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Behind the Lens: the Pride and Politics of Filmmaking in Ghana

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Behind the Lens: the Pride and Politics of Filmmaking in Ghana

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, Kyle Vickery, who has always supported my work and goals over the last 11 years. I would also like to dedicate this work to my daughter, Jocelyn, who, while still in utero, pushed me to finish this work before her arrival into this world. Finally, I’d like to recognize Dr. Karla Davis-Salazar, who first convinced me to reach further by completing a senior thesis as an undergraduate, and then encouraged me to apply to graduate school.
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Abstract

This research looks at the production of media in Ghana, specifically, film produced in the “Glamour” style or Western-style tradition that originates in its capitol of Accra. The film industry in Ghana, known as Ghallywood, is a vibrant and prolific field in which content is produced and distributed throughout the country for local consumption. Research on production practice, rather than content, can show cross-cultural differentiation in visual media production and also offers a lens through which to explore Ghanaian culture. The following research questions frame this study: What are the production practices of Ghanaian video films? How do Ghanaians communicate the process of creating Ghanaian video films? How do the practice and discourse of the video film production work to create and reinforce messages from the producers to the audiences? This research necessarily departs from looking primarily at the content of films, instead exploring the processes behind the creation of those products. Nick Couldry recognizes practice as an emerging theme in media research and this work focuses on his theory of media practice, in which the focus shifts from a content analysis to what people are actually doing in relation to media and its production.

Using visual techniques and on-camera interviews, this work supplements a documentary about Ghanaian filmmaking and the voices that characterize the industry. This research and its visual product show the processes and conflict within the industry, including several different players who are often at odds with one another: students learning film from either academic or trade institutions, professional filmmakers who are either academically trained or self-taught, as
well as scholars who provide their perspective on the industry as a whole. This research shows that filmmaking in Ghana is characterized by many competing elements, including a rift in what is known as “Ghallywood.” Two separate industries actually exist: the Accra “glamourwood” industry and its highly localized “kumawood” counterpart based in Kumasi, Ghana. This research also introduces concepts of how Ghanaians see the world and reproduce it in film, with the use of long takes and wide shots.

This work illustrates the value of understanding production practices of media products cross-culturally as a departure from the more traditional approach to media studies of content. The attention given to a supplementary visual product in the form of a documentary aims to raise awareness of visual methodology and the value of visual and public anthropology in research and its applications to dissemination to mass audiences beyond academia.
Chapter 1:

Background and Introduction

Visual media offer a unique platform that both transmits information to the public and reaffirms existing norms of behavior and ideas of the community and society in which their messages are disseminated. It is thus useful to look at the media as a cultural phenomenon and use the practice of media production and its producers as a space for anthropological research. The cultural knowledge that is necessary for media creation and reception may provide insight to the way societies understand their history, environment, technology, professional and interpersonal communication, artistic expression, and so much more. Media are pervasive, which has made media anthropology a more important focus for researchers: “As media are becoming more ubiquitous even in remote locales, an increasing number of anthropologists have recognized not only the necessity of attending to their presence, but also to their significance” (Ginsburg 2005:17). As Debra Spitulnik reiterates, “one enduring concern is ‘the power’ of mass media, and in particular their roles as vehicles of culture” (Spitulnik 1993:294).

This research looks closely at the production of media in Accra, Ghana, specifically, film produced in the “Glamour” style (a term coined by Ghanaians), or Western-style tradition that originates in Accra. The film industry in Ghana is referred to as “Ghallywood,” and locals further distinguish two industries that exist in the country: “Kumawood,” and “Glamour” or “Glamourwood.” These terms will be explored in more detail later. The outcomes of this research are two-fold: A written thesis to discuss the research and background of data obtained
during fieldwork, as well as a 30-minute documentary that chronicles and informs audiences about the world of Ghanaian filmmaking through the interviews of professional filmmakers, scholars, and students in Accra, Ghana. This research does not intend to provide a comprehensive overview of West African film, but in order to situate the Ghanaian case in context, it is necessary to look historically at filmmaking in Nigeria (as the nexus of West African film) as well as in Ghana.

A (Brief) Overview of Nigerian and Ghanaian film

In ‘Nollywood,’ the Nigerian term for the film industry in Nigeria, films are produced at the rate of about 1,500 a year, with the industry employing about 200,000 people and reaching millions (Barrot 2005:13). In 2009, it was considered the second-largest film industry in the world (Krings and Okome 2013:25) Films are produced on a small scale, using video, with three to five days being the average production time (Barrot 2005:13). Films are produced in an almost assembly line fashion, with the focus of the film’s creation on its distribution, minimizing the length of time between the output of expense and the return on investment (Barrot 2005:53). Given the tight budget constraints and the short allowance for production, many of these films lack the quality of traditional cinematic examples (Barrot 2005:53). However, these films are still wildly popular and consumed in the homes of millions of Nigerians. It is important to note that these films not only have an audience in Nigeria, but in other African nations as well as diaspora regions as far reaching as Europe and the United States. These films are streamed at several websites, including YouTube and others that are dedicated to posting Nigerian films for viewers online.
The Ghanaian film industry, ‘Ghallywood,’ operates in much the same manner from a production and distribution standpoint. However, according to the Ghanaians I had the opportunity to speak with, their films differ significantly in content from their Nigerian neighbors. The locally produced films in Ghana and Nigeria are created to mirror local life and culture: “Video movies presented Ghanaian and Nigerian audiences with characters who looked and talked like them and with stories that were familiar” (Garritano 2013:9). Thus, the Ghanaian films differ in cultural context from their Nigerian counterpart. While these differences may be subtle, or even unnoticeable to the outsider, to Ghanaians and Nigerians, these differences are profound and easily recognizable. It is thus important to distinguish the Nigerian and Ghanaian film industries and producers from one another; while they have similar elements and are created in close proximity geographically, they have distinct cultural attributes that deserve recognition. Ghanaian and Nigerian audiences can readily distinguish the two products. For outsiders, it may be more nuanced, but these differences stem from variations in language, dress, environment, and attitude. According to Ghanaian interview subjects, they can tell Nigerian films by the tone of the actors’ voices and their general demeanor, something that they are able to easily distinguish from their own people. Still, it is important to note a “nigerianization” occurring in Ghana as an outcome of the popularity and inundation of the Nigerian film industry over many years (Aveh 2014:99). Over-the-air television channels show Nollywood films, and many of the all-movie channels show mainly Nollywood productions (Aveh 2014:100). Many Ghanaian films will cast Nigerian actors because they are easily recognized and will boost the prominence of a film. While the Ghanaian film industry is influenced by its Nigerian counterpart, it still merits recognition and further study in its own right. There are recent cases of “reverse Nigerianization” as Ghanaian productions and actors are recognized in Nigeria (Aveh 2014:105).
There is an aesthetic similarity between the two industries that cannot be discounted, but for those living and working within the Ghanaian film context, this industry has attributes that distinguish it from its Nigerian neighbor.

My research focuses on the *production* of Ghanaian film, rather than its content, which distinguishes my work from the majority of research on the topic, most of which has addressed content. At the forefront of this research has been Birgit Meyer and her work on the themes of Pentecostalism and heritage in Ghanaian film (Meyer 1999, 2003, 2003, 2010). Meyer contends that Ghanaian film “was born out of people’s desire to see their own culture mediated through a television or cinema screen” (Meyer 1998, 1999). Given the hyper-localized goal of Ghanaian film to reach Ghanaian audiences, it follows that the production of such products would be localized as well. This localization could take the form of the producers who are creating the film products, the shooting locations, and any specialization of production practice that may result from a Ghanaian cultural tradition. Research on production *practice*, rather than *content*, can thus show cross-cultural differentiation in visual media production and also provide a deeper understanding of what research on Ghanaian film content provides: a lens through which to explore Ghanaian culture.

Established ideas about the “correct” way to produce television/film content are widely held, and are transferred through educational settings. In Western schools of communication and film-making, students are taught the “proper” way to produce content; these include the ways that cameras should frame shots, the way that music should match a scene, the proper lighting for a scene, the number of shot changes that are acceptable within a scene, and the composition of materials that are seen within a scene. These rules of production are designed from a prescribed belief about what is visually appealing according to the field of visual production and mass
communication (Zettl 2009; Martin et al. 2009). Examples taught in these institutions include the rule of thirds and the Golden Ratio. These Western ideas are used to distinguish “professional” work from amateur productions. According to media professionals in the United States, Ghanaian video films may not reach these standards and would likely be labeled as “amateur films” or “independent films” at best. But differences in the way Ghanaian films are created and the production practices of Ghanaian filmmakers are not the result of faulty education or substandard work. Rather, I will argue in this thesis that these differences point to specific cultural ways of producing visual media.

**Understanding Media Research, A Cultural/Practice Approach**

According to Faye Ginsburg, the “vitality” of visual anthropology is its ability to teeter “between the disciplinary world of anthropology and the more free-wheeling universe of film and video practice, disengaged from academic constraints” (Ginsburg 1998:174). My approach to this research rests on this framework, as I present myself to professional filmmakers in Ghana both as an anthropologist and as a professional media producer. This duality allows entrance into the world of Ghanaian production, but still provides an ability for anthropological research.

The following research questions frame my study: What are the production practices of Ghanaian video films? How do Ghanaians communicate the process of creating Ghanaian video films? How do the practice and discourse of the video film production work to create and reinforce messages from the producers to the audiences? This research, as mentioned above, necessarily departs from looking primarily at the content of films, instead exploring the processes behind the creation of those products. Nick Couldry recognizes practice as an emerging theme in media research, as a way to “sidestep the insoluble problem over how to
prove ‘media effects’” (Couldry in Brauchler and Postill 2010: 37). This research thus focuses on two concepts from Couldry’s (2004) theory of media practice: an analysis of two “publicly observable processes”: the “routine activities (rather than consciously chosen actions) notable for their unconscious, automatic, un-thought character” and discourse, “which is not what anyone says, but the system of meanings that allows them to say anything at all” (Swidler 2001, 74 in Couldry 2004:121). His approach to media studies centers on practice, in which the focus of media research moves away “from the study of media texts or production structures and to redirect in onto the study of the open-ended range of practices focused directly or indirectly on media” (Couldry 2004:117). Following Couldry’s (2004) lead, this approach does not center on the Marxian locus of political economy, but on Bourdieu’s sense of practice, “the media-oriented practice, in all its looseness and openness…what…are people doing in relation to media across a whole range of situations and contexts?” (Couldry 2004:119). This paradigm in media research also includes the specific “practices of avoiding or selecting out media inputs,” (Couldry 2004:120) which points to a research agenda focused on the producers and the power structures associated with media production.

In order to understand the practice of media production, it is necessary to understand the political and cultural economic conditions that surround such practice (Couldry in Brauchler and Postill 2010: 37). These existing structures do have an effect on the kinds of practices in which media producers and players engage. An “analysis of industrial and market structures in the media and cultural sectors is important in its own right and vital to understanding the pressures which limit participation in those sectors and constrain the outputs they produce” (Couldry 2012:36). In learning what individuals are doing in relation to their media creation, there is a subtext within this research that looks at and aims to understand the economic and social
structures that may be driving such practices. It is important to note that these structures are taken into account and these media practices and procedures of creating media products do not happen in a vacuum.

