Licensed, Re-uploaded, Withheld: The Digital Afterlives of Four Colonial Films of Ceylon

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ABSTRACT

Colonial films are now encountered mainly online, where the terms on which they can be seen, shared and answered are set by whoever holds the copy most people find. This article traces the holdings and online afterlives of four films of colonial Ceylon: A Ramble Through Ceylon (c. 1910), James A. FitzPatrick's Charming Ceylon (1931) and Tropical Ceylon (1932), and Basil Wright's Song of Ceylon (1934). It combines a review of public archive catalogues, rights statements and web archive captures with a census of YouTube in English, Sinhala and Tamil, captured on 7 and 10 November 2026, which found 23 uploads with about 498,000 views but only 48 comments. The films follow three regimes of access. The earliest is held by the British Film Institute but has no public online copy. The FitzPatrick films are seen almost entirely through a commercial footage archive's watermarked copies, offered for licensing, with comments disabled. Song of Ceylon, a United Kingdom public record, circulates widely through re-uploads whose comments mostly thank uploaders for a "priceless" record. Drawing on critical archival studies and theories of the colonial archive and digital circulation, the article argues that access has become the new frame of the colonial image, reproducing the films' hierarchy of voice in who may hold, sell, retitle and answer them. Because the legal enclosure of films of this age is weak, gatekeeping lies chiefly in custody, metadata and platform design. The article recommends open metadata, collaborative digitisation with Sri Lankan institutions and comparative research, and treats its four cases as a basis for testing rather than generalisation.

Keywords: colonial film; archives; critical archival studies; YouTube; footage licensing; digital circulation; Ceylon; Sri Lanka; decolonization

1. INTRODUCTION

The most-viewed copy of *Tropical Ceylon* (1932) on YouTube opens with a map of the Indian Ocean. In the corner of every frame sits the label of the footage archive that uploaded it, and beneath the video a single line informs the viewer that footage from the film is available for licensing. The comment section is closed. More than 200,000 people have watched the film in this form. They have seen the coconut groves, the thatched houses, the buffaloes and the men whose long hair the American narrator presents as a curiosity, and none of them has been able to reply under the video. The archive's copy of *Charming Ceylon* (1931) is presented on the same terms.

This article is about such terms. It studies four films of colonial Ceylon that the first author analysed in a doctoral study of colonial representation (Wijewardhane, 2026a). Companion articles have examined what the films show: how *Song of Ceylon* (1934) displays the plantation worker while giving voice to commerce (Wijewardhane & Laksiri, 2026), how the intertitles and commentary of the travelogues turn the people they show into types (Wijewardhane, 2026c), and how the four films represent the island's religions (Wijewardhane, 2026b). These studies concluded that the films decide who may speak and who is spoken for. This article asks whether that hierarchy ends with the films, or whether it continues in the conditions under which they are now held and seen.

The question has become pressing because colonial films are now encountered chiefly online. For most viewers in Sri Lanka, and for most students of these films, the copy that matters is not the print in a London vault but the file that appears first in a search. That file has an owner, a title, a description, a watermark or none, and a comment section that is open or closed. Each of these is a choice made by someone other than the people in the film. Scholarship on colonial cinema has given close attention to how such films were produced and what they represent (Grieveson & MacCabe, 2011; Jaikumar, 2019; Rony, 1996). Much less attention has

been given to who holds them now, who controls their circulation, and on what terms.

The article asks four questions. First, where are the four films held, in what copies, and under what stated rights and conditions of access? Second, where and in what form do they circulate online, and who controls the copies most people see? Third, how do uploaders' titles, descriptions and stated terms reframe the films? Fourth, who can answer back, given that some copies are missing and others have comments disabled, why are there so few comments, and what do the comments that exist say? It answers them through a review of public catalogues and rights statements, a census of online copies captured on two dates, an analysis of how each upload is framed, and a qualitative coding of every comment found. The argument is that the four films fall into three regimes of access, withheld, licensed and re-uploaded, and that these regimes reproduce, in a new medium, the hierarchy of voice that the films built into their images.

2. ARCHIVES, MEMORY AND THE COLONIAL IMAGE ONLINE

2.1 The colonial archive

Archives do not simply store the past; they decide what can be found and in what order. Trouillot (1995) showed that silences enter history at every stage, from the making of sources to the making of archives, narratives and histories. Stoler (2009) argued that colonial archives should first be read along their grain, as records of the categories and anxieties of those who made them, before they are read against it. Mbembe (2002) described the archive as an instrument of power whose authority rests on its physical custody of documents and on the rules that decide who may consult them. These arguments were developed for written records, but they apply with special force to colonial film, whose copies are few, fragile and expensive to hold, and whose custody has followed the routes of empire. Films of the British Empire are held mainly in British institutions, and the scholarship on them has been organised around those collections (Grieveson & MacCabe, 2011).

Critical archival studies extends these arguments from the history of archives to their present practice. Caswell et al. (2017) define the field by its attention to how archives produce and sustain inequality, and by its commitment to changing that practice; Punzalan and Caswell (2016) identify inclusion, the recognition of marginalised communities as rights-holders, and the reform of archival description as central to such change. For film, Fossati (2018) has shown that digitisation does not simply copy a film into a new medium but produces new objects, whose selection, restoration and metadata are choices made by archives. The questions this article asks of the four films, who holds which copy, how it is described and who may see it, are the questions these studies make central.

