CHAPTER 2

Merdeka for Malaya: Imagining Independence Across the British Empire

Tom Rice

'And now an era comes near to its close', announces the British commentator, 'as the last few minutes of 170 years of British protection over Malaya tick away'. A shot from below of the clock striking midnight is interspersed with the image of the Union Flag, now lowered from its pole. The sound of the chiming clock competes with that of the British national anthem before both are replaced by the noise of cheering crowds. The camera pans down to reveal a neon sign, stating 'Merdeka' (Freedom). The shot fades to black.

This short sequence within the Malayan Film Unit's (MFU) official record of Malayan Independence, *Merdeka for Malaya* (director unknown, MFU, 1957), visualises the country's move from colonial to independent state. This complex, contested and often violent process is contained and imagined throughout this 30-minute film within succinct visual displays, through public celebrations, airport departures and official ceremonies. The film offers a record of the ceremonial events of independence, illustrating the ways in which states are symbolically imagined through such pageantry. While there has been much excellent recent scholarship on independence ceremonies, I want to think more closely in this chapter about the film record. In doing this, we might usefully examine the spectacle of colonial handover as

a distinctly 'filmic' moment, one that is organised visually and constructed on film. In short, how is changing statehood visualised through film? Furthermore, what role do government film units play within this process? A closer examination of the production history of *Merdeka for Malaya* provides a further way to explore the move from 'colonial' to 'postcolonial' within film. Much literature on film continues to present independence as a point of rupture, a starting point for national cinema histories, but in looking at the personnel, the unit and indeed equipment involved in *Merdeka for Malaya*, we might better understand the continuities, as well as the ruptures, that mark the very moment of the post-colonial.

In many respects, the films of independence and the events that they depict follow a prescribed path, although given the plethora of states that would achieve independence in the decade following Malaya (Malaysia) in 1957, the spectacle of new nationhood is partially worked through and made visible in this example. In his examination of Merdeka Day, A. J. Stockwell illustrates the level of planning involved for the ceremonial handover of power – from the selection of dignitaries to the drafting of goodwill messages – but also notes that the pattern for independence ceremonies would follow 'a more of less standard form of flag ceremonies, military tattoos, firework spectacles and state banquets'.[1] Richard Rathbone, in his study of Ghanaian independence which took place earlier in the year in March, characterises these moments with a dash more cynicism as sharing 'similar quotients of military display, fireworks, pious sentimentality at midnight and the profoundly implausible pledges of eternal friendship between long-term antagonists'.[2] All are present in *Merdeka for Malaya*, but what is particularly striking is the way in which the MFU seeks to articulate this message of 'eternal friendship' through these displays, at once

mourning the loss of the British empire while simultaneously projecting a continued colonial influence within the new nation.

The filmed pageantry in *Merdeka for Malaya* serves both to celebrate British influence and validate the transition to independent state. A lengthy sequence in the recently-built Merdeka stadium depicts crowds 'representative of every race and every walk of life' watching as the British national anthem is played 'for the final time'. The first King of Malaya is introduced, seated alongside the heads of state, while the Prime Minister and the new cabinet arrive in 'their newly designed uniforms'. British Royalty and the emerging Malayan leadership are used to mediate this handover to both domestic and international audiences. The Duke of Gloucester stands to deliver a speech, in which he notes the 'close cooperation' involved in the formation of the constitution, before the Prime Minister states that the new nation 'will always remember with gratitude the assistance that we have received from Great Britain down our long path to nationhood'. In the next sequence, it is the 'people's turn' as the film depicts public street celebrations. While relatively brief compared with the focus on official ceremonies, the film again celebrates the continued European influences here, through shots of colonial architecture and sports events. The film shows Europeans supporting a local swimming meeting, local Malays watching cricket, a cycling race and finally a bull-fight, a coming together of the varied cultures, customs and sounds that now make up Malaya.

Merdeka for Malaya comprises a series of performances that were, or would become, common to films of independence ceremonies. The ceremonial handover is represented by the passing of the constitutional instrument from Duke to Prime Minister, a 'simple gesture' which, the commentator explains, now makes 'Malaya responsible for her own destiny'. The Prime Minister raises his right hand and repeats

the call 'Merdeka', the Federation Flag is raised – 'and with it the hopes and aspirations of a people, the symbol of nationhood' – and the new National Anthem plays. 'The guns boom, the flags flutter, a pledge is honored and a nation is born', surmises the British commentator. Later, the film records the elaborate investiture ceremony of the King, an event described by historian T. N. Harper as 'a medieval sacerdotal ceremony in a month-old throne room; an invention of tradition that projected a pre-colonial sovereignty for the new nation state'.[3] The review of troops ('the pageantry associated with nationhood') emphasises the different races, states and genders paying respects to the new King, before the monarch opens the new parliament. The structures here – in the events depicted, the government formation and indeed in the film form – closely follow established British models.

