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French military masculinities and the birth of cinéma colonial: triangulating queer desire in Jacques Feyder’s L’Atlantide (1921)

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ABSTRACT
Jacques Feyder’s L’Atlantide (1921) is widely considered not only cinéma colonial’s first major representative example but also one of the genre’s most emblematic narratives. However, ambiguities in the film’s portrayal of the mission civilisatrice have received comparatively little analysis. This article aims to expand our understanding of L’Atlantide and the mirror it held up to interwar France in three main stages. First, it situates the film’s discourses of gender and colonialism within present post-colonial scholarship. Second, it analyses the aesthetic and political contexts of L’Atlantide, paying particular attention to how the film offered a remedy to France’s ailing postwar film industry and, albeit superficially, discovered a way to address a country undergoing a crisis of masculinity. Third, through a discussion of the sexually ambiguous relationships that structure the narrative’s central erotic triangle, this analysis posits that Feyder’s film registered France’s postwar trauma and the fallibility of French colonial rule. This article ultimately argues that although L’Atlantide played a foundational role in perpetuating certain monolithic stereotypes, it also established a subversive tradition in cinéma colonial which would flourish during the interwar period in films such as Julien Duvivier’s Pépé le Moko (1937) and Jean Grémillon’s Gueule d’amour (1937).

RÉSUMÉ
L’Atlantide (1921) de Jacques Feyder est bien connu non seulement comme le premier grand exemple du cinéma colonial mais aussi comme une des histoires les plus représentatives de ce genre. Cependant, relativement peu de recherche porte sur la façon ambiguë avec laquelle le film présente la mission civilisatrice. Cet article a pour but d’approfondir notre compréhension de L’Atlantide et de ses façons de reflet la France de l’entre-deux-guerres en trois étapes. Premièrement, il situe le discours du film sur les sexes et le colonialisme à la lumière des recherches postcoloniales actuelles. Deuxièmement, il met en évidence les contextes esthétiques et politiques de L’Atlantide en se focalisant sur la manière dont le film a offert un remède à une industrie cinématographique française mal en point et a su répondre, même si de façon superficielle, à la crise d’identité masculine qui subissait le pays. Troisièmement en discutant de l’ambiguïté sexuelle des relations du triangle amoureux au cœur du film, cette analyse postule que L’Atlantide témoigne du traumatisme d’après-guerre et de la faiblesse du

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**Introduction: cinéma colonial as aesthetic, economic and political strategy**

With 600,000 francs borrowed from his cousin, Alphonse Frédérix (then director of the Banque Thalman), Belgian director Jacques Feyder (1885–1948), hitherto best known as a director of sophisticated comedy shorts (Têtes de femmes, femmes de tête, 1916; La Faute d’orthographe, 1918), directed L’Atlantide (1921) from March to October 1920 in a variety of Algerian locations including Touggourt, the Aurès mountains, Djidjelli and a temporary studio constructed in Bab El Oued.¹ The result was the first French film to be shot in the Sahara desert and earliest example of one of classic French cinema’s defining genres: cinéma colonial.² Colleen Kennedy-Karpat notes that Feyder’s début feature-film spawned a ‘proliferation of imitators’ (2013, 4), Abdelkader Benali describes it as the genre’s ‘film-phare’ (1998, 289) and Charles O’Brien observes that the very term cinéma colonial ‘appears to have become a part of the vocabulary of the film industry’ in the wake of the blockbuster’s financial success (1997, 226).

Although these scholars all observe the major role played by L’Atlantide in establishing cinéma colonial’s characteristic tropes, ambiguities in the film’s portrayal of the French colonial mission have received comparatively little analysis. Yet this is a potentially revealing avenue of enquiry towards contemporary perceptions of masculinity, military duty and nationhood since colonial Africa (especially Algeria) had played an important role during the First World War and France itself was struggling to mask its own heavy losses following armistice. This article aims to expand on our understanding of L’Atlantide and the mirror it held up to postwar France in three main stages. First, it situates the film’s discourses of gender and colonialism within present post-colonial scholarship. Second, it analyses the aesthetic and political contexts of L’Atlantide, paying particular attention to how the film offered a remedy to France’s ailing postwar film industry and, albeit superficially, discovered a way to address a country experiencing a crisis of masculinity. Third, through a discussion of the sexually ambiguous relationships that structure the narrative’s central erotic triangle, this analysis posits that Feyder’s film registered France’s postwar trauma and the fallibility of French colonial rule, inaugurating a subversive tradition in cinéma colonial that would flourish during the interwar period in films such as Jean Renoir’s Le Bled (1929), Julien Duvivier’s Pépé le Moko (1937), Jean Grémillon’s Gueule d’amour (1937), Pierre Chenal’s La Maison du Maltais (1938) and Feyder’s own Le Grand Jeu (1934).³

Algeria had become crucial to France’s perception of itself long before the First World War. France conquered the country in 1830 and integrated it as three départements in 1848, a move that identified members of the indigenous populace as citizens of la République une et indivisible whilst disavowing their right to be recognized as fully-fledged subjects. Thereafter, the colony constituted a crucial component of what
Edward Said terms the Orient’s ‘imaginative geography’, which legitimized distortive representative discourses across French cultural texts ranging from postcards to Flaubert’s Salammbô (1979, 49–73). Algeria was particularly important to France’s self-projection as a virile nation after the latter’s military defeat in the Franco-Prussian war (1870–1871). Compounding France’s humiliating loss, Germany annexed substantial portions of France’s eastern regions of Alsace and Lorraine, the Second Empire collapsed, French feminist movements developed into an increasingly visible presence and France’s birth rate, which was considered an index of military power, contrasted worryingly with the rising figures of their German rivals (Maugue 2001, 13–23; Howard 2009, 107). All of these factors contributed from 1871 onward to what Annelise Maugue (2001) considers a crisis of masculinity. During the same period, Algeria tempered France’s fears and profound sense of shame, partially because the French government annexed 687,000 hectares of the colony’s land in 1871 for French settlers (or colons), which supplemented the 481,000 hectares that had already been acquired by 1870 (Evans 2012, 23). Most importantly, as Robert Aldrich observes, ‘[e]mpire reinforced patriarchy and was a test of a nation’s virility’, especially traditional virtues ascribed to masculinity—courage, stamina and duty—which were considered essential to imperial vocations owing to the number of men involved in exploration, battling and administration (2007, 123). The opportunity to demonstrate such grit was seized by substantial numbers of men from Alsace and Lorraine who continued to enlist in the French Foreign Legion (Porch 1991, 290–91) and by French refugees from the two lost provinces who were allocated 100,000 hectares of confiscated Algerian land in recognition of their patriotic rejection of German rule (Varley 2008, 102–103; Evans 2012, 24–26).4

Algeria was equally critical to France’s vision of itself as a virile force when the First World War, in which Feyder and Benoit both served (the former as an actor in a theatrical troupe operated by the Belgian military, the latter as a soldier on the Western Front), instigated another seismic crisis of masculinity. The socio-cultural roots of this crisis were numerous and varied, but three particular factors pertinent to our understanding of the production and reception of L’Atlantide are especially worth noting. The first is the physical and psychological trauma sustained by men. Whereas the war restored l’Hexagone to its pre-1871 form, the bodies of French soldiers had been mutilated to an unprecedented degree, due largely to deadly innovations in artillery and to infectious injuries aggravated by trench conditions. 16.8% of the 8.4 million Frenchmen mobilized during the war died and an estimated 40% were wounded at least once. By the end of the war, some 300,000 men had been officially designated mutilés de guerre and approximately two million men were classified as suffering from at least a ten percent physical disability. In the aftermath of the war, millions of men remained psychologically scarred and the gueules cassées served as public reminders of the cost of victory, provoking reverence and horror in equal measure (Smith, Audoin-Rouzeau, and Becker 2008, 84–96).

