

Case study

Documentary film practice at the Institute of Film and Television, Ghana: truth claims, oral histories and documentary strategies

Joseph Aketema^{1,*} and Cecilia Avorkliyah^{2,*}

¹Doctoral student and assistant lecturer, Institute of Film and Television, University of Media, Arts and Communication, Accra, Ghana

²Doctoral student, Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana, Legon

*Correspondence: joseph.aketema@nafti.edu.gh (JA); cecilia.agbogbo@nafti.edu.gh (CA)

Submission date: 1 April 2023; Acceptance date: 23 May 2023; Publication date: 12 December 2023

How to cite

Aketema, J. and Avorkliyah, C. (2023) 'Documentary film practice at the Institute of Film and Television, Ghana: truth claims, oral histories and documentary strategies'. *Film Education Journal*, 6 (2), 116–25.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/FEJ.06.2.04>.

Peer review

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-anonymous peer-review process, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Copyright

2023, Joseph Aketema and Cecilia Avorkliyah. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (CC BY) 4.0 <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>, which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original authors and source are credited • DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14324/FEJ.06.2.04>.

Open access

Film Education Journal is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

This article explores a case study of how documentary film practice is taught at the Institute of Film and Television, Ghana. Drawing on the practices of its authors – themselves documentary film-makers and former students of the institute – we explore some of the contemporary challenges facing how we approach the theory and practice of documentary film-making in contemporary Ghana, including how our students might best approach contested conceptions of the truth, and how such notions of the truth may be articulated within Ghana's living oral traditions.

Keywords documentary film-making; ethnography; Ghana; oral tradition; participatory film; relativism; slave trade; storytelling

Introduction

The National Film and Television Institute (NAFTI) of Ghana was instituted in 1978, with support from the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Germany, to offer training in film production, acting and film-making

for adult education. (In 2023, the name was changed to the Institute of Film and Television [IFT]. In this article, NAFTI and IFT refer to the same institution.) In the period between 1960 and 1979, there were only 10 feature films produced through the Ghana Film Industry Corporation (GFIC) (Sakyi, 1996, cited in [Garritano, 2008](#)), highlighting the need for a more strategic approach to training and skills development in the industry and leading – in turn – to the foundation of the NAFTI. Since 2020, the institute has been affiliated with the University of Media, Arts and Communication, Ghana, offering a wide range of programmes in film production, including, but not limited to, film directing, television production, editing, sound and animation.

As Carmela [Garritano \(2008\)](#) has explored, the notion of ‘authenticity’ in African cinema, and in Ghanaian film-making in particular, as linked to discourses around documentary’s representation of truth(s), is a complicated ideological and historical construct. [Garritano’s \(2008\)](#) article explores the tension between institutional perceptions of how Ghanaian culture should be represented (underlying the approaches of both the IFT and the GFIC), in contrast to the explosion of amateur video production in the late 1980s, which allowed non-professionals the means, for the first time, to offer representations that might counter the preferred narratives of the industry. Indeed, the relevance of this latter movement for today’s film-makers in Ghana, who have greater access to the means of film production, and thus the ability to make films more easily and affordably than ever before, is not hard to see. [Ukadike \(2000: 245\)](#) similarly notes the tension in this period between the desire of young film-makers to ‘create a full-fledged cinematic industry that emphasises entertainment over education’, and the goal to ‘induce an awareness of African consciousness’, perhaps prioritised more by national funders than by local audiences, and which may further prove more appealing to film festival and cinephiliac audiences beyond Ghana, in contrast to work defined more by local appeal. While such observations pertain, of course, to most non-Hollywood cinemas, they serve to provide a useful, contextual background to the formation and development of the IFT, and its priority of impressing on students that film and television are expressions towards the development of the intellectual, philosophical and cultural ideas of Ghanaian people, through skills development and professionalisation of the film and television sector (see <https://nafti.edu.gh/p/>).

