Transformations of the National

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Transformations of the National — Rammstein's "Deutschland" as a Provocation of German History

Introduction

As Diedrich Diederichsen argues, "pop is always transformation, in the sense of a dynamic movement in which cultural material and social environments mutually reshape each other and cross previously fixed boundaries" (Diederichsen 2013, 188, translation by the authors). These deep entanglements of pop and pop music with social and cultural configurations also raise important questions surrounding the relation between pop (music) and "the political," as such configurations not only emerge *from* and *within* specific national and global political climates but also potentially draw attention to the political nature of pop (music) itself. The political is a concept that is not to be confused with politics. It is to be understood as the sum of social negotiation processes concerned with questions of identity and foundations of community togetherness. At the same time, as Chantal Mouffe pointedly observes, the political is never geared towards unmitigated consensus or stagnation but towards conflict, provocation, antagonism, departure, and constant renegotiation (cf. 2007, 159). It thus also withdraws the boundaries of what is sanctioned in a (national) community: What is allowed to be said? What is beautiful, good, compatible, consensual? And where does this space end?

In the context of German pop music, hardly any band has pushed these boundaries as hard as Rammstein. This chapter analyzes the band's by now second last, untitled album released in 2019, particularly the controversial video of its single "Deutschland" (2019) regarding the band's political nature. It is common knowledge that Rammstein are provocative; from the band's name, which alludes to the plane crash at the US airbase of the same name, to concerts with strap-on dildos on stage, to the "Pussy" (2009) video, showing the band members having sex with professional porn actors. Fans celebrate the band despite, or precisely because of, these provocations, while critics are constantly provided with new material for criticism. In addition to the numerous, often highly sexualized provocations, the band regularly plays with ambiguities about German history and national myths in their songs and music videos. In doing so, it frequently picks up aesthetics that are at least loosely connected to nationalism and Nazism — and often (perhaps too simplistically) equated with the New Right — for the sake of publicity: For the music video of "Stripped" (1998), they use scenes from Leni Riefenstahl films and thus place Nazi propaganda aesthetics in a pop context. Similarly, lyrics like "Blitzkrieg mit dem Fleischgewehr" ("blitzkrieg with the meat rifle") in their song "Pussy" (2009) create explicit links between German (Nazi) history and sexual acts. Time and again, the band has used the political archive in their videos and lyrics, testing the limits of what can be said and sung in the German music business. This testing becomes particularly clear in their single "Deutschland" (2019), an (anti?) hymn to the Nazi regime, and the accompanying

cinematic bombastic music video, in which the band members present themselves as concen-tration camp inmates and SS officers, among others. Even before the release of the video in March 2019, Rammstein shocked with a 35-second teaser showing the band members with ropes around their necks and seemingly in concentration camp uniforms, announcing the title and release date of the song in a font clearly resembling German *fraktur* script. The teaser caused outrage in the media and was publicly condemned by the Central Council of Jews in Germany. This kind of self-staging, which routinely uses scandals to promote new records, raises the question of how political Rammstein's provocative pop is — or at least wants to be.

This question will be explored in the following. We argue that the extremely multi-layered and unusually long clip for "Deutschland" is particularly well-suited not only to critically exam-ine Rammstein's work through a complex case study and various readings, but also to discuss the political potential of contemporary pop music more generally. We will take a closer look at this relationship and understand Rammstein's work as a conscious provocation in the field of tension between pop and "the political." "Deutschland" delivers an overabundance of references that ultimately counteracts any referentiality. At the same time, Rammstein re-constellate popular images in such a way that they bring them to a political point — which they, in turn, undermine themselves.

Background and Methodology

This chapter analyzes these partly contradictory movements in "Deutschland" from different perspectives. It is loosely based on a related panel discussion on the question "How political is pop?" and a larger collaborative research project about Rammstein's "Deutschland." The pro-ject emerged from two consecutive conferences on "The Sound of Germany," which took place at the University of Münster in 2019 and 2020. While the first of these conferences was primar-ily concerned with the political dimension of pop music in general — the speakers presented on a wide range of pop music phenomena, which they examined from an equally wide range of disciplines — they soon came to realize that it would be productive to focus on one common research object and to analyze it collectively, but from different perspectives. Serendipitously, the last day of the first conference coincided with the release of Rammstein's "Deutschland," which proved to be not only an interesting object of inquiry for the subsequent conference, but which has also inspired further conversations about the political *of, in* and *through* pop (music) over the past two years.

Methodologically, our research is inspired by the book *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music* (von Appen et al. 2015). As Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, Dietrich Helms, and Allan F. Moore convincingly argue, "musicological analysis is not necessarily an aim in itself, but a toolbox that can be used to address many different issues of broader relevance" (ibid., 2). "[G]roup work," they continue, "will put forth on a small-scale what musical analysis is all about in the first place: the communication of your individual interpretation of a piece of music to enhance our common understanding of it" (ibid., 4). It is in this spirit that this chap-ter approaches Rammstein's "Deutschland." Its objective is thus threefold: *Firstly*, we wish to showcase different interpretations of the song itself, its corresponding music video, and its performance on stage in order to approximate a common understanding of them while also embracing the tensions between these different readings and perspectives. *Secondly*, we intend

to use these findings to reflect on the potential of collaborative and interdisciplinary projects like this one case study for the field of music studies and beyond. *Finally*, this chapter wishes to illustrate that our analytical case study of Rammstein can help us better understand an issue "of broader relevance," as von Appen, Doehring, Helms, and Moore call it, that is, the broader question concerning the relation between pop and "the political."

At the center of our investigation lie categories such as intertextuality, form, history, pop aesthetics, affect, identity, race and gender, narrative, nation, music, sound and performance, and the central question of the political nature of pop. As complex as the question of "the political" is in general, the question of whether and how it is negotiated in pop, or can be negotiated by us, is equally non-trivial. "Once you 'got' pop," writes Andy Warhol, "you could never see a sign the same way again" (Warhol and Hackett 1980, 39). Pop is an aesthetic mode that must be understood like irony, usually (initially) preconceived by the recipients. This common modal "understanding" constitutes the respective communities of style and distinguishes them from others. Consequently, it is necessary to consider what defines pop as pop if one wants to speak adequately about the political aspects of a band like Rammstein: functionality, outwardness, artificiality; a sensual aesthetic that does not create distance and demands disinterested pleasure but has an exciting effect and sets the "body temporarily in motion" (Hecken and Kleiner 2017, 8; translation by the authors). The offerings of pop are made to be present and to participate, to immerse oneself, captivating through their outer form (as different as it may be), through the surface, the sound, their sweetness, their exuberance, their cool attitude, or crass appearance. In contrast, aspects such as semantics, meaning, and interpretation are of secondary importance. After all, pop always offensively emphasizes its own artificiality and technicality and conversely rejects any pretension of originality and authenticity — or, in turn, appropriates them for its mode of secondary.

All this changes — see Warhol — the status of signs in relation to their primary use. When Rammstein in their performance of music, lyrics, video, and stage show invoke the "imaginary of the nation" and its historical abysses of violence, horror, libidinousness, and destruction, they activate "Germany's deepest essence and Germany's deepest images" (Maier 2019; translation by the authors), not by penetrating this "depth" but by invoking the corresponding signifiers. "Rammstein's songs and their shows do not perform or express anything, they retrieve responses" (Wicke 2019, 37; translation by the authors). Rammstein's *Gesamtkunstwerk* is composed of musical and symbolic codes, many of which are considered typically "German" in global popular culture: Machine-precise "storm of sound" (Wicke 2019, 63; translation by the authors) — one immediately thinks of Ernst Jünger's "storm of steel" with this formulation — militarism, Nazi symbolism, Nordic mythology, enriched with "set pieces from Germany's cultural heritage" (Wicke 2019, 94; translation by the authors), including the Grimm fairy tales, Romantic horror stories, and popular poems by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe or Bertolt Brecht. Everything seems somehow "incredibly strange." The band digs deep into the pot of popular culture, draws from the national image archives, and ubiquitously quotes the political imaginary.

