

Nonfictional Film as Historical Source: Materiality – Visuality – Performativity

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Figure 1. A MOTOR HONEYMOON, Margaret and Lawrence Thaw, USA 1924

In October 1936 New York millionaires Margaret (1902–1983) and Lawrence Thaw (1899–1965) set out for Africa to pursue an extraordinary project. During the following seven months they travelled from Algiers across the Sahara to Nairobi while accompanied by Thomas Hogan, a professional cameraman, who recorded their journey. The couple planned on making an ethnographic travelogue and therefore cooperated with the National Geographic Society and the New York Museum of Natural History. When they stayed in

Agadez (in present-day Niger), they filmed a staged fight between native warriors on camels. In her travel diary Margaret noted on the event:

Eight large white camels magnificently caparisoned raced in from two sides of the public square and their riders jumped to the ground and went furiously at each other with sword and shield. [...] Tom & Larry who had the big camera up on a truck to get a good perspective yelled to them to stop as they were out of range of the camera but it was useless [...]. They had got their teeth into the fight and nothing would stop them. Larry rushed down & managed to make the interpreter understand he got 20 men to go in at their peril to stop the fight. And then they were given fresh instructions and started the fight all over again.¹

This quote draws attention to a crucial aspect when dealing with film sources in historical research: rather than only looking at the final product, it is equally important to explore the production process. Besides their narrative and visual qualities, films have a material and performative dimension as well. As Margaret's description makes clear, the camera position and the — partly unpredictable — performance of the fighters considerably shaped the scene's content. This insight proves true for fictional movies too but even more so for nonfictional films that might not entirely follow a script.

By the time Margaret and Lawrence tried to coordinate the warriors of Agadez for the shoot, they could already look back at years of filming experience. Since their honeymoon to Europe in 1924, the couple took amateur pictures of their yearly travels around the world before they decided to aim at bigger audiences with their Africa travelogue.² During the 1920s to the early 1930s

1. Margaret Thaw, *Africa Travel Diary, 1936/37*, 53. Thaw Private Papers.

2. On the story of the Thaws and their travel films see my dissertation, Juliane Hornung, *Um die Welt mit den Thaws. Eine Mediengeschichte der New Yorker High Society in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2020).

the Thaws recorded ten amateur films in Europe, Africa, and the Caribbean.³ They were mostly shot by Lawrence and show Margaret, famous sights, landscapes, luxury grand hotels, and American friends the couple used to meet while abroad. Back in New York, the Thaws would give large parties at their Upper East Side apartments and screen the films for family, friends, and famous gossip writers. The Africa travelogue, however, not only attracted the attention of New York's high society and the press. Lawrence and Margaret were also invited to show it at the prestigious annual lecture series of the National Geographic Society in Washington D.C. From their first amateur film *A MOTOR HONEYMOON* (USA 1924) to the professional documentary *BLACK MAJESTY* (USA 1937), Lawrence and Margaret tested a variety of amateur cameras starting with one of the very first models of 1923 and moved from 16 to 35 mm film. Moreover, they knew well that a recording could develop as an open and interactive process. Whether it was between Margaret and her filming husband or in a colonial setting between the Thaws, their cameraman, and indigenous people — often power relations were negotiated and inscribed in the images.

Already in the 1980s and 1990s research on documentary film has dealt with these issues. Bill Nichols for example has drawn attention to the filming practice and the interactions between filmmakers and protagonists.⁴ Others like Fatimah Tobing Rony or Elizabeth Edwards have stressed the agency of the subjects in ethnographical films — and photographs in the latter case.⁵ Still, film theorists as well as historians tend to concentrate on the aesthetics and the plot of film sources or on the reception process. This article takes up the impulses from film studies and visual history and shifts the focus even more

3. Differing strictly between amateur and professional films is difficult. Amateurs can use professional technology or make commercial profits while professional filmmakers may film for private purposes. Alternative terms like 'home movie' even complicate the matter. In this context, Martha McNamara's and Karan Sheldon's pragmatic definition is helpful: "'Home movies' are essentially domestic moving images meant to be screened for a small audience of friends and family, whereas 'amateur film' connotes nonprofessional productions often intended for a wider audience." Martha McNamara and Karan Sheldon, "Introduction," in *Amateur Movie Making Aesthetics of the Everyday in New England Film 1915–1960*, eds. Martha McNamara and Karan Sheldon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 3–4.

4. Bill Nichols, *Representing Reality. Issues and Concepts in Documentary* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 13f.

5. Fatimah Tobing Rony, *The Third Eye. Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* (Durham/London: Duke University Press, third printing 2001); Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories. Photographs, Anthropology and Museums*, (Oxford and New York: Bloomsbury, 2006).

thoroughly to the production side of nonfictional filmmaking. It looks at the films of the Thaws — amateur and professional — and argues to consider materiality and performativity as equally important qualities of moving images as visuality. It asks what the recording process, the technical capacities of the filming equipment, and the interactions between the filmmakers and the protagonists can tell us about the final product. Does the production provide insights into the hierarchies between the persons involved? And at what points does it create these hierarchies in the first place? In this way, analytical concepts like the ‘gaze’ can be critically challenged and reconsidered from a material and performative angle.

