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The Right To Tell That It Hurt: Fiction and Political Performance of Human Rights in South Africa

This essay examines the political impact of the ways in which human rights are “staged” by the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The committee for human rights violations collected stories of the victims and presented them during the public hearing. As such, telling of the truth was meant to contribute to restoring the dignity of victims and reconciling the nation after apartheid. By “staging”, then, we mean the theatrical performance of these hearings. The aim of this essay is to examine that policy of commemorative juridical culture in the following South African literatures and their filmic adaptations: Gillian Slovo’s novel *Red Dust* (2000) and its adaptation by Tom Hooper (2004), and Antjie Krog’s book *Country of My Skull* (1998) and John Boorman’s adaptation (2004). In these examples, we argue, fiction enforces the victims’ voices because of its power to mobilize empathy and contribute to the development of human rights.

The Political Performance of Human Rights in South Africa

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was set up in the mid-1990s by the Government of National Unity in South Africa and its goal was to help work through the human rights violations under apartheid and to pave the path for a more hopeful future in which human rights would be respected. After the policy of racial segregation had been abolished under the presidency of F. W. de Klerk, Nelson Mandela became president of the new republic. The old rulers called for a general amnesty, while the resistance movements were demanding a prosecution of human rights violations. The result of the negotiations was the *Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act* of 1995, which gave a mandate to the commission to unearth the truth about the human rights violations, in order to comfort the victims and reconcile the nation. The objects of investigation were gross human rights violations (such as murder and torture) between 1960 (Sharpeville massacre) and 1994 (Mandela’s inauguration). While the systematic injustice of apartheid had been excluded, the crimes of resistance movements

were included. The commission was divided into three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee collected stories of victims and partially brought them into public hearings, the Amnesty Committee decided (or made considerations) on amnesty applications, and the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee was charged with restoring the victims' dignity and submitted proposals for the rehabilitation of the victims to the government.

Chairman of the Commission was the Peace Prize Laureate and Anglican Archbishop Desmond Tutu. The work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission attracted worldwide attention as a juridical form of collective remembrance. It was borne by the public staging of the hearings and supported by a wide media coverage. However, it was also controversial because of the amnesty program, which was considered synonymous with sacrificing retributive justice for reconciliation. South Africa has opted for the public policy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to make the work of remembrance shape the culture of the country. Consequently, the hearings were staged for the public and the victims had to tell their stories under such conditions. On the one hand, then, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was charged with the publication of traumatic experiences, authentic narratives; on the other hand, the outer frame was designed like a theater performance.

This theatricality began with the selection of locations and commissioners who should represent the various groups of society. Not only were the locations were selected on behalf of the local proximity to past injustice, but also public buildings in city-centers, were preferred to those in townships. The South African writer Antjie Krog emphasized the symbolic importance of this decision:

By choosing the city hall in the centre of town and not a community centre in the township, the Truth Commission wants to portray a symbolic break with the institutional frameworks of the past. This city hall is no longer the official domain of whites and perpetrators: it now belong to all of us [...]. (Krog 1998, pp. 38–39)

In permitting or supporting all African languages in the hearings, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made a symbolic statement in opposition to the marginalization of black people under the apartheid system. Moreover, the selection of the victims represented different types of human rights violations in order to convey a wide picture of the gross misdeeds of the past, and in regard to the white victims and crimes of the resistance it was about the staging of impartiality in the restitution of human rights. Critics, however, complained a preference of well-known personalities and lurid stories for the sake of media effectiveness.

Desmond Tutu finally shaped the course of the hearings by religious rites: The religious character of the “staging” was particularly evident in the attempt

to restore the victims' dignity: Instead of taking them as witnesses in a criminal trial for cross-examination, they thanked the victims for their willingness and courage to tell their stories. The victims had time to cry and they received emotional support. Thus, the emphasis was drawn more to the suffering of the victims than to the factual report because of the healing effect and the expected promotion of public willingness for reconciliation. With the help of this theatrical manner of dealing with the past a path should be prepared, a path for a future, in which human rights would be respected. The collective memory should then be the basis for the new society. In sum, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was less about the reconstruction of the apartheid crimes than about the project of nation-building because the telling of human rights violations was tied to the purpose of reconciliation. From the perspective of historical science, this is an object of criticism (Posel 2002).

