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Concrete Jungles: Street Skateboard Cinema, Animal Worlds, and Contingent Ecologies

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> *Openness to contingency can only be playful, as it is openness to the* world as a game *that knows no determination.*
>
> -Marcus Steinweg, *Inconsistencies*[1]

> *How can one tune oneself so that a part of that radical difference, the experiences that overwhelm us, would be able to enter our registers of experience? How can one enter a plane of immanence and open oneself up to durations of animals, insects, stones, matter, technology, etc?*
>
> -Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media*[2]

I suspect that the poet Marianne Moore would have loved the 2016 film *Spirit Quest*. Suspend judgment for the moment, if you will, as director Colin Read's latest feature-length effort is (ostensibly) a "skateboarding film," and consider Moore's late-career reflections on her own work: "Why an inordinate interest in animals and athletes? They are subjects for art and exemplars of it, are they not? minding their own business. Pangolins, hornbills, pitchers, catchers […]. I don't know how to account for a person who could be indifferent to miracles of dexterity."[3] Although Moore's musings

also include references to the non-conversational bent of animals and athletes as well as their refusal to "make us self-conscious"[4]—claims which are at once wonderfully droll and in need of major finessing—I would like to dwell herein on *miracles of dexterity* as evoked through the nexus of animals, sporting bodies, and moving-image technology. While *Spirit Quest* is certainly the acme of skate cinema's integration of animal images (whether documentary or animated) within its presentation of street skating, it is hardly the only film of its kind to rely on such a fusion; in truth, various *zoe-images* have long been integral to a particular strain of skate productions: birds in flight, plant-focused time-lapse footage, the motion of insects—all have emerged to punctuate the athletic-artistic endeavors of the skater.[5] Is this little more than an extension of "mourning for the disappearing wildlife" that Akira Lippit links to cinema's genesis?[6] Evidence that the medium is still "haunted by the animal figure," chasing the ever-escaping metaphor?[7] Do these films participate in processes of control and capture, the spreading of an epistemological net? And, more specifically, how does a glimpse into the mode of skate cinema, hitherto an almost total blind spot in the eye of film and media studies, somehow purport to offer a renewed understanding of animal and vegetal worlds, on screen and beyond?

Elsewhere, in a more hopeful register, Lippit returns to the collision of animals and film, *physis* and *technê*, and media- and animal-studies. Here, in the foreword to *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, he prizes a space of potential which is likewise crucial to a number of thinkers forming this essay's critical constellation: *the middle*. "In the middle, midfield, medium," he writes (or intones)—referring at once to the two fields of study, which lack definable "beginnings," and the field one finds oneself in when activating a connection between the two—movement is the only choice.[8] By approaching skateboarding through both its moving image ecology and its relation to animal life, and by thinking animal worlds (*Umwelten*, perhaps) through the curious athletics and environmental engagements of street-skateboarding, I am beginning from a (thickened, idiosyncratic) middle field that takes little for

granted and remains open to the contingent, the connective. And while these discussions carry significant political and ethical weight, they must not lose sight of the playful. Play, we should emphasize, can be a serious business.

This essay is thus an attempt, however provisional, to fill in some gaps in the critical study of street skateboarding and its media extensions, while at the same time it aims to open up both media- and animal-studies to a set of objects and experiences as yet almost wholly outside their purview. It begins by clearing the ground a bit by sketching some of the ways that skate filmmakers have produced and integrated animal images into what we might term the films' diegesis, before making the case for *Spirit Quest* as a limit case of sorts pertaining to the athletic-animal-technological experimentation of the genre. I will be relying here on a mixture of the process philosophy of A.N. Whitehead and the Spinoza-influenced affect theory of Deleuze and Guattari, all of which is channeled exquisitely by Jussi Parikka in his media archaeological study of insect technics. I argue that Read's film, inasmuch as it offers a multifaceted take on metamorphosis and troubles what seem to be strict anthropomorphic links, urges us toward a different understanding of the mediation of human, animal, and environmental bodies on screen. That it does so while tinging the fluidity of its "miracles of dexterity" with moments of rupture is perhaps its most aporetic feature, yet also its most accessible space for critical inquiry.

Ground Clearing: What Skateboarding *Isn't*

If, as Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence suggest, animal life "is arguably both constituted *by* and constitutive *of* moving image ecologies,"[9] then it should hardly surprise us that skateboarding, which accentuates a hyper-focus on movement and rhythm, a semiotics akin to that of dance and focused on bodily expressivity, and an openness to experimentation, should offer a particularly rich

media ecology with respect to this interplay. It might be more accurate to say that while skate cinema weaves animal representations and affects into its tapestry, it also more broadly functions as a mediascape wherein a slew of interrelated cinema-historical pursuits continue to surface, enter into new relationships, and forge novel experiences. Light-rhythm experiments, stop-motion trickery, city-symphony sequences and avant-garde spirited animation seem naturally to make themselves at home in the skateboard film, in a manner that speaks less to a reductive post-modern surface play than an attempt to aggregate affective images that resonate with and through the act of skateboarding. Skate cinema is also particularly fertile with respect to optical investigations, in terms both spatial (e.g. the reliance on "fisheye" lens technology) and temporal (time-lapse cinematography; slow- and fast-motion "ramping").

Furthermore, skateboarding is on the short list of fields that still regularly utilize sequence photography, as image arrays of between nine and twelve frames-per-second continue to be a mainstay in its print publications. These appear in forms descendant from both the Muybridge approach (individual images arranged sequentially within an external frame) and a tactic more akin to Marey's chronophotography (images sequenced against a "stable" background, tracking motion through an ostensibly homogeneous space). Often a particular trick will appear in both a single image and sequence form in a magazine, while concurrently (or shortly thereafter) manifesting in a video release. Skate culture's own reflection on and of its "miracles of dexterity," then, is ranged across still photography, an ersatz *zoopraxography*, and the moving image proper.

