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The First German Genocide Enters the Popular Stage: Colonial Theatricality in Berlin, 1904-1908

This article discusses the representation of the first German genocide on the popular stages in turn-of-the-century Berlin. In the colonial war 1904-1908, the German military exterminated eighty percent of the Herero and Nama people in the former colony Southwest Africa, which is today Namibia. While this genocide has only recently gained larger attention in the German public sphere through an official apology from the German government, the colonial war and its genocide had been highly popular topics of representation at the time itself. Through the analysis of two case studies this article argues that the theatrical strategies through which the colonial war was represented on stage had profound epistemological consequences for how the colonial war and the lives of the Herero were perceived in the German public sphere at the beginning of the twentieth century. Lisa Skwirblies is a Ph.D. candidate in her final year at the School for Theatre, Performance and Cultural Policy Studies at the University of Warwick.

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Introduction

In July 2016, the German government officially recognised that the extermination of thousands of Herero and Nama people in Namibia by German troops between 1904 and 1908 was a war crime and a genocide. For some, this admission of genocide constitutes a landmark in the multiple and tireless campaigns for recognition by Herero and Nama activists in Namibia and across the diaspora. For others, it constitutes a well-calculated political gesture without any real impact on either restorative justice or sincere admission of guilt. Despite its mixed reception, the apology fostered renewed attention worldwide to a chapter of German history neglected and dismissed for all too long. At the time itself, however, the war against the Herero and Nama was a

well-represented and highly popular topic. As such, the extermination of the Herero and Nama people constituted a 'sales hit' for the growing industry of popular entertainment in the metropole. Popular entertainment capitalised on the events in the colony and thus played an important role in mediating, codifying and popularising the war and its exterminatory character to a domestic audience. This article explores the particular theatrical strategies with which the 'first German genocide' was represented on popular stages in Berlin between 1904 and 1908. It argues that the strategies of 'colonial theatricality' employed by the popular theatres need to be understood as framing strategies, which had epistemological consequences for the perception of the war and the misapprehension of the lives of the Herero as worthy of protection. How these framing strategies functioned will be discussed through two case-studies: the colonial pantomime *German Southwest Africa* (1904), which took place in Berlin's famous Circus Busch right at the beginning of the war, and the annual revue of the similarly popular Metropol Theater, which was staged at the end of the war under the title *You Gotta See That!* (1907). While historiographical scholarship on German colonialism has experienced a 'cultural turn' since the 1990s, theatre, as an institution, genre or medium, is still rarely part of these analyses.¹ This is an unfortunate oversight, as colonial knowledge manifested itself not only in enduring works such as statues, monuments, or books, but was most often staged and embodied. As part of the expanding mass entertainment at the end of the nineteenth century, popular theatre and its framing strategies were thus much more crucial for the production and transmission of colonial knowledge in Germany than is so far acknowledged in the scholarship on German colonial history.

The war in the colony lasted from 1904-1907 and led to the extermination of about eighty percent of the Herero population. It is today referred to in scholarly discourse as 'the first German genocide.' The Nama entered later into the war against the Germans and were less visible in the discourses and representation of the war on the stage at the time. In August 1904, on the remote Waterberg plateau, the main body of the Herero population found themselves surrounded by German military under the command of General Lothar von Trotha. The Germans bombarded Waterberg for three days and when they had finished a general massacre of those they found alive ensued. Eyewitness accounts recorded in soldiers' letters or provided by terrified members of the tribe of the Berg Darama "offer a glimpse into this mass orgy killing."² Those Herero that could escape fled into the waterless Omahake desert, where von Trotha's troops had sealed or poisoned many of the scarce water holes. Most of the Herero thus died either of thirst and exhaustion, or through execution by the German military. Those who survived were interned in concentration camps where they were treated as slave labourers.³ Nearly 15,000 Herero were incarcerated in these camps in 1906, which meant "the tribe had collapsed to considerably less than one-quarter of its pre-revolt numbers."⁴ Historians have noted a great number of military interventions in the colonies between 1889 and 1909 alone: seven in the colony of German Southwest Africa, seventy seven in the colony of German East Africa, and one hundred and one in the colony of Cameroon.⁵ As historian Jürgen Zimmerer argues, these high numbers of military conflicts, which occurred within only two decades of colonial occupation, indicate "the hubris and the utter failure of the German

colonial project. [...] What was supposed to prove to the world the superior colonising skills of Germans fell to pieces within the first 20 years of Germany's colonial adventure."⁶

