

# Double Vision: Encountering Early Ethnographic Films in the Digital Archive

Petra Löffler

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## **Double Vision: Encountering Early Ethnographic Films in the Digital Archive**

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*“... the circulation of images presupposed by the archive implicates social, historical, and political relations of dominance.” (Fatimah Tobing Rony)<sup>1</sup>*

Ethnographic filmmaking contributes greatly to the variety and complexity of modern visual culture. In the early days of cinematography “a remarkable parallel development in anthropology and cinema” can be observed,<sup>2</sup> starting with the first film screenings by the Lumière brothers in Paris in 1895 and the Torres Strait expedition to Papua New Guinea led by British anthropologist Alfred Cord Haddon in 1898, who declared the film camera “an indispensable piece of anthropological apparatus”.<sup>3</sup> However, mastering the new technology was a demanding task for the scientists who were not trained as cinematographers in the first place. Moreover, the specific climatic and light conditions expedition teams had to face in the tropics, for instance, presented a challenge for them. It is no wonder that many attempts to film the everyday life of indigenous people as part of ethnographic fieldwork failed, with only a few 35mm film reels surviving in museum collections and archives.

Early ethnographic films, always on the margins of film history and widely dispersed across various archival institutions, challenge conceptions of film historical artifacts as well as “the methodological mythologies of archival encounters.”<sup>4</sup> Many of these largely “unseen and unused” films have only recently been digitised and are now available on the websites of institutional or popular digital platforms such as the Library of Congress or YouTube.<sup>5</sup> Thus, archival encounters are increasingly mediated by digital technologies and infrastructures. Although more accessible, digitised films are often presented on websites without valid information about the circumstances of the filming and the captured subjects.

The question remains how the digitisation of marginalised early ethnographic films changes the way they are perceived as archival objects. In this featurette, I choose the archived filmic outcome of the so-called “Hamburger Südsee-Expedition” from 1908 to 1910 as an example. The surviving eleven minutes of the original 35mm footage was digitised in 2018-19 by the Technical Information Library (TIB) in Hanover. I will analyse this footage both as an event of early ethnographic filmmaking *and* as a specific archival object. In doing so I will argue for a relational understanding of ethnographic filmmaking and its preservation that accounts for the responsibilities, constraints, and different interests of the people and institutions involved in capturing, distributing, and transforming moving images into an archival object.

The eventful history of the Hamburg films raises questions about the significance of film recordings for ethnographic research, the role of archives and museums in their preservation or digitisation, and, not least, their entanglement in German colonial politics. In the following, I will reconstruct the object biography of the Hamburg films based on signatures, inventory lists, and descriptions of the expedition members to shed light on this entanglement and to question its status as an archival object. I am explicitly interested in the material condition of the archived films and will discuss their specificity in relation to their accessible digital supplement.

In 1908, Georg Thilenius, director of the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde, sent a group of researchers on an expedition to the then-German colonies in Melanesia and Micronesia. The team was equipped with several still cameras, two phonographs and a film camera. The goal was to make as many recordings of indigenous people – their bodies and lifestyles, their crafts, rituals, and languages – as possible. Already in an unpublished letter dating from 1907, Thilenius declared that the film camera should be used to “record dances, working methods, etc.”<sup>6</sup> After two years of exploring the Pacific islands of Papua New Guinea, New Britain, New Ireland, the Caroline and Marshall Islands, the German scientists brought back several thousand photographs, sketches, and notes, filling twenty-four printed volumes with their findings. In

comparison, the quantity of film produced was very low: only around eleven minutes could be shot on 35mm footage.

