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Docudrama and the agential child: treading a path between melodrama and *National Geographic*.

Introduction

In *Visual Cultures of Childhood*, I argued that the child in social reform visual media, regardless of its form and the context of production or reception, rarely escapes representation as a melodramatic figure of innocent suffering who it is incumbent on the spectator to rescue, figuratively or literally (Wells 2020). This paper describes the making of a documentary film about children's learning cultures in West Africa to show that it is possible to escape the melodramatic gaze through deploying specific shooting, editorial and screening choices that represent children as active, knowledgeable subjects situated in a specific cultural milieu. It also discusses the legacy of ethnographic film, especially in relation to Africa, which in its aim at cultural translation presumes a non-local spectator and deploys what has been called an entomological gaze; glossed here as 'national geographic' and proposes that key to disavowing that legacy is making film for African audiences.

The film production and reception analyzed in this paper is of a documentary film, *Weaving Knowledge*⁽¹⁾, which aims to depict some of the cultural life of its child subjects and the knowledge that they develop and display in a range of cultural activities of everyday life. The research that underpins the film suggests that this knowledge is at least as valuable as what children might learn in school and that, in fact, these activities provide a ground from which to scaffold scientific and mathematical knowledge, as well as engineering, design and technology. The film seeks to provide an aesthetically arresting, visually pleasurable narrative of activities in rural farming and craft communities that, by taking moments in everyday life of making and playing, makes newly visible to these communities the skills and

knowledge embedded in craft and play and the modes of learning that children and adults deploy during these activities. The documentary was made by reconstructing scenes of children making that had first been observed by the project's PDR (postdoctoral researcher) during the fieldwork for the research that underpins the film.

While the film is primarily intended as a research output addressed to villagers in the researched communities who view their children's participation in farming and craft as a form of induction into necessary skills and knowledge and part of family life, it is also to be screened to policy audiences in Africa and elsewhere that are likely to view many of the scenes in the film as representations of child labor. For about three-quarters of the film, we see children participating in economic activities. Even if most of these are crafts that are deeply rooted in the cultures of rural West Africa (Chalfin 2004, Cochrane 2012, MacGaffey 2009), including weaving (Cochrane 2012), shea-butter (Chalfin 2004) and oil-making and blacksmithing (MacGaffey 2009), and even if children are doing these activities alongside their parents; they are economic activities that in classical economics would therefore be defined as work. This creates a tension between the representation, which very much concurs with the local view, and its reception.

Further entrenching a possible reading of the film as an observation, if not a critique, of child labor, is that it was made with the co-operation of local NGOs whose modus operandi, as with all institutions of governmentality, is the identification and solution of problems. This means that *Weaving Knowledge* is almost inevitably, outside of the villages, going to be approached by the viewer in a melodramatic mode, the predominant genre of the social reform film: A tale of those who suffer through no fault of their own, in which speech fails because the structural causes of their condition cannot be easily represented, in which the individuality of the child is subsumed in a representation of them as 'a child like this', and in

which the spectator is literally or figuratively invited to rescue them. Through such a reading, the moral legibility of the film would then turn on this problem of child labor and the solution to it (invariably, school enrolment).

We worked to avoid a melodramatic rendering of the film for two reasons; firstly, because the research that underpins the film is intended to contribute to a discourse of decolonizing children's learning, rather than to reproduce a narrative of African childhoods as abject, precarious and resource poor. Secondly, melodrama's emotional appeal works on the premise of spectator identification with the character's downfall 'there but for the grace of God, go I', and relief/guilt that they are not experiencing the character's suffering. Since the primary audience for our film is people living in the villages where we made the film, we did not want to represent them to themselves as living abject lives and, obviously, they could not claim 'there but for the grace of God', because there were, in fact, already 'there'.

The production of a film was an integral part of the research design. Inspired by the practice of the Senegalese film auteur Ousmane Sembene, we set out to make a film that engaged with the communities where the research was conducted and to screen it in rural villages to engage the audience in a discussion about the themes of the film. We sought through the shooting and editing decisions we made and through the screenings to decolonize representation and produce a film that resonated with cinematic histories and practices within West Africa.

Although made by an international team of researchers, it was of critical importance that the film was shot and edited by an African director, not least so that the film's participants and audiences might see 'a cinema of affirmation in which the spectator has been invited to recognize his [or her] own experience and take a different angle on it. Europe [or the USA] is secondary here' (Barlet 1996:21).

