Parkour, Play, and the Neoliberal City

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Abstract

Having emerged from the Parisian *banlieues* at the end of the 20th century, the practice of parkour remains in its infancy. Parkour is an inherently transgressive practice which actively *remakes* and questions the boundaries of the neoliberal city. By considering three primary themes - the importance of play within society, the locale in which play takes place, and the resistance that occurs between play and place - this dissertation aims to explore the role of parkour within the neoliberal city. Firstly, exploring the development of parkour from its birth as a hedonistic *lifestyle sport*, its growth and portrayal in the moving image, through to its maturity as a *landscape* of play that *re-enchants* space by imaginatively *drawing lines* through the urban landscape. Secondly, using Caillois' rubrics of Huizinga's 'play-element' enables an understanding of parkour as a multiplicitous act of playful engagement with urbanity. In turn, using an analytical mapping of parkour to investigate how *play* enacts poiesis within the ludic city. Lastly, this text will examine how the turbulent parkour *landscape* resists the social and spatial mechanisms of the neoliberal city. Situating the *traceur* as a *flâneur of fun*, who operates to *remake* and *smooth* urban space, generating *agonistic* encounters. This dissertation will conclude by using parkour as a lens to view the wider architectural implications of play within the urban landscape.

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Glossary of Terms

parcours - course, route, journey

tourner un parcours - the art of composing a path

traceur/traceuse - participant of parkour (male/female)

jam - parkour training session

line - the path of the *traceur* through space, often composed of a series of running, jumping, rolling and flipping

stick/precision - the act of jumping and landing on the balls of the feet, and not falling off the obstacle

spot - a parkour training location, often regularly used and known under a moniker

kong/cat pass - also known under the name *cat pass*, a *kong* is a vault where one (often moving at a run) places both hands on an object and brings one's legs through the space between

tic-tac - the act of pushing off an object or wall with a leg to propel oneself in a different direction

lache - the act of swinging from a high bar in order to propel oneself forward

freerunning - regularly used interchangeably with 'parkour' but can denote a more aestheticized form of movement

paidia - active, tumultuous, and spontaneous play, with derivatives in children's play

ludus - the counterpart to *paidia*, denotes play associated with repetition, training and rules

alea - play involving chance or fate

mimicry - play involving imaginary milieus and illusory acts

ilinx - play that involves risk-taking and moments of vertigo

agon (play) - play that involves, competition, contest and rivalry

agon (contest) - a 'productive' conflict in which the actors engage in a discourse with respect to their counterpart

poiesis - the 'bringing-forth' of something from itself, the spawn of an entirely new entity

POPS - Privately Owned Public Space

Parkour, Play, and the Neoliberal City

Introduction

Parkour can be defined as the act of moving through space in a playful and creative way. It "involves finding new ways of crossing an urban landscape" ("The Art of Parkour," 2006) through running, jumping, climbing, and flipping; traversing space in a manner that challenges the individual both physically and mentally. Visually similar to gymnastics, this "ad hoc, urban ballet" (Marks, 2008) is analogous to skateboarding as an explorative spatial practice. The term 'parkour' is derived from French, *parcours*, a journey or course - whilst not explicitly defining parkour, Michel de Certeau categorises the architectonic nature of pathfinding within the city as "the art of composing a path (*tourner un parcours*)" (Certeau, 1988). Practitioners of parkour are called *traceurs*, also derived from French, *tracer*, to trace or draw. '*Traceur*' is seen as a faux pas within the parkour community. Monikers such as freerunners, parkour athletes, parkour practitioners, parkouristas, "parkourists" (Storror, 2021a, 29:04) are also commonly used. These alternate names highlight the multiplicity and lack of shared identity within parkour. For clarity, I will refer to the overarching practice as *parkour* and the participants as *traceurs*. Flynn Disney, a *traceur* and researcher, aptly describes parkour as a "landscape", comparable to music or sport, encompassing "different styles of arrangement, intention and expression" (Disney, 2022).

Parkour is in essence a tactile apprehension of space through movement and imagination. A counter-cultural product of the neoliberal city, parkour emerged in the late 1990s and remains in its infancy. The practice seeks to "re-enchant" (Potter, 2019) the 'liminal' through play into spaces of secular sacrality (Turner, 1977; McDonald, 2019). The parkour *landscape* has grown because of the moving image, with the representation shifting from that of a

'spectacularized' and transgressive act to a participatory and playful one (Angel, 2011; Debord & Knabb, 1967/2006). The modern parkour *landscape* is best represented through social media, predominantly through self-published videos from *traceurs* and parkour groups. One group, named *Storror*, have amassed over 7 million subscribers on *YouTube*; regularly filming and uploading their training online to a global audience. A video released in September 2021 features a sequence (*Figure 1*) which typifies the friction between parkour and the neoliberal city: whilst practising in a public space the *traceurs* are approached by an elderly lady who confronts them about their activities. One *traceur* attempts to explain that their actions are not illicit and they are having fun, the woman proceeds to photograph them and call the police (Storror, 2021b, 22:03).

1. What are you doing here?
    We're just doing some jumps.
Not jumping, it's not for jumping.
    We'll be gone in a second.

2. We're not doing drugs, we're not selling drugs, we're just jumping off walls.

Where can adults play these days? Where can adults be creative?

3. Oh smile for the picture. Cheese!
Sending it to the council okay?
    Yeah send it to the council they'd love to watch this, have a lovely day.

4. Just a bit of parkour, you know how it is.
You about to head off now?
    Yeah.
Alright lads, where you off to now?

Figure 1

During this exchange one *traceur* raises a pertinent question, "where can adults play these days?" (Storror, 2021b, 22:10). The underlying issues this interaction poses are threefold: the importance of play within society, the locale in which play takes place, and the resistance that occurs between play and place. This dissertation aims to explore the role of parkour within the neoliberal city to ascertain the wider architectural implications of play within the urban landscape. By engaging with a theoretical analysis of play and the city alongside a fieldwork-driven understanding of parkour, this dissertation will situate parkour as an act of play that is intrinsically linked to urbanity. Exploring the social and spatial function of play in the context of the city, I will examine the resultant conflict between the associated actors. In these terms, parkour provides a lens through which to understand the role of play within the neoliberal city.

Parkour and the Urban Landscape

An ad hoc urban ballet

The human necessity for play is expressed by Johan Huizinga in Homo Ludens. Huizinga asserts that play is an animalistic action extending beyond the confines of a physiological reflex (Huizinga, 1938/2000). As Roger Caillois acknowledges, Huizinga demonstrates the role of play in the "development of civilization" (Caillois, 2001). Evidence suggests play has been incorporated into all facets of life since the earliest societies (Budano, 2019; McDougall, 2011; Gillespie, 1991; Shephard, 2017). Many early ludic games were enacted as part of religious ceremonies; in a contemporary context, it is remiss to argue play has displaced religion, however, it has replaced aspects of ritual (Singleton, 2014). Instead, some spiritual needs are satiated by the secular sacrality of participatory play (Clegg & Butryn, 2012; Huizinga, 1938/2000). The uptake in 'lifestyle sports' reflects this, seeing "unprecedented growth" across "diverse global geographic settings" (Wheaton & Gilchrist, 2016). *Lifestyle sports*, often dubbed extreme sports, can be categorised predominantly as outdoor activities, hedonistic and individualistic in form, that are participatory and performative with a particular lifestyle that extends beyond the practice (Wheaton, 2013; Wheaton & Gilchrist, 2016; Wheaton, 2004). Having emerged since the 1960s these sub-cultural practices encompass a

diverse audience and range of sports, including climbing, surfing, skateboarding and more recently parkour (Wheaton, 2004).

Lifestyle sports can be considered forms of play (Howe, 2003), as they do not fit the traditional mould of competitive sports, with others likening the concept of 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) experienced when partaking to the sublime (Atkinson, 2009; Stranger, 1999). Parkour enables *traceurs* to progress both physically and mentally through a re-*enchantment* of the city. One *traceur*, Rhys, explained the process between visualising and "actualizing" (Certeau, 1988) a move, describing the moment of *liminality* turning to one of learning in the aftermath. Through *flow* states parkour enables *traceurs* to "develop meaningful intuition" (Disney, 2022) from the immediate haptic feedback received from an environment, a rarity in modernity; using ludic play to improve the "legibility of the image of the city" and the image of oneself (Clegg & Butryn, 2012; Lamb, 2014).

Illustrations on correct jumping bio-mechanics in Hébert's *la Méthode Naturelle.*

Figure 2

Despite parkour's recency, its roots date back to the early 20th century and French naval officer, and physical educator, Georges Hébert. Hébert's seminal writings on *la Méthode Naturelle*, the Natural Method promoted a

functional and rounded lifestyle with a "final goal... ...to make strong… …beings, developed physically in a complete and useful manner" (Hébert, 1912/2009). This all-encompassing approach to health and fitness ties closely to Belinda Wheaton's definition of *lifestyle sports*. Hébert taught fundamental techniques of overcoming obstacles, becoming "the earliest proponent of what the French call *parcours* (obstacle course) training" (Atkinson & Young, 2008). Parkour's militaristic origins have resulted in a direct approach to space that centres around 'drawing lines of flight' (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). *Traceurs* plot trajectories that ignore the "straightjacket" (Price & Littlewood, 1968) of the city, instead reading the city as a "contiguous whole" of "architectural surfaces that are public objects and part of the public realm" (Clegg & Butryn, 2012). This attitude towards space is depicted in *Rush Hour* (2002), a BBC ident which depicts *traceur* David Belle as an office worker commuting home after work (Mould, 2009). After checking his watch, Belle climbs out the window, careening across rooftops using parkour to reach his flat (*Figure 3*). The sequence is montaged with iconography of a dead-locked city. By reading the landscape as *whole*, the fluidity of the *traceur* juxtaposes the "constipated" (Price & Littlewood, 1968) space below, bisecting the rigidity of the city.

1. Belle checks his watch before standing up from his desk.

2. He removes his jacket, unbuttons his shirt and removes his suit trousers.

3. Walking over to the window he lifts the blinds, opening the window wide before climbing out.

4. By shimming between two columns he ascends to the rooftop.

5. On the street below commuter traffic is at near stand-still.

6. Pausing momentarily at the summit Belle performs a handstand on a railing.

7. After back-flipping from a wall he breaks into a run.

8. The *traceur's* motion constrasts the stasis of the traffic below.

9. Jumping from building to building he cuts across the streets below.

10. Belle forms *lines* across the rooftops, combining jumps and flips in sequence.

11. Iconography of red lights, signs and queues depict the drudgery below.

12. The ident ends with Belle entering his flat, again through a window, before falling onto the sofa.

Figure 3

David Belle is widely ascribed as the founder of the modern practice of parkour. He was taught the principles of *la Méthode Naturelle* and *parcours* by his father Raymond, who had served as a firefighter in a division of the French military (Angel, 2011). Belle shared his father's teachings with his friends as they began incorporating Hébert's techniques within childhood games (Christie, 2003). Parkour's childlike nature is further reflected in its ideological outlook on space.

"Here is where freerunning [parkour] began, it started here, it originated here, this was our school, we were only this high... ...we'd be running around, everyone would be running, turning, jumping, it was a bit like playing hide and seek... ...we'd chase each other jumping, it became our game." - Sébastien Foucan (Christie, 2003, 3:15)

Figure 4

The architecture of Belle's friend's 'playground' (*Figure 4*) provided a ludic framework; meaning, however, was "rendered only by the sovereignty of play" (Claydon, 2003). The ambiguity within the *spot* accommodates playful (mis)readings of space, allowing it to be a "methectic vehicle" (Claydon, 2003) for participatory acts of play (Jones et al., 2014). As Peter McDonald's reading of Huizinga asserts, the uncertainty between actor and intention links play to the sacred (McDonald, 2019). This childlike view exploits the *liminality* of space through the "communitas" of play and parkour (Turner, 1977). As a group of young men, Belle, and his friends collectively formed the first parkour group, the *Yamakasi* which "means 'strong spirit' in the language of Zaire" (Congolese) (Wilkinson & Als, 2007). The *Yamakasi* continued this childlike reading of *whole* to develop the practice of parkour, exploring the surrounding area of Lisses and Évry.

