

Schiller, Melanie: *Soundtracking Germany. Popular Music and National Identity*. London: Rowman & Littlefield 2020. ISBN: 978-1-78661-596-1; IX, 277 S.

Rezensiert von: Edward Larkey, Department of Modern Languages, Linguistics, and Inter-cultural Communication, University of Maryland

In *Soundtracking Germany*, Melanie Schiller espouses acknowledging the major contributions of popular music productions during postwar German history in constructing German identities. She reminds the reader that in the German context more research needs to focus on the role of the nation and national discourses in mediating local micro communities of authentic scenes on the one hand, and transnational and global music flows and influences on the other. She underscores the importance of pop for studying national identity because it „provides a productive means by which national identity (and Germanness in particular) is negotiated“ (p. 5). In her eyes, musical meanings are formed both in extra-musical discourses of nationhood and by pop music narratives themselves.

Schiller proposes a three-dimensional temporal modal notion of German identity narratives in song examples: metonymic, metaphorical and melancholic. The metaphorical mode comprehends the national past as a totalizing and unitary source of identity to unite the nation. In the metonymic mode, the nation is performatively and continuously reproduced in cultural identities rooted in the – differing – experiences of citizens. This challenges metaphorical notions of a fixed identity. The melancholic mode of temporality conjoins the national past and present, but wavers between an „unmasterable“ and „unpresentable“ past, and an ambiguous and ultimately alienating present in which national narratives of Germanness are both remembered and forgotten. The melancholy narratives of Germanness are permanently locked into an unresolvable and infinitely repeatable uneasy relationship of remembering and forgetting, past and present, and past and future characteristic of traumatic loss.

While acknowledging a focus on dominant narratives of German identities in her examples, Schiller counters that they also undermine metaphoric unity and contain „destabilizing moments and elements of metonymic deferral“ (p. 225). The author’s song-analyses uncover the different layers of meaning inherent in each song’s differently configured third – melancholic – modality, by examining lyrics, music, images, song discourses and video clips. Her examples include transnationally popular songs both inside and outside of Germany, along with factors such as commercial success, lasting national or international influence as cultural artifacts and cultural relevance. They figure prominently in national narratives of identity and mediators of Germanness, and are at the core how „Germanness is performatively constructed, challenged, and reaffirmed throughout the course of more than sixty years of sonic national narration“ (p. 26).

However, the choice of one song per chapter reveals major gaps in continuities and discontinuities of historical German identity narratives in popular music by eschewing important bands and vocal artists – Udo Jürgens, Rio Reiser/*Ton Steine Scherben*, or Udo Lindenberg – or prominent female singers since the 1970s. Also, more references to other songs of the same bands she analyzes would have also provided deeper discursive context. Furthermore, whole genres of popular music – rap/hip hop artists, political rock music of the 1960s, reggae and ska, the so-called *Neuer Deutscher Schlager* of the 1970s – are not included, and only a passing reference is made of the many diverse bands of the punk and *Neue Deutsche Welle* narratives that defy a generalized characterization. Feminist and post-feminist female vocalists or bands are also not worthy of inclusion, nor are other East German bands besides *Rammstein*.

The initial introductory chapter develops her theoretical approach exemplified by the *Rammstein* song „Amerika“ which exhibits the dual nature of the melancholy that characterizes German popular music throughout the postwar decades. The song appeals both to the „exotic image of ‘authentic Germany’ while remaining accessible to an international audience“ (p. 3), and both celebrates and crit-

icizes American cultural imperialism, while mediating local East German *Ostalgie* and global stereotypes.

In the second chapter, Schiller discusses the crucial role of the late 1940s Schlager „Trizonesien-Song,” initially a Cologne carnival song which became an anthem for constituting the first – separate – West German identity even before the West German Federal Republic was officially established. It metaphorically represents a common collective identity of the three Western zones of the immediate postwar period and playfully draws a metaphorical performative boundary against the Eastern and Western Allies occupying the country.

The third chapter examines the song „Poor Boy” by *The Lords*, a West German beat band which hyperbolically mimics an imaginary Britishness and utilizes imperfect English lyrics to avoid the „unbearable memory” of the traumatic (German) past (p. 26). This song thus illustrates melancholic Germanness by the explicit invisibility of Germanness in 1960s youth culture. It thus implicitly reveals the trauma of collective national memory and identity beyond the German, while it attempts to refashion Germanness through the Other.

