

The Last Laugh: African Audience Responses to Colonial Health Propaganda Films*

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Focusing on the complexity of local spectators' responses to the simple ideological formulae of colonial health and hygiene films, this article asks about the ways in which the presence of local aesthetic tastes and values represented a vital third space of mediation alongside film content and filmmakers' "authorial" objectives in the much-studied media archives on public health and hygiene in colonial Africa. The article argues that a host of cognitive failures is encapsulated in colonial officials' reports on the laughter of African audiences between the late 1920s and early 1950s. In attributing African laughter to unrefined "native" cruelty, colonial officials precluded the possibility of a politics of ridicule among audiences, among many other aesthetic and social practices affecting spectators' reactions to films.

Keywords: African audiences, Colonial Film Unit, Ghana, laughter, movies, Nigeria, public health

One evening in 1943, a British medical officer and his traveling film unit set up their open-air cinema in a remote village in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). No advance publicity was needed to assemble an audience in this free, impromptu cinema-space because news of the arrival of the Colonial Film Unit (CFU) would have followed the truck into the village and people would have flocked in from surrounding settlements for the screening. Top of the bill on this evening's variety program was the film *Machi Gaba*, completed in 1939 by the *doyen* of colonial educational films, Sanitary Superintendent William Sellers, whose passion for amateur filming in Nigeria between the late 1920s and early 1950s combined with his work to promote European ideas about health and hygiene in films like *Plague* (1926; re-edited as *Anti-Plague Operations in Lagos*, 1937), *Lagos Health and Baby Week* (1933), and other movies

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* Research for this project was funded by the ERC (AdG 323343) between September 1, 2013, and June 30, 2015; from July 1, 2015, to December 31, 2016, the project in Lagos received generous funding from the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University.

focusing on the need for urban sanitation.¹ Sellers's Health Propaganda Unit (HPU) traveled regularly to rural areas of Nigeria to screen general educational films for "backward" audiences with titles such as *The Construction of Bored-Hole Latrines*, *Modern Slaughter House Practice*, *Slum Clearance and Town Planning in Lagos*, and *Anti-Malaria Field Work*.² These films were powerfully described by their makers and promoters as "documents of the future" for British imperial subjects, not only teaching them how to be free from dirt, but also how to be modern participants in the global economy.³

After 1931, when he obtained filmmaking equipment from the Colonial Development Fund and pioneered a filming technique believed to reach the hearts and minds of "primitive" audiences through simple shots and singular lessons, Sellers used all of his "spare time for producing and projecting local documentary and instructional films."⁴ A government truck was converted into a mobile cinema and propaganda vehicle during the Lagos Health Week of 1935, from which Sellers oversaw the production and distribution of numerous short information films and educational parables.⁵ By 1936, a special section of the Medical Health Service had become a dedicated Health Propaganda Unit, and by 1940 Sellers had been joined in his work by moviemaker George Pearson, famous for his silent films.⁶

Machi Gaba (The Village that Crept Ahead) was Sellers's pride and joy. He was especially pleased with the film's use of Muslim amateur actors recruited from the Hausa area of northern Nigeria where it was filmed and set. To him, this film was a perfection of what had come to be known throughout the British colonial film world as "the Sellers technique," being "a simple [story . . .] full of human interest" that "show[ed] how filth and dirty habits bring misery, poverty and sickness and then follows enlightenment, self-help, improved general health and prosperity."⁷ The film opens with scenes of a typical northern Nigerian town, designed to be familiar to

1 Most sources list 1929 for the release of *Plague*, but Sellers claimed to have toured Nigeria with the film in 1926. William Sellers, "Making Films In and For the Colonies: A Paper Read to the Commonwealth Section of the Society on Tuesday 24th March 1953," *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 1014910 (1953): 830.

2 William Sellers, "Enclosure 1 in Circular Despatch," PRO CO 1045/227 (January 30, 1940), 1. Release dates are not available for most of Sellers's amateur movies in the late 1920s and early 1930s.

3 See Commission on Educational and Cultural Films, *The Film in National Life* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1932), 115; Rosaleen Smyth, "Grierson, The British Documentary Movement, and Colonial Cinema in British Colonial Africa," *Film History* 254 (2013): 82–113; Brian Larkin, *Signal and Noise: Media, Infrastructure, and Urban Culture in Nigeria* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 77.

4 Sellers, "Enclosure 1 in Circular Despatch, 30 Jan 1940," 1.

5 *Ibid.*, 2; see Larkin, *Signal and Noise*; Smyth, "Grierson." By 1950, the CFU boasted twelve production units in eight British African territories with a total of 339 reels circulating for free in the colonies. See "Colonial Film Unit: Policy," PRO CO 875/52/3 (1952–53), 35. For a detailed history of the changing faces of the CFU between 1939 and the early 1950s, see Rosaleen Smyth, "Images of Empires on Shifting Sands: The Colonial Film Unit in West Africa in the Post-War Period," in *Film and the End of Empire*, eds. Lee Grieveson and Colin MacCabe (Basingstoke, England: British Film Institute and Palgrave Macmillan, 2011): 155–75.

6 "Editorial," *Colonial Cinema: A Bulletin Issued by the Colonial Film Unit for Distribution in the Colonies* 52 (1940): 26–27.

