Playing with fear: parkour and the mobility of emotion

Stephen John Saville
Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University, Ceredigion SY23 3DB, UK, sjs99@aber.ac.uk

This article engages debates on emotional geography and non-representational theory by considering fear as a distinctly mobile engagement with our environment. Parkour, or freerunning, has exploded into public consciousness through commercial media representations and films. It is depicted as a spectacular urban sport that either can or cannot be done. Through ethnographic research with groups of parkour practitioners I consider what has been excluded from these representations: the emotions involved in trying, experimenting, and gradually learning to be in places differently. In parkour places are ‘done’ or mobilised in tentative, unsure, ungainly and unfinished ways which can be characterised by a kind of play with architecture. I argue that this play is contingent upon an array of fears, which, rather than being entirely negative, are an important way in which practitioners engage with place. Here fears can manifest differently, not only restricting mobility, but in some cases encouraging imaginative and playful forms of movement.

Key words: fear, parkour, freerunning, emotional geography, mobility, place, play.

On Wednesday 17 May 2006, David Belle, a man heralded as a founder of parkour, and now international celebrity, runs towards a solid wall that cordons off an underpass. His movement is purposeful and practised. All eyes are turned towards him. As he closes on the barrier and jumps, his calloused hands reach out, pushing off the top to propel him over. His trailing foot does not clear the wall; it hits. It pulls his body out of alignment. Travelling at speed and out of control David Belle’s back makes contact with the far wall of the underpass and he falls…

He was pleased and excited. After the ‘fakeness’ of Californian media-appeasing performances, the Frenchman said he felt more ‘real’.

This scene, watched and discussed world-wide amongst parkour practitioners and enthusiasts, gives us pause. How could the hero of parkour, the symbolic superhuman fail? Watching Belle’s body moving in pixilated slow motion, repeatedly crashing on so many thousands of monitor screens, how does this event shape the way traceurs (parkour practitioners) or indeed geographers understand
and enact places? How might such two-dimensional clips influence and reveal our emotional, and specifically our fearful, engagements with place?

Introduction: what is parkour?

Parkour has been variously described as free-running, a type of play, the art of displacement, the discipline of moving from A to B as fast and efficiently as possible, and even as a way of life. One of the most defining depictions of parkour is the documentary film *Jump London* (directed by M. Christie), which first aired in the UK on Channel 4 in September 2003. It combined stylised footage of a group of French traceurs to fabricate a narrative of three heroes who journeyed to London, revitalising and transforming the architecture of the city as they went. Early on, the authoritative narrator tells us what parkour is:

‘Imagine living in a city where you didn’t have to rely on overcrowded trains, gridlocked roads and packed pavements. Imagine having superhero abilities, able to leap from rooftop to rooftop as if nothing, not even buildings could stop you. This is parkour, the anarchic new sport of freerunning.’

However much contested, the hugely influential documentary along with other representations—from television advertisements and music videos, to blockbuster Hollywood movies and internet forums—has been responsible for propelling parkour into the public imagination. Such depictions of parkour are almost always scripted through with heroic narratives of accomplishment; of highly skilled, mature bodies overcoming the constraints of the environment. The ‘armchair view’ that one might get of parkour from the media could be misleading because it is finished; it is a fearless and mature product. Out of the many thousands of people practising parkour worldwide, for the most part we only see images of the few most proficient and experienced individuals performing a highly rehearsed set of body movements in well-considered and thoroughly explored environments. Of course the vast majority of parkour practice remains beyond the mainstream media’s focus.

While there exists a great divergence in styles, practice and definition of parkour (many of which clash with sensational media representations), my contention is that it is essentially a practice intent upon re-imagining place. It does not give any particular clear or finished blueprint for action (as is often peddled by media interests), but constantly seeks new ways to move playfully with places. In this act of imagination parkour is granted spatially transformative powers which can prevent comfortable closure (Parker, Fournier and Reedy 2007). When the traceur attempts to master some movements through space, such mastery, as it occurs (or not) is always accompanied by an emotional refiguring of spatial possibilities. In this sense, parkour speaks quite forcefully to an enchanted notion of place which, through wonderment, imagination and participation, is in continuous composition (Crouch 2003; Edensor 2005; Fenton 2005; Thrift 2004c). The extended and serious practice of parkour is always a questing, a search for new and more elaborate imaginings, it is an opening out of possible, but not necessarily attainable, mobilities.

