



Film clip by Deborah Natsios 2008

The Geographer in Jules Romain's'
Donogoo Tonka or The Miracles of Science: A Cinematographic Tale
by Deborah Natsios

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We do not make landfall in Jules Romain's "undiscoverable" South American city of Donogoo Tonka before a flyover of infrastructures of *fin-de-siècle* empire -- from a fateful bridge in Paris' port of la Villette to the crossroads at the Rue de Buci, to the Rue de l'Estrapade. To the Châtillon plateau. To a farm in Normandy. A market town of the Vendée. A city in the Midi. The ports of Marseille; Immacolatella Vecchia in Naples; Lisbon's Caes do Sodré; Porto's Praça Dom-Pedro. London's Commercial Road. The diamond seller's district in Amsterdam. An automat in San Francisco. The Tapajoz region of Brazil.

Placenames emplot a modernist geography within Jules Romain's *conte cinématographique* of 1920, wryly rendered *esquisses* that send up the apparatuses and spatial methodologies of French empire, an indie director's-cut that spoofs the sacred tropes of imperial geography: the expedition *to*; the manufacture *of*; a heretofore-only-imagined city of Donogoo Tonka -- whose mock-indigenous, cartoonishly assonant name suggests a colonial *mise-en-scène* less heroic than say, Babar the Elephant's Celesteville of 1931, which Gwendolyn Wright has cited for its exemplary pachydermic social order (Wright 1991, 3).

Tracking shots, montages, dissolves, simultaneous projections, jump cuts, randomness and chance structure Romain's cinematographic cartography as a portolan chart of spiralling depth-of-field and satiric glee that metes out special ridicule for the institutional cultures of *les sciences coloniales* -- notably that imperial state science, geography -- and geography's collusion with the emergent *cinéma colonial*. A fundamentally geographic cinema, the *cinéma civilisatrice* of paternalistic *outré-mer* travelogues produced by the brothers Lumière and the brothers Pathé, by the orientalisme of Feyder's *L'Atlantide* of 1921 -- is a compliant tool of colonial pacification, which as Richard Abel notes "established the colonial landscape as special site for resolution of specifically French crises" (Abel 1984, 155). David Slavin reminds us that in French colonial film "broad challenges to the colonial order were extremely rare" (Slavin 2001, 1).

When a full-scale urban maquette of the imagined settlement of Donogoo Tonka -- constructed for a propaganda film on the Châtillon backlot -- later provides the post-production backdrop for a real expeditionary party's sendoff, we confront issues of identity, authenticity and power raised during the shooting of *L'Atlantide* -- notable for having been filmed entirely onsite in Algeria -- but not before it was argued that the royal hunting forest at Fontainebleau would provide a suitable enough representation of the North African landscapes of *la France extérieure*.

Romain projects the failures, aspirations and streets of an ambivalent *métropole* onto the inflexible periphery of *outré-mer*, the blank film screen of the French imperial map. Constructions that underwrite the geography of *l'imaginaire colonial* are exposed as farce in Donogoo, a pasquinade of

l'idée coloniale that linked French national identity to territorial conquest, settler nationalism and putatively scientific urban planning: the *aménagement* of streets, plazas, monuments, signage and teardown structures of the colonial new-town boom-town.

Romains' own Unanimistic philosophy is not immune to spoofing, as utopian socialist visions with roots in the 1840s (Wintle 2002) are corrupted by his cast of endearing, gold-rush driven fools -- the fraternity of instrumental extras of empire's spatial project: fusty geographers, venal subprime lenders of the proto-Bear Stearns type, opportunist architects of the Ecole des Beaux Arts and not least, those righteous predators from the Salvation Army's faith-based initiative.

In locating Donogoo Tonka in South America, Romain re-targets a continent largely decolonized in the early 19th century by the *libertadores* Bolivar and San Martin. French Guiana, however, had continued to maintain a notorious penal archipelago just off the postcolonial landmass, redeeming the failure of France's imperial machinations in Brazil. In 1582, the Florentine-born French queen Catherine de Medici had commissioned an ill-fated expedition targeting Brazil's Portuguese. The party's doomed leader, Catherine's cousin, *condotierre* Philippe de Strozzi, would not survive despite the tactical notes inscribed on portolan charts of Rio Bay and greater Brazil, assiduously prepared by cartographer Jacques de Vau de Claye (Mollat and de La Ronciere 1984).

French geography was politicized during the Great War, but South America is not within the cross hairs of French empire's final thrust. Rather, focussed on Africa, the Near East and Asia, French geographers service state war aims linked to the redistribution of colonial territories of the Ottoman empire and Germany's *kolonialreich*. A 1936 film based on Donogoo by the noted German studio Universum Film AG -- which was by then producing Nazi propaganda films -- evokes the lost *kolonialreich* through a comedic *mise-en-scène* supporting the redemptory ambitions of *lebensraum*, the leitmotif of interwar German geopolitics.

