

Blue Woman

Blaue Frau

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Antje Rávik Strubel's prize-winning novel *Blaue Frau* (Blue Woman) paints a panorama of violence and relations of power in Europe at the beginning of the 21st century. The novel brings to the surface the 'dark spots' of the dominant Western European memory and a universal politics of trauma that takes male bodies as its flawed framework. It juxtaposes the seemingly 'personal' violence of rape with political crimes in international politics in order to underline that traumatic experiences that remain invisible in mainstream historiography are interwoven with political apparatuses of social domination and neoliberal modes of exploitation. Ultimately, the novel underscores possibilities for agency and resistance against normalised structures of violence, while exposing legal justice as a naïve illusion. There is also an inherent aesthetic resistance in the novel itself, which Strubel expresses in the vital forces of an overpowering nature and an experimental aesthetics of queer fluidity.

Blaue Frau is structured in four narrative parts and revolves around the 21 years old Czech protagonist Adina Schejbal, who leaves her village in the Czech Giant Mountains, where she feels lonely as the last teenager, to fulfil her dream of moving to Germany and starting anew. She begins an internship at a newly founded cultural centre in Brandenburg, where she is raped by an influential West German 'cultural ambassador' named Johann Manfred Bengel. Traumatized by the assault, she flees to Finland and meets the member of the European parliament and professor for political science, Leonides Siilman, who advocates for a European Day of Remembrance for Victims of Stalinism and Nazism. In Helsinki, Adina makes attempts to take back control over her life and to share her story.

The narrative is interspersed with passages from another layer of reality: In a mysterious part of the Helsinki harbour, a place full of a wild nature, a first-person narrator, who bears many similarities with the empirical author, and the 'blue woman', a fairy-like luminous figure, meet and discuss poetics and politics. It is a way for Strubel to write herself in the narrative, play with identities and underline the significance of speaking in the context of violence.

In the first part of the novel, readers encounter Adina in an apartment in Helsinki. It quickly becomes apparent that something literally unspeakable must have assaulted Adina's body and selfhood, reflected in disturbing moods and fragments of memory, bad feelings of anger or unwellness, and precise descriptions of smells, sounds, lights and objects of the surrounding world. She imagines herself to be invisible and liquid like the Estonian vodka she drinks. The text creates gaps, only indirectly circles around the trauma, and never shows any graphic depiction of the rape. While her lover, Leonides, takes on a challenging fight in the European parliament to get justice for the countries of the European periphery, he is not able to read and understand the signs of Adina's trauma. Leonides' epistemology is based on the works of Zygmunt Bauman or Umberto Eco, which

excludes references to feminist or anti-racist authors (371) and therefore characterises him as blind to sexist power structures.

Parts one and two of the novel go back in time and depict Adina's journey to Berlin until the fateful encounter with Bengel takes place. When Adina reaches Berlin, the radio broadcasts the election victory of Angela Merkel, Germany's first female chancellor, who announces in her winning speech that "nobody can stop us from taking new paths" (148). In Berlin, Adina meets Rickie, a queer photographer who gives Adina ideas on how to change her identity and physical features. Adina expands her self-image as a queer stray and wants to pursue her queer desire to be 'The Last of the Mohicans', her male identity based on James Fenimore Cooper's novel, which she used as a teenager in an online chat and which is now slowly taking on a physical existence. Throughout the novel, Strubel uses different names and female and male pronouns for her protagonist, which alludes to political debates about linguistic potentials to give space to other ways of being.

Rickie recommends Adina to Razvan Stein, a former soldier of the GDR army, who is a loyal subordinate of Bengel and bought some land and a mansion at the river of the Oder where he wants to create a cultural centre. What sounds like a vision to unite East and West misses any opportunity to create a true dialogue between people with different experiences. During a feast, Bengel, who is described as a multiplier with connections to Berlin, triggers a feeling of shame and disgust in Adina. He gives her the name of Nina and imposes his distorted image of the 'wild land of the East' on her. His fetish for Eastern European and Russian women culminates in the rape of Adina, who is locked in an industrial refrigerator to silence her after the assault.

