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Liesbet Depauw & Daniël Biltereyst

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CENSORING TARZAN IN BELGIUM: THE BELGIAN BOARD OF FILM CONTROL AND THE TARZAN FILMS, 1932–1946

Liesbet Depauw and Daniël Biltereyst

In this article we are concerned with how the Hollywood Tarzan productions of the 1930s and 1940s were received in Belgium, a country with a long and troubling history of colonizing. The MGM Tarzan films were hugely popular but they seldom reached Belgian audiences uncut, due to the practices of the Belgian Board of Film Control. Apart from the obvious downside to this practice of mutilating films, there are some more productive sides to this as well. Censorship is also a significant social response to representations, thus making it a fascinating issue for studying a society in flux. From an international perspective, it is interesting to see how particular movies like the MGM Tarzan series have caused troubles with censorship boards or not, and how censorship practices interfere with local societal and political sensibilities. In the Belgian case, Tarzan films have been severely cut because of their violence, but as this article tries to show, not all violence was alike. The persistence with which they cut out violence on whites but made almost no problems over violence on blacks serves as an unwitting testimony of Belgian attitudes and views about colonialism. We use the censorship and newspapers’ reception of the six MGM Tarzan productions of the 1930s and early 1940s as an indicator for the dominant colonial and racially prejudiced discourse in Belgium.

What clues do we have […]

to that great intangible ‘the national mood’?

I suggest that we need to turn above all
to popular culture.¹

¹ Correspondence to: Houtekiet Publishing, Katwilgweg 2, 2050 Antwerpen, Antwerpen, Belgium. Email: liesbetdepauw@telenet.be
Tarzan stories have long been accused of being a myth – and a racist one at that – about colonialism. While it is certainly valuable to scrutinize these stories for the way they represent Africa and its inhabitants, these examinations always have to take into account the specific context in which these popular products were produced, distributed and consumed. Only that way, popular products can be used as indicators of norms, values and the prevalent discourse of a certain society.

During the 1930s Belgium, with its long and troubling history of colonialism, had some documentary footage of Congo made by adventurous film-makers, but basically had no film production of its own. What it did have however, were over a thousand film theatres for barely eight million people and an audience devouring American, French and German films. The MGM Tarzan films especially were hugely popular, together with other films from the so-called ‘jungle-adventure’ genre. As popular as these films might have been, they barely ever reached Belgian audiences uncut.

Two film control boards were active during the 1930s and 1940s: an official one and a Catholic one. The Catholic Film Board, active from 1931 onwards, could only classify films, but the official Belgian Board of Film Control (BeBFC), founded in 1920, had an additional weapon: the possibility of demanding cuts. Since the official classification board was born out of a societal need to protect Belgian youth from harmful effects of the new mass medium, they could either label a film as appropriate for children (under 16) or not. But they could also ask the distributor to cut certain inappropriate images out of the pictures in order to become children approved (CA).

Apart from the obvious downside to this practice of mutilating films, there are some more productive sides to this as well. As Annette Kuhn and Janet Staiger have pointed out, censorship marks the boundaries of what is acceptable in society as representations of troublesome issues. Whereas research on film censorship tended to look at it as a problematic ‘top down’ practice exercised by an institution which imposed cuts or prohibited particular images and movies, Kuhn, Staiger and others considered it to be a more complex form of social disciplining involving negotiations between censors, film-makers, producers, exhibitors and other groups in society. Regarding it as a ‘significant social response to representations’, censorship becomes a fascinating issue for studying a society in flux. From an international perspective, it is interesting to see how particular movies like the MGM Tarzan series have caused troubles with censorship boards or not, and how censorship practices interfere with local societal and political sensibilities. In the Belgian case, Tarzan films have been severely cut because of their violence, but as this article will try to show, not all violence was alike. The persistence with which they cut out violence on whites but made almost no problems over violence on blacks serves as an unwitting testimony of Belgian attitudes and views about colonialism. In what follows, we use the censorship and newspapers’ reception of the six MGM Tarzan productions of the 1930s and early 1940s as an indicator for the dominant colonial and racially prejudiced discourse in Belgium, despite the overt condemnations of Germany’s racist policies.
Based upon the characters of Edgar Rice Burroughs: the Tarzan myth and the language of violence

Despite popular beliefs, Tarzan – as a creature of Edgar Rice Burroughs – is quite a complex figure whose behaviour, norms and values change throughout the books. But there are some characteristic elements about Tarzan as a myth that most authors agree upon and which can be relevant to take into account when looking at the films. In the novels Tarzan is the uncrowned king of the jungle, with aristocratic blood running through his veins but unhindered by the burden of civilization. He rules over natives, women and wild animals – arguably the series own descending hierarchy – which all take up a dual position in the series. Tarzan is both a slayer and protector/ruler of natives, a guardian and victim of women and finally a killer and a defender/friend of beasts. And the language of Tarzan to establish any of these relations is quite often the language of physical force.

Apart from the overt violence, the novels are also characterized by sometimes very explicit racism. According to John Newsinger the Tarzan myth is a myth of colonialism. Its material is the relationship between the ‘whiteman’ and Africa during the heyday of European colonial empires. Moreover, the whole series is drenched in a powerful, compelling racist discourse of which the racist stereotypes are the most evident. Tarzan (which literally means white-skin) clearly recognizes racial difference in the jungle. Natives are referred to as ‘Blacks’ and ‘Gomangani’, while the occasional African-American is named ‘Negro’. These races are believed to be inferior to Tarzan since it is implied that culture and mores are transmitted genetically, leaving natives as inherently cruel and indiscriminately violent and Negroes as faithful yet fully dependent upon the white people they serve. However cruel the nature of these Gomangani might be, Tarzan’s reaction to them is at least as violent. At the beginning of the series, Tarzan’s foster mother-ape Kala is murdered by a Gomangani (a man named Kulonga), which seems to supply enough justification for Tarzan sadistically slaying blacks throughout the whole series. Tarzan often is a trickster-figure, playfully inventing ways of killing blacks such as using them as life bait in a lion trap in *Jungle Tales of Tarzan*. The death of Gomangani is seldom deplored – neither by Tarzan nor by the surviving Gomangani, which are ‘by nature’ blessed with a short memory. At the beginning of the series, Tarzan does not kill out of revenge, but simply because ‘to kill was the law of the wild world he knew’. Later in the series though, Tarzan acts from revenge, continuously deploying exterminatory violence against blacks. In defence of the series one could argue that Burroughs introduced some admirable black characters, in particular the Waziri Tribe who are intelligent, trustworthy and brave. However, the fact that the Waziri – whose physiognomic features are more alike to Euro-Americans than any other native tribe – willfully accept Tarzan’s ‘natural’ leadership reinforces yet again their inferiority to white people and underpins the colonial myth. The cruelties of the colonists however are sometimes mentioned, especially those of the Belgian king Leopold II in the Congo Free State which had been made public just a couple of years before the first Tarzan novels appeared.

