

The Blinding Camera

1.

As a film student coming to Kenya to make a documentary, the theories I had learned on documentary ethics circulated my mind before I even boarded the plane. I would be making a film that wished to achieve humanitarian relief, but would I be a humanitarian? As my plane drifted above Detroit and I stared down at skyscrapers that looked like Lego sets, I thought about William Rothman describing the documentarian as an exploitative hunter that prowled on less powerful cultures. I thought of the power the camera had to disrupt a world in which I did not belong, and I thought of footage's ability to capture and manipulate the very essence of a human being. I asked myself, *what was I about to do, really, and could I do it in the right way? Would I be a hunter or a humanitarian?* As the clouds obscured my vision of the land below, I turned away from the plane's window and directed my attention to the small TV screen in front of me and searched for something to watch.

2.

I wondered what Joseph Nymundo thought of my film crew and I as we questioned him. I imagined him to see us as strange aliens. I imagined that as we spoke to him, he thought of the riches we must contain, as if our pale white skin had dollar signs branded upon it. I imagined that he felt both excited and afraid to have westerners coming to make a documentary in Kenya questioning him on his life story. "Are they going to choose me?" he likely thought. "What will this bring? How must I act? What do they want to hear? God, they ask a lot of questions." A tinge of guilt snaked through my gut as

my cinematographer, Danni, who had the curiosity of a newborn, asked him an endless array of questions. Joseph's eyes darted to each one of us as he told us his journey in finding permaculture at Palos Farm. All the while we all pretended not to notice the PR crew following us, taking pictures to document our project's process.

We had been in Kenya for almost a week, searching for our story. I was there for an internship with a media organization dedicated to, as they put it, "making movies, changing the world." They chose young filmmakers to create short documentaries that served as promotional videos for local NGO's in places of great poverty and distress. As a blossoming documentarian, there didn't seem to be anything better than such an opportunity. I received the role of director, and upon boarding my plan to Kenya, I felt destined to find a story.

What I didn't expect to encounter, however, was the immense sense of guilt that being the man with a movie camera would make me feel as I traveled about the town of Kisumu. Our NGO was a permaculture farm dedicated to laborer and environmental betterment in their community, and as we drove away from our hotel in the city and into outskirt villages, our very faces caused an immense stir. On our first drive to our NGO, I was amazed at our driver's ability to maneuver on dirt roads with bumps and potholes that amounted to the size of mountains and valleys. In order to not get sick in the heat of the car, we kept our windows rolled down, allowing the road's red dirt to circulate within the vehicle. As I felt the dirt particles between my teeth, I looked out the window to see children rushing away from their homes to wave to us, screaming, "Zungu," which was slang for "white man." Adults froze while we passed, sometimes raising a hand at us as

their eyes met our inquisitively. I didn't feel like I deserved all of this attention, and I hated myself for partly enjoying it.

The farm manager, a Norwegian permaculturist, had already told the workers about our assignment. I imagined him telling the workers about our organization's goal. "They're going to make a film about our farm to make our work look good," he would say. "To do this, they are going to find one person—what they will call a protagonist—who has a story for them to follow." While we traveled about the farm looking for out protagonist, probing all levels of workers for information, I could see a flash of hope in their eyes as they extended their hands to us and shook it with an enormous grin. We were moviemakers, not students, to them. The conflict behind how they saw us and what we actually were created a sense of shame in me. The mere presence of our camera made us a spectacle, and everyone wanted to be captured by it.

And, so, as we captured Joseph Nymundo, measuring him as a possible protagonist, he told us about his journey with glee. He told us about how exploitative his work in the sugarcane fields was; he told us about how little he was paid, and all of the brother, sisters, nieces and nephews he had to support; he told us about his mother's illness and his family's failing farm back home; but, most of all, he told us about what a blessing from God working on Palos Farm was, and how it had served as a solution to all of his problems. Not only was it a solution, but it also gave him the dream of sharing the knowledge of sustainable farming with his neighbors as he created his own garden. To top off the story, he told us he was adopted, but it was a secret kept between only him and his parents that the rest of his family must not know. While my crew soaked in the

information like it was liquid gold palpitating through their pores, I became nervous.

Were we helping him?

