

UCLA

Recent Work

Title

Reeling History: Film as Records for Human Rights Abuses

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6zx725mw>

Author

Saito, Yuma

Publication Date

2026-07-10

Peer reviewed

University of California, Los Angeles

Reeling History: Film as Records for Human Rights Abuses

Yuma Saito

COMM 141: Films of Persuasion: Social and Political Advocacy in Mass Society

Professor Paul Von Blum

9 June 2025

How must society remember the history of human rights violations? Newspaper columns, court transcripts, and government archives preserve these events through text. Songs serve as emotional anthems of resilience, allowing generations to remember the experiences of those who have been oppressed. Art installations such as monuments or paintings visually capture the dread of human suffering, which can be universally interpreted regardless of the audience's language or cultural background. Embodying all of these sensory inputs, however, is *film*. Through the combination of visual, auditory, and narrative features, film serves as a powerful medium to engage the audience directly in moments of historical violence. A zoomed-in clip of Emmett Till's mutilated body in "Awakenings (1954–1956)" of *Eyes on the Prize* viscerally captures the brutality of his murder, underscoring the violence of systemic injustice in ways a written description may not fully convey. Scenes of Shola repeatedly enduring verbal and physical assault by her plantation owner in *Sankofa* display the atrocities of the slave system, likely unimaginable by simple accounts in the history books. *Thelma & Louise* highlights further the violence against women in a society that victim-blames, and *Ravished Armenia*—despite being in silent form—gives voice to those victims of a genocide that often gets overlooked. Thus, through its eclectic appeal to the human senses and emotions, film serves as a powerful medium to raise public consciousness of worldwide human rights abuses.

The first essence of film, which effectively relays human rights violations, is visual techniques. The portrayal of Emmett Till's murder in "Awakenings (1954–1956)" of *Eyes on the Prize* is one such demonstration. The episode reconstructs the 1955 lynching of 14-year-old Emmett Till, a Black boy from Chicago, who was killed in Mississippi for allegedly whistling at a white woman. Throughout the documentary, Director Henry Hampton employs powerful visual techniques to encourage viewers to confront the inhumanity of racial violence: discomfort is no

excuse for ignoring the violent murder committed. An example of this is Emmett's mother, Mamie Till, and her decision to host an open casket funeral to expose the crime's severity. The camera focuses on a photograph of Emmett before the crime: the subject glances out of frame with a subtle boyish grin spread across his face. Then his corpse (recovered from the Tallahatchie River three days after his murder) is shown up close—face swelled and disfigured, eyes gouged out, nearly unrecognizable as the boy, let alone a human being. The resemblance of a 75-pound cotton gin fan tied around Emmett's neck, with barbed wire to weigh him down in the water, wraps alongside the still, cold figure. Despite there being no narration in the background of this almost brief scene, the visual representation of Emmett's disfigured body serves as an undeniable symbol of the cruelty of white supremacy and Jim Crow South ("Awakenings (1954–1956)," 00:16:49-00:16:55). The film underscores the personal, bodily, racial terror inflicted on a child, and anchors the early narrative of the Civil Rights Movement in grief and visual truth. Scenes such as these demonstrate film's ability to visually preserve memory and ensure that stories like Emmett's are not sanitized or forgotten, but carried forward with emotional urgency.

Film further employs auditory effects to preserve accounts of denied civil liberties. An example of this is demonstrated in the second episode of *Eyes on the Prize*, "Fighting Back (1957–1962)." This segment traces the years after the Supreme Court's landmark 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, which declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional. Despite the ruling outlawing segregation, many Southern states resisted its implementation: at Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, nine Black teenage students became the center of the crisis, attempting to attend an all-white school. Amongst the members was Elizabeth Eckford, whose filmmakers used archival video footage to depict her entrance to Central High School. The scene captures her walking toward the school while surrounded by a white mob

hurling racist insults and threats: “You don’t belong here!” The camera shakily follows her movement, emphasizing her vulnerability and composure in the face of tense hostility (“Fighting Back (1957–1962),” 00:10:12-00:10:30). Despite an article’s ability to describe this moment through text, the film scene activates both emotional and sensory dimensions of the event in real time. The mob’s hellish expressions, the pacing of Elizabeth’s walk, and the heat of the moment captured in crowd noise allow the viewer not only to acknowledge the event but to *feel* it. While a reader may skim through or skip past a few details, films remain unforgiving and keep the audience focused through simultaneous techniques—framing, ambient sound, and slow pacing—that make historical moments feel immediate and human.

