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H-France Review Vol. 2 (August 2002), No. 70

David Henry Slavin, *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939: White Blind Spots, Male Fantasies, Settler Myths*. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001. xv + 300 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, filmography, and index. \$39.95 U.S. (cl). ISBN 0-8018-6616-2.

Review by Owen White, University of Delaware.

Among the earliest representations of French colonialism on film is a fifty-second reel shot by a collaborator of the Lumière Brothers in the Vietnamese province of Annam in 1897. Entitled *Enfants annamites ramassant des sèpèques devant la Pagode des dames*, the camera frames a scene in which two French women, dressed from head to toe in colonial white, scatter coins to a group of Vietnamese children. The children scramble for the coins like chickens fighting for grain as the women smile down benignly from the steps of a pagoda.[1]

Perhaps the cinematographer intended this film to display French munificence; a French viewer in 1897 might well have understood the message to be that France was taking care of its newly adopted children in Indochina. Or perhaps the intent was to expose the debasing inequalities of the colonial relationship, which is likely to be most modern viewers' interpretation. Either way, the filmmaker set up his camera very deliberately, hoping to capture some fundamental truth about French Indochina.

In the century or so since the Lumière Brothers sent filmmakers from their studio to every continent, there have been innumerable on-screen representations of the French Empire, though few, if any, can be more telling or more succinct than this early contribution. The abundance of French colonial cinema represents a sort of trump card for those of us who try to convince American students of the importance of France's colonial history in the overall scheme of things. I have found that skeptics can usually be won over by means of such films as Gillo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* (1965) or the Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène's *Camp de Thiaroye* (1988), both of which are highly effective in dramatizing the high stakes involved as colonized peoples challenged French rule. Even Régis Wargnier's *Indochine* (1991), often criticized as an exercise in colonial propaganda *après la lettre*, at least gives some sense that someone was getting rich on the back of cheap colonial labor, and it can be used (as can Sembène's film) to raise important questions concerning historical memory.[2]

Most of the best-known films that represent the French Empire were made after decolonization, and indeed many of them dramatize this demise. David Henry Slavin's *Colonial Cinema and Imperial France, 1919-1939*, on the other hand, concentrates on films made when the empire was still very much alive but which are, with one or two exceptions, rarely seen today. In choosing this focus Slavin takes most of us into uncharted territory, and as such his book represents an important contribution to the study of French colonial culture, a field that is now beginning to flourish.[3]

Slavin's prime resource is a corpus of films—he cites fifty—set in French North Africa in the 1920s and 30s. The stories often unfold in what for French viewers were forbidding yet exotic locales, such as the desert or the Casbah. Thematically, most are at their core tales of doomed romance, a storyline that even the many Foreign Legion movies made between the wars usually follow at some level. Especially

in view of the fact that the colonial authorities in Morocco or Algeria facilitated location shooting for filmmakers, it will come as no surprise to hear that these films rarely challenged any aspect of France's right to rule the Maghreb in the manner it chose or the pre-eminence of white European settlers in colonial society. Slavin goes a step further by arguing that colonial cinema performed a hegemonic function within France itself; it "legitimated the racial privileges of European workers, diverted attention from their own exploitation, and disabled impulses to solidarity with women and colonial peoples" (p.3). Thus "colonial cinema" not only justified the racial oppression of non-Europeans in the Maghreb but also, by defining identity in terms of race and gender rather than class, helped to foster among workers in Europe what Slavin calls "blind spots," manifestations of the "dual consciousness" that Antonio Gramsci held responsible for the "moral and political passivity" of industrial workers (p. 5).

Slavin's analysis of colonial cinema is informed throughout by this Gramscian perspective, as well as echoing in certain regards the "Social Imperialism" thesis of historians such as Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Though not the most fashionable line of argument, there are many reasons to commend Slavin's approach. Rather than setting out to identify free-floating "discourses," Slavin makes a serious and often intriguing effort to situate colonial cinema in relation to the shifting contours of French power in North Africa. Moreover, Slavin is very aware that these films were made within the context of an emerging French film industry that was both influenced by and defined in opposition to its American counterpart. In this connection he makes the interesting argument that the films made in French North Africa in the 1920s were "culturally specific" and therefore represented "a formative component of French cinematic nationalism" (p. 58). Some recent cultural histories of empire informed by literary criticism have struck this reviewer as all superstructure and no base, so to speak. By contrast, Slavin's more historically rooted approach to cultural production is one of the strengths of his book.

The influence exerted by the colonial authorities and the army over film production in North Africa provides a major reason to accept the logic of Slavin's basic schema for the evolution of colonial cinema in the Maghreb. The first films made in French North Africa were shot in Morocco, and Slavin argues that these bear the imprint of the policy of alliance with traditional elites favored by Resident General Louis-Hubert Lyautey, insofar as they were "glaringly paternalistic" but "sympathetically portrayed Arab culture." When the Rif War which broke out in 1925 unseated both Lyautey and his associationist thinking, this semi-positive view of North Africans faded away as the primary locus of filmmaking in the Maghreb shifted to Algeria, "where the settlers had imposed themselves as the agents of social control" (p. 13). Gung-ho Foreign Legion films which brooked no challenge to the supremacy of white males became the norm in this environment, with only a few "poetic realist" productions from the Popular Front era—*Pépé le Moko* (1937) being the best known—offering any significant stylistic deviation before the Second World War.

