

Intellectual biography in film

Portraying Sophie Bòsèdè Olúwólé

Juul van der Laan

Thanks to Sophie Olúwólé, the ancient Yorùbá philosopher Ọ̀rúnmilà is lifted out of obscurity onto a pedestal next to Socrates with her 2014 publication *Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmilà* (Olúwólé 2014). We decided to make a film together, after meeting in 2017 during the book tour of its Dutch translation. Here I reflect on how I portrayed her thought and personality as part of an intellectual biography in a short film. This essay explores how film as an art-form can be an implicitly suitable means of depicting a philosopher, but also how it can act as a means of philosophy in and of itself. The importance of the inextricable role of personality in light of intellectual legacy is recognised here in reflection of Yorùbá traditional thought related to personhood. By providing a translation of my artistic process, while taking into account the ethical considerations related to documentary filmmaking, I demonstrate that the plural, complementary nature of filmmaking can lend itself particularly well to express African philosophy.

Key words: Sophie Bòsèdè Olúwólé, Ifá, documentary film, intellectual biography

1. Seeing is believing?

It might seem easy to reflect someone's being and thinking in a truthful manner through documentary film.¹ The medium tends to be taken as one of the purest possible reflections of reality itself. Documentary film scholar Brian Winston refers to this as the old error—"the camera cannot lie" (Winston 2000: 133). So nothing is less true. To tell stories the filmmaker utilises 'manipulation' within its medium in a similar fashion a painter does who deliberately places and shapes strokes on a canvas. For a filmmaker, by choosing a lens with specific focal length to put on the camera, by framing the shot, by determining the focus, they are already deciding what to leave in and what to leave out of the

¹ With 'film' I do not distinguish between analogue and digital modes of filmmaking, even though the term originally designated 'film' as a material medium. To me, 'film' is not about creating a short clip or a video by pressing record and stop on your phone for example. Although strictly one could call a digital film file a 'video,' I find that a film encompasses a fully invested artistic process towards the expression of something like an idea, and in this case a portrait.

picture. This in turn influences how its subject is being perceived by a viewer with many possible outcomes. Furthermore, other conditions in the process of making, like the size of the film crew, or the location chosen for an interview, has an influence on what happens in front of the camera. These are complex processes which establish a multitude of relations that affect one another. The decisions made by the director, or maker, are of incredible influence on that which is recorded. But this is not where that influence ends, because after recording, a filmmaker moves into the phase of montage. Here the footage enters a level of further selection, choices are made regarding the juxtaposition of images, rhythms are added, colours are corrected, and sound is designed, among others. The focus of this phase of the process is editing the images themselves to establish a certain (audio)visual quality, as well as the spoken text, which is being edited to tell the story of the subject as clearly, and appealingly as possible, whatever that may mean, given the specific context of the subject matter or the release of the work.

These acts of ‘manipulation’ however do not automatically imply a broken connection with truthfulness. It is just that a documentary film should not naively be considered, because of its very nature, more truthful than any other form of film (or art for that matter). Even a fiction film may be more truthful in its expression than a non-fiction (Böker 1978: 127). So, as ethically conscious documentary filmmakers, we are aware that *we do shape* the stories that depict our subjects heavily. And that we also have to work hard artistically, and thus with integrity, to approach truthfulness. Integrity referring to honesty in combination with ethical consideration - which does not necessarily imply truthfulness in and of itself (Ramose 2014: 68).

But finishing a film is not where the interpretative process of the ‘film story’ ends; it continues in the reciprocity between film and its audience, and consequently starts to take on shapes of its own. Susanne Langer reflects in this respect that both the artist and the spectator are actively trying to understand the meaning inherently expressed through an artwork, however they each do so in a different way. For the artist it is an active, intense, and persistent exercise of artistic creation for which maintaining focus is key. For the spectator it is a more gradual process of gaining more or less clear insights (Langer 2023: 70).

It really is a plural and ungraspable project, such an artistic expression. Which is exactly where it delivers its strength in relating people to each other, and to critical ideas. That what is experienced, the feelings generated, the insights as a result, however clear or vague, they act upon everyone involved. Each artwork, such as a film, is in doing so a unique case. Therefore its methods of creation and research (often both at the same time) are by no means scientific. They ought not be quantifiable nor replicable, and they fulfil their expressive role the better for it. As such it is important to keep in

mind that when reflecting on the process of making a particular film as a maker, it could never become a standardised recipe for filmmaking in general. It is merely an exercise in translation of their particular process to gather an insight on how ideas and thoughts can be expressed through another medium than, for example, writing.

With this in mind, for this article, I would like to reflect on my (philosophical) process as a maker in creating a short intellectual biography of Sophie Bòsèdè Olúwólé in film.² All within the framework of the experience of me meeting (and filming) her for the first time in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, in May 2017 and for the second time in Lagos, Nigeria, at the turn of November into December 2017. In effect, this project might be considered an act of intercultural dialogue, as well as a dialogue between the traditional-academic domain of philosophy and film.

It is vital here to be aware that the language of film is a language in itself and the transposition of that language into words always is limited. So it might be beneficial to watch the film itself beforehand, and afterwards, to be able to follow and understand the text (for the link see footnote 2). As I will later discuss in more detail, a core facet of Olúwólé's philosophy, being an African thinker, she describes as *binary complementarity*. You may see the film and this article also as existing within each other's complementary light.