Atop this structural basis lie the true subjects of the research, the major players that make up the media landscape of Ghanaian film: producers, directors, actors, film educators, and film students. These media creators were chosen as the subjects, as opposed to audiences and critics, in order to glimpse the ‘behind-the-scenes’ culture of Ghanaian media, in order to learn the “social processes [that are] enacted through media-related practices (Couldry 2012:44).

**Introducing Visual Anthropology**

Traditionally there has been some disadvantage to using visual images, as a fear exists of further reproducing “others” and affirming stereotypes of anthropology and their subjects (MacDougall 1997:277-279). But looking at visual anthropology anew can provide ways to combat these issues and the use of visual methods can positively affect current issues and struggles. Wang et al. (1996) used visual anthropology in their methodology to empower the research subjects. For this population of Chinese women who “are often neither seen or heard,” visual methods allowed the subjects to gain a voice through the use of cameras (Wang et al. 1996:1391). In this research, subjects were trained in the photo novella process, and used photography to reach policy makers and discuss issues that the women participating felt needed to be address, including child care, midwifery, and girls’ education. In this case, the resulting photos provided a way to open dialogue between policy makers and village women, who are otherwise voiceless in community proceedings (Wang et al. 1996). Also, the dissemination of the video affects the local population, as the visual images from the research help the women to
“broadcast their voices to decision-makers” (Wang et al. 1996:1396). Here, visual anthropology addresses all aspects of engagement as defined by Lamphere (2003), as it illustrates anthropology’s ability to affect policy, include the community in the research process, and reach public audiences beyond academia. In this case, visual anthropology is used during the process of anthropological work. While this method is important for anthropology, I propose taking visual anthropology a step further in order to reach broader audiences, through mass media. While Wang et al. (1996) effectively uses media to reach audiences at a local level, the products of visual anthropology can potentially reach beyond the local to mass audiences in online communities and through television airtime, which has the potentiality to reach hundreds of thousands of viewers or more. This research follows that tradition in visual anthropology.

Documentary film is an outlet that allows the filmmaker to produce and discuss meaningful social issues while also catering to specific audiences. Documentary film, while limited in some sense (not all people watch documentaries), still provides freedom of dissemination through DVD’s, cable providers, PBS, and film festivals. In current times, visual media is an effective way to transmit ideas. Thanks to the Internet, videos can be disseminated even more widely, due to FTP sites and mediums like YouTube. This avenue is invaluable to anthropology and the need to impact broader audiences. Sarah Pink (2003) addresses the importance of visual anthropology in the 21st century in light of the “writing-culture debate.” Briefly, this debate centers on the criticism of anthropology as a discipline, including the need for reflexivity among anthropologists and their research, a need to include “native” anthropologists in fieldwork and ethnography, and problematizes so-called “objective” observations of ethnographic work (Clifford and Marcus 1986). According to Pink, the shift toward reflexivity, subjectivity, and engagement has allowed filmmaking to flourish, creating a
“prominent place in anthropological research and representation” (Pink 2003:191). So, in addition to working with and learning the production practices of Ghanaian filmmakers, I also worked to produce my own film, interviewing subjects on camera, shooting B-roll during participant observation opportunities on film sets, and editing the footage into a 30-minute documentary that works to document the production practices and world of Ghanaian film and reach broad audiences through its creation and dissemination.
Chapter 2: Methodology

The goal of this fieldwork was to work closely with filmmakers during the filmmaking process, studying their processes of production, decision-making, communications with crewmembers, their interaction with technology on set, and any other observable practices that would help me understand Ghanaian film production and the research questions I had. But in addition to answering my research questions outlined in chapter 1, an important aspect of this research is the production of my own documentary film. This film will not be used solely for educational purposes, but carries the added professional goal of airing on WEDU, the Tampa Public Broadcasting Station and my current place of employment. By airing the documentary on PBS, there is the potential for this product to reach mass audiences, as WEDU has a 16-county viewing area on Florida’s gulf coast, with a viewership potential of 300,000-500,000 households. Thus, the methodological approach to this research focuses on using my own filmmaking expertise as well as learning from the filmmaking expertise of the Ghanaian participants with whom I worked. The methods outlined here can hopefully be used for future work in how visual anthropology can be employed as a subject of research and a method for research at the same time.

Site

Using Nick Couldry’s (2004) theory of media practice required being among the practitioners of the Ghanaian film industry. Accra, the capital city of Ghana, was the practical
site for conducting this research. Accra is arguably the center of Ghanaian film, at least the Western style of film recognized in the country (more about this later). Accra is the locus for many of the most famous Ghanaian directors, actors, production studios, as well as the most notable educational institutions for film, including the University of Ghana and NAFTI, or the National Film and Television Institute, a technical college well known for fostering talent in the Ghanaian film industry.

The site of this research became a pivotal decision in the research design and outcomes, as a different site would produce a very different picture of filmmaking in Ghana. This is due to the nature of filmmaking in Ghana, in which filmmaking practice varies drastically among geographic locales in the country. This important reality was not fully understood until I was in Accra and began talking and working with subjects in the field. For example, filmmaking in Kumasi, locally referred to as “Kumawood,” is characterized by unique styles, production practices, filming schedules, and audiences, compared to filmmaking in Accra. Conversely, the Accra film industry is known locally as “Glamour” or “Glamourwood.” While this latter term is not officially recognized, it was used repeatedly by the research subjects to describe the Accra industry. This industry is coined such to denote the “glamorous” settings and situations that characterize films produced in Accra in the English language, and are called such to “show contrast to those [films] produced in Kumasi” (Yamoah 2014). These “glamour films” are generally set in the city, and often showcase wealthy characters, expensive vehicles, and fashion trends (Aveh Interview 2015). These industries together make up what is known as “Ghallywood.” This finding will be explored in more detail later, but it is important to note now that the site of this research greatly affected the study design and data generated during the course of fieldwork.
While I worked throughout Accra during my fieldwork, my home base was the University of Ghana. I lived at an on-campus hotel, designed for international visitors and professors. Many of the interviews were conducted at the hotel and at other sites at this University. Living and working here proved invaluable, as it was centrally located in Accra, making it relatively easy to travel by taxi to various locations in the city. Of course, there were some drawbacks to this arrangement. For one, the conflict between Ghanaian film in academic and professional settings (which will be discussed in detail later) sometimes hindered initial access to professionals, as tensions and distrust that exist among some professionals would initially hold them back from working with me. But after meeting me and speaking with me, I generally did not have an issue. Further, being in the university setting may have created a disconnect to the greater city area and its goings-on, and so there are certain events I might have missed among the professional film community that I do not know about.

Study Design

Due to my own agenda in producing a film, this study design has two distinct (but synchronistic) aspects. (1) On-camera interviews with subjects that would provide background and context about Ghanaian film from a variety of sources, including film critics, professors, students, professional directors, crew members, actors, distributors, and any other voice that might add to an understanding of the “Glamourwood” industry. And (2) participant observation on set of films during the production phase in Accra. Participant observation included shadowing the directors, actors, crewmembers, as well as using my own camera to capture footage of their production. This footage acts as both a way to review what I’ve seen in the field during the production and as B-roll, or footage that will show during interview sounds bites, for the
documentary. Again, informed by the work of Nick Couldry, I framed my study around the idea of practice: the “routine activities” that I could observe on set during production, as well as the interaction that production crewmembers, directors, actors, and producers had with each other and me as an outsider, but also as a fellow filmmaker.

Also, using Caldwell’s (2008) emphasis on material practice, I gathered textual and physical forms of data: scripts, text messages and communications among the media practitioners, and completed films and visual materials produced by the subjects. These materials, in addition to my observations on set and my on-camera interviews, provide the data that inform my conclusions and answer my research questions.

The on-camera interviews were unstructured and interview questions were derived organically through my conversations with the subjects, which varied greatly depending on the type of person (a student, film scholar, professional director or producer, camera operator, et cetera). However, my interviews did follow a certain flow and there were some questions that I always tried to tie in:

- How the subject became interested in the field.
- What their education/experience in the field consisted.
- A description of the industry in their words.
  - This aspect included different lines of questioning, such as a description of the production practices, films, production techniques, and the conflicts that exist in the industry and between whom.
- Any differences they perceived between Western films and Ghanaian films that are visually unique and an explanation from them about why that might be.
Why, in their opinion, they believed that Ghanaian films are so locally popular compared to foreign films.

These interviews varied greatly in time, again depending on the individual. Interviews ranged from about fifteen minutes to about two and a half hours. The shorter interviews were generally those with students and the longest interviews were with professional filmmakers and film scholars.

Data Analysis

The analysis of this research involved two related and amalgamated processes. With two products, including a written analysis of the data and a visual representation of the fieldwork, the analysis of the data collected was necessarily multifaceted. Data from field notes, in-person observations from shadowing individuals working on productions and in their day-to-day lives, and the on-camera interviews served as the basis for qualitative analysis. This qualitative analysis is based in grounded theory, in which the triangulation of data collection provides multiple sources of information, with the aim of “gather[ing] extensive amounts of rich data with thick description.” (Charmaz 1995, 2000:514; Geertz 1973). These data were then coded with the aim of finding redundancy that would suggest emerging themes and concepts that exist in this film industry and with its players. While there was no formal coding process, sentiments that were echoed among multiple sources, such as personal observations and insights from the interviews, served to “define and characterize [the] data,” which then became the basis for the findings outlined here (Charmaz 2000:515). This process is not objective; I agree with Charmaz’s (2000:515) assertion that “data are narrative constructions… [and]… reconstructions of experience.” However, this understanding does not mean that the data do not provide a
meaningful narrative that reflects a reality that exists in the context of the Ghanaian film industry.

In the case of producing a film for this research, the process is even more subjective. In some ways, the data analysis worked backward and began with the production of the film. While analysis actually began in the field when field notes were taken and participant observations were reviewed, a close analysis of the on-camera interviews did not begin until I left the field. Initial analyses taken in the field served as a basis for the interview review. All of the on-camera interviews were ingested and rough edited (sounds bites were broken up into usable parts, and my voice was removed), with redundancies noted and specific sound bites that verbalized initial field analyses saved for later use. Sound bites from on-camera interviews reflect the sentiments of the research participants and their beliefs regarding the Ghanaian film industry and their understanding of it. I therefore recognized the value of these sound bites as significant data and worth sharing with audiences. I aimed to include and share the sound bites that were echoed among multiple subjects (following analyses from grounded theory), but individual insights among the participants also proved poignant and worth sharing in the visual product. Therefore, while coding for similarities in the data were important for analyses, varying viewpoints were sometimes even more valuable to include in the case of the documentary. The documentary itself is a subjective output; as the researcher and producer, I put together the compilation of video and audio with the aim of creating something that is both engaging and informative. Sound bites were selected and edited based on several factors: whether they provided a concise thought, how well they moved the story along, and if they provided conflict when necessary. B-roll (supplementary) footage was chosen on the basis of how well it fit with the sound bites and the evolving visual story. More on content decisions is discussed in more detail later.
Despite content decisions that played a role in the video analysis, the process of reviewing the footage and on-camera interviews aided in the analysis for the written work. Video review and editing is a tedious process that requires watching the video several times in order to make the proper cuts and sequences. This in-depth review of the footage that was necessary for creating the documentary made me very familiar with the visual data, which made coding and pulling themes from the data a natural process and outcome of the production. Thus, the documentary was created first, and the written work came later as a result of the in-depth review of the footage and interviews. Analyses of the data for both research products were therefore conducted simultaneously as the video was being produced.

