

## Documentary Play: Approaching the Staging of Children's Performance in Documentaries as Play

by Ryan Bowles Eagle

### Introduction: What is Documentary Play?

In this article I approach the discernible staging and direction of children's performance in documentary as play. More specifically, I introduce the term "documentary play" to refer to moments when the creative collaboration between filmmaker and child social actor is rendered recognizable in such a way that their interaction has the potential to be perceived as play. These exchanges are made perceptible via stylistic techniques such as reenactments, staged *mise-en-scène*, choreographed movements, and repetition of actions and dialogue used to accommodate camera set-ups. I argue that documentary play is a fitting and useful conceptualization of such encounters between filmmaker and child social actor in that it is well-equipped to highlight the agency, creative capacity, and impact of children in documentaries. In order to demonstrate the potential of this conceptual approach I apply it to two contemporary documentaries in which the staging and direction of child social actors is easily observed: *Bombay Beach* (Alma Ha'rel 2011) and *On the Way to School* (*Sur de Chemin de l'école*, Pascal Plisson 2013). Across a range of popular press publications and industry trades, reviewers noted the films' recognizable staging and direction of the children featured. While the tenor of their responses to this stylistic choice varied, reviewers shared a common understanding of the films as noticeably staged, highly stylized, and carefully planned.<sup>1</sup> As I will show here, those same features also lend themselves to being perceived by viewers as play.

The word *play* is used widely in scholarly discussions about documentary film: most of the people in documentaries are not professional actors and so scholars often discuss them as "playing themselves." However, these scholars also recognize that people in documentaries remain aware of the camera and filmmaker; they call documentary participants social actors as a reminder they are still performing and thus "playing a role." When a social actor's performance comes across as exaggerated it may be said they are "playing to the camera," or perhaps "playing up a situation" for greater effect. Notably, Bill Nichols refers to documentary subjects as "social actors," and explains the term can "stress the degree to which individuals represent themselves to others." He says "the term is also meant to remind us that social actors, people, retain the capacity to act within the historical arena where they perform." (Nichols, *Representing Reality*, 42). Since, as Nichols notes, social actors are people, the designation should include children. And yet in conversations about documentary truth

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and ethics, children have often been figured as unknowing, innocent, and vulnerable rather than as active participants in their self-representation. To address this tendency, I use the term “child social actor” throughout my analysis.

As common as it is to see the word *play* pop up in scholarly discourse around documentaries, documentary performance itself is seldom discussed as being a kind of play. Likewise, children’s participation in documentary practice is not approached in relation to theories of play. This is not to say scholars have not written about documentary representations of children *at play*; however, I am less interested in documentaries that merely show children playing than I am in considering how the documentary encounter itself creates an opportunity for child social actors to play and, by extension, for viewers to observe child social actors playing with the filmmaker. As I am defining it here, documentary play refers to what is perceptible by viewers. I will go on to explain how the perception of any sequence as a “play behavior” is largely dependent upon the visible evidence of several specific criteria. Documentary play also refers to an exchange, an interaction. Because of this, a filmmaker’s intervention in the child’s performance need be made plain such that it is clear they are also “in on the game” as a fellow player, rather than merely an outside observer to children at play.<sup>2</sup>

In this way documentary play fosters recognition of the co-production of meaning that can take place through children’s documentary performance. Attention to documentary play also opens up a space for discussion of how filmmakers harness the cultural meanings and creative potential of both childhood and play. For instance, documentary play can be a way to get viewers closer to children’s lived experiences and internal realities, from their struggles and fears to their hopes and dreams. Moreover, it can be used to heighten the narrative stakes and emotional effect of a child social actors’ performance and the film as a whole. In the pages that follow I contextualize my understanding of documentary play by considering how other scholars have conceptualized play, documentary reenactments and performance, and the significance of child social actors. I then take up documentary play as a framework for close analysis of *Bombay Beach* and *On the Way to School*, showing how these two films construct documentary play in ways that highlight the agency and creative collaboration of their child social actors, as well as draw on cultural meanings of childhood and play to enhance aesthetic and rhetorical impact.

## **Perceiving Play**

Scholars have long been interested in theorizing play (see, for example, Walter Benjamin 1928, Roger Callois 1961, Johan Huizinga 1967, Gregory Bateson 1972, Helen B. Schwartzman 1978, Brian Sutton-Smith 1997). Yet for as much as it has been

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theorized, the concept of play still lacks a clear or even widely-accepted definition. Indeed, there are such “various definitions of what play is, and of various kinds of play” (Smith 2009, 1) that there is “no [scholarly] consensus on what play is and what it does” (Felicia McMahon, Donald E. Lytle, and Sutton-Smith, 2005, i). Still, as with many concepts that are difficult to define, there is a prevailing sense that play can indeed be recognized, and we will somehow know it when we see it. As Brian Sutton-Smith writes, “We all play occasionally, and we all know what playing feels like. But when it comes to making theoretical statements about what play is, we fall into silliness. There is little agreement among us, and much ambiguity” (1997, 1). Given that play seems to be easier to sense than it is to define, I contend the best starting point for conceptualizing documentary play is not to try to understand what play is, but rather, the criteria by which play is most likely to be perceived by documentary viewers.

