

A black and white photograph of a mobile cinema tent. The tent is a large, rectangular structure with a white interior. At the top of the tent, there are four circular lights. A large audience of people is seated on the ground inside the tent, facing a screen. The screen is currently blank. The audience consists of men, women, and children, all dressed in early 20th-century attire. The tent is set up outdoors, and the background shows a dark, possibly wooded area.

**At the Margins of Cinema History:
Mobile Cinema in the British Empire**

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It is a little known fact that the British Empire was one of the early agents of development for mobile cinema. Less spectacular than the remarkable 1920s agit-prop film trains used by the Soviet Union or the cinema ambulanti of Fascist Italy, and much less known than Third Cinema and other movements of underground cinema that challenged theatrical distribution and aesthetics in the post-war period, British experiments in mobile cinema are nonetheless an important and often overlooked part of cinema history.¹

Mobile cinema in the British Empire has its own distinctive characteristics. In particular, communications theory of the British Empire emphasized differential rates of modernization between and within each colony and nation. Reception of government film became a realm for examining audience morale, values, and even politics. At Canada's National Film Board, for example, extensive mobile cinema operation established in the 1940s served as a space for the monitoring of citizen response to government objectives. Given his background in Empire communications, inaugural NFB Chairman John Grierson was no doubt aware that two decades before Canada began its rural circuits, films had been shown in Africa and across the English countryside in similar manner. During World War II, the parallels across the British Empire and Commonwealth are striking. Cinema vans were used by the Colonial Film Unit to spread war propaganda in Africa, to tour around the English countryside to show war propaganda, as well as to make the circuit of Canadian rural outposts. Yet these examples are rarely brought together. In what follows, I trace the "hidden" history of mobile cinema practices utilized in the ambit of British modernization, comparing colonial and national applications.²

There is a utopian potential lodged in cinema's ability to transport us beyond physical limitations, to show us new horizons. The detachment of eye and mind from constraints of time and space does appear to bestow an unprecedented mobility. For many analysts this quality has made cinema and its spaces of reception into privileged sites of the modern. Film historian Anne Friedberg has explored the qualitative changes to experiences of time and space wrought by both new technologies of movement as well as those of representation in late nineteenth-century Europe.³ Her analysis of the "mobilized *virtual gaze*" (my emphasis) and the emergence of cinematic *flânerie* has been an important contribution to a post-psychoanalytic analysis of film and subjectivity. She asserts that "as the gaze become more *virtually* mobile, the spectator become[s] more physically immobile."⁴ In a colonial context, however, the introduction of modern media such as film and the modes of perception they implied and encouraged, were arguably imbricated within a system that mitigated this virtual mobility.

Footage shot in Africa and the Arab world, for example, was for many years most likely destined for audiences in Europe. The virtual mobility of European audiences was thus linked in complex ways with the work of demobilizing colonial subjects. In their book *Arab and African Filmmaking*, Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes write, "The European-dominated media production of representations of African and Arab life has a history almost as long as that of media consumption, as exemplified—in cinema—by the development of distribution and exhibition structures."⁵ The early uses of mobile cinema for natives and "static" cinemas for Europeans in the colonies, as well as the shooting of material to be sent back to the imperial centre, would establish a set of differential distribution and exhibition practices with long-term effects. Where radio broadcasting was established early on as a private medium, cinema was from the outset public and was structured, in terms of both production and distribution, by colonial relations that emphasized the constraint on mobility.⁶

In the interwar period of 1918 to 1928, the working class in England gradually won the right to vote. As a result, the British Conservative Party targeted this newly enfranchised group with propaganda projected from mobile cinema daylight vans. While workers' film groups were certainly active in the 1920s and 1930s, generally-speaking these groups' films were shown almost exclusively at labour meetings and film societies.⁷ By contrast, between 1925 and 1939, the British Conservative Party treated film as its most valuable propaganda

weapon and took the show out to the constituents.⁸ In order to reach non-affiliated working class audiences, the publicity arm of the Conservative Party hit upon the idea of "daylight cinema vans" that could show films in the street at any time of day. Historian T. J. Hollins writes, "The draw of a free film show, particularly in rural areas where films were still a novelty, was sufficient to attract large audiences of mixed political persuasions, and from the earliest period the films produced were designed to hold the audience by entertaining and amusing them at the same time as putting across a message."⁹ Touring around the Midlands in 1925, van operators would screen a short film used to attract a crowd and then subject the audience to a more or less traditional political meeting that would follow. In 1926, the year of the General Strike in Britain, the vans toured mining areas in order to reach disgruntled workers.