Research in Real Life

A discussion of the reality of conducting fieldwork among filmmakers and the world of film production is a necessary one that helps to explain how the study design shifted during the course of the research and how the assumptions about what I would do and learn in the field drastically changed. First, just as in the American film industry, it is usually all about who you know. Fortunately, my advisor at the University of Ghana seemed to know everyone in the Ghanaian industry. This individual, Professor Africanus Aveh, is a senior lecturer in film studies at the University of Ghana, as well as a practitioner in the film industry, with experience as a director, producer and actor. He not only shared academic contacts and students who proved invaluable as interview subjects, but he also knew several professional filmmakers, many of whom are well-known names in the Ghanaian industry. The importance of my advisor’s role in introducing me to the Accra film industry cannot be over-stated. Quite frankly, his contacts provided my access into the world of Ghanaian filmmakers.
While a review of the literature on Ghanaian film and my previous visit to Ghana offered a background and general (I believed) understanding of the film landscape in Ghana, even my very first on-camera interview drew a very different picture of the Ghanaian industry, namely, that there are two distinct film industries in Ghana—one based in Accra and the other in Kumasi. While I read and heard about the quick turn around and near constant in-production projects that were going on in Ghana (as one of the largest film industries in the world, and among the highest numbers of film products in distribution), I believed that I would be able to apply my methodology to multiple film sets, with ample opportunities to work with different directors and crewmembers. This was quite far from reality in Accra.

While there is a tremendous outpouring of film products in the Ghanaian film industry, the constant occurrence of in-production works was not the case at the time that I visited Accra. I learned that if I was hoping for that kind of production schedule, then I should be in Kumasi, where productions last for less than a week on average and literally ran on an on-going basis like on a production line. But this was not something that characterized the Accra industry. I quickly learned that Accra has a film production “season,” and when I visited Accra in February and March of 2015, it was just shy of this season of production. Thus, much of my methodology was focused on interviews and the student, educational, and professional “downtime” of producers, but generally lacked the production phase of Ghanaian film. At the end of my time in the field, I was able to go on set to one production, and so that provided that portion of my methodology for participant observation as I intended. But, my original design to include “production discussions” with crewmembers, and gain experience on multiple production sets simply did not happen. The implications of this will be discussed in greater detail later.
Still, I was able to gain rich insight to other aspects of the Accra film industry: What producers do in between projects, what post production looks like, and what distribution looks like. In addition, I was able to conduct 35 on-camera interviews with various voices in the academic and professional sectors, providing a much richer context of the industry than I could ever have imagined or gathered by simply being on set during production. This discussion of the reality of working in the field shows the need for flexibility in my research design (which I was able to adapt to my unique situation) and the dynamic culture of media practice in various geographic centers of Ghana.

**Conducting Research, Producing Video, and the Intersection of Both**

As stated above, an important aspect of the research was the production of my own documentary. Therefore, the semi-structured interviews that were conducted on-camera were designed to serve as the backbone of the documentary product as well as provide data for the research. The on-camera interviews were conducted using a Canon 60-D DSLR, with full high resolution 1080p capabilities. I chose this particular model due to its small size, ideal for traveling, and its ability to work well in hot and humid environments such as Ghana. I came to discover during this interview process with the subjects that many of them use the Canon 60-D camera in their own work as well. Since DSLR cameras are known for producing poor audio quality, I used a separate audio recording device called a Zoom, which uses a wireless lavaliere microphone to record audio to the device. The equipment used in the process is important to the methodology, not only for future reference for field shooting and producing, but because it became an invaluable way to gaining insight into Ghanaian film practice.

Since I was working with students and professionals who were familiar with the process of filmmaking, setting up my semi-structured interview became vital even before the camera
started rolling. I learned about the technological knowledge of the film subjects, as we discussed the kind of camera and audio equipment I was using, and I learned about their practices for filming in the Ghanaian environment (which is when I learned the value of using the Canon 60-D in humid and hot temperatures). The subjects knew how to put the microphone on themselves in much the same way that I would attach it for them, again a vital piece of evidence for their media practice. Thus, the interview process became so much more than an exercise in on-camera questions and answers. It became yet another opportunity for participant observation that I could not have planned for ahead of time.

When I finally did have the opportunity to be on set during film production, the camera I held in my hand again became a learning tool. I realized that during these moments that I was not the only one observing; the filmmakers were observing me and my practice, too. My camera and my work with it became an avenue for discussion about production and filmmaking. It provided an “in” for me, in which I was accepted as one of the filmmakers. Having a camera showed that I knew something about the industry, even if it was not the Ghanaian industry, and that opened the door to discussion about production, shooting style, technology, and so much more. Again, my video work provided another methodological advantage that I did not predict, but that provided rich data in the field.

Me Looking at You, Looking at Me

Being a media professional and a researcher proved immensely advantageous for gaining access to my subjects, but it also had its pitfalls. I was acutely aware that the subjects’ knowledge of my status as an American television producer would sometimes frame their responses to my questions about film practice. For example, when I would ask a subject about a
particular technique or look that seemed unique or different from a ‘Western’ film style, the subject would often reject this as anything that might be ‘Ghanaian’ and associate it to something that is wrong. Thus, for the Accra filmmakers at least, any film practice or technique that varied from a Western style was interpreted as nonprofessional or backward. I could not help that my status prevented the subjects (at least on a few occasions) from offering honest thoughts and opinions on their media practice, perhaps for fear that I would judge it as incorrect.

I also understood that my very existence at the production set with my camera inherently changed the practice, at least to some degree. Occasionally, I would find myself the subject of a camera lens, as the camera operators would get footage of me instead of their intended focus. I know that I was somewhat of a novelty on set, and that the filmmakers wanted to capture my presence as much as I was trying to capture theirs. This phenomenon is further revealed by the fact that the film producers of the film that I did shadow wanted me to be a minor character in their film. I had reservations of such a role, and ultimately did not participate (mainly because of time constraints on the part of the filmmakers). But, the producers wanted to add my role into the script and the production plan simply due to my presence as a white woman on set and an opportunity for them to use this situation to their advantage (white actors in Ghana are not very common).

So, it must be discussed and understood that my presence could and did affect the media practices that I witnessed while on set. However, I realized that the longer that I was on-set, the more I blended in and became less of a spectacle. My true observational moments came when I was no longer an outsider, but considered as part of the production process. I never contributed directly to the production work in progress, but eventually the crew ignored by presence there and the producers and directors treated my video recording as a tool for their use, as I could
provide them with “behind the scenes” footage that they would not be able to capture themselves (whether due to time or equipment restraints that they were working against). This is a vital part of my methodological development during participant observation on the Ghanaian film set.

**Gender and Color in Ghana**

Beyond my presence as a researcher, my existence as a white female surely had an impact on my work, as mentioned above. While the presence of white individuals is not too uncommon in the capital of Ghana, it is important to note that in some of the rural areas of Ghana that I have visited, this is not the case. In previous trips to Ghana in which I had the opportunity to visit rural villages, children would come up to me and touch my skin, because they were not used to seeing light skin tones. Since the Accra industry attempts to appeal to Ghanaian audiences across the country (as well as beyond), it is in their interest to use white actors. This case explains what I experienced as noted in the previous section. Further, the historical reality of the country, including colonization and the slave trade, cannot be ignored. Candid conversations with subjects and friends in Ghana revealed that this history is reflected in the way I am treated as a white person: Ghanaians were eager to help me and work with me because of my whiteness. In their words, the local people believe that I should be “helped,” because that reflects the history of Ghanaians “helping” white people during the times of colonization. This fact and local belief cannot be ignored, and it surely affected my work and most likely contributed to my access and success in the field.

Gender is another consideration in this work. The Ghanaian film industry is predominantly male. On set, I was usually the only female working with a camera; the other females on set were actors. In some rare cases, Ghanaian women were able to break this glass
ceiling and I met one woman who was an editor (not very common at all, even she admitted), and I also met one female director, the famed Shirley Frimpong-Manso. During her interview, she also admitted to being a sole female voice in an industry run by males. Kwansah-Aidoo and Owusu (2012:53) explain, “Ghanaian films…are key sites where gender identities are constructed and contested on a regular basis.” They go on to acknowledge, “Working in a male-dominated industry located in a patriarchal society, filmmakers tend to reproduce dominant ideologies.” It is not only the content of the films that are affected by the culture and gender realities of Ghana, but also the production work happening behind-the-scenes of these films. Women working in the filmmaking process have only become apparent since the 1990s, and few female filmmakers purposely inject a feminine perspective into their films in the way that Shirley Frimpong-Manso does (Kwansah-Aidoo and Owusu 2012:55). This reality in the industry must also be considered with my work on set: As a woman surrounded by mostly men working in the industry, their behavior may have been modified in ways that I cannot know. My presence as a female producer and videographer was likely a novelty for them as well.
Chapter 3:

Findings

First, one of the most important lessons learned during fieldwork in Ghana is that the film industry in Accra is not prolific all of the time. While it seems that Accra producers work during a specific season, Socrate Safo, a professional Ghanaian filmmaker, put it best when he said,

“There is a way to come to Ghana for six months and see nothing, or you can come to Ghana for six days and see everything.”

-Socrate Safo, speaking on the timing and the Ghanaian film industry.

Fieldwork may never quite work out exactly as planned, and my experience in Ghana was affected by the lack of production actually taking place. This not only changed the study design somewhat, but also the findings and the significance therein. Since I was only on set during one professional production and one student production, many of my observations are derived from data taken from on-camera interviews and tertiary events and moments with filmmakers and students when they were not specifically working on a production.

Still, the importance of these non-production related activities cannot be over-stated. In fact, the extra-production environment proved rich in data about what filmmakers do when they aren’t on a production. The events, meetings, and day-to-day life of the filmmaker in between production sets actually allowed for a deeper context of Ghanaian film, including structural constraints and those “routine practices” described by Nick Couldry (2004). Thus, instead of
focusing directly on media, as the initial study design was intended, the focus of the study shifted to the practices indirectly tied to media—what “people [are] doing in relation to media across…situations and contexts” (Couldry 2004:119, emphasis added). Importantly, the findings that unfold here provide a new context for the state of Ghanaian film, which includes several structural and cultural conflicts and opposing forces. In answering my research questions, I have divided the data into sections, which are reflected in the supplementary documentary:

- A Glimpse into Ghanaian filmmaking
- The Situation of Ghanaian Film Today
- Ghanaian Film Through the Eyes of the Film Student
  - The Academic Lens: University of Ghana, Legon
  - The Trade School Lens: NAFTI
- The professional Ghanaian Filmmaker
- Film in Ghana as a cultural Tool

These sections represent the major themes that emerged out of the on-camera interviews and participant observation/observation during the productions, classes, events, meetings, and simple presence that I was afforded during the fieldwork. The first section encompasses data that were gathered from the majority of the interviewees, offering a consensus among the interview subjects regardless of their experience in the field, academic affiliation, or professional work that paints a picture of the Ghanaian film industry. The latter two sections are divided as such to understand Ghanaian film practice from both the student and professional perspective, since both type of individual is represented through on-camera interviews and observational study. The sections here are designed to be supplemental to the documentary, adding context and a deeper
understanding of the research questions that I aimed to answer and show through the visual medium of the documentary.

