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A window on children's lives? The process and problematics of representing children in audio visual case study

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the challenge of representing children in audio-visual material commissioned by the Open University to support an interdisciplinary undergraduate course on childhood. The paper explores the process of filming and representing children's lives audio-visually and the ways in which these processes contribute to an understanding of childhood as an unstable conceptual category. Our exploration of these themes rests upon a critical analysis of the production process that includes reflections on our own role as academics, interviews with the directors responsible for the filming and textual analysis of the audio visual material itself. Our focus throughout is upon the pedagogic project of producing audio-visual material for distance learners. The paper places emphasis upon the film-making process, the content of the films and the teaching points they seek to address. Our analysis suggests that processes of representation highlight the fragility of childhood as a conceptual category in which boundaries between adulthood and childhood remain fluid, geographically diverse and contextually contingent.

Keywords: childhood, representations, audio-visual, case study

Sherbet lemons, a bracelet, a musical toy, an extract from Wordsworth's *Prelude*, family snap-shots and a wooden clog. These are just some of the items that colleagues brought to the first meeting of the *Childhood* course team at the Open University in January 2000.¹ We had been asked to bring along an object that we associate with childhood and to present it with some thoughts on childhood – our own, our children's or our musings on the concept more generally. Our childhoods and our thoughts about childhood permeated the meeting. We all had active memories that could be triggered by sensory experiences – touch, smell and taste as well as sight and sound. If this was the case for us, a less than homogenous group of academics, editors, clerical assistants and television producers, it would also be the case for our students. But should our collective

endeavour to capture childhood be reliant upon memory and sensory stimulation reconstructed in adulthood? What about the experience of being a child in the here and now? Shouldn't children have a voice on the course and if so how? How could we avoid the paradoxical position of being adults that talk and theorise about childhood while ironically marginalising children themselves? We believed that a partial response to these difficult questions could be provided by the audio visual material planned as an integral aspect of Open University course design. In the case of the *Childhood* course this material, produced in conjunction with a BBC film crew, could give children a 'voice' in the course through filmic documentation of their lives and interviews in which children spoke directly to camera about their lives and experiences. The audiovisual material could thus provide tutors and students with vicarious access to children's embodied experience across a range of social and cultural contexts. This shared reference point not only incorporated material illustrating the diversity of childhood experience, but was also particularly important in a distance-teaching course where all students might not have direct contact with children.

This paper deals with issues relating to representing children through involving them in the process of producing the *Childhood*² course. In particular, we focus upon the representation of children in audio-visual material commissioned by the course team to support the objectives of the course³ and to supplement the books and study guides that delivered distance learning materials to students. We explore the process of representing children's lives audio-visually from our own perspective as academics and from the perspectives of the directors responsible for the filming. We discuss the integration of audiovisual and textual materials within the course, and examine instances where the children themselves provided unanticipated material, or challenged our expectations and assumptions. A total of twenty-eight mini-films varying in length from 5-30 minutes were made to support the course, eighteen of which focussed on twenty-four children across three international locations. This paper focuses on these case-study films of particular children. The authors were both involved in planning and writing the course, integrating the visual material into the textual teaching materials for distance learners, many of whom have non-traditional educational trajectories as adults with few formal qualifications. One of us, XXXX, co-ordinated the audio visual components of the course, working between academic staff and directors and spending time on location in South Africa and the US.

The course team decided early on to allocate a large part of the course audiovisual budget to collecting film to provide case-study material on a diverse sample of children within Chittagong (Bangladesh), Oakland, California (US) and Cape Town (South Africa). Our decision to focus on children in these three international locations was influenced by the geographic and cultural contrasts they offered, existing research in the field of childhood studies, marketing considerations for the course, the experience and contacts of course team members and logistical filming considerations (see Appendix for full details of case study children and how they were used in the course materials). We aimed to examine features of contemporary childhoods and cultural representations of childhood in different economic and socio-cultural contexts both within and across the different locations, where modern Western childhoods were one amongst many exemplars. In keeping with the contemporary framework of childhood scholarship, our starting point involved the recognition of childhood as a social construction that varies across time and place and necessarily engages researchers in matters of ethics and reflexivity (James and Prout 1997). Representing children's lives in audio visual material involves further constructions, producing images that create the illusion of a childhood being lived. We aimed to capture a sense of children as active social participants in different cultural settings and thereby offer insights into how children's identities, social skills and understandings are constructed across a range of social practices in different spheres of their lives. Through filming children's everyday experience we sought to include the voices and perspectives of children themselves within the course, both through the audio visual material and through their integration in the print materials in the form of 'real life' examples and case studies.

