

'Don't Push Me Around': An Enquiry into the Origins, Function and Continuing Impact of Illustrated Graphics within 1980's Skateboard Culture

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Abstract. This paper will expand on insights unearthed during a practice-led PhD recently undertaken by the author at University of the Arts, London. The research project is investigating illustrated skateboard deck artwork in order to identify the distinct visual aura the skateboarder conjures within popular culture. Skateboard deck artwork is a kind of illustrated vernacular, principally developed in California during the 1970s and 1980s, to market skateboard products. The imagery is distinguished by thematic concerns aimed at young adult skateboarders. A practice-led investigation will reveal the origins and function of this persistent illustrated language. This approach will rely upon the author's prior experience as a professional illustrator and arts educator to illuminate the significance of visual aesthetics, thereby offering a new lens to survey skateboard's resilient visual culture.

Keywords: Skateboard, Illustration, Risk, Printmaking, California, Gothic, 1980s.

1 Introduction

This paper will begin to address and expand upon the key objectives of a PhD research project recently undertaken by the author. It will employ a practice-led approach which - via a formative process of play, reassembly, and hybridisation - will seek to address the relationship between skateboard deck art and the experience of skating itself. The outcomes intend to engage skateboarding communities and contribute to current popular interest in the practice exemplified by an inclusion in the Olympic Games, a 2023 Smithsonian Museum historical monograph, and a major Design Museum exhibition in London, autumn 2023. This approach builds upon an absorption and fascination with the visual aspects of skateboard culture - a topic the author was first permitted to introduce in Guimarães 2017 - and a passion best summarised by Kyle Beachy at *Pushing Boarders 2019* thusly - "This is what the skate industry did to me: it shaped my dreams, was the algorithm of my desires, and was just *profoundly* instrumental in the way I conceptualize my identity" [1].

An emerging academic community has focused on the skateboarding via an ethnographic and philosophical lens (Borden, 2019. O'Connor, 2019. Beachy, 2021, et al.) but has yet to fully address the distinct visual appeal of the pursuit. That is, how the skateboard deck uniquely integrates illustration with movement and risk. It is a graphic site which implies action and is idealistically designed to be viewed in motion. The research contribution focuses on the relationship between the inherent risk associated

with the practice and how these sensations are conveyed within images that embellish these objects.

This project was brought about by asking the question where else - in what sport or pastime - does this happen, where the function of an image seems so integral to the act itself? Borden (2019) states “from its earliest days imagery has been central to skateboarding and that skaters wanted to be noticed, but not understood” [2]. O’Connor (2019) expands from this position arguing that “religion is an important part of how skateboarding can be understood, whereby pious true believers display their ‘insider’ knowledge to form social distinction” [3].



Fig. 1. Powell Peralta *Ripper* skateboard deck. Artwork by Vernon Courtlandt Johnson (1983). Skate One Corp.



Fig. 2. Ripper Tattoo for R. Figueira, by Eduardo Rossoni in Curitiba, Brazil, 2022. Image available at <https://twitter.com/powellperalta/status/1524042878892212224?lang=fr>

The veneration of totemic imagery is evident throughout skateboard culture and identifiable across a wide range of customised products, fashion apparel, and subcultural forms. The reverence such codified images still hold over skateboard devotees is discernible upon examination of the *Ripper* (1983) skateboard deck graphic (Fig. 1).and its contemporary reinterpretation as a tattoo design (Fig. 2). This comparison points to how skateboard images of this period are frequently appropriated, indicating that such cherished motifs still retain their cache - and remain resilient - within international skateboard fraternities.

2 Historical context

The essence of skateboarding is an urge for speed and a desire to manipulate the board and the body in a release of energy that combines skill with voluntarily induced danger. Jocko Weyland, 2002. [4].

Weyland's summary of the act of skateboarding evokes the thrilling sensation the practice affords its participants. This acceptance of danger - or as Weyland goes on to suggest "death wish" [5] - informed much of 1980s skateboard culture and was eagerly projected via products, advertising, and combative territorial publications, such as Thrasher magazine. Since this particularly formative underground period, skateboarding has flourished and been cautiously adopted within mainstream society. However, online investigations still expose the psychological command 1980s graphics possess within skateboard culture. This PhD project aims to firstly address how this rebellious aura came about brought about and what prior existing cultural forces established this persistent phenomenon. Gordon and Rogers (2022)

point to a particular historical technical development towards the end of the 1970s that instigated the practice –