7 William Sellers, "Health Propaganda Unit: Tour of Northern Provinces Nov 3rd 1937 to Feb 11th 1938," NNA-I CSO 26: File no. 30314 (1938), n.pag.

spectators. Close-ups then reveal the truth about spectators' reality, with "heaps of refuse lying about the streets, untidiness and dirt," and, as the local commentator is scripted to explain, "there is a great deal of sickness in the town."⁸ At this point in African screenings, the local interpreter was required to interact directly with the audience: "Here is a very dirty house. Who is that man?"⁹ The technique, Sellers explained to an audience at the Royal Society of Arts, London, "is to get the audience to answer questions. We say 'what is the matter with him?' and back comes the answer 'he is sick.'¹⁰ The interpreter is required by the script to reply: "Yes. Sick people cannot work properly." The audience is then asked, "Are you sorry for that man?" Back comes the answer "Yes, we are very sorry for him."¹¹ To and fro go the questions and answers, with colonial information about the connections between dirt and sickness repeated back to audiences in the form of a vernacular commentary containing explanations for the scenes of distress. "Yes . . . He is very sick," runs the script: "That man's sickness, it is more than likely, is caused by all this filth and dirt that you see lying about his house, and a great deal of the sickness in the town is caused by the filth and dirt that the people allow to lie about all over the town."¹²

Sellers's script takes the form of a pantomime rather than a Socratic or genuinely dialogical exchange, allowing only one correct answer to each question. As he insisted in his general guidelines for the vernacular commentaries accompanying the screening of all such educational films, "[o]ften it will assist if it contains a few questions involving short and obvious answers for the audience to shout out."¹³ Thus, as the "dirty" and "foolish" protagonist of *Machi Gaba* lies down in sickness and the audience is asked, "Are you sorry for this man? . . . back comes the answer in a roar, in a revision of their opening expression of pity, 'No! We are not sorry for him.'¹⁴ "Why are you not sorry for him?" and back comes the answer 'Because he is a dirty man and lives in a dirty house.'¹⁵

Later scenes in *Machi Gaba* show "the people busy and, acting upon the advice given them by their new District Head and his council, they clean up their homes and all useless water pots are broken."¹⁶ In this manner, the happy-ever-after ending of the

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid. Sellers had been invited to the podium during C. F. Strickland's lecture on "Instructional Films in India" at the Royal Society of Arts: he showed clips from *Machi Gaba*, performed sections of the voiceover, and described Nigerian audience reactions. For further discussion of this and other ventriloquistic performances of African spectatorship by colonial officials, see Stephanie Newell, "Screening Dirt: Colonial Film Audiences and the Problem of Spectatorship," *Social Dynamics*, forthcoming 2017.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid.

13 William Sellers, "Memorandum: Non-Commercial Films, Film Strips and Film Slides in the Colonial Empire," PRO CO 1045/227 (n.dat [1951]), 9.

14 Sellers, "Enclosure 1 in Circular Despatch, 30 Jan 1940," 6. In practice, Sellers's prescribed commentaries were subject to great variation. In Yoruba areas of Nigeria, for example, alterations were required to the commentator's original English script when the film *Smallpox* was shown, not least a modification of the recommendation for infant vaccination at the age of three months, for no Yoruba would allow a baby to be injected before it was at least one year—and more probably five years old. See Peter Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria: A Field Study of the Impact of Fundamental-Education Films on Rural Audiences in Nigeria* (Zaria, Nigeria: Federal Information Service and Gaskiya Corporation, n.dat. [1953]), 57.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

colonial script is played out in what the media historian Brian Larkin compellingly describes as a “futuristic urban fantasy of colonial rule.”¹⁷ As in fairy-tales, the final scene of *Machi Gaba* shows a land of health and wealth, with “plenty of corn and cloth, [while] the children play and dance and prosperity reigns,” and with this closing scene the audience is asked, “Do *you* want to keep fit and strong? . . . Are *you* going to keep your town clean and free from sickness?” to which the reply is ‘Yes.’”¹⁸ How difficult could the effective communication of such a stark colonial health message be?

Each time it was shown in rural Zambia, *Machi Gaba* reduced its audiences to helpless laughter. Reporting back on this reaction in 1943, the bemused and “surprised” British information officer, who had placed Sellers’s exemplary film at the top of his bill, tried to fathom the causes of his audience’s mirth. He could not understand where the problem lay. Perhaps, he speculated, “[t]he type of native character is so foreign to the Northern Rhodesian native that he finds Mohammedan dress amusing and instead of being taught that clean village life makes for healthier living, he is left with the idea that the Nigerians are funny people.”¹⁹ As a consequence of this failure of its intended message, he judged *Machi Gaba* to be “the least popular film so far” of all the Colonial Film Unit productions circulating in southern Africa.²⁰ Based on the audience reaction, however, one could equally conclude that the film was a triumph with local filmgoers. Unsuccessful in its direct educational messaging rather than unpopular as a movie, the film had simply failed to remain anchored to the genre intended for it by the CFU. Southern African audiences seemed to regard it as a type of anthropological comedy rather than an educational parable. Indeed, the officer in Zambia admitted that “*Machi Gaba* as an educational travelogue would have been successful,” acknowledging the failure of the creators’ intentions and generic categories above a failure of the film *per se*.²¹

