

Juliane Hornung, Um die Welt mit den Thaws. Vom Honeymoon zur Expedition. Eine Mediengeschichte der New Yorker High Society in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts, Göttingen (Wallstein) 2020, 384 S., 141 Abb., ISBN 978-3-8353-3771-8, EUR 42,00.

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Jan Logemann, Göttingen

Larry and Peggy Thaw traveled the world during the 1920s and 1930s. The New York high society couple became global celebrities, they toured the Grand Hotels of Europe, and at least for a week every year they made their way to Paris. More daring than most, they even ventured on African safaris and dined with the Maharajas of India. The Thaws were media stars in their day, covered by an eager press, and they were champions of self-promotion reminiscent of present-day influencers. Yet, they would be all but forgotten, if not for a massive collection of amateur films about their lives and travels which they amassed over the years. These films, along with diaries and endless newspaper clippings about their exploits, form the empirical basis for Juliane Hornung's insightful media biography of the couple.

Hornung uses the Thaws and their relentless pursuit of self-promotion as a lens into the emergence of a new American »high society« in the early part of the 20th century; centered in New York City, but ultimately transnational in character. Methodologically, the book understands itself as a media history and the author focusses on the (self-)representations of the Thaws and other wealthy socialites who found their way into the newly established society pages of the newspapers because of their wealth, their lifestyles or their links to the world of arts and entertainment. This high society was more open and fluid than the old »upper class« of the late 19th century, Hornung suggests. The films of the Thaws demonstrate the growing importance of performative consumption as well as an increased attention to working on one's body to become or remain part of the »in crowd«. Hornung deftly draws on recent work in cultural and gender studies to analyze the media strategies employed by her high society actors.

»Um die Welt mit den Thaws« is structured in three main parts. The book begins with an analysis of New York high society life during the interwar years, its emergence and social composition, its schedules and routines and especially its mediated performances and increased public visibility. A second chapter is devoted to the amateur films of the Thaws as a source to capture the materiality, visuality and performativity of high society life, particularly during ritualized vacations in Europe, Florida or in the Caribbean. The final section of the study is devoted to the more lavishly produced films covering the African and Asian travels of the couple, which increasingly resembled professional travel documentaries of the



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time and were conceived for wider audiences. Here the focus of the study shifts to a Western and specifically American tourist gaze of Africa as well as the films' implicit modernization narratives regarding India and the Middle East.

The greatest asset of Hornung's study is perhaps her unique source material, including a collection of film roles which survived on a Bavarian attic. The films formed the basis for a larger research project on the Thaws and the emergence of high society supported by the Gerda Henkel Stiftung. The author certainly makes the most out of this material and her close analysis of the films, and the material history of amateur film production offers rich insights to media historians and scholars of film. The book's innovative visualization strategy stands out as well. Next to photographs and stills from the films themselves, Hornung uses QR-codes to direct readers equipped with smart phones to short video clips stored on a designated project website¹. The offering of clips could have been more selective, but these film excerpts allow the author to transcend the limitations of the printed medium and to illustrate her analysis in a way that is truly enriching for the audience.

The sources vividly document a transformation from amateur to professional film from the 1920s to the early 1940s, which comes out most clearly in the African and Asian travel pictures. Drawing on the findings of (post-)colonial scholarship, Hornung reveals a pseudo-ethnographic perspective in the couple's Africa films. Depictions of »unwashed« and seemingly backward Africans and of untamed nature accentuate the contrast to the consumerist standard of living of the Western high society. Their trip through Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, and India, by contrast – spectacularly staged in a state-of-the-art recreational vehicle sponsored by General Motors and supported by the U.S. State Department – stressed the modernity of this region about to shake off European colonial rule. The Thaws mingled with the Maharajas of India's Princely States, many of whom were regulars in the elite social circles of New York or Europe. The study makes remarkable efforts in contextualizing the Thaw's films and travels within broader (post-)colonial scholarship, but the sources in these sections of the book frequently serve more to confirm the state of research rather than to offer entirely new perspectives. Regrettably, these sections at times also lose sight of the high society phenomenon, which the book sets out to explore.

The story of an emerging transatlantic high society and of the media strategies it produced presents the real strength of Hornung's study. She uses the Thaws to elucidate the daily routines and the annual rhythms of society life. She explores time, but also space as a category of social construction, and the Thaws take us to the luxury apartments, grand hotels, ball rooms and overseas resorts where society life took place. Belonging to these

¹ <https://edit.gerda-henkel-stiftung.de/die-thaws/um-die-welt-mit-den-thaws/>.



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circles was no longer determined solely by birth or even wealth, but increasingly by media savvy. To be in the papers was key to success and socialites like the Thaws knew how to keep themselves interesting. They made their appearances, they (particularly Peggy, meeting gendered expectations) worked on their bodies and public personas, and they used their movies and film screenings in notable society circles as a way to elicit continuous attention and media coverage. At times the study dwells too much on the concepts of self-professionalization and media competence with regard to the Thaws. However, the author impressively documents the degree to which modern-day social media influencers and society celebrities build on media dynamics and strategies that emerged in the early 20th century.

Ultimately, the fame of the Thaws proved ephemeral. Today, neither of them even have a Wikipedia entry and sceptics might ask what merits such an extensive study of people who were famous primarily for being famous. In many ways, early twentieth-century high society and the media coverage around it appears as self-reflexive, shallow and ultimately inconsequential as its modern-day counterpart. Through the films of the Thaws we learn little about the vast majority of American society at their time and, despite Hornung's best efforts, information on audiences and the reception of their films remains scant. We only receive glimpses, too, of the financial and commercial side of the Thaw's media endeavors which despite some sponsorship were only possibly because of the enormous inherited wealth of the couple. They were unique people, hardly representative of their contemporaries. Except, of course, for the elite 1% who also traveled in their circles. Their worldview, largely unrestrained by material challenges, social conventions or national borders, comes clearly into focus in these films. It is a world in which the outbreak of World War II primarily registers as an inconvenience for the couple's travel plans even if Larry later manages to leverage some of his connections and insights for a short (but impressive) career within military intelligence. Juliane Hornung's book artfully immerses the reader in this high society world, deciphers its mediated construction and in doing so makes many astute observations that will enrich the historiographies of media, travel and transnational consumption in this era.



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