

# BRAVE OTHER WORLD? THE AFRICANIZED HEIMATFILM AS SUCCESSOR OF THE POST-NAZI HEIMATFILM?<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** German-speaking television draws on the success of the famous autobiographical book “The white Masai” from Corinne Hofman. Since its publishing in 1998 solely Austrian public service broadcasting shows every year one to two new film productions that seem to build upon the Hofman novel. This new subgenre of “Africa films” is characterized by its trivial narrative styles and similar topics revolving around a white saviour narrative. As interim findings of a reception research including content analysis and group discussions show that these films use an African setting for the construction of desire, identity, and otherness in German-speaking television. Beyond, it could be argued that the subgenre can be read as continuation of the post-Nazi Heimatfilm – though the levels of power are displaced.

**Keywords:** othering, television, entertainment, reception, content analysis, focus groups, migration, media, Heimatfilm, Africa, power, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies

## I. INTRODUCTION

One quandary of the West is a desire for lust and passion. Therefore ethnicity is used to spice up the

white mainstream. The difference seduces because mainstream produces homogeneity. The playground, or rather the battle ground, are bodies and cultures. Globalisation walks hand in hand with a new form of global mass culture which is determined by the fact that visual arts encroach directly on the transfiguration of daily life, entertainment and recreation. This mainstream culture is ruled by television, film, images, metaphors and styles and its centre lies in the West. (cf. hooks 1994, Terkessidis 2008)

Communication studies prove that media provide spaces for experiments with the own identity. Consumption and entertainment offer a special access to reality. Media present culture, they are culture and they produce culture themselves – and everybody can consume culture like many other accessories of identity. (cf. hooks 1994, Terkessidis 2008)

My social research focuses on entertainment TV-films in German-speaking television (Austria, Germany, Switzerland) from an Austrian perspective. I’m interested in media’s role in relation to reality-defining effects. This paper is part of my dissertation project that wants to answer how the strange – as

representation of the cultural “other” – is presented or staged in entertaining media products. Another research question asks how those media contents are processed by the audiences. I trace my basic idea to research on tourism and transcultural communication as I appeal to the similarity between tourism and racism. This similarity derives from their revolving around culture and difference. Postcolonial studies, social constructivism, and an understanding of culture as (everyday) praxis form the theoretical framework.

## II. OBJECT OF STUDY

Entertainment plays an important role in television. For example, one of Austria’s main public service broadcasters, ORF 1, broadcasts 74 percent fictional and 7 percent nonfictional entertainment. I focus on entertainment as a cultural relevance of entertainment exists that is still underestimated as related to its effects on our everyday world – maybe no longer by scientists, but by subsidies granting politicians.

Beyond, I want to emphasize the other side of the coin – because entertainment is of course not only a category in television production but also a characteristic of the spectators’ media use. Essential is what Roland Barthes (1975) has called “le plaisir du texte” – the pleasure of the text. It is evident: These days it is impossible to draw boundaries between one culture and the other, between the self and the other. Telecommunication, mobility and migration overcome at least the spatial dimension of strangeness. Furthermore cultures are interconnected because of global tourism and culture plus in dependence of politics and economy. The heterogeneity within a traditional homogenous culture is big. There are almost as many strangenesses inside as there are outside.

Nowadays it is especially modern tourism as well as mass media which care about the people’s desire for the Edenic strange – or, from a perspective of criticism of capitalism and consumption, they create the desire and feed it. And, as a consequence, they keep the meaning of cultural differences alive. This gets dangerous if homeland charmers deny that culture is a permanent interplay between the own and the strange (cf. Luger 1998); and if culture is kept defined by its seclusiveness.

Before plunging deeper into the subject matter the object of the study needs to be specified: I call it – according to some essential results of the group discussions (cf. chapter V) – the *Africanized Heimatfilm* referring to the Austrian-German *Heimatfilm*-genre<sup>2</sup>, that represents sentimental films in idealized regional settings. The genre developed after the Second World War in West Germany and was interpreted as answer to the external destruction and the Nazis who instrumentalized the term “homeland” and “tradition”.

The *Africanized Heimatfilm* is a German and/or Austrian produced entertainment television film with an African setting. The protagonists are the “usual suspects” that are known from other prime time films. The “birth” of this genre can be found in the success of the book “The white Masai” from Corinne Hofmann in 1998 – since then there have been produced a lot of similar films; similar in their plots, actors and sceneries.

## III. ENTERTAINMENT AND TELEVISION

It’s necessary to look questioning at those specific TV products because reinforcing stereotypes of marginalized groups has been considered harmful. This paper’s focus lies not only on racism, but

especially on the so called “positive racism” that can be described as some kind of exoticism. That goes with prejudices like “music is in the blood of black people” or “black people have a special connection to nature”.

