

# Educational Sheet - Africa2020

Sauve qui peut le court métrage - Centre Yennenga



# TSUTSUE

2022 / France, Ghana

## Amartei Armar

Special Mention at the Clermont-Fd Film Festival 2023

Official Selection at Cannes 2022

**Author: Camille Varenne et Oumou Diégane Niang**  
**Design & publishing: SQPLCM - Centre Yennenga**



INSTITUT  
FRANÇAIS

# THE FILM

## Crew

Director: Armatei Armar

Script: Armatei Armar

Editing: Nobuo Coste, Nicolas Milteau

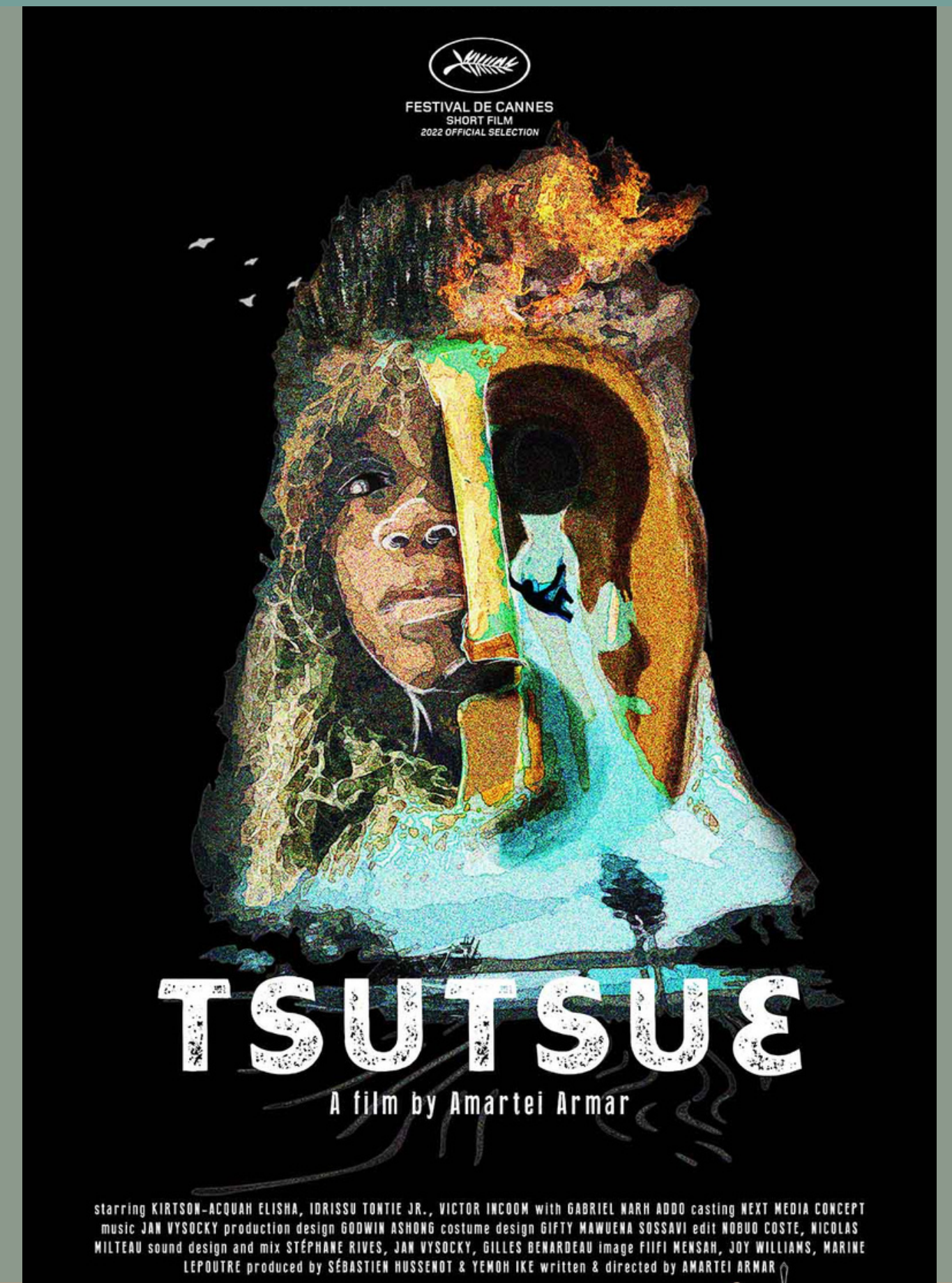
DOP: Fiifi Mensah, Joy Williams

Music: Jan Vysocky

## Cast

Irtson-Acquah Elisha (Okai), Idrissu Tontie Jr. (Sowah), Victor Incoom (Adjei), Gabriel Narh Addo (Laryea)

*The sons of a fisherman, Sowah and Okai, struggle to cope with loss of their eldest brother who drowned during a fishing expedition. Haunted by his demise, Okai believes their brother is still out there.*



# THE DIRECTOR

Born to a Ghanaian father and an American mother, Amartei Armar spent most of his life travelling between the two countries and currently lives in Accra. He works on issues around identity, immigration and belonging. After studying film in Canada, he directed a number of shorts, namely in Ghana.