Strubel shows that female solidarity is not the norm. An affluent Swiss woman, who is never given a name – one of Strubel's narrative techniques of irony – and is a business partner of Bengel's, meets Adina in the morning after the rape. Instead of taking Adina's accusation seriously, she recalls details about Bengel's private life that clear him of any wrongdoing and annihilate Adina's narrative: "He had already invited the Swiss woman over twice, to a bright home with a wall of books and colourful seating areas. He had a knack for vegetarian BBQs" (264). Strubel links this instance of silencing with the structural level of international politics, as the narrative voice alludes to Switzerland's problematic history in terms of pacifist politics and women's rights that has influenced the perceptive patterns of the nameless character. The narrative voice comments ironically: "There was always a solution in the field of diplomacy" (264). By thematising sexualized violence and social reactions to it, Strubel problematises common practices of victim blaming that reproduce and legitimise the viewpoint of the perpetrator. Earlier on, the blue woman and the author reflect on the destructive power of prejudice: "How we believe the absurd logic, not the obvious logic, when it is of our advantage" (99).

Strubel narratively links structural racism and sexism against Eastern European women, the shortcomings of the legal systems in Western democracies, power imbalances between centre and periphery, the exploitation of undocumented low-wage workers, and the ignorance about Russian politics of aggression with the fate of Adina. But there are forms of relationalities, alliances and activism in the novel that are based on shared feelings and ethics of solidarity. In the fourth part of the novel, *Blaue Frau* reads like a political thriller when Adina reluctantly tells her story to Kristiina. She is a friend of Leonides, Finnish activist and queer woman who needs "to be in the fresh air, cooled by plants and supplied with oxygen, which obeyed the laws of gravity" (341), and sends clouds of smoke to the moon. In the finale, Bengel is ironically awarded with an important prize for human rights, despite Kristiina's and Leonide's attempts to convince the committee to see and recognise the violence. However, there is one member of the committee, a doctoral student who either is a Sámi or sympathises with the Sámi indigenous people, who resigns in protest during the

session of the committee. He states: "Regarding a living being as a thing is not a trivial matter. It is slavery. And we condemn slavery. The awarding of the prize must be suspended until Johann Manfred Bengel has been cleared of the allegations" (416). Kristiina notices his rebellious attitude and connects her struggle with the struggles of the indigenous people of Scandinavia, reminding her to fight for more, whatever the cost. In the very end of the novel, Kristiina tells Adina about the location of the award ceremony. Adina, equipped with a knife, is ready to storm the stage to frighten Bengel. She feels like the Last of the Mohicans and regains selfhood and agency. When the first-person narrator asks the blue woman why Adina did not kill Bengel, the novel ends with a note on the pleasure of confusion and corporeal ambiguity: "The blue woman puts her fingers to her temples and pulls the skin back tightly. Her eyes narrow, her face becomes a laughing mask" (426).

Blaue Frau was awarded the German Book Prize in 2021, because it proves literature's potential as "a fragile counter-power that makes a stand against injustice and violence despite all despair" (Deutscher Buchpreis). Instead of reproducing a "foggy fantasy of happiness" (Berlant), Strubel clearly emphasises that equality and freedom are out of reach for many women, minorities, children, and non-humans in a Europe that exploits Romanian workers on Finnish mink farms. However, the novel also envisions a Europe that is rethought from the margins and populated by hopeful figures. There is Adina, Kristiina or the doctoral student from the north. There is the grandfather of a childhood friend of Leonides who was able to save his family during the Soviet invasion of Estonia in the 1940s, because he had a talent for talking to the Soviet soldiers due to his seaman profession. Despite the geographic distance, Adina has a special connection to her mother, who always drove past the Russian military vehicles, "breathless, laughing" (290). These characters present possibilities of a different Europe, away from the failures of institutional politics and endlessly repeated violence of memory. Adina is never reduced to her trauma, but is defined by transcending the boundaries of space, body and being. She realises that she is much more European than anyone else: "She had crossed three borders between four European countries, by bus, on foot, on a ferry, as a fare dodger, by hitchhiking and finally by train with a regular ticket" (41).

Strubel's aesthetics is highly poetic, tricky, intertextual and queer. Its imaginative power also stems from an aesthetic resistance expressed in wonders of the natural space. Trees like birches or rowan trees that produce an excess of colour reappear throughout the text. A character imagines becoming one with the snow after being stuck in a blizzard. In the realm of the blue woman, water and air have the agency to change things and offer possibilities of a more colourful, enlivened world. The beauty of this world is set against the annihilating force of violence.

References

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