

22 ‘White punks on dope’ in Germany

Nina Hagen’s punk covers

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East to West

Teenagers listening to the Nina Hagen Band in 1978 were not likely to ever forget the experience, and quite a few lines from the lyrics went straight into the thesaurus of colloquial German (just google ‘alles so schön bunt hier’ [everything is so beautifully coloured here]). Nina Hagen, born in 1955, had already been a successful schlager-starlet in the GDR when she was exiled to the FRG in 1976 in the wake of the expulsion of her stepfather, political singer-songwriter Wolf Biermann. When she came to the West, Biermann negotiated a record contract for her with CBS, but before making a record, Hagen spent some time in London, where she witnessed the birth of British punk and dated fourteen-year-old (and German-born) Ari Up, precocious leader of The Slits. Back in Germany, she formed a band with members of the former political rock band Lokomotive Kreuzberg to produce the eponymous album ‘Nina Hagen Band’.

‘TV-Glotzer’ (TV Gaper), the album’s first track, can be seen as a programmatic gesture. As a German-language cover, it seems to be an answer to the question, how to practice punk in German? Interestingly, Hagen, who had just returned from the London punk scene, did not choose a song by a British band such as the Sex Pistols or The Slits for her album opener, but instead a song by a bombastic rock show band from California called The Tubes. This song, ‘White Punks on Dope’, released in 1975, hardly sounded like punk music at all, but it did feature the word ‘punks’ in the title and chorus. This obviously was reason enough for A&T to re-issue the song as a 7" in Britain in November 1977 in the middle of the punk wave, where sure enough it became a Top 30 hit.

When the American original came out, there still must have been an oxymoronic quality to the combination ‘white punks’. It is a character song, sung from the perspective of the bored son of rich Hollywood parents, whose ennui alternates between drug abuse and suicidal fantasies depicting exactly the world that ten years later was to give rise to the international pop novel with Bret Easton Ellis’ ‘Less Than Zero’ (1985, named after an Elvis Costello song) and which, another decade later, would feature in the book that triggered the German pop literature boom of the 90s, Christan Kracht’s ‘Faserland’ (1995). But the travails of being rich and bored were definitely not the concern of British punk in the

1970s. And, sure enough, The Tubes' line 'Hang myself when I get enough rope' was drily answered by the title of the 1978 Clash album *Give 'Em Enough Rope*.

Lost in translation

'Other dudes are living in the ghetto / But born in Pacific Heights don't seem much betto'. So sing The Tubes. But the social democratic welfare state in West Germany in the late 70s was known neither for its ghettos nor for its enclaves of the extremely rich. So what does Nina Hagen in her so-called *deutsche Übersetzung* (German translation) do to the American original to adapt it to its new European home? For one thing, she reduces the sing-along chorus ('we're white punks on dope') to a strictly first person singular statement ('Ich schalt die Glotze an' [I turn on the tube]). These words, voicing the feelings of a lonely German girl in front of her TV set (the 'tube') also re-gender the song. And, further, all markers of wealth and upper class are stripped away, the colloquial and even vulgar language of Hagen's version connoting the lower middle class, with specific hints of the Berlin dialect ('Ick hänge rum' [I hang out]). The most blatant difference to The Tubes song, though, is what Nina Hagen does with her voice. Although Hagen does not use the extremes of her three-octave range on this song (she employs the full extent of her voice on some other songs on the album), the virtuosity of her phrasing is already fully present from the prologue on. The way she is exaggerating the stereotypical welcoming tone in over-phrasing the positive adverbs in her impersonation of a TV host has no equal in the original. Crucially these are the first lines on record by Nina Hagen in the West and, as well as everything else, they make the implicit but clear statement: 'I know how to do it, and I know how to overdo it'.

From the very beginning, Hagen's voice puts everything she sings in the quotation marks of *Camp*. Virtuosity is used to combine her unique performative power with the distance of reflection. Hagen impersonates her role in a much more lively way than The Tubes' front man had his, but there can also be no doubt that it is just a role. This gesture – which, by the way, becomes all the more puzzling in the more feminist songs from the album – is far away from the supposed raw authenticity of early punk performances.

