

Introduction

On May 31st, 1955, I stood with Hugh Davison to close the doors for the last time on empty rooms that had ceased to care.¹

In describing the closure of the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) in 1955, George Pearson presents the unit as the victim of seismic political shifts; a unit disbanded and broken up like the empire it had served; a unit now out of step, unwanted, and soon to be forgotten. For 80-year-old Pearson, a celebrated pioneer of British silent cinema who had spent the previous fifteen years making films that sought to promote, preserve, and redefine the British Empire for colonial audiences, this seemingly represented a point of no return; the work of the CFU now to be discarded or deemed superfluous as moves toward mass decolonization gathered pace.

From its establishment at the outbreak of war in 1939 to its disbandment on the cusp of political independence, the CFU had deployed particular technologies, practices, ideas, and forms to foster imperialism and to sustain the British Empire. The CFU represents a significant state effort to use film and media to shape Britain's global empire, as it spoke directly to colonial audiences, producing and exhibiting films specifically for the colonies. Its work here was extensive and varied. The CFU produced more than two hundred short films, which were widely exhibited throughout the British Empire. These films, often short instructional pictures showing Africans visiting London, weaving methods in the Gold Coast, or the perils of tuberculosis, employed specific filmic

practices based on reductive assumptions about the cognitive capabilities of African audiences, which often precluded the use of close-ups, cross-cutting, short scenes, and excessive movement within the frame. In this way, the CFU projected a colonial ideology through its film form that both justified its own existence and foregrounded the intellectual primacy of the British colonizer. Film was imagined here as an integral part of the colonizing process, speaking directly to colonial audiences often beyond the reach of existing government propaganda. To this end, the CFU established networks for the distribution and exhibition of film across the colonies (most notably by mobile cinema vans), one part of an emerging media infrastructure within the colonies.

The CFU ran training schools, conducted audience surveys, and published a quarterly magazine (*Colonial Cinema*, 1942–54), which sought to direct and disseminate the pedagogical use of film across a disparate, increasingly fractured empire. The unit evolved and responded to political shifts, as cinema was deployed in the service of an imperialism that was both territorial and economic. Initially established to mobilize colonial support for war, the CFU later prioritized welfare and development within the postwar colonies and finally prepared the ground for independence. Indeed, as independence moved ever closer in the postwar era, the CFU helped set up a series of local units—most notably in West Africa and the Caribbean—many of which would continue beyond independence. These units, a complex hybrid of liberal imperialism and local personnel and traditions, would both shape postcolonial cinemas and help to manage and mediate the moves from colonial to independent state.

In this way, the closure of the CFU in 1955 should not be considered an “end,” as the work of the CFU helped promote ongoing economic “partnership” and also formalized practices and institutions that would extend well beyond independence. George Pearson hinted at this in the final edition of *Colonial Cinema* in December 1954. Pearson addressed those students—which he said numbered more than a hundred from thirty overseas territories—who had attended instruction with him at the CFU’s offices in Soho Square, London. “The good work must go on,” he wrote. “From your own people you must find new disciples.” This message was visualized on the magazine’s front cover, which showed an African looking through a camera. The editorial suggested that this might be “very aptly” entitled “A Peep into the Future” (see Figure 0.1).²

Looking through the lens of the Colonial Film Unit provides a fresh historical perspective on both the emergence of global film cultures and the last decades of the British Empire; a history told not simply through



FIGURE 0.1. “A Peep into the Future,” the front cover of the final issue of *Colonial Cinema*, December 1954.

the films and their exhibition, but also through the policies, administration, and shifting priorities of government filmmaking. Film records, responds to, and negotiates what Paul Gilroy has described as “the slow, fractious blood-soaked decomposition of the British Empire.”³ One of the many ironies here might be that an institution created to administer and maintain an empire through film should also serve as an exemplary study of the empire’s dissolution. However, while at first glance the CFU’s own decline ran parallel to the empire it served, the CFU also worked to redefine imperial power to colonial audiences. To this end, the British state produced (invariably cheap) media for colonial audiences to help transact a shift from empire to one of development and “commonwealth,” from territorial to economic imperialism. In doing so they used media as a form of biopolitics to foster the utility of a laboring population. These government fantasies, which played through traveling units on new imperial networks, projected models of industry and citizenship that helped to establish new social and, in particular, economic relationships between London and the colonies. Whether showing visiting Africans learning from British workers in a

car factory in Coventry in 1948 or the visit of Princess Margaret to Jamaica in 1955, these films both preserved and articulated these new relationships to colonial audiences.

