



Ca' Foscari
University
of Venice

Single Cycle Degree programme
in LINGUE E LETTERATURE EUROPEE, AMERICANE E
POSTCOLONIALI

Final Thesis

Tarzan of the Apes:
The First Motion Picture Adaptation
(1918)

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Academic Year

2017 / 2018

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Introduction

My thesis explores and analyzes the first filmic adaptation of Edgar Rice Burroughs's famous novel *Tarzan of the Apes*, released in 1918, with the aim of explaining why this film was so successful that so many other filmic adaptations followed. This first filmic adaptation is still considered the most faithful to the novel but it adapts only the first part of the book: the second part – specifically when Tarzan follows Jane to America – was depicted in the sequel *The Romance of Tarzan*, a film that unfortunately is now considered lost.¹

Tarzan's story became successful as it satisfied a certain longing for escapism, reflecting popular views on race, gender, masculinity, the Darwinian theories, and primitivism. Tarzan's story unfortunately perpetuates the distorted ideas about racism and race that were widespread in the United States at the time. Burroughs depicted Africa and African natives basing his portrayal on his personal knowledge about the continent - knowledge that came basically from blackface minstrelsy. Tarzan's adventures continued spreading the idea that Africans were uncivilized and savage, in the film in fact we have many scenes portraying the African native village and the activities of the black inhabitants. For example the native women are shown stirring a huge bubbling pot: the bubbling pot was the typical symbol representing cannibalism in adventure films where white explorers and adventures were usually cooked and then eaten. Here it is a device used by the filmmakers to underline the savagery of the native tribe.

Moreover, black people are portrayed while perpetuating acts of unmotivated violence,

¹ The film is divided into three chapters: the first one is set at the end of the nineteenth century and shows the events that forced Tarzan's parents to settle on the African coast

such as killing Tarzan's ape mother, Kala, and when Tarzan subsequently takes revenge by lynching the murderer, this act is portrayed as totally justified and legitimate. This episode calls attention to the fact that, in the early twentieth century, violence was racialized: white man had the duty to protect the purity of their white women and so they had the right to lynch blacks while the violence perpetuated by the blacks was always condemned and considered senseless and cruel. The black natives are depicted as extremely superstitious too: after the mysterious killing they credulously start believing that Tarzan might be some sort of divine creature possessing supernatural powers and they start worshipping him like a God by making food offerings to him.

Furthermore, blacks were showed as posing a threat to white womanhood because of their sexual instincts: Jane is abducted by a giant black man who aims to take her further away into the wilderness probably to rape her. Fortunately Tarzan intervenes, saves the lady and defeats the black savage. The movie here clearly aims at pointing out the subhuman qualities of the black men.

Tarzan also embodies the timeless idea of perfect masculinity and ideal manhood. Indeed, the Tarzan novels and first films came out in an era when the United States was undergoing a powerful transformation, shifting from old Victorian stereotypes to new and modern standards of evolution. As Darwin's theory was sweeping the country, more and more people started discarding the creationist theory in favor of the theory of evolution. Burroughs was a sustainer of Darwin's theory and in fact the character of Tarzan represents that *trait-d'union* that links civilization to the animal kingdom and the natural world from which man was said to have ultimately evolved.

At the turn of the century people wanted to break free from the old constraints and sought a primeval and more direct contact with nature. Primitivism was the strong

reaction to the industrial revolution and technological innovation. People desired to go back to nature, to the basic instincts of human kind and live a life out in the open. Boy scouting was achieving an enormous success for example and the idea of masculinity totally shifted: the ideal was no longer the stiff and moral Victorian Man but a mighty male individual who, by using both his strength and his wits, could feel at ease in nature and enjoy spending his leisure time in the open air. Men were now struggling to regain their masculinity which had been suffocated by the Victorian standards and they were doing it not by forsaking civilization and leaving the country to go inhabit a savage and wild environment, but by experiencing vicariously this sense of freedom that nature was now offering them. The anxieties concerning their jobs, their families, and their masculinity were tempered by figures such as Tarzan and the watchers and readers, through him, could entertain their fantasy without forsaking their own actual life.

This first movie adaptation proved to be an enormous success because the majority of the scenes were set exactly in the wilderness, in the savage African jungle. People rejoiced in seeing so distant and far away places on the big screen and they were eager for more. In fact, two months after the release of the movie, the filmmakers started working on the sequel. This unfortunately proved to be a flop because the majority of it was set in California among the Victorian society, leaving ten, maybe fifteen minutes of scenes set in the jungle. This proved boring for the spectators who had come to see the sequel to enjoy more action set in the wilderness. People were no longer interested in seeing the environment of the Victorian society and the usual outdated motifs of the previous century. They loved Tarzan's adventures set in the wilderness because they brought with them that wind of change that the spectators were yearning for in the early twentieth century and because they gave a sort of psychological relief to the society

oppressed by modernization and the industrial economy's need to produce goods.

Tarzan is the figure that harmonizes these two sides of the American population: the need for civilization but at the same time the opportunity to live in a natural state.

My thesis is divided into four chapters. Drawing from contemporary adaptation theory, in the first I will briefly discuss literature-to-film adaptation, focusing in particular on the response to such artistic practice in the early twentieth century.

In the second chapter I will offer a biographical sketch of Edgar Rice Burroughs, of his literary output and of cultural context in which the original novel came out. Then I draw some connections and distinctions between two famous literary heroes who are considered *feral children*: Tarzan and Mowgli. The two characters present many similarities but also some essential differences that make them two perfect specimen of this literary motif and therefore are definitely worth exploring.

The third chapter focuses on and analyzes the 1918 filmic adaptation of Tarzan and in particular the differences between the novel and the film, how the critics reviewed the movie. In this chapter I will also show how this adaptation, as well as later ones, was probably influenced by social theories and cultural discourses that were particularly influential in America when the film came out: Darwinism, the Rejuvenation Theory, and the gender discourse that were popular in the early twentieth century.

In chapter four, to conclude, I will compare the 1918 adaptation with subsequent silent movies on Tarzan and with the early movies featuring Johnny Weissmuller, perhaps the best-remembered actor in the role.

Chapter One

Adaptation

1.1. What is Adaptation?

In order to analyze at best the film *Tarzan of the Apes*, we have to keep in mind, first of all that it is an adaptation and second of all we have to explain what an adaptation is.

An adaptation is a work, which is in relationship, usually, with another previous work. It appropriates for itself the meaning of the prior text and replaces one perception of reality with another one. Obviously, for the audience the memory of the prior text is evoked but it is not disrupted or altered with too much violence. Parody, censorship, and translations are the exceptions, though, because they inevitably alter the text and the original meaning is bent out of shape. Linda Hutcheon², who defines the adaptation as an extended, deliberate, and announced revisitation of a particular work of art, identifies two main examples of adaptations that alter the original source: “(1) literary translations, which are, in fact, inevitably refractors of the aesthetic and even ideological expectations of their new audience and (2) transcriptions of orchestral music for piano, which cannot help altering the relationship between the public and the private” (2006: 194).

To these two examples I would add, as I mentioned before, censorship, which deliberately alters the original text or source by enacting cuts and changes that openly modify the original. Then parodies which are examples of adaptations that, once more,

² Linda Hutcheon is a Canadian academic who has been working thoroughly on adaptations and the theory of adaptations. She has written many essays and articles on the topic and her most famous book on the subject is *A Theory of Adaptation*, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2006.

deliberately alter the original source to make fun of it and make it look ridiculous. When parodied, some stories might end up completely reinterpreted and with a totally different meaning at the end. Ultimately, the original source can be altered also by sequels and prequels, which expand the original story, spin-offs, and fan fictions.

Each adaptation has its own characteristic and is different and special in its uniqueness. One might consider the adaptation simply as another kind of repetition of the original story. Though we can say that it is a form of repetition, it does not replicate the source material; rather it transforms it according to its own will.

Adaptations can be done in an infinite number of different ways; we could also define them as transpositions of previous works. They might involve a change of medium, so, for example, we call a movie which was based on a novel previously written an “adaptation”; a change of genre, so adapting a certain story and transforming it, for example, from romance to musical or even a change of context. This last case I believe is one of the most interesting ones because you retell the story through a different point of view and, thanks to this, you can obviously obtain a much clearer picture on the whole story³. In this last scenario the interpretation and the whole message of the story may change greatly. The adaptation can also imply a change in ontology so a shift from real events to fiction, from historical or biographical accounts to novels and narrative.

When someone adapts a story he or she always has to reinterpret and recreate the atmosphere of the source material. Then, when we experience an adaptation, we always recall in our memory the original source and we cannot but confront the two versions at least a little bit. So we have repetition of the original work, but we have it with some, usually interesting, variations.

³ This is the example of Cinderella’s story retold from the perspective of her ugly step-sisters.

Adaptation is also a form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation.

According to Hutcheon,

“Adaptations can be described as the following:

- An acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works.
- A creative and an interpretative act of appropriation and/or salvaging.
- An extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work.

Therefore, an adaptation is a derivation that is not derivative – a work that is second without being secondary” (2006; 9).

A story may be considered as something that transmits cultural values from generation to generation, or as Auger puts it, “a basic unit of inheritance allowing the accumulations of adaptations” (176). Linda Hutcheon affirms that adapting “is somehow the inclination of the human mind”(2004; 108), to which I totally agree. Adaptations can be regarded as vehicles that convey a narrative idea and this idea is embodied “physically” in a medium that contains and transmits it. The adaptation re-tells the story, repeats it, but without copying or doubling it. The adaptation is able to stand on its own ground, and it does not necessarily require the knowledge *a priori* of the original source material; it can be perfectly understood by the audience as it is. It can also be judged and criticized on its own but, since it is usually considered a secondary work drawn from a previous one, it is considered dependent on the original. Because of this, many critics tend to judge and evaluate an adaptation basing their judgment on its closeness to the source material. Critics almost always give more importance and precedence to the

original work, and the adaptation is commonly judged either faithful or unfaithful compared to it.

Robert Stam has claimed that the original source will always have “axiomatic superiority” (4) over any other form of adaptation of the work, be it cinematic or not, simply because the first work came out earlier. According to this way of reasoning, it is taken for granted that adaptations will always be inferior and mediocre by definition.

However, in the mind of the receiver, the adaptation is something necessary and fundamental: it’s the chance of having the same beloved story told again and again in different and always new and original ways that make us love them so much. When we read or watch adaptations we can experience the same feeling we felt the first time, but in a fresh and regenerated atmosphere. They succeed so well because they manage to make us feel the same emotions the original made us feel but with this taste of renewed power and vitality. Adaptations necessarily require some changes, which may include a simplification of the original story, but at the same time, some main ideas and meanings may be put into sharper focus or explored more deeply. So as we amplify meaning and we extrapolate the most interesting parts, we can make references to the original or other works or express our personal opinion in adaptations.

As Linda Hutcheon reaffirms, “The desire to transfer a story from one medium or genre to another is neither new nor rare in Western culture” (108). In fact, we can find adaptations everywhere and, nowadays, they include not only the transposition from novel to film but also every kind of medium, genre or field. Many often achieve considerable economic success.

Linda Hutcheon says that the different media through which adaptations can be presented are divided into three macro-categories according to the way the story is told:

telling, showing, and interacting. In some the narrative mode based on telling prevails (the novel), in others the showing mode (theatre and cinema), and lastly, the interacting one in media such as videogames in which the user can interact with the story, thereby transforming it further (Nasi, 5).

1.2. The Adaptation from Book to Film

Tarzan of the Apes is a precise kind of adaptation, specifically an adaptation from book to film. In the passage from written source to cinematic medium we concretize and embody ideas into physical figures and actual situations.

Many filmmakers want to draw some of the success of the original novel and decide to create an adaptation rather than coming up with a totally original story that might end up being not as successful. This decision obviously leads to many advantages: the story is already there for the scriptwriters to be taken and adapted, the characters are already created with their own specific personality and attitude, and if the novel is well known and successful, the fans will certainly be interested in seeing how their heroes and heroines will be depicted on the big screen. This is exactly what happened with the movie *Tarzan of the Apes* of 1918, where the scriptwriters adapted what Edgar Rice Burroughs had created in fiction in order to draw something from the huge success the book had achieved.

As we well know, every genre, much like each medium, can aim at displaying certain things better than others; for example film semiotician Christian Metz has said about

cinema that it “tells us continuous stories; it 'says' things that could be conveyed also in the language of words; yet it says them differently.”⁴ (44)

Hutcheon instead claims:

“The shift from looking at black marks on a white page to perceiving a direct representation on the stage or the screen is a fraught move. Since it takes longer to sing rather than to speak (much less read) a line of text, operas and musicals – and cinema I would add – must necessarily distill, often radically, the narrative of a novel. This necessary compression often means the trimming of expansive plot lines, the removal of much psychological analysis, and the loss of stylistic texture. Characters and events are omitted. [...] With literature, we start in the realm of imagination - which is simultaneously controlled by the selected, directing words of the text and unconstrained by the limits of the visual or aural. We can stop reading at any point; we can reread or skip ahead; we can hold the book in our hands and feel (as well as see) how much of the story remains to be read. But with films and stage adaptations, we are caught in an unrelenting, forward-driving story. And there we have moved from the imagination to the realm of direct perception, with its infinite detail and broad focus” (2004; 110).

“The cinema,” according to Stam, “'inherits' all the art forms associated with the matters

⁴ See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier*; Indiana University Press. Bloomington, 1977

of expression" - "the visuals of photography and painting, the movement of dance, the decor of architecture, and the performance of theater" (2000; 61). Cinema can use many different features to best convey the feelings and emotions that are going on in the characters' minds: in the book we can read about them, while cinema uses the power of the close-up to emphasize at close range the facial expressions of the actors and the voice-over to convey their thoughts. Also, music and the soundtrack help to set the tone of the different events that are happening throughout the film.

Hutcheon confirms that "The private and individual experience of reading is closer to the private visual and domestic spaces of television, radio, DVD, video, and computer than it is to the public and communal viewing experience in the dark of the theater" (2004; 110). In fact, I think that we in the audience go to the cinema to see a particular adaptation because we especially love the original novel and we want to experience the characters more directly than simply imagining them and their actions: we actually want to see them embodied into flesh and bones and we want to see them move and interact with each other.

Brian McFarlane studied thoroughly the issue of adaptation from novel to film and discovered two types of different elements: those 'transferable' and those that are 'non-transferable'. The plot and the character are the 'transferable' elements because they can be adapted from one medium to the other without encountering significant difficulties. We have problems in transposing elements such as the 'first-person narrator' or the 'omniscient narrator,' however, because in cinema there are no suitable equivalents. In the process of transferring from one medium to the other, McFarlane distinguishes between *narrative* (the elements that can be transferred) and *enunciation* (those which

cannot be transferred)⁵. Accordingly, he adds, “Novel and film can share the same story, the same ‘raw materials’, but are distinguished by means of different plot strategies which alter sequence, highlight different emphases, which – in a word – defamiliarize the story” (23). In the movie, it’s the filmmaker, as the author was for the book, who is responsible for omitting or putting in a different order the narrative elements or for inventing or creating new ones. He crafts those parts that are non-transferable.

This distinction is a fundamental part in his book and he further explains that the plot of the story usually belongs to what he had previously called *narrative* because it is easy to transport it from novel to film. The style and formal decisions that were taken in the novel by the author, however, belong to the other category because they unavoidably involve the necessity of finding a different means to render them in the movie⁶. According to McFarlane, there are two lines worth exploring: “(a) in the transposition process, just what is it *possible* to transfer or adapt from novel to film; and (b) what key factors other than the source novel have exercised an influence on the film version of the novel?” (22). We mustn’t forget that even the elements that are easily transferable always undergo at least a slight change in the passage from one medium to the other. A successful transfer, for McFarlane, means: “visual and aural signifiers have been found to produce data corresponding to those produced by the verbal signifiers of the novel” (82).

Also the atmosphere of the original source can be subject to broad adaptation rather than a more precise one; these decisions are always up to the scriptwriters and the

⁵ See his book *Novel to Film: An introduction to the Theory of Adaptation*. Clarendon Press. Oxford 1996

⁶ Usually devices such as music and soundtrack are used to set the tone of the scene.

movie directors. Just some lines earlier I identified one of the issues most commonly to be found in the transposition from book to film: the first person narrator. In the movie the only possible strategy to convey this element is using a lot of voice over to express the feeling of the first-person narrator and dedicate more scenes to this character and have a preponderance of his viewpoint. Obviously this could never equal the direct consciousness of the device used in the book, but filmmakers try to approach it in this way. So, as McFarlane confirms, “while cinema is more agile and flexible in changing the physical point of view from which an event or object is seen, it is much less amenable to the presentation of a consistent psychological viewpoint derived from one character” (16). Another problematic element is that the spectator sees everything there is in a movie shot, and he or she cannot focus on a single object as would happen if the reader was sampling the world through one character’s consciousness. The camera shows what happens in an objective manner and reports the events and discourses without ambiguity. In a first person narrator novel we always have to face the issue of reliability of the speaking voice and we are never completely sure that we can fully trust it.

While in the book we can have long and detailed descriptions, in the film the character’s aspect and physique is conveyed directly through the film’s *mise-en-scène*. In the film the omniscient narrator vanishes and is replaced by the “camera-eye”. In fact, as McFarlane points out: “the camera in this sense becomes the narrator by, for instance, focusing on such aspects of *mise-en-scène* as the way actors look, move, gesture, or are costumed, or on the ways in which they are positioned in a scene or on how they are photographed: in these ways the camera may catch a ‘truth’ which comments on and qualifies what the characters actually say” (17). We have to take into consideration, though, the significant distinction that the camera is outside the general discourse of the

movie, while the omniscient narrator is indissolubly part of the story. McFarlane comments on this topic by saying: "In a sense, all films are omniscient: even when they employ a voice over technique as a means of simulating the first-person novelistic approach, the viewer is aware, as indicated earlier, of a level of objectivity in what is shown, which may include what the protagonist sees but cannot help including a great deal else as well" (18). So, he concludes, "the novelistic form of the *restricted consciousness* perhaps approximates most closely to the cinematic narrative mode" (19). Another fundamental distinction that McFarlane draws between novel and film is that "If film, unlike verbal language, has no vocabulary (its images, unlike words, are non-finite), it also lacks a structuring syntax, instead of which it has conventions in relation to the operation of its codes. [...] There is, for instance, nothing corresponding to the comparatively fixed usage of full-stop and comma as punctuational signs denoting the longest and shortest pauses respectively" (28). The book relies fully on a verbal system, while films rely on visual signifiers; we don't usually watch a film frame by frame as we read books word by word. Films do not have a vocabulary that can be exploited as in verbal language, so they can use images, but the problem here is that – unlike words – images are non-finite; moreover, the film lacks a structuring syntax, and in its place, it has some conventions that operate in relation to its codes: when we watch a film we inherently assume that we, the audience, share with the filmmaker and subsequently understand the same codes that are applied in the movie. Written language is replaced by the film *mise-en-scène*: the story is not *told* but *presented*.

So, we can conclude that McFarlane uncovers that the crucial differences between the two media are to be found at the level of enunciation rather than narrative.

1.3. Adaptation in the 1910s-1920s

After the film *The Great Train Robbery* made in 1903 by Edwin Porter, in which scenes set in diverse places were united together in order to create a story, cinema established itself as a narrative art and no other future progress of its techniques has ever threatened the sovereignty of this predominantly narrative function. As Bryher has observed, “the film was new, it had no earlier associations and it offered occasionally, in an episode or single shot, some framework for our dreams” (Donald; 101). In the 1910s and 1920s there was a love-hate relationship going on between the motion picture and modernist writers: Virginia Woolf was one of the first literary people to comment on this new art form, but she wasn’t satisfied with the simplification that unavoidably must be perpetuated when transposing a literary work into the visual medium. She even got to the point of calling film a “parasite” and literature its “prey” and “victim”. Still, she concluded that “cinema has within its grasp innumerable symbols for emotions that have so far failed to find expression”⁷ (309).

In order to be realized a film certainly requires a script; the script’s function is to indicate how the material coming from the book will be transferred in the movie. The script itself, needless to say, is an adaptation. We have to keep in mind that one of the most difficult challenges in adapting a novel into a film during the 1920s was that these films were silent so scriptwriters had to find a way to incorporate dialogue into the movie scene. They usually did so by inserting intertitles so that the public could better understand the scene and what was happening. The scripts also indicated place and action into an accurate set of scenes, dividing the story into a sequence of shoots.

D. W. Griffith, the greatest director of the silent film era, declared: “The task I am trying

⁷ We can find this quotation by her in *The movies and reality*. 1926. *New Republic* 47 (4 Aug.)

to achieve is above all to make you see". (Jacobs, 119) This sentence draws from Joseph Conrad's aim to make the reader "see": he wished that the reader would be able to read through and past his language and narrative: "My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see. That – and no more, and it is everything." (Conrad, 5).

So, we could say that writers such as Conrad and Henry James anticipated the cinema's function to make audiences directly see what lay before their eyes. Cinema also had the capacity to decompose a scene and present it from different points of view; its capacity to focus more on certain details rather than others and for fragmenting the visual field into a series of shots. Cinema managed to achieve what they – Conrad and James – wanted most: motion pictures showed events and did not simply tell them. Films thus started to replace the 19th century novel in popularity, but they drew from the techniques that the modernist writers were employing in their fiction, such as the insistence on making the audience "see" and the technique of restricted focalization so as to present a limited point of view from which the action and the other characters were observed.

Very soon after the birth of the motion picture the idea of adapting novels and presenting their stories on the big screen spread rapidly. As Frederic Raphael sarcastically claims about filmmakers: "[they] like known quantities... they would sooner buy the rights of an expensive book than develop an original subject" (Metz, 12).

German theorist Walter Benjamin pronounced film the definitive modern form and the modernist magazine *Close Up*⁸ contributed significantly to forging aesthetic associations

⁸ Magazine which was published and had a great impact in the years between 1927 and 1933.

between film and literary culture “from the angles of art, experiment and possibility”⁹. This new visual art had in itself great potential to overcome the limits and go beyond mere written word. Another fact that led filmmakers to the printed word was that it conveyed aesthetic validity to the early cinema. Adapting modernist texts, though, was especially challenging because they presented very controversial narrators and characters that were psychologically complex and unreliable, the field of perception was fragmented, and the modernists used mythical references and literary devices that were extremely difficult to translate into the visual art form. On the contrary, adapting Edgar Rice Burroughs stories was a task very easy to accomplish: the author put the focus of his stories on the plot, the adventure and the exotic elements. Burroughs did not employ an articulate and complicate prose or innovative literary devices as the modernists used to and so his novels resulted perfect for adaptation.

