FILM AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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SOME THOUGHTS ON THE ROLE OF FILM IN
AFRICAN DEVELOPMENT

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First, let me state my interest in this topic.   I
am a film-maker working in a UNICEF team which has made
several 16 mm. colour films designed to support specific
development projects in Africa.   You may safely assume,
therefore, that I believe film has an important role to
play in the development process.   But that does not mean
I believe that a film is a necessary support for each and
every development project.   On the contrary, I feel very
strongly that film is often an unsuitable medium to
transmit certain kinds of development-oriented information.
I have stressed elsewhere (PSC Paper No. 17) the need to
select carefully which media can be of help in which kinds
of situation.   Here my purpose is more modest, I wish
merely to discuss some of the controversies which surround
the use of film in development support work in Africa and
explain why I feel film has an extremely important part to
play.

Films are made for various reasons, to record important
events, to celebrate prestigious achievements, to express
national political, cultural and artistic feelings, to
educate and to instruct.   Even though the film-making
industry of Africa is in its early stages, films play a very
important role as media of cultural expression, as symbols
of national identity and evidence of social achievement even
when inadequately distributed.   But so far film has not
been extensively used to support the process of developmental
change and rural transformation in Africa.   It is with the
potential of film as a powerful support for development
projects that I am concerned in this paper.

The idea of producing a film is always extremely
popular with administrators and politicians.   The reasons
for this popularity may have nothing to do with the
educative function of the film.   It often arises from a
sense of vanity, as evidenced by the number of times these
same administrators and politicians wish to be in the film.
Nevertheless, I do not think we should dismiss these reasons.
Politicians and administrators have to relate to their
constituents and subjects in order to survive.   Consciously
or unconsciously in asking so frequently for the production
of a film, these men and women show a keen awareness of the
power of film as a communicator.   When the issue of communi-
cation is raised, they think immediately of the most powerful
medium available to them.

Why is film so powerful? Film is powerful because
it has an unsurpassed ability to create the impression
of reality. But it can do more than that. The mechan-
ical storage of audio and visual information on film and
tape allows the film-maker to re-order reality in the
process of re-creating it. This ability to sharpen our
perceptions of reality without sacrificing the impression
that we are watching real life, gives films such impact.
Combining, as film does, colour, movement and sound, it
evokes vivid emotional responses from an audience.
Movement is the most powerful factor convincing us of
film's 'truth to life', and it is movement above all
that enables the film-maker to appeal to the curiosity,
emotions and intelligence of his audience. Films can
make people laugh or cry, and experience the whole range
of emotions in between. Provided this emotional impact
is linked to the need for action, film can be the most
powerful medium for motivating developmental change.

Many critics of the use of film in development support
work in Africa would concede that a good film can make a
very powerful impact, but they say, film is expensive.
It is expensive because the equipment is costly, and
requires trained personnel not easily found in Africa to
operate the cameras and tape recorders. Editing the
film and sound is also a difficult process which takes a
long time requiring the use of more expensive and compli-
cated equipment. The processing of the film, and the
printing of the release prints must generally be done
overseas. Sound studios for mixing are few and far
between. Then when the film is finally ready, it is not
easy to distribute in the rural areas, given the lack of
electricity and motorable roads in many parts of Africa.
Even if the film is well distributed, its effect is
vitiated by the perceptual difficulties rural people have
de-coding visual information presented in an unfamiliar
medium.

This is a pretty comprehensive indictment you would
agree, and I have to admit that all these points are
valid — but only as far as they go. For they leave out
of account the particular and uniquely powerful impact of
film. Film is more expensive, does take longer to produce,
and is harder to distribute, than radio, posters or slide
sets. On the other hand, are these objections universally
valid when in many situations film is a much more effective
educator and motivator than cheaper media? One must
balance the extra cost and time involved in the production

of a film against its greater impact.   The question is
whether a particular development project needs the extra
impact that film gives, or whether a slide set with sound,
a radio programme, or series of posters can do the job just
as well.   This is a decision that has to be made in each
individual situation.   In many situations the likely
result cannot possibly justify the extra cost, but equally,
in certain situations nothing else will do because only a
well made colour film can produce the necessary effect.

