13 Nazi-Barbies[*]

Performing ultra-femininity against the "Feminist Elite" in the Alt-Right movement

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Introduction: what is ultra-femininity?

In the public mind the so-called Alt-Right[1] is mostly regarded as a hate-filled "manosphere" that is defined in large parts by its misogyny and its anti-feminist, anti-woman rhetoric (Nagle, 2017; Sauer, 2020). It is deemed a movement of angry white men to such an extent that in the aftermath of the attempted insurrection in January 2021, the fact that the violent mob storming the Capitol building was scattered with female faces made international headlines (Givhan, 2021; Shaw, 2021; Thomas, 2021). This unwillingness to recognise the role of white women in spreading racism and (neo-)fascism has its historical precursors in the 20th century and has been addressed by a number of feminist scholars (Davis, 1983; Lorde, 1984; Kompisch, 2008). Women in white supremacist movements, including the Alt-Right, often also receive less media and scholarly attention because they are less likely to assume active leadership roles. Instead, they typically self-identify as "shield maidens" that help to soften and normalise white supremacy (Love, 2020). During the Trump administration, Alt-Right imagery increasingly spilled into mainstream media in the US and many other countries. With it came a specific type of female self-stylisation, broadly defined as a bundle of beautification practices, that I refer to as *ultra-femininity*. Although this look is in itself not new, but has been familiar in conservative circles for some time, particularly in the US, I will argue that it is now strategised in a new way. What differentiates the Alt-Right from previous white supremacist movements is its rootedness in digital culture, especially social media. Utilising new aesthetic forms, such as memes, earlier and more effectively than their political counterparts, has given the movement a decided advantage in what is now referred to as a "online culture war" (Nagle, 2017; Hornuff, 2020). In internet culture,

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[*] The term "Nazi-Barbie" used in the title was coined in 2015 on online message boards frequented by members of the Antifa and their sympathizers. It originally referred to the US-American Influencer and White Supremacy Activist Brittany Pettibone, but has since been used more widely to describe a certain type of young female social media personalities connected to the Alt-Right movement. Although I am acutely aware of the critique surrounding the trivialization of the label "Nazi" in contemporary political discourse, I do feel it is a fittingly crass description of the women examined in this paper as it reflects both the use of pop cultural iconography and their ideological agendas.

digital images play an essential part in shaping social discourse – and it is especially young women that have made use of, and in many cases benefited from, these new possibilities of self-representation by creating highly influential aesthetic standards and motifs (Kohout, 2019; Weis, 2020).

Based on approaches from fashion theory and cultural studies, this chapter examines mainstream media coverage, social media posts and refences in popular culture as well as scholarly literature, especially feminist theory, and conducts a discourse analysis of ultra-femininity and related female beautification practices in order to examine the "cultural rules" attached to these practices. The chapter seeks to answer the question how stereotypes associated with ultra-femininity are being used politically – both to captivate and to antagonise. Next to the gendered meanings obviously associated with ultra-femininity, the role of class criticism as a founding narrative of the Alt-Right movement – in this case, the positioning of ultra-femininity as a form of anti-elitist class resistance – needs to be examined as well. What part do "progressive" left-wing and especially feminist approaches to female beauty and beautification play in this? The chapter focuses particularly on a few controversial moments in popular representations of fashion and politics and on "metapolitical"[2] visual strategies within the Alt-Right, highlighting four themes: depictions of right-wing women and the "Fake Melania" meme in liberal-leaning media, a brief look at the history of western female "beautification" and its class implications since the 19th century, a discussion of changing feminist and post-feminist perspectives on "beautification" and, finally, the role of ultra-femininity in pop cultural strategies of the Alt-Right.

