Fantastic Sailors. Imaginations of Seamen in German Popular Culture

Timo Heimerdinger

The character of 'the Sailor' is widely spread in various areas of contemporary German popular culture: art, cinema, literature, comics, advertisement, and pop-music, to name but a few. With its ambiguity between wanderlust and homesickness, freedom and bondage, fortitude and frailty, this character fits into a number of contexts perfectly.

Here I will discuss the forms and functions of this maritime motif within the field of popular culture from an ethnographical and media-analytical perspective. From the broad range of seamen's representations, I will concentrate on three types of popular sailors within the contemporary cultural process, touching different aspects of popular culture.[1] The first one is part of product advertising, the second belongs to the field of pop-music and the third can be characterized as a mass media icon of collective memory. With these three examples, the phenomenon of the 'fantastic sailors' will be placed and illuminated in their cultural context.

It is necessary to analyse the relevant phenomena with reference to different aspects: their load of content which can be defined as the semiotic dimension, their cultural use and function, which points to the pragmatic dimension, as well as the aspect of perception. Therefore I will first conceptualise the-

atricality as a heuristic concept for cultural and media analysis in general.[2] Then I will interpret the three given examples with reference to the presented sub-categories of theatricality.

Concluding this paper I will – based on a philosophical concept of performativity – examine how this maritime motif is used within the never ending performative process of our popular culture that aims to create and represent cultural identity.

Theatricality

In recent years the model of theatricality has been the subject of a very lively and fruitful interdisciplinary debate, it has been developed and discussed as a cultural model in humanities not only in theatre studies but also in everyday culture studies.[3]

It is worth looking at the central ideas and terms of the concept in order to evaluate the heuristic merit which is derived from using this model. The central idea is to take the theatrical situation that someone impersonates a role and presents this role in front of an audience as a metaphor for culture in general. Starting from this idea and understanding theatricality not only in a narrow theatre-related, but in a wider cultural sense, the theatrical situation can be split up into four

aspects as analytical categories, that accentuate different aspects of the cultural process; needless to say they are dialectically related to each other and only theoretically separable.

The first of these aspects is the activity of staging (German: Inszenierung) that takes place behind the curtain. This aspect corresponds with the job of the director and also somehow of the author: someone has to plan the whole thing, to choose the right words, costumes, requisites and tools for expression and has to pre-assess the impressions and the effects of the play on the audience. The aspect of staging refers to the semiotic aspect of culture that implicates the generation of meaning and that is analysable by studying texts and other intellectual or cognitively accessible material. To study the aspect of staging, all varieties of discourse analysis are suitable methods. Dealing with the dimension of staging in the cultural analyses, means to de- and re-construct the semiotic architecture of cultural phenomena, to exemplify the intertextuality of various cultural elements and to interpret culture within the paradigm of an intentional communication process.

As shown above, culture consists not only of thoughts, texts and meaning but there are also real human beings who have to live their lives and thus embody the system of cultural meaning. Therefore the second aspect of theatricality is corporality (German: Korporalität). As a play is not feasible in an empty space, but is always and necessarily bound to specific actors with their specific personal and physical characteristics (there is no abstract 'Hamlet' on the stage but always an individual Hamlet, played by a certain person), culture is also body-bound. Human life is only thinkable in connection with human bodies and ,in a wider sense, with the material world. Treating this physical dimension of culture, one has to distinguish two forms. Rather close to the metaphor of

'theatre', there is the procedure of embodiment, which means that a person impersonates a certain concept as, for example, the culturally configured role of a doctor or a captain. Within this process, a person brings an abstract conception of a certain role to a concrete reality, using his or her distinctive and individual body and 'lending' his or her physical conditions to form this single concrete exemplar, for example, of a doctor. While in this case the body acts as a vehicle to substantiate a concept, the other form of culturally relevant corporality can be found in the fact that the body itself becomes an essential part of cultural ideas and therefore not only a 'container' but part of the 'content'.

