

**Edward Larkey**  
**Hedging their Bets:**  
**East German Rock Music and German Unification**

**Introduction: East German Popular Music Narratives in German Popular Music Discourse**

In 1996, journalist Wiglaf Droste wrote a review of the “First East Music Exhibition” in Berlin from Feb. 23 to 25 in the German-language edition of the magazine *Rolling Stone* (April) entitled “Rock & Roll Identitätärä,<sup>1</sup>” heaping mounds of ridicule on the event. It featured pop music vocalists Frank Schöbel and Dina Straat, as well as the *Puhdys* and *Karat*, the two most prominent pre-unification East German bands. Calling it an exercise in self-flagellation and a “festival of the undead,” Droste was blunt in his derision at what he considered a “confirmation of every potential prejudice” about the music of the Eastern Germans abundantly evident at the get-together. His scorn was not only directed against the very groups “which made GDR culture so horrible”<sup>2</sup> like *Karat*, who he dismissed as a “bombastic poetic rock band”<sup>3</sup>, or the “feared Puhdys.” For Droste, the lyrics of the music of what he termed the “Zone-Zombies” is the same: “sob, boohoo, no one likes us, everyone from the West is ignorant, illustrated by the fact that they don’t like our music.”<sup>4</sup> The “East-Person, i.e., “*Ostmensch*” sways back and forth autistically, protected in his own musty air, he stands in the corner, swinging between social jealousy and self-pity.”<sup>5</sup>

Two years later, the German-language *Musikexpress* (Nr. 476, September 1998) published a special edition featuring not only what it called the “Old Guard” of East German rock bands like the *Puhdys*, *Karat*, *City*, *Silly*, and others. It also provided information about the “new ones” like *Pankow*, *Karussell*, *Keimzeit*, *Rockhaus*, *Gundermann*, *die Zöllner*, along with those considered a part of the “next generation” like the *Inchtabokatables*, *Bobo in White*

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<sup>1</sup> This is a play on words on the satirizing West German designation for the German Democratic Republic [DDR-or “Tätärä”]

<sup>2</sup> “was die DDR-Kultur so scheußlich machte”

<sup>3</sup> “eine schwülstige Poesie-Rock-Kapelle”

<sup>4</sup> “Schluchz, buhu, keiner hat uns lieb, alle Westler sind ignorant, was man daran erkennen kann, dass sie uns und unsere Musik nicht mögen.”

<sup>5</sup> “Geborgen in seinem eigenen Mief schunkelt der Ostmensch; autistisch sich wiegend steht er in der Ecke, pendelnd zwischen Sozialneid und Mitleid mit sich selbst.”

*Wooden Houses*, *Das Auge Gottes*, *Blind Passengers*, and others who came into being shortly before, or after the beginning of unification. Contrary to Droste's polemics, which – by rejecting any positive musical developments from the East – made no distinctions between good and bad music, the *Musikexpress Special* (produced by both East and West German journalists), attempted to give reasons for the continued popularity of a stylistically diverse spectrum of East German bands and vocalists up to the present. For instance, the authors characterize the sound of the *Puhdys* as “freshly deep-fried: shiny, oily, sweet.” And while the post-unification album “Wie ein Engel” (“Like an Angel”)<sup>6</sup> was praised for having “classical song material with contemporary lyrics,” the second one, released in 1994 (which sold 19,000 copies) was criticized for its “embarrassingly slogan-like formulae of past recipes for success”<sup>7</sup>. The music of *Karat*, according to this feature, plays with “people’s fascination with nostalgic memories,” but also stands for the idea of “beautiful melodies and philosophically-spiced lyrics”<sup>8</sup> but without the bombastics of earlier periods. East German music found mention in the *Pop2000* television series, a twelve-part presentation on the history of postwar German popular music broadcast in late 1999 and early 2000, and currently rebroadcast on the 3SAT cooperative network.

While Droste's overview ignores a broad cross-section of East German rock and pop music in the post-unification period, the *Musikexpress* special edition conspicuously avoided discussion of two of the most prominent East German bands in the German market: *Rammstein* (Berlin) and the *Prinzen* (Leipzig). This paper will discuss the CD releases “Mutter” (“Mother”) of *Rammstein*, “D” (for Deutschland) of the *Prinzen* along with the release “Am Fenster2” of the East German band *City*, the band with perhaps the most prominent “East German” identity next to the *Puhdys* and *Karat*. This paper will discuss if and how successful these bands have become at overcoming “Ostalgie”, or the nostalgia for the East attributed – by the West – to East Germans and their music, for instance, by Droste in the immediate post-unification period. We will also investigate if East Germans continue to lay claim to “victimhood” as the disadvantaged and discriminated of German unification. We will analyze three songs to discover if other narratives have emerged within the course of unification signaling a more consensual notion of German identity between East and West. These songs, which include “Dünnes Eis” (“Thin Ice”) by *City*, “Deutschland” (“Germany”) by the

