Ro-Revus Talks about Race

South Carolina Malnutrition and Parasite Films, 1968–1975

DAN STREIBLE

In the twenty-first century, a short educational film with the curious title Ro-Revus Talks about Worms (1971) became a minor cult film. With its titular character—a frog puppet with a South Carolina accent—telling children in his comic basso voice how to avoid getting intestinal worms and its bareboned production values, the hygiene film typically draws laughter from audiences encountering this decontextualized ephemeral work. Whether viewers are amused, bewildered, disturbed, or indifferent, most remember the essential lesson of the film, which the wise frog Ro-Revus states plainly: “Never use the out-of-doors for a bathroom.” In schooling Nutty the squirrel, his naive puppet sidekick, the raspy-voiced bullfrog repeats variations on the dictum throughout. That contemporary viewers still come away quoting the phrase testifies to the film’s effectiveness. The uncanny voice of Ro-Revus maintains a curious staying power a half century on.

Rediscovering Ro-Revus

In 2005, collector Skip Elsheimer discovered Ro-Revus Talks about Worms among a jumble of 16mm prints deaccessioned from the University of South Carolina (usc). He found receptive audiences at his A/V Geeks screenings, and its popularity spread. When usc’s 2006 Orphan Film Symposium projected his print, it again proved a crowd pleaser. However, among the viewers was venerable documentarian and North Carolinian George Stoney,
then eighty-nine, who had begun his career at the Southern Educational Film Production Service more than sixty years prior. He rose to defend *Ro-Revus* as a “good film” that did its work effectively. Further, he pointed out that to make a state-funded film showing racially integrated schools was practically unheard of in the South in 1971.

Inspired by Stoney’s trenchant remarks, this reexamination of the film’s history builds upon his two points. First, contrary to first impressions, *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms* is a well-made educational film, one that accomplished its goal with laudable effect. It was one of three classroom shorts produced by South Carolina Educational Television (ETV) with scientists at USC’s Malnutrition and Parasite Project (MPP), both in Columbia. *Who Lives with You?* (1969) features “Carrie Ascaris,” a cartoon rendition of the menacing roundworm (*Ascaris lumbricoides*), while the sequel short *Ascaris, a Human Parasite* (1972) is a conventional science documentary aimed at high school students. *Ro-Revus* proved the most popular and long-lived. After the grant-funded university project concluded in 1973, the state’s health department commissioned three more Ro-Revus films in 1975. Along with a multimedia kit, *The Amazing Ro-Revus Educational Packet and Learning Circus*, they were integrated into the public school curriculum. The health campaign worked. The incidence of roundworm infestation among Palmetto state children fell. Among schools participating in a mass treatment and education drive, infection rates fell from more than 70 percent in some areas to single digits.2

Second, *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms*, like its companion films, presented a relatively progressive depiction of racially integrated schools, playgrounds, bathrooms, and medical facilities. In a state notorious for its history of de jure racial segregation, white-dominated power structures, and the pernicious treatment of African American citizens, this unassuming little film of 1971 nevertheless offered viewers images of black and white children playing and learning together. The images of people, however, are confined to silent B-roll footage, which alternates with animation while Ro-Revus talks throughout. By casting a green frog as its defining voice and face, the film was able to distance itself somewhat from the issue of race and, for a moment, defuse the politics of race that otherwise vexed the place and time in which it was produced.

*Ro-Revus Talks about Worms* merits scholarly attention because understanding its origins makes its ephemeral negotiation with issues of race and class more legible. This film and its nontheatrical companions made between 1968 and 1975 entered into intense state and national debates about race and
poverty. They did so in idiosyncratic ways specific to their place of origin and their ability as nontheatrical films to travel outside of mass media.

The War on Worms: South Carolina and Ascaris in the National Spotlight

It is worth recalling the defining social experiences of 2.5 million South Carolinians, circa 1970, nearly a third of whom were African American. Intestinal worms were a perennial affliction in the warm climate, but ascariasis had reached alarming levels, especially among the rural poor. Many families lacked clean water, toilets, or even outdoor privies. The 1970 census revealed the state had the lowest life expectancy in the nation. Racial desegregation of the infamously separate and unequal public schools in South Carolina had barely begun to take effect when these films went into production in 1968.

