

FILMS FOR AFRICANS – 1910. or 1950?

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FILMS for Africans ! What Africans ? The Africans of towns and cities, or their more primitive brethren ? The Africans with whom we shall be mostly concerned this evening are the illiterate peasants amongst whom I have worked in East and West Africa

However, let it be made quite clear that because these people can neither read nor write they are by no means uneducated. We are dealing with people who are emotionally adult but technically immature. The peasants with whom I have personally come in contact are but a fraction of the populations of Nigeria and Uganda, and an infinitesimal part of the population of the African continent, but they have this in common, their experience of film is nearer that of 1910 than 1950, for they see films rarely, and there are no sound films.

Mental Level of Audiences

In the educational world there are well-recognised age groups within which it is possible to postulate an "average" child and be sure that teaching aimed at this "average" will benefit most of the individuals within the group. In the same way, cattle owning nomads such as the Masai of Kenya, the Karamajong of Uganda, the Fulani of Nigeria, have a common set of characteristics and problems which enable us to talk about them as if they were a single generic group. This "average" results from a common way of life.

One of the tasks facing those making films for the audiences we have in mind is the discovery of a technique which will influence an "average" illiterate, for once discovered—presuming it is possible—this technique will be reasonably valid for similar audiences wherever they are found. The almost universal appeal of Chaplins and Westerns in the days of the silent film show the problem was once solved in the world of entertainment.

The kind of audience we have in mind is the illiterate peasant ; what kind of film do we produce for him ? My own work with the Nigerian Government and with the Colonial Film Unit in Uganda was to make films for instruction, education, and information. In both cases the work was financed from public funds and suffered the advantages and disadvantages of such an arrangement. There are certain functions of Government which, because they earn revenue as a direct result of the services provided, can be judged as a paying proposition from a commercial standpoint ; a railway system can be so judged. But how are we to judge an educational film service ? The revenue is nil, and the cost is met from the public purse. In the commercial world a picture must be successful at the box office, and this is true irrespective of any artistic merit it may possess. This standard cannot apply, at present anyway, to films for Africans, because the box office is non-existent.

What standard are we to adopt ? We must reject any standard based upon attendance records ; to claim so many people have seen so many films over a given period of time is an interesting measure of what is done, but no measure at all of its effectiveness.

Methods of Presentation

At the moment, and for some considerable time to come, it would seem that the mobile kinema van will be the instrument by which films are taken to

*Colonial Film Unit

their audiences. In the two Colonies where I have worked, the vans and their staff came under the control of the Public Relations Department. An itinerary of weeks, or months, was arranged, and the van set out on tour. The programmes consisted of films dealing with agriculture, health, social welfare, etc., and invariably finished up with a comedy, generally a Chaplin. A commentary was given over a microphone in the local language so that the films might be followed, but rarely was there present any official of the Department concerned to follow up the impact of the film.

This was not my idea of the use of films for mass education, for I suggest that only with literate or pre-educated audiences is it possible for a film to be teacher on its own. The major criticisms of this particular method of presentation are the lack of the necessary supervision; the programme is too diffuse, too many ideas are presented at the same time. There is no "follow-up," and above all there is no authority behind the film. If the films about which we are thinking are to fulfil the terms of their directive, I submit the ideas concerning them must spawn from the classroom until such time as it has been proved that our audiences are capable of absorbing a less direct approach. It therefore follows that films on agriculture should be presented by the Agricultural Department as part of their extension methods. The expert should always be in attendance to answer questions, stimulate discussion, encourage endeavour; then the film becomes an instrument capable of injecting new ideas into the very blood-stream of the people.

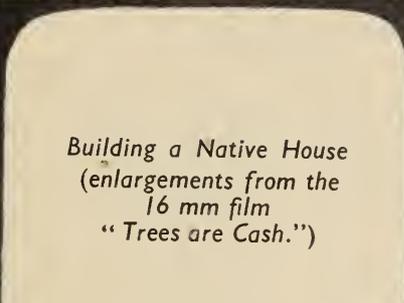
The Colonial Film Unit, which is incongruously enough part of the Central Office of Information, is not only responsible for making films in the Colonies, but advises the Colonial Governments on film matters, and over the years the Producer, Mr. W. Sellers, and Mr. George Pearson, Associate Producer, have played a large part in development. Sellers brought to the problem the practical experience of a pioneer who had not only made films, but had used the films he made in health propaganda for Africans¹. I was fortunate in following in his footsteps in Nigeria. George Pearson, pioneer of the British Film Industry, brought to the problem practical experience of teaching, as an ex-headmaster; and of course that wealth of knowledge of film-making gained when films had to tell their story by pictures or perish. A further influence has been at work in the shape of the personnel recruited for the various units of the C.F.U., and as members of the modern film industry they have brought to the problem current practices and attitudes associated with the coming of sound.

Assessment of Results

It is one of the misfortunes of work in this field that, for the most part, the theories governing the making of these films depend upon information gained at first hand over twelve years ago, largely due, in my view, to the unfortunate separation of production and exhibition. If there is one thing required above all else it is accurate data regarding the effect of the films upon the audience. Over-enthusiastic reports by van operators, or biased reports from apathetic officials, are poor foundations for valid information. To claim that audiences liked the films, or counting heads, is little better.

Because of this we tried to devise some system of assessment in Nigeria which would be an improvement on past methods. What we wanted to do was impossible, that is a full-scale test, with control groups, stretching over a period of time; instead we sent out amongst the audiences trained observers whose task it was to note down the free comment they overheard during the showing of the film. On no account were questions to be asked, and the information was to be gathered with the minimum of fuss. In Uganda we used a disc recorder to get similar information, as exhibition and production were separated.