The *Yamakasi* named their activity *l'art du déplacement*, the art of movement (Angel, 2011) "a phrase which helps underline its simultaneous existence as a sport, an art, and a rigorous discipline. At times the movement can

resemble a religious order" (Potter, 2019). The devotion of the group was quasi-monastic, pushing their own physical and mental fortitude (Christie, 2003). Stories of Belle training barefoot and sleeping atop buildings pervade parkour, whilst the *traceurs* I interviewed recalled stories and videos of themselves and others following in the footsteps of the founding members of parkour (Wilkinson & Als, 2007; Doyle, 2007). In many cases *traceurs* continue to make the pilgrimage to Lisses and Évry, underlining the sacrality formed through parkour (Potter, 2019).

"When you have parkour vision, everywhere is very good."

The modern practice of parkour originated south of Paris in the suburbs, *banlieues*, of Lisses and Évry. Built in the period that ensued World War 2, Évry was one of five new towns built in the Paris region (Rubenstein, 2019). These new towns were a response to the expansion of Paris, with modernist ideals of segregation under the guise of the urban hygiene movement (Paskins, 2016). Parkour has since emerged as a product of the conditions of the *banlieue*. Whilst translating to 'suburb', *banlieue* is a politically charged term which denotes socially-immobile, poor, densely populated areas containing neglected social housing developments and a higher migrant population (Slooter, 2019). Similarly, the term *jeunes de banlieue* (suburban youth) refers not to all young people who live in French suburbs, instead a profile: "migrant ('Black', 'Arab', 'Muslim'), male, poorly educated, dangerous, coming from a lower socio-economic working-class family" (Slooter, 2019). *Jeunes de banlieue* are looked upon negatively due to an association with violence and drug use; similarly, *traceurs* are often viewed in the same light, in an ethnographic study in Toronto the activities of *traceurs* were decried as "social junk" (Atkinson & Young, 2008) due to perceived deviant behaviour (Wheaton, 2013). With father Raymond being Vietnamese, and through practising parkour, Belle, alongside other members of the *Yamakasi*, would have been categorised as *jeunes de banlieue*. The rapid development and transformation in the post-war era resulted in a "dismantling of neighbourhoods" (Paskins, 2016) and communities, reshaping the urban fabric of Paris as a fragmented series of *banlieues*. As a result, social-mobility for young immigrant inhabitants was limited due to the stasis of the *banlieue*. The *Yamakasi* practised parkour as a *lifestyle sport*, a hedonistic form of betterment, but also an outlet to connect with the spaces they inhabited.

Traceurs form connections to places through a childlike reading of the city as *whole*. This reading can be referred to as "parkour vision" (Christie, 2005, 52:30). The term '*parkour vision*' is used by Sébastien Foucan (one of the founding members of the *Yamakasi*) to describe the ludic lens through which *traceurs* view urbanity.

When Sébastien Foucan asks John Kerr, an English *traceur*, about how *parkour vision* altered his outlook on his surroundings, Kerr replies: "now I do Parkour, I appreciate this area, because I always find something new" (Christie, 2005, 52:30).

Figure 5

The relationship between the *traceur* and the urban landscape is reciprocal, through parkour this "encounter with, and imaginative response to, urban space is ultimately to provide insights into the individual as much as to the city" (Sheringham, 1996; Lamb, 2014). The *Yamakasi* used *parkour vision* to "remake" (Harvey, 2015) Lisses and Évry as an urban playground. "Just as skateboarders took advantage of the empty swimming pools in1970s Southern California to create ollies and grinders, bored teenagers like Belle and Foucan saw extreme possibilities in their lackluster environment" (Kaplan, 2003).

Évry I, social housing block built as part of the revelopment of the area.

Figure 6

Not only did the social conditions influence the growth of parkour but likewise the physical conditions of the *banlieue*. The development of Évry featured the building of new social housing blocks and *Agora*, a combined shopping and community centre. Much as Californian swimming pools provided the archetype for the skatepark, the post-war modernist architecture of these 1970s 'new towns' amounted to the ideal *spots* for *traceurs* to practise (Peralta, 2001). The planar bricolage of walls, ledges, rooftops, walkways, steps and other plastic forms provided a parkour utopia. The area has since become emblematic in the world of parkour through its representation in visual media, the first notable instance being in a video released by Belle, *SpeedAirMan*, in which Belle is seen performing various jumps montaged with quasi-spiritual, super-heroic clips of himself, a '*SpeedAirMan*' (*Figure 7*) (Belle, 1998/2008).

1. The video opens with shots of Belle gesturing as if performing a ritual ceremony.

2. These shots are overlaid with videos of Belle's movement as if visualising the actions.

3. Belle begins to bring his arms across his body as if channelling an inner energy.

4. Drawing his arms apart a burst of light appears followed by videos of Belle practicing parkour.

5. There are shots of Belle vaulting and jumping in the *Agora* to the bemusement of onlookers.

6. Belle *actualises* one of the actions in the opening sequence (Certeau, 1988).

Figure 7

The *Yamakasi* took inspiration from the ouvre of Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee, whilst David Belle directly cites nature documentaries such as *Warriors of the Monkey God* as a source of inspiration for his own movement. (Stratford, 2018; Wilkinson & Als, 2007; Chapman, 1999, 6:45).

David Belle climbing the *Dame du Lac* in *SpeedAirMan* (Belle, 1998/2008, 0:45).

Figure 8 & 9

Parkour is intrinsically linked to the moving image, with the *Yamakasi's* movement inspired by martial arts films and nature documentaries. (Stratford, 2018; Wilkinson & Als, 2007; Chapman, 1999; Kaplan, 2003). Aspects of these films have translated into the core philosophies and moves within parkour; these characteristics can be seen in *SpeedAirMan*, from the kung-fu-esque sequencing and soundtrack to the animalistic movement of Belle (Belle, 1998/2008). We see Belle performing jumps in the *Agora* and multiple shots of him scampering monkey-like in ascension of the *Dame du Lac*, The Lady of the Lake, a sculpture in Lisses (*Figure 10, 11*). The sculpture is described by its creator, Pierre Székely, as "a kind of cliff for learning how to climb and for practising different kinds of climbing techniques" (Székely, 1977). Originally built for alpinism it served as the perfect place for the *Yamakasi* to hone their ability. As Székely writes "sculptors and alpinists, in their particular ways, contend with space. Their physical is guided more by imagination than by mechanical devices and tools," (Székely, 1977) he might as well be talking of *traceurs*.

"If parkour has a shrine, it is the climbing wall in Lisses, called the Dame du Lac" (Wilkinson & Als, 2007)

Figure 10

"A sign might read: 'Bare-handed explorers. 'La Dame du Lac' welcomes you. You are not forbidden to touch: in fact. you are warned to hold on tight!'" (Székely, 1977). Today the sign reads 'Escalade Interdite', danger, climbing prohibited (Kaplan, 2003).

Figure 11

The most iconic jump in parkour is the *Manpower Gap* in Évry, given the moniker after the insurance company in the premises below, first depicted in *SpeedAirMan* (Belle, 1998/2008, 1:31). Notable for its short run-up and sheer scale, the jump's contribution to the growth of parkour can be attributed to the moving image (JimmyTheGiant, 2020). The harmony between parkour and film is a result of the architecture of the city. In the latter half of the 20th century "the city itself became the inspiration for the film" (Thomas & Penz, 2003) and likewise for the *traceur*, influencing and guiding their *lines of flight*. The architecture of the city mediates between parkour and film, giving scale and presence to the movement of the *traceur*; the city in this context is not a removed stage set, rather a prop with which the *traceur* interacts. Scott, a cinematographer for parkour group *Ampisound*, explained how he captures *lines* on film, using the framing of architectural elements to emphasise the motion of the *traceur*. Sometimes closely

following the *traceur* focussing solely on the fluidity of overcoming obstacles, other times using wider angles conveying the drama of the action in relation to the architecture (*Figure 12, 13*).

1. The initial shot opens alongside the *traceur* as he breaks into a run.

2. As the *traceur* vaults over the railing the camera mirrors his motion.

3. The *traceur* runs along the top as the camera drops below the height of the wall.

4. As the *traceur* jumps the camera frames him against the sky above.
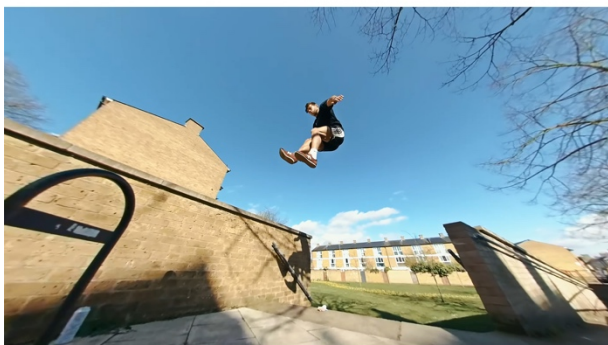
5. This framing dramatises the scale of the jump, and the explosiveness of the movement.
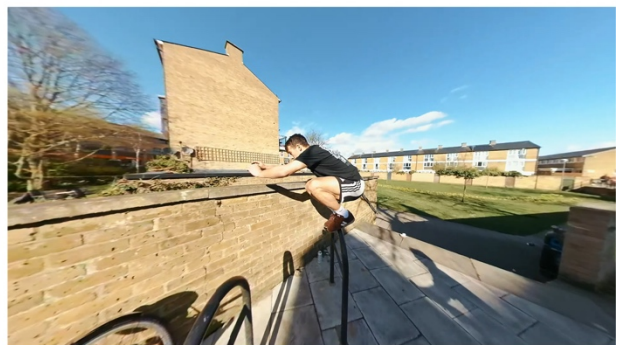
6. Lifting up, the camera catches the *traceur's* landing before he *cat-passes* beyond the wall.

Figure 12

1. The initial shot of the clip is a wide angle drone shot.

2. As the *traceur* ascends the drain pipe the drone rises slowly.

3. The *traceur* continues climbing, the architectural elements give presence to the movement.

4. As the *traceur* nears the summit we see a glimpse beyond the building.

5. The *traceur* is no longer central in the frame as the drone continues rising.

6. The camera pans out to display the city beyond, contextualising the speed and scale of the climb.

Figure 13

It is the theatrical shot of the *Manpower Gap* which resulted in *SpeedAirMan's* virality online (*Figure 14*) (Belle, 1998/2008, 1:31). Following its notoriety, the *Yamakasi* were depicted in a local news report, in which Belle jumps the *Manpower Gap* (*Figure 15*) (Le Parkour - TF1 Reportage, 1999, 10:29). This coverage exposed the group to screenwriter and director Luc Besson. Besson asked members of the group to feature in the action-comedy film

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Taxi 2 (Krawczyk, 2000). With *traceurs* dressed as ninjas, this was an inauthentic, slapstick representation of the discipline - it was not until the following year when members of the group featured in *Yamakasi*, which showed the dynamism and fluidity of parkour (Zeitoun & Seri, 2001). The advent of parkour coincided with video cameras becoming widely available and portable, allowing for both commercial and self-made films to use dynamic camera styles to match the movement of the *traceur* (Thomas & Penz, 2003). It is this dramatization and *spectacularization* that resulted in the rapid expansion of parkour at the turn of the 21st century (Debord & Knabb, 1967/2006).

David Belle jumping *Manpower* in *SpeedAirMan*. The figure of Belle can just be made out in the middle of the frame, and the signage of the insurance company below despite the low-resolution of the shot (Belle, 1998/2008, 1:30).