In the following sections we explore and discuss the process of representing children's lives audio-visually. We are particularly interested in the ways in which processes of representation may enhance our understanding of childhood as a conceptual category that is both constructed and lived. The paper is divided into four sections. The first section outlines some of the generic issues relating to the cultural politics of representation. Here we discuss some of the literature and theoretical perspectives that has provided us with valuable insights into the process and practice of visually documenting children's lives. The following sections develop a critical analysis of the

film-making process and its place within the *Childhood* course. Section two outlines our approach as academics to collecting film material as a form of pedagogic ethnography. Section three documents the active input of the children we filmed, to this process. The fourth section discusses the approaches of the directors to filming and working with children and their creation of visual narratives and counterpoint within the films.

Constructing childhood – representing children’s lives

Images of children have acquired iconic status in the West while simultaneously providing a contested site in the struggle to define the mutually constitutive categories of childhood and adulthood (Holland 1992; Higonnet 1998; Buckingham 2000). The power of Western imagery of the child lies in its capacity to give childhood meaning and particularly to encode a version of childhood as ‘ideal’. Drawing upon the legacy of the Romantic movement, such images position children as symbols of innocence and hope. The idea of children as embryonic prefigurations of ‘the future’ leads Castaneda (2002) to suggest that it is the representation of children’s potentiality that gives them status as a uniquely available cultural resource. While this construction of childhood is commonly seen as specific to Western capitalism and modernity, there is a sense in which Western notions of childhood have been globalised through economic processes and international organisations with established bodies of practice such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (Wells 2007; Drotner and Livingstone 2008). Dominant discourses in the West suggest to adults that they have a responsibility to care for children, protect them from the ‘harsh realities of the adult world’ (Boyden 1990) and preserve the ideal of childhood innocence.

In preparing the audio-visual material the course team did not want to suggest that we were presenting ‘ideal’ children who carried the burden of representation for childhood as a whole. Rather, we wanted to focus on a number of children in each location whose lives reflected something of the diversity of experience in that locality for children of different ages, gender and ethnicity from a range of socio-economic backgrounds, living in a variety of family structures and sizes. In doing so we positioned ourselves centrally as engaged in the project of presenting and re-presenting children’s lives. Cultural Studies approaches to the visual suggest that all cultural products exist in a ‘circuit of culture’ (du

Gay 1997), moving through the cyclical processes of production, circulation and consumption. In this circuit meaning can be constantly accumulated, adapted and transformed. The encoded messages of the cultural producers are subject to decoding by cultural consumers who bring their own meanings to the product which, in turn, have an impact upon the circuit (Hall 1980)⁴. In keeping with the idea of meaning as fluid, Kuhn (1991) indicates that visual images involve encounters that generate a struggle for meaning, a collision between past and present, public and private, subject and object that is never fully resolved. Further research has pointed to the ways in which images encode dominant discourses and prevailing ideologies (Burman 1994; Holland 1992; Higonnet 1998). Burman's (1994) study of images of children in charity appeals draws attention to features of Northern privilege that invest in images of Southern children as powerless, vulnerable and dependent. Furthermore, Burman asserts that Western ideologies construct childhood as a universal concept when it is in fact geographically specific. Her analysis powerfully suggests that the Western idea of childhood is dependent upon a particularly impoverished image of children in the South:

The image of the Southern child victim is reassuring, securing and maintaining our sense of what childhood is *precisely* through its violation of this. If we can recognise that our fantasy of childhood is more concerned with adult and Northern insecurities, we may be better able to engage with the situations of real children in their varieties of cultural, political and geographical contexts (Burman 1994:35, italics as original).

In collecting video material from locations such as Chittagong and Cape Town, we were aware of the danger of reproducing or feeding into normative assumptions of Southern children. We were also mindful of the postmodern charge of contributing to the endless proliferation of images that may produce a simulated 'hyperreality' (Baudrillard 1994; 2002) of children's lives in non Western contexts. However, we were also aware of the visual as a powerful resource for educators and students.

