

*The State, Citizens and Control: Film and African Audiences in South Africa, 1910–1948**

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The period between Union in 1910 and the inception of apartheid in 1948 was an important stage in building a South African nation and national identity. In the context of racial segregation, this South African nation and national identity was white: 'Boer and Brit', to be more precise. Film was an important component of building English–Afrikaner national identity and unity. Black people in general and Africans in particular stood outside this nation-building project, on and off screen. In fact, cinema for Africans positioned them in such a way that their exclusion from any putative South African 'nation' seemed a 'reasonable' decision. Through the widespread and effective control of cinematic production, exhibition and censorship, Africans were framed simultaneously as visually unsophisticated, mischievous and criminal, and therefore unable to assume the role of responsible citizens of a modern nation. State control of all three aspects of cinema was never fully centralised; instead it was widely dispersed throughout the various provinces and state departments which exercised a degree of autonomy in the granting or withholding of exhibition licences to private operators. It is precisely this decentralisation and dispersion, however, that made control so much more effective, because the ideological framing of Africans as criminally credulous audiences remained a consistently shared vision among the key players in the state and among the white citizenry.

Introduction

In 1910, South Africa became a Union, a self-governing 'white' dominion within the British Empire on the constitutional pattern of Canada, Australia and New Zealand, and built on an ideology of Boer–British reconciliation following the South African War of 1899–1902. These years were also marked by the growth of Afrikaner nationalism, which rejected such a conciliatory ideology. The other polar point of this study is 1948, which marked another significant turning point in the history of the South African state with the inauguration of the policy of apartheid under a National Party government. This paper focuses on cinema as popular culture, the cinematic placement of Africans in the context of nation-building after Union, and the growth of Afrikaner nationalism in these formative decades. The question of a South African 'nation' as well as that of a 'national cinema' before 1994 continues to be a point of scholarly debate.¹ Jacqueline Maingard has argued cogently for a cinema deployed in the service of nation-building.² The articulations of nationhood may be questionable and flawed, but none the less these were made by both the

*I would like to thank Nicholas Southey, Chet Fransch and the JSAS reviewers for reading earlier drafts and for providing insightful feedback.

1 See Neil Parsons, 'Nation-Building Movies Made in South Africa (1916–18): I.W. Schlesinger, Harold Shaw, and the Lingering Ambiguities of South African Union', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 39, 3 (2013), pp. 641–59.

2 Jacqueline Maingard, *South African National Cinema* (London and New York, Routledge, 2007).

white state and sectors of its white citizenry. Cinema was thus deployed in the service of nation-building. This was most clearly evident in 1956, when a state subsidy was introduced for the development of a 'national cinema'. The question this raises is where black South Africans in general, and Africans in particular, featured in this cinematic nation-building, if at all. According to Ntongela Masilela, they appeared nowhere. Masilela identifies the moment of Union as the convergence of Afrikaner political power and British cultural domination, in which black people in general were excluded, made invisible and rendered powerless.³

Masilela's point is valid in its description of English–Afrikaner convergence, but not on the question of the exclusion, invisibility or powerlessness of Africans. One can argue that in the very attempt at effacement and exclusion, Africans were accorded a significance that belied efforts to render them invisible and powerless. The necessity for intervention through censorship and control of production and exhibition of film defies a negation of Africans, I would argue. Admittedly, the African presence was framed in highly pejorative terms, and they were denied full political rights and citizenship, but they could not be wiped out of the cinematic experience. Africans may not have featured on camera, but their off-camera presence informed many aspects of cinema, and traces of their presence bled through to what appeared on screen, how production was shaped and the manner in which censorship was formulated and practised. Moreover, the 'national' cinema of this period was as much a palimpsest as was the country itself – every effort to wipe out traces of earlier and 'other' presences led to the creation of a much more complex image.

Film for African audiences, of course, has a history rooted in colonial attitudes and practices. The colonial view, in South Africa and other British colonies, was focused primarily on the pedagogic and utilitarian nature of film.⁴ To what extent did these colonial attitudes and practices shape film production and exhibition for African audiences after 1910? This paper focuses on the 'framing' of Africans as film audiences by the South African state and its white citizens in the context of nation-building and growing Afrikaner nationalism. It traces the nature of this framing by examining the ways in which the South African government and private citizens intruded and controlled production and exhibition of films for African audiences.

The 'National Epic' and Africans

The cinematic moment of nation-building after Union began with the proposed filming of *De Voortrekkers* in 1916.⁵ Africans were drawn into the filming of this national epic as the ethnic other, from whom the Afrikaner 'race' had to wrest the nation rather than 'with whom the state could negotiate'.⁶ 'Natives' were to be recruited via the Native Recruiting

3 Ntongela Masilela, 'Thelma Gutsche: A Great Film Scholar', in Robert Kriger and Abebe Zegeye (eds), *Culture in the New South Africa (After Apartheid series, Volume 2)* (Cape Town and Maroelana, Kwela Books and South African History Online, 2001), p. 215.

4 See, for example, J.M. Burns, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Athens, Ohio, Ohio University Centre for International Studies, 2002); David Kerr, 'The Best of Both Worlds: Colonial Film Policy and Practice in Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland', *Critical Arts*, 7 (1993), pp. 11–42; Glenn Reynolds, 'Image and Empire: Anglo-American Cinematic Interventions in Sub-Saharan Africa, 1921–1937', *South African Historical Journal*, 48 (May 2003), pp. 90–108; Rosaleen Smythe, 'The Development of British Colonial Film Policy, 1927–1939, with Special Reference to East and Central Africa', *Journal of African History*, 20, 3 (1979), pp. 437–50.

5 See Maingard, *South African National Cinema*, Chapter 1. See also Edwin Hees, 'The Voortrekkers on Film: From Preller to Pornography', *Critical Arts*, 10, 1 (1996).

6 Peter Merrington, 'Masques, Monuments and Masons: The 1910 Pageant of the Union of South Africa', *Theatre Journal*, 49, 1 (1997), p. 3.

