

Parkour as Object of Science

A review essay of published scientific literature to date, and a planned chapter for a forthcoming ethnography of parkour preliminarily titled "Parkour. People and Places, Physicality and Philosophy."

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In talking about urban spaces, parkour has come to be mentioned and considered in science, as well – although still not in depth. "city" (from the book series *Key Ideas in Geography*), for example, considers "le parkour" together with "situationism, street stenciling, and graffiti" as "deliberate attempts to subvert and subvert urban space," in contrast to street children or beggars who get into conflict with conventions or law because they have no other possibility (Hubbard, 2006). The best, and still short, consideration of parkour in this context is to be found in "*Placing Words: Symbols, Space, and the City*" (Mitchell, 2005). The author suggests that not only drivers and flaneurs experienced the city in particular ways because of how they move through it, but, nowadays, so did skateboarders and traceurs. In the case of traceurs, according to Mitchell, the perceived need to be in marginal areas and situations is less strong, of paramount importance is the velocity and fluidity of the movement which takes urban structures as its playground. (He further draws parallels between traceurs and Spiderman as their "apotheosis.")

Whereas this is the (shallow) extent to which parkour has been analyzed from any theoretical background, there is at least one instance in which a theoretical point is illustrated by the example of parkour: Dragan Milovanovic, in an article on "Postmodernism and Critical Cultural Theory" (Milovanovic, 2006), discusses an approach to "edgework." Basically, what is meant by this is an investigation of behavior at the margins of social convention. The author suggests analyzing it along five dimensions: 1) structural conditions, including class, race, gender along with the condition of a late modern/postmodern society of risk we may currently be in; 2) control; 3) intensity of the experience; 4) legality or illegality; 5) "the form and verbal expressivity of enjoyment (jouissance)." Eventually (ibid, p.237), he points to the example of "parkours" (sic!) as a case which could be analyzed in terms of an interaction of these five dimensions (without going into detail, however).

One somewhat similar case, in which parkour is used as metaphor, should not go unmentioned: Rachel Nicholls argued that Reception History (*Wirkungsgeschichte*, the discipline studying the impact of the Bible on culture) could be seen as "a kind of intellectual parkour" (Nicholls, 2005). In

her article, she suggests that both needed a similar dedication to the activity, creativity in working with the available material, and temperance not to overshoot what would be wise limits.

Scientific articles in journals are similarly rare: Most of them (which is: three) have been about fractures sustained through the (attempted) practice of parkour/"free running" (Frumkin, 2005) (McLean, Houshian, & Pike, 2006) (Miller & Demoiny, 2008).

Only recently did we even move from medicine to psychology: One researcher studied associations between risk-taking, narcissism, and sensation-seeking using traceurs as at-risk and gymnasts as not-as-risk groups (Cazenave, 2007). His conclusion was that adolescents practicing parkour did rank higher in the need for strong sensations and in measures of narcissistic personality (which is to be expected), especially seeking leadership and authority, but also that "the practicing of free running ... does not seem to be linked to maladaptive or psychopathologic behaviors."

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