

Comments on Work with Film Preliterates in Africa

John Wilson

Preface

The paper that follows is an edited transcript of an oral presentation made at Teachers College, Columbia University, on May 2, 1961, by John Wilson, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Education in Tropical Areas, Institute of Education, University of London.

The presentation was made in the Seminar of Communication and the Communication Arts at Teachers College, about which I should provide a bit more information for context. Teachers College, the graduate school of education of Columbia University, has an institutionalized interest in the study of communication going back to the 1940s. The first interdisciplinary doctorate in communication was given in the mid-1940s, and we have continued to give degrees in that field, without pause, for over forty years.

At the center of the Interdivisional Program in Communication and the Communication Arts (we now call it simply "Communication") in the early days was a Seminar in Communication and the Communication Arts, which met weekly. It consisted of both students and faculty members, with faculty members generally outnumbering students. The pioneer faculty members at Teachers College who formed the Program in Communication and the Communication Arts understood that the field had to be seen as interdisciplinary; otherwise it was simply English or Speech or *Somesuch* in new bottles. The scholars who served in the seminar—trying to gain a common body of concepts, a common set of terms—came from psychology, linguistics, anthropology, sociology, literature, and the other arts. It also included specialists in the teaching of reading, writing, theatre, special education, and English as a Second Language.

Chairing the Seminar was passed along each semester, and the chairing professor generally determined the topic on which to focus that semester. I chaired in Spring 1961, and we centered on, so my notes say, "The Concept of Literacy as Applied to Film and Television." It was no accident that this was in my mind, for I was at the time deeply involved, as I was to be for about seven years, in studying the possibility of "accessible" film, which my colleagues and I in a research effort felt would soon be available because of the development of cartridge-loading 8-mm motion picture projectors. We assumed that such gadgetry, were it to come (our research began before the first Technicolor silent single-concept projector was introduced), would for the first time make film easily and randomly accessible to students. We further assumed that the style and content of the films used in the cartridges would be profoundly shaped by the fact of high accessibility and that perhaps the most important result would be the need for much more literate viewers of the medium. Our thoughts in

those days are being realized now by cassette-loading television sets and in some measure, by computer programs. Interactive videodiscs will probably cap the venture in which we were interested. The need for literate viewers remains.

In any event, we focused in 1961 on film literacy, gathering together many people from the Columbia campus and film production agencies in Manhattan. John Wilson was visiting Teachers College that year as an exchange scholar in an Afro-Anglo-American Program in Teacher Education. He joined the Seminar with enthusiasm, because, as it developed, he had experienced firsthand some of the problems we were theorizing about and scraping around for anecdotes to analyze.

I personally transcribed the audiotape of Wilson's informal presentation. He checked and approved it. Knowing John, I'm sure he would have changed it further if time had been available. Still, it is more than simply conventional apology when I say that any errors that may turn up in the transcript are mine. The original tape, alas, is not to be found.

I regret that I cannot answer a question that will come to your mind: What was the Crown Film Unit? In general, I recall it to be a group, based in England, which had an instructional filmmaking function in, among other places, Ghana and Nigeria.

After his year at Teachers College, John returned to the University of London, where I had the pleasure of paying him a return visit, while on my way to India, in the mid-1960s. He is now dead. If memory serves, his death occurred in the late 1960s.

I have a vague recollection that Wilson may have redone this piece for a Canadian journal. In any event, the original seminar give-and-take is here. It proves again, if we have ever doubted it, that many scholars were aware of the difficulties of "reading" images, before the popular (and welcome) rebirth of that area of inquiry.

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My first acquaintance with the problems of film literacy came after some ten years of schooling in Africa in problems of teaching people to read. I was aware of the fact that when you try to teach people to read something that is not related to their own culture, nothing happens. You get them reading gaily about railway stations and they've never seen a railway station. You pause and ask them to draw you a picture of a railway station, and they'll reproduce something that they saw in a book, not a railway station they would find if they travelled a hundred miles further south in their own country and saw a railway station. The personal concept of what a railway station is is just not there. This of course represents a very very serious difficulty. One solution is to teach them to read and talk about only the things which they can quite obviously see. But you are faced with a problem later on—how do you move from there to wider contexts? It seemed perfectly simple to me that this wider move should be made through pictures. I began looking through well-illustrated books, searching for materials, thinking I had the key.

