

FILMS FOR PRIMITIVE PEOPLES

By W. SELLERS, M.B.E.

The author is an acknowledged expert in the important field of visual education for primitive peoples. He is at present working on several films of the type described in this article.

I AM never surprised when people ask me in a doubting sort of way whether primitive Africans do really understand and appreciate cinema films. It is well known that if an illiterate African is handed a photograph even of himself or some scene familiar to him he will invariably turn it the wrong way up in an effort to focus his eyes on the picture. In other words a still picture of any kind conveys nothing to him. Some fifteen years ago I tried using lantern slides to illustrate my talks to Africans, but the results were very disappointing indeed—except with comparatively highly educated Africans.

About this time an enterprising native set up a 35 mm. silent projector in a small enclosure in the native town and projected some very old and badly worn silent films on to the whitewashed gable of an adjoining house. The capital outlay for equipment and a library of half a dozen films was somewhere about £10. The charge for admission was a penny for adults and a half-penny for children and seating accommodation was provided on mother earth. I became interested and attended these film shows many times to study how the Africans reacted to films. The first thing I noticed was that it mattered very little to the audience in what order the parts of a film appeared on the screen. They were not at all disturbed when the whole of part ten of the *Last Days of Pompeii* was projected upside down. What I did discover was that cinema films succeeded where still pictures failed. The natives looked upon the films as a collection of animated photographs a few of which they could appreciate, but they were quite unable to link the scenes together to form any kind of story. In other words they treated the films as a novel kind of peep show.

Quite a large proportion of the films was allowed to pass on the screen without comment or reaction of any kind. It was clear, however, that whilst a still picture conveyed nothing to the ordinary native he could at least get something from a moving picture. I followed this up by obtaining a 35 mm. projector and a supply of films from England with which I was able to carry my investigations a stage further and observe reactions more closely. These early experiments proved conclusively that if films were to be successful in conveying a story or teaching a lesson to these people they would have to be specially made. This I began to do in 1929 and then my troubles started. I found myself confronted with many problems, both technical

and psychological, and I was fascinated by the many interesting facts which came to light as I wrestled with one problem after another.

One important point appeared early—the great difference between the angle of acceptance of human vision compared with that of the cinema camera. Human vision is roughly 190 deg. whereas the normal camera lens is only about 30 deg. Looking at a cinema picture is therefore like viewing the actual scenes through a tube or pipe. In other words every scene we see on a cinema screen is very much incomplete. You and I do not find the difference very disturbing. When we see a picture projected we are, because of our experience and training, able to imagine the part of the picture which extends beyond the margin of the screen. Thus we can mentally appreciate the actual scene in its entirety. Illiterate people, on the other hand, find great difficulty in using their imagination in this way. For them, consequently, the approach to any particular subject requires special treatment. If I show you a shot, say, of the deck of a battleship, you will think of water around the battleship although it may not be part of the picture. Illiterate natives, however, do not make this visual adjustment. It is probably one reason why backward people prefer to see locally produced films with familiar backgrounds and people. The difference in the field covered by a camera lens compared with human vision is very noticeable in all “panning” shots, the effect of which educated people have always taken for granted. Show a horizontal “panning” shot of buildings to an illiterate and he will tell you he saw the buildings rush by. Show him a vertical pan and he will tell you he saw the buildings sink into the ground. This means that panning shots can only be introduced in a film for such people under exceptional circumstances.

Some conclusions

Investigations indicated that illiterate people have their own way of looking at a picture. Educated people normally focus their eyes on a point a foot or two in front of the screen, and by more or less glancing at the picture are able to appreciate the entire scene as a whole. The same thing happens when we use our eyes for reading. We see a word, a group of words, or even a whole line, and are not conscious of the individual letters. This is only possible because we focus our eyes a little distance in front of the page. The eyes of illiterate people are not trained to

see non-stereoscopic things in this way. They focus their eyes flat on to the screen and they scan the picture and analyse it in detail. They fasten their gaze on to any movement in the scene to the exclusion of everything else in the picture.