2. The short film, the background

As hinted at before, filming, not unlike life, is a complex process involving a multitude of factors that all need to fall into place for its organisation. We can plan the process in advance, but plans are liable to change due to unforeseen circumstances. Perhaps these remarks seem like an open door, but these unexpected confrontations with reality, in fact play a vital part in the (documentary) filmmaking process itself.

I met Sophie Olúwólé for the first time thanks to the book tour celebrating the translation of her book *Socrates and Òrúnmìlà* into Dutch in 2017. She visited various places in the Netherlands to present and explain her philosophical vision and deliberations embodied within this book. We met in her Amsterdam hotel, and decided to make a film together about her philosophical and emancipatory work.

²The film is accessible via the link:

<https://juulvanderlaan.nl/portfolio/sophie-vod/> or find the QR code underneath references.

The artistic process³ was roughly scheduled as follows: first a pre-production phase of research to familiarise myself not only with Olúwolé⁴ and her work, but also with the culture of the Yorùbá. Secondly, a writing phase to process the research into concrete storylines and to come up with a plan for filming them. Followed by the production process, in which raw footage for the film is recorded, ensued by the post-production process, in which the montage is shaped. Finally, there is the presentation of the finished film.

I recorded my first interview with Olúwolé the day after we first met, and continued filming during her tour in the Netherlands and during my research visit to Nigeria late 2017. But as early as during this continued research and writing stage, the preconceived plans fell by the wayside. Sophie Olúwolé unexpectedly passed away late 2018. In memory of her I decided to edit a short film based on these early recordings. My aim was to create the film as an introduction to the professor: to her as a teacher of philosophy, and her specific work on Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmilà. The name of the short documentary: *Sophie*. When talking about her, I tend to refer to her on a first name basis, because a special friendship had grown between us, but there are other reasons for this choice of title, which I will expand on later.

What I intend to do in this article is to discuss how I expressed the philosophical concepts involved in Olúwolé's work through the artistic filmmaking process. Starting from the concept that reflecting Olúwolé's personality in conjunction with her intellectual work is paramount in providing a valuable philosophical portrait. The specific Yorùbá ideas around personality, or personhood, are key here. Individual social integrity and personality have to be earned in Yorùbá society (Kazeem 2009: 168). Olúwolé herself analysed this concept surrounding the Yorùbá term *omólúàbí*, which is popularly, and roughly, translated as 'a good person.' She however analysed it within its broader linguistic context, deriving that a 'good' person or personality, is a person who behaves like someone properly nurtured with deep knowledge, wisdom and trained to be self-disciplined and to develop a sense of responsibility that shows in private and public interactions (Kazeem 2009: 168). It extends to the line of thinking that ethics and aesthetics are inextricably linked. The importance of good character as part of personality as well as aesthetics is also illustrated by perhaps one of the best known Yorùbá proverbs: *Ìwà l'ẹ̀wà* (Character is beauty).

³ For practical purposes I am leaving a description of the business side of (independent) filmmaking out, even though it does influence progress of the artistic schedule. However, it is not relevant regarding the central question asked in this text.

⁴ And she familiarising herself with me, and my backgrounds!

Through this text I will discuss a selection of decisions made during the process of the montage. These are examples which I consider to provide clarity in terms of reflecting both Sophie Olúwólé's philosophy as well as her character. Of course to this discussion there are some limitations: I can only reflect on what I consciously did as precipitated in hindsight. The process itself is often guided by many unconscious decisions directly expressed through the medium. However some decisions were consciously made, mostly those related to establishing the frameworks within which the film would exist, such as the thought that this should be an introduction to Olúwólé and her work within the context of me meeting her, it will not be about Òrúnmilà. Yet, some decisions, or the implications of the results of them, entered consciousness while thinking about the process in retrospect. These latter two types of decisions I can establish here. Even though I will mostly reflect on the decisions during the editing phase, it is relevant to consider my specific approach to recording the filmed material. Because, simply put, how I record images directly influences what I can work with for the montage.

2.1. The title, a name

But let me first go deeper into the title as a first example of dealing with representation of personality in conjunction with intellectual legacy. The title, by the way, was chosen during the editing process. *Sophie*, referencing the name she decided to keep as her first, was inspired by the name (originally 'Sofia') the headmaster of her primary school had given her—in so doing referencing the Greek word σοφία (*sophia*) for 'wisdom,' as the headmaster had considered her to be very clever from an early age (Beier and Oluwole 2001). Even though Olúwólé's work is largely focussed on emancipating traditional African thought, and her second mentioned name on her books 'Bòsèdédé' indicates that heritage, I decided to run with 'Sophie.'⁵ To me, it shows what I learned while travelling with her in person: that she loved the Socratic method of questioning, the so called *μαιευτική τέχνη* (*maieutiké téchnē*), meaning 'the method of the midwife': let the path of wisdom be born by questioning. This is always a dialogical process, an approach she valued highly. The decision for this first name as a film title stresses the value of what she called 'binary complementarity' which she posited as an inherent African way of approaching the world we live in. She never wanted to exclude any intellectual heritage, she wanted everyone to be valued according to what they can bring to the philosophical table, without bias or prejudice against them based on, for example, racial or gender related categorisations (Olúwólé 2001: 231). In the film she says:

⁵ In the title sequence of the film it is soon after followed by her full name.