A third quality of film that raises public consciousness of historical human injustice is immersive narrative techniques. *Sankofa* is an example of this, a film that depicts the transatlantic slave trade and its horrid psychological aftermath. The story begins in the present day with Mona, a modern Black woman modeling at a slave castle in Ghana, who is transported back in time to inhabit the life of Shola, an enslaved woman on a Caribbean plantation. This transformation occurs during a ritualistic drum ceremony at Cape Coast Castle, where the elderly guide, Sankofa, warns Mona: “Back to your past. Return to your source” (*Sankofa*, 00:09:15-00:09:27). This moment marks the story’s shift from present to past—and from a passive understanding of slavery to an embodied experience. In one key scene, after being beaten and forced to serve in the slave master’s house, Shola begins to resist psychologically and spiritually, influenced by fellow enslaved Africans such as Nunu and Shango, who speak of liberation and ancestral memory. By having the protagonist experience this trauma firsthand, the film bypasses historical abstraction and instead delivers a lived, emotional narrative. Although an art monument or photograph may depict the same content, film’s ability to control and juxtapose

historical events with modern society forces the audience to reflect on how the past lives within the present. This nonlinear structure thus demonstrates the media's unique power in mobilizing memory for education and resistance.

Filmmaker's use of contrast is further evident through character in *Thelma & Louise*, a powerful narrative capturing the unjust reality of gender-based violence. Directed by Ridley Scott, the film follows two women—Thelma, a sheltered housewife, and Louise, a sharp-tongued waitress—as they embark on what begins as a weekend getaway turned flight from the law. The trigger sets when Thelma meets Harlan at a roadside bar; the tone is light and seemingly harmless: “That’s your name? Thelma? That’s a lovely name” he flirts (*Thelma & Louise*, 00:16:00-00:16:03). Contrasting this initial warmth, however, Harlan quickly becomes aggressive once outside, dragging Thelma into a dark corner of the parking lot and attempting to rape her. The sudden shift from casual intimacy to brutal threat alarms the viewer immediately. When Louise arrives with a gun, the predator gives a flippant excuse: “Alright...hey, hey, hey, just calm down. We were just having a little fun, that’s all” (*Thelma & Louise*, 00:20:49-00:20:55). This dismissive mocking of his attempted rape, serves as another contrast between the traumatic reality of sexual violence and society’s excusing of it. Just as Harlan shifts his demeanor before the attack, the perpetrator is quick to flip the narrative to downplay his assault; instead of the rapist, the raped gets held accountable. The contrast of this character symbolizes how men like Harlan rationalize coercion, expecting women to accept aggression as part of normal social interactions, and society’s tendency to blame the victim for somehow inviting or accepting the behavior. Carmen Indurain Eraso describes in her journal article, “‘Thelma and Louise’: ‘Easy Riders’ in a Male Genre,” that “remarkably, all these secondary characters’ abuse has sexual connotations, therefore revealing this as one of the main factors

generating oppression for women in this patriarchal system” (Eraso, 69). For instance, the truck driver appears multiple times, making lewd gestures and sexually harassing Thelma and Louise. His behavior mirrors the daily objectification women endure, often in silence, as it is dismissed as “harmless” or simply “jokes.” Accompanied by masterful film techniques—the dimly lit parking lot, Thelma’s echoing, isolated screams, and the truck driver towering over from his truck—these male characters underscore society’s unbearable enabling of male entitlement.

