



FORUM

University of Edinburgh
Postgraduate Journal of Culture and the Arts
Issue 28 | Spring 2019

Title	Breaking Down Walls: Truth, Fiction, and GDR Memory in <i>This Ain't California</i>
Author	James Cleverley
Publication	FORUM: University of Edinburgh Postgraduate Journal of Culture & the Arts
Issue Number	28
Issue Date	Spring 2019
Publication Date	28/06/2019
Editors	Dominic Richard

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Breaking Down Walls: Truth, Fiction, and GDR Memory in *This Ain't California*

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This article examines the issues of authenticity that accompany Marten Persiel's award winning 'hybrid' documentary This Ain't California (2012). Taking on the appearance of a traditional documentary, Persiel's film tells the little-known story of a skating subculture in 1980s East Germany. Occupying a contentious space between documentary and fiction, This Ain't California's form and content raise questions of authenticity. When it comes to cultural memory and storytelling, this paper posits that plural, material, and emotional authenticities can be usefully revealed by breaking down the perceived wall that separates the broad ontologies of 'truth' and 'fiction'. Nuance in this regard is as vital as ever: memories of the German Democratic Republic remain contested, despite three decades having passed since the fall of the Berlin Wall.

An analysis of technologies and techniques of filmmaking is tied together with central focus on the embodied spectator's perception within the film-experience; this study touches on the "memory work" (Kuhn) of This Ain't California through an investigative framework that considers the relations between two bodies – those belonging to both viewer and film. Of particular interest is how the filmmakers (re)create the everyday by shooting 'amateur' skate clips with Super 8 cameras. Presenting these 'falsified' sequences as archival footage, in accordance with generic documentary conventions, the film arouses salient points for examining how the spectator is affected by mediated cultural memories.

'Art is a lie that makes us realize truth' – Picasso¹

Introduction

Documentary films are ostensibly about the representation of reality. To distinguish nonfiction cinema from other forms, one should be able to point to its opposite – fiction film. This comfortable distinction has been challenged over the years, particularly as critics increasingly have had to come to terms with the instability and ambiguities of the postmodern era. One such challenge is expressed in the following provocation against traditional conceptions: "Documentary films are often presented as depicting 'truth', but are in fact just as much ideological constructs as fiction cinema" (Sætre 118). Indeed, the stakes involved in assertions of truth-versus-fiction feel exceptionally high in our contemporary moment; current anxieties around factual representation in media are reflected in, and fuelled by phenomena such as the Trumpian cry of 'fake news'. This article examines questions

¹ This quote comes from a statement made by Picasso to Marius de Zayas. Picasso approved de Zayas's manuscript before being translated into English to be published by *The Arts* in New York, 1923, under the title "Picasso Speaks."

of authenticity in documentary filmmaking, seeking theoretical pathways out of the labyrinthine debates that lie in-between the walls that separate truth/fiction, subjectivity/objectivity and reality/illusion. These themes are raised with an analysis of the award-winning ‘docufiction’, *This Ain’t California* (2012).

Directed by Marten Persiel, this ‘hybrid’ film synthesises technologies of fiction and documentary filmmaking to depict its story of skateboarders in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) in the 1980s. Acclaimed by many critics, Persiel’s film also drew controversy for its undeclared use of actors, and for mixing ‘historical’ images with footage presented as archival, but which was in fact shot by the filmmakers, who used Super 8 cameras in order to achieve an ‘authentic’-looking, ‘home-movie’ aesthetic. This study asks the question: How does *This Ain’t California*’s formally inventive, non-traditional approach affect its telling of history and memory?

