

Andrew J Day**May 2003****An Introduction To Parkour**

At this stage of its existence especially, parkour is difficult to define. Still in its infancy, there lacks a suitable discourse both within parkour itself and in its broader cultural context. Furthermore, as an expression of counter-culture there is the possibility that it evades definition in order to avoid formalisation - and thus institutionalisation - instead seeking to maintain its marginal status and consequently its potential to critique modern society. Parkour will eventually insert itself into the public consciousness but, until then, any discourse available here is provisional and aware of its own potential for change. To present the most widely known example is perhaps the simplest means of describing the part of parkour that constitutes its physical activity. From this point it will be possible to expand on its treatment of space and the body, its modes of representation and position as a cultural phenomenon. Iain Borden's *Skateboarding, Space and the City*¹ will be used as a basis for this examination as it applies Lefebvrian theory to a movement that, although well established, is similar in its treatment of the urban – physically, temporally, spatially and socially – and should provide a frame of reference.

Around April 2002, an advert was aired on BBC1. This short film made by the BBC was entitled *Rush Hour* and showed a man in an office stripping to the waist, climbing out of the office window and making his way acrobatically across the rooftops of London to his apartment where he settles in front of his television. No special effects were used, despite the apparent danger involved in many of the man's moves. With the exception of two spectators – both uncertain as to what they have just witnessed – the man goes generally unnoticed. His moves are fluid and graceful and the editing emphasises his

¹ Iain Borden, *Skateboarding, Space and the City; Architecture and the Body* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

freedom by juxtaposing his movements with the occasional glimpse of the static rush hour occurring at street level. This advert is responsible for much of parkour's presence in England arousing interest in and the growth of what might best be described as an urban extreme sport akin to skateboarding and in-line skating. The first clans were formed: small groups typically composed of between three and eight members, usually male and in their teens or early twenties. These clans, usually established through already existing friendships and similar interests in martial arts and/or gymnastics, train and develop their skills and currently keep in contact with other clans through the Urban Freeflow website.²

The origins, however, lie in France. Gathering information on its background presents similar difficulties to establishing details of its current status. Only limited information exists, primarily on relatively obscure websites and then usually in French. Amongst even its leading English exponents, there appears to be a lack of a formalised name used consistently in all areas of its discourse. Very few people practice parkour and as a cultural phenomenon it generally reproduces its image within its own limited circles (mainly online communities). From various websites³ it is possible to establish an outline of its origins. David Belle plays the office worker who finds an alternative route home in the BBC short film⁴ and parkour as a concept and an activity is attributed to him. (It is assumed that Belle coined the term "parkour" and there is also trend to use his term "traceur" to describe a person who practices parkour. Use of "parkour" is widespread but neither of these terms is universal.) How the original French clans were formed is unclear; one assumes that it developed socially and slowly became more established as numbers grew. Presumably some of the early members worked as acrobats; the story goes that after having seen an indication of their skill in *Taxi 2*,⁵ Luc Besson decided to make

² 'Urban Free Flow; le parkour by the people for the people' <<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com>> (25th April 2003).

³ <<http://www.parkour.com>> (25th April 2003) and <<http://www.le-parkour.com>> (25th April 2003).

⁴ Hugh Schofield, 'The art of le parkour', <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/entertainment/1939867.stm>> (April 19th 2002).

⁵ *Taxi 2*, directed by Gérard Krawczyk, written by Luc Besson, Digital Factory, 2000.

Yamakasi ⁶ to showcase their talent. Despite reasonable box-office success in France, the film has not been released in the United Kingdom or the United States. Pirated copies are accessible via the globalising force that is the internet through P2P (peer-to-peer) file sharing software such as Kazaa and DirectConnect. Yamakasi appears to have been responsible for a division between David Belle and other protagonists, the former allegedly choosing not to appear in the film as it did not portray parkour as he originally intended and would force him to be separated from his home town. ⁷ Since the BBC advert, occasional coverage of French clans has appeared on the Extreme Sports Channel ⁸ and the Channel 4 programme Passengers. ⁹ Mainly due to its size, English parkour has received little or no media coverage or academic study and for those outside of the immediate social spheres of the clans, it is only accessible to interested parties who are suitably proficient at using the web.

Although a comparison with skateboarding will be drawn, parkour has an ethos that renders it quite unique. Just as its methods draw on martial arts, there is an underlying philosophy that has looked to eastern mythology for its root. Alluding to what might be construed as Buddhist attitudes, the emphasis of parkour is not on competition with others but on the discipline of the individual:

It is in quest of itself, of its becoming.¹⁰

⁶ *Yamakasi*, directed by by Ariel Zeitoun and Julien Seri, written by Luc Besson, Digital Factory, 2001.

