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FACULTY OF PHILOSOPHY, THEOLOGY AND RELIGION

Satirical Colonialism or Not?

BREAKING DOWN RACISM AND COLONIALISM IN THE VIDEO CLIP OF *Ausländer* BY
RAMMSTEIN

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1 Introduction

Unsurprisingly, rock and metal bands have a history of being controversial and going against society's norms. Perhaps one of the most famous of these bands is Rammstein, as it is on the line between popular and alternative music. The German *Neue Deutsche Härte* band is famous for their extreme video clips, such as *Pussy* in which the band members have uncensored sex with prostitutes or *Deutschland* in which the controversial history of Germany is untangled, including Nazi Germany. A less well-known example is their 2019 clip for the song *Ausländer* (Foreigner) (Rammstein Official, "Rammstein - Ausländer (Official Video)"), which discusses colonialism. My central thesis is that this clip shows a satirical narrative of colonialism in order to highlight the absurdities of the discourse behind it. This thesis will be supported by first providing a discussion of the clip and then an analysis of how successful the band is in its goals. In order to understand the rest of the paper, the reader is advised to watch the clip themselves¹, taking into account that it may be uncomfortable to watch in that it clearly displays racism and suppression. Hence, a trigger warning is in order.

2 Description of the video

The video² starts out by showing the six members of the band, peddling on a boat in the sea, nearing land. These shots are mixed with images of groups of supposedly African people dancing in a circle. In popular discourse, they would likely be called a 'tribe'³. Once the band steps off the boat, they are greeted by a welcoming committee, who appear to be very happy to welcome them. We see the band interact with the tribe, who are assumed to be the natives of the land. Together, they go hunting, dancing and eating.

At a certain moment, the band's lead singer is shown in Christian missionary clothing, teaching the small children Spanish. Later on, he paints one of the women while accentuating her breasts in the painting. We also see the natives carry the band's belongings and the band themselves on chairs.

Towards the end of the clip, it gets darker outside and there is a party around a campfire. Slowly, the band members go, one by one, into the huts with the women.

¹The clip can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pat2c33sbog>

²Note that every description is necessarily subjective. Yet, an attempt was made to describe the video as objectively as possible.

³This is a loaded term, which can have negative connotations.

Finally, it is day again, and we see blue eyed and white skinned children, with the implication that they are the band's children. The band leaves on the boat they came with, except for one of the band members, who is left behind. The video clip ends by showing that he has become the tribe leader.

2.1 The lyrics

While the video clearly portrays colonization, the lyrics do not have this clear link. The lyrics appear to be a criticism on sex tourism and they ridicule how people learn three words from different languages to be able to engage in sex tourism. Because the lyrics are focused on a different topic than the video, I will not analyze the lyrics in greater detail and only refer to them when they become relevant for analyzing the video clip.

3 Analysis of the video clip

The analysis is two-layered. I will first untangle some of the symbolism in the video, and then make a guess at the intentions of the band and director by interpreting the video.

3.1 Symbolism

First, which is almost too obvious to write down, one should note that the Rammstein band members symbolize the White Man (see e.g. Said 226 for this notion) or the colonizing man, while the African people symbolize the colonized. It is clearly a case of Othering, in that the Africans are the Other. The video utilizes several hierarchical binaries: black/white, woman/man, colonized/colonizer. These all need to be seen in an intersection (see e.g. Crenshaw). It is not just a man dominating a woman, or just a colonizer and a colonized. It is white men colonizing black women⁴. Hence, the binaries are very pronounced and accentuated.

Besides this, the video is also highly stereotypical. Hall describes stereotyping as reducing people to “a few, simple, essential characteristics, which are represented as fixed by Nature” (257). Stereotyping and Othering go hand in hand, as it accentuates difference; “[s]tereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’” (Hall 258). Finally, one should note the importance of hierarchies and power in stereotyping. According to Hall, “stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of

⁴The video also portrays two black men. The vast majority are women, however.

power” (258).

In the portrayal of the African tribe, the video relies heavily on stereotypes. The huts, the clothing and the dances can be considered stereotypical; it is what white Europeans think of when picturing an African tribe. The dance specifically, has been often emphasized in early descriptions of African tribes: “describing Hottentot worship of the moon, which involves “Shouting, Screaming, Singing, Jumping, Stamping, Dancing, Prostration on the Ground, and an unintelligible Jargon”” Nongbri. These descriptions have singled out characteristics, which, as Stuart argues, have become what we reduce these people to.

