Parkour as a Visual Urban Subculture: An Aesthetic Understanding of its Performative Scope

Javier Toscano

Parkour is a relatively recent urban sport that has been anchored in a complex yet co-constituting media environment. While media representations of the sport fascinate outsiders, they also generate certain uneasiness for parkour's practitioners, who know these representations are more the result of mediated effects than actual renderings of their own interactions. And yet, many traceurs keep on producing these materials themselves. This article analyzes how this tension reveals parkour's underlying philosophy working on a two-tiered structure, seemingly contradictory at times but actually serving a complementary function. In that sense, the analysis aims to show how this structure is articulated. Once the social world of parkour is described, both on its interactional and its media levels, an analysis of its aesthetic narratives and representations shows how an "inexact" or "complementary" series of depictions actually serve a supplementary objective, a task that fulfills both an organizational as well as a symbolic need.

Keywords: parkour, urban performance, media analysis, aesthetic function, media environment

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Introduction

Parkour was developed as an urban sport during the late 80's and early 90's in the outskirts of Paris and soon afterwards became a trending activity with recognizable figures worldwide. Part of its success has been due to its effective integration to a media environment (see Geyh, 2006; Saville, 2008; Ladewig, 2008; Archer, 2010; Lauschke, 2010; Hietzge, 2014), for the type of movements that the sport produces can be very easily conformed into edited sequences and astonishing images where bodies are depicted in implausible poses and situations. Now, as much as these representations allure newcomers and outsiders, they also generate a certain uneasiness in parkour's regular traceurs or freerunners—as practitioners name themselves—who know these depictions are more the result of mediated craftings and individual stagings than actual exemplifications of their own interactions. Yet, many traceurs keep on producing these media materials themselves. So, if there is a tension opening up over the community assessments between the mediated and the actual performances, what is the function of those media artifacts? How are these produced and consumed by the community itself? And how is the tension solved in the end, if at all?

This article aims at answering these questions by examining parkour's *social world* (Strauss, 1978; Unruh, 1980) and its most important interactional events. Specifically, the article explores how these events are rendered into media artifacts, explaining how the depiction and understanding of the sport is based on a two-tiered structure. This structure might seem to be contradictory at times, but it also serves a complementary function. The description of how it is articulated will shed light on the specific media usages of the sport, where media objects will appear to have a specific role within a symbolic ordering. This ordering is highly valuable, not only because it implies the creative unfolding of a worldview, but also because it enables a unique way of experiencing an urban environment. In other words, once the social world of parkour is described, specially from the vantage point of its interactional and its media levels, an analysis of its aesthetically-based representations will show how an "inexact" or "complementary" series of depictions actually serve a functional objective, a task that fulfills both an organizational and a symbolic need.

Materials and Methods

The empirical data for this paper derives from two years of regular participant-observation among traceurs in Germany and Austria, while assembling a vast collection of images and videos that the participants produced and/or posted, shared

or followed online. During that time, I attended and participated in a variety of training sessions and other events relevant to the regional parkour community. Materials in the form of field-notes, interviews and photographs to document situations and explain spatial renderings stemmed out of this approach. All the data was continuously organized and coded following the guidelines of the grounded theory methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). Interviews and important passages in the video clips were transcribed in detail to make them easier to analyze; the interview fragments presented in this article were translated into English correspondingly.

For grounded theory, theoretical sampling is a key process. It implies finding suitable samples and making constant comparisons between them. Relevant materials are sought in order to discover progressively specific phenomena that can be assembled under certain categories and their elements, out of which it is possible to detect and explain any given relations or associations. As it has been hinted, parkour is a sport with a strong media component; therefore, media materials are key to understanding both its visual organization and the function of its symbolic structure. For, as Konecki argues, on the path towards a visual grounded theory: "The process of construction of a visual phenomenon begins with coordination work accompanied by systematic perception/interpretation of the constructed action. It continues with accounts of diverse indispensable aspects of creation, reception, and maintenance of the phenomenon in question. Activities often tend to be visually maintained. 'To see' very often means 'to be'." (2011: 147).
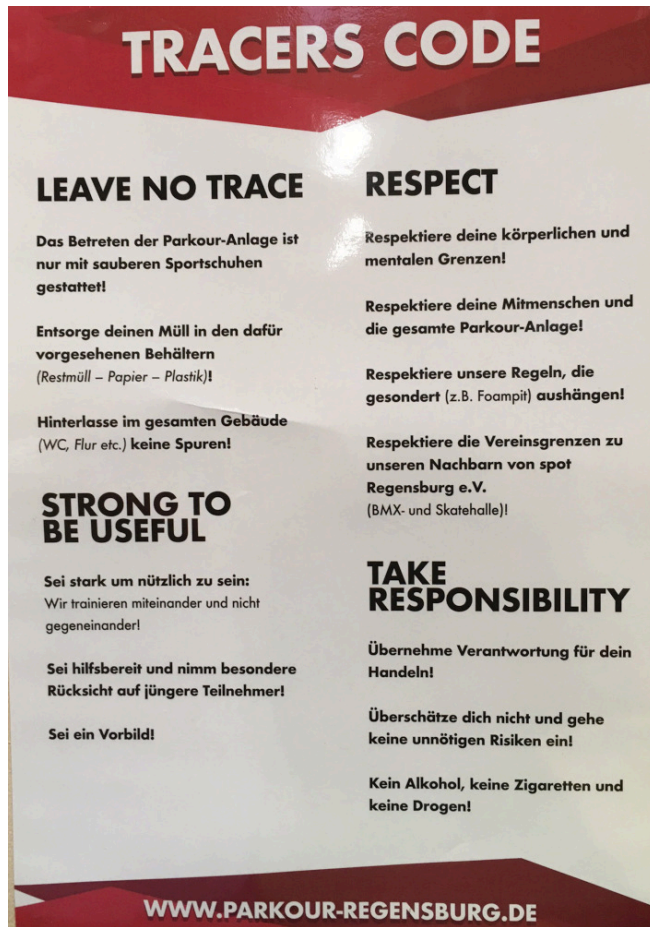
Parkour is here understood as performative insofar as it is an embodied practice that offers a way of knowing by challenging the conception, perception and occupation of a given urban environment and its context, both by the performer (in a self-reflective manner) as by the viewer. But it also means that a given interpretation may only be possible when integrating the resulting media objects –as informal public scripts making up for an online archive of sorts– to the resulting patterns of fleeting movements, in order to appreciate the set of choices, challenges and propositions made by a traceur. With this in mind, I constantly underwent a process of analytic separation of the face-to-face (i.e., interactional) performances and their mediated representations, while reconstructing continuously their unity in action and perception. The videos presented here for analysis are exemplary in the sense that they contain, in an abridged form, a specific treatment and/or routine which can be found all along the available materials that the community views and shares. Other tangential aspects of the methods used to obtain these results will be explained in the course of the article.