Peter Smith explains that such a “criteria-based approach” to play “is based on the point of view of the observer” and “asks what criteria an observer might use to judge whether a behavior sequence is play or not play” (6). Smith draws on a model proposed by Linda Rose Krasnor and Debra J. Pepler (1980), who identify four “play criteria.” Krasnor and Pepler claim while none of these criteria alone would be enough for observers to determine a behavior to be play, an increase in the number of criteria present would increase the likelihood that a behavior would be perceived as play (6). Hence, there is not a “rigid distinction between ‘play’ and ‘non-play,’” but rather a “continuum from more clearly to less clearly playful behaviors (from the point of view of the observer)” (6). This continuum model can be applied to documentaries as well, as some films will employ discernible staging and directed performance in ways that can easily be perceived as play, while others do so in slightly more ambiguous or subtle ways. When Smith and Ralph Vollstedt (1985) tested Krasnor and Pepler’s model by screening short filmed “episodes” to 70 “real [adult] observers,” they found there were three criteria that contributed to whether behaviors were judged as playful or not (6): *nonliterality*, which refers to play wherein behaviors do not have their “normal or ‘literal’ meaning” and could include pretend/fantasy play or role-playing; *flexibility*, which refers to how a behavior is seen as playful if it is varied in form and content such that actions are “repeated,” “fragmented,” “exaggerated,” and “re-ordered”; and *positive affect*, meaning the “enjoyment of play” as signaled outwardly by things like laughing and smiling (6). They found that with each criteria present, the likelihood adult observers would perceive a behavior as play increased; if all three of the criteria were present then 100% of the episodes were perceived as play (8).

I posit that due to their reliance on assessing observable, visible evidence, those same three criteria—nonliterality (pretending), flexibility (repetition with variation), and positive affect (enjoyment)—are well-suited to an exploration of the perception of

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play in documentary. Nonliterality is key to my analysis of sequences when child social actors engage in pretense and role-playing with the filmmaker. Flexibility—via repetition with variation—is central to the kind of documentary play I elaborate on in my film analysis. I show how child social actors can be directed to perform and repeat specific staged actions with each of those repeated actions leaving room for variation via the child’s creative interpretation. In “Toys and Play,” Walter Benjamin writes about how flexibility also contributes to positive affect: he describes repetition as “the essence of play,” and says “We know that for a child repetition is the soul of play, that nothing gives him greater pleasure than to ‘Do it again!’” (120). While such pleasure, or positive affect, is not present in all examples of documentary play, my analysis demonstrates that its presence can further heighten a documentary’s emotional and narrative impact when child social actors signal their enjoyment of their performance. In my own determinations of whether children’s staged performance in *Bombay Beach* is likely to be perceived by viewers as play, I consider the presence and coexistence of these three play criteria.

To more fully make sense of the semiotics of documentary play, I draw from the interdisciplinary work of experts in childhood studies. Scholars have identified positive cultural associations (specifically in the West) with play, in particular with regard to children’s play. These powerful discourses frame play as both unquestioningly natural to and beneficial for children. For instance, Sutton-Smith refers to the “Rhetoric of Play as Progress” as “an advocacy of the notion that...children...adapt and develop through their play” (9). This rhetoric is evident in how Western educators describe the role of play in child development and advocate for play-centered learning in early childhood education (Ingrid Pramling Samuelson and Maj Asplund Carlsson, 2008, Ingrid Pramling Samuelson and Eva Johansson, 2007, and Joe L. Frost, Sue C. Wortham, and Stuart Reifel, 2007). Another common discourse around play is the “Rhetoric of the Self,” which applies when “play is idealized by attention to the desirable experiences of the players—their fun, their relaxation, their escape—and the intrinsic or aesthetic satisfactions of the play performances” (Sutton-Smith, 11). This ties back to the perception of positive affect. In terms of the interrelationship between play and agency, Ellen Berg describes how the history of children’s play in the United States demonstrates that “despite adults’ efforts to the contrary, children seek autonomy—and find it—through play” (2009, 804). Each of these positive associations contribute to the enjoyment viewers may experience when observing documentary play.

Playing pretend is something children tend to do well, whether in the form of “acting natural” or exaggerating, repeating, or otherwise altering their behavior in ways that adults might feel a sense of unease. Even what might seem like laborious or dull kinds of play to adults—such as repetition—have long been understood as central to

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childhood. In this sense, children make ideal social actors for collaboration through documentary play.

### **Documentary Staging and Performance**

While some critics cited the staging of children's performance in *Bombay Beach* and *On the Way to School* as reason to question whether the films should be categorized as documentary at all, scholars instead see staged reenactment as a ubiquitous documentary convention (Jonathan Kahana, 47-48) with the potential to artfully render time, including traumatic memory (Deirdre Boyle, 97). With regard to reenactments of child social actors, Joe Moran notes how they can provide "impressionistic snatches of children's lives," in particular when paired with a camera that adopts a "child's-eye-view" (389). This kind of staging, Moran argues, can be a way to "examine children's culture on its own terms" (389). Thus, scholars have explored the value-adding potential of staging documentary performance far beyond simply conveying visual information or filling in historical gaps.

