



Not Just a Blackened Face

Sandrine Micossé-Aikins, 4 December 2013

A lot has been said and written in the recent weeks and months about the use of blackface in German theatre (and other cultural) productions. It has become very clear that there is, on the one hand, an almost obsessive tendency to hold on to cultural practices that are rooted in the violent historical construction and submission of a Black “other”.

On the other hand, there is a strong resistance to engage with that very history and the ways in which those practices, images or words have been and still are part of what is constituting German contemporary society. The recent discussion about the elimination of racist terms from children’s books strengthens the impression that what we are really dealing with here, is a struggle about the power over the black body. Mainstream positions that keep surfacing in these debates are based almost without exception on a deep lack of critical knowledge about Germany’s colonial past as well as the history of blackface, but also the complete underestimation of the power inherent to images and words. At the same time, the intensity of the reactions to anti-racist criticism in the cultural domain suggests, that there is indeed a, if subconscious, awareness of a historical “right” to psychological and corporeal violence against (former) colonial subjects that is now being endangered.

In this essay, I want to challenge four of the most popular misconceptions about this subject by taking a deeper look at the intrinsically linked mechanisms of identity, race and representation in Germany.

The first is the idea that what happens on stage/in a movie/in a book is inspired by, but does not impact, everyday reality.

The second is the notion that the protest against, and the rejection of, white actors painting their faces to portray Black characters is rooted in the problematization of blackface in the United States – whether or not this problematization is seen as legitimate by those using this line of argumentation shall be secondary here. More importantly, according to this theory, white German actors performing in black make-up today are really isolated incidents that are not in any way connected to the history of blackface in

the United States or the history of racism in general. Merely an undue connection is constructed by the protesters.

The third is based on the overrating of intent: this position may even acknowledge the original, racist function of blackface but claims that it will be erased as soon as an author intends a neutral or antiracist meaning.

The fourth regards the repetition of racist practices and images as a means to commemorate a past that should not be forgotten. Here the reenactment or simple continuation of colonial imagery presumably constitutes in itself a critical engagement with this past. Racism and the embeddedness of racist practices in the everyday are projected onto previous, vague historical eras, while their ubiquitous presence in contemporary German society is denied and conveniently ignored by white people. The violent experiences of Black people are rendered invisible and insignificant.

What will follow is an attempt to unravel the inner contradictions and the incompleteness of such argumentation by reconnecting the practice of Blackface to the stereotype that is at its origin and redrawing the linkages between the historical development of imagery, colonialism and our contemporary moment – linkages that belie the idea that Blackface could exist in total isolation and neutrality on a German stage.

I

Cymothoa exigua, the tongue-eating fish louse is an amazing little animal. It is a parasitic crustacean which attaches itself to the tongue of fish, slowly making the organ wither away and eventually *becoming* it. This *Cymothoa* is the only known parasite that can replace a living organ. As probably most people, the first time I saw a picture of one of these little fellas, I was repulsed and fascinated at the same time. For days I could not get its image out of my head. What a wonderful metaphor this is, I thought, for the meaning and impact of racist imagery on our mind and body.

For if you happen to be a Black person in a predominantly white society like Germany, you will most likely be aware of the fact that your body constantly speaks with somebody else's tongue. It is communicating false information about you and there is often nothing you can do about that. This is due to the uncanny interplay of the absence of representations of Black people as normal, possibly German individuals, and the overwhelming presence of racist and exoticizing stereotypes. Blackface is only one of many vessels containing this stereotype which is based on a very limited set of negative and dehumanizing ideas about Blackness. Thus, whether Blackface is used within the traditional framework of a minstrel show in the US or within the staging of a presumably

anti-racist play at the German Schlosspark Theater, it can never be an independent means of expression. It comes with a baggage and is inspired and influenced by, or at least connoted with, racist images of Blackness.

Anyone who has ever watched a horror movie at night and caught themselves double checking whether the door is locked properly hours after knows that images do not stay with us only for the moment in which we are looking at them. They will nest in our minds, whisper in our ears and influence our actions beyond our better knowledge. They will speed up our heart rate, make us sweat, steal peaceful hours of sleep from us. As in the case of Blackface, they will become haunting ghosts, remote-controlling the mechanisms of a whole society, most of whose members do not remember why.

II

The blackface used in the version of Dea Loher's *Unschuld (Innocence)* staged at Deutsches Theater, for instance, is quite obviously citing the American minstrel tradition: pitch black face, bright red and exaggerated lips, emphasized by the unnaturally widened eyes of the actors. The casual use of a classic minstrel blackface as a reference apparently comprehensible to a German audience testifies to the familiarity of the image in this context. The functionality of the image depends on the apparent universality and established knowledge of what it contains. Its content has been fed into it for more than 200 years. From the mid-19th century on, advertisement, a domain that relies more than any other on the power of imagery, began to play an important role in the way that black people were seen in Germany. Minstrel shows were indeed touring in Europe and along with the "human zoos" constituted in themselves a powerful practice of creating and propagating a derogatory image of "the African" and other POCs. However, what had the greatest impact were not the shows themselves but the Posters that promoted them. Their particular style was picked up by advertisers, artists and musicians and found its way into various spheres of German cultural production.¹ With the import of goods from the US and the growing of the advertisement industry in Germany, images of Black people became common signifiers for certain products, such as ink or toothpaste.² One particular image though that enjoyed a special popularity nicely links up with the idea of Blackness involuntarily evoked in the Deutsches Theater's staging of *Unschuld*: the idea that Black

¹ For example, Paul Linke's "La fête du Nègre" (1903) was musically inspired by the "Cakewalk," a dance that originated on the plantations in the US and later became a popular element of minstrel shows. The sheet music featured a minstrel-style image on the cover of its partition booklet.

