

FILM REVIEW

Resistant Culture, African Travel

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Kurze Schatten, Documentary, Germany, 2013; Gerd Roscher (director); color; 56 minutes; no distributor

In 1859, twenty-three-year-old Albrecht Roscher embarked on a quest to discover the sources of the Nile. He was one of the earliest pioneers of the German exploration of Africa. His untimely death turned him into a martyr of science and challenged posterity to lift the mystery surrounding his demise. The search for his remains and his murderers was instrumental in accelerating the process of penetration of the African interior and the generation of knowledge, or opinion, on the continent (though these two categories were frequently conflated). On the one hand, the circumstances of his death prompted follow-up expeditions that attempted to ascertain the whereabouts of Roscher's remains and to achieve his ultimate goal, the verification of the geography of the central African Great Lakes region including the sources of the Nile. Roscher's example shows that travel, whether disrupted and aborted, or "successful," generates further travel, sets in motion processes of penetrating, of collecting knowledge, and securing passage. On the other hand, Roscher's fate contributed to the perceived knowledge about social, political, and ethnic conditions in the African interior, including the role of Arab slave traders as responsible for Roscher's death and thus as threats to European access. Lines were drawn and impetus derived from such explanatory constructs—the European mission to rid Africa of the scourge of slavery subsequently became one of the strongest justifications for any kind of European interference and political control.

A distant relative of Albrecht Roscher and former professor at the Hochschule für bildende Künste in Hamburg, Gerd Roscher, set out to retrace the early explorer's journey. The result of this quest is the documentary film *Kurze Schatten* (Short shadows). The title forms an allusion to the equatorial sun but also prompts viewers to relate contemporary experience to that of travelers 150 years ago. The inter-iterality, the dynamics of one journey spawning the next—which characterized patterns in the nineteenth century—is replicated by the modern film documentary. Yet, this attempt at reenactment begs the question: how long is the predecessor's "shadow" really, how relevant is his example? While aspects of mobility loomed large in Albrecht Roscher's correspondence, modes of transport feature hardly at all in the modern filmic

travelogue. What is at stake in the latter, though, are the modalities and limitations of generating knowledge and translating it into the visual medium of film. At the root of this attempt lies the question of the "knowability" of African alterity, of ascertaining concrete, transferable information on the precursor, the terrain he traversed, and the culture he might have encountered had he been receptive to the experience of cultural difference rather than chasing the glory of lifting one of humankind's oldest geographical mysteries. The postmodern age's sensitivity for alterity, for the difficulties of achieving intercultural understanding and knowledge about "the other" very much guided the filmmaker's approach. On his website (www.gerdroscher.net), the filmmaker refers to a "resistant culture" that he encountered, thereby formulating an age-old dilemma between the impossibility to ever completely understand and the imperative to try nonetheless.

Gerd Roscher very deliberately avoids giving his viewers familiar markers of orientation—the African place names along the way would be largely meaningless to today's viewers, and the maps shown in the film represent speculative knowledge that bears little resemblance to today's maps. In a striking scene early on, an African man draws a map in the dust on the ground and, or so we have to assume, explains the itinerary Albrecht Roscher will have followed, a journey along established caravan routes. The map, two vaguely parallel lines in the sand, brings into sharp relief differences between European knowledge that relies on adherence to contexts, metrics, and grids (where is the coast as starting point? where is Lake Nyassa, the final destination of Roscher's journey?) and an unfamiliar, incomprehensible way of representing and transmitting local knowledge, the nature of which appears even more obscure since the cartographer gives his explanations in his own language—which remains untranslated. Since the viewer only sees the African cartographer's arms and legs, since the identity of the originator, interpreter, constructor of this African image of the world remains vague, the question of agency in knowledge generation and of the nature and status of all knowledge is moved center stage. While the map that briefly comes into view at the very outset of the film—the so-called Slug Map produced by missionary Johannes Rebmann in 1855 that, based on reports received from freed slaves from the interior, depicts the alleged large interior lake as an immense unified water mass—illustrates the European drive to convert speculative knowledge into verified and valid knowledge, the makeshift map in the sand defines *any* knowledge as provisional and fluid. Yet, as both maps are "wrong" if held against the accepted cartographic picture of the region as presented in standard modern maps, the tension between the two concepts of knowledge ostensibly enacted here is revealed as conditional at best.

