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Notes on Slovak Skateboard Photography

Abstract

This study examines the evolution of Slovak skateboarding photography through the lenses of everyday aesthetics, spatial performance, and subcultural capital. It explores how photography captures and co-constructs skateboarding as a creative reappropriation of urban space, with a particular focus on how the legibility of the trick and the decisive moment are visually codified. These photographic conventions are historically situated within a broader transformation of visual and media infrastructures. The first section maps the arrival of skateboarding into the Czechoslovak public sphere via newsreels and cinema, emphasizing its visibility in socialist urban contexts. The second part traces the post-1989 formation of communities and media platforms, culminating in the emergence of Boardlife magazine (2004 - 2009), which established editorial standards and a recognizable visual language. The third section investigates the rise

of zine culture (2013 - 2018) as a grassroots response to the decline of print and as a form of bottom-up archiving. Zines expand the grammar of skate photography through diaristic documentation, spatial mapping, and participatory authorship, thus producing an alternative visual memory of the subculture. By combining visual analysis with cultural theory, the study frames skateboarding photography as both aesthetic practice and social record - a dynamic archive that negotiates between performance, identity, and urban transformation in the face of changing technological and social conditions.

Key words

Archive. Photography. Skateboarding. Slovakia. Subculture. Urban Space. Zines.



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Introduction

Skateboarding photography deals with movement at the moment when it is most legible: at the point where trick technique meets body expression. The result is determined by the layout of the elements in the shot, the chosen angle, and the anticipation of the exact second when the gesture “comes together” into a believable image (Cartier-Bresson, 1952; Price, 2015). In this reading, photography is no longer just a record (see, e.g., Mohammadmiri & Nabavi, 2018); it is an authorial practice that conveys the rider’s performance along with the tension of the situation.

The urban environment does not merely serve as a backdrop. Skateboarders change its function and meaning - railings, stair edges, and curbs are used differently than they were designed for - and photographs make these interventions visible and legitimize them as culturally significant (Lefebvre, 1991; Borden, 2001, 2019). In the sense of de Certeau’s “tactics”, the rider’s body rewrites the rules of space, and the image of these gestures becomes circulating visual signs, now shared almost instantly across networks where the urban and digital environments overlap (de Certeau, 1984).

Within the subculture, photographs function as carriers of recognition: they visualize skill, courage, spatial practice, and style, and together with the media infrastructure (magazines, zines, photo books, blogs, social profiles), they co-determine

the status of riders and authors (Thornton, 1995; Hebdige, 1979). At the same time, they create a long-term memory of the community - an archive that offers alternative narratives alongside the dominant culture (Roush, 2009). This line combines documentary accuracy and authorial style: from pioneers such as Glen E. Friedman and Craig Stecyk to later

approaches by Ed Templeton, Hugh Holland, and Sergej Vutuc. Skate photography understood in this way is part of a broader representation of the sport: it maps the evolution of tricks, DIY infrastructure, and civic initiatives, demonstrating the adaptability of the subculture in changing technological and social conditions.



Figure 1: Screenshots from the Newsreel “Skejtbord - Doska na kolieskach” [“Skateboard - A Board on Wheels”], Týždeň vo filme 46/1980
Source: Piroh (1980)



Figure 2: Still from the Filming of “Chlapci na doskách” [“Boys on Boards”], 1987, Photographer Unknown

Source: Databázy Slovenského filmového ústavu (n.d.)



Figure 3: First Cassovia Skate Cup, Organized by Jaro Kudlovský, 1991 - Held in front of the “White House” (Košice City Hall)

Source: Kudlovský (1991)

1 Slovak Skateboarding Photography

Skateboarding emerged in Czechoslovakia in the late 1970s with parallel beginnings across cities. Early sparks included Škrabal's homemade board built from ABC magazine plans and the Forman brothers, sons of film director Miloš Forman, whose U.S.-made decks helped seed the scene (Overstreet & Nanoru, 2013). Popularization accelerated via press photos and the newsreels *Týždeň vo filme/Kinožurnál* in 1980 (no. 46) a short “Skateboard - doska na kolieskach” (“Skateboard - a Board on Wheels”), shot in Bratislava's Old Town and at Slavín, introduced the craze to a mass audience. Further clips mapped the boom - 1985 Brno (with Claus Grabke and Shane Rouse at the Czechoslovak Championships), 1986 Moscow, and 1987 Prague (Poříčí) and Olomouc - now preserved by the Slovak Film Institute, forming the first official visual memory of the local scene.

Contemporary cinema also responded to skateboarding: for example, *Neberte nám princeznú* ([*Don't Take Our Princess*], 1981) and the documentary *Chlapci na doskách* ([*Boys on Boards*], 1987), directed by Pavol Benca (Slovak Film Production Bratislava, Koliba), captured skateboarding's urban arrival.

Its symbolic anchoring came with the bronze statue of rider Jaroslav Hladký at Prague's Folimanka (1982; out of public view 2006 - 2021),

among the world's first skate monuments. In the socialist context, skateboarding thus entered news, film, and the cityscape.