In what follows, I will first elaborate on the terms of materiality, visuality, and performativity in connection with the amateur films. Against this backdrop I will examine two scenes from *A MOTOR HONEYMOON*. Second, I want to transfer this approach to the professional travelogue of 1937 and look at two clips from *BLACK MAJESTY*. While it is helpful to explore the three dimensions separately, the concrete examples demonstrate that a film’s materiality, visuality, and performativity always intersect.

Setting the Scene: Early Amateur Film as Historical Source

Moving (and photographic) images do not depict their production process or the apparatus that has made them.⁶ Instead, they seem to open up a window to a past reality while only a fault reminds the spectator of the underlying technology.⁷ However, neither the film material nor the camera simply carries a message. Indeed, the materiality of the film stock and the technical equipment significantly shape the content.⁸ When Margaret

6. Sybille Krämer, “Das Medium als Spur und Apparat,” in *Medien. Computer. Realität. Wirklichkeitsvorstellungen und Neue Medien*, ed. Sybille Krämer (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1998), 73.

7. David Gugerli and Barbara Orland, “Einführung,” in *Ganz normale Bilder. Historische Beiträge zur visuellen Herstellung von Selbstverständlichkeit*, eds. David Gugerli and Barbara Orland (Zürich: Chronos, 2002), 9.

8. Krämer, “Medium,” 73.

and Lawrence went on their honeymoon to Europe in April and May 1924, they brought one of the first amateur cameras by Eastman Kodak or Bell & Howell. In 1923, both companies introduced their own model — the Ciné-Kodak and the Filmo 70-A.⁹ With approximately 7 by 14 by 20 cm and 2,3 kg, they were smaller and lighter than professional cameras at the time. Besides, they ran with Kodak's new 16 mm safety film that, unlike the 35 mm nitrate film, would not accidentally inflame itself. Both cameras were equipped with a fixed-focus lens that could take close-ups (up to one meter) as well as long shots.¹⁰ Zooming in wasn't possible, though, so if one wanted to take a close-up one had to get physically close to a person or an object.¹¹ Furthermore, these early amateur cameras could not be used under bad lighting conditions, e.g. indoors or by night, and neither in the rain. The Ciné-Kodak had to be hand cranked steadily for the duration of every shot, so a tripod was required. The Filmo 70-A, in comparison, was powered by a spring motor that ran for a little less than one minute at a time, thereby exposing seven meters of film. Afterwards it had to be manually rewound.¹²

In 1923, Kodak's Camera, tripod, projector, and screen cost 335 dollars (today ca. 4,700 dollars).¹³ A reel of 15 meters would last for approximately two minutes of filming and was sold for four dollars (today ca. 56 dollars), a reel of 30 meters ran for four minutes and cost six dollars (today ca. 84 dollars). Processing the film was included and clients could pay extra for intertitles and splicing.¹⁴ The Thaws used this service extensively and added elaborately made title cards and opening credits to their films.

These brief remarks already underline that the materiality

9. Alan D. Kattelle, "The Amateur Cinema League and Its Films," *Film History* 15, no. 2 (2003): 238.

10. Dino Everett, "The Technologies of Home Movies and Amateur Film," in *Amateur Movie Making Aesthetics of the Everyday in New England Film 1915–1960*, eds. Martha McNamara and Karan Sheldon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 42–43.

11. Eastman Kodak Company, ed., *Instructions for the Use of the Ciné-Kodak B Model f.6.5 Lens* (Rochester N.Y., 1927), 22–23.

12. In 1925 the Ciné-Kodak was equipped with the same mechanism. Everett, "Technologies," 42.

13. Kattelle, "Amateur," 238.

14. Eastman Kodak Company, ed., *Kodaks and Kodak Supplies* (Rochester N.Y., 1928), 30.

of the film stock as well as the camera determined where, when, and for how long one could film. Since the time to shoot one scene was rather short, the film stock expensive, and only available in limited numbers during the journeys, it is rather unlikely that the Thaws spontaneously started filming at any point of their trips. Even though they certainly didn't script the scenes, they probably agreed on when and what exactly to shoot most of the time. The films, thus, don't show any randomly picked motives or events but carefully chosen content. Furthermore, for the final product the couple selected the most important scenes and cut out others. The later inserted intertitles and the images may seem like they fit together naturally but it must be kept in mind that the comments were written weeks after the films had been shot. Considering all these material aspects, it becomes clear that Lawrence' and Margaret's amateur films don't provide a more authentic or uncontrived glimpse to the past than professional movies would do.¹⁵

