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Sensational Africa: Roosevelt's Cultural Politics and Expeditionary Filmmaking of 1909-1910

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to discuss the competing and contradictory influences inherent in cinematographic representations of Africa. In particular, I will focus on the films pertaining to Theodore Roosevelt's exploration of East Africa with emphasis on the following points: how Roosevelt's safari expeditions created a framework for exploration films; and how natural history added educational discourse to U.S. cinema of the transitional period.

Keywords: transitional cinema, natural history, Theodore Roosevelt, Cherry Kearton, Selig Polyscope Company

要旨

セオドア・ローズヴェルトの東アフリカ探検に関連する映画の調査から、合衆国映画のアフリカ表象に内在する複雑な拮抗を論じる。(1) ローズヴェルトの探検がいかに関与したのか、(2) ナチュラル・ヒストリーがいかに関与したのかを言及する。

キーワード: 移行期の映画、ナチュラル・ヒストリー、セオドア・ローズヴェルト、チェリー・キーアトン、セーリグ社

1. Introduction

During its early years, the cinema served as a substitute for the real thing: spectators were able to catch a glimpse of remote landscapes and exotic ways of life while sitting in the movie theater. This formed the early cinematic mode of what Tom Gunning termed the “cinema of attraction” which “dominated cinema until about 1906-7” (Gunning 1990: 57). Many critics have pointed out that the “cinema of attraction” evolved into classical cinema through a process of cultivating narrative strategies. This process of change is often identified as the transitional period.¹ The transitional period comprised competing, sometimes contradictory influences. One such influence, which had a marked impact on the exploration-film genre at the time, was Theodore Roosevelt’s East African expeditions of 1909-1910. I will, therefore, particularly focus on these years.

Two previous studies tell us much about the particular potential of expeditionary filmmaking: Brownlow’s *The War, the West, and the Wilderness* (1978) and Abel’s *Americanizing the Movies and “Movie-Mad” Audience* (2006). These two studies highlight the contradictory aspects of U.S. cinema in transition. Brownlow attempts to seek out politics in U.S. silent cinema, outlining core premises for building accounts of expeditionary filmmaking.² He points out the coexistence of several arenas within the framework of expeditionary filmmaking. Abel carefully investigates Selig’s African series (which will be discussed below), reinforcing Brownlow’s insightful assertions on expeditionary filmmaking. Abel (2006: 4) further tentatively associates Benedict Anderson’s concept that “U.S. cinema was inextricably bound up with Americanization and the process of imagining a national identity during the early 1910s” to the cinematic experience.

European film productions on Africa were closely linked to European domestic colonial policy. However, we should note that the United States did not have any colonies on the African continent, therefore U.S. boosters, whose politics could be associated with “progressivism”, attempted to hypostatize Africa through canonic discourse. Ben Singer’s discussion on early sensational cinema in *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and its Contexts* could relate to a connection between Africa and U.S. canonic discourse. The African continent could function as a site of sensational melodrama which U.S. policy could embody.

These complicated aspects led me to consider how specific forces urged U.S. filmmakers to produce exploration films. In the second section, I will focus on the function of scientific values in U.S. cinema in the transitional period in order to historicize expeditionary filmmaking. I will, in

¹ Janet Staiger defines the formulation of classical mode as beginning around 1909-11, and as being completed by 1917 (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985: 157). For further details concerning transitional cinema, see Eileen Bowser (1994); Roberta Pearson (1992); Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs (1998); Charlie Keil (2001); Richard Abel (2006).

² Brownlow’s interest centers on Roosevelt’s experiences as a soldier, a cowboy, and an explorer (Brownlow 1978: xv).

particular, focus on Roosevelt's East African expeditions due to the fact that they played a central role in advancing the exploration genre. In the third section, I will examine *Roosevelt in Africa* (1910), discussing the tensions that occurred between filmmakers and naturalists. In the fourth section, I will discuss Selig's re-enactment film: *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1909). In comparing it with *Roosevelt in Africa*, I will describe how Selig tried to re-enact a Theodore Roosevelt expedition, and how it was accepted both by critics and by audiences. In so doing, I will attempt to highlight the competing and contradictory politics of expeditionary filmmaking during the transitional period of U.S. cinema.

