Not Quite Cricket: "Civilization on Trial in South Africa": a Note on the First "Protest Film" Made in Southern Africa

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NOT QUITE CRICKET: "CIVILIZATION ON TRIAL IN SOUTH AFRICA": A NOTE ON THE FIRST "PROTEST FILM" MADE IN SOUTHERN AFRICA

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I

Michael Scott, the long-term Gandhi-esque opponent of the South African government, was a man of many talents and one of his ignored skills was using a cine-camera. Between 1946 and 1948 as he worked in Tobruk squatter settlement near Johannesburg and environs and traveled to Namibia, in addition to his powerful writing, he also filmed scenes he encountered. The purpose of this note is to share the delight of viewing "Civilization on Trial in South Africa." It is, as far as I can ascertain, the first "protest" film made in South Africa, yet is not mentioned in the standard histories of film in southern Africa (Cancel 2004, Davis, 1996, Botha/van Aswegen 1992, Tomaselli 1988). While working on another project I fortuitously came across a copy in the Smithsonian Film Archives that I had copied and have deposited in the Namibian Archives.

The Smithsonian catalog dates this 24-minute edited black and white film to ca. 1950, and believes that it was shot between 1946 and 1952, prior to the implementation of the Group Areas Act, although it seems likely that shooting was completed earlier, before Scott was declared a Prohibited Immigrant in the late 1940s. Certainly, reading the documents on Scott's travels to Namibia, it seems likely that portions of his film was shot before 1948. In his autobiography, *A Time to Speak*, Scott mentioned showing the film in 1949 (Scott 1958:248). The Smithsonian obtained the film from the late Colin Turnbull, an Oxford educated Africanist anthropologist (J. Homiak, personal comment). The entry summarizes the film as follows:

> Opening panoptic shots of Johannesburg and the "civilisation intended for whites only" are contrasted with township areas and government housing. Visual documentation of the color bar and its social and eco-

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> nomic impact includes overcrowding, lack of pubic services and the proliferation of squatter habitations that accompanied mass urbanization in post-War South Africa. Film also includes; street life in Sophia Town, a tribal ceremony, a "beggar band" in Tobruk performing for pennies, the little-known bare-knuckle fights which were organized by the police to "keep Africans off the street"' and for the entertainment of white spectators, and separate facilities for Europeans, Africans and Indians. Final sequences document scenes from the British Protectorates of Basutoland, Swaziland and Bechuanaland within the Union of South Africa. Herero sites outside of Windhoek are shown with women in dress that was introduced by German missionaries at the turn of the century. In Bechuanaland Herero are filmed in an annual procession to pay tribute to ancestors who died fighting the Germans. As an advocate for the continued independence of these peoples [sic], Reverend Scott presented a petition to the United Nations from the Herero of Bechuanaland stating their opposition to incorporation within South Africa [sic]. Herero are shown gathering to hear news of the United Nations response to their petition (Wintle/Homiak 1995:23).

II

The purpose of the film was clearly to generate international support for dealing with the plight of the African and Indian population in South Africa and South West Africa. Indeed, the very title, "Civilization on Trial" is a direct take-off of Arnold Toynbee's influential 1948 book of the same title. The footage was edited into a film by Clive Donner (Peter Davis, personal comment) and distributed by the Africa Bureau in the early 1950s. Clive Donner (1926-1994) might not be a name familiar to southern Africanists, but to cinéastes he is an important figure. Having learned editing from, among others, David Lean, the first big-name movie Donner edited was *Scrooge* (1950). During the "auteur"-happy 1960s and 1970s, Donner was regarded by many as the sole 'author' of such films as *The Caretaker* (1963, script by Harold Pinter) and *Nothing but the Best* (1964, script by Frederick Raphael). His largest commercial success was undoubtedly *What's New Pussycat?* (1965). The decline of the British film industry forced him into television, where he produced numerous miniseries like *Not a Penny More, Not a Penny Less* (1990), based on the best-selling book by Jeffery Archer.

Scott, of course, is justly honored in Namibia for his role in the liberation struggle although it is interesting to speculate on how he might reacted to the fact that Rev Michael Scott Street transects with Robert Mugabe

Avenue! For someone who was the *bête noire* of the South African Administration, the Archives are (un?)surprisingly devoid of material on him. Several of the files are empty; nevertheless, some details emerge. In September 1947 all police stations in the Territory were asked if Scott had visited Reserves or Locations in their Districts and, if so whom he had visited or spoken to. But apart from one or two hapless photo-happy tourists, this police informational dragnet did not dredge up anything (NAN, SPO 48 Circular, September 1947), while at the same time any labor "unrest" was magically imputed to Scott's undesirable influence. This was shortly after he had visited the Territory and filmed the Herero Day celebrations in Okahandja.[1]