In this case study, we – Joseph Aketema and Cecilia Avorkliyah – film-makers and researchers, and ourselves former students at the IFT who now teach at the institute, reflect on pedagogical strategies for training documentary film-makers in Ghana. In doing so, we revisit, within an explicitly Ghanaian context, how well-rehearsed discussions regarding the truth claims of documentary film might be complicated within a culture that continues to privilege oral histories and traditions of storytelling, which, as such, has less previous reliance upon documented and archival sources of information. We discuss our approach to dismantling the objectivity sometimes associated with the documentary mode, through a series of discussions and screenings with our students. Finally, we look at several of the documentary films produced by our students, to consider the extent to which these tensions are apparent in the films themselves, which often seek to examine contentious issues in Ghanaian politics, culture and history.

Pedagogical underpinnings: examining the ‘truth claim’ of documentary film

Given the significant body of literature on documentary film’s contested claim to have a privileged relationship with ‘truth’, this section offers a brief survey of the discussion as it relates to the formulation of pedagogical strategies underpinning our approach to teaching in the classroom. Okwui [Enwezor \(2004: 31\)](#) notes:

The root of the term ‘documentary’ is the document. In its literal term, it is a record or evidence of something that proves the existence or the occurrence of that which the document records,

hence the claim of 'truth' often imputed to the documentary. But to document is never to make immanent a singular overwhelming truth.

Elsewhere, Nigerian playwright Wole Soyinka (2016) discusses how knowing and defining the truth can in itself be problematic. This is because there are often, as Soyinka (2016: n.p.) argues, 'my truth, your truth, the truth and *no truth* (relativism), and what exists as your truth may just be relativism'. Here, Soyinka's different conceptions of authenticating truth are based on historical social injustices, such as child rights abuses, and enslavements, where the need to establish victim and perpetrator for the purposes of reparation and restitution are of critical concern. Soyinka's (2016) argument regarding the difficulties of authenticating truth, while outside discussion of documentary film, is, however, countered by Hughes (2012). Citing the documentary film-maker Errol Morris, Hughes (2012: 248) explains: 'Truth is not relative, it's not subjective. It may be elusive or hidden. People may wish to disregard it. But there is such a thing as truth.' Hughes here poses a question that we educators and film-makers asked ourselves and our students at the IFT: if documentary students were investigating an undocumented, or little documented, historical event – for example, the horrific activities of Bagao, the notorious slave raider who tormented the people of Navrongo, Paga and Chiana in northern Ghana in the early 1870s (as we discuss below) – would they each produce the same film, and uncover the same 'truth'? Our answer, and that of our students, was *no*; in each instance, the approach to the subject of filmic enquiry may vary, the choice of documentary participants, and the questions asked of participants by each student, would likely be different, and the narrative structure and story content of each student film would therefore not be the same when the editorial processes were complete. This would seem particularly evident in a case such as Bagao's slave raiding in the 1870s, for which there is little documentary evidence to go by, and no eyewitness accounts to offer veracity. Even when such material is available, the documentary film-maker has to subject them to scrutiny, and their interpretation may therefore differ from those of their peers. In instances such as these, it becomes a case of documentary film-makers approaching truth from a perspective that is inevitably unique, because it arises from the social, cultural and historical location and experiences of each film-maker.

Discussions with our students frequently seek to explore the challenges facing traditional forms of documentary film-making, between what might be considered moments in which unfolding events are captured, in person, by documentarians (what Enwezor [2004: 24] has discussed as 'the amanuensis' of truth), and those in which an event is reconstructed by the film-making (what Harindranath [2018: 408], paraphrasing Nichols [1991: 28], discusses as 'metonymic representation'). The former – as broadly encapsulated by observational modes of film-making – largely comprise what the film-maker themselves directly witnesses and films; for example, when an accident or historical occurrence happens when the documentary film-maker is there at the time to record it, such as in *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (Bartley and O'Briain, 2003), which highlights a coup threatening the then Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez's leadership. In terms of the latter, more 'metonymic' representations of truth tend to pertain to the detailed reconstruction of events in loyal adherence to how they are believed to have happened; for example, as presented in Errol Morris's *The Thin Blue Line* (1988). A further, well-explored example of the metonymic representation of truth is the reconstruction of Robert Flaherty's documentary *Nanook of the North* (1922), after the film-maker claimed that he lost an earlier, more 'authentic', observational version of the hard-lived experiences of the Inuit. As Winston (2013) notes, what separates Flaherty's groundbreaking and problematic film from those which recorded 'actuality' before this point lies in how he organised the material in editing, and staged various re-enactments, to support a dramatic narrative. While this narrative was informed by Flaherty's observations of Inuit life, the way in which he then consciously arranged the material to suit the imagined narrative appetites of Western audiences lays bare the complexity of the documentary's 'truth claims', in a way that earlier actuality films, such as the famous Lumière brothers' *L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (*Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat*) (1896), did not.

