

Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965): Fiction and Historical Reconstruction in Movies

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Received 26 September 2012; accepted 2 October 2012.

Summary

The 1952 Nobel Peace Prize granted to Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) meant not only an acknowledgement of his altruistic work in Africa but also implied his development into a global public figure. His influence covered a wide range of fields (theologian, philosopher, musician, physician). In the context of the cold war and the menace of a nuclear war, he advocated for a universal concept of ethics and the "Reverence for life". His life was very soon object of dramatisations, both in film and theatre plays, often openly apologetically. Following the decolonization and the fall of real socialism, his figure has been revisited in a number of films. However, many of these modern dramatisations tend to focus on then-current concerns and disregard the contradictions and limitations of Albert Schweitzer. The biopic is a genre where the freedom of scriptwriters and directors prevail, and where those specific events that may be most appealing to the public are emphatically portrayed. The documentary film, intended to enhance the image of the person, has given way to other approaches, where a number of Schweitzer acquaintances provide a more clear and corroborated picture of his complex personality.

Keywords: Schweitzer, Religion and Medicine, Ethical Theory, International Cooperation, Voluntary Workers, Documentaries, Factual Films.

Resumen

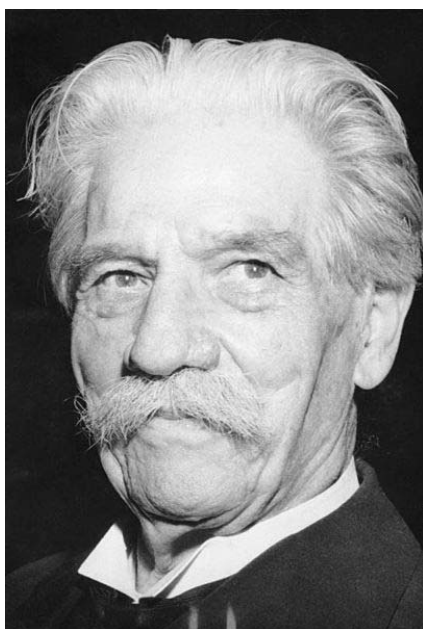
La concesión en 1952 del premio Nobel de la Paz a Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965) supuso no solo un reconocimiento de su compromiso altruista en Africa sino también su conversión en una celebridad mundial. Se trataba de un personaje lleno de facetas infrecuentes (teólogo, filósofo, médico, músico) que defendía una ética universal, el "Respeto a la vida", que estaba en riesgo por la amenaza de un conflicto nuclear promovido por la guerra fría. El teatro y el cine le dedicaron muy pronto su atención con una intención abiertamente apologética. Tras la descolonización y el fin del socialismo real se ha producido también una revisión cinematográfica de su figura que, en muchas ocasiones, atiende más a las inquietudes actuales del momento cronológico en que se ha rodado el filme que a un análisis de las contradicciones y limitaciones del personaje. El "biopic" es el género cinematográfico donde se impone la libertad de guionistas y directores que enfatizan sobre sucesos y comportamientos que pueden resultar más atractivos para el público. También el documental elaborado con un seguimiento muy atento a reforzar la figura del personaje ha dado paso a otros acercamientos, donde diversos interlocutores que conocieron a Schweitzer, ofrecen una interpretación más matizada y contrastada de un hombre complejo.

Palabras clave: Schweitzer, religión y medicina, teorías éticas, cooperación internacional, voluntariado, documentales, cine.

The author states that this article is original and that it has not been previously published.

Between intellectual engagement and the call of Africa*

When dealing with multifaceted lives such as that of Albert Schweitzer (1875-1965), it is difficult to restrict public life to a single activity. As a theologian, musician, organist and constant advocate of pacifism, Schweitzer found in his late graduation as a doctor (at the age of 37) a professional space to develop his social engagement without leaving aside the other multiple dimensions of his exceptional personality. Believing that specialization sets boundaries to our horizons, rendering us unable to analyse the reality of our surroundings, he always avoided restricting his life to a single profession, even at the risk of straying from it.



Lambaréné, at the time the French colony of Gabon, was where he spent his life since 1913, performing work related to healthcare, education and religion aimed at improving the living conditions of the native population. He often travelled to Europe for conferences and concerts in his efforts to raise funds for his hospital and spread, ever more insistently, his ideal of ethical improvement.

Until his ideology finally took shape, Schweitzer undertook a long intellectual journey that placed him at some of most interesting cultural crossroads of our time. The son of a Protestant pastor, he focused his intellectual curiosity on theology and philosophy when he began his university studies. One of his theological works, first published in 1906 and still reissued from time to time, *Geschichte der Leben Jesu Forschung*, *History of Life-of-Jesus Research* in English, culminated a research process that had begun in the 18th century on the possibilities of reconstructing the life and thought of Jesus using the methods and accuracy of illustrated and positivist historiography. Schweitzer definitely proved that such a project was not feasible, the historical character of Jesus was overwhelmed by his own message, and the extensive literature consulted appeared full of limitations and contradictions.



His theological theories were challenged by many Reformed Churches, so that during his first working experience in Africa, through his commitment to the Parisian Société des Missions Évangéliques, he initially refused to conduct missionary work. A progressively secularized thinking, while still preserving its original religious basis, became the ideology he relentlessly preached as a result from his new experiences. "Reverence for life", understood as our commitment to the preservation of all that surrounds us, was the only principle able to bring about an essential change in the

* Schweitzer is the author of a great many literary works. Seven volumes of his unpublished writings have been published in Munich between 1995 and 2006. His most popular and widely available books are *À la orée du forêt vierge*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1965; *De mi vida y mi pensamiento*. Barcelona: Aymá, 1966; *J.S.Bach: el músico-poeta*. Buenos Aires: Ricordi Americana, 1985 and *Investigaciones sobre la vida de Jesús*. Valencia: Edicep, 1990. Recent editions of his letters to his wife Helene between 1902 and 1912 have appeared in German, French and English. His biography has also led to different publications such as Pierhal J. *Albert Schweitzer. La vida de un hombre bueno*. Barcelona: Noguer, 1955; Vázquez Borau J L. *Albert Schweitzer*. Madrid: Fundación Emmanuel Mounier, 2009; Brabazon J. *Albert Schweitzer: A Biography*. Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000; Oermann N O. *Albert Schweitzer. Eine biographie*. Munchen: C.H.Beck, 2009; Munz W. *Albert Schweitzer's Lambarene: A Legacy of Humanity for Our World Today*. Rockland: ME: Penobscot Press, 2010.

