

# Empire and Film

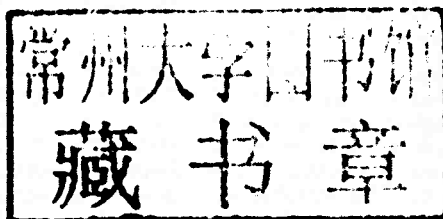
Edited by

Lee Grieveson

and Colin MacCabe

# Empire and Film

*Edited by* Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe



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## Acknowledgments

*Empire and Film* grows like its companion volume *Film and the End of Empire* out of an Arts and Humanities Research Council Major Resource Enhancement research project entitled 'Colonial Film: Moving Images of the British Empire', which ran from October 2007 to September 2010. The project produced a catalogue for the 6,200 films representing British colonies housed in the British Film Institute (BFI), the Imperial War Museum (IWM) and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum. That catalogue, with over thirty hours of digitised films and various writings about the films and other institutions, can be visited at <[colonialfilm.org.uk](http://colonialfilm.org.uk)>.

The initial idea for the project came from Heather Stewart at the BFI, who asked Colin MacCabe, then at the University of Exeter, to lead the bid. While Colin MacCabe was preparing this initial bid with Patrick Russell, Senior Curator of Non-fiction at the BFI National Archive, and Kay Gladstone of the IWM, Emma Sandon of Birkbeck College alerted him to a complementary bid being prepared by Anna Maria Motrescu of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum and she joined the team, which submitted a bid that also included the Bill Douglas Centre at the University of Exeter. This bid was turned down in 2006. A new bid was submitted later that year, which was prepared by Colin MacCabe, now based at Birkbeck, and Lee Grieveson of University College London (UCL), who became Co-director. The project was led by MacCabe and Grieveson, with a research team including Russell, Gladstone, Sandon and Nigel Algar, Senior Curator of Fiction at the BFI National Archive.

The research team started work in October 2007 with Tom Rice and Anna Maria Motrescu as postdoctoral researchers. Anna Maria left the project to work in Cambridge in 2009 and was replaced by Francis Gooding. Before that, with funds provided by the London Consortium, Richard Osborne had been recruited as a third researcher. In May 2009 Filipa César joined the team to prepare her film and installation *Black Balance*. The team held regular seminars throughout the three years: thanks to Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, Priya Jaikumar, Tom Gunning, Stephen Frears, Laura Mulvey, Patrick Manning and David Trotter. The seminars led to two conferences, one held in London in July 2010 and one held in Pittsburgh in September 2010.

The project was administered through Birkbeck College with particular efficiency by Liz Francis. We benefited greatly from support from both the London Consortium and the University of Pittsburgh. The London Consortium contributed considerable financial support and two of the postdoctoral researchers. The Director of the London Consortium, Steve Connor, was particularly helpful in ensuring that the project had a

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*Lee Grievesson and Colin MacCabe, London and Pittsburgh, March 2011*

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## 'To take ship to India and see a naked man spearing fish in blue water': Watching Films to Mourn the End of Empire

Colin MacCabe

I might have called this introductory essay 'Never Apologise, Never Explain'. That was the advice offered by the late nineteenth-century Master of Balliol, Benjamin Jowett, to the young men whose education he oversaw, when the time came for them to leave the college and sally forth to rule the empire.<sup>1</sup> I must confess to a sneaking regard for the maxim. In an era where apologetic confession has become a dominant genre across domestic and public life, I prefer as a virtue the Stoic recognition of error. And as for explanation, there is so much of our lives to which T. S. Eliot's words about the impossibility of explanation apply: 'I can't tell you, not because I don't want to but because I cannot find the words to express it.'<sup>2</sup> And yet if it is possible to construe Jowett's maxim in positive fashion, it must also be admitted there is no more concise summary of the certainty that is perhaps the most seductive of imperialism's pleasures – to always be right, to be transported to a realm in which doubt is impossible. However, that pleasure should always be trumped by the even greater intellectual pleasure of getting it wrong, by the tremendously exciting possibility of failure. No intellectual inquiry is of much interest if its outcome is known in advance.

