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PETER LANG

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Jens Martin Gurr, Duisburg-Essen

Urbanity, Urban Culture and the European Metropolis

"Urbanity": 1. The character or quality of being urbane; courtesy, refinement, or elegance of manner etc. [...] 3. The state, condition, or character of a town or city; urban life.

W. Belsham: "The serenity, the elegance and urbanity of Paris", [*Essays, Philosophical, Historical and Literary*, 1789–91]

R. Capell: "Men from the mountains come down for their first taste of urbanity" [*Simiomata: A Greek Note Book, 1944–1945* 1946]
Oxford English Dictionary

I. Introduction¹

On the occasion of the City of Essen's taking over as European Capital of Culture "Ruhr.2010", Essen-born writer Jürgen Lodemann in January 2010 with a curious if telling statistic opened an essay cautioning the region against excessive metropolitan airs and graces: 196 members of the international P.E.N. Club currently reside in Berlin, Munich boasts 56 members, Hamburg 30, Frankfurt 35 and Essen, about the same size as Frankfurt? Not a single one.² Lodemann does make clear that, among many questionable criteria to assess the metropolitan status of a city, the number of P.E.N. members it is home to is hardly the most compelling one. But if the numbers are correct, might they not be indicative of the presence or absence of a metropolitan quality that is much harder to quantify and to grasp?

As a city with undoubted metropolitan status and arguably the only European "world city", London has for a number of years now been home to a sub-cultural icon, graffiti artist Banksy, in many ways the Thomas Pynchon of street art, its great unknown celebrity figure.³ His witty and often ingenious defacements of urban surfaces have quickly become commodity products, salvaged and with considerable effort detached from their original surface only to be sold in posh metropolitan art galleries, fetching prices of up to 400,000 Euros.

1 The ideas set out in this essay have been inspired by the research carried out in the University of Duisburg-Essen's Main Research Area "Urban Systems", of which I have the pleasure of being one of two speakers. In interdisciplinary cooperation across virtually all faculties of the university, over 70 scientists and scholars in numerous multidisciplinary projects here engage with key issues in urban systems. Most of the ideas in this essay have grown out of an ongoing project on the role of urban culture in urban systems, which is part of this larger research context. I am particularly grateful to my colleague Martin Butler; the ideas are ours rather than mine.

2 Jürgen Lodemann, "Kulturhauptstadt Ruhrgebiet: Bloß nicht auf Metropole machen!", *Die Welt*, 6 January 2010. Cf. www.welt.de/die-welt/kultur/article5745714/Bloss-nicht-auf-Metropole-machen.html [accessed 10.1.2010].

3 For a dazzling display of some of his most spectacular works cf. Banksy, *Wall and Piece* (London, 2006).

What, these two observations on culture in European cities invite us to ask, is a metropolis? What does culture contribute to the metropolitan qualities of a city? And what about the connection between culture, urbanity and the city? How do we classify and conceptualize forms of cultural expression in urban contexts? In this essay, I would like to make a few remarks on the terms and concepts of "metropolis", the "city" and "urbanity" and on the connection between them and would like to explore the notion of an unquantifiable and elusive specifically "metropolitan" culture, and especially popular culture, which London obviously has and the Ruhr, for instance, is frequently perceived as lacking. Taking my cue from Hubert Zapf's conceptualization of literature as cultural ecology and conceiving of urban environments as complex ecological systems, I will argue that urban culture can be regarded as an 'ecological force-field' within urban systems, in which it fulfils a number of crucial roles that go far beyond its economic importance as a location factor. Using selected examples of contemporary London street art as case studies, I will suggest a model allowing for a systematization in the analysis of urban forms of cultural expression.

II. The Metropolis, the (European) City and Urbanity

"Metropolis" and, to a lesser extent, "city", it seems, are not merely descriptive terms, but more or less strongly imply normative elements, even a utopian promise – and this, I would argue, is largely a *cultural* promise that is difficult to categorize. But the concept of the metropolis of course is not *only* normative. It does make sense to classify cities according to various criteria, and many attempts to define the metropolitan character of cities are very enlightening.⁴ Thus, the concept of "metropolis" curiously oscillates between designating a status of centrality as a financial centre, a traffic node, a centre of research and education or of the media industry on the one hand, and a far less tangible '*je ne sais quoi*', a metropolitan "feel" of cultural promise: Frankfurt may be a financial metropolis, because, second to London, it is the seat of the most important European stock exchange and of several important banks, but a cultural metropolis? Berlin, although certainly not a financial centre, is a metropolis, because it is a capital with over 3 million residents, but it also appears to have the intangible cultural "flair" a metropolis in the wider sense also appears to need. Even in scholarly discourse, the descriptive and the normative components of the concept of "metropolis" are not always neatly distinguished.