Bryher defined the period between the late 1920s and the early 1930s as “the golden age of what I call ‘the art that died’ because sound ruined its development” (Donald; 101) because sound cinema which spread after 1928 started to use very standardized dialogue and, as Scott Eyman has argued, this made film material “less malleable” since “allusion and metaphor” were replaced by standardized dialogue that did not sit easily with the psychological interiority of modernist fiction (10).

1.4. How to Read Adaptations

⁹ As stated on the cover of the fourth issue of the magazine from October 1927.

Adapting a literary source into a movie is certainly a creative task that requires a selective interpretation of the printed material and the capacity to recover and refashion the mood previously set by the novel. Usually the adaptor owns allegiance to the source material and manages to conscientiously transliterate the written word into the visual. Generally, filmmakers do not approach their source material too boldly and tend to stick to the initial concept of the book. This is exactly what the scriptwriters Lois Weber and Fred Miller did when adapting the novel *Tarzan of the Apes* into a movie: they realized that audiences wanted to have more of the book they appreciated and, in order to get it, they waited with great anticipation for the filmic adaptation.

Readers in general like to see and confront the mental image they created in their own mind depicted on the big screen and check if it corresponds to the one the filmmaker has created. But obviously, as Christian Metz remarks, a person “will not always find *his* film, since what he has before him in the actual film is now somebody else’s fantasy” (12). Obviously every single person makes his own interpretation about the world he is reading about, but this represents only one of the possible renderings of the story: the film reproduces the filmmaker’s version of it, but, if the film was made by someone else, we would probably have a much different version of the story. So we could say that an adaptation is the adaptor’s personal view and rendering of the original story. Critics encourage fidelity to the source material as a feature to be sought when adapting from a novel to film; but the critic Christopher Orr responds in a more interesting way: “Within this critical context, the issue is not whether or not the adapted film is faithful to its source, but rather how the choice of a specific source and how the approach to that

source serves the film's ideology."¹⁰ (72)

Geoffrey Wagner suggests that three possible categories are accessible to the filmmaker and to the critic assessing his adaptation: he calls these *transposition*, "in which a novel is given directly on the screen with a minimum of apparent interference"; *commentary*, "where an original is taken and either purposely or inadvertently altered in some respect... when there has been a different intention on the part of the filmmaker, rather than infidelity or outright violation"; and *analogy*, "which must represent a fairly considerable departure for the sake of making another work of art"¹¹ (222).

An adapted film's potential for popularity lies in sharing more or less the same story and therefore the same success of the original. Stories, however, are not merely the medium through which they are transmitted or the rules that structure them and make them belong to a specific genre. This means that the rules on which movies are based channel audiences' narrative expectations and the filmmakers exploit these means to create their product. So films base themselves on a communicative context and, in the end, they want to transmit a message to the spectator.

To conclude, all these definitions of what an "adaptation" is and what it actually means serve to better understand the movie I am going to analyze in depth in Chapter Three of my work. The movie *Tarzan of the Apes* is a perfect example of a successful adaptation: people loved the book so dearly that they rejoiced at the idea of seeing their beloved fictional hero incarnated in a real person who moved and performed incredible stunts

¹⁰ See Christopher Orr "The Discourse on Adaptation", *Wide Angle*, 6/2, 1984

¹¹ See Geoffrey Wagner. *The Novel and the Cinema*. Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; Rutherford NJ. 1975

through the jungle. This first movie is one of the few examples in which the scriptwriters tended to stick as much as possible to the original source and one of the most faithful cinematic adaptations of Edgar Rice Burroughs's novel. Maybe also for this reason the film was such a fantastic hit and, as we will see, it was praised by the critics too.

Chapter Two

Edgar Rice Burroughs' *Tarzan of the Apes*

2.1. Edgar Rice Burroughs and *Tarzan's* Success

When the movie *Tarzan of the Apes* was released in 1918, fans were not expecting a reinterpretation of their favorite fictional hero but simply a retelling of the story through a different medium. Tarzan was adapted later on into various different forms such as many other films, radio shows, comic books, and an infinite number of merchandising products.

We could use this huge proliferation of adaptations as a means to measure Tarzan's success, since every adaptation serves to perpetuate the core narrative idea. Tarzan's longevity was certainly possible thanks to this great succession of adaptations: diversity keeps the possibility of the demise of the narrative near to zero and the huge success Tarzan enjoyed helped to perpetuate the narrative throughout the years.

Burroughs understood quite soon that his hero was perfect for cinematic adaptation and very shortly after the publication of his first book he started to look for a producer. On June 6th 1916, in fact, he successfully signed a personal contract with Bill Parsons, a Chicago life insurance salesman, granting him the rights to *Tarzan of the Apes*. Parsons, both an actor and a producer, was able to convince Burroughs to become his partner in business by giving him \$50,000 worth of capital stock and only \$5,000 in royalties¹².

Edgar Rice Burroughs was born in Chicago, Illinois, on September 1st 1875 to

¹² We find this information out in Al Bohl's documentary *Tarzan, Lord of the Louisiana Jungle*. (18:05)

businessman and Civil War major George Tyler and Mary Evaline Burroughs. He attended the Michigan Military Academy and then, once finished his studies, he joined his brothers on the Snake River in Idaho to pan for gold. He was the kind of man who was willing take on any job to try to get rich quick, and this comes up many times in his stories too, where there are always many characters that aim to become rich. But of course the gold panning wasn't successful. He then mined with the Sweetser-Burroughs Mining Company in Idaho and Oregon. He also applied to the United States Military Academy at West Point but was one of 33 who were refused entrance. According to George T. McWhorter, he got angry and said "I want the worst job in the whole world so that I can forget about West Point."¹³ (Bohl; 10:15). He was then assigned to Company B in the Infantry division in Arizona, but, because of a weak heart, he was dismissed with an honorable medical discharge. So he went back to join his brothers in Idaho on their ranch as a cattle driver. In his life Burroughs had several careers: he was a cowboy, he was a soldier, he applied to be a Rough Rider with Theodore Roosevelt, but Roosevelt turned him down. In January 1900 he married his childhood sweetheart Emma Hulbert; but unfortunately most of the time he was unable to support her and his children adequately. He seriously needed a job and stopped in Salt Lake City, Utah to become a railroad police officer. Obviously, this job did not last very longer either. People around him used to call Burroughs a failure, but he was still looking for something that would have stimulated and satisfied his creativity. Admittedly, it took him a long time to find himself; maybe he failed at so many jobs because he always ended up bored to death by every one of them. In 1911 he was in a very difficult situation, he had pawned his wife's jewelry and all the jobs he tried to do hadn't worked out... The only thing he loved to do,

¹³ He is the curator of the Burroughs Memorial Collection at the University of Louisville, Kentucky

while drifting through the unsatisfactory real world, was consoling himself with a fantasy world in which he was handsome, virile, and capable of success – the idol of the whole civilization, beyond the limits of credulity. He began reading pulp fiction as a way to escape reality; he loved the magazines of the early 20th century, which were printed on cheap “pulp” paper, because they published fantastic, escapist fiction for the general entertainment of a mass audience. He was however appalled at the poor quality of these stories: they were nowhere equal to those he produced in his own prodigious imagination. He was selling pencil-sharpeners door to door when he finally decided to write down his fantasies, which resulted in his first novel *Under the Moons of Mars* published in 1911. He needed the opening that *A Princess of Mars* and *Tarzan of the Apes* gave him to completely blossom. From this moment on, he wrote book after book, the money started to roll in, and the good life began.

The first Tarzan novel was published in 1912 and sold three million copies; Burroughs then proceeded to write 25 other novels that featured Tarzan as the main character. As we can learn from the documentary, Burroughs never stopped selling his fictional hero; radio programs and many filmic adaptations accompanied the series of books, which had become a real cult.

“He certainly saw himself as an ordinary person,” declares professor James F. Thomson from Austin State University in Al Bohl’s documentary. “He was a self-made success as an author; he didn’t follow the traditional path,” Thomson adds “He taught himself to write, he had a huge ambition but he struggled to find his way to success” (8:28).

“I write,” Burroughs once confessed, “to escape...to escape poverty” (Essoe, 8). He lacked a higher education; even though he had received a very good high school education, he never went to college and never studied to become a writer. Because of this, he was

guilty of being too verbose; his stories were too melodramatic and relied too heavily on coincidences. Burroughs was too prone to use ornamental language and redundant adjectives. His greatest accomplishment and skill was his tale-telling ability: the best part of his stories and the reason why they became so successful was that they were overflowing with action, drama, and suspense and, as a result, they were never dull to read.

The first time the world witnessed the image of Tarzan was on the cover of "All-Story" magazine in October 1912 in an illustration by Clinton Pettee¹⁴. In fact, the turning point for Burroughs's literary career was when the magazine purchased the story for \$700.

When Burroughs died in 1950 he had written a total of sixty-seven novels, twenty-seven of which had Tarzan as the main character. Furthermore, Burroughs was an extremely clever businessman: he always serialized in magazines the adventures he wrote and only at the end of the whole story would he consent to publish the novel in hard cover in order to always maximize his profits. He also created and sold a serialized radio show, which aired in every state of the Union. In 1936 Tarzan was also launched in comic strip format and later on as a comic book. He got his own comic magazine in 1947. Burroughs was very forward-looking because as soon as his fictional hero started gaining success in 1913, he registered it as a trademark and so he gained money every single time Tarzan was mentioned somewhere.

¹⁴ See Images, pic. 1.

2.2. The Novel

The novel *Tarzan of the Apes* narrates the adventures of a man who was raised by apes in the savage and primal African jungle populated by cannibals and fierce beasts. *Tarzan's* plot starts by describing the final part of the life of Lord John Greystoke, a young British officer on a diplomatic mission, and Lady Alice, his pregnant wife, who are set ashore in Africa by mutineers. They die shortly after the birth of their only child who manages to survive because he is luckily adopted by an intelligent and motherly ape, Kala, who had lost her own offspring and so decides to nurse and take care of the baby. She names him "Tarzan", which in ape language means "white skin", and nurtures him just as if he were an ape. The story jumps many years into the future when Tarzan has become a grown child who perfectly acts and behaves as a real ape. Wandering off in the unspoilt jungle he notices something that catches his attention: a wooden cabin. This startles his senses and his imagination starts to torment him until he decides to explore the mysterious place. Inside the construction he finds many objects and books, which belonged to his dead parents. Thanks to the children's books his parents had brought with them in order to teach him English, he gradually starts to teach himself the language. Another most precious item he discovers in the cabin is a knife that belonged to his father and, thanks to this artifact, he manages to become a skilled and mighty hunter. All the other animals are now afraid of his powerful weapon: he is now able to kill other beasts and his great prowess allows him to become king of the apes.

The novel jumps into the future again to when Tarzan is 25 years old. Five other human beings arrive in the African jungle because they too are set ashore by mutineers. One of them is Jane Porter, and as soon as Tarzan lays eyes on her he immediately falls in love.

After a series of adventures, Jane becomes interested in him, but they are separated because Tarzan has to rescue another white man, Lieutenant D'Arnot, from the cannibal tribes who populate the African jungle. D'Arnot, a member of the crew of the ship that arrived to rescue Jane's party, teaches Tarzan how to speak French. At the very end of this first book Tarzan manages to go to America, thanks also to the Lieutenant's help, to reach his beloved Jane, but once there, he sadly discovers that she is to be married to his cousin Clayton. Once back in "civilization," Tarzan finally discovers that he has very noble origins: he actually is the heir to Lord Greystoke. He obviously is a human being and he does not belong to the ape tribe as he had previously believed.

Not only did Tarzan's origins differ from what he had thought, but also "civilization" differed starkly from "Africa". As the critic Gail Bederman suggests, Burroughs depicts Africa not as a real place but rather as an imaginary construct; "a place of origins, frozen at the moment the earliest human beings appeared on Earth... a place where 'the white man' could prove his superior manhood by reliving the primitive, masculine life of his most distant evolutionary forefathers" (220). Africa is merely a stage where events such as the struggle between man and nature and the ultimate victory of the white man take place. We readers can easily recognize that the world Burroughs is depicting is not a real one: his vision of Africa precisely incarnates the primitive and fantastic one that was commonly held among the people in 20th century America. The landscape is full of dangers and common people are not able to navigate the impenetrable forest. Burroughs recurrently emphasizes the deadly intent of a "fierce jungle" that "would make an easy prey of [an] unprotected stranger" (*Tarzan of the Apes*; 110). The jungle is a hostile landscape where the vegetation and ancient trees impede visibility and any attempt at navigating the "wild and tangled labyrinth" (106). The jungle is dark, impenetrable, and

mysterious: Tarzan in his many wanderings through it discovers that it holds secret societies, lost civilizations, and unexpected and sly animals. It is a primordial space “which stands unchanged today as it stood on that long forgotten night in the dim, unthinkable vistas of the long dead past” (54). As we have said, the jungle conveys this sense of extreme impenetrability: all the explorers, military soldiers, and hunting parties have failed every single time they tried to force their way in. It’s not possible for Europeans or Americans to navigate the territory, not even if they hire a local guide: natives get lost too or flee in superstitious terror at the horrors of the interior.

Burroughs decided to construct Africa as a place where the white man could test his capacities and his superior manhood by recreating the primitive, masculine life of his most distant forefathers. The many dangers that lie hidden, like the threat of being attacked by wild animals, being captured by cannibals, suffering from jungle fevers, or dying of starvation, are all perfect elements that provide the thrills of the adventure. The jungle embodies the perfect arena where the white male hero can assess his inherently superior capabilities and skills: in these adventures he has to prove his masculinity by rescuing the endangered lady in distress and defeating the infamous creatures that populate the jungle – and he has to achieve and carry out all of these heroic deeds only by trusting his superior strength and brains.

Another original feature of this literary adventure is that Burroughs gave his apes the capacity to speak some sort of rudimentary language, similar to the human one, just more primeval and animalistic. Apes furthermore are socially organized and are ruled by a monarchical government that tries to set things in order among the members of the tribe. We can say that they resemble very closely some sort aboriginal society because they also have a sort of religious ceremony, called the “Dum-Dum”, in which they move

as if they were dancing and use some kind of ritualistic drums. Another curious thing worth noting is that Burroughs, absurdly, decided to depict the ape tribe in a far better light than the black cannibal tribe. The apes, it's true, are primitive, but they are noble and they adhere to a certain code of "civilization" based on respecting the rules; on the contrary the natives are extremely cowardly, stupid, and superstitious. They have not evolved at all in contrast to the rest of the white civilized world, and they are even more backwards than the apes that, after all, are animals.

2.3. Burroughs's Tarzan

Burroughs assigns many different roles to his main hero Tarzan: he is the king of the ape tribe, lord of the jungle, he is a mighty and skilled hunter, he explores the wilderness and lives many adventures in unknown and uncharted territory. Yet he can be and do all of this because he can always rely on his capacity to read situations and master the environment that surrounds him. After so many years living in the wild, he is able to perfectly read and interpret every track in the thick jungle forest. He is the embodiment of perfect intelligence and perfect physicality: he incarnates the ideal strength a man could achieve and he could be defined as some sort of forest god: he's incredibly resourceful, courageous, and chivalrous. He follows his personal moral code and at the same time he is always driven by the passion for discovery and adventure. All these extremely positive qualities that he embodies are a device Burroughs uses to express the white man's potential for perfection and to dominate over the other races. In fact his

prowess does not exclusively come from his animalistic upbringing but mainly from his noble inherited origins. The combination of these two fundamental elements makes him the perfect specimen. Burroughs also makes this a racial attribute: only because Tarzan has virtuous Anglo-Saxon origins is he able to develop his primitive skills; had he belonged to another race, this would not have been possible. We see this example embodied in the natives: they grew up in a wild and hostile environment that should have made them savage and extremely powerful, but on the contrary, because they do not possess any kind of noble origin, they are merely barbarous cannibals, stupid and superstitious; they have not adapted to the environment they are in, as Tarzan did, and are afraid of every odd sound or noise. They cannot survive as a race because of their backwardness and lack of noble heritage.

Here we are talking about noble blood as the primary source that enables Tarzan to become what he is, we are not talking about the benefits of civilization. In fact, civilization has the opposite effect on men making them weak and too effeminate to survive in hostile environments. Too much civilization weakens the body and the mind as seen in the characters of Jane's father, Professor Porter, and his assistant who completely fail to realize the dangers that are lurking in the jungle.

Violence is another fundamental part of Tarzan's upbringing: from his earliest childhood he has always been exposed to and experienced the animal violence of the jungle. Perpetuating violence is fundamental if one wants to survive in this hostile environment: for example at the age of ten, Tarzan had to overcome a giant gorilla only with the help of his knife¹⁵. We have to remember that violence belongs only to the male realm: when women in the book try to act violently they either lose their minds or faint.

¹⁵ This is the episode that will make him understand the powerful potential of that little weapon and that will start to establish him as a violent hunter.

In fact, when Tarzan's mother Alice tries to shoot a gorilla that was threatening her newborn son, she starts losing her mind and this is what eventually leads to her death. Likewise, when Jane shoots the lioness that was attacking her in the cabin she immediately loses her senses: violence is exclusively a male attribute and only men can endure the consequences of perpetuating violent acts.

We have to make a clear distinction though, between Tarzan's legitimate violence and the violence carried out by the apes and the natives: their violence is not employed to insure their survival or for self-preservation. Their violence is random, cowardly and inhuman. The example here is when one of them, Kulonga, kills Tarzan's mother ape, Kala, without any apparent valid reason. Kala throughout all her time in the story has always behaved as a real mother for Tarzan: she has always nursed and protected him as if he were her own offspring, so her death seems to the reader even more cruel and inhumane. Because of all this, Kulonga and the rest of the natives in general deserve punishment: Tarzan will slay his mother's assassin and will start to kill natives without repenting because they deserve to be treated violently. Themes like the fact that violence was racialized, meaning that white violence like lynching (perpetuated by Tarzan) was acceptable, while black violence (perpetuated by black African natives) was not, is one of the elements that makes us understand the ideas of the popular culture of the period. We could say that Burroughs interpreted conquering violence as a positive feature of the white colonizers, which are embodied in his male hero's figure. Bederman seems to suggest that "it is acceptable and natural for a white man to lynch black men who violate white women. The impulse to kill black men, like the impulse to avoid cannibalism, is a racially superior man's inherent masculine instinct" (225). Black natives are not even considered "men", they completely lack any kind of masculinity and

so they deserve the fate that Tarzan, the “true man,” assigns to them. Killing natives only emphasizes the contrast between proper masculinity and the total lack of it. We could argue that Tarzan has become a murderer, but the book does not take this perspective because he killed some sort of creature, not a true man. So Tarzan’s deed is not condemned at all, on the contrary, the text exalts and appreciates it: “to kill was the law of the wild world he knew” (*Tarzan of the Apes*; 73). In order to survive in the jungle, a creature has the only possibility to kill to save its life. Something that we readers could find a little too sadistic, though, is the fact that Tarzan enjoys his killings:

Few were his primitive pleasures, but the greatest of these was to hunt and kill... that he joyed in killing, and that he killed with a joyous laugh upon his handsome lips betokened no innate cruelty. He killed for food most often, but, being a man, he sometimes killed for pleasure, a thing which no other animal does. (73)

This is another fundamental trait that distinguishes him from his animal companions: only men can think about killing for sport and not exclusively for the need of food¹⁶. So we can conclude that violence is one of the features that belong to the sphere of perfect masculinity since Tarzan has the inherent instinct to kill black men and avoid cannibalism: in fact he feels appalled at the mere thought of eating one of his species. Tarzan becomes “civilized” only after he has met Jane Porter and the rest of the Europeans explorers, but since the very beginning he instinctively feels that certain things are wrong: avoiding cannibalism, as I was saying, should be a concept that he

¹⁶ This human feature is embodied also by the native hunter Kulonga who kills Kala, Tarzan’s mother-ape, for sport and not for the need of food.

learns only after he establishes contact with the civilized society. Instead, he intrinsically has this moral value because it is literally in his blood and his noble origins instinctively keep him from transforming into a savage.

His cousin Mr. William Cecil Clayton represents what Tarzan would have become had he grown up among the civilized society: he is courageous, loyal, honorable, brave, and intelligent, but he lacks that animal instinct that would allow him to survive the perils of the jungle on his own.

In fact, many times Tarzan has to save him and the rest of the party from the dangers lurking in the thick forest; by saving white men, Tarzan acquires even more value and honor in the eyes of the readers. He instinctively feels the need to protect Jane: “he knew that she was created to be protected and that he was created to protect her” (134). He soon has the possibility to play the part of the protector when Jane gets abducted by a giant treacherous male ape, Terkoz, who is incapable of controlling his sexual impulses and for this reason wants to add her to his harem. Tarzan immediately sets out to rescue her, and once he reaches the giant ape, the two immediately engage in a fight to the death. In this fight they embody the two perfect examples of the two species who are fighting for the possession of the most desirable female in the tribe. In this fight between species, obviously the superior white man wins because he combines his animal strength with his sharp intelligence.

We could say that Terkoz, even if Burroughs represents him as an ape and not as a black man, perfectly embodies the myth of the black rapist, a widespread stereotype in early 20th century America. Richardson says that the myth of the black male rapist was “a public and ritualized manifestation of growing white panic about a shifting social order in the South that promised blacks education, property, political participation, and social

inclusion" (59), and Lott adds that it was constructed to "justify withholding citizenship from African Americans by representing black men as 'moral monsters'" (39).

Tarzan is different from the "black rapist" because in the decisive moment when he is finally alone with Jane, his noble origins supplant his primeval instinct and he decides to follow his reason and not impose himself on the girl. His genetic legacy is stronger than the urge of the moment and conclusively he behaves as a civilized man and not as an ape. His chivalrous temperament keeps him from committing a barbarous act that he would surely have regretted. In fact, Tarzan reflects: "True, it was the order of the jungle for the male to take his mate by force; but could Tarzan be guided by the laws of the beasts? Was not Tarzan a Man?" (227). Here we finally witness his realization that he belongs to the human species and so he decides that he wants to behave accordingly. He stops following the laws of the jungle and consciously starts to follow those of the humans. Jane too, who initially seems to be taken by some sort of sexual attraction towards the ape man, quickly recovers her "civilized" manners and suppresses her instincts. She is the character who makes Tarzan definitely understand that he is human since she literally opens the medallion Tarzan found in his parents' cabin and carries with him, to reveal the pictures of his human parents.

Burroughs absorbed racism from the culture around him and depicted Africa and the African natives in a way mostly derived from black face minstrelsy. Unfortunately, the novels and the films based on Burroughs's stereotypes kept perpetuating such a distorted vision. The "black rapist" stereotype was the result of the growing panic of whites towards blacks who were becoming more and more emancipated in society. The white society helped to perpetuate the myth of the black men as inhuman beasts willing

to rape their pure white women. They were seen as overly sexualized animals that could not control their sexual instinct and therefore represented a huge threat.

