

# Stripped Pop and Affirmation in Kraftwerk, Laibach and Rammstein

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This is a revised version of a lecture held on 29 January 1999 in Potsdam during the Leni Riefenstahl exhibition. It intended to deal with the issue of Nazi aesthetics and Pop culture. Rammstein, currently the most successful German band, took part in the discussion. In their music video “Stripped” they use shots from Riefenstahl’s 1936 movie Olympia, and after the lecture a discussion was held during which anti-Semitic and nationalistic statements were made by both the public and the participants on stage, and the discussion was detailed in Taz and Jungle World. The harsh mixture of hatred for the capitalistic economy and anger towards memorials celebrating Jewishness gravitated towards comparisons of the holocaust and the slaughtering of the buffaloes by the American pioneers. In such debates it is obvious where (and how curiously) the frontlines between leftist and nationalistic thought are drawn in the five provinces of former East Germany. However attempts by the authors of the texts to separate out leftwing and rightwing avant-garde techniques in the contemporary Pop industry ended in failure.

## **Kraftwerk and the “German” game**

In the mid 1970s, famous US music journalist Lester Bangs was asked: “Where is rock going?” And he answered like a gunshot: “It’s been taken over by the Germans and the machines.” In 1975 the Germans and the machines were considered the future of rock music, and the critic’s words were not without sarcasm. It was a victory of the often ridiculed “Krautrock” and “Teutonentum.” It was — according to Bangs — a victory of the steely will and the all-promising eruption of the machine-age in music. A victory which, in Bangs’ opinion, had already begun with the invention of amphetamines. The drug was developed as a stimulant for bomber pilots and was intended to speed up their mental reactions. The drug was later used by many pop musicians and writers, including Bob

Dylan, Lou Reed, Jack Kerouac, and it showed up in their songs and books. "The Reich never died," wrote Bangs. "It just reincarnated in American archetypes..." With the invention of speed and a new rapidity, "German" pop-culture became quicker, colder and more technoid. Therefore Bangs was extremely curious when in 1975 he met and interviewed Florian Hütter and Ralf Schneider from Kraftwerk during their Autobahn tour through the US. He was looking straight into the eyes of the heirs of the German Empire.

The humor of the situation is depicted in a grotesque scene at the beginning of the interview. Bangs teases the two percussion players, Wolfgang Flur and Karl Bartos, asking them if they ever have their groupies perform oral sex on them. They don't understand much English, and answer without batting an eye: "Yes, of course." Had they also sported black eyes, it would have looked like a classic movie scene depicting the stilted, cold German nature.

Hütter and Schneider come off as typical mad scientists during the interview. Their controlled and calm manner of speaking and thinking is accurately recorded in the text. During the interview with Bangs, Hütter and Schneider explain, both speaking good English, their theory of Menschmaschinen and why synthesizers are sensitive and peculiar instruments that help people, while at the same time imposing their will on them. They emphasize the power of a machine-complex and laboratory that can manipulate the audience and seize them physically. Their mental states are dangerous, or, in other words: absolutely un-PC.

And no less did Kraftwerk express itself as a representative of German culture. "After the war," says Hütter, "the German entertainment was destroyed. The German people were robbed of their culture, putting an American head on it. I think we are the first generation born after the war to shake this off, and know where to feel American music and where to feel ourselves. We are the first German group to record in our own language, use our electronic background, and create a Central European identity for ourselves." Both of them did not wish to be lumped together with Tangerine Dream or Can, bands with English names and which have an Anglo-American identity while on stage. They speak German, emphasize

their German origin and use machines produced by the German industry. “We cannot deny we are from Germany, because the German mentality, which is more advanced, will always be a part of our behavior,” says Hütter. Bangs offers no commentary to these passages. Yet face to face with so much “Germanness” the feeling of cold estrangement comes through — exactly thirty years after the Americans helped to free the German people from the Nazis. At the same time this also confirmed the notion Bangs had constructed before the interview with the Germans. Kraftwerk appeals to his idea of difference, and they understand it at the same time as the basis from which they are able to create further distortion. When Bangs asks whether Hütter and Schneider will allow themselves to be photographed, they refuse. “We have our own pictures. You can use them.” Bangs is astonished, and Kraftwerk explains: “We don’t pose. We are paranoid.” No further explanation is offered. Both musicians in their black suits, narrow ties and short hair interrupt the interview. “We have to take a rest. Excuse us, please,” they explain politely. Bangs withdraws with amazement and relief in his eyes: “Still, it was somehow comforting to know that they did, apparently, sleep.”