On several occasions I projected a film which included quite a good shot of a housing estate in England and in the middle distance was a dog trotting along the pavement. The picture was intended to show houses, but all the Africans could tell me they saw was a dog. If the dog had walked out of the picture and left the houses on the screen for a few seconds then they would have said to themselves, “That was a dog.” “It has gone.” “Now I can see some houses.” “They are very fine houses.” “Much better than ours and there are some trees but they have not many leaves on them,” and so on. This also illustrates how essential it is to make individual scenes much longer than is usually considered necessary, in order to enable illiterate Africans to analyse the scenes in detail.

The question of changes in camera angles is another important point. Experience has shown that reverse shots and other violent changes in camera angle are very confusing to the minds of illiterate people. Close-ups are essential as they assist the eye by making things appear large on the screen, but they cannot be pitchforked into a film every few seconds as is normally done for the purpose of avoiding monotony in shots of fair length. There should always be a definite reason for changing to close up, and when doing so it is preferable to retain the same camera angle. This is probably the most difficult of camera changes to make as cutting must be perfectly matched on some definite action such as picking up an object or someone taking a seat.

These are some of the things which I found to be of vital importance in the production of films for primitive people. They indicate how essential it is for films to be specially produced for their benefit, and how confusing normally produced films must be to the African villagers. The films are made as silents and a master commentary is written and added by a local interpreter through a microphone. This system is necessary as sound films cannot be used because of the great number of languages in use. In Nigeria, for instance, there are between forty and fifty different languages, and goodness knows how many dialects.

Interpreters are a constant source of worry as they will often express their own opinion which does not always coincide with what is intended. It is hoped to dispense with spoken commentaries before long and synchronize films with the sound-on-disc system. This may appear to be turning the hands of the clock back, but it will be several years before the use of sound-on-film is practicable for our particular purpose.

Unsophisticated outlook

It is not possible to lay down hard and fast rules for the making of films for primitive people. Each film subject requires special treatment and every shot in the film must be given individual consideration. The African believes everything

he sees on the screen; and, therefore, shots which may appear quite innocent can be interpreted by the African in a way that may be amusing or may be highly dangerous. I once reversed the projector on a shot of a man performing a high dive. The result of this was that the audience believed there was a super-human man in England who could leap backwards thirty or forty feet from the water on to a small plank. Strict accuracy is, therefore, vital in all scenes and particularly so in the production of local films, where a thorough knowledge of local habits and customs is essential. Mistakes in this direction, however slight, may turn the most serious film into a roaring comedy.

The African's sense of humour is one of his most engaging characteristics—a characteristic, incidentally, which can be very misleading. In my very early experiences I was often discouraged by the audience going into fits of laughter at the most unexpected moments. I soon found that this was because Africans do not reserve laughter to express a feeling of pleasure alone. They will laugh outright at any point in a film which they find is novel or which they clearly understand. This reaction, of course, is not confined to African audiences. A class of English students will probably smile and even laugh when they see the satisfactory results of a serious and involved laboratory experiment. An Englishman will often wear a smile as he relates how he just escaped with his life in a motor smash. In such instances, of course, laughter is restrained and under control, whereas the African will give full vent to his feelings and laugh heartily. Africans also laugh to express sympathy and they do so without realising it. They will always laugh outright at the tragic scene of a badly maimed leper which appears in one of the films I made in Africa. Yet they are very indignant and perturbed when questioned as to why they laughed, and will say they feel very sorry for the poor man and quite definitely that they did not laugh. Observing the reaction of African audiences to cinema films is no easy task and requires tact and infinite patience.

Recent experiences

I recently made a film in Northern Nigeria called *Machi Gaba or The Town that Crept Ahead*. The story is a simple one and includes the family lives of a native farmer and a weaver. The European Government officer in charge of the district sent a messenger to inform the Chief of the village that on a certain day we would be taking some photographs and requested the Chief to give us all the assistance he could. Early one morning I and my African assistants set out for the village, with all our filming paraphernalia. As we neared the village the Chief and his followers came galloping on their high-spirited horses to meet us. After the usual greeting, I tried to explain that we wanted to make a cinema film. As these people had never seen a cinema film in their lives, this proved rather difficult; the Chief, while he admitted he did not understand what we wanted to do, said he would help us all he could. After inspecting the village and choosing the natives who were to take the leading parts, we began

the filming. From the many remarks I overheard it was obvious the people had not the slightest idea what we were doing—in fact, they found our activities most amusing. However, we completed the film and the acting was very good and natural throughout.

