

1.4 Heino... Über Alles!? The controversial receptions of a German singer in North American and German punk rock scenes

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A b s t r a c t

This paper is based on the various controversies that surround the German singer Heino and the different receptions of his music in German and American punk rock scenes. During his early career, Heino gained success as an interpreter of traditional German Folksongs. Therefore, his persona constituted the conservative opposition to the "British Invasion" (Beat) during the 1960s in Germany. Being much loved and hated at the same time by different kind of people, the controversies around him were later handed over to the punk rock generation. In contrast, Heino also has a small following within the American punk rock scene, where he is considered to be special, too. Yet, in a different way. As a consequence, this paper will compare the deviant receptions of Heino in parts of German and American punk rock scenes and explain how both are connected by their interpretations of the German expression *Über Alles* (*Above all*).

Keywords: *Heino, Germany, North America, punk rock scenes.*

GENDER IS
DEAD,
PINK IS 4EVER

1. Heino

In December 2018 the German singer Heino celebrated his 80's birthday. The event had a huge media response, as Heino has been considered to be one of the most famous Germans inside of Germany (98 % in the 1970s).³² This might be due to his German lyrics, which – on the other hand – also exclude him from bigger international audiences. In 1938 “Heino” was born as Hans Georg Kramm in Düsseldorf (NRW, Germany). His father was a dentist, who unfortunately died in 1941 during WW2.³³ Heino claims that he grew up in a leftwing working-class environment (Düsseldorf Oberbilk)³⁴ and started his professional career by learning the profession of a baker / confectioner.³⁵ Yet, his passion always had been music and he received his first instrument – a red accordion – as a Christmas present from his mother.³⁶ Later, Heino started to sing in different bands and also performed as a fashion model, which accumulated more income than playing music.³⁷ Finally, he was discovered by the German musician and producer Ralf Bendix, who recognized his talent and was fascinated by his deep baritone voice that sounded similar to the voice of Freddy Quinn – another German singer and star at the time. As Bendix saw a chance for revenge in an ongoing conflict with Freddy Quinn, he immediately started to promote the career of the – much younger, but similar sounding – singer Heino.³⁸

His blond hair and a pair of dark sunglasses – that he did not wear during the early stages of his career (until 1971) – became the visual trademark of the newborn artist Heino. The sunglasses became necessary, because Heino suffered from a temporary eye disease. Eventually, his eyes were cured, but the dark sunglasses stayed as a trademark.³⁹ Musically, Heino started out as an interpreter of traditional German “Volksmusik“. After that, he became famous as a singer of German “Schlager“. Furthermore, he also performed in various other genres (e.g. rap music during the 90s) and only recently started to interpret rock music, which was highlighted by a joint performance with the German band Rammstein – performing the Rammstein song *Hier kommt die Sonne* – at the biggest Heavy Metal festival in the world (Wacken, 2013).⁴⁰ Yet, despite all his trips into different styles of music the “Volksmusik” and “Schlager” image never disappeared. Therefore, Heino could be accused of staging his own parody during the late years of his career. Summarizing his biography, one can state that Heino surely has had a varied career so far and can be considered an interesting object of study in many ways. Therefore, he should be introduced further to non-German-speaking audiences that are interested in German Popular Music.

2. The controversial reception of Heino in Germany

Despite his commercial success, Heino is considered to be a very controversial figure inside of Germany. The controversy goes back to the early stages of his career, when he started to perform his “Volksmusik” repertoire. As many of his songs were reinterpretations that also had been used by the military during the NS period (1933–1945). Consequently, Heino was considered to be a conservative, rightwing artist and linked to the dark times of German history. Yet, as Heino was managed by a professional team of lawyers and songwriters, none of his songs was directly connected to NS ideologies. But, many lyrics – especially the soldier songs (e.g. *Schwarzbraun ist die Haselnuß*) were listed in the songbooks of the Wehrmacht or the SS (e.g. *Wenn alle untreu werden, Des*

³² *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und die Deutschen* (21:48).

³³ *Der deutsche Heino* (00:50).

³⁴ *Der deutsche Heino* (02:47).

