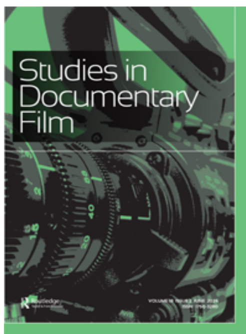

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Girlhood, performance and risk: *Learning to skateboard in a war zone (if you're a girl)* and the action sports documentary

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the Academy award-winning documentary short *Learning to skateboard in a war zone (if you're a girl)* (2019), which depicts girl participants at a skating facility in Kabul, Afghanistan, run by Skateistan, a sports nongovernmental organisation (NGO), until the Taliban returned in 2021. The article uses the film as a case study for a research project interrogating a recent trend in documentary production, namely films seeking to disassemble established gender, class, race, ableist and ageist norms in the representation of action and lifestyle sport participation and performance, in this instance by tapping into contemporaneous discourses of empowered girlhood prevalent in the US. Looking at the distinctive production contexts that shaped *Learning to skakeboard,* and at key sequences of the film, the article shows why and how it offers a striking counterpoint to the panoply of skateboarding documentaries that overwhelmingly represent risk-taking young white Western men, and which work powerfully to shape the associations and meanings of the pursuit. As we watch Afghan girls learning skate tricks, *Learning to skateboard* foregrounds the dynamics of performance, and its viewing, in ways that implicitly critique what kinds of bodies are most typically seen in play and in peril in action and lifestyle sports documentaries.

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Introduction

In February 2020 filmmaker Carol Dysinger and producer Elena Andreicheva accepted the Academy award for Best Documentary Short Subject for *Learning to skateboard in a war zone (if you're a girl)* (2019) [hereafter *Learning to skateboard*]. This was merely the latest and most high-profile award picked up by the film, which had also won Best Documentary Short at the Tribeca Film Festival in May 2019, the IDA award for Best Short in December 2019, and the BAFTA for British Short Film in the week preceding the Oscars. Reflecting on the remarkable acclaim for the documentary, Dysinger admitted to being 'totally shocked when it started to win these awards,' adding that

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'my other work is very long and serious, but this was just one from the heart' (quoted in World Cinema Reports' Editors 2020). This sentiment was evident in Dysinger's acceptance speech, when she stated that 'this movie is my love letter to the brave girls in that country' (Oscars 2020). *That* country was Afghanistan, and the brave girls were the female participants at a purpose-built facility run by Skateistan, a sports nongovernmental organisation (NGO) in Kabul that offered skateboarding tuition alongside education, and which was the subject of the documentary.

While Dysinger may have been shocked by the plaudits for the film (not least because it offered her a very belated return to the spotlight she first enjoyed as the recipient of a Student Academy Award in 1977) its appeal can be attributed in large part to its capacity to fuse, in an artful and uplifting way, several notable elements. The filmmaker was keenly aware of the importance of naming short documentary features to attract attention, stating that 'the title has to make them want to see it,' and as an instructor in documentary filmmaking at NYU advised her students to try and ensure that 'the logline is the title' to 'get more attention' (quoted in Mike I 2020). As a documentary with a title announcing it was about skateboarding, Dysinger's film was able to connect itself to an action or lifestyle sport whose evolution from Californian youth subculture to global commercial phenomenon has been inseparable from the riveting images of tricks and jumps captured in dedicated magazines and videos, while retaining its status as a 'cultural symbol of cool' (Beal 2007, 276). Moreover, skateboarding, like other action or lifestyle sports such as surfing, rock climbing, snowboarding, or BASE jumping, had by that point found itself the subject not just of media content made for or by participants and exponents of the sport, or used to sell products by association, but critically acclaimed documentaries aimed at general audiences and playing at major film festivals (e.g. *Dogtown and Z-Boys* (2001); *Touching the Void* (2003); or *Free Solo* (2018)). These documentaries showcased the remarkable performances of physical risk by their subjects as a major appeal, often harnessing contextual elements to help explain the drivers (psychological, environmental, or cultural) for pursuing such behaviour. In the case of *Learning to skateboard*, this association with physical risk was given vivid amplification by the title's reference to a war zone, thereby indicating novelty in relation to one of documentary's most longstanding and respected topics, namely the chronicling of life in sites of military conflict. And by homing in on young female skateboarding participants, the documentary promised to tap into contemporaneous discourses of empowered girlhood prevalent in the US in particular (Koffman and Gill 2013, 84). Indeed, the director made the ambitions in that domain quite clear when describing her intention to 'make a feminist, subversive, feel-good movie about skateboarding' (quoted in Carey 2019).

