

HEALTH EDUCATION BY FILM IN AFRICA.

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Unit.*

IN the wise development of our vast Colonial territories the greatest undertaking is the mass education of the illiterate millions who form by far the larger proportion of the population. The long-term aim is the cultural uplift that achieves a higher standard of living, ends illiteracy, and leads eventually to self-government.

This is a matter of many years, probably generations, but while the purpose is steadily pursued, methods must be used for the speedy dissemination of urgently needed information; these available immediate methods are the spoken word, the radio, the practical demonstration, the model, the diagram, the still picture, the film strip, and the living scene of the moving picture.

The Colonial Film Unit concentrates on the use of the cinema screen as a pre-eminently potent means of instant value for bringing to primitive audiences new ideas within their comprehension, especially those that affect their welfare. The films are taken to remote primitive villages by cinema vans and shown to audiences of hundreds, and even thousands. In all plans for progress the physical well-being of the native is paramount, and health education is definitely the first directive of the Film Unit; to bring to the native mind realisation of the benefits of better homes, cleaner villages, wiser sanitation and healthier bodies, is the noblest purpose in our film programme.

In the African bush the struggle for life is intense; expectation of life is grievously low, and only by placing better health in the van of the progressive march can the desired cultural goal be reached or even approached. Local custom, apathy, prejudice, and even in some cases active opposition have all to be overcome.

To say to those whom we wish to benefit "Don't do this or that" is no way to urge them; it is through clear understanding only that they can be stimulated to comprehension of our picture messages, and that demands on our part a deep appreciation of the native mind. We are dealing with adults, who though unenlightened are not necessarily unintelligent; on the contrary they are often very shrewd and always keenly observant, but they are adults who cannot read or write, primitive in customs and environment, heirs of an age-long savage tradition of fearsome folk-lore, fetish and strange superstition that we cannot ignore.

They have characters and opinions resulting from what has been impressed upon them by their predecessors and the circumstances of their environment. Only on the accumulated memory store of those strange adult minds can we build towards our purpose, the bringing to them of a fuller understanding of the world, of life, of living.

Arousing Primitive Interest

So we shape our films in accordance with the established laws of all mental progression ; in essence that all acquired knowledge must derive from experienced sensations, of which those of the eye are ever the strongest. Those experienced sensations are held in the memory as thought material, and as fresh sensations are added to the store, new mental comparisons and associations are conceived ; from perception to conception, that is from apprehension to comprehension.

The native who will see our film has a mind compact of memories, interests, and expectations. Our picture message enters that memory store and stirs a new consciousness which is a fusion of the old with the new. If what we have provided has no point of contact with anything previously experienced we shall have failed, but if we have given that mind something that though unfamiliar has stirred some memory cell, interest will be captured, imagination aroused, and awakening of understanding born.

It is this acceptance and appreciation of the stored material in the native mind that rigidly affects our choice of the new material we desire to supply ; for whatever our culture or race may be, all present thinking depends on past experience. We can only start from those things of which our audiences have clear perceptions if we are to succeed in leading them to comprehension of associated ideas. An example may make this plain.

On one occasion a film on malaria and the mosquito was shown to an utterly primitive audience. After a while a greatly enlarged picture of the ugly insect was projected on the screen, presumably to give more intimate knowledge of its structure. The reaction amongst the natives was ruinous to the film purpose, for they said there would be no need for them to worry about the little mosquitoes they knew ; those in the film were enormous and terrible things quite different from anything in their country ! What had been overlooked was the complete ignorance of the primitive mind about magnification. By this lapse the film makers utterly failed to make their point and unfortunately added a false idea to the native memory store.

Walt Disney has recently made a cartoon film for South American primitives in which he has dealt ingeniously with this problem of the explanation of magnification.

One other psychological factor affects our methods. We have to arouse in the native mind the will *to do*, to put into practice what the screen has revealed as beneficial, and this vital will can only derive from stirred emotions. The prime movers towards human action are always emotional, therefore we endeavour to stir our audiences emotionally by threading the picture lesson through a simple story of native life with native characters on native soil. Many of our films have been profitably tied to the parable of Mr. Wise and Mr. Foolish. It is a good way to carry a health lesson agreeably and provocatively.