MELODRAMA, DOCUMENTARY AND AFRICAN FILM

In the melodramatic narrative the victim is an innocent, one who suffers through no fault of their own. The child as an image of innocence in art and photography has a long history, albeit one that shifted to incorporate anxieties about the desiring spectator in the late 20th century (Higonnet 1998). The figure of the child, always already read as innocent, is almost inescapably a figure of innocent suffering who the spectator yearns to rescue. The defining feature of melodrama is its moral legibility (Brooks 1995, Gledhill 1987, Kakoudaki 2002, Williams 2001). Film scholars have argued that the dependence on non-verbal signs in melodrama is a function of the inability of the narrative to be resolved through action (Brooks 1995, Mercer and Shingler 2004, Singer 2001). This inability arises from the constraints to the range of action available to the characters because of their structural position. The inability of the narrative to be resolved through action generates an excess that cannot be contained within the script and is displaced onto color, music, gesture and other non-verbal signs. In melodrama the action is constrained by the passivity and impotence of the victim in her confrontation with villainy and injustice. The problems posed within the film cannot be resolved within the narrative. The action is externalized to the audience and to the mise-en-scene and music. It is the audience that gasps, shrieks and is horrified, whilst the characters themselves are resigned to their fate. Echoing Spivak's famous declaration (Spivak 1988), in the melodrama, the characters cannot speak. In melodrama, the body itself becomes a gesture made by 'speaking bodies' (Holmes 2001:6) 'whose very physical presence evokes the extremism and hyperbole of ethical conflict and manichaeistic struggle' (Brooks 1976:57 cited in Holmes 2001;6). The melodramatic mode presents the main character as both singular and multitudinous. It is, as Boltanski says, that the spectator should be made to feel that "it is that child there who makes us cry, but any other child could have done the same" (Boltanski 1999:12).

The standard distinction between the fictional feature film and the nonfiction documentary is blurred by the dependence of both on a narrative structure that borrows its modes of storytelling from literature. Early documentary film reconstructed events, rather than, as the mythic genealogy of real-life film has it, capturing what was already occurring. The idea of the documentary as documenting reality and the feature film as fiction was a late development in documentary film, 'not really stabilizing until the late twentieth century and continuing to be disrupted and contested right up to the present day' (Wells 2020:8). John Grierson (who coined the term documentary and is regarded as the founder of British social realist documentary) approvingly described Robert Flaherty's work as the 'creative treatment of actuality'. In this definition, Grierson sought to distinguish Hollywood feature films from other films that were non-fiction but were not newsreel or archive films. He claimed that documentary has no 'background in the story and the stage as the studio product so glibly possesses' (Grierson 1933: 8). Clearly Grierson wants to put distance between Hollywood film (the 'studio product'), the novel and other textual fiction forms, and theatre (likely, especially melodrama).

This insistence on the distance between documentary and fiction film nonetheless hints at an underlying unity between the two; there is no need to disavow an object that shares no genealogy with the 'pure' object. Documentary film emerged out of the possibilities of a new technology, (the moving image) but it continues to tell stories that borrow their narrative structures precisely from the 'story and the stage' (Grierson 1933:8). Nor can the focus of documentary on social change or social problems put distance between itself and the studio film. As is now widely recognized, melodrama in Hollywood film frequently invokes the broader social structures that shape personal frustrations and failings. As a genre of narrative story-telling documentary film shares many characteristics of the studio film, particularly when it makes use of melodramatic music, and visual metaphors to carry a larger story about

oppressive social structures without referring directly to them. The space between documentary and melodrama is therefore not as broad as Grierson would have liked it to be. Depicting reality cannot prevent the melodramatic reading of a documentary.

During the colonial period, Africans in French West Africa were prohibited from making films. Ousmane Sembene, who made his first film, *Borom Sarret (Cart Master)*, in 1963, is credited with being the ‘father of African film’, while the white French ethnographer of Africa, Jean Rouch, made his first film in 1946 (Africa in *Hippopotamus Hunt (Chasse à l’Hippopotame)*). This, perhaps complicates what it might mean to make a film that reflects or is situated within West African film cultures; is Rouch’s film an ‘African film’ or is Sembene’s the first African film? Furthermore, Sembene was trained in the Soviet Union, not in Africa, and many reviewers see the influences of Italian neo-realism in *Borom Sarret* (Murphy 2002). Nonetheless, 60 years on, several generations of African filmmakers have contributed to African film (Barlet 1996), rejecting the ethnographic/entomological gaze on Africa of European film (and subsequently, the melodramatic gaze of films like *Beasts of No Nation*). Decolonising African film involves ‘disclosing a space and a behaviour which are presumed to be familiar [to the audience] and are to be reclaimed...the image is not a backdrop but an art of living (Barlet 1996:40).’ It was this ‘art of living’ that we wanted to depict, specifically to show how local resources shaped the participatory learning cultures of West African rural childhood. Always keeping in mind that the primary audience for the film were the villagers who participated in the research and in the filming and other villagers drawn to the film by its depiction of cultures of learning in their own villages and in other villages across West Africa.