In this article I seek to explore some emotional sense of what makes parkour a powerfully engaging mobile practice. Through a year-long participatory engagement with parkour, I wish to present a feel for the sensuous connectedness of the emotional body;
one which can be thrilled after a fall (as with the opening example), and one that can laugh with friends after the most demanding and painful experiences. In the process I hope to dispel a seemingly common understanding of parkour as a spectacular finished product. By considering some of the emotional specificities of being a traceur that plays with place, I draw attention to what is often overshadowed by a symbolic or visual ‘reading’ of parkour. The changing embodied movements of parkour can be both motivated by different kinds of fear, as well as a ‘method’ for altering, unveiling, refining and layering emotional engagements with places. Emotions here are more than simply something that ‘happen to’ a body; rather when fear is a lived and mobile process it can be considered, cultivated and sometimes even enjoyed.

While there has been some significant work on embodied mobile practices such as skateboarding (Borden 2001), driving (Edensor 2004; Merriman 2007; Sheller 2004), cycling (Jones 2005; Spinney 2006) and walking (Wylie 2005), the practice of parkour gives us an excellent opportunity to examine a rapidly emerging phenomenon that is focused on finding new ways of moving the body and of inhabiting space. In this article I have three main aims. First, to develop a concept of the ‘parkour body’: an unfinished, ever-learning, emotional body that will move away from an understanding of maturity/immaturity as a positive/negative binary. The traceur is ever questing towards new and often fearful movements, many of which are predicated on the attainment of bodily skill. Here, mobile possibilities arise, and new unsure spatial imaginings are drawn forth from previous experience and the prior development of bodily maturity and habit. In this case a mobile maturity can come before and ceaselessly blur into a kind of playful immaturity in place.

Secondly, I wish to show how such practice is characterised by a ‘trying’, that is intent on creating futures which dare. The way movements are tried in parkour reveals some of the intimate and profoundly emotional connections traceurs have with their material environments. By considering this contact, and describing it in some detail, here I hope to work towards a ‘re-enchanting’ of the body in place (Massey and Thrift 2003; Thrift 2004c). Further to this and responding to growing calls in geography that bid us attend to emotions (Anderson and Smith 2001; Bondi, Smith and Davidson 2005, Davidson and Milligan 2004) and to distinguish between ‘types’ of, and subtleties within emotions (Anderson and Harrison 2006), I consider the flux of experiences that could be described as fear. Avoiding giving fear a purely negative polarity, or defining it in terms of opposites (to hope or fearlessness for example) (Solomon and Stone 2002), I show how fear can be a highly complex engagement with place, which can in some circumstances be considered more a playmate than paralysing overlord. Here affect is not only worked into emotion but also reconfigured by the emotional engagement traceurs have with place. Affect has been theorised in numerous ways, some of which conflate it with emotion (Anderson and Smith 2001; cf. Kraftl and Adey 2008; Thrift 2004a). Common to most understandings though, is an abstract sense in which affect involves a ‘sense of push in the world’ (Thrift 2004a: 64). In this article I have considered the way the body senses this ‘push’, and have thought of ‘the push’ itself to be the potential for new mobile relations between bodies. This potential is always in a state of emergence as configurations of people, things, ideas and animals form and reform; their movement bringing about new possibilities and potentialities. Thus affect both motivates and
depends upon the mobility that re-organises connections between elements of the world. While affect is present, as raw possibility, between all those things that comprise life as we know it, I am concerned here with the way the human body senses, and to some degree plays with, affect, through its engagements with the world.

