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## SCREEN DRAMATURGY IN AN AFRICAN TRADITION\*

by

Martin A. Rennalls

*Introduction*

A speaker once likened Jamaica's haste, as a developing country in the modernization process, to a child mounting a horse for the first time. Overwhelmed with interest, eagerness and the best of intentions, the child leaped to the saddle, but so high and with such force that he went clean over the back of the horse and landed on the other side. This parable does seem appropriate to the Jamaican situation in its current struggle for national recognition and economic independence. There should be concern about the results if this mad rush is maintained without cautious and due consideration of the long term sociological effects it will have upon the people.

A large percentage of the people are of African descent and are illiterate. However, the superstructures of conventions, customs, values, traditions and techniques are often imported from western countries, and in many instances imposed upon them without due regard for their original culture and related underlying predispositions. These efforts seem to be producing the effect of "the rich get richer and the poor get poorer." For while there is some degree of overall improvement in the economic, social and educational conditions, a large proportion of the masses are still left behind in the modernization process. The communication gap between the "haves" and "have-nots" seems to be widening instead of narrowing, thus producing attitudes of frustration, suspicion, hatred and lack of confidence among the majority.

This condition should be a major concern of those responsible for developing a viable communication system in that society. A method should be developed; a key to the understanding of this basic communication problem among the people, a way of successfully presenting new information and channeling their attitudes in new directions.

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The intention of this study is to attempt to show a line of investigation into the problems of communication within the masses of the Jamaican society with special reference to the film and its use in communicating primarily to the masses of the Jamaican society, a large proportion of which are rural. To provide a content and background information for this study, the first two chapters are devoted to a brief history of the Jamaican society and an introduction about the communication gap.

The main body of the study, however, is devoted to a close examination of the film and its suitability as a communication medium for these unprivileged Jamaican audiences. The film medium *per se* is first investigated in the light of the premise that it is basically an international language. This is followed by penetration into the concept that film, in what might be considered its virgin, pure and "original form", is natural to man and began in the pictorial representations of life by primitive man in overhanging rocks and caves; and that much of what has developed to be the film of today is a conglomeration of "original film" and with a superstructure of a large body of conventions. It is therefore assumed that some of the problems of understanding the medium by unsophisticated audiences are largely due to the conventions. The origin of the dramatic narrative, which is also popular in Jamaican culture in the form of folk tales, is next investigated. This aspect of the study leads to the assumption that this format is a natural form of expression and was implicit in the film's early stages of development and thus it should be understandable to Jamaican audiences. The differences in the basic configuration between the western and the Jamaican narrative structures are examined and the importance of these differences highlighted. The point is made that the dramaturgical configuration characteristics and structures inherent and implicit in the majority of films made for Jamaican audiences, are western in origin, primarily from England and the United States of America with little or no conscious attempt by the film makers to apply and exploit to advantage the configurations of the myths and folklores of Jamaican ancestry. The message of these films seem to fall upon unresponsive minds, for subconsciously, the people may have been perceiving this form as alien to their internal cultural heritage and thus the films fail to sensitize and strike at the deep roots of their original feelings, values, predispositions and aspirations. The final chapter contains some suggestions for experimentation in the production of films for the audiences of Jamaica that might make them more understandable, meaningful and more conducive to the effecting of lasting changes in their way of life.

The conducting of a rigorous examination into this communication problem is undoubtedly a complicated, involved and

multi-layered problem which needs lengthy and scientific investigation. Here, it is intended to try to "peel off the first layer" of the problem, but in comparison to the magnitude of the proposition, this effort should be regarded as an initial attempt to raise questions for study.

This paper, therefore, should be regarded as a "launching pad" for an introduction to what seems a fascinating and important field of study. Those speculations and conjectures made are just that. The investigations made have been inconclusive as far as answers are concerned. Answers must be arrived at with scientific study. But it is intended to provide an indication of the direction of thinking and possible areas for further exploration. The search for a solution could help Jamaica and other countries like her climb firmly and surely into the saddle of this very powerful, tough-headed and unpredictable steed of modernization, and have the reins of the future well in hand rather than experience all her pride, efforts and expectations destroyed by undue haste, cheap mimicry and imitation.

#### *JAMAICA AND ITS PEOPLE*

The island of Jamaica, with an area of nearly four and one half thousand square miles, is part of the New World. Although "the area is as old as the earth itself and its past reaches as far back in time,"<sup>1</sup> its recorded history began with its discovery by Christopher Columbus in 1494.

The island was then inhabited by Arawak Indians, who are now extinct. For in the brief span of one hundred and sixty years, after discovery which marked the period of the Spanish occupation, they were gradually exterminated.

Jamaica was at first disappointing to the Spaniards, as their anticipation and search for precious minerals proved fruitless. Frustrated in their mining prospects, and unable to pay their way back to Spain, the immigrants settled down to agricultural pursuits. Sugar cane was introduced as the staple crop. Agriculture became the basis of the island's economy, and has remained so throughout the greater part of its history.

#### *The First Negro Immigrants*

The first Negro immigrants were brought in from the west coast of Africa by the Spaniards to replace the Arawak Indians. They were bought from slave traders or captured by the Spaniards. The initial group arrived in 1517. They proved hardier and more resistant to disease than the Arawaks. In view of their previous

occupations as skilled herdsmen and hunters the Spaniards, in addition to using them to provide labour on the cane plantations made them participate in regular hunts for wild cattle and pigs and assist in the rearing of animals.

They fared much better than the Arawaks and seemed to have gained some favor in the eyes of their Spanish masters, for many of their descendants were the result of liaisons between them and the Spaniards. This interbreeding resulted in "half-breeds" later called "mulattoes". Around 1580, small numbers of Jews and Portuguese began arriving and participated in intra island marketing on a very elementary scale.

### *The First English Immigrants*

On the 10th of May, 1655, the English captured Jamaica from the Spanish. Under the terms of surrender, all the then inhabitants were allowed to leave the island. The Spaniards freed all their slaves and left en masse for Hispaniola hoping to return and capture the island. The freed slaves, perhaps encouraged by the Spaniards, fled to the mountains with guns and ammunition where they organized and carried on guerilla warfare against their new captors. They became a strong, determined, sagacious and daring militant force called the Maroons and for many years defied the English. From their exploits originated many myths and folk heroes that have become sources of inspiration to the evolving Jamaican society.

