

World Premiere at the Forum of the 69th Berlin International Film Festival

Long Synopsis

For decades, Swiss traveller René Gardi (1909-2000) explained the African continent and its inhabitants to us. In books, television programs and films, he waxed poetic about the beautiful naked “savages” and the pre-modern era in which they apparently lived. This supposedly idyllic world became Gardi's paradise, as Africa was transformed into a projection screen for the desires of the audience back home.

The film AFRICAN MIRROR tells the story of our problematic image of Africa using materials from Gardi's archive, whose ambivalent pictures mirror our European self-conception in myriad ways. The film reveals image production as a form of colonialism and shows how we have refused to truly look into this mirror to this very day.

Short Synopsis

For decades, Swiss traveller René Gardi (1909-2000) explained the African continent and its inhabitants to us. In books, television programs and films, he waxed poetic about the beautiful naked “savages” and the “pre-modern” era in which they lived. This supposedly idyllic world became Gardi's paradise, as Africa was transformed into a projection screen for the desires of the audience back home. The film AFRICAN MIRROR tells the story of our colonialist image of Africa using materials from Gardi's archive and shows how we have refused to take an unflinching look into this mirror to this very day.

Director's Statement

Over the course of prolonged stays in West Africa, I became aware of my own personal entanglement in prejudices and clichéd images regarding Africa. Among other visits, I spent seven months in Burkina Faso, where I realised image films for an NGO. Assuming the role of the white filmmaker in a country whose history and culture I was only superficially familiar with frequently made me feel uneasy. I became sensitised to images of Africa and their communication through media.

I recalled the presence of René Gardi's Africa books in my parental home during my childhood. For decades, Swiss traveller and author René Gardi (1909-2000) explained the African continent and its inhabitants to us. In countless books, television and radio programmes and films, he waxed poetic about the beautiful naked savages and the pre-modern era in which they supposedly lived. Gardi's tales were met with great interest far beyond the borders of the German-speaking countries. His books were translated into dozens of languages, and his films were shown on television in Japan and Great Britain. For his documentary film MANDARA, which screened in the competition section of the Berlin International Film Festival in 1960, Gardi received a Special Mention.

Then I learned of the existence of René Gardi's artistic estate, which had yet to be assessed in earnest to any extent: an archive featuring diaries, letters, newspaper articles, rolls of film, reels of audio recordings and over 30,000 photographs, the majority of which had never been published. We were able to acquire the entire estate and hand it over to the State Archive of Bern. As such, I had unimpeded access to the archive and thus began my research.

Gardi's Africa was subjective and constructed. The scenes in his films were often meticulously staged, in order to eliminate any traces of "modernity". Life in the big cities was deliberately ignored. This view of Africa says a lot about Europe. It speaks to the existence of a yearning for bygone simple, pastoral times far removed from any hint of industrialisation. At the same time, it testifies to a desire to break out of conservative societies and find another form of freedom. The freedom of white people was based on the enslavement of black people. As soon as the African states became independent, that is, as soon as their inhabitants gained their own freedom, whites in Africa no longer felt free.

It is remarkable that René Gardi himself never treated these contradictions in his work. I wonder whether he was aware of them? From Gardi's point of view, Africa was the land of freedom, Africans were true democrats, whose farmsteads obviously needed to be burned to the ground however whenever they refused to pay colonial taxes. Gardi did not conceive of himself as part of the problem in this regard. He saw himself as an observer who captured the truth in the most authentic manner possible.

René Gardi enabled Europeans to dream of adventure and freedom at a time when most individuals were not in a position to undertake travels of that nature. Many people in Switzerland got to know Africa through Gardi. It is as if he created colonies for Switzerland with his work. Switzerland's relationship to colonialism is often described today as "colonialism without the colonies". Switzerland itself never possessed colonies, but it did profit financially from trade with the colonial powers. The making and selling of images, as practiced by Gardi, was also an important component of this other type of colonialism. To date there has been no critical examination of Gardi's work – time and

again we have succumbed to our romantic infatuation instead.

During my research, I was very surprised to discover a court case involving René Gardi. Gardi was convicted of “unlawful sexual relations with children”. To this day, there has been no attempt to further investigate these cases of abuse – they have remained cloaked in silence. It is not difficult to recognize connections between Gardi’s sexual proclivities and his obsession with Africa. For instance, the search for a sort of innocent purity seems to be a leitmotif in Gardi’s work.

My film AFRICAN MIRROR is composed almost entirely of pictorial, sound and text documentation drawn from René Gardi’s archive. In assembling the materials into a montage, I have attempted to lay bare the contradictions and conflicts within this archive. Sound and image are set in a new relation with one another – the pictures begin to think for themselves.

The film AFRICAN MIRROR tells the story of our image of Africa. The West’s image of Africa is determined by its own self-perception. One sees one’s self in the other. Every society has a need for images of the other in order to arrive at its own identity. I believe that Gardi’s work is not about Africa and Africans, but instead that it says something about us and our history. Or to express it in the words of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe: “That which we refer to as ‘Africa’ is a collection of desires, longings and naive fantasies – which are promoted, disseminated and cultivated.”

Biography and Filmography of Director Mischa Hedinger

Mischa Hedinger (born in 1984) is a freelance filmmaker and editor. He studied video at the Lucerne School of Art and Design, and film at ECAL in Lausanne. In 2013, he realised his first extended-length documentary film **ASSESSMENT**, which was honoured with the Carte Blanche Award for up-and-coming filmmakers at Duisburger Filmwoche. Hedinger lives and works in Zürich.

