

The Reification of Skateboarding

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Abstract

Being a *constellation* sport, skateboarding is, in present times, at odd with itself because it is engaged in a process of reification. It is being transformed into an *organized* sport characterized by a *single* path and participation in ideology's larger process of rationalization and identification of reality. To become an organized sport, a sport must submit to quantification: skateboarding and skaters are becoming quantifiable commodities. But skateboarding is and always has been a qualitative activity not akin to identification with ideology. Adorno's negative dialectics provides a useful approach for understanding this contradiction as it exists between skateboarding and ideology and for showing how the reification of skateboarding is taking place in particular by means of the institutionalisation of skateparks and contests, all of which will be examined in the following.

Keywords: Skateboarding, reification, Adorno, skateparks, contests

Introduction

Becoming a sport – and in particular an organized sport – has serious philosophical implications. Critical thinking shows that for an activity to become an organized sport, it must abandon its freedom by allowing itself to become logically standardized and administered within the context of the current global ideology.¹ In other words, by means of this reification process, an activity permits outside interests to dictate what is to become of it without its consent, in accordance with an external definition of what this activity is. Some sports are, in their essence, more akin to reification than others because they are more prone to quantification.² But skateboarding is not one of them. Skateboarding, which is currently going through a(nother) reification process – which is not to be understood in terms of the dynamics of social class, since the dynamics of individuality at place here render social class irrelevant (Muggleton, 2000; Dinces, 2011) – is now in the process of losing its meaning.³ It was born from a reified toy (Louison, 2011: 11), to become, after initial resistance on the part of ideology,⁴ an (almost) organized sport, identifiable primarily through ‘freestyle’ skateboarding.⁵ But the closure in the late 1970s and early 80s of skateparks as a response to

¹ “As the Frankfurt School indicates, sport as cultural practice is subsumed by instrumental rationalism, with technical efficiency and result achievement prioritized over subjective immersion in experimental play” (Giulianotti, 2005, 41-2).

² As Hibai Lopez-Gonzales (2014, 248) puts it: “This desire for quantification constitutes an essential part of sport in modernity, and especially since the evolution and maturity of communication and media industries, has become a constant characteristic in the routines of modern citizens.[...] In order for the contemplation of sport to be meaningful to media consumers and spectators, it can no longer be reduced to an ‘observational action’, due to the sheer volume of knowledge that is required to fully enjoy and understand the spectacle.”

³ Other papers have been written addressing this question of reification, or commodification/incorporation, of skateboarding, S. Dinces (2011) and K.-L. Lombard’ (2010) papers being some of the most recent ones. They both insist on the fact that the oppositional or resisting aspect of skateboarding has been taken up by reification and that this oppositional/resisting aspect of skateboarding is what makes skateboarding so popular in mainstream culture. For instance, S. Dinces claims that the skateboarding means of surviving as an alternative activity “are manifestations of a regime of accumulation that incorporates multiple forms of commodification and anti-authoritarian imagery” (1515). But, by approaching skateboarding on than angle, it seems that skateboarding had always been reified and that no true misfit self-affirmation could ever be possible; as if any defiance or strangeness in skateboarding had always been a marketing tool. On the contrary, I wish to insist on the fact that there is a *Dasein* in skateboarding that goes beyond commodification, opposition and resistance, and that this ureified *Dasein* was not always a marketing tool but it is being lost by the reification of this precise unreified meaning. Some pioneer skaters were not resisting to anything, but were pushing the limits of their self and of the environment by creating new possibilities of existence, enlarging skateboarding’s constellation. The words of Rodney Mullen, perhaps the most important skater of all time, are clear on that matter: “But what skater doesn’t feel like an outsider? It’s a collection of people who don’t belong in collections. And in there, there’s a sense of pure respect and camaraderie” (Louison, 2011: 130). Camaraderie of *not* belonging does not imply necessarily becoming a resister and engaging in an affirmative dialectics with ideology.

⁴ “Nineteen sixty five was also the year skateboarding was declared ‘a new medical menace’ by the California Medical Association. Articles about skating from this time really love to use the world *menace*. Pat McGee’s *Life* cover was great, but the heading was THE CRAZE AND THE MENACE OF SKATEBOARDS. [...] By August of 1965 skateboarding was banned in a total of twenty cities” (Louison, 2011: 13).

⁵ In the eye of the general public, skateboarding was still at the time an underground culture and did not have any success comparable to major organized sports, but skateboarding itself was working in a way that imitated organized sports: a *single* path traced with training camps, leagues, coaches, medals, prizes (Louison, 2011).

