05 2007

“The Halfmoon Files” – Text montage

Text montage based on a lecture (2007) by Britta Lange and Philip Scheffner

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We would like to talk to you about a project we are working on – “The Halfmoon Files”.

Our independent research activities led our paths to cross and we decided to link our basic questions and results. This enables us to watch - and to talk about – "The Halfmoon Files" from more than one angle. Together we developed an exhibition which opened in early 2008 at the Kunstraum Kreuzberg / Bethanien in Berlin under the title “The Making of ...”.

„The Halfmoon Files“ is still a „work in progress“. In this lecture we will present a project cartography of sorts – which continues to develop through new research, questions and contacts.

One focus consists of the question, how and from which angle at all can we talk about the individual aspects of the project. Thus we will change

perspectives as we narrate stories. It is seldom possible to see the protagonists of these stories – nevertheless they are present.

"What is a ghost?
How does he live?
How many types of ghost are there?
How does he become a ghost?
That is what I will tell you about."[1]

Our story is centred on ghosts – about how someone is made into a ghost.
In the field of documentary film, one is obviously faced by a problem when it comes to ghosts:
Spirits rarely let themselves be filmed, let alone interviewed.
They elude your gaze and go through walls.
They are not bound to a particular place or a specific time.
They hover somewhere between life and death.
They come from the past and break into the present.
They always carry with them a secret that needs to be unravelled.
They are invisible but their presence can be felt in the air.

"I can sing you tender songs of love.
I can enable you to always hear the voices of your loved ones –
Even though they are far away.
I can talk in every language.
I can help you to learn other languages.
The name of my famous master is on my body.
And tells you that I am a genuine Edison phonograph."[2]

Thomas Alvar Edison invents the Phonograph in the year 1877 – a device that records sounds on a phonograph cylinder by means of an oscillating diaphragm, which can be played back later by means of a needle.

Suddenly, it is possible to record a person's voice and to reproduce it at any place and time – without the person actually being physically present. Today this seems a matter of course to us. However, at that time it caused a sensation when for instance a family could listen to the voice of the mother who had passed away.

The dead are suddenly able to speak. A kind of spiritual world can be experienced. The phonograph makes it possible to break through the apparently eternal barrier of time and to transport a dead person directly into the present. Not really the dead person, rather just the recorded voice. Yet: real contact seems to be within reach.

And: It seems possible to record – living - individuals and their stories, to track them down again and listen to them – and in turn to construct identities and stories from this material, the recorded "life units" as Edison called them, without ever having had any real contact with the respective person.

This is also what we are doing in the project "The Halfmoon Files". As academics, authors, filmmakers, we construct personal stories, and thus stories based on historical archive material that deals with concrete persons and events. We compile the most diverse fragments, slips of paper, notes, media, footnotes that have to correspond to the drama structure of the respective end product – an academic publication, an exhibition or a film.

Consequently, how the story starts can only be decided at the end of the work. Chronologically seen, the discovery of traces of a complex historical link between India and Germany lies at the start of the work for the project "The Halfmoon Files".

possible beginning 1:

In 1892, 15 years after Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, the Sikh Mall Singh is born in the North Indian village Ranasukhi in the district of Ferozpur, Punjab. His father is also from Ranasukhi, his mother from Derki in the Ludhiana district. He attends the Regiment school in Naushera, Peshawar and joins the army at the age of 19.

At the time he becomes a protagonist of our narrative, Mall Singh is 24 years old. Several ten thousand kilometres away from home, he is located in Wünsdorf, a small German town near Berlin.

On December 11th, 1916 at 4 pm, Mall Singh speaks a short text in his mother tongue into the funnel of a gramophone. The duration of his speech is exactly one minute and 20 seconds.

possible beginning 2:

In 1877, the year Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, a man named Wilhelm Doegen, later to become a teacher and linguist, is born in Berlin.

In Oxford he studies under Henry Sweet, who plays a significant role in the development of phonetic notation. Back in Berlin, Doegen promotes the use of the phonetic script for educational books and sound records for language teaching.