Our pedagogical approach to documentary film-making at the IFT is also influenced by our own experiences as film-makers and former students. Our approach to teaching is practice-led, with our own

experiences as documentary film-makers complementing our understanding of documentary studies scholarship to provide a rounded perspective for our students. In certain key instances, this has allowed us to conceptualise our approaches to literature for students via our own experiences, and to encourage them to do the same.

One experience that Joseph had while directing a documentary about the slave trade in Ghana (*The Gwalla in Retrospect: The story of Bagao*, Joseph Aketema, 2020) provided a compelling basis for discussion of the importance of documenting oral histories, even if the 'truth' of those histories can never be fully verified with certainty, leaving audiences to come to their own understanding of what the truth of the events may be. This is particularly the case in Ghana, where there remains a strong, extant tradition of oral storytelling. When making a documentary about a well-known slave trader, Bagao ('Bush Man') in the Upper East region of Ghana, Joseph had to weave together stories from a variety of townspeople regarding the activities of a man who had terrorised the area more than a century earlier. Bagao captured locals and transported them to the Pikworo Slave Camp, where they would be chained up and left in squalid conditions before being marched on foot to the coast to be sold to Europe or the Americas (a journey also captured in Ayesha Harruna Attah's [2018] recent novel *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*). One of the film's interviewees recounted the capture of his grandfather and great-uncle as young men by Bagao. While his grandfather returned, his younger brother was never seen again, leaving his history unknown and unknowable.

A similar situation arose during an earlier encounter in Paga, a town in the Upper East region of Ghana, when investigating the activities of Bagao. Here, Joseph initially received what he considered to be scant and disingenuous information which failed to elucidate any further accounts of Bagao. Local interviewees in Paga did, however, reveal the disconcerting and horrendous torture that Pe (Chief) Bayemvua, son of Ngwuru (who reigned in Paga from 1846 to 1878), had experienced at the hands of enslavers, including Bagao himself. From this encounter, it became clear to Joseph that one of the tensions when exploring and interacting with oral storytelling traditions is that narrators may be selective in sharing information, perhaps in certain circumstances only sharing that which validates and favours their own perspectives, while avoiding material that might cast themselves or their ancestors in an unfavourable light. Perani and Smith (1998) recognise that, in the pursuit of reconstructing truth through oral means, the researcher must tread carefully with participants who might be deliberately adapting facts for various reasons – for example, to please the investigator, or to validate a particular set of interests or a political position with which they are affiliated. Indeed, at the IFT, we have often discussed with our students the broader question of how individuals may self-realise and articulate their own histories, sometimes in ways that are very problematic. Joshua Oppenheimer's *The Act of Killing* (2012), which explores the recollections of those participating in genocidal killings in Indonesia in the 1960s, takes an imaginative, unusual approach to documenting how architects of mass murder justify and memorialise their acts, through encouraging the perpetrators to represent their own memories and experiences through stylised cinematic re-enactments. In this respect, Joseph approached the subject of Bagao in the understanding that some of his participants' versions of the truth might be conflicting. When he realised that there were seemingly certain historical gaps in the participants' recollections, which would render a documentary history of Bagao incomplete and not comprehensive, he sought to address this by delving deeper into his research process, moving onwards to other communities within the same Paga enclave, where other participants were able to elaborate upon some of the other distressing happenings suffered by Paga royalty. To navigate the subject, Joseph was guided by his subsequent choice of participants, and by further research, pertaining in particular to their location and what other interviewees had said about them. At the Pikworo Slave Camp in Paga, Joseph was told by the camp's caretaker that Bagao had indeed been a source of terror within the Paga area. When Joseph asked him if there were people within Paga whose ancestors might have suffered as a result of Bagao's nefarious activities, the caretaker mentioned a participant from the paramount seat (a traditional political title) of Paga, a reputed local historian, and the reigning chief of the Paga Kazigu royal house, who, among others, were able to provide significant additional information. Having gathered

