Quarterly Review of Film and Video

ISSN: 1050-9208 (Print) 1543-5326 (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/gqrf20

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To cite this article: Brady Earnhart (2007) A Colony of the Imagination: Vicarious Spectatorship in MGM's Early *Tarzan* Talkies, Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 24:4, 341-352, DOI: 10.1080/10509200500526778

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/10509200500526778

Quarterly Review of Film and Video, 24: 341–352, 2007

ISSN: 1050-9208 print / 1543-5326 online
DOI: 10.1080/10509200500526778

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

A Colony of the Imagination: Vicarious Spectatorship in MGM's Early *Tarzan* Talkies

BRADY EARNHART

MGM didn't originally intend to make a Tarzan picture. What the producers needed, rather, was a way to improve their returns on the 1.3 million dollars they had invested in their W.S. Van Dyke's hit film *Trader Horn* (1931)—most of that sum going to finance the unheard-of gamble of shooting on location in Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, the Sudan, and the Belgian Congo. The exotic scenery had proved successful at the box office, and it occurred to "someone at the studio" that extra location footage might be put to good use in a film based on Edgar Rice Burroughs's famous lord of the jungle (Behlmer, I 39).[1] The writer's response to the idea was more equivocal than we might expect. By 1931, "Tarzan" was already a household word. The trademarked character had migrated from his pulp-magazine beginnings to comic strips, games, an ill-fated Broadway play, radio dramas, and bread and gasoline ads. Burroughs had granted his neighbors their request to rename their town "Tarzana" (Essoe 3). He had watched a succession of six hunks[2] in Fred Flintstone-ish cave-man garb swing their way through a total of eight serial and feature films based on his work[3] —all of these more or less silent, the last few using brittle, synchronized recordings of music and sound effects (a lion's roar, a strong wind, generic Native Music, an early precursor of Tarzan's famous yell). Frustrated by hack adaptationeers, and rich enough to set his own eccentric terms, he decided to lease MGM the Tarzan name only on the condition that the studio provide a completely original story. Following the terms of his contract, he was paid $20000 up front, plus $1000 a week for five weeks to look over the scripts and veto anything that looked too familiar. A year later, Van Dyke's *Tarzan the Ape Man* (1932) followed a plot freshly dreamed up on contract by novelist and poet Cyril Hume and revised by a committee of Hume, dialogue writer Ivor Novello, producer Bernard Hyman, and director W.S. "One-Take Woody" Van Dyke (Behlmer, I 39–41). It's not much of an exaggeration to say that the most iconic, enduring Tarzan—the one played definitively

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[1]This sampling technique was to become more widespread over the mid-1930s: according to Dana Benelli, *Variety* increasingly reported "camera crews being dispatched to distant locales to 'gather atmosphere' for upcoming films" (14).

[2]One of these, Jim Pierce, would go on to marry the writer's daughter and co-star with her in an early '30s radio version of *Tarzan* (Essoe 56).

[3]Gabe Essoe's *Tarzan of the Movies: A Pictorial History of More Than Fifty Years of Edgar Rice Burroughs' Legendary Hero* (1968) provides illustrated descriptions of all major Tarzan movies from 1917 through 1968. Of the many readily available sources of information on the MGM series in particular, I have found most useful Rudy Behlmer's two-part *American Cinematographer* article "Tarzan: Hollywood's Greatest Jungle Hero" (1987) and the interview with Behlmer and Scott Tracy Griffin included as an extra in the boxed DVD set *The Tarzan Collection* (2004).

by Johnny Weissmuller for the next fifteen years and best remembered by audiences ever since–was spontaneously generated by a pile of film.

The happy coincidence I would like to explore here is that this most postmodern of births resulted in a series of films permeated by a sly acknowledgment of the fact they *are* films. In *Tarzan the Ape Man* and its sequels, Jane Parker takes on the figurative identity not of just any American, but of the American moviegoer. Just as she and Tarzan are set adrift from their parents, the signifiers in their world lose their attachment to what they signify, until what precipitates out of the original narrative is a many-faceted representation of our experience of the medium itself. Jane's journey makes a safari of the tired Disney cliché "a journey into the imagination." We're invested in what she's doing because it's a lot like what we're doing right there in the theater, and, conversely, we're happy to be doing what we're doing because she's showing us how exciting spectatorship can be. It becomes churlish to question the realism of *Tarzan*, because what it provides is precisely a release *from* the real world–a correlative for escape into the imagination. The thread I would like to follow, in short, is that one of the main sources of pleasure in the 1930s Weissmuller/O'Sullivan vehicles is the allegory they provide for the very act of watching a movie.[4]