The idea of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to come to terms with the past while providing a foundation for a future where human rights would be recognized and protected. The moral difficulty here was that the detection of the torments and killings should be performed in the service of reconciliation, which was incompatible with the prosecution of the crimes demanded in the name of justice. Proponents of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission declared the peaceful future for the country as a higher goal and believed that the policy of reconciliation had made a significant contribution to the reformation of South Africa, which would not have been possible on the legal or institutional way alone. Reconciliation achieved by story telling was regarded as a higher value than that of criminal law and the traditional court process. On the one hand, the necessary inquiry of the human rights violations made the demands for prosecution and penalty understandable and justifiable, indeed, because the governmental penal power was ethically legitimized by the preservation of basic human rights. On the other hand, the waiving of retributive justice in transitional societies was supposed to pave the way to reconciliation. The emphasis here lay on "retributive" justice since there was no sacrifice of justice in general. Maybe there was no sacrifice of justice at all:

The question, rather, is whether punitive justice has simply been sacrificed to some or other conception of an overridingly important social goal or whether some respect for justice might still be thought to be embodied in this institutionalized encounter. (Allen 1999, p. 326)

Desmond Tutu asserted that the restoration of dignity and human rights via reconciliation had to be regarded as a higher form of justice. He interpreted the healing mission of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as the realization of

justice in a more integrative sense, which corresponded to the African conception of justice called *ubuntu*:

Here the central concern is not retribution or punishment but, in the spirit of *ubuntu*, the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships. This kind of justice seeks to rehabilitate both, the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be reintegrated into the community he or she has injured by his or her offence. This is a far more personal approach, which sees the offence as something that has happened to people and whose consequence is a rupture in relationships. Thus we would claim that justice, restorative justice, is being served when efforts are being made to work for healing, for forgiveness and for reconciliation. (Tutu 1999, pp. 51–52)

Considering the social recommencement, as it was intended by the idea of reconciliation, many people had principal concerns about its religious scope because it was doubtful that political consolidation could emerge from such an imaginary form of policy. But on the other hand, the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission could also be legitimized by the idea of political justice in terms of an ethical legitimization of state power. This included the establishment of a democratic culture and a rule of law, which provided basic rights. Especially in transitional societies prosecution was not always the best way to achieve a more just legal system.

The special focus of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was on the symbolic restoration of the dignity of the victims. After a long period of disregard of basic rights, the restoration of the victims' dignity was an equally important concern as was the institutional enforcement of law. Symbolic policy was part of a fundamental redefinition of the political identity of a society. Human rights were of particular importance to this development because historically they had been established and further developed especially in political transition processes. They included a continuous transitional dynamics which, within the historical context of political experiences of injustice, could also lead to the reformulation of the legal claims. This was illustrated by the fact that the victims were granted a "Right to the truth" which the Truth and Reconciliation Commission sought to meet both by the victim hearings and the ascertainment of personal responsibility for crimes within the amnesty process.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's concentration on restorative justice involved a central reference to human rights and even included some aspects of retributive justice like the assignment of guilt. This required both the political imagination of new forms of transition from injustice to a legal system in a peaceful society and the continuous factual work on the "restoration of dignity". To this end, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission made an important contribution, but it could be burdened with the whole responsibility for the political and social integration of the New South Africa.

The previous development of South Africa had revealed how many political problems the young state had to combat. The limits of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's mandate were partly responsible for this development because due to the insufficient implementation of the compensation obligation the idea of restorative justice had been restricted to mere symbolic action. (For the discussion about reparation see Duxtader/Villa-Vicencio 2001.)

Lucy Allais distinguished between a forward-looking and a past-oriented justice. The former served social justice and the needs of the victims, the latter was based on compensation, and only this form of restorative justice was compatible with the basic intention of retributive justice:

Here, the aim is not to meet victims' needs merely because they are needs, but rather as a way of condemning wrongdoing, which means that the ground of obligation with we are concerned is the same as that with which the retributivist is concerned, as opposed to the promotion of welfare. In this case, it is essential that reparations are paid by the perpetrator [...] Retributivists may accept restorative justice processes in cases where there is an uncontroversial admission of guilt, and with the criminal justice system operating as a backup, if it is reasonable to think that these processes will enable us to express condemnation for wrongdoing more effectively in these kinds of cases. [...] On this alternative model, restorative justice is not seen as a new paradigm of justice, but as an alternative to criminal prosecutions situated within the framework of retributive justice. (Allais 2008, pp. 133–134)