This article employs *Learning to skateboard* as a case study example for a research project interrogating a recent trend in documentary production, namely films seeking to disassemble established gender, class, race, ableist and ageist norms in the representation of action and lifestyle sport participation and performance. As Belinda Wheaton and Holly Thorpe note, despite the potential for such sports to offer 'space for more progressive … power relations than many more traditional, institutionalized' sports, 'young White males have long constituted the dominant force at the core of most action sport cultures' (2018, 318). This is something that media representations of such activities, including documentary films about skateboarding, have historically had a key role in

promulgating. Yet recent years have seen a varied range of filmmaking entities and individuals seeking to meaningfully and powerfully capture the diversity of participation in these sports. Looking first at the distinctive production contexts that shaped *Learning to skakeboard,* and then closely at key sequences of the film, the article shows why and how it offers a striking counterpoint to the panoply of skateboarding documentaries that overwhelmingly represent risk-taking young white Western men, and which work powerfully to shape the associations and meanings of the pursuit. In so doing, the article seeks to contribute to the scholarship analysing contemporary documentary film's representation of risk through forms of embodied performance, and what Mette Hjort terms the kind of 'flamboyant risk taking' she finds evident in a broad array of contemporary documentary work (2012, 51). As I have made clear elsewhere (2019; 2020), documentary films depicting forms of embodied risk reward close viewing, revealing distinctive filmic structures and compositional choices shaped around the dynamics of performance – what Elizabeth Marquis terms the 'observed, semiotically rich actions of non-fiction film subjects' (2013, 46). As we watch Afghan girls learning skate tricks, *Learning to skateboard* foregrounds the dynamics of performance, and its viewing, in ways that implicitly critique what kinds of bodies are most typically seen in play and in peril in action and lifestyle sports documentaries.

Commissioning a skateboarding movie in which no one can skateboard

As stated, *Learning to skateboard* was able to draw upon the fact that skateboarding has established itself as a vivid and compellingly filmable activity, with skateboarders' desire to push the limits of the sport in terms of the technical and physical challenges of stunts and tricks ensuring a steady supply of exciting new footage. Given this fact, is perhaps surprising that the analysis of skateboarding on film has been of limited interest to screen studies scholars. The vast majority of academic attention to skateboarding has come from sociology, cultural studies, ethnography and sports science, where the discussion of the imagery associated with it (if employed at all) has tended to centre around questions of agency, authenticity and identity-formation on the part of participants, with work on the perpetuation of gender stereotypes being a key focus (Beal 1996; MacKay and Dallaire 2013; Rinehart 2005). Yet there is, at this point, a significant corpus of skateboarding documentaries, from film festival titles such as the aforementioned *Dogtown and Z-Boys*, *The Man Who Souled the World* (2007), *Minding the Gap* (2018) and *Stay on Board: The Leo Baker Story* (2022), as well as straight-to-video/DVD/online titles such as *The Search for Animal Chin* (1987), *We Are Skateboarders* (2012), and *Daewon* (2019), that offer keen insights into the culture of skateboarding, and distinctive cinematic approaches to documenting the sport. This corpus has not been examined in the scholarship on documentary, with one or two exceptions (McDonald 2007; Willing, Green, and Pavlidis 2020), and there has not as yet been an attempt to offer a historic or aesthetic overview of the 'skate film' in the manner provided for the 'surf film' (Beattie 2001; Beattie 2008; Booth 1996; Rinehart 2015). Moreover, both might be understood as subsets of the action or lifestyle sports documentary, which is a category that has also failed to receive much scrutiny by scholars – attention that the notable volume of recent documentary output surely warrants.

Dysinger was sharply aware of her relationship to that legacy of documentary content when establishing the basis for her own work, most particularly the assumption that films about skateboarding will inevitably contain virtuosi stunts and tricks. As she expressed, ‘the big problem is making a skateboarding movie in which no one can skateboard,’ adding that ‘I didn’t want anyone expecting that they are going to see some girl shredding and doing loop de loops’ (quoted in World Cinema Reports’ Editors 2020). In a sense, this pinpointed the most obvious and direct way that the film subverted convention, not least because the minority of skateboarding documentaries that *did* feature female participants were understandably eager to showcase their aptitude and risk-taking in intricate performance (e.g. *Underexposed: A Women’s Skateboarding Documentary* (2015); *Woolfwomen: Now or Never* (2023)). Her solution was to come up with the idea that ‘the girls will teach you how to skateboard … you will watch them learning what they’ve taught you’ (quoted in World Cinema Reports’ Editors 2020), and to make that instructional theme and the structure it offered explicit in the title of the film. In so doing, the filmmaker found an ingenious way of making a potentially significant limitation into a novel point of appeal.

