

Josephine Baker and Pierre Batcheff in *La Sirène des tropiques* (1927)

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Abstract

La Sirène des tropiques was Josephine Baker's first feature film, made as result of the extraordinary success of *La Revue Nègre* in Paris in 1925. This article sets the context for the revue in the post-war fascination for all things American, incorporating original archive work on the trade press of the period. It then explores Baker's persona as a stereotypical contrast between nature and culture as mediated through the spaces used in the film (the tropics and Paris). It shows how the sequence in the transatlantic liner where she becomes more black by rolling in coal, and then white by rolling in flour, complicates the over-simplified nature/culture binary. A second complication is the on-screen relationship between the two stars, Baker and Pierre Batcheff, one of the leading French stars of the 1920s. Batcheff was also 'other' by his Russian associations and his acting style. This makes Baker more 'other' than she might otherwise have been; but it also legitimizes the way in which the narrative punishes her: she doesn't get her man, and overdeterminedly sacrifices herself for his happiness. The article explores the hypothesis that her punishment would have seemed acceptable for audiences of the period, for two ultimately xenophobic reasons. First, because the narrative makes her more 'Western', destroying the comfort of the nature/culture binary. Second, because she draws attention away from the leading man by being excessive in her acting style, thus undermining Batcheff's agency.

Key words

Josephine Baker

Pierre Batcheff

La Sirène des tropiques

Gaze

Colonialism

La Sirène des tropiques/The Siren of the Tropics (1927) was the first of Josephine Baker's four feature films, made as result of the extraordinary success of *La Revue Nègre* in Paris in 1925. Baker's co-star was Pierre Batcheff, at the height of his career as one of France's young leading men. Both Baker and Batcheff were very different from other stars of the 1920s, their common feature, despite many differences, being their otherness. The focus of this article is the exploration of that otherness.

Much has been written about Josephine Baker, but few capture the electrifying nature of her performance in *La Revue Nègre* better than the eyewitness account of American poet e e cummings:

She enters through a dense electric twilight, walking backwards on hands and feet, legs and arms stiff, down a huge jungle tree-as a creature neither infrahuman nor superhuman but somehow both: a mysterious unkillable Something, equally non-primitive and uncivilized, or beyond time in the sense that emotion is beyond arithmetic.

(cited in Hammond and O'Connor 1988: 411)

