Visual afterlives of colonialism
Images of Namibia on contemporary German television

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Abstract
Namibia, the former ‘protectorate’ German South-West Africa and main colony of the German Empire, has long been absent from contemporary German popular culture. However, since the centenary of the German extermination campaign against the Herero and the Nama in 2004, Namibia has attracted the attention of public television in a highly specific way. Namibia’s desert has become the new regional background for a genre of melodramatic films that up until now had been set against Alpine backdrops. Starting with the genre itself, and then examining the material and the visual strategies, this paper considers the discursive relation between the new popularity of the Namibian setting on public television and critical explorations of colonial history.

Namibia has become a popular backdrop for modernising a conservative genre that until now has been situated mainly in the Alps or the Lüneburger Heide. Gradually the first and most important colony for settlers in the German Empire (1884-1915) has been (re-)discovered by public television, giving birth to a neo-colonial version of an established genre in film history: the German Heimatfilm, a sentimental movie that is set in an idealised regional location and suggests the notion of a homeland beyond alienation. While Namibia had occupied no visual space in the public memory of the Federal Republic of Germany for decades, numerous films such as Endloser Horizont (“Endless Horizon”, 2005), Folge deinem Herzen (“Follow Your Heart”, 2006), or its sequels Für immer Afrika (“Forever Africa”, 2007), Afrika im Herzen (“Africa in One’s Heart”, 2008) have been broadcast in German prime time in recent years. They draw on narrative and visual strategies typical of the 1950s Heimatfilm while integrating Namibian landscape, wild life and — exoticised people. But the depiction of the ‘dark continent’ is not just used as a new backdrop combining the imagery of a fictitiously Africanised Namibia with recourse to well-tried formulas. Rather, it has a specific discursive function within the German political context. As I will argue, this modernisation of the Heimatfilm reoccupies the old African ‘homeland’ symbolically, while at the same time...

time ratifying the ideological production of a new German identity.² The Africanised Heimatfilm is an indicator of and a productive force within an on-going discursive shift regarding the contemporary afterlives of German colonialism.³

The Heimatfilm after 1945 explicitly repressed Nazi history contributing to an amnesiac public memory and a recoding of the Heimat concept. Its modernisation within a Namibian setting plays a somewhat comparable role. This is exemplified in one of the most problematic films produced within the last years, Für immer Afrika.⁴ It serves as a programmatic way of banishing the genocidal chapter of German colonial history that is associated with 1904: the extermination of a major part of the Herero- and the Nama-speaking community and the establishment of concentration camps in which more than half of the Southwest-African prisoners of war died as a result of forced labour, hunger and lack of shelter.⁵ In the following pages I will discuss the genre-specific elements in the film and the material quoted. Then turning to visual strategies, I will explore the translation of existing patterns of the Heimatfilm to the image of a contemporary African ‘homeland’ for the white female protagonist from Germany, a translation accomplished by displacing the masculinised spectre of colonial rule and inventing a ‘pre-colonial’ African spirituality. Finally, I will link the new Heimatfilm to the contemporary discourse on Germany’s past and its future role.

³ “Afterlife”, Nachleben, in this Benjaminian sense implicates both, mortification and reanimation through quoting; see Walter Benjamin, “Das Passagen-Werk”, in: idem, Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 1, Frankfurt am Main, Suhrkamp, 1991: 574-575; N 2, 3 and 595; N 11, 3.
⁴ Für immer Afrika was initially broadcast by Germany’s public television program ARD on Tuesday, 18. December 2007 at 8.15 pm. Setting aside questions of the actual target audience, productions like this seem to be very successful. According to film’s copyright holder, ARD Degeto, more than 6 to 8 million viewers have seen Folge deinem Herzen and its sequel Für immer Afrika. This represents a market share of 20% to 25% compared to the 15% average of primetime broadcasts.
Differences in repetition

Some film stars seem more familiar to us than our neighbours. For some of us this might be especially true of the unchanging white German actors in the Africanised Heimatfilm, as shown by Für immer Afrika starring Christine Neubauer and Francis Fulton-Smith, both well-known from other Heimat-productions. They had already played the main characters in a mini-series called Die Landärztin (“The Country Doctor”), which started in 2005, shortly before the prequel of Für immer Afrika, and was located in the German south. The Namibia film thus clearly draws upon a sense of brand recognition. The visual strategies through which this ‘dream team’ is presented – whether in front of the Bavarian Alps or the Namibian desert – are to a certain extent similar too. Camera distances are shortened to heighten spectatorial identification. Then, right before the cut, a soundtrack suggestive of the region is laid over the protagonist’s image, which brings us to a long take of the landscape. The juxtaposition seeks to produce identification with ‘the land’ through audience empathy with the characters.