Both varieties of the physical dimension of culture, embodiment and bodily alloyed culture, refer to the human body as an indispensable factor of cultural reality which generates a surplus value to the semiotic dimension. This material and sensual dimension of culture is only sensually perceptible and at the same moment absolutely essential for human life experience. It is not possible to say something sensible about human life while ignoring the corporal dimension which is not completely analysable by semiotic structures.

The third aspect of theatricality is perception ('Wahrnehmung'): there always has to be an audience to generate a theatrical situation, even if it consists only of one single person. Only if there is an audience is there a theatrical situation. The whole play is constructed and designed for this audience, a certain effect is calculated whether it happens or not. Transformed to the field of culture it can also be said that cultural activities mostly happen in the context of other persons who constitute a type of audience. The forms of interaction and social life called culture are situated in collective formations that establish a type of performance.

Performance (German: Performanz) is

the fourth aspect of theatricality and signifies the situation 'when it happens'. It is the execution of what has been planned, thought out and rehearsed. The aspect of performance implies an element of emergence, because theory is grey, but practice is colourful and has its own value that surpasses every form of theoretical consideration. On an even more general level following Michel de Certeau) the acting of the individuals has to be appreciated as an own dimension of cultural reality that can be surprising, creative, oppositional or self-willed and not only conform to the tracks of discursively or otherwise regulated established rules of the cultural game. I shall come back to this aspect of performance as cultural mechanism in a philosophical perspective at the end of my text.

With its four dimensions of staging, corporality, perception and performance, theatricality became a heuristic concept that inspired a number of studies within a wide range of humanities. The discussion about the theatricality of culture directed the attention to the evident point that the semiotic production of meaning and the playing of a role is only one aspect of the cultural process among others. There is also the impact of the performative practice, the sensual weight of the acting bodies and all the effects of the presence of an audience however they may be conditioned.

It is clear that culture is not theatre, but it can fruitfully be described as theatrical. The model of theatricality can neither explain culture nor give answers to the questions of interpretation, nor describe it completely. But keeping the four aspects in mind is helpful in order to remember that culture is a complex system that acts on different levels and that these levels are interwoven and interdependently connected.

For the following examples, I shall concentrate on the analysis of popular represen-
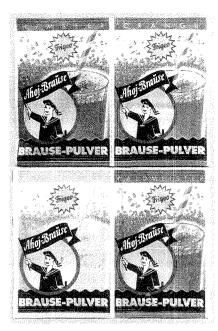

Fig 1. Ahoj-Brause, German sherbet powder (2007).

tations of the sailor with respect to staging, performance and perception. As corporality seems less relevant in this context, I will neglect this aspect here.

Ahoj Brause

The first example to present is the product advertising of the famous sherbet powder or pop rocks 'Ahoj Brause'. This German product, a powder to prepare a non-alcoholic refreshing drink, has been produced and sold since 1925 and was so named from 1932, decorated with the emblem of a little sailor boy.

They started out with a rather pictorial form but after several revisions a more schematic version was created that has been hardly changed in the last 25 years. In Germany this little sailor represents Ahoj-Brause

Fig.2/3 The Berlin Band 'Nylon'(2005).

as a widespread symbol that almost everybody knows and that has become a permanent feature of our collective iconic-cultural repertoire. It is clear that the friendly smiling and flag-waving boy is an indispensable component of the Ahoj-Brause powder. The question is: what has this sailor to do with an article of food which is not even related to coastal areas, the domain of the sea or maritime culture?