The academics' experience

Our collaborative research and production of film material to construct the *Childhood* course constitutes a kind of 'ethnographic pedagogy'. Like ethnographers, we wanted to capture as holistic as possible an understanding of children's lives, and gain insight into

insider (i.e. children's) perspectives. As in ethnographic research, we were focussing on micro-level peer-group, family and community activities and practices, building up knowledge of the social and cultural context through the use of observation, recordings and interviews (Atkinson and Hammersley 2007). Like ethnographic film makers, we were editing and combining first hand accounts, images, contextual footage and commentary to convey the embodied experience of life in one cultural setting to audiences in another (Heider, 2007). In our case, the structure of the film material was shaped by the priorities and preoccupations of Childhood Studies (see Note 3), and the needs of our diverse audience of Open University undergraduate students.

We spent an initial three week period in each location getting to know children and researching their homes, schools, workplaces and local communities. For this initial research, we used a childhood studies conceptual framework structured round the idea of foundational institutional sites (e.g. family, school, work, peer group) with their associated social practices (childrearing, socialisation, education, play, friendship and so on), focalised through the eyes of children as agentive social actors. When we returned a month later with a film crew, we used the children's accounts of their ordinary, everyday lives as the central reference point for collecting audiovisual material, placing emphasis on the importance of children's voices in reconstructing their social experience (Maybin, 2006). This was reflected in the structure of the films themselves. Thus, we interviewed the children on film about their daily routines and their favourite activities and interests. We then followed up these interviews by building segments of film around the places, activities and people that children themselves identified as important in their lives. Film segments in Cape Town included Shane working and begging on the streets in Cape Town and Ryan at scout camp on Table Mountain. Chittagong segments included mini-documentaries of Bilkis' combination of work as a domestic servant with part-time schooling and Minna and Elizabeth's best friendship with their shared love of music, clothes and ice cream. A final layer of more general location shots provided a sense of the child's overall environment, often linking with themes in their accounts of their lives.

In this way we placed emic perspectives, in other words the children's own meanings and interpretations, at the centre of the filming process to build up thick descriptions which would help us to achieve course objectives (see Note 3). Case study material was augmented by interviews with local practitioners and experts, and further in-depth focus on particular issues, such as child labour, AIDS and rites of passage, to produce some of

the additional mini-documentaries mentioned at the beginning of this article. While six weeks of research and filming in each location does not in any way equate with the traditional long-term involvement of anthropological ethnographers, our intensive focus on specific children's experiences and perspectives served to represent, as far as we could, the 'irreducibility of human experience' which ethnographers also aim to reproduce (Willis and Trondman, 2000) as a central dimension of course pedagogy.

Table 1 provides a brief example showing how footage from an interview was combined with filming of a child's activities and location to convey a sense of a particular life. The child's voice from the interview recording provides the main voice-over with an occasional contextual details being provided by an adult commentator. We contacted fifteen year-old Asanda through the South African children's rights organisation Molo Songololo, meeting her at a weekend course for teenage activists who were learning how to facilitate workshops for their peers on violence, crime, drugs and teenage pregnancy. Asanda was charismatic and confident, proud of her Xhosa identity and reflective about the ways in which she had changed and 'grown into myself'. The extract below introduces Asanda in a mini-documentary 'Children on childhood', which students view at the beginning of the course, as they consider the main factors shaping children's experience of childhood, how these differ across different locations and what can be learned about childhood by asking children themselves.

[Table 1 about here]

We used further extracts from our filming with Asanda as resources for students' work on different family structures and child-rearing practices, and on children as political activists.

Overall, the films of the case-study children provided a vast array of exemplar material which could be extracted and woven into the written course. In a unit on 'Family, kinship and beyond', for instance, the conception of family was interrogated in relation to case study children's experience of extended family households, nuclear families, reconstituted families, single parents, gay marriage and life as a street child. Children's experience also clearly illustrated the dynamic, temporal dimension of the family as a social institution. For instance, eleven year-old Sophie in Oakland had been brought up by two lesbian mothers who were now separated and she divided her time between them. thirteen year-old Sean's siblings included his mother's sons from two previous marriages, and when we were filming him the household temporally included his mother's former as

well as her current husband. Similarly, a course unit on ‘Children’s friendships’ illustrated diverse experience within and across locations, from ten year-old Bilkis playing hopscotch in the poorest area of Chittagong, to fourteen year-old Chet’s film-making with his friend Dylan in Oakland and from Shane, Wilfred and Steven’s accounts of scraping a living together on the streets in Cape Town to Nonhlanhla’s clothes shopping expeditions with her middle class girlfriends in the same city. Examples of children’s activities and reflections were invoked in the printed course material through the reproduction of still images from the films, together with transcripts and explanations. These provided real life, embodied examples which, moreover, resonated for students with the contextual knowledge from the rest of the case study film material. Children’s direct personal experience could bring to life abstract concepts like friendship, or gender, while the conceptual framework of childhood studies enabled students to make theoretical links across individual examples.

