

Postcolonial Historiography in the Essay Film: ›De-Colonizing‹ Sound and Image

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›De-Colonizing‹ sound and image

Historical documentary films must deal with the established historiography of the events that they portray. That is, the viewers' perception of historical events is already shaped by historical and scientific studies, past and present political discourses as well as filmic patterns of representation. In particular, documentary films that deal with colonialism must often work with historical images and recordings that convey stereotypes and clichés of the colonized. How might it be possible to gain new insights from audiovisual material that reflects the colonizers' point of view? Can such material be framed in a filmic way which re-tells history in a new, non-hierarchic documentary form?

This work reveals the possibilities offered by essayistic documentary film for a critical postcolonial presentation of history by analyzing a recent German documentary film, *The Halfmoon Files*, directed by Philip Scheffner in 2007. The film revolves around the colonial practice of recruiting Indian soldiers to the British Army in World War I. Some of these Indian soldiers were captured during the war and detained in a prison camp in Germany. At the camp, the soldiers' voices were recorded as part of a scientific project. Today, these recordings are kept at an audio archive at the Humboldt University in Berlin. Scheffner's film is concerned with the construction of a historical account of the experiences of those prisoners of war based on the recordings. I argue that this film demonstrates a way in which the essay film's non-realistic conventions of representation can overcome a traditional historiography and thus establish a postcolonial approach. There is some similarity between the approaches of postcolonial historiography and of the essay film—both

forms process real events in a way that expands the limits of conventional realistic and scientific discourse. This expansion is achieved by using new methods of narration. First, in both approaches narration does not unfold in a model of linear cause and effect that tends to reduce complex interactions to one single explanation. Second, both approaches question our ability to reach objective knowledge and true explanations. Essay films convey knowledge as provisional and subjective (Scherer 2001, 14). Their narrative involves different points of view and bits of information that do not always fit neatly together; they are more like a collage than like a straight line. The information is provided through various single plot units instead of a teleological narration; the essay film undermines the tendency to connect events in a causal chain of development that produces a sense of closure at the end. Likewise, postcolonial historiography aims to re-construct the past in an entangled narrative (Conrad and Randeria 2002, 17–19) that enables reflection upon power constellations within history, and thus provides an alternative to the historical master narrative. An additional aspect shared by the essay film and postcolonial historiography is that they both question the validity of their own historical sources. They often strive to expose the political, social, and cultural influences on the creation of historical sources, thereby raising questions with regards to the objectivity of the sources.

The first section of this paper provides a general outline of postcolonial historiography, and the next section describes the historical context of *The Halfmoon Files*. This is followed by an analysis of various components of the postcolonial approach applied by the film. The final section presents conclusive remarks on the possibilities that the film reveals for postcolonial filmmaking.

Postcolonial historiography

Colonialism and its ideology of dominance left its traces in the popular culture of the Western countries as well as in their system of sciences. Historiography in particular justified colonial thought within its epistemology, as its project of interpreting Western national pasts prepared the

ground for an ideology of national dominance, colonial expansion, and inner processes of exclusion. These developments affected not only traditional history's content, but also its scientific methods themselves. Many works that can be categorized as postcolonial consider both the content and the methods of traditional historiography to be 'contaminated' by the ideology of European dominance (Conrad and Randeria 2002, 35). Therefore, although historical sources that were generated in the era of colonialism seem to be based on a naturalistic documentary realism, they cannot be accepted as a neutral and objective tool of scientific description. This criticism also affects the historical documentary film, because it shares a common tradition with historiography. Both documentary film and historiography are committed to the factuality of the world, i.e. they process real events through their historical traces. And both—due to their documentary nature—are part of the tradition of evidence-based discourse (Hohenberger and Keilbach 2003, 8).

A documentary film that deals with colonial history faces several challenges. It deals with a historical process full of violence which created structural inequalities whose after effects still have a strong impact on today's patterns of representation. This violent quality of the colonial past left traces that can be considered traumatic. The realistic narrative and the realistic representation of traditional historiography, as well as of documentary film, aim to create one single causal explanation with an overall meaning that tends to suspend disbelief and 'tame' history (Friedländer 2010, 24). Yet dealing with historical events of extreme violence can be seen as a challenge since their ongoing traumatic legacy makes it difficult to process them into a historical narrative which is complete, linear, and unified (LaCapra 2001, 3).

