

Kolonialismus begegnen.

Dezentrale Perspektiven auf die Berliner Stadtgeschichte.

Online-Portal: www.kolonialismus-begegnen.de

Germany's colonial film industry Wolfgang Fuhrmann

Until the start of talkies, Friedrichstrasse represented Berlin as an international film location. [1] In addition to renowned film companies such as Léon Gaumont, Pathé Frères, Eclipse or Deutsche Bioscope, the office of the Deutsche Kolonial-Filmgesellschaft mbH, or Deuko for short, was found in today's Kreuzberg from 1917. With it a new genre emerged: the fictional colonial propaganda film. However, the films were not produced in the colonies, but in Berlin. With the outbreak of the First World War on August 1, 1914, the production conditions had changed – the naval blockade of the British Navy cut off Germany from the overseas territories. Until then, so-called actualities and travel pictures, ie early forms of documentary film, had been produced in the German colonies. The Kreuzberg Deuko, on the other hand, relied on the personal drama of Germans in the colonies with their films. [2]

The Berlin businessmen Martin Steinke, Alfred Leopold and Karl Karalus signed the articles of association on March 20, 1917 with share capital of 60,000 marks; the entry in the commercial register took place in the following month, April 27, 1917. Martin Steinke was primarily responsible for the company after Leopold and Karalus left in 1917 and 1918. Deuko initially had its office at Friedrichstrasse 235 and moved to Friedrichstrasse 5-6 in May. In the Deuko, the efforts of the colonial private sector to establish their own film propaganda came to fruition – independent of state propaganda institutions such as the state-affiliated German Photo Society (DLG / DEULIG) or the Image and Film Office (BUFA), which was subordinate to the top military command.

The establishment of the Deuko went hand in hand with a discussion within the DKG about colonial film propaganda. The entry into the commercial register took place on the same day as the decision of the DKG not to participate financially in the establishment of a “colonial film company” for the time being, but to act as an important cooperation partner for possible film projects. [3] In September 1917 Steinke described the goals of the Deuko in the Deutsche Kolonialzeitung, the mouthpiece of the colonial society. In contrast to foreign inflammatory films, according to Steinke, which appealed to the low instincts of the audience, DEUKO wanted to do “cultural work”. [4] Since “colonies are of tremendous importance for the homeland”, the Deuko intends to produce “colonial film dramas with exciting content and healthy tendencies”. [5]

By the end of its activity in 1919, the Deuko had realized eight film projects: Der Verräter [6], Farmer Borchardt [7], an animation film for the colonial warrior donation [8], The last moment [9], The heroine of Paratau [10], The End of Alma Bonar [11], The Prisoner of Dahomey [12] and a humorous cartoon [13]. Only The Last Moment is still preserved today, but even with this film the last film role is missing. This film does not take place in the colonies, but the colonial areas are thematized as a place of refuge in the “criminal society drama”. [14] Three films are accessible via reviews in the film press: The Traitor, Farmer Borchardt and The Prisoner of Dahomey. The plot of The End of Alma Bonar is not known at all. The animated film, which will be shown on 17.-18. August 1918 was

ORT

Friedrichstr. 235

HEUTE

Friedrichstr. 4

[1] Hanisch, Michael: On the trail of film history – Berlin scenes. Berlin: 1991. Henschel Verlag. P. 168.

[2] The film: No.31. 4.08.1917

[3] German Colonial Film Society files. Federal Archives Berlin. BArch R 8023-328. F. 87.

[4] Steinke, Martin: Colonial Propaganda Films. In: Deutsche Kolonialzeitung. Organ of the German Colonial Society. Vol. 34/35, No. 9/1917. 1917, p. 137.

[5] Cf. ibid.

[6] Georg Alexander / Carl Boese: The traitor. FRG: 1917.

[7] Carl Boese: Farmer Borchardt. FRG: 1917.

[8] Carl Boese. FRG: 1918.

[9] Carl Boese: The last moment. FRG: 1918.

[10] Carl Boese: The heroine of Paratau. FRG: 1918.

[11] Carl Boese: Das Ende der Alma Bonar. BRD: 1918.

