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Heino, Rammstein and the double-ironic melancholia of Germanness

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Melanie Schiller** 

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Abstract

Mass migration and the so-called refugee crisis have put questions of national identifications high on political and social agendas in Germany and all over Europe, and have ignited anew debates about the inclusiveness and exclusiveness of Germanness. In this context, popular culture texts and practices offer insights into how identities are marked, and they engage in and produce discourses about national belonging. In this article, I will focus on how popular music in particular plays a pivotal role in the creation and negotiation of national identifications as it functions as a site of continuous (re-)articulations of Germanness. I focus on a recent peak in the controversy of the discourse surrounding Germanness as it unravelled in 2013, when the nation's most successful *Heimat*- and Schlager singer Heino ironically covered, among others, the song 'Sonne' by Germany's internationally most successful (and notoriously controversial) popular music export: Rammstein. In analysing the multiple layers of irony articulated by Rammstein, Heino and the audience as tropes of negotiations of Germanness in popular music as processes through which identity is actively imagined, created, and constructed, I argue that the double-ironic articulation of Germanness by Rammstein and Heino, and the discursive controversy in its wake, point to the melancholic temporality of German national identification as an impossible 'remembrance' of its traumatic national past.

Keywords

Germany, irony, national identity, nostalgia, popular music

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In 2005, Peter Heppner, the former lead singer of the German electronica/synth pop band Wolfsheim, asserted, in reference to the post-Second World War German struggle of identifying with the nation as *Heimat*, 'We Germans have an identity problem' (Wagner, 2005). A little more than a decade later, in 2016, Frauke Petry, leader of the right-wing populist and Eurosceptic party *Alternative für Deutschland* (AfD), echoed Heppner's diagnosis, criticizing chancellor Angela Merkel's 'open arms policy' during the so-called refugee crisis that began in 2015 and argued that the declared German 'welcome culture' ('Willkommenskultur') should more accurately be understood as an expression of Germany's 'more profound problem with its own identity' (Focus, 2016), including its alleged tendency to belittle its national culture as a means of atonement for crimes committed in the past. Whether one agrees with Petry or not, mass migration and the arrival of more than one million refugees from countries like Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq have undeniably put questions of national identification high on the political and social agendas in Germany and all over Europe. Facing the challenge of integrating newcomers ignites anew debates about German identification and the inclusiveness or exclusiveness of Germanness. As Julia Kristeva (1991) points out, the stranger always reminds the nation of its own 'strangeness' and inherent uncanny foreignness, bringing to light particular elements in a nation's history that, following Ernest Renan's (1990) argument, need to be 'forgotten' in order to enable an identification as a nation of belonging.

In this article, I will focus on a recent peak in the controversy of the discourse surrounding Germanness as it unravelled in 2013, when the nation's most successful *Heimat*-singer Heino ironically covered, among others, the song 'Sonne' by Germany's internationally most successful popular music export: Rammstein. Being notorious for referring to – or flirting with – Nazi aesthetics in their music, sound, vocals, imagery and overall performance, Rammstein's tapping into German stereotypes has made them as controversial and successful as they are nationally and internationally. As the most popular representatives of the heavy metal sub-genre 'Neue Deutsche Härte' ('New German Hardness'; Mühlmann, 1999), their predominantly 'German lyrics, heavy metal rhythms, and techno motifs with electronic, industrial and Gothic influences' (Weinstein, 2014: 131) are deeply linked to discourses of national and international imaginaries of Germanness. However, by simultaneously thematizing subversion and transgression of boundaries, evoking feelings of melancholy and disorientation, Rammstein can also be seen as destabilizing fixed markers of national identity and deconstructing totalizing ideologies: Rammstein's incessant references to the nation and its traumatic past are highly ambiguous in meaning and steeped with irony, and, as I will argue, perform a particular form of ironic nostalgia that critically undermines the very possibility of the nation as 'natural' *Heimat*.

My concern in this article is the question of identity and memory in the negotiation of Germanness in and through popular music, and in particular the role nostalgia and irony play in recent articulations of German identity. In analysing narratives of national belonging and the role of remembrance in the recent media discourse surrounding Heino's ironic cover version of Rammstein, this article has two interconnected aims: first, by engaging the work of Svetlana Boym and acknowledging the analytical challenge of ironic expression, I will contextualize Rammstein's ambiguity in its references to Fascist aesthetics (among others) as ironic nostalgia, which will allow me to subsequently

contrast Rammstein's with Heino's oeuvre as restorative nostalgia for a utopian German *Heimat* as a mythical bond rooted in a lost past (Morley and Robins, 2002: 89). While Rammstein's ironic nostalgia seems to refuse notions of a stable national identity (Carter, 2003: 11; Hutcheon, 1991: 65), I will argue that both Heino's performative augmentation thereof, as a doubly ironic articulation of Germanness, and the discursive controversy that emerged in its wake point to the melancholic temporality of German national identification. Faced with both an impossible remembrance and, equally, an impossible forgetting of its traumatic national past, German national identity, I will argue, can only be seen in the light of its ambivalent relationship to the concept of nation as *Heimat*. Second, I posit that these two interrelated case studies work to show that ironic cover versions (can) function as more than signifiers of postmodern sensitivities or a shift in notions of authenticity in rock culture, as argued by Steve Bailey; instead, they reveal the central role of irony in negotiations of Germanness. Therefore, this article will unravel the multiple layers of irony articulated by Rammstein, Heino and the audience as tropes of negotiations of Germanness in popular music, processes through which identity is actively imagined, created and constructed.