I want to highlight that this work uses the terms “black” and “white” not to describe a skin colour but to be able to analyse the political and social constructed attributions. “Race” is constructed, but nevertheless a socially effective category. This construction has a political as well as a cultural impact. (cf. Arndt/Hornscheidt, 2004)

#### *A. Reality of Everyday Life*

In Austria, every fifth person has immigration background – those statistics includes as well people with Austrian citizenship whose parents were born abroad. About 42.000 native Africans are living in Austria, about the half in its capital Vienna. On the downside, black people are outstandingly often victims of crimes.

When it comes to racism there is a massive lack of awareness, although Austria has always been an immigration country. Justice, mainstream media and politics ignore or even encourage this blind spot by denying racist praxis. For example blackfacing happens in satirical TV shows as well as in national theatres despite protests from speakers of black communities and anti-racism activists.

#### *B. Othering Black People*

The idea of the other was made popular by Edward Said in his book “Orientalism”. Originally it was a philosophically concept, but it has political, social, psychological and economic implications. Othering as a sociological term is characterized by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (cf. Spivak 2008) related to the

imperial discourses that creates the others as the ones who are excluded from the discourses of power. Othering aims at improving the own image by classifying people with different characteristics as “strange”. Strange is not the difference but the difference, which is perceived as relevant. These emphasised differences concern gender, religion, class, ideology, or ethnicity. Othering can lead to xenophobia and/or racism. (cf. Reuter 2002)

Othering is one way to position oneself on one pole of the we-they-dichotomy and entrust the antipole to somebody else, or rather to knock the other one down a peg. Only persons who possess power and/or knowledge can “other” people. It’s a hegemonic action. In literature othering is mostly described as a pejorative act. Some could debate that highlighting positive aspects of someone’s cultural identity is contradicting the definition of othering. But I argue that reducing somebody to his or her cultural identity is a pejorative gesture too.

A parallel can easily be drawn between those insights and the processes of media production and representation.

There is a long tradition of othering the black people. It is seen to be continued in entertainment television. Until nowadays African and/or black people play the exotic or exoticized minor parts: Africa was and is the playground for white people who argue out differences in the desert or the jungle, have to survive the “life-threatening” nature in general or come to rescue and protect the African people, the nature or the continent itself.

#### *C. The Research Project “Brave other world”<sup>3</sup>*

This research is conceived as a qualitative study design with an elaborated interdisciplinary theoretical part, that feeds on knowledge from Sociology,

Psychology, Communication Studies, Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, and an involved empirical part – consisting of discussions with focus groups after a film screening and the in-depth qualitative analysis of films that is built upon the audiences' responses.

This article focuses on the first results of the focus groups. In a second step, they will be used in addition to the theoretical output to create categories for the film analysis. In this way it's possible to slip the viewers' perspective in. This is relevant, because strangeness is not an objective value but a very relational concept. There is no objective perception of strangeness and I have regard to that through the audience-based analysis. I follow the research of Michael Kunczik (cf. Kunczik/Zipfel, 2006), who analyses violence on TV, and named this method "functional content analysis".

#### IV. A CLOSER LOOK AT THE FILMS

Since the publication of the popular book "The white Masai", Austrian public service broadcasters ORF 1 and ORF 2 have shown 29 different films – Austrian and/or German productions – with my criteria of the *Africanized Heimatfilm*. That amounts to an average two productions every year. Beyond, those films air countless times in reruns and there are untold German productions as well that can be watched on German TV channels by Austrian audiences.

A (news excluding) program analysis of German-speaking television within an inquiry period of two weeks and three weekends has shown 28 different programs that relate to Africa (Non-Pay TV) – most of them reality TV-series and documentations. Films that meet the criteria of the *Africanized Heimatfilm* were shown every week. That means that audiences that are interested in that subgenre have once a week the possibility to watch an *Africanized Heimatfilm*.

Considering the steadily production of supplies, it's needless to say: those films have a reliable, good rating.

I have categorized the spotted films of the subgenre *Africanized Heimatfilm* by use of their plots and created four different characteristics:

- the main character is caught up by his or her European past (f. e. a missing half-sister)
- the main character is caught up by his or her African past (f. e. a heritage)
- a new challenge, a new love, a new task (f. e. the opening of a clinic)
- a travel adventure (f. e. honeymoon)

#### V. FOCUS GROUPS: FIRST INSIGHTS

Following this, I have selected key scenes from each category and showed them to – by now – two focus groups. The groups have been homogenous regarding one characteristic that was the existence of a migration biography or none.

There came out some interesting contextual observations: The discussion within the migrants' focus group was very emotional and partly controversial. The discussion of the non-migrants' group was embedded in a relaxed and playful atmosphere. There was a lot of sarcasm and irony as well. This can be attributed to the fact that the people of the non-migrants' group were speaking in their mother tongue, but the different levels of concernment may have been an issue as well.

