

# Greyzone Zebra

# Family Films

# A Colonial Anamnesis

The collective Greyzone Zebra was founded in 2016 in Brussels by a group of researchers interested in the issue of transmission and the rewriting of colonial history. Following the aborted partnership between the Royal Museum for Central Africa (MRAC) and the École de Recherche Graphique (ERG) due to profound differences in approaches to this history, Anna Seiderer, Alexander Schellow, Antje Van Wichelen, Maxime Jean-Baptiste, Nelson Makengo, Miléna Desse, Fred Mutombo, and others felt the need to come together and work collectively on the narrative forms of colonization. The collective began working with the films commissioned by the colonial governments to be used as political propaganda, by missionaries to evangelize, and by researchers as part of their scientific explorations, but the artists quickly shifted to looking at amateur home movies that had been shot on film. The interest in this cinematographic production lay in the spontaneity of gesture and its form that was at once freer and ordinary, and which allowed for historical interpretation and visual intervention. Even though these private archives do not explicitly or consciously constitute propaganda images, they nevertheless preserve a trace of this. In the collective's own words, their private nature "decenters our gaze from the discourse imposed by the official ideology and provides us with unique, intimate readings of history."

Initially, the practices that grew up and around these family archives took the form of performative projections during which the public was asked to take notes while watching the films, which they would then share during the collective discussions that followed. As Anna Seiderer describes it, the challenge was to "materialize the experience of our own subjectivities in relation to the work," to spur a collective dialogue about the forms that a contemporary rewriting of our colonial past could take. After a few experiences in Khiasma in Paris and at Wiels in Brussels, this process turned out to be unable to achieve this, as it required a more limited context. The collective then focused on two other areas of research. They held workshops during which the projection of the films was the subject of performances or animations. They also digitized these home movies and developed a digital platform to house them,

an archiving process that also prompted considerations about how to classify them and make them accessible. In addition to the practical difficulties experienced during the pandemic, Greyzone Zebra often called itself into question, whether because of internal dissent over the use of the images or how the collective defined itself, as the following interview explains. Despite all this, the archiving work continues, as does the design of a book to be published by Bartleby & co in Brussels, an edition that recounts the experience of *Colonial Anamnesis*, an ambitious, necessary, diverse, and fragile project.

(A/R) How did this collective come about? What led you to join forces to carry out this project?

(A.Se.) In 2009, I was working as a researcher in the ethnography department at the Belgian Royal Museum of Central Africa (RMCA), where I helped with the digitization of the archive of official propaganda films that is now housed at the Royal Cinematheque in Brussels. The material was very interesting. We wanted to develop a partnership between the RMCA and the ERG Art School so that artists could more readily access the archives and work with them. It was in that setting that Corinne Diesers, then Director of the ERG, asked us to participate in their major annual seminar at Bozar to present this partnership to make it official, but this turned into somewhat of a political drama. These are clearly very sensitive topics, and there were a lot of people in the room. The Director of the RMCA began to talk about the museum's renovation, focusing on the formal aspects. When the curator and head of the film collections began to speak, she discussed the history of this film material in terms of A-B-Cs, beginning with A as "Adventure," as in the "adventure" of colonization, the adventure of film, and so on. The room was already bristling with tension after the first speech, but at that point, it just erupted. Someone interrupted her after the letter B to say that it was impossible to continue under such conditions. It turned into a very deep discussion of the memory of Belgian colonization and forms of transmission, among other things.

It led to a very meaningful dialogue, but unfortunately people took the criticisms personally. So, this event, which was supposed to formalize a collaboration, actually put an end to it.

Various artists and teachers at the ERG were involved in the partnership, but when they witnessed the scale of the polemic, some of them became afraid, others felt incompetent, and most of them withdrew. Except for Alexander Schellow, who stayed. After that, people started to come see us, Alexander and myself, to ask us if they could continue to work with these images and be associated with this process of reflection.

(A/R) So, the collective was born out of a conflictual situation. How did you establish the project's foundations under such conditions?

(A.Se.) We held a rather small initial workshop at the ERG. To prepare for it, we had ourselves begun working on these images, which were still merely propaganda images. It was really hard to work with these documents and to step back from their discourse. One of the challenges was seeing to what extent these images conveyed interesting information independently of their propaganda. This was possible with the films by the ethnographer Armand Hutereau, for example, whose images had never been edited. They were filmed as ethnographic footage for his monograph on the peoples of the Uele. These were in another register, and that's when we discovered that working on unedited images gave us much more material and many more research possibilities.