The cultural promise of an enlightened civic society as well as the concomitant notion of "urbanity" frequently associated with the "metropolis" and the "city" is most strongly tied to the European city. In this vein, Walter Siebel

4 For an early influential study cf. Peter Hall, *The World Cities* (London, 1966); for a widely debated recent contribution cf. Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton, NJ, 2001); for a survey cf. Dirk Brongers, *Metropolen – Megastädte – Global Cities: Die Metropolisierung der Erde* (Darmstadt, 2004).

writes: "The European city is the place in which the civic society originated ... European urban history is a history of emancipation."⁵ How, then, does one define this quality of "urbanity" that, in addition to size, economic and political importance, qualifies a city as a metropolis?

From the very beginning of the history of the term, "urbanity"⁶ has had strong evaluative implications. With Cicero in 55 B.C., "urbanitas" was etymologically tied to "urbs", the city, and thus obviously Rome, but from the very beginning was a clearly positive term designating refined manners, intellect, *esprit*, experience, and thus a refined "urban" lifestyle, which could, however, also be cultivated in a country residence. There is no space here to retrace the complex history of the term, but as late as 1781, Friedrich Nicolai noted after taking the waters in Pyrmont, even then hardly a metropolis:

[Ich hatte] das Glück, dort in einem kleinen Zirkel von schätzbaren Männern und geistreichen Frauenzimmern zu leben, deren Kenntnisse, feine Sitten, Anmuth, fröhliche Laune, Witz und Gutmüthigkeit, der Konversation jene *Urbanität* und Unbefangenheit gaben, die den Geist so sehr aufheitern und erhellen kann.⁷

At times, the term thus appears to have been largely dissociated from the physical space of the city. Given the question of what makes a "metropolis", one might thus ask more generally to what extent the quality of "urbanity" is tied to the physical space of the city as a densely populated agglomeration. Though one can generally assume an empirical – if not an inherently necessary – connection between "urbanity" and the city (at least since early modern times), a dissociation of urbanity and city is possible under specific historical, socio-cultural and geographical conditions, and an "urban" habitus can to some extent be cultivated in the country.⁸

The connection between the city and urbanity today needs to be seen in the context of the debate on the potentially decreasing role of cities and metropolitan regions in a process of de-spatialization⁹ in many areas of life, particularly

5 Walter Siebel, "Einleitung: Die europäische Stadt," Siebel, ed., *Die europäische Stadt* (Frankfurt, 2004), 11-50, 13, my translation. The particular role of the European city has frequently been discussed, in addition to the volume ed. by Siebel, cf. for instance the following collections: Dieter Hassenpflug, ed., *Die europäische Stadt - Mythos und Wirklichkeit* (Münster, 2002); Friedrich Lenger, Klaus Tenfelde, eds., *Die europäische Stadt im 20. Jahrhundert: Wahrnehmung - Entwicklung - Erosion* (Cologne, 2006); Friedrich Lenger, Dieter Schott, eds., *Die europäische und die amerikanische Stadt* (Berlin, 2007).

6 Cf. for instance Edwin S. Ramage, *Urbanitas: Ancient Sophistication and Refinement* (Oklahoma, 1973). For a helpful survey of recent theories of urbanity cf. Peter Dirksmeier, *Urbanität als Habitus: Zur Sozialgeographie städtischen Lebens auf dem Land* (Bielefeld, 2009), 21-81.

7 Qtd. in Reinhold P. Kuhnert, *Urbanität auf dem Lande: Badereisen nach Pyrmont im 18. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1984), 12.

8 For this cf. Dirksmeier.

9 It is interesting to observe that this de-spatialization in many areas has coincided with the rise of "space" as an analytical category in various disciplines. For the "spatial turn" cf. Stephan Günzel, *Raumwissenschaften* (Frankfurt, 2008), as well as Mike Crang,

with the idea of the "global village" brought about by technological means of communication which make spatial distance increasingly irrelevant.¹⁰ In this vein, it has been argued that cities are losing their privileged role altogether. Siebel, for instance, has argued that, given recent developments in society, the city is no longer the privileged "site of a way of life impossible elsewhere": "In highly urbanised societies such as that of western Europe, the difference between city and country as far as a way of life is concerned has shrunk to a difference of more or less of the same. It no longer designates something qualitatively different."¹¹ While this may be true for the field of tension between public and private or for forms of work, it seems less applicable to the sphere of culture. Here, too, there is the question to what extent different forms of cultural expression are logically and empirically tied to the physical space of the city. Logically, neither the opera nor graffiti are bound to the city: A number of far-from-urban festivals have shown that world-class classical music is possible in barns; and graffiti, too, is theoretically possible on barn doors, but relies on urban density for the number of potential spectators.¹² In practice, both forms are strongly associated with the city.

