**Urban Beats: Graffiti Styles and Hip-Hop Beats in Recent German Visual Culture**

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Deeply rooted in underground counterculture, graffiti writings and hip-hop music have now assumed key roles in mainstream popular culture in Germany and worldwide within the last three to four decades. Graffiti and hip-hop are omnipresent in audiovisual expressions of contemporary urban life. The analysis of recent German city films as a reflection of current socio-political and aesthetic trajectories requires the incorporation of the cinematic urban land- and soundscape. In regards to graffiti, the field of German Studies has seen a significant shift in recent years towards incorporating the examination of tags, posters, images, signs in the urban landscape, thereby bridging disciplines such as German Studies, Urban Studies, and the Studies of Visual Arts. Regarding hip-hop music, German Studies has seen a major surge of readings of hip-hop culture, from the GSA seminar on lowbrow culture in 2014, to several recent articles and books on hip-hop music and films to this workshop at UT Austin on hip-hop culture.

In my analysis of the meaning of graffiti in German cinema, I examine the Linguistic Landscape[[1]](#footnote-1) depicted in city films that make rather subtle use of graffiti and hip-hop music as visual and acoustic reflections of current socio-political and aesthetic trajectories in post-wall Berlin. I do not focus on graffiti and hip-hop films such as *Status Yo!, Unlike You* and *U-Train* that portray hip-hop culture as its main subject. Among the films with a subtle but meaningful use of graffiti writings, is, for example, Thomas Arslan’s Berlin trilogy (*Geschwister* [1997], *Dealer* [1999], and *Der Schöne Tag* [2001]) that portrays the daily life of young Turkish immigrants in Berlin. Various forms of readable and significant texts mark the visual acoustic landscape in Arslan’s trilogy. Together with Turkish hip-hop music that marks the trilogy’s soundtrack and the sounds of the streets captured in several sequences, graffiti texts code the protagonists’ immediate urban environment as a site of resistance in a highly contested urban area. The presence of language and sound in Arslan’s three cinematic depictions of Berlin’s urban landscape correlates with significant transformations in Germany’s capital on the brink of the new millennium. Reading all three films together allows an understanding of how Arslan’s protagonists, all young second-generation Turkish migrants in Berlin, to whom language use is obviously important, adapt to modern urban life in a city on flux.

A close reading of the *Linguistic Landscape* in Arslan’s three films with a focus on graffiti and hip-hop music reveals that graffiti tags and hip-hop beats are conspicuous in *Geschwister* and *Dealer*. However, tags and hip-hop music mostly disappear in the third film. I conclude the following: First, since tags are means to claim space and translations of a strong attachment to a place, the omnipresence in the first two films emphasizes the protagonists’ primary concern with identity, place, and belonging. The lack of graffiti in *Der schöne Tag* alludes to the fact that the “modern metropolitan figure” is less concerned with these issues but rather with challenges that are pertinent to this generation of urbanites, whether they are German, Turkish, German-Turkish, or from any other ethnic background. Second, the graffiti-filled urban spaces in the first two films are heavily populated soundscapes marked by resistance and social struggles whereas the city in the trilogy’s last film is the transformed Berlin of the new millennium: a rather clean, “tag-free”, and faceless global space of commerce and transit.

1. Elana Shohamy and Durk Gorter define the examination of *Linguistic Landscapes* as the “attention to language in the environment, words, and images displayed and exposed in public spaces: *Linguistic Landscape. Expanding the Scenery*. New York: Routledge, 2009. 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)