Finally, film’s emotional impact on an audience is demonstrated through *Ravished Armenia*, the 1919 silent film depicting the atrocities of the Armenian Genocide. Based on the real-life testimony of survivor Aurora Mardiganian, the story outlines mass killings, forced marches (calculated to bring on starvation and death), sexual violence, and mass burnings of the Armenian people. Though silent, the film employs visually arresting imagery—such as the crucifixion scene of Armenian women—to convey the sheer brutality inflicted upon civilians. “For the Armenians, the worst fate of all awaited the women and girls at the end of their journey. As one neutral observer noted, ‘the Armenians died a thousands deaths unheard of in our time’” the film notes, with text displayed under visuals of Armenian women crucified (*Ravished Armenia*, 00:21:49-00:22:08). These stark visuals dismiss the absence of dialogue, as it makes the trauma universally understandable and emotionally accessible. At a time when most of the world had little knowledge of the Armenian Genocide, *Ravished Armenia* offered a visual record that challenged political silence and denial. Unlike written testimony, which could be censored or ignored, the film makes the suffering of Armenians visible and undeniable, creating an early precedent for how cinema could educate global audiences. Further, Leshu Torchin examines in her journal article, “‘Ravished Armenia’: Visual Media, Humanitarian Advocacy, and the Formation of Witnessing Publics,” that: “Film can visualize abject conditions or humanitarian

mission work for a broad audience while stories and images marshal the sentiment of vast and dispersed spectators to generate empathy, encourage action, and, as in the case of NER, raise money for political and relief efforts” (Torchin, 214). Here, the author reinforces the idea that film catalyzes emotional engagement and collective response. By visualizing abject conditions, the medium turns distant, historical, or overlooked atrocities into intimate, immediate experiences. The reference to NER additionally exemplifies how film has historically been used to mobilize humanitarian aid and political attention: the emotional power of storytelling and imagery transforms passive spectators into active participants.

Thus, through a range of narrative and visual techniques, film serves as an unparalleled medium for raising public consciousness of human rights abuses. Unlike written documents or historical archives (which often remain strictly factual), film creates visceral, emotional experiences that compel the audience not only to understand injustice but to feel its impact. *Eyes on the Prize* captures the intense violence of the Civil Rights Movement—Emmett Till’s mutilated figure and video footage of Elizabeth Eckford walking stoically through a screaming mob—through scenes far more affecting when seen and heard than through mere descriptions. *Sankofa* reclaims the narrative of slavery through a nonlinear story that centers Black resistance against an evil system. *Thelma & Louise* employ male characters symbolic of real-life misogyny and gender-based violence to expose societal tendencies of victim-blaming. And finally, *Ravished Armenia* preserves the horrid realities of a genocide that political powers threatened to erase. These works highlight the impact of storytelling methods—through faces, silences, and ruptures. Film makes the distant immediate and the invisible visible, thus serving as a vital medium to remember human rights abuses across history.

Works Cited

- Eraso, Carmen Indurain. “‘Thelma and Louise’: ‘Easy Riders’ in a Male Genre.” *Atlantis*, vol. 23, no. 1, 2001, pp. 63–73. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41055009>. Accessed 10 June 2025.
- Fayer, Steve. *Eyes on the Prize. Awakenings (1954–1956)*. Blackside, 1987.
- Fayer, Steve. *Eyes on the Prize. Fighting Back (1957–1962)*. Blackside, 1987.
- Gerima, Haile, director. *Sankofa*. Mypheduh Films, 1993.
- Khoury, Callie, et al. *Thelma and Louise*. MGM-Pathé Communications, 1991.
- Selig, William. *Ravished Armenia*. First National Pictures, 1919.
- Torchin, Leshu. “‘Ravished Armenia’: Visual Media, Humanitarian Advocacy, and the Formation of Witnessing Publics.” *American Anthropologist*, vol. 108, no. 1, 2006, pp. 214–20. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3804747>. Accessed 10 June 2025.