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Australia's Image in Germany in the Digital Age

I have been invited to present a brisk and provocative statement for our joint discussion, no slides, no frills. Let me therefore give this Doctor's Report in shorthand.

Diagnosis: In Germany, Australia (in spite of a few serious efforts to the contrary) still enjoys the haziest, most fantastic and most erratic image of any continent, except for Antarctica.

Anamnesis: The question is: Who should be blamed for this? Scholars - and especially German scholars - are inclined to categorize the factors that shape territorial and national images. They will find the following:

1. A vague historical sediment, forming what we have come to call "cultural memory". For Australia, this is still largely the **Antipodean Myth** based on both positive and negative projections and valorized by fear and fascination. Generally, antipodean myths can be attached and extended to any form of the "Other". But the concept of Australia has been the major training ground for our antipodean imagination. Since classical antiquity, Europeans have had their deeply ingrained notions of Terra Australis Incognita. That Australia should be a continent holding every imaginable inversion of the world familiar was taken for granted long before the first Dutchmen actually ventured into the southern seas. In fact, inversion is the structural principle by which the yet undiscovered but nonetheless conceptualized "southern world" is used in Joseph Hall's dystopian satire of European mores in 1605.[1] This antipodean principle is still valid for many of the positive or negative projections which Europeans tend to associate with Australia. Whenever, on the one hand, Europe is felt to be old, conventional, repressive, narrow, or culture-ridden, Australia is considered to be young, unconventional, free, spacious, natural

[1] First published anonymously in Frankfurt under the title *Mundus alter et idem sive Terra Australis ante hac semper incognita longis itineribus peregrini academici imperrime illustrata autore Mercurio Britannico* and shortly after (c.1609) translated into English by John Healy under the title *The Discovery of a New World.*

etc. On the other hand, the antipodean principle allows for all kinds of negative clichés wherever one's own familiar world is credited with positive qualities. The ineradicable British colonial notions that in Australia birds do not sing and flowers have no fragrance can serve as blatant examples of such negative antipodean projections.

2. Beyond the antipodean principle, there are more recent and more evidently active agencies at work trying to create realistic representations rather than imaginative projections. These can be subsumed under the large cloak of **the media**.

a) Starting with realistic **literature** based on log-books, journals and travellers' reports, we can trace a path of German reflections on Australia starting from Georg Forster's *Voyage Round the World* (1777). These Friedrich Gerstäcker's numerous Australian sketches and narratives (dating from 1849 to 1879) and are, in a way, continued by Hans Bertram's and Hans Egon Kisch's critical adventures in *Flug in die Hölle* (1933), or *Landung in Australien* (1937) respectively. Moreover, we would have to take into account Walter Kaufmann's mixed experiences as a refugee treated as an enemy alien before finding his fellow workers' solidarity, and we may finally arrive at Siegfried Lenz's or Joachim Fuchsberger's favourable Australian impressions of a friendly, liberal and generous country.[2] But, in an age of world literature, no German reader would exclusively rely on German writing alone. His image of Australia would be equally informed and influenced by translations (or even the originals) of outstanding British, American, and above all, Australian authors. Popular perception would naturally tend to bypass academic reading lists with their demanding array of Henry Lawson's, Patrick White's, David Malouf's or Peter Carey's sombre or grotesque panoramas. Instead, more credit would be given to the best-selling melodramatic or mystical concepts of Australia expounded by Colleen MacCulloch or Bruce Chatwin. The success of a novel's film version may certainly help an author to make his way from the educational to the popular

[2] For more authors and material in this field of the German literary reception of Australia the following bibliographies and collections may be consulted: Johannes Voigt, *Australia - Germany: Two Hundred Years of Contacts, Relations and Connections* (Bonn: Inter Nationes, 1987), 48-57; Leslie Bodi, Stephen Jeffries and Susan Radvansky, *Image of a Continent: A Bibliography of German Australiana from the Beginnings to 1975 / Bild eines Kontinents: Eine Bibliographie deutschsprachiger Australiana von den Anfängen bis 1975* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1990); Alan Corkhill, *Antipodean Encounters: Australia and the German Literary Imagination 1754-1918* (Bern: Lang, 1990); Manfred Jurgensen, *Eagle and Emu: German-Australian Writing 1930-1990* (St.Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1992); Volker Wolf, *Australien: Deutsche - zumeist literarische Impressionen* (Bern: Lang, 1992); Gerhard Stilz (ed.), *Australienreisen: Von der Expedition zum Tourismus* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995).

camp, though usually at the cost of the more differentiated aspects of his or her image of Australia. Complex matter is hard to sell, and questioning established stereotypes requires much educational commitment.

b) Possibly for this reason, the German **press**, until very recently, was quite reluctant to adopt Australian subjects. Information about political, economical or cultural issues and events was irregular and rare. Even major weekly papers indulging in sumptuous feuilletons were not as "global" in their political and cultural interests as their headlines in the economy sections purported. Even the Australian Bicentennial in 1988 did not trigger off a lasting recognition of the Fifth Continent's dynamic economy in the German press. Nor did the laudable festival activities staged in 1995 in various German cities under the catchword "Erlebnis Australien" create a new awareness of Australia's cultural relevance in the German print media. Even to this day, news on Australia are still kept on a scanty and discontinuous level, not due to the lack of correspondents, but allegedly to the lack of interest and space. There is, however, an ongoing and widespread preference for antipodean curiosities. It remains yet to be seen whether the Olympic Games in Sydney will move the German press to include more continuous and reliable information on Australian political, economical and (multi-)cultural life.

