

# Knowing Obstacles: Urban Dialogues in Parkour Practice

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## Abstract

This paper inquires into the newly emergent urban discipline of parkour and its participants (*traceurs*). Addressing the spectacular depictions of the discipline, the work seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of the multi-layered global phenomena and assert the highly formalized and structured composition of parkour practice. The author relies upon theoretical framing and his own ethnographic accounts to present the underlying structures that have helped disseminate parkour and form a global community of traceurs. By engaging the vehicles of parkour transmission, learning processes and place making activities the paper also seeks to posit a dialectical relationship between the built environment and individual actors as creative partners in the everyday practice of the parkour discipline.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: URBAN DIALOGUES

Le Parkour is a physical discipline that teaches its adherents to find new courses of movement through the urban environment. Usually anglicized as simply 'parkour', the practice has also come to be known as 'freerunning'.<sup>1</sup> Parkour is a combination of movements often strung across seemingly mundane urban configurations that draws upon physical traditions within martial arts and military training in order to innovate urban perambulation.<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon has given rise to a viral new youth subculture and it is spreading quickly across the globe. On the surface, practitioners of parkour called *traceurs* (male) or *traceuse* (female), reinterpret the constraints of the built environment by 'tracing' alternative paths through the city in pursuit of what traceurs call *l'art du déplacement* (the art of movement). Although in appearance parkour can be seen as a conglomeration of several well-established methods of physical training, parkour in its present (global) form emerged recently in the Parisian suburb of Lisses in the late 1980s, and early 1990s co-developed David Belle<sup>3</sup> and Sebastian Foucan.

In parkour, courses of movement perpendicular to the physical features of the street are common. For example, a direct course from point A to point B may be apparently hindered by several obstacles; the traceur however is trained not only physically in *l'art du déplacement*, he is also trained mentally. He sees no obstacles, only sources of 'nourishment'; physical impediments through the holistic practice of

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<sup>1</sup> Freerunning is a term considered more media friendly and accessible than parkour although the two terms are often used interchangeably. As evidenced most recently by the emergence of the joint World Freerunning and Parkour Federation (WFPPF). Nevertheless, Freerunning is seen by some to be a more stylized and 'less efficient' version of parkour.

<sup>2</sup> In particular, I refer to Georges Hébert's *Méthode Naturelle* a discipline that became a standard physical training for the French military and civil firefighters.

<sup>3</sup> Belle, now 37 years old, continues to dominate much of the global culture surrounding parkour, but has been eclipsed by younger traceurs.

parkour are transformed into points of decision and creative negotiation with the built environment: a barrier wall becomes a jumping off point leading to a railing that is now a balance beam. So the traceur moves along, overcoming obstacles and thriving on the reproduction of meaningful space (de Certeau: 1984). The holistic practice of parkour requires discipline, both in training and mental outlook. Parkour is a discipline. Through examining its modes of transmission and practice I will situate it as such, providing an antipode to the popular media conception of parkour and in doing so I will illustrate its content.

In this study, I introduce some aspects of the current global culture as disseminated through the Internet and other media sources. These high-profile expressions of the practice relate to the various iterations of the parkour meta-narrative, commercialization efforts and the forums of its global dissemination. I will relate these sources of information to my case study of traceurs in Budapest. As a participant observer of the traceurs in Budapest, I was given insight into what cannot be understood through textual analysis alone. By learning as the traceurs learn, I was in a position to understand the performed and practiced result of parkour transmission, experiencing the cadence of regular parkour training.

Parkour presents us with an outward image of freedom. Freedom from prescriptive environments, routine movement, and the norms of bodily expression is written all over the superficial visage of the traceurs' run. This widely broadcast image is what I refer to as the 'Freedom Spectacle' and it is a compelling one that has extended its influence throughout the world. Recent academic literature has also contributed to Freedom Spectacle by positioning parkour as inherently radical, anti-corporate, and even anarchic (Atkinson 2009:182; Daskalaki: 2008:56). However, the Freedom Spectacle is conflated and has come to represent a side of parkour that

stands apart from day-to-day training. The seamless acrobatic stunts presented in the media and commercial manifestations of parkour serve to obfuscate the discipline's continuous dialogue with the city. Largely composed of regimented techniques, parkour must be learned through constant repetition. It is a discipline that depends on structure and although creativity is required, radicalism is not.

I have found that the structured aspects of parkour practice have facilitated its global reach and appeal. In parkour Freedom and Structure go hand in hand. To the outsider only the Freedom Spectacle is immediately visible and to the tracer Freedom and Structure become inseparable. In this way, the parkour discipline is a structure with the capacity to liberate its adherents from the role of passive urban 'consumers' and allows them the opportunity to enter into dialogue with the city. Even in the most mundane and alienating circumstances of the urban environment the traceur forms a dialectic relationship between his body and the static obstacles of the built environment (Daskalaki 2008:58). This relationship, or dialogue, underscores the real significance of parkour practice. Urban dialogues in parkour practice are often performed in a quiet, unspectacular fashion, motivated in part by the embedded meta-narrative that transmits alongside the physical movements of the discipline.

I have presented a superficial illustration of parkour, its form and apparent objectives, but my initial description only scratches the surface of the discipline in practice. Researching parkour, it is almost impossible not to be confronted with statements such as "Parkour is life!" or other exclamations that indicate a level of lifestyle association (Saville 2008:903). This mantra is repeated all over the world, In Rio de Janeiro as in New York City I have come across this same message. It is also recited in Budapest. Some distinction then must be made for the way parkour is elevated beyond the category of 'sport' and so called 'leisure activities'. Unlike most

sports, parkour requires no equipment other than a pair of suitable shoes.<sup>4</sup> There are no standardized courts or arenas in parkour and traceurs readily use vague terms like ‘art form’, or ‘a way of being’ to categorize their practice. In these regards, parkour can be readily compared to the martial arts, an equation that strikes a resonate chord of my own sensibilities, but does not adequately address the contextual and specifically *urban* context of parkour practice that is in many ways at the very core of the discipline.

In parkour the same moves are practiced over and over again they are refined, combined with others and then fluidly strung together. These strings of movements form paths across the city referencing the etymology of the term parkour from the French verb *parcourir* (to travel or cover ground). In practice, the traceur is moving from one point to another in a very creative atypical fashion, but below the immediate spectacle of freedom he is embodying a performed philosophy. It is a philosophy that espouses the ability to look at obstacles both physical and mental as sources of ‘nourishment’ and not as constraints.

That the actions of the traceur are in fact rehearsed, transmitted, emulated across the world with methodical and devotional care indicates the depth of the meta-narrative that is transmitted alongside the discipline. In the meta-narrative can be found the makings of the cultural ‘tool kit’ that enables the dissemination of parkour so efficiently (Swidler:1986). Here, I refer to principally to Atkinson in his ethnographic account of a group of traceurs in Toronto, as he goes about the recitation of many of the key aspects of the dominant parkour meta-narrative as part of his research (2009:171-173). In online forums and the emerging academic literature, the meta-narrative is generally accepted at face value: as the emerging

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<sup>4</sup> Some may see even ‘suitable shoes’ as unnecessary. Barefoot training has been advocated by leading traceurs such as David Belle.

history and philosophy of the discipline. For my purposes, I draw upon parts of the meta-narrative to help situate and explain certain aspects of parkour as it pertains to my fieldwork, but do so explicitly in order to avoid the reiteration of an already multi-layered narrative.

In this meta-narrative David Belle and Sebastian Foucan are the originators who created parkour in the 'restrictive' high modernist Parisian suburb of Lisses. This suburban neighborhood contains mostly residential developments that have been described by Daskalaki as "among the most alienating and dehumanizing urban clusters in the world" (2008:55). The 'creators' of parkour would go on to bifurcate the discipline; each in his own image. Foucan distinguished his style under the separate banner of 'freerunning', while Belle's direction in parkour became decidedly more practical than spectacular –in Belle's words "[in freerunning] you see guys doing flips and completely useless things. [It] is a fanciful extension to what was created, however there's no real useful goal to it."<sup>5</sup> In my fieldwork, I found parkour was simply the dominant term for *l'art du déplacement*. Encompassing some moves considered part of the flashy domain of freerunning, parkour served as an umbrella term that covered many aspects of a complex and layered lifestyle.

When I first discovered Parkour in 2005, I had the feeling that I was encountering physical culture with a type of movement that I had been drawn to for years without even having a name for it. As I have found with many traceurs, the feeling of familiarity with parkour prior to learning about the formalized aspects of the discipline or even the general concept is common. It didn't take long for me to want to know more about what was driving this exciting physical culture forward and I began my researching parkour, as most traceurs do, on the Internet. Online I quickly found

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<sup>5</sup> This quote was accessed at: <http://www.misterparkour.com/faq/>



bits and pieces of a cross-referenced meta-narrative complete with heroes, philosophical underpinnings, famous training grounds, and some early impressions of parkour as a structured and organized discipline.

Thinking particularly about the fields of architecture and urban planning, I was immediately convinced that parkour could inform the design process. Inspired by this idea I went on to design several children's playgrounds. My playground designs featured unspecified elements that could be used in several ways depending upon the size of the user and their intentions. By leaving design elements open to individual interpretation, I wanted to 'set the stage' for play and not write the script. During the design process of the first playground I gratified myself with the thought that such a playground would surely encourage the sort of 'freedom' and creativity that the traceurs seemed to exude in their practice of parkour. In my analysis, I will discuss the trend of parkour responsive architecture. It is a trend that presents its own set of problematic contradictions but has nevertheless contributed to the applicability and transmission of parkour practice, as indicated by my own involvement in the field.

My fieldwork was conducted throughout the months of March, April and May of 2010. During this period, I came to meet and train with approximately half of the 60 traceurs that I have estimated to be active in Budapest. I progressed considerably as a traceur in training during this period, but more importantly my role as a participant observer gave me the opportunity to study a discipline that is transmitted through the rigors of physical training. I was forced to rethink my initial research questions and approach after only a short time in the field. Although the connection between the Freedom Spectacle of parkour and prescriptive social housing developments in Budapest is a convenient one to make, Budapest contains a wide spectrum of

suitable urban settings that are regularly used by the various groups of traceurs in the city, who come from diverse backgrounds. I realized during my second week of regular training that a focus on the environmental situations of parkour in Budapest would be a limiting and likely inconclusive endeavor. Rather, I began to see my research scope expand considerably. Training gave me insights into parkour practice that I see as both locally specific and broadly applicable to my inquiry surrounding the disciplines' creative reinterpretation of the city through structured movement.