By the last half of the 17th century, a new Jamaican population was well along in the making. Already the basis of a multiracial society was laid, consisting for the most part of English settlers and soldiers who lived on the coastal plains, the Maroons, who were pacified by the provision of reservations in the mountains and some autonomy, and a minority of Jewish and Portuguese traders. The language was predominantly English. Nothing remained of the Spanish occupation except a few structural and household remnants, a dialect of an intermixture of Spanish and African native languages which for a time was spoken by the Maroons, and names of places, e.g., Spanish Town, Ocho Rios, Rio Cobre.

### *Growth of the African Population*

The English tried to create a colony consisting primarily of their own people in the island. But soon they were harassed by disease and continued relentless attacks by the Maroons. Following the lead of the Spaniards, the English began to bring in Africans as slaves to work on the sugar estates. Comparatively large numbers began to arrive in the 1660's, and by the middle of the 18th century, quite apart from the Maroons, they outnumbered the Europeans by about 7 to 1.

The Africans who were brought to Jamaica were of different ethnic origins even though the majority came from the West Coast of Africa. Apart from physical and personality differences, they also had different languages. They were the Eboes (Igbo) from the Niger Delta (Bight of Benin); Akim, Ashanti and Fanti peoples who made up the Gold Coast Coromantee faction; Mandingoes from the region between the Niger and the Gambia (south coast of Sierra Leone); Pawpaws from Dahomey, and others from the Congo and Angola south of the Bight of Benin.<sup>2</sup>

A flourishing trade in human cargo sprang up as a result of the increasing demand for farm labor. "In those early days of the slave trade," writes Jamaican historian Clinton Black, "the negroes shipped were mainly prisoners of war or criminals bought from African chiefs in exchange for European goods."<sup>3</sup>

These people were herded into boats, conveyed to the island, and sold at public auction to the highest bidders. Such was the brutality meted out to them that they developed a bitter hatred for the traders and planters.

The slaves were a heterogeneous mass of people. They had lost their family and community life. They could neither read nor write. The slave owners exploited their heterogeneity in order to prevent consensus among the slaves. Education was denied them. Public gatherings were prohibited and family life was discouraged. The techniques of animal breeding were applied as promiscuity and the procreation of as many children as possible was encouraged, a factor which has left its indelible mark on the morals of Jamaican society. These strategies of social engineering were intentionally designed to destroy the pride of the slaves in their origins and to destroy any motivation to retaliate or fight back. But the common experiences of fear, hunger, disease, danger and suffering, caused a gradual cohesion among them. They began to evolve informally a common language derived from English which was the language of their masters. Sufficient English was learned, however, and a dialect developed to make the simplest forms of communication possible. Their vocabulary was limited because the words learned were those with particular reference to work and life on the plantations. The words were poorly pronounced and the sentences grammatically incorrect. Occasionally, a few words from their original African language crept into this new language-in-the-making. As it developed, their original languages were discarded and in time forgotten. Pronunciation and grammar were so distorted that the origins of the words, be they English or African, at times were difficult to discover. A dialect word like 'senseh', used to describe a special breed of Jamaican fowls, came from the Ashanti word 'asensah'; 'Duckunoo', 'fufu', names of certain kinds of native cooked food, and 'packi', a vessel for cooked food, were also from the Ashanti language. Names of places in

the island, such as 'Mocho' and 'Naggo Head' originate from the names of African peoples, and 'Quashie' and 'Cudjoe' folk heroes of the slavery period, are names for the days of the week after which the people of the Gold Coast named their children. "Gie mi mi packy mek mi put mi fufu in deh" is an example of a sentence in the dialect which is translated thus: "Give me my vessel (or bag) and let me put my food into it." This dialect has persisted to the present and is referred to as "patois."

The original deep seated attitudes of the slaves, their beliefs and values, those on which 'time lays a heavy hand', defied the social acculturation strategies of the English, and survived. Generally, these were their superstitions, music, dances, and folklore. These fundamental likenesses were sufficient to bring about a gradual welding of the African races. Witchcraft called 'obeah' was prevalent, and has persisted to a degree until today. The lack of information or formal education only served to intensify their beliefs in the unknown and a dependence on the 'obeahman'.

There were scant opportunities for recreation. Holidays were at Christmas, New Year and Easter; and these provided moments of release for their pent-up energies, emotions, and frustrations. They roamed the villages dressed up in the most colorful clothes they could acquire, singing songs and dancing the dances they could remember from their homeland, together with what they picked up by observing the English. They formed costumed and masked bands in which were depicted animals, real and imaginary, and symbols of their beliefs. These were accompanied by music from fifes, drums and combs, and were called John Canoe bands, a custom which has persisted to the present.

In addition, there were the nightly secret gatherings when work was over and there was no place to go and nothing to do. It was at these meetings that they displayed the ingredients and characteristics of their real original culture. There was a great deal of singing and dancing, some of them lighthearted and gay, full of rhythm and fast tempo. Modern Jamaican dances like the mento, ska, reggae, and calypso are said to have their basic origins in these traditional rhythms. Sometimes these meetings were of religious nature where they gave release to their belief. Religious practices of this nature still persist - a belief in spirits and peculiar types of religious participation which have become known as pocomania. At other times, the old would with deep emotion recount their experiences and folklore of the past to the younger folk. It was at these meetings that the culture of their forefathers, or what was left of it, was communicated to their offspring, and the Jamaican socialization process with an African flavour got under way. As Reisman writes, "Implicit here is the fact that a society dependent on oral traditions and oral communication is, by our standards, a slow paced one: ther

is time enough for grown-ups as well as children, to roll back the carpet of memories."<sup>4</sup> The stories they told centered chiefly around Brer Anancy, the cunning spiderman. Of all the culture of the past, the saga of Brer Anancy and the love for storytelling has persisted strongly in the Jamaican culture.

All the foregoing factors marked the beginning of a culture that was truly Jamaican; rich and dynamic in origin, but as yet without the necessary stimuli, nurture and guidance for rapid development.

Africans continued to be brought into Jamaica as slaves until 1808, when the slave trade was abolished by law.

