(Re)visions of the Outre-mer: looking at the male gaze in Jacques Feyder’s Le Grand Jeu (1934)

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ABSTRACT

Cinéma colonial is regarded by certain scholars as a highly conventionalised and commercialised film practice that grants spectators a sense of control over the potentially threatening colonial Other, and Belgian director Jacques Feyder has been subject to particularly harsh criticism in this regard. This article argues that Feyder’s Le Grand Jeu (1934), which depicts a young legionnaire’s relationship with a cabaret singer who bears an uncanny resemblance to a previous lover who jilted him in Paris, challenges dominant tendencies in portrayals of gender and colonialism in French cinema of the 1930s. Drawing on the relationship between Laura Mulvey’s theorisation of the male gaze and E. Ann Kaplan’s understanding of the imperial gaze, this article considers two core aspects of Feyder’s film. First, it illustrates how narrative sequences structured around the male protagonist’s point of view simultaneously grant insight into his vision of women and critically distance the spectator from his manipulative relationship with Irma. Second, it demonstrates that the framing of the protagonist’s gaze is linked with broader questions regarding French white objectification of indigenous Algerian women in a fashion that reflexively exposes the ideological underpinnings of cinéma colonial and French colonial culture of the interwar period more broadly in ways that French cinema of the 1930s largely elided.

KEYWORDS

Colonialism; Algeria; Sidi Bel Abbès; Foreign Legion; cinéma colonial

Introduction: Feyder, Le Grand Jeu and cinéma colonial

There is a moment in Jacques Feyder’s Le Grand Jeu/The Full Tarot (1934) when the protagonist, Pierre Martel (Pierre Richard-Willm), stands outside a bar and views a poster of an amnesiac cabaret singer, Irma (Marie Bell). In the poster, as in life, Irma bears an uncanny physical resemblance to his one-time Parisian lover, Florence (also played by Marie Bell), and her poster exudes a defiant attitude and confident sexuality reminiscent of Florence. However, the latter are traits that Irma herself never exhibits over the course of the narrative. Furthermore, this inanimate picture of Irma deprives her of her voice, a key attribute whose low and vibrant quality distinguishes her from Florence’s high-pitched tones and problematises Pierre’s deliberate attempts to conflate the two women over the course of the narrative. Both of these contrasts are reinforced when Irma herself emerges from the bar and stands...
between Pierre and the poster (Figure 1), crystallising the drama of vision and misrecognition that constitutes the film’s core.

This article aims to re-evaluate *Le Grand Jeu* as a subversive example of 1930s cinéma colonial by considering two core questions: first, how narrative sequences structured around the male protagonist’s view of the female body prevent spectators from identifying with his objectification of Irma; second, how the framing of this gaze intersects with broader questions regarding French white objectification of indigenous colonial women and reflexively exposes the ideological underpinnings of cinéma colonial more broadly. In order to answer these questions, which are embedded in the film on both a thematic and formal level, the present analysis proceeds in three main stages: first, it identifies the film’s current position within post-colonial film criticism; second, it theorises the relationship between the male gaze and the imperial gaze, as conceptualised by Laura Mulvey and E. Ann Kaplan respectively; third, with a view to remediying dominant criticism of the film’s allegedly pro-colonial discourse, the article analyses the ways in which Feyder’s narrative creates a textual space that actively encourages the spectator to recognise and interrogate the male imperial gaze.

The plot of *Le Grand Jeu* is replete with colonial tropes that were reproduced by cinéma colonial and 1930s French cinema more broadly, including inheritance, the exotic, dreams of escape, exile and nostalgia for Paris (see Benali 1998, 195–268; Crisp 2002, 50–51, 95–106, 233–236). The film recounts the story of Pierre, whose family discovers that he has been embezzling funds from their business and forces him to leave the country, leaving his avaricious mistress, Florence, and assets behind him. Pierre subsequently enlists in the Foreign Legion during an unspecified stage of the Rif war, a battle fought primarily between colonial Spain and Berber tribes in the Rif region of Morocco between 1920 and 1927, with an intervention by French forces from 1925 to 1926. The remainder of the

**Figure 1.** Pierre (Pierre Richard-Willm) stares at Irma (Marie Bell) in front of Les Folies Parisiennes (Eureka Entertainment DVD).
narrative focuses on Pierre’s obsessive dual attempt to efface Irma’s originality and to determine whether or not she is, in fact, Florence. Guided by the advice and insights of the tarot-reading Mme Blanche (Françoise Rosay), Pierre’s relationship with Irma develops and they eventually decide to sail back to Paris together. However, a short time later, he encounters Florence by chance in Morocco. When she jilts him for a second time, the despondent Pierre signs up for another five years in the Legion and sends Irma to Paris under the illusion that he will be joining her there.

Studies of Le Grand Jeu to date have largely focused on three particular aspects of the film. The first of these is the film’s importance as a precursor to poetic realist works directed by his four-time assistant Marcel Carné (Le Jour se lève/Daybreak, 1939), Julien Duvivier (Pépé le Moko, 1937) and Jean Renoir (La Bête humaine/The Human Beast, 1938) through its deployment of now-famous tropes such as doomed love and the tantalising impossibility of escape, as well as visual aspects including the prominence of atmospheric milieus, highly detailed décor and symbolically charged props (Christiansen 1987, 7–16; Andrew 1995, 246–248; Bergfelder, Harris, and Street 2007, 208–210). The second is the film’s innovative use of post-synchronised sound to distinguish Pierre’s two near-identical lovers, Florence and Irma, from one another (Jeancolas 2005, 154; Burch and Sellier 2014, 57–58; Nevin 2019, 39–48). The third aspect – the one this article intends to challenge – concerns the film’s conservative portrayal of French colonialism and the Foreign Legion’s place within it.