2.2 Digital circulation and the poor image

Online circulation has changed the situation of colonial film without dissolving it. Snickars and Vonderau (2009) examined YouTube as an accidental archive, a platform built for sharing that became, without curatorial responsibility, the largest public store of moving images. Burgess and Green (2018) describe it as a site of participatory culture in which uploaders, viewers and commenters negotiate meaning, but also as a commercial system whose rules are set by its owner. Steyerl (2009) has called the compressed, re-uploaded and re-titled copy a "poor image": an image that loses resolution and provenance as it circulates, but gains speed and reach, and that stands outside the economy of the pristine archival print. Baron (2014) has described the "archive effect", by which viewers recognise footage as coming from another time and treat it as evidence of the past. Online, that effect is produced not only by the grain of old film but by the frames that uploaders

place around it: titles that announce a date, descriptions that claim rarity, and watermarks that announce an owner.

The re-uploaded colonial film is also a medium of memory. Erll (2011) has described memory as "travelling" across media, places and communities, acquiring new meanings in each. When Sri Lankan uploaders re-title a colonial travelogue as a view of "our" island, a memory made by others for foreign audiences travels into a national memory, carrying its original framing with it.

2.3 Openness, ownership and return

For colonised societies these frames raise questions of ownership, consent and return. Christen (2012) has asked whether information "really want[s] to be free", showing that the open circulation celebrated by digital culture can override the protocols by which communities govern their own knowledge and images. Elsewhere Christen (2011) has described digital repatriation as a collaborative practice in which archives return copies and share curatorial authority with the communities represented, rather than simply releasing files. These arguments were made for Indigenous archives, but they illuminate a different case here. The images of Ceylon's people were not made with their consent, are held mostly outside the country, and now circulate under the terms of commercial archives and anonymous uploaders. Openness and enclosure can coexist: a film can be freely viewable and yet owned, licensed and closed to reply.

The infrastructure of access is itself fragile. The four films studied here were described in a specialised scholarly catalogue, the Colonial Film database, built by British universities and the British Film Institute (BFI). That website has since been retired as part of changes to the BFI's digital services and survives only in a government web archive (British Film Institute, n.d.-d). Research infrastructure that once made colonial films findable and contextualised can disappear while the films themselves continue to circulate without context elsewhere.

The literature thus supplies four ideas on which this article builds: that archives distribute silence as well as memory, through custody and description (Mbembe, 2002; Trouillot, 1995); that archival practice can be examined and changed for its effects on marginalised communities (Caswell et al., 2017); that online circulation adds new frames of ownership, title and reply to old footage (Baron, 2014; Steyerl, 2009); and that openness is not the same as justice for the communities represented (Christen, 2011, 2012). What it does not supply is a close account of how particular colonial films of South Asia are now held and circulated. This article offers one for four films of Ceylon.

3. CORPUS AND METHOD

3.1 Selection of the four films

The four films were not selected for this article. They are the corpus of the wider study, which was defined before the online research began, on analytical grounds: together they span the period from about 1910 to 1934, three producers in three national industries (a French-associated silent travel film, an American sound series and a British sponsored documentary), and the change from intertitle to spoken commentary (Wijewardhane, 2026a). Availability online played no part in the selection, and one of the four has no public online copy. The corpus is therefore not biased towards conveniently documented films, but it is also not a sample. It cannot represent colonial films of Ceylon, of which the BFI's catalogue alone lists more than a hundred works under the search term "Ceylon", still less colonial film elsewhere. The article treats the four films as cases whose contrasts make the regimes of access visible, and it makes no claim about their frequency in a wider population.

3.2 Tracing the films

The films were traced through six procedures, summarised with their dates in Table 1.

Table 1

Procedures Used to Trace the Four Films

Procedure	Sources	Date(s)	What was recorded
Platform census	YouTube, 14 queries in English, Sinhala and Tamil, searched without signing in from Sri Lanka	7-Nov-26	Title, channel, upload date, duration, views, category, description, comment status, all visible comments
Second capture	The 23 uploads found in the census	10-Nov-26	Availability, title, views, comment status, age restriction
Catalogue review	BFI Collections Search; BFI Player; Imperial War Museums (IWM) collections search; websites of the National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka (NFC) and the Department of National Archives	7 and 10 November 2026	Catalogue records, formats, access routes, rights and sales statements
Provenance from the copies	Title cards, watermarks, timecodes and certificates visible in the online copies	8 and 10 November 2026	Evidence of the print from which each copy derives
Web archive check	Internet Archive Wayback Machine availability service, for all 23 upload pages	10-Nov-26	Whether any capture of each page exists
Rights review	Public statements by holders; copyright legislation of Sri Lanka, the United Kingdom and the United States	10-Nov-26	Stated rights and the general legal framework

In the census, each search result was screened by title, description and duration. An upload was included if it contained a complete or partial copy of one of the four films, identified by its title or description, or by a duration matching a known copy to the second together with a matching description. Compilations of old footage that did not identify their sources were excluded, since their contents could not be attributed without frame-by-frame comparison; this is a limitation, because some of these compilations have very large audiences. Two uploads that respond to *Song of Ceylon* were also recorded: Laleen Jayamanne's film *A Song of Ceylon* (1985) and a 1975 television critique by Harun Farocki. The second capture, three days later, tested the stability of the record. For each upload it also recorded screenshots of the pages of commercial and institutional uploaders, which are preserved in a supplementary evidence file; pages of private uploaders were recorded as data only (section 3.4).

