

“Us” and “The Others”

PICTURES OF REFUGEES IN THE AUSTRIAN PRINT MEDIA

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This article summarises the findings of a visual analysis run on the Austrian print media on flight from countries of origin and refugees.

Images of refugees in camps on the Hungarian or Slovenian border, at Austrian train stations, in tent cities, or walking along motorways have been shown during public debates in Austria since the summer of 2015. Particularly because of the increased use of the so-called “Balkan route”, Austria began to play a larger role as a transit and host country. Since then, the topic of flight has been present with numerous images in public media discourses.

RESEARCH FINDINGS ON REPORTING ON REFUGEES

The communication scholar Heinz Bonfadelli (2015) argued that reporting on refugees was fundamentally different from previous migration discourse. Social and media discourse had “completely shifted”: The previous “negatively framed media reporting [...] suddenly and surprisingly changed in the media and in the policies of Germany, Austria and Switzerland.” “Media reporting is no longer dominated by migrants who are not willing to integrate, violent, criminal, and actively abusing the social system; instead, the focus is on a large number of refugees framed positively as victims of war, terror, famine, and traffickers.” (Bonfadelli, 2015, p. 9) In contrast, in an analysis of TV news reporting, Friederike Herrmann (2016) found 2 dominant, competing discourses. The “welcoming culture”

faces off with a discourse on threat and insecurity, whereby it is not the “We can do it!” (“Wir schaffen das!”, a phrase coined by German chancellor Angela Merkel) that dominates the discourse but instead the alleged overstraining of the majority German population by the number of refugees.

THE STUDY

In the following, we present an image analysis of Austrian media reporting on flight from countries of origin and refugees. We were interested in the following questions: How are reports on flight visualised in Austrian media reports? Which processes of inclusion and exclusion are at work? Which identity-political positionings can be detected in the press photographs? With the visual representation of refugees, certain images are produced and identities are constructed. How bodies and the place in which people live are staged leads to social ascriptions and thus justifications for inclusion or exclusion. Our analysis was based on the national Austrian daily newspapers *Standard* and *Presse*, the tabloid *Kronen Zeitung*, and the regional newspaper *Salzburger Nachrichten*. The period of analysis was from 1 August 2015, the start of the increased use of the so-called Balkan route, until 30 October 2015. Due to the visibility of the refugees in Austria, in this period the topics flight and migration took a prominent place on the media agenda. The large number of articles required us to further restrict the data basis. Creating 2 artificial weeks resulted in a selection

of 1,328 articles. In a further step, all articles were chosen that were accompanied by one or more pictures. Preliminary results confirmed that visual representations on the topic of flight played an important role in the print media, as 62.4 % of all articles contained one or more images. Our sample included 829 images. We identified recurrent themes that dominated the reporting and used a visual context analysis to identify interdependencies between images and figures of thinking (cf. Müller, 2011, p. 47).

The analysis showed that 3 repeating themes appeared most frequently:

Theme 1 – On this side and on the other side

One dominating theme that was used to visually frame contributions on flight was that of fences, for example at the Austrian borders or as demarcations between tents or tent cities and other settlements.

In Ill. 1, multiple tents can be seen behind a fence, and on the edge of the pictures several people can be seen although they are blurry. As observers, the newspaper’s readers are placed on this side of the fence. They see a camp in which people are living separately from them. Such high fences inevitably trigger an association with prisons or internment camps. The invisible “us” thereby not only remains separated but also protected from “the others”.

In Ill. 2, which does not show any people, the landscape is divided into 2 areas: In the foreground a tent city is shown that symbolises the short-term stay of the campers, and on a hill in the

background there are silhouettes of a church tower and roofs that show the long-standing pictures of an old familiar town. The row of trees between the 2 dwellings acts as a seemingly natural border between the refugees and the population.

In both images, 2 territories are clearly separated from each other: the territory of the population, who remain unseen, on the one side and on the other the area of the refugees, who can sometimes be dimly made out at the edges of the pictures.

Theme 2 – “Us” and “The Others”

When refugees can be seen in the pictures, they are usually shown as groups of people. Only occasionally are individual refugees singled out from a group. The pictures are often kept in dark colours and thus tap into the culturally imbedded fear that has existed since the early 1920s of a crowd that, as a mere collection of bodies, is likely to think and act irrationally. The anonymous crowd,

in which individual faces can hardly be discerned, arouses feelings of uneasiness and a diffuse impression of being threatened.

Ill. 3 appears to be a detail from a larger group picture and shows a group of refugees. In contrast to many other pictures, here 2 people can be more easily recognised: One can be seen in the foreground partly turned away from the camera, and the other looks up at the readers from below. Due to the camera perspective that captures a bowed head with eyes looking directly at the reader, the person who is identified as male gives the impression that he is devious and possibly dangerous. The caption reinforces this interpretation: “Who or

what is looking at us from these eyes?” (Salzburger Nachrichten, 20 Oct 2015, emphasis RD/EK). Men are shown much more frequently in the pictures, often accompanied by captions that ascribe patriarchal, backward ways of thinking to the “men travelling alone”. By comparison, the imagined European or Austrian “community of value” appears modern, emancipated and equal.

Theme 3 – Here up front and back there

Another theme that appeared repeatedly in our sample were photos that show refugees arriving at the train stations or in refugee accommodations.

As in Ill. 4, often police or guards can be seen watching the group.

Ill. 4 shows a group of refugees who are waiting at the train station and being observed by a police officer. The police officer, who is in the foreground and therefore takes up more space, has his back turned to the observers of the event, a gesture of trust and belonging to that group as opposed to the group of refugees that needs to be checked. He thereby marks a symbolic boundary and shows which movements the refugees are allowed to make and what space they have been assigned to. The bodies of those being watched can only move in a limited way – along the paths determined by the executive authority, in contrast to others – in this case invisible bodies – whose movements are in no way limited and are protected by the executive.

CONCLUSION

Our image analysis makes it clear how visual framing marks actual or symbolic boundaries. Fences, tent cities

and guards divide “us” – who are worthy of protection – from “the others” who are foreign and to be kept apart. At the same time, with the frequent images of groups of refugees, they are de-individualised and thus portrayed as possible threats. The visual discourse on flight and migration of the newspaper analysed thus marks political-geographical spaces and, beyond that, assigns identity-political spaces to refugees that places them outside rather than inside the imagined European community.

The pictures we analysed usually show refugees as victims of war and terror when they reach the saving beaches of Europe, that is, when they are still far away. But as soon as they arrive in Austria, there are only few visual representations that frame the topic in a humanitarian way – instead, a threat and security frame dominates.

Already in the first few months of reporting, the majority of images printed by the media implied those metaphors that later on increasingly dominated the debates in politics and the media: that of the “tide”, the

“flood”, the “wave” that is threatening to wash over “us” and thus describes a crisis and catastrophe scenario (see also vom Orde in this issue). All too rarely could visual representations be found that showed refugees as diverse individuals or interacting with the cities’ and towns’ residents, that pointed out the various and diverse reasons for flight or that even hinted at the prospects of building a heterotopic community. ■

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