Research Article

Visual content analysis of stencil graffiti: employing street reading for the study of stenciling

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Abstract

Stencil graffiti are visual street interventions with various contents. Such contents can be detected employing street reading, a method for exploring environment-specific everyday cultures. This method examines communication devices such as signs, text messages and symbols used in everyday interactions. In our study, we combined street reading with content analysis for the purpose of studying and classifying stencil graffiti. Our analytical procedure offers a framework for practicing street reading of a specific visual public phenomenon and, in particular, reveals characteristics of stenciling and its contents. The findings challenge arguments which assume a strong relation between stenciling and political involvement. In our case study, most stencil graffiti appear to be cryptic, personal tags and advertisements. Only a small proportion of stencil graffiti actually address current political issues or contain propaganda.

Key Words: Stencil graffiti; street reading; visual content analysis; street art; graffiti; stenciling

论文摘要

型版涂鸦是包含多样内容的街头视觉文化。此类涂鸦内容可通过街头观察予以解读。作为研究特定环境下通俗文化的一种方法，街头观察可对符号、标志和文字信息等日常交流手段进行解析。这篇论文将街头观察和内容分析相结合，对型版涂鸦进行考查和分类。在针对特定公共视觉现象实施街头观察，特别是揭示型版喷刷的特点内容两方面，这一分析程序提供了有效框架。就型版喷刷大多涉及政治这一说法，此文提出不同见解。案例研究显示，大多数型版涂鸦都包含隐喻、个人标签和广告内容。只有一小部分涉及时事政治或包含宣传信息。

关键词：型版涂鸦；街头观察；内容分析；街头艺术；涂鸦；型版喷刷

Abstract

Stencils (Schablonengraffitis) sind visuelle Interventionen mit verschiedenen Inhalten auf den Straßen. Diese Inhalte können mittels „Street Reading", einer Methode zur Untersuchung kontextspezifischer Alltagskulturen, eruiert werden. Die Methode untersucht Kommunikationsmittel wie Zeichen, Textnachrichten und Symbole, die in alltäglichen Interaktionen verwendet werden. In unserer Studie haben wir "Street Reading" mit einer Inhaltsanalyse mit dem Ziel kombiniert, Stencils zu studieren und zu klassifizieren. Unsere Vorgehensweise bietet ein Rahmenwerk, um mit Hilfe des "Street Readings" ein spezifisches öffentliches visuelles Phänomen zu analysieren und die Besonderheiten und Inhalte des Stencilings zu verdeutlichen. Die Resultate stellen lange vermutete Verbindungen zwischen Stenciling und politischem Engagement in Frage. In unserer Fallstudie haben wir festgestellt, dass die meisten Stencils kryptisch, Signaturen oder Werbung sind.Die Resultate stellen lange vermutete Verbindungen von Stencilling und politischem Engagement in Frage. In unserer Fallstudie haben wir festgestellt, dass die meisten Stencils kryptisch, persönlich motiviert oder Werbung sind. Nur ein kleiner Teil der Stencils widmet sich aktuellen politischen Themen oder einer gewissen Propaganda.

Stenciling: Stencils (Schablonengraffiti); Street Reading; Inhaltsanalyse; Strassenkunst; Graffiti; Stencilling

From the perspective of urban studies, spatiality is socially produced (i.e. social space). Architecture and urban planning constitute space-related meanings. Functional spaces like private houses, public buildings or public spaces induce specific connotations and behavioral options. Additionally, the functionally characterized urban space is superimposed by meanings related to everyday cultures. The latter produce their own understanding of urban environments. For this reason, urban studies are interested in examining the everyday-specific appropriation of urban space. The focus here is to reconstruct environment-specific everyday cultures or particular forms of urban usurpation through unauthorized signs, texts and pictures.

Prominent research about unofficial forms of urban usurpation, for example, has focused on writing, etching, drawing, or spraying graffiti[1] on public surfaces. Graffiti have been studied for various reasons since people started using it as a form of anonymous, visual dialog for the purpose of demarcating a territory (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974), constituting an identity (Carrington 2009) and reflecting on community concerns (Reisner 1971) or specific events (Klingman and Shalev, 2001). Nonetheless, the term graffiti comprises various distinct forms of expressions like parole graffiti, signatures and stencil graffiti. Whereas studies have examined written and drawn graffiti (Reisner 1971; Klingman and Shalev, 2001) and signatures (Ley and Cybriwsky 1974; Macdonald 2002; Snyder 2009), little is known about stencil graffiti.

