



STYLE WARS *A Document Of Graffiti Time*

TEXT Jens Pacholsky | PHOTOS Henry Chalfant

»They call themselves writers because that's what they do. They write their names among other things, everywhere – names they've been given or have chosen for themselves.« (Kommentator aus »Style Wars«)

When the film producer Tony Silver and Henry Chalfant started to collect material for their documentary »Style Wars«, they couldn't know that the phenomenon of graffiti they wanted to document, was already on the downward spiral of its initial development, even though it still would take graffiti many years to become seriously recognised – particularly in Europe. Henry Chalfant had been around as a graffiti photographer for three years in New York at that time, before he actually met a writer personally, who introduced him to others at the Writers Bench, where writers gathered to exchange new styles and figures. That was 1981. One year later the film came into existence.

From single lines to a graphic revolution

It all had started twelve years ago. With Take 183 in 1970 the first tag appeared in and on trains of the city. When people realised that this tag was actually the name of a kid named Taki living in 183rd Street in Washington Heights, the ghetto kids became conscious that with these signings they could make something possible that had never been possible for them before. Getting attention and respect way beyond the boundaries of their own street or district. A communication with kindred spirits over large distances and a battle with potential competitors without direct confrontation. Also the chance for a competition that lacked violence and was amazingly cool at the same moment. Within a short while many other tags like Papo 184, Stitch and Eva 62 appeared on the trains. Over the following years the small simple signings the tags that got applied in and on trains in an act of fast »bombing« – evolved to new graphic forms of expression, from the round Bubble Letters to the Wild Styles with their high level of camouflage. The aim was the establishing of original styles and the transport of ones graphically wrapped name through districts the kids generally never came to; to people that would never even recognise one. At this time the house walls were out of question for the young writer. It was about the public transport system that was able to keep ones name and legend moving, at least for a moment. »Going all-city« says the young writer Skeme. »What we have is a whole miserable sub-culture« his mother counters, who is firing against the writers' self-confidence and self-justice throughout the whole film with a mixture of parental lack of understanding and honest angst for her son.

And this is a not to be underestimated merit of Tony Silver's and Henry Chalfant's film. It doesn't value. The different writers' opinions get documented as un-commentated as the view of then New York's Mayor Edward Koch, the anger of Detective Bernie Jacobs of the Metropolitan Transit Authority and partly disgust of the civilians that are facing the graffiti day in and day out. The proud announcement of Skeme's three-wagon piece »All you see is crime in the city« is countered by

Bernie Jacobs quite logic vandalism argument »Graffiti is the application of a medium on a surface.« Kase 2, the one-armed master of Wild Style graffiti, even recognises the dichotomy of his doing when he explains »People say 'What you write on trains? Oh you vandalism!' and all that. Yeah, I am vandalising all right, but still in general I know what I am doing. I did something to make your eyes open up, right.« And in a twisted moment even Mayor Edward Koch can't hide his pride when he gets handed over a photograph of a wagon-wide graffiti reading »Dump Koch«.

For Silver and Chalfant it's not about a certain perspective. It's more about the effort to catch this moment of time with all its connection between graffiti, breaking (with the Rock Steady Crew being a dignified representative in »Style Wars«) and Rap music, with all the different perspectives and conflict points existing.

Lines crossing

At the same time this particular moment is the drama the film is built upon. In 1982 the Metropolitan Transit Authority had already reacted on ten years of bombing. The yards got surrounded by barbed-wired double-fences that were guarded by dogs. Police went on guard on stations and in tunnels. The first »Graffiti died« found its way on a train. The trains got moved more frequently, so there was hardly enough time to finish a big, colorful piece. »[The Metropolitan Transit Authority] invented the white elephant. It still gets, well, they weren't bombed, but they got little mosquito bites. Call it whatever you want«, writer Iz recapitulates and returns the authorities actions with the argument, the trains were looking even worse now than they did before all that repression of graffiti. Bombed trains got cleaned with strong acidic cleaning emulsions and returned on line with a puke-like color. The train bombing had become nearly impossible, now forcing the writer to use the static space of house walls, where the art of graffiti lost its dynamic, its initial intention.

Furthermore, the commercialisation of graffiti was starting to put up its tents. Gallerists liked the idea of this sort of investment, looking for something new and hot. The writer on the other hand, as well as breaker and rapper saw their long awaited chance to actually earn money with their passion. Walls and trains got exchanged for a canvas, and it doesn't miss out the feeling of being coned when a gallerist happily claims: »The pieces were peeled off the train and put onto canvas. So you have the same energy, you have the same coloring, you have the same intensity and the real big piece.«

Betrayal from inside

But even within the graffiti movement conflicts, fights and signs of decease appeared. An until then totally unknown sprayer named Cap was challenging the writer scene by bombing the best writers' works like Skeme, Kase 2 and Seen UA with simple red-silver »Cap«-throw-ups in high frequency. Cap never defined himself as a writer. He was a bomber, »the king of bombing.« He was the counter part of those writers that had emancipated themselves from pure bombing and saw their work as some sort of original art. In some sense Cap had gone back to the very beginnings of bombing by only throwing up his name where ever he went. But he was crossing the very fragile border of not respecting the other writer's work. He wanted to fight a war one against all. »Especially with me, the objective is 'more'. Not the biggest and beautifullest, but more. It's like a little piece on every car is what counts. Not one whole car on every 30 cars that goes by.« It's this »Fuck-You« attitude and paradox thinking making Silver and Chalfant questioning Cap's appearance in the film. In the end they decide to include Cap for the simple reason of script, drama and film context and give Cap his first public appearance after years of his incognito game. In »Style Wars« his identity, the personality of this vandal of vandalism is revealed. It would have been interesting to know what had happened with Cap after the screening of the film.

Old and Fresh

Tony Silver's and Henry Chalfant's »Style Wars« has become a comprehensive contemporary document and still helps shade light into the general conditions under which this thing called HipHop happened to evolve. »Style Wars« is the moment before the final commercialisation of the movement around rap, breakdance and graffiti. »Style Wars« is – next to »Wild Style« – the first film considering the HipHop culture, having a great deal of influence on the following HipHop generation. The re-release therefore captures a retrospective of its own width of influence. It comes with a second DVD showing a comprehensive gallery of the film's writers and those that happened to become essential for the scene, as well as a brilliant 30-minute loop with about 200 graffiti photographs Henry Chalfant did during the years. Interviews with some writers that Silver and Chalfant conducted in 2002 also put the writers' personalities into retrospective. It's amazing seeing Seen UA still doing his thing (way more professional though) while Skeme is remembering his graffiti action with a smile and the status of a Sergeant Major of the US Army. Furthermore guest interviews with Goldie, Fab 5 Freddy and Guru testify the massive influence of the film and New York's graffiti movement on the second HipHop generation.

The Double-DVD Edition had originally been re-released in 2003 already but is now reappearing once again. »Style Wars« hasn't lost its freshness and fascination though. Tony Silver still is full of enthusiasm, thankfulness and understanding for this movement, that made even bigger circles in the world's art scenes than one would have guessed 25 years ago. And the actuality of graffiti aspects and intention hasn't changed a bit even though the spaces graffiti can be found are a different ones. »The subway was a garbage dump essentially. It was a vacuum of attention on the part of the civic authority of the city. And you could argue that what graffiti artists and writers and taggers were doing was they were filling this vacuum the way they knew how.« What counts for trains, is just as true as for many of our cities' public spaces.

:: *Style Wars, 2DVD (Public Art Films)*