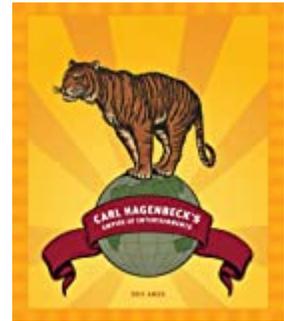




Eric Ames. *Carl Hagenbeck's Empire of Entertainments.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009. vii + 336 pp. \$35.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-295-98833-7.



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The “Tierpark” as Diegetic World

Presentations or performances of “exotic” people—*Völkerschauen* in German—have in recent decades become as fascinating to historians as they were to the general public in their heyday before the First World War. The transnational turn in history has augmented this interest in these relatively well documented collaborations among Europeans, Africans, Asians, and Native Americans. Historians of anthropology and of imperial culture have done most of the work on these shows of people. Eric Ames’s compelling new book now approaches these spectacles precisely as spectacles, placing them in a history of popular entertainment culminating in the cinema.

No single figure was more important to the history of the exotic spectacle in Germany or, perhaps, anywhere else than Carl Hagenbeck (1844-1913). Hagenbeck expanded the business of his father, a Hamburg fishmonger turned exotic animal showman and dealer, into a global firm that supplied zoos and circuses and organized and promoted performances. Hagenbeck junior first included people in his animal shows when, in 1874, he brought to Germany six Laplanders along with a herd of reindeer

from Norway. The Hagenbeck name, Ames shows, soon became a veritable “brand” for exotic displays throughout Germany. In 1907, Hagenbeck opened a *Tierpark* near Hamburg, a novel type of animal display unlike earlier zoological gardens. That same year, Hagenbeck’s *Tierpark* began offering animals and set locations to the nascent film industry. By offering a complete account of the career of the Hagenbeck business, from fish to film, Ames offers new insights into the culture of the exotic in imperial Germany and into the place of the exotic show in the history of what Guy Debord has called “the society of the spectacle.”

In placing the *Völkerschau* in the history of spectacles, Ames extricates it from the histories of anthropology, of zoological gardens, and, to a certain extent, of imperialism, the contexts that most historians have regarded as the native habitats of these forms of entertainment. Ames emphasizes that, as important as the *Völkerschauen* of Hagenbeck and others were to the discipline of anthropology, the discipline of anthropology represented just one element of the larger context

of Hagenbeck's displays. Ames makes a similar point about zoological gardens in relation to Hagenbeck's *Tierpark*. Zoos at the time displayed living animals typologically, without seeking to represent their original habitats. By displaying animals in enclosures that represented their native environments, surrounded by relatively invisible moats rather than confined behind bars, Hagenbeck did indeed influence subsequent zoological practice. The *Tierpark*, however, rejected contemporary zoo-keeping, moving from a typological scientific display of isolated animals toward an "empire of entertainment" not motivated primarily by science. Similarly, Ames notes, *Völkerschauen* had at best an ambivalent utility for pro-colonial ideology, and Hagenbeck did not frame his exotic spectacles of people or animals as political rallies in favor of empire.

For Ames, the *Völkerschauen*, as well as Hagenbeck's *Tierpark*, constituted a novel form of public fantasy. Ames reveals that Hagenbeck's entertainments did not merely show their viewers a fantastic world but actually brought them into it. These spectacles were closer to the Wild West shows then popular on both sides of the Atlantic than they were to museums, anthropological spectacles, zoos, or colonial propaganda. Hagenbeck did not fail to live up to the standards of anthropological and zoological accuracy, but rather succeeded in creating an immersive fantasy, not fictionalizing reality, but realizing fictions for its audiences.

Ames argues, provocatively and persuasively, that Hagenbeck's entertainments constitute one of the origins of the cinema. Hagenbeck's entertainments, like cinema, created a diegetic—that is, an internally consistent fictional—world. Hagenbeck's entertainments thus did not represent other places, the author argues, so much as displace other places to performance spaces and displace spectators into those other places. Hagenbeck's enclosures and performance spaces did not, furthermore, merely foreshadow, inspire, or resemble film sets; they sometimes actually served as sets for early filmmakers. Hagenbeck also supplied exotic animals for filmmakers. Indeed, when the hunger years of the First World War decimated the Hagenbeck's animals and the *Tierpark* closed its doors in 1920, the establishment almost

became a film studio before reopening in 1924.

This book adds an important new dimension to earlier, empire-focused accounts of the *Völkerschauen*. Ames might have made his argument even stronger, though, if rather than presenting his book as an alternative to accounts that place Hagenbeck in the context of the history of anthropology and empire, he had incorporated these narratives as further elements of a powerful network. The first chapter of the book describes, through a number of fascinating case studies, the intimate relation between the transnational world of empire and the networks that brought *Völkerschau* performers and exotic animals to Germany. Hagenbeck's entertainments depended on anthropology and empire, even if Hagenbeck and of his cinematic heirs disavowed these connections. Ames points to, but also sets aside, Hagenbeck's only partially conscious connections to empire.

Hagenbeck's entertainments not only relied on complex interactions with the global South but have also informed the visual culture of parts of the global South. Artists in Africa and the Americas incorporated a lithograph of a snake charmer, originally produced to advertise one of Hagenbeck's shows, into the art of veneration of Mami Wata ("mother water" in pidgin English).[1] Reproductions of the original Hagenbeck image, as well as the art partly inspired by it, now circulate not only in West Africa, but also in the Caribbean and the United States. While representations of Mami Wata are images rather than diegetic spaces, they nonetheless emerge from Hagenbeck's "empire of entertainments," showing the surprising ways in which the prehistory of cinema that Ames so intelligently and insightfully interprets intersects with both colonial and postcolonial history.

Note

[1]. Henry John Drewal, "Mami Wata and Santa Marta: Imag(in)ing Selves and Others in Africa and the Americas," in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, ed. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 193-211.

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