Films have great emotional impact, they can also
stretch scarce resources, bring distant objects close and
make the invisible visible.   The emotional impact of films
can change people's minds, or when there is a shortage of
suitable instructors, a film can make the skill and expertise
or a particularly good teacher available to the whole country.
Film can extend the resources available to a teacher and
show events or concepts visually which it would not other-
wise be possible to show to the class.   Information about
faraway countries, even about other parts of the same
country can be brought to the classroom.   Medical operations
can be filmed and give a much more detailed and complete
picture of an operation than a group of trainee nurses and
doctors could see by crowding into the operating theatre.
But all these advantages must be balanced against the cost
of film.   It is no good using film where a good black and
white photo can do the job just as well.   There is plenty
of work for film to do without wasteful duplication of
scarce resources.   It can never be wise to use the most
expensive medium where another cheaper one will do the job
just as well.

Distribution is certainly a problem in Africa.   There
are not many cinemas, and the number of rural cinema vans
is not large in relation to the needs of most countries.
This lack can, however, be exaggerated.   The number of
cinema vans is increasing all the time.   Projectors are
found in most training institutes even now, and the number
of villages and schools with electricity is constantly
increasing.   Are we to wait until every school and every
village has electricity and projectors before we begin
making films?   No, obviously not!   We must begin making
educational and motivational films now.   We must develop
our expertise and improve our techniques, by making and
showing films to those who have the facilities to see them.
This will undoubtedly mean a heavy concentration of films
for training institutions and secondary schools.   The
UNICEF PSC Unit has made seven films of which five were
specifically designed to be used in training institutions
of one kind or another.   The other two were made for use
in mobile cinema vans, and this is important, for whilst
concentrating on films for training institutions we must
not forget the majority of the population which lives in
the rural areas.

We must learn how we can most effectively communicate development information in the rural areas. Cinema vans do not yet reach all of rural Africa, but their coverage is improving and the film show has a tremendous impact in a village. It is a talking point for days before the show, it holds the audience's rapt attention, and will be discussed for days, weeks and months afterwards. It becomes a point of reference for discussion and arguments in the village. Because of the powerful effect a film has on the collective consciousness of the village, I believe, although this is a gut feeling not the result of detailed research, that it is better to show only one educational or instructional film per visit and to show that film more than once, rather than to show several instructional films in one night. By concentrating on one film and showing it more than once, one ensures that the audience really has a chance to absorb the message of the film. Subsequent discussions in the village of the issues raised by the film will then be much more closely related to the true content of the film than would other-wise be the case.

It has been frequently argued that despite the powerful effect of film on educated urbanised audiences, people in the rural areas have greater difficulty under-standing the visual information given in a film. There have been many stories of rural audiences looking round the edges of screens for disappearing trains and the remainder of apparently truncated bodies. How many of these are apocryphal I do not know, but they are certainly indicative of a widespread belief that difficulties of perception vitiate the intended effect of educational films in Africa. I myself think this problem is much exaggerated but first I would like to review some of the results of academic research on this problem.

Many studies suggest that a majority of the rural population in Africa have difficulty in interpreting a two dimensional representation of a three dimensional reality.(1) Most of the studies which 'prove' this have used pictures and posters to back up their thesis. Spatial relationships pictorially represented are perceived quite differently in rural Africa from urbanised populations. The problems which give most trouble are interpreting Western conventions of representing the size and depth of objects within the pictorial frame. The conclusion is that "Representation which depends upon specific graphic conven-tions, upon symbolism or upon serialization will increase the likelihood of misperception and reduce the probability of comprehension."(2) The lesson to be drawn is that different cultures have different ways of 'seeing' and interpreting pictures, that must be taken into account. Fairly obvious one would have thought.

These studies are all, of course, related to the use of photographs and posters and not films. But there has been one study which tries to test levels of filmic comprehension among children in schools in Tanzania. (3) The researcher, David Gilltrow, found that there was no significant difference between black and white and colour films, that live action was more accurately comprehended than an animated version of the same content, that plain backgrounds aided comprehension, that silent films were as effective as those using realistic sound effects, and most interestingly, there was no significant difference between pupils attending rural schools and those attending urban schools. The researcher did not test the use of voice-over narration, which was unfortunate because our colleagues at the Audio Visual Institute in Dar es Salaam believe that the separation of voice and vision may in fact be the common feature of films which is hardest to grasp for rural audiences rooted in a culture where most communication is oral and face to face. A further drawback of the research was that the tests consisted of individual shots and no attempt was made to evaluate sequences and total films. So the results of the most systematic research into perception of films in Africa, while interesting, are of limited relevance.