From the outset, it should be clear that femininity is a highly loaded concept not without problems or conceptual inconsistencies in feminist theory. Second-wave feminist Susan Brownmiller, for example, described it as "a rigid code of appearance and behavior defined by do's and don't-do's" (Brownmiller, 1984, p.9). In the context of concrete practices of beautification, the subject becomes even more thorny: As female beauty standards are understood as patriarchally imposed, any efforts made to comply with those norms are regarded as irreconcilable with female autonomy. Seen from that perspective, femininity – understood as a cultural performance – in itself is a betrayal of the cause of feminism (Kauer, 2009, p.33). Even though, as I will argue in more detail below, feminist theorists of the third and fourth waves have been more welcoming to the idea of productive female self-imaging through beautification techniques (Davis, 1995; Degele, 2008; Kohout, 2019), the term femininity has remained problematic if only due to its inherent gender binarism. It is usually circumscribed as a symbolic place or practice, defining the bottom position in a binary gender hierarchy (Butler, 1990; Schippers, 2007). However, understanding femininity as a social construction within a power relation does not mean that the symbols chosen to represent it are semantically arbitrary. Approaches in cultural theory and sociology to the construction of beauty norms have argued convincingly that the "materiality of the body", is inseparable from its symbolic properties and must be

understood within the context of power relations – especially those relating to class, race and gender (Fleig, 2000; Koppetsch, 2000).

Enhanced women: from "rightwing women all dress the same" to "Fake Melania"

During the Trump presidency liberal-leaning media were outspoken in exposing and expressing their disgust for a certain brand of conventionally attractive, pointedly groomed femaleness:

> But American rightwing women all dress exactly the same, which is to say, mainstream feminine – dresses, not trousers; heels, not flats; no interesting cuts, just body-skimming, cleavage-hinting, not-scaring-the-horses tedium.
>
> (Freeman, 2017)

> You know the look: Hair that is long, layered and blown to salon perfection; makeup that covers the face in foundation, paints the eyes with subtle smokey shadows, and adds coat upon coat of mascara.
>
> (Del Russo, 2017)

> It was a good reminder for Americans about how the Trump administration likes its women: hair done, makeup piled on, and lying through their teeth.
>
> (Valenti, 2017)

One could argue that the women described here share a kind of Wittgensteinian *Familienähnlichkeit* (family resemblance) in that their visual likeness points to further semantic similarities. It can be noted that their self-presentations lay the focus on traditional markers of femininity (long hair, use of make-up, dresses and high heels), while the perceived "sameness" hints at a dismissal of personal individuality in favour of a collective identity. A recurring point of criticism lies in the fact that these women's bodies have been artificially *enhanced* in a multitude of ways. Next to their "piled-on" make-up and professionally "done" hair, acquiring "the look" requires an arsenal of further beautification techniques such as lash and nail extensions, dental work, as well as injections with Botox and fillers. The bodies in question are constructed not only socially, culturally and politically, but also material constructs in a very literal way. Serving as objects of study to a femaleness performed through a series of embodied acts, by "what is put on, invariably, under constraint, daily and incessantly, with anxiety and pleasure" (Butler, 1988, p.530). One could argue that this is true for the vast majority of women in media today regardless of their political affiliation. But what makes fashion and beauty culture such useful tools in setting symbolic boundaries is precisely that its aesthetic markers are nuanced and refined: the tone of lipstick, the height of the heel, the dosage of Botox injections.

In October 2020, just a few weeks shy of the highly anticipated US election, photographs depicting the then-presidential couple boarding the Marine One helicopter in Nashville, Tennessee, gave new fuel to a conspiracy theory commonly referred to as "Fake Melania". As with previous instances, its purveyors cited perceived inconsistencies in Melania's facial appearance as evidence of her being replaced by a body double in public appearances. Several in part contradictory approaches were offered to explain why the "real" Melania was unwilling or unable to be by her husband's side. The more benign interpretations framed the operation as a cover-up for publicly unacceptable behaviour on MT's side, such as secretly separating from her spouse or undergoing cosmetic surgical procedures requiring extensive healing time. However, it was the darker and more bizarre theories that captured the imagination of the audiences and took the concept of *Fake Melania* to another level. They claimed that MT had either been lobotomised into complete submission, murdered and replaced by a look-alike robot or perhaps never existed at all (Benjamin, 2020).

This approach coincides with the aesthetic critique of the "artificial look" of women in the Trump administration in liberal media. Even before the rise of "Fake Melania", MT had been relentlessly ridiculed for her appearance, which was perceived as overly groomed and strangely emotionless. Normative beauty, demureness and sophistication – qualities women are usually praised for in popular culture – oddly seemed to work in MT's disadvantage.