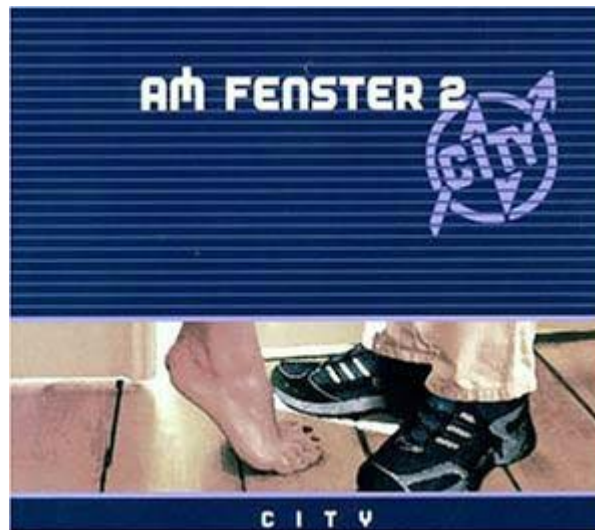
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<sup>6</sup> The authors state that 16,000 copies were sold since it was released in 1992

<sup>7</sup> “peinlich-plakative Billigschablonen einstiger Erfolgsmuster”

<sup>8</sup> “die Idee von schönen Melodien und philosophisch angehauchten Texten”

*Prinzen*, and “Mutter” (“Mother”) by *Rammstein*, are contained on the most recent releases of these groups.



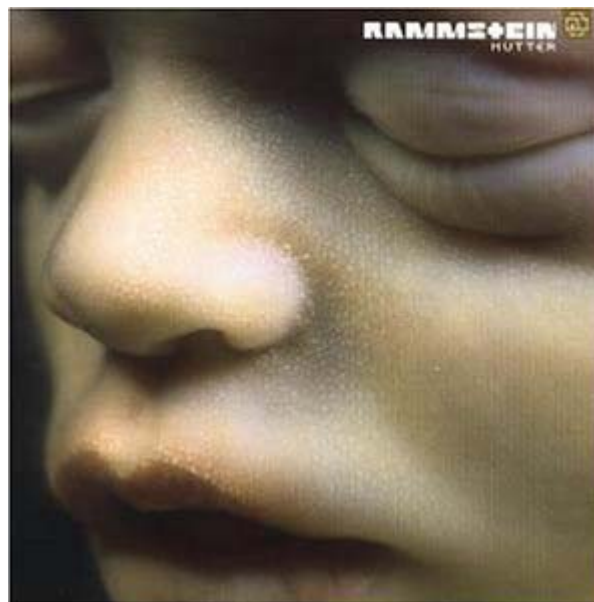
City, Am Fenster 2, Cd-Cover

The *City*-CD “Am Fenster2,” is a clear reference to, and reinforcement of their East German identity in its use of the album title derived from its 1978 hit “Am Fenster,” a musically innovative song with a violin improvisation based on Bulgarian folk harmonies of its bassist Georgi Gogow. *City* gained its reputation as a critical band prior to unification with its concept LP “Casablanca” (1987) which contained several songs banned from the airwaves, in spite of being produced in the state monopoly record company VEB Deutsche Schallplatten. Before “Am Fenster2,” *City* released two CDs in the post-unification period, “Keine Angst” [“No Fear”] (1990), and “Rauchzeichen” [“Smoke Signals”] (1997), which used lyrics by Alfred Roesler and Scarlett Kleint, the lyric authors behind the pseudonyms of “Titti Flanell” and “Friedrich Hayn” on the “Casablanca-LP.” *City* band members Fritz Puppel and Tony Krahl now operate their own record label, K+P Records, which is a part of the BMG Music Group.

The reputation of both other bands is not specifically East German, and both work with Western producers and record labels. *Rammstein*’s recordings are produced by Motor Music in Hamburg, although their management is in Berlin. The CD “Mutter” (“Mother”) of *Rammstein* was released in 2001, and was their third after “Herzeleid” (1995) and “Sehnsucht” (1997). *Rammstein* has also released two videos, one full length video called “Live in Berlin” (1998), showing their legendary stage show complete with pyrotechnics and dazzling effects.

The other video, “Stripped”, embroiled the band in controversy after it had used images from Leni Riefenstahl’s film classic “Olympia. Festival of the People, Festival of Beauty” in its cover version of a *Depeche Mode* original. *Rammstein*’s ambiguous utilization of Nazi aesthetics, their sometimes brutal and coldly mechanical stage show, along with misogynist and sadistic song lyrics, have prompted some rock critics to place them at the vanguard of what has become known as the “*Neue Deutsche Härte*” (NDH) [“New German Hardness”]<sup>9</sup>. Mühlmann has described the NDH in the following terms as a recruiting tool for Neo-Nazis:

It is a “large national genre-receptacle, which, on the one hand encountered a broad consumer acceptance, and on the other hand it doesn’t comprise distinct, profound political statements, but shrouds itself in a fog of ambiguous or empty metaphors. In this fog, many lyric lines can be mis-interpreted up and down – and the consumers are largely young, very young. For the political right and their ideological leaders it [i.e., NDH, E.L.] represents a made-to-order trend, receptacle for utilizing the musical mainstream, something which could hardly be more attractive and, above all, valuable, for Nazis.



Rammstein, Mutter, CD-Cover

The band has had to continually declare its non-political intentions and verbally distance itself from the right-wing rock scene, declaring in an interview with the weekly news maga-

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<sup>9</sup> See for instance Wolf-Rüdiger Mühlmann, *Erste Ausfahrt: Germania*. Bielefeld: Jeske/Mader 1999.

zine *Der Spiegel* last year entitled “Eternally justifying ourselves grinds us down<sup>10</sup>” that “the whole discussion around our allegedly right-wing image is unnecessary and gets on our nerves.”



