

OVERSEAS FILM AND TELEVISION CENTRE,
FILM TRAINING SCHOOL

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It is almost twenty years since William Sellers left Africa to develop further in England a work he had initiated in Nigeria. There he had proved the value of the motion picture as a beneficial medium for giving information to the illiterate and backward who formed a large proportion of the populace.

He is not alone in this desire to widen the use of the medium for enlightenment of the unenlightened; enthusiasts from other nations have joined the Cinema Crusade to remove the ignorance that is born of environment.

In England, for many years, by Government aid, contact was maintained overseas through films constructed to meet the different mental calibres of the varied audiences. Even more important, through Sellers' efforts, young overseas students were given opportunity to become skilled in filmcraft by instruction in London. Back home, their films made by them on their own soil, with their own people, to meet their own specific problems, proved invaluable.

Great interest in Sellers' purpose led me to join him eighteen years ago, and I have been privileged since to help in the training of over a hundred enthusiastic students, all of whom are now working in their own lands. The films they are making are fitted to purpose. Many of them are equal in technical efficiency and imaginative approach to the best from European documentary sources.

Temporary schools were also held in Accra, Jamaica, and Cyprus, with chosen instructors from England in charge. Excellent films made by the pupils now come regularly from West Africa and the West Indies. All these happy results are sure proofs of the value of opportunity granted in a worthy cause... the opportunity of initial training.

Unfortunately, due to changing conditions, this opportunity in England had to end three years ago. It is very regrettable that no permanent school now exists there, through the need is great.

But to-day this is a world of dynamic change. Stagnation is decay. Where progress is frustrated, the barrier must be broken. In Nigeria there are wise thinkers who realise the power of the Motion Picture when made with set purpose, and used with judgment. They also realise that those who have to translate those set purposes into pictorial living messages must surely be Nigerians.

And those Nigerians should be the young men of to-day, who can devote their lives to the work, and grow old in its service. This year Nigeria has six such youths, well chosen, eager, and anxious to serve. Where could they obtain the needed training? The need was met by the opening of a temporary school in London, a courageous gesture by Victor Gover after discussion with Sellers. Plans were made for a six months course in the theory and practice of filmcraft. The location of the school, its organisation, and its finances, needed close consideration, but the problems were solved. The school opened in March with a staff of three, and the six young Nigerians as pupils.

The School method aimed at combining theory with practice throughout, but a flexible syllabus was necessary, since our English climate is an uncertain factor where photography is concerned. We have a small lecture room, a dark room, working benches and the necessary apparatus, and a little private theatre. We are in close contact with the many operations of film processing, editing, sound recording, and dubbing, since the school is housed in part of Victor Gove's Overseas Film and Television Centre.

We have a five day week, and manage to fit in occasional visits to commercial studios, film laboratories, museums, and associated film societies. Arrangements are also made for extra-mural lectures by experts on specific subjects. The training by its brief period must perforce concentrate on those definite fundamentals of the medium that need actual application in practice to achieve success. So Theory and Practice move hand-in-hand. By trial and error we move forward, learning most, and quickest, by making mistakes.

Since our young Nigerians will have to face many problems in film structure to meet the minds of varying audiences, we have given much time to a study of the factors that affect audience reaction, as so far ascertained by anthropologists. The long term aim of Nigerian progress is the cultural uplift that leads to better health, better living, better industry, better trading, better government, an eventual literacy, and a wider knowledge and understanding of the outer world.

All these aims are stirring in the minds of the young students, and in our daily discussions there is much excited argument as to how the film might grapple with the problems. Quite brilliant ideas often result. They are convinced that though subjects are plentiful, yet films dealing with health education are the most urgent. The physical well-being of the African is paramount. To bring to the audience mind the full realisation of the benefit of better homes, cleaner villages, wiser sanitation, and healthier bodies, is the most pressing item in any film programme.

In the African bush the struggle for life is intense; the expectation of life is grievously low, and only by placing the plea for better health propaganda foremost, can the desired cultural goal be reached. Malnutrition is at the root of much mortality, and you cannot educate an ill-nourished people with any hope of success.

But second only to the health of the body is the health of the land. There are sicknesses the African farmer does not understand. swollen shoots that strange disease threatening the cocoa plantations with destruction, the depredations of the coconut beetle, the disasters of soil erosion. The farmer relies on the good earth for his sustenance, but at times it seems to fail him.

The students are fully aware that farming in Africa is the common base from which all other economical activities radiate, and they are eager to help preserve its strength. They feel there is much that film might do to diagnose and clarify the earth afflictions for farmer's appreciation, in terms of life as he knows it.