individual's behaviour to make possible the achievement of a truly free and equal society. The desire to live, shared by humans, animals and plants, gives rise to a universal ethical requirement that should be imposed and sustained at all cost: respect and reverence for life. From the tradition of the Reformation, Schweitzer frowned upon the material progress that was taking place without a parallel development of individual moral values. The wars that took place in the first half of the 20th century were proof of this existential failure. During his last years, the threats posed to humankind by the military use of atomic energy led him to repeatedly criticize this harrowing reality – remember his famous letter to Kennedy and Kruschev. For current thinking, which is more sensitive to environmental and animal protection issues, Schweitzer is a pioneer at the highest levels, a man capable of warning against the risks of an exacerbated human interventionism that degrades our planet and the very substrate of our existence.

Whereas in the eyes of theologians Schweitzer is an exegete that goes beyond all limits of historical approach, musicologists see him as a specialist in Bach and one of the best organists of his time. Music study and practice were common in his family and Schweitzer always strove to improve the musical training he had received. While in his African home, he devoted the little free time his medical activities left him to playing his vertical piano. His concerts and his book on Bach, published almost at the same time as his *History of Life-of-Jesus Research*, raised funds for both the hospital in Lambaréné and the family home at Gunsbach (in Alsace, which belonged to France since 1920), which was the main headquarters of his support projects in Africa. A great lover of 17th and 18th musical instruments, he believed that the technologically improved and more complex organs of later times deformed the sounds that former composers had imagined. His aim was to recover the purity of the most authentic Bach from the simplicity of the instrument, setting it in such a place in the church that the sound of the original score would not become altered.

His leaving Europe did not put an end to his intellectual activities. On the contrary, Africa provided the time for reflection he needed to work on various types of books, their topics ranging from the meaning of Saint Paul of Tarsus to the works of Goethe, from texts on Hindu thought to reflections on ethics and civilization. With other lighter and more approachable publications he managed to draw attention to the needs of his hospital and to also spread his ideal of commitment to nature and animals. Certain former and more recent biogra-

phies approach him as a character with a complex and sometimes contradictory personality whose degree of commitment is, nevertheless, always moving.



A life in film: the man and the public figure

Cinema could not fail to be attracted to a character with such an unusual life experience, and therefore there have been several cinematographic approaches with different degrees of success and different types of intention. To condense such a long and complex life in the limited frame of a script is, no doubt, a challenge for any filmmaker. This is why attempts have focused on specific periods or facets of his life that could be more interesting from the point of view of the general public's concerns. While he was still alive, *Il est minuit, Dr. Schweitzer*, a play by Gilbert Cesbron, premiered in 1951, provided the basis for a film of the same title by André Haguët that was presented in 1952¹. The following year he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize (the one corresponding to 1952 was awarded in 1953). This, together with his involvement in campaigns for international harmony at the height of the Cold War, contributed to increase a public relevance that would accompany him until the end of his days. Cesbron's text and subsequent film reinforced the main character's most heroic aspects and reviewed the need to overcome the national antagonisms that had brought European inhabitants into conflict, all of this from the perspective of 1914, where the action is set. Schweitzer's confinement in the French Lambaréné by the colonial troops and his subsequent



transfer to France, were an attack on a man who had put the attention to the least favoured in a corner of Africa before his consolidated social status in Europe. Born in the German Alsace (which had become French again following the Treaty of Versailles), Schweitzer suffered the contradictions of European policy, shaken by national confrontations since the Middle Ages. The absurdity of this situation was reinforced by the presence of actors who were torn between different moral standings towards the war, in the best style of Catholic literary theses. The filming was remarkably low-cost, almost all of it took place in studio sets, and the parts made in Gabon have a certain documentary style that is difficult to fit in with the stiff sequences filmed in France. It was originally conceived as a play, the cinematographic adaptation of the script deals extensively with the pacifist side of the text, although it avoids excessive praise of the character's vicissitudes. In any case, the film reinforced the national pride in face of its Eastern neighbour of a France that had recently emerged from war with Germany. The film ends with the departure along the river towards confinement in Europe, after which an imageless text leaves few doubts as to the propaganda intention of the film: "He is back again... it has started again. After the

armistice, with an already recovered Alsace, Dr Schweitzer, French citizen, has returned to Lambaréné with a single purpose, to provide hope, relieve suffering... heal... save... right up to the last minute of his life".

In 1952 the French were not yet conscious of the negative effects of colonialism; and most of them imagined the native population as benefiting from the protection of the metropolis. Schweitzer had become the clearest example of altruism and commitment to the most disadvantaged at a time when only openly faith-based institutions, with the support of religious organizations, were concerned with improving living conditions in the African colonies. Even when a colonialist reaction vindicating "blackness" as an identity trait had already emerged in France itself among young people from overseas, the message communicated by the film lacks sensitivity towards this issue. Indeed, Africans appear as completely secondary characters and, in more than one sequence, displaying degrees of violence and recklessness that justified the presence of Europeans with pacifying and educational purposes. This interpretation of the character was, of course, also criticized. Not all was self-satisfaction and pleasure, despite the efforts to make it seem so of a fraction of French society. In 1959, in one of his sharpest poems, Boris Vian, fed up with so much beatification, launched the following words against Schweitzer: "*Jouez de l'orgue avec vos pieds/Étudiez Bach si ça vous plait/Mais sachez que depuis cent ans/En long en large et en travers/Qu'il soit minuit, qu'il soit midi/Vous me faites chier, docteur Schweitzer/Il importait que ce fût dit ...*" (Play the organ with your feet/study Bach if you please/but be aware that for a hundred years now/far and wide and across/be it midnight or noon/you give me the runs, doctor Schweitzer/It is important to say this...). This is a flat rejection, from a left-wing iconoclastic point of view, of any "exemplary" conduct spread by bourgeois propaganda. However, it also transpires a certain weariness of a character covered with praise by the press and described as a paragon of virtue².

