

## FILM AND EXTRACTION

# "Mining" the Film Archive: South Africa's Mining Industry and Film Production

Emma Sandon<sup>1a</sup><sup>1</sup> Film, Media and Cultural Studies, Birkbeck, University of London, London, UK

Keywords: Africa, Film, Gold, Mines, Workers

<https://doi.org/10.1525/001c.127504>

This paper examines the relationship of film production and the mining industry in the forty years of the Union of South Africa, before the National Party came to power in 1948 and established its system of apartheid. It argues that the mining industry used the new technology of film to promote its exploitative system of African migrant workers, mobilized to extract the maximum natural resources of precious metals at the greatest profit. In South Africa in this period, film production and cinema exhibition were controlled commercially by the African Films Trust through its production company, African Film Productions, and its exhibition arm, African Consolidated Theatres. In the face of the rise of trade unions and collective bargaining, the Chamber of Mines commissioned African Film Productions to make documentaries, including instructional, topical, and propaganda films, from the 1920s until the 1940s. These were intended to counter overseas public criticisms of working conditions, health and safety, and racial segregation of workers on the mines. The Chamber of Mines also commissioned films to recruit African migrant workers through its recruitment agencies, the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association and the Native Recruiting Corporation. These recruitment films were screened using mobile cinemas in villages throughout southern Africa. The film company made other publicity films, often co-produced with various South African government departments, to attract White settler immigration and investment by shareholders, and domestically aimed at allaying settlers' anxieties about the growth of mass African labor systems. These films were exhibited in cinemas all over South Africa and overseas. Building on existing scholarship on the importance of cinema to the recruitment and regulation of African miners in southern Africa, particularly South Africa, this paper will excavate the intricate imbrication of filmmaking in the consolidation and expansion of mining during the first half of the twentieth century.

---

<sup>a</sup> Emma Sandon is a researcher in film and television at Birkbeck, University of London. She has published on British colonial film and photography, South African film history, and early British television history. She was on the core management team of the *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire* project. Currently she is on the steering group of the Women's Film and Television History Network (UK and Ireland). She is a director of the June Givanni Pan African Cinema Archive and a research associate at the University of Cape Town. She is a co-investigator on a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council project: *Colonial Reels: Histories and Afterlives of Colonial Film Collections*.  
[sandonemma@gmail.com](mailto:sandonemma@gmail.com)

## Introduction

The emergence of new technologies of filmmaking, the business of cinema, and the industrialization of mining coincided at the beginning of the twentieth century, and these two industries were deeply intertwined in South Africa. The fledgling film industry, represented by African Films Trust—with its production company, African Film Productions (AFP), and its exhibition arm, African Consolidated Theatres, owned by the entrepreneur Isidore William Schlesinger—extended its increasing monopoly on film production, distribution, and exhibition through securing commissions with private industry and state-owned bodies (Gutsche 1972; Maingard 2007; Parsons 2018; Sandon 2007, 2013). The South African mining industry grasped the potential of using film to promote its interests, to recruit workers to labor in the gold mines, and to counter mounting international criticism of its labor practices and working conditions. The Transvaal Chamber of Mines and its related recruitment agencies, the Native Recruiting Corporation Ltd. (NRC) and the Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA), used cinema extensively.

This article posits that film, and particularly documentary, played a major role in advancing “extractivism” (the exploitation of resources of labor and land) in the Union of South Africa. It is in response to a recent research manifesto published by Priya Jaikumar and Lee Grieveson in which they “consider the ways in which reckoning with modernity’s dependence on extractive industries and modes of labor reformulate media histories” (2022, 19).<sup>1</sup> Grieveson, in his earlier study of the role of cinema in liberal political economy, makes the point that “cinema was enmeshed in wider practices of extractive imperialism” literally through film’s materiality and consumption of silver and through the investment of finance capital in media and communications industries as well as in markets for the extraction of precious metals and minerals (2018, 248). Documentary as a mode and practice of filmmaking was emerging in the 1910s and 1920s, in parallel to that of commercial cinema entertainment, and was principally shaped by its institutional use and state sponsorship (Anthony and Mansell 2011; Grieveson 2018; Wasson and Acland 2011). Grieveson has charted the early development of didactic, persuasive, and pedagogic cinema in the United States and Britain, where “intertwined state and corporate practices produced new and innovative film forms, including in 1920s Britain what came to be called “documentary” (Grieveson 2018, 2).

As a form, documentary drew stylistically on actuality, topicals, and travelogues from early cinema, and newsreel footage from the 1910s. Key to its persuasive appeal were the practices and discourses of “realism,” which

---

<sup>1</sup> See Jaikumar and Grieveson 2022, 197–98, for an overview of the term “extractivism” in theories of resource extraction developed in Latin America.

framed its representations of the world as "truthful" and "authentic." Types of documentary have variously been referred to as instructional, educational, industrial, propaganda film, and more recently "useful" cinema (Wasson and Acland 2011). While some of these films were projected as part of programs in cinemas, they more often circulated in nontheatrical spaces: public places such as workplaces, schools, and universities; village, town, community, and church halls; clubs, museums, libraries, hospitals, prisons, and stations, and on transportation such as trains and ships. Mobile cinemas extended the spaces of exhibition to open air and rural areas. As Haidee Wasson and Charles Acland argue, "useful" cinema can be understood as functional in its relationship to industries, institutions, states, and publics: "The concept of useful cinema does not so much name a mode of production, a genre, or an exhibition venue as it identifies a disposition, an outlook, and an approach towards a medium on the part of institutions and institutional agents" (2011, 4).

Documentary became established more formally as a mode of film practice in Britain in the 1930s for state and corporate use when John Grierson promoted it at the Empire Marketing Board, then at the General Post Office, where he established film units (Aitken 1990; Anthony and Mansell 2011). Documentaries were already being produced in the 1920s in the colonial territories of Britain, such as South Africa. Mining documentaries in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century provide a key example of the centrality of film to imperialism and the modernization project of the British Empire. Gold mining was one of the first extractive industries in South Africa to invest in filmmaking at the time. The documentaries discussed here promoted the extraction of gold at a time when gold's importance as a global resource was threatened. During the First World War, Britain suspended the gold standard that secured the international exchange rates through the Bank of England, returning to it in 1925. However, over the next few years, during the Great Depression, this proved to be unsustainable, and Britain abandoned the gold standard completely in 1931. South Africa left the gold standard in 1932, which increased the price of gold and led to overseas investment boosting the South African economy.

In analyzing mining film, this article returns to the extensive scholarship on histories of the modern state of South Africa and to historical materialist analyses of class formation and labor in the mining industry.<sup>2</sup> It proposes that media is central rather than marginal to this history of colonial exploitation and extraction in a developing capitalist society. It also draws on the work of James Burns and Glenn Reynolds on the impact of cinema on African audiences, and in particular those working for the mines. Reynolds's

---

2 See Marks and Rathbone 1982; Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991; Katz 1994; McCulloch 2012; Dlamini 2020.

contribution to our understanding of mining recruitment films is especially rich on the reception of films for potential African recruits in mobile cinemas across southern Africa, based on his research of the mining archives.

This article covers the period from 1910 to 1948. In 1910 the Union of South Africa was established as a self-governing dominion of the British Empire, after the First Transvaal War of Independence (1880–1881) and the South African War (1899–1902) (formerly known as the First and Second Anglo-Boer Wars), which were fought between Britain and the South African Republics of the Transvaal and the Orange Free State (Nasson 2010). Dutch-speaking settlers had declared these republics independent of the British Empire after they migrated into the southern Africa interior during the mid-nineteenth century to escape British rule in the Cape. White settlement in southern Africa has a long history of violent seizure and dispossession of land on which indigenous African farming and pastoral communities lived and to which they held communal rights. The British, who defeated the Dutch East India Company in the Cape in 1795 and set up the Cape Colony, fought a series of wars against the Xhosa in Eastern Cape (1779–1879) as they moved east, annexing Natal on the eastern coast, and against the Pedi (1879) and Zulu kingdoms (1879). Itinerant Dutch-speaking settler groups moving north initiated many battles and conflicts, against the Basotho (1858–1868), the Pedi (1876), and Ndebele kingdoms (1836–1896) who were dispossessed of the land.<sup>3</sup>

The land on which seams of gold ore were found in the Transvaal in 1886 by White prospectors was, by then, settled on by Dutch-speaking farmers. However, gold had been mined in the area in the past. There is plentiful evidence of precolonial mining (Hammel et al. 2000). The southern Transvaal was one of the most densely settled areas in the Iron Age (Marks 1980, 10). Indigenous farming communities moved into southern Africa from around AD 1200, and there is a complex history of different kingdoms, clans, communities, and language groups that lived there. In 1932 the site of Mapungubwe, one of the largest kingdoms in southern Africa, which flourished from the 1200s until the 1400s, was excavated, revealing evidence of an advanced trading society and fine gold objects and ornaments, of which the golden rhinoceros is the best known. There is also an earlier history of the indigenous gathering, hunting, and pastoral communities that lived across southern Africa.<sup>4</sup>

One of the key contributing factors fueling the South African War was the burgeoning mining of gold on the Witwatersrand after 1886. Thousands of prospectors, miners, investors, and settlers, particularly from Australia and

---

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of this history, see Etherington, Harries, and Mbenga 2010, 319–91.