⁷ Sébastien Foucan, 'The art in motion', trans Jeremy,
<<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/artinmotion.html>> (25th April 2003)

⁸ <<http://www.extreme.com>> (25th April 2003).

⁹ 'Yamakasi' <<http://www.ps2passengers.com/stories/yamakazi/htm/3.php?warning=ok>
<http://www.ps2passengers.com/stories/yamakazi/htm/3.php?warning=ok>> (25th April 2003).

¹⁰ Sébastien Foucan, 'Birth of An Art', trans Jeremy,
<<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/birthofanart.html>> (April 25th 2003).

This search for “perfect fluidity and of the pure gesture”¹¹ is not limited to an individual’s attitude towards the self. In order to practice parkour, the traceur must first be able to ‘see’ different ways of negotiating the urban terrain:

parkour has given me a different view of everything around me.¹²

Parkours [sic] is more than a sport, it is an art that develops body and mind. This discipline consists in [sic] seeing in the environment, urban or natural, obstacles way in which to vanquish [sic], overcome and clear with easiness and fluidity. This requires showing proof of an excellent physical condition and imagination.¹³

This unity of body and mind is seen to be important and in his article ‘The Birth of an Art’, Sébastien Foucan, one of the original traceurs alongside Belle, mentions that he has been influenced by Japanese martial arts and Samurai teachings for a holistic training that is both mental and physical. Modern representations of oriental martial arts are inevitably present as several traceurs state their admiration for Bruce Lee¹⁴ and Jackie Chan¹⁵ and often discuss which martial arts films contain elements of parkour. More contemporary films, although not directly acknowledged, are influential such as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *The Matrix* if only to reinforce the Western preoccupation – whether it be homage or appropriation – with Eastern culture. The attitude and alternative way of

¹¹ Foucan, ‘Birth of An Art’.

¹² Blue Devil, ‘blue devil’ <<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/bluedev.html>> (April 25th, 2003).

¹³ ‘Discipline’, <<http://www.parkour.com>> The url for the specific page is not available due the site’s use of Flash (April 25th 2003).

¹⁴ Foucan, ‘Birth of An Art’.

¹⁵ “Jackie Chan is da man!”, posted by dark bredren 4/11/03 3:33:22 pmGMT, thread Whats the best martial arts film to feature pk moves? <<http://pub77.ezboard.com/furbanfreeflowfrm1l.showMessage?topicID=141.topic>> (April 25th 2003).

'seeing' the body in relation to urban space is not unique to parkour. An interesting crossover is seen to occur between parkour and an urban gymnastics group in the United States:

Every move The Beale Street Flippers do is self-taught. They don't call it 'teaching', however, they call it 'seeing'. One member does a move and the others watch and try to copy it.¹⁶

With the exception of a few countries, Parkour as a concept is virtually unknown outside of France, Belgium and England yet this gymnast troupe based in Memphis, Tennessee have an emphasis on the visual and visualising that is similar to parkour.¹⁷ The Eastern mythology contributes to an American cultural myth that, mainly through Hollywood, has contributed to Western culture. The frontiersman is morally, physically, spiritually superior and is 'at one' with his environment and it seems possible that certain elements contribute to parkour's identity.

Research of parkour has been carried out through extensive use of the internet. Many of the websites host video clips and photographs featuring the activities of the relevant clans. These are shot with home video cameras and edited at home, using the recent developments in digital video and personal computers. The production skills, picture resolution and quality of editing is mixed. Clips are usually short (a couple of minutes) and of comparatively low quality to allow for easy download. Despite there being only twenty or thirty video clips available, common elements have begun to emerge. Borrowing from skateboarding videos such as 4-11¹⁸ traceurs are often named by a

¹⁶ 'Nike Presto' <<http://www.nike-presto.com>> The url for the specific page is not available due the site's use of Flash. (April 25th 2003).

¹⁷ The only known American traceurs have a website at <<http://www.parkcore.net>> .

¹⁸ See <<http://www.411vm.com>> for more details.

caption and various alternative music tracks (usually hip-hop or drum 'n bass) are used to provide a soundtrack. There is some choreography of "runs" – dependent on prowess and clan sizes – where traceurs will follow each other closely or link sequences of moves together. Even the less coordinated video clips tend to have common elements; traceurs usually run into the frame, perform various moves and run out of frame. The camera is frequently static allowing an emphasis of the traceur's movement across a fixed space: instead of focusing purely on the movement of the body, it is seen in relation to the immovable urban furniture. This provides a greater sense of distance and perspective in the traceur's run.

