**Repeating the Rhizome**

Alice van der Klei

Stable URL:

*SubStance* is currently published by University of Wisconsin Press.

# Repeating the Rhizome

*Alice van der Klei*

The concept of the rhizome, as articulated by Deleuze & Guattari in *Mille Plateaux*, offers us a way of thinking and theorizing hypertext[1] within the new technologies. I would like to explore the creative implications of this concept and to suggest that with the coming of hypertext, the classical model of text as *"arbre de connaissance"* is more appropriately replaced by the rhizome, in order to "grow" a concept of differentiation.

## Repetition and Recuperation of the Rhizome

A rhizome is an underground root system that attaches itself to other root systems and scatters in all directions. Out in the air, there is nothing arborescent about it. Unlike an *"arbre de connaissance,"* there are not millions of roots growing into an orderly tree, but a million little underground proliferations. The simultaneous presence of heterogeneous space means that there is no hierarchized distance between one element and another; they are in the same territory, grafting ideas across continents irrespective of national boundaries. The rhizome, like Deleuze and Guattari's "book-machine,"[2] connects and assembles in movement, without necessarily losing or gaining anything and without giving more importance to one element over another.

When I decided to continue my literary studies in North America, I was asked to let go of colonialist thinking—of hierarchical ways of thinking—in which I had presumablyy been raised in Europe. I had to "deterritorialize" myself, to become more "pluridisciplinary" and learn to work in a rhizomatic sense. Thinking about links through Deleuze led me to ask how the "new book-machine" worked, and just as I was rethinking my knowledge base, the Internet opened before me, laying out a hypertextual mode to be read, discovered and explored.

In browsing the Web, one finds elements to be linked, in a nascent rhizome. In the Deleuzean concept of *becoming*, when A becomes B, A does not give up being A. It continues to be A, yet it becomes B without transforming itself into B. So when the European scholar becomes

"American," he/she does not cease being European and will not entirely transform into an American. "Deterritorialization" cannot be separated from "reterritorialization." Becoming part of the same simultaneity, within its simultaneous undoing and redoing—this was the way I was now being asked to look at textuality.

On the Web, we are in between texts, in search of links which, because of the addresses of their URLs, we *believe* to be travelling from one continent to another, between Europe, North America and other points on the globe. The linking and browsing within hypertext forms our "textual corpus," a part of knowledge sharing. There is a corporeal becoming of hypertext, like any biological organism, *"un devenir-animal"* or *"devenir-matière"* of a document-machine. We are grafting a common text-machine in which origins may begin to become scattered or blurred. Beyond North America or Europe, I link up with an Australian scholar, C.-F. Kon, and quote his text found on the Internet:

> The Net is a hybrid of several earlier technologies, including the typewriter, the telegraph, telephone, cable links, satellite-broadcasting, radio, print technologies and computing. [...] At the same time, the Net could not have "become" if there had not been ruptures between distinct fields of study — telecommunications, computing, psychology, military defense, and so on.

This hybridized knowledge that we are now linking together, these transcontinental ideas that are being grafted, attempt to do away with all classification, plunging us into a common, non-hierarchical database. This is where the concept of the rhizome concept is germane.

## Rhizomatic Quotations and Transfers

Rhizomatic "reading leaps"—those leaps between and within texts— are a figure often used to explain hypertext. The success and the reappropriation of the "rhizome" in hypertext thought and in new writing technologies appears in the work of hypertext theorists such as Stuart Moulthrop (Baltimore), George P. Landow (Brown), and Janet Murray (MIT) in America, as well as Ilana Snyder in Australia (Monash, Australia) or Pierre Lévy, formerly in Paris.

The mapping of hypertext thought has become so active that it's increasingly a question of explaining by quoting someone who was quoting someone who in the end was quoting *The Rhizome* by Deleuze and Guattari.