The documentary as a historical source

As opposed to the clearly discursive nature of *Il est minuit, Dr. Schweitzer*, in his movie *Albert Schweitzer* (1957) (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gf4B9v0s0CY>), Jerome Hill chose to follow more closely the autobiographic texts written by Schweitzer himself (especially his popular *Out of My Life and Thought*). Awarded an Oscar in the category of Best Documentary of the Year, it has become the main iconographic source for the characterization of the doctor and knowledge of daily life at the hospital. Certain sequences of the documentary, or

even filmed material that was not included in the final editing, are still frequently used in other cinema and TV reviews. It is the main historical documentary on the life of Albert Schweitzer³.

The images sought to be as faithful as possible to reality, in the best tradition of the genre, following in the steps of great documentary filmmakers of considerable influence, ranging from Flaherty to Rouquier. There were also some lines at the beginning of the film reminding the viewer of the fact that it was the result of six years of work, and that the authors were grateful for the help provided by Schweitzer and his partners in spite of their busy schedules. As a skilfully assembled counterpoint, a period of Schweitzer's life in Europe was accompanied by images of his childhood and youth, while at the same time mentioning his activity as a theologian and musician. His sister and grandson appeared briefly in a fictitious evocation of his mother and Schweitzer himself as a child, in the documentary style that had been followed since the 30s. The second part of the film reflected daily life at Lambaréné and the material conditions in which the doctor and his collaborators carried out their work. This is where the film's testimonial

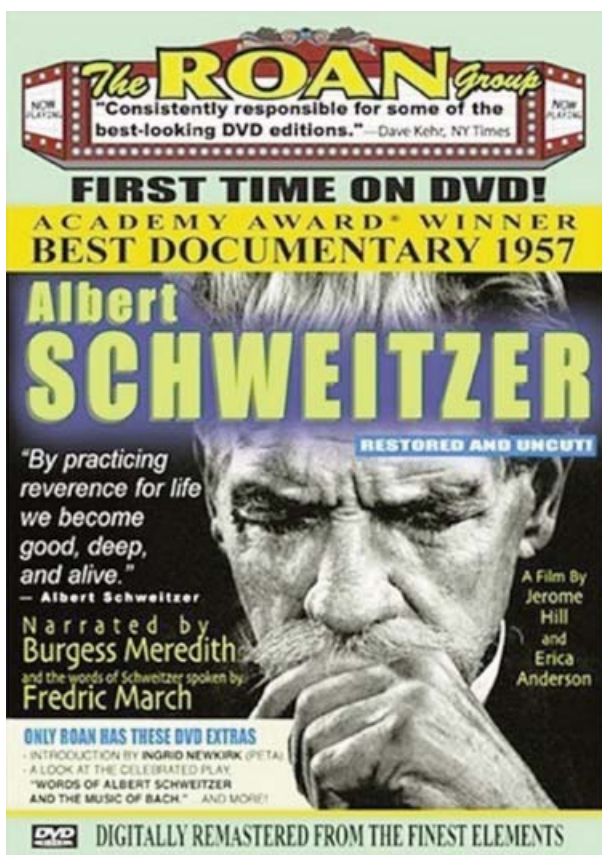
nature, understood as an accurate reflection of reality, becomes clearer, and where its exceptional historical value can be perceived. The tone is always one of reverence and admiration towards a character who in recent times has been compared to Mother Theresa of Calcutta, even if there is no mention of the Nobel Prize he was awarded a few years before the premiere.

The film industry as revised in the 90s

For more than three decades the figure of Schweitzer faded away into silence, becoming a blurred character in the memory of the general public. There are several reasons to explain such a fall into oblivion. The newly independent countries are continually denouncing the discredit pinned on the colonial period and the role of the dominant powers. The Cold War polarization turns the so-called Third World countries into a battleground where the great powers contended for influence and possibilities for expansion. There is no interest in vindicating figures from the past or triggering potentially controversial discussions that might distract attention from other more profitable goals. An interpretation of history where the essential element of change is in the masses, social groups and organized minorities, prevails among the intellectual communities. The study of singular figures or "great men" is discredited and perceived as obsolete and belonging to an earlier time.

The film industry also turns its back on this. Documentaries focus on ethnographic or anthropological aspects of reality (Jean Rouch and his followers), on inequalities and injustice [*Calcutta* (1969) by Louis Malle], or on the most dramatic aspects of politics [*Général Idi Amin Dada: Autoportrait* (1974) by Barbet Schroeder], to mention some significant examples. Historical documentaries are more conceptual and reflective (Marc Ferro, Marcel Ophuls), dealing with problems and situations that define the present (the *Shoah*, collaborationism or witch hunts, national liberation wars, the Vietnam conflict). In short, long-term problems as opposed to incidental events, in accordance with the common terminology used in French historiography, where the role of cinema is claimed as a source of historical knowledge. There is not much room either for those who do not take up positions in favour of one of the two fronts (state capitalism-socialism) that seek to impose their hegemony. Schweitzer was too vague about this, having an alternative ideology unrelated to political, social or religious groups that could promote his figure.

