

## Nancy Keefe Rhodes

SANDY CIOFFI'S *SWEET CRUDE* (2009)

At least three independent documentaries about oil have gained significant attention on the film festival circuit in 2009. Full Frame debuted *Oil Blue*, a short film from Finland about tankers crossing the Baltic Sea. Joe Berlinger's *Crude* focuses on the lawsuit brought by indigenous peoples in Ecuador against Texaco and Chevron for polluting the Amazon River. Finally, there is Seattle-based Sandy Cioffi's fine film, *Sweet Crude*, about the effects of oil-drilling in the Niger Delta.



*Sweet Crude* screened in late April at the 6th Syracuse International Film Festival (SYRFILM), several weeks after premiering at the prestigious Full Frame in Durham, NC, and it wound up on the International Documentary Association's coveted roster of selected films for IDA's late summer DocuWeeks—week-long theatrical runs in both Los Angeles and New York City that are designed to meet minimal requirements for Oscar nomination. The film is notable in several ways—for Cioffi's explicit attempts to make sense of her evolving role as filmmaker, her decisions about what comprises effective "evidence" in a documentary, her critique of main-stream media's coverage, and her insight into the ways a film's subject can shift in the course of its being made.

"Sweet crude" is a 19th century term for the high quality crude oil most prized for making gasoline. Because of its low sulfur content—less than 0.5 percent—such oil is sweet to the taste and smell. Just like the drug dealers you see in the movies who try a pinch of cocaine or heroin on the tips of their tongues, those first prospectors checked out their claims by having just a little taste. Somehow conjuring that quaint image makes the notion of "oil addiction" real in a way that abstract stratospheric numbers measuring billions in profits—and damages—has so far failed to do.

*Sweet Crude* is set in the Niger Delta township of Oporoza. In the first few minutes, after a 2008 National Public Radio *Morning Edition* clip reports

that rebels have just blown up three oil pipelines—a turning point, we'll see, for at least some young activists; Cioffi informs us in voice-over that this was not the film she intended to make and takes us back to 2005 and the first of four trips she would make to the Niger Delta. She was originally hired to document the construction of a library there by Seattle-based Global Citizens Journey, a project aimed at bringing together the Ishakiri and Ijaw tribes.

Cioffi learned about oil drilling during that first trip, discovering a history of non-violent activism persisting mostly out of sight to Western media since the Nigerian military regime executed environmental activist Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight others in 1995.\* During the Oporoza library's opening ceremonies, a student group staged a surprise protest that objected to the oil companies' behavior toward the environment and their efforts to remove the local population, and demanded a greater share of oil revenues.

Cioffi came to meet a group of women activists who had taken over oil platforms in 2002 as well as a group that has emerged since (many are these women's sons and brothers), the Movement for the Emancipation for Niger Delta (MEND), and decided to return to make an entirely new film. While the resulting *Sweet Crude* focuses on four individuals—Fanty, a Delta woman organizer, Timi and Kestian, two youth leaders, and Joel Bisina, a peace mediator and director of Niger Delta NGO—Cioffi also sought out other experts, journalists, local leaders, environmental activists, and historians plus some oil company representatives too. The complex play among the ways that international media, the Nigerian government, the U.S. State Department and the oil companies have cast all these actors, and how they themselves have splintered and changed their methods over this period of years, forms the body of Cioffi's narrative. Given this complexity, it's hardly surprising that Cioffi would be critical of what she calls “scratch and sniff” journalism of the drive-by variety.

Given the pace of developing events, it's not so surprising there have been successive versions of *Sweet Crude*. In the fall of 2007 Cioffi had completed three trips to the Delta and was ready to try out a rough cut of her movie on some real audiences. Her ties to the Upstate region—she had studied film

\*The same week that *Sweet Crude* screened at Syracuse's 2009 film festival, a landmark court case opened in New York City against Shell Oil, charging complicity in the execution of Saro-Wiwa and eight other environmental activists which resulted in a settlement with survivors.

at Colgate University in the 80s (with Berlinger, as it turns out) and lived in the area for another decade, forming lasting ties with the activist community here—prompted her to include Syracuse for a one-night screening at the Eastwood Palace during a short swing through the Northeast.

A professor of film at Seattle Central Community College, she had just spent three or four years—when not in the Niger Delta—watching, critiquing, and sometimes funding “tons” of documentaries. That early version of *Sweet Crude* employed what she said was really a cinematic experiment. Throughout what was an almost contemplative film that takes the time to notice and record the details of people’s daily lives, Cioffi had embedded periodic thickets of historical timelines and statistics that annoyingly cascaded off the screen too fast for a reporter to read, much less write down. Was there a statement there? I had asked her then, wondering if she were commenting on activist journalism’s old reliance on making cases with numbers out of a stubborn belief that audiences simply need to be well-informed enough to take action.

