“Skate and Destroy”?: Subculture, Space and Skateboarding as Performance

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Abstract

This essay offers a critique of the subcultural discourse surrounding skateboarding. Skateboarding, I argue, has been represented in academia, popular culture and skateboard media as a subculture which resists mainstream society. First by identifying three central themes in the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies’ (CCCS) theorisation of subcultures: resistance, societal reaction and subcultural identity, and by demonstrating how geographers have interpreted these themes spatially, I deconstruct the nature of the skateboarding as subculture discourse. Then, drawing on a qualitative – mainly ethnographic – set of methods, including: participant observation, the go-along method and interviews, I argue that the everyday lives and experiences of skateboarders complicates the assumed naturalness of the subculture-mainstream culture binary. Indeed I end this paper by concluding that this core ontology in the study of skateboarding is unhelpful. Instead I propose an alternative framework, centred around the concept of Performativity, and a novel ontological starting point taking inspiration from Jennifer Robinson to argue that skateboarding, and potentially other so-called subcultures, might be best understood as “ordinary” rather than marginal or different.

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Contents

1. Introduction .........................................................................................................6-8.

2. Literature Review .............................................................................................9-20.
   2.1 Subculture: A concept's genealogy ...............................................................9-11.
   2.2 Geography and Youth Cultures ....................................................................12-14.
   2.3 “Always question authority”: Skateboarding as a spatial subculture ........15-20
      2.3.1 Challenging the normal: Skateboarding as a critique of the city
      2.3.2 Skateboarding: Out of place
      2.3.3 “Smash the state… Learn to skate”
   2.4 Methodological Limitations .......................................................................20.

   3.1 Research Site ...............................................................................................21-22.
   3.2 On ethnography and positionality .................................................................22-23.
   3.3 Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) ...............................................................24.
   3.4 Interviews .....................................................................................................24-25.
3.5 Participant observation and the Go-along method…………………………25-26.

3.6 Analysis………………………………………………………………………………26.


4.1 Skateboarding, Space and Performance……………………………………28-39.

4.1.1 Societal reaction: In place/ Out of place?

4.1.2 Space, Power, Performance: Relational encounters and skateboarding.

4.2 Skateboarding and Identity……………………………………………………. 40-45.


5.1 Relational Space…………………………………………………………..……46.

5.2 “The Seductions of Resistance”……………………………………..…………46-47.

5.3 A Post-Subcultural Identity…………………………………………………47.

5.4 By Way of a Conclusion………………………………………………………47-48.

6. Auto-Critique……………………………………………………………………49.

7. Appendices……………………………………………………………………50-62.

8. References ………………………………………………………………………63-70.
subcultures are groups of people that are represented - or who represent themselves - as distinct from normative social values or “mainstream” culture... they come in many different forms, from Teds to Skinheads to Skateboarders, clubbers, new age travellers, graffiti artists and comic book fans (Gelder and Thornton 1997: n.p.)

Introduction

Throughout September 2008 Thrasher skateboard magazine, “the most accurate and influential mouthpiece” of skateboarding according to Ian Borden (Borden 2001a: 161), ran an online opinion poll asking what was the most dangerous threat facing skateboarding:

a) Sarah Palin,
b) Cops,
c) skate stoppers,
d) rocks,
e) jocks,
f) The life of Ryan.

In doing so Thrasher presented a short but telling insight into the discourse surrounding skateboarding. This discourse, I argue, has been informed by two inter-linked theories: First the classic theory of subculture, developed by the Birmingham Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and framed by the three tenets – resistance, societal reaction and subcultural identity: Second the geographical study youth cultures, based on Tim Cresswell’s (1996) ideas of transgression. Underpinning both of these theories is the ontological assumption that subcultures are clearly distinguishable from the mainstream and its normative ideology. Skateboarders are represented as resistant as they reject mainstream society (including rocks and jocks) and the normative authority embodied by the likes of Sarah Palin.
On the other hand society, in a homogenous and hegemonic form, rejects skateboarders through the use of skate-stoppers (architectural adjustments that hinder skateboarding) and police surveillance. Together societal reaction and subcultural resistance distinguish skateboarders from the mainstream, marking the basis for a subcultural identity. Due to the fact that skateboarding is an inherently spatial activity, taking place in and across urban space, it has been of interest to numerous geographers. Geographical studies have sought to demonstrate how skateboarders critique the normative logic of urban space and as a result are made “out of place” by local authorities who close off public spaces to them.

In this paper I aim to demonstrate how this discourse is an overly romanticised discourse which has little relevance to the everyday lives of skateboarders. Using a mixture of qualitative methods I argue that the experiences of skateboarders, their relational encounters with others and their identities are far more nuanced than the subcultural/geographical analyses allow. Instead I propose a set of theories that I believe may enable an alternative, and more critical, framework in which to study skateboarding and potentially other youth cultures. This framework is strongly influenced by the insights of post-subcultural studies and new developments in cultural geography that are concerned with the concept of Performativity. Together these insights provide an alternative perspective of skateboarding which rejects the inevitability of a mainstream-subculture binary.

In the opening section of the first chapter I present a discussion of the classic theory of subculture – framed by the three tenets mentioned above – and the geographical work on youth cultures. Both I argue, are based on a hierarchical ontology, which privileges the idea of the “mainstream”. I will then demonstrate how these bodies of work inform the romanticised discourse of skateboarding as a subculture by drawing upon primary research undertaken using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Subsequently this section may seem oddly placed in a chapter reviewing literature. It is justified however as the proximity of this section to the theoretical discussion upon which it is based is, in this context, useful. The second chapter outlines the methods used in this study, discussing the issues faced in the field. Finally the last chapter presents a critique of the skateboarding as subculture discourse, and my attempt to offer both an alternative framework, based on the concept of Performativity, and an ontologically novel starting point to the study of subcultures.
Aims:

1. To deconstruct the discourse of skateboarding and to highlight the theoretical and spatial assumptions upon which it is based.

2. To offer a critique of this discourse by analysing the day to day realities of skateboarders and their use of urban space, particularly focusing on:

   - How skateboarders construct space in Clermont-Ferrand

   - The experiences of skateboarders in urban space, including how people react to them and how they react to other people – in short the relational encounters between skateboarders and society.

3. To gauge how skateboarders define skateboarding as a practice and themselves as skateboarders.
Literature Review

Subculture: A concepts genealogy

The study of subcultures has a long and well established history across the social sciences. From its early articulations in American deviance studies (Cressey 1932, Gordon 1947, Cohen 1955) to its frequent contemporary usage particularly as a popular buzz word, the term has long been present in Sociology, Cultural Studies and Anthropology. Despite the length of its history and the breadth of its academic usage the term subculture has enjoyed a surprising degree of definitional continuity. Although this has been challenged over the last ten years or so with the growing number of post-structuralist accounts, its core definition has remained unchanged since Komarovsky and Sargent asserted that:

The term “subculture” refers... to cultural variants displayed by certain segments of the population... they constitute relatively cohesive social systems. They are worlds within the larger world of our national culture. (Komarovsky and Sargent 1949, cited in Jenks 2005)

Or as Mercer puts it “these cultures within cultures are called subcultures” (Mercer 1958: 34). Clearly the recurring theme is that a subculture is a unique entity set apart from, yet encompassed by the envelope of mainstream culture. In 1975 this vaguely defined relationship gained further elaboration, if little more clarity, as the structuralist CCCS pushed the boundaries of this concept when publishing Resistance through Rituals (Hall and Jefferson 1975). This influential, though flawed, work, taking Marxist philosophers Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser as inspiration introduced the idea of resistance to subcultures. Subcultures were considered “Pockets of working class resistance to the dominant hegemonic institutions of society” (Bennett and Kahn-Harris 2004: 1).
Central to *Resistance Through Rituals* was Gramsci’s (1971) notion of hegemony. Gramsci believed that authority was gained through domination and consent. The former is “the hard and brutal edge of power, more typical of an older order in society” (Jenks 2005: 114) which, at least in the west, has been superseded by a more subtle and pervasive method of control - consent. Here control is gained through political voluntarism with hegemony providing the enabling factor for this “soft” power tactic. Hegemony works on an institutional plane; religion, education, mass media, sports etc, and on an informal plane, where hegemonic power becomes “viable and permanent through cultural values, norms, beliefs, myths and traditions” (Jenks 2005: 115). Similarly Althusser (1971) believed that ideological power was being exerted through stealth. Compliance, he wrote, was being obtained by means of *interpellation*, or the way in which dominant ideologies “claim the individual” in order to maintain cultural stasis.

Hegemony and interpellation provided the framework for the CCCS’ conceptualisation of the relationship between subculture and parent culture. The parent, or hegemonic culture, is that which seeks to extend its “total social authority” (Hebdige 1979: 15) whilst subcultures are groups that seek to resist this process at every possible juncture, rejecting the social norms and traditions of hegemonic culture. Resistance can be articulated in several ways. One of the most important in CCCS writings is the resistance through style. The Punk’s safety pin (Hebdige 1979), the Ted’s Edwardian suit (Widdicombe 1993), the skinhead’s shaved head like “the cultivation of a quiff, the acquisition of a scooter...” (Hebdige 2007) all constitute the “construction of a style...[intended as]...a gesture of defiance and contempt” (Ibid.). Others have found resistance in rebellious subcultural practices, such as skateboarders “…waggling their backsides in front of observation cameras and twisting high speed just beyond the reach of security” (Flusty 2000: 154). According to standard subcultural discourse resistance is not met by the parent culture apathetically. An oppositional force flows from the mainstream to the sub-stream. This reactionary, not revolutionary, force sees “total social authority” bear its full weight of tradition and upstanding morality down upon those that seek to upset the status quo. As Cohen writes in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*, the 1960’s subcultures mods and rockers were portrayed by the media as folk devils:

A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylised and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people... (Cohen 2002 [1972], cited in Williams 2007).
Having discussed resistance and societal reaction we can now begin to conceive of a subcultural identity, but before this a brief discussion of how identity has been theorised is necessary. Identity has been a dynamic concept over time. It is therefore important to highlight the CCCS’s historical intellectual moment as it tells us much about their epistemological perspective of identity. The 1970’s were, across numerous academic fields, a time of structuralism. A structuralist viewpoint sees identity as a stable and autonomous self (Panelli 2004) i.e. the consideration that inside us there are inherent traits that make up our core essential being. People behave or react to circumstances in a scripted manner as a consequence of their identity. Subcultural identity was thought of initially in a structural framework.

The importance of subcultural participation on both the self and on groups of individuals has been a longstanding focus in the studies of subcultures. The CCCS argued that subcultures had distinct structures, forms and practices that enabled “the degree of insulation and boundary maintenance from the parent culture” (Jenks 2005: 118). Subcultures they argued had mappeable boundaries. They were presented as “rigid, reified and realist…” (Muggleton and Weinzierl 2002: 8) entities, both ontologically distinct from the “normative social values or “mainstream” culture” (Gelder and Thornton 1997: n.p.), and internally cohesive and stable. To be part of a subculture was to be, in a pre-given and essentialist way, in oppositional resistance to the “Other”. The Other, writes Backstrom (2007: 157) is the “antithesis… the Other may be despised but it is also highly necessary as an opposite pole to the right and the normal”. A subcultural identity is therefore about not being like everyone else, it is about being “authentic” to the ideals that set the group apart. In this sense subcultural identities are both personal and collective, one is individually identified as different from the mainstream but the same as others in the group. Resistance, as theorised by the CCCS, has a complicated, interlinked, relationship with the concept of identity in subcultural studies. Resistance it would seem is the visible articulation of the authentic identity, it is resistance that enabled the CCCS to demarcate the boundaries between subculture and the hegemonic with such confidence. In short without resistance there can be no subculture. Subcultural resistance and subcultural identity are interlinked concepts, the former being the visible articulation of the latter.