THE RESEARCH

The research project ‘Development Education in the Vernacular for Infants and children in West Africa (DEVI)’. that underpins the film was funded by the British Academy Early Childhood Education grant program. It was started in March 2020 and then delayed because of restrictions on travel due to the global covid pandemic. Devi means ‘child’ in Ewe, a Ghanaian language spoken in south-eastern Ghana and southern Togo and south-west Benin. We use ‘vernacular’ to refer to culture broadly, and not just to language. The focus of the project was to understand the activities of young children who had not yet reached school-enrolment age. However, during the early fieldwork it became apparent that this focus was in tension with our aim to document practices related to the development of knowledge and skills connected to scientific understanding and practice, and to design, construction and mathematics. While such practices were very evident in the activities of older children (of around six to twelve years old) it was not very apparent in the activities of younger children. When younger children (of around one to five years of age) were involved in these activities they were very peripheral to them, mostly simply watching the activity or engaging with a very small and focused aspect of it. We therefore expanded the scope of the research to include the activities of children aged six to twelve years and what they did when they were not in school (at the weekends, after school and in the school holidays).

The project team are researchers from UK, Germany, Ghana, and Senegal, and a Ghanaian videographer and film director^[2]. The project NGO partners were Afrikids in Ghana, Plan Togo in Togo and West Africa Research Centre in Senegal. In each country our project partners seconded field workers to work with the postdoctoral researcher, who conducted the fieldwork, as translators and facilitators.

Access and field sites

Villagers are aware that their ways of life, especially in relation to children, are constantly scrutinized, critiqued, and even rendered illegal. Our reassurance that we would make a film that we would return to screen to them, and which would depict the forms of learning that children engage in through their everyday activities, including making and play was important in assuaging peoples' fears that we were setting out to 'expose' or 'critique' local practices of childhood. As important in engaging villagers with the research, perhaps more so, was the relationships that the researcher built up over the three months that she was in each region, and the relationships that many participants already had with our project partners.

During each period of fieldwork, the project's the PDR was hosted by a family and worked with a translator/field worker seconded from our local partners. The fieldworkers and their organizations identified three villages or small towns relatively close to one another; in each country the villages were less than an hours' drive apart. The PDR lived in the village and participated in village life, and interviewed 'key informants', mostly teachers and education officials, the village headmen, the village chief, health visitors and so on.

Data collection

The data (photographs, short videos and fieldnotes) that underpinned the filmic choices were recorded by the PDR, herself an art curator, who is Senegalese and fluent in Wolof (but not in Ewe, Frafra or Gurune). Fieldnotes were primarily visual, photographs and videos taken on her mobile phone with brief accompanying notes on names and ages of the participants and some background information (for example about what price children charge for the birds that they catch in homemade bird traps and fatten up). The research team asked her to pay attention to and record a variety of activities that could plausibly be said to involve some

knowledge of science, technology and design, engineering and mathematics.

THE FILM FORM, SHOT CHOICES AND FRAMING

Form

Against the tradition of 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary, we recreated or 'staged' all the scenes that are included in the film. In part, this was a logistical decision; documentary films in the realist tradition involve high ratios of footage to film that demand a very lengthy editing process. The DEVI film, as a research output, could not be made in the editing room. The decision to stage scenes was also related to our recognition of the dominant framing of poor children as either preternaturally resilient or vulnerable to the point of abjection. We wanted to be able to control these effects by not relying on naturalistic filming but rather pre-selecting scenes that we agreed conveyed the central purpose of the film and could then be re-created for filming. This also meant that we could involve the people in the film in the making of the film. The PDR selected with the participants who would be filmed and what they would be doing and how to set up the scene. Far more than simply giving their consent or being filmed and signing release forms, this practice meant that the participants co-created the film footage.

