A Transgressive way to Play! Skateboarding and the Oblique

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This research highlights the overlaps between Paul Virilio and Claude Parent's theories and the evolution of Skateboarding. Discovering their ideas embodied in skateboarding and skateparks, presents a playful new way of reading their work while recognizing the impact of this activity in society. The recognition of the potential of the relation between the body and the forces at play are exhibited as a transgressive way to design, questioning our static everyday life spaces and the way we inhabit them.

> "A child sometimes is a product of his "environment. And sometime a child's "environment" is a product of him"
>
> ——*Mark Gonzales (skateboard legend), Untitled poem, 1999 (marker on paper). Beautiful Losers*

As architects, we think of gravity when designing a wall, a floor or a roof, looking at it as an issue of materiality and structure. In 1964, the French architect Claude Parent and the theorist Paul Virilio introduced the theory of the Oblique Function, creating an environment built on a continuous surface where floor, wall and roof became one.

By transgressing the relation of the vertical and the horizontal in architecture Claude Parent and Paul Virilio depicted a new condition for the body in relation to gravity and the forces at play. Studying slopes and inclination in the research of a continuous surface, the oblique engages the human body and its dynamic condition as exposed in Claude Parent's diagram of "potential charge".

In the essay Habitable Circulation,[1] Paul Virilio draws a range of planes that exist between the horizontal and the vertical, categorizing slopes. In doing so, he presents the limits of human adhesion, as well as highlighting the domain of artificial means of adherence. In the early 1970's, Frank Nasworthy and his invention of the polyurethane wheel, will completely revolutionized the surfaces of Dogtown, a dirty and filthy paradise area in Venice, California as Skip Engblom states.[2]

Simultaneously with the theories of Parent and Virilio, a new playground was being constructed by teenagers on the streets. Without realizing it, skateboarders were inhabiting and producing the oblique, challenging the normative of what was possible on the ground. With this body engine moving-surface (skateboard) they were defying the laws of physics and creating their own playgrounds and environments.

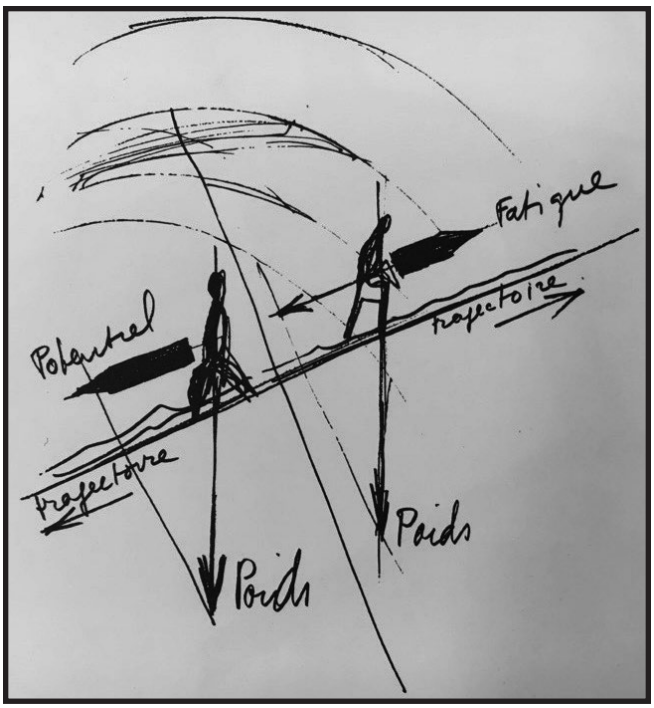

Figure 1: Potential Charge diagram by Claude Parent (in) Claude Parent's Essay Structure, Architecture Principe 1966 et 1996 (Paul Virilio & Claude Parent, 1996)

TRANSGRESSIVE PLAY AND THE SUPER-ARCHITECTURAL SPACE

When reading the Production of Space by Henri Lefebvre, Ian Borden[3] highlights the power of a transgressive attitude present in skateboarding and their relation to space, the city and design. The recognition of a Super-Architectural Space represented by skateboarders brings up the role of the normative and how can a transgressive attitude help to the creation of an environment that embraces heterogeneity.