Indeed, the films give a special insight into the Thaws' lives. To be more precise, they show Lawrence' view of foreign places, his wife, or friends. But Lawrence wasn't just documenting the journeys. By filming certain events, places, and people, he made them visible and gave them meaning while excluding and marginalising others. In this way, he took up a powerful position. When dealing with the visuality of film sources it is therefore fruitful to draw on the feminist film theory's notions on the 'gaze.' In her ground-breaking article *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* on gendered looking relations in Hollywood cinema, Laura Mulvey developed the "male gaze" as a concept to analyse female disempowerment through the camera.¹⁶ According to her, the male camera perspective and the gaze of

15. Considering the material dimension of amateur film adds another point to arguing against the alleged authenticity of this genre. See Roger Odin, "Reflections on the Family Home Movie as Document," in *Mining the Home Movie: Excavations in Histories and Memories*, eds. Karen L. Ishizuka and Patricia R. Zimmermann (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 259; Karen F. Gracy, "Midway between Secular and Sacred: Consecrating the Home Movie as a Cultural Heritage Object," in *Amateur Movie Making. Aesthetics of the Everyday in New England Film 1915–1960*, eds. Martha McNamara and Karan Sheldon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 105–107.

16. Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 44–53.

the male actors on screen eroticise and objectify the female actors while the spectators are forced to adopt this gaze. Although Mulvey's approach was criticised as being ahistorical and neglecting oppositional spectator positions, it remains stimulating to think about viewing relations and their effects — while considering its materiality and the agency of the protagonists.¹⁷

Another take on power dynamics and viewing relations, that considers material and spatial aspects, can be found in Michel Foucault's panoptic surveillance.¹⁸ Film theorist Catherine Russell as well as historian Norbert Finzsch have looked at Mulvey and Foucault from a shared perspective. The control mechanism of the panopticon is based on permanent (assumed) visibility that produces certain behaviour.¹⁹ Noticeable in the context of early amateur filming is the spatial dimension of the panopticon that possesses a theatrical quality at the same time. As Foucault states, the cells are like "so many theatres, in which each actor is [...] constantly visible".²⁰ Analogously, it can be argued that the gaze of the camera opens up a space, a field of view, that sets the stage for the persons filmed. Especially the early amateur cameras defined a rather static scope of action since they could be moved only very slowly in order not to blur the image. The person in front of the lens was obliged not to overstep these boundaries while the camera rolled and to act 'correctly,' to perform a little plot, smile, and maintain eye contact. But there is another spatial aspect: the gaze of the camera is potentially able to exceed a person's individual distance with a close-up shot. That may happen unnoticed by zooming in on somebody. The fixed focus lens of the early amateur cameras, though, made it necessary to get physically close and thereby invading someone's personal space.²¹

17. For the critique see Jennifer M. Bean, "Introduction. Towards a Feminist Historiography of Early Cinema," in *A Feminist Reader in Early Cinema*, eds. Jennifer M. Bean and Diane Negra (Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2002), 4; bell hooks, "The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectator," in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), 94–105; Jane M. Gaines, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," in *Feminist Film Theory. A Reader*, ed. Sue Thornham (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 293–309. Mulvey later dealt with the critique in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' inspired by King Vidor's 'Duel in the Sun,'" *Framework* 15/16/17 (1981): 12–15.

18. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 195–228. On the connection of media visibility and surveillance see Hannelore Bublitz, *Im Beichtstuhl der Medien. Die Produktion des Selbst in öffentlichen Bekenntnis* (Bielefeld: Transkript, 2010), 70–73.

19. Catherine Russell, *Experimental Ethnography: The Work of Film in the Age of Video* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999), 120–123; Norbert Finzsch, "Male Gaze and Racism," *Gender Forum* 23 (2008): 23–40.

20. Foucault, *Discipline*, 200.

21. On the concept of the "personal space" see Erving Goffman, *Relations in Public. Microstudies of the Public Order* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2010), 29–30.

Still, conceptualising the gaze of the camera as a tool to constitute social hierarchies and, at the same time, as their effect doesn't mean to see it as one-sided and exclusively disempowering. On the contrary, being made visible might also be highly empowering. Looking at the shot sizes and camera angles is indeed helpful in this regard. They can, for example, create the impression of intimacy (close-up shot), of being large and capable (low-angle shot) or small and insignificant (high-angle shot). Moreover, being looked at is usually an interactive process in which the person filmed looks back. Already sociologist Georg Simmel elaborated on the reciprocity of viewing relations that constitute an ambivalent interplay of looking and being looked at — of providing agency and constraining it.²²

Hence, the gaze of the camera must always be contrasted with the agency of the person in front of the lens. (Art) Historians such as Horst Bredekamp and Gerhard Paul or film theorists like Jane M. Gaines have stressed the generative power of pictures.²³ Besides that, however, moving images are performative in a threefold sense: the act of filming itself, the performance in front of the camera, and the practices of screening the film. Firstly, recording with an early Ciné Kodak or a Filmo 70-A meant moving in a specific way. Since it was crucial to keep the camera as still as possible, either a tripod was necessary, or it had to be pressed tightly against the body. A Kodak manual from 1927 recommended: "It may be found convenient to hold the camera against the hip to keep it steady. If the camera is held against the lower part of the chest the breathing of the operator will cause the movement of the camera".²⁴ A panoramic shot required turning the whole body very slowly together with the running camera.

