

FIRST CONTACT: THE BEGINNING OF ETHNOGRAPHIC FILMMAKING IN GERMANY, 1900–1930

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In general, very little is known of the history of early ethnographic filmmaking. But the history of ethnographic filmmaking in Germany should be of particular interest, since it seems to be quite different from that which could be told about ethnographic film traditions in other national contexts. As Martin Taureg pointed out more than twenty years ago, German ethnographers had a strong commitment to using film cameras as research tools and films as teaching aids.¹ Recently, Assenka Oksiloff has emphasized that historians of ethnographic filmmaking per se should find German films of special interest, arguing that ethnographic films made by German scholars are the "best documented and preserved".² Nevertheless, there has been little research on the beginnings and the institutionalization of filmmaking in German ethnography. The following article gives a short overview of the work, problems and provisional first results of my historical research project, "Film and Ethnography in Germany, 1900-1930." Funded by the German Research foundation (DFG), I have been working on this project for two years, investigating the origins and establishment of ethnographic filmmaking in Germany. My point of departure has been the experiences that led Leipzig ethnologist Fritz Krause to call for the creation of an ethnological and anthropological film archive at the conference of the German Anthropological Society in August 1928.³

Archives and Research

The project is based on study of primary sources in all German ethnological museum archives. It would have been impossible prior to Germany's reunification. However, I have had many problems in accessing and working in the archives, which have slowed the progress of the project; of necessity, I now plan to continue the project's archival research phase until 2008. Moreover, cultural politics in Germany have created a precarious financial situation for academic work. If current trends are sustained, anthropological/ethnological, historical and cultural research projects will soon become almost impossible.

Due to extensive restoration work and safety problems, the archive of the Hamburg Museum for Ethnology (Museum für Völkerkunde) will be closed for research until at least 2009.⁴ The closing of this archive is particularly unfortunate, since the Hamburg Museum is

¹ Martin Taureg, 1983. "The development of standards for scientific films in German ethnography." *Studies in visual communication* 9, 1: 19-29.

² Assenka Oksiloff, 2001. *Picturing the Primitive: Visual culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema*. New York: Palgrave. Oksiloff's remark refers to early ethnographic films that are archived at the Institut für Wissen und Medien gGmbH (henceforth IWF) in Göttingen. All early films are explained in small booklets that were written in the sixties and seventies, which supply viewers with information about the ethnographic content and the historical background.

³ Georg Thilenius, ed. 1929. *Tagungsbericht der Deutschen Anthropologischen Gesellschaft. Bericht über die 50. Allgemeine Versammlung der Deutschen Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Hamburg*. Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter, 67.

⁴ Letter to the author from Prof. Dr. Wolf Köpke, director of the Museums für Völkerkunde Hamburg, May 10, 2006.

one of the biggest ethnological museums in Germany, and its archival collection is significant; for example, it houses the files of the Hamburg South Seas expedition, one of the first German expeditions to use film.⁵ Research in Berlin and Leipzig has also been difficult, owing either to limited opening hours (Berlin) and/or to small staff (Berlin and Leipzig). However, after years of extensive restoration, the Leipzig museum has been reopened and now has a special room for research with good technical equipment. Excellent working conditions with an extremely helpful staff can also be found at the Linden Museum in Stuttgart and the Institut für Länderkunde in Leipzig. So far, the most valuable source for the project has been the records of the German ethnographer Theodor Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924) deposited at the University of Marburg. Among their features are correspondence between Koch-Grünberg and the Freiburg film company *Express Film*, which specialized in nonfiction film production.

In addition to archival work in German museums, I have systematically gone through such primary sources as ethnological, anthropological, geographical and colonial journals, in order to enumerate entries on the use of film in ethnographic expeditions. Finding announcements of the intention to use film does not provide incontrovertible evidence that expeditions realized their plans, but the number of such entries shows how significant the new medium was thought to be for the discipline.⁶ I now estimate that roughly fifty expeditions between 1905 and 1930 considered filming to be important.