While the term genocide and its legal implications did not exist at the time of the war against the Herero and Nama, rules for "civilised warfare" nevertheless did.⁷ The Hague Conventions, setting the framework for a European standard of civilised warfare at the end of the nineteenth century, took place in 1899 and 1907. Those standards, however, would not apply to situations where "the adversary turned out to be non-uniformed and, thereby, 'illegitimate'." Thus these conventions did not apply to the colonial context.⁸ According to this logic it was possible for General Lothar von Trotha to retrospectively state that "in his opinion war in Africa couldn't be fought 'according to the laws of the Geneva Convention'."⁹

The colonial project often appears in scholarly discourse as being embedded in a very particular discourse, which is commonly that of colonial bourgeois enthusiasts who insist on a "univocal, controlled, expert discourse."¹⁰ While the colonial discourse of the nineteenth-century originated "in the public sphere of bourgeois associational and institutional life," it was, from the 1890s on, increasingly refracted by the burgeoning popular entertainments.¹¹ Where colonial propaganda was explicitly political and calculated by institutions such as the German Colonial Society, commercial entertainment processed the colonial topic without a unified agenda or clear political intention. An important factor that both realms, the popular as well as the colonial discourse of the bourgeois associational life, shared was the 'masses.' As historian John P. Short has pointed out, the desire of the bourgeois colonial discourse was to educate ordinary Germans in the role that the German empire played on a global scale. He described this desire as 'colonial enlightenment.' Popular entertainment, similarly interested in reaching a mass audience, was both a vehicle for this colonial enlightenment as well as a threat to it, as I will show in the course of this article.

It is thus with little surprise that the first German genocide also found its immediate representation on the popular stages. In the capital Berlin, the metropole's new mass media had turned the war between the Herero and the German colonial military into what we would today call a 'multi-media-event.'¹² The press vividly reported on the brutal events overseas. Memoires and diaries of settlers and soldiers offered first-person-accounts of the war. Trade cards and postcards depicting the battle and burning farmhouses circulated in the public sphere of the *Kaiserreich*. Entertainment personality and entrepreneur Carl Hagenbeck showed his support for the war by sending 2,000 camels to Southwest Africa.¹³ And images of battle scenes, of dying Herero, and of the German colonial soldier "with the iconic Southwestern hat and rifle," appeared across a range of products in the years leading up to the First World War.¹⁴ Many of the popular theatre repertoires included those stories, anecdotes and witness-accounts from the Southwest Africa colony and battlefield.

Newspaper announcements and posters, for instance, reveal titles of performances such as *From Berlin O. to the Herero* (1904, Winter Theatre), *Black Hell* (1904, Belle-Alliance Theatre) or *Kasperl as Herero* (1909) referring to the war in the colony.

Colonial Theatricality

On 15th November 1905 the German newspaper *Der Tag* reported the following about the war in German Southwest Africa:

The drama took place on the dark stage of the *Sandfeld* desert. But when the rains came, when the stage lit up and our troops arrived at the borders of *Betschuanaland*, the gruesome image of a large army that had died of thirst unfolded before their eyes. [...] The tribunal had found its end. The Herero had ceased to exist as a sovereign tribe.¹⁵

What is striking is the many rich theatrical metaphors employed in the description of the war-scene. According to theatre historian Christopher Balme, theatrical metaphors that appear in written accounts of cross-cultural encounters “are more than rhetorical tropes.”¹⁶ They are “symptoms of deeper-seated, fundamental categories of perception that can be best embraced by the term ‘theatricality’.”¹⁷ Understood as a category of perception, theatricality *renders* people, actions, and things theatrical “by a combination of aesthetic conventions and discursive practices.”¹⁸ It is thus both a category of perception and of representation, and bridges verbal, visual, and corporeal dimensions. In other words, the theatrical metaphors employed by the newspaper article to describe the genocide of the Herero, do not indicate that the war and the genocide were particularly and inherently theatrical, but that they were perceived as such by a domestic public. I argue that the particular ‘colonial theatricality’ in the representation of the colonial war needs to be understood as framing strategies, in the way that Judith Butler has conceptualised it. In her book *Frames of War* (2009), Butler argues that frames (in the form of discursive as well as visual phenomena) work to differentiate the lives we can apprehend from those we cannot. Certain kinds of lives will appear in the field of perceptual representation as more precarious and more ‘grievable’ when lost than others. This “differential of power at work” distinguishes “between those subjects who will be eligible for recognition and those who will not.”¹⁹ We can thus, according to Butler, not refer to life outside of the frame. Rather, life is produced through and by these epistemological frames. Understanding the ways in which popular theatre staged the colonial war—its colonial theatricality—as a framing strategy in the Butlerian sense, allows us to look at these representational strategies as social practices that produced and perpetuated the image of the Herero as lives that were not ‘grievable’ and thus not worthy of protection. It allows me to argue that the ways in which the war was represented on stage were neither arbitrary nor merely motivic, but most often compatible with a colonial ideology that deemed the lives of colonial subjects as ‘lose-able’ and ‘destructible.’ The framing strategies of the first case study, the circus pantomime, indicate its compatibility with a bourgeois and institutionalised colonial discourse.