Parkour's Social World

Social worlds are emergent—sometimes evanescent—structures conforming in the absence of a central hierarchy, in and through which actors, organizations and

practices coalesce (Unruh, 1980). Looking out for these features in parkour, one recognizes very soon that sports associations are the gatekeepers to parkour's socialization. And for associations, there are two main event formats in which this is organized: training sessions and jams. Training sessions are regular meetings during the week in which traceurs gather to exercise together, practice tricks and get reminded about the sport's philosophy. Following Goffman's frameworks, these consist in "rituals of practice" (1974: 59). If training indoors, with mattresses and setups that will protect from injuries, these meetings do not differ much from a fitness or a gymnastics session; if outdoors, the athletes get closer to a street culture, they adapt their routines to the specific urban situation and show more initiative on a creative level. Jams are congregations where different groups, associations and individual traceurs meet. Under the Goffmanian frameworks, these count as "rituals of demonstration or exhibition" (1974: 60). Jams include the same activities as a training session, but in an expanded time horizon, with a greater amount of participants and with more occasions to interact with other traceurs. Sometimes, central exhibitions by parkour influencers or other guests also take place. During jams, organizers do not explain parkour's philosophy, but refer continuously to it as specific behavioral traits that are expected from participants ("respect," "cooperation," "autonomy," "horizontality"). In that sense, a parkour *ethos* is enacted as a shared condition or set of communal values. And very likely due to this, jams seem to follow an anarchistic organization, looking more as a form of chaotic jamboree for outsiders (see also Atkinson, 2009: 180; Kidder, 2013: 236).

Through these events, parkour's philosophy—its *ethos*—plays a fundamental role, shaping, influencing, and guiding the activities. Inasmuch as it is constitutive of the parkour community, one could say that it has the form of that "solidary system of beliefs and practices […] that bring together a moral community", in what Durkheim analyzed as the elementary forms of a spiritual life (1912/1960: 65). To be sure, parkour cannot be labeled a religion in any way; it has no dogmas, liturgies or preachers, and could not count as a purely spiritual practice, but it comes close to a secular assemblage of rites that attempt to bring an individual closer to a higher ideal: the "sacredness" of the self. Viewed in this way, training sessions and jams can be seen as communicative performances (rituals). Through them, the disciplined body and the confrontation of one's own ideas with the values of the community shape a given path (a "journey"), which is always both unique and individual but also communally signified. In this direction, a "collective effervescence" emerges from a "same form of thinking and a same action" (Durkheim, 1960: 553). One can then locate here specific community values assembled as physical rites that drive the routines and at the same aim towards a higher goal: the improvement of oneself. Accordingly, participation-based accounts have here detected the ritual significances and corresponding symbolizations of "trying" (Saville, 2008: 900), "challenging to grow" (Bavinton, 2007: 401),

TRACERS CODE

LEAVE NO TRACE

Das Betreten der Parkour-Anlage ist nur mit sauberen Sportschuhen gestattet!

Entsorge deinen Müll in den dafür vorgesehenen Behältern (Restmüll – Papier – Plastik)!

Hinterlasse im gesamten Gebäude (WC, Flur etc.) keine Spuren!

STRONG TO BE USEFUL

Sei stark um nützlich zu sein: Wir trainieren miteinander und nicht gegeneinander!

Sei hilfsbereit und nimm besondere Rücksicht auf jüngere Teilnehmer!