<sup>4</sup> See <https://www.sahistory.org.za>. See also Hamilton, Mbenga, and Ross 2010, chapters 1–4.

Britain, came as part of the gold rush to the Republic of the Transvaal. They were referred to as "uitlanders" (outsiders) and were given limited citizenship in terms of voting rights, residential permits, and licenses to work and trade. British mining investors and magnates, coming from the Cape Colony, who were buying up mining companies and shares in gold mining, were taxed highly on their profits. It was they who were behind the Jameson Raid four years before the South African War, in which Leander Starr Jameson, working for Cecil Rhodes, prime minister of the Cape Colony, led the British South African Company police on an abortive attempt to collude with these "uitlanders" to overthrow Paul Kruger's South African Republic and make it a British crown colony.

The South African War ended with the British imperial forces defeating the Dutch-speaking settlers of the South African Republic, concluding with the Peace Treaty of Vereeniging between Britain and the Republics of the Transvaal and Orange Free State. A compromise settlement was reached with the status of a self-governing dominion of the British empire granted to a union of South African states, including the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, Natal, and the Cape Colony. The government of the new Union of South Africa was elected through a parliamentary system under the British crown represented by a governor general, in which only Whites were franchised and recognized as citizens. There was a succession of governments in the Union, with South Africa fighting on Britain's side in both the First and Second World Wars, after which the National Party came to power in 1948, establishing its policies of apartheid based on racial segregation.

This article will first sketch salient aspects of the histories and contexts of both the mining industry and the film industry in South Africa, before discussing examples of the different types of mining films produced in South Africa. My proposal of "mining" the film archive is not intended to be "an extractive exercise" (Stoler 2009, 47) about finding treasures: "an all too expedient research mode" Ann Laura Stoler warns in which to approach colonial archives (2009, 48). She proposes that in order to research colonial archives, a methodological shift is advisable: "to move away from treating the archives as an extractive exercise to an ethnographic one" (Stoler 2009, 47). This immersion in the archives as a cultural space as well as a place enables more reflective modes of analyses that take into account more than the official documents housed there. My understanding of the mining film archive is through bringing together disparate holdings of the mining companies and film company in documentation and moving images. As a mode of enquiry, this allows me to evaluate the processes of production, the relations of power and knowledge, reasoning and "common sense" informing the collaborations and connections between these industries, and the role of media—in this case film—in the history of mining in South Africa. I contextualize the films through readings of critical historical South African scholarship on race in the emergence of capitalist mining industries on the Rand. My analysis

is constructed in part by viewing films held at the National Film Video and Sound Archive (NFVSA) in Pretoria in 2005. Since 2006, however, the NFVSA has been severely under-resourced, and I have not had further access to the film collections due to lengthy closures of the archive. Existing films have since deteriorated or been bought up by the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) or M-Net (Electronic Media Network) and are no longer available. I have viewed films held at the British Film Institute Collections (BFI) in London and gleaned material from archive film extracts used in *Dying for Gold* (2018). Frame grabs illustrate some of this content. There is little extant paper archive of AFP, except that found in other collections. When the AFP enterprise closed in 1959, the films were placed in the NFVSA, but it is not clear what happened to the production office files. In this article, I discuss films with no extant copies by referencing related documentation, such as screenplays, shot lists, records of mobile cinema units, and correspondence held in The Employment Bureau of Africa Ltd. (TEBA) collection.<sup>5</sup> Thelma Gutsche's book, written in the 1940s as a PhD thesis and published thirty years later, is also an invaluable archive source (Gutsche 1972).

## **The Mining Industry—Background and Context**

In South Africa, with the discovery of diamonds in Kimberley in the 1860s and gold on the Witwatersrand in the 1880s, emerging mining companies consolidated ownership of the mines and quickly absorbed the initial flood of prospecting. These gold mining companies were set up by diamond mine owners, financiers, magnates and colonial entrepreneurs mostly based in the Cape Colony, such as Cecil Rhodes, Alfred Beit (De Beers Diamond Company, Gold Fields of South Africa, British South Africa Company), and Barney Barnato (Kimberley Central Mining Company, De Beers). A merger of two diamond companies owned by Barnato and Rhodes formed De Beers Consolidated Mines Ltd. in 1888, and, as a result, both were able to invest heavily in gold mining. Representing these companies, the Witwatersrand Chamber of Mines was formed in 1889 to eliminate competition and control labor. The Transvaal mines were shut down during the South African War, then reopened in 1902, when the renamed Transvaal Chamber of Mines became the largest mining operation in South Africa.

South Africa's gold on the Rand was the largest reef in the world. Geological conditions, technological innovations, and access to cheap labor combined to make gold mining central to South Africa's expansion of global racial capitalism. Due to the type of hard rock formation, mining companies used deep-level mining techniques, and introduced industrial cooling systems and

---

<sup>5</sup> The Employment Bureau of Africa Ltd. (TEBA) collection, which includes the WNLA and NRC archive. Library Special Collections, the University of Johannesburg, <https://www.uj.ac.za/library/information-resources/special-collections/online-exhibitions/the-teba-collection/>.

air quality control systems.<sup>6</sup> Pneumatic drilling techniques were developed and chemical processes, cyanide, and activated carbon were used to extract the gold from the rough ore. The mining industry was, however, reliant on human labor for the successful industrialization of gold extraction. Key to this growth was the exploitation of African workers.<sup>7</sup>

The workforce was divided into skilled and managerial jobs (White) and unskilled work (African) a racialization of labor that was institutionalized in 1911 and referred to as a "colour bar." White miners made up 10 percent of the workforce compared to Black miners, who constituted 90 percent of workers on the mines. White miners from Britain and Australia came for skilled work; along with Afrikaner workers, they were paid at much higher rates than African migrant workers. African migrant workers were recruited from all over South Africa and more broadly southern Africa. The mining industry was competing with the coal and asbestos industries, as well as with the demands for workers from farms and the Natal sugar plantations. The Chamber of Mines set up recruitment agencies: the WNLA in 1901 had arrangements with the government of Portuguese East Africa (Mozambique) to operate local recruiting stations and transport African workers by rail to the mines in South Africa. WNLA (referred to colloquially as Wenela) soon extended its reach to other British and Portuguese colonial territories north of the Tropic of Capricorn (then Bechuanaland, Central African Federation including Nyasaland and Northern and Southern Rhodesia, Tanganyika, and Angola).<sup>8</sup> The NRC was set up in 1912 to recruit Africans living in South Africa in the Cape Province, Ciskei, Transkei, and Natal, as well as in the British colonies and protectorates Basutoland and Swaziland.<sup>9</sup>

After the initial rush to work on the mines, many Africans from the rural areas of South Africa were reluctant to sign up for mine contracted work, despite economic hardship, due to reports from those returning about conditions underground, and the high injury and death rates. Accidents were frequent from explosives, falling rock, and tunnels caving in, and from machinery. Miners working underground suffered from the intense heat and drilling, contracting the disease of silicosis from the silica dust and its related condition of phthisis, also known as pulmonary tuberculosis. Moreover, in the transit from these areas to the mines in overcrowded trains, there were many injuries and the spread of disease, particularly pneumonia and

---

<sup>6</sup> Deep-level mining refers to the mining of rocks underground. Outcrop mining refers to the mining of exposed rocks at the surface of the ground.

<sup>7</sup> Africans needed income to pay taxes and replace subsistence farming once forced from their agricultural lands. Taxation in British colonies was introduced through Hut Tax from the mid- to late nineteenth century, and in 1913 the Native Land Act enforced segregation of land ownership in South Africa when Africans were prohibited from leasing or owning land except in the "reserves," thought to be variably between 7 percent and 13 percent of the land.

<sup>8</sup> Current names of these former British colonies are Botswana, Malawi, Zambia, Zimbabwe, and Tanzania.

<sup>9</sup> Basutoland was renamed Lesotho at independence in 1966; Swaziland became independent in 1968.

tuberculosis (Van Onselen 2020, 109–10; McCulloch 2012, 85–89; 2018, 62). Contracts that migrant workers were made to sign forced them to live on the mines for long periods of time in single-sex compounds with a pass system that controlled their movements.

