Left, Right or Wrong? Rammstein Playing with Symbols of Sex, Violence and Dictatorship as a Test of Democracy

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At the end of the Second World War, Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper predicted one of democratic society's biggest challenges ahead: the paradox of tolerance. The main problem was how to deal with those who peddle intolerant opinions in otherwise tolerant democracies. As Popper saw it, such a situation was unsustainable in the long run (Popper 2012: 581). Indeed, in an increasingly digitalized and polarized world, his warning, although very much a product of discussions in the 1940s, have become more and more tangible. Although far-right parties are not an immediate threat to democracies, intractable divergences between continuous demands for a far-reaching freedom of speech and calls for control over contents or banning criticism of religion, characterizes the present. A dilemma is that is it not enough with consensus among the like-minded to protect democracies. As political scientists Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt emphasize, a functioning society requires coalitions that bridge differences between adversaries (Levitsky & Ziblatt 2018: 218–219).

Such considerations are by no means relevant only for party politics and ways of governing. While politics increasingly tends to be professional and the parties smaller, many discussions of what the characteristic of democracy is in the 21st century are pursued in different cultural contexts, not least in popular culture and popular music. In many ways the questions are similar, but some are more specific such as: What to do if sound and vision seem to go in different directions or when symbols create reversed meanings? And what if the meaning is, or seems to be, a tribute to intolerant rulers or ideologies? In this article, these questions will be addressed by an analysis of Rammstein, an industrial metal band formed in Berlin in 1994 that first became known as a part of *Neue Deutsche Härte* (New German Hardness), and their song and accompanying video "Deutschland" from 2019.

From early on, Rammstein's spectacular stage performances, characterized above all by all kinds of pyrotechnic elements, paved the way for a broad success, not least in Germany. To this day, explosions and stunning effects on stage is the band's main trademark, characterized as a "hellish version of Cirque du Soleil soundtracked by an industrial stomp" (Young 2015). This "industrial stomp" or "Shock'n'Roll" is a mixture of the dark-voiced Till Lindemann, "heavy motors" guitar-playing from Richard Kruspe and Paul Landers, a driving rhythm section with bass and drums, signed Oliver Riedel and Christoph Schneider, and Christian "Flake" Lorenz

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techno-inspired performance on keyboards (for an exhaustive description of the Rammstein sound, see Wicke 2023: 14–19). Despite, or thanks to, recurrent discussions on how the six members – who all grew up in GDR, the German Democratic Republic that was a part of the Soviet dominated Communist Eastern Europe – have described and related to, for instance, nudity, hetero and homosexuality, pornography, BDSM, violence, and Nazi aesthetics in lyrics, images, and performances, Rammstein has become the best-selling German band ever. Their records have sold in more than 20 million copies in Germany alone. In addition to a large fan base around the world, their influence can be felt in countless features on YouTube, where, for example, children's and adult choirs take on their songs in new versions, as well as folk musicians who have replaced the band's leaden sound with banjo, balalaika, and bass tuba. The many easy and easily digestible cover versions do not exclude the fact that the members of Rammstein are at the same time some of the most controversial musicians in Germany and therefore characterized as representatives of provocations as an art form (Bagińska 2022: 55–56).

Against this background, Sophia Deboick, historian and an influential writer on popular culture, has claimed that "Rammstein are not the ambassadors modern Germany wanted, but they are the ambassadors it got […] despite a constant courting of controversy" (Deboick 2022). Like her, Paul Hockenos, a journalist who is based in Berlin and New York as well as author of several books, including *Berlin Calling: A Story of Anarchy, Music, the Wall, and the Birth of the New Berlin* (2017), tried to figure out the success of Rammstein against the backdrop of a long line of provocations and scandals, including the recent allegations directed towards the band's singer and frontman Till Lindemann (Hockenos 2023). The background to his article was as follows. After a few concerts during their European tour 2023, charges of sexual assault and violence were posed against Lindemann. Several young women claimed that they had been offered booze and drugs at pre- and post-gig parties, in some cases including coerced sex with the singer. In the end, Lindemann was acquitted, but the fact that he in 2013 had written of similar situations in the poetry collection *In Stillen Nächten* (*On Quiet Nights*, 2015) added fuel to the fire and became somewhat of a "no-smoke-without-fire"-scenario.