(A.V.W.) The Hutereau film reels were extremely interesting in that they revealed an unintentional "out of frame", past the borders. 16mm-cameras film a larger frame than what the filmmaker can see through the camera viewfinder, which means that an extra space is filmed around the intended frame. This extra space will not be shown by a 16mm film projector. But in the digitization process, the scanner had copied this extra information. This revealed how Hutereau constructed his images, which were meant to give an "authentic" image of village life. For example, he showed a woman waiting—"outside the frame" but visible to us looking at the digital version of the film—for an order from the person behind the camera to walk into the frame, as well as onlookers next to a composed scene of musicians. This is material well worth deconstructing. I had intended to work with this, but when

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we left the avenue of the propaganda films behind, the idea was shelved too.

(A/R) Can you specify in greater detail what in this specific context distinguishes a traditional propaganda film from a home movie? And especially, what makes the latter better suited to your project?

(A.Se.) Home movies approach the colonial context through the prism of intimacy and everyday gestures: the “infra-ordinary,” as Percey terms it. They represent a counterpoint to the propaganda films and allow us to reinterpret the official versions though these anodyne, unconscious gestures. Obviously they are nothing more than fragments, which we cannot use to write a counter-history, but they nevertheless allow us to approach the past. There was also this notion of the fragment, the unedited object with its more open and workable form, its larger room for maneuvering in terms of appropriation and interpretation. And lastly, there was another, more pragmatic reason, which was that we were no longer able to work with the official materials after the diplomatic incident at the Bozar...

(A/R) In concrete terms, how did you put these materials together?

(A.Se.) During the first workshop, one of the participants came with a box of private films that he didn't know what to do with. We began by looking through the reels, which were full of material. We understood then that we shouldn't just be collecting anymore, and instead calling out for films and working on the ones that came to us. The material is very sensitive, because it raises issues in terms of its usage. The people who brought these to us were not necessarily the people who filmed them or who were depicted in them. Sometimes these were films that people had inherited, more or less directly. This made it hard to make them publicly available.

(A/R) What were these films about?

(A.Se.) We had films from the 1920s until the end of colonization. There was even one dated just a few days before independence, and which was filmed in what was then Léopoldville, now Kinshasa. What's interesting is seeing the repetition of the same motifs: all these happy families, flowering gardens, people doing gymnastics. You see very few Congolese people or motifs typical of the Congo. It's often hard to pinpoint the place. They are also characterized by a lack of any tension, which is in and of itself interesting.

(A/R) How did you deal this private material, these ordinary gestures, these absences, to reveal their significant part?

(A.Se.) First of all, the artistic gestures give a form to these absences. For Alexander Schellow, for example, this consisted of drawings made on the basis of these images that address the issue of memory. The animations in some way express the indeterminacy one can experience when dealing with these materials.

(A.Sc.) These animations and drawings that were developed in resonance are an outgrowth of a practice of notetaking that we have conducted since the project's beginning. They concretize a change in epistemological status for the colonial images, as we no longer saw them as documents of the past, rather as traces of memorization. The images of the final sequences, which were drawn by making black dots on tracing paper, appear as unstable forms, ghosts appearing in a state of permanent transition. They seek to bring about an ungraspable experience, in the strongest sense of the term; rather than focus our gaze on “the Other,” they point to the nature of our own process of observation as something that is ultimately constructed.

(A.Se.) At the collective level, this is supposed to happen primarily via a digital platform that will propose a kind of colonial counter-archive which follows other, very subjective forms of logic. The idea is to create an interface that will grant interested individuals, artists and not, access to this content using indices, individual entry points so they can work directly with these materials. This is proving rather complex to implement. A large portion of the home movies have been digitized and are in the process of being uploaded to the platform.

(A.Sc.) Nevertheless, the project does not correspond to the state of things. Internal disagreements have slowed down our progress in these last several years. For the time being, it is structured as a rather simple database that includes (and makes available) the digitized home movie sequences. A text will contextualize the material and will serve as an assemblage that highlights the contradictions and the polyphony that characterize and inspire the group. However, we do hope to pursue this possibility by working on the indexing modes and categories for sorting these images. We plan to develop an annotation system based on the temporal indexations that future users of the platform can appropriate. This means that we will provide a framework within which, for example, a potential viewer can annotate, comment, and add notes in real time. Under certain conditions, this could automatically become an integral part of the navigation system for other viewers and create a growing research network, based on these annotations.