“Yes, because I’m just not so sure what number would ever be enough,” she told me. “What number could I give you that would mean something changes? The numbers may make it worse. I don’t think anything but individual humanity ultimately moves us. The IMF and the World Bank and the UN have known these numbers for years and children are still dying in the Niger Delta.”

Since then, Cioffi has dispensed with the distracting cascades of numbers, though *Sweet Crude* retains enough of them to provide an overview of Nigeria’s situation. But Cioffi continues to speak astutely during her post-movie Q&As about how we interact with media and information and what documentary film might really be for.

Her concern with the bankruptcy of simply illustrating quantitative arguments onscreen places her in a group of thoughtful young documentarians who have begun telling stories that expose injustice in other ways. Their means are the individual portrait built unhurriedly, and their methods frankly, unapologetically aesthetic.

Washington, D.C.-based Sean and Andrea Nix Fine’s 2007 documentary *War/Dance*, for example, follows three youngsters in a northern Uganda refugee camp who take part in a national music festival despite the civil war. *War/Dance* takes full advantage of northern Uganda’s extraordinary landscape and implicitly explores alternative states accessible to traumatized

children through rhythm and music; it's also taken criticism for being "too beautiful." The well-regarded Iraq War films of colleagues Andrew Berends and James Longley (*The Blood of My Brother* in 2006 and *Iraq in Fragments* in 2007, respectively) are first attempts at feature films by still photographers whose framing and composition give them away.

Cioffi began as a still photographer too—she's acquainted with Longley, a Seattle native—and confesses to a lingering preference for the "frozen moment." In *Sweet Crude*, this emerges in the nearly omnipresent image of the Chevron refinery's Escravos River Terminal's burning gas flare, sometimes in close up, sometimes hovering on the horizon, always brazenly wasteful and polluting—creating toxic acid rain that eats holes in the corrugated zinc roofs of nearby Oporoza township. Yet despite this inclination toward the still image, Cioffi is adept at capturing the essence of a story that is far from static: how her own role as objective observer morphs into advocate and go-between (on her fourth trip, she and some of her crew were arrested, held in detention and their film confiscated); how the Oporoza activists grapple with the seeming ineffectiveness of their non-violence and eventually splinter; how Western mainstream media—victim of its own lightning speed—misses the nuances that might distinguish local activism from the latest global terrorists (you will not see ABC's Brian Ross or CNN's Anderson Cooper with quite the same trusting eye after this film's "Jomo Gbomo" episode); or how the film's very subject changes, making earlier versions of the film obsolete. On May 15th, two weeks after *Sweet Crude's* screening at SYRFILM, for example, Oporoza was among the group of villages attacked and razed by the Nigerian military. The version shown subsequently contains a new ending and epilogue to encompass those events.

In 1998, Cioffi was in the North of Ireland filming the sectarian marches and the aftermath of the Good Friday peace accords, an experience whose enduring insights have informed *Sweet Crude*. This is her reference point, for example, when she discerns the young activists of MEND may be more like the IRA—which also splintered over the use of violence—than they are like Al-Qaeda, a perhaps too-ready handle for every situation of local resistance. She says she learned in Belfast that "no matter how committed you are to telling all sides, your presence alone is advocacy. And the camera changes what happens."

Among a slew of festivals last summer, Cioffi also took *Sweet Crude* to the Galway Film Fleadh on Ireland's west coast, just a stone's throw from the North, and it might have seemed like she'd come full circle. *Sweet Crude* did well at Galway—first runner-up—and the festival hosted a panel with Cioffi and townspeople from Rosspport, County Mayo, where Shell Oil's pipelines were raising more havoc with local fishing. ☰

*Sweet Crude* Official Festival Selections and Awards in 2009:

Full Frame Documentary Film Festival—World premiere  
Syracuse International Film Festival  
Seattle International Film Festival—Lena Sharpe Award for  
Persistence of Vision, 1st Runner-up Best Documentary  
Galway Film Fleadh—1st Runner-up Best Documentary  
Vancouver International Film Festival  
United Nations Association Film Festival  
Rhode Island International Film Festival—Second Prize  
Best Feature Documentary  
DMZ Korean International Film Festival—Special Jury Prize  
Strasbourg International Film Festival—Best Documentary  
IDA DocuWeeks LA and NYC  
Artivist Film Festival  
Corona Cork Film Festival  
Festival Millennium Brussels  
Newburyport Documentary Film Festival—Best Feature  
Bahamas International Film Festival  
Rocky Mountain Women's Film Festival  
Red Rock Film Festival  
DocuWest Film Festival  
Tallgrass Film Festival—Audience Choice Feature Film  
Northwest Film and Video Festival  
Ellensburg Film Festival—Best Documentary  
Tacoma Film Festival  
October 2009  
CounterCorp Anti-Corporate Film Festival  
Maine African Film Festival  
Women Film Critics Circle (U.S.)—cited for Best Female Images  
in a Movie in 2009  
Bahamas International Film Festival—Best Documentary