2. Sensational/educational Africa within the context of natural history

The rise in immigration at the turn of the twentieth century created many tensions in U.S. society. Widespread racial tension stimulated racism, inciting D.W. Griffith to produce *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). This social climate posed new problems with regards to class, race, and ethnicity. Such tendencies did not just incite racism but also helped shape a new scientific paradigm. Anthropologists such as Franz Boas began to investigate the "Race Problem", took part in reformist activities concerning immigrants, tensions between scientific values and ideas of racism. Both scientists and filmmakers were engaged in the social reform aspect of the media, especially through photography and the motion picture. The Eugenic Record Office (ERO) and the Motion Picture Patents Company (MPPC) were established at the same time and shared a similar mission.

The ERO was established at Cold Spring Harbor in 1909. Led by Charles Davenport, ERO members compiled and analyzed the results of amalgamation with photographs mainly taken by the fieldworker Florence Danielson (Davenport 1913: 2; Maxwell 2008: 118). The MPPC was officially set up in December 1908, its aim was "to gain oligopolistic control of the industry" and "to wrest power away from exchange operators (i.e. distributors) and exhibitors" (Keil 2001: 22). The MPPC's campaign called "both for new forms of filmic discourse and a way of certifying the moral value of these new forms of narration" (Gunning 1991: 155). The MPPC shared educational and more or less eugenic concerns with the ERO. In cooperating with the National Board of Censorship, the MPPC encouraged filmmakers to apply an educational schema to their productions.³ Film critics also spurred discussion on enhancing films for educational subjects. W. Stephan Bush was arguably the most prominent among such reformers. His opinion had a great influence on the guiding principles of the National Board of Censorship, helping to introduce a moral discourse into films of the transitional period (e.g. *MPW* 1909a).

³ The article in *MPW* regarded the United States as "the most cosmopolitan country in the world," and analyzed that U.S. immigrants were "in process [*sic*] of Americanization" (*MPW* 1910h). It emphasized that, although American subjects were in the process of nationalization, it should be cultivated without excluding non-American subjects.

The American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) also attempted to stimulate U.S. people through the medium of photography and the motion picture. In 1909, the AMNH launched a significant exploration campaign, that of Theodore Roosevelt's East African expeditions. These expeditions covered a broad range of activities and had various implications. As a natural historian Roosevelt aimed at deepening knowledge while his mission was primarily to obtain specimens of animals and birds to enrich the AMNH collection. He conceived of Africa as a joyful place (Roosevelt 2001: xix). Though his accounts do not portray racism itself, such as D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), he responded to the dominant discourse on eugenics. During his African expeditions, Roosevelt tried to establish a racial hierarchy through an observation of the "genesis" of the human race and its evolution:

Most of the tribes were of pure savages; but here and there were intrusive races of a higher type; and in Uganda, beyond the Victoria Nyanza, and on the head-waters of the Nile proper, lived a people which had advanced to the upper stages of barbarism, which might almost be said to have developed a very primitive kind of semi-civilization.

(Roosevelt 2001: 2)

Roosevelt's accounts subsumed the radiating images of racism that he projected on the African continent.

According to Staples (2006: 393), "Theodore Roosevelt's widely publicized hunting and collecting expeditions to East Africa in 1908-1910 marked an important change in American perceptions of Africa and the African safari". Indeed, Roosevelt's approach toward Africa showed an epistemic change from "darkest" Africa to "brightest" Africa. The paradigm of the Dark Continent is most evident in Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* (1890). In contrast to Stanley, Roosevelt's attitude toward the African continent was closer to that of Carl Akeley. Akeley was an expeditionary naturalist and author of *In Brightest Africa* (1923). As a leading naturalist, Akeley also helped collect animal species for the AMNH exhibition. He too played a prominent role in advancing filmmaking on the African continent (Haraway 1993: 260-1). According to Haraway (1993: 261), Akeley "is a transitional figure from the Western image of darkest to lightest Africa, from nature worthy of manly fear to nature in need of motherly nurture". In the same manner Roosevelt's filming of the African safari attempted to portray the epistemic shift from "darkest" Africa to "brightest" Africa.⁴ As we can see the cinema was emblematic of the transition in American perceptions of Africa.

⁴ African subjects in the 1910s were mostly categorized as the "brightest" representation of Africa. Nevertheless, Stanley's "darkest Africa" was still influential in films such as Kalem's *Missionaries in Darkest Africa* (1912).