The geopolitical context for that limitation was the situatedness of *Learning to skateboard* in Afghanistan, the location of the Skateistan school featured in the film, and a country within which years of Taliban rule and entrenched patriarchal norms about female behaviour outside the home had made sports participation for girls and women difficult if not impossible. Dysinger had extensive experience as a documentary filmmaker in the country while making *Camp Victory, Afghanistan* (2010), shooting approximately 300 hours of footage over the course of three years to produce a bleak verité chronicle of U.S attempts to build up the Afghan military (Scheib 2010). The film, which garnered excellent reviews at the Human Rights Watch Film Festival and at the SXSW Film Festival, was co-produced with the Independent Television Service, and broadcast as part of PBS’s long-running Independent Lens series.

Awareness of Dysinger’s work led to an approach by Orlando von Einsiedel of Grain Media, the documentary production company responsible for *The White Helmets* (von Einsiedel 2016), the Syrian Defence Force documentary short that garnered Netflix’s first-ever Oscar win in 2017. Grain Media had been asked to develop a documentary short on the girls of Skateistan by Molly Thompson, then director of programming at A&E IndieFilms (2005–), the feature documentary division of A&E Networks. Thompson had seen a ten-minute documentary von Einsiedel had already made on Skateistan, entitled *Skateistan: To Live and Skate Kabul* (2011), produced with funding from the fashion brand Diesel and style magazine *Dazed and Confused* for their short-lived ‘Diesel New Voices,’ a ‘platform for young filmmakers to have their work seen by a global audience’ (Dazed Digital 2010). A former professional snowboarder, von Einsiedel had started making action sports documentaries, before, in his own words, gravitating towards ‘shooting documentaries about social issues in places experiencing conflict’ (quoted in PBS News Hour 2011). *Skateistan: To Live and Skate Kabul* offered an opportunity to combine the two. According to Dysinger, ‘A&E decided they wanted a girls’ version of Skateistan’ (quoted in GoldDerby, n.d.), while von Einsiedel stated that Skateistan founder Oliver Percovich had insisted that A&E use Grain Media, with whom they had a trusted relationship (Ritman 2020). von Einsiedel recognised that uninhibited access to Afghan girls, particularly in the home environment, would be easier for a

female filmmaker and crew. Through this somewhat circuitous route, Dysinger came to accept the film commission, one which she saw as an opportunity 'to write a love letter to my favourite thing about Afghanistan, which is the girls' (quoted in GoldDerby n.d.).

If Dysinger's motivation for making *Learning to skateboard* was clear, the impulse to commission the film on the part of A&E IndieFilms warrants further examination. The formation of A&E IndieFilms is indicative of key developments within the US documentary sector in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Lyons 2023), in particular the investment by premium cable channels in 'authorial documentaries' – so named to distinguish them from 'executive-produced' documentaries created by a channel's in-house team (Chattoo et al. 2018, 499). Arguably the most prominent purveyor was HBO, which under Sheila Nevins became a serious rival to the ITVS in co-producing and broadcasting acclaimed and award-winning documentaries. Other networks, such as CNN, The History Channel, The Discovery Channel, MTV and the Sundance Channel also offered audiences a mixture of commissioned and acquired titles. A&E was already one of the world's largest originators of factual television, and its decision to create A&E IndieFilms was an attempt to further diversify its output and acquire a different set of brand connotations for the network, specifically those that could convey 'indie' cool and cachet in line with other facets of 'indie' culture (music, fiction films, games, fashion) that had gone mainstream at that time (Newman 2011). As its appellation suggested, A&E Indiefilms positioned itself as a purveyor of the 'indie doc,' defined by Sony Pictures Classics' Tom Bernard as 'populist, the story of an interesting subject, has auteur style, and doesn't follow the rules of the 60's and 70's strict documentary authority' (quoted in Thompson 2004). This is in line with Yannis Tzioumakis's argument about the assimilability of some American recent independent documentary films into the specific category of 'indie,' with its increased emphasis on 'recognisable stars […] stronger generic frameworks […] well defined niche audiences […] [and] the deployment of authorship as an extremely significant marketing hook' (2016, 10). And as the financing of Grain Media's Skateistan documentary by 'cool' lifestyle brands Diesel and *Dazed and Confused* evinces, the production and distribution of the 'indie doc' had percolated into the wider youth-oriented entertainment and leisure economy.