³⁵ *Der deutsche Heino* (04:20).

³⁶ *Der deutsche Heino* (04:03).

³⁷ *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (08:24).

³⁸ *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (13:13).

³⁹ *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (16:13).

⁴⁰ *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (39:30).

Geiers schwarzer Haufen).⁴¹ The majority of these songs already dated back to the last century or even had a much older history. Some also had been used by pacific youth organizations (e.g. “Wandervogel”) at the beginning of the century. Because some of the songs had been re-contextualized by the Nazis, the re-recordings by Heino caused many controversies in Germany. Primarily, by people who suffered during the NS time (e.g. leftwing political activists) and the kids of the war generation, who were not at ease with their parents past and therefore could not identify with Heino and his music.

Yet, not everybody was aware of the controversial history that the lyrics had gone through, which also might explain the huge success of Heino. In addition, other people did not care much about the historical background of the songs and simply welcomed the traditional repertoire, which reminded them of their youth. Finally, the controversies about Heino can be described as being partly political and partly generational. As these songs represented the repertoires of the war generation, some people preferred to listen to “Schlager” or “Beat” music during the 1960s and “Pop” or “Punk” during the 1970s and early 1980s in Germany.

3. The reception of Heino in German punk rock scenes

The 1970s also saw the most prominent scandal about Heino and his repertoire of traditional “Volksmusik”, when he re-recorded all three verses of the song *Das Lied der Deutschen* in 1977. The music of this song is based on a melody by the composer Joseph Haydn and part of his famous *Kaiserquartett*. It was composed in 1797 for the Austro-Hungarian Emperor, which is reflected in the lyrics by the words: „Gott erhalte Franz den Kaiser“ (“May god protect Franz the emperor”). This shows that originally the song was not connected to Germany or German nationalism at all. Yet, the lyrics became rewritten by the German poet Hoffman von Fallersleben on the Island of Helgoland in 1841. His new text expressed the wish for unification of all 48 German mini-states. This is primarily articulated in the first line of the first verse: „Deutschland, Deutschland über Alles“ (*Germany, Germany, above all*). Yet, these lyrics – especially the words of the first line – became also misused by the NS regime and interpreted as a claim for German superiority and expansion. Practically, this was done by using the first verse of the song “*Deutschland, Deutschland – Über Alles*” as an introduction to the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* (*Die Fahne hoch...*), a song which clearly can be categorized as NS repertoire and remained banned in Germany since 1945. As a consequence, after WW2 only the third verse of *Das Lied der Deutschen* (*Einigkeit und Recht und Freiheit / “Unity and Justice and Freedom”*) was sung at official occasions and later also used as German national anthem. Therefore, the recording of all three verses – including the words “*Deutschland, Deutschland Über Alles*” – on a single, which was issued for 2000 German school children, was a huge provocation for many people. The scale of the scandal was even bigger, because Heino was asked to record all three verses of the song for Ministerpräsident Hans Filbinger (head of state in Baden-Württemberg at the time), who used to work as a navy judge during WW2 and also had sentenced people to death. Therefore, the recording placed Heino even closer to the dark side of German history and the scandal was immense.⁴²

The criticism of Heino finally accumulated in a different scandal, which

⁴¹ *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (26:00).

⁴² *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (29:07).

emerged out of the German punk rock scene. A German Punk called Norbert Hähnel, who ran an independent record store in Berlin (“Scheißbladen”), started to ridicule Heino by dressing up with dark sunglasses and blond hair, performing play back impersonations to original Heino songs at legendary Berlin punk clubs like “Risiko” and “SO 36”. He even called himself “Der Wahre Heino” (“The real Heino”) and also managed to get some media attention during the first part of the 1980s.⁴³ Yet, Hähnel got sued by Heino and his lawyers and had to pay 10 000 DM or go to jail for 20 days, if he would not pay the fee.⁴⁴ At this point, even the famous German punk rock band Die Toten Hosen got involved and organized a solidarity concert (“Knastkonzert”, 1986) for Norbert Hähnel in order to raise the money and prevent Hähnel from going to jail. Finally, the concert turned out to be a success and the money could be handed over to Norbert Hähnel, who kept it, went to jail anyway and opened a bar with the money called Enzian (Berlin) – named after the title of a famous Heino song.⁴⁵ The scandal of Norbert Hähnel (“Der Wahre Heino”) is just one example, which shows how the German punk rock scene reacted to Heino and his music. Although, Heino got ridiculed by Hähnel and Die Toten Hosen – that at some point also dressed up in “Heino Style” (blond wigs, dark sunglasses) – he was taken seriously and regarded as a pop cultural enemy by the German punk scene.⁴⁶ This is also confirmed by Hähnel, who states that he was not interested in only acting out a parody. Instead, he also wanted to attack on Heino as a person.⁴⁷ This behavior clearly differs from other Heino parodies, e.g. performed by Otto Waalkes – a famous German comedian.

