The Missing Link: Tarzan in the Early-20th Century French Fantasy Landscape

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Introduction

Tarzan, monkey man, swinging from a rubber band… the beloved ape man, known today as Phil Collins’ animated Disney darling, has “the power to be strong” and the “wisdom to be wise.” Tarzan enjoys mythic pop culture status, his current iconography largely separated from Edgar Rice Burroughs’s literary storyline. Today, Tarzan is more fondly remembered as a cartoon catalyst of sexual awakening than as “THE KILLER OF BEASTS AND MANY BLACK MEN” (Tarzan of the Apes 91).

While Tarzan has basked in global popularity since its creation, the Tarzan narrative was curiously popular in France in the 1930s, the decade in which the serialization (release in frequent and regular installments) of Tarzan novels, films, and comic books converged (Jobs 692-693, Slavin 80). Yet serialization cannot fully explain Tarzan’s cult French following; instead, this thesis argues that the themes evoked in Tarzan acknowledged, supported, and resolved French ambitions and anxieties. These core themes subliminally resonated with French audiences: when contextualized in 1930s France, Tarzan may be understood as easing the cognitive dissonance underpinning French colonization of Africa.

Key unifying concepts of “benevolent” colonization, the imagined “Africa,” la plus grande France, “civilization,” eugenics/evolution, and masculinity in the Tarzan narrative weave together to construct Tarzan as an emblem of the French colonial mission in Africa. These narrative themes, central to the Tarzan story, supported and reinforced the values and psychology underlying French colonization in the interwar period by constructing and making real idealized French fantasies.
While different media have adapted *Tarzan* in varying ways, almost all adaptations draw substantial inspiration from *Tarzan* creator Edgar Rice Burroughs’s original storyline. Tarzan first appeared in 1912, when American author Edgar Rice Burroughs published *Tarzan of the Apes*, the first of twenty-four immensely popular English language stories detailing the adventures of Tarzan, the son of British aristocrats, who was raised in the jungles of Africa by apes. Published in a serialized fashion, Burroughs’s *Tarzan* stories were released over the course of nearly three decades from 1912 to 1940.

In Burroughs’s works, Tarzan is the son of English aristocrats shipwrecked on the Atlantic coast of Africa. After his parents’ death, Tarzan is named and raised by the Mangani apes, specifically a female ape named Kala, who serves as an adoptive mother. As Tarzan enters adolescence, his intelligence and physical prowess elevate his status in the jungle, first amongst the Mangani and then as a ruler of the entire forest, which includes a tribal community. When a group of white Westerners are also stranded on the Atlantic coast, Tarzan feels a racially-based affinity with them, particularly a woman named Jane, with whom he falls in love. After restoring the group of explorers to “civilization,” Tarzan leaves the jungle to romantically pursue Jane. Unsuccessful, he returns to Africa, first traversing through the desert, then returning to the jungle, where he and Jane reunite and are finally married. From this point forward, Tarzan and Jane rule over their jungle utopia, vanquishing fantastical foes, adventuring throughout Africa, and acting as the jungle’s guardians.

*Tarzan* enjoyed a particular, unexpected, popularity in France. Even before the 1930s, the 1918 release of the films *Tarzan of the Apes* and *The Romance of*
Tarzan caused a stir in Paris because they created what Paris-midi described as “sites de rêve,” or dream sites (“Un Drame” 2). By 1921, the original Tarzan film was one of the top ten grossing American films in France and was so popular that theaters replayed the film just days after it was first shown (Florange 2, “Cirque” 2). The 1918 Tarzan films had left a major impression on the French public, such that Tarzan shifted from simply an American import to a hero in the French cultural consciousness. In 1926, Le Journal reported that “[a]ucun succès ne peut se comparer à celui, qui a accueilli Tarzan chez les singes dans le monde entier […] Le public français lui fait un accueil enthousiaste.”¹²

What was revolutionary about these Tarzan films? The first Tarzan films were faithful to Burroughs’s storyline, the film advancing in discrete scenes with title cards describing each of the key plot points. These early films highlighted novelty footage of live animals typically found in Africa, such as monkeys, crocodiles, and elephants. Still, this content was not unfamiliar to the French: in fact, the Ménagerie, the zoo at the Paris Jardin des Plantes, featured live animals (such as elephants, lions, camels, ostriches, bears, and buffaloes) that visitors could see in person as early as 1798 (“History”). Rather than the films’ technical innovations, it is likely that Tarzan’s popularity stemmed from its ability to create “sites de rêve.” What was original about Tarzan was not its technology or even its storytelling, but rather its specific combination of thematic elements that spoke to the French during the interwar period.

¹ All translations in footnotes are my own, unless otherwise noted.
² “no success can compare to that of Tarzan of the Apes around the world […] The French public gives him an enthusiastic welcome.”
Though he was an American-created and British-born protagonist, Tarzan was readily adopted by the French public as early as the 1920s. *Tarzan’s* early successful reception in France foreshadowed the *Tarzan* fervor that was to follow in the 1930s. *Tarzan’s* popularity in France reached explosive new levels in the 1930s with the production of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) films featuring Johnny Weissmuller as Tarzan and Maureen O’Sullivan as Jane. The six MGM *Tarzan* films were released between 1932 and 1942, spanning the decade in an episodic fashion akin to Burroughs’s serialized release of the *Tarzan* novels.

There were several reasons why these 1930s films may have experienced greater acclaim. Compared to the 1918 films, MGM’s films were higher budget and more frequently released, a new level of both quality and quantity. Additionally, the lead actor, Weissmuller, was already a globally-recognized celebrity due to his Olympic prowess in swimming. Perhaps most importantly, the MGM franchise films were “talkies,” films with spoken dialogue rather than subtitles, a sharp contrast to the first two *Tarzan* movies, which were silent films. “Talkies” increased film audiences, as moviegoers no longer had to be literate to understand the dialogue. While the *Tarzan* films were not the only American “talkies” to be distributed in France, *Tarzan* nevertheless benefitted from the popularity and accessibility inherent in mass media.

*Tarzan’s* existing popularity, the casting of Weissmuller in the title role, and the “talkie” technology compounded to make the 1932 release of MGM’s *Tarzan the Ape Man* an awaited event in Paris. In 1932, *Comoedia* reported, “Il y a un film qu’on attend avec impatience, c’est *Tarzan L’Homme Singe;*” 3 and *Le Journal* contended

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3 “There is one film that we look forward to, it is *Tarzan the Ape Man.*”
that the film’s director “Van Dyke […] a réussi une œuvre dont l’intérêt est indiscutable”\(^4\) (“« Tarzan, L’homme-Singe »” 4, *Le Journal* 6). Even before the films were released, there was palpable intrigue surrounding *Tarzan* in France. After the immense success of the first MGM film, the French public eagerly received the remaining five movies, released with remarkable regularity in 1934, 1936, 1939, 1941, and 1942. The anticipation, high budget, technological advancements, and frequency of the MGM films combined to keep *Tarzan* relevant in the French cultural sphere throughout the 1930s.

In addition to Burroughs’s novels and the MGM films, a third serialized *Tarzan* medium rose to prominence in the 1930s: comic books. Comics, or *bandes dessinées*, first emerged in France at the beginning of the 20\(^{th}\) century and rapidly climbed in popularity throughout the 1930s. In fact, the interwar period in France is known as *l’âge d’or de la bande dessinée*,\(^5\) a pivotal moment in French cultural history when American comics gained traction in France over domestic works (Filippini 21). The rise of comic book culture in France was aided by the 1934 introduction of *Le journal de Mickey*, a comic publication that was larger in size than most illustrated publications of the time, and almost fully devoted to comic strips, allowing more comics to be distributed per issue (Grove 19, Jobs 692).

*Le journal de Mickey* instantly gave comic strips a broader platform, both literally and figuratively. In his essay “Tarzan Under Attack,” Richard Ivan Jobs, historian studying youth culture in France, writes that by the late 1930s, periodicals like *Le journal de Mickey* elevated the status and renown of American adventure

\(^4\) “Van Dyke […] has managed to create a work that has indisputably sparked interest.”
\(^5\) the golden age of comics
comics like *Tarzan* so much so that the domestic French comic industry unsuccessfully sought protectionist legislation (692-693). Laurence Grove, professor of French and Image/Text studies, adds that American superhero comics in the 1930s, like *Tarzan*, had a significant impact on the *bande dessinée*, inspiring French equivalents or spin-offs (19). Again, *Tarzan* was not the only American comic to become marketable and influential in 1930s France. And it was not only in comic book form, but also in text and film, that *Tarzan* rose to popularity. Something deeper in *Tarzan* than media marketability appealed to the French public, beyond serialization, technological advancements, or *Le journal de Mickey*: Tarzan’s ability to make real the fictional, to create “sites de rêve.”

*Tarzan*’s core themes of “benevolent” colonization, the imagined “Africa,” *la plus grande France*, “civilization,” eugenics/evolution, and masculinity all played into fictions in the 1930s French cultural consciousness. At the time, France sought to defy negative expectations of European colonialism by characterizing French colonialism as “benevolent” in comparison to the Belgian Congo. The notion that French colonial rule improved quality of life for people in the colonies was an ever-present fiction used to justify colonialism. *Tarzan* plays into this French fantasy by presenting Tarzan’s intervention in the jungle as unequivocally improving the space and portraying Tarzan’s rise to power as accepted and needed.

This jungle, as envisioned by the French and as presented in *Tarzan*, was itself a figment of the colonial imagination. The imagined “Africa,” illustrated in extremes as simultaneously abundant and dangerous, sparked curiosity. For France, “Africa”

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6 In this thesis, terms employed by the French in the 1930s that are connoted differently today will be placed in quotation marks to indicate their subjective and time-specific use.
was a space to vanquish and harvest: it was imagined as just wild enough to inspire a sense of delicious fear and conquest, but also not so ferocious as to be invincible. *Tarzan* realizes this contradictory portrait of “Africa” through depictions of the jungle as simultaneously fearful, Edenic, treacherous, and conquerable.

Another rationale for French colonialism in Africa was the notion of increased French national vigor through imperialism. France believed that in extending its political reach globally, France itself would expand into a “Greater France,” or *la plus grande France*. The colonial expositions held in Paris in 1931 and 1937 concretized the abstract fantasy of *la plus grande France* by constructing buildings populated with people from French colonies on the outskirts of Paris. These tangible structures substantiated fictional ideas about French colonialism by sanitizing the image of colonies and presenting geographically-diverse cultures in simplified aesthetic-based representations, all placed in one location. The colonial expositions represented Paris as the center of the universe and reified French colonial fantasies. Tarzan helped to realize this fiction as a character in a play at the 1937 exposition, acting alongside people from the colonies. Tarzan, presented as equally “real” as the indigenous actors, exemplified the conflation of fiction and reality at colonial expositions.

A central tenet of “benevolent” French colonization in Africa was *la mission civilisatrice*, or the civilizing mission. A great fiction and contradiction at the core of *la mission civilisatrice* was the premise that a “savage” or “uncivilized” individual could ultimately become as “civilized” as a Frenchman. Hinging on stage theory and ideas regarding social evolution, the French civilizing mission defined “civilized” and “uncivilized” in discrete Western terms and theoretically sought to elevate those
considered to be “savage” to “civilized” status. Yet if la mission civilisatrice truly succeeded, the need for French intervention would evaporate and France would have no moral cause for controlling Africa. Tarzan’s representation of the French civilizing mission, but emphasis on maintaining European supremacy irrespective of “civilized” nature, revealed the contradiction in this French colonial justification.

Race was not only determinative when it came to la mission civilisatrice, but it was also used to create binaries of desirable and undesirable traits, the former being attributed to white Europeans and the latter to indigenous Africans. This absolutist viewpoint lacked nuance and was rooted in fictionalized generalizations predicated on the belief that personality and intellect were related to genetic traits. Essentially, that being “civilized” was an innate, unlearned trait, again undermining la mission civilisatrice. Tarzan actualized this binary while revealing its inherent fallacies by simultaneously typifying the most-“evolved” “ideal man,” or l’homme idéal, and the least-“evolved” “missing link” between man and apes. Tarzan’s dual identity as l’homme idéal and the “missing link” reflected contradictory desires to return to a more primitive state while also distancing France from the “savage” “Africa.”

Part of the French fascination with primitivism stemmed from the notion that masculinity was inherently primordial. Masculinity in interwar France was synonymous with youth and virility, full of promise and potential to go forth into the world and lead. A masculine icon in the 1930s was the légionnaire, a soldier in the French Foreign Legion whose portrait was idealized in the French imagination. Once again, Tarzan made real this masculine ideal, by serving as a légionnaire in
Burroughs’s second novel and by embodying the youth and sexual virility that were central to the portrait of the 1930s Frenchman.

1930s France was full of imagined notions and abstract concepts that were clearly invented but nonetheless used to further the French colonial mission. These fabricated French fictions and fantasies were frequently flawed and contradicted themselves, precisely because they sought to present the uncomfortable realities of colonization as unambiguously positive. *Tarzan* smoothed over these conflicts and inconsistencies; as a fictional narrative, the *Tarzan* universe was one of infinite possibilities and allowed audiences to reconcile divergent and clashing notions in “sites de rêve.” It was *Tarzan*’s ability to concretize and reify French reveries regarding colonialism in Africa that catapulted *Tarzan* to success in 1930s France.

**Embracing the Invented in the “Benevolent” Colonial**

France was an ocean away from Africa, distanced physically and mentally from the colonies. The clear majority of the French population had never set foot on the African continent. Regardless, France had to present a cohesive and positive image of French Africa to its people to overwrite the existing harmful image of European colonialism in Africa. By the 1930s, examples of “bad” colonialism were everywhere. Although no colonialism is good, “bad” colonialism was marked by shocking atrocities, abject mistreatment of indigenous people, and public corruption.

The most salient examples of “bad” colonialism were the atrocities in the Congo Free State, which occurred over a period of over twenty years, from 1885 to 1908. King Leopold II, the ruler of Belgium at the time, enacted punitive labor policies to maximize rubber and ivory collection for export. These policies included
violence against the Congolese, devastating the population both physically and emotionally. The severe exploitation of the Congolese led to disease and famine, ultimately annihilating the population by millions. Additionally, there were almost no resources provided for the Congolese: schools or infrastructure were not established under Belgian control. To make matters worse, the profits from the forced labor went directly to King Leopold II, who used the money for personal expenditures.

Investigations led to the formal annexation of the territory by Belgium, somewhat improving conditions. Still, the “Congo became synonymous with the excesses and horrors of imperialism” (Jones 64). The atrocities in the Congo Free State drew international attention to European control of Africa, casting a shadow of doubt on all European colonization in Africa.

Distaste for “bad” colonialism was further broadcast during the late-19th and early-20th century by literature. Famously, Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) exposed atrocities in the Congo and connected with many readers, not only by reporting facts, but also by detailing Conrad’s cognitive dissonance regarding colonization. *Heart of Darkness* was a subjective account of Conrad’s experiences, not a full critique of colonialism. Still, Conrad writes, “They were no colonists […] They were conquerors, and for that you want only brute force—nothing to boast of, when you have it, since your strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others” (7). Here, Conrad makes it clear that the Congo Free State was “bad” colonization, involving no mission, only exploitation. Conrad expresses compassion for people in the colonies and condemns European actions, criticizing all colonization as essentially “bad.” He asserts, “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the
taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much” (7).

Similarly, Edgar Wallace’s *Sanders of the River* (1911) details the work of Commissioner Sanders, appointed as an overseer in Africa by the British government. Though Sanders is the main character, he is not a hero, and Wallace does not paint a positive image of colonization. In his leadership, Sanders is cruel and violent: the indigenous people “understand punishment to mean pain and death, and nothing else counts” (7). Wallace paints a bitter image of colonization, writing that the indigenous “people formed a sort of grim comic relief to the tragedy of African colonization” (24). Thus, the critical period at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century saw a rise in open criticism of African colonization, a trend that, if allowed to go unchecked, would apply the same critiques of the Congo Free State to French Africa.

Around the same twenty-year period as the most glaring atrocities in the Congo, France and Britain were engaged in a fierce competition for African terrain, known as the “Scramble for Africa.” By the beginning of World War I, France controlled almost one third of the continent. Even after the devastation of the war, Africa was a source of French power; yet publicized atrocities like those in the Congo Free State threatened the integrity of French Africa. France responded to this scandal by narrowing the scope of “bad” colonialism to the specific case of the Congo, diverting attention away from French colonialism, characterized as “benevolent.” In condemning Belgium and promoting “benevolent” colonization as fundamentally different, France drew focus away from its own bad practices in Africa.
As Albert Memmi explains in his 1957 work, *Portrait du colonisé, précédé de Portrait du colonisateur*, participating in colonialism necessitates understanding and agreeing to be a non-legitimate, privileged party: a usurper (39). Memmi contends that being a colonizer is “doublment injuste : c'est un privilégié et un privilégié non légitime […] En bref, à ses yeux comme aux yeux de sa victime, il se sait usurpateur : il faut qu'il s'accommode de ces regards et de cette situation” (39).

Memmi distinguishes between the *colonial*, the *colonisateur*, and the *colonialiste*. He writes, “Par tempérament ou conviction éthique, le colonial serait l'Européen bienveillant, qui n'aurait pas vis-à-vis du colonisé l'attitude du colonisateur. Eh bien ! disons-le tout de suite […] : le colonial ainsi défini n'existe pas, car tous les Européens des colonies sont des privilégiés” (40). Essentially, Memmi claims that there is no real “benevolent colonizer,” or *colonial*. Instead, every colonizer is either a *colonisateur*, one who acknowledges his privilege, or a *colonialiste*, who refuses to recognize his privilege, legitimizing his colonial mission through the denigration of the colonized.

The fictional persona of the *colonial* is an unstable position. The “benevolent” *colonial* lives in harmony with the indigenous people, seeking only to elevate their lifestyle. Yet even if a colonizer adopts the same living conditions as indigenous people, he is inherently privileged by his status as colonizer. Even if the colonizer himself does not see himself as more powerful or worthy than the indigenous

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7 “doublment injuste: it is a privileged position and an illegitimate one […] In short, in his eyes as in the eyes of his victim, the colonizer knows he is a usurper: he must adapt to this perspective and to this situation.”
8 “By temperament or ethical conviction, the *colonial* would be the benevolent European, who would not have the attitude of a colonizer towards the colonized. Well! Let us say it immediately […] : the *colonial* thus defined does not exist, because all Europeans of the colonies are privileged” (40).
population, the colonial mission as an institution wields greater power than the individual and the colonial is not sanctioned to change the power structures intrinsic in colonization. All it takes for this fiction to be revealed is one test: a national emergency, a military order, a political shift… and the colonial is forced to acknowledge that he is on the side of institutional power.

At some point, the colonial must reconcile that not only can he not live in the colonies without receiving privilege, but also that this privilege is arbitrarily and unjustly handed to him. And even if the colonial sees the power of the colonial machine but seeks to independently refuse its premises, he is constantly attempting to mentally escape from his lived experience, to reject the colonial mentality while encountering daily its realities. The colonial does not exist because this portrait is fraught with extreme cognitive dissonance, trying to do good and live without privilege under the patronage of an institution built on inequality and taken by force.