III. On "Urban Culture"

In a survey essay on "Urban Culture" ["Stadtkultur"], Rolf Lindner¹³ heuristically distinguishes between at least three major meanings of "urban culture": 1) "Culture of the City" ["Kultur der Stadt"], perceived as an ideal and as the 'cultural promise' of a democratic civic society; 2) "Cultures in the City" ["Kulturen in der Stadt"], defined as the diversity of lifestyles and cultures in cities; 3) "The Culture of a City" ["Kultur einer Stadt"], seen as the cultural uniqueness or "style" of a particular city.¹⁴ Cutting across these categories, I am here largely concerned with "urban culture" in the sense of artistic, performative, literary or

Nigel Thrift, eds., *Thinking Space* (London, 2000); Phil Hubbard, Rob Kitchin, Gill Valentine, eds., *Key Thinkers on Space and Place* (London, 2004). For the origin of the "spatial turn" in urban studies cf. Doris Bachmann-Medick, *Cultural Turns: Neuorientierungen in den Kulturwissenschaften* (Reinbek, 2007 [2006]), 290 et passim.

10 Cf. the debate about the role of cities in the global networked economy occasioned not least by Manuel Castells, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture. Vol. 1: The Rise of the Network Society* (Oxford/Malden, MA, 1996).

11 Siebel, 32.

12 Once more, the exception proves the rule: Norwegian street artists Dolk and Pøbel conspired for a project "Desolate Decorations" on the remote Norwegian Lofoten islands and "took street art out of the urban environment and into the desolate places ... for a strange exhibition in the country." Cf. Gary Shove, ed., *Untitled II: The Beautiful Renaissance* (Darlington, 2009), 72-81, 74.

13 Rolf Lindner, "Stadtkultur," Hartmut Häußermann, ed. *Großstadt: Soziologische Stichworte* (Opladen, 2000), 258-263.

14 Cf. also the Darmstadt approach to the "intrinsic logic of cities". Cf. the following excellent collection: Helmut Berking, Martina Löw, eds., *Eigenlogik der Städte: Neue Wege für die Stadtforschung* (Frankfurt/New York, 2008).

medial cultural expression, with a use of semiotic resources in urban contexts as a form of human self-expression. Here, the city is not merely a *place* of cultural practice, but often also its *object*: the city frequently thematises itself in its culture. One might even ask whether certain forms of urban self-reflexiveness may not be constitutive of "urbanity" itself. In the course of this essay, I would like to discuss ways in which urban culture can thus be seen to react to key urban challenges but also actively to shape perceptions and thus to be socially productive as well.

One function of urban culture thus understood which was long underestimated but has recently received wide publicity is its economic importance as a major economic sector and as a location factor to attract economic and cultural 'elites'. One might here think of Richard Florida's widely debated but partly simplistic and problematic theses on the "creative class".¹⁵ In addition to potentially overstating the contribution of specific forms of culture to an attractive economic milieu – theses which have led a number of cities to strategically target "creative segments" of the population in their urban development strategies –, the concomitant instrumentalization of art and artists has also met with significant resistance with artists refusing to be commodified as mere location factors conducive to the 'bohemian index' of a city.¹⁶

The significance of urban culture to the city as a whole, however, not only emerges from its instrumental value and its measurable and immediate economic relevance, but also, and perhaps more significantly, from its social and socio-psychological significance as a form of critically negotiating social, political and economic problems and particularly as a medium for critical reflection on processes of urban development and change as well as on the limitations and restrictions set by highly technologized and functionalized urban settings. Practices and manifestations of urban culture thus also serve as a means of coming to terms with the accelerated pace of life and (extreme) complexity of life in big cities. Finally, urban cultural expression can also serve as a means of articulating and negotiating individual and collective identities, which, particularly in urban agglomerations where cultures and ethnicities constantly mix and mingle, seems to be of vital importance.

15 Cf. for instance Richard Florida, *Cities and the Creative Class* (New York, 2005). For the use of such factors in city marketing cf. for instance John R. Gold, S.V. Ward, eds., *Place Promotion: The Use of Publicity and Marketing to Sell Towns and Regions*. Chichester, 1994, as well as G. Kearns, C. Philo, eds., *Selling Places: The City as Cultural Capital, Past and Present* (Oxford, 1993).

16 Cf. for instance the much-publicized protest of artists in Hamburg against such endeavours: "Kunst als Protest: Lasst den Scheiß!": "Hamburg nur noch als 'Marke', der wir Aura, Ambiente und Freizeitwert verpassen sollen? Das machen wir nicht mit. Ein Künstler-Manifest gegen die Hamburger Kulturpolitik," www.zeit.de/2009/46/Kuenstlermanifest [10.1.2010].

IV. Negotiating Cityscapes: Metropolitan Cultures as Seismographic and Catalytic 'Force-Fields' within Urban Systems

Within the complex system of the metropolis, urban culture thus fulfils important functions, which, though they have already been explored from a multitude of different angles¹⁷, still deserve particular attention and, against the backdrop of a transdisciplinary perspective, need to be theoretically reconsidered. This paper proposes that the central position of urban culture as an integrating momentum within the dynamics of urban systems is basically due to the *seismographic* or diagnostic and the *catalytic* or processing function of cultural forms of expression. In order to give substance to this claim, I will resort to one of the basic assumptions of literary and cultural ecology to conceptualize urban culture as a 'force-field' within urban systems. Combining the central notion of urban 'space' with Michel de Certeau's ideas of 'strategies' and 'tactics', which he, interestingly enough, inferred from an analysis of cultural practices in urban environments, I would then like to contribute to a theoretical reconceptualization of urban culture, the analytical surplus value of which will be demonstrated by means of two brief examples from London, which, in turn, serve as a starting point for the delineation of the relational category of 'mediacy' as an additional heuristic tool for the systematization of urban cultural practices.

