Cinema at the End of Empire
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part one  *  IMPERIAL GOVERNMENTALITY
Viscount Sandon (Shrewsbury, Unionist) said that this Films Quota Bill was necessary for social and domestic as well as for Imperial reasons.
—The Times, 17 March 1927

It is no secret that the Government, and indeed practically the whole of the country, recognizes in the Bill something which far outstrips any ordinary trade legislation. Apart from the purely trade aspect, there is the deeper question of Empire, of the Imperialistic Outlook.
—The Bioscope, 2 June 1927

The British [film] industry needs a larger market within which to extend its scope. The British Empire is an obvious field, but it is untilled. Distribution is largely controlled by American capital. . . . The British industry has a legitimate and encouraging opportunity to enlarge its field; but it is an opportunity which must be courageously seized, and without delay.
—The Film in National Life

two  * ACTS OF TRANSITION

The British Cinematograph Films Acts of 1927 and 1938

In 1927 Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister, president of Britain’s Board of Trade (BT), supported the Cinematograph Films Bill, drawing both enthusiastic applause and sharp criticism in the British House of Commons. Arguing against the bill’s proposed quota for British films in the United Kingdom, free-trader Philip Snowden (Colne Valley, Labour; also Chancellor of the Exchequer, 1924 and 1929–1931) accused Cunliffe-Lister of being “simply a tool in the hands of the Federation of British Industries,” complaining that if the BT president had his way, “he would impose a quota restriction on every trade in the country, and, for instance, compel every greengrocer to stock a certain proportion of British fruit.”1 Within sight of an economic depression, the British State’s urgent consideration of a protectionist, nationalist economy was matched by the issue’s severe political divisiveness. British film, like British fruit, was caught in a national debate over tariffs versus free trade.

Imperial conferences held in 1926 and 1932 made it obvious that the imperial question was a significant part of prevailing discussions about state and industry.2 Both conferences aimed at improving trade relations within the empire, and by the 1932 Conference, held in Ottawa, the political climate
in Britain had shifted definitively in favor of protectionism. In the preceding year the Labour government led by Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald had been replaced by a pro-tariff, coalitional “National Government,” also under MacDonald. Reflecting this change, the Ottawa conference initiated a policy of imperial preferences by creating a zone of trade incentives restricted to the empire. Also known as “empire free trade,” the policy notionally retained the sense of an open market while appeasing the protectionists.

The British State’s first modest protection of its film production with the Cinematograph Films Act of 1927 (or the Quota Act) anticipated this relationship between nation and empire. The policy was carefully worded to offer special concessions to empire-made films entering the British market, in the hope that British films would receive similar favors from colonial and dominion governments. Perhaps a measure of its controversial nature, suggestions of imperial preference were hidden in the strategic ambiguities of policy language rather than declared as an explicit part of the act. Existing scholarly accounts of the Quota Act, referenced throughout this chapter, focus on the policy’s domestic significance to the exclusion of its submerged imperial dimension, thus missing the centrality of empire to Britain’s geopolitical position between the two world wars. Though British investments in colonial enterprises were increasingly unpopular because of their diminishing returns, the British State and its domestic industries persistently attempted to mobilize the empire to national advantage. The manner of this mobilization expresses the impact of decolonization on the British State’s and film industry’s self-definition.

Arguably, the centrality of imperial markets to Britain’s global primacy during the nineteenth century made it a field of investigation for British filmmakers and policy makers seeking bulwarks against Hollywood. But the Quota Act’s timing is of interest. By 1927 British filmmakers well knew that the empire was neither a viable nor a coherent entity with regard to its receptivity to British films. The Federation of British Industries (FBI) noted that the United States had more theaters than the British Empire, and each theater had considerably greater seating capacity, with audiences of greater “comparative wealth” to occupy those seats. The FBI also knew that harnessing empire markets would not put Britain’s film industry on par with Hollywood’s. Despite this foreknowledge, the organization cast Britain’s national industry within a framework of imperial aspirations in its 1926 petition to BT President Cunliffe-Lister. Arguing that American films exhibited in the British Empire were “obscuring the prestige of the mother country, and
greatly injuring British trade,” the FBI requested that the BT “move for legislation” in the empire “against the wholesale usurpation of British kinemas by foreign films.”

An initial Economic Sub-Committee report to the Imperial Conference of 1926 that set the Films Quota Bill in motion contains discrete evaluations of the so-called empire market. The report does not, in other words, collapse distinctions between self-governing white-settler dominions like Australia and New Zealand (where British films entered free of duty), Canada (where Britain received tax concessions as the “most favoured nation”), and the Irish Free State (which paid preferential duty to Britain); self-governing nonwhite-majority dominions like Southern Rhodesia (where British films paid no duty); and nondominion, nonwhite territories like India (where British films paid the same tariff as other film imports). Given the state’s cognizance of the empire’s diverse cultural, racial, and linguistic affinities and tax structures, the appearance of blanket terms like inter-imperial and empire market in discussions of the Quota Act created homogeneity where none existed. Evidently, in the British film-quota debates, the term empire signaled less an actual region than a desired one, regarding which the British State perceived a proximity and a prerogative. The genealogy of the 1927 Quota Act as it moved through the annals of British state departments highlights a dialectic between the imperial desire for an empire market and its frustration. The Quota Act’s imperial designs read not only as a narrative of failure (in that an empire film market couldn’t be produced, so it couldn’t be won) but also as a narrative of fantasy.