Quotations, however, are in inverted commas, and the inverted commas of pop present us with distinct analytical challenges. It is possible that Rammstein's work is not about Germany at all, but at best about a "Germany" in quotation marks, pre-formed by the media, discursively predetermined, and potentially conveyed to an audience in the form of commodities. It is important to do justice to this secondary status, also concerning the political, which is not

rendered irrelevant but rather comes into play in a more complex, less unambiguous, and definitely non-trivial way. After all, singing in German alone seems strangely idiosyncratic for a metal band and always somewhat uptight in pop anyway (Schneider 2015, 105f.). However, it also underlines the pop-aesthetic approach to being German and thus enables, before any unambiguous semantics, "free associations between riffs and beats [and language and voice] on the one hand and certain fantasies on the other" (Diederichsen 2017, 117; translation by the authors). Thus, our research must take on the task of reading and interpreting Rammstein's signs and doing justice to the mode in which they come to us through pop.

Central to this mode is the band's use of intertextual references, which will be considered in various sections of this chapter. On the one hand, the intertextual references that traverse Rammstein's work seem to refer to political-historical events. On the other hand, they also aim to perpetuate the familiar Rammstein aesthetics and — independent of socio-political discourses — to cater to the fans' expectations. Depending on the respective context, this results in very different readings. For example, the single "Deutschland" (2019) is built on a national myth that does not primarily function narratively; that is particularly offensive due to its pop aesthetics, as it does not fit into the identification patterns of "politics." The fulminant spectacle of reference in the video has always been part of Rammstein's "aesthetics of overwhelming" (cf. Wicke 2019; translation by the authors) but becomes particularly explosive when it works with aesthetics of the right-wing scene. No less provocative is the image of history conveyed in the video. The juxtaposition of Teutons, knights, Holocaust victims, and RAF terrorists presents the past as a large surface with an arsenal of freely available and combinable figures, motifs, and signs that seem arbitrarily interchangeable.

The aesthetics of overwhelming in the video also illustrates an essential characteristic of Rammstein's public image and marketing strategy: Over the years, they have established an international community of style under their label that expects all their products to be highly recognizable. At the same time, these products must always be surpassed in their spectacularity. The single "Deutschland" achieves this balancing act through the ambiguity of its pragmatism: On the one hand, the supposedly political Rammstein primarily serve the spectacle and do not actually pursue any current political discourses. On the other hand, "Deutschland" presents itself as clearly political, as a question about "being German" or the relationship to the nation, for example, about national identity in the form of pop. In doing so, it functions, at least potentially, as a discursive counter-draft to both the banalization and naturalization of the nation; for example, as in Max Giesinger's "80 Millionen", 2016, in which the only possible frame for love and happiness is the implied nation (see also Schiller and de Kloet 2020) and to open radicalization (by bands like Frei.Wild and artists like Chris Ares). In addition to the question of the political substance of Rammstein's "Deutschland," the casting of Ruby Commey, an Afro-German actress, as Black Germania, as well as the numerous pop feminist quotes and the cross-dressing of some band members in the accompanying music video, also raise the question if — and if so, to which extent — "Deutschland" can also represent a counter-project to the hegemonic White masculinity of the song and the band.

Perspectives

In the following, we will discuss the seemingly contradictory readings of Rammstein's "Deutschland" from a variety of (inter)disciplinary angles. As stated above, the different perspectives are the result of extensive discussions among the members of our research group. The individual sections may differ in style, tone, approach, and scope as a result of repeated mutual and asynchronous interventions into the text as well as the disciplinary origins of some of the key ideas and concepts in each passage. Nevertheless, all sections reflect important focal points and nodes in our shared discussions rather than the opinions of individual researchers within our group. Our aim is to present our findings without harmonizing them completely to make the political and discursive aspects of the musical artifact transparent while avoiding reducing their complexity. At the same time, we understand this work not as a comprehensive or exhaustive representation of approaches *to* and perspectives *on* Rammstein's "Deutschland," but as an attempt to showcase "individual interpretation[s] of a piece of music to enhance our common understanding of it," to quote van Appen et al. once again (2015, 4).[1] Overall, the readings of the text and the video are completed by a musicological analysis and an examination of the live performance of "Deutschland." The focus here is on the sonic and performative dimension of Rammstein's "Germanness" and its relationship to the previously identified textual and visual strategies of the political as well as the (self-)staging as a work of art and consumer product.

Sound and Production

At the center of the controversy surrounding Rammstein is their exaggerated portrayal of Germanness that, at first glance, seems to manifest in the "Teutonic" sound of their music (see Nye 2012; Reed 2007). There is a considerable body of literature on the political power of sound, for example, Jacques Attali's (1985) influential writings on the disruptive and transformative power of music, or Julian Henriques' (2011) analysis of the subversive practices of Jamaican dub reggae sound system operators. Yet, the question remains whether a sonic signature specific to a nation or culture has political implications. Taking metal music as an example, the answer depends on the country or style. While musically, the New Wave of British Heavy Metal bears little political weight apart from its historical dominance and the Empire's colonial past, the sound of metal from other countries carries more overt political undertones.[2]

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1   A more detailed analysis of the different facets discussed in these sections can be found in Kerstin Wilhelms et al. *Rammsteins Deutschland: Pop – Politik – Provokation* (2022). Other aspects that exceed the scope of this article but are worth exploring in future research particularly concern the nexus between Rammstein's musical and artistic work and the music industry. With regards to "Deutschland," this specifically pertains to the role of Universal Music in funding and producing the video as well as to marketing aspects, e.g., on social media. We would like to thank reviewer 2 for their inspiring and insightful comments in this matter.

2   For example, the "Brasilidade metal" of Brazilian band Sepultura must be interpreted against the background of the band's upbringing during a dictatorship with a system of cultural censorship and repression (Avelar 2003). Similarly, Latin American metal artists use native language, extreme lyrics, and sounds to criticize ongoing issues resulting from coloniality (Varas-Díaz, Nevárez Araújo and Rivera-Segarra 2020). In other cases, however, bands may be motivated by "strategic essentialism" (Connell and Gibson 2003) to penetrate a global market through exoticism, authenticity, and branding through the "fetishization of localities" (see also Herbst and Bauerfeind 2021). Viking metal is an example of a subgenre of metal that does not stand out sonically but has achieved great popularity by marketing folkloristic, Norse-themed lyrics and corresponding stage costumes and properties.

In the discussion about Rammstein's aesthetic, the question remains whether a "German" sound is political *per se* or whether Rammstein's exaggerated pastiche of a German sound becomes political through the wider associations of the band, genre, or country of origin. *Metal Hammer* editor Robert Müller (2002) reflects that political messages are commonly expressed through musical styles that are not controversial. He agrees with Wolf-Rüdiger Mühlmann that this was different in the case of *Neue Deutsche Härte*, as the style was "automatically not politically correct because it received its aesthetic appeal through German elements in its sound" (1999, 264; translation by the authors). Given Germany's Nazi past, Mühlmann concludes that a sound emphasizing German qualities is principally politically inappropriate in public perception. The available literature commenting on the reception of Rammstein's sound suggests that it highly depends on the cultural context. For Sean Nye (2012), it is precisely the exaggerated portrayal of Germanness that appeals to Anglo-American audiences for its Otherness without being overly political. Likewise, Alexander Reed (1997) argues that four qualities – epic, military, romantic, and technological – attract a North American audience. Precisely these qualities have long irritated and upset large parts of the population in Germany.