By taking these ironic articulations of Germanness seriously, I will focus on the (political) function of irony in negotiating national identity in relation to the memory of its past. Since irony as an act (Muecke, 2018: 100) rarely involves a simple decoding of a single inverted message (Hutcheon, 1994: 85), it explicitly sets up (and exists within) a relationship between ironist and audience (Hutcheon, 1994: 16). Irony is therefore always based on a shared knowledge and context of an interpretative and discursive community (Hutcheon, 1994: 18). To trace the multiple ambiguities and divergent constructions of national belonging, this article will offer semiotic close readings of the two versions of 'Sonne' in their discursive contexts, taking into account generic conventions and their associated interpretative practices, as well as the nation as discursive community (of which I am a part). Both texts, while differently coded, address – and are interpreted within – the context of Germany in a period of political transformation: the establishment of a new right-wing party that increasingly gained power and legitimation (the aforementioned AfD, founded in 2013); extreme right politicians, outspoken racists and Holocaust-deniers being represented in state and national governments; and weekly marches of the German nationalist, anti-Islam and far-right political movement PEGIDA (founded in 2014) in Dresden. In this context, being neither a fan of Rammstein nor Heino, I argue that the latter's irony as restorative nostalgia dangerously feeds into growing nationalist sentiments, while Rammstein's irony as reflexive nostalgia challenges such notions of national identification, albeit willingly accepting the irony-inherent risk of ambivalence and of appropriation by the right.

The multiplicity of the popular and Heino's restorative nostalgia

Popular culture is a particularly productive realm for negotiations of who 'we' are, how we should feel about both 'us' and 'them' (Duncombe and Bleiker, 2015: 41) and how we thus relate to the nation's past. Far from being unanimous in its narratives of identity and (national) belonging, popular culture, as Stuart Hall (2011) highlights, is a site where

'[the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged. [...] it is the arena of consent and resistance' (p. 79). With a similar emphasis on a multiplicity of perspectives, Esther Peeren (2008) argues that 'popular culture presents the reader/viewer with a plethora of identity positions that appear as competing self-narrativizations, all undermining each other's claims to truth or naturalness' (p. 25). (Popular) music in particular then also plays a pivotal role in the creation and negotiation of national identifications. As John Connell and Chris Gibson (2003) point out, popular music is 'an integral component of processes through which cultural identities are formed, both at personal and collective levels' (p. 117), and as such, 'music [...] is embedded in the creation of (and constant maintenance of) nationhood' (p. 118). Popular music hence functions as a site of continuous (re-)articulations of Germanness, a space for the contestation of narrative authority, as it offers 'a platform to negotiate questions of belonging or to challenge national [...] identification' (Stehle and Kahnke, 2013: 123).

One of the core elements of the discourse surrounding German national identity is of course the question of remembrance and how to position oneself as a nation facing one's traumatic past. As a result, any utterance of Germanness is inescapably related to Germany's problematic history, and hence, representations of German national identity are always (re)constructions or uncanny reappearances of that unforgettable past. After decades of guilt and struggle with its own particular history and identity, popular voices from the first half of the 2000s forward, including the aforementioned Peter Heppner, have been arguing for a new, self-confident Germany,¹ and a heated debate has emerged as to whether or not, and in what ways, Germans could identify proudly as a nation (again). However, even pro-national discourses in favour of a positive identification with the nation are always haunted by the past, be it implicitly or explicitly (Schiller, 2017: 221). These ever-returning uncanny reminders of Germany's inherent 'strangeness' hence challenge any identification with the nation as *Heimat*, defined by David Morley and Kevin Robins (2002: 89, 95) as wholeness and unity with shared traditions and memories, defined against all that is foreign or distant.

In their discussion of questions of memory in the construction and definitions of Europe and European culture, Morley and Robins (2002: 5) address the centrality of the metaphor of *Heimat* (homeland) with its implied opposition: *Fremde* (foreignness). While *Heimat* signifies security and belonging, *Fremde* evokes feelings of isolation and alienation. Following Heidrun Suhr (1989), *Fremde* is 'a synonym for separation, hardship, privation, homesickness, and the loss of a sense of belonging' (p. 72). Germany, as Morley and Robins argue, is at once *Heimat* and *Fremde*. This split identity, with its complexities and ambivalences, its inherent strangeness and unforgettable past, is often negotiated through the trope of irony, particularly in popular culture. Although irony as a concept is notoriously hard to define,² what is at stake in irony is always the question of 'the possibility of deciding on a meaning or set of meanings or a controlled polysemy of meanings' (De Man, 1997: 166, emphasis in original). This notion of (impossible) closure, and irony's repetition of its aberration (de Man, 1979: 301), is closely related to Germany's eternal state of self-reflexivity (another function of irony according to de Man), and its oscillation between *Heimat* and *Fremde* – a narrative of national identity that can never be complete or consistent. According to Linda Hutcheon (1992: 220), irony, with its inherent double entendre of saying one thing and

meaning another, can function as a distancing mechanism as it creates a semantic space of in-betweenness that refuses any stable and fixed meaning, as it always includes both the spoken and unspoken. In the case of German identity, irony opens up a space for negotiating its unspeakable history, while simultaneously creating a distance between the national self and the nation's past, which I will elaborate upon in more detail in the following.