Prioritizing a critical cultural analysis of state policy by focusing on the language of the Quota Act, as opposed to that of the individual players, offers tactical advantages. As a liberal parliamentary democracy, the British State was more than the sum of its parts. Individuals and groups arguing for the need to utilize Britain’s imperial influence in expanding the scope of British film distribution could not, and did not, transparently assert their will on the state. Rather, in a Gramscian sense, the modern state machinery mediated its civil society’s competing demands to formalize and bureaucratize a political and economic agenda for its national film industry. During the 1920s, for example, a few voluntary organizations (funded by shareholder capital and state grants) encouraged the production of imperial-themed British films and promoted them within Britain and throughout the empire. One such organization, the British Empire Film Institute (BEFI), started in 1925, had a distinguished “Grand Council” (including Sir Arthur Conan Doyle), and it enjoyed
the support of the king, the British prime minister, and “members of Parliament of all parties.” Its goal was “to encourage the production and presentation of all British Films, that faithfully represent the achievements, ideas and ideals of the British Commonwealth.” The organization gave awards to films with “British scenarios dealing with Imperial, Historical” subjects, in the hope of creating an “atmosphere” which would build “an intensified demand for the new pictures, pictures of Imperial Value, of our great Colonial achievements.”

The BEFI argued that imperial territories gave Britain an edge over the United States and that the distribution of British films in the empire was imperative in view of native susceptibilities to moving images. Thus the sentiments of its members conveyed a sense of Britain’s importance (“Our past history is too precious an asset to the Anglo-Saxon race to permit it to be . . . belittled, by the presentation . . . of films produced on foreign shores,” said the Rt. Hon. The Earl of Meath), national pride (“Our far flung dominions should enable us to discover climates, even more suitable for film production, than that of California,” said the same), and anger (“I have long felt bitterly the obvious degradation that is fostered by the American Films. I cannot see why the trade-profits of such an injurious system should be allowed to render it permanent. . . . The evil is almost worse in Eastern countries, I hear, among other races, where the exhibition is a slander on civilization,” said Sir Flinders Petrie). Though not a member of the institute, Sir Philip Cunliffe-Lister (formerly Sir Philip Lloyd-Graeme, created Viscount Swinton in 1935 and First Earl of Swinton in 1955) was like many of his fellow aristocrats in that he believed in the British Empire. Unlike them, however, he headed Britain’s trade and manufacturing industries as the BT president (1922–1924, 1924–1929, 1931). By his initiative the Films Quota Bill was first proposed in Parliament. He also served as secretary to the state for the colonies (1931–1935), embodying the enduring weld between colonial affairs and national industry.

Cunliffe-Lister’s political sympathies and peerage become significant insofar as they affect his official portfolio and allow him a part in the contest between lobby groups with competing interests in domestic and imperial protectionism. With the quota bill becoming an act, the effort to activate imperial distribution of British films was no longer the mission statement of one among several discrete organizations but was structurally constitutive of a national film policy. On the one hand, British film producers played to the imperial anxieties of Cunliffe-Lister and like-minded lords and parliamen-
tarians to press for state assistance and to provide a secure market for British films at home and in the empire. On the other, the state gave bureaucratic form and juridical legitimacy to their arguments by approving the Quota Act. With the implementation of the act of 1927 and its amendment in 1938, one of a range of competing positions toward the British film industry solidified into regulatory state form. It defined the terms of engagement for subsequent domestic and colonial dissent against the British State and influenced each sector of the British film industry.

The embedded imperial assumptions that adhered in the policy, however, lie less in the act’s stipulations and effects than in its premises: in the details of policy discourse—including the language of official lobbying as well as the popular discussions surrounding film policy and policy lexicon—resides the sociocultural context of anxieties and ambitions within which the act was concretized. The British State was hesitant to interfere directly in the legislative matters of its colonial and dominion governments, instead emphasizing diplomatic efforts and commercial trade initiatives to promote British films within the empire. The state’s temporary acquiescence to mobilize its empire as a market for commercial British film producers through a combination of cooperation, diplomacy, and combativeness toward the dominions and colonies was distinctive to this period of negotiations. Operating through implicit and strategic trade terms was one of the few ways in which the British State, caught between assisting its domestic film industry and withdrawing from direct control over colonial and dominion governments, could assert its economic preferences. The actual elusiveness of empire film markets that accompanied the British State’s prolific discussion of their potential exploitability altered the policy debates, making the debates emblematic of changing political relations during late empire. In effect, the language of the Quota Act expressed the prevailing power play between Britain and its empire.9

Imperializing Britain: British Film as “British Empire Film”

Before the Quota Act, the British government’s involvement with films had pertained to taxation, censorship, and the regulation of theaters. Following the Quota Act of 1927, however, all films had to be registered as “British” or “Foreign” with the BT prior to their exhibition in Britain, and unregistered films were not allowed to be screened. Controversially, the act required film renters (distributors) to acquire and exhibitors to screen a prescribed number of British films (calculated by footage, as a percentage of all registered
The act further specified that the quota of British films was to increase on a sliding scale, beginning at 7.5 percent for the distributors and 5 percent for the exhibitors in 1927. By 1936, when the Act was to be reviewed, 20 percent of all films rented and exhibited within Britain were to be British.

The act stipulated guidelines by which the BT could identify a film as British. Among other factors, a film could be registered as British if it was made by a British subject or a British company, if its studio scenes were shot in a studio in the British Empire (unless otherwise authorized by the BT), if the author of the original scenario for the film was a British subject, or if 75 percent of the wages were paid to British subjects or domiciles of the British Empire. According to this act, then, films made anywhere within the empire could be categorized as “British,” and by this definition films from British dominions and colonies were eligible for a quota in Britain.

