part two  *  IMPERIAL REDEMPTION
Philosophically, then, the kind of language, thought, and vision that I have been calling Orientalism very generally is a form of radical realism.

— Edward Said, Orientalism

“I am Sandi who gives you the Law.”

— British Commissioner Sanders to African tribes, Sanders of the River (1935)

It was only that a certain inventive legerdemain was required to permit the empire to appear attractive in national drag.

— Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities

### four  * REALISM AND EMPIRE

Defining imperial realism in film entails clearing a path through a profusion of descriptions about cinema’s encounter with reality. Christopher Williams observes that “the first major realist function film has fulfilled consists of the ability to provide various kinds of documents, i.e., accounts of things outside itself,” and that the “second area of form which is important in a discussion of realism is the area of narrative.” The author goes on to negate this division between documentary realism and narrative realism, noting that while such distinctions “have some virtue on the descriptive level, I doubt whether their opposition as theoretical concepts is helpful in thinking about film. Their meanings overlap too much; and there is also too strong a sense in which no film is realistic or naturalistic.”¹ Though no theorist of realism denies cinema’s inalienably technical apparatus, contrary to Williams's suggestion we may shift the emphasis away from cinema’s excessive artifice and examine instead the processes by which film struggles to “enframe” an abounding world to produce meaning. Photography and cinema’s “excess of mimesis over meaning,” to use Tom Gunning’s evocative phrase, makes the techniques through which film bends reality to its representational purposes revelatory of the ambitions underlying its style (and hence, of its politics).²
Artifice is certainly part of naturalism (wherein form refers to an external world and operates with a documentary sense of truth) as well as classical or high realism (wherein form invisibly follows the internal rules of a narrative), but abandoning their differences ignores the manner and end to which each form makes objects from the world submit to re-presentation.

At least since film theory took a linguistic turn in the 1970s, classical realism in cinema has been discussed as a historical product as well as a cultural symptom. Most frequently analyzed with reference to the nineteenth-century realist novel and classical Hollywood cinema, this form of realism is defined as a hierarchy of discourses structured to be most completely readable or comprehensible from the point of view of an “ideal,” textually-produced spectator-position. According to this definition, realism’s textual functions parallel and reinforce bourgeois capitalism’s institutional functions, of which they are a part. In Althusserian terms, individuals are “interpellated” as social subjects under capitalism because its injunctions are not represented as dictatorial impositions but reproduced as obvious, commonsensical, and true. The spectator/reader is sutured into a realist text much as a social subject is constituted by capitalist, patriarchal structures—invisibly and through an internalized prioritization of the socially hegemonic perspective. With this critique of classical realism’s ideological operation, 1970s film theory sought unconscious and conscious contradictions within realist texts. Film criticism looked for moments of subversion, of textual unraveling, of hegemony’s displeasure in realist texts, and found its critical gestures mirrored in modernist, avant-garde cinema.

At variance with this analysis of realism as ideological construct, but with similar aspirations to define radical ways of seeing and interpreting the world, earlier definitions of realism by theorists such as André Bazin, Siegfried Kracauer, Georg Lukács, and John Grierson sought to articulate an ideal form of artistic expression: ideal, that is, to an emancipatory agenda and/or to a medium like film. They explored cinema’s photographic potential for indexicality to probe ontological links between image and reality at the instant of recording. Alternatively, their questions revolved around cinema’s ability to reveal material connections between individuals and their social totalities, against modernism’s preoccupation with the subjective state of alienated beings. Instead of focusing on realism’s rupture, as in the case of later psychoanalytic and poststructuralist film theorists, Lukács connected literary realism with a liberatory promise by arguing that genuinely realist art functioned to de-reify reality. For Lukács, realism penetrated appearances to
“reproduce the overall process (or else a part of it linked either explicitly or implicitly to the overall process) by disclosing its actual and essential driving forces.” According to him, the primary function of realism was to reveal the truly dialectical nature of social reality, hardened in art forms that presented objects or human relations as “a finished product.” To qualify as realist, art had to show the world “as a moment in a process . . . in constant vital interaction with its preconditions and consequences, as the living result of the (class) human relations between those people.”

By Lukács’s definition, imperial realism would be the very antithesis of realism in that it dehistoricizes colonial relations, making the ideology of one race, nation, and class stand in for a totality. Classical definitions of realism point to art’s promise to disturb the bounds of ideology, to humanize, and to bring the audience into astonishing proximities with the world and its social relations. Contemporary theories of realism suggest cinema’s possible subservience to a political ideology. Combining both insights, prototypical empire films of the 1930s such as Sanders of the River or Rhodes of Africa can be read as texts that deploy realist techniques at the behest of imperialism, betraying cinema’s potential to create startling encounters with unexplored realities or with undisguised social truths.

In imperial cinema the realist mode traditionally functions through documentary realism as well as narrative realism. Frequently, cinematic representations of imperialism presume to present colonial subjects naturalistically, as is well illustrated in the abundant use of documentary footage from the colonies, incorporated with a minimum of motivation within the narrative sequences in Sanders of the River and Elephant Boy. The naturalist mode of realism contributes to a defense of “enlightened” imperialism, portraying colonial subjects in a state of savagery or infancy and in need of assistance. (Interestingly, the scenes that were censored from Sanders before it was screened in India included twelve feet of “close-ups of dancing semi-nude negro girls” from reel 4, which were edited out by the Bombay Board of Film Censors in India; the anthropological justification of the scene that made it permissible for white audiences did not apply to a nonwhite viewership. Other scenes deleted for the Indian screenings included black-on-white violence and white men calling each other “bloody swine.”) The British themselves are represented through another mode of realism, one that was closer to classical Hollywood realism, with carefully constructed sets and continuity editing normalizing their social and racial hierarchies. Certainly, documentation of colonial dances and animals are also presented as if unmediated by
technology or power, so no scene in a realist film is exempt from a deliberate erasure of artifice. But it is important to distinguish conventions of naturalism and of narrative realism in the first instance, to highlight how they vary in technique and purpose while sharing the operative paradox of cinematic realism’s necessary reliance on artifice.⁹