The research project of which this book *Empire and Film* and its companion volume *Film and the End of Empire* are a part risked failure at three very different levels. The initial task was to provide a catalogue for the films representing British colonies held in three different institutions: the British Film Institute, the Imperial War Museum and the British and Empire Commonwealth Museum. This catalogue was dependent on getting academics and archivists to work together. This, at least in principle, is about as advisable as throwing a set of cats into a sack. Archivists famously hate academics and academics despise archivists. Academics tend to regard archivists as dim troglodytes difficult to tempt from the underground dungeons in which they hoard treasures that they do not fully appreciate. Archivists tend to regard academics as arrogant ignoramuses; parochial in their intellectual interests, and incapable of understanding the long-term value of the material they are studying. It has to be said that both are, of course, right. Archivists conserve material so that future generations can find in it meanings which are not yet apparent to us, academics are concerned to interpret that material in terms of the meanings that are pressingly evident to them. My decade as Head of Research at the British Film Institute from 1989 to 1998 had given me a good understanding of both perspectives and I felt that it was of importance for the future of film studies to show that genuine collaboration between these two fundamentally different approaches was possible. June Givanni's work at

the BFI for Africa 95 had also made me aware of a rich corpus of colonial films that had not been fully catalogued and whose very existence was known to only a handful of scholars. When it became possible to add the complementary holdings of the Imperial War Museum and the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum, it seemed clear that we had a perfect example of a corpus that needed collaboration between academics and archivists to make it available for wider study both by academics and by a more general public.

The primary task was to prepare a catalogue and one thing that a catalogue promises is completeness. Let us be clear that such completeness is always misleading for it promises a sufficiency that it cannot deliver. You probably don't have to be a pupil of Derrida or of Godel to appreciate the theoretical point. If one promises a catalogue *raisonnée* of Picasso, and it should be said that just such an art-historical genre was one of the models that the research team considered at the beginning of its work, one is assuming an importance for the individual artist that may be very misleading. Would a catalogue *raisonnée* of Picasso, Matisse and Braque 1906–14 not be more complete, or one that linked Picasso's work to the African art that was so powerful an influence and so on literally, if we talk theoretically, to infinity.

However, in committing itself to a catalogue the project had to opt for the vernacular of empiricism and to eschew the more complex questions of theoretical tongues. If we were to compile a catalogue then our first job was to establish a corpus. Our initial parameter was given by the holdings of the three archives with which we were working. First, the British Film Institute, which held many of the state-funded policy and educational films shot in the colonies. Then the Imperial War Museum with its unparalleled holdings in the field of conflict. These included, most importantly, footage from World War I that ruined for ever any claims of the superiority of European civilisation and World War II when the empire rallied to the anti-fascist flag on the explicit understanding that it was assisting at the end of empire. But it also included a wealth of material from, to take merely two examples, Palestine at the time of the mandate and Malaya during the Emergency, which illustrated the centrality of conflict to the empire throughout the twentieth century. Finally, the holdings of the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum completed these largely public holdings with some 800 home movies shot by those who administered Britain's colonies – a domestic record of empire.

The first definition of the corpus was thus given institutionally – we were looking at films held in these three institutions as the research project started at the beginning of October 2007. The institutions were determined by funding. It would of course make much more sense for this project to have been an international one. But, despite what the papers tell you, globalisation is not a recent event. It begins more than 500 years ago with Da Gama's rounding of the Cape and Columbus's crossing of the Atlantic. Indeed my dear dead colleague Paul Hirst used to argue that the international capital flows in the period leading up to World War I were a much more significant form of financial globalisation than more recent developments.<sup>3</sup> Certainly the distribution of film was much more globalised in this decade than at any time later in the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Hirst also argued very persuasively that the power of national governments has not been significantly weakened by the most recent wave of globalisations. What is certain is that our research was funded nationally and the most

important definition of the corpus was determined by the national institutions that were our partners in the bid. It should be stressed that at every stage we were more than conscious of the international dimensions of our work and that we made every effort that we could to internationalise the perspectives on our research. Indeed, the two concluding conferences in London and Pittsburgh in July and September 2010 represented a major element in this effort. Even more crucial to that effort is the publication of the proceedings of those conferences. However, it is important to stress the national nature of our funding and the extent to which that determined our corpus. To develop fully the work begun with the catalogue and website will require the full participation of former colonies. The fact that the primary outcome of this research will be a globally available website, one with access to thirty hours of digitised film, removes some if not all of the material obstacles to such participation and one can hope it will stimulate interest across the full range of the former colonies. From another perspective the research would benefit from complementary work with the other former European empires. The Portuguese, the Dutch, the French, the Belgian, the German (I cite them in chronological order) all have similar archives and a comparative study would, I think, prove both fascinating and illuminating. But if the national nature of the corpus was given, there were further choices that were, more consciously, ours.