Three procedures that the evidence would ideally include were not undertaken. No formal access requests were made to the BFI or other holding archives, no interviews were conducted with archivists, rights holders or uploaders, and no licensing agreements were examined, since such agreements are not public. The analysis of rights and access therefore rests on what holders state publicly and on the general law, not on the terms of particular contracts. These gaps are discussed in section 7.

3.3 Framing analysis and comments

The title and description of each upload were read for how they present the film, and each upload was assigned to one of five framings that emerged from the material: *commodity* (the description offers the footage or a copy for sale or licence), *national heritage* (the title or description presents the film as Sri Lanka's own past), *tourism* (the upload promotes travel to the island), *film culture* (the upload presents the film as a work of documentary history, usually by naming its director), and *critical response* (the upload is a later work that answers the film).

Every comment visible under the included uploads on 7 November was collected, including the few replies,

giving 48 comments (45 top-level comments and 3 replies). The comments were coded inductively. A first reading identified recurring kinds of response; these were consolidated into eight categories (Table 6), and each comment was assigned the category that best describes its main point. Comments in Sinhala were translated by the authors, who are native speakers; comments in Italian, Indonesian and Portuguese were machine-translated and are reported only in paraphrase.

3.4 Ethics and reflexivity

All uploads and comments were public. Commenters are not named, their display names were replaced by codes, and comments are paraphrased rather than quoted so that they cannot be traced by searching, following the Association of Internet Researchers' guidance (franzke et al., 2020). Uploads by commercial and institutional channels are identified by name, because their terms are the object of the analysis; uploads by private individuals are described but not named, and their pages were not captured as screenshots. The census and coded comments are available from the authors in pseudonymised form.

Studying colonial images carries the risk of re-circulating them. The article reproduces no frames of the people filmed, describes rather than shows, and quotes the films' commentaries only where their wording is the object of analysis. Both authors are Sri Lankan and Sinhala-speaking. That position gives access to the Sinhala titles and comments and to the places shown, but it does not make the authors spokespeople for the communities represented, who include Tamil, Muslim and other Sri Lankans whose perspectives this study did not gather directly.

4. THE FOUR FILMS: HOLDINGS, RIGHTS AND COPIES

4.1 Holdings and access

Table 2 sets out, for each film, its production context, the institutions that hold it according to their public catalogues, its rights status as stated publicly, the platforms on which it circulates and the conditions of access.

Table 2

Holdings, Rights and Access for the Four Films, November 2026

	A Ramble Through Ceylon	***Charming Ceylon***	***Tropical Ceylon***	***Song of Ceylon***
Production context	Silent travel film; BFI records the Charles Urban Trading Company, release 1910, and a title emblem reading "Radios"; reviewed in *The Bioscope*, 29 September 1910	Sound travelogue in James A. FitzPatrick's *Traveltalks* series, which MGM distributed (Arnold, 2016); the online copy's titles credit FitzPatrick Pictures	Same series; BFI records Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Distributing Corporation; the online copy's titles read "FitzPatrick Pictures presents"	GPO Film Unit, directed by Basil Wright for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board; BFI also records Denning Films and Cinema Contact Ltd
Holding institution (public catalogues)	BFI National Archive	Not found in BFI or IWM catalogues under this title; held by a commercial footage archive (Travel Film Archive)	BFI National Archive; commercial footage archive	BFI National Archive, as a UK public record; commercial footage archive
Formats	35 mm black-and-white safety positive,	Digital copy with burnt-in label	35 mm black-and-white	35 mm and 16 mm positives, video and

recorded	silent, status "pending"	"TFA-54F" and timecode	positive, combined (BFI); digital copy with label "TFA-31A" (archive)	digital viewing files (BFI); digital copy with label "TFA-338A" (archive)
Rights as stated publicly	None stated	Footage "available for licensing" from Global ImageWorks	Footage "available for licensing" from Global ImageWorks	BFI: "government film … public record"; available from BFI Archive Sales; archive: DVD for "personal home use or educational use" and footage licensing
Platforms	None found	YouTube: archive copy and four re-uploads	YouTube: archive copy and two re-uploads	BFI Player; BFI Mediatheque (London); YouTube: archive copy and twelve other uploads
Access conditions	On-site or by request to the BFI's Archive Access team	Free to view on YouTube; comments disabled on the archive copy	Free to view on YouTube; comments disabled on the archive copy	BFI Player lists it as free but prompts users to sign up; YouTube copies free to view, comments open

Note. Compiled from BFI Collections Search records (British Film Institute, n.d.-a, n.d.-c, n.d.-e), BFI Player (British Film Institute, n.d.-b), the IWM collections search, the uploaders' YouTube descriptions and the title cards of the online copies, consulted 7 to 10 November 2026. The BFI's catalogue displayed a notice of technical difficulties during the review. The IWM collections search returned no record for any of the four titles. "Not found" means that a search of the public catalogue returned no record, not that no copy exists.

