

# Cinema and Colonial Exhibitions: *Le Bled* (Jean Renoir, 1929) and Its Historical Horizon

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## Abstract

The article aims to examine the relationship between cinema and colonial exhibitions in France based on the examination of *Le Bled* (1929), by Jean Renoir, a fiction film commissioned for the Exposition du Centenaire de la Conquête de l'Algérie, 1830-1930, and on the participation of cinema in it and in the Exposition Coloniale Internationale et des Pays d'Outre-Mer.

**Keywords:** Jean Renoir; *Le Bled*; Colonial Exhibitions; French History; Contradictions.

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In the 1920s, the relations between cinema and colonial exhibitions were consolidated as instances of communication and celebration that participated in the joint effort to build a discourse justifying the actions of imperialist countries in places that were, since the 19th century, annexed or incorporated into their area of influence and dominance. In France, in particular, this convergence was expressed in *Le Bled* (1929) by Jean Renoir, a fiction film commissioned for the *Exposition du Centenaire de la Conquête de l'Algérie, 1830-1930*, which occurred in France and Algeria in 1930. The “film of the centenary”, as the project was announced in 1928, was produced by the *Société des Grands Films Historiques* (SGFH) and received the support and resources of the associations involved with this celebratory event.

*Le Bled* thus integrated and reinforced a genre that, in French cinema, was dedicated to praising colonial action (Boulanger, 1975). At the same time, it sought to strengthen the symbolic link between past and present, as may be seen in one of its most emblematic scenes. In it, the reconstitution of the landing of French troops on Algerian soil is superimposed onto a shot of the enriched settler speaking to his nephew about the true meaning of the French presence, “transforming the first conquerors of Charles X into valiant protagonists of the country’s qualities through the representation of land cultivated by hordes of tractors!” (Barlet and Blanchard, 2002: 119).

This sequence shows how much *Le Bled* was in tune with the greater sense of colonial propaganda, passing on so-called “civilizing” values to younger generations. André Tardieu, Minister of the Interior and chairman of the *Exposition du Centenaire de la Conquête de l'Algérie* in 1929, considered: “The French are, unfortunately, very poorly informed about our colonial empire. They frequently ignore what we owe [to the colonies] in material and moral strength” (*Cahiers*, 1930: 53). One then could add that it was necessary to see it to believe it.

The analysis proposed in this article is not aimed at condemning<sup>1</sup> or reevaluating *Le Bled* to, in this case, harmonize it with Renoir’s later and more recognized work, as Barry Nevin (2016) already did, but at considering it within the ideological project to which it was linked. The intent here is to evaluate how much the film adheres to and distances itself from the demands of the State, and appraise the points of tension with its most immediate historical context.

The *Exposition Coloniale Internationale et des Pays d’Outre-Mer*, which occurred in France in 1931, stood on the horizon of Renoir’s work, having been conceived in 1927 to crown the journey dedicated to the memorialization of the colonial experience (Ministère des colonies, 1932: 105).<sup>2</sup> From the perspective of consolidation of France’s intended place of primacy in the general concert of nations, cinema played a decisive role in the construction and reinforcement of an imaginary aimed at affirming the country’s role as a civilizing nation. By pointing out the contradictions present in these actions, we intend to historically situate both the exhibitions and cinema, considering the associations between them.

## 1 *Le Bled*, a film for the centenary?

In the transition from silent to sound cinema, Renoir directed two productions for SGFH – the historical drama *Le Tournoi dans la Cité* (1928) and the colonial film *Le Bled* (1929) –, in addition to his first sound film, the comedy *On purge Bébé* (1931). These are works that were not incorporated, neither by the director, nor by the historiographical and critical literature on his work, as references to understand the filmmaker’s style and worldview. The previous period is seen as a time of learning and experimentation, as expressed by *La Fille de l’Eau* (1924), and of his adherence to the aesthetic that was most dear to him, *Nana* (1926) being regularly seen as a response to the director’s fascination with *Foolish Wives* (1922) by Eric von Stroheim. At the same time, these films would contribute little to understanding the period that truly mattered in his trajectory. Renoir is known for his work in the 1930s, as attested by the immense wealth of the critical tradition around *La Grande*

1. The introductory commentary on the film in the book that brings together Renoir’s criticisms and interviews is devastating: “*Le Bled* is an act of frivolous complicity. (...) Everything about it is awful.” (*Jean Renoir*, 1962: 96).

