

## Introduction

In an April 2006 interview with XXL Magazine American rapper Immortal Technique clearly distanced himself from the different labels that are usually attached to him within the media and hip hop circles: “I’ve heard 'Revolutionary Rapper,' 'Street Politician,' 'Political Rapper,' 'Activist MC,' all that shit. I pay it no mind”. While his lyrics are in many cases actually very explicitly political, which might contradict his aforementioned statement, he elaborates further that “[e]very aspect of this rap game is political, any veteran will tell you that. If you don’t like politics, stay the fuck outta the music business. Politics is the most gangsta shit in the world“.

The important role that the MC ascribes to politics in rap music is very much foregrounded in his own music, as mentioned before. On his second album, released independently on Viper Records in 2004 and titled *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, Immortal Technique engages openly with political topics ranging from politics in the music business to big-scale international politics. In the interview with XXL Magazine he explains: “That’s politics, nigga. [...] I just tell it like it is, like it was and how it could be [...]”. The album opens with an introduction, spoken by imprisoned African American activist and convicted murderer Mumia Abu Jamal: „You’re listening to Immortal Technique, and this is *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, bringing you the truth in the form of hip hop. From death row, this is Mumia Abu Jamal“ (“Revolutionary Intro“).

The aspect of truth that Abu Jamal mentions in the intro is one of the main themes recurring on the album. The importance that the artist ascribes to the 'truth' is also revealed in his interview with XXL Magazine when he is asked about snitching:

What about the CIA? They kill snitches. Who ever heard Col. Oliver North—who was funneling drug money and weapons to the Contras in Nicaragua—snitch on Reagan? Fuck outta here, nigga. You never heard of anything like that. You want us to snitch? You snitch, muthafucka. You want crimes solved? So do we. You want truth? Guess what? We do too. Malcolm X. Martin Luther King Jr. Tupac. Biggie. Agent 800. Gulf War Syndrome. Cancer clusters in the 'hood. JFK. 9/11. Anthrax. The circumstances behind the War in Iraq. The funding of the Taliban by America up to five months before Sept. 11, 2001. Start there.

In this short excerpt from the interview it already becomes clear whom the „truth in the form of hip hop“ that Immortal Technique presents on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* is directed against. The lyrics that the MC raps on his album serve a counterhegemonic function, meaning that they critique and dismantle

ideological operations that the ruling class uses to stay in power (cf. Edgar 164).

This paper will focus on the way in which Immortal Technique's counterhegemonic account of the 'truth' is constructed rhetorically on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. Due to limitations of space I have chosen four exemplary songs from the album that will be analyzed with regard to the way that counterhegemonic discourse is constructed in them by means of structuring and the political-ideological, social and artistic self-positioning that Immortal Technique conveys in them.

## **2. The Rhetoric Construction of Counterhegemonic Discourse on Immortal Technique's *Revolutionary Vol. 2***

### **2.1 Rhetoric, Rap Lyrics and Hegemony**

#### ***2.1.1 Rhetoric and its Relationship to Poetry through the Ages***

Rhetoric, in its most basic sense, has ever since the ancient times been „die Kunst der Meinungsbeeinflussung durch eine triftig argumentierende, sinnvoll gegliederte, stilistisch ansprechende und wirkungsvoll vorgetragene Rede zunächst im mündlichen [...] Kontext“ (Müller 576). More specifically, Aristotle in his *Rhetoric* „focused his discussion on the means and devices that an orator uses in order to achieve the intellectual and emotional effects on an audience“ that will succeed in making them accept the orator's opinion (Abrams 277). Terry Eagleton states that in the ancient and medieval world rhetoric was conceived in „both a textual and a political sense“, meaning that it combined „the study of verbal tropes and figures, and the art of persuasive public speech“ (10).

While the basic meaning of rhetoric has not changed much since classical ancient times, the relation to poetry underwent a complete reevaluation, as Jonathan Culler points out: „Aristotle separated rhetoric from poetics [...]. Medieval and Renaissance traditions, though, assimilated the two: rhetoric became the art of eloquence, and poetry (since it seeks to teach, to delight, and to move) was a superior instance of this art“ (69). This, however, was again subject to change with the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the subsequent „age of scientific rationalism“ that made an art of persuasion such as rhetoric seem suspicious (Eagleton 11). Jennifer Richards sums up that from the early 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards „the renewal of literature has often been perceived as only becoming possible by breaking from rhetoric“, an attitude that she traces back to William Wordsworth's *Preface* and his *Lyrical Ballads*:

„Wordsworth's assault on poetic diction and all forms of artifice is an attempt to liberate the poetic from the dead hand of formal rhetoric“ (102).

