

Review: Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo, Jeremy Silvester, (eds), *Posters in Action. Visuality in the Making of an African Nation*, Basel, Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009.

A richly illustrated, large-format (and unfortunately large-price) publication, *Posters in Action* can with some right be said to do three things at once, or is three books in one. First, it makes accessible to a broader public a selection of the rich stock of posters from and on Africa, and in particular Namibia, which are archived at the *Basler Afrika Bibliographien* (BAB) and the *National Archives of Namibia* (NAN). The numerous replicas of posters and especially the *Photographic Poster Archive* at the end of the book – “photographic” less because the visuals are reproduced in the book, but rather because it presents pictures taken of the posters (when) “in use” – provides a valuable resource for anyone interested in the poster-based visual communication modes from colonial times to the present. Second, *Posters in Action* contains a baker’s dozen of intelligently arranged, yet at closer inspection not equally persuasive articles about the production, distribution and reception of these “posters and related visuals such as placards, flyers and T-shirts” (p. 205), based as they are and actually mirroring a six-year research undertaken in the above-mentioned archives. Some of the articles actually go beyond the analysis of those visuals which are in one way or another politico-propagandistically infested: thus, the reader gets a fine and very insightful introduction to the art and technologies of

printing and production of posters by Marcel Göhring (p. 17-27), or learns about the more economic employment of posters known as advertising in Don Stevenson’s considerations about pre- and post-independence Namibian beer company advertisements or Luregn Lenggenhager’s discussion of Namibian tourism advertising. Third and presumably most important, the editors of *Poster in Action* strike a far-reaching and, given the so far existing conventions of interpreting visual material, unusual key note in their introductory words: “Posters act. More than simply being a thing, posters are designed to act and trigger off reactions.” The publication thus claims a methodological and theoretical stake when it “determinately moves beyond conventional poster analyses” (p. 7) undertaken in the more traditionally oriented art and visual history departments.

The theoretical preference articulated by the editors may thus appear risky, yet stands its ground in most of the article contributions. Indeed, whenever these listen to and obey the key note provided in the “Introduction”, they succeed in adding further valuable facets to the general topic, and thus help to substantiate the impression that *Posters in Action* figures as a role model for future in-depth analyses of the largely unobserved arena of visual (re)presentation in times of political struggle and warfare, for awareness creation or as a central effect of African medial modernity. The subdivisions of the collected essays into six categories are intelligently chosen – they further clarify the main foci of the papers – and are a constant reminder of the “doing”

and “acting” perspective highlighted by the editors: “Printing Posters”, “Creating Space”, “Mobilising People”, “Creating Citizens and Consumers”, “Memorialising History” and “Fighting a War”. Compared to this, the two-page “Insights” (p. 13) between each of these article sections are at best informative and should for clarity’s sake rather have been called what they are: not so much “insights”, but rather mere interview-based portraits of poster designers, printers or distributors.

In the “Creating Space” section, Dag Henrichsen’s historical sketch of those photographs which have most strongly shaped our conception of the poster landscape in Namibian towns stands out as the most remarkable contribution. “Lees! Historical Photography, Public Reading Sites and Visuals” (p. 45-57) first pivots on Ilse Steinhoff, a *Third Reich* photographer who “was influential in the construction of the myth of the ‘good German colonial master’” (p. 47), before it provides an intelligent survey of the “pronounced architectural and visual colonisation of space” (p. 52) from the early 20th century to its second half. By comparison, Luregn Lenggenhager’s very subjectively coloured overview of “Motifs in Namibian Tourism Advertising” (p. 31-44) pays practically no heed to the theoretical framework given in the “Introduction” in its attempt to “identify the most important images used in Namibia tourism advertising and describe shifts in the ways they have been used, both in colonial and post-colonial times” (p. 32).

