

# THE KANYE CINEMA EXPERIMENT, 1944-1946

by Neil Parsons

Copyright the Author 2004

## *Introduction*

'Movies have a surface realism which tends to disguise fantasy and makes it seem true.' (Hortense Powdermaker, *Hollywood the Dream Factory*, 1950)

As a small child, running your fingers over the television screen, you soon discovered that the reality portrayed there was unobtainable. Your desire to enter the filmic drama was frustrated but not killed. Instead, you wanted more and more. The author quoted above, Hortense Powdermaker, argues that movies create emotional needs (for adventure and romance) in the audience that can only be satisfied by watching more movies—'just as advertising can and does promote anxieties to increase consumption.'

Movies are bits and pieces of celluloid film or digital images, and ultimately just a string of still pictures, which are presented to you to make sense of. No discussion of cinema is therefore complete without consideration of the viewer.

There was much discussion in early twentieth century Europe and America about the effects of cinema on youths, and on the effects of television later in the century. With the rise of academic cinema studies since the 1970s, there has been renewed concern with the theory and practices of cinema audience spectatorship. But academic cinema studies *within* Africa have only taken off in the last few years, and the study of cinema audiences in Africa is relatively undeveloped. Probably the best known such study was conducted as long ago as 1935-37 in East Africa—the so-called Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE).

BEKE was not the only such 'cinema experiment'. This paper reconstructs an outline of the 'experiment' conducted at Kanye, capital village or town of the BaNgwaketse people, in south-eastern Botswana, at the end of the Second World War. The study should be supplemented and modified by oral testimony and by more comparative materials on other rural areas in Southern Africa. In this paper, the Kanye 'experiment' is put in the context of people's experience of cinema in colonial Botswana before 1944, and in the context of other well-known studies of African cinema audiences in colonial Southern Africa.

Academic studies of cinema audiences elsewhere in the world have concentrated on whether audiences correctly read, misread, or perversely re-read the intended or 'preferred' messages of Hollywood. Some studies emphasize audience responses as *spectators* of visual 'spectacle' (rather than as *readers* of narrative 'text'). Psychological studies speculate on how films can be analyzed as manufactured 'dreams' (fantasies of reality) in which we identify ourselves with, or ogle and worship, what we see on screen. Other studies investigate the historical context of when and

where and how different audiences responded differently. This paper adopts the latter approach.

Do movies open minds or close them? Many film-makers in the 1930s and 1940s saw movies as the perfect form for mass propaganda, to lock people's minds onto some political or social (usually health) message. Thus the educationist E.G. Malherbe, who was (incongruously) head of South African military intelligence as well as of its army adult education services, gave a lecture in December 1940 which he titled 'The Magic of the Silver Screen'. He argued that films had a magic 'semblance of truth' because they focused people's tunnel-vision on a screen glowing in the dark, and kept their hold on audiences by the tension and excitement of action. Best of all, they could attract huge and regular audiences—particularly of the most susceptible—and their performances could be indefinitely repeated. Films were also more effective than printed matter because they could pass off propaganda as 'truth', and would make sense as much to the illiterate as to the literate.

However, movies usually make fuller sense when they are discussed in conversation between viewers. And such conversations can misread or subvert the intentions of the film-makers. For that reason, silent movies, which allow the audience to talk, may have greater intellectual impact than movies with sounds that swamp out the viewer's mind with emotions. Most of the films shown in Africa up to the 1940s were silent, or they were sound films in languages that audiences barely understood and could ignore while they chatted to their neighbours. (You can still hear such 'audience participation' in some African cinemas.) The hidden messages within propaganda films invariably misfired or backfired.

This paper will argue that the Kanye cinema experiment of 1944-46 opened minds (to a variety of viewpoints including Soviet propaganda) rather than closed them. At a time when the world was undergoing the most dramatic changes of the twentieth century, new ideas were beginning to burst the constraints of local 'tribalism' and colonialism. However, the opening of dialogue, in expectation of participation in national development, was to prove premature.

### *Cinema in Botswana up to 1944*

The earliest cinema shows actually within Botswana borders were in tents annexed to circuses that took the train from Kimberley to Bulawayo after the completion of the railway in 1897. The circus stopped off at stations to play a few nights—Mafeking and Palapye Road were at first the only places with sizeable audiences. (The use of tents for film shows appears to have stopped by 1911 because of safety regulations, as both canvas and nitrate film were highly flammable.)

From 1913 onwards cinema became big business in buildings, and sometimes in the open air. The first cinema at Zeerust, over the border east of Lobatse, opened in this period, operated by a Greek trader running a corner café. This enterprising gentleman was himself a clown, a juggler, a trick violinist, and a player on the musical saw, who performed between silent one-reel films of under ten minutes each. But he died in the great influenza epidemic of 1919, and Zeerust lost its 'bioscope'.