Third, a participatory study of parkour and ‘types’ of fear can illuminate the way we move with the materiality of the world. Things, that is walls, rails, roofs, trees, etc., as David Belle claims in the opening example, can become ‘real’ and raw when we move in new ways with them. I wish to present some new ways people are finding to make contact with their environments. Prizing ‘freedom’ of expression and movement, parkour is often intentionally formless, and as such, finding ones ‘Way’ is a key element of parkour practice. There are few overarching or distinct goals and little set structure, which opens an almost unparalleled space for play and creative engagements with architecture. I wish to mirror this play, and aside from giving the reader a flavour of the practice of parkour, essentially this paper is an attempt to make a playful, possibly risky, intervention in our almost universally negative understandings of fear in place.

While primarily this paper is informed by my learning of and immersion in parkour movements and practice, it is impossible to separate this out from the more or less inspiring representations, philosophising, stories, images and signs, that always have an affective materiality (Latham and McCormack 2004). In other words, such representations are often encountered in a way that is not representational (Laurier and Philo 2006), they can, for example, evoke unbidden memories, thoughts and feelings (Crang and Travlou 2001). What is clear is that my engagement with parkour, as much as anyone’s, is a composite affair, connected much more than one might think through international assemblages of technology (television broadcasting, internet, etc.), which, far from delivering a bland disembodied representation, have stirred up a new world-wide phenomenon.

Yet although these representations are important, this paper is not so concerned with ‘reading off’ some part of this mass of distributed media, but with the body practices themselves, through which this media gains most if not all of its evocative power (for the traceur). Texts permeate the practice of parkour, but are primarily interesting in relation to the practice itself—the embodied grounding of their affective potential.

Movement, fear and place making

Feeling so fragile all over. It was as if I could already begin to feel the jagged concrete below crunching through my spine, dislodging vertebra. Try as I might I could not focus my attention on the goal: a flat pink vertical wall which I wanted to jump to—gripping the top edge with my hands, letting my feet and legs absorb the speed of the impact, before pulling up and hopping over. After some time here considering from different angles, testing the surfaces, watching JZ jump the gap, feeling more and more shaky and sick(!), I moved on without trying it. (Author’s diary, 8 February 2006)

From the well-used mantra, ‘the only thing we have to fear is fear itself’, to the common association of fear with terrorist tactics, it is fair to say that the emotion of ‘fear’ has a terrible reputation. Of all the emotions it has, in academic literature, received unrivalled attention (Tuan 1979) and in much of this analysis fear has been cast as the ultimate villain; something to be railed against, out
thought, and surmounted so as to minimise its unhealthy effects and immoral tendencies (see for example, Bannister and Fyfe 2001; Bauman 2006; Brownlow 2005; Katz 2008; Koskela 1997; Nayak 2003; Panelli, Kraack and Little 2005). In short, fear is very often taken to be the overgrown roots from which stems much human suffering. Some authors go further still.

Evil and fear are Siamese twins. You can’t meet one without meeting the other. Or perhaps they are but two names of one experience—one of the names referring to what you see or what you hear, the other to what you feel; one pointing ‘out there’, to the world, the other to the ‘in here’, to yourself. What we fear, is evil; what is evil, we fear. (Bauman 2006: 54)

Yet even so-called ‘irrational fears’ often have some foundation in the material world, which is awash with real dangers. Something akin to fear can be observed in almost all living animals and provides a useful and necessary survival mechanism (Tuan 1979). In humans’ experience of fear, it is when there is a mismatch between ‘real’ dangers and the danger ‘perceived’, that the value of that emotion comes to question. For Bauman, and many others, it is our inability to perceive risks and danger with good timing and precision that makes fear an emotion to warrant our concern. When fear is defuse, vague and unidentifiable, it is at its most potent and harmful (Bauman 2006). Our fearful inaccuracy—a fundamental characteristic of humans’ inability to know the future—is exploitable, and routinely deployed to bolster, maintain and change webs of global politics, and hierarchies of power and inequality (Robin 2004). Whether specific fears are well founded or not, propagated through global networks or everyday activities or combinations of both, they have a very real materiality of their own (Pain and Smith 2008).

