

RESIDUAL CULTURE OF ROLLER RINKS: MEDIA,
THE MUSIC & NOSTALGIA OF ROLLER SKATING

by

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ABSTRACT

Residual Culture of Roller Rink: The Media, Music & Nostalgia of Roller Skating

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More than other cultural sites or practices, roller skating invokes nostalgia and notions of the past. This project analyzes the ways in which roller skating has occupied a residual cultural status for more than one hundred years. Ultimately, the music at the roller rink mediates not only the movement in the space itself, but also the cultural movement of roller skating within society. Thus, this project explores the ways in which roller rink music engenders nostalgia through its use of residual sound technologies and genres. By focusing on the two prolific eras of roller skating, the Golden Age (1926-54) and Roller Disco (1977-1983), we will assess the role music played in both the rise and fall of popularity in roller skating, while exploring the re-presentations of these moments in film.

Plus que d'autres sites ou pratiques culturelles, le patin à roulettes invoque la nostalgie et les notions du passé. Ce projet analyse les façons dont le patin à roulettes a occupé un statut culturel résiduel pendant plus de cent ans. En fin de compte, la musique à la roulatèque obtient par médiation non seulement le mouvement dans l'espace lui-même, mais aussi le mouvement culturel de patin à roulettes dans la société. Ainsi, ce projet explore les façons dont la musique de la roulatèque engendre la nostalgie par son utilisation de technologies résiduelles du son et des genres. En nous concentrant sur les deux ères prolifiques du patin à roulettes, l'Âge D'or (1926-54) et le "Roller Disco"(1977-

1983), nous évaluerons le rôle que la musique a joué autant dans l'ascension que dans la chute de la popularité du patin à roulettes, en explorant les représentations de ces moments dans le cinéma.

Acknowledgments

Throughout this arduous process, I have dreamt of writing the acknowledgements section as I knew it was representative of not only the end, but of the moment at which I could express my gratitude to the people who helped me to reach this point.

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Chapter One:

You begin to recall those dreamy Saturday afternoons at the roller rink; it was raining outside, but inside it was real warm ... Then there was that steady roar of a thousand clay wheels on hardwood, and yes, you can here it now, the organ music that had nothing to do with Bach or church, but that was very, very close to heavenly.

- Anybody's Roller Skating Book, 1979¹

Roller skating in America never dies...

- The Complete Roller Skating Book, 1979²

There is the romance of discovering the thing in all of its dripping nostalgia.

- Greg Urban, *Metaculture*, 2001: 2.

1.1 Introduction

October 20, 2007 -- At the corner of Portage Avenue and Langside Street in Winnipeg, Manitoba, an unsteady chain-link fence surrounds a wrecking site.³ This late fall afternoon on the prairies, with its vast gray skies and snow-dusted ground, works to set the tone for the task at hand. Standing near the fence is an old man who is watching a bulldozer effortlessly tear through a building, Galaxy Skateland, an old roller rink. The building itself is more than one hundred years old, but this history seems irrelevant when in a few hours the building will be transformed into a pile of old wood. The man recalls all those childhood afternoons he spent at the roller skating rink, listening to music and skating with friends. Surveying the rubble, he takes comfort knowing that those beautiful maple wood floorboards were being saved for reuse.⁴ In the same way that a chopped

tree trunk reveals its age in rings, this demolition exposes the many layers and colours of paint that indicated the indisputable maturity of the rink.

This Winnipeg site once held the title of the largest roller rink in Canada, but over the years safety inspectors closed the third floor catwalk, the second floor struggled to meet building code standards and, for the last twenty years, only the ground floor remained open with an installed low-suspended ceiling. In fact, all that remained from its feted past were those glistening maple floors, along with dozens of framed black and white portraits of roller skaters from bygone eras. Last year, when the University of Winnipeg announced it had bought the location in order to build a new science complex, the community of Winnipeg was not surprised to learn that this old building was set for demolition. However, despite the rink's imminent demise there was no doubt that this historic and once vibrant social fixture would be missed from the cityscape.⁵

Galaxy Skateland is not an unusual case. Scores of other roller skating rinks across North America experience similar fates due in part to decrepit buildings and a declining pool of roller skaters. This Winnipeg narrative works well to introduce the foundational issues of this project:

- Roller skating is often perceived as a dead or dying culture.
- Roller skating simultaneously represents both nostalgia *and* historicity.
- Music defines the role of roller skating in popular culture.
- Roller skating and its rinks never *completely* disappear from popular discourse.

In spite of roller skating rinks disappearing from cityscapes, the same cannot be said for the representations within contemporary mediascapes. The abundance of roller

skating cultures found in film, television and music demonstrate that roller skating is still very much alive and well in popular culture. In these representations, however, roller skating is presented as a dead culture experiencing either a revival or an ironic resurrection. No matter the context, roller skating is regarded as residual – a cultural classification that we will unpack throughout this thesis.

1.2 Current State of the Skate: Viva La Revival!

Let us begin by considering the current status of roller skating. Due in part to a resurged interest in roller derby, post-millennial depictions of roller skating can be found in recent films like Drew Barrymore's comedy *Whip It!* (2009), and in roller derby documentaries such as *Blood on the Flat Track* (2007), *Hell on Wheels* (2007) and *High Heels on Wheels* (2006). On television, the popular reality show *Rollergirls* (2006) follows the 'real' lives of roller derby teams in Texas, while the books *Rollergirl: Totally True Tales from the Track* and *The History & All-Girl Revival of the Greatest Sport on Wheels* are bestsellers archiving and circulating derby histories. Involved in more than just the return of the sport itself, derby imagery is used to advertise products ranging from Apple's iPod to "hip" deodorant (Figure 1).

Roller derby apparel is a cottage industry on the Internet demonstrated by websites like *RinkRashSkateWear.com* and *DerbyorDie.com* selling derby related shirts and accessories to derby players and fans alike. In addition to derby paraphernalia, items of iconic roller disco apparel like satin bomber jackets and leggings are the latest trends appropriated by clothing designers. An article entitled "Retro Style" lists over a dozen clothing merchandisers recycling 'duds' found at roller disco rinks decades ago (Critchell, 2007). In fact, Macy's flagship department store in New York City dedicated

an entire section of its store to ‘vintage’ roller skate clothing style and ultra-hip clothiers, American Apparel admitted an “obsession” with the film *Roller Boogie* (1979) inspired a new clothing line.⁶ This appropriated roller disco aesthetic was used in recent music videos for Madonna (2005) and Jessica Simpson (2006) where both roller skates and rinks are reflective of both popstars’ kitsch aesthetic value (Figures 2 and 3). Most recent are the Breeders with their use of roller skate imagery. This iconic Indie rock band announced that their new music video would feature Seattle’s roller skating scenesters and derby girls (Breihan, 2009).

The musical *Xanadu on Broadway* opened in New York in 2007 as an on-stage interpretation of the critically reviled film *Xanadu* (1980). The stage show achieved major success, and the musical now runs as a national tour; productions have opened in Seoul, and are scheduled to open in China, Australia and the Philippines.⁷ On screen, roller skating rinks set the stage in films such as *Roll Bounce* (2005) and *ATL* (2006), and roller skates evoke nostalgia for films set in the 1970s such as *Boogie Nights*, *Austin Powers: Goldmember*, *Music Within* (2007) and *Semi-Pro* (2008), to cite a few examples.

1.3 Succinct History of the Rink

Colouring all media representations of roller skating are notions of the past and nostalgia. Every post-millennial depiction of roller skating refers to either a specific roller skating era, or to a past moment in American popular culture. The history of roller skating is more than 300 years old, and we will look briefly at this history as a means of understanding how roller skating has continuously disappeared and reappeared in popular culture for centuries. And while chapter two provides a specific history of the relationship between music and roller skating, this section will contextualize the cultural

significance of roller skating by mapping the histories of both roller skates and roller rinks. Roller skating historians agree that roller skates were invented in the mid-1700s, but this claim is of uncertain status, as it refers to the appearance of roller skating in the West; it is unknown whether comparable devices were produced in Asia or elsewhere. Despite their introduction in the 18th century, roller skates would not be adapted into popular culture for another hundred years, in the mid-1800s. This hundred-year gap is best explained by socio-economic factors. The book *Leisure: Theory and Policy* posits that it is ‘impossible’ to consider leisure without understanding its relationship to economy because leisure is procured only after economic capital is established (Kaplan 1975). The economic paradigmatic shift that occurred between the invention of roller skates and their adoption by mainstream society was the Industrial Revolution. Marxists view the Industrial Revolution as the catalyst for new forms of leisure insofar as new forms of mechanized technologies, as well as newly secured labour rights that shortened work weeks and determined an increase in personal income. More than that, the surge of people moving from cities and towns made a newly centralized labour force created a demand for collective leisure facilities and activities (Cunningham 1980, p. 20).

According to Luna Lambert, an American history scholar, ice skating emerged as the dominant leisure activity of during the Industrial Revolution. Ice skating harkened back to the old days in the country when a frozen pond sufficed for entertainment, while in the newly expanding city, it provided the much needed space for leisure. In a comprehensive account of ice skating history, Lambert describes it as “the first modern, socially equally sport in America” (1978, p. 697). Here Lambert suggests that skating rinks were newly designated sites where an emergent middle-class participated in leisure,

an activity once largely the province of the upper classes. The problem, however, with Lambert's description of skating as "socially equally" is that it portrays rinks as classless spaces, existing outside of the constraints of capitalism. In actuality, skating produced a tidal wave of entrepreneurs offering various commodities. One of these rink entrepreneurs was a young man named James Plimpton. Plimpton grew up on a farm in Massachusetts, and moved to New York City to become a mechanic foreman. It was his knowledge of mechanics, which led him to develop a 'rocking skate,' a four-wheeled roller skate that propelled movement when a skater rocked from side to side. He introduced his design at an ice rink in 1863 (Traub, 1944, p.14).

Historians posit that Plimpton created this new roller skate as a means of prolonging the short ice skating season, but he also envisioned roller skating as a means of promoting the sport as an exclusive derivative of ice skating; an indoor activity not intended for the 'masses' (Lambert, p. 697). From the beginning, roller skating's exclusivity was seen in opposition to the participatory and collective character of ice skating.

Plimpton opened the first skating 'parlour' in New York City and during the summer of 1866, he converted a dining room at an 'ultra-fashionable' resort into a rink as a way of introducing skating to the "educated and refined classes" (Traub, p. 17). This brief decade from the mid-1860s to the mid-1870s, is truly the only moment in the history of roller skating when it might be considered emergent, an important cultural ascription discussed in the next section. The exclusivity of roller skating was short lived, due in part to its rapid proliferation across America. By the 1880s, roller skating parlours had opened all over North America, Europe and Australia and its appeal as an elite

cultural experience vanished (*Ibid*, p. 21). Alongside the proliferation of parlours, hundreds of roller skate patents and designs were popping up all over North America. In his chapter “Roller Skating Toward Industrialism,” Dwight Hoover describes how the production of roller skates transformed small agricultural spaces into booming industrial towns (1992).

In his chapter, Hoover unpacks the history of Muncie, Indiana and its transition from a small farming community to a thriving producer of roller skates and explains; “roller-skate manufacture was different in kind from the manufacture of other products in the town at the time, and it signaled the transition from a pioneer agricultural village to a burgeoning industrial city” (p. 61). The transition was felt across all spheres of Muncie, and Hoover uses various case studies on the residents of the town in 1885 to demonstrate how this relatively trivial object, the roller skate, had the ability to forever transform Muncie. More than integrating industrial manufacturing into the community of Muncie, roller skating also established new social codes and cultural practices. As Hoover explains, the Muncie roller rink “brought in contortionists, championships, trapeze artists, and, as always, Lockwood’s Band” (p. 73). This emphasis on the pervasiveness of the rink band, or musical accompaniment is one of the overriding themes of this thesis, as the next chapter will further investigate.

In the Canadian context, *Revival & Roller Rinks: Religion Leisure and Identity in Late Nineteenth Century Small Town Ontario* describes how “working-class young people were drawn to a new kind of rink” (Sorrel Marks, 1996, p.128). Despite its title, the book dedicates only a few pages to roller skating; however, it is enough to demonstrate how quickly roller skating transitioned from a high-cultural activity to one

deemed lowbrow. This rapid movement from high to low culture is paradoxical insofar as over the next hundred years, roller skating would see very little change in its cultural status. By the turn of the 20th century roller skating had lost its cachet completely, and it has since remained a mass cultural phenomena.

Historians have sought after the precise reasons as to why the ‘boom’ period ended so quickly. Some have suggested very specific reasons for its decline such as ‘poorly managed public rinks’ and monotonous movement. Many historians speculate that the ‘gas boom’ and a interest in cars and motorcycles in the Twentieth century is likely the cause of roller skating’s demise at the turn of the 20th century (Traub, p. 23; Hoover, p.74; Cuthbertson, 1979, p. 39). It is also important to note, that when roller skating made its introduction in popular culture, the choice of other activities was limited. At the turn of the century, however, roller skating faced a vast number of competing public activities and amusements. David Nasaw explains in *Going Out*, choices in entertainment in the early 1900s ranged from movie palaces, ballparks and vaudeville halls to amusement parks, world fairs and kinoscope parlours (1999, p. 2). Whatever the reason, it was certain that the popularity of roller skating was destined to wane, a result of the movement and cycles of culture. In his theories of cultural movement, Greg Urban posits that a new culture will ‘eventually recede into the past’ and like the tide, cultures flow and ebb, surge and subside (2001, p. 229). This resemblance of a tide is apt in this case of roller skating; throughout the Twentieth century, roller skating would surge and subside at two more periods. The second wave of roller skating occurred in the 1930s and 1940s, an era described as the Golden Age by skate historians, while Roller Disco followed in the 1970s and the early 1980s. Chapter two provides a closer reading

of these two eras and show how the music that accompanied roller skating was responsible for its fluctuations in popularity.

This brief introduction to the history of roller skating demonstrates how the rise and fall of roller skating was not exclusive to the 20th century. Moreover, it showcases how roller skating and other “amusements” of the early 20th century are often painted with a nostalgic brush. Roller skating did not democratize society or leisure; if anything, it was the impetus for various commodities and capitalist investments during its emergence in popular culture. What is interesting, is the way in which roller skating was able to reinvent itself as “new” two more times within the century, a feat to which, arguably, no other amusement or sport can lay claim. Our research shows that, unlike most other fads, roller skating continually lands back in the spotlight after it has culturally died. Ultimately it is the music of roller skating which spurs its cultural resurgence, and it is music’s capacity to evoke nostalgia that shapes roller skating’s life cycles.

1.4 Roller Skating Axioms: Nostalgia and Music

Roller skating is unremittingly nostalgic. This is likely a result of the fact that roller skating is typically experienced as a youth (or at least seen within the popular imagination to be associated with coming-of-age). Introductions to articles and books on roller skating offer statements like this one: “Remember the delight you felt as a kid wearing your first pair of clamp skates?” and “Skating at the local roller rink is a fond childhood memory for millions of Americans” (Phillips p. 14; Kreiser p. 46). Also, Library of Congress classifications place “roller skating” in the Children & Young Adult

sections, while a search on eBay auctions demonstrates the ubiquitous associations of roller skating and childhood, through roller skating Smurfs, Snoopy and other toys.