This was the regulatory birth of the “British Empire film,” a confusing, changeling term that appears in various documents to refer to films made with British or empire resources and, quite contrarily, to describe films originating from colonies and dominions. The imperial push for British cinema’s preferential treatment within empire markets rested on the Quota Act’s definitional ambiguity between “British” and “British Empire” film, which was claimed as the basis for a similar ingress of British films into imperial markets. Such ambiguities were not exclusive to the Quota Act but part of a general fuzziness between references to empire-made films and British films made with empire resources that is evident in other documents as well. To quote The Bioscope, a British film journal, 1927 was an “opportune” time “for the big boosting of every Empire-made film,” because there was a rich “fund of literature and historical material from which to make our own—speaking Imperially—epics of colonisation, our own ‘Birth of a Nation’ and ‘Covered Wagon.’” In the article, “empire-made films” are completely equated with British “epics of colonization.”

Such strategic vagueness surrounding the term “empire film” first appeared at the Imperial Conference of 1926. The Economic Sub-Committee report, titled “Exhibition within the Empire of British Films,” noted “that the proportion of British films, that is, films produced within the Empire by British Companies employing British artists, to the total shown at Cinema Houses in the United Kingdom amounts to scarcely 5 per cent, and that the position throughout the Empire generally is as bad, and in some parts even worse.” The report offers suggestions for economic reforms to assist commercial British film production: “The principal proposal for Government
action, apart from methods of taxation, and one that has been strongly urged by a number of bodies interested in the revival of British picture production, is the establishment of what is known as the ‘quota’ system, to be imposed on either the exhibitors or the renters or both.” The main body that “strongly urged” state involvement was the FBI, with whom the quota initiative began. Formed in 1916, the FBI was a powerful organization, dominated by the shipbuilding, iron, and steel industries, that represented the concerns of British trade and industry to the British state. The Economic Sub-Committee’s report reflected a preliminary petition “To Revive [Film] Production,” submitted by the FBI to Cunliffe-Lister in 1925. This petition for government intervention is an early document that conflates “British films” with “Empire films” in a manner advantageous to the British film industry.

As the term empire (as symbolic phrase) threads through the quota debates, the Quota Act, and the act’s 1938 amendment, it reveals the weave of empire’s influence (as material reality) on shifting national policy. In proposing strategies by which the government could increase capital for the production of British films and provide an assisted market for their exhibition, the FBI’s petition suggests Germany’s quotas as a role model. In addition, it recommends secure national funding for British films on “National” and “Empire subjects,” such as films about the “nation’s heroes, scientists, and prominent literary men and women,” obviously conceiving of the empire as a domain of British protagonists and British industry. Throughout the document, the term “Imperial” refers to themes, facilities, and markets that expand the domestic film product by exploiting “the marvellous and varied resources of the Empire.”

Similar usage of the term was favored in 1926, when the FBI was joined by the Film Manufacturer’s Committee and the Film Producer’s Group, the latter representing sixteen British film companies, including British Instructional Films, British Screens Classics, Gainsborough Pictures, and Gaumont Company. Immediately lobbying Cunliffe-Lister in their own interests, the FBI’s Film Group noted that Britain’s facilities and studios could produce “12.5 per cent of the films required by the Empire’s kinemas,” but for this the British companies “must know that they have a reasonably assured market.”

Here was a happy coincidence between the conservative elements of the state that worried about Hollywood’s impact on the colonies, and the FBI and the British film producers’ appeal that linked national pride to a robust trade of British films in the empire. The free-trader Philip Snowden wasn’t far wrong in thinking that the FBI had Cunliffe-Lister’s ear, given the follow-
ing carefully worded resolution passed at the 1926 conference through the Bt’s efforts: “The Imperial Conference, recognizing that it is of the greatest importance that a larger and increasing proportion of the films exhibited throughout the Empire should be of Empire production, commends the matter and the remedial measures proposed to the consideration of the Governments of various parts of the Empire.”

The chief “remedial measure,” of course, was the Films Quota Bill. The home (British) government assured colonial and dominion governments that such a bill would promote “Empire produced” films in Britain. Empire governments were commended to consider similar measures in their markets. In effect, during this imperial conference, underlying concern about the lack of British films in imperial markets translated into a manifest support of “Empire-production films” in Britain.

The Films Quota Bill in this manifestation was of a piece with other efforts demonstrating Britain’s interest in imperial cooperation. The EMB, for example, was established in 1926 to revive imperial trade in various commodities, and “it sought to influence consumer choice, not by financial means—tariff barriers—but by propaganda.”

Advertisements about Britain’s reliance on empire products and corresponding information to the empire about Britain were intended to create an awareness of the empire as a live economic and social entity. In 1932 Sir Stephen Tallents, president of the EMB, noted in his pamphlet “The Projection of England,” “If we are to play our part in the new world order, we need to master every means and every art by which we can communicate with other peoples. The need is especially urgent between ourselves and the other parts of the Empire. We are experimenting together in a novel political organization, in which are joined together peoples most widely separated from each other in space and character.”

In the new multicolored and multiclassed order, wrote Tallents (eerily echoing Prime Minister Blair’s speech defending the United Kingdom’s support for the U.S. war on Iraq in 2003), “the English people must be seen for what it is—a great nation still anxious to serve the world and secure the world’s peace.”

