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COVID-19, "Roll Camera and Action": Filming culture of the Ghanaian Cinematographer in a Pandemic Era

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Abstract

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, filmmaking and filmmakers have been affected most across the globe. Predominantly, it has not only changed execution of the role of Cinematographers on film sets during the filmmaking process, but also has certain repercussions on the profession as far as filmmaking is concerned. Based on this situation, this study examines how Ghanaian Cinematographers observe protocols on set when filming during the pandemic. In addition, it considers some effects of COVID-19 pandemic on the Cinematography profession in this part of our world as far as filmmaking is concerned. Findings indicate that personal hygiene, which was disregarded during filming in the past has now become a daily ritual before a camera roll on film sets. It is noted that in spite of some participants being cautious during filming on set caught the disease in one way or the other. Despite its negative effects, it has also introduced various avenues that serve as new opportunities to enhance the Cinematography profession locally. Also, it has introduced alternative ways of capturing images to enable effective visual storytelling on screen. Based on these findings, it recommends that Cinematographers in Ghana should continue to adhere to the conventions and observe protocols to avoid contracting the virus. Also, Cinematographers should accept the situation that we are in the new normal and should further explore current strategies in filming.

Keywords: cinematographer, COVID-19, filmmaking, pandemic, protocols

Public Interest Statement

COVID-19 pandemic has affected the film industry in diverse ways such as the filmmaking processes as well as the screening of films in cinema halls. Ghana is not an exception since filmmaking came to a halt during the outbreak of COVID-19 which affected its filmmaking processes, distribution and marketing. Considering the crew members behind the scenes, Cinematographers are affected most due to certain roles they play on film sets and the equipment they handle when filming. This research intends to fill a gap in Cinematography and filming during COVID-19 in the Ghanaian space. The research also considers how the outbreak of COVID-19 has affected some aspects of the profession. It recommends that Cinematographers, as well as other filmmakers, should continue to observe protocols and take other preventive measures to mitigate the virus and keep people alive.

1.0 Introduction

The eruption of the novel Coronavirus disease popularly known as COVID-19 has affected many industries across the globe such as Education, Economic, Agriculture and Health. As acknowledged by Zhang *et al.* (2020), the infectious and contagious nature of the virus, has emitted fear and fright among individuals globally and caused disruptions in the operations of several industries. As a result, the film industry cannot be exempted since it has done a huge damage on its filmmaking processes worldwide. For instance, it has affected the style of storytelling from including more to few casts, the hiring of less crew during filming and the observation of strict protocols before and after shooting. Asker (2020) revealed that in the filmmaking process, although new protocols were observed by crew and actors, the virus kept spreading across several film sets worldwide. Also, film distribution and marketing by major film production companies were harmfully affected. Moreover, many film festivals organized around the world were hosted online instead of the usual face-to-face (Johnson, 2021). Owing to film pedagogy in film schools worldwide, a lot of hands-on practical lessons were cancelled or postponed until recent times. In addition, online teaching and learning via zoom were adopted by most faculty members in some filmmaking tertiary institutions in some parts of the global north and global south (Strohmaier, 2021). According to Stolz *et al.* (2020) as cited by Asker (2020), the pandemic ceased the increase of subscriptions of several online channels streaming services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, Apple TV+ and Disney+. Besides, film productions in most countries, cinemas, theatres and film schools were all shut down. However, the theatre industry was not spared either due to the pandemic which saw a failure in attendance and a split at the box office. Jasak (2021) emphasized that most theatre production crew members suffered monetarily due to the closure of theatres and quarantine of travelling theatre companies. Another study in most communities in West Bengal, India showed that most theatre ensembles had to halt their performances which affected theatre practitioners and the audience as well. This affected their mental and physical health since there were no performances for a long period for practitioners to make some money and for audiences to relieve some stress from watching a series of performances (Tudu and Hansda, 2021). In that circumstance, this can be related to many communities in countries as far as COVID-19 and its effects on the theatre industry are concerned.