In this way, the film does more than merely record the major ceremonial events, carefully constructing a narrative that negotiates loss and celebration, the old and the new. Significantly, the Malayan Film Unit articulates its vision for the new nation to both a domestic and global audience. On the domestic front, the MFU's films played to an estimated non-theatrical audience of ten million in 1954, while also providing 6910 screenings in Malaya's commercial cinemas. [4] Shortly after independence, the MFU claimed that its films regularly played in 378 cinemas in Malaya, through 134 mobile film units and, what is more, in 68 different countries.[5] Given the mass decolonisation that would follow across the empire over the next decade, *Merdeka for Malaya* represents a significant example of the ways in which film was used to explain and manage this British 'loss' while simultaneously circulating images of independence around the world. These films of independence addressed, and circulated, a subject that was often avoided in official British film. As one example of many, the 1950 Central Office of Information (COI) documentary,

Spotlight on the Colonies (Diana Pine, COI, 1950), which offers a 'survey' of the empire, makes no mention of India, which had achieved independence less than three years earlier. The film largely eschews any reference to the potential dissolution of the empire though by 1957 this issue starts to be worked out and played through these official films of independence.

The Malayan Film Unit and the end of empire

The independence ceremonies and celebrations in Malaya on 31 August 1957 would represent the largest production undertaken by the MFU in its eleven-year history. Seven cameramen worked 'flat out for 14 days' providing newsreel footage within 24 hours of the celebrations. Intended for 'all countries in the free world', the footage was followed a few weeks later by the more extensive documentary, *Merdeka for Malaya*. The images of independence would now play in other territories seeking and witnessing the processes of independence from British rule. *The Straits Times* noted barely three weeks later that 'millions of people throughout the world next week will be able to see how Malaya celebrated the advent of independence'. The paper further explained that the MFU was turning out 120 prints of *Merdeka for Malaya*, which would go initially to America, Australia, England, India and Jakarta where the unit had its own agencies. [6] The MFU produced commentaries in Malay, Mandarin and Tamil, while there were at least two different versions of the film in English. For example in Singapore, the film played in Tamil and in Malay at the Diamond cinema, in Malay at the Taj cinema and in English at the Rex. In addition, the MFU made copies of the film available at a cost of $250 to 'any member of the public', suggesting a further use for this film, as a historical keepsake to be shown at private parties. [7]

As *Merdeka for Malaya* attests, the MFU recorded the major historical incidents leading up to independence but it also claimed a more active role in prefiguring the formation of a modern, self-governing Malaya. The official company catalogue noted in 1953 the Unit's part in assisting Malaya's 'progress towards self-government', while Tom Hodge, the Director of the Malayan Government Films Division which oversaw the work of the MFU, wrote on his departure from Malaya in 1957 of this broader political role. 'Recording every stage in Malaya's march towards independence', wrote Hodge, helped establish 'that unity and harmony among Malaya's many races which alone make independence a workable aim'.[8]

The film works within a longer colonial tradition by presenting 'racial' unity as the foundation for 'national' unity, and this emphasis on racial harmony was a common feature of British documentary in Malaya. Alexander Shaw's 1938 film, *Five Faces* (Alexander Shaw, Strand Film Company, 1938) presented five cultures, clearly delineated, but all 'living in harmony', with each culture shown in turn and defined by a different way of life or product. This formal structure, which endorsed a British policy which sought to maintain ethnic boundaries within Malaya, was evident a decade later in *Voices of Malaya* (Ralph Elton, Crown Film Unit, 1948), which now examined the five voices within post-war Malaya. *Voices of Malaya* was a seminal film in the history of the MFU, a first foray into production and a training ground for many leading local figures, including Ow Kheng Law, who was head of the MFU in 1957 when *Merdeka for Malaya* was produced.

The origins of the MFU owe much to British documentarians such as Ralph Elton and Denny Densham, who arrived on Penang at the point of Japanese surrender in 1945 and proceeded to record, over the next year, the rapidly changing situation within Malaya. This initial Crown Film Unit expedition would provide the personnel,

ideologies and equipment for the emerging MFU, which was set up in 1946. By the time of Crown's departure in October 1946, the trainee Malay and Chinese film-makers who had travelled with the Crown Film Unit, including Ow Kheng Law, had all been absorbed into the MFU. By 1953, Ow Kheng Law was one of 30 Chinese working for the MFU alongside 70 Malays, 22 Indians, 9 Eurasians and 4 Europeans.[9]

Such a narrative serves in part to present the developments within the MFU as indicative of the nation as a whole, a manifestation of the broader political moves to self-government in post-war Malaya as these two histories – of imperialism and film history – are inextricably enmeshed. It also highlights the movement of British documentary film-makers, ideologies and practices into the colonies after the war, as the so-called Griersonian tradition – with its purported humanist, liberal, pedagogical agenda – found a fresh outlet within the post-war colonies as part of the 'nation building' process. Yet, this narrative becomes more complicated during the 1950s, both with the intensification of the Malayan Emergency, a decade long war (in all but name) in the jungles of Malaya between the colonial forces and the 'communist terrorists', and also with shifts in personnel, most notably the arrival of Tom Hodge, who was seconded from the Foreign Office to become Director of Films Division in the summer of 1952.