2. Not by chance, Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre refer to the *Exposition du Centenaire* as a “magnificent prelude to the Vincennes Exhibition” (1991: 29).

*Illusion* (1937) and *La Règle du Jeu* (1939).<sup>3</sup> Our objective, as already mentioned, is not to look at *Le Bled* aesthetically in order to reconstruct this association between Renoir's two periods, emphasizing the stylistic elements that could push the film back onto a more cohesive trajectory.<sup>4</sup>

*Le Bled* is thus situated in this small set of films seen by historians and critics as part of a great hiatus in his career. Characterized by large budgets<sup>5</sup> as well as the acceptance of communication strategies imposed by the studio system, at a time when the filmmaker was seeking affirmation and recognition, these productions belong to cinematographic genres in vogue, such as historical film, romantic comedy and, what is of our interest in this article, colonial cinema.

The association with the celebrations of the centenary of the conquest of Algeria was largely responsible for increasing the silence around *Le Bled*, to which the director himself contributed. As stated by Antoine de Baecque: "*Le Bled* is never watched, it is never spoken about, and rarely have I ever read about this film more than mentions of its date of filming (1929) or the genre it illustrates: 'colonial adventure'. Jean Renoir himself, in *Ma vie et mes films*, does not dedicate even a single word to it (...)" (1994: 50).<sup>6</sup> If Renoir did not include *Le Bled* in his legacy, this was due to the fact that he considered it from an ideological point of view as being at odds with his filmography of the 1930s, when, allied to the *Front Populaire*, he received the support of the French Communist Party to produce *La Vie est à Nous* (1936), and the support of the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (CGT) to produce *La Marseillaise* (1937).<sup>7</sup>

During filming in Algeria, between December 1928 and March 1929 (Sarrouy, 1928a: 156 and 1929b: 434), the titles initially attributed to this film project reinforced the political dimension committed to the French government's colonial agenda.<sup>8</sup> In December 1928, it was announced with the name *La prise d'Alger* (The Conquest of Algiers) (Gronda, 1928: 10), a title that evokes the scene portraying the military action of 1830, which is frequently associated with *Le Bled*. Another title attributed to the project further highlights the intended ideological bias: André Sarrouy, a correspondent of *Cinémonde* in Algeria, calls it the *Film du Centenaire* (1928a: 156).<sup>9</sup>

As these initial titles clearly imply, the project was designed to "prepare for the Centenary celebrations of the conquest of Algeria" (Saffar, 1928: 125). In 1927, the Superior Council of the Centenary accepted the proposal of Henry Dupuy-Mazel, director of SGFH and one of *Le Bled*'s screenwriters, to produce a "film about Algeria that made people want to know this country" (*apud* Cantier, 2004: 49). During filming, Renoir had all the support of the Algerian government and its local administrations for its realization (Saffar, 1928: 125).

Expectations about the film were high, as revealed by André Sarrouy in an article published in *Cinémonde* on December 13<sup>th</sup>, 1928. It was a project that had long been in demand by the French established in Algeria. According to the critic, the film that was conceived to "celebrate on the screens all over the world the magnif-

3. In [https://www.cinematheque.fr/sites-documentaires/re noir/rubrique/sur\\_son\\_oeuvre.htm](https://www.cinematheque.fr/sites-documentaires/re noir/rubrique/sur_son_oeuvre.htm), last access on 27-05-2020, it is possible to find an exhaustive list of works about the director and his films.

4. Nevin (2016) performs this work of connecting *Le Bled* to the director's later filmography, emphasizing the presence of depth of field in the enunciation of possible ambiguities brought about by the 1929 film.

5. Paul Saffar (1929a: 72) reports, in January 1929, when *Le Bled* was being filmed in Algeria, that "the making of this film will certainly cost a few million". Jacques Cantier, who had access to the documentation produced about the *Exposition du Centenaire*, believes that the film received great part of the resources destined to the advertising of the event (Cantier, 2004: 55).

6. Barry Nevin consulted the Jean Renoir archive at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) and found that in the drafts of his autobiography Renoir mentioned *Le Bled* "somewhat proudly (...), including it within the same category as the other two silent projects that receive significantly more attention over the course of the published autobiography" (2016: 3).