As skaters increasingly turned to riding Pools or bowls, skate decks and trucks crew wider to provide increased ability for speed and for grinding along the coping. . .Initially an unseen space to place the manufacturers logo, the undersides of decks became increasingly visible as skateboard magazines featured shots of skaters riding out of the pool or bowl. Betsy Gordon and Jane Rogers, 2022. [6]

Gordon and Rogers’ observation is critical in how any genealogy of deck graphics can be understood, i.e., it was the functional demands of the skateboarders themselves that gave rise to this distinctive graphic site. In order to establish the conditions that gave rise to the emergence of skateboard graphics, tools of inquiry have been sought out to reveal motivations and rationale. Bestley and McNeil (2022) [7] point to Michael Baxendale’s *Patterns of Intention* (1985) as a methodological apparatus from which a historian of design can un-pick the machinations that bring a specific designed object into being. This project intends to employ such a schema to address the intersection of opportunities and broader cultural environment from which 1980s skateboarding emerged, inhabits, and still borrows from.

The core thesis of this project will affirm that skateboard graphics sit within a much broader history of American technological and cultural dominance in the twentieth century, and that skateboarding’s perceived rebellious roots align with many other highly visual, salacious practices targeted towards the teenage imagination and emerging in the same geographic location, i.e., hotrod customisation, psychedelic graphic design, pulp comics, and B movies. These parallel practices frequently overlapped and informed each other and were instigated by the frenzied ubiquity of U.S. popular culture during that century. As Kyle Beachy (2021) describes thusly “I’m content thinking of skateboarding as a prize America awarded itself after World War II” [8]. It was the hordes of imagistic consumer goods and fads - post WW2 and beyond - that brought forth new markets intent on thrills and excitement for a young generation striving to distinguish itself and asset a new identity in opposition to its polite suburban origins.

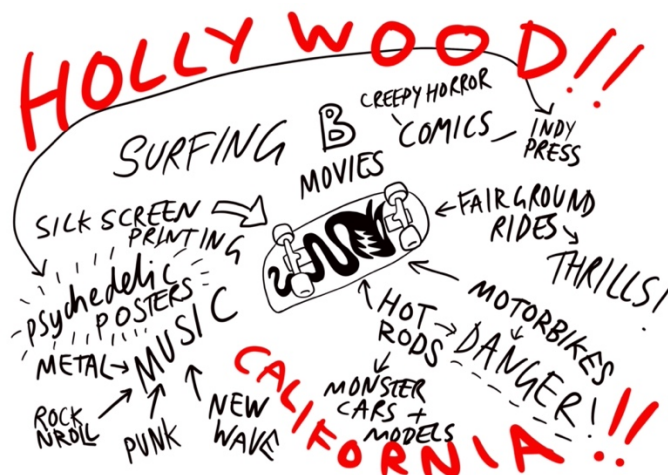


Fig. 3. Speculative diagram (by the author) of the cultural forces that informed skateboard vernacular during the 1980s

Critical to the success of this project will be an engagement and dialogue with the intersecting subcultural visual forms loosely alluded to in figure 3. This will help establish a range of insights and positions in relation to the wider contextual history of graphic symbols and styles associated with adrenaline, speed, danger, pop culture, subversion, and movies.

3 Visual analysis

Skateboard artworks are emblems that define customs and codes of practice; as O'Connor (2019) attests “skateboards are lifestyle paraphernalia communicating aesthetics, and orientations of style and identity” [9]. As commercially manufactured toys they disseminate motifs and postures informed by the music, fashion and politics that appeal to discerning image-conscious skateboarders. This project will be underpinned by comparative analytical procedures to deconstruct, identify difference, and explain the function of this image culture. This goal will be firstly achieved by the surveillance and coding of historical archive material from which to compose typologies to better inspect and understand this unique, resilient graphic language.

Because of the absence of previous scholarly work in this field the research will entail a pragmatic approach based on empirical knowledge mostly gathered from internet archives and private collections. With the exception of Sean Cliver's (2004) exhaustive and indispensable visual survey - *Disposable: A History of Skateboard Art* [10] - which gathers together high-resolution photographs and candid anecdotes to narrate the arc of deck graphics' evolution, most of the work ahead will involve interviewing skateboard collectors and connoisseurs to access specialist knowledge (details, value, variations etc.) as they can provide a critical viewpoint and position in relation to the objects of study and offer insight into how their curios relate to the wider history of skateboarding.