A few other themes emerged during the research, but did not make the cut into the film (due to a lack of visual representation, time restraints in the visual product, and a need to tell one cohesive story through the film). These themes are also worth discussion here:

- The process of Film Marketing: Conception and the Winding Road of Distribution
- Creating Visual Stories from a Ghanaian’s Point of View

These sections will be discussed at the close of this chapter and also point to future research goals that will be discussed in a later chapter.

A Glimpse into Ghanaian filmmaking

An important part of the documentary as a product is its ability to show what I witnessed in the field; moments on set of Ghanaian films that depict the process of filmmaking in a new context. These visual moments are vital to the documentary and immediately draw viewers in, showing something that many individuals may never have had the chance to witness. The moments shown in the documentary were not chosen for any extraordinary quality. On the contrary, these are normal, typical moments that occurred during the filmmaking process. These shots that open the film present an important window into the world of Ghanaian filmmaking.

These images are intended to show a ‘typical’ set in Ghana. Since I had limited access to multiple film sets while in the field, I understand that it is difficult to know if this was completely typical. However, through my interviews with multiple subjects throughout the
fieldwork, as well as the subjects with whom I was on set with, I am confident that this experience and the visuals were ‘normal.’

The opening scenes depict a day on set of a professional film production in Accra. There are several important elements of the ‘Ghanaian film story’ that these opening scenes begin to tell. First, the director of the film gives a brief synopsis of what the story is about. This is the first bit of data shared with the audience about Ghanaian film: that one of the main characteristics of this industry is the element of human-centered stories. The story described here is typical of Ghanaian films and stories: intertwining village and city life, overcoming adversity, and complicated love. Most importantly, these stories are dramas.

In addition to the story, this initial introduction shows the basic production format of Ghanaian film: An intimate crew with limited equipment. The opening scene shows one camera, so that multiple takes will have to occur to get different shot frames. There are only the basic crewmembers, who are introduced early: The director, producer, production manager, audio engineer, camera operator (Director of Photography, or DP), and, of course, the actors. These visual moments depict the basic lighting and equipment for the film, and the sets. One set depicts a hotel interior, which is translated to a character’s home in the film, and a second set is a village close by. The production manager shares the hardships of set locations and equipment failure due to power issues. These issues are all too common in the industry and are echoed with interviews of other professionals. The producer of this film shares the nature of this film in monetary terms: that this is what a low-budget film in Ghana looks like (at a $10,000 investment by the producer). All of these opening scenes and sound bites begin to paint the picture of Ghanaian film in practice, by introducing the players and the structure to audience members.
The Situation of Ghanaian Film Today

Several oppositional forces exist in the Ghanaian film industry today, which essentially subdivides the industry into smaller segments with distinct practices. First, and importantly, it is clear that there are two film industries that exist in Ghana today: The Kumasi industry and the Accra industry. The industry that is the focus here is solely the Accra industry, which is the center for Western-style production. What this means is that the productions are produced in English and the style is more traditionally “Western.” In contrast, the Kumasi industry is produced in the Twi language, produced cheaply and quickly, and focuses on subjects and events that are extremely localized. In essence, the Kumasi industry might be considered as indigenous filmmaking, while the Accra industry is characterized by Western training, dissemination, and production processes. Thus, in learning the Ghanaian production practices, those practices under study here do not encompass all forms of Ghanaian media practice, but one distinct part of a larger whole.

While content in Ghanaian media is not the focus here, there are some differences between the Kumasi and Accra industries in that regard. The Kumasi industry caters more to village populations, especially those in central and northern Ghana (which are more rural areas). Accra and other coastal areas are centers for education and generally sites of more wealthy populations, and so content of many of the films in the Accra industry reflect this. Filmmaker Shirley Frimpong-Manso, who will be introduced later in this chapter, exemplifies this Western-style content and production practice and is solely associated with the Accra industry. Even when Accra films do not cater specifically to more wealthy viewers (and imagery associated with such), the Accra industry is still more apt to include an intersection of village and city life, as is the case of the film that is highlighted at the beginning of the documentary film (titled *Blind*).
The Kumasi industry, conversely, caters specifically to village life and issues, and does not often include city culture, especially in a visual sense (in general, these films are shot exclusively in villages). According to Yamoah (2014:160), “The Kumawood movies tell the everyday life of the Ghanaian, particular in Kumasi.” Further, “the story lines easily resonate with the audiences, compared with some of the movies in English, which have been criticized for telling stories that do not tell the Ghanaian story” (Yamoah 2014:160).

The Accra industry is further divided into two schools of thought and training. There are the trained filmmakers, who attended film schools like NAFTI, graduated, and are working in the industry. The oppositional force to this are the untrained professionals who have worked in the industry for a long time and essentially learned “on the job” (Africanus Aveh, int.). Even further, there are two schools of training that separate the subcategory of trained filmmakers- the students who either attend a trade school like NAFTI or a traditional academic institution like the University of Ghana (more on this in the next section below).

These subcategories are set in opposition to one another because the practitioners do not necessarily work together or see eye to eye. In fact, the individuals in the different areas of the industries are in direct conflict with one another. For example, untrained professional filmmakers often refuse to work with students at NAFTI, and fundamental disagreements among the Kumasi and Accra practitioners with regard to distribution and marketing keep the industry separate, especially with regard to possible policy making and regulations of the industry.

This latter conflict proves to be detrimental to moving the film industry forward in Ghana. During my fieldwork, I was fortunate enough to attend a professional anti-piracy conference. Here, and in other professional contexts, the dissension about how to push forth legislation to protect filmmakers from piracy and allow government funding for film production
in the country has kept a film bill from being passed for the last decade. Interview data reveals that filmmakers believe it is the lack of unity among filmmakers that has kept the industry as a whole from moving forward and becoming more legitimate on the international stage.

Further structural barriers in Ghana that go beyond the film industry also constrain the production possible in Accra. During my fieldwork, a mandatory energy conservation policy was put into effect for the Greater Accra area due to a national energy crisis that stems from massive droughts in the country. This policy specified that residents would have a “24 on, 48 off” electrical usage. This policy, in addition to the general inconsistent power availability, was called Dumsor. Dumsor impacted every aspect of Ghanaian life, but it had a huge impact on the film industry. During my fieldwork, on-location production was pushed back or cancelled several times because of power outages. Professionals were not able to edit their projects due to the power outages. According to the professionals I worked with, Dumsor was a major reason for the dearth of production taking place at this time.

These oppositional forces in professional, institutional, and structural areas of the film industry and beyond create huge hurdles for filmmakers across the spectrum, from student to professional. These issues set the stage for what it takes to actually produce a film in Ghana, amidst a general lack of resources, from monetary to energy availability.

Ghanaian Film Through the Eyes of the Film Student

The distinction between the trade school and the traditional academic institution is simple: The NAFTI program is a traditional film school in which students are immersed in the practice of filmmaking without the inclusion of other subjects. At institutions like the University of Ghana, Legon, students are required to complete general pre-requisites before specializing in
their degree program, in which film studies is one option. Neither institution guarantees that the students will work in the industry. To the contrary, some interview subjects have divulged that students attend NAFTI just to receive a bachelor’s degree, as NAFTI is easier to be accepted into than other universities, and then go on to completely different field of work. Still, both types of educational institutions have their place in Ghanaian film practice and the rise of the future of filmmakers in Ghana.

The Academic Lens: University of Ghana, Legon

At the University of Ghana, Legon (UG), the film studies option is nestled within the School of Performing Arts, so that this program educates students in traditional stage acting and production in addition to film. The film classes are advanced courses only, so that students only study film in the upper level courses toward the end of their academic careers. Further, while some of the classes at UG deal with actual production, much of the education here focuses on film theory and criticism instead, and the professors who teach the subjects are not necessarily practitioners or have ever worked in the industry (though some of the professors have indeed worked in the industry, that is not a requirement to teach the film classes).

The students in this program are generally interested in acting, but there are exceptions. The precedent for the film program within the School of Performing Arts nods to the history of storytelling in the country as well as the inclusion of performing arts practice within the industry currently, especially among the actors.
The Trade School Lens: NAFTI

The National Film and Television Institute is more directly honed to train students in traditional, “Western” style filmmaking, apart from the performing arts tradition in Ghana. Here, several of the students are already working in professional capacities, or interning with professional production houses and filmmakers. The school also focuses on student productions and opportunities to showcases student productions, such as student film festivals put on by the Institute.

The equipment available to the NAFTI students also differs from those at UG. The NAFTI students are using DSLR equipment, the standard tools in the industry, even in the US. In one of the student productions I was present for (shown in the film), the students were using multiple DSLR cameras, industry-standard lighting equipment, and a slider, which is also an industry-standard tool and very current shooting method. Each aspect of this production pointed to the Western style of production and training, with no apparent differences that would categorize it as uniquely ‘Ghanaian.’

The professional Ghanaian Filmmaker

While a handful of filmmakers were interviewed during fieldwork, two prime individuals help to characterize the two schools of professional filmmaking: Socrate Safo and Shirley Frimpong-Manso. Both are based in Accra, but they have very different outlooks of what Ghanaian filmmaking can and should be. It is their stories that help to paint the picture of the professional film industry in Ghana.
Figure 1. Socrate Safo, professional filmmaker in Ghana.

Socrate Safo is an industry veteran. He’s been directing films for several years, and has been referenced repeatedly in other anthropological studies of Ghanaian film. He’s an outspoken, controversial figure in Ghanaian media, and his films are often released in tandem with scandalous publicity. In Ghana, the Nigerian films are viewed at times as scandalous, through controversial content (violent or sexual in nature) and the actors of Nigerian films are seen as dressed more provocatively than is customary in Ghana. Safo’s films are at times equated to Nigerian films due to similar controversy in content. One of his films, *Hot Fork*, is one of his most recent controversial films, and is cited by many of the interview subjects as a point of contention with Safo as a Ghanaian director and producer. Safo believes that Ghanaian films should be uniquely local, dealing with localized issues, beliefs, and values. His films, though often controversial, follow the norm when it comes to the subject matter and look of his films: They often depict issues of family and low-average income lives in Ghana. Safo is an untrained filmmaker, having learned the craft while doing and gained respect in the industry over time. He is divorced from NAFTI and other institutions, and instead opts for crewmembers that he can train himself. He is very active in professional circles, attending meetings like the Film
Producers Association of Ghana and anti-piracy conferences. Safo is adamant about the need for a film bill and works to protect Ghanaian filmmakers and their creative products.