Beginning with my second chapter *Structure and Meaning: Parkour Context and Theory* I intend to situate parkour as a discipline of considerable interest to the academic community. The reappropriation of urban space, a theme especially apparent in the budding literature dedicated to the subject, has developed into a trend that in many regards moves parallel to the Freedom Spectacle; contributing to the distorting effect that places parkour practice within the bounds of a rebellious subculture. Examining the structure and embedded meaning of parkour with a theoretical lens I will provide a counter balance to those parallel vectors in parkour perception. In my third and fourth chapters I outline the investigative intentions and methods employed during my fieldwork term moving into an analysis of my research within the chapter entitled: *Tracing the Traceurs*. In that chapter, I relate some of my experiences in the field, situating them among theoretical perspectives and the broader global trends that surround the global parkour culture. I will then move discuss the implications of this study.

## II. STRUCTURE AND MEANING: PARKOUR IN CONTEXT AND THEORY

There exists a small body of published scholarly work related directly to parkour as a subject of urban study, almost all of it published in the past five years. Another incidental and perhaps telling concentration of parkour citations in the literature can be found in medical journals, particularly those dealing with orthopedic trauma cases. Of those examples pertaining to parkour as a new interpretive form of negotiating the urban landscape there are some excellent and articulate examples that I draw upon and add to with this work. Notable examples include a capitalist versus 'subversive' event space analysis (Mould 2009), 'anarcho-environmental' interpretations of the discipline (Atkinson 2009), an exploration of the 'emotional geographies' of parkour (Saville 2008), parkour as a reinterpretation of corporate urban spaces (Daskalaki 2007), and the reinvention of 'material-spatial' restrictions by traceurs (Bavinton 2007). In the past few years there have also been some very interesting unpublished student projects (mainly in design fields) dealing with parkour. However, as a whole the academic establishment is just now taking note of the newly emergent discipline. In adjacent fields of inquiry, such as skateboarding there have been significant contributions. Borden's work on skateboarding (2001) discusses the sport as an embodied practice, an approach that resonates with many attributes of the parkour discipline. Likewise, cycling was explored in by Jones (2005), as a way of 'remaking' the city through performative means. These adjacent inquiries into the 'embodied' and often highly personal nature of urban leisure activities have facilitated the recent outpouring of parkour related studies.

In an effort to situate parkour within urban theory, recent academic literature has tended to attribute radical motivations to the discipline. Both Saville (2008) and Atkinson (2009) discuss parkour in anarchic terms, in effect contributing to

'radicalization' parkour practice and situating it within the bounds of subcultural phenomena. This trend is understandable considering the spectacular depictions made of parkour, but does not reflect the highly structured and deliberate substance of daily practice. Due to a timely confluence of cultural events, parkour has exploded in popularity during the past decade and has become a global phenomenon through its dissemination via the Internet, making the study of its structured composition of immediate relevance.

As sociologists, urban geographers and theorists of the city make increasing contributions to the budding literature on parkour, I have no doubt that the rapidly expanding phenomena will provide researchers with a better understanding of the uses of urban space and come to be seen as an investigative window into the liminal areas of contact where the body meets the city. In developing a theoretical framework to help situate parkour as a highly structured and deliberate 'way of life' I engage the work of a diverse group of theorists with the intention of redeploying their ideas to address the subtle complexities of the parkour discipline. Specifically, de Certeau's *Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) has provided this study with a crucial link between structuralism (Lévi-Strauss) and the post structural thinking (Turner) that has come to influence my own interpretation of the traceurs' uses of space and process of generating personal meaning in the built environment through parkour training.

### *PHYSICAL LANGUAGE AND PERFORMED DIALOGUES*

Lévi-Strauss, in his essay *Language and the Analysis of Social Laws* (1963) notes: "language alone has thus far been studied in a manner which permits it to serve as the object of truly scientific analysis, allowing us to understand its formative

process and predict its mode of change.” The scientific optimism of Lévi-Strauss’ project is further extended to phenomena outside of the realm of language, as he posits the essential question: “Is it possible to effect a similar reduction in the analysis of other forms of social phenomena?” (1963: 58). By exploring the linguistic properties of the limited (and possibly finite) repertoire of Parkour movements, I do not intend to oversimplify the discipline or drive forward the reification of Structuralist theory. Yet, found within the many structured elements of parkour are definite linguistic qualities that in both a literal and conceptual sense have come to facilitate this written effort to analyze parkour. The traceurs’ vocabulary of movements serves as base of common understanding that is used as a means of transmission, but can also be applied to better understand parkour practice and culture. Furthermore, the elaboration of the highly structural composition of parkour goes part way in the larger task of taking up the relational study between the terms of the discipline and the social organization of the Parkour community. In making his case for a scientific extension of the rules of language into other areas of study, Lévi-Strauss brings up the critical point that the measurable *relationships* are more important than purely ‘observed’ or ‘external measurements’. As abstract as they may be, these relationships take priority over the sort of ‘external measurements’ that hard science typically relies upon. Pattern languages composed of relative positions and relative relationships, according to Lévi-Strauss, can be analyzed as systems unto themselves, suggestive of language and open to the same sort of interpretative rules and reformulation.

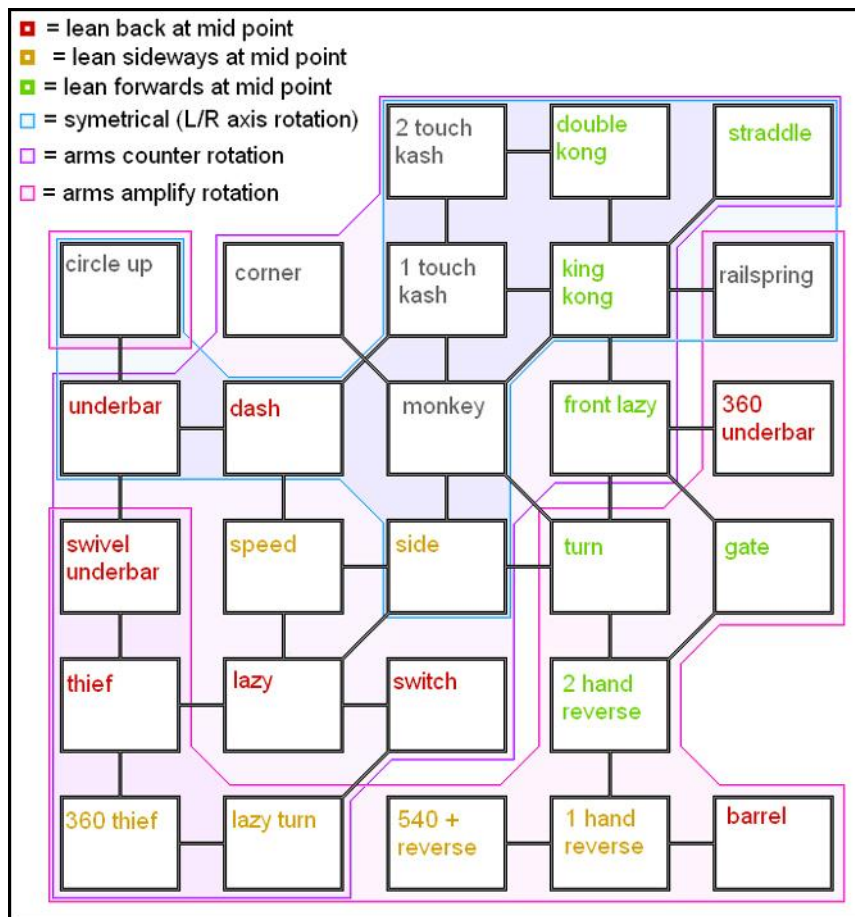
In practice, parkour is a discipline existing within narrow environmental parameters, with a limited repertoire of movement governed by the capacities of our human anatomies. It is the relationships between the actors, principally the traceurs

themselves and the built environment, that defines the content of the urban dialogues I explore in this work. Parkour practice is as structured as the urban landscapes it so conspicuously re-samples and I have found that many traceurs acknowledge these structural elements. As I will show, parkour contains – in contrast to the superficial Freedom Spectacle – a level of institutionalized organization and linguistic execution. My employment of linguistic analysis is not only a guiding metaphor to help understand the structured aspects of Parkour. The ‘language’ of parkour provides a functional framework for understanding its everyday practice and how the traceurs continuously adopt, perform, and disseminate their discipline.

In much the same way that the meta-narrative of parkour contains a structure that is replicated again and again, it can be seen that the structure of the human body and the moves specific to Parkour interface directly with the built environment in a similarly patterned way. The terms used to describe Parkour moves, having originated in the French language, have been largely transmitted in their native tongue, but there is a second tier of terminology that is freely translated into other languages. These are the ‘moves’ of Parkour that are renamed to suit individual cultures. For example, the *Saut de Bras* (Arm Jump) in French is often translated and known within the sphere of English speaking countries as the Cat Leap<sup>6</sup>, however the basic movement remains the same as well as the built contexts in which this jump would be performed.

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<sup>6</sup> See ‘Essential Moves Chart’ in the appendix.



**Fig. 1**  
Vaults and Bodily Movement Relationship Chart <sup>7</sup>

An organizational chart demonstrating the structural relationships between the moves of parkour and they way they are performed can be seen in the vaults chart in Fig. 1. Here are represented a number of common types of vaulting moves in Parkour. This chart is not an exhaustive list of the types of vaults known to traceurs, but it does indicate that there is a definite limit to how the human body can respond to and in this case physically overcome elements within the built environment. Despite the absence of a comprehensive chart displaying *all* the movements in Parkour, I venture that that due to bodily and spatial constraints, there is an upper limit to the ways in which the human body can move through the urban environment – even in the relatively unorthodox style of Parkour. According to my understanding

<sup>7</sup> Accessed at: <http://www.norwich-parkour.co.uk/vaulting.html>

of the highly structural movements of Parkour, such a comprehensive listing of techniques would be feasible and indeed, this has been carried out in many of the martial arts.<sup>8</sup> Extending this line of thought, I have observed that despite the free and spontaneous appearance of Parkour, it is composed of smaller irreducible elements, (what Lévi-Strauss would call the ‘atoms’ of meaning) these elements can be fancifully reconfigured, but remain the basic building blocks of a complex system that is not simply a new urban perambulation, but a way of life—a culture unto itself (1963:48).