The seriousness and racial complexity that generated the parasite prevention films become clear when considering the political events of their moment. South Carolina received national attention for its roundworm and malnutrition crisis in the months leading up to the release of the ascaris films. Doctors and scientists became immersed in a mounting campaign to fight worm infestation, which was tied to economic and racial inequalities. Beaufort County, at the state’s southeastern tip, became the epicenter of attention.

Throughout 1967–68, Donald E. Gatch, a white physician serving the county, garnered national attention and local opprobrium when he spoke out about a social order that kept African Americans in poverty, with high worm infestation a major factor in their malnutrition. When his findings met with attack, the “Hunger Doctor” increased his activism. In November 1967, he spoke at a forum convened in Columbia by the national Citizens’ Board of Inquiry into Health and Malnutrition, telling them about coastal Carolina’s hunger problems and the toll parasites took on black children in particular. Among those present were Dr. James P. Carter, the first African American faculty member at Vanderbilt University, and white civil rights leader Leslie Dunbar, head of the Field Foundation. (The foundation soon thereafter funded USC scientists to study parasitism with Carter.) The Citizens’ Board of Inquiry published its influential report Hunger, U.S.A (1968), which in turn prompted the landmark CBS Reports television documentary “Hunger in America,” broadcast in May of the same year.³

In June, Esquire magazine lionized the doctor’s work in “Let Us Now Praise Dr. Gatch.” Photographs by Diane Arbus showed him visiting

[292] Dan Streible
impoverished black families. On June 6, he testified to a U.S. House of Representatives committee about the impact of intestinal worms in Beaufort. In 1969, yet another photograph of Gatch treating an African American child appeared on the front page of the New York Times. In “the first of a series” of reports on hunger, the reporter followed Gatch on a “tour of Negro shanties.” The doctor diagnosed a variety of severe health problems, correlating them to intestinal parasites and charging that a treatable condition was being ignored because the victims were black.

The article also previewed the three days of hearings that Sen. George McGovern’s new Senate Select Committee on Nutrition and Human Needs devoted to testimony about South Carolina. Those testifying often cited Gatch’s work, including USC professors whose work led to the educational films about worms, parasitologist Felix Lauter, and nutritionist E. John Lease. Joining their panel was coresearcher Carter, as well as Robert Coles, prominent author and child psychiatrist at Harvard. All had visited Beaufort County, then enduring what their state senator earlier told the committee was “the harsh glare of publicity which has fallen on my district because of the discovery of the ascaris worm.” Press follow-up mentioned Lease and Carter’s finding that an alarming 73 percent of children carried either roundworm or whipworm. The four experts presented their evidence with a call for educational campaigns. “We are going to try to feed these children and job No. 1 is to get rid of all these intestinal parasites,” Lease argued. He framed his scientific presentation with a plea for funding production of “visual aids and other education materials geared to the educational level of these victims.” Finding the printed material ineffective, Lease reported, “We are, therefore, preparing educational films at the level that they can understand.”

Lauter presented a slide show that was, in effect, a preview of how Ro-Revus talked about worms and how all three films visualized the worm problem. He led with a photograph of a male and female worm alongside a twelve-inch ruler; such a shot appears in all three films. As in the later productions, Lauter showed microphotography of ascaris eggs, emphasizing “her” ability to produce thousands of eggs when “she lives with” a host. Other slides were charts of the ascaris life cycle, its migration through the human stomach, intestines, and lungs; illustrations of dooryards contaminated by human feces; and pictures of worm transmission via pets, as well as children putting dirty fingers in their mouths. Lauter’s slide presentation to senators was sequenced and narrated much like the films that followed. He described his concluding slides as points to be taught via a “massive program on hygiene.
education and sanitation,” a five-year project for which the university had not yet found funding.

