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FROM ISIS TO THE AFD: ULTRAIST RHETORIC AND VISUALITY IN ALT-ORIENTALIST CONCURRENCE

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In April 2019, the German nationalist and right-wing populist party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD, Alternative for Germany) put up a series of campaign posters in the lead-up to the European Parliamentary elections (Figure 7.1).

The posters appeared in various cities and high-traffic junctures, including parks and bus stops. To further disseminate these political images in the digital sphere, the Berlin-based AfD's Twitter account posted them online, where it lauded such visuals as essential pedagogical tools in its series entitled 'Learning from Europe's History' (*Aus Europas Geschichte lernen*). One of these campaign posters, showing turbaned men inspecting the teeth of a white-fleshed nude woman, was posted on Twitter on April 8, 2019.[1] This image included the hash-tagged statement: 'On the basis of numerous motifs from European art history, our #EUElection campaign is intended to draw attention to the common value that must be defended today more than ever.' This so-called 'common value' (*gemeinsame Wert*) is clarified through the written reference to the 2015–16 New Year's Eve (*Silvesternacht*) in Cologne, at

[1] Available at <https://twitter.com/AfDBerlin/status/1115572899115675649> (last accessed 4 June 2022).

Figure 7.1 Campaign poster by Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany), Germany, April 2019.
Source: Image in the public domain.

which time German women were sexually assaulted by foreign men described as of Arab or North African origins (BBC 2016). The image is thus intended to stoke a fear of lustful, violent foreign interlopers while also stirring the urge to defend white women's honour and their physical integrality.

Other renditions of the AfD's poster using the same painted scene expand the visual's semiotic range through other captions, including the exclamation: 'So that Europe won't become Eurabia' (*Damit aus Europa kein 'Eurabien' wird!)*, as in Figure 7.1. The historical lesson that is putatively to be learned goes beyond sexual intimidation and violation to activate a larger geographic reference to 'Eurabia', a portmanteau term embraced by various white nativist groups to describe an Islamist takeover of Europe through migratory invasion (Litmann 2005). The image thus seeks to stoke an existentialist fear of Euro-Christian cultural extinction, whereby the Old Continent is embodied by an exposed odalisque who stands ripe for the taking by a closing circle of dark-skinned and/or Muslim intruders. This Orientalist–Islamophobic cliché,

premised on rape- and race-based anxieties, is not new or surprising to scholars who have studied the evolution of the alt-right's xenophobic rhetoric over the years. This rhetoric involves a medley of tropes, above all the terrorisation and racialisation of religion wherein Islam, in particular, is conceptualised as contra-white (Aziz 2021; Yukich and Edgell 2020).

Beyond such verbal stratagems, what is striking in this particular case is the AfD's reliance on a European art historical canon that involves an Orientalist painting, twisted and turned for alternative ends. These recent rhetorical and visual tactics aim to craft a picture of insurmountable alterity above all else. Moreover, the Orientalism of Edward Said from several decades ago (Said 1978) gives way to today's imagistic landscape of romanticised radicalism, which I term 'alt-Orientalism'. This approach to the Other transcends critical theory and post-colonial discourses about imperial power and domination writ large to explore how identitarian movements and ultraist groups wilfully deploy Orientalising imageries to vex opponents, cause dismay, consolidate public opinion and entrench a binary worldview.

These incendiary and polarising efforts gain a new life online, where they spread and speciate in multi-participant platforms and groups: some mainstream and others ultra-conversative, neo-Nazi, or jihadist. On the Internet, images quickly turn into memes: that is, digital visuals engaging shorthand cultural symbols that are then virally transmitted through participatory behaviours (Denisova 2019; Kien 2019; Blackmore 1999). The most widespread among such graphics warn of European and Muslim hybridity: that is, the formation of a new mixed breed that neo-conservative and Islamophobic conspiracy theorists refer to as 'Eurabia', the latter also central to the AfD's alt-Orientalist poster caption. Such mongrelised memes point to a purist discourse on race that is central to white nativist groups, which in turn is reified in a pictorial language that undergoes semiotic cooptation, diversion and reinvestment. Per Nicolas Bourriaud, images that navigate in such conflictual agoras essentially act as social go-betweens and constructed situations whose 'spectacle deals first and foremost with forms of human relations' (Bourriaud 2002: 84–5).

Beyond Orientalist iconographies and memetic admixtures, other images aim to depict Western civilisation on the precipice of death. This portentous scenario instrumentalises end-of-times rhetoric while also depicting the white

race as if at the knife's edge of survival. Such iconographies pretend to offer lessons in European art history but in fact circulate online in close symbiotic relationship with ISIS's extremist visuals, most notably its photographs and films of human beheadings. Whether in alt-right European posters or jihadi digital spheres, images of decapitation engage in a looping of Orientalist and self-Orientalising stereotypes, each of which build a polarised yet unified global visual culture of call-and-response extremism.

Before proceeding any further, two questions must be addressed: first, how does one define extremism and, second, how can art history and visual culture, as the allied humanistic disciplines at the centre of this study, potentially provide a tool kit for an 'interventionist' analysis of sorts?