Despite the lack of a comprehensive accounting of the entire vocabulary of parkour moves, the movements within the parkour repertoire have been readily organized into categories. There are for example many types of vaults as indicated in Fig. 1. Such efforts to classify the moves are no doubt precursors to more comprehensive attempts. Regardless of these graphic developments in parkour transmission, it is plain to see how in this performed language individual movements serve as the basic ‘words’ and the sentences of parkour are composed of these movements fluidly strung together in order to make new combinations and new courses through the city

Some of these courses however have already been plotted. They are the paths, or as de Certeau referred to them, the *trajectories* that Belle has shown his followers and are sought after and rehearsed in the manner of an incantation. Carefully performed, these path-trajectories are followed in specific sites that are meaningful for traceurs around the world due to the advantageous configurations of built forms that they present and the associative meanings they have developed.

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<sup>8</sup> Here, I refer specifically to Aikido, a martial art that shares many common movements with parkour.



The language of the meta-narrative and the physical moves of the discipline are accompanied by important supporting symbolic sites found mostly in Europe. Among these sites, *Le Dame du Lac* (Fig. 2) is the principal example. It is a climbing structure in Lisses, France that Belle and Focuan used to develop skills in the early days of parkour. This climbing structure, the creation of the Hungarian born sculptor Peter Szekely, is now officially closed to the public for safety reasons, but persists as a widely recognized symbol of globalized Parkour. The iconic form of *Le Dame du Lac* now graces parkour related graffiti around the world and it has become a site of pilgrimage, a Mecca to the young and often globally mobile community of traceurs. In some of the most viewed parkour videos on the Internet, one begins to see a pattern: certain sites, considered ideal for practice or significant to the development of parkour have become shrines to the meta-narrative, visited and engaged by the mobile youth culture that has with remarkable consistency developed a devotional aspect to the discipline.<sup>9</sup> My use of the word 'devotional' here implies the full connotation of a religious practice. In parkour this practice involves the whole body and mind, complete with shrines, paths, and *routes* of pilgrimage. The 'quasi' religious undertones of parkour and what has been called an "obsession" with Buddhism and other eastern philosophies contribute the devotional aspects of parkour discipline (Mould 2008:747). The venerated sites of parkour are in many cases the very same ones that Belle has been filmed at and as one might expect, not only the location is revered, but also the *patterned path* of movement through the site is re-traced by the traceur pilgrim.

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<sup>9</sup> An example of a videos showing a group pilgrimage to *Le Dame du Lac* the parkour "Mekka" can be accessed at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HSAB3zVRLlg&feature=related>



**Fig. 2**

A traceur 'pilgrim' at *Le Dame du Lac*, Lisses, France. Source: Parkour Generations website

The environmental context of parkour practice is heavily laden with imbued meaning. As the above example of devotional sites like *Le Dame du Lac* demonstrates, the built environment has begun to correspond to the meaning of the parkour practice. Certain sites are being recoded in the wake of the traceurs who have passed there. Unlike the visible remnants of other 'misuses' of urban space like graffiti, the remnants of parkour are wrapped up within its meta-narrative and performed practice; they are fleeting, but not undetectable. The relationship between the practice and the environment of parkour begs further questions related to the meaning of this type of spatial production. By framing linguistic analysis of parkour movements in the terms of its practiced context (the urban situations and obstacles) the seemingly novel movements of the traceur can be understood as the initiation of a dialogue. As structural as parkour may be in its formal composition, I must also

address the private meaning the traceur derives from the city through urban dialogues of movement. And so I take up my inquiry within the operative territories of trajectories, tactics and consumption that de Certeau handles so fluidly in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984).

### *BEYOND EVERYDAY LIFE: REWRITING THE CODE OF THE CITY*

As spectators reading the city passively from a great height (as in the example of Manhattan seen from a skyscraper that de Certeau uses), we must remove ourselves from the occurrences below. In de Certeau's words, the urban 'voyeur-god' "must disentangle himself from the murky intertwining daily behaviors and make himself alien to them" (de Certeau 1984:93). Looking down at the city, this 'voyeur-god' derives a pleasure from his separation. From this vantage point he can suspend his understanding of the city, what Charles Taylor calls the 'rules' (Taylor 1993). However, this birds-eye view of the city is only a Cartesian rendering of the world below, what de Certeau calls the "atopia-utopia of optical knowledge" (1984:93). It is the high contrast between voyeuristic consumption methods and the facts-on-the-ground that makes the re-appropriation of the city by traceurs especially relevant as I interpose my own meaning upon the explicit performance that is devotedly enacted by the traceur.

Taking up de Certeau's assertion that "spatial practices in fact secretly structure the determining conditions of social life" (de Certeau 1984:96) I examine parkour practice with a hope of revealing something of the substance of its patterned language. The stated overall project of de Certeau's seminal work on everyday life is the revelation of the systems of operational combination that compose a culture through the actions of its individual operators. Much like my own theoretical project

within my study of parkour, this approach is at once atomistic in search of the general. In order to connect Lévi-Strauss' quest for the scientific with the patterned language of the traceur, I look not only at the syntax of the traceur, but going beyond the scope of de Certeau's project towards the traceur himself, as an individual intent on generating personal meaning through the architectural vectors of mass control mechanisms. The manifest ability of the traceur to reinterpret obstacles in the built environment is informed by de Certeau's concept of tactic, a method employed by the disempowered to gain footing. Tactic, for de Certeau is "an art of the weak" (1984:37). In the scope of this study, it is beneficial to think of the young traceurs' movements in terms of tactics. It is the characteristic choice of the traceur to turn the most every day action, moving through the city, into the type of "tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation" that de Certeau (1984:97) attributes to walking in the city.

When speaking of non-linguistic performance like parkour as a language, the necessity arises to extrapolate the parts of 'speech-acts' that give that support such a heuristic. There are parallel facets between spoken language and the more pedestrian example that de Certeau focuses on. These facets are not just convenient tricks of the tongue or coincidental thought patterns; beyond their parallel lines they share common connections and meanings. Among these de Certeau points out a particularly apt example in the 'rhetoric of walking' saying; "The art of "turning" phrases finds an equivalent in an art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*)" (1984:100). Such packaged analogies go a long way in drawing attention to the syntax of movements in parkour, but it must first be noted that while de Certeau bridges 'speech acts' and 'walking the city', the study of parkour is entirely another level in the analogy of language. Not only is parkour a reinterpretation of the city, it is

also a reinterpretation of the performance-language analogy that de Certeau advances. When elaborating the pedestrian speech acts that relate to the act of walking, de Certeau limits himself to the everyday. Parkour is clearly not a normal pedestrian pastime; it changes normal ambulation by re-routing the spatial prescriptions of the city according to its own cultural economy as it adheres to the patterned path of its own meta-narration.

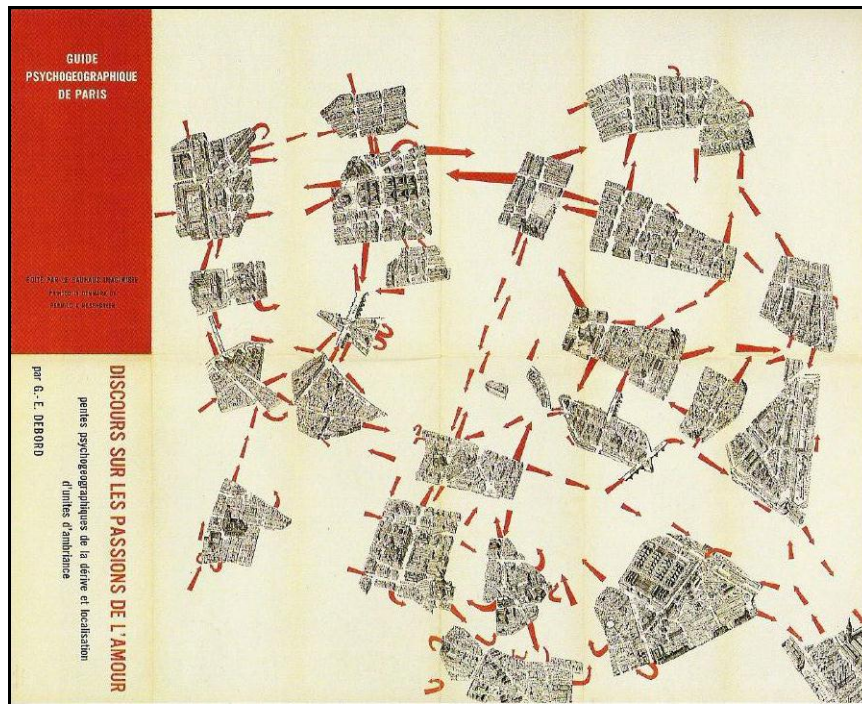
The trajectories or seemingly spontaneous paths of the traceur do not at first appear to be formulaic, but like the meta-narrative mythology that “makes it go” (de Certeau: 1984:102) the atomistic movements of the traceur are highly composed. However, despite the possibility handling the traceurs’ movements as formulaic trajectories, the paths he makes have the distortional and un-Cartesian qualities that de Certeau describes in his exploration of the ‘speech act’ of walking the city. Like the parts of speech called a synecdoche<sup>10</sup> or asyndeton<sup>11</sup>, de Certeau makes the unusual and expressive analogy to walking as it “selects and fragments the space traversed; it skips over links and whole parts that it omits” (1984:101).<sup>12</sup> If this creative reading can be gleaned from the context surrounding the most pedestrian of acts – walking – I find it applies doubly for parkour.

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<sup>10</sup> A synecdoche is a figure of speech by which a part is put for the whole (as in fifty sail for fifty ships).

<sup>11</sup> A asyndeton is the omission of the conjunctions that ordinarily join coordinate words or clauses (as in “I came, I saw, I conquered”).

<sup>12</sup> Definitions of synecdoche and asyndeton from the Merriam Webster dictionary.



**Fig. 3**

Psychogeographic map entitled: Discours Sur les Passiones de l'amore Guy Debord, 1957

As I have often felt while training with traceurs or even watching parkour videos, the *situational* distortions performed by the traceurs runs directly contrary to some of the common perceptions of parkour in practice. Instead of *tourner un parcours* in relatively even series of successive movements, traceurs are constantly creating uneven space out of the most repetitive and linear spaces. The situational quality of one site that may have a particularly useful assemblage of staircases, railings and obstacles may privilege it over the surrounding area and consequently, hours may be spent training in one small area before the traceur carries on to the next. In other words, the vocabulary of movement in parkour that is so carefully rehearsed in daily training does not apply evenly to the urban canvass. The distorting effect that this has on the perception of the city is remarkable. This effect in many ways resembles the practice of *dérive*—or 'drift' that was the impetus for psychogeographic maps made by the Situationist International (Fig. 3). When compared side by side, it can be seen that the psychogeographies of the

Situationists served much the same purpose of de Certeau's concept of tactic; both reassert the individual in the urban context and in the process engage in unconventional forms of urban dialogue. I turn next to Victor Turner's work in order to invert the focus I have placed squarely on structured outcomes of creating individual meaning.