The McGovern committee hearings affirmed lead witness Sen. Ernest Hollings’s opening statement: “There is hunger in South Carolina.” While an obvious fact, his pronouncement signaled a political departure from the state’s culture of white denial and silence. Hollings even confessed that as governor (1959–63) he had been guilty of perpetuating that silence. His 1968–69 hunger tours across the state followed Sen. Robert Kennedy’s example. “Hookworm Hollings,” as his opponents dubbed him, brought reporters to rural and urban sites of poverty, including a visit to Beaufort and Dr. Gatch. Eight of the fifteen Carolinians testifying referred to the ascaris infestation as an urgent problem. Charles E. Fraser, a real estate developer in Hilton Head, Beaufort County, had privately funded a local public health project. He too urged a mass education campaign, telling senators, “We know of no lesson plans, pamphlets, or visual aids which would be useful.” The federal government’s catalog, Selected Films on Child Life, he testified, included “not a single film” on intestinal parasites among its 480 titles.10

Nontheatrical Precursors

Although teaching films appropriate for the time, place, topic, and audience were lacking in 1969, both the U.S. government and public health professionals had a long history of effectively addressing worm problems via nontheatrical films. Unhooking the Hookworm (1920) and Exit Ascaris (1921) were created as the educational film movement entered its initial heyday. The latter, produced by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, addressed Midwestern farmers, then seeing heavy losses due to roundworms infecting swine. Its scenario depicted a farmer with a failing herd learning from an agent how to eliminate the intestinal worm. The two-reeler was widely seen in small towns across the Midwest for a decade, accompanied by USDA field agents offering further instruction. While few people might know the word “ascaris,” the Linnaean genus name was long in use.11

As Kirsten Ostherr’s account of Unhooking the Hookworm demonstrates, the South Carolina productions closely parallel its form and approach. In 1909 the Rockefeller Foundation launched a hookworm eradication campaign. Its International Health Board funded this one-reel film as part of its public health work in the 1920s. Used in many countries for fifteen years, Unhooking addressed the hookworm epidemic then afflicting up to 40 percent of Southerners. The USC team may not have known the film, but
they replicated its technique, which mixed animation, microcinematography, and live action. These films also bear other similarities: a dangerous, fanged worm enemy invades a child’s body, grows, and multiplies, with its movements through organs represented in animated diagrams. Direct address warns viewers that the microscopic eggs are found in ground soiled with human feces, repeatedly stressing the need for sanitary outhouses and instructing viewers to follow medical authorities’ orders for cure and prevention.

Ostherr also points to an issue that begs comparison with the South Carolina films, the “principle of racial identification.” The narrative portion of Unhooking the Hookworm features only white actors. Responses from nonwhite viewers in Latin America, Asia, and the Southern states—ranging from laughter to disengagement—led Rockefeller administrators to believe, as Ostherr puts it, “racial and cultural similarity between spectators and actors seemed vital to ensuring that a film’s ‘message’ was received.” Finding African American viewers in the rural South indifferent to white-cast educational films, a white physician explained it aptly. “No one realizes better than a southern negro the vast gulf that exists between the whites and the negroes,” Dr. Mark Boyd wrote, “Consequently the negro is not much impressed by scenes dealing with whites.” He replaced the “human interest scenario” in one Rockefeller health film with new footage of black actors and reported enthusiastic reception among African American viewers. Others in the organization followed this practice, on the principle of racial identification. A half-century later, the makers of the ascaris and Ro-Revus films found a more efficient and arguably progressive way to address spectators in a historical moment of contested racial desegregation.

Making the Malnutrition and Parasite Films

The state’s inglorious moment in the national spotlight soon led to funding ($57,000) from the Office of Economic Opportunity, which allowed USC to create the MPP, which operated from 1970 to 1973. The university had been linking grant-funded research with educational film production since 1968. The Beaufort field research began with a $15,000 grant from the Field Foundation, matched by Lease’s federal grant for a pilot education campaign to elevate “health and nutrition standards of disadvantaged pre-school children in Beaufort County.” Lease funded Food and Drugs (1968), which lecturers would show to county officials, teachers, and families to demonstrate “the
an incontrovertible causal relationship” between poor sanitation and parasitic infection, as well as subsequent malnutrition. The movie's generic title masked the contested premise as well as Lease's collaboration with Gatch. After the 1969 pilot's success, USC and ETV produced a short film annually, rolling out the campaign statewide. The first ascaris film, *Who Lives with You?*, was followed by *What You Eat, You Are* (1970), which replicated the *Food and Drugs* message, teaching low-income homemakers how to get nutritious food. *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms* reinforced the ascaris and hygiene lessons for children ages four through nine.