In contrast to the photographs taken during the expedition, these early attempts in ethnographic filmmaking played only a minor role in the volumes of the expedition's results published later. When Herbert Tischner, an expert on the arts and crafts of the Pacific islands who had worked for the Hamburg Museum since 1933, viewed the footage again, he did not even know who from the expedition team had taken the moving images. Moreover, after only twenty years of storage, Tischner had to lament the poor condition of the footage already affected by deterioration.<sup>7</sup> By this time, the films had become a marginal archival object. In 1941, the easily combustible 35mm nitrate film was sent to the Berlin Reichsanstalt für Film und Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht (RWU) where they were copied to the then-prevalent 16mm film format. This Nazi regime institution first produced and distributed educational films on 16mm, but it also had scientific research films in its portfolio.<sup>8</sup>

Although the Hamburg films are mentioned in historical outlines of ethnographic film, no attention is paid to either the individual films or their potential for ethnographic research.<sup>9</sup> This is even more surprising considering their diverse subjects. It can be assumed that Tischner arranged the total of eleven individual films, ranging in length from fifteen seconds to one minute and fifteen seconds, according to the primary research interests of ethnographic filmmaking at the time, namely visible daily life and public activities that could easily be captured on film. However, this arrangement as a series raises questions – not least since it does not correspond to the chronology in which the films were originally recorded. This can be determined by comparing the location information of the film titles with the expedition diary.

After the war, in 1956, the films were kept in the newly founded Institute for Scientific Film in Göttingen (IWF). On the hardboard boxes in which the film copies are stored, damage to the

negative and loan data are also recorded. Since the liquidation of the IWF in 2001, the TIB in Hanover took over its collection of 1,953 copies, the world's largest collection of ethnographic films. In 2018-19, the TIB also handled their digitisation as part of the large-scale DELFT project, which aims at long-term archiving, DOI assignment, indexing of metadata and integration of the digital copies into its portal for audio-visual media. Due to this institutional shift, the digitised Hamburg films can also be viewed on the TIB's website accompanied by some basic information.<sup>10</sup> However, I first encountered them at the Hamburg Museum am Rothenbaum (MARKK) when I visited the South Seas section of the permanent exhibition, along with Tischner's explanatory notes written in 1939 and published in 1941. Here, the films were shown until recently on a small screen surrounded by vitrines with ethnographic objects collected on Pacific islands, such as masks and ancestral images.<sup>11</sup> When I happened to come across the film footage in the museum, I was struck by the fact that it was displayed without commentary next to the material artefacts. In fact, I wondered what the films were supposed to show or explain in comparison to the ethnographic artefacts on display.