Regarding the former, Peter Coleman and Andrea Bartoli provide several useful definitions for 'extremism', which they posit can be, among others: an incentive-driven ideological construction, a rational strategy in a game of power, an emotional outlet for severe feelings, and an apocalyptical worldview (Coleman and Bartoli 2015). The third premise, which takes a psychological approach, is best left to scholars who study extremists' psychological distress and their black-and-white perception of the world, a kind of cognitive splitting or simplicity that results in ideological dogmatism, the belief in conspiracy theories, and religious intolerance and over-confidence (van Prooijen and Krouwel 2019). Moreover, the fourth possibility – the doomsday mode, especially with regards to ISIS's output – has already been studied extensively (McCants 2015). For the purposes of this study, the first two premises – namely, the constructed 'extreme' position as declaratively anti-middleground along with the calculated use of messages within a larger conflictual landscape – take centre stage. I argue that extremist visuality should be considered a 'rational' endeavour in the visual field: in other words, it is a 'judo politics' (Wintrobe 2006: 7) with two partners engaged in, and benefitting from, ideological sparring in pictured form.

Such battling also quickens a dichotomisation of the global visual lexicon. The emergent binary concepts and motifs that are examined in this study include male v. female, Europe v. Islam, and peace v. violence. Such contrarian copulates are not a stable given, however. They rely on an entrenchment of perceptual realities as well as an acceleration of the viewing process itself. And this is where the methodologies of art history and visual culture can provide a

theoretical – and perhaps practical – intervention as both aim to highlight the complexity of visual operations through iconographical analysis, itself a slowing down of the seeing process. Such interpretative deceleration and double-checking, especially along Panofskian lines, can help lay bare an image's constructed nature and hence expose, perhaps even undermine, its tactical foundations.

Female-mania and the Sexually Depraved Other

The pictorial source of the AfD's variously captioned poster is a painting entitled *The Slave Market* (*Le marché d'esclaves*) executed in 1866 by the renowned French Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme (Figure 7.2) (Lees 2012; Des Cars et al. 2010: 272–4). Known for his academic style and treatment of mythological subjects, Gérôme also produced a wide range of drawings and paintings based on his travels to Egypt and the Near East. These images often include a close attention to details, including facial features and ethnographic types, clothing and headgear, and various objects that the painter collected and used as props in his Paris studio.

Figure 7.2 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *The Slave Market*, oil on canvas, 1866.
Source: The Clark Institute, Williamstown, MA, 1955.53.

To these elements he added others, most especially an emphasis on the idealised female nude, whether represented as relaxing in a Turkish bathhouse or as an object of the slave trade. Scholars such as Linda Nochlin have pointed out that these types of depictions display an 'imaginary Orient' at the height of French colonialism, in which documentary realism is combined with an erotic mystification of the female body put on full display for the European beholder's visual enjoyment and possession (Nochlin 1989). A decade prior, Edward Said examined these types of sexualised tropes within European literature through a post-colonial reading that positioned itself as resistant to facile dichotomies (Şahin, Schleck and Stearns 2021).

For Gérôme himself, however, slavery and the female nude transcended a mere Orientalist fantasy staged in nineteenth-century Cairo, Damascus or Istanbul. Indeed, the auctioning of a female nude formed a central theme in about half a dozen paintings of his, some of which take place in ancient Rome instead (Figure 7.3). The topic of the slave trade offered the French artist an opportunity to explore the statuesque and sensualised

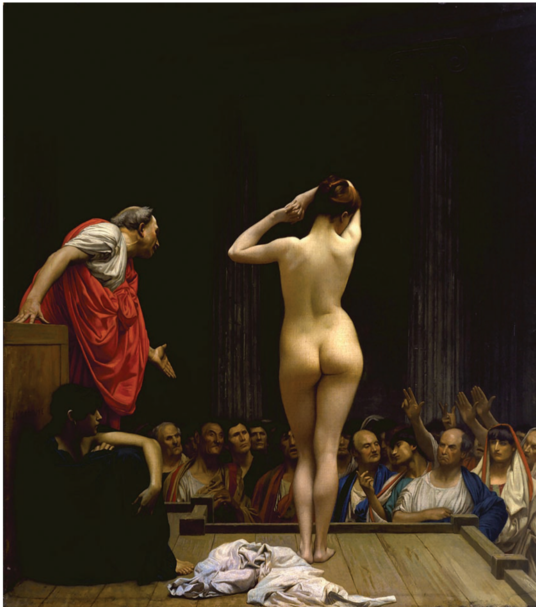

Figure 7.3 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Slave Market in Ancient Rome*, oil on canvas, c. 1884. Source: The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, 37.995.

female form as well as an occasion to depict a wide range of body gestures and facial expressions among a crowd of interested male buyers. Beyond physical forms and movements, Gérôme also used the female nude to perfect a chiaroscuro effect, a strong contrast achieved in the painting through a dark background and the ricocheting of light upon the woman's pearlescent backside.

Gérôme's female slave depictions augur their own purchasability in the Paris salons where, despite the overt and rather daring eroticism of their contents, they proved highly desirable items for private acquisition and, eventually, museum ownership and display. In this manner, the artist might be offering an underhanded and self-referential commentary on the allure and marketability of his own paintings rather than scathing commentary about Orientalist notions involving despotism and sexual deprivation. After all, his depictions of female slaves in ancient Rome – depicted as faceless in repoussé or blinded by their own forearms – do not make for the crafting of a grand pictorial narrative about the moral or cultural superiority of Western European civilisation.