In addition to the naturalism reserved for colonial subjects and the classical realism for the colonizers, encounters between colonized subjects and the ruling race occur within a mode of narrative realism that reproduces spatial divisions between colonizer and colonized as obvious.¹⁰ According to historians of silent cinema, this “referential heterogeneity” created by a combination of naturalism and realism is potentially a product of different modes of address and spectatorial positions—derived from actualities, newsreels, political cartoons, and narrative fiction—that competed with each other in articulations of early film form. Kristen Whissel explores the relationship between early cinema and U.S. imperialism in Edwin S. Porter’s The “Teddy” Bears (1907) arguing, for instance, that “while the disjunction between outdoor and indoor space marks this film as pre-classical, its ability to codify these differences (and thereby make disjunctive space into narrative space) is symptomatic of the film’s historical position on the threshold between the cinema’s preclassical and classical modes of representation.”¹¹ By these terms, Sanders is an anachronism in 1935, for though its narrative codifies the differences between outdoor (documentary and process) shots as well as indoor (studio) shots, it retains a stylistic disjunction between them.¹²

During the film’s production, the two kinds of realism came into direct competition when the producer Alexander Korda disagreed with his brother, the director Zoltan Korda, over the making of Sanders, and with the filmmaker Robert Flaherty over Elephant Boy. Alexander Korda wanted to make narrative and melodramatic imperial sagas, while Zoltan Korda and Flaherty supported the documentary form. In the case of each film, Zoltan and Flaherty shot on location before the material was partially incorporated into a narrative with back projections and studio sets at Denham Studios, so that each film’s final version contained discordant styles that combined location shots with studio photography and artificial effects.¹³ As a film, Sanders is not always artistically coherent, but its dissonance affirms the “radical realism” of a variegated realist text that posits—at every turn, but in different ways—a transparency between representation and meaning. The consequences of such a style for imperialist ideology’s adaptation to a more liberal era of politics can be unearthed by following Sanders's multistranded realist mode through its treat-
ment of colonial bodies, colonial place, imperial work, and the very act of narration.

**Imperial Narration**

*Sanders of the River* is about District Commissioner Sanders (Leslie Banks) and his administration of the lower Isisi tribes, who are tyrannized by King Mofalaba (Tony Wane) during his regular raids for slaves and women. In keeping the peace of the land, Sanders is assisted by the British officers Tibbets (Robert Cochrane) and Hamilton (Richard Grey) as well as his native ally Bosambo (Paul Robeson), chief of the Ochori. At the film’s conclusion, Sanders has effected a “regime change” in the Isisi by eliminating Mofalaba and nominating Bosambo as the new king. The film begins with a set of intertitles over a fluttering Union Jack, as Robeson’s famous “canoe song” extolling the virtues of Sanders plays on the soundtrack.¹⁴

Sandi the strong, Sandi the wise;  
Righter of wrong, Hater of lies.  
Laughed as he fought, worked as he played;  
As he has taught, let it be made.

[Intertitle 1] Sailors, soldiers and merchant-adventurers were the pioneers who laid the foundation of the British Empire. To-day their work is carried on by the Civil Servants—Keepers of the King’s peace.  
[dissolve]  
[Intertitle 2] **AFRICA.**  
Tens of millions of natives under British rule, each tribe with its own chieftain, governed and protected by a handful of white men whose everyday work is an unsung saga of courage and efficiency.  
[Intertitle 3 fades in]  
One of them was Commissioner Sanders.

As the titles fade to black, a spinning globe fades in and stops at Nigeria. This dissolves to a wall map of the “District of Commissioner Sanders,” followed by a final dissolve to a zoom out from the nameplate on Sanders’s door as the man himself appears, pipe in mouth.

Intertitles, maps, and globes are used abundantly in imperial films to mark fictional representations as facts and locate them in a geographical space and historical time. Jean-Louis Comolli argues that fiction that presents itself
as history uses two orders of meaning: the order of belief (the viewer must believe that the fiction is real) and of knowledge (but they know that they are watching reconstructions). In historical fiction there is more to believe against, as there is more to de-negate, a “body too much” of referential information that impedes our faith in the fiction. Arguing against this, Mimi White notes that the body of “historical” reference that is supposedly anterior to the fictional text may be used self-reflexively by the text and the audience. The viewer is called on to evaluate the text using this information (an “extra body of reference” rather than a “body too much”), as historical films establish their validity by engaging viewers with referential material preceding and surrounding fiction.

Sanders, like all imperial fiction, incorporates realist indices to periods and places, and the film’s fragments of reality—maps, location shots, footage of indigenous peoples, excerpts of Kroo, Ochori, and Yoruba tribal songs recorded on site and advertised as authentic—exist to endow the same order of legitimacy to the fiction. So the film opens with a song that borrows its rhythms from a Nigerian boat song but transforms the lyrics into a paean to the fictional Sanders, implying that a native lore has sprung up around the protagonist. By re-scripting an African boat song into a song about Sanders and making it a recurrent thematic sound, Sanders gets an emotional authenticity and the film appears to merely recreate an environment rather than propagate a worldview. Colonization is portrayed as acceptable to people who incorporate validations of empire in quotidian expressions of their daily life, such as their music, speeches, and wedding rituals. Intertitles labor to this effect in Michael Balcon’s Rhodes of Africa as well, when they state that Rhodes was honored by the Matabele, “the very people he had conquered,” with their royal salute, “Bayete!”

The opening titles in Sanders similarly legitimate the hero, although he is not a pioneer-adventurer but a bureaucrat, typically not an ideal candidate for thrills. But the excitement of the place (AFRICA in capital letters) and the scale of the work undertaken (an “unsung saga” of “a handful of white men”) outweigh the bureaucrat’s potential dullness (the “everyday work” of “one of them” civil servants). Not long before Sanders was made, Winston Churchill had celebrated civil service in India as a superior form of impassive selflessness.

Our responsibility in India has grown up over the last 150 years. It is a responsibility for giving the best possible chance for peaceful existence and
progress to about three hundred and fifty millions of helpless primitive people who are separated by an almost measureless gulf from the ideas and institutions of the Western world. We now look after them by means of British Officials on fixed salaries who have no axe to grind, who make no profit out of their duties, who are incorruptible, who are impartial between races, creeds and classes, and who are directed by a central Government which in its turn is controlled by the British Parliament based on twenty-nine million electors.\textsuperscript{17}

Everything Sanders says in the first scene confirms his neutral performance of duty at the behest of British taxpayers.

Work is a significant aspect of all imperial films because imperial rule legitimates itself by making certain claims for the significance of the colonizer’s work. Consequently the first sequence establishes Sanders’s matter-of-fact attitude toward his task. When junior officer Tibbets looks wistfully out of the window, dreaming of future decorations for bravery, Sanders says in clipped tones, “Stop thinking of that Victoria Cross of yours. What you’re in for is tramping through swamps and jungles. The only decoration you get:
mosquito bites.” In consonance with the intertitles, Sanders neither seeks nor expects any recognition: his is an “unsung saga.” But recognition is nevertheless conferred on him by the film's eponymous title, its characters, mise-en-scène, camera angles, and nondiegetic text.