#### *Afro-Europeans*

During this period, also, a sector of the population who was the progeny of European fathers and African slave mothers had grown greatly in number, so that while not as large in number as the Africans they soon outnumbered the Europeans. These offsprings of Africans and Europeans proved by-and-large to be a great asset to the country. They were vigorous, strong and ambitious, and as they were usually freed and sometimes educated by their fathers, they quickly became an important element for change in Jamaica's population.

During the approximately 180 years that slavery existed under the British, a large section of the African derived population was always restless and desirous of freedom. They maintained continuous pressure on the English rulers through rebellions, as well as lawful means, until 1838 when freedom was achieved.

#### *Social and Political Changes 1838-1963*

With the abolition of slavery, the ex-slaves were free to work for whom they chose. The planters had to institute a system of wage labor to take the place of slave labor. But the freed slaves preferred to set up their own homesteads in the mountains and to strive to support themselves rather than to continue working for their former masters. They created their own villages and communities, became small farmers and cultivators, and began to lay the foundations for the rural population of the island.

To fill the labor gap, which had become acute for the English landowners, large numbers of East Indians and Chinese were imported; but the latter proved unsuitable as agricultural laborers, so they became shop keepers. Later in the century,



Lebanese immigrants also began arriving, thus gradually developing and extending a multiracial society.

The tensions between the former slave owners and the ex-slaves that had characterized slavery were not resolved by Emancipation. The island was gripped by economic depression, including a rise in food prices and increased bitterness between the whites and the negroes. These conditions exploded into the Morant Bay Rebellion of 1865. Though the ex-slaves suffered a great loss of life and property, the rebellion marked an important landmark and turning point in Jamaican history.<sup>5</sup>

The power of the ruling class in the government was reduced as England took over full responsibility for the government. The needs and aspirations of the negroes began to be realized and some efforts were made to improve the conditions of the people. What was done paternalistically, however, did not stem the rising spirit of nationalism. Finally, success in overthrowing the power of the ruling white minority was achieved as a result of the rebellion of 1938. Then began rapid progress towards Independence which was achieved in 1963. A democratic form of government fashioned after the English system was instituted.

The population of one and three-quarters million is still predominantly African. According to the population census of 1960, the percentage distribution of the people of Jamaica by racial origin is as follows:

Census Year	All Races	Afro-African	Euro-European	Euro-Chinese	Chinese Afro-Chinese	East Indian Afro-East Indian	Other Race
1960	100	76.3	15.9	0.8	1.2	3.4	2.4 <sup>6</sup>

The rate of literacy was still very low. In 1960 it was as follows:

Can read and write	-	442,182
Can read only	-	<u>11,241</u>
Total		453,423
Attending school		375,119 <sup>7</sup>

The per capita income was between \$300 to \$500 according to Wilbur Schramm's tabulation of income in 1958 for the major countries of the world.<sup>8</sup> The gross domestic product at factory cost in 1950 was 70.1 million pounds sterling, and in 1962 it ha

risen to 252.5 million pounds sterling. This showed not the relatively poor state of the economy, but an indication of the rate of development that was then taking place.

"But the Jamaican situation is a classic demonstration of the race between development and discontent."<sup>9</sup> The control and the benefits of economic improvements were limited to the relatively small sector of Europeans, while backwardness, gross neglect and discontent prevailed among the major segment. Disbelief and distrust of the system were clogging the societal communication lines and retarding progress and threatening the successful continuation of the modernization process. The social climate for further development seemed doomed unless successful communication lines could be opened and trust, understanding and participation in the social system established. Today, after nearly fourteen years of independence, the socio-economic climate has worsened. The rich have become richer, the poor poorer and discontent is ahead of economic development in the race to modernize.

#### *THE CASE FOR A BETTER UNDERSTANDING*

Since 1938 there has been a rapid race toward modernization and correlated with this a major concern with the communication of information.

The island became "concerned with the part that information can play, if wisely used to speed and smooth what Julius Nyerere called the 'terrible ascent' of the developing nations of the world toward social and economic modernity."<sup>10</sup> It is realized that old ideas and attitudes have to be changed, and new ones introduced. The interest, participation and collaboration of the people have to be secured, stimulated and maintained.

The literacy rate is relatively low, over-population and unemployment are pressing problems. The largest sector of the population consists of small farmers and artisans. They provide the labor and grow the food to feed the nation, and are the backbone of the island's economy. As stated previously, they are predominantly of African origin, and their ancestors were brought from the 'uncivilized', traditional and preliterate cultures of Africa over 300 years ago and were also liberated from slavery for just over 100 years. There are also the people to whom the bulk of the government information has been directed and with whom a large sector of the development programs has been concerned. Every effort is being made to modernize their way of life through many different media of communication and accul-

turation. There have been some expressions of interest on their part. Their numbers have increased at film showings. Concurrently, the government has been increasing the production and exhibition facilities of films. On the surface, there seems to be signs of success.

There have been observable changes, for instance, in some of their behaviours and ways of life, but still many of their deep-rooted attitudes, predispositions, beliefs, customs and values which are not consistent with and supportive of modernization practices and principles seem to persist and to resist change. They behave as if they are split personalities. They shout with their lips while their hearts are silent. Overtly they seem eager and interested in the country's fight for progress. Often their verbal expressions and their opinions seem to give that impression, but on the inside they seem to feel differently, for their actions in many instances are in contradiction to their words. They will overtly disown some of their suspicions, superstitions and beliefs while deep down they remain firm in their own convictions. Ada Wilson Trowbridge seems to have been hitting with a sledgehammer when she wrote about Jamaican Negroes:

*When a negro becomes civilized and Christianized up to a certain point, he considers himself above his heathenish custom and looks with a small degree of scorn upon those of this brothers who still cling to it as a soul saving rite. There are many interesting phases in the character development of the civilized and christianized negro which makes us smile at the substitution of one saving ceremony for another and this conventional custom or that and makes us wonder if aside from their cruel and barbaric practices, the washed and dressed negro is any better than his brother who has not met with European refinement."<sup>11</sup>*

Agricultural programs have changed from government to government, new politics and techniques tried, new means and methods of communication and persuasion applied, but all the results are far below their expectations. From 1938, films have been one of the main media of communication that have been directed at the farmers. And since 1951, when local production commenced, a primary concern of the local films has been to bring the messages relative to social and economic development to the farmers, to engage their interest, redirect, channel and activate their attitudes and so involve them in the race toward modernization. But the real extent to which success has been achieved in the use of films is still a matter of conjecture due to the lack of scientific research facilities for testing and assessing audience reactions to the films and other media o

communication. It is so easy for the communicator in the absence of a thorough understanding of his audience to lapse into the habit of producing messages for his "fantasy" audience, to treat his audience as he perceives them, and not what they really are, and to evaluate results in terms of the quantity of messages produced instead of their quality and effects.

