

## Exploring the Creative Use of Germany 's Encyclopedia Cinematographica

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## Exploring the Creative Use of Germany's *Encyclopedia Cinematographica*

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### 1. Introduction

The production of ethnographic films, which are recordings and studies of culture using the methods of cinema, has been positioned as a central pursuit of visual anthropology. My own activities have been chiefly oriented around the production and presentation of ethnographic films dealing with Africa's intangible cultures, especially musical and performative expressions in local Ethiopian communities. *The Encyclopedia Cinematographica* (EC) films produced by Germany's Institute for Scientific Film (Institut für den Wissenschaftlichen Film, or IWF) and discussed in this report are well known for an approach that, in service of the comparative study of people and animal behavior, places an emphasis on the thorough observation of subjects without explicitly revealing the presence of the filmmaker. These EC films generated insights in the context of education and the comparative study of culture both in their home country of Germany and around the world (Murao 2006) and were highly influential on the styles of academic films, including twentieth-century ethnographic films. More recently, however, the 16mm film media format and recognizably dated observation-and-recording cinematic style—i.e., a style that seeks to avoid revealing the position or presence of the filmmaker as much as possible—have come to represent barriers. As a result, EC films have attracted less attention and generated fewer opportunities for discussion not only in Germany but also within the academic forums of visual anthropological discussion. The EC films, freed of the contemporary scientific context in which they were produced, have crossed space and time to be imbued with new meaning and values here in Japan. In this paper, I would like to draw on the case of a screening of the EC films to think about the creative use of these archival films.

### 2. *Encyclopedia Cinematographica*

*Encyclopedia Cinematographica* was an initiative launched at the institute in 1952 based on a proposal by Gotthard Wolf, then the IWF's director, to archive scientific films. This film series is composed of films dealing with a variety of scholarly themes including ethnology as well as science, technology, and biology (zoology, botany, and

microbiology). These films, which the institute took the initiative to systematically produce, collect, and preserve, have been used for research and education around the world. Wolf reportedly liked to explain the EC films using the example of films featuring chimpanzees. Rather than producing a single long film capturing the entire life cycle of the chimpanzee, the EC features a series of short films capturing chimpanzee behavior in terms of various themes such as eating, sleeping, and mating patterns. Furthermore, by similarly recording and accumulating the behavior of other animals, the institute aimed to realize a systematic cinematic mosaic that would eventually enable the comparison of behavioral patterns between different animals (Husmann 2007).

### 3. The Influence of EC Films on Visual Anthropology

The logic of the systematic collection of visual recordings to enable a comparison between behavioral patterns was also applied to EC films in the field of ethnology. The cinematic style of the EC films is characterized by a commitment to “objectivity” that approaches asceticism. For example, the shooting methods used in the EC ethnological films called for the avoidance of artistic expression or direction and as little interference with the subjects as possible. In terms of editing as well, modification of time series, excessive commentary, and background music were controlled. Among the explorations of ethnographic film styles pursued in the mid-twentieth century, when the EC film project was launched, there were also movements and experiments to pioneer the dimensions of interactions between the filmmaker and the subjects of the films or of the direction and expression of ethnographic films. For example, the “ethnofictions” of French anthropologist and film director Jean Rouch (which involve acting, fact-based re-enactments, and improvisational drama based on ethnographic research), as well as explorations and experiments in *cinéma vérité* (a “truthful cinema” based on the recognition that facts are generated and altered by the act of filmmaking itself, as opposed to a shooting style that seeks to eliminate the filmmaker’s involvement with the subject) are well known to have influenced not only ethnology but also the French *nouvelle vague* movement.

However, EC films, running contrary to these trends, were shot through with a kind of stoicism that was arguably reflective of the empirical scientific gaze that prevailed in Germany at that time. Apparently, experts in a variety of academic fields from countries all over the world regularly came together as members of an editorial committee to watch new films produced by the IWF, working to maintain the production standards of the EC films.<sup>1)</sup> Archives of the EC films have been established around the world, and nearly complete collections may be found in Germany, Austria, the Netherlands, the United States, and Japan. Those countries where partial archives exist include France, the UK, Portugal, Switzerland, Canada, and Turkey (Husmann 2007). In the 1970s, the Shimonaka Memorial Foundation in Japan purchased EC films dealing with biology, science and technology, and ethnology. The collection of the National Museum of Ethnology (hereinafter “Minpaku”), which comprises over 70,000 audiovisual materials, including 1,336 16mm EC films on ethnological themes purchased mainly in the late 1970s, is now

kept in our audiovisual materials room. Nevertheless, these materials, hampered by the barrier presented by their 16mm format, are hardly enjoying effective use. In any case, the archives set up around the world are recognized as exceptional models of scientific film archives, and the EC films—particularly those relating to the field of ethnology—are recognized as exemplary examples of twentieth-century scholarly film-making that had a major influence on the style of imagery in ethnographic films.