7. For Giorgio De Vincenti, *Le Bled* is "in clear contradiction with Jean Renoir's thinking and ideas" (*apud* Quintana, 1988: 62). When he filmed *La Vie est à nous* and *La Marseillaise*, as Pascal Ory states, Renoir was recognized as "the most 'engaged' of the renowned filmmakers, the 'compagnon de route' (fellow traveler), recognized as such, of the Communist Party (...). At that time Renoir, consciously or not, expressed positions close to the far left" (1994: 448 – 449).

8. We must note that the director was not SGFH's first choice for making *Le Bled* and the previous film, *Le Tournoi*. Raymond Bernard, a more experienced filmmaker than Renoir, who until then had few films made, none of which were very successful, came to sign a contract on April 23, 1928 (Mérigeau, 2012: 123).

9. In February, the screenwriters decide to rename the film *Le Bled*, as Saffar informs us. (1929b: 32).

icent work done here by the settlers from France, and finally [reveal] to the impressed eyes of foreigners the true face of our beautiful country” would finally be made (1928a: 156).

At the same time, Sarrouy interviewed the governor general of Algeria, Pierre Bordes, who was a decisive character in the realization of the *Exposition du Centenaire* (Cantier, 2004). Like many in his day, Bordes defends the use of cinema as propaganda, mainly for tourism. His wish is “that every day, in the main cities of France and abroad, a film will be shown that evokes the landscape of Algeria” (Sarrouy, 1928b: 179).

This touristic dimension to be emphasized by the film is also evoked by Paul Saffar (1929a). The expectation, in January 1929, was that the film would “aim to make the whole world aware of all of Algeria’s activities, as well as the beauty of its sites” (1929a: 72). *Le Bled* would meet this demand by being filmed “in the main touristic and commercial centers”, thus constituting a “formidable instrument of publicity and propaganda to bring a large number of tourists to the parties, mainly” (1929a: 72).<sup>10</sup> According to Saffar, Renoir visited these places, as he mentions that the director “filmed numerous important scenes in the maritime terminal, in the gardens of Bardo, in the Mitidja plain, in the elevators of the République and Carnot avenues, in Boufarik and in a model farm in Staouéli” (1929a: 73). At the end of this trajectory, Renoir would finish filming in southern Algeria, “where important Arab and desert scenes are to be shot” (1929a: 74).

The expectation of a film with such a “touristic” vocation, in line with the expressed desire to show the economic progress achieved by the action of settlers, could have been more easily met if the intention was to make a travel documentary. In this genre, known as travelogue, widespread in the history of cinema and very present in colonial cinema, the displacement from one region to another would provide a record of what is considered peculiar and typical. *La croisière noire* (1925), by Léon Poirier, shown with great repercussion in the *Exposition Coloniale* in 1931, is one of the examples of what critics and state officials probably had in mind when stating their expectations for the film of the centennial.

However, in a fictional project, the difficulties in reconciling the affinity with travelogue and the concession to the cinematographic genres with the demands for the representation of the intended modernity would probably be greater. Let us see to what extent does *Le Bled* answer to these questions.

*Le Bled* tells the story of Pierre Hoffer, who travels to Algeria to borrow some money from his uncle Christian, a wealthy farmer. On the same ship is Claudie Duvernet, who also has business in the colony: her uncle has passed away and left her a substantial inheritance. The two collide on a staircase leading to the deck, falling in love “at first sight”, as the expression goes. They go their separate ways momentarily, but fate will bring them back together more than once.

After staying at Zoubir’s, his former companion in the regiment, in Algiers, Pierre sets off towards his uncle’s farm. Not before showing his nephew that everything was achieved with a lot of work and effort, a dedication akin to that of the “founding fathers” (and at this moment, we have the reenactment of the landing of the French troops), Christian agrees to lend the money on the condition that Pierre works on his farm for six months.

Meanwhile, Claudie faces opposition from her cousins, Diane and Manuel, who have been disinherited by their uncle and are interested in stealing her fortune. After fate has her meet with Pierre once again and the vows of love are confirmed, new difficulties arise for the young couple: Christian is firmly opposed to their union, as he imagines that his nephew will leave Algeria as soon as he gets married.