Both Black and White miners fought for better conditions; however, this was not a united struggle. By 1902 White miners, who were paid much higher rates than African workers, had organized themselves into a union, the Transvaal Miners Association, which was renamed the South African Mine Workers Union in 1913 and recognized by the Chamber of Mines in 1914.<sup>10</sup> There was a series of strikes on the Rand demanding higher wages and better working hours. In 1913, during a strike, 19 White miners were killed and 150 wounded, and in 1914, White miners came out again in support of a general strike. Black mine workers, whose membership in unions was not recognized by the Chamber of Mines, came out on strike for better wages in 1913, boycotted mine stores between 1917 and 1919, and came out on strike again in 1920 (Alexander 2000, 12–15; Couzens 1982, 315). The state used armed response and martial law to suppress these. Mine companies were attempting to bring down wages by promoting Black miners to skilled and supervisory work in place of White skilled mine laborers who joined up to fight in the First World War.<sup>11</sup> When in 1920 the gold price fell by 30 percent, the sacking by mine owners of 2,000 White workers incited the Rand strike of 1922, an armed insurrection of White mine workers against the weakening of the "colour bar," which led to no operations for three months. While this strike was also met by a government military response, concessions were made to White miners' demands for the reinstatement of the "colour bar" in relation to employment. This division of the workforce meant that labor conflict was more controlled on the mines, and the Chamber of Mines increased its recruitment of African laborers throughout the 1920s and 1930s and during the Second World War. By 1910 the mining industry's demand for African laborers was around 200,000 a year, and by the 1930s, 300,000 a year. It was not until 1946 that another major strike took place on the mines, a strike by African mine workers over pay (Alexander 2000).

## **The Film Industry—Background and Context**

The mines that were becoming central to a global economy of extraction based in South Africa provided locations, crew, and cast to the development of South Africa's early film industry. Isidore W. Schlesinger had built a studio in Johannesburg in 1915 for AFP's feature film production, aimed at rivaling American studio production. He employed international film directors, technicians, and film and theater actors from America and Britain

---

<sup>10</sup> Membership in the White union was restricted to those with blasting certificates and apprenticeships to exclude Black workers (Alexander 2000, 10).

<sup>11</sup> Africans also were recruited for service in the First World War, mostly as laborers, although sometimes as combatants.

to produce many short fiction films and feature films. AFP made agreements with the mining companies to use their land as filming locations for their epic feature films and employed African mine workers in large numbers as extras for *De Voortrekkers* (1916) and *Symbol of Sacrifice* (1918) (Gutsche 1972, 314–15). Despite these films being distributed internationally, it quickly became clear that AFP was not going to be able to sustain a feature film industry that could outdo the international success and popularity of American cinema in South Africa.

Documentaries and newsreel became the company's mainstay. AFP had taken over an existing weekly newsreel, *African Mirror* (Sandon 2007, 2013), and had begun to produce documentaries, in the form of instructional, advertising, and propaganda films, for the new Union government departments. One of the key sponsors was South African Railways and Harbours. Joseph Albrecht became the general manager of AFP when he moved from Britain to work with the African Films Trust, bringing his experience as a cameraman for Pathé and Cinéma Éclair (ESAT 2023c). AFP expediently proposed to make publicity films for private industry, and the Chamber of Mines subsequently became one of its largest clients, commissioning recruitment, health and safety, propaganda, and publicity films. The new medium of film thus became a crucial tool in promoting the extractive industries' interests in the region and recruiting its labor force.

The following sections analyze documentary films made for the gold mining industry and discuss the contexts of their making, under the headings: recruitment, health and safety, and publicity films. My interpretation of the films entails various ways of assembling the existing archive and related scholarship. My readings have drawn inspiration from other studies of film archive. Paula Amad, in her study of Albert Kahn's *Archives de la Planète*, argues that film in the 1920s with its documentary qualities appeared as a "counter-archival" challenge to the traditional text-based concept of the archive. She suggests that in this early period, documentary recorded aspects of daily life that were often overlooked in the traditional paper archive: "at the core of film's counter-archival record of reality was its attraction to the everyday fragment as a history of the present" (Amad 2010, 4).

Amad's idea of documentary in this period as counter-archival in its capacity to record fragments of daily life as the history of the present resonates with viewing these mining films today. The footage, a source that historians often ignore, inadvertently documents the mining industry's routinely exploitative system of corralling African people to labor in the gold mines of South Africa.<sup>12</sup> These films were made for propaganda and resource extraction and were not intended as records for an archive. Yet the idea of film as

---

<sup>12</sup> Albert Kahn's fortune, which financed the *Archives de la Planète*, came from his investments in the diamond and gold mines of South Africa.

counter-archival nevertheless holds relevance for how we view and interpret the mining films from the colonial archive. In recording the history of their present, these film archives complicate the documentation and paper archives of mining, not only in their form and content but also in the way in which they reanimate the past.

Turning to another example of a study of colonial film, Jaikumar makes the point that any reading of the films' form, narration, and representation of their subjects must consider the contexts of production and the forces behind them. Similar to Stoler's discussion of films in the colonial archives, Jaikumar argues that seeking contingencies, resistances, and potential disruptions in racist and colonial films in order to read against the grain has limited historiographic value (2019, 38). Bearing these cautionary words in mind, I interrogate the historical importance of media's role in the extractive industry of gold mining by reconstructing a colonial film archive, which involves not only attending in detail to the existing, albeit scarce, archival holdings of mining films but also exploring adjacent material such as correspondence, memos, reports, scripts, and shot lists to fill in the multiple contexts and intentions of their productions.

## Recruitment Films

The following letter from the general manager, African Film Productions, to the manager, Witwatersrand Native Labour Association (WNLA), dated 9 August 1920, records an early proposition from the film company to get a foothold in producing films for the mining industry (TEBA 1920d):

Dear Sir,

[...]

As you are probably aware, few people have any idea of the conditions under which labour is recruited, hence the many outbursts which occur from time to time against native labour.

My friends suggested that it would probably be of great benefit to yourselves and therefore probably to the Mining Industry and South Africa at large, if a picture were taken, showing the whole operations from the applying of the boys at the Compound on the Portuguese Border; their travels across to the Transvaal; the rest houses on the way down; and their being entrained at the Railway head.

We shall be very pleased to go into this matter if you think that such a film would be of use to you. We should be prepared to do it, and exhibit it, on the same basis as we are at present working with the S.A. Government in making pictures for the Overseas Publicity scheme.

Yours faithfully  
African Film Productions  
H Barlow Coulthard  
General Manager

The WNLA manager who received this letter strongly recommended the proposition, and according to the minutes of the WNLA Board of Management, 23 August 1920, the general manager of the Chamber of Mines, William Gemmill, took up the suggestion of a public relations film to counter negative reports that accused the mining industry of using alcohol and drugs to recruit African laborers: "From a propaganda point of view such a film might be useful in removing any prevailing misconceptions as to the Association's actual methods in recruiting natives" (TEBA 1920a).

Immediately following the meeting, Coulthard supplied Gemmill with a proposed shot list for the film, *With the WNLA in Portuguese East Africa*, which would run for ten minutes and be shown in all the principal towns in South Africa.<sup>13</sup> As there is no copy of the film, I will reconstruct it through reference to the shot list and correspondence in the TEBA archive. The filming location proposed was the Pafuri recruiting station, inland from the coastal city of Inhambane, on the Limpopo River "at the junction where Rhodesia and the Transvaal meet on the Portuguese East African border" (TEBA 1920c). It outlines forty scenes, "showing the flow of Portuguese African Natives to the mines of the Transvaal and the methods of the W.N.L.A."

After the titles, a map shows the many recruitment stations described as "hundreds of posts to assist the Natives to reach the Rand free of expense." The list includes "pictures" of "Typical East Coast Mine Natives" with the title "It is the ambition of every East Coast Native to work at some time on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines" and images of the possible recruits arriving at the WNLA station to be interviewed and physically inspected. Those chosen for work are to be filmed being vaccinated (against pneumonia) and being issued with clothing before being sent to the railway station. The recruits are to be seen departing on the train for Johannesburg and arriving at the WNLA depot in Johannesburg. The next scene follows the medical examination of the men with a final film title: "Every Native is submitted to three medical examinations before commencing work" (TEBA 1920c).

---

13 The film would cost approximately £250 for a film 800 feet long. The film went over budget as the WNLA wanted it to be longer at 1,200 feet.



Figure 1. Image of the WNLA and NRC crests on a map. TEBA, Special Collections, University of Johannesburg.