In *The Imagined Past*, Malcolm Chase and Christopher Shaw posit that our understanding of nostalgia derives from our memories of childhood. We are predisposed to experience nostalgia because each of us “carries the memory of an age when the experience of time was different” (1989, p. 4-5). We imagine how things were in the past because we are unable to recall an exact history. In *Yearning for Yesterday*, Fred Davis explains that in its most simplistic form, nostalgia is imagining that ‘things were better then, than they are now’ (p.18, 1979). Roller skating is, perhaps, one vehicle allowing us to return to an ‘imagined past’ to a fantasized time when things were better. This “imagined” childhood at the roller skating rink is a prevalent theme in film and one that we will explore in chapter three.

1.4.2 Music Mediating Past-ness

During my first experience at a roller skating rink (as a relative late-bloomer at age 23), I was surprised at how distinctly music and nostalgia filled the space. The music was visceral, thumping and almost deafening, akin to that heard at a rock club. Along with the ‘oldies’ music being played, nostalgia for bygone times was present in multiple forms. Roller skaters in the lobby reminisced about the ‘old days,’ while old photos lining the wall confirmed a glorified past. Even the antiquated rental roller skates I was wearing led me to speculate about how many hundred of others had worn these same pair of skates over the years. In all these respects, the space of the roller rink was unlike any other I had experienced, and it spurred my interest in unearthing the significance of music and nostalgia within it.

Music theorists, such as Simon Frith, have explored the role of music in mediating nostalgia. In his essay, “Rock and the Politics of Memory,” Frith posits that “music is such a powerful trigger of remembered emotion that it is probably more widely used for nostalgic reasons than for anything else” (1984, p. 68). Nowhere does this assertion seem more relevant than within the space of the roller skating rink. As chapter two explores, the music genres found at roller skating rinks, as well as the sound technologies (re)producing the music, are responsible for these evocations of nostalgia.

From the very beginning roller skating and music have been paired. In fact, the first roller skate design invented in the mid-1700s is credited to a man who is remembered by historians more for his accomplishments as an instrument-maker than as the inventor of roller skates (Palmer and French, 1986, p. 470). In the midst of the Industrial Revolution roller skating fad, rinks typically included an accompanying brass band. During the most significant eras in the history of roller skating culture in the 20th century, those of the Golden Age (1927-1954) and of Roller Disco (1977-1983), roller skating was intimately bound up with music. In both these periods in roller skating history, the rise and decline of skating’s esteem within popular culture were connected to the use of music.

Roller skating music relies upon residual media (specifically outmoded sound technologies) to produce the music. For example, the roller skating rinks of the mid-1800s appropriated popular ice skating songs and musical arrangements. Decades later, Golden Age rink managers adopted outdated cinema sound technology to outfit their rinks during the Depression, because once “Talkies” became standard fare by the end of the 1920s, theaters sold their expensive pipe organs for a fraction of their original worth.

What was considered “new” at the roller rink was actually a technological leftover from another site of cultural consumption.

The Roller Disco era is perhaps the most widely known period in roller skating history, largely because of its explicit relationship to a music genre. Though disco music was ostensibly a “new” music genre, the fact is that by the time disco hit mainstream America and roller rinks across the country, it was already on its way out the cultural backdoor. In a way, the Roller Disco fad was the death rattle of disco. Even at the height of its mainstream popularity, critics of disco regarded the music as a dead cultural form inasmuch as the genre itself was pre-recorded and mixed, with no pretensions to being music of live performance. As Walter Hughes suggests, the very name disc-o unashamedly admits its dead-ness and reliance on recorded music (1994).

The nostalgic status of roller skating is thus very complex. It is not simply a result of roller skating and its music having been experienced in childhood. Instead, it is bound up with the ways in which residual sound technologies and musical genres have become central to the perception of roller skating as a nostalgic pastime.

1.5 Nostalgia & The Past

Nostalgia is such a pervasive term that its original meaning and syntax are often misconstrued. Fredric Jameson’s comprehensive work on the subject frames this research. In *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, Fredric Jameson argues that within, what he designates as our postmodern condition, our culture has become simultaneously focused on the future (as a result, in part, of our consciousness of a new millennium), and, in nostalgic ways, on the past. In the chapter “Nostalgic Mode,” Jameson suggests that postmodernity creates an “intensified” role for nostalgia and

imagery, which often results in “a desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past” (1991, p.66).

Undoubtedly, both periods of roller skating in the 20th century were defined by reference to the past. The Golden Age roller rink was nostalgic for the skating rink of the era following the Industrial Revolution when such rinks were emblematic of social and cultural movement. In the 1970s, Roller Disco rinks would invoke the memories of Golden Age roller skating and worked to fuse ‘old’ aspects of roller skating with the new roller disco trend. This fusing of the old and new aspects of roller skating is a prominent theme found in roller skating films produced in the Seventies, as we will argue, further in Chapter Three.

Roller skating and its rinks differentiate themselves from other pastimes and sites of leisure in that the former saw little technological change throughout the span of their history. Save for a few minor updates, roller skates have looked the same for over one hundred years, while the architecture of the roller rinks retained the rink’s unchanging oval shape. The only real difference marking each roller skating era was the presence of ‘new’ music technology. However, the technology was not new, culturally or technologically, or at all. In fact, residual media embedded the roller skating rink within a nostalgic soundscape. Roller skating in the 20th century articulated notions of the past mainly through the music that accompanied it.

Jameson uses the film *American Graffiti* (1973) to demonstrate how cinema communicates stylized past-ness and nostalgia for a bygone era. However, he does not discuss the ways in which the role of soundtracks in these ‘nostalgia films’ is crucial to authenticating the ‘past-ness’ of the genre. David Shumway expands upon Jameson’s

definition of a nostalgia film in his article, “Rock ‘n’ Roll Soundtracks and the Production of Nostalgia,” suggesting that “music plays a central role in the production of nostalgia in the nostalgia film genre” (1999, p. 36). This question of nostalgia film and its soundtracks will be fleshed out in Chapter Three when we look at representations of roller skating and rinks in film, and the critical role that music plays in such films in evoking nostalgia.

Shumway concludes his article by positing that nostalgia films and their soundtracks almost always refer to childhood and youth. His examples range from *Dirty Dancing* (1987) to *The Graduate* (1967) -- films which, in his argument, demonstrate a “new consciousness” where “youth is the privileged site of nostalgia” (p. 49).

Shumway’s term ‘youth’ is perhaps, more accurately, a way of designating the coming-of-age element in nostalgia film. In a way then, the nostalgia film is representative of a transition from child to teenager, or teenager to adult, in a way, the roller skating rink is perceived as a ‘coming-of-age’ site. As Chapter Three will explore, roller skating rinks in films are privileged spaces of nostalgia for the growing pains of youth.

Although the nostalgic rhetoric which surrounds roller skating is persistent, the actual interest in the pastime is not. In other words, interest in roller skating comes in waves despite the constant nostalgic treatment the pastime receives in film or in popular culture. Thus, the prevailing question throughout this research is why roller skating is different from other cultural practices, in the way that it continuously and so dramatically comes in and out of our lives. But what factors set the stage for this constant disappearing and reappearance? As Charles Acland and others suggest, a residual culture

“lives as dead” with conscious modes of circulation and cultural practices. As we shall see, this is most certainly the case for roller skating.

1.6 Residual Media

Raymond Williams posits that cultural phenomena begin as emergent, and are practiced in their initial stages by what marketing terminology calls ‘early adopters’ or trend-setters (Williams, ed. Higgins, 2001, p. 171). A culture phenomenon eventually moves from the status of emergent to that of dominant (hegemonic) and once it reaches this status it is only a matter of time before its popularity peaks and it recedes down the slope of residualism. When a culture has reached the residual stage, it is ostensibly in the last phase of its lifespan. Simply put, the culture is not dead; it hangs in the balance between remaining a living culture and one that completely disappears. These three categories ascribe movement and cycles to each culture phenomena. They establish a framework for understanding how the status of cultural phenomena can move and change rather than remain eternally static. A cultural phenomenon is perishable. This analogy to food is apt insofar as Williams and others such as Charles Acland describe a residual culture as a ‘leftover.’

In his edited anthology, *Residual Media*, Charles Acland explores this notion of ‘cultural residue’ in the introduction (2007). Here he describes how Williams’ initial interest in identifying cultural stages and progress was a Marxist response to the faltering position of art and objects within society (2007, p.xx). More than that, these demarcations provide a context for understanding how cultural practices live and die. Acland posits that the term “living dead” more aptly describes a residual culture, and despite the continuous ‘improvements,’ not all materials and cultural practices fade into

an abyss of obsolescence. With reference to chapters in the book dealing with the culture of vinyl record collecting, Acland suggests that a 'dead' media lives because of current collectors conscious methods of re-circulating this technological artifact.

At the crux of the cultural framework developed by Williams, there is a conceptualization of movement. In *Metaculture*, Greg Urban explores the ways in which cultures move and 'inertia' drives culture phenomena from dominant to residual statuses (2001). He begins by questioning the desire to track an object across time, and suggests that this desire is born in the drive to "assure the public that something from the past carries over into the present and on to a future ... to insure that a culture is, indeed moving through time" (*Ibid*, p.203). In reality, as Urban later suggests, cultures do not necessarily operate on a linear trajectory, rather, they operate in cycles. He writes, "What is curious about the imagery of tides in relationship to newness is that tides are cyclical ... the basic fact is that tides flow and ebb, surge and subside" (p. 229). This analogy of cycles also explains the 'circulation' of post-modern culture through revisited trends and fads, most observable in clothing styles.

Let us summarize the arguments put forth by Williams, Acland and Urban and suggest that cultural *movement* is *cyclical*, despite the fact that a culture appears to move in a linear fashion from 'new' to residual. Cultures tend to *re-circulate* phenomena ensuring their survival rather than their obsolescence. Words like movement, cyclical and circulation are the critical terms with which to account for the dynamics of culture. At the same time, these ideas of "cyclical movement" and "circulation" are mirrored in the ontological rhythm and movement of roller skating. More than other cultures,

perhaps, roller skating is predisposed to a constant recirculation, to its cycles of popularity, because this cyclical movement is built into the culture itself.

1.6.2 Rhythm & Circulation

Roller skating at the rink is a markedly rhythmic experience; roller skaters rely on rhythm to propel themselves forward (and sometimes backward), and roller skaters collectively move cyclically around a rink. The rhythm of roller skaters is in a dialogue with the rhythm of the music playing. In *Rhythmanalysis* Henri Lefebvre posits that ‘repetition of a measure is the only generalization we can make about rhythm’ (1992, p. 6). While this might seem a natural remark of rhythm, actually helps us to frame what is at stake in roller skating and its music: repetition. Furthermore, writes Lefebvre, rhythm is expressed in either cyclical or linear repetitions, representative of time and space, respectively (p. 8). Using this framework, I wish to consider how music and roller skating at the rink are cyclically rhythmic and the ways in which particular music genres and technologies, such as pipe organ music and disco, create popular interest in roller skating through the ways in which the music articulates the repetitious cyclical rhythm of the activity.

In a seminal essay on sound and technology “The Waltz: Technology’s Muse,” Teresa Magdanz posits that “the movements typically associated with the waltz, such as turning, gliding spinning and flying, appear – even if illusorily—to be built into an automatic device” (2006, p. 251). In other words, Magdanz aims to understand how the movements of the waltz dance are reciprocated in the technology producing its sounds such as the barrel organ, as well as the ‘nineteenth-century fairground amusement ride’ (p. 252). In essence, Magdanz’s project aims also to establish a framework for

understanding how movement is married to the rhythmic sounds of music. Ultimately, she determines the waltz to be a ‘human interpretation’ of the machine’s ‘turning and swirling’ movements to produce sound. Her resolution works outside of the context of this research; here we aim to understand how the cyclical rhythm of both movement on the rink and the music that is played, are emblematic and expressive of the continuous cultural phenomena lifecycle of roller skating. The question of whether roller skating is a means by which humans mimic mechanical behaviour would offer an interesting supplement to Magdanz’s work. However, it exists outside the particular scope of this research paper.

1.7 Contextualizing Roller Rinks: Sites of Comparison, Points of Departure

The notion that roller skating has only recently faded from the cultural spotlight is not only erroneous, but itself is a feature of the life-and-death cycle of roller skating. As we will explore in chapters two and three, popular opinion in 1910 would likely have regarded roller skating as completely over, as simply a fleeting fad. Similarly, no one could have imagined that roller skating would return from the dead, after the Golden Age roller skating boom ended in the mid-1950s. It is this unique ability to recreate itself within popular culture that separates roller skating from other comparable cultural practices or public amusements such as dancing, cinema and carnivals. Arguably, no other cultural practice has experienced similar extreme peaks and dips in popularity throughout the 20th century. We will compare and contrast roller skating with other sites and practices such as ice skating rinks, dances and cinemas, as a way of understanding where roller skating fits within the ‘leisure’ paradigm.

1.7.2 Ice Skating and Roller Skating

Ice skating helped to both instigate and popularize the roller skating fad of the 19th century. When roller skating was adopted as a mass cultural practice in the mid-1880s, there were only a handful of other amusements to choose from. By the turn of the century, a wealth of activities was available: baseball, dancehalls, amusement parks, nickelodeons and cinema palaces (Ashby 2006; Nasaw 1999). Socio-economic factors were largely responsible for this increase in leisure activities and amusements, as we will see in the next chapter. What is of interest to note here is that historians generally tend to romanticize this era of American leisure, using a nostalgic brush similar to that which often paints roller skating. For instance historian David Nasaw laments, “The era of public amusements that was born in the latter decades of the nineteenth century has come to an end. We have lost not simply the buildings and parks but also the sense of civic sociability they nourished and sustained” (1999, p. vii). Although Nasaw is overwhelming nostalgic for that particular era, his discourse does not allow room for the likelihood that various amusement spaces, such as the roller skating rink, would continue to exist on and into the 20th century.

David Nasaw is not alone in his presumptions about leisure activities dying at the turn of the 20th century. As we have previously discussed, Dwight Hoover’s research in “Roller Skating Towards Industrialism” focuses entirely upon the 19th century roller skating fad in Muncie, Indiana, suggesting that roller skating was completely over in Muncie by 1900 (1992, p.61-76). He provides no further indication that Muncie would experience another boom thirty years later, and his insight is typical of research on American leisure during the Industrial Revolution. In academic research, the period in

which roller skating might be considered “emergent” has stood as the privileged, if not exclusive, era to be studied. The result is that roller skating research is typically concerned with a pre-20th century context, one limited to consideration of the ‘first wave’ of the trend. The entire hundred-year history following that era has been overlooked.