Lease headed the initiative, with Lauter and researcher Bettye W. Dudley extensively involved. Although her only screen credits are as writer of two films, she played a role in the deployment of all five. (Her three children are among those seen in the films.) A biochemist, Dudley published in medical journals and authored three editions of *Malnutrition and Intestinal Parasites: An Instructional Guide for Control and Eradication* during 1971–73. These books outlined a rudimentary curriculum to educate children and the public about hygiene and nutrition. Dudley described the films and their suggested uses, understanding them as only one tool in the kit, which included pamphlets for parents, technical information for health professionals, and a battery of classroom items for preteens such as puzzles, quizzes, and art projects. Lauter also devised a filmstrip and audiotape with novel accessories that encouraged children to playact routines of good hygiene. The three-dimensional tabletop objects were designed for different domestic environments: “dolls representing both black and white families,” buildings with indoor toilets or outdoor privies, electrical or manual water pumps. The *Instructional Guide* went to every public school library in the state, with information on how to obtain 16mm prints from USC or the state’s departments of education or health.

Dudley scripted the text for teachers with imperatives. “You must follow your doctor’s directions.” “Listen to your teacher . . . and never, never put dirt or dirty objects into your mouth.” “WASH YOUR HANDS.” The language closely resembles the narration she wrote for *Who Lives with You?* and *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms*. The *Instructional Guide* is notable for its earnest tone, but steers clear of naming the issue of race that was both beneath and at the surface of the problem it addressed. The films show African American citizens more positively and frequently—and address them more directly—than other media in the state in the 1960s and ’70s. But this aspect is muted in curricular materials and newspaper mentions.
What You Eat, You Are is the most striking example. The Instructional Guide says only that the film is “designed for the low-income or disadvantaged homemaker” but also serves “any adult or teen-ager.” Yet the producers chose to center on an African American family. Throughout the fifteen minutes, we see an unidentified black woman, in a well-furnished home, making and serving dinner for a man and three children. The nutrition worker who visits is also an African American woman, as are the smart shopper with kids we see in a supermarket and other makers of home and garden. The cutaways to children at play intermix white and black faces. However, we never hear them. The unseen narrators are a white male and female pair of voices (local television personalities), alternately conveying banal facts about diet, thrift, and sanitary habits.

Dudley, who cowrote What You Eat, You Are, adds a conspicuous comment in her Instructional Guide, its rare reference to racial identity literally tucked in a footnote: “The family scenes were filmed locally [in Columbia] in the residence of one such person whose home is situated in the center of an infamous poverty slum. This mother through diligent effort and pride has upgraded her home, educated her children, and serves as an inspiration and example to her community.” The footnote tells us that “the Camp Fornance area, long known [disparagingly] as ‘Black Bottom,’ had about 150 white and Negro families living in conditions that were labeled ‘a public disgrace.’” The passage stands apart from the rhetoric of the MPP grants and manuals, which consistently identify their subjects and audiences in socioeconomic terms. To be sure, this allowed for recognition that both white and black citizens suffered when trapped in cycles of poverty, but it also avoided the issue of race that determined how the films were cast.

While his parasite research and treatment efforts continued in low-income areas statewide, Lauter brainstormed with students about how to convey the dangers of intestinal worms to children. However, Dudley led the education project, designing a comic book format and coloring sheets to teach the evils of roundworm. Carrie Ascaris, the female, dragon-like cartoon, was then animated for the film. “Carrie is a bad worm, ugly, and very mean,” says the alarmist voice-over narrator. The seven-minute movie previewed for a legislative committee chaired by the Beaufort senator who had testified before the McGovern committee. Beyond this press mention of the then-untitled film, documentation of its use is scant. That would change greatly when much of the footage was repurposed in 1971 to make Ro-Revus Talks about Worms.
**Figure 14.3.** Carrie Ascaris, as seen in *Who Lives with You?* (1969) and *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms* (1971).