Looking back over the texts that I have on hypertext, I found that either rhizomatic linkage did not explicitly refer to *Mille Plateaux*, or that the reference was to Stuart Moulthrop, one of the first to mention Deleuze and Guattari's *Rhizome*. So, in a similar transfer, allow me to quote Moulthrop, in Landow's major book on hypertext:

> We begin on the *Thousand Plateaus*—which is appropriate for a commentary on hypertext and culture, since Deleuze and Guattari's rhizome-book may itself be considered an incunabular hypertext. [...] what Deleuze and Guattari have in mind is a chaotically distributed network (the rhizome) rather than a regular hierarchy of trunk and branches. (300-01)

Others no longer bother to quote or mention *Mille Plateaux* but quote Moulthrop directly. For example, Ilana Snyder in her book, *Hypertext, the Electronic Labyrinth*, which summarizes the theory of hypertext, says that her book is "itself a kind of hypertext created out of the connections I have made between the ideas of key theorists in the area of electronic literacy" (xiii). She quotes Moulthrop directly in reference to the rhizome:

> The coming changes in textuality allow us to create a different kind of linguistic structure, one that corresponds more closely to Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizome," an organic growth that is all adventitious middle, not a deterministic chain of beginnings and ends. (in Hawisher and Selfe, 253)

Where Moulthrop is remembered for quoting *Mille Plateaux*, Snyder concludes: "[hypertext] is the linguistic realisation of Deleuze and Guattari's "rhizomatic" form" (52), but she has not gone into the *Rhizome* text itself. Janet Murray from MIT, on the other hand, in her *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, does reference both Deleuze and Moulthrop in her analysis of the digital labyrinth. She defines hypertext narrative as being

> like a set of index cards that have been scattered on the floor and then connected with multiple segments of tangled twine, they offer no end point and no way out. Their aesthetic vision is often identified with philosopher Gilles Deleuze's "rhizome," a tuber root system in which any point may be connected to any other point. Deleuze used the rhizome root system as a model of connectivity in systems of ideas; critics have applied this notion to allusive text systems that are not linear like a book but boundaryless and without closure. Stuart Moulthrop, a theorist and electronic fiction writer, states it... (132)

Within hypertextual linkage, I become a "scissors-reader" like Antoine Compagnon's "homme aux ciseaux," who, in order to remember his readings,

just snips out the essential, with a pair of scissors (27). Like a "scissors-reader," I pinpoint and cut out one link after another, seeking, finding, clicking and storing each clipping on the basis of single words or concepts. This redistributed "knowledge network" is more of a scattering that allows the differentiation so dear to Deleuze (*Différence et Répétition*), rather than a simple repetition. The text metamorphoses, in a biological sense, as it changes with a click, giving way to a new transmission; while passing from one electronic page to another, there is fragmentation. The metaphor of the rhizome embeds a concept of differentiation or of biological recuperation. Deleuze and Guattari explain that in a "becoming-animal," one is always within a pack, in a multiplicity, a community: "Mais nous, nous ne nous intéressons pas aux caractères, nous nous intéressons aux modes d'expansion, de propagation, d'occupation, de contagion, de peuplement" (292-93).

Talk of hypertext being rhizomatic, of its "packing-expansion," its propagation and contagion—all this has a biological sound to it. But I would like to concentrate more on its fragmented transmission and non-hierarchical textuality. This becoming hypertextual doesn't act according to a hierarchy or a canonical order, but according to the behavior of the public using it.

"Why Deleuze?" was the title of a Call for Papers I saw while browsing the Net. Deleuze because of the fertility of his biological concept in *Mille Plateaux*. This creative rhizome concept is essential in the search for information because it allows for an autonomy of the "reading material" without having to organize the user in a restrictive way.

### The Concept Caught in an Archiving Dispersal

Another Deleuzian text is *Difference and Repetition*, where we see that with repetition comes difference, and also remembrance. It's a question of what I remember from my readings, and how the reading-links make me recognize or snip out only the essential. One could say that theory has always worked that way; it has always been a question of someone being influenced by someone else. In the case of hypertext, the attempt to theorize has only just begun. So while we still know who started the rhizome and who made the link between the concept and hypertext, we are at the beginning of a search where archiving is still possible. Then again, we are already starting to think hypertext on the basis of a single concept, and is the rhizome not already being lost somewhere along the way? While recuperating the rhizome concept, shouldn't we beware of once again "growing" an archive in a hierarchical mode?

If the reader/browser does not understand the content of what he is reading, but is merely organizing it intuitively around criteria based on collective and rhizomatic "interests," then the object of research itself becomes a rhizome (growing in one direction due to interest, then drifting off due to lack of interest, all the time growing in multiplicity because of other interests, yet needing a certain stability and stockpiling of information). Hypertext is interlinking but ephemeral; even if archives can be found, one has to know that an archive exists in order not to repeat what has already taken place, and one can still miss a relevant link by being unaware of its existence.