The CCCS’ approach has not been the only approach of importance. There have also been analyses that stress the importance of outside forces, such as the media, as being complicit in drawing lines around subcultures, marking them as distinct. The Stanley Cohen quote above demonstrates this point. Although such an analysis differs from the CCCS’ it does not
compromise the subculture-hegemonic mainstream binary, indeed it maintains it, albeit from a different perspective, and is thus in keeping with subcultural studies.

Geography and Youth Cultures

Together the three tenets: resistance, societal reaction and identity, outlined above, distinguish subcultures from the “mainstream”. They are essential aspects of the prevailing, hierarchical, ontological assumption that places the mainstream in a privileged position against which subcultures are defined and thought to resist. In the following section I demonstrate how this assumption is articulated geographically.

A failing of classic subcultural work is that, with few exceptions, it ignores the importance of space in both the articulation of resistance and the construction of identities. Moreover despite the recently growing body of work that has sought to theorise the spatialities of youth cultures and their relationships with “adult space”, few geographers have taken an interest in the CCCS or subcultural studies. The term subculture is infrequently used in Geography, rather geographers have preferred the term Youth Cultures. This is demonstrative of the lack of communication between geography and disciplines interested in subcultures, a notable exception being Skelton and Valentine’s *Cool Places* (1998). In spite of this the theorising of youth cultures resembles the CCCS tradition in more ways than one, as I will now attempt to show.

Streets have long “held a particular fascination for those interested in the contested domains of the city” (Malone 2002: 157). This is certainly true of the developing field of analysis in geography that considers the spatial experiences of youths in Public spaces. Youths, it has been argued (Valentine 1996, Lees 1998, Malone 2002), pose a threat to the normative conceptualisations of public space due to their high visibility in such spaces. They are often depicted as threats to public order (Baumgartner 1988) due to the identities that many youths
adopt in public which are “contradictory and oppositional to the dominant culture” (Malone 2002: 163). Consequently these youths are often subjected to a number of regulatory measures or “exclusionary regimes” (Ibid.) such as surveillance, curfews and move-on laws (Valentine, Skelton and Chambers 1998). These enactments of power serve to demarcate the adult authority over public space, which in turn youths seek to resist.

Youth resistance to the normative ideals of space have been tied in to wider geographic theories concerning the social construction of space, notably those of David Sibley (1995) and Tim Cresswell (1996). According to Karen Malone (2002) Sibley’s open space/ closed space binary offers a useful framework to think about issues of youth resistance and authoritative space. David Sibley distinguishes between what he terms open spaces and closed spaces (see Figure 1.)

Figure 1.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Characteristics of open and closed spaces</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Characteristic</strong></td>
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<td>Definition of boundary</td>
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<td>Value system</td>
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<td>Response to difference and diversity</td>
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<td>Role of policing</td>
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<td>Position of public</td>
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<td>View of culture</td>
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*Source: adapted from Malone (2002)*

Closed spaces have clearly defined boundaries between inside and outside which excludes those people and practices that do not conform to the internal logic of that space. If we think of this in terms of youths then the majority of public spaces might be, indeed have been, seen as closed spaces to youths and their resistant practices:

Public space… is not produced as an open space, a space where teenagers are freely able to participate in street life or define their own ways of interacting and using space, but it is a highly regulated – or closed – space where young people are expected to show deference to adults (Valentine 1996, cited in Malone 2002: 162)
People that defy the internal logic of these closed spaces are usually deemed transgressive, or “out of place” (Cresswell 1996). Tim Cresswell’s theory of transgression, though subtly different to Sibley’s open and closed space theory, is no less partial to the use of conceptual binaries. Cresswell believes that space is socially constructed by invisible, taken for granted assumptions of what is “in place” and what is “out of place”. These taken for granted assumptions, which are sedimented over time by a dominant group, are only thrown into relief once someone transgresses their normative meaning (Nolan 2003). Transgression he points out is “defined by how other people react” (Nolan 2003: 312). In both Sibley and Cresswell we find the idea that a dominant group in society have the power to create a normative landscape that can make “others” out of place. Youth cultures are commonly regarded as being out of place in public spaces as they resist the normative logic of public space and offer unwanted alternative uses.

The parallels between this geographic theorisation of youth cultures and transgression, and the CCCS’ ideas of resistance to an hegemonic authority are hard to miss. Both are based on the same ontological premise; that there is a social hegemonic, whose authority is resisted by the resistant practices of subcultures. Where the geographic take on subcultures differs significantly from the CCCS’ approach has been in the emphasis on spatial appropriation as an articulation of resistance. In the following section I will demonstrate how both the classic approach to subcultures and the geographic take on youth cultures form an integral part of how skateboarding is represented.
“Always question authority”: Skateboarding as a spatial subculture

Since its beginnings in 1950’s California (Woolley and Johns 2001), to its present day global appeal and multi-billion dollar industry (Neeson 2001) skateboarding has gone through numerous phases; phases in types of equipment used, in terrain skateboarded, in style, in popularity. Nevertheless despite these changes I argue that from the 1970’s there has been a coherence in the way that skateboarding is talked about and written about in academia, popular media and the skateboard industry itself (comprising of magazines, videos and internet sites) that amounts to a pervasive discourse on the subject. According to this discourse skateboarding is a rebellious subculture, resisting mainstream society. Predominantly the articulations of this subcultural resistance are spatially enacted. However this is not necessarily the case as many authors (Beale 1998, Beale 2001, Borden 2001a, Weyland 2002, Wheaton and Beale 2003, Beale and Wilson 2004, Davis 2004) have found resistance to the mainstream in the alternative consumption patterns of skateboarders, presented as waging a “cultures war” (Mitchell 2000) against the “culture machine” (Adorno 1991). Nevertheless due to the nature of contemporary skateboarding the majority of what has been written about skateboarding focuses on the spaces of the city, and consequently as will this study.

Challenging the normal: Skateboarding as a critique of the city
The most significant, at least the most written about and most theorised, articulation of skateboarding as a resistance to social norms occurs during the practice of skateboarding in the urban setting. According to John Carr (2006) the mere presence of skateboarders poses “a crisis for public space” (Carr 2006: 3). Skateboarding is a “symbolic challenge to the normal world” (Backstrom 2007: 151) as hegemonic ideals of urban space are rejected and reworked by radical “pavement commandos” (Flusty 2000: 154). Borden (1999, 2000, 2001a, 2001b, 2003) sees an outright rejection of the economic rationale in skateboarders’ use of the city, claiming that efficiency, labour, commodity, production and capitalism are all rejected: “skateboarding... offers no such contribution, consuming the building whilst not engaging in productive activity” (Borden 2001b: 257). Consequently skateboarding critiques the city and the neoliberal logic upon which it is based. Skateboarding is portrayed as posing a similar rejection to the normative ideals of the general public and of state authority in Stratford’s (2002) analysis of Franklin Square. Here the skaters’ presence and use of the public square is seen as edgy and dangerous, at odds with the public and authority. Parallel accounts can also be seen in Nemeth (2006) who documents the clash between skaters and civic authority and the public at Love park in Philadelphia, Karsten and Pel (2000: 337) who see skateboarders as “colonizing...public space” in their alternative use of the urban environment, and, Flusty (2000: 154) who finds playful resistance in the “...hit and run tactics...[of the mad dog skate crew]...to claim the only space available to them, evade capture and, not incidentally, irritate authority”. In clear terms Borden, in an interview with James Davis, confirms the representation of skateboarding's spatial resistance, stating:

> If all urban squares were designed in order that skateboarders could use them as well, would skateboarders be very interested in that? Because it seems to me that the whole point about skateboarding, to some extent, is that you’re not supposed to be doing it. There’s a strong counter-cultural element to it...
> (Borden, in Davis 2004: 90).

**Skateboarding: Out of place**

By challenging the city skateboarders transgress the normative logic of public space. According to the discourse these transgressions are not met with quiet acquiescence. On the contrary “civic authorities have been working at break neck speed to criminalise skating…” (Flusty 2000: 154), through anti-skateboard legislature enforced by a combination of police patrols, visible signs (see figure 2.) and skate stoppers (see figure 3.). Hence *Thrasher’s* inclusion of cops and skate-stoppers in their poll. Skateboarders are reduced to the status of
the homeless (Carr 2006, Flusty 2000, Mitchell and Staeheli 2005, Borden 2001a, Willard 1998: footnote 32) who face similar opposition in the form of police patrols and redesigned architecture such as benches that prevent people (homeless people) from sleeping on them. Civil authorities are creating ideological spaces. The powerful decide who is in place and who is out of place, Skateboarding is represented as disturbing the hegemonic sense of space and it is thus deemed “out of place” (Flusty 2000, Karsten and Pel 2000, Borden 2001a, Stratford 2002, Mitchell and Staeheli 2005, Nemeth 2006), “they’re trying to control disorder…they’re complaining about it because it disturbs their sense of normality…people are opposed to it” (Borden in Davis 2004: 90).

Figure 2.

Anti-skate legislation, place de la Victoire, C-F, France. Photo: Jérôme Trives
Ironically, according to the discourse, legislating against skateboarders only adds to “the anarchist tendency within skateboarding, reinforcing the cry of “skate and destroy”” (Borden 2000: 228) as repression only “further whets their appetite” (Flusty 2000: 154) and results in dramatic clashes with both public and police. Through resistance and societal reaction in urban spaces we see a dichotomy emerging between skateboarders and the mainstream society. As I will now show this dichotomy is furthered in the creation of a skateboarding identity.