In the same spirit, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) initiated new foreign (Arabic) language broadcasts in 1938, to “make the life and thought of the British peoples more widely known abroad.”

The 1948 conference “Film in Colonial Development” started new programs to train African filmmakers because, as the inaugural speaker noted, “We are recognizing today that Empire (if we continue to use that particular word) is not an opportunity of exploitation to our material advantage, but the occasion of service.”

In an early index of this public-relations oriented developmen-
tal turn, proposals for a film quota in Britain emphasized benefits for the colonies and dominions and demonstrated acute self-consciousness about the term empire. At home, the bill was drafted with careful discussion of its phraseology. Proposals for the actual wording of the bill traveled back and forth between the BT and the Customs Office prior to the bill’s introduction in the House of Commons. A Finance Act from 1922 that extended trade preferences to film negatives produced in the United Kingdom was used as a guideline. The first discussion of the Films Quota Bill pertained to the parameters of the commodity, and the quota was applied to film positives as well as negatives. The second discussion fixed the parameters of place. The Customs Office suggested, with an emphasis on its key terms, “It might be possible to substitute British Empire for United Kingdom. . . . (This is a concession to British enterprise: there is no condition that the picture must be made in the Empire).” Though the final Quota Act did have a stipulation regarding the film’s place of origin, these preparatory talks defended the substitution of “British Empire” for “United Kingdom” by appealing to “empire” as a form of trade rather than territory. The argument that Britain could benefit from an extension of privileges to its empire depended on treating empire less as a (static) point of production and more as a (mobile) space for British enterprise. Here the empire becomes not so much a place as a spatialization of British industry, which disaffiliates territories from their regional politics and economies only to assimilate them as a transnational space for British trade. The rhetoric, in fact, was not so much colonial as protoglobal.

Several contradictions strained at this formulation of empire. At one end, the interaction between a conceptually deterritorialized market and a would-be expansionist national enterprise pointed to nascent efforts at globalizing British film production. At the other end, this particular reascription of empire as space rather than place depended entirely on state power, to the exclusion of capital mobilization. Preliminary discussions of the quota bill were imperialist in their premise but transnational in their expectation. The state was straddling two divergent discourses. A distinguishing aspect of a global market as opposed to an imperial one is that while imperialism depends explicitly on political and territorial dominance, globalization functions through a more decentered apparatus. Globalization produces insidious forms of domination that are difficult to localize, though privatization requires state acquiescence, and it may collude with state control. Partnerships between corporations in different nations or a dispersal of the sectors of one
industry across national territories creates transnational circuits of operation and privilege. In Britain’s case, Hollywood’s transnational collaboration with British film exhibitors and distributors threatened the British State’s sovereignty over its film industry. U.S. distribution centers in Britain’s colonies and dominions also gave Hollywood a wider and more organized base of operation. To counter Hollywood’s successful globalization, the British Films Quota Act participated in maneuvers through which the British State laboriously and with challenge attempted to recast imperial territories as a global market potentially available to British industry. Britain could not compete with the United States by transforming the emerging “commonwealth” into its global playground because in addition to Britain’s weaker market forces, the empire was increasingly subject to competing foreign interests and comprised independent economic and political wills. Britain’s command over the empire was precisely what was in contest, as colonies and dominions were caught up in defining a sovereign national place.

Parochializing Britain: “British Empire Film” as British Film

In 1927 the BT sent copies of the film bill to colonies and dominions like Australia, Canada, and India, where inquiry committees used the bill as leverage to initiate parallel moves. Provincial legislatures in Canada proposed a screen quota for empire-produced films, with the British Columbia legislature taking the lead in 1929. The Cooper Organization, a pressure group representing the U.S. Hays Office, which was funded largely by U.S. distributors, thwarted this Canadian bill. Meanwhile American studios looking to beat the British quota system found a loophole in the term “British Empire films.” Since films produced in Canada counted as “British films” under the terms of the 1927 Quota Act, U.S. companies were lured into producing films in Canada and using them as quota films in the British market. Australia, on the other hand, passed quota legislations similar to the one in Britain, requiring the exhibition of a percentage of locally produced films. The British film industry began to fear that foreign distributors supplying to both dominion and British markets would distribute Australian films rather than British films, since they could technically fulfill the quota in both areas.

Proposals to consider imperial preference within the Indian market did not fare well either. In 1927–1928 the Indian Cinematograph Committee (ICC) was constituted to consider issues such as censorship, the status of the Indian film industry, and possibilities for imperial preference. The ICC con-
ducted an exhaustive investigation of the Indian film industry and produced four fascinating volumes of written and oral interviews (termed “evidence”) from 353 interviewees (defined as “witnesses”) who were primarily film producers, exhibitors, distributors, actors, and censors, along with newspaper editors and educationalists working in India. With regard to the question of instituting some quota for British Empire films in India, a majority of the members of the Indian film industry interviewed by the ICC felt that the inclusion of British Empire films in the Quota Act (which was still a bill when the ICC conducted its interviews) would not lead to the entry of Indian films into Britain. Moreover, they asserted that business initiatives by British film producers were preferable to policy changes.

No artificial aid is . . . needed to advance the British film in this country. We entirely endorse the remarks of the Australian Board of Censors in their report for 1925: “If fewer British films are imported into this country the reasons are generally well known. The prices have something to do with it. Whereas other countries have agencies here, British producers are scarcely represented at all.” As in Australia, here also there is no accredited representative of the British film industry. When British Empire films can show the quality and finish and can be had for the same prices as other Western films, there will be no difficulty in those films finding such a market as is available in this country.