In *Mal d'Archives* Derrida refers to Freud while discussing the archive. He focuses on Freud's "death impulse" that makes us repeat. Derrida defines the archive as a form of memory control. An archive exists where things begin, where there is consignment and gathering. Archives allow one to trace something that is repeated, and to repeat it again.

Thus, for example, Freud is re-introduced by Deleuze in *Difference and Repetition*, and by Derrida in *Mal d'Archives*. By repetition, he is kept archived. Knowledge filiation can be seen as comment upon commentary. An archive allows an initial chronological approach to knowledge, to be assimilated through reading. But like Mallarmé's *"coup de dés"* to which Deleuze refers (*D&R*, 255-56), reading is like rolling dice, scattering us into a multiplicity of thoughts. There is a sort of scattering of nomadic concepts, according to Derrida (*Mal d'archive*, 56), because concepts are not reliable and create a dispersal between archives. It is this Freudian "death impulse" that makes archiving desirable. By the scattering or nomadism of Freud, the latter's ideas on repetition are taken up again and discussed by Deleuze and Derrida, in the same way that Deleuze's rhizome is picked up again by hypertext theorists. This kind of archiving and dispersal is not new, so what is different about hypertext linking?

## How can Repetition Reach a Difference?

For Derrida, inheritance is important because the material is often repeated and can assume its difference in full. But as in Plato's academy, the archive is the institution of repetition. Since every repetition is different, it will be cataloged and archived precisely for its difference. Inscription on paper is for the purpose of storage, where it is necessary to rediscover difference. But in the presence of hypertext, there is a differentiation of links to be brought out, and not a repetition. The instability of differences and the permeability of borderlines in the virtual mode of hypertext highlight

differences even better. With this reading tool, the "difference-reader" seizes what is at stake in the text, once it is hypertextualized, and jumps from one link of the rhizome to another.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,* Freud does not see repetition as imitation: rather, it discloses life or death.[3] Deleuze invokes Freud in order to show how a blockage of the concept occurs. Freud's *pleasure principle* and *death instinct* are phenomena of repetition. Difference is understood within the repetition in which it is concealed:

> Quand manque la conscience du savoir ou l'élaboration du souvenir, le savoir tel qu'il est en soi n'est plus que la répétition de son objet : il est *joué*, c'est-à-dire répété, mis en acte au lieu d'être connu. La répétition apparaît ici comme l'inconscient du libre *concept*, du savoir ou du souvenir, l'inconscient de la représentation. *Il revient à Freud* d'avoir assigné la raison naturelle d'un tel *blocage* : le refoulement, la résistance, qui fait de la répétition même une véritable "contrainte", une "compulsion". (*Différence & Répétition*, 24)

Shouldn't we be aware of a blockage when thinking repetition? What we keep or clip from Freud is the following: in the "working-through"[4] process, we don't succeed in archiving our impulses; moreover, repetition is not yet admitted as belonging to the past. We aren't able to create the distance necessary to archive. To do so, we must learn to recognize the difference in every repetition. Even though Deleuze repeats Freud, as does Derrida after him, it is not a matter of a repetition of this repetition.

Derrida says that there is a theory of the Freudian archive, but that there always is an *impensé* —an unthinkable, an unthought—that enters the history of the concept. One always forgets one or several elements, either consciously or unconsciously. Hence the pain of archiving. Contrary to Deleuze, for Derrida, "working-through" is not a blockage but a concept in formation. But if for Deleuze there is blockage in repetition and its memory, what matters more is finding a difference. With Derrida, on the other hand, one turns to the future: "...on associe l'archive avec la répétition et la répétition avec le passé. Mais c'est d'avenir qu'il s'agit ici et de l'archive comme expérience irréductible de l'avenir" (*Mal d'archive*, 109). I would suggest that an archive must be allowed to forget occasionally, because if we are only concerned with knowing where something comes from, we will be blocked in our creativity.

