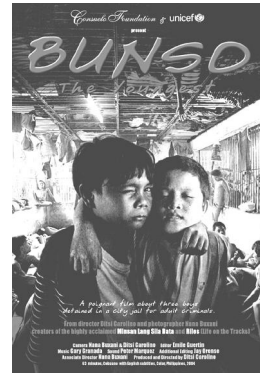


Documentary and the Child Rights Framework

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Film Review of ***Bunso***
By Ditsi Carolino, 2004

Triumph and Failure

Ditsi Carolino triumphs in making her documentary, *Bunso* (*The Youngest*), a cinematic event by realistically presenting the horrors of prison life. The film is successful in putting a human face on the phenomenon of children in conflict with the law—otherwise known in less politically correct language as “child offenders” or “juvenile delinquents”. The present lack of a juvenile justice system law in the Philippines, according to the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), is the “unfinished business” in the promotion and defense of child rights in the Philippines. *Bunso* is an attempt to portray this problem.

However, the strength of *Bunso* is also its weakness. The documentary is powerful because of its painful and visceral images of imprisoned children. But in showing generous slices of unrestrained and true-to-life human drama, did Carolino violate the rights of the very subjects whose interests she is trying to promote?

The Department of Justice’s (DOJ) Guidelines for Media Practitioners on the Reporting and Coverage of Cases Involving Children provides adequate direction:

There are special groups of children who need protection in order to balance their interest vis-à-vis the

right of the public to be informed about their cases. These are children who are victims of abuse and children who are in conflict with the law. These children must be protected from all forms of abuse and suffering, trauma or social stigma that may arise from inappropriate publicity or approaches to media coverage of these cases.

The term 'media practitioners' refers to editors, publishers, reporters, columnists in case of printed materials, announcers, program hosts, producers in case of television and radio broadcasting, producers and directors in case of the movie industry.

It is important that media practitioners themselves do not inadvertently abuse these children.

Bunso is typical of Carolino's brand of storytelling that is closest to a true-to-life depiction which leads us to ideas about truth and life itself, and how a filmmaker can subtly set up desired scenes of human conflict deemed imperative in storytelling. *Bunso*'s realism is akin to the storytelling of *Riles* (2003), another compelling documentary by Carolino about the plight of an urban poor family.

Documentary realism is far from being objective as the camera puts a frame on the filmmaker's chosen images of reality. What the filmmaker includes or excludes from the frame, which shots are included or excluded and according to what sequence, represents the world view and politics of the filmmaker.

Unlike cinema verite, much of the chaos and the unstudied presentation in this documentary require tedious planning and structuring. Like it or not, there is a lot of intervention in the lives of the people being captured on camera. To what extent did Carolino intervene in the lives of three children to come up with the film?

In capturing the behavior of characters in any film as naturally as possible, the filmmaker runs the risk of being insensitive to the needs and rights of the children featured in the film, bringing to the fore the issue of child protection in the process of presenting and documenting the dire situations of children.

The film shows the faces of children, contrary to a DOJ ruling that says: “There should be conscious effort to respect and prevent violation of the confidentiality provision under existing laws.” The DOJ strongly discourages the showing of children’s faces and prohibits the revelation of identities of children involved in situations like sexual exploitation, human trafficking, armed conflict, crime and abuse. The explanation at the beginning of the film about why faces of children in the documentary were not concealed is that due to the urgent nature of the issue, it has been decided that the film is exempted from the rules. But the question is: will the explanation be justifiable or will it set a double standard?

In disregarding the guidelines, all that Carolino needed was to put the camera in front of Diosel, Anthony and Itsoy whose faces alone already tell a thousand stories. In fact, the best parts of the film were during the interviews when children talk straight from their very soul. Meanwhile, other filmmakers, broadcast media reporters and photojournalists struggle to abide by the DOJ ruling in producing moving images of children without framing their faces.

Not satisfied with showing the faces of children, Carolino pushes the documentation of reality to more grit and texture. We see Anthony being released from prison, fetched by a social worker. The filmmaker documents how the child walks home barefoot through the mud-spattered, trash-filled, and poorly-lit alleys of an urban poor community. The scene was disturbing, not because of the stark realism of the scene, but because both social worker and filmmaker unduly exposed Anthony to hazardous conditions to achieve a pitiful image of a child, contrary to the guiding principle that “the best interest of the child shall be the primordial and paramount concern.”