After the abolition of slavery, interracial couples were becoming less rare and white conservatives didn't want this phenomenon to spread further. Many American southerners in particular were obsessed with preserving the "purity" of the white race. The "black rapist" stereotype perpetuated the two most famous stereotypes of the country: that black men were sexual predators and that white women were utterly pure and chaste; so the white man had to struggle in any possible way to preserve and protect the purity of the white women. Through rape, the black man could usurp and overthrow white supremacy and ruin the symbol of the economic and social status the white woman represented. Lynching, unfortunately, was a way in which white people showed the vulnerability of the black race because black men were still considered a threat even if regarded as inferior and less worthy.

Burroughs represented the natives in the same way Americans considered African-Americans: barbaric, inferior, violent, cruel, and sexually promiscuous. There was also the idea that black people were lazy, incompetent, idiotic, and moved only by their sexual instinct. Women, on the contrary, occupied more peripheral positions: they were mostly regarded as servants. In fact Esmeralda is the only African-American character in the novel and she is Jane's maid. She is shown as a woman always afraid of everything and always fainting at the first sight of danger. She is extremely superstitious and totally passive; she is indeed used by Burroughs as a comic character, which serves to convey some sort of humor and comic relief in the story.

To confirm all these prejudices about black people I want to point out that Burroughs refers to blacks possessing a "bestial brutishness due to their appearance" (57) and to

be “sleek and hideous [...] fearful creatures”¹⁷ (60); he really seems to share the same ideas spreading in the white society of his age.

Another feature that distinguishes the African black culture is that it is characterized as extremely superstitious, as I was hinting earlier on. When Tarzan kills the tribal chief, the natives start to believe in the existence of some sort of forest god that would kill them all and so they start to make offerings to calm his anger. Tarzan secretly starts to eat those offerings and the natives are awe-struck and completely paralyzed by terror when they discover that the donations have vanished into thin air. Furthermore, the religion Burroughs crafts for them is nothing more than an irrational cult: they actually believe in a false god and the thought that the killer of their chief might be human never even crosses their simple minds. They are firmly convinced that it was an evil spirit who did the deed and they try to soothe him by offering him food.

Another significant trait of Burroughs’ characterizations of the natives is that, through the language he uses, he makes the audience consider them nothing more than cattle (as African-Americans actually were considered during slavery) and so when a member of the tribe dies or is killed, readers couldn’t care less about his tragic end. When Tarzan kills Kulonga we regard his action as rightful and justified by the terrible act the black man had previously done: killing the innocent Kala. So, as Tarzan, we too don’t feel any compassion or piety towards them. As soon as we read about their barbaric deeds and their cannibalistic life-style we immediately feel disgust and we start to hate and despise them at once. We don’t feel any kind of sympathy towards them.

The western racist stereotype is certainly widely employed in this novel and it is aimed at proving that the American and European lifestyle is the right one to be sought. In this

¹⁷ Taken from the novel *Tarzan of the Apes*.

period there were many theories aimed at demonstrating the superiority of the white race; they were tailor-made in order to justify whites' exploitation of the black population. In the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, as Maynard points out, many pseudoscientific explanations for the innate superiority of the white race were developed to justify the conquest of Africa.¹⁸

In order to rationalize their brutal exploitation, the Europeans began to develop pseudoscientific explanations for their "innate" superiority over conquered Black Africans. Thus, as Maynard explains, in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries, a detailed philosophy of racism was written to justify the conquest of Africa.

We can without a doubt add that the Tarzan series of novels and movies helped to perpetuate this distorted vision about black people. The absurd part is that Burroughs never went to Africa and never encountered a true African. Nevertheless all his life he continued to put black characters in his extremely popular books, which became the main source both for Americans and African-Americans to have a taste of the true African culture. Burroughs's ideas about blacks and their behavior likely came principally from stereotypes in blackface minstrelsy performances. This taste was obviously totally wrong and biased. Burroughs's books became a main source for misinformation about Africa and Africans for many generations. Myths about the region were created and perpetuated: for the majority of Americans, the idea they had about Africa accorded with the stereotypes that Burroughs presented; they regarded Africa as a place full of perils and mysteries. People were totally ignorant about the true African cultures and traditions because their knowledge had always been distorted by

¹⁸ For further analysis see Maynard, R. A. (1974). *Africa on film: Myth and reality*. Rochelle Park, NJ: Hayden. P.13

colonialism and racism, too.

Another main problem is that since its birth Hollywood has depicted Africa in negative terms and this also reflected the negative relationship between whites and blacks that was tearing the country apart. Hollywood was one of the major means through which this unrealistic vision of Africa spread through the country and the rest of the world. African-American critic Lindsay Patterson commented in 1974 in discussing Hollywood films: "Despite the political, social, and economic changes occurring [in Africa] within the last two decades, the films... persisted in presenting Africa as the lost, dark continent, populated by stupid, bloodthirsty savages" (78). Africa was frequently used as the setting of exotic adventures that people of those years loved so much: Americans loved escapist tales and Africa was the perfect land of dangers, threats, and exotic animals and populations. Marylee Wiley in 1979 concluded that "African societies are typified as backward and static... The implicit assumption... is the superiority of the cultures of the industrialized people. There is no evidence... that we have much to learn from African peoples. We may learn about them but they advance only by learning from us". (7)

Joseph Adjaye has pointed out that the media tended to characterize Africa through many banal generalizations such as "Africans live in villages," as if no urban areas at all developed in the continent, and this oversimplification was what the people absorbed and actually started to believe.¹⁹

¹⁹ For further reading see Adjaye, J. (1979, May). Media on Africa: Problems and related strategies with reference to the elementary curriculum. Paper presented at the Images of Africa: New Directions in Media conference, African Studies Center, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI.

2.4. *The Book's* Ending and Its Cultural Context

At the end of the first novel Tarzan becomes completely civilized: he speaks perfect English and acts as the noblest of the Anglo-Saxon breed to which he belongs. His intentions towards Jane are clear and he proposes to her, but a problem starts to emerge: now that he is a “normal” civilized man, Jane is no longer attracted to him. In fact, what had awaked her deepest instincts and what made Tarzan completely different from the rest of the world, unique and special, was his wild and untamed nature. Now that he has given it up, he’s completely dull and uninteresting in Jane’s eyes. So she thinks it through and decides lucidly that it would be more advantageous to marry Clayton instead of Tarzan because of his social position and merits. She realizes that what she felt for Tarzan was just a momentary passion developed in the heat of the moment and now that she is safe back at home, those wild emotions she had felt in the wild jungle have disappeared. So Tarzan, the perfect man, has to give up the fantasy of marrying her; but, if he embodied perfect masculinity, we understand that this is not enough to win the woman of his dreams because she favors civilization over nature in the end. So we could conclude that masculinity and civilization are incompatible; either you achieve one or the other. This kind of ending might be read as Burroughs’s accusation and blaming of an overly civilized society that has lost any possibility at achieving true masculinity: men living in his period were just effeminate males behaving as the society wished them to.

Ultimately Tarzan, having lost his woman, renounces all this civilization and his inheritance and claims to be “still a wild beast at heart” and declares what he knows to be false: “I am an ape” (235). He cannot be tamed and, in fact, after publishing this book,

Burroughs started writing the sequel very soon after, in which Tarzan goes back to his African jungle and finally gets Jane.

Tarzan's character is portrayed as a survivor, a creature able to master every situation he has to face, who always ends up winning over the hostile environment in which he finds himself. He can easily be considered a modern hero and a winner in a society that still valued male visibility and aggressive masculinity. Tarzan is "the natural man", he is pure and primal, and when he was young he represented the "natural child" archetype; he is more attuned with his animal side than with his human part. Having been raised in the jungle by a society of apes protects Tarzan from the corruption and weakness of the human society. In the very end of the first book, Tarzan is unable to bear civilization and decides to become one with nature again by retiring to his jungle. He embodies also the figure of the "noble savage" because he is very altruistic and always saves people in need such as the explorers. He then defends his tribe and falls in love with Jane.

Burroughs clearly seems to suggest that too much civilization spoils the human heart, weakening it. In the book he clearly depicts the effects that over-civilization has on men: Professor Porter and Mr. Philander, respectively Jane's father and his assistant and oldest friend, embody the concept of over-civilized men. They are presented as failures and incapable of surviving in the jungle. They have lost any trace of genuine masculinity, are effeminate and are always worried about suppressing and never let loose their emotions. They always master their passions and are completely powerless in the natural environment, not even realizing the dangers that are lurking in the jungle.

When *Tarzan* was published, it came out at a time that had a huge need to break away from the constraints of the Victorian period. Life was nothing more than a dull routine in the urban-industrial environment. Many men felt the urge to express themselves, to be

young, wild, and adventurous and to retrieve and express their lost masculinity. Roosevelt himself delivered a remarkable speech in which he declared: “it is only through strife, through hard and dangerous endeavor, that we shall ultimately win the goal of true national greatness”.²⁰

The strongest message Burroughs wanted to give to his male readership was that every man had in him the potential to become like Tarzan; he preached that the white man was inherently superior to other races and that he could best adapt to hostile situations. This book represented the perfect escapist way to overcome the confines of the dull Victorian life full of constraints and repression that Americans were still forced to live at that time. Through this book, the fantasy that they could become flawless specimen and achieve perfect masculinity spread into their minds and gave them a new or renewed hope and confidence in themselves. In fact, sports and recreation had a huge surge in popularity at the turn of the century and an interest in untamed nature came up more strongly than ever. Sports in colleges became an extremely fundamental part of the students’ lives and people proved to have a great enthusiasm for outdoor recreation as well as physical and personal improvement and they wanted to achieve an athletic body through contact with and sport in the open nature. We can talk about an actual sports revival in which one of the most loved sports was football; but people enjoyed also athletic contests and Americans always excelled in these because they showed a great ferocity. In fact, Americans won most of the challenges of the early Olympic Games and established a series of new world records. Participating in this sports revival also entailed cycling in the countryside, far away from the chaos of the city, or going hiking and camping. This love of nature freed the Americans’ minds and allowed them to start

²⁰ The speech I am referring to is “The Strenuous Life” speech he gave in 1899

living vivid experiences in close contact with nature. Nature study clubs started to become popular free time activities, and pastimes such as bird watching started to become a serious occupation. This love for nature, we must say, also drew from Americans' distrust of the city: it meant a release from the constraints of society and staying outdoors meant getting release from the stiffness of civilization and an imaginative release from institutional rules²¹. Thanks to the close contact with nature, people felt more freedom and virility. All this discourse explains, at least in part, why the Tarzan series had such a huge impact on society and why its success was so vast and long lasting. Novels up to this moment had usually focused on domestic subjects, never daring to explore the extreme potential of adventures taking place in the wilderness. During this epoch we witness the decline of romantic idealism in favor of the masculine principle of virility and spaciousness; the feminine principle of refinement and delicacy no longer dominated literature. In these years, not only men, but also women started to change and the figure of the New Woman was born. Her main features were being bold and expressing radiant vigor. Women too started to go out in the open: they rode bicycles, they played sports and they smoked cigarettes. They were "masculine" also in their demand for political attention and they wanted to get the right to vote: the suffragette movement was born.

Up to this moment, faith in the material progress of humanity and utter rationality had dominated the principles of the Western world. Unfortunately, the cult of continuous progress, stability and materialism were oppressing and suffocating the citizenship. In this huge shift towards nature, people now celebrated almost primitive vitality and

²¹ Most of the information and interpretation I am discussing comes from Highman, John "The Reorientation of American Culture in the 1890's". Wayne State University Press. Detroit, 1965. Pp 25-48

helped precipitate a rebellion against the sovereignty of rationality. Many observers believed that Europe now was associated with the old principles of order and stability, America no longer belonged to the same movement of thought; it was now associated with freshness and openness. Goodness and harmony, they claimed, were no longer to be found inside oneself, but outside in nature. This need for open and unspoilt nature was, some social critics concluded, a necessity to oppose the corruption and decadence of the urban society, which wished for a never-ending urbanization of the territory.

Burroughs's Tarzan books managed to reframe a lost masculinity that in the Victorian Era was completely suppressed and repressed. Burroughs presented a totally different concept of man: he was no longer effeminate, gentle, and kind, but ferocious, savage and wild; still not tamed by civilization.

In this period there was also the social problem that more and more women were starting to get a job and earn money, because they were paid less than men, and men encountered ever-growing difficulties in obtaining a job and many were unemployed and considered themselves failures. Tarzan's character helped male readers to revitalize their lost manliness and gave them a renewed hope, because they now were shown the way for achieving and gaining back their lost masculinity, or at least given a model of ideal masculinity they could engage with, if only vicariously. I want to explain that men weren't necessarily "regaining" their masculinity by swinging on vines through the jungle or killing natives. It was more that they now could have their anxieties tempered by entering the fantasy world Burroughs had created. So we can say that they obtained more a psychological relief rather than an economic one. The men's lives basically remained the same but they could live new adventures vicariously through Tarzan. This reason contributes to explain why the character was so popular.

2.5. Tarzan vs. Mowgli: Two Feral Children in Comparison

In the Twentieth century stories of feral children, so stories about babies raised in the wilderness by animals, were very famous and common in American popular literature. With the term *feral* we indicate those children who have been raised away from civilization, reared by animals, or who grew up alone in isolation. Kidd confirms that the first to devise the term in the eighteenth century was Carlos Linneaus who in his work on animal and vegetal cataloguing *Systema Naturae*²² in 1758 differentiated between man living in society, *homo sapiens*, and man living into isolation from other human beings, the *homo ferus*. He furthermore ascribed three main characteristics to the *homo ferus*: tetrapus – meaning that he walks four-footed; mutus – not capable of performing human speech; and hisrutus – meaning covered in hair.

Since these individuals learned to walk with four limbs when they were still really young, the muscular and bone structure was modified by the quadruped locomotion and they can present significant abnormalities in their physical appearance caused by the life in the wild and savage context.

As Kidd confirms “The children, usually boys, are supernatural in strength and insight, benefitting from both human and animal culture but belonging to neither” (92).

Edgar Rice Burroughs certainly contributed to this field of narrative with his character Tarzan who grew up among the apes’ tribe, but he is certainly not the only example of a child nurtured by wild beasts. I think the first story that comes to our minds when we

²²Kenneth B. Kidd in his article "Men Who Run with Wolves, and the Women Who Love Them: Child Study and Compulsory Heterosexuality in Feral Child Films." (The Lion and the Unicorn, vol. 20 no. 1, 1996, pp. 90-112) confirms that the term “feral man” was firstly employed in the tenth edition of *Systema Naturae*.

say “feral children” is the Roman Legend of Romulus and Remus, the two children who founded Rome and who were reared by the she-wolf Lupa.

Throughout the years many authors and writers have exploited this leitmotif in their stories and Rousseau himself spoke about the image of the “noble savage,” meaning that man was born inherently good and was then ruined by the advent of civilization.

Another novelist who exploited this story of the good savage was Rudyard Kipling who in 1894 wrote *The Jungle Book*, which is the story of a young boy who grows up in India and is raised by wolves. So some years before, Kipling had envisaged a story very similar to Burroughs’s one, and he gave life to the character of Mowgli in a combination of imaginary, mythical, fictional, and magical elements all fused together. Mowgli too is a child abandoned at birth who was raised by wild animals, in this specific case wolves and not apes; and like Tarzan, he has to survive in the wild environment only thanks to his own resources and the help of his animal companions. *The Jungle Book*, unlike *Tarzan of the Apes*, is considered a children’s book due to its young protagonist and a vast number of speaking animals; in truth this book has many underlying layers and lends itself to levels of interpretation that make it a very sophisticated and challenging book. In fact Kipling claimed that the parents of the children were ultimately his principal target²³. In fact, through this “children’s story”, Kipling is perfectly able to state his philosophy and his estimation of the white and black race. It is subtly remarked in fact that the white race is the superior one who has the duty and moral commitment to civilize the inferior races, such as the black one, through its portrayal of the community of foolish black apes. Kipling was one of the main supporters of the precept of the “white man’s burden”, meaning that civilized (and therefore superior) races had the

²³ As he declares in *Something of Myself*, p.190 (Penguin, 1977).

responsibility to bring their way of thinking, social organization, and order to the other uncivilized races. This concept is subtly expressed through this children's book and is at least worth mentioning.

In this book too a child is deprived the possibility to grow up in a safe and urban environment because of a certain series of circumstances and is forced to grow up away from civilization and alone, helped only by a group of animals. The triggering cause that forced Mowgli's parents to abandon him was that they were victim of a tiger's attack and so the little human baby was luckily found and raised by a wolf pack that educated and taught the child the secrets of the jungle. Other friendly beasts contribute to the child's development including Baloo, a grumpy and petulant bear, the courageous black panther Bagheera and the secretive and powerful python Kaa.

Each of these animals has its own distinctive name and they do possess a language that allows them to communicate, and, more important, each one of them has its specific character and attitude; they are very precisely individualized and distinguished from each other.

In Tarzan, some of the apes do possess their own personality and particular behavior, see Kala and Terkoz for example, but the rest of the animals are not so specifically characterized.

Both Tarzan and Mowgli start on a narrative that leads them to self discovery and understanding of their true nature, of adapting to the circumstances they live in, always struggling with the environment they were forced to grow up in. Obviously the two children start very disadvantaged in respect to the other animal cubs because they are weak and they lack strength and resistance. But this savage upbringing will allow them to possess incredible and out of the ordinary characteristics that they will acquire

through this animal training, making them extraordinary specimens because they will combine both the animal and the human features to best adapt to the dangers the jungle always presents them.

Burroughs describes his fictional hero as able to “make more rapid strides, so that by the time he was ten years old he was an excellent climber, and on the ground could do many wonderful things which were beyond the powers of his little brothers and sisters” (*Tarzan of the Apes* 38) and

“he could spring twenty feet across space at the dizzy heights of the forest top, grasp with unerring precision, and without apparent jar, a limb waving wildly in the path of an approaching tornado. He could drop twenty feet at a stretch from limb to limb in rapid descent to the ground, or he could gain the utmost pinnacle of the loftiest tropical giant with the ease and swiftness of a squirrel. [...] And day by day his strength was increasing” (39).

As we see Tarzan has acquired the animal abilities of the apes in particular and is now able to act as one of them and swing from tree to tree with only minimal effort.

In the same way, thanks to the teachings of the animals, Mowgli too is able to “swing by one hand from a top branch for half an hour at a time” (*The Jungle Book* 323) and he is capable of performing super-human tasks such as, for example, falling for a good fifteen feet and landing on his feet and skinning a ten-foot tiger all by himself. As he admits: “he did not know his own strength in the least. In the jungle he knew he was weak compared with the beasts, but in the village people said that he was as strong as a bull” (83).

A significant distinction that has to be made between the two fictional heroes is that

Tarzan could count only on the motherly love and nurture of his ape-mother Kala. The rest of the ape tribe and the other jungle animals pose a huge threat to Tarzan and he has to learn alone to achieve all the skills he requires to be able to live in the jungle. Mowgli's position instead is opposite because he not only has the love and protection of his wolf mother, father, and brothers but also, as I was touching upon before, he can count on the teachings and shelter also of the head of the wolf pack Akela, Baloo the bear, Bagheera the black panther, and Kaa the python. It's Baloo himself as a matter of fact who teaches Mowgli to look for honey to eat and to fall from high distances without hurting himself: "Baloo told him that honey and nuts were just as pleasant to eat as raw meat" (43) and "Mowgli fell as Baloo had taught him to fall, and landed on his feet" (71). Mowgli loves dearly all the animals in the jungle that live and grow with him. They hunt him down and rescue him for example when he is kidnapped by the Monkey-People and they even risk their own lives in order to save him. Therefore, while *The Jungle Book* praises and celebrates comradeship and community to overcome life's obstacles, *Tarzan of the Apes*, instead insists on the capacity of the male hero to survive and make it on his own by relying only on his superior strength and his wit. He not once allies with other animals or tribe members in order to defeat the dangers hiding in the thick jungle. The wolves always consider Mowgli as part and parcel of the pack while the ape tribe of Tarzan leaves him to face the greatest dangers of the jungle all by himself, never helping him or sustaining his actions; exception made for his ape mother Kala, obviously. The apes "respect" Tarzan exclusively because he has proven to be the fiercest component of the tribe and because they fear him: there is no love or affection among the members of the colony, only a sentiment of respecting the authority of the strongest individual. On the contrary the wolf pack aims at the best for each component of the pack and always

tries to reach a common good for every member of the community, which is founded on mutual help and support. A strong solidarity permeates the pack and this represents also the kind of perfect society that Kipling envisaged: a humanity where all its members work together to achieve the supreme good and welfare for everyone. The greatest achievement the author reaches is portraying a landscape where there isn't civilization opposed to nature (as Burroughs clearly does while portraying his African jungle), but on the contrary, Kipling displays a nature that is already civilized in itself: the wolf pack follows a precise set of rules which render them civilized and not savage, wild beasts. This natural law of the pack is mainly based on those values and principles dictated by common sense such as respect for the elderly, kindness towards the weakest individuals of the group, hard work aimed at collective well-being, the need to keep one's word, and so on and so forth. This Law is self-evidently justified and used merely to describe; it is a bare necessity. Harrison says

“the basis of all law is something as inexplicable and “natural” as biology, moral and social law being but extensions of biological law [...] Kipling has created something which, from his point of view, is like religious law in ways other than were at first apparent. For religion, to Kipling was always more a matter of consensus than of truth or falsehood, of social fact than of supernatural faith, of what exists because people believe in it than of what people believe because it exists” (158-159).

And here we start to see Kipling's concept of superior and inferior races: in fact, those who can stand by these principles are part of the elected and therefore superior species.

Those who do not respect the natural law instead are those who are uncultivated and need to be civilized by the superior species; talking about the book those who do not follow this rule are the Monkey-Folk who are in other more concrete words, those species who are not white. Monkeys and apes in general are associated closely with black people and I shall remind the reader that in the 1967 Disney movie, the apes speak in the typical Black English slang, another close association to the teaching of Imperialism perpetuated by the book²⁴. In *The jungle Book* apes become outcasts and dispossessed by society, exactly the opposite position that apes held in *Tarzan of the Apes*, where they were considered the mightiest and fiercest of all the animal breed. The Monkey-Folk live up in the trees and are mostly ignored by the rest of the Jungle-People; they do not follow the Jungle Law nor do they have any dealings or friendly association with the rest of the animals. As Harrison points out they “claim above all to be free, and it is this freedom, this lack of all law, which excludes them from the jungle society [...] it is law rather than freedom which seems to be the distinctive feature of Kipling’s Eden” (157). When Mowgli is kidnapped by them because they wish to find a leader, he will finally learn from their words that they are his evolutionary forefathers. The apes take him to an old and deserted city, and by walking erect they pretend to be men²⁵ and try to explain to Mowgli Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution, a theory that we can say also influenced Burroughs’s novel. As Harrison confirms, in Kipling’s book “Monkeys, or make-believe men, have the virtues of neither man nor beast.” (154).

