

*Orhan Kipcak*

## The Return of the Fanzine

In the 1970s and 80s, the Fanzine was the first opportunity for now well-established authors and journalists to publish their texts. This function as a medium for ambitious but not-yet recognized writers has now been taken over by internet-based social media, which seemed to supersede the low-cost zines with a small print run. Thus it is all the more surprising to see the growing interest that especially young writers show in this old medium: The “fanzine” is being discussed in classes at art-colleges, degree theses in the shape of fanzines emerge, and final-year-projects of whole graduate classes claim to be fanzines (Spielmann et.al, 2003). This gives reason enough to deal with the question of what defines a fanzine and find the reasons for the fascination it currently evokes.

Historically, the fanzine was part of the American and British popular culture. It emerged in the 1960s as a publishing format that dealt mainly with rock music and from there, it spread to different subjects and deepened theoretically. The specific, very personal and actionist writing-style that was cultivated in the fanzines was further in contact

with some serious writing-styles of those years, such as the Beat Poets and the Gonzo-Journalism (Farmer, 2013).

Fanzines penetrated the German-speaking culture when music enthusiasts and exchange students got to know the English Fanzine-scene and started to imitate it. The main point hereby was, that fanzines are not produced as isolated text products, but as parts of music scenes in which it serves not only as an information platform, but also to indoctrinate its readers: Not only does a fanzine represent a music style, it represents a totalitarian concept of coolness, a lifestyle that can even grow to become a holistic *Lebenswelt*. (Teipel, 2001.)

For the fanzine in its purest form, there is no obligation for seriousness or objective truth – after all, there is a higher truth, which may live on thousands of fallacies. Here, prejudice counts as knowledge as well – as long as it proves or hints intimate expertise in the subject and for the common cause.

The Fanzine has hegemonic knowledge, and, what's more, it decides which knowledge is relevant. Thus some indispensable elements are: the allusions, the hermetic, the code – religious speaking patterns: Liturgy, preaching, canonisation, damnation. Then: name dropping – the name of the famous and the meaningful on the same level with the name of the unknown, to know what makes true knowledge.

No author is as egoistic and as dominant as the author of a fanzine: Their first assertion: I, I, I – then: We, we, we – finally (spat out): the others – the unknowing. The matter allows, or even demands rhetoric of presumptuousness. The insolent act forms peculiar language patterns, stylistic

extravagances, which are ultimately expressed in daily habits and dispositions: A lifestyle comes to life.

Anyone who has anything to do with fanzines – the writers as well as the readers – are closely connected to each other. This has mostly to do with the fanzine, but also with charismatic proceedings, with mythomanias and tribal rites. Many of these connections are made very directly: Fanzines are not only written, laid out and duplicated by their creators – they are also sold personally. Buying a fanzine is seen as a catalytic procedure – it is meant to initiate community and tie friendships for life.

Originally, fanzines are a youth medium for a young audience. They rarely survive the adolescence of their authors and readers. The marks they leave behind are often interesting. Two examples from Vienna of the 1980s will illustrate this.

“Der Gürtel” (“The Belt”), a fanzine with a legendary bad layout was mostly written by the Upper-Austrian Christian Schachinger. In it, Schachinger developed a particularly ironic and at the same time relaxed writing style that combined Austrian slang, comical exaggerations and unerring impishness into a plodding, virtuous mixture. Schachinger was then absorbed by the reputable daily press into the role of a culture editor: Nowadays, he is an established pop-journalist who has found many imitators of his humoristic, very specific Viennese style of music criticism (Der Standard, 2016)).

Another Viennese fanzine from the 1980s was the burlesque publication that went by the name “Die Amerikanische Krankenhauszeitung” (“The American Hospital Magazine”). It was a hectographically reduplicated text-im-

age-mess, made up of scrawled funny pictures and resourcefully written text deserts. It was the project of a northern German who immigrated to Austria and found fame under the name of Tex Rubinowitz. He is a threefold talent as a musician, illustrator and writer.

After only a few numbers, the “Krankenhauszeitung” disappeared. It left behind a legendary memory and weirdly-funny acrobatic narratives which in the following years and decades held a lasting influence on the German-speaking humour paradigm in broadcast and print media. The significance of this fanzine is widely accepted within the Viennese journalism and writing scene, and it has been confirmed by talks with different writers. There was no copy of “Die Amerikanische Krankenhauszeitung” available, not even from Rubinowitz himself. It seems that the fanzine now only exists as a legend. Rubinowitz’ laconic-surreal style as an illustrator is now being published in newspapers and magazines of the whole German-speaking area (In *Falter*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, *Der Standard*, *Spiegel Online*, *Titanic*, *Kurier*, *Die Zeit*, etc.). He conceived comedy-shows (Rubinowitz, 2007) and web-portals (*Wir Höflichen Paparazzi*, 1999-2013). As a writer, he was awarded the Ingeborg Bachmann-Preis in 2014, the highest endowed literature prize in the German-speaking area.

Successful fanzines seem to be safe places, where talents can flex their fingers, where materials are being tested for their resilience. And even though it is claimed that fanzines are a “do or die” thing, failure is a well-calculated and not unwelcome option. In the world of engineers, there are laboratories for destructive material science, where new

constructions are being tested for their resilience. A similar role seems to be filled by fanzines for their creators, where they serve as stopovers of live-passions, or as springboards to an established career.

These examples seem to imply that the death of a fanzine is one of its most important purposes. However, this is not always the case. There are unswerving print-adventurers who, despite having an established arts career, continue to publish their fanzines for more than twenty years. The Viennese “art-inclined” monochrome-group for example, who started a fanzine of the same name in the 1990s, and whose transmedial art projects are represented at festivals all around the world (Monochrom, 2016), still indulges in the nostalgic luxury of producing a high-end-fanzine with several hundred pages, aesthetically conform to the early style, and sells the copies with noble covers as a bibliophile rarity – *noblesse oblige* (Monochrom, 2004).

Nevertheless are those fanzines, such as the college-project fanzine by the Swiss art college mentioned earlier, more a shadow of a fanzine than a fanzine in the strict sense of the word. These projects apparently want to profit from the anarchistic and experimental aura of old fanzines, from its own historical punk & wave-patina as well as its seemingly improvised, spontaneous attitude towards design from old times.

For young authors, on the other hand, the attractiveness of fanzines seems to be multi-layered and emotional: For a writer, the question of the effect his text does or does not have is of great importance. The fanzine often delivers an immediate feedback in which the combination of passion, style and community can be felt spontaneously. Further

the author of a fanzine enjoys quite a flattering, privileged position by his followers.

Another reason makes the fanzine interesting particularly to writers-to-be: The production of literature is embedded into a process of education. They have traditions of insights and move within a frame of knowledge, where most of the others can orientate themselves better than them, especially when they are still young. Differently than literature, a fanzine does not move within an obligatory educational canon. They have the chance to set their own game rules, and dance to their own tunes. This feeling of freedom is invaluable.

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