In spite of the absence of scientific data, however, there is evidence of a deep seated lack of rapport and empathy between a large proportion of the masses and those concerned with the job of improving their lives. There seems always a gap that defies bridging, some deep down subliminal chords of consciousness that have not been touched, some deep rooted cultural values that resist the methods used by the films to reach them, to affect them and to bring about change. There seems, therefore, to exist a basic gap in the government communication system and a lack of understanding by Jamaican film makers of their audiences and methods and techniques that might be more effective.

It could be assumed that some of the basic cultural factors of the people are being, as it were, sacrificed on the altar of modernization which though desirable, can be too rapid. Western values, methods and conventions are being imposed without, in many cases, sufficient consideration being given to the foundations of the dominant culture of the many. Indeed, many innovations seem to be in direct conflict with the basic values of the people. Not enough attention has been given to the origins of the majority of the people and the cultures from which they came. Three hundred years of erratic and nonsystematic western acculturation seemed to be considered enough by many to destroy the roots of the past and to achieve fundamental changes. But in the life of a people, or a nation, three centuries are but a moment.

The fallacy of the belief that three hundred years in the life of a people is sufficient to change the true nature of a stream of culture dating back almost to the very beginnings of man is demonstrated by the existence of the Rastafarians. They are a minority sector of the population who have defied and rebelled against the constraints of the modernization and westernization process. Though they have been motivated by a religious cult which is supposed to be based in Ethiopia, and centered around the charismatic figure of Haile Selassie, former Emperor of Ethiopia, their way of life is by and large dedicated to the preservation of much of the remnants of the culture of their forefathers. This is mainly seen in their attire, their religious practices, their beliefs and values, their rich effusion of artistic endeavors and their strong desire to evade much of the superimposed culture in the island and to return to Africa.

Though this sect might be regarded as indicative of extremists of an anti-modernization attitude, they seem to underscore the argument and premise of this study. What is a conscious and overt display on their part might be an indicant of the strong subconscious feelings and predispositions of many others of their kith and kin. The lack of any well meant and planned western acculturation of the Jamaican masses might have strengthened instead of weakened their hold on the culture of their forebears and increased their antagonism to change.

These sociological and anthropological factors in the Jamaican society should pose many questions to the communicator who is concerned not only with communicating but to whom he is communicating and the effects of his communication. They are of paramount importance to all forms of communication consideration related to large masses in under-developed and developing nation throughout the world in their struggle to modernize. The fact that such a large sector of the Jamaican population seem impervious, unmoved and unimpressed by innovations in methods and purposes which seem to be to their benefit and advantage poses a basic communication problem or gap of great magnitude and global importance. It should be possible for suitable films to be produced and used to help in bridging this gap, for the film medium could be regarded as organic in structure and, as such, an international language.

#### *THE FILM MEDIUM - AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE*

The old theory that different races and societies of men are biologically unequal has been exploded. The new concept is that civilized man is largely the product of his environment. Given the conditions, the opportunities, the facilities, the total conducive environment and the time, human beings of any race and in any part of the world could in time achieve the highest forms of civilization. There has also been a broadening of the concept and meaning of the term culture. In general terms it may be described as the way of life of a society, the ways in which a society satisfies its needs, the whole process of action and interaction between man and his environment. It is deep and comprehensive, because it includes all the behavioral patterns of a people, "it is a completely different way of organizing life, of thinking and of conceiving the underlying assumptions about the family and the state, the economic system and even of man himself."<sup>12</sup> Culture controls our behavior, our relationships to our environment and our relationship to other people individually and collectively. As E.T. Hall puts it, "culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and, therefore, beyond conscious

control of the individual."<sup>13</sup>

Civilization in its various forms and stages of development is regarded as an ingredient of culture for it becomes part of culture in its later stages of evolution. The concept of communication as propounded by E.T. Hall and M. McLuhan, and as expressed by Schramm is that it is also synonymous with culture for both are explicitly and implicitly concerned with the very life and existence of a society and the component of society-man. Where there is no culture, there is no life, and vice-versa. Therefore, film, which has become a universal medium or language of communication seems then to be an integral part of and one of the natural ingredients and characteristics of culture and civilization. But film by virtue of its enormous potentials for extending man's domain of sensations and awareness can also be regarded as one of the extensions of man. Hall believes that "culture is bio-basic, rooted in biological activities."<sup>14</sup> It had its roots in the very beginnings of man when he commenced to satisfy his basic drives by securing food, shelter and to perpetuate his kind. From his earliest beginnings he began building a culture, a civilization, a communication system even in the most primitive ways. His efforts established the basic forms and methods of communication which man has expanded over his time of existence on this earth and which have been found in various degrees of development in the many different cultures and stages of civilization found throughout the world. Man has been extending himself inwardly and outwardly which has culminated in the establishment of some of the complicated systems of communication, as part of his culture and civilization. In referring to this process of development Hall writes:

*Today man has developed extensions for practically everything he used to do with his body. The evolution of weapons begins with the teeth and the fist and ends with the atom bomb. Clothes and houses are extensions of man's biological temperature-control mechanisms. Furniture takes the place of squatting and sitting on the ground. Power tools, planes, glasses, TV, telephones and books which carry the voice across both time and space are examples of material extensions.<sup>15</sup>*

It seems logical to conclude, therefore, that film is one of man's material and biological extensions for to a considerable degree it possesses the characteristics of extending man's eyes, ears, and feelings.