##### *D. Identity and Desire*

Popular culture makes the search for identity happen by desire, appropriation and exclusion. As a consequence people of marginalized groups need to be

different from the mainstream society. Being different becomes their “job” to help the majority to sharpen their identity. (cf. Mayer/Terkessidis, 1998) Popular culture is the perfect agent for “othering”.

One main question was: Does the object of study please the needs of identity search? It does, in both groups. The participants were asked to discuss what makes those films to crowd favorites. They emphasize that the films show a different and other world and that watching them is a bit like travelling. Participants called it „leaving the daily routine“ and „leaving the madness“. Exotism was mentioned within both groups – it is interesting that within the migrants’ group it was especially „southafrica“ that was mentioned as exotic, whereas within the non-migrants’ group it was Africa itself. Another noteworthy aspect is the fact that the as exotic described woman was in the migrants’ group a white actress and in the non-migrants’ group a black actress. Love was also mentioned in both groups. Although “love” within the non-migrants’ group was interpreted narrower as romantic love and love story in an ideal world whereas “love” within the migrants’ group was defined as love without borders, love for a foreign place, for a person with different skin colour and love for a different culture.

In this context I want to accentuate Stuart Hall’s assumption of the deep ambivalence of identification and desire: „The play of identity and difference which constructs racism is powered not only by the positioning of blacks as the inferior species but also, and at the same time, by an inexpressible envy and desire; and this is something the recognition of which fundamentally displaces many of our so far stable political categories, since it implies a process of identification and otherness which is more complex

than we had yet imagined.“ (Hall, 1994: 19-20, translated) That brings me to the next issue.

#### *E. Strangeness and Difference*

People fight for self-assurance. As argued, identities and styles of life are mediated by media and popular culture, that are supported by globalisation. The strange reflects like a mirror the self. The difficulty of the analysis is, that this so called strange is not unknown. In contrary. It is the living cliché. Because the white gaze defines what strangeness is. There is rarely anything – not a place or a group of people, not a natural phenomenon that’s not know because of narratives of western discourses. (cf. Terkessidis, 2008; Fanon, 1980; Ha, 1999; Ha, 2000; Hall 1994)

The participants didn’t like to draw parallels to their own life – that “is completely different”; despite the fact that it was emphasized several times that the stories could happen anywhere in the world and the films are stories of love and family. One participant of the non-migrants’ group, an elderly woman, recognized and identified with a scene where hanging out the washing was shown. One participant of the migrants’ group, a young woman born in Mali, told that she can identify with the role of a European woman that left Europe for Africa.

Strangeness was never explicitly articulated. The participants of both groups demonstrated the difference between Africa and Europe. The participants of the non-migrants’ group stated that the films are stories about Africa but about Europe as well.

Africa seems to work like the Orient in Eduard Said’s concept of Orientalism that explains how the Orient function as the perfect “other” of Europe. Africa is constructed as an opposite of Europe as well.

*F. Reality and Stereotypes*

There is a dangerous connection between clichés and othering of black people because stereotypes can be a political tool: “Stereotypes have the political function of defining identities and of holding these identities in their place. That means, they re-create a old colonial order, by making a clear division between the ‘We’ and the ‘Others’. (...) [S]tereotypes are used to maintain racism.” (Grada Kilomba quoted from: Haruna, 2013: online) As a matter of fact cultural differences are produced as the impact of discriminatory life praxis. (cf. Terkessidis, 2008)

When it comes to evaluate if the films show reality or not it is according to theory only logical that especially the non-migrants’ group was informed about stereotypes and clichés about Africa.

At the first moment the participants decided the films to appear artificial, not real, and stereotyped. The plots were seen as not especially place bound. Both groups highlighted that Africa is shown as country side. The participants of the migrants’ group focus on the negative biases like criminality and the cast of black and white actors and actresses that favours white people for the good main characters. Except one person, a woman from Ukraine, made clear that she didn’t concentrate on black or white, but on emotions.

Within the non-migrants’ group racism was no explicit issue. The participants numerate witchcraft, the exotism, the colonial pictures, poor education, the rural setting, the beautiful nature, the idyllic orphanage, the jeeps and the safari-style and the clothing. Only two women – one in each group – pointed out sexism and gender stereotypes.

Both groups highlighted the opposite of a relaxing lifestyle in Africa and a stressed European way-of-life.

The participants discussed it as a cliché as well as reality.

When it comes to bi-racial relationships all participants agreed that problems in a relationship are not related to a special country or continent. Although one participant of the migrants’ group, a woman from Mali, stated that bad behaviour of black people in relationships – for example adultery – rebound on all black people in the sense of “They are all like that.”

