

German Colonialism, Visual Culture, and Modern Memory

Edited by Volker M. Langbehn

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Visual Culture,
and Modern Memory**

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Volker Langbehn
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Introduction

Picturing Race: Visuality and German Colonialism

Volker Langbehn

*Such as are thy habitual thoughts,
such also will be the character of thy mind;
for the soul is dyed by the thoughts.*

—Marcus Aurelius

Over the past decade, the study of Germany's colonial past has experienced a dramatic transformation in its scope of inquiry. Influenced by new theoretical and methodological approaches to the study of race, nationalism, and globalization, these new studies are reevaluating and redefining the parameters within which to understand German colonialism.¹ Despite the significant changes in the study of Germany's imperial ambitions, however, research has almost completely neglected the history of its visual representation. While Anglophone research has long experienced what has been termed the pictorial or visual turn,² scholars of visual culture studies pertaining to German history—and especially German colonialism—have hardly considered, often derided as unworthy of attention, or simply dismissed images as irrelevant for understanding the history of German colonialism.³ Until the end of the 1990s, scholars of German history on either side of the Atlantic used images primarily as mere supplements to a more important textual reference, and treated them like illustrative quotations, instead of perceiving them as objects that signify histories of their own.⁴ Research subordinated visuality to textuality, a distinction grounded and empirically validated by reference to documents and sources from the privileged site of the archive.⁵

A significant change has recently occurred; over the past few years, there has been a gradual acceptance of the role of visual materials, such as photographs, postcards, advertisement, posters, and films, as a medium of inquiry in the history of German colonialism. This anthology draws on an array of other studies that reevaluate Germany's colonial experience and its place within a German and European historical context.⁶ Despite

2 *Volker Langbehn*

the changing landscape of media studies, hardly any scholarship exists on medial representation in the context of German colonialism. The reasons for the marginal position of the “visual” are manifold and central to this introductory essay. Considering that disciplines such as history, anthropology, and philosophy have in one way or the other in the past provided intellectual or political justification for the colonial, I will offer a cursory overview of the state of the “visual” in these disciplines.

Anti-visualism has a long history, and Barbara Stafford has offered some important reasons for the repression and the subsequent resurfacing of the “visual” since the Enlightenment, her point of departure for this hierarchical structure. According to Stafford, there has been a rivalry between anti-visualism and visualism since the Enlightenment, located at the intersection of visual arts and medicine. At this juncture, visual culture was born and concurrently viewed as a mere illustration of rational knowledge.⁷ According to her and Martin Jay, eighteenth-century sciences developed a strong interest in visual objects as a unique way to offer proof for a scientific argument.⁸ Scientists reduced the “visual” to the role of testimony, supporting the quest for origins, ancestry, and genealogy. The visual dissection of the body involved “*reading* the hidden properties of the soul and the intellect.”⁹ Stafford shows how mental augury was elevated to scientific status, and the continually increasing mistrust of visual media from the Enlightenment to the present demonstrates the complications of seeing versus believing. Stafford’s tracing of the reasons why visual knowledge has been subordinated to logical deduction, leading to an anti-visual argumentation, I will frame in the debates about image versus text that characterize the above disciplines under scrutiny. The birth of visual culture as described by Stafford “coincide(s) with the birth of modern race theories,”¹⁰ adding to Nancy Stepan’s argument that, “by the eighteenth century Europeans were decidedly ethnocentric and racist.”¹¹ The overlapping of visual culture with the development of a specific science of human racial distinctions, notably framed in the discussion of “nature” and human similarity and difference, informed the development of biological and human sciences. “Biology,” a word coined in 1802, physiology, and psychology shaped the new division of perceptions of the body.¹² Johannes Fabian has maintained, for instance, that anthropological research defined itself in conjunction with the tradition of “natural history,” a tradition that stresses visualization as a means to provide an accurate account of reality.¹³ But anthropology’s fixation with pictorial images is text based and as Fabian asserts, overtly political, because visual evidence has mutated into a theory of knowledge, and assisted in the construction of exotic Otherness; difference turns into “natural” and reveals the interest of segments of a bourgeois society.

As these commentaries suggest, the analysis of scientific racism must consider the larger cultural context of societies. The study of racism has to be seen within the European context, embedded in the contours of various economic, philosophical, historical, and anthropological traditions. These

traditions are reflective of the overall general bias toward the “visual” in the natural and social sciences and the humanities. Consciously or unconsciously, the bearers of these traditions have gradually reduced the “visual” to a mere adjunct of logical reasoning. I delineate the significance of visuality and visual culture around 1900 to set the frame for my brief reading of the disciplines of history, anthropology, and philosophy and their respective treatment of visual and medial representation. My approach aims to be comprehensive but identifies the broad patterns and commonalities in these different disciplines.

You have to learn to see, you have to learn to think, you have to learn to speak and write.

Friedrich Nietzsche

SETTING THE FRAME—VISUALITY AND VISUAL CULTURE AROUND 1900

In the late nineteenth century, an explosion of the visual image¹⁴ created what Donald Lowe has described as the new field of bourgeois perception. Technological developments, the emergence of new urban spaces, and the economic as well as symbolic functions of images established a visual culture that challenges the widespread assumption that the Weimar Republic was the first apex in this field. The rapid expansion of medial representation through news photography, cinema, picture postcards, posters, the restructuring of city space, the periodic spectacle of World Expositions, and the rise of giant department stores provides powerful evidence of the shifting contours of the “visual.” The perceptual revolution, characterized as a shift from linearity to multi-perspectivity, epitomizes the decades around 1900.¹⁵ The new repertoire for describing and representing intercultural encounters dramatically expanded accordingly and configured the knowledge of alterity throughout Europe. Soap advertisement, for instance, became the most prominent display of the “hidden affinity between domesticity and empire.”¹⁶ The visual appeal to alterity triggered an imperial commerce that became a central characteristic in a vast array of industries. Pictorial advertisement contributed to the fascination with Germany’s imperial progress displayed as a voyeuristic spectacle. The consumer participated in the stylized celebration of imperial spectacle, in which indigenous peoples functioned as frames for the commodity.¹⁷

The mutual influences among capitalism, rapidly advancing technology, and certain kinds of cultural forms created a diverse yet stable system of spectacular representation. It affected perceptions of the body, emotions, sexuality, and the unconscious, so aptly detailed by Thomas Mann in *The Magic Mountain*,¹⁸ a novel that mirrors the gradual encroachment of the visual in daily life.¹⁹ His protagonists are obsessed with eyes, vision, bodies,

visual culture, and visual experience. On nearly every page, we discover references to sight and encounters with Otherness such as, for example, Hans Castorp's addiction to Clavdia Chauchat with her "narrow Kirghiz eyes." Chauchat radiates an exotic, undisciplined, unconstrained "Oriental" sexual power, so exemplary of pictorial images of Otherness in visual culture around 1900.²⁰ Settembrini, one of the main protagonists, and a member of the "International League for the Organization of Progress," a eugenic alliance, even speaks about the problem of degeneration and displays his unconcealed aggression toward Slavic and Eurasian patients.

