Reviewed by James Burns

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

by Tom Rice.
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Tom Rice's *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire* is an impressive study of the Colonial Film Unit (hereafter CFU), a British government agency that made movies for British imperial subjects in Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean from 1939 until 1954. It is exhaustively researched, drawing on archival materials, published works, interviews with CFU staff, and extensive analysis of the films produced by the unit. While many scholars have described the work of the CFU in Africa and elsewhere, Rice's book is the first to document its rise, fall, and aftermath in detail. In producing the definitive account of the unit's history, he makes significant contributions to multiple lines of historical inquiry. *Films for the Colonies* will prove essential reading for the growing community of scholars interested in the history of media in European colonies. But Rice sees the story of the CFU as having relevance beyond its imperial context. He locates the unit's history within the broader field of British film history and seeks to contribute to recent scholarship on "useful" cinemas: that is, studies that examine "nontheatrical exhibition, educational, industrial, and instructional film," the institutions that produced them, and the agents who disseminated them.[1] Finally, as the

1 Tom Rice, *Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019), 5.

title suggests, Rice also contends that the CFU's history can tell us a great deal about the transition from Empire to Commonwealth that transpired rapidly in the wake of the Second World War. Rice persuasively argues that the CFU played a role in refashioning the relationship between Britain and her colonies, helping to "enact new models of empire that often continue to this day."[2]

Chapter 1 explores the interwar origins of the unit. The key figure here is William Sellers, a civil servant who made several pioneering films for African audiences in British Nigeria during the 1920s. Sellers was a sanitation officer with no technical film training who began making movies for use in public health campaigns. He became the head of the CFU at its inception in 1939 and led the unit continuously over its fifteen-year life span. As head of the CFU, he became an influential "expert" on filmmaking for rural audiences around the world in the postwar era. Rice carefully documents Sellers's early experiences in Nigeria, which strongly influenced his subsequent work for the CFU. During the 1930s, Sellers was one of several officials pressing the Colonial Office to fund filmmaking for colonial peoples. These proposals were met with a tepid response as government officials viewed these initiatives as amateurish, and the Colonial Office could not justify financing film production during the depression. But as war emerged on the horizon, the British government began to take a greater interest in film propaganda in the colonies and placed Sellers in command of the newly created CFU in late 1939. The other figure looming over these interwar conversations was John Grierson, who was working for the Empire Marketing Board during the 1930s and was called to head film propaganda efforts for the British government in Canada during the war. Grierson's interest in storytelling influenced a generation of British documentary makers. Though Grierson and Sellers held quite different philosophies of filmmaking, Rice observes that these two figures "[b]oth represent efforts at this precise moment to institutionalize film and make it useful for an imperial project."[3]

Chapter 2, "Film Rules: The Governing Principles of the Colonial Film Unit," analyzes the approach to filmmaking that Sellers implemented at the CFU. He insisted CFU films had to utilize a simplified film language because he believed Africans would be confused by sophisticated cinema techniques. He had developed this approach while making films in Nigeria. "These early experiments," Sellers explained in 1941, "proved conclusively that if films were to be successful in conveying a story or teaching a lesson to these people they would have to be specially made."[4] Sellers popularized his views in speeches and articles with titles such as "Films for Primitive Peoples." Sellers's views on the limited film literacy of colonial audiences were disseminated in the pages of the Colonial Office's in-house journal *Colonial Cinema*. Rice shows how Sellers's simplistic approach to filmmaking guided a generation of colonial filmmakers and came to influence film theorists such as André Bazin and Siegfried Kracauer. Drawing on the work of anthropologist Brian

2 Rice, 4.
3 Rice, 14.
4 Rice, 66.

Larkin, Rice shows how these scholars relied on works published by agents of the CFU to conceptualize their understanding of how new audiences processed cinematic images. However, Rice demonstrates that their articulation of the Sellers approach removed it from an imperial context and instead viewed CFU stories of audience incomprehension as evidence of the early stages of the process of cinema literacy experienced by all new audiences. At the CFU, Sellers worked closely with George Pearson, a former teacher and silent film director who shared his views on the limitations of their target audience. Their partnership would shape filmmaking for colonial peoples for a generation. However, some recruits to the film unit were unhappy with this simple, didactic style. Many had been inspired by Grierson, and this tension between the two approaches would characterize the CFU throughout its life. These competing visions lived on after the unit wound down, as film units working in former colonies drew inspiration from one or the other style.

