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Film and the British Empire

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Film and the British Empire

The British Empire impacted film both during its rule and still today.

Introduction

Throughout history, empire has played a big part. In documenting and marketing the empire, particularly the British, different methods were used, such as film. This project explores the film *Gunga Din* and the ways in which empire has influenced both the way it's made as well as what's in the movie.

Methods

The film *Gunga Din* explored in a media press kit which includes a movie poster, a set of lobby cards, and a brochure that contains more information about the film, its characters, and the influence that the British Empire had on the film.

Conclusion

As a result of British expansion, several cliches became common in movies that are still seen today. Some of these cliches are how the indigenous people are portrayed and the relationship between the natives and the Europeans. These films show how the empire has guided its subjects into a better world and way of life.



Lobby Cards above, poster right, brochure below.

FILM INFO

DIRECTOR
George Stevens

WRITING CREDIT
Joel Sayre
Fred Guiot

PRODUCER
George Stevens

PRODUCTION COMPANY
RKO Radio Pictures

BASED ON THE POEM BY
Rudyard Kipling

STARRING
Cary Grant
Douglas Fairbanks Jr.
Victor McLaglen
Sam Jaffe
Joan Fontaine
Edward G. Robinson

CINEMATOGRAPHY
Joseph H. August

MUSIC
Alfred Newman

RELEASE DATE
February 7, 1939

RUN TIME
117 minutes

GUN G A D I N

ABOUT THE FILM

Gunga Din is an adventure film set in the British colonies of India. The film is centered around three soldiers in the British army and their duty to protect both the empire and its colonies from the Thuggee criminal cult group who aims to rid India of British influence. These three soldiers, MacChesney, Cutter, and Ballantine, are also aided by their water carrier Gunga Din who dreams of becoming a British soldier. Together they, and the British Army, work to stop a Thuggee uprising and save the empire.

The film is directed by George Stevens, a creator of classic Hollywood cinema, and stars top actors such as Cary Grant, Sam Jaffe, Douglas Fairbanks Jr., Victor McLaglen, and Joan Fontaine. It was loosely based on the poem "Gunga Din" by Rudyard Kipling, about a water carrier who sacrifices everything to save a soldier's life. The film was filmed in the Alabama Hills region of California and came out in 1939 at the start of World War II. The film was the sixth highest grossing film of the year nationally, earning around \$2.8 million dollars.

MAIN CHARACTERS

GUNGA DIN
Gunga Din is a native Indian water carrier for the British Army that throughout the film works specifically with Cutter, Ballantine, and MacChesney. He is ambitious in his dreams of becoming a "first-class soldier," more specifically a bugler. His undying loyalty makes him willing to sacrifice everything for the British empire and their causes.

CUTTER
Sergeant Archibald Cutter, one of the three main protagonists seen in the film, is brave and fearless. A soldier for the British army, Cutter also makes time for fun with his best friends and soldiers-in-arms, Ballantine and MacChesney. Cutter is an adventurer and treasure seeker, a combination that can lead to trouble in the exotic lands of India.

BALLANTINE
The dashing and chivalrous Sergeant Thomas Ballantine is one of the three main protagonists. Although Ballantine enjoys his time with his friends in the army, his enlistment is coming to an end, something his friends try to dissuade him from doing. He finds a commitment to his friends and the army, who are willing to sacrifice anything for one another.

MACCHESNEY
Sergeant MacChesney is also one of the three main protagonists of the film and a long-time friend of Cutter and Ballantine. As the top sergeant, MacChesney is obedient, willing to follow orders, and level-headed, but also always up for a good time or a fight.

THE INFLUENCE OF IMPERIALISM

The idea of empire was one that has stretched far and wide throughout the history of man, and no can be more a better example than the British Empire. Spanning about a quarter of the earth's landmass from North America to Asia, we see the influence of the empire throughout the world. Many of these subjects lived in colonies which included natives of those foreign lands. As a way to document the empire, film was a method employed as a type of propaganda for the empire. Films about the colonies were created for the masses to support imperialism and emphasize the good the empire was doing in these foreign countries. Many of these films began to develop certain tropes for depicting the indigenous peoples, countries, and lives of those living under imperial rule. These tropes became very prominent during imperial rule and can still be found in films today.

A trope that is found in many films of this time that can be seen in *Gunga Din* is the portrayal of the indigenous people through their clothing, speech, as well as the roles they played in the films. In the film, though shown in a variety of ways, the clothing of the indigenous people is mainly depicted wearing a simple white cloth that covers only the vital parts of their body. During their rituals, their speech contains a lot of chanting and words that the viewer does not understand, compared to the British who are depicted as more civilized in their speech. The portrayal of these foreign lands under imperialism were also seen as dangerous, mysterious, exotic, full of adventure and abundant resources. The film itself is an adventure film whose protagonists create a fun and exciting environment in the wilds of India. The repeated use of these types of tropes are stereotypical and often times inaccurate, fueling the excitement of foreign lands to their viewers.

Another way that the influence of imperialism can be seen in this film is the relationship between the British and the natives. Many of the British characters are in positions of power and leadership over the natives. One example of this can be seen in the character of Gunga Din. Although the poem was based on him and the film itself is named after him, his role is secondary to that of the three main protagonists: Cutter, Ballantine, and MacChesney. Another relationship seen throughout the film is the paternal hand that the Empire plays to India and its subjects. In the film Cutter helps teach Gunga Din how to march like a soldier. He also does his best to protect him from the Thuggees when they find themselves surrounded. The main goal of the Thuggees is to remove the British from the land, however, the British prevail and protect the empire's subjects. The influence of imperialism in film, particularly in this film, show the masses how the empire has guided its subjects into a better world and a better life.