The term "visual culture" received a very specific understanding insofar as the advertising industry sought to transform pictorial advertisement into an art form. Starting in 1907 with the founding of the *Werkbund*, advertising advocates elevated the medium of advertisement to a form of aesthetic education. Tasteful advertisement assumed the role of raising the public's aesthetic consciousness. The founding members of *Werkbund* wanted to integrate art into daily life, and to transform crafts into art.²¹ Friedrich Naumann, one of its founders, openly proclaimed that companies should hire artists to address the needs of the consumer, and elevate people's lives through tasteful products. *Werkbund* members concerned themselves with the quality of manufactured goods in Germany and openly encouraged the "cooperation between producers, tradesman, and art professionals."²² The furthering of cultural reforms enjoyed widespread support from numerous circles inside and outside of government. The sociological community, most notably represented by Max and Alfred Weber, Ferdinand Tönnies, Georg Simmel and Werner Sombart, provided creative and intellectual stimuli, some of them contributing to its literature. As Fredric Schwartz notes, the sociologists assisted in turning the "presuppositions of the *Geisteswissenschaften* (human sciences) into analytical tools to study contemporary society" with a shared focus on the term *Kulturkritik* (cultural criticism).²³ While Tönnies provided the key terms, Simmel explored the presumed "tragedy of culture." Sombart introduced the concept of capitalism into bourgeois circles and participated as a contributing member of the *Werkbund* in its early years. Naumann's call for the integration of visual culture into German bourgeois society illustrates the attempt to destabilize the volatile relationship between high art and visual culture, to reform the existing notion of culture.

The irreconcilable differences between high art and visual culture or mass culture or popular culture, depending on our viewpoint, has a history insofar as advocates of modernism have consistently tried to keep both spheres as independent as possible even though high art was part of visual culture in the first place.²⁴ The *l'art pour l'art* movements at the turn of the twentieth century, notably symbolism, art nouveau, and aestheticism, were averse to becoming part of popular culture. This aversion fueled the debates about high versus low art during the German Empire. As the examples of visual culture will reveal, the desire of the *l'art pour l'art* movements to remain separate

from the culture of everyday life and its political, social, and economic issues has been unfulfilled, in that the media industry has in fact usurped themes, topics, and styles from the art movements. The Great Divide, as Andreas Huyssen has called bourgeois culture's insistence on the distinction between high art and mass culture around 1900, was fragile to begin with, as the development of visual culture testifies, and appears to be more of an artificial boundary driven by aesthetic, political, and moral interests.²⁵

Traditional bourgeois culture in the late nineteenth century was rather skeptical toward capitalism. The German bourgeoisie equated capitalism with civilization, the rapid transformation of German society due to the dramatic increase of industrialization, and the growing power of liberalism and secularization. Capitalism symbolized the corrosion of norms and traditions, whereas advocates of the term "culture" infused it with a positive aura. The emerging advertising industry, supported by the *Werkbund*, co-opted the terminology of art and culture to clothe advertisement as a vehicle of high culture, to underline continuity and historical relevance, and to distinguish itself from low or popular art.²⁶ The advertising industry successfully integrated and presented capitalism as part of culture whose task is to infuse cultural and educational values. However, we should not equate the increasing transformation from a traditional bourgeois culture into modern commercial mass culture the production of *Kitsch* (cultural trash), or visual culture lacking high quality. Even without adhering to the canonized notions of quality, as the examples of posters, picture postcards, and trading cards demonstrate, visual culture around 1900 produced high quality works. The poster boom, which experienced its height as early as the 1890s, is the perfect example of the amalgamation of art and commerce, style and media.²⁷ Media specialists and German industry saw the poster as art for the people and its special feature as presenting democratic vision on the street.²⁸ As Schwartz further opined, the *Werkbund* symbolizes the transformation of the traditional notion of culture viewed as "the idealized field of non-alienated existence" to a modern notion of culture that incorporates commodity production within the social parameters determined by imperial production.²⁹

Within the context of visibility, the idea of art as a form of expressing a democratic vision clearly shows that visual culture was already on its way to becoming a major influence in the development of taste, infused by the technological imagination. Pictorial advertising assumed the role of a window onto the world. Whether deliberately or not, it set the frame for a regulation of knowledge of Otherness and political power. As Germany entered the global imperial waltz, visual culture and its consumer entered an imaginary way of looking at the world. The commodity industry held sway over the imperial imagination even though colonial imagery was primarily commercially useful (David Ciarlo, Joachim Zeller). Writing about German colonialism without examining visual culture is paramount to viewing Otherness without a face.