The Lester Bangs and Kraftwerk interview was probably the first important encounter between a representative of the American Pop intelligentsia and German Pop conceptualists, and it will most likely remain one of the more engaging. Even on the visual level it is a bizarre sight — Bangs with his beer belly, moustache and long hair, and the two Kraftwerk musicians looking like engineers from a German spacecraft factory. However their mutual estrangement never interfered with their discussion and so remains a symptom of inconsistency, which is so atypical of the cosmopolitan manifestation of Pop culture.

### **Intruders in the Pop culture mainstream**

Pop surfaced after the Second World War as the rebellious child of Western capitalistic civilization so that it could — like a speaking tube, an amplifier of emotions and a constructor of identity — quickly unite nearly all the youth of this civilization. Pop music was a language everyone understood,

and English became the Esperanto of Pop culture. The bands that didn't speak English had to assimilate or perish. That's how it was, until Kraftwerk landed in 1975 with Autobahn in the Top Ten on the US Charts. After that the band became one of the most trend-setting formations in Pop music. Like an intruder, Kraftwerk invaded mainstream Anglo-American Pop culture, and they found their success in their refusal to assimilate. They described themselves as children of Fritz Lang and Werner von Braun, substantiating their claim that their roots are not with Elvis, the Beatles or the Rolling Stones. Their status as "foreigners" reflected to a certain extent hatred of foreigners, racism and anti-Semitism. Kraftwerk consciously stressed their own conception and "Germanness" which must have been especially strange to the Pop world. The ostentation of taboo — and not national pride — determined the need to proceed according to the dialectic of negative affirmation.

In the same way that hip-hop later used "blackness" as an aesthetic and political sign of defection, Kraftwerk accept their "Germanness" as an element of dissidence. The political context after 1968 enabled this. Hütter and Schneider became engaged in the leftist APO-movement, and in Willy Brandt there was a new anti-fascist Bundeskanzler. The moment he knelt down and apologized in Warsaw a new Germany seemed to have arrived. Kraftwerk played with the aesthetic codes of a specific German tradition. At the same time both were very much aware that they had created a Pop image: very obvious, distorted and intense. It was formulated in the language of Pop and its market strategies.

The concept of dissidence in Pop required a double encoding: the songs and images had to be understandable to the mainstream, as well as to other outsider "intruders." The members of Kraftwerk seized on the ambivalence and ambiguousness of Pop culture, which alternately takes on the role of insurgent, as well as integrating pacifier during various social shifts. The mixing and games with resistance as a method of adaptation, adaptation as resistance, adapted resistance as a rebellious adaptation, etc. in their case unwinds into the fine thread of one structure that only fits with difficulty into the standard

schemes of non-dissidence or subversion.

Pop music arose as a decontextualization of black R&B, a derivative of slave music from the southern American states, and during the segregation of the 1950s it became a successful product of the culture industry. To this day black and white Pop historians quarrel over whether this occurred only due to a change in the color of the musicians or on the basis of a cultural permeability which had perforated the racist society from the inside. The question remains whether the “foreign” could be accepted as “foreign,” or whether it became disguised as something trustworthy and known. Many black musicians dressed like whites just to make sure, others resisted and were therefore successful. Kraftwerk’s constructed estrangement in their simultaneous acceptance of Pop rules as a kind of adapted dissidence works within the background of a systematic theoretical observation of adaptation as a central element of social function. Kraftwerk’s seductive melodies and tones enable them to become a very tasty infusion of something utterly different, which the pluralistic culture industry gladly lapped up. This infusion broadens the complexity and appears to be innovative. The fact that Kraftwerk loudly expressed “praise of the steely rhythm” (Adorno/Horkheimer) emphasizes the educational factors of their exceptional fraud. In many places this could, may and should be verified as fraud.