The Emergency would dominate the work of the MFU during this period, as the Unit became an integral part of the Government's Emergency propaganda campaign. The MFU initially held broader ambitions – 'it is important that the idea of the three races living in harmony should be preserved and fostered' – but after the British government declared a State of Emergency in June 1948, the MFU focused on bringing government propaganda to those communities, like the rural Chinese, that were involved with the insurrection.[10] The MFU grew up alongside these tumultuous

events and was framed by this history. In his lengthy report on the function of the MFU in 1950, the Producer in Chief for the Australian National Film Board, Stanley Hawes, determined that the MFU should 'concentrate mainly' on 'films designed to assist the Government in the emergency by showing the positive side of democratic government and the strength of the British Commonwealth'.[11] Having produced 19 films in its first three years, the MFU delivered 52 films for distribution in 1950 and 111 in 1951.[12] As the MFU became more fully integrated into the Emergency Information Services (EIS) in 1952, it increasingly produced films that directly endorsed Emergency propaganda campaigns, such as *The Knife* (Ow Kheng Law, MFU, 1952), and expanded and centralised its mobile cinema network. By 1954, there were 92 mobile units (giving a total of 17,092 shows during the year), extended to 123 by 1957 and 134 by 1959.[13] The units played not only in Malay villages but also in Chinese resettlement areas, as the government used film within a political campaign, which was at once both imperialist and part of the Cold War.

Yet while the Emergency dominated Malayan political life and was at the forefront of the MFU's work, it is almost entirely absent from *Merdeka for Malaya*. Aside from one brief mention when showing the parading troops – 'to all of whom Malaya owes gratitude in helping her rid the country of communist terrorism' – which suggested that the problem was now fully resolved, this defining and all-pervading aspect of post-war Malayan history is ignored. The MFU was ultimately a product of the Emergency, shaped and expanded through its ties with the EIS after 1950, yet this ongoing tale of dissension and anti-colonial struggle is pushed beyond the frame, obfuscated in a narrative of racial harmony and nation building. As with so much of colonial film, these films are most interesting for what they do not show or, put another way, they reveal through what they conceal.

The presence of Tom Hodge would also help to reshape the MFU. He was to offer, in his own words and using patriarchal language common to colonial literature, 'strict parental guidance to this brilliant and exuberant youngster [the MFU]'.[14] While he oversaw the continued expansion of the Unit, his focus on quantity and on short instructional films represented something of a break from the Griersonian 'prestige' model previously favoured. Ian Aitken has recently argued that Hodge was 'openly critical' of the early Griersonian elements he found at the MFU.[15] The MFU's 1953 catalogue of films had listed quotations from John Grierson on the inside page, celebrating film's ability to 'bring the outside world alive to the growing citizen' and to 'bring to the stubborn fact a measure of imagination and inspiration'. It further quoted Grierson as stating that 'Any medium which can help government to give an account of its stewardship, elucidate its legislation or otherwise help to provide a background of civic understanding is very precious'. In this way, Grierson's words were used to endorse, justify and define the MFU's work, but the influence of Grierson, evident in the government's pre-war and immediate post-war film work, would become ever more marginal with the arrival of Hodge.[16] A later production such as *Merdeka for Malaya* deviates significantly from the more 'poetic' work seen in productions like *Voices of Malaya*. While Ow Kheng Law described *Merdeka for Malaya* as a 'documentary', he further labeled it an 'objective record of the merdeka celebrations'.[17] While such claims to objectivity may appear spurious, the language hints at the ways in the MFU imagined and positioned the film. Indeed *Merdeka for Malaya* more closely follows a form seen in other MFU 'special news films' like the 1953 film *Malaya Celebrates* (director unknown, MFU, 1953), which depicts the response in Malaya to the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II. It is to this film that I turn briefly now.

Celebrations on screen: From the coronation to Ghanaian independence

The MFU dispatched seven mobile camera teams to film the coronation celebrations throughout Malaya in 1953. In sending the footage to newsreel companies overseas, Hodge predicted that it would 'reach a world audience exceeding 100 million people'.[18] At the time this was the largest project undertaken by the MFU and the completed film, *Malaya Celebrates,* would share many characteristics with *Merdeka for Malaya*. *Malaya Celebrates* opens with fireworks and contains celebratory crowd scenes, official ceremonies – featuring the British national anthem and the raising of the Union Flag – and inspections carried out by Sir Donald MacGillivray. There are scenes of British welfare work (visiting hospitals), the arrival by aeroplane of dignitaries (in this case General Templar, the British High Commissioner in Malaya) and ceremonial handovers (the insignia of 'Honorary Knight Commander of the British empire' to Malay politician, Dato Onn).

As Tom Hodge indicated in planning the production, *Malaya Celebrates* also illustrates the different religious ceremonies held freely within the country, as the film promotes an image of a multi-racial community united through its support for the British empire. Integral to this is the image of the Queen, foregrounded as a unifying symbol of the empire (both the banners and commentary refer repeatedly to 'our' Queen). In this later period, as focus shifts towards the Commonwealth, the Royal family serves as a means of legitimising imperial control and authority overseas. 'Never has there been such widespread enjoyment', the commentator states, 'and never have the people's feelings been expressed so spontaneously and so generously'.