This does not necessarily mean that the reduction is done with negative intentions by the reducing party. Rather, I would argue that this video shows how the white men, the band, perceive it positively. They seem to enjoy the dancing and rituals very much. Therefore, I would argue that the video rather portrays Orientalist reduction, which is based on the idea of Orientalism by Edward Said. The indigenous people are portrayed as very intriguing, and they are highly romanticized. This might at first sight make it look like it is less harmful, but this type of stereotyping is still very damaging, as Said argues extensively in his book *Orientalism*.

As said before, the colonizing men seem very happy with their arrival, but so seem the colonized. So much even, that one of the band members is forced to stay at the end. This is at first thought perhaps somewhat puzzling. Yet, I would argue that by doing this, the video engages in what I call the ‘warm welcome’-myth. This myth is the idea that indigenous people welcomed the colonizers. For example, there are many myths of warm welcomes by certain indigenous tribes that then helped the colonizers colonize less welcoming tribes. Similarly, in this video, the tribe seems to have no problem at all with the men interfering with their daily business.

On how such a myth comes to be, I find the notion of subjective understanding, as put forward by Sylvia Wynter, useful:

Given that since our human behaviors are invariably oriented in the forms of the specific perceptual-cognitive processes by which we know our reality, then the behaviors that we normally display, as well as the empirical social affectivities to which our behaviors, taken collectively, lead, can “give” us access to the specific mode of “subjective understanding” in terms of which we normally, even when dissidently, perceive our contemporary sociosystemic reality as well as conceive the past that led to it. (Wynter 13)

Wynter then uses this idea to discuss how people have come to the notion of the ‘discovery’ of America. I argue that this idea also explains the ‘warm welcome’-myth, which is shown in the Rammstein music video, in which the goal similarly is one of expansion (17). Hence, the video seems to make use of this myth by displaying people happy with colonization.

The tribe also seems receptive to the religious aspect of the colonizers. Topolski speaks of the race-religion constellation, in which “European racism has its historical roots in a hierarchical binary between Christian and non-Christian religions” (75-76). The video also supports this binary of erasing the non-Christian religions in favor of Christianity. The lead singer of the band has two main outfits. One of these outfits is what a priest would wear, with a cross around his neck. As a priest, he teaches the young children language, under the lyrics “das man Sprachen lernen muss” (that men have/one has to learn languages), while holding a book which might be the Bible. It is clear that this is a reference to the role that religion played within colonization, which is also attested in the *making of* video on this video clip (Rammstein Official, “Rammstein - Ausländer (Official Making Of)” 5:40-5:50).

In the video, the colonizers seem to be in a paradoxical relationship with religion. On the one hand, they engage in this hierarchical binary as mentioned by Topolski. On the other hand, they are also engaging in an orientalist interest with the local religion.

3.2 Interpretation

As said in the introduction, Rammstein is known for its controversial music and videos. If we move one level deeper into the analysis, beyond what we see, and instead ask ourselves why we see this, we can wonder what ‘the point’ is that the band and director are trying to make. For this, we have several tools: the video itself, the previous literature on Rammstein and the *making of* video.

A first guess could be that the band and director think in the ways described before; they have an orientalist train of thought and are firm believers of the ‘warm welcome’-myth. However, on closer inspection, we quickly realize that this seems unlikely, as all of our three sources suggest otherwise. First of all, while the music video seems to paint an overall happy picture, at closer look we see violence sipping through. This is not done in an obvious way, but rather in a subtle way. When one of the band’s members catches a butterfly by abruptly and violently closing the book, this seems to symbolize killing beauty and nature. The band members go hunting with big guns, compared to the bow and arrow of a tribe member (which also reinforces the hierarchical binary between the

groups). There is also a scene where one of the band members starts shooting at the feet of another band member. This is portrayed as a slapstick, funny scene, but is in reality rather disturbing and unnecessarily violent. Finally, at the end of the music video, we see how the band members take back elephant tusks home (3:55-4:05). At the complete end, there is a small, tuskless elephant on the right side of the screen (4:35). Tusk hunting is a contemporary problem in Africa where people hunt and kill the animals, mostly for European and American commodities.