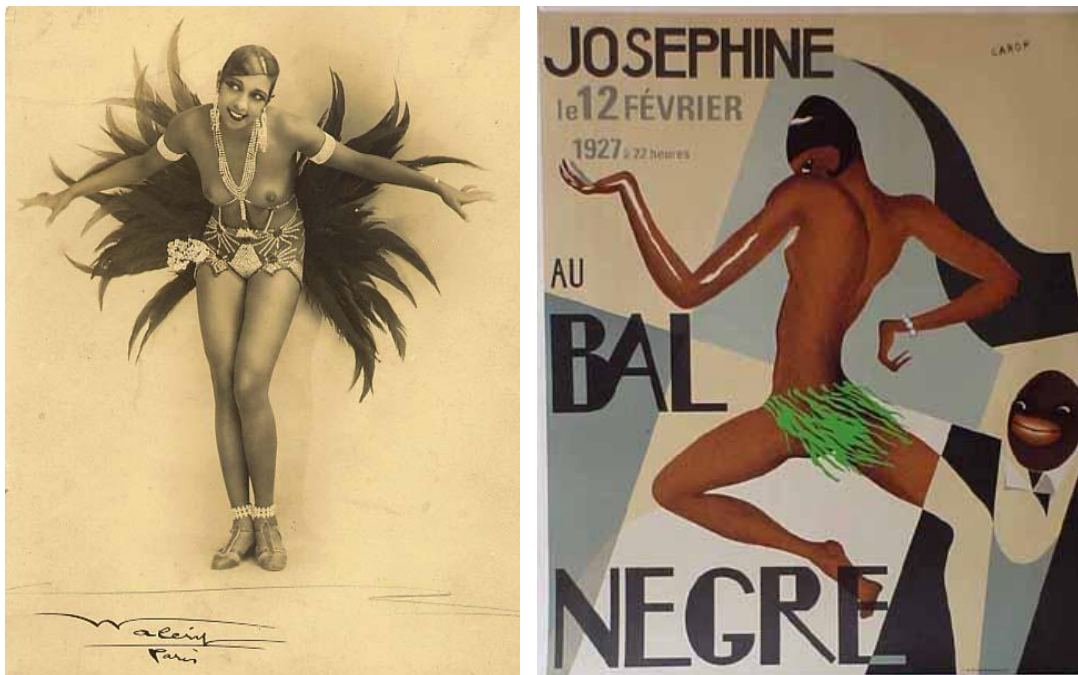


Figure 1. Images from *La Revue Nègre*

Baker was the star of *La Revue Nègre*, which had taken Paris by storm for a few short weeks in October and November 1925. This was due in large part to Baker, whose more than half-naked body gyrated and jerked in what appeared to be a combination of carefully worked out dance steps and expansive, loose movements, accompanied by comical contortions of her facial features. These included the trademark crossing of her eyes, which, as the following comment indicates, suggested elements of parody and knowing self-irony: 'The cross-eyed, goofy, stereotypically blackface grin would become a kind of signature, even when – most effectively when – she was glamorously dressed, so that it seemed a parodic comment on her own beauty, on conventions of beauty, on the culture that had made her famous' (Rose 1989: 15). She was one of the most iconic figures of the 1920s, synthesizing 'Americanism, dance-mania, hedonism, feminism' (Klein 1990: 371).

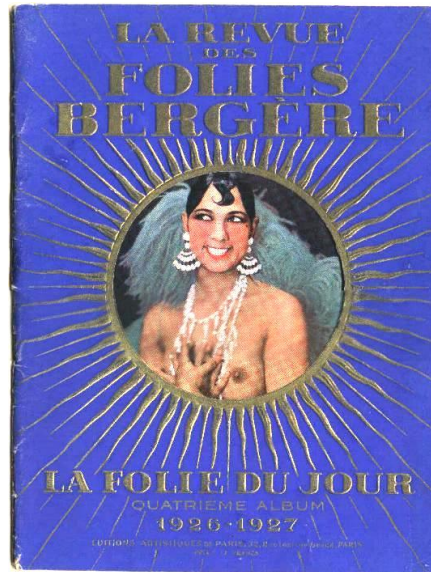


Figure 2. Programme for the Folies-Bergère

After a brief European tour, Baker signed up in 1926 at the Folies-Bergère. A number of films were released in 1927, capitalizing on Baker's success. Part of the Folies-Bergère performances was captured in a film entitled *La Revue des revues/The Review of Reviews* (Joé Francys, released December 1927); it contained selected routines, including Baker's number 'Fatou' with the belt-skirt of bananas (see Figure 4). A seven and a half minute film was released at about the same time, *Le Pompier des Folies-Bergère/The Fireman of the Folies-Bergère* (director unknown), in which a fireman, enthused by the Folies-Bergère, fantasizes that the people he meets in the street are naked women; Baker dances the Charleston briefly in an underground Metro station. The major film of this period, and Baker's first feature film, was *La Sirène des tropiques*, based on an original idea by the popular novelist Maurice Dekobra, well-known for his travelogues and adventure stories. The film was directed by the veteran actor-director Henri Etiévant, and Mario Nalpas. Etiévant's career had started in 1911; he and Nalpas had co-directed *La Fin de Monte-Carlo/The End of Monte-Carlo* (1926). Baker was contracted by La Centrale cinématographique in early June 1927; Batcheff was contracted a month later, just before the start of production at the recently constituted Studios Réunis in rue Francœur, which brought together Bernard Natan's group and the Union Française Cinématographique in the best-equipped studios in Paris, refurbished and opened in January 1927. Location shoots included the studios at Épinay for the tropical village; an ill-disguised Fontainebleau forest¹ for the scenes in the hills of the 'tropics'; Le Havre for the scene where Papitou becomes a stowaway; the Place de la Concorde, where Papitou is discovered by a promoter; and the Mogador theatre for Papitou's stage performance. Production took place from early July to early November 1927, and the film premiered on 21 December at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. We shall consider reactions to the film by reviewers below.

