

Palimpsestuous Behaviour: Democracy, Resistance, Downtowns, and Skateboards
or, How to Read Culture

by Jason Phillips

For those unfamiliar with the term, a palimpsest, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, is “A parchment or other writing surface on which the original text has been effaced or partially erased, and then overwritten by another; a manuscript in which later writing has been superimposed on earlier (effaced) writing.” Palimpsests are not restricted to textual practice and can also be “a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multi-layered record” (Oxford English Dictionary 1989). In this paper, I am working in the context of this extended usage. I will explain the distinction between palimpsestic and palimpsestuous – the two adjective forms of the term – as I reconsider the palimpsest as a conceptual tool that helps us to more effectively read culture and cultural practice. Specifically, I will show that the palimpsestuous structure of the central business district represents a threat to democratic practice and potential while, at the same time, retaining traces of the heterogeneous polyphony of the city, traces that can lead us to the voices of populations that might otherwise be buried or silenced. My palimpsestuous reading of the modern city is illustrated with examples of skateboarding in and on the city itself (as opposed to skateboarding on ramps or in designated skateboard parks). Reading and thinking culture palimpsestuously allows us to understand modes of cultural expression, such as resistance, as fluid; as being more like sets of temporarily negotiated responses and exchanges than static systems of opposition.

Sarah Dillon distinguishes between two types of analytical reading based on the palimpsest. A “palimpsestic” reading involves separating the different layers of the palimpsest, an act that she says “unravel[s] and destroy[s] the palimpsest” (Dillon 2005: 254). A “palimpsestuous” reading, on the other hand, preserves the structure of the palimpsest and “seeks to trace the incestuous and encrypted texts that constitute the palimpsest’s fabric. Since those texts bear no necessary relation to each other, palimpsestuous reading is an inventive process of creating relations where there may, or should, be none; hence the appropriateness of its epithet’s phonetic similarity to the incestuous” (Dillon 2005: 254). A palimpsestuous reading involves making sense of a tangle of patterns in motion, and the analysis of contemporary culture is best accomplished by reading palimpsestuously; that is, by looking for and considering invented and imposed social relations that are otherwise hidden – that remain beneath the surface of the cultural text.

The similarity between palimpsestuous and incestuous is more than just “phonetic.” Ignoring hidden social relations in favour of surface-only readings is a homogenizing move, while reading culture palimpsestuously reveals the diversity necessary for healthy communities to develop. The imposition of only one form of social relations – specifically, the imposition of commercial relations over, and at the expense of, all other social relations – results in a dilution of cultural diversity similar to the dilution of genetic diversity that occurs with the imposition of incestuous sexual relationships. Acts of resistance performed by skateboarders, for example, are attempts to assert a plurality of cultural forms and social relations.

Resistance is often recognized only as loud and visible acts of protest wherein masses of people take to the streets. Reading culture palimpsestuously, however, allows us to more clearly see how temporary acts of resistance have a more enduring presence in the contemporary city. In [this video clip](#) (“Warren Ounjian...” 2005), you see a lone skater skating through Toronto’s central business district, or CBD. Toronto’s CBD, like those of many other cosmopolitan centres around the world, is what is known as a “grade-separated” space. The grade-separated city is an architectural reinvention of the palimpsest: it consists of the surface or street level and both elevated and submerged layers that function as pedestrian walkways and as vast tracts of retail space. According to geographer Jack Byers, grade-separated “environments are woven through downtown in such a way as to share the same geographic location while functioning as two separate entities” (1998: 200), much like the separate, layered texts of the palimpsest share the same page. The skater you are seeing here is writing his resistance on the surface or street level. But resistance to what, and how?

Sociologist Becky Beal says, “In the subculture of skateboarding, the most blatant form of resistance... [is] the opposition to the corporate bureaucratic forms of sport (and, as a consequence, corporate bureaucratic social relations)” (2001: 48).

Architectural theorist Iain

Borden describes the contemporary CBD as being designed almost exclusively for the facilitation of commerce, and he says, “Skateboarding involves a critique of the processes of exchange and consumption in the modern city, and, above all else, proposes a reassertion of use values as opposed to exchange values” (2001: 237). In the context of commercial facilitation, grade-separated city-scapes represent what

Byers calls “a proliferation of quasi-public spaces, constructed and controlled by private enterprise” (1998: 189). Street skating functions as an act of resistance to this corporate, commercial privatization of public space and the imposition of a set of commercial social relations.