Other elements of the historical context also found their way to the novels. During the First World War the Germans made their entry in the fictional jungle with an unseen brutality towards blacks, later followed by Russian communists.
who wanted to start a bloody revolution over gold in the heart of Africa. Remarkably, these cruelties towards blacks are never used as a contextualization and perhaps explanation for their violent behaviour but are seen as an amplifier of their violent nature.

Finally, Tarzan’s conduct towards women in the jungle further reveals the racial discriminatory undertone of the books. In Burroughs’ universe, women want to be dominated and Tarzan’s instinctive nobility makes him dominant in a chivalrous and protective fashion. White women are in desperate need of protection since all of the Tarzan stories involve them being threatened at some time or other with rape by either renegade Euro-Americans, blacks or various anthropoids. The rape itself is always prevented, but the purpose of these attempts is to stress women’s vulnerability and their need to be rescued. In the novels, Edgar Rice Burroughs consistently plays with the threat of miscegenation, an act that had become a ‘crime’ relatively recently in America. During slavery this ‘crime’ was not recognized as such long as it was a case of a white man and a black woman. But, according to Williams, ‘only after the end of slavery, when persons of mixed blood began to have a stake in property rights and inheritance from their predominantly white fathers, did miscegenation become a “crime”’. On the other hand, black women never seem to be the cause of any heroic rescue since generally they are not threatened. They are surpassed as erotic objects, leaving white women to ‘incite lust in villainous hearts’.

Formulaic colonial adventures: The MGM Tarzan films

In order to examine the reception and censorship of Tarzan films shown in Belgium during the 1930s and early 1940s we will restrict ourselves to the series of six MGM movies made between 1932 and 1942 (Tarzan, the Ape Man, W.S. Van Dyck, 1932; Tarzan and his Mate, Cédric Gibbons/Jack Conway, 1934; Tarzan Escapes, Richard Thorpe, 1936; Tarzan Finds a Son, Richard Thorpe, 1939; Tarzan’s Secret Treasure, Richard Thorpe, 1941; and Tarzan’s New York Adventure, Richard Thorpe, 1942). Following Derral Cheatwood’s assertion that the Tarzan film is not a unified genre and that different subsets can be distinguished in the series, one can conceive the six MGM pictures as an important subset with a well-defined set of characteristics. They all had Johnny Weismuller as their Tarzan, Maureen O’Sullivan as Jane and Johnny Sheffield as their – in the last three films – adopted son. Tarzan’s aristocratic origin is never mentioned, except for a minor reference to Lord Greystoke in Tarzan Finds a Son! Geographically, they are all set in a semi-jungle area in the mid-horn of Africa where Tarzan lives on the Mutia Escarpment, a magical place feared by all. According to Clara Henderson the films depict two kinds of ‘savages’: first, there are the ones serving as porter and servants to European characters. They are ‘colonized savages’ and are depicted as lazy, superstitious and slow. As in the films, we will refer to these ‘colonized savages’ as safari boys. Second, there are the ‘raw savages’ who have not been colonized, live in dense forests committed to cannibalism and lion eating. But as in the novels, these ‘raw savages’ are proud, independent and fully capable of defending their lands. Tarzan respects their territory and does not cross into lightly. On the other hand,
these ‘raw savages’ fear Tarzan and often Tarzan can stop their violent assaults by just calling out his famous roar. Unlike other Tarzan films, all the natives in the series are black. Some footage of the indigenes was shot in Africa but the studio research department forgot the names of the tribes they had been filming. They ended up labelling them as ‘Gabonis’ and ‘Jaconis’ after Cedric Gibbons and J.J. Cohn, two studio executives. Nearly all MGM Tarzan films would use the same method to name their savage tribes, going from Gabonis in *Tarzan and his Mate* and *Tarzan Escapes*; over Hymandis in the latter referring to producer Bernard Hyman; the Zambelis in *Tarzan Finds a Son!*, referring to producer Sam Zimbalist; and finally the Joconey’s in *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* and *Tarzan’s New York Adventure*. This in a way reflects the main purpose of these portrayals of blacks, namely to provide an opportunity for white heroes and heroines to be terrified but victorious in confronting savagery and danger. At no point in the films are blacks anything more than a device to get the action going, therefore naming them seemed unnecessary and even inconvenient since their fate often was to die anonymous deaths. The last thing a Tarzan movie was supposed to do was to make the audience feel sorry for the natives who lost their life on the big screen.

The natives were actually played by African-American actors who were trying to survive in a Hollywood dominated by white conventions. They could not afford to be critical of the stereotypical way they had to portray their characters. As Thomas Cripps put it: ‘The grateful blacks who regularly appeared in movies and lived on the fringe of the industry were in no position to offer protest or even honest observation. They paid their dues for the right to work by keeping silent’. During the 1930s, jungle movies like the ones concerning Tarzan were especially spoiled by vestigial racism but after World War II this shameless racist portrayal of blacks became problematic. During World War II the American rhetoric directed against the racist theories of Nazi Germany brought about a reaction against racism at home and heightened the pressure within American society to provide racial equality. Black political consciousness had also heightened during the war and these societal changes were reflected by Hollywood.

