

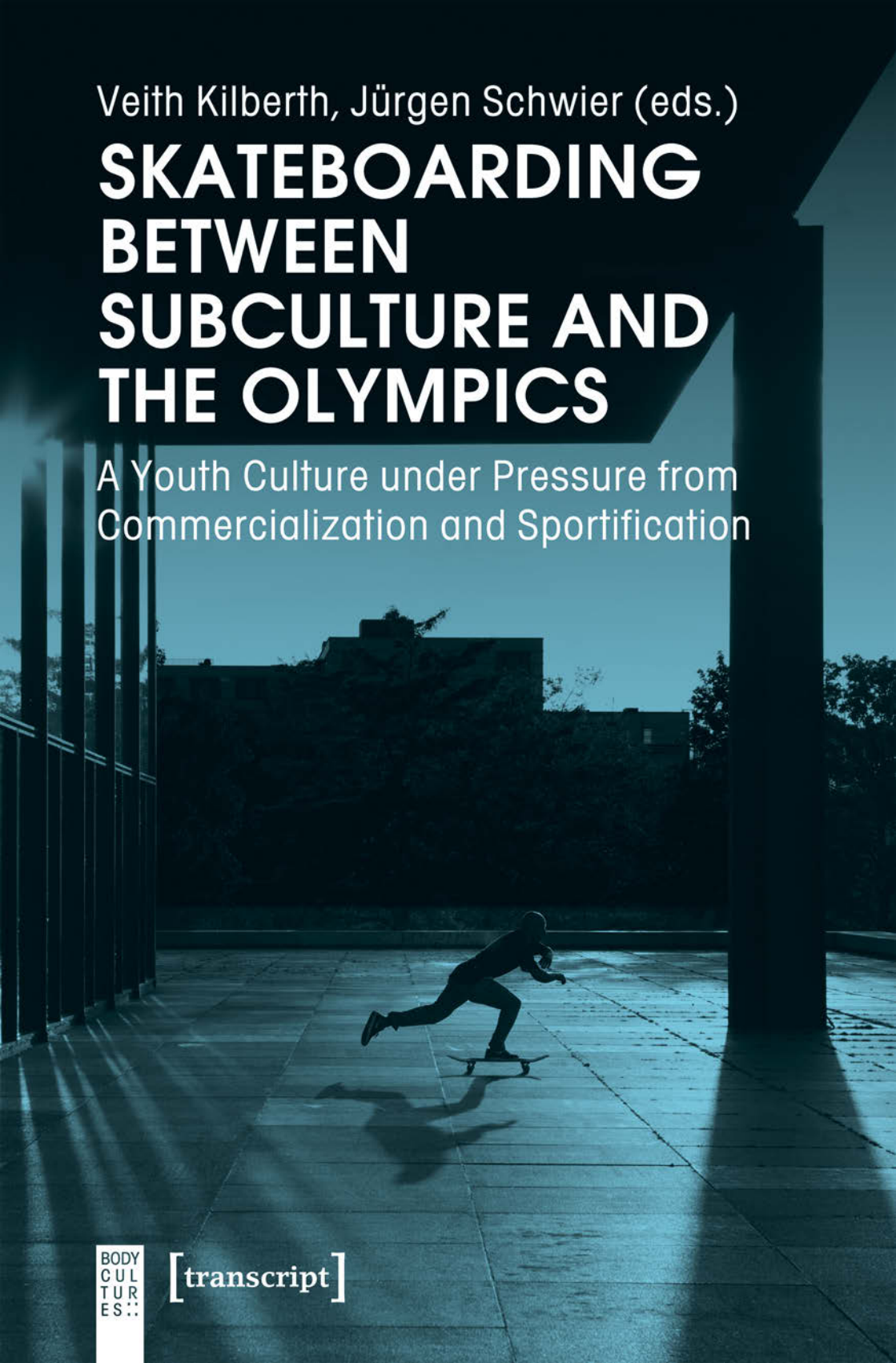
Veith Kilberth, Jürgen Schwier (eds.)

SKATEBOARDING BETWEEN SUBCULTURE AND THE OLYMPICS

A Youth Culture under Pressure from
Commercialization and Sportification

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Skateboarding Between Subculture and the Olympics

Veith Kilberth, born 1976, blends his Sports Sciences diploma from the University of Cologne with experience as a former professional skateboarder. Currently a doctoral candidate at the Europa University Flensburg, he plans and realizes skate park projects as a partner in agency Landskate. He specializes in the fields of youth marketing, trend sports, skateboarding and skateparks.