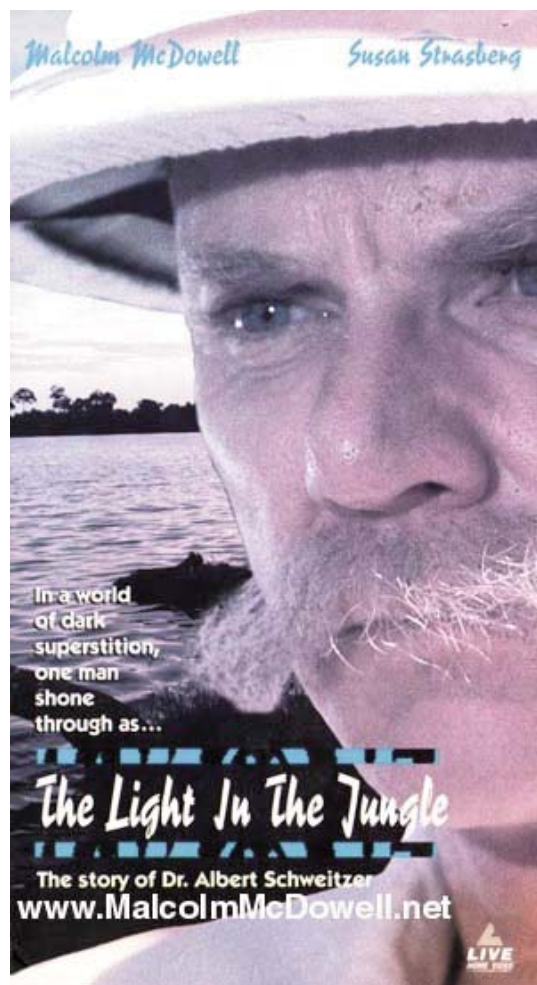
Recovery or *revival* arrives in the 90s, when the end of "real socialism" brought about the need to rescue



former models of commitment to collective welfare that were not necessarily revolutionary or related to left-wing stances. The spreading of environmentalism and distrust of hegemonic systems (economic, ideological or political) also drew awareness to nonpartisan vital commitments. In addition, the boom in secular depoliticized voluntary service and the proliferation of humanitarian NGOs attracted interest in a character that, to a great extent, could be considered a model of these new social practices.

The film by Grey Hofmeyr, one of the most famous South African film and TV directors, was premiered in 1990, at the dawn of a political change that in 1994 would result in a black majority government. *The Light in the Jungle* (1990), filmed in the Ivory Coast, praised Schweitzer's humanitarian commitment, the doctor being played by the British actor Malcolm McDowell, while Helene, the wife, was played by the American Susan Strasberg. Legal issues concerning the authorship of the script prevented the distribution of the film, which has only been premiered in certain countries and has not been presented in other media. Following the usual line, the director uses the work of the European doctor to challenge African culture and the role of healers and witch-doctors.

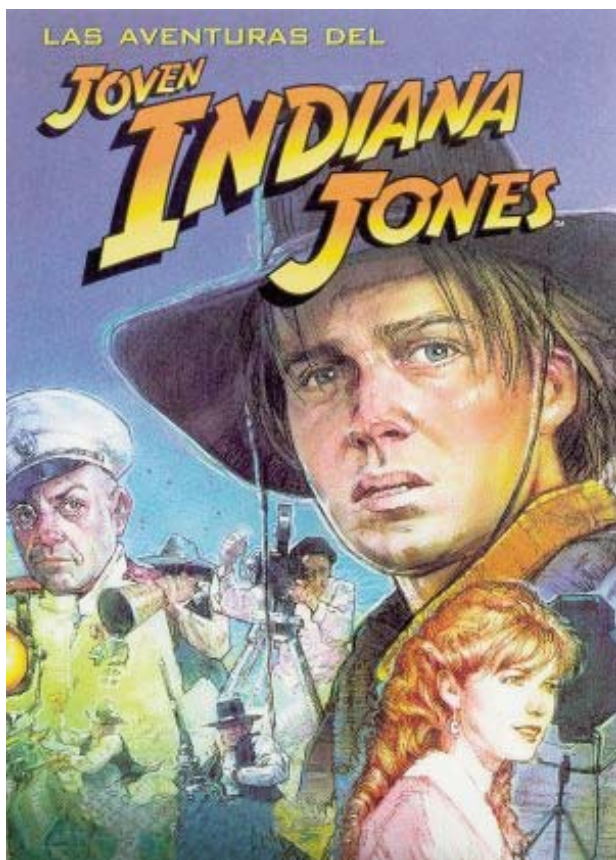
In the best adventure film tradition, Schweitzer made his way as a singular character into a TV series of the 90s about the childhood and youth of Indiana Jones, the commercial success of Hollywood adventure films of the former decade⁴. This was his great introduction to the young people who watched TV as their main source of information. The series was broadcast worldwide and made available for household use. The part where Schweitzer appeared, under the unitary title of *Oganga, the Giver and Taker of Life*, was covered in the first two episodes *German East Africa, December 1916* and *Congo, January 1917*. The series, *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles*, was full of encounters with historical characters (Picasso, Churchill, Lenin, Puccini, Mustafá Kemal, Freud, Thomas Edison...) that played a role in the development of the adventurous archaeologist's personality. In the middle of an expedition along the African equatorial coast, during World War One, Schweitzer healed young Indy, who had the opportunity to enjoy a musical evening with the doctor and his wife. Through this meeting, Indy would learn about the "Reverence for Life" doctrine, becoming aware of the fact that fighting against illness and for the disadvantaged was a higher goal than that of domination through war. This episode was presented as the turning point where the future archaeologist decided to follow an ethical altruistic criterion, choosing to fight for



just causes and for the disadvantaged. Anachronisms, such as the confinement of Schweitzer and his wife before the eyes of young Jones in 1917(!), were common in a series whose main goal was to entertain its audience and had no qualms about making excessive use of fiction as long as the intrigue and spectacle were guaranteed.

The critical review

The first film providing a critical review of Schweitzer, *Le grand blanc de Lambaréné*⁵, was premiered in 1995, separated by more than 40 years from the film by André Haghet, and by 30 from the doctor's death. Along those years the figure of Schweitzer had faded in time and the role of modern NGOs and the figure of the volunteer who altruistically committed to the reform of unfair social situations was becoming more and more common. In addition, after the independence achieved in the early 60s, generations of Africans with no direct experience of the colonial period have felt the



need to recover their roots themselves without being conditioned by cultural Euro-centrism or economic dependence. Directed and written by the Cameroonian Bassek ba Kobhio as a coproduction among Cameroon, Gabon and France, *Le grand blanc de Lambaréné*, reviews the figure of Schweitzer from the point of view of the colonized, for whom his figure has been nothing but a propaganda item devised by the metropolis to legitimize the exploitation and oppression of other peoples.