Before we discuss the ways in which Rammstein's sonic signature ties in with these debates, let us turn to a more in-depth analysis of the band's sound and production in the song "Deutschland".[3] Structurally (see Figure 1), "Deutschland" simultaneously conforms to and deviates from pop conventions. It adheres to the structural simplicity of most pop songs by consisting of only a few sections. Essentially, "Deutschland" only has two parts, verse and chorus, whose arrangement is modified and whose elements are recombined to create variations that function as intro, outro, and bridge. This approach is common in pop music. On the other hand, with 5:22 minutes, "Deutschland" is much longer than the average pop song and begins with a long instrumental intro of over one minute, which is not in keeping with the conventions of radio or commercial streaming platforms.
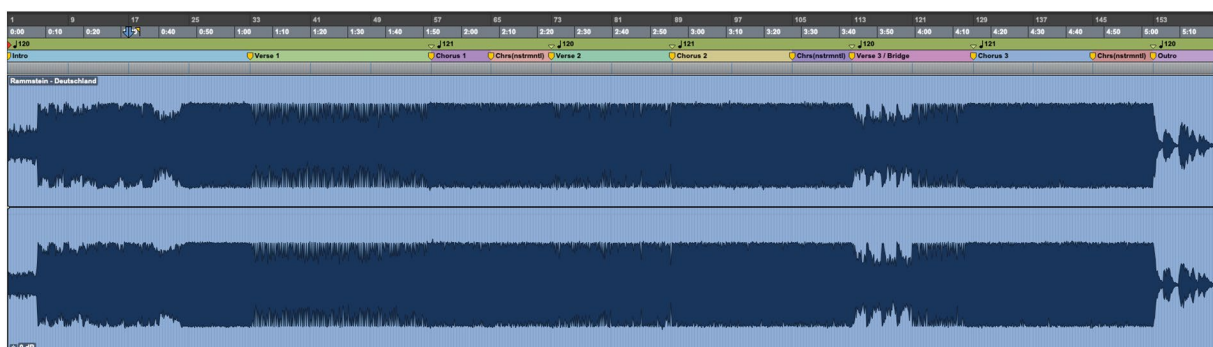
Figure 1: Structure of Rammstein's "Deutschland"

The 32-bar intro is divided into four parts: it begins with the synthesizer playing the chorus melody (bars 1–4); the melody continues, accompanied by drum accents and distorted rhythm guitars performing sustained power chords (bars 5–20); lead guitars double the synthesizer melody while the rhythm guitars stop and the drums transition to an eighth-note snare drum roll with a crescendo (bars 21–24); finally, the synthesizer/guitar melody continues, but the distorted rhythm guitars re-enter and the drums change to a full drumbeat, with the kick producing a four-to-the-floor beat (bars 25–32).

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3   A detailed analysis of Rammstein's production aesthetic is also provided in Kerstin Wilhelms et al. *Rammsteins Deutschland: Pop – Politik – Provokation* (2022) and an article on the politics of Rammstein's sonic signature (Herbst 2021).

"Deutschland" continues with the verse (bars 32–56), where the vocals enter. Musically, the arrangement is reduced: the drums are limited to the four-to-the-floor beat and an eighth-note hi-hat that emphasizes the downbeat; the bass outlines the underlying harmony in eighth notes; the synthesizer consists of layers of sustained pads, orchestral instrumentation, and a piano melody.

The verse leads directly into the first chorus, which consists of two parts. The first half (bars 57–64) contains vocals and the intro/chorus melody; the second half (bars 65–72) is instrumental, with the melody continuing. As for the arrangement, the distorted rhythm guitars re-enter and play sustained power chords, supported by a more rhythmic bass performing eighth-notes. The synthesizer provides more sustained layers for a fuller sound. The drums play a beat, similar to the last part of the intro, but the kick is reduced to accentuate the first and third beat of each bar. Furthermore, the hi-hat is sped up to a sixteenth-note pattern, but it is layered with synthesizers, making it seem electronic, although its sound is very natural on close listening. Worth noting is a subtle tempo change; this and every other chorus is sped up by one beat per minute, from 120 to 121 bpm, which increases its intensity.

The second verse (bars 73–87) is musically similar to the first, but shorter (eight bars instead of twelve). The only two differences are the full drumbeat and, in the second half, distorted rhythm guitars performing a complementary groove with palm-muted power chords. The subsequent chorus (bars 89–112) is largely unchanged from the first, except that the first half (with vocals) is doubled in length.

The instrumentation of the third verse of "Deutschland" (bars 113–128) is greatly reduced so that this section functions as a bridge, even though all musical elements are taken from previous verses, and no new content is introduced, as would normally be the case with a bridge. With an eighth-note snare drum roll, it transitions smoothly into the final chorus. This chorus continues the previous structure, with the vocal part (bars 113–128), followed by the instrumental melody (bars 145–152); the only difference from the preceding choruses is an additional female voice singing high, sustained notes with modulated vowel sounds. "Deutschland" ends with a piano outro (bars 153–163), consisting only of the verse melody in free time with a rubato.

As discussed previously, a large part of Rammstein's provocation stems from the artificially exaggerated portrayal of Germanness in their personas, imagery, and music. Due to the paradigmatic song title and lyrical theme, one may expect "Deutschland" to be particularly "German." As far as Till Lindemann's vocals are concerned, "Deutschland" indeed features his typical style known from other records, especially the mixture of regular singing and *Sprechstimme*, his masculine bass register, the rolled "r," and short sentences with guttural noises (see also Burns 2008; Kahnke 2013). This "German" impression is reinforced by deliberate record production strategies, the staging of close proximity above all. It is achieved through recording the voice at a very close distance to the microphone, which increases the sense of proximity by amplifying the bass response and capturing the higher frequencies, which, in turn, heightens the articulation and noise of the physical tone production. The close impression is further reinforced by extensive processing, particularly parallel dynamic range compression and limiting, as well as frequency-shaping with spectral modifiers, to make the vocals appear as close as possible – although the perceptual distance from the listener varies between sections depending on the instrumentation, arrangement's density, and vocal style. This production approach

ultimately exaggerates the "German" speech features in Lindemann's voice, including mouth and guttural sounds, breath, and hard consonants.

Concerning guitars, musicians generally distinguish between American and British sounds, but there is also a "German" guitar sound (see Herbst 2020). Interestingly, Rammstein do not have a particularly German guitar sound, which is generally based on Engl amplifiers, but sound American instead due to their use of Mesa Boogie amplifiers (among others). The bass guitar has no distinct tonal identity nor a particular signature that would associate it with geographical or cultural signatures – it mainly supports the guitars to produce the wall of sound.