### **Punk and post-human androidness**

At the same time the New York Dolls and later the Sex Pistols were dealing with the cultural heritage of fascism. Exactly ten years after Kraftwerk’s participation in the student unrest and anti-fascist resistance towards their fathers, values and institutions, hippies were proclaimed as enemies and their naive humanism was fought against, in every possible way — and when necessary, even with the Swastika. The punishment for whatever looked like barbarism that took place in the 1970s meant, above all, the rejection of hippie humanism. In its place an aggressively cynical self-denunciation was born. The Sex Pistols’ “Pretty Vacant” was close in spirit to the robotism of Kraftwerk: the rigidity of their self-denunciation went

hand in hand with their flirtation with the “radical.” The provocativeness and self-denunciation blended, and one was unable to exist without the other. Just like the enlightened Anti-Christ, garbage, human waste and the apocalyptic rider, the Nazi armband also became a modern identity in punk: not as a sign of identification with political goals, as it was in the Third Reich, nor as an image the enemy, deemed an antithesis by the students in 1968 to good leftist morality, but one of communication and the symbolic expression of destruction which leaves all morality behind. Kraftwerk avoided positioning itself in the hierarchy of morality through their futuristic affirmation of machine-ness. Robot-like, their basic constituent elements were soulessness and non-existent authority towards any moralistic position. The offensive game with “Germanness” also foretold its own rapid demise: a switch into the circuit board — one more program among many. The alleged loss of German identity after the Second World War was confronted by a coquettish regard for odd traditions. Kraftwerk played its superficial game with associations in what had been a taboo space: while in American television and war films a strange, thin German with short hair still represented the enemy and Nazism, Kraftwerk, in trying to leap over a superficial identification with the enemy, made a quantum leap into the futuristic future of “Germanness,” which could not forget the past, but also imposed a new threat on western society — fear of the extermination of man by the computer. How would the world enjoy the technical positivism of Bill Gates if he were a German? What would happen if the fear of Germans clashed with the fear of slavery? Kraftwerk asked these questions as a prophetic forecast, and left them unanswered. In one moment Kraftwerk composed both history and science-fiction. An opaque amalgam with powerful features that ensured instant attention. Fortunately the signs of the German hunt for culture, in the way they were emphasized in the interview with Bangs, were further evaluated, and the post-human androidness of Kraftwerk was unassailable. The band brought together the free ends of apparently foreign identities. They named their LP *Autobahn*, or highway, the construction of which had earned for the Nazi party in Germany great sympathy, and two years later they presented themselves on *Menschmaschine* as descendants of the Soviet Constructivists

with an undertone of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*.

The synthetic ability of Pop music seems to have no limits: except for those who were, in the old sense of the word, truly "ideological." On this borderline, the pluralism of the culture industry — which doesn't limit itself to the freedom of consumption — transforms into a dogmatic barrier thrown up before the slightest sign of totalitarianism. Uniqueness in the aesthetic principles of Pop is usually unintentional. The short history of Pop culture knows both its bastards as well as its abortions and mixed marriages, which were to eliminate any sides in certain genetic dispositions. In short: racism and totalitarianism would be considered as natural enemies of Pop, if concerned individuals did not attempt to correct these dispositions.

