

FILM REVIEW

Marc Allégret, director. *Travels in the Congo*. 1927/2017. Original title: *Voyage au Congo*. 117 minutes. Silent with music, French intertitles/English subtitles. France. Icarus Films. \$398.

Icarus Films has released, with English subtitles, a carefully restored and digitized version of Marc Allégret's 1927 film *Travels in the Congo*. The restoration was done by Les Films du Panthéon, Les Films du Jeudi, and the Cinémathèque Française, from an original nitrate negative held by the French Centre National du Cinéma (CNC) and a copy from the British Film Institute (BFI). Mauro Coceano composed an original score commissioned for this reissue, which premiered at the Louvre Museum in Paris and was an official selection at the 2018 Cinema Ritrovato Festival in Bologna. A feature-length documentary with rare footage shot in central Africa in the 1920s, *Travels in the Congo* is a fascinating artifact, and Coceano's music heightens and modernizes the viewing experience. It is an important film for understanding both colonial history and film history in sub-Saharan Africa.

Travels in the Congo was Allégret's first film, and he is better remembered for a series of French comedies from the 1930s and early 1940s starring Raimu, Marcel Pagnol, and Josephine Baker. Over the course of eleven months beginning in 1925, Allégret traveled with renowned French novelist André Gide through what was then Belgian Congo and French Equatorial Africa. Allégret was twenty-five years old and Gide fifty-five. Upon their return, Gide published his travel diaries as *Travels in the Congo* and *Return from Chad*. Allégret's film, subtitled *Scenes of Indigenous Life in Equatorial Africa*, is a visual travel diary; each chapter begins with a map identifying its location within the Belgian and French colonies in the region, and intertitles provide descriptions and occasional commentary. Scenes were for the most part shot with a stationary camera, with panning shots appearing in the last quarter of the film, and occasional dissolves and iris in/iris out effects were added during editing.

Allégret and Gide never appear on screen and are never mentioned in the intertitles, but the spectator must assume that they were among the white tourists socializing on the deck of a ship as *Travels in the Congo* begins. While the documentary images that follow highlight such African geographic wonders as M'Bali Falls, they more often have an ethnographic focus,

displaying the dances that follow N'zakara excision rituals, the giant clay structures built by the Massa, and the dancing masks of the Moundang. Baya women make what an intertitle calls "bread" from tubers they have soaked, dried, ground, sifted, and boiled, and another intertitle notes that the Foulbé in northern Cameroon are Muslim and not "fetichist." Allégret also incorporated a lengthy acted sequence into his travel documentary, in which a young Sara man and woman meet and flirt, then negotiate and celebrate their marriage.

Travels in the Congo was filmed midway through the colonization of Congo, forty years after the Berlin Conference awarded it to King Léopold II of Belgium, seventeen years after Léopold ceded it to Belgium following revelations of the mass casualties resulting from his rule, and thirty-five years before independence. Although Gide became a vocal critic of French colonialism, and particularly of the abuses of "concessions" (companies created by France to exploit Africa and Africans), his trip with Allégret was granted the status of "mission" by the French government. And *Travels in the Congo*, one in a long line of documentaries shot by French cameramen in colonial-era West and Central Africa, is not an anticolonial film. Allégret filmed Congolese men and boys waiting to weigh their harvest at a rubber production center in Bambari, yet his intertitles do not mention the violence of Belgium's exploitative rubber trade. An intertitle praising the colonial governor of Oubangui-Chari for the region's network of roads, thanks to which automobile convoys have "liberated the population from the harsh labor of portage," seems bitterly ironic today, as does another declaring that "Nothing is more peaceful than life in one of these villages."

At Fort Archambault, Allégret filmed competitions organized by French officials as part of a New Year's Day celebration. Featuring African contestants, these scenes were shot and edited to amuse a French audience. A group of boys try to climb up a greased pole after the "serious competitors" have finished. The camera then travels down a line of women waiting to compete, their breasts and not their faces centered in the frame; an intertitle notes that they are wearing their "best pearl necklaces." A game involving an enormous "push ball" amplifies the colonial stereotype of Africans as childlike. The French residents of Fort Archambault who would have been watching the competitions do not appear in any of Allégret's images, and throughout the film, the colonizers remain hidden. We catch only brief glimpses; two men in white uniforms and pith helmets examine a dead hippopotamus brought in by a group of Kotoko men, and several others watch a parade of Foulbé notables on horseback. When the film concludes with an intertitle announcing the viewer's arrival in "civilization," even among the European-style houses and at the Protestant Mission in Douala, amid the "agitation of European life," there are no white people on screen. Allégret later wrote about this aspect of the film, maintaining that "We wanted the spectator to be enveloped, as we had been ourselves, by the atmosphere of this mysterious land, wanted him to become the secret observer of a

humanity without history.” European spectators of African life retained their privacy, remaining behind the camera and in front of the screen.

Coceano, an Italian composer based in Paris since the early 1980s, has written and performed close to fifty “cine-concerts.” For *Travels in the Congo*, he used piano, accordion, clarinet, saxophone, violin, cello, guitar, and several percussion instruments, both to make sounds linked to actions on screen and to create a spare, modern musical accompaniment that occasionally evokes traditional African instruments. It is intriguing to imagine the possibilities for tension and counterpoint between images and sound that could have been accomplished by a cooperative effort with an African composer and African musicians.

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