African Mirror, 80 minutes, 2019

Assessment, 49 minutes, 2013

Website: www.mischahedinger.ch

Technical Information

Title

African Mirror

Country

Switzerland

Year

2019

Running time

84 minutes

Languages

Swiss German, German, French

Subtitles

DE / EN

Aspect ratio

16:9

Sound

5.1

Background Information on the Protagonist René Gardi

Early Work

Gardi's early work was heavily influenced by the Scouting movement. This was of central significance in his life and anticipated many of the things that would preoccupy him throughout it. At the age of 17, René Gardi joined the Berna boy scout troupe, which he would later go on to lead for six years. He wrote his first texts as evening entertainment for the troupe. Gardi's scouting activities culminated in his first book "Mit Rucksack, Zelt und Kochtopf" ("With a Backpack, Tent and Cooking Pot"), which he published in 1936 at the age of 27 and which subsequently appeared in five editions. This little guide seems like a programme for his later life: camp life, organisation, travelling. His successful youth novels "Schwarzwasser" ("Black Water", 1943) and "Gericht im Lager" ("Court in Camp", 1944) also emerged from the scouting world in which he moved.

René Gardi's first great journeys took him to the far North, with a trip around Finland in 1936. Further Scandinavian tours would follow before and after the Second World War. Already during this period, Gardi was searching for the simple, primal life. Among other things, he was fascinated by the Sami people (known as Lapps at the time).

Rupture

In 1943 a large rupture occurred in Gardi's biography. While employed as a secondary-school teacher in Brügg, he unsuccessfully attempted suicide and subsequently turned himself in to the police. In 1944, René Gardi was sentenced to serve conditional jail time for "unlawful sexual relations with children" by the high court in Bern. It appears that such an offense did not necessarily have to mean the end of a career at the time. As he was forbidden to continue working as a teacher, Gardi made a profession out of his passion, working from that point on as a freelance travel writer, photographer and filmmaker.

Following his conviction, Gardi travelled once again to Scandinavia. It is thanks to a co-incidence that he found his way to Africa in 1948. A close friend persuaded him to book a trip to Algeria that was advertised by a travel agency. However, said agency went bankrupt during the trip. Gardi and his friend resolved to continue their journey on their own and realised how surprisingly easy it was to go it alone. After that, he travelled countless times to Africa in a roughly 18-month rhythm. He undertook his final journey in 1992 at the age of 82.

Career

René Gardi was on the road for 40 years. He lived from the sales of his articles, books and pictures. He worked for himself as an entrepreneur, and was neither a media correspondent nor active in aid projects. Aside from his passion for the Sahara, he was also especially fond of Northern Cameroon. During his expedition to Lake Chad, he stayed briefly in the Mandara Mountains for the first time. Fascinated by the naked blacksmiths at their furnaces, he planned a further expedition with ethnologist Paul Hinderling, who worked for what is now the Museum of Cultures in Basel. From this voyage alone, Gardi brought home over 2000 photographs, seven reels of film, over 400 minutes of audio recordings and a journal with 102 typewritten pages. Assisted by a team, he shot his highly successful feature-length documentary film "Mandara" during his fourth trip to Cameroon in 1959. Due to his skills in communicating through media and his talent for storytelling, Gardi became an in-demand expert on Africa. His career was additionally facilitated by the emergence of the mass media. His television series "Gardi erzählt" was similar in format

to a slide-show presentation. René Gardi sat at a table, telling of his experiences during his travels and holding up objects he had brought along in front of the camera from time to time.

In the late 1970s, media interest in Gardi began to wane. Though he continued his travel and lecturing activities, he published very little beyond this point. The discourse concerning Africa in Switzerland had begun to change, with the emergence of new voices, such as the “Erklärung von Bern” (or “Berne Declaration”, an NGO known today as Public Eye), which engaged critically with development topics and the treatment of the so-called Third World. That Gardi’s image of Africa continued to resonate however is already made evident enough by the fact alone that his films continued to be disseminated and shown after his death by schools, for instance by the school media centre of Bern.

René Gardi received various honours for his work, such as the Youth Book Award from the Swiss Teachers Association (1963), an honorary PhD in ethnology from the University of Bern (1967) as well as the Literary Prize of the City of Bern for “Heiteres aus Afrika” (1969). Many of his books were very successful and were published in multiple editions and translated into diverse languages. His feature film “Mandara” was broadcast on Japanese and British television after its world premiere at the Berlinale in 1960. Researchers are in unanimous agreement regarding the significance of René Gardi. Christraud Geary, curator for art from Africa and Oceania at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has commented for instance: “No other writer and photographer who dealt with Africa exerted such a defining influence in the German-speaking countries from the 1950s into the 1970s like Gardi did.”

Credits

Screenplay, direction, editing
Mischa Hedinger

Dramaturgy, editing
Philipp Diettrich

Speaker (René Gardi)
Markus Amrein

Speaker
Rachel Braunschweig

Music
Machinefabriek (Rutger Zuydervelt)

Scientific consultants
Felix Rauh
Gaby Fierz

Colour correction and post-production assistance
David Röthlisberger

Sound design
Fabian Gutscher

Voice-over recording and mixing
Daniel Hobi

Music licensing
Claudio Bucher

Subtitles
Peter Jud

Archive
State Archive of the Canton of Bern

Consulting and assistance (archive)
Silvia Bühler

Digitalisation (photographs)
Lea Ritter

State archivist
Barbara Studer Immenhauser

Digitalisation (film)
Lichtspiel / Kinemathek Bern
Brigitte Paulowitz

Christine Gissler
Eliane Antonia Maurer
David Landolf

Media documentation (SRF archive)
Corina Zuber

Graphic design
Lars Egert

Production assistance
Kathrin Gschwend

Production
Simon Baumann
ton und bild GmbH

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SRF Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen
Urs Augstburger (editor)
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Burggemeinde Bern
State Archive of the Canton of Bern

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