The children’s input

We referred earlier to the problems of representing Southern children for a Western audience in the context of powerful discourses about victimhood and the exotic. However, we would argue that starting with children’s own accounts of their activities and interests enabled them to make an active contribution to course content in at least three ways. First, as we have discussed in the last section, individual films fleshed out the conceptual framework of childhood studies through representing children’s direct experience of, for example, the diversity of what can constitute a ‘family’, different conceptions of friendship and play. Secondly, as we will discuss below, some children led us to film unplanned material which resulted in the restructuring or extension of course resources. Thirdly, perhaps most significantly, some children challenged our assumptions about conceptions of childhood itself.

An example of how children led us to augment the course materials is provided by 10 year-old Karen in Oakland. Karen’s parents came originally from El Salvador, and she and her family were excited about her recent role as handmaiden at her cousin’s Quinceanera (a Latin American ceremony for 15 year-old girls marking their transition from girlhood into womanhood). We were able to include some clips from the family video of this event in the case study film about Karen’s life, and we used the Quinceanera as an example of a coming-of-age ritual for students to study in the course,

alongside the Xhosa manhood initiation ceremony which we filmed in South Africa. This additional material about girls' initiation fed into a richer discussion, in the course, of the diverse ways in which transitions out of childhood are gendered, marked and ritualised in different cultures, including students' own.

The research trip to Oakland also highlighted the importance of children's bedrooms as an important part of children's identity, and we subsequently decided to film these. The idea of the bedroom as a personalised space for teenagers is well documented (McRobbie 1978; Harris 2001; Lincoln 2004; Kearney 2007). However, we found that bedroom culture was also important for younger children, often actively constructed by children and parents in ways that assume normative gender identities. The filming of Karen's and her younger brother Brian's bedrooms reveals Karen's retreat into the tranquil land of pink and Brian's all-blue action zone as illustrations of gendered childhoods, initiated by parents and inhabited by children. Both bedrooms can be seen as fantasy spaces that provide a protected environment for the child, colour coordinated and filled with commercial products that reflect their gender and Latino-American culture.

Filming the shared bedroom of teenage Chinese American sisters in Oakland, Cathy and Sharon extended our materials in a rather different way. We had noticed a mixture of Chinese and American texts and images on the bedroom walls and planned to ask Cathy and Sharon on film to explain the significance of these pictures and artefacts, so that our students could trace different cultural resources in their emerging teenage identities. Instead, during the filming the girls began to play out some of the dynamics in their relationship with each other and the difficulties of defining yourself in relation to a sibling within a shared space. At some points echoing the confessional genre of Reality Television, their expressions of sibling love and rivalry illustrated the very social, inter-relational and oppositional nature of children's construction of identity within the home (Kehily 2003).

Other children also intervened in the filming process to push it in a new direction. In Bangladesh, the film director talked to Moni (around 12-13 years old) about her experiences of growing up in Chittagong. During this interview Moni 'blurted out her story' of being coerced into a marriage she did not want. Rebecca (the film director) negotiated how much Moni wanted to talk about her arranged marriage, and her resistance to it, on film, aware that Moni's story could be representative of many young teenage girls' experience while also running the risk of raising issues of victimhood and

control that may encode normative assumptions of Southern girlhood. In the filmed interview, Moni expresses her anger and sense of injustice clearly and forcefully by pointing to the symbolic objects associated with her wedding. She points to the wedding sari which was presented to her by her husband's family and says how much she dislikes it, repeating this for her ear-rings and nose-ring which were also wedding gifts. These gifts have particular significance as they have been used by Moni's husband's family to argue that the marriage has been properly contracted, cannot be revoked and that she should now move to live in their home with her husband. Moni wanted to talk about her own experience but was very concerned about being overheard by family or neighbours. The final filming took place in a location well away from Moni's home (a room in the building where her wedding had taken place), where she talked about her feelings of anger and resistance to the marriage. This produced a resolution for the purposes of filming and gave Moni a strong voice within the course. However, the broader issues pertaining to Moni and young women in her position were not and could not be resolved, bringing into sharp relief the limitations of our project as a agent for advocacy or change and the salience of postcolonial arguments that position postcolonial subjects as muted voices in contexts where colonial forces have *become* the history, defining the space in which non Western subjects can be heard (Spivak 1988).