In early 1948 on his "report back" mission from the United Nations, Scott was denied permission from both the South West African administration and the municipality to show a 15-minute long official film about the United Nations in the Windhoek location on the grounds that "it is not the policy of the government to allow private persons to have talks or show films in Urban Locations unless it has the Government's sanction." (NAN, MWF 2/1/082, March 8 and 11, 1948; Troup 1950). Scott was clearly aware of the impact he was having on these officials; thus in a March 1948 letter to the Location Superintendent, Piet de Wet, requesting permission to visit and show films in the Windhoek location he opens with: "I have not had the pleasure of meeting you but you may have heard of me by name." He concluded his request by pointing out that "Bishop Tobias (Head of the Anglican Church in Namibia) tells me that he does not think it is necessary to have a permit to go into the location in the ordinary way . . . but under the circumstances it seems only right to refer this matter to your department . . ."

Of course Tobias was correct: ministers of religion were exempt from requiring permits to enter urban locations, but this did not stop the manager of the municipality's Native Affairs Department from instructing his subordinates to refuse Scott a permit to enter the location and to arrest him if he did enter without such permission. Alerted to the situation, the Windhoek Town Council resolved to refer the matter to the SWA Administration but also instructed the Chief Health Inspector to "inform Rev. Scott that no camping was allowed at the particular spot in the vicinity of the Mertens property where he had settled" (NAN, MWF 2/1/082, March 11, 1948). The Administration responded by citing its answer to a request from Scott to visit the Reserves: "His Honour the Administrator pointed out the unwisdom of your visiting the Native Reserves and his remark

[1]Not Botswana, as reported in the Smithsonian catalog.

naturally referred also to Native Location(s). In the circumstances your application will be held in abeyance" (NAN, MWF 2/1/082, March 23, 1948, Troup 1950:172)). The fact that Scott's permit was not refused, but deferred, suggests that there were legal issues that had to be skirted. Scott himself believed that the reason why the Administration refused to give him permission was because the film on the United Nations, *The People's Charter*, had scenes of blacks and whites sitting together at the same table (Scott 1958:243).

At the same time, the local CID had one or two detectives constantly trailing Scott, and interviewed two "well-educated" Africans, Berthold Himumuine and Clemens Kapuuo, who claimed that he had only discussed his experiences at the United Nations, and emphatically denied that he was engaged in anti-government agitation. Indeed, the head of the CID believed that Scott was not a Communist, and that it was preferable "for Mr Scott to be among these people than for communist propaganda agents." The police had no grounds for objecting to Scott's activities, and the manager of the municipal Native Affairs Department personally had no evidence against Scott, except that prior to visiting the United Nations Scott had traveled through the country with his petition and had not obtained permission to hold meetings in the Windhoek location.

Perhaps the most symbolically interesting reaction to Scott's visit was that of Captain Octavus G. Bowker, long-term manager of Windhoek's Native Affairs Department and one of the last "liberal" Anglican English-speaking civil servants:[2]

> In regard to Mr.Scott's first visit I think his behaviour was abominable, he obtained authority from the Administration to move about on the reserves with absolute freedom. Having prepared a lengthy petition to U.N.O. he returned to the Union without so much as paying his respects to His Honour and without giving the slightest indication of what he intended to do. Furthermore he interviewed a number of members of my Advisory Board and induced them to sign his nonsensical petition, for reasons known only to himself he avoided me as if I were a bad smell; he has of course, being a Minister of Religion, access to urban townships without obtaining permission but it was his duty as a stranger to have called upon me and stated his wish to contact the people under my control and not have sneaked in by a back door under cover of darkness. As an Englishman he should

[2]For additional information and an alternative perspective on Bowker see Gewald 2000.

know the meaning of the word cricket but apparently his education did not include this noble game (NAN, MWF 2/1/082. Bowker to Town Clerk, May 12 1948).

III

We don't know what possessed Scott to use the movie camera as part of his arsenal in fighting the South African regime. Suffice to say that it has long been viewed as effective in exposing injustice. In his brilliant, albeit ignored, critique of imperialism, Mark Twain has King Leopold of Belgian Congo fame soliloquize in 1905:

> The Kodak has been a sore calamity to us. The most powerful enemy indeed. In the early years we had no trouble in getting the press to "expose" the tales of the mutilations as slanders, lies, inventions of busybody American missionaries and exasperated foreigners… by the press's help we got the Christian nations everywhere to turn an irritated and unbelieving ear to those tales and say hard things about the tellers of them. Yes, all things went harmoniously and pleasantly in good days, and I was looked up to as the benefactor of a down-trodden and friendless people. Then all of a sudden came the crash! That is to say, the incorruptible *Kodak* – and all the harmony went to hell! The only witness I have encountered in my long experience that I couldn't bribe. Every Yankee missionary and every interrupted trader sent home and got one; and now—oh, well, the pictures get sneaked around everywhere, in spite of all we can do to ferret them out and suppress them. Ten thousand pulpits and ten thousand presses are saying the good word for me all the time and placidly and convincingly denying the mutilations. Then that trivial little Kodak, that a child can carry in its pocket, gets up, uttering never a word, and knocks them dumb! (Twain 1970:68).