A postcolonial history offers a different historiography than the traditional approach, in that it recognizes the absence of the histories of marginalized groups in the master narrative. In order to make these groups' absent voices audible in the present, new styles of representation have to be developed. These styles deal with the challenge created by the materials' process of generation. Because historical sources and archive material were generated in colonial practices, they are not just objective data

and neutral remnants,¹ but are rather pre-structured by those hegemonic power practices. New forms of representations aim to create some form of presence and agency for once marginalized voices. The filmmaker as well as the historian strives for a non-hierarchical way to stage these voices—not as mere illustrative examples for their own arguments—but in a way that allows them to perform their autonomy as subjects on equal footing in the (filmic) text. In order to examine the postcolonial approach to history in *The Halfmoon Files*, the following section presents the historical context of the film.

Historical context of *The Halfmoon Files*

The Halfmoon Files develops its plot around a large-scale collection of 1,650 audio recordings of prisoners of war that are now stored in the sound archive of the Humboldt University in Berlin. The historical background of this collection is the political setting of WWI. The German Reich and its allies fought in 1915 against the armies of the Triple Entente of Britain, France, and Russia, as well as against soldiers from colonized countries in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. Indian as well as African prisoners of war were interned in special camps near Berlin for political purposes: The German Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to convince them, by way of good treatment and propaganda lectures, to join the jihad against Britain led by the Ottoman Empire—ally of the German Reich. The goal was to get the prisoners to surrender and fight against the colonial powers in their home countries (Lange 2008, 22–23).

In 1914, at what was known as »Halfmoon Camp« in the city of Wünsdorf near Berlin, about 4,000 soldiers (Muslim prisoners from French

1 In general, historical sources are, of course, never »neutral.« Rather, they are subject to political, social, and cultural purposes. In addition, the selection of historical sources for a research or film may be arbitrary and serve the purposes of contemporary history or culture. However, the creation of the audio files in this case was within a scientific framework (questionnaires about the test person, photographs, etc.) that aimed to turn the recorded voices into »objectified,« standardized sources.

North and West Africa as well as Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs from British India and Afghanistan) were imprisoned. The prisoners were not only politically indoctrinated, but also staged as exotic *Others* and exposed to the voyeurism of their German surrounding.² After 1915, the captured soldiers also became the center of interest for a scientific linguistic research project initiated by the linguist Wilhelm Doegen, founder of the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission. Thirty German scholars took part in the project »Museum of Peoples' Voices« in German POW camps and made wax recordings of the imprisoned soldiers' voices in 250 languages and dialects between 1915 and 1918. The film *The Halfmoon Files* concentrates on several recordings of soldiers from the Indian Sikh religion.

The cultural historian Britta Lange found that most of Halfmoon Camp's historical audio sources contain texts of collective cultural origin, such as folkloric and mythological pieces. These were also of ethnographic interest, as they could document the »culture« of the speakers (Lange 2011, 8). Only few of the soldiers' audio recordings contain information that oral history research projects would rely on today, such as personal stories about their lives or information about the soldiers' situation in detainment. Within this scientific linguistic framework, the soldiers themselves were objectified as test persons for research purposes. As can be reconstructed from the taxonomical historical sources that framed the recording process, the soldiers' names were kept on index cards that added some key statistics such as the quality of the test person's voice and the dialect or language spoken in the audio recording. In addition, two standardized photographs were taken of all soldiers, the aesthetics of which were influenced by the contemporary discourse on »race«—one from the front and one in profile. Considering these strict taxonomic patterns of colonial practice under which the voices as well as the images of the soldiers' were stolen from them, one key challenge

2 Contemporary photographs show residents of Berlin who traveled to Wünsdorf in order to observe the prisoners in the camps like they did in the racist ethnological exhibitions [Völkerschau] that were popular at the time (Lange 2008, 23).

arises: how can the story of these marginalized voices be re-told in a critical postcolonial cinematic way, i.e. without perpetuating existing stereotypes and hierarchical manners of representation? The following sections examine the way that this challenge is approached by *The Halfmoon Files*, beginning with its exposition, which establishes the centrality of the soldiers' voices.

