

## THE MAKING OF FILMS FOR ILLITERATES IN AFRICA

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To elevate the social life by broadening the minds of millions of loyal natives, at present illiterate and isolated from world contact, is the problem of the Colonial Film Unit's mobile cinema long-term campaign.

The high standards of civilisation we ourselves enjoy reach us through education, instruction and human contact from early childhood. Thus we are favoured, caught young in a fully functioning civilised environment; not so with those we would serve.

If the child or the adult is unschooled, has no high cultural environment, no contact with the outer world, then the school must go to them, make known the facts and the cultural standards of the world they have never seen.

It is here that the travelling cinema comes into a greater destiny than mere entertainment.

But the cinema used without an ever advancing wisdom can be as tragically harmful as the reverse can be elevating. The methods governing the making of our films have been reached through long experience at first hand in native reaction to the screen. The methods are not rigid, they expand with every fresh experience of audience reaction, and are tested with sincerity.

In our educational work we hold the Socratic belief that the fundamental thing is the activity of the learner's mind, and that nothing is learnt that does not become part of his own experience.

I will try to give you a picture of our work by telling you—

What the Colonial Film Unit is.

What it has done so far.

The HOW and WHY of its methods.

Its plans and hopes for the future.

The Unit was initiated by Mr. Sellers in 1939 with set purpose. He had experimented with 16 mm. films, made by himself on African soil, and the results encouraged him to give his whole energies to the wise use of the cinema in raising the standards of health, agriculture, industry and education amongst the peoples for whom he cared so much.

I was privileged to join him in 1940, and today the Unit has a staff of thirty-one, ten of whom are now working in East and West Africa.

During the eight years of its existence the Unit has made over 200 films. Of every film made, approximately seventy 16 mm. copies and twelve 35 mm. copies are distributed amongst forty Colonies.

The films are shown to the native audiences by means of travelling cinema vans. A running commentary is spoken to the film at its showing by a native interpreter. These visits of the cinema van are great events, eagerly awaited. Native interest in the moving picture is amazing. For

example, in Nigeria the average attendance at a showing is 2,000; the record is 15,000 at Ijebu in the Southern Provinces.

When one realises that out of a Nigerian population of 20 millions, approximately 80 per cent. are illiterate, and that Nigeria is as big as France, but that only four vans are as yet available, the immensity of the task will be appreciated.

This sparsity of vehicles and the great distances to be covered limit the showings, in many places, to no more than three a year—hence the spreading of knowledge by cinema is grievously restricted.

During the first five years of our existence we were largely confined to explaining the war to our audiences, but since then we have been able to develop the more beneficial purposes of better health, better crops, better living, better marketing, better human co-operation.

But we have always known that such purposes could only be served faithfully by films made on the native soil with native characters. Though the war prevented this ideal for five years, we did move a little way towards it by the inauguration in 1941 of what we call our Raw Stock Scheme.

By this we provided 16 mm. apparatus and film stock to Europeans in the Colonies who had some amateur skill in photography, enough to enable them to film local events and items of native interest. Their products were sent to us in London for processing, editing and expert helpful advice. The films considered as usable were returned for exhibition where and when such was possible. Since 1941 we have sent out 110,000 feet of film, and of this 62,000 feet have proved worthy of showing.

The scheme still operates with increasing success. And now that the war is over, we have been able to carry out our long desired purpose—to make 80 per cent. of our films on native soil and 20 per cent. in our homeland; to interpret our British life and customs wisely to our native brothers overseas.

In 1945-46 we sent out first overseas unit to the Gold Coast.

In 1946-47 we sent two units out—one to Nigeria and one to Kenya and Uganda.

And now, 1947-48, we have four units out—one in Nigeria, one in the Gambia and Sierra Leone, one in Kenya and Uganda, and one in Tanganyika and Zanzibar.

Many worth-while films have resulted, notably *Weaving In Togoland*, *Fight Tuberculosis*, *Towards True Democracy*, *Good Business*, and very fine results are now reaching us from the units, dealing with *Better Housing* and *Mixed Farming*.

Our Home Unit has been constantly busy, filming every home item of special interest to the Colonies. I think our version of the Victory March was a valuable added link to our bonds of Empire.

