

Laura Fair, *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audience and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Urban Tanzania*. (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2018). pp. 452.

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Studies examining the consumption of commercial films in Africa are very few. Laura Fair's *Reel Pleasures* is a critical addition, as it extends our scholarly gaze beyond familiar themes and actors. Film is a crucial theme that continues to expose sociocultural and political landscapes of everyday life in colonial and postcolonial Africa, yet it has not attracted significant scholarly attention. During the period when colonial urban geography segregated more than it unified, "cinemas were one of few attractions that brought people from across the city into the same leisure space."¹ Obviously, cinemas in urban centers were nodes of social and cultural life as well as spaces of encounter. What is less obvious is the extent to which cinema spaces emerged as "places where urban citizenship was physically and discursively grounded."² This observation is central to Fair's argument. Constructing cinema theaters as forms of lively urban spaces that "resonated with soul[s] and spirit[s]" of moviegoers, Fair informs us that they erased the artificial gender boundaries existing in colonial Africa, where public recreation was largely gendered male, a theme appearing in chapters three, five, and seven.

Fair narrates a complex story of local, national, and transnational cinematic experiences of individual and communal consumers across time and space. Stitching together a canvas that consists of primary—oral data, films, and official and non-official documents—and secondary sources, Fair assumes the early colonial period as a departure point. She walks the reader through the country's socialist era—which witnessed the postcolonial government nationalize cinema buildings and film distribution—into the neoliberal era. Significantly, the book carries informative visual elements in photos, 45 in all, and three maps that aid the reader's understanding of the country's physical geography and the movie theatres that shaped the general landscape informing urban citizenship, leisure, and entertainment.

Structurally, the book is organized around eight chapters, a lengthy introduction, and an equally long epilogue. Collectively, the chapters cover eight decades encompassing multiple themes

of exhibition and distribution networks, as well as the “businessmen” who initiated them and constructed the architectural grandeurs that informed cinema buildings across the country (Ch. 1); the gender disparity in the cinema industry that privileged the men who sparked life in these buildings—such as the managers, ticket sellers, projectionists, and concession stand operators—and “held the warmest spots in communal hearts”³ (Ch. 2); and social lessons gleaned from films, especially from Hindi films about marriage, love, and romance across class boundaries (Ch. 3). Here, Fair reveals that the African penchant for Hindi films arose because these films “echoed [Africans’] concerns” and “developed themes and issues in ways that were far more relevant to East African life than those dreamed up by Hollywood.”⁴ Fair extends the discussion on taste to Chapter 4, which also shines a bright spotlight on sartorial appropriation and personal style. Chapters 5 and 6 map the geography of cinema buildings and highlight the connection between cinema and the post-colonial socialist ideology. Whereas the penultimate chapter pays attention to continuity and change in the cinema industry and demographic shift, the final chapter exposes the nexus between politics, as understood through Tanzania’s national cinema policy, and art. According to Fair, the national cinema policy had minimal effect on daily lives, but it affected cinema owners, managers, and buildings in profound ways.⁵

Reel Pleasures cuts across multiple disciplines. It is ideal for graduate students in history, subaltern studies, film and media studies, urban studies, and gender studies, but instructors in undergraduate courses, particularly in gender studies, will find chapters three, five, and seven instructive. For these reasons, Fair’s book is a valuable contribution to the literature of imperialism, colonial and postcolonial Africa, commodities, gender, and popular cultures.

Fair has covered almost all imaginable topics related to commercial film in colonial and postcolonial Tanzania, but one wishes that she would discuss censorship at much greater length than the brief mentions appearing on pages 101, 143-44, 183-84, and 306-08. It is no exaggeration that colonial officials believed censorship to be a vital component of commercial cinema. In a real sense, censorship distorted plotlines, themes, and narrative continuity, and it quickly endeared itself to the colonizer as a sure weapon for nurturing politically and morally acceptable citizens. For the most

part, during the colonial period, censorship informed citizenship and identity formation. Sadly, the practice lingered after colonialism's end, including in Tanzania, where the ruling class banned "films deemed contrary to socialism."⁶

Pointedly, *Reel Pleasures* captures stories of ordinary individuals and societies in marked spaces that, in many ways, shaped urban citizenship, social encounters, modernity, urbanization, consumer behaviors, and leisure. Broadly, however, the book situates entertainment within a complex history of framing and re-framing identities and, consequently, deepens our understanding of the interplay among power, art, and leisure. It challenges how we perceive the meaning of social spaces in colonial and postcolonial Africa, and it encourages us to think critically about how societies appropriate spaces to meet certain expectations.

Notes

¹ Laura Fair, *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audience and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Urban Tanzania* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2018), 238-39.

² *Ibid.*, 4.

³ *Ibid.*, 93.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 121-22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 306.