

WHEN OHLSEN FORGOT HIS HAT – PICTURES FROM A GERMAN-CHILEAN ROBINSONADE

KRISTY SCHANK

In 1939 the German director Arnold Fanck travelled to Chile as part of the Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition to shoot his last major feature film “Ein Robinson – Das Tagebuch eines Matrosen” (“A German Robinson Crusoe”). The ambitious expedition was an impressive feat in many respects. And it brought together a group of people whose biographies painted a vivid picture of German-Chilean relations shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Arnold Fanck and the German mountain film genre

Arnold Fanck was born on 6 March 1889 in Frankenthal in the Pfalz to Friedrich Fanck, an industrialist in the sugar trade, and his wife Ida, née Paraquin. After finishing grammar school in Freiburg im Breisgau, he went on to study geology at the University of Zurich. Fanck’s interest in geology and passion for skiing saw him make frequent trips to the Alps. He initially trained as a photographer (Holba et al. 1984: 88), but soon began working in film under the supervision of cameraman Sepp Allgeier from Freiburg. In 1919 they shot the first film on skiing, “Das Wunder des Schneeschuhs” (“The wonders of skiing”).

Fanck founded the company Freiburger Berg- und Sportfilm GmbH and made numerous films in the 1920s and 30s, which led to the emergence of a new genre: the “German mountain film” (Holba et al. 1984: 88). According to Rapp, German mountain films are feature films set in the Alps, produced between 1924 and 1940 by German companies for a German audience (Rapp 1997: 7).

Other proponents of the mountain film included Fanck’s protégés Leni Riefenstahl and Luis Trenker. Technically, the films were distinctive for their ambitious shoots on location in the high mountains. Fanck often demanded incredible feats of strength from his crew and actors. The plot itself was of secondary importance. Fanck’s most important films include “Im Kampf mit dem Berge” (“Battling the mountain” – 1921), “Die weiße Hölle vom Piz Palü” (“The white hell of Piz Palu” – 1929), “Stürme über dem Mont Blanc” (“Storm over Mont Blanc” – 1930) and “Der weiße Rausch” (The white ecstasy – 1931).

Fanck’s films certainly influenced the growing Alpine tourism industry and significantly boosted the popularity of leisure organizations such as the German Alpine Club, which would later be controlled by the National Socialists (Bendler 2011: 514). The shots of nature and the valiant protagonists were perfect propaganda for the National Socialist ideal of the healthy individual, who eschewed the modern world and was firmly rooted in their native soil.

Academic literature on Arnold Fanck almost exclusively examines the genre of the classic mountain film, focusing on how Fanck and his films can be interpreted in the context of the Weimar Republic and during the emergence of National Socialism (Amann/Gabel/Keiper 1992; Schenk 2008).

By contrast, very little has been written about his last major film. There is barely any secondary literature on the 1939 Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition to South America



In 1915 the SMS Dresden sank in Cumberland Bay, which was the location for the opening scene of Fanck's Film "A German Robinson Crusoe". (1939)

and the two resulting productions, the feature film "A German Robinson Crusoe" and the documentary "From Patagonia to the Tierra del Fuego". The Ibero-Amerikanisches Institut (Ibero-American Institute, IAI) houses 49 black-and-white photographs of the expedition. The photos depict the various shooting locations and scenes in the film "A German Robinson Crusoe", some of which also appear in the press materials for the film. The selection of images featured here above all demonstrates the variety of landscapes the film crew encountered on their expedition in Chile.

More information on the venture can be found at the library of the German film archive, Deutsche Kinemathek, which houses the screenplay and press materials on the film. Fanck's papers and manuscripts were donated to Munich Film Museum in 1996 by his grandson Matthias Fanck. A major exhibition showcased some of these papers in 1997.

The film "A German Robinson Crusoe"

At the end of 1938 Fanck had no projects in the pipeline and made a personal appeal to Goebbels, the Reich Minister of Propaganda. As a result, he was contracted to direct a film for Bavaria Filmkunst GmbH (Horak 1997: 60).

The idea for the film was based on the true story of Karl Hugo Weber, a German sailor on the SMS Dresden. In March 1915, the Dresden sank during a sea battle with the English navy off the Chilean coast. The crew were interned on Quiriquinia Island at the entrance to the Bay of Concepción.¹ A short while later, a number of officers managed to escape. Weber did not return to Germany until 1921. He then began to equip himself for a longer trip to Chile. He settled on the Isla Más a Tierra, part of the Juan-Fernández Archipelago. From 1704 to 1709 this had

been the home of English sailor Alexander Selkirk, whose story inspired Daniel Defoe to write his novel "Robinson Crusoe". The island was later renamed Isla Robinsón Crusoe. In Germany, Weber was known as "Robinson from Berlin" and featured in several newspaper reports. As a result of this coverage, he began a correspondence with Johanna Stade, the daughter of a German doctor. They married and spent the next 30 years living together in Chile.

