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## From Soundtrack of the Reunification to the Celebration of Germanness

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and – from a present-day perspective – maybe naive, but definitely different’ The appeal to reminiscence of this kind in the commercial recycling of austropop follows the globally circulating ‘rock as heritage’ (cf Bennett, 2009, pp. 474–489) discourse that seeks to reposition rock musicians of the late 1960s and early 1970s ‘as key contributors to the essential character of late twentieth century culture per se and an integral aspect of the way in which this era of history is to be remembered, represented and celebrated’ (cf Bennett, 2008, pp. 245–258)

As a significant cultural product of Austria, austropop may be understood of Austria’s democratic identity after World War II and as the ‘rock heritage’ of the Austrian post-war generation. Moreover, the claim is that austropop should be recognised as an integral aspect of the national cultural heritage. For this construction two contradictory images of Austrian culture must, therefore, be connected: namely, the image of austropop as a ‘rebellion’ of the post-war generation against the Nazi past and the image of austropop as part of the official cultural (self-) image of Austria, which extols music and nature as the cornerstones of national identity but whose attitude regarding Austria’s participation in the Third Reich is ambivalent to this day.

Recall the opening lines of this essay: the use of term austropop by the German music magazine *Musikexpress* in fact endorses the definition suggested by the Dolezal and Rossacher of austropop as a broad category of any and all pop music from Austria, but a category which assumes that such music is in fact an integral part of Austria’s cultural heritage. Yet the only unifying characteristic of some of the acts – such as Der Nino aus Wien, Wanda and Ja, Panik – mentioned in the article is the use of German or Viennese in their lyrics, while, in fact, most Austrian pop musicians also write in English or even other languages such as Turkish, Serbian or Croatian. This diversity need not imply that there is no longer a viable notion of Austrian pop music, but rather that Austria’s pop music reflects more diverse national identities than might be expected for such a small country, a cumulative artistic achievement all the more remarkable in a country where classical music remains a key identity and tourist attraction.

### Notes

- 1 This queer music scene also includes musicians such as Crazy Bitch in a Cave and First Fatal Kiss, the record labels Comfort Zone and Unrecords, and regular music festivals (e.g. ‘Ladyfest’, ‘Rampenfiber Festival’, ‘Girls Rock Camp’), club nights and burlesque shows that call into question hetero-normative notions of masculinity and femininity with their queer styles and performances.
- 2 This article is a shortened version of Reitsamer (2014, pp. 331–342).
- 3 This text can be also found in the booklet accompanying the DVD box set.

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Paul van Dyk and Peter Heppner’s  
‘Wir sind Wir’ as national trance  
anthem

*Melanie Schiller*

### Introduction

On October 3, 2005 Germany celebrated the fifteenth anniversary of the nation’s reunification. The festivities took place in Potsdam, where Berlin’s trance star DJ Paul van Dyk and singer Peter Heppner were the very first popular music artists invited to perform their song ‘Wir sind Wir – Ein Deutschlandlied’ (We Are We or We Are Who We Are) during the official ceremony. The version performed in the context of the official ceremonial act was a classical interpretation in collaboration with the Deutsche Filmorchester Babelsberg, which eventually granted the song an additional aura of authenticity and state approved high culture. The original version of the song, which was released a year prior to the performance, is a trance-pop celebration of ‘Germanness’ with a particular focus on post-war national achievements. The official video as well as the lyrics tell a (selective) history of the German people, which made the song widely successful but also controversial. In this chapter I underscore how ‘Wir sind Wir’ (re-)narrates ‘Germanness’ as an attempt to fix national identity and assert national pride based upon the performance of a collective past. By briefly tracing the generic ‘routes’ (as opposed to ‘roots’, cf. Gilroy, 1993) of this sonic national narrative as a trance-anthem, and by analysing its sonic, visual, and textual articulation, I aim to unravel the underlying notion of a unitary ‘Germanness’ as opposed to the excluded ‘Other’ of the nation’s traumatic history. Through a close hermeneutic reading of this video, I argue the inherent impossibility of overcoming the ‘forgotten’ past even in the most celebratory accounts of the nation as this officially sanctioned audiovisually mediated performative act.