The construction of grade-separated city-scapes allows “architects to free-up street-level spaces for expansive, high-modern lobbies and plazas” (Byers 1998: 193). According to Byers, “Such opulent, serene spaces were meant to remind visitors and passers-by of the power and prestige of the corporations within the building” (1998: 193); that is, the architectural structures are monumental representations that mean ‘this space is a place of commerce’. The skater in this clip is resisting and re-negotiating this meaning by acting in the tradition of the Situationist concepts of *dérive* and *détournement*. According to Situationist founder Guy Debord, *dérive* is “[literally: ‘drifting’], a technique of transient passage through varied ambiances. The *dérive* entails playful constructive behaviour and awareness of psycho-geographical effects” (1993: 696). Of central importance is the idea of moving through the city as a non-consumer. *Détournement* is “the reuse of preexisting artistic [in this case architectural] elements in a new ensemble...a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression” (Debord 1993: 697); it is a process of appropriation and re-signification. Since commercial value and the imposition of commercial social relations are the meaning and function of the CBD’s architectural scape, it is that meaning and function the skater is temporarily effacing. The skater is behaving palimpsestuously by almost literally scratching out the original meaning and inscribing his own new meaning onto the surface, a meaning which is itself re-written over every weekday between the 9 to 5

business hours. Resistance here is implicit. This is skateboarding as play, in both the sense of innocent child's play and the Derridean sense of "the play of signification": "the substitution of contents, elements, or terms...the permutation or the transformation of elements" (Derrida 1992: 1117-8).

This kind of resistance to the corporate privatization of downtown public space is important because, as Byers claims, "grade-separated systems are trenchant indicators of the erosion of public life and increasing social polarity in North American cities...[they] reveal cracks in the notion that downtown is still the meeting place for the many different segments of society...[and they] threaten to unravel the social heterogeneity that defines downtown" (1998: 203). The consequences of the monumental impositions of capital and commerce are thus akin to the consequences of incestuous impositions. Not only is diversity diluted, but the imposition of such relationships is an act of domination and violence that has horrific implications for those being imposed upon – implications that Jodi Lundgren describes as shattering the sense of body and self (1998: np, online).

The loss of body and self that takes place with the imposition of the privatized grade-separated city is the loss of public space and the permutations of identity that can emerge and flourish within that space. This loss of public space is a blow to democratic political potential, for, within the quasi-public spaces that Byers describes, "typical freedoms and rights that are guaranteed, accepted, and enjoyed...are not protected. Freedom of speech, freedom to congregate, and a host of other legal rights are curtailed. In addition, a bevy of cultural expressions are actively discouraged" (Byers 1998: 189). As a result of this curtailing of democratic practice and potential, people

who inhabit the CBD are increasingly susceptible to the subjugations of imposed, and enforced, social relations.

Our lone skater is almost devoid of experienced social relationships. He is a figure subjected to and subjugated by only the architectural surface space of the physical landscape. Let us dig a little deeper into the palimpsestuous structure of the modern city to see what social relations lie hidden beneath the surface, and how they are indeed imposed and enforced.

The skaters in [this video clip](#) are skating in Toronto's PATH system, the subterranean level of the grade-separated city which, as the sequence of text blurbs at the beginning of the clip tells us, is:

[...]the largest underground shopping complex in the world...it has more than 27 kms of halls, and 4 million square feet of retail space...there are more than 125 grade level access points connected to the PATH, along with 5 subway stations and 20 parking garages... [and] more than 50 office towers and their underground property are connected through the path.

(“PATH...” 2005)

The skaters here are still engaging with the physical landscape, but they are also interacting with each other, and, most importantly, with panoptical forces of technology and security. Here, there is no separation of layers in the palimpsest of the city; we are below the surface, where the different texts or scripts of cosmopolitan culture are forced to interact with each other. And, for the most part, the relationships the skaters experience are antagonistic. They are susceptible to the imposition of a relationship with

security forces intent on preserving the commercial meaning and function of the space. Byers notes that “Internal security is the most important means by which property owners control the use of space by the general public” (1998: 199). Security is the means by which private property owners attempt to protect their space against the temporary negation of its commercial context. This imposition of security can be read as an imposed social relationship – one of Dillon’s “relations where there may, or should, be none” (2005:254) – that makes up and holds together the palimpsestuous structure. The relationship between the skaters and forces of security has an aura of the incestuous because it demands the presence of authority, domination, and violence; the effort to uphold a single meaning and use of space dilutes the diversity necessary for democracy; the relationship is democratically illegitimate.