Three features of the table matter for the argument. First, holdings are concentrated in London and in a commercial archive in the United States. No Sri Lankan institution publishes a catalogue in which any of the four films appears. The NFC operates a film archive dedicated to Sri Lankan cinema (National Film Corporation of Sri Lanka, n.d.), and the Department of National Archives established a national film and television archive in 2014 (Department of National Archives, n.d.), but neither institution's public website lists these colonial films; their internal catalogues were not searched. Second, the public institution also sells. The BFI makes *Song of Ceylon* free to view through its streaming service, but it also offers the film through its archive sales service, so that licensing is not a practice of commercial archives alone. Third, the most explicit statements about rights are made by those who sell access, not by those who own copyright, a point taken up in section 6.

4.2 Provenance of the copies

The copies differ in origin, and their provenance is often uncertain. The BFI's record of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* dates its release to 1910 and attributes it to the Charles Urban Trading Company, consistent with one published account (Boyle, 2010), whereas the wider study dated it to 1912 and read its title card as bearing the trade mark of the French company Eclipse, with which Urban was associated (Wijewardhane, 2026a). The BFI's shot list records three titled sections, "Cinghalese Natives", "On the banks of the Mahavelli-Ganga" and "The Sacred Elephants", and notes that the film "ends abruptly". The wider study's transcription records further intertitles not listed in the BFI's shot list. The difference may reflect an incomplete catalogue description, a different copy, or both, and it cannot be resolved without examining the BFI's print. It shows that claims about what a colonial film contains depend on which copy was seen.

The online copies of the FitzPatrick films open with title cards that credit FitzPatrick Pictures and do not name

MGM, although the BFI catalogues *Tropical Ceylon* as an MGM release and the series is known as an MGM product (Arnold, 2016). The copies may therefore derive from prints made for a market other than the original MGM release; the archive does not say. Of the copies of *Song of Ceylon*, the archive's opens with a British censorship certificate passing the film for "Universal" exhibition, while the most-viewed re-upload opens with a distributor's title naming Denning Films and Cinema Contact Ltd, so that at least two different prints underlie the online copies. In the wider study, the 1932 film was catalogued under a descriptive title referring to India and to Lord Chaitanya; its content corresponds to the copy titled *Tropical Ceylon*, and this article uses that title.

4.3 Stability of the online record

The online record was more stable over three days than the literature on platform volatility might suggest, but less securely preserved. All 23 uploads found on 7 November were still available on 10 November, under the same titles, and total views rose by 94, to 497,994. One change was found: Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon* could no longer be viewed without signing in to confirm age, a restriction that the first capture had not recorded. The web archive check found that only 4 of the 23 upload pages had ever been captured by the Way-

back Machine: the commercial archive's three copies and the upload of Farocki's critique. None of the uploads by Sri Lankan individuals, and none of the copies that present the films as national heritage, has a public archival capture. The evidence of how Sri Lankans have re-titled and answered these films is therefore the least protected part of the record.

5. THREE REGIMES OF ACCESS

Table 3 summarises the census. The four films fall into three patterns, which the following sections describe in turn.

Table 3

The Four Films and Their Online Copies, 7 November 2026

Film	Online copies found	Views (all copies)	Comments under all copies	Holder of the most-viewed copy
A Ramble Through Ceylon (c. 1910)	0	-	-	No public copy found
Charming Ceylon (1931)	5	160,131	2	Commercial footage archive (comments disabled)
Tropical Ceylon (1932)	3	207,638	1	Commercial footage archive (comments disabled)
Song of Ceylon (1934)	13 (and BFI Player)	126,685	45	Private individual (2008 upload)
Responses to *Song of Ceylon* (1975, 1985)	2	3,446	0	Private individuals

Note. Views and comments as displayed on the census day. Comments include three replies. On 10 November all uploads remained available and total views had risen by 94.

5.1 The withheld film

No public online copy of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* was found. The film that labels the people it shows as "Cinghalese Natives" can be seen only on the BFI's premises or by request to its access team; the catalogue does not list it as viewable on BFI Player or in the BFI's London Mediatheque. For the descendants of the people it shows, and for most Sri Lankan students and staff, the film exists only as a catalogue entry and a reference in other people's writing.

Withholding is not the same as protection. A film kept from circulation is shielded from careless reuse, and there are good reasons, including the condition of early film and the cost of digitisation, why an archive may not publish it. The BFI's own record of the copy as having a status "pending" suggests that its condition or cataloguing is unresolved. But withholding also means that the film whose intertitles most directly classify the people of Ceylon is the one that their society cannot see, discuss or answer. The silence that Trouillot (1995) located in the making of archives is here a silence of access: the film survives, but its audience is limited to those with institutional means and the ability to travel to London. The retirement of the Colonial Film database, which once gave researchers anywhere a catalogue description of films such as this, narrows that audience further (British Film Institute, n.d.-d).