In September 1904, the famous Circus Busch opened its new season in Berlin with the colonial pantomime *German Southwest Africa – War-Images from the German Colonies* [‘Deutsch-Südwest Afrika – Kriegsbilder aus den deutschen Kolonien’]. The circus pantomime depicted the crucial battle in the war between the German colonial military and the Herero, and is noteworthy because it did so only four weeks after the actual battle had taken place in the colony.

The circus pantomime was a specific genre in Germany that needs some introduction as it differs from the British understanding of pantomime. Historian Gerhard Eberstaller describes the circus pantomime as an adaptation of a historical, political or literary topic embedded in a “fantastical-bombastic” staging.²⁰ The circus pantomime combined elements of German operetta with those of the music hall revue, and was especially inspired by the dramaturgy of these two forms. Circus pantomimes often included up to 600 artists, spectacular stage techniques and extravagant scenery, such as waterfalls, fountains or crowd-scenes. An important element of the circus pantomime was thus the emphasis on visual elements, the body, and the immediacy of a physical language, which differentiated the repertoire of the circus from that of the text-theatre. The additional genrefication of the circus pantomime as ‘colonial’ is an invention of Circus Busch and can be read as a PR strategy. The fact, however, that other genres of popular entertainment also added the adjective ‘colonial’ to their programmes (colonial burlesques, colonial variety show, etc.) allows for the assumption that this addition was commercially rewarding.

A programme booklet of the pantomime with a full description of the plot has survived thanks to private collectors.²¹ It allows for some careful assumptions about the action ‘on stage’ and the social experience of attending this pantomime. The programme mentions that the first scene is set in an area of the Waterberg plateau. Centre stage and on top of a hill stands a farmhouse owned by the Bavarian farmer Erdman and his wife Luise. An old Herero woman arrives at the scene accompanied by a young Bavarian boy called Michael. He turns out to be Luise’s brother who has just arrived “to Africa.” Both the Herero woman and Michael work for the German colonial military. The happy reunion of the siblings does not last long as the soldiers are called into battle with the Herero. Here the programme booklet mentions the arrival of a troop from the German navy, which (seemingly unmotivated) performs a navy ballet. The circus ring is now filled with drum roll and the blaring of trumpets. The navy ballet is followed by a military equestrian parade. While waiting for the Herero to attack, the German soldiers sing a “German song” in a “German manner” and evoke “feelings of *Heimat*.” The Herero enter the farmhouse, Michael and Erdman are quickly wounded, and it is Luise who continues fighting alone on the battlefield. In the end, German colonial soldiers come to her rescue and the ‘machine-gun-division’ opens fire against the Herero. In the light of the burning farmhouse the German flag is hoisted, a patriotic marching song is sung, and, while still singing, the soldiers, Luise, Erdman and Michael leave the circus arena. On their way out they encounter a German scientific expedition who have explored new land in the North-East of the country and are accompanied by an “Ovambo Negro” with a herd of elephants. This encounter stirs great ‘entertainment’ and ‘laughter’ in the group and the programme booklet ends by pointing out the ‘general happiness’ of the three German settlers and the soldiers. The fact that a scientific expedition

is mentioned points to a common strategy in colonial narratives to legitimise conquest by giving it “a scientific aura.”²² The *Ovambo* people were demographically and politically a dominant group in former German Southwest Africa and did not participate in the colonial war. They remained ‘loyal’ to the German colonisers.²³ The pantomime thus left its audience with an image of the future, in which the Herero are defeated and the rest of the people of Southwest Africa, embodied in the Ovambo shepherd, have submitted to German rule.

Whereas the pantomime does not mention the extermination of the Herero as such, it does mention the idea of extermination in relation to the farmhouse. It says in the programme booklet that if the military does not succeed to drive the Herero out of the farmhouse, the “extermination of the farmhouse will become an unconditional necessity.” It is striking that the idea of extermination is presented as being “an unconditional necessity.” Seen in the larger context of the colonial war, this phrase from the programme booklet uncannily resembles the military strategy of General von Trotha, whose infamous firing-order²⁴ (*Schießbefehl*) did not allow for prisoners to be taken. The Herero, occupying the farmhouse, need to be either driven out or exterminated with the farmhouse. That the Herero were indeed killed by the German military in the pantomime is further insinuated by the description of the machine-guns as “murderous” and by the fact that the farmhouse is razed in the end. The reason why the Herero were fighting the Germans in the first place is, however, not once mentioned in the performance text.