[12] Hubert Moest: Der Gefangene von Dahomey. BRD: 1918.

[13] Vgl. BArch R 8023-328: Bl. 87.

[14] Lichtbild-Bühne. Berlin: 1918.

[15] Gehrts, Meg: Weiße Göttin der Wangora: Eine Filmschauspielerin 1913 in Afrika. Wuppertal: 1999. Peter Hammer Verlag. S. 55.

produced and should help, donations for colonial warriors, probably had something to do with the colonies. In the case of *The Last Moment* and *The Heroine of Paratau*, a reference is implied indirectly. According to an advertisement in the film magazine *Der Film*, one of the leading actresses in *The Heldin von Paratau* was a “Meg Gehns”, which was very likely Emma Augusta (Meg) Gehrts (1891-1966). In their book *Die Weisse Göttin der Wangora / A Camera Actress in the Wilds of Togolandshe* reports on film work in Paratau (today Paratao in Togo) [15]. It cannot be ruled out that *Die Heldin von Paratau* is identical to an older production or that it is the remake of a film that Gehrts’s husband, the director Hans Schomburgk, shot during his stay in Togo in 1914.

The Deuko’s first feature film, *The Traitor*, which was released in September 1917, aimed at anti-British propaganda. It tells the story of the young Englishman Smith, who falls in love with the daughter (Else Roscher) of a German businessman and farm owner in German South West Africa (DSWA) during peacetime. Smith marries the girl, moves to Deutsch-Südwest and becomes the manager of his father-in-law’s farm. After moving to Africa, he neglected his young wife, but intensified contacts with his British neighbors. The farm’s German assistant telegraphed to Germany and reported the strange events. The father-in-law’s nephew is sent to the colony to review Smith’s work. When the war breaks out, Smith’s cover is blown. He’s a spy and tried to transfer the property of his father-in-law to the British side. He dies in a motorboat chase on the Orange River. The plot not only put the German colonies on the agenda, but also showed the front in Africa, where German soil was to be defended against the British.

The second Deuko production was about the cohesion of women and men under war conditions. The film was set in DSWA in 1904-08 at the time of the Herero War. The film was not only able to appeal to supposedly German virtues such as loyalty and perseverance, but at the same time was a reminder of the last war won by the German military. Farmer Borchardt appeared in March 1918 and promised in his advertisement: “Effective !! Highest tension until the end! “. [16]After separating from her fiancé, the young Agnes (Frydel Freydy) marries the farmer Borchardt (Ferdinand Bonn) and moves with him to “Southwest”. Although they lead a carefree life, the young woman cannot forget her first fiancé. After the death of her child, she feels lonely and gets back to her old lover, who now works for the government in the colony. Borchardt discovers secret love and sends them both away.

In the meantime the Herero war has started. Agnes returns to Borchardt’s farm. Shortly afterwards, the Herero attack. Borchardt desperately wants to save his wife from possible atrocities by the attacking enemies and shoots at her. But the protection troops arrive and save the farm. Borchardt believes he killed his wife and becomes depressed. But Agnes recovers and they begin a new life together. Farmer Borchardt had its premiere on March 10, 1918 in the famous marble house at Kurfürstendamm 236 and was successful at home and abroad. Film images in the press show that the production used black actors to portray the acts of war. Even if nothing is known about the individual actors and extras,

The actors of African origin were even decisive for the Deuko’s third film. The success of Farmer Borchardt enabled the Deuko to produce an even larger film, *The Prisoner of Dahomey*, which would also be the last film. This film was clearly anti-French propaganda. It was based on a script by the colonial writer Lene Haase and told the story of the German planter Burgsdorf (Fritz Delius), who was taken prisoner by the French army at the beginning of the First World War. In the prison camp in Dahomey (in what is now Benin), Burgsdorf and his comrades suffer from the sadistic excesses of the French commandant (Friedrich Kühne). Burgsdorf does not rebel at first and tries to to make the best of his situation. Ultimately, however, he demands fair treatment for

[16] *Der Kinematograph*. Düsseldorf: 1917-1918.

