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MEDIA & EVENT REVIEWS

DAS WEISSE ALBUM, HAFTBEFEHL, AUDIO CD, BERLIN: URBAN AND UNIVERSAL

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INTRODUCTION

In 2010 Haftbefehl released his debut album *Azzlack Stereotyp*. With powerful beats and his raw way of rapping, his distinctive slang ('Kanakis') as well as his visually stunning lyrics, he roughed up the German rap scene. Four years later, in 2014, Haftbefehl released *Russisch Roulette* ('Russian roulette'): his masterpiece. The album follows a clear arc of tension and reflects the dark overall atmosphere of the social reality of Offenbach am Main. These descriptions of social reality are either cynically exaggerated or combined with authentic biographical self-reflections, which inscribe a subtle social criticism into the album.

In early June 2020, Haftbefehl released *Das weisse Album* (*D.W.A.*, 'The white album'). After a six-year break, the album claims to pick up where *Russisch Roulette* left off and to continue its story on both a musical and thematic level as well as its self- and socially-critical perspective. Here, I analyse the album and show whether and how *D.W.A.* maintains both *Russisch Roulette's* musical and thematic roughness as well as its critical perspective. The main focus is to show that the album – although it glorifies a criminal lifestyle in most of its tracks – indeed has a critical perspective, as it self-reflexively interrupts its criminal narrative at compositionally central points and teleologically culminates in a depiction of the dark sides of this lifestyle.

ALBUM ANALYSIS

D.W.A. follows a clear arc of tension. It is divided into three sections: the first and third have four songs, while the second has three.

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The album is opened by the track 'Bolon', which was both the first single of the album and Haftbefehl's comeback to German Rap. The musical foundation of the song is a slow and calm piano melody. After an instrumental intro, Haftbefehl begins to rap the hook, stylistically orienting himself atop the tranquillity of the piano. After the hook, the drums kick in and Haftbefehl's sound changes as well: his rap now sounds much more staccato, rough and overall harder. In terms of content, 'Bolon' is a comprehensive portrayal of street life in Frankfurt and Offenbach am Main: drug smuggling, dealing and consumption, human trafficking and prostitution, violence and lack of perspectives. This thematic panorama characterizes especially the first third of the album, whereby each song has its own focus. The focus of 'Bolon' is on drugs.

This tenor continues on the following tracks. With slight stylistic variations, Haftbefehl delivers a hymn to violence with 'Morgenstern' ('Morning star'), and with 'Koka macht Dich Feucht' ('KMDF', 'Coca makes you wet') he combines the themes of drugs and women. On *Für immer reich* ('Rich forever') he takes up the variety of themes from 'Bolon' again, refers back to the song through lyrical allusions and thus concludes the first third of the album. '1999 Pt. 4' then marks the transition to the second part of the album.

The songs of the second section of the album form the chiasmic centre of *D.W.A.*'s arc of tension. At the centre of this section is the track 'Ice'. 'Ice' presents itself as a self-glorification of Haftbefehl, which is reflected both on a textual level and in the fact that the track contains a feature by Gucci Mane. Back in 2017, when the song was recorded, there were no comparable features of US rappers on a German rap track – and even in 2020, such top-class features are rare in German rap. The main motif of the song is an iced-out Rolex, which symbolizes Haftbefehl's financial wealth. Ice is surrounded by the tracks 'Rücken an der Wand' ('RADW', 'Back to the wall') and 'Conan x Xenia'. Both tracks build on very rough and loud beats and Haftbefehl with his raps seems to 'fight' against them. This 'fight' is evident both in the powerful performance of his raps and in the lyrics, which bear witness to both his struggle against external distress ('RADW') and his inner ferocity ('Conan x Xenia').

Table 1: Hook of the song 'Bolon' (translation added).