22. Georg Simmel, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 2: *Soziologie. Untersuchungen über die Formen der Vergesellschaftung* (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1968), 484.

23. Horst Bredekamp, *Theorie des Bildakts. Frankfurter Adorno-Vorlesungen 2007* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 2010); Gerhard Paul, "Einleitung," in *BilderMACHT, Studien zur Visual History des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts*, ed. Gerhard Paul (Göttingen: Wallstein, 2013), 10. For a similar approach see also the articles in Ludger Schwarte, ed., *Bild-Performanz* (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2011); Jane M. Gaines, "Political Mimesis," in *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 95–98.

24. Kodak, *Instructions*, 20f.

Secondly, how to behave properly in front of an amateur camera was neither obvious nor self-evident in the early 1920s. For most people, the ‘natural’ thing to do was to take up a static pose as one would for a photograph. That a film, in fact, required the opposite — movement and a little performance — had yet to be learnt. As an interaction between the cameraman and the persons in front of the camera, a shoot always developed as a process. Even though most scenes may have been sketched out beforehand in order not to waste any film stock, the outcome was never entirely predictable.²⁵ Furthermore, what was enacted for the film was by no means isolated from ‘real’ life. These performances reflected the actors’ social status and, at the same time, constituted gender roles, class affiliations, or ideas of race, nation, and ethnicity in the process of the enactment. Looking at nonfictional film from this angle makes it a valuable source on how identities, relations, and hierarchies were negotiated, undercut, or stabilised in a society.

Thirdly, the screening of the final film can be seen as a performative act as well. There aren’t many sources on concrete examples from the 1920s but at least these practices can be reconstructed from manuals from Kodak and other manufactures. At any rate, it should be taken into account that it was rather laborious to organise a film screening at home. Furniture had to be moved to make space for the screen, seats had to be set up, and the room had to be darkened. Besides, even if the films had intertitles, they probably had to be commented for the audience to make the presentation more interesting.

Two scenes from *A MOTOR HONEYMOON* demonstrate how fruitful it can be to analyse nonfictional films in terms of their materiality, visuality, and perfor-

25. Andreas Reckwitz, *Unschärfe Grenzen. Perspektiven der Kulturosoziologie* (Bielefeld: Transkript, 2009), 120; Martina Roepke, *Privat-Vorstellung. Heimkino in Deutschland vor 1945* (Hildesheim, Zürich and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2006), 109–111.

maturity. The complete film takes 90 minutes and is on six reels. It covers the first journey of the newly-weds across England, France, Switzerland, Germany, and Italy in spring of 1924 and starts with the trip over the Atlantic on the luxurious ocean liner Aquitania.



Figure 2. A *MOTOR HONEYMOON*, Margaret and Lawrence Thaw, USA 1924. For the video, please see the online version of this article: <https://film-history.org/issues/text/nonfictional-film-historical-source-materiality-visibility-performativity>

This short clip is situated on the first-class deck of the ship. It shows the skipper of the Aquitania (a position similarly to the captain) standing on the rail. In the following shot Margaret, a friend from New York, and the skipper are next to each other looking through binoculars. This might seem trivial at first glance, but it impressively illustrates what early amateur filming required. For one thing, it is noticeable that the scene has already been set beforehand. The skipper is positioned and awaits the start of the recording. For another, he obviously tries not to move too much in order to stay in the camera's field of view. At the same time, however, he doesn't seem to know exactly what he is supposed to do. He keeps his hands in his pockets, turns a little to the right, and looks up in the sky. Despite his insecurity, the medium wide shot that focuses on the skipper as well as the slight

low angle still emphasise the importance of his status.

The shot size and angle of the following scene are similar. Here, it becomes even more apparent how the materiality of the camera shaped the shooting: before Lawrence began filming, everybody had to line up side by side so all three persons would fit the picture. While the skipper remains quite motionless at first, Margaret proofs her media competence. She is clearly aware that film — unlike photographs — requires movement. Therefore, she initiates a small performance by asking her friend for her binoculars and giving them to the skipper. Moreover, she points a finger in the distance, gesturing where to look, and smiles. Finally, for Lawrence, operating the new camera offered the chance to stand out of the crowd of his rich peers on the ship and presenting himself as a technological pioneer with an exceptional hobby.