### Becoming one: the soundtrack of the reunification

In post-reunification Germany, techno was significant in the negotiation of a new German identity, as its music and culture were a major factor in (re)establishing a social connection between the East and West. The sudden availability of urban

space (abandoned bunkers, ex-army warehouses, closed down factories, etc., see Meteo & Passaro in this book) in the 'transitory period of legal uncertainty in the aftermath of the collapse of the GDR' (Robb, 2002, p. 134) facilitated the physical and symbolic encounter between the East and West German youth, and as Paul van Dyk himself highlights, techno was the first realm of social life where unification actually took place (cf. Messmer, 1998, p. 26). However, in lieu of a positive shared history and the attendant necessity of overcoming deep internal divisions, a common national identity needed to be forged. Therefore, the negotiation of Germanness through techno – initially a cultural import from Chicago and Detroit in particular – can also be seen as a reflection of German youth's problematic relationship to its own culture and identity in light of its complicated national past. Correspondingly, Simon Reynolds describes what he identifies as the German techno community's obsession with Detroit (like the Tresor club's talk of a Berlin-Detroit alliance and the legendary Hardwax Record store selling T-Shirts with a 313 phone code print, to name just a few, cf. Reynolds, 1998, p. 503) as 'a form of displaced patriotism' (Reynolds, 1998). 'Worshipping Detroit became a way back to embracing their own Germanness which could be comfortably affirmed because Kraftwerk and Moroder were mediated through black people (Detroit's own Germanophilia)' (Reynolds, 1998). In short, based on Kraftwerk's iconic style (see Matejovski in this book) and Giorgio Moroder's eurodisco sound (see Krettenauer in this book) as fundamentally influential for the Detroit scene, the true root of techno could be re-narrated as being 'originally German'. Wolfgang Voigt, one of the co-owners of Kompakt (see Nieswandt in this book), for example, talks about his desire to create 'something like a "genuinely German pop music"' (Reynolds, 1998); beyond the influence of Anglo-American pop (which in turn is largely based on black American music) Trance, 'the world's most beloved form of techno' (Reynolds, 1998, p. 439) subsequently developed out of 'the whitest, most Kraftwerk-derived aspects of Detroit Techno [ ], layered on top of the least funky element in Chicago house', and by the end of 1992, 'this whiter-than-white sound had evolved into Teutonic trance' (Reynolds, 1998, p. 184), since 'producers had refined out both the black gay Disco elements of house and the hip hop/reggae derived ruffage of hardcore' (Reynolds, 1998, p. 440).

Having now briefly sketched the connection between the 'routes' of techno and post-reunification German identification, as well as the strategic 'forgetting' of trance's 'black' influences, I will continue by mapping how 'Wir sind Wir' as trance anthem articulates a national narrative of unity and belonging, which however ultimately failed in its attempt to 'fix' national identity.

### Song for the Germans: 'Wir sind Wir' as a national trance anthem

In 2004, DJ Paul van Dyk from Eisenhüttenstadt (former GDR) together with vocalist and songwriter Peter Heppner from Hamburg (FRG) collaborated in a singular (pan-German) project and released the song 'Wir sind Wir (Ein Deutschlandlied)' – a highly repetitive trance-pop sound with only minor musical changes,