Gib mir eine Tonne weiße Ziegelsteine und ich baue ein Iglu	Provide me a ton of white bricks and I'll build an igloo
Ich hab' mehr Weiß geseh'n als ein Eskimo	I've seen more white than any Eskimo
Wovon ich rede? Von Kilos Kokaino	What I'm talking 'bout? About kilos Cocaino
Kolumbianische Ware direkt vom Latino	Columbian goods, directly from Latino
Choya, Plomben, hab' Kilogramm	Choya, blow, got kilograms
In Hamburg krachen Tonnen durch den Zoll	In Hamburg, tons crash through customs
Zwei Stunden spatter Holland, Rotterdam	Two hours later Holland, Rotterdam
Oder Barcelona, Español	Or Barcelona, Español
Belgien, Brüssel, Napoli, Italian	Belgium, Brussels, Naples, Italian
Mir doch Schwanz, woher es kommt	I don't give a fuck where it's from
Hauptsache, es kommt in Frankfurt an	As long as it arrives in Frankfurt Bianco
Bianco Bolon	Bolon [white rocks]

The second third of the album thus represents a comprehensive rap-demonstration of Haftbefehl's power on the level of beats, rap technique, lyrics and features. It is completed with '1999 Pt. 5'.

In the last third of the album, *D.W.A.* becomes much calmer: the beats become quieter and Haftbefehl's performances softer – on the track 'Hotelzimmer' ('Hotel room') he even sings. Also, the topics become more profound: Haftbefehl looks at himself with some distance and reflects on his current state of mind and affairs.

On the track 'Trapping', Haftbefehl self-critically reflects his current standing in the German rap scene. He contrasts his own status with the social media hype of current German rap artists and refers to the far-reaching influence he has had on the scene on multiple levels. For this he draws comparisons with US rap legends.

Table 2: Verse 2 of the song 'Hotelzimmer' (translation added).

Alzheimer-Generation (Ja), doch das, was sie vergaßen:	Alzheimer generation (Yes), but what they have forgotten
Ich hab' die Sprache verändert in diesem Land, lan, fick Hip-Hop (Wouh)	I changed the language in this country, lan, fuck hip-hop (Wouh)
War ein YouTube-Phänomen, hängt Platin an der Wand (Tzz)	Was a YouTube phenomenon, platinum's hanging on the wall (Tzz)
Parallel dazu verändert sich dank mir der Duden in diesem Land	At the same time, due to me the dictionary's changing in this country
Plötzlich erinnern sich Rapper an Azzlack Stereotyp (Trap)	Suddenly rappers remember Azzlack Stereotype [Haftbefehls first album] (Trap)
Kanackiș-Autotune-Hook, schon 2011 auf Melodien (Trap)	Kanackiș-Autotune-Hook, already 2011 on melodies (Trap)
Damals flowt' ich wie Biggie, alle wollten 2Pac sein (Öh)	Back then I flowed like Biggie, everybody wanted to be 2Pac (Öh)
Heute tanzen sie wie Diddy und ich hab' mein Imperium wie Suge Knight (Trap, Trap, Trap, Trap)	Today they dance like Diddy and I have my empire like Suge Knight (Trap, Trap, Trap, Trap)

Table 3: Verse of the song '1999 Pt. 6' (translation added).

Wie lang wird sich noch die Erde dreh'n?	How long will the earth keep turning?
Nicht mehr lang, solange sie der Teufel auf den Schultern trägt	Not for long, as the devil carries it on his shoulders
Rotz' die Narben aus der Seele, verflucht war meine Kindheit	Snort the scars from my soul, cursed was my childhood
Meißel' die Zeile an die Wände und Blut ist meine Tinte	Chisel the line on the walls and blood is my ink
Ich schrei' so laut ich kann in die Erdatmosphäre:	I scream as loud as I can into the earth's atmosphere:
„Lieber Gott, ist das die Nacht, in der ich sterbe?“	'Dear God, is this the night I die?'

1. Cf. the documentary on Haftbefehl: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uyoXS-xBFLQ>. Accessed 23 June 2020.

While the self-reflections in 'Trapking' emphasize the positive sides of his career, the other three songs emphasize its dark sides and negative effects on Haftbefehl's current state of mind. He reflects on his origins from the margins of society and the lack of recognition that comes with it ('Hotelzimmer'); how missing perspectives made his heart die and cause depressions and pain ('Depression & Schmerz'); on his role as a father without a father of his own and how the birth of his child opened up new perspectives for him ('Papa war ein Rolling Stone', 'Daddy was a rolling stone').

The third, distanced, self-reflexive part is concluded by '1999 Pt. 6'.