In terms of skating and the moving image, a brief bit of historical context can help clarify this still relatively obscure field. Skate culture has intermittently found its way onto cinema screens in a variety of forms, including the Palme d'Or winning short film *Skaterdater* (1965, dir. Noel Black), Larry Clark's independent—and majorly controversial—feature film, *Kids* (1995, screenplay Harmony

Korine), and the 2001 documentary *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (dir. Stacy Peralta), which tracks the evolution of Southern California street skating in the 1970s and its ties to surf culture. These disparate films are all, in their own way, *about* skateboarding; the act itself is part of their subject matter, and they both evoke and capitalize on different elements of the skate zeitgeist. What I will be tracking throughout this essay are what might be most easily referred to as skate videos—productions made (primarily) by and for skaters, concerned ultimately with displaying the most recent achievements and experiences of riders from an individual company or a "crew." Skate videos first came about in the early-to-mid 1980s, rose in popularity throughout the next decade, and experienced a sort of golden age (in many minds) between the years 1995-2005. Part of the allure of the skate video scene during this period was certainly the potent mixture of a DIY ethos, decentralized VHS distribution, and new camera and lens technologies for capturing the expression of an underground subculture. The rawness and energy conveyed by these productions and the skating they represented, in tandem with the almost clandestine circulation of video tapes (whether original or dubbed), fostered a sense of belonging strengthened by both the embodied experience of taking to the streets and the materiality of shared media objects.

It would thus not be unwise here to invoke Deleuze and Guattari's use of the *rhizome* to explain the particular resonance of the turn of the century skate scene. To the wolves, ants, and weeds of Deleuze and Guattari's rhizomatic multiplicities we could certainly add the aptly named "skate rats." Guerilla skate crews as disruptive "nomads," the circulation and flow of videos along "lines of flight"?[10] To an extent, surely. And it appears as though this particular skate experience, although far from dead, faded a bit in the early 2000s, concurrent with a rise in mainstream media and commercial interest. To the notoriety and cachet of a film like *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, we can add the takeoff of the *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* video games, increased visibility of ESPN's *X-Games*, and the boom in

corporate sponsorship of "extreme" sports, including that of Red Bull and Monster energy drinks. To extend the rhizomatic metaphor, this mainstream presentation of skate culture appears to be an effort to "arborify" an ever-escaping fluid experience.[11] These two perspectives of skating on screen have thus developed in parallel, and both tell part of the skate story. Yet they speak in wildly different voices. I am concerned here with the voices (and gestures) of skate videos which document the experience from the inside, but which need not remain accessible only to those "in the know."

As far as the subculture's own media productions goes, two primary strains of skate videos that have long dictated its moving image aesthetic are, for the sake of ease, definable as the Hollywood approach, spearheaded by the well-known filmmaker Spike Jonze, and what I will term the independent-experimental approach. The former is historically no less visually sophisticated and inventive, and tends to punctuate its skating with extended "skits" of varying budgets (again, the influence of Jonze here is palpable both artistically and financially). The latter is often, though not exclusively, a product of East Coast skateboarding—with Philadelphia and New York City as its primary loci—and tends to supplant the more "narrative" skits and *pas de deux* of films such as *Mouse* (1996) and *Yeah Right!* (2003) with a mélange of material either shot by its makers on 8- or 16mm, produced through a variety of low-budget animation techniques, or integrated from documentary, found, or "orphaned" film. While there are plenty of companies and independent producers who have contributed to the development of this filmic language, the company Alien Workshop, along with its subsidiaries, is the premiere example for us to set the stage.

Alien Workshop Co.'s video output, including *Timecode* (1997, dirs. Mike Hill and Chris Carter), the aptly named *Photosynthesis* (2000, dir. Joe Castrucci), Habitat's *Mosaic* (2003, Castrucci), and *Mind Field* (2009, dir. Greg Hunt), constitutes perhaps the most extended—and exploratory—integration of animal and vegetal life to its skate segments. Consider the opening moments of *Timecode*:

[CLIP 1, available at http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/thecinefiles/clips/experimental-strategies-in-timecode]

as well as the following images culled from *Photosynthesis*:

Figure 1: *Photosynthesis* (2000, dir. Joe Castrucci)

Figure 2: *Photosynthesis* (2000, dir. Joe Castrucci)

Figure 3: *Photosynthesis* (2000, dir. Joe Castrucci)

Figure 4: *Photosynthesis* (2000, dir. Joe Castrucci)

[FIGURES 1-4. Skating's animal and vegetal images—produced, found, borrowed.]

While these experimental (whether or not related to animal life) images from *Timecode* might now be read as a sort of trial run for what most would agree to be the more effective and fluid

presentation of the films beginning with *Photosynthesis*, it is nonetheless telling that the video's opening flourish has nothing to do with skateboarding per se. Or does it? What rhetorical charge is invoked by leading with this battery of images, a mixture of animals, insects, and technology, some of which flash somewhere *just under* our perceptual register, flittering past? What relations are established, and what "affective tonality" bodies forth, to borrow a phrase from Erin Manning?[12] In a basic sense, if we approach street skateboarding not merely as a unidirectional critique of architecture,[13] a sport with analyzable "scores" and/or strict rules, or a self-contained mode of expression, and opt rather to forego the beside-the-point question of what skateboarding is (but not what it can become), we will operate from a much more deterritiorialized, thus rich with potential, middle ground. I believe that skateboarding has always prized process over product, and renewal over regulation, which accounts for its emphasis on testing and aggregating affective connections as well as its relentless (though always unpredictable) evolution. The brief opening move of *Timecode*, then, void of strict connective linkages and commentary, asks us to hold in suspension other bodies (human or non-, living or dead) and a distribution of other modes of sensing and knowing. Posing meaning as ultimately contingent, and teasing experience from beyond (or prior to) language, in a manner resonant with—and indebted to—the work of Stan Brakhage, it opens a space within which the skate-specific footage can better be realized for its own playful (if often violent) recalibration of the relationship between organism and environment.