Learning to skateboard was the last documentary released by A&E Indiefilms before Thompson departed the company to become Apple's new Head of Documentaries in 2019. The documentary unit had been given a limited slate, releasing twenty-six titles between 2005 and 2019, beginning with *Bearing Witness* (Eisenhardt, Kopple and Wotton 2005), about the experiences of five women journalists during the second Gulf war in Iraq. Two subsequent titles also centred on recent military conflict. *City of Ghosts* (2017) was about citizen journalists in Raqqa, Syria during the rule of ISIS, while *The Tillman Story* (2010) examined the suspicious death of a US soldier in Afghanistan. The solider, Pat Tillman, had been a professional football player, and two of A&E Indiefilms' other releases were also sports-themed, namely *Happy Valley* (2014), about a college football coach who committed acts of sexual abuse, and *Murderball* (2005), about quadriplegic rugby players preparing for the Wheelchair Rugby World Championships and Paralympics. Several titles, such as *Rock School* (2005) *Jesus Camp* (2006), and *American Teen* (2008), offered tales of challenging childhoods. What is striking is how much, thematically and conceptually, *Learning to skateboard* aligned with the corpus of A&E IndieFilms' output: in combining childhood adversity, sports participation and

geopolitical conflict, it compactly triangulated the unit's three most pronounced topic areas. Moreover, under Thompson's stewardship A&E IndieFilms' had been an advocate for films by women filmmakers and/or about the lives of girls and women, from titles such as *Bearing Witness*, *American Teen*, and *The September Issue* (2009) to awarding all its inaugural 'Brave Storytellers Awards' at Sundance 2019 to women filmmakers (Cecilia Aldarondo, Jameka Autry, Margaret Brown, and Yoruba Richen). *Learning to skateboard*, a film made by an all-female crew about the lives of Afghan girls, thus represented a fitting bookend to Thompson's tenure at A&E.

Skateistan and 'the girl effect'

If a number of A&E Indiefilms' documentaries addressed challenging subject matter, there was also an overall focus on attracting a younger audience to the network with titles that promised to catch the eye and entertain. Dysinger was clearly in tune with that sentiment when stating that she approached *Learning to skateboard* as a chance 'to make a movie about Afghanistan that people wanted to see … not took like medicine' (quoted in GoldDerby n.d.), and in fact revealed that the 'A&E "marketing people" didn't want Afghanistan in the title' (quoted in Carey 2020). Indeed, *Learning to skateboard* even avoided the use of the word Skateistan, which in absorbing the Persian -stan suffix would have made the film's geolocation more apparent. In marked contrast to her other work about Afghanistan for US public television, Dysinger made evident that her approach was to be more assimilable to the contours of the commercially oriented indie-doc, stating explicitly that 'I wanted it to be light-hearted' (quoted in Carey 2020). Its intended broadcast home was to be A&E's Lifetime basic cable channel, which was geared towards entertainment programming for women (Lotz 2006; Mullen 2003), and where the film's uplifting focus on skateboarding girls, and the female instructors and teachers who supported them, would find an apposite home.

The fact that skateboarding could lend itself to the objective outlined by Dysinger, and to direct attention away from the more politically contentious questions prompted by filming in Afghanistan – such as those raised forcefully in the filmmaker's other work – was in fact precisely why action sports have served so well as the locus for humanitarian aid and development campaigns. Holly Thorpe and Robert Rinehart argue that action sport NGOs such as Skateistan, SurfAid, and SkatePal have been successful in securing investment because:

> seemingly pure (typically noncompetitive, individualistic, nonnationalistic) and playful physical activities […] may be appealing to governmental agencies that see these sports as apolitical, and thus 'safe' channels for investing, and thus manoeuvring, within these volatile countries. (2013, 124)

They make the point that this extends to corporate investment and more wide-ranging sponsorship activities integral to sustaining the infrastructure and public profiles of organisations such as Skateistan and note that their website describes it as an 'independent, neutral, Afghan NGO' (121). Moreover, making a documentary specifically about the 'seemingly pure … and playful physical activities' of the girls of Skateistan, A&E IndieFilms and Dysinger were in alignment with the promotional activities conducted internally by the NGO. Skateistan staff revealed that 'media requests […] are really

focused on the female element though this is only one part of what we do with our programs,' and admitted that 'we use the Afghan girl [action sport participants] as a hook to get the attention […] So, yeah, it's now become a hook … but that's marketing!' (quoted in Hayhurst, Thorpe, and Chawansky 2021, 178).