The creation of a postcolonial historical approach in *The Halfmoon Files*

Reviving the soldiers' personal voices



Fig. 1: Establishing the audio files as a central narrator in the exposition (screenshot *Halfmoon Files*, HMF)

A film's exposition is like instructions on how to read it (Hartmann 2003, 20). The exposition expresses its documentary mode and its aesthetic style; it also introduces the topic and establishes the protagonists as well as the narrator. In the exposition of *The Halfmoon Files*, the audio files are established as the main narrator, so to speak the historical subject *and* the historian of the film. After the title fades in, the image track shows a poetic river landscape in the morning mist. An audio chant in Punjabi opens the film, accompanied by abstract sounds. The images of the landscape and the sound create the expectation of a history with a mystical

angle. The audience hears one of the audio recordings made during WWI at the Halfmoon Camp in Wünsdorf. During the recording the speaker, Bhawan Singh—an Indian soldier—skillfully changes from the recitation of a poem to addressing an imaginary audience. In his speech, he introduces a truth claim about his story and interweaves the information that the story was handed down by a member of the older generation. Both rhetorical strategies are characteristic of storytelling in oral cultural traditions. By choosing this audio file as the opener of the film, *The Halfmoon Files* establishes the recorded voice and the oral history narrative it contains as central. A number of Indian soldiers will speak their voice during the course of the film.³

In *The Halfmoon Files*, these audio files of Indian soldiers, forgotten in a European sound archive, are accorded a new updated performance. Unlike their status in the archive, where they are bare material sources, the film transforms the audio sources into a cinematic oral history. In oral history, historians' attention was directed towards oral sources in order to return to subaltern groups that have been excluded from the dominant historical discourse their own voice in history. The soldiers' voices in *The Halfmoon Files* tell a counter-history that highlights aspects of WWI ignored in the German master narrative.

Unlike the majority of the audio files, which contain impersonal content, the Indian Sikh Mall Singh from the Ferozepur district creates a personal oral history testimony in his recording from December 11, 1916. Singh, who was a 24-year-old soldier at the time, talks about his feelings of frustration in detainment in a foreign country and thus gives insights into a history from below that cannot be found in government records:

There once was a man.
He ate one pound of butter everyday in India
And drank one litre of milk everyday in India.
He joined the British Army.
This man went to the European war.

3 I would like to thank Philip Scheffner for his permission to use screenshots from *The Halfmoon Files* in this work.

Germany captured this man.
He wishes to return to India.
He will get the same food he used to have.
Three long years have passed.
Nobody knows when there will be peace.
If this man is forced to stay here for two more years
He will surely die.
If God has mercy, he will make peace soon.
And this man will return home soon. (*Halfmoon Files*)

Mall Singh's testimony is a rare one, as it defies the scientists' intentions of objectifying their test persons. Moreover, Singh frames his personal testimony as an expression of a collective dimension by referring to the autobiographical narrator not in the first, but in the third person. It seems as if he speaks also on behalf of his comrades, who do not know if and when they will be freed from their imprisonment. When he refers to his personal experience and his feelings such as homesickness, Singh's recorded voice breaks out of the rigid matrix of scientific acquisition. Thus, the audio file conveys aspects of the POWs' everyday life that were not known before, as the public representation of the camps was managed by the German government. For the government, it was important to emphasize the supposedly pleasant conditions under which the prisoners lived (Lange 2008, 23). The regime aimed to present Germany as a 'good colonizer'—in contrast to its enemy, the British Empire. Within this framework, Singh's recording, in which he displays a negative perception of the soldiers' condition, contributes to the creation of a counter-history of WWI.

Other prisoners, such as Bela Singh from Amritsar, also used the recording process to tell what happened to him during the war. In his sound file PK-589 from August 12, 1916, Bela Singh reports:

When we arrived in Marseille, we ate well. This made everyone happy. We were placed in cars and the major gave the order: 'Go now, you lions into the trenches! Fight the Germans! Why are you running back?' For two month we sat in the trenches. A few of us lions had had enough of fighting. The German cannons hurled

their artillery with great force. Everybody ran when they noticed it. There was an obstacle and I couldn't run away. The Germans saw me and used all their strength against me. They took me away violently. Where, they didn't tell me. I had a good laugh when I saw Mr. Walther. (*Halfmoon Files*)