On December 31, 2019, Covid-19 gained popularity when numerous infections of pneumonia which affected some Chinese citizens were disclosed in Wuhan, the Hubei province of China (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). Later on, the novel virus was renamed SARS-COV-2 that results in the 2019 Corona virus disease by the International Committee on Taxonomy of virus 2 (Lu *et al.* 2020). Since January, 2020, the novel virus epidemic swept across the whole of China and has affected normal life of people and the stable operation of the economy. As researchers presented reports on

the novel virus and its outbreak with symptoms of pneumonia, it was later declared as a global pandemic on March 12, 2020, by the World Health Organization (WHO) (Paules *et al.* 2020). The situation caused several deaths and thus countries across the world embarked on several strict health measures to overcome the pandemic.

A myriad of scholars presents some characteristics of this deadly virus including symptoms such as high fever, continuous cough, shortness of breath, fatigue, body pains, headache, loss of taste and smell, sore throat, congestion or runny nose, nausea or vomiting and diarrhea. These are early symptoms one may come into contact with the virus after two weeks. It is noted that the virus can be transmitted through animal-to-human and from person-to-person contacts. The person-to-person transmission routes include droplet inhalation, coughing and sneezing. Therefore, practicing preventive measures such as handwashing with soap and water, wearing of face mask, social distancing, covering of nose and mouth when coughing and the prevention of touching the face, nose and mask can mitigate the spread of transmission of the COVID-19 infection (Chen N *et al.*, 2020; Lei *et al.*, 2018; Otter *et al.*, 2016 and Zumla, *et al.* 2015).

For Ghana, the novel corona virus hit the country on March 12, 2020, which was infected by a lot of people under one week and the number of infections in percentage got escalated by 300% with the death of two people (Bukari *et al.* 2021). With one of the measures taken by Ghana government to curb spread of the disease, the President of Ghana, His Excellency Nana Addo Dankwa Akufo-Addo, in a nationwide address on 15 March 2020, announced a ban on all public gatherings including schools, religious activities, funerals, business, supermarkets and night clubs for four weeks. Despite, the gradual easing of lockdowns later in the year 2020, severe measures such as personal hygiene, mandatory wearing of masks, ban on social gathering, social distancing, increase in the number of testing sites and health support for Ghanaian citizens were put in place and has been so to date (Kenu *et al.* 2020). Subsequently, in line with COVID-19 and several nations of addresses by the President of Ghana to limit spread of the virus, there was a ban on public gatherings that affected places of worship, schools, social gatherings and cinema halls. Further, most citizens were sensitized to engage in handwashing, wearing of masks, practice social gathering and self-quarantine. Later on, numerous lockdowns were imposed on selected cities, communities and villages.

As established earlier by Johnson (2021), the pandemic's effect on Hollywood affected many film industries as well as the Ghanaian film industry. As a result, filmmaking on some film sets went to a halt whereas few others continued under strict observation of protocols and preventive measures. Funding became a huge problem for film and television productions and several film premieres were suspended. Although literature may be silent on this, in year 2020, popular Ghanaian films like *Aloe Vera* (Sedufia, 2020) which received a huge audience patronage upon its primary weekend openings at the Silver Bird Cinema, Accra could not be premiered in other regions due to COVID-19 outbreak. Similarly, the Ghanaian film titled *Drops of Happiness* (Salifu, 2020) and other films that were ready to be premiered at the cinemas around that period got suspended. It is noted that operation of cinemas and theatres in the entire country were closed as of March, 15, 2020 and was opened in June, 2021 upon deliberations between the government and filmmaking stakeholders. According to Joshua Otabil, a Cinematography lecturer at National Film & Television Institute (NAFTI), Accra, Ghana, filmmakers locally are struggling to fight the spread of the virus since its outbreak as filming is still ongoing in some parts of the country (Personal Communication, October 5, 2021). Therefore, he stressed on emphatically that individual crew, especially Cinematographers must beware of how deadly the virus can be and follow the essential protocols. It must be noted that the Cinematographer represents a visual storyteller who plays a major role in the filmmaking process. With the film camera as a tool

in hand, he or she collaborates with the Director, together with other crew members to tell believable stories visually on screen. As a result, the Cinematographer is viewed as an inevitable crew in the creation of believable worlds.