With the rise of poststructuralist thinking in the 1970s and 1980s, the tide for rhetoric once again changed, as it was now „revived as the study of the structuring powers of discourse“ (Culler 69). Poststructuralists like Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man contested the rationalist claim that anything truly reliable could be stated on the ground of language, which automatically serves as the vehicle for all reason – and is, in poststructuralist thinking, a very slippery ground at that, since it is „infiltrated by figurative devices from end to end“ (Eagleton 15). Since poetry can be regarded as „the home of figurative language“, it served as the epitome of rhetoric for the poststructuralists – however, the meaning of rhetoric in this case was to be found „in the Nietzschean sense of slippery speech, not in the ancient sense of public utterance“ (ibid. 15).

In contemporary literary and cultural studies the relationship between literature and rhetoric is once again foregrounded, as Uwe Neumann argues: „Der Qualität der Sprache kommt in der Rhetorik und der Literatur ein hoher Eigenwert zu, sie ist zur Entfaltung der Text- und Redewirkung von großer Bedeutung“ (229). He further contends that this is especially valid applied to „engagierter, politischer Literatur, die auf eine Haltungsänderung bei ihrem Adressaten hin verfaßt ist“ (ibid.). The quality of language which is so central to both rhetoric and literature is also, according to scholar H. Samy Alim, „the most useful means to read the various cultural activities of the HHN“<sup>1</sup>, a statement that makes the importance of language in hip hop culture – and, especially rap music – absolutely clear (4). The importance that Neumann ascribes to rhetoric language in political literature, along with the role that language in general plays in rap music will be the starting point of my analysis of Immortal Technique's rhetoric on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. In the following chapter the focus of the rhetorical analysis will be introduced.

### **2.1.2 Rhetoric and Rap Lyrics: Some Categories for Analysis**

Most commonly associated with rhetoric are the rhetorical figures, which can be defined as „depart[ing] from what is experienced by competent users as the standard, or 'literal,' use of language mainly by the arrangement of their words to achieve special effects“ (Adams 279). Under this heading, Adams subsumes

<sup>1</sup> HHN is the acronym used by Alim to refer to „Hip Hop Nation“, meaning the group of people that are engaged actively or passively with hip hop culture.

such devices as anaphora, apostrophe, alliteration, assonance and rhetorical questions (279-82). While there are in fact many more rhetorical figures, I have listed only those here that appear with a certain frequency in rap lyricist's textual production. Of special importance in hip hop are, according to Alim, the figures of alliteration and assonance, which can be used to create "a harmonic, *dope*-sounding musical effect" and thereby function as a means "of displaying one's verbal ingenuity" (146). However, besides this function of creating a musical effect, alliteration and assonance can also be used to highlight the respective passages of the lyrics and to support (contradict) their content – very much in the poetic tradition (Eagleton 65-66). Another important rhetorical device in rap lyrics is that of wordplay, which can be used to create a humorous effect or to create double or even triple layers of meanings, especially by the use of homophones (cf. Alim 151-2).

A rhetorical strategy that is used very frequently on Immortal Technique's *Revolutionary Vol. 2* is what I term the framing technique, meaning that an intro, outro, or, in some cases, both are used to frame the central part of the respective song's lyrics.<sup>2</sup> Drawing back on classical rhetoric terminology, the framing technique belongs to the field of the disposition, which means the arrangement of the material the orator wants to present to the audience (cf. Adams 277). While intros and outros – both to whole albums and to individual songs – are anything but rare in rap music, there has been no academic engagement with these categories and the effects they can play in the context of the respective songs they frame. However, especially in the case of *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, intros and outros form a very important part of many song's rhetoric structure. Analyzing them will enrich the reading of the rhetorical strategies used by Immortal Technique on the album.

The rhetorical strategy that will be the main focus of the analysis of Immortal Technique's *Revolutionary Vol. 2* is what Adams terms "persona" (226). In traditional rhetoric, "Aristotle [...] pointed out that an orator projects in the course of his oration an *ethos*, that is, a personal character, which itself functions as a means of persuasion" (ibid. 226). Adams states that current literary theory recurs on these concepts, creating the term *persona* to denote "the first-person speaker who tells the story in a narrative poem or novel, or

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<sup>2</sup> In order to avoid terminological difficulties I will try to briefly define the terms 'intro' and 'outro' here: An intro is an introducing part of a song that is not directly integrated into the first verse and in most cases does not incorporate rhyme and is spoken rather than rapped, therefore lacking flow. Furthermore, an intro is different from the hook, if there is one, marking it as not belonging to the actual lyrics. An outro is characterized by the same qualities as an intro, but placed at the end of a song.

whose voice we hear in a lyric poem” (ibid. 227). This makes it seem sensible to apply the rhetorical concept of a persona to rap lyrics, which can be regarded as a form of poetry, according to Alim (127). In order to analyze the persona that Immortal Technique portrays on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, under the special focus of the rhetoric construction of counterhegemonic discourse, the positioning of the constructed persona in the political, social and artistic realm will be analyzed.