The national socialistic propaganda machine tried to propagate its popular concept of a cultural nation via the developing medium of mass communication. That was before the onset of Pop in American civil democracy. At the roots of country western music the ideology of its culture has survived through its content, still explicit and old-fashioned; otherwise, weak content and estrangement have become the dogma of the culture industry. The non-origin of the new, which the culture industry wanted to create in machine production, has led to the elimination of any identifiable function. The first stars, identified as both rebels and national heroes, the confusion of races and behaviors, have increased the ability of the affluent society to integrate. From this point of view, super-national Pop culture worked as a foundation stone for the cultural super-nation, which, as the West, was put into opposition against the red East in a battle of cultures. The cultural nation was then no longer bound to one state or nation, or to any popular concept of nations.

Kraftwerk began to indicate how groundless these old concepts were. Nazi ideology constructed the eternal German, the Aryan, in tradition and in history. When Kraftwerk plays with this, while at the same time joining these relations with others, they undermine the ideology. At the same time they draw our attention towards authorship, and thus unmask the mythical roots.

## **Laibach — an ambivalent critique of totalitarianism**

The Slovenian philosopher and psychoanalyst Slavoj Žižek defended the Slovenian group Laibach for slipping Nazi ideology into their work by characterizing it as an artistic strategy. According to Žižek, Laibach's insistence is an attempt to bring to light an implicitly twisted ideology. By combining the aesthetics of German and Italian fascism with state communism, they join two forms of totalitarianism and create an artistic unity, which, with its open non-authenticity, contradicts the essence of fascism. As one could see in Leni Riefenstahl's exhibition in Potsdam, fascist ideology and the cultural production aim for the eternal, for all of time and the timeless Aryan ideal, however empty and meaningless it is upon closer observation, so that its "over-significance" can fulfill its political effectiveness. This nearness to emptiness radicalized the attempt to attain the illustrious, in itself an enclosed aesthetic superficiality. How were these myths constructed and which lies had the best chance for success — that is what the art group from Slovenia analyzes in the framework of the compact context of New Slovenian art. With great joy they perform a wide range of new, mischievous tricks: they create imaginary maps, publish absurd historical bequests and unite the national tribes of Slovenians, the Slovaks, Slavs under one nation — only on the basis of names. Laibach got into their practice not only from the first seismographic warning before the ethnic madness broke out in former Yugoslavia and the rest of the Eastern bloc. As citizens of Yugoslavia, a relatively young national state with a strong religious federalist system, they were able — according to Žižek — to show ideology to be an "empty container" into which anyone can reach and take out whatever one needs. Ideology is — like a container — an empty moment of agreement. What is important is that all the "believers" of this ideology understand this container to be the correct one.

In this connection, the reactionary confirmation of identity could be understood as the deliberately unconscious belief in the eternal validity of content. A society which has lost this belief is non-reactionary, or rather, no longer remembers. Kraftwerk and Laibach operate within situations of

historical transition, distrustfully exorcising the old, because — in the case of Kraftwerk — they are sure that this specter is gone, and — in the case of Laibach — suspect that it could still rear its powerful head.

The calculated ambivalence is an uncertainty which both groups — face to face with the contaminated history of 20th century mass communication — take as an absolute self-reflection. These almost paradoxical, even exorcist ways of dealing with power in Pop culture, and the fact of accepting responsibility for it, together make any power relationship problematic. The work of Kraftwerk and Laibach surely constitutes an exception in the context of Pop culture. Their premeditation could be compared to some hip-hop musicians or Malcolm McLaren's situationism. In the 20th century, incendiarism and the artistic avant-garde were often very close. Their statements often have the character of a manifesto presenting an ideology of a specific cultural world, while at the same time pointing to ideological questions of the classic avant-garde. Laibach and Kraftwerk strove with their artistic experience for a solution — though they were aware that it was a vain — to ideological structures that were increasingly able to adapt. They chose a paradoxical strategy: the catharsis came about through hysterical exaggeration and iconoclasm.