5.2 The licensed film

The two FitzPatrick travelogues present the opposite case. They are freely viewable, and widely viewed, but almost entirely through copies that the Travel Film Archive, a commercial footage archive, uploaded in 2008. These copies account for 358,574 of the 367,769 views recorded for the two films (97.5 per cent). Each carries the archive's label and a running timecode burnt into the picture, and each description states that footage from

the film is available for licensing through a commercial agency. The comment sections of both are disabled. The same archive's upload of *Song of Ceylon* offers a DVD "for personal home use or educational use" and footage for licence. A smaller channel that re-uploaded *Tropical Ceylon* in 2018 states that it did so "with the kind permission" of the archive's owner.

The licensing notice changes what the images are. In the travelogues, the people of Ceylon were already presented as sights for a paying cinema audience: winnowing rice, dancing, waiting at a hotel table (Wijewardhane, 2026c). In the licensed copy they become stock: footage that can be cut out and sold by the second to a documentary producer, an advertiser or a television channel. The watermark announces that the image belongs to someone, and that someone is neither the people in it nor their society. Baron's (2014) archive effect is here reinforced by an ownership effect. The label tells viewers that what they see is authentic historical footage because it comes from an archive, and at the same time that it is property. In Steyerl's (2009) terms, the archive's copy is the opposite of the poor image: it is degraded deliberately, by watermark and timecode, so that the clean image can be sold.

The closed comment section completes the arrangement. On the copies that most people see, no one can respond: not a Sri Lankan viewer who recognises a place, not a descendant who objects to the narration's account of their ancestors, not a viewer who wishes to thank the uploader. The decision to disable comments may have ordinary commercial reasons, such as the cost of moderation, and we do not claim to know the archive's motive. Its effect, however, is clear. The commentary that FitzPatrick spoke over the images in 1931 and 1932 remains the only voice attached to them in their most widely seen form. The narrator who called a winnowing scene "primitive" and a waiter "a typical example of the original Singhalese" still speaks, and no one else may.

5.3 The re-uploaded film

The third regime is the most varied. Besides the archive's copies, the census found six re-uploads of the two FitzPatrick films and twelve uploads of *Song of Ceylon*, among them complete copies, partial copies and short clips. Table 4 classifies all twenty-three uploads by their framing.

Table 4

Framing of the 23 Uploads

Framing	Uploads	Views	Share of views (%)	Comments
Commodity (licence or sale offered)	3	394,797	79.3	14
Film culture (presented as documentary history)	9	89,361	17.9	31
National heritage (presented as Sri Lanka's past)	6	8,937	1.8	3
Critical response (later work answering a film)	2	3,446	0.7	0
Tourism (promoting travel to the island)	3	1,359	0.3	0
Total	23	497,900	100	48

Note. Views and comments as displayed on 7 November 2026.

Six uploads, most of them by Sri Lankan individuals, present the films as national heritage. Their Sinhala titles invite viewers to see "our" island as it was in the 1930s, describe the footage as rare and important, or place a part of *Song of Ceylon* under the heading of Sri Lankan history. The colonial travelogue is thereby reclaimed as a record of the nation's own past, a clear case of memory travelling across media and communities (Erll, 2011). This reclamation is understandable and, in part, a form of answering back: it takes images made for foreign audiences and addresses them to the society they depict, in its own language. But it also tends to take the films' framing on trust. A title that presents FitzPatrick's travelogue simply as a view of "our little Lanka" in 1930 inherits his selection of what that Lanka was, including the "primitive" methods and the "typical" natives that his commentary named. The re-upload changes the addressee without changing the voice.

There are exceptions that show what a different practice might look like. One Sri Lankan film-culture channel divided *Song of Ceylon* into parts and added Sinhala descriptions explaining that the film arose from the documentary unit that John Grierson built around the Empire Marketing Board, whose purpose was to film the life and resources of Britain's colonies. That description gives Sinhala-speaking viewers the context that the film itself and most English-language uploads omit. It is a small example of contextualisation from below.

Three uploads present the films as tourism. A Colombo travel company re-uploaded *Charming Ceylon* without comment; a Russian-language channel promoting tours to Sri Lanka presented it as one of the first video guides to the island and linked it to a tour website; and an aggregator channel described *Song of Ceylon* as a "stunning documentary" of the island's "beauty and culture". In these uploads the travelogue returns to its original function. Made to sell Ceylon to foreign audiences in the 1930s, it now sells Sri Lanka to tourists ninety years later, with the same images and, in the case of *Charming Ceylon*, the same narrator.

The nine film-culture uploads, mostly of *Song of Ceylon*, present the films as works of documentary art, usually under the director's name, sometimes with links to reviews. The most-viewed copy of *Song of Ceylon*, uploaded by a private individual in 2008, is of this kind. These uploads keep alive the critical reputation of Wright's film as a classic of the British documentary movement. In doing so they also keep alive a way of seeing it that centres its maker and its formal achievement, a view that the companion article on the film's soundtrack has questioned (Wijewardhane & Laksiri, 2026).