The pioneer mobile cinema operator in Botswana was the famous Setswana writer and South

The pioneer mobile cinema operator in Botswana was the famous Bechuanaland and South African politician Sol Plaatje. In the mid-1920s he tried to make a living by touring South Africa and Bechuanaland with his 'Travelogue and Coloured American Bioscope'--showing educational films donated by African-American institutions, plus a copy of a 1911 or 1922 film of a parade at Serowe. He showed his bioscope at places like Kanye, Gaberones, and Serowe, and in halls in African townships in South Africa. But there was insufficient wealth and consumer culture among Africans in the 1920s to make his bioscope a paying proposition. In September 1924 he reported:

I have been round a good deal with my films. With the poverty of the Natives it is a profitless job; but when I see the joy, especially of the native kiddies...it turns the whole thing into a labour of love.

Another enthusiast for cinema in the 1930s was the Rev. K.T. Motsete, though it is not known if he showed films at his Tati Training Institution. Fast-living *Kgosi* Molefi of the BaKgatla, who shuttled between Johannesburg and Mochudi in the late 1930s, began by showing slides of bathing beauties in a Mochudi hall, and graduated to showing films such as *The Arabian Nights*. He also showed his own home-made movies.

Hotels had occasional cinema shows, though hotels in railway towns were racially segregated and indoor shows would have been for whites-only. But Maun appears to have been an exception. In October 1942 the Batawana Home News Letter, written for the troops in the Middle East, reported:

On the 17th September, we were well entertained by Mr. C. Riley who showed us pictures, i.e. he admitted after payment of two shillings by each individual into his Cinema, where many interesting things were shown. The pictures included the train, which thing is not known in Ngamiland.

In June 1943 the British government 'presented the Bechuanaland Protectorate with a Cinema Projector and an engine for generating electric light which is necessary for the showing of moving pictures.'

The British Government has also sent us a large number of pictures for us to show to the people and already some of these have been shown at Maung and Francistown...[and will be shown] in the near future at Serowe.

Six hundred people in Maun watched the film, followed by more in Francistown, Palapye, and Mahalapye in June 1943. The films shown were 'mostly in connection with the war' but 'A Charlie Chaplin film which was also shown was popular'. The newsreels shown were of the war in Libya and Tunisia, and of Smuts and Churchill, with interpreters explaining the meaning of the pictures. 'When the moving pictures were first shown at Maung, many of the young people sat with their backs to the screen' and therefore only realized which way to face after the film began.

The education department was responsible for the equipment but the medical department seems to have been the most enthusiastic user of the mobile film unit at first. By mid-1945 a regular circuit ran between Lobatse, Kanye, Gaberones, Serowe, and Francistown--with a new programme every six weeks consisting of a feature film, a newsreel, and a documentary or short instructional film. [Mahalapye, Mochudi, and Maun were not mentioned.]

instructional films. [Molepolole, Mochudi, and Maun were not mentioned.]

### *The Kanye Cinema Experiment*

It is against this background that Kanye ran its own cinema programme between the latter part of 1944 and sometime in 1946. Films were shown every month in the King George V Memorial Hall over two or three days, using the education department's equipment. The programme's patron was *Kgosi* Bathoen II, who was still seen as a progressive modern chief and appears to have had the cooperation of the local intelligentsia at this time. Its organizer was an innovative young district commissioner with a doctorate in social anthropology, named Hugh Ashton.

The first cinema show of the series at Kanye, in mid-September 1944, featured a film on Basutoland which Ashton had helped make, with the film maker Bill Lewis of Cape Town. The show was described by Ashton 'most successful'.<sup>31</sup> This introduced local people to the principles of film making, necessary because a film maker called Graham Young was scouting round the reserve choosing interesting targets for a film to be shown to the ten thousand men of Bechuanaland Protectorate then in the Middle-East. On 11th October 1944, Kanye clerk A.R. Moatshe sent dispatched the following report to the troops' newspaper:

Our people are all keen on some form of entertainment being provided for them. Recently they packed the hall to see a bioscope show and I am sure it would be most pleasing if such shows could be managed periodically.

Ashton took the hint, and wrote to all and sundry film providers for monthly shows. First there was the 16mm colour film made in 1943 on the soldiers' training camp at Lobatse, by Matron D. Murch of the local Athlone hospital. Moatshe's Kanye news dated 23rd October 1944, waxed lyrical about a Kanye cultural renaissance:

Latent talent is plentiful in Kanye and requires bringing to the surface. It would be pleasing to see everybody rally round the people who are making efforts to bring such talent to light. Literature, Music, Speech-making, etc., could all be improved considerably, and...there is no reason why we should be stick-in-the-muds in the world of progress.

