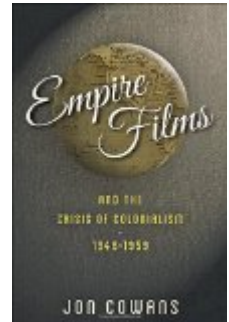


Jon Cowans. *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism, 1946–1959*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. 448 pp. \$54.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1641-0.



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Historians often overlook film as a reliable source to study public opinion. Cinema, in its quest for popularity, tries to please its audiences. As novelist Aldous Huxley pointed out, “Political and religious propaganda is effective, it would seem, only upon those who are already partly or entirely convinced of its truth.... Propaganda gives force and direction to the successive movements of popular feeling and desire; but it does not do much to create those movements.”[1] In *Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism, 1946-1959*, Jon Cowans investigates how public opinion toward the process of decolonization in the United States, France, and Britain was changing in the period immediately after World War II. He extensively researched fiction films that premiered in these countries from 1946 to 1959 that explored colonial themes, as well as their reception in terms of box offices and critic reviews. The book uses cinema to investigate changing attitudes toward colonialism in the beginning of the process of decolonization, which laid roots for the development of Western anticolonialism in the 1960s.

The book is divided into an introduction; three parts, each with three chapters; and a conclusion. In an illuminating introduction, Cowans advances his working definition of “colonialism,” which entails four components: occupation, exploitation, discrimination, and acculturation. He notes that the notions of imperialism and neocolonialism complicate things, and therefore it still remains useful to see colonialism and imperialism as a continuum. In fact, decolonization was a process that lasted decades: “Decolonization thus began well before independence and continued long after it” (p. 7). Cowans stresses that although this study is interested in artistic assessments, its primary aim is to understand political outlooks. He points out that critics and the audience shared a general lack of knowledge about their colonies, and therefore, critics’ opinions on colonialism were not very different from those of the general population. Cinema offered a rare opportunity to learn more about the occupied territories, their cultures and peoples, even if that information presented a distorted reality.

In 1945, colonial empires were still in their apogee, but in the wake of fascist imperialism, colonialism was no longer viewed favorably, especially in terms of its racist component. In 1947, India and Pakistan achieved independence and in 1960 the British prime minister, Harold Macmillan, gave a speech in which he acknowledged that decolonization was inevitable. The Cold War dominated the political scene in the United States—if on the one hand colonialism was not seen in a good light, on the other hand the fear that the countries fighting for liberation would turn to the Soviet Union for help made the United States reluctant to support decolonization. France was still recovering from World War II and the trauma of the Vichy government that had split the country in two.

In the first part of this book, “The Persistence of Empire,” Cowans explores films that favored the empire and whose main characters were Westerners with a mission to conquer or civilize occupied territories. The first chapter, “The White Woman’s Burden,” deals with missionary films in which female figures traveled to occupied territories to evangelize local populations. These films avoided discussing colonialism and intended to offer “emotional rewards and comforting fantasies of success” to Western audiences (p. 55). They usually portrayed the colonizer in a positive light, advancing their civilizing mission as highly beneficial to the colonized. The following chapter, “Heroes of Empire,” focuses on the male side of the conquest, and most of the films analyzed are set in the past, avoiding the issue of present-day colonialism. The figure of the white protector, just like that of the missionary, aimed at reassuring Western audiences of the worth of the colonial enterprise. Most of these films advanced an idea of liberal colonialism, which defended a type of occupation that respected the basic human rights of the colonized, and that in fact improved their lives. The last chapter of part 1, “Westerns,” concentrates on what Cowans perceives as internal decolonization, as in the case of the United States,

where occupation never ceased to exist. The western genre presents itself as an ideal case study of the subject, since it was one of the most prolific genres of Hollywood cinema at the time. Even though there was a trend to represent Native Americans positively, some films depicted them in a negative light and others were ambivalent about the subject. The author points to the fact that in many of these films there was a tendency to defend the pacific coexistence of Native Americans and whites, and maintenance of native culture, and such an approach suggests a multicultural outlook *avant la lettre*.

Part 2, “Coming to Terms: Confronting Insurgency and Decolonization,” delves into the films that tackled liberation struggle and decolonization. Chapter 4 focuses on films about the British Empire, chapter 5 on the French Empire, and chapter 6 on the American presence in postwar Asia. Films focusing on British colonialism, even if they recognized and condemned the injustices against the colonized, still favored colonialism. Liberal colonialism was preferred to a conservative version of it. In the French case, most of the films studied are Hollywood productions; French censorship prevented the theme from being explored in France. However, Cowans notes that, contrary to popular belief, the box-office success and positive reviews in France of the two French films he discusses prove that French audiences were quite receptive to the big screen. Regarding cinema about the American presence in Asia, most films supported US colonial presence on the continent, and the criticism usually aimed at British and French colonialism was absent when Americans portrayed their own colonial ventures. Furthermore, within the context of the Cold War, “anticommunism consistently trumped anticolonialism” (p. 240), and many of these films aimed to build support for US policies in Asia.

The last part of the book, “Dangerous Liaisons: Interracial Couples in Films,” deals with miscegenation in cinema, a theme that became

quite popular in the late 1940s and the 1950s. Chapter 7 explores the subject in westerns, where miscegenation tended to be seen positively. In this case, cinema was ahead of its time, as opinion polls revealed hostility toward the subject. The following chapter focuses on interracial relationships in Asia, which were mostly presented in a sympathetic manner. Even though, in the long run, miscegenation undermined notions of racial superiority, at the time it helped to support Western presence in Asia. The last chapter focuses on black-white couples, who usually suffered most prejudice. However, films increasingly approved such relationships, and critics refrained from openly voicing segregationist views. Cowans concludes that the ubiquitous presence of interracial couples in cinema contributed to the changing attitudes toward colonialism: "If these films indeed led viewers to think more about people of color and to reconsider their assumptions of racial difference, then cinema played a significant role in undermining one pillar of colonialism" (p. 333). Having sympathetic people of color represented on the big screen contributed to humanize them and to undercut colonialism.

Cowans concludes that many of these films presented ambivalent, even contradictory views. Messages of support for colonialism overlapped with strong criticism of it. Because films are collective products, and many people intervene in the process—director, producer, writers, censors, etc.—opposing views are sometimes incorporated in the same film. Disapproval of colonial injustice was slowly increasing, but the majority of these films condemned only conservative colonialism and usually endorsed some form of liberal colonialism. Films not only reflected public opinion but also helped to shape it. Cinema of this period was slowly humanizing the colonized other, and helped build the bases for the anticolonialism of the 1960s that would lead to the independence of a majority of colonized countries.

Empire Films and the Crisis of Colonialism is a well-researched book on the political outlooks of empire cinema in the post-World War II period. Cowan's research is extensive not only on the films of the period but also on their reception. He proves that cinema is an effective source to study public opinion about pressing political issues of an epoch. His work includes helpful tables with lists of films, characters, and other important information regarding attitudes toward decolonization. It would have been helpful to have the bibliography listed alphabetically, instead of appearing in notes where it can be difficult to quickly identify important works that he used as references. The book falls short on the promise, made in the introduction, to show three distinct national cases, as the United States ends up having considerably more visibility. Cowans justifies this with the fact that Hollywood produced many more films than France or Britain, and he uses film reviews written in these two European countries, whenever these are available, to evaluate trending views on colonialism.

Note

[1]. Aldous Huxley, quoted in Richard Taylor, *Film Propaganda: Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany* (London: Croom Helm, 1979), 10.

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