

Mining History and Mining Film Archive

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This paper will discuss the use of film and cinema by the mining industries in Southern Africa, during the first half of twentieth century. Taking an overview of the scholarship on the importance of cinema to the regulation and recruitment of African miners: in the Copperbelt (Reynolds 2005, Smyth 1979, Windel, 2011); Rhodesia (Burns 2002, Smyth 1979); and South Africa (Couzens 1982, Gutsche 1972, Peterson 2003, Reynolds 2007); and assessing the range of films produced for the mines, copies of some of which are held in the National Film, Video and Sound Archives in South Africa and the National Film Archive in London, this paper will examine the broader ramifications of mining interests in film production and cinema exhibition in South Africa and Southern Rhodesia.

In other parts of Africa under British rule, such as the Gold Coast, Nigeria and Sierra Leone, the mining industries did not use film to the same extent, and British film companies were commissioned by the British government or British companies to promote trade in the empire. In the 1930s and 1940s, the British Colonial Office supported film production for African audiences first through the Bantu Education Kinema Experiment (BEKE) then through Colonial Film Units (see <http://colonialfilm.org.uk>). In South Africa, film production and cinema exhibition was controlled commercially by The African Films Trust, African Consolidated Theatres, and African Film Productions (AFP), a conglomerate which struck up a deal with the Transvaal Chamber of Mines to distribute American and British commercial films for screening on the Mining Compound Cinema Circuit both on the Rand and in Southern Rhodesia. The Mining Compound Cinema Circuit was set up in the 1920s by Reverend Ray Phillips of the American Board of Missions and financed by the Chamber of Mines. Concerns amongst mine owners, managers, missionaries and settlers about the content of the entertainment films shown led to a system of strict censorship of dramatic [westerns and melodramas] and comedy films. The Chamber of Mines commissioned AFP to make instructional and topical films to be screened on the cinema circuit, and AFP also produced films for the mining recruitment agencies, Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA) and Native Recruitment Corporation (NRC), later The Employment Bureau of Africa (TEBA) (Reynolds, 2007) [up until the 1970s, when the Chamber of Mines set up its own Public Relations Media Division alongside the TEBA Film and TV Unit which produced a newsreel]. These recruitment films were screened in villages on mobile cinemas, but they were not just screened for rural African audiences. They were also exhibited at cinemas all over South Africa as well as overseas, alongside other publicity films made about the mining industry for urban audiences, often coproduced with various South African government departments, especially the South Africa Railways and Harbours (SAR&H). These publicity films were made and used strategically for a variety of reasons: to allay settlers' anxieties, to counter overseas public criticisms, particularly coming from missionaries, to attract settler immigration and investment by shareholders.

This paper will discuss these sources of mining history, and assess how film and cinema were used to promote mining interests in the region.