Our office in Soho Square has been a useful centre to which Colonial officials or others interested in our work have come for advice or instruction in cinema problems. Many have come, and the visits have drawn closer the bonds between us.

A further link is our small booklet, "The Colonial Cinema", published quarterly. A thousand copies are printed of each issue, and these are distributed amongst the Colonies we serve as an instructive medium of cinema information.

These few facts give you some knowledge of what the Unit is, and what it has done so far.

And now, to the making of our films—the HOW and WHY of our film construction itself.

We have a technique shaped to our purpose. It is no strange mumbo-jumbo of which we are the sole High Priests, but a simple doctrine for gaining by cinema, and holding by cinema, the attention of an illiterate audience, whilst imparting knowledge that is appreciated and later applied. I have heard stated frequently that the simpler films made specifically for our English schools should be quite suitable for our audiences, and that in fact our work is nothing more than making films for children.

That is a foolish generalisation. Films for children must be built within the ambit of their stored memories of child life. How vast the difference between such minds and those of the adults we serve—adults who cannot read or write, primitive in customs and environment, heirs of an age-long tradition of folklore, fetish and strange superstition.

Only on that strange memory-store of those adult minds can we begin to build towards fresh understanding.

But—we are not prejudiced.

Since 1942 we have maintained a close examination of educational and instructional films from every available source. Of 1,500 such films that we have viewed, only ten *might* be useful to us for our illiterate audiences, but even those ten would need drastic cutting and re-shaping. The final result could be nothing more than makeshift.

So, at present, we are compelled to rely upon our own product. Then how do we proceed? We hold fast to two fundamental rules in our screencraft.

First, to keep rigidly to those principles of education based on the laws of all human mental progress. In essence, that all acquired knowledge derives from experienced sensations, of which those of the eye are ever the strongest; that these myriad sensations are held in the memory, to form our thought material—our perceptions; that with these stored perceptions stimulated by imagination we can move to new mental comparisons and associations—our conceptions. From the known to the unknown.

That is our constant touchstone in shaping pictorial choice and pictorial flow; realising always that all *present* thinking depends on *past* experience; knowing always that our vital task is the arousing of the imagination that functions between past apprehension and present comprehension.

Arising from our first rule we reach the second.

To use a technique in cinema that will sustain, without confusion or misunderstanding, a flow of pictorial narration within the compre-

hension of our audiences.

Modern cinema method for literate audiences follows a highly developed formula of brief scenes carrying the story forward, with all the time and space gaps covered by screen conventions of mixes, wipes, montages, and fades—varying its scene form with "dolly shots", "panning shots", queer angles, and on occasion diagrams.

All the conventional methods for short-circuiting time and place are utterly confusing to the illiterate, with the possible exception of the "fade". His experience of the approach of darkness and dawn helps him to the understanding of the fade-out or fade-in as an indication of an ending or beginning of something.

Mixes and montages and wipes may suggest something wrong with the machinery. Diagrams mean nothing to a mind that has never learned to read into a pattern of arbitrary shapes and lines the objects intended for explanation.

Panning up and down, dollying backwards and forwards, amaze him. Trees seemingly running along the far horizon, buildings apparently rising or sinking, static objects seeming to move of their own volition, only divert his attention from the scene message to the mystery of seeming magic.

All these conventions are for the cinema-minded, not for us—as yet.

Another vital factor in our screen form is the maintenance of a visual continuity from scene to scene. In the forward flow of changing scene every fresh picture starts a new and sudden interest, past interest forgotten momentarily—possibly lost—unless some visual link joins each succeeding picture with its predecessor. Some moving person or object holding the eye of the audience must carry that eye interest with it into the next picture.

And we avoid painting two pictures on one canvas, since because the eye always goes to the moving object, the thing we wish to be watched, some other movement is also occurring in the scene, the audience may shift its attention and lose our scene purpose.

And finally, we take care that the scenes we link together by our simple method are longer, separately, than is usual for literate audiences. The native mind needs longer time to absorb the picture content.

