



European Children's  
Film Association  
Association Européenne du Cinéma  
pour l'Enfance et la Jeunesse

## YOUNGSTERS DOCUMENTARIES – DIRECTOR'S OBLIGATIONS

### A Film'on Roundtable Exchange

During a roundtable at the Brussels Film'on Festival, four directors discussed their vision on youth documentaries. How do they deal with their young protagonists? What responsibilities should they take? Around the table were Sigrid Klausmann (NOT WITHOUT US, an ambitious documentary project), Frederike Migom (straight from the editing room, where she's finishing her film SI-G), Edward Cook (in SKATEKEET a young girl lives an unusual passion) and David Ruf (LAND OF LIGHT, a fiction film with a strong documentary feel).



### Persons & Projects

- Sigrid Klausmann: her documentary NOT WITHOUT US shows the effort children make every day to get an education. But the core of the film are the thoughts that children share about their dreams, their future, the society they live in etc. The film follows 16 children from very different places on earth and emphasises how similar their longings are.
  - David Ruf: LAND OF LIGHT was made with (and about) young Syrian refugees, expressing their opinion about the war and the future that awaits them. The film breaks quite abruptly with the general expectations of 'what is cinema' and 'how to tell a story'.
  - Edward Cook: "SKATEKEET shows you can be different and do things that not many other kids do. As Keet does her own thing, you can do yours. That seems to be a reason why many children, especially girls, appreciate the film."
  - Frederike Migom (who has several projects about/with young people in the pipeline, including the pre-production of her first feature) all her projects so far have focussed on young people in Brussels, growing up in an urban environment. SI-G follows the rise of a young girl from Molenbeek, writing rap song without much ambition. Until she meets an artist who wants to work with her on a song and even a music video. It's not about getting famous, but about finding the confidence to do what you want to do.
- Apparently 'giving a voice' (offering a platform) is an ambition that all four directors have in common.



*Skate-keet*

### **Relationship director – protagonist**

Cook: Officially the bond I had with Keet ended after the filming. But I meet her regularly – we live in the same city and I like to stay in touch. Once I made a documentary about a hotdog stand in Iceland. Every time I went to Iceland ever since, I always dropped by to see how the owner was doing.

Klausmann: It's an obvious thing to happen: working in poor countries, of course you want to help these people. But paying protagonists isn't something I would do in a formalised way. For NOT WITHOUT US, every participating child received a present (like a new schoolbag, a school uniform) and in some cases a certain financial support was paid to the family. The film has the same effect on its audience, there are always people who immediately want to start up an aid initiative. Whenever it's possible it is nice to stay in touch with your protagonist for a while, but offering these people substantial support for us is impossible. What I do is: telling their story, hoping that maybe other people who see it are in a position to give real support.

Migom: Si-G and I became friends already before the filming started. I gave her an old laptop and iPhone, as hers got broken during the shooting. I found that rather 'on the edge', as I didn't want to interfere with her life.

### **How to convince?**

Migom: Convincing Si-G was easy. Living under rather tough, difficult circumstances, the urge to be 'someone' must be big. The only difficult thing I found was getting her not to look into the camera. Being 'a fly on the wall' was simply impossible for me.

Cook: I noticed the same with Keet. She wasn't hard to convince either, but this generation seems so used to the presence of cameras all the time.

Klausmann: The method of approaching was very different for every child. But one rule is always: create an atmosphere of trust, otherwise they'll never open up. For example, we had a girl with whom one day the interview was going nowhere, she couldn't formulate her thoughts, not even if we used all our tricks (like pretending to switch off the camera). The other day she couldn't stop talking, telling her story over and over again.



Si-G

### **Protection**

Migom: Do I have to protect my protagonist from scenes that might give a negative impression of her? For example when Si-G is fighting with her sister. It's even in the camera angles. For example, when holding the camera really low (the hip hop atmosphere sometimes asked for specific angles) I wanted to tell Si-G directly to 'sit up a bit more straight', but wasn't sure whether to do that. Some things she doesn't mind now, she might regret them later. Is it okay to put a spotlight on a girl, making her almost feel like she's a celebrity? When talking to her teachers and family members, they all said Si-G is just very happy to get this experience.

Cook: I showed Keet the movie before we finalised the editing. She didn't have a problem with it. But when the film was about to be screened for her classmates, that's when she got really nervous.

Ruf: Life doesn't stand still for your protagonists. By the time the film is on the screen, they might have further evolved. Yes, they were into hip hop back then, but maybe they are no longer now. It can be empowering for refugees to participate in a film, but what if they only get portrayed as refugees, and nothing more than that?

A remark from the audience by Iris Verhoeven (JEFF Youth Film Festival): There is also a responsibility with the festivals. We screened a film about a refugee, and we had the boy with us in the cinema. Still we decided for a small scale screening, followed by an intimate, serene dialogue instead of a big Q&A. Of course you want as many people as possible to join in the experience, but the film itself (and the protagonist) benefitted more from this other approach.

### **Memorable screening**

Ruf: In a screening in Turkey, I was frightened by the governors' presence. We never got the permission to make a documentary with refugees, so we 'disguised' it like a live action movie, with refugees as actors. People walked in and out all the time, but the governors stayed till the end. Though we never got to know how they liked the movie.

Klausmann: A woman in the audience got so moved, that she immediately wanted to organise fundraising to help the children, all 16 of them.

Cook: The première was with Keet's skater friends and a big bucket of popcorn. That was the best audience.

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