Taken together, it seems more likely that we need to read this video as ironic and exaggerated. The choice for this reading is further reinforced by the extremely stereotypical portrayal of the tribe. It is also more in line with previous scholastic readings of the band's work. For example, Schicker and Henry, in their paper on the whole 2019 album, argue that "[t]his video is indicative of much of Rammstein's social criticism, in that it is steeped in irony, double-meanings, humor, and satire. Here, Rammstein decides to portray the colonizers and the colonized in the most stereotypical way possible, both perpetuating and mocking these tropes" (8).

In analyses of other videos, similar observations have been made about their references to nazi ideology. Schiller, for example, also identifies it as exaggeration with the purpose of pointing out the contradictions in the ideologies. "Rammstein's excessive references to Nazi aesthetics and connotations, the band's über performance of Teutonic stereotypes suggest a reading of the band's work as steeped in irony and self-reflexivity, rather than representing a totalitarian or fascist ideology" (268). That is why Schiller argues that the over-the-top exaggerations, which are hyper-German and hyper-masculine, "suggest a self-critical and self-conscious ironic strategy and form of imitative critique to undermine totalitarian ideology through mimicry. By erasing distance between fascist tropes and contemporary German post-war congenially anti-fascist sensibility [...] Rammstein in fact neutralize fascism by emphasizing its own absurdities" (268).

Looking at the *making of*, we see that this is indeed the intention. The goal is "to confront society with its own images" (Rammstein Official, "Rammstein - Ausländer (Official Making Of)" 1:40-1:45)⁵. The band members express the hope that it comes across as an ironic story (2:24) and that they feel like the only way to deal with racism is to take a satirical approach (1:55). The uncomfortable feeling one gets when watching is precisely the point of this video, even though on a shallow level it looks like they are having a lot of 'fun': "But some of the fun ends up getting stuck in your throat - because

⁵The English quotes refer to the subtitles that were added by the makers of the video. The spoken text in the video itself is almost completely in German.

of the barbaric way we've behaved over the centuries" (4:43).

Accordingly, we arrive at an ironic reading of the video clip. The question now becomes; does the video reach this goal?

4 Does this video reach its intended goal?

Clearly, we need to move past the shallow reading of the video and dive deeper into it to come at the intended reading. It seems to be the intention of the producers that people stop and think about these topics, as they argue that the only way of dealing with racism is satire. Yet, in the past, it has proven difficult for Rammstein to get this goal across in other videos. As Schikler and Henry summarize, "while the band's intent is usually clear to a critical audience, satirical and ironic elements of Rammstein's work also have the potential to undercut or diminish their message" (14).

This means that their stereotyping can reinforce stereotyping (as Stuart Hall argues), even though it is intended ironically. There always is a certain danger in using stereotyping. This is exemplified by the video for *Deutschland*. While most (if not all) academic authors agree that an ironic and satirical reading is intended, this has not always been performed by everyone. The extreme right has used the music as a rally cry, for example.

The band seems to be conscious of this in some sense, as they try to make their point abundantly clear in the making of video. They also seem to realize that it can be perceived as 'wrong' that they asked African people to act in this video in this stereotypical way. The *making of* therefore spends considerable time on letting the actors explain that they are okay with this (for example, at 6:45 or 7:20). That begs the question whether even if they agreed to participating, there is still not some racism involved anyways. The music video gives off the impression of almost compulsively trying to make it alright, which is not very convincing.

However, it is clear that the band is seriously trying to address race issues. For example, in their music video for *Deutschland*, a black woman embodies Germania, which proves a controversial choice⁶.

⁶see Schikler and Henry for a more elaborate discussion on this topic

5 Conclusion

Looking at the video, the previous literature and the *making of*, we clearly see that Rammstein has produced a video that intends to ridicule the stereotypes brought along by colonization. The exaggeration performed by the characters in the video is meant to show the absurdness of precisely those stereotypes. Yet, it has also been proven in the past that these types of exaggerations can be problematic and reinforce stereotypes instead of breaking them down. The fact that this video and the band are so controversial only attests to that.

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