An analysis of early German cinema and films during the Weimar era reveals how colonialism was an important dimension of the visual experience in German daily life (Wolfgang Fuhrmann, Christian Rogowski) and German colonial revisionism. The producer's ways of seeing and presenting the world reinforced the (in)visible yet clearly defined relationship between perception and the world, between the artificial binary of Self and Other so characteristic of colonialism. However, there are many early German colonial films outside this binary signifying ambivalence toward the colonial network. Whether big-game expedition, travel, hunting, educational, or entertainment film, the diverse array of films illuminate the idea of a new sense of seeing and viewing the world. The success of ethnographic film depended upon popular culture, on popular film production practices, with the goal of being informative and entertaining at the same time. Like the advertising industry, most films produced in the 1910s and 1920s were for a lay audience, with the dual function of objectively and authentically presenting the "primitive" as well as, of course, entertaining the audience. Colonial cinema continues to remain inextricably linked to the discourse of race and other issues such as identity and its artificial division as found in the Self/Other dichotomy (Fuhrmann and Rogowski). This dichotomy resurfaced in the use of stereotypes in postwar movies and documentary films (Struck and Haehnel). When combining African melodrama with German history, contemporary German cinema displays an irritating similarity to well-known colonial stereotypes of earlier decades, and provokes speculation about the continuity in the use of visual tropes associated with the German "colonial idea" (Rogowski). These scripted narratives rely on clichés to be profitable. The medium of film reifies the already entrenched categories of Same and Other, Western and Indigenous, or Civilized and Uncivilized. Whether we write about ethnographic films or African melodrama, it is essential to address their constructed nature and the ramifications of using colonial tropes for entertainment or anthropological purposes. Ethnographic films especially require much more scrutiny, as Fatimah Rony has maintained, because anthropology has been hesitant to address its ethnocentric biases.³⁰

The poster industry and visual culture in general are prime examples of successful attempts to incorporate strategies from high art. Supported by prominent artists, and influenced ironically by the various art movements around 1900, such as symbolism, expressionism, and art nouveau, the media industry saw its message spread across a diverse spectrum of visual media such as the picture postcard or trading card, a phenomenon described as an iconographic domestication of colonialism (Zeller).³¹ The popularity of picture postcards signaled their victory over letter writing and reflected the industrialization and commercialization of visual communication.³² Picture postcards provided the ultimate medium to illustrate Germany's imperial story. People shared the many illustrations of characters and events with the rest of the world, aided by postmaster general

Heinrich von Stephan's global communication system. Picture postcards helped spread the news of Germany's successful conquest and securing of new space (Axster). Images from the frontlines of German Southwest Africa show postcards to be accomplices in a nationalist discourse. The sending of picture postcards reduces the visual materiality of communication to nationalist economics.

Aided by the delivery of mail several times a day, the picture postcards became the principal communication method of the masses. This victory signaled a radical alteration of previous temporal and spatial consciousness, creating and provoking an array of new aesthetic responses.³³ Postcards shaped people's presence to the world and their representation in it. The cakewalk dance is just one cultural phenomenon that benefited from Heinrich von Stephan's global vision of communication (Kusser). The message of the cakewalk, a metaphor of the colonial disorder and the conflicts of international politics, relied on its visual advertisement in the form of postcards, photographs, or cartoons spread around the world. As one of the main suppliers of postcards, Germany's printing industry participated in the historical changes that subverted the sense of temporality, spatiality, and existential presence.³⁴ Feeding and creating anew a taste for exotica and a fascination with Otherness, picture postcards disseminated news and views in images that captured the world and delivered it to the consumers in their living rooms.³⁵ It is, in the words of John MacKenzie, "the supreme expression of control through a particular type of slanted visual understanding,"³⁶ a "homogenization of difference,"³⁷ or "a centralization of knowledge" and power.³⁸

While MacKenzie pinpoints one of the problems in the visual representation of colonialism in general, the question remains whether images of visual culture were a reflection of or instrumental in Germany's imperial policy, as he has shown in the case of British colonialism. Geoff Eley offers one possible way of addressing this question. Since its founding as a nation-state in 1871, Germany had endeavored to confirm its national identity in political and cultural terms. To build a form of national identification and to imagine "the nation as an organized, proselytizing act depended on private more than official bodies, on individuals and voluntary associations more than governments."³⁹ As a form of political community of citizens, private industry played a significant role in this quest for a national identity, but differed significantly from the institutional ways of creating a national consciousness. The private sector had its own nationalist ideas and ambitions, as my contribution to this volume demonstrates, in the form of modern-day racial profiling performed by satire magazines.⁴⁰ More often than not, caricatures and cartoons of German satire magazines reveal how the relation between historical reality and its transformation into visual and cultural productions remain embedded in stereotypical images of Africa.

Fuhrmann and Rogowski document the marriage between private sector commerce and nationalist ideas or ambitions in the film industry. Both

situate their contributions in the context of mass entertainment, the political sphere, and pro-colonialist propaganda. Like its British counterpart, the German film industry became a servant to dominant racial and social Darwinian ideas.⁴¹ As Rogowski's title suggests, the "colonial idea" is of imaginary character, the call for imagining the lost colonies, to visualize the colonies retroactively during the Weimar era. With the loss of the colonies in 1919, imperial propaganda lost its validation, but the colonial spirit was kept alive by the *Deutsche Kolonialgesellschaft* (German Colonial Society) and the *Deutsche Kolonial Zeitung* (German Colonial Newspaper), its main propaganda organ, which supported colonial films and mass spectacles as platforms to advance its revisionist imperial vision. When juxtaposed against Fuhrmann's and Rogowski's film analyses, Struck's insightful analysis of the mini-serial *Afrika, mon amour* from 2007 compels us to speculate if contemporary films are rooted in nineteenth-century imperial perceptions: a rather troubling thought. Not all of postcolonial cinema and its colonial fantasies affirmed the racist, nostalgic longing for a return to imperial prominence. As Deniz Göktürk suggests, films like Murnau's *Tabu: A Story of the South Seas* (1931) display a critical potential of postcolonial melancholia and might illuminate the representation of migrant and post-migrant populations in contemporary Europe.

The "colonial idea" received additional stimuli from the so-called *Die schwarze Schmach* ("The Black Disgrace"). The stationing of a sizeable contingent of French colonial troops from North Africa, Madagascar, and Senegal in Germany from 1919 to 1923 as part of the terms of the Treaty of Versailles added to the nostalgic longing for imperial grandeur and increased racial resentments. Reflected in the racist-tinted visual and linguistic tropes circulating through the popular press, the experience of *Die schwarze Schmach* offered fodder for German nationalists, who perceived the black occupation troops as racial and cultural pollution.⁴² While the film industry and popular press continued to display aspects of the lingering visual legacy of Germany's colonial history, artists such as Hannah Höch and the Hungarian painter and photographer László Moholy-Nagy, a member of the Bauhaus school, offered alternative ways of seeing and experiencing the "colonial idea." Van Hoesen's reading of Höch's and Moholy-Nagy's use of photomontage shows how artists disrupted or deconstructed the patriarchal hegemony of visual "postcolonialism." In her "Ethnographic Museum" series created between 1924 and 1934, Höch, one of the few women among the Berlin Dadaists, arranges mergers of African and Asian sculpture and Western body parts, commenting on contemporary gender definitions and ethnographic attitudes. Her suggestive title "Ethnographic Museum" already alludes to the common practice of collecting images and objects of modern sciences around 1900.