### *LIMINALITY: IN PRACTICE AND PURPOSE*

Victor Turner's 'Liminality and Communitas' from his book 'The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure' (1969) provides another useful theoretical framework from which I have interpreted the parkour phenomena. Borrowing Arnold van Gennep use of the *rites de passage* that characterize transitional phases in a life, Turner focuses on the liminal qualities of the transitional phase placing these within the brackets of anti-structure or in between structures. This phase is defined by Turner as detachment from fixed social groups, an in-between period in which the 'ritual subject' – what Turner calls the 'passenger' (for my purposes the 'traceur') is in transit between two realms, existing in a state of ambiguity.

Indeed, parkour resembles many of the in-between characteristics Turner discusses in the context of Zambian tribal traditions. In practice parkour is characterized by liminality on many levels. Wary of calling parkour a 'sport' it is more readily referred to as a 'discipline' (as I find useful), but also 'a way of life', and even more broadly 'a way out'. What can be empirically described with some certainty is that it is practiced somewhere between the ground and the air. A traceur making a parkour (course) acts as one adverse to the ground plane, stepping on and off everything but the bare ground itself as he bounces, jumps, and vaults from one obstacle to the next in a series of fluid sentence-like arrangements.

The meta-narrative of parkour is transmitted via the Internet and through this ethereal yet accessible route of transmission (which one might describe as liminal in its omnipresence), the ‘origin myth’ of parkour and the dominant philosophy is also conveyed. As Turner discusses, the liminal entities (he refers in this case specifically to neophytes) are stripped of possessions, distinguishing characteristics, and marked by intense devotional behavior to their instructors. According to the theory of liminal *rites de passage* the initiated are equally homogenized and powerless developing an “intense comradeship and egalitarianism” (1969:95) describing accurately much of the teachings and practices of parkour discipline. There is the ‘naked’ traceur, free from any hindrances of equipment or even protective gear, the traceur community; composed of socially undistinguished youths and young adults, and the routes of pilgrimage that connotes certain devotional aspects when considered along side the ritualistic and prescribed movements implicit in the discipline. All elements of which correspond to the attributes of the passenger in Turner’s description of liminal *rites de passage*.

As I have already noted, the avoidance of the ground plane in the practice of parkour is a significant example of the liminal essence of the discipline. One that brings to mind a Freudian interpretation of the same hovering or flying sensation during dreams which was discussed in Freud’s seminal book *The Interpretation of Dreams* as a longing for stature, power, and even sexual potency (1932:246). Such an interpretation would support the notion that the traceurs are a disenfranchised group looking for a feeling of empowerment and receiving it though the practice of the discipline, a topic I discuss later in my analysis.<sup>13</sup> The traceur as a ‘passenger’ is transitional exactly because it is the *going* that is important for him. There are no

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<sup>13</sup> As a personal observation from my own experiences with Parkour, I find this line of reasoning entirely plausible based on the intense feelings of accomplishment and energy that result from even the most conservative performance of ‘crossing the lines’ in the urban realm.



destinations, no starting points, only movement between the voids and volumes of the urban landscape.

The traceur is as Turner expounded, a “threshold” person (liminal *personae*) practicing a form that is between legality and illegality. Additionally, it should be noted that as the rigors of the discipline tend to require the traceur is of a certain age group, somewhere between childhood and adulthood, often in their late teens or early twenties. Thus, the traceurs are a group that must exist in a liminal state and network themselves together based on the very uncertainties that baffle those on the ‘outside’—the spectators. From the apparent ambiguity of their objectives, movements, and even social status they find common community or as Turner prefers “*communitas*” from Latin meaning to form an “area of common living” (1969:98).

In Turner’s work, the essential connection between practice and performance has strongly influenced my understanding of parkour as a discipline containing not only embodied personal meanings, but also extraverted tendencies towards spectacular and a willingness to consent to the process of external appropriation. Thus, the performative ritualistic aspects of parkour can become more discernible using his work as a guide. Turner’s approach involved studying the practice of ritual as a symbolic whole (including the explanative discourse surrounding the ritual) making it particularly well suited to my holistic examination of the parkour discipline.

### III. WAYS OF KNOWING / METHODOLOGY

In order to address the structure and content of a discipline that is commonly portrayed in misleading and spectacular ways, I required an empirical understanding of how parkour was being considered by the traceurs themselves. Parkour research on the Internet can provide versions of the discipline's meta-narrative, its philosophical underpinnings, and glimpses of its practice. However, in parkour embodied knowledge is the principal means of 'knowing'; it allows the lessons learned in training to be enacted and instilled within the traceur. Atkinson, in his ethnographic account of traceurs in Toronto (2009:178) uses the term 'Poiesis' after Heidegger, to describe this imbedded knowledge and its development within the traceur that is able to create original meaning for the individual. To achieve the proximity needed to pursue my study, I welcomed the first person and at times subjective method of participant observation. The empirical data from which this study is derived was of three principal forms. My field notes, including informal interviews and quotes from the traceurs were taken with a wide and at times itinerant scope, creating a contextual framework for understanding my case study. Photography was employed initially as a means of linking traceurs and specific sites of training or environments, but as the objectives of my research changed, I used photography primarily to record specific parkour techniques in order to establish the vocabulary of movement that was at the core of the day-to-day training. Photo elicitation was also employed somewhat spontaneously as an unexpected by-product of my photography. I also relied upon content analysis of media sources and websites dedicated to the dissemination and practice of parkour.

The sites and situations of parkour practice within Budapest, in accordance with the spirit of the discipline, are spread throughout the city. However, high

concentrations of training sites were to be found in certain areas where I conducted a majority of my fieldwork. Most of these sites were in the first district of Budapest (the Buda side) on the principal hill overlooking the city, known as 'Castle Hill'. This study places particular importance on the existence of favored training sites in order to draw out the dialectical relationship between traceur and obstacles (built forms) that comprise the my use of the term 'urban dialogues'. Site identification and diagrammatic mapping efforts quickly became integrated into the study of the parkour repertoire of moves, as a way of recording the associations between certain sites and the moves considered ideal for those locations. Wall Runs<sup>14</sup> for example were frequently practiced below the Fisherman's Bastion monument (see Fig 9) as the configuration of that site was ideal for such training.

Being an English-speaking student in Hungary, the language barrier can at times seem a significant impediment in everyday life. I was pleasantly surprised however that many of the traceurs I trained with in Budapest knew enough English to communicate confidently. Some were much more advanced in their ability than others. On certain days during my fieldwork the language barrier became a noticeable issue, but it also forced me to put down pen and paper and focus on training. Although I felt little hesitation in training with the various groups and did my best to 'jump right in' there were times when the significant age differences between traceurs and myself compounded language difficulties resulting in a few positively awkward moments. These instances were few and passing, and in general were not surprising to me. In the very beginning of my training, I did little to 'blend in' or adhere to the parkour fashions; I wore what I considered comfortable clothing and shoes. However, as I will discuss the 'look' of the traceurs is specific and my initial approach

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<sup>14</sup> See 'Essential Moves Chart' in the appendix.

to 'comfortable' clothing placed me apart. I was frequently asked about my age by traceurs several years younger usually within 16 to 19 years old range; evidence perhaps that I was perceived as unusual, foreign or simply 'older'. However, the awkward moments in which 'otherness' might have overshadowed my interactions seemed to be quickly transformed through training perhaps assisted perhaps by my performative acts. The first third of my field notebook is full of semi-triumphal accounts of my own 'performances'. In the beginning of my fieldwork I felt the need to demonstrate the moves I was proficient at, using these displays as a way getting to 'in' with a group, or for the sake of making a dramatic entrance to a training site. These displays were unnecessary and at times needlessly dangerous. Nevertheless, 'showing off' is part of many physical cultures and although in parkour culture the stated priority is given to personal development; competitive displays are very real motivators in daily training and not at all uncommon.

With the above depiction of my situation of my fieldwork and status in mind, I now turn to the fieldwork itself. My experiences training with the traceurs of Budapest have been structured as vignettes and interspersed with stories of the global parkour culture as it has filtered down onto the local level of Budapest. I hope to convey something of my experience through this structure while retaining a view of the larger context that makes the actions of the traceur of larger significance in the realm of urban studies.

#### IV. TRACING THE TRACEURS / ANALYSIS

After two months of parkour training in Budapest, I felt I had gained a new awareness that permeated my whole body. Mine had been a long and rather inactive winter and the training shook me out of a complacent routine. Sore muscles and sprains followed my initial training sessions, but I learned how to absorb impact, got stronger and in the terminology of the group began to “level up” to a point that my muscles developed their own parkour memories.

The traceurs I trained with were all male between the ages of 15 and 23: young guys looking to condition their bodies and in many cases their minds as well through the parkour discipline. In my effort to find out about how the Budapest traceurs engaged their city and what they knew about the global parkour culture, I was really addressing a larger holistic question. I began my fieldwork with the intention of wanting to know what this parkour ‘way of life’ was all about and to experience a bit of it for myself. In that spirit I embraced the opportunity to be ‘trained’ by them, to *know* parkour in broad sense and become adept at some of the basic moves that are familiar to traceurs all over the world. I also was beginning to get some control over the distinctly mental challenges that parkour presents –the fears and the moments of focus that are just as concrete to the discipline as any series of obstacles.

I was fortunate to start training with a traceur named Bálint in early April. Bálint is very articulate teacher and while we were practicing moves he took up the task of orienting me to the undercurrents of parkour practice. He would speak at length about how parkour taught him to look at not only physical obstacles, but also life situations differently. When we first started training together I was shocked at how he handled risky situations, apparently deeply immersed in concentration before leaping

out across a void. Often if we were in a very prominent public location (the Chain Bridge for instance) a passerby would let out an anxious gasp as Bálint's sneakers flashed by overhead. Even though Bálint had well developed abilities, knowledge of the obstacles and the necessary bravado to do very risky moves, he did it all in stride, seemingly unaware of the spectacle he generated.