The decision to stage the scenes could be criticized as a kind of tampering with the evidence. In contrast to the docudrama genre epitomized in Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922) contemporary expectations of documentary are that it is capturing, rather than staging, reality. However, despite its claims to simply capturing 'the real', so-called 'fly-on-the-wall' documentary is also framed by a narrative that both determines what the photographer finds interesting and then what footage makes it to the final cut and how that cut is visually

narrated; even with 60:1 ratios of footage to final cut, documentary film can never simply mimetically reproduce reality. Conversely, melodrama often aims for the appearance of a ‘naturally occurring’ or true to life story. We wanted to disrupt the melodramatic narrative, and at the same time to avoid a kind of ‘national geographic’ observational nature photography that, as Ousmane Sembene once ‘charged Jean Rouch, his counterpart in French ethnographic film... "Tu nous regardes comme des insectes" ("You look at us as though we were insects")’ (Amad 2013:49); actively involving people in the making of the film also aimed to avoid the sense of the camera/spectator looking at, rather than looking with, the protagonists in the film.

Although we staged scenes that were re-creations of activities that the PDR had previously observed children taking part in, we did not stage other aspects of the scene; for example, we did not ask people to dress ‘for the camera’, and we did not ask adults to engage with children if they did not spontaneously do so. Some children were very smartly dressed on the day that we filmed, but most children and adults were wearing their everyday clothes.

In addition to being able to choose how they presented themselves for the camera, recreating scenes and discussing with children and parents how to recreate their everyday activities gave the participants more control over the filming process than a fly-on-the-wall documentary would allow.

Shot Choices

Reflecting the view of school as a child’s place, the draft shot list proposed by the director for the first round of filming in Ghana centered on school, for example, of the ten items in the proposed shot list, two were establishing shots and four were of children at school. The film

footage was based on a shot list that was collectively constructed from the research data by the research team and project partner field officers and the director. This had no shots at school and instead, drew on the activities seen in the PDR’s fieldwork notes (see Table). When we prepared for the second round of filming, in Togo, our emphasis on the learning potentials for Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) of children’s activities had been sharpened and we constructed a list of individuals doing making and play related practices. For the third and final round of filming, in Senegal in July 2022, we focused our lens on toy-making, tailoring, and basket-weaving. Unfortunately, in Senegal the rainy season had started, and we could not capture as broad a range of images as we had hoped to for the film and relied heavily on three sites: children making boats, children and adults weaving baskets, a boy and his father making clothes.

Round	Round 1	Round 2	Round 3
Country site (date)	Ghana (October 2021)	Togo (March 2022)	Senegal (July 2022)
Focus	Water collection (bore holes, pumps filling containers,	Bicycle repair, cassava preparation,	Toy-making (boats and cars),

	balancing containers, children collaborating with each other to collect and carry water, on bicycles and wheelbarrows), farming using plough and hoe, grain processing including drying and milling rice, counting, drawing shapes, repairing motorbikes and bicycles, weaving.	motorbike repair, broom-making, video game play, oil-making, toy-car making, making musical instruments, playing football, soya-curd making, basket weaving, blacksmithing and various play and game demonstrations.	tailoring, basket-weaving).
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We did not include in the shoot any ‘talking heads’ or key informants explaining what children were doing or the relationship of these activities to either work or learning. The

reasons for this decision are fully elaborated below in the discussion of sound and voice.

Framing

Melodrama needs a suffering/protagonist who is innocent in the dual sense of unworldly and not guilty. In melodrama, this often involves portraying the suffering protagonist as immobile, trapped, incapable of action. The representation of this innocence is difficult to maintain if the protagonist is agential. In NGO fundraising communications, which invariably trade in melodramatic conventions (Wells 2013), increasing the connection between the spectator and the subject is often accomplished by stripping the child of their cultural context through close framing of the child's face or body and having the child look out of the frame 'directly' at the viewer. Thus, to avoid a melodramatic framing we conveyed children as agential, both in the sense of active and of pursuing their own projects, with their view focused on these activities rather than 'looking at' the spectator and situated within a specific cultural milieu. While many of the shots in the film were close-ups of the child's face these were intended to convey concentration and interest of the child in the activity that she or he is pursuing, rather than isolation from others.

As mentioned above, many of the forms of making that children are engaged in were economic activities (weaving, sewing, making shea-butter, oil and soya-curd). The project research team began, quite early in the fieldwork, to think of the children's learning activities as taking place in 'makerspaces'. The frame of 'makerspaces' is conceptually connected to embodied cognition, active learning, sociocultural theory and related concepts. To turn the viewer toward a reading of learning and cultural activity and away from an interpretation of this as child labor, the director focused on the activity of making, zooming in on the detail of the child's hands and the object that they are working with and pulling out to the context in