And yet, through the AfD's modified visual syntactics, Gérôme's *Slave Market* has achieved this semiotic status. The painting instead presents a moral lesson by reasserting paradigmatic art historical motifs that, we are told, aim to preserve a larger European 'common value'. As suggested by the poster's diversionary textual 'voice-overs' (Bourriaud 2002: 7–11), this 'common value' is twofold: the first consists in protecting European women from Muslim sexual predation and the second is the eugenic notion of miscegenation, wherein the female embodiment of a free and sovereign Europe faces the threat of sexual penetration and hence the birthing of a mixed breed called 'Eurabia'. This pictorial move seems to tip its hat to the mythology of the rape of Europa by Jupiter, who transformed himself into a bull to abduct the beautiful Phoenician princess whose name eventually gave the continent its appellation.

Apparently, AfD entrepreneurs decided not to reassert the Ovidian tale or rely on Titian's famous painting (Pope 1960), as neither is easily overglazed with an anti-Muslim animus.

This Islamophobic availing of an Orientalist image caused consternation both within and beyond Germany. In the United States, Olivier Meslay,

Director of the Clark Art Institute where the original Gérôme painting is held, issued a series of statements on Twitter on 30 April 2019 (that is, three weeks later, so it took some time for the story to gain international traction). In his retort, he noted that: 'We strongly condemn the use of the painting to advance AfD's political stance and have written to them insisting that they cease and desist [from using this painting]' (Hickley 2019). Meslay's statement leverages two responsorial strategies: the first is what Ghassan Hage calls the 'condemnation imperative' (Hage 2003: 67), whereby an individual erects a strong binary between himself and the Other through absolute rhetorical rejection, and the second is his use of the legal doublet 'cease and desist', which warns an individual or organisation of alleged illegal activity, infringing on intellectual property or using an unlicensed product or image.

Meslay then added that 'the Clark Institute owns Gérome's painting and we are strongly opposed to the use of this work to advance any political agenda. We did not supply this image to the AfD Berlin.' Here, the museum director leaves moral censures and legal caveats to the side to stress that the Clark Art Institute is an unwilling participant in the German political poster campaign. Meslay then ends his series of tweets by finally admitting that the high-resolution digital image of the painting is available in the public domain and therefore 'there are no copyrights or permissions that allow us to exert control over how it is used other than to appeal to civility on the part of AfD Berlin' (CBS News 2019). This last comment reveals that our web-based 'Commons' proves a double-edged sword: on the one hand, it allows for the free and open use of images in scholarly talks and articles such as this one, while, on the other, it provides creative fodder for race- and sex-based fearmongering. The battle over this canonical European painting turned alt-right Orientalist clickbait captures this rather uncanny toggling.

The AfD's visual's 'shock-and-awe' approach accelerated its viral spread, thereby amplifying the party's ideological platform, footprint and influence. Indeed, Meslay's public stance gave the party an opening to strike back, with its spokesperson declaring that the museum's 'gag order' is futile and that 'the German public has the right to find out about the truth about the possible consequences of illegal mass immigration' (ibid.). In this instance, as in

many others, a well-intentioned condemnation coupled with a legalistic yet unenforceable threat not only did not silence or halt the AfD, but, through a boomerang effect, transformed the poster campaign into a *succès de scandale* covered from one media story to the next. Echoing P. T. Barnum's famous dictum that 'there is no such thing as bad publicity', this poster controversy turned into a global circus for rival position-taking. Within this political theatre, Gérôme's Orientalist painting was diverted, recoded, fought over and reasserted to sharpen ideological divides, especially with regards to the EU's and Germany's immigration policies.

Beyond such issues, Gérôme's painting is thematically linked to another matter of the moment: namely, the emergence of female slavery at the height of ISIS's power in Iraq and Syria in 2014–15. At that time, ISIS militants overtook the Sinjar area, in Iraqi Kurdistan, killing Yazidi men and capturing women and girls. From Sinjar, these and other Middle Eastern non-Muslim females were subsequently transported to registration sites in Iraq and Syria, and from there they were taken to be sold at 'slave markets' (*ṣūq ṣabāyā*) located in the Syrian cities of Raqqa, then de facto capital of ISIS's caliphate, and Tadmur, near the ancient city of Palmyra.

Female bondage and servitude can be traced back to the early Islamic period. However, practices of enslavement – whether European, American or Islamic, and whether during times of war or peace – often rely on a 'superficial and selective enactment of certain provisions from scripture and law' (Ali 2015; also see Ali 2010). While journalists and newsreaders across the globe became perturbed by ISIS's violent form of female enslavement, for the militant group such sorties exceeded sexual desire and conquest. Much more tactically, these subjection operations aimed to clear a swathe of land of its non-Muslim minorities and to unleash a genocidal strategy involving physical extermination and psychological torture – or what ISIS operators call a 'vexation and exhaustion' (*nikāya wa inhāk*) martial manoeuvre (Gruber 2019: 137). These women war captives also were monetised through human trafficking, a hyper-modern practice that cannot be explained away, or sexually Orientalised, as a recrudescent medieval Muslim phenomenon (Nicolaus and Yuce 2017). As several scholars have stressed, ISIS's trade in the female body thus must be understood primarily as a market economy, having generated a pool of funds, much like the

militants' seizure of natural resources, agricultural lands, military bases and ancient Near Eastern antiquities.