Sei ein Vorbild!

RESPECT

Respektiere deine körperlichen und mentalen Grenzen!

Respektiere deine Mitmenschen und die gesamte Parkour-Anlage!

Respektiere unsere Regeln, die gesondert (z.B. Foampit) aushängen!

Respektiere die Vereinsgrenzen zu unseren Nachbarn von spot Regensburg e.V. (BMX- und Skatehalle)!

TAKE RESPONSIBILITY

Übernehme Verantwortung für dein Handeln!

Überschätze dich nicht und gehe keine unnötigen Risiken ein!

Kein Alkohol, keine Zigaretten und keine Drogen!

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"progression" (Kidder, 2013: 242), "efficiency of the self" (Ladewig, 2008: 120) or "overcoming" (Toscano, forthcoming). In this regard, parkour's symbolic system can be seen as a constellation of elements (rules, advices, suggestions, routines) that constitute a practical mechanism towards self-knowing and a specific form of subjectivation: a technology of the self (Foucault, 1978).

Fig. 1 (left): Poster with the traceur's code

Now, for Durkheim, the material elements are precisely a functional component in the ordering of the community; they are the concrete pieces used as connectors between rituals, practices and beliefs. Moreover, the symbolic system that translates a given language "is the product of a collective elaboration. That which expresses it is the form in which society as a whole represents for itself the *objects of experience*." (Durkheim, 1960: 620). Focused on the challenges and prowess of the body, parkour would seem to have few of those material entities at hand (sometimes they constitute elementary objects, such as posters, which work as mnemotechnical devices that hold and recall these moral resolutions; see Figure 1 for an example). But actually, this seems to be the function, or at least one of the main contributions, of its media artifacts. It is mainly with and through them that parkour's philosophy is expressed, condensed and disseminated. In the following sections we will see how these materials play a specific role in the praxis, not without tensions and paradoxes of their own.

Out of Joint: Articulating Parkour's Media Level

Parkour is an urban sport, which implies the physical action of the practitioner in a given site. The background information concerning parkour's origins, its values and its quests, but also the practicalities of its social gatherings, are deeply linked to engaging urban spaces. However, the significance and assessment of parkour's history and present forms of practice are mostly produced and disseminated through the internet and the contemporary environment of social media networks (see Lauschke, 2010; Kidder, 2013, but also parkour influencers such as Tapp, 2014; Wieland, 2016 and 2017, or Paul, 2017). Early on, websites and blogs were critical sources to read about the practice and the tricks (arranged in a loose system of chorographical moves), as well as to understand the values sought by the community. Nevertheless, with the widespread availability of mobile recording devices and platforms for broadcasting (mainly YouTube), videos have become the main objects from which to access, peak at, appreciate, understand, research and celebrate the movements, routines and discursive elements of the sport. Correspondingly, different specialized articles have recognized how parkour as a sport is an activity articulated through both its interactional and its media elements. Saville, for example, has described parkour as a "composite affair" between media technologies and the body (2008: 894); likewise, Ladewig has referred to an "amalgam" between body and media practices (2008: 110).

  Now, while these and other descriptions (Geyh, 2006; Lauschke, 2010: 38-42; Hietzge, 2014: 110; Raymen, 2019: 23) seem to attest to a smooth continuity of both levels, what actually ensues is an articulated tension. This tension is at stake in parkour's typical definition, which appears in innumerable studies and pop culture magazines, as: "the most efficient way to go from point A to point B."[1] The definition seems to be straightforward and simple, but a careful field observation easily falsifies what it states, and could ask if this is even the intention of any traceur. Few scholars have reported this inconsistency. Among them, Kidder reports that traceurs "very rarely (if ever) use parkour to traverse any sort of appreciable distance. Instead, [they] gather in a certain area […] and 'train' on the obstacles there […]. After a while, people would move to another area —usually just by walking (in the typical fashion)" (2013: 236). Sometimes indirectly, other studies make subtle remarks that question the imagined smoothness of parkour's flows (Laughlin, 2004; Saville, 2008: 900; Lauschke, 2010: 42), demystify the spectacularity of its training places (Ameel and Tani, 2012: 171) or simply find the alleged difference between a traceur and a freerunner unconvincing (Meinhof, 2011: 32). In the course of this study, traceurs appear to be aware of these discrepancies. One of them plainly stated:

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[1] According to Bavinton, this definition can be traced back to David Belle, one of parkour's founders (2007: 392).

> [Parkour was never] this quick and efficient way to get from A to B; [the founders of the sport] wanted it so, but it never was. We have never ran five minutes. [...] I've never seen anyone doing parkour for five minutes through the city. We have an endurance range from two seconds to a maximum of one minute. So, one minute is really the maximum that we do sports all the time. [...] So, in the end it's actually just sprinting, jumping off, landing, done ... that's it. (Personal communication, 17 October 2018).

