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Notes on the Representation of Young Male Skateboarders as Sexualized Subjects in Internet Imagery

Abstract

The emergence of skateboarding as a widely influential physical and aesthetic paradigm is a contemporary phenomenon. This paper will focus on visual imagery of young male skateboarders in selected examples of internet imagery, specifically within the discourse of male homosexual desire. The paper will propose that within this context, the figuring of the young male skateboarder as a desired subject is symptomatic of a combination of his performative actions as a spatial interrogator, and the symbolic associations ascribed to particular clothing codes such as baggy pants, visible underwear, socks and sneakers.

Critical to this analysis is an investigation of the classification systems of identity types within the internet imagery under discussion. The identity type of the young male is further abstracted by groupings based upon singularised elements of clothing which carry their own specific fetish-oriented symbolism.

This study forms part of broader research analysing coded representations of male identity in contemporary art and related visual culture.

Biography

Chris Chapman is currently a PhD Candidate in the Art History, Curatorship and Film Studies Graduate Program, School of Humanities, at the Australian National University, Canberra. He writes regularly on contemporary art and culture for catalogues and journals in Australia and overseas including *Art and Australia*, *Art Monthly Australia*, *Broadsheet* and *Eyeline*. Recently he has written catalogue essays for exhibitions at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney; City Gallery, Wellington, New Zealand; Casino Luxembourg Forum d'art contemporain, Luxembourg; and *Austellungen bei Horst Schuler*, Dusseldorf, Germany.

Chris has worked as a curator at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra; the Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide; and was Director of the Experimental Art Foundation, Adelaide 1998-2001. He has developed multi-level, independent, and collaborative artistic projects in Australia and New Zealand.

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Introduction

This paper forms a part of a broader study analysing coded representations of male identity in contemporary art and related visual imagery, to be submitted in the form of a Doctoral thesis at the Australian National University. The scope of the research considers tropes of representation of young males in relation to aspects of identity formation. It identifies and analyses particular identity types, as they are represented in pertinent examples of contemporary art, and in related imagery, discussing this representation in relation to broader social studies of male identity formation and subjectivity.

This paper is primarily concerned with visual images of young adult males, classified according to the identity type of the urban skateboarder. It analyses the figuring of the young male skateboarder as a desirable subject, within the context of non-pornographic websites catering to the gay male consumer. The paper proposes that within this context, the figuring of the young male skateboarder as a desired subject is symptomatic of a combination of his performative actions as a spatial interrogator, and the symbolic associations ascribed to particular clothing codes such as baggy pants, visible underwear, socks and sneakers.

The young male skater as a spatial interrogator

The origin of skateboarding as a practice has been well documented by skaters and commentators as historically relating directly to the activity of surfing in California. The formation of skateboarding as a sport runs from the 1950s culminating with the development of freestyle skating in the 1970s.¹ Among the most influential and highly-documented histories of skateboarding culture is that of the Zephyr Team of surfers of Dogtown, California.

In his paper on the history of skateboard shoes, Cameron Kippen neatly sketches the move from surfing to skating:

Accordingly the surfers of Southside Santa Monica could only surf in the morning waves and were on the lookout for something else to do. A steep incline provided potential and the Z-boys were soon perfecting their surfing styles on asphalt. Influenced especially by Hawaiian surfer Larry Burtleman, the kids developed the lexicon of skateboarding. When in the mid-seventies California suffered its greatest drought, dried out swimming pools all over L.A. became the new place to Vert... (the act of skating up or down a vertical surface.)²

While skateboarding originated in the 1950s in the USA as a sport within which a circumscribed degree of styles could be practiced, its contemporary freestyle forms developed from the creative attitude exemplified by the Z-boys and their use of unconventional terrains, such as empty swimming pools, which, in turn, lead to the development of particular freestyle moves. As skateboard cultural theorist and historian Iain Borden notes, in relation to skaters' use of empty swimming pools, 'Skaters carved up the walls, explored the limits of the tile and coping, and even the space beyond the wall with 'aerial' moves...'³

Along with Becky Beal of the University of the Pacific in Stockton, California, Borden has clearly articulated the social and creative significance of skateboarding. Borden's 1998 paper for the Nottingham University 3Cities Project is subtitled 'A Performative Critique of the American City: the Urban Practice of Skateboarding', and his recently published book *Skateboarding, Space and the City: Architecture, the Body and Performative Critique* expands upon this thesis. Beal's influential paper, published in the *Sociology of Sport Journal* in 1995 is titled 'Disqualifying the Official: An Exploration of Social Resistance Through the Subculture of Skateboarding.'