Documentary photographs revealed that these captured females were chained up and encaged like chattel slaves. And although indeed stripped and inspected prior to being sold, they were not arrayed in the nude in any sexually titillating manner, as is the case for Gérôme's *Slave Market*. Rather, they were often cloaked from head to toe, sometimes their faces fully covered in a black niqab. Such photographic scenes record human exploitation, and not sexual exploits. In the throes of such devastation, the AfD's repackaging of a European painterly tradition adds insult to injury by reframing war crimes as a salacious gawking at the pain of others. These 'pictures of calamity', to borrow Susan Sontag's expression (Sontag 1982: 359), breach ethical lines while enabling viewers mock forms of control and possession.

This, it can be argued, is likewise the case for the AfD poster, which invites its beholders to adopt a voyeuristic position involving the crafting of white moral supremacy. This self-stereotyped ethical register, however, relies on several semiotic diversions of Gérôme's painting. Through such alterations, the poster effectively muddles Orientalism and othering, the latter a painterly style and the former a racialised mode of subjection. This imbroglio tactic is a 'rational' one – a visual 'judo politics' of sorts – that deliberately drags a historical image towards a latter-day reframing by political actors active on the far right. This radicalised gloss and deflection prove central to the AfD's 'alt-Orientalism' brand in both rhetoric and visuality.

In-between Memes: Eurabian Mongrels

The AfD's alt-Orientalist female enslavement concoction is also propelled by, and animating of, European nativist anxieties. Suggestive of a white woman's looming violation by a group of black and brown males, Gérôme's painting is diverted to recall recent sexual assaults in Germany while also foreshadowing the resultant birth of a mixed-race offspring. This hybrid human entity *in potentia* is conjured up via the metaphor of 'Eurabia' – a linguistic creolisation of what right-wing groups consider non-coterminous cultural and religious spheres: that is, Christian Western Europe and Muslim Arab lands. The word 'Eurabia', however, is not new to the AfD and its campaign posters; instead, it has a longer history and context of usage that merit discussion.

The term 'Eurabia' made its debut in earnest in 2005, with the publication of *Eurabia: The Europe-Arab Axis*, published by the British-Swiss Giselle Litmann who writes under the pseudonym of Bat Ye'or, or 'Daughter of the Nile' (Litmann 2005). Although she fashions herself a historian, Litmann propounds various conspiracy theories, chief among them a putative plan for Islam to take over Europe through the secret efforts of members of a global ruling elite. This so-called 'Green Peril' (or 'peril of Islam') – as she and other European and American neo-conservatives argue (Huntington 1996) – has as its ultimate goal the annihilation of Christian heritage and culture through migratory submersion (Bergmann 2018: 123). This fear is sometimes put to picture via digital images showing a green, mosque-silhouetted 'spill' overtaking the European continent (Figure 7.4). In this glum Eurabian scenario, it is claimed that Christians will be reduced to a state of 'dhimmitude': that is, of being classified as dhimmis, or non-Muslim minority groups whose second-class status may devolve into slavery.

Figure 7.4 Digital graphic showing the expansion of Islam in Europe, undated. Source: M-SUR / Alamy Stock Photo.

Related to this fear of religious takeover and fall in status is the correlative issue of demographic decline. Right-wing writers, conspiracy theorists and white nationalists, such as Bat Ye'or, Renaud Camus and Richard Spencer, refer to this process of racial decimation as the so-called 'Great Replacement' (Camus 2011). Within today's alt-right spheres, including among the Proud Boys (Stern 2019) and members of Identity Evropa, the frequently repeated slogan 'You Will Not Replace Us' verbalises such fears, as does the drive to establish a white ethnostate or 'whitopia' (Stern 2019: 51–69). Such calls for a Christian 'crusade' recall the rhetoric of Islamists who similarly use the trope of the 'victorious faction' (*al-ṭāʾifa al-manṣura*) to claim superiority for themselves through practices of jihad. This 'symmetrical appropriation' (Günther 2022: 92f) creates a rapprochement for these so-called 'strange bedfellows' (Schneider 2021), all of whom trade in the notions of tradition, disenfranchisement and heroism (Brzuszkiewicz 2020; Rogan 2019).

Replacement anxieties need not be immediate or aggressively imposed, however. White nationalists point to a more pernicious and durable underlying condition, which they identify as social, ethnic and racial diversity. They contend that the ethos and practice of multiculturalism, along with its state-sponsored programmatic and financial support, lead to racial mongrelisation, diluting the white race and leading to a white genocide. Moreover, in their estimation, supporters of diversity – which is mocked in Germany with the diminutive expression 'Multi-Kulti' – are guilty of genocide by association (von Laer 2012). Their sheepish tolerance and naïveté provide the last nail in the coffin of Western civilisation – or what Niall Ferguson calls 'impire': that is, an implosion of empire that ushers in a period of post-colony in which Europe itself becomes colonialised (Carr 2006: 5). Ergo, this looming demise requires preemptive Western 'counter-colonization' efforts against Muslim immigration (Camus 2011: 51), a remarkable capsizing of the history of European colonialism per se.