Zoubir then arranges a meeting between the two families on his farm, located in the countryside, seeking reconciliation. He makes plans for an activity that is considered traditional: gazelle hunting. While everyone is busy chasing the small animal, Claudie’s cousins set a trap and kidnap her. Upon realizing this, Pierre sets off after Manuel and Claudie, in a chase sequence through the desert that mobilizes cars, horses and, finally, camels. Pierre defeats his opponent, thanks to the Algerians who help him along the way, and takes Claudie in his arms. In the end, they get married and settle in the colony, with Christian’s blessing.

As can be seen from the synopsis, this is a love story with the colony as a backdrop (the city, the farm, the desert, among other sets). In view of the expectations stated above, a first aspect to be noted in the film concerns the documentary dimension of *Le Bled*.

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10. The incentive to tourism was one of the important aspects of the project of the *Exposition du Centenaire* (Oulebsir, 2004: 274).

Before we get into the story itself, an intertitle warns us that the country cannot be reduced to deserts, caravans and camels. The images we see next correspond exactly to what the film wanted to avoid: the desert, the mosque, men preparing food on the streets, people walking around a simple-looking city, dances performed by women and Roman ruins.<sup>11</sup> The second intertitle brings attention to the fact that this is a country with “prodigious” industrial and commercial activity, and the images that follow seek to attest to this information, depicting roads being opened, so the last intertitle can finally tell us that it also has “an incomparable agricultural wealth”, with special emphasis on wineries. After the economic activities have been presented, we see Algiers from the French point of view, i.e., of those who arrive from Marseille towards the port, as will be the case of the couple that will shortly be on board the vessel.

These initial images, probably taken from cinematographic reports, would cover part of the demand. Like little postcards addressed to the viewers,<sup>12</sup> they situate the drama in a space characterized as modern, full of potential to be explored.

However, the unfolding of the story, as we have seen, did not occur in Algiers, but within the territory. It will be at the farm that Pierre will be confronted by his uncle, Christian, who does not agree with his nephew's Parisian way of being. One of the scenes when this becomes evident is at the first family dinner. Pierre comes down from his room wearing a tuxedo and, upon arriving in the living room, sees Christian surrounded by his employees, eating at the same table as them and behaving in the same way as the peasants. This simplicity of country life, coupled with the value of work, will be seized by the city boy, who becomes a convert.<sup>13</sup> In the end, at the celebration of his engagement, it is he who descends from his room dressed as a worker, contrasting with his uncle and other guests, who are all wearing formal clothing. His transition from city boy to settler, however, occurs more due to the difficulties in being with Claudie – first his uncle's rejection; then her kidnapping by Manuel – than due to his recognition of the value of hard work in the field. As noted by Louis Delaprée, “love, as you can imagine, collaborates brilliantly in this conversion” (1929: 6).

Moreover, it is not in modern Algeria, the end-result of the intended French labor, that the story will reach its happy end. It is in southern Algeria that Claudie is amusing herself with the falcon tamer, a character who will be responsible for delaying Manuel's advance, allowing Pierre to reach him. It is in the countryside that the gazelle hunt takes place, and it is in the immensity of the desert, an image that alludes to the film's first scene, that the final chase sequence comes to an end.

This emphasis on the picturesque and exotic landscape as a stage for the outcome of the story and the frantic pace with which it unfolds led to comparisons with “the chase sequences of North American Western movies” (Delaprée, 1929: 6), a factor probably considered to cause the film to deviate from the project, as we shall see.

Despite its identity being thematically consistent with the *Exposition du Centenaire*, as pointed out by Jacques Cantier (2004: 51),<sup>14</sup> *Le Bled* did not fully meet the demand established by the project, as can be seen by the reaction of critics and the reception of the film in exhibitions dedicated to colonization.

In October 1929, André Sarrouy publishes an article with the following emblematic title: “It is necessary to make the film of the Centenary” (1929c: 945). The idea that such film had not been made and the lack of reference to *Le Bled* indicates that the project's demands had not been met, and that the director had been unable to build the cinematic monument desired.<sup>15</sup>

11. The Roman past was held in high regard, as it was understood that the arrival of the Arabs had interrupted the flow of civilization, resumed in 1830 with the French invasion (Oulebsir, 2004: 282 – 287).

12. Nabila Oulebsir (2004: 262) says that “hundreds of postcards (...) showing the diversity of the [Algerian] landscapes” were distributed during the *Exposition du Centenaire*.