The two most important deliberate choices were the following: 1) to limit ourselves to celluloid rather than video; and 2) to opt for a juridical definition of the colonies in the definition of the films that we would catalogue. The choice of film rather than television was centrally governed by the research time at our disposal. Almost all significant colonies had achieved independence by 1965 and the video record was meagre. Both the war over the Malvinas/Falklands in 1982 and Hong Kong in the period leading up to China's resumption of sovereignty in 1997 had left a huge video archive that was beyond our resources to catalogue properly. Second was the vexed question of whether we should include the Dominions within our corpus. The decision against was again partly dictated by available resources, but just as the post-65 colonies fell outside the clear period of colonialism and de-colonisation, so the Dominions with their very different relations both to Britain and their own indigenous populations seemed to constitute a different set of political and cultural relations.

If these two axes of selection combined economic necessity and cultural analysis, two further choices seem much less justified. By opting for a juridical definition of a colony, we excluded all of South America apart from Guyana and yet on both economic and cultural grounds, it might be argued that a country like Argentina was just as closely bound to Britain as colonies in other parts of the globe. Perhaps even more serious: why accept the formal achievement of independence as a crucial break in the filmic record? Surely it is just as interesting to see what transformations attend these political changes. Here, most importantly, resources and funding were determining: our designated archives held almost no post-independence films and with only two postdoctoral researchers and effectively no travel budget we felt that this research would be dependent on inter-archival co-operation. When we started we had optimistic views of similar research projects running concurrently with our own. These hopes proved unrealistic but it cannot be stressed too strongly that our project marks only the first stage of what must be an international process if it is to achieve its most

ambitious intellectual goals. The establishment of the website and the publication of these volumes is simply the first stage in a work that must involve the archives of the former colonies and further reflection from former colonies if it is to achieve genuine fruition.

These conscious decisions did produce the first requirement of a catalogue, that is a defined corpus: more than 6,200 films from over fifty colonies with 2,900 titles at the IWM, including a large number of rushes, 2,500 at the British Film Institute and 800 at the British Empire and Commonwealth Museum. The corpus constituted, we now had to fulfil our most precise intellectual aim and here I quote from the original Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) bid: 'to offer a model of collaboration between archives and universities integrating international standards of cataloguing with production of academic knowledge at the highest level'. It is worth noting, in this context, that it was a conscious aim of the project to recruit researchers who were not only versed in film studies but who had qualifications and competences across the range of the humanities and social sciences: history, anthropology, art history, cultural studies, music studies and more.

The decisions on the constitution of the corpus occupied some two weeks, but it took us a further three months to settle on the form of the catalogue. In addition to the basic cataloguing that was intended for all titles, we wished to produce a form of enhanced catalogue entry that would guide any future researchers or teachers and that would open up a relatively closed and specialised collection to much wider audiences.

We did not aim to provide enhanced entries for all titles both because of the labour involved and because the archivists, who at that stage knew the collection better than anyone, felt that there was a great deal of repetition of date, region and genre. It was decided initially that we would attempt to produce enhanced entries for 10 per cent of the collection that we then calculated at 6,000 films. In fact, as we began to explore the corpus, we discovered that it was slightly larger than we thought but more repetitive. It also became clear that there were a number of institutions that warranted completely separate and much longer entries (the Colonial Film Unit and the multiple national film units that it spawned; the Empire Marketing Board and the Central Office of Information would be three such examples). We therefore in the second year, in consultation with the AHRC, revised our target of enhanced entries to 5 per cent or 350 (in fact, the figure is slightly higher) and added some twenty plus topic entries to our targets.

It should be said that these enhanced entries remain the core of the research project and it is probably worth saying something about their structure. Each film has, in addition to the basic cataloguing information, a 1,000-word entry, the length determined both by the time and labour of writing and the time and labour of reading. The entry is divided into two parts: context and analysis. The context section is itself divided into two; the first providing an account of the film's context in terms of the film institutions that produced it; and the second concentrating on the political, social and historical backdrop. The analysis that follows focuses on the film's form and genre to produce a preliminary reading of the film. Theoretically, of course, such divisions are suspect. It is an axiom of film theory that the frame is an integral part of the image and thus to divorce the context from the analysis is already to operate a spurious distinction. Further to attempt to divide the specifics of film history from the wider

industrial, economic, political and ideological history of capitalism is to misunderstand how film is woven into the fabric of imperialism. From the Hays Code to the Blum Byrnes agreement – what might seem discrete events in an industrial history rapidly reveal themselves, on any serious inspection, as key moments in wider social, political and economic developments.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding these arguments, we felt that, to make the catalogue of more practical use, a division should be observed between discrete industrial history and wider historical processes, which future users could deconstruct in more complex analyses. While perhaps even more conscious of the provisionality of the line between context and text, we felt again, within the limits of the catalogue, that it was valuable to include a discrete analysis of each chosen film although we were well aware that the analysis section was of necessity more personal than the context. That is one of the reasons all entries have initials to identify their author. Let me take one such film, *District Officer* (1945), and consider its entry both as example and to lead us into more complex arguments about the value of this collection and to consider more difficult questions of success and failure.<sup>6</sup>