Die Prinzen, D, CD-Cover

The CD “D” (for Deutschland) of the *Prinzen* was released in 2001 and produced with the help of former (West German) New German Wave-personality Anette Humpe, who also produced their most successful earlier hits before the band produced its previous LP with Stefan Raab. The *Prinzen* started before the fall of the Wall as a group calling themselves the *Herz-buben* (Jack of Hearts), an a capella vocal group. After unification, they changed the name of the group to *Prinzen* and established their reputation as “nice guys” with sweet harmonies and ironically humorous social criticism more or less reflecting a socially critical view of reality in a unified Germany. They are aesthetically almost the complete opposite of what *Rammstein* stands for, and they regularly participate in demonstrations against neo-Nazi events in their home city of Leipzig, in the Eastern part of Germany.

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<sup>10</sup> i.e., “Das ewige Rechtfertigen mach uns mürbe”, in: Spiegel online, 02. April 2001, URL: <<http://www.spiegel.de/kultur/musik/0.1518.126031,00.html>>

## Description of Song Narratives

### City – “Dünnes Eis”: Domestic Partnership as Refuge

The song “Dünnes Eis,” or, in English, “Thin Eis,” is one of several on the CD whose lyrics are written by Alfred Roesler, but the CD also includes lyrics by both Heinz Rudolf Kunze, a West German singer/songwriter, and Werner Karma, one of the most prolific lyric writers in East Germany prior to unification<sup>11</sup>. “Dünnes Eis” is typical of most of the songs on the CD in that it seems to react to an abstractly perceived physical and psychological endangerment by clinging to an intimate relationship. The tendency of most of the songs on the CD departs therefore from the two previous post-unification releases in that concrete issues facing the newly unified country are no longer confronted, such as the song “Laura” on the “Keine Angst” LP, about a woman who commits suicide or “Marie Marie” about abortion. Other songs on the “Keine Angst” CD involve contrasts between the period before and after unification, for instance, “Steinzeit,” or the title song “Keine Angst.”

The title song on the “Rauchzeichen”-CD (1997) conveys the image of a lonely person who, while shut inside “a bunker without a target and ammunition” is still attempting to communicate with the larger groupings of his/her fellow human beings using “smoke signals.” Other songs call on others to “do something” (“Mach was”), or sing of flying off to places “beyond the horizon” (“hinterm Horizont”) in the song “ganz leicht” (“very easy”). Even personal relationships were depicted in the “Rauchzeichen”-CD as stifling (for instance, in “rosen”), or “lieben und lieben lassen” (love and be loved”) in which two people fall both in, and out of, love, or the satirical “komm und trink aus” (“come and drink up”) which tells the story of man whose female partner has just left him (for the singer-protagonist), while the (former) lover keeps on making up excuses for her absence.

Of all three bands, *City* is the most explicitly “Eastern,” with coded references on their records about their identities. These are more open in earlier productions, for instance in “Rauchzeichen” the band declares in an unspectacular and matter-of-fact manner that the “East is the area where I live.” On the CD “Am Fenster2” there are only abstract references to

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<sup>11</sup> He has just published an anthology with his most prominent writings See *Alles wird besser, nichts wird gut. Alte und neue Songtexte 1976-2001*, Berlin 2002.

their Eastern identity contained in naming the titles of earlier City songs popular in the GDR like “Am Fenster” or “Berlin,” while two tracks on the CD actually use short musical passages from their own popular songs of earlier years, like “Meister aller Klassen” or “Gläserner Traum.” This self-quotation of earlier songs was featured in the title song on the “Rauchzeichen”-CD, which contained references to “Casablanca” (“gute Reise”): Instead of the US-film indicated in the words “Play it again, Sam” in the lyrics of the 1987 production, “Rauchzeichen” states that the GDR-film “Spur der Steine” (“Trace of Stone”) is on the program, meaning that East Germans are catching up on their own history by watching films like “Spur der Steine” (based on a controversial book critical of the socialization of agriculture in the 1960s) that were previously prohibited in the GDR.

While the two previous CD-productions therefore illustrate both the attractions and de-attractions of domestic partnerships and relationships, the newest CD is conspicuous in that most of the – long term – personal relationships provide stability, security, and protection in the face of a less than satisfactory reality. These include: Falling in love (“Flieg ich durch die Welt<sup>12</sup>,” “Darf ich”), intimacy with one’s child (“Nachts wenn wir träumen<sup>13</sup>”), explaining oneself to a partner after a one-night stand (“wie du”), or returning from an affair to the previous partner (“Flugzeug ohne Flieger”), longing for the departed partner after a wonderful evening (“Für immer und immer”), and celebrating relationships (“Nie wieder” and “Ich bin ganz Auge”).

The song “Thin Ice” relates how people go about their daily activities without giving it much thought, following routines, yet unconscious of looming, and unperceived catastrophic dangers which might interrupt these. Sunrise and sunset, love, growing trees, a place to live, reason, eating well, etc, are the assumptions and practices of daily life that are built upon “paper-thin ice.” Our taken-for-granted daily activities, therefore are perched on a dangerously insecure set of assumptions about how this life might continue. All of these customary activities can “belong to the past”, or our assumptions of reason as people’s motivating way of thinking may “no longer be valid,” and our whole way of thinking, seemingly set in stone, may be destroyed by the “collapse of the heaven.” Being conscious of these dangers leads us to re-commit to our personal and intimate relationships as the most humanly valuable accomplishment.

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<sup>12</sup> This song title is taken from a line in the song “Am Fenster.”

