

THE SOFT SKIN OF THE NATION THE AfD, GENDERED METAPHORS, AND THE MEDIA

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Political campaign posters for the European elections were omnipresent in Berlin this May. Out of the multitude of posters all over the city, one sparked a great debate: the Alternative für Deutschland's (AfD) campaign poster that featured a part of Gérôme's 19th century Orientalist painting "Le Marché d'esclaves" ("The slave market"). By adding the slogans "For Europe not to become 'Eurabia!' Europeans vote for the AfD!", I suggest that the party aims at establishing a sovereignty of interpretation. The AfD wants the viewer to read the otherwise equivocal image unambiguously as showing a naked 'white' woman as the slave to be sold by three fully clothed 'Oriental' men who are negotiating her value. The image at the same time is recontextualized in a way that directs its interpretation within the context of contemporary European politics: 'white' people should fear the presence of foreigners who will enslave and violate 'white' women.

The AfD stresses this interpretation of the painting that reproduces the party's racist narrative of a gendered threat of foreign invasion. It has routinely utilized in its campaigns the 'white' female body as a metaphor for the German nation and the broader Europe that is threatened by the proximity of an 'Other'. This 'Other' takes different stereotypical forms. In the election campaign poster it appears as the violent misogynistic 'Oriental' man. The metaphor further fuels the party's populist *Us vs. Them* narrative and allows for the nation's borders and defenses to be constructed like skin. As Sara Ahmed wrote in *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, the nations' borders and defenses are constructed as "soft, weak, porous and easily [...] bruised by the proximity of others. It suggests that the nation is made vulnerable to abuse by its very openness to others (2004:2)." This then implies that Germany/Europe should close itself off from 'Others' through stricter laws on immigration and asylum seekers, which the AfD frequently calls for.

The Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Massachusetts owning the Gérôme painting was

outraged and demanded the withdrawal of the painting from the party's campaign. In addition to the discussion of the poster itself, this conflict led to a lot of media coverage for the AfD. The party could not have been happier about the outcome. Frank Hansel (AfD representative) even sarcastically thanked the *Tagesspiegel* for the coverage without having to pay for an ad. Johannes Hillje (2017), who writes on the AfD's propaganda, argues that the success of the party has to be understood as a result of its media strategy.



Anti-AfD poster left on the street after a counter-demonstration on the occasion of an AfD event in Lübeck in 2017 © Martin Lemke

According to him, although the AfD routinely accuses the media of being tendentious, it depends on them to provide the necessary platform for its staging and willful provocations. The overstepping of boundaries, discriminations and the ensuing outrage already constitute a part of the party's strategy, as the case of the Gérôme painting illustrates. Moreover, the affective dimension of the party's populist style, as illustrated by the above mentioned narrative of threat, guarantees attention. Accordingly, the media provide the AfD with access to the public, which the party needs to set topics within public discourses. Eventually, this must be seen as the success of the party. Developments, such as the creation of the "Heimatministerium", debates about losing the German "Leitkultur" due to "too much immigration" or FDP's Christian Lindner's racist comments in 2018 when he directly linked abilities to speak the German language and belonging to skin color are not only crooked attempts at retrieving voters lost to the AfD, but also attest to a shift to the right in political and public discourse.

As I argue in my Master's thesis, it is important to consider the historical (dis)continuities of visual topoi, such as drawing on the female body as allegory. The fact that the AfD used a 19th century Orientalist painting in its poster attests to this. Moreover, this demonstrates that the AfD's visual politics is embedded in visual traditions and not a singular phenomenon.

About the Author:

Anna-Kathrin Oswald joined the Global Studies Programme at IAAW in 2016. She wrote her Master's thesis on the visual politics of 21st century European far right parties, especially focusing on the 2017 federal election campaign posters of the AfD. Her interests include visual anthropology, matters of representation and nationalisms.



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