La Sirène des tropiques is the first of four feature films starring Baker. Her two next films date from the 1930s: *Zouzou* (Marc Allégret, 1934) and *Princesse Tam-Tam* (Edmond Gréville, 1935).² In each of these three films, a simple plot line imitates Baker's meteoric rise, featuring 'protagonists that long for love but get stardom instead of domestic bliss' (Francis 2005: 829), or, as Phyllis Rose less charitably put it: 'An innocent girl from the

¹ As Baker herself pointed out in an interview a few years later; see Sauvage 1930a: 7.

² Her fourth and final feature film is *Fausse alerte/The French Way* (Jacques de Baroncelli, 1939) is discussed by Elizabeth Ezra in this issue.

tropics goes to Paris, where she dances and is transformed into an elegant woman by beautiful clothes' (Rose 1989: 120); indeed, *La Sirène des tropiques* incorporates part of her Folies-Bergère routine. It is also her best film, according to a recent commentator, because she was able (at least partly) to improvise, articulating a very personal gestural space quite at odds with those of her time, and close in its specificity to a ritual: 'Her almost mechanical savageness, her childlike grimacing, the Chaplinesque side of her character, gave her dancing the strangeness of a ritual, sketching out a radical break in the body language and the behaviour of her time' (Bensard 1995: 6).



Figure 3. Posters for Baker's 1930s films

La Revue Nègre played into an early-twentieth-century fascination with 'blackness'. This had started with painters such as Picasso prior to the Great War, and had extended into the other arts, with jazz and dance being the focus in the mid-1920s (see Klein 1990: 373-74; Sweeney 2004: 11-33). Much of the discourse focusing on blackness tended to contrast nature with culture, blackness being seen as a marker of the primitive. This was something to be applauded and cultivated for those seeking new types of 'authenticity', and a connection with an eroticism eroded by the Great War. We should perhaps say *re*connection rather than connection, as the fascination with blackness, and Baker in particular, is a version of a well-rooted Orientalism, articulated in the mid-nineteenth-century figure of Baudelaire's Black Venus, whose thick hair evokes 'languorous Asia and burning Africa' for the poet, as some commentators pointed out at the time (see Klein 1990: 370). Indeed, she was called the Black Venus in the caption for the cover of *Cinémagazine* (10 February 1928).

However, Baker's persona is somewhat more complex than the nineteenth-century representations of the black female body analyzed by Denean Sharpley-Whiting, 'a body trapped in an image of itself, whose primitivity, exemplified in a childlike comedic posture, sexual deviancy, degradation, and colonization, is intimately linked with sexual difference' (Sharpley-Whiting 1999: 10). This is because she embodies, as the comment by Klein on the contemporary focus on blackness above might suggest, far more than the primitive side of the simple binary between nature and culture. Rather, she is a complex combination of both nature and culture, which makes her hard to pin down. As Elizabeth Ezra points out, Baker was geographically impossible to locate: 'Baker was so popular (...) because she was so hard to place; a floating signifier of cultural difference, she represented many different things to different people. (...) She could evoke Africa, the Caribbean, the United States, and France,

by turns or all at once as the occasion required' (Ezra 2000: 99). And she is equally impossible to pin down in cultural terms, as Carole Sweeney says: 'Baker's performances, literally, rehearsed a variety of texts of difference. She could appeal to the modernist artist as much as to the colonial lobbyist, the jazz lover, or the negrophile writer. Her performances provided a locale where colonial fantasy and ideological discrepancy could be played out yet contained' (Sweeney 2004: 38). The complex combination of ideologically loaded 'primitive' pastness with a paradoxically almost postmodern modernity is well exemplified in Baker's brilliantined Eton crop:

In Baker's era, choosing to process one's hair helped to signify a break with 'country' and older ways, because it involved being serviced by another person, engaging a chemical process and reconstructing the self in order to play a public role, usually within white society. What was at stake in hairstyle was Baker's public identity as a modernized American woman, which was layered over the Africanist dancing she performed.