this information from Paga, Joseph subsequently travelled to the nearby community of Navrongo, where three further oral narrators corroborated the story of Bagao with similar details to those received in Paga. In particular, one man, whose grandfather had ferreted Bagao from his hide-out in Suswoe of Feru, in modern day Burkina Faso, offered further historical accounts of Bagao in Navrongo up until the moment his grandfather ambushed him and brought him to Navrongo for execution in 1915.

From Joseph's experiences piecing together conflicting accounts of Bagao, the traditional African saying that 'victory has many fathers' is resonant in highlighting the extent to which one must adopt a number of varying strategies in seeking to arrive at a conception of 'truth'. The imperative to approach notions of the truth (whether one is engaging with oral testimony or otherwise) with a significant degree of complexity is central to how we teach documentary practice at the IFT, for, as we encourage students to consider, documentary film-makers have an ethical obligation to their audiences to seek to present their conception of truths with a greater degree of rigour and responsibility than that underlying other forms of film-making. As Fuhs (2014: 783) states: 'non-fiction films – with their presumed indexical relationship to reality and their attendant claims to authenticity – are often seen as having a privileged relationship to truth, and the ethical and epistemological stakes of these visual representations are heightened'. Similarly, we have found that the work of Harindranath (2018: 401) resonates with our students, in particular the notion that: 'Documentary's claims to "truth" draws on audience awareness of and familiarity with the world to which it refers, and it follows that its credibility lies in its approximation to historical reality, and its force derives from its association with the world it represents.' As we have discussed with our students, the reasons why we must concern ourselves with modes of authenticating truth in conventional documentary teaching practices are inseparable from the ways in which we each make meaning of the world and its realities, and, with this, the demanding task of documenting events and people honestly and responsibly.

Documentary discussions and screenings with IFT students past and present

One class at the IFT that warrants particular consideration in this case study is Film Perspective and Aesthetic (NAFD 303), taught by Joseph, and delivered exclusively for students majoring in film directing (whether fiction or documentary). Here, a diversity of films, including documentaries, are introduced to students, with the explicit aims of evaluating the truth claims articulated by film-makers (in the case of historical documentaries, in particular) and of gauging the ideological positions of the film-makers (with regard to questions of gender, culture and politics, in particular), and how this is manifested within their films. During this class, students engage with a number of key film texts in order to structure discussion around different modes of documentary, utilising the framework proposed by Bill Nichols (n.d.), leading students through a discussion of the various ethical issues in each film's truth claim and attempt to represent reality. For example, in *1804: The hidden history of Haiti* (Tariq Nasheed, 2017), interviews with experts and those with an interest in or relationship to Haiti, are used to reconstruct the revolutionary activities and resistance of Makandal, Dutty Bookman, Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Alongside these expert testimonies, however, the film also uses canvas designs, graphics, reconstructions of the slave revolts, archival footage and photographs of Haiti in the present and the recent past. As such, the film allows for a discussion of how the film meets the expectation of narrative and narration that many documentaries strive towards. In *1804*, in particular, a narrative reconstruction of relatively under-documented events is utilised in order to present an account of events from a relatively marginalised historical perspective. Wynants et al. (2020: 10) have speculated about whether 'Stories [may] reveal a deeper truth about the world in which we live than statistics or measurable facts.' In our teaching at the IFT, we therefore seek to advocate an ethical approach to documentary film-making, requiring a sensitive, yet rigorous, approach to gathering evidence and presenting arguments, in which one can present conceptions of truth without necessarily relying on already documented sources, albeit with a significant duty of care to honesty and veracity.

