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Katie Young

University of Development Studies, Ghana, katie.young.2014@live.rhul.ac.uk

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Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth Century Urban Tanzania

Abstract

This is a book review of Laura Fair's *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth Century Urban Tanzania*.

Author Notes

Katie Young recently completed her PhD in Music at Royal Holloway, University of London. Her thesis examines histories of Hindi film songs in Northern Ghana, 1957-present. She is currently a visiting fellow at the University of Development Studies in Ghana, supported by the African Studies Association of the UK.

Laura Fair. 2018. *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth Century Urban Tanzania*. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

Introduction

Laura Fair's *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Urban Tanzania* presents a richly textured and methodologically rigorous history of late colonial and early post-colonial Tanzanian cinematic culture. Fair not only engages with the many films that were popular amongst Tanzanian youth throughout the century, but also provides insight into what these films meant to viewers of differing gendered, generational, political, religious, and socioeconomic perspectives. She further details how popular fashions, songs, and choreographies from films moved beyond the cinema hall and into urban life, where youth experimented with global popular media in relation to their lived experiences. As the first full length history of twentieth century Tanzanian cinema, *Reel Pleasures* weaves diverse mainland, coastal, and island media histories seamlessly, bringing twentieth century Tanzanian cinematic experiences into dialogue with broader transnational media histories.

Each chapter of *Reel Pleasures* loosely follows a chronological order, focussing on specific regional and generational cinematic experiences that link to broader political and geographic themes. Chapters one and two historicize the development of cinema businesses and their management support networks in Tanzania from the 1900s until the 1950s, while chapter three explores the immense popularity of Hindi films amongst Zanzibari audiences in the 1950s. Chapter four examines global film reception from the 1950s to the 1980s, including Elvis, Kung Fu, Blaxploitation, and Italian "Spaghetti Western" films. Chapter five builds on the chronological histories established from chapters one through four, connecting the cultural geographies and social significances of films in Tanzania from the 1920s up to the 1960s. The world's only socialist drive-in in Dar es Salaam is the focus of chapter six, while chapter seven hones in on the generational experiences of post-Independence cinemagoers, focussing on

changing experiences of gender and sexuality in growing urban centers. Chapter eight examines the onset of state control of Tanzania's cinematic economy from the 1960s to the 1980s, setting the scene for the epilogue, where the further demise of Tanzania's cinema culture is discussed in relation to a changing media landscape in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The final discussion of cineplexes leaves readers with a taste of Tanzania's cinema history-to-come, a new social sphere that is markedly different from the earlier ethos of twentieth century Tanzanian cinema culture. While religion is not the main focus of any chapter in this book, links between religion, gender, and film are woven throughout. Fair also discusses the relationship between cinema and morality, including the entrepreneurial task of being a "good man" in business as well as the relationship between film and sexuality in post-colonial Tanzania. Later in this review, I tease out Fair's discussions of morality, religion, and film in more depth.

Central to Fair's research is her commitment to exploring urban geographies of Tanzanian in-land, coastal, and Zanzibari urban environments. Readers are given a sense of the broader transnational histories of urban space, clearly contextualizing the differences between Tanzanian cinematic culture and those of nearby regions including Kenya, South Africa, Zimbabwe, and the Congo, where policies restricting Africans' access to towns hampered access to cinema as well (7). In contrast, coastal Tanzanian cinemas were sites where diverse communities interacted with each other and developed ties (11). At the national level, Fair provides unique insights into the differences between in-land and coastal cinematic experiences depending on the relative degree of colonial power in differing Tanzanian towns (182).