Another distinctive trait that differentiates the two books is that, as I said, Tarzan enjoys killing, while “Hunt then for food, but not for pleasure” is instead the main precept of the

²⁴ As Kidd confirms, in the wake of the civil rights movement, black dialect was assigned to the Indian monkey King Louie in 1967 Disney’s *The Jungle Book* movie.

²⁵ “They would sit in circles in the hall of the king’s council chamber, and scratch for fleas and pretend to be man” (*The Jungle Book*, 67).

Law of the Jungle and the only case in which animals are allowed to kill other living creatures is to satisfy their hunger, not their desire for pleasure. Mowgli, unlike Tarzan, does not kill for revenge but exclusively for food and to satisfy this primary need.

While in Tarzan's story it is Jane, another human being, who reveals to our hero that he belongs to mankind, in *The Jungle Book* it is the panther Bagheera who understands and explains to Mowgli that he is human. This happens when the animal sees the child crying and so she says: "No, Little Brother. That is only tears such as men use. Now I know thou art a man, and a man's cub no longer. The jungle is shut to thee henceforward" (52-53). Other than this, Mowgli actually acknowledges some kind of physical resemblance between himself and the villagers and in his memory he can recall a time in which fire, called by the jungle beasts "Red Flower", didn't scare him but on the contrary was warm and pleasant.

In the confrontation he has with the Council in which he is declared to be a man and not a wolf, he sneeringly proclaims his dominance over the other animal races: "Ye have told me so often tonight that I am a man (and indeed I would have been a wolf with you to my life's end) that I feel your words are true. So do not call ye my brothers anymore, but *sag*²⁶ as a man should." (51) and later on when he is finally confronting his arch-enemy Shere Khan he outrageously calls him dog: "'Up, dog!' Mowgli cried. 'Up, when a man speaks, or I will set that coat ablaze!'" and again "I see that ye are dogs. I go from you to my own people"(52). This is obviously a very powerful and emotional scene: as we read in the parenthesis, Mowgli didn't want to leave the wolf pack at all and he would have gladly continued to live among his wolf-brothers. The jungle world is in sharp contrast to the world of men and even Mowgli admits, "It is better in the Jungle" (151). His heart

²⁶ *Sag* here stands for *dogs*.

is filled with pain and bitterness at the expulsion and he clearly suffers from the decision the Council has taken to send him away. In Tarzan's story exactly the opposite happens: it is Tarzan himself, who fed up with the jungle life and in love with Jane, consciously abandons the ape tribe to follow his wish to be among other human people. He clearly doesn't suffer from the separation and when he understands he is a man by birth, he does not aspire to identify with the apes any longer. I want to remind the reader though, that in Tarzan's tribe there was not love and affection to dominate the relationship between the various members of the community as it was in Mowgli's case, in which this expulsion feels like a huge betrayal for him. Tarzan did not love his ape companions, with the exception of Kala understandably, and did not feel any loss while forsaking them.

The animals of *The Jungle Book* take the dramatic decision to send Mowgli away because they are desperately afraid of men: "No longer was there safety for bird or beast. Man had come" (99) and once they realized that Mowgli belonged to the human species, they no longer trust him and consequently he has to be distanced from the pack. Bagheera, who was born in captivity and later escaped, confirms this dread of the humans and says, "because I had learned the ways of men I became more terrible in the Jungle than Shere Khan" (29).

Once among the Men-Folk, Mowgli experiences the same powerful desire to learn to communicate with other men that Tarzan feels once he discovers the parents' cabin and when he meets Jane and the rest of the explorer's party. In fact Mowgli understands that in order to be able to communicate and integrate in his new community he has to learn to speak: "Well, if I am a man, a man I must be. [...] "What is the good of man," he said to himself at last, "if he does not understand man's talk? [...] I must learn their talk.'" (81-

82). Both he and Tarzan are extremely clever and quick to learn and they soon grasp the essentials of the language. Tarzan too, however, will need the help of man to fully become a man: it's true that he has mastered writing and reading in English from the books his parents left for him, but he still isn't capable of speaking and pronouncing a word of it. To achieve this further ability he will ask Lieutenant D'Arnot: "Teach me to speak the language of men" (218).

Other similarities within the two characters are that both find clothes very annoying and both cannot fully understand the need for and the purpose of money²⁷. Both have and make constant use of their knife, one to claim his position as king of the jungle, the other as a useful instrument to skin animals and prove his mightiness to the tribe. Both have a terrible feline as archenemy: Tarzan will fight and kill Sabor, the lioness, while Mowgli will skin Shere Khan, the tiger.

Both Tarzan and Mowgli experience the powerful feeling of revenge but they achieve it in different ways: Tarzan immediately kills the man responsible for the killing of his ape-mother Kala and resents and hates the black villagers. Mowgli, on the contrary, when he is cast out of the human community because he is believed to be some sort of demon since he was able to kill Shere Khan the tiger, doesn't feel hatred at the beginning and only wishes to have nothing to do with mankind anymore. As Harrison states: "Mowgli, cast out of the jungle for being a man, is in turn cast out by men for being still in a state of Edenic innocence" (155). But when he finds out that his foster parents in the village are being hunted and tortured because they have given shelter to a "Wolf-demon," he starts to feel a profound sentiment of loathing and disgust for what men are capable of doing to other members of their own species. He condemns them with rage: "Thou

²⁷ Mowgli describes coins as "cold and hard, and by no means good to eat" (264).

knowest the village of the Man-Pack that cast me out: they are idle, senseless and cruel; they play with their mouths, and they do not kill the weaker for food, but for sport. When they are full-fed they would throw their own breed into the Red Flower” (226). Men are depicted by Mowgli as extremely superstitious and this element characterized the village of the black natives in *Tarzan* too.

Mowgli’s foster mother resembles the characters of Kala and Lieutenant D’Arnot in *Tarzan* because they are all innocent victims of man’s cruelty and brutality. But Mowgli and Tarzan are profoundly different by one single fundamental trait: Mowgli does not kill people. “But deeply as he loathed them, their talk, their cruelty, and their cowardice, not for anything the Jungle had to offer could he bring himself to take a human life, and have that terrible scent of blood back again in his nostrils” (225). Mowgli does take revenge on the villagers who cast him away and who senselessly hurt his foster parents by getting the elephants to stampede on the villagers’ huts and food supplies so that they are forced to flee and leave the jungle.

As James Harrison proclaims the “destruction of the whole village [...] has the quality of a ritual cleansing by nature” (153). Nature has ultimately won over man’s cruelty and superstitious beliefs. Exactly as the black natives in *Tarzan*, the villagers don’t understand what caused their ruin and ascribe the crime to a sort of “forest-god”. The two passages are moreover very similar: in *Tarzan* the protagonist is described “with the noble poise of his handsome head upon those broad shoulders, and the fire of life and intelligence in those fine, clear eyes, he might readily have typified some demi-god of a wild and warlike bygone people of his ancient forest” (108); while Mowgli “as he stood in the red light of the oil lamp, strong, tall, and beautiful, his long black hair sweeping over his shoulders, the knife swinging at his neck, and his head crowned with

a wreath of white jasmine, he might have been mistaken for some wild god of a jungle legend” (335).

Both Tarzan and Mowgli struggle to entirely comprehend their true identity and complete a full self-realization. As soon as Tarzan understands that he is different from the apes that raised him, he starts wearing ornaments and pieces of clothes to make the distinction between him and the animal-world visible and clear and considers the hair that grows on his face a “degrading emblem of apehood” (109). At the very end though, when Jane refuses his marriage proposal, he declares himself an ape and denies his human origins in order to go back to the jungle. Mowgli on the contrary is miserable when he is forced to leave the wolf pack and yearns to belong to the animal community and not to the human species. He consciously knows he is a man but he wishes he were not: “I am a wolf. I am of one skin with the Free People. It is no will of mine that I am a man” (320). In the end though it is Mowgli himself who will come back to his human tribe thanks to a chance encounter with his foster mother many years later and the curiosity he starts to feel towards a young girl of the village. “Man goes back to Man at last” and now it is Mowgli that decides to join the human community: “It is no longer the Man-cub that asks leave of his Pack, but the Master of the Jungle that changes his trail” (341).

Chapter Three

Tarzan of the Apes (1918): An Analysis

3.1 The Cinematic Adaptations of *Tarzan*

Over the years, the Tarzan story has been adapted and transferred into various media and different forms over and over again: as Cheatwood testifies, “between 1918 and 1970 a total of forty-one Tarzan films were made. Two of these were made-for-TV films, and eight were silent, leaving thirty-one commercially produced sound Tarzan features between 1932 and 1968” (127). I would argue that Tarzan achieved such an incredible fame that it’s difficult to find another character or story based on a single idea that has ever had equal success. Furthermore Burroughs hero had a huge impact on society and helped shape people’s view of Africa and the African native populations. For over forty years, and probably more, these films were the first source of information and most of all misinformation regarding the African continent and for African Americans the only source to grasp at least a little bit how their original homeland looked like.

Tarzan’s adventures today are widely associated with the 1999 Disney movie adaptation created for children. So people and critics alike often think that the Tarzan movie series was made primarily for a very young audience, forgetting that the original book was aimed for an adult audience and contained many brutal and savage portrayals of violence. As Cheatwood observes: “most discussions of the Tarzan films regard them as “B” movies made primarily for children and unworthy of serious research” (127). Then he goes on “One of the biggest mistakes commonly made [...] is to regard the series as a

unified set, with Tarzan and Jane in Africa undergoing a series of exotic adventures surrounded by black natives and dangerous animals” (129). In fact, many different filmmakers and actors took part in the various productions, and each one of them had his personal vision of the characters and the environment where the scene was set. There is no specific theme that runs through the entire Tarzan series nor do the various film follow a chronological sequence. Each work is a reinterpretation of the original novels and each production is self-standing and it often does not take into consideration, most of the times, previous productions.

Maybe the film that resonated most with the people living while Tarzan’s story was becoming successful was *Tarzan the Ape Man* with Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O’Sullivan made in 1932 by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer²⁸. In fact, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer films were envisioned for a mature audience and they had more funds than other productions so they could create a more realistic landscape and environment and also employ real Africans as advisors²⁹. Even today if I ask my parents or a relative if they remember something about the first Tarzan movies, the perfect physique of Johnny Weissmuller, the incredible swimmer, immediately comes to their minds. His bare chest evoked the image of the flawless male physique of classic statues. His co-star Maureen O’Sullivan remembers: “Golden make-up covered a body that was perfect. The setting sun lit his hair that was touched with gold” (Fury, XI). She was instead the physical opposite to this impeccable masculinity: “Fair, dark-haired, curvaceous, delicate and as feminine as Weissmuller was masculine, Maureen O’Sullivan proved a perfect counterpart to the dark, moody and uncommunicative Tarzan” (Fenton, 168).

The actor was a perfect choice also for Fenton: “Weissmuller not only had the physique

²⁸ See Images, pic. 2.

²⁹ As testified in Cheatwood; p. 134

but he had that kind of face – sensual, animalistic and good-looking – that gave the impression of the jungle... outdoor life. Undoubtedly, Johnny was the greatest of all Tarzans” (167).

While audiences remembered Johnny Weissmuller’s Tarzan most vividly, as Cheatwood reminds us, during the same period another independent producer named Sol Lesser, was making a separate set of movies: he made two films, one in 1933 and the other in 1938, employing Buster Crabbe as Tarzan in the first, and the deadly Glenn Morris as Tarzan in the second. Furthermore, during these same years Edgar Rice Burroughs was involved in the production of a serial entitled *The New Adventures of Tarzan* starring Herman Brix³⁰ (129). The curious part about the production of this entire set of movies is that surprisingly enough they had nothing in common besides the name of Tarzan; moreover, the same actor or star was rarely used twice to depict the main character: the public might well have been exposed to five different Tarzans in a very limited time span.

So if the first movies were created for an adult audience, when did we start to regard them as children’s movies? This happened when the production shifted from Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer to Radio-Keith Orpheum Pictures. This second studio began to consider these films as suitable for a more juvenile audience and the Tarzan movies started to be seen progressively as children’s fare.

As we can well imagine, one of the most difficult parts of the production of the Tarzan movies was recreating the perfect location. In the early movies very rarely did the entire

³⁰ See Images, pic. 3- 4- 5

set and crew move to Africa to shoot in real landscape; most of the time they tried to re-create the atmosphere of distant and exotic climes in the studio. Usually they achieved this by excluding familiar objects, rather than including real exotic ones. They, indeed, rarely paid too much attention to accuracy. Cheatwood testifies:

“Prior to 1955 only one of the 20 Tarzan films was made on location, and none was made in color; after 1959 every film was shot on location and every film was made in color. The location of these films is interesting: the two films shot on location prior to 1955 were made in Mexico and Guatemala. Of the seven films made on location after 1959 only three were made in Africa. One was made in Thailand, one in India, two in Brazil and one in Mexico. [...] The difficulties of producing a rain forest, arid savanna, or accurate jungle, which are encountered in studio locations, were not problematic in location filming. Likewise, local natives were used as extras. Although the plots tended to stress the adventure and foreign drama of Tarzan, there was no more need to create the sense of exotic mystery, which had led to the bizarre features found in Lesser series” (140).

In order to make the audience believe that the adventure was taking place in Africa, filmmakers used different methods: they could directly state the geographic location by using an on-screen text or by presenting a map and making the camera zoom in the correct spot of the action. To convey a greater sense of geographical location they used terrain features, such as plains and jungles, botanical features, items most widely associated with exotic climes and easily identifiable animals with limited habitats like

lions, giraffes, rhinoceros, hippopotamuses and so on. Cheatwood testifies “Tarzan’s home is located in the horn of Eastern Africa, near the current nations of southern Sudan or Uganda. Actually, Tarzan’s home is in a heavy forest rather than a rain forest or a jungle: this is due to the fact that the set department could construct an accurate looking forest more easily than a heavily overgrown and moist jungle or rain forest” (133).

One thing that binds all the movies together, though, is their heavy reliance on the African landscape as a never-ending source of great adventure, perils and excitement. In all the movies, more or less, we can find the same botanical and zoological features.

Despite all this huge success, however, not everyone loved the Ape Man and his series: in 1986 Eble, for example, criticized the movies because he said they obscured the actual exploitation of the Third World that Europeans and Americans have perpetuated over the course of the years. These films, according to him, celebrated a “pax Americana” that promises to bring civilization to those areas still not directly under American control; he says:

“What... Tarzan... imposed on foreign societies was a better and more just system than what had been in force, but it is worth noting that there is a very American assumption as well that ‘our’ way is unquestionably desirable and therefore to be imposed. We may note that rarely if ever is there any debate about what kind of governance should be established – only about the means for inaugurating what is assumed to be the only form possible: an American-style republican form of government” (7).

It's true that, when seeing these kinds of movies, the American audience was presented with a very precise and specific image concerning Africa and this particular vision would stimulate discussion about the problems afflicting that part of the world and how to intervene to resolve them. So the discussion then focused on "how to save Africa" rather than focusing on "what Africa actually is". We could say that Burroughs's stories relocate the idea of the American frontier to be conquered from Western America to Africa. In fact, these adventures based on the jungle helped to perpetuate the idea of the legitimacy of white male authority both at home and abroad and they presented a world where chivalry and romance were values still worth pursuing.

3.2. Al Bohl's documentary *Tarzan Lord of the Louisiana Jungle*

If today we can watch a very good version of a hundred-year-old movie, it is thanks to the work of the director Al Bohl and his team: they understood that the version that was remaining was very probably one used for private screenings and the chronology in it was all jumbled. In fact, the original movie had to be about eight reels long for a total of two hours and ten minutes of film, more or less. The version that survives today is very much shorter, in fact it lasts only one hour, but the interesting fact is that Al Bohl in 2012 started working on what we had, cut the film into pieces and re-ordered them following a chronological order, and divided the movie into three different chapters. He also created from scratch a new original soundtrack that better suited the action of the movie. He also analyzed the original movie very deeply, he tracked down people and experts to comment on the original film, and in the end he created an amazing

documentary about the story of this first cinematic adaptation, which revealed many interesting and curious details about the characters, the actors and the production.

First of all we find out that it took about eighteen weeks for the entire production of the film to be completed. As Essoe testifies, the scenes in which we can see the jungle background were actually shot in Brazil – not in Africa – while the scenes with the characters were shot near the town of Morgan City in Louisiana (13). The first nine weeks of production were shot in Morgan City in four different areas around this city: Al Bohl's documentary attests that production offices were housed on Shannon Hardware on Front Street while the jungle scenes were shot on Avoca Island, Lake End Park and the Atchafalaya River Basin. The documentary also reveals curious facts about this place: even today there is a ferryboat for tourists that runs across the very landscape that was used for the jungle scenes and tourists can experience a taste of the actual reality of Tarzan. It is also curious to note that the landscape used in depicting the jungle atmosphere was particularly rich in moss. People at that time didn't know for sure if Africa had a lot of moss or not, but it is a detail that is present also in the original book.

Louisiana was an ideal place to shoot the movie for many reasons: the Atchafalaya River basin is home to the largest swamp in the United States covering nearly six hundred thousands acres and the trees that grow here were perfect for the movie's purposes. For example the documentary testifies that the scenes in which Tarzan hangs and swings from the trees, were shot exactly in the Atchafalaya River Basin, which is northwest of the town of Morgan City. As we can imagine, the conditions for filming were extremely difficult to sustain: Al Bohl attests that they filmed in July, one of the hottest months in southern Louisiana and the temperatures that year were very high. The cast and crew

then had to take a ferryboat to go from the place in which they were living to the set and put in place all the equipment they needed for shooting, and then take it all away at the end of every shooting day; it must have been extremely tiring. The documentary even says that many people may have gotten malaria on set.

Unfortunately, one hundred years later, there is zero evidence and no remaining set of the original Tarzan except for a boat made in the late 1800s that was recovered and subsequently used by the crew of the movie *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button* as reported by Bohl in his documentary (1:08:21).

Always in the documentary a rumor is reported that when they finished filming *Tarzan* the production left some monkeys behind. Monkeys and chimps were taken from a local carnival and, when shooting ended, they were released in the forests of Morgan City. Actually they would have had a good chance of surviving in that environment and visitors and locals claim that for many years they sometimes heard strange screams among the trees.

Other than real monkeys and chimpanzees, the production also employed a group of acrobats and twenty gymnasts from the New Orleans Athletic Club who had to wear ape costumes and swing from trees as actual apes would have done. Bohl testifies that the costumes were manufactured right there in Morgan City at the Shannon building on Everett Street. These costumes are very fascinating because they had a mechanism that, thanks to an ingenious arrangement of wires, allowed the people inside them to make the mouth open, pull back the lips from the teeth and wrinkle the skin on their cheeks. A great technological idea for the period. The documentary also testifies that the masks were constructed out of a spongy material and the hair of the apes' body was sown from brown goat hair (Bohl 43:09). As I said earlier on, actors and crewmembers had to work

in extremely hot weather conditions. We cannot even imagine the struggle for those people inside these costumes: more than being extremely hot, these costumes were particularly heavy and, obviously, they had no ventilation in them.

Another curiosity is that, as we find out once more in the documentary, Burroughs had set some restrictions and some rules for Hollywood to respect when portraying Tarzan's character on the screen (the document is two and a half pages long): for example Tarzan doesn't smoke, so no tobacco allowed; he doesn't drink, so no alcohol allowed; he can get injured but recovers quickly and finally he's a pure fellow (1:07:29).

As I said earlier, Al Bohl divided the original movie into three chapters. Each chapter is set in a different time period and features a different actor or actors playing Tarzan: the first chapter, in particular, is set in 1886 and narrates the events that lead Tarzan's parents to be stranded on an African island and how they tried to live a civilized life and bring up their child even in this terrible condition. In the second chapter the year is 1907 and Tarzan is a ten-year-old boy played by Gordon Griffith, while in the last chapter we have the actor Elmo Lincoln playing the adult Tarzan³¹.

The story starts with Lord and Lady Greystoke who are in England. Lord Greystoke is told that he has to go to Africa to settle down an uproar that rose over the slave trade. Greystoke is delegated by Her Majesty to ferret out the inside of the slave trade and the secret diplomatic reasons for the African unrest.

He is to go alone but his wife, Lady Alice, is a very stubborn woman and she decides to go to Africa with him. She insists on following him and we can read the dialogue between the two. Lord Greystoke, at her request, answers "You, my dear lady?

³¹ See Images, pic. 6.

Impossible! You would be in a wild country absolutely unattended. You could not even take your maid." But she vigorously replies, "Is courage only for men, then?" And so they leave together on a ship directed toward Africa. During the journey, however, a mutiny takes place and the Greystokes are set ashore. The movie shows their Robinson Crusoe existence, the birth of their child, their eventual death, and the adoption of Tarzan, the baby, by an ape, Kala, who had lost her own offspring. Since Africa is a primeval wilderness, classes are abolished and it comes as not too much of a surprise that "...Kala, the ape, nursed the son of an English nobleman."

Tarzan enjoys this primitive life and happiness, but one day he has a glimpse of his true nature: "Happy with Kerchak's tribe, Tarzan did not dream he was different from the apes. Until one day, in the mysterious depth of the pool he glimpsed a vision that set his little English brain to wondering." So Tarzan starts to slowly understand that he might be different from the apes that nurtured him. Soon after, he discovers the cabin his father had crafted for him and his mother in the jungle. There Tarzan notices a knife. This discovery is fundamental and even the text points it out: "The wonderful weapon which would transform him from a weakling to the master of the beasts."

In this movie there are many scenes that depict the village of the black natives, including long shots of mothers taking care of their children and stirring a huge bubbling pot. This image of the bubbling pot was very common in western legends because it was believed that these black populations were cannibals and they used to eat explorers and missionaries by slowly letting them cook in huge boiling pots. This reference to cannibalism was a very frequent occurrence in jungle movies depicting native villages. Both in the book and in the film African men are depicted as evil, cruel and superstitious.

A native kills Tarzan's ape mother Kala³². This ends up being a very poor decision because obviously, Tarzan takes revenge and strangles him.

After this act, the natives are now terrified by Tarzan's strength, and they credulously start to believe that he is endowed with supernatural power. As the intertitle explains: "In superstitious awe of the strange white being who killed their chief, the natives for days made offerings to appease his wrath."

Toward the end of the film, Jane is abducted by a giant black native. He takes the poor white woman into the forest; she struggles and shouts in the native's arms, but he screams at her in such an aggressive and frightful manner that she faints. Her reaction is culturally and socially determined: she cannot bear to look at her attacker and by refusing to glance at him she confirms her sexual purity; when she eventually does look at him, she cannot withstand the terror she feels and her brain has to shut itself off.