Moni's marriage challenges Western notions of childhood innocence, protection and sexuality (Kehily and Montgomery 2003), which were also called into question by the film segments of Maya, aged around 15, who was already living with her husband and their baby daughter. Maya's daily activities and responsibilities revolved around caring for her daughter and carrying out the duties expected of a daughter-in-law in an extended household. Her experience, responsibilities and competence challenge Western assumptions about the capabilities and appropriate activities of children of this age.

To take a further area of children's everyday experience, for some of the case study children work was an economic necessity and took priority over schooling. The implications of this for their own sense of rights and identity were highlighted by an incident which occurred during our filming of street boys in Cape Town. The BBC policy was to pay a fee to the families and expenses to the children. However, the charity that had helped establish contact with the street boys advised against paying them, claiming they would immediately spend the money on drugs. Consequently the producer, Chris, brought football shirts and hats for the boys and a small fee to cover daily expenses. After the first days' filming the boys expressed anger at not being properly paid or even compensated for losing a day's work and Chris had difficulty persuading them to return for the second day. In retrospect, he commented: 'it kind of clarified something that I already knew, which is that in many ways those children are adults already in the sense that they're economic beings and that they go out to work everyday and they should have been compensated adequately for their contribution.'

The directors' perspectives

Directors working on the audio visual case studies for the Open University generally deployed an interactive mode of representation while also drawing on features of expository, observational and reflexive modes (Nichols 1991) at specific points. The interactive mode places the subjects of the documentary at the centre of the text as social actors capable of commenting upon and demonstrating the validity of their world view, making it particularly appropriate for our pedagogic aims in representing children's perspectives. The directors' work echoed the emphasis in the interactive mode on images of testimony or verbal exchange that present the viewer with a situated account, forged in the local encounter between the film-maker and their subjects. As is traditional in interactive documentary film-making, they also used interview as a key method in the creation of jointly authored narratives of life and experience.

While the editing of the audio-visual material was in progress we interviewed the three directors⁵, to elicit their perspectives on the challenge of representing children and the experience of producing audio-visual case study material. The directors were assigned to particular locations: Marinella was responsible for the filming in Oakland, California,

Rebecca in Bangladesh and Chris in South Africa. All three were media professionals with established careers in documentary film-making. In each location around eight children between 7 and 18 years old, from a range of different backgrounds, were selected for filming⁶. All three directors saw the communication of an authentic sense of children's lives, within short four or five minute films, as the major consideration guiding their work. The objective of focussing on children as commentators on their own experience involved interviewing children in some depth. In order to portray each child's experience the directors needed to be able to establish a rapport with them, often within a short time span. Marinella and Rebecca in particular stressed the centrality of this relationship of trust between themselves as director and their subjects in their approach to film making. Getting to know children and getting inside their lives in a time limited medium was one of the most challenging aspects of the work for all three directors. There remains an inherent contradiction in establishing rapport and producing 'depth' quickly for the purpose of visual portrayals. As a process it is open to the postmodern charge of media products as purveyors of surface, superficiality and pastiche while masquerading as substance and depth. It is interesting to note that media professionals remain concerned with matters of authenticity, real life and real relationships while working in a medium that relies upon the televisual trickery of manufacturing the real for the camera.

Of course, the question of authenticity in the documentation of social life remains notoriously problematic. An ethnographic film, while purporting to present 'real life' is subject to its own status as a particular kind of cultural object, shaped by particular aesthetic criteria as well as the film maker's cultural sensitivity, and sensitive to the expectations of an intended audience. However, each director stressed that they wanted to produce films that were 'honest' and 'true' to children's lives, but expressed this slightly differently in each case. Marinella was originally trained in ethnographic film making and, while she saw the Open University project as producing teaching rather than ethnographic material, it was important for her to produce videos which were true to the ethnographic context. The extracts she valued most highly were the moments where she describes the material as 'breaking through the medium, breaking through the video screen and actually touching you'. Rebecca's approach to filming children in Bangladesh was informed by the four and a half years she had spent making documentaries about issues in the developing world, motivated by her own long term interests in equity and

social justice. Rebecca saw her knowledge of the developing world as providing an important 'layer' in the film making in Bangladesh. She says,

I wanted to be honest about how their lives were portrayed and that their lives would be shown as part of a bigger society where there were lots of other complex issues going on. I hope in my films that through speaking with those children there is a greater depth of understanding of world issues.

