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## **Beyond Urban Subcultures:**

### **Urban Subversions as Rhizomatic Social Formations**

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#### **Abstract**

The paper analyses urban pastimes as rhizomes expanding prior work that predominantly examines urban ‘subcultures’ as oppositional to the world city paradigm and homogenised cityscapes. We discuss the process of what we call subculturalisation through which, after they have been marginalised and illegalised, urban practices become formalised as subcultures and incorporated into the fabric of consumption and profit making. However, the paper proposes, these crystallised moments, that are ossified and embedded to the world city paradigm, are only part of wider rhizomatic territories that continue to remain open fields inviting virtual urban identities and creative states of becoming.

## **Introduction**

It is now common knowledge that the cities of the world are rapidly increasing in population and will continue to do so throughout the twenty-first century (United Nations, 2010). As such, a more multiplicitous urban fabric is emerging, with heterogeneous cultural practices enmeshing to produce an overtly pluralist urban culture. There is a universe of activities which can be identified as part of this plurality, with some gaining more attention than others namely, skateboarding (Borden, 2001), parkour (Daskalaki et al., 2008; Mould, 2009; Saville, 2008), graffiti (Bloch, 2008; Dickens, 2008), culture jamming (Dery, 1993; Lasn, 1999), guerrilla street theatre (Cohen-Cruz, 1998), urban pranks (Anderson, 2009), yarn bombing (Moore and Prain, 2009) and urban exploration (Ninjalicious, 2005). According to the aforementioned studies, by engaging with and using the urban topography in new and innovative ways, 'urban subcultures' (Fischer, 1975) are extending the functionality of the planners' original intentions, and in effect redirect and even oppose the pre-determined usage of urban spaces. These readings of the city thus have in the main examined emerging social formations as reactionary forms resisting homogenisation forces of the capitalist city (Harvie, 2009; Pinder, 2008).

These reactionary discourses of the urban, however, as this paper will suggest, have the propensity to create a duality (homogenisation vs. resisting subcultures) which builds boundaries around urban practices and becomes a diagnostic of a linear and a non-relational ethos. It 'frames' the experience of these urban activities into entities that can be positioned alongside, or in opposition to, economic and consumerist tendencies that are inherent in the prevailing modern world city paradigm (Sassen, 2009). We support that the construction of an identity of a singular subculture is a manifestation of the subculturalisation process, and one which serves to contribute to the formation of world city making. If, however the formation,

existence and praxis of these social formations are considered rhizomatic, then the identification of subcultures becomes more fluid, not in opposition to the city, but in relation to it. Hence, starting from the foundational spatial premise that ‘urban space is relational, not a mosaic of simply juxtaposed differences’ (Massey, 2007: 89; see also Harvie, 2009), we consider attempts to discuss social formations as crystallised, arboreal extensions, regulating and structuring discourses which fail to acknowledge the rhizomatic capacity for endless connectivity and creative hybridization. In order to develop upon this premise then, urban subcultural activity will be analysed using the concept of the ‘rhizome’ (Jung, 1963; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987) as a metaphor that enables us to better comprehension of urban practices as fluid acts of becoming.

Instead of discussing urban subcultures as isolated groups in the periphery of mainstream cultural activity (the ‘other’) like traditional definitions of subcultures (Bennett, 1999; Clarke, 1981), we shift the focus to the emergence of ‘fluid microgroups that do not connect individuals to a particular community’ (Pilkington and Johnson, 2003: 265). Instead, they remain scattered temporary formations or *tribus* (Maffesoli, 1996)<sup>1</sup>, collectives, moving between different urban sites of expression reconstructing their urban identities (*ibid.*). This nomadic orientation invites multiple, ephemeral, affective but above all rhizomatic membership to the city that allows ‘occasional members’ to write their own urban immanent stories, rather than some observational meta-narrative of capitalism, subculture or other cultural hegemony.

In arguing for a rhizomatic analysis of urban subcultural activity, the paper makes three

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<sup>1</sup> *Tribus* are “not ‘tribes’ in the traditional anthropological sense for they do not have the fixity and longevity of tribes. Nor are they neo-tribes; they are better understood as ‘postmodern tribes’ or even pseudo-tribes” (Shields, 1996: x). This is part of the wider literature on neo-tribes (Hetherington, 1992; Maffesoli, 1996; Bennett, 1999; Muggleton and Weinzierl, 2003).

pointed conceptual arguments. First, it explains how emerging urban practices are constructed as oppositional and how this contributes to the subculturalisation process. The second part explores the concept of 'subculturalisation', as a two-stage appropriation process: initially, these urban activities are enacted as the 'other' through illegalisation and marginalisation (othering). Then, globally-orientated homogenisation forces proceed to formalise them and incorporate them as part of dominant (world city making) practices by re-branding them as cultural products, subjugated to commercialisation processes within a rationally bounded (and tightly regulated) urban landscape (accruing).

Having explained the way in which subculturalisation frames and restricts both the definition and function of 'urban subversions'<sup>2</sup>, in the third part of the paper, these 'subversions' are analysed as rhizomatic social formations which continually move across different sites of expression. That is, the six principles of the rhizome are engaged (namely connectivity, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania) to illustrate how emerging subversive groupings are comprised of fluid and flexible, individual and collective identities that create new territories of engagement and collaboration and are in a constant state of flux due to their permeability. By opening up the analysis to those areas of collaboration, connectivity and the 'in-between', new relations and forms of social engagement then become possible as fluidity, accessibility, sharing and play, invite states of becoming, not materialising as the antipode of capitalism or another 'other', but as urban moments (Amin and Thrift, 2002) and 'happenings' (Kirby and Dine, 1965, Kaprow, 2003). The paper's discussion and conclusion section highlights how these new social groupings co-exist with ossified subcultures and collectively provide platforms or spaces in which new urbanities can emerge.