Following cinematic convention, the nondiegetic text occupies an omniscient and controlling position in relation to the film’s visuals, directing attention to key events and invoking scenes that visuals display faithfully. Scenes of harvest, fecund banana trees, and happy Africans accompany intertitles that report

Five years of harvest, peace, and plenty. Under Sanders’ just rule the People of the River enjoy their primitive paradise.

The relationship between titles and images replicates the relationship between Sanders and the cinematic world, in that the titles could almost be his internal thoughts, so seamlessly do they overlap and affirm the film’s reality. Sanders’s subjective vision permeates the film’s form, and his vision mediates our access to all versions of this reality.

In other words, in addition to being the film’s central protagonist, Sanders is the central consciousness that serves as the touchstone for the film’s internal coherence and veracity. “Realism offers itself as transparent,” says Catherine Belsey, and Sanders presents a mise-en-abîme of transparency. Sanders takes imperialism to be a self-evident good, which mimics the film’s presumption of imperial benefits, which in turn mimics Sanders’s perspective, ad infinitum. The other characters (English and African) exist to validate this hermetically sealed echo chamber of reality that surrounds Sanders; consequently their relationship to fiction is one of incomplete knowledge. In such a narrative, there is room for narrative suspense only when one is at the same level of awareness as the characters who have no agency beyond anticipating Sanders’s actions. When Sanders departs for the Government House to get married, leaving a new Commissioner Ferguson (Martin Walker) in charge of the residency, the collapsing order in his wake reflects the audience’s lack of certainty about what will ensue in the narrative.

Sanders’s absence effects an immediate crisis, with the arrival of two ill-intentioned men who spread rumors: “Sandi is dead. There is no law any more.” They distribute “Gin and Firearms,” and an emboldened Mofalaba kills Ferguson on the assurance that Sanders is dead. Sanders rushes back, but when asked for his command he retorts, “I don’t know.” Subsequently, there are no more titles. The film builds its climax by withholding the
protagonists’ plan of intervention, which, in accord with the concomitant omniscience of Sanders and the intertitles, demands the suspension of all nondiegetic communication with the audience. The film’s evisceration of narrative agency for everyone but Sanders contributes to the construction of a mythic status for his character. Unlike empire films in the romance mode, this film doesn’t defend imperialism as the manifest destiny of a race or a class. Unlike an imperial modernist text, it does not offer a stylized meditation on the irrevocable struggles of those who inherit that destiny. The certitude of Sanders is conveyed by a textual attitude wherein every aspect of the film form creates, overtly and invisibly, a world according to Sanders. Consistent with this, the film’s protagonist is a figure who never questions the value of his colonial mission.

Imperial Work/Imperial Identity

Unlike protagonists in romance and modernist imperial fictions, heroes in the realist modes are not altered by their colonial place of work. They are typically white men who have a certainty of purpose, demonstrate no self-reflexivity about their mission, and encounter an alien land to change it rather than be changed themselves. They are self-assured and “unperturbably English, unaffected by the atmosphere, customs or climate of the alien lands.”

To maintain this integrity of imperial character, the film’s shots are designed with clear spatial divisions subordinating the African to the white man. In the first sequence of Sanders, we witness two settings. The first is Sanders’s living room. This area, with couches, windows, and alcohol, is spatially unified; the camera and the characters have great mobility within the room. British officers (and Sanders’s African servant, Abibu, who stands respectfully at the margins of the frame) inhabit this space, which is safe for easy movement and an exchange of whiskey. The second setting is Sanders’s office, where Sanders meets Bosambo. The office is spatially divided in a way that the living room is not. The shot is split into screen left and screen right, with Sanders and Hamilton seated on one side of the table and Tibbets lounging behind them. Bosambo walks into the room and stands facing them across the table, framed by various maps of Africa. The camera loses its mobility, providing only two positions other than the establishing shot, namely, the British point of view and the African point of view. In imperial realism, “the colonial world is a world cut in two.” Any form of social interaction outside the formal palaver is taboo. Deviations from spatial division occur either during mo-
ments of conflict or during formal ceremonies, which bring their own relational hierarchies.²¹

The filmic apparatus endows the character of Sanders with a position of privileged isolation from his surroundings. Despite his references to the rigors of life in Africa, his work is portrayed as mental rather than physical. He plans, gives orders, thinks, and smokes his pipe. When his men shoot at Mofalaba’s settlement, he remains off-screen so that he always appears in command, visibly and invisibly controlling the natives who work, fight, gather fruit, dance, and follow orders. Narratively speaking, there are only three exceptions to Sanders’s apparent inviolability: his fever, the fragility of peace at the residency when Sanders is replaced by his colleague Ferguson, and the competing visual presence of Bosambo.

At a key point in the film, Sanders commands junior officer Tibbets to keep his steamboat “Zaire” in midstream, as he feels his body succumbing to malaria. Retreating from the natives and his fellow officers for his moment of weakness, Sanders is nevertheless exposed to the audience in his sweat-drenched delirium. Embedded in these depictions of the imperial
body’s response to a colonial place are varying shades of a defense for the empire’s place in the British nation. This is particularly true given the extent to which the represented imperial body is an allegory for Britain, especially at a time when colonial officers were upheld as ambassadors of the nation. In an effort to streamline colonial administration, late-imperial state policy decreed that colonial officials could only be selected from certain classes of British society. The film historian Jeffrey Richards argues that the hero Sanders epitomizes all the criteria used in selecting colonial administrators from 1910 to 1948, noting that English public schools were considered the ideal model for colonial administrators and that testimonial letters for prospective candidates commented on their “agreeable” manner, “well-balanced mind,” and their ability to maintain “the best traditions of English government over subject races.” Unlike his counterparts in imperial fiction, Sanders is never homesick or submerged in danger. Yet his confident exterior only serves to emphasize that “something can always happen in this part of the world,” as Sanders warns ominously when a colleague does not return from an expedition.

In imperial films defenses of empire range from the notion that officers pursue their missions despite lurking dangers (as in Sanders) to the idea that only treacherous colonial frontiers can provide appropriately epic terrains for testing true courage and heroism (as in The Drum or The Four Feathers). The mosquito bites and fevers that assail Sanders proclaim the possibility of danger, but they are dangers easily contained and resolved. In apparent opposition to the imperial-realist hero’s invulnerability to the colonial place, Ferguson, the film’s one serious casualty, meets death at the hands of Mofalaba’s men. As Sanders’s replacement, Ferguson pays with his life for not being Sanders. He is at a loss when Mofalaba’s men start rioting and has the misfortune of being surrounded by British officers who make unhelpful remarks such as “Sanders’ life’s work destroyed in a week!” “You must be quick and strong now like a father with his misguided children. Like Mr. Sanders would. Or else much, much blood will flow very soon.”