While the emphasis is on celebration and national unity, the film does make one mention of the political situation within Malaya, acknowledging, albeit briefly,

the anti-imperial struggle dominating and decimating Malaya at the time. As security forces make their way through the jungle, they stop, lay out a commemorative rug emblazoned with the Queen's face, pull out some drinks and toast the new Queen. The scene neatly encapsulates an imperial ideal, showing a multi-racial country (represented by British, Malay, Chinese and Indian forces) united through the image of the Queen, while also illustrating the 'civilised' nature of the security forces as they pay due respect and drink together. *Malaya Celebrates* manages here to offer a fervent, uncritical, endorsement of the British empire during a period of sustained anti-imperial unrest. There is a clear trajectory from these celebratory scenes of the coronation (or royal visits), which are common to most colonial units, to the subsequent films of independence celebrations. These events, of celebrations and parties, traditional pageants and displays, are visually striking and can be largely isolated or removed from the politics of the time. They stand alone, tied up in symbols and rituals, and serve to represent, construct and encapsulate a national history.

A comparison with another government film of colonial handover, produced by the Ghana Film Unit a few months earlier, reveals another model for such nation-building and further indicates what was at stake in these widely-circulating representations. On first glance *Freedom for Ghana* (Sean Graham, Ghana Film Unit, 1957) appears to adopt a similar format to the subsequent MFU film, *Merdeka for Malaya*. The opening minutes comprise a map, fluttering flags, dignitaries arriving at the airport, a royal procession and religious ceremonies within a stadium. Later there are formal state banquets, royal visits and the unveiling of the Independence monument. Yet, what is perhaps most striking here is the commentary, which offers a much more critical perspective on the colonial influences within Ghana. The film celebrates those that have lost their lives fighting for freedom and when the British

flag is removed, the British commentator is replaced by a local voice stating 'too long up there making us other people's property'. Despite this more critical approach, which appears to reflect more clearly the tensions marking the end of empire, the film still qualifies what the flag represents and seeks to negotiate a peaceful handover. 'But behind that flag, fine, sincere people devoted to this country's good', the commentator adds, 'there is a friendship and affection between us'.

Freedom for Ghana is notably more 'poetic' – both sonically and visually – and more closely aligned to the earlier Griersonian *Voices of Malaya* than *Merdeka for Malaya*. Indeed the Ghana Film Unit (formerly Gold Coast Film Unit or GCFU), which produced *Freedom for Ghana*, held closer ties with the 'prestige' work of the British Documentary movement than the instructional work adopted by other colonial units in Africa. This is, in some ways, surprising. The Colonial Film Unit (CFU) was at its most active in West Africa during the 1940s and set up its first training school in Accra in 1948, which provided the founding personnel for the GCFU. Yet, the head of the GCFU, Sean Graham, was a self-proclaimed 'disciple of Grierson' who vehemently rejected suggestions that the GCFU was a colonial unit; 'colonial was a dirty word'. [19] Martin Stollery recalls GCFU film-maker Chris Hesse's recent description of Graham as a 'rebel' within the Gold Coast Information Services, marked out by his integration within Ghanaian culture and his more liberal, humanist politics. [20] There is a notable shift within both units during the 1950s. While in Malaya, a more instructional cinema associated with William Sellers and the CFU replaces the 'Griersonian' influences, in the Gold Coast, the reverse is true as the 'Griersonian' influences come to the fore. The GCFU is also able, surprisingly, to invite more critical and radical voices to work on its films. Indeed the credited writer

on *Freedom for Ghana* was Basil Davidson, a radical journalist, noted African historian and champion of liberation movements.

The latter sequences of *Freedom for Ghana* also deviate from the more 'prosaic' form of *Merdeka for Malaya*. After the raising of the Ghanaian flag at midnight, the film conveys the energy and excitement of Ghana through travelling shots, which follow Prime Minister Kwame Nkrumah's car, and the multiple cuts, which capture the urgency of the crowds. The commentators celebrate Nkrumah's rise and struggle ('the government put him in prison. They tried to forget him. They failed'), but also, once more, attempt to locate Britain's place within this process. As the procession moves through the streets, a British voiceover states 'I suppose we could have hung on of course, we could have gritted our teeth and called in the troops and somehow muddled through, shot our way through'. The commentator concludes that such an approach is 'out of date, greedy, stupid'. An Indian voiceover then responds by recalling how the Indians felt about the British 'before they decided to leave India'. 'We used to dislike the British, we don't now', he concludes. At the departure of the Duchess of Kent, the commentator outlines the 'warmth of friendship that will continue to unite Ghana with Great Britain'. As with *Merdeka for Malaya*, the film celebrates the confluence of influences and styles, although in this instance it is marked by an infiltration of African culture on colonial structures more than the colonial influences on local life. For example, the film presents the formal dance at the Hotel Ambassador as a sign of progressive racial integration and gleefully champions the African influences now creeping into the European club, 'that dear old department of the stiff upper lip'.