I argue that *This Ain’t California* inspires a critical provocation to the ontological status of ‘truth’ in nonfictional audiovisual works, both in its formal characteristics and in its reception. This uncertainty prepares the ground for questioning the film’s thematic content; Alongside the theoretical considerations, the assemblage of Persiel’s aesthetic, formal, and narrative choices challenges dominant frameworks of East German cultural memory, which typically recall negative elements, the “memory of dictatorship” (Sabrow), by telling a vibrant tale of youth and rebelliousness. In this way, this film proves an example for doing what Annette Kuhn has termed “memory work”:

an active practice of remembering which [...] undercuts assumptions about the transparency or the authenticity of what is remembered, treating it not as ‘truth’ but as evidence of a particular sort: material for interpretation, to be interrogated, mined for its meanings and its possibilities (157).

Persiel’s film produces its memory work within the borderlands between truth and fiction, challenging common sense assumptions in the process. This article seeks to show that it is in the viewer’s attitude to the screen, as much as any essential quality of the film, that the value of ‘truthfulness’ gives meaning to the memories of *This Ain’t California*.

***This Ain’t California* as GDR Memory**

The year 2019 marks the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the event which we remember as precipitating the collapse of the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR), and the subsequent re-unification of East and West Germany. It did not, however, mark the complete disappearance of all that is, or was, 'East German'. The GDR has rather experienced something of an afterlife as the subject of popular debates, academic scholarship, television shows, blogs, YouTube channels and films. These acts of remembrance have often been highly conflicted, as the German nation, still in the well-documented process of coming to terms with its National Socialist past, faced yet another social and political upheaval (Hake 208). Central to these examples of memory work is the fact that, as Silke Arnold-de Simine observes: "How we remember, individually and collectively, has become almost as important an issue as what we remember, as the former is seen to determine the latter" (7).

Too 'documentary' to be comfortably called 'fiction', and vice versa, Persiel's genre-exceeding film details the history of skateboarding in East Germany. The film begins in present day, post-unification Germany with a gathering of former skaters (see Fig. 1), who have come to pay their respects following the death of their friend, Denis 'Panik' Paraceck.



(Fig. 1)

Sitting around a campfire in a locality, now abandoned, where they used to hang out, the skaters perform a dual function as narrators and witnesses to the (sub)cultural memory that constitutes the film's subject. Their reminiscing works as a device by

which the history of the origins and development of skating in the GDR can be told. Our journey to the past is coordinated through the oral testimony of these ‘witnesses’; memories of the GDR are recreated in vibrant colour, contrasted with the drab greys more typically associated with the former East. These memories are complemented with frequent cuts to illustrative ‘archival’ footage. Denis’s life is reconstructed through the combination of these techniques; the film’s detailing of his growth into his alter-ego ‘Panik’ accompanies the story of the development of the skater scene in the former East. We learn how the East German skaters were constantly frustrated with their lack of access to quality materials for their boards and travel with Panik and his mates on an exceptional trip away from the restrictive borders of the GDR to the ‘Euroskate ’88’ competition in Prague. We note how the young skaters return home reflecting on their place in a global society, having spent those days interacting with the West German team, and the rest of the world.

The film’s toying with conventions of documentary authenticity begins from the very opening shot (see Fig. 2), with a tribute appearing over a black screen in white text: “This film is dedicated to Denis ‘PANIK’ Paraceck, 1970 – 2011” (*my translation*).



(Fig. 2)

The appearance of what could be thought of as ‘documentary actuality’ thus registers from the first moment – the dual figure of Denis/Panik is established as a ‘real person’. Kai Hillebrand is not credited as being the actor who plays Denis/Panik either here, or at the end of the film. *This Ain’t California* received criticism for its

'hoax' of filming footage and (re)presenting this as 'archival', using undeclared actors, and constructing a narrative ambiguously based on a 'historical truth' of the story of skateboarding in the GDR. By opening the film with this deliberate posture of sincerity, the film asks the question of the spectator – to what extent does the fictive, dual character of Denis/Panik matter?

