



March 2021

Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire

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Recommended Citation

Barker, Thomas (2021) "Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 25 : Iss. 1 , Article 61.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol25/iss1/61>

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Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire

Abstract

This is a book review of Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire* (University of California Press, 2019).

Keywords

British Empire, documentary, nonfiction film, Africa

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Author Notes

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Rice, Tom *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire*, (University of California Press, 2019)

Tom Rice's work *Films for the Colonies* comes out of a fascinating historical project connected to the Colonial Film online archive, a publicly available resource drawing from UK based collections.¹ Rice was one member of the postdoctoral research team under the guidance of Colin McCabe and Lee Grieveson, collecting materials, writing summaries, and building a resource for others to use. *Films for the Colonies* is the first monograph to be published out of that project following the project's two edited volumes *Empire and Film* (2011) and *Film and the End of Empire* (2011), also edited by Grieveson and MacCabe.² It accompanies other thematically similar works including Grieveson's *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations* (2018), *Where Histories Reside* (2019) by Priya Jaikumar, and the edited collection *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia* (2017) which includes a chapter on colonial Malaya from Rice.³

Most of *Films for the Colonies* focuses on Africa, in particular Ghana, Gold Coast, Nigeria, and other British colonial territories, though the book does bring in the Caribbean (West Indies) and Malaya in the final chapter. In its structure the book is largely chronological with a pre-WW2 phase (1920s to 1940s), a brief war period, followed by post-war and decolonisation, and finally the postcolonial era of independence. With its focus on administrative and technical matters, Rice's book is arguably less ideological than the work of Peter J. Bloom, for example (*French*

Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism (2008)) but it is nevertheless an indictment of British colonialism and its approach to governance and development.⁴

Rice shows the internal workings of the British empire in its final decades (1920s-1960s) through the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) and its variations. Headquartered in London, the CFU operated from 1939 to 1955 and produced over 200 films for the vast British empire. *Films for the Colonies* won't be essential for scholars of religion and film in general but will be useful for those interested in how the colonial apparatus of non-fiction film is a microcosm of the larger ideological and operational forms of administering empire. Rice reveals how the imperial use of film in the 20th century is a continuation of colonial processes of knowledge production and governance demonstrated for an earlier period in the work of Tomoko Masuzawa (2005), David Chidester (2014), and others. While Rice does not provide any specific analysis of 'religious' subjects, the civilizing discourse of British imperial projects that established a hierarchy between Europeans and Africans or Asians is obvious for readers familiar with this background. He shows that the ideas of colonial service, approaches to the 'natives' and their education, fostering forms of loyalty and fealty to empire, and the use of modern technology are central for imperial dominance. Rice does zoom into one Nigerian film *Giant in the Sun* (1959) which promoted religious tolerance between Muslims and

Christians as part of nation building in the lead up to independence in 1960 (p. 212), but otherwise readers will be left to read between the lines.

What Rice shows is how little the British film style changed over this forty-year period, noting that there is a strange consistency in the British approach to film subject matter, form, and thinking about the audience and their mental capabilities. For sure, those operating the film apparatus here engage in an institutionalised form of racism, founded on the ‘white man’s burden’ ethic of British colonial service. The history here is that the colonial film unit was founded by William Sellers who was himself a public health official in Nigeria in the 1920s and was one of the first colonial administrators to use film to promote health messages on hygiene, sanitation, and disease.

One of the enduring models seen in these colonial films is the Mr Wise / Mr Foolish character pairing used to tell morality tales about public health, personal finances, and even good road behaviour. A relatively simple narrative device, Wise/Foolish provides a contrast between undesirable or uncivilised behaviour and so-called civilised characteristics necessary to modern life. This Wise/Foolish model was linked to the perceived simplicity of the African audience and the need to follow certain formulas to ensure maximum indoctrination. Rice notes how this was a pattern of colonial film administration and conception that privileged form over reception (p. 180) and continued in some territories after independence.

It also leads to discussions of two stylistic movements in the documentary world which Rice neatly categorises as ‘prestige’ and ‘educational’ with Sean Graham and George Noble in the Gold Coast belonging to the former grouping and William Sellers and Norman Spurr associated with the latter. It mirrors in some ways the ambitions of filmmakers themselves: whether to follow conventional wisdom about audiences, form, and content, or to innovate following new modes of documentary being developed in the UK. Innovation only seems to come in the post-World War Two context, constrained as it is by colonial administrations: as the British Empire’s grip and stature is challenged, the film units begin to become more independent and autonomous (p. 227).