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<sup>2</sup> Here we use the term 'subversions' to denote the diversity of emerging social formations and not their alleged counter (sub)-cultural function. In this sense and hereafter the term subversive will refer to more open and fluid expressions/performances of the city.

It would be counter-intuitive to our argument of permeability of sub-cultural boundaries to analyse one particular subculture in depth (such as parkour, skateboarding, yarn-bombing, or urban exploration). Yet, though this is not an empirical paper, we draw from our ongoing research in emerging urban formations and mention incidental examples, evidence of rhizomatic activity of urban practices throughout the paper to illustrate and colour the argument. Moreover, we have to highlight that it is not our intention to question the presence or critique urban subcultures as spaces of political action, but to suggest that they describe the crystallised expressions of broader rhizomatic social formations which remain, despite instances of subculturalisation, in flux. And it is this flux which is of interest to this paper as it constitutes the 'in-between', those territorialities that are as of yet, 'unimagined'. In this sense, it is the imminent stories of urban activities that are considered crucial to develop and reflect upon in this paper – those which are open, unintended and intangible, all characteristics of the rhizome.

### **Homogenisation of Cityscapes and Oppositional Urban Activities**

Culturally and economically, cities (particularly in the West) progress along seemingly homogeneous paths, with amenities, cultural provisions and even architecture, showing increasing signs of convergence (Jones, 2009; Sassen, 2009). The planned ecology of the built environment is created by urban officialdom to serve the progression of the global and world city paradigm, and in doing so creates an environment engineered for economic production and cultural consumption. In echoing Bauman (1998) and others (Harvey, 1978; Mitchell, 2003; Jones 2009) the world city has become a homogenised consumption space where the built environment 'both expands and expends capital' (Cuthbert, 2003: 29). Arguably, global forms of mass consumption (Harvey, 1989) increasingly assist in the

formation of non-places (Augé, 1995) that foster loss of identity and disorientation. Within the world city paradigm then, there is a perpetual struggle in which capital builds a physical landscape appropriate to its own condition (Harvey, 1989).

In attempting to counter this positive feedback of linearity and to 'let difference in' (Bridge, 2005), prior studies have looked into alternative urban activities that seem to challenge the intended usage of the built environment. Nevertheless, starting with the example of the surrealist and situationists (Fenton, 2005; Harold, 2007), these movements have a propensity to situate these activities as oppositional to the homogeneous city thus constituting them as counter-discourses that subvert, undermine and resist the modern world city paradigm: within the Paris surrealist movement 'there is a copious critique of the architects and planners who increasingly impose developments on the city's topography that do away with city's surprise detours...its disturbances and glances' (Bridge, 2005:212). The situationists criticized surrealism concluding that automatic writing is monotonous and that the ostentatious surrealist 'weirdness' is not contributing anything new. *Dérive* was proposed to stress the ways in which the environment can be resisted, seeking not only the marvellous adoration by surrealism but bringing an inverted perspective. Though they despised surrealism, the situationists partook of the surrealists' *disponibilité*, total physical, intellectual and emotional receptivity, a state of existential availability, an attitude of creative readiness and perpetual resistance to the Spectacle.

Similarly, when discussing skateboarding, Borden (2001) explains how, under the Queen Elizabeth Hall on the South Bank in London (see Figure 1), many skateboarders (who have subsequently been since joined by) urban trail riders, parkour practitioners and passers-by

congregate, creating a space where the architecture is ‘played upon’: ‘skateboarding, like other subcultures, attempts to separate itself from groups such as the family, to be oppositional, appropriate to the city, irrational in organisation, ambiguous in constitution, independently creative, and exploitative of its marginal of ‘sub-status’ (p. 137).

*Insert Figure 1 about here*

Also, parkour, a more modern urban pastime, has received significant media and public attention in recent years due to its spectacular movement; the documentaries *Jump London* and then *Jump Britain* (Channel 4, 2003; 2005) clearly brought parkour closer to audiences by portraying it as a spectacular urban game. This ‘free-flowing’ activity is a socially symbolic act, a form of resistance to cityscapes that alienate, restrict and subjugate’ (Daskalaki et al., 2008: 57). These discourses in the literature (Shahani, 2008) recognise parkour as a subversive and oppositional art form and traceurs as heroic performers who reclaim subjectivity and agency through transcendence of the predetermined urban path.

*Insert Figure 2 about here*

A New York City-based prankster group, *Improv Everywhere* (Andersson, 2009) has also been seen as a group that conducts social pranks to appropriate various public sites, from city squares and corporate megastores to spaces of public transportation (see Figure 3). Its aspiration is to make interesting and positive experiences for people in spaces that do not usually provide such experiences, thereby enacting an urban dramaturgy ‘reconfigure structures of meaning’ (Harold, 2007) for passers-by to their everyday encounters as they pass through these spaces and see the prank in action. Yet ‘appropriation is not only a tactic of resistance, it is also the rule that governs corporate marketing’ (Harold, 2007: xxxi). Therefore, these pranks, or the more collective form of ‘flash-mobbing’ (Wasik, 2006), have now entered the commercial consciousness with many advertising campaigns for mobile



phone providers and television stations which utilise these interventions to market various products.

