

THE MOBILE CINEMA VAN IS A New Weapon in Mass Education

One of the weapons man now uses in his ceaseless struggle against disease, superstition and ignorance is the film, and it is the use of the film in the mass education of the African native that an Englishman, touring Nigeria with a cinema van, describes for us.

By Norman Spurr

(Reprinted by courtesy of *London Calling*)

A NEW weapon! I wonder what sort of image that phrase brings to your mind. In these days, it is almost certain to be a weapon of war; but there are, of course, other weapons—weapons which man uses in his ceaseless struggle against disease, and superstition, and ignorance. One such weapon is the film, and it is the use of the film in the mass education of the African that I am concerned with at the moment. For the past eighteen months, I have been responsible for the film work of the Public Relations Office in Nigeria.

* * *

During the war, mobile cinema vans toured Nigeria with films designed to bring home to the African the objects for which the war was being waged, his own part in that struggle, and the progress being made towards victory. To take but one example, a film on African timber always delighted the bush audiences because, as one African put it, "it showed how African timber was helping to win the war."

These programmes were so successful that Mr. W. Sellers, head of the Colonial Film Unit, was authorised to experiment with the use of films to instruct Africans in education, agriculture, health, and other similar subjects.

The Reactions of Audiences to Films

But before we started production, it became apparent that fresh research was needed into the reactions of our audiences to the films we showed them. There was no longer a single, unifying idea—the winning of the war; peace had come, and, with it, the collapse of a stimulus, and the return to the old patterns of living. We were not out to find if our audiences liked our film shows; we knew that; but we wanted to know how effective they were in communicating ideas, where our strength lay, and how we might improve—always bearing in mind that we existed only to inform and to educate.

The first thing we found was that our programmes were too long, too diffuse, and too indigestible. It was the Charlie Chaplin comedy, put in

at the end of the programme, which stole the show, and not our instructional films.

Competition of this kind within a programme simply would not do. So the first lesson we learned was to select a programme in which the films reinforced each other's message. As a result, the mobile cinema vans went out with a selection of programmes—generally, three—and the village was allowed to make a choice from those, which were built round a single theme, such as social welfare.

It soon became evident that the system of finding out what an audience thought of the films was completely inadequate: there was far too much opinion, too little fact, and sometimes we were deliberately misled. Questionnaires were not possible, because the audiences were illiterate, and the ordinary question by word of mouth was little better, "for," argued the African, "we like these film shows, and they will continue as long as we say they are good"—a most understandable sentiment but not much use to us!

Finally, we hit on the idea of having several observers who spoke the language of the audience, roaming amongst them and taking down any remarks overheard during the show. This gave us a cross-section of the audience when their reactions were completely uninhibited. The sampling at times was so accurate that observers would bring in almost identical comments from the various parts of the audience.

One programme contained a film called *Weaving in Togoland*, made in West African territory. It is a factual film, concerned with the story of some students who went into a village to teach new methods of weaving, and how these methods brought economic prosperity which, in turn, yielded better social conditions, such as a new school. One person was overheard to say: "Cloth-making is very good; it is how they make cloth we use." Another remarked: "Old women and old men not good to follow cloth-making; they cannot see well and which is which."

The man who made the following comment evidently believed in the rigid division of labour, for, said he: "It is not good that men take part in cloth-making for it is lazy work; it is better that they plant and leave the cloth-making to the women." On the other hand, we overheard: "This cloth-making is very good; if I had money I would send my boy"—presumably to the Government Training College.