This book (and the media discussed within it) is then not simply reporting on the decline of the British Empire, but also recognizing its endurance, highlighting how the CFU helped to preserve, “remake,” and—through the units it worked to establish—enact new models of empire that often continue to this day. Building on the recent scholarship of media historian Lee Grieveson, the book highlights the ways in which the CFU’s organizational model, content (regarding hygiene, conduct, and economic practices), and mode of delivery (mobile exhibition) helped to transform formally controlled colonies into intra-imperial trade blocks. The CFU created and adapted an imperial network similar to other networks of trade—one routed through the imperial center in London—and, as Brian Larkin shows in the context of Nigeria, facilitated the trafficking of people, products (including film), and ideas over a vast territorial space.⁴ The CFU was hardly alone here but rather intersected with other prominent state, media, and administrative organizations, which were producing and projecting information across the world through new forms of media, such as the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), British Council, and UNESCO, as one prominent (and critically overlooked) part of twentieth-century imperial administration. These citizen-building organizations often operated in tandem. However, they deviated significantly in their understanding both of what a decline in territorial power would mean to a geopolitically powerful nation-state such as Britain and of how best to respond to these shifts through media. The CFU became an interlocutor within this debate.

The CFU itself remains something of a critical pariah, often consigned to the footnotes, unloved and unwanted as Pearson acknowledged, and invariably ridiculed by other “professional” documentary filmmakers. In challenging this view, this first book-length study of the CFU provides a revisionist history of British and global cinema. While there is no shortage of critical writing on John Grierson and the celebrated British Documentary Movement, this book reveals another path that runs counter to, but intersects with, the more familiar British documentary history. This instructional, educational, “useful” cinema, run by administrators, teachers, and civil servants, forms an integral aspect of British cinema, one that is too often obfuscated by a focus on prestige documentary and the feature film. Indeed, this cinema, deployed as one part of government administration, remains somewhat marginalized within a film history

that privileges a narrative form of documentary and bases value judgments primarily on aesthetics. Such a history celebrates filmmakers like John Grierson often at the expense of department officials and subject experts, who apply their expertise to film. While Grierson features across these pages—and indeed recent scholarship, such as Zoe Druick and Deane Williams’s *The Grierson Effect*, has helpfully foregrounded Grierson’s “engagement with colonial and nationalist formations across the globe”—the central figure within this book is William Sellers, the producer for the Colonial Film Unit. Sellers initially worked as a sanitary inspector in Nigeria, and what we see with the CFU is an organization working with, and run by, disciplinary experts whether in health, education, or agriculture.⁵ Furthermore, in recasting the CFU not only as a British institution but, in the vein of cinema historian Priya Jaikumar, as a node in the nexus between empire and colonies, the book positions the colonies at the center rather than the margins of British cinema history.⁶

As a corrective to traditional documentary and British film histories, this book examines the emergence of government filmmaking, nontheatrical exhibition, and wider film culture across the globe, from Ghana to Jamaica, from Malta to Malaya. The work, of course, engages directly with scholarship on colonial cinema, in particular that emerging from the Colonial Film project (on which I worked), a collaboration with the British Film Institute and Imperial War Museum that made many of these colonial films freely available online.⁷ Yet for cinema and media historians, the book also contributes more broadly to the recent wave of scholarship on what Charles R. Acland and Haidee Wasson labeled “useful” cinema, a term that can incorporate, as this book does, work on nontheatrical exhibition, educational, industrial, and instructional film but moves beyond a specific focus on production or exhibition to consider a broader “approach toward a medium on the part of institutions and institutional agents.”⁸ My focus is on this wider deployment of cinema, and indeed its *usefulness*, for an empire in decline. The CFU often inexpertly (albeit through an army of experts) formulated ways to shore up imperial power, not only through film, but through other means, such as its organization of the film space, through talks and demonstrations or through its training programs. In exploring the CFU’s institutional genealogy, the book uncovers the longer history of this pedagogical cinema for the colonies, which stretches from the earliest health films screened by mobile units in Nigeria and Kenya in the late 1920s to the work of local government film units into the 1960s, recording and circulating the carefully staged moments of independence whether in Barbados or Uganda.