c) Similar shortcomings and concerns seem to apply to German **broadcasting**. Lacking, however, a representative survey of German radio programmes during recent years, I leave this assessment to the self-probing journalistic conscience and responsible judgement of those in charge.

d) German **television** was, during recent years, as erratic and taciturn as the other media in its news coverage of Australia, but the entertainment sections seem to have decided on transmitting a growing number of films and documentaries from or about Australia. Unfortunately, the popular image of Australia spread by movies is largely shaped by block busters such as "Crocodile Dundee" or "Mad Max", whereas the documentaries tend to follow the tourism format to present Australia as a spectacular continent bulging with tightly-packed heroic landscapes and gorgeous sights. What emerges from many of these 45 minute features is a rather disoriented impression of an unreal island of curiosities assembled on an area not much larger than Berlin.

e) If I should voice a hope for the **digitalized electronic media**, it is that they may, with their options to cater for specialized interests, escape the mutilating simplification mechanisms issuing from the presumed dictates of

large audiences who are suspected of having neither time for details nor a desire to be educated while being entertained.

3. Another factor in modern life which has come to shape our images of other places to an unprecedented degree has been mentioned: **Tourism**, the industry providing both the anticipated clichés and the "real" experience of heterotopia, has become the supplier of a major form of existence in the contemporary world. Tourists, eager to enact their suppressed nomadic urges within the comforts of a settled society, need the tourist industry for a safe and socially accepted arrangement of their temporary escape.[3] For this purpose, the tourist industry produces anticipatory catalogues, safe and controlled (if not guided) tours, and portable objects for collection and recollection. All of these products provide for a strange mixture of pre-established clichés about Australia. They establish and confirm conventionalized "sights" and supply licenced values, which provide the tourist with the legitimation needed for his temporary escape from settled European life. Such licences valorized for travelling "down under" and projected into Australia, recapitulate the genealogy of travelling. They appeal to the mystical aims of pilgrims and anchorets, use the discourse of official errands, tickle the adventurous fancy of gold diggers, promise the glorious loneliness of explorers, raise the high expectations of unique discoveries in the ultimate wilderness, turn tourists into conquerors, make them a settlers elsewhere, endorse their romantic desires to flee the crowded cities, support that they have deserved a quiet, relaxing and refreshing holiday far from home or, finally, insist that a true global citizen must have seen all sights on the globe anyway. Significantly, some of these rhetorical travel licences are much older than the European knowledge of Australia. Therefore the Australian images propagated by tourism often tell us much less about the area to be toured than about the desires and impediments that motivate or obstruct our departure from home.

Therapy: What could and should be done in order to improve our images of Australia? - This depends on what we aim to do.

a) If we wished to **sell** Australia, we would probably do well if we followed the lucrative tracks of successful tourist agencies shaping Australia into a commodity that corresponds to the desires of those who pay. We would

[3] See my keynote "Reisen - wozu? Australien in der touristischen Rhetorik" in *Australienreisen* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1995), 1-20.

then have to strengthen Australia's self-contradictory image as a comfortable antipodean experience.

b) If we wish to **defend** Australia against this image of a cheap, ultimately unreal and misleading tourist commodity, we will have to resist proliferating that image wherever we can, by showing its glib falseness and seductive treachery.

c) If we wish to **inform** the German public about Australia, examining the similarities and differences of Australian and European life, or accounting for the Australian failures and successes in creating a new world, we will have to consciously move away from the antipodean projections and the facile bundles of touristy idealizations, and grant this underrated and underrepresented continent a sober, patient, differentiated and continuous coverage in all media.

A reading of Australian literature is a rewarding entry to this track of responsibility which I recommend for forming Australia's future image in Germany.

Prognosis: Whether the digitalization of the media can assist to reach this aim is not at all self-evident to me. It may to a certain degree. The blessings of digital information may be helpful as far as the options of specialized programmes are concerned. But digitalization may also stand in the way of a comprehensive image of Australia and, indeed, of any kind of integrated perception.

On the one hand (and I am not quite sure which hand to open first), digitalization facilitates the decentralized, degeneralized, highly individual access to medial production and reception. It may therefore be able to help differentiated, down-to-earth notions of Australia to be spread among highly different interest groups. Bankers, business students, poultry farmers, scuba divers or environmentalists may be able to exchange their special interests, select their own news, shape them into their own myths and communicate, even socialize over vast distances, across the barriers of more traditionally compartmentalized cultures and languages.

On the other hand, this competition with and dissolution of large-scale media communities may also bring about a fragmentation of perception enhanced by a maximum of comfort in selecting preconceived interests. This may be accompanied by the decay of learning and being able to cope with new ideas and aspects, and it may lead to a general weakening of negotiative skills and virtues. We should therefore not ignore the danger emanating from a

flood of special interest programmes: the danger of losing sight of integral notions of and responsibilities for the territory and society we are living in. The growth of new *global* villages through the networks and virtual realities of the digital media may not only draw its sap from the old *local* villages (whose participation in civic life may largely be said to have changed for the better through radio and television). But the digital media - by catering for all kinds of diversified special interests at the cost of matters of general interest - may also deeply affect our *provincial*, *regional* and *national* structures of consensus, responsiveness and responsibility.

Summing up, we find that certain advantages can be seen in the digitalization of the media. But at the same time, the more powerful agencies mediating the general public interests - whose task is to care for integrated views beyond the limited partialities of a host of relatively small social groups communicating on their special interests - must not be weakened. Germans and Australians, under the imbalanced modes of fragmented awarenesses facilitated by digitalization, may no longer be interested in finding or even discussing integral, consensual images of either Australia or Germany. Yet who will run the world if its citizens are set floating as digital surfers on the waves of self-serving subjectivity?