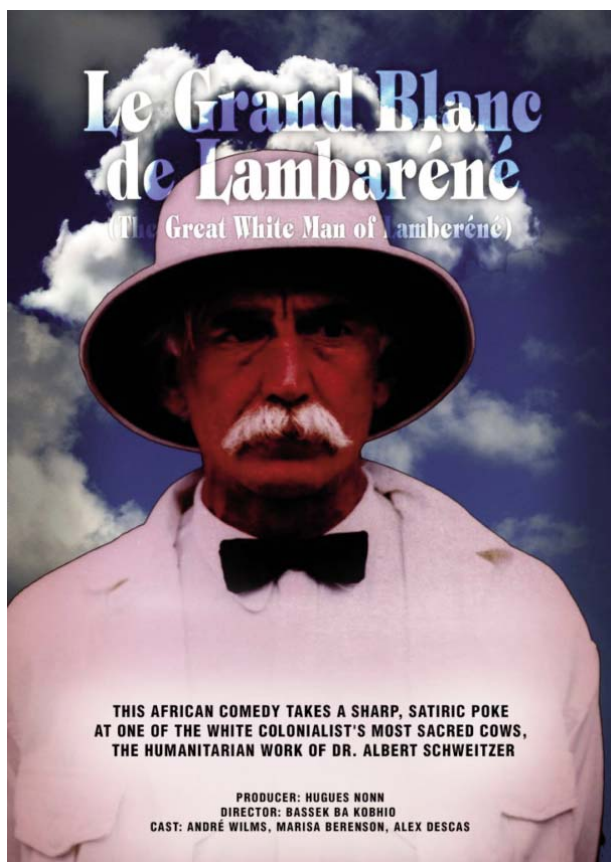
The plot develops over a period that covers the last twenty years Schweitzer spent in Africa, when Koumba, a native boy who admires the Alsatian, manages to graduate as a doctor with the help of his tribe. His return to Lambaréné coincides with Gabon's independence, and is followed by confrontations with the authoritarian methods and the rigid personality of the European doctor, already in his last years. Some episodes, such as Schweitzer's interview with the village witch-doctor, the return of the native soldiers after the end of World War Two, or the arrival of a journalist, that unleash the arrogance and histrionics of the "grand blanc" - the nickname sarcastically attached to his title -, show both the colonizers' radical lack of understanding

of local conditions, and their attitude of superiority towards the native culture. The European counterpoint, a Schweitzer numbed by alcohol who only abandoned his dependence when near his local lovers, further accentuates the radical injustice of the colonial experience.

Unconditional admirers of Schweitzer's work might find this film insulting, seeing it as a display of resentment and ungratefulness of the colonized towards he who selflessly devoted his life to maintaining his hospital in the heart of equatorial Africa. These viewers also reject the reductionism used as a form of silencing or distorting Schweitzer's ideological conflicts. However, it must be acknowledged that the film has more valuable features than those perceived by the dismissive Eurocentric gaze. A collection of coetaneous iconographic documentation allows the scriptwriter/director to very faithfully reconstruct some of Schweitzer's daily activities, such as his occasional preaching to the native population, his music practice during non-working hours to maintain his soloist skills, certain medical activities, or the very arrangement of the pavilions that made up his "hospital". In his immediate surroundings, his wife (a glacial and hieratic Marisa Berenson, in contrast to the intense sexuality of women of colour) seems to find it hard to become involved in her husband's African project.

Bassek ba Kobhio uses this plot - this "auteur" film - to criticize the effects of colonization and to vindicate native values (large families, tribal solidarity, innate kindness) as opposed to the more authoritarian position of the representatives of metropolitan power. Born in 1957, in the immediacy of the independence of the decolonized French-speaking countries in the 60s, through his film the director/scriptwriter reviewed the role of Europeans in the African continent from a particular point of view, almost an indulgent settling of scores (the film is a co-production of Gabon and Cameroon but also, not to be forgotten, of France). Throughout the 20th century, military personnel, teachers, doctors and missionaries had attempted to replace values and cultures that they considered primitive and backward with supposedly more refined and superior standards of living (Bach as opposed to the African drum is a repeated musical counterpoint of such incompatibility).

Despite his critical point of view, Bassek ba Kobhio's general position towards the character of Schweitzer is one of understanding, acknowledging an underlying good will flawed by his geographical origin and his age. The film provides an African perception of the altruistic and supposedly civilizing experience of many Europeans, without placing undue emphasis on certain aspects that had



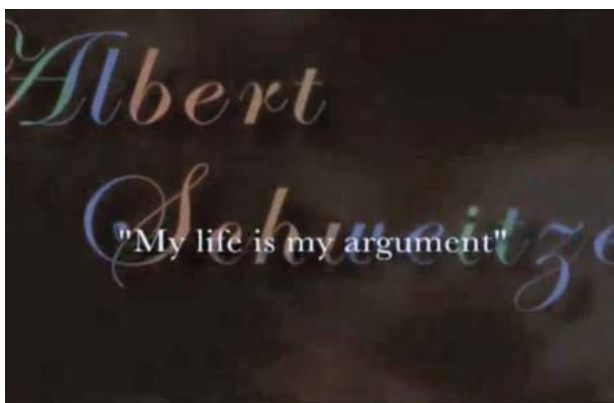
already aroused reluctance among some of his contemporaries. In spite of its exaggerations, *Le grand blanc de Lambaréné* is to date the best film on Schweitzer. The arrangement of shots, lighting or outdoor locations, show the director's clear willingness to make an ambitious, and at the same time "African", film. Mostly filmed in natural locations near Lambaréné, it gives the viewer an impression of veracity. The reconstruction of the atmosphere and the different moments has been excellently achieved, and the dialogues and editing of the shots very skilfully show the will to analyse, from a certain distance and with a progressive ideology, the colonial phenomenon. An expert use of ellipsis proves a knowledge of cinematographic language that is absent in other much more explicit films that are bent on imposing their message on the viewers' judgement.