Several witnesses considered proposals for trade reciprocity to be a smokescreen for British interest in the Indian market, as is evident in the ICC’s extended exchange with an outspoken Indian film exhibitor, Rustom C. N. Barucha.

MR. GREEN [British member, ICC]: Does not the Bill, as I have endeavoured to explain to you, give a better opportunity for Indian-made films to be exported to England?

ANSWER [Mr. Barucha]: On paper it appears that by the mere passage of this Bill in England, the market will be thrown open for Indian films, but I am not sure if that would be beneficial to India in the long run. Theoretically it appears that Indian films will have an open door in England, but I am not sure that there will be any appreciable and genuine demand for them in England.

. . . I will go a bit further and say this. Suppose India now definitely commits herself to the policy of participating in what is called the British
Empire scheme. For the present we are allowed to produce our own pictures to meet our own demands and needs. But I do not think they are really anxious to have Indian pictures in England. I dismiss that idea altogether from my mind at once. What is the guarantee, I ask, Sir, that the next step will not be the imposing of some condition which will prevent Indian pictures being manufactured in our own country, and the only result of this Bill will be that we will be compelled to have British pictures.

MR. GREEN: The Bill is not going to be applied to India.

COL. CRAWFORD [British member, ICC]: The point is, does the producer want an opportunity to sell his goods in the world market? Is it of any value to him?

ANSWER [Mr. Barucha]: The idea undoubtedly looks splendid . . . [but] I have grave doubts about it. You need not accept my statement alone. . . . This will be clear from other circumstances also. How many Indian-made articles, let alone Indian-made films, find a ready market in the Empire? I cannot sell a single Indian-made shoe in England.36

This exchange brings to light the insubstantial reach of the term “British Empire film” (and Barucha’s enterprise in trying to sell shoes when films failed him). What did a British Empire film look like? Which films finally benefited from the Quota Act? If it referred to an Indian film as much as a British film, under what conditions would a British renter and exhibitor distribute or screen Indian films? In theory, for instance, all the Indian films discussed in this book, having been made within the empire, could have served as quota films in Britain. But in fact none of them were screened in England, so theory did not always translate into practice.

According to available records, some Indian films were in fact registered as British films and were beneficiaries of the British film quota. A 1930 issue of Film Report, a British trade journal of the Cinematograph Exhibitors Association, assessed five silent Indian films—Durgesh Nandini, Madhuri, Anarkali, Krishna Kanta’s Will, and The Tigress—which were booked by British renters under the Quota Act.37 The journal describes Durgesh Nandini as “an Indian production, played by natives. As a production, it is extremely crude. . . . The picture is for all practical purposes just a Renter’s Quota.”38 Madhuri is estimated as “another of those films which, being made in India and interpreted by a native cast, rank as quota,” and neither film is given release dates.39

Rental bookings clearly had little to do with screening the film or find-
ing an audience. One of the loopholes in the 1927 act was that while British renters were legally obligated to acquire a percentage of British Empire films, they were not penalized if no one booked them for exhibition. So British renters used Indian films to fill their British Empire film quota, because they were longer and cheaper by the foot. Whereas American and British features measured approximately 5,000 to 7,000 feet in length, Indian features ranged between 10,000 and 14,000 feet, and were attractive to renters because a few inexpensive Indian films satisfied the letter of the renters quota law. The Indian exhibitor Baruch was accurate in his prediction that the passage of Britain’s Quota Act would not lead to any significant increase in Britain’s receptivity to Indian films and could not be claimed as valid grounds for a reciprocal quota in the colony. Based on the overwhelmingly negative response of witnesses, the ICC reported to the government of India that regulatory assistance for British films in India was unnecessary and unwelcome.

The British Empire film purported to serve the empire while acting on behalf of national interests. A nation with a history of imperial power could appear to represent cosmopolitan concerns even while its argument was at base parochial, by virtue of the fact that it could refer to overseas markets while protecting a domestic commodity. The cosmopolitanism promised by the empire acquired particular significance in relation to Britain’s competition with Hollywood. A mundane example of this, which makes an oddly frequent appearance, is the dreary weather of the British Isles. The advantages of locating outdoor shoots for British films in the empire were brought up in both houses of the British parliament, as in this exchange from the House of Commons in 1927.

MR. HARRIS: This country is handicapped by its climate. One of the reasons of the immense success of the American films is that they have many months of dry sunshine in which plays can be produced in the open air. . . .

VISCONT SANDON: What about the rest of the Empire?

MR. HARRIS: That is one of the ways we can get over the handicap.40

If the predominance of Hollywood films in the world film market since 1919 reinforced the idea that its narrative and visual content carried a type of universality against which competing cinemas had to mobilize a domestic allure, Britain’s presumed proximity to its imperial territories appeared to be its opportunity for access to an exclusive base of appeal.41 With little defini-
tional negotiation, the empire represented the strengths of the British nation combined with the advantages of transnationalism, and it came to be said that “no single country can offer to cinematography so fruitful a field as the British Empire.” Thus, in discussing empire films the Quota Act traded on two meanings of the term empire: (subtly, sentimentally) as a national British possession and (explicitly, in the words of the British ICC member Colonel Crawford) as a “world market.”

