Book Review: *Advertising Empire: Race and Visual Culture in Imperial Germany*
David Ciarlo (Harvard University Press, 2010)

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In an era where commercial culture has saturated social life to such an extent that it appears inescapable, David Ciarlo’s recent work, *Advertising Empire*, sets toward the ambitious task of unpacking the social, political, and economic consequences associated with two centuries of Western advertising. While humanists with specialized backgrounds and research interests in African and Colonial Studies, Cultural Studies, and the History of Advertising seem the most likely primary audiences, Ciarlo successfully constructs an interdisciplinary approach that is inclusive of secondary audiences such as scholars in fields such as Economics, Rhetoric, Public Relations, and Journalism.
An accomplished piece of historical scholarship, *Advertising Empire* traces the appropriation of “the African native as a motif” by German mercantilists and advertisers between the late 19th and mid-20th centuries (24). Pointing to over 100 advertising images from Germany before and after the *fin de siècle*, Ciarlo illuminates how fetishized depictions of Germany’s colonialist and mercantile aspirations provoked the emergence of a racist visual trope. As *Advertising Empire* demonstrates, such visions not only figuratively commodified the exotic but had the material consequence of commodifying racial superiority. Consumers of the time literally purchased a vision of intra-racial homogeneity, which positioned the “African native” as Other (see Chapter 2, “Impressions of Others: Allegorical Clichés, Panoptic Arrays, and Popular Savagery).

From the perspective of the current historical moment, *Advertising Empire* stands as a work that is unique in that it looks not simply at the ways history has been wrought discursively. Put differently, in a time where digital-screens have become the dominant mode of communication in Western society, Ciarlo pauses to look backward and critically reflect on a time when the ability to compose and mass produce images was a profound step forward. As visual rhetoric theorist Sonja K. Foss put it, “[t]he study of visual symbols from a rhetorical perspective...has grown with the emerging recognition that such symbols provide access to a range of human experience not always available through the study of discourse” (303). In this regard, *Advertising Empire* serves as a mirror by which today’s civilization might read itself.

Thus, while the technological developments of 19th century might have afforded colonialists and mercantilists the ability “to compose” differently—the opportunity to access new visual semiotic modes of meaning making—*Advertising Empire* shows us that culture was drawn, again, across predictable lines. The images in this work of
scholarship depict a society and time divided; they show races, places, and faces which are polarized and grossly oversimplified. What stands as Ciarlo’s greatest lesson for readers, then, is the consequence of failing to recognize the way in which text and image serve as powerful boundary maintenance tools. Consumers of the era quite simply failed to recognize, as most would do today, that these advertisements were concretizing the types of binaries of North/South, Black/White, and Modern/Uncivilized which continue to debilitate human civilization and push it to the brink of war. Put most simply, Advertising Empire is a book about becoming critical of the power that resides in the mundane texts that surround us.

Works Cited

Foss, Sonja K. “Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory.”

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