3. Sensationalism created Roosevelt's politics: *Roosevelt in Africa* (1910)

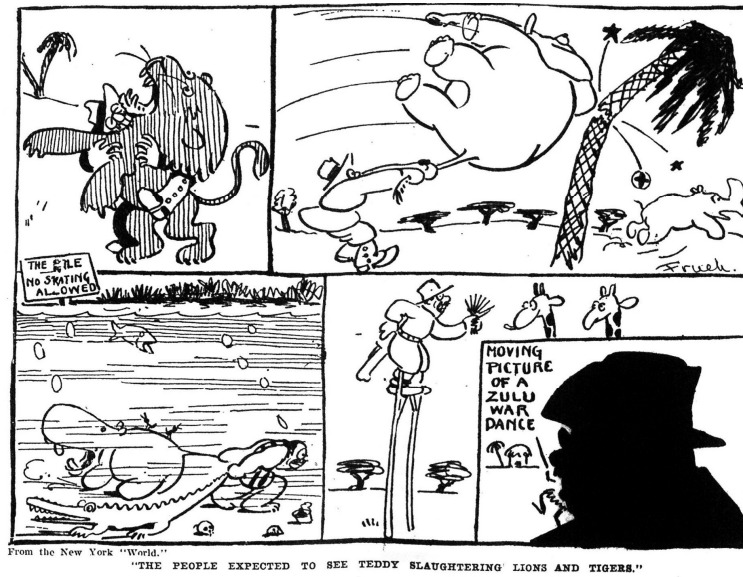
An article titled "Theodore Roosevelt: the Picture Man" pointed out Roosevelt's talent for applying cinematographic traits to his political campaign (MPW 1910j). According to the article, not only "he has been well advertised by photography," but also "he and his [sic] are good photographers" (MPW 1910j). In fact, Roosevelt's idea of the role of the camera was related to his approach toward foreign and domestic policy. In "*Camera Shots at the Big Game*" he suggested that a true democracy would be achieved when the rifle was supplanted by the camera (Roosevelt 1995: 310). Roosevelt (1995: 310-1) also insisted on recording the wild life of the wilderness. His aim was to preserve "the physical hardihood," "the sense of limitless freedom," and "the remoteness and wild charm and beauty of primitive nature". He conceived of a connection between the camera and U.S. policy with particular ideological implications.

With these debates in mind, I will focus on *Roosevelt in Africa*, an actuality film of Roosevelt's East African expeditions. The cameraman was Cherry Kearton, an Englishman. Kearton was renowned as a photographer particularly expert at taking pictures of birds and penguins. In 1909, Kearton met up with Roosevelt at Neri and joined the party for the purpose of recording the expedition (Roosevelt 2001: 323). Kearton's camera was to cover Roosevelt's activities, performances of native peoples, and wild animals observed while on safari. Fragmentary footage was sent to Pathé Frères, one of the traditional French film companies. Pathé edited it into a 2-reel film of 36 scenes, in which the film ended with a still photo of Roosevelt in Rough Rider costume (MPW 1910c; MPW 1910e).

The MPPC released the film in 1910 with the sensational phrase: "The Far Famed American Hunter, Colonel Roosevelt, amid the man-eating monsters of the Wild African Jungle" (MPW 1910a). Kearton, however, did not refer to *Roosevelt in Africa* in his book *Wild Life Across the World*, as the only lion scene he could take was a still photo: scene 26 "Flash Light of a Man Eating Lion [sic] in the Jungle" (MPW 1910c). Habitually lions are only active after nightfall, thus it was too dark for the camera to shoot the scene. The flashlight of a lion taken from a still photo print looked "like a dead lion, or a poor wash drawing of that animal" (MPW 1910e). At the preview of *Roosevelt in Africa*, Roosevelt celebrated the progress of cinematography (MPW 1910i). Nonetheless, neither the audience nor the critics were satisfied with the film (Figure 1). Therefore, in another film, supposedly a Selig comedy titled *Teddy in Jungleland*, Hoffman proposed inserting a scene of an active lion instead of the still photo of scene 26 (MPW 1910e).⁵

⁵ I couldn't identify the Selig comedy titled *Teddy in Jungleland* that Hoffman mentions here. I imagine Hoffman was referring to *Teddy in Jungle Land*, which was produced by the Vitagraph Company in 1909.