The critical attitude towards Heino within the German punk scene is highlighted by an interview with the musician, actor and comedian Rocko Schamoni (Studio Braun, Fraktus) that can be seen in the documentary *Heino – Made in Germany*, which was written by Oliver Schwabe (2013). The attitude of the German punk rock scene becomes perfectly summarized by his words: *Wir brauchten solche Feindbilder und Heino war das Beste* (“We needed such enemies and Heino was the best”).⁴⁸ Therefore, one can conclude that Heino was a very controversial figure in post-war Germany and seen as a pop cultural enemy to a lot of people. Primarily, to the German punk rock scene.

3. The reception of Heino in North American punk rock scenes

Heino is also known to some audiences outside of Germany - mainly within groups of German migrants, who live outside of the country. The documentary *Mensch Heino, Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (ZDF Zeit, 2018) for example, displays his popularity amongst German migrants in Namibia.⁴⁹ In contrast, the documentary *Heino – Made in Germany* focuses more on the reception of Heino in Germany and North America. Although, Heino is almost unknown by the American music industry, he has a small following of fans within some German communities in North America as well.

For example, Jello Biafra – the singer of the legendary US-American punk band The Dead Kennedys – tells that he went to a Heino concert with his ex-wife at the “German-American Hall” in San Francisco, where the whole audience was able to sing along with the Heino lyrics.⁵⁰ As Heino is good friends with the German entertainers Siegfried & Roy he also used to play in Las Vegas. But, in general it is difficult to see a Heino show in North America. Nevertheless, Jello Biafra, who comments frequently on Heino in the documentary *Made*

⁴³ *Heino – Made in Germany* (41:24).

⁴⁴ *Heino – Made in Germany* (48:25).

⁴⁵ *Heino – Made in Germany* (49:05).

⁴⁶ *Heino – Made in Germany* (46:32).

⁴⁷ *Heino – Made in Germany* (46:40).

⁴⁸ *Heino – Made in Germany* (29:22).

⁴⁹ *Mensch Heino! Der Sänger und Die Deutschen* (01:40).

⁵⁰ *Heino – Made in Germany* (34:42).

in Germany, surprisingly is a big Heino fan. Although he thinks that Heino is a bizarre and trashy pop figure from Germany, he is fascinated by his looks and the sound of his music.

In addition, the same documentary introduces the Canadian comedian and Heino impersonator Marc Hickox, who – as well as Norbert Hähnel – performs with dark sunglasses and a blond wig on his head. He frequently tours between Toronto and Los Angeles as a Heino impersonator. Yet, in contrast to Norbert Hähnel, no deeper criticism of Heino can be found in his stage persona. Although, Hickox does not officially agree with the fact that he is a punk, he confesses that there is nothing more punk than dressing up as Heino.⁵¹ For him, Heino is considered to be an exotic underground phenomenon. The documentary shows that, although Heino is only known to smaller audiences in North America, the parody character by Marc Hickox is always well received wherever he shows up. Hickox also had the chance to meet Heino in Bad Münstereifel at the famous Heino Café, when he visited Germany and was welcomed with open arms. Therefore, one can conclude that in North America Heino is considered to be a “trashy cult figure” from Germany and his reception by migrants that live in the US or Canada and North American punks (e.g. Jello Biafra) seems to be always positive.