Figure 2. Shirley Frimpong-Manso, professional filmmaker in Ghana.

Shirley Frimpong-Manso, on the other hand, represents the ‘new’ in Ghana. First, she brings a female perspective to the industry, which, just like the American industry, is severely lacking. Her work has a filmmaker offers a purposeful feminine message that “reflect[s] a locally-grounded gender awareness that continues to be very much in evidence in… her…works as a filmmaker” (Kwansah-Aidoo and Owusu 2012:56). Not only do the content of her films aim to inspire women to seek beyond traditional female roles and identities in Ghana, her work behind-the-scenes also acts as a model for other women (Kwansah-Aidoo and Owusu 2012:56, 61). Frimpong-Manso uses film and her work behind the lens to present alternative narratives for women in Ghana, and uses film as a platform for embracing a feminist perspective. Her work as a filmmaker is perhaps a more inspiring role than her on-screen stories, representing the minority as a female working successfully in the Ghanaian film industry.
She also focuses her films on the upper class in Ghana, which is a part of society that is often left out of popular media and filmmaking alike. Her target audience goes well beyond the confines of Ghana; she has been recognized in international film festivals and aims to reach audiences outside of Ghana. The look of her films is more Western, and she uses all of the latest industry-standard equipment, including Red cameras. Her film budgets are larger than the average production, which allows her equipment and crew to be better and larger. Frimpong-Manso is a NAFTI graduate who regularly employs current students and other graduates. She is part of a new wave of Ghanaian filmmakers who are working to move beyond the borders of Ghana and make a name for Ghanaian productions on a worldwide scale. She has been criticized by some in Ghana, however, for straying too far toward “westernized” storytelling:

With the more Western perspective, it is very difficult for viewers to see the Ghanaian culture. It is very difficult to notice the culture of the Ghanaian society and vulgarity is slowly steeping in her movies… Her movies portray high fashion, rich and dramatic way of living that is unreal in this part of the world (Oteng 2014).

While her efforts aim to move beyond typical portrayals of African imagery and storytelling, it may prove too much of a shift for some audience members in Ghana.

Film in Ghana as a cultural Tool

In several of the interviews conducted, students, scholars, and professionals alike repeated a sentiment about the nature of what films should do: that this medium should teach and reflect Ghanaian culture and values. In talking with students, several subjects explained that the films that they gravitated toward relayed some kind of positive message or educational point. In
their own education and production of films, several students aimed to send messages about issues happening in Ghana meant to inform audiences or lessons that could be taught to audiences through their storytelling. This is a pointed shift from the Western viewpoint in which films can serve a purely entertainment purpose. None of the research subjects believed that filmmaking is a superficial or even solely creative endeavor; for Ghanaians, films are supposed to mean something.

For professional filmmakers, their viewpoints varied only slightly from the students: while they weren’t as concerned with teaching lessons to audiences, they were very concerned with the power of film as a cultural asset and its ability to send messages about Ghana to broader audiences beyond the African audience. Shirley Frimpong-Manso made a pointed statement to this effect:

“…We have enough people out there trying to tell African stories from a totally different angle… I’m not going to be one of them. I’ll tell it from a totally different angle [from them]. I’ll tell it from the more positive angle. I want to show that indeed we have our ugly side, but actually the positive side exceeds the ugly side.”

Others, including the subject David, who is a graduate and now professor at NAFTI, shared the need to tell African stories instead of recycling stories from the West:

“I’m still not comfortable with the kind of stories we are telling… Before we were telling bad stories about ourselves. Now we are not telling our stories. We are making other peoples’ stories ours. So we are losing our identities along the way. We are losing our Ghanaianess.”
These sentiments mark an important departure from Western notions of film and show that the perspective shared by the subjects here indicate an understanding and appreciation of film as a tool for sharing cultural knowledge and solidifying a uniquely Ghanaian or African mode of communication and storytelling.

**Beyond the Film: Data from Behind the Scenes**

The following sections represent important data that were collected in the field but are beyond the scope of the film that was produced. The information here is on the ‘cutting room floor,’ but still represent important elements of the Ghanaian film industry and point to new directions in Ghanaian film studies and cross-cultural film studies more generally.

**The process of Film Marketing: Conception and the Winding Road of Distribution**

Part of my field research included understanding the process of filmmaking beyond the creation of the visual content. Some questions that subjects were asked included:

- How do you conceptualize your story/film?
- What physical aids are used to aid in the storytelling process?
- How do you plan a film shoot?
- What is the process of distribution?

These questions were targeted specifically at the professionals who have experience with the process. Socrate Safo provided invaluable details about his process, and shared physical data, such as past scripts, that I could keep and study. These physical documents included shooting schedules, scene descriptions, and the full scripts. A similar record of this production book can be seen in the documentary film, in the hands of director Anderson Frimpong (a white binder).
This production book is an important element of any Ghanaian production and is essentially a road map for the planning and conceptualization of the story before and during production.

Through my own contact with the professional filmmakers, I also saw firsthand how producers and assistants planned and executed shoots. I was interested in learning the process of contacting and hiring talent, and it turns out that a lot of that occurs through word of mouth.

When I was invited onset to a production, I was contacted through text message and met the crew that way. Interview data suggest that this is the norm. While I was able to gather little in regards to the process of conception, it was made clear through interview data that this planning process can vary, but generally only takes a couple weeks to a month before shooting begins. For directors like Safo, his creative storytelling process is on going. He shared with me that he constantly has story ideas waiting to transform into films.

In an industry where time equals money, the quicker a film can be conceptualized and shot, the faster it can be handed over to distribution to generate profit. An exception to this rule is the case of Shirley Frimpong-Manso, whose conceptualization and planning process is a bit longer, perhaps a few months. This filmmaker has been able to transcend the problems that other Ghanaian filmmakers seem to have with generating profits and is one of the few local filmmakers who enjoy first-run film distribution in Ghanaian movie theaters (there are only 2-3 movie theaters in the country, two of which exist in Accra). For the vast majority of the Ghanaian film industry (Accra and Kumasi), the primary film market consists of a straight-to-disc format, and patrons can purchase newly released films directly on disc. This distribution style contributes to the “run and gun” faced-paced production style notable in the West African film industry at large, including that of Nigeria and in Kumasi. The Accra industry is not exempt
from this structure. With some limited exceptions noted above, most distribution, even among popular directors like Socrate Safo, operates within this straight-to-disc distribution process.

I had the opportunity to learn first-hand the distribution process in the Accra industry through my work with Socrate Safo. The following images depict this process, as well as part of the issues generated by an unregulated industry.

**Figure 3.** Distribution of a new film begins with mass duplication. This image depicts the VCD duplication system at one location in Accra, Ghana.

This image marks the start of the distribution process. When a film is completed, a master copy is sent to an office where it is mass-produced, using disc copiers. The tower on the right side of the image above is a disc copy machine, where several VCD’s (Video CD’s, a disc similar to a DVD) can be created at once. A film distributor I spoke with said that depending on the popularity of the film, 20,000-50,000 copies on average are made and sent to different location for distribution on ‘market days.’ For a popular film produced by Socrate Safo, though, this same distributor said that there could be 300,000-400,000 copies made for distribution. This location is also where the disc art and covers are mass-produced.
After copies are made, VCD cases are purchased, and those are collected from a different vendor. I traveled with one of Safo’s assistants to the heart of an Accra market to place an order with one such vendor, pictured below. This same vendor also provides the blank discs for copying.

Figure 4. An Accra vendor who provides blank discs and VCD cases for film distribution.

When the film has been mass-produced and the cases are filled with the new film, film distributors go to work. Distributors from all over Ghana receive copies of the film for distribution, and these individuals are also responsible for promoting its release. This is done through posters and word of mouth. The below image depicts a film market. This is one location of distribution for films. According to a distributor, films are released weekly. Ghanaian films are released on Mondays and Nigerian films are released on Wednesdays.
Figure 5. A film market in Accra, Ghana.

The following image is what a distribution house (comparable to a video store) looks like. This distribution location is for the first-run of a film’s release, during a film’s primary market sale. Films will be in this location for a few months before heading to the “oil market.”

Figure 6. An inside look at a distribution center for films in Ghana, a video store for local consumers.
The oil market is the film distribution market that takes over after sales in the first-run, or primary market drop off. This secondary market is referred to as the “oil industry” according to film professionals. Here, films are sold at discounted prices and is a way to squeeze more profit out of a film. Many times, the highest profits are obtained from a film’s oil market, as there are often more sales at this time due to the cheaper prices. Below is an image of an oil marketer in his place of business.

![Image of an oil marketer in his place of business](image_url)

**Figure 7.** An oil market vendor in his place of business, where consumers can purchase films at a lower cost after they have been on the market for some time.

Due to the nature of the distribution market and especially the lucrative potential of this oil market, the lack of regulation for the film industry hits producers especially hard. After the primary market dies down, producers begin to barter their films to television stations. This process is a double-edged sword: producers barter their older films with television stations in order to promote their newest upcoming films on television, thereby getting wider audience potential for their newest releases (and hopefully to boost primary market sales). However, airing films on television essentially kills the oil industry for these films, as sales drop off completely when viewers can see the film on television without the added cost of purchasing the film.
separately. Thus, there is a place after the oil market dries where these films are stored- it is where these films “go to die.”

Figure 8. Film storage belonging to filmmaker Socrate Safo. After the film oil market has dried, films are store here indefinitely.

So, why would producers kill the market for their own films? The answer is simple: to make way for their new films. Advertising on television is too expensive for producers to promote their newer films without using this barter system with the television stations. Even for producers who do not barter with the television stations, regulation is so lax that stations eventually obtain copies of films and air them anyway- without repercussion. Another profit barrier for producers is the issue of piracy. With no piracy laws preventing such activity, films
are freely shared among viewers, generating another profit loss for producers. With such a small window of primary market profit for films, it becomes clear exactly why films are produced so frequently in Ghana: so that the profits from these products can continue. Without producing new film products, producers would lose their investments and go bankrupt, thus truly ending the cycle of film production. The way that Ghanaian film distribution works is thus vital to understanding the film industry as a whole and offers an explanation for the prolific rate of film production within the country.

Creating Visual Stories from a Ghanaian’s Point of View

As a professional TV producer with a background in framing visual content, one of the most striking elements to me was the difference in how Ghanaian films looked: the way that shots are framed and the length of time spent on a particular shot before it goes to another shot. Western media professionals might mistake these differences for a lack of training in the art of media, a primitive media industry in the host country, or a laxity in media professionalism. But I argue that these differences are a product of culturally specific ways of creating visual images, which are at least in part based on how different groups of people experience vision. This difference in the way that stories are told visually begs an important question: Do people physically see the world differently cross-culturally, and how does that translate in visual media? The work of Worth and Adair (1972) explored this concept, in which they gave Navajo subjects film cameras to see if the what the subjects chose to film would reveal how they saw the world. According to Pack (2000:273), this project “played a pivotal role in the movement towards indigenous self-representation from within the tradition of ethnographic filmmaking.” Worth and Adair (1972) recognized that the filmmaking practices of the Navajo were reflective of the
Navajo people and their ways of thinking and could not be diluted down to a lack of knowledge of film practice. In this vein, Pack (2000) raises the question: “Are native-made films not only different from its mainstream counterpart but distinct from one another? In other words, is it possible to tell whether a film is made by an African or an Asian (or more accurately, a Nigerian or a Laotian)?” (Pack 2000:274). Although Pack (2000:274) initially dismisses this inquiry as ethnocentric (in assuming that “when minorities take pictures, they will automatically express their cultural identities”), these questions are still relevant, and this exploration in film can be attributed to not just an expression of “cultural identities,” but as a window into physical sight and possible tangible differences that might exist cross-culturally in that regard. The study of vision and neuroanthropology can provide some insight on this topic.