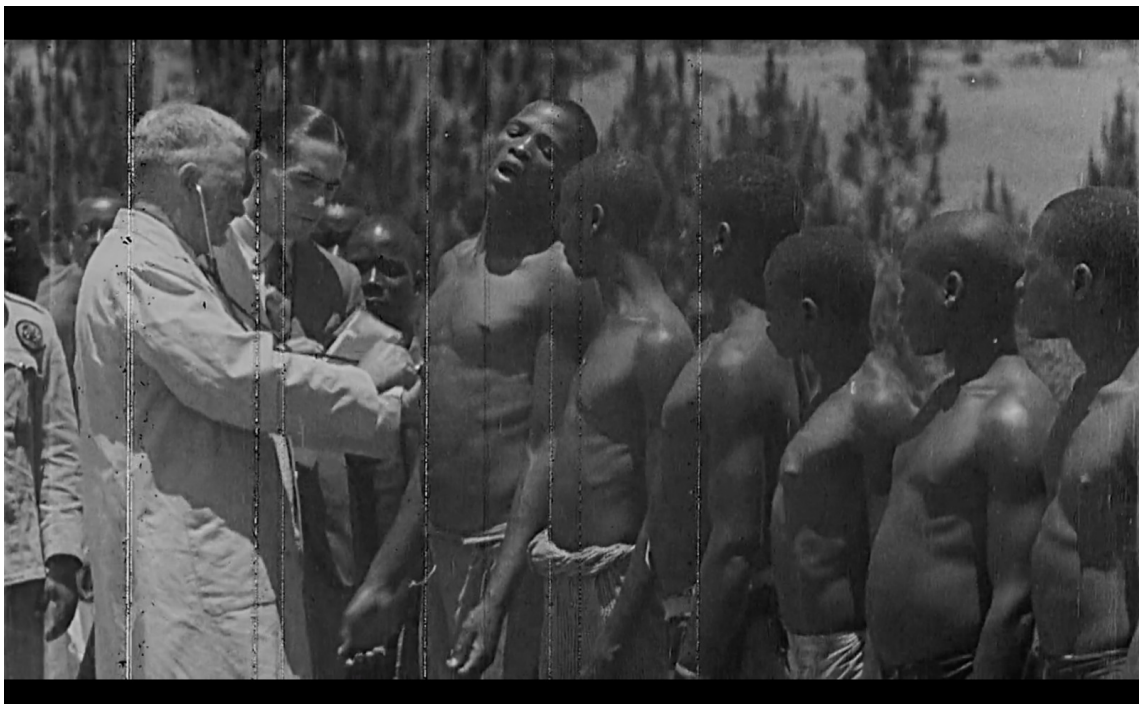


Figure 2. Men being inspected at the recruitment station. Frame grab from *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (Albrecht, 1935).

From the outset, AFP has clearly drafted a film to counter public criticisms of the mining industry. The proposed narrative and moving images underscore the film's dual purpose: on the one hand to address perceptions of mining recruiting practices and working conditions, and on the other to make mining jobs attractive to African audiences. Some of the instructions from the WNLA association manager and secretary, Robinson, to Du Plessis at

the Ressano Garcia local recruiting office, another filming location, illustrate decisions about film style. He advises the AFP cinematographer on what shots might be appreciated by audiences: "Dense undergrowth, palms and other tropical features make a pleasing picture" as well as shots of "the river winding through the hills." Such proposed scenes draw on pictorial trends and the language of cinema evident in travelogues and ethnographic narratives shown in Britain and America at the time.<sup>14</sup> He also suggests that Du Plessis should choose three "East Coast Natives for their good looks" to feature in the film. The film must include, Robinson's letter urges, the "European recruiters," the WNLA medical officer, the Portuguese emigration officer, and the fiscal officer (TEBA 1920b). These images aim to reassure audiences that the activities of the recruitment agency are legal and managed. In an attempt to refute poor management by the mines of the health risks involved in deep-level mining in the goldfields, a scene is included that suggests that illness on the mines is due to the vulnerability of workers from specific regions. "Tropical Natives" from Lake Nyasa in Nyasaland appear to be told they can no longer be recruited as they have been prohibited legally since 1913 from working on the mines, due to the high rates of death of Africans with no immunity to pneumonia.

Health and safety on the mines is addressed in all the later films that AFP made for the Chamber of Mines. The Chamber of Mines' agreement with the government of Portuguese East Africa to supply migrant workers for the mines had a devastating impact on communities in this region. Previously the mines had employed local recruiters who traveled with groups on foot to the mines. Jacob Dlamini (2020) has documented how this recruiting network for workers from Mozambique to South Africa was facilitated by the management of the Kruger national wildlife park, which borders South Africa and Mozambique. Subsequently the notorious night trains transported hundreds of thousands of migrant workers from Lourenço Marques to Johannesburg (Van Onselen 2020).<sup>15</sup>

Missionary societies working on the mining compounds used the film. William C. Terril, superintendent of the Transvaal District Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church, with its headquarters based in New York, wrote to Dr. Bostock, WNLA, Lourenço Marques, to request a copy of the film so that he could show it in England and America. He urgently wanted it, he said, to dispel the misunderstanding regarding the treatment of the "natives" who were recruited in Portuguese East Africa. Terril's motivation was most likely to reassure congregations in England

---

<sup>14</sup> On "ethnographic narrative," see Sandon 2000.

<sup>15</sup> See also Crush, Jeeves, and Yudelman 1991.

and America that their foreign missions working on the mining compounds and near recruiting stations were not supporting a corrupt system of labor exploitation. He explains:

Strange as it may seem, the other day in Rhodesia, I picked up an American Pictorial Magazine and there were pictures of the natives recruited for work in the Transvaal Mines and a brief article, which was very erroneous in some of its statements. For example the natives were reported as being made drunk and "doped" in some way, in order to induce them to consent for work in the mines. I feel that this matter should be put right and I know of no better way than through a film and slides for a movie or stereopticon. (TEBA 1921b)

He also asked for pictures to illustrate an article he was writing for *National Geographic* magazine on the recruitment of Africans for the mines. Another missionary who requested a copy of the film to show at "native bioscopes" was Reverend Ray E. Phillips of the American Board of Missions, with a base in Johannesburg. Phillips was involved in promoting film screenings as part of his mission of "moralizing the leisure time" of African mine workers, to teach them Christian morals and keep them away from the vices of drinking, gambling, fighting, and having sex with prostitutes (Phillips 1930, 58). Phillips had begun experimenting with film shows on the compounds in 1920, and by 1921 this had been officially adopted by the Transvaal Chamber of Mines as the Mines Compound Cinema Circuit.<sup>16</sup>

*With the WNLA in Portuguese East Africa* was AFP's first recruitment film for the Chamber of Mines. Of the mine officials keen to promote the use of film in recruitment, Gemmill and Taberer were the most active. Henry Melville Taberer was African labor advisor to the NRC. He was fluent in isiXhosa and traveled in the Transkei and Eastern Cape reserves on behalf of the mines. He had already been involved in the encounter between filmmaking and mining in 1916, when supervising the use of mine workers as extras in the filming of *De Voortrekkers* at the East Rand Proprietary Mine (Gutsche 1972, 315n25, 355n153, 380). Taberer wrote the screenplay for a subsequent recruitment film, *From Red Blanket to Civilisation* (1925) (Reynolds 2007). Again, this film had a dual purpose: to be screened both overseas and to African audiences on mobile cinemas. The film was initially made for exhibition at the British Empire Exhibition, held at Wembley, 1924–1925, and was also screened in 1928 at the International Labour Organization (ILO), which had been established in Geneva in 1919 (Gutsche 1972, 153n153). It circulated as a recruitment film for some years, before Gemmill sent a memorandum to the NRC district managers soliciting

---

<sup>16</sup> The Mines Compound Cinema Circuit was the initiative of Phillips and Taberer. African Consolidated Theatres supplied the films. See Burns 2002; Couzens 1982; Maingard 2007; Peterson 2003; Reynolds 2015.

responses for new filming ideas. There were various proposals as to what would work in a film to recruit Africans viewing the films. In these replies, it becomes clear that ideas were being considered about propaganda and how documentary can communicate, based on district managers' observations of showing *From Red Blanket to Civilisation* to African audiences. Here we see no proposal to develop documentary narrative techniques for African audiences that suggest the need for a specialized film language for illiterate or "primitive peoples," such as those William Sellers expressed using film in Nigeria between 1929 and 1937 and articulated in the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment (BEKE, 1935–1937) and later still in the Colonial Film Units, 1939–1955 (Rice 2008, 2010a, 2010b, 2019).<sup>17</sup>

In response to Gemmill's request came the following reply from the district manager of the NRC at Zoekmakaar, Northern Transvaal:

Dear Sir,

CINEMATOGRAPH PROPAGANDA

In reply to your letter No M 30768 of September the 25<sup>th</sup> I beg to state the following:-

That judging from the impressions gained at the exhibition of the Picture From Red to Civilisation the parts depicting Mine work; compound life; recreations and glimpses of Johannesburg, were received with enthusiasm, and, in my estimation, did the most good from a point of view of Propaganda. The other parts; such as dances and ceremonies among the Transkei natives, created widespread interest and merriment; but did not in any way suggest to the natives that the Gold Mines provided pleasant and lucrative work.

At every showing in this area I felt that the pictures provided succeeded in amusing the audiences; but failed to create a desire to sample Mine work. I venture to suggest that the reason is due to the lack of persuasive material in the picture.

I consider persuasive material to be that which suggests to the native that Mine work is pleasant; interesting; healthy; safe and above all paying.