Nearly a decade later, on the other side of the continent in the Hausa-speaking village of Soba, Nigeria, the Ghanaian infant nutrition film *Amenu’s Child* (1950) was screened in 1952. Believing they are acting in the best interests of their baby, who has dysentery, malnutrition, or another curable disease, the parents in the film take their infant to an expensive traditional healer rather than following the advice of a Western-educated urban character who tells them to take it to the European hospital for treatment. The scene with the healer shows an obvious charlatan, surrounded by heaps of unidentifiable and grotesque “fetish” objects. In this common colonialist representation of African medical practitioners, the filthy man is pictured in a dirty, windowless hut, waving a flywhisk over the baby in an exaggerated way and chanting hocus-pocus incantations. The film cuts to the parents’ return home with the baby who is found to have died on the journey. In Soba, there was a most unexpected response: “[t]he whole audience was hilarious when they heard of the death of the

17 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 100.

18 Sellers, “Enclosure 1 in Circular Despatch, 30 Jan 1940,” 6.

19 Colonial Office, “Cinema Propaganda, Colonial Film Unit: Replies to Questionnaire, Section A1,” PRO CO 875/10/11 (1943), 6.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

child,” commented Peter Morton-Williams in his report on audience reactions for the Colonial Office in London.²²

By the early 1950s, when Morton-Williams received his portfolio from the Colonial Office, “research into the causes of laughter” was deemed not only pressing but essential.²³ Why, the Colonial Office needed to know, did African spectators laugh at such “inappropriate” moments in educational movies? This type of laughter was such a problem for the Colonial Office, who funded the expensive CFU movies with their basic health messages, that in a survey of the impact of “cinema propaganda” in the colonies in 1943, the CO included a request that officials should “give a few examples of typical sequences that make people laugh.”²⁴ This survey, and subsequent ones through the 1940s and early 1950s, form the problematic archive out of which this article is constructed: as the final part of the article will suggest, any information these surveys yield is packed with methodological problems for historians of mass-media audiences in colonial Africa.

British filmmakers’ observations in log books and reports, and the scripts they produced for interpreters to translate into local languages, ignored the vital and noisy stream of commentary that accompanied all screenings. African audiences did not sit or stand quietly during film displays. As colonial officials acknowledged again and again, spectators provided running commentaries throughout each movie, filling the breaks between reels with noisy discussion, reacting to scenes with exclamations, applause, laughter, conversation, debate, judgment, and speculation, and directly addressing commentators on the topic of the behavior of individual characters on screen. With few exceptions, the audience responded to commentaries “by shouting questions at the interpreter, by loud adverse comment, and by a hubbub of conversation in their own tongue to each other, trying to make out amongst themselves what is on the screen.”²⁵ A “general buzz of conversation and exclamation” would erupt at the end of high-impact films such as *Smallpox*.²⁶

Audience members reacted to other audience members, as well as to the material on screen, actively negotiating the messages and meanings of scenes with one another. CFU movies were accompanied by these vibrant, noisy parallel discussions among spectators, demonstrating the intensely dialogical character of the African cultures in which the films circulated, as well as gender (and other) divisions in the interpretation of particular scenes. As one official reported, the audience “chatters, ululates, interrupts, hisses, anticipates the embrace of the heroine by the hero” or simply vacates the cinema if a film does not meet its standards.²⁷ Given the size of crowds at screenings, plus the fact that most of them were standing up, and the open-air cinema environment in which the commentator’s loudspeaker, or microphone and amplifier, had to serve the entire audience, these viewer-to-viewer communications were

22 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 72. For a detailed discussion of Morton-Williams’s research, see Newell, “Screening Dirt,” forthcoming.

23 Colonial Film Unit, “Policy: Annual Report of the Colonial Film Unit, 1951,” CO 875/52/3 (1952–53), 38.

24 Colonial Office, “Cinema Propaganda,” Section D21, n.pag.

25 Ibid., Section B17, n.pag.

26 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 48.

27 Colonial Office, “Cinema Propaganda,” Section B17, n.pag.

probably necessary to give meaning to cracked and muffled commentaries, and certainly would have rendered such commentaries inaudible. But Sellers and his team showed little interest in the local tastes and values expressed in viewers' noisy communications, even when audience reactions became so loud and unrestrained that they "made commenting very difficult even with the amplifier working at full capacity."²⁸

British officials frequently explained what they regarded as the failure of films' educational messaging as a consequence of the flawed reactions of audiences to filmic naturalism designed to elicit identification rather than alienation. Countless film-makers expressed concerns that "even slight misrepresentations of native life and customs can change the most serious film into comedy."²⁹ A journalist writing for *United Empire* in 1940 described how, during the screening in Nigeria of a scene showing close-ups of hookworm, in which "the object . . . was to impress upon people the tragedy which results from dirt and disease," to the great surprise of CFU personnel, the audience "found it highly amusing!," reacting with "unsympathetic laughter and ribald remarks . . . they roared their delighted appreciation!"³⁰ At other times, "[m]oments of great pathos in a film . . . cause[d] considerable laughter."³¹ Partly entangled with colonialism, but not defined by it, these late colonial film audiences exhibited a cultural distinction that colonial officials interpreted as a sign of parochialism and the presence of "closed systems of thought."³² Whether regarded as closed and parochial, or as refreshingly remote from the behavioral prescriptions of British culture, the fact remained that, as Morton-Williams stated ironically in his report on his tour of 1952, "[n]ot all African peoples are prepared to acknowledge the superiority of all European practice to their own."³³