In general, research on the culture of roller skating is underdeveloped, considering that the activity has a history dating back to the 17th century. In fact, Hoover’s history of the Industrial Revolution era roller skating rink is one of the only examples of peer-reviewed research published about roller skating. There is, however, a wealth of additional research available from an interesting source. The National Roller Skating Museum Press in Lincoln, Nebraska produces the most comprehensive work on the history of roller skating. The museum has published seminal work on Golden Age roller skating in Sarah Webber’s *Detroit Arena Gardens* (1999) as well as an extensive history of roller skating by James Turner (1997). Unfortunately, due to the press’ independent status, these books are out of circulation and access to this research is dependent upon the capacities of interlibrary loan systems. More than that, as we will discuss in chapter two, the National Roller Skating Museum was founded and is operated by the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA), an outmoded organization created in the 1930s proclaiming to enhance the sport through its controls of the movement of people on the roller skating rink. The histories that are ‘remembered’ by this particular press are very specific.

1.7.3 Dance Halls and Clubs

The cultural site that may be most directly compared to the roller skating rink, perhaps, is the dancehall. Both spaces operate as sites of entertainment using music to

mediate human movement and to initiate social interaction. In *Club Cultures*, Sarah Thornton describes how the aesthetics of the dance club “offer other-worldly environments in which to escape,” as well as providing a space where “the dictates of dance abandon from the routine rules of school, work and parental home (1996, p. 21). The dance club is also a space specific to nighttime, an important facet of the space inasmuch as the night permits subversive behaviours and acts. This is what differentiates the roller skating rink from the dancehall; the former is typically visited in the day and the rink is a heavily monitored space in comparison to the darkened dance floor at a club.

Roller Disco is the fad whose associations with the dance club are strongest, inasmuch as the former is now virtually synonymous with the experience of the discotheque. In the 1970s, however, one finds distinctions made between the deviant discotheque and the sanitized space of roller disco. A magazine published in Montreal in the 1970s, *Le Disco*, includes a two-page advertisement for the roller disco event “Kebekelektrik” at Recreatheque in Laval, Quebec. The ad uses a vinyl record as its logo for the event; however in the centre of this record is a trio of stick figures holding hands – a man and a woman with a child in between (Figure 4). In other words, this roller disco is a family-friendly space, a claim further verified by the accompanying images of ping-pong and mini golf available at the ‘Rec (1977, p.20-1). The Recreatheque advertisement is the only one in the entire magazine promoting an event; ‘authentic’ discotheques would not dare risk ‘subcultural capital,’ as Thornton would call it, by advertising in this publication. Both chapters two and three will discuss the history and proliferation of disco and roller rinks as a means of contextualizing how these spaces fit somewhere between Studio 54 and a Golden Age roller skating rink.

Roller rinks and dancehalls are thus completely different creatures. The similarity of these two spaces is the way in which music is used to elicit movement. In the beginning of her article on the waltz, Magdanz asks whether “humanity dreams through the machine” inasmuch as the mechanical technology providing the sounds of the waltz invoke a type of mechanical movement from the dancer. This notion that a musical genre has the ability to produce a specific movement is not in itself groundbreaking; music with faster beats than is usual will produce faster dancing, for example. What is unique about Magdanz’s assertion is the way in which she argues that sound technologies implicate human movement; a fundamental issue of roller skate music that we will discuss in Chapter Two. In that chapter, we aim to understand how the circular movements of the sound technologies and musical genres found at roller rinks are both fundamental and parallel to the movement of the roller skaters.

1.7.4 Films & Cinemas

Roller skating is perceived as more closely related to the dancehall or club than to the cinema or movie theatre. In actuality, the roller skating rink is akin more to the movie theatre than the dancehall, and understanding how this comparable relationship functions will ultimately help to establish the groundwork for Chapter three which looks at cinematic roller skating. The similarity between the site of the roller rink and movie theatre is located in the discourses discussing the role and function of sound and sound technologies; the music of roller skating rinks are typically considered “accompaniment” rather than a crucial facet of the activity, in the same way that filmic soundtracks have also occupied a similar ‘backseat’ status within film studies. In fact, the idea that a soundtrack plays an equitable role as the image track in film is a relatively novel idea

found in film theory. In *Audio Visual*, Michel Chion discusses the contentious role of sound in film and argues that what actually happens is synthesis, where image and sound tracks work in tandem to produce the affect of film (1994, p. 5). Similarly, roller skating music works with the movement of the rink to produce the affect of roller skating; however, the critical role of music in roller skating often takes a secondary position to the movement.

For example, the *National Museum of Roller Skating's History of Roller Skating* states that “from the beginning, music played an important but sometimes *distracting* roller skating function” (Turner, 1997, p. 89, my emphasis). The view that the music is “distracting” from the task at hand is reminiscent of the role of soundtrack in film, and, to that end, it is this hesitant acknowledgement of ‘synchresis’ between music and movement that makes roller skating and cinema similar. Simply put, dance *needs* music, but discourses have suggested that music and sound in roller skating and film are merely additional to the main task at hand. In film studies, the visual is often the privileged sense, just as movement (roller-ception) is the privileged sense in roller skating. In actuality, these senses work with the aural to produce the affect of the activity.

Let us briefly return to Chion and his theory of the audio/visual contract. This contract, explains Chion, is one in which the body uses both the audio and visual senses for the reception of film. This is to suggest that vision is not the only sense utilized in cinema, and along these lines, we might attest that there is a audio/roller-ception contract at place in the roller rink. The movement, or ‘roller-ception’, is but one innate sense used at the roller rink, but it works in tandem with the aural sense. Though some roller skating rinks in the past may have existed without traditional music, as chapter two explores,

roller skating has *always* included sound, just as silent cinema, as Michel Chion argues (1994) was never watched in ‘silence.’

As a result of these parallels between rink music and film soundtracks, theoretical work on film and sound has proved useful as a means of understanding the mediating role of music in roller skating. The music played in the ‘real world’ roller skating rink works to evoke emotion and nostalgia. In an anthology entitled, *Celluloid Jukebox* Mark Kermode states “pop music can serve as a film’s memory, instantaneously linking it with its audience, tapping into a nostalgic past, or fixing the film firmly in the present” (1995, p. 9). Just as pop songs in soundtracks mediate notions of time and temporality, roller rink music plays a similar role in contextualizing both time and space. While Chapter Three will take up the insights of films studies research on film scores and soundtracks, it can be noted at this point that the work most useful to this thesis was that which examined the ways in which soundtracks have used popular music to produce nostalgic affect.

1.8 Chapter Conclusion

At the crux of this research is an interest in understanding how notions of nostalgia and residual culture are articulated and mediated by the music found at the roller skating rink. More generally, this project sets out to answer why roller skating is different from other sports or pastimes in the way in which it constantly returns to the limelight of popular culture, while other sports that emerged at the same time such as ice skating or baseball did not experience the same fluctuation of interest. In many ways, the roller skating rink occupies a position in society that, while different from those of other

sports, dances and cinema, incorporates elements from each to secure its function in culture.

The paradox of roller skating is that it is often forgotten in histories of sport or leisure throughout the 20th century, yet it is so deeply ensconced within rhetoric of nostalgia. How is that we continuously overlook the history of this space and activity, despite a hundred year old discourse in which it is suggested that we all have memories of roller skating, albeit real or imagined? The following chapters set out to understand the ‘real’ history of roller skating music, charting the paring of music and roller skating throughout history in order to understand how music was the catalyst for the nostalgia surrounding roller skating, as well as the ‘pastiche’ and imagined histories of it showcased through decades of Hollywood films. More generally, the basic goal of this project is to understand how roller skating and its rinks operate within notions of time. This time is articulated as either ‘real’ time (historicity), or, as in the case of nostalgia, as imagined time. Let us begin at the beginning of the roller skating story and look at how this culture has been embedded with residual music and technology for centuries.

Chapter 2: History of Roller Skating Music

“There is a hypnotism in the movement on the maple boards,
in the distant hum murmuring behind the music,
and the sway of many people circling all in rhythm”
- Morris Traub, *Roller Skating Through the Years*, 1944⁸

2.1 Introduction

May 1760 – One of the guests at a dinner party held at the exclusive Carlisle home in SoHo has just received the exciting news that a distinguished instrument maker and inventor is amongst them. The nosy guest overheard this eccentric Belgian inventor named John Joseph Merlin, mention his plans for introducing his latest invention as post-dinner entertainment. Merlin had moved to London only a few years prior and opened “Merlin’s Mechanical Museum” in Hanover Square: it quickly became a popular spot among the “fashionable London Society in the last quarter of the 18th century” (*Palmer and French*, 1986, 470). Best-known for his instrument design, the harpsichord-pianoforte, Merlin intended to introduce an entirely different object at this party. This object had four “small metal spools attached to strips of wood which fastened to his feet” (Sullivan, p. 8). Without knowing the consequence of his invention, Merlin had developed the world’s first roller skate. Back at the scene of the party, Merlin was determined to put on an entertaining show, and he opted to play the violin whilst skating around the room. The evening would have gone off without a hitch if it were not for the fact that he had inadvertently neglected to include a breaking mechanism in the skate’s design. Only after smashing into an expensive and oversized mirror did Merlin realize this oversight (Traub, 1944, p. 4).

The obvious symbolism of this event ‘mirroring’ the colossal ‘crash’ of roller skates into Western culture explains why this particular story is regularly found in roller skate histories. Whether or not Merlin’s story is *actually* the first roller skate story is beside the point; it represents the ways in which roller skating is enveloped in mythology and the importance of narratives, such as this one, for its history. Moreover, the fable is demonstrative of the nostalgic mediation of roller skating, and how even one of the first moments in its history is embedded within nostalgic rhetoric.

Nevertheless, the significance in retelling Merlin’s fable within this project lies in the part music plays within it; the shattered mirror tends to be the focus for historians and all but one historian has discussed the significance of the musical instrument at the site of this introduction (Turner, 1997, 89). More than the mere presence of music at the skates’ introduction, there is the critical fact that a revered instrument maker designed roller skates. Merlin ostensibly developed the roller skate in the same ways he constructed his musical instruments. This seemingly inconsequential tale often found in introductory books or children’s stories about roller skating, works as a point of entry to the key questions of this chapter:

- Is music fundamental to the ontology of roller skating?
- What function does music play for roller skating and its rinks?
- How does the sound and rhythm of roller skating music mediate time and space?

As noted in the previous chapter, the two predominant eras in the history of roller skating are those recognized as The Golden Age and the era of Roller Disco. These two specific eras will be the focus of this chapter. The significance of studying these two moments in roller skating history, as we will see, is that each case shows how the music

played at roller rinks was central to the popularity of roller skating within a broader culture. As a means of contextualizing these two moments, however, let us first consider the brief history of roller skating and roller skate music, in the years between Merlin's introduction of the roller skate and the onset of Golden Age roller rinks.

2.2 History of Early Roller Skating Music

Despite the 'crash' with which roller skates appeared on the cultural radar in the 1760s, roller skating did not reappear again in popular culture until 1818. Historian Morris Traub, who writes of roller skating during the Golden Age of roller skating, points to 1818 as the year in which, "roller skates were first used on stage in Berlin at the premiere of a ballet ... roller skates were used to represent ice skates in [this] theatrical exhibition of winter sports" (1944, p. 4). Once more, roller skates are found within a predominately musical space, and by 1849, roller skates were a costume staple at the Grand Opera. Traub recites perilous stories of 'several young ladies of the ballet corps skating right off the stage and into the orchestra pit and one was rescued with difficulty from the middle of a bass drum (*Ibid*, p. 9-10). This operatic tale of ballerinas crashing into a musical instrument works well as a historical addition to the fable of Merlin crashing into a mirror with a musical instrument.

Interestingly, the operatic roller skate changed the design from Merlin's original straight-wheeled skate, which replicated ice skates, to the quad-wheeled skate that we recognize today. The opera singers found Merlin's original skate design to be too difficult to maneuver within the confines of the small stage-sized rinks and the quad-design was more amenable to turning and movement (Traub, p. 10). More than merely inspiring a functional skate design change, the opera positioned roller skating within what

Pierre Bourdieu would call a high cultural capital space. Roller skates carried an emergent status in the mid-19th century because they were showcased onstage at operas, as well as being marketed as a new and fashionable amendment to ice skating.

This brief early history of roller skating demonstrates that music and roller skating have been paired from the very beginning; an instrument maker was the father of the modern roller skate, and opera singers reconfigured its design. More than a product of music, roller skating itself was an exclusively indoor activity, such that the sound of skates and the playing of music were in a constant dialogue with their acoustical environment and with sound technologies, an aspect that we will expand upon in a moment. This status of roller skating as an indoor activity is important to consider as we now turn to the point in history at which roller skating and ice skating were competing leisure entities.

2.3 Ice Skate Begets Roller Skating

In the last chapter we looked at how James Plimpton used roller skating as a means of attracting the upper classes in 1863, by riding on the coattails of the ice skating craze (Trap et al., 20). More than touting itself as an exclusive high-brow activity, roller skating also prolonged the short ice skating season, since the available technologies meant that freezing relied upon nature's ability to freeze water, and then the cold weather for the ice to remain frozen. Roller skating not only replicated the design of the ice skating boot, it also aimed to reproduce the entirety of ice skating culture (Lambert, 1978, p. 697). The most important feature that roller skating appropriated from ice skating was the use of orchestrated music performed at the sides of rinks. Luna Lambert explains that in the mid-1800s, "evening [ice] skating with musical accompaniment was a regularly

scheduled activity of many skating clubs” (*Ibid*). Full brass bands were located on the periphery of ice rinks playing popular hits of the day such as “Skating Beauty” and “Gliding on Ice.” The roller skating counterpart to these tunes included “The Pretty Roller Skater” and “Life on Roller Skates” (Harding and Senyk, 1997, Series 7.12).

This “skate mania” of the late 19th century, as Lambert calls the fad, made use of sheet music designed for both ice and roller skating. The skating scores were readily circulated and the music for the two skating styles were nearly identical in their scoring and in performances. The use of brass bands to accompany skating was likely a result of the fact that the cold weather would have prevented the use of string instruments, as it would have altered the tuning of such instruments. As a result, the brass band at the roller skating rink was merely a leftover from ice skating, rather than having a strategic relationship to the musical repertory of roller skating rinks. The most striking similarity between ice skating and rink skating music, however, was in the cover art found on the sheet music. The covers of sheet music for both activities had illustrations of young women and men skating together on the rink (Figures 5 and 6). This emphasis on couples raises interesting questions about the role of gender and sexuality at the roller skating rink, questions that fall outside the scope of this work, but would provide an interesting subject for further research.