Stencil graffiti are created with paint and a template for designing contrastive and reductive pictures and texts. First appearances have been acknowledged on the wall of the Cosquer cave near Marseilles on the south coast of France. Hand stencils in the cave were produced around 25,000 BC. Throughout history, stencil graffiti occurred alongside political propaganda and trading activities and was also used for decorative and artistic purposes. With the upcoming of street art as a new form of urban art (Austin 2010), stencil graffiti were documented in many magazines, books and websites. These collections present a wide variety of images and contents and offer some general remarks on stencil graffiti. However, systematic approaches and investigations are still lacking.

The main problem is that stencil collections are using material from around the world and are focusing on the variations instead of providing an in-depth analysis (Howze 2008; MacPhee 2004; Manco 2002). Most empirical studies on stencil graffiti, consequently, focus on local contexts for empirically and methodically controlled investigations (Figueroa-Saaverda 2007; Kane 2009; McGaw 2008; Tsilimpounidi/Walsh 2010). They examine stencil graffiti and its makers based on material collections and interviews. Usually, such material collections are restricted to a few case studies and tend to predominantly serve illustrative purposes instead of being assembled for systematic investigations.

Our study offers a systematic exploration of stencil graffiti using the method of "street reading" (Alber 1997; Schubert 2005; Sinclair 1997). Street reading was established to explore environment-specific everyday cultures by examining communication devices like signs, text messages and symbols used in everyday interactions. Apart from street reading, another similar approach to the culture of graffiti writers is described as "reading the walls" (Macdonald 2002; Snyder 2009). Reading the walls means to decipher stylish signatures. Of course, such reading requires insider knowledge about graffiti writers and their styles. In contrast to graffiti writing, stencil graffiti are addressed to the public using pointed, reduced icons and text messages. In many cases, the communication with stencil graffiti is even based on commonly known signs, phrases, and pictures. It is argued that most stencil graffiti present short-term political issues, that they are deployed for the purpose of mobilizing demonstrations and social movements and propagating political ideologies (Chaffee 1993; Manco 2002; Rafferty 1991; Tsilimpounidi/Walsh 2010). For these reasons, everyone can usually read stencil images and texts. For content analysis purposes, we therefore decided to identify such elements in stencil graffiti and use them for classifying stencil graffiti.

Hence, our first aim is to offer an analytical procedure for a systematic approach to unsanctioned visual materials on urban surfaces. Secondly, we provide findings about stencil appearances in the street and about the stencil makers' intentions. Here, we focus on the question of what the contents and frequencies reveal about the stencil makers and whether there is any evidence of strong political involvement.

Street reading and different kinds of meaning

Street reading focuses on the messages conveyed through inscriptions in the architecture or street arrangements, pedestrian ways, trees, lamps, signposts etc. (Alber 1997; Schubert 2005). Apart from the messages

inherent in urban planning and development, urban space is also loaded with other signs and symbols. Shop owners add decorations, instructions or advertisements, pedestrians leave messages (i.e. graffiti, stickers, notes) on lampposts, windows and walls or present certain styles or company logos on clothes. All these messages produce an environment-specific everyday culture, which can be observed and investigated during street reading.

In his New York study, Alber (1997) documented street messages by collecting symbols and inscriptions in urban spaces. For this purpose, he defined street messages as all the text-based artefacts in the streets. This included graffiti, posters, stickers, postings, traffic signs, advertisements and even portable messages on clothes, cars or shopping bags. He then related the text content with media forms and spatial contexts in order to reveal specific everyday cultures in different streets, places or neighborhoods.

Consequently, street reading is used to synchronically explore an environment-specific culture to its full extent. Its objective is a comprehensive description of space-related cultures. Less attention is paid to specific communication devices and how they change over time. Unsanctioned texts like graffiti, in particular, are categorized as being indicative of an identification with a specific neighborhood or social group (Alber 1997; Schubert 2005) - or are even perceived as being altogether "meaningless" (Sinclair 1997: 3). Carrington (2009) took a different approach. She collected photographs, video footages, documentary data and field notes in selected streets and communities in the USA, the UK and Australia, concentrating on graffiti texts. However, she was not interested in environment-specific interrelations and only wrote about graffiti texts in general. In our research, we combined the street reading approach with content analysis, thereby offering an analytical procedure for studying and classifying stencil graffiti. As a consequence, the research objective shifts the focus from describing an environment-specific culture to achieving a categorical-functional understanding of the usage of a communication device like stencil graffiti.