Le Grand Jeu has been recognised by numerous scholars as a key entry in French cinéma colonial, a staple genre which flourished during the entre-deux-guerres, with numerous films taking French North Africa (particularly Morocco, including Algeria and the Sahara) as their setting (see Crisp 2002, 31–71). Some scholars – notably Michèle Lagny, Marie-Claire Ropars, and Pierre Sorlin (1986, 127–176), Benali (1998, 340) and Elizabeth Ezra (2003, 57) – have viewed cinéma colonial as a highly conventionalised and commercialised film practice that reinstated hegemonic social and economic bourgeois norms, all of which granted metropolitan spectators a sense of control over the potentially threatening colonial Other. Such views are supported by the political context in which these films were released, which marked the peak of l’Empire triomphant: three years before the release of Le Grand Jeu, the Exposition coloniale had commemorated the centenary of the French conquest of Algeria throughout the Bois de Vincennes; an anthropological expedition travelled across Africa in 1931–1933; and France and Belgium would travel to Easter Island in 1934, the year in which Feyder’s film was released. Such was the popularity of colonial culture that cinéma colonial intersected with a variety of subgenres including patriotic epics such as Légions d’honneur/Legions of Honour (Maurice Gleize, 1938), musicals including Princesse Tam-Tam (Edmond T. Gréville, 1935) and military comedies, most notably Un de la légion/A Legionnaire (Christian-Jaque, 1936). All of these films espoused pro-colonial ideology, homosocial solidarity and the redemptive power of service in the Legion, and even Christian-Jaque’s comedy ‘clearly proclaimed the Legion’s message’ (Slavin 2001, 147).

Other scholars, however – among them Christopher Faulkner, Martin O’Shaughnessy and Steven Ungar – have valuably contested the alleged homogeneity of colonialist discourse during the entre-deux-guerres, arguing instead that French interwar cinema registers ruptures within prevailing colonial discourse and illustrates the genealogy of the empire’s eventual erosion (Faulkner 1994, 14–15; Ungar 1996, 35; O’Shaughnessy 2002). Yet, whereas some of these films such as Le Bled/The Bush (Renoir, 1929) and Les Hommes nouveaux/The New Men (Marcel L’Herbier, 1936) are now considered subversive examples of cinéma colonial for their
treatment of intergenerational conflict or gendered relations (Hertaud-Wright 2000; Nevin 2016), *Le Grand Jeu*’s representation of French colonialism remains widely viewed as a regressive image of what the *Outre-mer* had come to stand for in the minds of French spectators: Pierre Boulanger considers *Le Grand Jeu* one of a number of colonial interwar films that ‘sont devenues des films partiellement insupportables à cause de leur racisme latent, de leur paternalisme ou de leur mentalité guerriere’1 (Boulanger 1975, 135), and Dina Sherzer places it within a category of 1930s colonial films that ‘did not attach importance to colonial issues, and were amazingly silent on what happened in reality’ (Sherzer 1996a, 4). Denise Brahimi writes even more damningly on both the film and Feyder’s apparent ignorance of North Africa’s indigenous populace, arguing that *Le Grand Jeu*

est conforme à une définition connue du cinéma colonial, en ceci qu’il ne nous montre à peu près rien de la population indigène du Sud marocain, ni quand les légionnaires sont au repos, ni quand ils partent en campagne [..] Il est clair que Feyder n’a pas eu l’intention de traiter dans ce film de la « question coloniale », encore moins de la « question indigène ».2 (Brahimi 2004, 17–18)

Attempts to redeem *Le Grand Jeu* are problematised on three counts, specifically Feyder’s own role in establishing the conventions of *cinéma colonial* through *L’Atlantide/Atlantis* (1921), his political background and the pressure exerted by the Legion on the making of *Le Grand Jeu*. Feyder, described by Carné (1996, 50) as ‘un homme de droite’,3 was born to an upper-class military family, and in Martine Astier Loutfi’s analysis, *L’Atlantide* upholds a regressively conservative vision of ‘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’ (Loutfi 1996, 22). Further underscoring the allegedly regressive portrayal of colonialism in *Le Grand Jeu*, Loutfi observes that whereas Anatole France, André Gide and even Pierre Loti (author of *Le Roman d’un Spahi/A Spahi’s Love-Story*) made explicit anti-colonialist statements during the 1930s, Feyder remained ‘in the sage territory of existing and commonly accepted colonialist ideology’ (Loutfi 1996, 23–24). It is also important to note that during this decade, the Legion’s censors desired films portraying soldiers who, conditioned by military discipline, patriotically laid down their lives in an effort to atone for immoral pasts (Slavin 2001, 144–145). Such a valiant depiction was of utmost importance to *Le Grand Jeu* since Feyder desired the participation of real legionnaires in a scene depicting the Legion’s arrival in Sidi Bel Abbès after Pierre’s extrusion from France. Rosay (Feyder’s wife from 1915 until his death in 1948) recollects that authorities in the Legion were dissatisfied with the fantastical portraits depicted by Hollywood cinema and only allowed Feyder to film them when, upon reading his screenplay (co-written with Charles Spaak), they understood that he did not intend to criticise the Legion (Rosay 1974, 191–192).4 By no surprise, Abel (1984, 160) ranks *Le Grand Jeu* as an apotheosis of the Legion’s ‘myth of redemption’ alongside *La Bandera/Escape from Yesterday* (Duvivier 1935), a film dedicated to Tercio commander Francisco Franco and which, in Slavin’s analysis, ‘turned Spanish invaders who had bombed, burned, and pillaged thousands of farms and homes into purveyors of civilization’ (Slavin 2001, 165). Indeed, Feyder himself suggested that his film was, first and foremost, a reappraisal of the Legion’s soldiers:

[J]e veux, avant tout, réhabiliter la légion étrangère […]. Jusqu’ici, on a fait de la légion le refuge de tous les voyous de la terre, un repaire de mauvais garçons. Je veux montrer son vrai visage, le visage de la douleur, de l’héroïsme. […] Je ne veux pas de cette légion d’opérette
vue par Hollywood, déformée, adoucie. Son vrai visage, rude, un peu sauvage, mais quelquefois sublime.⁵ (Feyder cited in Garrigues 1933, 611)

On the one hand, by privileging a white male legionnaire’s negative experience of the heat, torpor and isolation of Sidi Bel Abbès over the viewpoints of the local indigenous populace, Le Grand Jeu conforms to broader tendencies in French cinema of the 1930s, which portrayed North Africa, especially Algeria, as a land ‘at once so close geographically and yet so alien in climate, topography, and culture’ (Crisp 2015, 104), and supports Lagny, Ropars, and Sorlin’s assertion that in the 1930s, ‘[i]l y a souvent beaucoup d’Arabes dans les films, mais ils sont à la fois omniprésents et non reconnus’ (1986, 131).⁶ This trope extends to the narrative trajectory of Irma, who is branded by the implication of miscegenational conduct with Muslims and is promptly discarded by Pierre towards the end of the film after his chance encounter with Florence, a gesture that corresponds with Sherzer’s observation that contemporary cinema ‘discouraged interracial relationships […] by portraying them [as] doomed to failure’ (Sherzer 1996b, 232). Furthermore, the images of men purchasing sexual favours from women aligns with a common tendency in French cinema to externalise erotic excesses considered extraneous to legitimate parts of society in the form of ‘exotic characters […] whose dark skin served as a metaphor for the evil passions seething within’ (Crisp 2002, 42).

Despite this relatively conventional aspect of Irma’s characterisation, the film’s portrayal of French colonialism is uncharacteristic of contemporary French cinema in one key respect: its representation of gendered relations. Noël Burch and Geneviève Sellier, in their groundbreaking survey of gendered relations in French cinema, convincingly argue that Le Grand Jeu actively ‘calls sexual roles into question’ by interrogating the broader motifs of virility and prostitution that structured popular cinema at the time (2014, 60). Burch and Sellier also hint towards the complex process of identification forged by the relationship between the spectator as bearer of the gaze and Pierre’s own gaze within the film:

By that final stage in the movie, the audience’s identification with Pierre has been so undermined, and his credibility as a clear-sighted man so eroded, that many spectators are prepared to identify no longer with the firebrand whose fate has been sealed by his typically male illusions. (2014, 59)

Whereas Burch and Sellier’s analysis traces the contours of the film’s visual style and socio-cultural concerns, closer scrutiny reveals that Feyder enacts a relationship between the camera’s frame, Pierre’s gaze and the film’s interlinked gender and colonial concerns in a way that offers potentially rich insights into counter-discourses operating in contemporary French cinema. As porteurs du drapeau tricolore during France’s colonial expansion, the Legion was always at the forefront of France’s overseas imperative and acted in the name of France’s mission civilisatrice, values and principles. The Legion was particularly important to France’s own self-identification as an aggressive, fundamentally masculine force. Because colonial propaganda had to represent indigenous opponents as a savage and uncivilised alternative, the image of legionnaires ‘had to match and exceed this stereotype in terms of toughness and ferocity’ in a fashion that corresponded with and enriched France’s self-image as male gatekeepers for the Republic (Cooper 2006, 272). This endeavour was remarkably successful, even after the First World War: whereas the experience of total war dissolved the myth that death could be noble and generated a sense of fear that emasculated soldiers, the legionnaire still ‘seemed to embody a fantasy of unimpeachable virility and impeccable masculinity’ after 1918 (Cooper
2006, 281). As a film that not only undermines patriotic paragons of virility mobilised elsewhere in colonial culture but also encourages spectators to actively interrogate such norms, *Le Grand Jeu* potentially constitutes a textually rich site – and sight – of anxieties regarding gender and colonialism in the French Empire.