Fig. 1: Audience expectations



(MPW 1910e)

The article humorously illustrates the audience's expectations of the films on Roosevelt's expeditions. However, *Roosevelt in Africa* was a prominent actuality film available for natural history and anthropology study. It was not attractive as an entertainment film, therefore most re-enactment films of Roosevelt's expeditions included a scene of his dramatic confrontation with a lion.

Some naturalists were skeptical about the sensational sketches of wild animals and natural environments. Kearton was a prominent cameraman in terms of "pure unfaked photographs of natural history subjects" (MPW 1910g). *The New York Times* describes Kearton's stoic attitude to cinematography in natural environments as follows:

There is no excuse for nature faking [he says] even on the grounds of the need to make nature stories interesting. The truth about birds and beasts is far stranger and more interesting than anything that the faker can imagine. Many birds and some animals are very intelligent, but the relation between their intelligence and the human mind is about the same as that between a tallow candle and the midday sun.

(*New York Times*, 1 March, 1908)

Kearton's stance of "no excuse for nature faking" is comparable to John Burroughs' statement in which he insists that naturalists should tell nature stories in a faithful way. John Burroughs was one of the most prominent naturalists of the period. His obsession with recording nature reflected the expeditionary filmmaking of the early twentieth century (Mitman 1999: 10-2).

In *The Atlantic Monthly*, Burroughs devoted several pages to take issue with “nature faking.” A nature writer has to tell “what he sees and knows without any other motive than telling the truth” (Burroughs 1903: 299). Burroughs took issue with the popular writers of the period such as Earnest Thompson Seton and William J. Long:

But in Mr. Thompson Seton’s *Wild Animals I Have Ever Known*, and in the recent work of his awkward imitator, the Rev. William J. Long, I am bound to say that the line between fact and fiction is repeatedly crossed, and that a deliberate attempt is made to induce the reader to cross, too, and to work such a spell upon him that he shall not know that he has crossed and is in the land of make-believe.

(Burroughs 1903: 300)

He lambasted such writings as “sham natural history” (Burroughs 1903: 298). Just like Burroughs, when Kearton took photographs of animals, he insisted on not faking the scene. It was because of this emphasis on “telling the truth in nature” that there was no lion scene in *Roosevelt in Africa*. Nevertheless, the film helped to embody Roosevelt’s political ideas on the role of the camera and more notably it showed a marked phase in the transitional period of U.S. cinema. In the 1910s fiction films were the dominant mode of cinematographic expression. In the case of *Roosevelt in Africa*, an actuality film, the dominance of reality over fiction was strongly advocated by politicians, naturalists, reformers, and film critics. *Roosevelt in Africa* and the reactions it inspired demonstrate the contradictory aspects of U.S. transitional cinema.

4. The dominance of showing a real lion: *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1909)

Roosevelt’s East African expeditions inspired filmmakers to produce re-enactment films of African safari adventures. There was a rapid increase in such re-enactment films and their success encouraged Selig to produce an entire “African series” featuring animals from the Selig Zoo in Los Angeles.⁶ In 1909, an anonymous company embarked on recreating Roosevelt’s expedition at a studio in New York:

Col. Roosevelt hunted in the jungle of the cedars out on the marshes to the eastward of Sheepshead Bay village one day last week. He hunted before the eyes of a moving picture machine, and it would have been a perfectly bully hunt had it not been that the hind legs of the elephant caved in at the crucial moment and had not a grass fire maliciously set by some of the undesirable citizens of Sheepshead Bay destroyed the jungle utterly. (MPW 1909b)

⁶ As for the Selig Polyscope Company and Selig’s “African series,” I mainly consulted Emrich (1997); Lahue (1973); Musser (1994); Abel (2006); Bean (2008). For the Selig Zoo see MPW (1915); MPN (1916); *Katsudo no Sekai, 活動之世界* (1921).

The article described several episodes: Roosevelt's parades with native peoples and wild animals, elephants getting involved in a fire, the tight schedule, and so on. As to the article above, I would like to emphasize two points: firstly, the fact that "Roosevelt hunted before the eyes of a moving picture machine"; and secondly, the fact that Roosevelt's hunting was re-enacted at a village in New York. In other words, a film production tried to create "Africa" through placing wild animals and extras dressed as natives in a New York film studio. As Hanson (2004: 16-7) argues, "middle-class reformers advocated parks as helping to contain the threat posed by urbanization to moral and social order", and, just like parks, cinematographic representation was familiar to middle-class people. Recreating natural environments in a studio was to enhance a film's quality in terms of education.