At least in the MGM cycle, Tarzan’s hostile reaction towards blacks is, according to Edward Said, somewhat balanced by his mistrust of whites penetrating the jungle. While the novels stipulated Tarzan as a clear aristocrat, the cinematic Weismuller-Tarzan has no connection with ‘his people’ whatsoever, despite Jane’s pleas on their behalf. In each film these white people penetrate the jungle looking for natural riches. They are practically always attacked by ‘raw savages’ or ferocious beasts, and rescued by Tarzan’s roar. Although he rescues them from a certain death, he distrusts them, for they carry guns. Time after time though, Jane convinces Tarzan to put his faith in them, only to be betrayed by scrupulous gold diggers. This leads to a contradiction between Burrough’s and the directors’ racist view and Weismuller’s behaviour, which is indiscriminately hostile to anything or any man – black or white – that might disturb the jungle balance he holds dear.

The MGM films were shot entirely in the United States and all of them were in black and white. As an ‘adult’ studio, MGM aimed at an adult audience, except maybe in *Tarzan in New York*, which is clearly more juvenile-oriented than the others. The homogenous conventions of this subset make it easier to make assertions about the reception of these films by the Belgian censors, ruling out that the
films differ too much to say anything significant on the nature of the cuts they had to undergo in order to make them acceptable.

The reception of the MGM Tarzan films in Belgium by film control boards and the press

Although Cheatwood asserts that the MGM films were made for an adult audience, the Belgian press often labelled these films as children’s entertainment. Being children’s movies they all received fairly good reviews (except for Tarzan, the Ape Man) as captivating but ultimately futile entertainment. Very rarely does a critic mention the amount of violence in the films as troublesome, and most of the times the fights with wild animals and natives are seen as the sole attraction of the film.

All by all, the Belgian screening of MGM Tarzan films seems quite an unproblematic story, were it not for the classification decisions of the BeBFC. In Belgium official film control or censorship was a quite liberal, non-obligatory system of content regulation, aiming only to protect children and young adolescents. The BeBFC was installed by the 1920 law on cinema which stated that all films were forbidden for children under sixteen years old, unless that film had been approved by the board. The latter could make suggestions for cuts to be made in films that were meant to be shown to an under-aged audience. It was up to the distributor then to either follow this advice or not. But economic concerns cast a shadow over this liberal conception of film regulation, since fear of income loss made distributors comply with almost any cut the board asked for. Since the MGM Tarzan films were perceived to be children’s films, the distributor executed all demanded cuts. Apart from the official film censor, a Catholic Board of Film Classification was operative in Belgium as early as 1931. A Catholic Film Action movement had come up with their own Classification Board, whose decisions were broadly publicized in most national Catholic newspapers. They used a rather refined coding system that ranged from code 1 (for all) over 2 (for adults) to the negative codes 3 (to dissuade) and 4 (to abolish). It is important to note that the Catholics had no access to the films before they were classified by the BeBFC so they ended up classifying films that had sometimes already been severely cut. As we will see this is definitely the case for most of the MGM Tarzan films. The value of these Catholic classifications then lies in the fact that they form yet another trace of shifts in boundaries of what was seen to be acceptable in society and what not.

The first sound film with Tarzan as its main character was W.S. Van Dyke’s Tarzan, the Ape Man (1932), which used footage of Van Dyke’s immensely popular previous film Trader Horn (MGM, USA, 1931). This Pre-Code American adventure film had been shot on location in Africa and even had native Africans acting in the movie, such as the young Mutia Omoolo. The footage of the hugely expensive Trader Horn expedition provided all MGM Tarzan films of images of African tribes and wildlife (although many of the tribe members in the later films were Afro-American actors). In Belgium, Tarzan, the Ape Man (released as Tarzan, distributed by Belga Films) was presented to the BeBFC in July and August 1932, and only after several viewing passed as adults only without any cuts being made.
The movie’s trailer, though, was cut, more precisely ‘where the young girl sits on Tarzan’s knees’. Apart from the obvious sensual scenes between Tarzan and Jane, a substantial amount of violence surprisingly made it to the film theatres in Belgium. In the ‘children not allowed’ feature, Safari boys are killed by accident, fear, wild beasts, an enraged Tarzan or a rivalling tribe; a wildebeest falls under the knife of Tarzan to serve as meat for Jane; Tarzan fights and kills two lions and the whites shoot at any animal that seems threatening. In the last scene the village of the ferocious Ubangi (dwarf tribe) is trampled by elephants with a painfully clear image of a native’s face in pangs of death just before being trampled by an elephant. The actual trampling is not shown and as elsewhere in the film his death is suggested by an off-screen scream.

Tarzan does not kill wantonly in this film, but he does kill often, either protecting himself, Jane or his friends among the animals (elephants, apes and hippopotami). Only at one instant does he remind us of the revengeful Tarzan of the novels after The Son of Tarzan: when white Harry Holt shoots an ape, Tarzan kills a native to temper his anger. Going after the actual killer – a white man – seemingly did not cross Tarzan’s mind. In none of the examined MGM Tarzan films, Tarzan will kill or seriously wound a white person.

The publicity for this first film is different from the others since it clearly stressed the sensual nature of the film, showing Jane lying half-naked in Tarzan’s arms, lustfully looking up at him. The ads addressed girls in particular: asking ‘Young girls, would you like to live like this Eve when you were to be loved by such an Adam?’ Another ad shows Tarzan carrying a seemingly unconscious Jane in his arms asking ‘Modern Marriages, would not they be more happy if a man would take his wife as following?’ Also the Catholic Film Board was severe on Tarzan, the Ape Man, and strongly advised people to avoid it, due to the films sensual and extreme violent content (code 2RR, or ‘strongly reserved for adults’). Film critics did not care much for the film either, labelling it as childish, badly filmed and completely artificial. Especially the fights with lions were perceived to be overtly fake and therefore annoying, while the crocodile fight was seen as genuine and spectacular.