13. This conversion was acknowledged by the critics at the time (Souillac, 1929: 705).

14. Cantier even hypothesized that the film's screenwriters, Henri Dupuy-Mazel and André Jaeger-Schmidt, “benefited from the assistance, or at least the documentation from the Press Office in charge of running the Centennial's campaign from Algeria” (2004: 51).

15. The first time Sarrouy referred to the project, his hope was that the film would be “the visual epic of North Africa, the future monument of French cinematography” (1928a: 156).

Sarrouy always refers to a future film, one that has yet to be made. When he discusses what images and themes this project should contain, we can clearly see his criticism of *Le Bled*. For him, it should be “clean, sincere, beautiful, show us something beyond the gallop of small gazelle being chased, (...), sand – and more sand! – palm trees, camels (obviously...), attempted robberies in the middle of the desert and settlers whose features resemble those of peanut traders who come to offer their services on the terrace of cafes” (1929c: 945). His target, despite the lack of mention to it, is *Le Bled*; it is implied that Renoir opted for exoticism and folklore.

The mention of the Western genre above must be retained, since in 1924, Renoir had already proposed that French colonial cinema should be made to resemble this particular genre, considered North American par excellence. For the director, who had finished his first feature film, *La Fille de l'Eau*, the path to be followed would be that of the United States,

“where they were able to create a filmmaking model that became popular all over the world: the Western genre. Would it not be possible to make colonial films in France to be exported outside its borders? The metropolis and our directors could situate the action of dramatic and sentimental works in Morocco, Tunisia or Algeria” (*apud* Quintana, 1988: 63).

By betting, perhaps, on modernizing colonial cinema through its hybridization with the Western genre, Renoir moved away from the tone intended by those responsible for the project; the latter had idealized a postcard with records of scenes of economic progress, as the short introduction of *Le Bled* might induce the viewer to believe.

Even the scene depicting the landing of French troops in 1830, which required about 200 extras (Sarrouy, 1929a: 255), a sign of commitment to reconstitution and of investment of resources in this production, was not enough to contribute to the idealized memorialization of the film. If this passage was later seen as an example of ideological submission to colonial ideas, at the time it did not go by unscathed, receiving negative comments.<sup>16</sup> Some, like Didier Daix, saw these scenes as “a pretext to affirm that *Le Bled* is made to celebrate the centenary of the conquest of Algeria” (1929: 5).

Given the reactions, it would be difficult to imagine the film being used in the festivities related to the celebration of the French invasion in Algeria, an event that also resorted to cinema as a form of publicity and propaganda, as we shall see.

## 2 The Exposition du Centenaire de la Conquête de l'Algérie, 1830-1930, and educational cinema

The *Exposition du Centenaire de la Conquête de l'Algérie, 1830-1930*, with activities that took place both in the colony and in France from January to June 1930, followed the guidelines for colonial exhibitions of the time: celebrating the arrival of the invader as a civilizing action, the first milestone of a new historic stage for the invaded region.

Nabila Oulebsir (2004) describes in detail the initiatives taken to celebrate the anniversary, as a political party was designed to reaffirm the legitimacy of the French presence in Algeria. For this reason, a good part of tourist circuits, sports meetings, artistic events, public buildings, scientific congresses, publications, military parades, monuments, exhibitions, cathedrals and museums, among other works, were inaugurated and held in Algeria. If, on the one hand, these enterprises imbue the guidelines for the event with meaning, on the other hand, they accentuate the resistance of Algerians to the foreign presence (Oulebsir, 2004: 288 – 292).

One of the “most symbolic manifestations” (Oulebsir, 2004: 264) was the visit of president Gaston Doumergue, accompanied by high-ranking politicians and military personnel, in May 1930, the month in which the military conquest was celebrated. His arrival was staged so as to awaken memories of the “inaugural moment”, with intense mobilization of ships, as if a new landing had been taking place (Cantier, 1997: 46). The importance

16. When the film was released in May 1929, critics received it without much enthusiasm, as can be seen in the mentions already commented on in this article. Although not mentioned, the fact this was a moment marked by the end of silent cinema contributed to the coldness with which *Le Bled* was assessed. *Hallelujah* (1929), King Vidor's first sound film, was being shown in Parisian theaters, making a good impression in specialized journals.



of this theater for the metropolitan government could be measured by the investment in the thorough reconstruction of Charles X's troops and the reenactment of the 1830 occupation in several Algerian cities (Cantier, 1997: 47).