Though fantastic in its own right, the original "Tarzan of the Apes" (first published in *All-Story Magazine* in 1912) had involved a certain amount of irritable reaching after fact and reason. The plot was basically *Oliver Twist* in a loincloth: the year-old child of aristocratic colonials is orphaned somewhere on the West Coast of Africa and raised by an ape who has recently lost her own baby. Twenty or so years later, he encounters and rescues a group of explorers—fortuitously including his cousin and Jane Porter, the beautiful daughter of a brilliant but bumbling American scientist. A series of coincidences involving a locket and a baby's fingerprints reveal his identity; he quickly learns to speak and to use the right fork and, eventually, travels to Wisconsin to win Jane's hand in marriage. Burroughs claimed that what originally interested him in this plot was the question, "How much would heredity influence character if the infant were transplanted to an entirely different environment and raised there?" (Essoe 1). His take on heredity is basically Lamarckian: generations of the right schools and etiquette training will trickle down into the very genes. Tarzan will never have a thought about sex until an appropriate (i.e., white, educated, well mannered) girl comes along, and he will never act on his thoughts until invited. Needless to say, the idea that a family reputation at Eton would genetically overwrite the will to survive and reproduce doesn't stand up to a lot of scrutiny, but it appealed to the racial essentialism popular in Burroughs's day.

In the new story, having bought Tarzan out from under his author's guardianship, MGM soon did away with his fictional parents as well: Hume untethered him from his aristocratic past, leaving his presence in the jungle a complete mystery to everyone involved.[5] Jane Porter now became Jane Parker, the daughter of an aging but adventurous British trader.

[4]This is a dynamic present in any number of other movies as well: as a metaphor for the imaginative space to which movies transport the viewer, Tarzan territory is especially close to that other 1930s MGM protectorate, Oz; in the terms of this comparison, we might see in Jane a Dorothy who never goes back to Kansas. We might also consider Cecilia, the character played by Maureen O'Sullivan's daughter Mia Farrow in Woody Allen's *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985), a literalization of Jane's role as a stand-in for the viewer, though instead of rising into the screen Cecilia charms a fictional character down into the real world.

[5]"I can't make it out. How did he get here?" Jane's father asks. "Oh, it doesn't matter," Jane answers. "He's happy. . ." The MGM hero's indifference to his origins has led many commentators to describe him as the most American Tarzan.

Tarzan the Ape Man opens with her[6] springing a surprise visit on her father[7] at his trading post somewhere in West Africa. After strolling with him past a group of picturesque natives (rear-screen draftees from *Trader Horn*), she decides to accompany him and his American partner Harry Holt[8] on a safari to the mythical elephants' graveyard.[9] This ivory bonanza is reputed to lie somewhere on the Mutia Escarpment, an area of western Africa so sacred to the indigenous peoples that they do not hesitate to put members of their own tribes to death for merely looking at it. The Anglos brave a trek through the jungle, a small army of spear-throwing locals, a climb up the sheer cliffside, and attacks by wild animals (each of these dangers highlighted by the briefly regretted loss of a few black porters, "poor devils"). They encounter Tarzan[10] atop the Escarpment, and while their attention is distracted by yet another brief scuffle with locals (and another porter's death) he swings off into the trees with Jane under his arm. Over the next few days, her fear of him gives way inevitably to trust, gratitude, attraction, and (famously) English lessons. Her dutiful second thoughts do send her back to her father's side temporarily, but she and Tarzan are reunited when he and a herd of elephants rescue the few surviving members of the group from a tribe of lasso-throwing, giant-ape-worshipping black dwarves. Following a wounded elephant, the small party finally reaches the fabled graveyard, where Jane's father succumbs to wounds of his own and is buried. Jane decides to stay with Tarzan. Over the strains of Tchaikovsky's overture to *Romeo and Juliet*, the two of them say goodbye to Harry, who will return personally in Jack Conway and Cedric Gibbons' *Tarzan and His Mate* (1934) and whose surrogates (animal collectors, fortune hunters, gold prospectors, kidnappers) will show up every few years in the "Escarpment-invading safaris" that Rudy Behlmer rightly identifies as "One of the most important of the required formula ingredients of the MGM Tarzans" (II 40).

There were to be six of these in all: Tarzan *the Ape Man*, *Tarzan and His Mate*, and Richard Thorpe's *Tarzan Escapes* (1936), *Tarzan Finds a Son* (1939), *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* (1941), and *Tarzan's New York Adventure* (1942).[11] A hit abroad as well as at home, the series was abandoned only when the outbreak of World War II dried up the crucial international market. I speak of these films somewhat interchangeably here because they all follow the same basic sequence of events: a group of greedy white British or American opportunists invades the Mutia Escarpment, runs afoul of trouble, occasions once again the generous use of *Trader Horn* out-takes "progressively more faded, on the back projection screen," is rescued by Tarzan, and returns to civilization sadder, wiser, and having lost most or all of its black porters to painful deaths (Cameron 43).

The first prerequisite for a level of movie-going allegory here would be for the audience to realize *Tarzan the Ape Man* was *not* about somewhere real; the setting should be, on

[6]Twenty-year-old Irish newcomer Maureen O'Sullivan.