The tension that arises between that abstract definition and the actual interactions of the sport seems to be instigated by a poorly weighed rendering of its mediated representations, where a traceur can "appear" to be moving from a point A to another point B within a single thrust. In other words, parkour has been ultimately defined (and distorted) by the actions represented in its media artifacts, without a critical understanding of how these relate to the praxis in its entirety. The whole situation provokes a certain confusion. Now, this does not mean that the sport would be better off by leaving the media level on the side and concentrating in its pure presencial performances, a move that would even prove to be inconceivable at this point. What seems to be needed instead is to turn this tension into a productive articulation, and this can only be undertaken by a close analysis of parkour's media artifacts, in close connection to the social organization of the sport and its functioning as a symbolic system. On this track, the following sections will present, in a synthetic form, a series of analytical elements from a detailed observation of parkour's videos and films, produced by the community and spanning from 2001 to 2020.

Parkour's Media Artifacts

In order to understand the articulation of the media level in parkour, two processes are relevant: the production and consumption of its media materials. The production can be aimed at a mere personal reception or at a wider audience. The first form of production/self-consumption will not be tackled here under the form of a case study, especially because the resulting pieces under this usage usually remain isolated, as raw, fragmentary, unedited files without a stable context to produce a thorough interpretation. This does not mean that these materials are unimportant, for they actually yield a recognizable aesthetic that eventually can be even channeled into other videos directed towards a broader public (for example, as a sign of "authenticity", or as vestiges from the everyday). But, as we will see, the accurate analysis of these pieces remains attached to an understanding of the particular habitus that the traceur levies on them (for example, in its uses as a selfie, as a tool for recording one's own training progress, or as a souvenir from a given site).

Once we filter out that class of objects, we obtain an abundant mass of pieces which correspond closely to parkour's main social events, yielding thus two main

sub-genres[2]: *jam videos* and *training session videos*. The aesthetics of these sub-genres build up parkour's visual subculture, in what Jürgen Raab calls a "community of seeing" [*Sehgemeinschaft*] (Raab, 2008). The analysis of these sub-genres can lead to an understanding of "the shaping principles and construction forms on the aesthetical actions of the actors." (Raab, 2008: 167). As perceptual patterns, they guide and inform how a way of seeing is conformed and sets criteria to approach specific forms of assessing the material. The sub-genre parting can also support an analysis about the social uses of visual artifacts and about the habits and expectations embedded in the orders of seeing. In that way, the samples conformed under these categories can provide evidence about specific reality constructions and the worldviews of the communities engaging with them, as much as about the identity-making processes and the socio-structural arrangements of the communities themselves. This had been explored by Mannheim already in his documentary interpretation (1964:126ff). It had been also a subject of analysis on what Bohnsack deemed as "spaces of conjunctive experience" (2009), which provide indications about community practices and shared attitudes, many times concealed or just far-from-evident for outsiders. In this sense, parkour's sub-genre videos are valuable pieces of data that can shed light on how its practitioners communicate cultural, aesthetic and ethical values, how they transmit their own praxis-based concerns and even how they inscribe and turn symbolic elements into rhetorical elements of a consistent worldview.

Regarding the interpretation of the materials, a protocol was established. Within it, some relevant insights from the interviews were extracted and processed to understand visual approaches and interpretive strategies, but the case studies were not deciphered along with other traceurs. The reason for this is twofold. On the one hand, the materials are publicly available, so they are not meant for reserved or secretive readings. On the other hand, many of the elements at play work at an emotional level, so even if they performing effectively, this does not mean that all practitioners *qua* viewers are consciously aware of the visual connections at stake. As we will see, an effective discursive interpretation (an aesthetic understanding) requires an analysis of the underlying emotional elements within aesthetic features. But the aesthetic functions are not always easy to spot, they have to be reconstructed tracing them back from the emotions they are set to produce. In other words, as the cognitivist Martinez Marín states, "emotions do not constitute reasons by themselves but invite us to search for reasons." (2020: 144). In that sense, a specialized visual approach is useful in that it can delve into the material with a consistent focus, scope and depth. Towards this end and to produce each description, the videos were first viewed in full length uninter-

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[2] "Genre" and "sub-genre" are here already analytical categories, stemming out of field observations. A genre can be established as a relation of formal qualities with regards to conventions of seeing and interpreting. In this sense, it depends on an interplay between practices of production and reception (see Altmann, 1999).

ruptedly. During further viewings, the content and stylistic focal points in the videos were located. At the same time, key scenes were interpreted in detail; the interactive options of the viewers/users on the respective videos (parasocial interactions) were also taken into account. The process amounts to a hermeneutic film approach based on a thorough sequence analysis.

A hermeneutical approach can generate an understanding, an interpretation of a text, an object or an event. When the object of study is something produced (i.e., not a situation or an observable trait), the aim is to comprehend the unique selection and the concrete combination of an author's unitary elements (words and sentences, or images and sequences) and through that, an experience of the world, even a worldview (Gadamer, 1971: 112). Now, for this process to be productive at the media level, it must take into account how audiovisual data can produce a specific set of interpretative signs (Raab 2008: 136-140). This means that the actions taking place along camera movements such as the shifting of objects or behaviors of actors, the intersections of spoken language, music or fonts, the camera handling and post-processing techniques—editing, framing or other special effects—impact the meaning of the piece. In that sense, a visual hermeneutics, even if not a set of unmovable rules, establishes a guideline for an analysis on the scene's "mediasphere" (Roussel, 1999). In this direction, the detection of sequences forms the core of any hermeneutic video analysis. This means finding intrinsic pauses –borderlines in the storyline usually marked by a cut– and proceed to their dissection (the cut in the video itself might also work as an organic separation; the question can be asked as to why a certain cut was made at a given point in terms of content and aesthetics). Also, one approaches the sequence by describing the basic actions, and only later is one to add the contextual knowledge one has of the represented event. The results from the analysis are arguments developed out of the video material that are incorporated afterwards into theoretical contexts.

