THE 21st CENTURY STAGE: PERFORMING CLUTURE IN EDINBURGH'S SKATEBOARDING COMMUNITY

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Bristo Square is a plaza owned by Edinburgh University which was last redeveloped in 1983. Being set right in the heart of the city, one only needs to be there a moment or two to notice an almost constant stream of commuters, shoppers, tourists and students passing through. After more than one visit there it becomes very apparent that the social dynamics of the space are always the same. On one side dwells a long line of alcoholics, some of them homeless, with their usual arsenal of dogs, cigarettes and cheap cider. Littered around the edges are students, couples, tourists and businesspeople eating lunch. The first thing one sees and hears when they arrive at the square, however, is the skateboarders. A constant rumble across the ageing paving stones is fragmented by the regular snaps, screeches and thuds that occur when trying to perform a manoeuvre. They follow one another around recording videos with iPhones, laughing and groaning for each other's successes and mistakes. For years, the University has been threatening to redevelop the square. There have been rumours of grass, flower beds and even a large glass dome to go in its place, a few of my informants tell me. But this time it is actually happening. After April 2015, what was Edinburgh's epicentre of skateboarding culture for over two decades will be gone. I intend to consider the posthumously published work of Turner (1987) and developments on his ideas by Lewis (2013) and Schechner (1995, 2003) concerning performance theory. I will then use these ideas to display Edinburgh's skateboarding community as a culture based on performative acts and will also discuss this culture's place in the 21st century mediascape to illustrate the effects it has on a growing community and the increasing accessibility of its socialisation process.

Having used the square many times while growing up in Edinburgh, the redevelopment caught my attention as an excellent field for my first attempt at ethnography. Before beginning university I was an avid skateboarder and still know many of the people who are part of Edinburgh's skateboard community, at least by face if not by name. While many ethnographers may spend a great deal of time building relationships, learning languages and coming to terms with their new environment in the field, I felt I was able to immerse myself in participant observation with relative speed and ease because of my previous status within the community. One thing I noticed very quickly, however, is that during the square's precious last few weeks, besides the large increase in the number of skateboarders using the square, not much seemed different. Several of my older informants noted that it was similar to the 'old days', referring to a time when the square was used more regularly before the development of a large skatepark about a mile away from Bristo Square in 2010. Most of my informants told me that they now more commonly used the skatepark rather than the square. Paul told me there are 'just more opportunities and obstacles and endless lines in a bigger area.' The opportunities he refers to are opportunities to do stunts. These stunts are generally performed by incorporating the obstacles, and a 'line' implies a set of consecutive stunts that are performed without mistakes. The more time I spent at the square, the more I struggled to find what I was looking for. There was no dynamic between the skateboarders and the university as no officials from the university were ever present. The skateboarders just kept doing their best to enjoy themselves, often taking a break to drink a beer or to smoke cannabis, talking about who landed which trick, who got injured where and if I had 'seen the video'. Suddenly I was aware of which direction I wanted to take my research. By returning to the square with an anthropologist's gaze, I realised that what I was looking for was sitting right under my nose, even back in my bedroom at university. An entire subculture built on performance, and I had the videos to prove it.

With the arrival of Web 2.0 software (websites which emphasise user-generated content and simple usability) and YouTube (a website where people can upload videos that can be shared, rated and commented on) the ability to create and share homemade movie clips is easier than ever.

Dickey has suggested that this sort of technology exists in a peripheral sphere to culture (Wilson and Peterson 2002: 450), however, a more widely discussed understanding of it would suggest that this sort of technology with the ability to foster online communities acts as a context for culture (2002: 450) to be observed and analysed as though the mediascape were a physical place. Burgess and Green, on the other hand, have described YouTube as a 'dynamic cultural system' (2009: vii) by making YouTube the object of research as opposed to a space. With the object of my research being the performance element of skateboarding, it makes sense for me to adopt an inclusive stance which sees video-sharing software as both a context for culture and a dynamic system where culture can continue and evolve. Ferg, a college dropout who now makes videos for the Edinburgh based skateboard brand *Harvest* tells me he began making amateur films on his phone after moving in with Charlie and Myles, two skateboarders who are apparently very well-known within the community. 'I hadn't really been skating for a couple of years before I came back up to Edinburgh so I was really *stoked*[1] just to watch and get them *hyped*.' The creative editing style was very well received and after spending his student loan on camera equipment he became more and more involved in the company's media production. While the production skills he learns might be transferable to other industries in later life, it currently does not bring him any income. Jj, an 18-year-old skateboarder in his last year of secondary school, also regularly uploads videos of himself and his friends. Some of his footage is collected and edited together with music for his YouTube channel and he uploads other shorter clips of a single trick or 'line' straight to Facebook from his iPhone. A secret group on Facebook comprised of almost nine-hundred predominantly Scottish members exists where any member can invite their friends to join and almost all of the homemade media generated by amateurs across the country is generally shared. While a skateboarding community definitely existed before, communication hubs such as the Facebook page have let it flourish. Paul tells me there are a few skaters that he has gotten to know just by seeing them post on the Facebook page, and that it has been great for easing off a divide between older and younger skateboarders. It seems clear then