Corporation and the Department of Native Labour.⁷ Three thousand Africans were used to film the 'Battle of Blood River' episode, while a further '10,000 to 15,000 native spectators' were drawn to the film location at Elsburg. The filming of the 'Battle of Blood River' did not go as planned, owing to an actual fight between the African and white cast members. In October 1916, Inspector Trew of the South African Police reported to his superior that the fight started when 'young, excitable men' dressed as Voortrekkers in 'old-time clothing' fired blanks into a group of Africans who had gone to drink water from the carts. The Africans who were 'in full war dress, armed with sham assegais and imitation shields' became 'angry and stormed the laager' and a full-scale fight followed.⁸

Trew's letter indicated that it took a while for the police officers and compound managers to separate the two groups, after which he refused permission to allow filming with Africans to continue. In his letter, he voiced the doubt that a 'successful performance of this nature could ever be carried out considering the racial feeling between the white men and natives in this country'. His letter clearly indicated the tensions between the two groups, and his immediate concern was to remove Africans from the film location as the only viable course of action to prevent further violence between the two groups.⁹ Given the official support for the film, Trew eventually had to reach a compromise with I.W. Schlesinger (managing director of Films Trust) and producer Harold Shaw, and he permitted a drastically reduced cast of 75 white men and 400 Africans to continue filming the scene at Elsburg.¹⁰ A further safeguard to avoid conflict was to use only those white men who were known to the Africans.¹¹

Maingard's analysis of this film and her discussion of the context of production, including the violent encounter referred to in the correspondence above, are both substantial and will not be repeated here. However, the incident at Elsburg and the subsequent public response from at least one sector of Afrikaner society are discussed here for several noteworthy points relevant to the framing of Africans and their place in the South African 'nation'. One is the idea that, through inclusion in the cast of white men familiar to some of the Africans, a degree of familiarity was deemed sufficient to avert further conflict. The implication is that, for both black and white, anonymous masses recalled a bitter past, while individual familiarity engendered a degree of trust. Pertinently also, this suggests the idea of 'managing' Africans in the same way that a skittish horse would be managed by a known handler – in this case mine officials and compound managers who worked regularly with African miners.

Indeed, that the 'Battle of Blood River' represented a significant, and perhaps sanctified, past was reflected in an article published in the *Transvaal Critic* on 27 October 1916, nearly two weeks after the incident at Elsburg. The article was titled "'Spot niet ons Mensen":¹² An Afrikaner on the Blood River Film Episode', and voiced strong criticism of not only the film-makers but also the Native Affairs Department (NAD) and minister. The film-makers were criticised for their lack of experience in handling 'large numbers of raw, undisciplined and semi-savage natives', and for inaccuracies of location and costumes.¹³ The writer went on to castigate the film-makers for a perceived mockery, in which 'women were being made

7 National Archives, Pretoria, Public Records of Central Government (SAB) since 1910, SAB SAP 87, SAP 2/262/16, letter from the Commissioner of South African Police to Gustav Preller, 24 July 1916. Hereafter, Central Government records will be referenced only by file and folder numbers.

8 SAB SAP 87, SAP 2/262/16, letter from Inspector Trew to Deputy Commissioner of Transvaal Division (of the South African Police), 14 October 1916.

9 *Ibid.*

10 SAB SAP 87, SAP 2/262/16, letter from the Commissioner of South African Police to Gustav Preller, 24 July 1916, in which the Commissioner refers to Prime Minister Louis Botha's support for the film.

11 SAB SAP 87, SAP 2/262/16, letter from Inspector Trew to the Deputy Commissioner, 16 November 1916.

12 'Don't mock our people'.

13 SAB NTS 9495 132/400, clipping of the *Transvaal Critic*, 27 October 1916.

to look like fools by being dressed in frocks made out of window blinds', and quoted a 'Burger' who commented, 'Bah, it looks like a coolie picnic'. The minister and the NAD were

strongly condemned for allowing many lives (men, women and children of his own nationality) to be placed in jeopardy, not, be it remembered, for a patriotic or national purpose, but simply in order to enable certain business people to pander to the depraved cravings of American and other foreign publics for unedifying, unhealthy sensationalism.¹⁴

For 'Africander', who wrote this piece, *De Voortrekkers*, at least at this stage of filming, did not represent patriotism or Afrikaner nationhood. In fact it was quite the opposite; the filming at Elsburg was seen as mocking the Afrikaner nation because the laagers were incorrect, as were the costumes of men, women and children, as was the location of Elsburg itself. Furthermore, there was the perception that this film was aimed at and pandered to a foreign audience rather than a local Afrikaans-speaking audience, a perception that strongly questioned, or possibly was ignorant of, the film-makers' nationalist sentiment, as argued by Maingard. The minister and the NAD were further castigated for allowing filming to occur on a Sunday, a day 'sacred' to the Dutch. The specific reference to the Dutch and the importance they attached to a Sunday implied that the film-makers (Schlesinger and Shaw, who were American and British, respectively) had violated the sanctity of this day in their quest to pander to the sensationalism demanded by foreign audiences. 'Africander' thus made a clear distinction between Dutch and foreign, on the grounds that a Dutch/Afrikaner would not have violated the Sabbath as the foreigners had done. Furthermore, the minister, and even the prime minister, Louis Botha, being of the *volk*, were doubly in the wrong for permitting this violation of the Sabbath. Despite the best intentions of the film-makers and the Botha government to forge Anglo-Afrikaner unity and nationhood by means of this film, there was at least a segment of Afrikanerdom that in the immediate aftermath of the Elsburg incident voiced strong criticism of the entire enterprise. The framing of identities in this piece was that of Dutch and 'foreigner', with Africans strongly on the outside as 'raw, undisciplined and semi-savage' others who had to be managed and controlled. The African response to white violence in the process of filming hardly painted a picture of invisibility or of powerless victimhood.

The correspondence regarding the Elsburg incident detailed above hints at a complex relationship between black and white people as one of domination and exchange operating at multiple levels. Both aspects – domination and exchange – were crucially linked to the manner in which Africans were placed in the cinematic nation and the South African polity. The incident and the response from 'Africander' are also instructive in terms of the broader argument that I wish to make: that the presence of Africans in early South African film is affirmed in various ways, though it is highly circumscribed and pejorative. Production, exhibition and censorship of film had to accommodate the African presence, even in the production of 'national epics' that did not grant Africans nationhood.

