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## Another Walt Disney Experiment

by K. PICKERING—*Gold Coast*

WHEN Mr. Norman Spurr described, in *Colonial Cinema* for June 1951, the experiment carried out in Uganda with the Walt Disney Mackie Health Film *Hookworm*, his main reservation about his conclusions was that the success which greeted the film's teaching might partly be attributable to the Medical Department's propaganda preceding it. He wrote: "One would like to know what kind of reaction the audience would give to the film if it had never heard of the disease, although suffering from it". In August 1953, in the Gold Coast, the reaction of

the film on precisely this type of audience was experimented with by two Community Development Officers of the Department of Social Welfare and Community Development, Mr. Shirer and Mr. Pickering, who summarised their conclusions in a paper called "The Use of Disney Health Films in Mass Education in the Gold Coast". Neither officer was aware at that time of Mr. Spurr's experiment, a fact which, at first sight unfortunate, is an advantage in that the validity of common conclusions reached separately in widely differing territories in Africa is the more enhanced by their mutual independence.

In both Uganda and the Gold Coast, the experiments were carried out to resolve or confirm the misgivings felt about the films by experienced African and European officers. While their general excellence was conceded, it was felt that the highly developed cartoon technique with its graphic imagery and screen "magic" might obscure, if not destroy, the real lesson of the film for unsophisticated illiterate audiences. Again, as Mr. Spurr records, the film was not made against an African background which, in teaching films and film strips, experience has shown to be a prerequisite of effectiveness. Also, in the Gold Coast, some thought the presentation of what, in such an environment, might be described as revolutionary ideas about disease, was too forcible and dramatic for acceptance.

In scope, depth and method the experiments differed considerably. In Uganda results were based on the impressions of observers aided by the use of a disc recorder to collect spontaneous observations from the audience. The Gold Coast experiment relied on individual interrogation of over 200 people and after testing initial reaction, as in Uganda, went on to examine different methods of film usage for teaching purposes.

Before comparing results, it must be noted that, at the outset, in both Uganda and the Gold Coast the original sound track supplied with *Hookworm* was abandoned and a vernacular commentary substituted. Two examples referred to in each report will serve to illustrate the type of change necessary. "Charlie" is described in the sound track as being "robbed" of his health by hookworms. Mr. Spurr's revised commentary, as quoted, substitutes "What Hurt You Charlie?" for "Who Robbed You Charlie?" The Gold Coast report, dealing with this point describes the confusion caused by the trial use of a literal translation of the sound track when some people affirmed afterwards that they actually saw "thieves running away" in the film. Too much was being demanded of an audience whose understanding of theft was the physical abstraction of visible properties. Secondly Mr. Spurr records the confusion caused by the big "close-up" of the hookworm which, without clarification from the commentator, Gold Coast audiences imagined as various types of large animal. The translation of the English sound track is clearly inadequate. A commentary adapted for such audiences must serve three main purposes. It must override any

confusion of Western conventional behaviour and familiarise the background of the action by substituting local names and customs. Thirdly, it must, in the minimum of words, clarify the action of the film. The first two are matters of experience but the third probably necessitates a trial experiment since, as both reports show, it is not easy to forecast accurately where difficulties will arise.

Using the adapted commentary, both the experiments revealed that original misgivings had been surprisingly exaggerated. On the first, that of the effect of "white man's magic", Mr. Spurr writes, "It would seem that as long as the film followed a reasonably normal narrative presentation, or explained itself when there was any departure from the normal, e.g. when 'Charlie's' skin is removed and his intestines revealed, then the audience accepted the technique. However, when the film introduced a traditional cartoon comedy approach, e.g. in the building of the latrine, this was put down to European magic". An excerpt from the Gold Coast report closely parallels this. "Many people, while they knew that 'Charlie's' building of the latrine was pure 'magic', believed that hookworms do bite the stomach walls as they are shown." Both audiences proved to have understood why the latrine was necessary. These and other examples amply convinced the authors of the experiments and the observers that the attributing of the humorous sequences to European magic does not impair either understanding or belief in the teaching.

Again, Mr. Spurr states on reflection after the experiment that he is "not at all sure that there would have been a tremendous gain in perception had the character and background been African". This opinion is shared by the Gold Coast authors. The fact is that neither the characters nor the background in the film have nationality. They are cartoon characters in a world of "make-believe" but they and their story are recognisably human and credible. The devotion to simplicity and avoidance of visible characteristics attributable to any one people make it relatively easy, with the vernacular commentary, for the audience concerned to identify themselves with the story of the film.

These considerations apart, both reports strongly recommend the cartoon technique with its unlimited flexibility as a remarkably effective teaching aid. Its two main advantages over the straightforward film, as demonstrated by Disney, are in maintaining a consecutive narrative and in leaving nothing to the imagination. When "Charlie" takes his medicine the audience is actually given a visual picture of hookworms relaxing their hold on the wall of his stomach and dying. Similarly, as Mr. Spurr records, "due to the brilliant choice of the visual image and associated action, the movement of the throat as the hookworm sucked at the wall of the intestine, there is no doubt that the audience knew what was happening". Though such pictures may be fanciful

and exaggerated they carry conviction and both experiments show that unsophisticated African audiences are willing to accept their teaching.

Further experiments in the Gold Coast showed that all the Disney Health Films possess the advantages and limitations ascribed to *Hookworm* in varying measure. *The Way Disease Travels*, for example, tells a straightforward story with an excellent recapitulation of the lesson and with a minimum of "magic", whereas *The Winged Scourge* confuses its audience with the introduction of the seven dwarfs in a lively battle against fearsome looking mosquitoes. All, however, with careful handling, have the two qualities attributed by Mr. Spurr to *Hookworm* of unquestionably making a deep impression and of summarising the salient points in a vivid and unforgettable manner.

It is, however, precisely because the Disney Health Films make so powerful an impact that so much care must be devoted to their use. They are too important to be used indifferently. Inquiries in the Gold Coast of audiences who had seen, discussed, and thoroughly understood *Hookworm* a few weeks earlier revealed that in most cases the visual images remained, but out of sequence, and the lesson had been lost. More dangerous, the effort to reconstruct the action from the images produced grossly distorted ideas. Again, the effort to understand more than one film simultaneously produced a confusion of causes, symptoms, disease and methods of infection which increased with the passage of time. Further, and more grave, in a few cases, intense as had been the initial reaction, it was short-lived and belief had given way to scepticism.

It seems that the true character and function of Disney Health Films must be appreciated if its value is to be utilised. This can only be done in relation to the background and environment of the audience concerned. Experience shows it is an illusion to suppose that, because a society is illiterate and superstitious, firmly rooted ideas about disease do not exist. They are in fact the greatest obstacle to the dissemination of new ones. The unique role of the Disney Cartoon film is less in teaching the new than in breaking down the traditional belief where it is too erroneous to be used as a starting point for teaching the truth. It achieves this by shock tactics, by presenting a graphic and credible picture to the mind so realistically that temporarily the mind's resistance to it is overcome. It is at this stage that the mind is truly receptive to the follow-up teaching and the value of the film strip, flannelgraph and discussion group, with all the opportunities they afford—unlike the films—of "two-way traffic" is enhanced accordingly. It is in this preparation of the mind for learning new things that the Disney films offer a contribution of significance in the battle against disease in Africa. In isolation their dangers are manifest. Used as complementary to other forms of teaching, their potentialities are profound.