Naturalistic acting and settings were a prerequisite of the CFU's educational parables, intended to increase the impact of the didactic script, but colonial officials expressed repeated concerns that African audiences would transform both documentary and narrative non-entertainment films—with their serious messages designed "to act as a stimulant towards social and material progress"—into "first-rate comedy."³⁴ On numerous occasions, the CFU's cinematic naturalism was clouded by the audience's laughter. People laughed at the most unexpected material. Among the replies to the 1943 Colonial Office survey question about what elicited laughter, for example, came the following selection of seemingly unamusing scenes: "Mr English being handed his attaché case by his wife as she bids him goodbye with a kiss

28 William Sellers, "Health Propaganda: Report, 'Health Propaganda Unit: Tour of Southern Provinces, March 11th to April 28th 1937,'" NNA-I CSO 26: File no. 30314 (March 11–April 28 1937), 2.

29 Sellers, "Enclosure 1 in Circular Despatch, 30 Jan 1940," 8.

30 L. H. Ross, "Africans and Propaganda Films," *United Empire* (February 1940), 65, cited in James Burns, "Watching Africans Watch Films: Theories of Spectatorship in British Colonial Africa," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 20.2 (2000): 200.

31 Colin Beale, "The Commercial Entertainment Film and Its Effect on Colonial Peoples," *The Film in Colonial Development: A Report of a Conference* (London: British Film Institute, 1948), 19.

32 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 42.

33 *Ibid.*, 44–45.

34 Colonial Film Unit, "Policy: 'Annual Report of the Colonial Film Unit,'" PRO CO 875/52/3 (1951), 39; Colonial Film Unit, "Cinema Propaganda: 'VD Film,'" PRO CO 875/10/13 (1943), 32; Sellers, "Health Propaganda Unit: Tour of Northern Provinces Nov 3rd 1937 to Feb 11th 1938," n.pag.

(quite foreign to natives);³⁵ “Simple things of everyday life, e.g., a white man eating a meal”;³⁶ “Indian children eating out of bowls on the ground in *Children of the Empire*. The little girl skipping and dancing in *Mr English at Home*.”³⁷

People’s unscripted laughter was not only unfathomable but offensive to some British officials, further obstructing their efforts to interpret local filmgoers’ responses to material intended for social and physical improvement. Wishing for empathy and emulation, shocked colonial officials often identified cruelty and an absence of refined sensibilities above other causes of the apparent failures of identification that resulted in laughter. As a consequence, they cautioned, cinema in Africa required rigorous control or else “ridicule results.”³⁸ Throughout the continent, information officers repeatedly reported that audiences laughed at the misfortunes of protagonists on screen. “It is unfortunate that films such as *Air Raid Warden* and *Heroic Malta* fail to rouse the sympathy and admiration for the courage displayed that they do in European audiences,” one tight-lipped Kenyan information officer commented in the Colonial Office audience survey of 1943: “The laughter provoked by the wounded being rescued and treated, in spite of the most careful preliminary explanation, I found so upsetting that I show them but seldom, and have cut out some portions.”³⁹

The failure of African audiences to be aroused by wartime propaganda designed to stimulate empathy between imperial citizens and to strengthen support for the Allied war effort clearly offended and angered imperial officers, and their racism increased in direct proportion to the volume of African laughter. The Kenyan official concluded, “[t]he Kenya [*sic*] natives have not reached a stage in which they are capable of feelings for others. They laugh at a man being wounded or killed as they do Charlie Chaplin slipping on a banana skin.”⁴⁰ As he warmed to his catalog of African interpretive failures, other familiar complaints about the “native” came to the surface. “Scenery again leaves them unmoved,” he added: “[t]hey seem to be unaware of the beauties of nature which surround them. The attitude is summed up in ‘Whats [*sic*] the use of growing flowers, you can’t eat them!’”⁴¹

In one of the few full-length scholarly studies of laughter as a popular response, Simon Dickie (2011) describes “the guiltless, intoxicating pleasure of tormenting the disabled” in early modern culture.⁴² In accepting people’s “cruelty” and “malice” as authentic feelings, Dickie seeks to explain these reactions as fear responses arising from the proximity of affliction to their own lives.⁴³ As demonstrated by the Kenyan information officer’s reaction, however, if applied to colonial African audiences as consumers of transnational mass media, the attribution of cruelty and malice serves to reinforce colonialist stereotypes of African savagery. The Kenyan officer’s report draws from a corpus of prior colonial mediations rather than an effort to understand the

35 Colonial Office, “Cinema Propaganda,” Section D21, n.pag.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid., Section A2, 2.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Simon Dickie, *Cruelty and Laughter: Forgotten Comic Literature and the Unsentimental Eighteenth Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011), 49.

43 Ibid.

audience's response, and, like the CFU archive in which it is situated, although it offers historically specific information about the *producers* of colonial knowledge, his report does not help media historians to understand African cinemagoers' laughter because its way of seeing is determined by the British imperialist ideology.

