

The Art of Displacement

Parkour as a challenge to social perceptions of body and space

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Introduction

The 'art of displacement' and 'free-running' are terms used for what I shall refer to here as parkour. Practitioners have found parkour to be an activity which requires many qualities but also one which leads to insights into their mental, emotional and physical states; bringing feelings of freedom, ownership and expression not previously encountered in their day-to-day lives. In this dissertation my aim is to explore practitioners' claims that parkour has the capacity to encapsulate many factors of life that shape people in the direction of honour, trust, integrity and creativity. As individuals influence society, I also argue that parkour offers possibilities for change within the nature of culture in the direction of freedom and respect.

Although the meaning and uses of parkour are diverse and numerous, I will initially explain what parkour 'is' and give some background to the discipline. I will then look at practitioners' belief that the individual processes of mind and body can find a greater connectedness through parkour; leading to a sense of a fuller consciousness and a felt experience of ones body being the physical agent of the mind. As parkour continues to grow and develop globally, I will address whether this seemingly 'universal' appeal stems from some 'natural' human capacity or desire, whose appropriate outlet of expression has lain dormant.

Social constraints are placed upon movement through space; as parkour directly challenges city planners and architects in their vision of the use of buildings and space, I will explore some of the ways in which practicing parkour can change perceptions of the possibilities presented by the environment. This will also lead me to examine briefly the possible cultural and social impacts which parkour could have.

In researching this topic I have drawn upon the experiences and opinions of many practitioners of parkour; both through formal interviewing (Stephane Vigroux) and informal discussions over an 18 month period. I will be examining many of these perspectives within my thesis.

The Formation of Parkour

Originating in the suburbs of Paris in the late 1980s, parkour is a physical activity adapted to the prevailing environment and is a dynamic interaction with that environment. Practitioners of parkour, sometimes referred to as 'traceurs' from the French word meaning bullet, can be found swinging in trees, jumping from buildings, vaulting railings or running up walls. In recent years parkour has spread around the globe.

One culturally influential figure upon the inception of parkour is George Hebert. Hebert was a French naval officer who travelled the world pre-WWI and came to have an influence upon physical training within the French military and upon large parts of the western world. Hebert's 'Natural Method' was influenced by the observations he made of 'native peoples':

“Their bodies were splendid, flexible, nimble, skilful, enduring, resistant and yet they had no other tutor in gymnastics but their lives in nature” (Tony Wolfe, 2007). Influenced by Rousseau’s concept of the ‘noble savage’, he formulated a physical training programme that utilised at its core, the activities of; “walking, running, jumping, quadrupedal movement, climbing, equilibrism (balancing), throwing, lifting, defending and swimming” (ibid). Heberts’ influence can be seen in ‘adventure playgrounds’, ‘assault courses’ and other such physical activity apparatus, which utilise ‘natural’ environments. Heberts motto: “to be strong, to be useful” (ibid.) seems to sum up the ethos of his vision.

However, it was not solely a physical approach which Hebert was championing, the spirit of the ‘Natural Method’ “resides not only in the muscles and the breath, but above all in the “energy” which is used, the will which directs it and the feeling which guides it.” (Wikipedia, 2007). Parallels can be drawn here with the spirit of parkour. Hebert also spoke of the importance of ‘virile qualities’, which are:

“Obtained by the execution of certain difficult or dangerous exercises requiring the development of these various qualities, for example while seeking to control the fear of falling, of jumping, of rising, of plunging, of walking on an unstable surface etc.” (ibid.).

Hebert’s ideas influenced military training (“parcour du combatant”) and that of fire fighters (“parcour SP”). A French serviceman and decorated athlete, Raymond Belle, who served in Vietnam and also worked as a fireman, embraced the challenge of Heberts ideas. Belle’s son, David, inherited his father’s determination and aspired to achieve his strength. David is considered by many to be “the creator, the originator” (Jerome, 2006a) of parkour. David’s “obsession to release himself from all obstacles, constraints and fears, and to be able to go wherever he chose to go; achievements owing as much to mental development as to physical prowess” (ibid.) was at the heart of the development of this new discipline. In his own words:

“While running, I’d fix on a point to represent an objective, and tell myself: ‘I’m going to go there; I’m going to go there directly; I’m going to go there quickly; and nothing will stop me’. I must add that I was always an enthusiastic admirer and reader of Daredevil, Spider-Man and other superhuman characters from comics, animation and action. All excellent warriors, and all so free” (Jerome, 2006b).