"PK3" formed another aspect of the research. The informal event was organised by various individuals via the Urban Freeflow website and involved meeting outside Liverpool Street Station, Central London on the morning of Easter Sunday (April 20th 2003) and spending the day doing parkour. Certain members of the group – comprising several clans and various individuals – had not met before. The sites used were familiar to more experienced traceurs but movements were also dictated by police presence, security guards and surveillance cameras. Photographs can be found at the Kiellgfx website.¹⁹

As with skateboarding, describing parkour as a "sport", or even an "extreme sport", is ultimately reductive, not merely because it is involved with the construction of a social attitude, lifestyle, the identity of a group and the individual, but also because of its treatment of space and potential critique of modern society.

Foucault explains that:

architecture is not an object with a role to play, but is constituted by
the discourses and practices of social life. Architecture is not an

¹⁹ Andrew Day, 'Kiell's PK3 Photos', <<http://www.squareearththeory.com/pk>> (April 25th 2003).

object but a process, not a thing but a flow, not an abstract idea but
a lived thought.²⁰

As Borden has done with skateboarding, examining parkour as part of the 'process' that is architecture allows for a greater insight into parkour's cultural significance and its position in relation to society. The term 'counter-culture' implies a response to and a dependence upon cultural mores and, as with skateboarding, parkour can offer a direct critique as well as broader, implicit perspectives on dominant culture.

Lefebvre's writing on modern concepts of space provides a means of investigating the implications of parkour's engagement with architecture. He states that through a rejection of the standardised means of representing space, there is the "prospect of recovering the world of differences – the natural, the sensory/sensual, sexuality and pleasure".²¹ This recovery is possible through parkour as not only does it engage in a new treatment of urban architecture and space, it re-presents this treatment through the spectacle of its performance and also through the photographs and video clips that create images of the performance. Parkour thus becomes a state of interconnectedness as the traceurs seek to imitate, re-create and modify the images that parkour has created and this simultaneously forms the community that both contains and disseminates the performance. A traceur will perform a trick that he has seen performed either in person or on film. The traceur's enactment re-presents the image which is itself a link to a previous performance. Runs are usually performed as part of sessions with other traceurs who view the spectacle (and often record it on film): the "nexus of reproduction"²² is perpetuated. Borden explains this process in reference to skateboarding:

²⁰ Michael Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

²¹ Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 50, quoted in Borden, 89.

²² Borden, 217.

Every time skaters make moves they are at once replaying photographs and video clips through their own bodies., reliving and reinventing them, and – ultimately – rendering images, moves and themselves into social, fleshy, living entities.²³

This Baudrillard-esque dependence on the image and interconnectedness produces and is produced by the community of parkour. Already it is seen that the term “sport” or any similar label regarding it as merely a physical occurrence or occupation is inadequate. It is the use of space, and particularly of urban space that makes the interconnectedness relevant to modernity.

Two examples will be studied in further depth: handrails and rooftops. My series of photographs will serve as the prime point of reference as Yamakasi is almost unobtainable in the UK and the internet film clips are difficult to view without the necessary software and correct configuration.

‘Motion shot of cable and ez vaulting’²⁴ shows a (hand)rail being negotiated by two traceurs. (The predilection for using nicknames on the internet crosses over into the non-virtual; it is common for internet users to retain a degree of anonymity by using an alternative name. As much of the community’s communication is via the Urban Freeflow website, it is natural for nicknames to be retained in person.) Typically, rails offer stability and/or a division between two distinct urban zones, often of different height. They frequently offer a guide for both the gaze and the body along a specified path. By vaulting the rail and using it as a pivot between zones the divisions are erased, the body is

²³ Borden, 125.

²⁴ Andrew Day, Kiellgfx2003, ‘Motion shot of cable and ez vaulting’, <http://www.squareearththeory.com/pk/cable_ez_vault_bw.jpg> (April 25th 2003)