The drums are certainly important for Rammstein's "German" impression, especially because of their rigid rhythm (Nye 2012; Reed 2007). All the drums' individual instruments are highly synchronized and do not create a groove through micro-rhythmic deviations, such as a 'laid back' snare, as would be common in most rock music based on African American idioms (Herbst and Bauerfeind 2021). Rather, the drums sound stiff, rigid, and thus stereotypically "German." In terms of metric precision, the drums are played or quantized strictly to the grid/ metronome (Figure 2), and this impression is reinforced by the four-to-the-floor kick drum in most sections as well as by the absence of syncopation or ghost notes from the kick, snare, or any other drum instrument, which would enhance the groove of the drumbeat – again, a feature characteristic of Black music traditions. In keeping with this stiff aesthetic, the synthesizer and guitar melodies are tightly synchronized with the drums, contributing to Rammstein's stereotypically "German" rigid impression.
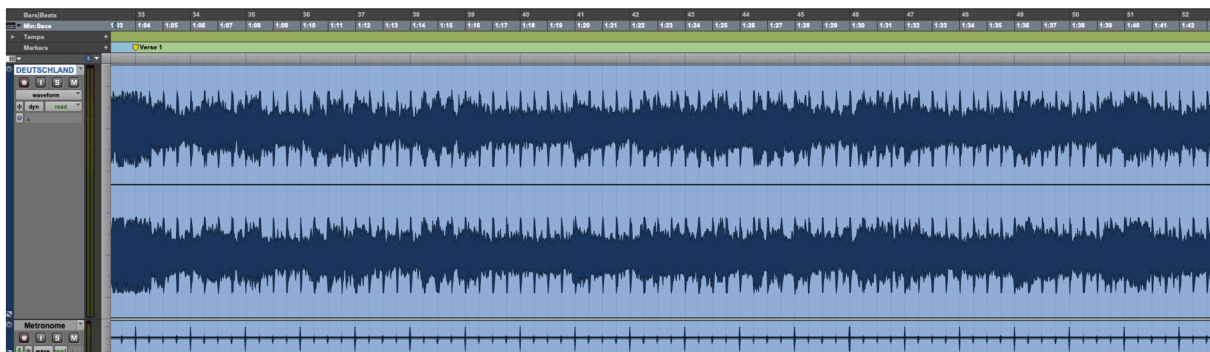

Figure 2: Verse of Rammstein's "Deutschland," showing how tightly the drumbeat is mapped to the grid

On the other hand, the drums sound surprisingly organic and natural and do not correspond to the industrial aesthetic and mechanistic "dance metal" style that Rammstein are known for – the four-to-the-flour drumming style in various sections aside. The drums were engineered in a traditional (conservative) manner, creating the sound at source and avoiding excessive production, including extensive processing and sample replacement. The kick and snare seem to be reinforced by sampled recordings, but most of the samples come from the same drum kit and were captured in the same acoustic space. Furthermore, the samples are only employed in dense sections to help the drum instruments cut through the wall of sound, and they are removed in sparsely arranged sections to preserve the natural acoustic impression. The drum *performance*, more akin to a drum computer, thus contrasts with the traditional engineering and the resulting *organic sound*, which is far less transgressive than one might expect from a provocative band like Rammstein. Furthermore, the drums on "Deutschland" sound less quantized, rigid, and internally synchronized compared to the majority of songs on earlier

Rammstein records, although thematically, the song could be understood as the pinnacle of the band's play with the German image.

The analyses presented here and elsewhere (Herbst 2021; Wilhelms et al. 2022), of both "Deutschland" and Rammstein's general sonic signature, do not confirm the widespread impression of Rammstein's aesthetic as purely "German." Instead, they note a carefully crafted sonic signature that essentially follows international standards, flavored with stereotypical German features, such as Till Lindemann's characteristic vocal style, heavily quantized and thus stiff drumming, and a rushing feel achieved by the guitars playing slightly ahead of the drumbeat and metric grid (see also Herbst and Bauerfeind 2021). Only a few of Rammstein's musical characteristics are overtly German; this association mainly stems from the band's general presentation, such as imagery, personas, and interviews. Musically, most of their sounds are, perhaps surprisingly, culturally neutral within the dominant, White pop discourse. Rammstein's sound is a highly stylized mixture of various cultural elements from the Global North that seems deliberately designed to appeal to a wide (and White)audience. The balance between conformity and unique Otherness is what sets Rammstein apart; this distinct exotic element, without violating international pop conventions, makes them a major player in the general popular music charts.

Rammstein are a band characterized by ambiguity. On the one hand, there are reasons to believe that they genuinely use music as a vehicle to process their personal experiences with German reunification and to improve the perception of popular music from Germany at home and abroad (see Herbst 2021). On the other, Rammstein have never made a secret of their commercial interests that have driven them from the outset. Distinctiveness and provocation sell in pop music. Flavoring an international sound conforming to trade standards with some exotic elements that audiences in the Global North do not reject may therefore be considered a commercial strategy rather than a political intention. As *Die Welt* observed: "Rammstein's biggest disadvantage [...] is, at the same time, their biggest advantage: they sound incredibly German" (in Nieradzik 1998, 23; translation by the authors).

Intertextuality

Germania Magna, a fistfight in the 1920s, RAF members on the run, a Black Germania, as well as concentration camp inmates and SS soldiers: The music video to Rammstein's song "Deutschland" incorporates a number of historical references, which form a complex structure if considered in combination with the references on the textual level of the song. "Deutschland" seems, at first glance at least, to relate and refer to "the real" Germany. Yet, we may have to ask how these references are constructed: Do they really point to "reality," that is, to Germany's historical past? Or do they need to be understood as self-referential so that the video constitutes and constructs a closed and pop-culturally organized Rammstein-cosmos?

If "Deutschland" directly refers to Germany, then "the political" lies in the selection and montage of the scenes and their coupling with the text. If the video, however, moves within a closed self-referential cosmos, then we need to discuss how to think about the logic of the political and where it is located. In order to understand the video's underlying structure, two aspects should be considered: Firstly, intertextual references on the level of text, music, and image, and,

secondly, the structural makeup of these references — extra-referential or self-referential. We will illustrate these findings with three examples.

On the level of text, the reference in the first line of "Deutschland" is striking: "Du (du hast, du hast, du hast)" ("you (you have, you have, you have)") points to Rammstein's eponymous song "Du hast." On the one hand, this intertextual reference exemplifies the self-referentiality that characterizes "Deutschland" by referring not to an "outside" but to Rammstein's own cosmos. On the other, it also invokes the play with equivocation, more precisely with homophony, which is a key feature of "Du hast." The song provokes an acoustic misinterpretation, for it provokes the confusion between the German verb "hassen" (to hate) and "haben" (to have) and their inflected, homophonic forms "du hasst" (you hate) and "du hast" (you have) — a confusion which the video visually underpins. It is only shortly before the chorus in "Deutschland" that the quotation is added in a way that initiates a revision of this interpretation; "du, du hast, du hast mich / gefragt […] und ich hab' nichts gesagt" ("you, you have, you have asked me […] and I have said nothing"). As such, the revised quotation in the chorus, which originally presents an allusion to the context of a wedding in "Du hast," is transferred to a different context in "Deutschland." Consequently, the intertextual references in "Deutschland" retrospectively also alter the interpretation of "Du hast" — and, by extension, provide an alternative or at least additional meaning.

On the level of music, we can find similarly complex references in the intro and outro of the video, which, however, function differently in terms of their extra- and self-referentiality. The synthesizer sounds in the video are reminiscent of Anne Clark's "Our Darkness" (1984) and thus refer to a new wave/dark wave piece of music — as its title indicates — which seems accurate in the context of "Deutschland" as well. Moreover, "Our Darkness" was also used as the theme of the (leftist-satirical) political magazine *ZAK*. As such, the references relating to this song also function on multiple levels.