*Insert Figure 3 about here*

As the following section will explain in detail, reducing ‘urban subversions’ to mere oppositional forces to homogeneous cities contributes to the first phase of ‘subculturalisation’ in that it positions subverters ‘outside’ of the participation, in the margins of city cultural life. And it is that ‘this myth of the outside, this romanticizing of the cultural rebel, is precisely the trope that best spreads modern brand identity’ (Harold, 2007: 159). This ‘outside’ is socially constructed (and identified only in relation to the practice that it subverts, the ‘other’) and formalised through prohibition, risk management and ‘official illegalisation’. After their identification as the ‘other’ (phase one), capitalist strategies gradually embed subversive activities, ‘accruing’ them as packaged subcultures from which profit can be made (phase two).

It is worth adding here that delimiting this phenomenon into a subculturalisation process with two distinct phases perhaps insinuates that there is an overt agenda somehow imbued into the world city paradigm. It is important to note, however, that this is not the aim and is undertaken to provide clarity of analysis and explanation. In reality, this is a more messy and non-sequential process that is symptomatic of totalising ordering and structuring of modern neoliberal city-making processes (Harvey, 1989). More importantly, the decision to employ the concept of subculturalisation here was taken in order to describe how rhizomatic expressions, that can open up possibility and new fields of urban engagement in the city, are re-constructed or reduced to subcultures by several institutionalisation forces (corporations, media or online communities), a process that results in their bounded conceptualisation. Yet, as it will be suggested in the last section of this paper, urban expressions, despite instances of crystallised activity (subcultures), remain propositions for immanent explorations of the city

and urban multiplicity. Before discussing this, the following section will explain in more detail the subculturalisation process and provide an alternative view on the opportunities presented when subverting the urban.

### **Subculturalisation of Urban Subversions: Othering and Accruing**

Instead of relating to the regime of world city development,

‘...one can analyse the microbe-like, singular and plural practice which an urbanistic system was supposed to administer and suppress, but which have outlived its decay; one can follow the swarming procedures that, far from being regulated or eliminated by panoptic administration, have reinforced themselves in a proliferating illegitimacy’(de Certeau, 1974: 100).

Urban subversions can be attributed to this mindset as they often exist uncomfortably with city authorities and in many cases are marginalised or prohibited altogether (or as De Certeau notes, administered and suppressed). Conducting these activities has often been seen as abrasive to urban officialdom and hence needs to be either tightly regulated, or outlawed altogether. Cities are awash with artefacts that prohibit or attempt to restrict the performing of activities which use a building or public space in a way that was not intended. ‘No skating’ or ‘those who undertake parkour-like activities on these premises will be prosecuted’ signs can be found in many of the world cities across the globe. Other specific examples include the process of ‘knobbing’ where small metal knobs are placed at regular intervals along smooth granite or metal blocks in order to stop skateboarders or urban trail riders using that particular urban artefact (see Figure 4).

*Insert Figure 4 about here.*

Those who manage these places are marginalising urban subversions, illegalising them and reinforcing the functionality of that building/urban space to what it was originally intended. In some cases, this prohibition of urban subversions is based on legitimate concerns about the

safety of those individuals who would seek to partake in the activity, and indeed any potential spectators or passers-by. But whether the reasoning is based on safety concerns or protection of property, it remains the case that city officialdom displaces these activities, thereby rejecting (or 'othering') them from the world city making process. This creates a binary logic of urban cultural practices with official and formulaic processes on the one hand, and anarchic, subversive, and non-structural on the other causing an inevitable schism. Instead of opening spaces to include and encourage possibility, urban subversions are incorporated into the capitalist framework as the 'other', groups outside the fabric of the city that has to be rejected, labelled unprofitable and ineffectual.

Yet, the social aspect of many of these urban subversions means that they will more often than not congregate into groups<sup>3</sup>. The presence of a community of participants, like other epistemic communities in economic and societal groups inevitably creates a set of practices which are gradually formalised and adhered to by others (Knorr-Cetina, 2001, Lave and Wenger, 1991). Internet and communication technologies further facilitate the formalisation process through dissemination (tutorial videos and forums) and what starts out as a group of friends climbing on walls, can turn into a global phenomenon over the course of a few years (as was the case with the emergence of parkour; Mould, 2009). Furthermore, the oppositional nature of a skateboarders' subculture status to conventional codes of behaviour, which are noted as 'groups such as the family' (Borden, 2001: 137), is a clear symptom of a set of alternative urban practices becoming more solidified as a formalised urban subculture.

Belonging to a subculture, means that members adhere to a particular identity (for example

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<sup>3</sup> The individuality of the work of Banksy, the UK-based graffiti artist-cum-activist is a clear exception to this community orientation (Dickens, 2008).

that of the ‘skateboarder’, ‘traceur’, ‘urban explorer’, ‘graffiti artist’) and have the need to be recognised by others as well as members of this particular community. This crucially contributes to the ‘accruing’ phase of the process for two distinct reasons: First, it encourages boundaries around a particular group of people through the existence and then the need to follow certain codes and practices. Take, for example, an urban subversion known as ‘yarn bombing’ (which involves people knitting paraphernalia for often bland and sterile urban artefacts such as drainpipes, lamp-posts and trees – see Figure 5). They may start out by experimenting with a range of urban pranks and exhibitions using knitted items, but as that group of people continued to develop their ‘art’ they developed sophisticated techniques; Other people wanting to join the group now need to enter a period of training or initiation in order to participate (see the yarn-bombing self-professed ‘DIY manual’; Moore and Prain, 2009).