A picture which will give the natives some idea of the working conditions on a Mine; both surface and underground of the greatness and splendour of Johannesburg and the Reef towns,

---

<sup>17</sup> African and Black cinema audiences in South Africa first saw films at mobile cinemas in rural areas and mining compounds. A further initiative to bring cinema to African audiences worth mentioning here is Sol Plaatje's bioscope, which aimed to modernize and "uplift" Africans (Maingard 2018).

is the one that will leave an impression upon the natives' mind and create a desire for him to sample mine work for himself. (TEBA 1930a)

He went on to advise what sequences could be added of the local recruitment places, and of chiefs and headmen of the area, warning against scenes of local dancing and tribe ceremonials that amused people and did not help recruitment. He concluded: "Briefly our purpose should be instructive and not to amuse. If we must amuse our audiences we can secure some of the Comics from the African Theatres Trust" (TEBA 1930a). The district superintendent of Queenstown, on the other hand, reported that *From Red Blanket to Civilisation* was much appreciated in his area as there were few opportunities to see films. He thought that films of "dancing, scenes from native life, animals, comic pictures of a simple nature" were most suitable, and that films with "natives going about their usual work on the mines" and "pictures dealing with our hospitals and the care of the natives" would be useful propaganda to overcome the "great antipathy amongst natives towards European hospitals and treatment" (TEBA 1930c).

Another issue raised in the responses that came back from the district recruitment offices was the identification of African viewers with people onscreen from their own region. The feedback of the district superintendents indicated that the communities in different territories were not identifying with *From Red Blanket to Civilisation*, which depicted mine workers being recruited from the Transkei, where the custom was to wear a red blanket. The district supervisor of Umtata requested that the films should depict the movements of Cape Province "natives" only, as viewers of *From Red Blanket to Civilisation* "appear to resent any references to the East Coast Natives" (TEBA 1930e). This is repeated in the letter from the district superintendent at Rustenburg NRC, who suggested that "it would appeal to the Bechuanaland natives if their own people appeared in the picture; if possible no Portuguese, Shanghaans, Xosas [*sic*] or other tribes should be included in the film, as the Bechuana is [*sic*] prejudiced against these tribes" (TEBA 1930d). He recommends further short film sequences to showcase the benefits of working for the mines and of workers' remuneration, including a scene of "a very poorly clad Bechuanaland native arriving at the Mine," followed by scenes of work and play, and lastly a scene where he appears "well dressed with a roll of rugs and suitcase returning home, well pleased with himself" (TEBA 1930d). Scenes of "natives drawing their deferred pay and the women drawing the remittances from the mines" and "Race meetings and beer drinks, which are always well attended and full of interest to natives" could be considered (TEBA 1930b). The WNLA district manager at Lourenço Marques had compiled the reports he had received from his assistant district managers on "Cinematography Propaganda" into

"Negative" and "Positive" points. He indicated that images of crafts and scenic views were not appreciated, while scenes of payday were definitely of interest (TEBA 1930f).

What becomes clear is that "Cinematograph Propaganda" was regarded as key to recruiting workers for the ever-increasing requirements for labor on the mines. Furthermore, that documentary narrative in the form of the short film was ideal for propaganda with a cause-and-effect storyline about the advantages of working for the mines, while ethnographic and travelogue styles of filming that framed cultural activities such as dress, dance, and crafts as "customs" were deemed inappropriate for these African audiences. Local African audiences recognized regional and cultural differences and apparently did not necessarily identify with people from other parts of southern Africa. These perceived differences were to be exploited by mine organizers as ways of controlling the leisure time of Africans in the compounds, the most prominent of which were the "tribal" mine dancing competitions. Film as a medium was able to create a persuasive visual narrative to attract African recruits, but it also visualized Africans as providing a never-ending resource of dispensable laborers for overseas audiences, which matched the needs of the mining industries' expanding exploitative extractivism.

After much consultation and consideration, Gemmill commissioned AFP in 1930 to make a further film, *Native Recruiting Corporation*. The decision was made to produce what was nicknamed "the kernel," which would form the central part of this film. The mining scenes were to show a recruit's arrival and medical examination at the NRC compound, "his work on the mines, feeding, recreation, accommodation, etc. payment of wages and so on, including familiar Reef scenes and prominent Compound Managers and other officials known to the natives and finally his departure home" (TEBA 1931). Edited to "the kernel" would be "a preface and conclusion" with scenes of the different local centers, showing the recruitment and later the return of men from the mines (Reynolds 2007, 144; TEBA 1930–1931).

Taberer had the task of overseeing the filming and assisting AFP with the preparations, alongside Mr. Owen Letcher from the Chamber of Mines. "The kernel" was completed quite quickly in 1931. Some of the local sequences were shot, and one of the films was completed, which AFP began screening. Taberer, however, died suddenly of pneumonia in 1932, and his death was a factor in the other films taking three years to complete. However, by 1937 the films were being shown all over the reserves and protectorates to tens of thousands of Africans (Reynolds 2007, 142–43).<sup>18</sup> The high attendance at film screenings did appear to contribute to increased recruitment to the mines during the 1930s, yet Reynolds makes the point

---

<sup>18</sup> Some of the local sequences for *Native Recruiting Corporation* were previously available at the NFVSA and are now held at the SABC: *Zulus* (1930s, 550 feet); *Ciskei* (1930s, 470 feet).

that African audiences used the screenings to argue for better conditions at work. He draws on notes by the projectionists, mobile units, and "native commentators" that indicate that the films were received differently than expected by the mining recruiters (Reynolds 2007, 146). Some of the discussions raised by audiences reveal how the screening of these films inadvertently created a forum for questioning conditions of work, pay, and terms of contracts. So, their content was often disputed and contested by communities. Those who had worked on the mines raised issues, such as pay rates for types of labor (shoveling, for example), and audiences used these screenings to question what was shown and to demand improvements. This "undermined" the purported value of the films for recruitment. Furthermore, by the late 1930s, the NRC needed to provide incentives to get people to attend the screenings, such as music, light shows, meat, beer, and sweets (Reynolds 2007, 146). It becomes clear that while films attracted audiences and clearly enhanced recruitment, as people became more familiar with cinema and the language of propaganda, there was a level of interpretation, discussion, and negotiation that entered the communal space of the screenings.

## Health and Safety Films

At the same time that *With WNLA in Portuguese East Africa* was being prepared, AFP was producing another film, *Dust That Kills* (1921), on the prevention of miners' phthisis, for the Chamber of Mines.<sup>19</sup> According to the preproduction planning, in a Groups Circular from E. L. R. Kelsey, secretary and legal adviser, Transvaal Chamber of Mines, the film "illustrates the various influences contributing to the incidence of miners' phthisis and the measures employed in counteracting them, and depicts the part played by the Miners' Phthisis Sanatoria and the Maizefield Settlement in the relief of sufferers" (TEBA 1921a). It was filmed on the mine Ferreira Deep, with the participation of its manager. The film is not available, but there are extracts in *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (discussed below) of the medical processes the Chamber of Mines adopted to contain mining-related illnesses arising from quartz dust. *Dust That Kills* was therefore made as an intervention to counter and control public perceptions about the health dangers of the gold mining industry then and today provides archive evidence of that legacy.

*Dust That Kills* was directed by Dr. A. J. Orenstein, the superintendent of sanitation for Rand Mines Ltd. in Johannesburg, who later became its chief medical officer. Before his appointment in 1914, he had previously worked in the Panama Canal Zone. He took measures to ostensibly improve

---

<sup>19</sup> *Dying for Gold* (2018) uses archive footage from *Dust That Kills* and *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* to support the class action in the South African courts that resulted in the legal recognition of miners' rights to compensation. See also McCulloch 2018, on the litigation against the South African gold industry.



Figure 3. Men being inspected at the mine. Frame grab of extract from *Mines Medical Association* (1921) used in *Dying for Gold* (Meyburgh and Pakleppa, 2018).

the quality of medical care on the mines, recommending the appointment of full-time medical officers. He wrote reports on transport conditions for migrant workers and stipulated that those miners suffering from infectious tuberculosis, a common result of the spread of silica dust, be isolated in trains and compounds (McCulloch 2013, 546). His film, however, obscures the extreme health risks of working on the mines and the dangers of working underground. Behind the making of this film lies a story of high disease rates due to dust levels that continue to this day. Jock McCulloch, who published extensively on diseases from mining, argues that there is mounting evidence that the mines were responsible for the spread of infectious tuberculosis within South Africa and to its neighboring states through its migrant labor system since the 1920s (McCulloch 2018, 62). In the films AFP produced at that time, the high human costs of gold extraction are now patently clear.