With a physical background in gymnastics, athletics, climbing and martial arts, plus grit, determination and the inspiration to be a ‘superhuman’, Belle soon found a group of friends who were willing to join him and help him to advance this new way of moving, of being, called “parkour”. In ‘Jump London’ (Christie, 2003), Sebastian Foucan (a long-time associate of Belles’) also sites ‘The Matrix’, ‘Star Wars’ and Bruce Lee as being influential to the philosophy of parkour. It seems that going beyond the ‘normal’, the expected, challenging perceptions of what is possible and being strong, are all-important factors in the creation and continuation of parkour. Stephane Vigroux, a student of Belle’s tells of “the philosophy; to be natural and to be strong. Also it was to be like a superhero! Most of the influence was to challenge and challenge and dream about, yeah superhero” (interview conducted 19/03/07). The mind state of the early practitioners and the influences upon them was to:

“Just have this kind of martial arts and kung fu stuff in mind, the superhero stuff and I think they just decided to say to do something in their life and, use this energy, channel this energy, in this original way. Maybe they wanted to be just apart, to not fit in the same box with

everybody else. In the beginning it was a bit rebellious. A way to express yourself differently” (ibid.)

However, the philosophy developed by David, Sebastian and others, is, according to Stephane, something which came after the physical experimentation:

“Some of the founders found a way to use these tools to develop each person’s life. They found through parkour, by training and giving a lot of themselves, parkour gives them back something and they use this thing to influence life and achieve things” (ibid.).

The group of friends who had developed this discipline began to gain some attention; local news stories evolved into a full length feature film, “Yamakasi- The Modern Samurai” (2000) – which Belle was not a part of, calling it “a prostitution of the art” (Shephard, 2007 p.34). The splintering of the original ‘crew’ led to other projects such as ‘Jump London’ (2003) and ‘Jump Britain’ (2005), both spearheaded by Sebastian. These projects opened up new audiences to parkour and the spread of the discipline has emanated from such filmic exposure and through the Internet.

The Embodiment of Experience

Being an activity that requires such physicality, parkour can be understood through studies into the anthropology of the body. Such studies have as their subject matter a “concern with the interface between body and society, the ways in which the physical organism constrains and inspires patterns of social interaction and the invention of culture” (Blacking, 1977 preface p.v/vi). Activities such as parkour (and skateboarding, to name but one other) place the participants body (and ‘mind’) within an experience that challenges social norms, due to its non-normal occurrence. Such activities also bring a reported sense of purpose through movement, an embodiment of intent. “Embodiment has as a principle characteristic the collapse of dualities between mind and body, subject and object” (Csordas, 2002 p.59).

In parkour, the practitioner must progress steadily. As each new move is attempted, it is accompanied by its own specific set of uncertainties, complications and fears. By a process of awareness and applying appropriate mental tools, combined with physical training and conditioning, parkour produces effects such as Mauss’ “notion of ‘les techniques du corps’, in which the human body is simultaneously the primordial object of and tool for cultural action.” (Csordas, 2002 p.30). Parkour has the perceived ability to allow its practitioners to feel as though “your body has always been on autopilot, and you’ve discovered for the first time that you are able to control it.... it’s a sport that permits exploration of the potential offered by your body” (Jerome, 2006b).

A question that arises from this is, ‘why or when do we lose this ability to feel in control of our bodies’? Much like psychological explanations for the separation between thought and emotion that occurs during childhood, this process can be seen as part of a ‘socialisation process’: “as children become fluent in language, so the barrier between biological proclivity and cultural constraint becomes even more acute” (Blacking, 1977 p.10). Or, in the words of Stephane Vigroux:

“We all have a kid inside; we never forget that we have been kids before. And I see in every playground park. The children play parkour and they don’t even realise, even the parents, they just read their books, they don’t care. It’s parkour, they just stop. Then you have to go to

higher school and look more adult in front of your friends, be more smart and after it's working life which begins" (interview conducted 19/03/07).

The accepted symbolic nature of 'body' within the 'western' cultural perspective is not congruent with the felt experiences of parkour practitioners. Such 'socialised' and accepted views may in fact have their origins in subtle expressions of "the interests of a dominant group, and become a straight jacket that inhibits self-expression and distorts posture" (Blacking, 1977 p.17). This is one possible explanation as to why modern, especially 'western' and 'urban', life is so devoid of physicality combined with expression, creativity and emotion, especially outside of the compartmentalised experience of the leisure centre. This separation, "the mind / body dichotomy can be partly explained as a cultural phenomenon as an artefact of certain modes of production and social formulations" (Blacking, 1977 p.18).