Freedom for Ghana continued to circulate well beyond independence and was presented as a positive call to arms for other nations. The Ghana Film Unit's

catalogue recognised that the film 'attempted more than the conventional record of a happy royal tour', setting a 'pattern for the wider picture' and presenting Ghana 'as a symbol for the whole of Africa'.[21] The film's conclusion, which features Nkrumah's moonlit speech, represents a much more provocative and politicised moment than we see at any point in *Merdeka for Malaya*. Nkrumah introduces the new national anthem over a shot of the Ghanaian flag, before proclaiming 'freedom' once more with his right hand raised. While this is not dissimilar from sequences in the MFU's film, the British commentator also speaks here noting that Africa has 'woken up' and that other countries will follow Ghana. 'Courage, freedom, these are Ghana's words for you wherever you are, whoever you are . . . humanity is indivisible. Indivisible.'

Flags, anthems and the contested symbols of a new nation

Freedom for Ghana concludes with a shot of the national flag fluttering in the night sky. The flag, as a manufactured symbol of the new nation, features in much the same way as a framing device in *Merdeka for Malaya*. The flag was, however, a somewhat contested symbol in Malaya. It was initially chosen through a public contest overseen by a committee chaired by Sir Alec Newboult, the colonial Chief Secretary. The committee discussed at length their hopes for the design, with Dato Onn suggesting that the flag should 'denote the birth of a new nation and should indicate the unity of the nine States and the two Settlements and partnership with the United Kingdom'. After a public call brought forward 373 designs, a shortlist of three was presented for public vote in the *Malay Mail*. The chosen flag was not without controversy as the favoured five-pointed star too closely resembled communist symbols. Further points were thus added to the star to represent each of the eleven states before it was approved by King George VI in 1950 and first raised by Sir Henry Gurney, the British

High Commissioner in Malaya, in the Sultan Selangor's Palace. Gurney referred once more to the flag as a 'symbol of unity'.[22]

The public was also initially invited to select the national anthem, listening to the final seven entries on the radio in 1956. Historian Cheong Soon Gan argues that the national anthem would ultimately become a more prominent and significant symbol of the new nation, but the debates over its selection – concerning whether the anthems represented the traditions, customs and cultures of Malaya – and, moreover, over the public responses to the selected anthem, attest to the broader, imagined function of the anthem within the new nation. Indeed the government ultimately rejected those tunes put forward for public vote and curiously commissioned one of the most prominent British composers, Benjamin Britten, to write its anthem in June 1957. Britten's composition was also rejected in favour of Negaraku, an established tune and the existing anthem for the state of Perak. [23]

The selection of the anthem illustrated the tensions between existing colonial authority and emerging local voices. Furthermore, Gan shows how the chosen anthem became imbricated in anxieties around local resistance. In particular, he notes the escalating discourse around its performance after film shows, when audience members would leave before it was played.[24] The British national anthem had formed a pivotal part of the colonial film show and had cemented the anthem as a daily feature of the nation-building process. The earliest mobile film tours in Africa in the 1930s had ended with a picture of the King and a performance of the national anthem. The performance was imagined here as an integral part of the colonising process, a means of creating British citizens. There are numerous reports of audience reactions at MFU film shows that challenged this stated ideological aim. For example some cinemagoers reportedly cheered the appearance of communist leader Chin Peng at a

screening of the MFU's film *1955: The Year in Malaya* (director unknown, MFU, 1955), which resulted in the government removing the film from screens. At film shows across the empire, any failure to observe protocol during the anthem was invariably construed as a political act of protest.[25]

The emphasis on the flag and anthem within the film, as carefully constructed symbols of the new nation, echoes much colonial cinema, symbolically representing a changing of the guard by using the form and conventions of its colonial predecessors. Through film, radio and photography, these symbols are used to mark, celebrate and circulate news of the new nation, but film also attempts to overlook the disagreements and political tensions that are stitched onto these symbols, stabilising this fluid and contingent history. These films of independence are part of a myth-making process, fantasies that are integral to the narrative of 'amicable' handovers and new nation building. However, when we look beyond the frame at the film's reception, these tensions often come to the fore as the sounds, images and symbols were critical sites not only for the imagination, but also the contestation, of national and global identities. For example, the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) complained that *Merdeka for Malaya* placed too much emphasis on the role played by non-Malays in the Merdeka celebrations, in particular by omitting shots of thanksgiving ceremonies at Mosques.[26] As noted earlier, the film attempted to show the different cultures 'of this multi racial country rolled into one', the 'rich and varied cultures' working together in harmony. Ow Kheng Law defended the film from the UMNO criticisms. 'In the film we have shots of the mosques, faces of the Malayans and children celebrating merdeka and the Nobat (royal drums) at the installation of the Paramount Ruler', he wrote. 'Surely these are Malayan scenes and background'.[27] The validity of the UMNO criticisms is of less relevance than the fact that they were

made. These criticisms endorse widely-held British fears of communal division and dissension, as these disparate groups sought to promote their own image within an emerging national identity. Evidently the stakes are high here for the many invested parties; the film represented, as a government document projected around the world, a microcosm of the new nation, a way to work through a new national identity.