**(En)gendering the gaze in *Le Grand Jeu***

Questions regarding the male gaze constitute a crucial avenue of enquiry for *cinéma colonial* because, in Kaplan’s view, they are fundamentally linked with the imperial gaze in Western patriarchal culture (Kaplan 1997, xi). Such questions are especially important where the framing of *L’Algérie française* by French mainstream cinema is concerned because, as Julia Clancy-Smith argues, ‘the construction of French Algeria was as much a forging of the gaze – or spectrum of gazes fixed upon Muslim women – as it was the assembling of mechanisms for political and economic control’ (1998, 155). Furthermore, the discourses and representations produced by that gaze ‘constituted a critical force in […] the metropole’s relations with its fractious African territory’ (155), and were therefore key to how domestic spectators conceptualised both the colony and the French colonial presence from a distance. Mulvey’s extensively debated theorisation of the male gaze incorporates two central arguments: first, that Hollywood cinema develops scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect by permitting the male protagonist’s active gaze to project his fantasy onto the passive, female figure, depriving her of her subjectivity; second, that Hollywood narrative style encourages the male heterosexual spectator to project his gaze on to that of a male protagonist and to share the latter’s privilege of ‘command[ing] the stage, a stage of spatial illusion’ (Mulvey 1975, 17). Drawing on Stam and Spence (1983), Ella Shohat (1990) and Edward Said (1993), Kaplan argues that the imperial gaze presupposes the centrality of the white Western subject (much as the male gaze reflects the assumption that the male subject is central) and ‘represses knowledge of power hierarchies and its need to dominate’ (Kaplan 1997, 78–79). However, Kaplan asserts that the intrinsically gendered imperial gaze can be challenged by the ‘look’, arguing that the latter implies ‘looking for the Other, in the sense of agency, searching for the Other’ and potentially establishing a mutual subject-to-subject recognition that the imperial gaze intentionally or unintentionally denies (Kaplan 1997, xviii–xx).

*Le Grand Jeu* repeatedly introduces us to questions regarding both the gaze and the look as well as the interwoven systems of gender and colonialism in which they are deployed by manipulating the spectator’s identification with the male protagonist’s point of view. More specifically, Pierre and the object of his gaze are viewed with a certain degree of objectivity throughout the film, but the film often simultaneously encourages the spectator to identify with his subjective perception of Irma. As a result, at a number of key moments in the narrative, the camera’s vantage point exhibits a sensibility that simultaneously incorporates and stands beyond the limits of Pierre’s experience. Although questions regarding subjective and objective modes of viewing are at the heart of the film’s dialectics of the gaze and the look, Feyder’s narrative framework and how it positions the spectator cannot be explained in a satisfactory fashion if one simply counterposes subjective and objective film narration, first person to third.
Stephen Heath, Gilles Deleuze and George M. Wilson emphasise that aspects of any individual shot must be related to the variety of elements that feature across other parts of a given narrative, which determine the spectator’s varying (and potentially non-existent) epistemic relationship with the different characters therein. Heath, in his landmark treatise on narrative space, explains that any narration in film ‘depends on an overlaying of first and third person modes’ (Heath 1976, 94). Deleuze, in his philosophical taxonomy, similarly asserts that films transcend this ultimately provisional distinction between subjective point-of-view shots and objective non-point-of-view shots, and argues that this binary is supplanted by an oscillation between an *image-perception* (potentially a specific character’s vision of the fictional world) and a *conscience-caméra* (an autonomous vision of the fictional world) (Deleuze 1983, 108). Compositions occupying a position between each of these extremes can incorporate a particular character’s perceptual impressions rather than assigning a character’s visual vantage point to on-screen space. Without citing Deleuze, Wilson nuances the distinction underlying the philosopher’s approach by comparing ‘directly subjective narration’ with ‘a kind of indirect or reflected subjectivity’ (2011, 144; Wilson’s emphasis). Whereas the former mode is punctuated by motifs that align the contents of the frame with the viewpoint of a central privileged narrator (an extreme example is Robert Montgomery’s *Lady in the Lake* [1947], shot entirely from the perspective of Marlowe, the protagonist), the latter presents the ‘focalising’ character within the frame and allows properties of the fictional world’s appearance ‘[to] stand in for properties of the way in which that world is experienced by the character’ (Wilson 1988, 87; Wilson’s emphasis). Read in relation to *Le Grand Jeu*, Wilson’s formulation usefully encourages spectators to recognise the potential import of Pierre’s epistemological position to Feyder’s *mise en scène*, even when the camera refrains from overtly merging the legionnaire’s visual perspective with the camera’s vantage point on the drama. This is particularly important to our interpretation of scenes in which Pierre remains visually present within the frame (as in Figure 1) or shots that allow the axis of vision between Pierre and the female object of his gaze to transgress the parameters of the camera’s frame (see, for example, Irma staring towards the off-screen Pierre in Figure 7).

Questions regarding voyeurism and its place within the French colonial context are evoked by the visual design of *Le Grand Jeu*, which frequently portrays objectified women and also frames men including (but not limited to) Pierre, who behold them. Irma is the explicit object of the male gaze on at least two such occasions: partially concealed behind a divider in Mme Blanche’s bar, Pierre scrutinises Irma’s appearance and behaviour as she serves drinks to customers (Figure 2); and cinema’s capacity for not only portraying acts of voyeurism but also positioning spectators as voyeurs is signalled more explicitly by a low-angle shot of Clément (Charles Vanel) ogling Irma’s legs whilst she hangs flypaper – clearly a metaphor for the physical allure of the female body within and beyond the fictional world on-screen (Figure 3). Rather than simply abetting female objectification, these moments alert us to the film’s complex contemplation of the male gaze and an interrogation of its place in French colonial society.