It is still seen as an important tool in speaking truth to power. As Peter Gabriel recently put it: "[a] camera in the right hands at the right time can be more powerful than tanks or guns" (cited in Cohen 1996:36).

The cine-camera was believed to be even more effective than the still camera as a tool for mental and political persuasion. The League of Nations termed cinema the "most influential medium of expression in the world." One has simply to peruse the numerous debates about censorship, not only in individual countries but also in international organizations like the League of Nations and the International Labour Organization during the interwar years to realize that many politicians and academics felt that

movies could have a dramatic impact on women, children, and Africans. As such it could also be used as a tool for persuasion. From the late 1930s there was a substantial effort to use film as a propaganda tool in Africa, an effort that was intensified during World War II (Burns 2002).[3]

Both Scott and the South African authorities were also clearly aware of the potential of film and the emerging role of mass media in shaping politics. In addition, to such strict censorship regulations that even the Americans were forced to complain, "non-commercial film" for educational use was actively promoted in the 1930s. In 1935, for example, Dr Ernie Malherbe's National Bureau of Educational Research created a film division, and African Consolidated Films established a 16mm film division to supply educational films to schools. In 1939 the Film Library of the National Education Department already had 349 subscribing members. Fearful of the impact of Nazi propaganda radio and films, the Government moved to establish a Bureau of Information in 1936 to counter pernicious German propaganda, especially that emanating from Radio Zeesen (Gutsche 1972:369).

But the Bureau of Information soon cast its net wider. In 1944 the State Bureau of Information gave a young journalist a three-year assignment in the Native Affairs Department (NAD) specifically to compile a series of booklets intended for American and British readers, and aiming to "present Native policy in South Africa in a true perspective." NAD had previously hired an agriculturalist as publicity officer, but had never published any of his material. Nor were they apparently to publish any of this journalist, Oliver Walker's, material (Walker 1949). Walker's work was to be quoted with approval in Scott's autobiography (Scott 1958).

Other forces also played a role. In 1938 an Association of Reef Managers and Location Superintendents was formed to discuss the increasingly common and important problems concerning urban black Africans on the Rand. The Association apparently enjoyed widespread recognition and support, and its views were sought and recognized by the Native Affairs Department, so much so that in 1944 it expanded into the Association of Administrators of Non-European Affairs of the Transvaal. In 1947 the Transvaal Association interviewed the Secretary for Native Affairs and reported that a national committee had been created to draft a constitution for what would become the Institute for Administrators of

[3]Even as late as the 1960s, Lord Hailey was still reporting a concern that "the social impact of films upon newly literate Africans is likely to be more pronounced than upon Europeans, and it should be noticed that in all countries anxiety is expressed regarding the tendency of many films to glorify violent crime and erotic passion" (Hailey 1965:1253).

Non-European Affairs. As part of this organization they proposed a "Bureau of Information for the purpose of keeping the world informed on matters concerning Non-European Affairs in South Africa, and that all persons engaged in Native Administration, whether municipal or Government service, be members."

Apparently, the Minister for Native Affairs vetoed these two ideas (Marais 1952). This is not the place to analyze the often bitter conflict between these often fiercely autonomous municipal officials and government bureaucrats concerning the issues of massive Black urbanization (see e.g. Evans 1997); suffice to mention some ethnographic tidbits mentioned by Oliver Walker in his underrated exposé about his experiences in NAD entitled *Kaffirs are Lively*. These vignettes, often of a strong visual quality, helped to create a sense of context for the archival materials.

V

The headquarters of NAD contained powerful symbolic expressions of this conflict. In 1944 the major innovation was a plan to provide a waiting room for Africans who had come to the departmental headquarters in Pretoria on business:

> Inside head office it would hardly occur to you that well over 1,500,000 Africans are detribalized town-dwellers. On the walls you see occasional photographs of Native tribal types in their beads and feathers, playing their primitive instruments, dancing the old heathen dances and baring a comely breast. The real vanguard of African progress—the urban African… does not appear on Department walls" (Walker 1949:160).