> I am almost sure that Mrs. Trump is not a robot, unlike the women in the famous novel [The Stepford Wives]. I say this despite her sculpted face and the generally 1950s Playboy Bunny appearance that seems to defy human aging. I am still sure that beneath the coaching and stilted speeches, she is a human being.
>
> (Landry, 2016)

Shortly after the inauguration signs reading "Melania, blink twice if you need help" appeared at Anti-Trump rallies, mockingly insinuating that she was held captive, possibly drugged and unable to communicate otherwise (Weaver, 2017). In June 2017 British comedian Tracey Ullmann launched a sketch on her TV show *Tracey Breaks the News* which showed a robotic Melania being remote-controlled from a secret Russian command centre.[3] Around the same time, the catchword *Melaniabot* gained popularity on Twitter (Bakke, 2020, p.147). In 2019 *The View*, a popular daytime US-talk show aimed at a predominantly female audience, dedicated its *Hot Topic* segment, typically dealing with pressing current political or social issues, to *Fake Melania*. Interestingly, the show's gaggle of female hosts adopted an ambivalent approach to the theory: While initially debunking it as "crazy", they later admitted to finding the narrative unsettlingly believable.[4] While it is certainly legitimate to express bewilderment at the ways in which MT chose to fill her position during her husband's term of office, entertaining the idea that the former FLOTUS might, in fact, not be human can be seen as an extreme form of *Othering*. Although conspiracy theories such as *Fake Melania* may

appear quirky and exaggerated, they serve as stabilising factors implying social categorisation, often by building on pre-existing stereotypes (Uscinski and Parent, 2014; Klein et al., 2015). Started as a half-joke on social media and quickly picked up by mainstream media (Hyde, 2017), the *Fake Melania* conspiracy theory was mostly referred to in a humorous manner, as an intriguingly absurd emergence of contemporary social media culture. But, as the Trump administration has impressively proved, repetition creates reality, or a semblance thereof (Polage, 2012).

The public discourse surrounding Melania focuses heavily on two qualities: the way she looks and the fact that she is Eastern European.[5] In her analysis of MT's perception in US-American culture, Wiedlack ascribes her Otherness to her Slovenian descent. She argues that even though MT's whiteness and beauty have the potential to blend into elite society, her public sexualisation as well as her classification as a victim of her husband's toxic masculinity assign her to the position of "Eastern European under-classness" (Wiedlack, 2019). Undoubtedly, MT's "Eastern Europeanness" largely fuelled the negative stereotypes ascribed to her public persona. In the specific context of *The View* though, her national origin appears less relevant. The talk show has been praised for its "identifiably" diverse cast of female hosts representing different ethnic and social backgrounds, body types, ages and sexual orientations (FitzSimons, 2019). Despite the show's commitment to inclusiveness, the discussion of the *Fake Melania* theory made it quite clear that the hosts did not consider MT to be "one of them". At the same time, the trope of MT as a robotic, mind-controlled victim serves to absolve her of any willing participation in her husband's white nationalist politics, confirming the utopian feminist idea that women are morally superior to men and less prone to violent or exclusionary behaviour (Gilligan, 1977).

But if MT's *Otherness* is not based on her political views, then what is it that's so wrong about her? What sets *The View* apart from other daytime TV shows, according to *The New York Times*, is its representation of women who are "smart and accomplished", defying the usual "bubbleheads-'R'-us approach to women's talk shows" (James, 1997). To put it bluntly, MT is not considered "smart" enough to serve as identification object for *The View's* audience, she belongs to the "bubbleheads". Taking into consideration that female college-educated democratic voters make up the bulk of *The View's* audience (Schaal, 2020; Flint, 2016) it becomes apparent that the issue taken with MT is closely tied to class-based femininity. Like the majority of Trump's female supporters, she has no college degree (Zachary, Merrill, and Wolfe, 2020). In that view, the social privileges she enjoys were not "honestly acquired" through institutionalised education, but through the time, effort and sacrifices invested into cultivating her body.