In 2013, the (in)famous German Folk-music, or *Heimat*, singer Heino surprised everyone by ironically covering, among others, Rammstein's hit 'Sonne' on his (umpteenth) comeback album *Mit freundlichen Grüßen* ('With Kind Regards'; Starwatch Entertainment, 2013). Known for his baritone voice, rolling 'Rs', platinum blond hair and for always wearing dark sunglasses, Heino has been a highly successful Schlager and Volksmusik- or *Heimat*-singer since the 1960s. Schlager (literally 'hit' or 'hitter') as a genre is hard to define in musical terms (Mendivil, 2017: 101f), but generally refers to conservative German-language popular music that tends to be standardized and consists of three chords: tonic–dominant–subdominant. Lyrics tend to be sentimental, and German Schlager artists construct a particular German community by singing about emotions that are considered to be familiar and affirmative, like love, friendship and the love of *Heimat* (p. 102). As Julio Mendivil highlights, the musical form of Schlager (the familiar and melodic chord structure) corresponds with and enables artists and listeners to construct a feeling of *Heimat* (p. 103). The *Heimat* trope of Schlager is also shared with *Volksmusik* (folk music),³ a genre closely related to, and which often overlaps with, Schlager, as exemplified by Heino (Simon, 2000: 87). Both genres share wide popularity in German-language music; Heino, for example, has sold more than 50 million records, which, according to him, is more than Elvis ever sold in Germany (Frank, 2013). Indeed, Heino is something of an antithetic icon of reactionary traditionalism for the youth. When asked about his cover versions, Heino called Rammstein's song the 'folk music of the modern generation' (Dpa, 2013); however, as I will argue, as opposed to Rammstein, Heino's *Volksmusik* celebrates the nation uncritically and represents a restorative nostalgia for the nation's former glories. Heino's ironic *Volks*-cover versions of recent popular hits, understandably, have not been embraced by all the original artists, some of whom have publicly disapproved of being appropriated by Heino for his own purposes. Rammstein, however, played along and invited Heino to collectively perform 'Sonne' as the headliners for Germany's legendary Heavy Metal festival Wacken Open Air (2013), where the Heavy Metal fans in turn ironically celebrated the elderly and traditionally 'uncool' *Heimat* singer.⁴

Rammstein, ironic nostalgia, and the impossibility of Heimat

In order to understand the double-ironic articulation of Heino's cover version of Rammstein's Germanness, it is first necessary to contextualize the band's ambiguity in relation to national identification. Therefore, I will begin by outlining the band's ironic performance of the national past exemplified by the song 'Sonne' to subsequently tease out how Rammstein's nostalgia effectively marks national identification as an impossible illusion.

Rammstein has been known for drawing on a wide range of German artistic and cultural traditions. As Robert Burns (2008) works out in detail, the band refers to influences as diverse as German Romanticism, cabaret, German Expressionism, Constructivism, folklore, Bertolt Brecht, Grimm's fairy tales, Leni Riefenstahl's fascist imagery, the Neo-Classicism of the 1930s, and Richard Wagner. Obviously, the latter has led many critics to accuse Rammstein of promoting a neo-fascist agenda, which, coupled with their playing with Nazi references, has resulted in the band's controversial image. Rammstein's performance of masculinity, for instance, often appears reminiscent of the Nazis' idealized broad-shouldered and naked German male image as representing the nobility and supremacy of the Aryans; the cover image of the band's first album *Herzeleid* shows the band members' imposingly muscular torsos, 'which led to them being derided as 'poster boys for the master race'' (Burns, 2008: 462; Robinson, 2013: 32). Furthermore, Till Lindemann's vocal performance, his 'deep and resonant voice, with its harsh timbre', (Robinson, 2013: 31) his 'guttural German and much commented upon rolling Rs' (Weinstein, 2014: 132) and the band's musical formula, based on marching drum patterns and male vocal *sprechgesang*, invite interpretations of Neo-Romantic right-wing Nationalism-with-a-capital-N (Anderson, 1991: 5; Burns, 2008: 457). Considering their continual reference to established and familiar German fables and narratives, as well as well-known (and nationally coded) Neo-Classical and mechanical-kinetic imagery, Rammstein can easily be interpreted as performing 'nostalgia for an earlier German culture' (Burns, 2008: 457) with their intentionally ambiguous connotations. In order to illustrate how Rammstein invites a neo-fascist reading of their music, which in its exaggeration can then be understood as being ironic, I will briefly take a closer look at their 2001 single 'Sonne' ('Sun') – the song Heino covered – and I will elaborate on the multiple layers of meaning-making, as well as its conflicting ideological implications.

The song 'Sonne' was originally commissioned as marching music for the boxer Vitali Klitschko for entering the ring, but was ultimately deemed 'too hard' by his management (Kahnke, 2013: 130). The song starts with a count off in German from 1 to 9 ending with a knock out declaration: 'AUS!' The lyrics tell the story of the sun, 'the brightest star of all', which seems simultaneously long awaited ('Alle warten auf das Licht'/'Everybody is waiting for the light'), and also terrifying and powerful; once it arrives, the sun will not set/perish ('untergehen'), it will shine the brightest and eventually vanquish the implicit narratee (second person singular, 'dich') of the song. The repeated militant count off as chorus, paired with the arrival of the calamitous sun ('hier kommt die Sonne'/'Here comes the sun'), implies a fatal ending and the glorious victory of the sun against an undefined universal other. The song's chorus 'Here comes the sun' presents a powerful and destructive force, rather than the invigorating sun of George Harrison's song of the same name (Parlophone, 1970), in which the sun offers the re-establishment of belonging and comfort. With the sun being a common trope for hope and sanguineness in Endurance Schlager at the end of the Second World War⁵ and in the 1950s *Heimat* film genre (Ludewig, 2014), Rammstein's forceful and threatening sun seems to refer to another prominent signification of the sun in German history.

Considering the familiar aggressive Rammstein sound, the bands' star text, and repeated explicit references to Nazi aesthetics in the band's overall oeuvre, the connection between the sun of the song and the primary symbol of Nazism during the Third

Reich – the Swastika – is an easy one to be made. In 1920, the NSDAP created the swastika, a stylized representation of the sun, as its emblem based on the assumption that it would symbolize the German *Volk*. Analogies between the sun, Nazism and the Aryan race were common during the Third Reich, both in written rhetoric and film propaganda; films like *Ewiger Wald* (1936) were promoted using the same analogy: ‘The people finds itself, a new forest grows: the forest of swastika flags rises up. From its *Heimat*, from the German forest, the German people has again drawn the power to reach for the sun’ (Von Moltke, 2005: 56), and in *Heimkehr* (1941), the closing shot of the film shows the sun being replaced by an oversized image of the *Führer* (*Heimkehr*, 1941). The sun as representing the German *Volk* was also used in music, for instance, in the Hitler Youth songbook entitled *Uns geht die Sonne nicht unter* (The Sun Does Not Set for Us) (1934), which includes the *völkische* song of the same title and its explicit call to arms against the Jews (Schreckenber, 2001: 16).