In a desperate bid to regain control Ferguson visits Mofalaba but dies at his hands. Before he dies, he threatens the African king with images of an avenging Sanders: “I tell you he will come, and wherever you may hide, he will smell you out and throw your body to the fishes.” The episode points to a generic tendency in imperial films to convey that for some district commissioners (or military officers, as in The Drum, or female missionaries, as in Black Narcissus) to succeed, others must be sacrificed. A death typically conveys
either the enormity of the challenge that colonizers face and handle unperturbed, or the moral triumph (rather than the physical actualization) of imperial values. With Ferguson’s death, Sanders makes the more straightforward claim that Commissioner Sanders plays a difficult role in maintaining the peace of Africa. Clearly addressing contemporary concerns about the expense of imperial expansion, the film portrays Sanders as a supporter of peace. Subduing Tibbets, who wants to break Mofalaba’s neck, Sanders cautions that the “British taxpayer won’t be delighted” with war, because “it’d cost him a thousand pounds.” Within this context, Ferguson’s death gives Sanders a motive to expend taxpayer money on war and empire.

The justification of violence is central to abstracting imperialism as a defensible practice, and in imperial cinema the British are portrayed as a peace-loving people who use violence as a last resort. (In Sanders Mofalaba says derisively, “It is easy to lie to the English. They want peace. If you say you want peace they will believe you.” In The Drum, a native ally rhapsodizes, “England has offered us friendship. If England is our friend, we shall have peace.”) Sanders, for instance, does not mount an attack on Mofalaba until the old king relentlessly provokes him by enslaving women, distributing guns and alcohol to witless natives, killing Ferguson, and kidnapping Bosambo and his wife, Lilongo (Nina Mae McKinney). This, anyone would agree, justifies violent retribution. Ferguson dies to demonstrate that Sanders is judicious in his use of force, strengthening the imperial-realist narrative’s derivation of legitimacy from its central protagonist, whose actions within the plot consolidate the metanarrative justification of empire.

To argue that nothing in the film interrupts its defense of imperialism does not do justice to Paul Robeson as Bosambo. Audiences at the time were familiar with Robeson’s status as a respected African American actor who, in his own words, was “100 per cent in agreement with the Communist Party position on self-determination for the colonies and for the Negro people in America.” Given his history of political activism, Robeson came under a lot of criticism for his part as Bosambo, and his exchange about Sanders of the River with close friend and fellow activist Benjamin J. Davis Jr. makes a compelling testimonial of his dismay at the film. By Robeson’s account, he agreed to act in the film because he believed it would show Africa’s rich culture. “Robeson dressed in a leopard skin along with half a dozen other guys from Africa, all looking more or less the same, seemed to me to prove something about my race that I thought worth proving.” In fact, the film rarely allows Robeson to be seen with the film’s Africans except when they are

reduced to back-projections. Robeson later spoke of the film as a lesson in how a film’s editing could completely alter what actors perceived to be its intent. He walked out of the film’s premiere screening in London, subsequently denouncing the film in public and reputedly attempting to buy its rights to prevent distribution.\(^{27}\)

Within the film’s logic as well, Robeson’s overwhelming screen presence and his delivery frequently gives the impression that his character’s behavior toward Sanders is a strategic device to achieve his own ambitions. His dialogue, too, seems at times to affirm this: “I lie to anybody when I think it is good for me”; “Every time I have seen the beautiful face of your great King [of England], my heart has filled with joy”; “I’m a Christian for Lord Sandi, but for you [Lilongo, his wife] I shall be of the true [Muslim] faith.” Though Bosambo’s function within the film dilutes Robeson’s potential, Bosambo’s possible double-speak and his unique status in relation to Sanders become apparent the instant his character first appears on screen. Bosambo stands in a loincloth, falsely claiming to be the chief of the Ochori tribe. Sanders looks at him unwaveringly: “Is that not a lie, man?” Bosambo ad-
mits, “It is a lie, Lord.” “It IS a lie, man,” confirms Sanders, demonstrating superhuman control over others. Sanders walks to his files and pulls out one on Bosambo. A close-up of the file shows Robeson’s photograph along with the text “Liberian negro, convicted for habitual petty larceny. Escaped from St. Thome prison.” The file entry on Bosambo points to the use of diegetic text within this film. In opposition to the intertitles, which are declarative “truths” endorsing Sanders’s view of imperial relations, the diegetic text of the film offers secret information that is either about Sanders (tom-toms drumming messages of Sanders’s rumored death in the jungle) or available only to Sanders (Morse code, files). Sanders either gives definition to that which constitutes the film’s reality, or forms the center of reference for every event, person, and object within the film.

The files reveal that “Sandi,” the legend known to his African “children,” and “Sanders,” the man known to his colleagues, maintains his mythic stature with technologies of military and bureaucratic surveillance. The secret that keeps him in control of the area is the panopticon of the British Empire, with its privileged access to the colony and its secret codes. However, technology requires mystification to maintain its authoritative position, and European rationalism, with its classifications and method, presents itself as supernatural to the natives, who believe that Sanders has “ears as long as an elephant, eyes on the top of [his] head and in [his] back and where other men sit.” British officers appear equally amazed by Sanders’s vast knowledge. Only Bosambo skirts the edges of his omniscience, as their first meeting reveals.

**SANDERS:** Didn’t you know that no man can be Chief in the River territories without my permission?

**BOSAMBO:** I knew, Lord. But I also knew that YOU also knew that I MADE myself chief of the Ochori.

**SANDERS:** And you knew that I knew because of my magic?

**BOSAMBO:** Lord, I knew that you knew by your spies, who are everywhere, who are called the eyes of your Lordship.

The myth of superhuman omniscience is revealed as a network of administrative data-gathering, and here we have a moment of acquiescence between two men regarding the levels of implicit and explicit knowledge necessary to maintain the precarious balance of imperial power. Despite great disparities of position and power in the sequence (Sanders sits fully clothed, while Bosambo stands half-naked, lit by bright lights during Sanders’s scrutiny), both
men appear to understand the operation of authority more than any other white or black man in the film. Such moments, however, are fleeting in a film that never carries Bosambo’s position in relation to imperial authority beyond the mildest flirtations with insubordination. He is quickly transformed into an emasculated figure who needs Sanders to rescue him from Mofalaba. Nevertheless, he is also the sole figure who constitutes the permissible outer limits of interrogating imperial authority within the reality of this fiction.