### **2.1.3 Hegemony and Counterhegemonic Discourse**

The concept of hegemony has been introduced by Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who “sought the reasons for [the] defeat [of the proletarian revolution] in the subjective, ideological control which the capitalist state exercised over its inhabitants” (Hawkes 113). Gramsci’s understanding of hegemony is that it is “the nexus of material *and* ideological instruments through which the ruling class maintains its power”, with ideology referring to the dominant class’s “own peculiar way of seeing the world” (ibid. 114). While traditional Marxism had put material factors to the fore when discussing the ways to uphold hegemony, Gramsci claimed that in capitalist societies the institutionalization of the ideas of the ruling class that took place in “civil society”: the law courts, the bureaucracy, the religious and educational systems and the mass media” was a much more important factor (ibid. 115).

Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and ideology have greatly influenced and inspired the work of Louis Althusser, who claims that any economic system has to reproduce “the kinds of people who will be able to participate in the process of production” (ibid. 118). He further contends that there are two ways for a modern capitalist state to achieve this goal: Firstly, the ‘Repressive State Apparatuses’, which include, for example, the police and the army and function by the use of force (ibid. 118). Secondly, and much more effective in Althusser’s account, there are the ‘Ideological State Apparatuses’, including institutions such as “the Church, the family, political parties, the media, and, most importantly, the education system” (ibid. 118). Ideology, for Althusser, is always there before the individual, and has “‘always already’ determined a specific set of roles, a particular subjectivity, into which the individual will be slotted” (ibid. 119). Chris Barker sums the function of ideology in the Althusserian sense up as following:

For Althusser, education transmits a general ruling-class ideology that justifies and legitimates capitalism. It also reproduces the attitudes and behaviour

required by major class groups within the division of labour. Ideology teaches workers to accept and submit to their own exploitation while teaching managers and administrators to practise the craft of ruling on behalf of the dominant class. According to Althusser, each class is practically provided with the ideology required to fulfill its role in a class society. (79)

Counterhegemonic discourse, then, is directed against they are directed against „[t]he intellectuals sympathetic to the ruling class [that] work to present the ideas and justifications of the class's domination coherently and persuasively“ (Edgar 164).

## 2.2 Framing the Lyrics: Intros and Outros on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*

While both intros and outros are nothing extraordinary in rap music, the frequency with which they appear on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* is comparatively high: ten of the 13 music tracks have either an intro, an outro, or both.<sup>3</sup> All four of the songs that are analyzed in this paper are organized with the help of the ‘framing’ technique, which is, however, used in different ways and to different degrees in the respective tracks.

Arguably the most complex frame of a song on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* can be found in “Peruvian Cocaine”, the third track of the album. The frame itself has two different levels in this case. The intro consists of a sample from the 1983 motion picture *Scarface*, which has gained large popularity in the hip hop community and is one of the most frequent motion pictures to be referred to in rap music, and a conversation in Spanish between two men that leads directly into Immortal Technique’s part at the beginning of the lyrics. The outro consists of spoken words from the MC that directly lead into another sample, this one taken from the 1991 motion picture *New Jack City*. The way that the ‘framing’ technique is used in “Peruvian Cocaine” shall now be put under closer scrutiny.

The outer frame of “Peruvian Cocaine” is constituted by the process of sampling, in which “a music producer takes an excerpt of one sound recording and reuses it as an element in the creation of another” (Bynoe, 349). In the case of “Peruvian Cocaine”, producer Southpaw uses a musical sample from the motion picture *Scarface* as the basis for the instrumental to the song. Furthermore, he takes two voice passages from two motion pictures to form the frame of his sound recording. The use of these samples first and foremost opens up a dimension of intertextuality to the original works from which the samples are taken, *Scarface* and *New Jack City*. Both motion pictures portray

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<sup>3</sup> Besides the 13 rap songs on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* there are a spoken intro (“Revolutionary Intro”) and a spoken track (“Homeland and Hip Hop”) by Mumia Abu Jamal, a spoken track by Immortal Technique (“The Message and the Money”), and two musical interludes (“Sierra Maestra” and “Truth’s Razors”).

the drug scene during the 1980s in Florida and New York, respectively, and therefore share with “Peruvian Cocaine” as a central concern the social and political dimensions of drug trafficking. Besides their intertextual function the musical as well as the voice samples also serve an important rhetorical function, namely supporting the argument of the lyrics that drug trafficking is an endeavor that goes “a lot deeper than the niggas on your block”, as Immortal Technique formulates it on the inner level of the outro.