(Francis 2005: 836)



Figure 4. Baker's famous 'banana skirt' and brilliantined Eton crop

It is a combination that also emerges in comments made at the time, such as this anonymous location report from Épinay: 'Josephine Baker does a vintage Charleston, a Josephine vintage, and the negroes haunted by rhythms from the depths of time begin to wiggle around in time with the music' (*Cinématographie française* 1927: 2). We can note that in this comment, Baker is presented as modern, embedded, as it were, in layers of the past. Similarly, in the following report a month earlier, Baker is presented as resolutely modern, interested in cars, speed and movement, emblems of modernity: 'Chat with her and she will talk about all manner of things (...), automobiles, automobiles, her joie de vivre, her desire for movement on the wide open road' (Marguet 1927: 282). An anecdote from the studio encapsulates temporal, geographical and cultural contrasts, as Gaston Ravel and Tony Lekain were directing *Madame Récamier* (1928) in the same studio, leading *Cinémagazine* to comment on how Baker was entertaining a group of revolutionary sans-culottes with a Charleston (*Cinémagazine* 1927: 11), an incident recalled by Baker a few years later, who

drew out the paradox: ‘Under huts with bright new yellow straw roofs we watched princesses and marchionesses gaily being led to the scaffold (...). The conjunction was curious to say the least. Negroes and sans-culottes drank like brothers in a corner of the studio’ (Sauvage 1930b: 7). Baker’s exotic primitivism, therefore, essentially faced both nostalgically backwards, as well as utopianly forwards, offering ‘a reconnection with the past, while pointing out a path through to the future’ (Sweeney 2004: 20). A similar tension between past and future was part of Pierre Batcheff’s star persona.

We have already devoted an article to Pierre Batcheff in a previous issue of this journal (Powrie with Rebillard 2008). The major points to recall in relation to Batcheff are as follows. First, he was a major star by 1927, with eleven films to his credit. Four of these had appeared in 1927 prior to *La Sirène des tropiques*; while he only had a small role in Abel Gance’s *Napoléon*, premiered in April 1927, he was the lead in both of the following films: *Éducation de prince/A Prince’s Education* (Henri Diamant-Berger, June 1927), *Le Bonheur du jour/The Writing Desk* (Gaston Ravel, trade presentation July 1927, although not on general release until February 1928). Second, he was one of a small group of young stars called *jeunes premiers*, young romantic male leads, fragile and relatively impotent figures on screen; in Batcheff’s case, many of his characters, as we showed in our previous article, are dominated by older and/or stronger women, and we shall see that this is very much the case with Baker. Third, the passivity evidenced in so many of Batcheff’s characters can be seen as a nostalgic throwback to a period of stability prior to the horrors of the Great War, and the domestic arena untainted by extreme physical violence. Fourth, Batcheff’s characters are frequently passive and immobile, quite different from Baker’s excitable animation. Unlike her, he is almost never a dancer in his films, oddly, given his well-attested love of dancing. Fifth, his characters often seem disconnected from what surrounds them, looking away, or into the far distance, even when with his female partners on screen.