**The Neuroscience of Vision.** There are two approaches to the study of vision in current neuroscience. One approach focuses on the mechanics of vision in the brain, and describes in innate terms how vision functions in the brain. This focus is specific to the processes of vision that are “a mapping from one representation to another… consist[ing] of arrays of image intensity values as detected by the photoreceptors in the retina” (Marr 1982:31). Further, an understanding of the process of memory is necessary, as “often one needs to use previously acquired knowledge about objects to identify the objects in them” (Ganis and Kosslyn 2007:24). The brain uses early and late processes in order to access information, in which “early processes rely entirely on information coming from the eyes whereas late processes rely on information stored in memory to direct processing” (Ganis and Kosslyn 2007:25). Object identification requires several subprocesses linked to the late visual processing system where information from memory is stored (Ganis and Kosslyn 2007:25-26). Thus, these processing subsystems “receive input, transforms it in a specific way, and produces a specific type of output; this output in turn
serves as input to other subsystems” (Ganis and Kosslyn 2007:26). Ganis and Kosslyn (2007) show that a major part of visual processing is through memory, which is where a person can access learned knowledge relating to their culture. This includes meaningful symbols and environments that they have seen in the past and continually access when seeing and interacting with the current environment. The ways that vision is used outside of the brain is the second approach to the study of vision in neuroscience and explores further this interaction between vision and the environment.

Although the processes of vision lay important groundwork for how cultural information may be accessed in the brain, what matters here is how humans utilize vision as a tool for understanding and operating within the world. According to Gibson (Greeno 1994:337), “people and animals are attuned to variables and invariants of information in their activities as they interact as participants in other systems in the world.” He introduces the idea that symbols “must be differentiated or identified in order to be carriers of meaning” (Gibson & Gibson, 1955:449-450 in Greeno 1994:338). Gibson thus shows that not only are humans interacting with the physical environment through their vision, but they are also distinguishing symbols within that environment, symbols that are culturally defined. This line of thought introduces the concept of affordances, which “relates attributes of something in the environment to an interactive activity” (Greeno 1994:338). In a sense, affordances are cultural cues for the possibility of action. Affordances in vision help humans effectively understand elements of the environment that allow them to interact with it. A great example provides effective insight into the way affordances are used by humans:

A mailbox provides an affordance for posting letters…the process of cognizing that affordance includes classifying the physical
object as a mailbox…the information for that classification has to be visually available, but the process of classification includes…a mental state that has the epistemic status of a symbol that designates the property of being a mailbox (Greeno 1994:341).

This example is important for several reasons. It shows that culture is vital in the concept of affordances. A mailbox is a cultural product used to send and receive messages. There is consensus within a community of people about what a mailbox should look like, and this creates the physical shape of the mailbox as a meaningful symbol. It then provides the visual cue for communication, which is a major part of human culture. The concept of affordances is an important element of media creation.

Noë and O’Regan (2000) introduce “inattentional blindness,” in which “we only perceive that to which we attend, [so] to see detail in the environment, you must direct your attention to it.” This concept relates to the fundamental experience of vision, in which people believe that they are taking in everything around them in the environment. As O’Regan and Noë (2001:946) describe, “normal perceivers take themselves to be aware of a detailed environment, but what this means is that they perceive the environment surrounding them as detailed.” The inattentional blindness may vary, then, depending on the cultural background of the individual. As research has suggested, visual experience does vary cross-culturally (Chua et al. 2005). A look at what Westerners perceive in an image versus what East Asians attend to show a difference in focal versus contextual attention in visual detail (Chua et al. 2005). The perceptual sensitivity, which is the way in which an individual perceives an environment, will thus be different cross-culturally (Noë and O’Regan 2000). It is then probable that these unique sensitivities that
individuals attune to cross-culturally may result in varying ways that video images are created and received cross-culturally.

**Media as a Reflection of Vision.** Vision has been imperative for communication since picture images appeared on cave walls. At the end of the 19th century, moving images attempted to mirror the visual process by showing objects and environments that moved in real time. Visual media have been progressing exponentially during the 20th century and into the 21st century, and now video and television technology, with its vivid colors and high refresh rates, is more real for viewers than ever. The visual processes outlined above have helped this process, and whether consciously or unconsciously, media produces have utilized techniques that make visual media accessible to all.

The visual image of a film or television scene is built around affordances. Ideally, all elements of a scene hold meaning that the viewer can understand, and this aids in the translation of a message from the producer to the viewer. For example, the appearance of a chair on-screen with a person walking toward it provides an indication for the viewer that the subject onscreen is going to sit down. The availability of this affordance provides artistic liberties for the producers, who can thus create shots that specifically do not mimic how vision works. For instance, a low angle that shows only the bottom of the seat and the feet of a subject still indicates the subject sitting, even though the viewer cannot see the whole image of this action.
Figure 9. An example that shows the visual of someone sitting in a particular environment without depicting an entire scene.

This image may be accessible to individuals cross-culturally, as every human being is familiar with the act of sitting. However, certain kinds of chairs might be an inappropriate affordance in some cultures, and would thus reduce the understanding of a visual message. The environment of the example used above, for instance, looks like a transportation vehicle, such as a car or truck. However, other cultures may not be familiar with this environment and so would not be able to access this information from memory as those from a culture that utilizes these vehicles, like mine, are capable of accessing. Culturally appropriate symbols are vital for visual media to effectively transfer messages. The visual system, as described above, is well suited for recalling symbols and applying the appropriate meaning to them.

Due to the limitation of time in television media programming, affordances must be used to convey messages quickly, and so a degree of cultural consensus is necessary in media production. This introduces a necessary cultural aspect to motion picture, as, when affordances of objects are utilized, the viewer must be able to understand them in order to obtain the message. In television programs, the concept of visual awareness as described above is also
important. In another example, a visual sequence on television might show many visuals that depict an environment. There might be a wide shot of a bedroom, and then a close-up shot of a picture frame.

![Figure 10](image)

**Figure 10.** Images depict a visual sequence, a wide-angle shot of a bedroom, followed by a close-up shot of something in the bedroom, such as a picture frame.

The producer creates a scene that depicts a normal (symbolic) image of a bedroom, and the viewer then sees the room as a normal room, but is not visually aware of every aspect that the image might depict. The subsequent shot of the picture frame brings attention to the picture frame. This shot sequence mirrors the way that humans use their vision, as “*we only perceive that to which we attend, [so] to see detail in the environment, you must direct your attention to it*” (Noë and O’Regan 2000, emphasis added). In television media, the producer is directing a viewer to see specific images, and transfers messages through controlling the visual stimulus of the viewer.

Television media provides a way for viewers to interact with a uniquely visual environment that requires the use of the visual system without inspiring an action from the individual. Although there is an “intimate relationship between vision and action,” the act of watching television does not result in any further action (Tipper et al. 2006:493). In the case that
vision is used for a subsequent action, such as grasping a mug and drinking from it, several processes in the brain must interact for this action to occur (Land and Tatler: 2009:4). In the context of watching television, even where no action results from use of the visual system, several subsystems that are detailed above are necessarily in use during this activity. Watching television is not a passive activity; the brain must constantly access information from memory, located in the late visual processing system.

**Shot Framing and Pacing in Ghana.** Turning to Ghanaian film, Western audiences may notice differences in the way that they look: These films typically have what Ghanaians call “long takes,” which is where a shot stays on a subject for an extended period of time without changing. Generally speaking, American films and television shots change every 2-3 seconds. The rate of shot change in a visual product is known in the professional industry as pacing. In general, the faster a shot changes, the quicker the pace of storytelling. Longer shots allow audiences to linger on a visual image and thus translate to a slower pace in storytelling. Pacing is a tool for filmmakers in the storytelling process, and helps audience “move” along the storyline in a way that is directed by the storyteller. Shots change rapidly in Western media, and this is just not the case in Ghanaian film. Generally, Ghanaian films exhibit slower pace of storytelling than their American counterparts.

A second departure from Western media is the shot framing. Ghanaian films do not often use close up shots. Many scenes are dedicated to using medium and wide shots, and wide shots are used far more often in Ghanaian film than in their American counterparts. It is more common in American media to use close up shots as opposed to wider frames, and the opposite tends to be true in Ghana. Again, shot framing is a storytelling device. Wide shots are used to establish a scene, while close up shots emphasize detail. Medium shots generally carry the story and are
used often in scene transitions. These content decisions are intentional and provide meaning to telling a visual story. These “rules” of media production are constantly bent by all producers and storytellers, and make for new and interesting ways of telling stories visually. Still, and in general, close up shots are used sparsely in Ghanaian films, opting instead for wide shots. In American media, close ups are prominent, and wide shots are used more sparingly.

The “Art” of Filmmaking. Ideas about a “correct” way to produce television/film content do actually exist and these cultural ideas of “correctness” are transferred through educational settings. In Western schools of communication, students are taught the “proper” way to produce content; these include the ways that cameras should frame shots, the way that music should match a scene, the proper lighting for a scene, the number of shot changes that are acceptable within a scene, and the composition of materials that are seen within a scene. These rules of production are designed from a “scientific” belief of what is visually appealing. Examples taught in these institutions include the rule of thirds and the Golden Ratio. These Western ideas are used to distinguish “professional” work from amateur productions. According to media professionals in the United States, Ghanaian video films may not reach these standards and would likely be labeled as “amateur films” or “independent films” at best.

According to Zeki (1999), there is a link between neuroscience and art. In his work, he explains that some artwork produces neural activity (Zeki 1999:89). It is unclear, however, if this neural activity coincides with the subject liking the artwork. Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999:17) contribute to this idea, stating, “Artists either consciously or subconsciously deploy certain rules or principles…to titillate the visual areas of the brain.” Symmetry, pattern recognition, grouping, and contrast are some examples outlined by the authors; none of them referenced here deal explicitly with the Western rules of aesthetic principles (Ramachandran and
Hirstein 1999). These aesthetic principles may be used to draw the viewer in, to focus on certain aspects of a scene, or to provide visual interest in a particular shot. These principles, however, do not reveal any predetermined “correctness” in media creation, pointing to the particular cultural perspective that Western media attends.

**Ghanaian Content Decisions: An Explanation.** Using the neuroscience literature above may help in creating new dialogue that moves past a “correct” way of producing video content. The cultural knowledge that is necessary for media creation and reception may provide insight to the way Ghanaians understand space and the environment. The use of wider angles and longer shots may in fact be purposeful, in order to showcase the “star of the show,” the Ghanaian landscape. In Ghanaian video films, the environment is a crucial part of the story, or arguably in every story, since this film tradition emphasizes Ghana as a subject. In this case, the affordances used by the Ghanaian producers are within the landscape of the scene; thus Ghanaians are able to discern this visual cue in a way that American viewers or non-Ghanaians may not comprehend visually. While answering these questions were not the primary goal of the research in Ghana, I did turn to my interview subjects for answers as to how they decide to frame their shots and pace their stories.

