Moving Image as Chronotope of the Colonial Imagination

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Introduction

Paul Gilroy’s essay, which opens the anthology Film and the End of Empire, makes an explicit connection between war and the colonial project. I would like to extend Gilroy’s assertion to ask a question about the role of film in the production of colonial imaginaries of space and time as essentially a form of military imagination. (Gilroy, 2011: 19). This question is asked in the context of a larger PhD research thesis on the place of moving image within the colonial project, provisionally titled: Moving Image and the Colonial Imagination, Cinema of Attractions, Actuality and Colonial Film in Africa, 1896 - 1940. The research works through several disparate moments in the last stages of the British Empire to understand the role of moving images in consolidating a particular spatial and temporal imagination. The research can be situated within film historian Priya Jaikumar’s call for ‘spatial turn’ in colonial film historiography. Jaikumar argues for the need for a return to the colonial film archive to ‘comprehend and disrupt the logics of seeing, being and thinking that make such films possible in their own time’. She asserts that this requires asking ‘fundamentally spatial questions’ about the ‘where, why and how we situate/d colonial objects, people, places then and now’ (2011: 167) While Jaikumar’s work addresses colonial and post-colonial film in India, my study is specifically focused on moving images and films produced within British Empire territories on the African continent, which were circulated to both British and African audiences.

The analysis to follow is a close formal reading of three films where the camera movement as well as movement within the frame produces a specific relationship between the filmic gaze and the off-screen space. To think through the question of off-screen space I draw on the work of Christopher Pinney on the histories of photography versus film in visual anthropology in relation to Christian Metz’s essay, ‘Photography and Fetish’. Pinney and Metz’s work form the basis for a discussion photographic stillness and filmic movement. I draw on the work of several authors in the volumes, Empire and Film, and Film and the End of Empire, edited by Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe. This double volume series forms part of the Colonial Film Archive project, which digitised a large portion of the British colonial films housed at 3 institutions: the British Film Institute, Imperial War Museum and the Empire Commonwealth Museum. Those 16mm and 35 mm films not available online were watched on a Steenbeck viewing machine at the British Film Institute. The affective experience of viewing film in different formats and modalities forms an important part of my research. I draw on the excellent insights of Fatimah Tobing Rony in her book, The Third Eye: Race, Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle to produce an account of filmic inscription that speaks to the placement and racial categorisation of subjects, bodies and landscapes within the frame.

The three films to be discussed are K.A.R signals: A Film of Routine in Remote Places (1936) and two Anglo-Boer War films, Repairing the Broken Bridge at Frere (1899) and Rifle Hill Signal Station near Frere Camp (1899). K.A.R Signals forms part of the wave of official and unofficial colonial film production of the 1930’s. The others are classified in the catalogues of distribution companies as ‘animated photographs’, now referred to as actuality films, and were shot during the South African (Anglo-Boer War). While these films are quite far apart temporally, and
contextually, it seems productive to attempt read them within the framing of a constellation of filmic movement, war and colonial movement. Here the question at the centre of the following analysis is how moving image produces the territory both within and outside of the frame as a potential theatre of war. Even when no actual military combat or violence is seen within the frame, a set of symbolic codes invoke tropes of war: control, exception and strategy. Thus a kind of symbolic violence is enacted through the very movement within the frame and of the camera across an imaginary territory produced in this framing.

*Film form, colonial movement and war: methodological approaches*

This paper should be seen in the context of my research into the entanglements of the colonial imaginary with modern shifts in perception produced by technologies of inscription and the material form of moving images, their exhibition and circulation. The period identified for study begins in 1896 and ends in 1940. What the research proposes is that what becomes visible in a selection of 'empire' films that intend to produce and consolidate an image of empire across the African continent is in fact not a territory, but rather a series of fragmentary movements that function as metonymic and partial substitutes for 'empire'.