“I think we have our protagonist,” my producer told our supervisor that night. “He’s got a really great story. It has all the elements we need—struggle, drive, hope, and change.” Joseph was a perfect subject—a perfect specimen.

“Research him further,” our supervisor instructed. “I think you have something here.”

That night, I watched the interns on all of the film crews tuck away their equipment in the safe room of our hotel. Any equipment left in our room wasn’t under the hotel’s responsibility (a Kenya custom that came as a shock to many of us). The cameras, tripods, hard drives, and laptops filled the room. The stacks of black plastic casing and exposed metal made the room look like a grand armory.

3.

My crew and I exited our car, walking out into the bright environment. The sun struck surfaces so violently there that staring at a tin roof was like looking into a camera with a never-ending flash. We walked toward the home of Joseph’s family, and his many relatives poured out of their surrounding homes composed of mud and dung. Their neighbors also ran down the road, coming to get a glimpse of the film crew that had come to research Joseph’s family. We greeted brothers, sisters, cousins, second cousins, nephews, nieces, and parents, who were all dressed in button up shirts. His father ushered us into their home, and we sat down upon the lace-covered benches in their common

area. They said a blessing for their house before offering us all Coca-Cholas, which for them could be the price of a full day's labor.

My crew and I instantly became fascinated with his mother. When we interviewed her, her face became animated as if a ventriloquist was above her—controlling every inch of her face to make it twitch in the most beautifully dramatic way. “Joseph is such a blessing to this family,” she gasped with her emaciated hand to her chest while our translator relayed her words. “His work at Palos Farm helped put his brother and nieces and nephews to school—I could not do it without Joseph.” Even I had to admit we had stumbled upon gold. Joseph sought out work three hours of a walk away from his home to bring back money to his family. He was the type of altruist everyone wanted to see in a documentary, right?

An unexpected turn occurred, however, at the end of our interviewing process. “I have an announcement to make,” Joseph’s mother said, raising her hand while her kin stared at her. “Joseph brought Americans into our home, and this is such a blessing. I must now be honest and own his truth. Our Joseph was adopted!”

A dead silence filled the living room. Joseph’s eyes became red and he clenched his fist while all the craniums of his family members turned in his direction. His father stood up and left the room without excusing himself. The family baby let out a whimper and her mother covered the infant’s mouth. “It is time we admit it,” his mother reaffirmed with her chest swelling in pride and her head high in decidedness.

“Being adopted is very taboo out in the villages of this area,” our driver and translator informed us as we drove back to our hotel. “Very taboo. They will be having some interesting family conversations tonight. And they will be facing some serious

drama.” I anxiously dug my feet into the floorboard of our car as I gritted my teeth, feeling those dirt particles once more. What had the camera caused? What had we caused?

4.

Despite the many criticisms I heard on documentary making, the resounding rhetoric around me was that it was a powerful tool for helping people and creating change. While I had never heard of a film that objectively achieved such action, I had to believe that it was true during shooting week—it was the only way to push forward.

“Just brining White men into my home will bring me a reputation. People will believe in the work I’m doing. They will believe in permaculture,” Joseph explained to us with his hands moving up and down besides his face.

There was an issue that we had with him during shooting week, however, that served as a major obstacle. When we finally interviewed him in front of the camera, his opinion of Palos Farm became less of a radically positive view. Instead of it being an amazing opportunity with great pay and better labor, it became “a bit better of work than the sugarcane fields with a bit better of a pay but...not a lot.”

We had to insist. “Joseph, can you be more positive—like you were when you first told us about the job.”

It wasn’t until the last day of shooting that a grain of hope expanded entirely throughout my body. We went to Joseph’s neighborhood around sundown, capturing images of his neighbors and the children of his village staring at him while he practiced permaculture behind his home. The entire community jumped with excitement at the

opportunity to be part of a movie, and, as we positioned them in their places, everything seemed incredibly beautiful. The bright blue paint of their concrete housing complex and the magenta of the clothes hanging on the clothesline between houses formed a stunning contrast on our camera monitor.