“Smash the state… Learn to skate: Subcultural identity”

Quoting French philosopher Henri Lefebvre Ian Borden argues that skateboarders are imbued with a “hatred - blind or conscious - for the pressures exerted by authority” (Borden 2001a: 161). Skateboarders he continues revel in “revolutionary romanticism” (Ibid.) and satirize the “value of the dominant order” (Borden 2001a:163) which they reject; decency, respect for the elderly, authority, work, private property, signs, good health. The resistance of urban spatial logic can thus be seen as the visible articulation of the rebellious “world-view” of skateboarders which is based on an “anti-order of nihilism…anything that can be construed as antagonistic to others” (Ibid.). Similar themes surface in popular culture too. Take the following Anarchy 6 (1988) lyrics for example, “…I skate and destroy!! Everyday I
bail school don't go there... shine their rules I just skate on my skate... skating through society's waste...” or the T-shirt slogan “Smash the state… Learn to Skate” (Larson 2006, in Carr 2006). Similarly the discourse is repeated in several popular films involving skateboarding. *Dog Town and the Zephyr Boys* (2001), *Thrashin’* (1986), *Kids* (1995) and *Paranoid Park* (2007). One scene in *Kids* follows skateboarders Telly and Casper as they casually stroll through New York City stealing, being vulgar and talking about narcotics and their promiscuous sexuality. All the while the director takes care to show the protagonists in juxtaposition to the general public. A subsequent scene involves a collision between Casper and a pedestrian, whilst the former is skateboarding. A potentially unremarkable event quickly turns into a violently confrontational one in which Casper and his friends beat the man with their skateboards. The boys later ponder whether he died or not, concluding that they cared little. *Kids* provoked much controversy on its release for its graphic sexual depictions and treatment of the AIDS issue using such young characters. However little was remarked about the fact that these morally depraved kids are skateboarders, the link is an apparently natural one. Finally the supposed tense relationship between skateboarders and society, its principle institutions, parents and authority finds its way onto the pages on numerous books. *No Comply: Skateboarding speaks on authority* (Long and Jenson 2006) for instance was reviewed as a book that “... vents frustrations about not only the police but other authority figures -- parents, sensitive neighbours, vigilant citizens -- who make it hard for skateboarders to roam unmolested...” (Harmanci 2006 WWW) whilst editor in chief Dale Dreiling asserts that skateboarders and authority "will always be in conflict. Always." (Ibid.) a point reflected frequently in his art work (Figure 4.).

Figure 4.
Skateboarders are united by a common set of values, forming the basis for a subcultural identity. These values are based on anything that is anti-mainstream. We can thus begin to see a discursive subject emerging. This subject is characterised largely as follows: skateboarders are young (between 8-18) males (Borden 2001a) that share a common “world view” of life, one that is particularly rebellious, and which rejects all of what “society” hold dear. Skateboarders articulate their resistance to society by “colonising” the streets and defying the normative spatial logic of the city. The skateboarder is immediately recognisable, not only because he will be carrying a skateboard in his hand, but because of what he will be wearing: the large T-shirts and baggy trousers that make up their “rigorously shapeless uniform…” (quoted in Borden 2001a: 168). Not only is there a strong degree of inner cohesivity but there is also a sense of stability as the counter-cultural element is portrayed as an essential part of the skateboarding identity. The three themes of Resistance, societal reaction and subcultural identity, as well as geographical concepts including Cresswell’s all come together in a pervasive discourse. Skateboarders consciously assert their difference “from normative social values or “mainstream” culture” (Gelder and Thornton 1997: n.p.) and are thus subcultural.
Methodological limitations

In the rest of this paper I will attempt to question the validity of this discourse drawing upon research undertaken in Clermont-Ferrand between June and July of 2008. The methods chosen, which are detailed in the following section, were chosen with the methodological limitations of both the CCCS and the existing geographical studies of youth cultures in mind.

A common failing of both the CCCS and Iain Borden’s work is their overreliance on semiotics. Rather than drawing on interviews the CCCS and Borden speak for subculturalists, basing their conclusions on participant observation in the case of the CCCS and magazine interviews of professional skateboarders in the case of Borden, without attempting to engage with the opinions and “indigenous meanings” (Muggleton 2000: 3) of subculturalists. Consequently essentialist, pre-determined theory has been privileged (Muggleton 2000).

With regards to the geographic analyses of skateboarding I would argue that there are numerous methodological issues that need to be highlighted. First there is a tendency to privilege the importance of one “obvious” public space and to then base all conclusions on a study of this one space. This is limiting because skateboarders rarely stay in once place for very long, on a day-to-day basis they are mobile and visit numerous places. Focusing on just one space ignores the importance of other spaces which may be of interest. Secondly, as Nolan (2003) notes, it has been common practice to point to the anti-skate legislation without paying much attention to how these legislations are enforced. Indeed little has been made of the relational encounters between skateboarders and members of the public or the police. Might there not be some discrepancy between the ways in which a space is legally supposed to be controlled and how it is controlled in reality?

In what follows I present a brief discussion of the methods used, highlighting the importance of moving away from a focus on semiotics, in favour of a more grounded approach that privileges the voices of those people involved and allowing for a more insightful, rather than conditioned analysis. I also detail the use of “maps of experience” and the Go-along method to overcome the spatial limitations explained above.

Methodology

In this study I chose a qualitative set of methods, including; semi-structured interviews, participant observation and the Go-along method. In unison these methods provide the
empirical basis from which I question the principle tenets of the skateboarding subculture and the subculture-mainstream culture dichotomy. To do this two priorities were identified, 1) to gauge the spatial experiences of skateboarding in the urban environment, focusing on the relationships and encounters between skateboarders, the public and the police, and 2) to investigate how skateboarders view themselves in relation to the mainstream society, concerning questions of self and collective identity.

Research Site

Figure 5.

Clermont-Ferrand, France

The research for this essay was conducted in Clermont-Ferrand, France (Figure 5.) which lies in the heart of the massif centrale. Within the city there were two distinct types of places where the research was undertaken. The First was the local skateshop B.A.S.S\(^1\) where I spent six weeks working as an assistant. The second place, or rather places, were the “skate spots” that the participants took me to, Figure 6. The advantages of choosing multiple spaces in the

\(^1\) B.A.S.S: Board Addict Skate Shop
city, as opposed to just one or two obvious spaces as has often been the case (Stratford 2002, Nemeth 2006), were that I was able to better grasp the complexity of how skateboarders experience the city and how in turn society views them across a variety of different spaces.

Figure 6.

Map showing the various “skate spots” visited.

On ethnography and positionality

What constitutes an ethnography is not set in stone, there are numerous variants (Herbert 2000). However generally it can be said that ethnographic research generally takes the form of participant observation, whereby the researcher observes and participates in the social life of a group of people. Beginning around the 1980’s with work such as Clifford and Marcus (1986), and, Marcus and Fisher (1986) ethnography underwent an important shift in emphasis from outdated research tool, focusing on the objective observations and descriptions of dispassionate scientists, to a critically reflexive and dynamic methodology, asserting that knowledge is rarely fact but fiction in ethnography. In other words “realities” are constructed as much by the ethnographer and her/his “moral, ideological and cosmological perspective…” (Crewe and Harrison 1998: 19) as by the researched groups going about their daily lives (Shurmer-Smith 2003). The importance of positionality and of recognising the influence that one’s own social history can have on research has also been acknowledged. The ethnographer...
should leave as little as possible to the reader’s imagination when their own social histories bear influence on their research, as Gramsci put it:

the starting point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is “knowing thyself” as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory… [concluding]… therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such an inventory” (Gramsci, in Said 1978: 25).

As my social history was important to both how I went into the field and how I was received once I was there it seems important to briefly detail my personal inventory.

I lived in Clermont-Ferrand for seven years and began skateboarding soon after I arrived. The group of skateboarders that participated in my research come from the city that I grew up in and where I learned to skateboard. Some were friends of mine, whilst others I met for the first time. This familiarity with the place was key to my being able to gain access into the scene as rapidly as I did. Who I was opened doors almost upon arrival, I was offered a job in the local skateboard shop B.A.S.S. within days for example. My experiences of being an English skateboarder in France was one of being at once an insider (I was accepted partly because I was foreign and so interesting) but also an outsider, though I spoke the language I lacked the cultural and “social capital” (Thornton 1995) needed to fully integrate. This ambiguous position was advantageous coming back in the role of researcher. I was naturally well placed to move between the dual roles of active participant in the scene and critical outsider able to “understand the scene on its own terms and concurrently apply theory to understand that scene more generally” (Herbert 2000: 552). Finally it was my experiences of being a skateboarder for the last seven years that made me sceptical of the popular representations of skateboarding as a subculture. Potentially this position could have put my objectivity into question, however rather than seeing my positionality as a problem to overcome I have attempted throughout my research to “put subjective meaning back into the empirical frame” (Muggleton 2000: 9). My aim is not to objectively unravel the truths about subcultures. I merely hope that this study can highlight the nuances and intricacies that make up the skateboard culture and identity.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)
Before conducting primary research there was the preliminary task of deconstructing the subcultural discourse of skateboarding upon which the research and subsequent analysis were based. This was achieved by critically analysing academia, popular culture and the publishings of the skateboard industry, both literary and non-literary, using the concepts of critical discourse analysis as listed in (Wodak 2007).

**Interviews**

As mentioned above giving the “subculturalists” a voice is an important and valuable tool. Conducting interviews enables you to understand people on their own terms, gauging how and why they live their lives the way they do (Valentine 2005). In the six weeks that I spent in Clermont-Ferrand I conducted 20 interviews with local skateboarders each lasting 35-40 minutes. These interviews\(^2\) were intended to gauge the first hand opinions of skateboarders on the issues and questions listed above. When choosing participants the only discriminatory factor was age, all had to be over 18, otherwise I sought out as many skateboarders as I could. The questions in the interviews were initially piloted on a friend in the UK and then translated into French. As mentioned an important theme with which I wished to engage the participants in was their experiences of skateboarding in the city, unfortunately “these trivial details of day-to-day environmental practices” (Kusenbach 2003: 462) do not lend themselves well to narrative accounting, or a strict question-and-answer format. In light of this issue I incorporated the use of maps\(^3\) into the discussion as a prompt to encourage reflection on different spaces in the city and how skateboarding was experienced in these spaces. The participant would highlight on the map the places that he/she skateboarded and then we would discuss these “skate spots” in more detail. This proved to be very useful as a means to stimulate conversation by “placing” otherwise abstract questions about experiences of different spaces.

Two issues became immediately clear upon conducting the first three interviews. The first was location. The importance of location has already been stressed in the social sciences (Elwood and Martin 2000) and a researcher should think carefully about where they “place” their interviews. In an attempt to talk to skateboarders in a familiar milieu, with the hope that a natural dialogue could ensue, the first two interviews were conducted at a city plaza and the local skatepark. However it became apparent that the interviewees were not entirely

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\(^2\) See Appendix 1 for further details on the interviewees, questions and a sample transcript.

\(^3\) See appendix for an example of one of these maps.
comfortable talking in such a busy environment, moreover they would become distracted by other skateboarders and it was clear that they wanted to skate more than they wanted to talk to me. I in turn became frustrated and found it hard to keep engaged in an already fragmented conversation. To get around this problem I opted to try interviews in local bars. Although perhaps not as natural as the skatepark bars are at least relaxed spaces where the interviewees could feel comfortable. The issue with choosing a bar as a location, however, was that more often than not I would be sitting directly opposite the participant with the Dictaphone placed in the middle of the table creating an unavoidable distance, separated us and affirming the roles of interviewer and interviewee more than I would have liked. Fortunately the antiquated nature of my Dictaphone (really a very old tape recorder) proved a blessing in disguise as most participants joked about my failure to make the transition to digital, and were not too put out by its presence.

Participant observation and the Go-along method

During the six weeks spent in Clermont-Ferrand I undertook extensive participant observation, spending five days a week working as a shopping assistant at B.A.S.S. My dual role of shop assistant and undercover researcher leads, unavoidably, to questions of ethics. The shop owner, and my two colleagues were both aware that I was researching the subcultural habits of skateboarders as did the participants with whom I had carried out interviews. However the majority of the shops clientele had no idea that I was doing any more than providing assistance and that on my note pad which I pretended to write stock counts I was actually noting observations, similar to Philip Crang (1994). Although many would question my lack of honesty on this account, I believe that it would not only have been analytically detrimental, but also practically impossible to let the clients know that I was conducting research.