One of the aspects that makes the CFU so compelling as a case study is that it often appears remarkably unremarkable, at points defined by dogmatic repetition (in their films, writing, and actions), by petty disputes and endless negotiation. This is a story as much of failure as success, of countless unmade films, broken technology, and unreliable commentators, of idealism giving way to pragmatism, of plans discussed ad nauseum in the corridors of London that were then ignored or overlooked in the villages of Nigeria. What is more, the films themselves are often most interesting for what they do not show, for what lies conspicuously absent outside the frame. As one example of many, the Crown Film Unit's 1950 survey of the empire, *Spotlight on the Colonies*, makes absolutely no mention of recently independent India. The commentary does acknowledge that "the colonies have long had their difficulties," but presents only "natural" problems, such as disease and drought, and unsurprisingly makes no mention of the social unrest or mismanagement attributed to the rise of nationalist movements.⁹ Although this is not a CFU film—it uses CFU footage but was produced primarily for British audiences by Crown, the in-house government unit—it reminds us that these films are often works of obstruction, smoke screens that reveal as much through what they conceal.

This expansive history, examining the role of film in the governance of the British Empire, is told through an array of archival materials, incorporating previously unaccessed films, images, audio files, and written materials. These include films from the CFU, its local offshoots and related units, official CFU and government papers, personal interviews with filmmakers, newspapers and journals, audience reports, unpublished autobiographies, and personal papers. Many of these materials are housed in London—most notably at the National Archives, the British Film Institute, the Imperial War Museum, and the Associated Press archives—a testament to the ways in which these government films and papers circulated through, and rested at, the imperial center. Records from the center are essential to this history, but they tell only part of the story. In exploring other archives, in former colonized spaces, such as Jamaica and Ghana, I attempt to uncover missing voices and perspectives. For ease and consistency—especially when working and quoting directly from archival sources—I have adopted the place names of the time (for example, I refer to the Gold Coast until 1957 and Ghana after this date).

The scope of this study is broad, encompassing parts of Africa (particularly West Africa), Asia (especially Malaya), the West Indies, and

Europe. Other imperial territories, notably the unique space of India and the white settler dominions, were beyond the remit of the CFU and so remain on the edges of this study. The book does, however, supplement existing studies of other governmental units—such as historian James Burns’s work on the Central African Film Unit and Ian Aitken’s recent study of postwar government filmmaking in Hong Kong—to build a fuller picture of the place and function of film across the British Empire.¹⁰ Similarly, the book’s focus on governmental uses of cinema foregrounds forms of documentary and educational cinema. Commercial, fiction cinema is not central to my history, even if it at times informed and shaped governmental discourses about empire.

These archival records not only allow us to reexamine the colonial past but also to understand its shaping of the “postcolonial” present. While this book addresses a particular historical period up to the 1960s, this history resonates as strongly as ever today. The corrosive effects of colonialism continue to shape postcolonial states, both internally (for example, through violent conflicts borne out of the redrawn borders that often artificially divided ethnic groups) and on an international stage (for example, through the exploitation of natural resources, and unequal economic relationships needed to sustain accelerated globalization). In revisiting these earliest films for colonial audiences, we see how the CFU sought to conceal or reframe the destructive impact of colonialism by promoting modernization projects, welfare schemes, and more broadly the biopolitical shaping of colonial labor to perpetuate an ongoing form of economic imperialism. Indeed, while the CFU might be largely forgotten today—and in many cases its films have decomposed—this pedagogic media helped to maintain often-enduring imperial power structures through the creation and circulation of film.

It is, therefore, essential to revisit and confront this history, to bring it into view, particularly as the end of empire remains such a contested and unresolved moment in British history. Two recent incidents exemplify this. First, in 2013 the British government paid compensation to Kenyan survivors, whom they now acknowledged had suffered “torture and other forms of ill-treatment” at the hands of the British colonial administration in the Mau Mau uprising in British Kenya in the 1950s. While again bringing into focus the devastating, violent impact of colonialism in the former colonies, it also reveals the historic processes of denial and myth-making, in which this media was often complicit. In the legal process for this case, “migrated archives”—Foreign and Commonwealth Office materials that had been concealed and thought lost—were brought

into view and revealed both the extent of this systemic abuse and also, given that many other files remain “lost,” the partial histories contained within the official record.¹¹ I noted earlier that the official record is only ever a partial one. This is one concrete example of that. Second, the recent “Rhodes Must Fall” campaign, which originally targeted a statue of Cecil Rhodes at the University of Cape Town, exposes both the unresolved legacies of the colonial era and the enduring power of its imagery. In seeking to challenge and remove symbols of Britain’s imperial past as part of a move to “decolonize” education, the campaign presented these visuals as evidence of the wider imperial structures that remain in place.¹² While these campaigns might invite a reexamination of Britain’s imperial past, paradoxically they run the risk of removing these contentious histories from view. The empire continues to pervade modern British life—defining the nation’s very recent history and dictating what the nation is today—but it does so from the shadows, largely exorcised from national memory. Indeed, it remains barely a footnote in a school curriculum that favors “victory” narratives of war, of underdogs fighting for freedom, of social progression and national heritage.

