

2018

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Recommended Citation

Rice, Tom (2018) "Reviewing the Reviews: Popular Film, Public Opinion, and the Enduring Crisis of Colonialism," *Criticism*: Vol. 60 : Iss. 3 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/criticism/vol60/iss3/10>

REVIEWING THE REVIEWS: POPULAR FILM, PUBLIC OPINION, AND THE ENDURING CRISIS OF COLONIALISM

Tom Rice

Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism, 1946–1959, by Jon Cowans. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. 448. \$54.95 hardcover.

In a YouGov poll, conducted in Britain in 2016, 43 percent of respondents felt that the British Empire was a “good thing,” and only 19 percent labeled it a “bad thing.” In addition, 44 percent saw Britain’s history of colonialism as something to be “proud of,” while far fewer (21 percent) saw it as a source of regret.¹ I was reminded of these figures as I read Jon Cowans’s timely study *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism, 1946–1959*, which seeks to evaluate public opinion in postwar Britain, France, and the United States through a study of popular fiction films, examining “how and when colonialism became discredited in the West” (1). While the 2016 poll, and indeed recent US foreign policy and the rise of populist nationalism in Britain and France, might challenge Cowans’s use of the past tense and suggest that this process is ongoing, the book productively explores a period when attitudes toward empire and colonialism were reconfigured.

Cowans’s book is characterized by his thematic analysis of an impressive range of films, moving well beyond those widely recognized as “Empire films” to include chapters on American westerns and on more than a hundred films depicting miscegenation. In so doing, Cowans articulates postwar moves toward what he repeatedly identifies as a “liberal-colonialist view” (331) on film. The analysis

frustratingly eschews almost any consideration of film form, and there is little attempt to consider how these responses on film compare with popular fiction, radio, or other forms of media. Instead Cowans seeks to evaluate “public opinion about colonialism” (2) by systematically examining film reviews from the United States, Britain, and France, outlining the percentage of reviews that “praised,” “panned,” or were mixed on each film. While Cowans does note some patterns within the reviews—“the New York critics” were harshest on the imperial nostalgia of *The Inn of Sixth Happiness* (1958) (50); the three “left-wing” publications saw the Mau Mau drama *Simba* (1955) as “deeply political and colonialist” (161)—this “qualitative analysis of reception” (17) will sit less comfortably with film scholars. Cowans’s own writing hints at some of the problems here. He notes that André Bazin reviewed *Sayonara* (1957) in three separate publications (286) and that *Time*’s review of *Duel in the Sun* (1946) was uncharacteristically lenient, possibly the result of a letter that the producer David O. Selznick wrote to his friend the publisher Henry Luce, lobbying for positive coverage (257). Furthermore, describing miscegenation as an issue “where the opinions of critics and many audience members likely diverged somewhat” (332) reveals the limitations

of presenting critics as the arbiters of public opinion.

However, in collating and comparing a plethora of reviews for each film from three countries, Cowans performs valuable historical work and draws out some fascinating insights. As one example, he notes that not one of the thirty-eight British reviews for the India-set *Black Narcissus* (1947), which was released in the year of Indian independence, “mentioned the Raj, colonialism or Britain’s departure from India” (44). The example reminds us that these films—and reviews—are often most interesting for what they do not say. British reviews of the Malaya-set drama *The Planter’s Wife* (1952) failed to mention communism, but French critics did relate the film to their own situation in Indochina (146), just as US critics saw *Something of Value* (1957), set in Kenya, in relation to “ongoing racial conflicts” in their own country (167). Cowans shows how the majority of reviewers did not even know where *Windom’s Way* (1957) was set (spoiler: it is Malaya). These films are appropriated and related to different imperial contexts.

