

The body in public culture: skateboarder

Daniel Steyn

Introduction

“If you can do vert and street and...swerve in and out of traffic, ollie up curbs, ollie down curbs, avoid pedestrians, if you can do that, then you’ve got a good idea of what skating’s about”¹

To the uninitiated this definition, of what to most is seen as a playful summer pastime, may seem quite elusive in expressing what skateboarding and its practitioners are “about”. Until recently outsider’s perceptions of skateboarding have been overtly negative, as damage to private and public property, noise pollution, the element of danger both to skaters and to those sharing the sidewalks have dominated public opinion. Skateboarders themselves did little to help this negative image as the subculture developed in the 1980’s and the dynamics of their identity became framed by aggressive attitudes, notions of indifference and rebellion, spatial and bodily destruction, and competition.

But then the youthful subculture grew up. Some started their own skate orientated businesses and the past time developed into a sport and they became sportsmen, some even icons². A world wide multi-million dollar industry blossomed based on clothing, equipment and multi-media all selling the subculture which has surprisingly remained relatively in touch with its at times anti-social values, in the face of mainstream consumption and commodification.

Public acceptance of the skateboarding subculture is well established, as recent works illustrate. The ethnographic historical work of Weyland (2002), the architectural reinterpretation of the city by Borden (2001) and the success of the documentary film “Dogtown and the Z-Boys” (2002) to name but three.³ But where these works focus on the history and the city as context of the subculture; the body, or skateboarder, as agent and site of the subcultural relations of representation, consumption, commodification and globalisation is relegated to the periphery.

Historical and documentary studies of the skateboarding subculture fail to explain its endurance in the face of the challenges posed by mass media, public acceptance and the capitalist economy. By focussing on the body as the context for, and within the context of, the subculture we may uncover the source of its endurance.

The body in skateboarding

As the single most defining characteristic of skateboarding, the skateboard itself, the skateboarding body requires the skateboard to be complete. It is a crucial accessory that has been incorporated into the body and mind:

“the skateboard is less a piece of equipment and takes on more the character of a prosthetic device, an extension of the body as a kind of fifth limb, absorbed into and diffused inside the body-terrain encounter”⁴

Some skaters take this notion even further, attributing lifelike and organic qualities to the board, which is of course impossible. There exists an unexplainable aspect of how the body moves and the skateboard with it.

French theorist Pierre Bourdieu speaks of a “practical sense” in his work *The Logic of Practice* (1992), referring to the sense of anticipation or instinctive reaction that the body displays in action. These traits, according to Bourdieu, exist and are acquired below the level of consciousness and thus defy complete definition. The commentary on action is consequently framed more often by the spectator, or by the practising agent assuming the role of commentator. The occasionally ironic and contradictory question then posed to sportsmen, as exemplar agents of this sense, “what were you thinking when...?” is often met with a basic or confused response. For this reason society relies on professional commentators, researchers and analysts for description, insight and ultimately understanding.

“the elementary acts of bodily gymnastics...are highly charged with social meanings and values, socialisation instils a sense of the equivalences between physical space and social space and between movements...in the two spaces and thereby roots the most fundamental structures of the group in the primary experiences of the body”⁵

As actions source social meaning and value to their agents, so are social meanings and values constructed by those who interpret these actions in the form of commentary or analysis. It follows then that what formulates public opinion may well be incorrect, inaccurate or biased, and so public opinion may be open to change or correction. An example of this is the negative position that skateboarding, and in particular skateboarders, held within the realm of public opinion during the 1980’s, and how this later changed in the 1990’s. As commentators reacted to and described the actions, style, language and attitude of the skateboarder as brash, confrontational, rebellious, loud, dangerous and destructive. Dominant and submissive roles in the competition for space were ascribed and the passive submissive public protested against the perceived acts of spatial domination of the skateboarder.⁶

Borden (2001) is in agreement with Bourdieu (1992) as he considers the body and agency central to his methodology and architectural discourse of the city emanating, in conjunction with theory, from the body-centric space created from practices, ideas, imagination and experience. Likewise the skateboarding subculture has developed from the body of the skateboarder.

Embodied subculture

As with other subcultures it is the distinctive style of that group which is the first to be noticed, considered, rejected or accepted and ultimately incorporated by the mass culture. For an action or activity orientated subculture such as skateboarding, this requires constant observation and reliance on the subculture's micro-media (magazines, videos, websites) for the purposes of reproduction and imitation. Whilst it is the mass media which seeks to imitate the skateboarding style through predominantly clothing, footwear and the commodification of the activity; it is the skaters who seek to reproduce and ultimately progress the subculture.

The repetition of the body's actions in attempts to reproduce the moves or tricks seen being attempted by others, on film or in magazines, discloses the consciousness of the skater and body. However, as a subculture, skateboarders choose to reject or ignore history in favour of acting in the present with what is already known as opposed to what has been recorded.⁷ Bourdieu (1992) too, makes this distinction between imitation and reproduction. Consequently skateboarders tend to view themselves as innovators and creators of new movement, despite the wealth of contradictory imagery they surround themselves with.

