

Stefanie Wolter: *Die Vermarktung des Fremden. Exotismus und die Anfänge des Massenkonsumenten*, Frankfurt/M & New York 2005, Campus, 216 S., 21 Abb., €24,90, ISBN 3-593-37850-7

Today our mass consumer culture is saturated with images of foreign peoples and places that do not and never did exist in the simplistic categories of cultural and ethnic difference that make these images comprehensible to us. The world is presented to us as a department store filled with exotic "others" ready for consumption, if you have the cash. A smiling South Sea Islander calls us to the Pacific from the window of a travel agency, while kitschy logos including kinky-haired and thick-lipped black heads give our tea and coffee a bit of exotic flair. Visitors to their local candy store might encounter a statue of an African-American "boy" straight from the Old South. Need we mention the Sarotti Mohr, or rather the Sarotti magician (since 2004), who has fed Germans' chocolate fix since 1918? Such observations led sociologist Stefanie Wolter to ask how these characters and places became exoticized in the first place and who decided which were marketable. Her book, adapted from her 2004 dissertation from the Universität von Erlangen-Nürnberg, explores the historic connections between such "exotic" symbols and consumerism in Germany, with particular emphasis on the development of spectacular visual culture. She focuses primarily on the period from the late nineteenth century into the 1920s, with occasional forays into the National Socialist period. This was the era when mass consumer culture broke onto the scene, and it was also an era of dramatically increasing contact between Europe and the wider world. The former led to a flood of visual stimuli, as producers tried to respond to the public demand for exotic "*Erlebnisse*" by loading their products with appealing references, and the latter provided a context within which exotic characters acquired specific meanings.

The emphasis on manufacturing consumable "experiences" using the media of visual culture led directly to "*die außerordentliche Popularität 'exotischer' Bilder etwa in der Werbung oder der Vergnügungskultur des 19. Jahrhunderts*" (8-9). These images reflected European desires and ideas about themselves rather than any existing reality, and in this case they referenced a generally understood "*Weltsicht*" based on European superiority over non-Europeans. Although she over-simplifies the existing state of research on the topic, Wolter is right that this development in popular culture cannot be explained solely through recourse to the scientific discourses of race of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries or as the "*Produkt einer mehr oder minder einstimmigen imperialistischen Propaganda*" (14). Instead she names *Warenrassismus* as the motor for this process. She finds an independent logic grounded in the developing mass consumer culture of the era – simply put, exoticized images that reflected contemporary racist stereotypes were prevalent in German visual culture around the turn of the century because they were profitable.

Wolter charts the development and commercial uses of this *Warenrassismus* through a variety of visual media. After a summary overview of academic understandings of race in the nineteenth century and the concurrent development of a visually oriented consumer revolution,

her first chapter outlines the innovations introduced by world's fairs. These spectacles combined the appeals of the midway with the *bürgerlich* ideal of self-improvement through education, and they did so by locating their goods and displays within a new world order that juxtaposed contemporary, progressive Europe against chronologically and geographically distant others. Just as did model villages of Europe's distant past, exhibits on non-Europeans and their backwardness reminded Europeans how far they had come. But visitors were not there to learn about a hierarchy of cultures; they were there to be entertained, to consume -- literally, in the case of the ubiquitous tea and coffee houses -- an exotic "experience." Advertisers, the subject of chapter 2, took advantage of this desire. They associated even the most mundane products with fantasies of imperial adventure, "oriental" luxury, and erotic conquest and also used racial humour to convince customers to identify with their products. In advertisements, exotic characters served as signifiers of the generally understood yet nevertheless fully imagined reality outlined in the world's fairs. These ads succeeded, Wolter suggests, only to the extent that consumers recognized themselves (or whom they wanted to be) in them.