The film "A German Robinson Crusoe" retells the story of Weber with the character of head sailor Carl Ohlsen, played by Herbert A. Böhme. The crew of the German cruiser SMS Dresden scuttle their ship in the Chilean Cumberland Bay to stop it falling into the hands of the English. Four men die and the rest of the crew are taken captive by the Chileans. After three years, the crew escape and return to Germany. When the soldiers of the Imperial Army finally arrive in the harbor in Kiel, they are jeered and taunted by mutinous soldiers and angry workers. Ohlsen also faces a personal humiliation: in his absence, his wife has remarried and his son no longer recognizes him as his father. He decides to return to Robinson Crusoe Island and starts to build a new life there cultivating the land, cattle breeding and hunting. Years later, "Robinson" hears about the political changes in National Socialist Germany on the radio and learns that his former comrades have set off on the new "Dresden" to find him. After a first failed attempt to get to the ship, he battles his way through the rugged landscape of southern Chile and reaches the Dresden, where he is taken on board by the crew, which now also includes his son.

The Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition

The Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition set off in September 1938. The film expedition consisted of around 12 people and 250 alphabetically-ordered boxes of materials.



In the film, Ohlsen starts a new life on Robinson Crusoe Island. (1939)

Fanck's family also joined him in Chile: His 20-year-old son Arnold Ernst Fanck Jun. worked as a camera assistant; his second wife Lisa Kind and their five-year-old son Hans frequently accompanied the film crew in Chile.

Robert Gerstmann was the official photographer of the Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition. The photographs featured in this volume can almost certainly be attributed to Gerstmann.

Robert, or Roberto M. Gerstmann Henckel, was a qualified electrical engineer from Germany, who traveled to Brazil in 1924. He started taking photographs on the crossing to South America and spent the next 40 years capturing the continent on film (Odone 2009: 16-17). He was mainly based in Santiago de Chile, but embarked on frequent trips as a photographer, financed by his work as an engineer, and built up his body of work in Bolivia (1928), Chile (1932) and Columbia (1951). His photographs have a striking documentary aesthetic and an almost scientific focus on landscapes and rural and city scenes. The central theme of his puristic and clearly structured images is always the landscape (Alvarado/ Möller 2009: 155-156).

The entire eight-month expedition had a very limited budget. Once they had reached Chile, the Chilean government supported the project, providing the film team with train tickets for the Chilean rail network and a cruiser to travel from the mainland to the Juan Fernández Islands.

The Isla Más a Tierra proved to be a problematic shooting location:

I was incredibly disappointed when I first visited the island. It was almost completely covered in jungle. The landscape in itself was very pleasant, but there were no particular features that had any great visual appeal. [...] Driven by a kind of obsession with authenticity,

we decided to go to the real Robinson Island, which turned out to be a disastrous mistake. Following in the footsteps of the writer Defoe and relocating the story to an island in the Caribbean would have been visually far more interesting. (Fanck 1973: 367)

Fanck subsequently adapted the screenplay: Ohlsen spots the new Dresden approaching the island to pick him up and decides to fetch his sailor's hat from the old Dresden. As a result, he misses the ship as it passes by the beach. He sets off in a small wooden boat to try and catch up with his crew and is caught up in a storm, which sweeps him far away to the south. By making this adaptation, Fanck was able to include shots of natural landscapes in his film, above all scenes in the mountains, in the Tierra del Fuego and in Patagonia, even if these additions make the film's plot seem even less plausible.

The press materials on the expedition paint an exoticized and adventurous picture of life on the island. Fanck Jun. recounts spending a night in the drafty "Robinson cave". The film crew lived off huge, cheap crawfish and lambs, went hunting for pumas, reared spitting llamas and provided the local population with medical care.² It was on this island that Fanck first met Weber.

After shooting on the Juan Fernández Islands, the crew continued their trip over the mainland to Puerto Montt and then traveled by schooner through the fjords of the Tierra del Fuego as far as Cape Horn to shoot the aforementioned landscape scenes. On 25 January 1939 Chile experienced the worst earthquake in its history near Chillán, which claimed approx. 30,000 lives. The Bavaria expedition team were fortunate and escaped unharmed.