Subject-matter as Basis for Discussion

At one of the shows, we had the District Officer with us, and he was able to answer the audience's inquiries as to what the Nigerian Government was doing about it all by telling them of the textile centres, and also of a village in their own division which had a teacher living with them to teach these new weaving methods. The District Officer was particularly pleased with the way the film put an audience in a receptive

Marangu



Court elders



Picking coffee

Mixed Farming

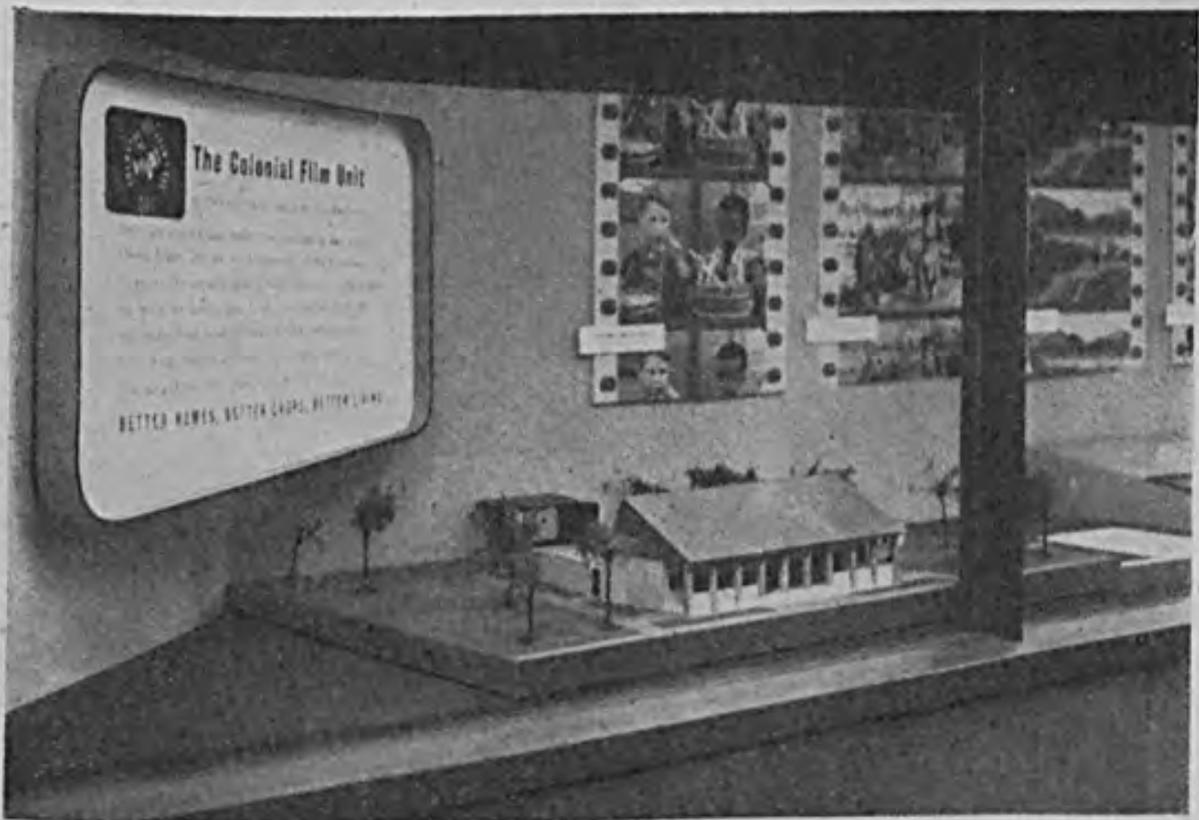


Produces good manure



A good sample of groundnuts

Village Cinema



Model in Colonial Office window



Window display—Colonial Office

The Theatre—21 Soho Square



The Oni of Ife views the Africa Conference film



Production staff viewing a film

frame of mind, or, to borrow a phrase from the advertising world, "It broke down sales resistance."

A parallel investigation was made into the reactions of literate audiences at a technical school and girls' school. As English was a common language, we were able to use an oblique method of investigation called the discussion method. As its name implies, the film shown to the audience became a basis of discussion. We asked the audience questions, and they in turn asked us questions about matters the film had raised.