The Jam Sub-Genre Videos

The first video to be analyzed here belongs to the jam sub-genre. Within this category, the chaotic and dynamic activity that one witnesses on the interactional events of the same name is never visible. Instead, one recognizes other features and structures. The edited representations show synthetic versions of communal festivities or celebratory gatherings, *always* accompanied by music (see also Day, 2003: 6, and Lauschke, 2010: 44). A typical jam video therefore includes (1) an introductory part showing preparations for the event, (2) a main section depicting challenges (different parkour tricks), and (3) shorter transitions that presents moments of relaxation or amusement. Quite often, these scenes are accompanied by (4) edition effects, which outline a specific sequence. Following a closer analysis

on each of these elements[3], they can be further described as containing *one or more* specific-type scenes, as summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Typology of sequences on a typical parkour jam video.

(1) Preparations	1. getting to the place 2. warming up 3. setting up the field 4. indoor pre-training 5. traceur's presentations 6. scenes from the surroundings
(2) Challenges	1. group repetitions of single tricks, one traceur at a time 2. one single performer, watched by many 3. different traceurs, different tricks at a time
(3) Transitions	1. group greetings 2. group interactions 3. gags/jokes/moments of joy 4. fails
(4) Edition effects	1. close-ups 2. fast-forwarded scenes 3. slow-motion scenes

The following interpretation of a jam video, stemming from an event in Hamburg in 2017, follows an analysis that highlights three aesthetic planes of meaning: (1) montage—the effect of each fragment in contrast to the previous and the following ones; (2) framing—what is to be seen on the selection of the visual display with the corresponding objective, and (3) the resulting compound of image and sound. These material choices are then further interpreted as elements performing a secondary, symbolic inscription, where specific socio-aesthetic values are at stake. The way the "seeing is seen" [*sehendem Sehen*] (Imdahl, 1980: 92) leads then to a reflection of the visual sample as a piece of a complex and dynamic worldview.

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[3] This analysis was made for a group of 40+ videos, filmed in places as different as Romania, Austria, Vietnam, Iraq or diverse cities in the USA, as well as different sites in Germany (Ulm, Erfurt, Koblenz, Berlin, Leipzig, Hamburg) from 2007 to 2019. Beyond the technical quality of the material, there is an astounding continuity in the narrative forms, which allows for their segmentation and analysis.

The "Gravity Sucks Jam" Video (Die Halle, 2017)[4]

The opening sequence of this video is representative of many traits of parkour's visual ordering. The use of music, the camera perspective, the content depicted and the edition of movement rearrange a recorded event and reinforce it with symbolic elements, presenting thus evidences of a given philosophy and lifestyle. To attain maximal analytical thickness, the analysis is restricted to the first 3 sequences (20 seconds) of the video piece. (To follow the main actions described, see Figures 2 and 3.) The theoretical insights and emotional settings yielding from concrete material practices are set in italics for distinction.

(1)　First sequence. The video starts with music of a plain undertone, which *becomes a major emotional element*. The opening shot shows a school gym or sports hall.

(2)　Opening scene: the attention lies on the running man at the center. He starts running from the left. The shot is in slow motion, which *underlines the action*.

(3)　The man in the center advances slowly, the camera moves with him.

(4)　On the next frame, the camera is still following the traceur, the man takes the first step to jump. Then, another frame, he takes the second step, a pit appears in front of him. Will the man jump into the pit? Will he try to reach the other end? *Expectation rises*.

(5)　On the next frame, the man steps over the edge of the pit.

(6)　For the next frame, the man jumps in the air on a backflip, over the pit. And still the next frame: the jumping man is at the top of the pit. Part of the body gets out of the frame (a sort of "out-of-field effect" is produced, i.e. the movement of the camera does not match the movement of the body. *This effect highlights that the body has its own trajectory, which is untraceable by the machine*).

(7)　*Expectation still lingers*. Will the man make it to the other side of the pit? *There is a great tension, but it does not get resolved*. This first sequence is cut with the body on the air (*the objective seems to be to show the man over the abyss, as a "flying body"*).

(8)　Second sequence. The same man starts jumping again, now shirt-less. The music follows the same melody, but with a stronger bass, which *signals a new dramatic point*. The camera perspective has also shifted to the other side of the gym, opposite to the previous one. The new perspective "discloses" what was behind the camera on the previous shot. This sequence follows the same movement as the previous one, only from a different angle. On a frame-by-frame analysis, the man runs and prepares to jump. He jumps over the pit again. While jumping, part of his body is left out-of-field again. The man lands successfully on the other side of the pit, realizing only now what the previous sequence did not show.