Nylon

The second example is part of the latest developments in German pop music culture, the Berlin band 'Nylon', a self-styled 'Elektro-Chanson-Projekt.'[4] Nylon is a band that consists of four people, three male musicians and one female singer. The style of the music is a very unconventional combination of electronic-ambient club sounds, jazz and old-fashioned Chanson-Style in the tradition of Friedrich Holländer, Marlene Dietrich or Hildegard Knef. In 2005 they published their second album called 'Eine kleine Sehnsucht' (a little longing) and the band appeared in maritime outfits, using maritime elements such as sailor suits, an anchor or a steering wheel as well as more clichéd components as a muscle shirt or a tattooed anchor. In the first song 'Wannsee ahoi' they explicitly refer also on the textual level to the maritime sphere and in an ironical way they connect Lake Wannsee near Berlin ,which of course is situated far away from the sea, with deep sea sailor associations. Without going into the textual interpretation any further here, it can be stated that in this context the maritime sphere becomes an allegory for love in general, including the aspect that fidelity despite all oaths may not last longer than after the ship has left the harbour. However, on their latest CD, which was published in 2007, there is the song 'Ausgedacht' (dreamed up) and on the video-platform YouTube we can find a corresponding second film of about two minutes that again uses the sailor motif.[5] In this film the sailor appears as an imaginary, even virtual person, he's a fanciful and chimerical sailor, an unreal man with erotic attributes. But why does a German band from Berlin choose this maritime subject to illustrate their music?

The Kissing Sailor

Eroticism is the link to the third example, beyond the German area and referring par-

ticularly to the American scene but with a worldwide echo. It is the quaint story of the New York kissing sailor that travelled around the world.

In the centre of the story there is a photo which was taken by the photographer Alfred Eisenstaedt on August 14th 1945 at Times Square in New York, in which a Navy sailor kisses a woman in celebration of the end of World War II.

Thirteen days later the photo was published under the title 'V-J day in Times Square' in LIFE magazine and was seen around the world.[6] In the USA this picture became a symbol for hope and spontaneous joy about the end of the war but the story does not end there. For years and years there has been an ongoing debate about the identity of the two protagonists and there were lots of people who claimed to be either the man or the woman whose identity, despite several expert evaluations, has not yet been definitely established. Sixty years later J. Seward Johnson revealed a sculpture 'Unconditional Surrender' based on Eisenstaedt's photograph and since 2005 the event has been commemorated by an annual kiss at Times Square, a mass event which has also been mentioned in the German mass media.[7] Again we may ask why has a kissing sailor become an icon for the relief and joy about the end of the war?
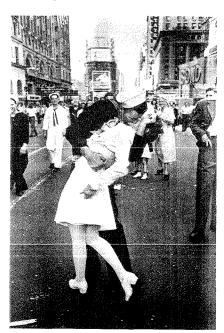
Contents, contexts and the theatricality of culture

Looking at all three examples of popularised imaginations of 'The Seaman' we can state a rather wide spectrum of content aspects or significations.

In the first case we see a young boy wearing a sailor suit, youth, jauntiness and innocence are to the fore. In the second case, the musicians, who are dressed like sailors, use certain maritime symbols to invoke a

field of associations characterized by melancholy, flippancy and momentariness. In the third case it is particularly the combination of eroticism and anonymity that characterizes the sailor figure. All in all we observe a variety of possible, not necessarily coherent aspects of content The Seamen figure appears as amorphous and iridescent, sometimes also ambivalent and contradictory. One explanation for this chimerical nature lies within the cultural contexts of both a general and a specifically German setting. With regard to the general dimension we can state that it is the dialectic of disappearance and return which is essential for seafaring in general and which forms an ideal breeding ground for producing stereotypes, clichés and imaginary symbolical accentuations. When the sailor

Fig. 4 Alfred Eisenstaedt, V.J. Day at Times Square, NY, 15 August, 1945

is working, he disappears over the horizon. Our fantasy, the individual one as well as the cultural one, has the ideal opportunity to imagine what may happen or what the sailor will do or leave undone in the distance. These imaginations are created totally undisturbed by concrete visions.