If *Timecode's* overture seems to linger with and resonate through the rest of the film's skating, the above images from *Photosynthesis* are integrated in a more melodic way, ranging from the film's credit sequence to scattered moments throughout and between its individual sections. Here, we are perhaps more tempted to grasp at meanings resulting from the placement of such material vis-à-vis skateboarding: do the repetitive images of flight simply index a kind of "freedom" that skaters feel?

Do close up shots of plant life, whether "motionless" or accelerated via macro time-lapse cinematography, nudge us toward thinking about skating's various rhythms, about time as it unfolds?[14] And is the butterfly (on which more below) little more than an over-coded symbol of metamorphosis, aesthetic harmony, lightness? By reconsidering what we *mean* by meaning (and signification), we can begin to unravel some answers to these questions, without wishing to do away with polysemy. In other words, by attending to questions of affect and process, we can reflect on these more structural approaches to meaning-making by placing them in dialogue with a distinct and radically different semiotic. And while a film like *Photosynthesis* may induce us toward just such a suspension of significatory structures, it is equally vital to insist on an ethics of viewer participation which catalyzes this potential.

Félix Guattari's decades-old framing of this imbroglio retains its charge, I think, perhaps now more than ever. In "Cinema of Desire," Guattari addresses the problem of "significative encoding" and the "normalizing power of language [being transferred] onto the signifier" thusly:

> When it is exploited by capitalist and bureaucratic socialist power to mold the collective imaginary, cinema topples over to the side of meaning. Yet, its own effectiveness continues to depend on its presignifying components as well as its asignifying ones: linkages, internal movements of visual images, colors, sounds, rhythms, gestures, speech, etc.[15]

In other words, what might open up if we hold fast to the "richness of expression" generated through "gestures, dances, rituals" on screen,[16] and/or—in this case—through skateboarding's own asignifying engagement with the city? What might open up if the integration of the aforementioned images, in tandem with light-rhythm experiments and animation, likewise pushes us toward different "collective arrangements of desire," in opposition to pre-constituted "semiologies of meaning"?[17] This is certainly not to suggest that a more structuralist approach to signification and meaning somehow evaporates; rather, it is to say that while cinema both relies upon the "asemiotic" and (at times, in certain

configurations) acts to translate its richness, these elements threaten ever to erupt in their refusal to be encoded. In short, then, Alien Workshop's output, and films produced in its shadow, are representative artifacts of an independent-experimental mode of creation which, not unlike other experimental film objects, threatens the supposed stability of meaning's groundedness. That its primary materials are athletic-artistic gestures, animal bodies, and affective resonances should hardly surprise us. We can now turn to *Spirit Quest*, which, although it seems to pose more direct links between skaters and would-be animal counterparts, in fact likewise works to trouble our standard reading of these relationships.

Lifting the Veil

Speaking of cinema and "meaning," we must also admit that the history of cinema passes through many eyes. Eyes are cut (*Un chien andalou*), reflect time travel (*2001: A Space Odyssey*), stare back at us lifelessly (*Psycho*). They are crucial to arguments about the gaze and/or the look. They constitute the elements of an equation we wish to puzzle out as (so some propose) situated spectators. And, of course, these human or animal eyes avail themselves as mechanisms to be compared with the camera's aperture, comparisons which have ranged from the radically liberative (Vertov) to the profoundly critical (Crary).[18] Colin Read's *Spirit Quest* opens with an unfamiliar natural eye, which becomes an equally unfamiliar technological one. Then these two "twin" eyes become four.

That is to say, we move from a close up of a chameleon's monocularly-focusing eye to an overlarge "fisheye" camera lens.[19] As Read rides on his skateboard following two other skaters, he deploys a second camera setup, and the dual lenses are analogized to the chameleon's eyes, this time through a frontal close up emphasizing the animal's ability to rotate these orbs independently and, ultimately, achieve full 360° vision (sadly the Century Optics lens can only account for 180°, even if

measured diagonally). The rest of the sequence features an exploration of what this type of vision *might* look (and feel) like, complete with a rhythmic back-and-forth between the strict separation of screen-space and its overlap point:

[CLIP 2, available at http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/thecinefiles/clips/the-animal-eye-in-spirit-quest/view]

The first thing that I would like to emphasize here is the decision to "surround" the hard cuts between separate eyes with an almost haphazard, hand-drawn ring.[20] The question of *what's in an editing device?* is, of course, ever crucial in terms of film language and representation; but, as Georgina Evans has demonstrated, these seemingly minor decisions can have major repercussions when dealing with the "translation" of/between human and animal optics. In "A Cut or a Dissolve?" Evans fixates on one of the most thorny moments in the nature documentary *Microcosmos* (1996), wherein the directors offer the only explicit attempt to fully imagine what an insect's perceptual apparatus might look like—in this case, a digital rendering of compound, hexagonal vision. In Evans' opinion,

> These few seconds of hexagonal imagery […] tell us that whatever we see hereafter is effectively a translation, and any sense of identification must always be qualified. Nevertheless, *it is telling that the boundary between human and insect vision is marked not by a cut but by a dissolve*; the continuity in the motion does allow us to suppose some continuity between these two perceptual worlds. The compound eye sequence offers the viewer a mimicry of the insect which, if only for a moment, collapses the distance between them at the same time as it stresses it.[21]

If the dissolve functions here for Evans to ease us into a resemblance between human and insect sight while the radical otherness of the hexagonal images necessarily posits mimicry, I would like to suggest that Read and animator Cosme's decision to employ the animated borders around the film's linkages—whether animal-technological or human-animal—likewise generates a productive tension. The

animation is somehow at once fluid and jarring, organic and artificial. In a film which will ask us to consider a range of potential metamorphic and transformative events, the fact that many of these thresholds are marked with such a technique suspends our ability to make clear sense of the relations, while also reemphasizing the role of media technology (and media makers) in the total ecology. Not quite a cut or dissolve, but something in the middle.

