

Spectacle + Experience

In my book I described our riding as producing “extraordinary spectacles and experiences.” There I used the adjective in the literal sense of “extra-ordinary”: skateboarding, like all arts, draws lines between the highly regulated everyday world and a special space and time where we have the freedom to make our own rules, if any. Here I would like to elaborate on the nouns. “Spectacle” and “experience” may help explain points of divergence between different types of skating as well as changes in the priorities of maturing rider.

“Spectacle” traces back to the Latin verb *spectare*, meaning “to look at” or “to gaze upon.” A spectacle is an object, event, or person worthy of our sustained visual attention. Some spectacles, like a meteor shower or an explosion, happen accidentally. Artists attempt to create spectacles deliberately. To do so, they must have an audience.

Vert skating is certainly spectacular in this sense. Its pools, parks, pipes and ramps demand attention by themselves; many sculptors, architects, and engineers admire them. Few people can ignore the slashing lip tricks, contorted inverts, and soaring airs of riding these structures. The dominance of vert skating from the late ‘70s through the ‘80s was no surprise; freestyle, slalom, and other types of riding were less impressive to behold. Half-pipes and megaramps continue to attract thousands of spectators at every stop on the action sports tours of the modern era. Vert skating then and now suffers from one weakness as a spectacle, though: big transitions are rare and inaccessible to most riders, limiting the number of performances there.

The flatground ollie and the kickflip began to make street skating equally spectacular in the mid-‘80s. Bigger pops and more high-tech flips on ledges, stairs, handrails, and other found terrain capture the greatest number of onlookers today.

In response, most companies produce shortboards optimized for spectacular street skating. They flood the market with popsicle decks, low-profile trucks, and small, rock-hard wheels. Eye-popping graphics on the decks’ undersides complement (or substitute for) sensational above-board maneuvers. An ever-growing number of shoe brands design their footwear not only to withstand a month’s worth of kickflipping and hucking, but also to lure others’ gaze. Garish, logo-covered “skate clothing” attracts spectators as well, even if the wearer’s riding is less visually stunning. Decorating one’s body with tattoos has also become part of the street skating spectacle lately.

Most skateboarding media has followed suit. Sometimes there are eyewitnesses to the biggest and flashiest tricks, but more often print and online sources peddle their eye-candy to a global audience. Photo sequences are really video stills; numerous split-second frames are necessary to show all of the technical details of the tricks. Video on websites cuts rapidly from one highlight to another, while a punk rock or hardcore hip hop soundtrack blares. The graphic design that surrounds the photo and video footage

is equally dazzling. Even the little bits of text function visually like graffiti, showing off the author's command of the latest slang for praise or blame.

This emphasis on spectacle is all well and good to a certain extent. The desire to display one's psychological daring and physical skills before a large audience is developmentally appropriate for adolescents and early twenty-somethings, especially males. Expressing this desire on a shortboard in the streets is healthy, so long as young riders craft their spectacles by themselves, rather than allowing older folks within the industry and outside to make decisions for them. Here lies the difference between the artist and the poser among skaters and between support and exploitation by their handlers.

Spectacle is not the whole of art generally nor skateboarding in particular, however; there is also the "experience." The source of this English word is the Latin verb *experire*, meaning "to share in." Experience is more a matter of doing oneself than watching what others do. Little or no audience is necessary; often the most rewarding experiences are solitary or shared only among a small group of fellow doers.

Experience appears to be a higher priority among longboarders and riders of non-popsicle short sticks. Some cruise and carve, others speed and slalom, still others push for distance. Their boards maximize the most fundamental experience of skateboarding: nearly effortless rolling and turning. The wide range of decks, trucks, and wheels—including hold-overs from the '70s as well as new products developed with cutting-edge design and manufacturing technologies—allows riders to vary their experiences as they choose.

The magazines and websites that cover these resurgent types of skateboarding naturally focus more upon experience too. Longer, more substantive articles discuss the "feel" of the author's riding more often than the visual "style" of someone else. Many times they mention a sense of harmony between the mind and body and between the rider and the larger world. Photos are large, rectangular stills rather than sequences of tiny squares. Videos record connected riding in fewer, longer takes. The music, if any, is mellower. Frozen and moving images surround riders with gorgeous natural landscapes, like a sunset beach or verdant mountain roads. Everywhere skateboarding's parallels with surfing are more apparent.

As skaters mature, their priorities often shift from popped spectacle to four-on-the-floor experience. Necessity is partly responsible: aging bodies are less able to coordinate the micro-movements of street skating and to survive its hard landings; the twitches of muscle fibers slow, bones and connective tissues weaken, and the brain's frontal lobes realize the danger more fully. More attachments to the world—like a loving spouse, a home, young children, and a more conventional career—also decrease a veteran skater's enthusiasm and opportunities for wowing an audience.

Greater appreciation for the fundamentals of rolling and turning may be a positive, aesthetic development as well. As our knowledge and understanding of the world grows

with years, we become more discerning in all of our tastes, preferring lasting values to passing trends, a solid core to superficial trappings. Leaving behind the worst expectations of parents, teachers, and civil society to join a pack of street shredders may have been the most liberating moment of adolescence, but escaping the pressures within that tribe to ride truly as one pleases may become the defining moment of adult skateboarding.

We must be careful, though, not to suggest that spectacle and experience are mutually exclusive terms. A crisp kickflip on a hot shortboard feels great, and many longboarders carve and slide with high style. Likewise, some ol' timers are still pushing the envelope of big, tech street skating, and a growing number of pee-wees are hurtling downhill or zipping through cones on boards nearly as tall as themselves.

“Spectacle” and “Experience” may be like two sliders on a mixing board in a recording studio. Every skater raises or lowers them to whatever level he or she chooses from trick to trick, session to session, and board to board. Neither priority is ever entirely absent or present. Most important, however we skate, and however we live more broadly, is having our own hands on the controls.

- TC