One of the main criticisms of grade-separated systems is that they stratify not only the physical landscape but also the populations that inhabit those landscapes. With the focus on commercial facilitation, the grade-separated city encourages “the absence of a whole host of the general population that might otherwise maintain a higher visibility: people of colour, the elderly, teenagers, homemakers, artists, and so on” (Byers 1998: 200), and relations between the commercial class and these other populations are mediated by an imposed relationship with security. When one is performing the role of consumer, security becomes more or less invisible. When one is performing any other sort of non-commercial role, security’s presence is made known, and the more vehement one’s resistance becomes the more aggressive security becomes. Life in the CBD involves a constant negotiation among roles one is willing, and allowed, to perform in the face of the impositions of security and the architectural

structures of the city-scape itself. As this negotiation amongst roles becomes embroiled in increasingly antagonistic sets of social relations that exist below the surface, acts of resistance become increasingly explicit, to the point where they begin to resemble the more conventional erupting-onto-the-streets modes of resistance. Explicit challenges to the set of antagonistic social relations are brought to the surface level of the palimpsestuous city as Other populations attempt to inscribe their texts, their meanings, onto the visible surface of the city.

In the summer of 2003, a series of actions were taken by skaters in downtown Toronto referred to as "[bumrushes](#)." Because security's response to the activity of the skaters was becoming increasingly aggressive, the bumrushes involved the swarming of specific spots in downtown Toronto in an attempt to overwhelm security so that the spots could, for a time, be skated. These actions were organized through internet message boards and word-of-mouth communication, often at the very same quasi-public spaces the skaters were attempting to re-claim as public space, an example of the very democratic practices public spaces allow.

The effectiveness of such outbursts is always negligible in terms of political gain or harm. However, the significance of such acts, when read palimpsestuously, is in the confluence of time and space. The bumrushes were temporary surface events – texts written, for a time, on the surface of the palimpsestuous city, only to be once again covered up, erased, scratched from view and written over. However, the traces of such events (including the documenting of them) allow us to read about the social relations that are otherwise kept below the surface. Thinking and reading the city palimpsestuously leads us to realize that once the surface event is over the set of

relations that motivated it does not just go away. We must learn to read beyond the surface by following the traces of scripts left behind. In the case of our skaters, whether they are behaving explicitly or implicitly, the marks they leave behind – the wax-blackened edge of a ledge, scratches down a handrail, wheelmarks on a wall, the consequential litter of adolescent disregard, the pig-ear skate-stoppers that make handrails useless and benches uncomfortable, the video clips you have just watched – are signs that another meaning was at some point inscribed on this space. With a little digging into the layers, a different text can be found and read, evidence that a different meaning can exist, and has existed, for a time and in this space. Reading the city palimpsestuously allows us to hear the polyphony of the cityscape that the privatization of public space works to silence.

That this is an effective conceptualization of how culture can be read is supported by Dillon's reference to Daniel Cooper Alarcón's historical application in "The Aztec Palimpsest: Toward a New Understanding of Aztlán Cultural Identity and History," wherein she says Alarcón "sets out the significance of the palimpsest as a tool and a trope that enables a critique and an understanding of cultural identity and history" (2005: 255). Alarcón argues that "the palimpsest's structure of interlocking, competing narratives has the advantage of preventing the dominant voice from completely silencing the others" (1988 cited in Dillon 2005: 255). Reading the culture of the modern city palimpsestuously lets us understand resistance as an ongoing re-negotiation of meaning, function, and behaviour, rather than brief instances of outrage. It shows us that not only is individual subjectivity malleable or negotiable, but so too is the signification and purpose of the monumental city-scape itself.

Via the palimpsestuous behaviour of skateboarders the structure of the city becomes palimpsestuously meaningful. The city comes to have imposed relational meanings; that is, different meanings at different times, yet always in the same space, dependent upon the subjugations placed upon it by different populations, as those populations are themselves experiencing the imposed subjugations of the city. Understood palimpsestuously, the city and its populations become “sheer subject matter” (“Art Gallery of Ontario” 2005).

Attempts to inscribe meaning and presence on the surface of the city builds and affirms community in opposition to the rampant individualism of neo-liberal global capitalism – the condition that demands the privatization of public space and the stifling of democratic potential. The formation of communities is an expression and preservation of sets of social relations that provide an alternative to a homogenous and antagonistic set of commercial relations. Thinking palimpsestuously allows us to understand that subjugated populations are participants in culture, and not merely false-consciousness-ridden subjects of a dominant order. Most importantly, the palimpsest provides a venue for the preservation of the political voices of populations that might otherwise be effaced and silenced. Thinking and knowing palimpsestuously tells us that democratic practice and potential is still present in the hyper-commercial cultural landscape of the central business district.

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