Due to great feelings of nostalgia and *liebhaberwert* (*Lover's value*) being placed upon skateboards of this era by generational formations that first consumed them, large archival ecologies inhabit social media channels and online depositories. Indeed, the seemingly ephemeral, toylike nature and value of skateboard decks has been surpassed by a monetary value aligned to their subcultural significance as indicators of taste. These collections stimulate much debate as to the origins and peculiarities of skateboard visual history, with ardent enthusiasts and aficionados using these platforms to argue and eulogise over particular models. Online posts frequently employ high-resolution photographic depictions which offer multiple viewpoints and reveal details of the specific skateboard artwork. Utilising this passionate reverence for skateboard designs of the 1980s the initial work will entail raking over these archives to discern points of difference and affinity across the multitude of designs produced during this moment in history.

This material will be arranged according to the particular symbolic connotations or physical properties of the object in question; examples of which could include the skateboard's emblem (be it abstract or representational), popular cultural points of reference, deck shape, year of manufacture etc. By employing images in this resolutely

formulaic and codified manner the project will embrace Rose's (2015) definition of a visual methodology "less concerned with the essence of the photograph or the provenance of the image but one much more driven with using images as tools" [11]. The resulting typologies can then be interrogated with X-ray methods (Bestley and McNeil, 2022) [12] to notice familiarities and distinguish stylistic reverberations across the material. This systematic approach will expose the thematic conceits that govern deck art of this period, providing patterns which can then be disentangled and reconstructed by way of practical deliberation.

Initial classification work has already showcased the multitude of distinctive facets that exemplify deck art of this era. Taxonomies currently include skulls, rats, dragons, zombies, hypnotic patterns, and many other themes which can all be aligned with conceptions of Gothic formulated by Dr. Gilda Williams in a lecture at Goldsmiths, University, London in 2009 [13]. Williams's lecture accounts for a host of literary definitions, many of which are reflected in the patterns and symbols found under the skateboards of the 1980's. So, Williams' categorisation will be employed as a coding schema with which to distinguish particular visual themes that govern skateboard artwork of the period; exemplifying the celebratory carnivale aspects, and manifestation of fun and play, that constitutes the tropes within this practice.

4 Skateboard accidents

The immediacy - let's say musicality - of skateboarding offers up a metaphysical means of approach to take forward within this project's practice-led speculations. The improvisational aspect of the activity - that relies on the imaginative repurposing of physical surroundings - has been compared to jazz (Alba, 2021 [14]; Beachy, 2021 [15]), a freeform mode of musical expression reliant on unpredictable patterns, and sometimes risk. Through this lens we can interpret the inevitable skateboard accident as an accepted aspect of the practice, an occurrence which is also fundamentally integral to creative combustion.

The accident is a catalyst for cultural artefacts of various forms, and it is within the indulgent spaces of exploration and experimentation that new insights can be recognised and enlisted as creative tools. Kessels (2016) asserts that "nothing will limit creativity more than sticking to what is appropriate or usual" [16]. This pronouncement not only reflects effective creative advice but also aligns with the reckless nature of skateboarding. So, the work will therefore undertake an experimental, non-linear approach reliant on intuition, an expectance of accidents, and a willingness to adapt.

By placing emphasis on a creative journey rather than pre-defined solutions or targets, the proposed plan of action will employ a multiplicity of directions from which to address the visual vernacular of skateboarding of this period. The playfully diverse strategies set out below will, "as the work unfolds, unearth propositions and potential visual solutions to as-yet undefined questions" (Bestley and McNeil, 2021) [17]. This experiment-led, malleable pattern of research will allow for the evolution of multiple concepts which - as the work continues - be perpetually evaluated and judged as to their clarity - or equally - awryness.

Speaking at the *Pushing Boarders Malmö* conference, Camille Ayme (2019) [18] elucidated upon the material - often painful - feedback between the skateboarder and the surfaces

that surround them; the continuous motion of the act presenting a montage of textures for the practitioner to contend with. Ayme depicts these patterns of the city being literally carried on the skateboarder's body, as scars and abrasions. In this same way the work ahead will include the breakdown, disintegration and reconstitution of the visual rhetoric associated with 1980s decks; that by dissecting images, then directing these components through a variety of unstable graphic processes, the practice of skateboarding can be replicated visually.

The author foresees that printmaking processes could provide a creative apparatus to replicate the risk associated with skateboarding. As a variety of mechanisms translate an original artwork in readiness for duplication, opportunities to enhance - or interfere - with this procedure are brought to light. So, the scope printmaking's mechanical duties afford the mischievous printmaker will offer many opportunities to reveal unforeseen, yet conspicuously intriguing design solutions. This research work will require procedural engagement with this (contestably) redundant technology and perhaps intentional misalignment of graphic components to - in some way- capture the twisted forms and causality riding a skateboard entails; in this way the blurring, distortions, and abrasion left by the city upon the practitioner and their deck can be adapted and reconstituted within the practice-led research.