At this juncture, it is important to distinguish roller skating from its predecessor, ice skating. Ice skating was an exclusively outdoor activity insofar as it was never located indoors because the ice could never freeze properly. Roller skating, on the other hand, was only indoors because of its reliance on waxed wooden floors. James Plimpton ensured the indoor character of roller skating by producing both the roller and the

accompanying skating “parlours” (Phillips, 1979, 26-7). The indoor space of the roller rink meant that music had to be omnidirectional (heard at every end of the rink) as well as loud enough to overpower the thunderous sounds of metal wheels clunking across hardwood floors. The use of music at the roller rink was as much a method for establishing ambience, as it was a strategy for covering up “unwanted” noise. In the case of ice skating, with its smooth gliding and relatively quiet movement of blades on ice, music was easily disseminated and heard. In contrast, roller rinks required instruments that had the ability to provide loud sounds, whilst emulating the music of the brass bands of the ice rink. One solution was to put the band into the center of the rink, a strategy that would later be used by Earth, Wind and Fire (Figure 6). The other strategy was to install a “Band Organ” because it could adequately fill the space with sound. A catalogue for Wurlitzer published in 1906 claims:

When roller skating began to grow popular several years ago, we realized that there would be an enormous demand for a band organ that would successfully supplant the human band (cited in Magdanz, 2006, p. 263).

Despite these predictions made by organ companies, this so-called “enormous demand” for organs from manufacturers was never realized at roller rinks. This is due in part to the fact that only the most popular and largest roller rinks could finance such an expensive musical instrument (Brooks, 2003, p.75). And by the turn of the 20th century, roller skating had lost its mass appeal and rinks were deserted. In less than one decade the roller skating rink went from being a prominent social fixture to a cultural wasteland. Historians describe the early decades of the 1900s as a moment when “most rinks deteriorated into the seedy haunts of society’s shadier element” – they were filled with

unsavoury characters and vices like drinking, gambling and women (*Ibid*, p. 17; Traub p. 37). The extreme decline in popularity, as discussed in the first chapter, was largely a result of the multitude of leisure and entertainment activities available at the beginning of the 1900s. Thus, by the turn of the 20th century, roller skating was a residual culture. What happened next in roller skate history is a result of shifts within music and sound technologies.

2.4 Organ Donors Revive Roller Rinks

With the Depression of the 1930s, North Americans were in desperate need of affordable leisure activities as a means of escaping the destitute realities of their daily lives (Phillips, 1979, p. 17). Although ‘cheap’ entertainment was one reason for the return of roller skating, the most probable reason for the rink’s return to popular culture was that roller rinks were being outfitted with new pipe organs. The explanation of how these Depression-era rinks afforded these large and expensive band organs involves one of the most remarkable facts in roller skate history.

By 1926 and 1927, the years in which “talking” soundtracks were integrated into films, movie theatres sold their unused theatre organs to roller skating rinks for a fraction of their worth (Junchen, 1985). Numerous organ manufacturers went out of business once they had finished installing the last of the organs in roller rinks, and theatre organists were desperate to find work (Peterson, 1963-4, p. 29). For example, when the Detroit Arena Gardens posted a job as rink organist in 1935, the rink was “swamped” with applications (Webber, p. 39). Thus, these refitted theatre organs were the catalysts for the start of the Golden Age of roller skating. The transplanting of musical organs, from cinemas to rinks saved roller skating from becoming a cultural fatality. With the

residual sound technology of cinema embedded within roller rinks, the analogy between film soundtracks and roller rink music became clear.

2.5 The Golden Age

It is difficult to imagine exactly how the roller rink would have sounded during the Golden Age. As R. Murray Shaffer posits in *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and Tuning of the World*, it is far more challenging to reconstruct the aural features of a space at a particular moment in time than, say, its architecture or structural components. We have no “ear witnesses,” but only sound recordings or sound reproductions. These recorded sounds more aptly reflect our capability in sound recording technology than of the *actual* and real-time sounds themselves (1993, p. 8). In the case of the roller rink, architectural floor plans of the era tell us that rink flooring was constructed mostly of maple, and, unlike contemporary methods of waxing, the Golden Age roller rink relied on heavy applications of rosin to ensure a smooth and functioning surface meant for wheels made of either metal or wood to skate across (Trap, 1980, 66). If we envision (or more aptly, enlisten) a rink filled with hundreds of skaters, the organ needed to be powerful in order to drown out the ‘noise.’ For example, the Oaks Amusement Park in Oregon had a Wurlitzer installed in 1925, “without shutters to make it loud enough to be heard over the din made by skaters” (Aalberg, 2003, p. 252).

The Golden Age theatre organ established the aural standard by which all proceeding eras and rinks would follow. Roller rink music had to be heard from all directions, to offer high decibel levels and to be profoundly rhythmic, an aspect we will discuss momentarily. This specific acoustic practice of roller rinks influenced the broader musical practices associated with these spaces. A sound engineer at Woodstock

and for the Beatles, Bill Hanley, admits that his interest in music and sound began at the roller skating rink:

I was skating every day and I fell in love with music. There was this organ, and it played loud with 12 Hammond B-40 tone cabinets and two 20-watt amplifiers with four 12-inch electro-dynamic speakers in a rink with excellent acoustics. I would hear other, band sound systems [later on] and wonder why something couldn't sound as good as that roller rink" (*Front of House Online*, Sept 2006).

This "Father of Festival Sound" as he is dubbed by the sound engineering world, offers an example of the ways in which roller rink music influenced the experience of contemporary "live" music. It is not difficult to imagine that the prototype for arena rock was the roller rink. Nevertheless, more than producing a particular sound, which overpowered unwanted noise, the pipe organ of the Golden Age mediated and controlled the movement and rhythm of the roller rink.

2.5.2 Listening to the Rhythm of the Rink

The controlled tempos of the pipe organs produced a deeply rhythmic form of roller skating. This is not to suggest that the orchestras and live bands found at the early rinks were not rhythmic; they were simply not rhythmic in a way that worked with roller skating, an important feature we will return to shortly. Historian Morris Traub wrote, in the midst of the Golden Age epoch, that "[t]he rink today offers far more than just circling around and around like a squirrel in its cage. Figure skating and all the dance steps from the rhumba down have been brought in" (1944, p. 60). Golden Age roller rinks emphasized rhythm inasmuch as the music and movements were in direct dialogue.

Popular dances found at the rink included roller skate waltzes, marches, trots and polkas all performed to specific time signatures and rhythms.

Determined to avert another descent into obsolescence, roller rink owners collaborated to develop specific movements and dances so as to prevent skaters from feeling like “squirrels in a cage” once more. By 1937 the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association (RSROA) had published an official roller skate dancing guidebook. In the subsequent years, amendments were made and supplementary inserts circulated to ensure uniformity in movement and sound at the roller rink. Roller skating rinks hired patrolling skaters to monitor and ensure that patrons were following the set rules (Webber, p. 39). The RSROA guidebooks are significant artifacts of this era inasmuch as they illustrate how roller skaters of the Golden Age learned how to roller skate, but, more importantly, rinks taught skaters how to listen to music:

Tin Ears: There are many pupils who have no sense of rhythm. Train them to listen to the BASS NOTES of the organ or records. These are accented notes and soon you will find them getting on the beat. If you use an organ, you may even tell them to watch the organist’s feet” (RSROA Official Handbook, 1953, p. 112).

This passage shows that roller skate rhythm is not inherent; rather, it is constructed. To understand roller skate rhythm, one must understand time signatures, for example. In fact, if we stretch this notion of roller skating working on beats and time, it is not hard to imagine that roller skating is entirely about constructing time, whether that time comes in the form of organ beats, or, as remembered time via nostalgia. Returning to a core theme of this project, how roller skating music mediates time and nostalgia, we

might ask, in this instance, how rink music constructs unified notions of “time,” a question to which we will return in Chapter Three.

2.5.3 Rhythm is a Roller Skate Dancer

Golden Age roller skate music compels us to think of terms like rhythm, tempo and time. To understand what we mean when we talk about rhythm, Henri Lefebvre provides an important framework suggesting that rhythm runs on repetition. He further distinguishes between linear and cyclical repetition, defining the former in terms of human constructs such as social structures, while suggesting that cyclical repetition “originates in the cosmic” (2004, p. 8). The cosmic includes the cyclical rhythm found in natures, and in our bodies. Lefebvre goes so far as to suggest that our first experience with rhythm is within the womb, wherein we hear our own heartbeats and those of our mother’s (*Ibid*, p. 9). At the Golden Age roller rink, the beats were also produced by an organ suggesting the roller rink is emulative of the womb. In a theoretical moment where suggesting an inherent naturalness of a culture is a risky move, this delegation is a means of countering notions that roller skating music and its movement is symbolic of a humanistic interpretation of technology. There is something innate about the space and movement found in roller skating rinks, and perhaps it is because the rink not only incites nostalgia for childhood, but they are also reminiscent of, and nostalgic for, the earliest period in our lives, our embryonic state.

This notion that roller skating rinks and recurrent musical cycles, express primordial impulses towards a return to the womb is obviously contentious inasmuch as the activity and the sound technologies are deeply entrenched in mechanics. In fact, in her article on pipe organs, waltzes and mechanics, “The Waltz: Technology’s Muse,”

Teresa Magdanz suggests that the waltz, vis-à-vis the organ, is “a human interpretation of the dynamics of mechanical motion” (2006, p. 276). Still, while there is no disputing the fact that roller skating was borne in the midst of the Industrial Revolution, and the skates themselves were devised by various mechanics, including Merlin and Plimpton, there is something worth exploring in notion that roller skating and its music are also emblematic of innate rhythms. Henri Lefebvre’s arguments offer an implicit challenge to Magdanz’s notion that ‘the waltzing body *is* the machine’ (*Ibid*, emphasis in original). Lefebvre posits that “[w]e easily confuse rhythm with movement ... following this, we tend to attribute to rhythms a mechanical overtone, brushing aside the organic aspect of rhythmmed movements” (2004, p. 6).

The literal *organ-ic* sounds of the Golden Age roller rink, with its corresponding cyclical movement on the rink and spinning skate wheels produced levels of rhythmic correspondence that, we suggest, account for much of roller skating’s popularity and esteem during this period. Conversely, the 19th century roller rink, with its orchestrated bands and scored music maybe be seen as not having spoken directly to the ontological rhythms of skating and the rink, a fact that may have hastened the initial demise of roller skating. As we will soon understand, the cyclical movements found within the sound technologies, and the repetitious rhythms of the music are imperative for the success of roller skating rinks within popular culture. Not all genres fit within this particular sonic mold.

2.6 Teenage Rebellion & the Great Rock n’ Roll Dwindle

Why this moment in roller skating history, roughly in the period from 1926-1954, saw an overwhelming push towards controlled rhythms and movement is not entirely

clear. This is not to suggest that, during its first wave of popularity, roller skating was exempt from rules and regulations. For instance, in his research on Ashbury Park in New Jersey, 1871-95, Glenn Uminowicz writes about the moral debate found at the time between various community leaders. A sermon published in a local newspaper had one pastor ‘favoring skating with restrictions’ and claiming that it ‘met the criteria for proper amusement [because] it was healthful exercise which could be stripped of everything which tended toward immorality” (Spring 1984, p, 66). When roller skating became popular again in the late 1920s, this moralistic aspect underwent resurgence as well.

A multitude of socio-economic factors might serve to help us understand the ways in which the roller rink and its music came to be controlled. One of the most important explanations involves an examination of a space occupying a similar social function – the dancehall. In *Going Out: The Rise and Fall of Public Amusement*, David Nasaw assesses the ways in which the dancehalls of the 1920s and 1930s started to ‘police’ the activities of the space because of pressure put upon them by a new wave of so-called Urban Moralists (1999). One of the overarching goals of these social policing forces was to ensure ‘appropriate’ and monitored interactions between young men and women. The roller rink became the exemplary dancehall; boys and girl could dance together in an open space, without leaving room for deviant behaviours. In fact, the shape of the roller rink had literally no corner for the devil to hide, as that pastor in New Jersey might have noted.

Let us remember that rinks were regarded as seedy haunts at the beginning of the 20th century. However, with the installation of the ‘new’ pipe organ sound system, which encouraged regulated rhythms and controlled movements, the roller rinks earned a

position as wholesome entertainment. We might also speculate that the sound of an organ within the rink was reminiscent of the acoustics of church organs, thus authorizing these spaces as respectable. Roller skating and roller skating rinks would almost certainly have remained important for young people in the decades that followed were it not for shifts in musical taste. Teenagers listening to rock and roll in the 1950s understood that musical genre as, expressing ‘rebellion’ against parents and authority; a generation seen as having followed orders and the status quo.

The Golden Age roller rink, and the Roller Skate Dancing that accompanied it, withered by the mid-1950s, largely as a result of the fact that youth came to perceive organ music as epitomizing roller skating’s rhythmic rigidity. Organ rink music became synonymous with adult culture in the 1950s and, once again, interest in roller skating dwindled. Some rink owners toyed with playing the new sounds of the 1950s and 60s, but as historian James Turner suggests, “Rock and roll music did not prove very adaptable to dancing on skates in the old-time sense” (1997, p. 92). The rinks were deserted once again, save for the few nostalgic adult skaters reliving their adolescences. The rhythm of rock and roll did not coincide with the rhythm of roller skating. Understanding the fundamental ‘beat’ of rock and roll will help us to understand why it was so off-beat at the rink.

In the book, *Rock & Roll: A Social History*, the authors posit that during the Fifties, “[r]ock music was adopted by a generation of teenagers who eventually came to question some tenets of dominant culture” (Friedlander and Miller, 2006, p. 20). Rock and roll was based in differentiation and rebellion, in being distinct from authority and its music. The 1950s also produced another important ‘beat’ for countercultural art, that of

the Beat Generation. Jack Kerouac is credited with ascribing the term 'beat generation' to young men and women who felt 'beat down' from the pressures of mainstream society (Lawlor, 2005 p. 13). As opposed to the beats produced by the pipe organs of the Golden Age roller rink, this particular generation of Beats 'emphasized spontaneity and a desire to dismantle control and conformity' (*Ibid*).

Rock and roll is not exempt from repetitious rhythms and controlled tempos, but it differs in its aim to go against the grain. In other words, the genre of rock and roll itself was markedly repetitious inasmuch as, collectively, the songs were written in the same time signatures and had similar sounds. What is important to consider, however, is that rock and roll touted itself as being different from past musical genres. The deviance that rock and roll claimed for itself in the early 1950s was derived mainly from its roots in African American music -- rhythm and blues -- and in that music's perceived explicit relationship with sexuality (Altschuler, 2003, p. 8). Unlike the Golden Age's organ music whose history began in the culturally acceptable movie theatre, rock and roll from the get-go was seditious within mainstream post-war American culture.

The controlled and heavily adult-mediated space of the Golden Age roller rink did not correspond to the interests of youth of the 1950s. This resistance to roller skating by youth was not unique to the Fifties; young people in the Sixties and Seventies were similarly uninterested in what the roller skating rink offered in terms of music and entertainment. A business case study providing instructions on opening and a running a successful roller skating rink in the Seventies suggests that "[m]ost adults over 35 do not like rock, but prefer popular, oldies and waltzes while skating. Yet the youth prefer

contemporary rock music.”⁹ However, the turn-around in the popularity of roller skating would not come until the popularization of disco in the late 1970s.