*Völkerschauen*, the subject of chapters three and four, offered Germans a new and more complex exotic encounter. As a consequence of contemporary *bürgerlich* norms, impresarios at the turn of the century found that they could not make a profit if they relied entirely on appeals to entertainment value. They understood that they could not get rich unless their products were enriching, and so they tried to distinguish their *Völkerschauen* from less respectable forms of exotic display by appealing to their edifying potential. Performers were lauded as authentic; as proof they were supposed to act out their everyday lives as if they were back at home. The selection of zoos as the location for many *Völkerschauen* reinforced the effort to brand them as sites of "*Vergnügen und Belehrung zugleich*" (11). Of course, as Wolter outlines in chapter four, we cannot simply take impresarios at their word. In reality, their shows only partially convinced audiences and critics of their authenticity. The moment of contact between audience and performer, however restricted, always contained a degree of ambivalence, as Wolter illustrates through an extended discussion of contemporary criticism and public responses as well as the experiences and motivations of the performers themselves.

*Völkerschauen* remained the most popular source of authentic, exotic entertainment until surpassed by a new medium. In her final chapter, Wolter examines the role of exoticism and truth claims in early film, specifically through the example of Joe May's *Das Indische Grabmal* (1921). While early short actuality films were very similar to the *Völkerschau* or the midway of a world's fair, the shift to the longer, narrative, fictional film created new standards and techniques for achieving authentic, exotic entertainment. The assumed fictionality of the film freed producers from the restrictions associated with "real-life" performers, indeed allowed them to transcend the requirements for factual accuracy without undoing the film's authenticity. Thus, in May's work, the inaccuracies in architectural details were less important than the authentic "feeling" evoked by the film's portrayal of India. In fictional film the consumable exotic "experience" had found its most evocative and profitable form to date.

There is much to admire in Wolter's work. She provides close readings of evocative examples, and she frames them with a useful concept of "*Ideologie*" that emphasizes the appropriation and manipulation of existing preconceptions rather than the imposition of a monolithic set of well-articulated ideas. Her general argument is also one that fits in well with some of the most exciting research in the fields of German colonial and post-colonial studies, research that emphasizes the everyday-ness of Germans' encounters with the non-European world.

However, Wolter's study also leaves some important issues under-developed, three of which are worth mentioning here. Wolter rightly talks about Germans' participation in larger trends in European/western visual culture, but the specifics of this relationship are never explored. Just as Hagenbeck's shows evoked different reactions when he took them on tour across Europe, so did images created elsewhere get taken up and manipulated to suit German audiences. More attention to this process of transnational translation -- where the images came from, how they moved, how they were adapted -- could have yielded valuable insights into the peculiarly German aspects of this exotic commercialization. More attention could also have been paid to changes in the era's commercialized exoticism wrought by factors other than the forces of consumerism and the technologies of visual culture. With regard to the contemporary expansion of European influence around the globe there is specific mention of the Boxer War but not of other events that one might expect to have left their traces in German visual culture. Numerous scholars have seen the genocidal war in Southwest Africa, to cite the most obvious example, as a watershed in popular understandings of Africans as racialized others. Such shifts provide opportunities to track change over time not merely in the strategies of display but also in what was actually on display. Finally, the emphasis on appeals to *bürgerlich* respectability also raises the spectre of class. Too often, Wolter conflates the German public with a middle class audience, even though one driving force behind the "consumer revolution" was the mass production of goods for even the poorest customers. To what extent, then, was the respectability that advertisers and impresarios employed specifically *bürgerlich*, and does attention to potential working class or rural consumers suggest multiple or more ambiguous readings of these materials? These are not merely tangential questions but rather cut right to the heart of the broader significance of this commercialized *Weltsicht* for a diverse German public.

These criticisms aside, Wolter's book is worth the read for scholars interested in the mechanisms of western visual culture in the age of empire as well as for a wider public interested in the roots of the exoticism that still has such a hold on western popular culture today. Readers will find some points to quibble with -- that is the nature of close readings of evocative examples -- and may wish that others had been developed more fully, but they will also find many productive insights that will hopefully stimulate continued research into the connections between commercialism and exoticism. One need only think of the controversy over the "African Village" held in the Augsburg Zoo in June 2005 to be reminded that these issues remain current.

Jeff Bowersox, Toronto