suspended and consequently new space is created. Firstly there is the space that was previously split into two zones. Through the negation of the division, the two zones become one, single uber-zone. The vault effaces the division but still depends on the division (to the extent that the rail is not merely passed over but is engaged and used as a pivot) so that the newly formed space comprises not just the uber-zone but the two previous zones, thus making space consisting of three contradictory and yet simultaneously complimentary zones. Secondly there is the space above the rail that is experienced by the traceur. In many sports, this physical experience has a certain mystique surrounding it; at the peak of the vault the body is temporarily weightless, and, more importantly the body is fully committed to the movement but is yet to negotiate recovery. The ephemeral experience between committing the body and ensuring the move's completion is common to various extreme sports and the exhilaration experienced during the momentary loss of control is the 'buzz' that forms the attraction. Borden explains that for the skateboarder it becomes the "symbolic limit of danger and achievement, the boundary and terrain deepest within the skater as well as the farthest limit of his or her activity."²⁵ It is no coincidence that this state is visually the most spectacular, as seen in the photograph mentioned above and several others: 'Thud, airborne'²⁶ and 'Blue devil cat jumps the leap of faith the other way'²⁷ serve as examples. On film, it is not uncommon for these moments to be slowed down or replayed, as seen in pkuk edit by thud.²⁸ Gaps can be subjected to the same analysis as rails, providing similar divisions and subsequent negations.

²⁵ Borden, 38.

²⁶ Andrew Day, Kiellgfx2003, 'Thud, airborne', <http://www.squareearththeory.com/pk/cowboy_bw.jpg> (April 25th 2003)

²⁷ Andrew Day, Kiellgfx2003, 'Blue devil cat jumps the leap of faith the other way', <<http://www.squareearththeory.com/pk/blue2.jpg>> (April 25th 2003).

²⁸ Thud, *pkuk edit by Thud*, <<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/Videos/PKUK.wmv>> (April 25th 2003).

Subsequently, two new spaces are formed, one through the linking of zones and one through the insertion of the body. However, these spaces are not separate, but dependent and reciprocal when created:

skateboarders re-image the architectural space and thereby recreate
both it and themselves into super-architectural space.²⁹

The duration of this 'super-architectural space' seems at first to be brief. Upon landing the move is complete and the negation of boundaries and insertion of the body has been temporary. However, looking beyond normative concepts of temporality, the super-architectural is never wholly present and, simultaneously, never wholly absent. Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle dictates that a moving body cannot be fixed and the motion contained by the traceur's movements means that the body cannot be located spatially. (The photographic image may freeze the traceur but removes the movement that is required to complete the negation of boundaries.) Because the imagery representing the super-architectural has entered the nexus of reproduction – through the spectacle of performance, the camera and physical imitation – it is never entirely absent. As Borden writes regarding skateboarding, it is "neither pure activity nor image, but a lived image"³⁰: 'pure activity' implies physical presence which has been seen to be temporary. Image implies absence through deferral of the signified. 'Lived image' accounts for this half-presence and continual state of ambiguity and demonstrates the importance of the nexus of reproduction.

²⁹ Borden, 89.

³⁰ Borden 125.

Rush Hour sees Belle moving almost exclusively across rooftops to find a better route home. Yamakasi's best action sequence features two of the protagonists being chased across the Paris rooftops by the police and through their greater skill and courage, ultimately escape them. Rooftops are not essential to parkour but have a definite allure, visually, physically and socially. The height offers greater danger to the traceur, adding to the spectacle and as it is usually trespassing on private property, there is the thrill of the illicit action. In Yamakasi, the Hollywood formula is undermined; stereotypically, a denouement occurs on the rooftop, as seen in films such as Die Hard, The Fugitive, Vanilla Sky and Bladerunner. Yamakasi sees three rooftop encounters between the traceurs and the police and only the final meeting sees the group arrested. Whilst fleeing to the rooftop usually implies that the fugitives are running out of space, the traceurs in Yamakasi are able to escape the police and avoid capture by using their superior physical skill and knowledge.

As the two Urban Freeflow clips *pk3 quick edit*³¹ and *pkuk edit by thud*³² show, the roofs offer good terrain for the traceurs with gaps and varying levels. Furthermore, the higher levels overlook one of the entrances to Liverpool Street Station and caught the attention of numerous members of the public, as well as the police who arrived shortly afterwards. (The building in the background of 'Rooftop – blake jumping'³³ and 'Rooftop – ez jumping'³⁴ is adjacent to the train station.)

Just as negotiating rails and gaps reinvents space, the rooftops are retrieved from near redundancy. Very rarely are rooftops used for any physical purpose and the tops of

³¹ Thud, *pk3 quick edit*, <<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/Videos/PK3%20Quick%20Edit.WMV>> (April 25th 2003).

³² Thud, *pkuk edit by Thud*, <<http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/Videos/PKUK.wmv>> (April 25th 2003).

³³ Andrew Day, Kiellgfx2003, 'Rooftop – blake jumping', <http://www.squareearththeory.com/pk/rooftop_blakejump.jpg> (April 25th 2003).