Control through Censorship

Censorship was one form of state intervention in films for Africans.¹⁵ Given that formal cinemas for Africans were relatively few, the focus of this discussion is mainly on other exhibition venues. In 1920 there were four cinemas for Africans in the greater Johannesburg

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ See Thelma Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895–1940* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1972), Chapter 14, pp. 283–305 and Keyan Tomaselli, *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film* (London, Routledge, 1989), Chapter 1, pp. 13–28. Both authors have written on early censorship.

region: in Ferreira Town, Vrededorp, Commissioner Street East and in the city itself.¹⁶ Apart from these few, scattered cinemas, mine compounds provided the best alternative venues, as they provided ready-made and captive – the pun is intended – audiences of African males. These compound venues were also one of the most important points of exhibition that needed stringent control in terms of censorship of films to be screened as well as in the awarding or withholding of exhibition permits. Outside mine compounds, and especially in the reserve and township areas, school and church halls were frequent venues, in the absence of established cinemas. Very few ‘bioscopes’ permitted mixed audiences. In the absence of established cinemas, it was much easier to practise differential censorship, passing films for white audiences while simultaneously restricting them for black audiences. Censorship was thus a key form of state intervention.

By means of censorship, the South African state was able to determine what constituted acceptable viewing material and what was ‘undesirable’. Archival evidence indicates that, in the first decade of the Union, there were interestingly complex and different attitudes among South African citizens and Union government officials towards film and censorship for African audiences. Theo Schreiner, elder brother of Olive Schreiner, and no doubt influenced by his work as a missionary and temperance worker, started a modest debate in the NAD regarding censorship in the Transkei territories.¹⁷ He wanted stricter censorship of films that were screened to African audiences in the Transkei. His concerns were centred on issues of ‘representations of immorality, commission of crime, violence and suicide, marriage infidelity and others offensive to religion’.¹⁸ In his reply, the Secretary for Native Affairs assured Schreiner that the NAD would look into the matter and draft a proclamation for discussion by the Department of Justice and the chief magistrate for the Transkei territories. It further asked Schreiner to supply supporting literature on the question of censorship to African audiences.¹⁹

On 6 October 1911, the Acting Secretary for Native Affairs dispatched a draft proclamation to the chief magistrate in Transkei. Contrary to what Schreiner had argued for, namely stricter censorship through the establishment of a dedicated censorship board for the territories, the proclamation drafted by the NAD was geared towards regulating the exhibition of films in the territories. It stipulated that anyone wishing to exhibit motion pictures in the Transkei territories (Tembuland, Pondoland, Port St. Johns and Griqualand East being specific areas included in the proclamation) needed to apply in the first instance to the resident magistrate, with the right of appeal to the chief magistrate. The chief magistrate’s decision would be considered final. Anyone contravening this regulation would be fined £10 or serve a prison term of one month.²⁰ So the NAD devolved the power of decision-making regarding film exhibition for Africans to the resident and chief magistrates, rather than attempting centralised control or direct intervention.

The draft proclamation would also seem to indicate that officials in the NAD, while wishing to placate members of the white citizenry, nevertheless resisted, on this occasion at least, attempts to shape policy around white concerns. This was strongly corroborated by the Minute of 7 October which declared that the NAD could not ‘impose on the censors the task

16 Pretoria National Archives, Central Government Records, SAB NTS 342 5688/1912/F1131, letter from Director of Native Labour to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 24 February 1920.

17 SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131, letter from Theo Schreiner to Mr Burton, Minister of Native Affairs, 14 September 1911.

18 SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131, minute from the Secretary for Native Affairs, 7 October 1911.

19 SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131, letter from the Secretary for Native Affairs to T.L. Schreiner, 28 September 1911.

20 SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131, letter and draft Proclamation from Acting Secretary for Native Affairs to the Chief Magistrate, Umtata, 6 October 1911.

of deciding difficult questions of morality and aesthetics, within a range of exceptional width and variety'.²¹ The document further outlined the practical complication regarding the establishment of a board of censors for the Transkeian Territories, including that of the time needed for viewing films, and the possibility of contradictory judgements should different censors be appointed throughout the Territories. More pertinently, the Secretary for Native Affairs was of the opinion that it was unnecessary to exercise stricter censorship, since the Territories had thus far escaped the influence of indecent cinema. The document presented the argument that current censorship of 'inter-racial pugilism and indecency' was sufficient for the time being.²²

On 18 January 1912, the Secretary for Native Affairs replied to Mr Schreiner that the minister did not think it 'advisable to issue a proclamation involving the creation of an elaborate machinery for censoring bioscope exhibitions in the Transkei Territories'.²³ The letter explained this decision on the basis of a lack of evidence that the kind of films to which Schreiner was referring were being shown in the Transkei. It went on to add, however, that should matters change and a need arise, then the matter of stricter censorship would be reviewed. The motivation for not introducing it in the Transkei at this time was clearly based on the region remaining relatively isolated. Given that these documents were directly pertinent to the Transkei, the question may be raised about the perceived isolation of other 'tribal areas' and whether or not the reluctance to avoid stricter censorship were valid for these territories also.

Schreiner's letter is likely to have been part of a broader public discussion around censorship in general. Between July and September 1911, the *Cape Argus* had published several brief notices regarding film censorship.²⁴ Two of these were correspondence received, first, from the Sea Point branch of the Women's Christian Temperance Union on 4 July, and, secondly, from R.G. Ross, 'Agent for the SRA' (Social Reform Association) on 1 September. According to Thelma Gutsche, the SRA was the originating force behind the establishment of the Bioscope Advisory Committee (BAC), which was established in 1913.²⁵ This was a voluntary group that took upon itself the role of vigilant guardian of the public moral good. Although the BAC campaigned vigorously to get various municipal and provincial authorities to enact and enforce stricter censorship, they were largely unsuccessful until 1916, when Afrikaner sensibilities were offended by the screening of the film *Dop Doctor* in Britain. There was no national response from the Botha government, but the Cape Provincial Council passed the Public Performance Control Ordinance (No. 9 of 1916).²⁶ Ironically, stricter censorship in South Africa, or at least in the Cape, rather than being aimed at Africans, came in response to Afrikaners taking offence at the representations of themselves in *Dop Doctor*.