An analysis of national consciousness must always include the preceding and existing cultural systems from which it came into being. The "visual," I would argue, is vital to what Benedict Anderson has called the imagined

communities.⁴³ As happened in England and France, the convergence of technology, capitalism, and visual culture in Germany unmistakably gave rise to an imperial consciousness. The “seeing” of Otherness along with the ensuing discriminatory language helped to form national boundaries, ethnic-racial classifications, and their systematic scientific quantification as exemplified by anthropology and cartography.

The strategic marriage between high art and mass culture was further strengthened in 1910, when Germany developed its own research on the psychology of advertisement. Advertisement provided a good way to address the masses. Influenced by French social psychologist and sociologist Gustave Le Bon’s *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), media researchers developed their own kind of mass psychology to describe the reactions of the average person to popular media.⁴⁴ Psychological effectiveness, economic efficiency, aesthetic value and taste, coupled with increasing anti-Semitism and racism, appear as the hallmarks of early German advertisement.⁴⁵ Considering the huge array of advertising forms, such as shop windows, films, picture catalogues, stamps, and signs, as well as the professionalization of the advertising industry itself, the era of the spectacle had begun in Germany, an era that had already influenced other countries such as England, France, and the United States.⁴⁶ Visual culture exploits the “optical unconscious” as Walter Benjamin would call it, and shapes our habits, routines, and assumptions—how we see the world. However, can we conclude with Guy Debord that this amounts to “a colonization of social life?”⁴⁷

The visual culture, especially advertisement, with its excess visual stimulation, contributed to the growing fragmentation and alienation in city life symbolized in the “American nervousness.”⁴⁸ Neurasthenia afflicted many people in bourgeois society, saturated with gender, class, racism, and nationalism.⁴⁹ Visual media had transformed the imaginary landscape by seducing the consumer to be part of the newly created world of the commodity, even though as Schwartz suggests, *Werkbund* reforms aimed at “de-alienating a cultural economy.”⁵⁰ The “cultural” subsumed under the economic defines the logic of the commodity and establishes a national commodity culture. The European intelligentsia especially regarded the shifting alignments of daily life, the erosion of bourgeois culture and lifestyle, and the formation of a commodity culture and mass consumer society as threats to the existing social and political order despite the widespread appeal of *Werkbund*. The erosion of faith in absolute reason and the increasing doubts about creating rational order out of natural or institutionalized disorder had led to a disenchantment with the world. Western Europe was experiencing a dramatic economic, cultural, and social transformation, and not every member of society was in favor of it.

In literature, writers equated the modern city with a jungle or saw it as a symbol of society running out of control.⁵¹ Expressionist poets, such as Georg Heym in “God of the City”(1910) and Jakob van Hoddis in “End of

the World" (1910), invoke apocalyptic motifs to highlight people's dwindling faith in most of their avowed values and the destruction of the old world.⁵² Georg Simmel, albeit in a different context, succinctly elucidates some social-psychological features of the culture of modern cities and their inhabitants' widespread sense of estrangement.⁵³ For him, the blasé outlook typical of city dwellers signals a renunciation of responsiveness and an indifference toward the values that distinguish things. Simmel judiciously identifies the predominance of the visual in day-to-day interaction; and I would add that the estrangement of our visual communication mirrors the influence of visual culture.⁵⁴ His insights still hold value for contemporary consumer culture insofar as "being different" is still central in our day and age. The social-technological mechanisms of advertisement still hold sway over our needs and desires. Just as it was at the turn of the twentieth century, today's external stimuli stand in an artificial dialectical relationship with internal stimuli, creating "the habituated regularity" that governs our excessive consumption.⁵⁵ It is therefore no surprise that the rapid reconfiguration of German society around 1900 provoked cultural discontent and nationalist hope in the form of a conservative revolution, personified by the likes of Paul de Lagarde, Julius Langbehn, and Moeller van den Bruck, whose visions came to fruition with the rise of fascism.⁵⁶ The year 1933 marks a caesura for the advertising industry, because the sophisticated modern visual communication systems openly joined forces with economic and political propaganda. The *Gleichschaltung* of NS propaganda and advertisement was unique insofar as the National Socialists had to interfere in order to preserve the uniqueness of their propaganda.⁵⁷

Considering the dramatic technological changes in the perception of the visual and its medial representation, I would now like to shift the focus of my exposé. I will explore the reasons why disciplines such as history, anthropology, and philosophy have not considered the study of visual culture as a means to understand racial thinking and its possible influence in the making of a German bourgeois identity. As the contributors to this volume demonstrate, the creation of Germany's colonial empire had a lasting impact on German political and cultural life and beyond. They document the entwinement of colonialism in its various forms with the inner workings of modern German life and society especially through the cultural and technical innovations of its time. The contributions show that colonial Germany played a significant role in shaping German perceptions of racial difference, influenced German support for World War I, and facilitated the construction of German nationalism.⁵⁸ The development of new disciplines such as history, anthropology, psychoanalysis, and ethnology, as described by Foucault, contributed to the production of discursive knowledge about locales outside of Europe.⁵⁹ Their growth as disciplines is part of the history of German colonialism and postcolonialism.

I will address the most recent scholarship in the emerging field of visual studies and focus on the key question connecting all three disciplines: What

is an image?⁶⁰ As my cursory reading and the contributions will suggest, in order to understand German colonialism, one has to consider the (visual) culture of colonialism and postcolonialism and its relationship to modernity and not solely focus on the political economy. After all, as the contributions ascertain, the cultures of colonialism maintained their impact from 1919 up through the present.⁶¹ Whether during the zenith of German colonialism or after the loss of the colonies after 1919 through the Treaty of Versailles, the assembled essays show how these overlapping, competing cultures of colonialism had a profound impact on the daily lives, political attitudes, consumer habits, and racial attitudes of men and women in the German Empire and beyond.

