

Critical Analysis

Life in a Day

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Life in a Day (2011) is a crowdsourced documentary film shot by people from various parts of the world. These snippets from people shot over a single day have been put together to create a montage that exhibits how everyday life is for people. The majority of these clips have been shot on a handheld camera by people who want to document the lives of their loved ones. The film combines sequences of similar activities together from various communities to allow the film to engage with the viewers and evoke a sense of belonging from them. However, although *Life in a Day* depicts people who come from varied cultures and have distinctly different lifestyles, it uses broad clichés of familial conventions and portrays routine activities to preach the theme of universality. Due to these elements in its composition, *Life in a Day* doesn't quite fit the mold of a travel film. Instead, it feels like an all-inclusive documentary about the world. It tries to form an emotional connection with the viewer by depicting conventional activities within the standardized life of a person in the world. As a result, the film lacks novelty and feels scripted and calculated, much like an early television production called *Our World*, which was broadcasted in 1967.

This evident lack of coherence between cultures can be seen through the lens of a grieving Asian family. The first shot of this sequence acts as an establishing shot: it sets the scene of the home. The soft score at the starting of the scene fades out as the camera rotates to reveal an untidy living room. The sunlight peeks through the window, hinting that it's morning time. Since the scene is framed in a long shot, we can almost see the entire household, which is illuminated by the natural light. At the center of the shot is a child, sleeping on the couch. The father starts speaking to the child, presumably his son, to try and wake him up. Although he talks in a language that we don't understand, we can comprehend perfectly what's happening in the scene.

This scene is followed by a traveling (follow) shot of the child as both the father and the son are maneuvering through the messy hallways to stop at the bathroom. The child slides open the bathroom door and the film cuts to a scene inside the bathroom. The next scene starts off with a stationary medium shot of the father dressing up his son whilst talking to him. Due to the dialogue as well as the diegetic sound of the water running, the scene feels very realistic. The devotion as well as the caring nature of the single parent is evident in how he wakes up his son and gets him ready in the morning. This sequence tries to get us to empathize with this grieving family; we connect with the beautiful relationship that is shared by the father and the son. The shot continues in the living room, where the father places the camera right next to the photo of an absent woman, who is presumably his dead wife. The father lights a candle in front of the photo. The sublime cinematography stands out in this particular shot. Due to the strategic positioning of the camera, we can see the child, the father as well as the reflection of the candle in the photograph. The father lights incense sticks and the son rings the bell as both of them say their

morning prayers for the woman. These diegetic sounds in the household such as the water running and the bells ringing keeps the film grounded in reality.

Although this sequence is being shot by a non-professional, the simplistic yet powerful cinematography of it stands out. We still cannot understand the language of their conversation and prayers, but we can decipher exactly what's going on. Despite the fact that neither the father nor the son portray sadness, there is a palpable anguish in the last shot as the son extinguishes the candle and the melancholy background score starts playing. This non-diegetic soundtrack adds a touch of sadness and unease to the sequence. This sequence, much like the rest of the film, tries to give the message that the world and its people are more similar than dissimilar. Instead of relying on language and narration, *Life in a Day* relies on these human emotions within conventional familial relationships to tell a story. One might not be able to put themselves in the shoes of the father or the son, but this two and a half minute sequence encourages the viewer to reflect upon the relationship he shares with his parents.

However, by trying to normalize relationships and values to a universal human level, *Life in a Day* blurs the boundaries that exist between cultures and countries. As a result, although *Life in a Day* is shot on a global scale with submissions from over 192 countries, it never feels like a travelogue. In his article 'The Whole World Within Reach', Tom Gunning states that "Travel films display a mode of perception which may give a new sense to the phrase *images without borders*" (25). He also goes on to say "In the modern era, the very concept of travel becomes intricately bound up with the production of images. The image becomes our way of structuring a journey and even provides a substitute for it" (27). Travel films as well as other devices such as lantern and stereoscope create a particular point of view, one from outside the land it is viewed.

This method of creating a unique perspective is commonly used in travel films to incite journeys from viewers. Although *Life in a Day* seems like a travel film, it is very dissimilar to a postcard, magic lantern or even an early travel film; instead of displaying vignettes that show what is distinctive and fascinating about each country, it focuses on showcasing the same activities in each country in a commonplace manner. It leaves out the aspects that are distinctive about each culture, community or country and instead, and tries to get the viewer to empathize with the film by using sentiments within these shared human activities.