The voice sample from *Scarface* that opens up “Peruvian Cocaine” portrays an interview situation, in which the international dimension of the drug trade is discussed: “On the one hand, you’re saying that the United States government is spending millions of dollars to eliminate the flow of drugs onto our streets. At the same time, we are doing business with the very same government that is flooding our streets with cocaine”, asks the host of the interview in the brief sample. The interviewee replies that he will show “a few other characters that are involved in this tragic comedy”, which directly leads into the inner level of the intro, where a Spanish dialogue between two men can be overheard – presumably the same two men that open up the actual lyrics of the song, a cocaine field worker performed by Immortal Technique and the cocaine field boss performed by fellow rapper Pumpkinhead. The sample from *Scarface* is therefore closely intertwined with the rest of the intro and, in extension, leads directly to the “different characters” involved in international drug trafficking that are each represented in “Peruvian Cocaine” by seven different MC’s voices.

In the outro, the sample from *New Jack City* is similarly intertwined with Immortal Technique’s spoken words that form the inner level of the outro. After the performance of C-Rayz Walz, who impersonates a prison inmate incarcerated for drug dealing, Immortal Technique sums up the content of the song by stating that “[t]he story just told is an example of the path that drugs take on their way to every neighborhood in every state” of the United States. He concludes by pointing out to the inhabitants of these decaying urban neighborhoods that if the government or media “point the finger at you, brother men, this is what you need to tell them”, which leads directly into the motion picture sample. This speech by *New Jack City*’s protagonist Nino Brown, played by Wesley Snipes, further underscores the point that Immortal Technique aims to make in “Peruvian Cocaine”. The character of Nino Brown states that “the lawmakers, the politicians, the Columbian drug lords, all you who lobby against

making drugs legal” are guilty of the crack epidemic that has shattered the poor urban areas of the United States during the 1980s and early 1990s (cf. George, 40-1). The complex frame of “Peruvian Cocaine” ends with the statements that drug trafficking “is big business” and “the American way”, which sums up and echoes the overall content of the song.

A less complex, but rhetorically also very important example of the ‘framing’ technique on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* is found in the song “The Cause of Death”, which also contains an intro as well as an outro. The intro is performed by Immortal Technique, who is talking after the beat has set in: “Immortal Technique. Revolutionary Volume Two. Yeah, broadcasting live from Harlem, New York. Let the truth be known”. This introduction serves to make it clear that the persona that Immortal Technique is assuming during the following lyrics is that of a reporter who claims to truthfully present the facts from the point of view of Harlem and “tak[es] on the identity of observer or narrator”, as Tricia Rose has put it in a more general context (2). Furthermore, the intro underscores Immortal Technique’s rootedness (both spatially as well as identity-wise) in Harlem, which is an important factor in establishing the realness of the MC, or rather the persona that the MC assumes. By introducing himself in the fashion of a reporter, Immortal Technique also reminds the listener of Chuck D.’s claim that rap music was the black CNN (Henderson 563). The rapper therefore puts himself in the tradition of highly political rap music as popularized during the late 1980s by Public Enemy, amongst others (cf. Bynoe, 316-7).

The outro of “The Cause of Death” is cut off from the rest of the track as it sets in only after the beat has faded away. Here, another voice sample from the motion picture *Scarface* is used, in contrast to the samples inserted in “Peruvian Cocaine”, however, this time the sample is more decontextualized, since “The Cause of Death” deals with sociopolitical issues of a much wider scale than the drug trafficking theme of the former song. The voice in the outro states, referring to the persona of the reporter that has been heard throughout the song: “He is scheduled for 60 minutes next. He is going on French, Italian, Japanese television. People everywhere are starting to listen to him. It’s embarrassing”. In the context of “The Cause of Death”, where Immortal Technique assumes the role of a reporter, the sample inserted as an outro serves to showcase the danger that “encourag[ing] people [to] disagree and do the research themselves” poses to those in power.

The song “Freedom of Speech” is another example for the use of the

framing technique on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. The intro in this case opens up a tension between the first line that says “Freedom of speech, motherfucker” and the second line, in which Immortal Technique states that the song is “something for the kids”, followed by laughter. This tension is kept up during the rest of the song by the use of a sample from *Pinocchio* as a chorus and the very serious engagement with the topic of freedom of speech in the verses<sup>4</sup> that furthermore carry “a double meaning”, as the MC states in the liner notes to the song: “I refuse to let the labels control me, just like I won’t let the government do so to my opinion”.