THE HISTORIANS DILEMMA OR HOW TO READ PICTURES

According to Jens Jäger and Martin Knauer, the marginal acceptance of visual media in the study of German history touches on various problems. Historians struggle to consider visual material in the study of German history because of the fairly well-defined parameters of their discipline, and because the historical science has traditionally been text based; it has lacked a methodology for analyzing images. Moreover, the politics of history (*Politikgeschichte*) dominates its subject matter, leaving little room to go beyond the parameters of its discipline.⁶² The struggle to consider the study of images (*Bildkunde*) dates back to the 1920s, when in 1928 at the VI International Historians Conference in Oslo, Norway, historians founded the International Iconographic Commission, whose mission was the study of visual sources (*Quellenkunde*). The National Socialists suspended the commission's work in 1937. Historians after the Second World War never took real interest in images due to their tainted legacy, and it seems not much has changed up to the present, as Paul Betts lamented in 2006. He observed that the explosive interest in the study of visual media worldwide has left little impact on twentieth-century history writing as a whole.⁶³ Debates about the pictorial or visual turn in history remain tied to basic concerns about its methodology. In her review of the forty-sixth German Historian's Conference in 2006, Wenke Nitz concludes that even the few advocates of visual sources remain closely bound to a text-based explanation of historical events.⁶⁴ Historians still tend to be skeptical about the historical significance of visual source material. To be sure, this view is not limited to historians, but reaches across many disciplines, such as literature and philosophy.⁶⁵

An aversion to theory adds to this resistance, especially when looking at the inclusion or exclusion of research arriving from France as personified by Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, or Jacques Derrida, to name the most prominent representatives. The term theory is not to be confused with a methodological framework, evident in academic trends in North American

literary criticism before the 1960s, that sets as its goal, in literary studies for example, “the rooting of literary exegesis” and critical evaluation within “a system of some conceptual generality.”⁶⁶ As historians, anthropologists, or literary scholars, we all frame our inquiries within a certain set of concepts, whether one is researching a historical situation, a biography, or literary tradition. The normative methodological principles of inquiry, characterized by their cultural or ideological viewpoints, strive to integrate a social and historical self within a specific historical or aesthetic frame. The emergence of the study of linguistic signs or language as a system of signs and of signification—presented for instance by Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, or Roland Barthes—disrupted the established patterns of scientific inquiry. The referential function of language subverted “its authority as a model for natural or phenomenal cognition.”⁶⁷ With the advent of structuralism and post-structuralism, scholarship has had “to learn to *read* pictures rather than to *imagine* meaning.”⁶⁸ Under scrutiny, and regardless of one’s intellectual persuasion, it is important to keep in mind that etymologically, the term theory connotes a very different way of looking at one’s object of study. Theory comes from the Greek verb *theorein*, to look at or to contemplate, or to survey. Within Greek society, the act of looking at or surveying designated a public act with important social consequences.⁶⁹

The “pictorial turn,” advocated by the art historian and most prominent supporter of visual studies, W.J.T. Mitchell, pinpoints one of the central aspects in the debate over medial representation: the relationship between image and text. According to Mitchell, there is no such thing as “*purely* visual and verbal media, or pictures without words and words without pictures.”⁷⁰ The heterogeneous character of media marks its medial representation. Mitchell refers to the relationship between image and text as an “imagetext.” Literary texts or any other texts incorporate visuality, the text is allegorical as the early German Romantics would proclaim, and writing therefore becomes a form of text in visible form.⁷¹ Seen from the opposite end, “the medium *writing* deconstructs the possibility of a pure image or pure text”⁷² or, in the words of Wilhelm Voßkamp and Brigitte Weingart, “no image without image-text difference, and no text without text-image difference.”⁷³ The imagetext displays its essence in being the transgression of borderlines or definitions.

The role of the reader or viewer adds to the complexity of imagetext. To look at images means to fill in or to complement the missing parts of the medial representation. The reader or viewer unconsciously or consciously (re)constructs, adds, and or appropriates the multiple strands of visual signification. The reader or viewer assumes the role of the extended author by extending and extrapolating the pictorial image.⁷⁴ The (in)visible and (un)sayable character of images, to invoke Voßkamp and Weingart again, plays with the absence of presence in consciousness. In Freudian terms, imagetexts assume the characteristic of a nodal point reflecting the process of dream formation, in which readers/viewers consciously or unconsciously

fill in the missing parts of the visual representation.⁷⁵ The imagetext as a nodal point, as a form of condensation and displacement, unifies a given field of meanings, and, subsequently, constitutes its identity. Imagetexts are the intellectual equivalent to woven tapestry and escape complete explanation.

Despite these specific contours of the imagetext, Mitchell acknowledges that “we still do not know exactly what pictures are, what their relation to language is, how they operate on observers and on the world, how their history is to be understood, and what is to be done with or about them.”⁷⁶ The open-endedness in our understanding of pictorial images promotes an investigation of visuality that includes alterity. This not-knowing or open-ended characteristic of pictorial images contributes to the skepticism in considering visual sources as objects for historical inquiries. According to Mitchell, anxieties about the visual in fact shape our perception of the relationship between image and text. These anxieties receive an additional degree of intensity considering that the often-invoked pictorial turn does not suggest a revitalization of “naïve mimesis, copy or correspondence theories of representation, or a renewed metaphysics of pictorial ‘presence.’”⁷⁷ Instead, the general notion of the pictorial image as a network of specific similitudes subverts the disciplinary matrix of individual disciplines such as history, literature, and anthropology. Mitchell specifies the complexity when attempting to answer the perennial question “What is an image?”:

[I]t is rather a postlinguistic, postsemiotic rediscovery of the picture as a complex interplay between visuality, apparatus, institutions, discourse, bodies, and figurality. It is the realization that *spectatorship* (the look, the gaze, the glance, the practices of observation, surveillance, and visual pleasure) may be as deep a problem as various forms of *reading* (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience or “visual literacy” might not be fully explicable on the model of textuality.⁷⁸