Then I got into the field of community development in Africa, which is adult education or basic education, and about then a fellow who would be called a sanitary inspector in England came along. His job was concerned with the simple business of trying to train Africans to keep villages clean, to clean up standing water where mosquitoes breed, and so forth. He said to me: "You know, you're not doing very much with those pictures." I said, "Why?" He said, "I have had some experience with this. I've got a camera and I went around my village and I made pictures—stills—of those standing pools and mosquito breeding, and all the rest of it. I thought I was doing very well, and you know, I wasn't getting anywhere. The still picture did not relate to what I was doing. Nothing I can do with a still picture can get across to these illiterate adults what it is I am trying to say. If I go along and act and show them what to do, that's another thing."

Then it dawned on me that I had perhaps made a bad mistake. I had assumed that to a primitive African a still was something simpler than a moving film. I had considered the complexity of the technique of films and imagined because the technique was complex that the impact of the finished product would be complex. But the sanitary inspector said this was not so, that he had discovered that a moving picture had much more meaning to a preliterate audience (I'm going to call them a preliterate audience) than a still film had.

There happened to be an artist in the company, and we put this question to him. Had he had a look at this business of difficulty of still photos? He said "Yes, I've had a look at the matter. It is a remarkable thing that these preliterate societies have not developed drawing. They have the most amazing complexities of drum rhythms, they have the most amazing complexity of three-dimensional art, but they have not got any two-dimensional art, and, when it *is* two-dimensional, it has no perspective in it. Of course, when you pause to think about perspective, it is a highly sophisticated convention that we have agreed upon as a convention for representing depth. In a photographic still you get perspective automatically, but this is still a convention. As far as the unsophisticated, untutored eye is concerned, this is a flat thing with no depth in it, and until the eye is trained to see this business of lines converging, until the eye is trained to this convention, the picture is not interpretable."

So I learned that even if you get a picture of something that is familiar, it may not necessarily make an impact; it may not even register as a picture of something which we know.

Our next bit of evidence was very, very interesting. This man—the sanitary inspector—made a moving picture, in very slow time, very slow technique, of what would be required of the ordinary household in a primitive African village in getting rid of standing water—draining pools, picking up all empty tins and putting them away, and so forth. We showed this film to an audience and asked them what they had seen, and they said they had seen a chicken, a fowl, and we didn't know that there was a fowl in it. So we very carefully scanned the frames one by one for this fowl, and, sure enough, for about a second, a fowl went over the corner of the frame. Someone had frightened the fowl, and it had taken flight through the righthand, bottom segment of the frame. This was all that had been seen. The other things he had hoped they would pick up from the film they had not picked up at all, and they had picked up something which we didn't know was in the film until we inspected it minutely. Why? We developed all sorts of theories. Perhaps it was the sudden movement of the chicken. Everything else was done in slow technique—people going forward slowly picking up the tin, demonstrating, and all the rest of it, and the bird was apparently the one bit of reality for them—a fowl that sort of flew away in terror. There was another theory that the fowl had religious significances, which we rather dismissed.

Question: Could you describe in more detail the scene in the film?

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Wilson: Yes, there was very slow movement of a sanitary laborer coming along and seeing a tin with water in it, you see, and picking the tin up and very carefully pouring the water out and then rubbing it into the ground so no mosquito could breed and very carefully putting this tin in a basket on the back of a donkey. This was to show how you disposed of rubbish, and he went along doing this very carefully. It was like the man in the park with a spiked stick, picking up the bits of paper and putting them in the sack. All this was done very slowly to show how important it was to pick up those things because of mosquitoes breeding in standing water. The cans were all very carefully taken away and disposed of in the ground and covered up so there would be no more standing water. These would have been familiar enough scenes. The film was about five minutes long. The chicken appeared for a second in this kind of setting.

Question: Do you literally mean that when you talked with the audience you came to believe that they had not *seen* anything else but the chicken?

Wilson: We simply asked them: What did you see in this film?

Question: Not what did you *think*?

Wilson: No, what did you see?

Question: How many people were in the viewing audience of whom you asked this question?

Wilson: Thirty-odd.

Question: No one gave you a response other than: We saw the chicken?

Wilson: No, this was the first quick response—we saw a chicken.

Question: They did see a man, too?