On February 27th, 1914, the Prussian Cultural Ministry receives a proposal by Doegen to establish a sound archive of "All the People of the World". Based on this idea, the "Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission" is set up on October 27th, 1915.

The day he becomes a protagonist of our narrative, Wilhelm Doegen is 39 years old. He is in a wooden barrack in Wünsdorf, a small German town near Berlin.

On December 11th, 1916 at 4 pm, he starts the gramophone and records a typical example of the north Indian language "Punjabi". He assesses the quality of the voice as "strong and light with a good resonance" and labels the recording with the registration number PK 619.

possible beginning 3:

In the autumn of 2002, during the research for my PhD, I come across the sound archive of the Humboldt University in Berlin. I am surprised to hear that hundreds of sound recordings from the First World War are stored in this archive.

In the autumn of 2004, I read an article on the sound archive of the Humboldt University in Berlin. I call the archivist Jürgen Mahrenholz for an appointment. He agrees to show me parts of the collection.

"There once was a man. He ate one ser of butter in India. He drank two ser of milk.
This man came into the European war. Germany captured this man.
He wishes to go to India. He wants to go to India.
He will get the same food as in former times.
Three years have passed. One does not know when there will be peace.
If this man goes back to India, he will get the same food as in former times.

If this man has to stay here for another two years – he will die.
If God has mercy, he will make peace soon.
We will go away from here."*[3]*

The first time I listened to this recording, I was shocked.
It was as if I had encountered an in-between world.
I can simply open a drawer, remove a record and get access to a real person, a historical individual who tells a story.
What did Mall Singh feel as he spoke into the recording funnel?
Why does he speak at all?
What would he think seeing me right now – sitting here with my headphones and listening to his voice?
90 years later.

In order to learn more about Mall Singh and the recording of his voice, we need to take a leap in time – to the last years of the 19th century.

The German Reich has become a colonial power. The "colonial spirit" has created a growing interest of both scientists and the population at large in foreign countries, "exotic" subjects and so-called "barbarians".

The „Barbarian" is an important aspect of the occidental imagination of the world in the late 19th century. The Western world is dominated by evolutionist theories: It is thus assumed that the world's population is divided into "primitive people" (ethnic cultures that live at the mercy of nature and do not own a writing or a written history) and "civilised people" (ethnic cultures that have writing and a written history, i.e. North Americans and Europeans). The "primitive people" represent something like the pre-stages of "civilisation". The "civilised" people thus rule over the uncivilised legitimately. Scientists therefore hope to learn about the early stages of civilised humanity, the evolution of mankind and also their own history by studying primitive ethnic cultures.

These scientific theories have strong popular effects, illustrated by the example of the ethnic shows in Europe: People from various colonial territories are hired by European companies, contracted "to play themselves" for a period of time, for example in European zoos. Seemingly authentic "African villages" are built to fulfil the European image of the "wild Africans", and thereby to legitimise the idea of colonialism.

Human Zoos drawing audiences like magnets. Apart from a trip to the cinema or a colonial museum, ethnic shows are the only possibility for Europeans to have any real contact with "exotics" and their foreign worlds. They are part of the cultural entertainment sector, and as such an economic factor, but also closely interwoven with political and scientific ambitions.

While the organisers consciously use scientific key words to advertise the show and politicians refer to the presence of such shows for their colonial pretensions, scientists carry out studies on the "primitive people" on display. In this way, the spheres of politics, science and economy/cultural entertainment supply each other with material. They are not at variance with one another; rather they are mutually dependent and benefit from each other.

This network of scientific, political and popular needs and intentions continues to work even beyond a most drastic historical moment in August 1914: The outbreak of the First World War.