Finally, the video ends with an acoustic piano version of Rammstein's own song, "Sonne" (2011). Here, "Deutschland" thus moves within a closed self-referential cosmos again. On the level of image, the glass coffin, in which Germania flies into space at the end of the music video, is evocative of the breaking glass coffin in "Sonne," out of which the supposedly dead Snow White emerges. This reference to the iconic Disney figure, itself based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, opens the reference structure again: Here, extra- and self-referentiality seem to be coupled within one figure. This complex composition, which does not merely conceptualize references through a simple structure of quotations but constantly stacks references on top of references and installs ambiguities, could be understood as the foundational logic of "Deutschland."

Ambiguity

"Deutschland, Deutschland über allen" ("Germany, Germany above everyone else") — this is the line by Rammstein that caused a stir in German media. An open reference to the nationalist self-aggrandizement practices by the Nazis? Unacceptable. Yet if we listen closely, we can see that the line is prepared in the text:

     Überheblich, überlegen (overbearing, superior)
     Übernehmen, übergeben (to take over, to surrender something /also: to vomit)

Überraschen, überfallen (to surprise, to attack)
Deutschland, Deutschland über allen (Germany, Germany above everyone else)

Zooming in on this micro-unit tells us a lot about the political dimension of the whole song: If we believe some reviewers, these lines pose a threat to political communication (Cf. dpa 2019; Lange 2019). For critics, they are too close to the infamous first line of the original German anthem "Deutschland, Deutschland über alles" ("Germany, Germany above all"), struck in 1991 due to its close historical association with the Nazi regime. For these critics, Rammstein seem too close to the right-wing scene.

However, the German prefix "über" has multiple ambiguous meanings and can either signify an increase or comparative, a surfeit or superfluity, or mark a change of location. The clustering of "über" is also reminiscent of the German idiom "über und über," in which the adverb translates to "utterly" or "exhaustively." As a preposition, "über," by contrast, signifies a spatially hierarchical position or a complete covering or taking control of something. Does the line thus imply that Germany is more than everyone else, better than everyone else? Or does it rather highlight a sense of brooding over the idea of nationalism, which seems so utterly omnipresent, covering and taking over the self?

One possible argument is that the political in Rammstein stems precisely from this kind of formal aesthetics. This aesthetics is characterized by constant historical and intertextual references, which seem to be clearly identifiable but are obscured by rhetorical, semantic, and syntactic ambiguities that obfuscate and rob them of their historical and cultural situatedness. Given that we expect clarity and clear positioning from statements that relate to the politics of memory, this is political precisely because it creates ambiguity. Obscuring references alone, which are then again held together by an(other) overriding narrative of violence, contradicts the necessary seriousness in and of political speech; it disturbs national memory and national memory culture (see also Braungart 2012, 7).

Against the backdrop of Jean-François Lyotard's critique of modern metanarratives (such as narratives of 'endless progress' or 'communism') as totalizing narratives relying upon appeals to universal truths and values (cf. 1984), we can, moreover, say that Rammstein's work is concerned with the coherence and persuasive power of national metanarratives. According to Lyotard, by drawing meaningful connections between historical events and cultural phenomena, metanarratives generate evidence for a teleological historical process as universal truth (cf. ibid.). In "Deutschland," Rammstein undermine a national metanarrative and create a new one. This new one, however, does not function narratively, that is, if we define "narrative" as a linear story with a clear arc of suspense. Metanarratives offer a certain openness for loose connections between familiar material: As Albrecht Koschorke argues, "fuzziness increases semiotic potency" (2012, 250; translation by the authors). Rammstein's "Deutschland" is a celebration of fuzziness — but it is still a national anthem. The doubling of generating and subverting meaning becomes its formal program. On the one hand, the song mixes intertextual and intermedial, historical and mythological references, and image reproductions. Single images or references relating to Germania's roles in the video are taken out of their historical, mythological, or pop-cultural context and blended together. The result of this is what Peter Wicke (2019) calls an aesthetics of overwhelming, which has always characterized Rammstein's work, and which is politically charged in combination with the stylized metanarrative about the German nation that we find in "Deutschland."

On the other hand, taken together with the song's title, the general flexibility of metanarratives, and the repetition of national violence in the video, we find that it not only *de*constructs (see also Schiller 2020: 268) but also constructs political identity: Germany, the collectively uniting significate of the nation is continuously recognizable as and through violence — violence that derives logically from the nation, for its "salvation," its "defense," or its "expansion." Violence becomes the paradigm of the nation (see also Baßler 2019, 186; Jakobson 1972, 126). The referential practice of the song freely draws on the archive of national motives but empties its references through their very excess and profusion (cf. Stöckmann 2013). This tilting moment of generating and subverting meaning installs an order of ambiguity, which makes visible the contingency of political collectives (cf. Vogl 2003, 24f.). Thereby, the nation is shown as a form in process, which cannot stabilize its form, but only its formation. "Deutschland" demonstrates that the "form" of Germany needs to be negotiated again and again. This is a double provocation: The ambiguity of the political statement that we usually expect to be unambiguous, on the one hand, and the disillusionment of positive and perpetual national identification, which is only possible through violence, and thus not constructive but genuinely destructive, on the other.

Conception of History

In "Deutschland," we see the band members on a journey through 2,000 years of German history; as Romans in Germania, as medieval knights and monks, as Nazi officers, as concentration camp inmates, as GDR functionaries, and RAF terrorists. What is remarkable about this journey through time is the way in which the historical fragments of Germany's cultural memory are arranged; namely, as could be argued, in the shape of a "flat past" — a simplistic depiction. Flat past is a mode of historical narration in which the historical material is organized on a surface on which all parts are equally far apart from each other (cf. Groebner 2008, 136); Romans from knights, knights from Nazis, et cetera. Actual historical distances, borders between different epochs, the distinction between "before" and "after" do not play a role. All "pasts" seem to be equally long ago. The individual scenes are not presented chronologically but are juxtaposed in an arbitrary order. In doing so, the fragments of cultural memory function as a stockpile that enables ever-new recombinations for new arrangements of a flat past.

The lack of chronicity, that is, the absence of chronological relations, is particularly striking in one scene in the video (01:59 min): Germania in her golden armor is visible in the foreground. She sports a Staufer emblem on her chest, a sword across her shoulder, and we see a battlefield in the background in fiery red. The belly of a zeppelin is superimposed on this scene, which connects the medieval spectacle with the following scene in which the zeppelin catches fire (02:01 min). This explosion is historically specific, as the lettering "Hindenburg" indicates: The "Hindenburg" crashed in Lakehurst in 1937. Thus, there is a time difference of approximately 750 years between the medieval battle and the explosion, which, however, does not seem to matter in the flat past of the video.

Valentin Groebner (2008) describes this mode of historical narration using the example of the popular fascination with the Middle Ages, which has more to do, he argues, with *Star Wars* and *The Lord of the Rings* than with Staufers or Carolingians. Groebner demonstrates that the combination of picturesque, barbaric, exotic, and other fragments that are vaguely connot-

ed as "medieval" leads to ever new stagings of the Middle Ages, which level actual historical differences. Rammstein do not only find themselves in the dark Middle Ages but also in Germania, in the 1920s, the 1930s, and 1940s, as well as in the 1970s. This begs the question: What is this selection based on, which skips multiple centuries while covering the 1920th century in much smaller steps?