Cultural forms of expression that originate in urban contexts are by no means detached from their environment, but, in a number of intricate ways, are shaped by and tied to a range of infrastructural, architectural and technological parameters that constitute this environment. Against the backdrop of this interplay between urban culture and its environment, it may be fruitful to conceive of urban culture as a quasi-ecological system, which, as a dynamic and cybernetic entity, develops according to its own logic and rules. Such an understanding of urban culture, which takes up central ideas of some of the most recent strands of ecocriticism, 1) makes it possible systematically to conceptualize the dynamic interplay between urban cultures and their environments, (also) because it allows for the integration of a number of different disciplinary approaches and 2) thus provides a theoretical framework that can serve as a basis for the development of a workable methodological toolkit for a more systematic and comprehensive

17 From among the innumerable contributions cf. for instance Anne Hegerfeld, James Fanning, Jürgen Klein & Dirk Vanderbeke, eds., *"The Mighty Heart" or "The Desert in Disguise": The Metropolis between Realism and the Fantastic* (Tübingen, 2007); Regina Bittner, ed., *Die Stadt als Event: Zur Konstruktion Urbaner Erlebnisräume*. Edition Bauhaus, vol. 10 (Frankfurt, 2001); Gary Bridge, Sophie Watson, eds., *The Blackwell City Reader* (Malden, MA, 2002); Richard T. LeGates, Frederic Stout, eds., *The City Reader* (Abingdon, 2007); Günter Lenz et al., eds., *Towards a New Metropolitanism: Reconstituting Public Culture, Urban Citizenship, and the Multicultural Imaginary in New York and Berlin* (Heidelberg, 2006); Malcolm Miles et al., eds., *The City Cultures Reader* (London, 2000); Manfred Smuda, ed., *Die Großstadt als "Text"* (Munich, 1992).

exploration, categorization and analysis of different forms and functions of metropolitan cultures.

To begin with, it would seem that, given the strong interest in ecocritical approaches and in urban studies in recent years or even decades, an application of ecocritical paradigms to the study of the metropolis lies close at hand. However, while some forays into this domain have been made,¹⁸ most studies in ecocriticism – both classics in the field and more recent work – have remarkably little to say about urban cultures.¹⁹ I therefore propose to heed Bennett's still pertinent warning that "ecocriticism will continue to be a relatively pale and undertheorized field unless and until it more freely ventures into urban environments"²⁰.

One approach from this field which particularly lends itself to a conceptualization of urban culture as an ecological system is the model of literature as cultural ecology outlined by Hubert Zapf²¹, which, though it explicitly focusses on literary texts, is particularly useful for the analysis and description of the dialectical and quasi-ecological relationship between forms of cultural expression and their specific contexts. I maintain that, by way of a few terminological and conceptual modifications, it is thus also transferable to the realm of urban culture, which may well be conceived of as a dynamic ecological system subject to constant change, too.

In his approach, Zapf outlines a functional theory of literary texts which is based on the assumption that the system of literature in many respects resembles

18 Cf. especially Michael Bennett, "From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places: The Urban Challenge to Ecocriticism," *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 8.1 (Winter 2001), 31-52, and Michael Bennett, David Teague, *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (Tucson, AZ, 1999).

19 Cf. for instance the special issue on *Literature and Ecology of Anglia* 124.1 (2006); Cheryll Glotfelty, Harold Fromm, eds., *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*. Athens, GA and London, 1996; Richard Kerridge, Neil Sammells, eds., *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature* (London and New York, 1998); Greg Garrard's otherwise excellent *Ecocriticism* (London, 2004); even Armbruster & Wallace's programmatically titled collection, though calling for a turn to "less obviously 'natural' landscapes" (4), contains no contribution which in any sustained way works towards an urban turn in ecocriticism; cf. Karla Armbruster, Kathleen R. Wallace, eds., *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism* (Charlottesville VA, 2001).

20 Bennett, 304.

21 Cf. especially Hubert Zapf, *Literatur als kulturelle Ökologie: Zur kulturellen Funktion imaginativer Texte an Beispielen des amerikanischen Romans* (Tübingen, 2002). Cf. also Zapf, "Literature as Cultural Ecology: Notes Towards a Functional Theory of Imaginative Texts with Examples from American Literature," *Literary History/Cultural History: Force-Fields and Tensions*, ed. Herbert Grabes, *REAL 17 [Research in English and American Literature]* (Tübingen, 2001), 85-99, and Zapf, "Das Funktionsmodell der Literatur als kultureller Ökologie: Imaginative Texte im Spannungsfeld von Dekonstruktion und Regeneration," *Funktionen von Literatur, Theoretische Grundlagen und Modellinterpretationen*, ed. Marion Gymnich and Ansgar Nünning (Trier, 2005), 55-78. Finally, cf. the recent volume Zapf, ed., *Kulturökologie und Literatur: Beiträge zu einem transdisziplinären Paradigma der Literaturwissenschaft* (Heidelberg, 2008).