Memmi’s colonial is a fantasy figure: Memmi makes it clear that no matter how intensely the colonizer distances himself from the truth of colonization, it is impossible to reconcile colonialism with benevolence. Navigating these fictions and realities creates cognitive dissonance, which is unpleasant and uncomfortable. The fictional colonial resolves this dissociation for the French public, who perceive their nation’s colonialism as “benevolent” through the lens of the colonial. Similarly, if not identically, Tarzan reconciles this mental discordance by rejecting the “bad” and exploitative colonization as seen in the Congo Free State, while promoting the idea that there exists a “benevolent” way to colonize Africa.
The *Tarzan* narrative identifies and rejects “bad” colonialism, particularly Belgian colonization. Burroughs’s first novel acknowledges the compounding deleterious impact of colonization on a West Coast indigenous tribe. Burroughs writes that the tribe retains “the poignant memory of still crueler barbarities practiced upon them and theirs by the white officers of that arch hypocrite, Leopold II of Belgium, because of whose atrocities they had fled the Congo Free State – a pitiful remnant of what once had been a mighty tribe” (*Apes* 155). In fact, the tribe only crosses Tarzan’s path because “they were fleeing from the white man’s soldiers who had so harassed them for rubber and ivory that they had turned upon their conquerors one day and massacred a white officer and a small detachment of his black troops” (*Apes* 57). Burroughs both explicitly names and alludes to the atrocities in the Congo to call out “bad” colonialism.

The repudiation of “bad” colonialism also emerges in the MGM films. In these movies, every white European man in Africa besides Tarzan is a colonizer. These men are either colonial officers or Europeans traveling to the colonies for business. Almost always, the inciting incident in the film is the intrusion of white Europeans into Tarzan’s jungle territory, in search of ivory or gold. In *Tarzan Escapes!* and *Tarzan’s New York Adventure*, political maps indicate that an ivory-abundant site is in or near the Congo. As this locale is known to exist within Tarzan’s zone of influence in the jungle, these maps help the audience situate Tarzan’s jungle in the proximity of the Congo (*Tarzan Escapes!* 1:04; *Tarzan’s New York Adventure* 50:47). Seeking to loot the jungle of its resources, these invaders are antagonists who use deceptive means to exploit the natural space.
In the final MGM film, *Tarzan’s New York Adventure*, Tarzan and Jane’s son asks, “Why doesn’t Tarzan want strangers on the escarpment, Mother?” to which Jane replies, “Because he loves us and wants to protect us. When strangers come from outside, they always cause trouble. They’re always seeking something […] Well, for instance, gold […] when they find [gold nuggets] they lose their reason. They do terrible things. They even destroy each other” (3:46). The *Tarzan* films define “bad” colonialism as plundering the jungle for resources (an allusion to the Congo) and disavow this type of intervention. At first glance, it may appear that the *Tarzan* narrative condemns European intervention into Africa and is thus anti-colonialist.

Thanks to *Tarzan*’s heavy-handed critique of “bad” colonialism, several scholars ascribe to the belief that Tarzan is an anti-colonialist hero. Roger Boulay, curator of the 2009 “Tarzan !” exposition at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris, quotes James J. Sullos, president of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc.: “Tarzan a toujours incarné la survie de l’être humain contre l’adversité, un individualisme acharné et la protection de l’habitat naturel—il est le premier défenseur de l’environnement”9 (16). Sullos characterizes Tarzan as an environmental activist, opposing any European intrusion into the jungles of Africa, and thereby necessarily challenging French colonialism. French film critic Charles Tesson argues that “Tarzan est le premier héros blanc à se mobiliser contre le pillage de l’Afrique”10 and that he “est le premier héros blanc anticolonialiste en Afrique proposé par le cinéma américain”11 (46, 49).

To Tesson, Tarzan’s personal rejection of European “civilization” and joy in the

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9 “Tarzan has always embodied human survival against adversity, fierce individualism, and the protection of the natural habitat- he is the first defender of the environment.”
10 “Tarzan is the first white hero to mobilize against the looting of Africa.”
11 “is the first anti-colonialist white hero in Africa proposed by American cinema.”
natural jungle represents a broader denunciation of European expansion into Africa.

French ethnologist Pascal Dibie writes that Burroughs’s novels demonstrate the harms of colonialism and therefore, *Tarzan* is anti-colonialist. He contends,

Le contexte colonial de « Tarzan » comme dans tout l’œuvre de Burroughs n’est pas négligeable et, d’une certaine façon la dénonciation, retenue mais présente, par un Américain modern plus au fait de l’impérialisme que du colonialisme, est très intéressante. Elle nous permet de cerner un peu mieux cette Afrique fantasmasée où se déplace notre héro. Si ce n’est pas exactement le Congo belge, les allusions qui y sont faites sont peut-être pour faire resurgir l’aspect tragique de ce colonialisme imbécile (24).

These scholars contend that *Tarzan* seeks to renounce European colonialism of Africa and that Tarzan himself serves as an anti-exploitation, ecological defense hero.

However, *Tarzan*’s peripheral rebuff of the Congo Free State does not, in of itself, make Tarzan anti-colonialist. Naming and repudiating Belgian colonization narrows the scope of what “bad” colonialism is and can be to one situation. In this way, focusing on the Congo Free State and the highly-publicized exploitation of the land exonerates other European powers, thereby freeing them from reflection on the demerits of their own colonialism. Simply because French colonization was less violent or received less censure than Belgian colonialism does not absolve France. The attention given to the atrocities in the Congo Free State concentrated worldwide shame on Belgium, thereby placing French audiences on a relative moral high ground from which to regard French Africa as “benevolent” in comparison.

Far from entirely rejecting colonialism, Tarzan embodies the *colonial*, actualizing this fictional figure and giving the fantasy of “benevolent” colonialism a

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12 "The colonial context of “Tarzan,” as in all of Burroughs' works, is not negligible, and, in a certain sense, the denunciation, reserved but present, by a modern American, more of imperialism than of colonialism, is very interesting. It allows us to better understand this fantasy Africa in which our hero roams. If it is not exactly the Belgian Congo, the allusions made to it are perhaps to recall the tragic aspect of this moronic colonialism.”
body and persona. Tarzan is a white European man whose presence in the jungle is celebrated and revered by the indigenous people and animals (*Return* 77, 189). Even though Tarzan’s ancestors are not originally from the jungle, Tarzan’s European-ness allows him to penetrate the jungle space and rule it impressively. Tarzan not only rises to become the ruler of the Mangani ape tribe in which he is raised, but also leads an African tribe. In Burroughs’s *Return of Tarzan*, Tarzan encounters the Waziri tribe, and through his leadership, the Waziri win a battle against a rival tribe, the victory culminating in Tarzan’s promotion to king of the Waziri (128).

Tarzan’s influence is presented as vital for the Waziri’s success and his control is absolute. He demands, “‘You will fight just as I tell you to fight, or I shall leave you and go back to my own country.’ They were frightened when he threatened this, and promised to obey him scrupulously if he would but promise not to desert them” (121). After the Waziri win a battle under Tarzan’s guidance, they beseech Tarzan to rule the tribe: “it had not been difficult for them to accept Tarzan’s authority as final [...]o remarkably successful had they been under the ape-man’s generalship that they had had no wish to delegate the supreme authority to another for fear that what they already had gained might be lost” (128).

Another main feature of the *colonial* is that he is on equal footing with the other members of the colonies, and thus is integrated into the space. Epitomizing this assimilation, Tarzan blends seamlessly into the jungle. In the first MGM movie, *Tarzan the Ape Man*, Jane’s father says of Tarzan, “He belongs to the jungle” (1:15:18). Tarzan actualizes the *colonial* by relating to indigenous people and animals alike, while maintaining his identity as a European. Burroughs writes that “Tarzan
held a peculiar place in the [Mangani ape] tribe. They seemed to consider him one of them and yet in some way different” (Apes 45-6).

As examined prior, the colonial is an incontrovertibly fictional character who is able to attain a genuine connection with indigenous people and maintain his European-ness within the colonial context. The reality is that no matter how much the colonial seeks equality with indigenous people, he is benefitting from the inevitable privilege associated with his European-ness. He cannot achieve both ends and thus remains “one of them and yet in some way different” (Apes 45-6). Tarzan personifies the fantasy of the colonial: his malleable identity empowers Tarzan to meaningfully engage with indigenous people and animals and maintain privilege and superiority. This positionality was purposeful, as Burroughs himself “condemned slavery and King Leopold’s brutal Congo regime, yet assumed the natural superiority of whites”; for the French, who “condemned other nations’ imperialism” but sought to perceive their own colonialism as “essentially benign,” Tarzan was appealing (Slavin 80).

Adhering ardently to a fictional narrative, and indeed a narrative that is tacitly understood to be fictional, has consequences. There are high costs of pinning hopes, dreams, and beliefs on fiction because real, important emotions are projected onto imaginary constructs. This fantasy demands constant cognitive maneuvering to keep reality in the background and maintain a facade at the mental forefront; essentially, keeping one’s back turned to what is known to be looming just out of direct sight. In addition to being exhausting, this endless mental negotiation creates an accumulating sense of dread because the truth cannot remain obscured forever.
Perhaps the most serious consequence of the chimera of “benevolent” colonialism is that attending to fiction over reality diminishes the verity and truthfulness inherent in reality. Effectively, putting greater faith in what is, on some level, known to be fictitious (because it cannot possibly be true), rather than fact, invalidates that which is not directly seen or felt. In the context of French colonialism, this esteem of fantasy over reality completely erases the African reality—the lived experience of indigenous Africans in the colonies—in favor of a desirable invention.

**Imagining “Africa”**

*Tarzan*, as a fictional narrative, is itself an invention of the mind. Burroughs never visited Africa, and as such, the Africa portrayed in *Tarzan* reflects Western perceptions of Africa more than reality (Taliaferro 84, 107). Each world power engaged with Africa in a different way. In 1914, Italy occupied the coasts, while Belgium held the Congo in the heart of the continent. Britain remained in eastern Africa, while France dominated the North and West. Moreover, Britain and France, the two main African colonizers, had different styles of colonization. Britain saw its colonies distantly, as political and economic assets to increase the mother country’s power, whereas France considered the colonies as extensions of the nation, its “benevolent” colonialism ostensibly seeking to elevate Africans to “French” status.

These geographic and stylistic particularities are significant because the variations in colonialism amongst European powers constructed numerous visions of Africa. French sociolinguist Louis-Jean Calvet writes, “Or le partage colonial de l’Afrique entre les grandes puissances a donné naissance à une géographie imaginaire (l’Afrique n’est pas la même pour les Français, les Portugais ou les Britanniques) […]"
L’imaginaire colonial témoigne-t-il d’une géographie de la domination” 13 (37-38).

Each nation, France included, had its own archetype of Africa: as seen prior, France’s “Africa” was founded in fiction. Although/because it is totally fantastical, Tarzan’s glorified conquest of the African jungle fit perfectly into the French imagination, legitimizing the French colonial mission.

It is unquestionable that Tarzan rules the jungle—but what is the jungle? From a geographic standpoint, Tarzan is primarily set in the jungles of West Africa off the Atlantic coast upon which Tarzan’s parents were shipwrecked, and as far inland as colonial Cameroon and the Belgian Congo (Tarzan Escapes! 1:04; Tarzan’s New York Adventure 50:47). This setting already situates Tarzan within the French context, as these regions were part of French Africa in the 20th century. But these real foundations were just screens upon which to project fantasy, as both Burroughs and the vast majority of his French audience had never traveled to Africa and had no interest in learning about what was really to be found in Africa.

Consequently, the jungle as portrayed in Tarzan is a necessarily imagined space, one that is created from ideas about Africa, rather than experience. As Calvet wrote, Africa meant something different to each of its European colonizers. Indeed, the African jungle and landscape served as a blank canvas upon which each nation projected its hopes and assumptions about the unknown. These projected images combined to form a different mythology of Africa in each European nation’s collective imagination, an “Africa” that was not congruent with reality.

13 “But the colonial division of Africa between the great powers gave birth to an imaginary geography (Africa is not the same for the French, the Portuguese or the British) [...] The colonial imagination bears witness to a geography of domination.”
Tarzan succeeded in realizing the French fantasy of “Africa” through persuasive imagery. Visual imagery was already in use as a French tool for bandwagonism and shared vision. In *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-De-Siècle Paris*, historian of European modern visual culture Vanessa R. Schwartz explains that the “visual representation of reality as spectacle,” was ubiquitous in late-19th century Paris (6). In Paris, displays of corpses at the morgue, wax museums, and panoramas all sought to concretize abstract ideas regarding death, personhood, and geography, respectively. These “spectacular realities” succeeded in establishing a sense of common cultural experience “through which people might begin to imagine themselves as participating in a metropolitan culture because they had visual evidence that such a shared world, of which they were a part, existed” (6).

The notion of a shared, mythical world is central to Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983), in which he defines the nation as “an imagined political community and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It is imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (6). Anderson writes that symbols and language become key to imagining the nation, shared motifs that play imperative roles in cultivating a cohesive national identity. However, when imagination is rooted in fiction rather than fact, the common culture that emerges is manipulable. Visual imagery was a powerful force in inventing and engineering fantasy in 1930s France.

Relating this phenomenon to the colonies, in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, historian Paul Stuart Landau writes that “people
use images to draw together previously inchoate social meanings from their own societies, and then [...] use them to ‘recognize’ people from other societies” (2). Anderson writes that the census, map, and museum, quantifying and visual tools, “illuminate the late colonial state’s style of thinking about its domain. The ‘warp’ of this thinking was a totalizing classificatory grid, which could be applied with endless flexibility to anything under the state’s real or contemplated control: peoples, regions, religions, languages, products, monuments, and so forth” (184). The use of descriptive imagery and visuals had powerful influence over popular perceptions of these “imagined communities,” rendering the mythology durable in part because it would never be fact-checked against reality (Landau 325). Indeed, imagining the French nation was not only about inventing France, but also about designing an idealized and lasting image of “Africa” within the French context.

Culture and Media Studies professor Martin O’Shaughnessy describes the importance of the colonies in forming this invented French fantasy landscape, writing that “it is precisely because the real France is absent in colonial space that an ideal, absent France can be imagined” (38). As Anderson outlines, the French nation is an “imagined community,” independent of geography. Mainland France and French Africa were distinct in so many ways: culturally, demographically, geographically… still O’Shaughnessy contends that “the imagination of an absent ideal […] makes the colonies a fantasy land where the shadows of two Frances (‘la plus grande’ [greater] and ‘la plus petite’ [smaller]) can overlap” (39). Essentially, the colonies were idealized and romanticized terrain where mainland French identity could envelope and be enveloped in “Africa.”
In “Affective Identities: French National Cinema and the 1930s,” film studies professor Christopher Faulkner purports that the most radical question of the 1930s in France, as displayed through film, was: “Who gets to imagine the nation, and on whose behalf? or, How does one get to test the limits of one’s identity?” (8). The colonies were the testing grounds for this expanded French identity. Since France saw itself as the colonial, a “benevolent” colonizer that engaged more closely with people in the colonies than other European powers, French Africa was seen as an extension of mainland France. As most French citizens would never encounter all, or even much, of the broader French nation, imagery provided a cohesive fantasy that integrated an idealized version of the colonies into mainland French identity.

“Africa” was portrayed in positive and negative extremes, as both lush and treacherous. The hyperbole involved in this portrait functions as a rhetorical device, sparking curiosity and wonder in its audience. “Africa” was a site of conquest and a fantasy promise land: just untamed enough to tame, but also not untamable. *Tarzan* plays into this bipolar representation of “Africa” through its illustration of the jungle as at once menacing, utopic, and vincible. The *Tarzan* narrative honors the diversity of African terrain, including jungle, desert, mountain, and urban settings. Still, one constant is that “Tarzan’s jungle”—the jungle within Tarzan’s zone of influence—functions as an improved and idealized space, a “site de rêve,” a Goldilocks-esque locale that is exotic, but only enough to be conquerable.

In the *Tarzan* novels, Burroughs simultaneously characterizes the jungle negatively and positively: as dangerous, isolated, and brutal, as well as peaceful and abundant (*Apes* 2, 100, 12). In the light of day, the jungle is utopic: “The surrounding
shores were beautiful with semi-tropical verdure [...] the shimmer of a little river which emptied into the harbor, insuring fresh water in plentitude” (Apes 12). However, just a few paragraphs later, the atmosphere changes abruptly, as Burroughs foreshadows “the hideous reality which awaited [the protagonists] in the grim depths of that gloomy wood” (Apes 13). This depiction of the jungle, at first paradisiacal, then suddenly dystopian, is a common thread throughout Burroughs’s storytelling.

It becomes clear that the valence of the jungle shifts according to the eye of the beholder. For strangers to the jungle, the landscape inspires awe, mystery, and fear. When Lord and Lady Greystoke are first shipwrecked on the Atlantic coast, “[a]ll during the day the forest about them had been filled with excited birds of brilliant plumage, and dancing, chattering monkeys, who watched these new arrivals and their wonderful nest building operations with every mark of keenest interest and fascination” (Apes 16). However, at night the jungle mostly inspires dread and is portrayed as brutal and dark. The lively sounds that were welcoming during the daytime becoming menacing at night, “for the night noises of a great jungle teeming with myriad animal life kept their overwrought nerves on edge, so that a hundred times [Lord and Lady Greystoke] were startled to wakefulness by piercing screams” (Apes 16). When Jane and her companions are later abandoned on the same coast, their find themselves in what they perceive to be “the abysmal depths of the savage jungle, from which [they] now heard issuing the almost incessant shrieks and roars, barkings and growlings of its terrifying and fearsome denizens as they sought their prey” (Apes 100). To these outsiders, the jungle is an intimidating space, unknown and terrifying.
These juxtaposed positive and negative impressions of the jungle correspond with the daytime and nighttime, an important symbolic choice. Nighttime and darkness elicit fear and uncertainty, a reference to the European perception of Africa as the “Dark Continent.” Africa was labeled as such because up until the mid-19th century, Africa was unexplored territory and thus constituted a “blank space” in the European mental map of the world (Brantlinger 166). Full of dense, impenetrable jungles, Africa was mysterious and inaccessible to Europeans: the “darkness” of Africa referred to the fact that it was a blind spot in the European consciousness.

Further, Africa was seen as lacking science and culture, values central to the post-Enlightenment West. This perceived deficiency contributed to Africa’s equivalence with darkness, historically symbolic for ignorance and evil. Lastly, Africa was abundant with untapped natural resources. As Africa was relatively disconnected from capitalism, its natural riches were obscured from the power of global commerce (Jarosz 107). Human geography professor Lucy Jarosz writes, “Africa as the Dark Continent is portrayed as a primeval, bestial, reptilian, or female entity to be tamed, enlightened, guided, opened, and pierced by white, European males through Western science, Christianity, civilization, commerce, and colonization” (108). Tarzan characterizes “Africa” as the “Dark Continent,” falling in line with the French perspective and suggesting that Africa is in need of enlightenment.