Capitalism as a system of production and exchange also has at its heart, control and power. Capitalism commodifies time and space; the ethos of a capitalist city is rejected by parkour. I have heard some 'traceurs' say that parkour is a non-political past time, however, for me this is not the case. Parkour brings a sense of freedom of expression, challenge to social behaviour and autonomy that is inherently political. Perceptions of the way society works, how we view ourselves and those around us, as well as time and space, are all challenged by the practicing of parkour. I see parkour not as an apolitical activity but in fact as a potentially revolutionary one. The physical body becomes less constrained by societal views through the practice of parkour. Social factors are always acting upon us to modify physical behaviour into accepted categories. This interaction of the social and physical is self-fulfilling, both aspects being re-enforced by the process. "As a result of this interaction the body itself is a highly restricted medium of expression" (Douglas 1973 quoted from Blacking, 1977 p.4). However, I believe parkour challenges, to some degree, this otherwise true statement.

Regardless of the prevailing social conditions, for those wanting to explore their own physical capabilities through parkour, the fact that "word-based categories and systems of thought may conflict with information that comes from the within the body, and so build up tensions in feeling-states that find expression in behaviour and social action" (Blacking, 1977 p.14) is to some degree negated. The tensions of life find a physical manifestation for release through parkour, leaving the practitioner with the relative and reported feelings of 'freedom'.

In Britain (at least) society does not stress the physical and mental well-being of its population, over say consumption and production:

"We live in a bland culture governed by the sacred principle of convenience. Everything around us, right down to the most mundane aspects of our daily lives is pre-planned, pre-arranged and pre-packaged so as to ensure an absolute minimum of the consuming, conscious involvement from us. You don't think so? Look around you" (Bowman- quoted in Borden, 2001 p.190).

Although there are many facets to society, the above comment illuminates a felt sense of ones possibilities being overly restricted by society. However, there exists an inescapable "evolutionary relationship of the species and its environment at any given time or place" (Blacking, 1977 p.10). I believe it is this relationship that has drawn and continues to draw many new practitioners to parkour.

Practitioners often claim the discovery of parkour is a life-changing experience: that it enables them to do things they had previously considered impossible. In this respect, they claim that parkour involves a developing knowledge of the body; acquired through training and the advancement of one's skills, as well as injury and set-back. Practitioners also claim that parkour encourages a connectedness with the self - and the physical space in which parkour is practiced - that they had not previously experienced. A succinct description of one aspect of parkour's affect was given thus:

“You feel connected to your environment, you feel connected to your body and you feel connected to the forces at play around you and within you, and between you and your environment. You feel sort of not in control of them, but sort of half in control of them and half controlled by them. But you're 100% there, in your environment, you can't afford to be thinking about something else... it's a very dynamic feeling, you feel very alive, vibrant, sort of full of power” (Dan Edwardes quoted in Angel, 2006).

Merleau-Ponty suggests that this feeling of being 'at one' with the environment, leaves the participant feeling that, “I am not in space and time, nor do I conceive space and time, I belong to them, my body combines with them and includes them” (Borden, 2001 p.110).

Many practitioners describe feelings of connectedness and power. The body and mind combine, bringing a depth of experience. “Parkour is not just a superficial activity; it allows you to discover yourself very deeply. I do it to enjoy myself and to understand myself” (Forrest quoted in Angel, 2007a). Creative activities, such as parkour, utilise the modes of thought located in the right hemisphere of the brain, as opposed to the linear thought patterns of the left hemisphere. A more complete human consciousness should utilise both hemispheres (Blacking, 1977 p.20). It is possibly this more 'complete' felt experience that affects practitioners to feel so 'alive'.

Once a level of proficiency has been achieved within parkour, there is a felt experience of one's body being an agent for existing forces to act upon or through. Invisible forces and lines of energy are reported to take one's body and propel it through the pre-planned routine of movement. Increasingly, as one becomes more proficient within the discipline, movements and interaction have a felt sense of being “shaped from within the body and monitored by patterns of energy flow that transcend the actors' conscious attempts to manipulate the situation (Blacking, 1977 p.14). When a move is executed efficiently, the forces of physics are reportedly felt within the participant. By overcoming the desire to panic, the practitioner relaxes his / her fears and seems to become one with his / her surroundings, moving through it exactly in the chosen fashion. “The secret of many athletic, gymnastic and musical techniques is to be found in relaxation and rhythm, and leaving the body to do its own work after a period of practice – which is surely the very opposite of mind over body” (Blacking, 1977 p.23). This argument illustrates that parkour is not exactly an activity for “adrenalin junkies”, but one that requires steady progress and fulfilment of existing potential. It was the cognitive and emotional affects of parkour that presented the original French practitioners with its philosophy.