On the basis of analysis of archival records and primary literature, I have provisionally concluded that two significant trends framed the emergence of ethnographic filmmaking. One, the introduction of cinematography into ethnographic research in Germany was much more closely related to the development of sound recording than to photography. The first recorded instance of consideration of the significance of cinematography as a contribution to ethnographic observation was in the discussion following a lecture by Berlin ethnographer Felix von Luschan on the use of phonographic recordings at a December 1903 meeting of the Berlin society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory.⁷ The introduction of the subject of film into the discussion is important because it is indicative of ethnographers' aim to present themselves as modern scientists who took advantage of all modern technology. Two, as film historian Tom Gunning has observed, the invention of the motion picture must be viewed "in relation to a broader attempt to recreate and capture the sensual world in several dimensions."⁸ Gunning understands the desire to supplement the phonograph with motion picture in the context of

⁵ Films from this expedition are archived as "Ethnological Film Documents from the Pacific from the Years 1908-1910" at the IWF in Göttingen.

⁶ Interesting examples of this possible marketing strategy are the several film expeditions of Dr. P.A. Marx. In the late twenties, Marx was planning a new film expedition to Equatorial Africa. In order to gain support for his expedition, Marx claimed experience of filming on five out of seven expeditions in which he had participated. However, in the primary literature no evidence was found for Marx's extensive filmmaking experience. Archiv, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin. Akten betreffend die Erwerbung ethnologischer Gegenstände aus Afrika, pars, I B: 47: Exposé über eine Film- und wissenschaftliche Expedition nach Äquatorial Afrika [File concerning the acquisition of ethnological objects from Africa, pars, IB 47: Exposé about a film- and scientific expedition to Equatorial Africa].

⁷ O. Abraham and E. von Hornbostel. 1904. "Über die Bedeutung des Phonographen für vergleichende Musikwissenschaft." *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 36: 223.

⁸ Tom Gunning. 2001. "Doing for the Eye what the Phonograph does for the Ear." In Richard Abel and Rick Altman, eds. *The Sounds of Early Cinema*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 14-31.

the pronounced anxiety of the nineteenth century that the combination of modern media could not only reproduce the human but also split up the human senses.⁹ The "obtainable ersatz immortality" provided by the technological double corresponded therefore as much to the modern fantasies of control as to the modern experiences of limitation.¹⁰ Gunning's consideration is important for the project as it links technological innovations and developments to a culture-historical context that also must be considered in the ethnographic film project. As it will be shown below, the combination of sound and moving image also played an important role in the exhibition context of ethnographic films.

In her study of the origin of ethnographic filmmaking in the United States, Alison Griffiths has emphasized its close relation to popular entertainment.¹¹ Griffiths's observation applies to the German situation. Archival records document frequent contact between German ethnographers and commercial film companies, which conferred important advantages to all parties, whether in making careers, playing museum politics, or succeeding in the commercial film business. However, understanding contact between scholars and production companies requires close analysis of ethnographic filmmaking's relation to the specific German context of the cinema reform movement (*Kinoreformbewegung*). I now turn to providing information and provisional speculations about the production, distribution, and exhibition contexts of early ethnographic film in Germany.

Production

The discussion of film's significance for ethnographic observation in 1903 seems to have inspired Felix von Luschan to include cinematography as a new research tool in his 1904 edition of his research manual *Anleitung für ethnographische Beobachtungen und Sammlungen in Afrika und Oceanien* (Guide for ethnographic observations and collections in Africa and Oceania).¹² And Luschan's manual became compulsory reading for every professional and amateur ethnographer. In 1905, Georg Thilenius, director of the Hamburg Museum for Ethnology, emphasized the special role of film in a memorandum on the goals of ethnographic research.¹³ In 1906, Karl Weule, who worked first as an assistant in and subsequently became director of the Leipzig museum from 1907 on, used film in his expedition to East Africa in 1906.¹⁴ In the following years, major expeditions would use the movie camera to record their findings for their home audience.

The collaborations between ethnographers and commercial film companies is documented in various collections of correspondence: Richard Thurnwald and the Berlin *Internationale Kinematographen und Lichteffect-Gesellschaft* in 1906 (South Seas Expedition 1906-1909); Karl Weule and *Ernemann* in Dresden between 1906 and 1907 (East Africa

⁹ Ibid., 29.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Alison Griffiths. 2002. *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn of the Century Visual Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹² Felix Von Luschan. 1904. *Anleitung für ethnographische Beobachtungen und Sammlungen in Afrika und Oceanien*. Berlin: Museum für Völkerkunde.

¹³ Hans Fischer. 1981. *Die Hamburger Südsee-Expedition. Über Ethnographie und Kolonialismus*. Frankfurt am Main: Syndikat, 94.