The approach of the research is not to write a conventional linear or national cinema history, but rather to work think through different moments in which a certain problematic of colonial visuality is exposed. Through a material investigation into the archive in my artistic practice I pose questions around how rapidly shifting technologies of moving image production and the circulation of early film form itself are implicated in the production of a colonial imagination of space and time, and the contemporary implications of this. Many studies have approached the question of how film re-organises Modern perception. However, this question has not really been posed in relation to the colonial project, and this is the intention of my work.

Priya Jaikumar’s work on Indian colonial film sets a precedent here, both in its articulation of a postcolonial history of film against the legitimating idea of ‘national cinema’, and in her invocation of cinematic form or aesthetics as the locus of colonial epistemologies. In her articulation, it is specifically a rationalised spatial and temporal imagination that consolidates ‘an old pact between territorial power and epistemic truth’ (2011: 167). In my thesis title, I work with the term *imaginary* drawing on the work of Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, Walter Benjamin, Nicholas Mierzoeff and Édouard Glissant to refer to the multiple processes and logics at work in the formation of collective, national, ethnic and geographical identities. Important here is what Said terms ‘imaginative geography’ in his study of Orientalism, and what Mierzoeff calls ‘complexes of visuality’. At the heart of this work is the question of how moving images function as an ideological form of knowledge imposed on a geographical field.

Central to this research is the question of movement. Firstly this refers to how moving image indeed ‘moves’, that is the circulation, distribution and trade in film and a variety of forms of moving image between different colonial states, territories and regions in Africa, as well as the circulation of instructional films produced outside of the continent screened to African audiences. What is key here is that the term *moving* has the dual function of also referring to the *movement* within cinematic form itself, i.e. to the kinetic nature of the medium. Thus, my analysis of
film form focuses on the movement of the camera across and within a field of vision, but also the movements and gestures of a body or an object within the frame. Here the material nature of film as even, object and medium are equally important. Considered here is also film’s duplicability as this relates to how and where different audiences, within and outside of the continent encounter these images.

The films selected for this paper, begin to sketch out a possible methodological approach that links the filmic movement observed in two Anglo-Boer War films to the visual field and movements in a propaganda film from a later period. My analysis builds on a statement by Paul Gilroy in his essay in ‘Film and the End of Empire’:

‘Exactly as later figures like Fanon would have anticipated, the militaristic, spectacular culture of empire and colony is dominated by violence ... the backdrop of warfare was essential in highlighting the moral legitimacy of imperial rule’ (Gilroy, 2011: 25).

Gilroy is here referring to a need for a working through (in the psychoanalytic sense) of the colonial film archive in order to expose the repressed violence of contemporary Britain’s relationship to its own multicultural, multi-ethnic society, borne of its colonial ‘past’. His invoking of ‘war’ as ‘backdrop’ is taken as a point of departure for my analysis which attempts to make a link between how an educational short and two fragments shot in the field of war both stage the ‘the militaristic spectacular culture of empire’.

K.A.R Signals and the Geographical Series

‘K.A.R Signals’ forms part of the Colonial Film Archive and is available in digital format online. Silent and shot on 16mm by amateur film-maker, Robert Kingston Davies, it was intended as an educational film for a British audience and was released within the British Educational film series for classroom release accompanied by notes for teaching, although it seems did circulate in some form of general release. The film received commentary from the Geography Committee at the British Film Institute (Rice, Colonial Film Archive online), who gave advice on the final edit and sanctioned the film’s value for a broader British audience.

Kingston-Davies proposed the film to the Colonial Office, titling his proposition: ‘Scheme of an Experimental Trip for the Production of 16mm’. Two things are striking here, that the film edit was passed through the BFI geography committee and that it claimed status as ‘experimental’. Davies use of titling slides reveals or essentially ‘wipes’ the printed text of the inter-titles by hand. This adds an amateur, home-made quality to the film, as does Davies rather incoherent editing of certain sequences. That the film is produced either after such formally radical films as Dziga Vertov’s Man with a Movie Camera, which captures a day in the life of a Russian city, seems incongruous. Vertov’s use of two camera’s, split screen editing, and moving camera a is a sophisticated moment of cinematic self-referentiality and technique. Kingston-Davies film seems literally out of place in the history of film, removed from any precedent or avant-garde tradition.