*Insert Figure 5 about here*

The second reason is perhaps more important in terms of being able to profit from the integration of the urban subversion into the world city paradigm, as the identification of sub-cultural boundaries or particular trends/fashions, allows people to be targeted as members of a particular subculture. To illustrate, particular items of clothing become popular among skateboarders, which then leads to the introduction and eventual prevalence of particular clothing brands; and in free-running, there are certain dress codes which dominate (i.e. baggy tracksuit bottoms and a vest singlet) and hence these can be styled, branded and sold to traceurs. Another marker of this process is the appearance of ‘heroic’ individuals within particular subcultures, who are often sponsored by the major brands and companies with a vested interest in selling clothing or items within the subculture. For example, Tony Hawk, a skateboarding ‘superstar’ is sponsored by Quiksilver who make skateboarding apparel and paraphernalia, and Sebastien Foucan, one of the founders of parkour, is sponsored by Nike

and often appears in advertisements for them as well as Hollywood blockbusters. Digitisation processes also aid in the subculturalisation of particular groups: American Parkour (APK) sells products online (APK Online Store) and promoting that their 'branch' of parkour 'does professional work like corporate event performances, tours, television and movie stunt work, corporate videos, parkour and freerunning demonstrations and workshops' ([www.americanparkour.com](http://www.americanparkour.com)).

Thus, the crystallisation of these practices into a coherent and self-regulated activity makes them more amenable to profiteering; once a practice can be labelled and formalised, it can be profited from. Consequential commercialisation reconfigures crystallised practices into money-making enterprises, either by sponsorship, tight regulation or dilution of content, a 'plug-in' to the city's capitalist accumulation and cultural consumption and re-produces them as 'new' (sometimes labelled as 'new wave' or 'underground art'). Inevitably, othering and accruing are enacting nuanced change in the workings of capitalism itself. For example, in order to survive and expand the platforms of control, find new cultures for appropriation and maintain hegemony, official institutions and regulators (such as corporations, planners) adapt so that they can exploit the opportunity of expanding consumption base and maximising profit. In other words, the world city making process begins to include the previously marginalised activities that have now become productive through their embeddedness to regulated and formalised platforms of social activity.

Nevertheless, the processes of othering and accruing are illustrative of a particular set of processes, which exist in a much more heterogeneous, multiplicitous and open urban realm. On the one hand, while the city may evolve to incorporate a wider variety of experiences,

other mechanisms of control still persist guiding the subculturalisation of divergence, polyvocality and ambiguity. At the same time, however, as the following section will explain, other forms of urban expressivism and social engagement arise, due to, or independently of the processes of subculturalisation. By focusing on some examples of rhizomatic presence in contemporary cityscapes, we propose and invite future studies that will position urban activities less as bounded 'subcultures' and more as open social formations that exist in the immanent temporality before, during and after (or in spite of) the subculturalisation process and offer opportunities for creative engagement.

### **Urban Social Formations as Rhizomes**

Urban studies literature, which attempts to conceptualise the complexity of cities in the contemporary era, have often looked to social theorists and philosophy for a suitable lexicon. From Plato's Republic to Badiou's theory of the event (Doel and Smith, 2010), there have been a myriad of approaches in attempting to comprehend the way in which cities are organised. One 'concept' which has gained a great deal of traction in recent literatures has been that of the rhizome. First articulated by Carl Jung, the rhizome was used a metaphor for life itself. He suggests that 'life has always seemed to me like a plant that lives on its rhizome. Its true life is invisible, hidden in the rhizome. The part that appears above ground lasts only a single summer. What we see is the blossom, which passes. The rhizome remains' (Jung, 1963: 4).

However, it was when utilised by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987) that the rhizome became more prevalent in social theory. In describing Amsterdam as the 'a city entirely without roots, a rhizome-city' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 15), the metaphorical vernacular of the rhizome and the rejection of 'aborescent culture' percolated urban studies,

with Smith (2003) arguing that ‘analogous to Deleuze's rhizome, city networks are in constant movement, undergoing a series of transformations, translations, and traductions that defy capture by the exclusionary dualistic thinking of non-poststructuralist social theory’ (*ibid.*: 580). In describing city networks, rather than a singular city, Smith emphasises how the rhizome allows for a conceptualisation of cities that is not focused on dualities, but rather multiplicities (*ibid.*). And it is this ethos that resonates with this paper; in that it is the alternative to a dualism of capitalist/subversive practices *within* cities and the recognition of the multiplicitous connections that a rhizomatic reading of the city affords. Other articulations of urbanity include ‘cyborg urbanisation’ (Gandy, 2005), whereby the city is seen as an amorphous amalgamation of human and city in a ‘radical fusion of human and technology’ (*ibid.*: 41). In discussing cyborg urbanisation, Gandy interjects rhizomatic functions by noting that the

‘philosophical challenge is to perceive space in the absence of any previously existent categories, hierarchies or systems as a form of ‘anarchic non-identical proliferation’ (Luckhurst, 1997: 128). The organic metaphor of the ‘rhizome’ is deployed in distinction to ‘arborescent’ conceptions of cities as hierarchical structures’ (Gandy, 2005: 30).