¹⁴ On Weule, see also Wolfgang Fuhrmann. 2006. "Überlegungen für eine mögliche Geschichte des ethnographischen Films in Deutschland." In Christian Hissnauer and Andreas Jahn-Sudmann, eds. *Medien-Zeit-Zeichen*. Marburg: Schüren Presse, 20-26.

Expedition, 1906); Theodor Koch-Grünberg and *Express Film* in 1911 (Amazon Expedition, 1911-1913); and Emil Trinkler's correspondence with his cameraman in 1926/27 (Asia Expedition, 1927/28). Collaborations were not officially supported by the museums but were private partnerships between individual ethnographers and companies. Their associations could lead to free supply of technical equipment, such as when Richard Thurnwald received camera and film stock from a company, or to the participation in an expedition of an experienced operator who shot expedition's films, as was enjoyed by Koch-Grünberg.

Such associations conferred prestige on production companies because of ethnography's academic reputation. As Martin Taureg observed, a major influence on German ethnographic filmmaking was the cinema reform movement and its emphasis on film as a didactic medium.¹⁵ Reformers emphasized cinema's educational and informational value, warning that watching *Schundfilme* (trash films) was leading to the moral and ethical decay of German society, and especially of German youth. Therefore, reformers favoured non-fiction films, such as technical, geographic, folklorist and ethnographic films.¹⁶ Although there exists no direct evidence of intellectual exchanges between reformers and ethnographers, making ethnographic films was important for every company that sought to enlarge its film program. New spectacular films depicting unknown regions of the world gave the companies an academic and educational image in the public eye, which improved the companies' market positions.

Distribution

The distribution of ethnographic films was crucial to their development. In the ordinary course of events, each expedition was described in a publication that addressed the broad public and was an important source of income for ethnographers.¹⁷ Book illustrations also drew public attention to films. The most striking example is Richard Neuhauss's *Deutsch Neu Guinea* (German New Guinea), published after Neuhauss's stay in the South Seas in 1909. The book not only included several illustrations taken from his films but also frequently mentioned how his films could be purchased, including price per meter.¹⁸ Similarly, Theodor Koch-Grünberg benefited from his cooperation with *Express Film*, which made a profit-sharing arrangement with him for the films from his Amazon expedition. The case of Koch-Grünberg is particularly interesting, since he was ambivalent about the intellectual value of films, as he indicated a year after his return from his Amazon expedition in a letter to his Leipzig colleague Fritz Krause, who would later call for the establishment of an ethnographic film archive. On the eve of World War I, both ethnographers had become doubtful about cinematography's promise for ethnographic observation. Krause responded to Grünberg in a letter:

¹⁵ Taureg, op. cit., 24.

¹⁶ Sabine Hake. 1993. "The Cinema Reform Movement." In her *The Cinema's Third Machine. Writing on Film in Germany 1907-1933*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 27-42.

¹⁷ The example of Karl Weule shows that ethnographers also could be successful in writing books with general public appeal. Karl Weule. 1908. *Negerleben in Ostafrika. Ergebnisse einer ethnologischen Forschungsreise*. Leipzig: Brockhaus. Published in English in Great Britain as *Native life in East Africa. Results of an Ethnological Research Expedition*. London: Sir Issac Pitman and Sons, 1909. Also published in the U.S. in 1909 at New York: D. Appleton.

¹⁸ Richard Neuhauss. 1911. *Deutsch-Neu-Guinea*. Berlin: Verlag Dietrich Reimer/Ernst Vohsen.

What you write about the Kino [movie camera] is almost identical to what I think. I would use one only if I got an offer from a company, but I do not know if they are still doing this kind of thing. There would be only few useful scientific images anyway. In most cases films remain more or less a device to illustrate and embellish lectures about our journeys. We have yet to make use of them in a scientific way. [W.F.]¹⁹

Koch-Grünberg and Krause's opinion about the scientific use-value of ethnographic film at this stage points to an important moment in the development of ethnographic filmmaking. Following the enthusiastic use of movie cameras on expeditions in the years roughly between 1905 and 1911, critical assessments were made. Films could be used in lectures and sold to companies, but they did not fulfill ethnographers' expectations that filmmaking itself could produce ethnographic knowledge.