accompanied by the melancholic singing of Heppner, whose vocal style takes cues from his former synthpop/darkwave band Wolfsheim (see Richard in this book). Paul van Dyk himself refers to the song as an explicit reaction to a national crisis as experienced in 2004, the 'year of stagnation' (cf. Geisenhanslueke, 2004), as he diagnoses that 'we Germans have an identity problem' (cf. Wagner, 2005). The music video, as a strategy to counter the prevailing pessimism of its time – a German 'crisis of confidence' – is framed as a chronological national retrospective that is documented by the protagonist (Peter Heppner), who, as a 'timetraveling' reporter, observes (staged) historic events while they are unfolding. Heppner highlights how he (as the credited author of the lyrics) intended to speak from the 'minds of the people',<sup>1</sup> and thereby makes the national people the 'original' author of this narrative. Notably, the title explicitly refers to the official national anthem of the Federal Republic, which since 1922 has been 'Das Deutschlandlied' (song/hymn of Germany).<sup>2</sup> Moreover the video instantaneously establishes a national addressee: it opens with an image of the destroyed Reichstag in Berlin, fenced off and marked with a sign that cautions the danger of collapse. Located in 1945, Germany lies in ruins – a nation on the verge of collapse. The iconic inscription on the Reichstag building indicates the addressee of this 'national anthem'. 'Dem Deutschen Volke' (to the German people). This national narrative hence begins with 'zero hour' and Germany as a defeated nation. Visually, a tilt shot from below to the top shows the Reichstag building as majestic, yet in ruins, both a reminder and remainder of its former glory. Only in the beginning (verse one) are the lyrics formulated in first person singular ('As I wander through the streets' and 'I ask myself who we are'); thereafter they shift to first person plural in the first chorus. Considering the framing and address of the video as well as the lyrics, this 'we' can be understood as 'the German people' and the interpellation of the addressee(s) hence creates a visual and sonic community of the narrator and the narratee of the song. The song then functions as a 'national trance anthem' on four levels. (a) as the official 'soundtrack' of the reunification during the formal state ceremony in 2005, (b) in its explicit reference to the national anthem in its title, (c) its assertive claim to represent the national people, and (d) in its sonic, visual, and linguistic creation of a national 'we'. Throughout the video – which juxtaposes a mixture of reenacted 'historical material' and archival images,<sup>3</sup> the first person narrator (personified by Heppner) functions as national allegory, and his (staged) individual experience and 'situational consciousness' becomes more than an individual story. It is the telling of 'the collectivity itself' (Jameson, 1986, p. 69).

The narrative of the video unfolds from rubble women reconstructing the destroyed nation – while the lyrics bemoan soldiers not returning from the front – and present Germany as a *victim* of this war, to an image of national comradeship and fraternity (cf. Anderson, 1991, p. 7) personified by two children standing hand in hand on a mountain of rubble. The children, symbolizing the future of this wounded nation, facing ahead, first see what the spectator soon learns in the next p.o.v.-shot: a candy bomber (American?). During the time of the Berlin blockade (April 1, 1948–May 12, 1949), the city became a major symbolic stage for the

international East-West conflict and the alliance between the Western Allies and West Germany against the Soviet East, which was not only made responsible for German suffering during the war, but also for its division and subsequent prolonged suffering as an incomplete nation. However, before the video recreates the construction of the wall, which finalized the nation's divide, 'Wir sind Wir's' first climax is reached in both the music and the lyrics. After a pausing of the electronic drums – which creates a moment of heightened anticipation – the (cathartic) chorus kicks in with a fuller and more pulsating sound, answers the question of identity ('we are who we are'), and calls for national unity and endurance while it proclaims 'no time for sadness'. Simultaneously the video's narrative reaches the first climax in post-war German national pride: the 'Miracle of Bern', the national football victory against the highly favoured team of Hungary in the 1954 World Cup final. The euphoria after this unexpected victory was translated into national pride ('we are back on the map') and in the video the scene is accompanied by a trance crescendo that affirmatively celebrates this collective experience as a national high point, while the sound of the cheering crowd mixed into the music reinforces the shared rapture and identification.

The images accompanying the beginning of the second verse portray the reconstructed city during the 'economic miracle' and continue with the erection of the Berlin Wall in August 1961 (musically represented as a low point): people in tearful disbelief are seen waving goodbye to their common natives, families, and friends. The historical continuity of German identity is repeatedly authenticated by the visual style as simulated historic images, and ultimately 'Wir sind Wir' itself is presented as being a product of the national archive: Paul van Dyk is shown sitting in a bar in the seventies, listening to his song on the radio (simultaneously the video changes to a muffled mono/tube radio sound), as it had just reached its second chorus and is about to break out into its final peak. The song, as a search for a shared identity and the 'authentic story of the people', is mediated back at itself and becomes a self-sustaining multi-temporal narrative in which past, present, and (implied) future collide. Not only are 'we who we are' now, but – according to the visual language and sonic rhetoric of the song – so 'we have always been' (and hence will always be). To ultimately manifest the German identity-as-one (the national 'we'), the video and music finally reach their peak: the harmonic modulation of the chorus insinuates euphoria, which correlates with images of the fall of the wall on November 9, 1989. The video dedicates a fair amount of attention to – and historically ends its national reconstruction with – the all too familiar images of *Trabbis*,<sup>4</sup> *Mauerspechte*,<sup>5</sup> and an ecstatically happy crowd with a cross cutting montage of Heppner (again) participating in, documenting, and sharing the collective euphoria of the people.