Initially, films shown were about the Empire and its colonies, but the Conservative Party soon began to commission purpose specific films. One popular decision was to use Felix-the-Cat type cartoons "ridiculing the policy and tactics" of the Labour Party and other political rivals.¹⁰ Other short films included speeches by Conservative Party leaders, vaudeville sketches with political messages, compilation documentaries, and live-acted dialogues between "working men" in which one actor demonstrated to another why conservatism was best. By 1930, there were 12 outdoor cinema vans and 12 smaller vans carrying equipment for indoor use. From 1927 all vans were fitted with early sound systems thought to be essential aspects of drawing audiences to their spectacles.¹¹ In the months immediately prior to the 1935 general election, it was estimated that 1.5 million people saw films from these publicity vans. In 1939 the vans were turned over to war publicity (which will be described below). After the war, the mystique of film had worn off. The vans were eventually sold in 1953.¹²

Soon after these first experiments with cinema vans, in 1926, the British government established the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) to promote the Empire at home and abroad.¹³ The EMB's first film was *Drifters* (1929), a film about the North Sea herring fishery that famously launched John Grierson and the British Documentary Film Movement. English school children were targeted with lessons about the colonial economic system and housewives were pitched with patriotic messages about food shopping. In his programmatic 1932 pamphlet, *The Projection of England*, Empire Marketing Board head, Sir Stephen Tallents, further emphasized the importance of an "immense non-theatrical film circulation" growing up outside the "picture theatres proper."¹⁴ Before its demise in 1933, the EMB was reportedly distributing "eight hundred films to film clubs, the YMCA, women's organizations, schools and other educational establishments" annually.¹⁵ Supported by this array of government and private funding, educational and cultural film services were increasingly achieved through non-commercial film distribution to schools, community centres and later welfare offices.

Given this interest in cinema, education, and indoctrination, it is perhaps logical that film and colonial life would soon be brought together. In 1927, a conference on film in the colonies was held. Two years later, high profile biologist Julian Huxley was sent to Kenya and Uganda to test the response of African audiences to scientific films.¹⁶ Huxley recommended that the EMB take a leading role in the development of instructional film in Africa.¹⁷ Subsequently the Commission on Education and Cultural Films was formed, which included members of government departments and the Colonial office. Their 1932 report, *The Film in National Life*, included a recommendation for the establishment of the British Film Institute to encourage the development and use of cinema for entertainment and instruction in both Britain and its colonies.¹⁸

Although the EMB was disbanded in 1933, its work was continued by the Imperial Relations Trust, established in 1937 with a grant of £250,000 from gold baron Sir Henry Strakosch, a life-long colonial administrator in India and South Africa.¹⁹ The mandate of the Imperial Relations Trust was to "strengthen the ties which bind together the Dominions and the United Kingdom." This pursuit included the allocation of



“limited funds for the encouragement of education and cultural film services between Great Britain and the Dominions.”²⁰ During World War II, mobile film units were focused on generating support for the British effort. By official estimate, in 1942 alone, 6.5 million viewers were reached within England by mobile cinema units—more than half of all viewers of government information films in that year.²¹

In their African colonies, especially East African countries, Rhodesia and Nyasaland (now Zimbabwe and Zambia), the British colonial governments sought to introduce cinema in a controlled manner. According to colonial white supremacy theories, colonial powers hoped that through control of viewership, they might keep Africans ignorant of their own oppression. To this end, Africans were banned from most movie theatres built to provide white colonialists with news and entertainment from home.²² The fantasy of the “illicit gaze” of the colonized at the colonizer at the movie theatre, especially white women, made the British administrators very nervous. As historian of colonial relations J. M. Burns notes, the ability to comprehend films was one of a “cluster of skills and abilities” that allowed settlers to claim superiority over “natives.”²³ Thus racist discourses of Africans’ backwardness, childishness and impressionability justified the censorship and prohibition of most Western films for African audiences, while simultaneously serving to perpetuate a racist discourse of inequality and domination.

From 1925, colonial administrators engaged in studies and formed policy positions on the use of cinema in their Imperial work in Africa. The most extensive study took place between 1935 and 1937 when Geoffrey Latham, the commissioner for native education for Northern Rhodesia and Major L.A. Notcutt, supervisor on an East African plantation, undertook a project they called the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE), the results of which can be read in their publication, *The African and the Cinema* (1937).²⁴ Travelling with a series of shoddy, hastily-made, silent educational films, Latham proceeded on a 9,000-mile tour of Tanganyika (now Tanzania), Kenya, Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), Nyasaland (Zambia) and Uganda, bringing messages about health and morality.²⁵