Given this scenario, it is possible to consider that Renoir had no other choice, given the nature of the order, but to incorporate this historic event in *Le Bled*. The impression is that, as in the short documentary-like introduction, the director tried to take care of the demand at the beginning of the film so that he could then dedicate himself to the love story and its unfolding in Algerian territory.

It is not possible to say for sure whether *Le Bled* was shown in the Exhibition. Cantier has no information on its screening in Algerian theaters (2004: 53). Gustave Mercier, in the *Exposition du Centenaire's* official report, refers to a "sensibly different summary of the film, which visibly corresponds to one of the first synopses" (Cantier 2004: 55), a sign that the general commissioner of the exhibition did not watch the film.

The second reference to *Le Bled*, found in the documentation related to the manifestations that occurred in the *Exposition du Centenaire*,<sup>17</sup> is made by René Weiss in his report (1930). For him, conferences and lectures should be accompanied by audiovisual material in order to perform better before the public. Among them, he mentions "the production of 'documentary' films & 'romanticized' films, such as the one dedicated to *Bled* that left on all those who saw it a strong impression of Algerian colonization" (1930: 87). The inaccuracy and generality of the report only strengthens our doubts about the effective reach of Renoir's film and its presence in the exhibition.

Despite the absence of *Le Bled*, film participated in the *Exposition du Centenaire*, mainly through educational cinema, a movement that had been already consolidated at the time, as stated in the publication of the *Revue Internationale du Cinéma Educateur*, an agency of the International Educational Cinematographic Institute, which was run by the League of Nations.

The centennial's committee in the Council of Paris asked the *Cinémathèque de la Ville de Paris* for films to carry out an advertising campaign on colonial activities geared to school-age children. According to Béatrice de Pastre, "Between March and July 1930, twenty-five thousand [young Parisians] watched one hundred and sixty-seven projections that mixed films with slides, accompanied by a conference by Jean Clair-Guyot, 'Algeria and our North African empire'" (2004: 16).

In Paris, the educational action was also addressed to immigrants of African origin established in the city. Among the films produced by the city for the exhibition, there were those "intended to present to all the achievements made in favor of North African immigrants (Algerians, Kabyles, Arabs, Moroccans, Tunisians)" (Weiss, 1930: 502 – 503), in addition to short "health advertising" documentaries and those dedicated to the action undertaken against tuberculosis in the Parisian region (Weiss, 1930: 503).

The city of Paris and its *cinémathèque* participated in the *Congrès de l'activité internationale du cinéma éducateur*, one of the countless congresses that took place in the *Exposition du Centenaire*. Conferences, projections and discussions defined the contribution of educational cinema to colonization.

The alliance between exhibition, cinema and colonization is expressed in the meaning attributed to the congress: "This congress is a tribute to civilizing France, it is the hope of accelerating the pace of penetration of its colonization, it is a new language, made so that all people can be understood and appreciated in a communion of fruitful and fraternal thoughts" (*Le livre d'or*, 2003: 142).

### 3 Cinema and Colonialism: the International Colonial Exhibition (Vincennes, 1931)

The *Exposition Coloniale Internationale et des Pays d'Outre-Mer* took place in the city of Vincennes, near Paris, between May and November 1931, and was attended by many visitors (Hodeir and Pierre, 1991: 101). Dedicated to celebrating the colonial empire constituted by France since the 19th century, its propagandistic

17. Jacques Cantier (1997) and Nabila Oulebsir (2004), two authors who extensively studied the *Exposition du Centenaire*, make no mention of *Le Bled's* screening or the participation of cinema in the event.

function was to educate citizens on the meaning of this so-called civilizing mission, resuming previous initiatives. Its motto, synthesis of this perspective, was: “to colonize is to civilize” (Ministère des colonies, 1933c: X).

The general plan of the Colonial Exhibition did not escape the characteristics of other exhibitions of its kind. So that the desired effects would influence the visiting public, a sense of *mise-en-scène*, of staging, was pursued because, as stated in one of the official reports, “an exhibition is, above all, a great show” (Ministère des colonies, 1933a: 95). This effect was materialized in the architectural projects of the pavilions, monuments and buildings, which were designed to last,<sup>18</sup> and in various other activities that made up the event, such as parties, artistic and cultural events, fireworks and nighttime lighting.