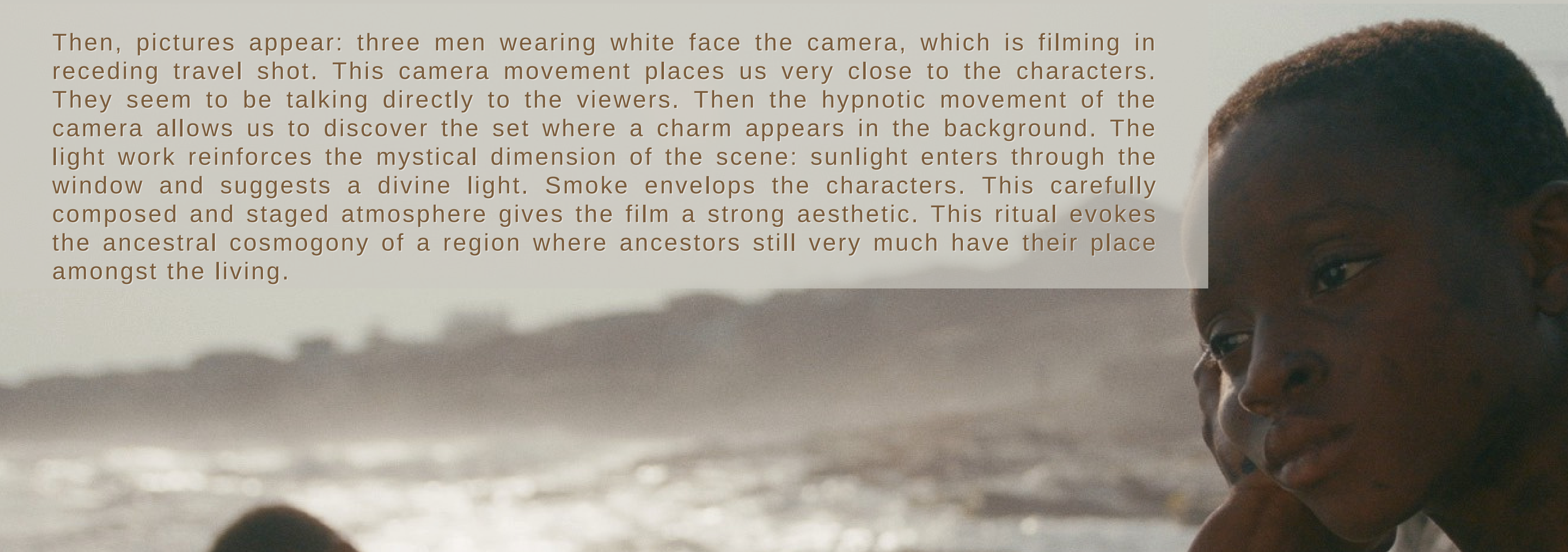
Tsutsué was selected as part of the official competition at Cannes 2022, at the Dakar Short Film Festival that same year and as part of the International Competition at Clermont-Fd 2023, where he received the Jury's Special Mention. Amartei Armar is currently developing his first feature film.



# OPENING SCENE: THE SACRED

The film begins with the psalmody of a registrar calling upon the ancestors to restore the natural order of things that Man had destroyed "because the artificial has supplanted the natural". "The land of God can feed us all, that's a truth we don't understand because we've destroyed everything" - these are voices heard over a black background. This very impressive device allows us to delve into the film through sound rather than through image. It gives great importance to these voices that chant a prayer: "The world has been destroyed, we've lost everything, we pray and we ask for the blessings of our ancestors, forgive us and restore the power of nature."

Then, pictures appear: three men wearing white face the camera, which is filming in receding travel shot. This camera movement places us very close to the characters. They seem to be talking directly to the viewers. Then the hypnotic movement of the camera allows us to discover the set where a charm appears in the background. The light work reinforces the mystical dimension of the scene: sunlight enters through the window and suggests a divine light. Smoke envelops the characters. This carefully composed and staged atmosphere gives the film a strong aesthetic. This ritual evokes the ancestral cosmogony of a region where ancestors still very much have their place amongst the living.



# OPENING SCENE: THE SACRED

In general, the opening scene of a film aims to introduce the main characters and to signal the general tone and set the narrative framework. However, in *Tsutsue*, Amartei Armar chooses to not show the main characters in the opening scene, which seems to be unfolding in a different space-time.

