

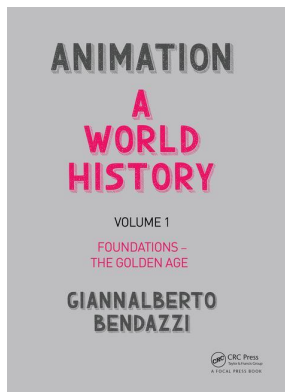
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Silent Africa

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Union of South Africa^{1,2}

The Artist's Dream/The Artist's Inspiration (1915) is considered the first animated film made in South Africa and was produced by African Film Productions. Directed by the American Harold Shaw,³ it tells the story of an artist's animated drawings and includes cartoons and live action. The protagonist was Dennis Sentry (a cartoonist for the *Rand Daily Mail* and the *Sunday Times*), along with star actress Mabel May. Sarienue Kersh describes it as 'a sophisticated drawtoon about an artist who draws a beautiful woman in a park. He then dreams a subsequent series of events in which his drawings come to life'.⁴ It is a self-reflexive work that challenges viewers' perceptions of reality and illusion and invites them to question the notion of authorship. This sophisticated 'drawtoon' (or lightning sketch/chalk talk) strongly echoed the modes of production and

style used by many of the early American animators, such as Winsor McCay and James Stuart Blackton. The film was produced by Isidore W. Schlesinger (1871–1949), Mabel May's husband and the father of the cinema production and industry in South Africa.⁵ He is credited with the establishment of the earliest documented native film production house, which was founded in 1915, called African Film Productions, and was created from the fusion of the African Theatres Trust (theatre management and administration) and the African Film Trust (import and distribution).

In 1917, African Film Productions released four more animated shorts directed by cartoonist and scriptwriter Norman H. Lee, entitled *The Adventures of Ranger Focus*, *Don't You Believe, Crooks and Christmas*, and *The Adventures of Ben Cocksles*. Regrettably, no remnants of these films exist, and only a few still photographs survive.

¹ By Shanaz Shapurjee Hampson and Giannalberto Bendazzi.

² On 13 May 1902, the treaty that ended the Anglo-Boer War was signed at Vereeniging; it signified a new era of cooperation between English and Afrikaner living in Southern Africa. By 1910, the two Afrikaner states of the Orange River Colony (*Oranje Vrij Staat*) and Transvaal (*Zuid Afrikaansche Republiek*) were joined with Cape Colony and Natal as the Union of South Africa. The repression of black Africans became entrenched in the constitution of the new union (although perhaps not intentionally), and the foundations of grand apartheid were laid.

³ Harold Shaw (1876–1926) began his career in film as an actor with Edison in 1908, quickly graduating to a live-action film director and then moving to the IMP Company. His best known work from this first period is the haunting fantasy film *The Land Beyond the Sunset* (1912). Shaw moved to Britain in 1913 to work for London Film Productions and made a name for himself with (for instance) *The House of Tempered* (1913) and *Trilby* (1914). In 1916, he ventured out with his actress wife Edna Flugrath to South Africa, where he had been hired by African Film Productions. His first film there, *Die Voortrekkers* (1916), which starred Flugrath, was sensationally successful locally and gained some screenings overseas (in the United States, this was known as 'Winning a Continent'). The scenario was written by historian Gustav Preller, and its version of the Great Trek emphasized the common destiny of Britons and Afrikaners (the Anglo-Boer War was long past and the political stress was now on the Union) and the 'savagery' of the native people (who, the film argues, were led to rise against the Boers by Portuguese traders). Newspaper reports of the time stressed the authenticity of the props and costumes and the huge numbers of extras, black and white, many of them mine employees. The completed film ran for some two hours. Shaw and Flugrath then made a melodrama about stolen diamonds, *The Rose of Rhodesia* (1917), and a horse-racing drama entitled *Thoroughbreds All* (1919). After having returned to Britain, Shaw went to the Soviet Union to film *Land of Mystery* (1920), a melodrama loosely based on the life of Lenin. Shaw made more films in Britain before returning to America to direct for Metro. He died in a car accident in 1926.

⁴ Sarienne Kersh, 'History of South African Animation', *Screen Africa*, 20 November 1996, p. 36.

⁵ Schlesinger was an American, too; he was born in New York and never gave up his original citizenship. Originally a developer, he embraced the film business in 1913. In the Johannesburg suburb of Killarney, he founded Killarney Film Studios. Killarney was one of Schlesinger's real estate properties as a developer. The housing that made Killarney a full-fledged Johannesburg suburb started only in the early 1930s.