This pattern is itself characteristic of the genre. In this case, the format quoted stems from the 1950s. The 2005 Landärztin is a remake of the now-canonised Heimatfilm from 1958 of the same name starring Marianne Koch and Rudolf Prack. The contemporary remake picks up the original plot, but transforms it a little by maturing the characters, since the target audience is clearly defined by ARD’s license company, Degeto, as one already familiar with the original film: women in the 50 to 65 age group and, primarily, retirees over the age of 65. Therefore, in the 2005 version the country doctor is no longer an unmarried youngster, but is over 40, already widowed, and has a son.

In the 1950s, the figure of a female country doctor revolutionised the genre by modernising gendered images while at the same time amplifying a conservative notion of the homeland. It can thus be read as an initial renewal of a genre that had become highly problematic because of Nazi history, the overt propagandistic use of the Heimatfilm by the fascists, and the later reuse of the same actors. In the 2005 version, the story from 1958 is only slightly altered and – not surprisingly – used again two years later in Für immer Afrika. ‘The woman’, a widow from Munich, begins a new life after a terrible blow of fate. She starts practicing medicine again at some provincial place, finds the second love of her life, and ultimately finds herself, because she is finally needed as a doctor, mother, and lover at the same time. In order to be accepted by the regional community, however, the female physician has to prove herself. In Die Landärztin, Christine

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7 Further, both films were directed by Peter Sämann, who is well known for his Heimatfilme in Germany, and produced by Regina Ziegler from Ziegler Film, the main company responsible for the production of neo-colonial films on German television since 2005.
8 Moltke underlines the nostalgic modernisation the film indicates by the depiction of the Volkswagen; Johannes von Moltke, No Place Like Home. Locations of Heimat in German Cinema, Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005: 121-128.
Neubauer does so by revealing the reason for poisoned milk; in *Für immer Afrika*, for poisoned water. Francis Fulton-Smith, the veterinarian of the Bavarian village Großramming in the first film, the director of the Guguletho clinic in the second, stands by her. This seems to be a harmless way of modernising the *Heimatfilm* for an aging German audience, even introducing a more contemporary image of ‘the woman’. But translated into a post-colonial context, the story of ‘the woman’ finding some new place like home has intersectional implications that go beyond the question of gendered image production.  

The difference in repetition becomes clear as soon as we examine the contamination story: the poisoning of the milk in *Die Landärztin* is shown as an act of desperation by someone from the existing community. It gives the female protagonist a chance to prove herself and become integrated into the village. The reiteration of this story line in *Für immer Afrika* changes the main social coordinates from gender to race. In Namibia, the profession of the female country doctor is not an issue because of the actual medical needs of a helpless local community staged as the racialised other. That is to say the Afro-pessimist re-contextualisation of the story grants emancipation to the white female protagonist from the very beginning. Her femininity is no longer marked in the sense of a category that excludes her from the culture of dominance. In other words, the Africanised remake of the country doctor’s story is less about the integration of the female character into a sexist society as about the integration of the character into two complementary communities: white German protagonists and black Africans in the background. The notion of a ‘multicultural’ homeland is produced by the recoding of whiteness and the reinvention of the African ‘other’. It requires first the symbolic exclusion of old patterns of white supremacy represented by a minor character; second, the invention of a Namibian blackness is needed as a backdrop to visually privilege the white protagonists.

**Displacing the undead of colonialism**

In *Für immer Afrika*, the spectre of bad colonial history is introduced to separate it from the good German country doctor. Götz Otto plays Christian Lindenburg, the rival of

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11 The ideological function of the *Heimatfilm* to transform the distinction of self and other in the process of narration has already been shown by Moltke, *No Place*:128.

12 This distinguishes the neo-colonial *Heimatfilm* from the total displacement of national socialism for the reappropriation of a notion of *Heimat*, which had become problematic, in the modernised version of the genre in the 1950s; on this initial modernisation and its political function see Jürgen Trimborn, *Der deutsche Heimatfilm der fünfziger Jahre: Motive, Symbole und Handlungsmuster*, Köln, Teiresias, 1998: 12-18.
Francis Fulton-Smith, alias Dr Sam Vanderloo. Lindenburg, as the owner of a lodge and the only Namibian character with German ancestors, wears beige clothes. While historical topics are never brought up explicitly in the film, his clothing in some scenes clearly refers to the uniforms of the German colonial troops. In contrast the obvious visual after-effects of German colonialism in Namibia are constantly hidden: the film does not show German town architecture, restaurants, or shops, for example.