The sequences that portray Pierre’s relationship with Irma enact a more complex interplay between both the subject and the object of the gaze and, furthermore, link his view of Irma with overarching questions regarding gender in the colonial context. Most interestingly, whilst a number of shots portray Pierre’s contemplation of Irma’s features (as in Figure 6), two particular scenes overtly oscillate between a Deleuzian *image-perception* and *conscience-caméra*. Consequently, the epistemological alignment
provided by the camera simultaneously invites spectators to position themselves within Pierre’s vantage point and exploits reframing devices that undermine such a process of identification. The first of these scenes unfolds when Pierre accompanies Ivanoff (Georges Pitoëff) to a table in Les Folies Parisiennes with a French cabaret singer, Betty Deauville (Lyne Clevers). Once seated, Ivanoff and Deauville pose questions to one another concerning Pierre’s intense curiosity as he stares at Irma. These exchanges are intercut with two counter-shots of Irma shot from Pierre’s viewpoint as she interacts with two other men. The camera subsequently travels rapidly towards Irma, reframing her face in a medium close-up (Figure 4). On the one hand, this shot conveys the shock experienced by Pierre during his encounter with Irma. On the other hand, however, the camera’s
mobility is antithetical to the spectator’s identification with Pierre’s fetishisation of her facial features, compromising our spatial relationship with Pierre’s vantage point on Irma by granting a perspective that cannot be deployed by the seated Pierre. As a result, the movement of the camera evokes and places us at a critical distance from his mental obfuscation of Florence’s and Irma’s respective identities, evoking Madame Blanche’s warning to Pierre that ‘on dirait que tous tes ennuis viennent de toi’.7

A similar strategy is mobilised in the following scene when Pierre accompanies Irma to her apartment shortly after viewing both Irma and her poster in front of the bar where he first encountered her. Pierre attempts to impose his imagined image of Florence on Irma by closely inspecting her body and progressively erasing the characteristics that distinguish her from Florence. The sequence opens with Pierre leading an aggressive line of

Figure 4. A medium close-up of Irma’s face conveys Pierre’s moment of (mis)recognition (Eureka Entertainment DVD).

Figure 5. Pierre repeatedly questions Irma regarding her identity (Eureka Entertainment DVD).
questioning in her enclosed room. As the camera hovers over the bed in an extended take, he scrutinises her body obsessively, beginning with her head and then proceeding to her arms and feet, until the camera cuts to a close shot of her face (Figures 4–7). Crucially, the camera proceeds from a vision of Pierre examining individual parts of Irma’s anatomy to a close-up of Irma’s face, relegating Irma’s revealing attire and dark hair – the two aspects of her character that differentiate her most readily from Florence – to off-screen space.

At first sight, this sequence risks implicating us in Pierre’s objectification of Irma: the first two camera set-ups appear to place the male heterosexual spectator in a position ‘[to project] his look on to that of his like, his screen surrogate, so that the power of the male protagonist as he controls events coincides with the active power of the erotic look’

Figure 6. Pierre attempts to compare Irma’s body with that of Florence (Eureka Entertainment DVD).

Figure 7. Irma stares at Pierre as she agrees to refrain from speaking (Eureka Entertainment DVD).
Indeed, the final shot of Irma’s eyes turned towards Pierre offers the closest view of Irma’s face in the entire film and evokes Mulvey’s emphasis on the capacity of conventional close-ups for eroticising the viewing experience without breaking narrative verisimilitude (12). Yet the very proximity of the camera to Irma’s face undermines the mechanisms underlying the male gaze and, as in the case of Pierre’s first encounter with Irma, this shot distances us emotionally from Pierre’s viewpoint. The possibility of such an impediment to pleasurable gazing is already implied by Mulvey when she argues that scale in cinema, like space and stories, is anthropomorphic and, by the same token, essential to a film’s ability to ‘focus attention on the human form’ (Mulvey 1975, 9). Mary Ann Doane proceeds further by specifically positing that the alignment of sexual difference with a subject/object dichotomy, as theorised by Mulvey, is supported by a binary opposition not only between activity and passivity, but also between proximity and distance in relation to the image on-screen: Doane suggests that a collapse in the spatial distance between spectators and the screen potentially places them ‘too close’ to the contents of the frame and consequently undermines cinema’s ‘illusory sensory plenitude’, a process that inhibits the mechanisms underlying the male gaze (Doane 1982, 78–79). Because this distance constitutes ‘the essential precondition for voyeurism’ (78), Doane’s argument holds equally true for the spectator’s view of extreme close-ups such as the one framing Irma’s face as she speaks to Pierre (Figure 7).

Therefore, despite the proximity of Irma’s face to the camera, which may initially appear to place us in Pierre’s physical position (what Deleuze would describe as the most concrete state of the image-perception), the framing of Irma prevents spectators from sharing Pierre’s own vision of her by simultaneously placing the spectator ‘too close’ to her face and by aligning the axis that unites their mutual gaze beyond the right-hand side of the frame rather than breaking the fourth wall. In other words, the spatial proximity of Irma’s gaze in relation to the off-screen Pierre creates a textual space within which spectators can identify Pierre’s obsessive project without identifying with it. Furthermore, her submissive vow of silence (‘Je ne parlerai pas, chéri, puisque c’est ça que tu aimes’), spoken during this shot through the voice that crucially differentiates her from Florence, reminds the spectator, even during the narrative’s most intimate engagement with Pierre’s perspective, of the importance of misrecognition to his gaze and the futility of Pierre’s attempt to impose his memories of Florence on Irma.

Clearly, Pierre’s privilege as bearer of the gaze is highly ambiguous. However reductive his vision of Irma may be, his is not the masculine gaze that immobilises the body of the woman, reduces her to an erotic projection and establishes ‘a main controlling figure with whom the spectator can identify’ (Mulvey 1975, 12). Rather, both of these scenes, in Kaplan’s sense of the term, invite spectators to ‘look’ at the male gaze by problematising their spatial distance from the screen in ways that critically distance the spectator from Pierre’s vision of Irma.