Another aspect of printmaking processes which parallels skateboarding - and builds upon Ayme's (2019) [18] assertions around the physical marks left on the body and environment - is the emphasis these antique, industrial processes place on the tactile surface. The research will examine how the layered planes of an object can be torn, or ground, and how these interactions distort visual components applied to paper, wood, and a variety of contrasting surfaces. Disfigured images can also ignite curiosity, their ambiguously obscure formations posing questions to the audience (Fig. 4).

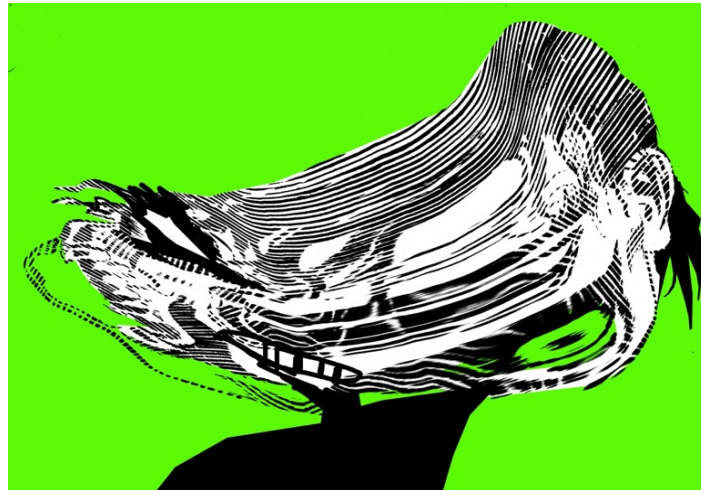


Fig. 4. Speculative print (by the author) employing improvised distortion (or smear) technique made with xerographic office equipment

Photo-mechanical reproduction mechanisms that modulate the tonalities of the printed images are of particular interest to this project. Half tone, wavy-line screen, and 'saw teeth'

hatching are all systems used to transcribe three-dimensional properties across a two-dimensional surface. They have been ubiquitous within a range of heritage cultural forms including comics, posters, tattoos, and because of these associations possess strong semiotic value which speaks of a functional, unpretentious, and pre-algorithmic authenticity. These treatments also can be accentuated and exaggerated to denote a nostalgic reverence for these redundant techniques. Pushed-out beyond their intended scale such images decompose, exposing abstract patterns and moiré forms that recall #3 *Demonic labour-intensive, obsessive and overwrought ('psychedelic') drawings* as defined within Williams' (2009) Gothic definitions [13]. These seemingly hypnotic qualities are highly pertinent to 1980s skateboard artwork that frequently employed similarly hallucinatory arrangements of shapes - possibly to conjure the modulating and sensory experience of riding a skateboard? - intentionally twisting and distorting the deck's surface in ways reminiscent of the weird architectural imagination of Giovanni Piranesi or M.C. Escher's tessellating puzzles.

The author also contends that many of these analogue, process-driven graphic strategies can also be philosophically aligned to understandings of the strange and the weird, notions that were frequently assigned to skateboarders of this period in question. Mark Fisher (2015) describes the weird as "a sensation of wrongness" [19], a remark which has parallels with the askew conceptions of spatial etiquette skateboarders enact within their shared urban environment. Ian Borden (2019), recounting the work of Henri Lefebvre, points towards the unusual manner skateboarders envisage architectural form thusly - "where capitalism sub-divides land into a homogeneous commodity...skaters create their own spaces in cities worldwide" [20]. So, it comes as no surprise that skateboarders sought out deck graphics that expounded strange, seemingly confrontational graphics that pronounced weirdness. By utilising and foregrounding the implicit errors print processes can through up - such as mis-registration, technological glitch, moiré pattern etc - practiced pursuits could allude to Fisher et al.'s definitions.

5 Research direction

The protrusion of gothic characterisations as defined by Williams (2009) [13] will provide a sympathetic template to playfully examine the monstrous manifestations that constitute much deck artwork of this period. This research intends to draw upon many iterations of the gothic, while also being aware of the contradiction such tropes expound, i.e., the carnivalesque, kitsch assemblages of skulls and zombies which adorn skateboards of the 1980's in no way evoke real terror or suspense. Their original function was to appeal to teenage markets intent on affectation and bravado, pronouncing the skateboarder's embrace of danger in the pursuit of thrills. The preeminent skateboard Illustrator Jim Phillips (1997) recites "when a skateboarder falls it's on asphalt and it can be life-threatening. It's a gnarly sport and the art has to reflect that" [21].