In their research, Madichie, *et al.* (2020) focused on how the entire Ghana creative arts business has been affected by the pandemic. It is revealed that the business of arts was affected immensely due to the cancellation and postponement of performances affecting industry connoisseurs, amateurs and their audience. Another research conducted by De-Graft Aikins (2020) considered how the responses to COVID-19 by creative arts communities have shaped public views of the pandemic. A major key finding revealed that the entire vulnerable communities need to be sensitized on the how the virus keeps mutating from period to period. However, as observed by the author there is a scarcity of research on Cinematographers on observation of protocols during filming and some effects on the profession during the pandemic era in Ghana. Therefore, this paper attempts to fill an aspect of that lacuna on COVID-19 and filmmaking discourses in Ghana.

This paper examined how Cinematographers observed protocols on film sets during the covid era. Also, it considered some effects of the pandemic on the Cinematography profession in Ghana. Employing the qualitative approach, fifteen (15) Cinematographers purposefully selected were interviewed to seek their views on observation of protocols during filming. It also considered some effects of corona virus on the Cinematography profession. To this end, only professional Cinematographers in Ghana who were working on film sets during the outbreak of the pandemic were engaged. Also, these selected participants are seasoned filmmakers who have worked on local and international film productions since the beginning of the pandemic era to date. Besides, they are eminent Cinematographers who have contributed most to the growth of the Ghana film industry. The selected Ghanaian Cinematographers as participants served as the author's primary source of data. Purposive sampling technique was employed to gain rich-information from participants (Patton, 2002). Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an interview question guide which provided a flexible structure to explore and discover the topic. The interviews required informal and face-to-face approach. Interviews occurred in their various homes, work places, recreational places on planned and equally arranged days. Also, the semi-structured interview was selected on a premise that responses from participants about their experiences would be shared openly (Flick, 2006). Data gathered from participants required some form of transcription and coding. Transcripts were read through thoroughly to identify possible emerging themes. A preliminary analysis was done to review initial codes which resulted in themes. Second analysis was done to identify codes that were in correspondence with the main themes. Later on, developing themes were reviewed and given names. Themes developed included personal hygiene, evil necessity, unfortunate mishap and career alternative. Themes were finalized and the report writing began. Participants' identities were anonymized due to the sensitive nature of the study.

2.0 Conceptualizing Cinematography: An art and craft

There are quite a lot of writings in the area of Cinematography. It is noteworthy that all these discourses vary from perspectives to core meanings of Cinematography by film scholars. For the purpose of this paper, Cinematography can be viewed as not just the mere taking of pictures, but the procedure of gathering ideas, words, actions, emotional connotation, tone and interpreting them in visual forms. As the terminology is used in this writing, it is the employment of methods and techniques that we use to add meaning and subtext to a film narrative through actors, sets, dialogue and action (Brown, 2016). In the opinion of Keateng (2014), although cinematographers are in charge of the visuals, their

roles surpass this idea in practice and demands one to be more meticulous. Thus, his or her skills brings responsibilities varied such as deciding on the lighting, composing the film frame and initiate camera movements. By this, the Cinematographer in collaboration with the Director and other crew members finalize on the visual structure and style in film. In that sense the cinematographer is often viewed as an artist painting with light on screen.

Also, the skill of the Cinematographer or Director of Photography, is to combine visual artistry with technical knowledge and managing the crew working under him or her. These personnel may include the camera and lighting crew. In that matter, a visual world is created by the Cinematographer which present meanings to an audience. According to Stump (2014), the Cinematographer can define the success or mar a film production. He or she is responsible to collaborate with the Producer and Director to provide a quality artistic piece and work within a stipulated budget. In terms of Cinematography, the shots and camera positions serve as some essentials in visual storytelling. The camera position and angle may define the characteristics of an actor in a film, whereas, the shot defines some details of actions in a story (Brown, 2020). Therefore, almost everything that happens in the cinematic frame in relation to shots, image sizes, camera positions, camera angles and lighting is fronted by the Cinematographer.