With these scenes the Thaws demonstrated that they travelled on the prestigious first-class deck and had access to the most important person on the ship — a point that is not only stressed by Margaret interacting with the skipper but also by the relative closeness of the medium wide shot. Even though Lawrence directed the camera, this is not the disempowering “male gaze” Laura Mulvey had in mind. Lawrence and Margaret rather worked together in order to create a little plot for their film. Margaret directing the skipper in front of the camera took up a powerful position like her husband, while Lawrence depended on his wife’s help. Nonetheless, the power of the camera’s gaze to control a space and people’s behaviour can be observed as well: the skipper clearly followed Margaret’s lead and complied to the requirements of the camera with his actions. Margaret’s self-confident appearance reflected her position as one

of New York's most important society ladies and, at the same time, strengthened and updated her social status anew. Screening this event back at home for an audience of friends and family had an even more reinforcing effect that Margaret probably already had in mind while performing for the camera.

Besides scenes like these in which the Thaws worked together successfully to create entertaining content there are others where Margaret didn't want to be filmed by her husband. They show a different power dynamic and highlight from another perspective how gender roles and nonfictional film relate to each other. During the return journey, Lawrence recorded his wife while she had breakfast in her cabin.

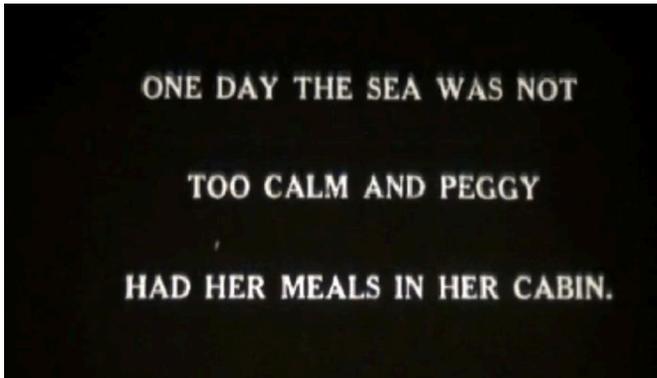


Figure 3. A MOTOR HONEYMOON, Margaret and Lawrence Thaw, USA 1924. For the video, please see the online version of this article: <https://film-history.org/issues/text/nonfictional-film-historical-source-materiality-visibility-performativity>

The room is hardly visible since the lighting conditions below deck were insufficient for the early amateur camera. Margaret seems annoyed, looks angrily at the ceiling and finally stops eating to put her arm on her hip and reproachfully faces the camera. What stands out immediately is the shot size and the camera angle:

a medium close shot from a high angle. Margaret is not only filmed against her wish, the camera also puts her in an inferior position while pestering her from a spatial perspective, encroaching on her scope of action. This wasn't a mere visual effect, though. Lawrence literally had to stand rather close in front of his wife to take this shot. Remarkably, if one looks closely, a cut in the footage can be seen (after 9 seconds) which proves that Lawrence even restarted the camera to continue filming. On the one hand, this can be described as a "male gaze" that limits Margaret's agency: Margaret didn't get up to leave the scene but stayed within the boundaries of the camera's gaze. With her dramatic behaviour she even offered a performance worth filming. The pressure to move and act in front of the camera obviously was rather high. On the other hand, in doing so Margaret didn't remain entirely passive but demonstratively stood up to the camera as well as to her husband. In this context, filming created an ambivalent situation that was inscribed in the images but also affected the relationship of the couple in a concrete way. Considering the material, visual, and performative dimensions of the film not only provides insight into how the Thaws wanted to present themselves for their fellow travellers as well as for their friends in New York. This approach also sheds light on non-intentional aspects — of underlying power relations and shifting asymmetries.

Already as early as in 1926 Lawrence' and Margaret's amateur film ambitions attracted the attention of society writers.²⁶ Not surprisingly, in the following years the couple turned the film screenings in their New York apartments into big social events and invited not only their high society friends but also Manhattan's famous gossip writer Maury Paul. In 1935 for example, impressed after attending a party where the Thaws showed their

26. "From family album to home-made movies," *Daily Argus* (June 16, 1926): 12.

latest amateur film on a trip through Africa Paul wrote:

It has been ages since I last had a thrill comparable to witnessing the Thaw 'movies' of darkest Africa. And I hope to be invited to E. 69th St. to see the film again and again and again. [...] Preceding the showing of their African film [...] the Thaws gave a dinner party that claimed the attention of many of the town's most loveliest young matrons.²⁷

When looking at the amateur film as source for historical research, it is important to take the performative dimension of the screening practices into account too. After all, there is a strong possibility that Lawrence and Margaret constantly thought about it while shooting their films. In view of their early success, in 1936 the Thaws planned their next journey to Africa on a larger scale and asked professional cameraman Thomas Hogan to join them.