What is perhaps most striking about the chameleon sequence's progression, however, is that it also frustrates the viewer's attempt to "follow" the action as if logically proceeding from the framing device (*i.e.* chameleon eye = camera (or fish) eye; chameleon mono/binocular vision = two camera split-screen). In other words, while we are still primed to experience—and perhaps read—the segment as effectively mimicking the chameleon's perceptual apparatus, the film again undercuts such attunement by presenting a dizzying array of ocular (and temporal) shifts. At first, Read's twin VX-1000 cameras pivot from an overlap point, or a "standard" point of view, to account for two skaters who have separated past the large 135° horizontal field of view relative to their distance from the lens. That they ultimately return to this original field and are thus "fused" back into a single image is, so to speak, as interesting an effect as it is "faithful" to the fact that chameleons are capable of shifting from binocular vision to separate monocular focusing. But the rest of the sequence offers two additional experiences that rely on the rhythmic oscillation of mono- and binocular vision, both of which present stumbling blocks to our conditioned familiarity with duration. The first involves the same skater either performing different tricks on split screens before "meeting" himself in the shot's conclusion, or splitting off from a single perspective to perform different tricks on opposite sides of the split screen. While some of this may rightly be chalked up as an attempt at a mystifying dynamism (hardly an errant pursuit), we should also consider the ramifications of such flourishes as they pertain to athletic process and how we think experience. What do these shots say about the different pressures of time, about

events, about contingency? The virtual-actual? A split-screen shot that presents, in parallel, a skater falling and their eventual "completion" of a trick not only highlights the complications attendant to notions of play, failure, and success, but it also frustrates a stable approach to the subject. While I will return to these concerns of process and potential below, it is sufficient to mark at this point that the film uses its chameleon-cam method not only to move us *toward* a particular animal experience, but also to adumbrate different understandings of how an event unfolds, as well as how it can be (multiply) perceived.

Although the film's opening primarily links the experiential world of an animal with camera and lens technology, much of its run-time relies on aggregating image-matches that pair a skater's body (or body part(s)) with those of animal forms, including diminutive yet expressive insects. Interviews with Read in skateboarding publications are extremely telling in this regard, as they at once pay heed to the incredible labor undertaken for a project like *Spirit Quest* and offer insight with respect to the process behind the video's metamorphic flourishes. Both *Transworld Skateboarding* and *Free Skateboard Magazine* queried Read, rather unsurprisingly, on just *how* he went about gathering and selecting the footage of animals for the project, as well as how certain of the skaters came to be "identified" with a particular (spirit?) animal. According to Read, production on the film entailed the solo project of watching "hundreds and hundreds of hours of nature documentaries," a laborious task made all the more impressive since *Spirit Quest*, which took three years to film, was independently funded.[22] Some of the metamorphic, or otherwise suggestive, moments of the film resulted from Read and his fellow skaters searching out spots or performing stylistic gestures to match "existing animal footage [he] already had," while others came about inversely, with the filmmaker "just searching obsessively through animal documentaries to find animal mimicry of skaters' moments [*Sic*]."[23] Crucially, however, these instances of morphing are not restricted to a skater and an animal (or animals) as elements in an

equation; skaters' surroundings are equally available in the film as potential correspondences or bodily co-compositions with animal worlds. Whether organic (e.g. trees punctuating a spot) or artificial (reflective surfaces, unique architecture, animal-centric sculptures), the space of New York City and its surroundings likewise slips and slides in and out of attachment with the *stuff* of both human and non-human experience and affects.

Therefore, although there are moments in the film which appear to posit a sort of reductive anthropomorphism, one method of sidestepping or resisting such an approach is to expand the constituent parts of would-be linkages beyond just animal bodies to account for the multifarious other bodies which populate the environment of experience. It is not simply that a skater "is" an ostrich or a frog—as Read recounts[24] and as the film sometimes seems to suggest—but also that the action of a rider and their board against an architectural body may invoke the gesture of a butterfly; the rigidly ordered grates and enclosures of streets and alleys call forth the structure of the zoo; untrodden (hitherto) paths through urban space mirror the milieu of burrowing rodents and insects, and so forth. The following brief clip adumbrates these concerns, inasmuch as it highlights a range of different connective threads within the film's matrix:

[CLIP 3, available at http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/thecinefiles/clips/human-animal-environment-morphing-in-spirit-quest/view]

In short order, and with some significant help from the jazz soundtrack, we move from a rather obvious—yet aesthetically rich—link between footage of a chameleon and a street mural framing Quim Cardona's wall-ride, a back-and-forth interplay of rider and lion (from Mt. Zion?), and a densely layered morph which subsumes board, skater, architecture, and butterfly. That these three "events" operate according to different logics, so to speak—animal "becomes" art-object/structure;

animal and rider oscillate via movement thresholds; skater, board, surface, insect (and camera position) fuse—further accentuates the bevy of linkages at the film's disposal, the last of which is likely a wonderful example of what Read admits were moments when the connections "[came] together magically."[25]

Like the chameleon vision sequence, then, which proposes a frame that ends up modulating, doubling back on itself, un/folding, the process of aggregating the rest of the film's animal-skater-environment connections resists the paradigmatic. The lasting effect of this situation is primarily an affective one, in which the ever-shifting center, or middle, consistently reconfigures itself to remain available to potential *milieux*. This echoes Jussi Parikka's reading of Jakob von Uexküll's *Umwelt* as emphasizing "becomings that are dynamically intertwined with their surroundings," or—as Deleuze and Guattari would have it—as an "associated milieu."[26] Parikka writes:

> In this context [of Uexküll's work on *Umwelt* and perceptual worlds] Deleuze and Guattari use the idea of associated milieu as a structuration going on across various scales of living entities. Associated milieu works through the dynamics of capturing energy sources, sensing and perceiving relevant materials nearby, and fabrication of compounds based on the perceptions and captures—a responsive gesture toward environment, that is.[27]