Ashton consulted with the local intelligentsia, clerks such as A.R. Moatshe and teachers such as B.C. Thema and Quett Ketumile Masire, and in March 1945 reported to the education department:

A small informal group of Africans has come together to organize the showing of educational films, and has asked me to help with getting the projector and films. They would like to have shows monthly if the projector can be made available. The idea is to have shows two or three nights in succession, on at least one of which a special feature film will be shown and a small entrance fee charged. On the other nights the films especially those of an educational nature will be resewn free of charge. The purchase of the charge is to build up funds for the purchase of equipment and eventually to assist with the production of etc cetera by providing properties, lighting etc.

The Tea Market Expansion Bureau in Johannesburg came up with *Mr. Tea and Mr. Skokiaan* and *Ramosa the Brave*, which were shown to 3,400 people at Kanye in April 1945; and *Xapa in the Big City* shown to a thousand in May 1945. *Mr Tea and Mr Skokiaan* contrasted 'the sober man who drank tea and prospered [against] the profligate who did not and who suffered dire consequences.' *Xapa in the Big City* (silent, three reels) was about the hapless Xapa who goes from his 'kraal' (hamlet) to the big city, in order to earn the money for *lobola*. He is persuaded to drink tea, but reverts to booze, and loses his job. All ends happily when he reforms and returns home enriched.

Ashton obtained a list of Kenya Information Office films, including *With Our African Troops in the Middle East* and a film on the operations of their *Mobile Cinema*, but did not succeed on obtaining copies. He was also emboldened to use his personal contacts with the communist intellectual Advocate Bram Fischer, who referred him to the Friends of the Soviet Union in Johannesburg.

In April 1945 the Friends of the Soviet Union sent along four films that Ashton reported 'were greatly appreciated and an eyeopen[ing] for the audience.' The Friends then became the most consistent supplier of movies to the Kanye cinema, which ran a Soviet film festival between April and October 1945. Four Soviet short films, *Two Discoveries*, *100 Million Women*, *Five Men of Velish*, and *Strongpoint 42*, kicked off the festival—the last title, a semi-documentary war thriller, seems to have been most popular. After those, *Soviet Schoolchild* and *Glimpses of Soviet Science* were followed by three more war thrillers *100 for One*, *Leningrad Fights*, and *Three in a Shellhole*.

Ashton reported back to the education department in June 1945:

During the past year, we have held about seven shows...The audiences were almost entirely African with children sometimes being well in the majority. Some of the shows were free but at others a small charge has been made, usually 6d for adults and 3d for children.

The films shewn have covered a wide range—news films supplied by your office [which are] almost entirely of war pictures and served a useful purpose...But there was too great a monotony about them and their appeal in the end was limited almost entirely to a small minority...Two dramatic Russian shorts, one showing the capture of a strongpoint and the other an incident in German occupied Jugoslavia—were much more effective in showing what the war is and what the war is about. The interest films shown by the Tea Market Expansion Board are good, and...shew interesting scenes of African life in the Reserves and towns...The British films have been very variable—one on forestry was excellent, but others have been uncoordinated pictures of English country side, with little point and sometimes downright silly. One Soviet film, on Russian education, was excellent. We have only just started on the Red Cross ones...

The South African Red Cross had sent along two films, *The Two Brothers* and *The Bantu Grows [sic] More Food*. The first film contrasted the stories of two brothers, Charlie and Enoch, who both get syphilis. Charlie goes to a traditional healer, and spreads the disease to his wife and children leading disastrously to death and deformity. But Enoch is 'sensible' and goes to a Western doctor and gets cured, and his family all live happily thereafter.

Ashton remained enthusiastic about the potential of 'the film medium' for the 'instruction of both adults and children'. But the films already shown 'have not been quite as successful as they should, for the following reasons...' He listed cold and rainy nights, lack of publicity and public apathy, and added:

The children are attracted by shows but most adults are not interested...the impression got round that the shows were primarily designed for children...adults do not like attending shows also attended by children...[as] when instructional films are presented feel some embarrassment.

Adult embarrassment can hardly be seen if the topic was a social disease such as syphilis! In another letter, Ashton remarked that 'experience has shewn that the state of the moon makes a big difference to attendances—on a moonlit night people come much more readily than on dark nights.'

It is not clear how Ashton and his committee solved the problem of too many children: perhaps by adults-only performances. But by October 1945 Kanye had run out of Soviet films. Only one Soviet film appears to have been withheld from Kanye, *Hitler's Dream*, which the secretary of Friends of the Soviet Union, E. Ward, disparaged as an inferior comedy. Ward comes across in correspondence as somewhat reluctant to lend films to Kanye, regarding it as a diversion from more worthy proletarian places of exhibition. More than once Ward claimed they had no more films left until Ashton wheedled one more out of the Friends.

In September 1945 Ward testily referred Kanye to the American Office of War Information in Johannesburg for more films. The great U.S. Army war documentary series, 'Why We Fight', initiated by Frank Capra, was in full flow with No.5 *The Battle of Russia* now available in Johannesburg, and it is probable that they were shown at Kanye in 1945-46.