Schiller classifies *Kraftwerk* as a part of the *Krautrock*-phase of German popular music in the early 1970s, in which musical sound experimentation was prominent as bands sought to develop their own musical language and place less emphasis on language. The *Kraftwerk* song „Autobahn” from 1974 is the focus of the fourth chapter and is therefore an anomaly in this respect. It exemplifies an active musical interrogation of Germanness in which ironic performances of stereotypes, the fusing of temporalities, spatialities and subjectivities reveal an open-ended narrative instability of identities. Particularly the driving on the Autobahn represents the open-endedness of identity formation. Schiller asserts that the „Autobahn” narrative is self-aware of its own construction as a non-organic unit but with a fixed identity rooted also in the Nazi past. The image of the album cover depicts a historically multi-layered and metonymically contested notion of Germanness due to the diversity of its past,

present, and implied future (p. 27).

The song „Tanz den Mussolini” by the punk band *Deutsch Amerikanische Freundschaft* (DAF) typified a phase in German popular music in which the German language featured prominently as a sign of authentic German identity for negotiating „personal, immediate experiences and circumstances” (p. 154). The music features a de-contextualized, military style rhythm with what Schiller characterizes as an „unmusical”, „robotic” and „dictatorial” declamatory vocal style, but also with „eroticized and arrhythmic moaning” which conjures memories of Nazism and militarism in a (present) „silenced German society” (p. 164). On the one hand, „Tanz den Mussolini” performs a queer mimicry of fascism and Germanness, and destabilizes the totalizing rhetoric of metonymic narratives by providing alternative identifications to counteract exclusionary Otherness. On the other hand, its usage of the German language foregrounds shared language, culture, and experiences inherent in metaphorical understandings of German identities (cf. p. 327).

Schillers broad queering concept signifies „the practice of questioning processes of meaning-making, destabilizing dominant assumptions about categories or concepts of identity” (p. 165). This understanding of queering enables the deconstruction of essentialism „by revealing its conceptual dependence on what it excludes” (p. 165) and paradoxically points to the aforementioned glaring gaps in an otherwise well-argued treatise. The singular focus of queering on the DAF song unfortunately evades a deeper contextualization and discussion of gender, sexuality, and changing notions of masculinity and femininity which were a prominent part of 1970s German pop in general. These narrative positions were not only shaped in songs of the *Neue Deutsche Welle* (NDW), but also of the *Neuer Deutscher Schlager* and others, including *Rammstein*. Even *Kraftwerk*’s counter masculinity to hyper-masculine male artists in Germany, that *Rammstein* hyperbolizes, underscores Herbert Grönemeyer’s question „Wann ist ein Mann ein [German, E. L.] Mann?” from his album „4630 Bochum” (1984).

Chapter five discusses the techno genre and

the song „Wir sind Wir“ by the duo of DJ Paul van Dyk and singer Peter Heppner. Schiller asserts that the song, along with its hedonistic and apolitically self-defined culture, arose in the early 1990s in the context of the anxiety during the transformation of the newly united nation-state negotiating both its re-defined unitary national identity on the one hand and persistent internal divisions on the other. She notes that techno, as the „sound-track for the disappointed youth“ (p. 184), celebrated unity beyond ideological and national boundaries and became the symbolic realm and space of the negotiation between East and West.

Schiller partially considers „Wir sind Wir“ an „explicitly metaphorical national narrative“ (p. 190) by representing a nationalistic repair of a unitary post-unification national identity by performatively reclaiming what it means to be German in 2004. However, this is undermined by melancholic repetitions and uncanny appearances of stifled and unrepresentable national trauma. She illustrates this not only by her close reading of the song lyrics, but also by an extensive discussion of nostalgic video images containing a panoramic summary of successive optimistic and iconic postwar images of Germany. The video idealizes national history in rebuilding the nation from the rubble of WW2 cast in the metaphorical mode, interspersed with a first-person narrator superimposed into the frame filming these documentary images. However, Schiller argues against the singular consignment of the song to the metaphoric past. She also insists on its multi-temporality, by also performatively reconstructing Germanness in the metonymic present while simultaneously collapsing past and present melancholically in its „uncanny repetition“ of historical trauma (p. 200).

Melanie Schiller offers an intriguing analytical paradigm and instrument for delineating narrative positions in identity and memory discourses. The three temporalities correspond to similar approaches to identities as shared, contested, or negotiated, but the category of melancholic highlights the contradictory nature of both identities and memory in a unique manner. Her method employs a refreshingly broad multimodal approach to

analyses of sonic, visual, and textual components of identity and memory narratives that combine to mark different historically determined discursive positions. She points to the different ways in which popular music is constitutive of contradictory national identities while constructing these very same discourses. Schiller believes her paradigmatic approach is appropriate for further investigations of popular music, a task for popular music researchers in the coming years.

HistLit 2021-4-406 / Edward Larkey über Schiller, Melanie: *Soundtracking Germany. Popular Music and National Identity*. London 2020, in: H-Soz-Kult 15.12.2021.