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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.¹ 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.curfboard.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 ‘coolonialist’ 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

2 Cf. for example, www.indiegogo.com/projects/carving-space#; www.goerlsrocknroll-skateboarding.com; www.suckmytrucks.de; www.geezerskate.co; www.facebook.com/groups/skatersover50/about/.

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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Skateboarding between Subculture and Olympic Games

Jürgen Schwier

INTRODUCTION

Skateboarding, along with surfing, is one of the first movement activities that, since the 1950s, have produced an unconventional alternative to the standardised world of modern sport and alternative interpretations of moving. From a sports, sociological and economic perspective, both skateboarding and surfing can also be described as long-term niche trends which, in terms of their attractiveness and circulation, now exhibit several wave movements. Beyond these 'ups and downs', the shared creation and awareness of differences in youth and body culture with the system and routines of organised sport stimulate the formation of a particular style. The practice of skateboarding always hangs in the air, so to speak, because it is not set in stone. Rather, it is produced and further developed through action (cf. Schwier, 1998).

When people are asked why they regularly and passionately ride a board with two axles and four wheels, there are certainly a variety of possible answers. Skateboarders of all genders are after the perfect trick and the perfect way to ride, perennially looking for uncommon (bodily) experiences or physical adventures. They seek to experience control where even the slightest control proves impossible. Skateboarders want to present themselves, develop their own style, strive for an intense yet fleeting experience, appreciate the community of like-minded people, and embrace the feeling of freedom. The rationale for skateboarding can therefore be as diverse as the intensity and forms of individual engagement. The scientific knowledge about motives and motivations mentioned above is still as incomplete as the entire state of knowledge about the practice of

skateboarding, whereby in recent years, in German-speaking countries, there has been a significant increase in corresponding publications.¹ However, since the majority of these qualitative studies deal with local street-skate scenes, their findings can only be generalised to a limited extent.

Against this background, this article examines the tension between the commercialisation and ‘sportisation’ of skateboarding on the one hand, and its potential as a creative, recalcitrant and subversive youth culture on the other. To approach this tension field, skateboarding will first be characterised as a youth culture, whilst the ongoing trends towards commercialisation and ‘sportisation’ of this practice will be covered afterwards. Further argumentation then deals with the opportunities and risks connected to the inclusion of skateboarding in the programme of the 2020 Summer Olympics, as well as with the already perceptible counter-movements.

SKATEBOARDING AS A YOUTH CULTURE

Skateboarding is a form of motion, a social practice and a form of cultural expression, whereby interrelations between culture and (motion) practice are shaped differently by different scenes, and in individual development phases. Like other lifestyle sports, skateboarding not only articulates an understanding of sport open to manifold readings, but its sometimes risky forms of body thematisation also stress the reckless character and the subcultural-hedonistic aura of activity. Moments of improvisation and exuberance are as much a part of the game as the immediate joy of moving unaided and an orientation towards personal challenges. Since its early days, skateboarding has been a youth culture with a massive male over-representation. But within the last ten years “female skater crews are also coming onto the scene” (Atencio et al., 2018, p. 14).

Youth cultures in the field of action sports unfold an ensemble of meanings, actions, aesthetics, rituals and strategies that mutually refer to each other, shape a style perceived as authentic by actors, and set the culture apart from other juvenile scenes. In a certain sense, they are thus always and also cultures of expression, which set their own signs with the body, design action spaces, produce a shared stock of knowledge, but at the same time show instances of the unfinished, fluid and changeable (cf. Schwier, 2008, pp. 272-274). The practice of

1 See e.g., Bock, 2017; Butz, 2012; Butz & Peters, 2018; Eichler & Peters, 2012; Peters, 2011, 2016; Schäfer, 2015a, 2015b; Schäfer & Alkemeyer, 2018; Schweer, 2014; Schwier & Kilberth, 2018; Tappe, 2011.

skateboarding thus requires an inescapable ability to move, albeit not only on wheels; as a lifestyle, in fact, it encompasses large parts of actors' everyday life. Everyday practice – similar to surfing – includes both visual signs (from clothing to board brands) and an invisible system of distinctive features and hedonistic values, which is permanently in flux. Therefore, anyone who wants to lead a skateboarder's life must go through a learning process which, according to Peters (2016, p. 172), results in a complete involvement, includes competent handling of scene-typical rituals and clothing, as well as special forms of dealing with pain and injuries.