Likewise, documentary scholars conceptualize performance not as separate from, but rather intrinsic to, the kinds of truth and reality offered by documentary films. Stella Bruzzi refers to participants' performance for the camera as being "the truth around which documentary is built" (*New Documentary*, 154). Similarly, Thomas Waugh discusses performance and direction as basic ingredients "within the documentary tradition," (75). In an exploration of what it means for a person to "play oneself," Waugh argues that social actors are always performing, whether or not viewers perceive it as a performance. He introduces two categories of performance for the documentary camera: "presentational performance," or, the performance of awareness by presenting oneself explicitly for the camera and "representational performance," meaning the performance of a lack of awareness of the camera or "acting naturally" (76). Likewise, the "performance choices" social actors make, "however circumscribed, can exert a significant impact on the meanings or implications of the texts in which they figure" (Elizabeth Marquis, 53). Even when directed in reenactments, documentary subjects exercise agency over their performance.

Stella Bruzzi has written at length about the documentary performance of child social actors in particular. Bruzzi describes children's performance in documentary as "fascinating and often unusually affecting" ("From Innocence to Experience," 204). She attributes this affecting nature to child social actors, unlike their adult counterparts, being "stripped of knowingness" and thus "seem[ing] genuine and spontaneous" (204). Drawing on Judith Butler's conception of identity as intrinsically tied to a learned performance of self, Bruzzi contends children are "usually unaware of the connotations

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their images carry” (212). She posits children’s images may have the potential to affect viewers precisely because children “lack guile as if they have not yet learnt that identity is imitative” (213) and says they are “not necessarily conscious of the performative choices they could make” (214). Still, Bruzzi acknowledges that while child social actors performances may seem genuine, others reveal traces of their construction. Bruzzi elaborates that watching a child’s performance “compels us as viewers to...fret about the differences between the potential fakery of the performances of excessive ‘innocence,’ ‘naturalness’ and ‘happiness’ rendered in *Capturing the Friedmans* and the apparently straightforward naivety of the childish performances in *Etre et avoir* and *Seven Up!*” (219). Where I see documentary play as adding value to a discussion of the affecting nature of child social actors is in how it shifts focus to children’s agency in the co-construction of their performance, whether it comes across as fake or straightforward or anywhere in between.

### **Child Social Actors: Potential and Particularities**

Bruzzi’s characterization of children’s performance as both “potential fakery of excessive ‘innocence’” and “apparently straightforward naivety” calls upon two paradoxical mainstream discourses: one is about children’s supposed innocence while the other is about their supposedly innate predilection for lying. This mismatch of symbolic meanings associated with children stems at least in part from the fact that Western conceptions of childhood draw on two distinct lineages: the contradictory Romantic and Puritan discourses (Bowman-Cvetkovic and Olson, 29). While Romantic discourses linger in tendencies to see children as vulnerable, innocent beings, Puritan discourses are rooted in understandings of children as inherently corrupted because of the Christian concept of original sin (32). Such discourses may well be at the root of the paradox inherent in children’s documentary testimony: children are simultaneously seen as both the people most likely to tell the unedited truth, and yet also the most likely to tell tall tales or even outright lies. A strength of the concept of documentary play then is that it allows for the recognition of children’s performance as simultaneously fake *and* straightforward. Approaching children’s discernibly staged performance as documentary play enables an embrace of that irreconcilable tension between truth and artifice as a given; play, after all, is both real and pretend all at once.

With regard to pervasive discourses of childhood innocence and helplessness, Debbie James Smith critiques the familiar and generalized way documentaries construct the subaltern child as a victim who lacks agency in order to generate pity—what she describes as “a familiar yet anonymous child” (164). This, she says, is a sign filmmakers

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have “failed to recognize” their child subjects’ actions “as a demonstration of agency” which “effectively re-victimize(s) the children by using sentiment to evoke pity” (164). Smith contrasts these tendencies with moments in documentaries when children are instead “provided with the means of production to define, shape, and tell their own truth” (173). In these moments, she says, space is “created explicitly in the film as a result of negotiation between the children and the filmmakers.” Likewise, in an analysis of *Born into Brothels*, Belinda Smail notes the use of photographs taken by children of sex workers as “clear markers of [their] expression and agency” (151). Still, Pooja Rangan complicates understandings of children’s cultural production as positive. Also looking at *Born into Brothels*, Rangan is concerned with the way discourses of liberal and humanitarian media are tied up in an exploitative neoliberal project of profiting off of children’s affective and immaterial labor (147). Rangan’s work is a reminder that attempts to give kids agency by inviting them to participate in the process of self-representation can not only result in “self-othering” (145-6) but also become a “lucrative technique of commodification” whereby the figure of the child is fetishized and children’s participation becomes “autoethnographic labor” (146). Thus, even as documentary play highlights collaboration between child social actor and filmmaker, it should not be taken for granted as evidence of a fair or just relationship.