2.6.2 What Is In A Name? A Roller Skate by Any Other Name...

Despite the incongruity of rock and roll’s rhythm for the movement of roller skating, the name rock and roll actually suggests otherwise. In her article on the waltz, Teresa Magdanz explores the etymology of the word *waltz*, which is rooted in German nouns for “spinning and “turning.” She suggests that this “linguistic evidence seems to cement the relationship between spinning movement, dance and its technological counterpart more than two hundred years before the appearance of the waltz (p. 254). In 1863, when James L. Plimpton was first shopping his new quad-roller skating design around America, he dubbed them ‘rocking skates’ because the motion skaters make to propel themselves comes from rocking side to side (Phillips, p. 26). Plimpton’s roller skate, the archetypal skate design, is literally a rock and roll skate. If this connection between etymology and movement had held true with respect to rock and roll music, the roller skating rink would have remained a prominent social space throughout the 20th century.

Perhaps the fact that Plimpton’s ‘rock and roll’ roller skate was quite ineffectual suggests that it does not ‘cement’ the relationship between rock and roll and roller skating. The rocking motion of the early roller skaters, on metal or wood wheels, was very hard work for roller skaters. It took the invention of a new material -- the Lucite wheel in the 1938 -- to revolutionize roller skating. John Wintz used a sheet of Lucite, shaped the wheels and placed bearing cups into the skate. Wintz’s new wheels worked quite well, but they were far too slippery for roller skate dancing. Thus, on a metal lathe,

Wintz decided to cut grooves into the wheel to create better grip, and he placed the wheel on a metal pin (Cutherbertson, 1979, p. 45). The process by which these new plastic wheels were produced is reminiscent of the production of a vinyl record; a metal lathe cuts grooves, and the record is placed on a metal pin in order to spin. In other words, the technology of the vinyl record offered the capacity to renew interest in the roller rink because of its paralleled circular movement. Parallels between the vinyl record and the roller skate would lead, with time, to the movement of vinyl records to the very centre of roller skating culture. Decades later, a music genre reliant on vinyl discs and repetitious rhythms would revive roller skating.

2.7 Vinyl Record Players and Sound Reproduction

During the Golden Age of Roller Skating, a handful of rinks used shellac record players for sound systems. However, shifts in radio broadcasting in the United States in the 1950s and 1960s, which saw the DJ-based music format replace earlier forms of programming (like the variety show and live concert) led American audiences to prefer similar formatting at roller skating rinks (Tuner, p. 91). In other words, vinyl record players and disc-jockeys were replacing the organists across the country, especially because they could cater to both the ‘traditionalist’ by playing organ recorded music and to the youth by playing contemporary bands. However, it was only when newly improved vinyl recording and sound technologies hit the market that roller rinks began to seriously integrate them into the space. In his article on the history of hi-fidelity, Keir Keightley explains that the ‘mainstreaming of stereophonics’ took started in 1958-59 (1996, p. 150). Sensing the move from live organist to disc-jockey, the RSROA attempted once more to control the rhythms of the rink and opened a music recording

company, Rinx Records. Rinx employed organists to play popular hits and recorded the songs onto easily recognizable 45 rpm colour vinyl records, which would be played at roller rinks across North America. Rinx Records continues to operate, now providing tapes and CDs of contemporary popular songs, but they admit that these appeal only to a “select market.”¹⁰ Hi-fi music was not introduced to roller skating until long after the advent of 45 and 33 rpm microgroove records. In the late 1960s owners and operators started developing hi-fi sound systems in the rinks, using the latest speakers and reproduction technology (Turner 89).

2.8 Race at the Rink: Sounding Differences

Up until now, this project has looked at the ways in which roller skating is entrenched in a dialogue with class (as a popular “low-brow” activity) and gender (inasmuch as the rink was a mediated space for hetero-normative socializing). We have not yet attempted to map race onto the space of the roller rink. Roller Skate Dancing is a predominately white, middle-class American activity. In fact, the RSROA continues to operate out of the National Roller Skating museum located in the suburbs of Lincoln, Nebraska. If the museum’s location is any indication, the roller rinks of the early 20th century were not accessible spaces and were racially segregated. The history of roller skating for African American roller skaters follows a completely different trajectory, as it will be discussed in the next section. Suffice it to say that the remembered history of the RSROA is markedly different from the experience of African American roller skaters. This difference is acknowledged in a national project currently being funded by Howard University to produce the National African American Roller Skating Archives by

collecting stories of a history, which ran parallel to that of the “dominant” roller skating rinks of the Golden Age.

One of the most prominent African American skaters in US history is famed roller disco dancer and teacher Bill Butler. His stories remain the most well-known accounts of the African American roller skating experience. In his book published in the midst of the roller disco craze, Butler explains:

I began skating at the Arcadia Rink, on the one night that was given to black people. Later, we got two nights. And for these sessions there was no organ music; they played rhythm and blues ... And we skated in the idiom of this music, doing what the music demanded, which everyone seemed to know already – jamming. It was a term used in both roller derby and in jazz music where it refers to on-the-spot composition. The difference between jamming and dance figure-skating is the difference between jazz and classical music (1979, p. 2).

We can see here how the memories and nostalgia meaning of roller skating are constructed. The nostalgic rhetoric found in books published by the RSROA involves different memories from those recounted by Bill Butler and his peers. This history of racial segregation at the roller rink, as of differences in the music played at the roller rink, is a significant topic to be explored in additional research. In this thesis, the following chapter will discuss how racial segregation and its relationship to roller rink music are represented in film.

The passage from Bill Butler also demonstrates how his roller skating experience was not dependent upon pipe organ sounds as the basis of a rink’s popularity. African American roller skate ‘jamming’ worked with other music genres such as rhythm and

blues, and by the 1970s, the new sound of disco. Ultimately, the significance of these different sounds found at African American roller rinks meant that these segregated roller rinks did not experience the same dramatic decrease in popularity as its pipe-organ playing Roller Skate Dancing counterpart. In the deserted rinks still reminiscent of the Roller Skate Dancing era, it is questionable whether roller skating would have ever come back into the cultural limelight; these old-fashioned rinks were cautious to change and new music genres. The African American roller skating rinks, on the other hand, were in and of themselves subversive in the way in which they fell outside of the constraints and regulations of the mainstream roller skating culture.

In the early Seventies, it was the both the black and gay communities in New York that brought disco into the roller skating rink. In fact, the Empire Rollerdrome in Brooklyn claims itself to be the ‘Birthplace of Roller Disco’ and in the early Seventies it was the “first to replace its live organist with a DJ and the first to cater to a [entirely] black clientele” (Kamber, 2000. p. 67). In her article, “Disco Knights,” Carol Cooper explains, “by 1977...roller disco was a major trend among dating-age black and Hispanics” (1995, p. 163). Of course, 1977 is also the seminal year in which disco went from being a subcultural music genre to a mainstream phenomenon after the film *Saturday Night Fever* and its accompanying soundtrack were released.

2.9 Disco Mainstreaming

The members of the Roller Skating Rink Operators Association probably would never have imagined that a music genre originating in African American and gay subcultures on the deviant streets of New York could ‘save’ their dying roller rinks. After all, this group had worked incessantly to ensure that all aspects of the roller rink

were mediated and policed. Nevertheless, by the time roller disco had moved to the mainstream of American culture, disco was a shadow of its former subversive self. In *Discographies*, the authors describe the cultural shift of disco:

“The popularity of *Saturday Night Fever* crowned disco’s crossover into pop culture, and set in motion its commodification ... Just as Tony Manero’s story tracked disco’s passage to the suburbs, 1977-8 saw disco leave New York and other urban centres which had been its home, and spread out over the states, beyond the strict realm of the young, the ethnic or the hip” (Gilbert and Pearson, p. 13).

Nowhere was this cultural mainstreaming of roller disco more apparent than in the most influential music industry publication of the era, *Billboard*. Various articles published during the period 1978-80 illustrate the significant role rinks played in defining and disseminating disco hits. These articles bear titles like, “Roller Rinks to Try Breaking New Disks” and “A Rosy Picture for Roller Rinks.”¹¹ Various record labels, such as disco giant De-Lite Records, worked directly with roller skating rinks to use the spaces as marketing test grounds. The president of RSROA summed up what was happening on roller rinks across North America during a “Disco Forum” panel held in 1979:

There are many rinks across the country that still feature skating to organ music and some that are 100% roller disco. But in between there is a vast difference of opinion ... In short, most roller discos across the country are between two extremes (Billboard, August 11, 1979: p. 50, 56)

In a span of a little over three years, over a dozen disco singles about roller skating were released. Among the most popular were “Roller Disco” (1979) by Citi;

“Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll” (1980) – Vaughn Mason & Crew; “Roller Boogie” (1981) – Vogue; “Hell on Wheels” (1979) – Cher; “Roller Star” (1980) – Arabesque; “Roller Boogie” (1980) – Bisquit; “Roller Skatin’ Mate” (1978) – Peaches and Herb; “Rollerskating” (1979) – Dolly Dots and “Roller Skates Is Up To Date” (1979) – Suzanne Doucet. In addition to these songs, there were roller boogie compilations released and popular soundtracks to films about roller disco.

The roller rink had cinema and its sound technologies to thank once more for its return into popular culture. Instead of an old theatre organ, the blockbuster soundtrack to *Saturday Night Fever* brought disco to its dominant cultural status, ensuring that disco and its moves were sanitized in ways that encouraged their easy incorporation into the world of the roller rink. However, by the time the soundtrack of *Saturday Night Fever* was released and disco music as a genre hit its stride in the mainstream, the originators of the genre considered it ‘over’. The popular phrase heard throughout the era, “Disco is Dead,” suggested that the genre had become, in terms used in this thesis, residual.

2.9.2 Turning the Beat Around (and Around and Around)

Roller disco handbooks published during the short lived disco era often suggest a natural relationship between disco music and roller skating. This relationship could be attributed to the same features which made organ music ‘natural’ in the rink; its cyclical rhythm and repetition were emulative of the movement on the rink itself. The repetition of disco, the feature which made it successful in roller skating, was the precise reason it met with hostile critical reaction. Richard Dyer explains, in his seminal work on the genre, “In Defense of Disco,” that the ‘typical’ disco song is one that is “endlessly repeated.” If we imagine a twelve-inch vinyl single spinning an ‘endlessly’ repeating

beat of a disco song, it is not a stretch to imagine its perfect alignment with the shape of the rink, a space which defined itself in terms of the endless repetition of roller skating around and around in a rink.

Culturally speaking, disco is dead in the same way that roller skating is dead, insofar as it was 'alive' only for a brief and fleeting moment. However, disco continues to exist through recirculated media and nostalgic treatments in popular culture. Moreover, the significance of the name disc-o, posits Walter Hughes, is that it suggests how disco, at its core, is about "technological reproducibility" (about the "disc"). Hughes writes, "As long as people go out to clubs and dance to recorded music ... disco lives, even if it is never 'live' and thus dispels the myth that disco died (*Ibid*, p.148). We could make the same argument about the original pipe organ in the roller rink, which worked to emulate the 'live' sounds of the first brass bands playing at skating rinks. Thus disco was, in many ways, a modernized version of the Roller Skate Dancing sounds of the rink organs. In Will Straw's article on the transglobal Montreal disco music scene, he discusses how a particular track "employs synthesizers to mimic string sections ... evok[ing] disco music of the late 1970s" (2008, p. 117). The synthesizer and the pipe organ both "mimic" live instruments thus showcasing yet another aspect of successful roller skating music – that its music must mimic the sounds of live instruments. Thus, to synthesize the arguments of this section, the synonymous features of roller rink music during its popular peaks are that the music had to be ontologically cyclical, repetitious and emulative of 'live' music.

2.9.3 Disco Memories and Nostalgic *Discourses*

Throughout the short-lived era of roller disco, various books published on the subject included nostalgic reminiscing the various bygone eras of roller skating, which typically started with discussion of the first skating parlours in the mid-19th century, and ended with Golden Age roller skate dancing and its pipe organs. Just as the discourse of roller disco was ensconced with inciting the past, roller skating moves themselves were also engaged in a dialogue with past music and movements. How do dance moves express nostalgia and history? In Bill Butler's account of African American roller skating experiences, to which I have already referred, he explains how the segregation of rink time caused black Americans to develop their own style of roller skate dancing called jamming. Jamming laid the foundation for roller disco, but more than that, jamming came to represent that particular moment in history. The subversive roller skate dance moves characteristic of 'jamming' were used to express where the skater was from or where he learned his/her dancing skills. Speaking of "Traditional Regional Styles", Butler writes about how

[f]rom city to city, all across the country the way of skating changes along with the way of speaking. I use different styles according to the music. Some music demands the Detroit Stride; other cuts put me into one of the other local motions. These are the most interesting ... the Cincinnati Style, Chicago Style, The East St. Louis Style, The Brooklyn Bounce and The Jersey Bounce" (1979, p. 50-8).

Butler's passage only touches upon a subject which could likely fill the pages of another thesis. Here, he describes the geography of roller skate jamming, but more aptly,

he describes a way in which African American roller skaters were simultaneously creating their own uniformed dance moves because the segregation of rinks prevented them from accessing the mainstream institutions of Roller Skate Dancing. The RSROA guidebooks during the Golden Age of roller skating established uniformity through national skating competitions which not only discouraged, but also worked to erase localized treatments of dances. Golden Age roller skaters were subversive in their practice of mapping roller skating geography by using roller rink stickers. In an incredible archive, Dan Brooks in *Skate Crazy* reprints hundreds of Golden Age roller skating rink stickers, where were collected by skaters and placed on skate totes. In other words, the skate cases were a type of passport, used to proclaim where the roller skater had originated from or was traveling to.

Without roller disco, roller skating would almost certainly have ended in the 1950s. We could speculate as to how we might “remember” roller skating in our current cultural framework if we were left with only the memories of the Golden Age. It is doubtful that the roller skating rink would have returned in the disco era were it not for roller skate jamming. Roller Disco’s role in providing a bridge between the Roller Skate Dancing rink and African American roller skate dances is an aspect of history which is overlooked by roller skate historians. It is worth noting that while roller disco rinks were also typically segregated, this segregation was unofficial more often than it was enforced in official ways. An interesting representation of this segregation is found in Earth, Wind & Fire’s film, *That’s the Way of the World* (1977), which includes a scene in an exclusively African American roller disco. When a white country-music singer decides

to visit the rink, it is clear that she is not only a visible minority, but, as well, an anomaly within the space.

In the next chapter, we will look at how one particular scene in the film *ATL* (2006) includes a moment in which a young roller skater identifies the regional skate moves of the ‘old people’ he watches from the side of the rink. Interestingly, roller skating geography expert Bill Butler was hired to teach the actors how to roller skate jam in order to ensure the film’s authenticity. This poignant scene, where music and roller skating are used as a means of ‘remembering’ a true history, stands as an exception to Jameson’s claim about a ‘crisis in historicity’ (1991, p. 69). In other words, this particular aspect of roller skate history is one that has been overlooked, but the inclusion of this long overlooked aspect of roller skate history in *ATL* means that this history will not soon be forgotten.