We propose that the dualist ontology of oppositional / world city making activities that pervades the urban appropriation literature (some of which we discussed in previous sections) is arborescent; in that it represents the Deleuzian ‘tree’ that ‘plays the role of a principle of dichotomy or binarity, and an axis of rotation’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 211), where the ‘tree’ is articulated as crystallised forms of subcultural activity. However, a rhizomatic interpretation could see them as part of a complex system of connections and tensions. Hence, the rhizome is employed precisely because of its ability to articulate a complexity and distinction from arborescent systems towards more fluid conceptualisations of urban social formations. In particular, the six principles of the rhizome namely, connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalomania (*ibid.*) are deployed below to

re-conceptualise urban social formations. This, with the inclusion of some examples, will contribute to the field of urban and social studies evidence of the process of rhizomatic formation of urban groups that remain open, transformative and creative in their embedded activities in the city, despite ruptures of subculturalised crystallisations.

To begin with, we perceive the capacity of urban social formations to build connections and form assemblages as key evidence of their rhizomatic quality (connection and heterogeneity – the first and second principles of the rhizome). ‘Assemblage is a topological concept that designates the actualizations of the virtual causes or causal processes that are immanent in an open system of intensities that is under the influence of a force that is external (or heterogeneous) in relation to it’ (Markus and Saka, 2006:103). That is, ‘a rhizome ceaselessly establishes connections between semiotic chains, organisations of power, and circumstances relevant to the arts, sciences, and social struggles’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 7).

For example, graffiti artists and favelas’ residents<sup>4</sup>, traceurs and socially deprived communities; street activists/artists and academics represent unexpected and spontaneous points of contact and exchange, reflecting the rhizomes’ heterogeneity and demonstrate the capacity for intriguing new urban action, forms of interaction, engagement and creativity. These diverse almost a-centred and anti-hierarchical, heterogeneous events bring together disciplinary content and identities, seemingly unconnected. ‘Assemblages are thus ...not part of, and so not foreseeable in light of, either one or the other system considered in isolation, but instead only discernible as a result of the intersection of both such systems’ (Markus and Saka, 2006: 103).

*Insert Figure 6 about here*

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<sup>4</sup> See <http://www.favelapainting.com>



To continue with another example, recently *Parkour Generations* in the UK has been widely involved with local communities and school children (Johnson and Wroe, 2009) as well as artists (Norum, 2010). Another event, the *Playground* film (Team Jiyo, 2010) in which architects, communities, planners and traceurs came together to explore and create place is another example of more fluid rhizomatic social processes starting to appear in a more participative and heterogeneous urban context. The Parkour group involved in this project, comments: ‘When you show (sic) that you look at the urban space and value it in a certain way, and when other people see that and also value it, then it becomes even bigger, and a way of creating your own identity’ (Team Jiyo, 2010). We see these collaborations indicative of new territories that emerge and offer possibilities for the exploration of new urban and social identities.

It is important to note however that crystallised subcultures newly formed out of emergent urban activities co-exist alongside these rhizomatic expressions in the city. This emergence then is symptomatic of repetition of the different (multiplicity – the third principle of the rhizome) despite its paradoxical state brings about new thinking – iterations that through rhizomatic amplifications, allow the unfolding of the new. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 13) suggest, ‘[does] not a multiplicity have strata upon which unifications and totalizations, massifications, mimetic mechanisms, signifying power takeovers, and subjective attributions take roots?’ Two different urban practices or communities (or other) interact together to form a multiplicity (i.e. a unity that is multiple in itself). So, unlike the roots of trees, the rhizome can connect any multiple points of differing characteristics and traits, and it brings into play very different regimes of signs, and even ‘nonsign states’ (Deleuze, 1994: 21). The existence of the ‘tree’ (subcultures) does not point at the cessation of ‘aparallel evolution’: take ‘the wisdom of the plants: even when they have roots, there is always an outside where they form

a rhizome with something else...' (*ibid.*: 11). Similarly, we suggest that a proliferation of evolving urban activities, despite 'circles of convergence' (subculturalisation), will constantly re-construct the urban condition. Ephemeral groupings emerge out of the relational transformations and a continuous evolution process.

For example, there exist free-running and parkour communities (in the virtual realm and specific urban groups) both with different activities and ethos. At its most fundamental, parkour is seen as the original technique which is seen as getting from point A to point B as quickly as efficiently as possible (an efficiency of movement). Free-running is more about spectacular movements and stunts (a freedom of movement). The co-existence of parkour and free-running, the former changing its identity and characteristics in response to the dilution and commercialisation of the latter, demonstrates that the activity itself is not static but evolves at times in a non-linear, non-progressive manner. Likewise, skate parks and the 'accommodation of skaters in the city' did not signal the end of street skateboarding (Borden, 2001; Howel, 2008) or the emergence of variants (e.g. skate bikes, skatecycles, Hardcourt Bike Polo, Urban Slacklining and Street Surfing). Nevertheless, a rhizomatic reading would suggest that when the multiple is created as a substantive multiplicity, it ceases to have any relation to a subject or object; instead consisting of only variance of magnitudes and dimensions.

