

Colonial



Cinema

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FILMS FOR AFRICAN AUDIENCES

THE object of the Colonial Film Unit, like that of every branch of colonial administration, is to raise the primitive African to a higher standard of culture.

The Unit works through the medium of the cinema, probably the greatest invention since the introduction of printing. Inherently it is ideal; for, apart from broadcasting, the benefits of which are confined to the few with receiving sets, it is the only modern invention through which large numbers of Africans can be effectively influenced. In the Colonies it is certainly the most fruitful, for whereas the printed word can have little effect upon the vast numbers of illiterate Africans, the moving picture appeals instantly to all; the range and power of the cinema is limited mainly by difficulties of organisation and distribution.

Films must be plentiful and equally they must be beneficial; and if the cinema can be controlled in its early stages, there is scarcely any limit to the benefits it can bestow upon Africans. It is far too vital an instrument to leave in the hands of those whose interests are purely commercial. If profit is to be the principle influencing the development of the cinema, it may well become a menace with consequences as dangerous as they are unforeseen. At all costs that end must be avoided.

We have said that the main obstacles to the development of the range and power of the cinema are those of organisation and distribution. Modern equipment must replace the cinema van, which is at best a makeshift. The ideal must be a static cinema in every village, with programmes in frequent circulation, for the aim is the widest possible exhibition of good films. (In this connection an idea which may lead to the realisation of the village cinema appears in this issue of *Colonial Cinema*.)

We may turn now to a discussion on the means best calculated to achieve the maximum benefit from the use of the cinema. Little study of the Africans' reactions to the cinema has been possible up to the present; but sufficient has been done to prove that we require a special technique in film production, conditioned by and adapted to the character and development of this type of audience. The African, though illiterate, is by no means unintelligent; and this must be fully appreciated if the most satisfactory approach is to be discovered.

The simple screen technique which has been evolved is founded upon careful observation undertaken in the earliest stages of film shows. On the basis of this work, certain experiments were carried out, and now reports by responsible officials abroad confirm the belief that our films undoubtedly attain their purpose and justify their production in accordance with the new method. The records of the Unit are being continually enriched by information about the reactions of African audiences; this information, so essential to the successful work of the Unit, will be slowly and surely supplemented by carefully compiled questionnaires to be sent out to a wide circle of observers.

The word "technique" may arouse misgivings, but there is no real reason why it should do so. In any art or craft, technique is simply the mechanics of expression and must be moulded to suit the purpose for which it is required. Thus, if observation assures us that the existing technique of making films fails to arouse any intelligent reactions in the mind of the African illiterate, it becomes obvious that a different technique must be employed to make the necessary appeal.

The salient principles of this specialised production are simple. The first object is to gain the attention of the audience. Though the novelty of the moving picture may command a fleeting attention, it will be maintained only by a technique which is skilfully related to the psychology of the African. Photographic clarity is essential. Tone values must be true, image shapes and patterns needle sharp. Clarity of subject is equally important; there must be one fundamental idea only in each film. Conventional tricks like "panning shots," "dolly shots" and others, used in modern films to short-circuit time and space will certainly create confusion in the minds of an illiterate audience. The "fade" is, in fact, the only technical subterfuge which can be used with safety. The question of camera angles is just as vital. Shots should be made from a viewpoint that is normal: bird's eye or worm's eye views should be rigidly eschewed since, for the African, they simply obliterate understanding of the content of the scene. It is no less necessary that visual continuity from scene to scene should be sustained. Every new shot without a visual link with its predecessor starts another train of thought which may exclude everything that has gone

before. More sophisticated audiences have been educated to a surprising mental agility in connecting up dimly related flashes. But to the illiterate such a technique leads to utter confusion; their minds are not sufficiently versatile to comprehend these swift and sudden changes. For the same reason, each scene should be longer than is usual for educated audiences. More time must be allowed to follow the sequences of visual images, to read them aright and to benefit by their proper understanding.

The ideas which inspire this technique are neither new nor mysterious. Essentially didactic in approach, beginning with the known and passing by gradual stages to the unknown, they may be said to be as old as Socrates.

Besides being a powerful weapon for the gradual elimination of adult illiteracy, the cinema can be a medium for promoting that better social understanding which must be the basis of post-war reconstruction. The scope of the educational film is almost unlimited. It can be used to impart vital knowledge in such subjects as agriculture and hygiene. Its propaganda value is high; the right type of

film should help to promote goodwill between governors and governed and can be the means of combating swiftly and efficiently subversive propaganda by the dissemination of truth.

If the real aim of education is borne in mind during these early days of film production, there will be few reasons to regret the introduction of the cinema to African audiences. This aim has been interpreted by a great exponent of education as follows:—

“To render the individual more efficient in his or her condition of life whatever it may be, and to promote the advancement of the community as a whole through the improvement of health, development of industries, the training of the people to manage their own affairs and the inculcation of true ideals of citizenship and service.”

With the maintenance of this aim and a measure of control in the exhibition of films, there will be none of the unfortunate consequences which have followed the promiscuous presentation of unsuitable films to illiterates in some other parts of the world.