Meanwhile the flow of British material improved. Comedies starring the comedian-singer George Formby (Britain's biggest film star till James Mason came on the scene) were the most popular British films at Kanye. The High Commissioner's Office in Pretoria lent British documentaries including *The Crofters* (20 minutes), a worthy film about the lives of isolated Scottish homesteaders, and *World of Plenty* (40 minutes)--a fast-paced modern documentary (by Karel Reisz) contrasting shots of farming on the North American prairies with starvation in the Third World.

Ashton recognized the necessity of 'gradually educating the people into an appreciation of this medium', like a strange new language. But such appreciation could only be achieved by 'really attractive programmes' of well-made films with action, conflict, and dramatic tension. Of the films that had already been shown at Kanye by June 1945, he complained:

[too] many of the films are either third rate or very remote from local interests and experience. It is essential that the films should be well and clearly produced and should appeal to the audience either by being related to their experiences or in the case of 'exotic' films by being presented simply enough to enable people to understand them. The Tea Market films and the Red Cross ones achieve these conditions very well. The principal actors are African and the action is simple and straightforward, in a setting the people know or can readily understand.

But many of the British films have no local interest or appeal—indeed I am afraid that

most of those we have seen would be found insipid by most audiences anywhere—and their theme, if they had one, is complicated or obscure...a succession of shorts are exhausting to watch and...people get tired of all the pictures being sermons.

They want to relax and enjoy themselves without feeling that they are being preached at all the time. It is noticeable that the only two commercial films we have shewn, a second rate "Wild West" and a weak American "stage" film, were keenly followed and enjoyed and drew one of the biggest houses.

Ashton was scathing about censored films considered suitable for black people in South Africa. Referring to their distributor, he remarked: 'I have [an] African [Consolidated] Films catalogue but their films are rubbish, so we have been chery about getting other films from them.' He wanted to see a central film library built up for the High Commission Territories which would collect educational films from places like Kenya and 'should also acquire "attraction" films such as the Walt Disney cartoon films, which could be shown again and again and would help provide much needed light relief.' He even contemplated the setting up of a film production unit:

The first step is to find out what films are available. Here we are almost completely in the dark but it is not unlikely that thorough enquiry will reveal a multitude of films to satisfy most of our needs will be found and will be readily available from British, American and African sources once conditions have settled down after the war. If suitable films of the type required cannot be procured, they should be made. The economics of this require examination but it may not prove to be as utopian or excessively expensive as it sounds.<sup>40</sup>

By the end of 1946 the pizzazz had fizzled out of the Kanye cinema experiment. Kanye had become just another stop on the Bechuanaland Protectorate mobile cinema circuit. Wartime plans for the development of Bechuanaland along East and Central African lines were abandoned and the British government once more promising to give the High Commission Territories including Bechuanaland and Basutoland over to South Africa. Ashton left the High Commission Territories administrative service that year in disillusion. He went off to what seemed the land of the future in the north, Southern Rhodesia about to be joined with Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland in a 'multi-racial' federation, where he took a job as a social worker in the African townships of Bulawayo.

### ***Other African Cinema Experiments***

The term 'cinema experiment' is unashamedly borrowed from the so-called Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE) that ran between 1935 and 1937 in British East and Central Africa. It is in the context of BEKE and other colonial attempts to use cinema among Africans that the Kanye cinema experiment should be understood.

Hugh Ashton himself had previously been involved in film-making in Basutoland, and obviously learned about films specially made for black South Africans by the Red Cross, etc. He would also have been familiar with the 1944 U.K. Colonial Office 'white paper' on *Mass Education in African Societies*, which advocated the use of cinema, and was no doubt aware of BEKE and colonial debates about which films were suitable for African audiences.

Here we should distinguish (a) stories about the first sight of films by audiences previously unfamiliar with them, from (b) colonial theories about films suitable for Africans. In the same way as small children today may be seen spreading their fingers in curiosity over a television screen, so also adult audiences at first responded with puzzlement. Stories of this kind are numerous—though they should be taken with a pinch on salt!

The French tried to duck when a train rushed towards them; Americans were terrified that a rough sea would crash onto them; Russians were concerned that people had their legs and arms chopped off by the frame; Nigerians consoled themselves that their mosquitoes were not so big when they first saw a close-up shot. In South Africa, according to Thelma Gutsche:

At the outset...at touring shows...assembled audiences not infrequently rose as a body and inspected the back of the screen to discover what had happened to the people they had just seen. Similarly, early native audiences in some areas became hysterical when they saw their first *Felix the Cat* cartoon and rushed screaming into the night declaring the drawings to be “ghosts”.

Colonial debates about the suitability of films for Africans went back to just after the First World War. In South Africa, an American missionary called Ray Phillips started showing Hollywood entertainment films 'severely censored' for Africans. The films were purged of the 'sex-appeal' and 'low-grade suggestive stuff gleaned from the gutters of the world'—which must have left some rather short movies. In Nyasaland (Malawi), a colonial governor expressed his concern about Hollywood films reducing African respect for white colonial masters. In Nigeria a British doctor called William Sellers made medical instructional films and studied audience reactions in the 1920s. He discovered that people more readily understood motion pictures than still photographs—hardly surprising, given that an object is better understood from many angles. He argued that Hollywood-style films with strange camera angles and snappy editing could not be well understood by Africans, and advocated instead the making of slower films with straightforward camera work.