That this was the case can be attributed to the 'Girl Effect,' which, as Ofra Koffman and Rosalind Gill point out, was a term 'coined by the Nike Foundation in the mid-2000s' (2013, 86), and which involved the 'explicit borrowing and mobilisation of discourses of "girl power" that have been circulating in the West (and now increasingly elsewhere) over the last two decades.' They argue that it is 'hard to exaggerate the impact it has had on development discourse and policy' (87). The wide-ranging analysis of this phenomenon by Lyndsay Hayhurst, Holly Thorpe and Megan Chawansky in *Action Sports for Gender Development* takes in the activities of Skateistan, and pays close attention to 'the ethical issues and power relations involved in social media portrayals of Afghan girls doing action sports' (2021, 178). While they mention *Learning to skateboard* only in passing, their assessment of the potency of Skateistan's social media imagery extends to the documentary, and what they describe as the 'intersection' of three 'hegemonic discourses,' namely 'Afghanistan as a site of ongoing conflict and female oppression;(2) action sports as activities dominated for many years by young, white men (see Beal 1996); and (3) the rise of the Girl Effect and postfeminist media culture' (179).[1] In relation to the latter, Koffman and Gill note that:

> the Girl Effect emerged post-9/11, following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Its continued prominence is maintained as Western forces discuss their impending withdrawal from Afghanistan (Traynor, 2012) and amid fears that any gains for girls and women will be undone by the Taliban. (85)

Particularly notable is the way that this unstable geopolitical context served to accentuate what they point to as a key component of discussions of girlhood, namely the way that they are 'structured by movement between discourses of 'can do' girls and 'at risk' girls' (87). And as I show in the pages to follow, what is striking about *Learning to skateboard* is the extent to which it works by affectively mobilising precisely that movement between 'can do' and 'at risk,' focalised around the girls' attempts at skateboarding, for which it serves as the symbolic embodiment.

Skateboarding in Kabul: Skateistan on film

While helpful in capsulising A&E IndieFilms' interest in commissioning her documentary, Dysinger's description of *Learning to skateboard* as 'a girls' version of Skateistan' (quoted in GoldDerby n.d.) elides some key differences between the two. von Einsiedel's film was shot in Kabul in January 2010, not long after Skateistan's purpose-built skate school had opened, comprised of classrooms as well as a 19,000 square foot indoor skate park, all funded by 'US$1 million in local and international donations and land gifted by Afghanistan's Olympic Committee' (Thorpe and Rinehart 2013, 121). But over its eight-minute running time the film devotes only around one and a half minutes to footage of the facility, cutting together shots of boys and girls using the skatepark separately and also in the classroom. In accordance with its subtitle *To Live and Skate Kabul*, the majority of the film is comprised of footage of children skateboarding

around the city, as well as through the ruins of Tajbeg Palace, located ten miles from central Kabul. In so doing, it offers in effect a boosterish snapshot of Skateistan's impact on Kabul since 2006, when it began 'as a series of small, relatively informal skate-board coaching sessions' (Thorpe and Rinehart 2013, 121). We see boys skating down a busy car-filled road, and gliding past street vendors, and also boys and one girl skating in an abandoned swimming pool and a Soviet-era water fountain (the girl is twelve-year-old Fazilla, singled out by the film for interview). In this way, it could be said that von Einsiedel's film hews closely to the conventions of street skating videos that document the sport's capacity to repurpose the built environment as a playground for stunts and tricks (Borden 2001), and thus performing in spaces far less planned and ordered than skate parks. Yet unlike such videos filmed typically in urban America, many of the sites and spaces are scarred, evacuated, or hollowed out by bomb blasts from the years of warfare and ongoing terrorist attacks. While a number had by that point traumatic histories within the city, such as the swimming pool, infamous as the former setting for Taliban public executions, the film elides these particulars in favour of brisk footage of each, thereby fashioning Kabul as a succession of strikingly skateable surfaces.