*Dust That Kills* was commissioned at a time that silicosis was being increasingly recognized as a miner's occupational disease, and accidents and deaths on the mines were rife. Apart from accidents, Elaine Katz, in her study of silicosis between 1886 and 1910, finds that deaths particularly in the Johannesburg mines were from lung disease caused by pneumonia, silicosis, and tuberculosis, as a result of pneumatic drilling of hard rock (Katz 1994). In 1903 Lord Milner, the governor of the Cape Colony, set up a commission of inquiry to investigate the deaths of African miners. There was pressure on the new Union government from the British government to establish more health monitoring. The South African government passed the Miner's Phthisis Act of 1911, followed by subsequent acts in 1912, 1916,

1919, and 1925, which introduced a mandatory but racially differentiated system of medical surveillance and compensation for silicosis and pulmonary tuberculosis. Payments were minimal for African migrant workers who were repatriated to their homes without medical support (McCulloch 2018, 62).<sup>20</sup> Data for postmortem results were required by law from 1925, though figures were recorded from 1924 (McCulloch 2013, 550). This data and these regulations were aimed at protecting the mining industry and benefited neither the thousands of African workers who became ill nor their families when they died.

The ILO also started collecting data from 1921 on death rates. Despite South Africa financing the South African Institute for Medical Research in 1912 to address the problems of occupational lung disease and being the first mining industry to use dust extraction technologies and to introduce mandatory medical surveillance, the figures the industry produced distorted the level of disease and death rates on the mines. As McCulloch shows, the Miners' Phthisis Medical Bureau set up in 1916, which treated White miners only, consistently published official figures of disease below that evident in the postmortem results (McCulloch 2013, 555). He reveals the role of individuals, such as Orenstein and Gemmill, and committees, such as the Gold Producers' Committee, the Industrial Hygiene Committee, and the Chamber of Mines' Group Medical Officers' Sub-Committee, in purposely obscuring the real impact of disease in the mining industry and formulating policy within the Miners' Phthisis Medical Bureau and the South African Institute of Medical Research that negatively influenced the medical requirements necessary and the compensation offered. McCulloch's studies of the disease and the mining industry's medical provision for its work force reveal the incommensurate response of the mines to the extent of the health crisis and illness and death rates of miners, and how the industry implemented only the minimum health and safety measures legally required by government. Reports from committees and enquiries into the health issues of workers in the mining industry demonstrate the level of disagreement about the systems that should have been put in place to monitor the incidents of disease. As McCulloch confirms:

The mine medical system was riven with conflict and between 1910 and 1954 there were twelve Miners' Phthisis or Silicosis Commissions, five Parliamentary Select Committees, and numerous interdepartmental enquiries into occupational lung disease. Most of those enquiries were called in response to

---

<sup>20</sup> Workers who became ill or injured were repatriated, along with those caught stealing or considered "undesirable." WNLA attempted to stop people re-registering for work on the mines using nicknames, such as "Waistcoat" and "Sixpence," by insisting on "native" names (TEBA, n.d.).

protests from the white Mine Workers Union, which demanded improved mine safety and enhanced compensation for its members. (2018, 64)

*Dust That Kills* was first shown in 1921 to a meeting of the Scientific and Technical Societies under Sir Lionel Phillips, a mining magnate, in Johannesburg. It was regularly shown to mine workers through the agency of the Prevention of Accidents Committee of the Rand Mutual Assurance Company.<sup>21</sup> Screenings of such training and instructional films were used to counter perceptions of the dangers of mining. These medical films were aimed at White workers and their union, who constituted a minority of the men working for the mines, while Black workers had no forums for contesting conditions and wages.

## Publicity Films

Film was influential in public perceptions of the benefits of mining, both nationally and internationally. AFP's *African Mirror* newsreel from 1913 promoted the new settler state of South Africa, a segregated modern nation, driven by scientific and technological innovation for the industrial extraction of resources, linked by modern communications and transportation, and part of a developing world of global wealth and competition. The newsreel had regular items on mining and used other AFP mine-related footage. *With the WNLA in Portuguese East Africa* and other films made for the Transvaal Chamber of Mines, the WNLA, and the NRC were also circulated widely to general urban audiences in South Africa, including in cinemas for "colored" and Indian communities, as well as overseas, alongside other publicity films made about the mining industry (Gutsche 1972, 353–55).

AFP produced films for the South African government's publicity initiatives in Britain, aimed at promoting tourism and attracting White settler immigration and investment by shareholders. These were mainly commissioned through South African Railways and Harbours.<sup>22</sup> AFP made forty to fifty reels for companies for the British Empire Exhibition, where the South African cinema section was one of the most popular venues, with thousands of visitors (Gutsche 1972, 322n53). AFP had announced in its trade paper, *S.A. Pictorial, Stage and Cinema*, that it had sent a circular to manufacturers, municipalities, agricultural societies, publicity associations, fruit growers, and cattle ranchers advertising its intention to take industrial, scenic, and topical films of five hundred feet in length to show once a day for the three-month duration of the exhibition (*S.A. Pictorial, Stage and Cinema*,

---

21 Gutsche lists further health and safety films that were produced (1972, 380).

22 The significant role that South African Railways and Harbours played in financing documentaries on South Africa has been linked to the visualization of South Africa, its land, and its industries. See for example, Sandon 2007; Foster 2008.

| "WITH THE W.N.L.A. IN PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA" |                   |       |             |
|-----------------------------------------------|-------------------|-------|-------------|
| PARISIAN                                      | SPRINGS.          | Sept. | 10.         |
| SIGL                                          | MIDDELBURG Tvl.   |       | 14          |
| SEABER                                        | VOLK SRUST.       |       | 17          |
| BIOSCOPE SYND.                                | HARRISMITH        |       | 21          |
| ROYAL                                         | DURBANZ           | Oct.  | 24. 27. 28. |
| PASCOTS                                       | KIMBERLEY         |       | 3. 4. 5.    |
| D'ATH                                         | PICKSBURG         |       | 9           |
| TYLER                                         | BETHULIE          |       | 14. 15.     |
| DURBACH                                       | BOJHOF            |       | 22.         |
| BAUDRUM                                       | QUENSTOWN         | Nov.  | 31. 1. Nov. |
| BIOSCOPE                                      | DORNBRECHT        |       | 5.          |
| COUSINS                                       | STERKSTROOM.      |       | 14.         |
| LEVITONS                                      | BURGHERSDORP.     |       | 15.         |
| BRINKMAN.                                     | TARKASTAD.        |       | 19          |
| APOSTOLIDES                                   | ZAARON.           |       | 26          |
| JOHANNESBURG                                  |                   |       |             |
| ALHAMBRA.                                     | DOORNFONTEIN.     | Dec.  | 30. 1 Dec.  |
| TURF CINEMA                                   | TURFPONT PIN.     |       | 2. 3.       |
| TOWN HALL CAFE                                | JOHANNESBURG      |       | 7 8         |
| ANGLO AFRICAN                                 | "                 |       | 9.10.       |
| JOHANNESBURG                                  |                   |       |             |
| PREMIER MINE REC CLUB.                        | CULLINAN.         |       | 17.         |
| VARIETA                                       | LOURENCO MARQUES. |       | 21 22 23.   |
| JOHANNESBURG                                  |                   |       |             |
| ACKERMAN.                                     | VREDE.            | Jan   | 31.         |
| BIOSCOPE                                      | LOUIS TRICHARDTS  |       | 7           |
| REC CLUB.                                     | MESSINA           |       | 14.         |
| PAIM COURT CAFE                               | PIRTORIA          |       | 25 26       |
| JOHANNESBURG                                  |                   |       |             |
| REC. CLUB                                     | GEDULD            |       | 28          |
| BIOSCOPE                                      | RUSTENBURG        | Feb.  | 1           |
| JOHANNESBURG                                  |                   |       |             |
| REGENT CAFE                                   | JOHANNESBURG      |       | 6 7         |
| GOOD HOPE.                                    | "                 |       | 10 11       |
| HANSON                                        | VREDEDORP         |       | 17. 18.     |
| POPULAR CAFE                                  | JOHANNESBURG      |       | 20.21       |
| GOLDBERG.                                     | WEST END.         | Mar.  | 10. 11.     |
| - * BIOSCOPE.                                 | EASTCOURT.        | Sept. | 24.         |

Figure 4. Cinema distribution list of *With the WNLA* (TEBA 1921c).

