Veith Kilberth, Jürgen Schwier (eds.)

SKATEBOARDING BETWEEN SUBCULTURE AND THE OLYMPICS

A Youth Culture under Pressure from Commercialization and Sportification
The inclusion of skateboarding as an official discipline in the 2020 Olympic Games marks the pinnacle of a decades-long process of commercialization and sportification. Is the tightly-knit subculture in danger of losing its very identity?

This anthology creates an analytical framework for understanding the fundamental conflict between skateboarding’s core ethos and the tenets of institutionalized sports. Eleven acclaimed international authors from the fields of architecture, philosophy, sociology, sports sciences and gender studies provide a unique perspective on the manifold manifestations of skateboarding previously ignored by academic discourse.

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**Contents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Quo vadis Skateboarding?</td>
<td>Jürgen Schwier &amp; Veith Kilberth</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skateboarding between Subculture and Olympic Games</td>
<td>Jürgen Schwier</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From Stairs to Podium</td>
<td>Eckehart Velten Schäfer</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Olympic Skateboarding Terrain between Subculture and Sportisation</td>
<td>Veith Kilberth</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skatepark Worlds</td>
<td>Iain Borden</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can You Sell Out if You’ve Never Been in?</td>
<td>Becky Beal &amp; Kristin Ebeling</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Comply. The Resilience of Skateboarding Culture</td>
<td>Sebastian Schweer</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Role of Online Media Content in Skateboard Culture</td>
<td>Katharina Bock</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport Instead of Play</td>
<td>Antoine Cantin-Brault</td>
<td>157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skateboarding in Pedagogical Production</td>
<td>Tim Bindel &amp; Niklas Pick</td>
<td>177</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lords of the Rings: Reasserting the Skateboarding Art at the Olympic Games
Tait Colberg  |  191

Authors  |  209
Quo vadis Skateboarding?

Jürgen Schwier & Veith Kilberth

Skateboarding is a worldwide movement culture that traditionally seems to be particularly attractive for male teenagers as well as for young adults. This movement culture, however, is perceived by numerous skateboarders of every sexual orientation and gender identity as an expression of a special attitude to life and as an idiosyncratic lifestyle which, depending on the degree of personal involvement, can permeate almost all areas of their everyday lives. At the same time, since its beginnings as so-called asphalt surfing in the 1950s, skateboarding has undergone both various technical developments as well as cultural developments. Over the past few decades, skateboarding has experienced several waves when it comes to the number and typology of participants. That is, in Europe and North America, skateboarding has faced several phases of commercial highs and lows.

With regard to its historical development, skateboarding – in the form of practice that has prevailed to this day – has, on the one hand, been created in the environment of Californian surf culture. On the other hand, the trends in the US still retain a certain pioneering function for the rest of the world. This applies in particular to the longer-term process of change that, according to Lombard (2010), has led to the fact that skateboarding, which only a few decades ago was labelled either as a form of play for children or as a purely underground activity, has gradually become a valued field of action for youth marketing and sports sponsoring as well as an object for state programmes to promote open youth

1 The close connection between surfing and skateboarding is reflected, among other things, in surf skating, which attempts to transfer the feeling of movement of surfing to skateboarding in concrete bowls and on asphalt surfaces (cf. www.carver-skateboards.com, www.curlboard.com or www.landlockedboards.com).
work or to revitalise public spaces (cf. for example, Beal, 2013, pp. 106-107; Beal et al., 2017; Borden, 2001, pp. 229-237; Borden, 2018, 2019; Vivoni, 2018).

Not least due to its playful approach to spaces, objects and social forms, this movement practice is, so to speak, an experimental laboratory for innovative forms of physical expression and youthful self-empowerment (cf. Schwier, 1998, pp. 24-38). In skateboarding, the mastery of driving techniques and tricks, driven by self-directed learning processes, pre-supposes regular, lengthy and sometimes painful practice, during which one has to get used to the unusual, overcome resistance, pass individual tests and deal with the risk of injury.

Overall, this adventurous aspect underscores the need for a genuine commitment to body capital, vitality and free time – or that which adolescents tend to have in abundance. In addition, risk is one of the style elements that initially make skateboarding – true to the motto ‘skate and destroy’ – a distinctive practice in the first place.