On one hand, some scholars have emphasized that the band members of Rammstein through the years have tried to avoid, between the lines, reinforced "male displays of masculinity and heterosexual prowess". Instead, they recurrently "transgress and challenge dominant norms and perceptions of gender and sexuality" (Savigny & Sleight 2019: 51). One the other hand, there have been numerous accusations of Rammstein as a band personifying brutality, violence, and anti-intellectualism (Fuchs-Gamböck 2023: 72–76). It was along the latter line of arguing that Hockenos understood the situation. The accusations aimed against Lindemann were a logical continuation of

Rammstein's "offensive misogyny" and "toxic masculinity", also to be found in right-wing chauvinism and German far-right populism. However, in the end, Hockenos had difficulties to solve the equation. The band members have time after time claimed that they indeed have been and still are leftists (Hockenos 2023; about Rammstein's denial of the charges of being a right-wing band and/or their leftist preferences, see Gabriella 1998; Lornsen 2007; Burns 2008; Twark 2015; Twiby 2019).

Totalitarian Symbols and Popular Music – Some Examples

When it comes to popular culture in general and rock and pop music specifically, controversy and contradictions have often been intentional, used to shock and surprise both those who already are fans and those who tend to be horrified. For instance, the American rock band Kiss, with original members of Jewish origin, used SS runes instead of S:s when writing the band's name. The members of D.A.F. (Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft) mixed synthesizers, a catchy dance beat and provocative stanzas like "Tanz den Mussolini / Tanz den Adolf Hitler" in "Der Mussolini" (1981), to criticize the regimes of the two totalitarian dictators. True, a few bands did cross the line in the late 1970s and early 1980s with Sex Pistols "Belsen was a gas" as the probably most infamous example. In most other cases, as Joy Division's decision to name themselves after a part of the concentration camp that hosted sex slaves, Nick Lowe's and Elvis Costello's songs referring to Hitler in the titles or even Sid Vicious' Swastika t-shirt, were not in the slightest tributes of the Nazi regime. That they rather should be seen as the opposite becomes clear considering that American and British artists on the punk and new waves scenes, with a few exceptions, were in synch with the growing interest in the Holocaust at the time. In general, none of them gave voice to antisemitism or other forms of racism, which instead was voiced in the neo-Nazi skinhead so-called Oi Bands at the time and by some metal and hip-hop artists of later dates (Gilroy 1987: 122–130; Savage 1991: 108, 135, 249; Stratton 2005: 79–105; Robbins 2022).

Although there is a fairly common agreement on how to understand the use of Nazi symbols in the punk scene, the interpretations vary in connection to the Slovenian avant-garde band Laibach. It was formed in 1980. Soon thereafter, Laibach was labelled as "fascist" by the Communist regime due to the band members military clothing and use of totalitarian slogans during interviews. After a few years as dissidents, the band became more and more accepted in Yugoslavia, a parallel process to the international breakthrough. They have continued to dress in military uniforms, which is one of the reasons that their critique of totalitarianism has been labelled as "calculated ambivalent" (Poschardt 1999). In combination with other controversial aspects, as the two concerts they performed 2015 in North Korea, heated debates have raged at uneven intervals about Laibach as a totalitarian and/or

fascist group. The ambiguous and congenial answer from the band has been: "We are fascists as much as Hitler was a painter" (Turner 2014).

The *Enfants Terribles* of Contemporary Germany

Similarities between Laibach and Rammstein have frequently been pointed out, often with the addition that they also differ according to the formula "Rammstein are Laibach for adolescents and Laibach are Rammstein for grown-ups" (Lukes: 53). Ever since the early days of Rammstein, conflicting reactions like those regarding Laibach have been heard. One obvious reason is that the members of the band, like many others in the rock'n'roll industry, have not been strangers to highlighting violence and sex. Their fascination with fire and destruction is already evident in the name. When the band took shape, it was soon to be called Ramstein-Flugschau, referring to the crash that occurred during an air show in August 1988 at the West German airbase Ramstein. Three Italian show planes collided mid-air and crashed in flames. One of them exploded in the crowd. In total, the accident claimed 70 lives, while nearly 350 people were seriously injured. Choosing a name after the Ramstein accident was unsurprisingly controversial. When the band won a competition for amateur musicians, the connection was downplayed, which was facilitated by the extra "m" in the band's name.