| "WITH THE W.N.L.A. IN PORTUGUESE EAST AFRICA" |                  |       |                |
|-----------------------------------------------|------------------|-------|----------------|
| Alhambra.                                     | Cape Town.       | March | 3 4 6          |
| Eljau                                         | JOHANNESBURG     |       | 17 18 19       |
| Apollo.                                       | Germiston.       |       | 24 25 26       |
| His Majesty's Theatre.                        | Pretoria         |       | 28 29 30       |
| Criterion.                                    | Benoni.          | Apr.  | 31. 1. 2 Apr.  |
| Rinko.                                        | Pimburg          |       | 4 5 6          |
| Empire.                                       | Durban           |       | 12 13          |
| Vaudette                                      | Krugersdorp.     |       | 13 14          |
| Empire                                        | Brakpan.         |       | 15 16          |
| Palace.                                       | Vogelfontein.    |       | 18 19          |
| Jeppe bio                                     | Jeppe            |       | 20 21          |
| Lyric.                                        | Braamfontein     |       | 22 23          |
| Vaudette                                      | Kimberley        | May   | 26 27 28       |
| Grand                                         | Port Elisabeth   |       | 2 3 7          |
| Bioscope Co.                                  | Uitenhage        |       | 12 13 14       |
| Vaudette                                      | East London.     |       | 16 17 18       |
| Electric                                      | Kangwilliamstown |       | 25 26          |
| Gaiety                                        | Oudshoorn.       |       | 30 31. 1. June |
| Hogarth and Newton.                           | Mossel Bay       | Juen  | 4 6            |
| Boschmansig.                                  | Robertson.       |       | 8 9            |
| Local.                                        | Pearl.           |       |                |
| CAPE TOWN.                                    |                  |       |                |
| Hertzberg                                     | Cape Town        |       | 10 11          |
| Globe                                         | Woodstock        |       | 13 14 15       |
| His Majesty's Theatre.                        | Mutsaersberg     |       | 17 18          |
| Premier                                       | Rondebosch.      |       | 20 21          |
| Abrahams.                                     | Salt River.      |       | 23 24 25       |
| William Street                                | Cape Town.       |       | 27 28 29       |
| United.(Union)                                | "                | July  | 30 1 2 July.   |
| Beilen.(Empire)                               | "                |       | 4 5 6          |
| Jackson.                                      | Wynberg          |       | 11 12 13.      |
| Electric                                      | Malmesbury       |       | 15 16          |
| Du Toit.                                      | Somerset West.   |       | 18 19          |
| Giannsidis.                                   | Worcester.       |       | 20 21          |
| Biscopes.                                     | Maitland.        |       | 25 26 27       |
| Star.                                         | Claremont        |       | 28 29 30.      |
| Bosman                                        | Strom            | Aug   | 1              |
| Lazarus                                       | Kalk Bay         |       | 3 4            |
| CAPE TOWN                                     |                  |       |                |
| Empire                                        | Bulawayo         |       | 12 13 14       |
| Palace.                                       | Salisbury        |       | 19 20 21       |
| Katsen and Fisher                             | Vereeniging      |       | 27             |
| Herholdt.                                     | Heilbron.        |       | 31.            |
| Tivoli.                                       | Johannesburg     | Sept. | 2 3            |
| Entertainment Co.                             | Robinson.        |       | 6              |
| Grand                                         | Rodepoort.       |       | 7 8.           |

Figure 5. Cinema distribution list of *With the WNLA* (TEBA 1921c).

3 March 1923, 5). Orenstein directed one of these films, *The Magic of Gold* (1923), about the Rand's gold mining industry. There is no extant copy of this film (*S.A. Pictorial, Stage and Cinema*, 3 March 1923, 5).

*The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (1935) was the most ambitious publicity film that AFP produced for the mining industry.<sup>23</sup> It was a feature-length documentary that ran for seventy-five minutes, and a shorter version was edited for screenings in South African cinemas and overseas. South African Railways and Harbours commissioned the film, and it was sponsored by the Transvaal Chamber of Mines and the Board of Trade and Industries.<sup>24</sup> AFP gave the film its highest level of resources, deploying into key production roles long-standing AFP staff who had worked together in many productions over several decades. Albrecht, AFP director/producer, wrote the script in conjunction with Chamber of Mines "experts." George F. Noble was the cinematographer (ESAT 2023a), and Hyman Kirstein was the editor (ESAT 2023b). AFP had invested in African Talking Pictures shortly before making the film, and the new sound technologies enabled a mixed soundtrack with a recorded voice-over, location sound, and musical accompaniment by the Colosseum Cinema Symphony Orchestra in Johannesburg (Gutsche 1972, 326).

The political timing of this documentary on the process of gold mining, from the recruitment of mine workers through to the extraction and processing of gold, should not be underestimated. Gold was a central feature of world economics at the time, and the film served to publicize the international profile of South Africa's position as one of the leading industries and producers of this precious metal. The film was released after the Great Depression, at a time of major international investment in the South African gold industry. AFP entered the film into the 1939 edition of the Venice Film Festival, where it won the Bronze award for nonfiction, at a time when documentary was gaining recognition as a film form. The film circulated in mining colleges in subsequent years and in educational institutions, such as the British Film Institute and the Imperial Institute in London.

The first credits of the film state: "That which follows is a practical and detailed dissertation on the winning of gold which is one of the most highly organised and scientific industries in the world." After an aerial view of the mines and reefs at Johannesburg, the film starts visually with African men leaving a village and the women and children living there, singing as they walk to the mines' recruiting office. Once there, White NRC officials and a medical doctor check the men's breathing and lungs, selecting the recruits, who then board buses for the railway station. The voice-over explains that the NRC recruits 250,000 "native labourers" and escorts them safely from their homes, and that "[a]ll of them pass through the Johannesburg centre to be declared medically fit for their work." Over images of the compound, where African

---

<sup>23</sup> Copy at NFVSA; incomplete copy at BFI Collections, London.

<sup>24</sup> The title is reminiscent of *The Golden Harvest of the Silver Screen*, a report written on the investment value of property ownership in Hollywood. See Grieveson 2018, 247–86.



Figure 6. African miners breaking the rock face. Frame grab from *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (Albrecht, 1935).

men are shown sitting around or sliding down a large playground slide, to the accompaniment of jazz music playing through a loudspeaker, the voice-over continues, "They are happy as sandboys and simple amusements give them pleasure."

A racial juxtaposition of workers structures the mining scenes. White miners are shown doing skilled work, including soldering machinery, fixing electrical fittings, building, and carpentry, before changing to go underground. This sequence is accompanied by light classical music and the background sound of the men talking English in regional British accents, emulating British documentary styles of representing the working class. In comparison, the African workers are filmed coming out of their hostels with their hats and lights, descending underground in lifts to wait for their White supervisors. The African miners are led by the White supervisor, who sets explosives to break the rock wall, which they are subsequently shown digging and then shoveling the rocks into wagons to be removed. Further images include African miners drilling into the rock with pneumatic drills that simultaneously spurt water. The voice-over explains that water is needed to reduce the dust that causes silicosis. Later scenes show African and White miners back up on the surface under separate, racially segregated showers, washing off the dust from their work underground. These comparative scenes imply a racial equality between workers that did not exist. Conditions for African workers, as discussed earlier, were completely different from those of White workers, and a "colour bar" operated to keep them separate.



Figure 7. African miner drilling. Frame grab from *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (Albrecht, 1935).



Figure 8. African miner showering. Frame grab from *The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (Albrecht, 1935).

The second half of the film demonstrates the industrial machinery of the processing plant and White workers managing this process of gold handling, whereas African workers are not featured. These scenes include the chemical washing and filtering processes that extract the gold ore before the melted gold is poured into molds to create gold bars. The bullion is then loaded onto trains for world markets. The film closes with shots of the miners in

their leisure time. Again, a comparative juxtaposition justifies the disparity in conditions between Black and White workers, presenting different lifestyles as a choice. The White workers are shown in their comfortable living quarters, engaged in sport, swimming, tennis, football, and boxing, while the African workers, the voice-over emphasizes, have "enormous appetites" and are given bowls of food, after which beating drums dominate the soundtrack, and shots of dancing close the film.

AFP thus succeeded in creating a film that showcased new documentary techniques of cinematography, lighting, sound, and editing to celebrate the gold mining industry, its industrial development through technology and extraction processes, its harnessing of the new forces of chemistry and electricity, and its use of mass exploitative labor systems and the rationalization of African recruitment. The film erased the human cost of the gold mining industry. AFP continued to make films for the mining industry into the 1940s and 1950s. Material was continually filmed and used for *African Mirror*, especially when public figures visited or opened a mine. AFP often reused its archive of films and film footage, which had already played a major part in the mining industry's recruitment and propaganda initiatives. Its archive continued to have its purpose as propaganda that framed people as labor: part of an integrated and smooth operation of the industrial extraction of gold and other resources.

## Conclusion

By approaching the mining film archive through the prism of media and extraction, I have "mined" the film archive and related documentation archives to demonstrate the levels of collusion between the mining industry and the film industry in South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century, when extractive gold mining reached its height of profitability. As colonial films, they are imbued with the racist attitudes and dehumanizing perceptions of Africans circulating in White South African society at the time and promote the ruthless industrial exploitation of the people, land, and resources. The terms "instructional" and "useful" film do not sufficiently evoke the political role of these documentaries. When viewed today however, the films' counter-archival record of reality offer fragments of daily life working on the mines as a history of the present, not necessarily captured in the documentation. These archive films, coupled with documentation in the mining industry archives, provide evidence of the way in which cinema was deeply imbricated in the extraction industry of mining in South Africa from its beginnings. It has had a devastating impact on the life expectancy, health, and well-being of generations of African migrant workers and their communities, still evident today.

## Acknowledgments

With special thanks to Jacqueline Maingard for her intellectual engagement and supportive advice. Thanks to Leslie Witz for advice on writing histories of South Africa; and to the Archive and Public Research Initiative, University of Cape Town for supporting the earlier development of this article at its workshops. I am grateful also to the editors and reviewers for their supportive input and guidance.