Tarzan immediately sets out to the rescue and when the two "giants" fight we in the audience cannot but hold our breaths in excitement and amazement at the great fight. Tarzan in the end triumphs over the native, carries Jane away, and also sets fire to the natives' village³³. It's very remarkable how he singlehandedly defeats a whole tribe. Once more, white brain wins over black muscles.

When Tarzan and Jane are finally alone, he feels a lascivious interest in her but fortunately she reasons with him by saying: "Tarzan is a man, and men do not force the love of women." This sentence probably refers back to the previous incident in which the black native had tried to take her away and clearly indicates the subhuman qualities of the black rapist.

³² See Images, pic. 7- 8- 9.

³³ See Images, pic from 10 to 14.

The movie ends with Tarzan taking back Jane to the cabin; he's about to leave, but she calls him back and they finally embrace.

Elmo Lincoln is remembered as the first and original Tarzan. But in the movie there are actually four more actors portraying the role: there is a baby who appears to be a couple of months old; a one year old; Gordon Griffith, a popular child actor of that period, who plays the ten year-old Tarzan; and Elmo Lincoln, obviously, plays the adult.

But there is another man playing Tarzan in a couple of scenes who is Stellan Windrow. Elmo Lincoln was one of the production's first choices but he wanted too much money to play the role. So as we can find out in Essoe, Stellan Windrow was signed for the part because he told the director he would play the same part for less money and so he was immediately taken (13). Stellan fit the part perfectly because he had muscles and was the right size and weight. He got the part and did a lot of the aerial work; he was in at least a week's worth of filming, mostly scenes shot in the trees, filmed in Louisiana – but he then left the part to join the army when World War I broke out.

So Elmo Lincoln was called back because the shooting of the film had already started and the production, needless to say, needed a Tarzan.

In Al Bohl's documentary it is revealed that it was D. W. Griffith who discovered Elmo Lincoln at the beginning of his career. In fact, Griffith cast him in his famous movie *Birth of a Nation* as a blacksmith. Here Lincoln played 16 different roles: he was in black face, he played the blacksmith, he played the role of a soldier on both the Confederate and the Union side... it's hard to actually say how many times he's on the screen because he was an extra much of the time.

The documentary points out that even in *Tarzan of the Apes* Lincoln couldn't resist

playing more than one character: he liked playing multiple roles and here he plays the part of a crewmember, too.

Enid Markey is the actress who plays Jane Porter³⁴; her shy portrayal of the character contrasts sharply with Lincoln's vitality. She pursued an acting career from a very young age. She attended a local acting school and she was a very popular actress when *Tarzan* came out, and was therefore a natural choice to play Jane. But when she saw that the Tarzan universe was becoming extremely popular and successful, she decided to quit her role because she didn't want to be remembered only as Jane. She played in the movie sequel *The Romance of Tarzan* and then she moved to New York City to pursue acting on Broadway. The documentary comments that she always felt that stage acting was real acting and did only sporadic film appearances afterwards.

3.3. On the Differences Between the Film and the Book

While filming *Tarzan of the Apes*, Essoe reports that Edgar Rice Burroughs was always "on hand to make sure that his novel wasn't distorted. Many fights with Parsons ensued over changes from his story, with Parsons always winning. The scenario, adapted from the book by Fred Miller and Lois Weber, was constantly being altered to facilitate shooting. Near the end, to Burroughs's horror, they shot with no written script, improvising as they went along" (14).

³⁴ See Images, pic from 15 to 20

Even if this first movie adaptation is considered the most faithful to the novel, we have to remember that, as always when adapting a book to a film, many changes are usually made. For example in the film Jane hasn't got the ability to defend herself from the lion's attack because the gun she holds in her hands is unloaded. So, in the film, circumstances force her to play the part of the lady in distress and her disadvantage justifies her need for a man's help.

Let's remember instead that in the book version she shoots the lioness but faints immediately after because violence is exclusively a male feature. A very curious accident that happened during the production of the movie occurred exactly during the filming of this specific scene in which a the lion crawls to the cabin where Jane and her maid Esmeralda are seeking refuge and tries to devour the two ladies. When filming, obviously they employed a real lion and Elmo Lincoln declares that what we spectators see is what really happened: he did kill the lion himself while filming.

As scripted, the actor had to stop the beast by grasping it by his mane and pulling it away from the cabin, but something went wrong and as Essoe reports:

“Although rather old and drugged the lion really turned on the actor. And Elmo really killed him. He said afterwards, “When the lion jumped me, I stabbed him and he died. After a stunned moment, we continued shooting and I stepped on him to beat my chest. As my foot pressed down on him, the remaining air in his lungs escaped with a loud whoosh. I was already shaken and you should have seen me jump!” (15).

Thinking the beast still alive, Elmo said that he set a new record for the broad jump

trying to get away. Obviously, one hundred years ago there weren't associations to fight for animal rights. Did Elmo Lincoln actually kill a lion on set? All his life he claimed he did; in all the interviews he made he repeated he had and he never wavered in telling this story. Even his daughter, Marcia, interviewed in Bohl's work, declared that he showed her the bayonet through which they sharpened the knife: apparently they had tried to use a knife but it was too dull so they got an old army bayonet and sharpened it up. Evidently Elmo saved this bayonet, but nobody knows where it is now because a lot of his personal possessions went lost when he died³⁵ (45:26).

Perhaps the most significant change the filmmakers made was creating from scratch the character of Binns played by George French. This character was intended to be a cohesive device to tie all three acts of the movie together: in the first act he takes the place that Black Michael had in the book and helps the Greystokes survive the mutiny and gets them out to land; he then becomes a captive of Arab slave traders. In the second act he manages to escape from the evil Arabs and is able to find the boy Tarzan and teaches him how to read and how to speak the English language³⁶.

The slave traders separate the two characters once more and Binns decides to go back to England to find the boy's relatives and summon a group of explorers to find him and take him back to his motherland. In the third act we encounter the group of English explorers who have come to Africa to rescue the ape-man and take him back to England. So we can easily say that the filmmakers used Binns to smooth over the most difficult and implausible passages of the book (such as Tarzan learning English all by himself).

Obviously in the book there are no evil Arab slave traders; their presence is simply

³⁵ See Images, pic 22.

³⁶ See Images, pic 23 and 24.

another device made to separate Binns from the boy and finally make him disappear from the action.

Another difference is that in the film young Tarzan is shot and injured by an Arab, while in the book he was badly bitten by a gorilla. In both cases, though, his ape mother Kala nurses him back to health.

Another remarkable difference is that in the novel, Tarzan is never described as swinging from trees and vines; there he would simply jump from branch to branch. But while filming in Louisiana the filmmakers saw the incredible scenario made of thick trees and the opportunity that the vines presented, so they decided to make this variation: they made Tarzan swing from tree to tree and this vision stuck in the collective imagination of the audience and future filmmakers; so we can say for sure that this film helped to create Tarzan's myth as we remember it even nowadays.

Other differences are that in this film Jane is English while in the book she was American; originally she had golden blond hair and not brown. In the book her father, Professor Porter, is an absent-minded explorer who went to Africa to mine for gold, while in the movie he is shown as a scientist who quenches his thirst for knowledge by searching for of the true Greystoke heir.

One major change is then the substitution of the huge bull ape Terkoz who abducts Jane, with another huge black native. The moviemakers made this change because it would have been ridiculous to make Tarzan fight with a man inside one of those ape costumes. So the production substituted the ape with a black man equal in size and height to Elmo Lincoln so that the fight resulted in a very exciting, breath-holding match between two equivalent opponents. To make the contest more ferocious and savage the filmmakers

hyperbolized the physical aspects of the black male body as the black African warrior is stripped to the waist to emphasize his great size, vitality, and strength.

Another unique trait of this film is that the director Scott Sidney decided to employ for the role of the natives, real black people and not actors in black face. The custom of the period was hiring white actors also to play the roles of African-Americans and paint their faces and hands black; it was extremely rare for black people to appear in movies even about them.

This film is so exceptional because it does not incorporate blackface at all and we only have real African-Americans playing the real African natives. As explained in Bohl's documentary

“Blackface began in the 1830s and 1840s when theatrical performers started to blacken their faces and borrow clothes from the African tradition to impersonate African-American people in a highly stereotypical way. This kind of performance became and remained extremely popular as one of the dominant forms of theatre all the way to the early part of the 20th century. So when films started it was almost natural that black face would also be transferred to films” (47:02).

This first adaptation introduces the character of Esmeralda, Jane's black maid, but she is not present in the future film adaptations. The only problem with her character is that we don't have a name for the actress who plays her³⁷; by the features of her face, she seems truly African-American, but we cannot be one hundred percent sure. Both in the

³⁷ There is no mention of her name in the film credit.

book and in the movie her character was widely employed for comic relief³⁸.

Another reason that black women were employed in the production of the movie is that there are a lot of scenes in which you see half-naked people that represent the native culture and tribe. Obviously, for a white woman in blackface it wouldn't have been respectable enough to show her naked body in a movie production. At that time black women had even less importance than black men but they were considered less threatening. Black women are here sexualized in a way that the filmmaker could not duplicate had he employed white women.

3.4. The Film's Reception and Reviews

As stated in *Tarzan, King of the Louisiana Jungle*, the original version of the movie lasted about two hours and ten minutes. The one we have now, as we know, is much shorter. This is because after the first few screenings the production decided to cut out most of the scenes set in England: people were fascinated and interested in the ones set in the jungle, a reality so far away from their own that the audience was eager for more. Nobody was very interested in having Victorian men and women depicted on the big screen because this was too close to their everyday reality. Consequently the version we can access now is a home version filmed in 16mm, mostly about the jungle life.

As Essoe reports "The eight-reeler directed by Scott Sidney opened at the Broadway Theatre in New York on January 27, 1918, and was a critical and financial smash" (15).

³⁸ See Images, pic 25.

The theatre was amazingly prepared: the lion Elmo killed ended up stuffed and displayed in the lobby; there were vines hanging down from the ceiling and other living animals taken from the zoo and kept in cages, all to recreate the jungle atmosphere of the movie. As Essoe reports “*Tarzan of the Apes* was one of the first half dozen silent pictures to gross over a million dollars, making Parsons a wealthy man” (15). The movie became therefore a huge phenomenon and extremely profitable: generally people had to pay only a nickel to see a movie, but for *Tarzan’s* big Broadway premier they were charged a dollar per head. It was playing in almost every theatre in every city for many weeks and it was accompanied by a huge publicity campaign: everybody had a chance to see it³⁹.

As Essoe reports, the movie had excellent reviews: “The *Chicago Journal* enthusiastically reported: “Wait till you see the apes and lions and elephants ‘acting’ in *Tarzan*.” Elisabeth Lang Foy of *Film Magazine* wrote: “most of us have read the story... that the filming on this most unusual tale was a worthy enterprise seems the unanimous verdict”. Critic Mirilo, *Theatre Magazine*, summed it up: “This picture’s fascination lies in its uniqueness” (15). The film critic for the *New York Times* praised the film encouraging moviegoers to see it. He added: “The picture as a whole, in addition to being interesting, also has a touch of educational value”.

Variety in its February 1918 issue comments: “the ten-reel screen feature produced by the National Film Corporation lacks such pep of the original [book].” It then goes on saying that’s “an unusual feature” and that “the occasional touches of the extraordinary are its greatest asset.” About the actors *Variety* declares that “Elmo Lincoln as *Tarzan* at 20 is all that could be asked for, while Gordon Griffith as the boy is wonderful”. The only

³⁹ See Images, pic. 26-27.

problem was the ape costumes because the close-ups “kill the illusion” (47).

The movie, however, was not immune to censorship and as we can find out from the *Exhibitors Herald* of April 20, 1918 in the “*Official Cut-Outs by the Chicago Board of Censors*” some scenes were taken out of the final production:

“Reel 1, the captain shooting man and his falling; two scenes of men with captain being shot and falling; striking man on head. Reel 3, scene of boy being frightened by lion and jumping up showing his sex; woman standing over kettle showing breasts. Reel 5, first two scenes of maid on man's lap in closet; three choking scenes. Reel 7, two close-ups of Negro leering at girl and four scenes where he carries girl off” (31).

The release of the film was so spectacular that in April, two months after its release, Bill Parsons began filming the sequel *The Romance of Tarzan*⁴⁰.

As Essoe testifies the sequel “was placed in general release in September 1918. Lincoln and Enid Markey continued in their roles under the direction of Wilfred Lucas” (20).

This second chapter of the story utilized the second part of the novel as an inspiration; Essoe goes on narrating the plot:

“Just before sailing for England, they were attacked by natives and Tarzan was believed to have been killed. The relatives returned to England and the Porters to their ranch near San Francisco. Very much alive and sporting a

⁴⁰ See Images, pic. 28-29.

tuxedo, Tarzan followed Jane to her home and rescued her from bandits⁴¹. Later she suspected him of taking up with another woman (Cleo Madison). Brokenhearted and disgusted with civilization, Tarzan returned to Africa. Realizing she was wrong, Jane set out after him” (20).

This second movie though was not very popular because there was almost nothing set in the jungle. It had 10 maybe 15 minutes of jungle scenes and then they moved to California. This proved boring for the audience who came to see the sequel to enjoy more action set in the wilderness. In fact, Essoe writes:

“A leading critic of the time, Louis Reeves Harrison, wrote in *Moving Picture World* “*Romance of Tarzan* disregarded all that went to make up logic, sustained interest, vitality of theme and definite purpose... its sole reason for existence seems as an illustration for the book”. “To take Tarzan from his jungle and make him the hero of a trashy story of the popular novel is a literary crime,” spoke the *New York Times* (and so reviewed half of all the future Tarzans); “as the uncivilized Ape-man, Elmo is splendid, but as Tarzan in a dress suit – that is different” (20).

As we can see from this kind of reviews, adaptations are successful if the core idea of the novel is perpetuated. This film moved too far away from the original source and presented an environment, the British Victorian society, that people were no longer interested in at the moment. This is maybe the main reason because the film

⁴¹ See Images, pic. 30

was a commercial flop, it didn't bring with it that wind of change that spectators were yearning in the early twentieth century, but just the usual outdated motifs of the previous century.

Unfortunately this movie is now considered lost, and we have to rely on the reviews and magazines of the time to try to grasp an idea of how it was.

The interesting part, as Bohl's documentary points out, though, is that we actually have some scenes from *The Romance of Tarzan*, which are now incorporated in the previous movie. In fact the scene where Jane and Tarzan are sitting on a log near a little pond is actually the last scene of the first *Tarzan* movie.

The copy of the film we can access now incorporates the beginning scenes from the sequel: from when Jane and Tarzan swing together on a vine to when they reach the cabin and Jane cries out Tarzan's name and they ultimately embrace⁴².

3.5. Darwinism and Self-Development

We can consider Tarzan as a fictional hero because he possesses all the qualities that a character requires to be considered as such: he has a specific costume and attire, he uses a knife that distinguishes him from the rest of the animal world, he is very skilled and agile, he has almost "super strength" and other special abilities that distinguish him from the rest of the other human characters. He is human but with animal skills and instincts.

⁴² See Images, pic 31 and 32

He also has his peculiar yell and he moves differently from the rest of the human beings because he swings on vines like the apes. Maybe the only too far-fetched characteristic that he displays is his ability to learn the English language from scratch. Apes do possess a sort of rudimentary language, it's true, but nothing comparable to human speech.

When the young boy Tarzan finds his parents' cabin he also discovers the books they had brought with them in order to teach him to read and speak. He then starts studying them and is able to grasp the essentials all by himself⁴³.

This is very interesting because in the book as well as in the movie, this ability to develop autonomously the features required to belong to the human world is Tarzan's best feature. When Burroughs was writing his book, the theories of Darwinism were spreading to the country and the idea that humans derive from animals, apes in particular, can be noted directly in this movie, too.

Darwin wrote his masterpiece *The Origin of Species* in 1859 and continued to write and defend his thesis until his death in 1882. Since Edgar Rice Burroughs was born in 1875, he surely must have been in high school when Darwinism was exciting scientists and people all around the world. As I was saying, in the movie *Tarzan of the Apes* there is a clear reference to Darwinism when the English settlers on the ship on their way to the African jungle see an ape and one of them makes a silly joke, saying that that ape might be one ancestors of another crewmember: "Seeing the monkey in his native haunts will be like gazing into your past". And then the other openly recognizes that the first one was talking about Darwin' theory and Darwinism: "You talk as if I were proof of Darwin's theory".

Darwin's theory spread so widely in the early 20th century because it contained the idea

⁴³ See Images, pic 21

that people can evolve and, thanks to this development, become superior to other groups of individuals. From here the idea that one race can dominate over the other started to sprout. Weak and inferior races are genetically doomed to extinction and only the “superior” race will perpetuate its existence. As is clearly explained in *Tarzan King of the Louisiana Jungle*, Tarzan gets easily identified with one of those individuals who will triumph easily over the other species: this is thanks to his noble origin as heir of the Greystoke household, which represents perfect Britishness, and also thanks to the fact that he possesses a flawless physicality and animal strength and cunning.

When Tarzan is alone with Jane in the jungle after having saved her, she teaches him an ethical code. Burroughs makes this possible because Tarzan has noble origins, and without even knowing it, he starts to overcome his animal instincts. Bohl’s documentary says that Tarzan can be considered a “feral child”: Dorothy Howell states that “feral children are individuals ordinarily who are somehow separated from their communities and manage to survive in the wild and they have been nurtured and raised by animals. They are found fairly young, [...] they are filthy and usually beyond the capacity to learn the capacity of using human language; they associate very closely to the animals that brought them up. They can’t make it in civilization (Bohl 36:30).

As we know, Burroughs had had a very good high school education and he had studied Greek and Latin mythology and, as we well know, there are many stories of “feral children” in those myths of Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. The children in these stories almost always benefit from their savage upbringing and they mix their human characteristics with the animal ones. So very probably, Burroughs was inspired by those stories when coming up with the idea of Tarzan.

In these early years of the twentieth century, when *Tarzan of the Apes* came out, Darwin's theories were getting more and more popular and they were starting to subvert the order of things and in particular the Creationism theory. This was becoming a serious threat to the religious teaching that God created man and, in trying to prevent the total subversion of the religious explanation of man's origin, in 1925 the Tennessee passed the Butler Act, which stated "That it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals⁴⁴".

The town of Dayton, Tennessee saw this act as a great possibility to get huge media coverage and publicity by triggering a public debate. John T. Scopes had been teaching biology at the Rhea County high school using the textbook *Civic Biology* by G. W. Hunter⁴⁵ which discussed Darwin's theory of evolution. At the time, Hunter's book was one of the leading sources of information about Darwinism and became a prominent text in its field. Hunter defined evolution as a steady development of the species from something primitive to an advanced life form. One of the main critiques of the textbook was that the author clearly defined humans as creatures evolving from lower classes of animals.

By making use of such a textbook, Scopes was clearly violating the Butler Act and there were all the premises to take the issue to court in May 1925. This trial became so famous

⁴⁴ See the complete document of the Butler Act in the Appendix, doc. 1.

⁴⁵ G. W. Hunter; *A civic biology: presented in problems*. 1914. New York, American Book Company.

that it was even transformed into a play and into a Hollywood movie⁴⁶. The trial was announced as a fight to the death between evolution and religion, and, in the end, it represented on a national scale the triumph of science over religion. Journalists were everywhere, people were jamming the courthouse and the trial was even broadcast on radio and loudspeakers; reports of the events were even wired overseas.

The trial, though, did not erase the Butler Act, which remained on the books until 1967, and the jury convicted Scopes in July and fined him \$100. However the event was regarded and is still considered nowadays a triumph of progressive development perpetuated by men of science and culture who hoped to free the minds of citizens from the shackles of conservative religious dogmatism. Scientific men had to be in control of social progress and advancement. Many saw the trial as a victory for modernism over traditionalism, and, by extension, a rejection of “primitivism” and the aggressive masculinity associated with it. Men were now trying to understand how the world worked rather than reflexively opposing the winds of change that dominated the modern world.

The main concern deriving from the discussion of Darwin’s theories on human origins was that religious belief was threatened and men were reduced from divine creations capable of transcending earthly limits thanks to God’s will, to mere products created by nature and deriving from lesser species of animals.

Maybe the main theory that sprouted from Darwin’s research was the notion of Social Darwinism that became surprisingly widespread in the early twentieth century. It stated that said that only the strongest and most adaptable humans would get the chance to

⁴⁶ The trial was made into the movie *Inherit the Wind* by scriptwriters Jerome Lawrence and Robert Edwin Lee in 1955. New York: Random House.

excel in society. It's clear that Burroughs too applied this theory to his writing: in fact Tarzan is always capable of excelling in every situation and against all odds because of his noble origins and superior blood deriving from his parents, and his supernatural skills that he developed living in the jungle among wild and ferocious beasts.

Furthermore, it was believed that Darwin had to be right because he had found the only possible explanation to justify man's physical appearance and his mental development. This movement of thought was widespread among American intellectuals. Essentially, it was the equivalent of the theory of survival of the fittest in nature: only the best individuals deserved to thrive⁴⁷.

Unfortunately, this kind of thought led to a bitter consequence: racism based on biological characteristics. This idea pervaded popular talk about scientific topics during the late 1910s and early 1920s. In fact, Elazar Barkan confirmed that in this period "Race was perceived to be a biological category, a natural phenomenon unaffected by social forces. Even for self-proclaimed egalitarians, the inferiority of races was no more to be contested than the law of gravity" (2-3). In Burroughs books and in the films drawn from them, racism is clearly shown while depicting the native Africans as culturally inferior and very superstitious. The author greatly contributed to the diffusion of these kinds of thoughts among Americans and the idea that the black race is inferior to the white one pervades his works.

In order to preserve this "racial order" it was essential to intervene in the evolutionary system and find further theories that could confirm the fact that the white race was the

⁴⁷ See Tarzan who perfectly embodies the theory of "survival of the fittest". He is perfect under any aspect and thanks to this he is able to thrive greatly in nature and adapt so as to become the king of the jungle.

best evolved one and the best suited to lead the others. Eugenics, which was broadly considered an objective science, confirmed the hereditary character of civilization and helped in the process. So positivist scientists started to claim that social evolution paralleled and was dependent on biological evolution.

The main idea that was now perpetuated was actually not that all men were ultimately created equal, but that race was a fundamental trait in the social order.

In the 1920s the term “Darwinism” had become so prominent in the lives of the American people that it was used in general context to mean the process of evolution itself and only scientists referred to it in professional discourse as a mark of an evolution driven primarily through a natural selection. Furthermore, nature was the mentor for social order and development and, as Osborn proclaimed, “The moral principle inherent in evolution is that nothing can be gained in the world without effort. The ethical teaching inherent in evolution is that the best only has the right to survive whereas the spiritual principle in evolution is the evidence of beauty, order and of design”(14).