an ecological system.²² Enumerating a number of striking analogies between the two, particularly highlighting their dynamic and complex nature,²³ he concludes that "the specific procedures of literature bear some interesting similarities to [...] ecological principles [...] Indeed, they appear to a significant extent as the transformation into language and symbolic action of some of those characteristic principles".²⁴ Zapf also points out that the similarity between an ecological system and literature is predominantly due to the specific aesthetic strategies employed by the literary imagination, when he claims that

literature is an ecological force within culture not only or not even primarily because of its content, but because of the specific way in which it has evolved as a unique form of textuality that, in its aesthetic transformation of cultural experience, employs procedures in many ways analogous to ecological principles, restoring complexity, vitality and creativity to the discourses of its cultural world by symbolically reconnecting them with elemental forces and processes of life – in non-human nature, in the collective and individual psyche, in the human body.²⁵

Following from this, the symbolic system of literature turns into a socially and culturally productive agent and,

by its aestheticising transgression of immediate referentiality, becomes an ecological force-field within culture, a subversive yet regenerative semiotic energy which, though emerging from and responding to a given sociohistorical situation, still gains relative independence as it unfolds the counter-discursive potential of the imagination in the symbolic act of reconnecting abstract cultural realities to concrete life processes.²⁶

Starting from his notion of literature as an 'ecological force-field within culture,' Zapf then argues that "this cultural-ecological function of literature can be described as a combination of three main purposes".²⁷ The first purpose, which he describes as "cultural-critical metadiscourse", lies in the "representation and critical balancing of typical deficits, contradictions and deformations in prevailing political, economic, ideological and utilitarian systems of civilisatory power".²⁸ The second purpose, or function, labelled "imaginative counter-discourse", is the "confrontation of these systems with a holistic-pluralistic approach that focuses specifically on that which is marginalised, neglected or repressed by these systemic realities, and articulates what otherwise remains unarticulated in the available categories of cultural self-interpretation".²⁹ The third function – that of a "reintegrative inter-discourse", a concept clearly reminiscent of Jürgen Link – is strongly connected to the second and lies in the "feeding back and reintegrating of the repressed into the whole system of cultural dis-

22 Cf. Zapf, "Literature," 90ff.

23 For a detailed elaboration on these analogies, cf. Zapf, "Literature" 88ff. Cf. also Zapf "Das Funktionsmodell," 60ff.

24 Zapf, "Literature," 90.

25 Zapf, "Literature," 93.

26 Zapf, "Literature," 88.

27 Zapf, "Literature," 93.

28 Zapf, "Literature," 93.

29 Zapf, "Literature," 93.

courses, by which literature contributes from the margins to the continual renewal of the cultural centre".³⁰ It can be argued that, as Zapf's metaphor of the 'force-field' may be transferred to culture in general, his triadic typology of functions can also be applied to cultural forms of expression apart from the literary text.

As already indicated, this essay proposes to transfer this idea of 'literature as an ecological force-field within culture,' which lies at the heart of Zapf's approach, to another level of metaphorical abstraction and to apply it to an urban context, thus conceiving of 'urban culture as an ecological force-field within urban systems.' In the first place, such an application needs to do justice to the spatial dimension of urban culture, which is quintessential for our understanding of urban cultural practices, as they are, with regard to both their various forms and functions, particularly tied to spatial parameters, in other words: characterized by a distinct 'spatiality.'

The notion of "space", which is here used to complement Zapf's functional approach in order to develop a viable framework to conceptualize urban culture, centrally functions as a conceptual and analytical category in urban studies generally and in the analysis of urban cultural practices in particular – in the narrow sense merely as the physical location of such forms of expression, but also as a surface of contact and friction and a projection screen, as a site of interaction for such practices, as psychological, conceptual, represented, contested and negotiated "cultural" space.³¹

Given the observation that it is urban space in particular which functions as an arena of actions and interactions of individuals and collectives, and thus, in a very concrete way, serves as a site for the expansion of the 'force-field' generated by urban cultural practices, what needs to be done is to ask for the various ways in which these individuals and collectives 'make use' of the spaces they are confronted with or exposed to, how they appropriate the spatiality of the city for their very own ends and purposes. In order to further conceptualize this intersection between 'space' and 'practice,' between 'site' and 'action', it is useful to take recourse to Michel de Certeau's ideas concerning the description and analysis of practices of everyday life.³² Generally conceiving of the study of popular culture as being concerned with "the battles or games between the strong and the weak, and with the 'actions' which remain possible for the latter"³³, de Certeau sets out to describe the nexus between cultural 'output' and cultural 'use' and distinguishes between "a rationalized, expansionist, centralized [...] production" and a "de-

30 Zapf, "Literature," 93.

31 Cf. especially Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford, 1991) as arguably still the foundational text for the "spatial turn" and more recently Brigitta Häuser-Schäublin & Michael Dickhardt, ed., *Kulturelle Räume – räumliche Kultur: Zur Neubestimmung des Verhältnisses zweier fundamentaler Kategorien menschlicher Praxis* (Münster, 2003).