The second factor is the increased importance of women and colonial men to the allied forces and French spheres of production. France imported over half a million soldiers and labourers during the war. Among these were approximately 200,000 colonial soldiers, the vast majority of whom were tirailleurs sénégalais who participated in a variety of important battles (the Somme, the Aisne and the Chemin des Dames), suffered heavy casualties and generally achieved an accomplished military record (Stovall 2003, 297, 302). On the home front, colonies including Algeria (78,566), Morocco (35,506), Tunisia (18,249),
Madagascar (4,546) and Indochina (48,955) collectively constituted the second-largest reservoir (28%) of France’s non-combatant manpower (Horne 1985, 59–60). Meanwhile, almost 700,000 women worked in France’s armaments industry and constituted approximately twenty-five percent of the country’s entire labour force (Stovall 2003, 302). The influx of non-white immigrants and the increased importance of women to factory work established a new degree of contact between the two. Sexual relations between working women and colonial men even instigated antagonism and physical assaults on the part of French male workers and soldiers and, as Tyler Stovall notes, ‘brought an increased prevalence of racial thinking’ among French officials (2003, 299).

The third factor contributing to France’s crisis of masculinity was its severely dented economy. After the war, the French lived with the possibility that their country, owing to a shortage of labour and a consequential rise in wages and prices, would be unable to maintain its colonies, to compete in the international market or to defend itself against economic exploitation by other countries after the war (Roberts 1994, 103). This was particularly apparent in French propaganda, which mobilized gendered images of a country whose economic impotence had resulted in a loss of virility and which ‘had become effeminate because it was dependent on others for its livelihood’ (104). The country determined to reassign women to the home and colonized men to the colonies, and virtually all of the latter had been repatriated by 1920 (Horne 1985, 61). In the meantime, war veterans deigning to reassert their superior pre-war position in society were contending with an entirely new phenomenon of ‘apparently incurable psychological symptoms that undermined the virility the war was supposed to restore’ (Dean 2000, 102) such as nightmares, insomnia, anxiety and paranoia, and contemporary commentators perceived France as lacking more in cohesion than it had at the end of the nineteenth century (5–6).

France’s film industry was certainly not immune to these economic issues or to their emotional and psychological consequences. Whereas this once crucial area of cultural activity ‘seemed almost as consolidated and powerful as was its counterpart in the United States’ on the eve of the First World War, chiefly owing to the prowess of Pathé, Gaumont and Film d’Art (Abel 1984, 7), the four years of battle that followed radically constricted such production companies by mobilizing men, rendering raw materials inaccessible and commandeering studios for the army, actions that entailed what Jean-Pierre Jeancolas (2007, 23) describes as ‘l’effet dévastateur d’une bombe tombant sur un marché couvert’. By 1915, most of the genres in which the French had specialized before the war such as the serial thriller (e.g. Louis Feuillade’s Fantômas [1913]) and the adventure film (notably Joê Hamman’s westerns) had been monopolized by American cinema, most famously in the form of Pearl White serials and William S. Hart westerns, all of which provoked ecstatic responses from French audiences (Abel 1984, 10–13). Moreover, by 1918–19, France was left with less than ten percent of the domestic market (Jeancolas 1989, 19) and was still grieving the departure of some of the industry’s most experienced directors including Léonce Perret and Maurice Tourneur for modernized studio facilities in Hollywood.

Feyder’s portrayal of soldiers enduring the torpor of military service in the Sahara with a view to fulfilling France’s mission civilisatrice provided a potent means of reasserting masculine constructions of the nation in a country that sought to definitively emerge from the First World War. Indeed, as though responding to a demand in the popular unconscious for a specifically national aesthetic remedy to France’s cinema and identity, the film became, in Jean Mitry’s view, ‘the first really successful postwar French film’ (cited in Abel
Although Feyder’s budget had spiralled to 1,800,000 francs by the time it premiered at the Gaumont-Palace on 4 June 1921, the film reaped a fortune, playing at the 850-seat Madeleine cinema (where it opened on 30 September the same year) for an entire year, a record eclipsed only by the release of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer’s lavish production of *Ben-Hur* (Fred Niblo, 1925) in 1927–29 (Abel 1984, 18–19, 44; Boulanger 1975, 33–35; Warren, Tixier, and Aventin 1998, 206). Matching the film’s commercial success, French critics reacted ecstatically, and ‘[i]n the context of a Franco-American rivalry for the domination of the French film market, the film was an object of national pride’ (Loutfi 1996, 22). As one reviewer wrote: ‘ce film est [...] l’une des rares productions françaises qui se soient frayées sur les écrans du monde entier la place que la production française cherche à prendre malgré toutes les difficultés’ (Anon 1923, 8).

Assessments of *cinéma colonial* tend to describe its representative films either as regressive attempts to reduce and contain the colonial Other (Benali 1998, 340; Lagny, Ropars, and Sorlin 1986, 127–176) or, alternatively, as ambiguous texts that subtly expose France’s inability to definitively domesticate the *Outre-mer* (Faulkner 1994, 3–29; O’Shaughnessy 2004, 27–40; Nevin 2020a, 87–106). To date, *L’Atlantide*’s ignominious distinction as the genre’s urtext has generally led critics to align it with the former category and, as a result, to inculpate both the film and its director for their allegedly monolithic vision of the East and for apparently failing to raise the colonial question. Benali argues that the film played a ground-breaking role in normalizing colonial expansion and in establishing dichotomies between the desert and the distant metropole, the Western male and the predatory indigenous female, human nature and civilization, indigenous tribal laws and French military authority (1998, 289–310). In a similarly critical reading, Martine Astier Loutfi writes that the film ‘upheld the basic worldview of the colonial system: the superiority of the White man fighting against horrible dangers to conquer a nearly empty land and to bring some wretched natives the benefit of French civilization’ (1996, 22). Echoing Benali and Loutfi, David Henry Slavin posits that *L’Atlantide* ‘effectively displaced history with myth’ (2001, 35) by dichotomizing European and African culture as ‘civilized and savage, advanced and primitive’ (57), and notes that the film is ‘[r]ife with colonial propaganda’ (52) already embedded in Benoit’s ‘mythomanical novel’ (35).

Such views are understandable. At the level of plot alone, Feyder’s Africa appears to correspond with Said’s description of the Orient as ‘a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes’ (1979, 1), and as Europe’s ‘contrasting image, idea, personality, experience’ (2). In 1912, Captain Aymard (Genico Missirio) is dispatched to the south of the Sahara desert to investigate the fate of fellow Frenchmen Captain Morhange (Jean Angelo) and Lieutenant de Saint-Avit (Georges Melchior), who disappeared a few months earlier. They find Saint-Avit lost in the desert, dying of thirst and incapable of offering a clear explanation for Morhange’s disappearance. Saint-Avit admits to having killed Morhange two years prior but is sent back to Paris for one year of convalescence. Dissatisfied in the French capital and unable to forget his experiences in Africa, he is subsequently appointed Commander of the Post at Hassi Inifel in the extreme south of the Sahara. There he meets Lieutenant Ferrières (René Lorsay), a friend from the Military Academy, to whom he explains the events that led to Morhange’s murder. Key moments include their discovery of Atlantis in the modern Hoggar mountains, their capture by its queen, Antinéa (Stacia Napierkowska), and the fatal attempt of her handmaid, Tanit-Zerga (Marie-Louise Iribe), to escape with Saint-Avit across the desert. By the end of the film,
Saint-Avit is returning to Atlantis with Ferrières, guided by one of Antinéa’s Tuareg envoys, in order to see her once again.