Risk taking, and the fear that accompanies any big jump was a deeply internalized and personal venture for Bálint. He regularly stressed the importance of "knowing your limits" saying that "I never push where I'm at...I never do something I'm unsure of" and "no time for hesitation...it's too dangerous". He told me how uncomfortable his family was with his parkour training, saying: "They don't understand why I do these things. I can't explain Parkour to my mother." I quickly developed the confidence that Bálint would land every jump he made and stopped tensing up every time he did something unusually risky. Taking a cue from Bálint's seasoned attitude towards risk taking, I became less adamant about pushing limits and keener to identify them so I could explore the spaces I was comfortable in and get to the point where I could turn some amount of risk taking into a source of excitement rather than an obsession. However, learning to control the fears that are associated with parkour practice is only one of the mental challenges that traceurs constantly deal with. Fear in parkour is an unceasing and central component to the traceurs' development. Saville (2008:896) points out in his article *Playing with fear: Parkour and the mobility of emotion* "As with all practitioners of parkour, my emotional engagements with space changed along with my mobility in it." Saville's observation highlights the crucial cognitive processes that effectually transform space for the traceur and in the process provide incentives to continue doing so.

In addition to fear of life and limb, there are other, more creative, cognitive processes also at work within the mind of the traceur. For the traceur walking down the street or setting out to train, it takes only a momentary switch of perspective to reveal new potentials in architecture; these are the occasions for urban dialogues. In such moments physical obstacles have a way of becoming the springboards of new freedoms. What I refer to has been called parkour 'vision', or more precisely a cognitive reorientation between the self and the built environment (Bavinton 2007:405). Developed through parkour training, parkour vision is a transformation that changes the way urban space is interpreted, utilized, and experienced. These changes are occurring not only for the traceur, but recently have expanded beyond the discipline to challenge societal perceptions of the uses of space. Baudrillard's observation that "It is the map that precedes the territory" (1983:2) takes on added meaning when considering the ways parkour practice has recently come to exert a direct influence on design and architecture.

Through parkour the urban map is being redrawn, barriers are being reinvented, ideas of propriety re-evaluated, and lifestyles are being recast in the image of newfound spatial and embodied 'liberties'. The effects are rippling through urban studies, design and everyday life. Aside from my own design projects leveraging the traceurs' interpretative re-sampling of prescriptive built forms, there have been many other building projects inspired by the traceurs' unusual interactions with architecture. For example, Cheryl Fu's 2004 proposal for the creation of "transformative built volumes" to accommodate parkour practice and foster "a laboratory for both Parkour and Architecture" (Fig. 4) has led to high profile design collaborations between prominent architects and traceurs. The exchange between Bjarke Ingels, the founding architect of B.I.G. Architects a major firm based in

Copenhagen and parkour team Jiyo profiled in the documentary film *My Playground* (2010) highlights the manner in which parkour is having a real-world impact in the creation of major building projects. Figure 5 shows a design charrette involving traceurs in the studio of the Bjarke Ingles Group Architects.



**Fig. 4**  
Image from *Parkour: Gaming in the City*, Cheryl Fu 2004



**Fig. 5**  
Still frame from *My Playground* (2010) Bjarke Ingles and Team Jiyo © Kaspar Astrup Schröder Studio



I asked my traceur friend Bálint, a former architecture student, what he thought about recent collaborations between the design field and parkour practice. Although curious about projects between architects and traceurs, Bálint's response was one of amusement saying: "Obstacles are everywhere...no need to build them...I want to train for something real: the street". As the common parkour metaphor describing the city as 'a giant playground' for traceurs gains traction, projects have emerged that take literally the concept seeking to cordon off parkour training into actual 'parkour parks' that would act as dedicated playgrounds for traceurs. The iconic climbing sculpture in Lisses, *Le Dame du Lac*, (Fig. 2) could be seen as a precursor to recent attempts to design environments for parkour. However, *Le Dame du Lac* was intended to serve rock climbers; and its form is nonrepresentational of urban environments.

Currently there are several parkour specific building projects in construction or development. One such project is underway in New York City, an initiative of the non-profit organization Urban Vanguard. It has been met with ambiguous initial responses from traceurs. A commenter on an American Parkour forum dedicated to the topic said in regard to the effort: "This is good. I think that something structured like this will bring awareness about Parkour and Freerunning alike. It will be a place to truly exemplify what Parkour really is". However, raising concerns in his next paragraph the conflicted contributor noted: "I hope that they don't think about the structures that much. Part of Parkour is about creativity of the environment, knowing that the structures had a mindset of certain movements and possibilities, kills some of the fun".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Accessed at: <http://www.americanparkour.com/content/view/5411/318/>

In Budapest, it is not uncommon for a traceur to train at a children's playground. However, these playgrounds are not designed specifically for them. This distinction in design intent is significant. The ambiguity of responses to parkour influenced building projects demonstrates to me how problematic the concept of designating parkour 'zones' within the city can be. Taken literally (as in the case of the proposed parkour 'playgrounds'), these projects go against the traceurs' ability to enter into creative 'dialogues' with their city. Presenting an apparent contradiction, parkour 'responsive' architecture projects propose to assign the traceur to a site: effectually forcing a dialogue that is not based on discovery and transmission, but rather one of designation.

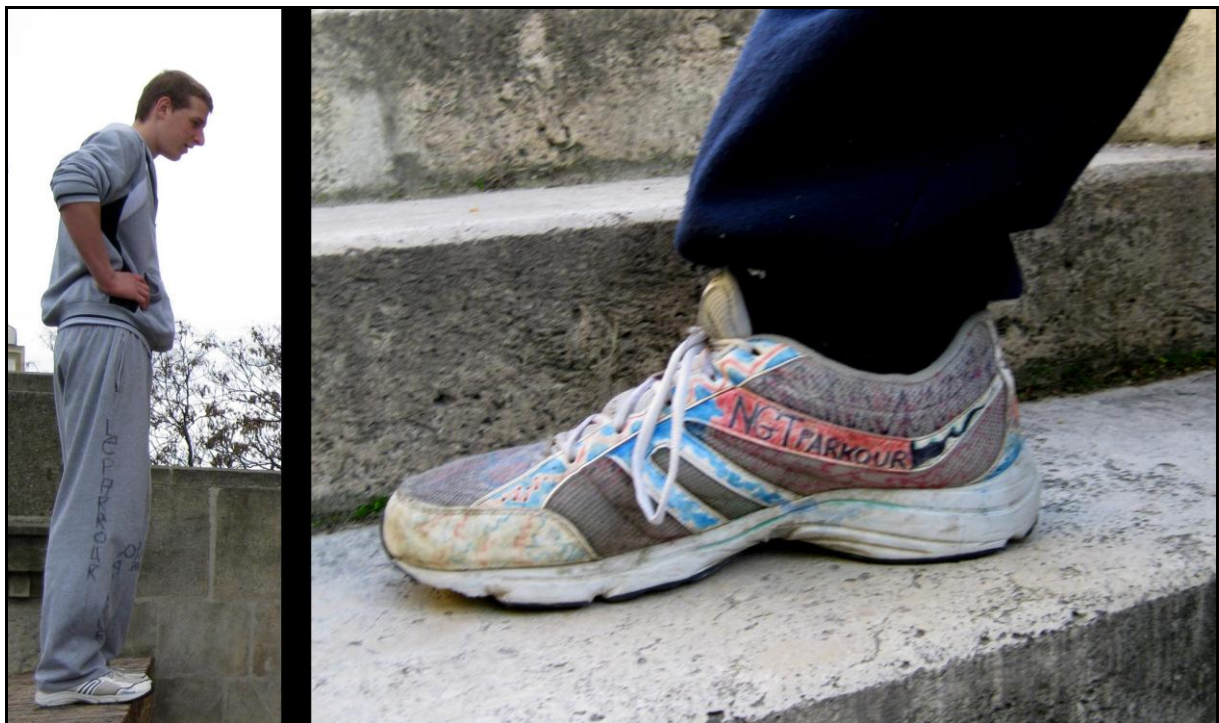
The same process of subcultural fragmentation and eventual absorption into the mainstream fold witnessed in graffiti and skateboarding (Borden 2001) cultures is evidently underway in parkour. The proposals for dedicated parkour 'parks' when seen in concert with the raising popularity of ancillary parkour-specific fashion trends<sup>16</sup> points to the demise of parkour as a marginal lifestyle activity. Despite this and other such indications of parkour going 'mainstream', there still exists significant doubt that parkour will ever be considered as a typical "youth subculture". The basis for these doubts mainly rests on the all-encompassing lifestyle message that pervades the meta-narrative and philosophical undercurrents of the discipline (Atkinson 2009:182).

Much of the argument against the potential integration of parkour into the realm of fully-fledged urban subcultures relies on the 'radicalization' of parkour practice – a trend present in academic literature and popular media alike seeking to position parkour as a form of urban 'rebellion'. The external radicalization of parkour,

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<sup>16</sup> I refer to the recent development of specialized footwear and major apparel brand divisions dedicated to the marketing of parkour 'lifestyles'.

part of the Freedom Spectacle that I find so conflated, ignores the structure dependant aspects of the discipline. However, beyond the trend of parkour responsive design and architecture, there are other more common place evidences that traceurs are willing to adhere to the types of conventions and markings usually associated with subcultural fashions.



**Fig. 6**

left: Traceur 'uniform' right: Parkour Shoes Decorated by a Traceur (Author's Collection)

Requiring no equipment beyond a pair of sneakers, the traceurs in Budapest do, however, show preferences for a specific sneaker brand (Fig. 6, right side), that they often decorate with parkour related phrases or symbols. In addition to the shoes, clothing with insignias also serves to convey and identify the traceur identity. These stylistic preferences of Hungarian traceurs correspond to the almost ubiquitous traceur 'uniform' that has become prevalent throughout the world. The global 'uniform' in its most characteristic form is composed of running or other suitable

shoes, sweatpants, and a sleeveless shirt (in colder weather a hooded sweatshirt) (Fig. 6, left side). Above all, this is a practical assemblage allowing a great deal of freedom of movement and versatility. However, in the details of the traceur outfit, small points of significance are to be found that can only be explained as 'parkour fashion'.