Rowena Santos Aquino joins together the aforementioned scholarly conversations about children’s agency and staged performance, making her work particularly important for grounding my discussion of documentary play. Santos Aquino argues that the reenactment of children “enables the creation of an alternative dialogic, collaborative space of expression and degrees of agency” (30). In an examination of “the collective performance of female youth” (26) in the Iranian feature film *The Apple*, Santos Aquino notes “the use of non-professional child actors conjures a tension between documentary and fiction insofar as their characters appear in a non-acting manner, which contributes to their affective immediacy and power” (28). Here, Santos Aquino is both echoing Bruzzi’s point that child social actors raise questions about the tension between documentary and fiction, as well as foregrounding child social actors’ potential to heighten the aesthetic impact of a film. Santos Aquino refers to reenactment as creating a kind of “documentary-fiction hybrid filmmaking where authorship is no longer singular but collective” (26). She argues the kind of reenactment where young people play themselves, as in *The Apple*, “is what enables” a “multivocal, creative, and collaborative” space as well as “collective performance” (26). Perhaps more than anyone, Santos Aquino lays the groundwork for my analysis of how documentary play can not only serve as a signifier of child social actors’ agency and collaboration with an adult filmmaker but also enhance the aesthetic impact of a documentary.

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As with play, documentary filmmakers who work with child social actors can tap into wider cultural meanings and symbols commonly associated with childhood, in turn leveraging those meanings for greater aesthetic and rhetorical effect. For instance, Smaill argues children's symbolic association with "hopefulness and futurity" is what enables documentary filmmakers to keep their social actors' "success and failure in constant play," with the viewer's "knowledge and discovery...revolving around the uncertainty of the outcome" (24, 147). In this way, child social actors can both add to a documentary's narrative tension (and thus its impact for viewers), as well as contribute a glimpse of hope to even the darkest of documentary subject matter. In addition to this, Karen Lury contends a child's presence on film actually allows filmmakers to be more creative and experimental, to "create filmic worlds in which the child's perspective is orchestrated via the representation of different embodied encounters and the adoption of an alternate mythic temporality" (6). Lury shows fictional film representations of children have historically embraced a messier space-time as a way to play upon the nonlinear quality, ambivalence, and disorder of childhood. This in turn prompts viewers to consider the "confusing associations and excitable passions that are allowed in childhood but which are conceived as perverse in adulthood" (5-6). In keeping with this, Smaill has written about how documentary filmmakers representing childhood draw upon the "narrative richness" of children's experiences (142) to inform their stylistic choices. In this way, children are ideal subjects for the realization of what Nichols calls the "fantasmatic mise-en-scène," wherein "despite their realist predilections," documentaries can employ "an entire mise-en-scène that possesses more of a psychic reality than a historical one, more an imaginary basis than a factual one" (*Speaking Truths With Film*, 10). The imagination, dreams, and confusion widely associated with childhood thus bring immense potential to the documentary performance of child social actors, as I demonstrate with the following analysis of *Bombay Beach*.

### **Documentary Play in *Bombay Beach* (2011)**

In *Bombay Beach*, Alma Har'el employs choreographed and coached performances to bring magic and beauty to a forgotten and bleak landscape. Har'el harnesses documentary play in ways that both provide much-needed relief from the film's heavy emotions, and vividly express the child social actors' internal experiences, including their capacity to imagine and dream. The documentary centers on a handful of subjects who live in Bombay Beach, a once popular tourist destination and now a largely deserted and poverty-stricken inland area of California surrounding the Salton Sea. The two featured young social actors are 10 year-old Benny Parrish and 16 year-old Cedric (CeeJay) Thompson. Har'el communicates the boys' difficult and even tragic

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circumstances via reflexively directed performances and discernible staging of the *mise-en-scène*, which she uses strategically to engage each boy in documentary play. She primarily does this through a technique I will refer to as “choreographed vignettes” staged to music. Throughout the film, the child social actors’ performances vacillate between presentational and representational, with the choreographed vignettes disrupting an otherwise seemingly chronological narrative in which the camera exhibits conventions akin to a fly-on-the-wall style.