**Countering the imperial gaze in Quartier Viénot**

Whilst the narrative’s emphasis on a distorted perspective contests the gendered discourse that proliferated in contemporary French cinema and French Legion culture more broadly, *Le Grand Jeu* lends this interrogation additional complexity by linking it with questions regarding the masculinisation of the imperial gaze within the film’s colonial context. In this regard, the
film’s geographic and chronological settings are key. After the First World War, General Paul-Frédéric Rollet oversaw a number of changes in order to foster a distinct identity for the Legion. Chief among these was the cultivation of a sense of inclusion, shared past and collective heritage through the creation of a sacred site, Quartier Viénot, at the Legion’s headquarters in Sidi Bel Abbès, which later became a place of pilgrimage as well as the focus of regimental ritual (Cooper 2006, 276–278). By setting the narrative in a location that was treated by filmmakers and Legion officers alike ‘as both Mecca and Jerusalem’ (Slavin 2001, 139), the film presents a microcosm of the French mission civilisatrice. Moreover, numerous shots within the film portray the deployment of the male gaze by others within the colony including legionnaires and the indigenous male populace. This further suggests the importance of locating Pierre’s gaze within its broader sociological context and of viewing Pierre’s relationship with Irma within the context of France’s imperial gaze, which is mobilised by countless legionnaires elsewhere in the film.

One key sequence in this regard features shortly before Pierre meets Irma for the first time. A mobile camera tracks legionnaires and Arab men as they proceed through a locked gate in pursuit of local women. The camera shows a group of three indigenous men surrounding one woman; two of the men pay her but when she looks for money from the third, the third gestures as though to say he has no money and simply carries her away as she screams. The camera subsequently travels to a legionnaire negotiating with an indigenous woman who is partially concealed behind a window. She shakes her head, evidently refusing the soldier’s financial offer; he offers her more money and she welcomes him inside and draws a curtain across the window (Figure 8). The camera then cuts to a wide shot of various men, including a large number of legionnaires, wandering through the locale and negotiating with other women. Among them is an Arab man stroking a woman’s hair after she tells him her price (Figure 9). Finally, the camera travels towards a group of men, including legionnaires and indigenous locals, staring at a belly dancer, and cuts to a shot of the dancer’s chest, placing us in a position that is even closer to her than the one occupied by the male spectators on-screen (Figures 10 and 11). These are incidental actions which, viewed out of context, appear to abet

![Figure 8](image-url). A legionnaire solicits sexual favours from a local woman (Eureka Entertainment DVD).
fetishisation on the part of the male heterosexual viewer within the familiar, Orientalist geography of the exotic. Furthermore, the various women in this sequence cater to the regressive projections of European spectators and align with Shohat’s description of the ‘veiled woman’ whose gradual denudation operates as a masculinist ‘metaphor for her land, [which] becomes available for Western penetration and knowledge’ (Shohat 1997, 32–33). Interestingly, however, the grouping of the soldiers in the Legion with local Arab men in these sequences illustrates the extent to which the French military forces indulged in ‘erotic excesses which cannot be figured as a legitimate part of any society, even French society’, and which were generally embodied in 1930s cinéma colonial ‘under cover of “foreignness”’ by indigenous colonised peoples (Crisp 2002, 39).
Clearly, although Pierre’s gaze constitutes the focal point of the narrative, his neglect of his military duties in favour of embarking on a relationship with Irma is not an entirely isolated case. Through this association, these instances of Mulvey’s active/passive dichotomy enter into dialectic with the drama of vision engendered through Pierre’s relationship with Florence and Irma: by emphasising the integral place of the male gaze throughout colonial Algeria whilst focusing on a relationship in which the result of the gaze is misrecognition, confusion, torment and a betrayal of responsibility to the Nation, the narrative suggests that the French colonial gaze is contingent on a necessarily oblivious vantage point whose subject obtusely presupposes its own centrality.

It is also important to note that the representation of the French legionnaires across the entire film is unflattering. The film displays the soldiers’ cafard, a kind of homesickness that ‘excused French savageries and produced a [...] wilful ignorance of the dark side of colonialism’ (Slavin 2001, 35). This is most memorably conveyed through the soldiers’ attachment to personal memorabilia (such as Pierre’s lighter and Ivanoff’s newspapers) and through the popularity of both Deauville, who shares her stage name with a resort in Normandy, and Les Folies Parisiennes, whose name recalls a theatre of the same name constructed in Paris for the 1889 Exposition universelle. The film also illustrates the lack of determination belying the French legionnaires: they build a road whose lack of clear purpose is strikingly unclear in comparison with other French colonial films, in which it tends to represent ‘a great icon of “civilization”’ (Slavin 2001, 168), their participation in the Rif war is relegated off-screen and the most virulent on-screen battle is the result of a private brawl between two soldiers. The irreconcilability of the Legion’s military activities with France’s colonial mission is particularly apparent in Pierre’s indifference towards his own duties and lack of solidarity towards his fellow soldiers. Pierre refuses to volunteer for a mission in which Ivanoff later dies, instead pursuing his frustrating and foredoomed relationship with Irma, such that the audience, as O’Shaughnessy remarks in a rare, nuanced interrogation of the film, is encouraged to identify with a hero who is ‘a passive victim of fate and not a maker of history’ (2002, 36). Pierre also explicitly calls the
Legion’s lack of discipline and the legitimacy of military promotions into question during a discussion with Ivanno:

Avant hier je suis allé réparer les lignes téléphoniques. […] Je me balade les mains dans la poche. J’allume une cigarette. Ça dure longtemps ; le briquet marchait mal. Alors, en face des salopards, je pisse. Encore rien. Résultat : ils vont me citer à l’ordre du bataillon et me proposer comme sergent. Hah ! Je suis un héros, Nicolas. Ils me prennent pour un héros. 11

As Pierre enlists in the Legion once more during the closing scenes, he is nonetheless praised for his ‘excellents états de service’. 12 Ironically, before departing for Morocco, a number of outgoing men listen to an experienced soldier’s warning: ‘Les camps, la colonne, les postes à construire, les pistes, avec les baroudeurs comme distraction. Quand tu auras hissé une pièce de soixante-quinze à trois milles deux-cent mètres on en causera. Un vache de métier …’ 13 By the end of the film, it is clear that the soldier recounting these trials is either misguidedly convinced that he has been working strenuously or is bragging to the Legion’s newest recruits in order to enhance his own aura of masculinity. As a result, the film contests prevalent tendencies in cinéma colonial in which, according to Crisp, French colonial forces tend to be linked with ‘more practical and material virtues’ (2002, 45) than the indigenous communities and display these through colonial activities that ‘promote the French nation as the highest embodiment of civilization’ (40).

The inability of Feyder’s legionnaire to domesticate and contain the object of his gaze is particularly subversive within the contexts not only of Burch and Sellier’s study but also of French colonial culture more broadly. Crucially, the years during which Le Grand Jeu is set, much like the period in which it was filmed, witnessed a crisis of masculinity with which the decimated Legion was forced to contend. The traumatic experience of the First World War, which had drawn to a belated close a mere six years before France’s intervention in the Rif war (1925), blurred boundaries between male and female. This became increasingly clear during the 1920s, when periodicals including La Renaissance politique and La Revue bleue as well as novels such as Victor Margueritte’s La Garçonne/The Bachelor Girl (1922) and Raymond Radiguet’s Le Diable au corps/Devil in the Flesh (1923) demonstrated a marked preoccupation with the changing roles of the sexes (Roberts 1994, 4–5). Cultural representations of this profound metamorphosis were accompanied by increased discussion of issues such as women’s suffrage, both in parliament and among various non-elected associations and committees that emerged from 1919 onward (Reynolds 1996, 173–174, 207–212). It was this crisis that provoked Rollet to restore visible links between the pre-war Legion and its post-war successor through the creation of Quartier Viénot. By the time Le Grand Jeu was being produced, Marcel Mauss and other French ethnographers had questioned the authority of conceptions of nationhood and citizenship, whilst widespread perceived metropolitan superiority had been contested by doubts regarding the morality of technological progress that had emerged in the wake of the First World War and increasingly accurate knowledge of France’s colonies (O’Brien 1997, 213–219). Hence, within the film’s production context, the narrative not only inscribes the legionnaire’s divided, conflicting sense of his personal and social selves, but also exposes frayed relations of power between the metropole and the Outre-mer.
Conclusion: looking at the Outre-mer

Marie-Hélène Hertaud-Wright identifies a dichotomy between colonial films of the 1930s promoting ‘the idea of French males in the colonies as active, courageous and virile’ and others featuring ‘passive, powerless or ailing male characters’ (2000, 218). Le Grand Jeu clearly aligns with the latter category. The main challenge of reading Feyder’s film against hegemonic contemporary post-colonial and political discourses is the necessary reassessment of tropes and devices that were common in cinéma colonial and in contemporary French cinema more broadly. The foregoing analysis builds on these views by demonstrating that a comprehensive understanding of this dialectical approach to French colonialism involves two steps: first, shifting our focus away from the film’s innovative use of sound and critically engaging with the varying degrees of perception which are mobilised by Feyder; second, recognising that elements of Pierre’s behaviour that are antithetical to the Legion’s mission are shared by his fellow soldiers and the indigenous male populace more broadly.

What makes Le Grand Jeu doubly complex is that it links this gendered question with the colonial question and encourages us to interrogate acts of objectification featuring elsewhere in the film within less complex compositions that appear to align with regressive contemporary norms. Therefore, Burch and Sellier’s observation that ‘[the film’s] narrative viewpoint is male almost from beginning to end’ (2014, 54) is not so reductive an assertion as it may initially appear to be: both Pierre and the male populace more broadly offer reflexively critical points of orientation for critical analyses of the male gaze in cinéma colonial. Feyder’s lucid portrayal of Pierre’s misrecognition brings the colonial gaze’s ocular inadequacies into sharp focus by distancing spectators from their conventional styles of visual comprehension, doubling Pierre’s perceptual misalignment within the film back upon them and guiding them down the path of their own distorted perspectives. More specifically, the film places the spectator in a position to look at (in Kaplan’s sense of the phrase), without sharing, Pierre’s viewpoint by continually affirming the possibility of forming a broader and more accurate viewpoint of gender relations in the colony and of his relationship with Irma than Pierre himself ever manages to attain. Although Irma does not offer an empowering subject positioning for female spectators, her relationship with Feyder’s mise en scène de-eroticises the camera’s gaze and, by extension, that of the spectator. By placing his drama within a broader sociological context of voyeurism and the unrealistic expectations this imparts to men regarding the strength of their own position in society as subject, the film also suggests that our perception of the female colonised populace has been perilously schematised into a monolithic frame by colonial culture.