Although a difficult concept for many new 'traceurs' to initially grasp, the accepting of one's emotional state, rather than the denial of fear is the way to progress within parkour. Silvan Tomkins (1964 – quoted in Blacking, 1977 p.5) explains that human activity is primarily

motivated by emotional affects. Physical activity and the body are used to communicate this relationship between self and the environment. These emotional “affects have profound effects on cognition and action” (Blacking, 1977 p.5). This principle works from both directions – cognition and action also effect emotional state, as cognition and emotion effect action. By weighing up the physical actuality of a movement and executing it satisfactorily, feelings of freedom, euphoria and joy, strength and control, amongst others, are reported to arise within practitioners of parkour. “Feeling is the catalyst that transforms acquired knowledge into understanding, and so adds the dimension of commitment to action” (Blacking, 1977 p.5). Practitioners commonly believe that this insight is not one that can be arrived upon by cognition alone. Only through practice, by repeating movements and becoming confident, relaxing fear and understanding ones self and body can the commitment to action be increased. Once one has greater commitment to action, greater actions can be committed to and more (visually) spectacular moves can be attempted and mastered.

Space / Cities Through “Parkour Vision”

The physical manifestation of parkour requires surfaces, gaps, heights, rails, trees, buildings etc. with which to interact. Although parkour training and practice also occurs in woodland and rural environments, most practitioners encounter the urban geography of the city during their training. Heavily populated areas have certain cultural norms of behaviour, to which parkour or other activities, like skateboarding before it, do not conform. To perform a physical activity in a place deemed “not designed for purpose” challenges and changes ideas of culturally acceptable behaviour and action.

For the examination of space and how parkour re-appropriates public spaces, I will be drawing upon the experience and insights of skateboarding. “Skaters undertake a ‘counter-habitation’ of habitually uninhabited but nonetheless public spaces. Skaters exploit the ambiguity of the ownership and function of public and semi-public space” (Borden et.al, 2001 p.181). The practice of parkour often happens within these public spaces; areas designed as walkways to filter the population towards their destination, or within dividing areas with no obvious purpose other than to segregate.

What is it that makes practitioners of parkour view these areas in such a markedly different way to the ‘general public’? Within parkour, the term ‘parkour vision’ is used to describe this phenomenon. ‘Parkour vision’ describes the altered way of analysing lines and architecture that occurs within the participant. The prevailing culture ushers us to not consider the use of a wall, of an ‘empty’ space, of a rail. Experience of parkour challenges these previously unchallenged notions. A psychological challenging shared with skateboarding:

“A handrail is a highly functional object; both the time and nature of its use are fully programmed. If there is a meaning at all in a handrail, then it is directly related to function; that of safety. The surprise of the skateboarder’s reuse of the handrail...is that it targets something to do with safety, with everyday security, and turns it into an object of risk, where previously it was precisely risk that was being erased” (Borden et.al, 2001 p.185/6).

Practitioners report a new appreciation of architecture and the lines of the city. The mind is open to possibilities of interaction that had previously not been considered. A traceur is constantly weighing up his / her environment and looking for new possibilities for moves, jumps or challenges. This way of viewing and analysing ones surroundings reduces all elements of the city to components within a ‘run’, or series of movements through an area.

“Buildings are building blocks for the open minded” (Borden et.al, 2001 p.187). This ‘open minded’ view can be seen as the relaxing of ‘adult’ tensions and preoccupations, perhaps an idealised ‘return’ to childhood. Certainly, it does seem that children generally possess this inquisitive kind of approach. “For me the city’s a playground, you have to see it through the eyes of a child” (Forrest quoted in Angel, 2007a). Parkour is a serious discipline with philosophical depth, requiring highly disciplined physical training, yet this feeling of being at play is repeatedly reported to accompany its practice. The city, the walls and railings used to practice upon become the traceurs ‘toys’.

A kind of possession is felt towards these public spaces, a freedom which comes from being released from mundane preconceptions and familiarity. Despite this, due to its unusualness, some people who see parkour and do not know about the discipline can conceive that the traceur is in some way vandalising the wall etc. he / she is training on. However,

“Over anyone I need this wall more than you because this is my baby. I need it to practice on, I need to train here, I don’t want it to be worn away, I don’t want the grip to go away, it needs to be all like this so I can train. If a brick falls off I’ll be devastated coz I might not be able to do like a dozen moves on it” (Sticky quoted in Angel, 2007b).