Despite having a large audience, the event was one the few in the history of the exhibitions that faced frank opposition. The socialist leader Léon Blum, for example, expressed a shared opinion: “we do not share the enthusiasm. We want fewer parties and speeches, more human intelligence and justice” in relation to the colonies (*apud* Hodeir and Pierre, 1991: 103).

Besides socialists, communists and surrealists – whose relations in the period were tense<sup>19</sup> –, joined in the boycott of the Exhibition. According to Catherine Hodeir and Michel Pierre, the most common themes of the counter-attack arose from the “remembrance of the massacre/sacrifice of black Africans in the trenches of the 1914 war [...], the exploitation of natives and, above all, the forced labor; in short, the upheavals that are still just colonials skirmishes” (1991: 112).

Surrealists denounced the situation with the slogan “do not visit the Colonial Exhibition” (Hodeir and Pierre, 1991: 111), printed at the top of a leaflet signed by, among others, André Breton, Paul Éluard, Benjamin Péret, Georges Sadoul, Louis Aragon, André Thirion and Yves Tanguy. The “colonial banditry, forced or free labor, the complicity of all bourgeoisie in the birth of a false concept: ‘the Great France’, that the Exhibition pavilions helped to implement” were criticized (Leiner, 1976: XV). The surrealists also demanded “the immediate evacuation of the colonies” and the trial of those “responsible for the massacres” (Leiner, 1976: XV).

The most significant opposition event was the exhibition “The truth about the Colonies”, held at the French Communist Party’s headquarters and organized by the League against Imperialism and Colonial oppression, linked to the Comintern.<sup>20</sup> The surrealists Aragon, Éluard, Tanguy and Thirion also participated in this counter-exhibition, taking charge of one of the halls.<sup>21</sup>

Private collectors lent objects of African, Oceanic and American origins in their collections; additionally, one section was dedicated to Tsarist Russia and the countries previously colonized by it. Another section comprised photos and pictorial documentation gathered in what was called “Against the Vincennes setting”. A retrospective section dealt with colonial crimes and another with forced labor, emphasizing the Congo-Océan Railway situation. One hall gathered material on the nationalist movements in the colonies, while another focused on the U.R.S.S. and the construction of the Turksib Railway, in contrast to the Congo-Océan.

Given the general spirit stated above, the strong resistance to the event, coupled with the need to disseminate

18. The creation of the *Musée Colonial*, which sought to fulfill its intended role of promoting the civic education of French citizens, is one of the examples that can be evoked. This space is today occupied by the *Musée nationale de l'histoire de l'immigration*.

19. Jacqueline Leiner in *Les chevaliers du Graal au service de Marx*, preface to the facsimile publication *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, details such conflicts: “Thirion will be excluded from the Communist Party from November 1931, for having written in a magazine (*Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*) not subjected to Party control, Maxime Alexandre will lose his teaching position due to his political views, Albert Valentin will be crossed out of the surrealist movement for collaborating on René Clair’s film, *À nous la liberté*, [...], finally, Louis Aragon, Maxime Alexandre, Pierre Unik, Georges Sadoul will finally abandon surrealism for the Communist Party.” (1976 : XIV)

20. For a critical reading of the French Communist Party’s action regarding the colonial issue, see Pierre Frank’s preface to the compilation of documents *La politique du Parti Communiste français dans la question coloniale* (1971). The compilation brings party documents on this issue, reconstitutes the activity of communist parties in many of the French colonies, among others.

21. Two photos were published in *Le Surréalisme au Service de la Révolution*, n. 4, December 1931 (facsimile edition, 1976). In one of them, one can distinguish the inscription “a people who oppresses others will never be free – Karl Marx”. In the other, “Europeans fetishes”.



colonial ideology, provided cinema with extensive participation in the exhibition.<sup>22</sup> The films produced and/or purchased for the Exhibition, under the supervision of the military forces, were supposed to: firstly, promote “the formation and value of our colonial empire”; secondly, represent “scenes of military life in the colonies”; and finally, show “overseas services” and activities (Ministère des colonies, 1933b: 193).

At least two documentaries were produced by the Army’s film unit: “one, devoted to the formation of the French colonial empire through the ages, and another, to the military scenes in Africa” (Ministère des colonies, 1933b: 193). Also featured was the film *La symphonie exotique*,<sup>23</sup> directed by Alfred Chaumel, administrator of the Colonies, and his wife, explorer Geneviève Chaumel-Gentil, who offered to make a film with “a number of military scenes in the course of a ‘journey around the world’” (Ministère des colonies, 1933b: 193 – 194).

