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Specialised Technique

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Abstract

William Sellers and the Colonial Film Unit developed a framework for colonial cinema, this included slow edits, no camera tricks and minimal camera movement. Hundreds of films were created in accordance with this rule set. In an effort to recuperate black dance from this colonial project, *Specialised Technique*, attempts to transform this material from studied spectacle to livingness.

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William Sellers was the first employee and later headed the Colonial Film Unit (CFU), the propaganda arm of the British Empire that operated from 1932-1955 throughout the colonial map. Sellers had a theory about the types of films that the Unit should make, it has been best described by an anecdote he told and has been repeated in several texts detailing the filmmaking grammar of the CFU (Burns 2000, 199). As the story goes, Sellers was showing a film about malaria to a small village in Nigeria in the 1930s. The film was supposed to educate the villagers about how malaria was contracted - mosquitoes carried the disease and when they bit an individual the disease was transmitted. This was communicated by a close-up image of a mosquito biting human flesh. The film ended with suggested methods to prevent being bitten by mosquitoes, the goal being that these films would facilitate lower malaria transmission rates. Sellers asked the villagers what they thought of the film, hoping to be able to write up their responses in the form of evidence that could be sent back to London as proof of the success of his educational projects. However, the villagers dismissed the film, lamenting those poor people that lived in a place that had giant mosquitoes (Sellers 1953, 831)!

I have told the Sellers anecdote during several screenings, talks and conversations about my work. It never fails to elicit a laugh. My response is nearly always, a wry smile followed by a quick coda explaining that this response allowed Sellers to develop a filmmaking style for the CFU, which was predicated on the idea that the eyes of those black villagers were different, defective in some sense (Larkin 2008, 160). And that this idea was not dismissed until in 1954 with Peter Morton-Williams's report, 'Cinema in Rural Nigeria', which found that low and behold, Nigerians did have the same appreciation of '…two dimensional images…[and]…the same depth of field as Europeans' (Larkin 2008, 108). The audience always seems to feel admonished for their laughter.

Sellers used this incident to create the rules for the CFU and his version of colonial cinema:

'1. The general tempo must be slow, and the length of individual scenes must be twice, or

three times as long as is usually considered necessary for English school audiences.
2. The content of any given scene must be very simple in its composition, because natives view all objects on the screen with equal interest, unless the important object is clearly emphasised. Close and mid shots are therefore preferable to long shots.
3. Strict accuracy is vital in portraying native habits and customs. Mistakes at once turn a serious film into a comedy.
4. No camera tricks of any sort. Continuity must be clearly maintained in all changes of scene, even if it means using three shots where one would normally do for audiences more used to film technique.
5. Films must be made as silents. A master commentary is then written, and is added by a native commentator, or by disc records, through a microphone during each performance. This system is vital, owing to the great variation in local dialects.'

<div align="right">(Sellers 1940, 10)</div>

In essence the films were supposed to be simple, slow and literal, a one-to-one reflection of reality so that the audiences could understand, assuming '…different cognitive capabilities for the European and African spectator…reasserting a division and highlighting the intellectual and cultural superiority used to justify colonialism' (Rice, 2010). CFU officer J.B. Odunton put it best, when describing these films, '…there is no scope for the free play of imagination' (1950, 29). Sellers also advocated that the locations should be local and specific to the audiences, and that the people who feature in the films should also reflect on-the-ground circumstances (Smyth 1988, 287-288). The native commentators, referred to in the rules would stand by the projection and translate the content into the local language. It has been noted that some of these translators went off script and it is not known exactly what was communicated to audiences (Larkin 2008, 95).

Most of the CFU output was newsreels, educational films or documentaries but sometimes morality tale dramas were made. These always presented strict binaries with '…a division that came to define colonial dramas splitting backward from modern, African from Western, bad subject from good' (Larkin 2008, 86). The lesson to be gleaned was always one of forward progression towards civilisation. These films, in both content and form, understood the black subject to be malformed in some way. The visual language of the films addresses a perceived lowly intellect while the content of the film aimed to train the black subject to civilise.

In making *Specialised Technique,* I was interested in approaching working with archive material from the CFU as a series of formal experiments in what can be done to the image. In attempting to shake the stereotype out of the colonial footage, I tried in as many ways as possible to change how the various people on camera were imaged. I am interested in creating and reprojecting a pensive spectator,

'…uprooting us in the films unfolding [to] situate us in relation to it…' utilised in order to create a pensive spectator,'…uprooting us in the films unfolding [to] situate us in relation to it…' (Bellour 1987, 122). I am asking you to look at these images again and think again and again about them.

Reusing these images was a constant reminder of the racist imagination that conceived them, begging the question -is it at all possible to reuse these images? Are they so tainted that any effort to show them again in another way can only ever fail?

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Onyeka Igwe is an artist and researcher working between cinema and installation, born and based in London, UK. Through her work, Onyeka is animated by the question — *how do we live together?* — with particular interest in the ways the sensorial, spatial and Othered ways of knowing can provide answers to this question. She uses embodiment, archives, narration and text to create structural 'figure-of-eights', a form that exposes a multiplicity of narratives. The work comprises untying strands and threads, anchored by a rhythmic editing style, as well as close attention to the dissonance, reflection and amplification that occurs between image and sound.

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