I believe that this reading of *Umwelten*, which in effect gives more credit to Uexküll's significance for thinking across perceptual milieux than others have given him (or that he gave himself), does urge us to refrain from qualifying glimpses into animal worlds as necessarily reaching toward what remains "hermetically sealed," as Anat Pick would have Uexküll's schema. For instance, while Pick makes clear that *Umwelten* can "touch and overlap" and function intersubjectively, we can also shift the terms of engagement to focus on the becoming *or intertwining itself* as the primary structuring experience.[28] This Parikka does not only by foregrounding the discussion (following Deleuze/Guattari) in a Spinozan sense of immanence, but also by back-dooring the process philosophy of A.N. Whitehead and the concept of the "superject": "It is the world of experience that *gives* the subject-superject, instead of the

subject having an intentional relationship with the object-world."[29] Parikka also asks us whether this view of superjection does not offer a particularly rich opening into how we conceive of "the perspective of the metamorphotic subject—a subjectile that occupies points of view in variation, [and which] is a product of the real relations of the world instead of just a prefixed universal subject."[30] Can this way of thinking movement and process with respect to entanglement of bodies resituate an ethical perspective on the "messiness" of relations, and might certain modes of moving image making offer particularly rich experiences through which we can think (and feel) variation as it unfolds?

It is clear that Uexküll's *Umwelt*, however faithfully we hold to his original position and through whatever texts we wish to examine the concept, has become an almost unavoidable centripetal tug in animal studies' moving image considerations. Consider Belinda Smaill's recent monograph, *Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Moving Image*, in which she deftly navigates the "complex and multilayered" situation of a "rapidly expanding documentary terrain" of animal images,[31] before dedicating most of her future-directed concluding thoughts to how the very "ontology of cinema [itself] might be entirely rethought in replicating nonhuman *Umwelten*."[32] Much like Evans' discussion of hexagonal visuality, Smaill turns to the potential for an "experimental" rendering of a honeybee's perceptual apparatus (and milieu), outlining the technical maneuvers that would aid in reconfiguring our notions of "the discourse of the real" and the availability of nonhuman perception.[33] Once again, I would like to suggest that films such as *Spirit Quest* provide a particularly fertile example of this process (already) in motion, as the interplay between sporting and animal bodies, interconnected perceptual fields, and media-animal technics affords an opportunity to speculate on situations wherein we are not simply presented with a *different Umwelt* of more or less "fidelity," but a space in which the very notion of environments and *Umwelten* are transformed before our eyes (and ears).

With this in mind, it is thus illuminating to return to the role of the camera and its operator(s) in *Spirit Quest*, as the chameleon sequence is but one instance of the film exploring distinct forms of embodiment and resultant perceptual worlds. For instance, a section filmed entirely at night, and revolving around images (and David Attenborough's commentary)[34] about the dynamism of nocturnal bats, seems to expand beyond the connections between winged bodies and skaters' expressions to include the camera-operator's movement as part of the "pack," as it were.

[Clip 4, available at http://www.criticalcommons.org/Members/thecinefiles/clips/the-camera-and-its-operators-in-spirit-quest/view]

Here the camera, much like the nocturnal skaters (sometimes lit only by Read's camera-mounted or hand-held LED light), swoops and tilts, passes from stasis to hyper-dynamism. The camera is as much an element in this evocation of affects as the surreptitious tricks performed on shadowy back-street objects are; it contributes to a shift away from historical attachments to the bat—those of vampirism and threat[35]—to concerns of the animals' collective dynamics as well as their echolocative navigation of space.[36] We are in the midst of a swarm that necessarily includes both skater and filmer. In a similar vein, other sequences feature the camera following skaters around and *in* public fountains (dolphins, unsurprisingly) and through urban tunnels and passage ways, the camera here being analogized to burrowing vertebrates.

But even to say this would once again be somewhat unfaithful, since the skaters in both of these sections likewise also are placed in a sort of riffing dialogue with various animal and architectural bodies. Over and above the importance of "spreading" its moments of metamorphosis across a range of environmental elements and *Umwelten*, then, and not merely hinting at a consideration of superjection as co-constituting ostensibly separate subjects, these sections of *Spirit Quest* ask us to

rethink who (or what) the *motor* of the rendered movement is. The dexterous motion of a skateboarder, anamorphosed by the fisheye lens, seems to emanate on screen "from" their perspective, even though it is patently obvious that the images are framed from elsewhere. In truth, the dynamic between skater and skater-filmer is closer to dance (or jazz) than other examples of "tracking" in sports media. (As Yeats once asked, "how can we know the dancer from the dance"?)[37] What skate cinematography, specifically its poetics of the filmed "line," can alert us to is a renewed way of conceptualizing camera movement and its complex reorganization of spatial fields; that the relationship between bodies on screen, the body of the camera-operator, and various other bodies evoked—however fleetingly—through their interplay, which, although seemingly "on rails," remains ever open to the contingent, foregrounds process itself as the motor. The "force of the event as it expresses itself," for Manning, is another way of explicating Whitehead's treatment of feelings "[having] the force of a momentum, an intuition for direction."[38] Toward a conclusion, I will dwell a bit on these questions of intuition and "instinct" as they pertain to both skating and animal worlds, to further tease out some of these complexities of process and becoming. We can note now, though, that while *Spirit Quest* asks us, via fleeting text overlays, to both "open our eyes" and "lift the veil" from them, this might need reframing. It isn't that there is an illusory veil to remove and shed, one *Umwelt* to prize above all, or one way of seeing and knowing to replace with another. The cinematic action *is* the lifting. Blink and you miss it.