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[4] The video was produced by the sports association *Die Halle*, in Hamburg, to show the results of a self-organized jam. It can be found online at
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eQQ9EtAQuO0
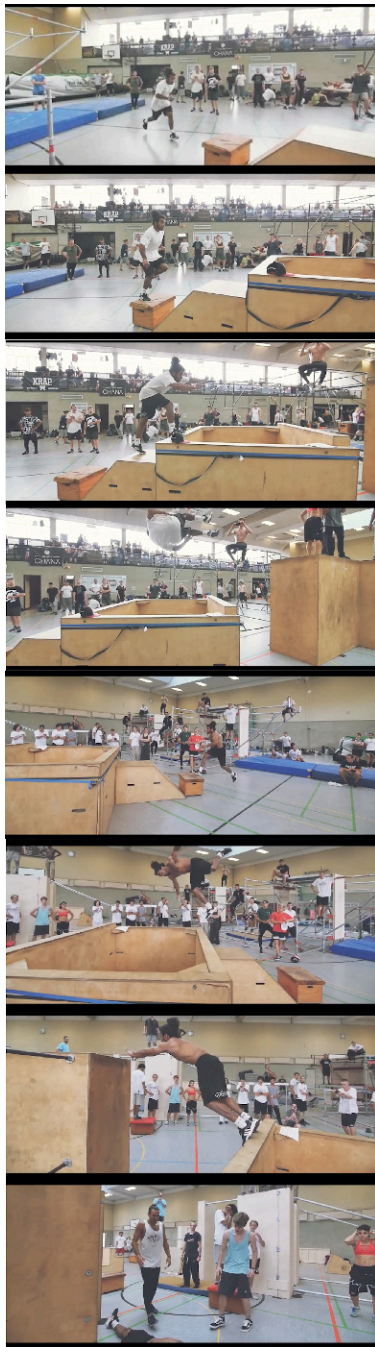
Figs. 2 & 3: First two sequences of the jam video (left); third sequence (right). Used with kind permission of the owner.

(9)   On the next frame, the man jumps to reach another corner, over a gap. (The man's first routine is now expanded, using a time ellipsis: the first attempt is complemented with this second try.) And indeed: the man reaches the other end this time.

(10) On the next frame, the man looses his equilibrium. Yet the camera moves forward. On the next frame, the man falls. The camera glimpses on the spectator's reactions. One of them looks to another side, as to avoid looking directly. The man who was running is down on the floor.

(11) On the next frame, the camera moves forward into the space where the man lies. The body is out-of-frame, only one of his legs is visible. Some of the spectators approach the man lying on the floor. They do not make any gestures. We now understand that, after his second attempt, the man fails to get across the pit. But the action was not hidden. *Therefore, the sequence affirms the legitimacy of failure. Failure becomes a theme. It acquires a heroic, moral value.*

(12) Third sequence. A new angle shows the same trail from a frontal perspective, with a new traceur. On a frame-by-frame analysis, we can see that another man prepares to jump. The man jumps successfully on the first step and advances to the second one. The man touches the edge of the pit to make a flip turn. He "flies" over the pit. Then he reaches the other edge and jumps towards the next piece. This action is outlined in slow motion, which *highlights the movements*. The effect is reinforced with the music. (*The edition functions as a visual representation of "flow".*) The man reaches the next obstacle successfully. He then uses an angle of the setup to make a frontal flip. A slow-motion effect is set again. (*This signals a second connection between moves*). The man lands succesfully. Now he tries out a last backflip and achieves the trick. A slow-motion effect is applied again. The sequence is presented with a short fast-forward effect at the very end. A fellow participant congratulates the traceur. The scene compacts the three previous sequences together, taken on the same trail. One can see a smile on the face of the traceur and his colleague. This traceur achieved what his predecessor could not, but *it does not feel as a competition. On the contrary, it seems that one's man's success is the group's success.* The short fast-forward effect at the end adds this accent: the success in itself is not excessively celebrated. This sequence marks the obstacles of an achieved passage, but it includes the previous failed attempts. *Success — represented as the accomplishment of flow (in a visual sense, an "edited" flow) — is therefore always a path, made up of repetitions and failures.*

As this analytical description of the initial sequences of the video shows, the aesthetic elements of a jam video are heavily compacted and convey altogether a specific *pathos* (i.e., an effect on the perception and emotions of the spectator), which actually reinforces the overall *ethos* that structures the sport. The description could continue for the rest of the video in order to find specific effects and deeper symbolic constructions, but we will turn instead to the second sub-genre of the parkour typologies: the training videos.