**Figure 14.4.** *Ascaris lumbricoides* measured against a ruler, also seen in both films.
Who Lives with You? intercuts two minutes of limited animation with some five minutes of live action sequences, both produced by professionals at ETV. The animated foot-long Carrie invading major organs and the microscopic images of slithering worms are aided by a conventional narration performed in a mellifluous baritone. Locals would have recognized the voice of a popular kiddie TV host and radio announcer praised for his “perfect” voice. However, the otherwise banal footage of playgrounds, yards, schools, offices, and housing contains a powerful representation of black and white bodies, the significance of which may be lost on many latter-day viewers. The film’s original Carolina audiences would rarely have seen such casual social interaction between African American and white schoolchildren, either on screen or in daily life. Excerpts from this footage were repurposed in What You Are, You Eat and Ro-Revis.

The camerawork is remarkable only in that it deliberately stages scenes of children and adults of both races. When not on camera together, they are strategically intercut. In the first sequence, two white boys interact with a pet dog in a backyard and at a veterinarian’s office. When the narrator asks, “Did you know that worms can get inside of you too?” we see a close-up of one boy reacting with surprise. The first black person we see is of like age, shown rubbing his aching belly. “And here’s a boy who looks as though he has a lot of these worms inside him.” But after this initial racial difference, the rest of the film abandons the principle of racial identification: “Many people have these worms inside them.” A series of shots depicts kids black and white, playing in the dirt. Later seen clean and well dressed, they happily interact on a racially integrated school playground.

The same filmic desegregation applies to the adult authority figures. Health care workers are white, but the classroom teacher we see is an African American woman. Not only do these children play and go to school together, they also share public bathrooms. The most important lessons to be taught in the worm eradication program were to wash hands and to use a “toilet or privy.” In Who Lives with You?, the narrator stresses, “Watch! When you use the out of doors, your yard, behind the bushes near your door, or the dirt under your doorstep for a bathroom you are asking for trouble.” The B-roll shots of ramshackle houses, junk-filled yards, and a dilapidated wooden privy show no people. This contrasts with the many documentary photographs, films, and television newsfilms of the period that consistently show African Americans in South Carolina living in extreme poverty. Media
Figure 14.5. Ro-Revus schools Nutty in Ro-Revus Talks about Worms (1971).

Figure 14.6. A racially integrated bathroom in Ro-Revus Talks about Worms (1971). This shot was also used in Who Lives with You? (1969).
coverage of the Hollings hunger tour and Gatch patients in Beaufort were uniform in showing large African American families living in unsanitary housing. An NBC Nightly News package that aired the night before the McGovern committee hearings, for example, showed Hollings talking with a black mother of eleven in her home, which they note had neither toilet nor privy. The children “go down to the woods,” she says. Hollings repeats her phrase, as if aware of his national television audience’s need to understand the continuing practice among the rural poor.²⁰

In light of this, Ro-Revus’s advice to children about the outdoors stands as straightforward schooling. Outhouses remained fixtures of daily life in some areas through the 1970s. Moreover, the idealized footage of racially integrated social spaces seen in both films was an unconventional and even bold choice. Rather than create separate films for white and black viewers to identify with, as some Rockefeller films had, they imagined (however naively) teaching tools that gave both black and white viewers points of identification.

Although Dudley referred to Ro-Revus Talks about Worms as simply a “revised edition,” the sequel’s use of the talking frog is what makes it far more engaging. In 1971, Ro-Revus was familiar to South Carolina families. He appeared regularly on ETV’s daily children’s program The June Bugg Show, which aired late afternoons from 1966 to 1974. In 1967, teenage production assistant Joe Bowie happened upon a hand puppet among the studio props and improvised a deep-throated frog character. Producer and on-camera host June Timmerman soon added him to interact with the kids who joined her in the studio. Bowie was already doing the puppetry and high, squeaky voice for Nutty the squirrel. The plywood tree prop in which his puppets appear in Ro-Revus Talks about Worms was part of the June Bugg set. Of the show’s many videotaped episodes, only one survives. The Ro-Revus in that extant 1969 segment about good manners is a bad-boy comic figure, not yet the “wise frog” Dudley scripted. To everyone’s surprise, ETV received growing amounts of fan mail for the character. Producers recorded Bowie/Ro-Revus singing covers of hit pop songs. College students tuned in, no doubt amused in ways similar to latter-day viewers.²¹