The connection between the sun symbol and Nazism has also been picked up by Rammstein fans from the (extreme) right. Fan versions of the song online, like the widely spread cover version of ‘Sonne’ called ‘Hitler’, show images of Nazis, war and Auschwitz with a Hitler-like voice speaking to the music of Rammstein and a ‘sung’ chorus of ‘Heil Hitler!’⁶ Another video shows military uniforms embroidered with ‘Adolf Hitler’, ‘Das Reich’, ‘SS Polizei Division’ and others, followed by glorious images of Nazi leaders and soldiers. The comments below this video feature, most popularly, an exclamation of ‘Sieg Heil Deutschland!’ (236 likes as of the date of writing), ‘Heil Hitler!’ as well as explicitly anti-Semitic, xenophobic and Islamophobic hate speech.⁷ However, as a prototypical and very well-known Rammstein song, ‘Sonne’ has also been a popular target for parodies poking fun at the band’s exaggerated performance of German ‘hardness’, including parodies that turn Rammstein’s ‘sun’ into ‘Sony’,⁸ or ‘Capri Sun’,⁹ and a mocking performance in which a drilling machine is used as a pretend-machine gun, with the fan-performer problematically impersonating a mentally ill person, and absurdly performing with oversized penguins.¹⁰ What these examples show is that ‘Sonne’ has become a popular favourite with audiences, regardless of their political orientation, and the song is also a core element of any Rammstein concert: the band’s live shows are aggressive and hyper-masculine (Robinson, 2013: 33), and the director of the live show, Gert Hof, has ‘been described as the male version of Riefenstahl, and his lightning design, known for its excess, provocation, and spectacular pyrotechnics, has been compared to the work of Albert Speer’ (Weinstein, 2014: 132). The live performance of ‘Sonne’ then also works to reinforce the sonic and symbolic associations with Nazism: fire fountains accompany the count off and a gigantic red cross (the Rammstein ‘R’ emblem in terms of colour reminiscent of the swastika and shaped similarly to the Wehrmacht Balkenkreuz) is lit on fire.

The official video of the song is based on Grimm’s fairy tale ‘Snow White’ and depicts a Disney version of the princess in a twisted narrative: the enslaved dwarfs (played by the band members), ‘labour for their dominatrix Snow White, the gold they mine serve her as a drug until an overdose sends her into the glass coffin’ (Kahnke, 2013: 124). The video has been read as censuring the appropriation and commodification of European folk culture by companies like Disney (Smith, 2013: 163) in its dark twist of German cultural heritage with a not-so-happy ending. This interpretation corresponds with other

Rammstein songs that criticize global culture as Anglo-American culture (Weinstein, 2014: 138), with the 2004 single 'Amerika' being the most obvious critique of cultural imperialism. Snow White as *femme fatale* in the 'Sonne' video can then be seen as representative of the decadent and lavish lifestyle of dominant Western capitalism, while Rammstein as dwarfs represent a submissive version of 'the hard working common man': the 'authentic' German underdog.¹¹

Besides the notion of a nostalgic longing for Germany's former glory as rooted in nationalism, 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. Accordingly, it is precisely Rammstein's over-the-top spectacle, exaggerated hyper-Germanness, over-identification with archetypes of masculinity and hyperbolic performances of sonic and visual spectacles that 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, as Slavoj Žižek (2011) argues, Rammstein in fact neutralize fascism by emphasizing its own absurdities.

Finally, Rammstein's continual performance of so-called 'German authenticity', in its exaggerated hardness and brutality as opposed to the 'superficial' and 'glamorous' 'Californication' of the world (Hoffmann, 2011), can be read as a critique of Western ('American') capitalist commodity culture (Henry and Schicker, 2013: 107) and Rammstein's ironic twist on Disney's 'Snow White' in the 'Sonne' video as a critique of the voracious character of dominant cultural hegemony, cultural imperialism and the addiction to consumption based on exploitation. The (self-reflexive) paradox in this lies, of course, in the fact that the critique of 'American' capitalist consumerism is expressed in the form of a commodity that utilizes stereotypes of 'exotic' Germanness to be accessible for an international audience. By means of ironic mimicry, appropriation and selling themselves as commodities – rather literally in the form of dildos allegedly moulded from the band member's own genitals in the *Liebe ist für alle da* special edition collectors box¹² or by presenting themselves as 'products' *Made in Germany* as the band's 2011 'Best of' album was entitled – Rammstein simultaneously condemns capitalism, subverts mainstream culture and self-consciously undermines their very own subversiveness (Kahnke, 2013: 125). Rammstein's incessant play with semiotic slippages, oscillating between sincerity and irony, criticism and compliance, representation and delineation can hence be seen as deconstructing totalizing ideologies and destabilizing fixed markers of (national) identity.