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The Training Sub-Genre Videos

Within the parkour genre videos, training tutorials are the most widespread type. They usually depict a single traceur, somewhere in plain urban settings, trying out a series of moves or routines. As it occurs with other sport videos (see Hoffman, 2010), there is here no single structure, format, sequencing or narrative, and the content relies on the bodily action and the message according to the skills of the presenter. Now, training tutorials are usually produced by influencers—individuals or teams—and less frequently also by parkour associations. They are mostly developed as teaching devices. But as it was stated before, videos of training sessions can be produced for self-consumption by regular traceurs who seek to follow their own progression for the acquisition of a given skill. This aim was consistently reported among the traceurs interviewed. One of them explicitly noted that making a video "has the training effect of seeing yourself and often seeing mistakes" (Personal communication, 18 October 2018). Another one expressed: "sometimes we make videos. [...] One makes a video easy to see, quasi reflect upon yourself, how clean was what I was doing. So, one records it, looks at it, and can then just look how is the external view on it, maybe one will notice something again" (Personal communication, 12 September 2018). However, in many of these cases, these videos not only serve the function of documenting a process, but also intrinsically show elements of an alternative lifestyle, symbolically opposed to the "performance society" from which they want to differentiate themselves. As yet another one of the interviewed traceurs put it:

> [In a training video] you also document where you've been, everywhere, what you've seen there and the spots for others to see. Boah!, that's a nice spot to train, I want to go there too. A little bit of that probably has something to do with it. So I think the philosophy fits, [...] because we also want to be free from working, it is now more so in society that today we only work 4 days and take 3 days off (Personal communication, 17 October 2018).

Therefore, these types of videos are only seemingly straightforward; in reality they are very idiosyncratic, in the sense that they transmit, through the apparent simple task of teaching a skill, fragments of a worldview. This is specially achieved through aesthetic and technical operations, as we will see in the next example. The hermeneutical analysis will follow here the same guidelines as in the previous case.

The "Only a Traceur Understands" training video (Ohia, 2015) [5]

The rhythm of the video is very consistent throughout its short duration (1' 32''). Therefore, we can describe the whole piece at once, profiting also from the fact that the edition repeatedly uses ellipses that advance the action with a specific objective. This objective will be made evident along the analysis (see also Figure 4).

(1)   The video starts with a legend on white typography over a black background (maximizing contrast) that reads: "Only a traceur will truely (sic) understand this video". This phrasing reinforces the perception that *there is some kind of secret code being here transmitted*.

(2)   The scene starts with a 14-year old boy (Tawera) against a white wooden wall. There is no music (*which is a stark contrast to the jam sub-genre*), and instead one hears some birds in the background. The boy starts running, jumps over a wide plant stand, then continues and uses a pole, i.e., the support of a terrace, to swing to the right; he then turns again over a handrail to get to the other pole to the left, where he swings again. The action continues for one more move, where the boy stands on the edge of a stair and suddenly stops, exhausted.

(3)   The next frame starts from the same perspective and implicitly announces the same action (a repetition of the routine). But the action does not see the boy from the initial stand, against the wall. The edition gets him already running and jumping (an ellipsis has taken place.) The boy repeats the same steps and the camera follows him as in the previous take. At the moment where he had stopped before, the boy now tries a move, and fails. The spectator can listen a sigh on the back. It is the boy breathing.

(4)   The next shot begins farther on the action along the same path (a new repetition). The routine continues and the boy stops at around the same moment. One can hear his compunction: "Where am I goooing?"

(5)   The next take begins further down the same path, but now the camera perspective has shifted. The spectator can see the building from the front. It seems to be a school. The boy has been practicing on the schoolyard. (It is a very simple setting, not a pompous landscape.) In any case, Tawera continues until the difficult move occurs again. He fails and yells out his lament. Now he sits, visibly frustrated.

(6)   The next scene sets him in front of the camera, fanning his face. This is only a pause.

(7)   Again, the same routine, but the action appears just seconds before the difficult jump. Tawera fails again, and yells.

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[5] The video was recorded and uploaded in 2015 by Atirau Ohia, father of the young boy Tawera, in order to document his son's progress in parkour. It can be found online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FetLHDFsEHQ

(8) In three sequential takes, the same move is about to be undertaken. Tawera fails every time, always complaining. He appears now exhausted. One more take and one more fail. But no more grumping this time. Yet he takes another pause.

(9) Another sequence begins, this time from the initial position. He repeats the whole routine, and the camera follows him. Now he accomplishes the difficult move, so he shouts: "Yeeeees!" He celebrates with another side flip, and starts running, leaving the camera frame. The video fades out to black and finishes.

Fig. 4 (right): Only a traceur understands, *training video. With kind permission of the owner.*

This very simple video shows how specific technical elements (edition, framing, camera perspective and movement, as well as the operation of sound) provide a strong narrative with emotional moments (the recurrence of failure, frustration, physical exhaustion, but also accomplishment and celebration), along with the depiction of very simple sceneries, which amount for the ideals of the praxis (i.e., represent its *ethos*). This minimalism of resources and the simplicity of the setting correspond entirely to parkour's ethical stand. That is also suggested from the title and the very first banner on the video. And it can be argued that, indeed, the choice of setting, the absence of musical components, the anti-heroic path on Tawara's routine—full of failures and frustration—and even the minimal celebration after accomplishing an insignificant feat (not a jump over an abyss, for instance), all signal to a very personal routine (a "journey"), with self-established challenges and objectives. But, as

the comments on the corresponding section point out, this is exactly what is appreciated in this video.[6] In the end, parkour's value system can be read through all these techniques and choices, throughout the cuts in the scenes and all along the edition.