Beautification and class shaming

The subtleties of "good" taste have long been utilised by the elites to keep the lower classes at bay. Much research has gone into the ways the taste of the

elites presents a discreet yet daunting barrier, hampering the social advancement of those not born into the educated classes (Bourdieu, 1986; Gebauer, 1982; Veblen, 2007). In contrast to his usual overconfident demeanour, former president Trump is reportedly highly sensitive when it comes to the outward perception of his electoral base. A White House staffer revealed that after watching footage of the failed insurrection, "Trump expressed disgust on aesthetic grounds over how 'low class' his supporters looked. […] He doesn't like low-class things" (Nuzzi, 2021). Yet DT, who famously ordered gold curtains for the Oval Office, has been continuously mocked by the press for the *"vulgarity"* and "garishness" of his taste (Budds, 2016; Menking, 2020), making him a textbook case of *Nouveau Riche*, whose abundant wealth cannot make up for his lack of cultural capital.

Much of the same malice can be observed in the discourse surrounding female beautification practices more broadly. A tendency to "overdo" things is typically ascribed to working -class and "low"-class women, with heavy make-up and big hair being some of the most widely recognised *white trash* signifiers (Skeggs, 2000, p.141). A similar notion is expressed in the aesthetic critique of the "Trump women" discussed earlier: Through expressions such as "piled-on make-up" "bottle-blonde" or "layer upon layer of mascara", they are placed within the *Nouveau Riche* taste spectrum. These ascriptions can thus be read as a simple yet effective way to discredit social upward mobility. It also, less explicitly, divides the "upper class" into fractions distinguishable by their aesthetic preferences.

The devaluation of "painted women" has a long-standing tradition in bourgeois culture (Peiss, 1998; Ramsbrock, 2011) that is about more than *Nouveau Riche* status. Decorative cosmetic practices were not only considered low class in economic terms, but also widely associated with unacceptably lose ("low") sexual morals, an "abject whorishness" (Penny, 2011, p.6) further barring the women who used them from entering relevant social circles. Common stereotypes of "painted women" such as the Vaudeville girl, jezebel or femme fatale can be read as euphemisms for sex-workers. In the popular *Snatch Game* segment of *RuPaul's Drag Race Season 10*, the winning performance was an impersonation of MT, which portrayed her as a robot dropping sexual innuendos hinting at her husband's love for "Russian hookers" – a term which apparently was meant to include her Slovenian origins. Portraying MT to be, at the same time, non-human *and* a sex worker cites and continues this tradition of devaluing women who come from outside specific elite circles.[6]

Beautification from feminist and post-feminist perspectives

Feminist critiques of conventional femininity have their own rationality and genealogy, but they are not entirely separate from these dynamics either. In her classic book *Femininity*, second-wave feminist Susan Brownmiller (1984) identified female beautification practices enforced by the cosmetic industry as one of the core conflicts threatening the women's movement from within. Interestingly, the trope of willfully creating a false female self by putting on

an "impersonal cosmetic mask" (Brownmiller, 1984, p.187) or turning the body into "cultural plastic" (Bordo, 2003, pp.246f.) picks up the familiar perspective that "painted women" cannot be trusted as they are not who they appear to be. Influential feminists of this generation agreed that not conforming to, or even opposing normative notions of female attractiveness are powerful forms of political resistance against an oppressive objectifying system – while at the same time complaining about being stereotyped as old-fashioned, unattractive, bleak and joyless (Daly, 1990; Bordo, 2003; Brownmiller, 1984). This feminist critique of feminine beauty culture is not free of class-based attributions, for instance when explaining some women's eagerness to comply with mainstream beauty norms by ascribing to them a status of social and economic powerlessness, relying on male sexual attention in order to sustain themselves (Adams, 1997; Davis, 2008). Institutionalised education and the rejection of roles ascribed to traditional femininity are regarded as the only truly acceptable forms of female self-expression. By expressing a general disregard for fashion and beauty culture, feminist scholars run the risk of alienating women who partake in and enjoy these practices, making this an easy access point for Alt-Right activists and others to reinforce anti-feminist stereotypes as position them as a form of anti-elitism.