The circus was without a doubt one of the important forms of mass media that had the power to visualise the German empire by 1900. It was especially the genre of the circus pantomime that turned the circus into “one of the most colourful signs that Germany had entered the modern age, in which technology, the rationalization of minds and bodies, and speed and precision were all held in high esteem.”²⁵ The close proximity of the pantomime’s premiere to the events in the colony raises the question of how much the war was already ‘coded’ in the German public at the time and how much the pantomime helped to codify it.²⁶ What kind of knowledge was produced by the pantomime about the war that allowed its imperial audience to ‘make sense’ of the belligerent events overseas? How far did the pantomime draw upon and extend the scientific and popular renderings of the colonial project that were already circulating in Germany at the time? Although it is impossible to fully reconstruct the staging or reception, one can assume that the circus pantomime reached deep into the metropolitan public sphere. The circus could encompass up to 4,000 spectators and played its pantomimes often twice a day. Unlike colonial literature, which attracted a small readership, the circus pantomime reached a much larger and much more diverse audience, especially in terms of class. From Paula Busch’s memoirs it can be deduced that the pantomime played long into the next season and was even shown in the children’s programme in 1905. It was such a great commercial success that she posited “the Herero from the *Waterberg* were indispensable in Berlin.”²⁷ In the light of the genocide, this is obviously a rather ironic comment. However, from a commercial standpoint the Herero and the war were indeed hard to miss in the cultural industry at the time and Busch’s seemingly naïve comment points to a possibly more intimate relation between (theatrical) modernity and genocide.

In representing a battle in the colonies that had received considerable attention in the press, the pantomime needed to employ new aesthetic and artistic forms. It could not apply the usual amount of fantastic and romantic elements that characterised other pantomimes, and even other theatricalised battle scenes, as the war had been a turning point in the representation of the colonial project at large. Idyllic representations of the colonies as a “re-found paradise”²⁸ or “a *locus amoenus* with heightened appeal to the senses,”²⁹ prevalent in the press in the years before, were made redundant by the outbreak of the war. The circus was faced with the dilemma that the representation of the war needed to be “sensational enough to attract but not so horrific as to repel.”³⁰ It is thus little wonder that Constanze Busch, Paula’s mother, stressed that the scenery and costumes, the depiction and representation of “the foreign people” and landscapes needed to be as “real” as possible in her pantomimes.³¹

In its quest for authenticity the colonial pantomime had to adopt a pseudo-documentary element without losing its spectacular character. Here, the circus helped itself with a strategy that could circumvent this dilemma. The programme booklet featured a short but meticulous introduction. It offered a very factual description of the history of the Herero tribe, whose main income was based on cattle holding. The introduction also mentioned firearms and the “fact” that these had been given to the Herero by the Germans long before the war. The booklet emphasised the fact that it was the Germans who had “light-mindedly” educated the Herero in how to use the firearms properly. This paints a picture of the Herero as ‘betrayers’ who had exploited the ‘good-hearted’ nature of the German colonisers and had now turned their own weapons against them. It also solves the theatrical dilemma of staging the enemy as a strong enemy in the circus ring, by emphasising that the strength of the enemy relies on the strength of the German firearms they are using. Moreover, it offers a representation of the war in which the Germans have been given no choice but to defend themselves against the “rebellious” Herero. Historian Mark Levene posits that when faced with an insurrection in the colonies “the racist prop underpinning it was as good as useless.”³² When faced with the resilient resistance of the Herero, “racial characterisation of the Herero as people without the martial spirit with which to mount an effective rebellion” did no longer hold.³³ The military strength and resilience of the Herero refuted the reasoning of a ‘black race’ weaker and inferior to a ‘white race,’ upon which the German empire had been justifying its presence in Southwest Africa in the first place. The outbreak of the war in the colony not only “awakened the German officials and military from their dreams that the Africans would submit to their fate,”³⁴ but also fostered an anxiety amongst the colonisers that they would lose their face as colonial masters. The framing strategy of the introduction in the programme booklet, posing as ‘scientific’ information, resembled what Achille Mbembe has called *Fabulieren* (‘to fabulate’), a strategy that was typical for scientific as well as popular European discourse that used the representation of invented facts to think, classify and imagine those worlds overseas.³⁵

While there is no evidence of who played the role of the Herero, whether or not black actors were involved at all, or whether this scene was staged in blackface, the artistic choice of representing the Herero as fighting with guns is

noteworthy. The depiction of African people fighting with firearms was new at the time, at least in the theatrical sphere, as was the depiction of them as aggressors. As historian David Ciarlo argues, the war informed new representation of Africans, who were now either depicted “as rebellious savages, drawn to look as murderous as possible, or as vanquished foes in ethnographic-style photographs of the enchained.”³⁶