Britain’s failure to acknowledge and think through its loss of empire also continues to shape its outlook and position on the global stage. This is played out through Britain’s recent involvement in foreign, neo-colonial wars, replayed in territories like Iraq that were already fought over a century earlier in previous moments of imperialism. These wars are fought for a control of space, for the movement of materials and resources, and to perpetuate a modern economic imperialism. The wars are also, of course, fought to retain Britain’s geopolitical role and remain tied up in discourses around Britain’s place and role within the world. While postcolonial states have often struggled with these complex legacies, at times through civil war and through the looting of resources by corporations and dictators, Britain too continues to be shaped by its imperial past. The issues of the day, such as immigration, are direct products of the late colonial period, a modern nation formed in this moment, and are buttressed by evolving forms of populist nationalism that are themselves founded on ideas of racial and ethnic difference. More specifically, the legacies of empire infiltrate the recent discussions around Brexit. The “patriotic” calls to “reclaim” British sovereignty were fueled by an imperial nostalgia, by a desire to turn the clock back, whether imagining trade links with Commonwealth countries—reportedly dubbed Empire 2.0 by some government officials—or posturing as a global superpower.¹³ This response is nothing new. At times of social

and economic crisis, we often see what Paul Gilroy characterizes as a “postcolonial melancholia,” a desire to return to past “glories.”¹⁴ Of course, this demands a voluntary amnesia and a level of historical illiteracy, privileging a particular memory of empire—tea-drinking, railway-building, cricket-playing, and keeping calm and carrying on—which was partly constructed and perpetuated in the films and media examined in this book.

Crucially, this national failure to confront the end of empire begins in the period of this study as the CFU seeks to mediate and conceal this loss, to retain a level of (particularly economic) influence across these territories. While these films were at first about governing the empire, over time they often mutated into a more elaborate game of hide and seek, concealing its dissolution. This concealing—through visualizing—is foundational for the current complex conjuncture of “Great Britain” as it fragments and withdraws from Europe. What we see through the CFU films is a government attempt to stage-manage the “end,” to remove violence and injustices, to replace pleasure with responsibility, to ignore what is lost in a bid to celebrate what is gained; a new “partnership” and a continuity beyond independence.

Similarly, film historians have too often neglected to examine the colonial antecedents in modern cinema cultures across the world. Whether appropriating colonial structures or directly rejecting them, these national cinemas did not begin at independence, but are products of this late colonial period. When outlining the work of the mobile cinema vans during the war, the public relations officer in the Gold Coast explained that more than boosting morale during the war, “probably their greater claim to fame is that they have introduced the cinema to every part of the Gold Coast.”¹⁵ The point here is that the work of the Colonial Film Unit, some of the earliest organized forays into film by British and colonial governments, shapes both state media today and attitudes and responses to the most pressing contemporary issues.

...

The book’s narrative begins in interwar Britain, but it is important to acknowledge very briefly here the longer history that informs the initiation, and later institutionalization, of film practices within the colonies. In short, film has always served as both a record and agent of empire, bringing the colonies to Britain and projecting British primacy and ideals back to the colonies.¹⁶ I contend that from the outset, film *is* colonial film, and histories of British cinema are equally histories of colonial

(and world) cinema. The earliest films from the late Victorian period visualized imperial power and established the hierarchical structures (in their framing and camera position) between the colonizers and the colonized that continue throughout the period of this study. Film privileged the colonizer, those figures with power and authority and access to the camera, projecting their point of view and highlighting their primacy over the objects they depict.

These early films also highlight the early movement of film across trade routes and through the latest imperial networks. This movement of film transformed the ways in which colonial rule was administered, connecting and transporting the rulers of the empire into hitherto unreachable colonial lands. What we see then in the late Victorian period is not only that film can represent the empire—through historical moments, attitudes, and places—and conceal or contain particular voices and histories, but also that even then it served as a tool for colonialism, moving goods, people, and ideas throughout the empire. Whether sponsored by state, religious, or commercial interests, film was part of the colonizing process, taking the camera and technology into distant lands and using film to reach these foreign audiences.

These early films do not, however, attempt to address directly the non-European audiences within the colonies or to reach beyond the urban centers. It was not until the 1920s that nonfiction film—whether “documentary” film in Britain, educational film for schools, or instructional films specifically for colonial audiences—started to be worked through and institutionalized by the British state. This development is examined in chapter 1, which explores the earliest attempts to use films to inform, educate, and inculcate colonial citizens. In tracing the prehistory of the CFU, the chapter reveals the origins of filmmaking in Africa. It foregrounds the role of film in colonial administration and, in particular, examines William Sellers’s work with the health department in Nigeria. Sellers’s work here begins at a crucial moment when the health of colonial subjects is seen to undergird, and is equated to, the fiscal health of the empire.