*Tsutsue* in Ga, one of the languages spoken in Ghana, means "In the ancient times". This is a key to understanding and analysing this opening scene, which already sets a mystical tone. This is a prologue, an introduction to the conflict between tradition and modernity, nature and artifice. In the context of a Ghanaian society that is in transition, with a growing urban population and rapid economic growth, the wise men of the villages still reach out to the ancestors. They call upon them to protect nature from the artificial world, which destroys their lives. They seem to be sending out an alert about the negative aspects of modernity that are destroying the ecosystem.

This scene allows us to situate one of the key issues of the film: environmentalism. Amartei Armar seems to want to affirm the importance of traditions as points of reference in the lives of communities but also as strategies of resistance in the face of the destruction of their natural environment.



# ENVIRONMENTALISM

Following this opening sequence, the film takes us right into a huge open dump. The very composed framing doesn't show us the limits of this sea of detritus, which seems to blend in with the ocean. This is the playing field of two brothers, Okai and Sowah. They have created soldier costumes and are playing at war. The war is punctuated by the sounds of engines discharging all sorts of rubbish.



Ghana is home to one of the largest open air waste dumps in the world. The country receives entire containers full of e-waste and detritus exported by other countries, namely the US. It is a country in Africa, the least polluting continent, that is picking up the waste of the most polluting country in the world. The dump where Okai and Sowah are playing is close to the ocean, and the waste pollutes the water, which becomes unlivable for marine fauna.

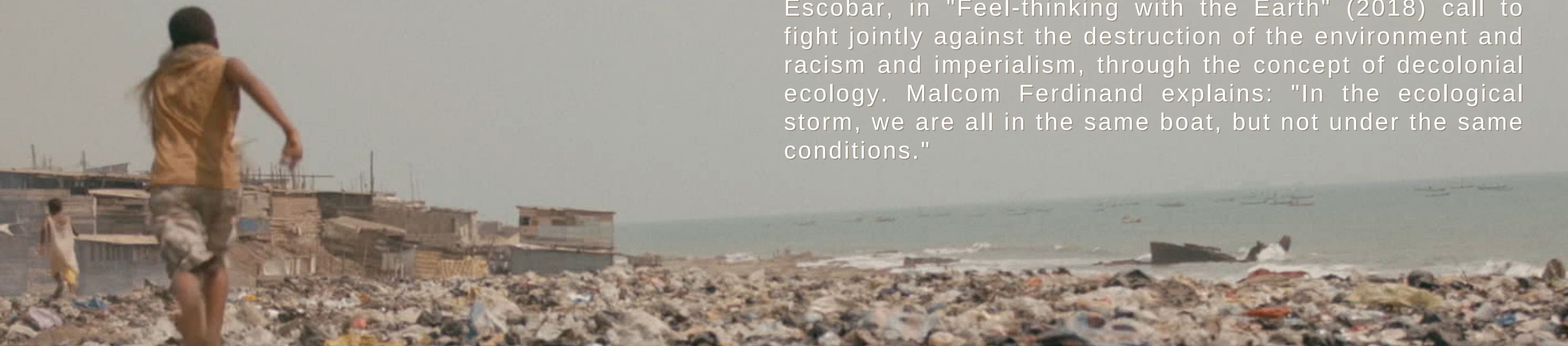
The fishermen are forced to take the risk of travelling far into the ocean to find fish. Navigation is thus dangerous and many men have lost their lives at sea every year. This is what seems to have happened to Adjei, Okai and Sowah's older brother.

# ENVIRONMENTALISM

Okai abruptly stops playing when he sees the body of Adjei, his older brother, floating on the waves. He runs to warn his father. He finds him on a canoe repairing the nets. He tries to warn the adults but nobody believes him. Faced with their ignorance, he gets angry and blames them for his brother's death. The father is touched by his son's words, which point out his own powerlessness in the face of death. He reprimands him violently by slapping him, leaving his own anger towards this tragedy to erupt.

Through his subtle direction and pared down dialogue, Armatei Armar offers viewers a different reading of the death of Adjei: the destruction of the environment and endogenous lifestyles. Through the prism of fiction, he triggers our emotions and empathy to highlight the dramatic consequences of the ecological crisis on human lives.

The powerlessness and indifference of the adults towards Okai's accusations can call to mind those of political leaders who let these disasters happen. Martinican engineer Malcom Ferdinand in his book "Decolonial Ecology" (2019) and Colombian anthropologist Artura Escobar, in "Feel-thinking with the Earth" (2018) call to fight jointly against the destruction of the environment and racism and imperialism, through the concept of decolonial ecology. Malcom Ferdinand explains: "In the ecological storm, we are all in the same boat, but not under the same conditions."