Mitchell’s response may cause historians and practitioners of other disciplines to be even more skeptical. Similar to the linguistic turn as propagated by twentieth-century philosophers, the pictorial turn provokes the “historical investigations of the entanglement of the political and the visual,” as Martin Jay has suggested.⁷⁹ Jay’s allusion to the obvious use of images for political purposes also applies to the practices of academic disciplines, because the negotiable understanding of an image poses a threat to the disciplinary matrix of historians and of course of any other field, as argued by Günter Riederer in his analysis of the relationship between history and the study of film.⁸⁰ The interdisciplinary character of pictorial images subverts the objectivity of empirical or scientific findings manifested through assumed truth-values, such as empirical data, oral history, or material documents such as registers, laws, customs, and objects. The

notion of objectivity legitimates and affirms the interpretative practice of its practitioners. To consider integrating visual material into the study of history inevitably prompts the question of what constitutes a discipline. The study of visual material or of a visual culture that defines itself through its interdisciplinary character engenders disciplinary anxieties in that the production of (in)visibility as an expression of historical and cultural values would inevitably bring existing forms of inquiry into question.⁸¹ It initiates a critique of the enabling conditions of disciplines as such, and uncovers their underlying paradigms, thereby revealing the protective ideological insularity of academic disciplines such as history or any other field of inquiry.⁸² Considering the ramifications of the interdisciplinary character of visual studies, historians remain resistant to questioning the basic constituents of their mode of inquiry. For Dominick LaCapra, the reflexive and self-critical component characteristic of literary criticism and philosophy is lacking in historiography, because “historians have paid scant attention to their own rhetoric and to the role of the rhetorical . . . in constituting their discipline.”⁸³ Simply put, the study of German colonialism has to include the willingness of its practitioners to address their own disciplinary, cultural, and political biases.⁸⁴

VISUAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF OBJECTIVITY

Expanding upon this argument, let us briefly address modern anthropology, a conglomerate of disciplines that is central to the study of colonialism, and its utilization of visual sources. Western research, most notably by British, French, and American anthropologists, has shaped German anthropology. Influenced by the structural-formalism of the British School (Malinowski, Radcliff-Brown, Leach, and Gluckmann), European and American anthropologists have viewed visual anthropology with profound skepticism.⁸⁵ Committed to empiricism and methodological cultural relativism as propagated by Franz Boas, the structural-formalism of the British School viewed photography and film as recording techniques, as a means to *support* particular scientific arguments. Key figures such as Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead began the anthropological analysis of film, television, and other forms of mass media in the 1940s, demonstrating the profitable utilization of pictorial images of Western culture. Mead has been the most influential advocate of visual anthropology in the United States. Anthropological research films and their producers, such as Jean Rouch, John Marshall, Robert Gardner, and Tim Asch, have advanced and shaped the development of visual anthropology. The fate of photography was no different. It served and still has the primary function of a supplement to written field notes and often ended up in a museum or personal archives. Traditional visual anthropology has yet to advance beyond being a recording technique to collect empirical data, or a study

of visual cultural forms. Traditional visual anthropology, as seen through its practitioners, remains at the center of anthropology's attention. Its researchers shape it by the paradigm of descriptive science and its interpretation by its various theories, such as evolution. According to David MacDougall, a leading ethnographic filmmaker, "the history of visual anthropology suggests that most anthropologists have never known quite what to do with the visual [. . .] the visual often seems uncommunicative and yet somehow insatiable. Like the tar baby, it never says anything, but there is always something more to be said about *it*."⁸⁶ MacDougall's description of visual anthropology reflects the struggle of the "visual" of visual anthropology to become accepted as a means to describe and analyze culture and to read the visual as imagetext, as proposed by Mitchell. The difference between using visual media and studying *how* it is used remains central to understanding the fundamental difference between the two positions.⁸⁷ It appears that modern anthropology remains stuck in its suspicion and fear of images or, as Anna Grimshaw has suggested, modern anthropology was about writing texts, a "largely mechanical exercise."⁸⁸ Anthropology's "iconophobia" has kept visual anthropology at the margins of the discipline with respect to the mainstream text-based tradition. For both MacDougall and Grimshaw, the addition of visual anthropology as another branch of anthropology has added to the problem of its professional justification, or its occasional "identity crisis."⁸⁹

Visual anthropology as a study of a "range of inflected relations enmeshed and encoded in the visual,"⁹⁰ or as "studies of the visible and pictorial world as well as the transmission of anthropological knowledge by pictorial means" has not yet arrived in German anthropology.⁹¹ German anthropologists, who have been very successful in ethnographic filmmaking, primarily invested in film more than other anthropological traditions, such as their British colleagues. German ethnographic filmmaking was not experimental. According to Assenka Oksiloff, "the intensity of the quest for the primitive as a visual object of truth [. . .] from the turn of the century through the 1920s" has shaped traditional German visual anthropology and formed its reputation.⁹² In contrast to British anthropology, German anthropology has succeeded in collecting the most extensive and best-documented ethnographic film.⁹³ Like its British counterpart and other international anthropological research, German anthropology followed the positivist assumptions that objective reality was observable, the belief that studying culture with and through audiovisual technologies would produce data for analysis and presentation.⁹⁴ German scientific ethnographic film in particular, influenced by a tradition of archeology and paleontology, has been shaped by Félix-Louis Regnault's study of cross-cultural movement, by Rudolf Pöch's interest in the non-Western "primitive" people as a sign of "purer, unmediated access of reality,"⁹⁵ and by the pioneering work of the South American explorer and ethnologist Theodor Koch-Grünberg.⁹⁶ Neutrality, transparency, and the objectivity of audiovisual technologies

secured reliable data. Thus, earlier practitioners of photography and film, the dominant modes of anthropological inquiries, sought to fit their empirical data within some larger epistemological or metaphysical program that at its core relied on criteria such as truth, certainty, objectivity, testimony, or knowledge, thereby echoing central tenets of philosophy.⁹⁷ Ethnographic research films, colonialism, and popular culture strongly influenced each other (Fuhrmann, Rogowski). Practitioners of German films have neatly clothed colonial and adventure movies in scientific objectives, echoing Germany's imperial rhetoric. Their claim to objectivity shares similar epistemological assumptions about its objects, the "primitive." We have to ask how to distinguish among traditional ethnographic films, colonial films of the 1910s, and the popular adventure-detective films of the 1920s. How do we separate the aesthetic and marketing goals of popular cinema from the proclaimed objectivity of traditional ethnographic documentaries?