Unfortunately it seems to me that most of these studies, interesting though they are, are of limited relevance to communicators in Africa today. This is because they lack any historical dimension or awareness. When films were first shown in Western Europe and America, audiences screamed as the train came towards them on the screen and ducked under their seats. Even in the early fifties the realism of Cinerama induced many people to hang on to their seats desperately when the camera took them for a ride on a big dipper. Many were physically sick. That film can induce these physical effects is a vivid testament of its powerful realism. But with each successive Cinerama production it became more and more difficult for the film-makers to repeat these sensational effects. Audiences adjusted to Cinerama's realism, in the same way that at the beginning of the century audiences learned to accept that the trains were not coming into the cinema. It seems evident that at first sight film's realism may be so overpowering that the unsuspecting audience will forget that it is a film and treat the images on the screen as real and react accordingly. However, with repeated exposure to films, audiences of whatever culture and educational level, while accepting that films are very realistic, no longer react as if they were real. Films retain their powerful emotional impact because they are very vivid audio-visual re-creations of reality, but audiences cease to <u>confuse</u> them with reality.

This is surely what is happening in Africa. The more
films are made and distributed in Africa, the more
successful rural audiences will become at de-coding the
particular visual and aural conventions in films such
as close-ups, and voice-over commentaries. While this
process is going on we should take care not to confuse
our audiences with technical virtuosity based on the
highly specific visual conventions of Western cultures,
but on the other hand we should not treat rural audiences
as perceptual zombies.

What has been the policy of the UNICEF Project
Support Communications Film Unit in Eastern Africa?
We felt that because of the power of film as an educa-
tional tool, it would be folly to abandon its use at
this stage of Africa's development. Whilst retaining
a healthy scepticism of the relevance of academic
research, we have tried to shape our material in such a
way as to take account of many of the lessons that can
be drawn from this research. As far as possible we
have filmed real objects in typical settings familiar
to the audience for which the film is designed. These
natural objects and surroundings have largely been filmed
from an eye-level perspective, eschewing dramatic camera
angles, and striving for clarity of background whenever
an important instructional point was being conveyed.
We avoided complicated technical tricks, and potentially
confusing switches in time. We used colour to enhance
the reality of our films. At all times we aimed not at
technical or filmic virtuosity but at the need to ensure
the simplest, most lucid presentation of the subject
matter in hand. How far we succeeded in our aim you
can judge from the films themselves. How far we
succeeded in communicating with our target audiences
will only be known when our films have been properly
evaluated. Our problem has been, of course, that we
are not African and how ever hard we try we are always
likely to be insensitive to certain cultural nuances
than a person brought up in an African culture. To
counter this deficiency we are now recruiting a Tanzanian
communication specialist to be a member of our team. He
will evaluate our past efforts and advise and participate
on all future films.

How should we evaluate films made in support of
development projects? The test of such films is not
their ability to win international prizes, or to impress
government ministers, administrators, academic or
cultural outsiders. A good development support film
would be one that satisfies the criteria for most
successful educational communication. It should be

simple without being simplistic, clear without being
dull or boring. It should be acutely sensitive to the
cultural environment in which it is shot and in which it
is to be shown, it should harness the power of the medium
to the educational purposes for which it is made, and
above all it should be informed by a passionate concern
to communicate with the audiences for which it is designed.
This means that the story or process related in the film
should unfold at a speed related not to the wish of the
sponsors of the film, but to the grasp of the audience
whom the film-maker has taken care to understand.

In conclusion, these are the points that I would
urge you, as administrators and government civil servants,
to bear in mind. Keep in mind the tremendous potential
of film but do not demand a film for every project —
just be sure that every development support film serves
its project. Commission young, sensitive national film-
makers, to make those films you deem necessary. As
cultural insiders these are the communicators who are
best equipped to help in the task of producing films for
development support in Africa. But above all, I want
to urge you not to abandon the use of the most powerful
educational and motivational tool available to you.
Provided it is correctly used, film, despite its cost, is
the most powerful educational and motivational tool for
development support work available in Africa today.

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Notes

**PSC paper No 18, discussed during Part III of the workshop, "Media in PSC campaigns".
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