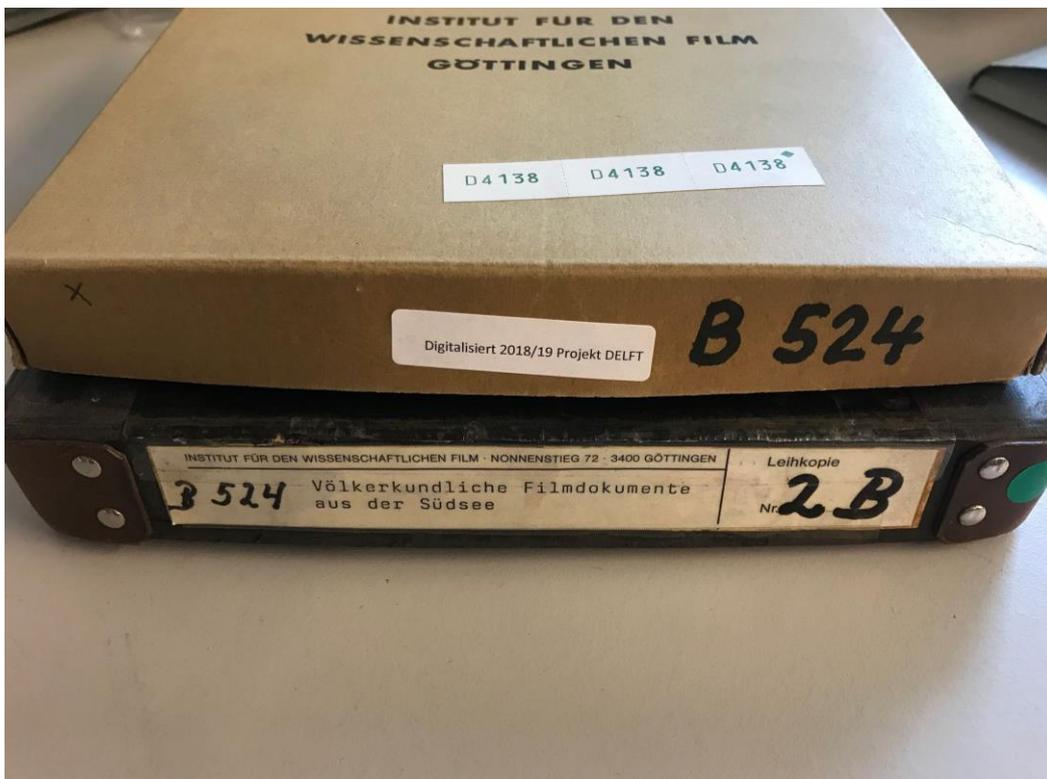


Figure 1. Hardboard boxes of the Hamburg films with IWF inventory number B 524.

After this first encounter in the museum space, I watched the digitised film compilation several times at the TIB's website, and focused on its subjects and the way they were filmed. Analysing the digitised films today, one cannot but notice the unevenly developed film emulsion, as well as numerous scratches and fingerprints, which are certainly traces from the original 35mm film. It is obvious that the films have not been restored prior to their digitisation. In addition, slight frame jumps repeatedly occur during playback. As indicated by the inscription on the film can, the footage was shot at 18 frames per second and played back at 24 frames per second, making all movements appear frantic and accelerated.