The outro of “Freedom of speech” is very complex. After the last chorus, there are eight more lines that make use of rhyming couplets, followed by spoken sentences in which Immortal Technique makes effective use of his right to freedom of speech:

Word, nigga, fuck John Ashcroft! Nigga, fuck Fox News! Fuck those snake-ass bitches trying to manipulate your opinion, telling you what to think. Word the fuck up, like “We invaded niggas ‘cause we want to free them”. You racist motherfucker, you don’t give a shit about those people! You can suck my dick!  
[Laughter]  
Another rum and coke at the bar, nigga. It’s my day off, word up. Fuck. For the kids! [Laughter] For the kids! [Laughter]

In this outro passage the freedom of speech is enacted in two different ways. Firstly, Immortal Technique makes excessive use of what would be considered obscene language in most circles of American society, and directly addresses (and insults) former United States Attorney General John Ashcroft and the television channel Fox News as manipulators of public opinion. Secondly, when referring to the invasion of Iraq by American forces and their allies in 2003, the MC uses his right to free speech and reveals a critical opinion towards government statements that portray the invasion of Iraq as a mission to free the oppressed citizens there from Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship. In the final paragraph of the quote above, Immortal Technique once again brings up the tension between the harsh language he uses in “Freedom of Speech” and the claim that the song is “[f]or the kids”.

## **2.3 The Rhetoric Construction of a Revolutionary Persona**

### **2.3.1 The MC as Revolutionary: Immortal Technique’s Political-Ideological Self-Positioning**

The concept of ‘persona’, introduced in the theoretical chapter of this paper, can

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<sup>4</sup> In this paper the term ‘verse’ refers to what is commonly described in literary studies terminology as a stanza. In rap lyrics, as opposed to poetry, ‘verse’ is the standard term for ‘stanza’, while ‘line’ (or ‘bar’) is used when referring to what is in literary studies usually described as a ‘verse’.

also be applied to rap lyrics and, I would argue, especially in the case of Immortal Technique's *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, where the MC creates a revolutionary persona in most of the songs, including three of the four that are analyzed in this paper, namely "Harlem Streets", "The Cause of Death" and "Freedom of Speech". "Peruvian Cocaine" is an exception in this respect, mainly due to the concept of the song: The seven different MCs that are rapping on this track each impersonate a different character that is involved in international drug trafficking. The overall content of this song, however, marks it as distinctively counterhegemonic in that it portrays the government agenda during the so-called "war on drugs" as full of lies.

In "The Cause of Death", the hook is especially important for the positioning of the speaker and the persona that the rapper portrays. The hook is rich in biblical references, as it begins with Immortal Techniques apostrophe to God: "Father forgive them, for they don't know right from wrong". This clearly refers to the apostle Luke's Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ, where Jesus' first words after the crucifixion are quoted as following: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (*The Jerusalem Bible*, Luke 23:34). The biblical reference here therefore relates the MC and Jesus, which is further reinforced when Immortal Technique raps in the fourth line of the hook: "The word of God brought to life, that'll save ya soul". This is again a biblical reference carrying important meaning. In the apostle John's Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ opens with the words "In the beginning was the Word: and the Word was with God: and the Word was God" (*The Jerusalem Bible*, John 1:1). Later, the apostle writes – referring to Jesus – that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us [...], full of grace and truth" (*ibid.*, John 1:14). The "word of God brought to life" in Immortal Techniques lyrics is therefore again a reference to Jesus, who embodies the truth in the apostle's account. These intertextual references to the Holy Bible in the hook of "The Cause of Death" serve to place the MC close to God as the ultimate authority and thereby strengthen his claim to know the truth. This notion is also supported by what Immortal Technique raps during the first verse of "The Cause of Death":

When I was a child the devil himself bought me a mic  
But I refused the offer, 'cause God sent me to strike  
With skills unused like fallopian tubes in a dyke

By claiming to have refused a tempting offer from the devil because he has been sent onto a mission by God the rapper once more underscores his being on the side of the righteous and his determination to fight for a good cause.

Beyond the intertextual effect of the hook of “The Cause of Death”, there is also a very political meaning intertwined with the biblical references. The “word of God” that embodies the truth is brought to life by the fact that Immortal Technique performs it on the track. The MC addresses those that “don’t know right from wrong”, meaning the ignorant victims of the propaganda that wants to “rearrange the whole point of view of the ghetto”, as he formulates it on the track “The 4<sup>th</sup> Branch”. Immortal Technique offers his words as a way to liberation: “The truth will set you free, written down in this song”. In that sense, Immortal Technique presents himself in the lyrics as a savior, even though in a strictly secular way: his spreading of the truth saves the victims of governmental propaganda and lies from the dangers of the “new world order [that] was born on September 11”. The term “the cause of death” carries an ambiguous meaning in the context of the track, which becomes clear when relating the final two lines of the third verse to the overall content of the song: “Read it yourself instead of asking the government why / ‘Cause then the cause of death will cause the propaganda to die”. The “cause of death” refers both to the truth that is “written down in this song” and to the actual deaths that American political activity causes within and without the borders of the nation.