In their correspondence, both the SRA and the Temperance Union were urging greater film censorship, with Ross detailing the manner in which the National Board of Censorship of Motion Pictures, New York, set about its task. The two South African organisations were concerned with 'criminal' and 'immoral' representations, especially when screened for 'mixed audiences'. The Temperance Union had also urged the Cape Town City Council to enforce stricter censorship. The city council's decision, as reported in the *South African News*, was not in favour of amending existing censorship.²⁷

21 SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131, minute from the Secretary for Native Affairs, 7 October 1911.

22 *Ibid.*

23 SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131, letter from Secretary of Native Affairs to Mr T Schreiner, 18 January 1912.

24 *Cape Argus*, 4 July 1911, 1 September 1911, 4 September 1911.

25 Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures*, p. 283.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 292.

27 *South African News*, 28 July 1911.

One area of public focus and concern that could arguably have influenced this discussion was the ‘black peril’²⁸ outcry, which appeared sporadically in the *South African News* for 1911, with more intensive national coverage and debate between March and June 1912.²⁹ While public discussion of the ‘black peril’ did not specifically link film to the perceived sexual threat to white women, it cannot be entirely incorrect to infer a link. This inference is based on the perceived obsession of the white citizenry and the government with censoring films that depicted white women in any form of undress. This preoccupation with censoring representations of white women for a black audience has its roots in colonial film policy and practice.

Rosaleen Smythe identifies colonial film policy in general as the ‘trusteeship approach’.³⁰ This approach was characterised by a concern to protect the ‘native’ from the ‘dangerous’ images of commercial cinema; the danger lay in social dislocation resulting from industrialisation that followed the discoveries of minerals in southern Africa.³¹ This dislocation was a result of the changing patterns of social organisation in urban centres, which now required greater numbers of African labourers. The colonial authorities responded with what Glenn Reynolds has called the ‘Social Gospel’, which was essentially a rethinking and transformation of the original Christian civilising mission of European settlers in Africa.³² Cinema, Reynolds argues, was ‘a cornerstone’ of this transformed European mission, and was utilised for the uplift and education of Africans, an important ingredient of which was the mitigation of what colonial authorities and the settler community believed to be the ‘corrosive influence’ of foreign films, which were bound to show the ‘least ennobling aspects of western culture’.³³

The settler community’s anxiety about the exposure of Africans to films was focused on issues of sexuality, loss of European prestige, and violence, especially of black against white. Cinema’s visual impact contributed to a sense of threat among settlers, especially with regard to white women. It was believed that cinematic depictions of ‘lewdness’ in the form of white women in various forms of undress would incite black men to perpetrate acts of sexual violence on white women. This colonial policy and attitude towards films for Africans seems to have continued relatively unchanged into the Union government, which reflected the same contradictory tendencies. Another modest discussion occurred between November 1919 and August 1920, when Mr J. Smith applied for a licence to screen films in the ‘native compounds’ of the Modderfontein mines.³⁴ The major concern on the part of the authorities was with censorship, especially with regard to ‘sexual matters or those which in any way lower the status of white women or men’.³⁵ Strict censorship of these issues was deemed especially important for an African male audience, where the ‘majority of the Natives would

28 See Gareth Cornwell, ‘George Webb Hardy’s *The Black Peril* and the Social Meaning of “Black Peril” in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 22, 3 (September 1996), pp. 441–53; David M. Anderson, ‘Sexual Threat and Settler Society: “Black Perils” in Kenya, c. 1907–30’, *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 38, 1 (2010), pp. 47–74.

29 See *South African News*, 4 July 1911, 3 October 1911, and SAB NTS 342 4415/1912/F1131. This folder contains a series of clippings spanning major national newspapers like the *Sunday Times* and the *Rand Daily Mail*, and regional and local publications such as the *East London Dispatch*, *Bloemfontein Post*, *The Worker* and *Natal Witness*, among others.

30 Smythe, ‘The Development of British Colonial Film Policy’, p. 437.

31 Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, p. xv.

32 Reynolds, ‘Image and Empire’, p. 91.

33 *Ibid.*

34 SAB NTS 342 5688/1912/F1131. This folder contains a series of correspondence between Mr J. Smith, the NAD, the district commandant of the South African Police, and the mining commissioner, beginning on 4 November 1919 and ending in August 1920.

35 SAB NTS 342 5688/1912/F1131, letter from the District Commandant of the SAP in Boksburg to the Deputy Commissioner of the SAP, Transvaal Division, 14 November 1919.

be fresh from the kraals and incapable of distinguishing between fact and fiction'.³⁶ Yet, despite these misgivings, and concern about being in 'contravention of the Trading on Mining Ground Regulation Act', permission was granted. But it was made conditional on the establishment of a special censorship board that would comprise officials from key government departments and agencies, namely the NAD, the South African Police (SAP), the Mining Commission and the Mine Compound Managers' Association.³⁷ Permission for film shows on the compounds was granted because of the belief in its 'educative' value. The irony is quite obvious. Despite the strongly voiced belief that Africans were gullible and unsophisticated viewers of film, there was also a fearful preoccupation with film's potential for subversion. Thus, while African audiences were dismissed as lacking visual literacy, the authorities expressed simultaneous and contradictory fears that Africans would none the less learn too much from watching films. This fear was most explicitly linked to loss of European prestige in the eyes of Africans, as well as 'acts of immorality' or 'indecenty'.³⁸ Policies on production, exhibition and censorship of films for Africans therefore tried to cover all possible contingencies. The discussion sparked by Mr Smith's application led to the realisation of the necessity for a central censorship board for mine compounds and the few cinemas catering to Africans in the Transvaal region. The Commissioner of the SAP proposed the idea of a central board based on the future probability of similar applications for screening films to African audiences.³⁹ The board would comprise the deputy commissioner of police, an inspector from the NAD and a compound manager.⁴⁰