Yet while Namibian-German colonial history is never a topic and its historical traces in everyday life are elided, it is nonetheless evident in the vicious character of Lindenburg— not only by his clothing, but also by the rather complex way the camera frames him, deliberately quoting visual strategies of colonial photography. In a representative scene, Berger comes for a candle-light dinner in the middle of the desert. Together with Lindenburg she stands before a table covered with a white cloth, while a black extra brings the food. As Lindenburg and Berger move in the foreground, the third actor freezes for a few seconds. The scene is composed in such a way that the extra becomes part of the backdrop, i.e. the image allocates him to the landscape. In contrast to colonial photography, though, this shot is used not so much to naturalise the notion of blackness as to prepare the viewer for the symbolic exclusion of the representative of the white German-speaking Namibian community. The camera presents Lindenburg as a reminder of history only in order to expel him from the scenery that produces the phantasma of a multicultural community in a homeland belonging to both white Germans as new immigrants and black Africans as the autochthonous population, i.e. the contemporary image of racialised difference.

At one point, Lindenburg is literally driven out of the picture. Backed by the corrupt authorities, he secretly runs an illegal gold mine, which is part of the old family property. He makes his workers use cyanide, poisoning the invaluable groundwater and endangering humans and animals. With the assistance of Vanderloo and a local witch doctor played by the South-African actor Tshamano Tsebe, Berger finally unmasks Lindenburg as the well-poisoner and saves ‘the natives’. When the witch doctor cooperating with Berger persuades his fellow Africans to lay down their jobs at the gold mine and to push the bad German out of the frame, Lindenburg shows his ‘real face’. Just before vanishing, he starts to yell at the workers and, echoing a gesture of colonial supremacy, points his gun at the witch doctor. Here Lindenburg is obviously depicted as representing the history of colonial dominance. In the happy-ending film though, this spectre is overcome by reactivating ‘authentic’ African spirituality under the guidance of the globalised German country doctor.


In my reading of this scene, *Für immer Afrika* performs the disburdening of a colonial afterlife for a German audience. In order to do so, the portrayal of the well-poisoner quotes a stereotype that the target audience, elderly women, know from their childhood: the anti-Semitic projection on the Jewish community stemming from the middle-ages that the Nazis exploited.\(^{15}\) The colonial history Christian Lindenburg alludes to is thus banned in order to cleanse the modern white character from the colonial stigma by reiterating an antisemitic topos and thereby making way for the constituting of an exoticised place as the ‘new homeland’.

**Reinventing African spirituality**

As I have already indicated, to facilitate German amnesiac memory successfully, immaculate whiteness needs a complementary backdrop. *Für immer Afrika* must therefore invent an authentic, timeless tradition of ‘the other’: Led by the witch doctor, the rural population is presented as ‘natives’ — half naked and decorated with fur.\(^{16}\) Only the witch doctor’s wife wears a pink Ovambo gown. Except for this, however, the costumes neither conform with historical dress nor do they have any relation to traditional clothing in Ovamboland, the North of Namibia, where the Guguletho clinic is supposedly located.

The would-be pre-colonial fur outfits are actually stage costumes supplied by Ondunga, a performance group from Windhoek that provided the film’s extras and was not credited at the end of the film. In the case of Ondunga, these syncretic costumes stand for a pan-Africanised ‘Namibness’. Within Namibian performance culture, they have a specific function: during apartheid the different language groups of those who were defined as the black population throughout Namibia were categorised and separated according to racist notions of ethnicity within the townships. Thus, after independence in 1990, there was a need to integrate the existing communities, even if only on a symbolic level, using performances that reinvented culture in a way that was not restricted to one population group. Eventually, however, this reinvention became commercialised, prefiguring the ethno-tourist gaze. This gaze, which today leads to stage-impoverished Namibians in allegedly traditional communities with respective outfits, is exactly what *Für immer Afrika* contributes to.\(^{17}\) When the Ondunga costumes are translated into rural everyday clothing by German television, they are misused to ascribe an imagined cultural difference between the figurations of black and white. So the neo-colonial claim in multicultural disguise is accomplished by reinforcing the fictional authentication of the African ‘other’ — a process we already know from the *Völkerschauen*, i.e. the live exhibitions of ‘real


\(^{16}\) The title of the film is *Forever Africa* not *Forever Namibia*, i.e. it is not the old German-Southwest, but the dream of Africa that is invoked. It already hints to what Hobsbawn has termed an ‘invention of tradition’ underlining its contemporary production; see Eric J. Hobsbawn, *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