<sup>13</sup> This song title is a slightly modified, and yet still identifiable adaptation of the song on the “Casablanca”-LP entitled “Nachts in meinen Träumen.”

Rammstein – “Mutter”: Psychotic Retribution against an Inhuman Technotopia?

“Mutter” is a song of resentment and retribution by an artificially-produced offspring without a human mother. The protagonist complains that he “wishes he had a mother,” explaining that he “had no sun to shine, and no breast cried milk,” – i.e., no human warmth and intimacy – and “no navel on the belly” – i.e., was thus socially and psychologically alienated – while a “tube was stuck in my throat” – under the suffocating control of its disembodied, technologized creator. The description of the artificial conception and breeding continues to describe the lack of breast contact (“I was not allowed to lick a breast”), no human intimacy or protection (“no fold for hiding”), anonymity (“no one gave me a name”) and without natural love and conception. The reaction of the protagonist to this unnatural and inhumane conception and birth is to swear that he “will present [“her”] with a disease” and “sink her in a river.” The protagonist of the song decries his own mark of shame, “ein Muttermal,” presumably distinguishing him visibly from other presumably “normal” beings in society. He seeks to remove it “with the kiss of a knife,” even calculating his own demise as a result (“even if I have to die from it”). What emerges is a dystopic vision of an over-technologized, inhumane society incapable of human reproduction, but breeding resentment and self-destruction.

The self-mutilation, physical disfigurement, and psychological deformation and destruction contained in these lyrics, along with the characteristic dark and foreboding music of the band, with its techno-inspired heavy metal sound continues the *Rammstein* tradition of singing about the darker, psycho-sexual taboo topics of life. There were first presented on their initial CD-release “Herzeleid”, such as in their song “Rammstein” (“Rammstein/someone’s burning/Rammstein/the smell of meat in the air”), or “Do you want to see the bed in flames.” “Herzeleid” was characterized ironically in a 1997 review in *Rolling Stone*<sup>14</sup> as a “calculated mixture of novelty-gag and marketing flotsam: wild men from the German East als descendents of *Clawfinger*, *Prong*, *Nine Inch Nails* and *Popeye*, along with foreboding romanticism, Gothicism, Black Mass, gleaming muscle and burning dementia, a little sado-masochism, paramilitary sport club and steel storm.” The second CD (“Sehnsucht”) extended

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<sup>14</sup> See Arne Willander, in: “Schwarze Messen und Wilde Enten,” *Rolling Stone*, August 1997, pp. 30-31, “Ihr Debüt-Album ‚Herzeleid,‘ vor zwei Jahren veröffentlicht, war eine kalkulierte Mischung aus Novelty-Gag und Marketing-Hybris: wilde Männer aus dem deutschen Osten als Nachfahren von *Clawfinger*, *Prong*, *Nine Inch Nails* und *Popeye*, dazu Schauerrromantik, Gotik, Schwarze Messe, glänzende Muskeln und brennender Irrsinn, ein bisschen auch Sadomasochismus, Wehrsportgruppe und Stahlgewitter. Ach je.”



the range of topics to incest (“Tier”), homosexuality (“Spiel mit mir”), masochism (“Bestrafe mich”), oral sex (“küß mich”), and anal sex (“buck dich”). The unmistakably foreboding music lends each song an atmosphere of dark seriousness and anticipation, and has substantially contributed to both the band’s notoriety, but also stimulates journalists’ derogatory comments for perpetuating male stereotypes, promoting crassly misogynist images and stories, and catering to inhuman, animalistic instincts.

Even *Rammstein* expresses deep skepticism about the human capability of making moral decisions, many of their songs, for instance “rein raus” (about sexual intercourse) “adios” (about mainlining drugs), “Zwitter” (about a dual-sexed being who does not need to rely on another person for anything), “Ich will” (about the inability of politicians to listen to the people, or the people’s inability to understand politicians), or “Neben” (about an elderly couple close to the end of their lives) expose a morbid amorality as a – perhaps – reprehensible, yet human quality.

Stefan Krulle in the April 2001 edition of the German *Rolling Stone* dismissed the “Mutter”-CD as “pure pathos, steely bombasticism, childrens’ choruses and battlefield chants, blood orgies and purgatory”<sup>15</sup>. Thomas Gross in the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* (March 23, 2001), complained that the *Rammstein* songs “always remind you of something, but always turn the horror into laughter. They are trivial-bombastic dramas of return without the deeper intention of meaning. It must only be cooked up, to the joy of those in the cheaper seats.”<sup>16</sup> Gross was at a loss to explain the meaning of the song “Mutter”: “

A creature complains about its breeding in a test tube, but what does it mean? Rejection of technology, the twilight of humanity, the debate about gene technology? The short-changing of a deformed figure not permitted to “lick a nipple”? The horrible revenge that the being takes on its creation has something therapeutic, cathartic, urschrei-like. But the dark mother calling could be just as much a reminder of the Fisher-Choir [a pop/Schlager choir popular in the 1970s, E.L.].

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<sup>15</sup> See “In Berlin nichts Neues,” in: *Rolling Stone*, April 2001, pp. 38-39. “Pathos pur, stählerner Bombast, Kinderchöre und Schlachtfeldgesänge, Bluttausch und Fegefeuer.”

<sup>16</sup> See “Schlafes Brüder,” in: *Die Zeit*, March 23, 2001, pp. 36.