32 Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven Rendall (Berkeley, 1984 [Arts de faire; Paris, 1980]).

33 De Certeau, 34.

vicious, dispersed [consumption] characterized by its ruses, its fragmentation, its poaching, [which] shows itself not in its own products [...] but in an art of using those imposed on it [by the dominant economic order]".³⁴ Accordingly, he introduces his notion of "strategies", which denote the institutions, rules, regimes and physical objects and limitations imposed by those in power as opposed to "tactics," which he defines as the "ruses and surprises: clever tricks of the 'weak' within the order established by the 'strong,'" as the subversive appropriation by the weak of what is imposed on them by the strong.³⁵

Though de Certeau's concept indeed bears ideological overtones in its all too binary opposition of the 'weak' and the 'strong'³⁶, his ideas help clarify the processes of interaction between urban spaces and its human protagonists. In this sense, city dwellers, who are confronted with a specific urban setting limited by infrastructural and technological parameters, in other words: with the spatial parameters of a particular metropolitan environment, which, in turn, work as regulatory 'strategies', may apply particular devious and dispersed, unintended or even unconscious 'tactics' to come to terms with this pre-structured and highly rationalized setting in a number of individual ways and for a range of different purposes. In other words, in order to cope with what Henri Lefebvre called "representations of space," i.e. "conceptualized space, the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers", the city dweller thus "mak[es] symbolic use of its objects" via forms of performative and/or imaginary cultural practices.³⁷

Against the backdrop of the ideas and concepts outlined so far, which have been introduced as modifications and extensions necessary to apply the theoretical concept of the 'force-field' to the study of urban culture, we can now propose a (re)conceptualization of urban culture which fruitfully incorporates the ideological impetus of both Zapf's functional model and de Certeau's notions of strategic regulation and of tactical appropriation and does justice to the significance of the spatial dimension (in the analysis) of metropolitan cultures: Accordingly, urban culture can be conceived of as a particular set of cultural practices which are both highly determined by their urban situatedness, i.e. tied to the very spatiality of a particular cityscape, and contribute to shaping and changing our awareness of this spatiality. In the most active sense of the word, urban cultural forms of expression *re-present* [sic] urban spaces: They reflect and comment upon forms and functions of architectural and infrastructural designs and thus may be said to work as a cultural-critical metadiscourse; in processes of constant

34 De Certeau, xiif., 31.

35 De Certeau, 35f., 40.

36 For the need to consider not only "the view from below" but also to understand "the structuring of the city as a whole, the more macro-view of urbanism, the political economy of the urban process" cf. Edward W. Soja, "Six Discourses on the Postmetropolis," rpt. in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Oxford, 2002), 188-196, 189f.

37 Lefebvre, 38f.

transgression and subversion, they create alternative spaces and thus function as an imaginary (and, at times, very concrete) counter-discourse; and, subversive as such practices may be, they only exist on, at or in (and thus due to) a specific architecturally or infrastructurally given, i.e. they, by definition, reintegrate the ideologically peripheral with manifestations of hegemonic power in the very moment of their being produced, installed or performed. Consequently, considering the processual and performative nature of urban cultural practices, they may well be characterized both by a 'seismographic momentum' in that they react to, or 'track,' urban transformations in a very sensitive way, and a 'catalytic momentum' in that they actively interpret, make sense of, foster and even instigate technological, infrastructural and climatic changes and challenges. In other words, they indeed function as constituents of a highly active, quasi-ecological 'force-field', the shifts and movements of which are quintessential for the development of the metropolis.

V. Street Art and Metropolitan Culture in London: The Case of Banksy and Slinkachu

In order to put this model of urban culture as a seismographic and catalytic force-field to the test, i.e. in order to both illustrate its analytical surplus value and to identify further theoretical and methodological modifications and extensions, I would now like to focus on two examples of urban cultural practices, as they not only serve to indicate the vast variety of ways of appropriating urban spaces, but – due to an extensive media coverage – also have assumed a prominent position within recent discussions of the social, political and economic significance of urban culture.

A first case illustrating the seismographic and catalytic function of urban cultural expression is the work of London-based graffiti artist Banksy. A particularly striking example of this artist's ingenious use (or abuse) of urban spaces and surfaces for a subversive "tactical" appropriation of strategically imposed infrastructures is his critical comment on the tendency for total CCTV camera surveillance in London in an enormous caption of "One Nation under CCTV" right in the field of vision of a surveillance camera – a truly counterhegemonic statement which critically tracks current political developments and tendencies, but which, at the same time, depends on the very infrastructure it attempts to criticize, as it materializes on its concrete surface. Equally political, and similarly reintegrating the hegemonic and the subversive, are Banksy's visionary 2005 illustrations of children joyfully playing on a beach or of stretches of blue sky left on the grey concrete surface of the separation wall in Palestine near the Ramallah checkpoint, or his recent spraying spree in New Orleans with works referencing the Katrina disaster.³⁸ Paradoxically, however, his defacements of urban spaces and surfaces themselves quickly become commodity products sold in

38 Cf. "Protest aus der Dose," *Der Spiegel* 36/2008, 175.

posh art galleries. Urban space, appropriated and re-appropriated by individual citydwellers for their very own ends and purposes, thus turns into a site of struggle, a battlefield, so to speak, of contesting ideologies, viewpoints, dispositions manifest in cultural practices and forms of expression.