Bela Singh's oral history testimony gives information about the route by which the Indian soldiers came to Europe. Furthermore, it also emphasizes the conditions under which the Indian soldiers had to fight in the European war: they were stationed in the trenches at the front. This was not a coincidence. The colonial powers consciously deployed the units of soldiers from the colonies in this dangerous strategic position (Lange 2008, 23). By mentioning a »Mr. Walther« as a reason for a good laugh, a personal and subversive connotation is created in the testimony. The director, in a voice-over, adds the information that Mr. Walther was an interpreter for Indo-Germanic languages who worked for the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the POW camp. There are more humorous aspects in the collection of audio recordings, such as the sound file of a soldier who—according to a note by Wilhelm Doegen—called an »unbidden »Guten Tag!« into the recording funnel.

By representing these kinds of personal voices and emphasizing their immanent subversive resistance, the film provides the soldiers' voices with a certain kind of agency. Once performed in the film, the archived voices come to life and their counter-histories can be heard by a wide audience. On their way out of the archive into the film, the subaltern historical sources have turned into main protagonists.

Another way in which the film draws attention to the soldiers' voices is in its processing of a ghost story told by Singh, as discussed in the next section.



Fig. 2: Photograph of the standardized choreography during the recording process of the audio files. A soldier speaking into the recording funnel being directed by a scientist (screenshot HMF)



Fig. 3: Photography showing the standardized choreography during the recording process of the audio files (screenshot HMF zoom-out)

Contextualizing the ghost story

In Bhawan Singh's audio file, Singh tells a ghost story that begins as follows: »What is a ghost? How does it live? How many types of ghost exist? How does one become a ghost? This is what I will tell you.« This

direct address towards the audience in the opening of the film adds a general metaphoric dimension to the ›ghosts‹: they become related to the soldiers, whose recorded voices are not attached to moving pictures of their bodies. The self-reflexive quality of this statement (i.e. the feeling that Singh is actually referring to himself and the other soldiers) is also strengthened by the convention of establishing a narrator in the exposition, which instructs the audience to understand this narration as a personal comment. In this way the editing places the recording in a new context in which this excerpt of a former impersonal collective myth is transformed into an autobiographical narrative. The voice of the captured soldier creates a critical comment upon the recording process that causes a separation of the human voice from the soldier's body and personality, and thereby creates a dislocation.

Both the exposition and the ghost story show how the film ›de-colonizes‹ the recorded voices of the colonial soldiers by establishing them as central and by contextualizing them in a different way. The next section discusses another element in the film's postcolonial approach, namely the expression of historical trauma.

Colonialism as historical trauma

The Halfmoon Files portrays colonialism as historical trauma in several sequences, beginning with a relatively early sequence in the film (00:06:25–00:09:00). The sequence opens with a tracking shot that establishes a beautiful metaphor about the relationship between past and present. Slowly the camera moves along the site of a barrack at the Halfmoon Camp in Wünsdorf. The combination of the parallel movement and the image composition establishes a direct relationship between past and present, between history and today, on the visual level. On the image track a fence that surrounds a gray wooden barrack can be seen. The old fashioned design of the barrack, shown in color-saturated images, takes the viewer on a journey to the past: in Germany's collective memory the iconography of the barrack and the barbed wire fence awakens associations with other camps—the concentration camps of WWII. This iconography can be interpreted as a reminder of a discourse

of memory that is charged with a history of violence. The combination of both narratives—the holocaust and colonialism—in one scene creates a feeling of discomfort for the audience. Trauma is not explicitly mentioned as an issue in the scene, but its legacy can be felt by an audience that reacts on a visceral level to the cultural meaning of this iconography.⁴ This cinematic method may be seen as expressing the absence of colonialism in the German culture of memory: the violent past is seemingly forgotten and therefore reappears in the film like a haunting flashback and reminder of a historical trauma.