which this making is taking place. However, a tension entered the process here, between the close focus on the child as maker, and the importance of showing the child in relation to other children and to adults. For example, when in a fishing village (Senegal) we were filming a group of boys making toy boats out of paint cans one of the boys was finding it difficult to form the deconstructed paint can into a rectangle and his father began to help him. The director initially asked the father to stay out of the frame because she felt that it detracted from the intended focus of the shoot (on children's activities), but after a discussion we agreed that he should be included since what we did not want to do was create the impression, so common in the melodramatic genre, especially in NGO communications, that children are in their own society, detached from and even neglected by their parents. The importance of this interplay between close-ups, relationships and wider context has been discussed by African filmmaker and scholar Florence Ayisi to avoid the mystification and exoticization often present in ethnographic film. She comments that 'the obsession of some filmmakers with close-ups creates a spatial abstraction that conceals not only the physical space, but also body language and character positions in relation to each other. This tends to render mundane actuality events into romanticized or mystified rituals' (Ayisi and Brylla 2013:136). On the other hand, extensive use of wide shots compromises 'the palpability of facial expressions and texture'. In contrast, she advocates the use of both wide shots and close-ups to provide a sense of 'bodily space' and 'objective space' (Ayisi and Brylla 2013:137).

Representations of African children continue to be dominated by the depiction of their lives as steeped in violence and neglect because they are poor, so much so that poverty itself becomes a synonym for neglect. Similarly, the representation of school as the space in which children naturally belong and a solution to poverty at every scale from the individual to the nation means that the out-of-school child is assumed to be both out of place and suffering

from parental neglect at best, and possibly abuse and exploitation. To counter this reading of the 'out-of-school' children in our film (in fact they were out of school because they were either too young to start school or it was the weekend/end of the school day) we set up several scenes where a parent was making things with the child. We did not direct how this should happen, for example in a couple of scenes a parent shows a child how to do something that they are struggling with; we did not ask the parent to do this, it just flowed as a natural part of the interaction in which the novice (the child) learns a new skill from the teacher (the parent).

EDITING THE FILM

By the end of the shooting of the film in three countries (Ghana in October 2021, Togo in March 2022 and Senegal in July 2022) we had 6 hours and 45 minutes of footage to be edited into a documentary of between 60 and 75 minutes. The editing was done by the director, Anita Afonu with her colleague Daniel Richardson in Accra, Ghana and each cut was shared with the producer, Bartek Dziadosz, and the research team. The high-production values of the film shoot were an important element in presenting the film as more film than ethnological documentary. In the editing, the fundamental task was to organize selected footage in a way that a visual narrative could emerge without depending on either non-diegetic speech or sound (as melodrama does) or on talking heads (as ethnographic and campaign films do). Diegetic sounds helped to convey relationships between characters and to carry a heightened sense of place.

Melodrama trades in tropes and archetypes. As Boltanski says, "it is he, *but it could be someone else*" (Boltanski 1999:12, emphasis added). Individuality is the hallmark of those with social standing, the representation of the powerless is always an archetype who stands in for all those others who are like them. We wanted to resist the reading of the children and

their parents in the film as archetypes but instead to have the viewer engage with them as individuals, albeit within the context of their socio-cultural milieu and family life. The focus of four of the film's five sections is therefore on extended moments of making an object from start to finish, or near completion, allowing the film to carry both the child's relationships with others and the socio-cultural context of their lives. Focusing on the coherence of the process in relation to the object being made provided a narrative frame or a series of short stories of the lives of objects inside the overarching narrative of making and learning. These scenes also present a fuller sense of each child's personality in how they approach the task before them.

Edit #1

In the first cut of the film the opening scenes were a montage of place-setting images. These scenes played over a soundtrack of a call and response song sung by a group of children in the film. The montage ends with girls running into a circle, in an image typical of NGO representations showing the happy ending of an intervention. It is followed by title cards of white text on a black screen explaining the origin and aim of the film:

'DEVI was a research project in west Africa that aimed to identify how families in rural communities support their children's learning in the early years'

'The project wanted to identify how children's cognitive development is accomplished and embedded in daily practices and interactions'

'The film tells the story of how children in the villages where the DEVI research was conducted learn through making toys, transforming matter, weaving materials and playing games'

The first cut then proceeds without any obvious narrative structure, for example it starts with weaving and ends with making clothes on a sewing machine and in between we see oil, shea-butter and soya being made. At 38 minutes and 54 minutes there are short sequences of montages of children playing games. For the director 'these are intended as "breathers" that visually transition the viewer from one activity to the next'. This had the effect of juxtaposing concentrated effort involving economic activity (except for toy boat and car making and making a musical instrument with a tin can and wire) with apparently intrinsically satisfying activities, reinforcing a representation of these activities as 'work' rather than 'learning'. It also meant that the play and games that we had filmed were now reduced to 'breathers' transitioning between activities rather than an activity that we wanted the viewer to also consider as having learning potential. The director was concerned that the absence of a final product for the shea butter and the soya curd made these scenes appear to be unfinished. However, this had the advantage of reducing the connection with economic activity and instead focusing on the process, and its learning potential.