Tarzan and his Mate (1934), the second of MGM’s twin pre-Code Tarzan blockbusters, marks an important moment in the series. In Hollywood, Tarzan and his Mate just came at the moment when the Motion Pictures Producers and Distributors of America were about to establish the Production Code Administration (PCA), headed by Joseph I. Breen. The movie was granted a Code seal only after a heavy fight between MGM and Hollywood’s censors, and after the producers took into account Breen’s criticism on the use of ‘suggestive nudity’. The Belgian reception of the movie, however, shows that this last pre-Code Tarzan picture was still quite controversial, mainly for reasons of violence and eroticism. It received the children approved or CA-label only after a long series of cuttings. Whereas the trailer was cut twice, the BeBFC asked for 10 cuts to be made in the feature film, eight of them having to do with violence. The remaining two had to do with Jane’s nakedness which also caused quite a stir in the film’s country of origin. At the beginning of the film the killing of a black carrier by the white Martin Arlington had to be omitted. Two minutes later, a close-up of a safari boy tied up on his feet with an arrow in the middle of his forehead had to be removed.
followed by the close-ups of two white men on the fore-plan with an arrow in their head. The long shots of the hanging men could stay in the picture otherwise the movie would likely become incomprehensible. The famous crocodile fight had to be shortened, so had the fight with the rhinoceros, of which they stated that the images ‘when Tarzan stabs the head of the animal with exaggerated violence’ had to be removed. The medium shots of Tarzan stabbing the dying animal and the close-up of the animal’s blooded face were cut out. The scene where villain Martin Arlington shoots Tarzan had to be omitted completely, including the shot of Martin throwing the gun in the water. This of course drastically changes the feature’s storyline. For where in the original version Tarzan was hurt and could not come to the rescue, now Tarzan lies in a tree bed surrounded by apes for no obvious reason at all, taking forever to get on his feet to rescue Jane. Finally, the long sequence of the lion attack had to be trimmed down, especially the scenes in which the lions attack Saïdi, Harry Holt and Arlington. Also, the scenes in which Tarzan throws several ‘raw savages’ out of trees into the paws of the ferocious looking lions, had to be cut. 35 Approximately one minute and a half were cut out of the film, which may not sound like a lot but which definitely changed the nature of the film. By not letting villain Arlington kill a disobedient carrier and later shoot Tarzan, the character becomes much softer which makes his death deployable (luckily the censors had asked to cut his death out as well). But despite these alterations, the movie is still packed with action scenes (mostly Cheetah being threatened by wild beasts), extremely vivid fights of Tarzan with lions (of which the average speed with which shots take turns is barely one second) and safari boys being killed by a hostile Giboni tribe, falling of cliffs while screaming in agony, or eaten by lions. Tarzan does nothing to save these blacks, he’s only looking out for himself, Jane and his animal friends. But he does not kill indiscriminately and always seems to have a justified cause for killing both animals and human beings. The cutting of this film clearly shows that Belgian censors had a problem with whites abusing blacks (after all Belgians had to come to terms with the embarrassing legacy of Leopold II’s escapades in the Congo Free State and the international condemning of Belgium’s politics of non-interference) more than with blacks killing of each other. Considering the high amount of violently killed blacks it is rather surprising that only two of these murders had to be cut. The first is the above mentioned killing of a carrier. The second is the agony of Saïdi who, as the only speaking safari boy and wearing trousers and carrying a gun instead of an animal skin and a spear, is undoubtedly the most westernized safari boy of the expedition.

*Tarzan and his Mate*’s publicity was more characteristic for the rest of the series, showing Tarzan fighting lions and crocodiles with Jane by his side. All advertisements clearly stress the violence and action rather than the romance between Tarzan and Jane. Natives however, were nowhere depicted in the announcements of the film. Of all Tarzan films ever to be shown in Belgium, this film was met with the most hostility by the Catholic Film Classification Board. The Catholics classified *Tarzan and his Mate* as ‘to dissuade’ (Code 3) and stated that the film should be avoided because of the ridiculous scenario, the erotic atmosphere and the nudity. 36 The reaction of the Catholic Film Classification Board was similar to reactions worldwide. In the United States for instance, Jane’s skimpy costume and
naked swimming scene had caused a stir. To quote Maureen O’Sullivan – who played the role of Jane – on this:

There was a little leather bra and a thing (loincloth) with thongs on the side.
But it started such a furor, that the letters just came in. So it added up to thousands of women who were objecting to my costume. And I think that was one of the things that started the Legion of Decency.\footnote{37}

After \textit{Tarzan and his Mate} Jane’s costumes would still be short, but they would cover up her midriff and mid-thigh.\footnote{38} Despite or perhaps thanks to the severe cuts in the film, \textit{Tarzan and his mate} received favourable reviews from film critics.\footnote{39} Especially the ‘extraordinary diversity of the fauna’ and the action scenes which ‘would strangle you with fear if you would not know they are technically tricked images’.\footnote{40}

The next film in line, \textit{Tarzan Escapes} (1936), which was made in Hollywood under PCA’s new morality order,\footnote{41} contains a lot of the same elements as the previous two and again cuts are being demanded in order to receive the under 16 label.\footnote{42} Many scenes, especially the action scenes, are partly made up of footage from the previous films. The crocodile fight is back, this time Tarzan saves a little deer, but now the scene passes uncut. Tarzan kills the same wildebeest as in \textit{Tarzan, the Ape Man} and the attack of the safari boys by the Giboni tribe looks strangely familiar to the one in \textit{Tarzan and his Mate}, where again a lot of natives find their unlamented death. All the recycled footage passes uncut and it is only in the new material some cuts have been made. Apart from the obligatory question of cutting Jane’s ‘nakedness’ out of the swimming scene, three other images had to be trimmed because of their violent content. The first seizure was the image of a dead safari boy hanging upside down with an arrow in his head. The last two seizures were made in the films second-last sequence in which Tarzan sends white scoundrel Captain Fry back to the deadly swamps to be eaten by according to the BeBFC ‘crocodile looking animals’. Images of those animals preparing to jump Fry (and Fry’s actual drowning in the swamp) had to be shortened.\footnote{43}

Surprisingly, some of the most gruesome pictures could stay in the film, such as the death of a safari boy falling into the swamp, an identical death to the one of Fry, the quartering of safari boys by the Gibonis and the whipping of safari boys by their leader and later by Captain Fry. Interesting here is that Jane is the one that stops the violence by shouting ‘Captain Fry’ with a repulsed voice.\footnote{44} This scene is in fact a weakened copy of the scene in the previous film and the BeBFC apparently had no problem with the white man whipping blacks, as long as he did not shoot them. Ironically, the original scene in \textit{Tarzan and his Mate} ends with the following: after Martin shot the safari boy the following conversation takes place between Harry and Martin:

\begin{quote}
Harry: A whip would’ve done just the trick.
Martin: Perhaps you’re right: he could’ve carried a 150 pounds of ivory.\footnote{45}
\end{quote}

A whip did just the trick for \textit{Tarzan Escapes} since the scene passed the censors unharmed.
Advertisements of *Tarzan Escapes* contain pretty much the same ingredients as the *Tarzan and his Mate*’s announcements. Tarzan is holding a knife or spear, ready to pin down lions, crocodiles or native men. The depiction of the latter is very stereotypical, the ‘raw savages’ serving the same purpose as the ‘wild animals’ in the advertisements: instigators of violence and hence providers of spectacle. The film received a ‘for all with minor reserves’ rating (Code 1c) from the Catholic Classification Board because they believed some fights in the film were rather harsh. *Tarzan Escapes* was received by film critics as an example of a good adventure film, nobody objected to the violence in the movie or the ill treatment of the natives in the film, one critic actually mentioning ‘the divine mystery that can be found in the Belgian Congo!’