The approach of street reading can also be used for investigating specific visual phenomena in public spaces. However, focusing on a particular visual communication device excludes all others. If we concentrate solely on graffiti stencils, any official and authorized street messages like signposts, landmarks, or advertising on billboards are ignored. But since stencil graffiti are reduced to pointed messages for communicating with the public (Manco 2002; Rafferty 1991), it should be possible to identify various 'objective meanings' (Mannheim 1964). In his theoretical outlines of documentary interpretations, Mannheim (1964) distinguished between three kinds of meaning: objective, intentional, and documentary. Objective meaning is shared knowledge necessary for understanding and acting in everyday life and other spheres like art, science or trade. Such knowledge is generally given with languages and is independent from individual intentions or experiences. In contrast, an individual perspective characterizes intentional meanings. Such meaning is defined by what is individually and consciously intended. Documentary meaning, however, is not given with intentions but is documented in practices as a specific 'habitus'. Hence, the documentary meaning is revealed by examining how people speak or act, which is never coincidental and appears in countless variations. Methodically speaking, instead of concentrating on *what* is being said or produced, the focus is on *how* something is being said or created (Mannheim 1964: 134). For instance, focusing on *how* stencil graffiti are designed offers insights about the habitual orientations of stencil makers. The usage of a low-tech, easy-to-use and cost-effective reproductive technology was interpreted as stencil makers rejecting and counteracting a high-tech, digitalized world by reanimating such old-fashioned reproductive tools (Carrington 2009). Or that, by copying utilitarian styles and typography, they mimic official texts or advertisement in order to alter dominant meanings and disrupt everyday activities (Brisman 2010; Manco 2002; Rafferty 1991; Visconti et al. 2010). Both practices indicate a provocative orientation contra the contemporary structures and ideologies of the consumer society.

In this article, we focus on the content or "objective meaning" of stencil graffiti. Thus, we investigate the content of materially disseminated stencils. Of course, street reading hardly offers any profound information on individual intentions. Examining the intentional meaning would require in-depth analysis of stencil makers' biographical experiences, their objectives and creations. However, street reading

generates data about visual occurrences of stencil graffiti on urban space which permits suggestions about related intentions.

Stencil graffiti are grouped into a number of categories: abstract, figurative, faces, characters, personal tags, animals, political, religious and so on (i.e., Howze 2008; MacPhee 2004; Manco 2002). In all these categories, stencil graffiti are differentiated and sorted according to what is typically (objectively) known as a face, an animal or a political icon. However, it is difficult to understand why such stencil graffiti of a face, words or animal were sprayed onto an urban surface just by looking at them. Nonetheless, some icons or phrases have functional relations representing specific ideas and world views. As a consequence, if such symbols and signs are used in stencil graffiti, they provide information about the purposes for which they are frequently employed. For instance, stencil makers who reproduce political icons or phrases in the public, communicate and confirm underlying ideologies. Such icons, like a five-pointed star or the portrait of Che Guevara, can be deciphered in any context. Their meanings would not change if they are put in the street, in a gallery or a living room. Of course, the meaning may change along with a change of colors or shape, like a black or red raised fist, but a raised fist still is a revolutionary icon and symbol. Even so, proper names are more than conventional signs or words. They intend to bring up memories of specific events, groups or products which allow for conclusions about their usage with stencil graffiti. For instance, stenciling a brand for advertising purposes is a well-established guerrilla-marketing practice[2].

The literature on stencil graffiti and street art suggests four different types of objective functional contents. Beside formal classifications of stencil graffiti contents into abstract, figurative or animalistic, there also are functional categories of political content, advertisements, personal tags and religious symbols (Howze, 2008; MacPhee, 2004; Manco, 2002). Political stencils represent and propagate different utopian and ideological convictions ranging from anarchist to far right-wing ideas. Advertisements with stencil graffiti are intended to appeal to consumer groups attracted to graffiti writing and street art. Graffiti writers use letter combinations as personal tags (graffiti writer's signature) in order to gain fame and respect from other graffiti writers for skilled stylized signatures with a high spatial density or placement in spectacular places.

Finally, religious emblems and symbols in stencil graffiti communicate specific commitments or beliefs to onlookers.

Data and Method

For our urban study, we selected and examined an urban area in the East German city of Leipzig. Of course, Leipzig is not Berlin or New York. Both cities are relevant and important for the evolution of street art and graffiti writing. Nonetheless, Leipzig – like most other places – combines certain conditions and characteristics. It has a buoyant graffiti writing culture and an active street art community. We therefore visited different neighborhoods of Leipzig, identifying stencil activities. Subsequently, we selected an area of 1,000 x 1,750 meters with a high frequency of occurrences. Within the selected neighborhood, most stencil graffiti appear along the main road and in the lower part. The chosen neighborhood (see Map 1) is a residential area with pubs, shops, restaurants, an arthouse cinema and clubs along the main road (gray section). The typical milieu is a mixture of students and educated, relatively affluent residents. There are hardly any residents with a migrant background. The neighborhood is south of the inner city and borders on media broadcast companies and garden plots in the east and a highway in the west. At the lower end, the selected area merges into a sub-culturally influenced district.

A long-term documentation of stencil graffiti activities was planned in 2006. The documentation started in autumn and was repeated in the following years at around the same time. Autumn was selected because stencil activities decrease with the arrival of the first cold days and frosty nights. Most stencil graffiti appeared throughout spring and summer. After a period of five years, documentation ended in 2010.