Òrúnmilà said many things like Socrates, but he even said some things better than Socrates.⁶

This does however not mean that she did not appreciate Socrates' legacy, nor that it would contradict her mission to put Òrúnmilà on the academic map. To reflect this, I chose the title of the film to carry her first name, implicating 'wisdom' in Greek, the language that provided the terminology for the academically accepted field of critical thought. And, as is known, among others in Yorùbá thought, names are important signifiers, carrying meaning regarding an essence of who they're given to. Sophie Olúwolé's main plea having been the acceptance of traditional African thought under this global-Greek umbrella term can perhaps poetically be interpreted as a reference to her personal destiny and intuition, or *Orí*, literally meaning 'inner head,' in Yorùbá. Her strength lies in critical translation through which she could create bridges between cultures. But that is me dreaming on in associations and intangibilities—which is perfectly fine, as I understood it, from an African viewpoint, and in art in general: to be in a free dialogue.

2.2. Research and method

Together with Sophie Olúwolé I traveled through the Nigerian area of Yorùbáland⁷ as part of the research process. After deciding to work together, Olúwolé stressed the importance of me visiting this part of Nigeria and experiencing the culture to better understand what she was talking about in her work.

As mentioned I tend to start filming during the research process. I did this in the smallest capacity possible: my crew was just me. This way the camera forms a part of me in interaction with the interviewee. Not in a hidden way, but with the camera acknowledged as an integral part of the process that demands time to set up, pull the correct focus, set the frame. So for me, there's a direct honesty towards the person I'm collaborating with, regarding what I come to do and how I do it. I make films, and I function in close proximity to this technology which helps me to do the job; so sharing, instead of hiding, the process involved is a form of openness towards the person as subject. But this early presence of the camera also has a more methodological reason. The filming to me is a way to explore the subject I am researching in the moment, through the medium I will be expressing it in. In a way I'm trying to extract myself from the situation as much as possible. Even though this is wholly not

⁶ All quotations from Olúwolé have been taken from the film *Sophie* (Van der Laan 2022) unless otherwise indicated.

⁷ In the past Yorùbáland has variably stretched from South-West Nigeria, to Benin and Togo. (Usman and Falola 2019, 5-6).

possible, it helps me to take on a role of near-pure observation. It provides an openness to take in as much as possible; to hear and see with particular focus. At the same time I'd like to stress that observation itself is never separate from the situation the observing occurs in (Bohm 2002: 181). It is also important to keep in mind that *Ohun t'ó k'ojú síni, èhìn l'óko s'élòmí*, translated by Olúwólé as: "What has its face to one observer, has its back to another" (Olúwólé 1997: 87).

Practically speaking, to try and achieve this mere witness-like state, I made a decision of minimal intervention while filming. I would simply follow and adjust to the occurring situation. At most for example I could say something like: "Oh, wait I have to walk to the other side so that I can take a shot of you walking down that path [which you already decided to walk down]." Yet, I would not forcibly stage a situation in action, i.e.: "Could you go stand there and look up at the sky?," except for when choosing a location to record a static interview. But even then I would let myself be led by the space that I feel is naturally important to the person, Sophie Olúwólé, who gives the guiding perspective.

From a technical point of view this *laissez faire* approach is not always easy, and it demands a more improvisational and spontaneous approach to filmmaking. But I found it important, especially at this stage, to minimise my already very present influence on the process. And I believe that trying to minimise control of the situation gives a lot of unexpected, beautiful, even though often imperfect, material from which I can learn, thus with which I can work. I would rather let it speak to me, than having me speak over it: taking on an inviting attitude in our interaction.

In South West Nigeria Olúwólé showed me important cultural places and introduced me to the system of Ifá by taking me to visit Babalawos near Abeokuta.⁸ To conclude our trip, we filmed an interview in her garden.

While the act of filmmaking forms an important part of my research method, it is not the only one. Important parts of the trip and research process were not captured on film, either because it was not convenient, or well-placed to take out the camera. The experience of being around Olúwólé, her entourage, and visiting these places, off camera, was as valuable to the process of filmmaking as the filmed material itself. In Yorùbá philosophy, and in African philosophy in general, the human person and their society and natural environments are very closely intertwined (Ramosé 2005: 57). In addition

⁸ The Babalawo (male counterpart of the female Iyanifa), a highly educated expert of the Ifá corpus, had long been mistaken for, and misrepresented as a priest dealing with divine messages within a for many considered 'fetish' religion. Yet as Olúwólé demonstrates, they are in fact experts in a computational oral tradition that deals with sound scientific and rational philosophical treatises. (Olúwólé 2014) They can be considered a specific figure to visit to restore health, which is intrinsically connected with rationality and argumentative ideas.

to this, further literature study to provide me with a more advanced insight in Olúwolé's work regarding the Yorùbá intellectual tradition over the years, was indispensable.

In the particular case of this short film, due to the circumstance of her passing, the full film production actually turned out to have taken place during the research phase. This is why, from here, I will jump straight to describing the logistics involved in the post-production phase and some of its philosophical implications, before moving into the discussion of the artistic process in creating an intellectual biography of the person Sophie Olúwolé.

