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BBC-2 COLOUR PROGRAMMES

FROM ITS VERY BEGINNING, the BBC has been showing colour programmes—in monochrome versions. *The Virginian*, the Danny Kaye Show, many feature films and several of our own domestically produced documentaries have been shot in colour. All we require to show them in their original form is a colour telecine machine. So, a proportion of our existing output can simply and easily be translated into colour. But this is not enough. The BBC has always prided itself on producing its own programmes in all fields of information and entertainment. It has never relied entirely on imported material for any major type of programme. We shall continue that tradition in colour.

All our own films will be shot in colour. If it is an oversimplification to say that all you have to do in this instance is to change the brand of film you load into your cameras, it is nonetheless true that the problems we shall encounter are relatively simple and that a large body of experience of colour filming already exists upon which we can draw. It is in the production of electronic colour that the most formidable complications lie.

When the possibility of planning colour television programmes is suddenly presented to you, the initial response is to think excitedly of the most colourful subjects—the Chelsea Flower Show, the Changing of the Guard, the great paintings of the world. And then a single sober fact brings a sudden halt to those enthusiastic ambitions—perhaps fortunately. For many months, indeed for several years, the majority of viewers watching colour programmes will be seeing them in monochrome. Colour therefore cannot so

dominate programmes that it becomes the overwhelming consideration to the neglect of other qualities. Plays must continue to be dramatic in black and white as well as in colour; events must be spectacular even when seen through monochrome spectacles. We must calculate therefore for our colour to be an enrichment rather than a replacement of the black-and-white images.

I suspect that, in the event, this will prove to be a valuable discipline. It will prevent us from repeating some of the mistakes that were made both in the cinema and in colour television elsewhere when, drunk with the thrills of newly arrived colour, producers swamped their drama with gaudy period costumes, when scarlet flames continually roared across screens both large and small, and sunsets lingered interminably at the end of every travelogue. Such self-indulgence must not be ours. We must not be so obsessed with colour that we break faith with our existing monochrome audience and subject them to programmes which—without colour—are dull and meaningless. Nor, conversely, must we stun our colour viewers with continuous and dazzling flamboyance.

We must also recognize technical dangers. Even though the BBC has been experimenting with colour television for nineteen years, and has been putting out test colour transmissions for over ten, there is a major difference between organizing such a restricted output under test conditions and transmitting each and every day a varied service for several hours. None know this better than the producers and engineers involved in the initial tests. Nor is the necessity for special colour expertise restricted to technicians in electronic studios.

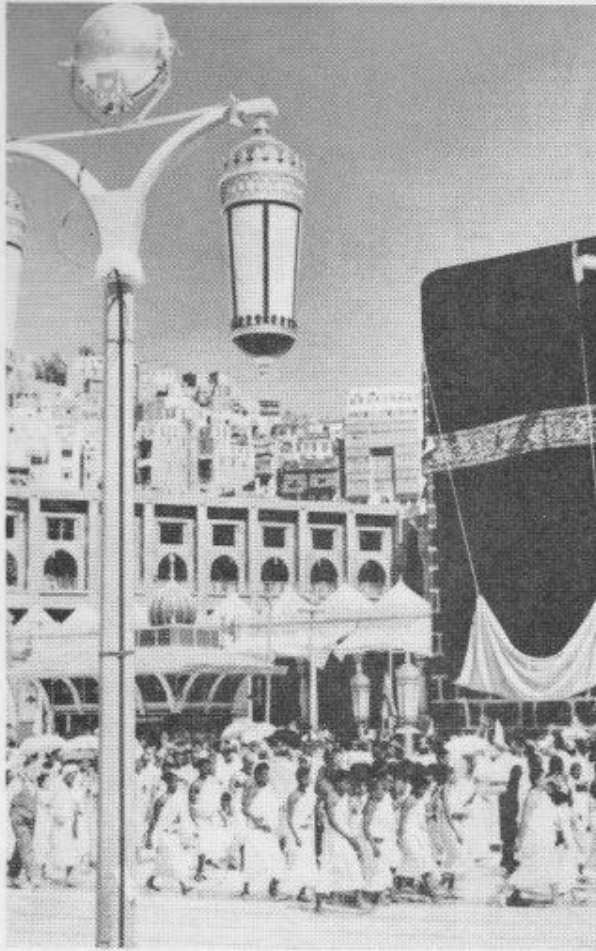


Fig. 1. A shot from *Travellers Tales*—the story of the pilgrimage to Mecca. Originally shot in colour.

Photographic laboratories are, even now, busy devising new colour stocks specially suitable for television projection, a process which requires characteristics very different in several respects from those appropriate to normal optical projection; manufacturers have still to gain experience in designing stable and high-fidelity colour sets; dealers have to become familiar with the technological problems of installing and servicing; and viewers themselves must become accustomed to the skills of fine tuning their receivers to produce the best possible picture.

There is no doubt that the colour pictures arriving in many homes at the end of 1967 will be of very high quality. Our own experiments and the lessons that have been learnt from American experience are enough to assure ourselves of that. Indeed, our first transmissions will assuredly be of a higher standard than the first transmissions of the colour networks that have preceded us by several years. We must, however, take the greatest care over the finest details of colour balance for, in some subjects, bad colour would be worse than no colour at all. If we do not comply with the most exacting technical criteria, a series of programmes on French Impressionist paintings or a ballet production could be disastrous. Outside the field of the arts, where colour quality can be so crucial, technical ineptitude is most worrying in situations and subjects that are most familiar to us; and of all subjects, it is the human face of which we are most critical. The slightest suspicion of a greenish pallor or a brick-red flush will offend us. On the other hand, a slight off-balance of hue



Fig. 2. Studio H at the BBC Lime Grove where the E.B.U colour demonstrations originated.