Between 2006 and 2010, all detected stencil graffiti were digitally recorded and archived. Pictures were taken, and further data was recorded about locations, used materials, chosen surfaces and peculiarities. The latter information was useful for reflections based on the photographs, particularly since knowledge about the stencil graffiti's locations, materials or painted surfaces are not evident in a picture.

Moreover, observation and recording was restricted to stencil graffiti in openly accessible public spaces. Shop names, advertisements and decorations based on stencil reproductions were counted as being legal

and authorized and, therefore, excluded from the sample. Additionally, pedestrian visibility defined accessible public space. Thus, the research assistants stayed on the sidewalks and did not enter backyards or open doors.

In the area, seven trained observers worked together to document stencil graffiti activities. All research assistants learned how to identify stencils and document their findings. Such measures were necessary because of the difficulty sometimes incurred in spotting stencil graffiti due to their small size and unexpected places of occurrence. Most research assistants participated in all or at least most recordings.

Hence, our documentation offers the opportunity to examine stencil graffiti diachronically and synchronically. Records and data collections offer information about content variations and alterations. In addition, we conducted semi-structured interviews (Ruben/Ruben, 1995) with stencil makers about their practices and experiences. The interviews helped us to gather information about the environment-specific context and the stencillers' intentions.

Stencil graffiti contents

Over a span of five years, we recorded 2924 stencil graffiti with 584 different contents in our selected area. A total of 488 stencil graffiti with 235 different contents were initially documented when we started in 2006. New contents were added in the following years: 94 different contents in 2007, 95 in 2008, 64 in 2009, and 96 in 2010. This makes an average of around 87 new contents every year and documents stencil graffiti activities throughout the observed time period. Thus, stencil activities continued despite statements of local stencil makers claiming that street art interventions peaked in 2005.

In our field study, we collected stencil graffiti which could be differentiated into the categories of "cryptic", "political", "personal tag" and "advertisement" (Table 1). We did not find contents related to the world religions of Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism or Judaism.[3]

Map 1: Street map of the designated area in Leipzig
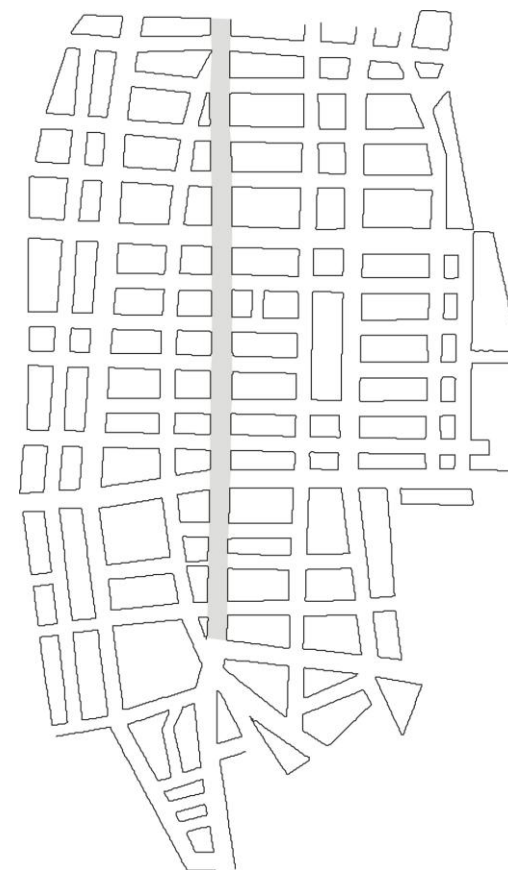
However, almost half of the stencil graffiti (43,8%) fall into the category of cryptic stencils. Cryptic stencils are ambiguous. In contrast to advertisements and political stencils, which have a clear message, they are open to different readings. For instance, the flower shown in Figure 1 is unspecific. It is neither the classical icon of a rose, a symbol of love in contemporary western cultures or a holy flower in different religions, nor the icon of a carnation worn by communists during the May parade. The flower is placed on eye level beside the entrance of a residential

house in a street off the main road. Thus, its producer may have dedicated the flower to someone living inside the house. However, it is also possible that he or she reacted to the personal tag on the left, just sprayed the flower icon because the motif was at hand, or it was part of a campaign to reanimate and embellish the grey urban space with wild colorful animals and flowers – like the French street artists group 'Nice Art'[4] did in Paris (Metze-Prou/Van Treeck, 2000). But reconstructing such intentional meanings would require information about the stencil maker and his or her ideas. Insofar, most stencil graffiti in our selected area were cryptic and left open to what end such stencils were placed. At the very least, we would argue that aesthetically elaborate cryptic stencils with references to art history indicate artistic intentions.