A band that covers topics such as, among others, necrophilia, pedophilia, cannibalism, and incest, often from the perspective of the perpetrator, will not undoubtedly generate strong feelings (Wicke 2023: 14). Around the turn of the millennium, Rammstein was repeatedly into a little hot water, not least because of how they portrayed bondage in lyrics and on stage. The cover of the album *Sehnsucht* (1997) effectively set the tone since the band members were photographed with different kinds of gags used in sexual bondage and BDSM roleplay. "Bestrafe mich" (Punish Me) was a kind of illustration in words of the photos, and "Bück Dich" (Bend Over) even more so, including the chorus: "Bück dich befehl ich dir / wende dein Anlitz ab von mir / dein Gesicht ist mir egal / bück dick" ("Bend down, I command you / turn your face away from me / your face means nothing to me / bend down"). In an analysis of a live performance of "Bück Dich", Agnieszka Bagińska repeatedly comes back to the description "interacting with the audience" and "taboo/controversy", the latter varied in different acts of faked sexual situations between the band members and with Lindemann in a leading position (Bagińska 2022: 223–237). Close to the end of a concert in Worcester, Massachusetts in June 1999, the band played "Bück Dich". In a performance described as "graphic pageantry of BDSM", Lindemann simulated that he sodomized keyboardist Lorenz, who crawled on the stage floor tied to a leash. Although they had their clothes on, the spectacle, complete with a dominant Lindemann who during the song takes out a phallus from his trousers and thereafter squirts liquid over Lorenz, led the local police to take the two band members into custody. Thereafter, they were charged

with "lewd and lascivious behaviour". After a night in jail and a small fine amount, Lindemann and Lorenzs were free to go (Daly 2022).

At a quick glance, it may look like the arrests of Lindemann and Lorenz mostly were a matter of violation of "good taste" and a reaction to how "wholesome entertainment" should be performed. However, below the surface dwells a more problematic matter. Those who see *Ilsa, She Wolf of the SS* (Don Edsmonds, 1974) and several other films of a similar kind, soon finds out that Nazisploitation is a phenomenon based on decadence, pulp, sexual deviance, and hardcore BDSM (Fuchs 2012: 279–294). Also, very reputable film directors such as Ingmar Bergman have from the 1970s and onwards broken "many of the previously-held taboos about the representation of the Nazi period, not least by acknowledging the ambiguous fascination of fascism" by including, for instance, "spectacle, glamour and erotic perversion" in their works (Elsaesser 2008: 167). The members of Rammstein have followed in their footsteps and acted out varieties of Nazisploitation in their lyrics, on stage, and in videos.

More directly visible links between aesthetics connected to Nazism, either as a historic reality or how it has been perceived in popular culture, came to the fore in connection with two of Rammstein's videos. They became the subject of vehement criticism, mainly because they were visually linked in various ways to National Socialism and its propaganda and aesthetics. At the same time, the lyrics in "Links 2, 3, 4", one of the tracks of the album *Mutter* (2000), alluded to Bertold Brecht's and Hanns Eisler's revolutionary song "Einheitsfrontlied" (United Front Song), written for the Communist Party in 1934 and popularized in the GDR by Eisler, combined with the lines "Sie wollen mein Herz am rechten Fleck / Doch seh ich dann nach unten weg / Dann schlägt es links" ("they want my heart on the right, but when I look down, it beats on the left"). However, the leftist references seemed to evaporate when they were combined with the animated images in the video for the anthemic and march inspired "Links 2, 3, 4". In it, an anthill symbolizes mass society and the mobilizing power of propaganda. Several of the scenes alluded to *Triumph of the Will* (1935), Leni Riefenstahl's controversial depiction of the Nazi party days in Nuremberg in 1934, although with an ironic twist (Kopanski 2022: 288–363; Wicke 2023: 19–21).