## *Films*

*Dust That Kills* (Orenstein, 1921)

*Dying for Gold* (Meyburgh and Pakleppa, 2018)

*The Golden Harvest of the Witwatersrand* (Albrecht, 1935)

*With the WNLA in Portuguese East Africa* (AFP, 1921)

Submitted: January 15, 2024 PST, Accepted: September 17, 2024 PST



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CCBY-4.0). View this license's legal deed at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0> and legal code at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/legalcode> for more information.

## REFERENCES

- Aitken, Ian. 1990. *Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Alexander, Peter. 2000. *Workers, War and the Origins of Apartheid: Labour and Politics in South Africa, 1939-1948*. Oxford: James Currey.
- Amad, Paula. 2010. *Counter-Archive: Film, the Everyday and Albert Kahn's Archives de La Planète*. New York: Columbia University Press. <https://doi.org/10.7312/amad13500>.
- Anthony, Scott, and James G. Mansell. 2011. *The Projection of Britain, The History of the GPO Film Unit*. London: British Film Institute. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781838710446>.
- Burns, James. 2002. *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe*. Ohio University Research in International Studies.
- Couzens, Tim. 1982. "Moralizing Leisure Time: The Transatlantic Connection and Black Johannesburg, 1918-1936." In *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930*, edited by Shula Marks and Richard Rathbone. London: Longman.
- Crush, Jonathan, Alan Jeeves, and David Yudelman. 1991. *South Africa's Labor Empire. A History of Black Migrancy to the Gold Mines*. Boulder, Colorado and Oxford: Westview Press/David Philip.
- Dlamini, Jacob. 2020. *Safari Nation. A Social History of the Kruger National Park*. Auckland Park: Jacana Media Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv21zp25d>.
- ESAT. 2023a. "G.F. Noble." 2023. [https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/G.F.\\_Noble](https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/G.F._Noble).
- . 2023b. "Hyman Kirshtein." ESAT. 2023. [https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Hyman\\_Kirshtein](https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Hyman_Kirshtein).
- . 2023c. "Joseph Albrecht." 2023. [https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Joseph\\_Albrecht](https://esat.sun.ac.za/index.php/Joseph_Albrecht).
- Etherington, Norman, Patrick Harries, and Bernard K. Mbenga. 2010. "From Colonial Hegemonies to Imperial Conquest, 1840-1880." In *The Cambridge History of South Africa. Volume 1: From Early Times to 1885*, edited by Carolyn Hamilton, Bernard K. Mbenga, and Robert Ross. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521517942.008>.
- Foster, Jeremy. 2008. *Washed with the Sun. Landscape and the Making of White South Africa*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Grieverson, Lee. 2018. *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital and the Liberal World System*. Oakland: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520965348>.
- Gutsche, Thelma. 1972. *The History and Social Significance of the Motion Pictures in South Africa, 1895-1940*. Cape Town: Howard Timmins.
- Hamilton, Carolyn, Bernard K. Mbenga, and Robert Ross, eds. 2010. *The Cambridge History of South Africa. Volume 1: From Early Times to 1885*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521517942.002>.
- Hammel, Andrea, Cygel White, Susan Pfeiffer, and Duncan Miller. 2000. "Pre-Colonial Mining in Southern Africa." *Journal of the Southern Africa Institute of Mining and Metallurgy* 100 (1): 49–56.
- Jaikumar, Priya. 2019. *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space*. Durham and London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478005599>.
- Jaikumar, Priya, and Lee Grieverson. 2022. "Media and Extraction: A Brief Research Manifesto." *Journal of Environmental Media* 3 (2): 197–206. [https://doi.org/10.1386/jem\\_00085\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/jem_00085_1).
- Katz, Elaine N. 1994. *The White Death: Silicosis on the Witwatersrand Gold Mines, 1886-1910*. Johannesburg: Witwatersrand University Press.

- Maingard, Jacqueline. 2007. *South African National Cinema*. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2018. "Projecting Modernity: Sol Plaatje's Touring Exhibition in 1920s South Africa." In *Rural Cinema Exhibition and Audiences in a Global Cinema Context*, edited by Daniela Treveri Gennari, Danielle Hipkins, and Catherine O'Rawe. London: Palgrave MacMillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66344-9\\_11](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-66344-9_11).
- Marks, Shula. 1980. "South Africa - 'The Myth of the Empty Land.'" *History Today* 30 (1): 7–12.
- Marks, Shula, and Richard Rathbone. 1982. *Industrialisation and Social Change in South Africa: African Class Formation, Culture and Consciousness, 1870-1930*. Longman.
- McCulloch, Jock. 2012. *South Africa's Gold Mines and the Politics of Silicosis*. Johannesburg: Jacana/James Currey. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781782040422>.
- . 2013. "Medicine, Politics and Disease on South Africa's Gold Mines." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39 (3): 543–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2013.818850>.
- . 2018. "Mining Evidence: South Africa's Gold Mines and the Career of A.J. Orenstein." *Social History of Medicine* 31 (1): 61–78.
- Nasson, Bill. 2010. *The War in South Africa. The Anglo Boer War 1899-1902*. Cape Town: Tafelburg.
- Parsons, Neil. 2018. *Black and White Bioscope: Making Movies in Africa, 1899-1925*. Bristol: Intellect.
- Peterson, Bhekizizwe. 2003. "The Politics of Leisure during the Early Days of South African Cinema." In *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa*, edited by Isabelle Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.
- Phillips, Ray. 1930. *The Bantu Are Coming: Phases of South Africa's Race Problem*. London: Student Christian Movement.
- Reynolds, Glenn. 2007. "'From Red Blanket to Civilization': Propaganda and Recruitment Films for South Africa's Gold Mines, 1920-1940." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 33 (1): 133–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070601136657>.
- . 2015. *Colonial Cinema in Africa: Origins, Images, Audiences*. Jefferson: McFarland and Company.
- Rice, Tom. 2008. "Anti-Plague Operations, Lagos 1937." *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*. 2008. <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk>.
- . 2010a. "Bekefilm." *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*. 2010. <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk>.
- . 2010b. "Colonial Film Unit." *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*. 2010. <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk>.
- . 2019. *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire*. Berkeley: University of California Press. <https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520971813>.
- Sandon, Emma. 2000. "Projecting Africa: Two British Travel Films of the 1920s." In *Cultural Encounters: Representing 'Otherness'*, edited by Elizabeth Hallam and Brian V. Street. London and New York: Routledge.
- . 2007. "Preserving a Heritage? South African Archive Documentary: 1910-1940." *Journal of Canadian Film Studies* 16 (1): 51–62.
- . 2013. "African Mirror: The Life and Times of the South African Newsreel from 1910-1948." *Journal of Southern African Studies* 39 (3): 615–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057070.2013.826071>.

- Stoler, Ann Laura. 2009. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400835478>.
- TEBA. 1920a. "File 211, Extract from Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Management of the WNLA, 23 August."
- . 1920b. "File 211/1, Letter from Robinson to Du Plessis, 25 October."
- . 1920c. "Letter and Shot List, from Barlow Coulthard, to Gemmill, 24 August."
- . 1920d. "Letter from Barlow Coulthard to the Manager, WNLA (Witwatersrand Native Labour Association), 9 August."
- . 1921a. "File 211/1, Groups Circular No. 12/21, from Kelsey, 3 February."
- . 1921b. "File 211/1, Letter from Terril to Bostock, 6 January."
- . 1921c. "File 211/1, Schedule for the WNLA in Portuguese East Africa, from the General Manager, AFP, to the Secretary, WNLA, 4 March."
- . 1930a. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 25/9/30-13/06/1938, Letter from the District Manager, NRC Zoekmakar, to Gemmill, 2 October."
- . 1930b. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 25/9/30-13/06/1938, Letter from the District Superintendent, NRC Kokstad, to the General Manager, 2 October."
- . 1930c. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 25/9/30-13/06/1938, Letter from the District Superintendent, NRC Queenstown, to the General Manager, 2 October."
- . 1930d. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 25/9/30-13/06/1938, Letter from the District Superintendent, NRC Rustenberg, to the General Manager, 10 October."
- . 1930e. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 25/9/30-13/06/1938, Letter from the District Superintendent, NRC Umtata, to the General Manager, 2 October."
- . 1930f. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 25/9/30-13/06/1938, Letter from WNLA, Lourenco Marques Agency, to the General Manager, 13 October."
- . 1930–1931. "File 317, Correspondence."
- . 1931. "File 317, PAD 1, Propaganda Cinematograph 17/1/31-14/1/37, Memorandum from Gemmill to the Native Labour Advisor and Owen Letcher, 17 January."
- . n.d. "File 61, Repatriation of Natives Misc."
- Van Onselen, Charles. 2020. *The Night Trains. Moving Mozambique Miners to and From South Africa Circa 1902-1955*. London: Hurst and Company. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780197568651.001.0001>.
- Wasson, Haidee, and Charles R. Acland. 2011. *Useful Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.