The basic intention of retributive justice was to clarify the question of guilt which was not necessarily attended with a sentencing procedure. To name the culprit and to discover the truth about their deeds was at least partly doing justice to the victims. On the other hand, the expectations that the perpetrators do the reparations were disappointed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

In retrospect, it has become clear that the work on the imaginary (symbolic restitution, restoration of dignity, policy of remembrance and reconciliation, etc.) makes an important contribution to the realization of human rights. In transitional societies the initiation and protection of human rights cannot be achieved by a juridical process alone; they rather require an appropriate formation of public awareness and political culture. The establishment of truth commissions is recognized as a third way between amnesty and prosecution, and with regard to this, especially the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission raised worldwide attention. The OHCHR resolution 'Right to the Truth' gives evidence to the international recognition of this path.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in Fiction

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission politically performed a restoration of human rights by giving the victims a chance to tell their stories during public hearings that were ritualized like a mixture of trial and mass. The stories were recorded and transmitted via media reports, radio and film documentaries. In fiction, the performance of the hearings is presented on a meta level because it is a staging of a staging. There are not many novels and movies about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The best-known films are probably *Red Dust* by Tom Hooper and *Country of My Skull* by John Boorman. Both films were produced in England and South Africa, and released in 2004. *Red Dust* is the adaptation of the novel by Gillian Slovo which has the same title and focuses on a single case of an amnesty hearing. The novel by the South African author, who is the daughter of two white anti-apartheid activists and now lives in London, was published in 2000. The film *Country of My Skull* is based on the homonymous book by Antjie Krog (1998) who, like Gillian Slovo, was born in 1952 in South Africa and is now a writer. This book is not a novel, but a nonfictional collection of direct quotes from hearings, journalistic commentary and biographical narrative. The script transforms these records into a story in which the Washington Post reporter Langston is sent to South Africa in order to attend the hearings and to track down Colonel De Jager, the most infamous wrongdoer in the South African Police, and meets Afrikaans poet and journalist Anna who is covering the hearings for radio. They fall in love and have an affair though at first they are at odds with each other because of their very different attitudes. She is a white South African and believes in reconciliation and in the work of the commission while he is a black American and claims the punishment of the perpetrators. Thus, the political impact of the story is brought to a personal level. The film is largely based on historical material and provides obvious references to famous and infamous characters such as Archbishop Tutu and Colonel de Kock, nicknamed 'Prime Evil', head of the so-called death squads.

Red Dust tells the story about Sarah Barcant, a human rights lawyer who lives in New York and returns to her hometown Smitsrivier in South Africa in order to represent the black South African politician Alex Mpondo in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission because ex-police officer Dirk Hendricks who had tortured him 18 years ago during the apartheid regime has made an application for amnesty. Sarah is there because of her friendship with Ben Hoffman, an old white lawyer who believes in the commission's work and whose words have validity since the novel and the movie present him as a very good character. During the

hearings Alex remembers and tells more and more about what has happened to him and his comrade Steve Sizela while they were captured and tortured by Hendricks and his boss Piet Muller. As the truth comes out that Muller killed Sizela, he, who scorned the commission all the time before, finally and ironically applies for amnesty himself. *Red Dust* sheds light on the situation in South Africa outside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission as well, where apartheid is still effective: on the one side views of townships, on the other side the rich neighborhoods of the whites. The privileges of the whites still exist, even in jail: Dirk Hendricks is to be seen alone in a cell, while in the cell next door many blacks are squeezed together like sardines. While the film works a lot with contrasts, Slovo's novel works out the parallelism of the different perspectives: The narrative point of view changes with almost every chapter, and includes the offenders. For example, Piet Muller's caring thoughts about his wife make him seem more human, more differentiated, and more sympathetic. In doing so, the novel does not legitimize the crimes of the former chief of the Security Police but it shows him as a man who can also claim human dignity and human rights, and who applies for amnesty despite the outrage of the victims.