Beginning in 1919-20, Rev. Ray Phillips of the American Zulu (Congregationalist) Mission regularly toured mine labour compounds on South Africa's Witwatersrand, with his travelling cinema. As well as religious narrative films, such as *From the Manger to the Cross*, Ray Phillips showed Tarzan (pseudo-African jungle adventure) films and pre-Disney cartoons such as *Felix the Cat* (which dates back to 1914). Phillips extended his cinema circuit to include 'native locations', hospitals, and jails—and made commercial employers realize 'the direct value of the cinema in sublimating potential criminal tendencies'. In the 1930s, when Phillips went off to do his doctorate at Yale University, his mine compound cinema circuit was taken over by the Native Recruiting Corporation—jointly owned by the Witwatersrand mining companies—and other parts of the circuit were taken over by municipal authorities (who also ran the beer-halls).

Another American Congregationalist, John Merle Davis, had a similar idea to Ray Phillips' for the rapidly developing Copperbelt townships of Northern Rhodesia (Zambia) in 1930. He proposed a three-country study comparing the impact of cinema on industrializing peasant societies in Northern Rhodesia, South Africa, and the Soviet Union. But the main funders, the Carnegie Foundation of New York, preferred what became known as the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE)—partly funded also by the colonial governments of Tanganyika,



Kenya, Uganda, Northern Rhodesia, and Nyasaland.

BEKE lasted from 1935 to 1937. Its producers (a colonial agriculturalist, a colonial educationist, and a couple of colonial medical officers) made thirty-five 16mm films of poor technical quality and simple-minded plots, aimed at improving the hygiene and living conditions of rural folk, rather than the urban-industrial people that Merle Davis's originally targeted. A start was made in developing cinema audiences in rural areas, and in training a small number of technicians to help make films. Local people were also used as actors—one was very successful as a comedian. But the plots of the productions and the characters that the actors portrayed were never properly indigenized. (The films were silent; an attempt at post-dubbing actors' voices was not a success, and faced the problem of the multiplicity of African languages.)

### *Cinema for Black South Africans*

There was a unified cinema market from the Cape to Nairobi from 1913 until the 1950s, because one man controlled Hollywood film distribution in the whole of Eastern and Southern Africa—an American-born millionaire, resident in Johannesburg, named I.W. Schlesinger. He also owned most of the cinemas, and the African Films Trust, which from 1913 onwards produced a weekly newsreel called *The African Mirror* that played in his cinemas. African Films produced feature films in increasing in number during the 1930s. Among Schlesinger's other properties was the radio network that was nationalized as the South African Broadcasting Corporation in 1936.

Hence South African film censorship effectively covered from the Cape to Nairobi for most of the colonial period. Films were first approved as a whole, or had bits cut out, or were rejected altogether, and were then graded as suitable for all audiences including non-whites, for white children, or just for white adults. The Cape provincial censorship board set the pace from 1917 until 1931, until a national board set up in 1931. In the year 1937 that board rejected 32 films, made cuts in 40 films, and excluded 'natives' from seeing 245 films. (In the Bechuanaland Protectorate the 1920 Cinematograph Proclamation gave the resident commissioner the right to censor any film not already graded in South Africa—and prohibited all filming of 'natives' without his permission. In 1946, no doubt because of the Kanye cinema experiment, film censorship was delegated to district commissioners.)

Most films made by the African Films Trust were aimed at white South Africans. But in 1939 the South African Red Cross Society (SARCS) commissioned it to make *Two Brothers*, a feature film with African actors, (It should be remarked here that until 1948 South Africa had a remarkably progressive health régime, concerned with malnutrition and infectious diseases.) We have already seen that *Two Brothers* played at Kanye, and contrasted the stories of brothers Charlie and Enoch. It was not the first, but it became the most famous, of a number of 'contrastive' Mister Wise and Mister Foolish propaganda films made for all parts of British colonial Africa.

During the later 1930s, the Native Recruiting Corporation (NRC) and its twin the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association ('Wenela') used 'mobile cinema units' in vans, to draw recruits from the reserve army of labour in the Ciskei and Transkei and Zululand, Basutoland and Swaziland, and as far away as Bechuanaland, Mozambique, Northern Rhodesia, Nyasaland,

and Tanganyika.