³⁴ Andrew Day, Kiellgfx2003, 'Rooftop – ez jumping', <http://www.squareearththeory.com/pk/rooftop_ezjump.jpg> (April 25th 2003).

buildings are generally little more than a visual effect. A skyline presents itself to the eye, and consequently the lens, providing the filmic grand view that eradicates difference. By reinserting the body, parkour undermines this totalising gaze and breaks the clean silhouettes of the skyline in order to provide the forgotten human in the boundary between the artificial (buildings) and the natural (sky). By appropriating the rooftop, parkour brings the body closer to the spectator's eye in the same way that the skyline brings the horizon closer. Just as the skyline brings the horizon closer to the lens/spectator's eye, by appropriating the rooftops, parkour brings the body closer. This re-insertion of the body is a crucial part of the parkour experience, just as it is with skateboarding:

The city is presented to the skater as a pre-existent object, who negates it through its opportunities and specifically through exploiting the texture of that space.³⁵

Both parkour and skateboarding may be selective in which areas and surfaces of the city they use, but the emphasis remains on returning from a state of continual deferral to a direct experience with the environment.

Drawing on Lefebvre's writings, Borden suggests that "modernity tends towards homogeneity, fusing geometry" and is in the process of "erasing localisation".³⁶ In response, through a return to the body and a truly physical encounter with the city, skateboarding – and parkour – is able to reject notions of architecture (such as its fixity, historicity, commodification) and return the space to the people and create the

³⁵ Borden, 194.

³⁶ Borden, 105.

aforementioned 'world of differences', regaining it from corporate and state power. As a response to consumer society, parkour is in some ways currently more effective than skateboarding in offering a critique. Whilst skateboarding, with its origins in surf culture, has a philosophy of freedom from employment, authority and consumerism, it is undermined to an extent by a reliance on a product and a propensity for (specific) clothing labels. Whilst maintaining the 'street' feel to its fashion, parkour has no loyalty to any labels and despite Nike's attempt at marketing a trainer ³⁷ through parkour, there is no marketable product. Footwear is important but not crucial, unlike a skateboard or a pair of in-line skates which Borden acknowledges has been exploitative. ³⁸ Traceurs are particularly wary of commercialisation but if parkour is to grow, it will have to enter public consciousness through media coverage and enter the capitalist discourse.

Borden argues that by occurring in the city, capitalism is rejected through various means. The vast majority of city centres are dominated by consumerism and monuments to state power. By reappropriating the space between these buildings and using it as a site of play and performance, consumerism is ignored and negated. As the Saiyan clan states, "there are no rules and we make the game as we see fit"; ³⁹ there is evidently a freedom of mind and body and referring to this encounter as a 'game' ties in with Borden's concept of "skateboarding's ludic procedures" which suggest "conflict and contradiction, chaos and confusion, internalization of the external world, emotion and spontaneity". ⁴⁰ The alternative lifestyle, means of seeing, attitude and use of urban space creates for parkour a cultural space from which to offer this "lived critique": ⁴¹

³⁷ Nike Presto. See <http://www.nike.com/nikepresto>. Amongst traceurs, despite early reception suggesting that Nike Presto trainers were good, it is now generally received that they are of poor quality. Thread 'shoes', <<http://pub77.ezboard.com/furbanfreeflowfrm11.showMessage?topicID=160.topic>> (April 30th, 2003) states that "Prestos are SHIT!" (posted by EVIL, 4/19/03 8:22:51pmGMT) and that "You are better off with a good pair of Reebok or Puma trainers than going for those shitty prestos." (posted by MidnightAssassin, 4/19/03 7:09:30 pmGMT).

³⁸ Borden, 158.

³⁹ Saiyan Clan, 'Saiyan Clan', < <http://www.urbanfreeflow.com/UrbanFreeFlow/saiyans.html>> (April 25th 2003).

⁴⁰ Borden, 112.

⁴¹ Borden, 206.

the spatial act of skateboarding is meaningless devoid of its subcultural attitudes, while, conversely, its subcultural attitudes have no substance except as produced in space in relation to urban architecture.⁴²

As a cultural phenomenon parkour will serve as a fascinating case study, especially when placed alongside skateboarding if only to see if it follows similar patterns despite the slight but important differences in its physical engagement of urban space and architecture. Whether the underlying philosophy and ideology of parkour survives entry into public consciousness and mainstream discourse will remain to be seen. The lack of a commercial product and its philosophy should endure but might ultimately prevent it from establishing a cultural position as powerful and enduring as skateboarding. Although it's critique of modernity might be more persuasive than skateboarding, this will remain irrelevant and subsequently ineffective if parkour stays outside of any relevant discourse.

⁴² Borden, 244 – 245.

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