Endless Subject Matter

Of suitable health subjects there is no end ; many are given priority to meet some urgent district campaign desired by the native administration. In some areas of West Africa the mortality rate from tuberculosis is as high as fifty per cent of the deaths from all causes. A film that could deal with this serious problem in some beneficial degree was urgently needed ; talking or lecturing no matter how expert could not have the emphatic and lasting effect of the living picture that could reveal clearly how the disease starts, how it spreads, how it can be *prevented*.

Under the guidance of the chief medical experts in Africa, a film-script was prepared with real enthusiasm by the Unit ; a rather unpleasant subject was made intensely interesting by carrying the implied lessons through a human story of a happy native family menaced by the disease. This film *Fight Tuberculosis in the Home* is considered a pioneer in its kind, and is now profitably used in West African campaigns.

That vital health necessity, pure water in constant supply, suggested another worthy subject. A story around three villages was scripted to show how the progress in one village stirred desire in two others for similar improvement. With the help of the Chiefs and hundreds of eager natives, at times overwhelmingly enthusiastic, a valuable film resulted showing how a community, mainly by its own voluntary effort, could obtain a constant and copious supply of pure water.

In dealing with human illnesses the Unit's main function is to show that prevention is better than cure ; in the preventable diseases we reveal the root causes, the mosquitoes, the rats, the fleas, lice, ticks and bugs ; we expose the sad ignorance that permits the existence of stagnant uncovered water, exposed latrines, dirty and ill-ventilated dwellings. We show the advantages of well-planned housing, covered pit latrines, bush clearing, rubbish disposal and the home-made barless incinerator . . . in a word, *cleanliness*.

Child care is high in priority ; many films have been made dealing with pre-natal clinics, infant welfare, and physical education in the school. We are not confined to the human aspect only, for there is much to be

taught concerning animal welfare. Films on animal husbandry, the veterinary farm, and mixed farming, have each served urgent needs.

As each film nears completion we examine it keenly to discover whether we have erred by ending the screen message at the point where it has shown *how* improvement can be achieved. Not until we have revealed *why* this achievement is possible have we fulfilled our purpose.

A Misunderstanding

Apropos of this, it is worth recording that the pioneer and founder of the Colonial Film Unit, Mr. William Sellers, was stirred to use cinema as a means towards native enlightenment, when as Health Officer in Nigeria many years ago he had a startling experience.

A most serious plague had broken out, mortality was great. Rats were the carriers and had to be exterminated. The Government were offering twopence a head for dead rats; the natives brought them in by the score, but the numbers never seemed to lessen, in fact young live rats were also being brought in. Sellers then discovered that on the town outskirts rats were actually being bred and taken to the official collectors. To his amazement the breeders honestly thought they were aiding the cause; if the Government wanted rats at twopence each, and dead ones at that, what more could the breeders do to help than supply live rats for the same price!

Surely a clear case for the need of knowing *why* as well as *how*!

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

GEORGE PEARSON, Hon.F.R.P.S.—Honorary Member British Film Academy, Honorary Member British Documentary, Senior Film Director Colonial Film Unit (C.O.I.) since 1940. Left Schoolmastering for Films 1911. Produced over 300 films, Great Britain, Hollywood, West Indies, Paris, Nice, Rome. Lectured on Cinema Art to many Societies, R.P.S., R.A.D.A., Oxford and Cambridge undergraduates, The British Institute Summer School, etc.

W. S. WALTON, G.M., M.D., B.Hy., D.P.H.—Medical Officer of Health and Principal School Medical Officer, Newcastle upon Tyne. Formerly Medical Officer of Health and School Medical Officer, West Bromwich. Has held appointments as Deputy Medical Officer of Health at Plymouth and Middlesbrough. Lecturer in charge, Public Health Department at Durham University. President of County Borough Group, Society of Medical Officers of Health, 1946–1947.

R. DOBBIN, B.A., D.P.A.—Public Relations Officer, Health Department, Newcastle upon Tyne. For many years has been responsible for organising local health educational work. Has developed public relations along original and practical lines. Finds contacts established as Liaison Officer to the Mass Radiography Unit very useful in establishing relations with commercial and industrial organisations, and voluntary groups. Recently appointed Assistant Secretary, Newcastle upon Tyne Regional Hospital Board.