The skateboarder's focus on style, or how they move with the board, leads the skaters away from the imagery of their subcultural micro-media to the development of their own personal style. This single-mindedness and self focus leads to declarations of lifestyle and subcultural identity, ironically the very notion that the mass media looks to export and sell.

“Originality is most important to me...skaters that copy a lot aren't skating for themselves.”⁸

Style may be a subculture's most readable feature, indeed the politics of style ensure that the bodily formation of a subculture is never neutral. However, subcultural style is not necessarily equateable with resistance or opposition, indeed action orientated subcultures enjoy a certain element of conventionality and transferability, which may account for their endurance.

Stratton, in Gelder and Thornton (1997), in his study on the origins of the surfing and biker subcultures in the United States after second world war notes the difference between “spectacular”, more culturally based; and “commodity orientated” subcultures, more consumerist in nature. Stratton further notes that mass culture is usually more accepting of a “commodity orientated” subculture, on the basis of their shared capitalist consumerist similarities.⁹

The resistance of some skaters to the commodification of their style is interesting in the light of Stratton's work, as the public already accepts the subculture. As skateboarders live out and display the myth of leisure and relaxation that middle-class capitalism strives for. The resistant and rebellious body politics of the skateboarder are seemingly negated by the proximity with which the skateboarding subculture developed to the mass culture, and the transferable appeal of their consumables. The irony is complete when the body of the skateboarder is covered in

branded clothing, footwear and accessories; all selling and marketing their lifestyle that can't be bought, only lived.

The skateboarding body

“Skaters have a completely different culture from the norms of the world’s society. We dress differently, we have our own language, use our own slang, and live by our own rules.”¹⁰

Skateboarding subculture and skateboarders are, with some regional variations, a relatively homogeneous group. Despite the concerns of subcultural commodification and consumerism, skateboarders still constitute a recognisable group; most easily discussed, given the bodily nature of skateboarding, in terms of the socially constructed categories of age, class, race and gender.

The majority of skateboarders traditionally are young, aged between approximately 8 and 20 years old. The development of skateboarding as an industry and as a sport has meant that many practitioners are now in their twenties and thirties, however, the recognised appeal of the sport is still predominantly with the youth. Besides the age prejudice, many older skaters have less time for a leisure activity and a decreasing ability to withstand the strains placed on the body by the sport.

Skateboarders are typically seen as a relatively classless group, but this situation is dependent on the larger socio-economic environment that the subculture finds itself in. Whilst homemade and second-hand accessories are available, the reality is that skateboarders need typically to be from middle and upper-middle class backgrounds to afford the equipment and accessories. Klopper in Nuttall and Michael (2000) acknowledges the class status of skateboarders involved in graffiti art in Cape Town, South Africa.¹¹

Skateboarders have traditionally been seen as a racially diverse group, specifically in the United States where the sport originated. During the 1980’s and 1990’s skateboarders were generally from more diverse backgrounds as opposed to the early years of the subculture as it evolved from the Californian surf culture. There have been few or no racial tensions in skateboarding as a sport, but this is more likely as a result of its loose and recent organisation as a professional sport; as with class, the localised demographic of skateboarders is dependant on the larger socio-economic environment.

Skateboarders are almost always men, or as the case may be boys. Skateboarding publications will almost always refer to skateboarders in male terms. “While female skaters are not explicitly discouraged, their relative absence is only occasionally noted and implicitly condoned”.¹² Skateboarding media continues to feature almost exclusively males only in pictures, articles and as contributors.

More than the body

Whilst the body in skateboarding is easily identified and characterised, it is the co-ordinated accessories of the body that establishes, composes and communicates the subculture within the group and to the outsider.

The most eye-catching area of the skateboarder's body is the underside of the skateboard deck, which usually starts with some form of graphic design and then deteriorates with use. These designs denote the model of the board and the manufacturing company, while the state of the underside will bear testament to the skater's commitment to their action. Graphic styles and colour schemes follow fashion trends, as deck dimensions have reduced markedly from the 1980's to present. The effect of the designs is quite post modern as a hybrid of themes, images, techniques and effects are used. The underside of the deck, and condition of the graphic, deteriorates quickly with use; skateboarders often choose to personalise the deck with stickers, art and the like.