*The New Reading, or the Rhizomatic Future*

Finally, I find it more important that, in new literary devices like hypertext and numeric networks, we are caught between archiving a concept in a perspective of repetition and looking at its difference, in order to go from singularity to singularity in a dynamic of replacement and scattering. This not only implies that we "re-visit" the rhizome; it also means assuming our "being and becoming" as a process—even a game—of differences, where the "reader," rather than attending to concepts or to what is being forgotten in the transfer, thinks about being caught up in a stimulating scattering of creation. Do we perhaps linger too much on the text and its concepts, having the habits of the "monastic archiving reader"? In a future archive, we should tend towards redefining reading as becoming a "reader-creator."[5]

I have only to be in the midst of it all and, as in a rhizomatic hypertext, think about rooting links from where I am and using concepts in a creative perspective.

Why the rhizome? Because I have seen people as varied as literary theorists, philosophy and cinema critics, disk jockeys, visual artists and even a dancer, in Canada, in The Netherlands, and on the Net, being inspired by Deleuze. Coincidentally, in Dutch, *"De leuzen"* is a saying or a slogan. In a redefinition of hierarchy, in a video-clipping, a fragmentation or a sampling textuality, I would suggest using modes of textuality that cross borders like a *"leuzen,"* or a slogan.

*University of Montreal*

Notes

1. "Hypertext describes a program that provides multiple pathways through text enabling the user to follow existing hyperlinks, to link related items of text together in a non-linear and random access manner." In *The Cyberlexicon* by Bob Cotton and Richard Oliver, Phaidon Press Ltd, London, 1994
2. "Le livre en tant qu'agencement, est seulement en connexion avec d'autres agencements. (...) On ne cherchera rien à comprendre dans un livre, on se demandera avec quoi il fonctionne, en connexion de quoi il fait ou non passer des intensités (...) Le livre est une petite machine, une machine abstraite. Quand on écrit, c'est de savoir avec quelle autre machine la machine littéraire peut être branchée pour fonctionner" (*Mille plateaux*, 10).
3. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud spoke of the analytical work of oppression: "Repetiton occurs under pressure of a compulsion" and "The repressed instinct never ceases to strive for complete satisfaction, which would consist in the repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction "(42). "The compulsion to repeat must be ascribed to the unconscious repressed" (20).

4. "Working-through" stops when the patient realizes that he is living in the present, and realizes what belongs to the past.
5. In the "reader-creator" metaphor, *SubStance* readers may recognize topics related to the those presented in *SubStance* # 82, "Metamorphoses of the Book,"in which Guest Editor Renée Riese Hubert ended her Preface by saying: that "we have to redefine reading and the reader" (Vol. 26, no. 1, 1997, 7).

## Works Cited

Cotton, Bob, and Richard Oliver. *The Cyberlexicon*. London: Phaidon, 1994.

Compagnon, Antoine. *La Seconde main ou le travail de la citation*. Paris: Seuil, 1979

Deleuze, Gilles. *Différence & Répétition*. ParisL PUF, 1968

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. "1730- Devenir-intense, devenir-animal, devenir-imperceptible..." in *Mille Plateaux, Capitalisme et schizophrénie*. Paris: Minuit, 1980, pp. 292-293.

——. "Rhizome," in *Mille Plateaux*, pp.9-37.

Derrida, Jacques. *Mal d'archive*. Paris: Galilée, 1995.

Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVIII, London: The Hagorth Press,1920-1922

Freud, Sigmund. , "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through," in *The Standard Edition*, Vol. XII. London: The Hagorth Press, 1911-1913.

Hawisher, Gail E. and Cynthia L. Selfe, eds. *Evolving Perspectives on Computers and Compository Studies: Questions for the 1990s*. Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, 1991.

Kon, Chuen-Ferng. "Internet: Towards a Holistic Ontology." http://wwwmcc. murdoch.edu.au/ReadingRoom/VID/jfk/thesis/ntitles.htm

Landow, George P. *Hyper/Text/Theory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994.

Lévy, Pierre. *L'Intelligence collective, pour une anthropologie du cyberspace*. Paris: Éditions de la Découverte, 1994.

——. *Les technologies de l'intelligence, l'avenir de la pensée à l'ère informatique*. Paris: Éditions de la Découverte, 1990.

Moulthrop, Stuart. "The Politics of Hypertext," in Hawisher and Selfe, 253-271.

——. "Rhizomes and Resistance: Hypertext and the Dreams of a New Culture" in Landow, pp. 299-319.

Murray, Janet. H. *Hamlet on the Holodeck*. Cambridge: MIT, 1997.

Snyder, Ilana. *Hypertext The Electronic Labyrinth*, Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 1996.