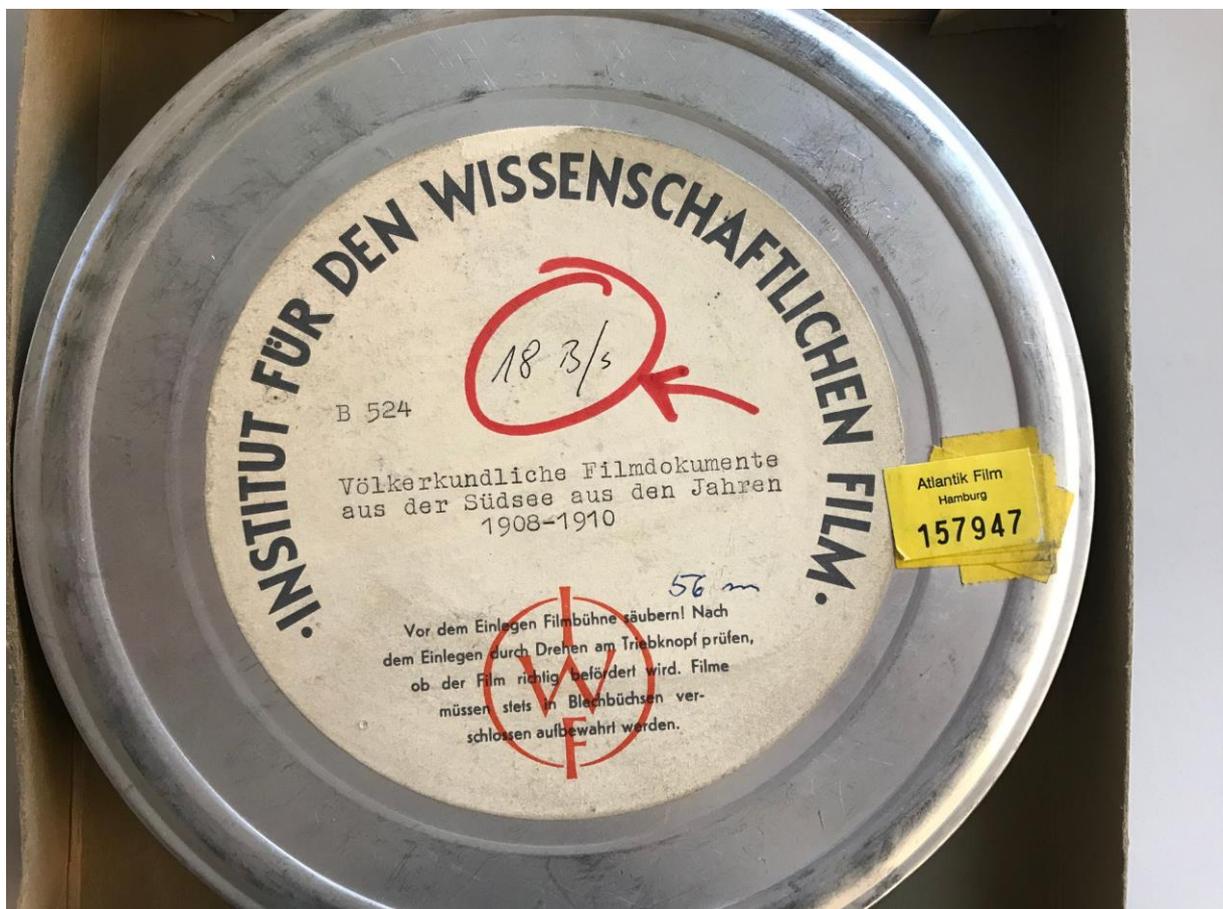


Figure 2: Film can containing the Hamburg films (IWF Göttingen)

According to the intertitles, the first two short films in the compilation show a masked dance and a stick dance in the Mortlock Islands of Micronesia. In the first film, six men wearing large, white-painted masks and carrying long dancing sticks appear in two rows facing each other. The masked men frequently change their positions, shaking their sticks and looking, from time

to time, in the direction of the camera, aware of its presence. To learn more about the date, the site, and the circumstances of shooting, I consulted the printed version of the expedition's official diary. It was kept by expedition member Franz Emil Hellwig and printed only in 1927, in the first volume of the results of the Hamburg South Seas Expedition. In it, one also finds Thilenius' detailed outline of the expedition where he specified the required photographic and filmic equipment for the expedition. According to this source, they must have been made on 26 or 28 March 1910. As Hellwig reports, on 25 March the expedition ship *Peiho* reached the three atolls of the Namoi or Mortlock and anchored in Chamisso Harbor. On the same day, expedition leader Augustin Krämer received the "ordered Mortlock dance masks" from Satawan islanders, and on the afternoon of 26 March, a stick dance performance took place on Tā "with the masks made for us".<sup>12</sup> Whether this performance was filmed is not stated. Hellwig only mentions that expedition member Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow would have made photographs on this occasion, and reports that also on 28 March, Krämer and his fellows witnessed another stick dance performance on the coral island of Nama.<sup>13</sup>

In the second film in the compilation, another stick dance is performed by six unmasked men, some wearing long white trousers. Again, the camera, typically mounted on a tripod, is positioned at a distance from the dancers. This time, however, other indigenous people – women dressed in capes and unclothed children – enter the scene, passing the dancers and disappearing into the palm grove, paying no attention to the performance. At the edge of that grove, a woman in a long dark Western dress stands with her back to the camera observing the dancers. This woman could have been Krämer-Bannow, who is reported to have participated in the trip to Tā on 26 March 1910 to take photographs. Just before the film ends, after only 27 seconds, the camera shakes briefly and moves from its rigid position, as if the cameraman had been jostled by one of the bystanders. These small incidents indicate that the filming was influenced and, to some degree, disturbed by both islanders and Westerners who were watching the performance

at the same time it was being filmed. As is often the case in ethnographic filmmaking, there is no clear distinction between the observer and the observed, or between the filmic space and the filmic “off.”