Based on this premise, I will re-examine the borderline between fact and fiction through investigating a re-enacted exploration film, that of Selig's *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (1909), a 1-reel film in which a hunter traps and kills a lion (Figure 2).

Fig. 2: A still photo from *Hunting Big Game in Africa*



(Brownlow 1978: 404)

Brownlow (1978: 573) listed this film as having been lost. The essential information for understanding how *Hunting Big Game in Africa* (SC 1909) was constructed was taken from a handwritten continuity script.

According to Brownlow (1978: 405), the film does not directly refer to Roosevelt's expedition; yet the initials TR are visible on the luggage. An article (*MPW* 1978: 405) reported the storyline as follows:

A lion run is discovered, and, unmindful of premises which must be fulfilled, they prepare to secure a fine specimen. This is accomplished by building a trap, a large hole dug in the soft earth and carefully covered with canebrake and jungle grass... The lion soon winds his prey, and unwittingly walks into the pitfall. The bearers rush forward a cage, brought along for that purpose, and a magnificent jungle monarch is soon started on his long journey to America.

In "Notable Films of the Week", moreover, a writer pointed out that "the earlier scenes show Mr. Roosevelt and his party in Africa just as one may roughly imagine them to have been when they got to their animal-killing business" (*MPW* 1909e). The chief attraction of this film was the elephants and the lions (SC 1909; *MPW* 1910k). Its plot is reminiscent of the animal collecting stories depicted in Akeley's *In Brightest Africa*. The storyline also reminds us of Franck Buck, an animal dealer who was active from the 1920s to the 1940s (Hanson 2004: 91). Narrative schemas of animal collecting stories were influential on the plot of *Hunting Big Game in Africa*.

The Selig Company advertised the film as if its cameraman had actually accompanied an exploration party (*MPW* 1909c). Selig tentatively forged an exploration story in which its cameraman had traveled with Roosevelt just as Kearton did. Selig's account deliberately obscured the line between fact and fiction. However, *Hunting Big Game in Africa* was appreciated because it included a scene of "a real lion". The unnatural aspects with regard to the costume of the natives were not so important (*MPW* 1909e). *Hunting Big Game in Africa* was considered successful in recording an authentic environment in spite of its inconsistencies. It laid emphasis on a "real" lion instead of on the story of an African expedition. In his attempts to promote films on the African safari, Selig unintentionally reacted against the dominant cinematic mode and partly modified the story-based narrative strategies that had evolved since the end of the 1900s. *Hunting Big Game in Africa* responded to a mode of actuality film which was influenced by scientific paradigms such as natural history. Such dominance of fact over fiction in the Selig film is regarded as confrontation and negotiation of discourse in the shift from early cinema to classical cinema.

In the series of articles entitled "The Modern Way in Moving Picture Making," Thomas Bedding considered the significance of scientific knowledge in order to advance outdoor cinematography. Bedding referred to the fact that wild animal photography demanded "a combination of skill, nerve and knowledge rarely possessed by the ordinary crank turner" (*MPW* 1909d). In a subsequent

article Bedding said, “the moving picture camera is a perfect substitute for the real thing itself, whatever that real thing may be” (*MPW* 1909f). According to him, cinematographic representations are useful to make sense of the world. Cinematography in natural surroundings is an intelligent, worthwhile practice. This commitment to fact resulted in the emergence of specific ideas regarding the motion picture and the cameraman that had political and scientific implications.

5. Conclusion

The nature of transition, as pointed out by Keil, “involves filmmakers’ slow process of reaction to externally imposed problems” (Keil 2001: 209). I believe this study has identified a specific type of problem and its solutions that confronted filmmakers of the transitional period. Several trends relevant to Roosevelt’s exploration films influenced U.S. film production. It helped to enrich cinematic expression and move U.S. cinema to another phase. Filmmakers and critics approached Roosevelt’s East African expeditions from the standpoint of emphasis on the essence of realness rather than of story. The exploration films I have focused on in this study showed the dominance of reality over fiction. U.S. cinema in transition exhibited contradictions between filmmakers’ commitment to fact and their commitment to fiction. These conflicting thoughts on cinematographic representation will enable us to further understand the dynamic paradigmatic shifts across science, politics, and the film industry.

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