In most of the interviews, I inquired about the long takes and wide shots that are common in Ghanaian films. Most, if not all, subjects knew exactly what I was talking about, and their immediate response was usually a smile or a chuckle; I knew we were on the same page. While subjects were quick to point out the use of long takes and wide shots (as well as fewer shot changes in general), most subjects did not see this as a desirable characteristic of Ghanaian film. Many were quick to point out that the only, or main reason that these types of shots exist is
due to financial constraints of Ghanaian films. Students especially are quick to explain all that is “wrong” with the industry to explain these differences:

“When you watch the foreign movies, I think editing is really done well sometimes, like most the times the editing is very good. But when you watch Ghanaian movies…we don’t have the right techniques, the right computer systems and editing things to produce quality edited movies.”

-Wilhemina Tetteh, University of Ghana student

“There is a different in terms of technology and the way things are done. With the Western films, I realize they take time to do them. But here, we don’t really take time to go through the actual process, we rush through it in a hurry to finish a film and then take it out and sell.”

-Seade Elorm, University of Ghana student

“It’s probably that they have one camera, so they just use one camera for everything. If they have different cameras, one camera can be taking the close up, one can be taking the long… Probably it’s just lack of equipment.”

-Bervlyn Lomotey, University of Ghana student

A common sentiment among subjects was to say “we are learning,” pointing to the Ghanaian film industry still being in its early stages, and as an explanation for the use of long takes and wide shots. This sentiment suggests that these individuals are using their educational training (built from a Western perspective) to frame their thinking on this topic, that this style of filmmaking is “wrong.” While financial constraints placed on Ghanaian filmmakers and a lack in equipment and manpower may be part of this story, it does not fully explain this characteristic in
Ghanaian film. While it is true that financial constraints do limit the variation in shot possibilities, when I was on set during filming, the filmmakers would shoot the same scene multiple times to get different shots and angles: first wide shots, then close ups. Even with the use of one camera, multiple shot frames are possible. And yet, wide shots prevail. Even filmmakers who are educated in Ghanaian film institutions like NAFTI, which teaches styles of filmmaking from a Western perspective, still produce films that have more wide shots than close ups (this is even evident with filmmaker Shirley Frimpong-Manso).

Financial constraints and educational barriers are certainly part of the story (after all, students attend film schools and get mass communication degrees in the United States to learn the process of visual storytelling), but it doesn’t tell the whole story. Some of the same students above are quick to point out that this is indeed not the whole story:

“Our storytelling system is kind of different from the storytelling system that foreigners have. Foreign movies want to make emphasis. Like probably I want to show you the plate of the, like, everything…but Ghanaian ones, they want you to like have probably a long shot of it so that you see how the person is actually probably eating the thing… so that it becomes imprinted in your mind. We normally take long shots so that you see the whole view of the thing as compared to foreign movies… laying emphasis on specific things.”

-Wilhemina Tetteh, University of Ghana student

Vincent Sackitey, a University of Ghana graduate student and TV news director, gave important insight into the use (and lack) of close up shots in Ghanaian film: “It’s a reflection of us,” he said, going on to say that Ghanaian children generally look down when speaking to adults as a sign of respect. Close up shots “are intrusive and intimidating” to Ghanaian audiences. He
went on to say that Ghanaian directors might not trust their actors to provide an emotional performance that would warrant close up shots. This insight points to both structural constraints within the industry, but also shows how shot composition can be a reflection of culture, as well as film as an extension of vision. In addition to shot composition, the pacing might be explained by cultural differences as well. It is true that American culture moves at a faster pace than the Ghanaian culture does (this perspective was obtained from personal experience), but does it then follow that Ghanaian video films will have more wide angles and slower shot changes? More research will be needed to corroborate this idea, but it opens new doors for research in neuroanthropology.

While this section does not intend to provide any concrete evidence for these inherent differences within Ghanaian film content, it is an important discussion to include. This discussion introduces new ways in which neuroanthropology can advance this topic and points to exciting new research in visual anthropology. It shows that there are physical as well as cultural considerations to include when looking at media production.
Chapter 4:

Producing an Ethnographic Film

A vital element to this work is the visual product that was produced during fieldwork in Ghana and after my return. This project is one of the largest I’ve ever done from a production standpoint: 6 weeks of production work in the field, including 37 on-camera interviews, and over 1 terabyte (1000 gigabytes) of video footage generated. Data include video, photos, hard copies of scripts, Ghanaian films on VCD, digital files from research subjects, newspaper clippings from the field, and pages of production and field notes. Postproduction began after my return from the field, and took about a year and three drafts to produce and edit. This chapter chronicles this process, including the hardships in making decisions in the midst of so much visual data and the burden of producing a creative product while still honoring the data and the research subjects. My hope is that this chapter can shed some light on the benefits and trials of using visual anthropology as a research method.

Behind the Lens

As a producer, I spend most of my professional time behind the lens, sitting next to the camera out of sight from everyone except the subject I’m facing and questioning. From that seat, I am able to observe and direct the process of the interview, and for this research, that seat became invaluable. It was not only the place to collect data from a practical standpoint during interviews. A lot of my insight came from the moments that occurred when the camera was not
rolling. Since my interview subjects were those well versed in video production, I was able to witness them working with my equipment, putting their own microphone on, and engaging with me about my work and experience. Thus, conducting the on-camera interviews was a methodological tool for seeing into the world of media production from the subject’s point of view. This exchange revealed to me that Ghanaian industry members (students, scholars, and filmmakers) are just as informed on production practices as I am.

As a “one-man-band,” or someone who was in the field alone, producing, shooting, and audio engineering, I used any opportunity I could to work with the locals. My advisor, Professor Africanus Aveh, brought two of his students to the set of a few of my interviews, so that I could see how they work and at the same time they would be able to help with conducting my interviews. Some of the interviews used in the final film were framed and shot by these students. It was a great experience to see their work in action and showed me that the techniques they’ve

Figure 11. A behind-the-scenes image of the on-camera interview with filmmaker Socrate Safo.
learned in school are similar to my education in the field. One of the students in an early interview held a light reflector during the interview for me, and captured the light better than I could have done, and even taught me something about using the light reflectors to capture the light in a new way. These experiences revealed that the production training in Ghana is really not different from the training in the U.S.

Figure 12. An image taken during a student film shoot at NAFTI, depicting a student taking a shot of me as I take a shot of them.

My positionality behind the lens while showing others behind the lens presents another unique dynamic. For professionals like myself who are used to holding the camera in the opposite direction, it was sometimes difficult to navigate my work as capturing others while they were also interested in capturing me. An important ethical question troubled me: What place do I have in capturing them without them capturing me? The following image shows that I was actually captured at times. It was natural for them to use their tools in my direction just as I pointed my camera in theirs.
In one of the productions I was able to attend on set (Blind Lyrics) one of the producers wanted to write a role into the script for me. As a white person who was readily available, the producer was using the opportunity to his advantage. He mentioned that having white actors in their films give the films more publicity and clout. Faced with this ethical issue, I had to decline. I was not comfortable being in the film, but I also had my work to do behind the camera. But, I was conflicted with that decision and not allowing my image to help them when their image was helping me in much the same way. In lieu of being in their film, I offered them the footage that I was capturing on set, so that they may use it as behind the scenes archives of their project. These issues are something that each researcher may have to navigate when working with a camera and with other professional media producers.

Digital Data

The collection of digital data is an important element to consider in using video methodology. I was using the camera everyday in the field, and that footage needed back ups just in case the files became corrupt one of the hard drives. I brought three 5 terabyte external hard drives into the field to copy the footage from each day and back up to each hard drive. This method proved successful, even through I did not have issues with any of the footage after I returned from the field. I would suggest others working with this medium to create the back ups in the same way. This method may be cost prohibitive (at the time these hard drives cost $100-$150 each), but the peace of mind that the data was safe was well worth it.

While the interviews and B-roll footage was invaluable, the aftermath of this work was daunting. After returning from the field, I was buried in visual data and the more than 1,000 gigabytes of footage that I captured in the field. The on-camera interviews lasted 15 minutes to
2.5 hours, and all the interviews had to be ingested into the computer and edit system, which took days. Each interview was reviewed and rough edited, with sound bites cut and created and markers placed at points to revisit for possible placement in the documentary. Even with only a handful of days in the field on a production set, those days were up to 8 hours long, with the camera almost constantly recording. This data was also ingested and reviewed for placement in the final product.

With all of these images, the most daunting task was selecting the “right” images and sound bites for the documentary. It is difficult to say if there is one “right” way of telling the story, but in this case, the visuals I was able to capture drove the story in the documentary. Even with all of the data that I was able to capture, there were major limitations: examples from existing Ghanaian films were limited and also impossible to ingest in my U.S. system, as I didn’t have access to a VCD player. All the data had to be in digitized form in order to use. Also, even during my participant observation on set, there were only a small number of scenes that were shot in a day, so that the shot variation I was able to capture was limited. I was also limited to what was actually happening in the field when working with the subjects. These issues minimized the scope of the documentary considerably, as I could only tell the story that would not be redundant with the visuals I had to use. For example, I could only have a finite number of sound bites discussing a certain aspect of the film process, because there was not enough variation in shots to show different visual examples of those sound bites. The original intention of the documentary was to show the process of filmmaking from start to finish, including the creative process and conceiving an idea. All of these elements simply did not happen during my fieldwork. With these visual limitations, there are elements of the Ghanaian film story that I simply could not tell in the documentary.
The “Characters”

This film bears the conscious decision of using the research subjects to tell the story. The “characters” consist of film scholars, students, and filmmakers who are able to provide insight into what the Ghanaian film industry is. Instead of using narration to move the story along, using the research subjects to describe the industry in their own words was a way to give them ownership of their industry. Now, this does not mean that I had no agency or control over the content decisions made in the final product. On the contrary, I made all of the decisions on what to include and what not to include in the final product. By using the words of the subjects from their interviews, I am hoping to capture their thoughts and opinions without interjecting too much of myself that already exists through the edit process. My hope is that the resulting video will create a more authentic view of the Ghanaian film industry from the point of view of its players.

Unfortunately, some characters that I captured on camera could not be shared in the documentary due to limitations of the visual product. These include some professionals who work with Socrate Safo, for example. While their stories are fascinating and worth telling, the time constraints of the documentary and the general arc of the story made it impossible to include them. My hope is to be able to tell these stories in other ways in the future, through short films and articles.