The return to the edifying model and the imposition of the politically correct

With the arrival of the new millennium, new revisions of the complex personality of the Alsatian have been made. The existence of specific thematic TV channels, the easiness of film editing and the collaboration

among documental directors has led to all types of historical reports. It is difficult to track the amount of film production related to these media that has appeared over the last years; therefore, we will focus on those films and documentaries with a wider diffusion that are still easily available on the Internet. With no other purpose that to reach a wide audience, and included in the popular series of reports titled *La storia siamo noi*, Rai television produced the documentary *Albert Schweitzer. Il rispetto della vita* (<http://www.lastoriasiamonoi.rai.it/pop/schedaVideo.aspx?id=2215>)⁶, directed by Maurizio Malabruzzi and including interviews with people belonging to the Alsatian doctor's family and professional environment that will repeatedly appear in later revisions. The informative effort and concern for reaching the general public are above all other intentions. Also made with didactic criteria by the Quinnipiac University, *Albert Schweitzer: My Life is my Argument* (2005), directed by Lyam O'Brien, is a documentary whose main purpose is to encourage the voluntary activities organized by the university itself through its Albert Schweitzer Institute⁷. Obviously, given the goals of the institution and its quest for dignity and prestige, the character is presented as kind and attractive. The participation in the documentary of ex-president Jimmy Carter, the winner of two Nobel Prizes, Óscar Arias and Betty Williams, as well as that of Rhena, Schweitzer's only daughter, reinforces the partly propagandistic purpose of the film. *Albert Schweitzer: Called to Africa* (2006), by Martin Doblmeier, repeats the official "politically correct" interpretation of the character⁸. The film puts even more emphasis on the exemplification elements, without leaving room for a less laudatory and more distanced view. Doblmeier is the author of several "biopics" such as that on Dieter Bonhoeffer, the Protestant theologian executed by the Nazis, or that of USA president Thomas Jefferson, and the only novelty that can be appreciated in his review of Schweitzer is that it is made through the eyes of his wife Helene, and the addition of certain testimonies by people who were close to him, such as that of his daughter or niece, following the typical style of docudramas. As in the aforementioned case,



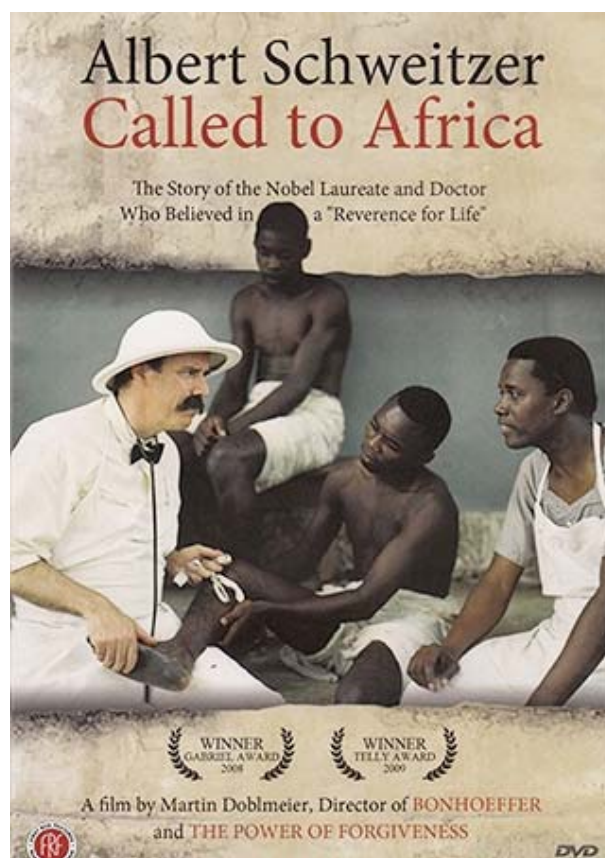


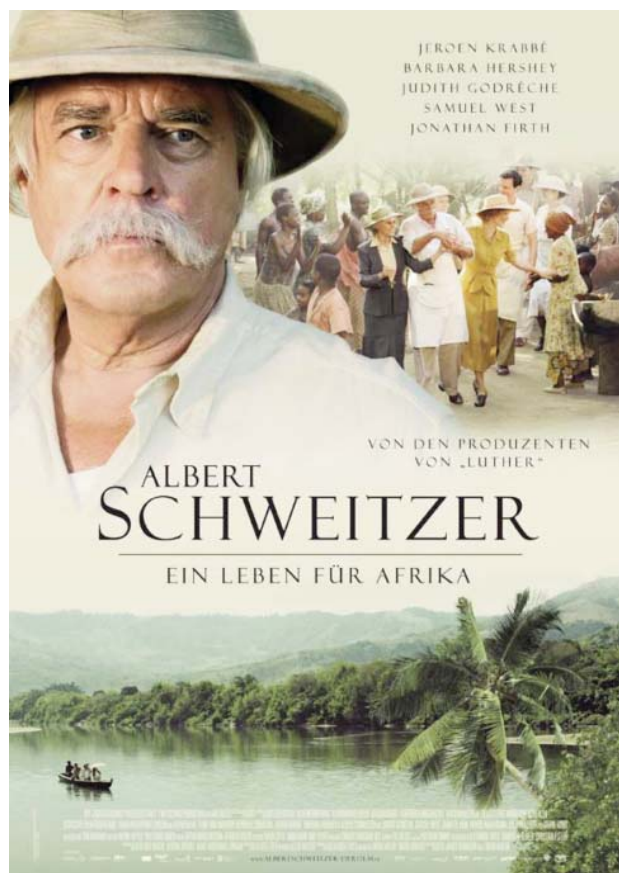
its runtime, about 45 minutes, makes these documentaries especially indicated for TV broadcasting.