The choreographed sequences signal to viewers all three criteria I have discussed as being most important for the perception of behavior as play: nonliterality (pretending or role-playing), flexibility (repetition and variation), and positive affect (enjoyment). As the child social actors enact Har’el’s musical vignettes, it is clear that they are on some level pretending, and that they have paused the reality of their everyday lives to step into a place of creative expression. Their movements are practiced, signaling that they have been coached, and provided with direction by Har’el. Yet at the same time their performances convey a certain degree of openness, leaving wiggle room for the boys to improvise amid the repetition and in turn put their own spin on the scenes. Even in the most melancholy of choreographed vignettes there is still an affect of enjoyment coming from the boys; it is in CeeJay’s bright smile and in Benny’s eager enthusiasm. Through the boys’ communication of their staged performances as play, they also show that they are creating these scenes along with Har’el; although Har’el stays behind the camera, the choreography, camera movements, and framing clearly convey her ongoing presence and engagement. In turn, the sequences come across as a creative exchange between Har’el and her subjects. Har’el’s child social actors play in front of the camera with innocence and wonder; she even brings their dreams to life in the *mise-en-scène*. In this way, play is used both to infuse the harsh desert landscape of Bombay Beach with a softness and beauty, and to allow moments to breathe within an otherwise depressing narrative. Har’el’s use of documentary play thus creates a powerful juxtaposition between a heart wrenching narrative and pleasurable performances. Her film is a prime example of how discernible staging can be perceived as play and in turn can bring viewers closer to child social actors as well as bear witness to their agentic power.

Like the town of Bombay Beach itself, Har’el’s child social actors are represented as isolated, cut off in many ways from the world outside. Benny is from a poor white family; his parents never finished high school, appear to be unemployed, and struggle to make ends meet. While the Parrish parents clearly love their children, prior to their participation in the film, Benny and his siblings had been removed from their home on multiple occasions when child protective services deemed their living environment unsafe. Benny is endearingly innocent but also has unnamed emotional and mental health conditions that create difficulties for him at school and with peers. At one point,

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when Benny has a seizure due to the high doses of medication prescribed for his behavioral issues, viewers learn that the nearest hospital is two hours away. In another scene, Benny is chastised by his teacher and then slumps sadly with his head on his desk as the rest of his class says the pledge of allegiance. Benny tells his mother he has no friends. His siblings exclude him from their games and other families in town also refuse to have him over to play with their children. There is arguably not much beauty or joy in Benny's everyday life. While playing in the lapping waves of the Salton Sea with his mother, Benny tells her that he wants to be a fish. When she asks him what kind, he heartbreakingly responds, "a happy fish."

CeeJay's challenges are different than Benny's, but no less tragic and thus also befitting the emotional power of Har'el's documentary play. Viewers learn that after his teenage cousin was killed in a drive-by shooting in South Central Los Angeles, CeeJay's mother sent him to live with his father in Bombay Beach. As a black teen from the city, CeeJay stands out in this rural desert town of mostly white residents, and Har'el includes evidence of the racism he faces there. Bombay Beach is a kind of liminal space for CeeJay, a stop (he hopes) on the way to something better, specifically the NFL. CeeJay is making the best of his life in the sleepy town and the boredom that comes with it because for him, the alternative was much more dire. Throughout the film viewers are positioned to wonder if he will work hard enough, get his grades up, and make it out—or perhaps, if he will instead get distracted from his goals and remain stuck. In the meantime, CeeJay makes friends, plays football, joins a dance crew, and finds a girlfriend named Jessie.

By employing choreographed vignettes throughout *Bombay Beach* to tell Benny's story, Har'el is able to construct an alternate reality within Benny's real world, allowing the harshness of his day-to-day life to coexist with scenes of beauty and hope. Benny's staged sequences in turn provide an escape for viewers, both from the bleak landscape of the abandoned desert town and from Benny's heartbreaking past and current isolation. Likewise, they represent Benny's own creative construction of his experience, his collaboration with Har'el to translate aspects of who he is and what he feels on screen. Har'el engages Benny in play through choreographed performances that evoke his inner thoughts, pain, and dreams. Take, for example, a choreographed vignette that serves as the visual manifestation of Benny's feelings of isolation from his siblings and peers. After showing one of the girls telling Benny he cannot participate in their game of make-believe, Har'el moves swiftly into an exterior staged sequence that was (based on the changing light between shots) filmed over at least a few takes as the Golden Hour turns to night. As the haunting musical track rises, the other children perform their choreographed movements without Benny. He first plays it off like he does not care, but then runs toward them in a kind of Red Rover game. Try as he might, Benny cannot

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break through the linked-arms barrier they have created. The children then encircle him as he twirls and leans up against their arms, still separate even though now “inside.” Finally, the other children dance in front of the sunset, leaving Benny to watch from the sidelines.