The entire philosophy of McLuhan's "The Medium is the Message" seems to be bound up with this conception of the various media of communication being extensions of man, being very parts of ourselves. Though he seems obsessed with TV in parti-

cular, his arguments are inclusive of all communication media developments and in this respect his philosophy has relevance to that of Hall. McLuhan's explanation of mankind not realizing these facts and the reasons for this, are illustrated by likening him to Narcissus, in the Greek Myth, who did not recognize his reflection in the water and mistook it for another person. "Men," he says, "at once become fascinated by any extension of themselves in any material other than themselves,"<sup>16</sup> and become oblivious of the organic relationships. This statement seems to be very relevant to 'film' for wherever it has been introduced whether its structure is understood or not, there has been an inherent and built-in fascination not only in relation to the content, but with the medium or form, *per se*. McLuhan further supports this concept thus:

*During the mechanical ages we have extended our bodies in space. Today after more than a century of electric technology, we have extended our nervous system itself in a global embrace, abolishing both space and time as far as our planet is concerned.<sup>17</sup>*

Film, by global transmission on electromagnetic waves has embraced mankind globally and has produced simultaneity of human reaction and interreaction. As Schramm puts it,

*Only in the most brutal surgery, therefore, can social communication be separated from society, and when the operation is completed both parts of the organism are dead. For the facilities of communication are part of the living structure of society, and the act of communication is part of the living function of society. Communication grows and changes with society because it is something society does. It is a way society lives.<sup>18</sup>*

The film as a medium of communication, therefore, can be regarded as a natural and organic form of communication that can be introduced into any society as a part of its cultural development and process of modernization. It need not be regarded as peculiar to any race or culture but an extension of man's capabilities for coming to terms with his environment and as a means of communication. Its use in Jamaica, therefore, or any part of the world, as a means of communication seems acceptable, permissible, and compatible with modern thought and concepts. However, the concept of film or the cinema as an extension of man and a natural part of his culture and his system of communication, refers to film in its original and virgin form, what might be described as its "purest" state and should be considered as possessing similarities but not identical to the modern cinema or film of today. Over the years it has be-

come an intricate patchwork of techniques and conventions so that the original 'garment' has become well nigh indistinguishable.

McLuhan seems to be in contradiction of his original premise of the inherent organicness of the electric media when he contends that film is unsuitable and meaningless as a communication medium for non-literate peoples. In his view the film is to them an entirely new, foreign, and unnatural language.<sup>19</sup> He seems concerned with aspects and problems that are not inherent, built-in and implicit in the medium, but are more related to the conventions that have been superimposed.

#### *PICTORIAL ORIGINS OF CINEMA NARRATIVE AND CONVENTIONS*

The most important characteristic of the cinema with its unique ability to give the illusion of reality and life quality is 'movement'. It is basic to the film medium, and as Paul Rotha states, "it is the most important of all elements contained in film creation."<sup>20</sup> There are different forms in which it is evident. There is the concept of movement in the image itself, there is movement created by the development of ideas reinforcing and conflicting with one another, there is movement in the interaction of space-time fragmentation, angle changes, sound manipulation, camera movement, rhythms, tempo, and the physical movement of the very film itself. Through the mechanism, "Movement in all its many forms, is the element in cinema that most creates feeling on the part of the audience."<sup>21</sup>

It would seem that its history did not really begin with Edison in America, Lumiere in France and Paul in England towards the end of the 19th century, as so many historians tend to believe and endeavor to explain. This was but one of the many evolutionary and revolutionary stages in its development and was concerned primarily with the synthesized mechanical aspect of overt and explicit movement achieved by the combined operations of the flexible film, the motion picture camera and projector and the neurophysiology of visual lag. These are concerned with scientific technical problems that made it possible for the cinema to become a mass medium. The ability to project a moving image was simply a very important mechanical and optical achievement long desired and long sought for by man.

The development of the concept of motion in the image, and the ability and the process to produce and reproduce dynamic, implicit cinematic image qualities with realistic and life-like quality began many thousands of years ago in the prehistoric times perhaps with the very beginnings of man but certainly in the Paleolithic era. Janson states:



*It is during the last stage of the Paleolithic, about 20,000 years ago, that we encounter the earliest works of art known to us.<sup>22</sup>*

Janson observes, however, that the evidence of sophistication and refinement in the artistic manifestations of that period seem to point to beginnings and developments dating much further back in time. The earliest film artist dwelt in caves where he sought protection against the hazards of the climate and the ferocious animals of the times. There in seclusion and far removed from the gaze of some of the others of his kind he began to paint and sculpture the images of animals and men. He thus began to discover himself and his environment and the relationship that existed between them. He started to extend his domain of sensations and awareness. He commenced the process of action and interaction between himself and his environment which as stated earlier was the beginnings of his culture. Implicit in his first artistic manifestations was the concept of dynamic movement in the image itself, and the preservation of the life quality. This important and fundamental characteristic was natural for him to capture, since he was concerned with discovering and preserving his identity, and establishing it within his environment. He first attempted to capture the life quality that was apparent in life around him for his own personal satisfaction, as well as for other reasons connected with magic, superstition and ritual. He made his recordings in the far recesses of his dwellings. Such recordings have been discovered in caves at Lascaux in France, Altamira in Spain, the Haggar or Tassili Region in North Africa and the Dzankensberg Mountains which skirt the southern portions of Africa (Figure 1) and dates back to about 15,000-10,000 B.C. Implied in these early artistic manifestations of life representations was the basic and fundamental characteristics of the cinema - "movement."

These early paintings may be described as portraits and were representations of animals (Figures 2 and 2a). Action and movement are implicitly depicted in conjunction with the manifestation of the life quality. In other words, the Eland Bull as depicted, is realistic in conception and representation. There was no concern for the limitations and demarcations of surface and space conceptions and conventions like the cinema frame. The figures flowed and conspired with the medium to produce life-like effects. There were none of the mechanics of perspective as we know it. Depth and solidity were suggested by the use of line and color masses, the composition of image movements in space and direction of movements. Their viewpoint was also flexible. The eye level viewpoint was their only consideration. Some of the fundamental characteristics of film were already becoming apparent. In referring to the manifesta-

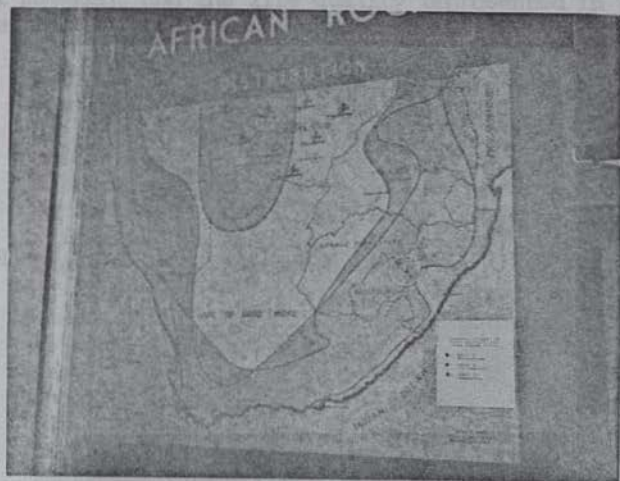


Fig. 1 Map of South Africa showing in light-grey the regions where cave paintings and carvings have been discovered.