3.0 Cinematography: A brief historical outline

Historically, the birth of Cinematography dates as far back as the nineteenth century when the *Cinématographe* was invented by the Lumière brothers preceded by several experiments in 1895. The *Cinématographe* patented by the Lumière brothers played a multi-purpose role as projector, camera and printer. Also, it was made to run at 16 frames per second which recognized the standard of storytelling in silent films. Its official unveiling on December 28, 1895 at the Grand Café, on the *Boulevard des Capucines* in Paris as a commercial product marked a new dawn of storytelling with the camera. Approximately, ten films were screened to a paying audience. To date, several films have been shot in form of shorts and feature-length films in telling stories to many audiences globally (Cook, 2016). Another pioneer filmmaker who employed creative ways in using the camera is known as Georges Méliès. Popularly known as the magician, he employed several tricks with the camera and painted backgrounds in telling stories on several genres. Likewise, he explored with special effects and stop-motions to create complex and fantasy scenes. Later on, Méliès, lost most of his audience to Edwin S. Porter, because they were amazed with his sophisticated narrative style. Porter, a projectionist and an expert in constructing camera equipment, was hired by Thomas Edison, to improve on his cameras and projectors for his company. Porter was credited with making story films employing stage-scenery technique. Porter is remembered for his most renowned film titled *The Great Train Robbery* (Porter, 1903) consisting of eleven shots. This was known as one of the early films with crime scenes told narratively onscreen. In the early twentieth century, the narrative changed in the cinema medium and the art of telling stories. Fiction films became the main product of the industry and films were rented to exhibitors, to pave way for easy distribution and exhibition to shape the industry. During this period marked the commercial manipulation of filmmaking. It is noted that early films shot were silent films and then later sound and colour were added to compliment the idea of telling stories on screen (Thompson & Bordwell, 2003).

With the advent of technology, the role of Cinematographers in the filmmaking process is inevitable and relevant in every professional filmmaking conglomerate. Above all, Cinematography combines lighting, equipment and the creative ability to capture a good shot in telling a story. However, it must be noted that using the most expensive camera in filmmaking does not guarantee

good shots, but how one manages the camera and lighting equipment to execute his or her artistic skills and techniques to create imagery to enable tell a story.

4.0 Results and discussion

Personal hygiene

Generally, many participants expressed their views on keeping to the observation of strict health protocols to prevent COVID-19. This is what some of the participants had to say:

Okoh: *"Off course, I sanitize my equipment three times before and after every shoot. As a matter of fact, some local and foreign productions I worked on during the beginning of the outbreak and now ensured that crew members went through a COVID-19 Rapid test on location every two days till the end of shoot".*

Owusu: *"I sanitize my equipment, hands and wear a mask before shooting begins on set. Also, I instruct members of my camera crew to do the same when I am playing the role as a Director of Photography".*

Akwetey: *"From my observation, some of the film sets I worked on had the entire cast without masks in order to deliver their dialogues efficiently. However, the onus lied on my camera crew and I to wash our hands with soap, sanitize our hands and disinfect the cameras before rolling. Considering other local and foreign productions I have worked on since the eruption of COVID-19, body temperatures of crew and cast are checked after shoot".*

Boateng: *"You see, health for me is very important and since the virus attacks people with underlining conditions as presented by some medical professionals, I do not take chances with the wearing of masks and observation of protocols on set. Due to this, I personally provide logistics such as nose masks and sanitizers for myself whether I am playing the role of a camera operator or working with a camera crew during filming".*

Participants keeping to observation of protocols on film sets has not been the ritual for some filmmakers locally and across the globe, but COVID-19 pandemic has changed the norm since its occurrence. As earlier asserted by Zumla, *et al* (2015), a key way to mitigate the spread of the virus is to observe all protocols like handwashing with soap, sanitizing the hands and keeping to social distancing. As acknowledged by Kenu, *et al* (2020), severe measures are put in place several professionals to date to mitigate spread of the virus.