Merdeka for Malaya also seeks to preserve British prestige at this moment of loss, perpetuating the idea that Britain had controlled and carefully planned the handover of power. This historical reworking is most neatly articulated through the movement of personnel. Just as much early colonial cinema highlighted arrivals and departures – the movement on trains and boats across the empire – *Merdeka for Malaya* visualised this shift in power through the technological advances that the colonial powers have brought. In one sequence, we witness the departure by plane of Sir Donald MacGillivray, the last high commissioner. Once more, the departure is marked by military pageants as MacGillivray says 'farewell to personal friends of all communities'. The commentator emphasises the amicable nature of the handover – 'the citizens of Malaya salute you' – and almost mourns the loss of empire here, explaining that 'there are some ties that are painful to break'. The commentator's words endorse a particular revisionist account of this pathway to independence. Suggesting that MacGillivray served Malaya well 'in the crucial years when independence became possible', the film reinforces the notion that independence was long imagined and willingly offered by the British. This was, of course, a much more rapid and unforeseen development, with the move towards independence in Malaya gaining sustained momentum after the Federal elections of July 1955. The Alliance Party, headed by Tunku Abdul Rahman had somewhat surprisingly won 51 of the 52 elected seats and, on assuming power, the Tunku had immediately pushed for

independence, arguing that 'the only real alternative to Communism is nationalism'.[28] The British remained suspicious of the political coalition and had repeatedly stated that independence would only be considered once the state of emergency had ended. However, by October 1955, British ministers retreated from this position, in part to ensure that the Tunku avoided striking a deal with Chin Peng. In January 1956, the Tunku led a delegation to Britain, and on 8 February signed an agreement (the Independence Treaty), which granted Malaya independence on 31 August 1957 'if possible'. Piers Brendon argued that the 'British were stampeded into granting *Merdeka*', while T. N. Harper noted that once a date had been agreed 'an unstoppable momentum built up towards it'.[29]

This subtext is carefully omitted from this official presentation of independence. Tom Hodge's account in 1957 presents a similar picture of a supportive MFU, preparing and enacting the moves to self-governance. 'It has helped to train the people in the methods and standards of elections and census taking and to encourage a sense of responsible citizenship'.[30] In endorsing a post-war rhetoric of welfare and development, the films served as 'visual education' outlining, for example, the benefits of literacy (*The Letter,* director unknown, MFU, 1953), the welfare of the blind (*Touch and Go,* director unknown, MFU, 1953), the Government's pension scheme (*Worry Free,* director unknown, MFU, 1954) and rehabilitation through the prison services (*A Better Man,* director unknown, MFU, 1953). In promoting self-sufficiency, modern welfare services and a western model of citizenship, the Unit sought to play an active role in the modern nation-state building process. Hassan Muthalib has more recently illustrated the ways in which the MFU awakened 'a sense of nationalism' during the 1950s while also presenting Tunku Abd.

Rahman, the Chief Minister, as a viable, 'heroic' leader, a process completed with *Merdeka for Malaya*.[31]

In these ways, the films of independence are essential historical records, not simply through their depiction of the people and events, but for the myths and fantasies they create or perpetuate. In a period of intense, tumultuous change, these recorded ceremonies seek to preserve a moment of reconciliation and celebration. The rigid structure and recurring patterns may attest to a continuing colonial influence and to an attempt to control and manage this loss, but as Rathbone and others have shown, it also serves to conceal the tensions and struggles that led to independence and that marked the very process of arranging these celebrations. Government records illustrate that the ceremonial plans were invariably contested (who stands where, who is invited, where and when this should take place). Power is visual, and the positioning and organisation of personnel (through editing, buildings and events) is one of the ways in which power is transformed into spectacle. Ultimately the on-screen fantasy, comprising fireworks, parades and flag waving, encourages viewers to surrender to a form of amnesia. These ceremonies, hypnotic in their repetition and order, are an integral part of a process that invites British viewers not to remember and to mourn, but rather to forget and move on. This process still continues today. For example, British education continues to focus on world wars, rather than the empire, on narratives of victory or good vs. evil, while even today surprisingly little fiction film confronts Britain's loss of empire and the more complicated process and repercussions of decolonisation.

Conclusions: Beyond Independence

In July 1957, on the eve of Malayan Independence, Tom Hodge left the MFU. In discussing his departure and the position of Ow Kheng Law at the head of the unit, Hodge suggested that the MFU 'now lives proudly up to the first word of its title, reflecting the nation in its composition as in the films which leave its laboratories'.[32] Shortly after completing work on *Freedom for Ghana*, Sean Graham would leave his role in charge of the Ghana Film Unit and return to Britain. The moves to independence also led to the promise of new equipment and studios. Ow Kheng Law announced plans to rehouse the MFU in the 'biggest and most up to date studio' in South-East Asia in 1956. The MFU's existing studio was a reminder of Japanese occupation – a former Japanese paper mill – and was described by the Kuala Lumpur fire authorities as the 'biggest fire hazard in the country'.[33] In Ghana, Nkrumah soon announced plans to modernise film production and to install a modern recording and film processing plant in Accra. He reportedly paraded the African film crews as a model for modern Ghana, suggesting that the film units were not only responsible for creating the new nation in the popular imagination but were also positively enacting this process, exemplars of the shift from colonial to postcolonial state.