Staging the Authentic: The Historical Value of Professional Travelogues

Before the couple hired him, Hogan was already an expert on documentary film having worked for the newsreel divisions of Pathé and Paramount. During the trip usually Hogan directed the camera but sometimes Lawrence, and rarely Margaret, helped out when an event had to be shot with several cameras from different angles. During their Africa trip in 1936/37 amongst other cameras they shot with two Eyemos from Bell & Howell and one Mitchell camera from the company of the same name. The Eyemo was the professional version of the Filmo and relatively small (ca. 20 by 15 by 15 cm). It was equipped with a spring mechanism as well as a battery-operated motor that could be charged with a generator.²⁸

27. [Maury Paul], "Cholly Knickerbocker Observes!," *New York American*, May 26, 1935 [n.p.], Thaw Private Papers.

28. For the Eyemo see H. Mario Raimondo-Souto, *Motion Picture Photography. A History, 1891–1960* (Jefferson and London: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2007), 57, 156.

The Eyemo took an internal load of 30 meters of film that lasted for one minute but two extra reels (121 m each) could be attached externally, which allowed a recording time of four and a half minutes. The Mitchell camera was larger and especially popular in film studios at the time. The following scene from *BLACK MAJESTY* shows Thomas Hogan operating the Mitchell and directing a group of African villagers to fit the picture. Using this professional technology, the act of setting the scene and of directing was so special that it was worth filming it.



Figure 4. BLACK MAJESTY, Margaret and Lawrence Thaws, USA 1937. For the video, please see the online version of this article: <https://film-history.org/issues/text/nonfictional-film-historical-source-materiality-visibility-performativity>

Besides the camera equipment, the Thaws brought spotlights and reflectors so lighting conditions could be adjusted. This led to a contradictory situation: on the one hand, the new camera technology made it possible to film longer and less restricted than it was the case in the 1920s. On the other hand, now a scene had to be set up before shooting could begin and the course of action had to be planned all the more carefully.

Another new feature of the Africa travelogue was the use of sound. Back in New York, Lawrence and Margaret

engaged a professional narrator and — after cutting and editing — added music and narration to the stock by means of the optical sound method by the Radio Corporation of America. Using sound provided the new opportunity of incorporating more information into the final film. While the intertitles of the silent films of the 1920s constantly interrupted the image flow, now sound and pictures worked together almost naturally. A seemingly omniscient (male) narrator provided ethnographical and geographical knowledge and the music could highlight or create a certain atmosphere. In this way, the sound considerably determined the meaning of the images.

In the Africa travelogue the visual dimension and the question of power relations gains even greater importance. Now the camera directed its gaze upon people in a colonial setting to produce ‘visually proven’ ethnographic knowledge that often created and naturalised racial inequalities. Paul S. Landau notes the crucial role pictures played and still play in constructing Africa from a western point of view as the ‘other’.²⁹ Drawing on the feminist film theory E. Ann Kaplan furthermore explores the links between looking relations and ideas of race within a powerful “imperial gaze”.³⁰

The aforementioned clip of Thomas Hogan operating the Mitchell camera highlights this point: the gaze of the camera defined a scope of action for the African protagonists. By visually linking whiteness, masculinity, and technology on the directing side of the camera and contrasting it with seemingly passive, barely clothed people on the other, the film established a binary opposition of civilisation versus a primitive black ‘other’. *BLACK MAJESTY*, however, does not only give

29. Paul S. Landau, “Introduction. An Amazing Distance: Pictures and People in Africa,” in *Images and Empires. Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2002), 1–40.

30. E. Ann Kaplan, *Looking for the Other. Feminism, Film, and the Imperial Gaze* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997).

insight into the Thaws imaginations of Africa. It opens up a wider perspective on colonial power hierarchies, for Lawrence and Margaret heavily depended on the help of the British, French, and Belgian colonial administrations. Governors, district commissioners, and officers of the Foreign Legion mediated the contact to local elites, sent translators, and above all made numerous suggestions themselves on what they thought was worth filming. Evidently, the “imperial gaze” of the film was informed and empowered by the colonial apparatus.

Nevertheless, in order to get the villagers to participate in the scene with Thomas Hogan the Thaws had to give them presents of salt and sugar.³¹ Regarding racialised looking relations Norbert Finzsch has asked not only to explore the disempowering effect of the gaze but also to take the agency of those persons pictured seriously: “An alternative strategy of reading the racist gaze would consist of a deliberate search for signs of a non-normative view in which the racialized and sexualized Other is able to return the gaze”.³² Altering the famous quote by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, E. Ann Kaplan has asked: “can the subaltern look?”³³ Going one step further in analysing ethnographic travelogues, native agency cannot only be found in the looking relations but also in the performances in front of the camera.