As I have shown, Rammstein's relationship to Germanness is highly ambivalent, with its ironic strategy complicating any notion of positive or negative identification with the nation. Rammstein's references to a German cultural (and arguably ideological) heritage might be expressions of a 'nostalgic yearning for the past' as critics have argued (Littlejohn and Putnam, 2010: 35); however, keeping in mind the band's background in the context of the former East German Democratic Republic (GDR), Rammstein's work not necessarily refers to an idealized 'Third Reich' past as source of national identification, but can also be understood as an indicator of the loss of *Heimat* after the disintegration of the band's native home in the wake of the German

re-unification in 1989. Following that stream of thought, Littlejohn and Putnam (2010: 35) argue, Rammstein's nostalgia is a form of '*Ostalgie*',¹³ a former East German's desire for the time before German reunification: Rammstein's title song of the 2001 album *Mutter* ('Mother') – told from the perspective of a clone, who has been 'conceived in haste' – bares resemblance to the creation of 'the new Germany' (the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) after the reunification). A reference to Mikhail Gorbachev confirms this assumption: 'On my forehead a birthmark/remove it with the kiss of a knife/Even if I have to die because of it'. Rammstein seems to mourn the loss of 'mother Russia', and as the motherless clone of the lyrics (Littlejohn and Putnam, 2010: 38) presents a sense of abandonment and 'homelessness'. In addition, the 2006 live album *Völkerball* (a play on the name of the sport dodge ball, which would literally translate as 'people's ball', with *Völker* being the plural of *Volk* – 'people', 'nation' or 'folk'), Littlejohn and Putnam argue, implies a competition between two German peoples (*Völker*). Pointing to *two* German *Völker* would contradict the notion of National Socialism's ideal of '*Ein Volk*' and reinforces a sense of national disorientation and incomplete reconciliation after the reunification. Finally, in 2013, Rammstein's single entitled 'Mein Land' tells the narrative of a disoriented and alienated protagonist's impossible search for a national *Heimat*. Solely wandering from the East southwards, then to the West, continuing north, returning to the East and eventually trying the West again, the protagonist is rejected admission everywhere, remains excluded and his disorienting search for identity remains open ended (Schiller, 2018). 'Mein Land' is hence emblematic of Rammstein's continual search for cultural identity beyond 'simple' nostalgia for a lost home in the East (GDR) or the problematic identification with the German and global 'West'. Neither East nor West, past nor present seem viable options for identifying as *Heimat*.

In the context of the band's open-ended search for (national) belonging, Rammstein's nostalgia is neither longing back to the GDR, nor is the earlier discussed (ambiguous) over-identification with Nazi aesthetics showcasing a trivialization of Germany's past. On the contrary, Rammstein self-consciously performs what Svetlana Boym terms reflective or ironic nostalgia. This type of narrative is ironic, inconclusive and fragmentary and does not 'pretend to rebuild the mythical place called home';¹⁴ instead, it is aware of 'the home being in [...] ruins or [...] beyond recognition' (Boym, 2002: 50) and can be understood as 'an extreme self-criticism that acknowledges the fragmented and subjective nature of the (post)modern narrative identity and avoids attachment to any places and times' (Grönholm, 2015: 376). As de Man (cited in Bailey, 2003: 141) reminds us, irony is dependent upon a process of creating discordance between two rhetorical codes resulting in a dissonant signification; the resulting defamiliarization and sense of distance in Rammstein's music is the driving force of narrating the relationship between past, present and future with a sense of humour and irony, as it is aware of the gap between identity and resemblance. Rammstein's ironic nostalgia does then not want to return to past glories nor does it maintain hope for betterment of the world (Boym, 1996: 512). Built on the experience of detachment, Rammstein ironically behave 'as if' the very notion of a (national) *Heimat* was a possibility in the first place (Boym, 1996: 512), while self-consciously undermining their own representation of national belonging as ultimately being an illusion.

Heino, Volksmusik and the inversion of ironic nostalgia

The legendary German *Volksmusik* singer Heino released an album with ‘Heinofied’ interpretations of recent pop and rock hits, including Rammstein’s ‘Sonne’, 2 years after Rammstein released their above-mentioned single ‘Mein Land’, on *Made in Germany*.¹⁵ Heino (born in Düsseldorf in 1938), known for his schmaltzy and sentimental songs of melancholic soldiers or homesick sailors, patriotic praises of the *Heimat* – songs that were popular with Wehrmacht soldiers and Hitler Youth – and ‘exotic’ party-songs, prides himself on having a recognisability factor of 99 percent in Germany, even higher than chancellor Angela Merkel (Connolly, 2013). His ‘rock’ album of cover songs entitled *Mit freundlichen Grüßen* (‘With Kind Regards’) has been legally downloaded more than any other German album, has sold tens of thousands of copies, topped the album charts and individual songs of the album, including ‘Sonne’, and broke into the official top 100 download charts (Kuz, 2013). In his exploration of the ‘Ironic Cover Album’ phenomenon that emerged throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s, Steve Bailey (2003) has argued that the ironic cover signifies popular music’s rhetorical complexity as the ironic quality of their interpretations cannot be located purely in the formal dynamics of the music. This being the case, I want to analyse Heino’s ironic cover version of Rammstein’s ‘Sonne’ in its multiple media performances. Following Bailey, who argues that an analysis of a mode as tricky and double-coded as irony in popular music needs to take into account a larger system of meaning production, which includes fashion and the use of visual style, the ‘author function’ associated with a performer, and the relative historical valuation of various genres, performers, and individual songs, I will first discuss Heino’s position as a *Heimat* singer in the German context. While agreeing with Bailey’s observations on the complexity of ironic musical strategies in popular music, I will argue that Heino’s ironic cover version does not merely mark a postmodern sensitivity or shift in expectations of authenticity, but instead points to the deeply rooted melancholia of Germanness.