Table 1: Frequencies of stencil graffiti contents

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percentage	Cumulated Percentage
Valid	Cryptic	1281	43,8	43,8	43,8
	Personal tag	864	29,5	29,5	73,4
	Political	552	18,9	18,9	92,2
	Advertisement	227	7,8	7,8	100,0
	Total	2924	100,0	100,0	

Personal tags[5] constitute the next group, having a proportion of almost one third of all stencil graffiti. Personal tags are personal creations, like AOS or MKS (Figure 3). Graffiti writers produce pseudonyms in the form of stylish signatures and disseminate them on a massive scale in order to gain respect and fame within the graffiti writer community (Castleman, 1984; Lachmann, 1988). The signature MKS, for example, was placed on eye level along a highly frequented traffic route. The many cars and pedestrians passing by each day warrant high publicity for the personal tag. Nonetheless, one has to note that most stenciled personal tags in the selected neighborhood appear on stickers and are placed on downpipes or other plane surfaces. According to the high proportion of personal tags in the area, stencil graffiti seem to be a popular form for disseminating graffiti writings. Insofar, our study confirms observations

about graffiti writing claiming that graffiti writers also include techniques beyond free hand creations with aerosol cans (Snyder 2009). He reported about the usage of multiple techniques and materials like stencils or paint rollers in the post-subway graffiti writing culture in New York City.[6]

Figure 1: An example for cryptic stencil graffiti. The flower was found on an old residential house in a calm street in 2008.

Stencil graffiti with political content make up 18,9% of the analyzed sample of stencil graffiti. Political messages often consist of reduced political text messages and symbolic icons. Such stencil graffiti propagate alternative political ideologies (i.e. anarchist, punk and vegan), mobilize for political actions like demonstrations or are reflexive commentary with the intent of enlightening pedestrians. However, the relatively small proportion of stencils with political content is quite the opposite of how they are perceived and presented – "often highly political" (Carrington 2009: 414), "a form of heightened politicality" (Kane, 2007: 14) or more generally "street art as one medium of political expression" (Chaffee 1993: 4). Many studies on stencil graffiti highlight relations between stencils and political ideas. Some authors emphasize links to political movements like anarchists and punks (Howze, 2008; MacPhee, 2004;

Manco, 2002), while others just concentrate on stencil graffiti with political content related to specific events like the Argentina crisis in 2001 (Indij 2007; Kane 2007) or the Iraq war in 2003 (Mathieson, 2007).

However, in our selected neighborhood in the city of Leipzig, political content plays a minor role. Most stencil graffiti present cryptic contents or personal tags. The sample of political stencils itself is dominated by those propagating well-known ideological statements and ideas (see Figure 4). They appeal to fight right-wing extremism, to deny nationalism, to combat increased surveillance, to protect our environment or to go vegan.[7] Furthermore, there are some political contents that occurred in reaction to specific political events. Different stencils informed about demonstrations, called to support marginal projects or contributed to political debates like the one about destroying hijacked airplanes in 2007. A stenciled commentary on this debate, for example, was 'Shooting Schäuble[8]'. For this reason, stencil graffiti are at least an option to investigate low-profile public communication with political content – similar to Chaffee's argument about street art as "a barometer that registers the spectrum of thinking":

> Street art's importance can be seen in repressive regimes where authoritarian systems attempt to reduce public space, including opposition street graphics. Street art breaks the conspiracy of silence. Like the press, one role of street art is to form social consciousness. In authoritarian systems where outlets for free expressions are limited, it is one of the few gauges of political sentiments (Chaffee 1993: 4)

Even so, in more open systems, stencil graffiti add viewpoints and perspectives to political and public discourses (Tsilimpounidi and Walsh 2010). Hence, with street reading one can detect environment-specific protest themes that are more or less unnoticed in political or mass media discourses. Street art media like stencil graffiti, in particular, are used to bring locally based issues unsanctioned into the public.

In Leipzig, for example, stencillers had run a campaign against local policies to prohibit unauthorized parties under traffic bridges (Figure 5). Young people had started to organize non-profit open-air parties beneath bridges crossing empty flood basins. When such events became popular, the police ended up forbidding them. The local press neither reported in any depth nor discussed the conflict between young people's

interest to create niches and the police that enforced their order. The conflict was, instead, made public through stencil graffiti that proclaimed "Free bridges!". The statement reveals the position of young people to preserve free, unused public space for own activities. They had discovered bridges (especially the space under bridges) as places that are outside of regular and controlled environments. It provided a niche for self-organized and unsanctioned activities based on young people's own codes. Bridges offered some freedom that they now wanted back.

Figure 2: An example for advertisement using stencil graffiti. The movie ad "28 weeks later" was spotted on a distribution box close to a junction along the main road in 2007.