*The Red Rover sequence in Bombay Beach. Frame grab.*



*The Red Rover sequence in Bombay Beach. Frame grab.*

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Har'el also introduces props and set pieces and invites her youngest social actor to play pretend; in turn, the *mise-en-scène* she constructs serves as a way to bring Benny's fears and confusion to life. For instance, in another sequence down by the water, Benny happily plays in an abandoned boat and then explores an elaborate, colorful set piece on the shore. For the benefit of Har'el's camera, Benny climbs on the set and peers out through its windows, playing pretend as he "rows" along an imaginary body of water. At the same time, Benny's voiceover describes his nightmare, one surely connected to the trauma he experienced by being taken away from his parents when they went to jail, and the fear that it will happen again. The matter-of-fact tone and depressing content of his voiceover are in stark contrast with the dreamy, magical quality of the *mise-en-scène*. Even in this melancholy scene documentary play comes across as a temporary escape for Benny. Relatedly, *Bombay Beach* closes with a scene that evokes Benny's inner thoughts and dreams, serving as a kind of wish-fulfilment for him. Early on in the film he tells his mother he wants to be a fireman when he grows up. Then, at the end of the documentary, Benny looks up as an actual fire truck, seemingly without a driver, speeds toward him. With superhuman strength, he pushes it back, and then wills it to circle him. As it does, he is for a moment hidden from view behind the truck. In that instant Benny is transformed into a tiny fireman, complete with hat and mustache. He then uses the truck as his stage for his memorized dance steps, dancing on the front of the truck, hanging from the rear while quickly kicking his feet, climbing to the top and spinning around, hands extended toward the sky. As he "drives" through the town, he waves proudly to everyone below. He comes upon a fire (more evidence of Har'el's staged *mise-en-scène*) and jumps off the truck, stomping out the flames just before the film's final shot.

As with Benny, Har'el inserts choreographed sequences for CeeJay that serve as both an escape from the bleak landscape of *Bombay Beach* and an expression of his emotions and dreams. In one choreographed vignette, CeeJay and his friends gather in an abandoned house: it is damaged, dirty, covered in graffiti. Yet as they dance the teens fill the space with joyful rhythms, further enhanced by Har'el's dreamy soundtrack. They demonstrate their youthful exuberance and skill, first through dance steps and then through skateboard tricks, their silhouetted bodies arching across the space at the Golden Hour. By juxtaposing the dingy, seemingly useless house with such joyful repurposing by the teens, Har'el breathes life into the filmed environment. In a similar vein, toward the film's conclusion, Jessie's older, abusive ex-boyfriend Brentley tries to damage her relationship with CeeJay; when Brentley is unsuccessful in splitting up the couple, he calls CeeJay racial epithets. As CeeJay's voiceover calmly recounts this incident, Har'el shows CeeJay dancing confidently—joyfully, even—in front of the mirror in his bedroom while wearing a white mask. CeeJay is disaffected, recognizing

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Brentley as a waste of his energy, insignificant in the scheme of what CeeJay hopes to achieve.

While both of these scenes show CeeJay performing with enjoyment, there is one sequence with him that reads most fully as documentary play. Toward the end of the film Har'el stages a choreographed vignette of Jessie and CeeJay in a couples' dance. They meet at a white gazebo at night, both wearing the same white masks donned by CeeJay and his dance crew. Some of their moves seem more improvised, drawing on their chemistry as well as CeeJay's talents as a dancer; in these moments, they exaggerate their reactions, role-play, and joke around, conveying both the nonliterality and positive affect necessary to be perceived as play. Other parts of the sequence are more strictly staged, such as when they first meet at the gazebo, don their white masks, and sway back and forth to the beat of the soundtrack; as the sequence comes to a close, the two lay on the pavement, embracing, and a high angle shot captures their bodies encircled by a carefully arranged line of the white masks. These elements convey rehearsal, and communicate that the more improvisational moments are indeed flexibility amid repetition—the last of the three play criteria. This vignette underscores the happiness CeeJay has found in *Bombay Beach*, which simultaneously presents a risk that he might lose focus and miss out on his chance to escape to something (and some place) better for him. By stylizing the young social actors' innermost experiences as documentary play in ways that are both dreamy and other-worldly, Har'el artfully renders their subjectivity.

### **Documentary Play in *On the Way to School***

Like *Bombay Beach*, Plisson's *On the Way to School* also employs discernible staging and setups to help shape the narrative and provide viewers with greater insight into the challenges and struggles of its child social actors. Over the course of the documentary, viewers are introduced to several groups of children from remote locales around the world who must travel long distances and tough terrain by foot to get to school. This includes 11 year-old Jackson and his younger sister, Salome, from Kenya who walk for two hours every day; 12 year-old Zahira and her two friends from Morocco who walk for four hours every Monday; and 13 year-old Samuel from India and his two younger brothers who push and pull his make-shift wheelchair for 75 minutes through sand and water every morning. The film's visible staging of some of the most treacherous and potentially dangerous elements of each child's journey could prompt questions of ethics and truth. Still, a focus on the film's documentary play draws attention to how the children's performances are not only directed by the filmmaker but also, importantly, examples of their own self-representation.

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In *On the Way to School*, the children's performances are again staged in such a way that they meet the three key criteria necessary for being perceived as play. First I will address the nonliterality and flexibility of the child social actors' performances. In terms of nonliterality, all of the children's performances within the *mise-en-scène* are choreographed as (re)enactments of the kinds of challenges they might face on any given day during their journeys to school; the (re)enactments are an efficient way to communicate the range of challenges the children face, or potential future ones—both of which involved a kind of pretending or role-playing. Despite the filmmaker's clear interventions in the social actors' dialogue and movements through the *mise-en-scène*, the children perform a lack of awareness of the camera's presence; this representational style adds another level of pretending to the film. Plisson sets up each of the film's shots with care, capturing the children's movements in multiple takes and across vast distances to document the scale of their journeys; this shows the flexibility—or repetition with variation—of play. He then edits these setups together to stretch out small moments while also maintaining seamless dialogue (another example of repetition/variation). Plisson's use of documentary play showcases an alternate temporality that is, as Lury argues, befitting the representation of childhood.