Indeed, Banksy's skillful appropriations of urban spaces walk the thin line between subversion and containment. For several years now, there has literally been a form of Banksy tourism with guided tours to the sites of his nocturnal visitations – including published guidebooks referencing key locations.³⁹

Another case in point is London-based artist Slinkachu, who, for his street art installations *Little People in the City*⁴⁰, arranges tiny plastic figures less than an inch in size (but with astonishing attention to detail) in amusing, dramatic, obscene or grotesque constellations and places them in various locations in the city – public parks, tube stations, shopping centres, train windows, phone booths or simply in the street. There is, for instance, a tiny figure looking up at a human-sized scaffolding with a minute note warning "Danger – Giants working above", an equestrian sculpture not even rising above the grass placed close to its life-sized "model", G.F. Watts's sculpture *Physical Energy* in Kensington Gardens, or a man, rifle still pointing at a dead bumble-bee about his size, telling a girl with her teddy bear hiding behind his back that "They're not pets, Susan". The central work of art, though, arguably are not the figures themselves, but the photographs taken of the installations, usually two juxtaposed photographs – a wide-angle shot of the figures barely visible in their larger surroundings and a close-up revealing the details: One of the more astonishing such pairs of photographs are those of a real-life commuter on a London tube, reading a paper, with a minute replica (again, less than an inch in size), reading a miniature copy of the paper including tiny images and captions, arranged to sit on a tiny metal ledge just around a train window. It is only once one has seen the close-up of the tiny figure in the window that one notices what initially seemed a mere speck of dust in the window next to the commuter in the photograph. In all these cases, it is the juxtaposition of the tiny figures with their overwhelmingly large surroundings which replicates and intensifies the contrast between the human body, its individual actions and maneuvers, and its often overpowering urban surroundings.

Thus, though frequently striking in themselves, it is, more often than not, only the effect of the mediation by means of photographs and the caption underneath the photograph that gives the installations their full poignancy and their frequently subversive energy, as with the group of tiny policemen, police tape and an emergency vehicle to scale, next to a towering pile of dog dirt. What is merely a striking, amusing or grotesque installation, if photographed and captioned "Terror alert", necessarily suggests political implications at a time when justified fear of terrorism leads to excessive measures of surveillance and control and

39 Cf. Martin Bull, *Banksy Locations & Tours: A Collection of Graffiti Locations and Photographs in London* (London, 2008).

40 Slinkachu, *Little People in the City: The Street Art of Slinkachu* (London, 2008).

when every dog turd may be suspicious in what is the world's most closely surveilled city. Finally, it is worth noting that it is only in the mediated form of photographs that these installations can be turned into a marketable good, while the tiny installations themselves are gifts to be enjoyed and marveled at for free by anyone lucky enough to spot them.

The works of Banksy and Slinkachu thus exemplify most of my central notions and ideas outlined above: They subversively engage with the imposed or given surfaces and spaces of the city and by means of sheer size (or minuteness) and the materiality of their inscription onto or integration into these surfaces and spaces draw attention to their dimensions, turn apparently stable environments into fleeting projection screens for visions and revisions of a new urban order, humanize, semanticize and poeticize the forbidden, sterile and disenchanted concrete waste lands, and often playfully reveal an awareness of their own commodity value as fashionably subversive forms of cultural expression adding to the cultural prestige of the British capital and its reputation for *chic* urbanity.

Urban cultural practices, which are designed to work within the confines imposed upon the city inhabitant, may thus indeed take very different shapes, as these two examples have only hinted at. Moreover, as the analysis of Slinkachu's tactics of appropriating cityscapes has indicated, it seems that a systematic exploration of 'urban tactics' within the limits and boundaries of a metropolitan topography needs to resort to yet a further heuristic category, which can be described as the 'mediacy' of the urban cultural practice employed by individual or collective 'urban players' to appropriate and negotiate the spatial dimension of their very specific urban environment. This relational category yields a further specification of the forms and functions of urban cultural expression, as it provides a continuum between more direct and more indirect forms of negotiating urban space.

Among the more direct 'tactics' of appropriating and redefining urban spaces are, e.g., forms of performance art that explore the architectural and technological constraints and possibilities of urban environments by integrating the human body into the geometrically exact and highly functional shapes of the city. Thus incorporating the living into the allegedly 'dead',⁴¹ the urban space is resemanticized and put into a new perspective. In contrast to performance art, which frequently requires a specific setting and – in spite of its often spontaneous appearance – is basically a planned and directed action, (ab)using a given architectural and infrastructural cityscape may also happen 'on the spot,' e.g. in specifically urban forms of sports such as skateboarding, BMX, or parkouring, which has recently been hyped as a new form of urban sports.

