



Sound-Tracking Germany. 70 Years of Imagining the Nation from Schlager to
Techno

M.M. Schiller

Summary

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In this study I investigate the mutually constitutive relationship of post-war German national identity and popular music. I consider pop to be an important cultural sphere in which identities are affirmed, challenged, taken apart and reconstructed—both individually and collectively—and I argue that pop, as a social practice as well as commodity, is not only constituted *in*, but also constitutive *of* national imaginaries of Germanness. The aim of this thesis is then to analyze how Germanness is narrated in pop at certain periods of transformation, how the past is remembered, and what specific elements are highlighted or silenced. It asks: how is Germanness constructed and contested? What and who are included or excluded in popular music expressions of Germanness? And ultimately, how can the study of pop music add to our knowledge about national identity construction and vice versa?

I begin by introducing Rammstein as Germany's internationally most successful and notoriously controversial pop group, who not only confidently entitled their "greatest hits" album *Made in Germany*, but simultaneously also released a new single fittingly called "Mein Land" ["My Country"]. I take the multiple ambiguities of "Mein Land" as a starting point for arguing against accounts of a decreasing importance of the nation as conceptual notion in the study of popular music. Herewith I follow Ian Biddle and Vanessa Knights who locate, or re-introduce, the national dimension as the "missing middle ground" between the local and the global in order to productively and critically reconsider how nations as social units operate as "mediators". After having argued for a continuing importance of the nation in the study of popular music, I reciprocally argue for the importance of popular music for the study of national identities, as pop provides a productive means by which national identity (and Germanness in particular) is negotiated.

Following Benedict Anderson's seminal concept of nations as "imagined communities", and Homi Bhabha's notion of "nation as narration", I consider nations as social constructions that are constantly undergoing processes of resignification and mediation in everyday life with culture as the most productive position for negotiating the nation's inherent ambivalences. Because Bhabha focuses (almost) exclusively on the nation "*as it is written*", I also make use of the work of Stuart Hall who aptly notes that national narratives are also told and retold in the media *and* popular culture (as contradictory sites of containment and resistance) and I concur with John Connell and Chris Gibson who consider pop music to be embedded in the creation and constant maintenance of nationhood.

Indeed, music has made a fundamental contribution to German imaginings of nationhood and collective identity, as it offers a platform to negotiate questions of belonging or to challenge national identification, as Maria Stehle and Corinna Kahnke argue. For Germany, questions of national identification are particularly problematic as collective memories of the Nazi period and the crimes committed during the Third Reich—above all the Holocaust—have greatly influenced its incessantly ambiguous relationship to itself; the interrelation of (national) identity as a process and music (as temporal form) is therefore particularly pertinent for the analysis of German national narratives.

Bulding on Bhabha's concept of "nation as narration" as a temporally disjunctive cultural construct that oscillates between a pedagogic rhetoric of national unity anchored in a shared past on the one hand, and divergent performative accounts of the national people in the present on the other, and keeping in mind the particular challenges that twentieth century history has posed to German national identification, I suggest a ternary temporal alignment of Germanness. I posit that Bhabha's chosen terminology is somewhat misleading and obscures the interconnectedness of the nation's relation to its past and its continual self-generation in the present, as well as the productive workings of both dimensions. I therefore hone Bhabha's terminology and, based on the underlying psychoanalytical structures of Bhabha's argument and in reference to the correlating linguistic structuralism of Ferdinand de Saussure and Roman Jakobson, suggest redefining Bhabha's pedagogical dimension, with its focus on fixing national identity as unitary and historical (national *past*) in its ideal image in the (rearview) mirror, the **metaphorical dimension** in its focus on **sameness**. Bhabha's performative mode, with its emphasis on contemporary negotiations of the nation (national cultural *present*) as a constant re-definition of inclusion and exclusion—and hence perpetual deferral of meaning—shall be called the **metonymical dimension** in its insistence on **difference**.