It is worth looking at the text of Hagen's translation in detail. The original Tubes' verses follow a regular scheme: parallel rhymes in the stanzas, alternating rhymes in the chorus. As in the 'ghetto-betto' couplet quoted above, they go a long way to use perfect rhyming. Hagen, in her first stanza, follows the original quite closely, though 'vergessen-verschissen' (forgotten-fucking) is only a near rhyme, and not a very convincing one either. But after this, within the stanzas, her German version abandons rhyming altogether – it is entirely replaced by the free running phraseological routines of Hagen. In abandoning the narrow metrical scheme of the original, she makes room for a hitherto unheard German pop language, avoiding the embarrassing effects that will inevitably occur in attempts to fit bulky German words and phrases into patterns of English prosody. Even in

the chorus, where Hagen retains parallel rhymes, these rhymes are weakened by her different intonation of 'vier' and 'hier' (four and here). This leaves just one perfect rhyme in each chorus (in the first two lines), and it is a very particular one, for it is the pairing of a German word with an English one ('an – everyone' in the first chorus, 'an – fun' in the second and third). This is all the more significant since there is no English whatsoever in the stanzas. The linguistic hybridity of the perfect rhyme, thus, makes a statement: as soon as the bored German kid turns on the TV – marked in the chorus as her equivalent to dope ('Ich schalt die Glotze an' / 'We're white punks on dope'), products of the American culture industry will ooze out like the sticky liquor from the 'Erfrischungswaffeln' (refreshing waffles): 'Die Daltons, Waltons, everyone'. The receptive vector of popular entertainment goes from the East to the West ('Ich glotz von Ost nach West' [I gape from East to West]). Hagen's background taken into consideration, this implies the transgression of at least two cultural borders: to move from East to West Germany means to open up to Western consumer culture, which of course has its origin in the U.S. The gaze of the TV consumer thus turns the direction of cultural export around. And while the Tubes' white punk is bored in Hollywood, Hollywood products seem to be the only excitement for his German counterpart.

'Ick kann mich gar nich entscheiden / is alles so schön bunt hier' (I cannot decide, everything is so beautifully coloured here). The confusing multitude of the TV program – and we are speaking of the 1970s here, when only three channels were broadcast in West Germany – the colourful world of media culture, is it part of the cure or part of the disease? How is the diagnosis of the stanzas – social isolation, lack of creative imagination, nausea created by bad literature and junk food – related to the chorus and its reference to the international culture industry? After all, we are dealing with a German cover of an American pop song, both produced by this very American culture industry. And, of course, this album was supposed to be – and actually was – the beginning of a great career within Western pop and media culture for Nina Hagen. Her hyperbolic TV announcement also announces the debut of the Nina Hagen Band, on record as well as in concert. It also adds a self-reflexive twist to the whole performance, putting it into quotation marks, indicating that all anyone will ever get is a media show.

From an East to West perspective, the chorus seems to imply that the world of Western media may be overwhelming at first sight, but in resolving everything into non-differentiated colourfulness proves to be extremely transitory ('Happyness flutsch flutsch fun fun'). Turning on the TV may be a last resort for the bored German youth, but in the passiveness of her consumerism, once again the parallel to the white punk's dope addiction becomes obvious, explicitly so in the song's coda ('TV is ne Droge. TV macht süchtig' [TV is a drug. TV makes you an addict]). Thus, the song, though not literally translating any material of the original's lyrics, really is a 'translation' of some kind, redefining the state of juvenile ennui in West German middle class terms, refusing to surrender to the opium for the people offered by the entertainment industry but willing to put the energetic potentials of pop culture into use.

Pank

Hagen's German cover of 'White Punks on Dope', as mentioned, the first song on her album, avoids the word 'punk' that had been the song's ticket to Europe in the first place. She makes up for this in the last song on the record, simply titled 'Pank'. Co-written by Arianne Forster aka Ari Up, this is the only real punk song of the album music-wise. But the Germanized spelling already serves as a strong marker for the cultural and linguistic transfer of the original material. The misspelling is continued in the cryptic line 'Hau ab, you fool of crub', probably a misreading of 'you're full of crap'. This time, the song takes up the topic of gender roles in a feminist way, Hagen impersonating an aggressive, liberated girl. One of punk's many heroic fight-the-power stories is connected to this song: when CBS officials agreed to release the album, but without 'Pank', the band declared their decision to either release the record with the song or not at all and won. Indeed, the punk attitude here licenses the most radical, most offensive language ever heard in German pop culture at that time:

Ich bin nich deine Fickmaschine.
 spritz spritz das isn Witz äh . . .
 Schätzchen, wir müssen ausnanda gehen.
 TSCHAU TSCHAU DU ALTE SAU!!!