For instance, Plisson constructs Jackson and Salome's trek by layering and repeating sounds and dialogue as well as providing omniscient shifts in vantage point. Toward the beginning of their journey, Jackson and Salome hike up a rocky mountainside to access a natural overlook. They scale the mountain in a long take from afar, and then in an instant the camera is right beside them as Jackson spots a group of elephants below; it is no coincidence these are the very same elephants Jackson's father warned him about the night before. Then the viewer is given Jackson's wide shot view of the vast landscape, then a medium reverse shot of the two siblings. As Jackson whispers to his sister, "There's an entire family!" the viewer gets a much closer view of the elephants grazing amidst the acacia trees, as though peering at the herd through the brush. The camera then jumps from the elephants to again back behind the children, and then once more to a kind of diagonal birds-eye view, showing their tiny bodies perched atop the mountain, providing a better sense of the distance they will need to travel to get past the danger the elephants pose. And then the camera is back again with them on top of the mountain. This continues throughout their journey to school, with frequent use of shot/reverse-shot and wide-shot/close-up pairings. At one point, Salome pleads, "You're going too fast, I can't keep up!" and yet the camera is always able to get ahead of Jackson and maneuver around the two siblings without disruption or difficulty. Throughout, the children's conversations remain seamless, and they show no awareness of a film crew.

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We have to go that way, today.

*Impossible witnessing in On the Way to School. Frame grab.*



I'd be scared, if I were alone!

*Impossible witnessing in On the Way to School. Frame grab.*

Plisson offers a similarly impossible witnessing through repetition and variation as Zahira and her friends zig zag up a rocky hillside. Their journey is captured with birds'-eye-view overhead shots, and low angle-shots. More wide, establishing shots

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contrast the girls' smallness with the grandeur of the natural environment. At one point one of the girls hurts her ankle; Plisson's camera moves in toward the girls, then pulls back away into the distance, behind them, then back in front of them, then at their feet as they walk, and then up above them. The view is alternately from the lone girl's perspective and then her friends' perspective, with wide shots underscoring the distance between them as she falls further behind. When they finally reach the road Zahira asks a man driving a truck if he will give them a ride. Even huddled in the back of the truck with a few goats, Plisson manages to provide viewers with several camera angles.

The same is true with Samuel and his brothers as they maneuver his rusty wheelchair across the sand. The camera angles and the distance between the viewer and the boys again change drastically from moment to moment, with wide shots of the terrain and close ups of the rickety chair and its wheels emphasizing the difficulty of their journey. At the same time, the dialogue remains uninterrupted; viewers overhear the boys remembering things that have gone wrong at this part of the trip before, such as when they fell because of some cows. In another part of that day's journey, Plisson shows Samuel's wheelchair stuck in water after taking an unfortunate shortcut. As all of this happens it is difficult not to think of the film crew standing by while the boys struggle, raising ethical concerns. And yet, there is also evidence of much collaboration between filmmaker and child social actors in the scene. As the boys argue, Plisson presents several impossibly divergent views emphasizing the predicament they have gotten themselves into.

In terms of positive affect, despite the harrowing nature of the children's journeys, *On the Way to School* does not come across as a sad film. This is due in part to the gorgeous scenery, Plisson's beautifully composed shots, and the construction of a happy ending with all of the children arriving safely to their destination by the film's close. Still, there is also a clear sense the child social actors embrace Plisson's invitation to perform their lives for the camera. For instance, at one point as Jackson and Salome hurry along past the camera, Salome's face betrays a bit of a smile. Their interactions are marked by chatter and even singing. Zahira sings and smiles as well; at one point, as she and her friends sit and wait for a ride, lamenting they will be likely be late to school, they each playfully toss a stone in the air and catch it. Samuel and his brothers show their enjoyment through storytelling, recalling past journeys to school and the various mishaps they experienced along the way. They also lovingly bicker with each other as family members can; Samuel's brothers remind him to "lift up your legs!" and "hang on instead of complaining!" Throughout the film, instrumental music carries the emotion, often happy and sweet, at times rising to highlight the sense of adventure in a scene. Notably, despite the apparent difficulty of the trips, no one cries, no one yells out in anger or frustration, and no one gives up. While these are not examples of a fun kind of

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play per se, all of them lend to the perception of the children's positive affect and thereby their documentary performance as play.

