

Citation style

Blaylock, Jennifer: review of: Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies. Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire*, Oakland: University of California Press, 2019, in: *Reviews in History*, 2020, October, DOI: 10.14296/RiH/2014/2417, downloaded from Website



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Tom Rice's book offers an extensive and cogent history of the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) from its early conception in the minds of bureaucrats and educational specialists to its dissolution following the wave of independence movements in the mid-20th century. This book is a welcome contribution to a growing body of film scholarship on colonial film (Chang 2019, Kim 2017, Aitken and Deprez 2016, Fuhrmann 2015, Reynolds 2015, Grieveson and MacCabe 2011, Burns 2002), cinema in African colonies (Goerg 2020), and 'useful' cinemas (Acland and Wasson 2011). While other works on colonial film may have a key impact on the field by focusing on the histories and films of local production within the context of national cinema (Burns 2002, Jaikumar 2006), *Films for the Colonies* covers the geographically broad influence of the CFU with historical evidence culled from archives across the globe. Like other works on British colonial filmmaking, the narrative of the CFU in *Films for the Colonies* explains how the simultaneous construction of the metropole and the colony through moving images was an essential process of British colonialism. What is unique about Rice's approach is his effort to centralise colonialism within broader histories of British cinema, particularly by emphasizing the CFU's work in relation to that of the canonical filmmaking of the British documentary movement. As such, *Films for the Colonies* is essential reading for scholars interested in the visual history of colonialism and the global history of documentary and other 'useful' genres.

Arguing that the CFU is a significant part of British cinema history that has been 'obfuscated by a focus on prestige documentary and the feature film', *Films for the Colonies* reframes the history of documentary film through an analysis of the relationship between British documentary and the didactic filmmaking of the CFU (p. 4). A strength of the book is how it situates the work of the CFU and its major figures—William Sellers and George Pearson—in juxtaposition with the iconic figures of British documentary, namely John Grierson and Paul Rotha. CFU films were akin to the instructional films that Paul Rotha distinguished as separate from—and inferior to—the films of the British documentary movement. Sellers and Pearson were primarily public servants with training in government service and education rather than filmmaking (though Rice does note that Sellers took filmmaking courses at Kodak's Medical and Scientific Department during three service leaves in the 1930s). They approached filmmaking as educators and the CFU was, as Rice argues, 'a cinema of expertise' (p. 19). What colonial filmmakers lacked in professional filmmaking training was made up for in their 'expert' knowledge of colonial 'mentalities.' Aesthetics at the CFU were in support of government 'usefulness', not beauty. And, as Rice shows, Sellers and Pearson repeatedly defended their work against criticism that their films were artless, by emphasizing that the value of CFU films could not be assessed using existing Western aesthetic criteria. Instead, they argued that only non-Western audiences (namely African audiences) could determine 'their effectiveness and usefulness' (p. 64). Rice reveals the circularity of their reasoning by pointing out that the CFU was the entity that measured and gauged the responses of African audiences.

Following Charles Acland and Haidee Wasson's approach to the study of educational, industrial, and instructional films, which moves away from an emphasis on production and exhibition histories to an analysis of institutional attitudes toward the medium, Rice shows how cinema was made useful for an 'empire in decline' (p. 5). By focusing on the shifting policies of the CFU, Rice articulates the ways that cinema produced institutional stability for the colonial government when the ideologies of late colonialism were contentious and variable. For instance, he emphasizes the critical role CFU films had in the British government's 'attempt to stage-manage the "end" of empire by showing how the CFU worked to obfuscate the colonial violence, racial injustice, and economic exploitation that marked the end of British rule in the former colonies (p. 9). He shows how CFU films projected a fantasy of British altruism in global development and imagined their support for independence movements as continuous by celebrating the valuable new partnerships England hoped to have with former colonies. Rice's argument is particularly strong around

his discussion of the Ghana Film Unit production, *Freedom for Ghana* (1957) and the Malayan Film Unit's *Merdeka for Malaya* (1957). His analysis of each film draws out their distinct approaches to the representation of decolonisation and concludes that these films mitigated the rupture and loss of empire by emphasizing continuity.

Apart from chapter two, which concentrates on the ideologies that informed the practices of the CFU throughout its 15-year history, *Films for the Colonies* is organized in chronological order. The book begins with a prehistory of the CFU, detailing early efforts to use film to teach and inform colonial citizens in the British Empire, including the Bantu Educational Kinema Experiment which was in operation from 1935–37. Early on Rice introduces William Sellers, a civil servant based in Nigeria in the mid-1920s and 30s, who would later run the CFU and become responsible for its controversial, but highly influential, ideological approach to filmmaking. His 'specialized technique' for colonial film production was formulated through his experiences making films for Nigerian health campaigns. In chapter two, Rice comprehensively draws on Sellers's writings about colonial spectatorship to explain the efforts made by CFU to standardise film distribution in the colonies. This analysis also draws out the structural racism that Sellers reinforced through the application of his film theory throughout his career.

The focus of chapter three is the CFU during the Second World War. In it Rice explains how the war brought both an unparalleled focus and a new level of uncertainty to the CFU. While the CFU found purpose in producing films to mobilize an imperial army and war resources, the ideological justification for the war that accompanied CFU films—freedom—was at odds with the dominating force of the British Empire. Through the close analysis of CFU films, especially those 'home' productions shot in England, Rice shows how CFU films projected a compassionate interest and support of the colonies as a counter to the perception of British indifference that was common among colonial populations. The emphasis on a benevolent partnership between Britain and the colonies in these films foreshadows the types of development films that would be made immediately following the war.