Right-wing proponents of the twinned notions of racial creolisation and civilisational collapse require strong dichotomies to forcefully make their cases and to differentiate between in-groups and out-groups. Beyond relying on emotivist conceptual modes and engaging in cognitive splitting, as psychologists note, this process of thinking also requires a thought-out script for public speech, including the rhetorical leveraging of binaries in which whites

and non-whites, Christians and Muslims, are posited against one another as if polar opposites on the ontological spectrum (Tomić 2013). This false dilemma fallacy is the key ingredient of polarised politics as it rejects third-siderism and the middleground – or what ISIS refers to as the 'gray zone' requiring extinction (Anonymous 2015).

European right-wing groups struggle against this zone of cultural complexity and political compromise though a range of visuals, especially Internet memes. These digital images are crafted and manipulated with ease, and they spread quickly and widely across web-based platforms by both political supporters and rivals. Their success is predicated on their free-floating reproducibility and mutability, both of which can catalyse moral panic and mass hysteria (Kien 2019: 78–82). Their persuasive qualities also endow them with a 'mindbomb' quality, especially within ideologically divisive registers (Denisova 2019: 33–5). Last, but not least, as emotional catalysts and replicators, their potential ability to induce anger and anxiety in visual form can lead to a condition that Susan Blackmore terms 'meme-fear', which stokes their viewers' deepest worries and suspicions (Blackmore 1999: 8–9).

In today's European right-wing memeplex, the blazon or flag of Eurabia counts among the most widespread of these politically charged memes (Figure 7.5). Unlike the Gérôme painting, which requires prolonged pictorial and exegetical analysis, this visual cuts to the chase through its logographic minimalism. The visual operation is as follows: the EU's blue field ornamented with a ring of stars is overlaid with the flag of ISIS, which includes the Islamic proclamation of the faith (*shahāda*) inscribed above and in the central medallion. This facile Photoshopping echoes the Eurabian conspiracy, which posits an identitarian admixture and eventual sublimation of 'Western civilisation' under the brunt of Islamic jihadism.

The picture is not as clear as one might presuppose, however. Turning first to the European flag, the EU's official website notes that the twelve stars represent union, solidarity and harmony among the peoples of Europe, while the number twelve stands as a symbol of perfection. It therefore does not represent the number of countries in the EU, which has enlarged its roster of member states over the decades. Additionally, the colours are explained through the metaphor of the firmament, with its golden stars illuminating a blue sky ('European Flag'; 'Graphics Guide to the European Emblem'). No other

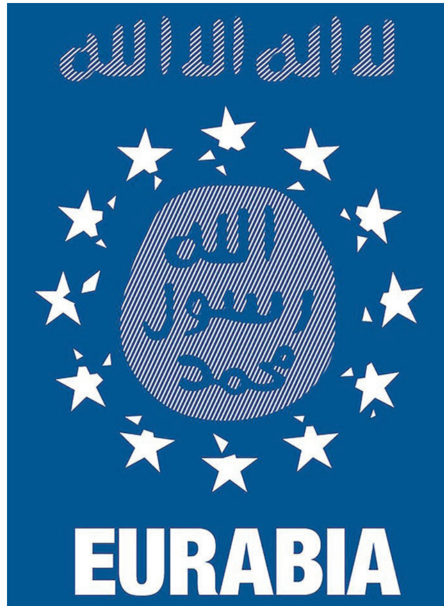

Figure 7.5 ‘Flag’ of Eurabia, showing the EU flag overlaid with the banner of ISIS. Source: Internet meme in the public domain.

indications or explanations of the flag’s design history are provided. The relative semiotic barrenness of the flag’s graphic elements fosters a larger sense of inclusivity and representation for a continent whose constituencies are highly varied and whose member states are at times in disaccord. It thus appears to function as a graphic equivalent to the ‘empty word’ in marketing, into which different stakeholders can interject and deduce meaning as they see fit, thus curtailing the image’s potential for unlimited semiosis (Potts 2003: 22).

As several journalists and scholars have shown, the EU flag nonetheless tells a different story – one that is not at all devoid of meaning. Rather, the circle of stars is reminiscent of the Virgin Mary’s astral crown, especially in depictions that show her as the ‘Star of the Sea’ (*Stella Maris*) or as illustrating her immaculate heart (Figure 7.6). In such images and sculptures, Mary’s head is framed or surmounted by twelve glowing stars, and indeed the EU flag’s designer, Arsène Heitz, has admitted that he was inspired by this type of Marian iconography after he experienced an apparition of the Blessed Virgin on the Rue du Bac in Paris (‘European Union Flag’).

Figure 7.6 The Immaculate Heart of Mary Statue, Roman Catholic Church of Saint Anne, Zegiestow, Poland, undated.
Source: Photograph by Adam Ján Digel, 2019.