William Sellers takes center stage in chapter 2. While the book is largely organized chronologically, chapter 2 more broadly explores the ideologies and operating practices of the CFU throughout its fifteen-year history. This history is told largely through the writings of Sellers, whose influential theories on colonial spectatorship were based on, and reinforced, racial and cultural assumptions about African audiences. In proposing his “specialised technique,” Sellers sought to define and create a

distinctly “colonial” cinema. The chapter also explores Sellers’s innovative attempts to organize and standardize film exhibition across the empire, imagining cinema in the colonies as a means of producing and managing modern colonial citizens. In examining the CFU’s attempts to standardize and control the deployment of film across the colonies, the chapter reveals the wider challenges for the CFU, whether uncovering pockets of local resistance or, most notably, the rise of an often unregulated local voice—the commentator or interpreter traveling with the film—within this cinema.

The third chapter considers the CFU during the Second World War, a moment when the CFU’s future and function was as uncertain as the empire it represented. A war that brought together an empire, its people and products, would ultimately tear it apart, exposing the ideological principles on which the empire was founded. The fictions of colonialism, projected and protected by the CFU, were now somewhat punctured and exposed by this fight for “freedom.” Throughout this period, the CFU becomes something of a battleground, fought over by the Ministry of Information and the Colonial Office, by government administrators in London and information officers within the colonies, and at stake here is the future direction of the British Empire. The chapter analyzes CFU films (and the often volatile discourses around them), whether produced in the UK or the colonies, whether addressing war or imagining a life beyond, and highlights the wider media infrastructures forming across the empire at this moment. It positions the CFU within the context of this wider media, including filmstrips and BBC radio broadcasts, and alongside other film producers, including the celebrated Crown Film Unit and the considerably less celebrated British Council, as the CFU sought to mobilize an imperial army and workforce for war.

The final two chapters examine the seismic social, political, and economic changes, which are played out both on, and through, film after the war. When Winston Churchill spoke in the House of Commons on 18 June 1940 of what he described as the “Battle of Britain,” he warned that upon this impending battle “depends our own life and the long continuity of our institutions and our Empire.” Concluding his address, he famously exclaimed that “if the British Commonwealth and Empire lasts for a thousand years men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour’.”¹⁷ Of course, despite withstanding the German invasion and ultimately securing victory in war, the empire would barely make it out of the decade, broken up and splintered as new anthems, flags, and constitutions were created over the next quarter century.

In the aftermath of war, with a Labour administration propagating new models of economic partnership, amidst public and political debate over the function, morality, and *value* of a postwar empire, the CFU moved increasingly into the colonies, promoting welfare and development programs. Chapter 4 examines this postwar movement—of film equipment and personnel—from London to the colonies. In January 1948, the British Film Institute (BFI) hosted a conference entitled “The Film in Colonial Development” in which its European participants outlined the need to “teach the people of the Colonies to run the show themselves.”¹⁸ At this same moment, the CFU set up its first ten-month training school in Accra (there would be subsequent schools in Jamaica and Cyprus), training a (first) generation of local filmmakers. These schools, closely examined here, would provide the personnel and equipment for the local units that began to emerge from the end of the decade.

The local units, most notably in Nigeria, the Gold Coast, Jamaica, and Trinidad, are the subject of chapter 5. In analyzing their films and practices, the chapter reveals the different media responses across the colonies. For example, while the Nigerian Film Unit largely endorsed the Sellers doctrine, the neighboring Gold Coast Film Unit more closely followed a Griersonian model, producing ambitious and entertaining fictionalized tales promoting maternity care, government housing schemes, or taxation policy. In negotiating central and local influences, these units navigate and embody moves toward self-government. Looking closely at films of independence ceremonies shows how this particular moment (the move from colonial to independent state) was articulated on film. In analyzing the continuities, as well as the ruptures, that mark the very moment of the postcolonial, we can start to examine the legacies and influences of colonial film on the cinema cultures of today.

The CFU that emerges through these pages represents, in part, a microcosm of empire, indicative of the British government’s attempts to contain and manage a social, economic, and political body splintering under the pressure of world events. It is also a significant part of British and global cinema, illuminating the development of nonfiction, “useful” cinema and, more broadly, of state media across the mid-twentieth century. For now, the story returns to the beginning, to the first movements of William Sellers and John Grierson, to the development of cinema of, and for, the British Empire.