Colonial Enlightenment

This framing strategy and its quest for authenticity performed yet another role, beyond merely transmitting knowledge and imagery from the war overseas to a domestic audience: it catered to the desire of a bourgeois audience to educate the masses, which John P. Short (2012) coined as “colonial enlightenment.” According to Short the rhetoric of colonial enlightenment developed from “countervailing discourses of socialist critique and bourgeois colonialism.”³⁷ It assumed that “[t]he working classes, and the broader masses of ordinary Germans in general, ostensibly required proper instruction to understand the German role in a world defined by resource extraction, commodity and labour flows, exchange and competition on a new, global scale.”³⁸ The idea of colonial enlightenment was especially popular in the years of the colonial war. The fierce battles in the colonies and the political struggle ‘at home’ renewed “the emphasis on colonial science, expertise, and education.” And the stronger the critique on the warfare in the colonies and its financial consequences became, “the more knowledge was rushed into the breach.”³⁹

In its close proximity to the (actual) battle in Southwest Africa and its authenticating elements, the staging of *German Southwest Africa* can be read as part of this revitalisation of colonial enlightenment. Constanze Busch, who was the author of many of the Busch’s pantomimes, described the role of the circus pantomime as follows: “Next to entertainment and sensationalism people want to satisfy their thirst for knowledge. The more stultifying work they have to perform during the day, the more they want to nurture their souls with new impressions and knowledge.”⁴⁰ She aligned the role of the circus pantomime with the popular libraries, workers’ education societies, and debating clubs that were emerging around 1900.

In its attempt to fuse entertainment and education, Circus Busch’s colonial pantomime can thus be read as bridging the bourgeois colonial discourse with that of the popular. This claim for holding an educative function next to its entertaining one was not unusual at the time. Next to the circus, many of the new visual media such as ethnographic exhibitions and panoramas claimed the role of transmitting and mediating knowledge alongside their amusement value. As Short argues, “[t]he links between class position and knowledge constantly surface in colonial discourse – requiring a history of German colonialism that is at once social and cultural, material and discursive.”⁴¹ He shows the bourgeoisie’s anxiety toward the lower classes’ sensationalism and their supposed fascination with cannibalism and fetish priests – “the stuff of dime novels and magic lanterns.”⁴² On the other hand, the great success of the colonial pantomime shows that different modes of colonial knowledge existed next to each other and even in dialogue with each other, despite the

bourgeoisie's attempts to tame mass colonial entertainment through their powerful weapon of colonial enlightenment. The pantomime indicates that much of the colonial discourse depended on the fusion of knowledge and fantasy, of authenticity and fiction, rather than their separation.

Colonial Propaganda: the limits of popular entertainment

While the circus pantomime at the beginning of the war was celebrated for its colonial theatricality, another 'colonial circus' was under public attack for the same reason at the end of the war. On December 13, 1906, Chancellor von Bülow had dissolved the German parliament due to the refusal of the Centre Party to sign off on 29 million marks for further financing of the war in Southwest Africa. The war had by then already cost up to 600 million marks. The political struggle around the financing of the war allowed the nationalist Right to recast the colonial discourse as one of patriotism and loyalty and to make the elections not about "suffrage, tariff, or tax reform [... but] about national honour and loyalty to the nation on the field of empire."⁴³ The result of the new elections was a landslide for the conservative, pro-colonial powers and a major loss for the anti-colonial opponents, which diminished the presence of the Social Democratic Party in the parliament by half. The struggle over colonial policy was a 'hot topic' in the contemporary mass media and offers another telling example of the burgeoning interweaving of mass culture and politics. The new elections were accompanied by a huge amount of colonial propaganda. The war, and especially the new elections as a direct consequence of it, gave colonial propaganda a new fillip and much of it appealed to "patriotic sentiment, colonial race hatred, and fear of socialism."⁴⁴ It is in this light that the following case study, the annual revue *You Gotta See This!* at the Metropol Theater needs to be read.⁴⁵ As I will show, instead of being applauded for enhancing the proximity of colonial propaganda and popular entertainment, this example rather shows a reception that dismissed the intermingling of these two spheres.

The Metropol Theater was one of the most popular and most successful theatres in Berlin at the time and its annual revues, famous beyond the city's borders, came to be considered "the ideal expression of Berlin's modernity."⁴⁶ They parodied current fashions and scandals, reflected on the multifaceted life of Berlin and its modernity, and employed both stage-effects and political satire. Formally they "replicated the fragmented diversity of urban experience" and thematically "they executed the self-confidence of the Imperial capital," as historian Peter Jelavich posits.⁴⁷ The revues usually consisted of a chain of different scenes referred to as 'images.' Embedded in a dramaturgy based on loose numbers, those images would depict scenes from the past year. For some critics the revues of the Metropol Theater could not be political enough, for others politics did not belong on the Metropol's stage at all. Most often the revues avoided outspoken political statements and rather made fun of every political party. All of them, however, showed a particular affinity for colonialism.