Albeit stripped of its religious embodiment and visually abstracted, the EU flag nevertheless preserves a substrate message in both iconographical and religious terms. To those in the know, it can further enable the alt-right and other nativist groups to argue for the purely Christian character of the EU, a stance that has made the inclusion of Muslim majoritarian Turkey a long-standing impasse.

For its part, the ISIS flag combines three major elements (Figure 7.7). The first is the colour black, which represents the Abbasid dynasty (750–1250 CE) that ruled from its imperial capital in Baghdad and whose caliphal mantle was claimed to be inherited by Abū Bakr al-Baghdādī, ISIS's de facto leader until his killing in 2019. Additionally, the colour black is connected to darkness and death, and thus it is likely that ISIS media strategists and designers made a conscientious decision to use this foreboding hue as a quick and effective 'vexation operation'. Some scholars argue that this black banner also points to ISIS's overarching doomsday approach: that is, as a material harbinger of an impending end-of-days battle and moral reckoning (McCants 2015: 19–22).

Figure 7.7 ISIS propaganda photo showing masked militants holding the ISIS banner, undated.
Source: Handout / Alamy Stock Photo.

Besides the overwhelming black field, the second element is the Arabic-script *shahāda*, which declares ISIS an Islamic state labouring under the imprimatur of the Prophet Muḥammad, captured by the jagged seal impression that contains the Prophet's name and honorific title, 'Messenger of God'. However, much like the EU flag, ISIS's logo contains creative complications, particularly in its claims to Islamic history and the sunna (tradition) of the Prophet Muḥammad. Leaving aside the militant group's medley of historical manoeuvres tying their flag to early Islamic war banners and its lapidary script as suggesting antiquity and authenticity (Günther 2022: 96–102; Ostovar 2017: 89–90), I would like to focus on the impression of Muḥammad's signet ring, or *khatam*. Islamic textual sources state that the Prophet had an inscribed ring that he used to seal official letters. While the ring itself has been lost, several letters preserved today in the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul are believed to include the Prophet's seal impression. It is this lapidary impression that ISIS has borrowed from the Ottoman palace's relics chamber, thereby framing their own flag as both a secondary contact relic and as bearing prophetic sanction for their own endeavours.

And yet, like other putatively early Qurʾans and several relics housed in the Ottoman palace, the seal-impressed letters have been shown to be nineteenth-century forgeries, as suggested by misspellings, paleographic unsteadiness and odd spacing (El Shamsy 2021). Another logographic conundrum therefore presents itself: just as the EU flag includes an undertone of Christianity, the ISIS flag is not what it seems. Instead of carrying any authentic Islamic historical value, it is merely a throw-back impression – forged in modern times – coopted and altered by militants through the uncanny visuo-material process of Orientalised self-fashioning.

The Eurabian logo is a 'mindbomb' of a different order. On the one hand, this logographic counter-jihad appropriates motifs in the ISIS flag based on the presumption that they are uncomplicated and pure *ab initio*. And indeed, agents operating on either side of the ideological divide concoct such visuals by adopting both the ring of stars and Muḥammad's seal impression as if autonomous and opposite entities, which are then conjugated into a memetic mixed breed. In accordance with a white nativist and Islamophobic worldview, the Eurabian grapheme therefore acts as a digital surrogate for the human mutt. In other words, it is a Christo-Muslim memetic mongrel, a monstrous compound heralding its own genetic demise.

This emphasis on polar opposites within a larger political landscape emphatically rejects the productive potential of identity hybridity and hyphenation, as articulated by Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1994: 313); it also mocks various forms of interaction and interlocution that include Islamic cultural registers. Instead, these types of 'mutational signs' (Denisova 2019: 7) reveal the dangers of oppositional self-construal, its concomitant emotional contagion as spread through digital algorithms, and the eventual affective mass confluence that may lead to extremist acts (Barsade et al. 2018) – whether these be ISIS-driven terrorist attacks in Europe and America or the January 2021 storming of the United States' Capitol by a motley of alt-right, nativist and hate groups.

At the Knife's Edge

Along with images of enslaved females and Eurabian memes, a third leitmotif in the ultraist mediatic nexus is the sword. This symbol shuttles back and forth between Islamist and alt-right ideologists, and it abounds in their intertwined visual propaganda. For instance, another digital flag of Eurabia shows the

EU's ring of stars, this time on a background suggestive of the Huntingtonian 'Green Peril' of Islam, with 'Allah' inscribed in Arabic script in the centre and two scimitars perilously leaning in from the margins (Figure 7.8). This visual is clearly reliant on the flag of Saudi Arabia – itself not surprising given Eurabia's linguistic conjugation of 'Europe' with 'Arabia' – but the latter's single sword has been duplicated. In addition, rather than fulfilling an honorific or heraldic purpose, within the Eurabian meme the sword suggests a looming enclosure and double-pronged attack.

Alongside such digital logographs, the sword also played a prominent role in the AfD's 2019 poster campaign entitled 'Learning from Europe's History'. Much like Gérôme's *Slave Market* was diverted in various semantic ways within this same pictorial series, so too was the painting of a beheading overlaid with the exclamation: 'Stop the head-cutter at the EU borders!' (*Kopfabschneider an EU-Grenzen stoppen!*) (Figure 7.9). The general term 'decapitator' is not given a precise name or identity, here. Its coded reference nevertheless hides in plain sight, and it is one to which we will return shortly.