In sharp contrast, daytime is associated with light, awakening, progress, and potential. In the morning, the rest of the day lies ahead: anything is possible.

Moreover, light is symbolic of learning and the Enlightenment movement, which
emphasized reason and resisted ignorance. That the jungle is a favorable and promising space under these conditions is no coincidence. This imagery suggests that when light, in the form of European education and insight, is brought to “Africa,” conditions are at their best. Additionally, daytime and light are associated with new beginnings and the dawn of man: these repeated and evocative references to daytime allude to a new chapter in history, one that coincides with European colonization of Africa. Its own form of Manifest Destiny, “benevolent” colonialism supposedly sought to spread Enlightenment values to African colonies, bringing light to the “Dark Continent,” and thereby improving quality of life.

Tarzan exemplifies and embodies this Manifest Destiny, thriving in the jungle and spreading light throughout. Born and raised in this environment, Tarzan is at home in the jungles of Africa, and his perceptions of the landscape reflect his comfort in the space, even in acknowledging the jungle’s inherent force. Tarzan speaks of “the savage jungle that has always been [his] home,” “the cruel, fierce jungle in which he had spent twenty of his twenty-two years,” “his beloved African jungle,” “his tropical jungle home,” and “the gorgeous Africa of his boyhood” (Return 191, 5, 21, 47, 57). While Tarzan recognizes that the jungle is a formidable space, he nonetheless takes ownership of it, characterizing the jungle as his place of origin and his to possess. When he returns after spending time in Europe, Tarzan is exhilarated at reuniting with “the cabin, the beach, the little brook, the dense jungle, the black, impenetrable forest. The myriad birds in their brilliant plumage—the gorgeous tropical blooms upon the festooned creepers falling in great loops from the giant trees” (Return 102).
Moreover, Tarzan’s positive regard towards the jungle extends to others, specifically those whom he chooses to invite into his way of life, like Jane. Reflecting on her first experiences in Africa, Jane recalls, “And there are moments of quiet and restfulness by day, and vistas of exquisite beauty. You may find it strange that I should say it, who experienced such terrifying experiences in that frightful forest, yet at times I long to return, for I cannot but feel that the happiest moments of my life were spent there” (Return 62). Even Jane, who had overwhelmingly negative experiences in the jungle, such as being kidnapped by a gorilla, can access the utopian vision of the jungle thanks to Tarzan. Indeed, Tarzan serves as a guide, for both the readers and the characters, allowing those who may be considered “outsiders” to the jungle to transcend fear and uncertainty and feel intimately connected to the space. It is only Tarzan’s version of the jungle that is Edenic; thus, it is only through Tarzan that the jungle is rendered familiar, conquerable, and romantic.

Jungle imagery is the cinematic centerpiece of the 1930s films. In the place of dialogue, extensive screen time is dedicated to natural scenery, interactions among animals, and action scenes, almost all of which take place amidst the vegetation. This emphasis on flora and fauna is significant: each film includes at least four or five scenes featuring only animals/landscape, thereby glossing over many of the plot elements present in the novels. At first glance, these film adaptations appear similar to nature documentaries or anthropological footage. The animal cast in the MGM films is expansive, including but not limited to: monkeys, lions, hippopotami, hyenas, zebras, wildebeest, elephants, fictional birds, rubber crocodiles, and humans dressed as gorillas. A clear focus of the films is the presentation of a diverse spectrum of wild
animals; the directors not only used live animals, but also created dummy animals and used human actors. There are several moments in the films solely dedicated to the landscape, such as silent scenes presenting panoramic views of the forest as Tarzan and his family swim underwater and swing from vines.

Beyond this cinematic focus on flora and fauna, the films also introduce novel relationships between Tarzan and the animals in the jungle. The film adaptations present a more harmonious jungle community than in Burroughs’s books, as relationships between Tarzan and animals can be easily acted in film, but are less simply portrayed through text. Notably, in the films, Tarzan has a loyal monkey sidekick named Cheeta who regularly alerts Tarzan and his family to danger; comes to Tarzan’s aid when he is threatened; and even performs domestic tasks, such as boiling eggs and washing dishes. When Tarzan and Jane travel to New York to find their son, they naturally bring Cheeta along: she is considered part of the family. It is not only monkeys who demonstrate comradeship with Tarzan. In *Tarzan the Ape Man*, Tarzan helps to rescue an elephant from a manmade trap. Towards the end of the film, the elephants repay Tarzan by saving him and his friends. In fact, the elephants emerge at the end of nearly every MGM film to assist Tarzan in the climactic battle scene. Tarzan’s harmony with the jungle renders visual the notion that a white man can invade and conquer Africa, and that this conquest reaps benefits for both the inhabitants of the jungle and the colonizer, Tarzan. Effectively, Tarzan’s symbiosis in the jungle space actualizes the fiction of “benevolent” colonization.

The MGM films’ focus on flora and fauna and Tarzan’s positive relationships with the jungle creatures feed the perspective of the jungle as paradise. In fact, there
is very little to fear in the film adaptations, aside from potential violence at the hands of men, whether they be white European men or tribal men. For example, *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* opens with the words, “Deep in Africa, beyond all the trails known to white hunters there is an escarpment—a sheer cliff, which legend says, ‘rises from the plains to support the stars’” and *Tarzan’s New York Adventure* commences with, “Beyond the last outpost of civilization, a mighty escarpment towers toward the skies of Africa—uncharted on maps—a strange world – a place of mystery.” The jungle as portrayed in the *Tarzan* films is an off-the-map dreamland, untouched by conflict, a place for escapism. Yet it is important to note that it is Tarzan who fashions this paradise: Tarzan fosters symbiotic relationships with animals and fights off threats; Tarzan diverts ill-intentioned humans from his territory, whether they are indigenous tribes or European men; and Tarzan is content with his simple pleasures, profiting from the abundance of the jungle effortlessly.

Although Burroughs’s jungle differs from the film representations of the jungle, a key similarity between the environments lies in how they are accessed: through Tarzan. In the novels, it is Tarzan who makes the jungle safe and positive, therefore accessible to Jane and other white European outsiders. In the films, Tarzan creates a utopia, promoting constructive relationships and deterring any menaces. In both, Tarzan’s jungle is “his”: an exclusive, defined territory that is isolated from the rest of the world, providing a means of secure and governed escapism from reality. Tarzan’s Eden is fantastical and idealized: even when it is intimidating, the jungle is exciting, abundant, and full of simple pleasures. In both the books and the films, the
jungle is depicted as a vacation from reality, but only when Tarzan is present to enable others to enter and participate in the otherwise inaccessible space.

This detail is a vital connection to “benevolent” colonization: the imagery of a harmonious jungle, created by and accessible through Tarzan, advocates that white European intervention in Africa brings light to the “Dark Continent.” Importantly, Tarzan serves as a symbolic bridge to the jungle not only for the characters, but also for the audience. It is through Tarzan that his French audience may ascend to the imagined “Africa”: without him, the jungle is terrifying, unreachable, or both.

This idealized, utopian version of Africa (“Africa”) is a fiction. Africa existed before European exploration of the continent and European visions of Africa do not define its reality. Tarzan’s invasion and takeover of “Africa” is presented as mutually beneficial to Tarzan and to the jungle residents: this fictionalized natural harmony places Tarzan into the archetype of the colonial, the impossible “benevolent” colonizer. As examined prior, placing real sentiments—hope, fear, desire—onto imaginary narratives is a delicate practice that involves constant mental maneuvering to escape from reality and engage with fantasy. This never-ending negotiation succeeds in providing escapism, but at the great cost of disengaging with reality.

This begs the question: what prompted this intense collective desire to escape from 1930s France? At the time, France was energetically searching for ways to expand its vision of national identity. The 1930s marked a decade in which France was reeling from the financial and social trauma of World War I and teetering on the precipice of its sequel. In short, the interwar period was miserable, characterized by disillusionment and neuroticism, from which the French public sought a distraction.
World War I had a devastating impact on French society. The 1920s, known as *l’après guerre*, bore witness to an increasingly pervasive sentiment of despair. France was hit hard by the war, whose unparalleled scale caused massive casualties and created a climate of fear and disillusionment. The war took a serious toll on French mental health: suicide rates and incidences of violent crime and drug trafficking rose significantly (Martin 106, 108-110). Further complicating French life was the rapidly-growing immigrant population. Be it foreign workers, soldiers from the colonies, or refugees, immigrants were flooding France. In the eyes of the French, immigrants were a source of trouble, arrested and incarcerated at disproportionate rates (Weber 87). *L’après guerre* was a period of processing residual trauma from the war and grappling with its resulting social changes, most of which were deeply threatening to French identity: “Tout était à réviser, tout à rapprendre; -- everything was open to revision, everything had to be relearned” (Martin 116).

In his book, *The Hollow Years: France in the 1930s*, Eugen Weber, historian of Western Civilization, characterizes the 1930s in France as *l’avant guerre*: still recovering from the scars of World War I, but further distinguished by the agitation of an impending World War II (6). 1931 signaled the beginning of a severe economic depression in France, later than in other industrialized nations (Martin 132). The financial crisis of the 1930s was a breaking point, not only economically, but also socially. Institutional insecurity deeply weakened public faith in the nation and expanded anxieties from an individual and social level to a broader political level. The difficulties of the 1920s were exacerbated, as government fiscal support dwindled and public services operated inconsistently. Weber writes, “The crisis of the
1930s was as much economic as diplomatic, as much institutional as economic, as much about public morality, confidence, and self-confidence as it was about economic interests, employment, or the balance of payments” (7). The economic crisis had far-reaching consequences, undermining faith in the nation and leading the French to seek escapism from the lingering horrors of the war (*Hybrid* 75).

One form of escapism from French disillusionment is well known today: surrealism. Founded by André Breton and Louis Aragon in the 1920s, surrealism was a cultural movement adopted by French artists and writers and headquartered in Paris (*Modern* 79). Surrealism took the motto of the 1920s—“Tout était à réviser, tout à rapprendre”—and ran with it. Leaning into the misery and confusion of the *après guerre* period, surrealists were “celebrating the cult of the irrational, publishing incoherent manifestos, presenting nonsense poetry and drama, erecting the absurd as a principle of life […] its adepts proclaimed that the name and their actions signified the negation of everything” (Martin 116-117). Surrealism reacted to World War I and to the colonial enterprises of the 20th century, taking a highbrow position that responded with abstract, politically radical, and often unappealing ideas.

In the 1930s, surrealism became increasingly anti-colonialist. Breton denounced French involvement in the Rif War, a colonial war from 1920 to 1927 between Spain and Morocco that ultimately led to French colonial expansion into Morocco. In opposing the Rif War, the surrealists publicly rejected French colonialism and rebuffed nationalistic patriotism (Bate 59, *Hybrid* 76). The anti-colonialist surrealism of the 1930s was just as metaphysical as before: “Surrealist arts imitated contemporary politics by draining words of their original meaning,
exploiting signs and symbols for their affective charge, incorporating the most effective clichés of publicity, mobilizing color, shape, motion, action, and their messages in the service of idiosyncrasy” (Weber 225).

While surrealism echoed a popular dissatisfaction with French politics and society, it did so on a conceptual and nonrepresentational level, one that was off-putting in its embrace of indigenous people and its disdain for national integrity and French cultural superiority. Weber writes,

The world as Sartre saw it, as Malraux and many Surrealists saw it, was not accessible to reasonable explanation, not shaped by some intrinsic order, not governed by providence or progress, but simply by what we call chance, contingency, sheer casual luck. Objects, individuals, societies, history have no meaning, no significance, no end; they do not ‘make sense.’ Or only the sense we give them and that we give ourselves (228).

Surrealism, at its core, did not “make sense,” and was thus best understood by the well-educated sector of the French population. Although responding to the same societal stresses felt by the masses, surrealism’s message was obscure, controversial, and complex. Therefore, not only did the overall French public find surrealism inaccessible, but it was also fundamentally disagreeable to French sensibilities.

Surrealism was not, and could not, be the only means for the French to respond to the trauma and despair of the 1930s. Instead, another form of escapism, one that was more readily available and consumable for the public, was needed. Mass media rose to the occasion: pulp fiction brought literature to the masses; “talkies” enabled the illiterate to appreciate film; and comic books simplified literary plots and engaged younger readers. Not only did the varied forms of media make escapism more accessible, but the straightforward storylines and uncomplicated moral messages were palatable and appealing to a wider audience. Rather than engaging
with daily banalities, mass media subverted reality and replaced it with pleasing fiction. For the French, this fiction was in the colonies, “a seductive terrain of adventure” (Evans 15). Unlike surrealism, which rejected patriotism and criticized colonialism, mass media worked within the existing political framework, sending the public gaze hopefully outwards to the African colonies as an exoticized and idealized escape from the economic and political disillusionment of interwar France.

Not only did Tarzan entice French audiences with adventures in faraway places, the narrative also acknowledges and attends to the disillusionment felt in 1930s France. When Tarzan lives in Paris, he comes away with some positive lessons: “If civilization had done nothing else for Tarzan of the Apes, it had to some extent taught him to crave the society of his own kind, and to feel with genuine pleasure the congenial warmth of companionship” (Return 5). However, Tarzan leaves Paris very critical of “civilization,” particularly in contrast to the jungle. He ponders, “Who would go back to the stifling, wicked cities of civilized man when the mighty reaches of the great jungle offered peace and liberty?” (Return 103).

Additionally, Tarzan expresses deep contempt for the materialism of civilization, reflecting the popular discontent with France’s financial state and its consumer culture at the time. He condemns Europeans as being “all alike. Cheating, murdering, lying, fighting, and all for things that the beasts of the jungle would not deign to possess—money to purchase the effeminate pleasures of weaklings” (Return 12). Tarzan characterizes “civilization” as feminine and feeble, a negative connotation in an era in which masculinity and virility were considered desirable (Return 113).
These critiques of “civilization” are echoed in the MGM films. In *Tarzan the Ape Man*, when Jane first arrives in Africa, she exclaims, “I’m through with civilization. I’m going to be a savage just like you!” to her father, displaying a simplistic desire for escapism (5:05). In another film, European visitors to the jungle attempt to lure Jane back to Europe by offering her haute couture fashion from Paris, portrayed as the world’s cultural epicenter (*Tarzan and his Mate* 6:54, 28:56). Though Jane is initially excited by the prospect of new fashion, she soon abandons the expensive gowns to swim nude in a lake with Tarzan, further illustrating her rejection of “civilization” (41:45). In *Tarzan Escapes*, Jane wakes up from a nightmare, crying, “I dreamt I was back in London in a horrible, rushing taxi” (29:41). Jane’s characterization of this dream as a nightmare again exemplifies her disillusionment and distaste with the European lifestyle. Lastly, Jane makes a choice to raise her son in the jungle rather than in Europe, saying to him, “Now darling, just you forget about civilization. Our world here is far more lovely and far more exciting than the outside world, I promise you” (*Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* 9:48).

Tarzan and Jane’s critique of European civilization does not come from a place of ignorance: rather, unlike most Europeans or people in the colonies, Tarzan and Jane experience both European high culture and the utopia of Tarzan’s jungle. Thus, these characters are uniquely positioned to choose the preferable locale, and use their informed perspectives to reject the disappointing “civilization” in lieu of the dreamlike “Africa.” Because the imagined “Africa” is a “site de rêve,” it is malleable and operates not only as a place of escape, but also as a foil to “civilization.” In
portraying Tarzan’s jungle as otherworldly, the *Tarzan* narrative challenges the assumption that European “civilization” is the best way to live.

Of the MGM film protagonist, Tesson contends, “Tarzan-Weissmuller a été le premier héros, symbole de son temps, et la première vraie réponse à la crise économique de 1929 et ses conséquences, à savoir la mise en doute les valeurs de la civilisation gouvernées par l’argent”\(^{14}\) (47). Tarzan is the gatekeeper who opens the doors for France to an imagined “Africa,” a terrain that serves as a means of escape from the struggles of the 1930s and that provides a means of critiquing “civilization.”

*Tarzan*, thanks to the availability and accessibility of mass media, and its more conformist tendencies, functioned as a cultural phenomenon in which anyone could partake and relate. Essentially, *Tarzan* acted as a bridge, bringing the escapism of the imagined “African” jungle to France in an obvious manner that didn’t require the radical perspective or the education central to the surrealist movement. *Tarzan* illuminated the obscurities of the “Dark Continent” and emblemized a symbiotic European-indigenous relationship by depicting the jungle as in need of and amenable to European cultural intervention and as a tamable space that could be made utopic.

*Le Tour du Monde en Un Jour: Tarzan and the 1930s Paris Colonial Exhibitions*

France’s colonial history began in the 16\(^{th}\) century with the European exploration of the Americas, or the “New World.” By the end of the 17\(^{th}\) century, France had established settlements in modern day India and the Atlantic coasts of South America and Africa, setting the stage for what would be, at its peak in 1931, a

\(^{14}\) “Weissmuller’s Tarzan was the first hero, a symbol of his time, and the first real answer to the 1929 economic crisis and its consequences, namely the questioning of a civilization ruled by money.”
geographically-diffuse empire (Jones 55). Though the French made inroads into North America by establishing “New France,” the Treaty of Paris and the Louisiana Purchase both greatly diminished French territory and power in North America. France entered the 19th century with very few colonial territories and redirected its focus from the independent Americas and British-controlled India to new terrain: Africa. In 1830, a century before the interwar period, France invaded Algeria, beginning a century long colonial expansion within the continent.

The effort behind the French colonial mission necessarily increased following World War I. The unprecedented scale of the war cost many lives and planted seeds of intense fear and distrust of neighboring world powers. Continental blocs, such as the Soviet Union and the United States of America, provided one means of political security (Bohling 217, 218). Post World War I, France was a small European nation in terms of geography, financial power, and population. These weaknesses rendered France vulnerable in the face of continental blocs and the growing power of Britain and Germany. It was clear that to remain unassailable and competitive, France had to expand its political, economic, and social resources. Consequently, French interwar policy sought to build a larger France—la plus grande France—by increasing colonial investment, thereby amplifying French political power, developing economic potential, and capitalizing upon the manpower of people in the colonies (Jones 62, Kostova 291). French politician Léon Archimbaud named this concept in his 1928 work, La Plus Grande France, writing,

Il faut que, le plus rapidement possible, tous les Français s'intéressent au développement de nos colonies. Il faut que ce bon sens, cette notion, en quelque sorte innée, de la justice et de la justesse, qui caractérisent notre peuple, gouvernent
On the eve of the 1930s, Archimbaud emphasized that it was of urgency and import that citizens enthusiastically favor increased attention towards colonial development. The 1930s were characterized by the fantasy of *la plus grande France*, seen as the security blanket and energy source necessary to reinvigorate France (Bohling 219).