In contrast, however, the third wave of feminism embraced the concept of female agency, honouring individual choices of self-definition as empowering and creative, while labelling second-wave feminists as judgemental of other women and anti-sexual in general (Davis, 1995; Snyder, 2008). The current fourth wave of feminism, shaped by digital culture, appears to continuously oscillate between those two extreme positions: Some voices celebrate the use of make-up and fashion as relevant political strategies regardless of gender (Kohout, 2019) and others warn against the pressures to perform a "robotic capitalist eroticism" (Penny, 2010, p.10) that sells femininity as a bodily property only attainable though consumption (Chae, 2019). Regardless of this opposition, the display of hegemonic white heterosexual femininity is mostly regarded as problematic, even toxic, for its tendency to appropriate and "erase" the experiences of all women not defined by that narrow margin (Butler, 2013; Daniels, 2015; Moon and Holling, 2020). A constricted perspective that focuses on the experiences of white, educated, middle-class women, has increasingly come into criticism (Daniels, 2015; Moon and Holling, 2020). In the current conjuncture, many female authors across a wide political spectrum explicitly defend themselves against class shaming in association with beautification practices. Journalist Cigdem Toprak, for example, criticised the white liberal elite in Germany for denying her intellectual capacity because of her heavily made-up eyes that made her look like "a girl from the streets" (Toprak, 2020). This emerging debate is strongly linked to the perception of migrant women and women of colour who claim specific techniques as markers of their cultural heritage. Author Jacinta Nandi even writes that the moral rejection of beautified women by the white German educated middle classes as "impure" reveals a "racist desire for the Nazi period" (Nandi, 2018, p.45).[7]

However, these dichotomies – even though still powerful within white supremacist visual cultures – can be applied to the politics of femininity in today's Alt-Right movement only to a limited degree. The image of the naturally fresh-faced, linen-clad, braid-swinging "shield-maiden", associated with pre-digital extreme right communities could not be more different from the appearance of today's female Alt-Right influencers. Instead, they opt for a look of a prototypical white "cookie-cutter beauty" in line with the standards of ultra-femininity described above that gained increasing popularity due to the combined rise of digital communication techniques and the cosmetic enhancement industry (Kuczynski, 2006, pp.110f.).

The adoption of this specific feminine style by the Alt-Right can partly be explained by the market rules of the digital playing field, where successful self-staging calls for a different set of presentation strategies. In addition, the idea of attractiveness as a personal achievement, attainable through participation in consumer culture, is one of the founding myths of modern US-American capitalism (Peiss, 1998). Or, as Karl Marx put it, the firm belief in the power of money to destroy ugliness (Marx, 1988, p.219).

Pop culture and the Alt-Right

When approaching the issue of why women are attracted to a movement like the Alt-Right that expresses blatant disregard for gender equality, post-feminism or "emancipation fatigue" (Dietze, 2020) is considered the most obvious explanation. Most theorists agree that the "new momism" culture of neo-maternity[8] also plays a big part (Mattheis, 2018; Hallstein, 2010). But as Angela McRobbie has pointed out, fashion and beautification are areas that do not address women primarily as mothers or caregivers, but rather as a "a gay young thing out for a good time" (McRobbie, 1991, p.145). Therefore, beauty culture within the Alt-Right should be examined separately from its glorification of motherhood.

While the third and fourth waves of feminism disagreed with some basic assumptions of classic second-wave feminism, Alt-Right post-feminism aims to displace feminism altogether, making anti-feminism a more appropriate term to describe the movement. The opinion that emancipation is an aberration, "a norm dictated by the elite", is widespread among Alt-Right women (Dietze, 2020, p.151). The negative stereotype of the "ugly, jack-booted, feminazi psycho lesbian" (Freeman, 2017), a woman so unattractive by conventional standards that she is unable to find a male partner, has been used to discredit the women's movement from the start and is frequently referred to in feminist literature as a bitter joke (Brownmiller, 1984; Daly, 1990; Bordo, 1998). This alone would make embracing ultra-femininity self-evident as a strategy for Alt-Right women. They actively use the "unsexiness" of feminism as an argument, especially when catering to younger women, and update it to current vocabularies. In January of 2020 Alt-Right influencer Brittany Pettibone, whose social media persona earned her the moniker "Nazi-Barbie", posted an advice video titled "Men won't date 'woke' women"[9] on

YouTube that has since received more than 600,000 views. In their quest to erase feminism, influencers like her seek to be understood not as backwards but as "modern women" who have overcome the "false consciousness" dictated by pro-feminist mainstream social and cultural discourse. Even when they are not actively fulfilling the role of the mother (yet), they see their "destiny as women" firmly situated alongside a white male in a heterosexual relationship (Mattheis, 2018). The feminist critique of patriarchal "toxic" masculinity is seen as "an undeserved castration and expulsion of the sexiness from the heterosexual relationship." (Dietze, 2020, p.151).