In the migrants’ group there was a longer argument about the sentence “When it comes to business, don’t ever trust a black person”, articulated by a tricky black business man to a white voluntary service worker. The discussion was how fatal such a comment is. Interesting about that is that the sentence was followed by a dialogue between the two man about the German national league. The white man retorted: “When it comes to business, don’t ever trust a fan of Bayern-München (a German soccer club).” The participants’ of the non-migrants’ group pointed only this sentence out to be a stereotype.

Mentionable is that the migrants’ group discussed the plot as well as the roles more seriously. For example there was a scene with an old woman with the attributes of voodoo and witchcraft. While the non-migrants’ group laughed at the scenery the migrants’ group wondered why the woman played just a neglectable part within the film. One participant also highlighted that the woman’s doing was shown in a negative way, but that she basically liked her appearance because witchcraft belongs to Africa.

During the discussion about the degree of reality the non-migrants’ group focused on the deconstruction of clichés while the migrant’s group’s debate revolved around the personal stories of the main characters,

especially around the credibility of the migrational part of their biography.

#### VI. CONCLUSION

Entertainment television that presents ethnicity as part of its entertainment value is one example for the maintaining the cultural difference between people – with the consequence of dividing the audiences into the ones who are reassured that they belong to the majority and powerful authority and into the ones who are confronted by their own alienation. (cf. Fanon 1980) This process creates a dichotomous atmosphere in a world that is no longer dichotomous. In fact, it never has been.

The group discussions have shown that the films fulfill the requirement of the bipolarity of belonging and differentness. This is the grounding of racism (cf. Hall, 1994; Spivak, 2013) – and in case of the object of study it's kind of a sponsored by public purse racism. This means that the *Africanized Heimatfilm* can provide a racist reading. It became clear that especially those discussants who state they would watch this television offer tend to be not so reflective about it.

The first global analysis of the focus groups' data has shown that there is a manner of reception of the films as the genre of the *post-Nazi Heimatfilm*<sup>4</sup> – with changed signs. A comparison with the characteristics of the classic *Heimatfilm* revealed the existence of similar features of the genre (cf. Höfig, 1973): the idyllic landscape, special cultural contrastive pairs, different milieus, and typical features of the storylines. But the pattern of power and dominance has been displaced, the boundaries enlarged. The setting is no longer Austria or West Germany but "Africa" – not so much a

special geographical place as its cliché. Furthermore the protagonists are no longer men, but women who have often undergone some kind of emancipation before the storyline starts. The repertoire of characters in both genres is divided in local and strange people. (cf. Schrödl, 2004).

#### VII. PROSPECTS

The classic *Heimatfilm* offers amusement, entertainment and no need to reflect the history, to the contrary, it gives a possibility to link to pre-war period. In times of globalisation and mass migration the *Africanized Heimatfilm* can provide similar offerings. Both genres superficially provide the reconciliation with the either Nazi or colonial past (along with the guilt of the profiteers of Western exploitation) and allegedly illustrate a democratic new beginning, but actually establish again only authoritarian patterns.

My ongoing research intends to light upon the coherences between the post-Nazi and the *Africanized Heimatfilm*. There is also a necessity to analyse the films within their contexts. It is worthwhile if there are parallels of their functions for the audiences. To gain in-depth looks I will trial the data from the focus groups with the aid of focused and contextual analysis (cf. Paus-Haase, Hasebrink, Mattusch, Keuneke: 1999) and use the results – as pictured before – in conjunction with theory driven categories for an elaborated functional content analysis.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] This article is an extended and with new insights supplemented version of my presentation *The Africanized Heimatfilm – the (mis)use of an African setting for the*

construction of desire, identity, and strangeness in German-speaking television at the Second Annual International CCCS Conference "Media: Theory and Practice" 2014 in Skopje, Macedonia.

- [2] I renounce to translate the term *Heimatfilm* because it's a genuine Austrian-German TV genre. "Heimat" can be translated as "homeland", "habitat" or "home country".
- [3] "Brave other world" is my dissertation project at the University of Salzburg (advisor: Ingrid Paus-Hasebrink). The title refers to Aldous Huxley's dystopian novel "Brave new world" (Huxley himself borrowed the line from Shakespeare's "The tempest": „O, wonder! How many goodly creatures are there here! How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world, that has such people in't!").
- The paper is part of an ongoing process, brief passages are adopted from a presentation at the Conference „Ethnicity, Race and Nationalism in European Media and Film: Rights, Responsibilities, Representations“ at the University of Manchester in 2013: *Othering for a better consuming. How entertainment television makes ethnicity consumable.*
- [4] The term is used as temporal classification and concretisation of the *Heimatfilm* genre, because there is a difference between the classical *Heimatfilm*, the National Socialist early forms ("blood and soil" films) of it, and the mountain films of the 1920s. (cf. Schrödl 2004).

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