Peabody Museum, Harvard.



Fig. 2

Figs. 2 and 2a: Eland Bull reproduced in water color from paintings by the Khoisan which date from at least the second millenium B.C. Transvaal, South Africa.

Peabody Museum, Harvard.

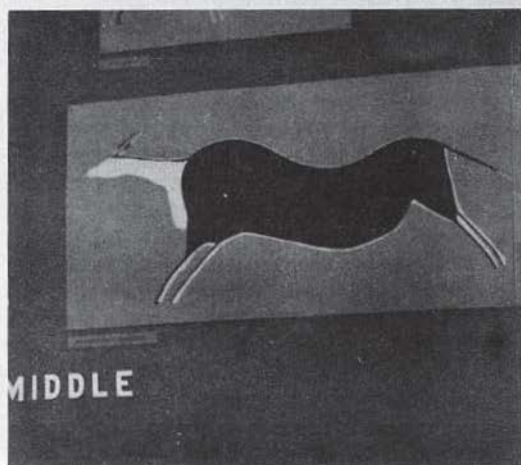


Fig. 2a

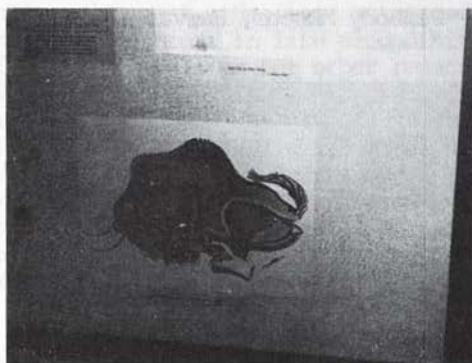


Fig. 3

Wounded Bison, in polychrome. (cave painting)  
Altamira, Spain.

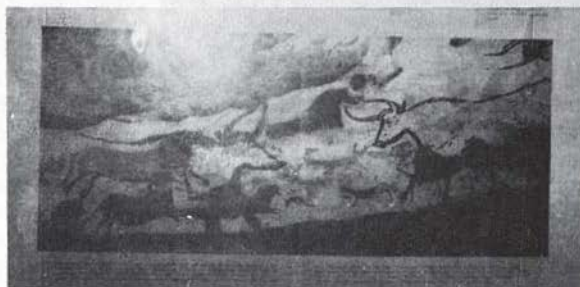


Fig. 4

Animals racing  
across the plain  
(cave painting)  
Lascaux, France.

tions of movement and the life quality represented in those early painting and sculptures Janson writes:

*The most striking works of the Paleolithic art are the images of animals incised, painted, or sculptured, on the rock of surfaces of caves, such as the wonderful Wounded Bison from the cave at Altamira in Northern Spain (Fig. 3). The dying animal has collapsed on the ground, its legs no longer able to carry the weight of its body, yet even in this helpless state, the head is lowered in defense against the spears of the hunters, which threaten it from the lower left hand corner. What a vivid life-like picture it is! We are amazed not only by the keen observation, the assured vigorous outlines, the subtly controlled shading that lends bulk and roundness to the focus, but even more perhaps by the power and dignity of this creature in its final agony. Equally impressive though not quite as fine in detail, are the painted animals in the cave at Lascaux, in the Dordogne region of France (Fig. 4). Bison, deer, horses and cattle race across walls and ceiling in wild profusion, some of them simply outlined in black, others filled with bright earth colors, but all showing the same uncanny sense of life.<sup>23</sup>*

The second stage or period of development was more sophisticated and took place about 8,000 B.C. - 10,000 B.C. and may be described as Levantine, named after the region where the artistic artifacts were mainly found i.e., Southeast Spain. These painting were monochromes either in dark red or black. There was no modelling, or relief of any kind, just flat figures surrounded by lines. An important characteristic that differentiated this period from the earliest stage was the artists concern with man and his condition. The accent was on man in action. Movement and the life quality were continued, maintained and preserved. These were achieved mainly by the distortion of the human figure, marking the beginnings of intensification techniques for personal expression. The flexibility of viewpoint, the unconcern with some of the modern conventions of background and space conception, the lack of regard for physical and psychological boundary by a frame line and the non-audience or very personal point of view orientation persisted. The important cinematic development, however, was the introduction of the scene with a story and the beginning of the pictorial narrative. (Figures 5 and 5a)

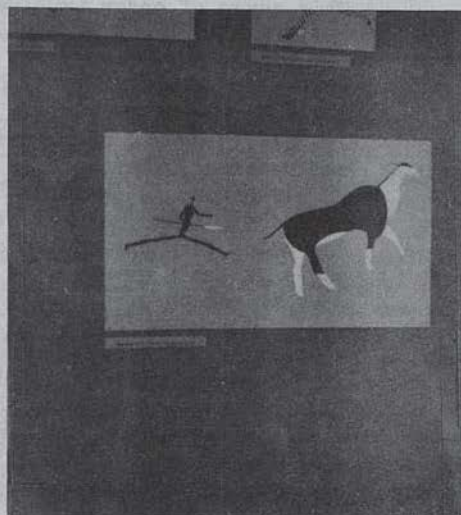
A third stage of cinematic development can be noticed in the representations of man in the Tassali Region and the Transvaal dating from 3,000 B.C. to 5,000 B.C. This had to do with some of the basic elements of dramatic narrative which mark

cinema representation as we know it today. In Figure 6, there can be distinguished a battle scene raging between what might be Khoisan on the left and Hottentots or Bantu on the right. On the left, a woman seems to be restraining a young warrior. On the far right, a man is holding his bleeding arm and also there is a casualty that is prostrate - three actions taking place in the same scene and at the same time. A splendid cinematic environment of the type Griffiths revived and used to perfect his now famous dramatic techniques of parallel action and cross cutting. The drawings were done in polychrome with all the characteristics of life quality and flexibility maintained. There is the continuation of stylistic distortions of the human figure to achieve further illusion of movement and action.