Prinzen – “Deutschland”: Contemporary Agit-Pop

The “Deutschland”-song by the Leipzig vocal band is one of several in their history which ironically comments on the political mood and behaviors of disagreeable people in the country. One of their most popular hits was the song “Du musst ein Schwein sein” released in 1995, which stated “you have to be a pig in this world/you have to be mean/if you go through life truthfully/you will get a kick in the ass in gratitude/[which can be] dangerous.<sup>17</sup>” On one of their first CDs after unification in 1992, a song entitled “Mein bester Freund,” (“My best friend”) stated that “my best friend is Robin Hood [and Sherlock Holmes and Winnetou]/because (t)he(y) fight(s) against injustice in the world/but unfortunately these friends are all dead/and that is difficult for me.../that is why *I* fight against the injustice in the world.<sup>18</sup>” Another song on the same CD chastises a factory director for polluting the air and water<sup>19</sup>. On the CD “Küssen Verboten” (“Kissing Prohibited”), the song “Suleimann<sup>20</sup>” pokes fun at the naivté of East Germans during unification who were prepared to accept any sort of consumer goods (“filter cigarettes,” “used cars,” “jeans,” and “video films” – all recognizable as goods from the West) from the West regardless of their lack of quality. The East Germans are ironically allegorized as “astonished,” “wise” and “always in a good mood” South Pacific islanders who are visited by rich tourists from the West, for their part, who are impressed by the “natives.” And finally, on the same CD, one of the other songs “Bombe<sup>21</sup>,” describes anger when “slogans are painted on the wall,” when “someone is called ‘Kanacke’ [the German equivalent of the word “Nigger” when talking about Turks, E.L.] because “their language is not understood,” or when someone wants to “punch someone in the mouth”, or “shaving their skull” while “marching in step,” an explicit reference to skinhead activities.

The “Deutschland” song starts off with a chorus of an exaggeratedly ironic, masculine martial tone, rhythmically chanting “deutsch, deutsch, deutsch...etc.” after a short, brassy, anthem-like musical introduction. This ironized introduction bears a certain structural similarity to that of the song “Links2,3,4” on the *Rammstein*-CD “Mutter,” which starts off with feet marching before the beginning of a heavy metal riff. The lyric content of the *Rammstein*

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<sup>17</sup> See track 3, on the CD “Schwein” BMG-Hansa 74321 25453 2. 1995.

<sup>18</sup> See track 11, on the CD “Das Leben ist grausam,” BMG-Hansa 74321 269 989. 1992.

<sup>19</sup> See track 5, “Der Betriebsdirektor.”

<sup>20</sup> See track 9, on the CD “Küssen Verboten,” BMG-Hansa 74321 11163 2. 1992.

<sup>21</sup> See track 2, on the CD “Küssen Verboten,” BMG-Hansa 74321 1163 2. 1992.

song, however, directly responds to critics who accuse the band of supporting right-wing thinking. The *Rammstein* refrain states “they want to see my heart on the Right/but then I look downward toward the left/there it beats Left<sup>22</sup>.” While the *Rammstein* song declares that the heart of the band is “on the Left,” the music retains its militaristic flavor, prompting journalists to reject the band’s declared political credibility. The *Rammstein* song remains highly abstract, with its biologically depicted political stance, referring to “the heart” as the place where the most decisive attitudes are evident, implicitly asserting that the music is not the crucial indicator. The *Prinzen* song, on the other hand, takes a different spin.

The song lists both positive and negative behaviors and phenomena among Germans using irony as a means of self and social criticism: A German invented the TV show “Wetten, dass” (“Bet on that”), Germans are “the friendliest customers in the world,” they are “modest” and “have money,” are the “best in every kind of sport,” and pay “world record taxes.” In an ironically critical tone they assert that Germans especially are waiting for, and welcome travelers, especially those who stay in the country, a veiled reference to actually unwanted immigrants from South Asia and outside of Europe. But Germans are, the lyrics ironically insist, “the most friendly people in the world.”

The second and third verses of the song openly critique negative behavior, for instance, those who imagine that Germany is the best, those who think that “it is cool to be an asshole,” those who complain about “Kanaken,” but then travel to Thailand “every year for a fuck.” Germans like their cars more than their women and are especially nice to dogs and cats, an implicit critique on German peoples’ inability to form personal relationships based on mutuality and trust. The third and last strophe asserts that Germans are “good at punching in the face,” a reference to skinhead activities against immigrants, along with the ability to “set fires,” a further sign of violence against foreigners evident in the mob burning of a Turkish family in the West German city of Mölln or against a dormitory of asylum-seekers in the East German suburb of Rostock-Lichtenhagen in the 1990s. Germans are adherents of “Order and Cleanliness,” two code words for anti-foreigner Skinhead thinking, while the lyrics state that Germans are “always prepared for war.” To counter the right-wing/skinhead slogan that “we can be proud of Germany,” the *Prinzen* exclaim “Schwein!” They thus explicitly reject the behaviors they have, until now, only been ironizing.

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<sup>22</sup> See track 2, on “Mutter,” Hamburg: Motor Music 549 639-2. 2001.

The lyrics of “Deutschland” are significant in that there is a subtle difference between earlier songs rejecting and opposing racist, chauvinist and anti-social behavior: The refrain of the song as well as some of the verses use the inclusive “we” and therefore the band implicitly both identifies with the majority of Germans on the one hand, but morally rejects the objectionable behavior on the other. This ambiguous relationship reduced the distance between the pontifications on the band high on its moral pedestal in earlier songs, and now re-presents the band as a part of those in the “national” family – in eastern and western Germany – with human failings:

All of that is Germany/all of that is us/You can't find that anywhere  
else/only here, only here./ All of that is Germany/All of that is us/We live  
and will die here.