In contrast, *Learning to skateboard* sees skating confined entirely to the Skateistan indoor park, with the film as a whole comprised mostly of sequences shot inside it, as well as in the classroom, and also in the home of Hanifa and her sister, two of the teenage girl skate instructors who feature throughout. Dysinger stated that 'one of the issues of the movie is that girls don't skateboard outside, and how do you make a movie when nobody [except the boys] can skateboard outside?' (quoted in Gianakopoulos 2020). If this might come as a surprise to anyone that had seen von Einsiedel's film, the creation of the purpose-built facility had ensured that girls who wished to skate no longer risked facing public opprobrium, effectively taking them off the streets by design. Indeed, while Dysinger was keen to stress that her film was light-hearted it in fact began by staging for the viewer the experience of a threatening and oppressive male gaze on a hypothetical girl skater in the streets of Kabul. The first shot we see is of a rubble-filled streetscape with a group of boys and a man in the background, as an onscreen title announces the location as 'Kabul, Afghanistan.' A quick montage of five more tightly framed shots of city streets each depicts unsmiling boys and men staring back directly at the camera. The filmmaker stated that she 'used the fact that there was a woman behind the camera to sort of reproduce what would happen if just a woman walked down the street' (quoted in Gianakopoulos 2020). But the fact that three of the shots are lateral tracking shots at skateboard speed, including the opening one, which offers a sustained movement from right to left across the ground, makes it less a reproduction of a woman walking than a girl gliding. This reading of the opening sequence is supported by a more explicit imagining of outdoor female skating in a later scene, as Hanifa is filmed at the top of a ramp in the indoor park. After stating that 'I'm a good skater, and I want to take part in international competitions' she takes off down the ramp to showcase her skill, and her voiceover continues, adding that 'it is difficult to skate on the streets because I'm a girl and this is Afghanistan.' As Hanifa ascends another ramp, the scene jump cuts to a travelling POV shot at the same speed on a smoothly tarmacked and largely deserted Kabul road, making it appear as if she had magically skate-teleported into a more hospitable exterior world. A cut back to Skateistan

and her reflection that 'I'll never have a chance to skate on the streets' sees reality abruptly reasserted.

The film's key theme of imperilled Afghan girlhood is reinforced by the intertitle that follows the opening montage, and which states that '17 years after the Taliban fell, Afghanistan is still one of the worst places in the world to be born a girl.' After a lingering shot of a woman in a burqa accompanied by two people we assume are her husband and daughter, another intertitle tells us that 'Most women are never taught to read. Girls are often forced into early marriage. For many, violence is a threat inside and outside the home.' Subsequent shots include an excerpt of TV news coverage of a car bomb, a woman surveying the blown-out windows and blood-soaked concrete interior of a building, and an unidentified woman in voiceover saying that 'the society we live in, it's not safe … especially for girls.' In this way, the initial minutes of the film are designed to establish an ominous, all-encompassing environment of corporeal risk to girls with which to then contrast the safe(r) space of the skate park. Other memorable moments in the film are designed to underline this dynamic, such as the patting down of the girls entering Skateistan to check for hidden explosives, or our experience of their journey to the skatepark in a dedicated school bus, necessary we are told in order to help them avoid 'street harassment and even kidnapping.' This approach effectively inverts that found in most skateboarding films, where the acute locus of risk is squarely in the performance of stunts and tricks; the viewer is never invited to contemplate the routine bodily hazards inherent in the journey to the skate venue by pro skateboarders such as Rodney Mullen or Letícia Bufoni.

One question prompted by this fact is thus what, precisely, is the appeal and meaning of skateboarding as it is performed in *Learning to skateboard*? Certainly, the film's organisation around a succession of skate lessons for Skateistan's newest intake of girl students (i.e. 'standing on the board'; 'pushing off'; 'tik tak'; and 'skating the ramp') furnishes it with a discernible structure and serves also as a pretext for the filmmaker to engage with the girls. The escalating difficulty of the tricks allows the film to subtly emulate the trajectory of performance skill commonplace in action sports documentaries, which involves saving the most challenging feats for last. Moreover, the regularity of the skate lessons establishes a comforting routineness that contrasts with the instability characterising life in Kabul. The skate performances depicted in the film also gesture towards the universal attributes of the sport, in particular the fun of being able to stand upright on a travelling board, evident in the smiling faces of the girls at the skatepark, and cemented by one, Reihana, stating in interview that 'it makes me happy.' But by focusing squarely on girl participants, it foregrounds the specialness of *their* opportunity to access this enjoyment through the Skateistan facility. Existing scholarship on girl skaters in North America has stressed the extent to which they value the fun of skateboarding as an important attribute of this male-dominated pursuit (Kelly, Pomerantz, and Currie 2005, 232), but here this is given additional import by Dysinger's observation that 'girls in Afghanistan, I mean they don't play tag, they don't do cartwheels, they do housework' (quoted in Carey 2019). A related point can be made about the value placed by North American girl skaters on 'a willingness to try new things or take a risk' and being 'physically strong and brave' (232–233). What are seen as essential elements of an 'alternative' performance of girlhood within North America – ostensibly at odds with hegemonic norms of conventional femininity – are amplified in *Learning to*

skateboard through the much more acute landscape of risk in which they live. Dysinger's statement that the film is 'really about courage' (quoted in Carey 2019) directs attention to the fact that the skating sequences are captivating not due to the actual physical peril of the elementary stunts performed, but because we witness the girls embodying a nascent willingness to be brave *as girls*, the real testing ground for which is understood to be outside the perimeter of the skatepark. This sort of freighted meaning is entirely absent from the skate sequences in *Skateistan: To Live and Skate Kabul*.