Chapter four details the movement of CFU production and personnel from London to the colonies after World War II, and the accompanying shift from a war content to colonial development. The CFU made efforts to train local filmmakers in the colonies with the establishment of new training schools in the Gold Coast, Jamaica, and Cyprus. Local film units were set up to promote community development and welfare programs. With the threat of communism and the new role of UNESCO in educational film advocacy, Rice demonstrates how the CFU situated its films not only as instructional guides for teaching modern agriculture and medicine but also as tools for instilling British values at the centre of African nation building. Also, in this chapter Rice shows the continuing tensions between Grierson models of filmmaking and those of Sellers in the post war period by highlighting Colonial Office objections to Ministry of Information films like *Achimota* (1945) and Crown productions like *Fight for Life* (1946).

The local film units in the Gold Coast, Nigeria, Jamaica, and Trinidad are the focus of chapter five. Juxtaposing the Nigerian film unit's adoption of the Sellers technique and the Gold Coast Film Unit's attachment to the Griersonian model, Rice analyzes the continuities and ruptures between CFU filmmaking and state filmmaking in the colonies. Sean Graham, the director of the Gold Coast Film Unit, notoriously rejected Sellers' 'specialized technique' in favor of making entertaining, locally specific narrative stories, while the Nigerian, Jamaican, and Trinidad Film Units followed more closely the traditional CFU instructional mode.

At the core of *Films for the Colonies* is the tenet that 'film is colonial film, and histories of British cinema are equally histories of colonial (and world) cinema' (pp. 9–10).

Acknowledging that British 'film has always served as both a record and agent of empire' is of immense importance (p. 9). This is especially so now, as the structures of white supremacy that were globally institutionalized through the processes of colonialism have become more visible through the international impact of Black Lives Matter and student decolonisation

protests at African universities and across the world. Rice's history of British colonial filmmaking gives a valuable account of the lasting influences of colonial filmmaking practices and aesthetics in the state film units of former colonies.

Rice's history of the CFU offers a 'corrective to traditional documentary and British film histories', and Sellars is added as an anti-hero (Sellers), to complicate the heroics of Griersonian documentary. This addition, though, risks simplifying the contesting agendas of a variety of filmmakers, government agents, and colonial participants that constituted the entangled practices of state filmmaking in the colonies before and after independence (p. 5). Because of the limits of the archive, which Rice acknowledges in chapter five, the ambitions and perspectives of filmmakers who continued their work in the colonies after the end of Empire are wanting. We can infer, as Rice does, their attitudes toward the 'specialized technique' based on the films that they made after the CFU, but Sellers' (and Grierson's) methods may have been adopted and maintained by national unit filmmakers for a variety of reasons. Without records that give insight into the aesthetic decisions of filmmakers in the colonies, their choices can appear to be the singular result of the influences their European instructors had on them and nothing more. That said, Rice thoughtfully pushes on the archive in ways that challenge and contest the limits of influence that the CFU had on colonial film productions in the post-colony. But the question remains, how might a global history of non-fiction filmmaking decentre the great white male, while still attending to the postcolonial legacy of such dominating individuals?

Adjacent to documentary studies, this book productively pushes against the defining features of documentary and useful cinemas. It shows, through archivally-rich connections, how these traditions were constructed in dialogue with one another. The historical details that Rice includes to support his analysis of the CFU's aesthetics and ideologies are copious and impressive. Likewise, scholars interested in colonial history are bound to find the sheer breath of sources that Rice has brought together of enormous relevance to their scholarship and teaching. The academically-oriented *Films for the Colonies* brings argumentative cohesion to the impressive material Rice has already provided to historically contextualise the colonial films streaming at colonialfilm.org.uk. Together, the website and *Films for the Colonies*, provide an abundance of historical material to address, in the classroom and in future global cinema scholarship, the colonial legacy of white supremacy in state filmmaking aesthetics world wide.

Resources

Acland, Charles R. and Haidee Wasson, *Useful Cinemas* (Durham, 2011)

Aitken, Ian and Camille Deprez. *The Colonial Documentary Film in South and South-East Asia*, (Edinburgh, 2016)

Burns, James, *Flickering Shadows: Cinema and Identity in Colonial Zimbabwe* (Athens, 2002)

Chang, Jing Jing, *Screening Communities: Negotiating Narratives of Empire, Nation, and the Cold War in Hong Kong Cinema* (Hong Kong, 2019)

Fuhrmann, Wolfgang, *Imperial Projections: Screening the German Colonies* (New York, 2015)

Goerg, Odile, *Tropical Dream Palaces: Cinema in Colonial West Africa* (Oxford, 2020)

Grieverson, Lee and Colin MacCabe, *Film and the End of Empire* (London, 2011)

Jaikumar, Priya, *Cinema at the End of Empire: A Politics of Transition in Britain and India* (Durham, 2006)

Kim, Dong Hoon, *Eclipsed Cinema: The Film Culture of Colonial Korea* (Edinburgh, 2017)

Reynolds, Glenn, *Colonial cinema in Africa: Origins, Images, Audiences* (Jefferson, 2015)