Figure 14

1. Belle stands atop the takeoff point contemplating and visualising the jump ahead of him.

2. A nervous onlooker peers from their window in the neighbouring building.

3. The *traceur* breaks into a short run as the camera pans around.

4. Stepping on to the low ridge he fearlessly propels himself over the edge.

5. Belle hangs monkey-like in the air for a moment as the camera looks down at the two storey drop.

6. Rolling out of the jump, he sprints along the roof, dropping down twice more to ground level.

Figure 15

Parkour emerged into the mainstream consciousness in the early 2000s, entering the Hollywood sphere with *Banlieue 13* (District 13), a 2004 film written and produced by Besson, and starring Belle as the lead character, Leïto (Morel, 2004). The film, and its sequel, *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum*, are both set in a dystopic near-future where a *banlieue* is walled off from the city, left to percolate as a dysfunctional and violent society run by cartels (Alessandrin, 2009). Both plots revolve around ploys from the French government to eradicate *Banlieue 13*, with the gangs, a policeman, and Leïto setting aside their differences and using parkour to overthrow the institution. Throughout both films "the camera's gaze is quasi ethnographic," overcoming the "obstacles that demarcate the spaces of the *banlieue*" like a *traceur* (Pettersen, 2014).

Besson explicitly riffs off Nicolas Sarkozy's failed plans to modernise Paris and its *banlieues* with the president asking if any of the group know Jean Nouvel, the French architect whom Sarkozy had solicited publically over designs (Alessandrin, 2009, 1:35:53; Pettersen, 2014; Rieff, 2007; Chrisafis, 2007).

Figure 16

Using parkour Besson critiques the attitude of the government towards the *banlieues*, portraying young *traceurs* as the heroes, however, also sensationalising the practice. The commodification of parkour as a *spectacle* separates it from its core philosophies as a *lifestyle sport* and childlike act of play. This is evidenced in *District 13* in the opening chase scene where we see Leïto (Belle) pursued by a gang using parkour to escape. Fleeing across rooftops, the sequence culminates in Belle jumping across the *Manpower Gap*, a climatic end filmed in slow-motion (*Figure 17*) (Morel, 2004).

1. Gang members knock on Leïto's flat door, peering through his peephole.

2. Leïto kicks the door down, vaulting over the wreckage.

3. He *tic-tacs* off a wall to get beyond his pursuers.

4. He then *laches* off a pipe, disappearing through a window above a locked door.
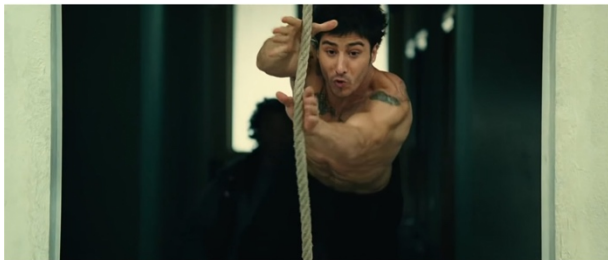
5. Diving out an open window Leïto grabs a dangling rope and swings away.

6. In hot pursuit a gang member leaps after him, falling onto a parked car several floors below.

7. Swinging round the building the *traceur* uses the window mullions as a ladder to climb to the roof.

8. Leaping between buildings, the Leïto is framed against the city beyond (Évry).

9. The sequence is interspersed with shots from below.

10. The landscape of the *banlieue* is depicted as hostile with spiked fences and angular edges.

11. The sequence depicts the gang on Leïto's heels following his death-defying route.

12. Leïto cuts through flats, across rooftops and around fences, ignoring private boundaries.

13. The chase culminates with a close angle of Leïto (Belle) on the take-off for the *Manpower Gap*.

14. The sequence changes pace and cuts to a wide angle shot depicting the whole jump in slow-motion.

15. Leïto sprints into the distance before dropping down to to ground level.

16. The remaining pursuers pull up short of the jump, watching Leïto escape.

Figure 17

These depictions categorise parkour purely as high octane and dangerous, *spectacularizing* it and removing the knowledge of training *traceurs* undertake. These connotations are stretched further through the reboot of the James Bond franchise with *Casino Royale* (2006), where Sébastien Foucan plays a bomb-maker, who uses parkour in a sequence in a building site to evade the pursuit of Bond; this time climaxing in a death-defying jump between two cranes (Campbell, 2006).

While the big screen has seen a continuation in the globalisation of parkour (Greengrass, 2007; Alessandrin, 2009; Newell, 2010; Delamarre, 2014; Benmayor, 2015; Kurzel, 2016; Bay, 2019) the small screen and the internet hold greater responsibility for the participatory growth of the practice. In the UK this can be attributed largely to the

documentaries of Mike Christie, and the former online forum *Urban Freeflow* (Christie, 2003; Christie, 2005; Christie, 2011). Christie's work was cited by the majority of *traceurs* I interviewed as the catalyst for their interest in parkour; younger *traceurs* tended to recall being inspired by videos on platforms like *YouTube*. In turn, the content creators interviewed predominantly attribute their interest to both Christie's work and online forums. This sharing of content has been integral to the growth of parkour, ingrained in its DNA from Belle's release of *SpeedAirMan*, parkour is a product of the emergence of self-content creation, coinciding with the inception of video-sharing platforms such as *YouTube* (2005) and the smartphone (2007). *Traceurs* continue to film themselves training, increasingly displaying the refinement process; emphasising "gradualism" over the final result (Wilkinson & Als, 2007). This act of self-publishing films has been integral to changing the perception of parkour. The modern practice of parkour should be seen not as an adrenaline-fueled rooftop rush, rather as a participatory *lifestyle sport* and *landscape* of play that *re-enchants* space by imaginatively *drawing lines* through the urban landscape.

Traceurs often train to make the pilgrimage to the birthplace of parkour to record themselves performing the same feats of acrobatic prowess some twenty years on (Storror, 2019, 7:30).

Figure 18

Play and Poiesis in the Ludic City

The importance of play

To understand the multiplicity of the parkour *landscape* with respect to play, it is important to first evaluate the function of the "play element" (Huizinga, 1938/2000) within society. Huizinga expresses that play holds "a significant function", although its benefits cannot be measured quantitatively, it is 'fun' that distils the "essence of play" (Huizinga, 1938/2000). Huizinga argues that play even precedes culture, as play is also an "irrational" action we can affirm that humans are "more than merely rational beings"; thus, play is the foundation upon which the cornerstones of culture, ritual, sport, music, theatre, literature, art and architecture reside, actions which serve no clear 'rational' purpose but which we derive 'fun' (Huizinga, 1938/2000). Huizinga further identifies how play becomes a social institution through ritual and *agonism* as these possess all the formal features of a game; with modern civic institutions, judicial courts, assemblies and parliaments, based upon these practises (Huizinga, 1938/2000; McDonald, 2019; Pullan, 2015).

The associations extending from play can also be assessed through literary analysis, with the Ancient Greek terms: paidela (education/culture), *paidia* (play/game) and paides (children) which share the same root, allowing us to understand that games played an important role for educating children during the Classical Era (Shephard, 2017). The term '*ludus*', a Latin derivative from Ancient Greek for playful love, could refer to 'play/game' but also to 'school' in an educational context, with the term associated with repetition, training and learning (Stevens, 2007). *Ludus* accompanies *paidia* as a descriptor of play, terms first coined by Caillois, who, in an attempt to formalise Huizinga's more abstract notion of 'play' created rubrics to categorise play. Caillois distinguished play into four categories: *agon* (competition), *alea* (chance), *mimicry* (simulation) and *ilinx* (vertigo), whilst placing acts of play on a "continuum" between *paidia* and *ludus* (Caillois, 2001). Caillois' definition of *paidia* is play that is "active, tumultuous, exuberant, and spontaneous," predominantly applying to children's games as its derivation suggests; whereas *ludus* sits at the alternate end of the axis "representing calculation, contrivance, and subordination to rules" (Caillois, 2001). *Agon*, from the Ancient Greek for competition denotes play that involves contest, rivalry, confrontation; *alea* derives from the Latin for dice and characterises play that is subject to chance and fate; *mimicry* describes play

that involves imaginary milieus and illusory acts; lastly, *ilinx* indicates play that involves risk-taking, inducing vertigo or momentarily destabilising perception (Caillois, 2001; Walz, 2010).

	AGÔN (Competition)	ALEA (Chance)	MIMICRY (Simulation)	ILINX (Vertigo)
PAIDA	Unregulated sports	Counting out rhymes	Children's initiations, masks	Children whirling, horseback riding
LUDUS	Sports, chess, billiards	Betting, roulette, lotteries	Theater and spectacles	Skiing, mountain climbing

Steffen Walz distils Caillois' criteria into a table with examples of play that fit in each cell; in reality Caillois' categories are not discrete, expressing that "under certain conditions these rubrics are paired." (Walz, 2010; Caillois, 2001).

Figure 19

Play is associated with a childlike manner of thinking and acting, *paidia*, with *parkour vision* also evolved from this process. As Foucan acknowledges "you just have to look, you just have to think, like children… this is the vision of freerunning [parkour]" (Christie, 2003, 4:15). This impulse to act playfully is facilitated through parkour, providing a framework in which one can legitimise action. Parkour allows adults to test the "affordances" (Gibson, 1979/2014) of an environment that are otherwise inhibited (Stevens, 2012). Parkour may initially be categorised as *paidia* due to the freestyle, improvisational nature of the practice, however, fluctuates to *ludus* when spatial constraints of place are applied and there is an attempt at mastering movement (Stevens, 2007).

5.2. Caillois' Model and Kinesis

Taking into consideration our general play definition and the concept of kinesis, we can trace particular types of kinesis in all of Caillois' categories:

- **Agonal kinesis includes, for example, athletic movements. Play dynamic is created by the to-and-fro between e.g. a running athlete and a tartan track as well as between competing athletes who watch their moving opponents;**
- **Alea kinesis includes the virtual movements of chance, the movement fate imposes on players, and the to-and-fro between chance results, probabilities, and the player's risk-taking;**
- **Mimicry kinesis includes theatrical movements to stage an illusory character, virtual movement to convert something into make-believe, and the to-and-fro between character(s) and audience that creates a make-believe situation;**
- **Ilinx kinesis includes movements that cause vertigo in the player (such as descending a ski slope), movements made by the player in order to experience vertigo (such as spinning), and the to-and-fro dynamic between, for example, the skier and the steep mountain.**

Walz applies the concept of 'kinesis' to translate Caillois' categories to actionable modes of play (Walz, 2010).

Figure 20

Walz's kinaesthetic translation (*Figure 20*) places parkour in opposition to Caillois' tight classification of play, simultaneously oscillating between *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. The *traceur* is undergoing *agon* when doing parkour; in competition with physical barriers in space, the *spot*, and mental barriers, fear, whilst they may face confrontation from external forces often in the form of security guards or the public. These attributes shift and overlap with *ilinx* due to the risk-taking and transgressive side of parkour, with elements of chance in being caught, *alea*, arising from transgression and trespass. *Alea* also arises from how long a *traceur* is afforded at a *spot*, this can be due to the aforementioned constraints or adverse foot-traffic or weather conditions. Finally, *mimicry*, which is more elusive in conventional sports, is present within parkour despite primarily being associated with theatre. This can in part be attributed to *parkour vision*, which sees the *traceur* visualise an action or a line in their head before actualizing the movement - in effect mimicking an ethereal replica of themselves. Alternatively, *mimicry* can be seen in relation to film; firstly, with *traceurs* replicating actions seen on video of others at particular *spots*, ie. *Manpower Gap*. Secondly through documenting the process on film, and distributing it via social media to the wider community *traceurs* engage in theatre. By utilising Walz's kinaesthetic translations of Caillois categories of play we can define parkour as a multiplicitous *landscape* that encompasses these modes of play.