These narratives of change, however attractive to politicians of the time and historians today, oversimplify and conceal a more nuanced transition in both countries after 1957. Many of the personnel retained close ties to, and were developed through, the colonial era. Ow Kheng Law, for example, had travelled and trained with the Crown Film Unit in 1945-46 and was a founding member of the MFU, while Mohammed Zain Hussain, who would later become Director General of the MFU, was a cameraman on the very earliest MFU productions like *The Kinta Story* (director unknown, MFU, 1949). Sam Aryeetey, who would later serve as the Managing Director of the Ghana Film Industry Corporation – a successor to the GCFU – was

one of six film-makers who attended the inaugural training school organised by the Colonial Office's CFU in Accra in 1948, and was a founding member of the GCFU. While Aryeetey is often credited as the director of the first Ghanaian feature film, *No Tears for Ananse* (Sam Aryeetey, Ghana Film Industry Corporation, 1968) this film would not appear until 1968, a full decade after independence. Indeed, during the early 1960s, films were still sent to London for processing, while the senior staff consisted of five expatriate officers and six Ghanaians. Graham even claimed that Nkrumah asked him to stay on after independence and, despite the Government's stated desire to 'make the film productions completely Ghanaian in character', the unit continued to bring in European directors.[34] Likewise, much of the equipment and structures remained in place – development on the MFU's new studio was postponed and only finally opened in 1965 – while the films produced within the colonial era continued to circulate. A film catalogue from the Ghana Central Film Library in 1971-72 is dominated by Gold Coast Film Unit productions (and productions from other colonial-era units, including the MFU), which still played on the mobile film circuit.

The government films of independence ceremonies, like *Merdeka for Malaya*, are hugely significant parts of the nation-building process, celebrating the new nation, while in their homogenous form and conciliatory narratives of partnership, still retaining strong ties to the colonial powers. The symbols of change – the raised flag, the handover, the departing dignitary or the new anthem – are powerful visual (and sonic) signifiers of this change, yet in capturing a few moments, the films become fantasies, seemingly removed from the politics and tensions that led to independence and that would invariably continue after the plane took to the skies and the cameras switched off. In a similar vein, the units that captured these moments are often

celebrated and presented as microcosms of the nation at large. In many respects they are, but not always in the ways imagined. Instead they reveal, like the films they produce, a moment of uncertainty and transition, one that often retains a close tie to the colonial influences that shaped its cinema cultures, but that often fails to confront and address the tensions, frustrations, failings and successes, of the colonial era. In preserving a moment, these films too often seek to forget what has gone before and what will likely come after. The legacy of this process continues to this day.

Acknowledgments

References

Aitken, Ian (2015), 'British Governmental Institutions, the Regional Information Office in Singapore and the Use of the Official Film in Malaya and Singapore, 1948–1961', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 35: 1, 27–52.

Anon., 'Films in Malaya', *Colonial Cinema*, March 1947, 13–15.

Anon. (1953), 'The Hawes Report', FO 953/757, The National Archives (UK). Accessed on 1 July 2015 at http://digital.lib.hkbu.edu.hk/documentary-film/index.php

Anon., 'Child Prodigy Gets an Expert', *Straits Times*, 6 October 1952, p. 9.

Anon., 'Surprise from the MFU', *Straits Times*, 21 June 1953, p. 13.

Anon. (1953), *Catalogue of Films Made by the Malayan Film Unit,* Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information.

Anon., 'Vintage Year for Malayan Film Unit', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 10 March 1955.

Anon., 'Malayan Plea for Speedy Self-Government', *The Times*, 1 September 1955, p. 7.

Anon., 'Presenting -– The Malayan Film Unit', *Film News*, 15: 3, Fall 1955, p. 13.

Anon., 'Chin Peng Cheered as KL Audiences see Peace Talks Newsreel', *Straits Times*, 6 January 1956, p. 4.

Anon., 'New Film Unit Studios will he S-E Asia's Best', *Straits Times*, 7 April 1956, p. 4.

Anon., 'Free Merdeka Films for Free World', *Straits Times*, 20 July 1957, p. 7.

Anon., '"Merdeka" Film for Foreign Lands, *Straits Times*, 19 September 1957, p. 7.

Anon., '$250 for Film Memento of Merdeka Day', *Straits Times*, 21 September 1957, p. 7.

Anon., 'Art in Uniform', *Straits Times*, 24 September 1957, p. 6.

Anon., 'Film Unit Head: We did our Best', *Straits Times*, 25 September 1957, p. 9.

Anon. (1959), *Catalogue of Documentary Films in the Federal Film Library*, Kuala Lumpur: Department of Information, Federation of Malaya.