The barrack also serves in the film as a metaphor of past and present clashing with one another. The shot reveals that the barrack consists of an old part, which seems not to have changed since it was used to house the soldiers, and a new part, which was recently renovated in friendly yellow paint and turned into a residential bungalow. The visual clash of the different time periods is thoroughly explored by the tracking camera that moves from the right side of the abandoned old part of the building to the new part on the left. The way the historic object is shown creates a metaphoric image. The tracking shot is a classical element of the cinematography of the essay film, as it generates a dreamlike perspective in which the viewer's gaze follows the flowing movement and seemingly travels with the camera to explore a place. Yet the parallel shot never reaches its desired object of representation, because the distance kept to the object always stays the same. Through this interplay with the viewer's gaze, the parallel tracking shot creates a feeling of inaccessibility. My thesis is that in an essay film about history, this kind of cinematography creates a visual metaphor to remind the viewer that the past in general is

4 According to Marianne Hirsch, members of a culture of memory born after a traumatic historical event adopt collective iconographic images as a kind of »foster memory.« Hirsch developed her theory for descendants of holocaust victims. Yet, she states, that »postmemory« can be seen as a general intergenerational structure in post-traumatic societies (see Hirsch 2007, 114). To a certain extent, it can be assumed that this iconographic reference to one traumatic past by connecting it with an earlier event can enforce certain feelings of irritation, awkwardness, and maybe even guilt.

not accessible—and that trauma as an individual and collective phenomenon can neither be accessed nor represented realistically.

The direction of the camera movement from right to left also takes part in creating a feeling of discomfort and irritation that refers to the legacy of trauma in the discourse of cultural memory today. The images are perceived ›against the grain‹ in a literal sense by European viewers, who are used to reading from left to right. This feeling of irritation is intensified later in the film in an interview with Ms. Heyer, the current resident of the bungalow, who appears as a historical witness and talks about the haunting legacy of the colonial past in present Germany. She reports that she found the names of former prisoners inscribed on the barrack's doors and walls when she renovated it ten years ago. She also mentions that sometimes at night she hears noises in her bungalow and she does not know where they come from.

The Halfmoon Files, by these associative hints, shows how even though all physical evidence of the camp has been removed in Wünsdorf—original tombstones were built over and doors with names scratched on them repainted—the silenced colonial history and its violent components are still present. The film's motif of the ›ghost‹ as a wanderer between past and present serves as a beautiful metaphor for a haunting history, and as a sign for the latency and belatedness of this history, which is colonial and postcolonial at the same time.⁵

This kind of exploration of an abstract concept such as trauma is typical for the reflexive way in which the essay film genre deals with history. It is also typical for the essay film to suggest cognitive associations by tacking on to metaphors of cultural memory. Furthermore, the audience's senses are directly addressed by the use of an unusual film lan-

5 The prefix ›post‹ in the term ›postcolonial‹ refers not only to a temporal delay or a location in an aftermath. It also signifies both a critical distance and a profound interrelation with the troubling continuity of colonialism's after-effects on structural, ideological, collective, and personal day-to-day levels.

guage, such as a tracking camera movement that stages the way in which past and present merge into one another traumatically.

Moving on within the film, no closing narrative is found for the soldiers' destinies. The director cannot explore what happened to the main protagonists, the POW soldiers, after the war and whether they were able to return to their homeland afterwards. This impossibility of finding a happy end to a traumatic story reminds the viewer that history does not resolve itself, but still ›hurts.‹ This lack of closure is common in essay films, which are often tentative endeavors that in general deal more with processes than with making final claims (Scherer 2001, 14).



Fig. 4: Scene showing the barrack (tracking shot from right to left), no. 1.

Unrenovated part of the building that used to house the soldiers in the POW camp during WWI (screenshot HMF).



Fig. 5: Scene showing the barrack (tracking shot from right to left), no. 2.

Establishing a visual metaphor: past and present merging into one another (screenshot HMF).



Fig. 6: Scene showing the barrack (tracking shot from right to left), no. 3.

The past painted over: the former barrack is today a residential bungalow (screenshot HMF).

Having examined the film's treatment of the soldiers' voices and its portrayal of colonialism and its historical traumatic legacy, we now turn to the film's visual techniques for presenting stories of subaltern groups; in

contrast to the traditional historical approach of telling the stories of ›great men.«

Against the grain of a visual history of ›great men«

»A democratic future is based upon a past in which not only the ruling voices can be heard,« was the claim in Germany's first oral history project in the 1970's (Niethammer 1980, 7). Yet one challenge that arises when dealing with a history of subaltern subjects is that their ›absence from history« coincides with a lack of personal records and visual representation such as typically left behind by the ruling subjects. The approach of ›history from below« had to find new ways of dealing with a past full of inequality. In *The Halfmoon Files*, this agenda led to the development of an unusual image and sound concept: the subaltern voices of the past are made audible; at the same time common practices of the visual representation of historical actors are subverted. As the analysis will show, the film seeks to take part in creating a »democratic future« by establishing a film tradition in which not only subaltern voices remain »unseen,« but ruling voices too are left with no representation.