The three 1999-tracks at the end of each album section form a trilogy and underpin the structure of *D.W.A.* In addition, they tie in with the first 1999-trilogy on *Russisch Roulette* and continue their story. Referring to the year 1999, an important year for Haftbefehl's biography,¹ they verbally portray the alienation from former friends ('1999 Pt. 4'), the nights in Offenbach am Main ('1999 Pt. 5') and the lack of perspectives in his youth ('1999 Pt. 6'). Haftbefehl uses mythical images – demons, devils, death, etc. – to illustrate this lack of perspective and to intensify this feeling to a hopelessness from which he can no longer find a way out on his own.

This hopelessness, reinforced by religious rhetoric, then also concludes the album. On his '1999 Pt. 6'-outro he repeats the line 'Auf der Suche nach Gott, denn sie geben mir Hölle' ('Searching for God, cause they give me hell'), four times before he transfers this mythical image into his social reality in *D.W.A.*'s last line: 'Entweder Rap oder Leben in der Zelle' ('Either rap or life in the cell').

SUMMARY AND REFLECTION

This analysis shows that *D.W.A.* follows a structural arc of tension that clearly unfolds over three parts. Stylistically the whole album is characterised by hard beats and Haftbefehl's distinctive way of rapping. Structurally as well as stylistically, it is thus similar to *Russich Roulette*. Thematically, too, Haftbefehl remains true to himself: from different perspectives and with different emphases he describes the reality of life in the problem districts of Offenbach am Main. He portrays the miseries he describes – drugs, violence, human trafficking, etc. – using powerful linguistic images. By using religious rhetoric, he mythically intensifies his depictions, thereby enhancing their expressiveness and adding emphasis.

On the one hand, Haftbefehl's descriptions of crime appear glorifying: violence, drug and human trafficking seem to be legitimate means to pursue one's own interests. Living with these issues and in an environment that is shaped by them is described as a normal state of society – sometimes even as a desirable state. Only those who 'tick Crystal' ('RADW') or 'beat you to a pulp for no reason' ('Conan x Xenia'), can 'throw bands in the Gucci boutique' ('Ice'), afford an iced-out Rolex ('Ice'), and celebrate cocaine excesses with prostitutes ('KMDF').

On the other hand, Haftbefehl regularly takes a step back with his 1999-parts and reflects on this lifestyle. Moreover, the whole album culminates in its third part, which impressively describes the dark sides of this lifestyle. Through these regular interruptions and *D.W.A.*'s teleological perspective, the album gains a momentum of criticism: what is so often glorified (also by Haftbefehl) and seems desirable, in reality is not. In reality, the costs of such a lifestyle are much higher than its benefits – on both an individual and social level.

In rare moments, Haftbefehl even lets shine through what seems to be really desirable to him: a loving partner ('Hotelzimmer'), his mother and brother ('1999 Pt. 4') and his son ('Papa war ein Rolling Stone').

But this thematic-critical focus raises a double question. Haftbefehl has been rapping for over ten years now about the hard life in Offenbach am Main and has been repeating the same topics from album to album: is that still relevant? And does it add a new perspective to his narratives when Haftbefehl is now rapping about them from the perspective of a label chief, multimillionaire and family father? Yes and no. No – with his repeated depictions of the hard life in the problem districts, Haftbefehl certainly tells nothing new. But on the other hand, the same issues as ten years ago still exist, if they have not worsened. In this way, Haftbefehl's rap is nothing new, but it remains relevant (and necessary). No – the fundamental narrative remains the same, even if he now tells his 'horror stories' from his fatherly and wealthy distance. On the other hand: as Haftbefehl is off the streets now and living a 'decent' life, he has had the time to reflect on and work through his past experiences. If, nevertheless, these experiences have not disappeared but still haunt him, this gives his narratives more emphasis. His long-term view, together with his distance from the immediate events, thus adds a new perspective by enabling him to have a more reflective view on things as well as a more emphatic critique.

Thus, a triple conclusion can be drawn: (1) Haftbefehl's *D.W.A.* succeeds with following up his previous album *Russisch Roulette* musically; (2) the album is characterized by a subtle but clearly critical perspective; and (3) this criticism is still appropriate (and necessary) and is put forward in a new perspective and with more emphasis. With this, Haftbefehl does justice to his own claim: he not only creates a musically sound album, but also an album that is aware of its social reach and puts socially relevant topics and perspectives on the agenda in an authentic way.

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