(A.V.W.) For me, the interest in making these images available formed part of our initial intentions. We sought to forge partnerships with the IFAN (Dakar) and École du Patrimoine Africain (Porto-Novo) to share these still unmined sources. Most of the film material from the 20s to the 60s lies in archives and attics across Europe. This intention of sharing, even if the material is problematic in many

ways, is still the driving force for me to continue digitizing and uploading the films.

(A/R) You have identified another way of processing this material, which you have termed “performative screenings.” What does that entail?

(A.Se.) In the beginning, we did hold collective screenings and take notes. We identified passages of films, relatively brief excerpts, which we then screened. We then asked the audience members to write about what they saw and to share their impressions. Based on that, we held discussions about what they had seen and understood. The idea was to concretize the experience of our subjective reactions to the images. This was a process of anamnesis, a way of insisting on the permanent process of rewriting that forms the basis for our memory. However, these screenings were often catastrophic, at least when they were held in institutions devoted to contemporary art.

(A/R) Why did it go so badly?

(A.Se.) I think that we shouldn't have done this publicly, as a “performance.” Expectations vary greatly from one person to the next. Despite the strength of certain participant's perspectives, the discussions were unfortunately dominated by a sense of pathos. We should have prepared a protocol, and we should have prepared the public too. Sharing implies a kind of trust, and that might not be there, depending on the means of representation. It became a performance with the naïve hope that spontaneity of feeling would provide a more immediate access to the truth of these archives, which was not the case at all.

That said, things went more smoothly at Khiasma in Paris, a place that is open to experimentation and which is very much embedded within the local social environment. Everyone there had worked on the images ahead of time, before the workshop we conducted in affiliation with University of Paris-8 (Vincennes–St-Denis), where I teach. We held an ongoing dialogue over five days with the Director Olivier Marboeuf, my colleague and philosopher Catherine Perret, the artists, and the students, and it resulted in an exhibition and collective screenings.

(A.Sc.) We developed similar sessions at the University of Oldenburg in Germany and the Royal Academy of Art (KABK) in The Hague. We had a lovely and highly fruitful collaboration with the artist Andréa Stultiens. The Colombian artist Juan-Camilo Gonzales also contributed significant insights regarding the digital platform. Lastly, during the public sessions, some of the experienced participants were able to provide very helpful comments and thoughts, despite the awkwardness of the event.

(A/R) As the Wiels sessions were in early 2019, these setbacks seem to pre-date your FRArt research. And yet, you have continued to describe these sessions as one of the three

main focal points of your research (together with the digital platform and the workshops for working on the images). So, is this still a model, despite everything?

(A.Se.) Since Khiasma was nevertheless a highly rewarding experience for all the participants, this goal towards which we were heading has remained. And at any rate, not everyone thought it was a total failure; people also gave different reasons for these setbacks. The idea was to reformulate things, to find another collective working format, but the pandemic dealt us a lousy hand in that regard.

(A/R) What were the other difficulties in your research that were provoked by the pandemic?

(A.Se.) We had planned to hold a workshop with Penny Siopis, a South African artist who produces video installations using home movies that she buys at flea markets. She's a terrific artist. She had agreed to conduct a five-day workshop at the ERG. We were really counting on her presence to restart our working process. She was supposed to come in April 2020, but obviously there wasn't any chance of her doing that.

(A/R) The third area of your research took the form of workshops where artists would "further their analysis of the collected materials." Specifically, there was a workshop at Centre Picha in Lubumbashi. How did this play out?

(A.V.W.) I problems with my visa, so I arrived a few days late in Lubumbashi. Other members did not make it at all. This left the group incomplete and unbalanced, as we were missing some of our most inspiring thinkers. To be honest, I also came unprepared, because I was engaged in an intense work process just before this. The Greyzone members had started a dance and performance-based formula, along with notetaking sessions. The Lubumbashi artists selected by Picha were overall impressively good artists. It was their second workshop on "decolonization." In the following days, we held notetaking sessions during screenings and performances, mostly in small groups. Some of the artists made really good work, but an uneasy atmosphere crept over the group. Expressions of anger and discomfort took the upper hand and remained unresolved. In the role-playing, there were the perpetrators and the victims of colonial times. Discussions stayed in that loop. In the last days, however, there were moments during the workshop on animation film that breathed fresh air into things, both as we watched excerpts of films I wanted to share, and in some of the filming I did with members of the group. The materials we had looked at before became more inspirational.