In addition to the work undertaken in the Skateshop I also researched skateboarders during their “sessions” around the city, with a mind to compare their verbal accounts of their experiences with first hand observation. Rather than passively watching skateboarders I conducted “Go-alongs” which involve active participation in the “natural outings” of skateboarders “as they move through, and interact with, their physical and social environment” (Kusenbach 2003: 463). Due to the mobile nature of skateboarding in the city the Go-along method is more appropriate than the “hanging out” method which tends to focus on one or two important spaces in peoples lives overlooking the importance of seemingly less
significant spaces (Kusenbach 2003). The Go-alongs would generally comprise of myself and two or three skateboarders (all of whom participated in the interviews). I would follow a typical “day in the life” of the skateboarders, immersing myself in the groups “everyday rhythms and routines…” (Cook 2005: 167). All the locations, times spent at each location and linking routes were chosen by the skateboarders. During these sessions I refrained from taking notes or using recording equipment in an attempt to create a natural atmosphere with the aim being that I would blend in, instead I wrote up my experiences and observations at home the same evening. These Go-alongs lasted from anywhere between 40 minutes to 3 hours, with 2 hour sessions being the most common. In total I went on 53 hours worth of Go-alongs over six weeks.

Analysis
The analysis of the interviews and field notes was undertaken in two stages. The first stage was informed by the themes identified from the CDA including: Anti-authoritarianism, spatial critique of the city and identity, these themes were then used as meta-codes, which framed the interview schedule. The second stage was more closely informed by Grounded Theory (Dey 2007) in so far as the codes were taken from the words of interviewees and named using specific, recurring terms where possible.
Analysis

Skateboarding, Space and Performance

**Vignette 1**...Was taken to a set of stairs today in the middle of a housing estate. I was told not to expect a long session as you can normally only skate the stairs in the middle of the afternoon and it was about eight thirty when we got there. Almost immediately after we had started skating a woman lent out of her window and asked us to stop, saying that she was working and that the noise was distracting her. The guys were pretty annoyed as we had come a long way across town to skate these stairs but they started packing up and apologised for the noise then we left. [Go-Along session 12, 09/07/2008].

**Vignette 2**...Went skating at Place de la Victoire this evening with Joseph and Alan. Had been there for about twenty minutes when we started to play a game of S.K.A.T.E. Joseph and I were both sessioning fakie big spin three-sixty flips, neither of us could land it. Soon though a family began watching us, they stopped and sat down on a bench. They were fascinated and clapped when we got close, after a while others started watching; an elderly couple and some middle aged men. They all stayed until Joseph landed the trick, which was met with applause, and we stopped playing, then they all left. [Go-Along session 14, 11/07/2008]

**Vignette 3**... Francois, Marc and Jonny took me to Marche Saint Pierre this afternoon. It is a good spot, there are a number of ledges lined with metal that grind well. The spot is surrounded by restaurants and one of them, a Vietnamese place, had left tables and chairs out – though it was closed so nobody was eating... The tables were in the way of the run up so the other three set about moving them aside. I thought it was odd that no one seemed to mind so asked Francois how come they got away with it. He told me that a while back the owners and they had come to an agreement. Francois had agreed not to skate outside of the restaurant during opening hours and in return the owners let him move the furniture as long as he put it back... This arrangement suited the skaters well because the closing hours during which they skated [2-5 in the afternoon] were also the times when most of the people who lived in the area were out at work or school. [Go-Along session 5, 24/06/2008]

**Vignette 4.** After skating at Place de la Victorine several times now there seems to be an interesting pattern emerging… the pedestrians that do not like the presence of skateboarders often try and use the signs (saying that skateboarding is illegal in the square) as the basis of power or authority upon which they can legitimately tell skaters to stop. However each time this has
The vignettes above provide brief snapshots of the various experiences of skateboarding in Clermont-Ferrand’s urban spaces. They are demonstrative of several themes that will be presented in this section. Moreover they provide an immediate and clear counter-analysis to the representation of skateboarders, urban space and social reaction based on Cresswell’s (1996) “In place/Out of place” concept. In the first section I argue, following Mitch Rose (2002) that concepts such as Tim Cresswell’s, and similar examples of Resistance theory, construct a vision of hegemonic, normative space that does not necessarily exist. The societal reaction (of both the public and the police) to skateboarders in Clermont does not sit well with such analyses. I argue that societal reactions to skateboarders are more fluid and context specific than previously imagined, and are better understood in terms of Nicky Gregson and Gillian Rose’s (2000) concept of performed space. The second section is concerned with countering the representation of skateboarders as “pavement commandos” that “colonize” public space in an assumed militant fashion. I argue that the anti-authoritarian stereotype is not an essential part of being a skateboarder, but instead is a spatially performed identity intersected with issues of power.

Societal reaction: In place/Out of place?

In his paper “The Seductions of Resistance”, Mitch Rose argues that Resistance theory developed in response to an overemphasis on the hegemonic system and its ability to produce normative space. It attempts to show that these normative visions of space can be resisted. “Ironically, however the literature establishes the dominance of the [hegemonic] system even more firmly” (Rose 2002: 390). Because resistant theories begin with an idea of normative space, which goes unnoticed until thrown into relief by resistant uses of space, they create an “analogous unified representation of social power” (Rose 2002: 338) which they are then obliged to challenge. Thus resistance theories are trapped by their own fictitious construction. To demonstrate this point Rose takes up Tim Cresswell’s ideas of “In place/Out Of Place”. Cresswell (1996) writes that normative space is largely invisible until its inherent logic is transgressed, it is then that the boundaries of normative space are revealed. Rather than seeing the apparently pervasive normative codes as competing codes struggling to “interpret and define space” (Rose 2002: 389) Cresswell takes for granted that these codes are part of a pre-existing hegemonic system, against which resistance occurs. However to what extent do these normative codes actually represent an orthodox? Or are they in reality just represented as doing so? Is, in Deleuze’s words (Rose 2002: 389), “what we present to ourselves as power…merely the representation of power”?"
The Second vignette demonstrates a theme that runs through all of the interviews and was evident on numerous Go-Along sessions, this being that public (or societal) reactions to skateboarders in urban space are complicated and diverse, and rarely totally negative. The crowd described in the second vignette were not perturbed by the presence of skateboarders in a central urban square – on the contrary they were fascinated, a reaction that is far from uncommon:

…You get people who are intrigued, who are interested. Who are interested, who stop and watch you [Niko]⁴ ⁵

Often those that pass are people that watch us and appreciate what we are doing rather… like yesterday those people stopped to watch us, they wanted us to land the tricks [Joseph]

Of course not all of those that pass by share this fascination. All of the interviewees picked up on this, though argued that for all of the negative reactions there were many positive. Reactions could also be conflicted or contradictory, a point captured in the following assessment of how the public reacted: “fascinated, disturbed… both at the same time… curious, fascinated but also disturbed” [Jasper]. Clearly Borden’s confident assertion that skateboarding “disturbs their [the general public] sense of normality” and that “people are opposed to it” (Borden, in Davis 2004: 90) is too simple an analysis. People are not always opposed to skateboarding in urban space and in many cases they actually embrace it. When we begin to analyze how public reactions change across space and through time – two defining parameters it emerged – we can begin to appreciate some of the conditioning factors that influence whether skateboarding is accepted or not. Where one skateboards in Clermont-Ferrand can have a notable influence on the types of social reactions that one receives. This became evident as participants reflected on their experiences of skateboarding in different spaces throughout the city. Spaces that were predominantly residential for example often elicited negative reactions from the public, particularly residents, who were disturbed by the noise (see vignette 1). Less obviously residential spaces, such as public squares, typically saw a greater variety of reactions. Although there was a general consensus that public reactions

⁴ Translations to all quotations can be found in appendix 2, these are placed in order with the omission of those interviews conducted in English: Interviews 3, 4, 7 and 20.

⁵ All names have been changed
differed spatially across the city, there was less coalescing of opinion on which of these spaces elicited which types of response. The experiences of skateboarders were in some cases diverse, many for example identified Chamalières as being a problematic space in which to skateboard. These views however were contradicted (Figure 7.). Similarly, opinions were divided over the common reactions to skateboarders at Courbetin.

Figure 7.

*The varying experiences of Chamalières.*

This is not to say that experiences of all spaces were diverse as some were not, opinions of les Volcans for example were very similar. However those places that are experienced differently demonstrate the point that societal reactions can be very different not only across space but also within certain places, as is clearly the case with Chamalières.

There are no simple explanations as to why reactions differ across space and within certain places. There seem to be multiple variables that come into play when skateboarding in Clermont-Ferrand – “there are several parameters” [Jonny] – of which time was the most commonly quoted, (figure 8.).
Figure 8.

…uh les cezaux, if you go, well you have to choose the time of day when you go, it depends when you go, it depends on the time. [Francois].

The variable of time… if you go at eleven at night people are going to shout you know. But after in the day, um, if you go – I don’t know – at the end of the afternoon there will be more people than if you go in the morning at nine O’clock… [Jonny]

At Courbertin, because of the noise and a lot of old people… it makes some, uh, some difficulties to skate after seven O’clock. [Billy]

Examples of this temporal variant are also found in the first and third vignettes which demonstrate how the time of day can play a determining part in the duration of the session and public reaction. The temporal variations described above refer to a specific temporal scale, that of the day. However larger time scales also proved to be of importance. Place de la Victoire (Figures 9 and 10.) is illuminating in this respect:

Figure 9.

… Place de la Victoire… it’s a square that’s near to the Cathedral and normally you’re not allowed to skateboard there because since a couple of years a lot of skaters have been there and no one said anything to them and then since a few years they put up signs and so normally its illegal to skate there, but now we can skateboard there because generally the police don’t say anything and we can skate there without people calling them [the police] often [Fred]

…people around Victory place are more or less happy when people come and skate, I mean it’s like it’s not a problem for them. Its just part of the animation of the street. [Billy]

Despite the very clear signs that forbid the use of skateboards in Place de la Victoire people can be seen skateboarding there daily will little concern. The restrictions are enforced
unevenly by the police, so that although officially skateboarding is transgressive in this space, the day-to-day reality is that skateboarding is often accepted, albeit ambivalently. Moreover when police do confront skateboarders they just ask them to move along, without enforcing the fines that they are empowered to. One participant argued that the relationship between skaters and the police is more like “a game” [Billy] another skater spoke of his familiarity with one policewoman “I remember that one woman cop, man that was funny, it was like a daily routine, she would come along and laugh at us, say “come on guys hop along” and we were like yeah all right we’ll go” [Alan]. This was not universally the case across the city, and there were spaces where the police were seen as particularly zealous in their pursuit of skateboarders. It was frequently claimed that the police at Chamalieres for example were very strict “like cowboys” [Marc].

Figure 10.

*Place de la Victoire.* Source: Clermont Mutations (2007, WWW).