Roller skate historians who subscribe to the RSROA model of history, such as James Turner, have argued that “[t]he evolution of rink music may be responsible for the demise of adults from public skating sessions ... The absence of formalized programming offers no incentive for patrons to improve their skating ability...” (1997, p. 92). This statement suggests the differences of perspective on which the segregation of roller skating culture has rested. Bill Butler and others would argue that it was precisely because music existed *outside* of the regulations of roller skate dancing that roller skating remained a prominent activity throughout the 20th century in African American communities. This is not to suggest, however, that jamming and roller disco have developed without uniformity or rules; as Bill Butler writes in his instructional book, roller skating is about understanding how to ‘keep the beat’ by ‘skating to the break’

which results in “jamming requiring more high-voltage sounds” (1979, p. 38-9). Here Butler is suggesting that roller skate jamming involves the experience of beats different from those of roller skate dancing. We might say that, insofar as these different roller skate dance styles use different time signatures, they involve different experiences of temporality.

This discrepancy between different experiences of time at the roller skating rink is particularly poignant at this moment, when the National African American Roller Skating Archives Project is invested in documenting and recirculating lost narratives and histories from African American roller skaters and rinks, producing a decidedly different story from the ones currently found in roller skating histories and archives. These new archives will likely add to this discussion of how the cultural role of roller skating is linked directly to rink music, and how this relationship to music evokes nostalgia.

2.10 Roller Skating Outside: Bringing Roller Disco to the Street

Improvements in wheel technology allowed for roller disco to be performed outside of the roller rink. Nearly one hundred years after the skate had been brought indoors, it was going back outside and starting a whole new chapter in roller skate history. By the 1970s, the novelty of roller skating as an indoor form of ice skating had completely worn thin, and the notion that roller skating could be performed outdoors was new. In the mid-Seventies, Venice Beach, California and New York’s Central Park were the first to introduce roller skating outdoors. The symbiotic function of music was perpetuated outside with portable sound devices. In Paul Lehrman essay “Insider Audio: Do You Hear What I Hear? – Learning to Listen in a Mediated World,” he describes the way in which he first witnessed portable and individualized listening practices:

I was walking in New York City's Central Park and came upon an amazing picture: On a patch of blacktop were several dozen gyrating disco-dancing roller skaters, but the only sound I could hear was that of the skate wheels on the pavement. Each of the dancers was sporting a pair of headphones with little antennae coming out of them ... it became obvious – after I watched them for a few minutes – that they weren't all dancing to the same music; each was tuned to a different station (2005, p.149).

This excerpt demonstrates exactly why roller skating outdoors led to the demise of roller skating. Despite the inclusion of music, there was no coordination between the sound and the movement of the sort found at the roller skating rink. Here all the skaters are in their own “audio world” but, more than that, the music to which they are listening is not in tune with the movements. The rhythmic contract between roller skating, the form of the rink, and the music played – a contract involving cycles and repetition – has little application to the outdoor world. On the contrary, that world provides a different rhythm, and evokes a different time.

When Rollerblades were introduced in the Eighties, roller skating enthusiasts viewed these skates as a bastardized version of their beloved quad-skates. An article published in *Time*, entitled “Zipping Along in the Asphalt Heaven,” made it abundantly clear that Rollerblades were designed specifically for use outdoors. Interestingly, roller blades, with their wheels in a row, bear a closer relationship to the first pair of skates that Merlin introduced at that fateful dinner party than to the iconic quad-skate design. It was the quad skate that had experienced all the dips and peaks in popularity throughout the 19th and 20th century, and it is the quad skate that has evoked nostalgia and a sense of residuality. The design of the new skate boots, and the lack of indoor facilities and music

systems, meant that Rollerblading was not only different from roller skating, but also it failed to fulfill the latter's purpose of evoking the past, imagined or real.

Disco not only changed the ways in which the "time" of roller skating is experienced by integrating new music and time signatures into the rink, it also caused a change in space because, for the first time in its history, roller skating was practiced outdoors. Ultimately, Roller Disco was a short-lived fad that was 'over' by the early 1980s in the places it originated, however, it would continue to exist in places considered marginal, as we will explore in the next chapter.

2.11 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at a history of roller rink music beginning in the mid-1700s when an instrument-maker developed the world's first recognized pair of roller skates. The connection between music and roller skating continued into the following century as roller skating appeared on-stage at the Grand Opera -- a site which led to the skate being redesigned in order to facilitate easy movement. What this early history shows the close connection between roller skating and music, the Industrial Age rinks for both ice and roller skating would feature brass bands and musical scores borrowed from other cultural fields. Music exclusive to roller skating would not be heard at the roller skating rink until the Great Depression of the 1930s.

By focusing on the peak moments of roller skating popularity, the Golden Age (1926-1954) and Roller Disco (1977-1983) we have seen how both eras utilized music which expressed the ontological rhythm of the rink; a rhythm that rested on the repetitious sounds and cyclical movement found within sound technologies (e.g. cylinders producing organ sounds and the spinning turntable). In both instances, the

coalescing sounds and movement of these two moments allowed roller skating to become a fashionable part of popular culture. At the same time, as we have seen with the example of rock and roll, musical forms and shifting tastes were able to destroy interest in roller skating.

More than merely mediating the movement found on the floor of the roller rink, music mediated the status and movement of roller skating in culture. The residual music of the theatre pipe organ and the fading sounds of disco, further constructed roller skating as a residual pastime, evoking nostalgia and notions of the past. The past, however, plays a contentious role in the history of roller skating music in the United States because the rinks were markedly segregated in racial terms. In this respect, roller rink music does not evoke the same memories or nostalgic responses for all people. For instance, the sounds of pipe organ music were synonymous with a very rigid and controlled hegemonic form of roller skating, which was distinct to the rhythm and blues music typically, found at rinks characterized by African American roller skate jamming. Music has always remained the prominent feature of roller skating, not only because of its aesthetic function of covering up the unwanted noises of the rink, but also because it negotiates the role of roller skating in popular culture, serving to locate it more broadly in relationship to time and space.

Chapter 3: The Cinematic Roller Rink

“Roller skating has now reached the point where three motion picture short subjects have been filmed about it.”

- Morris Traub, *Roller Skating Through the Years*, 1944¹²

3.1 Introduction

Despite their fluctuating popularity in the ‘real world,’ roller skating and roller rinks have had a relatively stable history of representation in film. For decades, the cinematic roller rink has appeared as an important site in propelling and authenticating film narratives through a variety of methods we will explore throughout this chapter. In the previous chapter we focused upon the history of roller rink music, and the ways in which it served to either popularize roller skating or lead to a decline in its place within popular culture. In this chapter, we will focus on the cinematic representations of roller rink music and sound and the ways in which these representations parallel their real world relationship. In what ways do roller skating and the roller rink in cinema articulate nostalgia and collective memory? What places do roller skating and rinks occupy within the time and space of film narrative?

In film, roller skating and roller rinks are almost always symbolic of a past. This past is either represented as the nostalgic space of adolescence or as a specific past era functioning as the object of nostalgia, typically the Recession or the 1970s. Frederic Jameson regards the nostalgia dimension of certain texts of collective memory – for example, films set in past decades – as a flawed attempt at historicity, inauthentic representations of history. The problem in our case is that there is no “real” history of

roller skating, insofar as the roller rink is a space that, even in the ‘real world,’ exists without an ‘authentic history.’ Nevertheless, the roller skate has become fundamental to authenticating a past, whether the past is real, imagined, collective or personal.

The image of roller skating and rinks simultaneously works to authentic time *and* space. Specifically, roller rinks work as mapping agents for narratives whose settings range from urban centers to Midwestern boondocks. Depending upon the context, the rink can represent cultural ‘newness,’ when located in California or other urban sites. It can also designate marginal spaces, if the rink is portrayed as popular because it exists within a site perceived as culturally vacuous.

There are two different categories of films in which the space of the roller rink is featured. In the first, roller rinks are the central focus of the narrative. In the second, roller skating rinks are featured only within a significant scene in the film’s narrative. Films that fall into the first category include *Roller Boogie*, *Skatetown, USA* (1979), *Xanadu* (1980), *Roll Bounce* and *ATL*. In the latter group are films such as *Radio Days* (1987), *Racing with the Moon* (1984), *Boys Don’t Cry* (1999), *Monster* and *Music Within*. While these films feature only one scene at the roller rink, that scene is crucial in authenticating both the time and space of the film’s narrative.

3.2 Depression-ness Rinks

One of the films which best showcases nostalgia and the irrational optimism of childhood is Woody Allen’s *Radio Days* (1987). The film is a memoir of his own youth in Queens, New York in 1942 and it is saturated with nostalgia and a vision of the relationship between historicity and technology. In *Radio Days*, Allen recounts the central role that radio played in American homes during the Second World War,

particularly within Allen's childhood home. In one poignant scene, his spinster aunt Bea paints a line down the back of her legs to imitate the look of (rationed) stockings; Bea is preparing herself for a date at the roller skating rink. The subsequent scene is a high-angle shot of the rink where we see a pipe organ and organist playing, while couples skate around the rink. Like the reference to war-rationing, the organ and roller rink work to authenticate the historical location of the narrative. In *Racing with the Moon* (1984), a young Sean Penn plays Hopper, a teenager drafted into WWII in the same year in which *Radio Days* is set, 1942. The film is set in California and the roller rink is used to portray 'innocence' and young dating rituals. Moreover, at this California roller skating rink we can only *hear* the organ music, as opposed to the Queens rink where we actually see an organist playing.

An atypical example of a Depression-era rink is found in Sydney Pollack's *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?* (1969). The film is an adaptation of a novel, based loosely on the 'real' endurance derbies of the 1920s and 1930s (Richmond, 1971). In the film, Gloria (Jane Fonda) and others enlist in an endurance dance taking place in "La Monica Ballroom" on Santa Monica Pier in 1935. Although the film identifies the space as a ballroom, the site resembles a roller skating rink with its oval design, wooden flooring and a barrier surrounding the rink. In actuality, the 'real' La Monica Ballroom was torn down by 1963; however, it operated as a roller skating rink for decades prior (Basten, 1974, p. 147). Unlike the other films which nostalgically remember the site of the roller skating rink as a space for dating and listening to music, the roller rink in Pollack's film is symbolic of the troubled time; the roller rink was an escape from harsh realities, yet the movement on the rink demonstrates how a lot of hard work and effort bring one to the

same place in which one started. In other words, the movement was redundant and representative of the literal redundancy of the era. Looking back to the last chapter, we can see how the filmic representations of Depression-era rinks accurately portray the rigid and controlled movement of roller skating at the time.

When these films were produced (roughly 1969-1987), there was still, arguably, a ‘collective nostalgia’ for the rinks of the Depression era. There are fewer references to such rinks now than there are to those of the roller disco skating era because this is no longer a shared cultural memory, and roller skating is now symbolic of “Seventies-ness.” Post-millennial films whose stories were set in the 1930s or 40s would likely omit roller skating because it would limit the films’ historicity, rather than enhance.

3.2.2 Remembering Seventies-ness Roller Skating & Rinks

More than other eras, the 1970s have come to be coded as richly semiotic, and the decade is a privileged focus of nostalgia. Objects like disco balls, platform shoes and bell bottoms quickly serve as visual shorthand suggesting the era. The quad roller skate not only functions as a marker of the 1970s, it also offers an enhanced level of Seventies-ness within a film. Films utilizing roller skates for this reason include, but are not limited to, *Boogie Nights*, *Dick*, *Austin Powers*, *Music Within* and *Semi-Pro*. The film *Roll Bounce* is emblematic of the nostalgia film with its treatment of the Seventies, and more specifically of childhood in the 1970s. It achieves its ‘Seventies-ness’ almost entirely through the rink soundtrack. Let us move onto other films of the 1970s before engaging with the crucial theme of this section, the way in which the soundtrack of the cinematic roller rink evokes nostalgia and authenticates time.

In 1979, a film critic for *The Washington Post* wrote, “*Roller Boogie*... is the sort of movie we should probably burn before it gets into a time capsule and reveals to some future generation the extent to which the 1970’s could descend into cultural and artistic barrenness” (Rosenfeld, p. C1). That this reviewer was already concerned with how a future population would remember the 1970s before the film had even hit movie theatres across the country suggests the extent to which that decade was viewed as culturally distinctive and likely the object of future nostalgia. Indeed, the film she reviewed would inspire clothing designers who, decades later, aimed to replicate Seventies aesthetics.

Roller skating films produced in the 1970s referred to Golden Age roller rinks and presented hyper-stylized treatments of the era. The trailer for *Skatetown, USA* (1979) begins with a dreamlike montage of a young girl skating down a sidewalk in a post-WWII suburb, wearing saddle shoes and a school uniform. In the background a pipe organ is playing a waltz, and the voiceover narrator asks:

Remember when roller skating was a lonely sport? The skaters were discrete and the skates were obsolete. The background had no beat. At all. Well, times sure have changed!

The absurdity of this question is that the audience, to whom the film is targeted, was born well after this period that it is portraying. The trailer works to establish a distinction between the ‘old’ childhood skating of the audience’s parents and the ‘new’ and hip roller disco of their generation. Frederic Jameson might argue that this trailer is demonstrative of a “crisis in historicity” wherein the desire to present a pastiche of a bygone era supersedes the real history. The trailer uses elements of the real past, such as the sounds of an electric organ, and transplants them into a fantasy of roller skating

history that erases the rink and its decidedly social aspect. The ‘memory’ of Golden Age roller skating is as historically inaccurate as the portrayal of roller skating in the Seventies in films like *Roll Bounce* or *Boogie Nights*.

The promotional description of *Xanadu* (1980) reads, “The ‘40s meets the 80s in a very special love story.”¹³ The story revolves around Sonny (Michael Beck) restoring a dilapidated Art Deco roller skating rink for his muse, Kira (Olivia Newton-John). The film is riddled with references to the past. Sonny’s mentor in the film, played by Gene Kelly (whose importance for the film we will discuss momentarily), was once a prominent recording artist in the Big Band era. The story tries desperately to surpass the excitement of the 1940s it romanticized in the first place. The memories of Golden Age roller skating offered by the film revolve around Big Bands and choreographed numbers, when in reality, these had little to do with roller skating during that period.

3.3 Rink Music on Film

Roller skating rinks in films *always* feature music. There is diegetic music playing at the actual roller skating itself, but it is typical for the music of the rink to be “heard” outside of the rink during an establishing shot. For example, the first scene of *Boys Don’t Cry* begins in the parking lot of a roller skating rink. The skating rink parking lot is full, and the soundtrack playing is the Cars song “I Don’t Mind You Coming Here.” The song is both extradiegetic and diegetic because, when we begin outside of the rink the music plays with a soundtrack quality, and not as if we are hearing remnants of sound coming through the walls of the rink. The music is then transposed into the space of the roller rink, suggesting that the skaters are hearing the same quality of music that we started with in the parking lot. This similar technique is used in *ATL* and

Roll Bounce where roller rinks are introduced by a song that is simultaneously playing inside as well.