It is all a matter of using the very simplest ways of explaining something with our *pictures*, in the same manner that a good teacher speaks with the simplest *words* to his pupil eager for understanding. And how curious is that pupil's verdict of contentment—"I see". How strange that utterance! How much it implies to us who work in Cinema!

In a sense our films belong to the Documentary School. I have the greatest admiration for our British Documentary, and a firm belief in its power, under wise control, to do magnificent work towards Colonial development in those matters that lie outside the illiterate field.

In that field of work Documentary technique, excellent as it is for

its cinema-minded audiences, is useless for ours. It uses a pictorial idiom beyond the comprehension of the illiterate.

Imagine a possible documentary sequence of a train leaving a railway station. It starts with the platform, the people, the waiting train—doors closed, ready to start.

Assume that *our* audiences of illiterates could appreciate this, since many might have seen a railway engine.

Now the documentary flow of scene might well change to a close shot of the engine driver looking out from his cab.

At once our illiterate will think: Ah! this is not about a railway engine, it's about a man, but where is he, is he in a house? Then, flash, a great wheel filling the screen starts to revolve.

Now our audience wonders what is going on—and before it has time to think, the scene may change to a weird picture of parallel lines running magically like long snakes along the ground.

What is it all about? Railway engines—man—houses—wheels—snakes? Admittedly, documentary fully justifies this as valuable creation of atmosphere and I approve it in its own field of cinema—but not for ours. Imagine the confusion of thought at such a kaleidoscope of pictures passing before unsophisticated eyes—as matter for minds that cannot jump to understanding with the agility of a spring-heeled Jack.

In time these conventions may be appreciated, for we are experimenting always.

This brief explanation of HOW and WHY in our methods will enlighten you as to our problems, handicaps and inhibitions. Though we have made some progress, we have much yet to learn. Many a film deemed successful at its showing has been revealed as futile through subsequent close questioning of the audience.

Our plans and hopes for the future are much concerned with research into audience reaction. We have got to know far more than we at present know about how much our audiences really appreciate—and far more important, what they fail to appreciate, and WHY.

We are developing the use of African music to the film as illuminant to picture, but we are only at the beginning. We have on our staff a musician of high rank, Mr. Fela Sowande; through his skill and enthusiasm great advance will be made in this important attribute to the moving picture.

Another vital project, of which you will hear more today, is the establishment of schools for training Africans in the craft of cinema from A to Z—camera use, laboratory work, script writing, film technique, and actual filming. What aim could be of more potential value than—Films for Africans, with Africans, by Africans? It is the African who has benefited by education who can be, and *must* be, the teacher and guide to his less fortunate brothers.

And I have one hope, arising maybe from long years in free cinema—a hope for the cinema of Story. I dare to say that in story form almost every desirable lesson can be embodied. What nobler pattern have we

than the Parables? Is there any request older than the child's: "Tell me a story, Mother"?

I want to see that story-hunger answered; I want to see the story of African folklore, of African fable, of African human emotion.

If the natives ever see such films of their *own* soil, of their *own* traditions, hear their *own* music, then no foreign-sponsored commercial fictional film will stand a dog's chance with them.

Yes, there is so much for our cinema to do—so much for us to learn.

And, in conclusion, one warning! We cannot claim for cinema that which it cannot do. There are such matters as the recognition of the printed word, the recognition of numbers and their relationships. These things belong to the school and the teacher. The long term aim is a literate culture—no society of human beings can attain a full civilisation without that culture. Towards this goal of literacy cinema may perhaps help to light the way, but it can never lead.

Cinema has its own fields, many of which are as yet untilled.

Its greatest potentiality is the stirring of human emotions—a power for evil or for good, dependent on the folly or the wisdom of those who use it. Let us combat any effort to misuse our cinema in the lands we govern, but with a vision that looks beyond the present aims of better health, better housing, better agriculture, better business, and all the other things that make for better living; we see our cinema stirring a new spirit towards the ancient Art of Africa—

arousing anew a great Pride of Country,  
a great Pride in Tradition,  
a great Pride of RACE.

It is this Pride that Race of matters—for that implies character building—and this is what that great African, Dr. Aggrey knew when he affirmed that character building was at the root of all effort to raise the illiterate from his unenlightened world.