A less successful film is the recent *Albert Schweitzer. Ein leben für Afrika* (2009), by Gavin Millar, which has not enjoyed international broadcasting⁹. The script is centred on two very specific moments, the beginnings of the construction of the hospital in Lambaréné in 1913, and the period between 1949 and 1954, prior to his being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Filmed in Germany and South Africa, with a good arrangement of means, it recovers most of the external topics that identify the character and his surroundings: from bow-tie and apron to the pith helmet and piano playing in the evenings, from the corrugated tin of the pavilions to the pelican that had become the emblem of the place. A fiction about the wildest theories of conspiracy of our days is built upon the basis of a faithful portrait of Schweitzer's life (the scriptwriter, James Brabazon, had already published a biography in 2000). Indeed, CIA and FBI were supposed to have plotted against him in the early 50s to close the Lambaréné hospital and deprive the doctor from his voice in the West. His relationship with Einstein and his wariness about atomic energy would become mixed with the witch hunt in the USA (which would begin a little later). An undercover agent in the hospital, in the best classic tradition of the genre, would trigger an implausible interim government into taking ruthless action against Schweitzer, a defenceless French citizen (the colonized have power over the colonizer!). A happy ending restores the kindness of the doctor above the plotting of the evil, and being awarded the Nobel Prize is the reward to an exemplary life. Anachronisms, conspiratorial obsessions, innovative environmentalism, world government as opposed to individual initiatives for reforms... The cinematographic images have historical value, not only as far as faithfulness to a past reality is concerned, but also because they show the values,

hopes and fears of the time in which they are filmed.

In 2010 the Franco-German TV channel Arte broadcast *Albert Schweitzer*, an informative-educational documentary by Georg Misch, whose two German and French subtitles, *Anatomie eines Heiligen* and *Autopsie d'un mythe*, reflect a dual perception of the character that is presented to the viewer: the saint and the myth¹⁰. The editing is a display of skill and knowledge in the use of the possibilities available to the director, who does not restrict himself to the recovery of old news items or interviews where the informer gives his/her views. Misch made use of material from documentaries and news items that were current at the time (including of course repeated references to the film by Hill and Anderson), as well as of sequences from the films by Bassek ba Kobhio and Gavin Millar. In addition, he resorted to the personal testimony of people who had been close to Schweitzer, such as the Swiss doctor Walter Munz, his daughter Rhena, his niece Christiane, or even one of his nurses. The interventions of these people are challenged with shots or reports that contradict the exclusive and monolithic image; thus, Rhena and one of her daughters comment and answer questions about one of the harshest





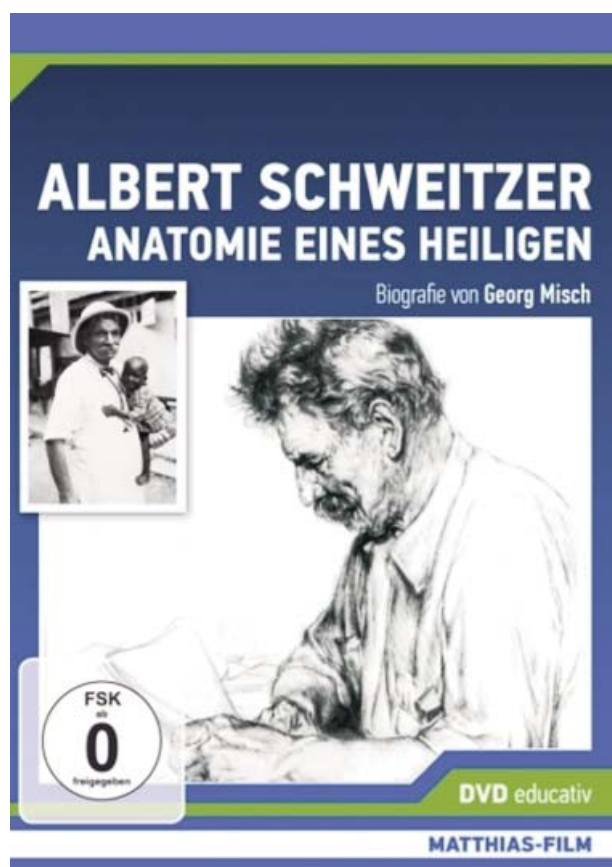
sequences of Bassek ba Khobio's film. The more idyllic and glorifying perception, provided in a gathering at the family house in Gunsbach by several former collaborators of the doctor, challenges the more critical memories of a former French military doctor who became acquainted with the reality of life at the hospital of Lambaréné and provides his testimony by the stone monument to the doctor that presides over the village, expressing his doubts as to the professional competence of the Alsatian. Misch sets the end of his film far from Alsace and Gabon. Two Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors recover Schweitzer's most pacifist message and attend a religious ceremony at the Seimazan (Mountain of Life) Schweitzer Temple, built in Kumamoto (Japan) in 1973 in his memory by Tairyu Furukawa, an independent Buddhist who was highly involved in humanitarian and interreligious dialogue activities. The path to the future and the defence of life are closed in Greenland with a few reflections on climate change and global warming.

Between the documentary and the report, Misch presents his images from a clearly understanding point of view, aware that he was gathering the testi-

monies of the last survivors of an experience that at their time was completely unusual (Rhena died in February 2009, shortly after providing her testimony). However, it is also necessary to consider, without naivety and from a distanced point of view, a career that was not exempt from deficiencies and limitations. In a world afflicted by lack of solidarity and, above all, environmental degradation, Misch attempts to recover the principle of "Respect for Life" as a fully valid message for our time.