[17] Vgl. Fuhrmann, Wolfgang: *Der Gefangene von Dahomey. Ein kolonialer Zombie*. In: Fürst, Michael; Krautkrämer, Florian und Serjoscha Wiemer (Hrsg.): *Untot. Zombie, Film, Theorie*. München: 2010. Belleville Verlag. S. 33-39.

[18] *Der Film*. No. 41. Berlin: 12.10.1918

[19] Ebd.

[20] *Der Kinematograph*. Werbeanzeige, no. 587. Düsseldorf: 03.04. 1918.

[21] Vgl. BArch R 8023-328: Bl. 79.

[22] Vgl. BArch R 8023-328: Bl. 58.

[23] Ebd.: Bl. 56-57.

[24] Vgl. Ebd.

[25] Ebd.

[26] *Lichtbild-Bühne*. No. 11. Berlin: 16.03.1918.

[27] *Der Film*. No.11. Berlin: 16.03.1918.

[28] Vgl. BArch R 8023-328: Bl. 14.

[29] Vgl. Ebd. Bl. 10.

[30] Vgl. Ebd. Bl. 11.

[31] Vgl. *Der Film*: 1918.

[32] Vgl. *Der Kinematograph*: 1918.

[33] Herbert, Birett: *Verzeichnis der in Deutschland gelaufenen Filme. Entscheidungen der*

Filmzensur 1911–1920. Berlin, Hamburg, Stuttgart, München: 1980. Saur Verlag.

[34] Vgl. Akte Deutsche Kolonial-Filmgesellschaft m.b.H. Landesarchiv Berlin: LAB A Rep. 342-02, Nr. 2476.

[35] Vgl. Wigger, Iris: *Die “Schwarze Schmach am Rhein”. Rassistische Diskriminierung zwischen Geschlecht, Klasse, Nation und Rasse*. Münster: 2006. Westfälisches Dampfboot.

[36] Ebd. S. 179.

the prisoners, for which he is to be punished with the hippopotamus whip. A black soldier is assigned to do this, but he defies the order and is killed by the captain. Soon after, Burgsdorf is tortured to the point of unconsciousness. An employee of the commandant's wife takes care of him and gives him a mysterious protective potion that puts him into a death-like sleep. He is pronounced dead and buried. He is then brought back to life by means of an antidote and returns to the camp as a living dead every night, where he gradually kills the black guards. In the meantime, Burgsdorf and the camp commandant's wife have fallen in love. When the commander discovers the relationship he tries to kill Burgsdorf. The camp commandant dies on a dramatic chase. Burgsdorf and his lover leave Africa and start a new life in Switzerland.

[37] Film Ober-Prüf-Stelle. B 81.21.

[38] Vgl. Nagl, Tobias: Die unheimliche Maschine. Rasse und Repräsentation im Weimarer Kino. München: 2008 edition text & kritik.

[39] Alfred Vohrer: Our house in Cameroon. FRG: 1961.

[40] Michael Steinke: Dream Ship 33. Namibia. FRG: 1999.

[41] Carlo-Rola: Africa, Mon Amour. FRG: 2007.

[42] Erhard Riedlsperger: My homeland Africa. FRG: 2010.

[43] Cf. Fuhrmann, Wolfgang: The restoration of a colonial memory in German cinema of the 1950s / 60s. In: Janne Lahti and Rebecca Weaver-Hightower (eds.): Settler Colonial World in Film. London: 2020. Routledge. Pp. 87-98.

[44] Cf. Neuser, Daniela: A place in the sun – the new home film: Africa, mon Amour and Momella. A farm in Africa. In: Astrid Erll and Stephanie Wodianka (eds.) Film and cultural memory. Plurimedial constellations. Berlin, New York: 2008. De Gruyter, pp. 107-138.

Zitierangaben:

Wolfgang Fuhrmann: Germany's colonial film industry. In: Kolonialismus begegnen. Dezentrale Perspektiven auf die Berliner Stadtgeschichte. URL: <http://kolonialismus-begegnen.de/en/geschichten/germanys-colonial-film-industry/> (07.10.2021)