The extent to which the film-maker becomes involved in the research is frequently a heated topic of discussion with students during our viewing of *Super Size Me* (Morgan Spurlock, 2004), an infamous documentary occupying what Nichols (1991, 2017) earlier defined as the 'performative mode', whereby the film-maker is also the central character and an active research participant in the documentary's key questions. As Nichols (2017: 139) writes, 'participatory documentary gives us a sense of what it is like for the filmmaker to be in a given situation and how that situation alters as a result'. While we acknowledge that even the most observational modes of documentary film-making necessarily involve the inseparable subjectivity of the film-maker(s), discussions of truth within participatory modes of film-making become clearly located in a more subjective position. In our discussions with students around the question of participatory film, however, we frequently returned to the concepts of honesty and truth. Even when the documentary film-maker is operating in what might be considered a persuasive mode, their responsibility to present issues ethically, and with the appropriate level of research and rigour, remains, in order to allow the audience to remain in a position to weigh up evidence and its presentation. In the pursuit of truth, Bruzzi (2016: 257) recognises that:

The perceptible relaxation of the boundaries between 'fact' and 'fiction' and the clustering of interest amongst documentary filmmakers around ideas of performance has led not to a feeling that reality does not exist, but rather an acceptance that reality does exist but that it is not fixed, finite or stable.

What clear pedagogical principles are then to be followed when seeking to affirm or establish truth claims in documentary film-making? According to Enwezor (2004: 34), 'To disbelieve what is presented as the truth about the world, may lend itself to distrust of the messenger rather than the message.' As such, the performative documentary film-maker may risk obscuring the truth claims of their work, if it is not sufficiently clear to the audience that the information is verifiable. In these terms, within an era of increasing misinformation (and disinformation), and the rising use of artificial intelligence, documentary film, we argue, is in an even more imperilled position in terms of its authority to represent reality and to articulate conceptions of truth.

In addition to the documentaries mentioned so far, another film discussed during the IFT's Film Perspective and Aesthetic module is the late Senegalese film director Safi Faye's *Fad'jal* (1979), a film opening with the words of Hampate Ba, that: 'It is said in Africa, when an old man dies that a library is on fire.' *Fad'jal* largely occupies an observational mode of documentary film-making, while simultaneously integrating aspects of autobiographical and ethnographic documentary approaches, alongside aspects of dramatic reconstruction and oral retelling. In celebrating the foundation of the Serer community in Senegal, the film utilises the community's elders, who reconstruct their history and ancestry, and Serer's founding matriarch Faidjal. When the film was screened at the IFT, students were impressed with the elements of documentary in the film, including those aspects of oral narration, and the histories of Serer detailed in song by community griots. Students recognised the importance of oral narrations in the film, especially at a time when colonial Senegal, under the political oversight of France, was teaching French history to school-age students in the community of Serer, while their own history remained undocumented. A classroom scene in the opening of the film, in which children recite aspects of French history, makes the film's postcolonial perspective readily apparent. The village elders, who are responsible for passing down stories to younger generations, often gather around the baobab tree (itself a site of knowledge and knowing), serving effectively as a decolonised, Afrocentric classroom, in which knowledge can be taught anywhere and at any time, and not necessarily in a physically constructed classroom. In this Afrocentric classroom, the history of Serer is constituted outside 'official' strategies of documentation, with their colonial connotations. Safi Faye (2018: n.p.) has questioned:

In contrast to the written history of France learned in school, how can African history be transmitted if it only exists through oral tradition? Who's going to pass it on to the children?

The village elder, he who holds the memory of history. Every evening, the children scrambled up into the beautiful kapok trees after getting out of school to gather around the village elder. He would then pass on their history, that which hasn't been written down.