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[1] A glossary of terms for all italicised words is provided at the end of the article.

that these web based platforms have opened up the field for 'participatory culture' (Burgess and Green 2009: 10). Before YouTube, British skateboarders would generally watch video performances from large American corporations or read publications such as *Sidewalk Skateboard Magazine* to create an identity for themselves as a member of the skateboarding subculture. Nowadays, skateboarding subculture exists on a very accessible local level where performances by local social actors can be captured, shared and viewed. Not only does this extend the physical spaces of performance to the digital realm but it also allows for the continuation and evolution of culture beyond Bristo Square and the community that began there.

Lewis argues that culture is performance and it is this performance which distinguishes one social group from another (2013). This is a clear evolution from Turner's idea (1987) that culture exists as a long series of performances which form the unwritten laws of normality and anomaly of a particular group. Schechner (2003) would argue that performance is performance when people say it is, yet, it was not until I asked my informants explicitly whether or not they considered skateboarding as a sort of performance when they themselves considered that it might be. Turner (1987) and Schechner's (1995; 2003) discourse on performance also presents a Levi-Straussian theory of mediated distinction. There exists a binary opposition between performance in ordinary life and performance in special events (Lewis 2013: 7). Performance as an ordinary event is actually difficult to notice since recognising that an ordinary event is a performance could theoretically render it as a special event. Special events can be planned or spontaneous but exist as singular, observable phenomena. Application of this theory to skateboarding would imply that a trick or 'line' is classified as a special event. Thus, it is the act of an individual self-reflecting on their role in a performance which allows for mediation to occur between ordinary and special events. Lewis calls this self-reflection the 'micro-evolution of signification' (2013: 12). This process begins right after the occurrence of a special event and immediately its participants (who could be the performer, an observer or anyone else involved) are subject to 'feelingful' effects. In the case of a skateboarder this would be feeling the skateboard underfoot and reconnecting with the ground, staying balanced and

rolling away after successfully completing a manoeuvre. The 'micro-evolution' continues and transpires to more 'ideaful' effects, where the performer may consider identity or self-worth just moments after landing the trick. This final self-reflection on the recently landed trick is what makes the event a performative act. Generally any other skateboarders nearby will be participants of the performative act through a similar self-reflection on their relationship to the manoeuvre that they have witnessed and to its performer. For example, one of my informants told me, 'Damien kickflipped the 'Sheraton 10' when he was 11 or some shit.' A kickflip is a trick by which the performer goes airborne and the skateboard flips round to the point where the wheels are facing upward and then continues right round to its default position before the performer lands back on it and reconnects with the ground. The 'Sheraton 10' I am told is a staircase comprised of ten steps located outside the Sheraton hotel in central Edinburgh, which Damien used as an obstacle to kickflip over, starting at the top and landing at the bottom. Evidently this is an impressive feat for a child of 11, and Paul's reflection on it proves that the trick was a performative event that is still being participated in today.

In a way, the phenomena of tricks or 'lines' as performative acts is the major socialisation process specific to the skateboarding subculture. The process of socialisation is generally considered in regard to infants. They find their roles as social actors within a community by reference to others (Lewis 2013: 17). I feel that the theory is relevant here in the sense that a skateboarder can find their place in the local community by their involvement in performances, whether they are the performer or merely an observer. What makes skateboarding in the 21st century unique is a greatly increased accessibility of this socialisation process because of the ability to digitally capture performances and share them with any other skateboarder who was not involved in the original performative act. Reichelt discusses this possibility as something termed 'ambient intimacy' (as cited in Gauntlett 2011: 96). She writes, 'ambient intimacy is about being able to keep in touch with people with a level of regularity and intimacy that you wouldn't usually have access to, because time and space conspire to make it impossible.' In simpler terms, the community on YouTube and the Edinburgh based

Facebook group allow for participation in single perfomative acts to be extended to anyone in the community who takes the time to watch the video.

From spending time at Bristo Square, it became apparent that the skateboarder's motives were not based on any understanding of their sport as performance. One informant, a carpenter who has frequented the square for almost ten years describes it as:

'the place where everyone could go and meet people for a skate, maybe go somewhere else or just stay all day. It kept the scene alive. It was place for everyone to just hang out, drink lots of beers, smoke til' you lose sight, look at so many pengalengs*, laugh at* tweakers *and kick it with* the squad'.