Conclusion: The Skating-Animal Superject

> *I have this, kinda like this idea: if you think of something, you can do it. You know? Skateboarding is ideas that are put into action.*
>
> -Marc Johnson, qtd. in *Hot Chocolate*[39]

This maxim, put forth by Marc Johnson—one of street skateboarding's most respected, articulate, and artistically-inclined figures—has long circulated as a sort of subcultural ethos, one which reminds skaters that the freedom and possibilities afforded by their medium of expression are nigh limitless. If one listens carefully to thought, welcomes the reverie or the fantasy, or simply dreams big enough, one can translate such an idea into action. It is easy to see why Johnson's musings would find purchase within a group that prizes progression, alternative experience, and the testing of limits: everything is *out there*, for the taking—you need only think (of) it, and you can make it happen. There is much force to this apothegm, and certainly it has prompted many a skater (from the well-known to the unknown "skate-rat") to action, to the accomplishment of something hitherto thought impossible.

I would like to suggest that it is also at best misguided, at worst wildly incorrect. Better to say that *if you can do it, you can think it*. This need not signify a privileging of "ability" over those labeled "disabled," nor must it do away with the importance of reflection and the mechanisms of consciousness. Rather, it asks us to consider the specificity of different modes of thinking as they arise from singular experiences in and with one's milieu, and to suspend human-centric attachments to thinking (as well as our distinction between "neurotypical" individuals and those held to be "outside" that register). For Erin Manning, the process of thinking "the body [as] dynamic co-composition with the environment" means that we must begin by "*putting thought in the world*," by highlighting thought that is stretched across a bodying reliant on, but irreducible to, the bodies which participate in it experientially.[40] To do so is to cast a fundamentally suspicious eye on what we mean by the "possible."

This is why we should follow Brian Massumi in insisting not only on the "difference between the possible and the potential," but also on a careful reconfiguration of their relationship to temporality, as well as to each other as modal categories.[41] In Massumi's blunt phrasing, "possibility is back-formed from potential's unfolding."[42] In other words, the possible is ever past, always-already

done; possibility *is* (*esse*)—or was—whereas potential always becomes *in (potentia)*. Possibility is the ossified form of potential's "openness to contingency," as Marcus Steinweg would have it,[43] which is simply another way of describing, per Massumi, "the *immanence* of a thing to its still indeterminate variation, under way."[44]

But the possible stays with us, of course, and as well it should. The sediments of process register and linger, avail themselves to both reflection and habit, and simplify things. The world would be an (even more) alarming place if not for this systematic template of past possibilities. Thus, while Massumi bemoans the prescriptive character and "normative" function of the possible[45] as it acts as "a systematic simplification" of potential,[46] this loss is at once necessary and useful for the continuous testing of new thresholds of experience; the possible, once realized, remains available in stored and mobilizable units, ready-to-hand, as it were.[47] It is profitable here to pair these observations with the more animal-specific claims made by Massumi in his essay "The Supernormal Animal," which, in a manner analogous to both Moore's fascination with "miracles of dexterity" and *Spirit Quest's* highlighting of non-human marvels, opens by evoking "The athletic grace of the pounce of the lynx. The architectural feats of the savanna termite. The complex weave of the orb-spider's web."[48] Rethinking these seemingly "instinctual" animal operations, with recourse to the animal-artistic theorizing of Raymond Ruyer and the ethological work of Niko Tinbergen, Massumi suggests that there is much more to the story than "mechanistic adaptation." Instinct is not reducible to the playing out of "normal" behaviors against an abnormal, unsuccessful, or bad activity; rather, "instinct seems called upon, from within its very own movement, following its own momentum, to outdo itself. Its instrumentality envelops an impulse to excess."[49] For the animal, as well as the human, this creativity reconfigures our thinking about different experiences of and within environments. Instinctual self-

excess as a creative process involves bringing something new into the world, and a making-new of the milieu. Its function is artistic and its results aesthetic. Thus Massumi:

> The environment, or external milieu, does in the end impose selective constraints. Its selective principle is and remains that of adaptation. And yet, instinct opposes to the law of adaptation an auto-conducting power of improvisation that answers to external necessity with a supernormal twist. The improvised modification of the instinctive tendency, although externally induced, takes its own spontaneous form. As an improvisation, it is formally self-causing.[50]

The consequence here is that such supernormal, improvisational acts, responding to but overshooting (and thus fundamentally altering) the environment's relationality, may be referred to as "Art." However, Massumi adds, "when we experience it in our desiring lives we arrogantly tend to call it culture as opposed to nature, as if the animal body of human beings was somehow exempt from instinctive activity."[51] Such supernormal activity is not *ipso facto* worthwhile, nor is it always to be celebrated; to suggest that all aesthetic striving and bodily self-excess is valuable would not get us very far. It may be another way to frame a type of openness to world-as-game, and to foreground a reshuffling of the "rules" (and how they are generated), but it is not a guarantor of positive results or a profitable recasting of socio-cultural relationships.

To bring these lofty and somewhat obscure assertions down to earth before they unravel overmuch, we can highlight a principal phenomenon of skateboarding: its practitioners fall. *A lot.* Young kids, skaters in their "prime" years, grown men and women: all are well familiar with the usually unpredictable—and sometimes quite violent—collisions between their body in motion, their tools, and the unforgiving environment. One could do worse in terms of skating's overarching maxim than to adopt Beckett's famous adage: "Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better."[52] In the simplest sense, this returns us to the importance of *play* in the matrix of skateboarding, animal

lives, and media technology. Skate videos often explicitly highlight instances of falling, of not-quite-making-it, of trial and error.[53] In *Spirit Quest*, for example, this tendency comes across in terms both figurative and "concrete": a forward fall to the chest with one's legs kicked up triggers a quick cut to images of a scorpion, the animal after which this style of bailing is named; whereas more harmless toppling while exploring a spot's potential is merged back-and-forth with the delightful tumbling about of baby elephants. In one case, then, there is a forced (yet humorous) link between the pain of a human body and the formal constitution of an animal, while the other begs us consider what kind of inventive and emergent experiences, however painful, flash before us in a cross-species connection.