Given the MPP’s aim for films that spoke to both black and white viewers, how might Ro-Revus have served that end? Would children be more likely to listen to or identify with a bass-voiced frog than the conventional voice-of-God baritone in Who Lives with You? Certainly casting an animal figure offers a point of identification without race. American children’s television, both national and local, has always had a multitude of frog characters. Captain Kangaroo’s Miss Frog puppet and Froggy the Gremlin on Andy Devine’s
Saturday kid’s show were among the first in the 1950s. However, none approached the popularity of Ro-Revus’s contemporary on public television, Kermit the Frog. In 1969, Jim Henson’s Muppet began his run on Sesame Street, a program that addressed children with a multicultural spirit and cast. A frog might not have race, but in the first season Kermit debuted “It’s Not Easy Bein’ Green” (1970), an introspective ballad about embracing one’s color. Many heard it as a song about blackness. Singers immediately started covering the song in that black-is-beautiful moment. Lena Horne and Ray Charles did duets with Kermit on the program. The June Bugg Show did not present a diverse cast, but ETV stations programmed it with Sesame Street, allowing viewers to see Ro-Revus and Kermit in one sitting.22

Watching Ro-Revus in my university classes over the past decade, a few students have wondered aloud if his voice was an antiquated black racial caricature. Some note the rhyme with Uncle Remus, associating it with Negro folktales. Joe Bowie’s origin stories tell us his sound was a natural imitation of a frog (who originally said only “ribbit”). However, he acknowledges he drew upon voices from popular culture, white and black: Frog Millhouse (Smiley Burnette), Gene Autry’s film and TV sidekick with a comic croak, and Clarence “Frogman” Henry, with his R&B hit “Ain’t Got No Home” (1956). The name came from Bowie’s friend with a penchant for dishing out nonsensical nicknames, something he might have heard from an “old black gentleman who told stories” in his hometown outside of Columbia.23 A more certain point of identification for South Carolinians hearing Ro-Revus is his regional Southern inflection.

Returning to the films, how might schoolchildren have experienced educational films in South Carolina in 1969? Would they have reached low-income rural populations, particularly the African American children the Beaufort studies showed were most in need? Evidence is scarce, but a white Beaufort County teacher who taught black preteens at the time is one suggestive source. Pat Conroy’s fictionalized memoir The Water Is Wide (1972) recounts his 1969–70 school year teaching Gullah children, ages ten to thirteen, on Daufuskie Island. The 16mm film projector, he writes, was as valuable as “gold bullion” in the classroom, with students wanting daily screenings, sometimes watching a reel twice. The Beaufort County Library and the State Film Library, Conroy says credibly, allowed him to keep a variety of prints on hand. Conroy’s account is embellished but verifies active use of educational films even in remote classrooms in the era of Ro-Revus.24

Beaufort County children, like those in other parts of the Palmetto state, experienced notable declines in roundworm disease before the MPP ceased.

Ro-Revus Talks about Race  [303]
The educational campaign of which the films were a part received some credit, although medical treatment and other poverty-fighting efforts more directly ameliorated the suffering. The hazards of intestinal parasites did not go away, of course. Seeing the end of the university project without an elimination of the worm problem, the press noted the MPP’s legacy was the availability of the USC films and guidebooks. Although Lease retired and Dudley moved on to other research, their Instructional Guide was certainly aspirational and even multicultural. The final edition in 1973 concluded with Ranita Habla de Gusanos, Ro-Revus and Nutty’s dialogue translated into Spanish.