A host of cognitive failures is encapsulated in these accounts of the responses of African audiences. British officials—charged with reporting back on filmgoers' aesthetic experiences—failed to recognize the presence of local interpretative conventions that took precedence over the intended educational messages of imported propaganda films.⁴⁴ In particular, in attributing African laughter to unrefined “cruelty,” callousness, and the desire for crude entertainment, white officials precluded the possibility of a politics of ridicule among audiences. Where officials described the predominance of “native” passions above the “higher” sentiments, the laughter of audiences may rather have expressed deliberate, deliberative contempt for the patriotic messages of pro-imperial wartime propaganda, or a general refusal of colonial educational messaging.⁴⁵ The “banana skin” antics identified by the Kenyan information officer as the source of African amusement take on a different, more political hue in the context of colonial discourse and power. As one information officer in Nigeria noted, “Chaplin and other similar slapstick films in which the little man is up against it and wins through” were more popular with audiences than educational documentaries on CFU programs.⁴⁶

Chaplin's portrayals of the resilience and cunning of powerless “little” people in the face of authority may have generated empathy and recognition among colonial audiences, responses that were often absent from films depicting African empowerment through the adoption of British health and hygiene practices. Understanding Chaplin from the perspective of a “common person” subject to local and colonial political hierarchies, as well as to complex power relations involving gender, seniority, marriage, and wealth, assists in our comprehension of audience laughter at other scenes in the supposedly “serious” CFU films. For instance, in one Yoruba village visited by Morton-Williams and his team in 1952, when the traditional healer in

44 African audiences were often highly alert to making *faux pas* in the face of foreign films, and controlled their own reactions accordingly. One of the more sensitive observers to work for the CFU, Norman F. Spurr, noted of one rural Tanzanian audience's responses to the South African musical film, *Zonk*, “The most surprising reaction was the almost complete absence of chatter . . . there was almost silence. This suggested at first glance that the film was not being followed in the sense that even visually it made no sense, or that it was not liked. Nothing was further from the truth.” See Norman F. Spurr, “A Report on the Reactions of an African Urban and Rural Audience to the Entertainment Film *Zonk*,” *CFU: Audience Research*, CO 875/51/7 26 August 26, 1950), 4.

45 See Megan Vaughan, *Curing Their Ills: Colonial Power and African Illness* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

46 Colonial Office, “Cinema Propaganda,” Section A2, 3. When the colonial secretary, Arthur Creech-Jones, gave the opening address at the British Film Institute conference on “The Film in Colonial Development” in March 1948, he attempted to prize open the hermetically sealed colonial optic. “Sometimes,” he suggested, “I have been told that, for practical purposes, a primitive African audience is quite as appreciative, say, of the antics of Charlie Chaplin as is the British audience (there is a certain common humanity there) but we do not know really the effects of films on the unsophisticated, the general reaction, nor are we quite happy about the place of commercial films and whether it is altogether wise in certain societies for the modern British or American film to be introduced at all.” See Arthur Creech-Jones, “Opening Address,” *The Film in Colonial Development: A Report of a Conference* (London: British Film Institute, March 1948), 6.

Smallpox (1950) runs away with his patient at the arrival of the vaccination team, “everybody laughed” and one man “roared with laughter”; similarly, “there was general laughter” as the health team entered the escapee’s recently vacated hut and found it empty.⁴⁷ Echoing a pleasurable thread in folktales, the “little” person—in this case temporarily—cunningly defeats the powerful authority figure who comes looking for him. The spectacle of a barefooted old man and a smallpox victim outwitting colonial officials by running into the bush aroused laughter among every audience to whom *Smallpox* was shown in Nigeria in 1952, including the generally quieter Hausa viewers. While the commentator was scripted to emphasize the foolishness of the smallpox victim for fleeing government health officials, and the foolishness of the traditional healer for failing to report the smallpox case as he was legally obliged to, audiences may have laughed out of empathy as well as pleasure at the slapstick potential rather than shock or critical distance at the sight of two villagers fleeing from an ambulance and government officials in uniform. In an Igbo village visited by the audience research unit, as “one man remarked to another, if it had been in their own village, many would have run away (from vaccination).”⁴⁸ Indeed, Morton-Williams observed, “I have been in a village when vaccinators arrived and seen most of the population vanish into the bush.”⁴⁹

Numerous members of Morton-Williams’ audiences—young people, married and unmarried people, mature women and men, Muslims and Christians, people from all of the language groups included in his study—laughed at the scene in the Ghanaian film *Amenu’s Child*, when the baby is found to have died after its expensive trip to a traditional healer.⁵⁰ The infant’s death caused such havoc in the Berom village of Dashit in May 1952 that “[t]he film had to be stopped during this scene, to re-order the audience.”⁵¹ The Kenyan officer described previously would undoubtedly have become apoplectic at this point and concluded that these audiences were laughing barbarically at the dead baby and its sobbing mother. In his own comments on their laughter, however, Morton-Williams suggested that it was “an appropriate reaction” in the context of “the social norms and values of the audiences. Laughter, whether of approval and enjoyment, or of ridicule, is a form of social control, a sanction for behaviour.”⁵² Although he did not explain what type of social control was being exercised, nor by whom over whom and for what reason, Morton-Williams carefully avoided concluding that audiences agreed with the film’s health message about not taking infants to traditional healers.⁵³

The unanimous Nigerian reaction to *Amenu’s Child* demonstrates the operation of local notions of appropriate and foolish behavior. The death of the baby clearly showed Amenu and his wife to have made a poor decision. Audience members

47 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 52; Smyth, “Grierson, The British Documentary Movement, and Colonial Cinema in British Colonial Africa,” 96.

