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Safari Adventure: Forgotten Cinematic Journeys in Africa

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Abstract

This essay examines the construction of the "safari adventure" through the motion picture films of amateur, semi-professional and professional filmmakers in Africa during the 1920s, 1930s and 1940s. It is argued that new forms of transportation and cinematic technologies (especially color and sound) created new modes of mobility and visibility on safari that allowed for the reinvention and recycling of narrative tropes and stereotypes of Africa. The archival films considered in this essay illustrate the creation of imaginary geographies of Africa in the popular medium of film and demonstrate persistent western fascination with the exotic and cultural difference.

Safari adventure: forgotten cinematic journeys in Africa

Amy J. Staples

“Take the trip of a lifetime” ... the tagline for a recent IMAX film *Wild Safari 3D: A South African Adventure* promises audiences a “real-life adventure” in Africa through state-of-the-art film technology and live-action 3D cinematography. As “passengers” in the back seat of an open-air jeep, the film creates a virtual safari by immersing viewers in the sights and sounds of Africa and simulating close encounters with the ‘big five’ (i.e. elephant, lion, leopard, rhino and water buffalo). Young viewers with 3-D glasses who reach out to pet the animals or part the grass as the safari moves through the South African bush vividly illustrate the impact of IMAX virtual technology on popular audiences. And yet, while press materials tout the film’s novel, ‘never-before-seen’ views of wildlife through satellite imagery and large format, stereoscopic photography, it recycles century-old tropes of time travel, the wilderness and vanishing Africa.¹ With the exception of the African game trackers assisting the white South African ranger, indigenous Africans have been erased from this safari route. *Wild Safari 3D* is the latest reincarnation of Africa in a history of cinematic technologies and visual practices that first emerged on hunting trips and motorized safaris during the early twentieth century.

While contemporary depictions of the African safari frequently conjure up images of tropical jungles or grassy plains with wild animals and exotic-looking peoples, the history of the safari, and the term itself, is more complex. In this essay, I argue that the ‘safari’ is a recreational practice that represents a dynamic process of transcultural contact and exchange in response to new forms of mobility and visibility in colonial and post-colonial Africa. The safari adventure can be understood as a historically situated set of social, technological and visual practices that have operated within western constructions of adventure and exoticism. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Swahili word

safari (referring to a trip or journey) was appropriated by European and American travelers in Africa and popularized as a mode of hunting and recreation.² With the establishment of nature preserves, hunting bans and independence for African nations in the late 1950s and 1960s, the safari adventure was increasingly commodified and transformed into a more benign (but no less significant in its impact on indigenous peoples) form of photographic and ecotourism. The camera, still and motion picture, was (and is) an essential piece of equipment on safari. In fact, the experience of exploration and discovery for most safari tourists is largely constructed through the camera lens and photographic encounters with African landscapes, animals and peoples. These visual practices resonate with the root meaning of the Arabic verb *safara*, to “unveil” or “discover”, an etymology that alludes to notions of gender and sexuality through the act of “unveiling” hidden landscapes through the cinematic apparatus.³ The notion of the safari in the western imagination is a transcultural concept that incorporates practices of travel, hunting, masculinity, photography and filmmaking.

In recent years, scholars have begun to look more closely at the intersections between early twentieth-century technologies of travel and cinema. Many have observed the inherent relationships between

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