The first cut ended with a montage of girls dancing in a circle and clapping, playing oware, playing cards, playing a game with lines and stones, hopscotch, ludo, sand and cans, little girls jumping and clapping. As with the earlier montage sequences, we felt this positioned these activities as a relief from the effort and concentration required for the other activities. This was confirmed by the director's explanation that she had wanted to 'show children just being happy and being playful/silly'. Instead, we proposed that playing and games should be presented in a block and that the film should end with the completion of the boat-making and the boys running into the sea with their boats.

We proposed that the footage should be organized into four sections: weaving and textiles, transforming matter, play and games, and toy-making. The intention was that the film would

be divided into four short stories, each focused on a set of culturally significant activities that either relate to making or to other aspects of children's everyday cultural life, for example play and games.

Edit #2

One of the problems for the film, and for our research, is that we cannot confidently say from the data whether children are learning STEM concepts through these activities or indeed, if they are learning anything other than the practice itself. Therefore, we changed the information titles at the start of the film to reflect this, inviting the viewer to 'consider what forms of knowledge are embedded in these activities.'

In the second cut, another section was added on 'farming and harvesting'. This decision, which was made by the director and editor, followed the question of whether harvesting groundnuts and pineapples could really be classified as 'transforming matter'. However, following audience comments at policy screenings in Accra, Dakar and Tsévié, it seemed that these scenes had the effect of focusing audiences on the child-labor problem. To some extent, as noted above, we had side-stepped the issue of what is to be done about the out-of-school child because the children in our research film are all in school or too young for school.

Nonetheless, the depiction of children weaving and making clothes, harvesting groundnuts and pineapples, and making shea-butter, palm-oil, and soya curd are classic images of child-labor. Indeed, groundnut harvesting and textile making (albeit in a factory) are two of the most iconic images of child labor, which have been circulating in anti-child labor campaigns since the 19th century. The spectator is already primed to see these as images of child labor rather than as learning, and nor is it easy to say that they are wrong to do so. Considering this, we may cut the section on farming and harvesting from the final cut. Not because we are entirely unconvinced that family farming is a form of learning but because it seems obvious

that to include it re-orientates the understanding of the film, for some audiences, away from the invitation to consider ‘what forms of learning are embedded in these activities’ and towards the policy-maker's default mode: the identification and eradication of problems.

SOUND, VOICE OVER & SUBTITLES

The director's expectation was that someone in the research team would voice a script over the documentary to provide it with narrative coherence. The place of sound in our film was debated between the researchers and the producers and the director. It raised many interesting issues about who a film is intended to be legible/audible to and the role of diegetic speech, which is audible but not necessarily legible to viewers, in narrating a story.

Our participants speak Wolof (Senegal), Ewe (Togo) Frafra or Gurune (Ghana). Most people are not fluent in either English/French or literate in their local language. We could not, therefore, have English or French speech from talking-head interviews with subtitles made in the four local languages because most people cannot read in the local language. Conversely, we could not have the interviews done in a local language and then subtitled into English or French, because this would mean that two-thirds of the film, assuming an equal distribution of people speaking in each country, would be unintelligible to the audience. These same constraints applied to having a voiceover narration for the film. For these reasons we decided not to include talking heads or voiceover narration, but to only have diegetic speech that occurs within the action of the film.

These issues with translation, subtitles and intelligibility were connected to the question of who the film should be intelligible to, and conversely who it should be opaque to.

Documentary film, like ethnographic texts, are not generally intended for audiences of the people depicted in the film; the primary audience is the outsider who wants to be immersed in a world that is not familiar to them, and to have that world and its relationships explained. By refusing to have subtitles and talking heads, we were refusing a form of transparency and asking audiences to look and hear differently; we wanted to disrupt the sense that there was a singular message in the film or a singular way to respond to it.

Our project partners were initially baffled by the film's absence of speech directed at the audience. When we arrived in Togo, having shared the final cut of the film ahead of our visit for internal viewing, one of our partners said that the film 'has no sound' and wondered how audiences would know what to think about the film if there was no voiceover to frame their response. Similar concerns were expressed by the director. This is not surprising since, as Irina Leimbacher notes:

“Conventional nonfiction works tend to solicit an inquisitive and acquisitive listening that privileges the intake of coherent, concise verbal information...Speech is chopped, elided, and reassembled by media makers to shape a message, emphasizing speech's referential function and minimizing, if not eliminating, digressions, paralinguistic expression, and reflection on vocalized speech itself (Leimbacher 2017:293)”.