This statement contains an implicit call to take responsibility for both the good things as well as the negative behavior evident in contemporary German society. The ambiguity of the refrain lies in the fact that it seems only partly ironic, if at all, since the irony is submerged at the end with the seriousness of the message.

### **Performing National Narratives: Interpretative Stances**

Before I explain how these narratives relate to ongoing notions of German identity in several ways, I find it important to emphasize that there are a variety of different tensions inherent in the interpretation of the songs of the three groups described above. The first set of tensions concerns the ability of the pop genre to transmit a humorously ironic interpretative stance. The *Prinzen*, for instance, are not expected to represent substantive positions with regard to personal relationships, since the “pop” genre tends to dilute socio-cultural commitment due to its subordination to the primary goal of commercial success<sup>23</sup>. It is therefore significant that the band makes political statements outside of its music activities, and participates in anti-Nazi activities in its home city of Leipzig. *Rammstein*, on the other hand, portrays its personal relationships as psychotically charged, but its use of the more “serious” genre of metal/techno renders its message less arbitrary in the sense of constituting Baudrillardian “simulacra.” This is one of the reasons why the band feels misunderstood by its media critics. It feels that its

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<sup>23</sup> For an overview of pop aesthetics containing a critique of the smothering ubiquity of its ephemerality, see Thomas Assheuer, *Im Reich des Scheins. Zehn Thesen zur Krise des Pop*, Reprinted from the weekly newspaper *Die Zeit*, in: *Musikforum*, Nr. 94, June 2001, pp. 111-114, in which he decries pop aesthetic's lack of social and political commitment in the name of lifestyle and deconstructing bourgeois aesthetics.

role-playing and song topics are just about the usual activities of a pop/rock band just trying to expand beyond the traditional topics and forms of presentation for the pop sector, positioning itself at the fringe of the pop market. But the band's dismay at being taken seriously when employing brutal, misogynist, and Nazi-aesthetic iconographies reveals that there is a perception dissonance between the band and some sectors of the public and media (not necessarily with its audience).

Both *Rammstein* and *City* present personal relationships as either deformed, or fragile, but *Rammstein*, unlike the *Prinzen*, not only remains aloof from practical politics, but presents itself as non-political in replies to critics claiming that the band consciously employs and adheres to rightwing or Nazi-derived aesthetic positions as an – implicitly political – commercial strategy. *City's* – continually reiterated through iconographic references on the CD – reputation as an “East” band reinforces a narrative which depicts domestic relationships in the post-unification, post-Sept. 11 reality as a fragile refuge worthy of defense and cultivation by people who seemingly have no other recourse in a pernicious social reality to achieve humane relationships, have been marginalized or discriminated against. *Rammstein* therefore exemplifies perhaps what can happen when domestic relationships and partnerships, whose neurotic deformations are perhaps also rooted in socio-economic and socio-political conditions, may evolve into psychotic obsessions. On the other hand, *Rammstein's* aesthetics seem dedicated to opposing the “feel good” attitude transmitted by techno raves and “boy group” teenie bands, and draws on the heavy metal genre to do so. While the *Prinzen* are able to mobilize the humorous irony inherent in the pop genre, this does not seem to be an entirely credible option available to *Rammstein*, at least not with its media critics.

CITY's escape into the privateness, intimacy, and shelter of a domestic relationship, coupled with its complex system of self-referentiality contained on the CD, with quotes and segments from earlier songs, creates a space and system of reference for an East German “insider” community, a community whose invisible “gates” and demarcators can only be decoded with the appropriate East German background, experience, and knowledge. On the other hand, the abstraction from concrete references to contemporary social reality makes the song and its lyrics especially accessible to those for whom domestic private relationships have gained increased importance in the aftermath of the September 11 events. The collective address of “we” does not exclude either audience in the group of people affected by the unforeseeable dangers ahead.

If we conceive of the *City* song as an allegorical national narrative as suggested by Frederick Jameson when analyzing Chinese lyric poetry (...), the collective “we” would refer to the “national” community in the territorial sense, in which the singer/protagonist questions the unreflected and unacknowledged maintenance of the daily habits, customs, rituals which represent the daily nationalism that Billig (...) mentions. The singer protagonist questions the underlying rational logic of how society and the nation functions, rhetorically inquiring about not only the functioning of the world of nature (“sunrise,” “trees growing,” “children,” etc.), but also the social and economic spheres (“paying cash,” “things that taste good,” “what love feels like”). The questioning of how society and the nation are supposedly governed by the laws of reason, guided by scientific discoveries, and the cultivation of an appropriate “lifestyle” can also mean any type of life-constraining event like unemployment, natural disasters, unexpected deaths of a friend or relative. It may also signify the disruption in daily activities and those taken-for-granted habits, customs, and ways of thinking of East Germans after unification.

But instead of representing a device of demarcation with their West German compatriots, *City* has generalized the dangers such that the community of those affected would include them as well. The “me” of “don’t let go” in the refrain could refer either to a concrete person, i.e., the domestic partner, or a government or politicians whose policies threaten to abandon the most vulnerable sectors of the population who are unemployed, underemployed, or on welfare, in addition to the corresponding politicians who perpetrate policies designed to marginalize the most vulnerable in the population.