The uproar was even greater two years before, in connection with the video to "Stripped" and the ideological collision between representations and symbols from radical left and far-right, respectively. Depeche Mode, the British electronic band, recorded "Stripped" for their album *Black Celebration* (1986). The appearance of red stars, cogs, mallets, and a muscular Stakhanovite worker atop a mountain on early album covers, at a time when the Cold War was very much present, resulted in some reviewers labelling the four man band as Marxists while others paved the way for an ironic reading: "It wasn't quite Test Dept. or Laibach, but it was of the same root ethos" (Smith 2017). The video for Rammstein's cover version of the

song did not invite contradictory interpretations since it mostly consisted of sequences from *Olympia*, Riefenstahl's documentary from 1938 about the 1936 Summer Olympics in Berlin. The criticism aimed against Rammstein was extensive in Germany. It did not help that the band members pointed out that although the footage was taken from Riefenstahl's film, the message of their video, shot 60 years later, was radically different from the original. The video for "Stripped" was not intended as a provocation but as a thought-provoking one, Rammstein's defense read. The sextet argued that several of the aesthetic ideals that had characterized Nazi cultural policy lived on in modern popular culture, but without causing any protests. The many outraged reactions their videos provoked demonstrated, if nothing else, the difficulties in criticizing and condemning aesthetics by using them (Poschardt 1999; Weinstein 2008: 130–147; Fuchs-Gamböck 2023: 77–85).

A Video Exposé of German History

A common theme in the reactions to Rammstein is their so-called "Germanness", sometimes labelled "teutonisch". On the surface, this theme is connected to hypermasculinity, militarism, nationalism, and the recurrent accusations of fascistic aesthetics and return to "the Teutonic spirit" of warrior symbolism from Roman times to the present, summed up in the statement that they make music "to invade Poland by" (Cummings 1998; for an in-depth discussion of the meanings of "teutonic", see Kopanski 2022: 290–291). Members of the band have emphasized that many of their fans do not understand German, which increases the importance of the visual aspects in videos and stage performances. The same conclusion has been drawn by some of those who have analyzed their music and live shows (Young 1998; Poschardt 1999; Robinson 2013: 30–51).

As the American journalist and writer Claire Berlinski has highlighted, there is more to the German influences than meets the eye. Beside the rather obvious inspiration from their 19th century world famous compatriot Richard Wagner's strive for a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a total artwork in theatrical but very modern, pyrotechnical special effects version, she points out inspiration from other classical composers as Carl Orff and Franz Schubert. The traces from the 1920s are also there to be found, especially with reference to the *neue sachlickeit* (New Objectivity), and the paintings of disabled soldiers by Otto Dix. At the same time, Rammstein has recurrently used symbols from Nordic and German mythology in similar ways as the National Socialists did in the 1930s and 1940s with the effect that a song like "Reise, Reise" (Voyage, Voyage) alludes to the Middle High German "Risen, Risen" (Wake Up), which in turn bear a resemblance to the SA song "Deutschland Erwacht" (Germany Awaken). Furthermore, their songs

> with sado-masochistic sexual themes, such as *Mein Teil* (My Part) – a homage to the German cannibal Armin Miewes, who in 2002 shared a final meal with his

> willing victim of the man's severed, flambeed organ – would not have been out of place in Julius Streicher's Der Sturmer, a newspaper even many Nazis found excessive in its pornographic obsessions and sensationalism (Berlinski 2005).

Journalist Ulf Poschardt and popular music scholar and musicologist Jan Peter Herbst are among those who have emphasized that Rammstein also is closely connected to a Germany still dealing with the reunification in October 1990 and the difficulties of adjustment for those who used to live in a Communist society to Western, capitalistic values. Herbst suggests that the members of Rammstein have, while still using provocations, humor, contrasts, recontextualizations and ambiguities, tried in later years to "improve the history of their country in foreign perception and to help the Germans to make peace with their nation's past" (Herbst 2021: 56).

The difficulties to succeed with the latter became obvious in connection to the release of the self-titled album released in March 2019. On home turf, the videos of "Radio" and "Deutschland" became widely debated. The environments in which the former video takes place recall the Weimar Period, the 1930s and 1940s of Nazism and the post-war decades of East German communism. Both the lyrics and the image sequences comment on the restrictions that surrounded radio broadcasts in both the Third Reich and the GDR. The music that Rammstein stands for, and which can be played on today's music channels in the Western world without restrictions, becomes in the imagery a revolutionary force that, for unknown reasons, mainly affects women.