This Ain't California utilises the GDR's infamous sports program in drawing up the backstory behind Denis/Panik; Denis was being groomed to join the elite sports school, having had his talent identified by scouts, his father was a former Olympian, and his trainer. Denis's rebelliousness is set against the prescribed fate of the pathway towards elite competition in the sports academy of the GDR. Right from the film's start, *This Ain't California* raises the topic of (sub)culture of skateboarding in conjunction with the broader context of the cultural memory of GDR sports. This is established by a montage sequence, which mixes shots recorded for the film by Super 8 cameras with various images and clips taken from the archives. The background music's driving tom-tom drumbeat raises the sensation of adrenalin; typical images that are supposedly representative of the GDR (i.e. mass choreographies of parades and sport competitions) are interspersed with the 'amateur movie' shots of Panik and his friends having fun with, and causing mischief on their skateboards – or, what they in the former East according to the film had, in a straight-forward way, termed a "board with wheels" (See Fig. 3).



(Fig. 3)

Cold War images of armed forces marching, and tanks and rockets on parade, are followed by footage of a person on a hospital bed receiving a 'shot', the allusion to doping is clear, and of young children being drilled hard in various sports. In one clip, a young girl, 'Simone', is yelled at by her trainer to keep pushing; as she skis across the finish line, she collapses. In another, a small boy, who looks no older than 12, lifts massive weights which expose extraordinarily defined muscles for his age. These extracted slices of footage continue to weave in and out of moving images of

Denis/Panik, filmed from the low-angles and with the fish-eye lens's rounded look, strongly associated with skate-movies. As Panik hurtles through the air, his board flying and his body crashing to the ground, we wonder, 'why were all these people doing what they did?'

This is the film's broad question, which is tied specifically to its GDR-context. This guiding framework of examining 'why?' is expressed in a slightly different way by Dirk Reiher, researcher for the film, who explains that the film-team was always preoccupied with the question: "How do we really spend our time?" ("Wie bringt man eigentlich die Zeit bei?"; *my translation*). This marks a distinct attitude towards the type of GDR memory with which the film is predominantly concerned – the everyday. However, the documentary observes an 'everyday' belonging to a demographic ignored in typical GDR remembrance narratives, commemorations and museums.

Reviewers typically discussed the ethical questions raised by the film's inclusion of invented, or (re)created visual and narrative 'evidence'. In *Sight and Sound*, Sam Davies writes: "The problem with *This Ain't California* is that imagining it is essentially what director Marten Persiel has done. A notional documentary, his film quite shamelessly conceals the fact that it is mostly acted, its home-movie 'sources' shot in the present day" (90). On the other hand, some reviewers expressed delight at the film's expressive, imaginative, and experimental approach to a 'documentary' portrayal of GDR history and memory. One critic positively reports that he "fell" for Piersel's movie; "fell," he clarifies in the sense that he enjoyed the film, and was "taken in by its subterfuge" (Mathieson). Another reviewer uses the same vocabulary to describe his own experience:

I have to admit right away that I 'fell for' the whole thing. That's what happens when you avoid reading about a movie before you see it, I guess. All I knew was that it won a special award at Berlin last year and that it was a documentary about German skate culture. And I fell for it, too, meaning I fell in love with it. I found it to be electrifying, which can't be ignored now that I know a lot of it is 'fake' (Campbell).

Both critics 'fall' for the film: they are duped into taking the Super 8 footage at face value, and at the same time they fall in love with the portrayal. All of this falling is evocative of the numerous 'stacks' we see from the skateboarders in the film itself, their bodies thrown towards the ground in a pleasurable disregard for the 'normal'

way to proceed around a city's public spaces. The pleasure these critics report, in being tripped up by this film's documentary artifice, is neatly linked in a mimetic way with the film's depiction of the liberation of the skateboarding experience.