¹ *J. Brit. Kine. Soc.* 4. No 3, July 1941, p. 104.



*Building a Native House
(enlargements from the
16 mm film
"Trees are Cash.")*

We hoped the educated African would prove a useful guide to the reactions of his illiterate fellows, but unfortunately all too often his opinions were coloured by racial sensitiveness, political axe-grinding, the desire to say the right thing, and sheer ignorance. When these inhibitions did not exist, there was no better guide.

Canons of Production

Although the method is open to criticism from a strictly scientific point of view, it was capable of yielding results as accurate as that of litmus paper when separating acid from an alkali. What did we find? In the main an almost complete vindication of the theories already governing the making of such films. Shots needed to be left on the screen for an appreciably longer time than with films for European audiences; there must be a simple aim; we found that bad visual continuity was the cause of more misunderstanding and confusion than close-ups or change of angle.

In addition, we found it quite useless to depend upon the commentary to give any information that was not very closely linked with the picture on the screen; moreover, when the visual completely absorbed the attention the sound-track was ignored. Our audiences were so parochial that a film on so basic a subject as "How to Wash" was severely criticised in Uganda by the Baganda because the Baganda wash their heads first, whereas in the film the Nigerian child is shown washing his head last. Finally, the manner in which the films were used made a great difference.

We should at this stage, I feel, concentrate upon the use of film in mass education as a teaching aid, and this means that films must be used by the Departments of Government for whom the films are made, so that films are never made in a vacuum. They will be concerned with problems already in existence or likely to come into existence. Let us take an example.

In Teso County, Uganda, the problem facing the Forest Department is the recalcitrant attitude of the peasant farmer who is suspicious of all land put aside for growing trees, for he argues such land cannot be used for cultivation or grazing. Nevertheless, this same farmer needs wood for fuel and for poles used in house building. A few, far too few, peasant owned plantations exist, but no tradition of tree planting has taken root. Eventually we decided to concentrate on trees as a source of revenue and a source of poles for building. "Trees are Cash" was made with the Forest Officer of the area as supervisor and it was intended for use by him and his staff. We adopted the narrative-teaching form of film shape, and so told a story of a man whose adventures made him realise the value of home planting, and who is taught in the film the technique of planting cassia seed.

Production Problems

A serious difficulty was one of language. I had to tell the Forest Officer what I wanted, whereupon he translated it into Swahili for the benefit of the

chief, and he translated it into Eteso for the benefit of the actors. Any breakdowns in this rather tenuous link only revealed themselves when shooting commenced. It was more than disconcerting to find upon starting a scene your principal character, instead of coming to the camera, mounting a bicycle and setting off in the opposite direction.

What an audience brings to the film is of no less importance than what the film brings to the audience. This raises a difficulty to which there seems no ready solution other than reliable data on audience reaction. Two audiences sit in judgment upon our films. One audience is composed of Europeans or educated Africans who bring to the films their own experience of film going. Is it to be wondered at that so often they fail to understand why tempo must be slower, why action cannot be short-circuited? The other audience is the illiterate who still says, "There is a chicken" and "Why don't they leave it on longer?" Time will close this gap, and in those places where films have been used extensively and continuously for a number of years, 1910 may well give way to 1950 with increasing rapidity.

As a result of audience reaction tests to a Disney health film we introduced a moving diagram into a film of cattle breeding, in order to show increases in milk yield. Whether this will be understood remains to be seen.

All these films were made with the aid of a Bolex H.16 camera with the standard set of lenses ordinarily sold with the camera. Other accessories were a geared-head tripod of substantial proportions, reflectors, and exposure meter, and actors found on location. Providing existing lighting conditions were reasonable we accepted them.

Films from other Sources

Is it possible to use films made for other audiences in other countries? It would seem to depend entirely upon what they are about. If the subject matter is within the experience of the audience and the film is simple and direct, the answer seems to be "yes." African locomotive drivers of coal burning engines might well profit from a film such as "Little and Often" concerned with the correct firing of an engine. In Nigeria we tried out films on the internal combustion engine with staff employed by the motor section of the Public Works Department, and the Shell films on aviation with mechanics of West African Airways. Properly used, we were convinced they had value, but of course such audiences are limited in number.

Even a cartoon film may make its point. This was amply borne out in an experiment with Disney's "Hookworm." The Africans to whom this film were shown accepted it as long as it remained reasonably normal in its approach. The final sequences where a spade appears out of the sky, a hole is dug in a single whirl of movement, etc., were quite beyond them and put down to white man's magic. We felt the success of the film, a 100 per cent. turn-out for treatment, was due to previous knowledge of the subject which the film vitalised, and the additional fact that although the film was made for South America, hookworm symptoms, life cycle, and cure are the same wherever the disease is found.

We started with the question, films for Africans, 1910 or 1950? Perhaps this is not the right question to ask; it implies concern with means rather than with ends. Once we have decided what place films have to take, with other visual aids, in the mass education of the African, we shall not be tempted to worship the false gods of technique. Any technique is permissible provided it achieves the desired end within the finances available, but my own inclination is to follow present theories until such time as they prove false or outmoded, and these theories are nearer 1910 than 1950.

The paper was illustrated by the projection of sequences from three films: "No Tax, no Improvement," "Trees are Cash" (both C.F.U.) and "Hookworm" (Walt Disney).