Views of *L’Atlantide* as an Orientalist text are also supported by the lucrative financial goals underlying Feyder’s film in an era characterized by pro-colonial fervour and a popular enthusiasm for the exotic. Indeed, Feyder’s own recollection of the production in his autobiography focuses on the film’s importance to his reputation as a commercially viable director:

*Avec L’Atlantide, je tente un ouvrage de proportions considérables dont l’ampleur et le devis épouvantent les producteurs; je me démontre à moi-même qu’une telle entreprise est possible, et aux éditeurs, qu’elle peut être rémunératrice, que le cinéma peut désormais se coltérer avec des sujets d’envergure.* (Feyder and Rosay 1944, 21)

In line with the views expressed by Benali, Loutfi and Slavin, the film’s emphasis on the exotic Other is manifest from the very first shot, which features Antinéa wearing her veil (*Figure 1*). So archetypal is this image that, according to Frantz Fanon, ‘le voile de la femme […] suffit, en général, à caractériser la société arabe’ (1972, 17). This image of Antinéa is followed by shots of the Sahara desert, evoking Ella Shohat’s description of the veiled woman as a stereotypically masculinist ‘metaphor for her land, [which] becomes available for Western penetration and knowledge’ (1997, 32–33). These interlinked sexual and geographical facets of exotic promise are reinforced early in the film in a scene depicting Saint-Avit on leave in Paris. Shots of the traumatized lieutenant unsuccessfully attempting to reintegrate into civilian life in the capital fade to images of the Sahara and the veiled Antinéa whilst intertitles indicate his ‘nostalgie des horizons magiques’ and ‘l’attrait mystérieux des grandes solitudes’, both of which prompt him to request a new assignment from a colleague garrisoned at Hassi Inifel.

*Figure 1.* The film’s first shot depicts Antinéa, veiled queen of Atlantis.
Corresponding with Shohat’s description of the desert in Orientalist cinema as ‘the essential unchanging décor of the history of the Orient’ (1997, 32), the desert’s menacing unboundedness, homogeneity and passive engulfment of human history are all emphasized over the course of L’Atlantide. The film’s introductory shots refer to the Tanezrouft by its popular moniker of ‘Pays de la soif’ and include images of a lizard and camel skeleton. The spatial depth of numerous shots of the desert is accentuated by camels riding from the background towards the foreground or by trails of footprints from one plane to another, which conform to broader tendencies in descriptions of the Sahara to focus on ‘its emptiness, its lack’ (Fletcher 1998, 200) (Figures 2 and 3). All evidence capable of identifying Morhange’s fate is nowhere to be found (‘et dans toute cette région aucun indice susceptible de nous éclairer sur la fin mystérieuse du capitaine Morhange’, remarks an officer) and the army is forced to rely on Saint-Avit’s possibly inaccurate recollections to determine the truth. This consumptive aspect of the desert is evoked once again when Tanit-Zerga dies of heatstroke in the desert and is buried in the sand by Saint-Avit. Nevertheless, the desert constitutes an inviting site of exploration: Morhange stands defiantly before a map in Ouargla (located in southern Algeria) during his first encounter with Saint-Avit (Figure 4) and the resulting image corresponds with cinéma colonial’s general tendency to include maps in order to create a scientific aura that legitimizes imperial exploration (Shohat 1997, 28–9).

Another major stereotype features in the film’s images of treacherous Tuaregs (the last Berbers to be conquered by France). In a flashback within Saint-Avit’s recollections, Bou Djema (Mohammed Ben Noui) recounts how a military expedition’s Targui guide, Cegheir-ben-Cheikh (Abd-el-Kader Ben Ali), betrayed the expedition and participated in the abduction of Lieutenant Massard (André Roanne). A short time later, Morhange and Saint-Avit aid the injured Cegheir-ben-Cheikh, who is disguised as a guide, only to be lured by...
the latter into a cavern linked to Atlantis. Later, when making Saint-Avit’s acquaintance, Tanit-Zerga recounts the story of Tuaregs encircling her town and taking her to Antinéa. Although Cegheir-ben-Cheikh eventually helps Saint-Avit and Tanit-Zerga escape from Atlantis, the fact remains that the Tuareg is already convinced that Saint-Avit will return and he arrives at Hassi Inifel at the end of the film to guide the lieutenant back to Antinéa.
This negative depiction of Tuaregs owes little to the sixty or so who reportedly assisted Feyder’s production (Boulanger 1975, 35) but is in keeping with the vision of Benoit, whose book interweaves popular myth and colonial history, often to accentuate the spectre of the Tuareg threat. The novelist’s childhood was steeped in narratives of French victims of the Tuaregs and he lived in Tunisia and Algeria from 1892 to 1907. Prior to writing L’Atlantide, he studied the geography of the Sahara and Les Touaregs du Nord (1894) by Henri Duveyrier (1840–1892), who was one of the most influential explorer-geographers of his generation and an awardee of a légion d’honneur for his solo exploration of the northern Sahara during his teenage years. The plot of Benoit’s novel was inspired by a reportedly true story of a French soldier who returned from a mission in central Africa without any knowledge of how his fellow soldier had died, and the doomed Morhange was modelled on geographer and (later) Catholic priest Charles de Foucauld (1858–1916) (Borneecque 1986, 133–35, 156). Foucauld set up hermitage in Algeria before being killed by Tuaregs and his spiritual contributions to the pacification were later explicitly mythologized by Léon Poirier’s L’Appel du silence (1936), which followed the success of L’Atlantide by becoming the most popular film by far of the 1935–36 season (Crisp 2015, 158).\(^5\) Combinations of Orientalist perceptions of Tuaregs and factual influences on Benoit are even more palpable elsewhere in the novel, especially when characters refer to the assassination of Marcel Frescaly (pseudonym of Lieutenant Justin-Marcel Palat) (Benoit 2015b, 55) and, on numerous counts, to the grim fate of Colonel Paul Flatters (21, 55–57, 66, 112–113, 122), whose death is even ascribed by one of Antinéa’s servants to the fictional character of Cegheir-ben-Cheikh (Benoit 2015b, 122). Flatters’ military mission was dispatched by the French government in 1880 to survey a route for a trans-Saharan railway linking Algeria with France’s West African colonies. In what ranks as ‘one of the most tragic episodes in the history of Saharan exploration’, his men were deliberately led off-course in 1881 by Tuareg guides who exhausted them of their supplies, drew them into an ambush and massacred almost all of them 1200 kilometres south of Ouargla (Heffernan 1989, 348). Reinforcing the novel’s historiographical inflection, Ferrières provides a signed and dated foreword to Saint-Avit’s account, in which he cites Duveyrier’s ‘Le Désastre de la mission Flatters’ (1881) (Benoit 2015b, 21). Whereas Feyder opts to fictionalize the Flatters tragedy through the disappearance of Massard (who is eventually revealed to be alive and ruminating obsessively over Antinéa whilst in capitivity in Atlantis), Benoit explicitly mingles factual events and fictional characters, bolstering the real threat posed by Tuaregs. As Foucrier surmises, ‘[l]e romancier reste [...] proche de l’étudiant en histoire et recourt au talent du journaliste bien documenté, soucieux d’écrire en témoin de son temps’ (2015, 293).\(^7\)

Despite the importance of such tropes as an economic, political and aesthetic strategy in postwar commercial filmmaking and the evident importance of Benoit’s regressive archetypes and plot trajectory to the film, Feyder’s narrative is far more ambiguous and unconventional than most scholars have suggested, particularly in its treatment of gender, which was crucial to the imagery of cinéma colonial and to the interrelated psychopolitical structures embedded in French national identity during the 1920s. Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, in a recent discussion of gender paradigms in French silent cinema, single out L’Atlantide as ‘one of the most important productions of the decade’ for how it ‘depicts with a surprising directness the perverse—homosexual and sadomaso-chistic—subtext of this extravagant story’ during a period whose films tended to either
idealize the poils who had fought in World War One or to centre on the struggles and suffering of women (Burch and Sellier 2018, 122). Whilst the sadomasochistic aspect of the film is readily apparent in Massard’s and Saint-Avit’s determination to return to a queen who, as Burch and Sellier observe, is far crueller than Brigit Helm’s incarnation of Antinéa in G. W. Pabst’s 1932 adaptation of Benoit’s novel (2018, 122), Feyder’s depiction of homosexual desire requires further elaboration.