2.3. Processing the data and montage

Filming creates a lot of data that needs to be streamlined and processed, both from a technical point of view, but also from an analytical one. And analysis is always a logical procedure within a philosophical framework, consciously or unconsciously providing a vision on the world as a whole. Practically, the film data needs sorting to make sense of. The act of sorting is a vital step in learning and trying to understand Olúwolé's work and the system of Ifá. In addition to that, it is an opportunity to relive the moments that were filmed, from a distance. It offers space for reflection on and interpretation of what was witnessed, this time, alongside further exploration of literature. These steps prepared me for the actual process of montage. Based on the footage I had 'rediscovered' while sorting, I consciously defined the framework within which the short film would exist. However, establishing an initial framework does not mean that the entire storyline had already precipitated at this point. I tend to start with a rough story structure that is being refined, shuffled, intertwined, clarified, etc. along the way. So even though I will be presenting it here as a set story structure, it is important to realise that it was never pre-determined before starting the edit. It evolved through conscious, unconscious decision-making and 'happy accidents' during the process. A former teacher of mine, filmmaker Prof. William Raban, likened it to sculpting, where you start with a big block of stone and discover the real shape of the art piece within it, only while chiseling away. In a way the process can be seen as an inner dialogue, one from which an implicate form is unfolded (Bohm 2002: 188).

Once the storyline is refined, and the images and sounds have found their place, a new process of refinement is entered. In collaboration with sound designer and composer Kit Wilmans Fegradoe we worked on the score, fully aware of the integrative role music has to play within a film, just like the French philosopher Merleau-Ponty stresses in his essay on filmmaking:

Disons seulement qu'elle doit s'y incorporer et non s'y juxtaposer (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 100).

Let's just say that she [the music] has to incorporate herself in it [the film] and not to juxtapose to it.

The music has to be 'embodied within' the storylines and overall view of the film. Other steps in finalising the montage are among others, creating graphics and colour correction. Working on the colours is necessary to refine the visual quality of the images, or stress certain parts of it over others. For this film it was especially important during certain scenes filmed in a rather dark Amsterdam church where Olúwólé presented her book. The dark brown wooden backdrop in some scenes, made the face of a white male professor seated next to Olúwólé jump out much more than hers. Obviously this had to be corrected, the focus 'had to' be on Sophie, through every detail.

So, where I try, as much as reality and logic allows, to be a witness during filming, in the edit I actively shape. And it is this particular part of the process I will further expand on later in this text. Before moving further into the artistic process during the montage, I will describe the framework I established beforehand, based on what I learnt about Olúwólé and her work.

3. A framework: the person, the philosophy

3.1. Defining a framework within which the film should function

Creating a framework by clearly defining the context in which a story is taking place enhances a story's character (Root 1979: 14-15). Furthermore, when having the responsibility of portraying someone through that story, it helps to present her in a more truthful way, relating her to the situation in which she finds herself while being filmed. And last but not least, practical constraints, such as having to work with what you have and not being able to record more footage, are very important to take into account, establishing this framework realistically.

So I decided to stick to the relatively simple context of my first meeting with her as a point of departure for this short film. This direct, spontaneous approach, reflecting our meeting, would align well with it acting as a first introduction to Sophie Olúwólé and her work on Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmìlà for a viewer. Our very first interview in Amsterdam would provide the backbone to the entire film. Our road trip in Nigeria, and her book presentations in various venues in the Netherlands were going to act as support towards the general storyline I would construct based on that first interview.

Secondly, I explicitly decided at the start of the process to have Olúwólé introduce herself to us. No external narrator would be involved in this film. I find it especially important in light of the aftermath of colonial histories and dominant Eurocentric perspectives (particularly in film) that she

would tell us her story directly.⁹ To honour this, yet provide a clear context, I made use of title screens, transcribed from a voice coming from me, the maker at the start. However, the only voice you'd hear is that of Sophie, or people she interacts with on camera.

Thirdly, it was clear: this short film would be about Sophie Olúwolé and her work, not about Òrúnmilà. Even though she would introduce him to us through her work.

3.2. The person, the message, the settings

The depiction of how someone is in the world, is, according to Merleau-Ponty, one of the main strengths of cinema; but I think he mistakenly stated that it would not be able to express thoughts (Merleau-Ponty 1965, 104). Having Olúwolé on camera speaking her words herself, alongside her gestures and movements, her intonations, and the expressions in her face represent valuable information about her as a person, and provides a clear image of her philosophising: the act of her thinking and talking.

A few things in her work at this point in time particularly stood out to me. Firstly, the importance of the acknowledgment of oral traditions as valuable modes of intellectual transmission and in the case of the Ifá system also as a form of documentation. To Olúwolé:

[...] philosophy is about thinking and talking, writing is just a technique of documentation.

Secondly, the idea of binary complementarity as way of looking at the world, which corresponds to the viewpoints from many philosophies from Africa. Sophie contrasts this with the idea and logic of binary opposition in the Western traditions of philosophy.

And lastly, as one of the key pointers, her attitude when reflecting on a history of colonisation which also affected gender relations.

It is natural that when the Western man came to colonise us, all he can teach me is what he knows. The culture he knows, the philosophy he knows, and so on. He doesn't know my own.

I look physically different.

We may think differently, but that you cannot think ... if you cannot think then you are not a human being ...

⁹ I am particularly adamant about this. Too many reportages exist in which an external -all knowing- narrator, typically from a dominating culture, narrates the histories, behaviours and lives of people from Africa. Through *Multiverse Ghana* (2015), an earlier film portrait I created about scientists in Ghana, I also made this point. Choices like these affect the portrayal of people and their agency immensely in film.