While the colonial pantomime of Circus Busch ended in a unifying laughter of the white settlers and soldiers and thus with a 'happy end' for the colonisers, the opposite was the case in the revue *You Gotta See This!* in 1907. Its second image was called *In Southwest Africa* and showed a troop of soldiers close to dying in

the desert of the colony. The soldiers and their lieutenant, resting at a dried out well in the desert, suffer from intense thirst and fever and are awaiting their death. They are surrounded by the enemy, the Herero, and their last hope is the arrival of a second colonial troop that is supposedly on its way. But the other troop arrives too late. The lieutenant is shot and dies in the arms of the arriving officers. The last words of the scene are "Too late! Too late!"

As historian Tobias Becker has poignantly argued, the image of the dying soldiers in the Metropol revue inverted the situation of the genocide by depicting the German colonial soldiers as thirsty and close to dying from dehydration in the desert, while it was in fact the Herero who were deliberately trapped in the desert by Germany colonial troops.⁴⁸ Representing, or rather framing, the war and the alleged necessity of the genocide as a matter of self-defence (of the 'white race'), places the cause for the war with its victims, the colonised. This dramaturgical strategy echoes what Mary Louise Pratt has coined the strategy of "anti-conquest," which connotes "strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony."⁴⁹ Here the frame, set around the German soldiers, regulates the affects and ethical responsiveness of the audience to feel with the dying soldiers, to apprehend their lives as 'grievable' and thus worthy of protection. Protecting the lives of the soldiers by allocating more money towards the warfare in the colony was the underlying point of the revue and thus rather a critique of the alleged stinginess of the German parliament than of the violence of the colonial project. The fact that the Herero did not even have to appear as characters on stage in order for the revue to frame the lives of the German soldiers as worthy of protection, only contributes to the representation of the lives of the Herero as disposable. By not being part of the frame, they are also excluded from the ethical responsiveness of the theatre audience and from the potential that their lives might be recognised by the audience as lives in the first place.

While the evidence of the commercial success of the colonial pantomime suggests that the performance hit the taste of its audience, there is no evidence as to whether or not the main part of the audience appreciated the Metropol's interpretation of the colonial war. The lack of evidence does not allow me to draw any larger conclusions about how the audience might have been affected by the performance, what kind of sentiments it stirred, and whether or not the framing strategies had immediate consequences for the audience's conception of the colonial war. This is not an uncommon problem for theatre historians and scholars of popular entertainment alike. As theatre historian Jacky Bratton has argued, we "can point to the ideological dimensions of each theatrical event which we can scrutinise closely enough; but beyond a certain point we cannot be sure of our interpretations of them."⁵⁰ And Jim Davis has suggested to look at 'performances of spectating' instead, which could indicate what was expected from a particular repertoire and what was not.⁵¹ This strategy could give us an idea of how the audience was supposed to make sense of what they saw on stage. In the case of the revue, newspaper articles and reviews are the only pertinent source and can at least give an idea how the critics perceived the representation of the exterminatory war in Southwest Africa.

What is clear is that the press was appalled by the revue's representation of the colonial war. A critic from the conservative-liberal newspaper *Vossische Zeitung* objected that "this is not the task of the Metropol Theater to depict such events."⁵² Similarly, the *Berliner Lokalanzeiger* testified that the scene "caused disconcertment" in relation to rest of the revue.⁵³ And the *Welt am Montag* simply assessed with regard to the scene that "entertainment can be many things."⁵⁴ The critique of the socialist newspaper *Vorwärts* is a bit more telling: "What almost never happened in earlier revues was this time performed extensively: a kind of War-Society-Patriotism, inside hollow, but greatly tarted up, replaced the Metropol's satirical audacity."⁵⁵

One could assume that the disconcertment of the press with the particular depiction of the colonial war had to do with the unusual staging of a "Teutonic masculinity."⁵⁶ The soldiers in the revue were staged as particularly weak and exhausted. This was clearly an aberration of the stock-character of the iconic German colonial soldier, who was usually depicted on the back of a camel, posing with canons or at gunpoint, but never as wounded or dying on the battlefield. I argue instead that the critique of the press points to something else: the anxieties of the bourgeois colonial discourse about popular entertainment's involvement in the production and transmission of colonial knowledge. While the circus pantomime was rewarded for its permeation of popular entertainment with the bourgeois colonial discourse, the press expressed their disapproval of exactly this overlapping in the case of the revue. Despite their political ideologies, all critics agreed that it was not the role of the revue to comment on colonial politics, or at least not in such a way. Whereas the conservative papers referred to a nebulous 'role' of the revue that did not include colonial propaganda, the socialist paper showed its disappointment with the scene because it overrode the usual satirical agency of the revue. All of them indicated that this particular scene performed an aberration of what was usually shown in the Metropol Theater, despite the fact that they did not agree about what *should* be shown in the Metropol in the first place.