While not as presentational as the staging of children's performance in *Bombay Beach*, *On the Way to School* still arguably constructs a version of Nichols' "fantasmatic mise-en-scène," in particular for the way the child social actors and Plisson's camera lead viewers through an exaggerated version of their actual journeys to school. The film leans on (re)enactments of fears and memories such that both the children's and viewers' imaginations are privileged over fact. The film's documentary play provides viewers with repeated set ups of the same moment from different vantage points, coupling an omniscient sight with conversations and experiences in a way that at once feels real and yet defies any possible time-space relationship. Sweeping establishing shots contrast the film's grand vistas with the children's bodies as they traverse the landscape. These are coupled with over the shoulder shots and closeups that provide a sense of what the world looks like from a child's point of view. From shot to shot, the conversations remain unbroken, and the viewer is never out of range of overhearing. These discernible setups and repetitions allow viewers to experience an impossible witnessing of filmic events, as though they are not missing any part of a conversation or the larger story, all the while getting the clearest sense possible view of the space in which the film takes place. Likewise, the events captured come to stand in for the sort of journey each child could expect to have and the kind of dangers they might face. In this way, the playful collaboration between the child social actors and filmmaker results in a heightened, larger-than-life tale for each child, with the children emerging as heroes in their own stories.

### **Conclusion: The Possibilities for Documentary Play**

Children in documentaries are not always regarded as full social actors. Because of their young age, child social actors can often be seen as guileless and unaware, and thus vulnerable to exploitation. I have introduced the term documentary play here as a call for greater recognition of child social actors as full subjects, capable of creative collaboration with an adult filmmaker. When constructed to highlight the criteria necessary for viewers' perception of play, discernible staging and directed performance of child social actors can enhance a documentary by bringing beauty to and offering relief from painful narratives, deepening viewers' connection to social actors' internal experiences, and highlighting child social actors' instrumental role in the film's construction. As my analysis of *On the Way to School* and *Bombay Beach* shows, highlighting how children's performance contributes to the perception of play can also help with further understanding the particular pleasures that documentary

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representations of children can bring, even when the subject matter of a film is arguably depressing. When viewers perceive that child social actors are playing with a filmmaker, they can in turn find comfort in that play as a signal that the children are willing and active participants, a reminder of their agency. Reconceptualizing the discernible staging and directed performance of children as documentary play fosters a recognition of child social actors as active—and vital—players in a game of pretend.

This is not to say the term does not have its limitations, specifically with regard to alleviating ethical concerns. For instance, while the child social actors in *Bombay Beach* and *On the Way to School* do have the agency to play along and co-create with the filmmaker, in some ways their play also exists for the benefit of an audience who is assumed to find their environment and challenges completely unrelatable if not unfathomable. Despite the difficult social issues they engage, both *Bombay Beach* and *On the Way to School* draw to a close at a place of hope that their child social actors will escape their current circumstances for something better. At the end of *On the Way to School*, Jackson and Salome, Zahira and her friends, and Samuel and his brothers all make it to their destination, each happily sharing in talking head interviews how they will use their education to achieve their dreams for the future. Likewise, *Bombay Beach*'s CeeJay is doing better in school and his coaches think he has a shot at a college scholarship. And while nothing has actually gotten better for Benny, Har'el uses the magical final sequence to fulfil his wish of becoming a firefighter. In this way, both films do the ideological work of constructing a kind of alternate happy ending for viewers, a narrative proxy for an otherwise impossible resolution to the challenges the children face. And while viewers may be moved emotionally via documentary play, the child social actors themselves remain stuck in place after the filmmaker (and viewer) departs.

Still, as a conceptual approach, documentary play does not require discounting concerns around power imbalances between adult filmmakers and child social actors, but rather offers a way to layer upon those concerns another lens through which children's self-representation, and in turn child social actors' potential role as co-creators, can be understood. What I am arguing is that documentary play opens up a space to better recognize the subjectivity of child social actors, their impactful contribution to documentaries, and the effect those contributions have on viewers. It does this by centering the creative exchange present in children's documentary performance, highlighting the agency of child social actors who, in spite of circumscribed choices, are subjects capable of deciding whether and how they will play pretend for the filmmaker's camera. Documentary play also serves as a powerful reminder that even when the co-production of meaning between filmmaker and child social actor is less easily perceived, it remains ever present. A focus on documentary play is thus particularly useful insofar as it highlights the creative collaboration between

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documentary filmmakers and child social actors, a collaboration that to varying degrees is always there, even when it is difficult to see.

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, see the following reviews of *Bombay Beach*: Mark Adams for *Screen Daily* on June 19, 2011; Peter Debruge for *Variety* on February 28, 2011; David Edwards for *Mirror* on February 3, 2012; Noel Murray for *AV Club* on October 13, 2011; and Mark Olson for *The Los Angeles Times* on October 21, 2011. Likewise see these reviews of *On the Way to School*: Ben Kenigsberg for the *The New York Times* on February 5, 2015; Jordan Mitzner for *Hollywood Reporter* on October 1, 2013; and audience posts on *Letterboxd*.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, some filmmakers presumably construct their documentaries so as to obscure their social actors' play for the camera and construct an appearance of the child's unmediated authenticity. Others might record their child social actors playing or being playful, without the filmmaker being directly involved in the play itself. Neither of these would constitute documentary play by my definition.