This is a turning point for every narrative dealing with history: The outbreak of the First World War. An epochal event. The entire world is on the verge of being completely re-organised. Documentary films on the First World War nearly always illustrate this moment through archival images in connection with a historical sound recording:

„The sword must now decide.
In the midst of peace, the enemy attacks us.
So arise! To the weapons!
Every falter, every hesitation would be treachery to the fatherland.
To be or not to be, that is the question for the Reich,
which our fathers newly formed.
To be or not to be, that is the question for the German might and the essence of being German.
We shall resist until the last hint of man and steed.
We shall stand our ground and fight even against an entire world of enemies.
As one, Germany has never before been overpowered.
Go forth with God who will be with us just as he was with our ancestors".[4]

The sound recording subtitled "original voice of Emperor Wilhelm the 2nd" is a lucky strike for the filmmaker: a unique audio document of a time which is usually known for silent film recordings.
Yet we are left a little confused when listening to the original recording: There is no applause at the end of the speech.
Our confusion grows on reading the date of the recording: January 10th, 1918. A date not at the beginning but shortly before the end of the First World War.
In January 1918 millions of people have already died in the War. The German Reich is at the brink of military defeat.
Fully aware of this situation, the German Emperor speaks the same words as three and a half years earlier into the funnel of a phonograph. Wilhelm Doegen, member of the Prussian Phonographic Commission, records the Emperor's voice for his archive "Voices of Celebrities". He believes it to be an important document of a crucial moment in German history.

At this point, a particularly significant aspect of the project becomes clear:
How does one narrate a story that touches upon historical events?
How does one deal with the existing archive material?
How do we represent history through the narrative form we choose?

In August 1914 the First World War breaks out. The German Reich allies with the Kingdom of Austria-Hungary, Rumania, Bulgaria and the Ottoman Empire. Together the so-called "Central Powers" fight against the assaulted Belgium and the Entente states England, France and Russia. All three send soldiers from their colonised nations to the European front: Africans, Asians, Georgians, Tartars, and so on. These "colonial soldiers" are basically abused as cannon fodder, many of them soon end up in war captivity. For the most part, soldiers from the Eastern front, members of the Russian army, are detained in the Austrian and Hungarian POW camps. The prisoners of war in the German camps are also brought in from the Western front, including the colonial soldiers.

A few weeks after Emperor Wilhelm the 2nd had committed the German people to war in August 1914, the Indian Mall Singh steps on European soil, probably for the first time in his life. He arrives in Marseille as a member of the Indian Units belonging to the British Armed Forces. His further transfer leads him directly to the Western front sector close to Neuve Chapel. He serves in the army of the colonial power ruling his own country.

The fact that colonialised people are fighting against nations like the German Reich or Austria turns the former hierarchies set by science and politics upside down. The reactions are drastic: So-called "primitive people" fighting beside supposedly "civilised people" against the German "civilised people". The Germans ought to fear being defeated and losing

their imperial supremacy at the hands of the "primitive people" they consider as inferior.

At the same time, the Germans have to accept Muslims serving in the army of the allied Ottoman Empire as comrades-in-arms. However, these Muslims are meant to play a special role in German war strategy: Soon after the outbreak of war, the diplomat employed at the German Foreign Office, Max von Oppenheim, composes a "Memorandum on revolutionising the Islamic territories of our enemies', which becomes the basis for German politics towards the orient and Islam.

In the text, Oppenheim defines three decisive aims as the "final result of the world war": "defeating England through the conquest of Egypt and uprisings in India; Turkey's victory over Russia in a ground battle in the Caucasus; revolutions in the French territories, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco".

He phrases: "In the war forced upon us against England [...] Islam will become one of our most important weapons", explicitly demanding Jihad, the holy war, as German war strategy.[5]

Concretely, von Oppenheim recommended the internment of the captured "enemy" colonial soldier in so-called special camps, which then took place from end 1914.

In the German special camps, the Muslim prisoners were to be encouraged by means of propaganda to actively participate in the 'holy war' as part of the Turkish units. The non-Muslim prisoners – like the Indian Sikhs and Hindus – were to be incited to revolt against their colonial rulers with the help of Germany. Two of these special camps – the "Weinberg Lager"/ "Vineyard Camp" and the "Halbmond Lager" / "Halfmoon Camp" were located in Wünsdorf, close to Berlin.

I went to Wünsdorf for the first time in 2004.

During this year, following the murder of the filmmaker Theo van Gogh in Holland, the heated debates about Germany's attitude towards Islam take on a new dimension.

On 18.11.2004, a mosque in Sinsheim (Baden Würtemberg) is set on fire.