It is important to note that Benoit’s novel, as Burch and Sellier suggest, does contain a homosexual subtext. The most provocative moment in this regard occurs not between the two officers but in a moment when a masseur in Atlantis places a cigarette in Saint-Avit’s mouth:

Sans attendre ma réponse, le nègre m’avait introduit dans la bouche une cigarette qu’il alluma, et se remit derechef à m’astiquer sur toutes les coutures. […] Et je lui envoyai une bouffée de fumée en plein visage. Cette plaisanterie parut infiniment de son goût. (Benoit 2015b, 160)

This non-verbal exchange evokes Richard Dyer’s theorization of the Queer, a brand of homoeroticism which he associates with ‘male-to-male sexual attraction where you wouldn’t expect to find it, where it’s been diverted or repressed or else obliquely expressed or unknowingly sublimated’, and which unsettles the limits imposed by socially constructed heteronormative frameworks (2002, 4). The masseur’s phallic gesture and his subsequent application of oils to Saint-Avit’s body depict homoerotic behaviour as a primarily Orientalist characteristic, albeit one that may be ambivalently reciprocated by a Western male. In contrast, the relationship between Morhange and Saint-Avit in the source-text corresponds with Dyer’s understanding of homoeroticism as a less sexually charged bond that is based on a ‘higher form of attraction’ and ‘indicates a sense of male pleasure in the physical presence of men, or even sometimes in their spiritually or ethically masculine qualities’, especially in contexts where libidinal forces must be contained (Dyer 2002, 3–4, 3). This is apparent when Morhange warmly remarks to Saint-Avit during their journey across the Sahara: ‘ils me semblent à cette heure, infiniment courts, les quelque cent kilomètres qui me restent, avant d’atteindre Shikh-Salah, à parcourir en votre compagnie’ (Benoit 2015b, 77). These sentiments are arguably reciprocated by Saint-Avit, who, upon beholding Antinéa’s exotically clad ladies-in-waiting, admits that ‘[d]e nouveau je pensai à Morhange, mais seulement l’espace d’une seconde’ (180).

Interestingly, Feyder’s film links Morhange and Saint-Avit, rather than any African characters, with homosexuality. Although his portrayal of the relationship between the two men is not as explicit in its treatment of homosexuality as other cultural texts of the era such as Marcel Proust’s Sodom et Gomorrah (1921) and André Gide’s Corydon (1924), it constitutes an audacious example of the Queer. Cultural representations of the Queer in French interwar culture demand to be excavated because despite the ‘open secret’ of homosexuality in the French military, men (with the exceptions of Gide and British poet Edward Carpenter) could speak openly about their homosexuality only late in the colonial era, and such feelings in French colonial contexts were ‘more visible in private writings, between the lines of published works, in the suggestiveness of visual art and in the generally discreet actions of men’ until the 1960s (Aldrich 2002, 405). Moreover, homosexuality was rarely portrayed in French cinema until the 1950s (Brassart 2007, 19), with
the notable exception of a confectioner played by François Perrier in *Hôtel du nord* (1938), directed by Feyder’s protégé and four-time assistant director, Marcel Carné.

After the First World War, discourses concerning homosexuality were generally pernicious and exclusionary in nature as they were inextricably connected with France’s anxious perception of its national growth and colonial impetus. Nationalism had become progressively synonymous not only with racial purity but also with virility during the expansion of the empire in the late nineteenth century, and the regulation of homosexuality was therefore considered essential to the preservation of the French ‘race’ (Dean 2000, 133). The war accentuated fears of homosexuality, which was believed to flourish in the trenches (Childers 2003, 5). Commentators consequentially invested homosexual behaviour with a pathological psychic and cultural signification during the intensely pronatalist interwar years, which led the public to perceive it as fundamentally disruptive and even capable of disintegrating the national body. Although the suppression of homosexuality was an urgent matter for state institutes, this was also considered a hopelessly challenging process because, in what arguably ranks as the most significant difference between pre- and postwar medical discourses, doctors were more inclined to view homosexuality as a generally invisible physiological problem that was no longer confined to a particular milieu or people rather than as a state typically indicated by feminine appearance (Dean 2000, 150–154).

Widespread homosexual practices in the French military contested the comforting line of demarcation that Orientalist discourses drew between East and West. Attempting to minimize the prevalence of homosexuality in French communities, many commentators including doctors argued during the 1900s and 1910s that homosexuality was a fundamentally Orientalist vice generated by hot climates (a belief dating back to antiquity), *le cafard* (a persistent melancholia associated with homesickness) and homosocial environments deprived of sufficient female companionship: physician Édouard-Adolphe Duchesne (1853, 44–45) posited that North African men were predisposed towards homosexuality due to Africa’s religious conventions and hot weather (a view that surfaces in the figure of Saint-Avit’s masseur in Benoit’s novel) and a doctor writing in 1909, informed by similar retrograde understandings of the aetiology of homosexuality, argued at length that it was also particularly common in army units, most notably the *bataillons d’Afrique* (Aldrich 2002, 58–63). This concern for the French military’s sexual behaviour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was provoked by an imbalanced ratio between European men and women and the limited range of sexual partners in some outposts, which meant that ‘mateship could and did veer off into sexual intimacy’ (3).

This and other facets of perceived ‘Otherness’ were considered a communicable and identifiable condition generated by the transgression of any number of Western social sanctions whether by living openly with a native lover or pursuing the indigenous lifestyle (Kennedy-Karpat 2013, 42–43). In response, medical practitioners recommended either repatriation or adherence to a consistent ethic of work and morality that privileged exercise, a healthy diet and moderation in sexual practices within the parameters of family and social life including a European wife and children lest those affected degenerate into what Kennedy-Karpat refers to as ‘rogue *colons*’, settlers whose hedonistic abandon ruptured the relationship between settler colonialism and metropolitan control. Keeping in mind these perceptions of homosexuality and the censurability of homosexual
voices in Europe in the aftermath of the First World War, the remainder of this analysis argues that Saint-Avit and Morhange’s queer relationship with each other contests Antinéa’s supremacy and thereby catalyses the latter’s death, occasionally challenging stereotypes that cinéma colonial is alleged to uphold.

‘Tu n’as manifesté qu’un seul désir, tu sais lequel!’: triangulating queer tensions

Judith Butler reminds us that gender identity is transient and tenuous, formed through a repeated stylization of the body that develops ‘the illusion of an abiding gendered self’ (1999, 179). This means that even though L’Atlantide relies heavily on archetypes commonly associated with pro-colonial discourse, gender’s unstable, essentially socio-political and cultural foundations leave heteronormativity open to the realm of the Queer, as theorized by Dyer. Crucially, without referring to Dyer, Eve Sedgwick defines the queer as ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’ (Sedgwick 1994, 8, italics in original). Such indeterminacy of sexuality within prototypical characters associated with cinéma colonial potentially exposes fissures in the heteronormative masculinist myth that French imperialist discourses sought to construct at the peak of l’Empire triomphant. The textual operations of such ambiguous representations in L’Atlantide are capable of offering revealing insights into French society since, according to Sedgwick, erotic triangles provide ‘a sensitive register precisely for delineating relationships of power and meaning, and for making graphically intelligible the play of desire and identification by which individuals negotiate with their societies for empowerment’ (Sedgwick 2016, 27).