Unlike Baker though he may have been in many respects, Batcheff shared with her a key trait: that of the exotic Other, making him much less like other French *jeunes premiers*, and much more like American matinee idols, such as Rudolf Valentino and Ramon Novarro. Batcheff’s characters are frequently exoticized. At the time of *La Sirène des tropiques* his otherness was more associated with the Slav. He had played Slav characters in two films in 1927: a Russian prince in Raymond Bernard’s *Le Joueur d’échecs*, released in January that year, and a Silistrian prince six months later in Henri Diamant-Berger’s *Éducation de prince*. There were frequent references in the popular press to his Russian origins, and it is more than likely that his films for the Russians of Montreuil, Films Albatros -- Jean Epstein’s *Le Double amour/Double Love* (1925), and Marcel L’Herbier’s *Feu Mathias Pascal/The Late Mathias Pascal* (1926) -- would have intensified this association; in the former he played opposite Natalie Lissenko, and in the latter opposite her husband, Ivan Mosjoukine. Schor’s sketch of French attitudes to the Russians shows the eastern-associated difference of the Russians in French eyes of the 1920s: ‘They were both ascetics and hedonists, fatalists and enterprising, tender and violent; the eyes of these disconcerting beings, full of an exquisite sensitivity, could be shot through with flashes of Asiatic savagery. This was why the Slav soul was so mysterious and charming’ (Schor 1996: 114; see also Lequin 1992: 388). One of his interviewers describes Batcheff’s well-bred elegance, Romantic appearance, and especially ‘his wonderful eyes with their Slav sensitivity and glimmers of an alert and intelligent mind’ (Sannier 1930: 665). His wife at the time, Denise Tual, frequently talks of his fantastical nature in her memoirs, and of his ‘Russian atavism’ (see for example Tual 1987: 112, 132).



Figure 5. Batcheff as exotic other in *Education de prince* (1927)

We therefore find a complex set of factors with the pairing of these two stars: both were connoted as exotic, but in very different ways. One was an excitable and animated American Black woman, the other was a languorous French White man. That contrast is neatly encapsulated in the account given by Denise Tual of Baker's tantrums: 'She was unbearably capricious, stamping on her glass necklace G-string, demanding a chinchilla cape without which she refused to act. Pierre watched impassively as a young assistant rushed to pick up the false pearls' (Tual 1987: 98-99).

Baker was such an unusual performer that she overshadowed both the storyline and the other actors in *La Sirène des tropiques*. This was not helped by a very conventional storyline which was criticized by one reviewer for not being more adventurous: 'The story is somewhat predictable, and we would have liked to see more unexpected twists' (Orta 1928: 31). The reviewer for *Le Figaro* commented that he 'could only remember Mademoiselle Josephine Baker', who was for him 'a real revelation (...) vivacious, touching and so amusing that the audience were shaken by uncontrollable laughter' (Spa 1927). For *Cinémagazine's* reviewer, 'the whole point of the film is Josephine Baker's very personal performance (...). She astonishes and delights' (Farnay 1927: 588).

The complex ideological and temporal layering of Baker's persona, no less than the radical break that her performance marks in contemporary acting, clearly impacts on Batcheff's persona, who was also connoted as Other through his exotic 'languorous' Slavism. Our aim in exploring *La Sirène des tropiques*, then, is to understand what happens when two very different Others work in the same imaginary space.

The film

The best example of this in the film is the sequence occurring after the apprehension of Alvarez, when André and Papitou search Alvarez's office. Papitou sits on Alvarez's bookcase throwing documents away haphazardly, while André finds the letter from Sévéro asking Alvarez to kill him. They occupy very different parts of the set, Batcheff at the desk, Baker higher up perched on the bookcase. The much-reproduced publicity still (Figure 6) is slightly misleading, as there is no such shot in the Kino DVD version of the film, although the still nonetheless manages to suggest different spaces: Baker poses ostentatiously for the camera, looking not at her leading man but at the papers on the desk, while Batcheff gets on with the

matter in hand. But this contrast is far less marked than the principal contrast between very different geographical locations.



Figure 5. Publicity still for *La Sirène des tropiques*

The film is structured in such a way that the ‘tropics’ (as the intertitle has it) and everything they represent are contrasted with Paris. There are three broad sections lasting about 20 minutes each: 20 minutes establishing the two locations and the plot; 28 minutes in the tropics; 24 minutes in Paris, with a comic transitional fourteen-minute section devoted to Papitou’s transatlantic voyage prior to this last section.