The simultaneity between modes of play aligns parkour with Huizinga's concept of 'pure play' (Huizinga, 1938/2000). In this respect Caillois' vocabulary of play is unsuitable to define parkour; however, it can be used to understand particular *arrangements* within the practice. As a result of this lack of definition, we can acknowledge the parkour *landscape* as an amorphous and multiplicitous one. The multiplicity of parkour responds directly to the multiplicity of its playground, the city (Stevens, 2007; Stevens, 2012). Correspondingly, parkour is a lens through which to apprehend urbanity, as Michael Sheringham states: "if this is the city, then to apprehend its mobility, its play of differences, will require a corresponding mobility on the part of the witness" (Sheringham, 1996). Parkour's insistence on exploring the ludic potential of space gives the *traceur* a comprehension of the continual metamorphosis which is at the heart of the city (Réda, 1986; Sheringham, 1996).

"Many people are trying to control how we use the city and try to make buildings and architecture, in order to make the most of our lives. I think parkour is about insisting on using the city as a playground." - Signe Holbjerre (Schröder, 2009, 3:06)

Figure 21

"Where can adults play these days?"

Martin Heidegger describes the term *poiesis*, from the Ancient Greek 'to make', as the "bringing-forth" (Heidegger, 1977) of something from itself, the spawn of an entirely new entity. Parkour enables *traceurs* not only to apprehend the space of the city but create new play-grounds through participation. This act of *poiesis* occurs naturally within the fabric of the city because of the overlapping trajectories of its actors (Certeau, 1988; Sheringham, 1996; Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). The city exists as a "locus of the collective memory" (Rossi, 1982), defined by its organismic response to its inhabitants (Sudjic, 2016). Cities are moulded by their actors and reciprocally mould their actors; reading the city as *whole*, parkour, and play more broadly, is a catalyst for change (Pullan, 2015; Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). The multiplicity of play exploits the ambiguity and *liminality* of space, contributing to the changeability and 'city-ness' of urban public space (Stevens, 2007; Sudjic, 2016; Pérez de Arce, 2018).

Effects of Good Government in the City fresco, part of Lorenzetti's *Allegory of Good and Bad Government.*

Figure 22

From the first depictions of the city, we see that play is fundamental to 'urban' life. Ambrogio Lorenzetti's fresco, *Effects of Good Government in the City*, (*Figure 22*) displays a group of women dancing and celebrating civic life at its epicentre. This is the "point from which all the light flows both in the city and in the countryside. The fresco must be read outwards from this central point" (Navone, 1994). Likewise, in *Children's Games*, (*Figure 23*) Bruegel depicts urbanity as a space for organised and anarchic play (Ferris, 2021). The scene depicts children playing

games of *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry* and *ilinx* in public space, with the playground an extension of the classroom (Orrock, 2012). Both works show play at the heart of civic life, and the centre from which the locus of prosperity emanates, telling us both that public space is the nucleus of a city and its function as a play-ground is fundamental to its success.

Despite the scene not depicting a schoolmaster it nonetheless features adults who facilitate and engage in play with the children, giving structure to turn play from *paidia* into *ludus* (Orrock, 2012).

Figure 23

The spatial conditions of urbanity structure public life and play within (Certeau, 1988; Stevens, 2007); whilst simultaneously space is shaped by its use (Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). By examining Greek *polis*, we also find play an essential component for transforming public space in the *agora*. Foremostly a place for political assembly, *agon*, the *agora* was an urban sports ground, an "incubator" (Pérez de Arce, 2018) for new forms of play, given "rhythm by the gestures… …produced within" (Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). As play formalised from *paidia* to *ludus* new space was created (*Figure 24, 25*).

In stark contrast to its namesake in Évry, the Athenian *agora* responded to the poiesis of play; temples, stadia, civic institutions were built as part of an evolving complex of public space.

Figure 24
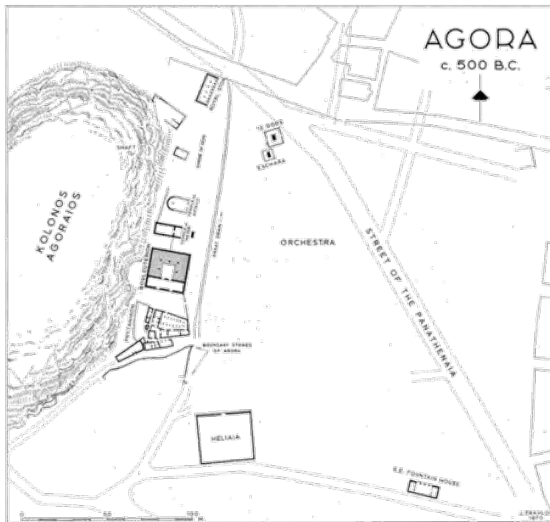
1. The Agora circa 500 B.C.
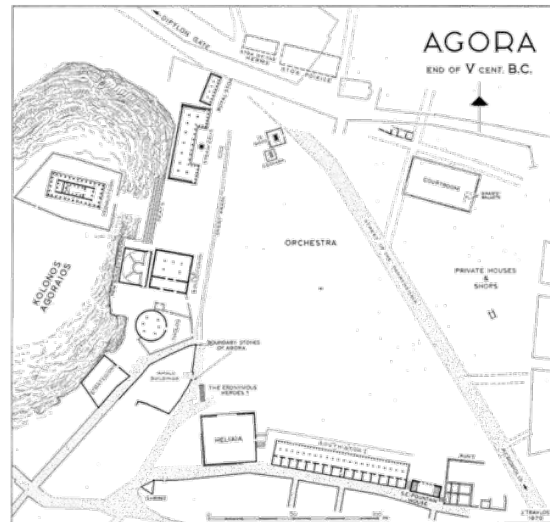
2. The Agora in Late 5th Century B.C.
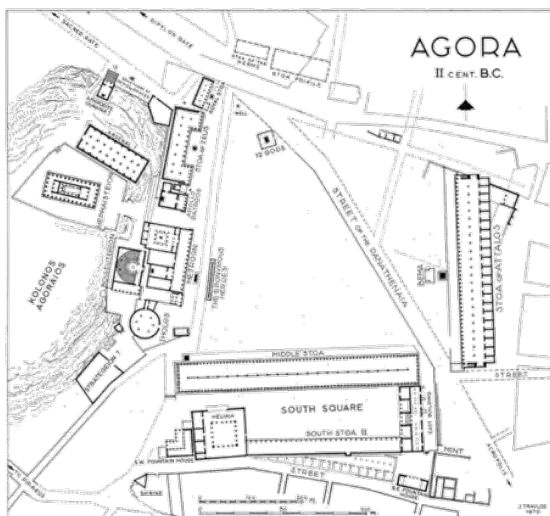
3. The Agora in Late 2nd Century B.C.
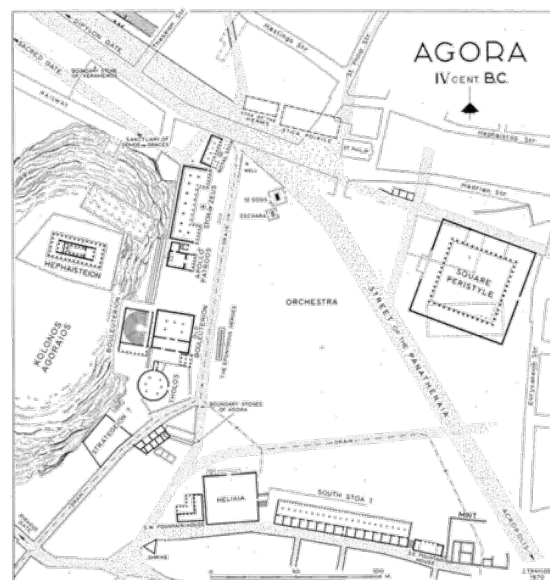
4. The Agora in Late 4th Century B.C.
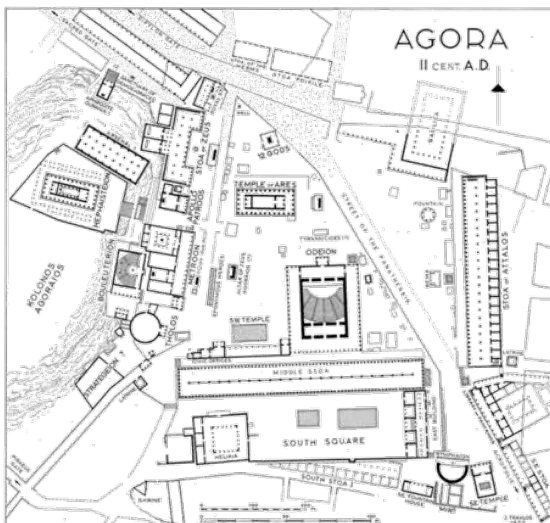
3. The Agora in Late 2nd Century After Christ
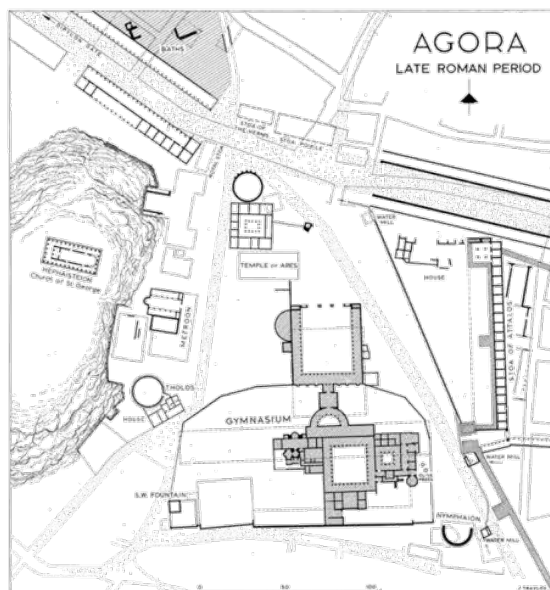
6. The Agora in Late Roman Period

31

Figure 25

The formalisation of play in cities developed an architecture of play-grounds in response. The boundaries of playgrounds are a result of the act of play; over time defining edge conditions and rules of play (Claydon, 2003; Huizinga, 1938/2000; Stevens, 2007). In traditional competitive sports these boundaries and rules become solidified in markings and distances, "they are accordingly often measured in paces, cubits, feet, palms or thumbs" (Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). The Ancient Greek word *canon* (measuring rod) came to signify a unit of measure of 600 feet, later becoming the term for a foot race that was a stadion long and subsequently the name of the arena itself (Pérez de Arce, 2018; Giannisi & Tzonis, 2004). In opposition to this parkour avoids institutionalisation, continually reforming boundaries and rules of play. Since *traceurs* regularly move between *spots* the locale of play shifts, thus the bounds of play have ephemerality that responds to the fluid texture of the city.