Increased labour recruitment meant increased market opportunities for manufactured goods and Western tastes in Eastern and Southern Africa. The Tea Market Expansion Board (TMEB motto: 'Any time is tea time' branch in Johannesburg made a series of films aimed at promoting tea-drinking among Africans in Southern and East Africa. Their 16mm films are said to have 'habituated tens of thousands of natives to cinema films' as well as to tea-drinking. TMEB's film making kicked off with a contrastive film of the Mister Wise and Mister Foolish type, titled *Mr Tea and Mr Skokiaan*. Though TMEB films of one Southern African culture are said to have been mocked and rejected in some other parts of the sub-continent, people in Bechuanaland such as at Kanye seem to have welcomed the window on a wider world. *Travels of Mr Jack Tea-Drinker* (silent, two reels) told the story of a motor tour from Cape Town, through Basutoland (Maseru and Roma) to Johannesburg, the Kruger Park, and the Transkei—visiting people among whom tea-drinking was popular. Each TMEB film ended with the slogan TEA IS GOOD FOR YOU:

The popularity of free exhibitions by the Bureau's touring vans was immense and natives in the territories, having seen a show in one village, would walk twenty miles to see it again the following night at the next. Invariably the end of a film would be accompanied by a chant from the audience: "Tea is GOOOOOOD for you" and the value of such publicity was strikingly demonstrated.

By 1939 the Tea Market Expansion Board had up to eight vans touring South Africa (and neighbouring territories?). The TMEB used political content like the newsreels shown by the British authorities in the High Commission Territories.

Other filmmakers in South Africa included 'Bill' Lewis of Cape Town, who filmed a documentary record of the installation of the Paramount Chief of Basutoland in 1940, which was followed by *The Social and Economic Life of the Basutoes*—both made in collaboration with enthusiastic young Dr Hugh Ashton when he was on the high commissioner's staff.

### ***Colonial Debates on African Audiences***

In 1939 Dr William Sellers from Nigeria was made head of Britain's Colonial Film Unit within the Colonial Office in London. Sellers by no means dominated all the film output of the Colonial Film Unit, which inherited a proud tradition of documentary film making from the (by then defunct) Empire Marketing Board. But his distinctive views about the kind of films that colonial 'natives' might understand were very influential, in French and Belgian as well as British Africa. From an influential lecture by William Sellers, given in London in 1941, we may sum up his rules for making films for Africans as:

1. *The chicken rule*: Africans do not see the whole screen, but notice a chicken in one corner which distracts them from the main plot.
2. *The mosquito rule*: Africans are confused by camera tricks and flashbacks, thinking the close-up mosquito is a monster

...equally is a member.

3. *The familiarity rule*: Africans grasp only what is familiar to them, and are confused by the unfamiliar because they cannot imagine any context not previously known to them.
4. *The laughter rule*: African laugh at inappropriate moments if the films are not made by 'experts' who understand 'native psychology'.

Of course there is a germ of truth in these observations: we have all thought some movies misleading, boring, confusing, and ridiculous. But when they were strictly applied in film-making, Sellers' rules resulted in slow, pedantic movies without imaginative imagery, hammering home a simple message. In treating all 'natives' as permanent children new to cinema, and in giving control to white 'experts' who claimed to know what 'natives' thought better than the 'natives' themselves, Sellers' rules were racist.

But if Sellers' rules became colonial orthodoxy on questions of audience response to films in Africa, there were also academic dissenters. The most notable opponent of Sellers was the highly respected scientist Julian Huxley. He had travelled out to Kenya in 1929 to test the responses of schoolchildren to scientific films—and had reported back enthusiastically, having found no significant difference to children's learning elsewhere.

The views of Huxley and Sellers clashed in the remarkably progressive (some said revolutionary) 1944 Colonial Office report (white paper) on *Mass Education in African Society*. Huxley sat on the committee, while Sellers was a major adviser. The contradiction between them can be seen in the report.

Paragraphs 120-122 followed Huxley in stating that 'colonial peoples are as much attracted by [cinema] as are any others', but that 'undue emphasis' should *not* be laid on the 'few experiments' (i.e. those of Sellers and BEKE) on the 'reception and effectiveness' of audiences. The report went on to tout the virtues of news films and documentaries as windows on the world, which 'could indeed help to develop a "national" outlook among the people of the territory'. (Nationalism was therefore seen as something still lacking, to be encouraged rather than repressed.) The report also remarked on the potential of 'history and folklore' as 'excellent material for [entertainment] film scripts'. Paragraph 129 advocated the establishment of libraries of 'entertainment films and documentaries produced primarily for audiences in Europe and America' because they are appreciated by 'many members of colonial communities'.

But the next three paragraphs delivered a Sellers-type counter-whammy:

Experience has confirmed that for the purposes of education and entertainment, films as produced in Europe and America are unsuitable for large sections of colonial peoples. The relatively uneducated, as well as the more primitive people, are perplexed by short sequences, quick transitions from one subject to another, such camera tricks as shots taken from curious angles, and "fading in" and "fading out." For them, films should have relatively long sequences, the minimum of rapid, unexplained transitions, and no camera tricks...