Other important factors that were commonly quoted by participants included architecture, including the architectural effect on sound in terms of resonance and the perceived degradation by skateboarders of new objects, such as benches. The attitude of skateboarders themselves was similarly seen as being important:
People accept that we skate, after it depends on the attitude that you have, if, if someone sees that we are not paying attention to them, that you’re doing all sorts. Well, I’ve never had any issues with people…but I pay attention, to how I skate, I’m considerate of other people [Joseph]

The point that I am trying to make here, and which analyses that have taken a Cresswellian starting point have failed to appreciate, is that the social construction of space is neither hegemonic in its scope nor rigid over time. Reactions to skateboarders show diversity in place and across space that forms a complicated geography of where and when skateboarding is accepted. On the surface it would seem that certain spaces are more “in place” than others, residential spaces for example have been shown to be particularly problematic whereas public squares are less so. However when we look closely at certain spaces and how they have been constructed over time, it becomes clear that they are in the process of a constant re-imagining and re-working. Place de la Victoire is a public space where the presence of skateboarders has, over the last several years, elicited a number of different responses ranging from acceptance, to rejection and back to acceptance again. On a smaller time scale participants noted that their acceptance was often determined by the day of the week or time of day, so that one might be “in place” on Sunday, or at nine O’clock in the morning but then “out of place” on another day or at a different time. Rather than being determined by hegemonic normative values societal reactions to skateboarders are fluid and inconsistent. They are influenced by numerous variables that intersect in various and changing ways. Consequently any attempts to classify spaces as being “in place” or “out of place” inevitably fail. In Clermont-Ferrand at least, a concept that assumes that an “analogous unified representation of social power” (Rose 2002: 338) codes spaces as part of a pre-existing hegemonic system is found most definitely wanting. The question seems to be less whether skateboarders defy the normative logic of urban space, and more whether there is in fact a normative logic of urban space to defy. I would argue that there is not.

The challenge therefore is to find an alternative approach to analyzing the social reactions to skateboarders, one that incorporates the highly dynamic and unstable nature of the social construction of space. In this vein I believe that a framework based on the idea of Performativity is appropriate, especially Gregson and Rose’s (2000) concept of performing space. Instead of starting with the assumption that space is pre-coded and waiting to be thrown into relief I argue, following Gregson and Rose (2000), that space does not pre-exist
its performance. Space is given meaning through the performative enactments of different subjects in different contexts, at different times. Skateboarding is thus never necessarily or essentially transgressive, but it can be made so. What matters is how space is constructed by different subjects in particular times and spaces (i.e. certain contexts). To give a more concrete example, skateboarders who arrive at Place de la Victoire and begin skateboarding are not immediately transgressive, often they will remain “in place” as people do not seem to mind their presence and police officers do not always choose to enforce their authority. They may however become transgressive if a police officer or member of the public makes them so, by telling them to leave. In this place and at this time skateboarding becomes temporarily “out of place”. The point here is that it is the performative enactments that are crucial to understanding how certain places seem to shift continually from being in and out of place. This approach is similar to what Mitch Rose (2002: 390) calls a “performative style of systems” in which social coherence is created through everyday interpretative acts that are not stable but variable depending on circumstance and context. Mitch Rose’s context specific analysis creates a very vague definition of society that is above all momentary and shapeless: “it has no definition beyond its transitory definitions” (Ibid.). This differs fundamentally from Cresswell’s idea that social coherence is sedimented through continual, repetitive practice that can then be stabilized as a structure. Mitch Rose contends that there is no reason to believe that these structures (which are unable to endure) actually structure people, they are just represented as doing so. Such would seem a most appropriate framework in this context.

Space, Power, Performance: Relational encounters and skateboarding

The common representation of skateboarders and their use of urban space is one of militant aggression. Skateboarders are portrayed as “pavement commandos” who “colonize” public space with “hit and run” tactics. Skateboarders are both anti-authoritarian and anti-social as they “skate and destroy” the urban landscape. In this section I show the limitations of this representation. Anti-authoritarianism is, I argue, an attitude that is performed across space and in different relational encounters that are both context specific and embedded with issues of power. Gillian Rose argues that “space is a performance of power and we are all its performers in our everyday relationalities…” (Rose 1999: 219). I aim to explore how skateboarders perform their identities in different spatial contexts and how power is evoked within these encounters.

As mentioned above, skateboarding is far from universally accepted in Clermont. On a daily basis it is common for skateboarders to be confronted. Place de la Victoire is a good example
in this respect as, despite the fact that many people enjoy the presence of skateboarders, many do not – see vignette four. As the fourth vignette shows those members of the public that believe skateboarders are “out of place” at Place de la Victoire frequently draw attention to the signs positioned around the square. These signs are used by the public to invoke a legitimacy, or authority (a power of sorts), based on municipal law. Skateboarders after all do not have the right to skateboard there. However despite this skateboarders rarely respond by leaving, and by not leaving they reject the authority that was being invoked:

That pisses me off [being told to leave by the public] I think they have no right to tell me where to skate [Alan].

If its just someone who is walking past who doesn’t live in the area, in that case I don’t give a shit about what they tell me [Niko]

The sight of skateboarders refusing to leave after they have been shown that are not legally allowed to stay and skateboard would seem to confirm the representation that skateboarders are counter-cultural and that they are doing it because they know that they should not – according to Borden that is the point. However a common sentiment felt by participants was that they had the right to stay at a public place such as Place de la Victoire, despite the fact that legally they do not. This sense of being in the right is compounded by relaxed reactions by police officers and most of the public, giving the impression that those who do complain are being unreasonable. This, however, is not always the case, as there were some places where skateboarders felt that they had much less of a right to skateboard. Commonly participants commented that if the place was a residential one then their reactions to being asked to leave would be, as in the first vignette, obliging:

If it’s someone that lives there then I totally understand [Niko]

If you feel that ok you are at his place and that you have no right to be there you back down [Marc]

… me, shit I wouldn’t want for people to make noise like that outside my window when I’m elderly [Fred].

Participant’s perceptions of different kinds of spaces clearly make a difference to how they react to people who ask them to leave. Participants did not feel that they had the right to
skateboard around residential spaces and so left when asked to. Indeed one skateboarder I talked to felt uncomfortable skateboarding in residential areas:

First when I skate in a residential place I don’t feel comfortable… I don’t like to impose myself. I don’t skate the same, I try and skate making the least noise possible [Joseph]

From the interviews it is clear that the participants are responding to a specific type of power, a power that is not based on legal rights and imposed by those that they do not believe have the authority, but a sort of moral or conscientious power. This is clearly indicated in the following quotes:

I remember one guy saying “please, look my kid is trying to nap or sleep”, so then you feel like shit and leave [Alan].

… if the person says just yeah, please you are making too much noise could you not go somewhere else, so there I just say that I’m sorry then leave [Charles].

Far from any militant aggression an important theme that participants were eager to get across was that they were concerned with respecting the people around them. In turn they expected to be respected back, a point made clear by the frequent attempts made by participants to enter into a dialogue with those who confront them in order to negotiate a compromise. In certain cases this works (see vignette 3) and in other cases it does not. As mentioned in those cases where negotiation does not work the reactions of skateboarders are influenced by the space, and their perceptions of whether or not they have the right to stay. This is a geographic dimension based on perceptions of public and private space. However as is inevitably the case the geographies of public and private space can rarely be mapped in a clear and neat way. The consequences of this are, once again, made clear by referring to Place de la Victoire.

Place de la Victoire is perceived by local skateboarders as being a public space, hence their reluctance to leave. However the square is surrounded by private property including numerous apartments. The noise generated by skateboarders, and compounded by the architecture of the square, no doubt disturbs the private calm of many people’s apartments. Herein lie the ingredients for conflict. Whilst in Clermont I came to hear of an elderly man
who lived in one of the apartments above the square and who came into conflict with skateboarders on several occasions, (figure 11.).

Figure 11.

There are people who shout a bit. For a while there was this old man who lived above who screamed [Pierre].

Francois: There was a man, on the top floor of one of the buildings, I’m not sure if he’s there anymore but he really didn’t like skateboarders coming around to Place de la Victoire.

Me: yeah, how did skaters react to him?

Francois: I think it made us laugh really...

Alan: At Victoire people can go a bit mental like that old man in the apartment (laughs).

Me: tell me about him.

Alan: Always shouts down from his balcony when we are skating, tells us we are ruining his night or his day or whatever.

Me: how did you guys usually react to him?

Alan: laughed at him (laughs) we just kept on skating, didn’t really give a shit about him I suppose. It was quite harsh.

Despite the fact that this man’s peace was being disturbed, which is usually enough to persuade skateboarders to leave, they were remarkably unconcerned by him. The question is
why was this man laughed at rather than respected? The example of this elderly man would seemingly counter the analysis that skateboarders respect residents. I argue that there are two points to understanding this case. First, despite the apartment buildings, Place de la Victoire is perceived of as a public space and so skateboarders believe that they have the right to skateboard there. Secondly rather than asking people to leave, the man shouted from his apartment, often insulting the skateboarders below. As a result the reactions of skateboarders were equally hostile. The negative response by the man meant that he was unable to mobilise the kinds of moral power that other residents have in different situations.

This example demonstrates an important aspect of the relational encounters between skateboarders and the public, which can complicate the geography of skateboarder’s reactions to the public. It was commonly argued by participants that their reactions were influenced by the attitude of the person confronting them. (Figure 12.):

Figure 12.

… if he is aggressive with me then I react, uh, I react badly like him you know, if he is aggressive with me I’ll be aggressive. Well not at the start, but after; I’ll first try and talk to him but finally if I see that really I’m wasting my time I’m going to be aggressive too [Benjie].

… if the person starts shouting and insulting us then of course we are not going to go. It’s logical [Charles].

I don’t say anything, in general I don’t say anything. Unless they are really being mean you know and they shout at you and insult you there you just say “alright it’s ok! We are leaving” [Florient]

Reactions to police officers were influenced in similar ways for one participant “[referring to male police officers] some guys were arseholes and gave us lectures, being all snobby about it. Then you would give them a bit of shit [Alan]”. Reactions to police officers were on the whole respectful, as the majority of participants recognised and respected the authority, or power, of the police. There was however a noticeable difference between the reactions of older and younger skateboarders to police. The sight of arriving police was normally enough to convince younger skateboarders to leave immediately. Older skateboarders, who perhaps
had more experience with the police and how they were likely to react, would often try to talk to police in an effort to negotiate. Although if this did not work it was rare that the skateboarders would protest.

The skateboarders in this study seem to react to people in two distinct ways, either they left quietly perhaps after trying to negotiate, or they argued back and refused to leave. We can thus conceive of two different identities that are performed, one anti-authoritarian and the other respectful. Immediately this complicates the simplistic stereotype that skateboarders are imbued with a “hatred-blind or conscious-for the pressures exerted by authority” (Borden 2001a: 161). Indeed representations that skateboarders are seeking to “destroy” or “smash the state”, and confident assertions that skateboarders and authority "will always be in conflict. Always." (Harmanci 2006 WWW) seem also comic when one hears repeatedly of the need to respect the public and to open a constructive dialogue with them! Of course it would be equally erroneous to paint an idyllic picture of skateboarders who do as they are told no matter who tells them too. Clearly skateboarders can be anti-authoritarian, as has been shown in this section. My aim here is not to judge either way on the moral issues surrounding skateboarders and their use of urban space, rather I seek to purvey a sense of the complicated ways in which anti-authoritarianism, or respect, are performed in different spatial contexts. There is a geography to the performed nature of skateboarders identities based on perceptions of different types of space. Summarised crudely, public space is perceived of as a legitimate space in which to skateboard whilst private, or residential space is not. This is not a firm and stable geography however: first the perceptions upon which this geography is based are highly subjective and so open to contestation. Second these performances are influenced by relational encounters, intersected with issues of power and attitude, which can often complicate the simplistic public/private binary.
Skateboarding and Identity

Whilst in France I was asked by someone who had heard about my research project, if skateboarding was really “un monde a part?” 6 This struck me as being a particularly relevant question that went to the heart of what I was interested in with regards to subcultural identities. Is skateboarding a cohesive and stable subculture that is set apart from a “mainstream” society and culture? can we theorise of skateboarding as being an identity in the essentialist way the CCCS theorised of subcultural identities?