Jaikumar’s study of the Geographical series of British Instructional Films, however, shows how the film follows a set of conventions that construct what she calls ‘accurate imagination’ in the service of producing imperial geographical knowledge. The film’s use of animation with actuality footage, ‘where animation refers to
cartographic drawings and moving symbols on maps' (Jaikumar, 2011: 168) was a standard convention. This hybrid approach brings together two registers that are at odds with one another: cinematic image and diagrammatic map. It is this contradiction that structures what Jaikumar calls the rational imagination of remote places and peoples. Jaikumar relates this project of imagination to the use of the films of school education, where students would be taught to construct maps from photographs of their own or more remote neighbourhoods. This ability to 'imagine', 'abstract' and montage produces 'the anatomy of a rational imagination' able to produce and consume an image of empire as a geographical field projected outwards. Kingston-Davies film 'experiment' with its clumsy inter-titles and maps is within the conventions of the genre. He is also representative of the amateur film-maker as the authorial figure of early film, a mobile masculinity that while it speaks to the explorer figure of early colonialism, sees itself in service of empire as duty and research rather than adventure. The Geographic series, shot in both India and Africa were 'anti-adventure colonial films that supressed visual tropes of danger, excitement, the sublime and the picturesque, assumed a spectator who was appreciative but evaluative.' (Jaikumar, 2011: 176). How does the film perform this production of imperial geographical knowledge?

The authorship and motivation for making the film is strongly linked to Kingston-Davies own movement and development as a film-maker - it is an 'experimental trip' aimed at testing out the possibilities of producing 16mm film. Thus the movement of Kingston-Davies along the border of Sudan and Kenya is in fact at the root of the film's 16mm form as experiment. Kingston-Davies, is however, not present within the frame, except possibly in the metonymic movement of the intertitles by his hand. His camera charts a movement in a region of East Africa that is described by Davies as 'the thinly peopled Northern Frontier District...undeveloped, barren, remote'. One reviewer notes that it provides 'some vivid pictures of landscape and environment' and 'although geography is incidental its value is considerable and is enhanced by the movement and human interest in the film' (Monthly Film Bulletin, 1937, 230). Indeed, one of the most strikingly contemporary sequences in the film is of a moving vehicle crossing the 'empty' landscape at some speed, followed by the camera, placed on a following vehicle. This sequence feels somewhat out of place within the film's awkwardly staged narrative sections.

The latter involve local African men, dressed in what appear to be traditional military regalia, who are ordered to perform reconnaissance missions into the landscape or who operate heliograph signalling stations. The military and colonial use of heliograph signalling forms the central narrative thread within the film, connecting the disparate sections of the montage and the landscape through which the camera 'eye' moves us.

It is important to note how several filmic devices produce the camera's navigation of the landscape. The film opens with a montage of maps, starting off as simply cartographic, with hand-made labels added to different regions, followed by a series of arrows. All of this is done in the same crude fashion as the inter-titles. The map sequence is followed by a title explaining how these 'widely-separated posts' are connected by the 'Signals Section of the Northern Brigade, K.A.R.' Thus, communication produced by wireless and heliographic signalling is what enables the production of the singular spatial field which the film navigates for us, and the film
narrative is itself hinges on a montage of vehicular and human movements between heliograph signalling stations. The sequence following the maps opens with a pan across an essentially empty plain where the laying of communication lines is visible, followed by shots of the erection of some kind of communication post, alternated with shots of processes of labour by local Africans employed or enlisted for this work.