Pain and failure here can be read in tandem with what has flared throughout this essay (which has been mostly affirmative) in the guise of frustration, disorientation, or the contingent, and which I will now refer to as friction. Skateboarding is eminently frictive, just as experimental media (for the most part) is. As is, of course, the interplay of and between bodies, whether human, animal, or environmental. Thus, the friction inherent in these relationships, not unlike the shuddering animated "frames" from *Spirit Quest*, troubles a glimpse of immanence at the same time that it highlights a type of slippage. In this way, we would be equally mistaken to suggest that skaters are a particular "type" of animal as we would be to extract from animal bodies modes of knowing and sensing that skaters (or athletes, for that matter) can gain access to. Rather, we must imagine, as much skate media does, that there is a zone of indiscernibility, a frictional experience, superjection, from which we conveniently—and perhaps inescapably—return to the logic of subjects and objects, knower and known. To do so is to hold fast to a contingent openness that does not take for granted hitherto-established borders to be blurred or easy meanings to be extracted, and which remains available to connections that can (have) become possible, but are never guaranteed as productive. It is an onerous yet wonderful middle ground to find oneself within, this field of potential.

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Notes

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[1] Marcus Steinweg, *Inconsistencies*, trans. Amanda Demarco (Cambridge, MA and London: The MIT Press, 2017), 1. Emphasis in the original.
[2] Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 73-74.
[3] Marianne Moore, *A Marianne Moore Reader: Poems and Essays* (New York: Viking Press, 1961), xvi.
[4] Moore.
[5] These inclusions range from minor moments that function to punctuate tricks within parts or bridge shifts between skaters to fully fleshed out structuring principles like that of *Spirit Quest*. While I will primarily be focusing on the latter and Alien Workshop's Co.'s *Photosynthesis*, a partial list of other skate videos that rely on images of nature and/or experimental techniques might include Foundation's *Art Bars: Subtitles and Seagulls* (2001, dir. Josh Beagle); Polar Skate Co.'s wonderfully original *In Search of the Miraculous* (2010, dir. Pontus Alv) and *I Like it Here Inside My Mind Don't Wake Me This Time* (2016, Alv); Habitat's *Mosaic* (2003, dir. Joe Castrucci) and *Search the Horizon* (2013, Castrucci); and Alien's *Memory Screen* (1991, dirs. Mike Hill, Neil Blender, Chris Carter) and *Mind Field* (2009, dir. Greg Hunt).
[6] Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Toward a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 196.
[7] Lippit, *Electric Animal*, 197.
[8] Akira Lippit, "Medium Foreword," in *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, eds. Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon (London: British Film Institute, 2015), xii. Cf. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2016), spec. 15: "In a politics attuned to emergent difference, we must begin instead in the midst, where force has not yet tuned to form. In this middle, where the event is still welling, there is potential for new life-living diagrams to be drawn."
[9] Laura McMahon and Michael Lawrence, "Introduction: Animal Lives and Moving Images," in *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, eds. Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon (London: British Film Institute), 9. Emphasis in the original.

[10] See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), spec. 3-33.
[11] Deleuze and Guattari, 14-16.
[12] Manning, 61: "The artful is the event's capacity to foreground the feeling-tone of the occasion such that it generates an affective tonality that permeates more than this single occasion. For this to happen, there has to be, within the evolution of an occasion, the capacity for the occasion to become a nexus that continues to have an appetite for its process."
[13] Iain Borden's 2001 clarion call to take skateboarding culture seriously (without letting go of play), *Skateboarding, Space, and the City*, remains invaluable for thinking through skating's critique of architecture and frustration of restrictive (=capitalist) spatio-temporal givens. Borden's approach is primarily a Lefebvrean one, but my reasons for only skirting his work here have more to do with his volume's lack of detailed commentary on skate filmmaking, as well as its linkages to animal worlds. Nonetheless, for a rich and textured history and theoretical exploration of skate culture, see Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space, and the City: Architecture and the Body* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 2001).
[14] For a deft and thorough treatment of popular science films in early cinema (and beyond), including an analysis of macrophotography and time-lapse techniques, see Oliver Gaycken, *Devices of Curiosity: Early Cinema and Popular Science* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).
[15] Félix Guattari, "Cinema of Desire," trans. David L. Sweet, in *Chaosophy: Texts and Interviews 1972-1977*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2009), 242.
[16] Guattari, 241.
[17] Guattari.
[18] See e.g. Dziga Vertov, "Kino-Eye," trans. Kevin O' Brien, in *Kino-Eye: The Writings of Dziga Vertov* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1984), 60-78; and Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 1992).
[19] The Century Optics Mark-1 fisheye, alias "Death Lens." Paired with the Sony DCR VX-1000, this kit has long been a mainstay in certain strains of skate filmmaking due in no small part to its unique distortion, crisp daytime color-rendering, punchy (if—or because—somewhat frictive) sound, light weight, and hand-held grip. In the face of increasingly "high-definition" technology, the VX/Mk1 combination continues to make its presence felt, as a sort of bastard technology that has found its perfect "milieu."
[20] It remains unclear exactly which of the film's animation techniques were done by Read himself, the freelance illustrator/animator Cosme Fernandez, or a combination of the two. See Jamie Owens, "Going on a Vision Quest with Film Maker Colin Read," *Transworld Skateboarding*, last modified November 17, 2016, n.p. https://skateboarding.transworld.net/article/spirit-quest/.
[21] Georgina Evans, "A Cut or a Dissolve?: Insects and Identification in *Microcosmos*," in *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, eds. Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon (London: British Film Institute, 2015), 116. Emphasis mine.
[22] Will Harmon and Arthur Derrien, "Colin Read, *Spirit Quest* Interview," *Free Skateboard Magazine*, last modified December 8, 2016, n.p. http://www.freeskatemag.com/2016/12/08/colin-read-spirit-quest-interview/. Not for nothing, it also merits mention that Read maintained a full-time job as a video editor and motion graphics artist during the three years of production; furthermore, health problems developed during filming—namely lower back and hip issues, which affect many skate videographers as a result of postural problems and physical demands—have caused Read to undergo a "back procedure" and put any future skate-related projects on hold. As someone who once spent nearly a decade filming for independent skate projects, I can attest to the significant mileage that skating adds to its participants' bodies, whether in front of or behind the camera. I will touch briefly on the importance of renewed critical attention to these concerns below, not to play into a loose romanticization of the *auteur* or craft-laborer but to remain open to diverse discourses on production culture. Also see Owens, n.p.
[23] Owens, n.p.
[24] Owens.
[25] Harmon and Derrien, n.p.