Also thanks to eugenics, it was paramount that race implied heredity and with heredity came all the good traits and features, which served to govern righteously the country in a morally, socially and intellectually superior way. From Darwin’s theories it derived that, over the course of many years, there was a significant increase of intelligence and this growth has occurred more in some races rather than others; the dominant race is consequently the one who has achieved the greatest level of intelligence during the development of the species. This top race had the moral duty to enlighten and draw to further development those races that had not yet reached a comparable level of intelligence, and in doing so it had the task to shape the future of the entire species. In

order to achieve this biological progress, the most advanced race had the task to “improve” the subordinate ones in order to attain a perfect final development for the entire population.

Starting from the 1930s, evolution has been considered a genetic phenomenon; the human traits and features vary in men from different parts of the world and it was understood that genes play the most important role in that visible variation of physical traits.

During this period the various races were compared and the white one always emerged as the preferable one. Some intellectuals used these arguments to prove the utter superiority of whites in a very racist way. Among them was Edwin G. Conklin in his book *Direction of Human Evolution* which explained that “probably the negroid races more closely resemble the original [less evolved] stock than the white or yellow races.”(34) and therefore concluded that “every consideration should lead those who believe in the superiority of the white race to strive to preserve its purity and to establish and maintain the segregation of the races.” (53) He argued that the superior race should perpetuate any effort to keep and preserve the purity of the race over time through techniques like restricting immigration, keeping the races segregated and avoiding mixed marriages. Since they could not kill all the “defective” races, intellectuals like Conklin strongly believed in selective breeding; according to him “race preservation and evolution [was] the supreme good” (115). He even claimed that “the development of moral and social ideas of equal justice for all people will prevent the extermination of the inferior races” (80). He strenuously worked to reverse the principle that all men were created equal favoring instead an “enlightened” view of scientific inequality.

In many respects, not only did the early Tarzan films confirm these “scientific” theories in a popular medium, they also reinforced white audiences’ racist views that had developed independently of science. In fact, the films’ popularity can in part be attributed to the extent to which they reinforced popular prejudices about race – prejudices now justified by “science”.

3.6. Gender and Masculinity

The Scopes trial took place in a nation that was undergoing rapid commercial expansion, economic and cultural experimentation, and a great fracture in the social order and hierarchy. In the 1920s the population was struggling to come to terms with the ideas introduced during the Progressive era and in particular with the national initiatives that had emerged from it. Boys and girls in public schools learnt that in order for the world to be a civilized one, it required sturdy masculine virtue to guarantee the solidity of government and guide the national progress. Conservative Christian belief has showed that modern examples of masculinity continued to compete with traditional masculine virtue as the fundamental element that shapes the figure of the modern man in society.

Woodrow Wilson’s administration was a very controversial one and it had to face social issues such as prohibition and the woman’s suffrage movement. This was an uncertain period because people showed both enthusiasm for and curiosity about a new kind of world and, at the same time, a certain hesitation to abandon those traditional moral

values that were changing in a cosmopolitan environment increasingly present in growing urban areas.

The Scopes trial in fact represented a fight between a model of modern manhood, based on scientific discoveries and understanding of the human performance, and a more conventional and outdated example of masculinity that put a strong emphasis on authority in the social sphere and which was based on ignorance and religious fanaticism.

Burroughs's Tarzan perfectly reflects this changing idea of masculinity: the protagonist is a natural man who lives in close contact with the animals and the fauna and is perfectly at ease in this new wild environment. He does not incarnate the ideal Victorian man but on the contrary he represents the Darwinian man who evolved and learnt how to survive in the jungle only thanks to his wit and his skills. The fact that he lives far from civilized society makes him unspoilt by social mores and those Victorian rules that were preventing men to experience a full masculinity.

Precisely, with the changing of the century, one of the main features that needed redefinition was the idea of masculinity. Now a contest arose between the theories of biological evolution - formulated mainly by Darwin - and the word of the Holy Scriptures, which instead postulated the creationist theory in which God created man in his own image and likeness. Because of this rising uncertainty about which theory was actually the right one, the image of masculinity too needed adjustment and redefinition in accord with the changing of times. Middle class people, in particular, supported the need for men to be righteous and virtuous examples to society; they coined the term "masculine virtue" to identify the main feature a man should possess, such as unwavering Christian morality, self-discipline and great physical prowess. These

features came from the idea of the civilized Christian man belonging to the Victorian Era. The followers of a scientific idea of masculinity too agreed that a man should possess ethical behavior and at the same time male physicality.

Unfortunately, in the late 1910s the rise of the Ku Klux Klan symbolized the will, among white middle class people, to preserve, celebrate and emphasize those old and outdated elements connected with man's proper behavior in public and to accentuate the female's domestic role and the children's responsibility to respect and accept parental authority. This Klan, in particular, celebrated the dominance of white people's values and civilization against a primitive and obsolete idea of black primitive people who threatened white progress and white values in general. One of the main claims supporters of this cult made was that black people lacked any sort of sexual restraint and self control: they were compared to black beasts that could unleash their instincts upon poor white women at any moment. Accordingly, blacks posed a huge threat to white females who could easily get sexually assaulted by them. This idea is clearly present in the first filmic adaptation of *Tarzan of the Apes*, when Jane gets abducted by that giant black man who threatens to force himself on her. As we see, the idea that black men were sexually very dangerous individuals who would have liked very much to rape any white woman is perpetuated in the movie too. Tarzan, the culturally and morally superior white man, saves the lady in distress from the terrible threat and, contrary to the black native, our hero does not force himself upon Jane because he belongs to an inherently superior race; even if he still doesn't know it, his noble blood is stronger than his animal instinct and leads him to act in a virtuous way.

This idea that black man posed an imminent danger and continuous threat to white

women was one of the principal beliefs associated with the idea of the two different races.

As I have been explaining, the idea that black men were unable to control their sexual instincts and could harm white women at any moment was widespread throughout the country at the turn of the century. Many white Americans took quite seriously the “black rapist myth” until (and even beyond) the first decades of the twentieth century. The only way white men had to prevent the rape of their women by these “sexual beasts” was to lynch them, and so many white considered lynching a righteous way to defend white female purity. Residents and state officials would therefore preserve those laws that favored racial segregation and they would take progressive measures to maintain the social order by imposing sexual restrictions and reminding the black community of its obligation behave respectably. With the rise of the Ku Klux Klan, a strong Christian belief spread through the nation and the idea that religious men had the duty to shape society and the form of modern America became established.

One obstacle that their doctrine may have encountered was Darwin’s theory of human evolution, so, since the 1920s religious people tried to ban the teaching Darwinian ideas in schools and public arenas, finally succeeding for example, in Tennessee in 1925 with the passage of the Butler Act.

Films and popular novels, like *Tarzan of the Apes*, which came out in the first decades of the new century helped to emphasize the conviction that the new modern world should be led by strong white men, while other races required the sustenance and leadership of the white race to prosper and thrive.

A hallmark of masculine manners among the white middle class was the ability to

always control and suppress exaggerated and wild emotions in favour of an enlightened rationality and control; they had to clearly distinguish themselves from people like the blacks who, according to general opinion, were exclusively driven by instinct and emotion. Tarzan represents instead the perfect combination of animal instinct and dominant civilized inheritance, which allows him to always behave as a gentleman without becoming “feminized” or over-civilized.

3.7 The Rejuvenation Theory

In order to perfectly grasp the reality in which first the book *Tarzan of the Apes* and then the film came out we have to address a very popular movement of thought that was widely spread at the beginning of the new century, and which for sure influenced Burroughs writing and his stories.

In the early twentieth century many believed that specific male and female characteristics were biologically determined and even originated from specific organs. Men’s intellectual qualities and women’s domestic abilities derived from sex hormones produced by sex glands. Given these assumptions, it is not surprising that scientists were beginning to issues concerning sexuality in the 1920s. Scientists such as Fred Koch of the University of Chicago started to conduct experiments on animals trying to demonstrate the effects of hormones on the development of gender specific characteristics.

As Laura Davidow Hirshbein points out in her article⁴⁸ “the theory of spermatoc economy [was] the prevailing theory of male sexuality of the nineteenth century. This theory suggested that men had only a finite amount of energy available in their bodies, and that excessive sex or masturbation would deplete that energy [...] resulting in increased strength and vigor for those who abstained from ejaculation” (278). People were still convinced that the more semen a man held in his body, the more physical, psychological and sexual energy would increase. During this period numerous quasi-scientific “experts” calling themselves “the rejuvenators” claimed they had discovered the source of male prowess in the sex glands and helped aging men to rejuvenate by injecting those hormones produced by the sex glands into their bodies. They attempted to raise the amount of semen in a man’s body through, for example, the Voronoff operation, which intended to increase the size of the testicles by transplanting testes from a young specimen of chimpanzee into an older man⁴⁹. Basically scientists wanted to intensify the production of semen, and so the essence of masculinity, by enhancing the capacities of the sex glands; these procedures would have supposedly rejuvenated youth in older subjects and virility in aging men.

Rejuvenation through surgical methods was a topic that drew the attention of Americans throughout the whole country during the early twentieth century because it promised to revitalize and improve men’s own masculinity⁵⁰. As I have been explaining the idea of masculinity was undergoing some serious changes in meaning and people now started

⁴⁸ “The Glandular Solution: Sex, Masculinity, and Aging in the 1920s.” *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 9.3 (2000): 277–304.

⁴⁹ Enthusiasts who successfully underwent the operation strongly believed that in order to obtain rejuvenation, new glandular material had to be added to their own, an assumption we now know to be incorrect.

⁵⁰ Not very surprisingly, the rejuvenators’ fame drastically fell by the 1930s when obviously their promises were never satisfied and kept.

to explore the issue of masculinity through the issue of sex and sex glands.

The most famous and popular rejuvenators, who asserted they could restore older men's vitality and sexual prowess by different methods, were Voronoff, Steinach and Benjamin⁵¹.

Steinach's procedure, contrary to the Voronoff one, promised to improve men's sex glands without the need of a transplant from other animals. The basic idea in the 1920s was that men were aging because their sex glands were malfunctioning; so a surgical operation could restore the power of their sex glands and make them young again while restoring their spirit. This possibility of reinvigorating aging men helped define the concept of manhood against the idea of decadence and decline linked with old age: older men were losing their masculinity and getting de-masculinized, but this process could be stopped or reversed.

Rejuvenators made clear that the main threat that old age brought with it was the risk of losing mental faculties and physical ability, which would all lead to mental infirmity and physical incapacity. As the aging process progressed, the body and the mind of men would acquire more and more defects that would keep them from continuing to live their personal and professional lives. As Hirshbein concludes, "The rejuvenators emphasized the catastrophic consequences of advancing age to illustrate the desperate need for surgical rejuvenation" (285). Another very interesting fact is that the rejuvenators did not see old age as something inescapable and unavoidable but as only an unfavorable option and so they worked hard to convince Americans that the aging process could be stopped.

Rejuvenators mostly emphasized these kind of operations for men because they helped

⁵¹ John R. Brinkley was a rejuvenator who proposed to transplant goat testicles into an aging man, but his theory did not have many followers or supporters.

redefine a lost masculinity and concept of manhood, which was connected with physical prowess and sexual energy. In the early twentieth century many middle class men, like Burroughs himself before achieving fame through *Tarzan*, worked for increasingly large corporations that de-personalized people and their identity as workers. They were looking for a way to achieve true masculinity since their job no longer defined their manhood. They tried to compensate for this lack of eminence in the workplace by emphasizing their ability in business and making money and they strongly believed they could achieve greater efficiency through good health and vital activity. They wanted to personally improve their condition and many of them wanted to reincarnate that image of youthful vitality represented by public figures such as Theodore Roosevelt.

In this period when the idea of masculinity and male character was undergoing a transformation and was fluctuating so greatly in the minds of people, rejuvenators offered a specific physical location for the male essence: the sex glands⁵². It must have been a malfunctioning of these glands that caused the loss of masculinity and resulted in de-masculinization. According to this theory, a man who was deficient or had grown weak in his sex glands was doomed to lack all the physical, mental, and even moral qualities that genuine manhood required.

Puberty was the moment when sex glands developed and started to function, so they had to look closely at this process in order to find the cure for future possible malfunctioning of the glands. During puberty boys underwent a process that transformed them into men so that true masculinity could finally be achieved. So rejuvenators concluded that if sex glands were responsible for turning a boy into a man, to turn a man into an old man they must have been faulty or inactive.

⁵² Researchers of the period were looking into various disciplines and, above all, biology to find the actual source of masculine and feminine character.

Old age deprived man of all the good qualities manhood had previously brought with it; in fact they now suffered from decline in muscle power, in memory and mental faculties and in sexual capacity most of all. After the surgical procedure men reported that they were more active, had a more dynamic mind and a more vivid imagination, and were more productive in the workplace. In fact, older men not yet retired needed to be competitive in their job to keep up with the young workers.

It was believed that intellectuals and professional men, since they had more reasons than others to stay vigorous, were the best subjects to undergo the Steinach operation and they were the ones who showed the best results. They believed they still had much to give to society and could still serve mankind; they trusted they could still be socially useful and the whole society considered them “important” men worthy of rejuvenation.

One of the first signs that showed the approach of old age was the lack of or decrease in sexual desire. One of the main goals of these procedures was to reinforce and stimulate that desire. As Hirshbein confirms “the rejuvenators promised to restore manhood itself to aging men who feared that they had lost the ability to function within the modern world” (293).

On the other hand rejuvenators tried to approach and study also the female glands and the feminine character, but with women things got much harder. In fact women who had reached menopause were not necessarily old and, apart from having ceased the reproduction activity, they did not show evident or problematic signs of aging. Obviously rejuvenators could not cure menopause and the lack of reproductive possibility it brought about. Neither could they restore fertility. As a result, they explored male sexuality more extensively because they could do very little to change female sexuality

and could not show concrete results of their efforts to do so.

Rejuvenators, however, did not have only supporters: many critics opposed their theories and what they were doing to people because they were essentially trying to subvert the natural order of things.

Americans had always had a certain prudery with regard to discussion of sexuality and sexual issues, and not everyone liked what the rejuvenators were preaching. They were trying to alter the social order and create something unnatural: an old man that could act as a young one, which could possibly deprive growing boys of their place in society. Hirshbein confirms “Rejuvenation threatened to undo the American social order by disrupting the relationship between younger and older men” (300). The commentators against such practices reminded the public that vitality and sexual appetites were not elements belonging to old age and they had to remain features fitting to adulthood and not elderly people.

By the late 1930s scientists and intellectuals who had endorsed the rejuvenation practices had almost completely disappeared and such practices fell out of favor. Physicians such as Morris Fishbein had insistently pointed out the myths and delusions of such practices and people had stopped believing in their effectiveness and efficiency. Ultimately they insisted that old men should not desire such rejuvenation practices because they should not need sex anymore at their age.

Shifting now the attention from elderly people to young boys, Boy Scouting was one of the major activities that taught growing adolescents how to achieve perfect masculinity and manhood. Edgar Rice Burroughs himself organized Tarzan’s themed camp activities

to entertain young American boys who wanted to experience a little taste of the jungle life through Boy Scouting. He firstly created the Tribe of Tarzan and subsequently in 1939 he founded the Tarzan Clans of America; they were basically an opportunity to promote once more his books and stories but they also aimed to teach young boys how to become great Boy Scouts. By preserving nature and the natural resources, boys were taught that boyhood was their most precious resource and that they had to use it serving the nation.

Boy Scouting's success demonstrated the need to go back to the primitive, to virile activity through outdoor adventure and competition. An enormous passion and interest in sports supplanted the Victorian precepts of modesty and self-control as the path to follow to achieve a perfect American masculinity.

David Macleod, the leading authority regarding the history of early Boy Scouting in America, affirmed that putting their sons into the scouts helped middle class parents to control and keep disciplined their offspring and it prolonged the dependence of boys on parents. Scouting channeled young boys' efforts and energies into sports, woodcraft, and other activities that helped them get into contact with their primitive nature. Such occupations stimulated the characters of the young adolescents and inspired a feeling of nostalgia among their parents for those values of rural boyhood. Boy Scouting taught boys and young men to preserve self-confidence, independence, and competition in a world that was getting more and more modernized. The huge success Boy Scouting enjoyed in the early twentieth century probably stemmed from a desire to combine Victorian principles of self-control and controlled virility with efficiency, with a love of nature and a desire to preserve it. Supporters of scouting believed that boys had to become useful and efficient adults to benefit the society they lived in. They needed to

engage in scientific analysis of the environment and learn how to administer natural resources and civic management.

As I was explaining earlier on, the concept of preserving youth and boyhood was rooted in the Victorian idea that males had to keep from losing bodily fluids and powers by not masturbating or tiring themselves physically or psychologically. Victorian men had to preserve their bodies and practice moderation in order to achieve a position in a society that was becoming increasingly industrial, expansive, and capitalistic. Only now, in the twentieth century, people started criticizing this Victorian ideal of manhood because it represented a too passive, too feminine, and over-civilized idea of man in society. As I have explained, *Tarzan of the Apes* describes and critiques harshly this image of the overly-civilized Victorian man not able to survive in the natural environment and not even able to grasp the reality of the situation around him. In the book Professor Porter and his friend perfectly embody the critique that Burroughs made to accuse this kind of outdated and useless image of manhood. It is not surprising that both such “scientific” theories and Tarzan were popular at the same time because they both addressed anxieties about masculinity – defining it clearly, preserving it, and defending it from the encroachments of modern, industrialized society. Tarzan films, in short, served the same purpose as the rejuvenators. One proposed to protect masculinity through misconceived “surgeries” and procedures, the other by allowing male readers to live vicariously through a “perfect” male character. If nothing else, identifying with Tarzan was safer than undergoing these surgeries.

Scouts were employed in various kinds of natural activities out in the open, such as cutting down trees to construct campsites and log cabins. Such activities offered them a

feeling of the life lived by the early pioneers in an all-male background which was carefully secluded from America's overly civilized cities and mass culture.

Boy Scout administrators argued that by accessing real nature and real forests, boys were offered the fundamental opportunity to absorb the masculine values of pioneering and conservation. For example, during World War I the Boy Scouts planted thousands of black walnut trees in order to commemorate the fallen soldiers overseas.

As I have cited before, Theodore Roosevelt incarnated the image of perfect masculinity and manhood and he was the main example Scouts looked to in order to reach those well-balanced masculine qualities and civic leadership, which were fundamental in environmental activism. Roosevelt's idea of manhood was having a sturdy, rough and resourceful character: the perfect combination of virile independence and self-discipline, public governance and progressive efficiency.

Women and girls were considered not well suited to be Scouts because they were stereotyped as too sentimental towards nature to preserve it appropriately. Boy Scouts leaders excluded girls from membership because they regarded them as too self-involved and too much interested in superficial matters such as fashion, for example, to conserve resources; while boys and male participants were interested in much more important matters like conservation and protecting endangered native birds, for example.

Tarzan was so popular because his portrayal of a "perfect" man triumphing over nature and all challenges to the superiority of the well-bred, white male resonated deeply with readers who were concerned about how modernity was diminishing masculinity –

specifically masculinity grounded in white male supremacy. Tarzan glorified a form of white masculinity that was immune to the challenges of industrialization, feminization, and racial mixing. In a way, reading a Tarzan novel or watching a Tarzan film provided a means of escaping all of the concerns about race and masculinity so prominent during this period. Since popular culture is often about escapism, we analyze its significance by inquiring what exactly were audiences at the time seeking to escape from. Given all that people were worrying about, it seems natural that they – and especially white men – would find following the exploits of Tarzan an attractive way to forget their troubles and identify with a character that showed them how white men could still retain their position at the top of the social hierarchy.

Chapter Four

Subsequent Adaptations in Silent Cinema and Beyond

4.1. Silent cinema

Having seen the enormous fame and popularity the character of Tarzan had achieved thanks to the first two silent films of 1918, producers and directors decided to continue the series of films based on the character and a total of two more silent films (*The Revenge of Tarzan* and *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*) and four serials (*The Son of Tarzan*, *Adventures of Tarzan*, *Tarzan the Mighty* and *Tarzan and the Tiger*) were realized during the 1920s.

Edgar Rice Burroughs was determined not to let Bill Parsons exploit his fictional hero again, and he decided to sell *The Return of Tarzan's* rights to the Great Western Producing Company of the three Weiss brothers' Numa Pictures Corporation⁵³. Numa Pictures tried to contact and employ Elmo Lincoln in this production once again, but when asked, he refused saying that he had a contract with Universal to make many more movies.

This initial complication did not deter the Weiss brothers, and while in New York one of them noticed fireman Joseph C. Pohler who wished to become an actor. He was 28 and physically looked like a giant because he was six feet two and a half inches tall, he weighted 215 pounds, and had a thirty-eight-inch waist (Essoe, 23). So he was engaged

⁵³ Numa Pictures was an off-shot of Weiss's Artclass Pictures Corporation but it had a very poor reputation for making low end and cheap products.

to play the role of Tarzan and the producers changed his star name to Gene Pollar and paid him only \$100 per week. Evelyn Fariss was supposed to play the role of Jane, but refused when she heard the production would be using real lions and so she was replaced by Karla Schramm.

As I have said, shooting on location was still unthinkable and in fact this movie too was shot in America, in particular in New York, Florida, and Balboa, California, and, to recreate the atmosphere of the African jungle, thousands of banana trees were transported to the set.

The filmmakers understood by now that people wanted to see more of the African scenes and wild animals so they employed seven live lions, Charlie the elephant, and Joe Martin the ape⁵⁴. As might have been expected, the movie was very loosely inspired by Burroughs's stories and the Weiss brothers compromised the result to save on costs. The movie was retitled *The Revenge of Tarzan* just two weeks before its opening on July 20, 1920. This choice was taken in order to make the production seem stronger and more dramatic. However reviews weren't kind to the film. Typical was one that commented, "fairly good picture but cannot compare with the first two Tarzans. Pollar is not an actor" (Essoe, 25). Clearly, audiences still saw Elmo Lincoln as the "real" Tarzan, and still preferred the earlier adaptation. As Essoe recounts, one exhibitor in Nebraska confirmed to the *Exhibitors' Herald*: "Would have been a wonderful production if Elmo Lincoln had starred and used the pep he did in *Tarzan of the Apes*" (25). Pollar in the end retired from acting and resumed working as a fireman, abandoning once and for all his cinematic career.

⁵⁴ See Images, pic. 33.

After Bill Parsons' death on September 28, 1919, National Film Corporation renegotiated with Edgar Rice Burroughs the rights for Tarzan resulting in an agreement for the screen rights of *The Son of Tarzan*. The production had to cast yet another actor to play the role of Tarzan because neither Lincoln nor Pollar were available. They managed to keep from the previous film *The Revenge of Tarzan* Karla Schramm as Jane and subsequently cast forty-one year old Tennessee athlete P. Dempsey Tabler as Tarzan. Once again the physical appearance of this man played a huge part in the decision taken by the production to employ him to play the part because he was six feet tall and weighted 190 pounds (Essoe, 30).