One of the greatest strengths of *Reel Pleasures* is its rich methodology, as Fair employs an impressive range of ethnographic and empirical strategies throughout. Each chapter draws on both formal and informal interviews with cinemagoers, cinema owners, audience members, fans, and non-cinemagoers, alongside empirical evidences sourced from both public and

private archives as well as newspaper collections. This mixed-method approach also includes innovative research strategies, such as an essay contest Fair advertised and facilitated, that yielded stories about nights at the drive in, fashions borrowed from films, and the broader significance of filmgoing for post-colonial Tanzanian youth. Fair's ethnographic research works to contextualize and enrich data sourced from newspaper cinema listings and archival documents: for example, she shows how the number of times a film is listed as screening in a newspaper advertisement does not take into account the overwhelming popularity of a film screened minimally in the region, nor do such documents make clear the cultural memory of popular film stars or songs. In addition to the rich mixed-method approach, *Reel Pleasures* offers visual insights into the world of Tanzanian twentieth century cinema through images of cinema owners, cinematic architecture, fashion, and music inspired by global films, and even film memorabilia, such as a limited edition 1970s Tanzanian stamp collection featuring Bruce Lee.

Throughout, Fair includes personal histories as well as ethnographic insights: she reflexively recalls the trials and successes of her research throughout the book, offering insights into the research process that draw the reader into the context of Tanzanian cinema past and present. In each chapter, Fair offers glimpses into her own experiences of cinema from her youth living near Chicago. Stories from interviews with Tanzanian cinemagoers are compared to her own time working at a cinema during her youth, as well as to stories of her family attending Chicago's cinema during the 1930s. Such a stylistic choice simultaneously situates the researcher within the broader subject while also adding a unique comparison of Tanzanian and American cinematic culture throughout the twentieth century.

Cinema and the Lived Experience

Reel Pleasures contextualizes the ways in which global media fed into social, religious, political, and gendered spheres in differing urban centers throughout Tanzania. Tanzanian youth linked the message of a film to lived experiences, including “generational tensions, the meanings of modernity, class exploitation, political corruption, dance and fashion styles, and the nature of romantic love” (2). Fair takes into account multi-generational perspectives on films in colonial and post-colonial Tanzania: for example, while Hindi films of the 1950s and 1960s echoed Tanzanian concerns about love and modernity (121), Blaxploitation films of the early 1970s contained key aesthetics and narrative elements that Tanzanians valued, including stirring soundtracks and “riveting visual action” (163). In the 1970s, plotlines from Bruce Lee films centered around tensions between the poor and the economically powerful, resonating with regional political discourses of the time (253), while also aligning with core messages of president Nyerere’s philosophies of *ujamaa* (self-reliance) and African socialism (263-265). In contrast, classic Hollywood films were less popular with Tanzanian audiences, as such films relied too heavily on dialogue, and were also too individualistic in nature, with characters motivated by personal psychological concerns (152).

Throughout, Fair makes clear that “‘foreign’ products were never swallowed whole” but rather “ground up, reconstituted, and transformed into signs with specific local meanings” (158). There are many examples of how youth experimented with dances, fashion, and music from popular films in their daily lives. In the realm of music, Egyptian film soundtracks, Hindi film music, and the soundtracks of Elvis Presley films were all creatively adapted into either new or existing musical practices in Tanzanian cities, including *taarab* music (130, 153-154). In the realm of fashion, both men and women creatively adapted visions from the screen in their dress and hair styles (143). With the rise of kung fu films in the 1970s, some women

began to wear ankle length pants for training in a period where most wore skirts and dresses, signalling that young women could be empowered through martial arts (258).

Movement and comportment are also considered as part of popular film culture that flowed from screen to street: for example, Blaxploitation films influenced the stance and swagger of youth who brought their moves outside the home (164), while Kung Fu films led to a burgeoning martial arts phenomenon throughout the country during the 1970s, with youth trying out new moves gleaned from films on buses, trees, and with friends on the street. Fair suggests that engaging with cinematic clothing, music, and choreographies was a part of Independence era Tanzanian youth's commitment to a globally integrated world (250). A great strength of *Reel Pleasures* is Fair's engagement with these less tangible histories, such as experiences of gender and sexuality in the cinema hall, or memories of swagger and martial arts on the streets. These often disregarded aspects of popular culture afford a richness and depth to Fair's work.