[7]James Parker was played by C. Aubrey Smith, fresh from a similar but much smaller part in *Trader Horn*.

[8]Neil Hamilton, a former shirt model. He is best known today for the role of Police Commissioner Gordon in the late '60s TV series *Batman*.

[9]An element lifted from the original *Trader Horn* story.

[10]Johnny Weissmuller was already somewhat famous as a swimmer, having won five Olympic gold medals and broken an unprecedented number of world's records. He was under contract as a BVD underwear model when Hume spotted him in a hotel pool and invited him to meet producer Bernie Hyman. At the interview, by Essoe's account, Weissmuller was "unexpectedly stripped to his shorts and offered the part without even a screen test." He was released from the modeling contract only when MGM agreed to let BVD photograph all the studio's top stars in BVD swimming suits (68–70).

[11]Warner Video has recently re-released all six together as a boxed set of DVDs.

the contrary, so far from ordinary life as to provide a sanctuary for fantasy. What better choice than Africa, a continent the public already related to more as a distant, carnivalesque image than as a real place?[12] In the original *Tarzan of the Apes*, Burroughs (whose own knowledge of the territory was bounded at the deep end by H.M. Stanley's *In Darkest Africa* and the novels of L. Rider Haggard) had no qualms about riffing on cannibal stereotypes, populating Africa with tigers, or making up a species of talking apes. And when his story was first adapted for the silent screen, few viewers seem to have been bothered by the fact that one of the black Africans was played by a young, chemically darkened white actor named Boris Karloff; or that strongman Elmo Lincoln (who had been spotted as an extra in *Birth of a Nation*) was swinging through the jungle sets of Louisiana, threatened by spliced-in South American animal footage, and consorting with members of the New Orleans Athletic Club in ape suits (Essoe 51, 14). The array of locations that donned Africa-face in Tarzan movies—over the 1920s and '30s alone these would go on to include Brazil, Mexico, Guatemala, New York, Arizona, Florida, and most popular of all, California—is, in fact, an excellent measure of the irrelevance of Africa to the "Africa" of Tarzan.

In the years immediately preceding the MGM series, the acts of going to Africa and going to the movies had already been conflated in several popular "documentaries," notably the travelogues of Paul Hoefler and Osa and Martin Johnson. A more accurate title for Hoefler's *Africa Speaks* (1930) might be "narrator Lowell Thomas speaks, ad nauseam and with questionable authority, *about* Africa"; his corny, avuncular voiceover[13] reassuringly interprets people and animals for the audience while Hoefler himself (duly pith-helmeted) pretends to interact with rear-projected scenery. To similarly reflexive effect, *Across the World With Mr. and Mrs. Martin Johnson* (1930) frames a viewing of African scenes home-movie style, within a fictional living-room screening for dinner guests (Cameron 51). The reduction of Africa to spectacle is also implicit in the sexual or violent sensationalism of some travelogues of the period, smuggled past the censors in the name of education: William Campbell's entirely fraudulent exploitation film *Ingagi* (1930), for instance, "notoriously presented itself as the record of an expedition which had inadvertently stumbled across the solution to the age-old riddle of the missing link, this purported solution being a group of bare-breasted black women living contentedly in the jungle with gorillas" (Benelli 7).[14]

Despite a generally scant knowledge of what Africa was really like, at least some of the MGM *Tarzan*'s early viewers explicitly recognized and even enjoyed the fact that they were being taken for a ride: one *New York Evening Post* reviewer who had just seen *Tarzan the Ape Man* in 1932 wrote, "Whereas *Trader Horn* made a grim effort to impress you with its fidelity, *Tarzan* is a frank and exuberant frolic in the imaginative literature of the screen . . . It even has a way now and then of making fun of itself, a ruse so disarming that you are tempted to enjoy the picture most when you are believing it least" (qtd. in Fury 70). *The New Statesman and Nation*'s Francis Birrell wrote that the film "gain[ed] enormously over such pictures as *Trader Horn* by never pretending to provide accurate information" (qtd. in Essoe 73). A *Newsweek* reviewer made a similar observation two years later about *Tarzan and his Mate*: "So exciting it is that even in the most ludicrously impossible scenes, the

[12]For more on the meaning of "Africa" as it was propounded to twentieth-century movie audiences, see Kenneth M. Cameron's thorough and highly readable *Africa on Film: Beyond Black and White* (1994).

[13]E.g., "Giraffes, having no vocal chords, cannot utter a sound. They're just naturally dumb, but not quite as dumb as the yokel who first saw one in a circus and said, 'There ain't no such animule!'"

[14]A kind of exploitation sometimes linked with *National Geographic* magazine. It backfires in Elizabeth Bishop's poem "In the Waiting Room" when a shy young girl reading a 1918 Osa and Martin Johnson article sees a picture of African women with "horrifying" breasts (4).

audience sits on the edge of the seats, cheering lustily and praying for the safety of the agile ape-man" (qtd. in Fury 78). In a letter to supervisor Bernie Hyman, Burroughs compared *Tarzan* to the circus (Behlmer, I 43). Hyman later noted the importance of "the mystery, the 'Never Never Land' quality that has made Tarzan a thing apart from ordinary people" (Behlmer, II 38).