Finally, Chris said that his approach in South Africa was influenced by his previous experience of filming there in the mid 1990s. He heard first-hand testimonies of what people had lived through in the Apartheid era and became aware that, 'South Africa is not black and white but made up of many black tribes, at least two white tribes and a whole range of other racial and unique hybrid racial and cultural groups.' His main approach to the filming was to find children's stories that:

stood up by themselves but which collectively contributed to a kaleidoscopic picture of what is optimistically called The Rainbow Nation. I wanted each child's story to add to the viewer's awareness of the multi-layered fabric of South African society. I thought that the children's individual stories would be most truthfully told if they were seen against this complicated and, at times, confusing backdrop.

All three directors, then, were concerned with both the 'truth' of individual children's stories, and also with the way in which they would give the audience insights into a particular world context: the cultural diversity in Oakland, the developing world issues in Bangladesh and the complexity of racial and political relations in South Africa. They also talked about using their training and experience as film directors to construct these different layers in the representation of children's experience for the camera. This construction is discussed in more detail below.

There were particular issues involved in building and sustaining a working relationship with children, and in capturing and reflecting social lives which were continually changing and moving on (Neale and Flowerdew 2003), sometimes in unexpected ways between the research trip and the filming, or even during the filming process itself, as we discussed earlier above. From the perspective of the directors, the selected children needed to have a cinematic presence, to appear as a distinctive character in a 5 -10 minute film. As Chris expressed it, 'there is no room for boring children here'. The

children were central to conveying the content and purpose of each piece of film. They had to be confident, articulate and able to cope with the demands of filming; surrounded by the paraphernalia of camera and microphones and the trials of waiting around, being on call, responding to instructions, performing to order. The director had to be sensitive to particular considerations concerning each child's wider relationships and the social context, as in Rebecca's filming of Moni talking about her arranged marriage. For Rebecca, this film could 'give a voice to those who don't normally get heard', while recognising Moni as a unique individual who wanted to tell her story. Working with street boys in Cape Town who were not used to trusting adults or cooperating with them was the most challenging aspect of filming for Chris, although he also described it as the most thought-provoking and rewarding part of the project.

To gain student engagement in the films so that they could begin to understand these diverse children's cultural worlds (Note 3), it seemed natural to use a narrative mode which, as Bruner (1986) points out, focuses upon the 'vicissitudes of human intention' and where readers engage with characters to form a unique construction of reality based around a multiplicity of desires and intentions. Drawing on Barthes, Bruner argues that narrative invites the reader's performance or creation of a text and through the process of performance the reader makes the text their own. In these films, the children are 'characters [who] are the agents whereby narrative structure gains coherence and completion' (Nichols 1991:244), and the elements of the story were given order and structure by the filming and editing process that encoded information for our students in particular ways.

All three directors talked about the way in which every film, no matter how short, had to tell a story that adhered to the conventional story-telling form of beginning-middle-end. Marinella expressed this as, 'good storytelling sets up what comes next'. In the context of films that could be as short as 3 minutes, this inevitably involved some simplification and, commonly, the highlighting of particular links in order to create coherence. Chris explained how he had presented Asanda's life for a five-minute sequence:

She was a child who could articulate her position in a family in a poor township in South Africa very clearly. And so you just had to give her a forum to say what she wanted to say. I mean the elements of construction there are simply bracketing the sequence with music, trying to raise the interest of the viewer seductively at the start, or movingly. Slowly opening out her world in an

ordered way so that you see her school, you learn about the township she lives in, then you meet her family, then you learn a bit more about the people in her family, then you learn about her aspirations for the future. So there's a kind of narrative sequence there, but that's all constructed.

We view the material about Asanda in the context of these stories, which inflect our interpretation of her experience. It is worth noting that our sense of her life could have been rather different if the stories had been constructed in another way. In the film sequence, Asanda's orientation to children's rights is used to reflect on her experience, and as a way of taking an audience into her life at home with her family and in the township. It could have equally been used to tell a story of her journey out of and away from her home community. Due to her experiences in Molo Songololo, Asanda had a reflective understanding of herself that made her particularly articulate in explaining her life to outsiders. This tension between representing generic childhood experience in a particular context and capturing the individuality of a particular child or young person exists as a recurrent theme in the audio visual material.