The native who completely defies imperial authority is, of course, the evil Mofalaba. He appears to have no grandiose visions of absolute power, other than following the custom of raiding for slaves and cutting down those who stand in his way (unlike Ghul Khan in The Drum, who wants an Islamic Empire). Significantly, Bosambo throws the fatal spear at Mofalaba when Sanders and his army come to the rescue. This death of the bad native at the hands of the good one (the corresponding image in Black Narcissus is the good colonizer killing her evil counterpart) reveals a close doubling of the two figures. Together, Bosambo and Mofalaba encompass a range of imperial perceptions regarding the colonized. To an extent, this is Said’s point about orientalism with Bhabha’s emendation. Though both theorists agree that an evocation of the oriental is crucial to the West’s self-definition, for Said orientalism is a self-referential system that constitutes the non-Western as a unified entity, for which “it is frequently enough to use the simple copula is,” as in the formulation: the orient is sensual and the West is rational. Against this, Bhabha argues that “for Said, the copula [is] seems to be the point at which western rationalism preserves the boundaries of sense for itself,” but such “signifiers of stability” ignore the various contradictory roles played by non-Western subjects in Western discourse. Consequently, the orient is better designated through signifiers of instability which show the “ambivalence” of Western-dominant discourse toward an East constructed as simultaneously despotic, childlike, sensual, menacing, and so on.

In Sanders’ depictions of a friendly Bosambo and a malicious Mofalaba are structurally necessary to the portrayal of Sanders, but in contrast to other modes of imperial representation, imperial realism maintains strict boundaries between enemies and allies. Bosambo does not find in himself a dark echo of Mofalaba; Mofalaba is never charming or enticing. The categories of “enemy” and “ally” remain unproblematized. To particularize Bhabha’s analysis, though non-Western subjects play contradictory roles in colonial discourses, certain discourses are founded on the suppression of ambivalence and occupy a position of apparent anachronism in (and after) the twen-
tieth century, because they deny the historical troubling of colonial, racial, gendered, and class-based binaries. Imperial realism builds an amnesiac world, channeling its horror of an anticolonial populace that chants “the last shall be first and the first last” through imagining easily isolatable native enemies amid a sea of native allies. The native subject who is similar-to-me-but-not-me (manifested in the threatening figure of Ghul Khan in the romance narrative The Drum, and in the uncanny moments of the modernist film Black Narcissus) is erased from the realist mode, in which categories of good and evil are clearly segregated, and distinguishing between them never provokes the central narrative or moral crisis.

The Manichean nature of realism need not prevent us from reading against the grain of a realist text. Following Sanders’s return to his residency, he calls for a palaver with his African allies to reprimand his “black children” for their unruly behavior. In defense of his tribe’s action Chief Koolaboo says, “My young men heard that your Lordship was dead, and their hearts were filled with a great joy.” Sanders replies, “Well, now they know that I’m alive.” Koolaboo admits, “Yes Lord, and their hearts are filled with sorrow.” The episode seems to reveal that the basis of Sanders’s rule is, above all, terror, and
the Africans’ obedience to him is motivated purely by their interest in survival rather than by their recognition of the British administration’s greater good. This is a pleasurable reading, but recognizably perverse because the repeated trope of natives as children who need to be ruled with a firm hand attenuates any insistence that the film depicts Sanders as a terrorizing force on Africans. As with the justification of violence against Mofalaba, the episode of lawlessness only vindicates Sanders’s aggression. The film’s resolution depicting a transfer of power from Sanders to Bosambo thus represents an empire founded on constructive cooperation rather than force. The portrayal of empire as an arena of cooperation invalidates accusations against British imperialism with nationalist aplomb.

During the transfer of power, Sanders sits and Bosambo stands facing him, the light behind him fanned out in rays, as though heralding him as the new king.

**Sanders**: Bosambo, you are king of the river. Your new people like you. I hope when I come back in ten moons they will still like you.

**Bosambo**: Lord Sandi, I have learnt the secret of government from your Lordship.

**Sanders**: You have?

**Bosambo**: It is this. A king ought not to be feared but loved by his people.

**Sanders**: That is the secret of the British, Bosambo.

Sanders—who insists on an official marriage registration between Bosambo and Lilongo, so that Bosambo will forsake polygamy, and permits the old king all his customs except slavery, because “slavery I will not have, King Mofalaba”—fulfils his work as an agent of modernization. In opposition to Mofalaba’s reign of terror, which is an end unto itself, Britain’s enforcement of law through violent retribution is represented as a necessary prelude to democracy and self-governance.

*Sanders of the River*, *The Drum*, and *Black Narcissus* all end with the departure of the English from a colony after having restabilized narrative and political order. In *Sanders*, though, the abdication of power is not final, and Sanders promises to return in ten moons to assess his nominated ruler’s progress. Because the text does not provide a strong antagonistic principle against imperial hierarchy (with hierarchy here referring to both the social ordering of races and the narrative ordering of events), there is no strong sense that imperial presence will be unwelcome, as in imperial romance, or unnecessary, as in imperial modernism. The fantasy of a repeated return to colonial au-
Imperial redemption

Authority is incorporated into the figure of the colonial ally, who is adult enough to understand the secret of governance but child enough to repeatedly err. We hear similar conceptualizations of African audiences, who are described as (eternally teachable) imperfect subjects and (eternally insatiable) ideal consumers. “Most white people go to the cinema to be entertained. Africans would come in their thousands to be instructed and would be entertained as a side issue. The African has so much to learn that this could continue almost ad infinitum.”35 The Sanders version of Africa redeems imperialism in the literal sense of Britain “making good” on its promise to tutor the “less-developed” African, who might need an indefinite number of lessons. And so the film keeps open the fantasy of a supervisory British State.