The commissioner's foresight with regard to future prospective applicants was accurate. A key figure in both censorship and the 'trusteeship approach' to film was the Revd Ray Phillips, of the American Mission Board (AMB), who in the 1920s was also screening films to African audiences, largely in the mine compounds of the Rand.⁴¹ His main concerns were twofold. First, as part of the AMB's civilising mission, he sought to use films to educate Africans about European culture, values and codes of behaviour. Secondly, his concern centred on what has been identified as 'moralising the leisure time' of urban Africans, especially migrant workers in the mine compounds. In this regard he was contracted by mine owners to provide 'wholesome' entertainment for miners in order to 'distract them from more antisocial activities such as drinking and fighting'.⁴² While various sporting and athletics activities provided a diversion in the daytime, Phillips' dilemma was finding appropriate entertainment for the evenings. The film shows were highly successful, proved to be a stronger attraction than drunken violence, and drew more workers to the South African mines.⁴³ The efficacy of film as a deterrent to alcohol abuse and violence 'convinced Phillips that the medium [of film] held a powerful sway over Africans. He believed that carefully chosen films would have the effect of "sublimating potential criminal tendencies" among miners'.⁴⁴ This cinema of 'pacification' was aimed at keeping urban Africans out of mischief and counteracting the evil influences of modernity, to which 'innocent' Africans were

36 *Ibid.*

37 SAB NTS 342 5688/1912/F1131, letter from Mining Commissioner to District Commandant of the SAP, 1 September 1919; letter from the Commissioner of Police to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 14 January 1920.

38 Smythe, 'The Development of British Colonial Film Policy', p. 438.

39 SAB NTS 342 5688/1912/F1131, letter from the Commissioner of Police to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 14 January 1920.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Tim Couzens, 'Moralising Leisure Time', in Richard Rathbone and Shula Marks (eds), *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness 1870-1930* (London, Longman, 1982).

42 Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, p. 8.

43 *Ibid.*, p. 9.

44 *Ibid.*

thought to be particularly susceptible.⁴⁵ His endeavours were thus one aspect of a larger project to provide 'wholesome' leisure activities for urban Africans as an 'antidote to degrading influences of the slum yards and liquor dens with vice and drink, where Natives drift in the absence of healthful leisure activities'.⁴⁶

Phillips's cinematic undertakings in the mine compounds were enthusiastically supported by the Chamber of Mines, which agreed to provide £5,000 annually.⁴⁷ The mobile circuit operated by Phillips expanded beyond the mine compounds, and included 80 exhibition venues for Africans in the urban centres. With this rapid expansion, the need to produce and select suitable films was pressing, and Phillips personally selected and edited the films to suit the educational and entertainment needs that were deemed necessary.⁴⁸ Apart from purchasing suitable films from overseas, Phillips was also working closely with Schlesinger's African Film Productions for the production of suitable films for screening to Africans.⁴⁹ Phillips's success in South Africa was exported to other parts of colonial Africa, especially Rhodesia, where colonial authorities further censored Phillips's films.⁵⁰

It was not only Phillips's films that travelled beyond the borders of South Africa. Colonies such as Kenya looked to South Africa for guidance on censorship too. The colonial authorities in Kenya wrote to the South African Board of Trade and Industries requesting information on how South Africa dealt with film censorship.⁵¹ The matter was referred to the Cape board of administrators. In his reply, the provincial secretary for the Cape board of administrators confirmed the existence of the Cape Province Board of Film Inspectors, which had been appointed by the administrator and was reporting directly to him. Furthermore, in reply to questions regarding mixed audiences, the letter indicated that the general trend at the Cape, in keeping with its historical tradition of liberalism, was for mixed audiences without discrimination on the basis of either race or age. It does concede, however, that it recommends censorship in cases where scenes might be thought objectionable on the grounds of race or age. The notable points here are: first, the existence of mixed audiences (sitting in separate parts of the theatre); secondly, that censorship was not lawfully enforceable, but only recommended by the board of inspectors; thirdly, that race and age were key factors in censorship.⁵² A further point of interest indicated by the correspondence and emphasised by Smythe is that South Africa provided the role model for other colonies in the drafting of censorship legislation.⁵³

With regard to general censorship, the Transvaal in the early 1920s operated on a basis similar to Natal's, in that a special committee was appointed to exercise censorship. One crucial difference between the Transvaal and Natal was that no mixed audiences were permitted in cinemas outside African areas. The Transvaal administration had signed an agreement with African Consolidated Theatres (ACT), 'whereby native and

45 Ntongela Masilela, 'The New African Movement and the Beginnings of Film Culture in South Africa', in Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela (eds), *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (Detroit, Wayne State University Press, 2003), p. 20. See also, in the same book, Bhekizizwe Peterson, 'The Politics of Leisure during the Early Days of South African Cinema'; Tim Couzens, 'Moralising Leisure Time'; Mark Beittel, 'Mapantsula: Cinema, Crime and Politics on the Witwatersrand', for greater exposition of government thinking on the issue of cinema's influence on criminal tendencies among urban Africans.

46 Peterson, 'The Politics of Leisure'.

47 Mark Beittel, 'Mapantsula', pp. 752–3.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Peterson, 'The Politics of Leisure', p. 36. See also J.M. Burns, *Flickering Shadows*.

50 Smythe, 'The Development of British Colonial Film Policy', p. 439.

51 Pretoria National Archives, Public Records of the former Transvaal, TAB HEN 590 78/1/1, letter from the Board of Trade and Industries to the Provincial Secretary, Cape Town, 25 June 1926.

52 TAB HEN 590 78/1/1, letter from the Provincial Secretary of the Cape to the Board of Trade and Industries, 29 July 1926.

53 Smythe, 'The Development of British Colonial Film Policy', p. 439.

coloured persons are not admitted to bioscopes at the same time as Europeans'.⁵⁴ By 1926, however, the police were solely responsible for all aspects censorship, and, according to the provincial secretary, this was a satisfactory arrangement, which they were in no hurry to change. The reason for this was expressed in terms of political sensibility. Despite representations for the establishment of a board of censors, the Transvaal administration believed that, as far as 'coloured persons' and 'natives' were concerned, a board may not have the same political sensibility that the police would have, and might therefore pass films for black audiences that would not be suitable.⁵⁵ This would indicate that the lack of a centralised policy in respect of censorship may have been deliberate and, certainly for the Transvaal, a political necessity better entrusted to the police. What is significant about this is the degree to which the state, at least in the Transvaal, wished to intervene in film exhibition for 'natives' and 'coloured persons'. The police, as representatives of the state, could be trusted to ensure that black people in general would not be able to view films that could in any way pose a political threat to the state's power and legitimacy. This important task could not be entrusted to private citizens, who might not be able to appreciate the finer distinctions between what would be suitable and what could be potentially subversive.