Still, the adoption of ultra-femininity by radical right-wing women should not be assessed solely as man-pleasing behaviour. Building on reactions to the devaluations described above, there is also an element of class resistance – or, in a more strategic sense, of exploiting class resentments – to it. This paradoxically benefits from increasingly blurry symbolic class boundaries. In 1986 Bourdieu found that French working-class women were less likely to work in fields that "most strictly demand conformity to the dominant norms of beauty" and were therefore typically less inclined "to invest time and effort, sacrifices and money in cultivating their bodies". He went on to say that it is the women of the *petit bourgeoisie* "who have sufficient interest in the market in which physical properties can function as capital" (Bourdieu, 1986, p.206). Since that time, the perceived attainability of beauty norms as well as the possibility of heightened visibility have considerably risen, not least through digital culture, especially social media, making the cultivation of the body appear worthwhile regardless of professions and class status. In a recent study of female supporters of the Tea Party, one woman stated her anger at "feminazis" for class shaming her and her peers as "ignorant, backward, redneck losers. They think we are racist, sexist, homophobic and maybe fat." (Hochschild, 2016, p. 23). For rural right-wing women like her, focusing on beautification can then also be seen as visual resistance against ascribed low-class ugliness.

However, ultra-femininity cannot be understood simply through the opposition between "elitist" and "working-class" taste, and through aligning "elite" with "feminist", which is a reading suggested by Alt-Right metapolitics. For one, it is no secret that even though the Alt-Right cultivates the image of a grass-roots movement, many of its leading figures themselves belong to the "elite" they allegedly aim to destroy. Furthermore, in many cases, the look of ultra-femininity reproduces a "high maintenance" style of beauty that could be observed in the *Nouveau Riche* fraction of the economic upper class long before its utilisation in the Alt-Right. As stand-in for sociologically more precise terms, the *Nouveau Riche* can heuristically be seen as a social stratum with money and influence whose members feels to some extent humiliated by their exclusion from more "cultured", educated, officially credentialed circles. Seen from this perspective, the self-assertive expression of ultra-femininity can also be understood as a further "emancipation of taste" among the *Nouveau Riche*, much like Trump's gold curtains, against the aesthetic standards imposed by the "liberal elite" – which, however, in this case

is made to encompass other fractions of the predominantly white upper middle class and the much more diverse and cross-class feminist movement.

Strategies of aesthetic subversion that are typical for subcultures play an important role in that context. In September 2020 British sportswear brand Fred Perry announced the decision to stop selling its iconic Black/Yellow/Yellow twin tipped polo shirt in the US and Canada[10]. The statement came as a reaction to a growing number of media reports worldwide portraying the self-proclaimed *Proud Boys*, a white supremacist, neo-fascist, male-only organisation engaged in targeted violence against left-wing activists, LGBTQI+ and people of colour, that had adopted the polo shirt as an unofficial uniform. This unwelcomed ideological charging of an item of clothing that had been a beloved subcultural staple since the late 1970s is only the latest chapter in an ongoing discourse surrounding the "appropriation" of pop cultural style codes by Alt-Right activists. A few years earlier the figure of the "Nipster" – a compound of the terms "Nazi" and "Hipster" – received some media as well as scholarly attention. The adoption of a dress code favoured by an urban, art-savvy elite sporting undercut hairstyles, skinny jeans and Converse All-Stars trainers was interpreted as a deliberate strategy to appear less threatening and simulate participation in mainstream culture (Rogers, 2014; Gaugele, 2018). However, this reading overlooks that fact that racism and misogyny had always played an integral, if controversial, part in Hipster culture itself (Current and Tillotson, 2018; Dubrofsky and Wood, 2014).[11] In fact, classic Hipster style as it appeared in the noughties of the 21st century was characterised by a preference for what John Leland labelled "caucasian kitsch": Trucker Hats, Wife Beaters and Pabst Blue Ribbon beer (Leland, 2005, p.353). Hipster culture has been frequently accused of "class tourism", college-educated middle-class offspring fashionably posing as "White Trash" (Schiermer, 2013; Weis, 2017). White male hipsters not only loved to "ironically" adopt the fashion style of white low-class country folk, but also their supposed racist and misogynist views that were in stark opposition to the "politically correct" consensus of their peers. Perhaps surprisingly, many white women went along with this under the assumption that the resurrection of sexist stereotypes could now be seen as amusing as gender equality had allegedly already been achieved (Douglas, 2010).