Though France had colonies around the world, French Africa received special attention as part of the *plus grande France* movement, thanks to Eurafricanism. The concept of “Eurafrica” was created by Richard Coudenhove-Kalergi in 1929. Though not developed exclusively for France, it complemented the *plus grande France* initiative, driving French attention towards its African colonies (Thorpe 503). In “The Un-European Idea: Vichy and Eurafrica in the Historiography of Europeanism,” historian Julia Nordblad details how intrinsically Eurafricanism was connected to French colonialism, noting that Eurafricanism was taken up by the likes of French colonial minister Albert Sarraut and French diplomat Henry de Jouvenel, the latter endorsing a continental European colonial administration and featuring work that proposed that African territories were the future of European colonization (719).

World War I had created intense competition and distrust among European nations such that a European continental bloc was an untenable notion in the 1930s. Instead of forming relationships with threatening European neighbors, France looked to rebuild its political security, economic potential, and social power through colonial

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15 “It is necessary that, as soon as possible, all French people become interested in the development of our colonies. It is necessary that this good sense, this notion, somehow innate, of justice and justness, which characterizes our people, govern henceforth our colonial policy. It is necessary that after having contributed so much to France in the past, these sentiments create, in the future, *la plus grande France.*”
expansion. In the interwar period, colonization was a protective measure against other European powers in the event of another war. Thus, as “inter-empire competition persisted, [French] imperial lobbyists hoped to stir the public’s and the government’s enthusiasm for empire” (Bohling 222). In the 1930s, it was in the French political interest to entertain and mobilize popular support for colonial expansion and the Eurafrican movement focused this consideration on French Africa.

It was vital that the public enthusiastically support *la plus grande France* and the colonial expositions held in Paris in 1931 and 1937 were perhaps the greatest testament to this resolution. The 1931 International Colonial Exhibition was not the first exhibition of its nature, but in 1931, it was the most impressive, expansive, and attended to date. Historically, French exhibitions were comprised of various pavilions, each representing a different locale and featuring people from the colonies, all presented in a single space. These large-scale events allowed visitors to travel through various cultural representations in the comfort of their home city. In 1889, the first Universal Exhibition was presented in Paris. Following its resounding success, the first Colonial Exhibition was held in Lyon in 1894. Similar expositions were hosted in Rouen in 1896, in Paris in 1900, and in Marseille in 1906 and 1922 (“Decentering” 248). These exhibitions brought the world to France’s doorstep, enabling those who lived in mainland France to traverse the globe within the comfort and safety of the *metropole* (the mainland capital of the empire), while also commodifying and sanitizing the colonies for uncomplicated cultural consumption (*Hybrid* 91). The 1931 and 1937 exhibitions were notable as the first major exhibitions after World War I and as the last of their stature to be held in France.
In plain terms, the colonial expositions were propaganda to promote the colonial cause and rally the public around the vision of *la plus grande France*. The French public was relatively uninformed about the colonies and often suspicious about their potential for national revitalization. Still, by the 1930s, the French had begun to piece together some ideas about French “Africa,” mostly from media and literature rather than fact. The colonial expositions sought to bridge the gap between the imagined “Africa” and reality to present a tangible example of the French fantasy “Africa,” thereby galvanizing support for the colonial mission. Historian Martin Evans writes, “The Colonial Exhibition, therefore, gave imperial expansion a sense of cohesion and purpose although to project the empire as the product of such a grand design, where a nation was united behind the colonial mission, was nothing short of an invention” (2). The pavilions manifested the fictional notion of *la plus grande France* by corralling geographically-diverse cultures into one space on the outskirts of the nation’s capital, thus representing Paris as the center of the modern world.

While escapism from 1930s France was as easy as flipping through a *Tarzan* comic book or watching one of the MGM films, the colonial expositions placed audiences inside this fantasy world, in a realization of fiction comparable to today’s fantasy theme parks. The expositions enabled the French public to experience an entire fantasy land just a metro ride from the center of Paris (Miller 45). This Epcot-like experience in the French political epicenter and cultural capital of the Western world exemplified an effort to envisage *la plus grande France* as an extension of the *metropole*: exotic, fantastical, yet under the watchful eye of France. Just as the motto
of Disney Parks is, “Where Dreams Come True,” the expositions were “sites de rêve,” fairs that sought to realize French dreams in an extremely curated setting.

From an organizational standpoint, the expositions combined people from the colonies, carefully-planned architecture, and existing motifs to commodify colonial aesthetics and further the notion of the imagined “Africa.” The pavilions in each exposition were specialized based on region: each display sought to depict the customs, traditions, and people of a given locale. These living dioramas were conceptualized and actualized by French commissioners and architects, consequently reflecting the French perception of “Africa” rather than reality. At the time, the pavilions were perceived to be authentic: the presence of live actors, strikingly different compared to the French, served as a marker of the pavilions’ legitimacy.

The exhibitions used a strategic blend of fact and fiction to propose that French colonial intervention dramatically improved quality of life in the colonies. Hubert Lyautey, the commissioner of the 1931 exposition, stated that its purpose “was to demonstrate that ‘colonial action, so long misunderstood, deformed, sometimes shackled, is a constructive and beneficial action’” (Hybrid 3). Lyautey was a preeminent figure in the Moroccan colonies, his name alone drawing crowds. His role as commissioner ensured that the curation of fiction was rooted in reality, giving the exposition legitimacy. His statement refers to the need to reaffirm French colonialism as “benevolent,” an example of how the colonial, the imagined “Africa,” and la plus grande France converged in “sites de rêve” such as the expositions.

At the 1930s expositions, the colonies were presented as necessary for French survival and success and as extensions of the metropole: “The explicit connection
between national renewal, economic and military strength, and international standing, on the one hand, and the empire, on the other, was more strongly and openly argued at the 1931 exposition in relationship to modernity than ever before” (Stanard 40, Kostova 151). The exposition itself was only a starting point: media covering the exhibition infiltrated every corner of Paris, spanning ideological and class boundaries, such that almost every Parisian was tuned into the exposition (“Decentering” 237). To a similar extent, the 1937 exposition became a cultural sensation and reached a wide audience, selling “over thirty-one million tickets and dominat[ing] the social life of many Europeans during the spring, summer, and fall” (Campbell 130). The 1937 exposition was not only as popular as the 1931 exhibition, but it was more expensive, costing the French government billions of francs (Kostova 220).

It seemed as though with each exposition, a sense of urgency was growing, “an urgency for France to define itself in relation to and to rise above other participating nations” (Kostova 223). As the 1930s progressed, the obsession with la plus grande France grew, and thus the French public was leaning deeper and deeper into the fiction of this “imagined community.” The propaganda of the 1930s expositions not only sought to promote French colonialism to its own people, but also to demonstrate French colonial strength to other world powers as a showing of political puissance. The fiction of la plus grande France was thus not only for the benefit of the French, but also a fantasy sold to other Western nations. Tarzan, a universal hero, was able to encourage the French colonial mission in a manner that was convincing and recognizable to both the French and the broader global audience.
From the visitor perspective, the tangible nature of the expositions made their message more real. Just as children believe actors portraying princesses at Disney World to be real, but recognize that the onscreen characters are fictitious, exposition audiences presumed that even if visual images and films depicting the colonies were somewhat constructed, the pavilions represented reality. If it walks like a duck, quacks like a duck, looks like a duck, it must be a duck. The exposition was marketed to audiences as an educational opportunity to see the colonies, as they were, firsthand, and it is likely that this experience was perceived as such by visitors. In promotional materials, the exposition was described as a display of human solidarity, and thus the commingling of people from the colonies and mainland French citizens in one space (albeit unequally) served to realize *la plus grande France* (Collectif).

Retrospectively, these distances between projection and reality become increasingly discernible. For instance, the people portraying the inhabitants of various colonial regions were actors. They were paid (albeit not much) to enact a fictitious charade, directed by French exposition commissioners. There was a tacit, and/or perhaps occasionally explicit, understanding between the actors and the French event organizers: the public had to believe that the pavilions depicted life exactly as it was experienced in the colonies. Footage from *Home Movies: Medicus Collection: Paris International Exposition* helps visualize this elaborate pretense. In this footage, an amateur filmmaker records video of an African man and woman in a small constructed hut. The man is sewing and wearing glasses to aid him in the detailed work; he carries on sewing until he glances up to see that he is being recorded. Immediately, he appears chagrined, hurriedly removing the glasses and continuing to
sew without their aid. This interaction illustrates the commitment of exposition
organizers and performers to creating an imagined “Africa” for the French public.

The pavilions were composed of tangible structures and live actors but did not
depict reality. Instead, they established a world in which people from the colonies
spent all their time involved in elaborate and exoticized cultural rituals, frozen in time
before the incorporation of technology or the trappings of European civilization. Even
an item as seemingly innocuous as a pair of glasses was dangerous material in the
pavilions, enough to shatter the carefully constructed illusion of how the indigenous
people of “Africa” lived. The imagined “Africa” of the pavilions also preserved the
image of “Africa” as “uncivilized,” suggesting that French “benevolent” colonization
was essential to bring modernity to the colonies.

Africa was messier than “Africa.” French colonization was met with
resistance, and invasion and imperialism were not peaceful endeavors. Life in Africa
was not as “unenlightened” as it was presented in the expositions, and it was also
more diverse, complex, violent, and difficult than in the pavilion representations.
However, to propagate the notion of an imagined “Africa” and spark the French
public’s interest in colonial investment, Africa had to be exoticized into a primitive
utopia to necessitate French intervention. Historian of contemporary European and
American architecture and urbanism Patricia Morton writes,

The messy reality of the colonies was ordered into a cohesive, pacific world. A
tropical ambiance without mosquitoes, poison snakes, or alligators allowed Parisians
the illusion that the colonies were benign, Edenic places. The advantage of this
sanitized view was that it offered, rich, exciting pictures of the colonies without any
of their dirt or inconvenience. It also edited out unpleasant realities of violent
conquest, forced labor and environmental spoliation. The unrelievedly positive
accounts of the Exposition […] further revised the history of French colonization and
its results (94).
In "Decentering the Gaze at French Colonial Exhibitions," Catherine Hodeir makes the connection between sanitized pavilions and the imagined “Africa” explicit, explaining that this sanitized model of “Africa” actualized the idealized landscape for French visitors who may have been turned off by a real venture into Africa ("Decentering" 241). Essentially, the exposition functioned as a fantasy vacation (a “site de rêve”) at a time when actual trips to Africa would likely diminish French support for the colonial mission, rather than compound it. Just as Tarzan presents the jungle as an “enlightened” utopia under his zone of influence and acts as a colonial whose influence and leadership over indigenous jungle denizens is welcomed and mutually-beneficial, the pavilions presented a simplified and sanitized version of “Africa” to the French. The physical trip to the exposition allowed fantasy to completely replace reality: where French travelers to Africa may have been forced to grapple with the uncomfortable tensions between colonizers and indigenous people and the lifestyle differences in Africa, French visitors to the exposition could claim that they had experienced Africa, and it was just as they had imagined.

Tarzan’s starring feature in a performance presented by the Parti social français at the 1937 exposition provides an example of how the Tarzan narrative supports the same realization of fiction as the colonial expositions by establishing notions of la plus grande France and “benevolent” colonization. At the 1937 fair, the Parti social français (PSF), France’s first mass right wing party, founded in 1936, organized a “Travail et loisirs” pavilion (Campbell 128). The PSF political agenda explicitly supported French colonialism in Africa, actively seeking to proliferate ideas of “benevolent” colonialism: “Specifically, the Croix de Feu/PSF used culture to
draw public attention away from growing anticolonial critiques of forced labor and demands to abrogate the *indigénat* by insisting that colonial subjects were happy members of Greater France” (Campbell 124).

Acknowledging culture’s powerful role in shaping public opinion, the PSF identified Tarzan as a cultural icon whose narrative could easily align with the French colonial mission. In her book, *Political Belief in France, 1927-1945: Gender, Empire, and Fascism in the Croix de Feu and Parti Social Français*, historian Caroline Campbell describes the performance using historical documents from the 1937 exposition. The plot “focused on how the French brought ‘civilization’ to ‘barbaric’ peoples in various French colonies around the world” (131). Tarzan took audiences on a world tour, indicating the colonies’ weaknesses in their precolonial state. Functioning as a before-and-after story, the “turning point in the performance took place with a scene called ‘The Arrival of the French,’ where Tarzan spoke on behalf of ‘Africa’ (and other precolonial regions) and begged France to bring “civilization” to the land through colonization” (131).

The depictions of precolonial Africa were unrealistic, relying on the “Dark Continent” stereotypes. Just as the actor caught on video quickly took off his glasses to maintain a façade of “savagery,” the PSF enactment's “first scene, set in Africa, was representative of the racist stereotypes and complete disregard for geography that threaded their way through the entire performance” to maintain the fiction expected by the audience (Campbell 131). Indeed, the PSF’s representations of “Africa” in the performance included tropes such as monkeys saving protagonists and homogenizing racist depictions of ethnic groups (Campbell 132). In the performance, Tarzan’s
despair at the precolonial regions was alleviated by a man draped in the French flag, representing the French nation (133). This man “touched Tarzan’s shoulders, and whispered, ‘Don’t cry anymore, Tarzan. I am France. I bring peace, work, and liberty to the whole world’”; upon hearing this, Tarzan planted the French flag into indigenous soil, representing his approval of French intervention abroad (133).

But why Tarzan? What role did Tarzan serve in the PSF production? It is Tarzan’s distinctiveness as a white European in the jungle that made him an ideal central figure. As a recognized character in France, Tarzan was influential and interesting to a wide audience. Campbell argues that “Travail et loisirs wanted children to know that such were the brutal and dangerous environments of each region and its people when left to their own devices, without the guidance of the French to enlighten them by demonstrating a proper work ethic and morals” (133). Fundamentally, though Tarzan “exhibited emotional depth that colonial subjects did not,” he was not at the level of the French, who “exhibited a mastery over colonial subjects and their environment that the impotent Tarzan lacked” (Campbell 133, 131).

Tarzan may be hereditarily European, but he was still portrayed by the PSF as lacking the benefits of French civilization. This contrast further elevated the French to the pinnacle of supremacy: the “French civilizers in the Fête were nothing like the passive and weak Tarzan, but stood atop a hierarchy of masculinity through their ‘enlightened’ colonial methods” (Campbell 134). Tarzan’s unique position in the middle of the continuum between indigenous Africans and the French allowed him to speak on behalf of both to further the French colonial mission. Tarzan, as a resident of Africa, was exceptionally qualified to welcome French colonial intervention.
Simultaneously, it was Tarzan’s European sensibilities that enabled him to value and desire what France had to offer. The PSF utilized Tarzan’s ownership of the jungle and his role as the gatekeeper to “Africa” to support French colonization as mutually desired and readily endorsed by both France and people in the colonies.

The great fiction of the expositions was that _la plus grande France_ could be made tangible, when it was nothing but an “imagined community” that the organizers sought to sell to French audiences. By erecting stereotyped structures and compelling actors to practice archaic and aestheticized cultural rituals, the commissioners of the expositions sought to reify fantasies about the French colonial empire: that it was diverse, exotic, sterile, and in need of help. But by attempting to integrate the untamed and exotic characteristics perceived in the colonies into the pure, “civilized” French context, the expositions struggled to remain loyal to these two radically different portraits: that of the colonies and that of the _metropole._

Indeed, the “pavilions at the Exposition could not maintain opposition between colonizer and colonized while meeting requirements for both savage imagery and civilized amenities” (_Hybrid_ 205). Tarzan successfully resolved this paradox, meeting expectations for savage imagery by transporting audiences to the ferocious, exoticized jungles of “Africa,” while also providing a “civilized” element thanks to his aristocratic white European heritage. At the exposition, Tarzan merged these seemingly conflicting principles by bringing “Africa” to France (by presenting audiences with tableaus of “Africa”) and by bringing France to “Africa” (rooting the French flag into indigenous ground).
In the colonial expositions, Tarzan’s role in the PSF’s pavilion supported preconceived notions of an imagined “Africa” that validated existing expectations and strongly supported French colonial intervention. Tarzan’s hybrid nature empowered him to represent the Other, as an individual from the jungle, and to subsume the Other to European dominance, both by demonstrating his superiority as a white European and by endorsing submission to French colonizers. The commitment to fantasy in 1930s France is palpable: Tarzan, a fictional character, was realized by a live actor and played alongside actors who were meant to represent people in the colonies. This conflation of reality and fantasy was intentional and served to distract audiences from real events, shifting the French gaze towards the collective colonial imagination.

Tarzan’s role in a production presented by France’s first right wing political party is no accident: it is proof that the qualities and lessons inherent in the popular Tarzan narrative supported the fantasy of “benevolent” colonization over its messier reality.

“Civilization” vs. “Civilized” vs. “Savage”

Tarzan eluded discrete categories, finding a middleman status between mainland France and the “Africa” of the French imagination. Yet, these classifications abounded: distinctions of “civilization” vs. the jungle and being “civilized” vs. being “uncivilized” or “savage” peppered colonial discourse in 1930s France. While the French were discontented with daily life in France during the interwar period, the dismissal of “civilization” did not necessitate the rejection of being “civilized.” To offer a distinction, “civilization” typically referred to a place from which to escape, usually urban centers in Western nations. In contrast, being
“civilized” was an inherent quality. “Civilization” was a noun, a concrete place, while being “civilized” was an adjective, an intangible but intrinsic trait.

To be certain, “civilization” was imbued with certain qualities, a population of “civilized” people chief among them. But even as the French sought escape from the banalities of “civilization,” being “civilized” remained a central tenet of French identity. Effectively, the Frenchman can be taken out of France, but the “France” is inextricable from the Frenchman. Thus, to actualize la plus grande France, France proposed a civilizing mission, to bring indigenous people into the fold of the French colonial empire by rendering them “civilized” (Modern 36).

In the Tarzan narrative, there are three main camps of people: the “civilized” indigenous people, the “uncivilized” indigenous people, and the “civilized” white Europeans. It is important to note that there is no fourth category, no “uncivilized” white European. Even Tarzan, raised in the jungle away from the trappings of European civilization, is considered innately and “uniquely civilized” (Tarzan’s New York Adventure 53:45). The “civilized” indigenous people are those who live in urban centers; those who live in societies with political and social structures comparable to those in Europe; or those who live in the colonies, serving white Europeans.

For instance, Burroughs writes of indigenous Arabs, “Their wild, rough lives, filled with danger and hardship, appealed to [Tarzan] as nothing had appealed to him in the midst of the effeminate civilization of the great cities he had visited” (Return 61). Describing a “civilized” indigenous society, Burroughs appears to esteem the Arabs, valuing their way of life over that of European civilization. However, though the Arab society provides a welcome escape from “civilization,” the Arabs
themselves are portrayed as “avaricious,” “bickering,” “scowling,” and “swarthy” (Return 125, 126, 49, 51). Ultimately, the “wild nomads of the desert” cannot compare in power and grace to “their more civilized brothers and sisters” of Europe (Return 78). Despite maintaining a successful society, the Arabs are characterized as inferior to Europeans solely based on their ancestry.