This lack of a centralised policy did not mean that censorship was not considered important. On the contrary: in the Transvaal at least, it was considered far too important to leave to ordinary citizens, even if they were carefully selected and groomed, and even if the final veto lay with the administration. Censorship was taken so seriously in this province that even films passed by the Cape censors for exhibition to black audiences were re-censored by the Transvaal police. Films for 'European' audiences that were passed by the Cape censors, however, were accepted and passed without scrutiny.⁵⁶ The Transvaal administration, it seems, took the matter of censorship for black audiences far more seriously than did either the Cape or Natal administrations.

The situation in Natal, in the 1920s, was somewhat different, in that while a committee appointed by the town council exercised censorship for Pietermaritzburg, no such body existed in Durban, where the chief constable viewed doubtful films. There appear to have been no mixed audiences in Natal, and only one of the four 'European' cinemas seems to have had facilities for mixed audiences. There was one cinema patronised by both 'coloureds' and 'natives' while the municipal Native Affairs Department operated another one in the location itself.⁵⁷ While censorship was exercised on an ad hoc basis, concern was expressed that problems might arise if other than the 'better educated Native' attended cinemas indiscriminately. And, in view of this, stricter and better-planned censorship would become an eventuality.⁵⁸

In keeping with its liberal attitudes, the Cape board of censors included white women, while in the Transvaal the attitude seems to have been that women would not be allowed anywhere near films that had not already been deemed suitable for feminine tastes.⁵⁹ The fact that three of the five members of the Cape board were women was not universally welcomed, and African Films Limited certainly had no scruples in expressing the view that there were too many women on the board. This was an undesirable state of affairs, according to the manager, who felt that the male members of the board might be unduly influenced by the

54 TAB HEN 590 78/1/1, letter from the Provincial Secretary of the Transvaal to the Chairman of the Board of Trade and Industries, 6 July 1926.

55 *Ibid.*

56 *Ibid.*

57 The archival source is not clear on which location is referred to. Specifically, it talks of 'native location' without mentioning a name.

58 TAB HEN 590 78/1/1, letter from the Provincial Secretary of Natal to the Chairman of the Board of Trade and Industries, 4 August 1926.

59 TAB HEN 590 78/1/1, letter from the Provincial Secretary of the Transvaal to the Chairman of the Board of Trade and Industries, 6 July 1926; letter from Cape Provincial Secretary, 29 July 1926.

women, as the 'average man is unwilling to argue or disagree with a woman'. Furthermore, women did not possess the 'logical and moderate grip on public affairs possessed by men', and they were inclined to read far too much into a film or a title. This assertion was substantiated by the fact that the company had had to change the title of the film *The First Night* because the board had passed the film but objected to its title.⁶⁰

That each province and region acted independently as regards censorship was emphasised by the Cape provincial secretary, who stated quite clearly that the Cape Province board of inspectors was not concerned in any way with what happened in the other provinces.⁶¹ Consequently, it was only in 1930 that a centralised policy was introduced, when the national government promulgated the Entertainment (Censorship) Bill, which was also submitted to industry role players such as ACT for their input.⁶² A National Board of Censors was formed under the aegis of this law. This law, however, was not comprehensive enough to cover all aspects of exhibition. The increasing number of film societies which did not exhibit to the general public, but only to a select membership, fell outside the strictures of this law, and the films they screened were thus exempt from the scrutiny of the board of censors.

The Entertainments Censorship Amendment Bill was introduced in 1934 precisely with the aim of closing these loopholes in the previous law. The motive, according to the Minister of the Interior, J.H. Hofmeyr, was to close the door on 'abuses' by private societies, which could not be prevented from showing censorable material, especially Russian propaganda and 'communistic' films. Furthermore, the minister argued, the previous law could not have prevented 'natives from forming themselves into such a society and thus becoming susceptible to subversive propaganda'.⁶³

Controlling Exhibition

It was perhaps this fear of the many avenues in which the production and exhibition of films for Africans could fall outside the control of the state that prompted greater state interest. During the 1920s and 1930s, state intervention in films for Africans was confined primarily to the Native Affairs Department, which vociferously exercised its right to control and intervene in reserve areas. This intervention took the form of producing state-funded films, as well as vetting or vetoing the production of private film projects.⁶⁴ Individuals and companies who wished to exhibit films to African audiences, especially in the rural areas, had to apply to the NAD for permission to do so. This permission was most readily granted to a Mr Nicholson, who had applied to exhibit films in Potgietersrust.⁶⁵ The Secretary for Native Affairs wrote personally to the local Native Commissioner to permit Nicholson to exhibit films in the 'native locations', but not in the town itself, provided he also had the permission of the local chief. Another condition was that all the films had to be 'viseed' (vetted) before exhibition, as it was 'essential that no picture should be shown likely to disturb the relations between white and black or to lower the prestige of the Europeans in the eyes of the native or to excite their primitive

60 Cape Town Archives Repository, KAB PAS 3/58, letter from the Branch Manager of African Films Limited to Acting Administrator, 5 September 1929.

61 TAB HEN 590 78/1/1, letter from the Cape Provincial Secretary to the Board of Trade and Industries, 29 July 1926.

62 Gutsche, *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures*, p. 297.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 300.

64 Burns, *Flickering Shadows*, p. 29.

65 Pretoria National Archives, SAB KPT 2/2/26, letters from Mr Nicholson to the Native Commissioner, 17 March 1931.

passions...'.⁶⁶ The letter continued with the positive sentiment that educational films could not be objected to, as these would 'tend to elevate the native mind'.⁶⁷

Nicholson's sentiments would also undoubtedly have weighed in his favour. In his letter of application, he stated that 'all reasonable care will be taken to prevent exposure of doubtful scenes which will have an unwholesome effect on the audience...'. What Nicholson considered unwholesome included crime, gun-fights and 'sob stuff'.⁶⁸ This correspondence provides instructive insight on several points. First, and most obviously, it highlighted the interventionist role of the segregationist South African state through the NAD in the exhibition of films for Africans. Secondly, it pointed to the collusion between individuals such as Nicholson and the state, represented by the NAD. Thirdly, it demonstrated that the 'trusteeship approach' went beyond the state to include members of white civil society.