There are clear and stereotypical echoes between the two locations. Both have their lecherous villain who attempts to rape the damsel in distress; in Paris it is Sévéro, in the tropics it is his henchman Alvarez. Both locations have a communal space -- the village in the tropics, and the Place de la Concorde in Paris -- and in both cases we see Papitou with children. Both locations have performance spaces in which Papitou dances, the difference between them being one of spaciousness. The village performance space is small and crowded, and the onlookers surround Papitou. The Olympic Palace, on the other, is large and airy, and the spectators are in serried ranks of seats, while Papitou is isolated on stage. Finally, both locations have a violent confrontation between André and the forces of evil, in which André is shown up, only to be rescued by Papitou, who observes what is going on in both cases. In Monte Puebla, André is set upon by Alvarez and his thugs when he confronts them as they steal minerals from Sévéro’s mine, and is rescued by Papitou, who calls the police. In Paris, André is challenged to a duel by Sévéro; he refuses to shoot at Sévéro, who is killed (inexplicably for André, who knows he shot his gun into the air) by Papitou hiding in a nearby tree.

Such parallels serve to emphasize the deeper binary between nature and culture on which the film appears to rest. Parisian spaces are large and airy, with straight lines, as we have already noted where the theatre is concerned. The other main interior, the Sévéro apartment, has tall columns used as framing devices together with door frames, and the paneling has distinctively straight lines and sharp angles. The tropics, on the other hand, are dominated by circular or natural lines, such as the round village huts, the communal space and its round well into which the village boys throw the cat, or the S-shaped tree in which Papitou plays before going to the river to bathe.

However, even if the geographical locations seem to suggest a strong binary, we would contend that the neatness of the binary is undermined. The section of the film located on the transatlantic liner serves to link the two locations in the most obviously geographical

sense, but equally it disturbs the distinction between culture and nature. The liner itself, as the word suggests, follows a linear trajectory across an unbounded ocean. Moreover, Papitou's antics make the travelers mill around anarchically through the liner's ordered spaces; she literally 'disorders' the crowd, and their perception of the subaltern, by changing her skin colour. What might have seemed a relatively conventional slapstick routine blurs the boundaries established by the colour of skin, and functions to parody the sophistication of white westerners. Papitou over-determines her blackness by rolling in coal, only to whiten herself with flour in a reversal of black-face (Figure 6), before emerging from her bath like Botticelli's Venus (Figure 7). The sequence also engages with a central paradox: the crowd seek her, but, as the captain's averted gaze suggests when Papitou emerges naked from the bath, they do not want to see her; we shall return to the issue of the gaze in our next section.



Figure 6. From black to white



Figure 7. Papitou as Botticelli's Venus

What began as a simplistic binary between nature and culture therefore turns into a more complex set of relations as a result of this transitional transatlantic sequence. It also retrospectively sheds a different light on what might have seemed to be one of the key markers of 'nature' in the nature/culture binary: Papitou's relationship with animals.

Papitou's dog Bamboula saves her from Alvarez's lecherous advances, suggesting the witch's relationship with her 'familiar'. Shortly after this, she rescues a cat that the village children have thrown into the well, as we mentioned above. Returning to her hut, she encourages Bamboula to lick the cat clean, and ends the scene by drawing her father's

attention to ‘Little Kat’, saying that it will bring her happiness. Neither of these animals is essential to the plot. It would have been just as easy for Papitou to break free of Alvarez and run off without Bamboula’s help; and the scene with the cat is a rather long and maudlin two-minute diversion. It is therefore worth asking ourselves what its purpose might be. A first view could well be the stereotyped correlation between ‘primitive’ peoples and animals, a parallel frequently drawn where Baker was concerned (see Habel 2005: 128). The sequence with her pets, however, articulates a different perspective, which is less ‘primitiveness’ than ‘innocence’; this is because the point of the sequence is to demonstrate first Papitou’s protective instincts (the cat is defenceless so must be saved), second to demonstrate what might be called a utopian view of nature, in that the dog ends up licking the cat protectively (Figure 8). The sequence is therefore much less about the correlation between Papitou and the animal kingdom, and much more an expression of utopian spaces where normal animal reactions (dogs chase cats) are transcended in a non-violent utopian space of reconciliation between opposites anchored in Papitou’s innocently childlike view of the world, where her desires rule (her greediness for fruit, or her love for André).