The scene thus stands out from the Metropol's repertoire in general. In no other revue was an event depicted with such unbroken seriousness. While colonialism as a topic did return in the following years in small skits or songs in the revues, it did so embedded in satire or sexualised narratives. The harsh critique against those particular framing strategies might indicate that this kind of colonial propaganda, that would have probably gone unnoticed on a leaflet or in an event of the official Colonial Society, was not 'readable' in the frame of the Metropol's annual revues. It shows that the audience could not 'make sense' of it, not because the content was not 'legible,' but because the form (colonial propaganda) was not yet codified in the frame of the Metropol revue (and would not be codified later on).

Conclusion

Deeply seated in contemporary discourses of progress, modernisation, and the vanishing of whole peoples, popular theatre thus did not have to shy away from depicting the exterminatory character of the colonial war. On the contrary, as I have shown, the genocide was a selling factor in Berlin at the time.

Moreover, what both examples have shown is that colonial knowledge and colonial discourse were marked by diffusion rather than concentration at the time. The colonial performances show how the field of popular mass entertainment produced and transmitted knowledge about the war that was not contained in the institutionalised forms of bourgeois colonial enlightenment or the state-sanctioned colonial propaganda machinery alone. They indicate that we have to consider a multiplicity of colonial discourses, informing and policing each other. And even within the realm of popular theatre, the mediation of the colonial project and its violence was by no means homogeneous and did not comply with a single line of propaganda, nor did it target a single audience. The example of Circus Busch has shown that popular entertainment sometimes mirrored the univocal, expert discourse of the colonialist bourgeoisie and intersected it with spectacular, mass culture-appropriate stage effects. And in other times, as the example of the Metropol Theater has shown, popular theatre could betray its usual repertoire of politically ambiguous satire by staging clear-cut colonial propaganda. Here, an anxiety about the blurry boundaries of the different colonial epistemes, popular and bourgeois, surfaced in the voices of the critics. What both cases indicate is that the war itself and its genocidal character were not only very present in the German public sphere at the time but in their representation, assuring commercial success for the cultural industry in perpetuating the image of the lives of the Herero as 'destructible.'

¹ Exceptions are: Christopher Balme, *Pacific Performances* (New York/London: Palgrave 2007); subchapter in Tobias Becker, *Inszenierte Moderne* [Staged Modernity] (Oldenburg: Oldenburg Verlag 2014); Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1993); Sylke Kirschnick, "'Hereinspaziert!' Kolonialpolitik und Vergnügungskultur," in *Kolonialismus als Kultur. Literature, Medien, Wissenschaft in der deutschen Gründerzeit des Fremden*, eds. Alexander Honold and Oliver Simons (Anselm Francke Verlag, 2002); subchapter in Nic Leonhardt, *Piktoral Dramaturgie* [Pictorial Dramaturgy] (Bielefeld: Transcript 2007).

² Mark Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State* (New York: Tauris, 2005), 233.

³ The British had already used those concentration camps to intern the Boers during the Second Boer-War and it is likely that the Germans took over this technology from their colonial neighbours.

⁴ Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 236. The critical ingredient towards the insurrection of the Herero against their colonisers is often argued to be provoked by a "combination of colonial oppression and overwhelming environmental disaster" (Ibid, 252). The outbreak of the rinderpest in all of southern and eastern Africa in 1897 meant for the Herero, a people wedded to a cattle economy, extreme losses and an important power-shift between German settlers and the Herero. Increasing numbers of Herero had to enter into wage labour with German farmers, settlers, businessmen or the colonial administration.

⁵ Uwe Schulte-Varendorff, "Schutztruppe," in *Kolonialismus hierzulande. Eine Spurensuche in Deutschland* [Colonialism over here. Searching for traces in Germany], ed. Ulrich Van der Heyden et al. (Erfurt: Sutton Verlag, 2007).

⁶ Jürgen Zimmerer, "Colonial Genocide: The Herero and Nama War (1904-8) in German South West Africa and Its Significance," in *The Historiography of Genocide*, ed. Dan Stone (New York/London: Palgrave, 2008), 325.

⁷ Levene, *Genocide in the Age of the Nation State*, 266.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid, 326.

¹⁰ John Phillip Short, *Magic Lantern Empire: Colonialism and Society in Germany* (Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 17.

¹¹ Ibid.