At the annual party assembly of the CSU on November 20th, Edmund Stoiber calls the German people a "community of destiny that emerged from a common history, in good as well as in bad times, a common language and culture, common traditions and a common Christian religion".

Today over three million Muslims live in Germany. The largest group of two million consists of migrants from Turkey and their descendants. For a long time, the religious life of the different Muslim communities was restricted to so-called “backyard mosques”. Only since the 1990s have there been attempts to represent Muslim life through visible mosque architecture. The building of these mosques draws regular protests from the non-Muslim population. The mosque becomes a political issue and an object of numerous trials and juristic opinions.

Even in 1915, a mosque on German soil was a political issue – yet under slightly different circumstances. According to the policy predetermined by the Jihad strategy, the prisoners interned at Wünsdorf were to be persuaded to defect through "guidance and education", "good treatment" and primarily through the endorsement of their respective religious practices. Under this policy, the first mosque on German soil, for the express purpose of exercising religious practices, was inaugurated on July 13th, 1915 at

the “Halfmoon Camp” in Wünsdorf. Concurrently, it was meant to prove abroad how liberal the Germans are when dealing with foreign and colonised people.

According to various sources, approximately 12,000 Muslims from Russia and additionally about 4,000 prisoners of war from the French and English colonies were detained in Wünsdorf. But what do we actually know about the people in the camps?

In trying to trace detailed information about the people in the camp, one is primarily dependent on "official records" prepared by German institutions. For the most part, these documents recount Germany’s perception of “the others” rather than observations from their own point of view.

As far as we know, original writings of the prisoners hardly exist at all. The prisoners remain blurred, like extras in a staged set-up, reflected today through photographs, figures, lists or footnotes. Or then through the motion pictures we discovered in the Federal Film Archive in Berlin. Until today, it is known to be the only existing film recording from the “Halfmoon Camp”. It was shot in 1915 and is about 4 minutes long.

The camera observes a festival – an occasion to invite top-ranking politicians and journalists. In the first part of the film they stride along the backdrop of the camp and it's inhabitants as if sightseeing. The focus is then turned away from them to several other scenes. The propaganda purpose is very clear: Politicians and the press witness the supposedly good treatment of the prisoners (at least in the special camps). Even goats are provided for the ritual of slaughtering, and the inmates can practice their religion without any restrictions.

But in particular it is the second part of the film that highlights something else: something we would today perhaps call „folklore“: the lighting of a fire, preparation of food, playing music, singing and dancing – scenes that are considered „typical“ for an ethnic group, a people or a religious community. These recordings could be called "ethnographic". They show the “foreign”, or more specifically: foreigners in motion at “typical” activities.

However, the foreigners are not being filmed in a foreign country, rather in the German Reich. They represent “primitive peoples” on the terms of the “civilised peoples”. Hence the second part of the film on the Wünsdorf camp is even more similar to films on ethnic shows, as made by film pioneers shortly after the invention of the medium: In 1894 Edison invited a group of native Indians performing in Buffalo Bill’s Wild West Show to dance in front of the camera in his studio; as early as in 1895 the Lumière brothers filmed so-called “wogs” in Lyon.

The film made in Wünsdorf in 1915 serves political ambitions but its presentation is like that of an ethnic show in a POW camp or a range of ethnographic villages in a colonial exhibition, also in the tradition of the entertainment industry.

Following the principle of propaganda, colonial exhibitions restaged life in the colonies for the German audience. Even the “Halfmoon Camp” in Wünsdorf is turned into such a stage – however not within the context of an exhibition, but as *location* for a series of colonial film dramas. Officially, these films are considered to be lost. A few photos from the private asset of camp director Otto Stiehl are archived in the Museum of European Cultures in Berlin.

A woman is seated with other people on a bench, looking seemingly relaxed. In the background, a camp barack is clearly

noticeable. It is the first picture that we came across of a woman in the camp. On a second look, one notices the film camera. The entire set-up really looks like a classical film set for a movie production: Cameras and people standing around waiting for something to happen.