While all thinkable pasts would have been potential material for a video about German history, not every past found its way into Rammstein's spectacular German history theme park. A past requires the selection of certain stations based on events that can be easily recalled and staged in a particularly spectacular manner, that is, events that have come to shape the image of German history in popular culture; events that everyone presumably recognizes. The selection criteria are thus primarily based on how popular and how bloody, brutal, sparkling, and blazing these events are — in other words, on their suitability for the theme park that is Rammstein's "Deutschland." For such spectacle, the explosion of a zeppelin or the launch of a rocket are certainly more appropriate than the diplomatic negotiations surrounding the Peace of Westphalia (1648).

The video depicts the flat past as unstructured, unresolved, and wild, as something that we need to grapple with constantly and repeatedly — as Rammstein themselves have done for the past 25 years. It is in their contribution to this ongoing engagement with Germany's past where the band's political effort is located. Yet, the highly aestheticized pop-representation in "Deutschland" cannot be measured with the same standards as a history book, for there is no chronological order, no evidence through sources, no complex reflection of the causes and effects of historical events. Instead, the video sparks a pop-aesthetic presentation of Germany's historical past enriched through mythical fragments, movie quotes, and countless other allusions, which also point to the band's own history. We can, however, not deduce any specific political position from this.

National Narratives

We know that nations are social constructs or "imagined communities" with a "fictional-performative" character (Anderson 1991). Homi Bhabha (1994) argues that the nation is constructed and imagined through "national narratives," and it is known that pop culture and music play a major role in the construction of collective identities such as the nation. Etienne Balibar (1991) also explains that the nation is always based on a "retrospective illusion." This illusion means a myth of origins, a collective experience ("our history") and, above all, selective forgetting.

Rammstein's "Deutschland" refers to questions of "being German" and national identity on all media levels and offers an alternative national narrative with the song, and especially the video. The question is to what extent this narrative is "political." Chantal Mouffe's (2007) understanding of the "political" is useful to answer this question. Mouffe makes a distinction between "the empirical field of 'politics'" (for example party politics) and the "political," such as social debates. For the interpretation of "Deutschland," the concept of the political is important — the level of social discourse. Mouffe also makes another important distinction: that between the "political" and the "social." In Mouffe's understanding, the "social" is that which is experienced as "natural" in a society and not (any longer) questioned, for example, that

which is socially sedimented. "Political," on the other hand, is what questions this social, ostensibly "natural," and offers alternatives, for example, questions the hegemonic procedures of the existing order.

One possible argument is that Rammstein's "Deutschland" is political in this sense, as it offers an alternative national narrative that questions current social discourses. If we look at the current German music discourse, with a view to German identity, we see mainly two opposing sides: On the one hand, we have German pop like Mark Forster, Clueso, or Tim Benzko, in which Germany as a nation is no longer an "issue." Andreas Bourani's "Ein Hoch auf uns" (2014) or Max Giesinger's "80 Millionen" (2016), for example, can be read as banal nationalist anthems (Billig 1995) which make use of everyday representations of the nation as unnoticed, taken-for-granted, and ordinary. Here, it seems "completely natural" that the nation (implied by the "80 million" referring to the national community of the Federal Republic and its 80 million inhabitants) is the only possible framework for personal happiness and love in this love song: "How did you find me? - One of 80 million" (Schiller & de Kloet 2020). No one talks about "German buffoonery" ("Deutschtümelei") with Giesinger and Co. anymore, as was still the case with MIA, Silbermond, and Co. in the early 2000s (ibid.). The nation has been naturalized in pop and thus become "social."

On the other hand, we also see a radicalization of nationalism in pop if you think of the very successful music of Frei.Wild, Andreas Gabalier, or Kollegah — mainstream artists who can either be categorized as belonging to the right-wing populist spectrum or whose music affords populist radical right interpretations. Or to go one step further: Chris Ares, Prototyp, and MaKss Damage are in the charts as right-wing neo-Nazi rappers with their music, and Xavier Naidoo, for example, has not only been a vocal antisemite but also said that he could very well imagine a collaboration with such extreme right artists.

In "Deutschland," Rammstein clearly present the question of "being German" but offer a different perspective than these two discursive opposites. Rammstein self-reflectively narrate an anti-nationalist national narrative. In "Deutschland," Rammstein go on a search for traces, an archaeology, a measuring, an exploration of the ruins of the past, and what we find is ugly. We do not see a chronological narrative, a success story, but a history of threat, violence, fear, and danger. Myths of origin are not presented as heroic but as terror. The Holocaust is presented and thus perhaps also perceptible in pop (Rancière 2011), but in any case, not "forgotten" in this national narrative. The nation is symbolized by a Black woman. We see the empowerment of Holocaust victims who take revenge on the perpetrators and shoot back, and, at the end, we see that the video is an obituary for the nation, with appropriate mourning music, specifically a melancholic version of Rammstein's "Sonne" (2001). Unambiguous (chronological) temporality of common (national) experience or history is dissolved, and different myths are juxtaposed, torn out of contexts, and made equal. They are reordered and "disarticulated." National signs can thus take on new meanings (Rancière 2011).

"Deutschland" can therefore be read as political because, on the one hand, it "de-naturalizes" the nation and does not accept it as a "natural framework" like Max Giesinger and colleagues, but rather takes the nation out of pop-musical social sedimentation and puts it up for discussion again. And on the other hand, it can be considered political because it reduces nationalist myths, that is, right-wing populism and extremism, to absurdity. Giddeon Botsch (2020) recently described contemporary nationalism, also with explicit reference to Andreas Gabalier, as "re-

constructive nationalism," which has no vision of the future but wants to return to a supposedly better, mythical past. What Rammstein celebrate in "Deutschland," however, is "deconstructive nationalism," which tells a national narrative but at the same time questions national narratives. "Deutschland" is therefore an anti-nationalist national narrative and thus political.

Race and Gender

Casting the Black German actress Ruby Commey as Germania for Rammstein's "Deutschland" has not only created a significant media buzz but also raises important questions considering Rammstein's representation of German history: Does the video re-imagine the German nation as Black and female? Does it thus subvert hegemonic conceptions of (German) history and national narratives traditionally centering Whiteness and masculinity? And finally, does that make Rammstein pioneers in current efforts towards diversity — and hence political in the best sense of the word? To answer these questions, there are at least two important aspects to consider: Rammstein's use of pop-feminist "quotes" and the relevance of Afrofuturistic elements in their music video.

While the numerous historical references in "Deutschland" are blatantly obvious, other references in the video may only be apparent to more attentive viewers. Dressed as a nun, covered with meat, or wearing an ammunition belt around her chest, many of Germania's outfits are reminiscent of iconic looks by Madonna, Lady Gaga, and Beyoncé, and can thus be read as an homage to feminist pop history as well. Yet, while Gaga's infamous meat dress, which she wore to the MTV Video Music Awards in 2010, is her attempt at reclaiming autonomy of her body, in "Deutschland," Germania's meat — a (stereo)typical German sausage chain with sauerkraut on the side — is eaten by a group of White men in monk's cowls. In contrast to Gaga's feminist provocation, which must be understood as a critical comment on the objectification and commodification of (cis) female bodies in the pop industry, Rammstein's video reproduces these mechanisms by visually exploiting how Commey's naked body is — quite literally — consumed. Not only covered in meat but reduced to naked flesh herself, the video degrades the Black female body to a purely aesthetic spectacle. Thereby, it represents Commey merely in the form of "bare life" (Agamben 1998), bereft of any emancipatory potential or even recognition before and protection by the law.