In *Country of My Skull*, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is also displayed differentiated and ambivalent: On the one hand the sentencing of Colonel de Jager (de Kock) shows that there is no blind general amnesty for murderers. So, justice does not fall by the wayside. On the other hand, the final episode creates the impression of vain endeavor: After the final party of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission all people are in high spirits but Langston's and Anna's kindhearted friend Menzi, on his way home, is killed by guys he allegedly once cheated. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission thus seemingly fails to provide comprehensive peace, when it leaves many people who still seek revenge. This very impressive scene overshadows the success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

The emotional impact in literature is different from that in film. Since the filmic presentation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission makes the (verbal) stories of the victims and perpetrators visible and audible in flashbacks, it doubles the story and its emotional intensity. *Red Dust* begins with a flashback of Alex Mpondo's memory. Alex appears before the commission in order to find out what happened to his friend Steve who unexplainedly disappeared after being captured. His memory runs as a leitmotif through the entire film: Somebody drags a bleeding body along the ground through blood soaked red dust. Later we learn: It is Steve Sizela, Alex's friend and ANC comrade and fellow prisoner, who was tortured to death and pulled out of the room. The horror of this repeatedly shown take is a constant companion of the film. The increasing temporal extent of the flashback symbolizes the process of bringing back suppressed memories, and the

memories receive a stronger evidence by being shown than by merely being told. This process is configured as out-breaking truth, not as subjective memory. The mission of the remembrance work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is presented here in its ideal fulfillment.

In one remarkable scene, however, it is drawn into doubt: Truth and Reconciliation Commission opponent Piet Muller is convicted of having murdered Sizela, and without a filmic cut which marks a temporal break or omission, Muller's lawyer announces that his client will apply for amnesty. This is an effective dramatization because it creates the impression that everybody is being granted amnesty at the push of a button. The impulsive outrage of the audience thus appears as an entirely justified reaction, and the whole mission of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is questioned, maybe not with regard to truth, but with regard to justice and reconciliation.

The movie presents the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in its staged character and in its authenticity at the same time. The stage-like features are obvious. The red curtain of the commission's stage in *Red Dust* is drawn, while the seats of the audience are being folded down and provided with headphones. In *Country of My Skull*, the protest song "Senzenina" is sung by the Zulu at the opening of the hearing.

On the other hand, there are scenes in which the non-staged is staged, which is to say, authentic expressions of emotions are displayed. The sudden flare of anger and the effervescence of memory are non-staged components within the real Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. In the movies, these moments of uncontrolled authenticity are arranged effectively. In one scene of *Country of My Skull*, the writer Anna has a nervous breakdown. She laughs hysterically as a reaction to a story about the flying body parts of his child after a mine explosion. Such cinematic stagings of the non-staged indicate that the stories in their awfulness go beyond the ritual procedures of the hearings. These are demonstrations of the effectiveness of individual stories.

The Political Surplus of Fictional Storytelling

The effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is controversial. For example, it has been criticized for implicitly legitimizing the systematic injustice of apartheid, as it focuses on gross human rights violation while failing to shame it as a crime against humanity (Mahmood 2000, pp. 179–180). However, the films draw attention to the social contrast between townships and white neighborhoods, the privilege of whites (even in prison), and the differences be-

tween black and white. They conceptualize crimes as acts that are politically encouraged by the apartheid system, and they individualize responsibility for human rights violations.

Another point of criticism concerns the pressure for reconciliation exerted by the commissioners. In asking manipulative questions, they take away and denounce the victim's right to hate. *Red Dust*, however, shows a slow change in Alex's attitude that goes from initial disgust at the confrontation with the tormentor, over exhaustion, into a final settling of hatred. And *Country of My Skull* represents even the astonishing reconciliation of a little boy with the repentant murderer of his parents. This scene seems implausible or has a rousing effect. Director Boorman emphasized that this scene was authentic, while the other hearings in his film, mostly of black women who lost their husbands and sons, had a more representative character. According to Boorman, there had actually been amazing cases of reconciliation. Even if these were somewhat isolated cases, it was significant that the film selected them for its story because it staged the success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. And by staging the commission's success cinematically, it made a political contribution for their real effectiveness.