In 2012 and 2014, I took part as a juror in the Göttingen International Ethnographic Film Festival, held in Göttingen, the home of the IWF, which was the seedbed of the EC films. On that occasion, I had the opportunity to interview Manfred Krüger, who was involved in the production of the EC films from 1971 onward. His work took him all over the world, including Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, Mexico, and Burkina Faso, where he was involved in the production of over 100 of the EC films. Beyond this, the German filmmakers and researchers who took part in the EC productions carried out filmmaking workshops around the world, directly transmitting the filmmaking methodologies established by the EC to students in each country. For example, between 1998 and 2003, with the financial assistance of the Volkswagen Foundation, staff members from the institute, Krüger among them, visited the East Asia Institute of Visual Anthropology in China's Yunnan Province on a regular basis to provide instruction on film production. This initiative produced researchers such as Professor Bao Jiang of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing and others who have since taken the lead in discussions of visual anthropology and ethnographic film in China, as well as documentary filmmakers who have met with success at international film festivals.

However, the EC editorial meetings stopped taking place at the beginning of the 1990s, and the IWF, which had been the progenitor of the EC films, was finally shuttered in 2010 owing to financial difficulties. Screening opportunities at the Shimonaka Memorial Foundation, which administered and operated the sole complete set of EC films in Asia, also mostly ceased. One factor militating against the use of the EC films is the use of 16mm film as a storage format and the fact that this medium is difficult for the non-specialist to handle. According to Rolf Husmann, other background factors that might be cited as having contributed to the discontinuation of the use of the EC films include the outdated perspective of the attempt to create a film-based “ethnological encyclopedia” and the thoroughly stoic observation-type filming style (personal communication). Manfred Krüger lamented to me that, along with the closure of the institute, the fact that the EC films were no longer being used was akin to having “a valuable resource shut up in a cave, hidden from the eyes of humanity” (author interview, May 2012).

#### **4. The EC Film Movement in Japan**

Nevertheless, around 2012, following a proposal from the Japanese linguist Masayuki Nishie, who had perceived the allure of the EC films, a committee was formed in Japan to pursue their use. The committee included officials from the Shimonaka Memorial Foundation, which had initially purchased the EC collection (Tomoko Niwa and Nabo

Shimonaka), a staff member from the PolePole Higashi-Nakano movie theater in Tokyo (Kisara Nakaue), and myself as a representative from Minpaku. Since 2012, we have been holding screenings of the EC films at PolePole Higashi-Nakano, featuring talks by invited speakers and researchers from a variety of academic fields.

On the website (<http://ecfilm-screening.jimdo.com>), which was prepared to post notices about the details of these screenings, we explain the significance of the EC films and their contemporary screenings as follows:

*People once dreamed of creating a magnificent film encyclopedia ...*

This film series is an attempt to breathe new life into the twentieth century's most spectacular visual archive found in the films of the EC, to reinterpret and refresh them from the standpoint of our contemporary lives through dialogue with people in a variety of fields. Among these images, we may find riches that will prove necessary to our own future.

As revealed in the above passage, this project, in addition to appreciating and discussing the EC films in terms of their original context as scientific films, is also explicit about its intention to mine new values from each of these films by considering them from a variety of angles through dialogue with "people in a variety of fields."

The EC films contain abundant records of music and performances from around the world. Among them, those of Africa's so-called traditional music, in particular, may be described as valuable materials that demonstrate the diversity and possibility inherent in human musical behavior. Among the screenings of EC films that I have planned personally have been several that dealt with the theme of African music and performance. At the screenings, we focused on human music making practices that cannot be described as either speaking or singing, or where it can be difficult to distinguish the sound of the instruments from noise, then discussed the film in comparison with musical films that I myself filmed in Ethiopia.

Recordings of African traditional music can be framed as valuable material for reconsidering the ways in which we think about the music making. At the second of the screenings that I planned (in February 2013), we screened films of African music and performance filmed by two Japanese visual anthropologists—an Ethiopian singers poets' performance and the "sonic world" of Cameroon's Baka Pygmies (filmed, respectively, by myself and Daisuke Bundō of Shinshu University)—from the standpoint of comparison with the filmmaking techniques and production approach taken in the EC films. These two works reflected the invisible relationships between their respective subjects and the filmmakers, as when the former make reference to the latter. By screening our two films as well as those of the EC, we wanted to make it easier for viewers to see the pervasive stoicism—in other words, the documentary style devoted exclusively to observation, seeking to hide the presence of the filmmaker—characteristic of scientific film during the era in which the EC films were produced.