What we learn about Africa, then, remains obscure, fuzzy, and speculative. Only at the very end does the filmic narrative become somewhat more lucid and explanatory, namely when the concrete location of Roscher's death



is shown, and a hypothesis regarding the identity and motivation of his assassins is proposed. The filmmaker suggests that not Arab slave traders, but members of the African secret society Nyau killed him in an act of resistance against European encroachment.

Throughout the film, there are constant references to unfamiliar forms of socialization, of asserting and celebrating community. These references are sprinkled into a visual itinerary of African impressions, some of which are deliberately clichéd, such as sunsets, pouring tropical rain, and colorful patterns on women's clothes. These images are then interspersed with historical recordings of dances, ceremonies, and the like that suggest, though no concrete information as to their origin is offered, their genesis in the context of early anthropology or ethnography. While the monochrome nature of these historical snippets clashes with the colorful images from the filmmaker's journey, they are aurally interconnected by a sound reel that blends both visual levels together to form a (relentless, sometimes almost menacing) carpet of everyday noises, voices, chants, and rhythms. The flow of this entrancing soundscape, though, is effectively interrupted by the explanatory voiceover. This narration by the filmmaker and by narrator Jakob Benkhofer is willfully restrained and studiously artificial so as not to align the German words too closely with the images. The words seem "imposed" on the African environment, they disrupt the film's flow, and thereby reveal as construct the "Africanness" of sound and image. This technique shows that the attempt was made to avoid the impression of an intimacy between the observers and the observed. Some of the narration's content, namely the excerpts from Albrecht Roscher's letters and the occasional citation from other contemporary sources (for example, Richard Burton expressing surprise about how unprepared his German fellow-explorer seemed) often conveys a sense of ignorance about the challenges of his own undertaking and disinterest in the things he encountered, a disturbing detachment that the film replicates in its own self-conscious way.

The film thus presents itself as an exercise in modesty, in acknowledging the disconnect, the impossibility of understanding. In other respects, though, this welcome reflectivity seems absent and certain elements of the film are in danger of undermining the otherwise considered and restrained approach. For example, the mere designation of the social formations blamed here for Albrecht Roscher's death as "cults" or "secret societies" imposes on autochthonous phenomena a suggestive and restrictive terminology that conveys a decisively European understanding; the "unknowability" of Africa is implicitly associated with this "cult," its rituals and its alleged secrecy, which, in the European mind, conceals something potentially sinister and untoward. The collage of early film reels (probably from the 1920s or so) and recent images implies a longevity of these incomprehensible modes of social organization that clash with the marked sense of incongruence between Albrecht Roscher's remarks and Gerd Roscher's narration. The latter suggests development, dy-

namism—the fact that in the twenty-first century we have learned from the mistakes of our forebears, whereas the insinuated continuity of African ways (between Albrecht's times, the period of the monochrome recordings, and the present journey) suggests stasis, sameness, lack of "progress." The concluding remarks of the narrator that the death of Albrecht Roscher occurred in a region that, only two generations later, became the site of the so-called Maji Maji uprising against German colonial rule in East Africa (1905–1907), constructs a link that might be true from a certain perspective (postcolonial critique), yet imposes on Africa European notions of historical logic and causality. In an attempt to thematize the perils of the colonial gaze, or a precolonial naivety such as displayed by Albrecht Roscher, the film involuntarily, and probably inevitably, perpetuates mechanisms of appropriation and "othering," and it demonstrates once again that the noble ambition of treating otherness with restraint and respect generates its own aporias. The filmic documentary, by virtue of the unstable character of the medium, represents a dynamic mode of capturing non-European knowledge. The act of capturing the incongruent and the tangible collision between object and representation in itself convey an uncomfortable knowledge about the limitations of knowledge—however far and deep one travels.

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