As Bhabha's suggested double temporality of the nation fails to (explicitly) account for the continuing presence of the traumatic German past as "unmasterable" in contemporary narratives of the nation and in order to account for the infinitely repetitive presence of the national past in the present, as neither "pedagogic" (promoting a teleological national past) nor "performative" (as transitional social reality in the present), I suggest a third mode of national temporality as relevant in the narrative construction of national identity and its "waverling between vocabularies". This I call the **melancholic mode**, in which the nation's traumatic experiences and anxieties result in a conflation of national past and present. Based on theories on the traumatic nature of modern nations by Ernest Renan, Benedict Anderson, Edward Said, and Etienne Balibar, and the implied problematic of national remembering/forgetting, I argue that the incomplete *past* always remains a constitutive

element of the national *present* in the **melancholic mode**: the past not beside the present, but the *past in the present*. The nation—and Germany in particular—remains in a state of attempted forgetting or suppressing, but yet the perpetual repetition of the incomplete past results in a *doubled* temporality, in which past and present converge and the inaccessible past remains an ever-returning presence of the unknown. This state of melancholy hallmarks the nation's endless self-repetition, and moreover, it is in uncanny (re)appearances and alienating moments when the suppressed past and current anxiety become visible in the present as in fact being tantamount to it.

My thesis operates on the intersection of popular music, Germany and national identity. Based on this triangle, I have chosen several individual case studies (popular songs from diverse genres) based on their expressiveness regarding the interrelation of all three themes. In order to highlight contemporary discourses of Germanness throughout the decades, all songs—with one significant exception—explicitly deal with questions of national identity. For their informative value, all case studies were chosen based on wide popularity, commercial (and critical) success and lasting national and/or international influence. Due to their explicit engagement in national discourses, as well as their pervasiveness, the selected songs are relevant in terms of their inception of national rhetorical strategies, as poignant negotiations of Germanness in particular and their qualities as popular musical commodities. The chosen genres hence correspond to the prevailing popular choices and cultural relevance at their time, as well as reveal changes in narrative rhetoric in different moments of national transformations. Therefore, my close reading of these national narratives and their rhetoric reveals the changing nature of the ternary temporality of the nation as I explore how Germanness is performatively constructed, challenged and reaffirmed throughout the course of seventy years of sonic national narration.

In the first chapter I explore how pop can participate in the creation of the German nation as the “people produce itself” in the form of the popular Schlager “We are the natives of Trizonesia”. The song, which was so popular that it temporarily functioned as a surrogate national anthem for the imagined nation of “Trizonesia” (West-Germany), shows most compellingly how pop can function as a language for “writing” national narratives. The song metaphorically unites the three western occupied zones in a rhetoric of a “natural” belonging based on a shared cultural heritage. However, it simultaneously metonymically challenges the “state ideology” of contemporary Germanness as imposed by the occupying (“colonizing”) allies. In the interstice of the cultural landscape at its time and availing themselves of the carnivalesque potential inversion of hierarchies, popular music enables the people to performatively (re)narrate “their” nation.

In the second chapter, I further explore the melancholic dimension of Germanness in its explicit absence from the discourse of Beat music of the sixties. The national silence of the emerging youth culture allows me to deepen my discussion of the temporality of trauma, the repetitive character of melancholy and the uncanny reappearance of ghosts of the past in the famous German Beat song called “Poor Boy” by The Lords. The song exemplifies the problematic of articulating national traumas and illustrates the double move of national forgetting/remembering in national narratives, as the uncanny silence of Beat embodies the implied struggle with the impossibility of addressing or incorporating the traumatic experiences of WWII and the unwillingness to engage with the past, while simultaneously being haunted by its impossible memories. Beat’s strong desire to reimagine Germanness through the Other as a modern cosmopolitan nation beyond its own history, and its immanent failure, shows how the repressed past is always already constitutive of the national present as uncanny reminders of the “forgotten” history.

In chapter three, I continue my tracking of popular music as national narrative as Krautrock, and in particular the renowned song “Autobahn” from 1974, emerges out of a so-called “cultural vacuum” in post-war Germany, in which musicians actively engage in the musical exploration of Germanness. “Autobahn” embodies how popular music can illuminate the multiplicity of national narratives. As Kraftwerk’s multi-temporal, multi-spatial narrative with multiple subjectivities shows, national imaginaries are always an open-ended process. Kraftwerk’s almost literal journey, again, exemplifies how narratives entail elements of metaphoric rhetoric (based on the common national experience of the lost identity that needs to be re-narrated), metonymic elements of ever-changing signification of national signs and a melancholic dimension: even if the song fades out, the journey continues of the “Führer’s roads”. What Kraftwerk manages most compellingly is to thematize the very multiple “writings” of national narratives and their changing meanings. In that sense, pop music—as a process, as movement in time—can narrate the nation on many different layers of meaning and it can embody the multiple dimensions of time in their different modes of signification: sound, image, language and discourse.

Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft (DAF), as discussed in chapter four, exemplifies how pop also provides the means for those “unwanted” of the nation to destabilize its central and totalizing rhetoric. DAF, in their brachial yet fragile sound and in their queer mimicry of fascism, appropriates the very elements that suppress or exclude marginal perspectives and highlight their always inherent instability. In performing a queer version of extreme Germanness, they open up the narrative for alternative identifications, and disrupt the rhetoric of exclusion of Otherness. However metonymic this strategy seems, again, it also entails elements of metaphoricity in that the aim of

Neue Deutsche Welle was precisely to make specifically *German* music, based on shared national experiences, cultural contexts and—most of all—the German language as central motif.

Finally, the last chapter reveals how even an explicit nationalist celebration of Germanness is never free of temporal ambivalences. While affectively appealing to the nation's unity through the euphoric quality of the Trance sound and effectively implying the nationalized audience in its narrative through the mediality of the music video, "Wir sind Wir" aims at a metaphoric unity of German identity—and yet this narrative of national pride is implicitly haunted by its suppressed past which is perpetually present in the melancholic mode. Employing the same nationalistic rhetoric as Schlager did sixty years earlier—albeit with an altered sound and context— "Wir sind Wir"'s simulation of history as rhetorically signifying contemporariness illustrates the repetitive character of national narratives as perpetual iteration loops, retained by repetition. In its visual narrative interpretation, the music video reinforces the recurrent quality of a selective past, as Peter Heppner "travels" through time and the viewer is positioned as witness to history while it unfolds, over and over again. In the end however, it is precisely the recurrence that also keeps haunting the nation in the uncanny reappearances of those elements that were rather excluded and forgotten, as the ill-favored and shunned but obtrusive past flickers through the celebratory images of the modern, cosmopolitan nation.

In the conclusion I return to Rammstein and highlight how "Mein Land" embodies the temporal ambiguities of German national imagination. The song not only challenges the boundaries of the local (lost GDR *Heimat*) and the global (American popular culture) as mutually constitutive in the nation as the "middle ground", but its split national subject also oscillates between inclusion and exclusion, East and West, past and present, and as such emblemizes the continuously riven national relation to itself: First, Rammstein's continual nostalgic references to a German cultural heritage and folklore in their imagery, performance style, and use of language, invokes a metaphoric national identification based on a unifying legacy of the German "natural" people-as-one. Simultaneously "Mein Land"—and the split national protagonist in particular—allegorizes the metonymic dimension, as Rammstein bemoans the loss of their socialist (GDR) *Heimat* and the demise of "authenticity" in the face of Western capitalism, and also adheres to a metonymic Germanness as a narrative from the "forgotten margins" of the nation and renders identification impossible. Finally, Rammstein's Teutonic image and continual reference to the problematic German past in the play with Nazi aesthetics, here Till Lindemann's martial *sprechgesang* in particular, as well as the video's final carnivalesque celebration of a dark "German authenticity" as monstrous and violent, are uncanny reminders of the traumatic past, ghosts of a "different" legacy that is

constitutive for the melancholic national present that is permanently stuck in the repetition of its traumatic form.

Returning to the central questions of this study, I underline that pop can function as a language for “writing” national narratives and complement Bhabha’s favored *written* narratives, as pop narratives operate as temporal arts and highlight the transitory nature of narratives. In fact, the study of the nation as narrated through popular music nuances Bhabha’s insistence on the performative—which I have labelled the metonymic—as primarily productive in the margins of the national imagery. My analyses of popular music as commodity and cultural form—commercially and critically successful songs at the height of their cultural relevance—have revealed that the national “center” itself is not as holistic as Bhabha seems to suggest; in fact the very distinction between national “center” and “margin” becomes blurred. My analyses have shown that re-narrations and metonymic rhetoric strategies of the nation *not only* originate in the margins or subcultural scenes, but also “mainstream” (popular musical) narratives of the nation are equivocal, multi-temporal and consist of destabilizing elements—across time and musical genres as well as cultural contexts.

Finally, I conclude by highlighting pop’s oscillation between the “ideological apparatus of state power” on the one hand and “the national-popular” on the other, as the gamut in which national narratives are told, challenged, repeated, altered and confirmed, and argue that researching pop music through the lens of national identity reveals pop’s relevance as a medium of collective and individual identity formation in its ability to offer subject positions and affectively engaging its audience, not only emotionally but also ideologically.