But some skaters were already challenging conventions, the Z-Boys (Z as in Zephyr) being the most notables of them: “Freestyle was still very dance-oriented, remember, with practiced routines that included handstands and

ideology's rationalization⁶ forced skaters back into the streets from which they had previously been banned. With their return emerged a heterogeneous *Dasein* which challenged ideology literally on its own ground and through which skateboarding acquired real freedom: street skateboarding.⁷ This type of skateboarding resonated with other aspects of the sport and skateboarding as a whole became what it always had (or should have) been by greeting and affirming the fundamental inadequacy it had faced with ideology, a *constellation* sport. A constellation eludes absolute and unified categories. In a constellation, some movements seem chaotic, unpredictable, and yet they remain part of an aggregate that does not constitute an absolute unity. Skateboarding, thus, evolved without a strong sense of self-awareness regarding what it was in essence or what it should become, for it evolved as a result of individuals pushing the limits of a particular life-style and never in fulfillment of a pre-conceived and strictly controlled idea of what skateboarding should be.

But skateboarding, as a type of otherness, is now being taken up again by ideology still more successfully and aggressively than previously, it is again being subjected to efforts to reshape it as an organized sport with a *single* path which precludes the possibility of embracing its otherness.⁸ This street skateboarding *Dasein* had remained very ambiguous, escaping definition by escaping a clear ending, as an existential *Dasein* proves to be. Nonetheless, all has changed: calling it an action or extreme sport does not eliminate the fact that its edge has been blunted. There are still exceptions that resist identification, but in sum ideology has taken over the individual creation that used to (re)define skateboarding's constellation. Skateboarding now obeys an end that controls its becoming: the essence of skateboarding has been lost when ideology is able to *capitalize* on it.

To examine this hypothesis, we must first explain reification with the help of negative dialectics, an insightful method proposed by T. W. Adorno.⁹ Adorno's understanding of

long-held poses, which you better believe were mocked by the Zephyr team. [...] The Zephyr team essentially introduced the world to an early form of street skating, a hard grace they demonstrated in pools and irrigation ditches, with an approach no one else would use until the next decade" (Louison, 2011: 73).

⁶ "It was now 1980, and while new insurance costs were closing parks across the country, skating also suffered from the same abrupt loss of interest seen in the '60s" (Louison, 2011: 50; c.f. Carr, 2010: 992).

⁷ Street skateboarding began in the '80s and incorporated new terrains: "First called streetstyle, this form of skating took the giant step of leaving ramps and parks and hills, incorporating all things paved into the sport and opening up a whole new world" (Louison, 2011: 116). If "bowl" or "transition" skateboarding is not street skateboarding in its purest form, in the present context they may be placed in this category since they take place mostly on ideology's ground.

⁸ This appreciation of the becoming of skateboarding can be felt inside the skateboarding community. For instance, Michael Sieben, in *Trasher Magazine* of September 2013, did an article on "skate graphics that are done", and one of those skateboard graphics is, according to the author, "the sports team logo ripoff": "This one confuses me the most. Isn't the whole ethos of skateboarding supposed to be the opposite of organized sports? You know, the spirit of DIY, counter culture, existing as an individual – oh, what's that? There are now nationally-televised skateboarding competitions and some participants get paid big money to wear their sponsor's logos on their heads like they're a damn Nascar racing car? Oh, well – never mind. Scratch this one off the list. It makes perfect sense now. Go Lakers!" (74).

⁹ Negative dialectics is of more interest in this paper than Adorno's positioning on sport itself, since for Adorno, as W. J. Morgan has pointed out, "sport cannot belong to end-time because it belongs to prehistory" (1988: 829), it has no critical potential. But skateboarding, in its very existence, seems to suggest that it is not something that belongs to prehistory: to exist, skateboarding presupposes the domination of man over nature. Its gratuity, its uselessness, its ruled frivolity, has to be understood as an aristocratic ideal (Gebauer, 2011: 24) rather than a bourgeois struggle: skateboarding offers a 'natural coolness' only possible in an enlightened behavior that favors

reification will then be used to show how skateparks, public funded skateparks mainly, are attempts to *tame* the otherness that is skateboarding, and contests, in particular mega-contests, are attempts to *capitalize* on it. The reification of skateboarding can be found in still other dimensions of skateboarding, but these two are of great interest when considering skateboarding's reification, as will be shown in the following.

Reification

Negative dialectics is a method signalling the fallacy of ideology. Ideology is the term Adorno uses to indicate a social organization that seeks unity, conformity, totality. Conceptually, ideology is enabled by *identity*. "Identity is the primal form of ideology. We relish it as adequacy to the thing it suppresses; adequacy has always been subjection to dominant purposes" (Adorno, 1973, 148). Hegel gave identity its fullest account by thinking identity through positive dialectics, negation of the negation that would lead to a greater and more determined unity. More precisely, contradiction is, for Hegel, the necessary sacrifice of the Absolute that splits itself entirely in a moment of complete opposition and negation, in a moment when unity faces otherness, by which, since the Absolute triumphs over this otherness in its sublation, it is able to attain a higher unity by gaining determination, truth, and freedom.¹⁰ Thus, contradiction serves, in idealistic dialectics, only to determine the Absolute's identity and conceptual universality – its truth as a systematic and infinite web of relations – and does not serve particularity or diversity: unity is the measure of heterogeneity (Adorno, 1973: 5).