The last MGM film before the war that was to be cut was *Tarzan Finds a Son!* (1939), a film with considerably less violence than the previous ones because the core of the film revolves around Tarzan being a family man, rescuing the naïve Boy out of the paws and claws of wild animals. Two scenes though could not be shown, the first being the scene of what the BeBFC called ‘savagery’. The scene opens with the view of a leopard jumping a baboon and eating him while another baboon tries to scare the big cat away, the leopard then turns to three hyenas attacking them and while the fight is still going on, a black panther comes along to attack the whole party. The long shots of what is likely to be documentary footage are crosscut with medium shots of Boy watching behind a tree. The scene lasted for only one minute but had to be omitted entirely. The other seizure in the film is the shot of the good white man (Sir Thomas Lancing) being shot in the back by his corrupt nephew Austen Lancing. A similar scene in *Tarzan Escapes* (where the unscrupulous Captain Fry shoots the amiable Henry Rawlins in the back while the latter is also trying to find Tarzan for rescue) was not cut out of the film, which seems to suggest that the decision of the BeBFC should be considered as a negotiation of how much violence a film could contain rather than as an automatic response to a particular kind of image.

Another familiar scene passed uncut: Tarzan’s killing of a rhino. The images are borrowed from *Tarzan and his Mate*, but this time it is Boy who is in need of saving. In *Tarzan and his Mate* the fight had to be shortened, whereas in *Tarzan Escapes*, the director had done just that and therefore unconsciously pleasing the Belgian censor. Surprisingly, the last scene passed without alterations, despite its gruesome depiction of Austen Lancing being ritually killed. The man is captured by the Giboni tribe, crucified and laid down on a circular flat stone. Tribe members raise their arms holding sharp knives and then slowly lower them. At the moment the knives should enter Austen Lancing’s flesh we see a close-up of his agonized and ultimately dying face. This ritual killing makes sense in the original picture because Lancing has to be punished for murdering his Uncle, but in the cut version the killing seems rather unexpected and particularly cruel. *Tarzan Finds a Son!* was the last film to be classified by the BeBFC before the German occupiers stopped all BeBFC activity in 1941.

Advertisements for the film nearly all portray Tarzan with Boy on his shoulders or by the hand, accompanied by a smiling Jane. Tarzan very clearly has become a family man and the element of violence is reduced in the film’s publicity. The Catholics rated the film for all with minor reserves (code 1c) due to ‘some
alarming instances which might frighten very vulnerable children’. Again *Tarzan Finds a Son!* was received favourably by the critics, who described the film as ‘a good adventure film’ with spectacular stunts of high technical quality, though perhaps a bit childish.52

Made during the war, *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* (1941) reached Belgian audiences in 1945 uncut and so did *Tarzan’s New York Adventure* (1942) one year later. This last film, with a more juvenile mode of address and with almost no violence in it quite logically obtained the CA certificate without obliged restrictions, although there is a similar scene to the one that was cut in *Tarzan and his Mate*, a close-up of a safari boy with an arrow in his head. The unproblematic passing of *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* though is more surprising. Admittedly, the film contains a lot of humoristic elements that seem to temper the violence. Wild animal attacks are countered by pranks such as a baby elephant scaring of a lion by giving him a shower or Cheetah making a Rhino leave by throwing a ripe white juiced fruit on its head. Nevertheless, the film contains elements that in earlier versions had been cut out. For starters, there is the obligatory crocodile fight, using footage of *Tarzan and his Mate*. The actual fight lasts for 31 seconds compared to 90 seconds in *Tarzan and his Mate* and 36 seconds in *Tarzan Escapes*. Where in *Tarzan and his Mate* the Belgian censor was clearly scrutinized about whites killing black men who work for them, this time the crime stays in the picture. White villain of duty Medford shoots a safari boy in the back for running away in panic just as Arlington had done in *Tarzan and his Mate*. Moreover, the two white villains in this film are duly eaten alive by a crocodile, in a vivid scene where shots of crocodiles jumping into the water are alternated with medium shots of Vandermeer and Medford’s anguished faces till they finally go under. This scene can be compared to the final of *Tarzan Escapes* in which Captain Fry is threatened and eaten by man-eating reptiles and where both the sight of the crocodiles going into the water and the sinking of Captain Fry had to be cut.

Advertisements for this film are very similar to the ones before the war, although there is one particularly interesting publicity sheet which tells the story of the film in nine drawings, as a comic. Again, a very stereotypical image of indigenes is reproduced: they have captured Boy out of superstition and are burning him alive. The film received a 1c code (‘for all with minor reserves’), just as many of the previous films had. Although the Catholic board called it ‘naïve without great artistic value that would please thanks to its great technique’, they did acknowledge that there were some impressive scenes but they thought the film was ‘as a whole inoffensive’.56

**Condemnation/reaffirmation of racist discourse and animal films**

The colonial gaze, apparent in the Tarzan films as well as in the Belgian films censor’s reaction to them can also be found in 1930s newspaper articles which condemn Germany’s overt racist discourse, but cannot help but reveal a colonial discourse themselves. For example, in 1936 the socialist newspaper *Vooruit* applauded the fact that the black ‘negro boy’ Jesse Owens won several medals during the Berlin Olympic Games, which according to the author were clearly held to
falsely glorify the physical superiority of the Arian race. He calls the German racial politics without reason and ridiculous.\textsuperscript{57} A year earlier, the same newspaper had written of \textit{Back Street} (1932, John M. Stahl): ‘In this democratic country [USA], the Negro is not equal to the European and will never obtain a high position in society. This criminal racial prejudice makes some Negroes to be Negroes, others just suffer in silence.’\textsuperscript{58}