Both writers establish the significance of skating as an interrogative activity. For Borden this relates to spatial interrogation. He writes: 'When skateboarders ride along a wall, over a fire hydrant or up a building, they are entirely indifferent to its function or ideological content. ...Skateboarding reproduces architecture in its own measure, re-editing it as a series of surfaces, textures and micro-objects.'⁴

Beal's formulation of social resistance is based upon the cultural attributes of skateboarding: that its culture is heterogeneous; that it resists traditionally competitive structures; that it is 'not bound by rules; rather it tested the physical limits and imagination of the participants'.⁵ Likewise, Borden stresses the aesthetic nature of skateboarding.

Skater clothing as an active signifier

While Beal stresses the heterogeneous nature of the culture of skateboarding, a certain set of clothing items have come to signify the look of the skater. Skateboarding is an exemplification of contemporary youth culture, and the clothing worn by skaters is directly related to the establishment of self-identity. The basic dress code of skating includes loose clothing, particularly baggy pants, and particular accessories such as the baseball cap, neckwear, and particular types of footwear. Cameron Kippen has noted that the default uniform of the Zephyr team was 'cotton Ts, Levi jeans and dark blue vans (rubber-soled shoes)'.⁷ The term vans refers to a particularly basic type of skate shoe: 'cheap, flat soled, gummy rubber, black canvas topped shoes',⁸ which provided the appropriate degree of traction, impact-absorption and flexibility. Skaters' clothing styles developed from that of surfers, whose loose clothing reflected their casual and laid-back lifestyle.⁹ However, the particular fashion of wearing low-slung baggy pants, often revealing one's underwear, is a style associated with skateboarding. Originating as fashion in the 1920s, baggy pants have been associated with Black American culture. As Ruth Rubinstein writes in her analysis of American clothing: 'In the early 1990s hip-hop style consisted of a baseball cap sometimes turned backwards, pants five sizes too big, and a swagger that violated the middle class's norm of self-restraint'.¹⁰ While there is little documented research on the genealogy of this type of clothing, an article included on a dance music website neatly defines the symbolism of baggy pants: 'As a style, baggy and loose fitting clothing have always been associated with the derelicts and bohemians of society. ... (The baggy look) can be seen as a form of symbolic protest, a means of subverting dominant culture through fashion and clothing'.¹¹ In his book *Fashion as Communication*, Malcolm Barnard proposes a directly resistant symbolism:

The fashion for oversized and baggy trousers which displayed the waistband of one's underwear ...originated in jails: belts were removed from inmates ...with the result that the prisoner's trousers were worn low and that they sagged, thus revealing the underwear.¹²

The skater as an identity type in non-pornographic internet imagery

Among the vast number and variety of erotic websites on the internet are particular categories that primarily consist of groups of images classified according to the type of imagery they depict. These are often non-commercial, personal sites, whose creators have collected images from various sources and re-presented them according to particular themes. Within the groups of websites for consumption by gay men, sets of images can easily be found that classify photographs of young men according to generic types based on physical attributes such as hair colour, or cultural types, such as the college student, the punk, the skinhead, the sportsman and the skater. Many of the images presented on these sites are taken from a broad range of non-pornographic sources, and recontextualised within their website categorisation. Without examining the ethics of the re-use of these images, in most cases they are claimed to be taken from the public domain, and in any case, they have often been presented in so many different contexts, often simultaneously, as to make their traceability impossible.

As a subset of desirable subjects, the skater is presented as a particular type, and is identified by both the activity of skating, and by the particular clothing attributes described above. Therefore, an image of a young man classified as a skater need not be actually skating, or holding a skateboard, but simply wearing the appropriate clothing. In most cases the skateboarder is depicted as a teenage youth.

What makes these images sexy? Performativism and revelation

There must be more to the desirability of the skater as presented on these websites than their youth. The attitude of the skater (that of a cultural outsider and spatial interrogator) is also, I suggest, an erotic trigger, in much the same way as the masculinity associated with skinheads, or sportsmen is a libidinal cue depending upon the viewer's taste. For this reason, the images of skaters actually skating are as important as images of skater types. But since these images are non-sexual, what makes them erotic? One answer can be found in the fact that the young men depicted are at an age of sexual awakening, a state that the viewer can self-project upon. In his article 'Picturing the Homoerotic', Allen Ellenzweig offers an analysis of the photograph *Teenage Runners*, 1976, by Arthur Tress. Ellenzweig writes:

...the camera has closed in on the two boys, yielding a composition that seems (more) documentary in effect. One boy peels a band-aid off the other's thigh. It is a moment of odd intimacy between youths; at that age, boys are eager to prove and maintain their manhood by denying their gentler selves. However the utopian ideal of teenage homoerotic encounter is strengthened by an iconographic element: the boy on the right's gym shirt is emblazoned with the word XAVIER referring to a Catholic boy's school in New York City. We only have to look at the slender pair of naked limbs in Tress's picture to clue into the potential for ardent teenage sexual excitement.¹³

In Ellenzweig's analysis, the fantasy of intimacy is attached to the signifier of clothing. However, the majority of images of skaters represented on the websites under discussion are depicted solo. In place of imagined intimacy, is the possibility of revelation, which is why the particular clothing of skaters is significant. The baggy pants and visible underwear already reveal the edges of the pubic area, or expose the top of the backside, activating a kind of unwitting exhibitionism on the skater's part. As opposed to a choreographed strip, or complete nudity, the candid and unselfconscious body display is what may establish an erotic charge.

The fetishised article of clothing

In addition to the eroticism of revelation, the skater's clothing activates particular degrees of abstraction through the mechanisms of fetishism. Significantly, in the case of the representation of skaters, singular items of clothing are not erotic because of their contact with genital areas (such as underwear), but connected to concepts of performativism. Entire websites are devoted to documentation of sneakers worn by skaters, classified according to respected skatewear brands. While the focus on shoes may involve an olfactory erotic trigger, it appears, in the context of the websites under discussion, as related to performative activities attendant with sadistic and masochistic game play, where the actions associated with skating are transferred into a sexual scenario.

Conclusion

The scope of this paper has only allowed an introductory analysis of each of the above issues. It points to a code of identification and eroticism based upon particular cultural and performative signifiers, in this case in relation to the young male skateboarder. Further, it suggests additional degrees of abstraction of identity and eroticism through fetishisation of particular articles of clothing. As a basis for further research, this paper establishes an analysis of young male identity where symbolic and coded representations are key to a deeper understanding of identity representation and formation.

¹ Borden, Iain. (1998) 'A Performative Critique of the American City: the Urban Practice of Skateboarding, 1958-1998', The 3Cities Project, Nottingham, United Kingdom.

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/borden.htm>

² Kippen, Cameron. (2002) 'The History of Skateboard Shoes', Perth, Western Australia: Curtin University of Technology. <http://www.podiatry.curtin.edu.au/thrasher/html>

³ Borden, Iain. (1998) 'A Performative Critique of the American City: the Urban Practice of Skateboarding, 1958-1998', The 3Cities Project, Nottingham, United Kingdom.

<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/3cities/borden.htm>

⁴ Borden, Iain. (1998) 'A Performative Critique of the American City: the Urban Practice of Skateboarding, 1958-1998', The 3Cities Project, Nottingham, United Kingdom.

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⁵ Beal, Becky. (1995) 'Disqualifying the Official: An Exploration of Social Resistance Through the Culture of Skateboarding', *Sociology of Sport Journal*, Number 12, p 263.

⁶ Woolley, Helen. and Johns, Ralph. (2001) 'Skateboarding: The City as a Playground', *Journal of Urban Design*, Volume 6, Number 2, p 212..

⁷ Kippen, Cameron. (2002) 'The History of Skateboard Shoes', Perth, Western Australia: Curtin University of Technology. <http://www.podiatry.curtin.edu.au/thrasher/html>

⁸ Kippen, Cameron. (2002) 'The History of Skateboard Shoes', Perth, Western Australia: Curtin University of Technology. <http://www.podiatry.curtin.edu.au/thrasher/html>

⁹ Polhemus, Ted. (1994) *Street Style: from sidewalk to catwalk*, London: Thames and Hudson, p 48.

¹⁰ Rubinstein, Ruth. (2001, 2nd Ed.) *Dress Codes: Meanings and Messages in American Culture*, Oxford: Westview Press, p 274.

¹¹ Junebug. (Undated, accessed 2003.) 'Small History of Baggy Pants',

http://www.groovetickets.com/bz_art.asp?DID=3

¹² Barnard, Malcolm. (2002, 2nd Ed.) *Fashion as Communication*, London and New York: Routledge, p 140.

¹³ . Ellenzweig, Allen. (1990) 'Gay Images in Photography: Picturing the Homoerotic', *Out/Look*, Number 7. Reprinted in Dynes, Wayne. and Donaldson, Stephen. (Eds) (1992) *Homosexuality and Homosexuals in the Arts*, New York: Garland Publishing, p 72.

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