The extent to which Feyder intended to interrogate the Legion remains open to question. His public assertion that the film provided a re-evaluation of the Foreign Legion was arguably motivated by his own negative experience of censorship during the 1920s: L’Image/The Portrait (Feyder, 1923) and Les Nouveaux messieurs/The New Gentlemen (Feyder, 1929) had previously suffered cuts, the latter due to its satire of the Assemblée nationale. By the time Feyder had begun directing Le Grand Jeu, he had fulfilled a largely unrewarding stint as a contract-director in Hollywood and the film represented a vital opportunity to re-establish himself as a commercially
successful director (see Nevin 2018). The threat of censorship continued to loom prominently over the director following his return to France, and he revealingly wrote:

*Le Grand Jeu* c’est une aventure d’amour. Que tourner avec une censure qui nous interdit de toucher au Parlement, à la Magistrature, à la Justice, qui vient même de couper dans l’inoffensive *Banque Nemo* [Nemo Bank, Marguerite Viel, 1934] toute la scène du Conseil de Ministres, que tourner sinon des histoires d’amour?14 (Feyder cited in Rickard 1934)

In fact, although Feyder did not publicly reveal that *Le Grand Jeu* had been subject to cuts, Boulanger notes that scenes containing lines including ‘Les Rifains défendent leur terri’15 were removed from the film (1975, 110). Feyder’s comments and the clear influence of censorship on French films of the period certainly indicate why *cinéma colonial* has remained susceptible to criticism from scholars noted in the introduction. Nevertheless, *Le Grand Jeu* aligns with the aberrational tradition identified by Faulkner, Ungar and O’Shaughnessy by revealing that French colonialism has produced an environment and associated conditions that challenge the country’s own claims to cultural superiority. How these contradictory interpretations of the Empire stimulated the development of a visual cinematographic grammar capable of accommodating questions during this period of increased technological refinement in the French film industry demands further elaboration across future studies of the genre.

To say that *Le Grand Jeu*, to paraphrase Kaplan (1997, 218), heals imperialised eyes would likely be an overstatement. What is clear is that Feyder’s positioning of the spectator not only extended the epistemological limits of *cinéma colonial* and the knowledge and questions it could produce, but also developed a narrative style that lends subversive resonance to Ungar’s assertion that *la plus grande France*, as it featured in French cinema of the 1930s, was ‘less perceived than imagined’ (1996, 35).

**Notes**

1. ‘Have become partially intolerable because of their underlying racism, their paternalism or their bellicose mentality.’
2. ‘Conforms to a well-known definition of *cinéma colonial* in that it shows virtually nothing of southern Morocco’s indigenous population to us, neither when the legionnaires are resting, nor when they leave on a campaign. […] It is clear that Feyder had no intention of treating the “colonial question” in this film, much less the “indigenous question”.’
3. ‘[A] man of the right.’
4. Josef von Sternberg’s *Morocco* (1930) was particularly contentious in this regard, cf. Slavin (2001, 149–150).
5. ‘Above all else, I want to rehabilitate the Foreign Legion […]. Until now, the Legion has been portrayed as a refuge for every bandit on Earth, a hideout for hoodlums. I want to show its true face, the face of pain and of heroism. […] I want none of this farcical, skewed and sweetened Legion perceived by Hollywood.’
6. ‘There are often many Arabs in films, but they are simultaneously omnipresent and unrecognised.’
7. ‘It is as though all of your issues came from within you.’
8. The word ‘look’, in the context of Mulvey’s analysis, should not be confused with Kaplan’s later interpretation of the term.
9. ‘I won’t speak, dear, since that is what you like.’
10. Benali (1998, 155–163) observes that unseen indigenous enemies were common in *cinéma colonial*. What is interesting in the specific case of *Le Grand Jeu* is how this trope forms part of a broader, unflattering portrayal of French military culture.
11. ‘The day before yesterday, I went to repair telephone wires. I walked around with my hands in my pockets. Nothing. I lit a cigarette. It took a while; the lighter wasn’t working properly. So I pissed in front of the bastards. Still nothing. The result? They’re going to nominate me for promotion to sergeant. Hah! I’m a hero, Nicolas. They take me for a hero.’

12. ‘Excellent service record.’

13. ‘The camps, the colony, the roads to be built, the paths, with scrappers for entertainment. When you’ve hauled a 75-ton gun across 3200 metres, then you can talk. One hell of a job ….’

14. ‘Le Grand Jeu is a love story. With a censorship board that forbids us to broach the parliament, the magistrate and the law, what can be filmed other than love stories?’ Viel’s film illustrated financial fraud and corruption at high levels of society. Approximately 20 minutes of the film, which were taken to allude to the recent Stavisky affair (1933), were cut by censors. For further information, see Powrie (2015).

15. ‘The Riffians are defending their land!’

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Filmography

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L’Image, 1923. Jacques Feyder, Austria/France.
La Bandera, 1935. Julien Duvivier, France.
La Banque Némo, 1934. Marguerite Viel, France.
La Bête humaine, 1938. Jean Renoir, France.
Le Bled, 1929. Jean Renoir, France.
Le Grand Jeu, 1934. Jacques Feyder, France.
Le Jour se lève, 1939. Marcel Carné, France.
Lady in the Lake, 1946. Robert Montgomery, USA.
Légions d'honneur, 1938. Maurice Gleize, France.
Les Hommes nouveaux, 1936. Marcel L'Herbier, France.
Les Nouveaux messieurs, 1929. Jacques Feyder, France.
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