6. Rights, Gatekeeping and Return

6.1 The weak legal enclosure of the films

The rights statements in Table 2 are claims about access, not determinations of copyright, and the distinction matters. A footage archive may license access to the copies it holds whatever the status of the underlying work, and a watermark shows possession of a copy, not ownership of the film. The legal position of each film depends on the jurisdiction and on facts about its making that the public record does not settle, and this article

does not offer a legal determination. Three general points can nonetheless be made. Under Sri Lanka's Intellectual Property Act, No. 36 of 2003, economic rights in an audiovisual work last for seventy years from its first publication (Intellectual Property Act, 2003, s. 13(3)); on the face of the Act, the term for films first shown between 1910 and 1934 has ended. In the United States, a work published between 1927 and 1963 with notice and with its copyright renewed is protected for 95 years from publication (U.S. Copyright Office, n.d.); if *Charming Ceylon* was so protected, its term ends at the close of 2026, and that of *Tropical Ceylon* at the close of 2027. In the United Kingdom, *Song of Ceylon* is presented by the BFI as a public record, and Crown copyright in published works is limited in duration (Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, s. 163), although the position of films made before 1957 is governed by transitional rules that this article does not attempt to apply.

The consequence is that the enclosure of these films is, for the most part, not legal but material. What restricts access is custody of the best surviving copies, the cost and distance of consulting them, the fees charged for clean footage, the watermark that degrades the free copy, and the platform setting that closes the comment section. In Mbembe's (2002) terms, the power of the archive here lies in its physical possession of the material and in its rules of consultation, rather than in a legal title. This finding qualifies a common assumption that copyright is the main obstacle to returning colonial films: for films of this age, the obstacles are custody, cost and metadata.

6.2 Gatekeeping and return

The question of return is complicated by the state of Sri Lanka's own film heritage. In 2018 a rescue mission organised with the International Federation of Film Archives (FIAF) found some 30,000 reels in Sri Lankan collections, many of them decaying in storage without climate control (Film Heritage Foundation, 2018). Sri Lankan film preservationists and officials of the NFC, interviewed in the national press since then, have described the loss of much of the country's own cinema and the slow, partly foreign-supported work of restoring what remains ("On a Mission," 2018; Wijesinghe, 2024). The colonial films of Ceylon held in

London and the United States do not appear in these accounts. National preservation is, reasonably, focused on Sri Lankan cinema; the films that represent the colonial island are the responsibility of no Sri Lankan institution.

Return should therefore not mean simply sending files. Christen's (2011) account of digital repatriation as collaborative curation, in which archives share authority over description and access with the communities represented, offers a better model. For these films, collaboration would involve the holding archives, Sri Lankan institutions such as the NFC, the Department of National Archives and the universities, and the communities shown, who are not identical with the national institutions and include minorities whom the films themselves excluded (Wijewardhane, 2026b). Collaboration would also need to address capacity: a digital copy deposited in an under-resourced archive is no more accessible than one held abroad.

7. Who Answers Back

The comments are few, and that is itself a finding. Under 23 uploads with nearly half a million views, the census found 48 comments, almost all of them under the uploads of *Song of Ceylon* that are open to reply. Under the licensed copies of the FitzPatrick films there are none, because comments are disabled. Under the re-uploads of those films there are three. Section 7.1 considers why there are so few, section 7.2 what the comments say, and section 7.3 what other Sri Lankan voices can be heard.

7.1 Why so few comments?

Table 5 sorts the 23 uploads by the state of their comment sections.

Table 5

Comment Status of the 23 Uploads

Comment status	Uploads	Views	Share of views (%)	Median views per upload	Comments
Disabled by the uploader	3	358,802	72.1	151,140	0
Open, no comments	14	7,430	1.5	278	0
Open, with comments	6	131,668	26.4	4,173	48
Total	23	497,900	100	715	48

Note. Views and comments as displayed on 7 November 2026. The three uploads without open comments are the commercial archive's copies of *Charming Ceylon* and *Tropical Ceylon* and the single upload of Jayamanne's *A Song of Ceylon*, which on 10 November was also age-restricted.

Five explanations, which are not mutually exclusive, account for the pattern. The first and largest is design. Almost three-quarters of all views are of copies on which comments are not open, so that most of the people who have watched these films online were never able to respond under them. The scarcity of comments is therefore not simply evidence of indifference. To a large extent it is produced by the terms of access described in section 5.2.

The second explanation is fragmentation. The 14 uploads that are open to comment but have none were seen by few people, with a median of 278 views each. Under the open copies that do have comments, there is roughly one comment for every 2,700 views. At that rate, a copy with a few hundred views would be expected to attract no comment at all. Re-uploading spreads a small audience across many copies, so that no single copy gathers enough viewers to become a place of discussion.

The third is time. The uploads date from 2008 to 2026, most from before 2018, and the 48 comments were posted over eighteen years, an average of fewer than three a year. Comment activity on YouTube concentrates around new uploads and around channels with a following; old uploads on dormant channels accumulate replies slowly, if at all.

The fourth is the absence of an addressee. Comment culture on YouTube is organised around creators, who reply, pin comments and invite discussion (Burgess & Green, 2018). The uploaders of these films are not their makers, and most of their channels show no sign of interaction with viewers. The commonest kind of comment, thanks to the uploader, is the response that suits this situation: there is someone to thank for the copy, but no one to debate the film with.

The fifth is that discussion may happen elsewhere. These films are also watched through copies embedded in other websites, for example a heritage website on Ceylon tea that embeds *Charming Ceylon*, *Tropical Ceylon* and *Song of Ceylon* among its featured videos (History of Ceylon Tea, n.d.), and through classrooms, social media groups devoted to old Ceylon and messaging applications, where any discussion leaves no trace on YouTube. The census could not observe these spaces, and we do not claim that substantial discussion takes place there. Comments may also have been removed by uploaders or held by the platform's filters, which a census of visible comments cannot detect.