Wilson: Well, when we questioned them further they had seen a man, but what was really interesting was they hadn't made a whole story out of it, and in point of fact, we discovered afterwards that they hadn't seen a whole frame—they had inspected the frame for details. Then we found out from the artist and eye specialist that a sophisticated audience, an audience that is accustomed to the film, focuses a little way in front of the flat screen so that you take in the whole frame. In this sense, again, a picture is a convention. You've got to look at the picture as a whole first, and these people did not do that, not being accustomed to pictures. When presented with the picture, they began to inspect it, rather like the scanner of a television camera, and go over it very rapidly. Apparently, that is what the eye unaccustomed to the picture does—scans the picture—and they hadn't scanned one picture before it moved on, *in spite* of the slow technique for the film.

Question: Was this the first film they had seen?

Wilson: As far as we know this was the first time they had ever seen a moving picture.

Question: Had they seen a sanitary inspector?

Wilson: Yes, this would be enacted almost every morning in their lives.

Question: Did they know why they had been invited to see the film?

Wilson: Yes, they had been invited to see a film about keeping their town clean. We said, "You've been told all about standing water and now we're going to show you what you do."

My point is that I think we've got to be very wary of pictures; they can only be interpreted in the light of your experience. Now, next we thought that if we are going to use these films, we've got to have some sort of process of education, and we've got to have some research. We found, also, some fascinating things in this research process. We found that the film is, as produced in the West, a very highly conventionalized piece of symbolism, although it looks very real. For instance, we found that if you were telling a story about two men to an African audience, and one had finished his business, and he went off the edge of the screen, they wanted to know what happened to him; they didn't accept that this was just the end of him and that he was of no more interest in the story. They wanted to know what happened to this fellow, and we had to write stories that way, putting in a lot of material that wasn't to us necessary. We had to follow him along the street until he took a natural turn—he mustn't walk off the side of the screen, but must walk down the street and make a natural turn. It was quite understandable that he could disappear around the turn. The action had to follow a natural course of events; otherwise the audience wanted to know why this fellow went off the edge of the screen—where was he?

Panning shots was very confusing because they didn't realize what was happening. They thought the houses were moving. You see, the convention was not accepted. Nor was the idea of a person sitting still while the camera was brought in to a close-up; this was a strange thing, this person growing bigger in your presence. You know the common way of starting a film: show the city, narrow it down to a street, narrow it down to one house, take your camera in through the window, etc. This was literally interpreted as *you* walking forward and doing all those things until you were finally taken in through the window.

All of this meant that to use the film as a really effective medium we had to begin a process of education in those conventions and make those films which would educate people to one convention, to the idea; for example, of a man walking off the side of the screen. We had to show that there was a street corner and have the man walk around the street corner, and then in the next part of the film show him walking away, and then cut the scene. A complete unit was set up in London to make films for this spe-

cific purpose. It has now been absorbed in commercial films, but when it was set up, there was no commercial company that would undertake this business of the slow presentation of a story. So we set up a special unit and brought in the sanitation specialist as co-head of it. With him was a retired Hollywood film producer. The Hollywood man had a long experience in the days of silent films, and one of the things he did was go back to silent film approaches. He went back to silent film explicated by a slow commentary. In other words, the perfect teaching situation was where the film was under the complete control of the operator all the time or controlled by the person doing the explanations.

This is an important matter. An African audience does not sit silently without participating. They must participate, so the person who shows the films must be flexible, stimulating, and get responses. If there is a situation where a character sings a song, the song is sung, and the audience is invited to join in. This audience participation had to be thought of as the film was made and opportunities provided for it. Live commentators who presented the films had to be trained to the last degree in what the film meant and in their interpretation of the film for different audiences. They were taken out of the teaching profession and trained for this business.

Question: In part you have answered my question, which was, wouldn't it have been perhaps more expedient instead of educating the audience to the film convention to have readjusted the film presentation to the audience?

Wilson: Well, the point really is this. In a situation of swift change in culture you want to bring the people to the stage of where they can appreciate *any* film that is going around. This was an educational process. You couldn't go on forever and ever making films for this society, at this particular level; it wouldn't have been desirable; in any case this would not have been an educational process. What you want is to get those people to a stage of film literacy.

Question: I've always been intrigued, and I think this is probably what sets motion pictures apart from other graphic forms, by the ability of film to condense time. How did you ever explain this to your film illiterates?

Wilson: Yes, this is one of the difficulties; it had to be progressive. This came about quite naturally, following the example of the time you took to show the man going down the street, then turning the corner. This then became a problem, of course: the films took so long.