Figure 3: The exemplary personal tag "MKS" was found on an old building along a traffic road crossing the main road in 2006.

Figure 4: A typical stencil graffiti that states an ideological message is "Let's fight white pride". It was seen on a new building in a side street off the main road in 2008.
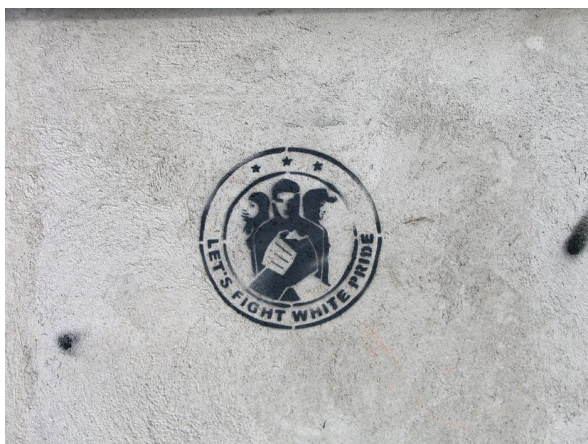

Figure 5: The stencil graffiti "Free bridges" was sprayed on eye level and found in a small street in 2010.

Figure 6: The short version "Chemie" for the soccer club BSG Chemie Leipzig was seen in 2010 on a new building in a side street.

The smallest proportion of recorded stencil graffiti (7.8%) consists of advertisements. Stencil graffiti advertisements promote a commercial product (Figure 2) or a proper name (i.e. "Chemie", a local soccer club). The use of illegal stencils is a form of guerrilla marketing (Droney 2010; Levinson, 1989) usually employed by small companies to attract new consumer groups or to compete with market leaders. However, companies do not necessarily run such campaigns with stencil graffiti because stencil makers themselves are "human pop-culture copy machines" (MacPhee, 2004: 47) willing to market brand names (Droney 2010).

In our case study, apart from some music and movie ads, most advertising was for a local soccer club with the name BSG Chemie Leipzig (Figure 6). Its enthusiastic supporters spray the signature "BSG" or "Chemie" all over the city. The supporters' strong involvement is related to the ups and downs of the soccer club. Its name appeared for the first time in 1963 when BSG Chemie was established as a second league team. Surprisingly, in its first season the so-called 'leftovers of Leipzig' became the best GDR[9] soccer team. Ever since, the soccer club played a minor role, but the self-image of being 'underdogs' was born. After German reunification, BSG was dissolved and re-established to start off again in the bottom league. Today, it is mostly young supporters who prepare and disseminate visual representations of the BSG Chemie Leipzig.

So far we have discussed the frequency of the stencil graffiti contents in a summarized manner. In addition, it is of interest to see how the number of stencil graffiti with certain contents changes over the observation period since differences document shifting trends using the stencil technique. Diagram 1 shows changes in total numbers of the four content groups between 2006 and 2010. Furthermore, we have calculated regression lines for each content group[10] in order to give evidence to the intensity and the significance of the changes.

In total, the numbers of stencil graffiti contents documented between 2006 and 2010 clearly change and show some tendencies. While cryptic stencils are an exception with no clear tendency, all proportions have altered significantly with a probability error of less than 1%. For instance, the number of advertisements increased from 11 to 95. Employing

regression analysis reveals a standardized Beta coefficient of 0.17**, which marks the strongest increase of all content groups. Personal tags, on the other hand, decreased in the same period by 46 documented stencils (Beta -0.15**). Nonetheless, significant minor deviations occurred with regard to political contents. During our documentation, the number of political icons and text messages within all contents grew from 71 to 163 (Beta 0.09**). Stencil makers, thus, continuously created stencils with advertising, political, and cryptic contents. The number of stencils with political content and those used for promotion had even increased. In contrast, new appearances of personal tags were lacking after many downpipes and plane surfaces were cleaned up during the years.

Diagram 1: Stencil graffiti content: total numbers and changes
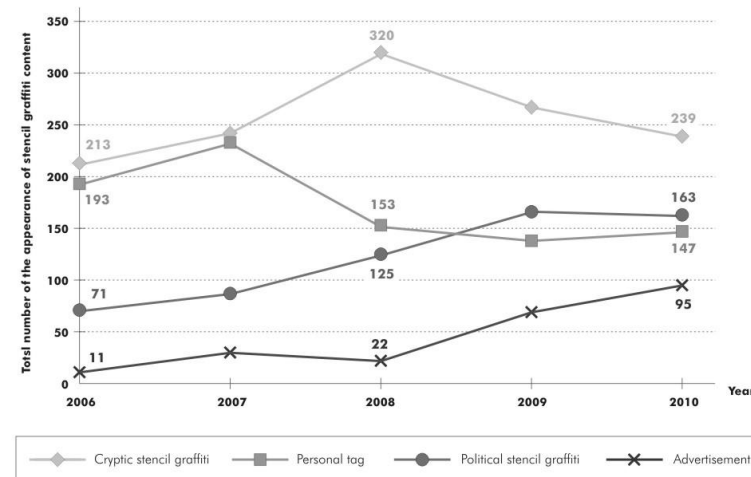
The changes occurred with the rising popularity of street art. Local street artists mentioned increased activities at the end of the 20th century and a peak around the year 2005. Leipzig's graffiti writers were one of the first groups who recognized the new occurrences:

> Well, I started as a writer who was trying to make a name for himself and find a particular style in order to take part in this

game in this city, in this neighborhood and see how one would compare to others and somehow make a colorful splash in the cityscape. The first street art appeared in the late 90's. It was somehow different from writing, which was the classical style (Graffiti Writer).

Some graffiti writers even have begun to experiment with stencils and aerosol cans and produced self-made stickers:

> I don't make any unique stickers; I'm involved in the mass production of craftwork. How should I put it? It's a kind of art design, I produce my motif a thousand times over and leave it in the locations I've been to. It's kind of a graffiti way of saying that you live in a particular place and that you can follow the trail of the person leaving the name as he moves around (Graffiti Writer).

Today, most self-made stickers are replaced by those created professionally. For the purpose of dissemination on a massive scale, competing graffiti writer crews use glossy, computer-processed stickers. Insofar, self-made and stenciled stickers have been an episode in Leipzig's graffiti writer community.

The supporters of the local soccer club BSG Chemie Leipzig, in contrast, only started with street interventions in recent years. Activities increased when more and more young supporters got involved:

> There were two people who had already painted graffiti privately. And they simply thought: let's paint a 'Chemie' somewhere [...] They probably painted three pictures a year and were totally happy with that. And then the young people came who were a bit bored and thought: "let us show more of 'Chemie' in Leipzig. We want to do more." So we started to make texts. We bought ink markers, wrote on the walls of houses, on electricity junction boxes and everywhere else. And, of course, the personal environment was also an influence. People became aware of the existence of stencils, writings, chrome and black, colorful pieces and rolled writings. And then, at some stage, the first 'Chemie' stencil was produced (BSG supporter).

Finally, the growing number of political content indicates that communicating such messages is becoming increasingly popular with stencil makers. But it is unclear whether active, experienced stencil makers have become more politically involved or if the number of political content increased due to novice stencil makers. In interviews with stencil makers, we often heard that it is the newcomers in particular who use prefabricated (political) contents for their first stencil graffiti. For example, a street artist said that one of his first self-produced and sprayed street interventions was a stencil with the following political content:

> It was a depiction of Hitler putting a gun in his mouth and firing. The text read "Follow your Leader". The motif was nothing new, it had been given to me at a demo. On a small sticker. From the sticker, I made the stencil (Street artist).

Like other stencillers who have been active for a long time, he today finds overt political contents bromidic and ordinary. He now has more aspiration to produce own creations. Hence, stencil graffiti with political content were just an episode in his early career as a street artist. Based on such statements, we suggest that the growing number of political contents indicate an increase of newcomers in recent years.

Discussion and conclusion

The goal of street reading, as introduced by Alber (1997), is the reconstruction of everyday cultures in a specific area, place, or quarter. His approach relies on text-based artifacts such as graffiti, stickers, postings, traffic signs or advertisements. In our case study, we concentrated on a particular artifact: stencil graffiti. As a consequence, we had to deal with anonymously placed stencils, which also include images and text-based artifacts. It is difficult to examine all stencil graffiti's meanings without speaking to all the stencil makers who produced them. However, it is almost impossible to find and interview all these artists. Therefore, we used a different approach to investigate the stencil graffiti's objective meanings. Existing knowledge about stencil graffiti in the literature was helpful in grouping the material into the categories cryptic, personal tag, political, and advertising. Such information, in particular, could be used to identify functional relations between the deployment of stencils and commercial promotion or

political propaganda. In order to gather further information, we interviewed some locally active stencil makers. Finally, content frequencies offer insights into stencil makers' use of the street environment as well as their intentions.

Our findings demonstrate that stencil makers disseminate personal tags, advertisements as well as cryptic and political contents. They use stencil graffiti to distribute a personal tag in the same way as graffiti writers do. In this regard, one could argue that stencil makers share the orientations and intentions of the graffiti writing culture creating stylized signatures, disseminating it massively, and gaining fame and respect for it from other graffiti writers (Lachmann, 1988; Snyder, 2009). The placement of political messages come close to what is often said about stencil makers: it seems that due to the lack of resources and power, political activists utilize stencil graffiti to issue alternative discourses (Chaffee 1993; Figueroa-Saaverda, 2007; Kane, 2009; Manco, 2002). Another type of content is for advertising purposes, which indicates that stencil makers practice guerrilla marketing. They illicitly allocate advertisements or place brand names to gain access to specific consumer groups and supporters (Borghini et al., 2010; Droney, 2010). Finally, there are stencil graffiti with cryptic contents. The meanings of such stencils are unclear because different readings are possible. They could be placed for aesthetic, self-expressive, destructive or other purposes.