The low number of comments therefore limits what the comments can show, and it is reported as such. But it is also a finding. On the copies that most people see, the conditions for answering back have been removed. Where they exist, the audience is too scattered and the uploader too absent for a conversation to form. Silence under these films should not be read as consent, approval or indifference; it is, in large part, an effect of how they are held.

7.2 What the comments say

Table 6 groups the 48 comments by their main point.

Table 6

Comments by Category

Category	Comments	Share (%)
Aesthetic or affective response	9	19
Gratitude for access	7	15
Valuing the film as heritage	7	15
Marking time, change and continuity	6	13
Provenance and historical knowledge	6	13
Critique, contest or unease	4	8
Requests for further access	3	6
Other	6	13
Total	48	100

Note. Percentages are rounded and do not sum exactly to 100. Given the small number of comments, the shares describe this set only.

Gratitude and heritage. The largest group of comments, taken together, thanks uploaders for making the films available or values them as heritage. Commenters thank the uploader for a "priceless" film, call it a precious record of history, describe it as preserved for the next generation, recommend it to young people as a masterpiece to study, or compare watching it to reading a large book that they wish to share with colleagues. One commenter adds a Buddhist blessing to their thanks. These comments treat access itself as a gift. They are addressed not to the people in the film or to the film's makers but to whoever uploaded it, and they express gratitude for the restoration of something that the commenters regard as theirs.

Time, change and continuity. A second group marks the films' age, by counting the years since 1934 or expressing surprise that moving images existed in the 1930s, or reflects on what has and has not changed. Two comments claim that village life has not changed, or that much of what the film shows is still there for those willing to look and listen. Such comments reproduce, perhaps unknowingly, the travelogues' own temporal

framing, which placed the island's people outside modern time (Fabian, 1983).

Provenance and knowledge. Several comments supply information. One reports that *Song of Ceylon* had been released on a commercial DVD of the GPO Film Unit's work, and its price. Another recalls the film being shown on television in the commenter's childhood, a reminder that the film had a Sri Lankan broadcast history before it had an online one. Another states that the British government invited Wright to make a film promoting tea, and a reply confirms it. One commenter recalls having worked at the director's house as a young man. These comments perform informally the work of contextualisation that the archive's and most uploaders' descriptions do not.

Requests. Three comments ask for more: where to find the soundtrack, whether similar films exist, and whether the uploader could share 1940s footage of foreign troops in Ceylon for friends abroad. They show viewers treating uploaders as archivists, people with access to a store of images that the viewers cannot reach themselves.

Critique, contest and unease. Only four comments contest the films, and none does so at length. One, written

in Indonesian, rejects the film's text and narration. One finds the film simply strange. One, in Sinhala, mocks a moment in the film with a vulgar insult and a timestamp. The most pointed comment values *Song of Ceylon* as a true record against later, distorted stories, but regrets that the government of the day allowed anyone to film the island without permission. That comment raises, in one sentence, the question of consent that the films' custody and circulation never ask.

7.3 Other Sri Lankan voices

The comments are not the only Sri Lankan responses to these films. Three others can be identified from the public record, although none was gathered through interviews. The first is the voice of Sri Lankan uploaders, who answer the films by re-titling them in Sinhala as national heritage and, in one case, by adding critical context (section 5.3). The second is the voice of filmmakers. Laleen Jayamanne, a Sri Lankan-born filmmaker and scholar, answered Wright's film directly with *A Song of Ceylon* (1985), made with support from the Australian Film Commission and catalogued by the BFI. Its single online upload had 228 views on 7 November and, by 10 November, could be watched only after signing in to confirm age, so that the most direct Sri Lankan artistic response to the film is the least accessible of all the uploads. Harun Farocki's 1975 television programme on *Song of Ceylon*, a European response, had 3,220 views; its uploader presents it as using Wright's film as a positive model of documentary integrity rather than as an object of critique. Together the two responses have about four per cent of the views of the most-viewed copy of *Song of Ceylon* alone. The third is the voice of Sri Lankan archivists and preservationists, whose published statements, discussed in section 6.2, show their attention fixed, for good reasons, on the survival of Sri Lankan cinema rather than on colonial films held abroad. The views of archivists, filmmakers and audiences on how the colonial films should be held remain to be gathered directly.

8. DISCUSSION: ACCESS AS THE NEW FRAME

The three regimes are not equal, and their inequality follows a pattern. The film whose intertitles most directly classify the people of Ceylon as "natives" is withheld from them. The films whose narrator called their practices "primitive" circulate mainly as licensed property, with the narrator's voice intact and no space for reply. The film that is most celebrated as art circulates most freely, and it is under this film that almost all the replies are found, most of them thanks. At each level, the possibility of answering back is set by someone other than the people represented: the archive that holds the best copy, the company that sells the footage, the platform that sets the rules of comment, and the uploader who chooses a title.