Traceurs take it in turns and exchange tips on how to tackle a challenge to shimmy across a ledge.
Figure 26

Traceurs often engage in *mimicry*, challenging themselves and each other to perform particular actions or *lines* (*Figure 26*). *Traceurs* often deviate to 'bring-forth' new *arrangements* and thus new boundaries for play. Across my fieldwork, this behaviour was present throughout *jams* regardless of *spot*, at the start of a training session *traceurs* begin with *paidia*, a chaotic symphony of moving bodies. As play continues, *traceurs* harmonise, identifying and

actualizing spatial possibilities. By mapping this transition from *paidia* to *ludus* we can understand how the *traceur* performs acts of *poiesis* through parkour.
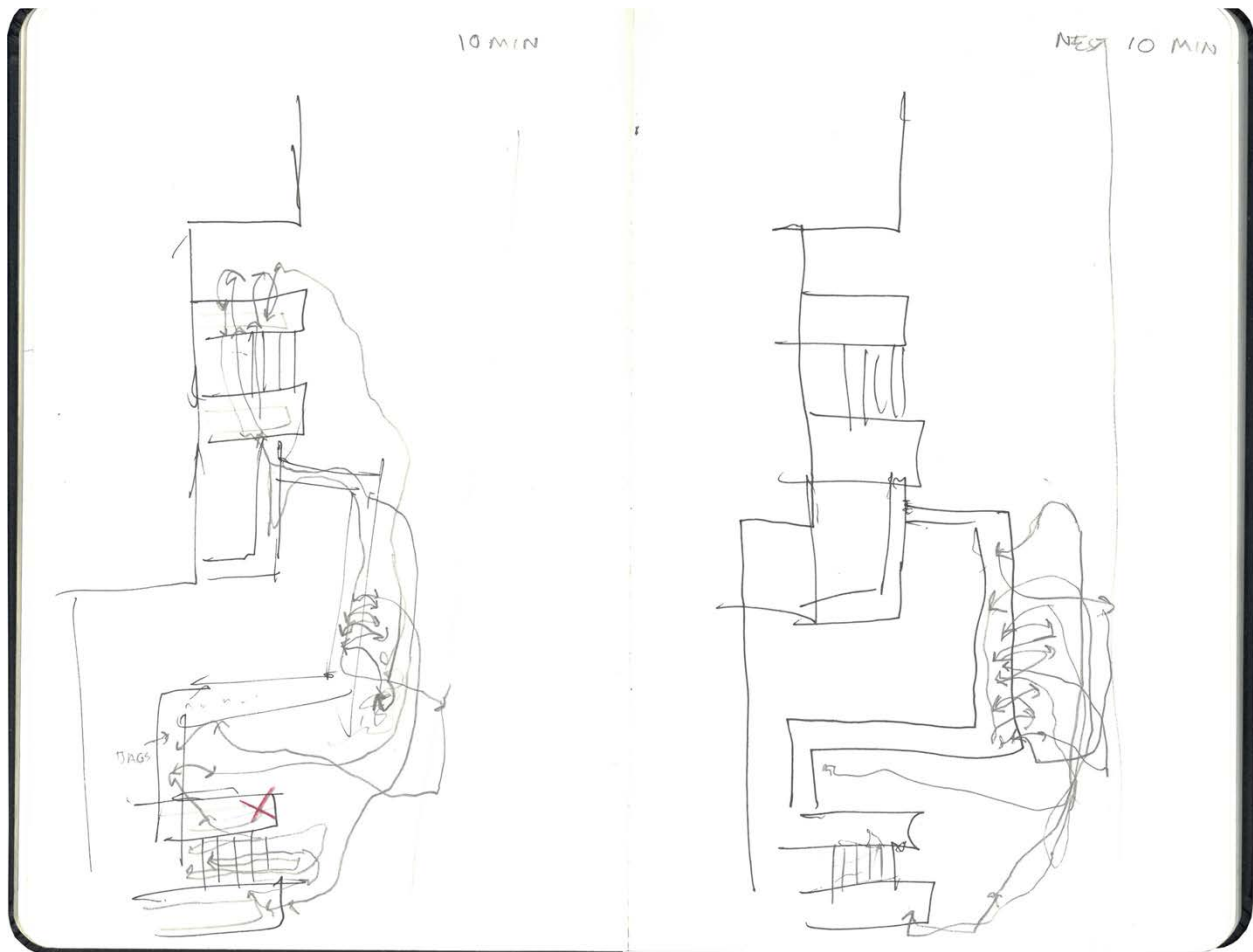
Preliminary sketches of Indi's movement.

Figure 27

The first element of the mapping was a preliminary sketch (*Figure 27*) undertaken at the *spot* (*Figure 28, 29*), tracing the path of a *traceur* named Indi, plotting moments where they performed a 'move.' This mapping was done in two intervals, each ten minutes long, separated by a short water break. *Figures 30* and *31* describe the halves in isolation, these are then overlaid creating one continuous form (*Figure 32*). Michel de Certeau notes that movement of people should be considered qualitatively as each action has a "style of tactile apprehension and kinesthetic appropriation" (Certeau, 1988); therefore, it is important to note this mapping does not describe the action, it does not distinguish between *kong*, *tic-tac* or *stick*, instead describes the patina of the *traceur*'s movement.

The *spot*, named *Cheffins* after the nearby estate agents, is outlined in red on the satellite photograph.

Figure 28
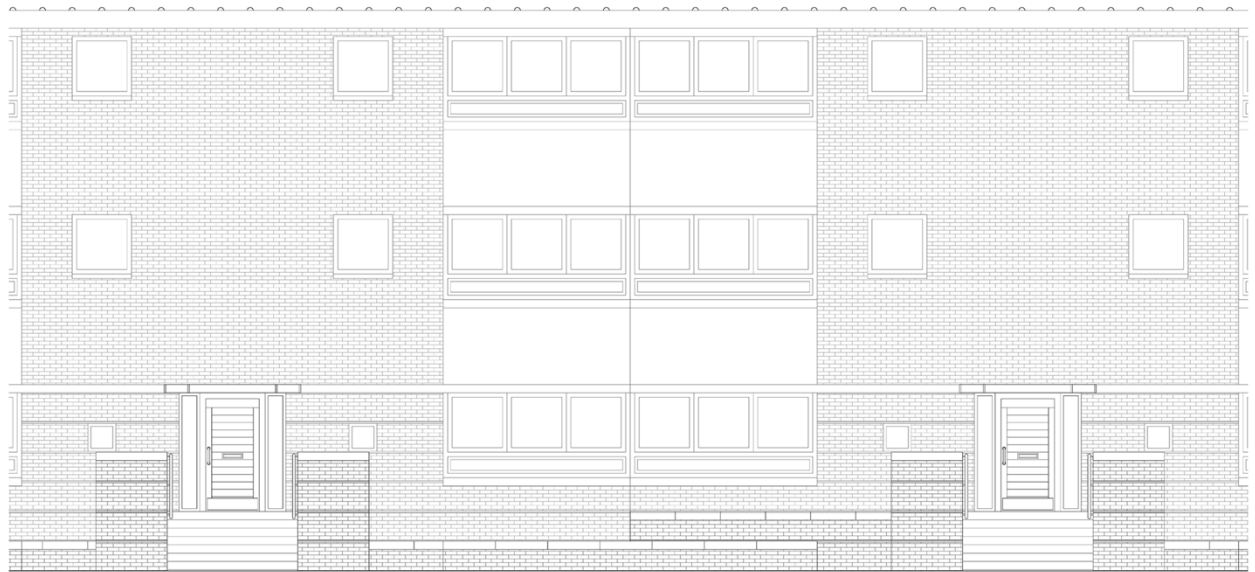
Section of *Cheffins*.

Figure 29
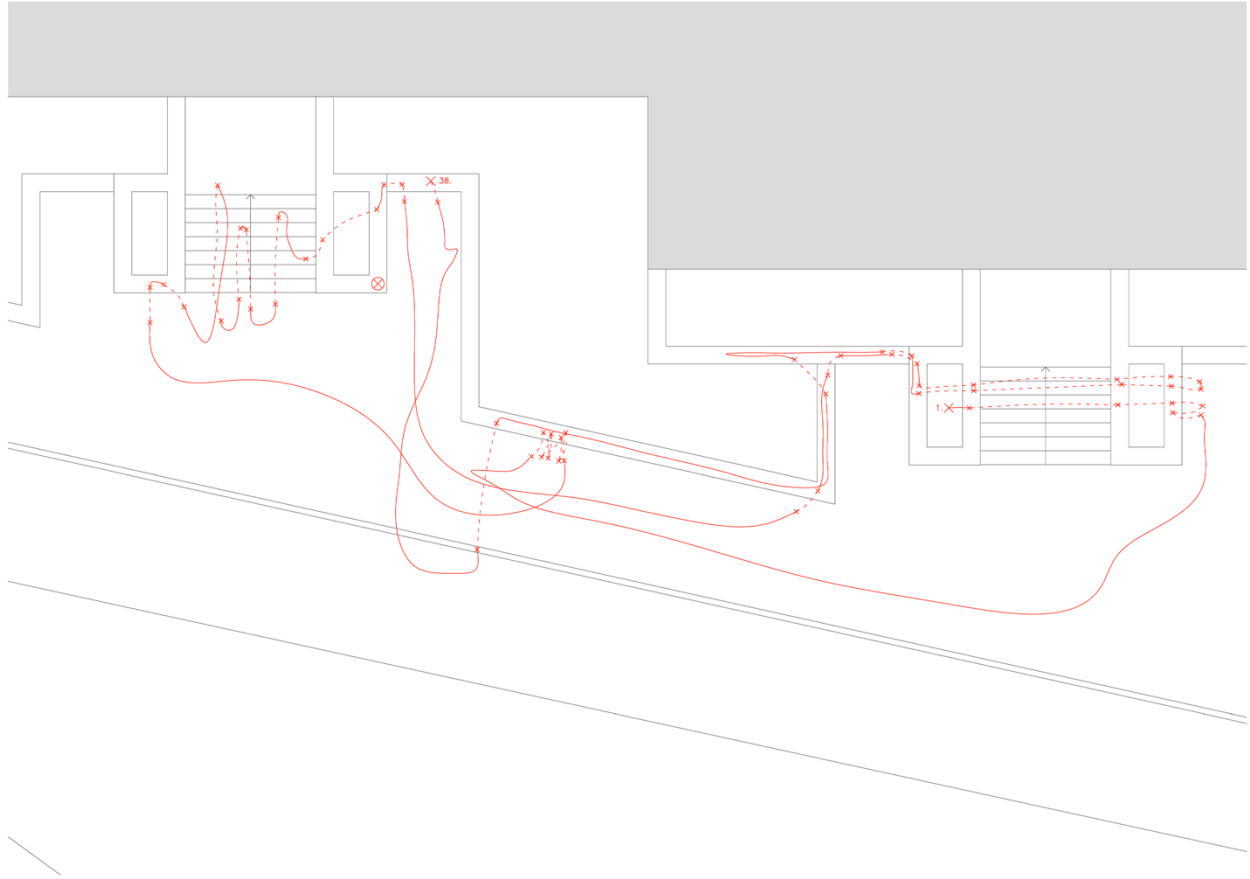
1. The preliminary sketch was translated to a formal plan of the *spot* with a solid line denoting the walking or running path of the *traceur*, a dashed line to indicate an aerial movement or action, and a cross at the start and end of the action. These are numbered to signal the beginning of the path and the terminal point, so one might follow the movement of the *traceur* linearly. The large cross with a circle surrounding it marks the point at which the author perched, observing and documenting.