In the MGM films, the “civilized” indigenous archetype is embodied by the workers in the colonies who serve European colonizers, occupying a lower social status. These workers are identified as “civilized” based on their use of terms of respect for their white overseers (bwana, meaning master) and their Western attire. Living and working in the colonies under the oversight of European colonizers, these workers are distinct from the people who live in tribal communities in the jungle. The opening scene of Tarzan the Ape Man shows a village in which indigenous men lie on the ground in front of their white masters, establishing them as servile. These workers are frequently beaten and whipped, furthering underscoring their subjugation; once, a worker is shot point blank by a white colonizer simply for refusing an order (Tarzan the Ape Man 24:49, 1:10:08; Tarzan and his Mate 14:25). In the MGM films, though the “civilized” workers live in the colonies, they are nevertheless shuttled into obsequious roles as servants to white Europeans and treated as second-class citizens.

The “uncivilized” indigenous people comprise another main classification found in the Tarzan narrative. These people are often referred to as “savages” and occupy the lowest place in the power hierarchy. In Burroughs’s works, indigenous “savages” sink below even animals in Tarzan’s esteem. Burroughs writes of “savage beasts and, possibly, still more savage men” and of “the black men, and they to my
mind are in most ways lower in the scale than the beasts” (Apes 12, Return 32). The “savages” are referred to as “creatures” and “demons,” rather than as humans, depriving them of power (Apes 61, 73, 157, 163). Even when Tarzan rules the Waziri, he continually refers to the tribe as “savages,” undermining their humanity (Return 109, 119, 189).

Similarly, the MGM films paint a picture of the “savages” as the worst class of people and the enemies of all other groups. In the first MGM film, the “savages” are unsympathetically portrayed by little people wearing blackface, who antagonize the “civilized” white and indigenous parties alike (Tarzan the Ape Man 1:25:44). In fact, the “savages” are depicted as villains in multiple MGM films, always capturing and threatening to kill both white and indigenous “civilized” men (Tarzan and his Mate 1:39:38). Just as in the novels, the Tarzan films esteem “savages” less than animals, such that the “savages” are frequently conquered or beaten by animals (Tarzan Escapes 1:09:00; Tarzan Finds a Son! 1:21:27).

In valuing “uncivilized” indigenous people as lower than animals, the Tarzan narrative soothes the French anxiety that white Europeans were closely related to indigenous Africans. As evolutionary theory became increasingly accepted, fears of evolutionary regression and desires to maintain a stated difference between white Europeans and indigenous Africans were eased when animals served as a divider between these two groups in the pyramid of power. The hierarchy in the Tarzan narrative places “civilized” white Europeans at the top, followed by “civilized” indigenous people, animals, and at the bottom, “uncivilized” “savages.”
The French civilizing mission was predicated on the assumption that there was an objective understanding of what it meant to be “civilized.” Historian of modern France Alice L. Conklin explains that the civilizing mission presumed that humankind could be perfected: that though indigenous people were “too primitive to rule themselves,” that they “were capable of being uplifted” and that it was France that was best suited to “civilize” the Other (60). La mission civilisatrice maintained the commonly-held belief that “French culture was a universal model and for this reason France had a duty to liberate others from superstition and ignorance” (Evans 10). Thus, even if French “civilization” was undesirable (as la vie quotidienne became increasingly miserable in interwar France), being “civilized” remained a core French value, one that had to be preserved even as France expanded into Africa.

A necessary conflict arises: if being “civilized” is the end goal of French “benevolent” colonialism, what is France’s place in Africa after this mission is accomplished? If France truly succeeded in “civilizing” Africa, what justification would it have for remaining culturally and politically powerful over indigenous Africans and controlling African land? To preserve French control of Africa, it was essential for France to establish an upper limit of success for indigenous people, one that ensured that even the most “civilized” indigenous person could never be as powerful as the least “civilized” white European. This hierarchy demanded that all white Europeans be inherently “civilized” and that all indigenous people be essentially “uncivilized.” This binary protected white Europeans, ensuring they would remain “civilized” as they ventured beyond the bounds of “civilization.” Even if

16 the civilizing mission
Europeans lived in Africa among indigenous people, they would retain their “civilized” nature and consequently, their intrinsic superiority. The innateness of being “civilized” situates Tarzan in the middle, his European ancestry affording him power over his indigenous counterparts, despite his jungle origins.

In the *Tarzan* novels, Burroughs demonstrates how the superior quality of being “civilized” pervades even the jungle sphere, imposing upon Tarzan’s lawless home a more structured and recognizable rule system. The introduction of European cultural norms in the jungle conflicts with the freedom Tarzan has experienced there. Though he is raised by apes, in his heart Tarzan knows that his instincts move him towards a different way of life. As Tarzan grows up and acknowledges that he is not an ape, he chooses to learn more about human life:

As he had grown older, he found that he had grown away from his people. Their interests and his were far removed. They had not kept pace with him, nor could they understand aught of the many strange and wonderful dreams that passed through the active brain of their human kind. So limited was their vocabulary that Tarzan could not even talk with them of the many new truths, and the great fields of thought that his reading had opened up before his longing eyes, or make known ambitions which stirred his soul (*Apes* 81).

French philosopher Auguste Comte’s “law of three stages,” a post-Enlightenment concept first elaborated in *Cours de philosophie positive* (1835), mirrors Tarzan’s experience in the jungle of opening his mind to more reasoned truths and subsequently discovering social evolution. In Comte’s first stage, the theological stage, people fail to connect phenomena with natural causes, instead attributing real occurrences to supernatural propulsions. In the second stage, the metaphysical stage, people rely on abstract powers to explain happenings. The last stage, the positivity stage, is the most “evolved” stage, which applies scientific explanations to real world events, seeking to establish causal relationships based on empirical facts. Writing
around the same time as Darwin and other evolutionary theorists, Comte saw scientific development as a means of social evolution, hoping to use increased knowledge to improve social welfare.

Just as in Comte’s theory, Tarzan’s new knowledge about humankind propels him towards a new stage of social evolution, prompting his departure from the ape pack. Burroughs characterizes this shift as an illuminating moment for Tarzan, where he progresses forward towards his true self: “Tarzan of the apes, little primitive man, presented a picture filled, at once, with pathos and with promise—an allegorical figure of the primordial groping through the black night of ignorance towards the light of learning” (Apes 43). Therefore, being “civilized,” ostensibly the “light” the Burroughs refers to, serves as the final goal (the positivity stage) and an inevitable outcome of Tarzan’s development, given his ancestry and the context of stage theory.

Tarzan’s journey to honor and uncover his core “civilized” nature is his own civilizing mission. Once Tarzan leaves the ape pack, he rises to prominence in the jungle, above both indigenous people and animals, demonstrating that being “civilized” propels him to the top of the jungle hierarchy. Tarzan must leave the ape pack to even realize that he is innately “civilized,” again establishing and supporting separated stages of social evolution and implying that one must leave “savagery” behind entirely to begin to see the “light” of being “civilized.” In this way, Tarzan’s “civilized” jungle lifestyle serves to distinguish him from the indigenous people and animals, reflecting the mentality that even the wild jungle space is improved by the imposition of European cultural values.
Comte’s stage theory appears to embrace the fiction that social evolution occurs in discrete stages and that the most European stage, the positivity stage, was the most “evolved” and best for humankind. Yet Comte himself was not in favor of colonialism. He writes that “l'esclavage colonial tendait alors à introduire une situation également dégradante pour le maître et pour le sujet”\(^{17}\) and that this situation “devait favoriser indirectement l’esprit de rétrogradation ou d'immobilité sociale, en interdisant l'entièr eextension philosophique des généreux principes élémentaires propres à l'évolution moderne,”\(^{18}\) ultimately slowing or completely halting social evolution (108). Comte himself contended that colonization was probably not the best method to render people in the colonies “civilized.” Comte’s commentary on his own theory reveals a flaw in la mission civilisatrice: subjugation (or, as Comte so baldly puts it, “l’esclavage”) is incompatible with social betterment for all parties involved.

French colonization rested on the assumption that there remained “uncivilized” people to “civilize”: if la mission civilisatrice truly succeeded, French intervention in Africa would be rendered obsolete. The French civilizing mission was a justificatory fiction used to rationalize colonialism: it was never intended to succeed. La mission civilisatrice was a comfortable fantasy, reinforced by Tarzan, which simultaneously presented France as having “civilizing” influences and established a clear hierarchy of people based primarily on race and secondarily on “civilized” nature. In this way, Tarzan embodied the contradiction of la mission

\(^{17}\)”Colonial slavery introduced a situation equally degrading to the master and to the subject.”

\(^{18}\)”Indirectly favors regression or social immobility, in restricting the philosophical extension of the generous elementary principles peculiar to modern evolution.”
civilisatrice, supporting social evolution but maintaining discrete social strata that placed “civilized” white Europeans at the top of the hierarchy.

_Homme Idéal or Missing Link? Fetish, Fascination, and Fear in French Eugenics_

Tarzan the ape man reigns supreme in his narrative universe. In Burroughs’s novels, Tarzan’s supremacy is starkly and unquestioningly established. Burroughs describes Tarzan in superlative terms, characterizing him as matchless and attributing his exceptionalism to his aristocratic European heritage. Tarzan excels in all classic realms: beauty, strength, intellect, and morals. He is exceedingly attractive, with a “handsome, winning face” that Jane characterizes as “one of extraordinary beauty. A perfect type of the strongly masculine, unmarred by dissipation or brutal or degrading passions” (Apes 143). Even Tarzan’s French comrade, D’Arnot, acknowledges that Tarzan’s “face was very handsome – the handsomest, thought D’Arnot, that he had ever seen” (Apes 168). Judged against Western beauty standards, Tarzan rises above them and puts the most extraordinary white European men to shame. Jane contends,

> a white man, above the ordinary in physique and intelligence could never [...] have lived a year alone and naked in this tropical jungle; but this man not only surpasses the average white man in strength and agility, but as far transcends our trained athletes and ‘strong men’ as they surpass a day old babe; and his courage and ferocity in battle are those of a wild beast (Apes 177).

Interestingly, Jane specifically labels Tarzan as a white man and only compares him to other white men. Typically, whiteness is an unmarked cultural category, the norm. Yet Jane’s focus on this term is not unusual in the _Tarzan_ context. Tarzan literally means “white skin” in the language of the fictional Mangani apes, and Tarzan’s whiteness is a marked category in the jungle context (Apes 30). However, this whiteness is not, as is usually seen with marked identities, negatively connoted.
Instead, Tarzan’s whiteness is reemphasized as a label of his superiority and uniqueness. Similarly, Jane’s description of Tarzan as a “wild beast” is not reductive, but rather alludes to Tarzan’s superhuman traits: not only does Tarzan encapsulate all that is idealized about white men, but he possesses additional remarkable abilities. In this way, Tarzan is at once the ideal white man and a superhuman “wild beast.”

These “superhuman powers” allow Tarzan to simultaneously embody the physical agility of a jungle animal and the intelligence of a Western-educated man (Return 120). D’Arnot claims, “It is no disgrace to fall beneath the superhuman strength of Tarzan of the Apes,” and the indigenous Waziri tribal men are in a state of “uncanny awe of [Tarzan,] the manlike thing to which they attributed supernatural powers” (Return 27, 115). Such is Tarzan’s dominance that he is frequently compared to a God, the ultimate guardian and authority figure (Apes 105, 107, 147, 148, 160, 161, 162 165, 166, 180, 215; Return 112, 153, 154, 188, 191).

Furthermore, Tarzan excels in the realms of intellect and reason, depicted as having “superior intelligence and cunning,” a “divine power of reason,” “superior wisdom,” and a “healthy mind endowed by inheritance with more than ordinary reasoning powers” (Apes 35, 35, 78, 45). Tarzan’s supremacy extends to his morality, as he is not only powerful, but judicious, possessing an “honest loyalty that [is] so inherent a quality in himself” and a “love of fair play” (Return 5, 10). Burroughs’s portrait of Tarzan is physically, intellectually, and morally perfect, driving home the image of Tarzan as a flawless figure. Tarzan’s picture perfect image is only possible because Tarzan himself is a fictional character: no real person could ever be as universally-admired as Tarzan in terms of physical beauty, strength, intellect, and
morality. Yet, Tarzan’s actualization of this fantasy, his personification of the perfect man, lends credence to the imagined notion that mankind is perfectible.

In the films, Tarzan is again portrayed as physically and morally superior to all the other characters. Due to the fundamentally visual nature of cinema, the audience can see for themselves that Tarzan is handsome: played by Olympic swimmer Weissmuller, Tarzan is athletic, agile, and as Jane admits, “far too attractive” (Tarzan the Ape Man 1:07:10, 41:45). Tarzan’s physical power is shown through his hyper-developed senses as well as his superhuman strength, notably depicted when Tarzan smashes himself through a window and scales a skyscraper in New York City (Tarzan’s New York Adventure 57:00-58:00). Released a decade after King Kong (1933), Tarzan’s New York Adventure calls to mind the ferocity of the giant ape, once again directing attention to Tarzan’s “wild beast” side. Though Tarzan is presented as an idealized man, his animalism is also not to be ignored: Tarzan is the perfect white male specimen, but he is also something bestial, even superhuman.

Tarzan’s moral character is unquestionable in the films. Tarzan frequently comes to the rescue of white Europeans who had previously acted against him, demonstrating his selflessness (Tarzan Escapes 1:07:45). When Tarzan believes that Jane wants him to enter a trap, he proves his loyalty to her by walking into the trap of his own volition (Tarzan Escapes 1:09:00). One white explorer comments, “Miss Jane, he’s the finest gentleman I ever knew, trousers or no trousers,” demonstrating that Tarzan’s moral integrity is independent of the aesthetic trappings of “civilization” (Tarzan Escapes 50:15). In the films, Tarzan’s illiteracy makes him appear less intelligent than he is, yet Tarzan’s excellent reasoning is ultimately
revealed through his actions, not his words. Jane notes that Tarzan is “clever at almost everything” (*Tarzan Escapes* 42:35). Tarzan on screen, though marginally less perfect, is nonetheless a representation of an ideal white European man.

Tarzan carves out a clear trajectory to domination, one predicated on his ancestry. Presented as a superior specimen, Tarzan is a natural leader, an individual who possesses the qualities necessary for successful rule. This combination of ideal traits enables Tarzan’s conquest of the jungle, allowing him to defeat any opposition, be it a ferocious lion or a West Coast tribe. Not only does Tarzan vanquish all enemies, but he also prospers as a ruler, both over the Mangani apes and the Waziri. These victories, as well as Tarzan’s unchallenged position at the top of the jungle hierarchy, reinforce the notion Tarzan’s ancestry inherently qualifies him to lead.

In both the books and films, Tarzan is known as the King of the Jungle. In addition to presiding over the Mangani and the Waziri, Tarzan’s preferred position in the trees also symbolically places him at the top of the jungle hierarchy. Tarzan is known for his agility, swinging from vines and rarely touching the ground. This positionality is key in both the novel and film representations and serves as a motif of Tarzan’s natural dominance. For Tarzan, the treetops are “the waving pinnacle of a lofty monarch of the forest” (*Apes* 49). When he becomes king of the Waziri, Burroughs writes, “And so Tarzan of the Apes came into a real kingship among men—slowly but surely was he following the evolution of his ancestors, for had he not started at the very bottom?” (*Return* 129). Tarzan’s progression to kingship is an actualization of his whiteness and European birthright.
In the MGM films, visiting white explorers describe tales of Tarzan as a “very capable leader [...] with power of life and death over the entire jungle” and as “The White Ape Man, they call him, the King of the Jungle” (*Tarzan Escapes* 5:30; *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* 25:52). Jane confirms these rumors, saying, “Out here, Tarzan’s a king” (*Tarzan Escapes* 38:32). It is Tarzan’s inherited superiority that imbues him with the traits of leadership. In *Tarzan*, ancestry is presented as the fundamental entitlement to lead. Therefore, the *Tarzan* narrative suggests that people who look like Tarzan and are of his ancestry (that is, white Europeans) are uniquely suitable to lead in Africa, regardless of their training or learned abilities.

The emphasis on ancestry and heritable traits predominant in 1930s France corresponded with the growing eugenics movement. Eugenics is the practice of selecting desirable heritable traits and implementing measures, such as controlled breeding or extermination, that promote the incidence of preferred attributes and that discourage the proliferation of those deemed undesirable. The primary stated goal of eugenics, a term coined at the end of the 19th century, is to improve the human gene pool, thereby ameliorating the future of humanity. In practice, eugenicist policies took on two main forms: positive and negative. Positive eugenic policies promoted the procreation of individuals embodying desired traits. In contrast, negative policies discouraged reproduction by those whose traits were seen as inferior. In extreme cases, negative eugenics took on the form of forced sterilization and genocide. Today, eugenics is closely linked to the Holocaust (1933-1945), which propelled Europe into World War II. Though this period exemplified the disastrous power of eugenic policies at their peak, eugenics had been a part of the European consciousness for
decades prior. In France, the rise of eugenics was interrupted and almost halted by World War I. However, concerns regarding depopulation and diversification reinvigorated eugenicist sentiments during the interwar period.

Eugenics was predicated on scientific advances that emerged in the mid-19th century, notably Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution based on natural selection, elaborated in *Origin of Species* (1859). The latter half of the 19th century in France was characterized by a strong distrust towards and rejection of Darwinism (Farley 279, 300). In response to Darwinism, French scientists sought to use evolution to confirm existing beliefs about the superiority of men over women and of Europeans over Africans (Schneider 210). For instance, in a lecture series at the École d’Anthropologie in Paris, “[Auguste] Marie drew on Lamarck, Haeckel, and Darwin to argue that physiological and evolutionary factors accounted for psychological differences among populations” establishing a scale based on mental sophistication in which “[c]ontemporary man’ occupied the highest rank, followed by children and then ‘savage’ or ‘primitive man’” (Keller 126-127).

France, already well established as the cultural capital of the world, was especially concerned with maintaining its image as *raffinée*. Vanessa R. Schwartz writes that the “way ‘frenchness’ has stood for the specificity of something linked to a place and a people—but with global and universal aspirations—remains one of the most compelling qualities of modern French history” (*Modern* 6). If Darwinism was to be taken as fact, it had become more vital than ever that the French use this theory to establish white Europeans as the final stage of the evolutionary timeline, the most

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19 refined
fully “evolved” race. This urgency stemmed from France’s increasing familiarity with people in the colonies. If white Europeans had painstakingly evolved to achieve their superior status over millennia, how quickly could this evolutionary work be undone? Considering this fear, France sought to intentionally and carefully preserve this ephemeral quality of “frenchness” using eugenics.

Eugenics shared many characteristics with neo-Lamarckian theory, which held that acquired characteristics could be inherited. Like neo-Lamarckism, eugenics hinged on the assumption that the desirable traits possessed by white Europeans were heritable. This overlap between theories meant that the approach to eugenics from the beginning of the Third Republic until formation of the French Eugenic Society was predominantly neo-Lamarckian (Brauer 42). Professor of art and visual culture Fae Brauer writes in “‘L’art Eugénique’: Biopower and the Biocultures of Neo-Lamarckian Eugenics” that the relationship to neo-Lamarckism focused the French eugenics movement “upon regenerating the physiology and psychology of the body, disciplining its movement and regulating its sexuality, specifically through the mechanisms of modern sport and physical culture,” such that “eugenics in France was not just biopolitical but biocultural” (42-43).

