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Skateboard Video

Archiving the City from Below

Duncan McDuie-Ra

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“In crisp, engaging prose, McDuie-Ra recognizes the rich resource that skateboarding video provides for tracing urban transformation at a variety of scales. In framing such media as an unparalleled window on how our city spaces—from the quotidian to the spectacular—are experienced, McDuie-Ra’s analysis does what only the best urban research can achieve, offering a profound and previously ignored vantage point for understanding the intimacies that evolve between humans and their shared built environments. And it does so in the context of media and performances of urban skateboarding that are in turn masterful, subversive, obnoxious, artful, problematic, beautiful, and startling.”

—John Carr, *UNSW, Australia*

“In this engaging and provocative work McDuie-Ra’s metaphor is powerful; here is a culture that documents itself ‘from below’. By adopting the video camera as a ritual item, skateboarders have created an informal archive of urban life and social change. In studying these videos, the author invites us to become intimately familiar with the overlooked corners of cities across the globe, presenting an informal index of development and austerity, and an extraordinary resource for academic study. This clear and accessible voice questions the central tenets of skateboard culture, showing that through video, skateboarders can be responsible delinquents, and inclusive elitists who cherish and honour their history. A remarkable text that urges the reader to reconsider the ways we archive urbanism, occupy space, and think of race.”

—Paul O’Connor, *author of Skateboarding and Religion*

“In an era when footage speaks louder than words, McDuie-Ra convinces us that we can perceive and understand cities from an alternative, yet novel perspective. This is a highly readable and intriguing work for urban sub-cultural scholars interested in conducting media-based archival research or content analysis, as well as for those seeking an in-depth depiction of skaters’ embodied and socio-cultural experience.”

—Chihsin Chiu, *National Taiwan University*

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Introduction: Archiving the Urban Backstage

Abstract This chapter offers a brief history of skate video before making a case for its value as an archive of the city from below. ‘Below’ has a dual meaning here. One, below as an unofficial or ‘rebel’ archive, a subaltern history of urban space. Two, below as the angle from which skateboarders and filmers gaze upon the city, capture it on video, and the angle from which it is viewed. I discuss the surprising underappreciation of skate video and skateboarding more generally in scholarship on cities; odd given the boon in attention to infrastructure, urban landscapes and their cultural imaginaries, debates about urban theory in the Global South and Global North, low-end globalisation, urban performance, and urban media among other themes. In response to this unappreciation, I consider the alignment of skate video with existing scholarship that experiments with the city as an archive. I argue that skate video is a record of ethnographic practice and an object of ethnographic inquiry, making it a durable media object to analyse an otherwise fleeting act of urban spectacle. The chapter closes with a breakdown of the book’s chapters and a short section on approaching the text.

Keywords Skateboarding · Skate video · Archive · Living archive · Urban backstage

This is short book about skateboard video. By putting skate video at the centre of analysis I advocate for taking skate video seriously to explore the urban backstage,¹ recent urban history, creative urban practice, urban encounters (people-to-people and people-to-object/s), and the globalisation of a subculture at once delinquent and magnificent.

From the early 1980s, skateboarding has been captured on film, video tape, and digital memory cards, edited into consumable forms and circulated around the world, circulating slowly at first before accelerating rapidly with changes to digital communications technology and video hosting platforms. Commonly referred to simply as ‘skate video’ regardless of method of capture or form,² every skateboarder has seen a skate video. Most have seen hundreds, maybe thousands; especially as the format has shifted from full-length videos running for 60–90 minutes purchased or pirated onto VHS cassettes and DVDs to shorter videos (20–30 minutes) and stand-alone video parts (3–10 minutes) circulated online.

In any one moment skaters are in city streets performing physical and creative feats, making mischief, encountering and reinterpreting the

¹ The urban backstage is a metaphor for the mundane, unspectacular backblocks of an urban landscape, and across different urban landscapes. These may be planned or unplanned, dense of sprawling, working class or gentrifying. Regardless, the backstage are the patches of the city rarely noticed and rarely captured on video and/or image and consumed by a globally dispersed audience. The term is most effectively deployed by Robina Mohammad and James Sidaway in their work on Abu-Dhabi. They differentiate between the urban ‘frontstage’, the landscape of spectacle for display and consumption, and ‘the city’s mundane backstage’, ‘inhabited by those whose labour enables the spectacle and supports the lifestyles of the elite’. See Robina Mohammad and James D. Sidaway. “Spectacular Urbanization Amidst Variegated Geographies of Globalization: Learning from Abu Dhabi’s Trajectory Through the Lives of South Asian Men.” *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 36, no. 3 (2012): 610.