Despite these quite liberal ideas of racial equality, \textit{Vooruit} – as most contemporary newspapers did – often made a clear distinction between ‘civilized Negroes’ who live in the Western world and the ‘uncivilized savages’ who – according to mainly Catholic newspaper accounts – were rather lucky to be colonized.\textsuperscript{59} So when discussing the representation of the black inhabitants of the fictional jungle in \textit{Tarzan Escapes} the \textit{Vooruit} film critic shows no signs of being in favour of racial equality when stating that the film contains ‘a ferocious fight with wild, human flesh eating, little blacks’ or defining in a 1939 article on \textit{Dark Rapture} (Armand Denis, 1938) Pygmees as ‘half-man, half monkey’.\textsuperscript{60} So although the main pages of the newspapers are disapproving of the growing racist discourse in the world, very little of that protest can be found in the film pages, where especially blacks in ‘romanticized jungle documentaries’ are described in very condescending terms.

The fact that they are called ‘jungle documentaries’ is not without interest. Although many scholars claim that the studio period produced many clear-cut genre movies such as gangster movies, classical horror movies and jungle adventure films of the 1930s, these clear distinctions were not always made by film critics of that time. In Belgium Tarzan films were often described as ‘documentaries’, stemming from the less romanticized animal films such as \textit{Africa Speaks} (1930, Paul L. Hoefler), the earlier mentioned \textit{Trader Horn} and \textit{Bring ‘Em Back Alive} (1932, Clyde E. Elliott). As Cynthia Chris pointed out, these films’ commercial success would depend on the degree to which they embraced sensationalism. Mere animal footage was not enough, in order to be successful the animals had to fight each other and – if possible – dispensable black carriers. Animal films started off as documentaries shot on an exotic location, but very soon, studio footage and staged fights were secretly inserted.\textsuperscript{61}

For instance, in \textit{Africa Speaks} expedition leader Hoefler notices being watched by lions and orders their Masai carrier to ‘get rifles from the motor car, quick!’ The boy does what is asked of him, but he runs into the paws of a lion and, despite shots from Hoefler and Austin (not so much as to rescue the boy but rather to protect themselves), is duly eaten alive (off-screen). According to Chris ‘this is one of the many apparently staged scenes in \textit{Africa Speaks}, but it tacitly devalues African human life as expendable’.\textsuperscript{62} These wildlife films typically represented animals and nonwhites alike as expendable resources to be exploited and dominated and hence continued to spread racist imagery.

Belgian film critics recognized the fact that these films were partially staged and they often condemned the use of special effects, for if anything, ‘a documentary film should be reliable’.\textsuperscript{63} But it never becomes exactly clear whether or not they knew none of the attacks on humans were real. For instance, in 1934, De Gentenaar comments on \textit{Devil Tiger} (1934, Clyde E. Eliott):
we will see the film expedition crossing a river, full of crocodiles; an expedition during which one of the helper’s – this is mentioned as a way of advertising – looses his life. If this cannot be mentioned a terrifying film, we don’t know a thing. But it should be made clear once and for all, that a sane audience does not demand films, for which a couple of unfortunates have to die. Nonetheless, film critics never go as far as questioning the way these films display indigenous people as objects whose physiological and behavioural curiosities should be examined by the ‘civilized’ white man. The colonial discourse was that prevalent in Belgian society during the 1930s that they simply failed to recognize the unsubtle racist undertone. Since they regarded Tarzan films as a more romanticized form of these documentaries it is no wonder their stereotypical racist representations didn’t struck these film critics either.

Conclusion

The question whether the MGM Tarzan pictures are representative for Hollywood’s racial politics and imagination during the 1930s and 1940s lies beyond the scope of this article. But recent scholarship on Tarzan underlines that these international blockbusters (together with the novel, comics, radio shows and many other forms of popular culture) helped to construct a powerful emblem of Western imperialism, colonialism and white supremacy, and that the MGM series occupies a special place in pre-war audience’s imaginative encounters with the unknown wilderness. Although these expeditionary jungle-adventure movies allowed film-makers to experiment with exotic imagery, cinematic violence, and male and female eroticism, they also embraced the primitivist and patronizingly racist discourse similar to Burroughs’ novels. What makes the successful MGM series especially fascinating is also that, in their attempt to deal with these issues, the Tarzan movies were released in a time frame characterized by Hollywood’s tightening internal morality policy.

This article is a contribution to the (underdeveloped) scholarship on the international reception of Hollywood pictures, more in particular on their censorship. Concentrating on the interesting Belgian case, with its troubled colonial past in the Congo, we looked at how these popular movies were distributed, received and consumed. Although newspapers looked at the Tarzan pictures as childish and, at times even ridiculous and cheap entertainment, nearly all of these movies encountered problems when first shown in Belgium. Not one of these movies passed children approved uncut, mainly due to their unacceptable level of sex and (especially) violence. The nature of these cuts – put in the broader perspective of the entire film – reveals the BeBFC’s biased attitude towards these ‘improper’ brutalities. While *Tarzan, the Ape Man* was censored as adults only, the second film, *Tarzan and his Mate*, was most severely cut. At first sight the BeBFC seemed to make little differentiation between the colour of the victims. The shooting of both a black porter and the white Tarzan had to be cut, so had the lion attack of the black Saidi and the white Harry Holt. Moreover both the close-ups of the black safari boy hanging upside down with an arrow in his head and the close-up of two
white bodies in the same position had to be equally cut. The cutting of this film seems to suggest that the BeBFC systematically ordered that all murders and fights had to be out of pictures. However, looking at what did make it to the picture uncut sheds a different light on this view. Literally dozens of nameless blacks are killed in the film and their deaths are seldom noticed, let alone deplored. Just as Torgovnick argued that black women were surpassed as erotic objects in the novels, we state that black men were often surpassed as victims in the BeBFC’s mind. It could be argued that a white man shooting a porter must have seemed inexpedient in the light of King Leopold II’s legacy and therefore had to be cut, while the cutting of Saidi’s death could have had something to do with the fact that he clearly had western features. Therefore these cuts should not be considered as an undermining of the racist underpinning of the BeBFC’s classification decisions, but rather as their confirmation. In the following films this even becomes clearer. In Tarzan Escapes, for instance, the gruesome death of Captain Fry had to be omitted, while the identical death of a safari boy just a couple of minutes before formed no problem at all. As a matter of fact, after a close-up of a dead safari boy in Tarzan Escapes, no image of a dying, wounded or dead native would ever be cut again in these MGM films.