48 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 53.

49 Ibid., 59.

50 Ibid., 64, 70, 72, 76.

51 Ibid., 74.

52 Ibid., 42.

53 See Eric Stein, “Colonial Theaters of Proof: Representation and Laughter in 1930s Rockefeller Foundation Hygiene Cinema in Java,” *Empires of Vision*, ed. Martin Jay (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013): 315–45.

in Soba were overheard to say, “[i]t’s just what they deserved” and “[i]f they haven’t any sense, they must put up with it; why all the fuss?”⁵⁴ This does not necessarily show acceptance of the film’s message about Western medicine; rather, people’s laughter seems to have been aimed at the “stupid” parents for visiting an incompetent healer. They laughed in reaction to being proven correct by the narrative trajectory of the film, having successfully predicted the narrative outcome suggested at the start of the film. Their reaction confirmed the public vindication, in the film, of the accuracy of their assumptions—and running commentary throughout—about the foolishness of the parents for consulting this particular doctor.

In this manner, the educational parable designed by the CFU was successfully “parabolized” by Nigerian audiences, but in a different shape to the one intended by its British makers, with meaning accorded to details deemed irrelevant to the story by officials. As Morton-Williams commented of Yoruba audiences, *Amenu’s Child* was “ineffectual” in its message because its lengthy sermon on child nutrition was entirely overlooked by audiences, and the parents’ folly was inflected with local explanations and beliefs about infant mortality stemming from spiritual rather than medical beliefs.⁵⁵ Spectators’ laughter exhibited a confident capacity to cross-reference film material with an existing corpus of moral and spiritual narratives. In general, for viewers of *Amenu’s Child*, with its numerous lessons about infant cleanliness and nutrition, “traditional practices about child care [were . . .] too well sanctioned to be readily altered by the simple assertion that one kind of food is better than another.”⁵⁶ Films were thus incorporated into local intertexts and contexts, and in the process their propagandist power was diluted or neutralised altogether.

Interestingly, Morton-Williams’s inquiries into Yoruba laughter at the baby’s death also raised technical factors relating to filmmaking and poor acting above cultural, spiritual, or sociological explanations for people’s mirth. After the screening in the villages of Egan and Ilaro, people commented that “[t]here was a note of false sorrow on the screen, through inadequate acting”;⁵⁷ second, the mother was “foolish” in the view of many spectators for refusing to take her child to the hospital, so “many jeered at her folly”;⁵⁸ third, “[t]he sudden cut from Amenu and his mother walking away from the Diviner with the living child to their arrival home, carrying the dead child, was startling,” triggering laughter.⁵⁹ These audiences recognized the medium’s forced naturalism, applied the principles of existing narrative genres in which foolishness is jeered at rather than pitied, and reacted to editing techniques in the studio. Contrary to filmmakers’ constructions of African village-dwellers as naive, gullible, and susceptible to the propaganda power of naturalism, Morton-Williams’s audiences recognized and commented on filmic technique and genre; they rendered the medium equally visible to the message; and they critiqued the structure of films. In so doing

54 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 72.

55 *Ibid.*, 79.

56 *Ibid.*, 31.

57 *Ibid.*, 78.

58 *Ibid.*

59 *Ibid.*, 79.

they comprehensively overturned the “truth” or “reality” claimed for the medium by filmmakers.⁶⁰

In other CFU “contrast” films—or “before-and-after” films⁶¹—that juxtaposed the success of European medicine with the failure of traditional remedies, audiences experienced similar types of pleasure at the fulfillment of their interpretative projections. Among Igbo audiences watching *Smallpox*, for example, “there were claps, laughs and cheers when Alabi left hospital,” free of infection, with members of the audience “saying a prayer of thanks to God.”⁶² Among Berom audiences, one man commented wittily at this scene, “Why didn’t he remember God before?”⁶³ As with *Amenu’s Child*, the narrative trajectory—or destiny—established at the start of the film was confirmed by its ending, allowing audiences to experience pleasure at the fulfillment of their interpretative projections, which predicted the fall of a character who clearly tempted fate by not agreeing to be inoculated against smallpox. Spectators’ laughter thus illustrated pleasure at their proficiency in interpreting the moral formula of CFU educational parables. The health messages of *Smallpox* and *Amenu’s Child* may have taken second place to this affirmation of success in the judgment of character.