Multiple Realisms

Imperial cinema’s arguments about colonization’s pedagogical and modernizing value for colonial subjects worked in parallel ways with domestic support of developmental programs for the British underclass. The political push toward a protectionist, enlightened state amid contentious departures from the individualist, laissez-faire market system envisioned new welfare policies in the colonial and domestic arena. This progressive impulse was equally motivated by an intent to tame socialist uprisings of the workers and the poor by making less-enfranchised constituencies a more visible and active part of national life. In cinema, if the Quota Act was one aspect of a benevolent state adopting measured protectionism toward commercial films, the state’s cultivation of noncommercial, educational films aimed primarily at the British middle classes was another. The pioneering work of John Grierson, supported by Stephen Tallents (in his capacity as secretary of the EMB and later as public-relations officer of the General Post Office) is well known in this context.36 Using the word documentary for the first time to describe Robert Flaherty’s Moana (1926), Grierson saw in the new representational form a unique way of bringing the faces, routines, and lives of Britain’s working classes and colonial subjects to the British bourgeoisie.37 Grierson’s leadership at the film units of the EMB (1927–1933) and the GPO (1933–1937) aimed to define a cinema that raised its viewers’ consciousness by exposing them humanistically to the neglected faces of industrial Britain.

The EMB and GPO film units’ experiments with film form gave documentaries an enduring vocabulary, comprised of a voice-over, music, lyrical vista shots interwoven with select individual lives, and (under Alberto
Cavalcanti’s control of the GPO film unit in 1937) direct-address interviews. Though Sanders is a commercial film, it may be usefully evaluated against the British documentary film movement of the 1930s for a few reasons. First, both the documentary and the commercial empire film depicted Britain’s national and/or colonial “others.” EMB and GPO documentaries aimed to educate British audiences about British workers, colonial lands, dominion markets, and diverse topographies by means of a cinema that was experimental, socially committed, as well as paternalistic. Given the overlap in target markets and depicted themes, one may legitimately ask if (and how) the familiar combination of social responsibility and paternalism in state- and privately sponsored documentaries about the colonial subjects and British working classes intersected or varied from commercial imperial cinema. Second, more than any other commercial films, the groundbreaking documentaries of the EMB and GPO film units exploited the visual medium’s ability to reveal diverse locations, lifestyles, and customs as much as its ability to tell a story. Elephant Boy and Sanders shared the stylistic idiom of combining actuality footage with narrative realism. Such coincidences in film language are not entirely surprising given the occasional duplications in film personnel; for example, Korda’s Elephant Boy was partially shot by Robert Flaherty, who also shot Industrial Britain (1933) for the EMB and Man of Aran (1934) for Michael Balcon.

On closer scrutiny, it is the dissimilarities between the documentaries and the empire film that better clarify their distinct cultural functions. Martin Stollery convincingly demonstrates the documentary film movement’s location and assimilation into the tradition of European art-film discourse of the 1920s and 1930s, which points to differences in the sites of exhibition and reception of documentaries as opposed to commercial films. Documentary films were primarily screened at nontheatrical locations such as London’s Imperial Institute, circulated among film societies in Britain and film festivals in Europe, or lent out by the Empire Film Library to educational institutions. Stollery’s analysis, along with that of Ian Aitkin and Sarah Street, effectively situates the documentary movement’s aesthetic alongside British and European modernist cinemas, evident not only in their more specialized travel circuits but also in the documentary filmmakers’ self-conscious emphasis on personal vision, artistic style, and references to other film movements (particularly the Soviet montage school). In addition to differing from empire cinema in their deliberate distancing from the commercial film form and exhibition sites, British documentary films expressed a liberal
politics despite institutional limitations on their narratives and images. In
corporate-sponsored colonial films such as Cargo from Jamaica (Basil Wright,
1933) and Song of Ceylon (Basil Wright, 1934), Stollery argues, anticolonial
and prosocialist commentary is necessarily hidden to evade detection. The
films’ critique of the state lurks in strategically placed voice-overs and in
the juxtaposition of images of low-paid, plentiful native labor against absent
British work forces clearly displaced by mechanization, thus presenting a
camouflaged critical commentary that is picked up in journal discussions of
the 1930s.42

Though the aforementioned films portray Jamaica and Ceylon as Britain’s
exotic, less-developed periphery, the colonies are treated as spiritually rejuve-
nating counterpoints to civilization in a manner that affilites their present-
tional mode to imperial romances. Romances endow greater complexity
to the colonized place than realist narratives, as they acknowledge a physi-
cal and psychic dependence between the imperial metropolis and the colony.
This is also borne out in films of the documentary movement that deal with
white working classes in ways visually parallel to the colonial documentaries,
such as Coalface (Cavalcanti, 1935), Drifters (Grierson, 1929), Housing Problems
(Anstey, 1935), and Industrial Britain; these films differ from each other in
terms of structure, poetics, pacing, and sound, but share with colonial docu-
mentaries an interest in making unknown lives visible to middle-class audi-
dences through a lyricism of images and an emphasis on human nobility.
Korda’s imperial films, in contrast, are for-profit ventures that incorporate a
variety of sentimental appeals and cinematic seductions—like stars, songs,
staged battles, and ethnographic footage—to attract mass viewership.

Audiences attending Korda’s imperial films did not merely see a film.
They were given an evening of entertainment filled with pageantry, music,
costume, and “authentic” documentary footage of unfamiliar places. This
“thrilling” aspect of filming within the empire was underscored in interviews
with the director Zoltan Korda and the production manager G. E. T. Gross-
smith. Narrating their experience of recording African songs and dances,
Grossmith emphasized the novelty of “never-before seen or heard” move-
ments and sounds: “A thousand savage warriors in huge ostrich feather hats,
buffalo shields, and spears were told by the interpreter that the great white
man, Mr. Zoltan Korda, wanted to hear their national songs. It was no good
explaining we were a film unit, that would have conveyed nothing at all. . . .
The thousand men formed themselves into a battle square and commenced
to sing and dance for ten solid days and ten nights. They never stopped!”43
Zoltan Korda added, “We had the Acholi [tribe] do some dances for us, but we were warned that we must be wary. These natives take their dancing seriously. We talk about dancing marathons. Every dance with the Acholi is a marathon. And ever so often one of them would dance himself into a frenzy when he felt he must kill whosoever was nearest to him. . . . We were compelled to arrest and lock up an average of about six ‘actors’ every day.”\(^4^4\) Though also dabbling in the shock effects of exposing bourgeois England to the lives of the English poor, the documentarists aimed to use film to ennoble and humanize domestic and colonial labor.\(^4^5\) In contrast, the documentary footage in Sanders spectacularizes and sensationalizes Africans, and the film’s surrounding publicity makes them incorrigible curiosities. As noted in “Interesting Facts about Sanders of the River,” “The 20,000 African negroes who take part in this picture received most of their wages in the form of cartons of cigarettes.”\(^4^6\)

In their analysis of the documentary movement, Katherine Dodd and Philip Dodd argue that for Grierson and other documentary filmmakers, films were as much about including the workers within the nation’s self-image as they were about instructing the nation on the lives of its invisible majority. The documentarists portrayed the working classes as heroes rather than victims, whose bodies provided a reinvented image of the nation. “The documentarists’ obsession with working-class masculinity should be seen as one of the ways that a new, alternative version of manly Englishness could be first imagined and then stabilized. The films themselves make clear that not only should virile, heterosexual, working-class masculinity be welcomed into the nation, but that such a masculinity might serve to incarnate it.”\(^4^7\) The Dodds present the revival of masculinity through working white or native bodies as a necessary cure for the ailing aristocratic male body, which was proving an inadequate symbol for post-imperial Britain.