Not coincidentally, commercial British blockbusters with imperial themes that became popular in the 1930s invested a similarly dual significance in the concept of empire, as the work of two film producers, Alexander Korda and Michael Balcon, illustrates. Despite their difference of opinion over viable options for British filmmaking in the face of American screen domination, Korda and Balcon both produced imperialist epics. Balcon produced Ealing Studio’s and Rank Organization’s Scott of the Antarctic (Frend, 1948), and was behind such Gaumont-British films as The Great Barrier, King Solomon’s Mines, and Rhodes of Africa. These empire films were quality products that qualified for national quota. Korda—a Hungarian who became a naturalized British citizen and was, like Balcon, eventually knighted—had ties with United Artists and produced big-budget films with an eye toward British, imperial, and American markets. Unlike Korda, Balcon passionately believed that while British films could aim for profits from “the home and Empire markets,” British national identity was best expressed through domestic themes. As the film historian Charles Barr observes, despite working successfully with MGM in the late thirties, Balcon was happy to leave his Hollywood collaborators for Ealing Studios where his prolific tenure as studio head was characterized by a successful mining of strongly local “English” themes, in films such as Passport to Pimlico (Cornelius, 1949) and Whisky Galore! (Mackendrick, 1949). According to Balcon, “The British producer can make no greater mistake than to have the American market in mind when planning and costing a picture. Not in that way will the British film ever become representative of British culture.”

The same sentiment was expressed in the prescient 1932 British report The Film in National Life:

a narrow and uninformed nationalism controlling at home a foreign competition with which abroad it is unable to compete, is sterile. Broadcasting, like photography, has done much to break down the barriers between nations; the film can do more than either. A self-conscious international-
ism, however, would defeat its own ends. A film which has been designed to be international is rarely a work of art or good entertainment. . . . We look forward with confidence to the time when the film industry in Great Britain . . . is producing films which are an unequivocal expression of British life and thought, deriving character and inspiration from our national inheritance, and have an honoured international currency.46

Commercial films about the empire were the perfect answer to these concerns. The empire was part of British history, and it simultaneously possessed a territorial and visual scope to demonstrate the largesse of Britain’s national theater of performance: picturesque, bare-chested Indian princes and fierce African chiefs could be part of Technicolor fables about British identity. With Korda’s and Balcon’s productions, empire films came to represent an avenue out of “uninformed nationalism” and “self-conscious internationalism” by being expansively national and unselfconsciously international. With their success in domestic and U.S. box offices, they also went a long way as ambassadors for Britain. In 1945 the 9th Earl De La Warr, president of the British Board of Education (later Postmaster General, 1951–1955), reportedly “urged that one of the most important factors in building up a closer understanding with the United States was to have greater understanding in America of what the British Empire—and that particularly referred to India—really meant.”47 Churchill had worried earlier that “the loss of India, however arising, would be final and fatal to us. It could not fail to be part of a process which would reduce us to the scale of a minor Power.”48 With Britain losing control over the empire as a marketplace, empire films captured it as a narrative and an image for international audiences, symbolically realizing a material fantasy of the Films Quota Act.

Unlike the fantasy, however, the dominions were not willing to be Britain’s California. While the quota regulation and British empire films produced a form of imperial cosmopolitanism, colonial and dominion film industries drew frequent distinctions between British films and Indian, Australian, or Canadian films, localizing their arguments. Differentiating national or regional self-interest from British expressions of interest in an empire-quota scheme was a crucial step in the Indian film industry’s assertion of nationalism. Rejecting the idea that an empire quota would promote trade reciprocity between Britain and India, Indian film personnel emphasized that its benefits were nearly exclusive to the British film producer.
That British film renters stockpiled Indian films to meet their British film quota clearly indicates that the British film industry was not a unified entity. The pro-quota lobby consisted of film producers (who enjoyed the sympathies of some Conservatives and Liberal Unionists), while British film exhibitors and renters were against protectionism (which found support among Labour representatives). The partisan nature of the quota proposal remained at the forefront of all domestic debates over it. In the House of Commons, Ramsay MacDonald (prime minister of Britain’s first and second Labour governments in 1924 and 1929–1931, and of the “national” government in 1931–1935) called the Film Quota Bill a “party Bill,” because “it does not consider the full needs of exhibitors and producers and renters. . . . It has been prompted over almost Clause by Clause by one side engaged and interested in the controversy—the side of the producers, and not all of them, but one section of the producers.”

The industry’s dissent legitimized state involvement. Ostensibly, the state crossed its boundary of regulatory restraint in relation to the British film industry on the grounds that the industry could not achieve consensus through its own devices. During the second reading of the films bill in the House of Commons in 1927, Cunliffe-Lister argued, “The effects of the constant exhibition of foreign films on the sentiment, habit, thought of the people is obvious. The picture shows the foreign flag, styles, standards, habits, advertisements, etc. . . . I submit that the need for the development of the British film, from a national point of view, is firmly established; and if it cannot be developed without Government intervention, then, I submit, the case for Government intervention is made out.” Interestingly, however divided the pro- and anti-quota lobbies were on the question of quotas, competing factions paid allegiance to the construct of a nation. In these debates, the nation acquired an external fixity and emerged as a sanctioning entity. On the pro-quota side, the FBI emphasized film as a commodity that had imperial, educational, cultural, and trade value. In 1925 the organization had argued to the BT, “The film has enormous power in influencing the masses, and especially the growing population throughout the Empire. In the U.K. alone it is computed that 20,000,000 people visit the kinemas each week. That this powerful influence should be directed from foreign countries and convey the ideas and customs of those countries instead of those that are British is deplorable.” Two years later, the FBI’s Film Group did not have to belabor
its line of argument, which was already accepted by Cunliffe-Lister: American films endangered national culture and siphoned out precious capital; a guaranteed market for British films would attract capital to domestic production; this could be found in the domestic and empire markets, if the state protected them.