However, this video was a gentle western breeze compared to "Deutschland", directed by the graphic artist and director Eric Remberg, better known by the stage name Specter Berlin. For just over nine minutes, Rammstein contributes a kind of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung*, meaning "coming to terms with the past", via a recurring feature of scenes in red, yellow, and black, the colors of the German flag, in the shape of an exposé of (a selective selection of) German history, where all scenes are tied together by a red laser beam that also appears in the video for "Adieu", with Specter Berlin, once again, as director, from the album *Zeit* (2022).

To the tune of Jóhann Jóhannsson's "The Beast", taken from the soundtrack to *Sicario* (2015), the video opens in 16 A.D. in the Teutoburg Forest, where seven years earlier the Romans suffered a decisive defeat against Germanic tribes. As the ancient historian Martin M. Winkler has pointed out in *Arminius the liberator: Myth and ideology* (2016), the renewed interest in this battle in the 19th and early 20th centuries helped to strengthen and consolidate German nationalism. The Germanic leader Arminius became the main character in all kinds of heroic stories and the subject of romantic historical paintings and huge monuments. He was also used by – in turn – the propagandists of the German imperial era, Nazism and East German communism.

However, Rammstein does not join the chorus of praise. As the soundtrack transitions into "Deutschland", it becomes clear that the Teutoburg Forest is just one of many places in German history marked by dark, destructive forces or ambivalence, including a heavy-handed arrival of Christianity, and the brutal German inquisition, including burning women alleged to be witches. A recurrent person is Germania, the personification of Germany, in the guise of the black actor Ruby Commey who appears in various settings. She is particularly striking as a regent in golden armor on a battlefield with fallen knights, portrayed with clear inspiration from John Boorman's film *Excalibur* from 1981.

Other stops on the dizzying and sometimes macabre journey are a distant future, drawn with inspiration from the *Alien* films, as well as the Middle Ages, partly illustrated with the help of voracious monks during the plague and references to the legend of the Ratcatcher of Hamelin. In addition, allusions are made to 19th-century monuments such as the Brandenburg Gate in Berlin and Walhalla in Regensburg, Bavaria.

However, the focus of the video is on the 20th century. Much attention is paid to the Weimar Republic, from its turbulent beginnings in the shadow of the end of the First World War and attempts at revolution via hyperinflation to decadent entertainment. Another scene highlights the terrorists in the Rote Arme Fraktion (RAF). Yet another one show how Lindemann, dressed as East German communist leader Erich Honecker, re-enact the so-called "socialist fraternal kiss" with the Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev. The band members are also portrayed in Honecker's office alongside Sigmund Jähn, the cosmonaut celebrated in East German propaganda who participated in the Soviet space program (Anderson 2020: 146–167).

The Everlasting Holocaust

The release of the video "Deutschland" was preceded by a YouTube teaser on March 27, 2019. The thirty-six-second clip consisted of four of the band's members, dressed as concentration camp prisoners. The trailer ended with the Rammstein logo supplemented by "Deutschland" in Fraktur font and the information that the complete video would be released the following day. The long version included book burnings, cooperation between state and church during the Third Reich, the 1937 downfall of the zeppelin Hindenburg and the submarine warfare of the Second World War. The incomparably most discussed sequence was the abovementioned, taking place in what resembles the Peenemünde rocket base. Four of Rammstein's members play concentration camp prisoners awaiting execution, surrounded by caricatured, sadistic SS soldiers, while V2 rockets are fired in the background. Like the plot of a revenge movie, they finally manage to reverse the roles and execute their tormentors.