The most literal way in which the film underlines the skatepark as a space of safety rather than corporeal risk is in Hanifa's declaration in interview that 'if Skateistan didn't exist, I'd have to sell tea on the street to support my family,' made after reflecting, stoically, that 'there are always [bomb] blasts … they happen all the time now.' This occurs three quarters of the way through the film, in the section dedicated to 'skating the ramp,' and is preceded by one of the most evocative sections in the documentary. We first see a wide shot of a man in a plastic chair looking back at the camera in now familiar fashion from outside a Kabul beauty salon, adorned with large images of glamourous blonde-haired white women. A cut to a close up of a headscarf-free female mannequin in the window display shifts rapidly to another from inside the display, and we are now positioned next to the mannequin, looking back out onto the street. A woman wearing a burqa moves slowly towards the window, seemingly contemplating the display, before beginning to exit the shot from the left. As she does so a graphic match cut to inside Skateistan substitutes her shape for that of a girl in a headscarf preparing to select some skate sneakers from a shoe rack. Dysinger has used brief shots of such mannequins twice before in the film, largely for their striking gender incongruity, but this sequence gives them additional resonance as part of a dialectic of female embodiment. A static archetype of western-style femininity meets its opposite in the window's reflection of the burqa, until a synthesis in the form of the fluid movement of an Afghan girl with a headscarf offers us what the film clearly posits as a preferable mode of female being – physically active, sartorially unfettered, but still culturally appropriate in appearance.

The sequence serves as a preface for a series of slow-motion shots of one of the girls attempting to skate the half pipe ramp, filmed from the bottom of the ramp and at a right angle to its surface. We watch one of the instructors reach out to grasp the girl's hands and support her as she pushes off to ascend one side of the ramp, and then the other, visibly growing in confidence as she adapts to the demands of the gradient and speed. The first twenty seconds of the sequence is accompanied by scoring from composer and filmmaker Sasha Gordon, whose music is used exclusively throughout the documentary. Gordon is Russian-born, but US-based, a combined background that has obvious relevance in the recent history of Afghanistan, although the orchestration uses traditional western instruments. It is employed frequently in the film to convey a sense of childhood innocence and playfulness, as it is here, with a western style tonal chord progression, a music box sound and pizzicato strings bestowing the girl's performance with a whimsical quality, rather than a sense of physical jeopardy. Yet this precise moment sees the insertion of the noise of an emergency vehicle siren into the sound mix, and a Welsh-accented male voice intoning sombrely that 'a massive suicide bomb is thought to have killed at least ninety people in the Afghan capital Kabul and more than four hundred others injured, many of them seriously in the worst attack on that city since last July.' (Although uncredited, it is most likely an excerpt from a BBC news report). The sequence is

synchronised so that the girl falls off the skateboard and hits the base of the ramp at exactly the instant that the phrase 'massive suicide bomb' is heard. Here, the film evokes the skate video's convention of escalating intrinsic risk, but for the first and only time absorbs the extrinsic risk of the warzone outside the park's confines to simultaneously freight this innocuous tumble with deadly gravitas.

While there is a clear and emphatic obviousness to the symbolism of the sequence's crescendo of risk, its enduring impact on the remaining minutes of the film is a good deal more subtle, albeit no less effective. It underlays them all with a lingering sense of fragility – that what is being performed at this skatepark could collapse at any time. Subsequent interview excerpts with Hanifa and her sister, and also with the Skateistan teacher Fatima, offer recollections of the harsh restrictions on the lives of women and girls under the Taliban, with the latter offering the sentiment, 'may the winds of Kabul never touch their faces again.' This utterance is made all the more poignant with hindsight and the knowledge that the collapse would indeed occur with the signing of the US withdrawal agreement with the Taliban in February 2020. That this kind of geopolitical portent can be catalysed with an innocuous fall on a ramp is testament to the way that the film imaginatively and effectively extends the meanings of a skate stunt sequence.

