

Reviews



General

Duncan McDuie-Ra, *Skateboarding and Urban Landscapes in Asia: Endless Spots*

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Skateboarding and Urban Landscapes in Asia: Endless Spots is a difficult book to pigeonhole, let alone summarize. While at its core it is a study clearly rooted in human geography, it is also significant parts Asian studies, ethnography, film studies, and social theory exploration, with a short history of skateboarding added for good measure. Yet, despite this breadth of focus, Duncan McDuie-Ra writes in a fluid style, that, as outlined in the following paragraphs, unfolds a bit like street skating itself with all of its mini-victories and road rash. It is an extremely ambitious passion project and, full disclosure, one that resonates with this reviewer as an over-fifty-year-old skater himself.

The monograph examines how skateboarding can be viewed as an alternative way to think through urban cartography, modernity, and globalization. In the opening chapter, the author frames his argument and the theoretical lexicon that rises and falls as a leitmotif throughout the book. Skating was initially popularized in California in the late 1950s, and by the 1990s the state became the key site of material-cultural output related to skate subculture—from boards to clothes to music to attitude, and important for the case at hand, the global circulation of skate videos. In so becoming, California concomitantly emerged as a global pilgrimage site for aspiring or dedicated skaters. It became skate culture's Mecca so to speak, a place of "spots" (13) (assemblages of material and social connections) that were "enrolled" (15) (reimagined and reinterpreted) through a particular "below the knees" (42) "gaze" (33) (skating as an embodied ethnographic method rooted in the appropriation of hegemonic place and purpose) to form alternative cartographies of urban landscapes or, as McDuie-Ra frames it, "shredscapes" (22) that are ever-emergent in modernizing cities. Without the conceptual shorthand, the argument could be roughly outlined as: the faster locations are thrown into an engagement with modernization, the faster urban landscapes change with the potential for a reinterpretation of urban features envisioned and repurposed as *skateable*, which results in the development of local skate cultures influenced by global skate culture. Locally and globally, and notably via the global exchange of video recordings, such locations become recognized as part of an always-changing alternative mapping of urban space.

This process of mapping spots first emerged in the United States, followed by Europe, and most recently, as the book details, East Asia and beyond. With the circulation of videos, first VHS then DVD and now on online platforms, come ideologies and material culture moving from the shifting core to the shifting “frontiers” (139), such as the Middle East or South Asia, where it is sometimes mimicked and sometimes appropriated and reinterpreted. With this theoretical framing outlined over the first two chapters, the book focuses on the recent past, present, and possible future of skateboarding spots and how their emergence is entwined as local and global encounters with modernity. Each chapter moves from the core to the periphery across location and time. First, China emerged as rife with spots in the 2000s (and slightly earlier Japan and Korea, though these regions are not focused on in this book due to an abundance of previous studies). Some of these locations were original, while others, like Shanghai’s LP, modelled on a well-known historic skate spot by then defunct in Philadelphia, became “approximate assemblages . . . reborn in China” (78). Chapter by chapter the book focuses on cross-cultural and comparative encounters with skaters and varied environments (usually through analysis of video). McDuie-Ra notes, “skaters care little about the complex causality that produces a landscape: they care about the assemblage of spots” (93). This claim is underscored as the book moves through Central Asia (Astana and Baku), Dubai, post-Soviet spaces (Tashkent and Abkhazia), Iran, and India, and the “endless search” for “endless spots” (171). In this quest the focus is skating, not local culture or politics; a host of positive and negative interactions with locals are highlighted, from lighthearted encounters such as security guards bribed with beers or local children becoming impromptu cheering obstacles to more serious confrontations over the below-the-knees vision of a depoliticized shredscape and local vision of a pain-ridden “memoryscape” (131). In sum, skaters, often from affluent countries with a relatively turbulence-free recent history, come to see that not every monument or temple is virgin marble waiting for the slap of wood and the squawk of urethane wheels.

As a reviewer, I am admittedly predisposed to enjoy this book. And I did. First, I am familiar with the theoretical language. Second, I possess some of the below-the-knees habitus discussed in the book; at least I can envision some of the tricks mentioned in the book performed on the surfaces mentioned. And third, I have lived in or visited several parts of Asia discussed in the text. Moreover, as a somewhat dedicated backcountry skier, I suspect there could be a similar comparative aspect to this sort of autoethnography for some readers. I view mountain vistas with a similar below-the-knees gaze in the summer, imagining powder lines, avalanche chutes, and easy approaches where I suspect many see a picturesque range and greenery. However, I wonder how many readers will come to the text with this sort of background. In short, the thicket of theoretical terms, skate culture terminology, and embodied/affect-oriented observations may (or perhaps may not) be hard for some readers to follow.

As an anthropologist, and writing this review for a journal dedicated to ethnography, I imagine another key issue some readers might have is with the lack of firsthand ethnographic fieldwork or anthropological sources. For example, reference to Ingold’s “wayfaring” (2011) or Stoller’s “sensuous scholarship” (1997) would have added more theoretical gravity to the concept of a below-the-knees skater’s gaze. And, with the notable exception of chapter 6, which offers outstanding insights into the personal lives of skaters in Iran and India, the ethnography is descriptive and evocative but lacking in interpersonal depth, especially in regard to what individuals *other* than skaters

might think, for example about the repurposing of spots. Finally, there is a sprawling introduction and a concise conclusion, but the chapters in between read more like a compilation of stand-alone papers on a set of theoretical themes. Despite being a bit repetitive, there is nothing wrong with this, but it returns to my opening point of reading it being a little like street skating itself. Each sandwiched chapter is like running a line of tricks—bailing back to earlier sections, regrouping, trying again—but in the end, McDuié-Ra lands it and earns a requisite pat on the back for making what seemed impossible at the start of the run, possible and enjoyable.

REFERENCES

- Ingold, Tim. 2011. *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*. New York: Routledge.
- Stoller, Paul. 1997. *Sensuous Scholarship*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

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