Evil necessity

The second theme is in the view of emergence of COVID-19 as a necessary devil as proffered by some participants.

Owusu: *"This pandemic has enlightened me notwithstanding its negative effects. Presently, I have ventured into online streaming and zoom photography for some documentaries I shot in order to satisfy my clients. For me, these are new avenues one can explore to make extra money from clients' demands".*

Boateng: *"Hmmm, I have learnt to improve on my Film Directing and Film Sound technique skills in filmmaking because I usually work alone lately. Currently, I do not have the luxury of working with a large camera crew under my supervision. Besides, I have improved upon my digital technology skills as an image creator which would enable me survive on the job".*

Odurowaa: *"Currently, I stay at home for months before getting a call from clients for a shoot which was not the story in past times. As a result, I utilize the available free time at hand to rather design and construct new accessories and equipment locally to improve my profession. Also, I utilize the period to read more on Cinematography and its current trends globally".*

Dekle: *"I must be honest, the advent of COVID-19 pandemic, has resulted in a drastic change in technology and the manner in which film productions are executed. I have personally taken the initiative to grab some knowledge on how to handle virtual productions online. It is obvious that acquiring knowledge in such skills is on high demand. Presently, every Cinematographer in Ghana must be able to handle virtual and augmented reality shows without any hustle".*

Despite, COVID-19 negative effects on the profession, it has introduced new ways of telling stories with a camera, light and technology. This serves as a positive news on behalf of participants locally since they learnt new things which contributed to their knowledge in filmmaking. As supported by Madichie, *et al.* (2020), creative industry players must see the pandemic as a blessing in disguise and seize the opportunity to explore all the positive opportunities of the moment.

Unfortunate mishap

In their accounts, some participants proffered that despite the observation of protocols on set during filming they contracted the virus. This might have transpired due to unawares and negligence on the part of participants or other ways.

Dekle: *"The ritual of sanitizing my hands and camera equipment are done in the mornings before a day's shoot and masks are eventually taken off in the process of changing lenses for a particular shot. I guess this is how come I contracted the virus. Despite my recovery state, I still feel some uneasiness in my breathing....."*

Awal: *"In covering the burial ceremony of the late President, Flt. Lieutenant Jerry John Rawlings, I contracted the virus even though all protocols were observed during filming. However, I remember taking my mask off whilst communicating with some film crew and perhaps that might have exposed me to the virus".*

Biney: *"Ahhh.....it beats my imagination how I contracted the virus in performing my role as a Cinematographer on duty. Looking at the loneliness and the kind of stress I went through during my quarantine period, I would not wish such an experience for any fellow Cinematographer. I must say COVID-19 is real and would urge filmmakers to mask up".*

Boamah: *"Hmmm.....the film sets I have worked on hardly checked temperatures of individuals before filming, but I took an initiative to cover my nose and mouth with masks throughout filming. Meanwhile, after one of my numerous shoots, I started experiencing some symptoms of corona virus. I was hospitalized few months ago and just recovered from the infection. My wife has personally warned me to always keep my mask on witnessing I went through before recovery. To date, I still experience some kind of fear and anxiety anytime I am working amid a large cast and crew. As of now, my sense of smell has been affected greatly".*

As recognized by Asker (2020) earlier in this writing, the virus kept spreading on film sets even though strict preventive measures were adhered to during filming. The way some participants came into contact with the virus is strange and difficult to explain even when protocols were observed and strict measures taken. Although, some Cinematographers masked up during filming per their

submissions, perhaps, they might have touched surfaces of camera equipments or people without washing and sanitizing of hands which resulted in catching of the virus. Also, it was revealed that the infection has caused certain abnormalities in the bodies of some participants. This confirmed the deadly nature of the virus which required extra carefulness from cinematographers during filming.