...a special type of film [is needed] which can only be produced by individuals who have a first-hand knowledge of the limitations of those they seek to educate, and are able

to grade a population into sections according to the technique suitable for each...

...[with scripts written by those with] an extensive sociological knowledge of their audiences...the sense of humour peculiar to a particular people, their standards of morality and their religious beliefs.

The Colonial Film Unit ran out of steam in the early 1950s, but left two major heritages. One was a film unit in the Gold Coast, which, for reasons not yet fully explained, never successfully transformed itself into a film industry for Ghana. The other was the Central African Film Unit (CAFU), based in Southern Rhodesia from 1948 to 1963.

CAFU based in Salisbury must be clearly distinguished from Central African broadcasting for Africans, based in Lusaka, which responded to African audiences and involved Africans in programme-making. (See Peter Fraenkel's classic book *Wayaleshi* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1959, and more recent studies by David Kerr.) The cinema historian James Burns, in his recent book *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (2002), has shown how CAFU was converted into the film unit of the Rhodesian ministry of internal affairs. That unit made child-like films (including political propaganda and humour featuring the comedian 'Tickey') that were shown by mobile cinema units to audiences in rural areas of Rhodesia.

### ***Colonial African Audience Research***

The only systematic research on colonial African cinema audiences known to me was conducted in 1960 by the American anthropologist Hortense Podermaker, who had herself previously produced the classic study of Hollywood producers, actors, writers, and technicians—but not audiences—in *Hollywood the Dream Factory: An Anthropologist Looks at the Movie-Makers*, published in 1950.

Earlier research was piecemeal, but there are some accounts of early audience responses to films in Southern Africa. The social historian Thelma Gutsche includes observations made during the 1930s and early 1940s in her University of Cape Town doctorate in 1946 (eventually published as author of *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940* in 1972). She remarked on the appeal of 'action, animals and actual circumstances' among African audiences, and added that censorship helped to explain why so few Hollywood drama features appealed to African audiences in South Africa:

...the drama proper, rendered aseptic by severe censorship, interested them very little, particularly as audiences, despite the sound film, persisted in chattering loudly throughout the performance.

(The tradition of chatter in African cinemas may be attributable in part to the English language on screen being incomprehensible at that time to most of the audience. Chatter can also be understood as audience participation and commentary, also evident among proletarian audiences elsewhere, before it was wiped out by bourgeois passivity.)

As for educational and instructional films, the writer-administrator Vernon Brelsford reported on African audience response to the Red Cross venereal diseases film, *Two Brothers*, in Lusaka around 1945. Responses ranged from 'critical and insightful understanding of the film's manipulative intentions' (because it falsely suggested that Western doctors could cure syphilis with sulphur drugs) to shock and horror and bewilderment. No doubt there would there would also have been sympathy for the view expressed by British cinema goers in 1942:

There is a feeling that when you to the cinema, you go to be amused and distracted from everyday life...If, while you are in the mood, someone on the screen lectures at you, you are inclined to resent it.

Back in South Africa, Thelma Gutsche found—consistent with the earlier findings of Ray Phillips—that cowboy films, and comedy films featuring the old silent movie stars Charlie Chaplin and Harold Lloyd, were most popular. Cowboy films (known as 'Westerns' to film buffs) were the archetypical American drama, going back to Buffalo Bill's Wild West 'spectacle' (or 'Drama of Civilization') of American circus in the previous century. Their appeal as a genre to Africans might be considered surprising, given their dedication to tales of white settler triumph over 'savages' and theft of land. Writing about Witwatersrand mine-workers, Gutsche directs us towards psychological rather than ideological explanation:

Sophistication was merely a matter of time but more than twenty years of film exhibitions on the mine circuit failed to cure the "boys" of their affection for a mythical cow-boy called "Jack" (no matter what his real name) and his always successful deeds of daring.

That the mythical 'Jack' was widespread among African miners in Southern Africa is supported by the observation of a compound manager called Spearpoint, on Northern Rhodesia's Copperbelt in 1937, that the favourite to win in fights between miners were cheered on with cries of "Jack, Jack, Jack..."

Chaplin and Lloyd films would have satisfied some of Sellers' film criteria by their long takes in long-shot, and lack of cross-cutting between camera angles—designed to show off their stars' dramatic art to best effect without interruption. A more sophisticated appreciation of the appeal of Chaplin to African audiences was given, though somewhat unfortunately expressed, with no actual location identified, by the documentary film pioneer John Grierson in 1958:

I have seen Chaplin films play to thousands of Negroes in the African jungles, and how they took him to their hearts! Oddly enough they had an even quicker perception of his movements and every development of a gag than I ever saw evidenced by a white audience. As you know, Chaplin is such a genius with a gag that he plays four or five or even six variations on it, and these Negro audiences would howl their appreciation of each move separately, exactly as the spectators in a bull-ring shout "Olé!" to the separate passes of the matador.