> [As Lefebvre notes, spatial practices and representation of space are "in thrall to both knowledge and power", so leaving "only the narrowest leeway" to spaces of representation. But as he also notes, it is through revolt against normative spaces of representation that there is the "prospect of recovering the world of differences – the natural, the sensory/sensual, sexuality and pleasure".
>
> —Ian Borden, Skateboarding Space and the City

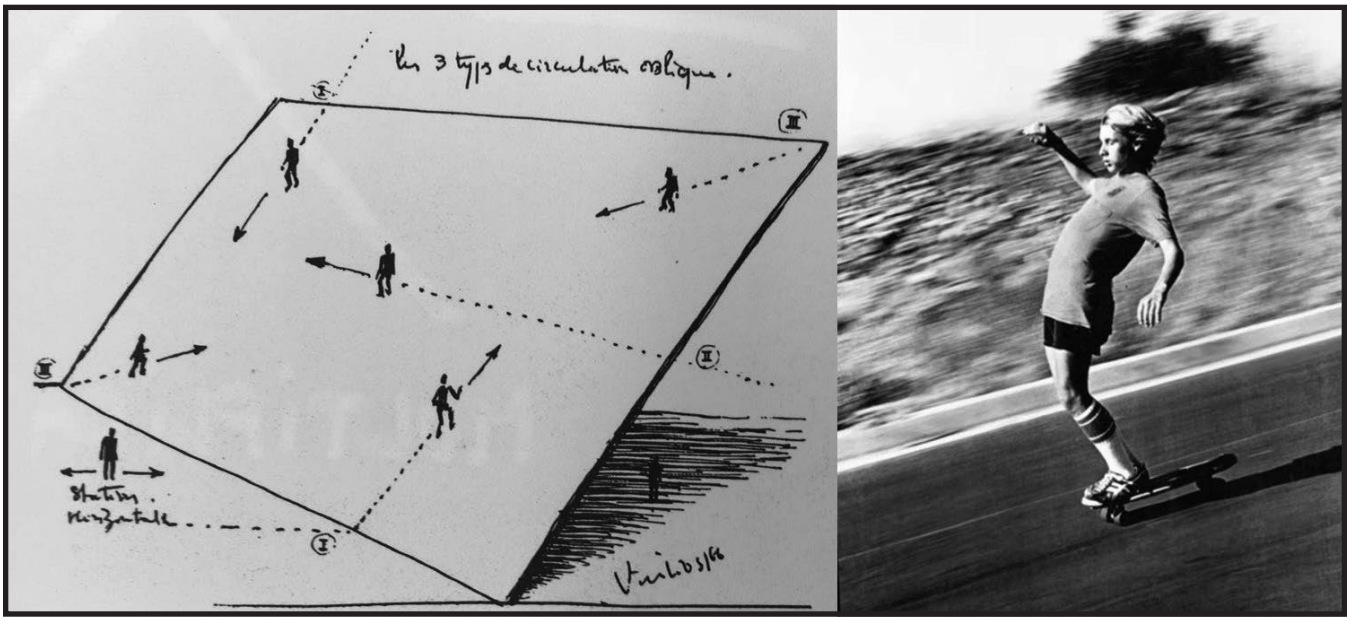

Figure 2: Skateboarding and the Oblique. Paul Virilio's diagram "Les 3 types de circulation oblique" and skateboard legend Jay Adams going downhill 1975. (in) Circulation Habitable, Architecture Principe 1966 et 1996 (Paul Virilio & Claude Parent, 1996). Photograph by Kent Sherwood (Jay's step father).

Skateboarding was born sometime in the 1950s,[4] when surfers in California wanted something to do when the waves were flat. This was called "sidewalk surfing" - a new mode of surfing on the sidewalk as the sport became highly popular. Nonetheless it wasn't until mid-1970's and the transgressive attitude of young skateboarders like Jay Adams, age fourteen at the time, and others like Tony Alva, Stacey Peralta and the Zephyr team (6), that skateboarding broke its constraints of a scaled version of surfing becoming its own paradigm. The invention of the polyurethane wheel combined with the attitude of teenagers that were constantly testing boundaries and finding their place in society, were key elements to the development of skateboarding as we know it today. This we could say is not a surprise for Lefebvre who clearly states how children (teenagers) have a unique opportunity to embrace heterogeneity.