The film is grounded in a realist approach, and the indexical ability of film and photography to capture and document life beyond its natural existence, or, in Bazin and Gray's (1960: 5) terms, the camera's 'preservation of life by a representation of life'. In Faye's film, the camera records its truth, which is no less verifiable for its orality. Furthermore, the film shows how the observational documentary can still offer a strong degree of perspective, albeit one more open to the audience, than documentaries in the performative mode. Faye is thought to be the first female to direct a feature-length film in sub-Saharan Africa, and the film subtly highlights the centrality of women to the Serer community (despite the oral recountings of the elder men), both in its content (for example, in a pivotal scene depicting a mother giving birth) and in its locating of the history of Serer within the matriarchal framework of village founder, Mbang Faidjal.

Having provided an account of some of the ways in which the IFT seeks to equip its students to make their own documentary films, through the mentorship and experiences of their tutors, alongside a critical conversation around conceptions of truth across different modes of documentary, we now reflect on some of the films that our documentary-focused students have since gone on to make.

Documenting the truth: selected documentary films of IFT students

Since graduation, a number of students from the IFT have gone on to work in the Ghanaian film and television industries, submitting their films to festivals worldwide and, in certain cases, returning to the IFT to teach, as we have done ourselves. Magdalene Eyram Kwashie is now also a teacher at the institute, and her short documentary *Evé Kornu (Inseparable Spirits)* (2017) incorporates many of the ideas discussed so far in terms of its exploration of how communities in the Volta region of Ghana continue to relate to a ritual that separates a surviving twin from their deceased sibling. Through oral recollections of the performance of the ritual, Kwashie's documentary focuses on the story of Atsu Ametsikor Constant, who lost his twin sister when he was 15 years old. Atsu's sister, Atsufi, died, as recalled by another of Atsu's sisters, after having given offence to a village elder. Although the family apologised on Atsufi's behalf, the elder did not accept the apology, and Atsufi was found dead the next morning, after complaining of headaches the night before. The documentary therefore explores a relationship to superstition and traditional beliefs which, like the oral culture from which they spring, articulate 'truth claims' in a different manner from that usually featured in many documentaries, with their focus on observation, evidence and so on. In order to protect Atsu, and to safeguard Atsufi's spirit, a ritual is then performed, whereby two dolls are carved, one of which is buried with the deceased twin, while the other remains with the living, to be cared for, bathed, fed and well-treated in order to appease the departed soul of the lost twin. According to one of the community members involved in the ritual, this allows both the living and the dead to move forward in peace. Various residents of the village and family members detail their belief in the power of this ritual, while Atsu's refusal to perform the ritual provides a sticking point in their relations.

Kwashie's film sensitively explores how truth for the participants is related to their various belief systems. For example, Atsu's strong Christian faith, explored in the film through discussions with his pastor, is what prevents him from performing this ritual, with its associations of idolatry and superstition. According to Atsu's relatives, the family suffers greatly because of this failure to perform the ritual: Atsu's fishing business is failing, his father is out of work, and his mother is perennially sick. Kwashie's documentary expertly creates a sense of narrative tension through the way in which it collates its interviews, showing the difficulty of coming to a resolution that satisfies Atsu and his pastor, as well as one that also satisfies his family, and the spirit of his dead twin sister. Eventually, Atsu agrees to perform the ritual. This begins with the spirit of Atsufi being summoned by a messenger from the spirit realm, with Atsufi revealing that she has been 'stuck between worlds' and unable to be at peace because the ritual has not been performed.

Atsu's head is then shaved, the dolls carefully prepared, and the blood and feathers of sacrificial chickens are placed into the shrine for each twin. Upon completion of the ritual, Atsu, somewhat reluctantly, reveals that he is relieved that his family can now be at peace, and that their misfortunes might lessen, although it is clear that, given his Christian beliefs, he is conflicted about having completed the ritual, and dubious as to its merits.