An it is in this matter of Life, caught in the Living, that the film medium has its greatest potency. With it, and by it, the Human tale can bring understanding to the doubting mind, providing the tale is true.

And since the African thinks in terms of family life and village unity rather than the individual, the principle of human co-operation is traditional with him. He appreciates that in union lies strength and applies this to those activities that provide his main needs. But extensions in co-operation in trading have widened his horizon. Films that emphasise the values of communal trading can be linked with films on transport, the very basis of commerce. Bush clearing, road making, river bridging, and provide excellent filmic material if associated with local life and environment.

Though much has been done by motion picture, there is yet much more to do. It is this knowledge that so obviously stirs the students. They are determined to justify the trust that has given them an opportunity to share, even in the most minute degree, in the shaping of a new and better world.

They are acutely aware of the opposition they may meet from those whom they wish to benefit. Their audiences will often consist of adults who cannot read or write, are primitive in custom and environment, heirs of an age-long tradition of folk-lore, fetish, and strange superstition. Audiences in which the strongest emotion is fear... fear of sickness, of unemployment, of nature, of their fellow men, of change of any kind... all fears buried in the sub-conscious mind. How can such opposition ever be removed by recognition in their conscious minds of its foolishness?

That is the question. Can the Motion Picture answer it? We believe it can, if it will add to its armament the Film Strip, Visual Aids, and best of all, actual demonstration. Motion Picture will stir the necessary and vital interest, the others will drive the lesson home. But all these means to an end will fail if we have no knowledge ourselves of the workings of the human mind. Our film students have shown deep interest in the study of the accepted laws of mental progress... the sense percepts.. the growth of concepts... the resulting thoughts that stir imagination.. the road from the known to the unknown. By knowledge of their people, aware of their traditions, their environment, their life experiences, and that all knowledge is nothing more than the sum of past experiences, they will so shape their pictorial messages to stir new ideas, based on old memories.

Against this generalised knowledge of film purpose, film nature, and audience calibre, as background, there is need for foreground knowledge of the technical requirements of the medium, and clear comprehension of the apparatus. Some study of elementary Physics is essential, for Light and Sound are the foster parents of Film. Only by understanding of fundamental laws can success in applying them be attained. In still-plate photography, dark room practice is paramount in importance, for by it, doing takes the place of listening.

Much time given to the still picture is not a waste of precious hours. The principles of good pictorial composition are worth knowing, for the still photograph is the cog in the wheel of the moving picture. When this stage of our syllabus was reached, the young students were eager for the vital thing in the course... the Moving Scene. There were many branches of the technique to master. Scripting, Directing, Camera-work, Editing, Commentary, Sound, Projection, and Dubbing. Practical skill in each could only result from absorbing the basic principles of each. Hence, from then onwards, Theory and Practice moved pari passu.

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The degree of achievement reached in every practical effort depended upon how far the student had succeeded in obeying those basic principles of Unity of Purpose... Singularity of the Significant... Truth. It was a gratifying moment in class, one day, when a student said he realized why he had failed in a matter of still-plate exposure...his spoiled negative was untruthful. Sub-consciously the students were beginning to appreciate the need for knowing WHY as well as HOW in every step forward in their work.

Taken in logical order, the Film Script structure calls for such preparatory effort. With us, a definite plan of approach that could be followed, no matter the type of film desired, was indicated and practiced. Every film is designed to meet some urgent purpose. Given the purpose, how do we begin? It may deal with health, or agriculture, social needs, or new laws of government. Whatever it is, we need to know all we can about it. We investigate.

With information gathered from every available source, a whole mass of notes, opinions, suggestions, will need sifting and logical arranging. Most important to glean is how much the intended audience knows already about the subject, limited but correct, or incorrect, for it is only on the known that we can build towards the unknown.

The problem now is how to transfer a beneficial message based on our garnered information to an audience, probably illiterate, and almost certainly suspicious of change that breaks with custom. The investigation has provided the material for the film, expressed in words. Those words have to be translated into pictorial language. It is on the nature and the quality of that translation, that Treatment that the success or failure of the film will rest.

Since cinema is a mass medium, and the mass is more emotional than the individual, emotions can be more readily stirred by the moving picture than by any other medium of thought conveyance. With our film message of beneficial import it is urgent to capture immediate interest in the audience, and having caught it, to hold it. From early childhood we are all interested in stories. The human tale is the answer to the problem of the Treatment. Even the driest subject can be illuminated. The human tale is rich in content. There is contrast of character, rich and poor, strong and weak, hardworking and lazy. There is the conflict, the essence of drama, ignorance fighting truth, old customs fighting new, the wise men fighting the foolish. Audience will take sides. Interest is gripped.. What will win? If your picture messages have been wisely designed, the verdict will be the one you want. Tie your film treatment to a human tale, with characters familiar to your audience, and your film will leave its designed message with them. With some, in full, with some, only part. But the seed will have been sown. A few may accept the new teaching and benefit. The sceptical begin to waver. Progress always moves in that way. The final sequence of the film should show its purpose reached in some human happening, for though much of the pictorial unfolding may be forgotten, the end usually stays in the memory store as a mental experience, a perception stirring other perceptions in the mind, which by imagination may lead to reasoning, and understanding.