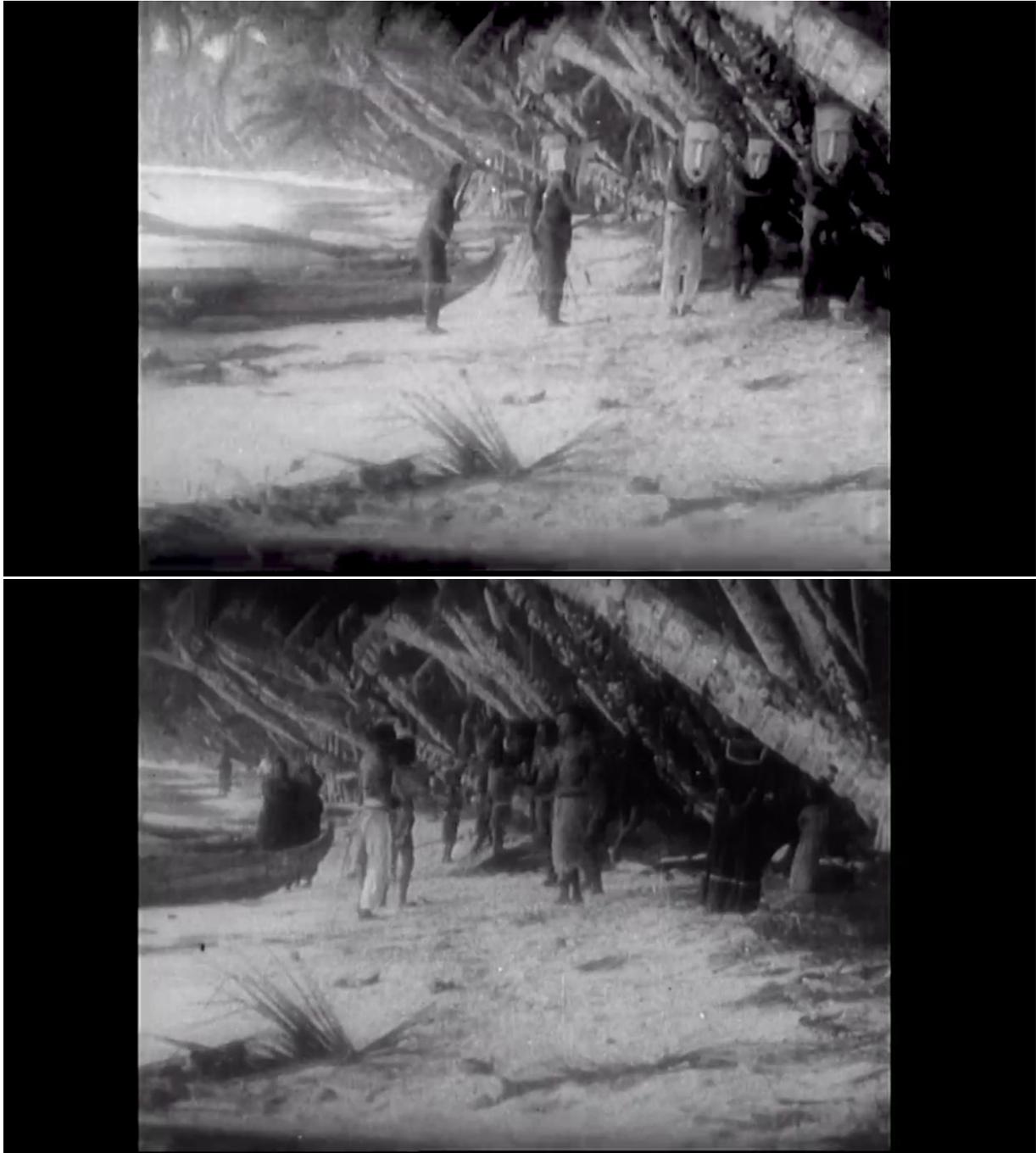


Figure 3 and 4: *Mask Dance and Stick Dance on Mortlock Islands* (Hamburg Südsee Expedition, 1910).

Five more shots of dances follow, representing various dances as one of the major themes of early ethnographic filmmaking. All these films are of a very poor visual quality; the images are blurred and show hardly any contrasts. Again, the body movements captured appear accelerated. I noticed that in the shots of a spear dance, the camera was positioned closer to the action: a group of men dance alternately on the spot, back and forth, finally passing the camera and leaving the frame. This movement toward the camera gives the impression that the ethnographer who is filming has become part of the situation being filmed. Even though recordings of dance performances had to be planned, they rarely met the Western ethnographers' high expectations: lacking the necessary preparation time, they "turned out rather flat".<sup>14</sup> They did not consider the moving images to be of high scientific value.