That the sleeveless t-shirt is favored above a normal t-shirt or tank top type shirts can be traced back to media associations with David Belle who has often appeared thus clad. As I was told by Attila, "This way of dressing keeps you loose so you can move, this is how we dress; you should get this kind of [athletic] pants". I took his advice and found that in this simple and functional outfit, I was blending right in with the traceurs in Budapest as well as with the 'look' of traceurs featured in the media. With the exception of the sneakers, the brand affiliations and styles are favored among the Budapest traceurs specifically because they are recognizable within the larger context of the global parkour discipline. As Saville (2009:897) points out "From the carefully selected footwear, the bag and clothing, to the arrangements of concrete, brick, metal and grass that make possible any form of parkour, the term 'traceur' must always refer to more than the individual body". The term traceur certainly does refer to more than an individual; it encompasses the built environment as well as the attributes of a rising global fashion culture. Belonging to this culture implies a relationship with both the geometries of the local built environment and with global 'fashion' trends. Examining the content of dedicated parkour symbols as components of the larger fashion trend is one way of exploring the global sense of belonging that helps position parkour as a lifestyle.



**Fig. 7**  
Urban Freeflow Glyph © Urban Freeflow

Iconic ‘glyphs’ have been created that seek to encapsulate the various meanings of parkour practice. The Urban Freeflow network, an online parkour resource based in the UK which describes itself as “the official worldwide freerun / parkour network”, has created a proprietary ‘glyph’ or insignia that they have turned into a highly recognizable and marketable icon of global parkour (Fig. 7). It is also worn in Budapest. An explanation of the symbol can be found on the website:

Based on Eastern symbology and inspired by ancient and fictional hieroglyphics, the Parkour/Freerun glyph depicts balance, equality, stability, control and simplicity. Also employing Hindu and Taoist beliefs, the Parkour/Freerun glyph characterises four segments, or stages that are used to represent the four seasons and the transition from awakening, through self improvement and proficiency, to self awareness.<sup>17</sup>

The infusion of eastern (Hindu and Taoist) beliefs into the explanation of the Urban Freeflow glyph fits well within of the larger trend within parkour culture to provide a fully elaborated lifestyle package. This cooption of eastern philosophies into a

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<sup>17</sup> Accessed at: [www.urbanfreeflow.com/the-glyph-explained/](http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/the-glyph-explained/)

discipline with western roots could be seen as an orientalizing attempt at providing a legitimizing background narrative to the recently formed discipline. However, that the hieroglyphics of the 'glyph' are fictional hieroglyphics does not in itself distract from the embedded philosophy that has come to pervade both the superficial layers of the traceurs' attire and more subtle performed gestures.

The traceurs in Budapest have a sequenced handshake that acts simultaneously as a greeting and an acknowledgement that both parties belong to the larger group of Hungarian traceurs. It is not dissimilar to other compound handshakes in that this sequenced gesture provides cohesion among the traceurs of Budapest, some of whom may go through weeks of solitary training before meeting with other traceurs. When I would meet a traceur for the first time, this handshake proved an invaluable introduction, one that succeeded in overcoming language barriers. In Fig. 8 the traceurs seen greeting each other meet regularly at this site. Nevertheless, the handshake is deployed; it is a formality considered unique by the Budapest traceurs and conveys in a sequenced and coded way the affiliations that bind these traceurs together. These affiliations encompass long standing social ties, and most importantly the traceur *identity*; a self-schema that is inextricably tied to both group affiliations and the urban configurations that serve as the stages of parkour practice.



**Fig. 8**  
Traceur handshake, greeting the newly arrived (Author's Collection)

For Turner, the concept of ritual, even in modern societies involves the symbolic manipulation and a referencing of religion (Deflem 1991:16). Comparing the traceur handshake within Turner's conception of ritual, I can relate the sequenced handshake deployed by the Budapest traceurs as part of both a local process of identity establishment and also a global acknowledgement of the quasi-religious aspects in parkour culture that I discussed in Chapter II. When one Budapest traceur greets another with the handshake he is in effect summoning all that is implied by his way of dress, patterned movements and expressed lifestyle affiliations; he is

acknowledging the patterned aspects of parkour practice that have become intertwined with the devotional structures and meta-narrative of the discipline. The sense of belonging to a local group and a global culture is thus reaffirmed in an interpersonal way. Yet, there are also other means in parkour for a traceur to connect to his practice; these are the urban dialogues and associations that directly link identity and environment.

In early April Bálint took me to a site close to the Fisherman's Bastion (see Fig. 9) to show me a move saying "This is where I did my first 'wall-run, five years ago"<sup>18</sup> and then demonstrated the move for me again, a reenactment of that first time. On two other occasions as well, I was independently brought by traceurs to train at a site and given an explanation very similar to Bálint's. They would go about the reenactment of a move as a way of training me in the environmental conditions they were most comfortable in and knew to work well for beginners. This route of transmission effectively linked the site (or situational configuration) with a specific move, individual experiences and initial occurrences in a powerful way. Combined, these factors compose a major instance of the 'knowing' that initiates urban dialogues in parkour practice.

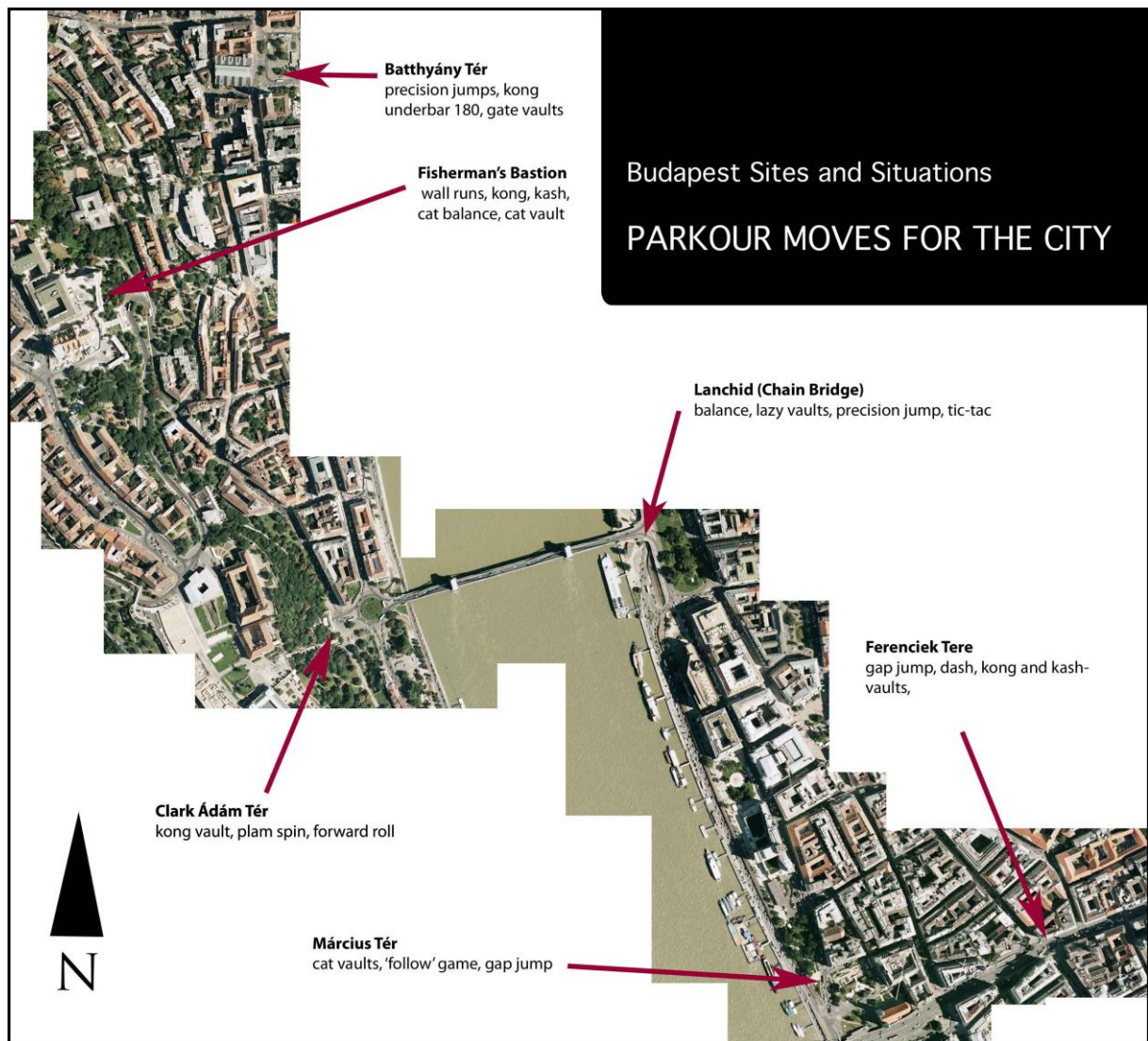
The map in Fig. 9 shows one of my efforts to graphically present the link between sites of training and moves. In much the same way that Bálint's association of site and movement was displayed by taking me to the Fisherman's Bastion to practice a Wall Run, I have compiled a sampling of sites around central Budapest displaying similar overlapping areas where associations and real world built configurations converge on mundane urban obstacles. Some of these sites of convergence were passed onto me in the process of training. By following the

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<sup>18</sup> For a description of the Wall Run see 'Essential Moves Chart' in the appendix.



example of traceurs who practice certain moves in certain locations I inherited and developed many of my own associations with these sites. This associative process linked the built environment and my emerging traceur identity by recalling the specificities of place and movement; creating a connection that is the basis of knowing obstacles.



**Fig. 9**  
Parkour Moves for the City

The World Federation of Parkour and Freerunning has within their mission statement the clever construction: “Know obstacles! Know freedom!” (World Federation: 2009). This mantra exemplifies the structured discipline that comes

through 'knowing' and the process of learning (training). The sort of intimate knowledge of an obstacle expressed to me by the linkage Budapest traceurs' make between themselves, specific sites and moves acts as a sort of template, passed from one traceur to another in the same city. Those 'templates' create a framework for the type of knowledge that allows one to then 'know freedom'. Moreover, this 'knowing' of obstacles is highly suggestive of the types of personal meaning generated through de Certeau's concept of tactic; a way for the disempowered to overcome or in the case of parkour reinterpret geometries of control.

During my very first day of training in March, I covered a lot of ground, visiting many urban 'situations' that my traceur friend Daniel wanted to show me. Between these situations, we generally walked along the sidewalk or street in a normal fashion, stopping to make precision jumps from point to point along the way where opportune. I was curious about how these 'situations' suitable for training are identified and what criteria Daniel had for training at a specific place. Although the obvious need for a high concentration of obstacles would become well known to me, at this point I was more curious about issues of legality and trespass. As we walked along, I began to see through the lens of 'parkour vision', noticing all the mundane surfaces of the streetscape as points of leverage, stepping-stones in a confluence of urban mini-events.