The apparent veracity of the film's framing, with the character Denis/Panik at its center, who is mourned by the vigil of his (apparently 'real') friends from former days, draws the viewer into its (almost) unbelievable tale. Where some people will relish the playful spirit of the film, by omitting to declare the parts of the film that are invented (or even *that* parts have been invented), Persiel opens the possibility for others to feel deceived. Upon discovering that parts of the film are less 'real' than others, the viewer might translate their sense of having been tricked into a more general suspicion of the film's intent and its broader memory politics. Mathieson, one of the reviewers who 'fell' for the film, hints at this prospect, declaring that:

The real danger isn't lack of authenticity, but rather that it might lessen the historic understanding of the state security service, the Stasi, who in scenes shown here – again, probably invented – come across more as dogged bureaucrats monitoring the 'unorganised rollersports scene' rather than the brutal fist of a totalitarian regime (*SBS Movies*).

Germany's division into East and West created a stark duality that is yet to be sutured. The *Mauer im Kopf* (Wall in the head) persists: a concrete metaphor for the temporal and spatial dislocations and ruptures that collectively continue to shape German-German relations.² The director's position is therefore also pertinent to these ethical concerns of contextualisation within the legacies of Germany's history. Persiel, being a 'Wessi', i.e. someone from western Germany, threatens to upset certain 'Ossis' (from the former East), who might feel that a liberty has been taken with *their* history across the Wall, in the film's fabrication of narrative elements and evidence.

The Witness and the Embodied Spectator

Hayden White writes of the way that modernist art is inflected with an uncertainty about the status of the past. Through its disavowal of the "historical event" as a fundamental temporal unit of "history," modernism has destabilised the link between realism in representation and the actuality of events from our collective

² This phrase, having found popular usage in post-Wall Germany, comes originally from *Der Mauerspringer* (The Wall Jumper), a rather prescient tale of the trouble in achieving unity by the author Peter Schneider, first published in 1982.

past(s). This “dissolution,” he observes, “undermines the very concept of factuality and threatens therewith the distinction between realistic and merely imaginary discourse,” it also breaks down “a founding presupposition of Western realism: the opposition between fact and fiction” (18). White goes on to explain how, having abandoned the foundational premise that an undisputed reality exists to be represented, modernism undermined the principle of fact, upon which conventional realism used to be based. The consequence being that the taboo of mixing fiction and fact is abolished. What follows is that in postmodernist docu-drama or historical metafiction, genres which share many qualities with *This Ain't California*, we increasingly observe:

the placing in abeyance of the distinction between the real and the imaginary. Everything is presented as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real, with the result that the referential function of the images of events is etiolated (White 19).

In many respects, Persiel's film could be considered a product of postmodernism in the way that it flouts the expectations of 'purist' documentary traditions. However, *This Ain't California* equally defies categorisation as a 'fiction' film.

In both its form and content, the film registers its attention to historical detail according to conventions of documentary (such as using witness interviews and archival footage), distinguishing its appearance from typical fiction cinema. Importantly, this arouses a particular response in the viewer who recognises the documentary features of the film. We can see this in the film's use of actors playing the roles of witnesses. The presence of paid actors in documentaries is not unknown – actors are often employed in 'recreations' in what has become a conventional, recognisable trope in non-fiction film. *This Ain't California's* undeclared use of actors in the role of eye-witnesses, could, on the one hand, be interpreted as simply a continuation of this relatively uncontroversial form of mediating its history and cultural memory. On the other hand, the special, authenticating power embodied by the figure of the 'witness' could be seen to be radically threatened by Persiel's move. The witness's legitimating strength is corporeally experienced by the spectator, as Sara Jones argues: “The emotive impact of witness testimony . . . is augmented by the illusion of immediacy, that is, the experience of embodiment created by the apparent transparency of the medium” (185).