After the skateboard deck, the next most obvious, accessory adorning the skateboarders body is typically the footwear, which like the various professional models of deck available, are often branded according to a professional skateboarder's image. Skateboarding footwear, like other clothing, tends to follow fashion trends in design, construction and colour. The industry and market for skateboarding footwear is enormous, footwear often costing more than the deck, as those wishing to buy the "look" or "image" need often go no further than the footwear. For skateboarders the obsession with footwear might be attributed to the importance of the contact point between body and skateboard, and the imperative of movement residing in the limbs and not the mind.¹³

Amongst the assortment of clothing worn by the skateboarder, the baggy trousers traditionally stand out over the varied range of T-shirts and occasional caps or other headwear:

"My style isn't a statement. It's just practical...I need roomy jeans for skating and biking 'cause you need to move your legs around. I want clothes to do stuff in. I can't wear clothes just to look good in."¹⁴

Usability of clothing has played an important role in the development of skateboarding style, or "styletribes"¹⁵ and according to Hebdige (1979) style has manifested itself and the skateboarding subculture through dress, look, sound and performance.¹⁶ Style has allowed individual visible expression of belonging to a group, giving separate bodies validation and coherence. However Hebdige (1979) fails address the post modern transferability and transcendence of skateboarding style as language, music, design and fashion are appropriated from other subcultures. Skateboarding, and the skateboarder, in the 1970's was characterised as a "sidewalk surfer" only skating when there no waves to surf; in the 1980's punk and heavy metal music and dress competed with the neon coloured fashion of the time; the 1990's saw hip hop style, graffiti art and rap music characterise the skateboarding scene; and now into the 21st century skateboarding

has become more streamlined, minimal and technical in its look and sound but awareness of the retro trend of the moment has seen a re-emergence of eighties and nineties style and fashion.

Just the body

Massey in Skelton & Valentine (1998) suggests youth cultures, and subcultures, be addressed in terms of scale and as being by definition hybrid in nature.¹⁷ This would seem useful and accurate in considering the difficulty in analysing bodies, as contexts for subcultures, that are essentially post modern.

Skateboarding, and the skateboarding body, defy complete definition and by that exhaustive analysis, as the actions of the body can not be used to wholly describe or represent the subculture¹⁸, and the context of the actions change with post modern irregularity. Skateboarding resists itself from exhausting through its action-orientated existence, where the subcultural mysteries originate in the agency of the body. The movement of the body can be imitated and documented, the clothing copied and the equipment and context replicated; but the subconscious and the subjective not.

The mechanics and representation of a body performing an “ollie”, the simplest and base move in skateboarding, can be easily described in scientific, analytical and descriptive terms; but will always be incomplete to the body that has not performed such an action. The beauty and attraction of a post-modern body operating in post-modern subculture is the absence of understanding as a fundamental to appreciation or purchase.

¹ Mark Gonzales, progressive and pioneering skateboarder from the 1980's in Jacko Weyland *The answer is never: a skateboarder's history of the world*, (Century, London, 2002), no page.

² Tony Hawk is probably the obvious and most well known example: professional skateboarding's first millionaire, founder of skateboard company Birdhouse, television host and the image behind Hawk shoes and the best selling computer game Tony Hawk's Skateboarding.

³ Both Weyland and Borden's initial interest in the sport comes from skateboarding in their youth; whilst Stacey Peralta, the director of “Dogtown and the Z-Boys”, is a former professional skateboarder and co-founder of the skateboarding company Powell-Peralta.

⁴ I. Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City*. (Berg, Oxford, 2001), p. 100.

⁵ P. Bourdieu, ‘Belief and the body’, in *The Logic of Practice*, (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992). p. 71.

⁶ P. Bourdieu, p. 71-72.

⁷ I. Borden, p. 170.

⁸ Professional skateboarder Rodney Mullen, in ‘Freestyle Fanatics’, *Thrasher*, (March 1986), vol. 6, no.3, p. 35.

⁹ J. Stratton, ‘On the importance of subcultural origins’, in Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton (eds), *The subcultures reader*. (Routledge, London, 1997), pp. 183-188.

¹⁰ K. Maeda, letter, in B. Beal, ‘Disqualifying the Official: an Exploration of Social Resistance Through the Subculture of Skateboarding’, *Sociology of Sport Journal*, (1995), vol. 12, no. 3, p. 256.

¹¹ S. Klopper, ‘Hip-hop graffiti art’, in Sarah Nuttall and Cheryl-Ann Michael (eds), *Senses of culture: South African culture studies*, (Oxford University Press, Cape Town, 2000).

¹² I. Borden, p. 144.

¹³ P. Bourdieu, p. 6.

¹⁴ T. Polhemus, *Style surfing: what to wear in the 3rd millennium*. (Thames and Hudson, London, 1996), p. 14.

¹⁵ Alternate clothing based term for subcultures coined by Polhemus (1996), where the uniform of a group indicates its belief, or culture. Notably you only have to acquire the clothes to join a styletribe and not subscribe to the doctrine, or in the case of skateboarding perform the action. Polhemus highlights the international media and music industries as responsible for this proliferation of styletribes since the Second World War.

¹⁶ D. Hebdige, *Subculture: the meaning of style*, (Routledge, London, 1979).

¹⁷ D. Massey, 'Spatial construction of youth cultures' in Tracey Skelton & Gill Valentine (eds), *Cool places: geographies of youth cultures*, (Routledge, London, 1998).

¹⁸ P. Bourdieu, p. 69 & 86.