Much like the Alt-Right movement, hipsterism was predominantly perceived as a culture of white men. While there were plenty of female Hipster icons, their style was not so much perceived as subcultural or intellectually stimulating, but as "the familiar 'female' knowledge of how to look" (Tortorini, 2010, p.123). Angela McRobbie has argued that the types of images available to girls and women are limited – in subcultural settings as well as in mainstream society, with a softer, sexually permissive approach generally appearing more acceptable than aggressive and transgressive behaviours (McRobbie and Garber, 1976). Mattheis's study of female Alt-Right protagonists points out a specific obstacle that women in far-right movements face: "How does one act as a warrior of the movement […] without emasculating men?" (Mattheis, 2018, p.137). While the heightened visibility of Alt-Right actors in

mainstream media brought attention to some memorably bizarre male figures such as the "QAnon Shaman" (Sheppard, 2021), the women seem to attract sufficient attention by their femaleness alone (Givhan, 2021; Shaw, 2021; Thomas, 2021). Yet there is an element of the strategic "semiotic confusion" associated with male "Nipster" styles to the look of ultra-femininity as well. In an article on the "TradWife" movement, women proudly proclaiming to be utterly fulfilled by living the life of a wife and mother without any professional aspirations, *New York Times* journalist Annie Kelly writes that they deliberately construct a "hyperfeminine aesthetic" in order to "mask the authoritarianism of their ideology" (Kelly, 2018).

This strategic use of the aesthetic is illustrated by the case of US-Alt-Right influencer Pettibone, who first gained social media fame as a self-proclaimed "pizzagate expert" (Maly, 2020). She relocated to Austria in 2018, where she staged a fairytale wedding to the far-right white nationalist "Identitarian" movement leader and "Nipster" posterboy Martin Sellner. Since becoming a wife, Pettibone's online rhetoric has shifted away from outright political activism and the spreading of anti-Democrats conspiracy theories, to cultural or "metapolitical" issues such as beauty and dating advice. As a social influencer she adopts a self-presentation technique that uses strategic intimacy to appeal to her followers, mostly white young women (Marwick, 2015). In 2018 she published her first book titled "What Makes us Girls" offering a low-threshold access to evolutionary-biologist, culturalistic, anti-feminist ideas and attitudes. The book suggests that beautification and the expression of femininity are acts of self-worth, even if it doesn't offer any make-up or fashion tips. On the cover, Pettibone poses for a glamour headshot, hair and make-up perfectly polished, wearing a demure black dress with lace inserts. In a YouTube video from February 2021 titled "The war on feminine beauty", she argues that women have an "organic desire" that makes them want to look beautiful but that some "deliberately promote ugliness in order to sabotage other women" [12].

Conclusion: ultra-femininity and (white) power

What makes the praising of hegemonic femininity so effective to the Alt-Right agenda is not just its stark visual opposition to the "dowdy feminist" stereotypes, but also that western beauty norms inherently reproduce whiteness as a desirable standard (Davis, 2008; Haiken, 1997). Openly racist motifs and memes that are popular in Alt-Right online circles suggest that the terms "beautiful" and "ugly" serve as thinly veiled euphemisms for white and non-white.

Applying beautification as a conscious strategy means to position oneself within a social field and making a deliberate choice whom to attract and whom to repel (Degele, 2008, p.71). Within the framework of race, gender and class, the Alt-Right women's performance of ultra-femininity deliberately promotes ideas of white supremacy and hegemonic gender roles while challenging norms of beauty and taste that predominate among other elites. Stereotypes associated with ultra-femininity are utilised in two ways: for the

purpose of othering women with a different social background or subset of values as well as to create a powerful counter-aesthetic of upward social mobility that is accessible through participation in consumer culture.