Accepting that power in these rhizomatic communities remains largely decentred and distributed – as well as located within the parts (nodes) of a complex (or in the connections) – suggests that rupturing of a part of the complex cannot destroy the complex as a whole (asignifying rupture - the fourth principle of the rhizome). In other words, the rhizome does

not become any less of a rhizome when being severely ruptured, thus despite local 'breakdowns', rhizomes flourish. In other words, the crystallization of urban subcultures can be seen as local ruptures which however seismic in their occurrence, do not destroy the ongoing rhizomatic practice. Some groups may become part of more solidified and appropriated activity yet new groups and more importantly, possibilities and potential spaces for new, different groups emerge. The solidification is not a 'break' in the rhizome, merely a rupture as it will continue to grow along old or new lines. These lines of segmentarity and deterritorialisation are where the rhizome constantly 'flees' (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 9).

Hence, the persistence of the rhizomatic nature of the urban conditions can be attributed to the horizontal and trans-species connections (collaborations or new formations) that they shape:

'Wasp and orchid, as heterogeneous elements, form a rhizome. It could be said that the orchid imitates the wasp, reproducing the image in a signifying fashion (mimesis, mimicry, lure, etc.). But this is true only on the level of the strata ... At the same time, something else entirely is going on: not imitation at all but a capture of code, surplus value of code, an increase in valence, a veritable becoming, a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp ...the two becomings interlink and form relays in a circulation of intensities pushing the deterritorialization ever further" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:9).

We propose the mapping of subversive movements from any point of entry into an invisible territory (cartography and decalcomania – the fifth and sixth principle of the rhizome). The act of tracing emergent social formations back to their point of origin is a structuring and ordering process. Instead, urban subversive activities can remain rhizomatic by 'constructing a real that is yet to come' (*ibid*: 42). Through mapping, we bridge the unconscious and the conscious and as a result we can challenge and destruct specific subculturalised urban identities in favour of new realities, immanent territories. In these urban territories, a

multiplicity of identities is defined by what remains ‘outside’; namely the plane of consistency or ‘grid’. It is not about transferring the qualities of one structure to the other in an attempt to represent, appropriate and ossify the territory that emerges; decalcomania brings about new patterns in all structures (groupings) that may come in contact because the rhizome is a ‘map and not a tracing’:

‘What distinguishes the map from the tracing is that it is entirely orientated towards experimentation in contact with the real... The map is open and connectable in all of its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group, or social formation’ (Deleuze and Guattari 1988: 12).

We expect that collaborative activities, patterns of interaction, inter-disciplinary initiatives and trans-formed urban places for action will embrace experimentation instead of representation, dynamic multiplicity instead of arboreal ordering. Urban subversions thus can be understood as an event site, ‘a point of exile where it is possible that something finally might happen’ (Badiou 2000: 84-85). This ‘happening’, we propose, overcomes the ‘either-or’ possibility embracing the creative forces of the virtual: This co-constructive and creative logic provides “the means for opening of communication across boundaries long thought to be impenetrable” (Kauffman 1996: 293). We see the new urban collaborative arenas denying this normalizing rationale which accepts one into existence only by constructing an-*other* in opposition or in relation to it. For Deleuze, not ‘otherness’ but ‘*and-ness*’<sup>5</sup>, a synthetic process brings into actuality the unconscious (potentialities or tendencies) – a process of re-territorialisation.

In this sense, the unconsciousness becomes a creative force due to its immanent and imminent qualities: something yet to come. And because of these qualities, as subversive happenings in the city grow more connected,

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<sup>5</sup> Jungian approach of psychological change that resists Freudian ordering/tracing that imposes tree-like structures to rhizomatic attempts to reach a *point de fuite*/escape

‘...by webs and actions, wires and stories, many things will emerge that we, as mere neurons in the network, don’t expect, don’t understand, can’t control, and may not even perceive. The only way to understand an emergent system is to let it run, because no individual agent will ever be able to reveal the whole’ (Notes From Nowhere 2003: 73).

This portrays a highly uncertain and unpredictable system (non-linear) that folds into a spiral (Deleuze, 1994), embracing complexity and a-genealogical transformations. This spiral process of transformation also signifies a simultaneous change in the capitalist city/topology through the creation of new territories. Again in ‘*A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*’, Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 472) describe this as the deepest law of capitalism: in the attempt of setting limits or boundaries around subcultures, capitalism ‘repels’ its own limits giving rise to multidimensional flows ‘that escape its axiomatic’. It is these flows that we perceive as revolutionary connections that ‘delineate a new Land’ (*ibid*: 472). In this ‘Land’, several subversive activities, groupings, and subcultures come together to experiment and actively resist any restriction to the unexpected transformation. They themselves may change and become something else or populate temporarily trans-spaces and trans-identities. This nomadic movement spirally redefines the potential that urban social formations could encapsulate in their capacity for polyvocality and variability:

‘The city goes soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in. You, too. Decide who you are, and the city will again assume a fixed form around you. Decide what it is, and your own identity will be revealed, like a position on a map fixed by triangulation (Raban, 1974: 9).

Before we conclude this section, a word of caution should be added: through this metaphorical reading of urban subversions, we want to demonstrate the transformation that urban practices undergo, but also we want to add a caveat. Akin to Hardy’s paradox in quantum physics, by the time we observe and theorise urban subversions, due to their immanence, they have already been transformed into something new or opened up the possibilities for new practices to emerge. Thus we would like to stress that the examples we

provide and the ones that we cannot know of are all dimensions of a grid that can be momentarily observed and theorised. Additionally, we want to acknowledge the fact that our illustrations do also frame these events as concrete practices at times of an oppositional, developmental or evolutionary nature. Yet they are mentioned here as instances of a process that does not cease to transform always remaining rhizomatic. Some of the practices may be subjected to subsequent appropriation or be in the process of creating new linkages towards the emergence of a new field for engagement, still unknown and interestingly unimaginable. The important thing nevertheless is that through their rhizomatic potential they invite new territories and assemblages and this is what keeps them embedded nonetheless unbounded.