In moments of high energy we took them all on and did our best to string them together fluidly. Daniel, running out ahead of me in huge sweeping movements, he would grasp a light pole, put his foot to the wall of an adjacent building and land the whole ensemble neatly midway up a staircase. As we made our way, I began to consider seriously the surfaces presented by the parked cars lining the streets. As I did, a black luxury sedan parked across the sidewalk ahead of us waiting for a

garage door to open. We looked at each other with the same thought on our minds. I'm certain I would have been unable to jump fully across the car-obstacle, but I knew Daniel could. He looked up ahead at the car and at the driver standing in the street, seemed to capture the situation and with a quick assessment shrugged his shoulders. We walked around the car. I asked him then about jumping on cars and other 'proprietary obstacles', a question I had had on my mind for several blocks. He told me that when he was younger, 17 or 18 years old, he would have taken the opportunity and thought little of attracting attention with his training (he is now 22). However, as he progressed and matured, his primary concern was training in "peace", without having to out run from disgruntled car owners, shop keepers and others that his unchecked path may offend. Daniel is committed to deliberate and regular training and even though capable of 'offending' with relative impunity (in his five years of training he had become a very capable traceur), he has chosen instead to conform to the societal codes that prevent every obstacle from being open to him. Instead, like most of the advanced traceurs in Budapest, he moves from site to site engaged in mostly repetitious and contained movements.

On the occasions that police, security guards or other authority figures interrupt training and ask the traceurs to leave, Daniel attempts to explain what he is doing. Although he adamantly told me that parkour was not a sport, but rather a lifestyle, he nonetheless goes on to explain parkour as a sport when confronted by authorities seeking to clear traceurs from their spheres of influence. He has said when referring to a security guard that told us to move on "he [the security guard] doesn't understand this ... so I tell them it's a sport". The practicality of the decision to situate parkour as simply "a sport" for the authorities is clear. In fact, I have seen instances when this explanation succeed in satisfying a security guard's desire to

assert authority when faced with an unfamiliar and seemingly rebellious cooption of their domain. For the most part though efforts to classify parkour alongside sporting activities that are more common in the city – running for example – does little in Budapest to calm the anxieties parkour evokes for the uninitiated.

On one occasion while training with a large group on the castle hill amidst passing tourists, security guards approached us and flatly told us to leave the area. ‘sporting’ explanations were offered, but in this situation it did not help. A few moments later two policemen arrived. The group of traceurs lined up and crouched down in a row seemingly aware of the drill. The goings on were being explained to me in English by a traceur sitting next to me. Crouched on the curb while the police milled around above us, I could not help but feel implicated in some criminal activity. To the passerby, were it not for our athletic outfits, the scene would have had all the markings of a preemptive drug or weapons search of a group of youths by the police. Only we weren’t asked to turn out our pockets, but rather to produce identification. Our names were taken and a fine was threatened for the next time anyone from the group was caught doing parkour anywhere on the castle hill. I was told that a man living nearby was the real source of the trouble; he had apparently called the police several times before, disturbed by the activity going on in the square below his high window. In this most public area of the Hungarian capitol, the traceurs were in the wrong, a disruption, and an excuse for the police to intervene. The fine that the police threatened (100,000 Hungarian Forints) seemed to me greatly exaggerated – a large number meant to scare the group. I did a conversion later that day (22 April) which turned out to be over \$500 US dollars—a significant sum.

After this episode, there was a perceptible feeling of gloom as we milled over to meet another group of traceurs who were training in another area to deliver the

news. I was worried about the continuation of my training and about the future training on castle hill in general. I began to think that the idyllic situations for parkour on castle hill had become – before my eyes – a thing of the past. We would have to go to Pest and train in less favorable areas. However, I soon learned that my dramatic thoughts were overblown. After half an hour's rest and conversation, we moved on with an even larger group than before after deciding to continue training in a less public site on the other side of the castle hill.

The ambiguity between legality and illegality that pervades parkour in Budapest also prevents the traceurs from having to directly explain or situate their training to inquiring authorities. It is in this liminal space of uncertainty that parkour is conveniently a sport or an all-encompassing lifestyle. The discipline seems to thrive on these ambiguities; if the traceurs are turned away from one site and told that they cannot practice their 'sport' in a given location, they quickly reassemble a few blocks away to resume their discipline. To the traceurs of Budapest, parkour is seen a completely innocent activity falling well outside the norms of criminal activity. As the episode with the police demonstrates, they do not take seriously condemnations or threats, they simply move on to train elsewhere; confident that the 'hard to categorize' nature of their discipline and their own situations will sufficiently baffle any attempts limit their interactions with the city.

The spectacle of a traceur running through the city, passing over walls, at play with the concrete and steel attributes of other's confinement apparatuses is undeniably one of re-appropriation. The apparent irony of this situation is that in parkour the tactics that appear superficially subversive (the active defiance of prescribed route) are nevertheless formalized and are consumed in stages,

beginning with a passive intake and reproduction of the well established Parkour meta-narrative.

Looking at the meta-narrative behind the discipline of Parkour, I see a rich territory of communicated meaning, translated across the world via the Internet and retold in many languages; nevertheless the 'story' remains much the same. In this meta-narrative, David Belle is seen as the founder of Parkour, a child reared in the tradition of Frances's most agile military physical training, Hébert's *Méthode Naturelle*, and as a rebellious youth looking for a 'way out' of his otherwise restrictive and marginal suburban environment. Meaning is generated anew each time the meta-narrative is absorbed by a traceur. In Belle, each traceur finds a role model and an adept leader, capable of reinterpreting the built environment. In fact, according to many online resources and the newly emergent 'Parkourpedia', the term *traceur* is considered to have a dual meaning; one that traces a new path, but also one who is tracing *the path* of David Belle<sup>19</sup>.

The relationship, between the leader (Belle) and his followers (traceurs) has several layers of significance. The traceur, in tracing the path of Belle and following his example both literally and philosophically through life is creating original meaning; engaging in dialogue with his environment, but he is also playing a clearly defined role. The meta-narrative is the origin story of a physical language guiding the relationship between the terms that in Parkour are just as important as the spectacle itself.

The meta-narrative of Parkour is a fragmented, yet coherent assemblage of discourses. It can be understood in much the same way that de Certeau defines the term myth; "it is a discourse relative to the place/nowhere (or origin) of concrete

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<sup>19</sup> A good reference of Parkour terminology that is constantly being updated is the parkourpedia. It can be accessed at: <http://parkourpedia.com/terminology/general-terminology>

existence, a story jerry-built out of elements taken from common sayings, an allusive and fragmentary story whose gaps mesh with the social practices it symbolizes” (1986:102). The young mythology of Parkour is its own meta-narrative and its gaps blend into the performance/practice of its cultural expression. Looking at the parts of the performative ‘moves’ of Parkour it becomes clear that these are the irreducible elements of parkour practice. Each move is carried out in accordance with the laws of physics and the limitations of our human anatomies. The parts of each move must be performed in an exact way before the whole move can be mastered and utilized in combination with other moves to form a ‘course’.



**Fig. 10**  
Máté performing a Turn Vault (Author's Collection)

This rigidity of discipline and route of transmission was conveyed to me by a young traceur who had been training for only one year, yet he was so intent on

mastering the moves that he proved to be an effective teacher. Setting out early one afternoon, thinking I would train alone until the traceurs were out of school and work, I unexpectedly met up with a solitary traceur named Máté who I had met the week previous. I had noticed then how when the others were taking breaks Máté kept going until he got the move, and then if no one saw his accomplishment, he would bring me over to the staircase and demonstrate. He's clearly proud of how much he's been improving, some of the other traceurs jokingly told me that he's the best traceur in Budapest—only he's not quite there yet. Máté is known as one of the most dedicated young traceurs in the Budapest group and it is plain to see why. At 16 years old he is training every afternoon he can, even skipping school to do so (see Fig. 10). His excitement about parkour is contagious and he regularly shows off the parkour related media (videos and related music) that he has downloaded onto his mobile phone. When I found Máté training alone, without an English-speaking traceur around, I wondered how we would be able to communicate. Nevertheless, we began training together, language momentarily forgotten. During that afternoon the structured and linguistic properties of parkour training stood out in sharp relief. We both knew the basic repertoire of moves, and as we moved from site to site practicing specific moves, we found a common ground in their structure. I realized after several hours training with Máté in various sites that we were communicating just fine, progressing with the moves we were working on and often laughing together.

While training with Máté, practicing the Kong Vault<sup>20</sup> over a wall, I was having difficulty clearing the wall and Máté, after demonstrating the move several times to me felt the need to explain it to me verbally. I didn't understand his Hungarian explanations so he ran up to a couple walking by and after exchanging a few

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<sup>20</sup> See 'Essential Moves Chart' in the appendix.



sentences, the three of them approached me together and the woman began to explain to me in somewhat broken English what I was doing wrong and that “I need to bring my legs up to my chest”. There was a crucial part of the movement I was missing and that instruction “to bring my legs up to my chest”, helped me to progress. Importantly however, the episode reinforced my understanding of how precisely structured the moves are.

Many situations require a specific move to overcome an obstacle; if a traceur cannot do the move that the obstacle calls for, he will be unable to overcome that obstacle. This is why the traceurs train so devotedly. They know exactly what the built environment demands of their vocabulary of parkour moves and at almost any point during training they can identify the edge of their knowledge simply by attempting to overcome a new obstacle with their repertoire of moves. This patterned way of learning and matter of course adherence to the exact execution of parkour moves is indicative of the ‘atoms of meaning’ that Lévi-Strauss used to posit the fundamental composition of language. As I have previously discussed, the ‘language’ of parkour movements provides a window into its everyday practice and at the most basic level, serves as a vehicle for the dissemination the discipline.

Maté’s commitment to performing the moves correctly (and making sure that I did the same) showed me how he has adopted and embodied the long chain of transmitted ‘knowing’ that extends through all levels of the parkour practice and meta-narrative. Through training, Maté was learning to string together the repertoire of parkour moves into what will undoubtedly one day become a fluid Freedom Spectacle: a marketable and readily consumed performance that is at its core atomistic and hard won.

My last day in the field was May 7<sup>th</sup> when I attended the 'Art of Motion' parkour tournament in Vienna. By this time I had begun to think through some of the contrasts apparent to me within the practice of parkour. And so at the prompting of a group of traceurs in Budapest, I readily agreed to go check out the corporate funded event. Áron, an 18 year old traceur, of significant talent would be competing and I wanted to see the convergence of the local and the international aspects of parkour. We were all confident that Áron, who was firmly seated as the best traceur in Hungary, would be taking a prominent role in the event. When I arrived at the gate, I was immediately met by a traceur I knew from Budapest. He told me an accident had occurred and that Áron was in the hospital. He had been med-evaced out by helicopter an hour and a half previous. It was raining and Áron had made a very big jump onto a wet edge of the Arena's stage while training. I was told that his foot had been nearly ripped off by the force of his misstep.