Other individuals, such as a Mr Breck and a Mr Rooseboom, echo this 'trusteeship approach' in their application to the town clerk in the Cape for permission to conduct film shows in the proposed town hall for Langa. Their objective was to provide entertainment in an area that had few such facilities for a populace that needed it. They believed that 'as the native mind is such that if it is not occupied in some form of healthy entertainment the probabilities are that it will find an outlet in some undesirable manner'.⁶⁹ The 'trusteeship approach' here believed that, as with young children who needed to be constructively occupied to prevent them from creating mischief, Africans too were required to have their minds occupied with wholesome activities in order to prevent misbehaviour. In other words, moralising the leisure time of Africans with film was an effective means of preventing trouble and waywardness.

Unlike the NAD, though, the town clerk for Cape Town refused permission, and was not prepared to recommend the introduction of cinema entertainment in Langa. No reasons were given for this refusal, and it is difficult to speculate, given that other town councils took a different view. From the early 1930s, the Johannesburg city council assumed the role that the Chamber of Mines had played, and was providing free film shows both in the mine compounds and outside. In 1933, the council contracted Revd Phillips to organise film shows in 'native villages' at a cost of £60 per annum. These shows proved highly popular, drawing capacity crowds of up to 3,000 at a time. Consequently, open air shows were introduced to accommodate the audiences.

By 1936, the Cape Town council had changed its position regarding film entertainment for township residents, and was prepared to consider private applications where in 1930 they would not. The council granted a Mr J.S. Phillips of Kenilworth permission in September 1936 to hold film shows in the Langa township.⁷⁰ It likewise granted permission to Mr C.J. Nabe, a general dealer, to conduct 'bioscope' shows at the Market Hall.⁷¹

Apart from the NAD and city councils in the various provinces, there were also other committees and individuals drawn into the decision-making process in the awarding of exhibition permits. Major T.W. Stack's application in November 1941 to construct a cinema in Wynberg, Johannesburg, had been circulated between the NAD, Johannesburg municipality, the Alexandra health committee and the South African Police.⁷² While the Johannesburg municipality had no objection to the proposed cinema, the application was

66 KPT 2/2/26, letter from the Secretary for Native Affairs to the Native Commissioner in Potgietersrust, 17 April 1931.

67 *Ibid.*

68 Nicholson's letter to the Native Commissioner, 17 March 1931.

69 KAB 3.CT 4/1/9/1/122, letter, 10 October 1930.

70 KAB 3CT 4/1/9/1/122, Phillips's letter of application, 18 September 1936.

71 *Ibid.* Letter of application, 13 August 1937.

72 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from the Native Commissioner to the Director of Native Labour, 7 January 1942.

unsuccessful owing to the objections of the SAP and the Alexandra Health Committee. The objection of the SAP was based on several factors, with the chosen location of Wynberg being the most significant. Wynberg adjoined Alexandra, a black township, and Major D. Baillie of the SAP believed that an influx of Africans from Alexandra into Wynberg would not only devalue the properties, but also cause a significant inconvenience for the white residents of Wynberg.⁷³ The Alexandra Health Committee's objection was based on the lack of a local health authority in Wynberg itself, which could exercise oversight.⁷⁴ Furthermore, Major Stack's application was being considered simultaneously with that of Mr Richard Baloyi, who wished to build a cinema in Alexandra itself. As the Secretary for Native Affairs indicated in his reply to Stack, Baloyi's application was being given preference first because of its location, and secondly because 'it is the policy of the Government to encourage such enterprise within the Native areas'.⁷⁵ He seems to have withdrawn his application, however, with no reasons provided. Interestingly, his application was being handled by S. Harris, presumably of Harris Film Investments, a company that would represent Mr Deali's application two years later, in 1944.⁷⁶

In the same letter, Harris mentions a new client, Mr J Brown, who also wished to build a cinema in Alexandra. Brown, however, seems to have changed representation, since subsequent correspondence on his behalf was dealt with by a law firm, Sadie and Sadie.⁷⁷ The Alexandra Health Committee approved Brown's application subject to strict building codes and criteria.⁷⁸ The Native Commissioner also gave approval on the following basis: 'The type of entertainment it is proposed to provide is to be encouraged and thereby the inhabitants will be kept out of mischief'.⁷⁹ Film as an antidote to black mischief is a recurring theme, and one of the primary reasons for the awarding of exhibition licenses.

Well into the 1940s, the 'trusteeship approach' and the state's desire to 'protect the native' were evident in the Johannesburg city council's refusal of a permit to build a cinema in Orlando. The application, by Harris Film Investments on behalf of a Mr Deali, 'a native trader', was made to the Department of Native Affairs, but the matter had been referred to the city council for a decision. The council's refusal was based on the fact that the council 'itself is considering the provisioning of such facilities'.⁸⁰ The council apparently operated bi-monthly shows in Orlando, to which admission was free. It was thus concerned that a private enterprise within the township would exploit the entertainment needs of the people who were too poor to attend 'non-European' cinemas in other parts of the city. The refusal of the application was therefore argued to be in the interest of the population of Orlando township. The council was considering building a multi-purpose community hall where free film shows could also be held.⁸¹ This consideration did not materialise, however. In Bloemfontein, meanwhile, film shows for Africans were organised by the Bantu Benevolent Fund and the Bantu YMCA, which were under the aegis of the town council.⁸²

73 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from Major D. Baillie to the Native Commissioner, 3 January 1942.

74 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from Secretary for Native Affairs to Major Stack, 16 January 1942.

75 *Ibid.*

76 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from S Harris to The Secretary for Native Affairs, 20 January 1942.

77 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from Sadie and Sadie to the Secretary for Native Affairs, 21 February 1942.

78 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from Alexandra Health Committee to the Native Commissioner, 18 February 1942.