In contrast to this legible speech in which 'recorded voices (as witness or expert) substitute for the textual voice, becoming mere "evidence" in the filmmaker's argument' (Leimbacher p.295 citing Nicols) I wanted the film to include what Leimbacher calls 'sonorous voice' and Trinh T. Minh-ha refers to as 'Language as voice and music' (Hadjoannou 2017:363 citing Trinh 1992).

SCREENING & RECEPTION

The film was screened in each of the nine villages where the research was conducted and in Accra, Dakar and Tsévié (the capital of Maritime Togo). The screenings in the capital cities were for an invited audience of academics, education professionals and policymakers. Program notes were prepared for the audience and the context of the film and the research that underpins it was briefly introduced to them by one of the research team. The screenings in the villages were held in the open-air in the evenings, except for one screening in Kayar, Senegal which was held indoors in the afternoon. Local education officials, the village chief and the village headman, and all the people who had participated in the research were invited to these screenings which were also open to the public. Apart from the indoor screening, which was attended by about fifty people, the audiences for the village screenings were large, ranging from 180 to 750 people. About one-half of each audience in the villages were children.



Screening of 'Weaving Knowledge' in Ghana, December 2022. © Karen Wells.

Our intention was that the film would make visible to villagers and to policy makers the learning potential and the funds of knowledge embedded in the everyday activities of children. Since many of the children's practices were connected to economic activity, we were aware that this aim could easily unravel if viewers were concerned that what they were watching was child labor and that they were being asked to endorse child exploitation. We were also aware that the melodramatic tropes of NGO communication are familiar to villagers and policymakers alike and that if the film was interpreted within this frame, then children's activities would inevitably be read as the consequence of poverty and exploitation.

The program notes for policy audiences explained briefly how the research was conducted and how the film is structured. They prepare the viewer for a visual narrative explaining that

‘[t]he only sounds you will here are those of the conversations of children with one another and with adults, their songs, and the sounds of the things they make...we wanted the film to be accessible to the participants and villages represented, regardless of the languages they are fluent in. We also wanted to resist tying down the meaning of the film in words, allowing spectators more free play in their interpretation of the film.’

Most of the screenings in the villages were held outdoors after sunset. The film was projected from an apple macbook air onto a screen and the sound was relayed through a portable PA system.

In the presentations to policy makers in Accra, Dakar and Tsévié, a dominant theme in responses was ‘I was that child’. The resonance of this statement, which was said in each of the policy screenings, is very different to that of the melodramatic sign that implores the viewer to save ‘a child like x’. In these statements, there is nostalgia and longing rather than pity. It is outside of the scope of this paper, and of the research that underpinned it, to theorize the significance of this nostalgic response to a contemporary representation of village life. However, it is worth noting that the speaker, now a secure member of the middle classes, is signaling his or her closeness to rural life, and respect for the place and people that made them the adult they became. In Accra, a platform speaker noted that he was raised in a village and had done all the activities shown in the film and that he valued the knowledge he had developed there. When one of the speakers (a professor at University of

Ghana-Legon, Accra) said ‘this is what we did before we had education’, the audience responded, spontaneously, ‘this is education!’ In Tsévié, the policy audience also responded very appreciatively to the representation of children’s learning and spoke about their own experiences as children and raised the possibility of incorporating these activities into the school curriculum or even bringing educators to the activities to scaffold children's learning to school science, mathematics and design and technology.

An audience member in Togo did raise the question of whether these activities were, in fact, forms of labor more than of learning; commenting that ‘we have been taught that this is child labor and should be stopped’. The representation made her uneasy.

In the villages, the child-labor question was not raised by the audience at all. The audiences were very engaged with the film, watching it intently. In Dzrekpo, where we screened in the town square by a water-pipe, passersby stopped on their way to or from the water pipe and then stayed for the rest of the film.

