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Rhizomatic principles and new aesthetics in graphic design

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Abstract
Graphic design is continually evolving, integrating new technologies and trends that lead to innovative aesthetics. In the 21st century, design has shifted toward more complex, saturated, fragmented, and multifaceted styles. This transformation can be understood through Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic model (1987), which proposes non-linear, non-hierarchical structures where any point connects to another. Applied to graphic design, it implies a rejection of traditional linearity and hierarchy, favoring dispersed and heterogeneous compositions. This research outlines key principles—interconnectivity, fragmentation, non-linearity, and heterogeneity—as defining features of rhizomatic graphic design, offering a framework to interpret its contemporary aesthetics and the complexity of today's visual culture.

Keywords
Design; rhizome; complexity; structure; method

Principios rizomáticos y nuevas estéticas en el diseño gráfico

Resumen
El diseño gráfico evoluciona constantemente, integrando nuevas tecnologías y tendencias que dan lugar a estéticas innovadoras. En el siglo XXI, el diseño ha cambiado hacia estilos más complejos, saturados, fragmentados y multifacéticos. Esta transformación puede entenderse a través del modelo rizomático de Deleuze y Guattari (1987), que propone estructuras no lineales y no jerárquicas, donde cualquier punto puede conectarse con otro. Aplicado al diseño gráfico, implica el rechazo de la linealidad y jerarquía tradicionales, favoreciendo composiciones dispersas y heterogéneas. Esta investigación expone principios clave—interconectividad, fragmentación, no-linealidad y heterogeneidad—como rasgos del diseño rizomático, ofreciendo un marco para interpretar su estética contemporánea y la complejidad visual actual.

Palabras clave
Diseño; rizoma; complejidad; estructura; método

Introduction

Postmodern design and its practitioners posed a distinct challenge to the order and clarity characteristic of modernism. In this new paradigm, design no longer follows a linear or hierarchical structure but instead consists of interconnected, heterogeneous elements that yield complex and unpredictable outcomes (Meggs & Purvis, 2016). Rick Poynor (2003) identifies key features of this shift, including fragmentation, blurred forms, depthlessness, indeterminacy, intertextuality, pluralism, eclecticism, and a return to the vernacular.

The digital revolution of the 1990s further transformed graphic design through computer-aided tools and the expansion of the Internet. These technologies enabled greater experimentation and precision, giving rise to trends such as minimalism—defined by simplicity and the elimination of superfluous elements—and responsive design, which adapts to multiple platforms and devices. Emerging technologies like augmented and virtual reality have since expanded design's possibilities, fostering immersive and interactive experiences that redefine the discipline (Lupton, 2008).

This evolving design landscape can be examined through the rhizomatic model proposed by philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus (1987). Rejecting traditional hierarchical structures, the rhizome offers a decentralized and non-linear framework. In graphic design, this translates into compositions built from multiple interconnected nodes, forming dynamic and non-hierarchical visual networks.

From tree to rhizome

Deleuze and Guattari (1987) introduced the concept of the rhizome to describe systems that oppose hierarchical and centralized organization. A rhizome, like the underground structure of certain plants, spreads laterally, forming a web of relations without a clear beginning or end. It is defined by multiplicity, decentralization, and continuous connectivity. As they note, "Most modern methods for making series proliferate... are perfectly valid in one direction... whereas a unity of totalization asserts itself even more firmly in another..." (p. 6).

Contrasting this is the arborescent model, which mirrors the structure of a tree: vertical, hierarchical, and rooted in binary logic. It prioritizes centralized authority and top-down organization. In contrast, the rhizome emphasizes lateral growth, with each element capable of affecting any other, regardless of its position in the network (Vaskes, 2008).

In rhizomatic systems, components are autonomous yet interdependent, capable of interacting in any direction. This model resists centralized control, functioning through expansion, variation, and transformation. It is akin to a map—non-linear, modifiable, and open to constant reconfiguration. As Deleuze and Guattari explain, the rhizome is "a centered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system... defined solely by a circulation of states" (1987, p. 21).

Importantly, the tree and rhizome are not mutually exclusive. The tree symbolizes a fixed model or blueprint, while the rhizome embodies a dynamic process of resistance and re-creation. Rhizomatic structures can continuously grow, break, and reassemble, allowing for adaptive evolution. These systems, marked by self-organization and resilience, are applicable across political, social, cultural, technological, and biological domains.