But if contradiction is negation, why must negation only be conceptualized under the dominance of positivity, i.e. under the *resolution* of what first comes in contradiction to the Absolute's identity? Identity itself cannot be set aside since it is part of reasoning, even in reasoning negative dialectics, although negative dialectics "seeks to say what something is, while identitarian thinking says what something comes under, what it exemplifies or represents, and what, accordingly, it is not itself" (Adorno, 1973, 149). This is what negative dialectics wishes to address: "The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity – things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant, and which Hegel labeled 'lazy Existenz'" (Adorno, 1973: 8). Philosophies of identity are said to be mythologies by Adorno; in that sense, negative dialectics is a demythologization process¹¹ by which certain particularities are to be

mutual recognition. Therefore, if Adorno's appreciation of sports may be true only to more traditional and organized sports, negative dialectics are still relevant in understanding how skateboarding is not to be reified.

¹⁰ This dialectical process that triumphs over contradictory concepts is firstly found under the category of *becoming*: becoming is the dialectical result of the contradiction between being and nothingness. Becoming appears as the first *identity of identity* (the identity of being and nothingness) and *nonidentity* (the nonidentity of being and nothingness). Becoming's negativity then becomes the driving force of the whole determination process of the Absolute's identity. (On *becoming*, see Hegel's *Science of Logic*, volume 1, book 1, section 1, chapter 1. Also, see Hegel's *The Encyclopaedia Logic*, § 86-8).

¹¹ "Demythologization is division; the myth is the deceptive unity of the undivided" (Adorno, 1973: 118). Heidegger is to Adorno probably the most mythological philosopher of his time, but Hegel too is a mythological thinker by presenting a philosophy that shows division, but division that is only there for the greater good of the unity; division is only a semblance. Idealistic dialectics is an abstraction, a subjective thought working without a connexion with reality: "It is rationally knowable where an unleashed, self-escaping rationality goes wrong,

salvaged from a totalizing unity. According to Adorno, Hegel could never eliminate the inherent contradiction that lies in all philosophies of identity: to say what an entity is with regard to the Absolute's identity is never to say what an entity *is in contradiction* to the Absolute's identity in which it has been sublated. Negative dialectics is therefore a celebration of contradiction *as* contradiction; it wishes to show what evades conceptual attempts to rationalize reality as a whole, for reality always leaves a residue that cannot be fully understood. This residue, this "lazy Existenz", upsets all intellectual attempts to seek unity. But a thought that is lucid acknowledges that: "No object is wholly known; knowledge is not supposed to prepare the phantasm of a whole" (Adorno, 1973: 14). Negative dialectics is a materialistic method answering to the abstraction of an idealistic position which distorts the object: "it is up to dialectical cognition to pursue the inadequacy of thought and thing, to experience it in the thing" (Adorno, 1973: 153). How can thought, which functions through identity and conceptuality, achieve such a thing? In a contradictory manner that is in accordance with negative dialectics, subjectivity has to be invested *even more* in the object by realizing around it a *constellation* of concepts: such a decision does not insure total understanding of the object, but it does assist in indicating what the object is, in as many of its aspects as possible, without engulfing it into the Absolute's abstraction.¹²

Since for Adorno "Society precedes the subject" (Adorno, 1973: 126), philosophy of identity is the more or less conscious rationalization and justification of a social *Dasein*, in the present case the bourgeois *Dasein*: the fetishism of the subject that initiates the identity process of idealistic dialectics is a result of the conditions of bourgeois existence (Adorno, 1973: 189). Liberalism in its original form explains that to be an 'I' is to possess something through labor (or through the labor of someone else), because without property, there can be no subsisting of the 'I' (Locke, 1690). In that sense, the bourgeois is the first 'I' in history: he is the first to conceptually define himself by his possessions, because he could not define himself through blood as monarchs but rather through his wealth and social status. The bourgeois 'I' is the concrete starting point and manifestation of contradiction as being understood as a method of identity: to be an 'I' is to sublimate things that are not like 'I' but that become 'I' (mine) through the sublation process, i.e. ownership. If we apply negative dialectics here, the contradiction appears clearly: the 'I' is less free the more it possesses because it defines itself in relation to things that are foreign to it; its freedom lies outside of it, which is unfreedom. If philosophy of identity is a mythology, ideology is the altar upon which is enacted the contradictory ritual which defines the *Dasein* of the individuals for whom no true individuality is possible. *Everything* is quantified, but qualitative differences in themselves are set aside; they are important only if they are quantifiable. And this is what reification is; *res*-identification: to become a *thing (res)*, a *commodity*, to become a value in the market that enables comparisons of worth of all things.

where it becomes true mythology. The *ratio* recoils into irrationality as soon as in its necessary course it fails to grasp that the disappearance of its substrate – however diluted – is its own work, the product of its own abstraction" (Adorno, 1973: 148-9).