Religion, Morality, and Film

Tanzania is a significant site for the study of religion and film, given the region's religious diversity. Throughout the book, Fair explores the ways in which film crossed social and religious boundaries: employees and cinemagoers bonded amongst diverse groups in the cinema hall, where a collective passion for cinema overshadowed existing schisms between those of differing faiths (111). Perhaps the most interesting exploration of religion and film in *Reel Pleasures* is the way that Christian and Muslim communities in Tanzania perceived the morality of film and cinema culture throughout Tanzania. Coastal Muslim men and women eagerly attended a wide range of films (202), and for young Muslims on the coast, one could maintain their status as "a good Muslim" while also performing as an Elvis impersonator at the cinema show or attending a film with friends (159). In contrast, Christian communities residing

in-land preferred to spend their leisure time within the church, and many considered the cinema and more broadly the city to be a dangerous place for women (202, 215). While some Christian women attended cinemas following Independence, Hindu women struggled to obtain permission to attend the cinema altogether (214). Fair engages with the nuances of religious views towards cinemagoing in the region over time, noting how opinions around the acceptability of cinema changed, as was the case with Shia Ithna-Asheri Muslims when the views of clerics and teachers became more conservative following the Iranian Revolution (214).

Fair's discussion of religion has a particular focus on religious notions of morality and gender as they relate to cinema-going culture, offering a unique perspective on religion and film rarely explored in the African context. While Fair's exploration of religion with regards to film is intriguing, it is quite limited. Given the religious diversity of the region, greater attention could be paid to the relationship between religion and cinema in Tanzania. A more in-depth focus on religion and film would further enhance Fair's already complex engagement with various gendered, socioeconomic, and political perspectives.

While an in-depth discussion of religion remains largely outside of the scope of *Reel Pleasures*, Fair's focus on morality is woven throughout each chapter, ranging from the values upheld by cinema owners to the changing experiences of sexuality within cinema venues for multiple generations. Chapters one and two make clear that for South Asian cinema owners in colonial Tanzania, the cinema was not only a financial investment but also a significant site for accruing social and cultural capital in the cities and towns where they lived (22; 45). Entrepreneurs are explored in terms of their moral labour, drawing upon pre-existing extensive local, regional, and transnational networks in order to ensure cinemagoers had the most popular and cutting-edge global media in their cinema halls (15). Fair emphasizes throughout that to be a cinema entrepreneur was a moral affair: businessmen worked together, sharing films, cash

connections, and skill sets with each other, ensuring the longevity of the cinema business at large while at the same time solidifying their reputations as “good men” (87). Cinemas were part of the urban social fabric, an investment in an urban community that brought together diverse populations who shared a passion for the global media they frequented in cinema halls (8).

In the realm of gender and sexuality, Fair examines the experience of moviegoing in relation to changing experiences of morality as well: sitting several rows away from a lover so to steal a glance, or meeting in lobbies and nearby streets before or after a show were a significant draw for many who sought to fall in love despite social barriers as to who one could marry (132). By the 1970s and 1980s, youth began to equate moviegoing with puberty initiation ceremonies, marking a critical aspect of social, sexual, and intellectual maturation for urban youth (269). While the relationship between morality and faith is not the focal point of Fair’s discussion, the relationship between morality and film in the Tanzanian context may be of interest to scholars in the field of African religion and film.

Conclusion

Reel Pleasures engages with twentieth century Tanzanian history on a broad scale: Fair engages with the cinema in its social, cultural, and geographical context in order to reveal generational, gendered, and political histories of late colonial and post-colonial Tanzania. Fair meets her goal of placing Tanzanian cinema culture into dialogue with broader regional and transnational trends. One of the greatest strengths of the book is Fair’s ability to engage with such wide-ranging experiences, remaining inclusive and open to an extensive range of perspectives and experiences over space and time. This detailed, complex history is holistic and all-encompassing, never simplifying the rich and diverse nature of Tanzania’s cinematic history.