Another documentary, *Gold Coast Soldier* (2017), by Patience Adisenu, looks at the recruitment of young men as soldiers by the British in the Second World War, from what was then the British colony of the Gold Coast (now Ghana). It similarly relies on oral recollections, in this case, those of Joseph Ashiteye Hammond, who was recruited by the British at the age of 16 in 1943 to fight in the Second World War. Mixing interview footage with hand-drawn illustrations and archive footage, Adisenu's film explores Joseph's participation in the Pacific, fighting Japanese troops. Investigating the trauma of warfare, the long-term psychological impact of witnessing death first hand, and the torture experienced by fellow soldiers captured by the Japanese, the film also offers insight into the colonial tensions exemplified by the recruitment process, alongside certain broken promises in the post-war period. Frustrated by the lack of previously promised compensation and pensions, a group of veterans marched to present a petition to the governor in Accra in 1948, at which point a British soldier, Sergeant Imray, fired on the protestors, killing three ex-servicemen. The rioting which followed, related also to the cost of living imposed by the British, is seen as a turning point towards Ghana becoming the first country in sub-Saharan Africa to declare its independence from European colonisation. All of these observations come from Joseph's perspective, which occupies a central position within the film (unlike the relative multivocality within *Evé Kornu*), with the film occasionally offering further contextualisation via text on the screen.

Finally, IFT graduate, and now documentary teacher in the same school, Manases Darko's film *Not for Sale* (2017), offers a compelling look at child trafficking as a form of modern slavery. The film features interviews with child victims (who tend not to be shown on screen), as well as academic experts, such as Professor Kodjo Sena, a sociologist at the University of Ghana, and Dr Diana Baah Odum, a child psychologist. As with the other documentaries, the film relies on oral recollections of events to offer the audience a moving and direct account of the horrors suffered by the children on their journeys, and the betrayal they feel, having been sold by their parents. As with the *Gold Coast Soldier* documentary, *Not for Sale* centres on the resulting trauma of the survivors, and their efforts to raise awareness of the issue to prevent more children from suffering the same fate. Where the film differs is in its sophisticated interweaving of eyewitness accounts with expert testimony to buttress the oral recollections, which offer a sense of authority in validating the truth of the survivors' stories. *Not for Sale* also manages to explore certain complexities of perspective, particularly when asking for the parents to be forgiven and educated about the perils of child trafficking, and for an understanding of the pervasiveness of poverty which forces parents into making such difficult decisions.

Conclusion

This article has presented a case study of how documentary film-making is taught and conceived within the Institute of Film and Television, Ghana, through a discussion of pedagogical approaches relating to the complexity of documentary film's relationship to the 'truth', the films and film-makers which inform this teaching (including tutors' own film practices), and the subsequent filmic output of some of the students who have since graduated from the programme. Rather than retread the well-worn path of the truth claims of documentary film-making, we have instead tried to relate these to the particularised sociocultural context in which this film education practice is taking place in Ghana. Given Ghana's living traditions of oral storytelling, and different approaches to recording history, we have sought to explore how orality may present challenges to the Ghanaian documentary film-maker seeking to present and evidence situations as truthfully as possible.

Through our experiences making documentaries drawing from Ghana's living oral cultures, and our explorations with students of different ways of approaching conceptions of objectivity within documentary film-making, we have sought to establish a sound basis from which students at the IFT could subsequently approach their own documentary film-making careers. In discussing three of the films subsequently produced by graduate students, we find correlations between their respective pursuit of the truth through the oral recollections and storytelling traditions of participants, which range from those which rely on a single narrator's recollections of historically verifiable events in *Gold Coast Soldier*, to *Évé Kornu's* interweaving and narrative construction of the opinions and recollections of the performance of a traditional ritual, to *Not For Sale's* issue-based approach, which reinforces participant testimony through interviews with respected authorities. As we consider the uncertain future that documentary film-making faces globally at the time of writing, we continue to refine our approach to teaching documentary film practice at the IFT, and we hope that this case study acts as inspiration for students at the IFT, and documentary film-makers across Africa, and contributes to ongoing discourses about documentary practice around the world.

Declarations and conflicts of interest

Research ethics statement

The authors conducted the research reported in this article in accordance with University of Ghana standards.

Consent for publication statement

The authors declare that research participants' informed consent to publication of findings – including photos, videos and any personal or identifiable information – was secured prior to publication.