After World War II, Britain maintained an interest in film in the colonies and former colonies. In 1948, the British Film Institute held a conference on *Film and Colonial Development*, which reflected a discourse of welfare that had become an intrinsic part of Imperial government since the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940).²⁶ The Colonial Office funded studies of African audiences between 1949–51 and experiments in audience response were carried out in Nigeria. In a 1949 UNESCO publication put out by the Film Centre in London, British colonial educators shared their experiences of mobile cinema with others interested in the use of technology in education and modernization.²⁷ British ideas about film as a method of modernizing consciousness were embodied in the formation of the quasi-independent Central African Film Unit (CAFU), which went on to make hundreds of films over the course of its fifteen-year tenure. Its ideas and methods influenced media and education policy in the developing world by bodies such as UNESCO throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Indeed, the strong threat of the possibly radical implications of indigenous media production led to a post-war suspicion of the radio and a technologically determinist “faith in the power of motion pictures over Africans.”²⁸

Between 1948 and 1963, CAFU reached a half million viewers per year in Southern Rhodesia. When it folded in 1963 “film had become one of the state’s most important tools of adult education and its most reliable weapon for combating forces of ‘subversion’ in the region.”²⁹ African mobile cinema officers showed films from vans pioneered by BEKE and used boats to show films along the Zambesi River, reporting regularly on audience reaction to their these screenings.³⁰ The intentions of colonial propaganda were obvious to audiences and “many mobile cinema operators found African communities fearful of the units and suspicious of the officer’s motives.”³¹ At the same time, operators often embellished reactions of audiences in their reports to colonial administrators.

According to Burns, the dominant audience for CAFU films was made up of rural women. As the novelty of films wore off and the coercive and patronizing nature of their messages became clear, many audiences ceased to attend the screenings, or intervened in them by talking back to the screen, loudly demanding more

entertaining, commercial films, blocking the light from the projector, or using their bodies to prevent people from entering the screening area.³² The films made for these African audiences were entirely ideological, educating Africans about improvements offered by Western ideas and the value of government services. Unlike documentaries made for white audiences, most films for Africans were told in the form of moralistic tales, often comparing two characters; for example, one character who embraces modern ways (Mr. Wise) and one character who does not (Mr. Foolish).³³ Newsreels for Africans did not begin until 1957, when a monthly program promoting colonial interests began to be distributed.

These examples seem relevant to the Canadian case as well. Starting in 1942, thirty projectionists loaded cars with projectors and gasoline operated generators and brought films to a variety of rural communities in Canada. Due to the cold climate, most screenings were held indoors, but outdoor screenings were organized where possible. Children were often reached in school, with the hope that they would inspire their immigrant and/or illiterate parents to attend a screening at night. Film programs were composed of a set of short films about agricultural improvement, profiles of various “peoples of Canada,” films about the war, propaganda for the Empire, as well as morality tales. Charming folkways of Aboriginal, immigrant, and Quebecois populations were also produced for use in the circuits. The screenings were often integrated into community events, which might include other social activities, such as sport and dance.³⁴ Often government films were endured in order to see Hollywood films, but this was usually downplayed in the projectionists’ monthly reports. Through interview and observation, the rural circuits were intended as sites of two-way information flow between government and citizens.³⁵

In January 1943, the NFB also began industrial circuits, especially in munitions factories, and by 1944 was reaching 385,000 people per month with an average of 1,116 15–25 minute screenings integrated into a workday.³⁶ There were also trade union film circuits held at union meetings, which were accompanied by discussion trailers to spark discussion of issues such as absenteeism and safety at the workplace and the role of the worker in wartime production. In 1945, the Film Board reported that 20,000 people were reached every month in this way, in addition to 1,700 shows on the 85 rural circuits.³⁷

As this all-too-brief sketch indicates, in Britain and its colonies—as well as in former colonies and dominions—as in other more radical mobile cinema projects, being without access to static cinemas served as a spatial signifier for being on the margins of modernity. In the British case, these ad hoc screenings were subject to an unusual level of audience surveillance, although there is every indication that, depending on the context, audiences often felt free to reject or ridicule the proffered images. In a *de facto* commentary on the failure to control information and distribution, British imperial practice ended up having a direct bearing upon post-war film policy in former colonies and on “fundamental education” campaigns of UNESCO in the 1950s and 1960s. Significantly, these forms of alternative distribution to the “semi-modern,” arguably ended up being adopted as a network for Third Cinema exhibition practices in the 1960s and beyond.³⁸ A practice that initially was used to promote colonial rule arguably ended up being used in much more radical ways.