Figure 7.8 'Flag' of Eurabia, inscribed in its centre with 'Allah' and flanked by two scimitars.
Source: Internet meme in the public domain.

Figure 7.9 AfD poster depicting the decapitation of St John the Baptist and inscribed with the expression 'Stop the head-cutter at the EU borders!' (*'Kopfabschneider an EU-Grenzen stoppen!'*).
Source: Image in the public domain.

But first, a few words on the painterly source. The AfD poster again reasserts the European artistic tradition, but this time the inspiration is not an Orientalist image but rather a painting of the decapitation of St John the Baptist, attributed to Anton Angelo Bonifazi (1615–82 CE). This rather poorly known artist active in seventeenth-century Italy practised in the Baroque style, using a strong chiaroscuro effect to heighten the bright white skin tone of the genuflecting early Christian saint. His executioner, sent by King Herod, exhibits a darker complexion. Why this specific Baroque painting was chosen remains a bit of a mystery given that numerous other representations of St John's decapitation are well known and available, including by such famous artists as Caravaggio (d. 1610 CE). However, no other painting, to my knowledge, provides such a close-up view of the sweeping sword nor such a sharp focus on a kneeling Christian captive draped in a bright orange cloak.

These iconographic elements hint that this less illustrious European painting of St John's decapitation was purposefully – that is, 'rationally' – selected in order to coopt and divert ISIS's dread-inducing visual culture. Since 2014, ISIS militants have systematically crafted and marketed a particular brand of terror, and they have been so successful in their efforts that viewers quickly recognise its key tropes. These motifs suffuse ISIS's mediatic performances of human decapitation, whose scenes are staged, rehearsed, professionally lit, and shot from various angles to be later stitched into a final product aiming for optimal dramatic effect (Harmanşah 2015; Tugendhaft 2020).

In such horror-reality films, ISIS militants force their lighter-skinned and at times Christian prisoners to wear jailbird orange jumpsuits, in emulative revenge for Muslim hostages clad in these very same vestments while held in America's overseas military prison complex (Gruber 2019: 141–6). Moreover, ISIS's captives are forced to kneel on the ground, while their bodies are beheaded by various blunt weapons, including scimitars (Figure 7.10) that revel in and redirect the European neo-conservative-Orientalist trope of the

Figure 7.10 ISIS fighter beheads an alleged spy in a propaganda video capture released by ISIS, Hama, Syria, 5 April 2016.
Source: Handout / Alamy Stock Photo.

'medieval savage' – an ill-used past on the ascendant in Europe, America, the Middle East, and elsewhere (Albin et al. 2019). As a result, this bait-and-switch combination of motifs choreographs a new genus of pictorial revanchism that is viciously parasitic of Orientalist clichés and whose primary goal consists in spreading optical trauma and psychological mayhem both locally and internationally, both key to ISIS's greater martial strategy of consolidating power on the ground.

The AfD's poster of Bonifazi's painting of St John the Baptist's decapitation – an otherwise poorly known artwork in the Western canon – thus does not truly offer a lesson in European history. Rather, its designer's selection seems primarily propelled by the painting's homicidal thrust, its hunched composition, its spotlight on the sword, and its orange colour symbolism, all syncopated to prompt European viewers' immediate recall of ISIS's vexation tactics. This visual and cognitive tethering is further entrenched thanks to the poster's caption that calls for stopping 'decapitators' at the EU's borders. Such head-cutters are, obviously, not the persecutors of early Christian saints like St John but rather the Muslim immigrants and refugees of today. Within AfD and alt-right Eurabian rhetoric, any Muslim man or boy arriving on or living in the European continent essentially fits the bill as a potential rapist, proto-terrorist or killer-in-waiting. Like other ultraist visuals containing alt-Orientalist iconographies and Islamophobic prosaisms, the AfD poster activates the fustian fear of 'border security' to suggest the impending martyrdom of a saintly Western civilisation. And through its iconographic boomerang effect, the poster paradoxically expands the international footprint of jihadist visual culture.

In their conjoined efforts to spread truculent images, the AfD, ISIS and other would-be antagonists depend on each other. They require a swarm of willing interlocutors, both on the World Wide Web and within the public sphere. Through mirroring and mimicry, ultraist visual 'vexation operations' pandered by the AfD, ISIS, and other hate and extremist groups also may deepen biased emotions and thus further forward the perception of rivalrous worldviews. In these hyper-mediated visual scenarios, both friend and foe come together through their proximity online, where they operate in antagonistic synchronicity and co-mingle in both emotional and rational ways. Sometimes they even come together in the streets as large-scale floats (Figure 7.11).

Figure 7.11 German carnival parade showing an ISIS militant winding up an AfD partisan, Düsseldorf, 27 January 2017.
Source: Photograph by Jochen Tack.

In such carnivalesque performances, third-party actors use the aesthetics of puppetry to lampoon what they see as the parasitic character of partisan politics: in this particular case, ISIS's instrumentalisation of AfD followers as 'our useful idiots' (*unsere nützlichen Idioten*) winding up and screeching out their 'hatred of Muslims' (*Hass auf Muslime*). Actors on both ends of the extremes thus tread on the proverbial knife's edge, revealing how hatred is stoked, and how it cuts both ways.

