

HERMANN VON
HELMHOLTZ-ZENTRUM
FÜR KULTURTECHNIK



THE MAKING OF ... GHOSTS

Voices and Apparitions in Archives of the
First World War

An installation by

BRITTA LANGE and **PHILIP SCHEFFNER**

with sound recordings, amongst others, from the Lautarchiv
(sound archive) of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

Historical background on the exhibition project

During the First World War the Ottoman Empire becomes Germany's ally. Islam develops into an important strategic weapon against France, England and Russia. Muslim soldiers from the British, French and Russian armies are called upon to change sides and to enter the war together with the Ottoman Empire and its German ally against the enemies of Islam. As part of this strategy, captured Muslim soldiers are interned in special camps with Indian and North African soldiers of the French and British armies. These so-called "colonial soldiers" are instigated to uprisings against their colonial rulers.

As it happened, the propaganda is rather unsuccessful; the camps however are faced with the growing interest of scholars. The detained „exotic“ prisoners of war become objects of different academic research projects. One such project is the recording of languages by the "Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission". This commission is founded in 1915 and comprises over 30 scholars from the fields of linguistics, musicology and anthropology. The aim of the commission is to systematically record the different languages, dialects and music of all those interned in the German prisoner of war camps. Under the technical direction of Wilhelm Doegen, 1.650 gramophone recordings of languages are made. To this day, these recordings form the basic stock of the Berlin Sound Archive ("Lautarchiv"), located at the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (<http://www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de/>). These sound recordings form the starting point of the exhibition "THE MAKING OF ... GHOSTS". Now digitalized and transferred to the exhibition room, the disembodied voices of the prisoners, preserved on shellac discs in the Sound Archive, reappear as ghosts – hinting at the absences in our archives and knowledge.

Exhibition

“THE MAKING OF ... GHOSTS” is a four channel sound and video installation; the German version was exhibited in Berlin in 2007/2008 and the English version in Mumbai and Delhi in 2011. In the year 2014, it offers a different perspective on the anniversary of the outbreak of World War I: a commemoration of those subjects of history who have remained silent for decades in the historiography of the Great War, the colonial soldiers who speak with their own voice.

The sound and video installation “THE MAKING OF ... GHOSTS” is based on the research carried out by filmmaker Philip Scheffner for his film „The Halfmoon Files“ and the academic research of cultural scientist Britta Lange for her postdoctoral research on war prisoners.

The starting point of the exhibition is the meeting of German researchers and imprisoned soldiers from the English, French and Russian armies in German prisoner of war camps during WWI. The main focus lies on the so-called “Half Moon Camp” in Wünsdorf near Berlin where mostly Indian and North-African “colonial soldiers” were imprisoned from 1914 to 1918. These “exotic” prisoners of war were utilised for political propaganda and became the object of many academic studies in anthropology, ethnology, linguistics, musicology and jurisprudence. Data and stories have amassed in the archives of WWI – about the political goals of the propaganda, the relevance of the prisoners for science, about the media used – as well as the prisoners’ stories about the war, their home, the village Wünsdorf and their view of the scholars.

From today’s perspective, these stories are meshed into a fragile audio-visual web of tales; tales on the interweaving of colonialism, war, media, politics, entertainment culture and science.

Britta Lange, PD Dr. phil., is a cultural scientist and Research Fellow at the Institute of Cultural Science, Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. She received her doctorate degree in 2005 from the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin and completed her Postdoctoral lecture qualification (Habilitation) in 2012. Her research focusses on cultural history and theory, cultural techniques, the history of colonialism and the First World War as well as on early film and sound recordings. Her recent research project, “Captures Voices”, is funded by the DFG. Selected publications: *Echt, Unecht, Lebensecht. Menschenbilder im Umlauf* (Berlin 2006); *Die Wiener Forschungen an Kriegsgefangenen 1915 – 1918. Anthropologische und ethnografische Verfahren im Lager* (Vienna 2013). Together with Margit Berner and Anette Hoffmann: *Sensible Sammlungen. Aus dem anthropologischen Depot* (Hamburg 2011).

