From:

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*Grinding California*

Culture and Corporeality in American Skate Punk

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»Grinding California« provides the first academic analysis of the subculture of skate punk at book-length. It establishes highly critical evaluations of the discourses that influenced early skateboarding and punk cultures. Based on an examination of songs, flyers, magazines, and videos, Konstantin Butz revisits American popular cultures of the 1980s and approaches them from a variety of theoretical and methodological angles.

Theoretical recourses to thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, Jean Baudrillard and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht are topped off with excerpts from interviews with some of the most influential protagonists of the 1980s skate punk scene.

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INTRODUCTION: “Let’s skate!”

“And remember: No skateboarding until you’ve done your homework!” These words introduce the 1986 music video of the song “Possessed to Skate” by Venice Beach hardcore punk band Suicidal Tendencies. It features a middle-aged father, ironically played by Timothy Leary, who instructs his son with this imperative before he leaves for vacation with his wife.1 As the parents depart in their minivan, the viewer catches a glimpse of the neighborhood: suburban sunny Southern California. The son waves good-bye to his parents from in front of their home, resembling a typical “McMansion” (cf. Batchelor and Stoddart 63), surrounded by almost identical single-family houses, palm trees and wide streets, before reluctantly starting to engage with his homework. When, out of frustration over his math assignment, he touches a wheel of his skateboard and absentmindedly starts to spin it, suddenly distorted guitar chords are heard. A burning pentagram appears in his exercise book, a punk song develops, and following a few shots of the neatly decorated living room and the luxurious swimming pool in the backyard, a group of skateboarders enter the house, headed by Suicidal Tendencies’ lead singer Mike Muir, who kicks in the door and shouts: “Let’s skate!” They literally start to tear the place apart, skate on the furniture, and spray-paint the walls. The main character excitedly moves to the pounding beat, swings his fist rhythmically, and joins the gang as they destroy the interior of the house and perform various maneuvers on their skateboards. The session culminates at the swimming pool, which is immediately emptied and exploited as a skateboard ground and becomes the site of a raging Suicidal Tendencies concert. The video ends with the return of the parents and their shock at finding a destroyed home.

1 | Leary, a psychologist who became famous for his advocacy of the use of drugs and psychedelics during the 1960s and its countercultural movements, brings an ironic twist to the video’s cast as his real life activities diametrically oppose the character of an authoritarian father and his patronizing instructions.
In just three minutes, this video offers a very condensed account of the rebellious aspects of the two interconnected subcultures of skateboarding and hardcore punk, best described by the term skate punk. It appears to be the music, its distorted guitar sounds, aggressive drum beats, and shouted refrains that, in conjunction with the activity of skateboarding, turn an apparently average teenager against his middle-class upbringing and into a full participant in a punk rock riot, or an “outcast of society,” as the lyrics suggest (“Possessed to Skate”). A few chords and a skateboard seem to be enough to disrupt the idyll of a middle-class California neighborhood and to question its very foundations: Parental and institutional (i.e. school) authority is disregarded by favoring skateboarding over math assignments, paintings are torn from the walls and replaced with graffiti, the living room furniture is rearranged and appropriated as skating obstacles, and the swimming pool is redefined by emptying it in order to skate its concrete slopes and inclines. The pool’s significance for the plot is obvious from its prominent position in the video’s mise-en-scène: As a “saturated symbol of luxury” the swimming pool stands for the family’s social standing and their (upper) middle class affiliations and aspirations (Halberstam 81), which renders its transformation by teenage skate punks a direct attack on these values of suburban prosperity. The pool is no longer accepted as a capitalist status symbol but turned into a medium of skate punk performance. It is sonically engaged by the punk band playing next to it while skateboarders literally scratch its concrete surface. The parents’ American Dream, their Californian Utopia, and their suburban existence are all attacked by each and every move in this music video. These teenagers and adolescents do not want a single-family house with nice paintings on the walls and crocheted blankets on the couch. They rebel against this image of domesticity and try to escape it through physical movement. Moving to the beats of the music, moving on the skateboard, jumping in front of a stage and jumping into an empty swimming pool with a skateboard—all of the performances and expressions of rebellion deployed in this music video are ultimately bound to the movement of the body. The static normalcy of middle-class suburbia is disrupted by the bodily movement of rebelling skate punks.

In what follows I will take a closer look at the cultures of skateboarding, hardcore punk, and their amalgam, skate punk, in order to approach the complex phenomenon of youth cultural rebellion and its reliance on discursive as well as corporeal representation and deviation. I want to question the rebellious stances and attitudes exemplarily insinuated in the music video for “Possessed to Skate” and find out by which means they are articulated within other media such as records and song lyrics, flyers, magazines, and videos, as well as through the corporeal movement of the body. How is skate punk rendered rebellious? What role does its discursive and material context play? How do subcultural media construct rebellious images of skateboarding punks and in what way do their corporeal activities contribute to the performance and expression of rebellious behavior? Who or what is the object of this rebellion? Who is involved and to what extent is the rebellious
and resistant claim of skate punks influenced, subjugated, and compromised by their social and cultural backgrounds?