In fact, both imperial and documentary films can be understood as responses to a crisis in national identity demonstrable in representations of masculine heroism, with the difference that commercial imperial cinema’s use of naturalism to resolve the underlying crisis in (national, masculine) identity varied from the GPO and EMB films’ deployment of images to do the same. Unlike the documentaries, Sanders rigorously avoids depicting white protagonists through the naturalism reserved for Africa and Africans, while also prioritizing narrative realism over documentary footage in the film as a whole. The narrative segments provide, in Colin MacCabe’s phrase, “the realm of truth” against which all other images are verified.\(^4^8\) Considering
both empire films and documentaries as the collective output of a nation, the repeated depiction of working-class white men through a documentary gaze that never falls on white aristocrats speaks of a prevalent politics of form.

Documentary realism is used several times in Sanders. To mention the first few longest instances, the rumors about Sanders’s death are followed by a montage of stampeding animals, feeding vultures, dancing men, burning huts, and running warriors. A three-minute segment of a dance ensues after a title informs us,

The fighting regiments—made bold by the news of Sanders’ death—whip themselves to frenzy by the fearsome Lion dance.

Belying premature celebrations, Sanders soon returns on his plane. His flight to the residency is conveyed through another documentary sequence, involving shots of the aircraft, birds in flight, splashing hippopotami, running ostriches, stampeding bison, and giraffes. These are primarily long aerial safari shots in which the camera is airborne, mobile, and occasionally subjective. Within the formal logic of Sanders, creating visual continuity or contact spaces between the two races within a documentary format carries the danger of stripping the English of their narrative power. However, while the aviation sequence is a rare occasion on which Sanders and his jet appear in the same frame as “documentary Africa,” the distance in species and space contain any possible threat to the imperial body.

Stollery notes similarities between the aerial sequence in Sanders and Paul Rotha’s imperial aviation documentaries (a similarity noted by Rotha himself, according to Stollery), although aviation documentaries used voice-overs, while Sanders shows a silent spectacle of a triumphant metal emblem of Western modernity swooping over Africa’s wilderness. These sequences are embedded into a narrative that utilizes Sanders as its referential center, but their duration and distinct mode of presentation give them a feel of independent segments within the film. The startling difference between the film’s documentary mode and its narrative realism gives pause, at least in terms of its disruption of the film’s flow and its shift in spectatorial engagement. In an admittedly structuralist definition of political art according to an “ultraleft fantasy,” Colin MacCabe, among others, argues that to be progressive, art should be able to break the “imaginary” relation between spectator and text, disrupting the unity of sign and referent to bring to light the obscured rules through which a realist text orders its discourse. With regard to the two realisms in Sanders, we may well ask if the documentary attractions produce
intentional or unintended artistic and ideological interruptions of the narrative segments. Do the blatant specularizations of tribal Africans or wild safari animals shock the audience out of the representational network of the narrative, exposing its mechanisms?

Clearly, such discussions are incomplete without considering historical viewers and their relationship to a film’s discursive organization. To current viewers, Sanders is immediately visible as a racist film. While modern audiences do not need an interrupted narrative to be conscious of this film’s politics, as intervening social struggles against discriminatory images have granted most of us such awareness, the historical viewer was not politically naïve either. The most compelling example is the controversy surrounding Paul Robeson’s role in Sanders of the River, a role that was criticized by several political activists in the United States, including, as mentioned previously, Robeson himself. Moreover, another British film, Gainsborough’s Old Bones of the River (Varnel, 1938), directly lampooned Sanders and provided a satirical antidote to the film. Subverting an imperial trope, the opening intertitles of Old Bones are placed in a parodic rather than indexical relationship to the film’s ensuing visuals.

Darkest Africa—where in primeval surroundings amidst crocodile infested waters, a handful of Englishmen rule half a million natives—teaching the black man to play the white man.

In this irreverent variation, titles generically deployed as unmediated statements of truth are called out as conventions supporting an ideology. Sanders and Old Bones (and their respective political attitudes) function as historical interlocutors of each other, so that the proclamation of imperial values in Sanders can be understood as an absolution of empire in a context in which there was dissent against it.

At the time, many objected on artistic grounds to Korda’s ham-fisted combination of anthropological film and fictional narrative, without exploring its impact on the film’s ideology. In a review of Korda’s Elephant Boy, John Grierson conveyed his perplexity at the film’s style: “I merely note the alien strangeness of its juxtaposition [of Flaherty and Korda’s filming] in this film. With its synthetic spectacle of studio, camp scenes and West End voices it brings the film at every turn to an artificial, different plane. . . . The film drives on under the lash of the synthesis.” Michael Powell, who shot most of Black Narcissus in a studio, was uncomplimentary about Korda’s decision to divide the film shoot between Denham studios and Africa rather than present a uni-
fied artistic vision. More recently, the film historian Jeffrey Richards wrote, “The resulting film reveals the split approach, with the documentary footage sometimes uneasily woven into the narrative, filmed in the main at Denham Studios with imported Cardiff dockers as extra natives.”

In fact, Korda brings narrative and documentary together in a manner that allows neither form of realism to politically or aesthetically invigorate, displace, or question the other. Unless we want to be formulaic about progressive art, we cannot posit that the mere fact of an interruption through a collage of other attractions breaks the identificatory processes of narrative. “A mere tableau structure is insufficient to reflect social contradictions or break the complacency of our (spectatorial) position. . . . [T]he scenes may not necessarily become dominant over the reality expressed in narrative.” The documentary sequences in Sanders leave the spectator in the same position of authority in relation to the images as do the narrative segments, and, to paraphrase Lyotard, both modes “preserve our consciousness from doubt” by stabilizing the meaning of the referent to enable easy affirmations of white, male, and British superiority.