Within the wider framework of United States politics and society, the references to the bible and the subsequent metaphorical self-positioning of Immortal Technique close to God also serve to undermine the claims to righteousness from the evangelicals in America and reverse the dichotomy of go(o)d versus (d)evil established by this Christian group. By positioning himself close to God, the rapper directly challenges President George W. Bush and his followers, the “evangelical group ... [which] believes that their leader is a messenger from God” (Suskind). In the rapper’s account, he himself lyrically becomes the messenger of God, assigning the President of the United States of America and the evangelicals in the US the role of the devil, or, referring to the theme of truth, the role of the liar and manipulator. Furthermore, the fact that Immortal Technique verbally puts himself in the place of Jesus has another dimension of meaning: William Jelani Cobb notes, in a slightly different context, that young African-Americans and Latinos often seem to have a relationship to Jesus “on the level of their common understanding of what it feels like to be fucked with by those in authority”, not necessarily on the basis of religious belief (71).

Taking the whole song as frame of reference, it becomes clear that

Immortal Technique positions himself not only opposite of America's political elite, but also of what they themselves define as their enemy: Osama Bin Laden, as personification of international terrorism. In the first verse, the MC raps that his "words'll expose George Bush and Bin Laden / As two separate parts of the same seven headed dragon", thereby deconstructing the binary opposition that both the mentioned parties usually construct in order to justify their actions against each other. The "seven headed dragon" is again a biblical reference: in the "Revelation to John", the seven headed dragon represents the devil ("Dragon") – the image of the American president and the terrorist leader both being on the side of evil (contrary to what they claim of themselves) further reinforces the effect of the hook with Immortal Technique's self-positioning on the side of the good.

### ***2.3.2 Rooted in the Streets of Harlem: Immortal Technique's Social Self-Positioning***

Next to the political-ideological position as counterhegemonic that Immortal Technique assumes on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, it is also important in what social context the MC positions himself in his rhymes. Again, "Peruvian Cocaine" is not that relevant here, as it showcases seven different characters that are explicitly created to portray the international relations in drug trafficking.

The social background that Immortal Technique represents as an artist is best described in "Harlem Streets", in which the MC states: "I'm a Harlem nigga that's concerned with the future", which clearly shows his attachment to Harlem as a place and a social environment. The track features two verses and a hook which appears after the respective verses and consists only of the words "Homicide Harlem, BLAOW, what's the problem". The simplistic fashioning of the hookline foregrounds the simple circumstances of urban living that most people in Harlem have to face everyday, and the repetition of "Homicide Harlem", in conjunction with the alliterative qualities of the words and the vocal imitation of gunfire ("BLAOW"), serves to illustrate the high crime rates that still continue to plague many poor urban areas in America.

The first verse of "Harlem Streets" mainly presents Immortal Technique's view of how life in Harlem is like, with the opening lines already introducing in an implicit way the MC's opinion of who is guilty for the circumstances that prevail in his neighborhood: "Yeah... Harlem streets stay flooded in white powder / Like those motherfuckers running away from the twin towers". This

simile implies that living in Harlem, where “white powder” – in the sense of cocaine, or, in extension, drug trade and abuse – still is a problem, is an American tragedy that can be equaled with the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center on 9/11, albeit one that is largely ignored by the nation’s public. Furthermore, in the context of the whole *Revolutionary Vol. 2* album, it becomes clear that the responsibility for the conditions in Harlem is, in Immortal Technique’s account, to be found with United States statesmen, similarly to 9/11, concerning which the rapper draws similar conclusions, for example on “The Cause of Death”. The MC also directly addresses the government’s responsibility for the living conditions he describes as following:

Innocence devoured like a Chicken Spot snack box  
 Government cocaine cooked into ghetto crack rocks  
 Corrupt cops, false testimony at your arraignment  
 Check to check, constant struggle to make the payments  
 Working your whole life, wondering where the day went  
 The subway stays packed like a multi-cultural slave ship  
 It’s rush hour, 2:30 to 8, non stopping  
 And people coming home after corporate sharecropping  
 And fuck flossing, mother’s are trying to feed children  
 But gentrification is kicking them out of their building  
 A generation of babies born without health care  
 Families homeless, thrown the fuck off the welfare

This passage, which fits Perry’s profile for descriptive rhymes that “often outline a particular situation, dynamic, or thing, but [...] lack the linear time frame the narrative form possesses” (83), mingles Immortal Technique’s description of life in poor urban America with clear accusations toward the social policy of the United States government that resulted in a lack of health care, gentrification, and corrupted police forces. The economic system of unregulated capitalism is compared to slavery and sharecropping, which both carry horrible meaning in African-American cultural context and therefore give Immortal Technique’s account of present-day life in poor areas of Harlem a historical dimension.