The film’s first hint towards the queer tensions that come to characterize Morhange and Saint-Avit’s relationship appears when Ceigheir-Ben-Cheikh deceptively leads them to a cave linked to Atlantis for shelter from a sand-storm. As they proceed deeper into the cavity, Feyder’s mise en scène is dominated by phallic stalagmites and stalactites, which playfully signal a transition to an environment that catalyses the emergence of male homosexual desire and distorts Western heteronormative boundaries (Figure 5). Feyder’s dialectical approach to gender is especially salient in the relationships that bind Morhange, Saint-Avit and Antinéa in Atlantis. Whereas one would expect both men to vie for a woman of whom the archivist (Paul Franceschi) declares ‘Famille, Patrie, Honneur, vous renieriez tout pour elle!’ the narrative is primarily concerned with the sexually ambiguous desire that Saint-Avit and Morhange display under captivity. To some extent, the archivist’s warning is justified: men who have previously ventured to Atlantis are portrayed as passive figures who are ensnared by their own sexual impulses and are incapable of decisively rupturing their relationship with Antinéa’s domain. Another lieutenant, Massard, has returned to Atlantis. Captivated by an unyielding Antinéa, he throws himself from her palace to a ravine below. Moreover, 120 tombs have already been erected in the palace’s red marble room, fifty-two of which are now occupied by the corpses of her previous victims, to whom her archivist refers as ‘les époux d’Antinéa’.

Yet even as Antinéa pursues each man, the narrative frequently holds the intimate bond between the two soldiers in tension with their respective relationships with her.
Furthermore, Feyder focalizes our attention on each of the lieutenants by erasing additional prisoners present in Benoit’s novel including a pastor and a count. Such an infatuation with the queen never even develops in the case of Morhange. When Saint-Avit enquires into Morhange’s whereabouts during their separation, the archivist responds, ‘Si tu ne le vois pas, c’est qu’il préfère rester auprès d’elle’. In sharp contrast to the archivist’s and Saint-Avit’s expectations, the following shot reveals Morhange in Antinéa’s throne room where he remains physically distant from her, turning his back towards her and gazing beyond a window (Figure 6). As an intertitle clarifies: ‘Condamné à vivre dans l’entourage de la Reine, Morhange s’enfermait dans son Rêve et ne semblait même pas s’apercevoir de l’Auguste Présence’. Most surprisingly, Morhange states, ‘Je vous ai demandé, de revoir, avant de mourir, mon ami’, implying that he would rather die in the interest of seeing Saint-Avit once more than submit to Antinéa’s romantic desires and revealing how both queer desire and professional duty may motivate comradeship within a putatively heteronormative military framework.

In Benoit’s novel, Morhange claims in overtly sexist terms that his ability to resist Antinéa stems from an asymmetrical relationship predicated on men’s innately supreme emotional lucidity: ‘Voyez-vous, l’homme a, sur la femme, en la matière, une incontestable supériorité. De par sa conformation, il peut opposer la plus complète des fins de non-recevoir. La femme pas’ (Benoit 2015b, 175). Yet the film leaves Morhange’s resistance to the queen unexplained and does not explicitly link it with his monastic training or his devout Catholicism, both of which are evoked throughout the film by a crucifix he wears around his neck. Morhange’s romantic history with women is also left tantalizingly opaque. The doctor attending to Saint-Avit in the opening sequences in the desert remarks that Morhange joined a monastery ‘à la suite d’un profound chagrin’ and an accompanying flashback portrays the soldier burning a photograph of a woman.

Figure 5. Morhange and Saint-Avit are surrounded by phallic stalagmites and stalactites.
However, Morhange wears no wedding ring at any point in the film, and whether the woman in the photo is a companion who has either died or rejected him or is a deceased family member is never clarified.

This queer aspect of Morhange’s behaviour in the film is implicitly mirrored by Saint-Avit, even though the latter’s wedding-ring clearly indicates that he is married. This is most evident when, in two shots contradicted by Morhange’s real indifference towards Antinéa, a weary and frustrated Saint-Avit imagines the queen embracing his comrade and confines himself to the archive during the following days (Figures 7 and 8). What may initially strike the viewer as jealousy of Morhange’s opportunity to spend time with Antinéa can be more accurately interpreted within the context of the film’s gender dynamics as an expression of Saint-Avit’s repressed longing for Morhange.

Interestingly, although L’Atlantide indisputably constitutes a foundational text for cinéma colonial, Saint-Avit’s ambiguous sexual desire noticeably distances the broader contours of Feyder’s narrative from the genre’s traditional gendered trajectories, even on the surface of the plot. Shohat identifies a prevalent ‘colonial rescue fantasy’ that metaphorically depicts colonized lands as females in need of salvation from disorder and weaves literal rescue narratives of Western and non-Western women from indigenous men across the genre (Shohat 1997, 39). Yet Saint-Avit’s relationship with Tanit-Zerga, which develops into the only purportedly heterosexual rescue trope, is relegated to a minor narrative thread, such that spectators are never granted a genuine opportunity to consider the possibility that they might share a future together. Again, this deviates markedly from Benoit’s novel, which gives Saint-Avit the opportunity to describe Tanit-Zerga’s hair, shoulder and face in erotic terms that the film elides (Benoit 2015b, 215). By becoming diametrically opposed to Western societal norms, most notably through his ardent queer attachment to Morhange and his eventual failure to readjust to life in Paris, Feyder’s Saint-Avit progressively personifies Kennedy-Karpát’s theorization of the rogue colon.9
In the opening scenes added by Feyder’s adaptation, Saint-Avit experiences hallucinatory visions of a mask, Morhange’s face, Antinéa’s caracal and a skull after being rescued. He then cries out, ‘[i]l faisait noir quand j’ai frappé! Il ne sait pas que c’est moi! Il ne sait pas!!’ In light of the close reading above, Saint-Avit’s outburst is not just an expression of grief but an oblique articulation of the queer yearning that develops beneath his and

Figure 7. Saint-Avit becomes visibly disheartened by Morhange’s absence.

Figure 8. Superimposition conveys Saint-Avit’s frustration over Morhange’s absence.
Morhange’s military camaraderie over the course of the film and aligns the officers with Orientalist characterizations of North African sexuality. The desert, rather than being open to French mastery, underscores the permeability of traditional constructions of white masculinity. In other words, the Sahara constitutes a site of ideological failure.