This general structure in Germany is amplified in a specific manner. In Germany, which is 'not a seagoing nation', as the British correctly told us in 19th century, the propagandistic popularisation of certain imaginations about 'the sailor' has had a long and rich tradition. Without being able to go into this aspect any further, it can be stated that in the 19th century certain pietistic religious groups as well as the state tried to exploit the sailor motif within propaganda campaigns to support their aims. However, and this is very important, they tried to do so in different ways and highlighted diametrically opposed aspects concerning the content of the propaganda. While the pietists tried to paint the seaman as a human being in moral peril of alcohol, gambling, sexual excesses, illness, poverty and all kinds of godlessness, and hence a figure who stands in need of religious care and awakening, the state propaganda was completely different. They tried to show the sailor as a youthful and strong symbol of the self-confident, young German Reich, representing power, technical progress and the military virtues of order, discipline, cleanliness and brightness in the widest sense. Both campaigns were successful in their respective area and achieved and popularised and established certain ideas of the seaman in the cultural repertoire , later used as a sort of 'mix and match' or a construction kit of identifiable attributes: the seaman appears as strong, wild, social, free, erotic or suffering. Above all he is a flexible character, in a local and in a social sense. He is not determined and always in movement, concerning time, place

and social structures as well. In our model of theatricality, the propagandistic technique of generating content and establishing semantic connotations refer to the aspect of staging.

Building upon this situation of the availability of a 'cultural box of toy building bricks', the requirements are met to create the sailor required under various situational and contextual conditions. Theses varying acts of staging or representations of the sailor figure can be understood as performances put into practice for a diverse audience and in different settings of perception. Now I come back to the three examples I presented before.

The first question is: How did the little sailor boy make his way to the front of the sherbet powder bag? The answer is rather simple: what we see is probably not a sailor, but a boy in a sailor suit. In the 1930s, when the logo was invented, the wearing of sailor suits by young boys was well established. This fashion had been created in Britain and during the reign of the German Emperor (Kaiser Wilhelm II) it also became part of popular fashion in Germany. Following a popular trend and connected with the above mentioned propagandistic activities, the sailor suit became a popular and widespread form of dress for boys. In Germany curiously enough expressing a certain identification with the self-confident, supposedly upcoming, German Reich whose fleet had become a symbol for modernity, power and international standing.[8] Even if these ideas during World War I turned out to be obsolete, the sailor suit fashion remained and persisted culturally. The maritime motif of the sailor suit was removed from the proper maritime context, transporting its semiotic charge of youth, freshness and optimism to another cultural area, the youth clothing fashion. Already in the 1930s, when the emblem was invented, the sailor was used as a type of cultural citation, not as a reference to the

reality of life on ships. Since then the little sailor boy has made his career in the area of cultural fantasies, disconnected from his origin. This process of cultural detachment, the separation of the maritime motif including certain 'contentual' aspects from the proper maritime-cultural life context and their shift to completely diverse contexts seems to be significant for the use of 'The Seaman' in popular culture.

A similar mechanism can be seen within the second example, the band Nylon.

The band, their music, their texts, their place of origin, Berlin, has simply nothing to do with maritime culture. The main topic they are dealing and ironically playing with is the vagueness of love, the insecurity and openness of interpersonal relationships and the cliché of a current urban lifestyle which can be characterised by volatility and vagueness, by keeping one's multiple options of life open. The bundle of connotations they use regarding the seaman is related to the famous topos of the handsome young sailor[9] as well as to the whole field of the problematic or at least ambiguous imputation of unsteadiness, ostentatious masculinity and erotic attraction combined with promiscuity and a pleasure oriented, even hedonistic lifestyle.

This presentation of the seaman ties In the tradition of the pejorative characterisation of the sailor as a human being in ethical and metaphysical danger and coincides perfectly with the physical danger that work aboard a ship inevitably brings.