Heino’s ironic cover album received a huge amount of media attention and was controversial for several reasons: the original artists were not consulted or refused approval (tv total, 2013) and some of the artists were not amused by the questionable ‘honour’ of being covered by the *Volksmusik* singer. According to Heino and his management, the cover versions were an ironic reaction to those who have always been poking fun at him,¹⁶ and the artist frequently equated the covered rock songs with ‘his’ *Volksmusik*; about Rammstein’s ‘Sonne’ he said: ‘A really nice piece of *Volksmusik*. The colleagues [Rammstein] have quite a talent for *volkstümliche* lyrics’.¹⁷ In a televised showcase, he introduced his version of ‘Sonne’ as follows: ‘Now comes a song I have also sung 50 years ago. [...] It used to be called “Die Sonne von Mexico” [‘The Sun of Mexico’], now comes “Die Sonne” by Rammstein’. What then followed was an awkward and visibly off-lip-synced performance of Heino adopting a cliché rock image: emphasizing the ‘rockiness’ of his performance by fist-gesturing the count off, wearing a studded wristband, long silver necklace and a t-shirt of himself as skull surrounded by roses and embellishments with his iconic blond hair and dark sunglasses. As such, Heino simultaneously ironically celebrates the original song and its associated ‘rock authenticities’, while ridiculing them in his exaggerated appropriation of such rock signifiers. The brutal

Teutonic sound of Rammstein is transformed into an easygoing Latin-American clave rhythm Schlager with rock instrumentation (drums, electric guitar and -bass), while brass instruments play the song's hook and Heino sings the unchanged lyrics in his characteristic voice and manner – which actually resembles Lindemann's – but loses the sonic vigour of Rammstein's original. While Rammstein may position itself as 'authentic' German alternative to international (Anglo-American) pop music, Heino here reverses the signifiers of rock authenticity in his ironic performance 'as rocker' and hence inverts the genre codings of rock and Schlager and their associated ideological values and connections to German identity.

Heino's repertoire usually consists of traditional *Volkslieder*, *Volkstümliche* music and Schlager. The genre distinction between Schlager, *Volksmusik* and *Volkstümliche* music is not always an easy one to be made. The original notion of *Volkslied* is based on a German romantic 'invention' of a unified German folk and Johan Gottfried Herder in particular who first collected and released the volume *Volkslieder* in 1778/1779 (Terkessidis, 1996: 122), although the commercialized form of *Volksmusik* has become popular as *Volkstümliche* (Folk-like) music (Von Schoenebeck, 1998). Schlager primarily refers to a fully commercialized and arguably standardized German-language popular music 'for grannies' (Mendivil, 2017: 100) and generally employs 4/4 time, orchestral or pop arrangements, and usually avoids African American musical characteristics like syncopation and blue-notes (Simon, 2000: 87). Just like *Volks-* and *Volkstümliche* music, Schlager is closely related to a conservative image of the German nation (Mendivil, 2017: 100). Heino sings both genres equally profitably (Mendivil, 2008: 173; Simon, 2000: 87) and is often seen as an emblematic representation of German Schlager and *Volksmusik* values. Heino himself frequently highlights the *Volks*-tradition of his repertoire, rooted in the *Heimat*-oriented anti-consumerist *Bündische* youth movement (which later became integrated into the Hitler Youth), as originally intended as 'protest songs'.¹⁸ Other representatives of the genre also frame Schlager as having 'oppositional' intentions, namely, defying Anglo-American cultural hegemony; in his autobiography, Dieter Thomas Heck¹⁹ describes the 'revolutionary' idea of his show *Deutsche Schlagerparade* to exclusively air German-language music to counter the dominance of music like the Beatles, the Rolling Stones and the Bee Gees in late 1960s Germany (Heck, 1991: 112; Schiller, 2014a, 2014b). Heino himself describes the grim conditions of post-war Germany in the 1950s as follows: 'The people were right when they said that everything was exclusively in English. The only thing one heard in German was the news' (Mendivil, 2008: 280). However musically opposed to each other, Heino and Rammstein hence both repeatedly position themselves as counter-voices to the cultural hegemony of Anglo-American dominance.

While Rammstein's performance of anti-American capitalist consumerism and play with German '*Volk*' signifiers can be understood as self-conscious ironic nostalgia, Heino seems much less inclined to any such self-reflection and represents nostalgic traditionalism, essentialist patriotism, the desire to reconstruct monuments of the past, and love for the (idea of) a German nation as *Heimat* (Boym, 2002: 41). While Rammstein 'exoticize' themselves through ironic mimicry and exaggeration, Heino's Schlager, however, tells narratives of the exotic 'Other' as a means of re-confirming one's own (cultural) identity. His 1968 hit 'Die Sonne von Mexico', which he refers to when introducing his Rammstein

cover, tells the story of an innocent and ‘golden hearted’ (implicitly white) protagonist travelling in ‘The Wild West’, who only narrowly escapes captivity by the ruthless ‘red-skinned Navajo Indian’. Anxiety-induced xenophobia and colonial fantasies, as well as desiring the exotic ‘Other’, are typical for German post-war Schlager, with Heino being its most prominent representative. Thus, while Rammstein self-reflexively turn *themselves* into ‘exotic’ commodities ready for consumption, Heino’s repertoire consists of several examples that problematically position the dominant desiring protagonist (by implication the notoriously blond Heino) against an exotic (female) ‘Other’ ready to be consumed.²⁰

Besides xenophobic and male chauvinist Schlager with colonial fantasies, Heino has released songs that invite interpretations of patriotic nationalism: ‘Schwarzbraun ist die Haselnuß’ (1967), being the most famous example of a folk song made popular by the Nazis and featured in the earlier mentioned Hitler Youth songbook *Uns geht die Sonne nicht unter* (1934). After 10 years, Heino released an album named after that same songbook (1977), which featured patriotic anthems of 11 German *lands* (precariously including the eastern regions, which after the Potsdam conference of 1945 had become Polish) and the German national anthem. After one year, Heino re-recorded the national anthem, including the verse ‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles, über alles in der Welt’ (Kj, 1978; ‘Germany, Germany above all else, above all else in the world’), which has been considered taboo since 1945 as it is closely identified with the Nazi regime. Also, his performances for White farmers in South Africa during Apartheid and German colonial settlers in Namibia in the 1980s were not uncontroversial (Der Spiegel, 1982). In 2006, Heino had a less successful comeback with an album entitled *Deutschland, meine Heimat*, which included the song ‘Wir tanzen Polka, denn wir lieben Germany’ (2006), and in an interview, when asked about plans of retirement, the 73-year-old Heino responded that he was ‘still as hard as steel, as tough as leather and as nimble as a greyhound’ (Haupt, 2013), a citation from Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*.