> "Perhaps young children can live in a space of this kind, with its indifference to age sex (and even to time itself) (…)"
>
> —Henri Lefebvre, The Production of Space (1974)

During the 50's and 60's society and its outcome was also questioned, the collapse that meant the two world wars, opened a variety of discussions where of course architecture was not alien to. Modernism was reconstructing society, empowering speed and production as part of our daily routines. Architects and theorist, such as Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, were born and raised in this climate of war and uncertainty, developing a critical position towards the models that modernism was constructing. They studied the normative that restrained architecture and society promoting a new urban order that challenged boundaries and distances. A new environment that transgresses architecture's frame of the horizontal and the vertical presenting the oblique function as a new model for inhabitation.

While doing so they understood that the body in this new environment will deal with a new experience in relation to the forces at play. The oblique and its inspiration on what could have been the playground for many post war children and teenagers in Europe[5] challenged our everyday life spaces, highlighting what at that time was taken for granted in the totalitarian modern project, the existence of a sloped space in which the body will experience and acknowledge because of gravity, potential and fatigue.

Meanwhile in California teenagers where occupying and trespassing spaces in different new forms transgressing not only the laws of physics but also the program of a space, contrasting the privacy exhibit in the paintings of David Hockney's pool with the public events that took place in backyard pools at the time, because of droughts.

Looking at the different transgressions of skateboarding and the oblique we can recognize that both have a strong dynamic relation between the body and gravity. Raising the question of what other forces at play are we not acknowledging or taking for granted today, because of norms and social contracts, in our spaces and daily routines. Even though at this point the formal relationship of Skateboarding and the Oblique can be assumed, we will expand on this, looking at some of the theories exposed in the book "Architecture Principe 1966 et

Figure 3: Kid playing on a bunker at Point du Hoc, Normandie, France. "Touring Normandy Beaches With Kids – What We Learned" August 22, 2016 by SHANA. themomedit.com

1996" by Claude Parent and Paul Virilio, exposing their work and overlapping it with the history of skateboarding looking for a new frontier for the oblique in the 21st century.

SKATEBOARDING AND THE OBLIQUE

> "Architecture must never be neutral or indeterminate. It must be active, the body in the architecture must be constantly concerned to participate in an action or a show".
>
> ——Claude Parent, Architecture Principe

In the book "Architecture Principe" Claude Parent refers to the idea of "Dominate the site" pointing out the importance of the body and experiences to the construction of a place. In Skateboarding this is a key element when performing. Skateboarders are extremely conscious and in control of the relation between their center of mass (body) and their moving base of support (skateboard) to keep balance and create a fluid motion that will show that they "dominate the spot", referring to the physical space and their bodies at the same time.

This first overlap shows the importance of movement to feel present and how architecture and the built environment have a crucial role on this issue. Everyday life spaces today can be questioned through this parameter, presenting an interesting element to be consider in the design of spaces today or in the future.

> "And we are therefore faced with the imperious need to accept as a historical fact, the end of the vertical as axis of elevation, the end of the horizontal as a permanent plane, this to the benefit of the oblique axis and inclined plane who realize all the conditions necessary for the creation of a new urban order and which also allow a total reinvention of the architectural vocabulary. (…) This changeover must be understood for what it is: the third spatial possibility of architecture".
>
> —Paul Virilio, The Oblique Function Architecture Principe

The inhabitation of an inclined plane through a board with polyurethane wheels, started to change skateboarding, gaining momentum and speed while performing different movements on the ground. This revolution sparked[6] mainly by teenagers like those of the Zephyr team created in 1975. Their variety of individual styles and control changed skateboarding creating their own culture distant from surfing. This shift is something which Paul Virilio exposes in the Oblique Function, transgressing the normative of vertical and horizontal, recognizing a new frontier for architecture.

This new frontier for architecture expresses a space where the forces at play are activated for the body to understand a new relation to the space it inhabits. As coincidental as it sounds Claude Parent refers in this book to the concept of "waves", which to early skateboarders was always present in their minds. To Parent waves are "weaving the fields of forces, weightlessness control." The space exposed by Parent can be physically understood by a surfer or a skateboarder, where the existence of a wave or a wave-like space is imprinted in their tacit knowledge.