Anon. (1961), *Ghana: An Official Handbook*, Accra: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting.

Anon. (1972), *Ghana Central Film Library: Catalogue of Films 1971-1972*, Accra, Public Relations Department.

Anon. (1974), *Films We Have Produced*, Accra: Ghana Film Industry Corporation.

Brendon, Piers (2007), *The Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997,* London: Jonathan Cape.

Gan, Cheong Soon (2015), 'The National Anthem: Contested and Volatile Symbol of Post-Colonial Malaysia, 1957-1969', *South East Asia Research,* 23: 1, 61–78.

Harper, T. N. (1998), *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya,* New York: Cambridge University Press.

Hodge, Tom, 'Eleven Years of the Malayan Film Unit: A Record of Solid Achievement', *Educational Screen and Audio-Visual Guide*, November 1957, 538–539.

Marshall, Alex (2015), 'Benjamin Britten's "Lost" Malaysian Anthem', accessed on 12 October 2015 at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-34417765.

Muthalib, Hassan Abdul (2011), 'The End of Empire: The Films of the Malayan Film Unit in 1950s British Malaya', in L. Grieveson and C. MacCabe (eds), *Film and the End of Empire,* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 177–196.

Nasruddin, Muhamad Razif and Zarul Nazli bin Zulkhurnain (2012), 'The History and Design Chronology of Jailur Gemilang', accessed on 1 July 2015 at http://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org/jalurgemilang.

Ramakrishna, Kumar (2002), *Emergency Propaganda: The Winning of Malayan Hearts and Minds 1948-1958,* Richmond: Curzon Press.

Rathbone, Richard (2010), 'Casting "the Kingdome into Another Mold": Ghana's Troubled Transition to Independence', in R. Holland, S. Williams and T. Barringer (eds), *The Iconography of Independence: Freedoms at Midnight*, London: Routledge, pp. 57–70.

Rice, Tom (2013), 'Distant *Voices of Malaya*, Still Colonial Lives', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 10: 3, 430–451.

Sandon, Emma, Tom Rice and Peter Bloom (2013), 'Changing the World: Sean Graham', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 10: 3, 524–536.

Stockwell, A. J. (2010), 'Merdeka! Looking Back at Independence Day in Malaya, 31 August 1957', in R. Holland, S. Williams and T. Barringer (eds), *The Iconography of Independence: Freedoms at Midnight*, London: Routledge, pp. 113–130.

Stollery, Martin (2014), 'White Fathers Hear Dark Voices?: John Grierson and British Colonial Africa at the End of Empire', in Z. Druick and D. Williams (eds), *The Grierson Effect: Tracing Documentary's International Movement*, London/New York: BFI Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 187–208.

Notes

[1] Stockwell, 2010, p. 117.

[2] Rathbone, 2010, p. 57.

[3] Harper, 1998, p. 356.

[4] *Film News*, Fall 1955, p. 13.

[5] *Catalogue of Documentary Films*, 1959, p. 3.

[6] *Straits Times*, 19 September 1957, p. 7; *Straits Times*, 20 July 1957, p. 7.

[7] *Straits Times*, 21 September 1957, p. 7.

[8] *Catalogue of Films Made by the Malayan Film Unit*, 1953, p. 13; Hodge, 1957, p. 539.

[9] See Rice, 2013; *Catalogue of Films Made by the Malayan Film Unit,* 1953, p. 13.

[10] *Colonial Cinema*, March 1947, p. 15.

[11] The Hawes Report, FO 953/757, The National Archives (UK).

[12] Ramakrishna, 2002, pp. 110–1.

[13] *Kinematograph Weekly,* 10 March 1955; Hodge, 1957, p. 538; *Catalogue of Documentary Films*, 1959, p. 3.

[14] *Straits Times*, 6 October 1952, p. 9.

[15] Aitken, 2015, p. 34.

[16] *Catalogue of Films Made by the Malayan Film Unit*, 1953.

[17] *Straits Times*, 25 September 1957, p. 9.

[18] *Straits Times*, 21 June 1953, p. 13.

[19] Sandon, Rice and Bloom, 2013, p. 530.

[20] Stollery, 2014, p. 193.

[21] Anon (1974), 'Films We Have Produced'.

[22] See Nasruddin and bin Zulkhurnain, 2012, http://www.malaysiadesignarchive.org/jalurgemilang accessed on 30 March 2016.

[23] Gan, 2015, pp. 61–78; Marshall, 2015.

[24] Gan, 2015, pp. 61–78.

[25] *Straits Times*, 6 January 1956, p. 4.

[26] *Straits Times*, 24 September 1957, p. 6.

[27] *Straits Times*, 25 September 1957, p. 9.

[28] *The Times*, 1 September 1955, p. 7.

[29] Brendon, 2007, p. 459; Harper, 1998, p. 348.

[30] Hodge, 1957, p. 539.

[31] Muthalib, 2011, p. 191.

[32] Hodge, 1957, p. 539.

[33] *Straits Times*, 7 April 1956, p. 4.

[34] *Ghana: An Official Handbook*, 1961, p. 114.