¹² "As a constellation, theoretical thought circles the concept it would like to unseal, hoping that it may fly open like the lock of a well-guarded safe-deposit box: in response, not to a single key or a single number, but a combination of numbers" (Adorno, 1973: 163).

To talk of skateboarding as a constellation sport points to this same appreciation of truth: to find the essence of skateboarding is not to give a general definition of it; it is to seek what every distinct and real individual brought to it to bring it to existence. "The constellation illuminates the specific side of the object, the side which to a classifying procedure is either a matter of indifference or a burden" (Adorno, 1973: 162).

As a consequence of reification, we are unable to connect to individuals, those whom we should recognize as different beings capable of helping us build constellations around objects; we are compelled to connect with them as commodities, preventing any empathetic engagement with them (Honneth, 2008: 56).¹³ The barter principle, akin to the concept of identity, insures “that nonidentical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total” (Adorno, 1973: 146). This false equality prevents any true reinforcement of the self (Gebauer, 2011: 25). If skateboarding is identified as being reified, this is because it has crossed the Rubicon into the barter principle: it is commensurable as a commodity, quantitatively comparable, and promoted and sold in insisting on the singularity of its participant, a singularity that is lost, or understood in a quantitative way (Dinces, 2011). In reification, only *things* have substance, freedom, reality, solidity, truth. In organized sports, the only ‘things’ that matter are those that are reified as quantities: contracts, medals, sponsorships, cups, statistical results, fan bases, etc. As long as humans aspire to unity, things will provide a model for them: humans will aspire to exist like things. To have meaning is to be administered, but an administered world is an impoverished one in which experience has no qualitative value.¹⁴ True freedom, which is truly ‘price-less,’ for skaters means not wishing to compare themselves to the athletes of organized sports who are something only in relation to their whole; it means not wanting to erase their heterogeneous side and learning to value their contradictory status with regards to ideology, as we can find example of this unreified behavior in the history of skateboarding.¹⁵ In adopting this approach, however, skaters risk never being fully understood, even by themselves, although to be fully understood is to be a thing and to forget how one came to live as a thing, since things have no history in themselves; there is only the history of their makers. “The individual is both more or less than his general definition” (Adorno, 1973: 151): in trying to fit in his definition, the skater no longer exists as an individual, since to exist is to necessarily contradict the conceptual identity that enables ideology.

Skateparks – Taming the otherness

Negative dialectics reveals irreducible contradictions. Skateparks, especially public funded skateparks, contradict themselves: they are justified as an attempt to give more freedom to skater, giving them a safe and legal ‘land’ of their own, but the more skateparks there are, the greater the difficulty in sustaining a skateboarding *Dasein* outside the ideology.

¹³ If Honneth has tried to think reification outside capitalism in opposition to Lukacs and Adorno, in regards to skateboarding capitalism cannot be cast aside and Adorno’s understanding of reification stays of great relevance.

¹⁴ “Unquestionably, one who submits to the dialectical discipline has to pay dearly in the qualitative variety of experience. Still, in the administered world the impoverishment of experience by dialectics, which outrages healthy opinion, proves appropriate to the abstract monotony of that world” (Adorno, 1973: 6).

¹⁵ Remembering Henry Sanchez’s part in the 1992 skateboarding movie *Tim and Henry’s Pack of Lies*, Jaime Owens, Editor in Chief of *Transworld Skateboarding Magazine* (referred to *TWS* hereafter), writes: “Looking back on it now from the perspective of what skateboarding has turned into these days with all the money, mainstream endorsements, and skatepark fetuses that have no idea about the true spirit of skateboarding makes that part even more special to me. It encompasses all the raw attitude and style that is missing from skateboarding these days. Henry and other guys during that time were fucking going for it so hard and going for it just because. No ulterior motives. No pay days. Just for the love of being hardcore skaters” (September 2014: 21).

Skateboarding is a way of expanding the possibilities of a city's architecture, challenging conventions, remodeling public space and creating another *Dasein* at the heart of ideology's ground. But skateparks produce skaters that are more *identical*, embarking on the *single* path of organized sport.

Skateboarding's natural habitat is the urban habitat, though it is realized by creating possibilities that were not intended by ideology's *ratio* (Borden, 2001), for instance jumping off of a set of stairs while flipping the skateboard. Or as the pool (i.e. bowl) riding era has shown, skaters have been able to reinvent things that were produced out of ideology and subsequently whittled away to give them a different concrete meaning. Skateboarding would be impossible in a purely given state of nature since it needs man-made surfaces to exist: streets, curbs, rails, ramps, sets of stairs, walls, intended voids, etc. A common ground, literally, insures the contradiction of skateboarding with ideology, because there is no contradiction where opposing things are indifferent to each other: skateboarding has freed ideology's ground from pure identification. But with the concrete trespassing of skaters onto ideology's ground, ideology was compelled to react.

