

FILM REVIEWS

CHRISTINE MODERBACHER

University of Aberdeen

Robert de Wavrin, from the Manor to the Jungle

Film by Grace Winter, Luc Plantier
2017, 85 min

Producer: Image creation.

Coproducers: Cinematek, RTBF



[www.youtube.com/
watch?v=stRKICZ9deA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stRKICZ9deA)

Christine Moderbacher is an Anthropologist and Documentary Filmmaker. (Harraga 2008, Men at work 2010, A Letter to Mohamed 2013, Red Earth White Snow (2017). She is currently doing her PhD at the department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, as part of the project KFI - Knowing from the inside. In her films as well as her anthropological work she is mainly focusing on migratory and marginal worlds as well as visual and textual storytelling.

At this point, most anthropologists probably think that there is not much new to discover in the history of early visual ethnography. The essay documentary “Robert de Wavrin, from the Manor to the Jungle” proves the contrary. The film invites us to follow the intriguing life and work of the Belgium noble Marquis Robert de Wavrin who was one of the first to travel to and in several Latin American countries with a 35mm camera. Divided in 8 chapters, the feature length film sensitively weaves together biographical elements and astonishing archival footage shot between 1913 and the late 1930s when the beginning of the Second World War set an abrupt end to Wavrin`s journeys.

It is due to one of the directors of the documentary, Grace Winter, that the work of this almost forgotten filmmaker and ethnographer can be seen anew. She found the Marquis` rushes while working on the documentary collections at the Royal Belgian Film Archive in Brussels. In no less than ten years of work, Winter archived more than 6000 meters of footage and around 2000 remaining photos that were kept safe in shoeboxes at the Brussels Cinquantenaire Museum. A former anthropologist, she reconstructed one of the Marquis` missing films and situated the work of Robert de Wavrin within the larger history of ethnographic cinema. This

contextualization seems at times quite pedagogical when watching the documentary but does achieve what many films in and about the discipline lack: it makes early ethnographic history accessible and interesting for a wider audience. Alongside this accomplishment, the carefully edited film sheds light on two specific topics that make this research documentary particularly important.

One of them is the strange life path of Robert de Wavrin himself. Born 1888 into a Belgium noble family in Flanders the Marquis, 25 years old, fires his rifle at two children collecting nuts on his property. Leaving one of them seriously injured, his body perforated with no less than forty-eight bullets, Wavrin goes back to his house, ignoring the fact that privileges of the nobility had been rescinded in Belgium in 1789. Sentenced to one year in prison, he flees the country soon after and embarks on his first journey to Buenos Aires. The initial encounter with the Robert de Wavrin - one that leaves the viewer quite bewildered - is at first reinforced by his personal notes that are read aloud throughout the film. They seem to prove a cliché in portraying yet another European explorer that dreams of freedom and independence in the "exotic world". But, as the introductory quote hints at the outset of the film, we slowly get to know another Marquis, one who is deeply moved and changed by the encounter with the people who are yet to become his friends: "If a man finds himself facing another man he will say to him: "I am a man. Who are you?" And the other will answer: "I too am a man."

With this statement the directors determine the underlying topic and strength of the film.



Slowly deconstructing the first impression about the protagonist given through his own writings and footage, the film tells the story of a man who undergoes a profound change while getting to know the stranger. "To understand the Indians` mentality, you have to be alongside them, dispensing with your own knowledge or perception of things, to see them with just the knowledge possessed by those people you are trying to understand," he writes during his second travel. Read against the backdrop of an area where the so-called "savage" where exhibited in "Human Zoos" - with the last human exhibition only being banned in Belgium in 1958 - the film gives space and voice to the work of a man who developed a deep appreciation of the people he encountered. "I visited savages who are less savage than those "civilized"

people,” he writes after learning about the outbreak of the first world war. His personal growth reflected in his diary entrances and the empathy for the people he got to know, impacts the second element that makes this film so relevant within and outside the anthropological discipline: While some of the first photographs presented are well within the line of stereotypical representations of the Western adventurer, showing the filmmaker with hunted animals laid out at his feet, the thoroughly edited rushed focus more and more on daily life scenes of the people he lives with. These images bare an intimacy and attentiveness that is rarely seen in footage from this time. Countering the striking features of the first ethnographic films that reduce the other to the status of an exotic creature, Robert de Wavrin is sitting in the middle of a group of Indians, joking and laughing with them. Even though the title of his most known film “In the Land of the Scalp” that is shown in excerpts in the documentary mirrors the spectacular sensation of the “exotic” in the 1930s, the material does not offer bloodthirsty evoking images but focuses on long scenes of the ceremony itself. His camera most of the time at eye level, Wavrin depicts people who do not pose to be exhibited and measured but look into the camera with pride. This is especially underlined when the directors chose to show original footage in silence, like the moving portrays of Mataco Indians and their face-paintings. Whilst the music composed for the documentary does not always add to the poetic intensity of the footage itself, it is within these silent moments that the Marquis` photographic eye and respectful gaze seems especially captivating. Instead of focusing on physical features

and differences, the original footage captures families sleeping and laughing with their kids, fathers who teach their little sons how to deal with bow and arrow and the knowledgeable craft of entire villages to use their environment at its best. We see daily gestures of life that are common to all humanity, which is - as the documentary rightly suggests - partly due to the fact that Robert de Wavrin travelled on his own expenses and could allow himself an independent, and patient gaze. Winter and Plantier manage to keep the change of the explorer`s character interesting until the end, refusing to give a distinct opinion but leaving the viewer with an uneasy sensation by showing compelling portraits of individuals from tribes that, to a large extent, do not exist anymore. In a future anthropologies manifesto written during the Conference of the European Association of Social Anthropologists in Tallin in 2014, the participants of the Anthropology at the Edge of the Future workshop wrote that “Anthropology of the future is accretive. It builds on traditions, reflects on pasts.” (cited in Salazar, Pink, Irving and Sjöberg 2017: 2). While not all of the history of anthropology is worth building on, this film shows that there is early ethnographical work that very well deserves reflection.

Christine Moderbacher
University of Aberdeen

References:

Salazar, Juan Francisco/ Pink, Sarah/ Irving, Andrew/ Sjöberg, Johannes (eds.): *Anthropologies and Futures. Researching Emerging and Uncertain Worlds*. London, Oxford, New York, New Delhi, Sydney: Bloomsbury 2017