

BOOK REVIEW

Neil Parsons. *Black and White Bioscope: Making Movies in Africa 1899 to 1925.*

Bristol, UK: Intellect, 2018. ix + 246 pp. Photographs. Appendix. Bibliography. Index. \$80.00. Cloth. ISBN: 978-1783209439.

The history of cinema in Africa is often consigned to a footnote of the big Western narrative under the heading of “world cinema.” The coupling of “Africa” with “cinema” conjures up perceptions of a historically derivative, secondary intrusion within a Western industry and art form. By returning to the original time and place of cinema’s birth—in 1895, when technology of cinema surfaced in Africa, North America, and Europe—historian Neil Parsons paints a more complex picture in *Black and White Bioscope: Making Movies in Africa 1899 to 1925*.

Film in Africa began with an Edison Kinetoscope parlor in Johannesburg in April 1895. The pioneers Carl Hertz and Edgar Hyman used the novel Edison Vitagraph and the first Lumiere projector. Although they were the first, they were not alone in this endeavor. A Mrs. Jones and Ada Delroy used the bioscope, along with the Lumiere and Warwick projectors, from 1897 to 1899. These accounts signal the author’s challenge to perspectives that confine early film history to technology in the Global North and its use by white men. In several chapters, the book charts the unequal but symbiotic interactions between Africa and the West in the development and exploitation of the novel apparatus and the resulting cultural form.

The focus of the book is early silent cinema in the southern part of Africa, “a voyage of rediscovery into nearly sixty movies” made between 1916 and 1923 (ix). Parsons admittedly stresses the content and historical contexts of the films rather than their aesthetic merits. He treats commercial narrative film both as an enterprising industry and as a historically sited endeavor. The narrative launches with a background of a decade of independent film show business under Warwick Trading Company Ltd., which notably made *The Last Stand of Major Wilson* (1899), “the first southern African drama film or movie” (5). The company’s rival Koster and Bial’s Music Hall, or Vitagraph, produced *Fighting in the Transvaal* (1899). This discussion is indicative of the filmmakers’ attraction to recent history as material for their films. The conception and screening of these movies crisscrossed continental Africa,

Europe, and North America, throwing into sharp relief the inter-continental dimensions of cinema's founding through the complicity of technology, imperial and colonial ideology, and global capitalism.

Epic features occupy the larger slice of the book's discursive scope—including *De Voortrekkers/Winning a Continent* (1916), *Rose of Rhodesia* (1917), and *The Symbol of Sacrifice, or The Flag and its Glory* (1918). It is not surprising that the majority of the book tracks many of the films produced under the aegis of the movie mogul I.W. Schlesinger's company African Films Production Limited. Between the 1910s and the 1920s, Schlesinger thoroughly monopolized the film industry in southern Africa, pitilessly suppressing all competition. The reader is introduced to several filmmakers connected to him, especially the Americans Lorimer Johnston and Harold Shaw and the British Lisle Lucoque, as well as actor-director Dick Cruickshanks. The overreach of Schlesinger's influence can also be regarded as a point of methodological tension in the book itself, which relies significantly for primary material on his cinema magazine *Stage and Screen*.

In addition to the films, biographies of filmmakers and some of the cast, processes of making the films, and press commentary are included. In this way, unknown black actors in particular—such as Goba in *A Zulu's Devotion* (1916) and Tom Zulu of *Winning a Continent* (1916)—enter the record as individuals. Regrettably, their brief inclusion compares poorly to the extensive treatment of their white counterparts. Visual screengrabs from the films, along with images of actors and “bioscopes” (cinemas in South African-ese), supplement the meticulous historical detail. The book's color scheme alternated between white and light brown leaves—the latter reserved mostly for production information and synopses of the films and their images. *Black and White Bioscope* is accessible to the general reader and scholar alike. Scholarly in endeavor and yet popular in register, the book addresses “serious” issues of the business of making movies alongside the mundane and frivolous. This volume is a timely contribution to film studies and film history in several respects; it is encyclopedic in scope, boasts expansive archival records, introduces relatively unknown figures, and relocates Africa to its proper place in the history of cinema.

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doi:10.1017/asr.2021.85

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