Even the breeziest theatergoer, however, might have been given pause by the gleeful antagonism toward fact exercised by the men behind the curtain, and by how certain it was that they should have known better. Director W.S. "Woody" Van Dyke had observed first-hand in 1929 that Africa was hardly a vast, uncharted stretch of jungle, as his vanity-press account of the *Trader Horn* filming expedition makes clear. Nearing the port of Mombasa and knowing the market demanded "Africa, the Dark Continent, dark in thought, deed and skin–the land of savagery and death," he was instead struck "numb with terror and sick with disappointment":

> There, dotting the hillside, standing amid beautiful gardens and wireless aerials, were some Hollywood bungalows. The same sort, kind, class, genus and gender of houses that Beverly Hills real estate men had tried to sell me for one hundred fifty thousand dollars! I hid my eyes. I had come twelve thousand miles to savage Africa to see the posterior of civilization assume all the likes and proportions of civilization's brow and scalp lock. Something must be done and that immediately. (54–55)

As they started work on the *Tarzan* series, Van Dyke and his colleagues "did something" with surrealistic abandon. At Lake Sherwood–so named for its appearance in Allan Dwan's version of *Robin Hood* (1922), starring Douglas Fairbanks Sr. —they brought in The Flying Codonas to perform Tarzan's aerial stunts (footage of these to be recycled, *Trader Horn* style, in several installments) on trapezes vaguely draped with vines, and they staged attacks on rafts by teams of real and fake hippos. Sequences filmed in the cold fresh water of Silver Springs, Florida show Tarzan and his crew swimming next to sea turtles. A fifty-foot steel and rubber crocodile, looking today as if it could only have escaped back in time from some late Cold-War creature feature, apparently tries to spin Tarzan to death in *Tarzan and His Mate*. Tarzan's chimp is named "Cheeta" [sic]. In reviving the *Trader Horn* myth about dying elephants[15] heading for sacred ground, the series also blurs the line between animals and African people.[16] The writers neatly divided the Africans themselves into nightmarish savages and somnolent porters, spiking their scripts with Hollywood in-jokes. They named the Zambeli tribe after line producer Sam Zimbalist, the Gibonis after art director Cedric Gibbons, the Hymandis after Bernard Hyman, and the Jaconi after Joe Cohn (Behlmer, II 37). "Mutia Escarpment" was a nod to Mutia Omoolu, a non-actor from Kenya who had played the gun-bearer in *Trader Horn* (Fury 68). "Juju" is used interchangeably as a word for "black magic" or as the name of a tribe.

Since they were contract-bound not to use the fictional ape language of Burroughs's stories, Hume and his colleagues "invented new words for Tarzan, including the classic 'Umgawa' (which meant 'up,' 'down,' 'halt' or 'go,' and in later pictures just about any

[15]*Tarzan*'s elephants are played by stand-ins: Indian elephants (they're easier to tame) sporting huge prosthetic ears and tusk extensions in order to pass as African, though it's odd that MGM took the trouble, considering how few people would have noticed.

[16]A more disturbing variation of this racist trope is the telephone conversation ("You ain't gettin' fresh wid me is you, colored boy?") between Cheeta the chimp and a black janitor in *Tarzan's New York Adventure*.

actions needing a command!)" (Fury 67). Weissmuller and Johnny Sheffield (who played Tarzan and Jane's adoptive son Boy) simply ad-libbed other non-English dialogue.[17] The unnamed and imaginary tribe of dwarves that attacks Jane's party was played by white actors in blackface, some of them widely rumored to have reappeared eight years later as Munchkins in Victor Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). The porters are so generic that white hunters early in the *Tarzan Finds a Mate* safari use their deaths as mile markers:

> "How many men have we lost?"
> "Eight."
> "We figured ten for the whole trek!"

Incidental music for the Tarzan movies was plucked with a similarly free hand from a range of sources, nearly all of them native to Hollywood. In the first two features, authentic field recordings left over from *Trader Horn* keep company with the pseudo-African "Voodoo Dance," originally composed by George Richelavic for Zion Myers and Jules White's 1931 short *Trader Hound*, a parody featuring trained dogs (Behlmer, I 43).[18] Opening credits for the remaining four roll to the tune of Sol Levy's "Cannibal Carnival," which had already been used in Harry J. Revier's silent feature *The Son of Tarzan* (1920) and Tod Browning's Lon Chaney Sr. vehicle *West of Zanzibar* (1928), as well as *Trader Horn* (Hockley). At the close of *Tarzan and His Mate* and the following four films, Tarzan and Jane bid farewell from their tropical paradise accompanied by "My Tender One," which was borrowed incongruously from Van Dyke's 1933 melodrama *Eskimo* (Behlmer, I 47). *Tarzan's New York Adventure* ends with a Herbert Stothert piece written for Mervyn LeRoy's *Waterloo Bridge* (1940) (Behlmer, II 43). As for Tarzan's famous yodel, it is hard to tell how seriously to take the studio's claim that sound technician Douglas Shearer concocted it out of "a hyena's yowl played backwards, a camel's bleat, the pluck of a violin string, and a soprano's high-C," but it is still less likely that Weissmuller delivered it himself, since (as Henderson has pointed out) it constitutes a perfect palindrome (Fury 69; Henderson 99). Typically here, we can say with confidence that it is not what it purports to be, but beyond that the trail is hard to follow.