Parkour's aesthetics: decoding values through emotions

The analytical description of two videos from the parkour media environment has attempted to show how the interlocking of visual material practices and aesthetic choices produce recognizable narratives that can be arranged accordingly into sub-genres. These sub-genres are heavily loaded with symbolic tropes and effects that generate emotional triggers. The key to spotting the informal rules of this aesthetic mechanism is to concentrate on the emotional and sensorial features of particular sequences (the different representations of pain, failure, expectation, exhaustion, joy, celebration, etc.) in order to understand how these are produced through technical means and concrete visual maneuvers. The importance of emotions for parkour's interactional practices has been already researched (see Saville, 2008; Kidder, 2012 and 2013; Leyden Rotawisky, 2013 and 2015). Now, a careful analysis of its media artifacts shows how emotions are also forms of potentiality that link the traceurs with the mediated performances through the practitioner's memories of past experiences, a heightened sensorial empathy, and recognizable visual narratives that underline a shared notion of purpose or common quest. In this sense, emotions function as shifters or triggers that, according to Tappolet, can provide us with information about the things that matter to us (2016). Ultimately, emotions are passages that channel the viewers into particular values, which are crafted in these media objects through aesthetic means.

The video aesthetics of parkour has rendered a dynamic and very successful sport genre, where many of the main tropes ("walking on the edge of the abyss", the "flying man", etc.) have even been funneled into mainstream action films. But the misreadings that the traceurs so much dread start with the plain spectacularization of actions that turn the value system invisible. Traceurs might relate to the media materials emotionally (therefore, the title of the second case study "Only a traceur would understand"), but in order to gain a thorough comprehension of these materials, an aesthetic understanding is needed. As cognitivist Martínes Marín writes, an "aesthetic understanding […] has to do with being perceptually aware of the relevant properties of an object and being properly oriented towards the reasons that would help an agent explain why she has ascribed certain aesthetic properties, and not others, to the object – in the sense of detecting the underlying structure of the object that is understood" (2020: 138). Accordingly, this

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[6] This can be exemplified by the user named *Leonie Cairns*, who wrote: "Too much Son. The persistent take ALL!"

form of understanding requires a double process. On one side, one sets a *cognitive stance* into motion, which implies an active understanding and an interpretative reasoning. These refer to a concrete knowledge on how a piece has managed to reach the desired goals intended by the producer (a material assessment); this evaluation also requires attention to non-perceptual features that are not to be found in the piece itself, such as the context, the uses, the intentions, and the function and meaning of the piece for its intended audience. On the other side, one needs to be aware of the *emotional configuration* at play, for it will be a guide into the values of a given worldview. Following again Martínez Marín, this shows that an aesthetic understanding "is cognitive insofar as it depends on how the world is presented to the subject, but it is also emotional, in the sense that 'valuing' includes a personal take on how that same world is revealed to us" (2020: 140).

In that sense, an aesthetic understanding of parkour's media objects is needed to expand our knowledge on parkour as a sport with actual performances that are able to resignify the environment, but also as a dynamic and resourceful visual subculture. Ultimately, parkour performances present already a visceral engagement with reality. Its joys and its pains are inscribed directly in the body. But its visual representations necessarily follow different rules of engagement and a specific material logic. The agony and the exaltation of traceurs, while very clear to the individuals engaged in its practice, is virtually impossible to transmit except within the visual techniques and aesthetic features found within its media artifacts.

Concluding remarks: the media supplement

Parkour is a very peculiar relatively new type of sport where media representations play a constituting role, not only for the dissemination of the praxis, but also, more poignantly, for the co-construction of its practical philosophy (its *ethos*). This *ethos* is built up through aesthetic and symbolic stances based on technical operations intrinsic to the media artifacts themselves. In this sense, the sport relies in its face-to-face interactions as much as in its mediated representations to enable and transmit a common worldview, where community values can be effectively located in the center of the praxis. In other words, the media production enables a recognizable *pathos*—parallel to the styled action that the practitioners so much pursue—that translates at an aesthetic level the ethical provisions that constitute parkour's construction of the self.

Therefore, the media and the interactional planes operate simultaneously, as a co-structuring architecture, even if they also function distinctively. This leads to specific tensions, sometimes leading to representational inaccuracies of actual performances, while others to outright unfitting interpretations of the media materials, which the practitioners resent themselves. Nevertheless, and despite this media uneasiness, the representational plane equips the traceurs with

a syntactical device by which they can transmit and represent even their individual pursuits (Baker 2003). Most likely, the tension will not be overcome. But in articulating it productively, traceurs can find ways to encode and negotiate their own strivings, all while offering a differentiated form of media production –not more precise or exact in the protocols and routines that they esteem, but highly symbolical and effective while minimalist in its resources.

In the end, the media level fulfills functions of self-representation, documentation, inspiration and information. But it also also offers a plane of symbolic meaning, where the objects are expressions of the community itself, as items of subjective inscriptions that are collectively appreciated and decoded. Media objects become therefore objects of ritual: learning devices and mirrors of personal progress, but also reminders, witnesses or receptacles of a performing worldview.

Acknowledgements

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