Cowans is adept at succinctly explaining the political contexts of the films and has an impressive command of the historical period. The individual case studies are accessible and will undoubtedly be of value to those of us teaching on this period, although the

focus on individual films does not always build to the wider connections. Cowans intriguingly mentions, somewhat in passing, that Britain produced no feature films about India in the decade after 1947 (150) and states that France avoided Empire films, partly because of political censorship (182), yet there is little attempt to examine these significant omissions. Similarly, while he primarily focuses on box-office successes, some of the more interesting revelations emerge when Cowans considers commercially unsuccessful films, such as *Devil's Doorway* (1950), which MGM delayed and then gave a limited release (115), and *The Last Hunt* (1956), which the director Richard Brooks suggested Americans hated “because of their own guilt” (122). There are valuable snippets from the production histories: for example, Darryl Zanuck’s note on the production of *Captain from Castille* (1947) that “we hate conquerors” (58) or his recognition that in order to gain the necessary cooperation from the British government on *King of the Khyber Rifles* (1953), the film must tone down its criticisms of British racism (76). Cowans also notes that the CIA asked Paramount to reduce the “image of Indian hating” in *Arrowhead* (1953) (124) and to stop the production of *Giant* (1956) (266), while he mentions that *Timbuktu* (1958), made in Hollywood by the French director Jacques Tourneur and offering

a positive view of French rule in Africa, failed to secure distribution in France. Cowans speculates here that France, in the midst of war in Algeria, was “in no mood for Hollywood desert fantasies” (191), although his well-considered examination of three films about Indochina and Algeria in the 1950s challenges the oft-held assumption that France deliberately ignored its colonial controversies. One of these films was banned, with reels seized by the police, while the other two proved significant box-office successes, despite cuts from the censors (199–207). The examples show the challenges of addressing topical colonial subjects, at once both politically sensitive and commercially appealing.

Given the book’s attempts to use film as a barometer of public opinion, it could have helpfully examined recent scholarship on the film press and clarified the varied role of governments across these films. Cowans notes very briefly that *Something of Value* was positively advertised as being “filmed under military protection in Africa’s Mau Mau country” (166) and that government departments arranged overseas screenings of *Three Stripes in the Sun* (1955) (280). Censorship hovers over these films—Cowans suggests that the peak period for on-screen black-white romances in 1958–59 came “in the aftermath of the Production Code revision” (321)—and evidently these films

were adapted across different exhibition contexts (an opening title in *The Seekers* [1954] foregrounding its liberal-colonialist intentions intriguingly appeared only in “some prints”; 90). Cowans mentions that *Tamango* (1958), a Franco-Italian production, was banned in the French colonies “because of its depiction of a violent uprising of blacks at a time of pressures for decolonization” (324), but this is again on the margins of the story, confined to brackets. The focus on box-office numbers limits a fuller examination of audiences, and it is beyond the ambition of this book to consider the exhibition or reception of these films within the colonies (there has, for example, been much written elsewhere on the popularity of westerns among colonial audiences). Cowans does note that a screening in Dublin of *Shake Hands with the Devil* (1959), a film that dealt with the Irish question, was “adored” by three quarters of the audience and “hated” by the other quarter, but again this is only mentioned because it is directly quoted in a review in the *Los Angeles Examiner* (177).

Cowans’s study ends in 1959 on the cusp of widespread

decolonization. While the next five years would see a plethora of significant films, such as *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962), *Sammy Going South* (1963), *Zulu* (1964) and *Guns at Batasi* (1964), that responded to decolonization, Cowans’s ambition is to show that “the growth of western anti-colonialism in the 1960s had its roots in the 1940s and 1950s” (346). The films studied within this book may have revealed, or responded to, shifts in “public opinion,” but they also helped to manage this loss and negotiate the public memory of Empire at a moment of “crisis.” This memory, partly configured in this postwar moment, continues to shape the three countries studied within this book today.

Tom Rice is a senior lecturer in film studies at University of St. Andrews. He is the author of White Robes, Silver Screens: Movies and the Making of the Ku Klux Klan (Indiana University Press, 2015) and a forthcoming book, Films for the Colonies: Cinema and the Preservation of the British Empire (University of California Press, 2019).

NOTE

1. “Rhodes Must Not Fall,” January 18, 2016, <https://yougov.co.uk/news/2016/01/18/rhodes-must-not-fall/>.