Question: Could these films be used with other preliterate groups? Are they, in a sense, preliterate films or specifically Ghanaian films?

Wilson: I can't say much about that with respect to motion pictures, although I've come up against this difficulty myself with respect to reading material for African societies. I was so convinced of the need for specifically designed materials that I abandoned all the generalized readers in use and wrote a set of readers for Ghana. My publishers—much against my will—wanted to use these new materials in another part of Africa, and the readers said: "These are very interesting, but all those pictures are of Ghana and the names are Ghanaian names instead of Nigerian names." It is a difficult problem to start from a selective text and move to universal texts. You've got to start in the culture you are in and then move off to other cultures by the process of association and contrast. We haven't paid nearly enough attention to the problem.

Question: Have you ever tried to isolate content from convention in films, taking essentially the same script, using the same technique, but shooting with a Nigerian audience?

Wilson: In point of fact, we didn't do much of that. After we found the secrets about where the natives were confused about films, we began to be able to find shortcuts around them. The interchangeability of films for different cultures is something you have to be careful about. All right, we developed one film for teaching viewers to generalize about film. We took a film of successive shots of old men doing exactly the same things in England and in Ghana, sunning themselves on the bench in the park, beside the well—just common situations. In another, we showed a mother carrying her baby in England, putting her baby in a pram, and a mother in Africa picking up her baby and tying it on her back—using situations from different cultures that had obvious meanings. We used techniques of that kind. But we didn't carry it out to the extent of teaching all the conventions and then showing a particular film. We used live interpreters, incidentally, to extend a film's usefulness. Even in those territories where we wanted to use a dubbed commentary, this would almost have been impossible because in twenty miles you can move into another language area. The interpreter generally could speak half a dozen different languages and interpret the film using different languages as your travelling unit moved forward.

One thing I should explain—the film showings did not stand out by themselves. There was a mounted unit with loud speakers, which went to the village and gave an evening's entertainment. The teaching film was embedded in the evening's entertainment. They brought along the local musicians. We would make a recording on the spot; the people would see a

recording being made of the local musicians and then the recording would be played afterwards, and the musicians and people then danced to the recording. The local chief was brought along to address his people through the loud speakers. Perhaps three films would be shown in a four-hour entertainment that would bore anyone here. But an African audience can get along with twelve hours' entertainment like this as long as it is embedded in drumming and dancing and all the ritual.

Question: Going back a step, what did you set up all those parallel shots for, the old man in Ghana and England, and so forth?

Wilson: There were two purposes. There was the purpose of establishing a common humanity and of teaching a film convention. The films used to teach convention always had a content or some value in themselves. We thought this content would teach them to be less parochially minded. Parochialism is a feature of all tribal life in Africa. It was difficult for them to generalize on the basis of a single picture in a motion picture; that is, if they saw one of their own people doing something, it was difficult for them to generalize to the point of saying this can be any man. The same thing occurs with readers, I suppose. When you read about the old man sitting on the bench and sunning himself, I suppose it is logical to assume that the reader is envisioning an old man of his culture.

Going back a bit, I said we set up a film unit. It grew out of the famous Crown Film Unit that made all those important documentaries by Grierson. Grierson was very interested in this [project] and he had moved on to another unit, so Grierson's old unit was handed over with many of his cameramen.

Question: Was it difficult for these audiences to understand that the sound track was related to the person whose lips were moving on the screen?

Wilson: No, this wasn't the problem. A bigger problem was our simple-minded assumption that all we had to do was dub an African commentary in place of an English commentary, but that didn't do the job because the audience was expecting to be involved. We discovered the best commentaries were often question and answer commentaries: the commentator asking "What is this?" and a reply coming back from the audience. They were thoroughly happy when they were roaring replies back, and the commentator would sometimes say they were all wrong. It was always a live commentary—for years and years. The commentator would alter according to the needs of the situation: he would refer to all sorts of topical events as he went along or make jokes about this fellow going around the corner. And all the audience made comments. This was all part of the game. Eventually we were able to come around to dubbed

commentaries once we got our audience to a certain stage, but in some situations we still used the silent films.

Question: How long did it take them to become literate with film?

Wilson: The process is still going on. Oh, in general, I should say this was a process of three or four years, but there are some films that are still too sophisticated yet. For example, I think that possibly the trick of peeling leaves off the calendar to show the passage of time is better than just to fade out and fade in again.

Question: To put it another way, how long did it take a preliterate audience, one that had never seen film, to begin to get some meaning?