German anthropology, human geography, cultural history, and other academic disciplines around the turn of the twentieth century assumed the status of cultural sciences and engaged in international dialogues with European and American contributors. Adopting an "antihumanist worldview," the discipline of anthropology exerted far-reaching effects.⁹⁸ According to Andrew Zimmerman, the age of global imperialism elevated the power of natural sciences to unprecedented heights, "exacerbated humanist anxieties about the European self and allowed for new, post-humanist configurations of the human sciences."⁹⁹ Geography in particular acted as a model for other disciplines, especially for ethnology.¹⁰⁰ As Woodruff Smith notes, the nomothetic sciences in Germany differed in their theoretical approaches from their European counterparts by, for example, the significance of the diffusionist theoretical pattern in German ethnology.¹⁰¹ Adolf Bastian's idea that all humans share a basic mental framework influenced the geographer and ethnographer Friedrich Ratzel. The latter coined the term *Lebensraum* (living space), and emerged as the main proponent of diffusionism. Ratzel argued that the "actual culture of a *Volk* [. . .] was a result of adaptation to particular geographical areas with distinctive environmental conditions."¹⁰² Ratzel's anthropogeography, his visualization of space, has influenced cartographical publishing, in that the systematic acquisition of new data via fieldwork and from travelers was essential in creating maps. The practice of cartography as visual representation reveals space as a recordable, knowable, and controllable object. It organizes space as an efficient visible way to ultimately manage and control people, and "suggests the dispersion of modern racism in social-Darwinist guise."¹⁰³

Similar to Ratzel's anthropogeography, physical anthropology created tables, curves, or the geometric visualization of skulls and bones. Scientists used the statistical visualization as a verification of results as objectified means to verify race or gender difference.¹⁰⁴ The fascination with typology notably favored the human skull, because the skull housed the brain; anthropologists perceived mental differences between racial types as the

most important.¹⁰⁵ Around 1900, the skull subsequently became the arbiter of racial distinction or, put differently, the “visual” has become the ultimate sign for racial classification according to mental, moral, and physical differences.¹⁰⁶ The scientific buzzword from the late nineteenth century to Hitler’s mass murder of the Jews was to become eugenics, introduced into science in 1883 by Charles Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton,¹⁰⁷ whose *Inquiries into Human Faculty* had offered the link between “eugenic questions” and “the cultivation of race.”¹⁰⁸ Galton’s advocacy of composite portraiture to distinguish racial traits advanced the mug shots invented by the Scottish detective Allan Pinkerton. Galton perceived photographs or composite portraiture as the best “method of discovering the central physiognomical type of any race or group.”¹⁰⁹ The connection between eugenics and racial sciences was strongest in Germany, where Alfred Ploetz in 1895 introduced the term “racial hygiene” and triggered popular debates about the fitness of the race.¹¹⁰ Even Charles Darwin’s system of evolution has relied on the descriptive explanation of a picture diagram. Without his form of visibility, evolution would hardly have become a visible phenomenon.¹¹¹

The strong belief in the paradigm of positivist science and empiricism shaped visual anthropology during the early twentieth century, and does so even today, at least when considering the rules of ethnographic filmmaking as established by the Encyclopaedia Cinematographica at the *Institut für den wissenschaftlichen Film* (“IWF—Knowledge and Media”).¹¹² The understanding of ethnographic scientific film as an unbiased and accurate observation of reality, as a demonstration of visual evidence, has defined anthropological research. On their website, we read the following slogan, “One is convinced by something that one has seen with his or her own eyes, because images say more than a thousand words and explain many things at first glance.”¹¹³ The conviction that seeing is believing, or the valorization of the power of images over words, remains dubious, yet echoes the preference given by historians and anthropologists for text-based forms of inquiry. While the historian subordinates medial representation to textuality, modern visual anthropologists valorize the objectifying character of the “visual” in support of the word.¹¹⁴

Like German anthropology, cartography played an important role in mapping the physical and visual link between German cartography and German colonialism. Supplied by the findings of traveling explorers, German cartography was an important visual medium of establishing and promulgating the colonial idea. Ratzel played a central role in the science of geography or anthropogeography. He radically advanced and popularized anthropogeography. His success is a visual reminder of how imperial maps mediate people’s exposure to “foreign lands.” Like traditional ethnographic films, popular adventure films and *Kulturfilme* (cultural films), maps offer an objective assessment of the world and signify the position of Western sovereignty. As Christian Jacob has shown, maps are constructions, “visual artifacts composed of several independent levels

of representation [. . .].”¹¹⁵ The meaning of a map emerges through the interaction between “a mind, a gaze, a material object, and a culture.”¹¹⁶ The cartographer’s visual codes of maps embedded in its architecture shape the imagination, knowledge, and memory. Like films, maps represent the visual mastery of the world, a comprehensive view of what the consumer or student needs to know about Otherness. They are the visual expressions of expansionism and very suggestive in their perspective of the world. The graphic mastery over space illuminates the visual division between the Western civilization and the rest of the world. In the German education system around 1900, geography was the twin of history and/or the natural sciences, literally overseeing the gradual evolution of the German Empire.

An array of publications and media, such as schoolbooks, juvenile literature, and literary texts, transmitted the mapping of colonial space. Scientists viewed geography as a bridge between the natural and historical sciences.¹¹⁷ Oliver Simons reads maps as a model of an ethnographic text. In many novels, such as Hans Grimm’s monumental *Volk ohne Raum* (*People without Space*, 1926), the reader encounters scenes of cartography that make colonial knowledge visible. The protagonists of the novel offer the reader a coordinate system that shapes the imaginary distribution and experience of space and time. Images of the exotic woman (as Thomas Schwarz shows) or the brutal savages were popular in colonial literature and often created what he describes as colonial disgust. He locates the cultivation of abjection or the visual disgust toward the colonized at the intersection between anthropological and tropical hygiene discourse. Hybridity functions as a horror vision of continuity between colonial culture and fascistic phantasmagoria seen in the harmfulness of race miscegenation.