Fig. 5. Gilbert Chadwick Junior's Ghost Train Loughborough Fair evening view. National Fairground Archive, University of Sheffield Library. Reproduced with permission of the University of Sheffield. Image available at <https://cdm15847.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p15847coll3/id/78406/rec/2>

This same emphasis on fun and vulgarity is also present in thrilling, stomach-wrenching scream machines that proliferate fairgrounds and amusement arcades (Fig. 5), and it is the reassembly and appropriation of these ubiquitous, frivolous forms - and their joyous absorption within skateboard culture - which continues to motivate this direction of this practice-led research. Gothic and horror archetypes have always been commodified within movies, comics, toys, trinkets; they are even physically manifest in entertainment parks and theatres. These associations with pleasure and spectacle also align with how skateboarding presents itself and skateboard publicity is displayed.



Fig. 6. *Phantasmagorie de Robertson*, Engraving, 1831. Image available at <https://archive.org/details/mmoiresrcratifss01robe/page/n7/mode/1up>

Phantasmagoric light shows, such as those performed by Étienne-Gaspard Robert in Paris at the turn of the nineteenth century (Fig. 6), could also suggest oblique, less orthodox means with which to address the visual culture of skateboarding. The research project will postulate that these archaic projected entertainments have parallels with how skateboarding is still pictorially represented, particularly the skateboard manoeuvres of the 1980's that intentionally foregrounded the deck graphics within photographic iterations (Fig. 7). Just as the skateboard practitioner bursts from a surface exposing the underside of the skateboard and revealing their ghoul insignia, so similarly Robert's beguiling Phantasmagorical amusements improbably defied rational science to the delight of an astonished audience.



Fig. 7. Tony Hawk, Witt's Carlsbad Pipeline Demo, CA. Artist: J. Grant Brittain (1985)

This research project is motivated by personal experience and despite being geographically distant from California the author has been ideologically moulded by the cultural legacy of these objects. The mesmeric feats of professionals such as Tony Hawk (fig. 7) in the magazines of the period - combined with the abundance of skateboard designs in shops and magazines of the period - provided an aesthetically stimulating education in opposition to formal art scholarship. By examining and discriminating between these artefacts new taste structures could arise to challenge received narratives about skateboard culture. In this way the research intends to contribute to popular interest in the practice of skateboarding and also broaden the scope of current academic research in the field of Illustration studies.

Professional skateboarder Neil Blender famously quipped - "its 1990 boys, let's get rid of the skeletons" [22] and yet despite frequent parody and dismissal, the persistence of gothic tropes on skateboard deck art is still evident after any search engine trawl. The gothic theatricality that still populates the graphic culture of skateboarding is also present in many cultural forms that celebrate vulgarity and expound that deep-rooted, fundamental aspect of the human condition that craves chaos and subversion - fun.

6 Conclusions

This project intends to utilise the author's illustrative skills to reflect and draw attention to this momentous juncture in skateboarding history; in that by employing a practice-led graphic response the research work can better engage an audience and even challenge preconceptions as to the importance and value of skateboarding's rich cultural legacy. To conclude, this paper offers initial points of departure via strategic and practical means to progress this intention. The next steps will focus on the clarification and testing of a thorough methodology to ensure that the relationship between skateboard deck art and the experience of skateboarding is in some way illuminated and expanded through visual outcomes. With a theoretical framework in place the author can then - via an interpretive process of engagement with this archival, historic material (deck art) – begin to unpick themes that align with the two most prominent practical suppositions raised within this paper.

Firstly, the author foresees that the risk associated with the experience of skateboarding can be articulated through emulation of planned graphic mistakes. This will entail print-based speculations that distort or warp their constituent details disguising and reimagining how deck art imagery is experienced by an audience, and distressed – on metal or concrete - by the skateboarder.

Secondly, that the performative aspect of the activity can be evoked via the display of projected entities within a skatepark environment. Animated – potentially interactive - illustrated characters that will conjure a historical embrace of the macabre and also reassert the theatrical nature of skateboarding itself. The intention being such playful deliberations will engage with the deck art phenomenon in a way analogous to critical writing; that the meditative thinking process enacted within the practice will propel this research journey and form the main arena of action as the project evolves.

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