Here we have the origin of the first complete scene of cinema narrative and the cinematograph characteristic of parallel action. Here too, as in the two previous periods, there was no distinction in views, no sense of location. There was no perspective. Depth was achieved by variations in color tone, lines and relief. This period was called the Bouvidian period by L'Hote who was the first to investigate these artistic discoveries. The area which is now mainly desert was then grazing land.

The development of art subsequent to this period and its influences on cinematic history and development seemed to have taken different courses. They were the Predynastic and Dynastic periods of Egyptian Art, the Art of Mesopotamia and the countries of the Near East on one hand and early African Art on the other.

The Egyptian Art began to be concerned more with life after death and less with life quality as were their ancestors and the art before them. The religion of the Egyptians required the belief in gods and the artistic representations manifested these qualities. They also became concerned with architectural and geometrical representations of the social establishment, and as a result their art lost the life quality and became static and symbolic. Their concept of art as a form of communication, however, became evident, in the development of the palette on which artistic representations were made. The convention of the frame also began to appear. These manifestations of rigidity and lack of flexibility were further developed in the Stele which was a religious emblem that came into use about 3,000 to 2,000 B.C. The static rigid figures arranged according to the dictates of perpendicular and horizontal lines became predominant. The sense of order and conventionalism cannot be regarded as natural to artistic development but have, however, persisted through the ages and still dominate much of our artistic perception and artistic representations, and are very evident in the cinema of today. Man lost the natural fluidity, flexibility, life quality and space conceptions of prehistoric art. As



Figs. 5 and 5a: The Hunter reproduced in water color from paintings of the Khoisan in Transvaal, South Africa.

Peabody Museum, Harvard.



Fig. 6: The Battle Scene reproduced from paintings of the Khoisan in Transvaal, South Africa.

Peabody Museum, Harvard.

Giedion says:

*This sense of order involves, at least ever since the times of Egypt and Sumer, the relation of everything that one sees to the vertical or horizontal. Each of us carries in his brain a sort of secret balance that unconsciously impels us to weigh everything we see in relation to the horizontal and vertical. This ranges from the composition of a painting to the most ordinary of our everyday habits. We feel slightly uneasy when our knife and fork are not laid straight beside our plate at table or when the writing paper on our desk is not parallel to the blotter.<sup>24</sup>*

The second trend of development which occurred in Mesopotamian art maintained the characteristics of the frame convention and the beginnings of language such as the hieroglyphics which emerged in Egyptian art, but the main and important difference was the maintenance and continuity of the life quality. Their representations contained the movement concept and other manifestations of realism and thus kept the cinematic concept alive. They also took cinematic representation a very important stage further by introducing the sequence, which is a section of a logical processional order of events. This was seen in the Banner Mosaic titled 'War and Peace'. More than one sequence of events were involved and in this representation the pictorial narrative was exemplified as more modern characteristics of cinema emerged. These representations developed in conjunction with writing and brought these countries into the age of history. Their artistic representations were no longer concerned only with their personal expressions but were produced for the gratification of kings and the communication and recording of information and events. Here again is seen the gradual emergence and evolution of the cinema and documentary films in particular.

Let us follow the trend of Egyptian art development and its concern with the static quality and the conventions connected with the conceptions of space and viewpoint for it is from this trend that Western art and the cinema as we know it, mainly developed. It seemed that the Egyptian trend continued and persisted through Grecian and Roman art. There were unmistakable improvements, expansions and advances in finesse and quality but still the static and lifeless quality predominated.

It was not until the Renaissance that what seemed to have been the Egyptian spell was partially broken. The Church and its compulsion with the concern for life after death was replaced with desire for reason and the improvement of man's lot on earth. Man in the pre-Renaissance period felt that "history was made in Heaven rather than on earth. The Renaissance, by contrast,

divided the past not according to the Divine plan of salvation but on the basis of human achievements."<sup>25</sup> The interest in humanity returned and there flourished a new set of artists, from about 1350, like Giotto of whom Boccaccio wrote he "restored to light this art which had been buried for centuries."<sup>26</sup>

Once more the concern with the manifestation and representation of the life-quality dominated the paintings of the times. Flemish painters like Hubert and Jan Van Eyck excelled in their life-like representations as depicted in Eyck's famous 'Ghent Altar Piece' and his 'Man in a Red Turban' which is considered to be his portrait. There was also the discovery of the oil medium to replace the use of tempera which expanded the possibilities of the creation of the life-like quality and all-embracing devotion to the visible world. By the subtle use of color and light and the gradual decrease in the intensity of color from the foreground to the background, Van Eyck achieved the optical phenomenon of atmospheric perspective which is more fundamental to the perception of deep space than the linear perspective which had developed from Egyptian art and continued to dominate our perception even until today. It was also at that period that experiments began to develop with the mechanical aspects of life-quality representations.

The camera-obscura was invented by Leonardo da Vinci and thus began the development of the representations of movement and life-quality by photography, the uses of lenses and projection equipment, culminating finally in the movie camera and projection equipment. These mechanical and optical achievements while immeasurably enhancing the reproduction of the illusion of life quality served but to perpetuate and increase the conventions that had begun to pervade and distort life representations. They also began to severely limit once again the ability to represent true life images. But most serious of all was the conditioning effects they had on man's perceptions which caused him to view life in the limited context of the various available optical devices and the distorted images they convey.

Later as the art of film representation developed, many more conventions concerned with optical effects and illusions were introduced, such as mixes, wipes and fades. These seemed to have had their origins in their use by Melies, who invented many of them as magical devices, and by those who tried to develop cinema as stage mimicry.