Like Haehnel, Schwarz accentuates the continuity in the perception of racial difference based on biology from the turn of the twentieth century to Nazi Germany. Schwarz offers the example of the scientific career of Claus Schilling (1871–1946), who went from colonial physician to scientific experimenter in malaria for the concentration camp Dachau. Such an example signifies the many overt connecting lines from the Wilhelminian Empire to Nazi Germany. In Simons’ and Schwarz’s discussions of maps and images, respectively, we see the inextricable entwinement of colonial ideas and fantasies with economic, national, and moral purposes. Disseminating progressive economic, scientific, social, and political ideas, novelists joined the colonial spirit in promoting interest in the value of the overseas space, the value of indigenous people for authenticating the white race or depicting the former colonies as a lost paradise.

Although interest in architecture among anthropologists is still limited, there is “considerable overlap between the new anthropology of the urban realm with the field of cultural geography.”¹¹⁸ My inclusion of Itohan Osayimwese’s investigation of German colonial architecture in relation to colonial ideology and policy, art, and culture in Germany, highlights

anthropology's neglect of architecture as a cultural science. Claude Lévi-Strauss had already paid attention to the significance of the house and its role in the formation of systems of social organization.¹¹⁹ He viewed the house and the body as physically and conceptually linked. The house stands as cognitive model for structuring and experiencing the world. Osayimwese's timely insights into architectural anthropology shed further light at the dazzling array of visual media as tools for political propaganda. Osayimwese presents colonial architecture as part of a complex totality encompassing the conditions of its productions and its relevance to economic, ideological, and political agendas. Her analyses of building manuals written by former colonists, architects, and engineers offer another manifestation of the power of visual culture within the colonial enterprise.

A VISION-GENERATED LANGUAGE— PHILOSOPHY AND ANTHROPOLOGY

The skepticism toward medial representation strikes us as a rather peculiar position, because of the dominant role vision and visibility have played in the modern era. As Mitchell's response to the question "What is an image?" suggests, a framing of medial representation solely within linguistic and pictorial terms would do injustice to our fascination with modes of seeing, or the "enigmas of visual experience."¹²⁰ The pictorial image requires its own mode of analysis, considering that the word "image" can additionally signify graphic, optical, perceptual, or mental phenomena.¹²¹ Although it is impossible to offer a detailed and nuanced historical overview of vision, it is important to sketch some important features of the proclaimed pictorial turn, or what we now deem visual culture within our cross-disciplinary frame.

Writing about the relation between vision and philosophy, David Levin has demonstrated how the history of vision remains closely tied to the history of philosophy. Vision has played a decisive role in the discourse of philosophy, and, as Levin suggests, philosophy is itself a historical construction that relied on a vision-generated vocabulary, such as *speculation*, *observation*, *insight*, *evidence*, on metaphors such as *clarity*, *perspective*, *point of view*, and with some methodological concepts such as *analysis*, *objectivity*, and *representation*.¹²² The philosophical gaze as a possible figure of the productive imagination has relied on ocular vocabulary and rhetoric for the construction of systems of thought. The dominant oclarcentrism of philosophical discourse expressed through the philosophers contemplative and speculative, all-encompassing gaze has reinforced the "metaphysics of presence."¹²³ The desire for immediate access to meaning privileges presence over absence. A logical understanding of the world reveals the desire to establish absolute identities or causalities, and to dismiss the absence of presence. As Levin notes, the rhetoric of vision has to consider the political

dimension of visualism and its inherent dangers of reinforcing existing social and cultural forces.¹²⁴

If we subscribe to Derrida's critique of logocentrism, then the rhetoric of vision propagated by traditional philosophy reveals itself as a deceptive appearance of naturalness, in Stafford's perspective a cultural bias that "devalues sensory, affective and kinetic forms of communication,"¹²⁵ or in Levin's view, as ideological mystification. None other than Friedrich Nietzsche was so critical of the logocentrism of traditional philosophy. His often-quoted army of mobile metaphors in *Truth and Falsity in an Ultramoral Sense* (1873), an essay published in 1896 without the approval of the author, signaled the return of metaphor into philosophical discourse. Nietzsche has radically inverted the hierarchy of truth and belief, valorized by historians, anthropologists, and philosophers. His stinging critique of traditional philosophy and history unveiled the authority of traditional power structures and the belief of truth sustained by philosophy and other disciplines. Their invented knowing determined our knowledge of world history. Like Charles Darwin and Karl Marx, Nietzsche had destabilized traditional notions of eternal truths preserved in any particular beliefs. He called philosophy an art of dissimulation, a legislation of language that establishes laws of truth.¹²⁶ Calling truth a mobile army of metaphors,¹²⁷ Nietzsche debunks absolute truths and overthrows the fixed observer.¹²⁸ His rejection of absolute standards leads to his notion of perspectivism, the changing relations between subject and object.¹²⁹ The lesson learned from Nietzsche so far is that we cannot escape visual mediation, whether linguistically defined or not. Mitchell's description of the term "image" finds its confirmation in Nietzsche. Other philosophers—notably Wittgenstein—who do not restrict image to a verbal description of visual experience, rather allude to "the metaphoric, ornamental, rhetorically figurative use of language."¹³⁰

However, as Jonathan Crary opined, the invention of modern technologies, such as photography, breaks with the classical model of vision already in the historical construction of vision between 1820 and 1830. Modern technology led to a dramatic "reconfiguration of relations between an observing subject and modes of representation."¹³¹ Now the terms observer and representation have received new meanings due to new technical devices, such as the stereoscope. The loss of the immediate referential experience subverts the contemplative beholder, leading to a separation of the senses; touch is without sight. The alignment of the organization of mass culture with the changing of visual experience ruptures the field of classical vision. With the development of photography, visual experience becomes instrumental and abstract. The underlying "evolutionary logic of technological determinism" shapes the foundation of the emerging disciplines of history and anthropology and its positivistic remapping of the body.¹³² Now to view photographs and other medial representation means that we place seeing as an intimate experience within a well-defined system