Due to the accumulation of equivocal choices and utterances, some of the covered bands expressed discontent with Heino singing their songs. Dero Goi, lead singer of the Neue Deutsche Härte band Oomph, for example, criticized that ‘Heino has several songs in his repertoire that can definitely be described as *völkisch*-glorifying’ (Pittelkau and Kuschel, 2013).²¹ Heino himself repeatedly denies any right-wing sympathies, points to the traditional origins of his repertoire (Pittelkau and Kuschel), revokes any Nazi associations in his utterances as unintentional (Sha, 2013) and quickly reacts to any such accusations with juridical steps. Meanwhile, Heino songs are reportedly sung by neo-Nazis at right-wing demonstrations (Mendivil, 2008: 18).

Regardless of his (ambiguous) political orientation, Heino’s *Volksmusik* can be described as restorative nostalgia – a nostalgia that engages in anti-modern mythmaking of history by means of returning to national symbols (Boym, 2002: 41). Heino ‘look[s] to the legitimacy of past generations as supplying cultural autonomy’ (Giddens, 1985: 216) and is always keen on suggesting history lessons to his critics, as he draws parallels between ‘his’ *Volksmusik* and today’s popular music (Haupt, 2013). The past in Heino’s discourse represents an ideal ‘home’, a shared collective history and memory that binds together the nation as a ‘natural’ whole. Then, what does it mean when Heino, who patriotically refers to national traditions and *Heimat* in his restorative nostalgia, ironically

covers the ironic nostalgia of Rammstein, who by means of over-identification with that very aesthetic undermines the notion of national identification as *Heimat* in the first place?

Doubled ironies: Heino performing as Rammstein performing as Heino

While many bands distanced themselves from Heino's cover versions, Rammstein played along and invited the *Volksmusik* singer to perform 'Sonne' with them at the 2013 edition of Europe's biggest Heavy Metal festival Wacken Open Air. A few days prior to the concert, rumours had started to spread that Heino might appear (Rolling Stone, 2013), and when the first notes of 'Sonne' were played during the encore of Rammstein's headlining concert, the audience excitedly called for Heino, until Lindemann, acknowledging the applause of the audience, introduced him as the special guest of the night. Heino wore a bright red studded-leather coat, a skull ring, a rhinestone skulled shirt and of course his iconic sunglasses. Lindemann and Heino (again missing his cues) sung in turns, with the fire fountains accentuating the count off and the heavy rhythm of the song, and in the background Rammstein's signature cross lit on fire. Besides the clash of two opposing genres and systems of representation (Heavy Metal and *Volksmusik*), another layer of irony was added by Rammstein's 'playing along' with Heino's irony.

A few weeks before this joint performance, Rammstein on their part performed 'as Heino' during their Germany tour on 25 May 2013 at Berlin Wuhlheide. At the end of the performance of 'Sonne', right after the characteristic red cross was lit on fire, Lindemann appeared in a blond Heino wig with sunglasses, singing deeper and out of tune (missing his cue), articulating less fiercely and mockingly lackadaisical, absurdly exaggerating his emphasis of the song's rhythm by walking (marching?) and dancing like a duck with his tongue out. Meanwhile, guitarist Paul Landers played next to him, dressed in Lederhosen, the typical outfit for a *Volksmusik* artist.²² Rammstein's ironic mockery of performing *as Heino performing as Rammstein*, who in the first place ironically over-identify with what Heino represents – the nation as holistic category, as *Heimat* – represents the melancholia of post-war German national identity as an impossible identification with the nation and the ever-present traumatic past.

Finally, the house of mirrors was complete when the performance of Rammstein together with Heino at Wacken Open Air was ironically celebrated by the Heavy Metal audience. The meeting of two clashing genres with opposing regimes of meaning-making, two potentially clashing ideologies was defused by the multiple and ambiguous layers of irony. The triple articulation of irony allowed the audience to make fun of Heino's conservative patriotism and restorative nostalgia while celebrating the ironic celebration of Germanness by Rammstein. Irony hence functioned as a trope of negotiation that likewise refused a stable identity and resolution in their performance; however, the multiple layers of identity and nostalgia at play were not 'just', as Hutcheon discusses, ironic stances of refusing any naïve notions of national identity (Hutcheon, 1991: 84). The multiple and juxtaposing articulations of Germanness in Heino ironically covering Rammstein and the discursive controversy in its wake, instead point to the melancholia of German national identification as an impossible remembrance *and* forgetting of its traumatic national past

resulting in its ambivalent relationship to the concept of nation as 'home'. Heino's uncritical restorative nostalgia evokes an ideal national past as source of identification, while Rammstein's ironic nostalgia is more about a self-reflective awareness of an impossible identification with any (national) *Heimat*. The two overlap in their frame of reference – the aesthetic and visual as well as sonic rhetoric of fascism – but they do not coincide in their narratives of identity. The constellation of the audience ironically celebrating Heino's restorative nostalgia, Heino ironically celebrating Rammstein's ironic nostalgia and Rammstein ironically celebrating an exaggerated Germanness, represents the disjunctive temporality of German national identification: the nation remains in a state of attempted forgetting or suppressing of the national past – the trauma of Nazism – and yet the perpetual repetition and reappearance of the incomplete past results in a *doubled* temporality, in which past and present converge: the national past not *beside* the present, but the *past in the present*. This state of melancholia hallmarks the nation's endless self-repetition, and moreover, it is in uncanny (re)appearances and alienating moments – like Heino performing as Rammstein performing as Heino – when the suppressed past and current anxiety become visible in the present as in fact being tantamount to it.

