

## **Posters act: Namibian poster action and the photographic poster archive<sup>1</sup>**

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*This article mainly draws from ideas and approaches developed in a recently published volume Posters in Action. Visuality in the Making of an African Nation. In contrast to most African poster historiography our argument has developed towards an understanding of posters as images in action and has linked them to their specific historical contexts of production, circulation and visual communication. While remaining critical of the assumption that posters were and are necessarily linked to urban and industrialised settings, we have acknowledged their being located within processes of negotiation of modernisation. The action approach understands posters as active agents in processes of visual communication, which involved different people and spaces at different moments in time. By doing so we have shifted the focus towards the realm of consumption and perception. The article, of course, reflects on the specific form and function of posters, but rather than focusing on image content, graphic vocabularies and genres, we have tried to understand and interpret posters in the context of specific forms of visibility emerging in Namibia throughout the twentieth century. We pay attention to varied forms of agency linked to visuals and explore how they have become meaningful through the ways they have been distributed, perceived and appropriated.*

*Historical posters are archival documents as they become available to us as parts of collections. Treating these collections and the specific status of posters as ephemera within them, we have engaged with an approach of exploring what we have termed archives of the poster, i.e. to link poster collections to other visual archives, such as photographic and oral ones.*

*Discussing various examples of historical posters from Namibia and by linking them to historical photographs and oral knowledge about them, we have reconstructed the place and role of posters in the constitution of public reading sites, among them most significantly the street. Public visual consumption was determined and regulated by segregation and apartheid policies, making access to public spaces in general and to images in particular highly contested. Nevertheless, as the article shows, despite the repressive policies of the colonial state, and linked to them a strong propagandistic bias in image production and circulation, multiple cultures of visual literacies emerged, challenging and at times undermining the containment to narrow spaces and the silencing by colonial rule.*

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<sup>1</sup> This article summarises key issues which are discussed extensively in the recently published book: Giorgio Miescher, Lorena Rizzo and Jeremy Silvester eds., *Posters in Action: Visuality in the Making of an African Nation* (Basel: Basler Afrika Bibliographien, 2009). The book, the result of a long transnational collaborative research association between Namibian and Swiss students and historians, offers elaborative essays and, in one part, an extensive photo section which we term the Photographic Poster Archive. Most of the images in this essay are taken from the book.