The last three films in the compilation capture the making of pottery in East Guinea and on the Admiralty Islands, the preparation for fire in the same location, and the practice of weaving on St. Matthias, focusing on the loom and the weaver's hands almost cutting off the head of the weaving woman sitting on the floor. The visual quality of the images in these films is also very poor; they have very low contrast and look overexposed, as if the film stock had been improperly handled and previously exposed. Apart from the poor condition of the original 35mm film stock, which gives the performing bodies a ghostly appearance, what strikes me most is that the films have not been arranged according to the chronology of the expedition. Their order follows Western ethnographic categories such as "ritual" or "everyday life" and fields of interest such as "dance", "pottery" or "weaving", which detach the footage from the concrete date, place, and situation, as well as from the people involved. Subsumed under these categories of knowledge, the films enter the dominant sphere of Western science as a specific "epistemological thing".<sup>15</sup>

As is shown by the official diary and the maps accompanying the publication (on which all the stations of the expedition are dated),<sup>16</sup> these last three films of the series from East Guinea and

the Bismarck Archipelago must have been shot in the first year.<sup>17</sup> According to Hellwig, the *Peiho* had been anchored off St. Matthias since 9 August 1908.<sup>18</sup> On 30 August, he reports the recording of a war dance performed by 15 men.<sup>19</sup> According to this source, on 5 September it was possible to photograph and film a spear dance performed by 20 men and on 19 September, despite persistent rain, photographs and films of weaving women could be taken in the village of Pálakau.<sup>20</sup> The official diary also states that some expedition members attended a dance celebration in Möve Harbor on the south coast of New Pomerania (New Britain) on 13 December: “FÜLLEBORN photographed, MÜLLER tried to determine the dances in the notebook. A cinematographic recording by VOGEL failed.”<sup>21</sup> The young, unexperienced artist Hans Vogel was hired by Thilenius to be the official painter, photographer, and cinematographer of the Hamburg expedition. However, the next day Hellwig proudly remarked that he succeeded in photographing “some dances performed even with the participation of the women”.<sup>22</sup> Surprisingly, none of these photographs are included in the volume, in contrast to images presenting weaving practices on several islands.<sup>23</sup>

These reports reveal that dance performances had to be negotiated with the Pacific islanders, who not only supplied masks “ordered” for these occasions, but also performed for a Western audience. At the same time, the film recordings had to be carefully planned by the expedition team and in some cases did not eventually take place: for instance, filming failed because landings were not possible or pre-announced celebrations did not take place at the expected time. The accounts also affirm that Pacific Island communities contributed to the success or failure of ethnographic filming and were integral part of the “complex social interactions around visual technologies” framed by the hierarchies and dynamics of colonial power.<sup>24</sup> This becomes evident when Krämer notes that dance ceremonies were banned by the colonial administration during his stay on the Caroline Islands in 1910 because they had to be elaborately prepared and often lasted for days, so that people could not work on the plantations during this time, and

openly complains that indigenous ritualised dances disappeared because of colonisation and missionisation.<sup>25</sup> However, the blind spot of ethnographers like Krämer is that collecting artifacts and recording scenes of indigenous life as part of “salvage ethnography” helps to destroy what it wants to preserve.<sup>26</sup>

With Thilenius’ support, Vogel published a popular book shortly after the end of the expedition, in which the ambitious artist described his tasks in detail: “I had to record house types and village views, groups of people and population, people at work, etc., had to sketch the construction of houses and objects, as well as boat types and ornaments. Of dances and working methods I made moving images (*Kinematogramme*).”<sup>27</sup> He also confessed that some of the films “survived the transport to Germany badly”, suggesting difficulties not only in mastering the camera and the film material, but also in preserving the captured images.<sup>28</sup> The poor visual quality of the images supposedly taken by the inexperienced cinematographer Hans Vogel, or the lack of ethnographic value simply had to be accepted.