Principles of rhizomatic organization according to Deleuze and Guattari

Rhizomatic organization, as proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), offers an alternative to traditional hierarchical and pyramidal structures. This model emphasizes decentralization and non-linearity, fostering greater collaboration, creativity, and adaptability in response to evolving environments and challenges.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari (1987) outline key principles that define the rhizome. These principles include:

1 and 2. Principles of connection and heterogeneity:
A point within the rhizome can connect to any other, reflecting its nature as a heterogeneous structure. This contrasts with the logic of subordination and the predetermined hierarchical order.

3. *Principle of multiplicity:*
The rhizome is inherently multiplicity, incapable of being reduced to the One or the Many. Units do not constitute it, but by -n- non-subjective and non-significant dimensions, with broken directions. It has no beginning or end but exists among things in between.

4. *Principle of asignifying rupture:*
The rhizome exhibits a continuous generation of new directions, which are interrupted and separated at any point in time and space. There is no resemblance or imitation, only emergence. In the absence of a fixed or central meaning; signs are connected without a hierarchical semantic structure.

5 and 6. Principle of cartography and decalcomania:
A rhizome does not align with the conventional tree model in its structure. It fundamentally challenges all mimetic procedures, operating according to a logic other than copying and re-

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production. Instead, it adheres more closely to the concept of a map, functioning as a system that is more open and sensitive to modifications, capable of being altered and adapted to different configurations. The cartography is the construction of a conceptual map, not as a fixed representation, but as a tool for exploration and understanding. The Decalcomania principle is the superimposition of structures without copying a pre-existing model; it involves transfers that generate new forms.

Rhizome and design

The concept of the rhizome has been used to describe a design approach characterized by the absence of hierarchical structure and the ability to form connections between diverse elements. This model is applicable to the design of products, services, systems, and the planning of spaces, landscapes, and cities. In graphic design, a rhizomatic approach manifests through the use of visual elements arranged in non-linear ways, forming decentralized, multidimensional compositions that connect disparate components such as images, shapes, colors, and text.

Rhizomatic design is marked by its adaptability and lack of a central focus, allowing for more fluid, flexible compositions that resonate with contemporary aesthetic sensibilities. It provides a conceptual and aesthetic framework to generate visual outcomes that reflect randomness, irregularity, and disorder—qualities that define many current design trends and challenge the rigid constraints of traditional hierarchical systems (Vaskes, 2008).

Within this framework, a new aesthetic emerges—one that breaks decisively from conventional principles of representation and composition. Graphic design informed by rhizomatic thinking often embraces destruction, transformation, and reconfiguration of form, moving away from established visual codes. The focus shifts from the final product to the creative process itself, akin to constructing a map rather than replicating a model.

This mode of design reflects a transformation in the perceptual and semiotic process, allowing for the coexistence and overlap of multiple codes. Such a shift encourages interpretations that move beyond the fixed visual language of modernity (Pelta, 2004). Prominent designers who exemplify this approach include Paula Scher, David Carson, Stefan Sagmeister, and Jessica Walsh. Their work is noted for its non-linear structure and dynamic interrelations between visual and textual elements, fostering multiple layers of meaning within the composition.

Principles and characteristics of rhizomatic design

Rhizomatic design embraces a non-hierarchical, decentralized aesthetic built on a network of heterogeneous, freely interacting elements. It is characterized by flexibility and spontaneity, allowing components to be added or removed without disrupting the integrity of the composition. Each element operates semi-independently, fostering unexpected outcomes and novel ideas.

This open and fluid structure encourages multiplicity and diversity in both form and meaning. Understanding rhizomatic design on an aesthetic level reveals the connection between philosophical thought and its visual expression, enabling representation beyond conventional methods and promoting creative experimentation.

Rhizomatic aesthetics are inherently linked to complexity and heterogeneity, visible in the formation of intricate patterns, textures, and structures that interconnect in unpredictable ways. The emphasis lies not only on the visual outcome but also on the generative process itself.