In light of scrutinising this past, she envisions a present and future of dialogue in which one does not discriminate against another. This, between the African and Western world, and between socio-political groups of African societies themselves. Her position as Chairman and Executive Director of the Centre for African Culture and Development underpins this, as she used it to bring these issues of inequity in power and valuation to the fore. Philosophy is in her view strongly connected with struggling for justice in societal and private realms.

Her expressive character, her storytelling as a natural part of philosophy (as it is in the traditional Ifá system), the humour, the constant questioning as a guide in everything she does and everyone she encounters, yet fierce confrontation with logical clarity when the situation required, are a summary of characteristics of her personality; which I experienced both on and off camera.

‘Where’ we met was of big influence on the context in which the recordings were made. This first happened in Amsterdam, a place she had visited before, but was not native to her. The effects of setting on a person, from sitting down in a rather busy hotel lobby for an interview, to moving along the strictly organised, tourists-laden, history-laden city centre streets of the capital of the Netherlands—are tremendous and almost speak for themselves as to someone’s character moving along these spaces. The image is complemented, when set aside seeing her traveling through Nigeria, with its lively business, crossing dusty roads, moving through colourful sprawl and warmer climate. We cannot only see her in these spaces, but also how she relates to her environments. A very telling and concrete example of her personality in relating to her (social) environment is a shot in which we see her enter the stage, under applause of the audience. Instead of immediately sitting down in the chair on stage, she turns around and starts giving an applause back at the audience: she acknowledges everyone in the room by doing this.

4. The artistic interpretation and critical thought

4.1. It’s a manner of reflecting

So, the question is how to reflect a person and her philosophy using film as medium. This requires shaping, like a painter shapes using paint and brush. As my method of filming is highly improvisational—providing a reflection of the encounter of me and Sophie Olúwolé in the settings we visited together—the more active shaping took place in the montage.

After re-discovering what had been filmed during the first phase of post-production, and establishing the framework within which the film would exist, the montage could begin. I will discuss elements of this process following a funnelling and somewhat anecdotal approach. Moving from broad structural ‘strokes’ to characteristic examples of finer detailed work.

4.2. General structure, rhythm and flow

Letting Sophie introduce herself, like she did to me, seemed like a straightforward and clear way to start the film. It was important to hear that she was from Nigeria, studied there, and officially retired.¹⁰ Furthermore, to set the context of where she was coming from, it was important to demonstrate and establish the discrimination against Africans that has been taking place for centuries and, importantly, that African philosophy had not been considered a field when she grew up. It had to be clear that she was here in the Netherlands to prove the non-sense of this and demonstrate what real critical thought looked like.

In the dry, down to earth, matter-of-fact way as she could do, she addressed a crowd at the ISVW (Internationale School voor Wijsbegeerte – International School for Philosophy, Leusden, May 2017):

I am quoting Hegel: ‘The negro mind is incapable of containing any reflective thinking [...]’. Speculation. [...] They should come and see whether what I said is reflective.¹¹

After which we could move on to follow her line of thinking and start with the core question: “What is philosophy?”

It was important for me to follow her reasoning as sharply and clear-cut as possible. Within a short film there is not much time for embellishments, but it would also form an opportunity for showcasing her clarity in reasoning, which started by first questioning our very basic assumptions.

Her love for questioning had to shine through the first part of the film, as I considered it an important part of her character. So it was important soon after seeing her for the first time on screen, to start with a question that is one central to her work, and would be repeated later on:

If the father did not write it, how can the son know it?

In leading with this question without answer, we are opening space to start considering other modes of transmission of knowledge and wisdom. In other words, it sets the scene for critically commenting on the thus far dominant idea that philosophy can only be encapsulated in writing. It makes us think,

¹⁰ Note that she does not throw around titles and accomplishments.

¹¹ This meeting was organised as a memorial for Heinz Kimmerle, who had passed away in January 2016. This German-Dutch philosopher introduced African philosophy in the Netherlands, other European countries, and at Asian, American and African (!) universities during and after his professorship at the Erasmus University, Rotterdam from the 70s onwards. Sophie Olúwolé and Heinz Kimmerle were friends and had a vivid philosophical contact.

if it happens without written texts, how then? The possible answer, the example of the intricate Ifá system, would be introduced later in the storyline.

So, following a clear line of ‘questioning’ (recall the importance of this for both Socrates and Òrúnmilà’s Ifá system) was vital to the structure of the film. But, this rhythm of her questioning is broken by someone else’s. A younger Yorùbá man, amidst a diverse Dutch audience, asks her a question from the audience during one of the book presentations in the Netherlands. It is a small scene (which I will be talking about in more detail later), but it is fulfilling multiple roles at once. This question and her answer provide important context about the realities in Nigeria today regarding traditional practices, and at the same time demonstrate her sense of story, timing and humour.

After highlighting the existence (still today) and reasons for the epistemic injustices done, that is the denial of African philosophers and scientists by their Eurocentric counterparts, and the Western patronising ‘know-it-all’ attitude towards others and Africans in particular, it was important to move forward and get into the Yorùbá philosophy itself. I selected only a few of her findings that were key to her work on the system of Ifá, for the sake of telling a short story. It included explaining the concept of binary complementarity, the existence of the binary coded Ifá system itself—a completely oral system that has existed for centuries—and a key example of a thesis from Ifá, a name interchangeably used to indicate both Òrúnmilà as a person, and the collectivity of people trained in Ifá over the ages. In this film I did not have the time and space to further expand on her precise analysis of the texts, but this limitation was fine, seeing that moving too deep into the material would hamper the introductory function of the short film as a whole.

