diminish the need for it.

## Being Watchful

Human rights films are popular teaching tools because they directly engage us in the process of judgment at the heart of human rights. Visual images, and film in particular, mobilize this kind of judgment by giving face to juridical concepts and encouraging students to ethically respond to these situations as they see the impact of abstract concepts on human experience. But in doing so, they are not neutral, and we must examine how we are positioned in relation to these judgments and take account of the representational aspects of human rights films to see how they shape our responses and reaffirm normative perceptions. Indeed, at the level of content *The Whistleblower* appears to be everything we could want from a human rights film, but attention to form reveals how it is implicated in the global distribution of power that structures the contemporary discourse on human rights. Taking the film at face value prohibits us from seeing that this face value is itself ideologically determined within a normalized western ethical framework.

My goal in drawing attention to the ways by which human rights film may be imbricated in colonial power structures isn't to provide a moral critique of human rights cinema. The solution to the issues revealed through this mode of analysis is not to condemn these films and stop watching them. Indeed, not looking at human rights abuses would be worse. Rather, our classrooms need to engage what Mark Ledbetter calls the "ethical integrity of voyeurism" (3). That is, we need to consider the power and politics of looking when dealing with representations of human rights in order to complicate our engagement with these films and ask to what extent they act as a testimony to suffering and to what extent they perpetuate the victimization of those who suffer, as well as the degree to which they elide our responsibility for this suffering. In doing so, our students become more critical consumers of the image culture in which they are immersed and thus more capable of understanding the ideological presuppositions that structure our experience of reality.

Visualizing human rights is fundamental to our understanding of the concept; we cannot do without it. As such, photographs, film, and video will and should remain a central component of human rights education. What we must recognize, however, as Chaudhuri does, is that "*all* images aestheticise, mediate, transform. A non-aestheticising alternative does not exist" (9). Our goal as educators, therefore, is to make our students aware of these processes of mediation so that they no longer accept as natural or given the systems of power that structure contemporary human rights discourse and its modes of visualization. As Tascón argues, we must not let the urgency of human rights advocacy prohibit us from critically examining the tools that we use to promote awareness and change. ("Considering Human Rights" 882).

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