> "There are weaving the fields of forces, weightlessness control. Men (humans) walk naturally on the curved surface and dive under the overhang of the overhang. In the fault, suspended, without weight, they move at will."
>
> —Claude Parent, Architecture Principe

Habitable Circulation and the body in skateboarding

On this research we have expose how skaters inhabit circulation, experimenting speed and potential as a new modern condition to the body. By controlling their balance skateboarders can inhabit, design and even built the space thought by Parent and Virilio, physicalizing their theories without realizing it. By using a space where circulation is habitable, they have neutralized the horizontal plane through animation and movement.

> "The introduction of VECTORS of tiredness (rising) and euphoria (descent) are the primary effects that combat neutrality and give direction to the occupation of a place. (…) The oblique function forces the man to be consciously participatory by integrating a specific potential charge of each individual, exalting his autonomy"
>
> —Claude Parent, Architecture Principe

Figure 3: Dogtown and Z-Boys Movie Still Skateboarding in the Pool, copyright. Sony Classics/Syndicated by: Sony Pictures Classics

The contraposition of rising and descent that Claude Parent explains relates directly to skateboarding, especially on their 80's form. Where pools and ramps became the place of recreation for millions of kids around the globe. The uprising of "vert skateboarding", as a response to stop the continuous trespassing of private property to skate empty pools, made skateboarders play with these vectors, controlling the structure explained by Parent to create momentum and challenge even more the possibilities of the activity at that time.

Skateparks and the Useful Surface

> "Realizing inside the house a generalized mobility, the oblique will transform the old cell which was in fact only a micro-ghetto, into a real landscape interior that we will travel freely. (…) As well as the partition, by bowing, the piece of furniture, until now object of decor, will become in turn useful surface, bearing its particular quality to the touch of the ground."
>
> ——Paul Virilio, Architecture Principe

In skateboarding the body redefines the discontinuity of the horizontal and the vertical, creating a continuous new surface. This concept has been strongly developed in the design of skateparks, where slopes, curves and other geometries work together to help skateboarders gain momentum to better perform their tricks.

In the early 1990's skateboarding was mainstream and commercial once more, the stunts performed on vert ramps and the broadcasting of skateboarding events through television, create an important industry associated to the activity. As a reaction to this and because of its rebellious attitude, skateboarding went underground once more during that period, developing a new concept. Street skateboarding was born as a new transgressive frontier for skaters bringing the movements back into the city, braking the constrains and normative of the stunning vert ramp.

This new terrain for skateboarders unfolded the whole urban context as a new site for skateboarding, exploding on different places of the world, taking over sidewalks, stairs, ledges and even fire hydrants if necessary.[7] This explosion became again a problem for the authorities, a transgressive use of a normed public space was questioning the design of architects and urban planners all around the world.

A clear example of this is the history of The John F. Kennedy Plaza (a.k.a Love Park) in Philadelphia, completed in 1965, designed by local City Planner Edmund Bacon and architect Vincent G. Kling, represented the dreams of the city to

become modern. With big concrete areas along with smooth benches and various types of stairs, this space turned into a skateboarding mecca since the 1980's with a worldwide recognition. Skateboarders became part of the landscape of the plaza, taking skateboarding one step further every day, offering many challenges to professional and non-professional practitioners of this activity. This not being the aspiration of the authorities for the space, the city redesigned the park in 2002 to eradicate skateboarders from the Plaza.[8]

As a reaction to this event, a new space was constructed in the city, a "handmade" skatepark "by and for" skateboarders that continues to grow under the I-95 in the southern peripheries of Philadelphia. FDR skatepark, built and designed by skateboarders, clearly physicalizes the idea of a useful surface of Paul Virilio, constructing a continuous space improving the experience of the fluidity and speed of the activity, helping the body transgress the forces at play.

> "The oblique is the support of spatial continuity. It is continuous. Its development allows partition without opposing displacement. As a structural support, the oblique is associated with any movement of fluids generated by human or nature. (…) The inclined precedes the human fluidity of the future, based on autonomous human flight. It is gesture of connection with space."
>
> —Claude Parent, Architecture Principe

This understanding of the inclined, reinforce the idea of skateboarding as a new modern condition for the body and through this research we have been relating its evolution as an unconscious unfolding of the ideas of Claude Parent and Paul Virilio. Nonetheless during the last evolution of skateboarding a very peculiar movement made possible for skaters to build a continuity where the horizontal found discontinuity.

