

BOOK REVIEW

Laura Fair. *Reel Pleasures: Cinema Audiences and Entrepreneurs in Twentieth-Century Tanzania*. New African Histories. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2018. xiv + 452 pp. Maps. Photographs. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$34.95. Paper. ISBN: 978-0821422861.

Laura Fair's *Reel Pleasures* offers a rewarding journey through the vibrant history of the Tanzanian cinema industry across the twentieth century, with an emphasis on the period from the 1950s to the 1980s. Previously, in *Pastimes and Politics: Culture, Community, and Identity in Post-Abolition Urban Zanzibar, 1890–1945* (Ohio University Press, 2002), Fair delved into the intersections of leisure, politics, and Zanzibari identity formation. In *Reel Pleasures*, she casts a broader geographical net but retains a firm focus on popular culture and pastimes as a window into Tanzanian world-making, particularly in relation to gender, youth identity, socialism, and modernity.

Fair's analysis deftly weaves together the economic, cultural, and political factors that both culminated in and sustained "one of the richest African and Asian moviegoing cultures on the continent" by the late 1950s (4) before it succumbed to the forces of structural adjustment and neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s. She draws upon extensive ethnographic and archival research, interweaving vivid recollections of cinema-going shared in oral interviews with fine-grained analyses of ticket sales, colonial legislation, the impact of entertainment taxes, and global distribution practices. Her multifaceted methodology and insightful analysis culminate in a textured understanding of "the city's cinematic beating heart" (11), where codes of urban citizenship and cosmopolitan identities were collectively forged.

Fair explores the cultures of entrepreneurship and spectatorship that kept the cinematic heart beating. In Chapters One and Two, she introduces the reader to the tireless "cinematic capitalists" (16) who sought to provide a top-notch film-going experience as well as an unprecedented selection of global films. Fair traces the entrepreneurs' navigations of regional and transnational networks of global film supply, changing technologies, colonial and postcolonial bureaucracies, and international politics. She explains how Tanzanian Asian cinema owners and managers integrated themselves into the social fabric of the neighborhoods where the cinemas were located; she

also suggests that a mutual love of cinema helped to defer tensions among and between Asian and African communities.

Later chapters shift focus to the audiences, as Fair explores how urban Tanzanians, particularly those on the coast, engaged forcefully and enthusiastically with a dynamic range of genres such as Hindu romances, spaghetti westerns, and blaxploitation films. Simply put, they made these films their own in an especially rich articulation of African modernity. (Fair makes a concerted effort to include up-country dynamics and perspectives, but due to a confluence of religious, historical, and geographical factors, cinemas in towns such as Arusha and Moshi did not achieve the kind of cultural status that they enjoyed on the coast.)


I was especially intrigued with Fair's analysis of the widespread appeal of the 1951 Indian film *Awara* as a means of affirming personal dreams of romance and political imagining of nationhood (Chapter Four), in addition to her discussion of how kung fu imports expanded codes of Tanzanian womanhood and formations of transnational blackness (Chapter Seven). In addition, Fair provides several rewarding glimpses of cinema employees (most memorably, the "reelers" who ran the different reels of a single film from one theatre to the next on their bicycles) as well as those who attached themselves to the industry as concessionaires and black marketeers. Throughout the book, Fair's interviews with entrepreneurs, spectators, and employees offer testaments to their keen awareness of and engagement with global movements and trends.

Chapter Five is a standout through its gripping tale of how socialist ideologies and aspirations for modernity intersected in "the first—and perhaps only—socialist drive-in on the planet" (221). Julius Nyerere's famous socialist concept of *ujamaa* was brought to vivid cultural life at the drive-in thanks to the broad cross-section of Tanzanian society that attended, creating a free-wheeling sense of "familyhood" that cohered around this tangible sign of socialist abundance and technological progress. The chapter underscores Fair's key argument that Tanzanian cinemas cultivated "stunningly and perhaps singularly successful examples of Tanzania's interracial, multiethnic, cross-class public sphere" (238). Ultimately, though, the heady socialist moment of the late 1960s came to a neoliberal end. The final chapter and the epilogue trace the impact of nationalization, structural adjustment, the advent of VHS and digital media, and a shift to monopoly capitalism. As described in the epilogue, the cinema industry was reduced to a pale reflection of its former vibrant self, consigned to air-conditioned shopping malls where economic segregation became the new order of the day.

The best books always leave the reader wanting more, and *Reel Pleasures* is no exception. As noted previously, Fair focuses on the cultures of film-going rather than the films themselves; as a result, she makes only a brief reference to the fascinating world of Tanzanian video production (319), often referred to as Bongowood or Swahiliwood. A more pointed acknowledgment of Tanzanian filmmaking over the past two decades would offer nuance to the relatively pessimistic epilogue. The creativity and popular agency demonstrated in such

abundance throughout the book did not simply dissipate but were instead channeled into new forms of cinematic production.

That said, the significance of Fair's project is undeniable. Those of us who analyze the expressive arts of East Africa are grateful to her for persevering with this project despite the unimaginable loss that she experienced during her research, as described in her poignant acknowledgements. As in her previous work, *Reel Pleasures* serves as a powerful reminder that African pastimes are not only sources of pleasure and profit, but they also enrich and expand cultural imaginations and transnational affinities. Similarly, Fair's book enriches and expands the fields of African cultural history, urban popular culture, and the expressive arts.

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For additional reading on this subject, the ASR recommends:

Higgins, MaryEllen. 2015. "The Winds of African Cinema." *African Studies Review* 58 (3): 77–92. doi:10.1017/asr.2015.76.

Petty, Sheila. 1999. "The Archeology of Origin: Transnational Visions of Africa in a Borderless Cinema." *African Studies Review* 42 (2): 73–86. doi:10.2307/525365.