Furthermore, our findings oppose a widely perceived and assumed usage of the stencil medium for political propaganda purposes (Chaffee 1993; Kane 2009; Rafferty 1991; Tsilimpounidi/Walsh 2010). The small proportion of stencil graffiti with political content (from 14.5% to 25.3% in five years) suggests its minor relevance for politically committed groups and individuals. Of course, there are stencils raising and circulating issues on social problems and propagating political ideologies, but most stencils are disseminated with other than political intentions. In addition, experienced street artists suggest that it is the mostly street art newcomers who use more overt political contents. Hence, the rising proportion of political stencils seems to indicate an increased number of novices rather than a growing political consciousness. Nonetheless, street reading enables researchers to detect environment-specific protest themes that go more or less unnoticed in political or mass media discourses. Insofar, street reading offers protest researchers an additional analytic procedure for investigating low profile and environment-specific protest themes.

Hence, street reading as a visual sociological method can enrich our understanding of various visual phenomena in urban spaces. Of course, our local case study and its results are restricted to the selected neighborhood of the city of Leipzig in which the investigation was carried out. Further research is necessary to investigate the relationship between the contents and environmental change. One fruitful dimension could be a comparison of neighborhoods with different degrees of prosperity and specialization as well as urban vs. countryside areas. But our study, which employs the street reading technique in combination with content analysis, shows what can be learned about such visual phenomena on urban surfaces which are not given with participant observation or interview methods (Philipps, 2012). Firstly, interviews offer insights into individual world views and interpretations. People may report about their practices, but street reading provides data about actually performed practices. The documentation of produced stencil contents allows comparative contrasting with individually stated observations. They can verify and support such individual statements or disclose contradictions which provide further grounds for interpretations. Secondly, participant observations are based on written protocols with the consequence that the interpretation of data depends on subjective descriptions. Precautions can be taken to reduce observer bias using negative case analysis or collecting quantitative data. It is important to ensure comprehensible and methodically controlled interpretations through the employment of different methodical strategies. Street reading is such an additional methodical approach to improve interpretation accuracy. Data collected using street reading is independent from the subjective perception of a single researcher. Such data can be saved in an archive and is open to different interpretations by different researchers. And finally, street reading is not restricted to the study of stencil graffiti. During research about visual phenomena on urban spaces, specific forms of expression can be singled out and studied independently. For instance, it is possible to focus on street art media like stickers, posters, or postings. These results could be compared with our findings about stencil graffiti and lead to an enhanced understanding of unauthorized street interventions.

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Endnotes

[1] Graffiti is plural for graffito.

[2] Guerrilla-marketing practices aim to promote a brand or product using unexpected methods, procedures and places.

[3] An exception is a stencil graffiti depicting the lion of Judah. The lion is a symbol of the Rastafarian movement.

[4] 'Nice Art' were mostly Ariane Pasco and Dominique Decobecq who operated in the streets of Paris in the end of the 1980s. They placed animals like dinosaurs, pandas, or ostriches on walls with the intention to cover the urban surface with exotic flora and fauna.

[5] Graffiti writer's personal tags were identified through stylish signatures and massive appearances, and were crosschecked on web homepages promoting local graffiti writers (i.e., www.farbsucht.org).

[6] For that reason it is difficult to distinguish between graffiti writing and street art. Austin (2010) described street art in contrast to graffiti writing as an urban art with a more expanded variety. But then it is unclear when to speak of graffiti writing and when of street art. Hence, more characteristics and aspects are required for drawing a distinction between graffiti writing and street art.

[7] In the neighborhood of students and educated, relatively affluent residents we did not find any right-wing stencil contents. We assume that the close proximity of an alternative and sub-culturally influenced district has an influence on the stencil contents. However, Lynn and Lea (2005) only found few racist graffiti contents in an area of Glasgow (Scotland) known for the xenophobic attitudes of its inhabitants.

[8] Wolfgang Schäuble, minister of the interior from 2005 to 2009, was heating up the debate with his proposition shooting hijacked airplanes.

[9] German Democratic Republic, the Eastern part of Germany until reunification in 1989.

[10] The regressions were calculated separately for each content group since the proportions of the content groups are not independent. The content variables were dichotomized in order to calculate the regression line relative to the total number of stencils.