From my experience with them, skateboarders skateboard for enjoyment. Schechner accounts for this sort of performance in his discussion of play (1995). He notes that play can be ascribed to a variety of acts, sometimes we are playing to cohere or defy a social norm; to seek comfort or to feel the adrenaline rush of danger, which Caillois describes as ilinx (Lewis 2013: 26); anything which brings an individual enjoyment could be understood as a 'play act' and the participation in play makes a 'play act' also a performance. The paradoxical quality of play is that it can be planned or unplanned; voluntary or involuntary. In the case of skateboarders in Edinburgh, one voluntary and impressive manoeuvre can lead to involuntary excitement from the performance's observers, which then leads to more budding performers attempting more impressive tricks to keep the mood going. Paul explains to me that, 'the more ballsy skaters feed off each other's *hype.'* With this in mind, skateboard performances seem to exist to satisfy the ilinx of the skateboard community, whether the individual is at the centre of the performative act or is merely excited to witness it.

The playful and performative aspects of the skateboarding community seem to exist beyond just tricks and 'lines'. As mentioned previously, Turner and Schechner's notion of ordinary and

special events highlights the fact that ordinary events are also classed as performative (1987; 1995, 2003). It is arguable that the entire lifestyle which the Edinburgh skateboarders conduct is a performance. From the language they create to the regular use of cannabis, these 'play acts' act as a basis of the typical Edinburgh skateboarder's performances and Reichelt's 'ambient intimacy' (Gauntlett 2011: 96) plays a prevalent role in the way skateboarders present themselves to one another. With the addition of modern media sharing sites as a context for culture, this performance through ordinary life is extended into the community's mediascape.

In Gauntlett's book *Making is Connecting* (2011) he discusses the 'metaphorical fingerprints' that are found on digital creations, where the personality of the maker can be seen through the finished product. In the case of the videos made at Bristo Square and around Edinburgh, these are very recognisable. In the case of Ferg's videos for the company *Harvest,* skateboarding performances are intermittent with artwork and animations often with minimal and ambient music to match (2014). While much of this style exists to match the marketing standards of the company, his other videos depict a much more comical amateur style, including clips of skateboarders horsing around between the tricks, 'I remember filming an older guy who used to skate Bristo. He was in a kilt and he fell right on his arse; that was a good one!' Jj's videos which are predominantly filmed from his iPhone often feature much shakier footage, with poorer lighting and music choice from his personal taste (2014). Gauntlett's study on digital creation discusses the move away from a need for videos to look professional. He speaks from experience and reminds us that when watching YouTube, we notice the unprofessional presentation of videos, but we do not mind (2011: 85). He draws the words from Ruskin, writing in the Victorian era who tells that we should recognise the effort gone into the subject matter, and not the frame in which it appears (2011: 85). It is evident that the majority of the videos uploaded by members of Edinburgh's skateboarding community are not to reach any audience beyond it. In fact, most recently it appears that this amateur style of video making is preferred among the local community. The YouTube and Facebook community relevant to Bristo Square and the rest of Edinburgh are thus a sort of stage by which the lives, pastimes and

tricks of local actors are performed. These performative acts satisfy the ilinx of play and allow for the nourishment of a growing community and the Web 2.0 software of the 21st century. 'Metaphorical fingerprints' act both as a mark of individuality and appeal to the local style which adds ease to new and existing members' socialisation occurring through sharing both their manoeuvres and their ordinary lives.

From an original interest in a social dynamic between Edinburgh's skateboarding community and the authority over Bristo Square, my research led me to see a subculture which I have been a social actor in for many years from a totally different perspective. Through Turner, Schechner and Lewis' (1987; 1995, 2003; 2013) works on performance theory, I was able to view skateboarding culture on a local level as akin to the performance rituals discussed in their books. With the increasing accessibility of video-sharing software and online communities, I have shown that the 21st century stage utilised by skateboarders in Edinburgh extends far beyond regular dimensions of time and space and into the mediascape which exists as a context for culture while it continues to evolve. The normalisation of unprofessional media production has also played its part in cultural evolution, allowing for new and existing actors of the community to socialise and integrate in ways that were impossible in the past. Whether their socialisation occurs through performing, filming, observing, sharing their lifestyle or even just feeling the *hype* there is evidently a growing sense of camaraderie amongst the community which continues to accelerate. I have learned a great deal about anthropology and its application to everyday life by entering a field I had considered very familiar to me and returning with a completely unfamiliar understanding of the people involved and their motivations for identifying with a subculture. Despite the demise of Bristo Square, it is clear that the community once founded there will continue to grow and prosper in both the physical and digital realm. And 'that's pretty *rad.'*

*G*lossary of Terms:

     i.   Stoked: Pleased with oneself or another, excited, glad

     ii.   Hype; hyped: Excitement; a sort of energetic feeling when participating alongside others

     iii. Pengalengs: Attractive women

     iv. Tweakers: Drug addicts

     v.   'the Squad':   The group of skateboarders performing together on any given day

     vi. Rad: Good, cool, impressive

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