The main criticism that hits the nerve of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, is the fact that it is often used as a mere instrument of amnesty without arousing repentance and reconciliation. Although repentance is not a requirement for amnesty, is it necessary for reconciliation. If it is merely faked, the staging of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission becomes a farce. The repentance of Dirk Hendricks in *Red Dust* is displayed ambivalent. On the one hand Hendricks appears in the perspective of Alex and Sarah as a hypocrite who pretends to be a dutiful policemen and actually himself a victim, on the other hand, he seems to repent the acts of torture. In the novel, he explains that he was taught to fight communism and his terrorists, and that he believed to act for the benefit of South Africa. By showing remorse he works strategically on his amnesty. The novel which represents Hendricks's interior perspective in some chapters, characterizes him as a man, not a monster: He is worried about his children who left him and about how far he can go with his loyalty to Muller. He does not really show remorse here but rather the desire to leave the past and the captivity behind.

One last important point of criticism, which is related to the question of repentance, is that justice falls by the wayside when the offenders would only have to say the truth in order to be granted amnesty, without remorse and without the requirement to change their attitudes. This is brought into play at the end of *Red Dust* by Muller's opportunistic amnesty application. On the other hand, the film shows how the victims slowly come to terms with their past. The Sizelas

wanted to learn the truth about their son, so that they could finally bury him. They have also reconciled with Alex, who seems jointly responsible for Steve's death.

If there is such a thing as a recapitulatory statement of *Red Dust* with regard to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, then it is put in the mouth of the lawyer Ben who had brought back Sarah to South Africa. He is her mentor and explains to her the meaning and merit of the commission because to her mind it would have failed as long as Hendricks and Muller escape being penalized. Here are his arguments, which remain unrefuted in the movie: "It's not about putting bad guys away. It's about bringing communities together." In Sarah's eyes offenders deserve life imprisonment. Ben, however, believes that the future coexistence is more important than nemesis. Another argument is: "How do you ever restore what they have lost?" In Sarah's perspective, the release of the offenders fails to do justice to the victim's suffering. Ben argues that the punishment does not bring the murdered son back to life. And his third main argument is: "Let them carry their own load." The guilty will not be spared, Ben believes, because they have to make up their guilt in their conscience.

Alex, who regarded the Truth and Reconciliation Commission at the beginning only as a reenactment of torment, finally comes to terms with what he has done and what they have done to him. He is the one who has the final say in the film: "We have the right to say that it hurt." The telling of injustice and suffering thus does not appear as a final stroke mentality but as a dialogical developed liberation from the shackles of the past. And it is appreciated as a political innovation that now everybody has a right to talk about the suffering and injustice that has befallen him/her, which is accompanied by a restoration of human dignity and human rights.

What did the Symbolic Policy of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and its Fictional Screenings effect?

Theoretically, it is possible that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission with its policy of commemorative culture has had a healing effect on the common future of South Africa. In practice, however, the healing effect is controversial because of the restrictions that have been imposed on the commission's work (e. g. the exclusion of the systematic injustice of apartheid from investigation and the insufficient implementation of the compensation obligation).

The obituaries for Nelson Mandela, who died on 12/05/2013, repeatedly stressed how important his policy of reconciliation had been for the improvement of the situation in South Africa. Mandela and F. W. de Klerk saved the country from a blood bath that was almost caused by the right-wing Afrikaans and the nationalist Zulus during the transitional period. For ending apartheid and leading South Africa into a new area of freedom and peace they received the Nobel Peace Prize. Nevertheless, since the end of apartheid, millions of blacks have continued to live in slums, the crime rate remains very high, and the corruption of the current ruling elite is rampant. Many people accuse Mandela of having “sold out the liberation struggle to white interests”, and on having “focused on the cosmetics of reconciliation, while nothing materially changed” in the lives of the black people in South Africa (Mda 2013). Though the majority of South Africans looks favorably on the commission’s work and Mandela’s policy of reconciliation, they are still pessimistic about racial reconciliation. If things are getting better, they do it very slowly. The South African journalist Mark Gevisser writes:

The overriding legacy of the Mandela presidency – of the years 1994 to 1999 – is a country where the rule of law was entrenched in an unassailable Bill of Rights, and where the predictions of racial and ethnic conflict did not come true. These feats, alone, guarantee Mandela his sanctity. But he was a far better liberator and nation-builder than he was a governor. (Gevisser quoted after Keller 2013)

