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Teaching Colonial History through Film

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Forum:

Film in the Teaching of French History

Teaching Colonial History through Film

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Film as a Source for Colonial History

Georges Duhamel wrote in 1930 that the cinema was "un divertissement d'ilotes, un passe-temps d'illettrés, de créatures misérables, ahuries par leur besogne . . . une machine d'abêtissement et de dissolution."¹ Over the course of the century, film has not merely served to distract miserable illiterate audiences, as Duhamel feared; it has also sought to inform, persuade, disturb, comfort, and entertain its viewers and has gained acceptance as a serious form of artistic and cultural expression. Attempting to trace the development of twentieth-century Western culture without attending to cinema is unthinkable.

The importance of cinema in twentieth-century culture has led me to experiment with the inclusion of film along with other historical sources in my course on France in the twentieth century. Rather than including film as it has traditionally been used in history and civilization courses—as an illustration of information already confirmed through readings and other written sources—I wanted to analyze film as a form of cultural practice. Such an approach involves treating film neither as a window on the past (as students often assume it is) nor as a vehicle for false history (as historians often assume it is) but rather as a historical product that both shapes and reflects the world around it.² When a film is analyzed both as a vehicle of representations and in the context of its production, distribution, and reception, it can be a valuable **[End Page 41]** source for both history and historiography. In the classroom, such an approach serves the dual aim of approaching history through film and of understanding film as history.

Because of my research interest in colonial cinema, I began my experimentation with film in the section of my course devoted to colonial history and the colonial legacy. My rationale for integrating colonial material into a course that previously focused primarily on metropolitan France was similar to that of Alice Conklin, who in a recent *French Historical Studies* forum makes a convincing case for examining the colonial project in courses on modern France as an integral part of the formation of the French nation. Understanding the ideology behind the civilizing mission, for example, is crucial to understanding the history of modern French republicanism. Linking French history and colonial history in teaching, she argues, and understanding the patterns of inclusion and exclusion inherent to nation-building, can help to break down students' monolithic notions of French identity. Modern France comes into sharper focus as a "sister republic" and a multicultural nation faced with many of the questions about race, gender, and ethnicity that shape the modern United States.³

Making film part of this project seemed a natural step because of the rich collection of filmed sources available, from the early days of cinema to the present. Both kinds of source necessary to the project—films contemporaneous with their subject matter that could serve as primary sources, and retrospective films that could serve as sources for the history of representations—existed for this subject area. Lumière cameramen brought the first moving pictures of the colonies back to France as early as 1897, and ethnographic films of the colonies were shown at the 1900 Universal Exhibition.⁴ During World War I, the efforts of the Section Cinématographique de l'Armée in filming the front, as well as the well-publicized film mission to Indochina, drew the attention of a mass audience to the colonies through the tremendous emotional impact of the moving image.⁵ The years 1919–45 witnessed an explosion in the numbers of films produced in the colonies. These were mainly documentary films containing various forms **[End Page 42]** of colonial propaganda, but colonial romances and adventure films such as Jacques Feyder's *L'Atlantide* (1921), Jean Renoir's *Le bled* (1929), Edmond Gréville's *La princesse Tam Tam* (1935), Julien Duvivier's *Pépé le...*

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Alison Murray is assistant professor of French at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. She recently published an article entitled "Le tourisme Cinéma au Sahara, 1924-25" in *Vigilance africain*. She is completing a book manuscript on representations of rural France and the colonies in *in-cinema* documentary films.

¹ Georges Duhamel, *Scènes de la vie future* (Paris, 1930), 58-59.

² This is the approach taken by Marc Ferro in "Le film, une contre-analyse de la société?" in *Nouveau alger*, vol. 3 of *Faits de l'époque* (Paris, 1974), 236-55. My definition of cultural practice is informed by Roger Chartier, "Le monde comme représentation: Redéfinition de l'histoire culturelle," *Annales ESC* 44 (1989): 1505-20.

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