Regeneration was a salient issue in interwar France. Following World War I, France seriously struggled with depopulation, more so than other European nations. Having lost at least 1.4 million men during the war, France was focused on recouping its significant losses. To add insult to injury, by the end of the 1930s, France had the world’s oldest population and the lowest birth rate; where “[t]he German population grew by 36 percent from 1900 to 1939; France's grew by 3 percent” (Sonn 417).
Depopulation issues rendered negative eugenics policies, as seen in Germany, unworkable. For this reason, postwar French eugenics first focused on positive eugenics, or the promotion of preferred traits within the population, rather than the elimination of characteristics thought to be adverse (Schneider 116-117).

In the 1930s, French eugenics shifted to increase attention towards negative eugenics policies, such as mandatory physical examinations before marriage, immigration restrictions, and emphasis on contraception (Schneider 171). Though World War I had raised issues regarding immigration, as many people from the colonies fought in the war and later remained in mainland France, “it was not until the 1930s that a full-blown immigration restriction program was advocated, with eugenic warnings of biological decline from intermixing of incompatible races” (Schneider 172). Professor of Contemporary History at Sciences Po Paul-André Rosental claims that increases in German power, both in population and political strength, as well as increasing racial diversity caused the French to flock towards eugenics as a concept, such that the use of the word *eugénisme* rose significantly (23). The 1930s also saw eugenics directed towards the colonies: in 1931, the Colonial Social Hygiene Service was created, providing information to France on public health abroad and enacting propaganda campaigns in French colonies (Schneider 143).

The French focus on evolution and eugenics translated to media, creating two prominent cultural tropes: the ideal man, *l’homme idéal*, and the “missing link” between apes and white European men. The former served to cement Europeans’ position at the end of the evolutionary timeline, while the latter created much desired distance between Europeans and their simian ancestors, but also frighteningly
suggested that evolution was a continuum rather than a set of discrete stages. In *God-or Gorilla: Images of Evolution in the Jazz Age*, Constance Areson Clark writes,

> From the very beginnings of European awareness of gorillas in the mid-nineteenth century, for example, these gentle animals often carried sensational, even salacious, metaphoric freight—and racial connotations—in European popular culture. Missing-link jokes and references alarmed many people because they reflected old visual and metaphoric traditions that held complex connotations (3).

The “missing link” was simultaneously tantalizing and alarming for the French, who at once fantasized about and feared what they labeled as the primitive. The concurrent fetishizing and trepidation regarding primitivism was expressed through media attending to the uncomfortable “missing link” character, who toyed with boundaries of “civilization.” Stone Age and Lost World media emerged and flourished from the late-19th century and well into the 20th, gaining traction as cavemen, ape men, and other “missing link” characters, like Tarzan, proliferated in novels, movies, cartoons, and museums (Clark 4, 8, 232). Perhaps more impactful than *Tarzan’s* literary plot was the explosion of images that the franchise created, rendering visual the formerly opaque concept of a “missing link.”

Despite his superior European traits, Tarzan is very much an unrestrained man of the jungle and truly toes the line between gentleman and “savage” at times. Yet Tarzan’s documented reasoning abilities, rule and subsequent abandonment of the Mangani tribe, and relationship with Jane all prove that Tarzan’s ape origins do not confine him, and that he is definitively a man (*Apes* 76, 84). Still, in classic “missing link” trope fashion, Burroughs refers to Tarzan as an “ape man” dozens of times (*Apes* 63, 73, 145, 157; *Return* 37, 70, 113, 128, 142, 143, 146, 189). In the MGM films, Tarzan is referred to as a “white ape,” “wild beast,” “man ape,” and “white
gorilla,” further exemplifying his “missing link” position (*Tarzan the Ape Man* 32:48, 38:56, 52:45; *Tarzan Escapes* 5:30, 8:53).

These “missing link” figures, whether they were cavemen, feral children, or Tarzan, occupied a place on the evolutionary timeline between humans and their ape predecessors. In this way, “missing link” archetypes served as a blockade that ensured a certain distance between man and monkey. This distance eased anxieties regarding evolutionary regression that naturally stemmed from new theories of evolution. In the French context, colonial expansion abroad posed the threat of commingling with those considered less-“evolved,” thereby threatening the racial purity and integrity of the white Frenchmen in the colonies. Characters such as Tarzan, who occupied an intermediary niche between the more- and less- “evolved” peoples, allowed the French to entertain the wild and exotic facets of primitivism, while keeping the fear of evolutionary regression at bay.

An episode in Burroughs’s *The Return of Tarzan* warns readers of the consequences of racial integration and accentuates the importance of maintaining racial purity, reflecting the common French fear of evolutionary regression. In this scene, Tarzan stumbles across “a lost race of white men that native legend described as living in the heart of Africa” (140). However, these white men are markedly inferior compared to typical white Europeans; though they are definitively established as having “white skins—neither in color nor feature was there a trace of the negroid about them. Yet, with their receding foreheads, wicked little close-set eyes, and yellow fangs, they were far from prepossessing in appearance” (143). This lost race is described as resembling primitive cave men and animals. Burroughs writes, “The
thick, matted hair upon their heads grew low over their receding brows, and hung
about their shoulders and their backs. Their crooked legs were short and heavy, their
arms long and muscular” (143). Burroughs refers to these men as resembling bears, as
“gorilla-like,” and as “bestial”; they are unable to communicate in almost any
language, including French, English, Arabic, or Waziri (144, 146). Finally, Tarzan
realizes that the lost race of men communicates using the language of the apes, his
role as the “missing link” allowing him to engage with the degraded lost race (147).
Tarzan is unsurprisingly puzzled: the men of the lost race are white, but they occupy a
place lower than even the lowest “savage” humans in Tarzan’s evolutionary order.

Tarzan comes to realize that these men have regressed to a more primitive
evolutionary stage because they failed to maintain their racial purity. The smart,
beautiful, and capable high priestess, her worthy qualities a result of selective
breeding over generations, explains how the lost race regressed. She clarifies,

the apes live with us, and have for many ages. We call them the first men—we speak
their language quite as much as we do our own […] in time we will no longer banish
those of our people who mate with apes, and so in time we shall descend to the very
beasts from which ages ago our progenitors may have sprung (150).

The high priestess has been able to maintain racial purity thanks to positive eugenics.
Her “strain has remained clearer than the rest because for countless ages [her]
foremothers were high priestesses; she explains, “Our husbands are chosen for us
from the noblest in the land. The most perfect man, mentally and physically” (150).
The perceived inevitability of racial/evolutionary regression to “grotesque parodies
upon humanity” says something important about the lure of life in Africa. The
assertion that, simply by cutting ties with “civilization” and settling in Africa, white
men are tempted to interbreed with monkeys adds an element of danger and imbues
the space with power. Without deliberation and purpose, as in the case of the high priestess, white Europeans risk not only racial, but species regression.

This excerpt presents evolutionary regression as an inevitability to be guarded against. How can one be a white man in the jungle without devolving into the lost race? Tarzan provides a wonderful model: his departure from both ape and tribal communities, his desire to forge his own path in the jungle, his esteem of European culture and being “civilized” in the European way… these choices all steer Tarzan from regression and towards superhuman, godlike status. These choices are also all core values underlying French colonialism in Africa: traversing the “unexplored” terrain of Africa, the civilizing mission, the superiority of European culture. Tarzan presents French colonialism as a protective response to global expansion, the alternative being racial/evolutionary regression.

Tarzan simultaneously embodies *l’homme idéal* and the “missing link,” a contradiction that highlights a fundamental inconsistency between French curiosity and revulsion regarding the primitive. Tarzan demonstrates a well-established physical, intellectual, emotional, and moral superiority, exemplifying the portrait of *l’homme idéal*, exceptional on all fronts thanks to his ancestry. Yet at the same time, Tarzan never fully banishes the “wild beast” within him, and it is this spark of “savagery” that renders him unique, but that also designates him as a “missing link.”

French attitudes towards race and evolution were characterized by an overlapping interest in and aversion towards the “savage.” Identity in France was, and continues to be today, centered around a relatively traditional culture focused on being “civilized.” While enthusiastic to venture out into “Africa,” the French feared
close contact with the Other. As France expanded its colonial mission in the 20th century and turned its national focus to the colonies in the 1930s, relationships with the Other became more interdependent and immediate. The emergence of evolutionary theory posited that being “civilized” or “evolved” was a sliding scale that held the promise of progress and the peril of regression. Consequently, creating distance between the French and the “savage” Other was vital to assuage fears of evolutionary regression. Still, these worries were tempered by a curiosity and fascination with the Other: Tarzan’s identity, both as l’homme idéal and as a “missing link,” reflects this intense conflict in the French consciousness. Just as the colonial allowed France to embody conquest and benevolence at once, Tarzan is simultaneously primitive and “evolved.” Rather than resolving the tensions created by evolutionary theory, Tarzan simply invents an unrealistic alternative.

In linking personality, intellect, and moral character to heredity, Tarzan implied that no matter how intertwined France and “Africa” became, the “civilized” nature that was core to French identity could be maintained. Even though Tarzan was born and raised in the jungle and his training was in “Africa,” his European-ness was preserved in his genes, and so he remained “civilized.” While at times Tarzan acts like a “wild beast,” this is a byproduct of his environment and will forever be moderated by his innate, inherited “civilized” nature (Taliaferro 93). Catering to a public that both fetishized and feared “Africa,” Tarzan allowed the French to comfortably approach the exciting aspects of primitivism while maintaining a distance that affirmed that French identity would remain stable.
Sex, Youth, Beauty, Valor, and the Légionnaire

Facing the “Hollow Years” of the 1930s, France embraced hyper masculinity as a means of revitalizing French power. Even before World War I, in the late-19th century, France was worried about its national vigor: though France was considered the cultural capital of the world, this reputation had also put forth an image of France as weak and feminized (Dean 5). In *The Frail Social Body: Pornography, Homosexuality, and Other Fantasies in Interwar France*, Carolyn Dean, Professor of History and French, writes that these existing concerns were exacerbated by the war, such that “many commentators thereafter perceived France as even weaker, more feminized, and more lacking in cohesion than they had at the end of the preceding century” (5-6). The notion of “civilization,” particularly French civilization, as feminine is also seen in *Tarzan* (*Return* 12, 61, 113). Consequently, interwar France, reeling from the ramifications of the war, sought to restore national pride and strength by emphasizing masculinity. This specific genre of masculinity, which emphasized sexuality, youth, fitness, and valor, became an essential facet of the *l’homme idéal*.

During the war, male sexuality had been greatly repressed, seen as a distraction from the war cause. Yet, postwar disillusionment and the decadence of the 1920s had led to (what France considered) sexual deviance; thus, paradoxically, repression of male sexuality had seemingly contributed to “immoral” sexual expression. As a result, French politicians were criticized for contributing to deviancy through the repressive rhetoric of the early-20th century. In response, France began the process of what Dean names “derepression” (Dean 85). Reacting to the trauma of the war, France encouraged heterosexual male virility as a catalyst of French regeneration. In this way, reviving male sexuality was symbolic of national renewal.
Sexual “derepression” reconsidered sexuality as a natural sign of masculinity rather than as a feminine weakness. Dean writes that the “liberation of the male sex instinct” was not at odds with culture; rather, a “‘higher’ or civilized perspective could only be sustained through a vigorously proclaimed virility” (88-89). Unlike the stereotypical notion of “wild” sexuality as opposed to being “civilized,” Dean contends that in the 1930s, sexual liberation was a requisite part of the “civilized” homme idéal. Nature and sex “were thus no longer equated with the female body and degeneration, but with masculinity and cultural grandeur” (85, 88-89).

Sexuality is featured heavily in the Tarzan narrative. While the sexual “derepression” movement was unfolding in France, Tarzan was proliferating sexual images in all forms of media. Burroughs’s books focus attention on Tarzan and Jane’s sexual chemistry, emphasizing Tarzan’s sexual dominance as masculine. Burroughs writes, Tarzan “did what no red-blooded man needs lesson in doing. He took his woman in his arms and smothered her upturned, panting lips with kisses” (Apes 137). Burroughs depicts Tarzan’s sexuality as an innate, “civilized” phenomenon, as defined by the French “derepression” movement. He writes that Tarzan’s experience of kissing Jane “fanned a new flame to life within his breast” and “seared a deep brand into his soul – a brand which marked a new Tarzan” (Apes 138). Burroughs’s rendering of Tarzan and Jane’s interactions focuses on untaught, unlearned impulses, signaling Tarzan’s sexuality as central to his sense of self and personhood, but also as something primitive. Tarzan’s sexuality is primal, evocative of his “wild beast,” side, and a large part of what contributes to his desirability.
This emphasis on sexuality is also found in the MGM films, in which Tarzan’s constant semi-nudity cannot be ignored. As mentioned prior, there are several long, silent scenes depicting Tarzan and Jane swimming nude together in the films. These scenes do not advance the plot of the movies, serving instead as purely aesthetic visuals of sexuality (*Tarzan and his Mate* 41:45). In his essay “Tracking the Sign of Tarzan: Trans-Media Representation of a Pop-Culture Icon,” Walt Morton asserts that the film version of Tarzan is an erotic object of the male gaze. Morton describes a scene in which Tarzan loses consciousness after wrestling an enormous snake and Jane caresses and examines Tarzan’s body in a series of close film shots: “The viewer, positioned as Jane, cannot avoid eroticizing the male body” (119). The erotic visuals in the MGM films serve to sexualize Tarzan, but do so in a way that preserves his hyper masculinity (“Tracking” 119). Both text and film versions of *Tarzan* place emphasis on sexuality, mirroring the “derepression” movement in interwar France.

Tied to virility and national regeneration was another facet of the *homme idéal*: adolescence. A limbo-like stage, adolescence is the unique developmental moment in which an individual is offered unlimited opportunity, but holds very little responsibility. In the interwar era, adolescence was treated as a critical period for the preservation of “primitive masculinity” by prominent theorists. American psychologist G. Stanley Hall ascribed to the theory of recapitulation, which posited that human development (ontology) mirrored the evolution of species (phylogeny), such that young boys were actually, not just metaphorically, primitive (Clark 8). As the primitive stage, adolescence was considered as crucially important to the retention of masculinity in the face of feminizing “civilization.” As a protective measure, Hall
suggested that encouraging young boys to engage in “primitive’ adventures” would “protect them from excessive civilizing influences later in their lives. It would, in a sense, inoculate them with a form of primitive masculinity” (Clark 8).

French scholar and leftist politician Ferdinand Buisson described both the potential and the hazards of adolescence in an 1899 speech on the “Present duty of the youth,” emphasizing this developmental stage as a crucial period (Surkis 29). In *Sexing the Citizen, Morality and Masculinity in France, 1870–1920*, historian Judith Surkis writes that Buisson drew “a striking analogy between the crisis of puberty and the growing pains of the new Republic […] Like the adolescent boy, the Republic itself was ‘formed but still weak,’ and thus in need of ‘a hygienic regimen that will lend it blood, flesh and muscles’” (30). Though the youthful male body was “necessary in order to fill out the malnourished republican skeleton,” it was also very dangerous “to the extent that it remained undisciplined” (Surkis 30).

Adolescence is defined by its in-betweenness: it is an unstable position linking the more secure positions of childhood and adulthood. Comparably, the interwar period was a time of uncertainty and anxiety: war, though tumultuous, is a fight against a known enemy. The 1930s was a precarious decade that cannot be described as peaceful, but must be contextualized by its place in the midst of two monumental wars. The French desire to remain young and adolescent may be understood as a fear of maturing and of taking on greater responsibility. At the time, global expansion was desirable because it provided political and financial security. Yet building *la plus grande France* also meant controlling acres of new land and thousands of people, a huge undertaking. The French colonial mission was entering its own adolescence in
the 1930s, holding great possibility for national growth, but also potentially a site for peril and failure. Unable to acknowledge the trauma of World War I and equally unwilling to venture towards the inevitable World War II, French national identity was in an adolescent stage, uncertain and stagnating.

In all iterations, Tarzan is portrayed as a Peter Pan figure, whose never-ending youth personifies adolescence. Burroughs frequently characterizes Tarzan as both a child and as a primeval man, resonating with Hall’s theory of recapitulation: that youth is synonymous with primitivism (Apes 33; Return 26). He writes, “Really Tarzan of the Apes was but a child, or a primeval man, which is the same thing in a way” (Return 112). Tarzan represents an endless youth: even as he physically ages and may be considered beyond the category of “child,” he is most certainly trapped in an infinite adolescence (Galloway 206).

In his critical analysis of Burroughs’s works, The Teenage Tarzan: A Literary Analysis of Edgar Rice Burroughs’s Jungle Tales of Tarzan, Stan Galloway focuses specifically on Tarzan’s youth as a literary theme, asserting that Tarzan’s moral trajectory aligns with psychological models of the ego: “Tarzan’s delight still in games of tag, for example, shows an ego that sees itself as the center and therefore the most important aspect of the universe, just as a child thinks and feels” (90). Tarzan’s youthful self-centeredness is a direct connection to the notion of France (often more specifically, Paris) as the center of the universe, the brain of the expansive nervous system conceptualized as la plus grande France. Just as the colonial expositions brought the world to Paris, Tarzan’s self-indulgence reflects a desire to remain the
central focus. This juvenile ego seen in *Tarzan* is representative of the self-importance felt in mainland France regarding the ever-expanding French empire.

In addition to sexuality and youth, the male role models ubiquitous in interwar France shared one common feature: their musculature. French weightlifters such as Alexandre Maspoli, Charles Rigoulot, and Ernest Cadini were revered as *hommes idéaux*, and Maspoli’s naked torso was famously advertised on the cover of *La Culture Physique*. Male beauty skyrocketed in the French cultural consciousness, as physical fitness and musculature were heavily marketed and desired: “Muscular masculine norms were entrenched everywhere” (Tumblety 8). Promoting physical fitness became a full-time job: known as “physical culturists,” elite doctors and athletes publicized the benefits of male beauty and physical strength to the French public, offering men widely-publicized, transformative programs not unlike those endorsed by wellness and fitness influencers on social media today (Tumblety 1, 17).

Again, it is important to note that this passion for physical fitness did not appear spontaneously, rather it was in response to fears of emasculation related to “civilization” following World War I. In *Remaking the Male Body: Masculinity and the Use of Physical Culture in Interwar and Vichy France*, historian Joan Tumblety writes, “Crucially, the physical culturist view was marked by […] the fear that the comforts of modern living, which left the male body ‘soft’ and thus potentially feminized, had resulted in an erosion of ‘the corporeal foundations of male privilege’” (17). In addition to sexuality and youthfulness, physical musculature and male beauty were hallmarks of masculinity in interwar France and essential traits of *l’homme idéal*. Tumblety explains how the “intertwined crisis of masculine virility
and national vitality” may explain the French emphasis on male beauty at the time, writing that the “appeal to beauty [was] made in countless interwar get-fit guides, in which individual virility was conflated with national vitality” (4, 7).