- ¹² See David Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and Medardus Brehl, *Vernichtung der Herero. Diskurse der Gewalt in der deutschen Kolonialliteratur* (Munich: Wilhelm Finke Verlag 2007).
- ¹³ See Carl Hagenbeck, *Von Tieren und Menschen* [On Animals and People] (Berlin: Vita 1909).
- ¹⁴ Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire*, 271.
- ¹⁵ Cit. in Brehl, *Vernichtung der Herero*, 215. Author's translation.
- ¹⁶ Balme, *Pacific Performances*, 1.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Ibid, 5.
- ¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London, New York: Verso 2009), 138.
- ²⁰ Kirschnick, "'Hereinspaziert!'", 92.
- ²¹ Private Circus Archive Family Winkler in Berlin.
- ²² Ella Shohat, "Imaging Terra Incognita: The Disciplinary Gaze of Empire," *Public Culture* 3 (Spring 1991): 45.
- ²³ Zimmerer, "Colonial Genocide," 338.
- ²⁴ General von Trotha ordered his soldiers to shoot "any Herero, with or without a rifle" and to drive women and children "back to their people or shoot them." Proclamation Lothar von Trotha, Osombo-Windhoek, 02.10.1904, Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde, Reichskolonialamt (R1001)/2089, Bl. 7af.
- ²⁵ Marline Otte, *Jewish Identities in German Popular Entertainment 1890-1933* (Cambridge University Press 2006), 31.
- ²⁶ British Circus groups all over Europe had already established the norm of staging colonial adventures and occupations in the middle of the nineteenth century. Similarly, the French circus pantomime played an important role for the 'Napoleon cult' at the beginning of the nineteenth century through staging military and battle scenes glorifying the French army.
- ²⁷ Paula Busch, *Das Spiel meines Lebens. Ein Halbes Jahrhundert Zirkus* (Stuttgart: Engelhornverlag 1957), 59.
- ²⁸ Kirsten Belgum, *Popularizing the Nation: Audience, Representation, and the Production of Identity in Die Gartenlaube, 1853-1900* (Lincoln/London: University of Nebraska Press 1998), 152.
- ²⁹ Balme, *Pacific Performances*, 10.
- ³⁰ Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire*, 271.
- ³¹ Cit. in Manuela Rath, "Zirkus in Wien. Zur Architektur und Programmatik der feststehenden Zirkusbauten," in *Artistenleben auf vergessenen Wegen: Eine Spurensuche in Wien*, ed. Birgit Peter et al. (Vienna: Lit.Verlag 2013), 92.
- ³² Levene, *Genocide in the Age of Empire*, 265.
- ³³ Ibid, 255
- ³⁴ Jürgen Zimmerer, *Genocide in German South-West Africa: The Colonial War (1904-1907) in Namibia and its Aftermath* (Wales: Merlin Press 2008), 42.
- ³⁵ Achille Mbembe, *Kritik der Schwarzen Vernunft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2014), 31.
- ³⁶ Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire*, 271.
- ³⁷ Short, *Magic Lantern Empire*, 3.
- ³⁸ Ibid.
- ³⁹ Ibid. 153
- ⁴⁰ Paula Busch, *Das Spiel meines Lebens*, 65. Author's translation.
- ⁴¹ Short, *Magic Lantern Empire*, 152.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid, 135.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid.
- ⁴⁵ *Das muss man seh'n! Grosse Jahresrevue in 4 Akten und 12 Tableaux* [You Gotta See This! Big annual revue in 4 acts and 12 tableaux], 1907, Metropol-Theater Berlin. Written by Julius Freund, Music by Victor Holländer. From the archives of the *Freie Universität Berlin* in the estate of Julius Freund.
- ⁴⁶ Peter Jelavich, *Berlin Cabaret*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 166.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid.
- ⁴⁸ See Becker, *Inszenierte Moderne*.
- ⁴⁹ Marie Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 9.

⁵⁰ J.S. Bratton, "Introduction" in *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790-1930*, eds. J.S. Bratton et.al. (Manchester University Press 1991), 15.

⁵¹ I quote Professor Jim Davis here, from an unpublished paper he presented at a Theatre and Performance Studies research seminar, Warwick University, 2015.

⁵² *Vossische Zeitung*, 15.09.1907, from the *Landesarchiv Berlin*, file 'Metropol Theater' A.Pr.Br.Rep.030-05 Th.714.

⁵³ *Berliner Lokalanzeiger*, 16.09.1907, Landesarchiv Berlin, File A.Pr.Br.Rep.030-05 Th.714.

⁵⁴ *Welt am Montag*, 16.09.1907, Landesarchiv Berlin, File A.Pr.Br.Rep.030-05 Th.714.

⁵⁵ *Vorwaerts*, 12.09.1905, Landesarchiv Berlin, File A.Pr.Br.Rep.030-05 Th.714.

⁵⁶ Heike I. Schmidt, "Who is Master in the Colony? Propriety, Honour, Manliness in German East Africa," in *German Colonialism in a Global Age*, eds. Geoff Eley et al. (Durham: Duke University Press 2014), 110.