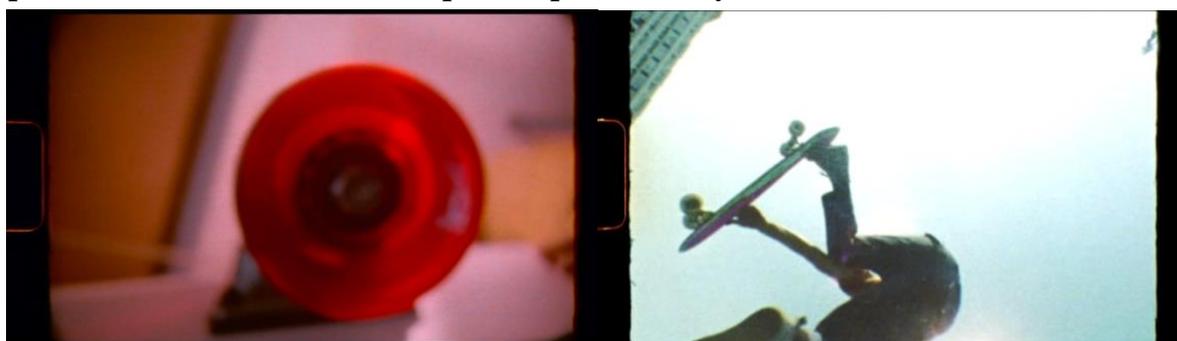
Central to the “transparency” in this mediation is what Bill Nichols terms the “virtual performance” of documentary interviews, that is, the presentation of “the logic of actual performance without signs of conscious awareness that this presentation is an act” (122). In *This Ain't California*, the former skaters who meet up, ostensibly to commemorate Denis/Panik following his death, flip this arrangement once again by engaging in an ‘actual’ performance, so to speak. As conscious actors, they are *performing* the virtual performance of ‘real’ witnesses. Persiel’s film thus presents us with a collection of witnesses, some of whom are engaged in a virtual performance of themselves, being ‘real’ eye-witnesses, while others are paid actors; the spectator is never certain of who is performing what role. The operations of authenticity incorporated into the ‘witness’ are toyed with through the actors’ embodying an oral history of GDR skateboarding. They recall this subcultural history via a conduit of the film’s script – they maintain the appearance of having authenticity that is typically conferred upon eye-witnesses, who have that special quality of ‘having actually been there’.

Filmmaker and theorist Trinh T. Minh-ha asserts that “there is no such thing as documentary – whether the term designates a category of material, or a set of techniques” - this is despite the clear existence of a “documentary tradition” (90). That is to say, most people, if asked, would have a clear idea of what a documentary is, despite the ontological uncertainty raised by Minh-ha. In order to consider how this tradition has managed to maintain a coherent meaning, despite the diversity in nonfictional filmic forms and the ontological uncertainty raised by Minh-ha, we can turn to Vivian Sobchack. She offers a possible explanation when she asks that we “remind ourselves that a ‘documentary’ is not a thing, but a subjective relationship to a cinematic object” (“Toward’ 251). Her phenomenological approach brings our attention to multiple ways a film can be received, for it is “the viewer’s consciousness that finally determines what kind of cinematic object it is” (“Toward’ 251). By thinking this way, we can see that the meaning of ‘documentary’ lies as much in the things that are brought by the spectator *to* the film, as in what the film (re)presents.

Despite, (or perhaps in response to), the persistence of contemporary, postmodern uncertainties, documentaries have continued to rely on the power of authenticity for their impact and strength in story-telling. If we accept a documentary/fiction binary is blurred – that all ‘documentary’ films deal with more than pure evidence, ‘objectivity’ or ‘fact’, and also that they can arouse emotions