The "Africa" of *Tarzan* is, in short, transparently and doggedly fictional—a signifier exempted from any requirement to correspond to what it signifies. As such, it partakes of a dynamic that postcolonial theorists have long recognized in Western representations of what are sometimes called (with an unconscious reference to photography?) "developing nations." In his landmark work *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said explains that such representations operate "according to a detailed logic governed not simply by empirical reality but by a battery of desires, repressions, investments, and projections" (8). The "projection" trope, which surfaces frequently in discussions of postcolonial texts, helps explain why Africa seems to lend itself so readily to a Western allegory of spectatorship. In his 1975 critique of *Heart of Darkness*, Chinua Achebe accuses Joseph Conrad of "project[ing] the image of Africa as 'the other world,' the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization" (252). He arrives at the analogy that "Africa is to Europe as the picture is to Dorian Gray—a carrier onto whom the master unloads his physical and moral deformities so that he may go forward, erect and immaculate" (261).

[17]Though Van Dyke may have contributed some actual African words from his recollections of the *Trader Horn* expedition, St. Andrews reports, "later expressions like 'wakashinda nippa doo' and 'oona toona beebee' were sheer inventions, and both Sheffield and Weissmuller carried them with them to the RKO Tarzan films" (⟨http://www.mergetel.com/~geostan/mgm.html⟩).

[18]In the same year, Disney put out its own notoriously racist parody: Trader *Mickey*.

The *Tarzan* films exhibit a similarly uncomfortable ambivalence. Like Van Dyke's earlier *White Shadows in the South Seas* (1928), they simultaneously critique European imperial adventures and echo their exoticist attitudes toward colonized peoples, swapping out ivory for box office receipts. The American audience is encouraged to feel superior to both the greedy colonials *and* the savages. Harry Holt is dismayed when his British partner shoots a porter who refuses to approach the Mutia Escarpment, but his humanitarianism is limited to the comment that "a whip would have done just as well." ("Perhaps you're right," Arlington coldly replies. "He could've carried 150 pounds of ivory.")

In representing Africa as a blank surface just waiting for Westerners to fill it in, the MGM movies owe a debt to postcolonial novels that becomes particularly clear if we compare representations of African maps in the *Tarzan* series and *Heart of Darkness*. In his youth, Conrad's narrator Marlow "dreamed gloriously over" the "white patch" of the map of the Belgian Congo. It is seeing another African map in a shop window years later that awakens his fascination with the unknown and inspires him to set out on a journey that will take his body to the Congo and his mind (as many scholars have noted) ever deeper into the Dark Continent inside himself. Now, however, it has been inscribed with colonial "rivers and lakes and names" (presumably including the emperor's name in "Leopoldville" and "Lake Leopold"); later, these will be overwritten figuratively with the brutal subjectivity of Kurtz's report to the International Society for the Suppression of Savage Customs (12, 50). The problem Conrad struggles with is not just that Western culture represents Africa only at its worst, but that it is too obsessed with projecting itself *on* Africa to leave room for any accurate representation *of* Africa at all.

In the Tarzan movies, too, the image of the map functions not so much to chart real places as to provide a *tabula rasa* for the Western imagination. Maps that derive their evocative power from their disengagement from reality—their very *inability* to do what maps are supposed to do—recur graphically in all six features, usually near the beginning, always accompanied by scenes of white characters' passage into Tarzan territory. In *Tarzan the Ape Man*, James Parker's map to the Escarpment–which subsequently proves more or less worthless, since he will rely for directions on a dying native–is black and dim, crisscrossed by the words "Cameroon," "Africa," and (several times) "Unknown." The opening credits of *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* are backgrounded by a map of Africa explicitly marked as a receptor for images: blank except for the word "Africa" and several drawings of palm trees, tents, and lions. After a fade-out, this map is replaced by another, identical to it, on which shadows are cast by 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.'" *Tarzan's New York Adventure* opens almost identically, except that the caption over the map has become still more anti-cartographic: "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."