Nylon displays this set of attributions of the seaman stripped of its moral dress and combined with implications of the frivolous 1920s chanson-culture, presented as part of a modern metropolitan aesthetic attitude towards life that points to indetermination as positive and explicitly desired. This pattern is intensified within the video clip where the sailor becomes a virtual creature of the imagi-

nation, nothing less than a symbol for unreal or unearthly beauty and unfulfilled yearning in general.

Finally the kissing sailor at Times Square: in this case we can also see a revitalisation of the erotic implications not only of the seaman but also of the nurse;   though this gender-specific analysis needs to be elaborated on elsewhere. Contrary to a generally rather wicked characterisation, the eroticism of this sailor is being shown into a positive light that emphasizes the aspects of spontaneity, situational joy and freedom. Beside the iconographical power derived from the balanced perspective, the elegantly arranged postures and the perfect colour contrasts – a painter or sculptor could not have chosen a more picturesque pose, it is the anonymity of both protagonists that still remains and feeds the endlessness of the story: These are two individuals who have become a symbol for this collectively highly charged date of the end of the war but it is still not definitely clear who those individuals actually are. This aspect of anonymity in a subtle way ties in the motif of the pretty sailor, who appears and disappears as an erotic dream: ephemeral, impalpable, anonymous but desirable precisely because of that.

Summing up these different pictures of seamen, it becomes obvious that first and foremost, they do not show real sailors. On the contrary, they present isolated aspects of maritime reality and enhance them. Confronted with the social-historical 'truth' these representations cannot be labelled as 'real'. But this is neither their intent nor their cultural function. Their reality is a different one because these are generalisations that are land-based, they are mental additions to an only fragmentarily perceived reality of the seamen's lives. Their function is not to teach us something about the maritime life but to make the sailor a symbolic representation for

certain ideas as, for example, youth, eroticism, freedom, anonymity restlessness etc. This sailor as a symbolic representation has its sociological setting, as shown above, within the contexts of advertisement, pop music or collective memory.

Culture as performativity

We can only understand these connections as 'culture theatre'. Visual elements and parts of the maritime sphere are charged with cultural meaning and can thus be integrated into mechanisms of staging. In individual acts, and each of the three examples can be seen as such acts, the visual elements are perceived by different audiences and thus converted into performance.

Reflecting these observations on a theoretical level these representations of seamen in pop culture can be understood as cultural performances; they can be taken as prototypical examples for the performativity of culture in general. Located between traditional aspects and situational links the cultural performance can be estimated as a useful metaphor for cultural activity in general. Hence culture is much more than the pure presentation or reproduction of certain information or content. The observation of the mode of these forms of presentation is of greater importance.[10] Content doesn't exist per se, it is realised within certain media, forms, contexts and historic constellations. The concept of 'performativity' investigates (or better: can help to understand) how previously existing images are used, transformed and functionalised in a certain current context. Following the performativity concept of philosopher Sybille Krämer cultural performances always imply two aspects at the same time: iteration and variation.[11] Performativity means to handle already established cultural elements in a specific, contextually bound way. The cultural performance of certain elements does

not simply mean to create something new, but to deal with something in a constructive way that has not been created by ourselves.[12]

In the case of popular images of seamen the aspect of iteration is realised in two ways: by referring to aspects of the maritime lived-in-world as danger, ship community, contending with natural forces etc. as well as by referring to culturally produced pictures such as 'the handsome sailor', 'the young and strong sailor' or the 'sailor in moral peril'.

The aspect of variation is realised by embedding these images in the relevant contexts as advertisement, pop music etc. and shaping these 'embedded sailors' under these contexts and conditions by sharpening certain aspects, neglecting others and contextualising the whole figure.

But it would be too narrow-minded to denounce them as pure fiction. In popular culture we observe a separation of the maritime motifs from their original context but retaining a certain charge of content when brought into new contexts.