The first possibility that exists for ideology in facing the otherness that contradicts its unity is to reject otherness and try to suppress it completely. This is a form of predialectical reasoning, but a very natural impulse. Ideology has tried this tactic on skateboarding (Carr, 2010: 993-5): skaters who practiced their sport on the face value of ideology were arrested by security guards or police officers, insulted by liberal pedestrians who felt that property is a natural right and that one's liberty – conceived in terms of property – ends where another's begins. Property owners would skateproof their assets by installing skate-stoppers on rails and ledges. It is still illegal in most liberal cities to skateboard on streets and sidewalks: skateboard still represents a dangerous shadow that threatens ideology's rationalized march. But, this first way for the understanding (*Verstand*) to deal with otherness lacks rationality (*Vernunft*) and is ultimately ineffective, since in defying skaters it motivates them to confront ideology, kindling the very fire ideology had tried to extinguish. As we have seen, reason (*Vernunft*) approaches the opposition in a dialectical way, finding a new unity where the other can exist, but not as otherness, rather as a product overseen and controlled, managed and unified in the whole of ideology: "Dialectics serves the end of reconciliation" (Adorno, 1973: 6). The dialectical march of the One cannot set aside the other, for the One will not be the One, it will be what sits aside of the other; it is a forever dynamic process to become the unity.¹⁶ "The system is the belly turned mind, and rage is the mark of each and every idealism" (Adorno, 1973: 23): the system makes it possible to devour otherness, keeping what serves identity and ejecting with rage any true heterogeneity that it cannot assimilate. Ideology's rage has taken on many victims, such as aboriginal people: letting them live, but in controlled reserves, therefore taming them and forcing them to change their way of life. Reserves do not seem to preserve, rather they seem to kill culturally. Of course, skateboarding has not endured what aboriginal peoples have suffered, but in the same way, ideology created 'reserves' for skaters, a reproduction of their 'natural' element, losing, in doing so, the whole 'naturalness' of it. Those reverses are called skateparks. Skateparks have existed from the beginnings of the sport. But, except for some of those that were the private projects of skaters, they have always

¹⁶ "To preserve itself, to remain the same, to 'be', that [bourgeois] society too must constantly expand, progress, advance its frontiers, not respect any limit, not remain the same" (Adorno, 1973: 26). In that sense, to reify skateboarding is a new way for the ideology to maintain the process of its own unified subjectivism.

been attempts intended to tame skateboarding.¹⁷ Skateparks could and can act still as a space that permits the progression of skateboarding's constellation, especially when they are DIY projects that generate creative individual impulses. But skateparks that owe their existence to funding that come from outside skateboarding (or from the reified core of skateboarding) are instruments which function to deny skateboarding its menacing and dangerous (from ideology's standpoint) freedom.

Civil society presents a contradiction that opposes street skaters to owners of spaces used by skaters for a common ground and a right of existence, but this contradiction must be sublated at a government level since skaters and owners do not have the legal authority to end this struggle. Because liberal-democratic governments serve to protect ideology – as their role is to insure order and peace through, mainly, the protection of private property – they must restrain skaters from trespassing onto ideology's ground. The concrete answer proposed by liberal-democratic governments was to build public-funded skateparks. To integrate the other that oversteps, ideology (here cities) reproduced urban architecture that could be found on ideology's ground, making skateparks increasingly seductive. The city of Winnipeg for instance invested 2.5 million dollars in a very well-built skatepark which contains all the assets a skater would want, and which was probably built in collaboration with skaters who helped, consciously or not, to ensure the reification of skateboarding. In doing this, the city of Winnipeg protects the general population and corporations from the rebellious side of skaters, and skaters lose something of their essence by experiencing the unfreedom of a limited area to practice their sport in. And if cities have invested millions in skateparks, they feel justified in repressing even more harshly anything that lies outside what is permitted.¹⁸

But skateparks point to another type of skaters, the 'vert skaters'. 'Vertical skateboarding' emerged from the '70s skateparks and also from bowl and drainage-ditch riding. It suffered greatly during the 'great depression' of skateboarding of the early '90s,¹⁹ but re-emerged thanks to continued interest in street skateboarding that had carried on despite changes in trends since it had eluded reification. Vert skaters need skateparks since their space is nowhere to be found on ideology's ground: they need half-pipes, full pipes or mega-jumps, and almost nothing compares to them in the urban landscape. It is no coincidence then that the first skater to be popularized in mainstream culture in this present reification, and thereby to popularize skateboarding in mainstream culture, was a vert skater: a non-threatening skater, to the eye of the general public at least. A vert skater has never, in theory, trespassed on ideology's ground. The type of skateboarding that was invisible in ideology's urbanism became the form that was the most appealing to ideology, in part also because the space this type uses is a controlled environment rendering it easy to put on show and to sell. According

¹⁷ In 1975 for instance, "an upholsterer named Joseph Gee nearly collided with a skateboarder on a sidewalk near Pomona College. Walking on, he thought about how nice it would be to have a place for this sudden influx of skaters to go, as well as the monetary potential in owning such a place – or places" (Louison, 2011: 53-4).