Postwar discourses contrasted the perceived degeneration of the French race with the ‘natural’ Algerian desert nomad who embodied a primordial masculinity no longer attainable by French men (Fletcher 1998, 209), a view that inverted Orientalist associations of African men with homosexuality. Echoing this paradigm shift, L’Atlantide juxtaposes the soldiers’ problematized masculinities with indigenous North African characters who are considerably more adept at navigating the desert, including regions manned by the French military. Cegheir-ben-Cheikh effortlessly rides across North Africa, travelling between Atlantis and the broader expanse of the Sahara desert and to Saint-Avit’s new military barracks in the film’s final scenes. In doing so, as Benali (1998, 305) observes, he operates as the film’s sole example of the personnage-frontière, an archetypal character capable of navigating both worlds and of catalysing the drama that unites each. Saint-Avit and Morhange are far less skilled at travelling across North Africa’s barren landscapes and contrast markedly with cinéma colonial’s typical Western male protagonist, who functions as ‘a masculine redeemer of the wilderness’ (Shohat 1997, 32). Furthermore, the unboundedness of the desert clearly challenges the military’s apparatuses of surveillance and control. Atlantis itself completely eludes Western cartography, and when Saint-Avit himself orients himself towards the upcoming military company and almost dies, he only ventures in that direction by chance. Given the fate of the two men, the image of the self-assured Morhange standing before a small map in Ouargla (a moment that does not feature in Benoit’s novel) early in the film is less an affirmation of colonial prowess than an indication of the French military’s delusional confidence in its ability to chart the Sahara. The limits of the soldiers’ political agency are underscored in Atlantis, most notably when Saint-Avit futilely demands, ‘Je désire savoir ce que nous veut cette dame “Antinée” et quels rapports elle entretient avec le gouvernement général de l’Algérie!’ Like the French, British and Italian soldiers before them, they are less pioneering explorers than passive victims of a path preordained by Antinée and catalysed by Cegheir-ben-Cheikh. Clearly, European forces are only ‘the antithesis of the oriental desert’ (Shohat 1997, 32) in the film to the extent that they are fundamentally displaced within it. In short, Feyder’s Sahara, like Forster’s India and Conrad’s Congo, is not entirely knowable to its protagonists.

The Sahara’s dangerous allure is embodied by Antinée, the third character in the film’s central triangle. Two particular aspects of her complex identity demand analysis before discussing her place in the narrative’s queer erotics. The first is her ethnic heritage. Benoit presents Antinée as a descendant of Neptune and an indigenous mortal, Clito, and as a hereditary link to Cleopatra through a previous Atlantidean king’s marriage to the Egyptian queen’s daughter (2015b, 137–43). This blend of Occidental and Oriental roots is identified by Saint-Avit, who describes her as having black hair and as being ‘[u]ne reine de Saba enfant’ (165), linking her with South Arabia’s ancient civilization of Saba and justifying Benoit’s own remark that ‘Antinée, elle, n’est pas blonde, assurément’ (2015a, 313). Yet Saint-Avit stops short of othering her entirely by remarking that she has ‘un regard, un sourire, comme on n’en a jamais vu aux Orientales’ (2015b, 165). Although such a remark could easily indicate that Antinée’s appearance contradicts stereotypes inherited
by the officer, he also refers to her pale appearance in the moments when Morhange threatens her and rejects her advances (234, 235). These descriptions clearly link Benoit's Antinéa with a history of métissage. Although Feyder, as already noted, introduces numerous changes to Benoit's story, he retains the queen's mixed ethnic background by casting Napierkowska, a white French actress, and describing Antinéa as a descendant of Neptune and Clito. This aspect of Antinéa's identity is key to our understanding of the film's ideological force since métissage functioned, in Ann Laura Stoler's view, as 'a metonym for the biopolitics of the empire at large' (2010, 80).

Racial hybridity and its disintegration of biological and socio-cultural divisions do not necessarily compromise Antinéa's (or any character's) symbolic role as the embodiment of North African Orientalism since miscegenation and métissage, especially in the colonies, were not unconditionally condemned between the wars. In fact, it became apparent during this period that exclusionary theories advanced by eugenicist commentators had to be reconciled with France's concern for its own declining birth-rate. 'The answer', Martin Thomas observes, 'was to blur the definitions of what constituted “Frenchness” by concocting a sliding scale of colonial races to discern those ethnic groups with which interbreeding was permissible, even positively desirable' (2005, 167). A case in point is the 1937 'Miss France d’Outre-Mer' pageant, which showcased ten female contestants, nine of whom were of mixed race. By objectifying progeny who embodied 'an ideal that consisted of equal parts exoticism and familiarity' (Ezra 2000, 39) and promoting relationships specifically between French fathers and colonial mothers, the pageant reinforced pre-existing patterns of domination inscribed in the metropole and in France's projection of its colonies as feminized possessions subjugated to the expansive masculine empire and its reproductive demands (37, 44). Antinéa's hostile resistance to male colonial control is one of her most ideologically provocative characteristics because it distinguishes her from such culturally constructed associations between femininity and subservience to male authority, and Feyder's hints towards a similar history of miscegenation in her ancestry imply that her predatory behaviour is latent in both metropolitan and North African women.8

The second challenge posed by Antinéa's identity is its contradiction of the Orientalist association between the veiled woman and land open to conquest, which is initially espoused by the film's opening shot in the manner theorized by Shohat. Many women featuring in the most famous examples of cinéma colonial throughout the 1920s and 1930s including Tanit-Zerga in L'Atlantide as well as Josephine Baker's characters in Zouzou (Allégret, 1934) and Princesse Tam-Tam (Gréville, 1935), Aischa (Annabella) in La Bandera (Duvivier, 1935) and the 'nativised' prostitute played by Marie Bell in Feyder's Le Grand Jeu correspond with prevalent contemporary preconceptions of the Arab woman (or moukère) as 'the least advanced socially, morally, and culturally' (Clancy-Smith 1998, 171), a powerless body denied rights as consenting adults by Muslim patriarchy and willing to sacrifice even her own life for the male colonizer (Slavin 2001, 21–23). Feyder's Antinéa resists this trend, albeit through an equally regressive French misogynist tradition that viewed Oriental female sexuality as destructive and powerful (23) and which would resurface more famously in the treacherous figure of Inès (Line Noro) in Pépé le Moko. In doing so, the Atlantean queen disrupts the fundamental ideological relationship between colonial possession of women and control of the land, a dyad that traditionally linked white settlers to the metropole in a 'metaphorical synergy of dominance' (32). Antinéa also rules Atlantis without being challenged by her servants, likens her linguistic talents
(which include fluent French) to those of Cleopatra and boasts an archive replete with European cultural texts including Shakespeare’s Macbeth, the theatrical works of Voltaire and a Spanish edition of Don Quixote. Furthermore, the archivist boasts that her realm is surrounded by ‘[une] ceinture d’infraîchissables montagnes’.

Despite the apparent immutability of Antinéa’s rule and the security of Atlantis itself, she eventually compels Saint-Avit to kill Morhange when the latter resists her sexual appeal. The reason for this in Benoit’s novel is clear: the archivist informs the soldiers that Antinéa’s goal is ‘[d]e rétablir au profit de son sexe la grande loi hégélienne des oscillations’ (Benoit 2015b, 156). Conversely, Feyder’s film does not explicitly link her motives with any particular mission, nor does it ascribe Antinéa’s aggressive reaction to vanity or vindictiveness. The only hint towards Antinéa’s goals is subtly provided by the archivist’s explanation for the galvanized remains in the red marble room. The archivist remarks that one of Antinéa’s previous victims died ‘[c]omme tous les autres et comme tous ceux de demain: Il est mort d’amour!’ He proceeds to inform Saint-Avit and Morhange that the only soldier to escape to date was an Italian lieutenant, Ghiberti, ‘[m]ais deux ans après, mourant de soif, il errait, cherchant l’entrée de la montagne, et revenait se soumettre à la loi d’Antinéa’. In Benoit’s novel, the archivist voices a similar remark but clearly states that Ghiberti ‘rentra dans son pays’ (2015b, 261) before seeking Antinéa two years later. That Feyder’s Ghiberti never made it to Italy suggests he may have returned to Antinéa’s palace owing to the inhospitable desert rather than to any profound sexual attraction to the queen. After all, even with the advantage of Ceigher-Ben-Cheik’s directions towards the safest route north, Tanit-Zerga dies and Saint-Avit almost meets the same fate.