# ENVIRONMENTALISM

Today, we are aware that the majority of resources extracted from African soil does not benefit its populations. And it is very much African populations who suffer the most from the environmental crisis resulting from global warming and water pollution that is putting their lives at risk. Militants like Malcom Ferdinand and Arturo Escobar suggest platforming the knowledge and stories of the people that are feeling the impact of the environmental crisis to rebuild our relationship with the natural world and resist its destruction.

This is also what Amartei Armar proposes by giving a voice to this three wise men who pray to their ancestors to protect the Earth. The environmental crisis is a subject that is currently increasingly centered in cinema. It is at the heart of the film "Disco Boy" directed by Giacomo Abbruzzese, Silver Bear at Berlin 2023. The film takes place in the Niger delat polluted by oil extraction. It tells the story of Jomo who rises up against the oil companies that are devastating his village. Like in Tsutsue, the polluted environment becomes one of the main settings of the film and we see the characters evolve in a forest that is destroyed by oil wells and water from the oil-filled river. Jomo is killed by a soldier from the French foreign legion but his soul will haunt his killer like a ghost.





# IMPOSSIBLE GRIEF



Tsutsue is also about the living that are haunted by the dead. When Okai is sitting on the beach, a flashback propels us into his memories. He remembers his brother teaching him to swim. The slightly orange tone, the tight editing and soft music suggest that we are in another timeline. We can sense Okai's grief and the loss felt by Adjei's absence. His disappearance prevents him from properly grieving and he refuses to accept his brother's death. At night, he gets up to look for him and crosses the burning dump. He screams at the sea: "I'm coming, I'm coming to get you" and dives into the water. As he sinks, he sees his brother. Is this real or is he hallucinating?

The director maintains the blurred lines between reality and imagination for the young boy. His brother Sowah comes to save him and pulls him onto the shore. As they go home Okai again sees the body of his brother floating on the cresting waves. This time, Sowah sees him too. The camera films the scene from above, showing the two brothers collecting Adjei's body. Whilst Sowah leaves to seek help, Okai sits next to the body. The very soft atmosphere created by the sun rising over the ocean contrasts with the sadness of the scene, which evokes the peace that Okai finds as he can begin to grieve.

# IMPOSSIBLE GRIEF

The figure of the dead at sea, which haunts the living is also featured in Mati Diop's *Atlantics* (2019). Young workers from a Dakar suburb are toiling away on a building site of a futuristic tower block named "Atlantique". But their rich boss isn't paying their salaries. They decide to leave the country and embark on a journey across the Atlantic ocean, leaving behind them their families. Following their departure, strange events start taking place and the property developer starts receiving nocturnal visits from these ghosts, returned to claim their earnings.

The women seem to be possessed by the spirits of the young drowned men, calling for justice and reparations. In this film, these ghosts allow the director to broach, through the prism of fiction, issues around belief, surrealism, the injustice of death and impossible grief. Like *Adjei*, the death of these young men is provoked by the injustice of a capitalist system, which oppresses many populations to benefit a minority.



# THE CHILDREN'S GAZE



Amartei Amar's masterful direction fuses Okai's imagination with reality, leaving the viewer's imagination to unfold. The sea's soundscape has a strong presence. When Okai crosses the burning dump at night, with his petrol lamp lighting the way, the play with lights imbues the scene with a fantastical atmosphere. The natural elements, the water, the fire, the wind, become allegorical. Tsutsue is a coming of age story that symbolises the transition into adulthood.

Okai leaves the world of childhood and games behind to face rejection, ignorance and having to cope with the death of a loved one. But instead of giving up, he fights to find life, brotherhood with a level of courage and tenacity that inspires us and gives us hope. The vitality of children that refuse to accept the injustice of the adult world is also at the heart of of director Idrissa Ouedraogo in his film *Yaaba* (1989). Bila and Nopoko become friends with Sana, an old woman accused of witchcraft and rejected by her village. Amartei Armar, like Idrissa Ouedraogo offers us a glimpse into the world through the eyes of children. The camera stays close to the characters and Okai becomes our guide through this dump to brave death and stand up to injustice.

# TO FIND OUT MORE



<https://clermont-filmfest.org/tsutsue/> (French)



<https://clermont-filmfest.org/en/tsutsue/> (Englais)



<http://www.formatcourt.com/2022/12/AMARTEI-ARMAR-YEMOH-IKE-ET-SEBASTIEN-HUSSENOT-AUTOUR-DE-TSUTSUE/> (French)



<https://acheampongmagazine.com/CANNES2022-TSUTSUE-WORLD-PREMIERES-ENTIRELY-GHANAIAN-PRODUCTION-AND-CREW-BY-AMARTEI-ARMAR-YEMOH-IKE/> (English)