In the previous section I began to question the distinction between subculture and the mainstream by looking at the spatial experiences and relational encounters involved in skateboarding. Skateboarders, I argued, are perhaps less rebellious, or anti-society, than the discourse implies, a point captured in the following quotes (Figure 13.):

Figure 13.

… rebel, no, rebel that’s shit that it is, we are not rebels we are normal people [Marc]

…. just pretty respectful, not really any kind of rebellion of any sort [Tim].

We are not rebels in the “fuck the society” sense, its not that… we don’t reject society [Joseph].

6 A world apart
It's not as though we are doing graffiti or something like that [Fred].

They are not at all hooligans… when you are a hooligan you don't spend a year without knowing how to do any tricks [Jasper].

As mentioned subcultural identity and resistance are interlinked, together they enable a separation of subculture from mainstream culture. By problematising the assumption that skateboarding in urban space is resistant the distinction between subculture and mainstream culture begins to look less distinct. This project of deconstructing subcultures by complicating the subculture-mainstream culture binary is a central concern of post-subcultural work (see Chambers 1987; Redhead 1990, 1997; Thornton 1995; Humphreys 1997; Wheaton 2000, 2007; Atkinson and Wilson 2002; Donnelly 2006), though questions were being asked long before, see (Downes 1966). In what follows I draw upon post-subcultural analyses in order to critically analyse how skateboarders identify themselves as individuals and how they relate to skateboarding collectively.

Skateboarders, participants argued, were not easy to categorise because in numerous respects they are noticeably heterogeneous, (figure 14.).

Figure 14.

They [skateboarders] are just really diverse, all ages from fifteen to forty, all professions from doctors to labourers you know everything [Francois].

…within skating there are several fashions… fashions evolve… there are several styles you know its definitely the styles, you get skaters that are more Hip Hop or Rock and Roll with really tight jeans and short T-shirts… its mixed. There are a lot of things in it, lots of styles, lots of ways of seeing things you know [Fred].

After groups form depending on the spot that they skate sometimes. There are some guys who skate mini\(^7\) a lot, those that don’t like street and who skate parks\(^8\), it forms like that sometimes [Marc].

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\(^7\) “mini” is the French for “half pipe” being a U shaped ramp used by skateboarders.

\(^8\) The distinction being made here is between streets and skateboard parks.
The truth of these words was made clear during the interview process which saw a variety of skateboarders of differing ages from 18 to 35, with a variety of occupations, from researchers to plumbers and shop-keepers. Styles ranged from Hip Hop, Rastafarian, Emo, Rock and Roll and Indie, suggesting that the rigorously shapeless uniform which according to Borden (2001a) characterizes skateboarders is far from accurate. A point that was reflected in the clothing stocked at B.A.S.S. making the shop akin to “a supermarket of style where, like tins of soup lined up endlessly on shelves, we can choose between more than fifty different style tribes” (Polhemus 1997: 150). The ways in which participants related to skateboarding also varied greatly, when asked what they thought about skateboarding there were numerous different responses, see figure 15:

Figure 15.

[Skateboarding] it’s an obsession… it’s a technical and intelligent and complex sport, like golf. There are some very technical sports like synchronized swimming, gymnastics, judo. Very, very technical like Zidane’s football [Jasper].

… A mixture of sport… but also an artistic creation… because it’s also a creation, a creation at all moments [Marie].

It’s like a therapy, like a kind of therapy [Billy].

It’s a sport, a real sport [Joseph].

For me its really a sport [Fred].

It’s not a sport foremost… it’s not a sport [Charles].

It’s not considered a sport in France [Niko].

Instead of there being a skateboarder or a skateboarding identity there are many based on various different clothing styles, skateboarding styles, occupations and ways of imagining
what skateboarding is. Indeed the only common factor amongst the participants was that all but one participant was male, and only three were not ethnically white. The result of this diversity is that it is not easy to identify skateboarders: “I’ve met people who you’d, well I’d never guess they were skateboarders showed up and skate” [Francois]. Working at B.A.S.S it became clear that it was difficult to tell the skateboarders from the non-skateboarders. The shops clientele was so mixed that the distinction between the two became distinctly blurred. This was also the case in the streets where skateboarders blend into crowds rather than standing out as one might expect subculturalists to. The most sure way of identifying a skateboarder is to actually catch them in the act, another way is by looking at their shoes which show strains unique to skateboarding. However many skateboarders own more than one pair of shoes and often only wear their used pair to go skateboarding. Since skateboarders do not spend their whole day skateboarding they are not always easy to spot. Jonny for example turned up to his interview with me wearing a suit and carrying a brief case. He had just come from work and unsurprisingly did not look like a skateboarder. In Figure 16 Jasper argues that:

Figure 16.

Each skater is different and occasional. Anybody can be a skater, in everyday life I am “costard”, suited, computer geek and when I’m at the theatre [theatre school] I am a model student and we cannot say who is a skater. It can be anyone at a moment. It’s an hour per week, it’s punctuated. We are not skaters all day neither in fact. We are skaters but not all the time… you cannot say who is a skater in general because, one, they are all different, and two, they are not themselves all the time. Their personalities change… [Jasper].

Jasper is pointing to a vision of skateboarding that is close to how post-subculturalists have interpreted Judith Butler’s (1990, 1993) concept of performance. Post-subcultural work has used Butler’s idea of Performativity, to de-essentialise subcultural interpretations of identity. Butler’s concern was to “de-mask…the apparent stability and naturalness of gender and sexual identities” (Muggleton and Wienzierl 2002: 10), showing that these identities are not stable, but fluid. A performative enactment of an identity is concerned with what individuals do, say and act-out, it has no ontological status in and of itself, it does not exist “anterior to social processes” (Gregson and Rose 2000: 434) but is constructed “in and through social action” (Ibid.). Gender, she argued, is constituted through the ongoing repetition of performances each being non-identical from the last (Muggleton and Wienzierl 2002: 10) and so leaving room for identities to be re-written and changed through performance. Applying
this to the skinhead subculture Barnard argues that “It is not the case that an individual is first a skinhead and then wears all the gear, but that the gear constitutes the individual as a skinhead” (Barnard, in Muggleton 2000: 92). Therefore there is no underlying essence of the subcultural identity, it is in constant process of being made and re-made through performative enactments. With regards to skateboarding it could be argued that there is something performative about the actual practice of skateboarding. For Jasper it is certainly this process that matters. When he skateboards he becomes a skateboarder. Similar notions of performance are found in the following:

… they are normal people like everyone else, students, collegians… but who do something abnormal… it happens that at six o’clock instead of playing football they go skating that’s all – but after they are like everyone else...

[Marie].

For Marie skateboarders become atypical by skateboarding, again it is the practice of skateboarding that is important. Other skateboarders in this study argued that there relationship with skateboarding had changed throughout the years, as they went through periods of not skateboarding, only to start up again later. The point being that there are different time scales to consider other than that of the waking day.

Skateboarding, far from being an internally cohesive and stable subculture seems to be internally heterogeneous and momentary. Yet in spite of this skateboarders in this study commented that there was something unifying about skateboarding, (Figure 17.):

Figure 17.

I think that skateboarding is a point of rallying… everyone has their own little cultural preferences… but in the end despite these differences people can find each other thanks to skateboarding, or through skateboarding. So in fact skateboarding enables a rallying of different cultures… it’s something that is mixed… it exists in different countries and in each different country there is a little bit of its own identity too… it’s a little bit different with each thing but at the same time it comes back to itself, well it regroups so it’s a real phenomenon of rallying of different people who each bring something of their own proper identity of their own culture [Jules].
Here we are presented with a sort of “gathering of the tribes” (Malbon 1999: 135) where social and cultural differences dissolve. A good example of where this takes place is the skatepark, where skateboarders of all ages, ethnicities, classes and styles merge in the same space. There is even a marked increase in the presence of females. This ability to unify people was commonly identified as being one of the most positive aspects of skateboarding and the basis for a community of sorts. Importantly however this community is not something that is easy to define:

Marc: there is something after all that makes it so that we regroup around something, there are common values I think.

Me: what are these values?

Marc: the values, oh I don’t know… it’s vague, its not really anything specific…

Here one might be reminded of aspects of Michel Maffesoli (1996) and his concept of neo-tribes. The tribe is not rigid in its organization but represents more of a “certain ambiance, a state of mind…” (Maffesoli 1996: 98, in Bennett 1999). Tribes involve fluid collective associations, where individuals relate to groups on a mobile and temporally variable plane, allowing for the possibility that people may identify with numerous groups at any given time. In the case of skateboarding there is the added dimension whereby people from numerous different backgrounds find common ground. In a purely material sense this unifying aspect is the skateboard, as people become skateboarders by stepping on to it. Yet it seems to go beyond that as there is a sense of community formed around a vague and intangible set of principles (Figure 18.):

Figure 18.

It’s a community… based on the meeting of people in the streets without knowing at the foundation and there is a tendency for the practice of meeting with skateboarders. They are used to meeting one another [John].

Me: Do you think finally that there is a community of skateboarders.
Billy: yeah, in a way I can say yes because when I go to other country and you go with your skateboard... all the skateboarder or skaters say hey where
However, as Malbon (1999) demonstrated in the case of clubbing, there is a danger of over-romanticising this annihilation of difference and forming of collective bonds. The skatepark should not be taken as utopian in this sense, for although at first glance it may seem as though park users are united in the same space, there is a tendency to form groups or cliques. These cliques often form around competence, with skateboarders generally socialising with those of a similar skill level, leading to a hierarchical dimension in the skatepark. These hierarchies are made obvious when skateboarders leave the skatepark to go street skateboarding. Whereas the skatepark brings different skill levels together in one space, when skateboarders take to the street they go with skateboarders of a similar skill level, thus demonstrating the divisions that the skatepark initially hid.

Summary and conclusion

In this essay skateboarding has given occasion to critique two related, though distinct bodies of work: the classic theory of subcultures and the notion that space is absolute. In this concluding section I identify three themes that best express these critiques, these are a) relational space, b) “the seductions of resistance” and c) post-subcultural identities. In these three themes lies a counter-analysis to the three tenets introduced earlier – resistance, societal reaction and subcultural identity – and in their entirety provide a convincing critique of the core concept of subcultures.