within the viewer in a manner that is similar to that of fiction films – then the ‘hybrid’ nature of Persiel’s film can be evaluated not as a trespass into narrative filmmaking, or a betrayal of documentary’s foundational principles, but as an experimental pushing of boundaries. The spectator plays an active, dynamic role in this regard. “Authenticity,” as Jones observes, “is not a quality that a person, object or narrative possesses a priori, rather, s/he or it must be ascribed authenticity by the listener, reader, visitor or viewer” (188). The spectator is vitally involved in this creative, fluid act of intentional perception – through an interrelationship with its haptic images, as will now be examined. Jane Gaines asks, “if it can no longer be said that the documentary has ‘reality’ on its side, what can be said of it?” (6). I suggest that *This Ain’t California*’s haptic qualities encourage the viewer’s documentary consciousness and attention in a way that invokes the concrete materiality of the ‘real’ – of the ‘real history’ of skateboarding in East Germany to be precise – such that its authenticity can be construed in ways that exceed the bounds of identification, symbolism and the politics of representation.

The debates over the legitimacy of the ‘documentary’ claim to a uniquely truthful indexical relationship between its image and the ‘real’ world beyond the camera, amongst many other forms of discourse and media, often come to an impasse: what is more authentic, facts or feelings? If, following Laura Marks, “film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by complex perception of the body as a whole” (*Skin* 145), then we should consider the affect of *This Ain’t California* to be holistic and physical. The film’s memory work, recalling Kuhn, presents sequences of “material for interpretation” according to a corporeally-aroused authenticity (157). The assemblage of its constitutive parts, the nostalgic framing of its Super 8 footage and the blending of archival footage with images that ‘appear’ to be so, engages the viewer’s emotional knowledges of the GDR; Persiel’s version shapes cultural memories through its stylistic effects. The crunchy sound of rubber wheels on concrete accompanies its grainy, glowing images (see Fig. 4) – these qualities in particular recall Marks’s concept of haptic visuality.



(Fig. 4)

To perceive haptically is to share in a reciprocal relationship between viewer and object (Marks, *Touch* 12). Persiel uses montage to weave footage from the past into the recently-shot images which appear to be from the past, the stylistic effects of amateur camerawork blur into energetic, highly saturated, and over-exposed sequences. We encounter Super 8 images layered together, depicting Panik and his crew running amok, using a car as a ramp for jumps and tricks, and irritating passers-by. This layering effect builds upon the snippets of the past, through sound, movement and colour, to create an impressionistic whole. This impression is also deeply physical. Jennifer M. Barker elaborates on the material ways in which the viewer can be touched by the film's body: "films can pierce, pummel, push, palpate, and strike us; they also slide, puff, flutter, flay, and cascade along out skin" (36). In terms evocative of cinemas power to haptically touch, one of the skaters remembers that the ground must have constituted "about 50 percent concrete and 50 percent skin"; he enmeshes a cultural memory of *place* with the vivid, corporeal experience of grazing his body into it, and our bodies are thrown to the ground in a youthful, spirited, and shared remembrance of skating in the GDR.



(Fig. 5)

Aerial shots of the centre of East Berlin (see Fig. 5) accompany these reminiscences; the Soviet architecture is remembered in glowing terms, as a superb place for rolling on wheels. "One look at the city centre offers proof of this" interjects a new voice; its coarse, recorded quality and timbre indicates an older era of film production. These words emerge from the narration to whichever documentary footage these shots of the old city centre were taken from and blur with the witness testimony of the former skaters. Regardless of their 'objective' status as 'real' or 'pretend', their evocations bring to life the physical reality of the feeling of rolling on a skateboard through East Berlin. As the architecture of Alexanderplatz is remembered positively by the 'skaters' in a subsequent voice-over, monotonous

Eastern Bloc concrete is thereby transformed into a living site of individual expression through its kinaesthetic potential. In this manner, typically pejorative evocations of the East as concrete wastelands are reversed, or resisted. The concrete itself is poetically reimagined, or re-remembered, as something beautiful, an affecting material that remains powerful in the film's recollection: "the way that the sandstone felt... it was so soft, so warm, and eternally flat, like an eternal desert" ("Und wie sich dieser Sandstein angefühlt hat, der war so weich, und warm, und ewig glatt wie so einer ewige Wüste"; *my translation*).