79 SAB NTS 4521 589/313, letter from the Native Commissioner to the Director of Native Labour, 23 February 1942.

80 TAB KJB 495 N9/13/3, letter from the Town Clerk to the Native Commissioner, 25 January 1944.

81 *Ibid.*

82 KAB 3/CT 4/1/9/1/88, memo from the Johannesburg City Council and a letter from the Bloemfontein Town Clerk to the Town Clerk of the Cape responding to Cape Town's query about film shows in the Bloemfontein locations, 1933.

What this correspondence presents is evidence of a growing awareness of the importance of film for both educational and entertainment purposes. Given this perception, it was crucial that Africans should be exposed to the right kinds of films, which would be wholesome to their development, as argued by Revd Phillips and echoed by at least one concerned citizen. Mr Mears of Rondebosch, in his letter to the Native Affairs Committee of Cape Town, recommended film shows for Africans and advised that the films be acquired from Revd Phillips, who was censoring his own films for exhibition in the compounds.⁸³

The inconsistency of the various town councils and municipalities with regards to both their own involvement and that of private enterprise in film exhibition in African townships was consistent with the lack of a coherent film policy for African audiences. This inconsistency is apparent in the fact that, while the town councils of places such as Johannesburg and Bloemfontein operated even an ad hoc system of film exhibition from as early as the 1930s, others, such as Cape Town, did not do so until much later. It is also apparent in the awarding and withholding of permission to private individuals to run film shows, apparently without racial discrimination. In March 1946, the Cape Town council approved the application by Mr P.R. Mphela, 'a successful tailor in Langa', to construct a hall for the purposes of film exhibition. Mphela was part of a syndicate involved in film shows in New Brighton, Port Elizabeth, and this group was prepared to spend £6,000 on building a hall in Langa.⁸⁴

Also in 1946, the council refused permission to ACT, which was part of the Schlesinger Group, to rent a hall and hold shows on 'as many nights per week as [was] found payable'. ACT's letter of application mentioned their long experience in film exhibition to 'natives', which had enabled them to build up a stock of suitable films.⁸⁵ While ACT's application was denied, the Council surprisingly granted permission to the South African Friends of the Soviet Union (SAFSU), a remnant of wartime anti-Axis solidarity, to conduct film shows in the townships on condition that they would be free and that selected films were pre-approved by the board of censors.⁸⁶ As no reasons were given for either the withholding or granting of permission to these organisations, one can only speculate that ACT's application was refused for the same reason that the Johannesburg city council refused Harris Film Investment: the fear of commercial enterprises exploiting township audiences. SAFSU's application, in the meantime, received a favourable outcome because it was not a commercial enterprise and the film shows would have been gratis to the public. A further reason for SAFSU's success could be that the 'red peril' had yet to grip South Africa, as it later would, after the victory of the National Party in 1948 and especially following the passage of the Suppression of Communism Act in 1950.

Conclusion

The Foucauldian view that 'power is everywhere' is an apt comment on the control exercised over films for African audiences. In the first instance, the South African state devolved power and control to various municipalities and state institutions, although the NAD remained the state department of last resort. State power and control was thus dispersed, fragmentary, and often also contradictory. Provincial authorities and town councils appear to have operated autonomously regarding both censorship and the awarding of permits for exhibition purposes. This autonomy, however, has to be placed in the broader context of the national project of

83 KAB 3/CT 4/1/9/1/88, letter from Mr Mears, 2 May 1933.

84 KAB 3/CT 4/1/9/1/122, letter of application, 20 March 1946.

85 KAB 3/CT 4/1/9/1/122, letter of application, 19 December 1946.

86 KAB 3/CT 4/1/9/1/122, letter of application, 13 November 1946.

building a white South African nation, in which all the municipalities, local and provincial councils, the various government departments and civil society organisations had a key interest. All these participants were in agreement about one aspect of this nation-building project: the place of Africans. This 'national' placement is reflected in how Africans were conceived as film audiences.

Attitudes in the period between 1910 and 1948 reflect clear parallels and continuity with colonial attitudes towards film and censorship for African audiences. Film for African audiences was at various times conceived in terms of its pedagogic function, as a form of distraction and as a means of moralising leisure time. These functions were not mutually exclusive. In fact, film was appreciated by the South African state and some citizens for being able to serve all three functions simultaneously. This utilitarian view of film was not unique to South Africa in this period. What is interesting, and perhaps unique, is the continued linkage between film and particular conceptions of Africans as audiences. These conceptions range from their being unsophisticated viewers unable to tell the difference between fact and cinematic fiction, to their being troublesome, wayward burdens needing constant engagement in order to distract them from mischief. Africans and their 'free time' needed to be constantly managed. More pertinently, what they were exposed to in their free time needed to be censored in very specific terms: crime, violence (especially black against white) and sexuality. This is clearly evident regarding cinema shows in mine compounds, where Revd Phillips was at the forefront of 'managing' and 'moralising' the leisure time of African miners. In this framing of them as childlike and mischievous, while sexually predatory on white women, African cinema audiences remain outside the domain of responsible adulthood, and therefore unqualified for full national status.

While the applications from many members of the white citizenry also reflect the 'trusteeship approach', one cannot discount the financial motivation behind the desire to build cinema halls or arrange film shows in mine compounds or in African residential areas like Alexandra. An integral aspect of the 'trusteeship approach' was the encouragement of African enterprise and entrepreneurship, hence the awarding of exhibition permits and licences to some African applicants. This was on a limited basis, however. More interesting is the different approach taken by different provincial and municipal authorities, with some wishing to maintain absolute control while others permitted private enterprise from black or white applicants.

The awarding of exhibition licences also reflects the cumbersome process involved in the consultation of various stakeholders, from the South African Police to health committees and municipal building inspectors. While it made perfect sense for health and safety inspectors and committees to be involved, as these are important considerations whenever large numbers of people gather in confined spaces, the involvement of the SAP, Native Commissioners, and Native labour officials was specific to time and place. The SAP, Native Commissioners, labour officials and the NAD itself were the 'experts' on all things 'native', thus necessitating their involvement in the decision-making process. This also prolonged the process, with applications such as that from Mr J. Smith taking nearly a year before a decision was reached. Film exhibition and censorship for African audiences during the period 1910–48 reflects the entire machinery of white South Africa in operation. This machinery included both the state and white citizens who framed African film audiences as simultaneously criminal, sexually predatory and mischievously childlike.

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