The BeBFC’s written description of the cuts they asked in Tarzan films are silent witnesses of their widespread colonial gaze, a gaze which can also be found in many 1930s and 1940s accounts of what was then considered to be the precursors of the genre: animal films. Despite their open condemnation of the German racist discourse, most newspapers made a clear distinction between ‘civilized Negroes’ who live in the Western world and the ‘uncivilized savages’ who – according to mainly Catholic newspaper accounts – were rather lucky to be colonized. To ‘the others’, the uncivilized inhabitants of an imagined Africa, the liberal ideas of racial equality did not apply, hence the deafening silence when the racist undertone of many ‘jungle films’ was concerned.

Whereas most work on censorial practices in film history tends to concentrate on (often extreme) cases of banning and cuttings, this case study illustrates that, in order to understand censorial practices, discourses and strategies, it is as important to look at what is left uncut as on what is (ordered to be) left out. In our wider understanding of (film) censorship, it is important as well to look at how other stakeholders behave and respond. The case of the Belgian reception of Tarzan pictures illustrates how the official film censor’s (quite consistent) view on the boundaries of representing sexuality, violence or race was to a large extent shared, or at least remained largely unquestioned, by other stakeholders like the Catholic film classifiers or the press. The BeBFC notoriously being ‘la grande muette’ (the big silent) in the public arena, it is true that for the press it remained extremely difficult to know what exactly was cut or not. But, most forms of censorship remaining invisible, it is true as well that no questions were raised on the censor’s latent racism. Finally and next to censorial and other stakeholders’ silence and mutual assenting complicity, this case study also illustrates the fascinating interrelationship between censor’s morality practices on the one hand and film distributor’s commercial imperatives on the other. After Tarzan, the Ape Man being labelled adults only, MGM clearly decided to negotiate with the BeBFC for the rest of the movies, often agreeing upon a long series of cuts in order to be able to release the
pictures for children and a wider audience. Whether this was a form of negotiation (with all its connotations of consultation and deliberation) or a more blunt form of censorial top down power remains unclear (we found no correspondence on the censorship of *Tarzan* pictures), but one of the results was that MGM agreed to fulfil the censor’s demands, even up to the point that the Belgian versions of *Tarzan* looked probably much more child-friendly than those in the USA and probably in many other countries.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

**Notes**

6. In what follows, we use the term ‘Whites’, ‘Blacks’, ‘natives’, ‘savages’, ‘safari boys’ and ‘jungle’ because they are so apparent in the *Tarzan* oeuvre. This is in no way meant to be belittling or offensive to anyone or any place.
10. King Leopold II had acquired The Congo Free State, as a personal possession, on 19 July 1885. Five years later, the first testimonies of the inhumanities occurring in the Free State leaked out, culminating in an ever growing international concern about serious crimes against humanity in Congo. On 30 October 1905 an official report by the government was published in the official
Le Moniteur Belge. A copy of the report had been handed to the press the previous day. The report contained many recommendations to improve the situation in The Congo Free State (which was private property of Leopold II) but implicitly the report contained many accusations about the horrific abuses of the Congolese people. International pressure on the Belgian government led to the annexation of Congo in 1907 through which the Belgian government gained power over the Belgian colony. Congo was declared independent on 30 June 1960. See Daniël Vangroenweghe and Linda Vandervelde, *Rood Rubber. Leopold II en zijn Kongo* (Zaventem: Elsevier Librico, 1985), and Martin Ewans, *European Atrocity, African Catastrophe. Leopold II, the Congo Free State and its Aftermath* (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2002).

12. Ibid., 69.
20. Ibid., 125, 275.
22. See for instance *Tarzan Escapes* (16’:47”–16’:59”), *Tarzan Finds a Son* (21’:46”–21’:59”), *Tarzan’s Secret Treasure* (24’:19”–24’:33”) and *Tarzan’s New York Adventure* (18’:11”–18’:29”). In this final film though the ‘raw savages’ are not that frightened any more and one of them is bold enough to cut the rope Tarzan and Jane are holding themselves on to (18’:30”–18’:37”).
26. Code 1 had several subdivisions, namely 1a (especially convenient for children), 1b (for all) and 1cr (For all with light reserves). Code 2 also had subdivisions: 2a meant that adolescents were able to view the film as well, 2b indicated light reserves for adults and 2RR meant strict reserves for adults. For more information see Paul Warlomont, *Face aux Deux Ecrans* [*Face between Two Screens*] (Tournai: Casterman, 1954).

27. *Tarzan, the Ape Man* was approved as ‘children not allowed’ by the BeBFC on 10/08/1932 under the Belgian title *Tarzan*. Records on Classification Decision BeBFC.*Trade Horn* was shot in Tanganyika, Uganda, Kenya, the Sudan and the Belgian Congo. See David Fury, *Kings of the Jungle. An illustrated Reference to ‘Tarzan’ on Screen and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1994).

28. BeBFC decision on 9/07/1932. Records on Classification Decision BeBFC.

29. The scene takes place between 48':28" and 48':55".

30. See for example the adds in *Le Soir*, September 9, 1932, 5 and the film flyers of *Tarzan, the Ape Man* held by the Belgian Royal film Archive.

31. See for example ‘De Nieuwe Film van Van Dijck “Tarzan”’, *De Standaard*, August 28, 1932, 10. ‘Tarzan. Film van W.S. Van Dijck met J. Weismuller, wereldkampioen zwemmer’, *Vooruit*, November 28, 1932, 5. ‘Cinéma Tarzan’, September 7, 1932, article from unknown source found in press clipping held by the Belgian Royal Film Archive.