British renters and exhibitors, who would bear the brunt of the regulation, had a more difficult case to defend, because their position revealed the schisms within the film industry and undermined the idea of an ideologically coherent national industry. Nevertheless, they adopted two lines of attack against the quota. First, they represented the exhibition and distribution sectors as the crux of a national film industry. If the FBI emphasized reciprocity in empire trade, film exhibitors stressed the possibility of bilateral arrangements with Hollywood. In return for giving Hollywood greater access to the British market, they suggested, the United States might be willing to prioritize the import of British films. Arguing for the significance of Britain in the world of film, the Cinematograph Exhibitor’s Association (CEA) noted that “the British market has increased in relative importance for American pictures.” (In fact, by the 1940s Britain would become the most lucrative overseas market for Hollywood). Given the dismal state of British production, exhibitors were the only ones qualified to sit at a negotiating table with the Americans. As Charles Lapworth, a spokesperson for the exhibitors, insisted, “It has got to be acknowledged, that for all practical purposes the British exhibitors are the British film trade.”

The anti-quota lobby also linked national pride to a commitment to free trade, arguing that quotas were antithetical to British thought. If perceived to be part of a state quota, all British films would be reduced to the status of also-rans. They would be treated as the penalty a British exhibitor paid to screen Hollywood films that were on the market through the logic of the market, unlike state-stipulated screenings of British films. “The British film would become the powder wrapped in foreign meat to make the dog swallow it, the medicine to deserve the jam. If Government officials had gone out of their way to discredit British films, they could not have hit upon a more ingenious device.” It would serve to “stultify the British Nation in the eyes of the Empire and to advertise its incompetence to the world.” A quota, in these terms, would compromise British national identity and British film quality.

These arguments went to the heart of the state’s avowed economic philosophy of a “free,” industry-driven marketplace, which had been Britain’s
rationale for participating in a fierce competition with other Western nations to acquire India and Africa. With industrialized nations turning to protectionism, Britain resisted abandoning economic liberalism more than any other state, as the policy had been a cornerstone of its global dominance. So, facing the possibility of quotas, the CEA could legitimately argue that the state was delivering exhibitors “to certain loss by forcing inferior films upon them to bolster up an industry which lacks the enterprise necessary to defeat the foreign producer.” The bill would bring “loss and disaster” to one section of the trade and “easy profits” to another which had neither deserved it, nor shown its worth. This was possibly a “political conception of justice” but “not in accord with British traditions in this respect.” “All the Exhibitors ask is that they should continue to enjoy the same freedom as other men of business, to invest money to what they consider the best advantage.”

The ethic of merit was harder to sustain when the United States benefited from the proceeds of the British film market and fractures in Britain’s film industry showed in the state’s departure from avowed proclamations of the neutrality of market economics. The FBI and the state hoped that a domestic quota would stave capital outflow and attract investment by causing American companies to set up production units in Britain, boosting film production and possibly enabling Anglo-American cooperation. As it happened, United Artists was the only large U.S. company to achieve anything like a reciprocal relationship with British film producers. Warner-First National and Fox set up production units at Teddington and Wembley, respectively, to supply their quota. Other American companies contracted British producers, creating as many as 59 new companies in 1929. A few of these companies grew to the stature of major production units, but many were short-lived and produced films of variable quality, referred to as “quota quickies.” Thus when the act was reviewed in 1936, a recommendation to institute some quality control on the films was passed by requiring a minimum labor cost of £7,500 per film.

Despite the damaging consequences of subordinating distribution and exhibition to film production, it is doubtful if British films would have survived without some form of protectionism. As the film historian Sarah Street points out, “Much maligned, quota quickies nevertheless provided work for British technicians and valuable experience for directors, and there is evidence that some were popular with regional audiences.” Simon Hartog notes that one of the unannounced objectives of the Quota Act of 1927 was “the creation of one or more British combines.” The inflow of capital into
the production sector stirred up the ambitions of city investors and filmmakers who had an eye on the international market, pushing the industry toward rationalization and reorganization. The two combines that emerged and dominated the 1930s were Gaumont British Picture Corporation (GBPC), formed by the merging of Gaumont and Gainsborough, and Associated British Picture Corporation (ABPC) resulting from a merger between British International Pictures (BIP) and Associated British Cinemas (ABC). However, concerns about Britain being “still a Hollywood Colony” arose again in 1944, when the British film industry integrated into the duopoly of ABPC and Rank Organization, both with significant ties to Hollywood’s major studios.

Dissenting Empire: Amending British Film

In 1938 two events altered the Quota Act’s slippage between “British” and “British Empire” film: first, the colonial and dominion film industries responded unfavorably to assumptions of reciprocity built into the phrase “British Empire film”; second, the FBI advised the BT to amend the Quota Act’s terminology as a consequence of uncooperative empire film markets. In 1936, two years before the Quota Act came up for renewal, the BT submitted a report to Parliament reviewing the act. This document, also called the Moyne Committee Report, recommended that the protection of a revised Quota Act be extended to “British Empire” films, but exclude “Dominion and Indian” films from a renter’s quota. By defining these films as British in the initial act of 1927, “It was not unnaturally anticipated that in the course of time reciprocal treatment of this kind would be given to films made in Great Britain by other parts of the Empire where film quota legislation might be passed. . . . This hope has generally not been fulfilled.”