Thus Slavin attempts to establish film broadly as a reflection of and an accomplice to power both in French North Africa and in the *metropole*. This attempt is not always convincing, since the films analyzed here were in spite of their origins not instruments of policy, their melodramatic plots usually conformed to long-standing literary conventions, and their form and style often reflected short-term cinematic trends. Moreover, Slavin's analysis unavoidably has to infer a great deal about how audiences responded to what they saw on the screen. It is easy to imagine what effect film had on the Moroccan notables whom Lyautey invited in 1914 to watch Bastille Day footage of French military might. But it is much less easy to say what French audience members are likely to have taken from the hallucinatory epic *L'Atlantide* (1921), the first film shot on location in Morocco—at a cost of one million dollars—in which French officers scouting the desert stumble across Atlantis. Assuredly there were more straightforward forms of colonial propaganda than this, though Slavin works hard to explain the context for some of the movie's less fanciful intellectual origins, such as the so-called Berber myth and the colonial officer's mental disorder known as *le cafard*.<sup>[4]</sup> It is clear nonetheless that films with colonial settings were capable of touching a nerve with metropolitan audiences; even the difficult-to-read subtitles for the Berber-language sequences of the film *Itto* (1934)—a complaint the lesson of which

some video companies have yet to learn—did not prevent it from becoming the subject of more readers' letters to the magazine *Pour Vous* than any other movie of the 1930s (p. 127). The favorable response to *Itto*, which Slavin describes as the most sensitive and ethnographically informed of all the movies made in interwar North Africa, suggests that many viewers were probably neither impressed with nor edified by the ham-handed masculine fantasy of the standard Foreign Legion film.

This relatively short book is full of detail; for example, I particularly enjoyed the accounts of French filmmakers looking for battle-scene extras in Morocco, expecting to have to explain to the locals what a camera was and instead finding seasoned performers with numerous film credits already to their name. Slavin's love of detail, however, is also a weakness, and his overall argument is often lost to view through his desire to cram in too many examples. The author's digressive tendencies cry out for better editing, and the book has a somewhat disjointed and repetitive quality that may result in part from the fact that three chapters have previously appeared in article form (this may help to explain such continuity problems as the appearance of the same Chinua Achebe quote on pages 18 and 35). The book is not well proofread, and there are a significant number of mistakes in the French: accents appear where they should not, genders do not agree, and in the most unfortunate (Freudian?) slip, Marcel Carné's *Quai des Brumes* is translated as "Quay of Frogs" (p. 183). Among the book's factual errors, despite several assertions by Slavin to the contrary Charles de Foucauld was not a White Father, and the Tuareg language that he set down in a dictionary is Tamachek, not Tamahak (p. 48); the Yen Bay uprising took place in 1930, not 1931, and was not a peasant insurrection (p. 60); and the names of Maurice Viollette, Théodore Steeg, Marcel Mauss, and Paul Rivet are all given incorrectly.

Perhaps the most puzzling aspect of Slavin's book, however, is his decision to write a conclusion which, rather than drawing together the themes of the eight preceding chapters, instead offers what is primarily a critique of the French Left's policy on a range of issues, from colonialism to abortion. Slavin's concern for the conduct of the Left, contradictory to its ideals though it may have been, is excessive and proves unsatisfying within the context of a book about colonial cinema. Whereas, inspired by Slavin's accounts, I spent much of the book wondering how one can get hold of such films as *Itto*, *Cinq Gentlemen Maudits* (1931), and the original *L'Atlantide*, this conclusion, which mentions cinema only once, comes close to undermining the author's case for the significance of his own material.

## NOTES

[1] This is one of many remarkable images contained on a collection available on VHS or DVD entitled *The Lumière Brothers' First Films* (New York: Kino International, 1997). A *sépèque* was a silver coin in use in French Indochina, not a kind of grain as the film's commentary implies.

[2] Two recent discussions of the pedagogical use of film depictions of the French Empire are Alison Murray, "Teaching Colonial History through Film," in *French Historical Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1 (winter 2002), pp. 41-52, and Michael G. Vann, "The Colonial Casbah on the Silver Screen: Using Pépé le Moko and The Battle of Algiers to Teach Colonialism, Race, and Globalization in French History," in *Radical History Review*, no. 83 (spring 2002), pp. 186-92. Criticism of Indochine and similarly inclined representations can be found in Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), and Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (New York: Berg, 2001).

[3] For a recent collection on this general theme involving French and Anglophone contributors see Tony Chafer and Amanda Sackur (eds.), *Promoting the Colonial Idea: Propaganda and Visions of Empire in France* (New York: Palgrave, 2002).

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[4] Slavin's discussion of *le cafard* would have benefited from deeper research. There was in fact quite a literature on the subject before the novel upon which *L'Atlantide* was based came out, notably Dr. Louis Huot and Paul Voivenel, *Le Cafard* (Paris: Bernard Grasset, 1918), which goes into detail on the Voulet-Chanoine affair and reveals that there was an Algerian variant of the disorder known as *biskrite*.

Owen White  
University of Delaware  
owhite@udel.edu

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ISSN 1553-9172