Assuming that skate punk culture developed in California during the early 1980s—a sociopolitical period often labeled the “Gimme Decade” for its blatant consumerism and probably best described as the climax of postmodern capitalism (cf. DeCurtis 2)—chapter 1 of this book starts with a discussion of various theoretical positions which anticipate the corporeal field of the body in its relationship to the discursive attributes of the time. In conjunction with a contextual delineation of both American politics and culture in the 1980s in general and the development of skateboarding and hardcore punk in particular, the first chapter constitutes a basis for an analysis of specific skate punk media and their content in chapter 2, and a consideration of the material and corporeal ramifications of skate punk performances in chapter 3. My work thus follows deliberations of contextual, discursive, and corporeal aspects of skate punk in order to fathom whether (and if so, how) American teenagers or, more precisely, skateboarding punks from the suburban middle class, find ways to resist, distance themselves, and deviate from their social, cultural, and physical environment in Southern California. How do these young people attempt to create a rebellious subculture and how do they attempt to live and cultivate a body in rebellion?

A Brief Note on Subcultures

The resistance to the perceived ‘mainstream’ of the middle class that is implied in “Possessed to Skate,” at least from the perspective of skate punk participants themselves, renders their youth cultural group a ‘subculture,’ i.e. a formation of people whose appearance and actions deviate and differ from the normative values of their environment and particularly from the dominant culture of adults and parents (cf. Barsch). Although the term ‘subculture’ has repeatedly received critical commentary over the last decade, most prominently in the studies of David Muggleton and Rupert Weinzierl and their *Post-Subcultures Reader* (2003), it provides a useful working concept for my purposes as it implies an intentional attempt by skate punks to set themselves apart from an imagined other, an alleged mainstream. I refer to subcultures within the context of the term’s original coinage at the Chicago School of Sociology by scholars such as Albert K. Cohen or Frederic M. Thrasher, their work on gang cultures, and their concentration on juvenile delinquency and deviance, as well as its further specification by the Birmingham School and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), which emphasized the subversive meaning of subcultural style (cf. esp. Hebdige). Following Ryan Moore and his recent study, *Sells Like Teen Spirit - Youth Culture and Social Crisis* (2010), I do not believe in the necessity of an “abandonment of [the term] ‘subculture’” as it is implied by ‘post-subcultural theory’ and its contestation of “the romanticism of the CCCS” and the latter’s alleged failure in reflecting “the political, cultural and
economic realities of the twenty-first century” (Moore, *Sells Like* 24; Muggleton and Weinzierl, “What is” 4, 5).

‘Post-subcultural’ approaches raise important questions and correctly emphasize how “youth (sub)cultural phenomena” and “global mainstreams and local sub-streams rearticulate and restructure in complex and uneven ways to produce new, hybrid cultural constellations” which not only contradict the at times rather narrow preoccupation with class relations characterizing the work of the CCCS (Muggleton and Weinzierl, “What is” 3), but which also question the strict binary implied by the term subculture and its alleged antipole of the mainstream. However, I agree with Ken Gelder who precisely values the notion of subculture for being “both powerful and fragile,” “both ‘inappropriate’ and ‘illuminating’” (Gelder 12, 14). Gelder’s account of the term, in fact, renders it much more flexible than the proponents of ‘post-subcultures’ might acknowledge and, thus paves the way for Moore’s affirmative approach and his proposition that “the ‘sub’ in subculture signifies not only plurality but also subordination and subversion” (*Sells Like* 25). This provides an ideal conception for the delineation of skate punk’s entanglement with dominant modes of white middle-class discourse while acknowledging its potential for possible resistance and subversion.

When I mention skateboarding, (hardcore) punk, and skate punk in the following, I will employ the term ‘subculture’ to outline and to question in what way the participants of these cultural phenomena act and interact within their respective environments. At the same time, I will consider the multiple influences and entanglements that link and relate them to broader contexts of popular culture. Moore’s approach exemplifies the possibility of adhering to the current state of research in youth and (sub)cultural studies while maintaining the notion of ‘subculture’ as a flexible concept. Instead of merely contributing to “what George McKay in a slightly different context has called a ‘rhetoric of newness’,” which Gelder locates within the works of “post-subculturalists” (Gelder 1; cf. McKay 13), I try to further enhance the term by referring to the very recently introduced conception of *corresponding cultures* in Emily Chivers Yochim’s book *Skate Life: Re-Imagining White Masculinity* (2010). Chivers Yochim explains that, “[c]ontinuously in motion, a corresponding culture is a group organized around a particular lifestyle or activity that interacts with various levels of media – niche, mainstream, and local – and variously agrees or disagrees with those media’s espoused ideas” (4). While her focus on media parallels my project’s intended analysis of song lyrics, flyers, magazines, and videos the verb form of ‘corresponding’ suggests a reciprocal movement, which not only bridges “a false [and static] binary between subculture and mainstream” but also perfectly fits my inquiries about the interplay, i.e. the correspondences, between skateboarding and hardcore punk (17). Chivers Yochim mirrors Gelder’s preceding explanation that “[s]ubcultures and society may be oppositional in many respects but they are also bound together,” i.e. corresponding (Gelder 7). She summarizes this flexible connection by emphasizing the permanent ‘correspondence’ that combines subculture and mainstream in a dynamic and interactive relationship. In ac-
cordance with Chivers Yochim and for the purpose of this book, I read subcultures, and particularly skate punk, as corresponding cultures that cannot be categorized in simple dichotomous entities. After the contextual remarks in chapter 1, chapter 2 elaborates on the extent to which the correspondence with a variety of media, e.g. TV series or popular movies, is crucial for an understanding of skate punk productions. chapter 3 points beyond the discursive realm and includes ‘correspondences’ to the material and corporeal field of bodily movement. All chapters include considerations of the different levels at which skateboarding, punk, and skate punk are subordinated and subversive in the environment of California, where they have developed as widely corresponding subcultures.