The histories of British and Canadian cinema alike have tended to overlook the significance of these early uses of mobile cinema. General cinema history highlights revolutionary “cinefication” of communist and socialist film experiments and the guerrilla tactics of Third Cinema in the 1960s and 1970s at the expense of prosaic—and often problematic—uses of mobile cinema by politically liberal Commonwealth forces. However, by overlooking these other instances of mobile cinema in film history, we risk leaving out large parts of the story that admittedly may not be as inspiring, but might provide more historical context for contemporary analyses of power dynamics in the all-important realms of media distribution and exhibition.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: Croon Helm, 1979), 88; Roman Karmen, "Agit Trains and Mobile Laboratories," *Imagining Reality*, eds. Kevin MacDonald and Mark Cousins (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), 61-65; Elaine Mancini, *Struggles of the Italian Film Industry during Fascism, 1930-1935* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: UMI Research Press), 122
- 2 See Zoë Druick, "Mobile Cinema in Canada in relation to British Mobile Film Practices," *Screening Canadians: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Canadian Film*, eds. Wolfram R. Keller and Gene Walz (Marburg, Germany: Universitätsbibliothek, 2008), 13-33, for a more elaborated version of this essay
- 3 Anne Friedberg, *Window Shopping: Cinema and the Postmodern* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 2
- 4 *Ibid.*, 61
- 5 Lizbeth Malkmus and Roy Armes, *Arab and African Filmmaking* (London: Zed Books, 1991), 12.
- 6 Debra Spitulnik, "Mobile Machines and Fluid Audiences: Rethinking Reception through Zambian Radio Culture," *Media Worlds*, ed. Faye Ginsburg et al. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 337-54
- 7 T.J. Hollins, "The Conservative Party and Film Propaganda Between the Wars," *English Historical Review* 96 (1981): 359. Bert Hogenkamp mentions that, although by 1919 the Labour Party was recommending the use of film propaganda, especially with mobile projection units, lack of funds kept the scheme from being pursued. See Bert Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels: Film and the Left in Britain 1929-1939* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1986), 18-19. In 1923, there is a record of a plan by British workers to set up a film van (Hogenkamp, *Deadly Parallels*, 23). So, even if the Conservatives were unaware of the connection to Soviet film distribution, their adoption of ideas from labour meant that the influence came indirectly nevertheless.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 360
- 9 *Ibid.*, 362
- 10 *Ibid.*, 363
- 11 *Ibid.*, 365, 363
- 12 *Ibid.*, 366
- 13 Stephen Constantine, "'Bringing the Empire Alive': The Empire Marketing Board and Imperial Propaganda, 1926-1933," *Imperialism and Popular Culture*, ed. John M. Mackenzie (London: Manchester University Press, 1986), 192-231; David Meredith, "Imperial Images: The Empire Marketing Board, 1926-32," *History Today* 37 (1987): 30-36
- 14 Tallents, *Projection of England* (London: Faber and Faber, 1932), 29
- 15 John Baxendale and Chris Pawling, *Narrating the Thirties: A Decade in the Making: 1930 to the Present* (Houndsmills: Macmillan, 1996), 31
- 16 J.M. Burns, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Athens, OH: Centre for International Studies, 2002), 25
- 17 Rosaleen Smyth, "The Development of British Colonial Film Policy, 1927-1939, with Special Reference to East and Central Africa," *Journal of African History* 20, no. 3 (1979): 440.
- 18 Established in 1933, the British Film Institute continues to be an important support for film education in Britain, especially through its high profile book series and web publications.
- 19 Andrew Rodger, "Some Factors Contributing to the Formation of the National Film Board of Canada," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 9, no. 3 (1989): 264
- 20 Imperial Relations Trust, *Annual Report, 1938-39*: 5
- 21 Helen Foreman, "The Non-theatrical Distribution of Films by the Ministry of Information," *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918-45*, eds. Nicholas Pronay and D.W. Spring (London: Macmillan, 1982), 224.
- 22 Burns, 8
- 23 *Ibid.*, 35
- 24 L.A. Norcutt and G.C. Latham, *The African and the Cinema* (London: Edinburgh House Press, 1937).
- 25 Smyth, 443-444
- 26 *Ibid.*, 449
- 27 Film Centre (London), *The Use of Mobile Cinema and Radio Vans in Fundamental Education* (Paris: UNESCO, 1949), 99
- 28 Burns, 68

- 29 Ibid., 106
30 Ibid., 108-9
31 Ibid., 121
32 Ibid., 123-33
33 Ibid., 76
34 Gray, *Movies for the People: The Story of the National Film Board's Unique Distribution System* (Ottawa: National Film Board, 1977), 48
35 Ibid., 49
36 Canada, Department of National War Services, *Annual Report*, 1944-45, n.p.
37 Canada, National Film Board, *Annual Report*, 1945-46, 12
38 "After the Second World War community development and fundamental education became more fashionable terms for what had previously been designated mass education." See Rosaleen Smyth, "Movies and Mandarins: The Official Film and British Colonial Africa," *British Cinema History*, eds. James Curran and Vincent Porter (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1983), 347 n. 49.