In this section, we proposed that future work should respond to the ‘distributive character of publics’ (Harold, 2007: 148) and re-examine the ways we construct and theorize emerging urban socialities. In particular we invited conceptualisations of urban subversions not as the privilege of named groups but as ‘territories of subjective formations’ and ‘spaces of engagement’ (Sassen, 2006). This, we suggested, allows for unbounded urban identities, structured around fluid configurations which re-arrange urban landscapes away from organised subcultures and singular functionalities by the selected few, towards urban environments that embody the multiple and reflect difference temporally as well as spatially. The performance of these alternative identities describes the city as a place not of *being* but of *becoming*; a continual process of adjustment with the other that is not limited to ordering ‘organisation discourses’. It invites new metaphors that release urban subversions from their rigid subcultural discourse. Such a metaphor, the rhizome, was employed here to re-conceptualise urban social formations as temporary connections or ‘intersections’ between previously unrelated emerging communities.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

The changing nature of world cities and how they will cope with the exploding urban population is a conundrum which, as urban researchers, we cannot ignore. Langford (2006: 48) argues that the question is whether in the contemporary city the regime of 'functional totalitarianism' has reached a point beyond what De Certeau (1974) calls perambulatory play's capacity to retrieve or redeem it, because play itself has taken on authoritarian characteristics. While the notion of 'play' in the city is being reined into 'totalitarian (or in this case world city) spaces' is a valid one, this paper argued there is a need to offer an alternative to the binary logic of these playful or subversive practices against official urban tendencies, which under the inauspiciousness of 'reason' have homogenising tendencies (Bridge, 2005). Instead, there is a chance to engage with a postmodern plurality of difference (Dear, 2000).

It is a well-versed argument that forces of homogenisation attempt to orchestrate totalising meanings of urban living in order to promote and accelerate profit through standardised consumption patterns. World city making processes have been primarily economic with socio-cultural controls accompanying the effects of the instrumental exchange relationships. The alternative discourses that have focused on resistance movements to these ideologies tend to be positioned with marginalised groups that are often treated as the only reactionary front against homogenised city life. We propose that these discourses only serve to further promote the world city paradigm (albeit new forms of it) which first marginalise alternative activities (othering) and then gradually, through the use of several institutional and technological means, appropriate them re-introducing them as new, crystallised cultural movements or trends (accruing) (such as underground art (Banksy exhibitions) or fashions (clothing in skaters' subculture)).

In this paper, we have explored how urban pastimes as rhizomatic practices rely on spontaneity and heterogeneity and thus, they have the capacity to remain what Harvie (2009: 67) calls, ‘unproductive play’. As rhizomatic social formations, they cannot be restricted or contained in an encompassing frame or description. Hence, our reference to a multitude of urban subversions, a handful of which have alluded to (such as parkour, skateboarding, pranks and so on), has provided a fertile area of exploration of the rhizomatic process, a series of becomings, rather than a deliberate attempt to provide an exact definition of them. Fluidity, interconnectedness and multiplicity of being are thus central in the conceptualisation of urban subversions. Yet more crucially, they are vehicles for moving beyond the categorisation of urban expressions as subcultures or subversive anti-capitalist groupings towards dynamic explorations of cities’ multiple entryways and rhizomatic mappings.

Recognising the complexity of these activities (that may include urban explorations, graffiti, parkour or community activism or a meshing of them all) and inviting future work to further explore their possibilities, we envisage going beyond urban segregation towards atemporal and performative happenings in the city. The articulation of these rhizomatic social formations as part of a cohesive yet open urban realm reinforces the discovery of new urban territories that challenge a fixed definition of the city as well as its bounded, formalised urban subcultures. We propose that it is through tracing these subcultures back into the map of the urban realm, one could discover a new, trans-cultural urban milieu. Resistance itself is “an ongoing renegotiation of meaning, function, and behaviour, rather than brief instances of outrage... not only is individual subjectivity malleable or negotiable, but so too is the signification and purpose of the monumental cityscape itself” (Phillips, 2007: online paper).

In the same vein,

‘the discipline of a social framework is exercised through basic lies...We can oppose one



basic lie with a different one—capitalism with communism or whatever - but that still leaves us with the same problem because it is no more the change of one straitjacket for another... Freedom comes only from injecting into the institutional bloodstream its antigens: ambiguity, spontaneity, uncertainty, irresponsibility, and...untruth' (Bailey, 1991: xx).

We consider these 'antigens' key to our conceptualisation of a rhizomatic urban landscape: emerging urban subversions (should) encourage new forms of interactivity, connectivity and relationality, embodied possibilities, a form of urban heteroglossia (Bakhtin, 1981)<sup>6</sup>, there by inspiring imaginative cross-pollinated explorations of the urban. These activities then would remain less re-appropriated from their original world city usage (as a Lefebvrian reading would afford), and also less bound up in the prevailing practices and norms of prescribed urban subcultures. This is because during the subculturalisation process, other spatial and cultural realities are being constructed to spirally expand the crystallised urban activity. In essence, the stories of these new formations are not yet being written, they exist fluidly in the absence of any formalised communities. In enacting the rhizomatic tendencies of urban social practices, they propose multiple urban identities that individuals can adopt in a creative exploratory state of becoming.