We interviewed Joseph as he sat on top of the plot of land that he hoped to make into his own permaculture garden. The dusk light did something to his skin that made it glisten while he proudly proclaimed his dedication to creating his own farm. “I will lead my community through example,” he claimed. “They will see my work, and believe in permaculture themselves. And I will have my own farm to live from.” His smile became wider and wider the longer we interviewed him with his neighbors watching from afar and the children of the neighborhood gathered close to us—staring into our camera monitor with silent curiosity. Joseph was now a star in his community, and I could sense the pride gradually vibrating off of him as his voice grew in strength and his eyes became moister.

“One day, I’m going to be somewhere and I’m going to be somebody because of what permaculture has taught me—yeah,” Joseph said as he stared straight into the camera.

“Can you say that again, Joseph? We didn’t get it the first time,” my producer asked.

Joseph straightened with pride, increasing his volume and speaking more clearly than I had ever heard before.

“One day, I’m going to be somewhere and I’m going to be somebody because of what permaculture has taught me—yeah.”

There was not a molecule of uncertainty in his voice. I believed in him. I had to.

6.

Editing week. Those two words meant that I was spending hours on end staring into a computer screen, listening to Joseph's voice so much that its cadence became like a beat from a song that I couldn't get out of my head. All of the people we interviewed soon seemed to become like birds within my brain, each containing a unique chirp. I spliced their words, eliminating "ums" and finding a clear narrative in their statements that maybe they didn't even know existed.

On the third day of editing, I sat in our hotel's common space, working on translations when my producer and cinematographer rushed into the room.

"We have bad news," my producer announced while my cinematographer nervously fiddled with the new "Kenyan-style" braiding of her hair. The involved massive amounts of red, white, and blue hair weaves that made her look like she was trying to be the Uncle Same of Africa.

"What is it?" I asked with my heart sinking as I imagined Joseph deicing we were of no help and that he would no longer participate.

"We can't use the adoptions segment," my producer responded.

"What? He told us we could use that in or film."

"He just found out that all of the farmworkers will be at the film screening, and he didn't want them to all know at once about his adoption."

"It's so taboo in the countryside to be adopted that he could be beaten, excommunicated, or killed," my cinematographer explained.

“Shit,” I responded. “But, it’s a major part of our story. It gives it the emotional aspect we need.”

“I know. But what are we going to do?”

I stared at my computer. I had spent the last month trampling through farm fields in the Kenyan heat. I had gotten in screaming matches with my cinematographer over how to structure our story. I knew the film I wanted to see, and there was no way I was going to give it up. I became hungry for control as I imagined cutting out his mother becoming teary as she disclosed the details of Joseph’s birth. The light caressed her face in that moment in such a way that her tears sparkled as they trailed down weathered skin. We could not lose that moment.

“I have a solution,” I stated. “We’ll make a version for the screening and then another version to hand into our company and put online.”

“But...what if people Joseph knows finds it when it’s online?”

“Well,” I replied, “they don’t have home computers, do they?” I thought of the computers with Internet in their farm’s education center. My sinuses tingled as they always do when I know I’m doing something I shouldn’t be doing. It’s my physiological response to shame.

“No,” my producer stated. “They don’t have computers at home—I think. And he did tell us originally we could use this in our story.”

“I guess we have it covered then,” I decided as I returned to my computer.

7.

Joseph and his family sat in the back row of the screening as we had at a public library in Kisumu. Two-dozen farm workers were in attendance, so they had an audience with whom they were familiar. As I stood in the very back while their images were projected onto the screen at the other end of the room, I observed them as they shifted uncomfortably in their seats as the farmworkers cheered for every person they recognized. *Had we gotten it right?* I asked myself. *Did they feel that the people on this screen were them? Did they feel that this was their story?*

After our screening, we gave them all tight embraces, but they were stiffer than ever before. They thanked us, but they seemed uncomfortable. They weren't angry. What were they? If anything, they seemed afraid. Joseph's mother, our beacon of dramatic flair, contained this unreadable expression in which her eyes had a mysterious glaze over them and her mouth twitched into the slightest of smile. When I hugged her, her spine was completely erect, and her arms only tapped my back. This woman had always been a charismatic star. Where had she gone?