34. *Tarzan and his Mate* was called *Tarzan et sa Compagne* in Belgium and was classified by the BBFC on 22/10/1934. Records on Classification Decision BeBFC and BeBFC Records on Description of Cuts. The Board asked that the shadows of a naked Jane in the tent would be cut out and two images where Jane during the famous swimming scene swims to the surface during which her bare breasts can be seen. The scene with Arlington shooting a black carrier occurs at scene occurs at 13':40"–14':00".

35. Close-up safari boy (14':19"), white man with arrow in head (14’:58”; 15’:32”), crocodile fight lasted from 53’:34” to 55’:08”, rhino fight from 49’:43” to 50’:35”, the shooting of Tarzan by Arlington from 1:08’:42–1:09’:02”. The attack of Saidi by lions occurs at 1:31’:29” till 1:31’:33”, and the killing of Holt at 1:33’:07” till 1:33’:26”. Tarzan throwing ‘raw savages’ to the lions lasts 1:35’:40” till 1:35’:59”.


38. Ibid., 83.

39. Perhaps due to the Catholic disapproval of the film the Catholic newspaper *Het Volk* didn’t mention the film at all.


42. *Tarzan Escapes* was brought out under the name of *Tarzan s’évade* and was classified on 5/03/1937. Records on Classification Decision BeBFC and BeBFC Records on Description of Cuts.
43. The crocodile fight takes place between 55':19" and 55':59". The image of a dead safari boy hanging upside down with an arrow in his head can be seen between 1:09':18" and 1:09':19". Images of animals preparing to jump on Fry (1:22':39"–1:22':41") and Fry’s actual drowning (1:22':50"–1:22':54").

44. Safari boy dying the same death as Fry between 1:20':48" and 1:20':55", the quartering of safari boys between 1:15':42"–1:16':16", and the whipping of safari boys between 12':42" and 13':01".

45. Takes place between 14':02" and 14':11".


47. Tarzan Finds a Son was translated into Tarzan trouve un fils and was classified as CA after cuttings on 16/10/1939. Records on Classification Decision BeBFC and BeBFC Records on Description of Cuts.

48. This takes place between 18':24"–19':25".

49. 1:01':20"–1:01':29".

50. 1:14':11"–1:13':33".

51. DOCIP File Tarzan Finds a Son!, Royal Belgian Film Archive.

52. ‘Tarzan vindt een zoon’, De Standaard, October 6, 1939, 8; Het Volk, November 23, 1939, 8; Rombauts, W. Tarzan vindt een zoon’, Vooruit, November 17, 1939, 6.

53. Tarzan’s Secret Treasure was called Le Trésor secret de Tarzan, and it was approved by the BeBFc on 22/10/1945. Tarzan’s New York Adventure, in Belgium called Tarzan à New York, and it was approved by the BBFC on 10/01/1946. Records on Classification Decision BeBFc.

54. Only the first twenty minutes and the very last two minutes of this film take place in the jungle were the law of the jungle rules. A lion attacks a trapped man without wounding the man and gets shot (15':50"–17':06"), the Jakoni attack yet another group of white people entering the jungle (17':30"–18':39"), and when Tarzan comes to the rescue, the branch he and Jane were holding is cut loose by Jakoni who later burn the place where Jane and Tarzan have fallen (17':30"–18':39"). By now, the image of a man in close-up with an arrow in his head (17:26–17:28) was already well known as a token that the Jakoni were coming. The rest of the film, Tarzan is in unknown territory and has to succumb to the law of civilization, leaving almost no room for violent action and leaving the solution to the police and judge. 17':26"–17':28".

55. For this comparison, only the shots of Tarzan actually fighting the crocodile are included. The time where Jane, boy or Cheetah are looking at the fight are not included in the duration of the fight.

56. DOCIP File Tarzan’s Secret Treasure, Royal Belgian Film Archive.

57. VAN, ‘De rekords van den neger Jesse Owens’ [The records of the Negro Jesse Owens], Vooruit, August 7, 1936, 2.

58. Vooruit, April 2, 1936, 6.

59. See for instance ‘Onze heldhaftige zuster-missionarissen in Kongo’, De Gentenaar, January 11, 1935, 1; ‘De Krisis in Kongoland’, De Gentenaar, April 3, 1934, 1. Occasionally, other voices can be heard, such as the accounts of Jef Wyns about his stay in the Congolese jungle, which ran in de socialist newspaper Vooruit during June–July 1937.

60. Vooruit, 19 March, 1937, 8.
62. Ibid., 22.
64. ‘Konkurrentie in de jungle’, De Gentenaar, March 9, 1934, 6.
65. See for instance ‘Krisis in de Film. Ekonomisch of Moreel?’, De Gentenaar, February 16, 1934, 5.
67. For a few examples of censorship elsewhere (e.g. on the Soviet Union), see Alex Vernon, On Tarzan (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008).
68. In the 2016 Tarzan picture, The Legend of Tarzan (David Yates), Belgium plays a prominent, though dreadful role, epitomized by the character of Captain Léon Rom played by Christoph Waltz, contemporary Hollywood’s ultimate supervillain.
69. This censorship was not exceptional, see for instance what happened in other countries like in the Netherlands, where the movie was first banned, followed by an adults licence with lots of cuts. See Cinema Context website, Tarzan and his Mate/Tarzan’s verdere avonturen, www.cinemacontext.nl (accessed 2 August 2016).

Notes on contributors

Liesbet Depauw holds a PhD in communication sciences from Ghent University (Belgium). Her research focused on the reception and control of films in Belgium between 1919 and 1939. She also worked on the Forbidden Images project, mapping the classification decisions of the Belgian Board of Film Control between 1922 and 2003. She currently works for the Belgian Book Publishing Company Houtekiet.

Daniël Biltereyst is a professor in film and media studies at Ghent University, Belgium, where he also leads the Centre for Cinema and Media Studies (CIMS). His work is on media, the public sphere and discipline. He recently edited Silencing Cinema (2013, Palgrave, with R. Vande Winkel) and Moralizing Cinema (2015, Routledge, with D. Treveri Gennari). He is now working on The Routledge Companion to New Cinema History (with R. Maltby and Ph. Meers), Mapping Movie Magazines (Palgrave, with L. Van de Vijver), and on a themed issue for Memory Studies (with A. Kuhn and Ph. Meers).