In this context, it should be noted that skateboarders do not normally travel alone with the board and carry out their own manoeuvres. There is simply something like a casual compulsion in skateboarding to form informal groups of like-minded people. In principle, social co-existence is the focus of and is anchored in this social and cultural practice. Community experience, mutual recognition and respect for the individual members of the scene and their movement action play a central role in this (cf. for example Butz & Peters, 2018; Schwier & Kilberth, 2018a).

Since the 1970s, at the latest, urban skateboard scenes have also emphasised sub-cultural attitudes (cf. Borden, 2001, pp. 137-139) and do not view skateboarding as a regular form of sport at all but rather as a rebellious movement practice or as a creative movement art and logically distance themselves both from the system of organised sport and from the usual social conventions. From this perspective, skateboard communities tend towards self-marginalisation – which can certainly include a ‘colonialist’ resistance myth (Butz, 2014, p. 172) – and, with their anti-authoritarian basic attitude, are located on the fringes of the urban or municipal order: “The loud takeover of city streets by skateboarders unearths the potential redefinition of urban space for pleasure and protest” (Vivoni, 2018, p. 121; cf. e.g. Bradley, 2010; Németh, 2006).

At the same time, skateboard communities are increasing continuously for quite some time. Beside older skateboarders (beyond the age of 30) and queer
skaters, young women and girls who skate, in particular, are increasingly drawing attention to their practice and developing their own networks and projects.²

Public skateparks, whose construction and maintenance are mostly financed by cities and municipalities, are not to be underestimated with regards to the development of this movement culture in German-speaking countries. Skateparks are purpose-built spaces that were initially created as a reaction to the general demand and the almost uncontrollable appropriation of urban spaces by young skaters. Part of the skate community thinks that such facilities, on the one hand, contribute in to the ‘domestication’ of the actual sub-cultural action practice, to which the idea of an isolated sports space has traditionally been alien (cf. Howell, 2008; Peters, 2016, p. 153).³ On the other hand, the parks are assigned an important social function as playgrounds for communal self-presentation, as places of local scene formation and as places of shared aesthetic values (cf. Beal, 2013, pp. 100-102; Bradley, 2010; L’Aoustet & Griffet, 2003).

There is, however, an ongoing discussion within the skateboard community about its own identity, as a response to the commercialisation and its role as a sport, most notably through the construction of skateparks, an increase in contests and competitions, and an increase in marketing and sponsorships. For some time now, this movement practice has been permeated by exploitation and marketing processes that not only seek to appropriate the skateboard culture for their own purposes from the outside, as it were, but at least, partially, also emerge from the scene itself. Due to the fact that skateboarding will at least temporarily be an Olympic sport in the near future, this debate about the commercialisation and development into sport of rollerblading has undoubtedly gained additional momentum. With the inclusion in the Olympic Program 2020, skateboarding reaches the interim peak of progressive development into a competitive sport. From the point of view of the scene, the identity of skateboarding is at stake. The Olympic perspective increases tensions between sub-culture and consumer culture, between a continuation of the stylistic forms of expression of an alternative movement culture, the objective quantification in the sense of the (performance) sports system and the commercialisation through the influence of brands and


³ A striking reaction to the worldwide renaissance of skateparks is certainly the DIY movement, whose popularity is also reflected in the fact that videos about local DIY skate spots on platforms such as YouTube generate up to 1.8 million hits (www.youtube.com/watch?v=P18nCQIA0g&t=1s).
media (cf. Schwier & Kilberth, 2018b). For skateboarding as an adapted, conformist sport represents something quite different from the non-conformist habits of skateboarding, which presumably inspired many actors to opt for this practice in the first place (cf. Beal, 2013; Beaver, 2012, p. 25).

Another aspect of the Olympic debate concerns gender relations in skateboarding culture. As already mentioned, skateboarding is globally regarded as a male-dominated movement practice in which different concepts and stagings of masculinity and femininity can be found but there are still noticeable barriers to access for girls and young women (cf. Atencio, Beal & Wilson, 2009, pp. 18-19; Sobiech & Hartung, 2017, pp. 214-219). Against this background, the question arises whether and to what extent the tendencies towards commercialisation and development into sport not only create more jobs and role models for female skaters but also – in the long run – favour equal participation for all genders in skateboarding.