Skate culture intertwined with punk and metal; bootleg VHS - Bones Brigade's Search for Animal Chin and Future Primitive - shaped style and identity (Overstreet & Nanoru, 2013). In Slovakia, crews formed in Ružinov, Petržalka, and Trnávka, building DIY ramps and repurposing squares, sidewalks, and stairs. Early parks appeared near Bratislava Castle and on Nevädzová Street. In 1988 Milan Zálešák founded the Club of Unconventional Sports (Ogurčák, 2011).

After 1989, open borders brought pro-grade boards, trucks, and wheels, plus freedom to organize. Ružinov hosted the 1991 Czechoslovak Championships (street, mini ramp), confirming community capacity, while Košice launched the enduring Cassovia Skate Cup (Ogurčák, 2011). The scene spread to Trnava, Nové Zámky, Banská Bystrica, Bardejov, Svidník, and Prešov, with music-punk, metal, later hip-hop - binding crews and strengthening community.

Skate photography in 1990s Slovakia was mostly personal documentation: riders and friends shot on simple film point-and-shoots, later early digital compacts. The images were informal snapshots - often blurred, poorly exposed, or only partly capturing the trick - reflecting minimal compositional or

technical ambition. There were no dedicated professionals; the scene documented itself.



Figure 4: First Cover - Dano Kolinovsky (Dirty), Backside Lipslide, Former Centrál Baths, Photo by Paul Štefek, Bratislava, 2004

Source: Boardlife (2004)

2 Boardlife Magazine (2004 - 2009)

As infrastructure and community grew, so did the volume of photographs - but the scene needed a medium to unify, organize, and give them a voice. In Slovakia, *Boardlife* (2004 - 2009) assumed that role: the first domestic magazine of its kind, publishing 30 issues in five years, it quickly became both the voice and the archive of the scene. From the outset, the editorial team built on strong local ties - prioritizing Slovak riders, cities, and spots - thereby shaping readers' identities and shifting the image from purely sporting information toward a broader cultural self-understanding. Each issue confirmed that a skateboarding magazine is not merely a “newsletter” but a medium of

belonging and style, combining action with storytelling about the community.

Boardlife did not function like a typical sports monthly. In addition to trick sequences, it featured rider profiles, interviews, regular columns (Look at/Look at pro), instructional articles, and commentary. The language came directly from the scene - colloquial, with slang and inside jokes - but the images were of high quality. The magazine maintained clear “grammar” of readability: a clean horizon, understandable takeoff and landing, precise timing of “peak action”, and a sense of architectural lines. Uniform captions - rider/trick/location/photographer - made the issues a usable archive; the photographs remained anchored in time and space and could be curated into the history of the scene.

Photography carried meaning. In *Boardlife*, images were not decoration, but the core of the message. Double-page spreads, “photo-focus” and lookbooks set the pace for each issue; text often served as a frame around the images. Matúš ‘Matt’ Rendek, one of the first domestic professionals in action and extreme photography, played a key role in helping to define the visual identity of the title and its standards of light and composition. Two issues were purely photographic: No. 6 (2005) and No. 25 (2008) - essentially local “photo issues”.



Figure 5: Sample from the “Look At” Section Introducing Riders - Braňo Moravčík, 2009

Source: Mrván (2009)

The magazine's signature also included an anti-mainstream stance. Editorials repeatedly criticized commercialization and Olympicization; the team emphasized authenticity, freedom, DIY, and participation ("a magazine for everyone who rides"). Its open-submission model – inviting readers to send in their own photographs – was not marketing but an editorial practice that blurred the boundary between "audience" and "author". In this way, *Boardlife* was not only a bearer of discourse but also its active creator: images brought the skater, the photographer, and the reader into a single communicative circuit.

The programming followed a two-season rhythm. The summer issues focused on skateboarding – streets, parks, urban spots – while in winter the focus shifted to snowboarding. Of the 30 covers, 12 were skateboarding, 17 were snowboarding, and 1 was a portrait. This annual cycle maintained visual diversity and trained the eye to different geometries: concrete and railings versus snow and slopes.

With the advent of digital platforms, the field was reshuffled. Several iconic print titles disappeared or moved online; Thrasher maintained a strong web presence alongside its prestigious print edition. In a regional context, the Czech-Slovak environment was also shaped by the *Czech Board Magazine* (1994 – 2017); its demise highlighted the pressure of digitization and at the same time reminded us of the value of print as a material archive. It was not the "end of the image", but rather a rethinking of the paths and speeds at which images circulate.



Figure 6: Sample of Zines - Left SKETORD 2, Right SKETORD 3, Peter "Kočo" Kočiš and Collective, 2013
Source: Sketord (2014, 2015)

3 Zines as Grassroots Archives: Visual Narratives of the Skateboarding Subculture in Slovakia (2013 – 2018)

In Slovakia, zines have become a medium that not only documents skateboarding up close but also helps shape its memory and visual language. Unlike magazines with fixed editorial hierarchies, they operate as open, collective, materially modest platforms: initiated by insiders, relying on DIY production (photocopying, risograph, tape, stitching), mixing action photographs with diaristic content, and offering "slow" reading outside social-media algorithms.