The film was shown with great success in all parts of Nigeria, and later, while touring in the district, we were able to show the film *Machi Gaba* to the people who had seen us make it. The demonstration was made widely known, and took place on a large open space in the centre of the village. The entire population turned out in their best clothes, and several European officials, including the Senior Government officer for the Province, attended the demonstration. The Senior Officer, who had already seen the film, arranged for those villagers who had taken a leading part in it to sit on the ground just in front of the officials, and he explained to them in the native language what they were going to see on the screen.

The film started, and as soon as the farmer appeared on the screen he was recognised at once by the thousands of villagers in the audience who shouted out his name "Audu"—"Audu"—"Audu"—at the top of their voices. Immediately this happened Audu the farmer stood up with a startled expression on his face and looked towards the people who were still shouting out his name. The Senior Government Officer somewhat excitedly called to Audu, "Look you fool—you're missing it—*there* you are—your picture on the screen!" but Audu just turned and sat down again looking very bewildered. A similar thing happened when the weaver appeared on the screen, except that this time I noticed Audu joined in shouting the name of the weaver. You see what had happened—they recognised each other on the screen, but not themselves.

Showing the films

Now a word about the distribution of these films. For the time being this distribution is restricted to the use of Cinema Vans and Travelling Projection Units in Africa. This calls for equipment specially designed to withstand the severe climatic conditions in the tropics. In addition it must be capable of giving reliable service over long periods without skilled servicing, since such servicing is unobtainable locally. All the Cinema Vans operating in the Colonies are identical in design.

These Mobile Cinemas often go off on tour for as long as six months, and each one will visit as many as eighty or ninety towns and villages, giving talks and film demonstrations to over a quarter of a million people before returning to headquarters for fresh supplies and a short rest. In use the Mobile Cinema is taken to a convenient open space near to a town or village. A noisy record is played through the reproducer amplifier at full volume, and when it is anticipated that the people have paused to listen to this unusual noise the interpreter switches over to the microphone and addresses the people of the place, inviting them to come along as we have something interesting to talk to them about and show them. In this way large crowds are collected in the space of a few minutes.

As the people arrive the interpreter instructs the children to sit on the ground in front of the screen and informs the adults where to stand in order to get a good view. The background noise from the crowd, at this stage, is usually very high and disturbing. The technique used to reduce the level of this noise is to ask the audience a question to which the obvious answer is yes; such a question might be "Are you proud to be British?" The interpreter complains to the audience that he cannot hear them very well and proceeds to ask the same question. This time most of the audience will shout their reply. The question is put to the audience a third time with the microphone at full volume. This time almost every member of the audience will reply and their answer comes back in a roar. This is followed by complete silence everywhere, and so long as the audience is kept interested the background noise will remain at a low level.

For the purpose of driving home the lesson in the films this technique is very effective when used at the end of a demonstration. Question after question based on the films is fired at the audience in quick succession. The interpreter, in this case, will gradually increase the volume of his voice with each question and the audience in return will reply to each question with great vigour. There is more likelihood of any lesson getting home if the people themselves have voiced their acceptance of it. It is sometimes useful to ask questions during the projection of a film in order to check up if the audience are following the story. Such questions and replies might be, "Who is this man?" A farmer! "Where is he going?" Home! "What is the matter with him?" He is sick! "Are you sorry for him?" Yes! . . . and so on.

The future

The possibilities of using the cinema for educating backward races are, in my view, tremendous.

I have given some idea of what is required in the production of films for illiterate people, and how highly specialised the subject really is. It is reasonable to believe that the African will not be slow in becoming cinema minded, and that it will be possible, step by step, to introduce some of the less involved technical tricks into the production of films for such people. In the meantime it is interesting to note that these specially produced films appeal to educated as well as to the uneducated Africans, and this is perhaps their strongest justification.

Some inventions have been thrust upon the African before he has been taught how to make use of them and the result has been confusing and bewildering to their very conservative minds. I think it is no small thing that the cinema, a tremendous instrument for good or ill, should be introduced to millions in a form they will appreciate. The Africans are being led by easy stages to understand the wonders that the cinema makes practicable. How great a factor this may be in their lives I do not venture to prophesy, but the work of twelve years has convinced me firmly that in the cinema we have an instrument of education whose possibilities are endless and whose effects may well be revolutionary.