41 For a fascinating history of the connection between the city and the human body from classical Athens to the present day, cf. Richard Sennett, *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization* (New York, 1974); cf. also Elisabeth Grosz, "Bodies – Cities," Grosz, *Space, Time, and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies* (New York, 1995), 103-110.

Another form of immediate engagement with pre-structured urban environments may be seen in the use of walls, roofs or streets as 'canvases' for graffiti and murals, which, more often than not, do not only redefine urban spaces by changing the surface structure through coloring and iconic as well as non-referential forms of expression, but may also contribute to establishing feelings of a shared (ethnic) identity among a particular collective, e.g. by deliberately undermining established versions of colonial history, thus re-writing the past and subverting hegemonic ideologies. Streets, or rather the sidewalk and the traffic signs situated there, can also be appropriated subversively, for instance by creatively modifying a stop-sign to articulate protest against war.

These often merely "decorative" – or annoying, as aesthetic preferences vary – but frequently highly political and subversive forms of street art, although they have long had a cult following, have only recently begun to receive serious scholarly attention⁴² and have also seen a publishing boom as far as anthologies and collections of images are concerned.

The direct ways of coming to terms with urban environments outlined above are, in the admittedly overwhelming realm of urban cultural forms of expression, complemented by more indirect forms of 'dealing with' the city in fictional and non-fictional 'texts' – in the broadest sense –, ranging from literature to city guides, from the daily news on television to the blockbuster about 9/11. Such medial representations, the sheer quantity of which seems to have been increasing in recent years, do not only articulate particular perspectives on the metropolis and/or give a voice to their inhabitants, but may also render dystopian or utopian urban scenarios, 'possible spaces,' so to speak, which make us aware of (hypothetical) consequences of processes of urbanization. Within urban culture, the city is thus frequently not only the site and location, but also the theme of cultural expression. Urban culture thus serves as a crucial medium of urban self-reflexion.

What this short enumeration of some examples once more helps to illustrate is that both the mediate and immediate tactics of appropriating or negotiating the metropolis, the variety of which still needs to be explored in further detail and in a more systematic and comprehensive way, must not be exclusively conceived of as (critical or non-critical) reactions to urban spaces, as *seismographs*, so to speak, tracking urban developments and changes in a very sensitive manner. On the contrary, assuming that urban cultural forms of expression do indeed constitute a 'force-field' within the larger infrastructural, technological and architectural framework of the metropolis, these tactics, as a kind of *catalyst*, also contribute to shaping our view of the city and thus, being socially and culturally productive, potentially have a significant impact on our understanding and percep-

42 Cf. for instance Cedar Lewisohn, *Street Art: The Graffiti Revolution* (London, 2008); Julia Reinecke, *Street-Art: Eine Subkultur zwischen Kunst und Kommerz* (Bielefeld, 2007); or Katrin Klitzke, Christian Schmidt, eds, *Street Art: Legenden zur Straße* (Berlin, 2009).

tion of the environment most of us live in.⁴³ Moreover, it is not only people's perception of the city that is altered by cultural forms of expression which use or represent urban spaces. It is the actual development of the city itself which is closely tied to medial representations and appropriations of the metropolis, as Faßler points out, going so far as to state that "urban developments are historically inseparable from media evolutions".⁴⁴

It may well be argued – and Richard Florida and his more uncritical followers have insistently done so – that vibrant urban culture is a significant factor in contributing to the perception of a city as a "metropolis" for the "creative class", though we may be less prone to exaggerate the significance of culture in this regard if we see a vibrant scene as *indicative* of a metropolitan "feel". Nonetheless, against the backdrop of the observations made in this essay, it seems vital to conceive of urban culture as an active, highly productive and thus socially, economically and politically relevant parameter in the overall dynamics of urban change and development in the European metropolis.

43 For the production of city images and the effects of such fictional and documentary images of the city and of self-projected images of different types of cities cf. Short's chapter "City Images"; John Rennie Short, *The Urban Order: An Introduction to Cities, Culture, and Power* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 414-462.

44 Cf. Manfred Faßler, "Vorwort: Umbrüche des Städtischen," Faßler, ed., *Die Zukunft des Städtischen: Urban Fictions* (Munich, 2006), 9-35, 21, my translation. For the close correspondence between views of the city and developments in literature and the arts cf. several of the contributions in Manfred Smuda, ed., *Die Großstadt als "Text"* (Munich, 1992). For the way in which fictional images of a city – especially filmic images – come to physically shape the real city, cf. Norman Klein, "Die Imaginäre Stadt: Abwesenheit und Scripted Spaces," Regina Bittner, ed., *Die Stadt als Event: Zur Konstruktion Urbanner Erlebnisräume*. Edition Bauhaus, vol. 10 (Frankfurt, 2001), 225-231.