What kind of publics were constituted by and in these colonial media spaces? For Michael Warner in his influential work *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002), the circulation of texts stimulates the commencement of otherwise discontinuous publics.⁶⁴ Publics, Warner argues, are a “space of discourse organised by nothing other than discourse itself”: they exist “by virtue of being addressed” and “cease to exist when attention is no longer predicated.”⁶⁵ In contexts of colonial rule, however, as Larkin argues, the “logic of governmentality” shaped colonial media spaces and organized the publics therein.⁶⁶ Organizations such as the CFU undertook far more than the screening of movies. The impact of British propaganda on colonial subjects’ cultural lives, aesthetic values, and self-confidence as interpreters was far greater than the convening of villagers as publics for occasional educational films. Screenings were an element in the physical regulation of bodies according to the dictates of colonial authority.⁶⁷ Larkin suggests that the organization and structure of CFU performances meant that spectators were present as a particular configuration of publics, as state-controlled citizens in receipt of a “political education,” and a training in “new forms of perception and attention” rather than simply as freely consenting consumers of global

60 In 1940, a similar failure of “authenticity” was given as the reason for audiences’ laughter in northern Nigeria. L. H. Ross noted that people laughed, not because of their “primitive psychology,” but because the village portrayed in *Machi Gaba* was implausible: it was “so utterly miserable, so utterly destitute” that it failed to “arouse the sympathy and understanding of the audience.” See Ross, “Africans and Propaganda Films,” cited in Burns, “Watching Africans,” 200.

61 Stein, “Colonial Theaters of Proof.”

62 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 53.

63 *Ibid.*, 55.

64 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002): 65–70.

65 *Ibid.*, 67, 72, 88; emphasis in original.

66 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 23.

67 *Ibid.*, 94, 99.

cultural commodities.⁶⁸ “[W]hat they were attending was first of all a political event,” he argues, directly connected to political rule.⁶⁹ Colonial power was exercised alongside, as well as within, the textual content of British propaganda films, rendering “the mode of exchange between image and spectator . . . one governed more by politics than by the commodity.”⁷⁰ No matter how rural, according to Larkin, CFU audiences were bound into a Foucauldian-style panopticon, not least as a result of the physical presence of local chiefs and other dignitaries at screenings, including in the form of giant silhouette figures on the screen as they stood in the glare of the projector to publicly endorse the CFU’s health messages at the end of film shows.⁷¹ The entire colonial apparatus and political agenda that buttressed health officials’ visits was thus on display at CFU performances.⁷²

Any discussion of the cinema spaces in which colonial African publics were convened must include this exoskeleton of colonial power, which, by its presence as a “pre-given framework,” denies these audiences access to Warner’s definition of publics, which is vitally dependent on individual autonomy from the state and other institutions.⁷³ In Larkin’s view, the CFU’s African film publics were recruited and assembled by, rather than simply attracted to, the discursive space of the cinema, and they were on display in a similar manner to the products they consumed.⁷⁴

For health propaganda officers, individual films were one important element in an elaborate, wider spectacle of colonial rule, contributing to and reinforcing the colonial optic through which African audiences were observed and understood by the regime. In this manner, as John Hartley suggests for television audiences in 1980s Europe, the discourse that organized these publics was also an expression of institutional power:

[a]udiences are not just constructs . . . they are the invisible fictions that are produced institutionally in order for various institutions to take charge of the mechanisms of their own survival. Audiences may be imagined empirically, theoretically or politically, but in all cases the product is a fiction that serves the needs of the imagining institution. In no case is the audience “real,” or external to its discursive construction. There is no “actual” audience that lies beyond its production as a category.⁷⁵

Larkin’s and Hartley’s persuasive models of institutional hegemony, intentionality, and ideological power help to explain the perspectives and presence of two out of three vital mediators in the colonial film dynamic—that is, British filmmakers and

68 Ibid., 85.

69 Ibid., 94.

70 Ibid., 80.

71 Ibid., 86.

72 Alongside film displays, lectures and practical demonstrations were given to members of the community and designated “clean-up days” and “dry pot days” were introduced alongside “school health displays,” “healthy baby” competitions, “clean house” competitions, and cake-making competitions for which teachers and elders were recruited as judges, with score charts and certificates provided by the Health Propaganda Unit. See Sellers, “Health Propaganda: Report,” 3; Sellers, “Enclosure 1 in Circular Despatch,” (January 30, 1940), 4.

73 Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 68.

74 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 77–78; Burns, “Watching Africans Watch Films.”

75 John Hartley, “Invisible Fictions: Television Audiences, Paedocracy, Pleasure,” *Textual Practice* 1.2 (1987): 5.

government officials—but they do not explain the vital third element at the core of this paper: the audiences that flummoxed and offended colonialists over the years with their unpredictable responses to educational films. The presence of heterogeneous local tastes represented a vital third space of mediation alongside film content and colonial ideological intentions. Here, Warner’s model of publics (and counterpublics) might be re-engaged in colonial African contexts. Colonial West African audiences—like media consumers worldwide—had multifaceted reasons for attending film screenings, including a desire for entertainment, peer pressure, political coercion, the wish to be seen by others, a desire to learn about strangers and about neighbouring ethnic groups, the wish to sell foodstuffs and other goods at screenings, curiosity about the content of films, sociability, time away from domestic chores, and, enveloped within these other motivations, an interest in or resistance to colonial educational messaging. In parallel with the colonial state apparatus that made CFU screenings possible, the arrival of the mobile cinema, as Larkin writes, “disrupted the steady flow of everyday life. . . . Children got to stay up late; people congregated in public spaces; friends got to chat and hang out; and the entertainment provided an excuse for larger groups to gather.”⁷⁶ If film shows were more than screenings, they were also more than spectacles of political domination.