The majority of the existing literature focuses on the temporary crystallisation of these practices. We stressed the need to examine these crystallised moments as part of a wider constellation of identities which through their transformation re-define our relationship with the city. These identities are performed as explorations of the urban unknown and unseen and at the same time, are a product of inhabiting a city of possibility, performative rediscovery and improvisation. Thus, future research could build upon this conceptualisation of a fluid rhizomatic urban identity to explore the processes and strategies through which the

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<sup>6</sup> Heteroglossia is defined by Bakhtin as simultaneous differences (i.e., several/diverse voices) that are found in dialogue, each associated with a set of distinctive values and presuppositions that govern the operation of meaning (Bakhtin, 1981).

dramaturgical and performative elements of the relational city inspire creativity and enhance possibility through the engagement with emergent urban territories and the cultivation of inhabitation of emergent identities.

We want to stress that various subculturalisation discourses that are discussed in this paper only partially describe this rhizomatic process, and could not hope to fully capture the possibilities that myriad of urban practices may offer. Appropriation or re-appropriation (or indeed un-appropriation), instead of being an indication of closure, can be seen as evidence of ruptures or 'breakdowns' part of the rhizomatic principles that underlie these practices. By focusing upon the rhizomatic principles of connectivity and heterogeneity, multiplicity, asignifying rupture, cartography and decalcomania, we recognise the potential of urban subversions to remain open-ended. This suggests the re-conceptualisation of urban experiences to include the realm of possibility (Pinder, 2008) that is, resituates marginalised activities (or 'the other') as 'experimentation'. The invitation of possibility and creative reconstruction of the urban is an open invitation to 'the other' in that the dialectic relationship with it (other voices, other uses of space or other paths) becomes a source of 'rediscovery' and interconnectedness. Both liberate the individual from the need to be part of a stable, formalised subculture and allow for difference and multiplicity.

Most of the subversive urban activities have a social element involving groups of people and remain open to membership, transcending the boundaries of the official city spaces and its usage. This openness is a community-based process that engages a wide range of subculture and non-subculture members, activists and non-activists, participants and audiences; thus we stress connectivity instead of isolation and fragmentation of social action – a permeability of

(traditional sub-cultural) boundaries and a dynamic process of becoming rather than a bounded membership of being in the city. Urban subversions present us with an opportunity to explore the spaces 'in-between', when we conceptualise them as rhizomatic social formations or open invitations to fluid and flexible urban identities -fluid and permeable boundaries for urban nomadic tribes, organically evolving, always becoming.

This paper does not intend to replace one urban framework with another; instead we present an invitation to studying urban activities as dynamic and rhizomatic expressions. Through this, the paper has provided a starting point for future empirical research into these urban formations examining them as open fields for social engagement. We suggested that urban rhizomes can become emancipating collectives, connect with other rhizomes and empower and inspire an open urban project to be re-made in practice. Play and joy, diversion and alterity are all part of urban life and are also elements that reinforce collaborations and produce new social arrangements that can co-construct a city of possibilities.

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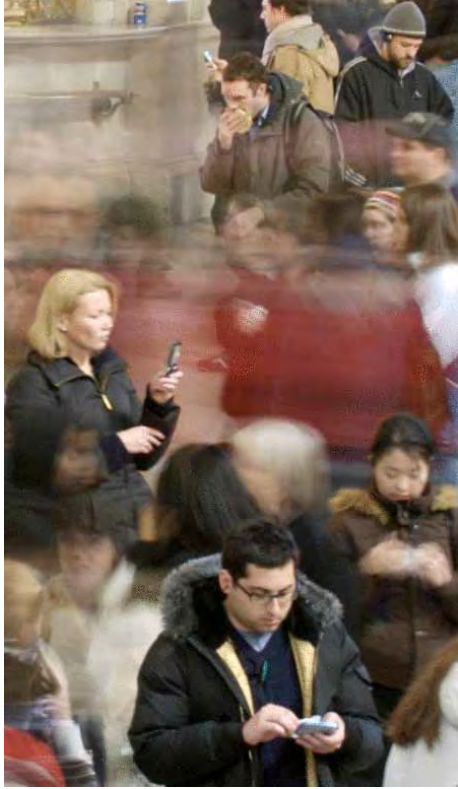


**Figure 1: Skateboarder at Queen Elizabeth Hall in London's South Bank, as people look on**



**Figure 2: Jump London; <http://www.channel4.com/programmes/jump-london>.**





**Figure 3: Two images of “Frozen Grand Central.” The same five frozen pranksters can be counted in each photo. (Source: Chad Nicholson, 2007)**



**Figure 4: Small metal ‘knobs’ on a concrete ornament outside Westfield shopping centre in White City, London (source: authors photo, 2010)**



**Figure 5: ‘Yarn-Bombing’ – A student dresses tress in coloured threads in Chicago, Illinois, USA (source: Authors’ photo, 2010)**



**Figure 6: ‘The first painting, finished in 2007, was a 150sqm mural depicting a boy flying a kite, by far the most popular pastime in Rio's favela's’**  
**(<http://www.favelapainting.com/favela-painting>, accessed in 3/3/11).**