With this history and the entire trajectory of Feyder’s narrative in mind, the threat posed by Morhange and Saint-Avit’s queer bond to Antinéa becomes clearer, especially when Morhange passively rejects her advance and an intertitle notes the following: ‘Blessée dans sa majesté méprisée, dans sa beauté pour la première fois impuissante, Antinéa sentait naître en elle un sentiment nouveau’. This feeling, easily construed as wounded vanity on an initial viewing, is in fact profound fear stemming in part from her previous rejection by Ghiberti, whose escape has already demonstrated the permeability of Atlantis’s boundaries. The contrast between Antinéa’s determination to attract Morhange on the one hand and, on the other, the anxiety she conceals is played out through her interaction with mirrors. After Morhange’s first visit to her boudoir, where he kisses her hand and takes his leave, she reacts angrily but then picks up a hand-held mirror and smiles at her reflection, satisfied by her prospect of attracting him on a subsequent occasion (Figure 9).10 Whilst waiting for Morhange to arrive a second time, Antinéa inspects her appearance in the large, ornate mirror located behind her bed in the background of the image (Figure 10). Lacan famously argues that the infant misrecognizes itself in the mirror as a coherent, stable entity through the image of corporeal plenitude and sense of control offered by its reflection. This process enacts a rivalry between the child and its mirror image which continues into adulthood (Lacan 1966, 93–100). A similar process is evident in Antinéa’s inspection of her own erotic force in front of her mirror in each of these scenes. This attempted self-assurance is essential to her determination to match her self-created image of a subjugator of men. After Morhange has arrived for the second time, Antinéa herself hints towards the sexually ambiguous bond shared by the two soldiers, remarking that ‘Tu n’as manifesté qu’un seul désir, tu sais lequel!’ During the moments after Morhange’s death, Antinéa conveys a variety of emotions that signal the precarious process of self-identification already evoked by her
mirror. She looks on, horrified, and then, as though to reassure herself once again of her dominance and irresistibly seductive power, kisses him aggressively whilst he lies dying on the ground (Figure 11).

The urgency underlying Antinéa’s hostile negation of Saint-Avit and Morhange’s sexually ambiguous bond is acknowledged after the murder, when Antinéa proudly

Figure 9. Antinéa inspects her appearance in her mirror.

Figure 10. Antinéa gazes at her reflection.
declares to Saint-Avit, ‘S’il n’avait pas su que c’était toi l’affaire n’aurait eu aucune importance pour moi’. She speaks the same words in Benoit’s novel, but her revenge on Morhange is provoked to a large extent by his threat to inform the French military of her palace’s location and to storm Atlantis (Benoit 2015b, 234). By eliminating this motive from Antinée’s actions within the film, Feyder emphasizes her own understanding of the threat posed by the queer bond between Morhange and Saint-Avit to the coherence of her identity and the permanence of her rule.

Given the importance of this bond to Morhange’s untimely death, the army’s reaction after saving Saint-Avit from certain death in the desert is alarming and evasive in equal measure. Before Saint-Avit finally discloses his story at Hassi Ifnifel, his superior prematurely dismisses the potentially incriminating circumstances surrounding Morhange’s death, concluding that ‘devant l’impossibilité de réunir aucune preuve, [...] il est d’un intérêt supérieur d’étouffer ce qui ne serait qu’un inutile scandale’. Although no explicit reference to a homosexual relationship between Saint-Avit and Morhange is made by this early point in the narrative, this statement, which foreshadows the ‘Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell’ policy instituted by the United States from 1994 to 2011, evokes attitudes towards homosexual behaviour in the military that persisted after the First World War. Despite the French military’s clear awareness of such practices among colonial troops and profound concerns voiced by commentators in the postwar period, the matter ‘was hardly a priority’ for the military, even for senior officers (Aldrich 2002, 64). In fact, notwithstanding aforementioned interwar discourses that encouraged les mariages coloniaux, colonialists historically saw homoerotic sex, which had been decriminalized in 1791 during the French Revolution, as a better alternative to the perceived perils of heterosexual miscegenation and racial amalgamation (4). By closing the book on Morhange’s death, the French military in L’Atlantide wilfully overlooks the potentially important place of

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**Figure 11.** Antinée grasps the dying Morhange in a predatory embrace.
homosexuality in understanding how French soldiers respond to each other and to intercultural encounters in the desert.

‘The essence of any Orientalizing erotics’, Joseph Allen Boone writes, ‘lies in the projection of desires deemed unacceptable or forbidden at home onto a foreign terrain’, generally in order to reencounter those desires from a safe distance (Boone 2015, 5). There is, in the case of L’Atlantide, an irony in this role. At first sight, the film appears to support nationalist and racial tensions that suffused the collective unconscious in contemporary France. On closer inspection, however, the narrative suggests that the French military is hampered by sexual impulses that it can neither control nor entirely comprehend and which challenge facile distinctions between Eastern and Western sexualities. As Boone notes, the distance Orientalist texts aim to establish between East and West occasionally ‘proves not to be so safe after all, dissolving the boundary between self and other and reconfiguring both in the process—or, conversely, revealing the extent to which that “other” already exists within the self, haunting its self-definition’ (5). Feyder’s manipulation of Orientalist tropes is doubly audacious because the film’s chronological frame links this gendered crisis with socio-cultural patterns in French pre-war society. The only precise reference to a date within his elliptical narrative features when Saint-Avit is officially assigned to the Spahis according to a newspaper dated 14 May 1914. By delaying the date noted in Benoit’s novel (where Ferrières’s manuscript is dated 5 November 1903), Feyder’s L’Atlantide suggests that France was still experiencing intermeshed crises in gender and empire on the eve of the First World War, crises that are traced back by Maugue and Said to the consequences of the Franco-Prussian war and which would be aggravated to an unprecedented degree beyond the screen during the years that followed Ferrières’s fictional discovery of Saint-Avit in the Sahara.

Whilst a queer reading of Feyder’s L’Atlantide reveals the film’s provocative socio-cultural richness, such an interpretation simultaneously problematizes our understanding of the film’s remarkable commercial success in France. The interwar period saw numerous commentators calling for the repression of homosexuality, which was perceived by virtually all postwar commentators as ‘reenact[ing] the trauma of war as the experience of spectacularly degraded manhood’, contrasting sharply with the war’s ‘unmet promise to regenerate and virilize the nation’ (Dean 2000, 144). The reason for the film’s massive domestic success appears to lie in its exotic surface, especially the threatening images of the vengeful Antinéa, deceptive Tuaregs and the vast expanse of the Sahara, which provided Feyder with a distracting screen of opacity between his provocative approach to queer desire and spectators seeking empowerment in the aftermath of conflict, whether through cinéma colonial or through the expositions coloniales hosted by Marseilles (1922), La Rochelle (1927) and Paris (1931).

L’Atlantide even appears to reflexively acknowledge its own exotic allure by exploiting Saint-Avit’s role as a Western audience’s main point of identification to allegorize how cinéma colonial appealed to contemporary spectators. Before leaving Atlantis, Saint-Avit is warned by Cegheir-ben-Cheikh that ‘Un jour, […] tu repasseras par le même couloir sous lequel tu viens de passer’. Fulfiling this prediction, Saint-Avit himself declares to Ferrières that ‘Depuis trois ans je ne sais plus rien d’ELLE. Mais je la vois, je lui parle!’ By the end of the film, Saint-Avit is preparing to return to Atlantis. The film’s final intertitles, intercut with a shot of Saint-Avit and Ferrières proceeding through the desert, describe them as ‘ivres de l’attrait sacré du Mystère’. Whereas
a colonial hero’s return to France’s African colonies, according to Benali, tends to affirm and propagate Western values, Saint-Avit’s is ‘un retour qui traduit une rupture totale avec la société d’origine, et n’est porteur d’aucune valeur occidentale fondatrice, susceptible de modifier la norme organisatrice du palais d’Antinéa’ (Benali 1998, 302). What is even more striking about the return of this rogue colon is that he is accompanied by Ferrières, who has never been to Atlantis, has never even met Antinéa and whose only impressions of her are based on Saint-Avit’s potentially inaccurate recollections. Apart from sustaining the sado-masochistic subtext identified by Burch and Sellier, this ending is a prophetic one: the critical and commercial success of L’Atlantide paved the way for a series of French films shot in Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco in the years that followed, among them Inch’Allah (de Gastyne, 1922), Le Sang d’Allah (Luitz-Murat, 1922), both versions of Sarati le Terrible (Mercanton and Hervil, 1923; Hugon, 1937), La Chatelaine du Liban (de Gastyne, 1926; based on a screenplay by Benoit) and La Maison du Malais (Fescourt, 1927), not to mention Pabst’s sound remake of L’Atlantide. In this respect, the stereotypes and engrossing vistas of Feyder’s film are configured within a text that lampoons the susceptibility of spectators to the exotic, thereby lending additional resonance to Cegheir-ben-Cheikh’s warning to Saint-Avit that ‘tu te trompes si tu te figures revoir ton Monde avec les mêmes yeux que lorsque tu l’as quitté’.