## CONTEXT

*District Officer* was produced in 1945 by Information Films of India (IFI), and distributed throughout the British Empire by the Central Film Library, Imperial Institute (London). The IFI was a state-funded body producing war propaganda and the Indian News Parade with largely Indian personnel. Ezra Mir, the producer of this film, worked both for IFI and its predecessor the Film Advisory Board from 1940–6 (IFI was established in 1943). In this period Mir produced over 170 films, both short documentaries (of 1,000 ft) and ‘quickies’ (of 250 ft), working alongside Bhaskar Rao and B. Mitra. IFI produced material in English, Bengali, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu versions.

IFI initially focused on wartime propaganda under the direction of the information and broadcasting department. However, over time IFI shifted towards more social, economic and ethnographic topics with titles like 1944’s *Tree of Wealth* and *Kisan, Rural Bengal*, *All India Radio*, *Child Welfare* and *Country Craft*, all produced in the immediate post-war period. In 1948, IFI was reconfigured into the new Indian state with the remit of producing ‘films for public information, education, motivation and for institutional and cultural purposes’, to be distributed by Documentary Films of India. Mir left IFI in 1946 and went on to become a crucial figure in the post-independence film industry.

District officers were a crucial element of the British administration in India. Recruitment had been extended to Indians from late Victorian times but their numbers grew particularly after Britain’s declared aim of self-government for the Raj in 1917. By 1929, there were 367 Indian civil servants to 894 Europeans and by the end of the war (the time of this film), there were 510 Indians to 429 Europeans. In part this was due to an ever-increasing difficulty in recruiting Europeans.

By the end of the war and with the independence that had been promised in response to the Quit India campaign at hand, these Indian district officers began to make political alliances to carry them into the future. On 11 December 1946, Lord

Wavell, Viceroy of India announced to the cabinet of India's committee that the Indian Indian Civil Service (ICS) officers 'could no longer be relied upon to carry out a firm policy'.

## ANALYSIS

*District Officer* shows the work of an Indian district officer, who is part of the Indian Civil Service, as he mediates local disputes and manages local affairs in the district of Bengal. The film has a conventional two-part form: the first section, which lasts nearly three minutes, portraying the setting and moving from a map and statistics to generalised shots of the region. The second, longer section of nine minutes focuses on the individual who lives within this setting. The film relies on an authoritative British male voiceover throughout to structure the scenes and it also promises to divulge particulars of both an unknown place and its inhabitants. The ideology of the film is best described as liberal imperialism at the end of empire. The general narrative is one of progress in which the historical reclamation of land from the sea that signals man's triumph over nature blends seamlessly into the new forms of transport and communication, particularly railways and telephones. Thus the historical facts of British conquest and domination are transformed into a natural progression. The film was made two years after the disastrous Bengal Famine, caused not by shortage of food but by maladministration.<sup>7</sup> The film never mentions the famine but it portrays a picture of an efficient and humane administration that would never let another such disaster happen.

Within this general narrative of progress we are introduced to the district officer, who administers the affairs of 3 million people, and then in a flashback we look at him arriving for his first job. Both the initial shot of the district officer appearing in a court and the flashback which shows him alighting from a train, have him emerging from an unknown and solitary space into a crowded social one. The implication from the beginning is that the district officer is a man apart – one who through hard work and study is able to exercise judgment. He is a man without family or background – that is to say, he is a man outside any history except that of progress. This progress is signified by the usual tropes of medicine and clean water rescuing the natives from a dangerous primitivism.

What is interesting about this particular film is how it portrays the liberal imperialist dream of India ruling itself without any British direction but in a completely British manner. Only two Europeans appear in the film: the police chief, who is shown as a subordinate of the district officer and one of the army officers with whom the district officer is on an equal standing. Perhaps the most evident marker of this absence comes when the district officer goes to Calcutta to report to his superior. We do not, however, see this superior – at this moment the film anticipates independence still more than two years away.

However, perhaps the most striking feature of this film is what it does not contain – any explicit discussion of independence. We know that it is exactly in this period that the district officers began to prepare for independence by establishing political alliances with both the Congress Party and other local centres of power. Not, however,