This anthology therefore focuses on the current discussion about the inclusion of skateboarding in the programme of the 2020 Summer Olympics in Tokyo from various cultural and social science perspectives and gathers ten contributions on current developments in the context of skateboarding. It begins with a contribution by Jürgen Schwier, who is intended to introduce the problem area and, in a first step, portrays skateboarding as a youthful movement (sub-)culture. Subsequently, the tendencies towards commercialisation and development into sport will be traced and possible effects of participation in the Olympic Games on the further development of skateboarding culture will be discussed.

Eckehart Velten Schäfer addresses the Olympics by reconsidering the assumption that skateboarding has undergone several fundamental developments over the last sixty years. Within the framework of these development and transformation processes, he distinguishes ‘sport-hostile’ and more ‘sport-compatible’ movement culture formats. In this context, Schäfer tries to clarify which forms of skateboarding stand closer to or further removed from the classic (competition) sport.

Veith Kilberth analyses the terrain of the Olympic skateboard disciplines, which have re-configured themselves several times in the past. Using the reconstruction of the Olympic terrains ‘Park’ and ‘Street’, he works out developmental patterns and constellations that make visible an interplay between development into sport and skateboarding’s sub-cultural origins. Suggesting a possible scenario for the future, Kilberth shows how the involved actors can secure commercial advantages for themselves, while at the same time preserving their non-conformist identity.
Iain Borden explores the key aspects of the global renaissance of skateparks over the last two decades, tracing inter alia the manifold usage options of such urban movement spaces. Borden argues that skateparks not only generate new forms of community, but – within certain limits – can also stimulate social change and processes of self-empowerment in challenging places (for example, social aid projects in neglected neighbourhoods or war-torn countries).

As documented by previous research, the debates around ‘authentic’ ways of being a skateboarder illustrate power dynamics within skateboarding. Becky Beal and Kristin Ebeling argue that the notion of authenticity as embodied by a risk-taking, creative, cisgendered male was fostered through the industry in the 1980s and reinforced throughout much of its history since. They consider how this version of authenticity has served to marginalize other groups of people, especially females and queer folk. The inclusion of skateboarding in the Olympics is one of the key shifts in the evolving narrative of authenticity, especially the inclusion of women as legitimate participants. Beal and Ebeling explore other key moments that have disrupted the traditional narrative and created spaces for gender inclusion.

The resilience of skateboard culture is the central theme of Sebastian Schweer’s contribution. Using the example of the Swedish skateboarder Pontus Alv and his Polar Skate Company, Schweer claims that the heterodox skateboarding style popularised by Alv can be understood as a reaction to the sportisation of the scene. He describes this as a form of resilience. Schweer concludes his remarks by referring to Hartmut Rosa’s resonance theory at the level of society as a whole.

Katharina Bock explores the role of online media content for skateboarding culture and examines how these digital media formats (e-zines, video portals, websites, skate-videos and tutorials) affect the scene. She concludes that online media (co-)created by the scene document the scene, whilst contributing to the production of knowledge and meaning. Starting from the historic description of skateboarding as an art form, Antoine Cantin-Brault sketches the dialectical process of how the practice is developing into a sport, which will reach its provisional endpoint with the appropriation by the Olympic Games. With reference to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existentialism, he argues that skateboarding currently runs the risk of gambling away the last remnants of its own autonomy.

Tim Bindel and Niklas Pick ask whether skateboarding can ever be an appropriate subject for (sports) education. They suggest that skateboarding in the context of schools necessarily differs from street skating on the road. A qualitative study at its core, this chapter explores the central challenges associated with a corresponding educational process in the context of school sport – along the
categories of teacher involvement, the teaching-learning problem and the spatial theme.

Skateboarding is taking place at the 2020 Summer Olympics, but don’t expect skateboarders to assimilate with all the other ‘real’ athletes. What would happen if skateboarders defied the strict rules and behavioural expectations of the International Olympic Committee and manifested the intrinsic values of skateboarding at the Games instead? Known as the author of the thought-provoking manifesto ‘The Skateboarding Art’ (2012), skateboard writer Tait Colberg imagines an Olympic debut true to the values of self-expression, international camaraderie, and DIY-initiative in his colourful essay. Watch out Olympics – you can take the skateboarders out the streets, but you can’t take the streets out of skateboarders…

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**REFERENCES**