Art History's 'Interventionist' Method

A close analysis of the rhetorical and visual production of Euro-American alt-right groups reveals not a diametric clash with ISIS's own output but rather a concurrence in symbolic lexica, in which an alternative form of Orientalism – that is, an Islamophobic anathemising of the perceived other – is asserted to craft and entrench a white nativist stance. This polarised position involves perceived identity-based taxonomic purisms as well as calculated efforts to stoke a fear of migration, miscegenation and misogyny.

This competitive conjunction of painting, photography, reprographic and digital arts also reveals how ultraist imageries are never neutral or natural; rather, they are always enmeshed in complex social, political, religious and cultural matrices, in which opposite constructs attract one another and thrive in rivalrous colloquy. This one-upmanship results in a rather circuitous conversation involving a larger algorithmic morass of fake news, conspiracy theories and negative affective spiralling. It also twists and turns images both old and new, such that we witness European actors emerging as semioclasts of the Western painterly tradition and Islamists as exoticising an emic Islamic history along with its visual and material heritage.

Although such collusive operations may seem ironic based on today's taxonomic expectations of world cultures and religions, they expose a larger problematic: namely, the complex, constructed and contextual character of images in themselves. Pictorial operations have long captured the attention of art historians, especially that of Erwin Panofksy, whose iconological method of 'reading' images has influenced scholars' methodological approaches for over seventy years. Key to the practice of iconology – which Adi Efal describes as philology in figural form (Efal 2016) – is the slow and careful investigation of an image. The process begins with close observation to enable observers to uncover the forms, schemes and operations at play. This requires an unhurried form of critical seeing, itself acquired over time through eye-training or what Elizabeth Sears calls 'visual calisthenics' (Sears 2007: 278). Then follows the decoding and classification of an image within a spatio-temporal structure (Panofsky 1957: 6f). The latter analytical system, Panofsky and other art historians argue, must be consistent but elastic, and scholars must be able to identify interpretative pinch points in order to pivot and self-correct during their explicative investigations (ibid.: 10, 17). This control mechanism – itself a critical method of intervention against potentially self-induced errors – is of paramount importance to detect and maintain an artwork's original meaning.

As Adi Efal notes, 'it is by following mistakes and deformations in the representation of artworks that the philological trail is formed' (Efal 2016: 25). Additionally,

> just as a particular word can have changed its meaning because of a change in linguistic usage and thus have changed the whole tenor of the linguistic

> proposition, so, too, within the total artistic organism any detail at all can be interpreted in the present completely differently from what it was in the past and so have a completely erroneous formal effect upon us. (ibid.: 24)

This pathway for explication, which takes into account erroneous formal effects on viewers, proves fruitful when it comes to understanding the visuals produced by the AfD and ISIS. Indeed, both pictorial corpora depend on obfuscations and diversions – all rationally conjured up and implemented – in order to yank images at the extremes of meaning. Art History's analytical tools, especially those rooted in the iconological tradition, can help expose images' visual structures and subterfuges, in turn offering the possibility of countervailing their overall emotional impact and political influence. Such a method can be considered 'interventionist' in two ways: first, it provides new critical insights on ultraist operations in the pictorial realm and, second, it can enable an undermining of their presumptive stability and earnestness.

The art historian's contribution, then, aims to break the visual stalemate by inducing a neutral exegetical state and by rerouting images towards more accurate historical contexts and meanings. This practice may help reduce visualised tugs-of-war at the edges of the political spectrum and eventually reduce intergroup conflict, also known as etiological escalation within the fields of peace psychology and bystander intervention. As ultraist groups engage in a negative spiralling of images, Art History, for its part, can offer some 'counter-tipping measures' and 'buffering effects', such as those used in behavioural psychology. These include, among others, an un-coupling of antagonists, a de-forming of cliques and a neutral mood induction (Barsade et al. 2018: 144–6).

But psychology does not suffice as an explicative method, so we shift our angle from the emotive domain back to the rational field: to evidence-based thinking, itself one of the greatest assets of the academic modus operandi. We thus ask ourselves in closing: in this loop of reciprocal radicalisation, how can we, as scholars, intervene in order to break the vicious cycle? One possibility, put forth by Julia Ebner in her book entitled *The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-Right Extremism* (2017), is to de-escalate the extremes that feed off one another. Instead, we can attempt to break the circularity of ultraist image-worlds by shifting our vantage point 'from

mythos to logos' (Ebner 2017: 206) in order to capture the productive messiness of a given situation. This methodological stance may provide a deradicalisation solution that Ebner calls 'mobilizing the middle' (ibid.: 200). As many scholars have shown, the best remedy against global forms of extremism is education: that is, critical thought turned into a mood-neutral practice. Within the humanities, Art History as a discipline can provide us with one means among many of cultivating anti-extremist thinking and seeing: that is, an interventionist act that demystifies and disengages the 'crisis-construct' (Strnad and Hynek 2020: 85) of ultraist images whose concurrence is built on but a shaky edifice.

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