Ro-Revus Reborn

With the MPP gone, in 1973 the state legislature appropriated an annual $100,000 to the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) to battle human parasites. Consequently, DHEC increased funds for classroom materials. Staff scripted a three-part series of new Ro-Revus films, written with teachers, scientists, and health educators. A journeyman nontheatrical filmmaker won the state contract to produce them. More intelligibly than the MPP productions, Ro-Revus Act 1, Act 2, and Act 3 squarely present an idealized interracial cast of kids joyfully playing together while learning hygiene lessons in recurring visits from their smart frog friend.

Director Bob Brabham’s films took an entirely different form. These too used only local talent, but Brabham was an experienced producer of sponsored films, nontheatrical documentaries, and television ads (including a national TV spot for the Slinky toy). Each lively production features an original number, sung by Ro-Revus, as well as a funky theme song during the opening and closing credits. “DHEC has some slickly produced Ro-Revus films,” a journalist noted during 1977 coverage of the continuing parasite problem. But the most striking departure from Talks about Worms is that this Ro-Revus is a different puppet with a higher voice. (Brabham did not know of the ETV character, and Bowie was unaware of the new productions.) Accomplished puppet maker Jean Cornwall created the new frog, who makes magical costume changes (garbed as a doctor, professor, drum major, song-and-dance man, jester, and Sherlock Holmes). Her ten-year-old son became the puppeteer.

The titles of the three short films suggest their light tone: As the Worm Turns, Wash Wash, Scrub Scrub, and Don’t Take a Worm to Lunch. Their style is marked by rapid cutting among close-ups of the white and black faces of the playmates with whom Ro-Revus visits in each episode. The nonprofessional

child actors speak with distinctive regional accents, far thicker than Bowie’s. The zippy pace, comic cutaways, whip zooms, substitution edits, and location shooting are reminiscent of the era’s interstitial films for *Sesame Street*. After the opening theme song, during which we see Ro-Revus and children among nature and farmland, each film begins with our host addressing the camera while sitting next to a poster for *The Amazing Ro-Revus Educational Packet and Learning Circus*.

“Can anybody get worms?” a child asks in *Act 1*. Yes, Ro-Revus replies. “Rich people, poor people; black people, white people; boys, girls. Animals, too.” Although the series otherwise does not name racial difference, the films equitably intermix close-up reaction shots and speaking parts between African American and white kids. In longer shots, the cast groupings are consistently interracial and free of stereotyping. Our protagonist’s closest bond is with the eldest black character, the only one he calls by name. Ro-Revus rides on Willie’s shoulder.

The *Educational Packet and Learning Circus* also scrupulously integrates images of children, even encouraging interracial friendship. Its game board’s illustrations exactly alternate black and white faces. The playing cards, which we see being used on-screen in *Act 2*, include a drawing of an African American girl showing a white boy how to write the name “Ro-Revus.” The card’s caption reads, “Tell friends about worms.” Whether or not such media succeeded in teaching across racial lines, there is evidence they were used in the way intended. A 1976 newspaper account, for example, included a photograph of a health educator playing the board game with black and white fourth graders at Hilton Head Elementary School. They discuss a Ro-Revus film. Students affected by worms were “embarrassed,” their teacher says, “until they realized that people aren’t singled out because of race or socioeconomic level.”

Unlike the *ETV* Ro-Revus, the rebranded character was created solely to be “the ‘Smokey-the-Bear’ of the roundworm world.” Both were creatures of state-funded agencies, but South Carolina’s interracial dynamics shifted in the decade between them. The state legislature had no African American representative in the twentieth century until 1970, and most public schools did not implement desegregation until then. Yet national battles for black representation on screen were visible in the state too. In 1971, when *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms* quietly worked its way into the slowly desegregating educational sector, Columbia moviegoers turned out for a ten-week run of Melvin Van Peebles’s *Sweet Sweetback’s Baadasssss Song*, the movie that catalyzed the blaxploitation boom.
Conclusion

Clearly some contemporary viewers have genuine affection for *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms*, taking pleasure in the vocal performance of its singular star. But any laughter it elicits need not be mingled with condescension toward region, class, or race. Seeing this film only as a curio to be enjoyed ironically as dated or bad would be to miss its powerful qualities. The little film had a positive impact on a big health problem, one that was bound up with injustices of class and race.