Visualizing this ideal Frenchman becomes increasingly difficult with each trait ascribed to him. White, European, young, muscled… with each additional characteristic, the pool of potential hommes idéaux shrinks. Yet, one genre of Frenchman was perceived as encompassing all aspects of l’homme idéal and was thereby a more accessible archetype: the légionnaire. The légionnaire was a young member of the French Foreign Legion (FFL), a branch of the army formed in 1831. As noted prior, France’s conquest of Africa began in earnest in the 1830s with the invasion of Algeria. Therefore, the FFL’s emergence can be directly tied to the expansion of and investment in French Africa. The FFL’s main purpose was to preserve and expand the French colonial empire, and as such, the légionnaire served outside of mainland France in the colonies. The FFL played a crucial role during World War I, cementing their heroic image in the French memory. Active during the interwar period, the FFL was also a major French asset during the North African Rif War of the 1920s, a significant event that furthered French expansion into Africa.

The légionnaire lived overseas in the imagined “Africa.” Just as the jungle became a fantastical space curated by the French collective imagination, so did the personhood of the légionnaire. Presented to the French public primarily through film, the physical distance between the French and the légionnaire allowed the public to project its desired image onto the FFL. Just as the colonial expositions were designed to meet French expectations, the légionnaire was constructed through media to affirm
existing stereotypes. In her essay “Un De La Legion: Myth Conception and Misconceptions,” Marie-Helene Heurtaud-Wright explains that FFL promotional films “foregrounded the much-vaulted virile qualities of the men, their sense of duty and honour, and their readiness to die. The concept of military valour thus elaborated functioned as a homogenizing myth around which the nation could unite” (41).

Because the légionnaire was an imagined figure, like the colonial and like Tarzan, he aligned almost perfectly with masculinity as promoted in interwar France. For one, the légionnaire was youthful, also stuck in an adolescent limbo. On the continuum of male adolescents as sexually irresponsible and adult men as sexually responsible, “in theory, if not in practice, ‘soldiers’ occupied an intermediate realm between ‘adult’ and ‘minor.’ While technically adult in terms of age, the soldier was a legal minor, liberated from his family, but still in tutelage to the state” (Surkis 212). The légionnaire was positioned in the same stage of development that Hall described as primitive, embodying those qualities considered synonymous with male virility.

The légionnaire was an archetype whose purpose was to awaken a multitude of feelings in the French public that would then be inextricably tied to colonialism, by virtue of the légionnaire’s occupation. For instance, the sexuality exuded by the légionnaire attracted men and women alike: men wanted to be desirable to women, and women were socialized to crave the virility inherent in the légionnaire’s uninhibited sexuality. The légionnaire’s youthfulness was attractive not only to youth, who could identify with the figure and use him as a role model, but also to older men, who longed for their lost youth and sought to return to the simpler times of
adolescence. The physical beauty of the légionnaire, distinct from his sexuality, was aesthetically appealing to all, be it in terms of sexual attraction or admiration.

Tarzan’s natural instincts for protection demonstrate his potential for military valor early on. In Burroughs’s first Tarzan novel, he characterizes Tarzan as courageous and lionhearted, writing, “[f]or a naked man to drag a shrieking, clawing man-eater forth from a window by the tail to save a strange white girl, was indeed the last word in heroism” (Apes 106). Tarzan’s bravery is most prominent when Tarzan is close to Jane, accentuating how valor is gendered and sexually-motivated, emerging as masculine when presented with a feminine counterpart: “He knew that she was created to be protected, and that he was created to protect her” (Apes 118). Tarzan’s masculinity is emphasized when he is placed in contrast to Jane. By protecting the weaker, feminine Jane, Tarzan establishes his masculinity as powerful and necessary.

Like any good soldier, Tarzan enjoys his mission: “It seemed to him that no pleasure on earth could compare with laboring for the welfare and protection of the beautiful white girl” (Apes 130). Moreover, his savior character is natural and inherent, an intrinsic part of being the man that Tarzan is: “The act was quite involuntary, and almost equally so was the instinct of protection that threw a sheltering arm around the girl’s shoulders” (Return 37). By protecting women, even in the face of personal danger, Tarzan establishes himself as a man. Thus, the Tarzan narrative underscores the importance of courage as an essential component of masculinity, the kind of masculinity also typified by the légionnaire.

In Burroughs’s first novel, Tarzan of the Apes, the character of the French soldier, D’Arnot, further valorizes the image of the légionnaire. D’Arnot, though he
may not be quite as perfect as Tarzan, demonstrates great bravery and valor in the face of danger. He is strong and hardy (“not once did the Frenchman cry out in pain”) and he is “civilized,” a true hero and gentleman (*Apes* 155). When D’Arnot is kidnapped by the West Coast tribe, he demonstrates grace in the face of adversity. Burroughs writes of D’Arnot, “He was a soldier of France, and he would teach these beasts how an officer and a gentleman died” (*Apes* 156).

It is not only the readers who are impressed with D’Arnot’s fearlessness and gallantry. The British aristocrat and Tarzan’s cousin, Lord Clayton, is also impressed by D’Arnot: “Clayton did not reply, but within him rose a new respect for Frenchmen which remained undimmed ever after” (*Apes* 164). D’Arnot’s bearing as a soldier of France abroad, a *légionnaire*, not only reflects upon him as an individual, but becomes representative of all French soldiers, and indeed, all French citizens. Clayton’s esteem of D’Arnot, as a British man admiring a Frenchman, reflects the previously-discussed French desire to be perceived as formidable and resilient by other countries like Britain. The imagined *légionnaire* was not only central to French politics and identity, but the representation of this archetype in fiction enabled all positive traits to be projected onto the *légionnaire*, and by proxy, all of France.

Burroughs’s novels ascribe merit to the *légionnaire* by portraying French soldiers abroad as heroic figures and by commissioning Tarzan himself as a *légionnaire*. In *The Return of Tarzan*, D’Arnot employs Tarzan within the French army, through which he is deployed to Africa as an undercover agent. Just as Clayton’s compliments towards D’Arnot generalize the fictional soldier’s positive traits to all Frenchmen, Tarzan’s status as a *légionnaire* imbues the image of the
légionnaire with Tarzan’s superhuman and desirable qualities. The implication becomes that if a young man decides to serve in the FFL, he will personify the exceptional qualities that Tarzan possesses. Extremely effective (if unwitting) French colonial propaganda, *Tarzan* is a vehicle through which any ordinary Frenchman, simply by enlisting as a légionnaire, becomes an homme idéal. In France, the légionnaire was the colonial, was the homme idéal: this man “who lived in people’s imagination” presented the same paradoxical dualities seen in the other archetypes: “an ambiguous mix of strength and fragility, both single-minded and confused, wishing to ‘wipe the slate clean’ and yet unable to forget the past, intent on cheating death whilst morbidly fascinated by it, irresistible to women, but happiest in the company of men” (Heurtaud-Wright 42). The interwar period was begging for a role model like the légionnaire, and for this reason, Heurtaud-Wright contends that in “the 1930s, the myth of the legionnaire had never thrived so successfully” (42). The demand for an homme idéal such as the légionnaire was time-specific to the 1930s. Alongside the growth of eugenics and the fears of depopulation, France established a new model of masculinity, one that sought to demonstrate virility and vigor in the face of feminizing “civilization.” To be a man’s man in interwar France, one had to embody sexuality, youth, male beauty, and military valor.

The idea of masculinity as a necessary underpinning of French colonial success is well summarized by an article written in *La Culture physique* in the late 1920s by a medical doctor. He contended that French men “were not robust enough to run their own empire,” and that successful colonial administration required people who were “conquerors of foreign climes” rather than those who could exert “their
influence only cerebrally and from a distance” (Tumblety 37). The doctor argued that “the French empire risked being colonized all over again [...] for lack of men willing and able to populate the French colonies themselves” (Tumblety 37). Not only was virility important for French power, but emasculation had dire consequences, including the reversal of colonial power structures.

Tarzan was the légionnaire, was the homme idéal, was the colonial. These fictional figures were assimilated into the ape man’s powerful portrait. Perhaps more importantly, these many personas were not just people, but also representatives of the French colonial mission: the légionnaire represented virility and youth abroad, signaling a revitalization of French national identity through exploration and conquest in the colonies; the homme idéal accentuated racial purity in the face of increased diversity, both as a result of increased immigration to mainland France and of French expansion in non-European communities; and the colonial embodied perceived French benevolence and integration in its colonial efforts, skimming over the power dynamics inherent in such a formidable governing institution. Tarzan specifically and completely incarnated these numerous tropes, thereby inventing fictions that circumvented and subverted reality, rather than engaging with the many cognitive conflicts present in French notions of personhood and nationalism.

**Saturnin Farandoul: Tarzan’s French Foil?**

Tarzan was not the only literary-fictional character of the time to embody these archetypes… Mowgli of Kipling’s *The Jungle Book*, TinTin the Belgian comic book hero, even Superman were all popular in the 1930s. Where Mowgli encapsulated the “missing link,” TinTin was a colonial and a légionnaire, traversing
through Africa and Asia. Superman was very obviously an archetype of *l’homme idéal*, named for his superhuman abilities, intellect, moral code, and attractive physique. Yet Tarzan epitomized not just one of these French archetypes, but all of them, managing to tick off nearly every box. Even though Tarzan was a British protagonist designed by an American author, perhaps his popularity in France was simply a byproduct of lack of competition. This begs the question: was there a French equivalent of *Tarzan*?

Not only did a *Tarzan* have a French counterpart, but this nearly identical hero emerged over three decades prior to Burroughs’s first *Tarzan* novel. In 1879, Albert Robida, a prolific French artist and author, wrote *Voyages Très Extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul*, a multi-part illustrated novel featuring the travels and conquests of the heroic Saturnin Farandoul. Robida was first and foremost a visual artist: he founded the weekly satirical journal, *La Caricature*, and was known for his illustrations of travel guides and literary classics. Moreover, Robida is known as a contemporary of Jules Verne, inspired by Verne’s *Voyages Extraordinaires* series. Like many of Verne’s celebrated works, Robida’s *Voyages Très Extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul* is both an adventure and science fiction novel, a common intersection at the time. As evidenced prior, science, fiction, and adventure were all conflated: eugenics, now ethically controversial, was seen as scientific, whereas Darwinian evolution, perceived today to be fact, was critiqued by skeptics.

Robida’s Saturnin Farandoul is a global citizen, who travels through Oceania, the Americas, across Africa, into Asia, and even ventures to space. This blend of realistic and futuristic elements mirrors Verne’s *Voyages Extraordinaires* series. In
fact, Robida’s take on the series is fully titled, *Voyages Très Extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul dans les 5 ou 6 parties du monde et dans tous les pays connus et même inconnus de M. Jules Verne*. The title of this work alone demonstrates Robida’s witty capacity to combine his interests of satire, travel, adventure, illustration, and Verne into one work. Notwithstanding Robida’s use of literary elements popularized by the eminent Verne, Saturnin Farandoul never emerged as a salient figure in the French consciousness. Robida’s works were mainly published in fin de siècle France, towards the end of the 19th century. Yet, by the end of World War I, Robida’s fame had already faded, his literary contributions forgotten works.

Saturnin Farandoul, the titular protagonist of Robida’s *Voyages Très Extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul*, appears at first glance to be Tarzan’s carbon copy predecessor. A shipwreck castaway, the orphaned infant Farandoul is discovered by a tribe of compassionate apes20, who raise him as their own; however, Farandoul is considered as vastly inferior to his ape kin, given his physiological differences and slower development (18-20, 23, 26, 27). Just like Farandoul, Tarzan is discovered by apes as an orphaned infant. At first, Tarzan is perceived to be weak and helpless in comparison to his ape peers, given his physical characteristics and age (*Apes* 31).

Both Farandoul and Tarzan experience deep feelings of embarrassment and insecurity in response to their relative powerlessness: Tarzan’s “little body, burned brown by exposure, suddenly caused him feelings of intense shame, for he realized that it was entirely hairless, like some low snake, or other reptile” and “Farandoul

20 In the context of *Voyages Très Extraordinaires de Saturnin Farandoul*, the terms “monkey” and “ape” will be used interchangeably. The French word *singe* was translated to English as “monkey” in Stableford’s translation of the work, but “ape” as used in Burroughs’s works is typically translated into French as *singe* as well.
believed himself irredeemably deformed” (Apes 31, Robida 27). Despite their physical limitations, both Tarzan and Farandoul are redeemed by their superior reasoning skills. Tarzan’s “higher intelligence resulted in a quickness of mental action far beyond the powers of the apes” and Farandoul is “marked with the seal of genius” (Apes 35, Robida 82). Tarzan and Farandoul appear to be incredibly similar from their origins, strengths and weaknesses, and identity within their community.

However, Tarzan and Farandoul respond to their perceived inferiority in radically different ways. The turning point for both heroes is remarkably similar: dejected, they both gaze pensively at their own reflections, using bodies of water as mirrors. For Tarzan, it is the first time he has seen his own face:

In the higher land which his tribe frequented was a little lake, and it was here that Tarzan first saw his face in the clear, still waters of its bosom. It was on a sultry day of the dry season that he and one of his cousins had gone down to the bank to drink. As they leaned over, both little faces were mirrored on the placid pool; the fierce and terrible features of the ape beside those of the aristocratic scion of an old English house. Tarzan was appalled. It had been bad enough to be hairless, but to own such a countenance! He wondered that the other apes could look at him at all. That tiny slit of a mouth and those puny white teeth! How they looked beside the mighty lips and powerful fangs of his more fortunate brothers! And the little pinched nose of his; so thin was it that it looked half starved. He turned red as he compared it with the beautiful broad nostrils of his companion. Such a generous nose! Why it spread half across his face! It certainly must be fine to be so handsome, thought poor little Tarzan. But when he saw his own eyes; ah, that was the final blow—a brown spot, a gray circle and then blank whiteness! Frightful! not even the snakes had such hideous eyes as he (Apes 31-32).

Tarzan is so preoccupied with his perceived physical abnormalities and inferiorities that he does not notice a lioness poised to attack. The lioness pounces, and Tarzan escapes into the water, swimming away, while his ape cousin is killed. Tarzan’s reasoning skills enable his survival, while his ape cousin dies. Tarzan’s survival is a key turning point, demonstrating to Tarzan that his “self-confidence and resourcefulness” may compensate for his physical deficits (Apes 33). This experience
emboldens Tarzan, empowering him to cast away his prior feelings of shame and to participate in, and ultimately dominate, the ape community.

In contrast, Farandoul’s reflections take him on a drastically divergent path. Farandoul “had given himself a crick in the neck staring at his reflection in the clear water of a spring but he had seen nothing to authorize the least hope that he might one day possess the same triumphant appendage as those he truly believed to be his blood-brothers,” his fellow apes (27). Rather than engaging in a feat of bravery, Farandoul dreams of “running away, exiling himself far from those he loved, in order to hide his sorrow and humiliation”; he constructs a coconut palm raft and sails away from the jungle, to the distress of his monkey community (27).

When confronted with the reality of their physical abnormalities and the powerful feeling of shame, both Tarzan and Farandoul utilize their human brainpower to devise remedies to their feelings of inferiority. However, Tarzan uses his superior reasoning to demonstrate his power through fighting and winning, whereas Farandoul employs his intellect to escape from his negative feelings. Tarzan is the colonial/légionnaire: he goes forth into the world and responds aggressively and affirmatively to any obstacles. In this way, Tarzan resonates with the French public. In contrast, Farandoul’s self-reflective approach to conflict acknowledges and admits weakness, thus appearing like surrealist responses to World War I: perhaps too introspective, mentally-draining, and unappealing to French audiences. Despite their similarities, this turning point for both characters reveals a fundamental difference in their motivations: Tarzan stays to fight, while Farandoul chooses flight.
Farandoul nonetheless proves to be a heroic protagonist, viewed as exceptional due to his above average intelligence and connection to the jungle. After leaving the jungle, Farandoul is adopted by the Lieutenant Mandibul, who rescues him in his ship, *La Belle Léocadie*. Farandoul is overjoyed to find a community of people with whom he shares resemblance: “No more humiliation! No more shame!” (30). Unlike Tarzan, who relates to white men, but prefers a solitary lifestyle, Farandoul’s association with white Europeans is about acceptance and community. In a political context, Farandoul’s community-building response relates to the continental blocs formed in the early-20th century (the United States, the Soviet Union), while Tarzan’s isolationism reflects the French experience of promoting national vigor rather than collaborative strength.

Though Farandoul is welcomed onto *La Belle Léocadie*, he is no ordinary seaman: much like Tarzan, Farandoul’s jungle upbringing has given him a physical agility and “wild” quality that is admired and coveted by the Europeans. Robida writes, Farandoul’s “superiority to the sailors aboard *La Bella Léocadie* was obvious. None could compare with him in the feats of wild gymnastics that he performed on the topmasts […] The benefits of education and civilization had converted the unsuccessful ape of other days into a superior human being!” (32). Unlike in *Tarzan*, Farandoul’s “civilized” nature is taught, rather than being innate, but like Tarzan, Farandoul’s combination of being “civilized” and being “wild” is unparalleled.

However, Farandoul’s failure to dominate or integrate into the jungle represents a stark divide between Farandoul and Tarzan. Unlike Tarzan, who can rule over the entire jungle thanks to his inherent intellectual superiority, Farandoul is only
considered exceptional when he gains a European education. Tarzan’s reasoning and subsequent success is treated as hereditary and intrinsic: he possesses “the active intelligence of a healthy mind endowed by inheritance with more than ordinary reasoning powers” (*Apes* 45). Further, this intelligence provides Tarzan with power over the jungle wildlife. Burroughs characterizes reason as “that little spark which spells the whole vast difference between man and brute” and writes, “it is mind, and not muscle, that makes the human animal greater than the mighty beasts of [the] jungle” (*Apes* 82, 186). If this were true in Robida’s universe, Farandoul would have triumphed in the ape society, despite his physical disadvantages, thanks to his inherited mental capacities. However, Robida allows Farandoul to fail in the jungle, making it clear that it is his learned European education that raises him above others in authority. This divergence raises a key difference between the two protagonists: Tarzan is inherently exceptional, whereas Farandoul’s singularity is taught.

Though both Tarzan and Farandoul are characterized as extraordinary, Tarzan’s uniqueness originates from his inherited qualities as a European man raised in the jungle, whereas Farandoul, having learned from his jungle upbringing, is subsequently elevated above the average man by his European education. In a way, Tarzan and Farandoul, while both partially related to “civilization” and the jungle, have opposite trajectories. Tarzan is an inherently “civilized” European with aristocratic blood whose development in the jungle infuses him with virility, strength, and power, such that he chooses to remain in the jungle. In contrast, Farandoul finds himself unsuccessful in the jungle, an average European man in an unfamiliar terrain, and chooses “civilization,” where he thrives as a “civilized” man whose time in the
jungle gives him leverage. Robida writes, “No one who caught sight of Saturnin
Farandoul five years after these events would have been able to recognize the
monkey’s foundling in the young man with the thin moustache, the intelligent face,
and the forceful gestures” (32). While Farandoul is an above-average European man,
beyond succeeding in “civilization,” he is otherwise unremarkable: his European
education has extinguished any evidence that Farandoul was raised by monkeys.