**Photo 1** The screening and discussion of EC films (Image by the author)

## 5. Watching the Films

When selecting films to hold the EC screenings, we first of all referenced an “Ethnological Film Index” containing entries for over 400 films relating to Africa (Ethnological Film Index 1992). However, because this index is geared toward the storage and maintenance of the films, the details in each entry are limited to basic information such as the title, featured ethnic group and region, year of production, and film length. While in some cases this data is supplemented with a short essay in German or English, other cases are completely devoid of supplementary explanatory material. For this reason, we came up with the strategy of acquiring supplementary information concerning the groups in question through interviews with researchers who possess a detailed familiarity with the societies where the films were made. Several of the EC films feature hunter-gatherers in the Kalahari Desert. One example shows films of the |Gui hunter-gatherers exorcizing illness by means of a trance dance (E2683, treating disease with trance dance, the |Gui, Kalahari Desert, filmed in 1976), clearly documenting a process by which healers cast out evil spirits while dancing to the accompaniment of polyphonic and polyrhythmic song. In order to obtain ethnographic information about the subjects of the film for introducing the film at our screening event, I approached Kazunobu Ikeya, a Minpaku scholar who has been researching hunting-gathering groups in the Kalahari since 1987, asking him to watch the film and offer his commentary (Photo 1). Dr. Ikeya focused on the fact that even though Western clothing would already have been mainstream by the mid-1970s when the films were made, the film showed people wearing relatively traditional clothing made chiefly of animal hide. This suggested to him the likely possibility that the film was, in fact, a staged reenactment of a dance performed by subjects “in traditional costume” at the request of the filmmaker. By viewing the film with experts in the region or target ethnic group or with descendants of

the people appearing in the film, the “scientism” of the EC films becomes relativized, thereby extricating the dimensions of staging and the intentions of the producers that lie in the background and, perhaps, offering us a clearer “behind-the-scenes” view of the gaze formation of twentieth-century ethnographic film. Sharing this viewing experience with multiple viewers adds additional and varied layers of information to the recordings. It seems it may yet be possible to situate the EC films as a device to promote the exchange and communication of knowledge.

## 6. Performances and Experiments Using EC Films

Based on this understanding of the issues, I have been exploring various ways of presenting the EC films at numerous events, such as combining them with other films and staging performances by invited guests to bring out the potential artistic value inherent in each film.

At a screening planned in Tokyo in 2014, we realized a creative collaboration between performance artists and EC films pertaining to the field of biology. One of the films used for this screening was about a member of the Pleidae (or “pygmy-backswimmer”) family of insects known in Japanese as “*marumizumushi*” (Latin *Paraplea japonica*) (E3101 *marumizumushi* /filmed in 1982). The event featured the staging of a dance performance as an interpretive response to the film by the Kyoto dance unit *Futago no Mibōjin* [The Twin Widows]. The dance unit created a dance that mimicked the intricate movements of the *marumizumushi*, which they performed in front of the screen, dancing to the screening of the EC film (Photos 2 and 3). As seen here, attempts seeking to explore the domains of creation and expression produced by artists in fields such as music, performance, and the visual arts out of their encounter with the EC films offer another possibility. Nevertheless, these examples were ultimately only attempts to use the biological films; staging collaborations between artists and scientific films in the field of ethnology will necessarily entail a careful examination of ethical



**Photo 2** The artistic response to the EC films through dance (Image by the author)



**Photo 3** The artistic response to the EC films through dance (Image by the author)

considerations vis-à-vis the subjects of the films and the societies to which they belong. This is a discussion that also resonates with the question of the extent to which ethnographic materials housed at museums should be displayed in artistic contexts.

### **7. Initiatives at the National Museum of Ethnology, Osaka (Minpaku)**

Minpaku holds 1,336 titles from the EC collection in its audiovisual materials room. In response to the EC film screening movement in Tokyo, last year, the museum purchased a Cintel Film Scanner from Blackmagic Design and has begun digitizing its collection of EC films at the pace of about 10 films a month. As of October 2017, Minpaku has completed the digitization of approximately 250 EC films. Realizing the digital transfer of film media in this way can be said to be indispensable in the service of furthering the creative use of these old films.

Minpaku's own "Videothèque" programs, as well, by altering the contexts in which they are screened and shared, could represent another possibility for liberating new allure. The current and ongoing trend of diversification in the transmission of visual information, away from the "classical" style of screenings, so to speak, seems to suggest that now is the time to engage once more in the utilization of archival films, and through this, we can create new forms of knowledge and communication.

### **Note**

- 1) Personal communication with Kazuo Okada, a former editorial committee of the EC films



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