What sets the maps in the MGM Tarzan movies apart from those of other postcolonial texts is their foregrounding of the medium of film, i.e., their smug displacement of the protagonist's relationship to Africa with the spectator's relationship to cinema. In both of the examples just cited, the map image fades into a matte painting of the white cliff-face itself–one blank screen giving way to another–which in turn fades to some atmospheric out-takes from *Trader Horn*. Any moviegoer arriving in the theater and seeing a white surface taken up by pictures as the houselights darken is thus immediately presented with an allegory of this same event *within* those pictures. The "desires, repressions, investments, and projections" Said notices in Western texts about the exotic Other are here overwhelmingly concerned with the very act of spectating.

The betrayal of representation in *Tarzan* is inherent in the fact that the Mutia Escarpment is itself completely imaginary. Though obscure to the audience, the fact that the Escarpment is named after a member of the *Trader Horn* cast typifies the underlying self-referentiality of the series. The hokey injunction not to look at the high, white, rectangular cliff-face works to make us little people out there in the dark feel a little brave, a little privileged, and very white to be looking with impunity up at the dangerous fictional space that rises before us in the theater. When Jane returns to camp after her first stay with Tarzan, her father tells her, "He's not like us." "He's white," she counters. It's hard to tell what her father means when he elaborates, "Whether white or not, those people, living a life like that—they've no emotions. Hardly human."

It seems unlikely that Parker has suddenly evolved to the point of recognizing that race isn't what makes one a "savage." Yet he speaks as if from long experience with "those people"—as if he has known others like Tarzan before. He behaves toward her kindly but not urgently, as if he had reason to know the surprising truth that Tarzan hasn't physically molested her. His consolation resembles nothing so much as that of a father trying to talk a star-struck girl out of spending so much time at the movies. When Holt returns for her in the sequel, he will try to tempt her back with the prospect of "sitting with real people and listening to the music." His partner Arlington will call Tarzan a "shadow" Jane is chasing. Appropriately for a character living in a fiction, *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* will show her describing the Escarpment to white intruders as "above and beyond maps—sort of a world of our own."

For the traditional colonials in the series—i.e., white intruders out to make their fortunes in Africa–crossing from the real world into the fictional one is usually represented by the (failed) use of maps, the scaling of the Escarpment face, and—most spectacularly–in the passage through the waterfall to the elephants' graveyard in *Tarzan and His Mate*.[19] Martin Arlington has shot an elephant expressly for the purpose of following it to the world's greatest ivory cache. As he and the rest of the crew pass beneath the falls, the screen goes nearly white with rushing water. "Gad—it's like a city paved with gold," Martin exclaims on the other side, unaware that no outsider will ever successfully plunder the Mutia Escarpment. Tarzan arrives shortly on elephant-back to protect the sanctity of the place, essentially enforcing a taboo against exporting fictional currency to the real world. While he is the primary patrolman of the border, he is also as bound as the ivory is to remain inside of it.[20] Jane refuses to entertain Martin's suggestion of taking him back to London: "Tarzan over there? Then he would die."

It is Jane herself, however, whose passage from our world into Tarzan's is the cornerstone of the series, as fans have often recognized. Hearing in 1939 that MGM was thinking of having her die of a spear wound in *Tarzan Finds a Son*, Burroughs successfully warned the studio to think twice[21] : "during twenty-five years' experience with Tarzan fans I have found that Jane is extremely popular and that when I leave her out of the Tarzan books . . . we receive many letters of complaint. No matter how inartistic a happy ending may be, you are going to discover that the Tarzan fans prefer it" (Behlmer, II 39). MGM's

[19]Widely considered the best of the *Tarzan* movies, it is also the most self-consciously a sequel: "Miss Jane–she stood right in front of that mirror putting cold cream on her face. Right where you're standing now" etc.

[20]*Tarzan's New York Adventure* is something of an exception to this rule, though its comedy depends on our understanding that Tarzan could never really become a New Yorker.

[21]To the chagrin of O'Sullivan, who had been trying for years to have done with the role (Behlmer, II 38).

most innovative move was to have Jane upstage the series' namesake, and the reason it works so well is because of the way the moviegoer identifies with her.

When Jane first arrives in Africa, she is a decidedly alienated spectator of the people and landscape. Watching herself in the mirror as she puts on cold cream, she hears the traders who have come to market and turns to the window; we see her through a screen of mosquito netting that pointedly separates her from the natives. She walks outside and quips, "I must see your lady customers. . . How women suffer to be beautiful," highlighting the difference between her daintily cared-for white complexion and the black women's piercings. "I feel quite out of fashion." Anyone with a faintly critical eye can tell, of course, that the natives here are projections on the rear screen. Jane sees them; they can't see her—any more than they can see O'Sullivan. How strange they are; how safe she is. There is a certain comfort in this for the audience, since the rear-screen footage is of the *real* Africa—not the land of water lilies and treehouses we want to go to.[22] It is hard to tell, of course, how consciously early audiences registered the use of the special effect, but anyone who sees *Tarzan the Ape Man* realizes that Jane is spending an awfully long time watching and commenting on African people. Born out of the studio's interest in using a movie within a movie, the scene's insistence on her outsider status here ironically encourages our bond with her. She is, like us, devoted to watching.[23]