On other photos, the letters DEUKO can be read at the bottom left, the abbreviation for the German Colonial Film Association. The company was founded in March 1917 in Berlin and specified its ambitions in the very same year in the German Colonial Newspaper: “Briefly said, we would like to present exciting colonial film dramas with a healthy tendency (...) this includes the conviction that colonies have an enormous importance for our country (...) and thus the Deutsche Kolonial Film has resolved as it's programme: the propagation and consolidation of the idea of Colonialism in the country.“[6]

Officially, the company exists for just two years but makes 5 feature-length films during this time. They generally select a real event as the historical setting. In the film “Farmer Borchardt”, the 1904 revolt of the Herero against the German colonial rule in German-South West Africa (today Namibia) was the backdrop of a tragic story of love, betrayal and loyalty to the fatherland.

The films are not shot in Africa. The African colonies are re-invented in the Wünsdorf prison camp for at least one film. The inmates provide “authenticity” and the necessary local colour; African shields, spears and a hippo whip are borrowed from the Museum of Ethnography in Berlin.

The production “The Prisoner of Dahomey” (1918) is a story about German colonialists in Africa, captured by the French and interned in the ‘Dahomey’ camp.

German actors stage their imprisonment and maltreatment at the hands of French camp commandants – it is filmed entirely in a real German POW camp with French prisoners from North Africa as extras...

The real situation in the German special camps changes. The successes of the Jihad-Propaganda are sparse, only a few prisoners let themselves be convinced to defect.

From 1916, another side declares increasing interest in the prisoners: The scientific world discovers the camp as the perfect alternative to the classical field research.

The director at the time, of the department of Oceania and Africa at the Berlin Museum of Ethnography, Felix von Luschan wrote:

"Represented in our prison camps is a sheer innumerable magnitude of different races, every continent and every colour ever observed in human beings. A visit to some of these camps is almost as rewarding for the expert as a trip around the world."[7]

Felix von Luschan, who conducts extensive body measurements on the prisoners, is member of the earlier mentioned "Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission", the very commission of about 30 scientists that was to add the voice of the Indian Mall Singh to the archives of German scientific history in November 1916.

The commission aims, "to systematically classify on sound records the voices of all different ethnic groups in German POW camps together with the corresponding texts on the basis of methodical principles." [8]

Between the end of 1915 and the end of 1918, anthropologists, linguists and musicologist visit 29 of the total 175 German internment camps.

The scientists find the general conditions in the camps "ideal": The objects of their scientific interest do not have to be tediously retrieved – they are already assembled at one place and cannot run away or simply deny collaboration. In this way, the prison camp turns into a laboratory, where scientific work can be conducted under controlled conditions.

The Prussian Phonographic Commission produces in German prison camps about 1030 music recordings on Edison-wax cylinders, which are part of the Berlin Phonogram Archive. An additional number of 1650 gramophone sound records of language recordings were produced under the technical direction of Wilhelm Doegen. These form the basic stock of the Berlin Sound Archive, located today at the Humboldt University.

1650 recordings of human voices
1650 biographies
1650 stories

Most of the recordings have an impersonal or mythological background: fairy tales, fables, religious texts, alphabets, sample words, series of numbers.

The recording with the register number PK 619 of the Indian soldier Mall Singh is an exception in this entire stock: It is one of the few recordings which depicts a personal view of the daily life in the camps.

Nevertheless, an impression of a person emerges through each of these sound recordings which neither a photograph nor a film sequence can provide. Not by what is said but rather how it is expressed.

Every stutter, every stumble, every gasp makes it possible to experience the physical presence of the person sitting in front of the funnel. This is a contradiction to the actual intention of the scientists: as they stringently define the procedure.

First, a text for the speech is agreed upon with the prisoner. The written text is held over the gramophone funnel so that the prisoner can read from it. The spoken (or sung) text is then directly inscribed onto a gramophone record. It is not possible to correct the recording.