This plot though, focused on the son of Tarzan, John or otherwise known as Korak which meant "killer" in ape language, and his growth from boyhood to adulthood. The production started on May 15, 1920 and the filmmakers decided to serialize the product dividing it into fifteen chapters each two reels long, which had to be ready to be released in the fall. To enable the audience to follow the plot even if they hadn't seen the previous movies, a prologue with the summary of the previous adventures of Tarzan on the big screen was arranged to be projected at the beginning of *The Son of Tarzan*. The serial enjoyed huge success and popularity; people awaited every chapter with enthusiasm and followed the production closely. Unfortunately this series is remembered for a tragic accident that happened while filming; while shooting the very last chapter an elephant which was supposed to lower the actor playing Korak gently to the ground, instead slammed him down so violently that the actor later died from the injuries caused by the accident and a double had to be used for the final scenes. News of the misfortune spread quickly, and the public was now even more eager to see the sequence leading up to this tragic occurrence. Another particular element of this production is that it is one of the

few films to portray in the first chapter the actual marriage between Tarzan and Jane⁵⁵.

Since serials about Tarzan were enjoying such a huge success, the Great Western Producing Company managed to convince Elmo Lincoln to reprise his role of Tarzan in another serial, once again divided in fifteen chapters, called *Adventures of Tarzan*⁵⁶. To support him, there was the tiny Louise Lorraine, who only turned 16 while filming, to play the part of Jane. The production started on January 1, 1921 and scenes were shot in the studio and in Arizona, where the parts set in the desert were filmed.

Elmo Lincoln once more found himself interpreting people's favorite hero and portraying a vast number of adventures: from escaping from an active volcano cracking the Earth open, to escaping lions leaping on him from both sides, to falling into a deep pit or risking to become a sacrificial victim of a sun-worshipping tribe, or a deadly struggle to survive a sinking boat. Each episode always ended on a sensational cliffhanger, leaving the audience always asking for more. Advertisements referred to the series as "the Tarzan of Tarzans" and the director Robert F. Hill declared

"Suspense, strength in episode climaxes, variance of locale, melodramatic situations and novelty of story are prime requisites for a successful serial. *Adventures of Tarzan* possesses all of these in abundance. I have directed Lincoln in many serials during the past five years, but never seen him equal his performance as the Apeman of the jungles. He risked death many times in scenes with the various wild animals" (Essoe, 40).

⁵⁵ The only other films that depicted the marriage between the two main protagonists are *The Golden Lion* (1927) and *Tarzan the Mighty* (1928).

⁵⁶ See Images, pic. 34.

Ultimately, thanks to Helm's excellent direction and thanks also to Lincoln's fame as the original Tarzan, this serial enjoyed a terrific success. The *Exhibitors Herald* confirmed Elmo's triumph as the protagonist: "Elmo Lincoln as Tarzan is too well known to theatre-goers to need further introduction. His red-blooded fights, staged in each episode, will evoke applause from the serial audience" (Essoe, 43). Essoe confirms *Adventures'* success by testifying that "within three months after the completion date, *Adventures* was completely sold out in the United States, Canada, Australia, Central and Western Europe, Asia, South America, Central America, Mexico, the Indies, Pacific islands and the Philippines" (43).

An interesting detail is that, despite the fact that during the first two movies Lincoln showed his bare chest and had only his loins covered by lion skin, now censorship, which was getting more and more severe, specifically demanded that he also cover his upper body. So he was forced to wear animal skin across his chest to cover it up at least partially⁵⁷. Surprisingly enough, the censors allowed female nudity but Lincoln's bare chest was somehow considered too scandalous for the audience to see.

For the first time, moreover, halfway through the shooting of the serial, Lincoln had to start using a double to perform the dangerous and acrobatic scenes: his insurance forced this decision because, seeing the stunts he had to perform they threatened to withdraw his insurance policy if he did not use a double. Elmo had always been very proud and eager to perform stunts, but after this decision on the part of the insurance company, he was forced to stop the activity. So in his place Frank Merrill, who would play the role of Tarzan himself only eight years later, started to perform as Lincoln's double in the most hazardous scenes.

⁵⁷ See Images, pic 35.

Adventures of Tarzan marks the last time Elmo Lincoln impersonated our beloved hero: during the filming of the serial an old friend of his, Gordon Standing, lost his life after being involved in an accident: he had been attacked and consequently killed by a lion on set. Elmo was profoundly shaken by the episode and realized that the accident might have been easily avoided had the production been more careful while filming with wild animals. After the serial, he grew more and more disillusioned and disenchanted with filmmaking and, in fact, as a result he played only small parts in the future. He is remembered and always will be for his portrayal of the Apeman and will forever stay in our hearts for his interpretation of Tarzan. He followed the progression of the Tarzan movies from a certain distance and never appreciated what they did to his character when sound cinema came in. "The Apeman's character is degenerated" he declared, "They want to talk too much now" (Essoe, 44).

Thanks to the huge success of this serial, *Adventures of Tarzan* was also adapted for the theatre and it inspired a Broadway production at the Broadhurst Theatre in New York in 1921. Surprisingly enough, despite the huge cinematic success, the show was a failure and producers understood that it was better to continue portraying the Apeman on the big screen. To complete the picture I want to mention that with the advent of sound cinema, the Weiss brothers recut and re-released *Adventures of Tarzan* in 1928 in a shorter version but adding sound effects; it was a massive success once more.

As I have been explaining the success of adaptations is also based upon the media through which the initial message is conveyed: filmic adaptations were perfect because they were able to capture the essence of the characters and transport it on the big screen. People could watch and admire exotic places and their favorite heroes in action. It's not surprising that when sound pictures came out the Weiss brothers understood

that they could exploit this new feature in cinema to achieve even more popularity and success and so it was when they released again the *Adventures* with sound effects. On the contrary instead, the theatre resulted not being a suitable way to convey Tarzan's message: the magic that cinema conveyed couldn't be reproduced on the stage and in fact the Broadway adaptation of Tarzan resulted as a failure.

After *Adventures of Tarzan*, no other Tarzan movies were produced for a good five years; one of the longest timespans ever to occur between the production of two films with him as a main character. Burroughs was eager to see his fictional hero once more on the big screen and managed to sell the rights for *Tarzan and the Golden Lion* in 1926 to Edwin C. King from Film Booking Offices⁵⁸ (Essoe, 49). The production was assigned to R-C pictures and they started to shoot in August in the West San Fernando Valley (South California), with James H. Pierce as Tarzan⁵⁹. It was Edgar Rice Burroughs himself who discovered the actor at one of the parties at his ranch; Essoe confirms that the author told him he was exactly what he had in mind and how he had pictured the character (49). I want to point out that Pierce was six-foot-four tall and weighted 225 pounds and his nickname was "Big Jim".

Tarzan and the Golden Lion was actually the last Tarzan silent movie and it was one of the few productions that adhered very closely to the Tarzan story from which it was taken. Once more censorship forced the actor to wear loincloth all the way across his bare chest to cover it up partially, but the costume designers fooled the censors by shortening his loin coverings.

⁵⁸ The Film Booking Offices (FBO) would then become Radio Studios (RKO). The president of the company was none other than Joseph P. Kennedy, the father of the Kennedy brothers and the late president.

⁵⁹ See Images, pic 36.

Edgar Rice Burroughs was, probably for the first time, exceptionally satisfied and pleased by this latter production and he wrote a letter to a friend in Philadelphia in 1926 saying “I suggest you not miss the new Tarzan picture, *Tarzan and the Golden Lion*, just being completed by FBO here. I have seen some of the work during the making and also some of the rushes, and am convinced that it is going to be the greatest Tarzan picture ever made. We have found a man who really is Tarzan, and whom I believe will be raised to the heights of stardom” (Essoe, 52). Unfortunately Burroughs was wrong and, even if the public quite liked the film, the critics tore it apart mercilessly: *Photoplay Magazine* declared: “This wins the hand-embroidered toothpick as being the worst picture of the month. The former Tarzans were enjoyable. But this is filled with such improbabilities that it becomes ridiculous”; the *Motion Picture Exhibitor* dismissed it as “overdone” and “a weakly exciting addition to the series”, while the *Film Daily* described it as “Pretty far-fetched” (Essoe, 55). The Tarzan actor himself, Pierce, was extremely dissatisfied: he had to perform very dangerous and painful stunts under “poor direction, terrible story treatment and putrid acting” as he defined the experience (Essoe, 6). He then retired from the acting scene and returned to his previous job as a coach of high school teams. But this was not the end of Pierce’s association with Edgar Rice Burroughs: in fact the actor had fallen in love with Burroughs’ daughter, Joan, and they married in 1928. After some years, in 1932, Burroughs himself asked his daughter and son-in-law to lend their voices to the characters of Jane and Tarzan because he had written a series of scripts for the “Tarzan radio act”, a radio show which recounted new adventures of the Apeman and his mate. The couple agreed gladly and a total of 364 fifteen-minute episodes were recorded and, by 1934, they had sold all the way through Western Europe, the USA, and South America.

Universal, mindful of the great success Elmo Lincoln's Tarzan had had, now wanted to make another serial named *Tarzan the Mighty*, which was drawing inspiration from Burroughs's book *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*. Universal called Frank Merrill, the very stuntman who had doubled Lincoln in 1921 and offered him the part. The production made a significant change because Jane was not present in the reel anymore and her character was replaced by the one of Mary Trevor played by Natalie Kingston, who ended up as Tarzan's mate anyway. The serial was an enormous triumph and, even though there were only twelve scheduled episodes in the production, three more were added in the end to exploit the great success it was having. All this was accomplished mainly thanks to the amazing Merrill who had been performing daredevil and breathtaking stunts, which kept the pace of the series moving very fast.

Before starting his acting career Merrill was a multiple award winning and acknowledged gymnast; his specialties included high bars, rope climbing, and Roman rings... he was simply the perfect man to play the Apeman crawling up trees and he was the one who perfected the technique of swinging from vines. His statuesque physique was one of his best features and he even got the second position at a contest held in England titled "World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" (Essoe, 61). This element too contributed to boost people's interest in the serial once more, which was in fact another big hit. His costume too was, unfortunately, covering his naked chest almost completely and he wore a headband to recall the one Elmo Lincoln's had worn⁶⁰.

Obviously Universal didn't let this opportunity for making even more money pass by and the studio soon signed Merrill to play in the sequel *Tarzan the Tiger* adapted from the

⁶⁰ See Images, pic 37.

story *Tarzan and the Jewels of Opar*. Natalie Kingston kept her part as the main female lead but this time she played Jane. The curious fact about this serial is that it was released between October 1929 and February 1930, making it a very singular movie because it was produced both in silent and semi-sound versions. This sound version, as Essoe confirms, consisted of a very rudimentary “musical score, sound effects and a few roughly lip-synchronized lines on a record” (62). In this first “talkie” Tarzan, the Apeman’s mythical yell was introduced for the first time and reproduced; from then on, this legendary feature was once and for all inseparably linked to the character. Unfortunately, Merrill’s voice was at that time regarded as unsuitable for the talkies and his film career soon finished.

4.2. The 1930s and Weissmuller’s “speaking” Tarzan

The first sound film, released in October 1927, featured Al Jolson singing and speaking on the big screen in *The Jazz Singer*. This event marked the end of silent cinema and the beginning of sound pictures.

By 1930 silent movies were long forgotten and the old Hollywood system crashed: silent actors were completely replaced with stars who had a fine and adequate voice and actors and actresses who had been playing in theatres were now favored. The public was extremely fascinated by talking pictures and cinema had for sure a new boost to revive the medium’s success.

Now, the time had come to transport Tarzan into this new genre in order to exploit his

brand new yell, which was perfectly suited for the sound era. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios was determined to make it happen. Their search for the appropriate speaking Tarzan was long and very complicated; at first the studio considered the football star Herman Brix⁶¹ to play the part. The contract was almost signed when Brix had an unfortunate incident while filming another picture for Paramount in which he broke his shoulder. Afraid that he would not recover in time, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer pulled back from the deal and started looking for another more viable candidate⁶².

Shortly after, the screenwriter of the production Cyril Hume was by mere chance staying at the same hotel where Johnny Weissmuller, the Olympic swimming champion, was staying and he noticed him while swimming in the hotel pool. Hume was incredibly struck by the athlete's physique and sturdiness and decided to suggest him to Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer as a suitable candidate to play the role of Tarzan in their upcoming film. During the job interview with the director and producer of the film, Johnny was asked to undress down to his underwear. His physique was a masterpiece and they immediately offered him the part without asking him to speak a word or to do a screen test. After a number of very intricate bureaucratic issues, he was finally free to work for the studio and impersonate the Apeman. Weissmuller was six-foot-three and weighed 190 pounds; he had had an extremely successful swimming career where he had won five Olympic gold medals and broken a number of international records. In 1950 he was praised as the greatest swimmer of the previous half-century. As I had mentioned in the previous chapter, Weissmuller's Tarzan is the one that audiences remember most

⁶¹ Herman Brix was a perfect choice because he was six-foot-three inches tall and weighed 212 pounds; he used to play football at Washington University and had won the shot-put championship during the Olympic Games held in Amsterdam in 1928.

⁶² Actually Brix managed to play the character of Tarzan in *The New Adventures of Tarzan* of 1934 which was one of the first movies to be produced outside American borders: it was in fact shot in Guatemala.

fondly. While playing Tarzan, Weissmuller had by now become an exception in costume wearing: he had only his loins covered by loincloth and unlike almost all of his predecessors, he was not forced to cover up his bare chest. Moreover, he was one of the few actors who was perfectly at ease and very self-confident when appearing half-naked. He really embodied the natural man in his primeval environment. The fact that Tarzan was depicted half naked did not put off audiences since his nakedness does not at all sexualize him: his nudity can be considered “innocent” and non-threatening because he does not threaten our middle-class conventions and we regard him as a natural man outside civilization; he is sensual but not “sexy” because he is part of the natural world.

He was accompanied by a twenty-year-old Jane played by Maureen O’Sullivan whose femininity perfectly contrasted with Weissmuller’s perfect masculinity. This movie too bore little resemblance to Burroughs’s book⁶³: it totally lacked Tarzan’s origin story, neglecting to explain how he got to Africa and what happened to him when he was little. Instead, it only focuses on his romance with the pretty English lady. Two elements that distinguish this movie in particular from the rest are the fact that Jane’s father dies and she, after falling in love with Tarzan, openly decides to remain in the jungle with him⁶⁴. But maybe the most significant change that Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer introduced was that the film portrayed a Tarzan who was not as well-behaved and well-educated as he had been in previous versions. Weissmuller’s Tarzan was little more than a savage beast, he did not have the capacity to speak or understand English, he did not possess sophistication and fine manners and was portrayed instead as a crude man of the jungle.

⁶³ This movie too was filmed in the Hollywood studios in a time span of five months.

⁶⁴ I want to point out that the production did not employ real African elephants but the Indian ones and attached huge plastic pieces to their ears to make them look African.

This vision of Tarzan was one that would become most dominant through the years.

As Essoe confirms “When *Tarzan the Apeman* was unleashed on the public in March of 1932, it was an immediate sensation. [...] One of the top ten box office hits of the year.” (73).

The critics acclaimed it and Francis Birrell from London’s *The New Statesman and Nation* wrote: “the eye is continually delighted, the nerves unceasingly harnessed [...] Tarzan has a hundred percent entertainment value, and gains enormously over such pictures as *Trader Horn* by never pretending to provide accurate information. It is just a terrific piece of gusto in the romantic manner” (Essoe, 73). Thornton Delehanty from the *New York Evening Post* also praised the picture:

“However credible or interesting Tarzan may be on the printed page, I doubt very much if he emerges in such splendor as he does in the person of Johnny Weissmuller, who makes him bow to the movie-going public [...] There is no doubt that he possesses all the attributes, both physical and mental, for the complete realization of this son-of-the-jungle role. With his flowing hair, his magnificently proportioned body, his catlike walk, and his virtuosity in the water, you could hardly ask for anything more in the way of perfection.”(Essoe, 73).

As we can easily understand from these reviews, Weissmuller was loved both by the critics and by the public with an unprecedented intensity and fervor. When the film came out in 1932 he became the biggest Hollywood star of the moment and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer immediately started to make plans for future sequels of the picture. In

1934, in fact, *Tarzan and his Mate*, came out in theatres and obviously was another amazing hit: *Time Magazine* defined it “a sequel which is better than its original... It is impossible to deny that the production is brilliant, the showmanship superb and the general effectiveness enormously impressive” (Essoe, 84). Censorship was sharper in this later production forcing the deletion of a scene in which Tarzan and Jane dive in a lake and when she resurfaces a breast is visible. The scene was considered too erotic by the Hays censorship office and was consequently cut. Moreover Weissmuller was forced to wear a much longer loincloth than he used to in the previous picture, once more to please the censors.

Seeing the huge success Weissmuller was enjoying, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer produced a new Tarzan film, *Tarzan Escapes*, in 1936, whose cost equaled that of the previous two movies put together. It's important to underline that this third movie helped to lower the Tarzan stories to child's standard: many scenes which at first were considered too savage were taken out of the final cut making the film more suitable for a younger audience.

Johnny Weissmuller starred once more in the role of Tarzan in *Tarzan Finds a Son*, which came out in 1939 and in *Tarzan's Secret Treasure* of 1941. In these two movies the character of Boy, Tarzan and Jane's adopted son, was added to form a happy family and this decision once more lowered the target audience to younger children. Interestingly, this occurs at the very time that men are going off to war and American families are being split apart. Families now felt the need to stay closer and wished to spend more time together. The cinema was a perfect occasion, now that it had become family friendly, to spend their leisure time together and the idea of the perfect family was now

incarnated by Tarzan, Jane and Boy also on the big screen.

Tarzan's New York Adventure marks the last Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer production in the series and it's particularly original because Tarzan and Jane fly to New York to rescue Boy who was kidnapped; for the first time Weissmuller's Tarzan had to struggle against clothes and gadgets as the radio. Obviously this picture wasn't taken seriously at all and it was by now considered a children's product. When the contract with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer expired, Weissmuller passed to Sol Lesser's RKO, while Maureen O'Sullivan refused to continue playing the part as Jane. For RKO Weissmuller starred in *Tarzan Triumphs* and *Tarzan's Desert Mystery*, both released in 1943 and dealing both with Nazism and the issues of the Second World War; *Tarzan and the Amazons* (1945), *Tarzan and the Leopard Woman* (1946), *Tarzan and the Huntress* (1947) and *Tarzan and the Mermaids* (1948) which was his last Tarzan appearance.

Weissmuller played Tarzan for sixteen years in a total of a dozen films and finally gave up the part in 1948. He had for sure become the most famous and most popular actor ever to play Tarzan but he did not give up the jungle: he continued acting for Columbia Studios in the part of *Jungle Jim*, which was based on Alex Raymond's comic strip from 1948 to 1956. He appeared in a total of twenty films as this character and it became almost as successful and popular as Tarzan; this time though he was fully clothed.

All these Tarzan adaptations serve to prove the success that the character has achieved during the century. As I mentioned in chapter one, the multitude of adaptations serve to prove the success and validity of the starting basic idea. Tarzan is timeless and his themes and motifs continued to engage audiences all throughout the twentieth century up until our present day. His never-ending popularity comes from the fact that he

embodied the ideal of perfect masculinity to which man aspired and he represented the fearless white man always triumphing over the difficulties life presented him with. People have been looking up at him as a role model and an inspiration, he promised an escape from the dullness of their life and the challenges of the modern world. Audiences could, for the duration of the film, forget about their troubles and identify themselves with a character that demonstrated how the white man could still achieve maximum success and hold his position at the top of the social hierarchy. Tarzan gave confidence back to people, that same confidence that was being taken away by industrialization, modernization and the two World Wars; through the many adaptations this idea continued to survive and people continued to follow and love the adventures of the character with ever renewed interest.

Conclusion

Movies can be amazing tools that, like time capsules, allow us to understand how people saw the world a hundred years ago, just as when *Tarzan of the Apes* was first released. While examining this film we feel like we are invited to envision and experience the life and ideas of those who lived in the early twentieth century after the Great War.

This movie, in particular, proved to be such a huge success because it managed to capture people's fantasy and wish for escapism and it managed to depict a wild and savage environment that fascinated the spectators and captured their attention leaving them eager for more.

The cinematic adaptation of *Tarzan of the Apes* is a successful cultural product that has now been around for a century. There must be something in the plot and theme that strikes a chord in the hearts of Americans and people in general: he is the king of the jungle, he's able to dominate over ferocious animals, over savages and over untamed nature itself. He is a remarkable artistic creation whose adventures and behavior often reflect the preoccupations and prejudices of the audiences that read about him or watch him on the screen. In this first Tarzan cinematic adaptation we can find the American general ideas about civilization, primitivism, man's relationship with nature, and racism that were widespread at the moment. Tarzan has become so popular because he represents the perfect man triumphing over the challenges nature puts in front of him. This resonated deeply with early twentieth century readers and watchers who were profoundly concerned about how modernity was threatening the idea of perfect masculinity based on white male supremacy. Specifically, this Tarzan's film glorified that precise form of white masculinity that was immune to the challenges of ever-growing industrialization, feminization and racial mixing.

Experiencing this first Tarzan film allowed people to escape all the concerns regarding race and masculinity that were so overwhelming in the period it came out. People were really worrying about all these social issues and they loved Tarzan because it represented a form of escapism from their anxieties, especially for white males: they could identify with the character and feel way more confident about themselves and their problems. Ultimately, Tarzan showed his fans how white man could still retain their dominant position at the top of the social hierarchy.

Adaptations based on Burroughs's novels are still carried out by directors and producers; currently the very last movie about the character is *The Legend of Tarzan* by David Yates, which came out only two years ago in 2016. But maybe the film that my generation most dearly remembers is the Disney movie of 1999. In respect to the first Tarzan's film, this cartoon took out the most brutish parts, such as Tarzan's ruthless childhood and Kala's death, to produce a family friendly product. Furthermore it took out all the racial implications and the controversy that the racism present in the original unleashed: the African natives are simply omitted in the animated feature. What remains is the original lure and fascination that proved to be Tarzan's key to success: the love and longing for exotic climes and mysterious settings. Exoticism is actually one of the strongest elements present in the film. Obviously, since it is a movie made primarily for children, it must end with a happy ending: unlike in the book, Jane stays in the jungle with Tarzan so he does not have to follow her all the way to America.