"Deutschland" also offers other aesthetic strategies relevant to discussing Rammstein's relation *to* and potential subversion *of* hegemonic conceptions of (German) history and national narratives. One particularly striking and equally surprising aspect in this context is the video's use of Afrofuturist elements. Afrofuturism operates at the intersection of science fiction and Afrodiasporic cultures and is marked by high-tech aesthetics, such as lasers, spaceships, shiny technological equipment, et cetera. At the center of Afrofuturist endeavors lies the artistic imagination of alternative futures in and through which systemic anti-Black racism is challenged and subverted (cf. Womack 2013, 9). At the same time, Afrofuturism functions as a "revisionist discourse" (Barber et al. 2018, 136), that is, the imagination of alternative Black futures is coupled with an attempt to make visible a Black *past* in hegemonically White historiographical contexts. Such temporal double movement, both forward-looking and backward-looking, is also visible in Rammstein's "Deutschland": particularly the use of montage — fast cuts reminiscent of parallel montage — as well as Germania's omnipresence evoke a feeling of tempo-

ral simultaneity of the events in the clip. This blurring of temporal boundaries disrupts any sense of causality and chronology and signals, at least potentially, a rejection of homogenized constructions of German history rooted in Whiteness and masculinity. Similarly, the measuring of White male statues in "Deutschland" by red lasers can be read as an inversion of the objectification of racialized persons in Germany's colonial past by reframing the practice of craniometry, which served as the pseudoscientific legitimation of racist ideologies. Both the sci-fi aesthetics evoked by the lasers and other technology in many of these scenes as well as the omnipresent — and markedly not victimized — figure Germania in the video counters the erasure of Black experiences in German historiography. Instead, "Deutschland" renders visible an Afro-German presence in German history — not only as passive and silent victims of colonialism but as active subjects. This presence, as the important work of scholars like Olivette Otele (2020), Katharina Oguntoye (1997), and Fatima El-Tayeb (2001) has demonstrated, is by no means speculative fiction but a historical fact. Yet, one that is hardly acknowledged in German public discourses or national narratives. As such, "Deutschland" allows us to imagine an alternative conception of German history and can thus be understood as an Afrofuturist "countermemory" (Eshun 2003, 288).

As this brief analysis has shown, we must take seriously the lines of traditions that "Deutschland" draws on, namely Afrofuturism and pop-feminism. Both these traditions are rife with subversive potential and doubtlessly highly political. However, attributing *their* progressiveness to Rammstein obscures the fact that "Deutschland" is a highly heterogeneous assemblage of quotes, traditions, and aesthetics whose main purpose is, presumably at least, to elicit an affective response; to cause a scandal that will help the band sell records. Particularly considering the, at times, problematic representation of Commey's body in the video, confusing Rammstein's programmatic effort to shock in order to sell with (true) efforts towards more diverse conceptions of German history is a dangerous path. At the same time, a multi-perspectival and multi-disciplinary analysis of a video such as "Deutschland" should not only acknowledge that it can have multiple, even contradictory, potential meanings but should also decouple a band's alleged intentions from affective, aesthetic, and political effects that music produces.

Political Feelings and Affects

In "Deutschland," two feelings are specifically present: On the one hand, inner-textual love; on the other, outrage as the public's reaction to the video. First to the text: The "I" finds itself in a limbo between wanting to love and not being able to love, between wanting to hate and wanting to love. It thus is about a longing for identification, for affirmation of the nation, but the object of love is so resistant that the fundamentally existing potential of love must remain in the realm of the hypothetical. In the video, this ambivalent love relationship is performatively crossed out and overwritten with feelings of disgust and revulsion. This results in the dissolution of identification, the dissociation from the loathsome nation that one really cannot love. The video suggests that a distancing from "Deutschland" is necessary and must be enacted performatively in order to be able to assume the position of the ambivalent love-hate relationship of the speaking instance. "Deutschland" therefore constructs a certain (its) audience as one that must first perform this action. At the same time, however, readings are suggested that are intended to put the out-group on the spot, not in the form of identificatory readings like those of the in-group, but as a targeted scandal.

The teaser that was released two days before the video was a calculated provocation. In the short clip, the camera moves along the faces of the artists, who are lined up next to each other, each wearing a noose around their neck and costumed in black and white prisoner clothing with a sewn-on Jewish star and pink angle. Blood trickles from Lindemann's temple. The gloomy, grey scenery is reminiscent of well-known cinematic concentration camp depictions. At the end of the tracking shot, the title "Deutschland" (Germany) appears in a "fracture-like" script (FAZ 2019), with "28.03.2019", the video release date, written in Latin numerals below it.

This font resembling *fraktur* script can hardly be misunderstood as a reference to Nazi propaganda. The font is combined with the Rammstein logo, which stands for the four band members, who stylized themselves as victims of the Holocaust only seconds before. The depiction of the band members alone would probably be scandalous enough; any comparison of Germans to victims of the so-called Third Reich is almost certainly socially sanctioned, but the additional combination with the perpetrator side completely breaks the code of commemorating the Holocaust. This drastic breaking of the code is a "stumbling block," a scandal, a calculated effort to produce attention.

The scandal makes the mechanisms that constitute the social order visible through powerful action (Käsler 1991, 13). For example, Germany's anti-Semitism commissioner, Felix Klein, and former president of the Central Council of Jews in Germany, Charlotte Knobloch, announce that a boundary has been crossed and thus claim that they are in the position to announce where this boundary runs (Bild 2019). The scandal thus institutes the boundary that is crossed by the *skandalon* in a performative way in the first place. The transgression triggers outrage because outrage is the affect that is closely linked to the scandal.

Outrage activates, calls for an activity, a follow-up communication or action, and in this respect is a "political feeling" (Hessel 2019; Walter-Jochum 2019, 163f.). So, if Rammstein are creating outrage here, then their artwork can be seen as a political one in that it encourages people to become active, even if this activity "only" relates to the performative exhibiting of discursive border demarcations. But the scandal takes place within the social order and only serves to performatively exhibit discursive taboos. The political fizzles out into a mere gesture of reassurance of established configurations of the social. We can thus think of Rammstein as a conservative project. From the perspective of the dynamics of affect, "Deutschland" is highly political in that it harbors an analytical potential that is unfolded in the public and medial communications and negotiations that it has sparked.

Live Performance

The dynamics of affect also play out — albeit in different ways — during Rammstein's live performances on stage.[4] The band's Europe Stadium Tour 2019 has certainly had its unmistakably political moments. For instance, the kiss between the two guitar players during the transition between "Ausländer" and "Du riechst so gut," which was read as a call for sexual tolerance, particularly given the concert's location in Moscow, was much noticed. Yet, not only does this kiss lack intensity compared to the — by now legendary — kiss between Madonna, Britney

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4   For a more detailed discussion of the affective dimension of stage performances and the ways in which they are intertwined with notions of entrepreneurship, see Sørfjorddal Hauge (2016).

Spears, and Christina Aguilera, it is also problematic (in a structural, not in a moral sense): Just like the LGBTQ flag, which the band waved on stage in Poland, the gesture itself, that is, the kiss between two men, may be political in itself but has no connection to Rammstein's overall artistic project. The role that this gesture plays in the context of the band's otherwise hypermasculine (and markedly heterosexual) self-presentation remains open. Indeed, it remains open if this is a moment in which the band members temporarily leave behind their established roles to articulate "private" attitudes that deviate from the position of their art. The gesture itself, thus, does not provide a definite answer to questions concerning "the political" *in* and *of* Rammstein.