In 1960 Hortense Powdermaker conducted research on cinema audiences on the Copperbelt

with a team of student interviewers asking open-ended questions. She was intrigued to find out how far people on the Copperbelt had caught the cinema-going habit, as part of their integration into what we might nowadays call the globalized consumer world. In her previous book, *Hollywood the Dream Factory* (1950), she had noted that while American audiences were always critical of movies that touched on their own experience, they tended to accept uncritically portrayals of lifestyles of which they had no experience—foreigners, gangsters, wicked women, rich and famous socialites.

Powdermaker's team of student interviewers, as reported in her *Copper Town: Changing Africa* (1962), discovered that individual responses to films varied with different levels of understanding of Western (i.e. European/ American) society—and different degrees of individual resentment against white settlers. We should recall that the study was conducted in the 'Year of Africa', when tensions were rising to boiling point against the Central African Federation, which had bound Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland to settler-ruled Southern Rhodesia.

Powdermaker built on her previous understanding of films as 'a secondary form of reality'—with 'surface realism and sensory appeal [that] tend to disguise fantasy and give it the appearance of reality'—to recognize how difficult it was for audiences without the appropriate experience to distinguish between (foreign) fictional drama and documentary films. Or as Copperbelt film goers put it, to distinguish reality from 'cheating' with 'clowns' (actors)—the sort of the playacting that they had done at school.

Newsreels and newsreel-style documentaries were in general found to be confusing, because they presented a jumble of quick images, only explicable if your command of English was good enough to grasp the spoken commentary. British newsreels were preferred among the better educated minority to Schlesinger's *African Mirror*, which was overly concerned with white settler culture.

Hollywood romances (what Pacific Islanders called kiss-kiss movies, as opposed to bang-bang movies) could be particularly misunderstood by audiences. Kissing was usually seen—as Hollywood usually intended it—as a preliminary to sexual intercourse. Hence the offence given when a man kissed his daughter on screen, as it was interpreted as a prelude to incest. (Lest this be thought fantastic, I recall buying a magazine in 1975 in Malawi, in which a photograph of the actor Ryan O'Neal kissing his daughter Tatum in the film *Paper Moon* had been blacked out by President Banda's censor.)

Raucous Copperbelt audiences, who often could not understand what was being said anyway, drowned out the sound tracks of movies. Powdermaker interpreted this in a positive light:

Whatever was seen was commented on, interpreted, criticized. Questions were asked. Sometimes a friend answered them—or no one answered.

The lack of importance given to sound may be one explanation why the silent comedies of Charlie Chaplin were so persistently popular as late as 1960. Powdermaker gathered that, in townships like Remba, Charlie Chaplin was appreciated as *Kaumuntu*, the little sexless man

township Bemba, Charlie Chaplin was appreciated as *bumwana*, the little scoundrel man.

Disney sound-cartoon films 'were regarded with amused condescension, the natives thinking it very ludicrous that a duck should be considered capable of speech.' In township Bemba, cartoon films were known as *Kadoli*, as children shouted "Dolly, dolly, hallow dolly" when they came on screen.<sup>22</sup>

Powdermaker's researchers asked Copperbelt miners about the appeal of cowboy films, and were told that "they teach us how to fight others and how to win lovers." Powdermaker found an 'almost uniform response' to Wild West cowboy films as if they really were Gutsche's 'actual circumstances':

Even older and better educated young men in their early twenties also found it difficult to accept cowboy films as fictional. To them the blows were actually heavy ones, men were really hurt...

The hero who fought with his fists, not with guns or knives, was universally applauded. American 'Jack' the cowboy was seen as the model resister, by contrast with African 'Jim' the passive collaborator. Powdermaker concluded:

My hypothesis is that [cowboy films] would particularly please those in a weak position in the power structure. Male adolescents in the United States, feeling their growing male strength and powerless to use it against the control of their parents and [of] other adults in authority enjoy cowboy films.

## **Conclusion**

The interest of the Kanye cinema experiment of 1944-46 lies in the close consultation between Hugh Ashton as its organizer and at least the leading members of the audience. The range of films was therefore wider and more daring than any of the 'cinema experiments' organized by white 'experts' elsewhere in Africa. Hugh Ashton was a man of scholarly cast whose expertise was to listen to and observe people, particularly those with education, rather than to pontificate from on high about the character of 'the native'.

The latter part of the Second World War in the Bechuanaland Protectorate can be compared to the gathering of rain-clouds after decades of drought. After the war a great wind almost immediately gathered and blew those clouds of promise away. The Protectorate reverted to its mid-colonial role as an impoverished appendage of the Union of South Africa, leaving its people dispirited and pessimistic for the next decade and a half. *Kgosi* Tshekedi sensed the new mood in April-May 1946 when he complained in a speech to the African Advisory Council:

Government has allowed to pass an opportunity for closer cooperation between Africans and themselves. We are getting more and more dissatisfied with the policy of having everything thought and done for us.

**Copyright Neil Parsons 2004**