Relational Space

Throughout this paper I have shown how skateboarding is represented as a resistant subculture by virtue of the supposed spatial resistance that occurs when people skateboard in public spaces. This representation is based on the notion that spaces can be coded in absolute and pre-determined ways. I have sought to critique this assumption by arguing that skateboarding in urban space points towards a “heraclitean ontology” (Ek 2006: 376) where space is seen as being in the constant process of becoming (Massey 1999) “a verb rather than
a noun and the articulation of relational performances” (Ek 2006: 376). Space becomes through the relational encounters and performative enactments of skateboarders, in this case, and those that they encounter. The urban spaces in Clermont-Ferrand are unstable and in a constant process of change over time as peoples attitudes towards what is in place and what is out of place are not sedimented into a hegemonic normative ideology but open to dynamic interpretation. Society, which according to subcultural discourse ought to be “straight…, incorporated in a consensus, and willing to scream undividedly loud in any moral panic” (Clarke 1981: 172) is in fact fluid and changing, which brings me on to my next point.

“The seductions of resistance”

As mentioned subcultural theory is based on the assumption of a hegemonic, mainstream society against which subculturalists, in numerous guises, resist. In classic subcultural theory, in the geographic variant “youth cultures”, and even in the more critical post-subcultural literature, the existence of this mainstream is taken for granted. For all that subcultures have been the focus of debate the term mainstream has remained unproblematised, often referred to but rarely given any real shape or form. It exists as a shapeless assumption. By focusing on the relational encounters between skateboarders and “society” I have attempted to give some shape to this idea of mainstream society and hegemonic norms. What I have concluded is that far from there being a homogenous and hegemonic mainstream, members of the public and the police behave towards skateboarders in a way that is context specific and unpredictable.

A Post-subcultural Identity

The assumed naturalness of the subculture-mainstream binary has also been questioned here in relation to subcultural identities. Skateboarding I have argued is neither internally cohesive, nor stable, as skateboarders are diverse and relate to skateboarding on a temporally variable plane. Skateboarders do not identify themselves in opposition to a supposed mainstream. They commonly argued that they were just normal people. Consequently the divide between skateboarding and “the mainstream” melts away into meaningless fiction. This is not to say that there is not a skateboarding community of sorts that groups skateboarders together, but that the values which constitute this community are unclear. Moreover there is nothing to suggest that this community is based on anything subcultural or resistant to society, indeed such was denied.

By Way of a Conclusion
The three points outlined above can be seen as central themes in an alternative framework, based on Performativity, that provides a more fruitful analysis to studying skateboarding than the highly problematic mainstream-subculture binary. In this concluding section I wish to end by expanding the scope beyond skateboarding, proposing an alternative ontological starting point to the study of subcultures. One which refuses the inevitability of a mainstream-subculture dichotomy and which complicates the idea of the “mainstream”. This proposal is neatly summarised by Iveson (1998, in Malone 2002: 162):

What might a model of publicness that does not assume the existence of a single public with shared values look like?... the first step is to redefine the public sphere not as a single universal sphere with a set of universal values, but as a sphere where there is more than one set of values or more than one “public”.

In so far as this relates to subcultures I believe that there is a need to flatten the hierarchical ontology characterised by the subculture-mainstream binary. Rather than working with the assumption that a hegemonic mainstream exists, against which other cultural variants resist and are thus defined, is it not possible to imagine subcultures, such as skateboarding, as “ordinary” cultural variants that make up the conceptual whole? By taking Jennifer Robinson’s (2006) Post-colonial approach to cities as inspiration I argue that the answer to that question is yes.

Robinson provides a powerful critique of urban studies by highlighting the eurocentricism inherent in using western cities as the basis for a framework of urban studies, which by consequence marginalises non-western cities. Instead of complying to this discourse Robinson refuses to privilege western cities, viewing all cities as ordinary, though in many ways different. The study of subcultures is based on a similar assumption to that of urban studies, one which privileges the notion of the “mainstream”. Where Robinson sees all cities as being “ordinary” and integral parts of the conceptual whole, subcultures can also be seen as ordinary and equal parts of the social and cultural whole, rather than necessarily marginal and oppositional. This is not an attempt to gloss over the differences and idiosyncrasies which distinguish cultural variants such as skateboarding, but rather to consider them as being a part of a wider and more encompassing definition of culture. One which is not defined by a hegemonic set of values but is a sphere where there is more than one set of values, more than one culture.
Auto-Critique

Looking back I am confident that this work has achieved it aims to a satisfying degree. I began with the hope that I would be able to complicate an established body of work and way of looking at subcultures, and believe that I have done this. Many of the key methods and concepts worked well throughout the research period. The use of maps for example worked particularly well. Not only did they provide an essential prompt in the interviewing process but were also useful in the analysis. Similarly I believe that the Go-along method was particularly well suited and yielded some important results.

Nevertheless despite these successes there were a number of shortcomings and missed opportunities in this study. An obvious problem was that only 20 interviews were undertaken and that more importantly only one of which was with a female. Although the lack of female participation reflects the lack of female skateboarders in Clermont-Ferrand, so that my research did not suffer greatly from being gender biased, in hindsight more could have been
done to include female skateboarders in the study sample. Another, related issue, was that many skateboarders are under the age of 18 in Clermont-Ferrand and it would have been beneficial to the study to include younger participants. This type of study might also have benefited from being located in a larger city, Paris or Lyon being French examples. The advantages of this would, I imagine, have been a greater ethnic and gender mix of skateboarders. This being said my familiarity with Clermont-Ferrand prior to the research period enabled me to collect a lot of data in a relatively short time. I did not have to waist time finding out the popular “skate spots” or gaining access to the scene. For this reason, and given the time constraints, the choice of city was well justified.

In terms of missed opportunities I believe that this study would have benefited greatly from the use of photography, which if used in tangent with the maps might have encouraged more detailed reflection, and video-recording. Video-recording Go-along sessions would have been a useful way of documenting the ways in which skateboarders use the urban environment and the different types of relational encounters that result. Moreover I do not believe that video recording would have been overly obtrusive or distracting as skateboarders frequently film their skate sessions. I could also have paid more attention the lives of participants when they were not skateboarding, for although I did this with over half of the participants, I could have been more thorough in this respect.

Appendices

Appendix 1.

Brief Profile of Interviewees:

Fred [26/06/08]. French Male, 20 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 8 years.
Terence [28/06/08]. French (Martinique), 21 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 6 years.
Alan [29/06/08]. English (lived in France for 8 years), 20 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 6 years.
Francois [01/07/08]. Canadian/French, 23 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 13 years.
Pierre [02/07/08]. French/Algerian, 18 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 3 years.
John [04/07/08]. French Male, 31 years. Has been skateboarding for 12 years.
Billy [05/07/08]. French/Croat Male, 28 years. Has been skateboarding for 11 years.
Jules [07/07/08]. French Male, 30 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 15 years.
Jasper [07/07/08]. French Male, 25 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 11 years.
Josh [07/07/08]. French Male, 20 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 5 years.
Benjie [09/07/08]. French Male, 26 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 10 years.
Brian [10/07/08]. French Male, 18 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 6 years.
Charles [11/07/08]. French Male, 22 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 10 years.
Marc [13/07/08]. French Male, 20 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 10 years.
Marie [14/07/08]. French Female, 32 years of age. Has owned a Skateshop for 10 years.
Jonny [15/07/08]. French Male, 34 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 15 years.
Niko [16/07/08]. French Male, 29 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 12 years.
Florient [16/07/08]. French Male, 22 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 6 years.
Joseph [17/07/08]. French Male, 36 years of age. Has been skateboarding for 16 years.
Tim [17/07/08]. English (Has lived in France for 14 years), 21 years of age. Skateboarded for 5 years, quit 3 years ago.

Cover Letter given to Participants:

Thank you for agreeing to meet me. The purpose of this interview is to ask a series of questions about where you skateboard in Clermont-Ferrand and the different kinds of experiences when skateboarding. I will also ask questions relating to how you perceive of skateboarding as an activity.

With your permission this interview will be recorded. I would like to stress that your identity will be kept anonymous and that the nature of this interview is solely academic and information given will not be passed on to any third parties. I will be happy to send you a finished copy of my work when it is finished.
Please note that if any of the questions make you feel uncomfortable or if for any other reason you wish to stop please do not hesitate.

Thank you again for your time

Joe

Interview Schedule:
The following is a set of basic questions posed to all participants. However I would like to stress that the nature was semi-structured. Follow up questions were common, especially regarding the “skatespots”.

Opening Questions: What is your name? How old are you? How long have you been skateboarding?

Interviewee would then be presented with a photocopied map of Clermont-Ferrand, and would be asked to mark out, with a highlighter pen, where they skateboarded in the city. I would then go through the “skatespots” highlighted. [See overleaf for an example of a completed map].
What sort of public response do you get when skateboarding at these places?  
Are there difference in the spots that you marked out here?  
Is it illegal to skateboard in any of these places?  
Do you react when you are kicked out of a skate spot by a member of the public?  
Do you react when you are kicked out of a skate spot by a police officer?  
Have you noticed any changes in the reactions towards skateboarders since you began skateboarding?

Why did you start skateboarding?  
Why do you continue to skateboard?  
What do you think the popular image of skateboarder is?  
Is this justified?  
What is skateboarding in your opinion?  
Does being a skateboarder mean anything to you?  
What would you say to the idea of there being a skateboard identity?  
Is there a community of skateboarders?  
Have your opinions towards skateboarders changed since you started?  
Are most of your friends skateboarders?  
As a skateboarder do you feel distanced from those that do not skate?

*The participant would then be thanked and once again ensured of their anonymity.*

Sample of Interview :

*After showing participant a map of the city, upon which he highlights where he skateboards, I proceeded with the following questions.*

**Me:** So how does the general public usually react when you skate in these spots?

**Francois:** uh, it depends if the people are living there or not, uh if they own the place things like that.
Me: if its private property?

Francois: yeah if its private property then people don’t react well. If its public… but there are guards things like that then they don’t react well but the general public walking down the street kind of doesn’t mind.

Me: are there differences in the spots that you have marked out here?

Francois: well Marcombes is like an open skatepark so your allowed to skate there… uh les Cezeaux, if you well you have to choose the time of day when you go, it depends on the time. If you go on a Sunday then no one minds.

Me : Why is that?

Francois : because they are not working [laughs] because they are not there so, or they are not bothered about what are you doing.

Me :How about at these spots you highlighted like Place de la Victoire

Francois : Oh you can get people not liking the noise, or people who are scared, things like that.

Me :Courbetin?

Francois : That you can skate whenever

Me :Why do you think that is?

Francois : Because nobody really uses that space, apart from just walking through, yeah, its just a pathway.

Me :So if there are fewer people you get fewer problems?

Francois : No, no problems.

Me :How about les Volcans?
Francois: Well you used to be able to skate there ten years ago, but now they have had a lot of, well, a lot of skate, a lot of noise and now I think they are tired of it so they put up signs everywhere.

Me: Is there any police surveillance in any of these spots?

Francois: um yeah but its not really, its police women on bikes and things like that, but other than that we don’t really get arrested apart from if you jump a fence and go in private uh company, you know something where you have valuable things. But that’s just trespassing.

Me: Why do you think that Place de la Victoire has been made illegal to skate? Whereas the other places that you have marked out seem to be ok?