Wilson: I keep coming back to this film where we showed the contrast—the old men in Ghana and England, and so forth. That was a kind of watershed; the audience began to have a certain ability to equate different things in generalizations. We found that in about six months' time a simple story of the Mr. Wise and Mr. Foolish type—the man who did all the wrong things and the man who did all the right things—went very well. By the way, we found a very interesting thing: that it paid us to reverse the process. Sometimes Mr. Foolish won out, and not Mr. Wise, because the audience was a very human one. We found, in point of fact, that buffoonery and the silent Chaplin films were absolutely wonderful. [An analysis of some of the early Chaplin films emerged.]

Comment: It is very interesting that Chaplin leaves the screen not by going off frame or being cut off—he walks out of the picture exactly as the people demanded.

Wilson: Yes, he does that. It was a very smooth technique when you look back at it.

Comment: I thought it might be interesting to say that when I was much younger, in the days of silent films, in my teens, I was a movie organist on Broadway, and I played at many Chaplin films, and among them the one I remember was *Shoulder Arms*, which I played for six months three times a day, and I never tired of that film. Some films you saw twice and you never wanted to see them again, but the Chaplin films you could see endlessly and always see something in them. I think it was the best proof to me of real artistry. I played the opening for Valentino in *Blood and Sand*, and after two days I couldn't stand the sight of the guy; I just hated him and there was nothing in the film to watch anymore, but with Chaplin you never exhausted that film; you saw things in it every time you never saw before, in spite of the fact that you had seen it hundreds of times. So it was interesting—your comment about the silent Chaplin films. Do you think they liked him because of the slow technique, because he did everything explicitly?

Wilson: Yes, that was it. He had to. If you missed the slightest movement, actually you had lost the point. I think something that gives a sidelight to your question is that we noticed in West Africa that the commercial film houses get their best audiences for films that don't have a closely knit theme—musicals get on better, something that will stand up by itself in terms of music, dancing or the like. This goes down very, very well indeed. Now the last British film I saw for my sins was *Henry V*. I found it awfully difficult to make sense out of that film. You had really to have a knowledge of the play and of the background of Elizabethan England. I think, myself, that it is a damn bad film. The film was not quite clear in its aim and didn't follow two simple characters in counterpoise to each other. It was very difficult for even the sophisticated audience to follow. And of course, you know, some films are becoming so damn sophisticated in their techniques that they're terribly difficult to follow, like some of the Orson Welles films.

Question: Do you have any information on whether or not young audiences or older audiences learn the difficult conventions faster?

Wilson: No, I have no information on that. The younger audiences in Africa were seeing teaching films in school, and we didn't make any special attempt with them. I've been talking about, really, what we would call bush areas in Africa, really isolated areas.

Question: On this matter of closely knit themes, which you said these audiences did not like or appreciate, is there an oral tradition in their culture? Does the typical story which they tell around the campfire or at night have a closely knit theme?

Wilson: No. One thing we were ignorant of at this time, and something that we ought to have known a lot more about, is that those African audiences are very good at role playing. Part of a child's education in a preliterate society is role playing; he's got to learn to play the role of elders in certain given situations. One thing, fortunately, we did discover was that the cartoon went down very well. This puzzled us until we found out that puppetry is quite a common pastime.

Question: Another art form which is so very conventional is their dance, reduced to a few very simple conventional gestures; and again in their sculpture there are certain very rigid conventions; apparently there is no transfer in the understanding of conventions.

Wilson: The conventions mentioned are three-dimensional, whereas film is two-dimensional. This probably accounts for some of the barriers to transfer until sophistication is reached.

Question: What about commercial motion picture houses that were close to more civilized areas? What process have they gone through to educate their city audiences to film?

Wilson: They were a post-product of ourselves. We built up the commercial houses and built up the circuits.

Question: There were literally no film houses there before you came in?

Wilson: As far as I can recall, there was only one in the whole of the Gold Coast—a fearful, lousy place patronized by the educated African and occasionally the European wanting something to do. The man who ran this was an entrepreneur in all sorts of things, and he got the most dreadful films. There was no popular use of the cinema at all until we came along. We subsidized the first commercial houses; got an entrepreneur who ran them. They were open-air houses on the style of the drive-in, and we got feature films of various types and subsidized them until they got on their own feet and were running quite well. These are the kind of things you've got to do when you're building up a young territory.