This is a sharp contrast to Tarzan, who (though possessing a hereditary
“chivalry and tenderness which only associates with the refinements of the highest
civilization”) does not take to living in Europe or any aspect of European training,
ultimately returning to the jungle (Return 188). Farandoul holds the passport of a
European education, which allows him to travel the world, settling nowhere and
enjoying global conquest. This is fundamentally different to Tarzan, who maintains a
dual citizenship between “civilization” and the jungle, allowing him to inhabit both
spheres with equal ownership and dominance and to choose the jungle. While
Farandoul is an exceptional European man whose adventures are exciting and
admirable, he is not unique, as is Tarzan, whose middleman positionality allows him
dual identification and equal power in “civilization” and the jungle.

Thanks to Farandoul and Tarzan’s upbringing in ape tribes, a commonality in
both Voyages Très Extraordinaires and the Tarzan novels is the featured presence of
apes. Apes, to be distinguished from the more fearsome, antagonistic gorillas, are
central to both stories, in that both Farandoul and Tarzan establish cherished
relationships with apes early in their development. Farandoul was welcomed into “an
honorable family of monkeys,” his mother described as possessing an “elegant
figure,” a “graceful demeanor,” and “candor and a dignified serenity” (18, 19). As part of a monkey family, Farandoul “lived quite happily” and “enjoyed the most complete individual liberty” (23). Similarly, Tarzan sincerely considers the she-ape, Kala, his mother, even after learning of his aristocratic ancestry, claiming, “I am perfectly content to remain forever the son of Kala, the she-ape” (Return 19). Though both Farandoul and Tarzan show great respect for their mothers, their views regarding apes thereafter evolve along divergent paths.

Tarzan, extraordinarily successful in the jungle, rises in status within the ape pack, eventually becoming king. Initially, he is pleased by this leadership role, using his power to promote the apes’ interests. He warns the rest of the jungle, “I am a great killer. Let all respect Tarzan of the Apes and Kala, his mother” (Apes 50). To some extent, Tarzan’s affiliation with the ape pack is tied to his relationship with Kala. Once Kala dies and Tarzan begins to develop an identity as a non-ape, Tarzan’s views on the pack and his role begin to shift; he begins to dislike the “irksome duties of leadership amongst a horde of wild beasts” and “he [finds] that kingship meant the curtailment of his liberty” (Apes 80). Prior to Kala’s death, Tarzan viewed himself as part of the ape pack, a “wild beast” himself. Once he leaves the Mangani, it is not that Tarzan is no longer a “wild beast” (in fact, we see through Jane’s eyes that this part of Tarzan remains very much alive), but rather that he is no longer only a “wild beast,” but also recognizes himself as a man. Tarzan does not renounce the “wild beast” part of himself, but acknowledges that he is all that and more, prompting him to resign from his kingship to begin a solitary life in the jungle as he comprehends that he, a human, is too powerful to be dragged down by the needs of the apes.
Farandoul’s relationship with the monkeys is almost the inverse. Unsuccessful in the jungle, Farandoul flees, leaving monkey society where he is positioned on the bottom rung of the social ladder. Still, when he later requires assistance fighting off pirates, Farandoul speedily recruits his monkey friends, who fight alongside him on his behalf. Again, when Farandoul lays siege to an aquarium to save his love interest, the monkeys selflessly join his cause. Not only does Farandoul depend on the monkeys, they are also characterized in an extremely positive light: fearsome in battle, but compassionate in nature. For instance, a journalist covering the battle writes, “The monkeys, so terrible in battle, now seem very amiable, and full of concern for our wellbeing” (80). When Farandoul forms his own kingdom, Farandoulia, he goes as far as to elevate monkeys to human status, proclaiming, “Men and monkeys are henceforth equal before the law” (84).

Farandoul’s rapport with the monkeys is very different from Tarzan’s; rather than rejecting the monkeys, Farandoul depends on them for support and enjoys being their leader. Moreover, Farandoul bridges the human-animal gap, equating monkeys and humans by characterizing the monkeys very similarly to men. Nevertheless, Robida makes it clear that monkeys do not function at the same intellectual level as humans. Without Farandoul’s leadership, the monkeys are easily tricked by enemy humans, and it is their guilelessness that leads to the downfall of Farandoulia: the integrated human-monkey society was ultimately a failed project. Still, the representation of monkeys in *Voyages Très Extraordinaires* exemplifies a major difference between Farandoul and Tarzan vis-à-vis their evolutionary predecessors.
Both Burroughs’s and Robida’s works represent a fascination with issues of evolution and race. As evolutionary theory, notably Darwinism and neo-Lamarckism, was an emerging field of study at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, evolution and race are present throughout both works (Robida 271, 331; Apes 197). However, the Tarzan novels reflect a fear of evolutionary and racial regression that Robida’s stories almost embrace. The Tarzan narrative both establishes and sustains discrete categories based on race and uses these classifications to link personality, intellect, and morality to heredity. In The Return of Tarzan, Tarzan’s derision towards the “lost race” of white men reinforces the importance of racial purity and of being “civilized” (Return 178).

In contrast, Voyages Très Extraordinaires takes a different perspective. Rather than distancing himself from “lower orders,” Farandoul embraces monkeys as equals. As seen prior, Farandoul’s kingdom treats monkeys and men equally, demonstrating a desire not to distance humans from their evolutionary predecessors, but to bridge the gap. Rather than promoting human regression, Farandoul “wishes to bring the simian race—which he calls a race of ‘imperfect men’—to civilization, bringing it nearer to the human race” (83). When Farandoul renders monkeys and humans equal before the law, he proclaims, “Live henceforth in peace with your formerly-disinherited brothers, the noble and generous monkeys who, brought up in the forests from generation to generation, have not been able, as you have, to partake in the banquet of civilization” (85). Robida’s work almost entirely tears down the fictional screen of la mission civilisatrice that Tarzan so carefully constructs. Farandoul’s earnest civilizing mission extends the undertaking to monkeys, attempting to place humans and
monkeys on even ground, thereby violating the French fiction of *la mission civilisatrice*, which never intended to fully “civilize” all humans, much less extend the mission to animals.

Though they may lead differently, Tarzan and Farandoul are both conquerors, be it Tarzan’s kingships among the Mangani and the Waziri or Farandoul’s kingdom of Farandoulia and leadership of *La Belle Léocadie*. However, Burroughs’s and Robida’s perspectives on European conquest and colonization are clearly different, evidenced by the characterization of adventure, invasion, and occupation in each narrative. Tarzan’s immense success in the jungle suggests that while there is a “bad” genre of colonialism, there exists a “good” way to invade as a white European. Tarzan’s conquest of the jungle also demonstrates that there are changes to be made in the jungle because its current inhabitants, humans and animals alike, are inherently inferior to white Europeans (like Tarzan). Robida’s portrayal of colonization and European influence in indigenous spaces is markedly different: characters in *Voyages Très Extraordinaires* tend to integrate rather than dominate.

When Farandoul stumbles across the all-female Makalolo tribe in Africa, he shocked to discover that “[n]ot only were the queens white, but they were Parisians!” (241). The queens, Angelina and Caroline, were Parisian artists who came to Africa to perform in an operetta at the Cairo Theater. There, the khedive selected them to be admitted to his harem, which they considered a great honor. Early on, Angelina and Caroline exemplify how European people may integrate into a non-European culture, respecting its authority and remaining subordinate. Angelina and Caroline were kidnapped and ultimately rescued by Makalolo warriors. They joined the tribe and
quickly rose through the ranks. While to some extent Robida portrays white European women as inherently more meritorious based on their race and cultural education, it is still notable that Angelina and Caroline never conquer the Makalolo tribe by force or attempt to institutionalize European rule. In fact, Angelina is a transient Makalolo who plans to return to Paris, whereas Caroline prefers to stay in the tribe, embracing their culture (242-243). Angelina will not fundamentally alter Makalolo culture, while Caroline chooses to accept the Makalolo way of life. Neither of these decisions resembles typical European settler colonialism as was seen in French Africa.

Farandoul himself diverges from traditional colonial models. When Farandoul establishes Farandoulia, he fights against the British colonial government in Australia, claiming that the mission of Farandoulia is to “repair the injustices of other continents; to cause the past to be forgotten; to bring back justice and happiness and restore the globe’s Golden Age” (98). Indeed, it appears that even in his conquest of Oceania, Farandoul seeks to repair institutional injustices done by British colonization, a type of “reverse colonization.” In this way, Farandoul rejects European colonial authority, deeming it unjust. Robida goes as far to critique man’s influence in non-European places as a perversion, writing,

Man was unknown there, never having repressed it with his barbarity or perverted it with his example – as he has those fallen races of monkeys, condemned to ignominy, which will vegetate forever in the lands inhabited by humans, unless some monkey of genius arrives one day to effect their return to the purer life of ancient times, in some wilderness inaccessible to humankind (23).

Farandoul proclaims that he will conquer all of Europe and overthrow current institutions to impose his mission on the mother countries as well. He declares, “Europe, so proud of its past glories, but where so many so-called civilized peoples maintain permanent armies beneath the scourge of modern times! Europe shall be
ours!” even claiming, “I shall make Paris the capital of the world. France, which marches at the head of the flow of modernity, will understand the grandeur of our mission; she will throw herself into our movement with generous ardor!” (99).

Instead of supporting the European colonial missions abroad, Robida’s protagonist opposes Europe, deems it unworthy, and vows to overthrow it. Interestingly, in both the propaganda of the colonial expositions and Robida’s “reverse” colonialist satire, Paris is incontrovertibly the center of the universe.

Moreover, Robida paints a picture of failed colonization when Farandoul and his European comrades travel to space and stumble across the planet Saturn. The salience of colonization in the European mind is evident: when Farandoul’s lost party catches sight of French soldiers also wandering in space, they immediately inquire, “Is France colonizing the comets?” (315). Initially, Farandoul’s impromptu colonial mission appears promising: his friend, Désolant, states, “I can see us already, recognized citizens of Saturn, owners of a patch of ground, founders of a prosperous colony. We shall form a new race” (331). Even in the Europeans’ colonial plans, they do not assert supremacy, hoping instead to live under another’s rule.

However, this plan fails, as the Saturnian scientists decide to examine Farandoul and his party and place them in a human zoo on display for the residents of Saturn. Farandoul’s party thus becomes a spectacle for the entertainment of Saturn’s residents: “gigantic posters plastered on every wall that announced the arrival in the national menagerie of extraordinary animals, viewable on payment of a small supplementary fee. A long description followed, issued by the scientific commission
and illustrated with fairly accurate portraits drawn by the finest animal artists” (329).

Treated like animals, the European party feels degraded. One Englishman laments,

> What a humiliation for officers of the queen! The Saturnians consider us as ferocious animals and treat us as such. We’re part of the menagerie, with bearlike species for neighbors. They beat us, and pass us raw meat on the end of a fork [...] the crowds come to laugh at our faces; the ladies try to provoke us and the infants throw little pellets of black bread at us. Sad, sad! (330).

Again, Robida’s satirical work provides astute social commentary, discourse that violates the French fictions constructed around colonialism. The European party’s plight in their human zoo, examined and derided by Saturn’s residents and considered as the Other, reflects the uncomfortable reality of the colonial expositions in Paris. Human zoos are, at their core, bizarre. To view another human in a diorama-like pavilion, deriving pleasure at simply watching their lifestyle, reveals that there is an ocean of distance between the observer and the performer. This excerpt from Robida’s work demonstrates how strange the colonial expositions appear when the audience’s gaze is no longer that of the visitor, but that of the subject/object. Resituated the readers in the place of colonial subjects infringes upon the distance established between Europeans and indigenous Africans: it is too close for comfort.

Ultimately, many elements of Robida’s work run parallel to those seen in *Tarzan*: both protagonists are European men raised by apes; both face similar difficulties in this unlikely situation; and their adventures are both set against the ever-present backdrop of European colonialism abroad. In both works, racial differences are acknowledged, as is the discomfort that naturally accompanies any discussion relating to evolutionary theory. Though Robida’s work was created earlier, was written in French for a French audience, and was even accompanied by imagery… Robida was a caricaturist at his core.
Robida’s use of satire as a form of social commentary shines through, particularly in his positive depiction of monkey/human integration and his sardonic portrayal of the human zoo on Saturn. Just as surrealism took a highbrow response to World War I, Robida’s use of satire to react to new ideas about race, evolution, and colonization (which were exploding into the public consciousness in the second half of the 19th century) required close-reading, analysis, and a refined sense of tongue-in-cheek humor. Unlike Robida’s work, Tarzan had no airs: in all its forms, Tarzan was gratuitous, catering to both overt and subliminal needs of 1930s French society. Rather than creating spaces to think critically or to problematize, Tarzan circumvented reality entirely, instead constructing alluring “sites de rêve.”

“Comment dit-on sites de rêve en anglais ?”

Be it in book form, on the screens of silent and “talkie” movies, in comic books, in video games, in cartoons, or in live-action plays… Tarzan creates “sites de rêve” for its audiences. In 1930s France, this fiction was not only desirable, but it was vital. The trauma and despair of World War I had left France wary; the rise of Nazi Germany next door generated malaise; the colonial expansion into Africa, though promising, entailed venturing into the “Dark Continent.” Interwar France was a place of instability in Europe: “Tout était à réviser, tout à rattreindre” (Martin 116).

During this precarious decade, French identity was vulnerable. French culture was hallmarked as palatable, dainty, and refined, and yet the events of the 1930s were the opposite, characterized by global migration and conquest in response to domestic disillusionment. Taking over the world could only be France’s saving grace if the nation’s intrinsic “frenchness” was preserved. To compartmentalize in an increasingly
diverse colonial empire, discrete classifications in terms of race, gender, and culture were propounded. These cut-and-dry categorizations created idealized archetypes: the colonial, the homme idéal, the légionnaire.

These unambiguous identities left little room for complexity and created constant contradictions, which were only resolvable in fictional spaces where the conventional rules of logic could be suspended and overlooked. These paradoxes were manifold: the notion that certain genres of colonialism could be “bad,” while others were “benevolent”; the perception of the jungle as at once fearsome, insurmountable, lush, abundant, gorgeous, and entirely conquerable; la plus grande France, which sought to expand French power outwards and capitalize off of colonial land and human resources, while maintaining that mainland France, specifically Paris, held all French power; la mission civilisatrice, the idea that French colonialism hoped to “civilize” Africa, but never such that France could be justifiably expelled from the colonies; the homme idéal and the légionnaire, whose perfect nature and masculinity were rooted in primitivism, but whose very being was used to proclaim white European superiority over those considered by France to be “savage.”

Almost none of these understandings of France, of colonialism, or of Africa make much sense when examined with any semblance of scrutiny. Full of contradictions, these concepts were not representations of reality and instead reflected French cognitive dissonance regarding French colonialism in Africa. As discussed prior, risking real resources, effort, and money on fiction requires a constant cognitive maneuvering to situate desirable imagination in the spotlight and shuttle reality backstage. French colonization was ugly, and facing up to the reality that “your
strength is just an accident arising from the weakness of others” is not easy (Conrad 7). But total escapism through fantastical fiction that avoided the issue was not enough. France needed a fiction that acknowledged just enough of the ugliness to validate the French feelings of horror, unease, and disillusionment, but one that would also brush aside these feelings and provide a more comfortable fantasy.

*Tarzan* catered to this very demand. Rooted in just enough reality to make the fiction seem utterly convincing, *Tarzan* presented colonization of Africa as “benevolent” by repudiating the Belgian Congo and presenting Tarzan’s white European influence in the jungle space as positive. *Tarzan* enabled France to draw its mind away from the realities of colonization and actualized the impossible and fictional persona of Memmi’s colonial. Additionally, *Tarzan* represented the “Africa” of the French colonial imagination, allowing this exoticized/sanitized locale of escape and conquest to overshadow African realities and to distract a French public disillusioned with postwar French society and facing a financial crisis.

Even more concretely, French expositions made tangible the same colonial fantasy that mass media had visualized. Going one step further than film, colonial expositions rendered invented narratives physical and substantial. Conceptualized, executed, and visited by the French, the pavilions at the colonial expositions exemplified the French proclivity towards the fantastical over the real. Illusion was a founding principle of the expositions, as colonial administrators who had seen life in the colonies used their experience as a point of departure from which to embellish (rather than as a strict blueprint), understanding that fiction founded from fact would be the most convincing. The conflation of reality and fantasy and the prioritization of
fantasy over reality were such that the fictitious persona of Tarzan was presented alongside people from the colonies as equally real.

Distress regarding close contact with the Other was fed by theories of evolution and what it meant to be “civilized.” Increasing diversity in mainland France and French expansion into non-European communities exacerbated this distress. Though discrete categories of “civilized,” “uncivilized,” “savage,” “white,” and “black” were all used to draw sharp lines between different peoples, the French were nonetheless fascinated by the Other. The contradictory fetishizing and fear of the “savage” is resolved and represented through Tarzan’s remarkable identity as at once *l’homme idéal* and the “missing link” between the more- and less- “evolved” races. Tarzan also embodies the virility, youth, and valor of the légionnaire, actualizing this portrait of the *homme idéal* who could boldly venture into the colonies, symbolic of and synonymous with French colonialism in Africa.

*Tarzan* poked at and then eased French anxieties in almost every sociocultural realm: colonial administration, geography, landscape, empire, culture, race, gender… It is truly the perfect storm. There were many technical, non-thematic forces at play, such as the rise of mass media, which allowed for the convergence of *Tarzan*’s book, movie, and comic representations, and technological advancements in film, which brought *Tarzan* to a larger audience thanks to the accessibility of “talkies.” However, more compelling than these superficial influences are the numerous components of the *Tarzan* narrative that directly addressed and subliminally soothed French hopes and fears in the interwar period.
When thinking of classic literature or artistic movements in 1930s France, even when calling to mind children’s stories or adventure narratives of the era, probably dozens of characters and works come to mind before *Tarzan*. Whether Dadaism, Babar, *Les Hommes de bonne volonté*, Tintin, or *La Nausée*, 1930s France offered many better cultural options than *Tarzan*. Yet amidst this wealth of culture, even in comparison with his almost-twin, Saturnin Farandoul, *Tarzan* experienced an unusual popularity in 1930s France. If *Tarzan* is not unique, and *Tarzan* is not good, then what propelled this narrative to French stardom? *Tarzan* was obvious, and just a little bizarre: he prodded at every tiny anxiety and problem only to smooth it over just as quickly. Everyone loves a guilty pleasure, and *Tarzan* was the ultimate indulgence at a time when there was a great desire to luxuriate in the uncomplicated. France did not know this then, but all the uncertainties and instabilities felt during the 1930s would come to a head during World War II, posing the question: at what point does it become dangerous to put all one’s real eggs in an imaginary basket?

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