### The limits of the national myth

Ending national history in 1989, 15 years prior to the release of the song, conveniently leaves out the wave of mainstream xenophobia and nationalist terrorism

in the wake of the reunification.<sup>6</sup> This narrative also fails to mention the factual continuation of the inner-German split more than a decade later. However, most remarkable is the chosen beginning of the national myth, which excludes Germany's darkest chapter – the Holocaust. Its exclusion is explicitly implied: 'what was before is rather left unspoken now', Heppner sings in the first verse. Yet, at the very end of this narrative of national achievements and overcoming of hardships, the unspeakable memory returns in an uncanny manner: the video ends where it began, at the Berlin Reichstag building. This time in its full glory again, risen from the ruins, modernized with a shining glass front and now representing a powerful 'German people' (again) Heppner, standing in front of the building, seems small and insignificant compared with the 'larger whole' of this monument of the nation. Just like in the opening, an upward tilt highlights the inscription 'Dem Deutschen Volke'. But now, suddenly and unexpectedly, the image flickers – the film seems faulty, out of synch, and a rupture becomes visible. The image is doubled: where we just saw the bright and modernized building (in color), we now – for just a brief interstitial moment – see the ruined Reichstag (again) on the verge of its collapse (in black and white). National history is suddenly not what it seemed and re-appears as an uninvited ghost from the past that keeps haunting the nation. The vacillating between old and new is a very brief (and almost invisible) uncanny reminder of the other, 'rather left unspoken', past. These images and repressed memories then, as quickly as they appeared, disappear again and are superimposed by images of Heppner turning his back to the building and walking out of the frame. Finally, the music dissipates and the video ends on a (visually and musically) melancholic note: the music fades out a beat before the vocals, which results in an 'open' (unfinished) end, while Heppner, sitting by the typewriter, contemplates and looks out the window with a view toward the future.

### Conclusion

In the wake of the reunification, techno came to signify a space of encounter between East and West Germany to symbolically overcome the inner split of the nation, while trance in particular embraced its 'white' Teutonic derivation. A decade and a half later, 'Wir sind Wir' as a national trance anthem affirmatively reconstructs a national myth of achievement and commonality that relies on a representation of the nation as a holistic entity with an evolutionary narrative of historical continuity (Bhabha, 1990: p. 3). The performative exclusion of otherness (techno as 'German' art) in the celebration of Germanness smoothly play into the nation-state's interest in promoting coherence and sustaining the imagined community, while adhering to popular taste. However, even though the narrative of national attainment as source of legitimized pride aims at totalizing 'Germanness' as fixed unity, the final uncanny repetition of repressed memory in the interstitial flickering of the doubled Reichstag reminds us that the nation, even in its most affirmative representation, is constantly and continuously constituted (and threatened) by its traumatic past.

**Notes**

- 1 In an interview Heppner used the popular Martin Luther idiom 'dem Volk auf's Maul schauen' (to listen to public speech)
- 2 Also called 'Das Lied der Deutschen' (song of the Germans) After the reunification, the third verse of the Federal Republic's anthem became the official anthem for the reunited Republic Haydn, J (Composer, 1797), and Hoffmann von Fallersleben, A H (Lyricist, 1841) Das Lied der Deutschen (Deutschlandlied)
- 3 Director Heitmann explains the objective of the music video to imitate original historical images (in terms of atmosphere, look, and texture) as convincingly as possible, and hence to blur the difference between original and simulation in the final editing
- 4 The most common vehicle in the former GDR. The Trabant
- 5 So-called 'Wall woodpeckers' were people who chipped off pieces of the Berlin Wall as souvenirs
- 6 Neo-Nazis committed a number of substantial crimes against foreigners, first and primarily in the former GDR, but also in the West Hoyerswerda (1991), Molln (1992); Rostock (1992) and Solingen (1993) (cf Schildt & Siegfried, 2009: p 498)

**Part VII**

**Electronic sounds and cities**