There is no quick and economically proven success of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission and the Mandela regime to be recorded; their political effects will still take years to unravel. Reconciliation between victims and perpetrators rarely occurred. The direct impact of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on the political everyday life is hardly measurable and can hardly be expected: How can political reconciliation of a nation, including the end of racial oppression and the realization of human rights, be an effect of such a short-term commission alone? Maybe it served more as a vehicle for communication and political collaboration than as an effective instrument of reconciliation in a deeper sense. Van der Merve and Chapman assert that “the Truth and Reconciliation Commission cannot be credited with facilitating political reconciliation” because it rather “increased existing tensions by bringing uncomfortable issues back on the agenda” (van der Merve/ Chapman 2008, pp. 258–259). Nevertheless, it is only with the help of a symbolic policy of human rights that the country can be ushered into a new regime where human rights are accepted and realized, because without a change in the people’s minds there will be no stable economic improvement.

What now is the significance of these movies as cultural memory media for the effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission? First of all, they

reach a much larger audience than the radio broadcasts, documentaries and written reports. Having watched *Country of My Skull*, both Mandela and Tutu emphasized that the film will not only strengthen the effectiveness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, but also make the people all around the world familiar with the essential questions of the policy of reconciliation. The movies reach many more people not only internationally, but also in a deeper and more insistent manner. With the help of the movies many people understand better what is at stake. One of the producers of *Country of My Skull*, Robert Chartoff, admits that he had read regularly about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in the New York Times, but had not fully understood the idea of forgiveness until he had watched the film. (He says so in an interview on the DVD *Country of My Skull*. The following statements are documented on the DVD, too.) Something similar reports the co-producer Mike Medavoy: An ANC member had said at a screening of *Country of My Skull* in Los Angeles that he could not understand the concept of forgiveness until now. The reactions in South Africa were very intense: The film was regarded to be authentic and created dismay. The Americans, however, considered it as at times exaggerated and unauthentic. Lynn Hendee, who was also a producer of *Country of My Skull*, explains that this was up to the South African culture and the people's mentality: If, for example, in the judgment scene the audience spontaneously begins to sing, this was quite authentically re-enacted and not artificially staged. Of course, a feature film includes several means of manipulation and emotional reinforcement. He controls and directs the sympathy with the characters and their views, and thus he can illuminate the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in either its strengths or weaknesses. On the one hand, flashbacks that show what is told with added music, are manipulative; on the other hand, they bring back the emotional impressiveness of the hearings in which the victims tell their stories, and thus re-enact an authentic situation, which loses its vibrations by the distance of the documentary recording media. All in all, the effect of the feature films is that they reach more viewers all around the world and do so in a more sustainable manner.

The importance of the emotional response of fiction for the recognition of human rights has already been pointed out by Lynn Hunt. While it cannot be proven, as Hunt claims, whether the reading of Rousseau's and Richardson's letter novels actually had a positive influence on the development of human rights, it cannot be denied that novels promote empathy and show that even women, servants and non-French people are similar to the readers. Letter novels demonstrate that others feel like we do and have their own valuable body, which is also worth protecting (Hunt 2007, p. 29). More specifically, Hunt refers to the 'torrents of emotions' which Rousseau's *Julie* has aroused in the readers: Women

and men would identify with Julie, so that an empathy “across class, sex, and national lines” came about (Hunt 2007, p. 38). Leaving aside the question what the influence of empathy on real policy is, psychologically speaking it is compelling to assume that reading promotes philanthropy, provided that the novels pay tribute to equality and dignity. This idea, which has arisen in the 18th century and was formulated by Friedrich Schiller as ethical and poetic postulate, can only be affirmed in light of today’s audiovisual media, as these have additional communication channels to convey empathy and to encourage people to recognize human rights. True, fiction is no foundation for political decisions. Paul Slovic and Daniel Västfjäll are right in arguing that this is precisely the problem: that people can indeed be moved by individual fates, but are emotionally paralyzed in the face of mass murder (see their contribution “The More Who Die, the Less We Care: Psychic Numbing and Genocide” in this volume). Political thought, of course, has to be rational and based on structural considerations. But without the stories of individual people and their suffering, the value of the individual does not become visible, and therefore it would also not become clear why we would need human rights.

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Filmography

Red Dust (2004), directed by Tom Hooper. UK/South Africa

Country of My Skull (2004), directed by John Boorman. UK/Ireland/South Africa