Recognizing rhizomatic design as part of contemporary aesthetics opens avenues for innovative visual representation. It supports the creation of more intricate and diverse formal proposals, contributing to the evolution of graphic design and the development of a distinctive visual language. The following section outlines the key principles and characteristics that define this approach.

a) *Multiple connections*

The rhizome is inherently multifaceted, composed of multiple dimensions, directions, and interconnections. In rhizomatic design, there is no defined beginning or end; it exists in the middle—between things, constantly in flux. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe, its essence lies in the conjunction: “and... and... and...” Multiplicity arises from the absence of a central point or origin, which eliminates a fixed order. Instead of adhering to the unity and syncretism characteristic of modernist design, rhizomatic design embraces plurality and divergence, opening space for complexity and variation.

b) *Heterogeneity.*

Rhizomatic design consists of diverse elements that intertwine in complex and unexpected ways. The principles of connection and heterogeneity assert that any element within the system can be linked to any other, regardless of origin or position. This allows for the creation of designs with heterogeneous structures, where form is dismantled and recomposed. The

Figure 1. Casa da música identity. Stefan Sagmeister, 2010.

goal is not to preserve a unified order, but to extract meaning from the process itself, tracing a map that generates new configurations. This reflects a deliberate "decomposition of the whole to achieve a destruction of the order that maintains unity" (Poynor, 2003, p. 48).

c) *Disruption and irregularity.*
Rhizomatic design defies linearity and predictability. Connections are fragmented and branching, breaking away from conventional structures and producing novel forms of interaction. In this framework, design follows "lines of flight" that can diverge or rupture at any moment, disrupting continuity and segmentation. There is no intention to imitate reality; instead, form is dismantled, restructured, and repurposed to function differently. This process reveals the emergent nature of design, highlighting singularities, collisions, and interruptions that generate visual complexity. As Cerezo (2002) notes, legibility may be sacrificed in favor of vitality and expressive richness.

d) Cartography and decalcomania.
Rhizomatic design is not a copy or reproduction but a dynamic and malleable system. It allows the addition or removal of elements without compromising its coherence. Its flexible structure encourages autonomous action and variation, enabling the creation of visual cartographies—maps that chart evolving relationships rather than fixed representations. These designs are open-ended, prioritizing process over final form and fostering ongoing transformation.

The field of graphic design has increasingly moved away from the arborescent model, challenging the rational, rigid, reductionist, and mimetic approaches that once dominated the discipline. Rather than seeking to copy or reproduce, contemporary design embraces the construction of cartographies—open, adaptable systems that evolve to suit diverse purposes. In this context, the map becomes a dynamic instrument: modifiable, accessible, and inherently flexible.

Within the rhizomatic framework, the concept of the copy loses its link to an original. Instead, the result is an eclectic, decentered map—lacking fixed meaning or historical linearity. The rhizome resists structural or generative models; it is driven by experimentation. As Deleuze and Guattari note, "The map is open, connectable in all its dimensions, detachable, alterable, susceptible to conscious modification" (1987, p. 18).

To further illustrate these ideas, several examples of rhizomatic aesthetics will be examined. One notable case is the identity for "Casa da Música," designed by Stefan Sagmeister. Here, a flexible visual system was developed, using the iconic, geometric form of the building—designed by Rem Koolhaas—as the basis for an identity that adapts across various media and applications. The building's structure becomes a mutable logo that transforms according to the musical genre being performed, reflecting the diversity and interpretation inherent in each style.

This design demonstrates a complex interplay of elements and agents that interact to produce an infinite array of outcomes. Governed by a set of algorithmic rules, the system analyzes the chromatic dominance in an image and generates a color palette that shapes a logo aligned with that specific visual input—based on perspectives of the building (see figure 1). As Culler (2000) emphasizes, the goal of deconstruction is not destruction, but rather dismantling and reinscription—to alter a structure and allow it to function in new ways.

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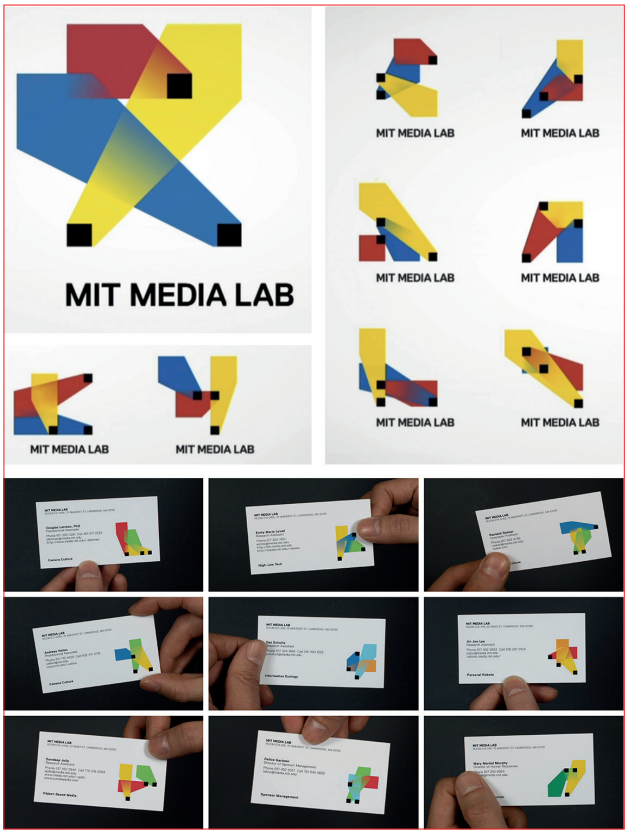