Would-be skateboarders learn what makes this style special by visiting meeting points and participating in motion practice and scene life. In skateboarding, however, the orientation of scene life (cf. Hitzler & Niederbacher, 2010, p. 16) does not follow a uniform pattern, but unfolds in the everyday practice of local communities, cliques or factions that keep the competition for style going (cf. Schwier & Erhorn, 2015, pp. 180-182). And it can also be in-style to warn against overdoing it among skaters, or to set individual accents. Still, striving to find the most accurate form of embodiment does not seem to be worth the effort; rather, in street or vert skating, the individuality of actors, their independent character and devotion to the cause must remain perceptible. Basically, style questions in the community are also regarded as rather insecure terrain on which you better tread cautiously: you cannot always say exactly what it means to do the right thing in a certain situation (or to refrain from doing it), and you cannot always say why a certain skateboarder embodies the style almost ideally.

Style skills combine motor skills, movement skills, willingness to improvise and take risks with coolness, interaction competence, connoisseurship (music, fashion, scene language, locations, Internet videos, etc.), as well as a demonstration of identity. Irrespective of age, gender and ethnicity, being a skateboarder ultimately involves an attitude that Stern (2010, p. 261) has described as a total commitment to new sports practices, which knows no clear boundaries between sport and everyday life. Against this background, the following explanations – deliberately neglecting other characteristics of the “style culture” (Stern, 2010, 2011) of skateboarding – concentrate on the forms of community and special space appropriation techniques.

Without a doubt, the community and the communicative construction of scene culture play a key role in skateboarding (cf. Bock, 2017, p. 197). Skaters seek the closeness and respect of like-minded people, as well as exchange and stimulation in the scene. In fact, riding solo is only an option if you want to practice a new trick, which you intend to present to the group once properly mastered. At first glance, skateboarding on the street or in a skatepark certainly ap-

appears to be an ‘individualistic sport’, since skaters ride by themselves and acquire new skateboarding techniques and tricks through informal, predominantly self-directed learning processes.

Concurrently, other riders on site constantly observe, reflect and evaluate riding techniques, the tricks and the manifold facets of the mutual style competence. Successful tricks or cool actions without a board are rewarded by attending skateboarders by ‘giving props’. This formulation, borrowed from hip-hop culture, means that one shows ‘proper respect’ to others. Common forms of such respectful expressions are a simple handshake, applause and the ‘high five’ gesture, whereby two people stretch one arm upwards and clap their hands. But it is more than skateboards that we see on roads or in skateparks; conversations unfold and videos are shot, riders move whilst browsing the Internet, or simply chill together.

In informal sports, however, the desire for social integration and community results – as revealed by an ethnographic study by Bindel (2008, pp. 143-161) – among other things in an unconstrained compulsion to negotiate various interests and interpretations of needs, as well as in the gradual development of one’s own social order patterns (such as positions, role expectations or definitions, interaction rituals, behavioural norms). The ongoing work on the communicative framing usually ties in with familiar motion-cultural language and dress codes, requires an ongoing negotiation processes, and implies a “training of equal relationships” (Bindel, 2008, p. 155), the balancing of recognition relationships, as well as a playful handling of status.

Since there are no ‘gate keepers’ at the spots – or at least no ‘gate keepers’ recognisable to novices – interested young people must seek access to the respective skater group on their own initiative, which first requires a precise observation of interactions, language, rituals or clothing and music preferences in this seemingly loose network of skaters (cf. Peters, 2016, p. 189; Schwier, 1998, p. 39; Tappe, 2011, p. 235). Still, the process of deciphering style resources and practicing the skateboard culture can only lead to successful access if riding skills meet certain minimum standards.

The development of youth cultures in the field of alternative, non-traditional sport is also closely linked to the use or reinterpretation of urban and near-natural spaces, whereby – according to Derecik (2015, pp. 15-18) – the meaningful self-motion of young people can be described ideally along five dimensions of appropriation.

Firstly, appropriation as an extension of motor abilities firstly arises from handling certain items (e.g. the skateboard), and refers to accompanying motion learning (e.g. the acting appropriation of a new trick) processes.

Appropriation (2) as an extension of the action space and (3) as a change of situations refer to the linking and temporary re-purposing of (local) spaces (e.g. a car park, a schoolyard or a shopping arcade as a skatespot).