Therefore, we must examine the topical features of Rammstein's gigantomaniac and spectacular "aesthetics of overwhelming" (cf. Wicke 2019) with reference to these questions: Is the live performance of "Deutschland" only a semantic zero grade of the video because it lacks the clip's semiotic complexity? Or is it, in fact, *more* political than the video due to its immediate, that is, not mediated, form of presentation in the physical and spiritual co-presence of an audience? For, in contrast to the regular staging of Rammstein, which does not seem to change in different cities and thus seems very indifferent to (spatial) context, it is crucial for this song where and with whom it is performed on stage — "with whom" in the sense that it is constitutive of the song's live version that the audience, hands in the air as usual, chants "Deutschland, Deutschland über allen" ("Germany, Germany above everyone else") along with the band.

An ironic and morally mostly uninvolved variant of this performance probably exists in Stockholm or Moscow, where it seems almost comical that Swedes and Russians, enthused by the show's aesthetic Germanness, bellow out the song, so that "Deutschland" also sounds semantically empty, without any appreciation for the significance of this highly charged sign. However, this completely changes when the performance takes place at the Olympiastadion in Berlin, whose architecture clearly gives away that its construction began in 1934. Is it outrageous if tens of thousands, mostly German, fans bawl "Deutschland, mein Herz in Flammen / Will dich lieben und verdammen" ("Germany, my heart in flames / Will love and damn you") in this place of all places? How relevant is the position of the humans in this space — here, their condensation into a mass that reacts to the actions on stage with their voices and a gesture, a mass that takes up these actions and amplifies them? Or is Rammstein's performance not a consensually proclamatory recital of the song under the banner of Nazi ideology, but rather an ahistorical, meaningless game of pop? From an epistemological perspective, it is a challenge to us, when we can only assume rather than confirm what the recipients think instead of being able to evaluate their perception. In other words, from an external perspective, we simply cannot know what the people in the audience mean, feel, or intend when they shout "Deutschland."

Thus, we may have to argue with a bit more caution: Whereas Rammstein could — to a certain degree at least — control and keep ambiguous the semiotic structure of the song when they recorded it in the studio or conceptualized the video, during a live performance, they cede some of this control, which is categorically different from a solitary reception of the song at home. As such, we could say that Rammstein's live performance evokes a kind of temporary "fusion of horizons" (cf. Gadamer 2013) between producer and recipient, which can vary tremendously from the band's original intentions. On stage, we can thus trace the concept of semantic ambiguity; the audience can disambiguate, but we must assume that the shared reception experience creates a collectivizing effect. Or, in other words again: The concert makes

it easier than the recording or video to ignore the semantic and historical ambiguity so that it is *possible* that "Deutschland" *can* be chanted to express right-wing views. This, however, does not make Rammstein political. Rather, they are a prime example of difficulties when interpreting the significance and meaning of live performances. It demonstrates that a concert cannot "simply" be reduced to "we play our new record." Instead, we must take seriously the multidimensionality of live performances, that is, the interplay between space, audience, music, text, band, and other elements that characterize these performances in order to adequately interpret them — and ultimately, to evaluate how political they are.

Discussion and Conclusion

At the end of this project, we still have not answered the question of how political Rammstein are conclusively — and we probably never will. The political in Rammstein oscillates between deconstruction and marketability, between irony and statement, between self-reference and historical reference. In doing so, Rammstein establish a community of people who know, who understand. At the same time, their work exposes the discursive power mechanisms of the out-group. Whether Rammstein can ultimately be appreciated as political art is also difficult to grasp because their work's multi-layered nature and complexity, as examined here using the example of "Deutschland," fundamentally undermines a fixation on a core message. From various interdisciplinary perspectives, we were able to break down "Deutschland" as a complex game of signs, images, and references. We were able to show that on the musical, textual, and visual levels, an intricate system of references to historical and contemporary national ideas, clichés, and myths, to the pop universe, but also to the Rammstein universe itself, reconfigures and recontextualizes discursive material in a way that legitimizes innovative, subversive, and even deconstructive readings. However, these readings also show that the ironic-subversive does not necessarily appear here as a political or even critical stance, but above all as a possibility to refrain from a clear positioning. Every supposed positioning, it seems, is immediately withdrawn. And conversely, every distancing from political positions brings them back in the same breath so that the question of the political message always remains unanswered and is shifted into the reception, the multiple debates in the feuilletons and online forums as an inconclusive dissent. This ambiguity and unstable position can be interpreted not only as a postmodern staging of the wavering principle but above all as a market mechanism that does not alienate any audience — neither the right nor the left are completely excluded — that relies on targeted provocations to enter into and remain in the conversation, and that paves the way for what seems to characterize Rammstein's aesthetics on all levels: the spectacular.

So, do we have to evaluate the political in Rammstein as a vehicle for market success? And is this a finding that applies to the pop business in general? Of course, this question cannot be answered across the board, but one can assume that politics and the market are mutually dependent or at least strongly linked when market success is also associated with a certain reach. This mechanism is certainly the case in pop music; the more buyers there are, the more people are reached by potentially political messages in and of certain songs. In Rammstein's case, as far as we can tell, their strategy to always eschew a definitive political positioning has not harmed their market success. The specific ambiguity and overabundance can thus be read as a trademark of Rammstein that cannot necessarily be explained by market mechanisms alone. And above all, the market factor shrinks in its significance when it comes to analyzing

the impact of Rammstein's "Deutschland." An audience that shouts "Deutschland" in huge stadiums is simultaneously presented with a Black woman as the personification of what they are shouting. The shouted "Deutschland" is decidedly not the same as what the Nazis shouted in Nuremberg, or the audience at an extreme right *Kategorie C* concert. Rammstein use terms, concepts, and images in new ways and assemble them into new statements. That *is* political — or at least has the potential to be.

Rammstein repeatedly put their finger on this fine line and push the boundaries of what can be said. Political ambiguity also helps here to show the discursive mechanisms of the political through art. Maybe Rammstein are not strictly or unambiguously political, but their approach suggests, in many teasing and even playful ways, that they have a political intent. But is that a difference at all? In any case, "Deutschland" is a dazzling work of art whose specific aesthetic is based on the triad of pop, market, and the political. It plays on a surface and leaves plenty of room for depths that it only alludes to but never plays out. It is a spectacle for the Rammstein community — and a scandal for everyone else.

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Abstract (English)

This contribution examines the nexus between 'the political' and popular music from an interdisciplinary perspective. Using Rammstein's highly provocative single "Deutschland" (2019) as an example, this case study showcases multiple different and often contradictory readings of the band's work with a view to its textual, visual, sonic and performative dimensions. Overall, this contribution suggests that the political in Rammstein oscillates between self-reference and historical reference, between deconstruction and marketability, and between scandalous irony and ambiguous sincerity.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Dieser Beitrag untersucht das Verhältnis zwischen ‚dem Politischen' und Pop Musik anhand von Rammsteins provokativer Single „Deutschland" (2019) aus interdisziplinärer Perspektive. Die Fallstudie beleuchtet verschiedene, oftmals widersprüchliche, Interpretationen dieses Textes mit besonderem Fokus auf die textuellen, visuellen, auditiven und performativen Dimensionen in Rammsteins Werk. Insgesamt, so zeigt dieser Beitrag, oszilliert das Politische bei Rammstein zwischen Selbstreferenz und historischer Referenz, zwischen Dekonstruktion und Vermarktbarkeit sowie zwischen skandalöser Ironie und mehrdeutiger Ernsthaftigkeit.