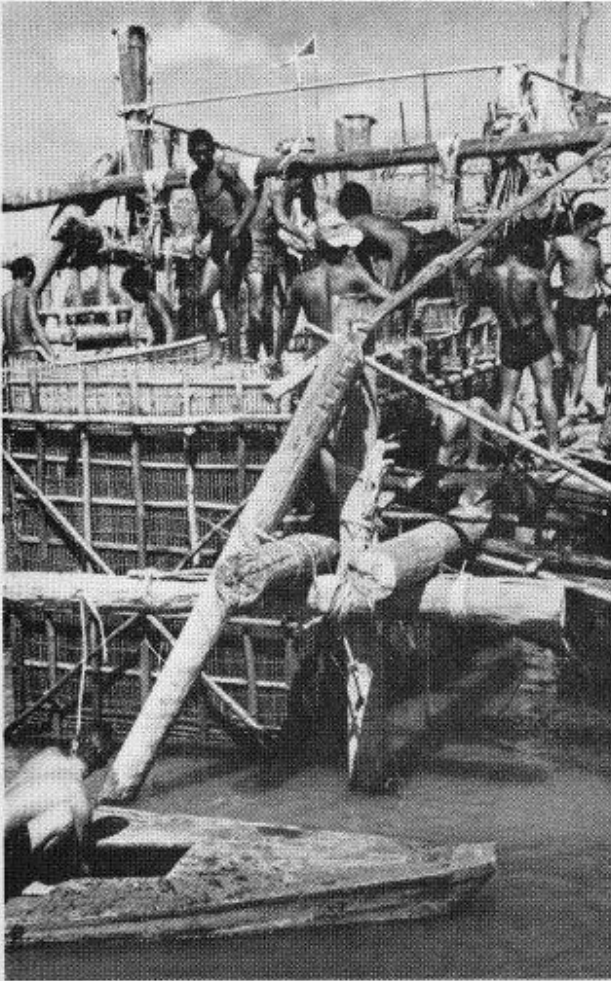


Fig. 3. The advantages of colour television are immediately apparent with scenes such as this, taken in Cambodia, on the banks of the Tonle Sap river.

in the set or make-up of a science-fiction play or in the colour of the brilliant fish of a coral reef filmed under water will not worry us, for we are not familiar with the originals.

I have stressed, perhaps overstressed, the difficulties, for they are uppermost in the minds of many of us who are determined that when colour television arrives it will be the best that can be achieved and at least the equal of any colour television service in the world. Indeed, the colour system we shall be using, together with the high definition of 625 lines, means that potentially we can produce colour pictures that are better than any others at present transmitted.

Of the excitement and attraction of good colour there can be no doubt. It is the difference between a black-and-white holiday snapshot and a colour transparency; between watching show-jumping in black and white on television and going to White City and discovering that the arena is covered by green grass, the

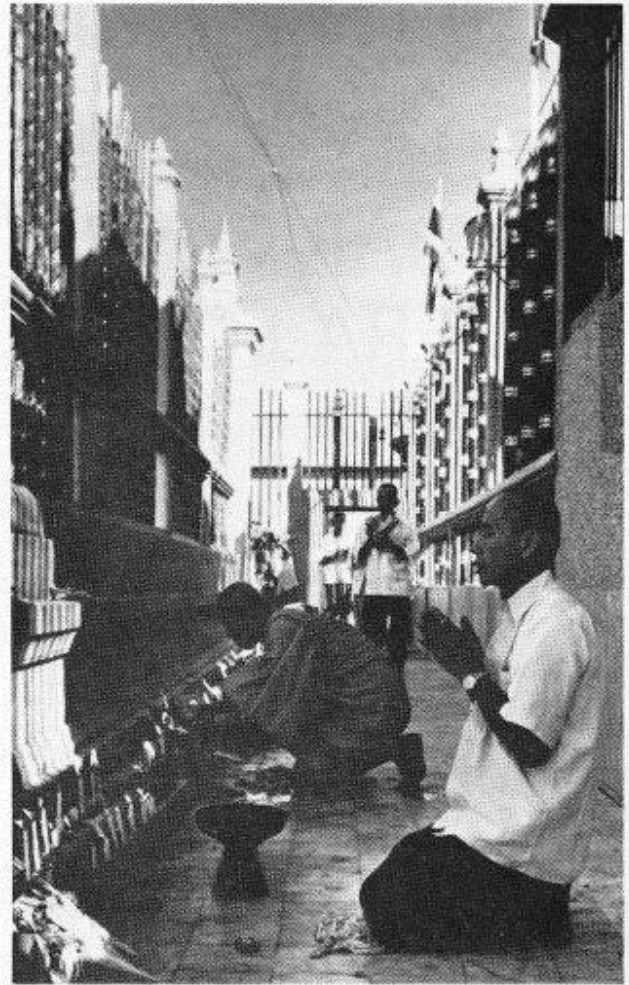


Fig. 4. A Thai farmer at a Buddhist temple near the Mekong river. Part of a series, *Image of the East*, it was shot for the BBC in full colour.

fences are white, the horses are chestnut and the riders wear scarlet jackets. American viewers have already made their opinions and reactions clear through the cold analyses of their indefatigable viewer researchers. There a new statistic has made its appearance—the colour advantage. To give a typical example, a programme that is viewed by 20% of the audience with monochrome sets is watched by over 30% of the audience who can see it in colour. In situations where the colour programme is competing with a different monochrome one on another channel, the colour advantage is real and substantial. It might be thought that this advantage would disappear when all networks are in colour. Yet the findings in America show that in such situations the advantage persists—all the programmes have a substantially larger audience. In short, viewers like colour very much indeed. It is our intention to make quite sure that, in this country, they will not be disappointed.