¹⁸ Even if skaters are *now* (and have been in previous reification attempts) engaged in a continual dialectical relationship with the law around private property (Carr, 2010: 990), this dialectics is a means for identification that will give more power to the law to repress what lies outside of it: the ideology, through law, will always be stronger than otherness. But this is no reason for the otherness to cave in to ideology, as J. Carr suggests skateboarding should do in "skat[ing] around' the edges of the law" (2010: 1000).

¹⁹ This great depression is the biggest of its kind, even though skateboarding struggled in the mid '60s and in the early '80s. But, when considering history of skateboarding, it becomes evident that every depression is the consequence of a reification attempt, proving that skateboarding is not akin to reification.

to *Forbes magazine*, “the story of skateboarding’s transition from Southern California backyard hobby to one of the most widespread and lucrative sports in the world is the story of one man: Tony Hawk, legendary pro skater, de facto ambassador and multimillionaire entrepreneur” (Boice, 2014). Tony Hawk is still the best, and for many, only, known skater, because of the series of video games he launched in 1999, and because of his participation in the success of the X Games. Tony Hawk, as vert skater, is an ambiguous figure in skateboarding’s constellation: he was not only a vert skater but was also a street skater for some time, and contributed to many of the different phases of the evolution of skateboarding. Tony Hawk, however, with his sponsors estranged to skateboarding, is not a figure who can be overlooked in consideration of the present reification of skateboarding. Skateboarding began to bloom again and was opened to reification during the glory years of Tony Hawk’s career in the mid ’90s. Of course no misfit skater could personify skateboarding though skateboarding needed personification to be identified; Tony Hawk was chosen by ideology but also accepted freely to partake in reification and bears much of the responsibility of the transformation of skateboarding. With his help, and that of others, the reification of skateboarding was successful and now spans from vert skateboarding to street skateboarding, the final bastion of skateboarding’s self-affirmation.

Contests – Capitalizing on otherness

The *promotion* of skateboarding is what most clearly identifies the attempt to capitalize on skateboarding. Organized sports are promoted; they are *showcased*. Skateboarding companies – who permitted the emergence of the skateboarding *Dasein* and are still needed for skateboarding to survive in the world of late capitalism²⁰ – have always made movies that depicted their skaters’ capacities, but also their personalities. Given *carte blanche* to present the characters and activities of skateboarding, those movies were raw and to a certain extent unpolished and chaotic, a quality which mirror skateboarding itself.²¹ But those movies were not enough to promote and capitalize on skateboarding within mainstream culture: their market was too small as these were sold only in local skateshops and publicized haphazardly through other low-budget skateboard movies.²² Contests were therefore the *ratio*’s finding. With the contradiction opposing skateboarding and ideology resolved through skateparks, there was no better way to profit from skateboarding than to make it an organized sport in a controlled environment.

²⁰ As D. L. Andrews has shown, “currently there would appear to be no sustainable, viable or, indeed, even imaginable alternatives to the late capitalism, corporatist iteration of sport” (Andrews, 2008: 222-3). No sport, or anything else for that matter, can survive today as purely unreified. But having to rely on basic capitalism does not mean that reification is complete and that no self-affirmation is possible.

²¹ For a good example of such a video, see Toy Machine’s 1996 *Welcome to Hell*: the music is underground, the parts are individually crafted in accordance with the skaters wishes, a ‘friends’ section features skaters that transcend sponsorships and a ‘bail’ section shows the risks of pushing the limits of self-affirmation.

²² In earlier reification phases, skateboarding movies could act as an official means for reification, especially those produced by the Powell-Peralta company: “These videos captured new aspects of the everyday potential of skateboarding and thus emphasized the subculture’s rejection of spatial norms at the same time that they highlighted the skateboard and skateboarders as commodities for mass consumption” (Dinces, 2011: 1518-9). There is a fine line between true attitude and ‘true’ attitude for the sake of reification, but this line exists.