But to be persistent in this line of inquiry, we may still ask if such a reading overvalues the ideological aspect of realism, abdicating an understanding of the differences between the two realisms in experiential terms. Can a fragmented realism allow images to establish a novel “intimacy” with the spectator, to use Rachel Moore’s term? In Moore’s theorization of film as modern magic, she points to numerous occasions when films depict the “primitive’s” “first contact” with technology in a manner that allows modernity to rehearse its own wonderment with itself. In films like Nanook of the North (Flaherty, 1922), Moore argues, “Through the contrivance of primitives’ eyes we see the marvel of technology’s recent past, and through the technology of the camera itself we enjoy the fine nuances of primitive gesture. Technology makes the primitive primitive and, at the same time, the primitive makes technology magical.” Moore calls attention to the Epsteinian photogenie of cinema, its “ability to touch you with no hands, elate you, shock you,” which are suppressed by psychoanalytic, cognitive, or cultural readings of film. To this end, she beckons us to early film theory’s “primitivist impulse,” defined in part as a discernibly modern and Eurocentric fascination with the figure of the primitive, and with the cinematic medium’s potential for animism.

Bringing Moore’s reconsideration of early documentary realism as a modernist project to Sanders, we may ask if, in their experiential dimensions, Korda’s documentary segments permit a new way of interrogating the film’s
content. A brief comparison between Sanders and a contemporary commercial fiction film that incorporates narrative and documentary footage helps emphasize the historically inflected nature of this cinematic experience. It contextualizes the use of realism and naturalism as dual aesthetic environments through which colonial images were delivered to the spectator within proximate contexts and periods of production.

The British director Thornton Freeland’s *Jericho* (1937; released in the United States as *Dark Sands*) tells the story of an African American man who escapes to North Africa and becomes a sheik. As Jericho Jackson, Paul Robeson reprises his role from *The Emperor Jones* (Murphey, 1933). Jericho is part of a company of all-black troops being shipped to France at the end of World War I. When Germans torpedo their ship, Jericho fights to save black soldiers who are treated like cargo and left to die by the racist white officers controlling the vessel. In the ensuing scuffle Jericho accidentally kills a white man. His race makes this an unpardonable crime, so when a friendly white soldier named Captain Mack allows him a moment’s respite from incarceration, Jericho gives his friend the slip and flees as a stowaway on a ship bound to North Africa. In the sequence that most memorably captures the aesthetic play between documentary and narrative, Captain Mack, having been disgraced by accusations of helping Jericho, is on a relentless quest for revenge. One despondent day, Mack enters a movie theater to distract himself. The theater is screening an ethnographic film of a North African tribe going on its annual journey for salt. This brief film-within-a-film contains all the familiar tropes of its type: the authoritative voice-over, shots of abject but noble Africans, their objectification by a seemingly impersonal camera. The spectator (along with Captain Mack) experiences the shock of seeing Jericho, who had hitherto been part of the primary film’s narrative segments, represented as a North African sheik subjected to documentary techniques reserved for the representation of Africans.

Freeland, clearly borrowing from the visual tropes of contemporary 1930s documentaries, exploits cinema’s ability to alter the filmed subject and affect the film’s spectator by destabilizing the relationship between viewer and the represented object. Korda’s vision for cinema in *Sanders*, on the other hand, uses varied visual styles to suppress the possibility of such discovery, pleasure, interrogation, or shock. In a broader sense, the film deprives documentary of its own poetics (as elaborated by Michael Renov), by making those sequences perpetually subservient to an ideological vision regulated by the narrative sequences. To refer back to Rachel Moore’s analysis, her theory
of cinema rests on a conceptualization of the medium as part of modernity’s dizzying encounters and transformations. She writes about cinema’s promise of a contact between estranged worlds — of the modern man meeting (and creating) the savage; of the savage meeting (and enabling) the modern; of cinema’s magical mutability meeting modern fragmentation — as best captured in the writings of early film theorists. This promise of cinematic modernity as a radically transformative encounter is denied in Sanders, unlike in Jericho, which uses realism in modernist ways to retain that possibility. Imperial fiction’s romance and modernist modes have a propensity to utilize color, sound, and image to stay alive to the mythic, abstract, and poetic aspects of cinema while conveying their worldview. The consequences of this visual pleasure for a film’s politics can be seen in The Drum and Black Narcissus.

The depiction of Bosambo and Lilongo, the two African allies of Commissioner Sanders who are played by recognizable African American stars, present a third dimension of representation in Sanders, which lies somewhere between the visual idioms of narrative and documentary. Bosambo and Lilongo are characterized by shots that fit neither into narrative realism nor documentary naturalism. Two shots stand out in particular. The first occurs when Bosambo sings about Sanders against a back-projection of boats on the Isisi River. He is filmed in a studio, but his background visuals are provided by the projection of actual documentary footage. In the second image, Lilongo repeats a dance performed by African tribes; while she is supposed to be one of them and mimics their actions, she is filmed on a studio set, and her image is spliced to follow the dance outside.

Within the film, as well as extra-cinematically, Robeson and MacKinney are not equivalent to white British actors, black British extras, or to anonymous members of African tribes. In the film they play Anglophone Nigerians who show their proximity to the British by forsaking polygamy and offering their loyalty to the Crown. They are also the only romantic male-female duo in an otherwise masculine imperial adventure; they have the longest speaking parts among actors playing Africans; and they are the only characters that sing. Pro-filmically, they are the film’s only African American actors. They both create a new and desired market for the movie and add to its salability with their musical numbers. Reflecting their in-between status, which straddles the narrative authority of the whites and the objectified specularization of Africans, these two figures are reproduced through hybrid shots that combine documentary and narrative fiction. They are in African costume but do not blend with an Africa that is depicted either in documentary form
or through constructed sets, projections, and sleight of editing. Nor do they assimilate with their fellow white protagonists, because shot compositions enforce a visual racial segregation. The film’s most experimental hybrid shots center on these two figures and are produced to relay and reinforce the relational and social hierarchies of the film’s narrative sequences.

What gives Sanders’s techniques a kind of imperialist “radical realism” akin to Said’s definition of orientalism is the film’s ideological organization of images at multiple levels. There is no contact between real and “studio” Africans, no tribal dancers with speaking parts, no black British or African American actors in the documentary sequences, and no nudity in the narrative segments. Realism and naturalism coexist in the film, moving in a “lash of synthesis” without touching each other. They are unified by an ideology that depends on a prohibition of contact between the two forms in order to prevent a destabilization of the film’s assumptions and to stall disorientations of our politico-visual experience. And so most profoundly, imperial realism refuses contact with its own historical moment, when divisions between colonizer and colonized were under attack. Colonial administration is accepted as the only route to democracy for a black nation, and the contradictions of that position are either suppressed or evaded.