Dominion and Indian films, not a category in the previous act, now needed to be distinguished from the definition of what constituted British Empire films, for a few reasons. In Australia, New South Wales and Victoria instituted a local quota for Australian films within the region. In response to the BT’s objection to New South Wales raising its distributors’ quota in 1935, the New South Wales government pointed out that their quota was regional and did not affect the rest of Australia. However, as correspondence in 1937 from the BT to the Dominions Office (R. D. Fennelly to C. R. Price) indicates, local Australian quotas did affect the national film industry because New South Wales distributors dominated over Australian film distribution. At the same time, a BT study of Canada revealed that a “United States-controlled renting
company operating in this country is making arrangements to meet its quota obligations here by producing at Vancouver the Wild West type of film which it previously produced in Hollywood.” Confidential correspondences name Central Films as the main production house in Vancouver, making low budget films for Columbia Pictures International (a subsidiary of Columbia Picture Corporation of America) purely to fill renters quota in Canada and Britain. Though no films are mentioned, the standing committee reviewing the British Film Quota Act expressed the conviction that Canadian and Australian film industries were in a good position—economically, culturally, and linguistically after the introduction of sound—to produce films for a British audience and encroach on Britain’s market.

Consequently, a memorandum (signed by “R.A.,” possibly for R. A. Wiseman of the Dominions Office) notes, “The producers feel very strongly that legislation passed here [in Britain] to protect their industry, which is at the moment in a very depressed condition, should not be of such a character as to give to Empire films all the advantages of films made in Great Britain unless the particular part of the Empire from which they come is affording us something like reciprocity.” Based on these recommendations, the BT proposed the disqualification of the following films from a quota.

(i) of films of inferior quality produced in British Columbia on behalf of United States interests;
(ii) of films made by native producers in India which are quite unsuitable to the United Kingdom market; and
(iii) of films produced in Australia for the purposes of the local legislation which can also count here.

Despite requests from various dominion governments (particularly New South Wales, Canada, Australia, and India) against the amendment, the new 1938 Quota Act changed its stipulation. To qualify for a quota in Britain now, a film had to be shot in studios or represent the labor of subjects domiciled in the United Kingdom (the Isle of Man and the Channel Islands), and not in the British Empire.

In correspondence prior to the amendment, the imperial expectation of reciprocity, implicit in the 1927 act, was made explicit. The changes came full circle to foreground what the state always knew to be at the crux of a British film quota—“the definition of ‘British’ in the Films Bill.” The original definition of British Empire in the Quota Act was straightforward: “The expression ‘British Empire’ includes territories under His Majesty’s protec-
tion and territories in respect of which a mandate on behalf of the League of Nations has been accepted by His Majesty.” But as internal governmental correspondence reveals, the state’s detailed consideration of the multiple deployments of the terms British and empire were tactical in an environment in which domestic opinions were sharply divided over Britain’s domestic as opposed to its imperial obligations. Nonspecific references to “British Empire films” conveyed the impression of catering to Britain as well as its empire without committing to a preferential treatment of any one area, appearing to be noncontroversial on the question of imperial preference, which inspired anything but consensus within the British nation. The motion to disqualify dominion and Indian films from British quota privileges, for example, was passed in the House of Commons but was not supported in the House of Lords, which remained invested in the possibility of empire preferences and an empire market.

The Britain that was in competition with Hollywood was a shifting entity, casting about for a market within its nation and its empire. Between the world wars, British dominions, colonies, and India continued to carry some of their archaic significance of being national prerogatives of the imperial nation while also bearing an emerging sense of an international community. Certainly, imperial relations were not strictly transnational, in that they did not involve relations between sovereign nation-states. But with the 1926 Imperial Conference’s proposal to replace “Empire” with “Commonwealth,” the former became a slippery term. This was revealed in the film-quota debates, particularly when it was suggested that Dominion and Indian films should count as “stateless films.” One of the proposals for amending the 1927 Quota Act was that dominion and Indian films should count neither as British nor as foreign films. In practical terms, designating empire films “stateless” meant that British renters and exhibitors could not use films produced in the empire to meet their domestic quota for British films. But neither would British renters and exhibitors have to provide British films to fulfill a quota against empire films, as they would with a foreign film. The “[Quota] legislation at the outset should be confined to films made in the British Isles, but the area could be enlarged by the ad hoc addition of other parts of the Empire as and when thought fit. . . . In the meantime, they would be ‘stateless’ films.”

By imagining Indian, Canadian, or Australian films as floating free of their national moorings and in hoping to rationalize them on an ad hoc basis, the British State attempted to produce and control empire trade in a new manner, one adaptive to shifting relational boundaries within the imperium. This was
not entirely viable; the idea of stateless films was ultimately dropped because it “would be a very difficult task to decide whether a particular Dominion (or part of a Dominion seeing that in Australia and Canada, for instance, [the Quota] was a State and not a Federal Matter) had done enough to earn reciprocity.” In this crisis of representation and adjudication we see an occasion when the British State attempted and failed to differentially integrate the empire into one flexible national regulation, because each sector of each film industry within the empire asserted its regional and national particularity.

“Modernism takes on as one of its missions the production of new meanings for space and time in a world of ephemerality and fragmentation,” argues David Harvey. Read in relation to its larger cultural moment, the Quota Act was a modernist imperial British film policy because its fragile production of a commodity called the “British Empire film” betrayed the motility of its context. The policy’s semantic reformulation caught the state’s definition of its realms of power in an act of transition. Official redefinitions of the British film commodity, desired and unforeseen uses of regulatory terminology, and subsequent amendments serve as the very chronicle of political change.