> "The recovery Threshold is a horizontal architectonic element linking two inclined courses. At the limit, the recovery threshold can become a much more theoretical and more open element on the future because, in the hypothesis where the man remains subjected to the gravitation it occurs in the continuity of the crawling spaces (bends or curves), a hiatus, a pause, at the moment of the overthrow."
>
> —Claude Parent, Architecture Principe

The ollie, a way of jumping and steering the board in the air, opened a new aesthetic to this activity at the same time as it helped skateboarding create a new space that connected the aerial experience of the vert ramps with what they could do on flat surfaces. Skateboarding became again a mainstream activity, looking on ways on how to jump higher, go faster and discover new ways to define itself, challenging its subjection to gravity.

Figure 5: SLO Skatepark Highline built in 2015 by Wormhoudt Inc. in San Luis Obispo, California and Claude Parent's sketch of fluid space. (in) Fluidite, Architecture Principe 1966 et 1996 (Paul Virilio & Claude Parent, 1996).

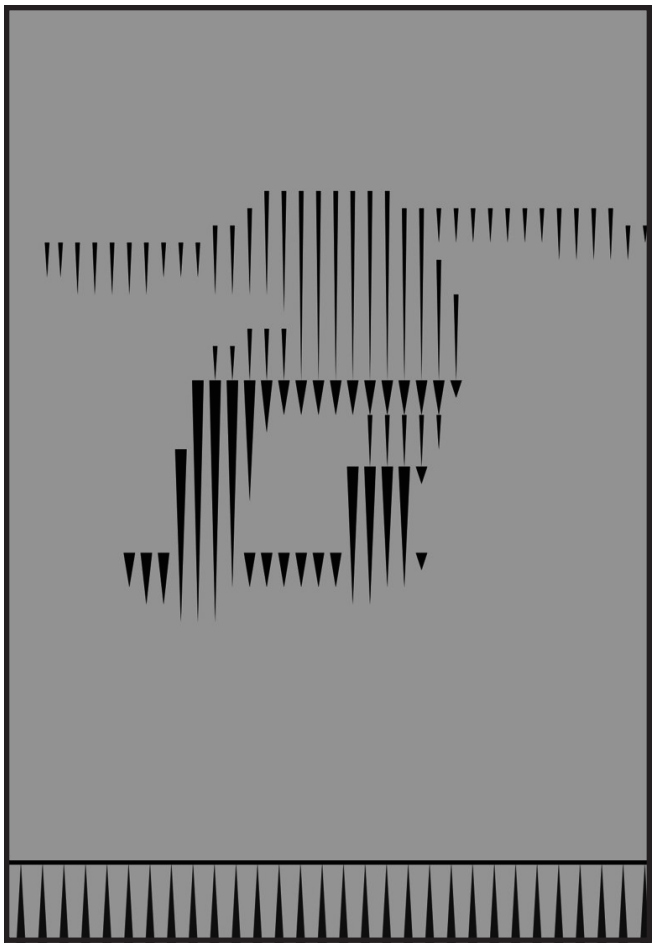

Figure 6: Ollie between gravitational and normal forces. Fragment of an ollie sequence from the project Haptic Skateboarding, from surface to volume"Author: Jose Luis Mateluna.Copyright .

> "The recovery Threshold is a horizontal architectonic element linking two inclined courses. At the limit, the recovery threshold can become a much more theoretical and more open element on the future because, in the hypothesis where the man remains subjected to the gravitation it occurs in the continuity of the crawling spaces (bends or curves), a hiatus, a pause, at the moment of the overthrow."
>
> –Claude Parent, Architecture Principe

Finally, the concept of a recovery threshold can be easily found in skateparks and other skate spots, helping to create more momentum and/or to project skaters in the air as we can see in the design of different ramps and surfaces. The continuity of the movement separated from the surface is a clear example of the use of the forces at play to transgress the norms of what is possible for the human body, defying gravity with the help of the oblique.

NEW FRONTIERS FOR THE OBLIQUE.

FFrom birth, our bodies become the medium to interact with reality; while our senses develop, we also shape ourselves. When reading Donald W. Winicott's book "Playing and Reality" we can clearly see that when we are born the smallest stimulus can shape our interaction with the world, we are constantly testing our environment and role in society through our body and gestures, constructing an understanding of the world and so defining how to operate in it.