Blinkers served to deliberately preserve a "rural outlook," which Walker felt was fostered by the fact that all the top positions in the Department were held by officials with a rural-*cum* mission background. Most of these officials had no sense of the problems of urban areas, epitomized by the lack of Inspectors of Urban Areas. The Native Urban Areas Act of 1923 called for their appointment, but it took twelve years for the first one to be appointed. By 1938 there were all of three, who by 1945 had visited only a fraction of the 450 local localities that fell under their authority.

Walker was soon disillusioned by his erstwhile NAD colleagues:

> I confess that my original impression of the Native Affairs Department was of State body full of white officials earnestly devoted to the welfare of . . .

> their African countrymen. . . . Closer acquaintance showed that, . . . it had more than its quota of time-servers. . . . Never have I seen so many brown files as when I was at the headquarters of the Department. Never, in the course of my three years' experience of Government work, have I met a body of men who believed more fervently that the right clerk or department head should cross the appropriate "t" or dot the relevant "i" (Walker 1949:156).

Officials whom he met in the field would avoid shaking hands with Africans—even with chiefs, clerks, and teachers. When he asked an out-and-out racist how he could hold a position in the Department, Walker was told that it was precisely because he was a racist that he was in the Department. There was a universal distrust of a scientific or disciplined approach to race matters. The "eternal plaint" was of the "lazy, child-like, shiftless, over-sexed, over-drinking, brutal, unpredictable African male who is only propped up into a semblence of manhood by the bottomless generosity of the Department." Officials "had no goal, no set plan, no conviction about the future of Africans. They see daily examples of the deficiencies of their methods. But they go on accepting them" (Walker 1949:158-59).

These observations by Walker suggest that the organizational culture of the state bureaucracy mitigated against officials taking an interest in local customs or people. As G.P. Lestrade, the first South African Government Ethnologist, shrewdly observed: "[w]e live in South Africa with a peculiar complex with regard to our knowledge of the native. We think we know the native through and through, while in truth we shy away from the magnitude of our ignorance." (Lestrade 1932:14, my translation). Efforts by both the Universities of the Witwatersrand and Cape Town to offer Vacation Schools which would professionalize "Native Administration" in southern Africa in the interwar years were doomed to wither away. A Southern Rhodesian official who attended one of these schools noted with surprise that, while it was sponsored by the South African Government, no South African officials attended (Morris 1930:30). A bonus for officials learning a native language was withdrawn because of the disappointing response. Surveying he situation at the outbreak of the Second World War Isaac Schapera complained that for promotion:

> Officers of the Native Affairs Department must speak the two official languages of the country, and pass the Civil Service Law Examinations; but they are apparently not required either to speak the languages of the peoples with which they are most directly concerned, nor is any special

> knowledge demanded from them of the Native laws and customs which they have to administer (Schapera 1939:102).

VI

In such situations of organizational ineptitude, rather than engage in organizational reform, it was easier simply to engage in public relations and rituals to cover the incompetence, which of course serves to entrench it further. Thus as part of the ideological counteroffensive in 1954, each Senior Native Commissioner had a Senior Information Officer allocated to his staff. Not only were these officers apparently expected to spy for the Minister, but it indicates serious concerns about the importance of public relations, based on the assumption that the reason why things are not working is because the clients—blacks—are ignorant. Controlling what blacks and whites know thus becomes important in this system of moral regulation. Apart from an impressively draconian Publications Control Board, there was massive state control of the mass media and what students should learn in schools. This filtered down to the local level. One Namibian Magistrate wrote that "[t]he personality of the person authorized to run the Bioscope is a very important one. The natives have impressionable minds and are in many respects like big uneducated children." Bioscopes, he felt, were best run by local authorities who would be able to exercise better control and "natives can be prevented from spending more than a reasonable portion of their earnings on this form of amusement."[4] It was only in 1939 after much legal representation that "Basuto Ben Ramora" was granted a bioscope license to show films in Lüderitz, and it was as late as 1956 that the Department of Bantu Administration finally bought a projector to show movies to blacks. As recently as 1963 an official circular to urban authorities stated that because of "policy, technical and financial considerations," showing of films in black residential areas should be undertaken by the local authorities "and that no other person or body, a Bantu included, be allowed to provide such facilities." Individual efforts had failed "because of the severe demands imposed in the fields of finance, technical knowledge, gauging the desires, tastes and background of Bantu public, and related reasons" (Jeppe 1967).

[4]NAN, Magistrate, Swakopmund, 29 March 1934, SWAA A50/57 Films. The content of the film was not an issue, as the South African Board of Censors had already developed a classification of films with the following viewing categories: a) European, b) Natives; c) Children; d) Females; e) Males.

These brief brush strokes suggest a situation in which it seems eminently plausible that local officials, even those of the more "liberal" persuasion, would have been threatened by Michael Scott's activities, including his films.

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