² Skate video has been filmed on Hi-8 and VHS tape through its early years, though some companies spliced this with footage captured on film and Betacam. The Sony VX1000 was launched in 1995 and became wildly popular with skate filmers following the release of the MK1 fisheye lens in 1998. While various HD cameras have become standard in capturing skate video—along with mobile phones and other portable devices—the VX1000 remains popular as it retains a look and feel of videos shot in the ‘golden age’ of skate video from 1999–2007. For a history of the VX1000 see Nic Doobija-Nootens, “Tracing the History of Skateboarding’s Most Famous Camera.” *Jenkem*, 13 July 2018. Available at: <http://www.jenkemmag.com/home/2018/07/13/tracing-history-skateboardings-most-famous-camera/>. Accessed 4 January 2019.

built environment,³ encountering other bodies (authorities, bystanders, and spectators), shedding skin, leaking blood, and making connections with other skaters across racial, class, and cultural boundaries. There is something like 20–60 million skateboarders around the world.⁴ The industry is estimated to be worth almost \$2 billion US Dollars.⁵ Despite this popularity, in its core form skateboarding involves illegal or semi-illegal acts; friction between delinquency and profitability. Skateboarding requires loitering, trespassing, vandalising, and liberating urban objects (see Image 1.1). Skateboarding subculture has its own internal mores while simultaneously coveted by grander agents of capitalism from ‘action

³ Iain Borden puts this beautifully in his landmark 2001 book on skateboarding, architecture, and space. He writes that these interrelationships are ‘not so much a specific place (for skateboarding occurs in cities across the world), specific moment (for skateboarding changes over the course of a 40-year history) or specific person or persons (skateboarding is practised predominantly by nameless millions), but is a practice, a particular patterning of space–time produced from a specific body-centred origin’. Iain Borden. *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture and the Body* (London/New York: Bloomsbury, 2001/2013), 12.

⁴ Estimates vary wildly because it is very hard to track. Skateboarding does not require registration nor association. Skateboarders don’t ‘show up’ in the ways formalised activities might. Sales of product may be indicative but are very difficult to capture in multiple markets (who tracks skateboards manufactured and sold in Indonesia?). The same goes for production. It is also difficult to align sales of product with number of skateboarders. A skateboard deck (the wooden part you stand on) may last one skater a year and another skater a week. The second skater might go through 40 or 50 skate decks in a year but is just a single body in a demographic count. Skaters who self-identify could be someone who skates occasionally, or someone who skates every day. Some skaters may not pick up their board for years, but still identify as a skater and still consume skate videos and buy apparel and shoes. Some skaters start and give up within a few months. Some keep going for decades. Where does this leave the estimate of the number of skaters globally? Hazy. Literature quotes various figures ranging from 20 to 60 million skaters worldwide and these figures are probably as good as any. For a discussion see Paul O’Connor. “Skateboarding, Helmets, and Control: Observations from Skateboard Media and a Hong Kong Skatepark.” *Journal of Sport and Social Issues* 40, no. 6 (2016): 478. In a sense it doesn’t really matter for the purposes of this book. The point is that this is far from a marginal activity. And therefore, skate video is far from a marginal cultural artefact.

⁵ Figures are thrown around all the time with little detail at how they are calculated. I am never sure if this figure includes the industry outside the US or not. In a 2020 magazine article, Mackenzie Eisenhower, a long running editor and journalist in skateboard media puts the value of the industry at 1.9 billion USD. See Mackenzie Eisenhower. “Skateboarding Culture in Dogtown, Los Angeles.” *WestJet Magazine*, 16 June 2020. Available at: <https://www.westjetmagazine.com/story/article/dogtown-los-angeles>. Accessed 10 July 2020. Of all people, Eisenhower would know!



Image 1.1 Pioneering street skater Tommy Guerrero pushing through San Francisco in *Future Primitive* capturing the backstage in a definitive slice of space–time (Directed by Stacey Peralta, 1985. Screenshot. Used with permission)

sports’ broadcasters to upscale fashion brands. City and town planners covet skateboarding too, especially as an element in the so-called ‘creative city,’⁶ while also cracking down on skateboarding or at least trying to contain it in designated skate parks.