Through this research we have seen overlaps between two transgressive ways of design, the theoretical ideas of Paul Virilio and Claude Parent and the practical activity of skateboarding. These overlaps expose a continuous questioning of the normative in design, challenging the discipline while looking for new frontiers. The reading of the Oblique through the eyes of skateboarders, not only shows the embodiment of Virilio and Parent's ideas on this activity. But also, the interaction between the body and gravity in a fluid dynamic continuous space, presenting a new frontier for the oblique, activating our senses through a more haptic communication.

> "A cockroach knows how to use a house better than we do"
>
> –Shusaku Arakawa, ArtNews May 1980 issue

The concept of a haptic Architecture is not new in the discipline. To Shusaku Arakawa and Madeleine Gins the quest for dynamic surfaces to inhabit is clear. When Arakawa looks at a cockroach, he clearly states that us humans are still framed to only occupy the floor as long as gravity is not challenged. The possibility of looking to an architecture beyond the horizontal and the vertical opens the possibility of augmenting the experience of our static everyday spaces. Perhaps this is possible on a non-gravitational space or through a new understanding of occupying it. To occupy could be more than just fill in a space. As explained by Parent, Virilio and Skateboarders, occupying a space is also about movement and animation, activating our senses and transgressing what we think is a restriction and turn it into potential.

I see a new frontier for the Oblique in relation to the forces at play. We can see how the use of the inclined plane and its interaction with gravity can challenge the way we see the world today, where routines and domesticity have made our everyday life spaces static. To this Claude Parent presents the idea of braking the surface, as the new frontier for the oblique, creating a new space where we will stop to crawl on surfaces and finally be in control of gravity instead of being framed by it.

This opens the question of which other forces at play are we taking for granted, where are we restricted by these forces and how architecture is defying our relationship with them

to construct a new order. If we agree that the construction of an individual is never ended and is highly influenced by each one's interaction with the outside world, we can see in Skateboarding and in the Oblique the idea of discovery and freedom, while the body is challenged by the environments that these two create. This invitation to discover as an individual the experience of a space presents an opportunity to recover heterogeneity in a world where the experience in the built environment tends to be homogeneous.

Transgressing the normative of movement to play with the fundamental forces, skateboarding challenges the variables that we use to design a space, where speed and time can be design to a new body scaled distance and space. The interaction between the body and gravity in a fluid dynamic continuous space, plays and challenges our relationship with the built environment working in harmony to create a spectacle. The recognition of the relationship of the body and the forces at play becomes a new transgressive frontier for the Oblique. To reposition the work of Parent and Virilio, by adding a haptic and tacit reading to it, is an opportunity to rethink what other normative forces are there for Architecture to transgress.

ENDNOTES

1. *Architecture Principe: 1966 and 1996*. Paul Virilio-Claude Parent-Paul Virilio-Paul Virilio-Claude Parent-Claude Parent - Éditions De L'imprimeur - 1997.
2. Skip Engblom is the Co-Founder of Jeff Ho Surfboards and Zephyr Productions in Santa Monica, California. Engblom helped create the Zephyr Team.
3. Ian Borden is currently Vice-Dean Education at The Bartlett, University College London (UCL), and Professor of Architecture and Urban Culture. Author of the book Skateboarding Space and the City published in 2001.
4. *The Evolution Of Skateboarding – A History From Sidewalk Surfing To Superstardom*. Skateboardingmagazine.com.
5. *Bunker Archeology*, Paul Virilio, 1975.
6. On the trailer of the documentary Dogtown and Z-Boys by Stacey Peralta and Craig Stecyk, Tony Hawk refers to the Zephyr team as those who sparked the revolution.
7. Look at skateboarder Natas Kaupas and his contribution to the world of street skateboarding.
8. Beautiful losers: on the occasion of the exhibition "Beautiful Losers: Contemporary Art and Street Culture" ... Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati, Lois Richard Rosenthal Center for Contemporary Art, Cincinnati, Ohio, March 13 - May 23, 2004, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, July 17 - October 3, 2004, Orange County Museum of Art, Newport Beach, February 5 - May 8, 2005. Iconoclast - 2010.