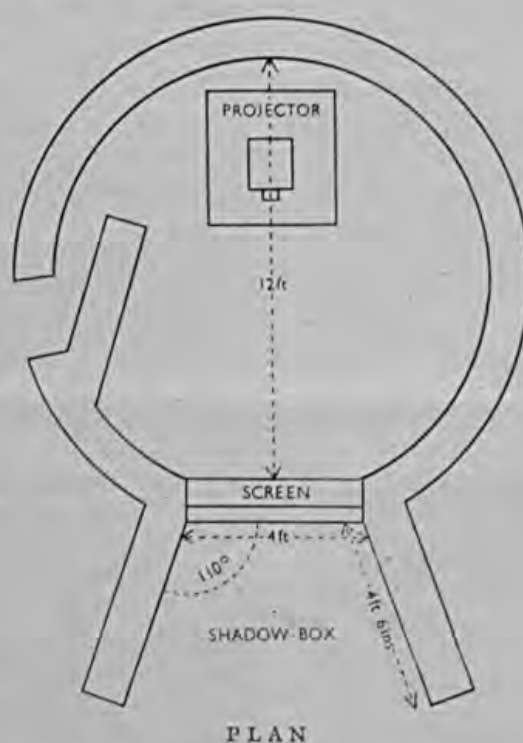
THE VILLAGE CINEMA

FOR the mass of the African population, the exhibition of cinema films is restricted mainly to the demonstrations given by the cinema vans operating during the hours of darkness. These vans carry out their long tours according to a pre-arranged schedule. So vast are the areas to be covered that any one place is fortunate indeed if it receives visits on more than two occasions in any one year.

Many less important places must suffer keen disappointment to see the cinema van pass by during the day to the scene of its next evening performance. In many cases time would permit vans to show films to audiences *en route* during the daytime.

It is not generally realised that, given certain conditions, it is quite practicable to hold satisfactory performances in the open during the day to audiences of about three hundred people. For such a demonstration a small building is necessary in which to house the projection equipment. Films are projected inside this building on to a translucent screen placed inside two walls forming a “shadow box.” Pictures can be seen clearly by the audience standing or sitting outside looking into the shadow box.

Photographs of a model of such a building are shown. To make the construction clearer, a plan is also given. With



a real community effort, it is possible to erect a small building like this in a day or so. Local material can be used and the cost is negligible. Daylight demonstration can be successful only if the interior of the projection hut is as dark as it is possible to make it. If you look at the plan you will notice that the interior wall overlaps the exterior wall, thus excluding most of the light from the entrance. This entrance faces the projector end of the hut so that no light filters that way on to the screen. The walls should be higher than the ordinary hut; about ten feet would be suitable. If the walls are too low, it will not be possible to place the screen sufficiently high to give a satisfactory view to a standing audience. It is important that

the eaves should overlap the walls all round to exclude any light that would otherwise come in at the wall top. The projecting walls of the shadow box should be built out 4 ft. 6 in. at an angle of about 110 degrees from the screen. A good thatch will be built over the projecting walls. Care must be exercised with the construction of the front for the screen. It is as though one wished to build in the wall a high window the size of the screen. The distance from the bottom of the screen to the floor should be about 5 ft. 6 in. As already noted, the screen must be



a translucent one as projection is made from the rear. In an emergency, a stretched sheet will serve admirably as a screen.

In certain parts of East Africa, on account of the roofing material used, rectangular huts are in general use. It will not be beyond the ingenuity of those responsible, to construct a rectangular hut quite as suitable as the round one. The layers of mkuti on the roof must be denser or the hut will not be dark enough for satisfactory projection.

What can be done to serve the less fortunate people who live in villages off the beaten track where it is found impossible to send a heavy cinema van? Many roads which will not carry a heavy van are quite suitable for a kit carrier or light van in which the necessary portable equipment may be carried. Such transport has been used successfully to supplement the work of the cinema van. In cases where any kind of wheeled transport is impossible, the projector, generator, screen and programme of films may be made up into head-loads and carried to the village.

Only in villages where the cinema hut is available is a demonstration possible. It is, in fact, the key to all cinema development in the outlying villages. Every encouragement should be given to the people to erect the cinema hut and to keep it in good repair when it has been built. As a gesture of appreciation, a showing of films should be arranged as soon as opportunity offers after the hut has been completed.

The village cinema hut should be sited near the most central open space where there is likely to be scope for development. This initial effort has great possibilities before it. Starting as a projection hut it will, in time, grow into a larger building where it will be possible for the audience to sit under cover in some degree of comfort for their periodic film shows. Gradually the larger building

will become the village hall and the centre of the adult social and educational activities.

It will be particularly interesting to this Unit to hear of any early development in the use of the village cinema.

Many people with knowledge of conditions in the Colonies have seen the working model here, and the idea has aroused considerable enthusiasm.



NEW STUDIO

The Colonial Film Unit has now got its own studio in London, and "Wartime Family" will be the first film to be made there. Hitherto we have had to rely on casual accommodation. The fact that the Unit has a studio of its own, small though it be, should help production and widen the scope of indoor work.