Chapter 3, "Mobilizing an Empire: The Colonial Film Unit in a State of War," examines the CFU's activities from 1939 to 1945. This chapter draws extensively on government documents to reconstruct the bureaucratic maneuvering and infighting that shaped the CFU's activities during the war. It also provides a close examination of the unit's limited wartime output. Rice analyzes a large number of the early films to plot the ways in which their subjects and themes changed as Britain's wartime prospects improved. Originally Sellers had conceptualized the CFU as an educational film unit, mostly with African audiences in mind. But shortly after its creation in 1939, Britain found herself in imminent peril, and the unit was called upon to produce propaganda for consumption in rural communities across the Empire. As peace started to come into view by 1943, Rice shows that production began to shift to the original educational mission. Rice demonstrates that these films were not experienced in a cultural vacuum but formed a part of a broader media landscape. CFU productions were screened by mobile cinema units run by government agents, which meant they were invariably mediated by interpreters. They were also one of several forms of media being disseminated to colonial peoples, which also included radio, the press, posters, and magic lantern shows.

Chapter 4, "Moving Overseas: 'Films *for* Africans, *with* Africans, *by* Africans,'" documents the postwar decade when the CFU began actively filming in the colonies. During the war, filming abroad had been largely impossible. Therefore, most of the films the CFU produced were intended to educate the colonies about Britain (with titles such as *Mister English at Home*) or were cobbled together from footage provided by local officials from across the Empire. But shortly after the end of the war, film crews traveled to Africa to begin producing, in the words of George Pearson, "films for Africans, with Africans, by Africans," a motto that many CFU staff embraced with ambivalence. As the CFU ramped up production abroad, it found itself dealing with the growing influence of the United Nations in global education, the new Labour government's shifting colonial policies, and the exigencies facing every government department in the era of postwar austerity. During this period, the CFU set up a series of film schools in London and in the colonies to train local people to take on the unit's mission upon independence. In his

analysis of these separate film units, Rice shows that local filmmakers began putting their stamp on these government productions as unique film cultures emerged. In examining work of units from across the Empire, Rice observes, "The films often appear remarkably similar, but they also reveal the particular ideologies of the local units, the ways in which the work of the CFU was now reworked and repurposed across different territories."[5]

The final chapter, "Handover: Local Units through the End of Empire," follows the CFU's influence beyond the official transfer of power. It demonstrates that many of the former colonies continued to employ cinema units for mass education and propaganda after independence. Some states retained the CFU's didactic tone and simplified film language, while others sought to distance themselves from this approach. Rice examines state-sponsored film production in such diverse nations as Jamaica, Ghana, and Malaysia to illuminate the enduring influence of the CFU on the aesthetics and agendas of postcolonial film units.

This is a fascinating story, clearly told by an author with an impressive knowledge of his subject. Rice is uniquely qualified to produce a history of the CFU. He was the senior researcher for the BFI website that contains many CFU films (an indispensable companion to this volume).[6] He helped to organize a conference in conjunction with the launching of the website that resulted in the publication of two edited volumes of essays on colonial film. This background is in evidence throughout the text. He displays a strong understanding of the complicated bureaucratic structures that shaped the CFU's history. He also appears to have an encyclopedic knowledge of these films, which underpins his thoughtful and insightful analysis.

Throughout its five chapters, *Films for the Colonies* maintains a close focus on the activities and influence of the CFU. It is thus likely to leave some readers curious about similar developments in other colonies. It also has little to say about the history of Hollywood and other less "useful" cinema experiences in the British colonies. Fortunately, Rice has provided an efficient bibliography to direct readers to the literature on these and other related subjects that his compact history does not have the space to address. The volume is also complemented by an extensive collection of effective photographs. In sum, this is an attractively packaged, absorbingly written history of a fascinating subject. It will prove equally valuable to scholars interested in British film history, the global history of film, or the end of the Empire.

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5 Rice, 233.

6 See *Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire*, http://www.colonialfilm.org.uk/home.