Alternative career

Some participants reflected on the theme that they have considered other careers due to the low rate of job call-ups from clients lately.

Godsway: *"Since the jobs are not coming anymore, I have ventured into another business of exporting local Shito to American which is quite fetching and serves as an alternative I can survive on as a bread winner".*

Antwi: *"For over eight months, clients have failed to call me for filming, due to the huge damage on the film industry. As a result, I have changed my job and gone into import and export of goods which for me is quite lucrative".*

Madichie, *et al.* (2020) supported that the outbreak of COVID-19 has thought some image creators' great lessons as some have ventured into other businesses. As a result of COVID-19 pandemic, participants have ventured into other careers to be able to earn some money for a living. In my opinion, even though they have to do so to survive in these difficult times, caution must be taken never to stop practicing on the profession. This because experiences are gathered individually the more, they work on many film sets.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how some Ghanaian Cinematographers observed protocols during filming in the pandemic and also considered some effects of COVID-19 disease on the profession. Thus, it dealt into certain effects the pandemic has had on the profession. The thematic analysis presents that most participants observed protocols on film sets keeping to personal hygiene. Others followed protocols during the beginning of shooting and in the course of filming took off their mask and as a result got infected with the virus. The study also found that the advent of coronavirus despite its negative effects has presented some positives. Moreover, it was observed that some participants had ventured into different careers due to the lack of jobs from clients. It is recommended that stringent rules must be observed during pre and post covid. Cinematographers must follow protocols, keep to distancing on set and avoid physical contacts with individuals since COVID-19 is a communicable disease. Although the government has taken some initiative to get most populations vaccinated, Cinematographers should still be cautious of observing protocol before and after filming. Also, Cinematographers must have knowledge of the use of certain antiseptics used on camera equipment and how cameras should be shared among the crew without getting infected with the virus. For instance, if camera equipment would be shared among Cinematographers, necessary precautions must be adhered to avoid contracting the virus. Presently, the future cannot be predicted since the vaccines available are on trial and also appear irredeemable to date. A year ago, another strain of COVID-19 variant known as Omicron was discovered in South Africa, which rapidly spread across the globe. Later on, it was classified by World Health Organization (WHO) as the fifth variant on November 29, 2021. It was discovered that the variant had a horde of more than thirty mutations which was highly transmissible and has the ability to resist vaccines. Therefore, it is quite evident that

COVID-19 is not going any time soon and if care is not taken it may result in lockdowns, closure of film locations and film shoots delayed again. This may see the Ghana film industry running at a loss in terms of revenue and income generation. On the aspects of negative effects on the Cinematography profession in Ghana, Cinematographers must increase the use of individual promotional platforms like social media, learn current skills, professional branding and networking. Creative industry players must embrace the negative effects as a blessing and infuse technological potential in the arts to entertain their audience.

On March 27, 2022, as part of the President's 28th address to the nation in relation to COVID-19 preventive measures, certain revisions were made. For instance, the wearing of masks in public places was no more compulsory, outdoor functions, funerals, entertainment spots, sports and political events could resume to full capacity provided that all persons attending such programmes are vaccinated. Above all, he encouraged the Ghanaian citizens to still provide places for washing of hands and sanitizing of hands at avenues and events where programmes are held in full capacity. Although the wearing of masks in public places is not mandatory, filmmakers must endeavour to still adhere to restrictions and prevent the spread of the virus. Policy makers should ensure that aside from the strict measures observed by the masses observing protocols, a good health system must be in place to monitor early detection and treatment to keep people alive.

This current study indicates potential for further future research on filmmaking and pandemics. Film scholars, film buffs and professionals may consider conducting research on how other film crews are also handling situations with COVID-19 and filmmaking in Ghana. Similarly, this can further be enhanced by exploring the government's initiative taken to enable filmmakers and the Ghana film industry to combat and mitigate the spread of the virus in the new normal.

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