Figure 30

During the initial ten-minute period, we see sporadic motion around the *spot*, identifying its bounding conditions and edges. These first actions are a warm-up, with the *traceur* getting 'their eye in', performing a range of jumps with varying distances, techniques and degrees of difficulty. During this stage, Indi and Rhys devised a challenge: to see how many steps they could jump up in one motion (left-hand of plan). They exchanged tips about tackling the challenge in the most efficient and aesthetic ways, participating in *agon* against one another. This game dematerialised as quickly as it materialised, generating rules and an arena of play for a fleeting moment before disbanding. Indi breaks off regularly during this period to reassess the *spot* and observe the actions of other *traceurs*, performing a total of 38 actions.
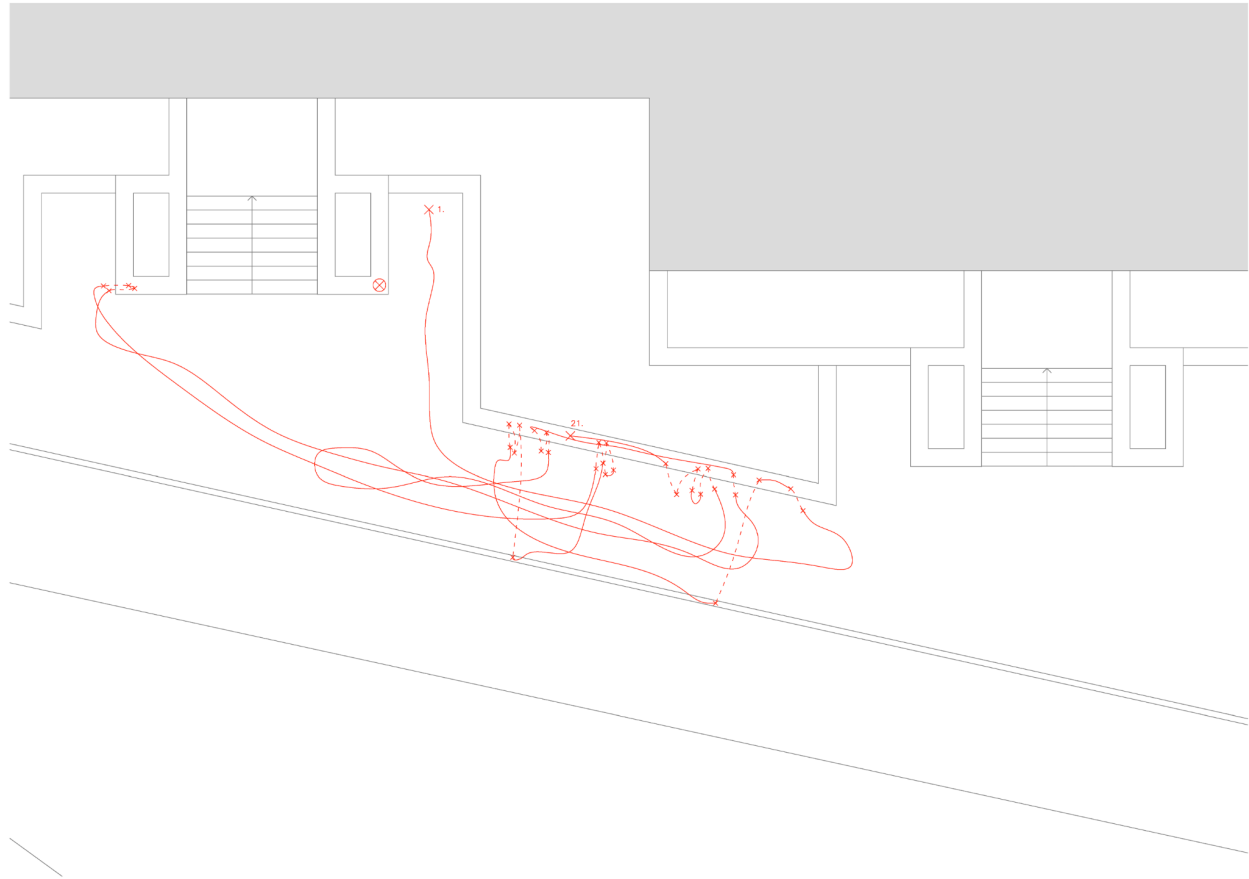
2. During the second interval Indi returned to the low wall in the centre of the spot, an area previously visited, beginning to *actualize* his movement within this zone. The locus of his movement is much tighter, choosing to focus primarily on the wall and means to traverse and interact with it.

Figure 31

Through localising his actions Indi creates a new play-ground, an act of *poiesis*. This demarcates a transition from *paidia* to *ludus*, having defined the boundaries and rules of play, with the number of actions dropping to nearly half from 38 to 21, whilst also repeating in nature (Claydon, 2003; Stevens, 2007). Indi has multiple attempts to *stick* a jump from the wall to a low ridge in the pavement that partitioned a bike lane, this new game defines a new field of play, in which the other *traceurs* partake, performing hand-springs, flips and vaults over the wall and *precision* jumps from the wall to the ridge.
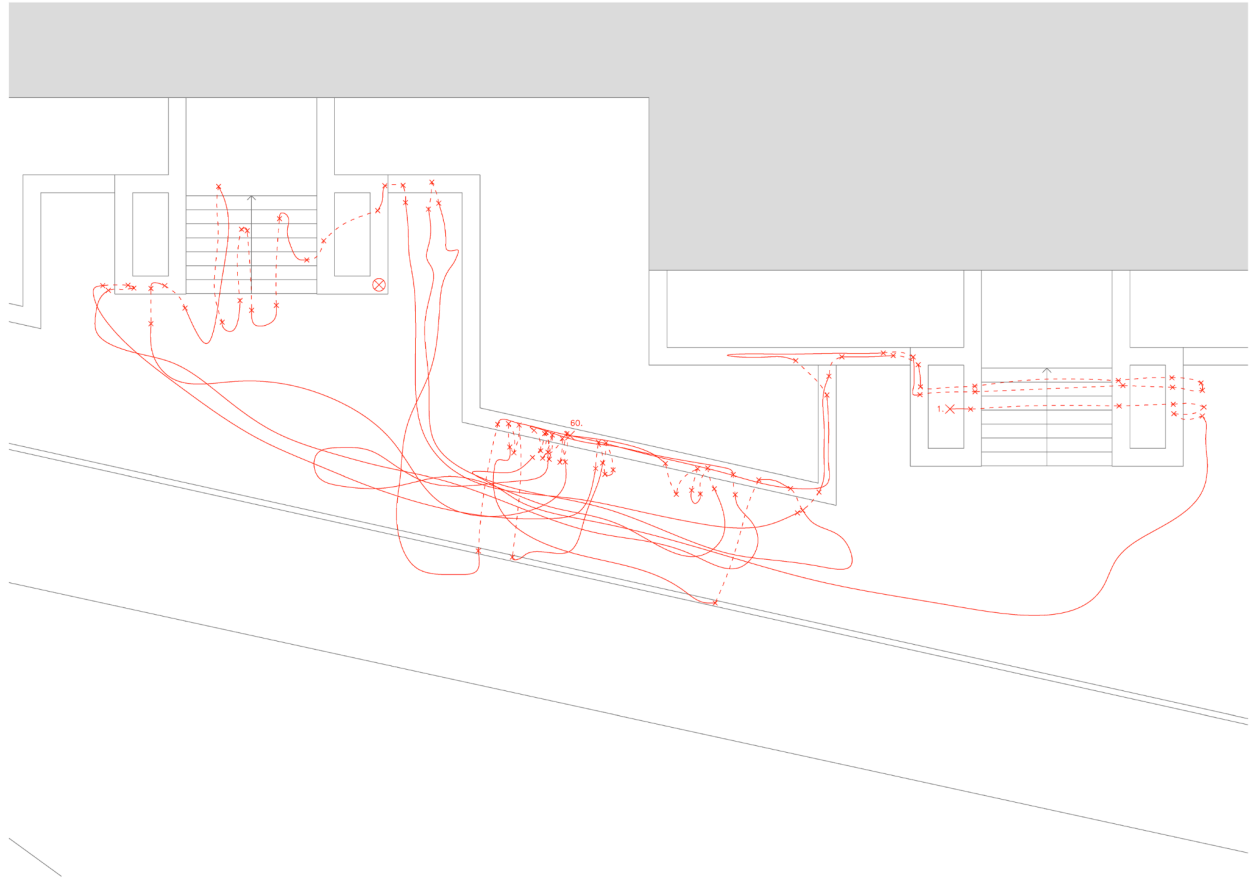
3. By overlaying these two intervals a 'heat-map' is created, displaying a nexus of 60 actions (one jump down from the wall links the end of the first interval and the start of the next) which begin to describe edges to the play-ground.

Figure 32

The edges defined by play are rough, chaotic and inconsistent, often infringing into private realms; these property boundaries are of little concern to the *traceur* whose ludic impulses have taken over in a state of *flow* (Clegg & Butryn, 2012). The fences, walls, gates and signs that demarcate private land merely become obstacles to overcome for the *traceur*; this transgressive play, or *ilinx*, poses questions surrounding the function and ownership of space (Stevens, 2012). This is particularly prescient when these boundaries do not manifest themselves in physical space, instead only existing within planning documents.

Agency and Ownership in the Neoliberal City

Sportisation and control

The friction between parkour and the neoliberal city is the result of spatial and social constraints applied by the architecture and governance of space. The processes of containment are as much a result of the contemporary urban conditions of the city as parkour is. The first means is "sportisation", a term coined to define the "process by which play-like activities become more regulated and organised" (Elias & Dunning, 1986; Wheaton, 2013).
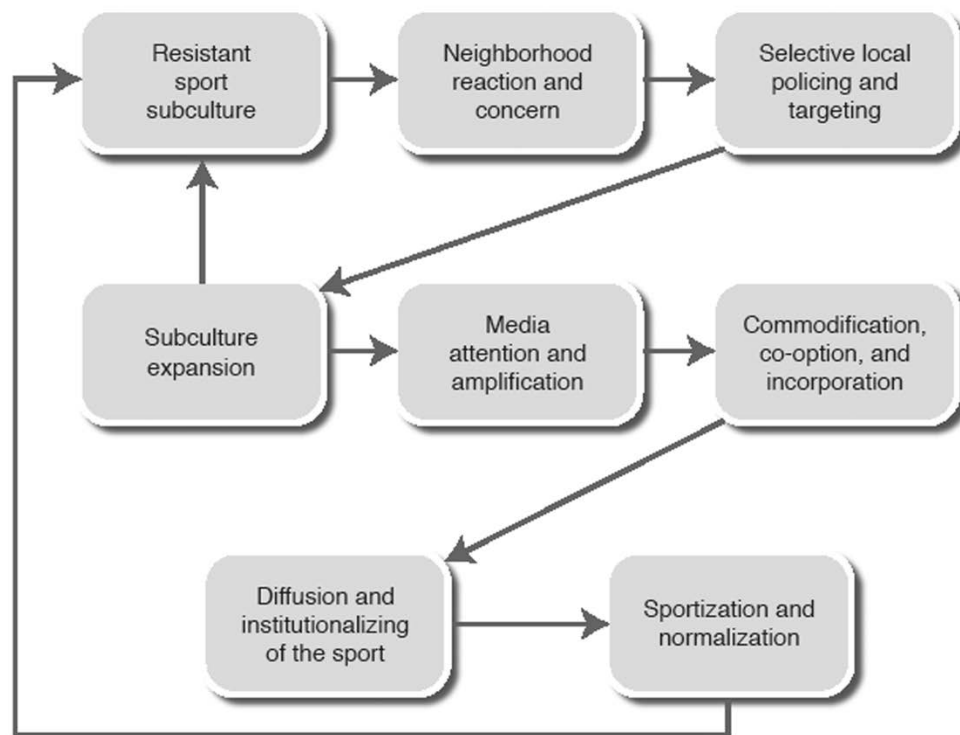
Figure 3.1 Emergence of resistance-oriented youth subcultures.

The stages of the *sportisation* of a subculture are represented in a flowchart (Atkinson & Young, 2008), charting the initial localised resistance against the subculture and the resulting process of reciprocal expansion. Thus leading to exposure and media attention and ultimately the commodification, diffusion and institutionalisation of a sport.

Figure 33

38

Sportisation is present from parkour's birth in the Parisian *banlieues*; from initial resistance and media amplification to its *spectacularization* and commodification on the big and small screens respectively. Parkour is further commodified and institutionalised in competitions such as Red Bull's Art of Motion (2007-present), and recent recognition by the UK as an official 'sport' in 2017, the first country globally to do so (Press Association, 2017).