We can firmly claim that Tarzan was the precursor of modern superheroes like Batman and Superman: he possesses almost super-human strength and wit and he always has to save his lady in distress. He ultimately is Jane's protector and savior; therefore

traditional attitudes about gender persist, even if the racism that originally characterized the Tarzan stories has been played down.

Adaptations are successful if they perpetuate the core ideas contained in the original source, therefore I conclude that this film became so popular because, despite the fact that Tarzan is just a creature of imagination, he is very close to our human nature and he embodies our never-ending struggle between reason and instinct, our search to find a true identity; his nature reflects ours and his story awakens our deepest desires to escape any form of restriction and formality that modern society imposes on us and our wish to achieve a balance between the primitivism of nature and the sophistication of civilization. The final message the film carries is that life in the wild, simple and primitive environment is the synonym for purity and fulfillment because ultimately man finds no satisfaction in a degenerating world of wealth.

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Appendix

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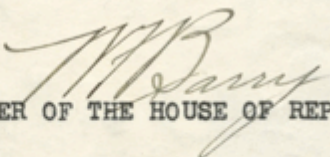
An Act prohibiting the teaching of the Evolution Theory in all the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of Tennessee, which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the State, and to provide penalties for the violations thereof.

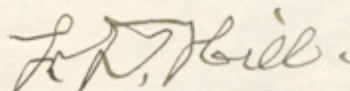
SECTION 1. BE IT ENACTED BY THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE STATE OF TENNESSEE, That it shall be unlawful for any teacher in any of the Universities, normals and all other public schools of the State which are supported in whole or in part by the public school funds of the state, to teach any theory that denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals.

SECTION 2. BE IT FURTHER ENACTED, That any teacher found guilty of the violation of this Act, shall be guilty of a misdemeanor

and upon conviction, shall be fined not less than One Hundred (\$100.00) Dollars nor more than Five Hundred (\$500.00) Dollars for each offense.

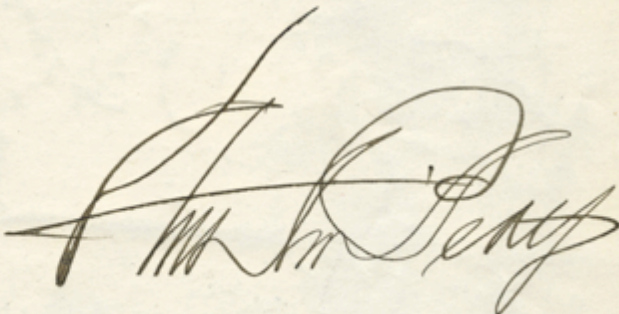
SECTION 3. BE IT FURTHER ENACTED,
That this Act take effect from and after its passage the public welfare requiring it.
Passed March 13, 1925.


SPEAKER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES


SPEAKER OF THE SENATE

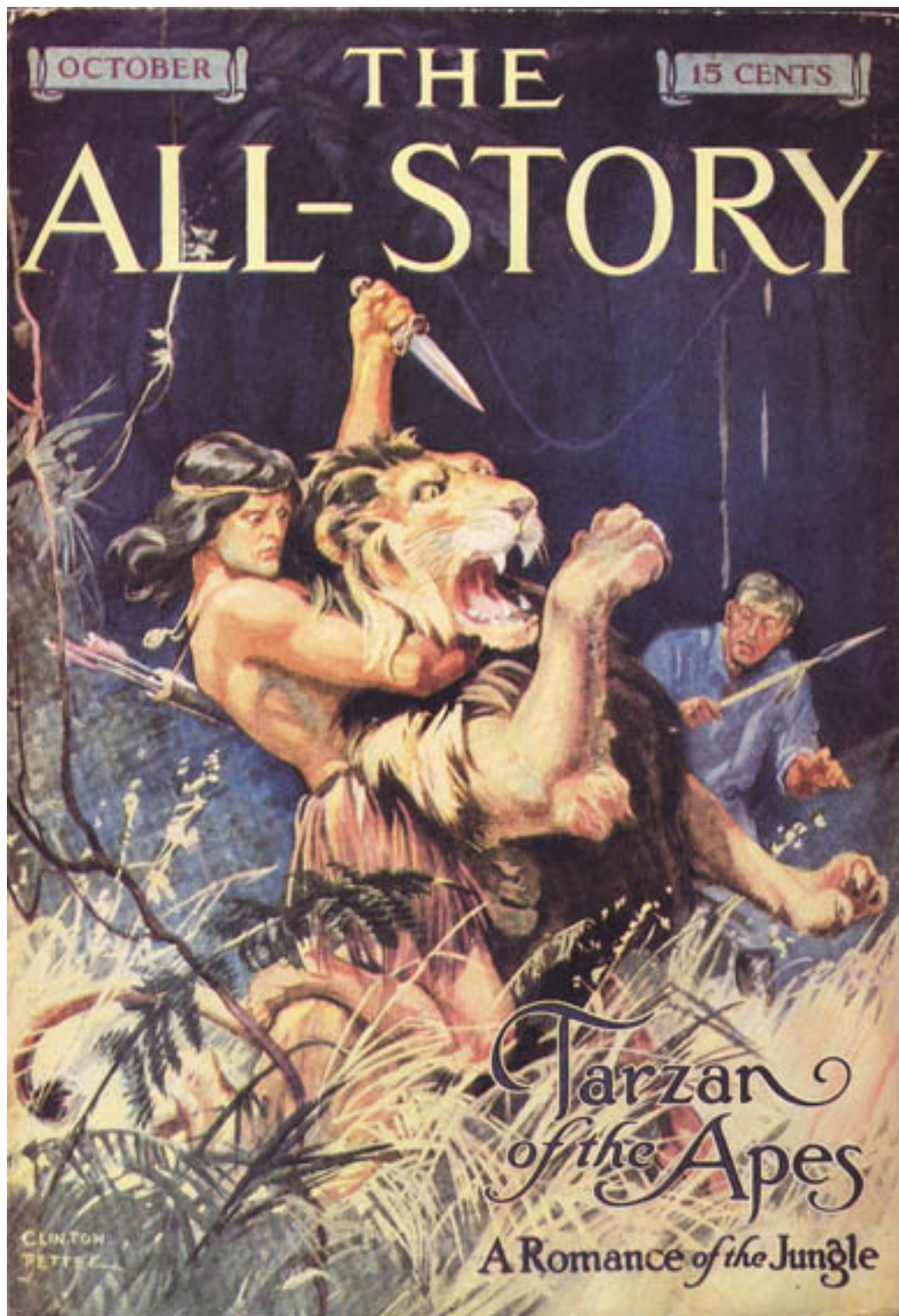
APPROVED:

March
21st
1925

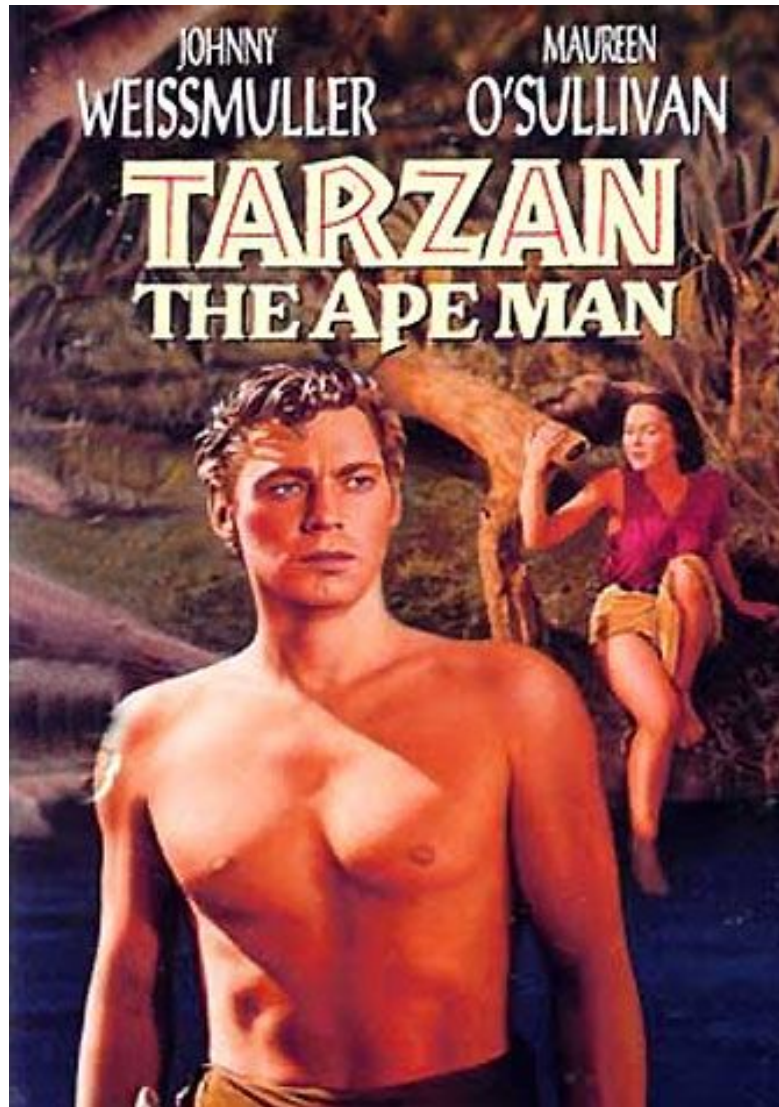


GOVERNOR

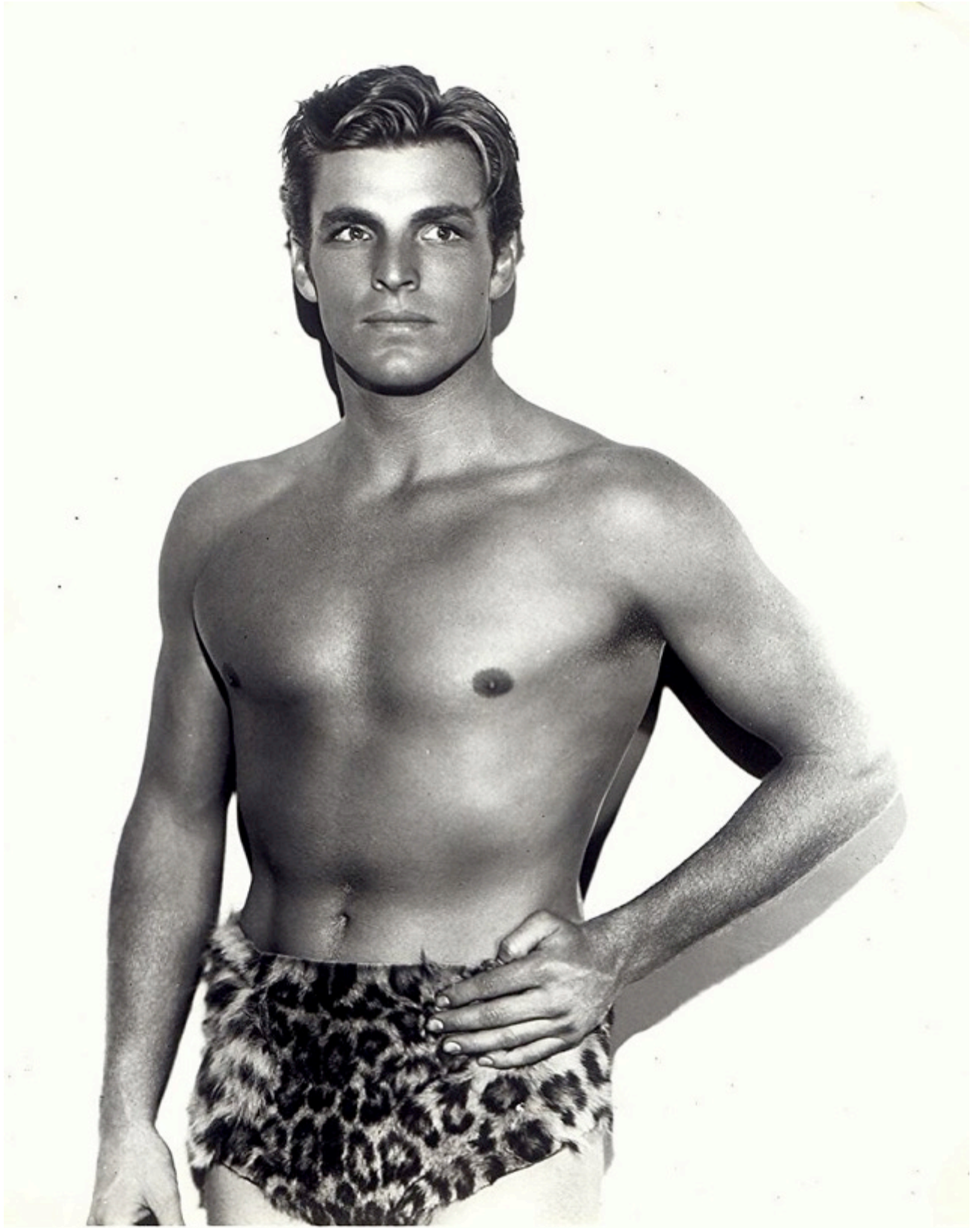
Images



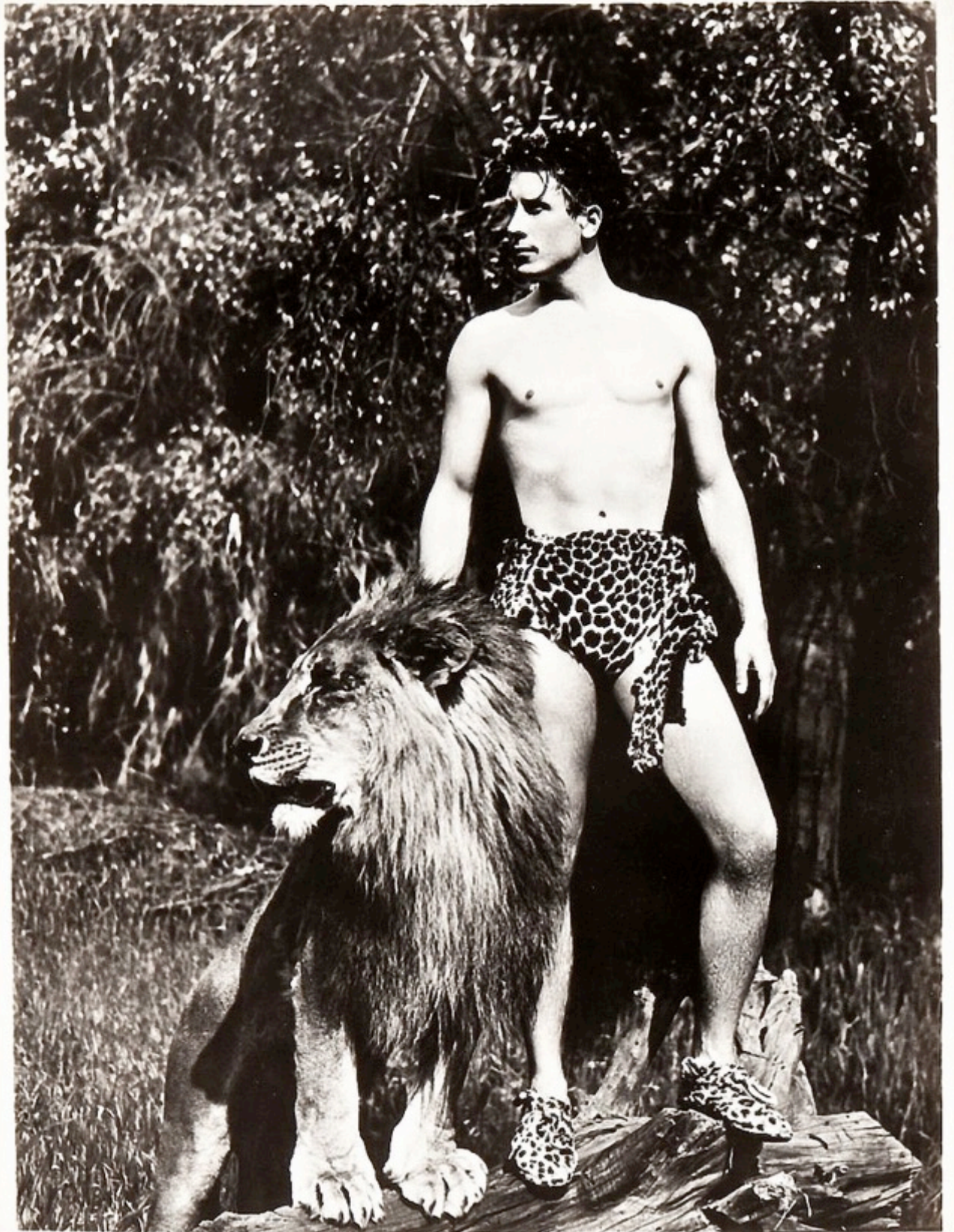
1. Tarzan appears for the first time on the cover of "All-Story" magazine in October 1912 in an illustration by Clinton Pettee



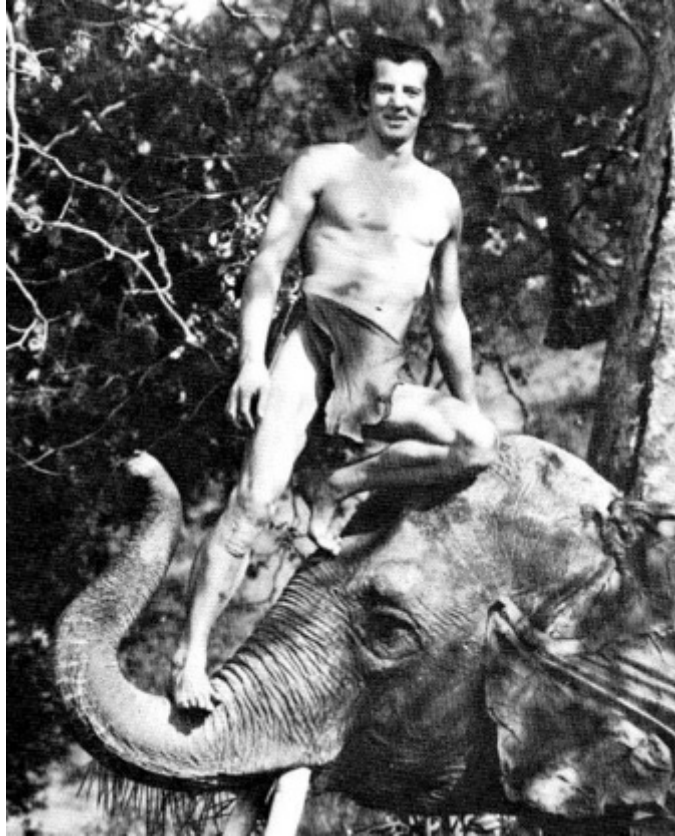
2. *Tarzan the Ape Man* with Johnny Weissmuller and Maureen O'Sullivan (1932) by Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer



3. Buster Crabbe in *Tarzan the Fearless* (1933)



4. Glenn Morris as Tarzan



5. Herman Brix in *The New Adventures of Tarzan* (1935)



6. Elmo Lincoln playing Tarzan in *Tarzan of the Apes* (1918)



7. The boy Tarzan finds the knife in his parents' cabin.



8. The huge bubbling pot where cannibal natives supposedly cooked white explorers.



9. Tarzan's ape mother, Kala, is killed by an African native.



10. Natives are convinced that he who killed their chief is a God and they start making offerings to him.



11. Jane gets abducted by a giant black native.



12. The black man aggressively screams at Jane who faints soon after.



13. Tarzan struggles with the black native.



14. Tarzan sets fire to the natives' village.



15. Tarzan as a baby a couple of months old.



16. Tarzan as a toddler.



17. Gordon Griffith plays the ten-year-old Tarzan.



18. Stellan Windrow swinging from trees in *Tarzan of the Apes*.



19. Elmo Lincoln plays the part of a crewmember during the mutiny.



20. Enid Markey portrays Jane.



21. Young Tarzan starts to learn the English language all by himself.



22. Elmo Lincoln kills a lion while filming *Tarzan of the Apes*.



23. George French plays the character of Binns in *Tarzan of the Apes*.



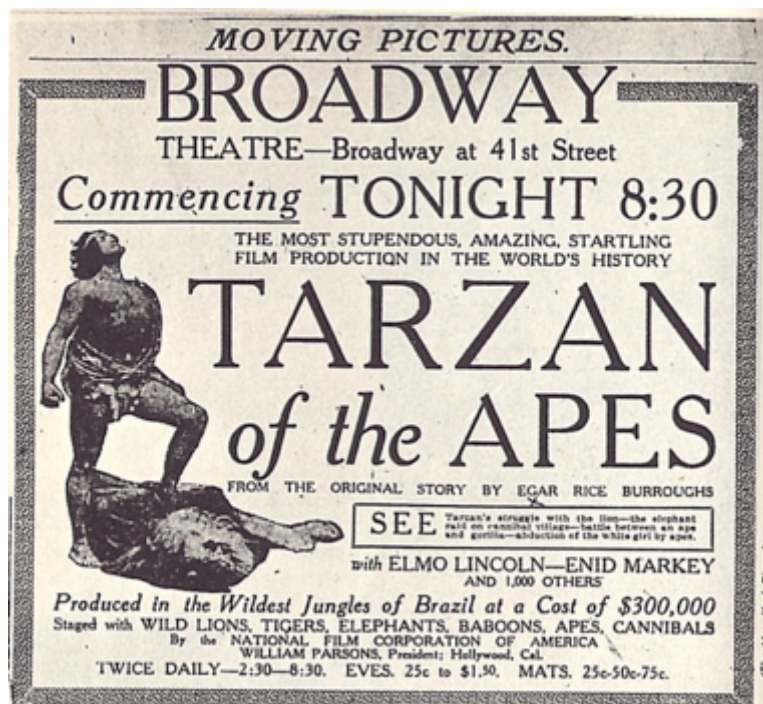
24. Binns teaches Tarzan how to read and how to speak the English language.



25. Esmeralda, Jane's black maid.



26. Advertisement for *Tarzan of the Apes*.



27. Advertisement for *Tarzan of the Apes*.



28. Advertisement for the sequel *The Romance of Tarzan*.



29. Advertisement for the sequel *The Romance of Tarzan*.



30. Elmo Lincoln playing Tarzan wearing a tuxedo in the sequel *Romance of Tarzan*.



31. The last scene of *Tarzan of the Apes*.



32. The first scene of the sequel *Romance of Tarzan*.



33. Gene Pollar playing Tarzan and Joe Martin the ape.

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"THE TARZAN OF TARZANS"

34. Elmo Lincoln coming back for his role of Tarzan in the serial *Adventures of Tarzan*.



35. Elmo Lincoln and Louise Lorraine in *Adventures of Tarzan* (1921)



36. James H. Pierce as Tarzan.



37. Frank Merrill in *Tarzan the Mighty* (1928)