Conflicts of interest statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work. All efforts to sufficiently anonymise the authors during peer review of this article have been made. The authors declare no further conflicts with this article.

Filmography

- 1804: The Hidden History of Haiti* (US 2017, Tariq Nasheed)
The Act of Killing (DK/NO/GB 2012, Joshua Oppenheimer)
L'Arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat (Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat) (FR 1896, Auguste Lumière and Louis Lumière)
Évé Kornu (Inseparable Spirits) (GH 2017, Magdalene Eyram Kwashie, Institute of Film and Television)
Fad'jal (GH 1979, Safi Faye)
Gold Coast Soldier (GH 2017, Patience Adisenu, Institute of Film and Television)
The Gwalla in Retrospect: The story of Bagao (GH 2020, Joseph Aketema)
Nanook of the North (US 1922, Robert Flaherty)
Not for Sale (GH 2017, Manases Darko, Institute of Film and Television)
Super Size Me (US 2004, Morgan Spurlock)
The Thin Blue Line (US 1988, Errol Morris)

References

- Attah, A.H. (2018) *The Hundred Wells of Salaga*. New York: Other Press.
 Bartley, K. and O'Briain, D. (2003) *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* [Video]. YouTube. Accessed 17 August 2023.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kWk1iiKzljQ>.

- Bazin, A. and Gray, H. (1960) 'The ontology of the photographic image'. *Film Quarterly*, 13 (4), 4–9. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1210183>.
- Bruzzi, S. (2016) 'Making a genre: The case of the contemporary true crime documentary'. *Law and Humanities*, 10 (2), 249–80. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17521483.2016.1233741>.
- Enwezor, O. (2004) 'Documentary/vérité: Bio-politics, human rights and the figure of "truth" in contemporary art'. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, 5 (1), 11–42. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14434318.2004.11432730>.
- Faye, S. (2018) 'Safi Faye recounts Fad'Jal'. Accessed 17 August 2023. <https://www.festival-cannes.com/en/2018/safi-faye-recounts-fadjal/>.
- Fuhs, K. (2014) 'The legal trial and/in documentary film'. *Cultural Studies*, 28 (5–6), 781–808. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2014.886484>.
- Garritano, C. (2008) 'Contesting authenticities: The emergence of local video production in Ghana'. *Critical Arts: A journal of South–North Cultural Studies*, 22 (1), 21–48. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560040802166219>.
- Harindranath, R. (2018) 'Veridicality and the truth claims of the documentary in the post-truth era: Rethinking audiences' "horizon of expectations"'. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15 (1), 398–411. Accessed 6 August 2023. <https://www.participations.org/15-01-23-harindranath.pdf>.
- Hughes, H. (2012) 'Scrutiny and documentary: Hubert Sauper's *Darwin's Nightmare*'. *Screen*, 53 (3), 246–65. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjs023>.
- Nichols, B. (n.d.) 'The documentary genre: Approach and types'. Accessed 19 August 2023. https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C5&q=Nichols%2C+B.+THE+DOCUMENTARY+GENRE.+APPROACH+AND+TYPES.&btnG=.
- Nichols, B. (1991) *Representing Reality: Issues and concepts in documentary*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nichols, B. (2017) *Introduction to Documentary*. 3rd ed. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Perani, J. and Smith, F.T. (1998) *The Visual Arts of Africa: Gender, power, and life cycle rituals*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Soyinka, W. (2016) *Dictionary of Now #3: Wole Soyinka & Manthia Diawara – TRUTH* [Video]. YouTube, 4 May. Accessed 6 August 2023. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQxFe_JgrA&t=602s.
- Ukadike, N.F. (2000) 'Images of the "reel" thing: African video-films and the emergence of a new cultural art'. *Social Identities*, 6 (3), 243–61. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630050137615>.
- Winston, B. (2013) *The Documentary Film Book*. London: BFI.
- Wynants, N., Reijnen, L. and Brinkman, E. (eds) (2020) *When Fact is Fiction: Documentary art in the post-truth era*. Amsterdam: Valiz.