[26] Parikka, 71.
[27] Parikka. See Deleuze and Guattari, 9-55.
[28] Anat Pick, "Animal Life in the Cinematic *Umwelt*," in *Animal Life and the Moving Image*, eds. Michael Lawrence and Laura McMahon (London: British Film Institute, 2015), 225. See Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans with a Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O'Neill (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).
[29] Parikka, 61. Emphasis in the original. See Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Corrected Edition), eds. David Ray Griffin and Donald W. Sherburne (New York: The Free Press, 1978), spec. 28-47; 85-89.
[30] Parikka, 61.
[31] Belinda Smaill, *Regarding Life: Animals and the Documentary Moving Image* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2016), 2. In terms of such a "complex and multilayered" field of media objects, Smaill makes clear that her account expands from time-honored (or "blue chip") nature documentaries to include the wildlife films of Werner Herzog, as well as "advocacy documentary, avant-garde nonfiction, and developments in new media" (2). My hesitance to demarcate skate cinema's "type" of filmmaking notwithstanding, the films treated in this essay do stack up in interesting ways, I think, with Smaill's willingness to explore productive connections across genres and modes.
[32] Smaill, 154.
[33] Smaill, 155.
[34] While I haven't lingered long on the stakes of Read's appropriation of and references to wildlife documentaries in terms of their original ideological bent, it would be interesting here to consider how the charge of Attenborough's commentary carries both an explicit scientific imprimatur and an element of pop culture referentiality. Since the voice over in this sequence is "lifted" from its original attachment to images of bat life and overlaid with both "new" bat imagery *and* scenes of skate-crews navigating nocturnal spaces, the latter of which seem to become more of the commentary's target, the film destabilizes—or defamiliarizes—the Attenborough approach even as it relies on it for peculiar effect. For a detailed discussion on "Attenborough's particular brand of science," which blends "the rationality of zoology" with "the masculine sensibility of mastery, exploration, and empire," see Smaill, spec. 107-114.
[35] (Despite, perhaps, the rather playful cut to a bat's tête-a-tête with a canine).
[36] On echolocation and the bat with respect to media and coding, see Parikka., 148-50; on bats, vampirism, and cinema, see Smaill, 94-95, and Oliver Gaycken, "Surrealist Contagion: *Le Vampire*," *Screen* 56, no. 1 (2015): 88-94.
[37] William Butler Yeats, "Among School Children," in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats* (New York and Toronto: MacMillan, 1966), 214. See Katie Bird, "'Dancing, Flying Camera Jockeys': Invisible Labor, Craft Discourse, and Embodied Steadicam and Panaglide Technique from 1972 to 1985," *The Velvet Light Trap* 80 (2017): 48-65. Bird has much to say here not only about "dance," athleticism, and the labor of camera operators as they may pertain to skate videography, but also about how these various descriptions are part of a tangled discursive web which spans industry ranks, academia, and film history writ large.
[38] Manning, 61. See Whitehead, 87-88.
[39] Marc Johnson, qtd. in *Hot Chocolate*, dirs. Ty Evans and Spike Jonze, 2004; Torrance, CA: Chocolate Skateboards, 2004. DVD.
[40] Manning, 115. Emphasis in the original. My mention above re concerns of "neurotypicality" explicitly echoes a major part of Manning's project in *The Minor Gesture*, which takes very seriously the lessons we can learn from "autistic perception." In her words, "I focus on autistic perception not only to honor neurodiversity, to take into account modes of existence I consider key to making our worlds richer, but to make a case for the political necessity of creating techniques and minor-gestures that open existence to its perpetual more-than. This is not to deny that autistic perception, for all its perceptual wonders, also makes typical aspects of everyday life difficult to manage."
[41] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002), 9.
[42] Massumi.
[43] Steinweg, 1.
[44] Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 9.

[45] Massumi.
[46] Massumi, 93.
[47] See Borden, 98-101. Borden touches on the way in which the skateboard as a tool of sorts is less "the simple application of a device against a remote object (Heidegger's *Vorhandenheit*, or 'presentness-at-hand' of the object 'out there') [than] the tool-object as *Zuhandenheit*, or 'readiness-to-hand'" (98). I find this a useful distinction for thinking through the board as an extension of the skater's body(ing), yet we may also consider that the trial-and-error and exploratory openness of the skateboarding act also renders a range of environmental bodies ready-to-hand in a fashion formerly unplumbed.
[48] Brian Massumi, "The Supernormal Animal," in *The Nonhuman Turn*, ed. Richard Grusin (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 1.
[49] Massumi, 1-2.
[50] Massumi, 7.
[51] Massumi, 10. Cf. Pick, 227: "Living systems, then, are inherently cultural. They give rise to variations in behavior, new forms of expression, new relational trajectories. We think of animals as belonging to nature, and of people as cultural beings. But life as a biosemiotic process links the 'natural' existence of animals to the 'cultural' life of humans and makes difficult, even untenable, distinction between nature and culture."
[52] Samuel Beckett, "Worstward Ho," in *Nohow On* (London: John Calder, 1989), 101.
[53] While the trend has somewhat subsided in recent years, the concept of a "bail [fall] section" was a sort of *sine qua non* of skate videos in the 1990s and beyond. It also merits mention that *Thrasher Magazine*'s website continues to run a feature titled "Hall of Meat," which highlights particularly painful (or acrobatic) falls.