Part of the reason this works dramatically is because it sets up a tension between Jane and Tarzan's "Africa" that the course of the narrative will work to dissolve. Jane's party first meets up with Tarzan when he swings into a tree over their campsite. When he fails to acknowledge anything they say to him, Jane sighs, "He can't understand." She is almost as distant from him as she was from the African traders, but his desire for her will make her the only member of the party who ever really enters his world. There she will retain an ambassadorial role, occupying a liminal space between reality and unreality.[24] We hear this oscillation when she talks with (or rather at) Tarzan the first time the two swim together: "I don't think you'd better look at me like that. You're far too attractive. I love saying things to a man who can't understand." "What color are your eyes?" she asks, looking straight into them (incidentally voicing another in-joke, at the expense of the black-and-white medium). Though Tarzan obviously thinks her beautiful, their relationship upsets the traditional Hollywood gender figuration, as she is remarkably less gazed-at than gazing.[25] Tarzan may rescue her from wild animals and natives, but she's the one who most often watches him–whether he's killing a rhino, swimming, showing off high-bar moves on a tree branch, or simply sleeping.

The constant rise up the face of the Mutia Escarpment and into the trees puts Jane in a blank white space roughly corresponding to that of the movie screen before the audience.

[22]Rear-screen shots of both Africa and Hollywood sets will recur throughout the series, usually either to render narrow escapes or to fill in background. The market scene in particular will echo near the beginning of *Tarzan and His Mate* when Martin Arlington takes a bath with rear-screen warriors dancing improbably outside his window, "Fresh from the Folies Bergère."

[23]Jane's entry into the land of spectatorship finds a close parallel in that of her adoptive child in *Tarzan Finds a Son*. The film opens with *Trader Horn* footage of animals, quickly shifting to a view of a married couple looking out the window of a plane. The woman holds her baby up to the window and says, "Look dear! Oh, poor darling hasn't even learned to use his precious eyes."

[24]O'Sullivan would evoke a very similar ambivalence as she reminisced, years later, about the movies' first, wild popularity: "I was offered all kinds of places where I could go in my shame to hide from the cruel public ready to throw stones at me. It's funny. We were unreal people, and yet we were real" (*Times Herald-Record*, 1998, qtd. in Henderson 104).

[25]For an interesting look at gender constructs in *Tarzan*, see Barbara Creed's "Me Jane: You Tarzan!: A Case of Mistaken Identity in Paradise."

The film progressively signals her acclimatization to his world by representing her as a movie image. In another strangely appropriate moment of technical awkwardness, one *Tarzan the Ape Man* scene (for whatever reason) shows her and Tarzan together on the rear screen, with three-dimensional vines dangling in front of it. More explicitly, the sound technician introduces Jane in *Tarzan and His Mate* with her own approximation of Tarzan's yodel. As Henderson points out, this moment marks her surrender to the libidinal energies unsuccessfully displaced onto the "savage" Africans, but its artificiality also announces her new distance from the real world (99). When Harry Holt, who has returned to Africa out of desire for her, introduces Jane to his ivory-hungry business partner Martin Arlington, Arlington tells her, "I thought you were a myth, and I'm still not sure." Watching Jane later he compares himself to "a hungry man outside a restaurant window." It's not surprising that Holt is the same man who, in the previous movie, kept Jane at the end of a rope long after the danger of her falling off a cliff had passed. In the sequel he has brought material enticements–gowns, stockings, jewelry, perfume—to coax her back to his world, but after he and Martin leave the tent to let her try them on, the camera lingers on the precise, two-dimensional image of her shadow cast on the inside of the canvas by lamps. The next morning, Tarzan will playfully tear off her dress so that the two can swim through an extended underwater ballet sequence in which she (played by Sullivan's stand-in Josephine Kim) is so completely dispossessed of material possessions that the Production Office forced a fourteen-and-a-half minute cut only recently restored (Behlmer, I 45, 47). We sigh happily to know that she will never leave Tarzan's side.

Deepening *Tarzan*'s "exotic land as movie theater" strategy is the fact that theater managers—especially those of the 1920s and '30s–have long encouraged their customers to think of the cinema as an exotic land. The natives and wild animals on the Mutia Escarpment in the 1932 theater were the direct descendants of the "live vaudeville acts—singers, dancers, comedians, acrobats, jugglers, or magicians" that had helped sell tickets before the advent of synchronized sound. And in the late '20s, historian David E. Kyvig reminds us,

> picture palaces termed 'atmospherics' were built... with expansive lobbies; thick carpeting; statuary and paintings; exotic Spanish, Moroccan, or Byzantine styling; and ceilings that seemed to resemble open skies with moving clouds or twinkling stars. Smaller, less elaborate versions of picture palaces in smaller cities likewise sought to make the experience of going to the movies a departure from ordinary life. (79)

For many viewers, splendid decor could lessen the distance between the Escarpment and the Bijou; some might even have looked up from their seats and said with Jane, "Glad you like Africa ... Who wouldn't. Look–isn't it marvelous? And the funny part is, I feel so completely at home."