Experienced researchers and photographers such as Krämer made detailed claims about how to take pictures in the tropics and preserve them correctly. He had already taken part in an expedition to Micronesia from 1906 to 1907 on the steamer *Planet*. In his expedition report, he describes how the exposed plates should be developed and how they should best be stored and shipped.<sup>29</sup> Krämer also mentions the particular climatic difficulties under which photographs are to be taken and processed in the tropics: “But it is not to be developed for long at all in the tropics. Everything depends on finding out the right lighting (*Beleuchtung*).”<sup>30</sup>

It comes as no surprise that many of the attempts to take photographs and especially moving images during the rather short field trips failed or remained unsatisfactory – especially since the scientists were in many respects not well prepared to produce such images. Under such pressure, filming dance performances must have been quite a difficult endeavour, perpetually

affected by colonial governance and third-party interests. In his critical study on the Hamburg expedition, ethnographer Hans Fischer revealed that, in addition to their research duties, the expedition members had a “colonial task” to which they agreed.<sup>31</sup> Colonial power relations had an impact on the filming in many ways: they not only dominated the contact and interaction with indigenous communities, but also influenced the situations and circumstances of the shooting.

After being stored in the Hamburg Museum für Völkerkunde, the films began a separate “life” as distributed archival objects stored in various institutions, from the RWU in Berlin (1941) and the IWF in Göttingen (1956) to the TIB in Hanover (2001), and finally the Bundesarchiv in Berlin (2010), where today there are two 35mm copies as well as a 16mm copy and two further DVDs.<sup>32</sup> Stored on different media formats and in different institutions, the object biography of the Hamburg films to date shows significant changes of their materiality and no less important ruptures concerning their preserving archives. As an archival object, the films *are* a multiplicity of separate entities – they coexist as a material thing *and* a digital file. Their archival “life” (or “afterlife”) continued and continues as a (decaying) material thing sealed in a state archive *and* as a digital file accessible on the TIB’s website. Their spectral longevity oscillates between visibility and invisibility, between presence and absence underlining the institutional power of Western archives and their inevitable desire to preserve. The digital archive also produces absences in reproducing the epistemological gaps of Western colonial archives and ethnographic image production. Today, when encountering early ethnographic films, one cannot help but note the absence of expressions by the people who were filmed a century ago and feel the need to counter the prevailing Western archival modes: cataloguing, sorting (out), and preserving. What these films can reveal to researchers today depends at the same time on the courage to decolonise Western categories of knowledge and on the recognition of the ever-changing media condition of archival things.<sup>33</sup>

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>2</sup> Anna Grimshaw, “The Eye in the Door: Anthropology, Film, and the Exploration of Inner Space,” in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 37.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>4</sup> Katherine Groo, *Bad Films Histories. Ethnography and the Early Archive* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 5. For a critical discussion of the term “early ethnographic film” see *ibid.*, 6–7.

<sup>5</sup> David MacDougall, “The Visual in Anthropology,” in *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 283.

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Hans Fischer, *Randfiguren der Ethnologie. Gelehrte und Amateure, Schwindler und Phantasten* [Marginal Figures in Ethnology. Scholars and Amateurs, Tricksters and Visionaries], (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 2003), 76.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Tischner, “Völkerkundliche Filmdokumente aus der Südsee aus den Jahren 1908-1910 [Ethnographic Film Documents from the South Seas 1908-1910],” in *Reichsanstalt für Film und Bild in Wissenschaft und Unterricht. Archivfilm B 524/1941* (1941), 1.

<sup>8</sup> It is worth remembering that 16mm film, together with corresponding cameras, was developed by Eastman-Kodak in 1923 specifically for educational purposes and that only few ethnographers were using 16mm film in the following decade, amongst them Franz Boas in the Kwakiutl region of Northwest America in 1930 and Gregory Bateson in Bali in 1936-39 (See Werner Petermann “Geschichte des ethnographischen Films. Ein Überblick [History of Ethnographic Film. An Overview],” in *Die Fremden sehen. Ethnologie und Film* [Seeing the Strangers. Ethnology and Film] (Munich: Trickster, 1984, 38).