The superimposition of "undiscoverable" Donogoo onto Brazil's Tapajoz region recalls French Guiana's late 19th century border disputes with Brazil, and the brief existence of the pro-French cross-border jungle state of Counani. But Romain's lampoon of a gold rush, and contrarian

recasting of the pursuit of scientific method as the ‘worship of scientific error’, also invoke the chimerical El Dorado, and in particular, its demystification at the hands of that hero of French geography --Alexander von Humboldt -- during his encyclopedic survey and mapping of South America at the dawn of monumental biogeographic science. As a work of critical geography situated in South America’s postcolonial space, *Donogoo Tonka* is a sleeper whose very absurdity begins to anticipate the first destabilizing wave of decolonization awaiting imperial France’s scientific apparatuses.

As the “representational production of empire”, *Donogoo*’s many maps internalize the conflict between the codifiers of imperial “stage space” and the explorers of *terra incognita*: the distinction G. Graham Burnett has made between the space of imperial administration and boundary making -- and the space of the explorer and boundary crossings (Burnett 2000). Romain’s cinematic space-and-time re-negotiate exploratory border crossings. They undermine the static map metaphor that underpinned 18th century French geography, superseding the doctrinal cartography crucial to topographic surveys of the militarist Napoleonic era -- which had languished in the face of the dynamism of relational sciences of 19th century, as illustrated in Bruno Latour’s example of the new space and time of the periodic table (Godlewska 1999).

When we first meet Romain’s hapless hero Lamendain, he is standing under the clock at Moselle bridge at la Villette, a would-be suicide, having almost flung himself into the waters below. Though it goes unmentioned, La Villette is known to emit the cloying red scent of Paris’ abattoirs, where a clock in the Tour de l’Horloge disciplined the city “of blood, meat and trade” later documented in Franju’s “Sang des Bêtes” (1949). In selecting the abattoir district as the initial port of departure of Lamendain’s expeditionary narrative, Romain obliquely links its trade in vivisected flesh with the degrading colonial exploitations of his protagonist’s antipodal destination.

We follow Lamendain as dubious colonial sciences displace him from the brink of the *néant* on a bridge in Paris’ bloody abattoir district -- to its antipode: the genocidal boundaries of colonial *terrae incognitae*, where he will assume the stock role as standard bearer for the rehabilitation of French national identity through territorial expansion. Projected into the utopian space and time of

colonial planning futurity, Lamendain is all about the anagrammic '*le landemain*', the day after...

Durkheim had concluded that France's leading suicide rate originated "in a pathological state just now accompanying the march of civilization" (Wright 1991, 16). Notwithstanding the sociologist's circumspection, "*la mission civilisatrice*" will be produced by 'scientific' discourses of colusive societies which are crucial constituents of the influential pro-colonial lobby, the *Parti Colonial* -- whether the "Donogoo Tonka Society" we see advertised on Romains' billboard, or the dominant *Société de Géographie de Paris*. Expansionism has been proffered as an antidote to pessimism and perceived national decline. Geography, instituted as educational reform during the Third Republic will redeem the defeat of the Franco-Prussian war, the loss of the Alsace-Lorraine, the class warfare of the Commune.

Thus, in a hilarious scene inside a suicide clinic from hell, a clinic where, "absurdity, oozing out of so many brains, becomes palpable", Lamendain is subjected to a Rube Goldbergian diagnostic apparatus, and after 'barometric' evaluation, is prescribed a pseudo-scientific therapy that leads him to render insistently fawning service to none other than a buffo geographer.

"*Etes-vous capable d'écrire des articles de polémique dans une revue spéciale de géographie?*" With this challenge, we first hear from Le Trouhadec, that caricature of a stagnating species: the descriptive cabinet geographer. He is secluded within the architectural interiority of Paris' grandiose imperial city, "in a vast room in the old tradition" surrounded by maps and files that are the representational apparatus of imperial administration and pedagogy.

Lamendain's Durkheimian moment is mirrored by the professor's own near institutional suicide in the context of French geography's byzantine sociology, for Le Trouhadec is being blacklisted by his peer-group of geo-mandarin rivals because his post-Humboldtian summa on South America has dared posit his imagined Donogoo as a verifiable city. It will become Lamendain's fate to redeem the professor's theory through acts of colonial practice, occasionally doing so dressed as Edward VII, perhaps alluding to the king's role in the *Entente Cordiale*, which codified British and French co-

lonial interests.

Le Trouhadec's speculative geography may have been reminiscent of the predictive cartography of the likes of Philippe Buache, whose imaginary geography of the 18th century, rather than being attributed to ridiculous error, was understood as plausible inference and conjecture based on observation, as Olivier Soubeyran has pointed out (Soubeyran 1994, 250). But captured in an ascendant moment of French imperial praxis, Le Truhadec is given no quarter for his theoretical insights and bumbling search for abstract Truth with a capital "T".

Le Truhadec's disciplinary crisis recalls the "*bataille des annales*" of the era, when disciples of master geographer Paul Vidal de La Blache, whose scientific regionalism enshrined myths of patrimony, national exceptionalism and "*une certaine idée de la France*" (Robic 2002) -- are pitted against the colonial geography of a Marcel Dubois, whose colonial planning reforms were linked to utopian, emancipatory ideals (Berdoulay 2001, 69). Vidal dies in 1918, shortly before *Donogoo* is published, but his legacy dominates. Reformist colonial geography does not survive the contest against the obdurate Vidalians, just as French geography, abdicating in favor of theory, drops out of the urban planning scene after World War I.

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