On one occasion, we showed the Technical School a film called *Steel*. Filmed in Technicolor, it has had considerable exhibition overseas. We asked the audience if the material taken out of the ground by the excavators was iron which poured from the furnaces. This was answered correctly; but when asked what other material went into the furnace with the iron ore, we got only a partially correct answer. Lime was mentioned, and coal!

Coal surprised us, for in the film there is quite a long and vivid sequence dealing with the conversion of coal into coke for smelting in ovens very like those at Wankie. But, somehow, the audience failed to relate these ovens and their product to the smelting process. We came to the conclusion that this was because the film never showed coke going into the furnace, only mentioned it on the sound-track. In contrast, the film showed trucks of lime, iron ore, and coal waiting in the sidings.

Time and again, in all our experiments, we found that information given by the commentary was often missed. But what was seen was always remembered.

Sometimes a film shown at the Technical School was also shown at Queen's College, and it was most interesting to note the difference in the reactions to the same film.

Conclusions Drawn from Investigation

A film made for Africans by the Colonial Film Unit and called *Mr. English at Home* brought forth such questions as "How much did the man earn?" and "What was the bus fare to work?", from the students; whereas the girls wanted to know was it right for a woman to leave home and go out to work, and whether "Mrs. English" ever got away from her household duties and went out of the house!

As a result of all these investigations, and other research into the reactions of African audiences at the commercial cinema, what conclusions did we arrive at? Let my chief African commentator summarise for you. Rubbing his chin reflectively at some further piece of evidence which cut right across our accepted theories, he said: "We don't seem to know very much about this yet." Nor do we.

There is no question of the tremendous value of the film; it is our techniques which need overhauling. Three things emerged quite clearly. One was that the silent technique with its visual continuity is better

than a film which depends upon the commentary to give shape to, and information about, the visual image. Secondly, the screen cannot do the job by itself; it must be followed up by discussion, and by the expert giving further instruction. Its principal job is to arouse interest in the subject. Thirdly, what an audience brings to the film is as important as what the film brings to the audience.

A film dealing with co-operative cocoa farming, and, of course, excellent for the cocoa farmers, was shown at Ogwofia, where palm kernels were the cash crop. The village is only some 200 miles from the cocoa-growing areas. Here are three comments to illustrate my last point.

Someone asked his neighbour: "What sort of fruit is cocoa like?" Someone else said: "What kind of cocoa is that, cocoa-nuts?" Not all were so naive, for overhearing a companion say "Oh, it's yams," a man replied: "Yams; do you pluck yams from tops of trees?"

One of the major difficulties confronting Europeans making films for African illiterates is to remember what a tremendous difference the various ways of communicating thought have made to people brought up in the Western tradition. A remote village in Cumberland knows considerably more about the world than an African villager does about a village a few miles away.

As a result of our research, we made plans to go into production. I have no time to tell you of the various experiments we made with cinemagazines to make them more vital than mere film reporting, nor of our investigations into the close-up, which seemed to cause some confusion.

Finally, we decided to incorporate most of our theories in a single film for the Cocoa Department. It was cast in a semi-dramatic form, and its purpose was to supplement a pamphlet on the correct preparation of cocoa beans for market. It is a story of a farmer who was content to go on in the old way despite the changing standards of quality. Though warned by the cocoa assistant, he takes his beans to market, has them rejected, and is then shown by the assistant how to do the job properly. His second visit to market is crowned with success.

Two-thirds of the film is concerned with actual instruction. Comment is the bare minimum, for we tried to say everything by visual images. The editing and cutting of the film are quite normal, and we did not cut our close-ups—rather the reverse; but we did pay very careful attention to visual continuity and to accuracy of setting. The film has yet to go into circulation, but test showings indicated that we are travelling the right road.

I have been talking about Nigeria, but other Colonies are using film extensively. Civilisation is largely the history of communication: the film is a new weapon of communication. We must use it wisely; we must use it well.