### **Provocation without provocation: the empty spaces of Rammstein**

Rammstein operates in a different way. This was the second German band after Kraftwerk to sell a million records in the USA, and in 1999 they were nominated for a Grammy. The musicians come from former East Germany, so like Laibach they are from the former Eastern Bloc. So they are twice the distance from Anglo-American Pop culture, which is not only non-German, but has always been capitalistic. Unlike Kraftwerk and Laibach, Rammstein doesn't come from an intellectual background — they are not academicians. Their work with symbols and myths is very direct. Musically they combine heavy metal, Electronic Body Music with a bit of Laibach, so that through the aggression and formidable number of decibels, a comical fear and horror radiate. The calculated vehemence doesn't create even a

second of authenticity, for this is too transparent for their plans. The name of the band is an allusion to the location of a terrible accident during an air show in the 1980s and is also a provocation. Similarly provocative are the themes in their music: incest, child abuse, Satanism, etc. Rammstein limit themselves to the convenient echo of themes presented daily in infotainment TV broadcasting and sensationalist media. Because they are presented with significant brutality, the provocation is heightened and stylized into aggression which works perfectly as a Pop image. Rammstein are less ironic than other Pop bands — their play with fire goes from one cliché to the next. They don't use irony, with every new song and video they multiply the concept of themselves. They are obstinately loyal to themselves. Thus they lose their dynamic and complex character, allowing their codes to be destroyed again and again, as did Kraftwerk and Laibach. The lack of ability to deal with their own codes makes them the victims of their own image.

Yet the dullness and primitiveness of Rammstein's music fascinates not only German audiences. The American film director David Lynch chose Rammstein to make the soundtrack for his movie *Lost Highway*. The German lyrics and aggression of the music, which rubs against the paranoid character of Lynch's movie, perfectly intensify the stylized, dark artistic worlds that Lynch serves up.

During Rammstein's successful 1998 tour in America they found out that this is precisely what Americans wanted a taste of in their music. Audiences at many concerts sang the lyrics along with them without knowing what they meant. As is true for many friends of Pop in Germany, Poland or India, not understanding isn't an obstacle to embracing a song. The lyrics are accepted as an integral part of the song. Speech is reduced to sounds, accents, performative components of the expression. The fact that this works very well in Rammstein is not surprising: the howling, deep voice of the singer, Till Lindemann, and his rattling "r" as if heard at a rally of the Nazi party are in themselves a tautological transmission of their code into a style of singing. Rammstein is homogenous, and they enjoy ridding themselves of the contradictions and coquetties which on a subtle level Pop music allows. The method of affirmation which Rammstein uses in their

provocation — constructs of masculinity and Germanness — differs from the strategic affirmations which came to the fore through Pop art and Pop culture.

The feebleness of fixating on subversion became a well-known fact by the time punk appeared, the great rock 'n' roll swindle. Kraftwerk, too, was fighting against stereotypical forms of rebellion, which itself became a scheme of the culture industry: Kraftwerk's battle tactic was their swerve towards the dull images of enemies and false questioning. Both Kraftwerk's strategy and the methods of McLaren or Andy Warhol were stuck in the inevitable need to adapt, as well as resist. Pop was defenseless against the unintentional, which became the social sediment of all ideologems.

The senselessness of the intentional in bands like Rammstein was convincing. In its unbridled energy and effort to be one-hundred percent Rammstein (in name, subject matter, sound, costumes, videos, etc.) they open up the nature of their intention. But they are so obsessed by this intention, by this "being" Rammstein, that they suddenly stand on the opposite side. They hide under the surface of the desired. Not the intention, but business relations determine every effect: Rammstein is successful as ordered goods. Pop art and Pop music, starting with Warhol and Elvis, only seemed to be ordered goods, in order to seed the rebellion or cynical consent.