In accordance with scientific systematic, the sound recording and the text sheet have to be identical. Hence, unwanted and unforeseen personal statements that arise during the recording have to be documented by the scientist in the data sheets. The claim for objectivity thus turns into it's absurd contrary - for example, in one recording of an Indian prisoner, he suddenly says at the end of the predetermined text “Guten Tag!” in German, mentions his name and starts laughing. Subsequently, the scientist must fill out a form called "comments", in which he also meticulously documents these acoustic expressions.

Thus the person talking into the funnel undermines the comparable, scientific collection of data simply through his acting as an individual. The immanent power relation between the scientist and the object – between the speaker and the person who activates the recording mechanism – is invalidated for a few seconds.

The gentle murmur of the scientist in the background, the failed recording that has to be restarted make the conditions transparent under which scientific knowledge is established. These moments,

microscopic disturbances in the scientific historical process of reproduction, are for us the core of “The Halfmoon Files” project.

Moments in which a real person, knowingly or unknowingly, resists the systematic utilisation and the linear, stringent appropriation through science.

The moment the real person refuses to be an extra in someone else's production, thereby questioning the methods not just of science, but also of any artistic and cinematic recording.

1650 recordings of human voices
1650 biographies
1650 stories

There is only one recording of the Indian Mall Singh.
It lasts one minute and 20 seconds.

For numerous participating scientists, the "Halfmoon Camp" formed the cornerstone of their careers – most of their names later appear at key positions of German scientific institutions – the further fate of Mall Singh, though, is not known.

We assume that he did not die in the camp. His name does not show on the official grave list.

He was probably transferred along with many other Indian and African prisoners in 1917 to a camp in Romania. Or maybe he was part of a group of 130 Indian prisoners who were transferred to the prison camp Großbaum close to Duisburg to work in the steel mills of the Hahn Corporation, a company that was later taken over by Mannesmann Group.

We do not know whether Mall Singh ever returned to India.

During the course of work on this project, an image is imprinted on our minds. This image shall conclude the story.

A place somewhere in the world – maybe a city in India.
A sunny day like any other – unspectacular.
A person sits across from us and puts on headphones.
Noise can be heard through the headphones and a voice sets in.
The voice does not say "I" but rather "he". It speaks of itself in the third person.
The voice talks of a place thousands of kilometres away.
The voice stumbles.
The clearing of one's throat can be heard.
The voice starts again and ends with the words, "We will go away from here".
Again the noise, then a crack – silence.

The person sitting across from us has just heard the voice of his great grandfather.

He takes off the headphones and looks at us.

This last image we described raises a series of complex questions for us:

What do we actually want from that person opposite us - do we get involved in a discussion?

To what extent do we, once again, turn this person into an extra – this time in a cultural project, a film, a lecture, a text?

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[1] Bhawan Singh from Almora/Darjeeling, „Narrations" in Khas, recorded in the prisoner of war camp Wünsdorf on 8.12.1916 at 4:30 (Berlin Sound Archive, PK 591).

[2] Advertisement for an Edison Phonograph (sound recording).

[3] Mall Singh from Ranasukhi/Ferozpur, „Thoughts about himself“ in Punjabi, recorded in the prisoner of war camp Wünsdorf on 11.12.1916 at 4:30 (PK 619).

[4] Sound recording of Kaiser Wilhelms II, conducted by Wilhelm Doegen, Schloss Bellevue, 10.1.1918, also published on CD by the German Broadcasting Archive (DRA 13-1524/8, 20.55).

[5] Memorandum on revolutionising the Islamic territories of our enemies, by Max Freiherrn von Oppenheim, Imperial Minister-Resident, October 1914; Political Archive of the German Foreign Office, IA-World War, WK Nr. 11, R 20938, Annex to Volume 2.

[6] Martin Steinke: “Colonial Propaganda Films”, in: *German Colonial Newspaper. Institution of the German Colonial Association,* No. 9/1917, 20.9.1917.

[7] Prisoners of war. A contribution to ethnology in world wars / Introduction to the main features of anthropology by Prof. Dr. Felix von Luschan. Hundred stone drawings by Hermann Struck, Berlin 1917, Pg. 2.

[8] Wilhelm Doegen: „Introduction“, in: id. (Ed.): Among Foreign Peoples. Berlin 1925, Pg. 9-16, here Pg. 10.