Beautification and the creation of glamourous images are techniques commonly applied by ambitious emergent groups and individuals in order to take over or re-invent privileges from elites, thus threatening hegemonic power (Gundle, 2008, p.19). A similar strategy has been adopted by the Alt-Right, whose representational approach to young white women has shifted over the last decade from mostly allegorical motifs to "beautifully photographed icons" consistent with contemporary influencer culture (Dietze, 2020, p.160). This strategy also makes use of the concept of *empowerment* which is highly popular in fourth wave digital cultures where it is commonly used to describe images that provide positive visibility to people enduring exclusion. Exactly *how* female Alt-Right actors are disadvantaged by elitist culture remains an open question. As white heterosexual women they belong to a privileged group most frequently represented in mainstream media. It can be argued that strategies of symbolic class resistance were influential in shaping and furthering ultra-femininity as a form of visual warfare by and within the Alt-Right movement. At the same time, many of the female figures associated with the movement do not actually come from lower or working-class backgrounds. Instead, they have appropriated the concept of empowerment by creating an anti-feminist narrative claiming that a war is being waged against feminine beauty by liberal culture pushing "ugly positive feminists as the beauty ideal" (Mattheis, 2018, pp.141f.).

When examining the power relations within the Alt-Right movement, as well as in the Trump administration, the display of ultra-femininity might serve another, subconscious, purpose as well. In her classic psychoanalytic essay "Womanliness As A Maquerade" (1929) Joan Riviere finds that women in power positions apply practices and behaviours associated with hegemonic femininity to appear less threatening and avoid punishment from the male leader/father figure in an oedipal entanglement.

Ultra-femininity can serve to appease some, but it certainly infuriates others. Seen from this perspective, it is highly effective as an image strategy to visualise the political and cultural opposition of "beautiful" white femininity and the "abject", diverse aesthetics of contemporary feminism. However, ultra-femininity seems less well suited as a tool to redistribute political power – within the Alt-Right movement or society at large – because it embraces, and constantly reproduces the very same limitations that spawned it.

Notes

1 The Alt-Right, short for "Alternative Right" here specifically refers to a new wave of web-based white segregationist subcultures that have gained strength and visibility during Donald Trump's presidential term (Nagle, 2017; 12).

2 The term *metapolitics*, as it is used here, refers to practices addressing, and potentially disrupting, existing political discourse as well as the dominant power structures in a given public sphere (Zienkowski, 2019). The Alt-Right movement uses

metapolitics to strategically frame topics such as family values, gender relations and beauty norms as ideological locations for political debates.

3 Tracey Breaks the News (2017) *Melania Trump Robot*. Available onlone: youtube. com/watch?v=b6NqscIsidQ [accessed 02/25/2021].

4 The View (2019). *Fake Melania Conspiracies Return*. Available online: youtube. com/watch?v=xOPeOUaREVc [accessed 02/25/2021].

5 On this aspect, also see the chapter by Breda Luthar in this volume.

6 RuPaul's Drag Race Season 10, *Snatch Game*. Available online: youtube.com/watch?v=iKl4EXFQTYc [accessed 02/25/2021].

7 As fashion historian and theorist Barbara Vinken has pointed out, ideas of "natural" and "artificial" beauty are deeply rooted in racialized beliefs, with the ideal of the unspoiled nordic women held high in national-socialist Germany, condemning the seductive refinement of "Jewish-oriental" women, cunningly using make-up, perfume and fashion to their personal advancement (Vinken, 2013, pp.152f.).

8 A movement of women, sometimes also referred to as "TradWifes" (traditional wives), that regard choosing full-time motherhood over a career as the ultimate form of female self-actualization.

9 youtube.com/watch?v=SbiWrOMhMho [accessed 02/25/2021].

10 help.fredperry.com/hc/en-us/articles/360013674918-Proud-Boys-Statement [accessed 02/25/2020].

11 It is no coincidence that the co-founder of *Vice* magazine, dubbed the "hipster's bible", Gavin McInnes went on to found the *Proud Boys*. As Mark Greif points out in his analysis of hipster culture, "the markers of hipster ethnicity were straightforward. They were coded 'suburban white'" (Greif, 2010, p. 146).

12 youtube.com/watch?v=R_rhL3eFeuE [accessed 02/25/2021].

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