Conclusion: ‘Tu repasseras’

Without focusing on L’Atlantide, Susan Hayward argues that the conventions of cinéma colonial were generally symptomatic of ‘the prevalent schizophrenic mentality of a nation caught between loss and change on the one hand, and on the other between a need to come to terms with that loss and change and a desire to escape from that confrontation’ (Hayward 2005, 121). It is arguably due to this tension that Feyder’s narrative sustains disparate readings such as those outlined in the introduction to this article and developed in the foregoing analysis. In line with dominant tendencies in the genre, the film undeniably resorts to exotic archetypes, and its Algerian setting, ‘aesthetically accomplished and attractive though it was, did not do much to illuminate the colonial situation of Algeria’ (Loutfi 1996, 22). In fact, the figure of Antinéa arguably encouraged audiences to contemplate the dangers of miscegenation and what indigenous female Other could become once liberated of colonial shackles and free to self-educate, as well as the threat that African women posed both to the French military and to French democratic powers more broadly. The queer bond between Morhange and Saint-Avit is also of a piece with such retrograde discourses since it supports the Western world’s perniciously racist association of North Africa with environmentally determined homosexuality. Therefore, despite the film’s complex intersections of gender, ethnicity and sexuality, there can be little doubt that it fuelled the galvanization of stereotypes that would be mobilized to justify pro-colonial force in cultural texts designed to bolster France’s postwar collective mentality, including comparatively regressive examples of colonial film such as L’Appel du silence, Un de la légion (Christian-Jaque, 1936) and Les Hommes nouveaux (L’Herbier, 1936).

What is equally clear, however, is that L’Atlantide contradicts Slavin’s assertion that the film portrays ‘[a]n austere, virgin wilderness awaiting the intrepid French officers to penetrate and tame with their civilizing hand’ (Slavin 2001, 38). Rather, Feyder challenges
views of the desert as a barren space predisposed towards colonial conquest, transforming it instead into a locus of ideological testing. As a result, the film challenges historically residual views of the French military as a masculine and masculinizing force, and exposes the ideological and psychological burden of the imaginary patriarchal Nation on real, volatile embodiments of masculinity that cannot rationalize sexuality. These elements run against dominant recognizable tendencies in cinéma colonial, in which ‘[e]xoticizing and eroticizing the Third World allowed the imperial imaginary to play out its own fantasies of sexual domination’ (Shohat 1997, 47).

The place of L’Atlantide in the development of cinéma colonial evidently requires reconsideration. It is clear that the ambivalent vision of French masculinity identified by scholars in films directed by lucid filmmakers such as Duvivier and Grémillon was already embedded in cinéma colonial’s inaugural feature. Gabin’s heroes of both Pépé le Moko and Gueule d’amour support Ginette Vincendeau’s observation that the star’s emotional range and positioning within the frame correspond to an unusually high degree with the characterization and framing of women in French cinema of the 1930s (Vincendeau 2006, 221–239). Moreover, the eroticization and feminization of the Casbah simultaneously imprison and ‘feminise’ Pépé (Vincendeau 1998, 63) and Gueule ends with the death of the female love-interest at the hands of Lucien (Gabin), a Spahi-turned-typesetter, and intimations of homosexual desire between him and René (René Lefèvre). Hence, although Benali is critical of L’Atlantide, he is correct in suggesting that the film ‘synthétise et rassemble les composantes de base qui constituent le point d’ancrage’ (Benali 1998, 289) of cinéma colonial to the extent that Feyder’s narrative presages the subversive narrative economy of later French colonial films and reflexively indicates cinema’s own critical role in the generation of popular Western perceptions of the colony. Although cinéma colonial eventually became ‘perhaps the only genre to disappear for political reasons’ (Hayward 2005, 169), Feyder’s watershed feature-film début stands one hundred years after its premiere not only as a reliable weather vane for the directions taken by French cinema during the entre-deux-guerres but also as a major example of why apparent conventions in cinéma colonial must be interrogated by scholars preoccupied with assessing the specific forms that one of French cinema’s defining genres once moulded in contested territories.

Notes

1. Feyder’s location-shooting in the Sahara prompted avant-garde critic and filmmaker Louis Delluc to famously assert that ‘[i]l y a dans L’Atlantide un grand acteur, c’est le sable’ (cited in Lherminier 2008, 130).

2. The main precursor to cinéma colonial was the conte arabe, examples of which included La Sultane de l’amour (René Le Somptier and Charles Burguet, 1919), Âmes d’oriente (Poirier, 1919) and Narayana (Poirier, 1920) (Abel 1984, 151–154).

3. For interpretations of this tradition, see Nevin (2016, 1–18) on Le Bled, Steven Ungar (1996, 30–50) on La Maison du Malais and Nevin (2020a, 87–106) on Le Grand Jeu. Duvivier’s and Grémillon’s films are discussed in the conclusion to this article.

4. Between 12,000 and 15,000 people emigrated from Alsace and Lorraine to Algeria between 1871 and 1914, 6,000 of whom took advantage of this confiscation. Although these numbers did not represent a notable spike, they fortified the colony’s ‘symbolic association with Alsace-Lorraine in the public consciousness’ (Varley 2008, 103).
5. *L’Appel du silence* also ranks alongside Duveyrier’s *La Bandera* (1935) as the most successful of all 1930s French films set in North Africa (Crisp 2002, 48).

6. Whereas Dyer capitalises ‘Queer’, Sedgwick does not. Unless referring to Dyer’s understanding of this term, I also retain lower-case spelling.

7. Dominique Casajus (2007, 231–232) observes that Benoit was an avid reader of Duveyrier. Other references to Duveyrier not specifically linked with Tuareg killings feature in the novel: Morhange refers to Duveyrier’s work on the place of the cross in the Tuareg alphabet (Benoit 2015b, 32) and Count Casimir, a fellow prisoner of Atlantis erased by Feyder’s adaptation, recalls a reception organized for the explorer by Napoléon III in honour of his recent trip to the Sahara (195).

8. Pabst’s adaptation deflates this myth by granting the blonde queen a specifically Caucasian ethnicity and revealing that one of the prisoners – a white man – is her father, who first encountered her mother (also white) in Paris. For more information on the implications of Pabst’s approach, see Winnie Woodhull (1998).

9. Without discussing Saint-Avit, Kennedy-Karpé identifies Massard as an example of the addictions linked by medical and popular discourses with expatriation and the enticing excesses Europeans encountered in the colonies (2013, 43–44).

10. Mirrors are a recurring motif across Feyder’s films of the 1920s and 1930s (Nevin 2020b, 107–108).

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