Interestingly, the film never positions us within any kind of specific national or colonial territory, we, the viewers, are placed within a borderless, stateless field in which movement and labour are organised around this massive communication project. In some shots, the landscape is framed within the signalling station apparatus, the poles and wires of which are shot in an aesthetic reminiscent of constructivist sculpture and painting. These lines thus organise our perception of the visual field in which both landscape and a stateless, dislocated African labour and military force are placed. ¹

**Inscription and Transmission**

It seems useful to give some background to the particular nature of the heliograph as one from of communication technology employed by the Signals Section, along with more modern wireless technologies. Invented in the early 19th century, the Heliograph is an apparatus that produces a physical light signal using a grided mirror that can be decoded and as such read across relatively large distances (almost an analogue version of Morse code). Interestingly, the Heliograph is also capable of producing a photographic image, and was indeed the original process used by Niépce to produce the so-called first ‘photographic image’ on a glass plate negative. Striking here is the strangely filmic nature of the heliograph, which is not unlike the camera apparatus, whose operation also depends on a reflected light signal from a mirror. Like film technology, the heliograph is both a device of inscription and transmission. Kingston-Davies' camera movement follows the lines of wireless and heliographic communication in the landscape. In other colonial films, a similar equivalence is set up between filmic kinesis and the building of railway lines as means of transmission and communication within and between colonial territories. ²

The next sequence opens with a shot of a landscape from the vantage point of a hill, what is called 'a commanding position'. Two figures enter the frame from the right, first an African man in military uniform, followed by a British man in a tan uniform. The camera follows them into position on the hill, framing them to the right, while the landscape fills the rest of the frame. The African soldier points to the left, gesturing towards the visible landscape but also further, into the off-screen space. In rather a camp fashion, the khaki clad English soldier mimics his pointing, and some exchange of words and more pointing, followed by the white man gazing into the

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¹ Thelma Gutsche, Ian Christie, Tom Gunning and Tom Rice provide accounts of exhibition and circulation of early film by travelling showmen and theatre troupes, as well as accounts of amateur film-makers.

² The camera's fetishisation of the movement of trains and telecommunication technologies from its very inception will be explored further. This suggests an almost indexical relationship to tropes of Modernity and global empire trade, and is echoed in more formally interesting films such as Basil Wright's sound and image montage of telegraphic cables in *Song of Ceylon*. 
landscape through binoculars. It is finally an order and gesture from the latter that initiates the movement of the pair off screen, exiting the frame diagonally to the left, leaving the landscape once again ‘empty’. The over-staged narrative and formal structuring of this short sequence forms the model for several similar sequences that dramatize looking and movement within the landscape, by both African and European figures in the employ of the Signals Section.

**Off-Screen Space as Part Object**

In his chapter, ‘The Lexical Spaces of Eye-Spy’, Christopher Pinney draws on Christian Metz’s essay ‘Photography and Fetish’ to formulate a critique of the certain uses of film in contemporary visual Anthropology. His argument hinges around differing notions of ‘stillness’ and ‘movement’ within photographic versus filmic registers. He argues for a return to photographic ‘stillness’ to counter what he calls the ‘complete mastery’ of the supposed ‘narrative coherence of film’. He returns here to a description by late 19th century writer, Oliver Wendell Holmes (1864) of the stereoscopic image of a landscape as a ‘sun sculpture’ as against the ‘flat carte-de-visites’, which Holmes describes as ‘sun pictures’. For Pinney, the stereoscope encodes the landscape with depth, and thus the potential for movement (or at least the analogue of movement by the suggestion that the eye ‘travels’ across or within the illusory depth of the visual field). Staged and documentary stereoscopic images of the Anglo-Boer war were in circulation along with films, including some rather melodramatic versions, such as ‘The last call of the dying bugler’. ³

While, I have several reservations about Pinney’s argument, his distinction between registers of stillness and movement is useful in order to think through the affect of filmic movement in the films I am discussing. For Pinney the play between stillness and movement within film is connected to Mulvey’s notion of visual pleasure, where both camera and character movement are heroic, active, masculine and the stillness of that which is gazed at or captured in the masculinity of the ‘look’ is feminized, passive, acted upon. While I am cautious about the schematization of stillness and movement here, I see some resonance with the stillness of the landscape and the camera’s gaze on the labouring subject in K.A.R Signals as producing potential registers of visual pleasure for a British colonial audience. However, I think a more interesting reading is possibly available through returning directly to Christian Metz’s more directly psychoanalytic reading of film. Metz complicates the medium’s relationship to fetish via an emphasis on off-screen space and time as partial objects. I quote at length:

> Film is much more difficult to characterise as a fetish. It is too big, it lasts too long, and it addresses too many sensorial channels at the same time to offer a credible unconscious equivalent of the lacking part-object. It does contain many potential part-objects (the different shots, the sounds, and so forth), but each of them disappears quickly after a moment of presence, whereas a fetish has to be kept, mastered, held, like the photograph in the pocket. Film is, however, an extraordinary activator of fetishism. It endlessly mimics the primal displacement of the look between the seen absence and the presence

³ The circulation of staged stereoscopic images of the Anglo-Boer war will be discussed in the thesis.
For Metz, it is the suggestion of the 'off-screen' space that marks this play between absence and presence, between desire and terror. In film the off-screen space is 'substantial', it is the implied 'castration' of the look, a 'stopping', a cutting off of perception, but also a suggestion of potential entry into the unseen, what cannot be seen. Returning to the stereoscopic images described by Wendell Holmes, the illusion of depth adds a temporal dimension to the viewer's experience. I would like to suggest that a more complex, and perhaps more violent, constellation of colonial desire, fear and promise is held by the potential in the moving image and the stereoscope via the suggestion of what Metz calls 'off-frame' space and time.

I will develop this idea in a brief initial sketch of an analysis of two Anglo-Boer War films, and finally a return to K.A.R Signals.

**Camera Movement and Camera Stillness in 2 Anglo-Boer War Actuality Films**

I refer to the actuality films of the Anglo-Boer War as distinct from fictional fake films produced by Edison and other production companies, in the period between 1899-1903. The former are short fragments of 35mm film shot in the field, normally unedited and of varying lengths, without explicit narrative structure but within the conventions of early cinema. Billed in theatrical programs at the time as 'animated photographs', they would be shown on reels that included several standard features, possibly including some of the original Lumière films, and films of city life, such as 'a ride on a tram'. These bills also often included theatrical performances and screening may be accompanied by the oration of a lecturer. 4 What they encompass is simply a scene, and here I refer to this in the double sense of the seen and scene. These films are formally in line with actuality films shot in the period from 1896 -1903, essentially by their nature documents staging an encounter between viewer and the scene/seen, and thus already certain conventions of early film form define these fragments shot in the field of war. Largely shot by self-taught cameramen they are examples of amateur and experimental early film. A lot of this original 35mm footage was lost in transit between the battlefield and the ports where it was shipped to London or New York for processing and distribution. What is interesting here are resonances between the amateur colonial film, K.A.R Signals, and these early war documents shot within an essentially colonial theatre of war.

It is important to situate these films within the period referred to by Tom Gunning et al as the 'cinema of attractions'. This period of actuality films begins with the ceaseless documentation of modern life, especially defined by movement: of

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4 Questions of representation of the body and the relationship between African and European subjects in the frame still need to be addressed her. This problematic will be discussed in a later section looking at movement and gesture in early anthropological and ethnographic film, centred around Tobing-Rony's analysis of 'inscription' that begins with Regnault's ethnographic chronophotographs and Assenka Oksiloff's *Picturing the Primitive - Visual Culture, Ethnography and Early German Cinema*. For now, I will put this important discussion aside to focus on spatial questions, while understanding this omission.
crowds, of trams, through cities and landscapes. Gunning notes that the attraction was within the affective registers of the image seen, both magical and 'stimulating an unhealthy nervousness', in the very speed at which images moved across the field of view. Early cinema audiences are often described as being literally 'moved' by the images, with descriptions of audiences running away from approaching trains, or moving closer to touch, even penetrate the projected image.\(^5\)