During their Africa trip, the Thaws followed a tight filming schedule. The stops and length of stays were planned beforehand and so were most of the scenes the couple and Thomas Hogan wanted to shoot. Indeed, the three Americans came to Africa with rather concrete ideas of what their film should look like — ideas that were strongly inspired by American Hollywood films of the time. The Thaws for example were highly impressed by seeing

31. Thaw, *Travel Diary*, 84.

32. Finzsch, “Gaze,” 31.

33. Kaplan, *Other*, 4.

TRADER HORN (USA 1931) in the cinema and knew the famous documentaries on African wildlife by Osa and Martin Johnson well. Thomas Hogan, moreover, had internalised Hollywood's Africa even more. In her travel diary Margaret noted:

*Tom is very funny about the photography. He never photographs things as they are [...] naturally but he insists they be done the way Hollywood imagines Africa to be so we are sometimes quite hysterical as he teaches natives how to hold their babies, grind their corn, light their fire etc. In other words, things they've done in a certain way for untold generations are changed to conform to what Hollywood and the great American public expect natives in Africa to do.*³⁴

34. Thaw, *Travel Diary*, 84–85.

Nevertheless, investigating colonial photography Elisabeth Edwards has stressed that native actors never stayed completely passive and simply followed directions, but often creatively used even the smallest scope of action.³⁵ In a colonial setting, the space in front of the camera — its field of view — can be understood with Mary Louise Pratt as “contact zone”: “[T]he space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict”.³⁶ This approach highlights the interactive and processual quality of encounters between colonising and colonised actors that were certainly shaped by asymmetrical power relations but not entirely determined by them. On the one hand, the contact zones the Thaws and their cameraman created while filming were regulated by the materiality of the camera, spatially as well as temporally. On the other hand, the actions always developed as

35. Edwards, *Histories*, 119, 172.

36. Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes. Travel Writing and Trans-culturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), 6.

a dynamic process that could not be fully controlled.

Margaret's account on the shooting of the staged fight at Agadez already illustrated how the materiality, visuality, and performativity of the film impacted the corresponding scene of the professional travelogue. This point shall be elaborated in more detail by looking closely at another clip from *BLACK MAJESTY*. At an early stage of their journey while still in Algeria in autumn of 1936, the Thaws met the Tuareg ruler Akhamouk. The Amenukul, as the chief of the Tuareg was called, and his people received the American couple in their camp 200 km from the oasis Tamanrasset. According to the images and the narrator, the Tuaregs lived a rather primitive life in the desert. The scene shows a feast at the Amenukul's tent, afterwards the Thaws 'confront' the ruler with a portable refrigerator and allegedly for the first time in his life with ice cubes.



Figure 5. A MOTOR HONEYMOON, Margaret and Lawrence Thaw, USA 1924. For the video, please see the online version of this article: <https://film-history.org/issues/text/nonfictional-film-historical-source-materiality-visuality-performativity>

The composition of the pictures reinforces the narrator's derogative comments on the Tuaregs being unclean and their food barely eatable. Firstly, the gaze of the camera

follows the group downwards as they climb into the tent. Its inside is cramped and without daylight and the narrator explains: “The bath is conspicuous by its absence among the Tuaregs and this goes double for the big shot of them all.” Then, in contrast, the white fridge is filmed from a low angle against the open sky, making it seem like an apotheosis of modern technology. Evidently, the second sequence was staged: to film the refrigerator and the Amenukal in a shot/reverse shot to create the impression of linearity, Tom Hogan must have set up one of the cameras to get the rear view, then stopped the recording and moved the camera on top of the lorry to shoot from the opposing angle.

Again, *BLACK MAJESTY* created a difference between Africa and ‘the west’ by identifying whiteness with technology and modernity, native people with backwardness and primitivity. How this scene plays out was by no means new. Already the film *NANOOK OF THE NORTH* (USA 1922) stages the Inuits’ ignorance of a gramophone while ten years later Osa and Martin Johnson re-enacted a similar scene in *CONGORILLA* (USA 1932). Regarding *NANOOK*, Fatimah Tobing Rony rightly stresses that the filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty could have never recorded this material without the cooperation — and in fact acting — of the Inuit protagonists.³⁷

37. Tobing Rony, *Eye*, 112f.

In order to shoot the Tuaregs the Thaws were reliant on the French colonial officials. The captain of Tamanrasset had arranged a meeting with the Amenukal beforehand and sent two lieutenants, three soldiers, and an interpreter for the couple.³⁸ In fact, the lieutenants can be seen in the scene, but the narrator doesn’t mention their help at all. Moreover, the Amenukal took up a rather powerful

38. Thaw, *Travel Diary*, 38.

position within the French colonial administration and one of the lieutenants impressed on the Thaws that — as Margaret recounts in her travel diary — “we must follow what he [the Amenukal, J.H.] expected us to do”.³⁹