The second verse of “Harlem Streets”, then, foregrounds the political dimension of urban America’s plight and the guilt that the rapper finds with politicians even clearer, while at the same time criticizing a lack of interest in political issues from the poor Harlemites that he identifies with. Immortal Technique accuses “conservative politicians” and their propaganda of warmongering, with the knowledge that “none of their kids serve in the infantry” – because, as the MC states, “most of the Army is black and Latino”, or, in other words, recruited from the underclass that doesn’t see another way out of their misery than joining the armed forces. In the next lines, he acknowledges that the passive recipients of government propaganda are also to a certain degree

responsible for the bad situation they are in, due to their lack of interest and their passivity:

And if you can't acknowledge the reality of my words  
 You just another stupid motherfucker out on the curbs  
 Trying to escape from the ghetto with your ignorant ways  
 But you can't read history at an illiterate stage  
 And you can't raise a family on minimum wage  
 Why the fuck you think most of us are locked in a cage?

In this passage, Immortal Technique condemns the disinterested attitude that he sees in many of his contemporaries in Harlem, concerning education and knowledge of one's history – and, therefore, to a certain degree one's self – as a means of escaping the deprived way of living described in the first verse of “Harlem Streets”. However, it becomes clear during *Revolutionary Vol. 2*, and especially in the song discussed in greater detail above, that Immortal Technique positions himself alongside poor urban minority groups such as African-Americans and Latinos. In the following chapter, the MC's position as a hip hop artist and the role he ascribes to himself as such shall be examined.

### ***2.3.3 Freedom of Speech: Immortal Technique's Self-Positioning as Hip Hop Artist***

The foregrounding of political-ideological and social self-positioning of Immortal Technique in the last two chapters has put the rapper's position within the hip hop community to the back. The focus of this chapter will be the role that the MC assigns to rap music and the interrelation between his own cultural production and his political views and social alignment that are constituted within the music.

There are few instances in the four exemplary songs chosen for this paper in which Immortal Technique explicitly foregrounds his being an MC. In the first verse of “The Cause of Death”, he uses the hip hop rhetorical device of boasting, which serves to showcase a rapper's verbal genius by “proclamations about [his] greatness” (Perry 80):

You better watch what the fuck flies outta your mouth  
 Or I'm a hijack a plane and fly it into your house  
 Burn your apartment with your family tied to the couch  
 And slit your throat, so when you scream only blood comes out  
 I doubt that there could ever be a more wicked MC  
 'Cause AIDS infected child molesters aren't sicker than me

In this passage, the metaphors of brutal murder that the rapper uses can on the one hand be read as referring to Immortal Technique's role as an MC that has to prove himself in the constant “war of position” that is part of the rap scene, as Imani Perry contends (59). She further argues that “one of the most commonly

used metaphors in this war is that of murder”, which makes this reading of the above passage seem reasonable. The following comparison of his sickness – meaning his exceptional skills as an MC – with “AIDS infested child molesters”, which is foregrounded by the internal rhyme that this noun phrase contains, serves to further showcase the verbal ruthlessness of the artist. On the other hand, however, the “you” that opens this verse can also be read as referring to the political conservatives that are directly addressed in the third verse and in opposition to whom Immortal Technique positions himself in “The Cause of Death”. This ambiguity shows that for Immortal Technique, his role as a rap artist is closely intertwined with political engagement and that the one should not exist without the other in the MC’s definition. At the end of the first verse the intertwining between politics and hip hop is again symbolized by the following use of the boasting device:

So I’m jamming frequencies in your brain when you speak to me  
 Technique will rip a rapper to pieces indecently  
 Pack weapons illegally, ‘cause I’m never hesitant  
 Sniper scoping a commission controlling the president

Here, Immortal Technique first threatens to verbally and, possibly, physically tear an opposing MC apart. He then switches the scope and portrays himself as a sniper that is out to kill a “commission controlling the president”, which at the same time is a verbal attack (highlighted by the alliteration) on the power of the presidential office. While the president of the United States of America is often said to be ‘the mightiest person in the world’, Immortal Technique weakens that position by claiming that the president is controlled by a commission – taking into account the third verse three of “The Cause of Death”, this commission represents the world’s huge economic corporations that exert their influence on American politics in the MC’s view.

As already shown in the chapter concerning Immortal Technique’s political-ideological self-positioning, in “The Cause of Death” the rapper portrays himself as a savior who brings the truth that will be the means to liberation for those under the domination of the hegemonic class. A similar aspect of Immortal Technique’s self-definition as an artist is to be found in “Harlem Streets”, where the rapper states: “But I see through the mentality implanted in us / And I educate my fam about who we should trust”. He portrays himself as a teacher for his “people in the hood”, and once again brings up the question of truth:

I give niggas the truth, ‘cause they pride is indigent  
 You better off rich and guilty than poor and innocent  
 But I’m sick of feeling impotent, watching the world burn

In the era of apocalypse, awaiting my turn  
 I'm a Harlem nigga that's concerned with the future  
 And if you in my way, it would be an honor to shoot ya

In this passage from “Harlem Streets” it becomes clear that Immortal Technique will no longer accept a feeling of impotence concerning the situation of Harlem and other urban areas in the USA, but that he sets out to actively change this situation with his music. He again uses the metaphor of murder, which can be related to the positional fight within the hip hop community that Perry has identified (59), but which can also be read as an element of the radical revolutionary persona that the rapper constructs rhetorically on many songs on *Revolutionary Vol. 2*. This ambiguous use of the metaphor again foregrounds the connectedness that exists for Immortal Technique between being a hip hop artist and being politically engaged that has also surfaced in “The Cause of Death”.