The third section on “Mobilising People” includes two articles that are noteworthy for the controlled skepticism they dare

to express with regard to the effectiveness and reach of the finally victorious SWAPO independence movement. Reto Ulrich and Benedikt Wyss’ “Poster Inaction – The Swiss Solidarity Movement and its Use of Posters” (p. 61-74) critically inspects the links that existed between the Southwest African liberation movement and its supporters in Switzerland. Since “the relationship between the main Namibian liberation movement and the two Swiss groups [*Anti-Apartheid Bewegung* and *kämpfendes afrika*] eventually broke down” (p. 64), the article emphasizes the possibility of failure – or poster “inaction” – when it concludes that “one needs to also discuss the factors that restricted the use and circulation of posters” (p. 71). Equally remarkable in an upbeat atmosphere of mostly pro-SWAPO articles is Kletus Muhena Likuwa and Bertha Nyambe’s “Posters, T-Shirts and Placards: Images and Popular Mobilisation in Rundu during the Liberation Struggle” (p. 87-99). In their “comparative study of the mobilising activities of DTA and SWAPO in Rundu during the liberation struggle” (p. 90) the authors concede that “it was easier to display DTA posters in public, whilst SWAPO posters were often restricted to private spaces” (p. 95), which may in the minds of some raise the question of what posters (and propaganda posters at that) are good for (or why they supersede leaflets and other print material) if they are being disclosed rather than displayed in halfway public arenas: a query that Martha Akawa will later return to. Sophia Mösch’s “What NANSO Posters from Cape Town Reveal” (p. 75-86), finally, analyses posters,

strongly text-based as they turn out to be, which the *Namibia National Students' Organisation* (NANSO) used in the 1980s – hence in the midst of the independence struggle inside Namibia – in Cape Town. The contribution's impact appears a bit limited, compared to the other case studies compiled in the book, but marks the first venture into a new and in fact important methodology for the study of visuals within a given or past politico-societal arena: empiricism and reception research.

If Mösch thus substantiates her claims with “the valuable information provided by Jon Berndt and Richard Pakleppa” (p. 77), Naitsi lizyenda and Sonia Ndimbira focus their empirical research on a less politically (and instead literally) virulent issue. Following Stevenson's instructive, if methodologically somewhat superficial, contribution on “The Mysterious Demographics of Beer Drinking” (p. 102-109) in the fourth section entitled “Creating Citizens and Consumers”, lizyenda and Ndimbira's “A Picture of Health: Posters and HIV/Aids Campaigns in Namibia” (p. 113-124) inspect the “reception of posters that were developed in Namibia as part of various HIV/Aids campaigns” by basing their analysis “on interviews done in Windhoek in December 2007” (p. 114). The survey is all-inclusive indeed with its crossover from traditional poster studies (how does one illustrate and finally get across the “message” in a sensitive field as HIV/AIDS?) to the probing analysis of the visuals' actual impact. One particular poster in fact got rather poor grades from the interviewees: that showing ex-President Sam Nujoma with his pointed

index finger stretched out in a pose of warning below a slogan saying that “Every Namibian has to contribute to the fight against HIV/AIDS” (see 126). Giorgio Mielscher and Dag Henrichsen elegantly pick up this thread in their ensuing “Fathers and Sons of the Namibian Nation – Posters, Visuality and African Leaders” (p. 125-137). Certainly the contribution which probes most deeply into the issue of cult figures, its authors convincingly demonstrate that “Sam Nujoma [...] is the central male figure in the visual construction of the new Namibian nation” and a “Pop-Art Icon” (p. 126).

“Memorialising History”, the fifth section, begins with Nadja Borer's “Images of the Cassinga Massacre – Contested Visualities” (p. 141-152) who “identif[ies] the subjects and graphic compositions chosen to represent Cassinga” (p. 141), i.e., the disastrous air attack against a SWAPO camp in Angola conducted by South African military in 1978. Borer employs a more traditional analytic approach, leaving as it does the concrete effects of the six poster examples on its viewers unmentioned. While refraining thus from the theory framework proposed by the editors, her research displays a thoroughness on the part of its author and, presumably more important, perfectly harmonizes with and actually complements the ensuing essay by Anna Vögeli. “‘They Gently Bring Back Memories of Those Events...’ – A Case Study on the Reception of Namibia Day and Cassinga Day Posters” (p. 153-167) somewhat all too bluntly and unjustly bemoans the “marginal treatment of the issue of poster

reception" (p. 153), downplaying thus the efforts by her co-contributors lizyenda and Ndimbira or Mösch. The result of her "series of nine qualitative interviews on political posters referring to '26 August' [Namibia Day] and '4 May' [Cassinga Day]" (p. 154) conducted in the fall of 2006 are then (re)formulated in a strictly "image-as-agent" perspective" (p. 155), and as such come close(st) to the approach propagated by the editors. Visibly another highlight of the article collection as far as its rigor in terms of theory-orientation is concerned, Vögeli's contribution is, however, like the other empirically designed and oral history-based studies, less persuasive when it comes to the representativeness of the conclusions. The testifying persons and eye witnesses she interviews do not always appear to recollect reliably the bygone use and impression of the posters, or tend to drift off into moments of nostalgia. A more 'source critical' attitude would at this point certainly have been beneficial.