The youths' liberal act of misusing both their time – people should be working towards a goal in the GDR – and the public spaces of Berlin is constructed as a moment of pleasure and insubordination. The historian Kai Reinhart remarks that the East German skateboarders closely linked their valorising of autonomy with the "production of their own 'truth'" (260). This resonates with the activity's American and global history of being a marginal pursuit, with an aesthetic that appeals to outsiders and rebels. In this material way, the film's subcultural themes are aligned, furthermore, with a central idea of this docufiction: that within the social worlds of the GDR there existed the potential for self-expression, fun, and play – despite how the dictatorship is typically recalled or understood in post-unification contexts.

Conclusion

'a fiction (un)like any other' (Nichols 125).

Persiel directs *This Ain't California* into the controversial spaces of contested GDR memory, incorporating a variety of audio, visual, and narrative techniques to tell his (post)modernist representation of a "historical event," recalling White's term (18). This "event" is the surprising existence of a skateboarding subculture in the GDR. Persiel's methods for telling this historical narrative take inspiration from fictional and nonfictional traditions. The persistence of the "Wall in the head" as a metaphor for German-German relations testifies to a need for the ability to negotiate between plural realities, as disillusionment and resentment at failures of re-unification remain. If we can think of authenticity as neither singular, nor static, then we open a space for considering the impact of the film's audiovisual memories of the GDR on more sophisticated levels than only their apparent 'veracity'. In order to open up this space, the perceived wall that separates truth and fiction into binary

distinctions must be dismantled. This is not to say that there is no such thing as ‘truth’ – far from it. But where contestations of truth are locked in cyclical argument, a more productive attitude might consider whether there may be alternative modalities of truthful experience that can emerge from affectivity, from within the gap between representation and reality.

The question that has pervaded discussions of *This Ain't California* has been whether this film can (or should) retain its ‘documentary’ status – with a greater percentage of its content being fictionalised or imagined. If we recall Sobchack’s assertion that a documentary is “less a *thing* than an *experience*” (‘Toward’ 241), then we must figure the spectator’s subject position prominently in our considerations of documentary film, authenticity and memory. The spectator’s active role in receiving, knowing, and responding to a variety of features in documentary films is fundamental to the genre’s (and to *This Ain't California*’s) memory work. Moreover, the multiplicity of viewer responses that are embedded in the creative act of watching, hearing, and being (haptically) ‘touched’ by a cinematic object must be taken into account. The mixed responses to *This Ain't California*, cited at the beginning of this essay, indicate that no simple barrier can keep ‘truth’ and ‘fiction’ fully apart. The film toys with the boundaries between formal, film-technical objectivity and imaginative creativity, and this was subject to rigorous debate amongst film critics and cinema-goers; its status as a historical document of skateboarding in the GDR is placed in tension with the desire to produce the feeling of memory itself.

To this end, *This Ain't California* grasps the attractive, fun and rebellious idea of skaters in the GDR, and develops this into an aesthetic and moving experience via the generic conventions of the skateboarding film. By examining the spectator’s intentional documentary consciousness, it is possible to conceive of plural forms of ‘documentary film’. Whether or not the cinematic object can be said to be authentic relies on how and where a film’s meaning(fulness) may be found, since authenticity and documentary are dynamic markers, resting in tension with the spectator’s own understandings and memories. Persiel’s film, full of movement, light and colour, recreates a subcultural memory of the GDR using techniques that draw on (and ‘fake’) aesthetics of documentary authenticity, but also on cinema’s power to sensorially engage with the ‘real’. The pleasures of the film lie in its ability to bring a forgotten world of skating in the former East to life. Its hazy, grainy images haptically

bring the spectator into contact with the (in)famous East German concrete; the roar of wheels and the crash of boards and bodies onto the ground excite and revive a nostalgia for a version of the past that many viewers would not have thought could ever have existed.

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