Another important point of the artistic self-definition that Immortal Technique constructs rhetorically on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* is treated in “Freedom of Speech”. Here, the MC states that being “independent in every single sense of the word” is an important part of the way he defines himself. Independent, in this context, means first and foremost ‘not signed to a major music label’ – which, however, is the aim of most rappers. Immortal Technique, nevertheless, regards independence from corporate dollars as the most important means for being able to “put the truth on tracks”:

And now they say they want to get me signed to the majors  
 If I switch up my politics and change my behavior  
 Try to tell me what to rhyme about over the beat  
 Bitch niggas that never spent a day in the street

In this passage the MC clearly portrays the record industry as a control mechanism that consciously forms the artists – concerning both their music and their personal life. Similarly, in the second verse, he attacks international multibillion dollar corporations who often sign music artists as advertising stars, which further restricts the freedom of speech these people:

But I ain't got no motherfucking deal with Pepsi  
 No corporate sponsor telling me what to do  
 Asking me to tone it down during the interview  
 Trying to minimize the issue, but I'm keeping it large  
 I love the place I live, but I hate the people in charge

Both corporate sponsors and major record labels, therefore, fall in the category of Ideological State Apparatuses, which, according to Althusser, encompass the mass media (Barker 78-9). Freedom from contracts with such regulating institutions that serve to reproduce “social formations and their relations of power” (ibid. 77) is in Immortal Technique’s account obviously one of the most

important means of being able to create a counterhegemonic effect as a rapper. The statement “I love the place I live, but I hate the people in charge” underscores the freedom of speech that the MC has as a consequence of his independence from a major music label.

There are two main pillars on which Immortal Technique’s positioning within hip hop culture and his self-definition as a hip hop artist as represented on *Revolutionary Vol. 2* rest. The first is that for him, the realms of being an MC and being overtly political in his work are inseparably intertwined. The second pillar is the independence from institutions and corporations that would fall under Althusser’s term Ideological State Apparatuses, meaning, above all, major record labels.

### **3. Conclusion**

The counterhegemonic discourse that Immortal Technique constructs in the four exemplary songs “Peruvian Cocaine”, “Harlem Streets”, “The Cause of Death” and “Freedom of Speech” clearly makes use of a vast array of rhetoric strategies and devices. A closer scrutiny into the role of intros and outros of three of the four songs has shown that these structuring devices serve important rhetorical functions. In the case of “Peruvian Cocaine”, intertextual references to the two motion pictures *Scarface* and *New Jack City* further underscore the point that Immortal Technique aims to make about the international dimension of and the government involvement in drug trafficking. In “The Cause of Death”, the intro defines the communicative situation of the track, while the voice sample from *Scarface* used as outro serves to show the danger that the MC’s counterhegemonic account of the truth carries for those in power. The outro to “Freedom of Speech” finally enacts the content of the lyrics when Immortal Technique raps with “no strings attached”, as a sample from Pinocchio states in the hook of the song.

The analysis of Immortal Technique’s construction of a revolutionary persona, divided into the fields of political-ideological, social and artistic self-positioning, revealed some of the rhetorical strategies used by the MC to position himself in the field of counterhegemonic discourse. In order to establish a counterhegemonic political-ideological persona, Immortal Technique rhetorically positions himself on the side of God, whereby he also delegitimizes the American president George W. Bush (and, in extension, the United States government), who often recurs on religious argumentation in order to justify his

political actions. Regarding his social self-positioning, the MC clearly aligns himself with poor ethnic minority populations of urban America, and very specifically with Harlem. Concerning the rapper's self-positioning within the hip hop community and his self definition as an artist it becomes clear that, just like he stated in the interview cited in the introduction, rap music and politics can not be separated, and Immortal Technique represents himself in his lyrics as a teacher and, therefore, as an agent – in contrast to the passive recipients of the ruling class's ideology.

While Plato “saw poetry as an ungovernable mob of unruly particulars, and banished it from his ideal state” (Eagleton 13), the American ruling class would probably want to do the same to openly political rap artists such as Immortal Technique, who uses his words as weapons by constructing a counterhegemonic discourse that aims to subvert the hegemony of those in power thereby putting a different account of the ‘truth’ on his album.

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Erlangen, den 17. März 2008