Whenever the audio files of historical actors are performed in *The Halfmoon Files*, the image track only shows a blank black screen. This montage systematically denies the recorded voices a visual counterpart in the form of a body or a specific image and thereby exposes the historic power structures that took part in generating the historical sources (Rothöhler 2011, 59). In the sequence about the barrack described above, two main historical actors of the film—an unknown Indian soldier called Mall Singh whose remarkable audio recording plays a key role in the film and the well-known linguist Wilhelm Doegen—are presented in the same style of cinematography. Both their voices remain disembodied in front of the black screen, although the reasons for this are different, as will be shown.

The tracking shot of the barrack is shown twice, first to introduce Mall Singh and afterwards to introduce Wilhelm Doegen. The film's main protagonist, Mall Singh, is introduced as an Indian member of the British armed forces who was interned in the Halfmoon Camp. While the image

track changes to a black screen, the director's voice introduces him on the basis of the information on the scientific index card that was filed during the recording:

In 1892, fifteen years after Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, the Indian Mall Singh was born in the village Ranasukhi in the Ferizpur district. At the time he surfaces in the story, he's 24 years old. He's situated far away from his birthplace: In the German city of Wünsdorf, close to Berlin. On 11th December 1916 at four p.m. Mall Singh reads a short text in his mother tongue into the phonograph funnel. In its entirety, it lasts exact 1 min. and 20 sec. (*Halfmoon Files*)

Just at the moment when the camera lens strikes the surface of the newly renovated part of the barrack, a change of time and of perspective takes place. By playing a radio feature on Wilhelm Doegen from the year 1967, the film goes back to the years of the student and cultural revolution in Germany—and shows that even fifty years after the end of colonialism, Doegen is still considered a scientific authority. His lifework is appreciated; society did not develop a critical awareness of his past colonial research practices:

This musical felicitation by our radio orchestra celebrates the 90th birthday of Professor Wilhem Doegen, the founder of the Sound Archive of the former Prussian State Library. He is writing his memoirs in Zehlendorf. We in the acoustic medium of radio sincerely hope that he will finally find someone to continue his life's work. (*Halfmoon Files*)

By repeating the same tracking shot along the barrack while introducing both actors, the cinematography re-stages the encounter between the two historical actors Singh and Doegen ninety years ago during the production of the audio files. Doegen, who represents »a great man of history« in this constellation, according to traditional historiography, is introduced using the same parameters used for Singh:

In 1877, the year Thomas Edison invented the phonograph, Wilhelm Doegen, later to become linguist, was born. At the time he

surfaces in this story, he is 39 years old. He is situated on a wooden barrack in the German city of Wünsdorf, close to Berlin. On 11th December 1916 at four pm, he starts the recording mechanism of his phonograph and records a ›typical example of the north Indian language Panjabi.‹ He assesses the quality of the voice as ›strong and light‹ with ›good consonant‹ and labels the recordings with the register number PK-619. (*Halfmoon Files*)

Both actors remain unseen—yet for different reasons: no pictures of Mall Singh exist, despite the taxonomic photographs of all soldiers taken at the camp. If these photographs still existed, they would reflect the contemporary gaze of racist physiognomic taxonomy: one shot in profile and one from the front. In contrast, it would certainly have been easier to find a photograph of the well-known Doegen, and these images would be suitable for a historical television documentary. But as an essay film that subverts traditional conventions and their inherent power relations, *The Halfmoon Files* refuses images that stabilize patterns of colonial representation. The film neither perpetuates a hegemonic gaze upon the soldier nor presents Doegen as ›the expert and institutional representative,‹ as in traditional visual histories of ›great men,‹ by giving him a ›worthy‹ bodily representation. This unusual sound-image concept helps to make the historical actors visible and audible beyond stereotypical colonial clichés and furthermore challenges the viewer to question the protagonists' social role in history.