The protagonist in *Rammstein*’s “Mutter” could be seen as an acutely self-alienated, isolated individual who finds himself a destructively psychotic, cyborg-like creature, artificially conceived in a non-human, non-natural manner, i.e., by machine. The central emotional attitude in the song is one of resentment, anger, and vengefulness of the protagonist, who cannot find solace, intimacy, or forgiveness for his plight. If we conceive of the “mother” as nation/society, and thus the carrier of the protagonist’s “history” who produced the offspring, the “mother” is neither individualized nor naturalized, much like the abstractness of “nation” indicated by Benedict Anderson in Imagined Communities (1983) or by Antony D. Smith in The Ethnic Origins of Nations (1986). It must also be remembered that several terms in

German to denote community are feminine nouns: *die Nation*, *die Gemeinschaft*, *die Gesellschaft*, etc.

The “mother” is therefore represented as a disembodied industrial breeding station of some sort, and thus “mother” could represent the industrial technology and production of male, self-destructive cyborgian individualities and subjectivities in a nation in which a technologized, but perhaps androgynous “femininity” reigns supreme. Redemption is achieved not by forgiveness and productive negotiation but by suicidal sacrifice and/or a self-mutilating removal of a “birthmark<sup>24</sup>” of the type depicted in the song. The band/protagonist delegates the “blame” for his plight to the “authority” of the “mother,” and thus is unable to assume responsibility for a positive attitude and behavior toward life in spite of his shortcomings. This delegation of authority parallels the kind of relationship inherent in the paternalistically structured relationship of GDR citizens toward the government before unification. However, contrary to most German depictions of “Vater Staat” and “Vaterland,” here state domination, which is portrayed as extending into the most intimate reaches of “national” society, is feminized as an anonymously treacherous “mother,” a recurring misogynist trope in the *Rammstein* repertoire. Femininity – here represented as a ‘birthing machine’ – has become mechanized, technologized, anonymous process without individuality, and constructs a “non-individual” subject. The call to action of the protagonist, i.e., to “give a disease” and “sink in the river” the “mother who never bore me” is different than the call to action to fight racial prejudice and behave in a tolerant manner towards others in Germany, an attitude promoted by the *Prinzen*.

This dystopic view of the mother-child relationship disrupts romanticized and idealized representations of this relationship, and would tend to stand in opposition to the domestic relationships depicted in the *City* song by portraying natural intimacy, family domesticity and emotionality as artificially constructed, inhuman mechanical products of industrial technology.

The *Prinzen* song on Germany ironically exaggerates negative aspects of German daily social life, petty “German” annoyances in the beginning of the song, but moves to more disagreeable qualities with regard to political and interpersonal relationships in the second and

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<sup>24</sup> The German term “Muttermal” mentioned in the song is a multivalent term meaning “birthmark” on the one hand, and a pejorative “bad sign” on the other.

third verses. The possibility of an allegorical interpretation of the song is remote since the lyrics are largely decodable at the level of the primary narrative. The primary emotional content of the song is indignancy at discriminatory and uncivil behavior towards others, particularly those who are adherents of right-wing, anti-foreigner ideologies. On the other hand, the humorous nature of its narrative is supplemented by the seriousness of its appeal to become active in fighting these aspects of social behavior and thinking, and take personal responsibility for the whole community.

While there are no direct references to the East German identities of *Rammstein*, band members freely refer to their experiences as citizens of the German Democratic Republic in interviews. Few journalists have seriously correlated the band's East German background with their aesthetics, behavior, or stage show. Some have tried to draw parallels in their aesthetic experiences in the GDR with socialist realism and analogous features in Nazi aesthetics. In a world fraught with seemingly irrational fundamentalisms unleashed by Western reluctance to assist in the more equal redistribution of wealth and political power in the face of a global economy, *Rammstein* is perhaps reminding Western "civilization" that it is not winning the "clash" that Samuel Huntington is so insistent about, and thus undermines Western "triumphalist" narratives mentioned by Stevenson and Theobald (2000: 4).

### ***Rammstein – Prinzen – City: Crossing the East-West Divide***

The final question to be posed here is if the songs analyzed contribute to, or help traverse the "continuing east-west cultural divide" mentioned in a recent volume edited by Stevenson and Theobald<sup>25</sup>. According to them, expectations of cultural equalization between East and West have devolved into a "linguistic wasteland of broken commitments, recriminations, stereotypes and scapegoats"<sup>26</sup>. On the other hand, they emphasize that the West German "annexation" has led to a "growing counter-hegemonic discourse" which is "gaining in currency" and "puncturing the dominant western story" and "creating a space for other memories, experiences, discourses and historiographies"<sup>27</sup>. In addition to "accommodating with varying degrees of obligation or pragmatism to western discourses," east Germans have, in the face of arrogant, patronizing, and humiliating West German behaviors and attitudes,

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<sup>25</sup> Patrick Stevenson / John Theobald, *Relocating Germanness. Discursive Disunity in Unified German*, St. Martin 2000, p. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8



“used their GDR experience to construct strategies of discursive autonomy and resistance in an attempt to salvage self-respect”<sup>28</sup>.

Thus, when looking at the songs of the three bands under consideration here, we can see that they, to varying degrees, reinforce an East German point of view, while not rejecting West German experiences, practices, and attitudes. *City* maintains this stance within a narrative advocating escapism to domesticity and is thus not specifically marked as an East German narrative. On the other hand, specifically encoded signs mark the narrative subjects as East German and thus simultaneously contribute to reinforcing and legitimizing an East German identity, experiences, and lifestory continuities within the project of German unification.