Other links to established figures and histories in (British) documentary also anchor this history in a larger documentary studies history and framework. Names such as Basil Wright and John Grierson, both from the British Documentary Movement, appear at different points in the story, reminding us of the links between these well-known domestic documentary figures, the Colonial Film Unit, and forms of British governmentality both at home and abroad. Rice’s extensive archival research also reminds us of the ‘forgotten’ or ‘overlooked’ films produced by figures such as Grierson and Wright which are more instructional than the often referenced liberal and poetic work they are best known for (p. 16). It is a reminder to readers in the UK of how these histories are inter-twined. Work by Smyth and

others have also revealed these complicated histories, including the links to UNESCO filmmaking.⁵

Amongst all the men, there is only woman figure - Mary Field - who Rice makes note of early in the book (p. 14). He positions her as representing “specialized” films (mostly for children), one of the “three strands of nonfiction film” alongside documentary and educational film (p. 15). Field was educational manager at British Instructional Films (BIF) and he describes her as one of the important figures in Colonial Film development. However, she fades into the background and does not reappear in the narrative in the way promised. It points to the larger issue: the history of British Colonial film is a story of white men. One work that provides an important counterpoint here is *British Women Amateur Filmmakers. National Memories and Global Identities* by fellow Colonial Film project researcher Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes (and Heather Norris Nicholson).⁶ Similarly, the unpublished PhD thesis by Aboubakar Sidiki Sanogo hints at other narratives of documentary history in Africa that raise the profile of African filmmakers and gives them a voice missing from Rice’s account due to its focus on colonial sources.⁷

Towards the end of the book and of the colonial film era, colonial subjects come to take on increased presence and significance. Many of the Colonial Film Units begin to train local operators who are to take over the operations after independence. There is a lingering reliance on British expertise and technical

facilities, and there is a deep imprint of colonial style and approach on the postcolonial film units and national propaganda. Through film the British were able to clearly present the transition to independence as one of “gifting” from Britain to the newly formed independent countries in Africa, Malaya, and the Caribbean. The final act of colonial benevolence was to secure ongoing British interests in the postcolonial nations through investment, trade, and membership in the Commonwealth of Nations.

Other potential links to corporate documentary such as plantation or oil companies, who operated film units in the 1920s onwards, are not explored but would be welcome to understand the links between colonial administration and corporate interests. Recent work from Sandeep Ray about documentary and non-fiction film in the Dutch East Indies (modern day Indonesia) for example has shown how corporate documentary operated in open collaboration with the Dutch colonial government.⁸ Other forms of nonfiction such as tourist travelogues, ethnographic film, newsreels, and actualities may also intersect with the colonial way-of-seeing. For example, Jean Rouch worked in Africa for fifteen years paralleling the events in the final chapters of the book before he returned to Paris in the summer of 1960 to make *Chronicle of a Summer* (1961).

Rice draws our attention to the role of archives and archival research in historical film studies. As archives are newly digitized and made available, conducting archival research is not only easier but benefits from being able to draw

from multiple collections. This not only allows for greater coverage, but also provides additional material for corroboration and exploring the polyvocality of multiple viewpoints. One of the rich resources that Rice draws on is the *Colonial Cinema* magazine published out of the Colonial Film Office in London. He has made scanned copies of this available on the book's accompaniment website.⁹ This publication contains news, opinion, and other written perspectives from many of the key people, including William Sellers who wrote the highly influential "Films for Primitive Peoples" in 1940 (pp. 65-68). Rice points to the Media History Digital Library from the University of Wisconsin-Madison as another source of archival material related to cinema.¹⁰ As Rice notes at the end of his book though, only about 5% of the colonial films made have been archived, with many lost to poor storage and institutional barriers. Nevertheless, this book shows the depth of available material and the kinds of media histories that can be researched and written based on that material. Rice makes a compelling case for the digitization of these publications and making them freely available online to other scholars, researchers, and members of the public to explore important media histories of empire.

¹ "Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire." <http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/>

² Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe, eds. *Empire and Film*. Cultural Histories of Cinema. London: Palgrave Macmillan on behalf of the British Film Institute, 2011; Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe, eds. *Film and the End of Empire*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

³ Priya Jaikumar, *Where Histories Reside: India as Filmed Space*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2019; Lee Grieveson, *Cinema and the Wealth of Nations: Media, Capital, and the Liberal World System*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018; Ian Aitken and Camille Deprez, eds. *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

⁴ Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008.

⁵ Rosaleen Smyth, "Grierson, the British Documentary Movement, and Colonial Cinema in British Colonial Africa." *Film History* 25, no. 4 (2013): 82. <https://doi.org/10.2979/filmhistory.25.4.82>

⁶ Annamaria Motrescu-Mayes and Heather Norris Nicholson. *British Women Amateur Filmmakers: National Memories and Global Identities*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018.

⁷ Aboubakar Sanogo, "The History of Documentary in Africa -- The Colonial Era." PhD Thesis, University of Southern California, 2009. <http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/ref/collection/p15799coll127/id/304371>.

⁸ Sandeep Ray, *Celluloid Colony: Locating History and Ethnography in Early Dutch Colonial Films of Indonesia*. Singapore: NUS Press, 2021.

⁹ "Films for the Colonies." University of St. Andrews. <https://films-for-the-colonies.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/>

¹⁰ "Media History Digital Library." <https://mediahistoryproject.org/>

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