The concrete example I did choose was part of the ones she mentioned to me in the interview in the first place. The one I chose does not only say something about the fact that Ifá poses theses (of complementarity), but it also establishes a link with Olúwólé’s feminist focus in her larger body of work.

Four groups of experienced people should govern the affairs of state: experienced men, experienced women, experienced youths, experienced foreigners. (as Olúwólé translated from the Yorùbá oral text Ówónrin Òbàrà in the Ifá system)

After stating:

In our place, there’s nothing you do, women must be there.

Here she contrasts the organisation of traditional Yorùbá society with that of the West where women were excluded from these types of duties up until the 20th century. As over her career Olúwólé had done a lot of work relating to feminism, and being a first female PhD in philosophy in Nigeria herself, I

found it important to stress that aspect somewhat implicitly through this particular example from the Ifá system.

Olúwolé's main goal was to highlight the fundamentals of logic beneath Western traditions of thought and those beneath African traditions of thought, and to stress that both can learn from one another to move our societies forward in a beneficial and humane way. In this context she champions African humanism, as inspired by African philosophical traditions. And upholding this vision, she made the strong plea that despite injustices, the African traditions had not been lost, and were there for us to discover. But that it had to be done properly to avert past mistakes of misinterpretation.

This wisdom of hers for the future would lead to the last part of the film. The title of one of her presentations in the Netherlands *What the West can learn from Africa* (Olúwolé, Amsterdam, 24/05/2017) set us up for her final words. Simultaneously it says a lot about her courage and drive, if you consider where she's coming from, delivering it in a central part of Amsterdam that in its historical construction as a city of global importance, had a lot to thank to the wealth gained based on a colonial endeavour.

She makes a strong statement by putting Ọ̀rúnmilà on equal footing with the father of Western philosophy Socrates, well supported by extensive analysis. And at the end of the film, we leave her, seeing her pride, and hearing her wish that fellow Africans should be proud as well.

This particular structuring helped me tell quite an extensive story in a relatively short time; only 14 minutes. As you might have noticed based on the description above, this structure is built out of literal interview quotes as much as showing actions, reactions or situations not necessarily accompanied by literal narration. Furthermore, rhythm, pace, and juxtaposition of images, sounds and text can help shape the story and thus the image of Sophie Olúwolé's personality and intellectual legacy. Let us dive a little deeper into examples of these occurrences.

4.3. Association, image, and truth

"Wisdom is like a road that goes in different directions. Therefore, nobody can be the custodian of absolute truth," a translated excerpt from Ọ̀bàrà-Méjì in the Ifá system (Olúwolé 2014: 30).

Time does not have to be linear in thoughts, nor in storytelling. Rather often a new ordering principle is created by association, which is also what happens when thoughts 'jump.' There has to be room for association and intuition in perception and (philosophical) thought. Moreover, truth is always on the move. This means that truth is always temporal; embedded in time, personal and historical (Merleau-Ponty 1953: 32). David Bohm also highlights this ever-flowing nature, indicating that the word 'truth' as a noun is actually unsuitable. He suggests to use the term 'verration' instead (Bohm 1980: 54).

In his continued endeavour to connect philosophy and art, Merleau-Ponty gives an interesting example of the enduring unfinished character of truth, which would also be applicable to the truth of a film:

Il est parfaitement vrai que chaque philosophe, chaque peintre considère ce que les autres appellent son oeuvre comme la simple ébauche d'une oeuvre qui reste toujours à faire [...] (Merleau-Ponty 1953: 33)

It is perfectly true that every philosopher, every painter considers that what the others call their work, a simple sketch of a work that is still to be made [...]

So, movement in truth, and movement of thought expressed through association and intuition are closely linked to each other, and can perhaps implicitly find its of expression through the moving image. This film, in a way, can be seen as an exercise in reflecting this: it is not an exact chronological recalling of events, but follows lines of thought through association. This also means that I chose the audio-visual elements to be guided by association. This way it is possible to work with both abstract imagery and what I would like to refer to as figurative imagery. The latter sets us up to directly recognise what we see in terms of objects and actions. In other words, clear signifiers are present that immediately give the viewer the idea they can place what they see in a certain context. The joy of working with this latter type of imagery, is combining them with unexpected text, other images, or sound so it gives it new meaning or carries a new perspective. The joy of working with abstract imagery lies in working with something that feels like a pure form, without presupposed, predefined (social, cultural, etc.) meaning attached to it. All these images, and their combinations, can move, stagnate; provide a certain rhythm which establishes thoughtful relations, that might even be felt, without having to put words to it to describe what is seen. It just is. Merleau-Ponty puts this as follows:

Le sens du film est incorporé à son rythme comme le sens d'un geste est immédiatement lisible dans le geste, et le film ne veut rien dire que lui-même. (Merleau-Ponty 1965: 103).

The meaning of film is incorporated in its rhythm like the meaning of a gesture is immediately understood in the gesture, and the film doesn't mean anything other than itself.