3.3.2 No Time Like the Not So Distant Past-ness

Representations of roller skating in film can also represent a time vacuum, and nothing affirms this feature more than the music playing at the rink. In the biopics *Boys Don't Cry* (1999) and *Monster* (2002) both films include scenes at the roller skating rink as a means of developing narrative and establishing the historicity of the time in which the films are set, rather than producing a stylized image of the time in order to evoke nostalgia. At the same time, the diegetic music played within the roller skating rinks within these films is meant to convey the ways in which these rinks are places of nostalgia for those characters who visit them. The song that plays throughout the first scene of *Boys Don't Cry* is the 1978 hit-song "Just What I Needed" by the Cars, whereas the roller rink in *Monster* plays an array of songs including, Blondie's "Tide is High," "Shake Your Groove Thing" by Peaches and Herb, INXS and Journey's tour de force, "Don't Stop Believing." As these songs were produced between 1978 and 1985, we might deduce that the films are set in 1986, at the very latest. In actuality, the Brandon Teena story begins in 1993 and that of Aileen Wournos in 1990. These scenes serve to add historicity to the films inasmuch as the narratives are set within culturally residual communities in Nebraska and Ohio, respectively. In fact, the films are invested in presenting the spaces in which Brandon and Aileen were operating as both unbending and narrow-minded towards these characters. In other words, by featuring music from the recent past, these songs function effectively in both films to signal the 'backward' status of both the rinks and the places in which they are located.

If the music played in the cinematic roller rinks to which Brandon Teena and Aileen Wournos go is emblematic of their peripheral and culturally vacuous environments, music is utilized for an opposite effect in the trio of films set in California. When *Roller Boogie*, *Xanadu* and *Skatetown, USA* were released in theatres at the cusp of 1979-80, popular discourse suggested that the roller disco fad was born in California with the trendsetting youth on Venice Beach. The use of California as the birthplace of roller disco was likely a strategic move to sanitize roller disco for film audiences, insofar as New York City, the real birthplace of roller disco, was arguably too deviant for mainstream America, given the city's associations with rampant drug use and sexuality. In fact, handbooks to roller disco tended also to focus on Venice Beach for the same reasons. The view of roller disco as 'healthy exercise' was probably more palatable to the North American public. One popular handbook of the time writes, "Venice is the Southern California community where the most recent revival of the outdoor craze was born. The beach is also one of the most beautiful and fascinating skating environments in the United States" (Phillips, 79). The backdrop of California for the roller skating rinks served a double function: the films were authentically hip because of the status of California as a cultural hotspot, and at the same time, they provided an image of a clean-cut roller disco, a roller disco that was more appealing to mainstream America than the supposed subversive rinks in New York City.

How does music work to demonstrate the ways in which California roller rinks are culturally advanced? For *Roller Boogie*, Cher and Bob Etsy wrote "Hell On Wheels" specifically for the film's soundtrack, and Olivia Newton-John and the Electric Light Orchestra (ELO) did the same for the roller disco anthems in *Xanadu*. These Californian

roller rinks were so current that their rink music that had not yet been heard at other roller rinks. In the same way that music found at the cinematic roller rink in Middle America exposes cultural stagnation, the audiences for *Roller Boogie*, *Xanadu* and *Skatetown, USA* are hearing the music of California roller rinks for the first time. The soundtracks accompanying these roller boogie films were very much modeled after the *Saturday Night Fever* mode of marketing, wherein the soundtrack filled with new music is sold alongside the release of the film.

David Shumway has expanded upon Fredric Jameson's discussion of the role of music in nostalgia films in his essay "Rock and Roll Soundtracks and the Production of Nostalgia" (1999). Shumway posits that films with popular music soundtracks work to merely 'idealize' moments in time rather than represent a reality (p. 41). This notion of popular music soundtracks as re-articulating history or time is reminiscent of similar arguments put forth by scholars writing about film musicals. It may be that roller skating films are more akin to the Hollywood musical than to other genres in the ways in which they offer the ability to briefly escape 'reality' and time. We will discuss their capacity to produce this effect shortly.

3.4 Cinematic Roller Rinks; Hollywood Musical

In a seminal anthology on the genre of Hollywood Musicals, Steven Cohan discusses the problems of defining a film's genre, inasmuch as there is no "perfect definition" that encompasses each and every scenario. The Hollywood musical, for Cohan, is "no exception." Cohan goes on to suggest that there are a number of shared features in these films. These include, "typically and inevitably set[ting] its impossible numbers in some kind of dialectic relation with narrative, heightening, disrupting,

revising, or multiplying the codes of cinematic realism ordinarily determining a film's diegesis" (2002, p. 2). Using this definition, let us consider how films such as *Roller Boogie*, *Roll Bounce* and *ATL* include scenes at the roller skating rink which are meant to showcase the talents of the diegetic characters, but in actuality, are heavily choreographed roller skating numbers. These fantastic skating scenes force the viewer to accept them as a part of realistic storylines presented throughout the film, in spite of the fact that the movements on the roller skating rink are highly stylized and choreographed. Above all else, the cinematic roller rink is a musical space.

Another defining characteristic of a Hollywood musical, claims Alan Williams, is that "music *dominates* the image track" (italics in original, p. 150). While this is the case for cinematic rinks, wherein the music "dominates" the image track, this seems a slightly dubious means of demarcating films, since most film scholars would argue that many films outside of the Hollywood musical genre are dominated by their soundtracks. The problem may be a terminological one, since "musical" tends to refer to films produced during a particular era of classic Hollywood. The dilemma, explains David Shumway, is that popular music muddies the once easily identifiable boundaries for the genre of Hollywood musical. Scholars have grappled with assigning more recent films, which employ a wide variety of forms of musical accompaniment, the problematic label "Hollywood musical," sometimes rectifying this problem by using terms such as *Celluloid Jukebox* (Romney and Wootton, 1995). However, the cinematic roller rink has more than just a soundtrack that dominates and disrupts narrative reality. It also features a few more characteristics of the classic Hollywood film musical, suggesting that these films fall within the parameters of this contested genre.

The actors in musical themselves, writes Alan Williams, also work as signifiers to authenticate the film as a musical. Williams uses the example of how the presence of Fred Astaire in a film automatically positions the film within the genre of Hollywood musical (p. 152). The reason, explains Williams, is that there are particular “musical” bodies, those of actors who are constantly in musical films, or of performers who can be read as authenticating the film as a musical, like Judy Garland or Frank Sinatra who, even outside of the film’s narrative, are ensconced within the music industry. Using this framework, cinematic roller rinks also use identifiable ‘musical bodies’ to further insert these films within the genre of musical. Of course, *Xanadu* is the most obvious of these films, with its relationship to the Hollywood musical. Earning her reputation as a singer and dancer in the musical *Grease*, released two years before *Xanadu*, Olivia Newton John became synonymous with a new-wave of Hollywood musicals. The epitomic musical actor in *Xanadu* was none other than Gene Kelly. It was Kelly’s role as Danny McGuire in *Cover Girl* (1944) which established him as a musical star, and he used the same character name, Danny McGuire in his final role in *Xanadu*. *Xanadu* also flitted between the genres of Hollywood musical and jukebox musical, since its soundtrack incorporated original scored musical songs for the film, as well as songs by the popular progressive rock band Electric Light Orchestra (ELO).

The most common attribute of actors playing protagonists within films about roller skating is that they are recognized in the “real world” as popular music artists. For example, in *Roll Bounce*, child hip hop prodigy Lil Bow Wow plays the disenfranchised teenaged protagonist. Similarly, *ATL* features multi-platinum rap recording artist Tip “T.I.” Harris. Harris plays the lead role in the film, but his onscreen little brother is

played by Evan Ross, son of Diana Ross. Other minor roles in the films involve appearances by Andre from the group OutKast and R&B singer Monica. Moreover, first-time film director Chris Robinson likely chose *ATL* as his film debut because he could deploy his *auteur* status in the roller skate sequences. Robinson is best known for directing dozens of critically acclaimed hip-hop and R&B music videos. The list of ways in which this film is related to music is extensive, including its narrative being loosely based on the childhood experiences of renowned hip hop music producers and artists.

In his article “Pop and Film: the Charisma Crossover,” Ben Thompson suggests, that audiences do not take issue with rappers having film careers. He posits that the relationship between what they do and what they are is not markedly different because “their day job [as a rapper] is all about delivering lines anyway” (1995, p.38). In other words, today’s popular rappers, such as T.I. or Bow Wow may be considered the Gene Kellys or the Fred Astaires of today’s generation in the way that their bodies are representative of music and performance. Dancers have also made their debuts at the cinematic roller rink. For instance, dancer Patrick Swayze, whose mother is a well-known choreographer, had his first filmic role in *Skatetown, USA* and ostensibly established his dancer authenticity within that film, enough to land him the lead ‘musical body’ in his next film, *Dirty Dancing* (1987). Unknown actor, Jim Bray, who played the male-lead role in *Roller Boogie*, was a championship roller skater, and popstar Cher co-wrote the film’s hit track, “Hell on Wheels.”

Thus far we have looked at how roller skating rinks situate a film within the category of the Hollywood musical genre, through the ways in which music dominates the image track and through the inclusion in such films of actors whose ‘bodies’

authenticate the film as musical. However, the final criterion situating these films within the genre is the way in which they are culturally and critically received. In the preface to *The Hollywood Musical*, Jane Feuer describes how older film buffs and scholars would have ‘scoffed’ at the idea of writing seriously about Westerns and musicals (1976, p ix). Feuer was writing at a moment in which most mass media and ‘low brow’ cultural products were starting to receive the attention of scholars and make inroads into cultural canons. Nevertheless, her preface demonstrates the apparent disconnect between the critical hostility to musicals and the universal appeal that they continue to have within popular culture. While Hollywood musicals have come to receive positive critical responses -- as with films such as *Chicago* (2002), *Across the Universe* (2007) and both versions of *Hairspray* (1988, 2007) -- the cinematic roller rink remains a constant target of scathing criticism.

Reviews of *ATL* include the headline, “Only Scratches the Surface of a Fascinating Subject” and a *NY Times* review of *Roll Bounce* states it to be, “a quasi musical with wall-to-wall tracks ... some nifty roller-skating and about a half an hour's worth of sitcom shenanigans stretched to a ruinously overlong 107 minutes” (Dargis 2005, p. E.1:21). One need only query a newspaper database to discover that *Roller Boogie* and *Skatetown, USA* are critically hated as much today as when they were first released. In fact, decades later, the campy elements of both films have revealed themselves to not only have worn the test of time, but have found a space within the genre of films enjoyed as guilty pleasures.

The film that receives the most condemnation, undoubtedly, remains *Xanadu*. Scholars, film buffs and musical enthusiasts alike openly express their disdain for the

film's narrative, score and acting. A reviewer in the *Globe and Mail*, writing during the film's release in theatres laments that, "[*Xanadu*] is a disaster of common occurrence - a poorly directed, ineptly edited, badly photographed bundle of celluloid" (Groen, 1980, p. 17). The film's protagonist Sonny is played by the budding actor of *Warriors* (1978), Michael Beck who has famously said, "*The Warriors* opened a lot of doors in film for me, which *Xanadu* then closed."¹⁴

At the crux of the issue surrounding Hollywood musicals is the reality that the genre is harder to define, particularly now that popular music soundtracks are ubiquitous within contemporary cinema. The features of the roller rink films which are like those of the film musical include similar critical responses, a use of 'musical bodies' to authenticate the film, and perhaps most importantly, the ways in which time is manipulated. Alan Williams has noted the difficulty in ascribing the genre "musical" to current films, but attests that one important aspect is the way "the image is only intermittently freed from the demands of veracity" (1981, p. 149). In the context of the cinematic roller rink, any time that a roller rink is onscreen it *is* 'intermittently freed' from the reality of time. This skewing of time is a feature of the genre, but, more than that, it points to the ways in which the roller skating rink in film is a site of what Fredric Jameson calls the Nostalgic Mode.

3.5 Space

In *Ethnicity, Identity and Music: The Musical Construction of Place*, Martin Stokes aims to understand the way in which music operates as a powerful mapping agent. He suggests that, "music is socially meaningful not entirely, but largely because it provides means by which people recognize identities and places, and the boundaries

which separate them” (5). The geography of music is the object of a vast amount of scholarship, and this passage from Stokes certainly does not do justice to the breadth of research available; however, it works well to establish the framework for understanding how roller rinks in cinema, and their soundtracks, are in a dialogue with space and location.

3.5.2 Urban Roller Rinks

In the film *ATL* (whose title refers to the acronym used for the airport code and moniker of Atlanta) the roller rink is classified as the epitomic space of this city. Only within the film do we learn that the roller skating rink is not experienced by everyone in Atlanta, but is a space specific to a group of young African Americans. During the establishing shot of the roller skating rink, protagonist Rashad (Tip Harris) says in a voiceover “It is a rite of passage to every kid in the A.” The statement is poignant in demonstrating how the film works within the framework of nostalgic literature or film through the “childlike innocence” of perceiving the world as through one’s own eyes. Thus, in Rashad’s nostalgic interpretation of the roller skating rink *he* knew as a child, he imagined that it was a universal experience for all kids in Atlanta.

The roller rink occupies the central position within the city, leaving all other sites at the periphery. Only late into the film’s narrative is it revealed that awareness of the rink’s location is restricted. When a wealthy girl is discovered skating amongst them, one of the other skater’s asks, “How’d you even find Cascade anyway? Did you go buy your 99 cent ghetto handbook to show you how to keep it real?” The Cascade roller rink, in other words, would never register itself on city maps or cultural guidebooks; however, for the young men and women of *ATL*, knowing where this roller rink is located is a

fundamental part of their geographic relationship to the city of Atlanta, either in or outside of the so-called “ghetto.” A similar storyline involving the ‘off-the-map’ subversive roller rink may be found in *Roller Boogie*, where the roller rink is known by ‘local’ surfer kids but is harder to find for the wealthy central character from Beverly Hills.

The music featured at the roller rink in *ATL* is southern hip hop and crunk, and almost exclusively features artists from Atlanta, which also serves to authenticate the story’s location. Music by Georgian artists OutKast and Young Jeezy is played at the roller skating rink, as is the music of Atlanta-native Tip “T.I.” Harris who skates to his own song. This particular moment is undoubtedly “intermittently freed from reality”, demonstrating the film’s affinity with the Hollywood musical. Most telling is the opening sequence of the film; it begins with the choral larger-than-life words, “Georgia, Georgia” from Ray Charles’ classic song from the 1960s, “Georgia on My Mind.” The song is actually a sample taken from Jamie Foxx’s performance as Ray Charles in the film *Ray*, and the song is sampled as a means of introducing rapper Ludacris’ remaking of the song entitled, “Georgia.” Ludacris is a prominent hip hop artist in Atlanta, but here historicity and nostalgia are confused inasmuch as the actor Jamie Foxx stands in as the ‘real’ Ray Charles. The classic song is interspersed throughout Ludacris’ song, perhaps symbolic of Atlanta’s two temporalities, those of the old and new South. The roller rink, like the opening title song, is an intermixing of old and new, of nostalgia and of authentic history. Although it is a popular youth hangout on Sunday night, the signage of the Cascade shows its age, as do the older skaters who show up on a designated old person night.