The professional construction of image, including the finical use of Leni Riefenstahl in their video, shows the emptiness of the annexed space of popular culture. It is obvious how meaningless, stupid and deserted the emptiness can be when it is not meant as a negation or refusal of fullness. Only the apocalyptic postmodern thinkers dare to long for the creation of such desolation, because this affirmed emptiness can give rise only to further uninteresting emptiness. Rammstein's affirmation remains an eager play with their own inability to rebel or desire to rebel against something, or their rebellion is already "right." If you ask them about their provocative lyrics, they refer to the horrifying reality surrounding them controlled by the media, they are only reflecting it. Such banalities — with regard to discussions about identity and nation in Germany and after the rightwing radical terrorism of

recent years — seem somewhat dubious. The political context Rammstein is referring to in Germany is no longer the one of Brandt's apology in Warsaw: here we have the burning of the houses of refugees and immigrants. These crucial differences divide the politics of Rammstein's image from the Pop politics of Kraftwerk, and not only on the aesthetic level. Rammstein's feedback on the national swamp of the new rightwing robs their music of all "hedonistic potential," even though "leftist" listeners would like to see it differently.

### **Nationally grounded or trivially devalued**

Pop is apparently also a cultural form in which the reactionary and "immoral" can give rise to great friendships. In this sense Rammstein was a success. Their (or what was made by their company) touching provocation in which they connected the video Stripped by Depeche Mode with samples by Leni Riefenstahl comes off as comprehensible and very aspiring.

Nevertheless this synthesis hides a transfer breakdown in its own vulgarity, which — as concerns the sampling and the sampled — alternately rids the music and images of their legal rights. Riefenstahl's scenes of nudity turn into an athletic striptease jingle with many naked Aryans, while Depeche Mode views the striptease as a metaphor for power issues in the libidinal chaos between men and women.

The musicians of Rammstein became the puppets of the music industry when they smuggled a taboo breaker into Pop music, and in the Nazis sympathetic year 1998 they opted for the "new" and "financially prospective." Compared to the attacks of the New York Dolls or Sex Pistols, who played under flags bearing the swastika or wore bands on their sleeves, their idea seems unimaginative and clumsy. One can imagine the serious expression on the face of the production manager who explains that this'll create a real stir, as he anticipates the media swallowing the provocation whole. The history of Pop culture is an accumulation of provocation. And what's more: the artistic quality of Pop music is last but not least demonstrated through the intelligence and craftiness of the provocation and its influence on mass culture. After Dance of Adolf Hitler

by DAF, or Kiss' rune-type SS, after photographers Bruce Weber and Herb Ritts feeding off of Riefenstahl, after Hitler-Bart by Sparks, after punk, New Wave, Laibach, EBM and industrial, Rammstein's video amounts to a commercially profitable and one-dimensional provocation.

The way in which music channels Viva and MTV accepted the video, as if it were a given, proves that the provocation was slight. Riefenstahl's displayed aesthetic falls effortlessly into the colorful stream of music videos. Young people will never convert to national socialism because of the video. The banality of this absorption is at the same time a compliment and the fate of the art of Leni Riefenstahl. A compliment for its timelessly entertaining beauty, fate because in the end it lands where it never intended: within the indifference of democratic mass culture, where such pictures are possible — like all others. The great photographic and film artist of the Nazi dictatorship has become one of many: the ordinary merchandise of Pop culture without any special ideological assertiveness. With its blatant references and profiting, Pop culture shows how quickly historical myths fizzle. The heroine of the thousand-year empire hits her limits in the ruthless malevolence of the fashionable, in which all things current are served to us for the swallowing. The superficial archaic posing that is the eternal kitsch of Nazi art here experiences its trivial devaluation. An optimistic interpretation — proud Pop culture delivers its final verdict over this part of German past: what it must mean to the time and world in which millions were taken in by this empty pathos!

Of course the unpleasant question remains: what is the mass consumption of Rammstein grounded in. The insufficient or non-existent level of awareness of how difficult it is to deal with the artistic products and provocative content of the Third Reich could be in the background of democratic indifference, understood as capital punishment for any form of fixation to a topic, or as a slow poisoning which has brought the generation which experienced the war and national socialism new freedom in dealing with the symbols of the Third Reich. The trivially postmodernist reincarnation of the popular in Rammstein is therefore either a marketing kindergarten, or an abhorrent soil into which young murderers stomp with Pop-cultural abandon the stoning-hurling “non-Aryan.”