Albert Pagels accompanied the expedition through the fjords of the Tierra del Fuego. Pagels was a former German sailor, who had lived in Punta Arenas for over 25 years. In his autobiography, the staunch National Social-



The film gave Fanck a chance to portray the Chilean mountains in all their glory. (1939)

ist recalled meeting Fanck's film crew in January 1939. Pagels accompanied the film crew for 22 days, chartered ships for them and helped re-enact the scenes portraying the final days of the Dresden (Pagels 1940: 157-158).

Due to the lack of ships following the earthquake, Fanck seized the opportunity to be picked up in southern Chile by the German passenger ship "Bremen", which had been chartered by a wealthy group of travelers from the U.S. In early summer 1939, the film crew left Punta Arenas and returned to Germany via Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro and New York.

Fanck arrived back in Germany on 5 April 1939 and filmed the indoor shots. He claimed that dramatic changes were made to his film during editing – against his wishes. He remarked:

My film 'A German Robinson Crusoe' certainly wasn't as good as the films I'd made before. The 'one-man' theme was too weak for a start, let alone the performance of the lead actor. Nevertheless, it was a pleasant enough film with interesting footage and rare shots of nature. It was when I delivered the material for editing that the real damage was done. (Fanck 1973: 376)

Fanck viewed the film as the low point of his career as a filmmaker. In 1940 he joined the NSDAP. He made ends meet during the war by producing a number of short films for Berlin's General Building Inspection Office. He fled Berlin towards the end of the war and subsequently eked out a living as a lumberjack in Freiburg. In 1946 Fanck made a failed attempt to re-establish the Freiburger Kammerschule; he was unable to relaunch his career in the film business (Horak 1997: 64-66). Fanck died in Freiburg in 1974.

However limited and ideologically biased the documentation on the Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition may be, it

does provide some vivid insight into the work of the film crew and the life of a number of Germans in Chile shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War.

Both Fanck and Pagel's autobiographies and the press materials on the expedition throw light on the trip and its exotic adventures. However, beyond what was permitted and ideologically acceptable, readers can only guess what else happened on the expedition or whether events actually occurred as they were described. Academic discussion of the mountain films and studies on Fanck have omitted to mention the Robinson film to date. From an artistic perspective, the film is mediocre at best; its images and plot are not good enough to warrant rescuing it from obscurity now or indeed in the future. What remains is a propaganda film aimed at the Kriegsmarine, the navy of Nazi Germany, which glorifies German comradeship.

¹ The IAI's Image Archive collection is home to a photo album dating from 1915 comprising 32 photographs of the German prisoners of war from the SMS Dresden on Quiriquinia Island.

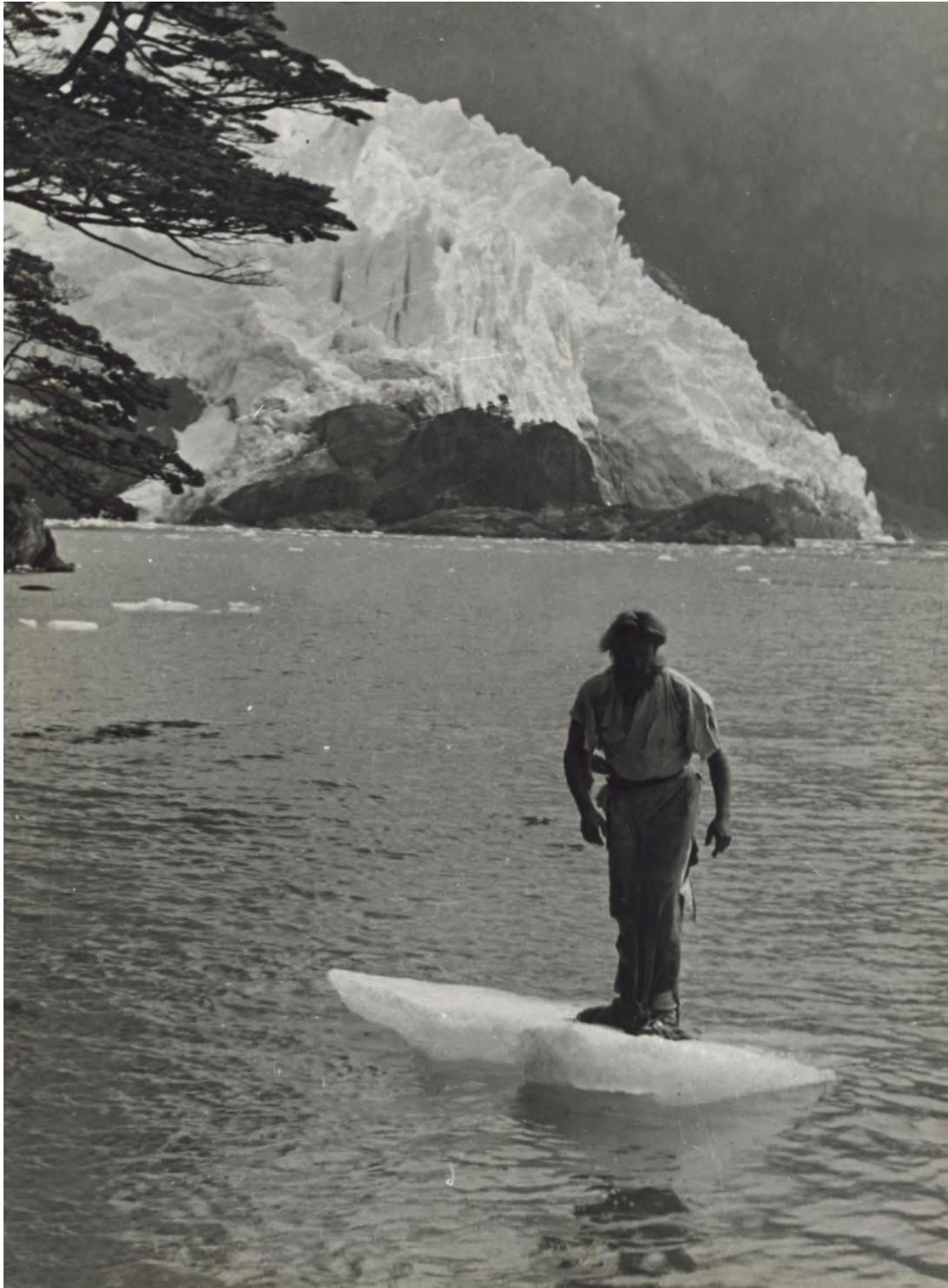
² Press materials on the Bavaria-Fanck-Chile expedition "Short episodes from a major film expedition" and "They lived in Robinson's cave", made available by the Deutsche Kinemathek.