I remembered back in forth grade, when my teacher told our class that Native Americans used to believe that taking a picture of someone could steal their sole. My classmates and I laughed at such a silly notion. But, as I embraced Joseph's mother, I felt validity in such a statement. Had each twenty-four frames we captured per second of her taken something from the woman? Had it lent her essence to interpretation of all those in the audience? Did she feel drained?

As we poured out of the library, Joseph took my producer to the side. I saw them conversing in the shadows, and I instantly knew what composed their conversation.

When my producer came back to us, he stated Joseph had asked for money.

“I want to start my garden—I want to be independent. How am I going to do these things?” he had asked my producer.

Unaware of what to do, my producer procured the rest of what he had in our production budget—five hundred Kenyan dollars, which was about five USD. None of us had any more money to spend—it was our last night in the country and many of us had spent at least ten thousand Kenyan dollars on artisan souvenirs, daily retreats to an expensive Starbucks-esque café with air conditioning, and a three-day safari in which we stared at hundreds of zebras and wildebeest carcasses.

8.

We arrived back out our hotel after the screening, ready for dinner and drinks. We sat down for our meal at our common area, and one of my cohorts rushed into the room, clutching her gut. “Guys, my camera is gone. My computer is gone from my room. All of my equipment is gone!”

Instantly, everyone rushed to their rooms, and I rushed to the safe room, where I had been taking great care to stash my laptop. My laptop was still there, but every room had been ransacked. My cohorts, who had become comfortable in the city, had decided to keep their things in their rooms. This amounted to over thirty-thousand dollars in stolen goods, which then resulted in piercing screams at the hotel staff.

“IT WAS OBVIOUSLY AN INSIDE JOB!” My editor shouted at the caretaker.

“Our policy is posted in every room,” the caretaker soothed them. “You must leave your things in the safe room.”

“Well, if most of us would have left our stuff there, that room would have been robbed too!” another person exclaimed.

I heard all of these yells while I searched my room for anything that was stolen. While my roommate's phone was taken, nothing of mine was missing. I searched through my toiletries bag, which contained a cheap camera I had not used the entire trip. I was surprised to find it still there. As I fumbled with its miniscule and fragile body, I was almost disappointed that it hadn't been sacrificed. I wanted to contribute.

The interns shed many tears, but it was useless. The Kisumu police we reported to had no interest—in fact, one fell asleep during our meeting. “Your things are gone,” the caretaker stated, “and I'm sorry, but that's not our responsibility.”

As we sat at the exit of our hotel, waiting to transfer to a gated resort, I imagined the incredible arsenal of cameras, hard drives, computers, and tripods racing away from us, and I felt defenseless.

“We can't be sure of who did it,” our boss explained to us. “When you're a westerner staying in these areas, you attract a lot of attention, and everyone is watching you. Everyone. Everywhere. And you don't know what they are planning.”

As we exited the hotel, I looked around the street and a chill ran down my back. For the first time, I felt genuinely afraid in this country as I imagined people discretely watching me through their windows, seeing every one of my actions over the past month. And I would have never noticed, because I was too busy burying my face into a camera or into a screen of a computer while editing. Our weapons had made us weak. Our

apparatus for seeing had blinded us. We had not had the upper hand at all—not here. I felt hunted, and for a moment, all of my guilt dissipated.

9.

On the plain ride away from Kisumu, I stared down at the town, trying to locate the areas I had visited. Everything from above was so visible yet so incredibly invisible. I could see everything in a sense—the entire landscape. I saw the mountains and the sugar cane fields that looked like patchwork. I saw the dirt roads winding off into the countryside. I saw small blocks of tin serving as houses for homes. But, I was so far removed that I couldn't see any details. I was totally blind to them.

And it was from this vantage point we had been looking the entire journey. But, I'm sure those on the ground had seen us incredibly clear—western tourists, doing what western tourists do, and making the mistakes that western tourists make as they were blinded by their new and mysterious surroundings.

As our plane rose above the clouds and the city became obscured by whiteness, I became nervous for Joseph and his family. I became nervous for if he would ever get his own garden or if his nephews would have the funds to go to school. Most of all, I became nervous for if my film had helped him at all. Had we done right by them? As I turned away from the plane's window, I wondered if doing right was even possible. More importantly, was what we thought of as right or wrong even relevant in a world we could never understand?