Figure 2. MIT Media Lab Identity. E Roon Kang and Richard The, 2010.

Figure 3. SWA Identity. Walsh, 2014.

Another illustrative example is the 25th anniversary logo of the MIT Media Lab (2010), designed by E Roon Kang and Richard The. This project introduced a dynamic visual identity capable of generating 40,000 unique variants across 12 color combinations. The result is an algorithmic system that produces a personalized logo for each lab associate and can continue generating variations for approximately 25 years (see figure 2).

The design reflects the Media Lab's interdisciplinary spirit. Each logo symbolizes the diverse individuals—engineers, scientists, artists, and designers—who contribute to the lab's collaborative environment. These participants bring distinct perspectives and methods, interacting and influencing one another, a dynamic captured in the conceptual structure of the logo.

The logo's design is based on a 5×5 grid pattern. In each iteration, three colored elements begin at randomly assigned points and expand into a square defined by four other randomly selected points. These components interact according to predefined rules, ensuring visual consistency while allowing for continuous variation and reinterpretation.

In designing the logo for SWA (2014), Jessica Walsh introduced an innovative and artistic approach that reflects the firm's dedication to nature, aesthetics, and sustainability (see figure 3). The logo operates as a variable system, modifying the surface and structure of the letters to evoke natural phenomena such as the movement of water and wind. This reflects a rhizomatic methodology characterized by the destruction, transformation, and reconfiguration of form.

Rejecting conventional hierarchies and traditional compositional standards, the design prioritizes process over outcome. It emphasizes emergence and fluidity—what Deleuze and Guattari (1987) describe as the "construction of the map"—enabling ongoing adaptation and creative evolution. This dynamic, organic approach mirrors the brand's identity through a system that is flexible, responsive, and continually in transformation.

The examples above illustrate that rhizomatic design is defined by its openness, dynamism, and adaptability. It introduces mutability, moving beyond traditional two-dimensional representations by integrating time and change as key elements in

its conceptualization. In rhizomatic terms, the focus shifts to constructing the map, rather than the written representation itself.

Conclusion

The primary concept presented in this text is the rejection of the traditional hierarchical and linear model of graphic design in favor of a rhizomatic approach, which is decentralized and non-hierarchical. Rhizomatic graphic design introduces a new conception of elements, which are connected in a more flexible and emergent manner, without a center, hierarchy, or fixed order. This perspective positions graphic design as a more diverse and mutable form of organization.

Rhizomatic design emphasizes the creation and organization of complex systems that avoid hierarchical and centralized structures, focusing instead on non-hierarchical and decentralized methodologies. Unlike linear or pyramidal structures, this approach promotes the creation of multiple, heterogeneous connections among elements, enhancing flexibility, adaptability, and diversity. As Lima (2011) notes, these new challenges contrast with traditional hierarchies in organizational theory. Thus, rhizomatic design offers a distinct alternative, prioritizing non-linear, decentralized, and diverse structures. Its key properties—decentralization, emergence, mutability, non-linearity, and diversity—facilitate greater interaction among elements, making the system more flexible, adaptable, and capable of responding to change.

Future research in rhizomatic design offers opportunities to explore its relevance in emerging technologies, interdisciplinary practices, and evolving modes of visual communication. As tools like artificial intelligence, generative algorithms, and immersive media—including virtual and augmented reality—become integral to design, rhizomatic principles provide a flexible framework to navigate and shape these developments. Rather than merely responding to contemporary aesthetics, rhizomatic design emerges as a methodological lens for innovation across design research and practice.

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