The *Prinzen*, on the other hand, because of their location, both discursively as well as geographically in a specifically East German space, use this subaltern position to appeal for political action on the part of all Germans in the interest of rejecting practices which in the common German past – i.e., during the Nazi period – led to the current state of relations between the eastern and western parts of unified Germany. They appeal for moral and ethical behavior rejecting racial bigotry, discrimination, and violence against foreigners, while at the same time emphasizing their common responsibility for action with a national audience. The narrative for action contained in the *Prinzen* song, which I am characterizing as *Agit-Pop* due to its call for action, is rooted in a political activist song tradition in both pre-unification German states with a highly controversial tradition. The political popular song movement in West Germany was a student-based subculture rooted in pop and rock music, a tradition spawning the *Neue Deutsche Welle*, in which Annette Humpe, the producer of the *Prinzen*, was a prominent figure with her band *Ideal*. The political song movement in the GDR, on the other hand, was the explicit child of the official GDR youth organization *Freie Deutsche Jugend* and was thus compromised in its credibility and authenticity. After unification, this politically motivated pop music has become one of the vehicles of resistance against skinhead violence, as the soundtrack for the various demonstrations in the *Prinzen* home city.

*Rammstein*'s “Mother” represents neither a distinctly eastern nor a western German narrative, although it could be interpreted as an expression of East German psychosis in the face of the “trauma” of unification. Without any specific references to German social reality, the

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 11

dystopic vision of psychotic retribution against a disembodied, yet feminized, producer, given the generic name “mother” tends to psychologize, rather than politicize, a political stance toward social and political issues.

Stefan Lindke<sup>29</sup> argues that *Rammstein* is a primary determinant of the *Neue Deutsche Härte*, which he characterizes as a music suited to the current period in which Germany is “reconstructing itself as a Great Power” and society is reshaping itself in nationalistic terms<sup>30</sup>. Lindke<sup>31</sup> defines the NDH as a musically heterogenous style which 1) renounces distinct usages of Nazi symbols and thus decontextualizes the fascist aesthetics, and thus gets people used to their usage and helps anchor – unconsciously – their ideals and images of people<sup>32</sup>, 2) moves away from ‘political correctness’ even up to, and including its vehement rejection, 3) a distinctly sexist character which postulates a negatively defined sexual difference in which the man is dominant. In addition, *Rammstein* and others belonging to the NDH utilize elements of fascist aesthetics like those of the punk and new wave movement, but without any recognizable ironic deconstruction or distancing devaluation<sup>33</sup>. NDH shares archaic, romantic, and mystical elements with other sectors of German pop music, like Gothic and Dark Wave groups currently popular among portions of the German public, in which “blood, fire, struggle, death, and virility” play a prominent role<sup>34</sup>. Lindke contends with Roger Behrends that these “heroic” tendencies are a ‘secret desire of the postmodern person’ for creating a ‘romantic idea of some kind of a national cultural identity’ in the face of ‘cultural globalization’ [...] and ‘German-language hip hop’.

Lindke feels that the NDH is not a subculture because of its lack of specific communicative codes, an infrastructure or certain forms of behavior<sup>35</sup>, and he therefore agrees with Mühlmann that NDH can be seen as a labeling strategy of the pop music industry with a

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<sup>29</sup> Stefan Lindke, *Der Tabubruch von heute ist der Mainstream von morgen*, in: Andreas Speit (Ed.), *Ästhetische Mobilmachung*. Hamburg/Münster 2002. p. 231.

<sup>30</sup> “In einer Zeit der nationalistischen Gesellschaftsformierung und der Rekonstruktion von Deutschland als Großmacht kann man davon ausgehen, dass die ‚Neue Deutsche Härte‘ einer solchen politischen Identitätsfindung gut einen musikalischen und kulturellen Rahmen gibt.”

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Lindke, p. 236.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. p. 240. Lindke feels that this is a danger because “components of these images of people already exist in our society and are goals continually propagated by the dominant consumer industry as an ideal type of human being to embody.”

<sup>33</sup> Cf. p. 235.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. p. 242

<sup>35</sup> Cf. p. 256

purely commercial motivation. However, Lindke considers the acceptance of the music by a wide diversity of audiences, ranging from the political ultra-right to normal consumers in the mainstream, to be a sign that people are looking for an authentic German identity in music. Lindke agrees with pop critic Martin Büsser that in distinction to previous forms of pop sub-cultures presents itself not as an identification with victims, but with the mentality of the victor. The danger for Lindke consists not only in the fact that values like “elite thinking, struggle, hardness and virility” are conveyed by the music, but that these are values that are propagated in the “bourgeois-conservative society” on a daily basis. Secondly, the protagonists are interested in “liberating” Nazi aesthetics and stylistics “from their negative connotations” and “depoliticize” them. Lindke believes with Ulf Poschardt that NDH bands are part of a new political mainstream “Zeitgeist,” which comprises the growing political self-confidence of dominant circles in Germany dreaming<sup>36</sup> of a self-conscious nation, a Germany willing to shed its inhibitions from the past in which Auschwitz stigmatized the nation, and whereby German society is “re-nationalized” and critique from the “outside” is rejected.

**Zitierempfehlung:**

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<sup>36</sup> See P. 258