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Notes

1. Although Peter Heppner has arguably been active in promoting a pro-national image even earlier, one example being the song 'Die Flut' ('The Flood', 1998) together with Neue Deutsche Härte singer Joachim Witt. The commercially very successful song was highly controversial, as it has been interpreted to be critical of the 'flood' of immigrants arriving in Germany, referring to totalitarian aesthetics in sound and image, and it has been argued that it is potentially promoting a fascist ideology (cf. Lindke, 2002: 243).
2. 'There is no agreement among critics about what irony is, and many would hold the romantic claim [...] that its very spirit and value are violated by the effort to be clear about it' (Booth, 1974: ix).
3. *Volksmusik* is a genre denomination that today often refers to a highly commercialized and mass-mediated version of folk music, more loosely based on tropes of traditionalism rather than actually being historically rooted.
4. Music critic Rainer Moritz referred to him as a 'vomiting agent of several generations' (Connolly, 2013).
5. For example, 'Nach Regen scheint Sonne' ['After rain comes sunshine'] (Amiga, 1948).
6. Online Video 'Rammstein Sonne (Cover Hitler)' uploaded by Sandro on 30 June 2011: <https://www.myvideo.ge/v/1390538> (accessed 9 July 2018)
7. Youtube Video 'Rammstein – Sonne (HD)', uploaded by Alexander Linares on 21 July 2012: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KD34cRVZo4Q> (accessed 16 June 2016). 475.314 views on 16 June 2016 and 2212 'likes' of the video compilation.
8. Rammstein Cover Amiright.com (n.d.) 'Sony' by S.T.G.: <http://www.amiright.com/parody/2000s/rammstein0.shtml> (accessed 9 July 2018).
9. Youtube Video 'Capri-Sonne (A Rammstein Parody)' uploaded by Miniteeny 9 July 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IYtWh2EH7mI> (accessed 9 July 2018).

10. Youtube Video 'Sonne Parody – Rammstein', uploaded by Junger Stern 23 October 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6If5GXsFhY> (accessed 21 August 2017).
11. My translation. 'Der hart arbeitende kleine Mann'. Video director Jörn Heitmann in 'Making of 'Sonne'.
12. In an interview with Bizarre Magazine, drummer Christoph Schneider (2010) explained that the dildos were actually not models of their own genitalia, but that the intention was to make people believe they were: <http://rammsteinfangel.blogspot.nl/2010/06/weird-news-how-bizarre-is.html> (accessed 9 July 2018).
13. A morphological blend of Ost (East) and Nostalgie (nostalgia) – a nostalgic longing for aspects of the former GDR.
14. Compare also Grönholm, 2015 who makes a similar argument about another German band famous for playing with national stereotypes: Kraftwerk.
15. On a re-release of the album, another Rammstein-cover was added: Heino now also sings 'Amerika' (Starwatch Entertainment, 2013).
16. Being an undisputed icon of conservative *Volksmusik*, Heino often serves as the antithesis for youth culture to identify against. Most famous is a parody by Norbert Hähnel as 'der wahre Heino' ('the real Heino') with the Düsseldorf fun punk band Die Toten Hosen in the 1980s. Heino did not appreciate being imitated and sued the 'real Heino'. Now he strikes back: 'Er möchte den Kollegen, die ihn [...] veräppelt haben, einfach auch mal einen Spiegel vorhalten' ['he also just wants to hold up a mirror to those who have poked fun at him'], explains his manager Jan Mewes (Maier, 2013).
17. My translation. About 'Sonne' he says: 'Ein wirklich schönes Stück Volksmusik. Die Kollegen haben durchaus Talent für volkstümliche Texte' (Bild.de, 2013a).
18. In an interview Heino suggests, 'Die Leute müssen mal musikalischen Geschichtsunterricht nehmen, dann wissen die, wo die Lieder herkommen. Und die Bündischen Lieder kommen aus einer Zeit, als die jungen Leute mit dem System nicht zufrieden waren. Das waren deren Protestlieder. Wenn jetzt ein Krieg ausbrechen würde – Gott beschütze uns davor –, was würden die Soldaten dann singen? Die würden Rammstein singen!' (Haupt, 2013).
19. Germany's most legendary Schlager television personality.
20. 'Mohikana Shalali', 1972. 'Die schwarze Barbara', 1975, 'Komm in meinen Wigwam', 1976 to name just a few. Regarding gender politics, it should also be noted that both Heino and Rammstein are clearly located in a masculinist discourse: Heino's heterosexual masculinity is that of desiring the exotic (female) 'Other', while Rammstein's incessantly emphasized militaristic hyper-physicality represents a problematic patriarchal machismo, linking masculinity to violence. However, frequent references to Bondage, Discipline/Domination, Submission/Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM), bondage, black leather and gender play, as well as the explicit depiction of homosexuality, also lend themselves for a queer reading and invite a queer identification as deviation from heteronormativity (Clifford-Naopleone, 2015: 135).
21. My translation. Original: 'Heino hat einige Lieder in seinem Repertoire, die man durchaus als völkisch-verherrlichend bezeichnen kann'.
22. Amateur live recording available on Youtube: 'Rammstein–Sonne Live Berlin Wuhlheide 2013 (Till Lindemann mocks Heino) Multicam HD' uploaded by Rammenstein95 on 28 June 2014: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WfnL-fTAdY> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2WfnL-fTAdY> (accessed 9 July 2018) Bild.de (2013b) also reported: 'Der Rocker-Krieg geht weiter. Rammstein veräppeln Heino auf der Bühne'. This is not the only instance of Landers performing in Lederhosen, but in the context of mocking Heino's *Volksmusik*, his choice of clothing becomes particularly meaningful.

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