(A/R) So, the collective consisted of artists, except for one researcher from the world of academia. What was your role, Anna Seiderer?

(A.Se.) Good question... In the beginning my work involved research in the broad sense of the term. But when this project became one for an artistic collective, I proposed withdrawing, because I didn't want to fall into the trap of being a theoretician who speculates on this or the other person's practice. But Alexander and I immediately found ways to interact. He is very self-analytical in his work, which created an interesting dynamic. Given that what we wanted to construct was a collective effort, within which our roles would all remain indeterminate, and the goal was the construction of the digital platform, this presupposes that we invent the indexing methods together. At the same time, unlike the others who were also conducting individual artistic projects, I proposed conducting interviews with everyone with the aim of creating an artist's book.

(A/R) What will this book consist of?

(A.Se.) The first idea was to conduct interviews with all the members of the collective. But Thorsten Baensch, editor of *Bartleby & co* and himself an artist, asked me to give him free rein. The idea is not to include too much text, for the book to be visually and graphically driven. In the end, the interviews will be just a few quotes, and I will write a foreword and a bibliography together with Alexander.

(A/R) To hear you describe it, it seems that you have established more of a "constellation" than a "collective" in the strict sense of the term.

(A.Se.) Yes, I myself never believed in the collective, in this identity that had to be maintained. The project experienced a lot of difficulties. One of the conditions was not choosing its members and therefore letting anyone who was interested join. That necessarily created working dynamics that were rather contradictory, and when the political and media pressure gained the upper hand, things became very difficult. Some people left the collective because they didn't feel they were being heard. In reality, this was due to the refusal of some of the other members to work in a political and critical manner. What was surprising was that this was mainly the viewpoint of young European women, and it took the form of a kind of guilt that was projected on our Congolese and diaspora counterparts, who at times felt as if they were being instrumentalized. Some of them were at ease with this idea of being spokespeople for a supposed reality, but others got tired of this and quit the project, because they felt that they were limited to roles and postures based on identity politics. Other quit instead because these identity-based screenings stirred up internal resistances that they did not want or manage to question.

At the same time, this setback makes sense. It is interesting because it is based on political

and epistemological differences that need to be reexamined constantly to avoid giving in to dogmatic, ideological posturing. Some of the collective working dynamics were very inspiring. What we really missed were sessions that could have articulated and concretized this polyphony around an actual proposition.

(A/R) Are you under the impression that the debate over these issues within society as a whole has evolved during the several years of your research?

(A.Se.) I think they have hardened instead. This corresponds to the group's situation, where we saw opposing viewpoints form and harden, to the point of compelling some people to jump ship. I do think it was important to preserve this heterogeneity. For that matter, I would like for the artist's book to preserve a record of that. I think this hampered the project's productivity, but it also revealed the political contradictions, which was one of the project's goals.

(F.M.) The debates over these issues always suffer from an ignorance of what the colonized and their descendants really feel. These archive films do not speak from the perspective of the colonized. I often wonder why the movies given by families had for the most part been forgotten in a cellar, as if they had been hidden. A lot of people didn't know about this part of their family's history in the colonies. When they discover these movies, they only gain access to one perspective on colonization. Hence, *pona nini Bokabuani ekoti na lisanga* ["This is the reason for the divergences and fractures within our group"].

(A/R) Do you believe that this group has a future?

(A.Se.) This or that other person will nevertheless pursue certain avenues. For example, I am now working on archive films at the Musée Albert Kahn as part of a French research project conducted in partnership with Benin and South Africa. This is an extension of the FRArt project. The dialogue with Alexander Schellow on the practice of making animated films using colonial images is also ongoing. Antje Van Wichelen has begun a collaboration with the film director Gustave Fundi Mwamba, whom she met at the workshop at Lubumbashi, a project that is centered on an archive film.

#### CAPTIONS

- fig. 01 Interview opening page:  
Work session in the studio. Photo credit:  
Greyzone Zebra.
- fig. 02 Discussion at Khiasma, Paris, May 2018.  
Photo credit: Greyzone Zebra.
- fig. 03 Installation at Khiasma, Paris, May 2018.  
Photo credit: Milena Desse.
- fig. 04 Workshop at Picha Center, Lubumbashi,  
féfbruary 2019. Photo credit: Kevin Kakami.
- fig. 05 Artist's book project to be published by  
Bartleby & Co. Photo credit: Milena Desse.