The Edit

The edit was the most difficult aspect of the process in creating the final film. I was mired by questions of what to include and what had to be left out. The intended audience of the film informed much of this decision-making, which will be described in more detail in the next
section. The sheer volume of subjects who were interviewed was also a point of consternation; while I wanted to include everyone, the time limitations simply did not allow that. An unfortunate truth about the production and edit process is that the most articulate and pointed individuals normally make the cut into visual products, and that was no different in this product. The individual who could concisely state a similar sentiment that another individual voiced in many more words was generally the one I included. While this process is generally straightforward in the professional world of television production, it is less desirable in anthropological research. Ethical questions arose: am I telling the real story? What are the consequences of cutting a subject out? What are the consequences of leaving out an entire aspect of the research that I witnessed in the field? Again, there may not be a right answer, but I did consider these issues and did my best to share the sentiments in the film that were shared among multiple subjects during the field interviews. Heider’s (1976) discussion of ethnographic film is fitting here, as there is an inherent conflict in what an ethnographic film is, and involves a continuous push and pull between the “scientific and the aesthetic”. Heider (1976:2) notes an important consideration of the film’s purpose: “How can films present information that written ethnographies cannot?” An ethnographic film, by its nature, is “ethnographically shallow” is some areas, even though the resulting film is beautiful with some poignant moments (Heider 1976:5). This is why, according to Heider (1976:7), an ethnographic film “demands an accompanying written ethnography for more serious use and deeper understanding.”

As mentioned above, the visuals tell the story. A second aspect of the edit process was telling a story that mirrored the visuals that I had at my disposal. The visuals drove the story that I was able to tell. As Heider (1976:113) explains, “The major conceptual step from ethnography to film is to decide what aspects of the ethnography can be described more effectively in film or
which aspects of the verbal description of the ethnography can best be supplemented by film.” This reality about production and the process of editing is difficult and limits what could be included in the final product. For example, while the distribution process that was described in chapter 3 is fascinating, the lack of visuals beyond the photos I shared made it impossible to tell this story effectively in the film. That is one reason why having two outcomes, a written thesis and the documentary, is so beneficial.

An important part of the edit process includes initial screenings before the final version of the film is finalized. I had the opportunity to present a late draft of the film in an undergraduate class, called Culture Through Film, where I was able to show the film, lead a discussion, and receive feedback from the students regarding possible changes they thought might make the film better. As the producer, videographer, and editor of this film, as well as the principal investigator for the research behind the film, I feared that I was too close to the subject and thus would not be able to tell if the information I was presenting through the film was too vague for a general audience. Having students review the film and be introduced to the topic of Ghanaian film for the first time was a wonderful opportunity to ensure that the film could be presented to audiences who have never heard of a Ghanaian film industry. Overall, the feedback of the film was positive, but I did receive some important suggestions for changes from the students. One suggestion that was implemented was the use of full screen graphics at some points in the film that provide additional information that is not presented by the interview subjects. These bits of information mainly clarify general facts about the Ghanaian film industry, such as terms, locations, and the structure of the industry. These graphics add context to the film and also provide some flow to the film. This screening experience with the undergraduate students proved invaluable to the edit process of the overall finalization process of the film.
The Audience

A consideration of the intended audience is vital when planning and executing any visual media. I made the decision early on to create a product that would be beneficial and appealing to mass audiences, and not only the anthropological community. This decision drove the content choices of the documentary, and made the focus of the story more general. By catering to an audience who knows little to nothing about the Ghanaian film industry, it was necessary to include content that describes the most basic information about the industry, to introduce them to this world. Using more generalized content forced some more specific elements of the industry to be left out. While some of the conflict that exists in the industry is shared in the film, much of that aspect is not included in the final product.

While this product is a great way of introducing the layperson to the Ghanaian film industry, another visual product could have been created with a different audience in mind. In the field, I realized a possible need for some kind of product for the industry professionals. Socrate Safo and others have been working toward a film bill for the past 10 years that would provide some regulation of the film industry that is desperately needed in order for this business to grow and flourish. With so much conflict, and with this research being able to bypass some of that (as individuals from different camps of the conflict, from the professionals, to the scholar, et cetera, were interviewed and presented together in this documentary), a visual product might be able to be created and shared with industry members to create some kind of unity within the industry for the greater good. While individuals like Socrate Safo and members of the academic community may not see eye-to-eye, their interviews proved that they all want the same thing: for this film industry to grow and be successful for the people of Ghana. It may be ambitious to think that this
work can help in that way, but it is worth a discussion with the research subjects, and perhaps another visual product can be created for a new audience at some point in the future.
Chapter 5: Conclusion

Doing research centered on visual anthropological methods was both stressful and rewarding. Working with other media professionals cross-culturally was a wonderful and eye-opening experience. Creating a visual product alongside a written work is also a valuable outcome for sharing new perspectives and ideas with mass audiences. Issues of representation are at the forefront of concern when doing such work, but when considering these issues and working through them, anthropological research that reaches beyond academia is possible.

Toward Public Anthropology

The push toward anthropological work moving past academia to reach broad audiences is linked to public anthropology. Nancy Scheper-Hughes explains, “public anthropology involves ‘translating’ anthropological ideas and concepts into a version that appeals to a broad public,” thus “making our work more accessible and also more accountable” (Scheper-Hughes 2009:1). Scheper-Hughes goes on to explain that although it is difficult for anthropologists to transcend the sphere of academia, as academics enter more realms of work, such as activism and collaboration, it is important that anthropologists learn to wear different hats (Scheper-Hughes 2009:1). Broader realms of work also help to gain access to doors that are shut to the lone academic, as Scheper-Hughes demonstrates with her IRB exemptions (Scheper-Hughes 2009:1).
Anthropological research cannot be fully appreciated until it is widely disseminated, no matter how much it speaks to current issues and debate. Therefore, the aspect of public anthropology that calls for reaching broad audiences is given precedence here. Borofsky (2011) weighed in on the predicament for the discipline in gaining wider audiences. He explains how the need of public anthropology is so great due to the fact that “the discipline has become isolated from broader society in detrimental ways,” relating the higher enrollment of students in anthropology to a disingenuously high amount of book sales that creates the façade of a larger readership (Borofsky 2011). The reality is, according to Borofksy (2011), that the main purchasers of anthropology books are students who are required to read them for their courses. Adding insult to injury is the reality that anthropology is widely popular in the media, and can be found in novels and in movies. Bestselling books, such as Skloot’s (2010) *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and the widely read *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down* (Borofsky 2011), use anthropological methods and themes but are not written by anthropologists. This creates “anthropology without anthropologists” as “they are not themselves active participants in these discussions” (Borofsky 2011). In this climate, public anthropology can help the discipline “regain something many anthropologists felt they had lost- a sense of status and respect from the broader public” (Borofsky 2011). The attempt to “increase its public voice” in order to “communicate its knowledge, insights and understanding to a broad public audience” has brought public anthropology to the forefront (Rylko-Bauer et al. 2006; Haas 1996).

Public anthropology can be achieved on a grander scale through visual dissemination. As mass media allows for national and international audiences, visual anthropology can tap into public awareness in ways that print publications and online forums cannot. Through collaboration with television and film industries, anthropologists can disseminate visual
ethnographies to national audiences such as PBS, film festivals, and cable networks. According to Faye Ginsburg, the “vitality” of visual anthropology is its ability to teeter “between the disciplinary world of anthropology and the more free-wheeling universe of film and video practice, disengaged from academic constraints” (Ginsburg 1998:174). This shows how visual anthropology can aid in public anthropology aims, as it uses anthropological methodology and themes, but caters the message to wider audiences outside of academia.

**Reflections**

The Ghanaian film industry is in a state of change and I am glad that I had the opportunity to work in the field when I did. Ahead of this research, there was no mention in the existing literature of the split in the industry between the Kumasi and Accra regions, and I hope that this work can shed some light on that aspect of the industry. There is also little in the literature that exists about the existing structure of the industry and the players involved, from the professional filmmakers steeped in the traditional style to those from academia and filmmakers influenced by the West. Hopefully this work has helped to add context to the current state of the industry as well.

Creating two products relating to the research, the written thesis and the documentary, was an invaluable experience and also holds the potential to reach beyond academia. My hope is that this half hour program can and will air on PBS, and that viewers can learn about this industry. Moving forward, I hope to use the data and the footage to continue to work with the research subjects in Ghana to see if producing a separate product for them can be useful. I tread lightly in this endeavor, as I fear how necessary my work can be for those fighting for a sustainable industry (why, for example, would the Ghanaian media professionals not be able to
produce a video product themselves to share with political stakeholders?). While I am happy with the product I have completed, and its use for educating wider audiences, I wonder what it can actually do, especially for the industry and individuals under study. With an industry that is currently divided, could the release of a documentary in Ghana provide the filmmakers with the legislation and legitimacy that they desire and need for the industry to flourish? It is clear that although there may be different ideologies and viewpoints from the different constituencies in conflict, the data and the video shows that all parties are still sharing the same sentiments that what they are trying to achieve is an industry where creative individuals can produce films that are meaningful, entertaining, as well as lucrative. Perhaps video can be used as a neutral and unifying tool to drive the industry forward.

I do believe that this work has value and can be a good formula for creating products in visual anthropology. The documentary is able to have its own audience, while the written work has a different, but equally important audience as well. I believe that this method makes the most out of the research and can be replicated in the future and by other researchers interested in visual methodology.

Looking to the Future

While this work has provided new data about the Ghanaian film industry and has introduced some new concepts about cross-cultural media production, there is still so much more to be done in this area. First, this research was limited by language. While most of the Kumasi industry operates in the local language, the Accra industry does contribute to local language production as well. In candid conversations with some film subjects, they shared that by only focusing on the English-language films, a large part of the industry is excluded. Future research
can and should delve more deeply into the local language films and what they have to offer audiences and the industry in Ghana. In that vein, a comparative study between “Kumawood” and “Glamourwood” would be fascinating and would likely shed more light on media production from a cross-cultural perspective as well as the place that indigenous media and mainstream media have in a country like Ghana. “Currently, of the ten movies released in Ghana weekly, seven are from Kumawood,” according to Yamoah (2014:157). Given the breadth of the Kumawood industry, more research should focus in this direction.

A deeper look at the use of vision and neuroscience in the field of visual and media anthropology is an exciting avenue for future development. The discussions presented here provide just a surface understanding of how vision and neuroscience can inform visual production, but a more in-depth study that focuses on this could be invaluable for understand cross-cultural media creation as well as a deeper understanding of the way art, culture, and vision intersect and aid in interpreting the physical world. While the Ghanaian industry could be the subject for future work on this topic, any visual industry and region could inform this idea and propel the field of neuroanthropology forward toward a meaningful understanding of how visual messages are created and transmitted. This topic helps to identify differences in media creation cross-culturally, not as a point of wrongdoing or backward technique, but as a way of revealing how people of different cultures might physically see the world differently and how these different ways of seeing translate into artistic forms like film.

There is so much opportunity available to further this research, and this work marks just the beginning. My hope is that this work can be used as a starting point for future work in Ghana and more broadly in the field of visual anthropology.
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Appendix A:

Behind the Lens: The Pride and Politics of Film in Ghana

The documentary that supplements this work can be found at the following link on Google Drive. The folder “Farah Vickery MA Thesis Film 2017” can be viewed by anyone. The total running time is 27:30:00.

Link

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/0Bx-S35R11dtveFpzbmVBNU1pdFk?usp=sharing
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