This pattern repeats, in a new medium, the hierarchy of voice that the companion articles found inside the films. *Song of Ceylon* gave voice to commerce and silence to the plucker (Wijewardhane & Laksiri, 2026); the travelogues named their subjects as types and left them no voice of their own (Wijewardhane, 2026c). Online, the same people remain those who are shown but do not decide. Their descendants can watch the travelogues, sometimes in very large numbers, but they cannot own the images, cannot reply on the copies most people see,

and in the case of the earliest film cannot see it at all. Access has become the new frame of the colonial image, a frame that is as consequential as the camera's and as rarely noticed. In the terms of critical archival studies (Caswell et al., 2017), the inequality lies less in the law than in archival and platform practice, and practice can be changed.

The comments show that Sri Lankan viewers are not passive in this arrangement. They reclaim the films as heritage, supply context, recall broadcasts and, occasionally, contest. But the dominant response, gratitude to uploaders, also shows how far the terms of access have been naturalised. A viewer who thanks an anonymous uploader for a "priceless" record of the island is expressing a real loss: the record has been held elsewhere, and its return, even as an unlicensed copy, feels like a gift. The gratitude is the measure of the enclosure.

The findings support five recommendations, offered as proposals for discussion rather than as conclusions of the census.

1. **Open metadata.** Holding archives could publish complete catalogue records for colonial films of Ceylon, including shot lists, provenance of copies and a clear rights statement, and link them through shared identifiers, as the BFI already does for *Song of Ceylon* with an Entertainment Identifier Registry (EIDR) number. Descriptions should be revised in consultation with Sri Lankan scholars, in line with the critical archival attention to description (Punzalan & Caswell, 2016).

2. **Collaborative digitisation and deposit.** Digital copies of colonial films of Ceylon held abroad could be made and deposited, with full rights for non-commercial use, with Sri Lankan institutions such as the NFC, the Department of National Archives and the universities, together with support for their preservation, so that Sri Lankan students and staff need not depend on licensed or unlicensed online copies.

3. **Context from within.** Online copies, including those on institutional platforms, could carry context written from within the society they depict, in Sinhala and Tamil as well as English, explaining who made the films, for whom and why, as one film-culture channel has begun to do.

4. **Means of reply and preservation of responses.** The communities shown could be given a means of reply on the copies that matter, through open comments, linked annotation or community archives built on the principle that those represented should help decide how their images circulate (Christen, 2011). Web archives and research institutions could capture the Sri Lankan uploads and responses that are currently unpreserved.

5. **Comparative research.** The census method could be applied to other colonial film collections, of South Asia and elsewhere, and to platforms other than YouTube, to test whether the three regimes found here recur.None of these steps would undo the films' framing. Each would change who frames them now.

9. CONCLUSION

This article has traced the holdings and online afterlives of four films of colonial Ceylon through public catalogues, rights statements and a census of their copies captured in November 2026. It has found three regimes of access. *A Ramble Through Ceylon* is withheld: it is held by the BFI, with a catalogue description that differs from the transcription of the wider study, but no public copy exists. The two FitzPatrick travelogues are licensed: almost all their views are of watermarked copies offered for footage sale, with comments disabled. *Song of Ceylon* is re-uploaded: a UK public record, it circulates in many copies, and its comments mostly thank the uploaders. Sri Lankan uploaders reclaim the films as national heritage, and tourism channels return them to the work of selling the island. Comments are scarce, because most views are of copies closed to reply and the open copies are too scattered for discussion to form. The critical responses that the films have provoked are barely visible, and the most direct Sri Lankan response is now behind an age gate.

The argument has been that these regimes reproduce, through custody, licensing, platform rules and titles, the hierarchy of voice that the films built into their images. The people of Ceylon were shown and named by others in the early twentieth century; their descendants now see the films on terms set by others. Because the legal enclosure of films of this age is weak, those terms are set chiefly by custody, cost, description and design, and they can be changed by archives and platforms without waiting for the law.

The study has clear limits, and its findings should not be generalised beyond these four films. The corpus was defined by the wider study for analytical reasons and is not a sample. The online record was captured on two dates three days apart, from one country and on one platform, and the search may have missed copies, particularly within compilations of old footage that do not identify their sources. The provenance of several copies is uncertain, and the discrepancy between the BFI's description of *A Ramble Through Ceylon* and the wider study's transcription could not be resolved without access to the BFI's print. No formal access requests, interviews or licensing agreements informed the analysis, so that the reasons for withholding, licensing and closing comments are inferred from public statements, not established; the legal discussion describes general frameworks and is not legal advice. The comments are few, so the categories describe this small set and

cannot be generalised to Sri Lankan or international audiences. Future research should make formal requests to the holding archives, interview Sri Lankan archivists, filmmakers, uploaders and viewers, and extend the census to other colonial film collections and platforms, so that the communities shown can say, in their own words, how they wish their ancestors' images to be held.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Use of AI tools

The authors used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with the census of online copies, the catalogue and web archive checks, the collection and initial coding of comments, the checking of sources and the drafting of the text, under the authors' direction. The authors reviewed the coding and take full responsibility for the analysis and the text.

Supplementary material

The supplementary evidence file contains the census workbook (both captures, the coded comments in pseudonymised form, the catalogue and rights review, and the web archive check) and screenshots of the commercial archive's upload pages and the BFI catalogue record of *A Ramble Through Ceylon*, captured on 10 November 2026.

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