A quarter century of colonial “theorizing” about Africans is challenged by the laughter and other nonverbal responses of African audiences.⁷⁷ Even the most starkly racialized parable of African backwardness was capable of eliciting the “wrong” reaction among audiences who rarely, if ever, regarded themselves through the same colonial lens as the filmmakers. Their laughter reverberates through colonial accounts of film spectatorship. At the very least, it can be regarded as a form of recalcitrance about the explicit didacticism of CFU films. The media consumers who hooted at *Machi Gaba*, and who found the dead baby “hilarious” in *Amenu’s Child*, were very different entities from African colonial subjects. The latter were grafted into colonial power structures as citizens, office-holders, critics, clerks, literate and Christianized elites, modernized and (un)governable entities, and they are identifiable in the colonial archives as media consumers and media producers, English-language readers and writers. The majority of film audiences for CFU productions were, by contrast, at several removes from the subjects of colonial discourse, not only for being rural dwellers but, for want of a better term, for their *subaltern* status on the outskirts of colonial knowledge and ideology.⁷⁸ They are, as a consequence, considerably more difficult to “retrieve” from historical records or to identify using conventional archival research methods.

Laughter was a form of collective film commentary among audiences. Arising from diverse sources and motivations, it conveyed the spirit of individuals and crowds on the night of a particular screening, as well as the core cultural and aesthetic values

76 Larkin, *Signal and Noise*, 89.

77 Burns regards the voluminous archives of British speculation about African audiences as forming a body of “colonial film spectatorship theory.” See Burns, “Watching Africans Watch Films.”

78 Gayatri Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), 271–313. In practice, there was no rigid divide between rural and urban areas, as individuals exercised a great deal of geographical mobility in colonial West Africa: there was no “native permit” system as in the settler colonies of East and southern Africa.

spectators brought to bear on CFU movies. People's laughter at the protagonist's infection in *Smallpox*, for example, which the English script insists should be described in the voiceover as a consequence of his "foolishness," did not necessarily express derision. As Morton-Williams points out, "[t]he Yoruba expression for a person who is in peril or in trouble is fixed by convention as one of sympathy, not admonition."⁷⁹ In this fleeting comment, an entire library of colonial parables is thrown into question, for "foolish" behavior was a central requirement in the binary structure of "before-and-after" educational films. From films that insisted upon the wisdom of choosing Western medicine over traditional healing (*Amenu's Child* and *Mr. Wise and Mr. Foolish Go to Town*, 1944), to parables of good versus poor agricultural practice (*Two Farmers*, 1948), the word *foolish* recurred in voiceover scripts to describe characters who followed "native" customs above "wise" Western alternatives.⁸⁰ If a character's apparent foolishness aroused sympathy, rather than admonition from spectators, and if fate and destiny were seen to shape a character's success or failure rather than his or her individual life choices, then the simple rationalist message of the CFU, that behavioral change will bring prosperity, would have had little traction with audiences. The CFU philosophy was that:

[a]ll acquired knowledge derives from experienced sensations, of which those of the eyes are ever the strongest; that these myriad sensations are held in the memory, to form our thought material—our perceptions; that with these stored perceptions stimulated by imagination we can move to new mental comparisons and associations—our conceptions. From the known to the unknown.⁸¹

The audiences discussed in this article demonstrate that content analysis alone is insufficient for anybody wishing to fathom the impact and reception of transnational texts. Whether in the form of films or printed texts, African audiences were unlikely simply to adopt and apply the health messages of educational parables without reference to their own aesthetic and behavioral rules. People's opinions, perceptions, prejudices, self-understandings, aesthetic preferences, memories of the past, and dreams for the future obstructed direct colonial messaging. This produces a conundrum for media and cultural historians whose sources are colonial archives in combination with content analyses of primary texts.

In spite of—or perhaps because of—our inability to retrieve their interpretations of films from the archives, the audiences discussed in this article offer valuable lessons for scholars interested in the analysis of transnational media. Whether analyzed by colonial information officers in the 1940s and 1950s or twenty-first-century historians attempting to mine Anglophone archives for evidence of local responses to

79 Morton-Williams, *Cinema in Rural Nigeria*, 57.

80 The word *foolish* is repeated in the English voiceovers of numerous films. See, for example *Towards Wholeness* (1952), made by the Overseas Film Unit of the Church Missionary Society. (Many of the CFU movies discussed in this article are available on open access via the Colonial Film Database www.colonialfilm.org.uk.)

81 George Pearson, "The Making of Films for Illiterates in Africa," *The Film in Colonial Development: A Report of a Conference* (London: British Film Institute, 1948), 24; see Simon Gikandi, "Realism, Romance, and the Problem of African Literary History," *MLQ: Modern Language Quarterly* 73.3 (2012): 309–28.

transnational films, African audiences have the “last laugh”: their responses to films convey aesthetic values and interpretations so far beyond the imaginations of the colonial filmmakers who reported back on the success or failure of screenings that they are largely irretrievable from the archives, except in the form of untranslated, untranslatable, and nonverbal reactions. At the very least, their responses issue a warning to scholars who wish to speak about the “reader” or the “audience” (or “readers” or “audiences”) in a singular manner, or about the “message” of texts without attention to consumers, for the audiences that rise to the surface of the colonial film archives are protean and culturally self-confident rather than gullible to imported mass media or available for British rescripting.