Like skateparks, contests have existed since the beginning of skateboarding and have been present throughout its history. Some contests were attempts at reification, others not. But in this present reification we have come to see the apparition of what has been called ‘mega’-contests, in which the participants have lost control over the format of the contests they participate in: participants, vert skaters but now also street skaters, who are being *shown* in the *casing* of a spectator friendly environment, have lost their freedom in being sold and advertised as things.²³ This capitalization process occurs in two major events: the X Games, held for the first time in 1995,²⁴ and the recently founded Street League Skateboarding (SLS), which dates back to 2010. These contests, and perhaps especially the SLS, are mimetic attempts to make skateboarding an organized sport. And as in all organized sports, ideology, through sponsors who often have nothing to do with what they are showcasing, dictates the rules which the athletes must follow in order to compete for the prize, alienating the individual by transforming him into a machine.²⁵ For instance, SLS’s main sponsors are Nike²⁶ and Fox Sports 1, two companies affiliated with organized sports that had not previously taken interest in skateboarding until a profit could be ensured, and that now dictate what is to become of skateboarding. Can skateboarding survive such reification? Can it still find a *niche* to exist as an alternative and underground *Dasein*? It would seem not: the neon light of reification eclipses the obscurity in which true freedom is achieved.²⁷ If this tendency continues, no skater will be able to receive endorsement from any skateboard company without first having shown his abilities in mega-contests, which will prevent any misfit skater from existing as an individual. SLS established a foundation in 2013 to help build public skateparks and skate plazas that are safe and legal²⁸: as suggested above, this rationale is

²³ These are the words of the skater who participated in the most contests, R. Mullen: “I know what contests are and what the expectation can be. Losses will define you more than wins, and at some stage that is all that is left for you – after the consecutive wins. And other people will define you. And the second that your skateboarding is defined by external things, such as media coverage and what number [is] associated with your name and the other guy who came up second [...] – then you’re the loser. And you become a slave to what you love, and soon you will come to hate it. And that will be the biggest loss” (Louison, 2011: 186).

²⁴ “The year 1995, however, marked a jumping-off point from which those charged with mediating skateboarding through videos and DVDs would embrace a much more transparent relationship with the forces of capitalism and neoliberalisation” (Dinces, 2011: 1525).

²⁵ “Like all big contests, the X Games are somewhat disdained in the general skateboard community, in part because of the point system used to rank skate runs. [...] [Ryan] Sheckler once told me most pros don’t fully understand them [the point system]” (Louison, 2011: 5). If skaters do not understand their own scoring practices that are decisive, they are truly alienated by ideology, a first step in becoming machines as in reification, “sport molds human beings to the machine, and, in a more explicit political vein, serves as a model for totalitarian mass rallies” (Morgan, 1988: 818).

²⁶ Nike entered the market for the first time in the late ’90s (Lombard, 2010: 479), just when the present reification process of skateboarding began to bloom.

²⁷ We wish here to echo how Adorno spoke of true art: “The more the all-powerful culture industry seizes for its own purposes the principle of illumination and corrupts it in the treatment of men for the benefit of a perduring darkness, all the more does art rise against this false luminosity; it opposes configurations of that repressed darkness to the omnipotent neon-light style and helps illuminate only by convincing the brightness of the world of its own darkness” (Adorno, 2006: 16).

²⁸ According to their website, “SLSF seeks to foster healthier communities by promoting and providing access to skateboarding to all levels of society equally.” (<http://streetleaguefoundation.org/about>). This is a true contradiction that is inherent to all organized sport: a sport, like street skateboarding, becomes costly to practice *only* if it is reified, because “commodification of sports goods exaggerates distributive injustices – for example,

altogether reifying, proving that ideology's logic is now omniscient in consideration of skateboarding.

As a result of being propelled into mainstream culture by mega-contests, skateboarding is now better accepted, but perhaps still imperfectly understood. This identification enables tolerance for skateboarding because what is understood through the contests is that *pain* is *gain*. "Relativism is a popularized materialism; thought gets in the way of money-making" (Adorno, 1973: 36). Mainstream culture does not need to understand why grown people practice skateboarding, mainstream culture does need to know, however, that it is possible to capitalize on it as an activity existing alongside other tolerated activities. Skateboarding, through contests, has found a place in the expression: 'to each their own'; public recognition that works with quantification (stats, earnings, etc.) has now become its be-all and end-all. The words of Dylan Rieder, a professional skater who previously participated in SLS, indicate how skaters perceive this change from skateboarding as subculture to reified sport:

I just don't really believe in purchasing real estate on your forehead. [...] I just don't believe that you should have a bunch of stamps on just because you sold yourself. I just feel like it takes away from the individuality of it, but that's just me. To each their own. I don't have any problems with any of those dudes in Street League. That's their thing and that's how they want to do it, and that's totally cool. It's just not something I believe in. And I'm not taking in the big bucks because of it. But I sleep better at night. [...] I'm just more into the creative side than just getting paid. That's not really why I do it. I like being in the streets. I like getting dirty and lying on the asphalt. Going out with my friends and getting the shit kicked out of me trying a trick. That's more meaningful to me at the end of the day than seeing how many tricks I can land in a row or whatever my stats are.²⁹

A lot of professional skaters resist taking a stand against reification because they do not want to alienate sponsors or limit the means of exposure needed to survive as a professional skater, although they do know that something of the essence of counter culture skateboarding is being lost in what it is to *think* (its identification) of skateboarding today. The cynicism³⁰ that was once at the core of skateboarding has now been transformed into a 'cool edge' that perpetuates the unfreedom of being a slave to the dictates of ideology.³¹ Because of

when poorer sports fans cannot afford stadium admission prices, club merchandise or television subscriptions" (Giulianotti, 2005: 42).