Fourthly, appropriation as the connection of spaces mainly represents the ability to link different geographical and virtual spaces with one another, or to be present simultaneously in different spaces (e.g. the skatepark and a social network or a video platform on the internet).

Finally, appropriation as “spacing” – in the sense of Löw’s relational spatial model (2001, p. 160) – illuminates the physical stagings of skateboarders on inner-city stages chosen by themselves, i.e. the “independent creation of spaces” (Derecik, 2015, p. 17; cf. Borden, 2018, pp. 248-249), as an extended form of appropriation. In this context, self-determined appropriation means the active contention with usage options, as well as readings of urban or virtual spaces, and can equally be an expression of individual freedom. Appropriation thus requires the actors’ proactive action (cf. Deinet & Reutlinger, 2004, pp. 7-9). The creation of space in skateboarding is therefore mostly intentional and follows its own subcultural conventions, which are sometimes inconsistent with intended uses and specifications. Therefore, street skateboarding can be characterised as an urban practice:

“Street skateboarding happens without the spatial and material framings that classic skate-specific spaces such as indoor and outdoor skate parks and street plazas designed for skateboarding provide. Its natural habitat is the street; it takes place in the public space of the city [...]. Street skateboarding thus autonomously occupies its spaces and venues in the public realm and in praxis constitutes them as skate spots.” (Peters, 2018, p. 202; cf. Chiu, 2009; Peters, 2011; Woolley & Johns, 2001)

In the most widespread variant of street skating, actors continuously ‘scan’ inner-city spaces (public squares, transit spaces, sidewalks, shopping streets, parking lots, backyards, city parks) for their ‘skatability’, acquire suitable spaces temporarily, make them suitable through their “staging work” (Löw, 2001, p. 208) into a scene of youth self-empowerment, where local items and structures (railings, curbs, stairs, flower pots) are reinterpreted via resistant action. According to Peters (2016, pp. 140-141), during participation in street skating, there will also be a training of awareness on the nature of hitherto unknown inner-city areas.

On the one hand, the (re-)use of the respective urban spots gives individuals plenty of room to implement creative ideas and express their emotions (cf. Schwier & Erhorn, 2015). On the other hand, it connects street skaters with each

other and largely follows uniform stylistic ideals (cf. Eichler & Peters, 2012, p. 151). Spaces and the meaning creation processes directed at them ultimately play a non-negligible role in the creation of an independent style. The meaning of skateboarding also emerges on the background of the respective spatial structures, and the actors' collective syntheses (processes of perception, imagination and memory), decisively so in the context of repeated physical performances.

“Whether on planned or found spaces, street skateboarding more closely embodies a politics of resistance and social inclusion. Practitioners of this style skate over distinctions between human-made and natural surfaces through spatial tactics of appropriation that transform the city into a playground.” (Vivoni, 2018, p. 125; cf. Löw, 2001, p. 224; Schwier, 2008, pp. 272-273)

In a sense, street skateboarding becomes a perfect example of the rebellious and resistant practices of spatial production as described by De Certeau (1984, pp. 91-110), which counter the concept of the planned city – aimed at extending social control – with clever reinterpretations, subversive appropriation of space, and ‘guerilla tactics’. For actors on skateboards, urban space is a place with which to do something (cf. De Certeau, 1984, pp. 91-110, 1990 pp. 292-295). Last but not least, the do-it-yourself (DIY) skateparks, which have been built in many places by ‘locals’ for some time, are unauthorised and, in the truest sense of the word, irregular. Within certain limits, they can be regarded as a remarkable result of such tactics (cf. e.g. Borden, 2016; Lombard, 2016b; Peters, 2018; Schäfer, 2015b; Stratford, 2002).²

For some time now, beyond the more or less subcultural life in the skateboard scenes outlined here, a commercialisation and ‘sportisation’ of this youth culture, in which at least a part of the skateboarding community actively participates, has been emerging.

2 The philosopher, historian and cultural theorist Michel de Certeau (1984, pp. 30-42, 1990) uses the term tactics in opposition to the term strategy. In contrast to the term strategy – which is linked with corporations, governments and other public or private institutions – he understands tactics as an art of making-do (in the sense of ‘bricolage’) and as a form of creative resistance in daily practices: “In short, a tactic is an art of the weak. [...] Power is bound by its very visibility. In contrast, trickery is possible for the weak, and often it is his only possibility” (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37).