Music does this too, in perhaps an even more directly abstract, ungraspable way. When reflecting on the significance of music, Susanne Langer agrees, which might pose problems in writing this article: artistic symbols are impossible to translate; their meaning is determined by the particular form they have taken (Langer 2023: 72). But then again, the article does not try to be the film.

The interchange with abstraction can help us think about relations between things, and establish intuitions towards new concepts. I do not intend to speak of ‘new’ in an absolute way, which would form another impossible project. To the traditional Yorùbá, for example, these concepts are age-old; yet the intercultural exchange between me and Olúwólé could deliver new insights even for someone familiar with the original concepts. This story is about the understanding and discovery of a certain perspective, not about invention. So in the montage I used the aforementioned associations of imagery to keep in line with the core idea of what Olúwólé was doing: uncovering an intellectual tradition that had been undermined by the dominant Western oriented perspective that still reigns supreme today; whether we are conscious of it or not.

4.3.1. Binary complementarity

An example of the utilisation of both abstraction and repetition in the montage, is when Sophie Olúwólé explains about binary opposition and binary complementarity. I use the same images during both explanations, but made them relate differently to each other. The role of sound in these sequences particularly is also very important in enhancing this distinction. Furthermore, in terms of time structure of the film, I first started with the explanation of binary opposition, which is estimated to be familiar to most (as it was to me), due to its more dominant heritage.

About binary opposition in relation to reality Sophie says in the film:

The West have done to define reality. Reality is made up of two elements: the physical, which is material and the non-physical. Most Western philosophers think that matter is real, non-material is nothing. It is not important.

She summarises binary opposition as the conception that matter and idea are independent. While binary complementarity sees them as interdependent (Olúwólé 2014: 124-125). She would sometimes do a demonstration with her hands, where she’d show the back of her hand, then her palm, pointing at them, saying something like: “in the West your hand has a back or a front.” Then she’d flip her hand again to show the back and the palm and say: “in Africa it has a front *because* it has a back; the two are there together.” It can be boiled down to the idea that in the West one typically departs from OR logic, whereas in Africa it is oriented towards AND logic. “Something is good OR evil,” compared to “good cannot exist without evil:” “something is good AND evil” (Olúwólé 2001: 227). Later on in the film, when Olúwólé has explained more about the Ifá system, I follow up on the explanation of binary opposition and introduce her explanation of binary complementarity, ‘the African way.’

I consider this comparison the beating heart of the story. This is why I went about expressing it in the film very carefully. The images I show in these sequences belong to the same world as one of the first scenes we have seen in the film, to generate a sense of recognition: we see a man on a boat, seated in front of us, we look up at him as he speaks, feeling smaller than him, perhaps reminiscent of the perspective of a child, and in voice over Sophie primes us with one of the core questions regarding oral tradition and knowledge transmission:

When the father knows something and he don't write it down, how can the son know it?

When Sophie introduces the concept of 'binary opposition' later in the film, I move us back into this space on the water in the boat. Her line of fundamental questioning that had started with "What is philosophy?" ended in "What is reality?" This props up the explanation of the difference between a Western and an African approach to the answer. Here, wanting to stress the importance of this question, I set in a fast movement, almost abstracting the scenery we are driving past, as if somehow the hard, material figurative landscape transforms into something else, something intangible. Then I move towards the abstract light play on water, at first glance not to be recognised as such. Until we see the top of the wooden hull up close, and we seem to be staring at the reflections on the water as the boat moves forward with speed. While simultaneously using the rhythm of movement in the image to correspond to her words: Sophie remarks a oppositional distinction between the material and the non-material conception of reality in the West. In this sequence we have moved from figurative to abstract to reveal the figurative imagery again. When we are clearly back in the boat, we pick up where we left the question about father and son at the beginning:

Some people are now saying that writing is philosophy [...]

And then, she throws this 'Western' argumentation back at us:

If writing is philosophy, *then Socrates was not a philosopher, he did not write anything.*

Very straight to the point, I cut back to Sophie talking to us from the chair in Amsterdam at the *italicized* part of the quote.

This is a confrontational set up which underlines the main statement she is making with her book *Socrates and Òrúnmilà*. And it expresses Sophie's character in both a sharp and gentle way.

When later in the film we move towards the explanation of binary complementarity, I use the same imagery again, but I let the light-play off the water mix in with 'the real world' in which Sophie

is present in Amsterdam. A shadow moving aside for her, while she is resting on the elevated steps in front of an old building, perhaps reminiscent of an urban throne. We then fade into the title of one of her presentations: *African philosophy. What the West can learn.*

4.3.2. Moving from space to space

Associations can happen in a myriad of ways. One such example is through moving from space to space. We are transported to Nigeria after a Yorùbá man from the audience during the book presentation in Amsterdam asked her how she was dealing with talking about Ọ̀rúnmilà in Nigeria today, as his name is commonly associated with fetish, to be eschewed. This was an important remark, which at once indicated that Olúwolé's work was in practice quite difficult to accomplish even in her native context. This question, and her answer, said a lot about the context and her personality in relation to it, but doing so without lengthy explanations. I start with providing the first part of her answer. Sophie responded:

I have a daughter, my daughter. She's a Christian. She does not allow me to take this book into her house. (Waving around the Nigerian edition of Socrates and Ọ̀rúnmilà she is holding.) Does that answer your question?