Another aspect of the *Tarzan* movies that deserves further study is their status as early talkies. It is striking that one of the most recognizable sounds (Tarzan's yell) and one of the benchmarks of comic romantic dialogue ("Me Tarzan–you Jane"[26]) in twentieth-century American film history both occur just after the end of the silent era. The elocution lessons that were to be famously mocked in Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly's *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) were a very real phenomenon in the late '20s. In 1928, according to film historian Donald Crafton, "Dorothy Manners reported that 'all the girls' (i.e., actresses) are 'having

[26]Though this is technically a misquote, and (as Creed points out) something of a sexist one: once he gets the point, the phrase Tarzan actually repeats is "Jane–Tarzan."

their voices cultivated,' as though this were a passive process like having one's nails done" (452). MGM congratulated itself on investing heavily in training actors to speak properly for the microphone, "building a two-story building for the teachers and engaging the University of Southern California to test and repair 'weak spots' in voices" (453). By the time *Tarzan the Ape Man* was being filmed, however, the vogue of exaggeratedly correct pronunciation had become "a Hollywood joke," replaced by a trend toward "naturalism" (456). It is tempting to see a gentle forerunner of the *Singin' in the Rain* parody in the English lesson O'Sullivan and Weissmuller performed on the MGM sound stage in the fall of 1931:

> Jane: No–I'm only "me" for me.
> Tarzan: Me.
> Jane: No–to you I'm "you."
> Tarzan: You.
> Jane: No–I'm Jane Parker, understand? Jane. Jane. You? Jane. And you?
> Tarzan: Tarzan. Tarzan. Jane–Tarzan–Jane–Tarzan–Jane–Tarzan. . .
> Jane: Oh, please stop! Let me go–I can't bear this. Oh, what's the use.

Weissmuller himself, furthermore, represented a retort to critics like Gilbert Seldes, who had predicted that with the rise of talking pictures "a young man who expresses 'it' by jumping over six-foot fences, will receive less fan mail than those whose voices register warmly and clearly" (449). By 1931, "The Depression convinced producers (if indeed they needed much pressure in this direction) that their films must appeal to 'mass' rather than 'class.' In other words, Hollywood felt that it could not afford to produce films aimed at narrow markets. Highbrow projects, such as operettas and melodramas from the New York stage, were scaled back" (17–18). Thumbing its nose at elitist taste, *Tarzan* delivered the goods as a romantic adventure story even as it registered the studios' growing confidence that talkies could stop trying to justify their existence. Simultaneously, Jane's sexy introduction of language to Tarzan evinced Hollywood's desire to reassure audiences with limited language skills–many of whom had been perfectly satisfied with the simple silent stories of the previous decades—that the new technology would not exclude them.

A screenwriter working on *Tarzan the Ape Man* described Jane's character as having gone to Africa because she is "tired of her own life" (Behlmer, I 41). When she arrives, she announces to her father, "From now on I'm through with civilization. I am going to be a savage just like you," but the truth is that she will become more a part of the landscape—hence farther from the real world—than he has ever been. Even if we are not exactly tired of our own lives, it is not hard to appreciate the daydream of being her for a while: of setting up house, for instance, with a mate who never talks back—who hardly talks at all. We gain a deeper appreciation of Jane's appeal to her contemporaries, in particular, if we imagine how motivated the 1930s working fan may have been to leave behind real-world money worries and dispiriting headlines—to be in what Kenneth Cameron describes as "a Depression-era fantasy: a stable couple in which the husband [is] stronger than the chaotic forces of life, able to provide a home and food and security" (43).

As Frank D. McConnell reminds us, the experience of watching movies is a solitary one: we watch "not as a group . . . but as atomic individuals whose collectivity, if any, will be re-created and reconstituted only upon our exit from the curious, self-enforced privacy of the film experience" (90). Just so, Jane's retains her citizenship in paradise only on the condition of her isolation from society. Her progress into Tarzan's territory demands her severing connections with every outsider she knows, even her own father. As if to remind us that the fantasy movies offer is always a fantasy under siege, though, the family or would-be

family she tries to jettison keeps coming back. In *Tarzan and His Mate*, it is Holt and his partner Martin Arlington who pursue her; in *Tarzan Escapes*, her cousins. Our own visit to the Escarpment is also a fragile one—likely to be destroyed by the sound of someone nearby digging into a box of popcorn, stray thoughts of responsibilities at home or work, even a date's well meaning embrace. At the backs of our minds, we know that we will only be able to stay a few hours. No wonder the real world in the *Tarzan* movies seems so threatening, so insistent. No wonder Jane resists her would-be rescuers so strongly.

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