A man of his time

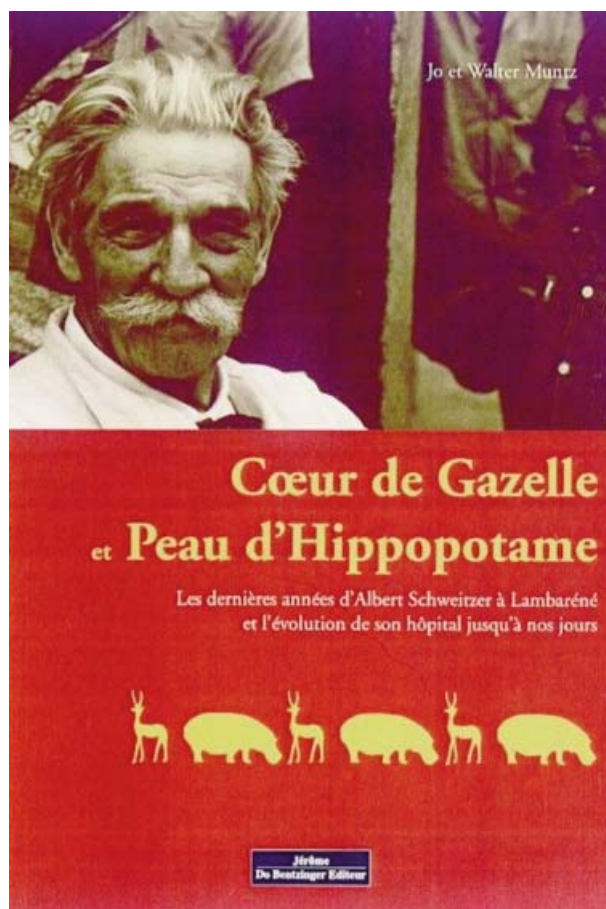
Nevertheless, was Schweitzer the exemplary character so often presented on the main screen? Was he "mystification in person", as he once told one of his African detractors in Bassek ba Khobio's film? Are we before one among many processes of postmodern "deconstruction" of a stale and essentially rhetoric image? The idealization of the character in his time was indeed very intense, and Schweitzer became the essential representative of too many things: an intellectual with many interests, a European at the crossroads of nationalisms, a pacifist opposed to nuclear power, a



humanist with an international commitment, a liberal Protestant engaged in conversation with eastern religious sensitivities, the forerunner of environmentalism... In his memories, the British journalist James Cameron, who visited Lambaréné in 1953, made reference to Schweitzer's enormously contradictory personality, describing him as a man endowed with an "immeasurable ego" that had led him to condemn his wife and daughter to an African loneliness brought about by his "immense personal vanity". Cameron's work was written only a few years after Schweitzer's death, however, his recognition of the Alsatian's thought, which he deals with in depth throughout his book, did not prevent him from uncovering the most unpleasant traits of his personality. His aloofness towards the native population or the energy he put into imposing European ways of working among the native workers were another display of his radical lack of understanding of African society, which according to the journalist was nothing but an expression of his underlying racism. The emphasis with which he repeated that he was a brother to all Africans, but that he was an elder brother, is evidence of his idea of superiority, which could well point towards a similar line to that criticized by Cameron. Many years after that visit, a dramatized report first broadcast by the BBC in 2008 returned to the almost fraudulent aspects of Schweitzer's African adventure as seen through Cameron's eyes, the journalist being included as a customized character. *The Walrus and the Terrier*, showing an animalization of the characters, at least in the title (Schweitzer's big moustache was similar to a walrus's tusks, and the journalist would play a role similar to that of a restless doggie sniffing around the immediate reality) deprived the character of all dignity and was another turn of the screw in the critical questioning of his humanitarian activity.

The direct testimonies of those who were closer to him do not share this perception. His daughter Rhena repeatedly complained about the opinions and information passed on by those who had only briefly visited Lambaréné, firmly stating that her mother had followed her husband in his African quest out of her own free will and in complete agreement with his ideals. Walter Munz¹¹ often referred to the high level of demand he imposed on his collaborators, but also to his gentleness, understanding and self-discipline in particularly complex situations. Other reports acknowledge Schweitzer's energy and his harshness when reprimanding his collaborators¹². The film reconstruction reinforces these behaviours, emphasizing them or toning them down depending on the director's intention, which is a concession that must be accepted. Biopics are histo-

rical reconstructions, but they are not intended to reproduce a spectacular image from the past so they should be regarded from a critical and detached point of view. Maybe this criticism should be interpreted based on evidence that is mostly neglected when judging the Alsatian. Schweitzer was born in 1875 at the height of the discovery expeditions to Africa and colonial expansion. David Livingstone had died only shortly before, in 1873, while carrying out his darkest work, or his dirtiest if you prefer, for Leopold II of Belgium. His youth and early manhood were lived at a time when Great Britain, France and Germany were disputing their share of a whole continent. He died at the age of 90, having witnessed the independence of almost every former colony and the immediate military coups that followed accompanied by tribal killings and ideological radicalism; too many changes in an undeniably intense and committed life. Schweitzer was inevitably unable to escape from many of the prejudices and beliefs of his time, which became stronger with time but, above all, they became especially evident in his last years, when his public reputation drew the attention of eyes that were not always kind.

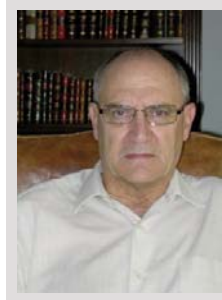


"In my relations with the primitive I wondered about the widely discussed question of whether they were no more than beings that were victims of their traditions, or whether they were able to think for themselves". These lines, written by Schweitzer himself in his most translated book gather his earliest feelings and prejudices, but they also help to understand the ideological context he faced in his African experience. The truth is that he never introduced native staff in positions of intermediate responsibility at the hospital, and his nurses were always European, meaning that he made no efforts to train native women for posts where the level of specialization was still limited at the time.

Schweitzer never ceased to be a European "on the edge of the primeval forest", as he entitled one of his most popular books, someone for whom the improvement in African living conditions did not involve the recognition of his autonomy, or his coming of age. As everyone, he had his shadows, the greatest perhaps being his survival in a rapidly changing world where the Cold War confrontation preferred clear political stances to independent ethical principles.

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