Nevertheless, in subsequent years Koch-Grünberg again changed his mind about film. Before his last expedition, which took him in 1924 to the Amazon accompanied by the American geographer/ethnographer Alexander Hamilton Rice, Koch-Grünberg contacted Rice to ask about shooting films on the expedition. At the same time, he tried to contact *Express Film*, most likely in order to get their assistance for the expedition.²⁰ After Rice told Grünberg that he had already hired a camera operator, Grünberg asked him for half of the net profit of European film sales and distribution.²¹ Grünberg's financial concerns can partly be explained by his personal situation. He had just resigned his secure position as a director of the Stuttgart Linden Museum and needed to be sure that his family would be supported during the time he was on the expedition with Rice. However, it seems that the commercial success of Robert Flaherty's "Nanook of the North" (1922) made German ethnographers aware of the immense financial and promotional potential of "adventurous" ethnographic films. In a letter to Swiss ethnographer Felix Speiser, Grünberg suggested that a film like "Nanook" could easily be made in South America.²²

Films were also screened within ethnographic museums. Recent studies of the history of German ethnology have shown that it was nothing if not diverse. In his provocative and challenging *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*,²³ Glenn Penny shows "how the cultural and social as much as the intellectual interests and desires of scientists, civic associations, collectors, patrons, and visitors, as well as the force of a growing international market in material culture, shaped the science of ethnology and German ethnographic museums."²⁴ Viewing the ethnographic scene from the perspective of the local rather than the national, Penny emphasizes the competitive situation

¹⁹ Archive of Theodor Koch-Grünberg's in the ethnological collection of the University of Marburg: VK Mr A 14.

²⁰ 2600 feet of the Hamilton Rice expedition film are archived at the Human Studies Film Archive at the National Museum of Natural History/Smithsonian Institution. http://www.nmnh.si.edu/naa/guide/hsfa_south_america.htm

²¹ VK, Mr A 37.

²² VK, Mr A 37.

²³ H. Glenn Penny. 2001. *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

among German museums, offering an important framework for discussion of the distribution of ethnographic films in Germany. In my project, "Film and Ethnography in Germany, 1900-1930," I am obliged to ask, to what extent was film used to promote a museum's policy?

In particular, Karl Weule's enthusiasm for experimenting with film as a new pedagogic medium indicates that the Leipzig museum was especially interested in using film screenings to interest the local public. German museum curators contrived a new genre of exhibits-- *Schausammlungen*, or didactic displays. These were quite different from scientific displays. As Glenn Penny observes, the personnel of the Berlin museum were distinctive in dismissing *Schausammlung* as "unscientific" and "inadequate"; in other museums, it seemed that the new displays were the best way to educate the broader public.²⁵ Film screening could support a museum's position in the competitive museum landscape.

Exhibition

As the correspondence between Koch-Grünberg and Fritz Krause shows, ethnographic films could not speak for themselves. In fact, film screenings and lectures were often a part of a multimedia event. Lecture notes such as those of Karl Weule show how the meaning of his films was explained through interpretations, anecdotes and allusions. Within his lecture notes were short headings such as "the prehistory of my expedition"; "acknowledgements"; "general map: research area"; "introduction to the research instruments and the goal of the research"; "my first fever"; "photo walk"; "my evening with the ladies"; and "the beginning of the ethnographic work." Moreover, his movie-lectures had a consistent narrative structure and dramaturgy.²⁶ Weule combined his texts with slides, phonographic recordings and movies. Combining sounds and images, Weule often presented a synchronized scene of dance or song and in order to portray African customs to the "non-East African" public.²⁷ Finally, his movie-lectures often ended with a phono-movie representation of his expedition troop returning to the point where the expedition began. This last point in the lecture evoked the so-called apotheosis, a theatrical and cinematic element in early cinema that gave a film its distinctive final visual climax.

Conclusion

The above generalizations about early ethnographic filmmaking in Germany are only provisional. In the twenties, German ethnographers worked at the same time as exotic and proto-ethnographic feature films were enormously popular in ordinary cinemas. Moreover, because Germany lost its colonies after World War I, ethnographic research became more difficult. However, the success of Robert Flaherty's "Nanook" influenced ethnographers' thinking about film. Further research and analysis are required to determine how ethnographic film practice in these years led to the historical moment when Fritz Krause determined that it was important to establish an ethnographic film archive.

²⁵ Ibid., 147.

²⁶ Archive des Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig: File C 17 AF.

²⁷ Bundesarchiv Berlin: File Reichskolonialamt, R 1001/5673-2, p. 57.