The report also mentions the films coordinated by Captain Calvet, head of the Armed Forces cinematographic services, namely, “over 2,000 meters of colonial military scenes taken either in Fréjus or in North Africa; a superb 1,400 meter film on the history of the formation of the French colonial empire.” The same service made 64 colonial films available to the Organizing Committee, totaling more than nineteen thousand meters of film (Ministère des colonies, 1933b: 194).

At least three hundred cinema sessions, with more than one million meters of films shown, were accompanied by conferences. Each session lasted an average of two and a half hours, with more than half of its time reserved for the screening of films (Ministère des colonies, 1933b: 271). The themes varied according to the geographic region covered in the meetings, such as “Journeys in Africa”, “Asia”, “North Africa”, “Oceania”, and “India”. Among the films, the official report highlights, among others, *L’histoire de la formation de l’empire colonial français* and *Les grandes manœuvres en Indochine* (Ministère des colonies, 1933b: 271).

Cinema participated in the Metropolitan Section, which brought together “everything the metropolis is capable of providing to countries, both new and distant, which it was in charge of and which it decided to bring civilization to” (Ministère des colonies, 1933c: V – VI). Visitors were therefore prepared to visually seize everything in this space that was the result of “efforts of intelligence, devotion, technique and capital spent by the mother country in her overseas domain” (Ministère des colonies, 1933c: X).

Upon entering the first central hall, they would come into contact with the representation of the theme of “Electricity”. To their right, they would pass through, in order, the “Precision”, “Surgery”, “Music”, “Photography”, “Cinema” and “Theater” side halls. The space dedicated to the participation of cinema in this civilizing action was opposite those of the “Aviation” and “Automobiles” groups, which occupied the central hall after “Electricity” (Ministère des colonies, 1933c: 5 – 7).

The “different branches of the film industry” were presented using “devices and accessories used for the projection and recording of views and sound”, “educational films (by J. Benoit-Lévy, Compagnie Universelle Cinématographique, Cinématographie Documentaire, Société Pathé, Reutlinger, Société Synchro-Ciné)”, “period costumes and furniture for the studios”, “necessary objects made available to concert halls” by seventeen companies, a scale model of a small studio; “a reconstitution made with mannequins, which represented with great similarity some well-known artists, dressed in 18th century costumes, which greatly interested the public”; and, finally, the reproduction of a cinema hall (Ministère des colonies, 1933c: 135 – 136).

The cinematography award did not highlight any film in particular, but prized the production companies, such as Société Lumière and Gaumont (*hors concours*), Pathé Enseignement (*grand prix*), etc (Ministère des colonies, 1933d: 768). This fact reveals the emphasis on the industrial aspect of cinema, rather than on its cultural and aesthetic dimension.

The fact that *Le Bled* did not figure among all those films and sessions is yet another sign that this work by Renoir did not contribute significantly to perpetuating the memory of French colonization in Algeria. In a way, its absence in an event that would be the culmination of a series of initiatives celebrating French colonization,

22. For more information on the presence of cinema in this exhibition, see Morettin (2014).

23. There is no copy of *La symphonie exotique* in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Cinémathèque Française and Les Archives Françaises du Film. According to the official report, the documentary had a section of “125 meters on the Indian sipahis” and a “beautiful 825-meter documentary about the great operations in Indochina” (Ministère des Colonies, 1933b: 194). Alfred Chaumel and Geneviève Chaumel-Gentil (1934) published a book describing the filmed regions.

two years after its completion, partly explains its erasure from the history of colonial cinema, reinforced by the very posture of the director and his critics in relation to a project that is, deep down, conservative from an aesthetic and political point of view.<sup>24</sup>

A few years after the festivities that took place in Vincennes, Leni Riefensthal's *Triumph of the Will* (1934) would attest to the effective vocation desired for cinema by so many political regimes until then: a means of communication used to win the hearts and minds of thousands of visitors of exhibition halls all over a world that was moving towards the abyss.

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24. Renoir's most assertive views against French colonization were expressed between 1936 and 1938, period of *La Vie est à nous* and *La Marseillaise*. In this moment of greater political engagement, he published in the newspaper *Ce Soir*, led by Louis Aragon, a series of articles on the subject, texts gathered in *Écrits* (1974).

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