



## AFRICA IN MOVIMENTO / AFRICA ON THE MOVE

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**TITLE: CINEMA REACHES AFRICA: A LINGUISTIC AND TRANSLATIONAL ACCOUNT**

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**ABSTRACT:** In Christian Metz's words (1968), cinema is "langage sans langue", a corpus of discourses which reveal a huge expressive potential but do not follow specific combinatory rules. For James Monaco (1977-2000: 152), "film is not a language in the sense that English, French or mathematics is. But film is very much like language. An education in the quasi-language of film opens up greater potential meaning for the observer, so it is useful to use the metaphor of language to describe the phenomenon of film".

Cinema is also, undeniably, dependent upon the use of verbal language: dialogues merge with images and sounds in the actualization of cinematic discourses, although verbal language is not universal, it requires translation across countries, communities, cultures.

This complex, stratified vision of cinema will guide us in our analysis of the messages conveyed in films made "for the African": in 1935 and 1936, the UK-based Department of Social and Industrial Research of the International Missionary Council, carried out an extensive experiment to bring cinema to the colonized African people. The experiment, which involved producing a large number of short films and showing them to audiences across Tanganyika, Uganda and Kenya, was the first of its kind. Luckily, it was duly reported in a book published in London in 1937 and entitled "The African and the Cinema".

Although the first declared aim was to provide entertainment to the African people, whose "recreational life" was found by the British missionaries and officers to be "extremely barren" (1937: 9), their true goal was to bring the cinema to Africa in their own terms, by exploiting its meaning potential to convey colonial and missionary messages and "educate" the people.

The book also offers an interesting account of the role, and treatment, of verbal language in the production and dissemination of these films. A few years after the advent of the American "talkies", the British officers decided not to limit the experiment to silent films, but rather to have multiple language versions. Interestingly, only certain languages were deemed fit for dialogue, whereas many others were superimposed to images in the form of a commentary, often written in English and then translated into one or more African languages.

This paper wishes to analyse the experiment reported in *The African and the Cinema* from a linguistic and translational point of view. From the interpretation of the language of cinema, to verbal language as it was constructed, constrained and translated for this experiment, we shall outline the arrival of cinema on the African continent.

### **AUTHOR'S ACADEMIC PROFILE:**

*Elena Di Giovanni* is Lecturer in English Language and Translation at the University of Macerata. She holds a degree in Translation from the University of Bologna, Italy, and a PhD in English for Special Purposes from the University Federico II in Naples (consortium with the University of Bologna). Her research interests lie in literature and translation in postcolonial settings, with special reference to Asia and, more recently, Africa. She also specializes in research on audiovisual translation (cinema, television, theatre) and media accessibility for the sensory impaired.