Figure 8. Utopian natural space

This allows us to read what might have seemed like a straightforwardly ‘colonialist’ review in a different light. *Cinéa-Ciné pour tous*’s reviewer speaks of Baker’s ‘impulsive nature, fiery and tender’, or of the way in which ‘her face can reflect mischief or childlike seriousness, joy or suffering, with equal ease’ (Orta 1928: 31). A review in *Cahiers du Sud* rather more luridly fostered a similar simplistic binary: ‘Her postures are those of an anxious and entertaining monkey, she grimaces, yells and threatens with teeth bared (...). You bring us the charms and shameless innocence of black virgins dancing under a full moon in a forest full of blood and savage lust’ (quoted in Bonini 2000: 40-41). These views apparently articulate the key binary of nature versus culture, unregulated impulsiveness being the opposite of sophisticated manners based on self-restraint. But the story-line where Papitou is concerned is much more about her loss of innocence as she becomes more westernized. This is partly demonstrated in a continuation of the ‘animal theme’ which returns in the final scenes where Papitou wears a very ostentatious animal fur collar.

Its purpose is partly to differentiate her from André’s fiancée, Denise, dressed in white, and to underline the moral of the story. But it also stresses that Papitou has to some extent lost her roots, been tamed, and in so doing must learn that she cannot do exactly as she

pleases. She asks Denise for a memento to remember André, and is given the prayer-book belonging to his mother, which he had showed her when she cared for him on the Monte Puebla; an intertitle spells out the fate of all of Baker's characters: 'Sacrifice is our purest source of joy on earth'. We wish to explore this sacrifice and its association with the gaze in our final section.

The moral

We might wish to argue that her 'sacrifice' shows that she is being punished for two reasons. First, she is being punished for her attempt to take away André from Denise. Second, she is being punished for attempting to become a more sophisticated westernized woman; in doing so, she is to some extent betraying Rousseauesque and Orientalist stereotypes of the Noble Savage, not least by her parody of 'whiteness' in the transitional sequence on the liner. While both of these arguments are quite plausible, we would wish to argue that her punishment is directly related to issues of performance and agency, and that these are connected to her relationship with Batcheff. Put simply, she is punished for taking control of the gaze. She does this in two ways.

Both Baker and Batcheff are objects of the gaze, but they are misaligned. We as spectators watch Baker watching Batcheff, who watches Baker in turn (as is made very clear in the long sequence in the village when Baker dances, watched by both André and Alvarez). Batcheff's character, crucially and typically, does not gaze back at the spectator as Baker's character does. As is the case with many of his films, Batcheff characteristically looks 'off', as we mentioned above. The first way in which Baker takes control of the gaze, then, is the way she draws the audience's gaze from Batcheff to herself, thereby weakening Batcheff as object of the gaze. Second, she turns Batcheff into an even weaker object of the audience gaze by dominating him in terms of the narrative and the *mise en scene*.