At the end of the village screenings, we asked for comments and questions about the film. These discussions lasted for about 30 minutes. Many people said that they felt the film showed how important it was for parents to talk with their children and show them how to learn from their parents’ knowledge. This was a nice contrast to one of our first conversations with villagers in Ghana at the start of the research who, when asked what they taught their children, said they had nothing of value to share since the only knowledge that counted now was that which their children learned in school. In Dua, the local education office commented that he is always waiting for the government to send the materials to teach science but that now he has seen the film he thinks that the science curriculum and the Building Design and Technology curriculum could be taught with what they have to-hand in the village. An extended discussion in Kayar was led by the father of Ibrahim who is seen in the film

learning in his father's tailor shop. He talked about how his son had asked to leave school and he had agreed to this because Ibrahim did not seem to be learning at school and in fact was being made to feel stupid. The father was very pleased with the progress his son was making in learning to be a tailor and that he found him to be a quick learner, and this was a skill that Ibrahim enjoyed learning and was good at. In Senegal, more so than in Togo and Ghana, audiences were very clear about the value and importance of Senegalese culture in children's education and appreciated the film's representation. There was also great interest in the different ways that the same products got made in each country, the differences in how palm oil was made and how weaving was done.

Several people in Dzrekpo said they would be interested to watch a film about what children in Europe do when they are not in school; perhaps a reference to the possibility of 'returning the gaze' and opposing the 'morbid geometrism' of a colonial order that demanded 'the right to look without being looked at' (Amad 2013:50 citing Ross 1975:76 quoting the literary critic Jacques Leenhardt).

All of the village screenings were attended by large numbers of children. They watched the full film very attentively. Their comments about the film in the post-screening discussion were brief but very positive. In response to a question asking how they would feel if what they had seen in the film was incorporated in school, several children said they would like that, and it would mean that they would understand what was going on in school. A teenager who now works in a manual trade said that he had not gone to school, and he had done all the things depicted in the film but that he had not realized that in doing so he also was learning.

TREADING A PATH BETWEEN MELODRAMA AND NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

In this paper I have shown how shooting and editing, and the space and time of a film's screening can be deployed to orientate the viewer away from a melodramatic reading of African rural childhoods. The deployment of high production values, the attention of the camera on the engagement between the child and the things they were making, the relationships depicted between adults, usually the children's parents, and children in the film and the absence of didactic text and, especially, non-diegetic sound were important elements in enabling the film to escape a melodramatic reading. Although the film escapes this reading, the possibility of making the kind of ethno-documentary that Sembene critiqued when he accuses Rouch of regarding Africans 'as insects' also had to be confronted. There is a contradiction in the process of making a film funded by the British Academy and produced by a British (English and Polish) production team and with a white English PI that aims to decolonize representation. Of course, the direction of Anita Afonu and the research conducted by the PDR who is Senegalese and committed to decolonial representation, and the partnership with Peace Tetteh at University of Ghana-Legon as well as with our project partners in the region, were important in ensuring that the footage was framed within a decolonial and/or nationalist gaze. The decision to edit the film without a narrative voiceover was, in a sense, a risky one, cinematically but, together with the absence of non-diegetic sound and talking heads also guarded against 'entomology' as Amad puts it. The lack of translation, and absence of subtitles or expert voices and talking heads, positioned the spectator already familiar with the environment of film as being the ideal viewer; rendering the film less transparent to the policy spectator, and to middle-class and white audiences.

The film was a critical part of the research process. It enabled us to engage meaningfully with children and parents about how to represent their experiences in ways that showed the rich texture of their everyday lives. The gaze of the documentary film is almost always that of the

outsider capturing the experience of the insider in ways that enable the spectator to accumulate knowledge of the ‘other’. Ethnographic writing has distanced itself from the colonial knowledge production that inaugurated the discipline of anthropology through various strategies. Ethnographic documentary film has its origins in these same conditions of colonial knowledge production and needs to develop similar strategies for re-imagining visual representation. This project offers one such set of strategies, including giving protagonists control over their representation in the film through both an extended period of research in communities to develop a mutual understanding and development of the research focus; forcing non-local audiences to question their own demand for the legibility of ‘the other’ through not translating local languages and refusing to include explanatory sub-titles of the activities included in the film, and refusing to have a didactic voiceover, which inevitably casts the protagonists in the film as objects of another’s knowledge. Finally, this paper has focused on the importance of genre framing in the shooting and editing of film and the uses of docudrama for foregrounding children’s participation and agency in their own representation.

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^[1] The film will be available to view on a vimeo link in the coming months for readers. I have also included a description of the film as an online appendix (4,000 words).

^[2] Karen Wells is the project Principal Investigator. Peace Tetteh and Erdmute Alber are the co-investigators. Anita Afonu, a Ghanaian filmmaker, best known for *Perished Diamonds* joined the project in the role of director and editor. The PDR, Fatou Kine Diouf, joined the project in March 2021, exactly a year since the original start date and began field work in northern Ghana in July 2021.