During my training, I had been able to overcome some of the fear of making big jumps and walking on high ledges by learning from the more experienced traceurs. I adopted the attitude that the more one trains, the safer he will become. Accidents were what happened to those who did too much too soon and didn't know their limits. Without a moment's hesitation the experienced traceurs seemed to land their jumps with a soft fluidity regardless of the heights involved, they knew their limits, and they were limits beyond what I first believed possible. Áron's misstep in Vienna was a freak accident, but I cannot help but place it within another larger apparent misfortune; parkour seemed split in two, divided between the media event spectacle and all of its consumer trappings and a form of kinetic culture that espoused utility, embodied philosophies and what has been called a distinctly 'zen' like approach to negotiating the city.

The daily training that occurred around Budapest was quite unlike the spectacular media event that I would attend in Vienna. After the news of Áron's accident, there was some uncertainty if the event would still be held, but it was and I stayed for the duration to see another member of the Budapest group take Áron's place and compete. I can most readily describe what I saw as a cross between quasi-Olympic event and a rock concert complete with bands, national flag waving, and fragmented 'runs' made by traceurs who strove to out do each other in a rapid fire contest for the most flips per minute. It was much more gymnastic than the training I had experienced in Budapest. In short, I was watching a type of contest that is dismissed by some traceurs as freerunning and not *true* parkour, but is nevertheless the beginning of a professional career path for the most adept and talented adherents of *l'art du déplacement*.

## V. IMPLICATIONS

In this study I have outlined the contours of the global parkour phenomenon and in the process have provided evidences of its highly consistent and structured composition. In an effort to address the superficial Freedom Spectacle and the renditions of parkour often mishandled by media and academia alike by affixing radical agendas to its practice, I have relied upon participant observation and content analysis to draw out the underlying structure of the discipline. The importance of acknowledging the highly structured meta-narrative history, transmission, and practice of parkour cannot be understated: upon these structures rides the creative pursuit of what I have referred to as the 'urban dialogues' central to parkour practice.

My fieldwork in Budapest provided me with the opportunity to experience the highly tactical and emotional spirit of parkour training. Through these experiences, I have been able to draw connections between the emergent and evolving meta-narrative of parkour practice that exists primarily on the Internet and the local, everyday level of parkour training occurring in Budapest. The landlocked and linguistically distinct state of Hungary has been, in many ways, an ideal case study to examine the worldwide parkour phenomenon. Despite the relative isolation of the Hungarian language within the region, parkour is nevertheless thriving in the Hungarian capital and in practice is formally indistinguishable from parkour training in the Americas or Western Europe. Finding such consistencies speaks directly to my assertion that it is the structured and even linguistic qualities of the parkour repertoire of movements that have helped convey it throughout the urban centers of much of the world.

By drawing out the heuristic of parkour's linguistic qualities and making comparisons to French Structuralist theory I have been able to describe the traceurs'

vocabulary of movement as a resource composing a complementary relationship with the forms or 'obstacles' of the built environment. The urban 'speech acts' that the traceur carries out are a central component to creation of individually specific awareness of the city, or in the terminology of the meta-narrative the "knowing of obstacles" as a means of "knowing freedom". The subtleties of a discipline that requires its practitioners to 'know' the obstacles in the urban environment have inadvertently positioned parkour in the ambiguous category of a 'lifestyle practice'.

Straddling global consumption trends and quasi-religious doctrines alike, parkour faces increasing pressure to transform itself into a more typical (and marketable) youth subculture, yet at the same time, seems to thrive on the recitation of its own meta-narrative structures. These are the background stories and ritualistic aspects of parkour that many traceurs embrace in order to help contextualize their practice and connect their own efforts to the performed urban dialogues of traceurs around the world. The veneration of certain sites of training, as evidenced by 'traceur pilgrims', carries the added significance of the physically performed moves that have occurred in these locations and are reenacted in devotional ways by each new generation of traceurs. Such religiously suggestive practices seem to counter balance the influence of corporations that are actively looking for ways to appropriate and market the Freedom Spectacle to general audiences. The devotional qualities of parkour, and the traceur pilgrim phenomena in particular are deserving of further study and attention, especially so when considered in relation to the other end of the parkour spectrum where corporate interests seem intent to reduce and sensationalize the parkour 'way of life'. Dialectic structures seem well suited to many aspects of parkour, however beyond the lived and perceived alterations of urban

space that the traceur engages in there are also more tangible trends underway suggesting the real world consequences of urban dialogues in parkour practice.

I refer to the parkour responsive design projects that I could only outline in the body of this work. Such projects provide fascinating evidences that parkour is exerting a strong and inspirational force in the normally hermetic world of design and architecture. I take the opportunity then to posit the occurrence of parkour responsive design as an area for further study. Parkour responsive architecture is an interesting and somewhat unexpected offshoot of a discipline that is commonly framed as being at odds with the design field; I see many opportunities to expand the notion of urban dialogues in parkour practice along such lines.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, 2008 was the first year in history when more of the world's population was assessed as urban than rural (NFPA: 2008). As a species, there can be no doubt that humans are now increasingly trying to 'find their way' in the urban environment; a venture that implies not only physical challenges but mental ones as well. Parkour, as a discipline, has evolved and emerged in close proximity to turning point of the year 2008, making the 'finding of one's way' in the city not only a matter of lifestyle and creative reinterpretation, but also of global consequence. By repurposing urban obstacles, traceurs have shown that even the geometries of mass control can be turned into sources of physical and spiritual nourishment. In a world with a predominately urban population, creative dialogue with the city may be the surest way to know freedom.

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## APPENDIX / ESSENTIAL PARKOUR TERMINOLOGY: MOVES AND DESCRIPTIONS

English	French	Description
Precision Jump	Saut de Precision	Precision Jump - Standing on a fixed spot, (a bar, a wall etc.) and jumping to and landing precisely on another fixed spot. This requires maintaining your balance and not letting your momentum carry you past or over the landing spot.
Wallrun, Wallhop, Pop Vault	Pass Muraille	A wallrun is a way to ascend a wall or tall object by using one or more steps to propel your body upward, and then use your hands to get on top of or clear the obstacle. If only one step is necessary it is called a "Pop Vault".
Wall Jump, Tic-Tac or Tac Vault	Saut de Mur	To step off a wall in order to overcome another obstacle or gain height to grab something.
Cat Leap	Saut de Bras	A Cat Leap is a jump to vertical or near vertical object where your feet absorb the impact before your hands catch the top. Cat leaps are often used to land on walls across a gap, as it is not possible to land standing on the wall, nor is it practical to catch all of your weight with your hands, so you first absorb the momentum with your feet, then grasp the top of the wall with your hands.
Gap jump, running jump	Saut de Détente	A jump from one place/object to another, over a gap/distance. This technique is most often followed with a roll.
Underbar	Franchissement	An underbar is generally described as the passing between two objects, in which you jump, pass through the obstacles, and land on the other side. The most common situations to use an underbar include through rails, trees, or scaffolding.
Drop	Saut de Fond	Literally 'jump to the ground' / 'jump to the floor'. To jump down, or drop down from something.
Roll (forward)	Roulade	Rolling is done after a landing to minimize impact on the joints and to redirect momentum. Rolls can also be used for other purposes, for instance in diving through a railing where it is no possible to land back on your feet, or to get across an area such as a high table where rolling is a suitable choice.
Muscle-up or climb-up	Planche	To get from a hanging position (wall, rail, branch, arm jump, etc) into a position where your upper body is above the obstacle, supported by the arms. This then allows for you to climb up onto the obstacle and continue.
Turn Vault	Demi Tour	A turn vault is less of a vault, and more of a movement used to drop from a higher place than is practical to jump straight down from. In a turn vault, you vault over the wall or railing, leaving your hands on top of the object, swinging around 180 degrees, then planting your feet against the object. From here you can drop to the ground.

English	French	Description
Cat Vault (king) Kong	Saut de Chat	Involves diving forward over an obstacle so that the body becomes horizontal, pushing off with the hands and tucking the legs, such that the body is brought back to a vertical position, ready to land.
Lazy Vault	Passement	A lazy vault is when you approach an obstacle from an angle, lifting your inside (closer to the object) foot first, placing your inside hand on the object. As you pass over the object, you are in a fairly reclined position. For a wider object it may be necessary to "pass" the outside hand on the object for extra push.
Dash Vault		A vault in which a person jumps off of one foot, passes over the obstacle feet first, pushes off the obstacle with both hands, and then lands. This is often a very inefficient vault, as you could basically jump over the obstacle with the same movement, but it does have value when it is appropriate for the resultant landing area.
Reverse Vault		A reverse vault is one where your body travels to the outside of your planted hand on the object, and you therefore rotate 180 degrees on takeoff and 180 degrees after clearing the object. The reverse vault can be useful when you have to approach a rail from an angle where a normal two-handed vault may not be smooth, or after exiting a previous vault where the reverse vault can help more efficiently preserve momentum over the next obstacle. Reverse vaults are a form of Passement.
Speed Vault		The speed vault is one of the most efficient movements for clearing an obstacle between about waist and chest height. It is a vault where both legs go to one side, and a single hand is placed on the object. This hand doesn't do much to support or guide, as most of the vault comes in the form of a powerful jump over the object, the hand is more for stability, as the body is sideways instead of upright. The speed vault falls under Passement.
Dash Vault		A vault in which a person jumps off of one foot, passes over the obstacle feet first, pushes off the obstacle with both hands, and then lands. This is often a very inefficient vault, as you could basically jump over the obstacle with the same movement, but it does have value when it is appropriate for the resultant landing area.
Kash Vault		This vault is a combination of two vaults; the Kong vault and the dash vault. After pushing off with the hands in a Kong vault, the body continues past vertical over the object until the feet are leading the body. The Kash vault is then finished by pushing off the object at the end, as in a dash vault.
Gate Vault		A vault in which the top half of your body goes over the object, grasping something on the other side, where the rest of your body comes over in a motion similar to a handspring. A good vault for a high object where it is easier to get your top half over and then have a handhold to slow your descent.

Source: compiled from American Parkour: [www.americanparkour.com](http://www.americanparkour.com)