(I am not your fuck-machine/ splash,
 splash, that's a joke, ah/ Darling
 we have to separate/ Bye-bye,
 you stupid sod!!!)

German 'Fickmaschine', of course, is just a very explicit (and re-gendered) translation of James Brown's sex machine, one of various male-dominated roles pop culture has in stock for women. Another one of these roles is integrated into the German lyrics in English: 'die Mädchen sind die sexie sadies'. In the Beatles' 'Sexy Sadie' (1968) a male voice accuses the girl of breaking the rules ('you laid it down for all to see'); in James Brown's 'Sex Machine' (1970) a male voice calls for the girl to 'get up' and 'shake [her] money maker' because he wants to act 'like a sex machine'. In both cases, of course, the girl's role is not the traditional one of mother and housewife, which the song also refuses, nevertheless the new, pop cultural roles turn out to be male fantasies as well. What Hagen propounds instead is a lustful female conduct: 'Leg mir lieber PUDER, KAMM + LIPPENSTIFT bereit' (better prepare powder, comb and lipstick for me). Referring to the Brothers Grimm's tale 'Frau Holle', the song's last verse calls up the good girl/bad girl story most deeply rooted in German culture – the golden girl being rewarded for taking care of household chores, while the pitchy girl is punished for being idle and selfish. Hagen, of course, inverts the common stereotype by declaring 'Dann geh ich mit Frau Holle aufn Strich' (then I will walk the streets with Frau Holle), associating clichés of the area around the 'Bahnhof Zoo' station in Berlin – drugs

(Frau Holle's snow) and prostitution – with the fairy-tale models of female behaviour. The attributes of girlish prettiness, powder, comb and lipstick, connect to the sleeve portrait of Hagen in punk make-up, smoking a cigarette, completing the integrity of herself as a role model.

Establishing the punk concept once and for all within German culture, 'Pank' is also the closing song of the band's 1978 live show, and sure enough, Hagen's introduction sets up the campy quotation marks again: 'Jetzt kommt das Allerletzte, was es überhaupt gibt, ähm, Pank' (now comes the very last existing-er-Pank). The ambiguity of 'das Allerletzte' – the very last and the very least – as well as her stage acting leave little doubt that the punk is just one of the many roles at her disposal – maybe this is why 'authentic' punks, e.g. at Ratinger Hof in Düsseldorf, hated her so much. This, the performance seems to say, is not punk, but Nina Hagen, and punk – the music, the attitude, the license to offend – is just part of the material she works into her tissue of quotations.

It is very fitting, then, that the first encore of her show is a cover of Frank Sinatra's 'My Way'. Originally a French chanson and translated for Sinatra by Paul Anka after he (Anka) had visited Paris in 1968, this song is a hymn to the self-reliance of the great entertainer, who, facing the 'final curtain', is looking back on his fulfilled life. Hagen, clad in a glamorous boa, intones the first verse and chorus in English, quoting the already campy *grandezza* of the great entertainer. In June 1978, Sid Vicious of the Sex Pistols had recorded his scary punk parody of the song, a couple of months before knifing his girlfriend and facing his own final curtain by a drug overdose, creating one of punk's die-hard myths of authenticity. Only if you listen very closely you will notice that Hagen, in her re-tailoring of Sinatra's final curtain, actually uses Vicious's version of the first stanza: 'You cunt, I'm not a queer' instead of 'My friend, I'll say it clear'.

Re-imported across the Atlantic, the chanson that became Sinatra's personal hymn had to suffer significant changes. British punk turned it into a bitter parody featuring fantasies of violence tearing the great showbiz gestures to shreds. Nina Hagen picks it up from where Vicious had let it fall and restores something of the old *grandezza*, if only in quotation marks, implying that *her* way is able to adopt Las Vegas and punk at the same time without reducing one to the other, because her way produces something new and different from its material, something we might most appropriately call 'Nina Hagen'. There is a market for authenticity even in pop culture, and parts of punk have been producing for that market. The alternative would be to stress the artificiality and reflect upon the semiotic volatility of the pop-cultural product. This is the way Hagen chose after being exiled to the West.