Significant too is the globalisation of skateboarding, which has intensified in the last two decades. Thriving communities of skaters can be found from Ethiopia to Palestine, from Brazil to Russia, along with the ‘discovery’ of iconic skate cities like Barcelona, Shenzhen, Milan, and Seoul. This has de-centred Californian cities from the centre of the skateboarding universe, though much of the industry remains based here.

⁶ See Ocean Howell. “The ‘Creative Class’ and the Gentrifying City: Skateboarding in Philadelphia’s Love Park.” *Journal of Architectural Education* 59, no. 2 (2005): 32–42; Kara-Jane Lombard. “Skate and Create/Skate and Destroy: The Commercial and Governmental Incorporation of Skateboarding.” *Continuum* 24, no. 4 (2010): 475–488; Oli Mould. *Urban Subversion and the Creative City* (London: Routledge, 2015); Gregory J. Snyder. “The City and the Subculture Career: Professional Street Skateboarding in LA.” *Ethnography* 13, no. 3 (2012): 306–329.

These dynamics—cultural, social, political, economic—warrant scholarly inquiry in several fields and disciplines interested in cities and the people and things who make them: from anthropology to sociology, history to cultural studies, architecture to media studies. And yet, skateboarding remains underappreciated in academia. I suspect this is in part because of its liminality. Skateboarding is not quite a sport, not quite a discreet culture, not quite political, not quite radical, not quite (or no longer) rebellious, not quite capitalism, not quite adult—yet is also all these things in small ways. There are several landmark studies on skateboarding transcending different disciplines⁷; blazing a trail that make this book on skate video possible. However, the level of scholarly attention is incommensurate with skateboarding’s presence out there in the world.

This underappreciation is weird. Skate scholarship tends to be put in a novelty box, even when research is published in high-end discipline and area-specific journals. It never seems to ‘cut through’ to scholars with parallel interests despite speaking to themes of concern across different fields. Skateboarding, as practice and as subculture, is entangled with elements of modernity that preoccupy scholars of cities: infrastructure and its intended and unintended publics, ‘socio-technical systems’ and their glitches,⁸ laws governing space and their transgression,⁹ comparability of cities between and within the Global North and Global South,¹⁰ low-end

⁷ Iain Borden. *Skateboarding and the City: A Complete History* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019); Borden. *Skateboarding, Space and City*; Kara-Jane Lombard (Ed.). *Skateboarding: Subcultures, Sites and Shifts* (New York: Routledge, 2015); Paul O’Connor. *Skateboarding and Religion* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020); Gregory J. Snyder, *Skateboarding LA: Inside Professional Street Skateboarding* (New York: NYU Press, 2017).

⁸ Ash Amin and Nigel Thrift. *Seeing Like a City* (Cambridge: Polity, 2017).

⁹ John Carr. “Legal Geographies—Skating Around the Edges of the Law: Urban Skateboarding and the Role of Law in Determining Young Peoples’ Place in the City.” *Urban Geography* 31, no. 7 (2010): 988–1003.

¹⁰ Jennifer Robinson. “Comparisons: Colonial or Cosmopolitan?” *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 32, no. 2 (2011): 125–140.



Image 1.2 Breana Geering impossible into the famous China Banks in San Francisco in *Credits* (Directed by Shari White, 2020. Screenshot. Used with permission)

globalisation,¹¹ playful media practices,¹² the somaesthetics of unsanctioned urban performance,¹³ urban subcultures, and the decay, renewal, and creation of urban landscapes in different polities.

As will be argued in the chapters that follow, skateboarders from diverse sexual, gendered, racial, and national identities—and the photographers and filmers that roll alongside them—have an intimate knowledge of these elements that preoccupy scholars; yet skateboarding’s artefacts and archives are rarely consulted (Image 1.2). Skaters are generous with modernity and will follow its material manifestations anywhere provided there are objects, obstacles, and smooth surfaces to skate; downtown to

¹¹ Gordon Mathews. *Ghetto at the Center of the World: Chungking Mansions, Hong Kong* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

¹² René Glas, Sybille Lammes, Michiel Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar Vries. “The Playful Citizen: An Introduction.” In René Glas, Sybille Lammes, Michiel Lange, Joost Raessens, and Imar Vries (Eds.). *The Playful Citizen* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 9–29.

¹³ Richard Shusterman. “Bodies in the Streets and the Somaesthetics of City Life.” In Richard Shusterman (Ed.). *Bodies in the Streets: The Somaesthetics of City Life* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 1–10.