Ohlsen's wanderings take him far down south to the fjords of the Tierra del Fuego.
(1939)

Bibliography

- ALVARADO P., Margarita/MÖLLER, Clara (2009): "Roberto M. Gerstmann y Antonio Quintana Contreras: Estética y fotografía de los indígenas del Norte Grande". In: *Aisthesis*, 46, 151-177.
- AMANN, Frank/GABEL, Ben/KEIPER, Jürgen (1992): *Revisited. Der Fall Dr. Fanck. Die Entdeckung der Natur im deutschen Bergfilm*. Film und Kritik, 1. Basel: Stroemfeld.
- BENDLER, Gebhard (2011): "Alpindidaktik". In: Deutscher Alpenverein/Österreichischer Alpenverein/Alpenverein Südtirol (ed.): *Berg Heil! Alpenverein und Bergsteigen 1918-1945*. Cologne: Böhlau, 507-556.
- FANCK, Arnold (1973): *Er führte Regie mit Gletschern, Stürmen und Lawinen. Ein Filmpionier erzählt*. Munich: Nymphenburger Verlagshandlung.
- HOLBA, Herbert/KNORR, Günter/SPIEGEL, Peter (ed.) (1984): *Reclams deutsches Filmlexikon: Filmkünstler aus Deutschland, Österreich und der Schweiz*. Stuttgart: Reclam.
- HORAK, Jan-Christoph (1997): "Dr. Arnold Fanck: Träume vom Wolkenmeer und einer guten Stube". In: Horak, Jan-Christoph (ed.): *Berge, Licht und Traum. Dr. Arnold Fanck und der deutsche Bergfilm*. Munich: Bruckmann, 15-67.
- PAGELS, Albert (1940): *Mein Leben*. Berlin: Scherl.
- ODONE C., Carolina (2009): "En sus ojos de vidrio pulido, primero la apertura, después la forma: El viaje de Roberto M. Gerstmann (1896-1964)". In: Alvarado P., Margarita/Matthews, Mariana/Möller Z., Clara (ed.): *Roberto Gerstmann. Fotografías, paisajes y territorios latinoamericanos*. Santiago de Chile: Pehuén, 15-22.
- RAPP, Christian (1997): *Höhenrausch. Der deutsche Bergfilm*. Vienna: Sonderzahl Verlagsgesellschaft.
- SCHENK, Irmbert (2008): *Kino und Modernisierung. Von der Avantgarde zum Videoclip*. Marburg: Schüren.



Ohlsen is drifting on an ice floe when he is finally rescued by the new Dresden. (1939)