In the end we have to state that the various popular sailor pictures presented to us constitute their own cultural reality. They tell us a lot but more about our own society or perhaps better about the cultural context where the popularisation of these pictures of sailors is located, than about the proper sailor life or maritime culture. They are vivid expressions of the secret dreams, fears and desires of our contemporary society. These dreams of a different, more thrilling and varied life seem to be timeless, at least they last longer than the rapidly changing realities of the work and life on ships. That is one of the main reasons why the images of the seamen are culturally durable and resistant against the changing socio-historical realities.

Contrasting the title of this conference session, rather than reflections of maritime people in art, the chimerical sailors can be

seen as mirrors of our very own subliminal desires, created by a bricolage of maritime motifs in an urban aesthetic of popular culture.

Notes

1   For linguistic support I would like to thank Dr. Silke Meyer very much! This paper presents some aspects of my PhD thesis, for more details see Timo Heimerdinger, *Der Seemann. Ein Berufsstand und seine kulturelle Inszenierung (1844-2003)* (Köln/ Weimar 2005), 178-284.

2   See also Timo Heimerdinger, 'Everyday Culture Research and the Challenges of Immediacy. Theoretical and Methodological Approaches from the Perspective of Cultural Anthropology / Volkskunde', in Hans-Günter Heimbrock and Christopher P. Scholtz (eds.), *Religion: Immediate Experience and the Mediacy of Research. Interdisciplinary Studies in the Objectives, Concepts and Methodology of Empirical Research in Religion.* (Göttingen 2007), 61-75.

3   Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'From Theatre to Theatricality. How to Construct Reality', in *Theatre Research International* 20 (1995), 97-105. Erika Fischer-Lichte, 'Theatricality. A Key Concept in Theatre and Cultural Studies', in *Theatre Research International* 20 (1995), 85-89.

4   http://www.lisa-bassenge.de/info.html – 27.03.2008.

5   http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jcForgPR1pY – 30.10.2008.

6   http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/V-J_Day_in_Times_Square – 27.03.2008.

7   http://www.spiegel.de/panorama/ 0,1518,431872,00.html – 27.03.2008.

8   Cf. Robert Kuhn, Bernd Kreutz, *Der Matrosenanzug. Kulturgeschichte eines Kleidungsstücks.* (Dortmund 1989)

9   Cf. Eckart Goebel, 'Distant objects of desire. Die schönen Matrosen. Der Seemann als Ikone der Homoerotik im Film', in *Mare 4* (oct./nov. 1997), 80-86.

10   Christoph Wulf, 'Der performative Körper. Sprache - Macht – Handlung.', in Hans Belting a.o.,(eds.), *Quel corps? Eine Frage der Repräsentation* (München 2002), 207-218, here 207.

11   Sybille Krämer, 'Sprache - Stimme - Schrift: Sieben Thesen über Performativität als Medialität' in Erika Fischer-Lichte and Doris Kolesch (eds.), *Kulturen des Performativen, Sonderband Paragrana, Internationale Zeitschrift für Historische Anthropologie*, Volume 7, H. 1, (Berlin 1998), 33-57.

12   'Wo aufgeführt wird, ist die Iterabilität, die immer ein Anderswerden des Iterierten einschließt, bedeutsam. Gegenüber der gerade in der Sprachtheorie gepflegten Betonung des Kreativaspektes ist daran zu erinnern, dass alle Sinngebung auf Prozeduren des Wiederholens beruht, die immer auch Wiederholungen der Form nach sind. [...] Die produktive Kraft des Performativen erweist sich nicht einfach darin, etwas zu erschaffen, sondern darin, mit dem, was wir nicht selbst hervorgebracht haben, umzugehen.', quotation from Krämer, 'Sprache - Stimme - Schrift', 48.

THE 9TH NORTH SEA HISTORY
CONFERENCE

Maritime People

Edited by

Jeroen ter Brugge, Arthur Credland and Harald Hamre

STAVANGER
MARITIME MUSEUM
MUST

Contents

Part 5: Poster Abstracts

The 9th North Sea History Conference