While a child may indeed go barefoot in ordinary life, is it necessary and ethical for the filmmaker to shoot the scene this way? Moreover, would a social worker, outside the abnormal conditions of filmmaking, allow her ward to walk barefoot in the muddy *eskinita* (interior streets)? The barefoot scene also raised some eyebrows among human rights workers because according to anecdotal accounts, adult prisoners out of camaraderie contribute money to buy slippers or clothes for any prisoner (adult or child) scheduled to be released.

Authoring Interviews

Another thing that makes *Bunso* extraordinary is how the filmmaker was able to capture raw emotions and true-to-life dramatic dialogue. Carolino definitely knows the importance of confrontation and conflict in drama. This is why *Bunso* has major highlights like husband and wife fighting, mother and child arguing, and so on.

One such device is the scene when Itsoy's mother (she was not introduced earlier nor interviewed separately) turns up unannounced to visit the boy. The filmmaker set this up as the camera follows the mother entering prison. One wonders why the visit was not a private conversation between mother and child, as what usually happens during prison visits set in a makeshift visiting area. On the contrary, the visit was like a public event with about 15 adult prisoners listening to the confrontation of mother and child. The camera captures how Itsoy expresses his rage against his mother who failed to visit him on his last birthday. He throws invectives against mom for not working for his release and mother chides son for being impertinent. As the exchange heats up, the dialogue sounds like soap opera, something like: Mother—You are ungrateful. Without me, you will not be born into this world. I should have killed you long ago. Itsoy — Kill me now! Mother threatens to keep Itsoy in jail for as long as needed to reform his bad behavior, accusing her son of taking drugs. Itsoy becomes more antagonistic while the rest of the prisoners become a bunch of rowdy commentators taking turns badgering him, which all the more hurts and confuses the child. We witness the 11-year old boy's helplessness but he tries to fight back by appearing tough, condemning his mother of being a bad parent and accusing her of being the real criminal. Finally, Itsoy is silenced and defeated when a fierce-looking inmate threatens to beat him up.

The lengthy scene runs contrary to the spirit of the DOJ guidelines that defines the proper procedures in authorized interviews:

Unless necessary for the prosecution and progress of the case, only supervised and authorized interviews shall be allowed. This is to protect children who are victims of abuse from suffering further emotional distress or

trauma resulting from the interview process and resulting media coverage. Supervised interview is also intended to protect children in conflict with the law from undue pressure that could result in their admission of involvement in the crime outside of the court or humiliation or social stigma due to the exposure and which in turn could hinder their successful rehabilitation in the future.

In the said confrontation, Carolino triumphantly captures the raw display of human conflict at the expense of both the child and the mother. She let the camera roll even when the badgering and the emotional exchange became very hurting to the child. In the process of video documentation, the child was exposed to unnecessary psychological torture and one wonders if the filmmaker was with a psychologist tasked to debrief a child after such sensitive intervention. Such a confrontation can be traumatic and damaging to the child.

The irony is, because of such scenes, *Bunso* makes us weep. And because the documentary makes us cry, it is considered effective for the advocacy of the issue.

Dilemma of Balance

Indeed, how do we strike a balance between sensational coverage and prudent exposition? The DOJ guidelines are clear on this: Focusing on graphic details of individual cases makes good copy and sensational journalism, but these may not be helpful in explaining the problem and providing possible solutions. “It would serve the interests of the public to focus more on the cases and *the possible solutions to these problems in order to raise public awareness and understanding about these issues.*” (author’s emphasis)

The social realism of Carolino truncates the view of the bigger picture of the problem and provides no possible solution. For example, the film inadvertently painted Itsoy’s mother as a bad parent simply because we did not hear her side of the story. The film tells us that parents are largely to blame, and that the situation is a rut because these people are poor, miserable, and uneducated. Though other social institutions are implicated – the police, judiciary, welfare, prison systems – the storytelling leads

to a related accountability because of the choices the filmmaker made in the exposition of the issue of juvenile justice.

Carolino chose not to document how a judge treats a child in court, or what happened to Anthony after release that transformed him into a recidivist. The documentary did not inform the audience if Diosel (the only survivor among the three, as both Itsoy and Anthony are now dead) overcame adversity and finally emerged victorious and empowered or if he suffered the same fate as the rest of his juvenile friends. She chose instead to focus her aesthetics and world view on powerlessness and victimization.

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