Her continuation of the answer, is picked up later in the film, after first making an associative move to Nigeria. We move into a scene where we literally see where she is coming from. And we continue to dive into the effects of the colonial history in relation to her work. In the montage I play with rhythm, in terms of stagnation, delay, and emptiness. This is complemented by the drum rhythms in the score, which in my mind highlight the kind of irony I wanted to imbue on the montage here.

How can a whole people not think?

Olúwolé's eye line moves downward and I cut to black, where an almost out of rhythm residual drum sound gives an almost awkward little encore. It is as if to say: "Yes, reflect on that for a bit." And then we move on.

4.3.3. Graphics and the system

I made the deliberate choice to make the graphics playful, plural and contemporary, yet incorporating original sources. Again, this was a choice made based on my judgement of Sophie's character and vitality. Examples of original sources are the use of Ifá code representations as given to me in booklet-

form by the Babalawo we see in one of the scenes, and online, partially highlighted screenshots of William Bascom's *Ifá divination: Communication Between Gods and Men In West Africa*, originally published in 1969. I also show an edited version of Raffaello's painting *Scuola di Atene* (translated: School of Athens) to show Socrates thinking and talking (as are the other philosophers in the painting) and transposing it over Sophie Olúwólé's thinking and talking in a public space as seen from almost a bird's eye perspective, zoomed out.

In this film I consider the subtitles to be part of the graphics; this is why I made them dynamic, sometimes popping up larger, and out of line, to stress a remark Sophie is making. When making the film, I felt that it was necessary to use subtitles to make her words come across loud and clear. The reality is that, during one of the presentations given in the Netherlands, one at which I was not allowed to film, the Dutch audience had been struggling to understand her Nigerian-English accent. I realised that a non-Nigerian, non-English general audience would likely struggle following the film without subtitles. So, in light of enhancing accessibility to an audience as wide as possible I decided to work with subtitles. But instead of translating, I kept them true to her actual words in English. It is interesting to reflect on this complementary role of the written and spoken word in this film.

One last graphic move I made, which very few people would (perhaps consciously) notice, is the fact that I extracted Sophie from her background in the Amsterdam hotel lobby interview shots. By using black bars on either side, I framed the background in approximation of the 4 : 3 ratio reminiscent of older film and television formats before HD had arrived: a nearly square framing format that fits inside the currently most utilised rectangular screen ratio of 16 : 9. It is now often adopted for stylistic reasons in (arthouse) films or when dealing with archival footage recorded in that ratio. However, I chose this framing to be able to make Sophie in her chair sit outside, or in front of, this frame within the actual frame. The hotel lobby had circumstantially been her space for the interview, yet it was foreign to her, and when she was talking to me it felt like she was doing so from another place: introducing me to this other way of thinking, this world I myself had not experienced before. Mind you, also in Nigeria she had been working thoroughly outside of the status quo; so it befitted her character to literally place her outside the frame in the interview setting which formed the backbone of the entire film.

5. Philosophical reflection through film

While there are many more details to dive into, even for a short film, I hope the above examples point towards cinematic thought processes that express both Sophie Olúwólé's personality and parts of her philosophy through an introductory intellectual biography.

When working within the field of documentary film in an ethically considered way, with integrity, we have to take into consideration an inherent prejudice towards truthfulness in expression of the subject. Seen the constructed nature of the art form called ‘film,’ and the plural, ever-changing nature of truthfulness in relation to observation, there is a responsibility towards subject, viewer and the collectivities they represent, to take the artistic process of research and expression through the medium seriously. But not all responsibility can be carried by the maker, ideally a viewer should recognise these implications as well when watching and interpreting documentary films.

Taking all this into account, the (documentary) film as a medium lends itself particularly well to expressing philosophy or philosophical concepts, capable of combining both oral, written and artistic forms of expression, as intended to demonstrate in this text. Particularly in the case of expressing African philosophy, there are interesting conceptual parallels that fit quite naturally within the formative process of a film. Its multifaceted production process points to an inherent plurality and complementarity of all elements involved. All of which contribute to an artistic ‘wholeness’ understood in the sense of Mogobe Ramose (Ramosé 2005, 56), that continues to act, and form within the minds of the viewer -and maker- even after the maker needs to consider their film production ‘finished’ because of practical constraints. Cinematic expression, in this case within the domain of the documentary film, can both teach philosophy directly through a thinking and talking philosopher portrayed, but can also actively philosophise, expressing thoughts and ideas through the language of the medium. In the particular case of this short intellectual biography *Sophie*, both were happening at the same time.

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¹² Scan to watch *Sophie*:

Juul van der Laan is an independent artist-filmmaker, based in Rotterdam, NL. Initially schooled in Chemistry (BSc, Utrecht University), she swapped lab equipment for a camera and proceeded her studies in film (MA Documentary Film, University of the Arts London). With a focus on strong research in creating her work, she moves between the overlapping domains of science, philosophy, and art from an intercultural perspective. Her short documentary *Sophie* was a.o. nominated for a Lions Award 2022, pre-screened at the University of Ibadan, and officially premiered at the Lagos Book and Art festival in 2022. She also made *Multiverse Ghana* (60', 2015) and currently works on the ongoing development of the critical AI - essay film installation *IMU* (v2.2 presented at Ars Electronica, 2024; v2.1 at Wageningen University, 2024) featuring Prof. Mogobe Ramose.

Find out more about her work on <https://juulvanderlaan.nl>

Juul can be contacted at: contactme@juulvanderlaan.nl