*Frere Camp Films (1899)*

'Repairing the Broken Bridge at Frere Camp' shows a massive timber beam being carried by a group of African men across the field of the frame. The men move diagonally across the frame and are positioned in the lower left hand portion. As they move out of the frame, it becomes visible that they are moving through shallow water. In the background is visible the mangled ironwork of the bridge, which appears to have been dynamited or blown up by cannon fire. The landscape is visible in the background, framed by the remains of the bridge structure. In the mid-ground another diagonal line is formed by a line of men, British and African, who observe the process of the carrying of the beam. Some men move along this line of observers, with the movement of the beam. The camera remains still throughout the movement of the beam off-frame, following this, the camera pans right passing across the line of observers and coming to rest on the concrete section of the bridge. Two figures are striking in the scene/seen. The first is a centrally framed man, African, who stares or gazes directly at the camera as the beam crosses the filmic space. The second is a white, I assume British, man who enters the frame towards the end of the panning shot. This second man also engages his gaze directly at the camera. The panning shot functions as an in-camera cut from the still shot of the beam crossing the space of the frame, panning right metaphorically returns our gaze to the place from which the beam emerged prior to the time of the film. This off-frame space from which the beam and the men carrying it emerged was unseen and implied until the camera movement right reveals it.

What is the affect of these plays between the stillness of observers, and the movements of the beam and bodies that hold it, and finally of the pan to the right at the end of the sequence? The second film in this series, in which no camera movement takes place, proves instructive for how to read the movements of the first film.

In the 'Rifle Hill Signal Station near Frere Camp' (1899) a still camera shot describes a battalion stationed at the top of a kopje. A line of rifle-men form a semi-diagonal from the foreground to the background of the frame, the signaller is placed on the left hand corner in the foreground, furiously waving a white flag throughout. A centrally placed leader figure, distinguished by his helmet looks to the right into the landscape off-frame with a viewing device, a set of binoculars. To his left and a little

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5 Film historian, Ian Christie, traces a recurrence of what he calls the departure / arrival genre in early colonial cinema, which arguably falls within the period of the 'Cinema of Attractions'. Many Anglo-Boer War films fall within this genre. A formal convention is set up where movement across the filmic space is by a 'diagonal movement towards the camera', as in one of the first Lumiere brother’s films: ‘Workers Leaving a Factory’. Christie locates several colonial and British national figures, including the Lord Kitchener in ‘The Sidars’ Reception at the Guildhall’, staging the triumphal return of Kitchener to London from a successful military campaign in Sudan. What Christie proposes is that this popular genre ‘played a significant part in communicating the experience of empire’ (Christie, 2011: 22).
to the foreground a man is sitting writing into a notebook. The rifle-men occasionally cock and seem to point their guns into the off-screen space in the same direction as the gaze of the captain. The film, while not fictional is certainly more staged than the the first, suggested by the careful positioning of all the ‘characters’ and the self-awareness of the riflemen and the man with the notebook, who looks up and smiles, even laughs self-consciously at the camera as if discussing its presence with a fellow soldier, who we do not see. The continuous motion of the signaller also seems somewhat forced, performed for the duration of the shot. All in the field of the frame seem occupied, all seem involved in the ordinary actions and labours of warfare, all anticipate the potential arrival of combat from a space and time off-frame.

*Systems of Fragments: re-inscription / re-transmission*

What emerges in these two Anglo-Boer War films, shot in the actual theatre of war, I argue is a play between what is inscribed within the field of the frame and an implied off-frame space and time. This play produces the desire and potential for movement by the camera, and by proxy the viewer, that could potentially master an implied but absent territory. At the same time, the fragmentary nature of these films, and their frustratingly short duration suggest an elusive and illusionary relationship between the camera and this territory. Here the territory described includes the landscape, but also the objects and bodies in the frame: the labouring bodies that produce the infrastructures not only of war but also for the geographical territory of empire trade.\(^6\)