Thus "pure or original" cinema has certain basic characteristics which were present in prehistoric and primitive art. They were mainly concerned with the representation of the life quality, movement and basic elements of the pictorial narrative. These qualities have persisted down the ages with improved sophistication in representation. The vast increase in conven-





Fig. 7

Portrait Head of male from  
Ife, Nigeria, 12th century.  
Collection of the Oni of Ife.



Fig. 8

Man with bronze scepter, Gio ethnic  
group, Liberia, West Africa.

Peabody Museum, Harvard.



Fig. 9

Chief's stool with  
supporting female figure  
Bena Kanioka ethnic  
group, Congo, Africa.

Peabody Museum,  
Harvard.



Fig. 10

Bronze Head, Benin, West  
Africa.

Peabody Museum,  
Harvard.

(Benin is one of the spe-  
cific locations from which  
slaves were brought to  
Jamaica.)



Fig. 11

Mother and Child in Cast Brass, Liberia, West Africa.

Peabody Museum, Harvard.

tions, many of which we fail to perceive and recognize because of our conditioning, together with the characteristics of "pure" cinema have created the cinematic patchwork of today. Unfortunately this "prostituted patchwork" cinema has been passed off and generally accepted globally as the cinema for "all peoples" notwithstanding the communication problems that could arise as a result of the conventionalization of the medium.

#### *The Art of Central and Western Africa*

In West Africa, where the majority of the Jamaican population originated, the development of art seemingly did not progress beyond the early stage. The people did not develop a system of writing and their art remained for the most part manifestations for personal contemplation, for magic and for ritual. Their pictorial representations did not go beyond the stage of the scene as depicted in Figure 6. There was also no indication that they became concerned with conventions of any sort. Their art still maintained the life quality, flexibility, freedom of viewpoint and unconventionalized space conception.

The many conventionalizing influences, changes and developments concerned with cinematic and other art endeavors did not seem to have affected the realistic approach to art in those regions. These people continued and progressed in the representation of life-quality which seemed to have remained with them from early times and was still manifested in their art. About the 12th century the people of Ife in Nigeria were producing heads which were "excavated at Ife somewhat to the west of the lower course of the Niger. Some are of... bronze. The casting technique called the *cire-purdue* (lost-wax) process was used here with great skill... Even more astonishing than its technical refinement, however, is the subtle and assured realism of our Ife head."<sup>27</sup> (Fig. 7) Specimens of realistic representations found in and around that region of Africa are shown in Figures 8, 9, 10 and 11. Thus it can be assumed that the early people of Africa, who are the ancestors of our negro Jamaican population, were oriented to cinematic representations of man and his environment. They were accustomed to the basic characteristics of cinema art in its pure and original form which was devoid of the many conventions that have cluttered the modern cinema.

#### *PROBLEMS OF WESTERN CINEMA NARRATIVE CONVENTIONS FOR SOME OF JAMAICAN AUDIENCES*

In view of the discussion in the preceding parts of this essay, it should *not* be assumed that the understanding of art conventions and perceptions which seemed to have accompanied the

artistic developments of western man, and are featured so much in his filmic presentations should also be easily understandable by peoples of the traditional cultures of Western and Central Africa and some of their descendants in Jamaica. For while the representations of movement and life quality and the basics of narrative structure or dramaturgy are acceptable and understandable, the static representations and restrictions of such conventions as the frame, perspective, the fixed viewpoint and the concern with horizontals and verticals are not familiar to their visual perception. The films which are being presented to them are dominated by a concern for these conventions, as the film techniques are completely and wholly westernized. The western tradition in film making is derived from the Renaissance tradition with its concern with conventions which have been perpetuated in the Jamaican techniques of film production.

There have been reactions by some rural Jamaican audiences to films that seem to point to this problem. They seemingly do not understand some of the conventions of the film medium as is currently presented to them. In support of this conclusion, here are some reactions of rural audiences to film presentation:

1. When a montage of shorts are shown in a film to cover a large span of a character's life, say from childhood to adulthood, using conventions of mixes and fades for action, time and space compression between the shots, people have been heard to make remarks like these - "How dem grow so fast? It can't be de same person. Dat no true!"

2. When an extra close-up of a fly's head is shown, for example, immediately preceded by a long shot of flies, remarks like the following are made - "Dat de fly too big. Me never see fly so big."

3. When a character leaves a shot frame left or frame right and appears again in the next shot in a new location, without sufficient transition cues, sometimes members of the audience will exclaim - "How him just jump out a de picture and jump on again? Him gwane like him is a magician."

Marshall McLuhan refers to problems of a similar nature among African audiences in the following statement:

*Movies assume a high level of literacy in their users and prove baffling to the non-literate. Our literate acceptance of the mere movement of the camera eye as it follows or drops a figure from view is not acceptable to an African film audience. If somebody disappears off the side of the film, the African wants to know what happened to him.*

*A literate audience however...will accept film sequence without protest. For even when natives have learned to 'see' pictures, they cannot accept our ideas of time and space illusions. On seeing Charlie Chaplin's 'The Tramp', the Africans audience concluded that Europeans were magicians who could restore life.*

The majority of films being produced in Jamaica have been entirely based on the Western traditions and techniques. The West Indies Film Training School, which first introduced formal film training in Jamaica in 1950, and other subsequent efforts of this sort did not take the sociological and anthropological factors the largest sector of the Jamaican society into consideration when planning the film techniques for West Indian audiences. What was considered good for the West was also felt to be good for the Jamaicans and so the film conventions were imported lock, stock and barrel and imposed without any considerations of the possibilities of differences in the culture of Jamaican audiences and the making of modifications in cinematic representations to suit them.

According to our investigations so far, it seems logical to hypothesize that a reason for the lack of successful communication in the use of the film in Jamaica primarily among rural audiences might be in the techniques of production practiced at the present time.

It seems pertinent to suggest, therefore, that one solution to the Jamaican communication problem might be found by carrying out an investigation in the use of film conventions in relation to the films produced for Jamaican rural audiences to find out their reactions to conventions and the extent to which the conventions affect their understanding and comprehension. At the same time experimentation could commence to develop a cinema style that is more compatible with their cultural origins - in other words, to initiate efforts to discover a screen dramaturgy in an African tradition.

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\* \* \* \* \*

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This is the first part of a two-part essay. Part two will appear in Vol. VII, no. 3.



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