



## Film Review: My Neighbor, My Killer

*By Peter Brunette, May 15, 2009 06:54 ET*

**Bottom Line:** This excellent documentary on the aftermath of the Rwandan genocide of 1994 could have provided more explanatory context.



CANNES -- Award-winning documentarian Anne Aghion is here at Cannes for the first time with another in her ongoing "Gacaca" (pronounced Ga-cha-cha) series, which records the ongoing struggle to deal with the aftermath of the genocidal violence that wracked Rwanda in 1994, when gangs composed of the dominant Hutus, authorized by the government, slaughtered nearly a million members, deemed "cockroaches," of the minority Tutsi community. A theatrical release in any territory is unlikely, but worldwide television distribution seems assured.

Similar in intent to the work of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the point of Gacaca has been to get the killers reintegrated into their communities by confessing their crimes and publicly asking forgiveness of the survivors of the families they wantonly butchered.

In the process, complicated ethical and political questions are raised that resist easy answers. As a recent authoritative article in *The New Yorker* by Philip Gourevich attests, the emotional and moral needs of the victims have basically been sacrificed, for want of a better option, to the overriding goal of bringing the country back together.

Shot in gorgeous high-definition Digibeta, this installment of Aghion's series focuses on several members, two of them victims and two of them murderers, of a small village. Eschewing the easy intensities of atrocity footage, Aghion relies for the most part on interviews with the central figures, a Gacaca "trial," in which the accused and the accusers face each other, and fascinating (if scarce) connective footage of the contours of life in a beautiful country that recalls the picturesque landscape of Tuscany.

Perhaps the most striking thing about the film is the deep wisdom, sad emotional maturity, and even poetry that seems to issue effortlessly from the mouths of the victims who are, after all, only peasants. The direct confrontations are infrequent, unfortunately, but when they come the stakes are raised considerably.

There are two other problems. The first, probably unavoidable, is that reliance on interviews and exchanges during the Gacaca sessions means that viewers end up reading subtitles non-stop for the length of the film, and thus often miss tell-tale facial expressions. The other difficulty, considerably more serious, is that in her laudable decision to focus on the testimony of the villagers themselves, Aghion has failed to provide the context for the Gacaca confrontations, reported in other media sources, that would give us a better sense of exactly what's at stake in the drama we're witnessing.