As well as conveying insights into children's experience, visual images were also used as a kind of counterpoint, to comment on or question what children might be saying or doing. In South Africa we hear Asanda talking about her plans for the future while walking through her township, passing a huge advertisement with the message 'AIDS KILLS'. Chris explained his choice of this juxtaposition:

For me the point of that is not to say she's going to get AIDs, it's just to say that an enormous question mark hangs over her future. Here's somebody who is incredibly gifted, who everyone seemed to fall in love with when they meet her, so impressed by her and you know that she could possibly not make it to her twenties for a number of reasons and that is quite distressing.

Like Rebecca, Chris describes his approach to film-making as 'layering' – a process that involves building up meanings through the relationship between general shots, specific shots and what the children are saying. This process of producing accumulated meanings through narrative, visual images and metaphors, however, provides an insight into children's lives which is inevitably partial; a window offering a glimpse into a life that can never be fully known or fully captured. These visual biographies served as enlightening and instructive reminders of the fragility of childhood as a conceptual category that is lived and constructed in diverse ways.

Image 2: Asanda (in white hat) and the 'Aids kills' poster

Concluding comments

In this paper we have explored the process of representing children's lives audio-visually and examined the ways in which these representations contribute to pedagogic aims to develop an understanding of childhood as a shifting, socially constructed category.

Drawing upon Cultural Studies perspectives, we noted the ways in which images exist within 'circuits of culture' (du Gay 1997), encoding dominant discourses and prevailing ideologies, particularly in relation to children in non-Western contexts. Our analysis of the visual material focuses on its pedagogic potential in relation to our course objectives, to develop an understanding of the theoretical framework underpinning the course and the relationship between this and the ways in which childhood is lived. Our reflections as academics were focused on our development of an approach we have termed pedagogic ethnography and interviews with the three directors responsible for the filming provide an insight into representational processes. The directors' shared a concern to communicate the authenticity of children's lives and highlighted the importance of narrative, visual imagery, sequencing and counterpoint to the film-making process.

Working with the children in each of the case study locations illustrates some of the complexities of *childhood* as a social category, raising questions of who is a child and who should decide on this. Brian and Karen appear self evidently to be children in the Western understanding of the term. Images of them point to a child-centred world of

toys and activities where they express thoughts seemingly appropriate to their age and gender. Cathy and Sharon appear to occupy a transitional space between childhood and adulthood. Their concerns with self-definition and matters of identity can be understood as a move into the individualising culture of the Western adult world. Moni and Maya, however, are children who challenge Western notions of childhood innocence, protection and sexuality, and the street boys in many ways behaved as adults, not children.

We have pointed to the paradox of capturing authenticity through a highly constructed process that involves the artifice of selection and editing. Our analyses of these processes of representation suggest that they provide a glimpse into children's lives as part of a pedagogic ethnography that is inevitably partial and incomplete. Our work with the children themselves illustrates some of the ways in which the concept of childhood may be constructed and challenged. Children such as Brian and Karen, Cathy and Sharon, Moni, Asanda and the South African street boys provide rich and diverse examples of lived childhoods. The films show them as both constrained by their circumstances, and also as acting on, and in some cases changing, the environment around them.

Collectively these children demonstrate that the boundary between childhood and adulthood is fluid and contextually contingent (Burman 1994). In some cases, as with Brian and Karen, it is adults that create the boundary in particular ways. In other moments it is children such as the street boys that define their status economically as 'adults', keen to resist being patronised or exploited. The assertive, agentic way in which Asanda, Moni and the street boys respond to the challenges life has dealt them undermines images of Southern children as passive victims; at the same time, the uncertainty of their lives call into question the symbolic valuing of childhood as the embryonic potential for a better future. Finally, we suggest that audio-visual representations of children's lives created for the course exist as polyphonic texts that include the voices and evaluative perspectives of the course team, directors and children.

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Notes:

¹ The Open University is an open access distance learning, higher education institution based in the UK, producing course materials in the form of books, CD-ROMS, DVDs and on-line resources for students to study at home. Courses are developed by a team of academics and media experts over a three year period.

² Childhood was defined, following the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, as covering ages 0-18

³ Course objectives for students included the following: understand the features of childhood as a distinctive life phase and cultural construct in human societies, by reference to historical and cross-cultural examples; recognize the diversity of childhoods and the influence of economic, geographical, political, health, and cultural factors; develop an understanding of children's cultural worlds, and of how these relate to broader social and cultural contexts.