The narrative of similarity and repetition created by showing the same sequence twice points out the centrality of the sequence within the movie. In order to emphasize the hierarchical power relationship between the historical actors in this representation, the filmmaker comments upon the different qualities of agency for both historical actors. In short informative statements, he reconstructs the historical actors' biographies until the day of the recording. Afterwards, he describes the creation of the sound file as a historical collaboration of both actors under unequal conditions. History is presented here as subject-oriented from multiple perspectives, referring critically to the processes of inequality

that influenced the emergence of the historical sources the film is dealing with today.

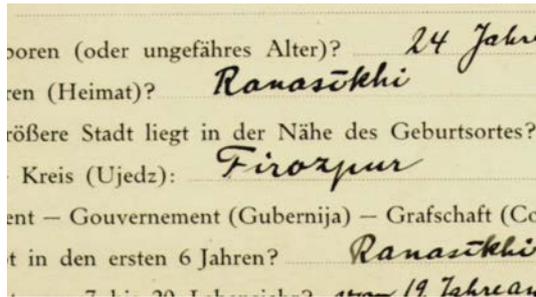


Fig. 7: Scientific index card accompanying the audio files in the research project »Museum of the peoples' voices«

Personal details of the Indian soldier Mall Singh (screenshot HMF)



Fig. 8: Photographs of the soldier Muttilal taken within the scientific research project

(screenshot HMF)

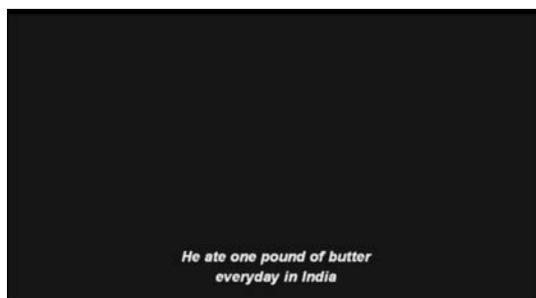


Fig. 9: Representing the historical actors

Performing an absence instead of re-staging colonial representation conventions (screenshot HMF).

Having examined the various filmic tools that are used in creating a postcolonial historical account, the following section shows how the film questions the medium's overall historiographical value through its critical analysis of the use of historical sources within mainstream documentary films.

Questioning the historical sources

One element that the essayfilm and postcolonial historiography have in common is that they seek to reflect critically upon the sources they deal with. This kind of self-reflexive criticism of sources separates the essay film from the realistic documentary tradition which seeks to create as natural as possible a representation of history (Hohenberger 2006, 24). As an example of the film's criticism of historical sources, consider the way the film deconstructs the seemingly natural representation of historical sources in an expository TV documentary about WWI (00:16:53–00:22:45). *The Halfmoon Files* uses a recording of a speech by Emperor Wilhelm II, in which the emperor seeks to convince his people to enter World War I. The recorded speech can be heard in the different stages of its development, providing the viewer with an insight into the recording process of the emperor's speech, which was full of trials and errors. Thus, the grandeur and authority of the emperor's speech is deconstructed by exposing the technical process ›behind the scenes.‹ This decomposition can be seen as an example of how the essay film undermines typical affirmative media representations of the history of ›great men‹ by utilizing a critique of historical sources. It also reveals the differences in practices of representation between the essay film and the expository realistic documentary film.

Furthermore, the film shows that the historical reconstruction in the seemingly realistic documentary in this sequence is actually based upon a technical manipulation. The director's commentary reveals that the historical TV documentary pretends that the audio source is from 1914—whereas it was actually only recorded at the end of the war as a retrospective form of war propaganda:

There's no film strip of Kaiser Wilhelm II making this historical speech. Actually, there should be one. The Kaiser allowed himself to be filmed almost every day. But of the moment the Kaiser swore in his people to war, there seems to exist only a photograph and a sound recording. There is no microphone to be seen anywhere on the photograph. But the historical sound document, the original voice, exists. The sound recording has the register number

AUT-1. The person who recorded the speech is Wilhelm Doegen, director of the phonographic Prussian Commission. The recording took place at the Palace Bellevue in Berlin. The recording is dated January 10th, 1918. At this point, the German Reich is on the brink of military defeat. Three and a half years after the original speech, Wilhelm Doegen and the German Kaiser are trying to find the right tone. (*Halfmoon Files*)

Another example of the film's questioning of conventional historical sources is evident in a sequence that opens with a black screen, while on the sound track the director describes archival footage from 1914 that has been edited into the historical TV documentary about WWI. Scheffner's description starts with the laconic comment: »Everything always begins in Berlin, at a big square in the city« thereby alluding to the fact that historical TV documentaries mainly focus on master narratives of the national historiography in which the capital city and the main political forces are at the center of interest. Relying on such sources excludes the stories of soldiers from the colonies due to their peripheral location. The black screen and the director's comment serve as an irritation, and create a vacant space that helps to bring the absence of a transnational narrative of entanglement into awareness.