Martha Akawa's "'Strictly Members Only' – The Circulation of SWAPO Posters in Northern Namibia during the Liberation Struggle" (p. 171-183), the first of two essays in the final "Fighting a War" section, likewise takes its departure from interviews with actors and activists of the independence struggle. Focussing like Likuwa and Nyambe on the Northern regions of Namibia, Akawa's case study turns out to be a truly effective piece of research in two respects. First, it succeeds in complementing the empirically largely unchecked mobilisation-with-posters thesis of Likuwa and Nyambe's with solid

interview data, describing all the while the classical iconographic setup and the key message of some the liberation movement posters ("recurrent images showed a pair of wrists tied together by a chain," p. 178). Second, Akawa acknowledges (involuntarily?) the limits and limitations of poster use among those who were supposed to be(come) agitated by them. If "possessing and circulating SWAPO posters in the northern part of Namibia during the liberation struggle operated on the basis of 'strictly for members only'" (p. 173), how could these visuals possibly reach the mobilising public effect attributed to them in many of the other essays? Akawa's silence at this point should not all too much be held against her, and may instead rather be kept in mind as a mild corrective element when reading some of the other essays. Jeremy Silvester seems to pick up a thread from Likuwa and Nyambe's article, too, when he in "'The Struggle is Futile' – A Short Overview of Anti-SWAPO Visual Propaganda" (p. 187-201) pivots on the antagonistic setup of Namibia's political and societal landscape before independence. More determinately than his precursors, Silvester inspects the South African visual propaganda which sought to stigmatise and actually defame the SWAPO opponent. Moreover, and somewhat like Akawa or Ulrich and Wyss in their contributions, Silvester has the courage to name certain shortcomings. In his case, these are directly research-related as they have to do with the presently unsatisfying availability of the Apartheid regime's propaganda posters in (their) action, compared to those

brought into use by the SWAPO (see 188). The author rounds off his article in a doubly convincing manner when he claims, firstly, “that the Namibian Liberation War was primarily an ‘information war’ with the marketing of the conflict to internal and international audiences being the central contest which determined the final outcome of the war” (p. 199). With an adequate dose of modesty, he secondly reclaims for the South African poster material what some of his fellow contributors have in their articles undertaken with the liberation activists’ visuals: “further research is required, through oral history interviews, to establish the extent to which the images discussed in this paper penetrated and persuaded their target audiences” (p. 200).

Conceptually, *Poster in Action. Visuality in the Making of an African Nation* is characterized by a great, yet happily reconciled divide. Theoretically according to its editors, this follow-up of the 2004 *African Posters* publication champions the concrete impact that posters and placards have on people and, more generally, their context over their materiality and content, or their generic adherence to the domains of advertising or propaganda. In practice, however, i.e. when reading the thirteen articles that are flanked and enriched with these illustrations, the book achieves in most cases the exact opposite: by reproducing posters from Namibia’s recent and more remote past, it necessarily decontextualizes the images again – removes them from their actual, yet now oftentimes past use – and instead presents them as material tokens in their own right that

invite the usual picture analyses. Some of the contributions – the less inspired ones and, at the same time, those that do not well enough stick to the key note provided in the editors’ “Introduction” – ekphrastically (and superfluously) describe their content or too strongly pivot on the specific genre of those posters that are anyway all too clearly designed for attracting tourists and beer consumers. If this seems contradictory and thus appears as if there was a divide between the publication’s theoretical claim and the unavoidable decontextualization of its key examples between the covers of a book, the problem is transcended and actually resolved in (and with) the impressive *Photographic Poster Archive* at the end. These reproductions at once display the documentary materials to the reader’s eye as what they consist of in terms of content, materiality or genre, *and* they present the posters as items that (have an imp)act in public arenas or private places in Southern Africa. Going well beyond the mere publishing of the large stock of posters and poster replicas at the BAB and the NAN, and presumably also reaching beyond the editors’ command of how their intelligent theorization of *Posters* (not per se but) *in Action* comes across to the reader, this book comes out to be a well-achieved and successful launch that smartly fuses a theoretical claim with the practice of reprinting posters.

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