Francois: well its because its one of the most uh how do you say that, not popular but most frequented. It’s the main city centre. A couple of people may be complained about skaters probably not out of all the people may only five complain but that is enough. Yes they put up those signs… there was a man, on the top floor of one of the buildings, I’m not sure if he is there anymore but he really didn’t like skateboarders coming around to Place de la Victoire.

Me: Yeah? How did skaters react to him?

Francois: I think it made us laugh really, I, I haven’t seen him that much

Me: What do you think of the police when they kick you out?

Francois: uh generally not too bad, some are rude but its never violent.

Me: what do you think of skateboarding being illegal in these places?

Francois: I don’t know really, not… well I think its justified in some cases, Place de la Victoire I can understand that you know old people are scared you know and that the Mayor or whoever is responsible has to respond to that, I can understand that and I can still skate… well cause that place isn’t the best place to skate maybe if it was then [laughs].
Me: Do you react to the public when they kick you out of a spot?

Francois: uh, well I probably don’t listen, well just answer for a bit and then stay cause they have no right… uh well, say if its under someone’s window or something, if someone's window is right on the side and someone’s like “oh I’m trying to work” you just leave I guess, or you stay for a little bit but leave as soon as you are done.

Me: what about when the police kick you out?

Francois : I just leave. Well sometimes pressure them a bit to see if we can’t stay.

Me : What did your parents think of skateboarding ?

Francois : supportive yeah. I moved from Canada to France when I was like 11 and started skating then and they were all kind of trying to make me happy in France so when I wanted a skateboard they got me a skateboard [laughs]. But I think that the second day that I moved to France and went to the skatepark they saw all these older guys and were a bit worried of me hanging out with them. But they were supportive.

Me :Why did you start skating ?

Francois : Um, I don’t know, a friend was into it, but I moved to France so I thought I might as well do that.

Me :Why do you continue to skate?

Francois : Because I enjoy it, Yeah I enjoy it and that’s what my friends do, that’s what I’ve done all the time, apart from injuries, non-stop.

Me :What do you think the popular image of a skateboarder is?

Francois : Blink 182

Me :So?
Francois: Young punk, into punk music. Gel hair with spikes, chain around the neck, uh nice fashion T-shirt, really big pants, with a chained wallet.

Me: Is that image justified?

Francois: No [laughs].

Me: So what is a skateboarder to you?

Francois: There is no real… well the groups that I’ve met in England, they are just really diverse, all ages from 15-40, all professions from doctors to laborers you know everthing.

Me: So do you think that there is a skateboard identity?

Francois: Oh yeah just a skateboarder, skateboarders doing tricks on a skateboard.

Me: Can you categorize skateboarders?

Francois: I’ve met people who you’d, well I’d never guess that they were skateboarders, showed up and skate.

Me: Do you think there is a skateboard community?

Francois: Yeah. Because when I walk down the street and I see somebody I don’t really know, but I know that they are a skateboarder then I’ll say hello. So if you can call that a community then yeah.

Me: Uh, do you find it easier to get along with other skaters?

Francois: Not easier, but easy. Well I get along with other people too but its easy when you see someone who skates you can say oh hey you skate.

Me: Common ground?

Francois: Yeah.
Appendix 2.

Translations of French Interviews:

…t’as des gens qui sont intriguer, qui sont intéresser. Qui s’intéresse qui s’arrête et qui te regarde… [Niko].
Souvent ce qui ce passe c’est des gens qui nous regardent et qui l’apprécie ce qu’on fait plutôt… comme hier les gens ont arrêté pour nous regarder, ils voulaient qu’on rentre le trics. [Joseph].

“fasciner, deranger… les deux a la fois… curieux, fasciner et en meme temps deranger” [Jasper].

“t’as plein de parametres” [Jonny]

Le paramètre de temps… si tu viens a vingt trois heures les gens vont faire la gueule quoi. Mais après en journée bah, si tu viens – je sais pas moi – a fin de l’après midi il y aura plus de monde que si tu viens le matin a neuf heures… [Jonny].

... Place de la Victoire… c’est un place en fait prêt de la cathédral et normalement c’est interdit à faire du skateboard parce qu’il y a quelques années beaucoup de skateurs aillent la bas personne leur disait rien et depuis quelques années ils ont mit des panneaux et c’est normalement interdit de faire le skate, mais maintenant on peut en pratiquer parce que généralement la police ne dis rient et on peut faire du skate la bas et les gens n’appelle pas souvent lui [the police]. [Fred].

Les gens acceptent qu’on skate, après ca dépende l’attitude que tu as, si, si un gen voie qu’on fait pas attention a eux, que tu fais n’importe quoi. Forcement, j’ai jamais eu des soucis avec des gens… mais je fais gave, de comment je skate, je prends considération des autres personnes. [Joseph].

Si c’est juste quelqu’un qui passe qui ne réside pas sur le lieu, dans ce cas la je me foutre de ce qu’ils me disent [Niko].

Si c’est quelqu’un qui habite la, je comprends très bien quoi [Niko].

Si tu sens que voila tu es chez lui et que t’as pas le droit d’être la t’incline [Marc]

…moi putain j’aimerais pas quand je serais âgée qu’on fasse de bruit comme ca derrière ma fenêtre [Fred].
Déjà quand je skate dans une résidence je me sens pas a l’aise… j’aime pas… j’aime pas m’imposer. Je skate pas pareille, j’essaye de skater en faisant le moins bruit possible [Joseph].

…si la personne dit juste oui, s’il vous plaît vous faites trop de bruit vous ne pouvez pas aller ailleurs alors la je dis désolé et puis j’allais [Charles].

Il y a des gens qui se gueule un peu. Pendant un temps il y avait un mec qui habitait juste au sud qui criée [Pierre].

…si il est direct agressif avec moi je réagir, uh, je réagir mal comme lui quoi, si il est agressif avec moi je vais être agressif. Fin au début non, mais après ; je vais d’abord essayer de lui parler mais finalement si je vois que vraiment je perds mon temps je vais être agressif aussi [Benjie]

…si la personne commence a engeuler et nous insulter forcement on ne va pas aller. C’est logique [Charles].

Je dis rien, en général je dis rien. Sauf si ils sont vraiment méchant tu sais et il te gueule la sud et ils t’insultent la tu dis “c’est bon la! On s’en va” [Florient].

… rebel, non, rebel ça c’est des conneries ca, on est pas des rebels on est des gens normaux [Marc].

On n’est pas rebel dans le sens que “fuck the societe” c’est pas ca… on ne rejet pas la societe. [Joseph].

C’est pas comme si on faisait du graffiti ou quelque choses comme ca [Fred].

Ils n’est pas de tout les hooligans… quand on est des hooligans on ne passe pas un ans a savoir pas faire des figures [Jasper].

…dans le skate il y a plusieurs modes… les modes evolues… il y a plusieurs styles tu sais c’est surtout le style, il y a des skaters qui sont plutot un style hip hop ou rock and roll avec des jeans trop serer et des t-shirts courte… c’est melange. Il y a beaucoup choses dedans beaucoup styles, de facons de voire les choses tu sais [Fred].
Après les groupes forment selon le spot qu’on skate des fois. Il y a des gens qui skate beaucoup le mini, ceux qui n’aime pas le street et qui skate que le park, ça forme comme ça des fois [Marc].

[skateboarding] c’est une obsession… c’est un sport technique et intelligent et complexe comme le golf, il y a des sports très technique patinage artistique, gymnastique, judo. Très, très technique comme le football de Zidane [Jasper].

… un mélange entre le sport… mais aussi une création artistique… parce que c’est aussi une création, une création de toutes les instances [Marie].

C’est un sport, un vraie sport. [Joseph].

Pour moi c’est vraiment du sport [Fred].

C’est pas un sport déjà… c’est pas un sport [Charles]

On n’est pas considérer comme un sport en France [Niko].

Chaque skater est différent et occasionnelle. N’importe qui peut être un skater, la dans la vie de tous les jours je suis costard, cravattes, ordinateur ou quand je vais au théâtre je suis étudiant modèle, élève discipliner et on peut pas dire qui est skater. Ça peut être n’importe qui a un moment. C’est une heure par semaine, c’est ponctuelle. On n’est pas toutes la journée skater non plus en faite. On est skater mais pas tout le temps… on ne peut pas dire qui est skater en général parce que, un ils sont tous différents et deux, ils ne sont pas tout le temps eux-mêmes. Ils changent, leur personalites changent… [Jasper].

c’est des gens comme tous le monde, des étudiants, les lycéens… mais quand même ont une pratique anormale… il se trouve qu’a six heure au lieu d’aller faire un foot ils vont skater c’est tout – mais après c’est des gens comme tout le monde [Marie].

Je pense que le skate c’est un point de ralliement…chaqu’un a ces petits préférences culturelles… mais au final malgré ces différences la ces gens peuvent se retrouver grâce au skate ou a travers le skate. Donc en fait le skate permet de rallier différents cultures… c’est quelque choses de mélange… ca existe dans des différents pays et dans chaque pays ca un
petit peu son identité aussi… c’est un petit peu différent dans chaque truc mais en même temps ça se retrouve, fin ça se regroupe donc c’est un vrai phénomène de ralliement des gens différents qui apporte quelque choses chaque fois a leur propre identité de leur propre culture [Jules].

**Marc:** Il y a quand même quelque choses qui nous fait qu’on regroupe autours de quelque choses, il y a des valeurs commun je pense…

**Me:** Quelles sont ces valeurs?

**Marc:** Les valeurs oh je sais pas c’est vague comme même, c’est pas des trucs vraiment précis…

C’est un communauté… base ou on se rencontre dans la rue sans se connaitre dans la base et il y a un habitude de la rencontre entre les skaters. Ils sont habitue de se rencontrer [John]

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**Appendix 3:**

Confirmation e-mail from Jerome Trives, owner of B.A.S.S. Skateshop in Clermont-Ferrand permitting me to work and research in his shop.
Salut Jo !

Ce sera avec grand plaisir !

Je vais être à Londres le 13-14 et 15 avril, ce serait cool de skater ensemble !

See you soon !

Jerome

Joe Penny <zcfac88@ucl.ac.uk> a écrit :

[Hide Quoted Text]

Bonjour Jerome,

C'est Joe Penny (l'anglais). J'espère que tout va bien à Clermont. En fait j'ai
un faveur de te demander qui concerne mes études ici à Londres. Cette été je
vais commencer une recherche qui est la base de mon diplôme. Je vais étudier le
idée du "sub-culture" vis-à-vis le skateboard. Une partie de la recherche sera
sur l'aspect commercial du skateboard, et voilà mon intérêt avec BASS. Je te
demande si il serait possible pour moi de travailler à Bass pendant l'été
(sans être payé) pour voir comment ça marche. J'aimerais aussi faire une
analyse de la composition de vos achats. Si vous ne voulez pas que je
travaille à BASS est-ce que vous auriez des figures sur les achats que je
pourriez voir. Je sait que ce que je te demande est beaucoup et sache que tout
les informations que je utilise seront confidentielle et seulement pour des
raisons académique. Si vous n'êtes pas d'accord avec ses idées je comprend et
on se verra en été sans doute. merci.

Sincèrement

Joe

(ps désolé pour le français et la manque d'accent)

This message was sent using IMP, the Internet Messaging Program.
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