<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, Karl G. Heider, *Ethnographic Film* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996), 18; Werner Petermann, “Geschichte des ethnographischen Films. Ein Überblick,” 22-23; Assenka Oksiloff, *Picturing the Primitive. Visual Culture, Ethnography, and Early German Cinema* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 54.

<sup>10</sup> For information on the origin and condition of the copies, I thank the TIB archivists Paul Feindt and Miriam Reiche, who also provided the photographs. For more information on the films, see (<https://av.tib.eu/media/22265?hl=Tischner> accessed 11/14/2021).

<sup>11</sup> The films were removed in December 2021 as part of a critical revision of the permanent exhibition.

<sup>12</sup> Georg Thilenius, *Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition 1908-1910* [Results of the South Seas Expedition 1908-1910] (Hamburg: L. Friederichsen & Co, 1927), 338, 339.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> See Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, *Toward a History of Epistemic Things. Synthesizing Proteins in the Test Tube* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

<sup>16</sup> Thilenius, *Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition 1908-1910*, maps 2 and 3.

<sup>17</sup> For a detailed account of the locations and dates of the visit, see M. L. Berg, “The Wandering Life Among Unreliable Islanders: The Hamburg Südsee-Expedition in Micronesia,” in *The Journal of Pacific History* 23, no. 1 (1988): 97–98.

<sup>18</sup> Thilenius, *Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition 1908-1910*, 47.

<sup>19</sup> See *ibid.*, 58.

<sup>20</sup> See *ibid.*, 70.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibid.*, plate 10 and 19.

<sup>24</sup> Alison Griffith, *Wondrous Difference: Cinema, Anthropology, and Turn-of-the-Century Visual Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 105.

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- <sup>25</sup> Augustin Krämer, *Truk. Ergebnisse der Südsee-Expedition 1908-1910* [Truk. Results of the South Seas Expedition 1908-1910] (Hamburg: Friederichsen, De Gruyter & Co, 1932), 277, 284.
- <sup>26</sup> See Jacob W. Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," in *American Anthropologist* 172 (1970): 1289–99 and Rony, *The Third Eye*, 90–92.
- <sup>27</sup> Hans Vogel, *Eine Forschungsreise im Bismarck-Archipel. Bearbeitet von Hans Vogel. Mit einer Einführung von Prof. Dr. G. Thilenius* [An Expedition in the Bismarck Archipelago. Edited by Hans Vogel. With an Introduction by Prof. Dr. G. Thilenius] (Hamburg: L. Friederichsen & Co, 1911), 35.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> Augustin Krämer, *Forschungsreise S.M.S. „Planet“ 1906/07* [Expedition S.M.S. „Planet“ 1906/07] (Berlin: Verlag von Karl Siegismund, 1909), 30.
- <sup>30</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>31</sup> Hans Fischer, *Die Hamburger Südsee-Expedition. Über Ethnographie und Kolonialismus* [The Hamburg South Seas Expedition. On Ethnography and Colonialism] (Frankfurt/Main: Syndikat, 1981), 38–48.
- <sup>32</sup> For information on the film formats stored in the Bundesarchiv in Berlin, I thank the archivist Justus Wörmann.
- <sup>33</sup> Here I refer to Derrida's insight that "the technical structure of the *archiving* archive also determines the structure of the *archivable* content;" see Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever. A Freudian Impression*. Transl. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 17.

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### **Author Biography**

Petra Löffler is Professor of History and Theory of Contemporary Media at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg. She is author of several edited volumes and books on media archaeology, ecology, and media practices: *Bilder verteilen. Fotografische Praktiken in der digitalen Kultur* (2018), *Earth and Beyond in Tumultuous Times. A Critical Atlas of the Anthropocene* (2021) and *Materials, Practices, and Politics of Shine in Modern Art and Popular Culture* (2021), among others. She has also recently published articles on the materiality of decayed film footage in *Cinéma & Cie. International Film Studies Journal* and on colonial histories of photography in *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft*.