Sportisation is fundamentally positive as it results in the expansion of parkour, increased funding through 'sport' status, and commercial sponsors who enable *traceurs* to make a living (Wheaton, 2013; Borden, 2019). For *traceurs*, however, it infringes upon the 'sacrality' of parkour and purity of play which occurs. As Huizinga asserts "play to order is no longer play: it could at best be but a forcible imitation of it" (Huizinga, 1938/2000). Play can be ordered from within, generating its own rules and bounds through *poiesis*; however, it resists external coercion (McDonald, 2019). Commodified parkour is a dissimulation as "forced play radically transforms an activity from a phenomenological perspective" (McDonald, 2019). When understanding the parkour *landscape*, we can differentiate the sects of *parkour* and *freerunning*, the main proponents of which are David Belle and Sébastien Foucan respectively. Both Belle and Foucan are seen as prophets of their disciplines - parkour originally derives from '*parcours*', however, Belle changed the c to a k as he believed it expressed a stronger more dynamic ideology (Angel, 2011). Alternatively, Foucan was the first advocate of the term *freerunning* in *Jump London*, promoting an aestheticised movement that involves more meandering *lines* and flips (Christie, 2003). Foucan and *freerunning* ideologically have an acceptance of *sportisation*, with Foucan appearing in a Nike commercial in 2002 for their line of 'Presto' shoes (Traktor, 2002). The term *freerunning*, rather than 'parkour,' is used to describe Red Bull's Art of Motion, the largest competition in the world of parkour and one which attracts advertisers alongside its title sponsor (Red Bull, 2021).

This lack of shared identity also exists in the aforementioned preferred monikers of participants, further outlining the amphorphality and multiplicity which exists within the parkour *landscape*. In 2003 David Belle described the insertion of parkour into the media after the release of *Jump London* as "prostitution of the art" in a BBC interview (Atkinson & Young, 2008), only to star in *District 13* the following year (Morel, 2004). This interaction typifies the fractious nature of subcultural practices like parkour, be it differing ideological outlooks or naming conventions used to describe itself and its participants. These divisions in acts of play are the result of the "spoil-sport" (Huizinga,

1938/2000) individuals who exploit the fragility of play, breaking the illusion and rules which bound play (McDonald, 2019). In the case of parkour, we see Sébastien Foucan as the *spoil-sport* of Belle's 'parkour'. The *traceurs* I interviewed spoke of how many of these subsets have since coalesced, instead expressing their own ideological outlooks and importance of hedonism and fun. Despite this, some *traceurs* still dogmatically follow the ideologies and training regimes of Belle and Foucan. In these terms, we can also see the parkour *landscape* as a turbulent one, perpetually in internal conflict. Consequently, parkour naturally follows the flowchart, resisting the processes of *sportisation* by continually redefining itself in pursuit of ludic play.

Iain Borden notes this same internal disjuncture in the territorial behaviour between sects of skateboarders, citing the division between skaters occupying the 'territory' of others (Borden, 2001; Borden, 2019). This can be attributed to the deep connections skaters create to *spots* through a "painful intimacy" (Borden, 2001), a result of repeated participatory practice in a specific place (Potter, 2019). This sentiment is shared by the *traceurs* I interviewed: they recounted their past escapades, bails and close encounters with security. Two of the older *traceurs* I spoke with, Ozzy and Scott, recalled countless stories of their younger selves climbing buildings in the dark, sleeping on rooftops, hanging from ledges, citing dangerous and enduring activities that elicited feelings of *ilinx* (Caillois, 2001). At a particular rooftop *spot*, we visited, *Magnum*, we encountered another group of teenagers exploring the surrounding roofs; Scott explained how this had become a frequent occurrence in the spaces of which they had once been the solitary occupants. This increased footfall led the owners of the buildings to erect a series of large industrial fences and signs across the surrounding roofs.

The preventative measures did little to contain the *traceurs* who used the fences as objects of play themselves. (Wheaton, 2013; Stevens, 2012)

Figure 34

These changes inhibit the *traceur*'s complete exploratory *paidia*; and likewise, the *ludus*, preventing *mimicry* of lines or jumps they would have previously undertaken (Stevens, 2007; Shephard, 2017). As a result, *traceurs* develop ownership over *spots* they have trained at in the past, becoming stewards on how to use the space and negotiate security, as to retain the unfettered sacrality of the *spot*; those culpable for the change of a *spot* are the *spoil-sports*, changing the rules of the game (Howell, 2008).

The relationship between play and its playground fosters a sense of personal responsibility within the *traceurs* for *spots* they frequent. Some urban planners exploit this connection to cultivate this attitude by creating designated spaces of play (Howell, 2008). Architectural historian Ocean Howell brands skateparks as "neoliberal playgrounds," functioning as a spatial constraint on the play that occurs within; these "safety valves" (Howell, 2008), physically contain play that impedes the 'productive' space of the neoliberal city - the flow of workers, shoppers, and goods

(Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). These spaces follow the modernist ideology of separating life into discrete functions (living, working, playing) and thus seek to shape young people to have desirable social qualities (Hill, 2011; Howell, 2008). The same is true for regulated sports as the "rules, victories and rewards are a proxy for how neoliberal society distributes its spoils" (Borden, 2019). As such the skatepark, and parkour's equivalent, the parkour park and the spaces of the city can be classified under Deleuze and Guattari's notion of 'striated' space. These spaces are rigid, gridded and hierarchical, seeking to control the flow of urban life through the architecture of the city (Mould, 2009; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987; Hubert, 2019; Esmaeili, 2009). In their writing, Deleuze and Guattari also introduce the concept of 'smooth' as a space of the 'nomad', one which stands in opposition to the *striated* space of the state (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). *Smooth* space is characterised as free-flowing space, free from the codifications which determine behaviour, alluding to occupation which resists the social and political restrictions of the city (Hubert, 2019; Esmaeili, 2009). In these terms Oli Mould sees the *traceur* as a mechanism to 'unstratify' space, *smoothing* urbanity through composing *lines of flight* and pathfinding in multiplicitous ways which disrupt the *striated* functions of the neoliberal city (Mould, 2009; Certeau, 1988). Subsequently, we can understand how the territorial nature of parkour allows it to resist the spatial constraints of the neoliberal city through the *nomadic* action of the *traceur* (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). Parkour is an inherently resistant and turbulent *landscape* that, by engaging in both internal and external conflict, can playfully disrupt the social and spatial constraints imposed by the neoliberal city.

The ballet of the street

As geographer David Harvey argues, the freedom to *remake* ourselves and the cities we inhabit is an inane yet neglected right (Harvey, 2015). Parkour enables *traceurs* to operate as urban *flâneurs*, using play to critique the city (Atkinson, 2009; Benjamin, 2006). The *flâneur*, a term coined by poet Charles Baudelaire, is defined as a 'stroller', an individual whose movement opposes the prescribed rhythms of the city, all the while observing the minutiae of the street. Philosopher Walter Benjamin describes the *flâneur* as "botanizing on the asphalt" (Benjamin, 2006); the *traceur* studies the urban *landscape*, not through observation but a tactile immersion (Amin & Thrift,

2002). As a result of continuous physical engagement with the city, *traceurs smooth* the *liminal* spaces into urban playgrounds, in this respect, they are "bricoleurs" (Atkinson & Young, 2008) creating sites of "jouissance" (Fiske, 1991) from uninhabited space.

The *flâneur* has received criticism for its gendered notions of domineering male gaze (Wolff, 1985). Likewise, parkour is undoubtedly a masculine dominated practice, with over 80% of *traceurs* thought to be male (Popejoy, 2017). Despite this, parkour promotes inclusivity in terms of gender, age, race and ability; focussing on a non-competitive, individualised approach (Donovan, 2006; Parkour UK, 2014). Parkour is less gendered than traditional 'sports', however, exists within the patriarchal structures of the city of which it is a product (Kidder, 2017; Wheaton, 2016). From its inception parkour has had a gendered background; from its militaristic origins to the *Yamakasi*, a group of young male participants. Additionally, the term *traceur*, like *flâneur*, is gendered, with its female counterpart being *traceuse*; further provoking the need for an alternate non-gendered term for participants of parkour. The parkour *landscape*, however, is diversifying due to changing representation online (Scott, 2022). Furthermore, parkour's focus on participatory and hedonistic action situates it as a more bodily and transgressive practice than *flânerie*. Parkour is concerned with haptic understanding of physical space through *flow* states rather than voyeuristic observation of city life. The traditional *flâneur* issues a passive and performative critique of space, concerned with the *spectacle* of city life. In contrast, the tactile transgression of the *traceur* makes them "a participant in the palimpsest of the city" (Sheringham, 1996).

In understanding the *traceur* as a *flâneur*, I differentiate the function of the *traceur* as one which is not explicitly gendered, despite its etymology and parkour's origins. I also argue that the *traceur* exerts more agency than the conventional *flâneur* as a result of this participatory approach to space. Parkour is more accessible than comparative *lifestyle sports* by virtue of its ability to occur without specific physical conditions (ie. smooth surfaces for skateboarding), and its only 'equipment' being a pair of shoes, which is not a necessity (Thorpe & Ahmad, 2015). Parkour allows for a greater diversity of participants, thus the *traceur* contrasts the *flâneur*, reading the city from a position of play, not privilege. In Gaza, *traceurs* employ parkour as a personal reclamation of space through physical engagement with the city (Vaillant & Aljakhabir, 2017). *Traceurs* use parkour as a form of playful self-expression to re-appropriate and *remake* sites of desolation as places of fun (Thorpe & Ahmad, 2015). In this context the *traceur*

is a *flâneur* who is actively engaged with the material space of the city; the *lines of flight* of the *traceur remake* and *smooth* the city through a corporeal understanding of urbanity (Raymen, 2018). The *traceur*'s critique opposes the patriarchal passivity of the *flâneur*, instead is a product of their ludic intention, thus we can see the *traceur* as a '*flâneur* of fun'.

Parkour allows *traceurs* to overcome personal and physical obstacles utilising movement as a tool for escapism (Abdeljawad, 2021).

Figure 35

Parkour's *remaking* of space is similar to skateboarding in this regard, with the notable example in skateboarding being the Undercroft at London's South Bank. An area originally demarcated for pedestrians, it soon found itself home to skateboarders because of the undulating terrain (Borden, 2019). Despite the area's significant development since the 1950s; from Skylon to Millennium Wheel, the skaters have remained present, skating the *spot* continuously for the past 40 years (Borden, 2013), acting as quasi-architects, *remaking* the Undercroft both physically and culturally in the process (Borden, 2014). An area somewhat forgotten after the 1951 Festival of Britain,

the South Bank has become a cultural and commercial hub, with the Undercroft, skating's "Mecca" (Borden, 2019), at its epicentre. The surrounding industrial buildings have become luxury flats, galleries and commercial units with the skaters the "shock troops of gentrification" (Howell, 2005). Parkour differs from skateboarding in this respect, resisting the neoliberal city wielding it as a mechanism for gentrification (Howell, 2005; Howell, 2008). Due to parkour's ability to shift the locale of play between *spots*, defining play-grounds without being restricted by materiality, it naturally resists this degree of control (Thorpe & Ahmad, 2015).

The Undercroft is beneath the Hayward Gallery, Queen Elizabeth Hall and Purcell Room, as part of an expansion of the Festival Hall and the Southbank Centre complex.

Figure 36

London's South Bank is an assemblage of constituent parts built from an evolving vision of urbanity; unlike many public spaces it has not followed a rigid ideological masterplan and the result is an ambiguous "patchwork" (Minton, 2006) of publicly and privately-owned spaces (Jones et al., 2014). This spatial makeup gives a playable 'looseness' (Ameel & Tani, 2012). Anna Minton believes the area is "justifiably hailed as a success" (Minton, 2006); a success which we can attribute to both the skaters and the unintentional *liminality* which allows continuous organismic change to occur (Sudjic, 2016). The ambiguity of the space allows for it to be *remade* as a space for fun, with play

as the catalyst for new *arrangements*. As Jane Jacobs comments: "the ballet of the good city sidewalk never repeats itself from place to place, and in any one place is always replete with new improvisations" (Jacobs, 1961/2011).