Thus, the filming created an interaction — a contact zone — between the Thaws and the Amenukal in which the African ruler not just followed their directions. Rather the other way around, Lawrence and Margaret obeyed his rules to get their pictures. Even though Margaret found the smell of the tent and the food served intensely repugnant, she had to remain within the scope of the camera and force herself to eat. In drastic words she wrote in her diary: “Waves of nausea passed over me [...] I thought I must must must get control of myself or I shall be very ill [...] The lieutenant said you must drink at least three cups [of tea, J.H.] and so three cups went down me and the others had 5 and 6”.⁴⁰ This episode goes even beyond what Tobing Rony emphasises for NANOOK: the Thaws not only depended on Akhmanouk’s cooperation and willingness to perform, they had to conform to his ideas of an encounter while the gaze of the camera was directed at them too. Finally, acting for the camera wasn’t entirely new for the Tuareg ruler. In the 1930s the Amenukal was so famous that he had already appeared in the travelogue *WHEELS ACROSS AFRICA* (USA 1936) on the Belgian Denis-Roosevelt Expedition of 1934/35.⁴¹ Thus, the Amenukal knew perfectly well what he was doing and proved to be a rather good actor. Taking this into account demonstrates that the racial hierarchies and the binary opposition between ‘Africa’ and ‘the west’ weren’t as stable as the Thaws and Thomas Hogan tried to suggest in the edited scene. Furthermore, it isn’t enough to expose these visually constructed differences while in doing so also repro-

39. *Ibid.*, 39. See on the position of the Amenukal within the French colonial system Peter J. Bloom, *French Colonial Documentary: Mythologies of Humanitarianism* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 75.

40. Thaw, *Travel Diary*, 39–43.

41. *WHEELS ACROSS AFRICA*, Armand Denis and Leila Roosevelt, USA 1936, 0:21:40–0:22:50.

ducing them.⁴² It is equally important to dissolve them by looking for agency of the native actors and stressing the unpredictability of actions in general. Focusing on the production process, its material conditions, and its inherent performativity helps to uncover ambivalences and to question supposedly unambiguous asymmetries.

Even though Lawrence and Margaret aimed to sell **BLACK MAJESTY** to Hollywood studios and bring it into the American cinemas, this plan didn't work out in the end. The company that provided the sound, the Radio Corporation of America, charged such high fees for commercial screenings that it was not profitable to show the film in movie theaters. Nonetheless, as already mentioned, the Thaws were invited to present **BLACK MAJESTY** at the annual lecture series of the National Geographic Society without the recorded sound but a live comment instead. So in the winter of 1937 Lawrence and Margaret screened their film at Constitution Hall in Washington D.C. to approximately 3,500 spectators and received the considerable sum of 300 dollars (today ca. 1,500 dollars).⁴³ A year later, Lawrence went to the annual lecture of the Maryland Academy of Sciences to repeat this procedure.⁴⁴

Evidently, this aspect of the film's performativity determined as well how **BLACK MAJESTY** was perceived by contemporaries. Presenting the film in a scientific context did not make the Thaws Hollywood stars. But it validated and legitimised their travelogue as scientifically valuable and labelled the couple as experts on Africa. Considering how the film was made, this might seem absurd in hindsight, but it also makes clear that a film should not be reduced to its plot and its aesthetics.

42. Signe Arnfred, "Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa: Introduction," in *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*, ed. Signe Arnfred, (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell Tryckeri AB, 2005), 7–29.

43. Melville B. Grosvenor to Lawrence Thaw, Washington D.C., 27.1.1938, National Geographic Society, Archives & Special Collections, File No. 22–2398.

44. "World Traveler Opens Academy Lecture Series", *Baltimore Sun*, November 13, 1938, 8.

Conclusion

Lawrence' and Margaret's films are representative of how valuable nonfictional films can be as sources for historical research. Concentrating exclusively on their visual dimension would already open up an extraordinary perspective on how the Thaws wanted to present themselves and their lifestyle, how they saw themselves as white Americans abroad, and how they perceived people of other nationalities or ethnic backgrounds. The edited films, however, don't provide insight into underlying conflicts of the filming process, its dynamics, and inherent unpredictability. Often, they don't reveal resistance or at least *Eigen-Sinn* at first glance nor in how far (native) actors wilfully performed for the Thaws and were able to profit from it. Moreover, the final product doesn't show what was predetermined from the outset by the material conditions.

Considering performativity and materiality besides visuality when dealing with nonfictional film in historical research sheds light on the various and complex aspects that are characteristic of images in general. Separating these three dimensions analytically can help not to be overwhelmed when watching a film — by the speed of the images, the often-emotionalising sound, the amount of information, and the impression of authenticity that comes with moving pictures. At the same time, arguing along the categories of materiality, visuality, and performativity makes it even clearer why nonfictional film is such a prolific source that goes far beyond its mere illustrative value.

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Fig. 1–3. Margaret and Lawrence Thaw © original copyright holders.

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