Philip Scheffner is a filmmaker, living in Berlin. His films *The Halfmoon Files* (2007), *Day of the Sparrow* (2010) and *Revision* (2012) celebrated their world premiere at the Berlin International Film Festival and received various national and international awards. Together with Merle Kröger, he runs the production house pong in Berlin.

www.halfmoonfiles.de

Background information on the Sound Archive – Perspective Humboldt-Forum

The installation THE MAKING OF ... GHOSTS depicts one way of engaging with precarious holdings in scholarly archives. The sound recordings of the war prisoners, produced for the Sound Archive in the forced situation of the prisoner of war camps of WWI, are unquestionably a sensitive collection. How can its materialization and the phase of its forgotten existence in the archive become an integral part of its presentation?

Britta Lange and Philip Scheffner illustrate ways of listening to the recordings, which irritate habitual modes of reception: Precise research on the individual documents as well as the distinct persons leads to associations, to the mumbling of the scientists behind the prisoners, to the contrast between imperial, scientific perspectives and the personal words of each imprisoned colonial soldier.

The exploration of new ways of engaging with the precarious records appears particularly relevant in respect of the Sound Archive: It is the only collection of the Humboldt University that is to be relocated in 2019 to the Humboldt-Forum at the Berlin Schlossplatz under the key theme “Exchange of Cultures”. The exhibition THE MAKING OF ... GHOSTS offers a conceptual approach that moves beyond all established representational practices of museums and science and is distanced from the former founding idea of a “Peoples’ Museum of Voices” to foster a respectful engagement with a sensitive collection. It thus gives occasion to stimulate and enrich the discussion on the profile of Sound Archive’s presence in the Humboldt Forum.

www.lautarchiv.hu-berlin.de

Opacities

A text on "The Making of ..." by Nicole Wolf (2007)

It shouldn't be difficult to imagine that many archives, such as the Sound Archive of the Humboldt University, are haunted by ghosts. Be this indeed the case, we can expect to encounter some of them if we follow the trails of the archived material. For the exhibition "The making of..." various sources are taken from their storage location, where the archive material is recorded and systematised, to another museal, artistic place, which is public and accessible.

The material travels – and aplenty wanders with it. As visitors we might embark similarly on this journey and thoroughly and attentively search for ghosts. The kinds of encounters emerging in this new place, between us and the numerous levels of evidence and latency, will however depend on the amount of risk we are willing to take as we view, listen and reflect on the voices, images, stories, historical circumstances. The most diverse vibrations and disarrays draw attention to how we ourselves are embedded in and tied to modernism's schools of thought. For if we look at, behind, beside or below documents, shellac records or dates of origin, our gaze is directed at colonial structures of historicity and the politics of allocating positions within those. We are confronted with constructions of truth and difference, with the urge for identification, but equally with the sound of coughing at the end of a voice recording, shifts in time lines and other inconsistencies. Consequently, if the archive is a place for ghosts, one might surmise that they are filled with a temporality, which can collapse the past, present and future. When archive material is released and (re-)presented differently, as is the case here, traces are left and an offer is made to position the shown and the said in the light of Here and Now. The attempt to singularise a numbered

shellac record and its voice categorised as “typical” or “atypical” develops a potential which intervenes in current strategies of standardisation and normalisation. The fascination with the abundance of the archive and the intriguing details and nuances of the crackling and rustling is therefore not driven by an obsession with collecting and recording with the aim of uncovering another truth – but with a political passion to think otherwise. This must often be accompanied by probing the limits of a specific medium and consequently of filmmaking, of exhibiting, of writing as well as it must challenge the practice of being a visitor to the exhibition. If we risk immersing ourselves, we become ghosts, we wander around and get involved in that which does not wish to be understood in its entirety. Ultimately we can take part in enabling that myriad relations to the archive are enlivened.

Nicole Wolf researches, teaches and writes on films and its many facets in cinema, gallery and activist spaces. She is currently teaching in the Visual Cultures Department at Goldsmiths University of London

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Opening times: Tuesday to Saturday, 2–6 p.m.

Admission is free

Video and sound recordings are presented in English.
Accompanying texts are available both in English and German.

The exhibition was developed in cooperation, among others, with the Sound Archive of the Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, the Helmholtz-Zentrum für Kulturtechnik, the Max-Planck Institute for the History of Science Berlin, Stiftung Deutsches Rundfunk Archiv and Kunstraum Kreuzberg/Bethanien, Berlin. It has been supported by the Capital Cultural Fund in Berlin (Hauptstadtkulturfonds). Special thanks to the Filmarchiv Austria in Vienna for film material by Rudolf Pöch, 1915.



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