²⁹ TWS, January 2014, 70. On a conceptual level: "a thinking in which we do not think qualitatively is already emasculated and at odds with itself." (Adorno, 1973: 43).

³⁰ The Greek word *κυνισμός*, that derives from *κύων*, means "dog"; cynicism debunks and mocks social conventions by imitating dogs, or animals in general, since animals find happiness in fulfilling basic needs in opposition to humans. It is of course a simple coincidence that the first street skaters, the Z-Boys, emerged from a California neighborhood surnamed 'Dogtown', but we cannot restrain our imagination to link the rising of street skateboarding out of a tough 'locals only' beach of California contradicting the American dream, with the cynic side of those first skaters. (On that topic, see the documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* of 2001.) But then again, it is admitted today that the *display* of the Z-Boy's attitude, and not their attitude themselves (see for instance how Jay Adams (1961-2014), a Z-Boy, lived his life), was a marketing tool in reifying skateboarding (Dinces: 2011).

³¹ At the beginning of 2014, *Elle Magazine* has made a list of what were the 20 best skate shoes to wear at the time, one of them being an unskateable shoe covered with crystals at the price of \$1,325. To cite their website: "The Lords of Dogtown are finally back on top. Skate shoes are the latest and greatest in the fashion comfort footwear trend. The best part is, designers have figured out how to rework the classic shape in metallic, pony hair and even bedazzled ways. Even if you can't skate, these shoes will shred on the streets" (<http://www.elle.com/accessories/bags-shoes-jewelry/best-designer-skate-shoes#slide-1>).

skateparks, and above all mega-contests, skateboarding has fallen into “that bourgeois consciousness that depreciates all cultural works to a simple function, to something that exists only to serve something else, and ultimately to an article of consumption” (Adorno, 2006: 23). Skateboarding’s likelihood of becoming an Olympic sport in 2020 will all but certainly be the final nail in the coffin of its reification.

Final words

Philosophy has never really taken an interest in skateboarding because for a long time philosophy was, as it largely remains, an affirmative and systematic activity which works, by its nature, hand in hand with ideology, or at the very least participates in it. A dominant philosophy seeks unity and unable to find any in skateboarding it thus remained indifferent to the activity. But as we have seen with Adorno, “in philosophy we literally seek to immerse ourselves in things that are heterogeneous to it, without placing those things in prefabricated categories” (Adorno, 1973: 13). A philosophy that wishes to avoid pretending, wrongfully, to have understood reality without ever exiting the concept must encounter reality in its entirety, i.e. as something in which not everything is easily understandable from within traditional categories. Such is the reality of skateboarding. Thus philosophizing on skateboarding is not a vain activity; it is a test of the concretion of philosophy’s search for the meaning of truth.

But in the present effort to philosophize on skateboarding, skateboarding has been shown to no longer be so heterogeneous to idealistic philosophy since it is now being reified. The contours of skateboarding are being made clearer, since its categories and principles, as in organized sports, are now being stated more clearly by the ideology that wishes to promote it as a thing. In return, skaters will continue to attempt to fit into these categories and principles in the effort to be recognized as true skaters. In opposition, negative dialectics suggests that skaters find recognition outside of a commodity relation to others and to themselves. Skaters need to find recognition in celebrating their roots, which are not to be found in a reified, quantified and ideological soil. A professional skater is not like the professional athlete of an organized sport: he is not in direct competition with others³² but only with himself, pushing his limits³³ and the limits of skateboarding’s constellation. But if professional skaters are to be chosen out of a reified mold, the constellation will cease to grow or transform further with inevitable results. A constellation that is inert is dead.

³² In 1996 the X Games, via their media partner ESPN, “pushed a rivalry that even most non-skaters knew was lame and false between Hawk and vert pro Andy Macdonald” (Louison, 2011: 165) to boost interest in selling skateboarding as an organized sport. On how reification forces forgetfulness of recognition for other participants in organized sports, see an example in Honneth (2008: 59).

³³ As a dangerous sport, skateboarding enables a self-affirmation in pushing back the boundaries of the self (Russell, 2005), this perfectionism that is needed to live as an individual and not a commodity.

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