The other subtle but important detail of the stunt sequence is the fact that the personal identity of the skater is not significant. In distinct contrast to typical skate film convention, the stunt does not offer itself up to be understood as an individualised performance – as an expression of the skater's personality, to be made apparent through traits such as style, speed, and attitude. Given the fact that the girl is only just learning to skate, that reasonably can't be the case, of course, but even the exigencies of her fall are not presented as the personalised failings of a novice so much as a synecdoche for imperilled Afghan girlhood itself – a vivid visualisation of the vicissitudes of collective fate. Yet the film moves towards closure with a final skate sequence that intercuts a series of shots of the girls' joyful navigation of the skatepark using their new skills, together with interview snippets where a number of them express career aspirations such as becoming a pilot, an eye doctor, a journalist or a teacher. It concludes with Hanifa and her sister, hand in hand, ascending a ramp together against a light-filled window. It would be hard to think of a better illustration of the way that the film seeks ultimately to reconcile discourses of 'can do' and 'at risk' girlhood through the imagery of skateboarding.

Conclusion

In interview, Dysinger reflected on the fact of her Academy Award nomination for a documentary about skateboarding by gesturing to her grey hair and stating, 'it's just funny' (quoted in GoldDerby n.d.). Her amusement derived from the fact that as a woman in her sixties, she clearly did not fit anyone's image of an acclaimed skateboarding filmmaker, not least her own. There was also mirth at the absurdity of the fact that after decades of struggle to develop painstaking, serious, feature-length documentaries as a woman in an industry disproportionately bestowing opportunities on men, she would be most widely recognised for this 'simple and joyful' short film made on commission for A&E (quoted in World Cinema Reports' Editors 2020). Yet in one of the other numerous interviews Dysinger conducted in the aftermath of her awards recognition, she spoke briefly about her own girlhood, and recalled that although she 'didn't really

go to the movies much' (Wyka 2020) two of her favourite films from that time were *The Endless Summer* (1966), and *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962). That the former is a seminal, globe-trotting, surfing documentary, while the latter recalls geopolitical conflict and deadly colonial exploits in the Muslim world (albeit thousands of miles from Afghanistan) seems rather pertinent, appearing to presage her skilful fusion of board sport and warzone in *Learning to skateboard*. The artfulness involved in doing so rather belies Dysinger's self-deprecating description of the film as 'simple.' On the contrary, as this article has sought to demonstrate, *Learning to skateboard* can be seen to expand the vocabulary of corporeal risk in the skate documentary, using filmic technique to freight the girls' performances with the extrinsic risks of the world in which they live, an environment that Dysinger has chronicled extensively in her other work. The challenge of the circumstances she was presented with – girls who can't skate and can't skate outside – in a sense forced her hand. Even von Einsiedel's documentary, while similarly generically atypical in its focus on skateboarding Afghan children, could rely on fairly adept skateboarders traversing striking features of the Kabul cityscape. Her approach was to use skateboarding to visualise the delicate balancing of empowered and imperilled girlhood in a landscape of acute corporeal risk.

Sports NGOs such as Skateistan, SurfAid, and SkatePal have received significant media attention for the way that they have made action sports the locus for humanitarian aid and development campaigns (e.g. Brummitt and Mason 2005). One consequence of interest to film scholars is how the attendant diversification of action sport participation is reshaping how performative risk is represented in action sports documentaries, especially as they attract a more diverse array of producers and filmmakers towards them.[2] For viewers of *Learning to skateboard*, any such consideration is tempered by the fact that the Taliban returned to power in August 2021, bringing with it the inevitable closure of the Afghanistan skateparks, and an increasingly tight grip on the lives of women and girls. Watching Dysinger's documentary in the aftermath thus takes on the poignancy of another notable strand of action sports documentary – those that capture the perils and the potentiality of risky performances on mountains or in oceans before some catastrophic event makes the performers disappear tragically from view.

Notes

1. Thorpe has worked closely with Skateistan and written extensively about it. See also Thorpe and Chawansky (2016); Thorpe and Chawansky (2017); Thorpe, Ahmad, and Williams (2018); and Thorpe, Hayhurst, and Chawansky (2018). *Action Sports for Gender Development* was written as the Taliban's return unfolded, and the risk of female participants and teachers being identified on social media was a focus of analysis.
2. For instance, Shextreme in Bristol, UK, 'the world's first film festival celebrating women in extreme sports and adventure' and creator of the 'world's first International Network for female adventure filmmakers' (Shextreme 2021). Other adventure sports festivals, such as BANFF and Kendal Mountain Festival, have made concerted efforts to expand diversity and inclusivity of those both behind and in front of the camera.

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