Drawing upon urbanist William Whyte allows an understanding of how the South Bank's playability creates successful public space. Whyte's studies of urban space bring one salient point to the surface: we are drawn to encounters with others; as Whyte explains "the street is the river of life for the city, we come to these places not to escape from it, but to partake in it" (Whyte, 1980a/2001; Whyte, 1980b; The Guardian, 2019). Whyte also introduces the concept of "triangulation", an external stimulus which prompts strangers to interact. This *triangulation* occurs because of performative acts of play such as busking, skateboarding and parkour. The interactions that occur from the *triangulation* of play create an improvisational *ballet* of space. Building upon these notions we can understand the relationship between play and urban space as reciprocal; not only in the means of moulding each other but in creating successful public space (Jones et al., 2014; Pullan, 2015; Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). The South Bank is characterised by skateboarding; however, the area also contains parkour's counterpart to the Undercroft, *IMAX*; a *spot* a stone's throw away at the entrance to an underpass of the Waterloo roundabout (*Figure 37*). As *flâneurs of fun*, *traceurs* highlight the transformative quality of parkour, *remaking* a desolate piece of urban infrastructure into a site of *jouissance*. Parkour's position as a purer form of play in contrast with skateboarding allows it to bisect and *smooth* areas of the neoliberal city that are more *striated*. The inherent turbulence and continual redefinition of the parkour *landscape* allow the *traceur* to adapt urban obstacles as objects of play to a greater extent than the skater (Stevens, 2012).

Given the name after the neighbouring BFI (British Film Institute) IMAX Cinema, the *spot* has been trained continuously for the past 20 years.

Figure 37

Parkour's transgressive *remaking* of space brings it into friction with the 'productive' neoliberal city, posing questions surrounding ownership of space (Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). The internal conflict present within the parkour *landscape* is also fundamental within the urban landscape as it is also a place of "shared experience and radical difference, habitual routine and unexpected events" (Pullan, 2015). In this regard it is not surprising to return to the Ancient Greek, *agon*, not only as a descriptor of contest within play but contest within the city (Caillois, 2001). Within the context of the city, *agonism* is a 'productive' conflict in which the actors engage in a discourse with respect to their counterpart; this is in contrast to its counterpart, antagonism, in which conflict is unproductive (Pullan, 2015; Mouffe, 2005). In terms of both play and the city, *agon* underpins civic and democratic structures which contribute to the diversity and success of urban life (Huizinga, 1938/2000; Pullan, 2015; Mouffe, 2005). *Agon* is a result of the plurality of urban space, with public space the "battleground" (Mouffe, 2005) for conflict. This plurality of space is increasingly diminished within the neoliberal city, the public realm is *striated* through "market-

led urban development" (Hoskyns, 2005), shifting towards privatised spaces of consumption (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987). These privately-owned public spaces (POPS) pose a threat to *agon* within the city by curtailing usage of 'public' space (Shenker, 2017; Hoskyns, 2005; Garrett, 2015).
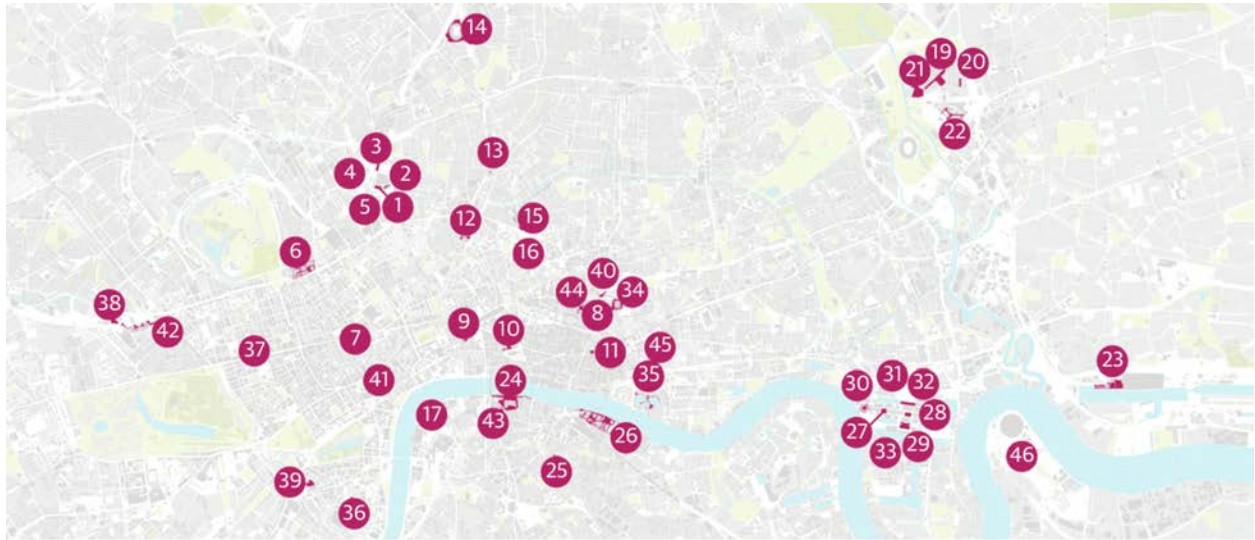
A 2017 mapping by The Guardian found swathes of public spaces in London were under private ownership; these POPS are subject to their own policing, a jurisdiction under their own right (Shenker, 2017).

Figure 38

To the reader of urbanity, the boundaries of ownership are imperceptible, in these spaces the legality of conflictual actions altered; in 2011 Occupy London protestors were forcibly removed by court order from Paternoster Square for protesting in POPS, with the judiciary deeming that the private ownership superseded the 'public' nature of the space (Minton, 2012; Shenker, 2017; Garrett, 2015; Garrett, 2017). POPS result in exclusionary spaces that aim to remove conflict, and thus create space that is the antithesis of public (Schindler, 2018). Parkour's capitalisation on the ludic potential of space and transgressive nature brings about a greater number of conflictual encounters. These encounters increase the prevalence of *agonism*, generating a discourse surrounding the 'function' of public space.

The *traceurs* are ushered away from a *spot* by an onlooking security guard.

Figure 39

The *traceurs* try continue training despite 'Frosty Jack's' presence.

Figure 40

Throughout my fieldwork, the *traceurs* were regularly in conflict as a result of their movement. The actions of the *traceurs* were not undertaken with the intention of antagonism, instead, they were actively averse to conflict as this usually resulted in the end of their time at a *spot* (*Figure 39*). The resultant conflict often prevented play from occurring freely, with the adversary a *spoil-sport*. The catalysts of conflict were not limited to security guards, with members of the public often perturbed and even children pestering the *traceurs* to "do a flip." One such conflict

occurred between a *traceur* named Connor and a drunken man, who Connor dubbed 'Frosty Jack' in relation to the cider he was drinking (*Figure 40*). Connor, who is a fireman by trade, was ironically accused of being a "burden on society"; despite attempting to explain the actions of the *traceurs* the exchange soon became a back and forth. Whilst we can classify the interaction between Connor and 'Frosty Jack' as antagonistic, the whole encounter was *agonistic* due to the performativity of the conflict. By occurring in public space, the discourse was a moment of *triangulation* drawing an audience of passers-by. This *agon* can be considered 'productive' despite no definitive resolution. Chantal Mouffe asserts that the notion that *agonism* will lead to "final reconciliation" is flawed, believing we should discard the idea of public space as a space of "consensus" (Mouffe, 2005). In this vein, we should regard the conflict present within urbanity as a consequence of *triangulation*, and thus precisely what makes public space successful (Whyte, 1980a/2001). Hannah Arendt describes the meaning of public life as being seen and heard by others, deriving significance "from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position" (Arendt, 1958/1998). The essence of public life and public space opposes uniformity, embracing multiplicitous and conflictual encounters. The turbulent parkour *landscape* mirrors the characteristics of successful city space, thus generating *agon*. By operating as a *flâneur of fun* the *traceur* critiques the homogeneity of the neoliberal city, by transgressing against the *striated* strata of the city. Thus, parkour is both a stimulus to question the function of public space and a *ballet* that is indicative of its success (Jacobs, 1961/2011).

Conclusion

This dissertation has aimed to evaluate the role of parkour within the neoliberal city to assess the wider architectural implications of play within urbanity. Arguing that parkour enables the *traceur* to attain legibility of the city through a tactile appraisal of space. By drawing *lines of flight* that bisect the *striated* strata of urbanity in the pursuit of fun, the *traceur re-enchants* the *liminal* creating spaces of secular sacrality. An analysis of the origins of parkour enables an understanding that *parkour vision* entails a childlike reading of the city as a "contiguous whole" (Clegg & Butryn, 2012). This reading enabled the *Yamakasi* to *remake* the *banlieue* as an urban playground, combining the architecture of post-war modernism and the moving image to inspire new forms of pathfinding within the city.

Alongside the development of the parkour *landscape*, we can cite its first interaction with the mechanisms of the neoliberal city as its *spectacularization* within film. Through its attempted co-option as a commodity, we can locate parkour's inherent resistive character within the implicit agency of content creation and self-identification as a participatory act of play. Furthermore, by using Caillois' vocabulary of Huizinga's play-element we can identify the simultaneity of play which occurs within the parkour *landscape* as it continually oscillates between *agon*, *alea*, *mimicry*, and *ilinx*. The multiplicity of parkour corresponds to its playground, the city, and in turn allows the *traceur* to "apprehend its mobility" (Sheringham, 1996). Due to this apprehension of urbanity parkour can enact *poiesis*, 'bringing-forth' space within the city through a pervasive reading of *whole*. A wider reading of play articulates the function of play as an explorative act whose "rhythms" and "gestures" define the architecture of urban space (Lefebvre & Harvey, 1991). Whilst a closer mapping of parkour displays the transition from *paidia* to *ludus*, and the patina of defined space. In contrast to less multiplicitous acts of play, the play-grounds created by parkour are more ephemeral, responding fluidly to the fabric of the city.

Parkour's contiguous reading of urbanity results in a transgressive practice that is in constant friction with the neoliberal city. The turbulent parkour *landscape* coupled with its resistive origins allows it to overcome spatial and social constraints. In turn, the *sportisation* of the practice leads to greater plurality within parkour in pursuit of ludic play. Despite the ephemerality of space created by parkour, we find territorialisation occurs through repeated participatory practice. Through the creation of parkour parks, we can understand how the neoliberal city seeks to wield play as a proxy for its ideological structures, gentrifying space and removing impediments to consumption. In opposition to this, the *traceur* operates as a *flâneur of fun*, *smoothing striated* urban space through corporeal participation with the palimpsest of the city. The *traceur* is a *bricoleur*, critiquing urbanity through a ludic lens, *remaking* the city as a site of *jouissance*.

As a *flâneur of fun*, the *traceur* contributes to the *ballet* of the street, spatially *loosening* the urban realm and creating ambiguity within the city. The *liminality* of the resultant space allows for organismic change to occur in response to new *arrangements* and trajectories. Parkour's ability to *triangulate* actors within space in turn contributes to the improvisational success of public space. This plurality of space leads to a multitude of conflictual encounters which

enable urban actors to engage in *agon*. It is precisely this dissonance that I argue is the role of parkour, and thus play, within the neoliberal city.

Architecturally we can understand parkour as a factor to disrupt the rhythms of urban space. Whilst this may oppose the architect's designed intentions I suggest that this playful questioning can allow a necessary *remaking* of space. This spatial ambiguity leads to a successful urban landscape that embodies 'city-ness' (Jones et al., 2014). Instead of attempting to contain or wield play, architects and urban planners should embrace public space as ludic space. Parkour exemplifies how purer multiplicitous forms of play will resist spatial and social restraint. Having used parkour as a lens to view the city, this dissertation thus proposes an approach to the architecture of public space in regards to play. For this we can turn to a reading of children's adventure playgrounds; the architecture of play must be more "methectic rather than mimetic" (Harrison, 1912), that is, "a helping-out of the action" rather than a proscription of its likely character" (Claydon, 2003). Spatially we can understand the successful city as a play-ground which should produce an architecture that is responsive and playable.

Figure 41

Filmography

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