It seems useful to return to the framing of the landscape in *K.A.R Signals* by the telegraphic apparatus’s lines and poles, and to think through how both the camera and the heliograph share a field of inscription and transmission within the frame. I am interested in how the colonial audience would relate to the part-object of the un-inscribed territory suggested by the camera’s framing of the off-frame landscape in *both K.A.R Signals* and the two Anglo-Boer war films. Here the off-frame space within the theatre of actual war on the one hand and of colonial occupation, on the other, is potentially mastered, possessed, communicated and transmitted by the signal of the projected film, itself a mobile unit. However, it is also always and only an absence, like the borderless, unbounded territory of Kingston-Davies fragmentary film, disorientating and incomplete. In the South African War films, the off-frame space and time to some extent exists as threat, as void, cut off suddenly as the film stops rolling, incomunicable, untransferable. It is an attachment to this unmasterable territory of the off-frame space and time that perhaps sustains the viewer’s attention, and perverse enjoyment.

I would like to end this sketch with a potential act of re-inscription, and re-transmission. I would like to return to the gazes of subjects in the films that disrupt the neutral point of view of the camera. First, there is the laughter of the British note-taker as he looks directly at the camera in the second war film, clearly ‘performing’ an act of inscription that is fake. Second, there is the African man who stares directly at the camera, ignoring the movement of objects and bodies in the frame, refusing to watch what everyone else watches: the movement of the beam.

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\(^6\) Grieveson addresses the enmeshment of colonial films with the shifting economic policies of Britain in relation to the commonwealth, see after WWW 1 as a market, rather than a territory of conquest.
Fatimah Tobing Rony’s discusses the anthropological chronophotography of Regnault as an attempted form of scientific inscription. She notes that the inscription is understood as a form of evidence, as the fact of what is seen, recorded by the neutral apparatus or device that writes it. However, the inscription is also always spoken for by the scientist, i.e. explained. For Regnault ‘film was the true scientific inscription’, and Tobing Rony discusses his ‘filming’ of African subjects at the ‘Exposition Ethnographiqyue de l’Afrique Occidentale of 1895’. Here she notes something interesting, that in the chronophotography of Regnault there is a young West African girl who ‘appears to break the cinematic code’ of early film by looking directly at the camera. She emphasizes the ‘chain of looks’ in order to argue for a potential to see the subjects in the films as ‘not just bodies’ but as ‘people who returned gazes’ (Tobing Rony, 1996: 24). I am curious here about the potential disruptions of colonial inscription and transmission of territories and subjects within these films.

Jaikumar describes a similar affective encounter she experiences in watching the ‘Indian Town Town Studies’ series with a diversity of faces of women and men pictured on screen. She concludes, ‘the present demands a more rigorous turn to film qua film so that we can reclaim the affectual distinctions between geographical films as disciplinary objects of their period, against the cinematic event that is repeatable, renewable (though always placed) encounter between spectators and texts.’ (Jaikumar, 2011: 177).

My conclusion is a provocation, and also a question about my own ‘placement’ as a researcher and artist in relation to these films. Can we situate our re-viewing of the colonial film archive (in its original analogue formats or digital translations) to open the space and time of the cinematic event to the potential for re-inscription and re-transmission of those subjectivities caught within the very violence of its movement?

Select Bibliography


7 I will attempt to research errant figures within the colonial archive, such as Sol Plaatjie, the author of Native Life in South Africa and founding ANC member, employed as translator during the South African war. Plaatjie had his own mobile ‘bioscope’ called ‘Mr Plaatjie’s Bioscope, which screened films he acquired on a trip to America in the 1910’s, moving specifically around rural areas in South Africa. Plaatjie’s movement here can be seen as a direct counter-movement to the movements of mobile cinema units in the South African provinces, which reinforced the separation of rural and urban central to the policy of separate development, so brutally enforced by both the Union and later the Apartheid state. Plaatjie’s circulation of moving images within the rural areas can be seen as effectively undoing this separation and I will also attempt to locate new archival research on Plaatjie’s bioscope.


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