Rashad goes to ‘old people night’ to study the veteran skaters from the side of the rink, identifying the origin of the skating moves. As Rashad explains to his girlfriend, “Every side of town got their own way of skating ... that’s Chicago. And that’s Detroit all day long, right there.” As we discussed in the previous chapter, specific styles of roller skating and music grew out of various cities. In the context of the film, they merely elicit a sense of ‘Chicago-ness’ or ‘Detroit-ness,’ in the same way that the roller rink of *ATL* presents Atlanta-ness more than it does a real Atlanta.

Unlike *ATL*, the film *Roll Bounce* does not identify a specific city, in part because the roller rink has an ‘urban-ness’ and model of segregation transferable to any other US city. The narrative opens with the closing of the ‘Southside’ roller rink. We know it is the ‘Southside’ rink because of the music playing -- tracks like “Flashlight” by Parliament and Vaughn Mason and Crew’s “Bounce, Rock, Skate, Roll” which are crowd pleasers among the exclusively African American roller skaters. With the rink closing, the young men are forced to travel across town to the racially mixed and commercialized rink, featuring hi-tech blacklights and arcade games. In spite of the new objects at this rink, protagonist Xavier (Lil Bow Wow) scoffs that “This rink’s got everything but *real* music.”

The boys walk into the new skating rink as the song “Emotions” plays loudly through the sound system, and when they learn the name of the group singing, one of the boys responds, “The Bee Gees? That sounds like something my cousin got from his girlfriend.” In this nostalgia-pastiche film, music defines the geography of the roller skating rink and, ultimately, the identities of the young men. The ending of the film, akin to the endings of other roller skate films, like *Roller Boogie*, *Skatetown, USA* and *ATL*, is

a final skate-off between skate teams. The Southside boys choose to skate to Chic's "Le Freak" because, "The cats 'round here don't know nothing about this." It turns out that the music is not exclusive to the Southside -- one of the other teams plays the song before they even have the chance. Ultimately, it functions to represent the circulation of culture at work.

3.5.3 Skating Around in the Margins

The last roller rink space that we will examine exists in marginal cultures and peripheral spaces typified by America's heartland. As we have already discussed, *Boys Don't Cry* and *Monster* are the biographies of two different, transgressive people living in Nebraska and Ohio. Middle America plays an essential role in both narratives, and roller skating rinks are used to typify these spaces. The first scene of *Boys Don't Cry*, even before the title credits start, is an establishing shot outside of a roller skating rink, with a parking lot full of cars. Inside of the roller skating rink we are introduced to Brandon Teena, interacting with a group of teenaged girls. Only after this roller rink scene ends does the title, "Lincoln, Nebraska," appear onscreen. In other words, the roller rink is emblematic of mid-America and the title works only to specify the city in which this narrative is placed.

In what ways are we able to read the roller rink as a residual space? The only song played throughout the scene is The Cars' song, "Just What I Needed" which, as we have already discussed, is played years after it was actually popular, and not for the purposes of pastiche or irony. Suffice it to say that the viewer of this independent film is already aware of the Brandon Teena story and the song works as a bitter reminder of how he once lived in such an innocent moment; this scene is nostalgic of the time in which Brandon

lived freely. Nevertheless, compared to the gritty ‘urban’ realist lyrics of Ludacris or T.I., the song by The Cars offers sounds and words tame in comparison. The song works to establish Lincoln, Nebraska as a subdued space, a notion the film will soon rupture.

In “The Brandon Teena Archive” Judith Halberstam explains how Brandon’s story moves “from the shadow lands of marginal queer rural life in Middle America to the glare of the spotlight in Hollywood” (p. 150). The Cars song works to authenticate the ‘shadow lands’ because the founding members of the band, Ric Ocasek and Benjamin Orr formed the band in Columbus, Ohio. Eventually, the Cars moved to Boston, a space known for its emergent cultural status and it is Boston that is most often cited by rock historians as being the originating site of the Cars. Recalling Bill Butler’s comments in chapter two, the Cars song is resounding of ‘local motion.’

The film *Monster* also includes a roller skating rink. The DVD chapter is titled ‘What is Ohio Like?’ because it is the question Aileen asks her new friend Selby and we know that the query will be answered within the scene. Selby has no answer, so the viewer assumes that Ohio is a place where roller rinks remain prominent social spaces nearly a decade after the fad ended in the rest of the country. Once more, we see that Ohio is a place stuck in residual time. More than any other moment of cinematic roller rinks, the *Monster* scene undoubtedly fits within the paradigm of the Hollywood musical. When the first piano notes of Journey’s song “Don’t Stop Believing” start, Aileen Wournos exclaims, “Oh maaaaan! I LOVE this song!” Immediately, Wournos identifies her interest in the song, and as we hear the lyrics we understand that the song almost speaks directly to her own situation:

Just a small town girl, living in lonely world
She took the midnight train going anywhere
Just a city boy, born and raised in South Detroit
He took the midnight train going anywhere

Before unpacking the significance of the lyrics, it is important to note that the scene at the roller skating rink is presented as the first date between Aileen and Shelby. Even if we did not know the histories of these two people, the lyrics explain it for us - Shelby really is a small town girl, living in a lonely world. She is from a small town, and had only recently moved to Ohio and has no friends, while Aileen Wournos was really born and raised in South Detroit. This notion of Wournos being a “city boy” seems apt in this scenario because she operates within a heteronormative lesbian relationship and is masculine in her demeanor and appearance. Once more, although biopics are invested in historicity, scenes located in roller rinks give licensing for a ‘queering’ of real time.

The opening line of the Cars song playing at the Nebraskan roller rink is, “I don’t mind you coming here” which is an interesting lyric with which to begin this dire film. The roller rink is the only space in the film where Brandon Teena is able to flirt freely with young women; within the confines of this building the rules found in normative time and spaces do not apply.

3.6 Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter we have looked at the very specific theme of roller skating in film. More directly, this chapter has worked to understand how representations of roller skating and the rink are markers for the time and space of the narrative. For instance, roller skates authenticate period films set in the 1970s, whereas the rink can represent the

Seventies, the Great Depression-era, or, when outside of these two moments, be reflective of the cultural stagnancy of a particular space, as is the case in *Boys Don't Cry* and *Monster*.

The cinematic roller rink is akin to the Hollywood musical inasmuch as it is ensconced in music, and insofar as the music and movement on the roller rink work as agents of the film's narrative. More than that, actors in these roller skating films, like the actors in Hollywood musicals, are marked as 'authentic' musical bodies. The fact that popular hip hop and rap artists, as well as dancers and singers, portray the protagonists in films such as *Roll Bounce*, *ATL* and *Xanadu* has much to do with the ways in which they culturally represent music. The third aspect that links roller skating films to the film musical is the extent to which both genres, while critically derided, have long been well-liked by film audiences.

With its soundtrack, the roller skating film also fits within the category of the Jukebox nostalgia film since it uses popular music to evoke nostalgic reactions from both the diegetic roller skaters and the audience watching the film. In many ways, the soundtrack of the cinematic roller rink is a literal representation of the soundtrack found at 'real' skating rinks, as we discussed in Chapter Two. While it may be considered a banal site for filmic action, the cinematic roller rink actually works to negotiate and authenticate the time and space of the filmic narrative. In so doing, it also redefines gender, racial and class codes within the space of the roller rink. This notion of the roller rink as a quasi-utopic space for marginalized identities is one that would be interesting to explore in further research.

Chapter Four: Conclusion

This project explored the history and representation of roller skate music as a means of understanding the unique relationship of roller skating and music and their capacity to invoke nostalgia and the past within popular culture. With a particular focus on the 20th century roller skating fads of the Golden Age (1926-1954) and Roller Disco (1977-1983), we have unpacked the history of roller skate music and its mediation of movement, both on the rink and within, the larger context of popular culture. The popularity of roller skating during those two specific eras is the result of a symbiotic relationship between rink music and movement. That is to say, if the music and sound technologies were repetitious, and included some form of circular movement mirroring the movement of the roller skating and the rink, then the pastime was popular. The moving cylinders within a pipe organ, playing repetitious waltz music, helped roller skating to achieve its popularity during the so-called Golden Age of roller skating. Similarly, the music of roller disco in the 1970s, with its spinning vinyl records and repetitious beats, brought about a new rise in interest in roller skating.

Despite the common perception that roller skating is dead, this project has pointed to a variety of representations that show how its existence remains in contemporary mediascapes. Indeed, the belief that roller skating is a dead or residual culture has been central to its identity and its lifecycle, inasmuch as it has been regarded as passé for more than a century. In fact, the only moment in which roller skating held an emergent cultural status was during the Industrial Revolution. By the turn of the 20th century, roller skating had faded into the cultural abyss; it was not until ‘talkies’ were created that movie theatres had to sell their pipe organ sound systems, and roller rinks became the inevitable

resting place for these residual sound technologies. We might go so far as to suggest that this organ transplant gave roller skating a new lease on life. Subsequently, it seemed that it was the ontology of rock and roll, with its ethos of anti-authority and differential rhythmic patterning that sent roller skating back into another cultural void. In actuality, African American roller skating rinks retrieved roller skating from complete culture obsolescence because the music that was found at these rinks ‘worked’ with the roller rink music paradigm. With R&B, and then eventually, disco, roller skating and its rinks would see another revival in mainstream culture in the late 1970s.

The reoccurring imagery of roller skates and roller rinks in film suggests that there is something at stake in studying these objects. And, as we explored in Chapter Three, cinematic representations remains a constant for roller skating. The roller skate is now symbolic of the Seventies, and works as an agent of historicity in a film’s narrative. Examples of these types of films include, but are not limited to, *Boogie Nights*, *Austin Powers*, *Semi-Pro* and *Dick*. Interestingly films produced in the 1980s used roller skates and roller rinks to authenticate a different past – the Great Depression. Films such as *Radio Days* and *Racing With the Moon* use roller skating to represent the past as well; however, it is questionable whether contemporary films would use roller skating to represent an authentic Depression-era past since our collective cultural memory likens roller skating to the 1970s.

The cinematic roller rink, with its pervasive soundtrack, has taken up a place within the genre of the Hollywood musical. This is to suggest that roller rinks in film use rink music to progress narratives as well as to invoke nostalgic memories for the on-screen roller skaters, and for the audience viewing the film. The roller rink soundtrack

works as a means of directing time and space with a narrative inasmuch as the music can either demonstrate a city's 'newness' like Venice Beach's *Roller Boogie* and *Xanadu* where the music was so new it had never been heard by audiences before, whereas the 'retro' songs played at the roller rinks in *Boys Don't Cry* and *Monster* showcase cultural stagnancy.

Representations of roller rinks and roller skating in film, akin to their real-world counterparts, are expressive of a past, whether real or imagined. Roller rink music is the mediating agent for inciting the past, because of music's ability to help us recall memories and nostalgia, as well as the fact that residual sound technology is embedded into these cultural spaces. This project has explored how roller skating and its rinks are unique cultural sites because of their extensive residual cultural status and intrinsic relationship with music.



Fig. 1 Xtreme Right Guard Deodorant,
International Print Campaign, 2006



Fig. 2 Still from music video. “Sorry” Madonna. 2006. Warner Bros.



Fig. 3 Still from music video, “A Public Affair” 2006, Epic Records.



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Fig. 4 “Kebekelelektrik Advertisement” in *Le Disco*. Quebec, Canada: G&D Canadian Record Pool Publication, 1977: 20.



Fig. 5 *The Roller Skating Song Craze* music by Charles E. Wellinger, 1907.

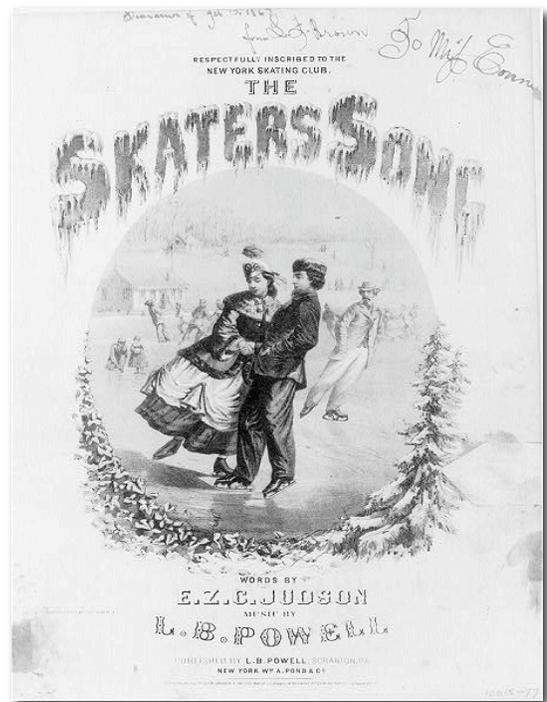


Fig. 6 *The Skater's Song*, music by L.B. Powell, 1864. Cited in Luna Lambert "The American Skating Mania," *Journal of American Culture*. 1.4 (Winter 1978): 688.

Notes

- ¹ Tom Cuthbertson. *Anybody's Roller Skating Book*. New York: Bantam Books, 1979: xi.
- ² Victoria Ann Phillips, *The Complete Roller Skating Book*, 15-16
- ³ This introductory story is a fictionalized account of the final days of the Galaxy Skateland based upon dozens of "true" accounts posted on the Galaxy Skateland Facebook page as well as the website dedicated to memorializing the rink.
- ⁴ Personal correspondence with former Galaxy Skateland manager Joe Lockhart, 13 August 2008. Lockhart says he has considered Galaxy Skateland his second home since 1975.
- ⁵ CBC News. "Historic Roller-skating Rink Prepares for Final Lap." *CBC.ca* 20 June 2008.
- ⁶ In Samantha Critchell, Critchell, Samantha. "Roller Redux; The Wheels of Fashion Spin Back to Roller Disco Days," *Associated Press* published in *Telegraph-Journal*. Saint John, NB: 23 June, 2007: G1. <<http://fredericksburg.com/News/FLS/2007/062007/06252007/293491>> .
- ⁷ Andrew Gans, "Xanadu Will Now Close Sept. 28," in *Playbill.com*. 16 May 2008. <<http://www.playbill.com/news/article/121628.html>>.
- ⁸ Morris Traub, *Roller Skating Through the Years*. New York: William Frederick Press, 1944: 70.
- ⁹ *Roller Skating Rink: IEA Business Manual No. 90*. Santa Monica, CA: International Entrepreneurs Association, 1978: 2
- ¹⁰ Roller Skater Gazette <<http://www.rollerskatersgazette.com/organist.htm>>
- ¹¹ Horowitz, and "A Rosy Picture for Roller Rinks" (August 11 1979)
- ¹² Morris Traub, *Roller Skating Through the Years*. New York: William Frederick Press, 1944: 47.
- ¹³ *Xanadu* DVD
- ¹⁴ Michael Beck, *Internet Movie Database*. <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0065235/bio>>.

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