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To convey a desired purpose through the medium of a human story appealed strongly to the students. Nothing could be more potent than a tale of African life, with Africans, in their own African environment, for this beneficial aim. But stories are told in words. The story needs translation into pictures... moving pictures. The language of the written word is for the literate; the language of the moving living scene is for both illiterate and literate. To the one it reveals things, to the other it reveals and illuminates also. How is this universal language acquired? Only in the way any language is learnt, by constant use, frequent incoherence, gradual familiarity with idiom, and eventual fluency.

That learning is the real purpose of the training school. In that aim, the course continues through constant practice in film direction, camera-work, editing and recording. By daily familiarity with the tools, camera, projector, moviola, synchroniser, magnetic stripe, and microphone, skill, and understanding of theory are both developed. The theoretical principles are clarified by frequent tests in Visual Continuity, Mental Continuity, Time and Place conventions, Lighting, Angle changes, Tempo. Bridge shots, and News Reel methods.

Frequent brief class gatherings vary these many practical procedures, in order to refresh the memory in matters of the fundamental factors of the film medium. The principle of UNITY OF PURPOSE that underlies every single factor in film making seems to be the one that causes the most trouble...the one most often broken, unfortunately. Over and over again we stress the need for One Purpose in each film... One Purpose in the film story of human effort... one purpose in each camera shot... one purpose in each changed angle... in each cut by the editor .. in each sentence of the commentary. This unswerving UNITY is the secret of the successful film. It seems to be the pons asinorum of the Film-Maker.

Much time is given to discussions of Audience reaction to the film medium. The students are very conscious of the opposition that their film efforts may meet from stubborn minds, steeped in tradition. We have frequent exciting arguments on this very difficult question. Though there is no sure solution of a many-sided problem, there is much helpful knowledge to be gained from the experiences of educationalists and anthropologists who are still seeking the answer. The class note-books hold much of this valuable information for future reference. Some is merely conjectural, some still in the experimental stage, some proven so far by empirical methods.


We have dealt fully with this garnered knowledge in our talks; some of it will stay in the students' minds, to serve them in time of need. Film-making such as ours, needs Faith. There are things we must know things we must believe.

With all of us, film-maker and audience alike, there are three principal activities in Life...Wanting...Thinking...Doing. Wanting depends upon our personal individuality and experienced background in life. We are always wanting, and it is in the thinking stirred by wanting, that leads to doing. But we can only think in terms of past experience. It is in doing that we gain new experience. Learning by doing is the swiftest road to knowledge.

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Hence, by encouraging the stubborn to do something in a new way, new experience is added to the mind-store of Memory; a fresh experience that can merge with the old to form a new pattern of thought. But, thoughts are stirred by wants, so, if a film is to be of any use, it must, in some degree, deal with some want. Thoughts may be stirred thereby, and doing may probably follow. A circle, but not a vicious one... a beneficial one.

Again, Superstition is almost an iron curtain, but it can be moved if we ponder why, and in that knowledge find the lever. Superstition derives from sub-conscious faith supports custom. Show real interest in that faith. Try to understand it. The teacher's interest stirs a trust in him by those whom he would teach. In that gained confidence the first step towards the goal is reached.

 In dealing with some age-old custom that is harmful, it is often wise to concentrate thought on what is RIGHT about that custom rather than what is WRONG about it. These customs have originated in many cases in some beneficial activity, but the centuries have debased them.

The traditional fear of changing old custom is dominant in the mind; the harm that living in fear inflicts on human life is impossible to calculate. The custom-ridden illiterate is mainly conscious of what he must do, according to his lights, to live. If he can be brought to think of what he may do... differently... he has been raised one step from his unenlightenment.

These are a few of the things, that by discussion, stir determination in our students' minds. They are anxious to prove their mettle. In Motion Picture they have the perfect medium for the Human Life Story with all its many problems faced, revealed, illuminated, and shown the road to solution.

Its immediate potency depends upon perfect functioning through a technique that calls for vivid imagination and sure skill from those who serve it. That skill can only come from experience, and experience in all techniques, begins with Training.