Baker draws the gaze away by being more 'Other' than Batcheff; she is black rather than white, and her acting style --by turns excessively comical or excessively tragic-- is completely at odds with Batcheff's considerably more understated style. She is also more obviously active; in so doing she neutralizes his exoticism as the languorous Slav. She constantly moves, darting to and fro across the set, nimbly shinning up trees and furniture, effortlessly scaling rocks; she is protean (parodically white with flour, as well as overdeterminedly black with coal). Batcheff, on the other hand, is relatively static; we tend to see him sitting (with Denise, with Sévéro, at Alvarez's desk), watching (Papitou dancing, Alvarez stealing). He is vacantly statuesque when contrasted with Baker's sinuously mercurial kinetics. One exception is the Monte Puebla sequence, although here his laboured movements across the rocks, due to his injuries, are pointedly contrasted with Papitou's lithe agility. Batcheff is Other by his passive immobility which turns him into the fetishized pin-up; while Baker is Other by excessive mobility, but also, crucially, by her ability to shift across multiple boundaries so as to play into fetishization, while at the same time interrogating it, for example in the coal and flour sequence. While both of them bare their chest, Baker's breasts 'trump' Batcheff's open-necked shirt, a familiar device for the male pin-up. Both her breasts and his chest are objects for the gaze of the spectator, but Baker moves around constantly, escaping that gaze, while Batcheff, passive and immobile, lets himself be pinned down. That immobility is a ploy for capturing the gaze of the spectator, of course; but it fails, because even though Baker's movements on the one hand suggest an escape, they also fascinate in ways that Batcheff's immobility cannot.



Figure 9. Papitou cares for wounded André



Figure 10. Papitou stands over André

Not only does Baker draw the gaze away from Batcheff through aspects of her performance, then; she also dominates him in the narrative and the mise en scene. Papitou controls André: she cares for him when he is hurt on Monte Puebla (Figure 9), in a masochistic-submissive trope repeated in Batcheff's next two films. She stands over him again when she promises to help retrieve the compromising situation at the end of the film (Figure 10), and she, rather than André shoots Sévéro in the duel. These events conspire to undermine Batcheff's agency, who comes across as impotent and not infrequently effeminate. When he arrives in the tropics, for example, he uses a lady's fan because of the heat; in the fight with Alvarez in the caves of Monte Puebla, André ends up on the floor, saved in the nick of time by the mounted police; and, most tellingly, at the end of the film, when Papitou shoots Sévéro from her hiding place in a tree, the last we see of André is his comical incomprehension that it is he who he has apparently but inexplicably shot Sévéro while shooting his gun in the air.

Finally, by having two Others working against each other, Baker emphasizes not just Batcheff's effeminacy, but more crucially his status as passive melancholic, anchored in post-war trauma. While 'Baker represented the unfettered frenzy of libidinal urges breaking through the nihilism of despair' (Sweeney 2004: 50), a supremely mobile and indeed upwardly mobile reaffirmation of life after the 1.38 million dead of the Great War, correlatively Batcheff's Sad Young Man, static in the face of Baker's 'frenzy', is caught, much more obviously than he would otherwise have been, in masochistic melancholia. Her 'blackness' emphasizes his 'whiteness', so that it becomes more than white; it becomes drained, lifeless, the pallor of a ghost, death contrasted with Baker's spontaneous and frenzied vitality. Baker plays at being a ghost in the sequence on the liner; indeed, the English woman she startles calls her a ghost in an intertitle. Batcheff's ghostliness is all the more poignant for not being named. By being placed next to Baker, he becomes a representative of all Sad Young Men dead on the battlefields, and those alive but shell-shocked, the alienated and traumatized younger generation; in a word: survivors. Her 'whiteness' is just ludic make-up, an over-determined whiteness that interrogates her skin colour, and in so doing positions her blackness as a thoroughly modern blackness, helped in this by the fact that her skin colour is not as deep as many.

The film therefore cleverly articulates a cultural transition from Old Europe, represented by Batcheff, to Modern America, represented by Baker; from the melancholic, traumatized and effeminate male, to the brashly innocent and desiring female. The final images of Baker are key in this respect: her fur collar exteriorizes her presumed 'animal' nature, turning her into a Westernized woman whose purpose is the sacrifice of her desire. She has changed from the Black Venus to the fetishized Venus in Furs, object of adoration for the masochistic male; but object rather than subject nevertheless.



Figure 11. Venus in furs

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