² See D. Ciarlo, *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2011.

people are after all not really black but just painted or, worse, dirty. Growing up as a Black child in Germany, I am all too familiar with this concept that one can encounter in everyday interactions with white Germans or in movies or children's books like *Pippi Longstocking*, etc. It emphasizes the notion that there is something fundamentally wrong with being black and that Whiteness equals normalcy, purity and cleanliness.

The paint on the faces of the two white actors in *Unschuld* dissolves as they move around on stage, interact with other characters and sweat. In the end, the make-up is gone. What has apparently been meant to signify a racist projection rather than "actual Blackness" brings back a haunted image that begins to march to its own rhythm.

The "Mohrenwäsche" (washing of the Moor) is also a figure of speech that has traditionally been used to describe the futile attempt to clear someone's culpability by using false evidence.

And in Germany the image became hugely popular especially between 1905 and 1911 to advertise soap. In *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany*, David Ciarlo demarcates the interrelation of the ever heavier use of this and other racialized images during this period and the political developments in the colonies:

*It would take a political event, however – an event of extreme violence – to provide an impetus for the adoption of racialization across all imagery in the consumer imaginary. That event was war.*³

The resistance against the German colonizers and the later genocide of the Herero and Nama in what is today Namibia (formerly German South-West Africa) intensely impacted the way in which Blackness was depicted in German advertisement.

The internal conflicts of an imperial German government, the atrocities committed by it in the colonies, and the tremendous amount of tax money eaten up by the colonial enterprise necessitated a propaganda that would make the war seem legitimate and mandatory, and portray Africans as less than human. It is therefore hardly surprising that the genocide that was accompanied by, and executed through, the use of concentration camps and horrific "scientific experiments" – practices that would be directly transferred into national socialism – correlate with an increase of imagery suggesting that Black people needed "cleaning".

³ Ibid., p. 257.

While this violent history has been mostly erased from the collective memory of German contemporary society, the images, whether conceptual or literal, have survived and await us, sometimes in the most curious places.

In 2007, the German branch of UNICEF picked up the image of the “Mohrenwäsche” for a fundraising campaign for schools in “Africa”. Posters showed white children with brown paint smeared over their faces. The uneven way in which it was applied suggested dirt rather than makeup. Clearly, here, too, viewers were expected to automatically make the connection between brown dirt and poor, African children. It took an intervention from UNICEF USA to withdraw the posters. Former protests from Black people in Germany had been ignored at best. The incident left me pondering. Why did German fundraising for Black children in „Africa“ require a campaign featuring white children in the first place? Why did these white children require (a really dirty looking) make up? The UNICEF campaign, the discussion around Blackface and racist language in children’s books are probably excellent moments to reflect upon what constitutes white German identity and what it relies on. What happens, when the *Cymothoa exigua* dies?

III

The Afro-German artist Philip Metz carried a German carnival costume all the way from Munich to Dakar to slowly stroll down the streets of the Senegalese capital. What would have been familiar to anyone who has grown up in Germany engendered nothing but incomprehension among the local population. Philip Metz was dressed up as what – in many incidents – is still understood to represent an “African” in the West: a grass skirt, a curious leather vest, a strange “afro wig” and a baton with a scull sitting on its top.

In the course of this artistic intervention, Metz asked shop owners and street vendors to advise him about what to wear to fit in and adopt the look of a “typical Dakarais”. Piece by piece, he dropped the racist costume and ended up in sneakers, jeans, a wax print shirt and a rather short haircut. One can probably look at this work as an experiment, as an investigation of the correlation of images and context. I see it as an exorcism that confronts a stereotype rather than simply repeating it and even goes beyond merely deconstructing it by exporting it into another epistemic realm, thereby making visible the short-sightedness and restrictedness of the white gaze.

Philip Metz’s own position as a Black German, the consideration of the existence of different perspectives on history as well as different epistemological approaches to subject matters and, lastly, the critical investigation of the stereotype itself are absolutely fundamental for the success of this artwork.

In the end, cultural producers decide which images they want to pick up. They do not decide, though, where these images come from, and how, and by whom, they are read. Blackface, in the German context, has a meaning. This meaning needs to be consciously examined and reflected upon. It cannot simply be replaced. So, the one question we should always ask ourselves before using an image is: who will be in charge of our tongue?

Bibliography

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