One example of the film exhibiting such an activity is the sequence in which the newspapers are getting delivered to people all around the world. We see people from all over the world, from a home in India to a person in the hospital, getting their news delivered to their doorstep. The tightly-cut shots in the sequence do not discriminate between which location the shot is taking place in, since the film tries to depict this as an activity that is ubiquitous. We are not shown how people get their news differently in various parts of the world but instead are shown a sequence we can relate to and comprehend.

As a result, *Life in a Day* uses the platform of cinema and travel sequences in a very different way. Instead of taking advantage of the motion picture medium to show the diversity and distinctiveness that exists in the world, it fails to create a complex worldview by not portraying cultures from a multifaceted perspective. Without placing these sequences in a larger context of the development of mass tourism, the film functions as “a means of appropriating the world through images” (Gunning 27). It creates a sense of accessibility to foreign lands that supports the modern worldview that technology renders every distant thing somehow available to us. It demystifies foreign lands by excluding the element of foreignness through formal visual

and auditory techniques such as handheld photography, diegetic sounds of households and tightly-edited shots which do not spend too much time on one specific sequence. As a result, *Life in a Day* is by no means a travel film. It comes in the category of a universal film; instead of showing viewers how each culture has activities and routines exclusive to itself, it dramatizes the concept of a global village - the world viewed as one single community.

Life in a Day supports this theme of oneness using long sequences that involve activities shared across countries. These sequences in *Life in a Day* seem predictable and elicit the same response as if the film was scripted. Lisa Parks, in her article ‘Satellite Spectacular’, which is about *Our World*, one of the first international satellite television programs, states that “...like other forms of television, *Our World* was carefully scripted, meticulously planned, and ardently rehearsed. What distinguishes it from other television formats, is its status as a rare occasion - a *spectacular*” (37). Although the audience recognized that the program was well-orchestrated, its novelty existed due to the attention that was directed towards its revolutionary broadcasting. The “canned liveness” (Parks 38) that *Our World* creates through its careful scripting and scheduling feels analogous to the repetitious structure that *Life in a Day* uses. However, *Our World* uses maps to signify movements from one part of the world to another, which directs focus to its international scale and generate excitement within the viewer. In comparison, *Life in a Day* does not focus too much attention to its global nature or its broadcast or filming being a spectacle. For example, at the start of the film, there is a continuous sequence involving people getting ready in the morning. In the sequence, the shots seamlessly move between various countries. The tightly-knit editing does not draw attention to any one shot in a specific country. Close-up point-of-view shots (POV) of day-to-day unremarkable activities do not direct attention to this

so-called worldwide spectacle. As we move on to the sequence in which people from all over the world are preparing their breakfast, the diegetic sounds are perfectly synchronised with the beats of the spirited background score. These ordinary moments allow the film to engage with the viewers on a personal level but omit the daily idiosyncratic activities that every individual and community possesses and cherishes. *Life in a Day* serves “...to visualize and construct the world as a ‘whole sphere’ while remaining instantly within reach of its most remote parts” (Parks 36). By using these generalized sequences, it tries to stay connected to its theme of universality whilst portraying the globe as a diverse place. As a result, the film does not emerge as raw, untended and unanchored but rather as calculated and scheduled.

The film’s use of broad clichés stems from the Western fantasy of portraying the world as “a global village” (Gunning 32) or “the miracle of a global-encircling now” (Parks 37). However, while trying to bring the whole world within reach, *Life in a Day* misses out the answers to some key questions. How is a birthday celebrated differently in Korea than in the United States? What father son moments are specific only to Japan? How is breakfast in India different from that in Africa? How do the means of livelihood differ in various parts of the world? As a result, by using these familial relations and common activities to help viewers relate to people who might be thousands of miles away, *Life in a Day* leaves out the unique facets that make each culture different. The film succeeds in creating a sense of belonging for viewers but one might lose interest due to lack of freshness as they are shown the everyday situations and routines of humans all around the world. This results in a world that might be legible to everyone, but one that seems oversimplified. *Life in a Day* drives home the point it set out to make: that there are many things that divide us as people, but there are far more things that unite

us. However, it creates this unifying theme through depictions of activities that are common across borders. By using these elements in its composition, *Life in a Day* seemingly trivializes the diversity that exists in the world and leaves out characteristics that are unique to each individual, family, community, culture and country.

Works Cited

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