Fig. 10: Emperor Wilhelm II at the balcony of the Palace Bellevue 1914

Photograph shown in the TV expository documentary in combination with the recorded speech from 1918 as a seemingly realistic audiovisual representation of Wilhelm II (screenshot HMF)



Fig. 11: Insert with Doegen's comment on the challenges during the recording process of the emperor's speech (screenshot HMF)

Conclusion: What are the characteristics of the portrayal of postcolonial history in the essay film?

The analysis of *The Halfmoon Files* shows how the essay film can be a suitable medium for delivering a postcolonial historiography. Yet generalizations should be made with caution, since in contrast to scientific works, the essay film has no standard patterns of representation. Instead, each individual essay film refers to a particular discursive constellation expressed in a specific cinematographic language (Kramer and Tode 2011). Nevertheless, there are some common characteristics of essay films: patterns of narration in these films usually follow a non-linear, collage-like narrative. Thus, instead of creating one single master narrative, the essay film tells history in a non-hierarchical way, including multiple perspectives and space for the questions, reflections, and detours of history. Essay films that deal with colonial history tend to search for entangled European and non-European historical perspectives.⁶

Another one of the essay film's most interesting qualities, which makes it suitable for the application of a postcolonial approach, is self-reflexive-

6 A postcolonial history of entanglement is a reaction to traditional Western historiography, in which Europe is considered to be the center of perspective. In the latter, Europe's relations with the colonial world are portrayed as a one-sided process only, driven by Europe as a force of agency. As an alternative, the postcolonial history of entanglement investigates mutual interactions and relationships of power and dominance for both entities and analyzes how they have changed through their reciprocal influence (Conrad and Randeria 2002, 17).

ness. As opposed to the so-called realistic tradition, the self-reflexiveness of the essay genre allows it to draw attention to the ideological discourses that are inscribed in the material. The tradition of realistic representation uses sources as bare illustrative authentication, and does not break the frame of filmic illusion. Thus realistic documentaries may carry on traditional versions of history without questioning their ethical grounds. The essay film, however, makes a different statement. It explicitly works against the grain of the viewer's perception by breaking historic and filmic conventions of representation. The essay film thereby encourages new and critical readings of historical narratives.

One component of this critical approach to the past is the recognition that the various voices of the film are related to one another in a less hierarchic manner.⁷ The voice of the filmmaker appears in a comment that brings his own perspective back into the text and serves as a device for rebelling against the pretense of scientific objectivity and detachment in the voice-of-god narrator of expository documentary films. In the essay film, the protagonists' voices are treated in a non-hierarchical way. This disruption of hierarchy is often accompanied by an unconventional aesthetic staging of the voices, partly in order to create irritation in the viewer by overcoming the medium's established tradition of representation.

Undermining the hierarchical colonial order of historical narratives and sources reveals the power structure from which they emerged. In *The Halfmoon Files*, the audio performances of the marginalized voices of the soldiers from the colonies are altered. Instead of being silenced, they are heard. Therefore the voices of the soldiers acquire a heightened social status in the film—as historians, storytellers and historical subjects. Due to the source criticism aimed at the audio files, the ›voice of knowledge‹ is stripped of its aura of authority—this is true for the scientist as well as for the political voice of the emperor. Nevertheless, these sources are not totally dismissed; their historical value is still acknowledged.

7 See Nichols 1991 on the concept of voice and the social order established by the different kinds of voices in documentary film.

The revival of the soldiers' voices in the film is not entirely satisfying. The question remains: to what extent can filmic representations by others give people their voices back? Within the diegesis of *The Halfmoon Files*, most of the soldiers' voices remain impersonal, with the exception of Mall Singh. Only the running credits in the end reveal the names of the people that were behind the audio files from almost a century ago.

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