Figure 7: Sample of Zines, Top - Dorici aj s Malmom [Screw it - Malmö included]; bottom - Po cestách neznámych [Along Unknown Roads] (Peter 'Koláčik' Kolarčík), 2016
Source: Kolarčík (2016a, 2016b)



Figure 8: Sample from the Project Monuments by Peter Mercel, 2019
Source: Mercel (2019)

In the Slovak context, they also compensate for the absence of an institutional archive – preserving not only tricks and names but, above all, atmospheres, relationships, and the geographies of riding. When the print magazine *Boardlife* ceased in 2009, the community filled the gap under its own steam. Within this space, the key collective project *SKETORD* – Slovak Skateboard Scene (Peter 'Kočo' Kočiš, Dávid 'Dejvo' Šima, Róbert Haberl, Jakub Slávik, Rudko Rokošný, Igor Hanečák, Miloš Ogurčák)

emerged: five issues (2013 – 2018) that insisted on regarding skateboarding as a way of life – that is, not only performance, but community, space, and the everyday. The final issue (2018), subtitled *The Committed Skateboarder*, explicitly articulated skateboarding as an attitude and cultural position. These publications are not merely a publishing trail but a memory infrastructure: archives from below that preserve an insider view – including "imperfections" (grain, dust, handwritten captions)

– that legitimize "quiet" situations (travel, transit, rest, board repairs, DIY construction) and map the ties between rider, photographer, and city.

In addition to collective publications, author photozines have also begun to expand the field. They offer a variety of perspectives – from travelogues and budget trips to personal diaries, community chronicles, and DIY spot mapping. What they have in common is a focus on everyday life, movement in space, and

a sense of “material economy” that promotes authenticity and shared authorship.

In these zines, photography has its own weight – it is not just an illustrative supplement. Alongside action shots of tricks, there are diary excerpts, portraits, and shots from skateparks. It is this combination that expands the “grammar” of skate photography. In addition to the legibility of the trick itself (who/what/where/spot), the micro-topography of the place and the rhythm of the image series are also used to give meaning to movements, rituals, and transitional moments. The materiality of the zine itself is also important – photocopies, handwritten notes, collages. Thanks to them, it comes across as sincere and intimate. Imperfection is not a mistake here – on the contrary, it becomes a carrier of meaning.

This is one of the reasons why zines have naturally adopted a post-digital workflow: analog, scan, subtle digital correction. The ethics remain moderate – legibility yes, manipulation no. Thanks to this, the image resists the fast economy of the feed and, in paper form, enforces slow, concentrated reading. Ultimately, author zines intensively map space and mobility: road trips (Šima, Kočíš, Rokošný); low-budget journeys with nights spent outdoors (Kolarčík); returns to local spots and community events (Sketord collective); and civic micro-initiatives. Together they create a cartography of

subcultural mobility – a network of places where people ride, sleep, build, and communicate – every bit as important as a list of tricks. While *Boardlife* established editorial standards for readability and metadata, zines followed with community curation: they strengthened participation and expanded the remit of photography beyond the boundaries of “proof of a trick”. As global print moved online, zines and photobooks became the venues where static photography has time, materiality, and a measure of resistance to rapid consumption. This is not a retreat but a regrouping: the archive has dispersed into scattered yet legible nodes that the community itself produces and maintains.

Conclusion

Slovak skateboard photography after 1991 appears as a multi-layered phenomenon at the intersection of sport, documentary, and visual art. Although its development mirrors global trends, it retains a specific local identity, anchored in a communal spirit and DIY ethic. Despite these strengths, a certain schematism persists, which can be traced back to the historical emphasis on the so-called “decisive moment” of the trick – photography often favours spectacular, immediately readable captures of demanding movements over deeper narrative construction.

In the early days, this was understandable: systematic

documentation was mainly in the hands of the riders themselves, and technical possibilities and compositional courage were limited by available resources and experience. Today, however, this visual canon – which builds on the legacy of figures such as Atiba Jefferson and French Fred – paradoxically hinders thematic and formal innovation.

Nevertheless, it should not be overlooked that even under conditions of limited production, Slovak skate photography has managed to find its place on the international scene. This is not only due to the technical level of the shots themselves, but also to the quality of the tricks and the creative use of urban architecture. Authors such as Kubo Krížo, Peter Lančarič (author), Peter Mercel, Branislav Poláček, David Suchár, as well as the younger generation represented by Peter Hlinka and Andrej Ondrejovič, show that the local scene has the potential to produce visually and athletically competitive content. The future remains open. The decline of print, the rise of video, and rapid consumption on social networks are fundamentally changing the way images are distributed and viewed. Static photography thus faces a dilemma: to adapt to new distribution ecosystems or to move to smaller, collector-oriented formats – zines, photo books, or exhibitions – where it can offer depth, materiality, and tempo that contrast with the viral flow of video.

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