\(^{17}\) See, for example, Winfried Schumacher, “Die Götter müssen entrückt sein. In der namibischen Kalahari öffnet sich ein San-Dorf vorsichtig dem Tourismus”, Süddeutsche Zeitung, January 18, 2007: 41.
natives’ in zoo-like areas throughout Europe during the second half of the 19th and the first half of the 20th century.18

Difference, though, is no longer devalued or eroticised in the millennial Heimatfilm: in Für immer Afrika it is rather ascribed to create the phantasm of authentic African spirituality contributing to a culturalist, i.e. neo-racist, stereotyping of ‘the African other’.19 This can be seen in the motherly role of Makhulu played by the South-African actress Nonkosi Frances Ndlazilwana, who — as a member of the Gugulethu staff — is wrapped in a stereotypically designed African cloth. Serving as staff member and self-proclaimed teacher of the witch doctor at the same time, she ultimately brings the modern white and the rural black communities together. She does so by detoxing the German from alienation: Makhulu finally helps the country doctor overcome her ‘inner demon’, the trauma Berger brought with her from Germany: she has not practiced medicine since she lost a patient during surgery years before. With Makhulu’s spiritual help, she regains her ability to practice and do what is needed so badly in a ‘developing country’ eventually even cooperating with the witch doctor. While the historical trauma Lindenburg represents is displaced, Berger’s seemingly biographical one can be cured through African spirituality in the new homeland. Allegorically read, the personal story implies that developmental aid is based on the reconciliation of modern Germany with an authentic Africa that has not been spoiled by colonialism. The ‘Goddess in White’, as doctors are referred to in Germany, and ‘Mother Africa’ together are able to expel the ghost of German colonialism. Racialised gendered images — minor black and protagonist white — are thus used in this Heimatfilm to spiritually displace Germany’s colonial legacy, which is symbolically linked to a specific form of white masculinity.

Conclusion

The dialectics of historical displacement and a reinvention of the culture of ‘the other’ in Für immer Afrika can be seen as a reaction to a double discursive shift that has taken place since 2004. With the centenary of General von Trotha’s extermination order the atrocities of colonial history became part of the German public memory. This was due to the work of historians, ethnologists, artists, political groups, the need for German politicians to take part in official commemorations abroad, and the reparation claims made in the name of the Herero community.20 At that point, the determining metaphor

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18 With regard to the history of Völkerschauen see Anne Dreesbach, Gezähmte Wilde. Die Zurschaustellung “exotischer” Menschen in Deutschland 1870-1940, Frankfurt am Main, Campus, 2005; Stefanie Wolter, Die Vermarktung des Fremden. Exotismus und die Anfänge des Massenkonsums, Frankfurt am Main, Campus 2005.


referring to the Namibian-German relation was ‘division’, i.e., the obverse of an imagined multicultural community. This metaphor has been substituted by the notion of ‘shared’ Namibian and German experiences and the call for a change in perspective, so that we look to our common future instead of a divided past. Für immer Afrika can be read within this framework of political thought. By ‘othering’ the black and replacing the German-speaking Namibian community, this Heimatfilm paradigmatically produces a ‘modern German’ understanding of sharing Namibia as a new homeland with the ‘real Africans’.

This imaginary turn needs to be understood within a broader political context. Paradoxically, the change in metaphors, which Für immer Afrika echoes, began with the opening of the Berlin Holocaust Memorial in 2005. That event marked the development of a new German self-confidence: publicly remembering the shoah had become the founding myth of the new, decontaminated democratic Germany that deals officially with its uncanny history. Since then, Germany has been depicted by ruling politicians as an ideal peacekeeper especially because of its ability to cope with its Nazi past and its lack of a colonial history after 1915. In this political context, the narrative and visual transposition of the post-fascist Heimatfilm to a Namibian setting is not as harmless as it might seem at first glance. It rather ratifies and reinforces a new national pride, which is implicitly accompanied by neo-colonial claims. In the case of Für immer Afrika, it first replaces the knowledge of the colonial genocide, even reusing anti-Semitic stereotypes; second, it reoccupies Germany’s main former colony by means of culturalist racism in a way that colludes with the ethno-tourist industry and updates principles of the Völkerschauen, and, third, through the story of medical aid it amplifies the new official concept of Germany and thus subtly supports its goal to play a more significant geopolitical role.

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21 See in contrast the disaster of German memory politics regarding the atrocities of colonialism as it was revealed once more when the bones of Namibian victims of German colonial rule were given back without any acknowledgment by higher ranking German representatives in September 2011 (E. Beis and D. Johnson, “Bis auf die Knochen blamiert”, die tageszeitung, September 30, 2011; http://www.taz.de/Eklat-bei-Rueckgabe-der-Herero-Gebeine/79183/).


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