4. Comparison and results

Looking back at the examples, one can conclude that the analysis of the Heino phenomenon in German and North American punk rock scenes is worth a final comparison. At first, we can state that the reception of Heino in the German punk scene has been very negative, while the reception of Heino in North America seems to be always positive. These findings were backed up by the analysis of two parodies. The first one, by Norbert Hähnel (Germany) and the second one by Marc Hickox (Canada) and by the inclusion of interviews with two famous representatives from the German (Rocko Schamoni) and US-American (Jello Biafra) punk rock scenes.

In search of an explanation for these differences, one can assume that the deviant perception might be due to the language barrier between the German lyrics and American audiences. While his lyrics can be fully understood in Germany, in North America the lyrics of Heino are not always understood and remain mysterious to the majority of listeners. Yet, it is not the lyrics themselves that are responsible for the big controversies around Heino in Germany, but the cultural and historically charged contexts around his lyrics. As these cultural aspects are totally missing out in North America, the reception of Heino differs fundamentally from his reception in Germany – even if an American would understand his German lyrics. Having this in mind, what remains for the average American listener is a strange looking (hydrogen blond, dark sunglasses), “trashy figure” with a very robotic body language. Therefore, in North America Heino is mostly understood in an ironic way. This is also coherent with punk rock attitude, as irony is considered to be typical for punk rock as well. Although, some irony is also present in the parody by Norbert Hähnel, his criticism of Heino is rooted deeply, because he is fully aware of the cultural contexts behind Heino persona. That is why his parody goes beyond irony. It becomes clearer, when we consider Heino’s reaction towards different comedians and their parodies, too. While Norbert Hähnel was sued to pay 10 000 DM, Heino tolerates and even seems to appreciate the parody of Marc Hickox, when both met in Germany.⁵²

⁵² Heino – Made in Germany (44:45).

⁵¹ Heino – Made in Germany (42:52).

Yet, despite these differences on the surface, both punk rock scenes are strangely connected by the German expression *Über Alles* (*Above All*), which is considered to be a taboo slogan in Germany, as it is linked to the first verse of *Das Lied der Deutschen*, which was misused during the NS period. Due to its recontextualization during wartime, the original meaning, which dates back to the times of Fallersleben completely vanished and is mostly unknown in Germany, today.

In comparison, the re-contextualized meaning of the German expression *Über Alles* is also known in North America. Yet, it is connected to the “dark past” of Germany, too. Therefore, Jello Biafra himself used the expression in the lyrics of the iconic punk song *California Über Alles* by The Dead Kennedys. By doing so, he tried to criticize fascist tendencies within US-American politics, e.g. by mentioning Governor Jerry Brown (Governor of California from 1975–1983) in his lyrics. As a consequence, one can conclude that the post war re-contextualization of the German expression *Über Alles*, has been transferred into the Anglo-American vocabulary and today is understood in the same way as in Germany. Yet, when the song *California Über Alles* is sung by punks at a Dead Kennedys concert, one can argue that another re-contextualization is happening, which turns the expression into a leftwing / punk rock slogan. This interpretation might be probably more valid for the North America cultural context, because of the existing language barrier, which makes it easier to de- and re-contextualize a slogan. Especially, if it is taken from a foreign language and not completely understood in its original meaning.

Finally, one can summarize that it is the different understanding of the cultural contexts around the Heino phenomenon, which divide German from North American punks, when it comes to Heino and his music. A further example, which perfectly represents these different attitudes towards Heino is told by Jello Biafra in *Made in Germany*: It was the soundman of the Dead Kennedys, who – on a German tour in Hamburg (1982) – played a Heino song to the audience before the beginning of the show. When the music started, the German punks laughed and folk-danced to the music and made fun of it in an ironic way. Yet, when a second Heino song was played, the German punks started to throw “everything they could find at the soundman”.⁵³

Acknowledgements: Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Harnisch and PD Dr. Günter Koch, Lehrstuhl für Deutsche Sprachwissenschaft. Universität Passau - Germany.

Funding: Graduiertenzentrum. Universität Passau – Germany.

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