The static nature of a wall or rail suggests an unquestionable function; planned, designed, built, and unchangeable. Parkour or skateboarding pose the question, ‘what is this for and what can it be for’? These activities show “architecture not as a thing, but as a production of space, time and social being” (Borden, 2001 p.1). Again, the capitalist commodification of time and space is directly challenged. Borden sees these activities as “antithetical to capitalism...it involves great effort, but produces no commodity ready for exchange” (ibid.). Within capitalist societies “exchange value is so dominant over use and use value that it more or less suppresses it” (Lefebvre – quoted from Borden, 2001 p.238). A question often reportedly asked, in relation to the practice of parkour, is ‘what do you get from it’? Increasingly parkour does hold an exchange value; advertising, displays, teaching etc. However, for most practitioners parkour is useful to the ‘self’. It is a release from the time / space commodification of the society around them and brings a great sense of power and ownership. These words should be understood as differing in meaning from the usual capitalist connotations: the freedom of parkour (and skateboarding) creates a sense of ownership, but not possession. It uses space that we all own but no one possesses (Borden, 2001). It takes that ownership; when training, a common felt perception of ‘these are my streets, this is my space’ is reported. However, this is not to the detriment of similar claims by any other person. Public space is public, however, possibly due to the capitalist concept of ‘ownership’, the ‘general public’ appear unwilling to take ownership of these spaces.

A possible influence upon the cultural formation of parkour, the ‘Situations’ movement in France in the mid-twentieth century, critiqued the way a population views a city. ‘The Derive’ was a way of creatively analysing the possibilities of a city and the routes one could take and possibilities one could encounter. The theory of the Derive has many similarities with the affects of ‘parkour vision’: “only an awareness of the influences of the existing environment can encourage the critique of the present conditions of daily life, and yet it is precisely this concern with the environment which we live which is ignored” (Debord quoted in Plant, n.d.). Both ‘The Derive’ and parkour challenge this ignored concern, making it a primary aim of each respective activity. There exists a

“concealed potential of experimentation, pleasure, and play in everyday life, the situationists considered a little chaos to be a valuable means to exposing the way in which the experiences made possible by capitalist production could be appropriated within a new enabling system of social relations” (Plant, n.d.).

The social change bought about by the theory of the Derive is not a subject within the scope of this paper. However, it is possible that parkour, which incorporates many similarities in the analysing of the possibilities of a city, could be the modern incarnation that will prove to have a more far-reaching influence. That is of course, if “communality, unification, and public urban space...emerge as more desirable than commodification, fragmentation, and privatisation” (ibid.).

Possibilities for Social Change

As a discipline that requires very little in the way of equipment or cost, parkour has the potential to become a very popular activity among all sections of society, especially disenfranchised urban youth. The uniform lines, the ‘desolate’ spaces, the abundance of walls and railings to be found within council estates and on the edges of high rise tower blocks are precisely the terrain utilised to great affect through parkour. By looking at these spaces with the altered analysing eye of a traceur, residents of council estates who have previously viewed their environment as devoid of possibilities for productive activity, could be offered a giant playground. “Chombart de Laue notes that ‘an urban neighbourhood is determined not only by geographical and economic factors, but also by the image that its inhabitants and those of other neighbourhoods have of it’” (Debord, 1958).

Through a youth incentive in Westminster in conjunction with Parkour Coaching (‘Positive Futures’) and teaching within schools in that area, parkour has already shown some measurable positive effects upon school children deemed ‘at risk’ from drugs, crime, anti-social behaviour and social exclusion. Crime rates among the age group 8-19 were reduced by 69% during the time period teaching was taking place and many children previously avoidant of and difficult to engage in physical activity, e.g. muslim girls, have found a creative sporting outlet with which they have identified (Angel, 2007c). The utilizing of ones environment has captured the imagination of children whose concepts of sporting activity invariably involve organisation, equipment and external challenge to achieve. The possible spread of parkour and the social / cultural changes it may lead to, will possibly not be known until a new generation has grown up embracing the new perspective on self, environment and life which parkour offers.

Conclusions

As parkour continues to grow in popularity, the degree to which its practice challenges social perceptions of the body and space will become more apparent. At the present time, an affect is reported within and upon the lives of those practicing this discipline which suggests it could facilitate many social changes. Through the process of challenging and overcoming ones capabilities and fears, parkour offers its participants an activity that re-shapes ideas about the self, body and environment.

The re-shaping of these initial self-perceptions, initially imparted through the commodification of time and space by contemporary Euro-American societies, may also directly challenge ideas of the body and environment within a population. Through the practice of parkour a greater sense of self and ownership is reported to lead practitioners to

question the use of space initially, and their own capacities subsequently. Through greater awareness of the self and the environment, it is possible that participants will challenge societal norms and a reconstruction of these ideas will take place.

In communities where residents presume the future to hold hardship, socio-economic and political constraints, parkour is an activity that presents possibilities for even greater change.

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