⁴ See Lister and Wells (2001) for a full discussion of cultural studies approaches to analysing the visual.

⁵ The interviews with the film directors ran to about an hour in each case and were structured around the following questions:

- a. What were the most important issues for you in filming children's lives for the course? What priorities and concerns did you bring from your training and experience in film/video making?
- b. What were the most challenging aspects of the work? What were the most rewarding parts?
- c. Did you see yourself as reflecting or constructing children's lives through the filming and editing?
- d. What was productive or problematic about the BBC/academic collaboration?

⁶ We explained the educational purpose of the films to the children and their families and obtained their written consent. For ethical reasons family names and precise home locations were withheld in the final products.

Appendix: Case study children

Location	Children	Situation	Example of course theme
Chittagong	Maya, c.15,	Married with baby daughter, living with husband in small room adjoining in-laws' house	Young motherhood
	Moni, c.14	Lives with extended family in urban shanty town	Arranged marriage
	Tinco, c.12	Traditional Hindu fishing caste, works with father	Work within the family

	Billkis , 10	Lives with large family in one-room shack	Work, play, school, friendship
	Yasir and Yamin, 13	Upper middle-class, large modern house, private school	Economic advantage
	Minna and Elizabeth, 13	Middle class	Friendship
Oakland	Brian, 8 and Karen, 10	Bilingual English and Spanish, parents migrants from El Salvador	Dual heritage childhood
	Sophie, 12	Daughter of a separated lesbian couple	Alternative families
	Terina, 12	African American, lives with mother, a hair stylist	Ebonics, friendship
	Chet, 14	Middle class, white	Liberal childhood
	Cathy, 15 and Sharon, 14	Parents migrated from China, live in less affluent, racially mixed area	Bedroom cultures
	Sean, 13	Reconstituted mixed race family, 4 boys, 3 fathers	Imaginative play
CapeTown	Asanda, 15	Lives with extended family in a black township	Children's rights activism
	Joshua, 8	Son of 'coloured' anti-apartheid campaigners	The joy of reading
	Nonhlanhla, 13	Half Zulu and Xhosa, multilingual, prosperous middle class	Shopping, friendship
	Ryan, 13	White, lives with divorced mother and grandmother,	Family change
	Shane, 15, Wilfred, 13, Steven, 13	'Coloured', work and partly live on the streets	Street-boys, friendship and economic independence
	Theo, 18	Xhosa East Cape	Initiation ceremony

Table 1

Visual	Commentary from Asanda's interview
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The camera zooms in to focus on Asanda as she sings in her high school choir, and the choral music fades and continues behind her voice	My name is Asanda xxx, I live here in New Crossroads, I'm fifteen. I go to xxx high School.
Asanda walks chatting with her friends along the street	It's a school here in the community and there are only black students in it. But then they're mainly black, like Sothos
The camera cuts to the interview with Asanda, seated cross-legged on the bed she shares with her aunt	and Zulus. But I'm a Xhosa. My language is Xhosa, so that's why I'm a Xhosa.
Streets and market stall-selling barbequed meat in New Crossroads	New Cross Roads is a township that mostly black people live in. It has many problems like crime, teenage pregnancy and drugs, guns. There's violence, there's gangsters.
Close-up of Asanda	I feel unsafe at night because there's a lot of gangsters, there's a lot of shooting and sometimes
Teenage students walking home, focusing on boys and then Asanda and friends behind them	maybe boys harassing you. It's just the problems that you face as a child as in the abuses that happened to you in your childhood. So that it's very difficult to grow, I mean, healthy, to be healthy as a child
Molo Songololo posters 'Put children first', 'children need to develop creativity' and 'Let children be children'	<i>Adult commentator's voice: Asanda is part of a youth organization called Molo Songololo, which has encouraged her to examine her rights as a child.</i> Ever since I joined Molo Songololo

Close-up of Asanda	I've kind of changed in the way that I've, what can I call it, I've grown into myself. You understand? Because now I've been given a chance to express my views, what I think, what, how I live and how I would express
Asanda walking up a small unpaved street, past young children playing and chickens, and entering the door of her home	myself as a child. It has changed the way that I behave in the home, the way that my parents, the people like behave in the home because it has taught me about the rights that I do have