In a wide-ranging debate about Rammstein's video that took place in German media, including leading dailies and magazines such as *Süddeutscher*

Zeitung, *Stern* and *Die Welt*, both pros and cons were distributed. Most of the discussion revolved around the representation of the Holocaust, ranging from accusations of it being "far-right clickbait" to praises of it as an exceptional example of anti-fascist art (Braun 2019). A few historians, politicians and representatives of Jewish organizations called the element that referred to the Holocaust tasteless, trivializing, and repulsive, concluding that Rammstein had crossed the line. Iris Rosenberg, a representative of Yad Vashem, the Israeli Holocaust archive and research center, spoke in more cautious terms. It would be unfortunate, she believed, if works of art were condemned solely because there were references to the Holocaust in them, regardless of whether they are provocative or not. Others praised the video. Authors like Sonja Zekri and Felix Stephan believed that Rammstein had never succeeded so well in uniting all the qualities that they developed into theirs during a more than twenty-year long career. On top of that, Rammstein managed to put their finger on several bone of contentions in a long-standing German history of displacement. The video was, they summarized, great art (Braun 2019; Twiby 2019; Kopalski 2021: 148–150).

The Polish-born and well-known journalist Henryk M. Broder, the son of Holocaust survivors, agreed with the praise. Rarely have so many sore points been activated at once, he concluded. That the video is provocative was not a disadvantage. On the contrary, Broder continued, that is what allows it to work in the service of enlightenment and illustrate the German predicament of always having to remind ourselves of a history that can never be anything other than problematic (Broder 2019).

Till Lindemann probably agreed with Broder. In "Deutschland" he formulated it as wanting to love his native country at the same time as he wants to condemn it. His heart is on fire, but the breath of the nation is cold. Its love is both a curse and a blessing, which is why Lindemann cannot reciprocate her love. The motto of the national anthem "Deutschland über alles", in the song changed to "Deutschland über allen", is deeply problematic. It is this attitude that can explain why German development has repeatedly gone in the wrong direction. The dilemma is, he summed up, that Germany is a young nation with an old history.

As we have seen, this interpretation was not apparent to many in the German debate, most likely because of Rammstein's controversial reputation. Others could however discover the "anti-patriotic" meaning of "Deutschland", including their effort to, with the help of an obvious and conscious historical anachronism, highlight the marginalized German history by making an Afro-German woman the driving force of it through the centuries (Twiby 2019; Lawes 2020). Bearing this in mind it could be wise to remind oneself of Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek's interpretation of Rammstein. As he saw it, the members of the band did *not*

> adopt "totalitarian rituals", with their costumes and shouting. In fact, they imitate fascism in the most extreme, fanatical way possible. But that makes you realize

> how ridiculous and absurd it all is. Basically they are doing the same thing as what Charlie Chaplin does with Adolf Hitler in *The Great Dictator*. They make fun of fascism. If you are afraid that not everyone will see this, you are seriously underestimating the "ordinary man" (Žižek 2024).

The Rammstein Test of Democracy

In principle, though, the division is seldom as clear-cut or absolute as Žižek suggests. Let us return to the concert in Worcester, Massachusetts in June 1999. It had not only a noticeable impact upon how Rammstein was perceived in the US. It also meant a feeling of disillusionment among the band members. Growing up in the GDR, United States were among those who opposed the Communist system as the aspirational alternative. However, the "Land of the Free" turned out, as the members of Rammstein experienced the situation, to be intolerant and close-minded, at least in Massachusetts. Hardly surprising, the lyric that the US "ist wunderbar" in "Amerika", a song from the album *Reise, Reise* (2004), is deeply ironic, clarified in the chorus "This is not a love song".

Related to how liberty and freedom have been perceived, Rammstein probably assumed that there ought to be no obstacles; on the stage they should be free to do what they wanted to do in the name of artistic expression. The other side of the coin, which also is a part of the democratic tradition, is to protect citizens from a diversity of manifestations that could be or indeed are offensive or harmful.

Regarding history, yet another layer is added since we could claim that there is a benefit of hindsight. However, how to relate to the past, especially such a difficult one as the Nazi era, is a question with no clear answers. Unarguably, Rammstein has not always managed to do justice to history by using symbols from the past, as in "Stripped". With "Deutschland", the ambition was higher, and the result became debatable in a way that forced adversaries to reason about not only Nazism as a thing of the past, but as a troublesome legacy that still must be dealt with. In other words, Rammstein contributed to clarify that dictatorships like the Nazi one are of relevance for democracies today, whether we like it or not. To have such a discussion is truly a test of democracy.

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