George Stoney was of course right in calling *Ro-Revus Talks about Worms* a good film. These movies communicated clearly to rural and low-income families lacking basic needs. They spoke in a regional inflection shared by their audiences. And they found a way to address black viewers their producers knew to be disproportionately affected by poverty in a state governed by a white power structure. As Jennifer Zwarich argues in her analysis of USDA agents using films such as *Exit Ascaris*, the unsung filmmakers working on educational campaigns should be recognized as “bureaucratic activists.” The term, she writes, “captures the nature of an enterprise”—state-supported nontheatrical film education—that could seek “social change from within the confines of the status quo.”

Major health and hunger problems continued after the Malnutrition and Parasite Project. Educational inequities persisted after these ephemeral films. Yet these good films made important strides in the midst of hard times.

**FILMOGRAPHY**

All available films discussed in this chapter can be streamed through the book’s web page at https://www.dukeupress.edu/Features/Screening-Race.

*Ascaris, a Human Parasite* (1972), 12 min., 16mm
Production: Malnutrition and Parasite Project, University of South Carolina; S.C. State Board of Health; Medical University of South Carolina. Director: Dan Givan. Access: University of South Carolina Cooper Library; Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries.

*Ro-Revus... Act 1 (Or... Don't Take a Worm to Lunch)* (1975), 9 min., 16mm
Cast: Bobby Brabham, Mario Rowe, Paula Harris, Brad Kneeece (kids). Access: University of South Carolina, Moving Image Research Collections.

*Ro-Revus... Act 2 (Or... Wash Wash, Scrub Scrub)* (1975), 7 min., 16mm
Cast: Dana Danielsen, Dotty Danielsen, Mark Derrick, Gail Martin (kids). Access: University of South Carolina, Moving Image Research Collections.

[308] Dan Streible
Ro-Revus . . . Act 3 (Or . . . As the Worm Turns) (1975), 8 min., 16mm

Ro-Revus Talks about Worms (1971), 7 min., 16mm
Production: Malnutrition and Parasite Project, University of South Carolina, with South Carolina ETV Network. Voices: Joe Bowie (Ro-Revus the frog, Nutty the squirrel), Tom Shirk (uncredited voice-over introduction). Access: University of South Carolina Cooper Library; Orphans 7: A Collection of Orphan Films, DVD (NYU Orphan Film Project, 2010); Kids and Kritters, DVD (A/V Geeks, 2011).

Unhooking the Hookworm (1920), 10–12 min., 35mm
Sponsors: International Health Board, Rockefeller Foundation. Production: Coronet Pictures. Director: George Skinner. Access: Rockefeller Archive Center (12 min.) and U.S. National Archives and Records Administration (10 min.).

What You Eat, You Are (1970), 15 min., 16mm

Who Lives with You? (1969), 7 min., 16mm

Related Films and Video
Exit Ascaris (1921), 20 min., 35mm

Food and Drugs (1968), 12 min., 16mm
Production: University of South Carolina, with South Carolina ETV Network. Access: A/V Geeks.
Production: Sharon Shattuck. Note: Includes footage from Ro-Revus Talks about Worms. Access: Sweet Fern Productions DVD.

Notes

1 While I was teaching at the University of South Carolina, the library shared its unpublished 1999 inventory of 3,767 16mm prints marked for deaccession. Among them were multiple copies of Ro-Revus Talks about Worms and related South Carolina films.


“Roundworm in Swine Subject of New Film,” *Educational Film Magazine*, January–February 1922, 20.


“S.C.’s Problem of Worms Is Far from Solved,” *The State*, January 2, 1977, says “the internationally known Ro-Revus was born” with the campaign, forgetting his birth at etv.

Bob Brabham, phone interview, January 2, 2017. Brabham said he received no instructions on casting but understood it was industry practice to have representation of African American talent. Interview with Dan Cornwall, May 25, 2017.


“‘Wanta Play, Go Croak!’” *Gaffney Ledger*, November 19, 1975.