A racing heart, and sweaty, shivering sickness, reassure us that fear is ‘happening’, but these effects—manifest from molecular reactions in the body—are the feelings of fear, which are part of, but do not constitute the whole emotion ‘fear’ itself. In contrast, William James’s (1884) famous theory, sees the emotion purely as the physiological bodily symptoms. For James, emotion occurs not because of a danger or risk perceived, but as a consequence of our bodily reactions towards the danger; that is, the quickened heart, shallow breathing, etc. ‘Common sense says … we meet a bear, are frightened and run … this order of sequence is incorrect’ (1884: 190). Rather, we meet a bear, and the body’s perception of the bear, before thought, causes us to tremble and run—for James the emotion fear occurs not because of a danger or risk perceived, but as a consequence of our bodily reactions towards the danger; that is, the quickened heart, shallow breathing, etc. ‘Common sense says … we meet a bear, are frightened and run … this order of sequence is incorrect’ (1884: 190). Rather, we meet a bear, and the body’s perception of the bear, before thought, causes us to tremble and run—for James the experience of the running and trembling is the emotion fear (James 1884). For him, the movement of the body at various scales, whether it be muscular or cellular, is the emotion.

For James it is impossible to separate out and distinguish between the emotion and the embodied responses we commonly recognise as being a consequence of that emotion. While there is value in such an understanding, I treat emotions as quite a bit more than this. If I have a dry mouth, raised heart rate and cold sweat, on their own, these do not tell us much. I could have one of a number of different illnesses, for example. The context in which these feelings arise is absolutely crucial. It is true that when I stand at the edge of a drop contemplating a jump, ‘my’ fear is indistinguishable from the shakiness I feel in my hands, my wobbly legs, and the watering of my doubt-filled eyes. Yet fear is more than this, it includes the wall I propose to jump to, and the jumps that have come before and that register this one as a
possibility. While much of this emotion may well be ‘in action’ before thought and before consciously calculating and understanding the danger, the emotion still includes more than the physiological feelings. Rather I consider fear as an engagement in place.

In doing so it is not my intention to undermine the aims and strategies of much important work that treats fear as a primarily negative emotion (indeed continued research into, just for one example, fear of crime and violence, is clearly crucial). I do, however, wish to push open what we take to be ‘fear’, and to make a preliminary attempt to talk about different ‘types’, layerings and nuances of fear. My argument is that in our tracing of fear’s trail, which, by all accounts, has been stretched and broadened to near all-pervasive magnitudes (evidenced by the now common usage of terms like ‘culture of fear’), we have as yet neglected the possibility that fear can be more dynamic, multiple and possibly productive than a survey of the literature might lead one to believe.

During my research, for example, as the initial shock of seeing and participating in movements which risked injury, and in some cases death, lessened, so the fear that accompanied my research changed. My perceptions of the risks involved became clearer, as I practised, and saw how practice and movement took place. It would be inaccurate and too simplistic to say my fear lessened. As I will discuss, fear began to permeate every aspect of my daily experiences. As with all practitioners of parkour, my emotional engagements with space changed along with my mobility in it. To consider the richness and complexity of certain types of fear will inevitably involve a consideration of the mobility and movement of the parkour practitioner.

Modern life, we are told, is speeding up. It is more mobile and dynamic, in a state of continuous flux and fear-inducing flow (Bauman 2006). Indeed time itself pre-supposes movement in all things (Cresswell 2006; Dewsbury 2000). Yet mobility is neither a universal ‘good’ (Bordo 1993; Massey 1991), nor are similar movements always understood or experienced in the same way. Thus for many academics mobility and the power that it might exercise can only be understood as relational (e.g. Adey 2006; Cresswell 1999; Sheller and Urry 2006). It is the differences in speeds and directions between objects, people and landscape that affect our relative experiences of mobility and immobility.

Relative velocities, vectors, directions and momentums is one way of thinking and writing about variations in mobility. Bissell (2007) proposes another, by considering embodied action and inaction rather than relative mobility and immobility. One key difference here—besides Bissell’s interest in ‘inactivity’ that poses some difficult methodological questions—is in the scale of analysis, which for Bissell is the body. While the emotional experiences of the body are inescapably linked to the global mobility of people, technology, information and ideas, which is in turn bound up in changing geometries of power (Massey 1991), they cannot be properly understood through an overarching meta theory that automatically ascribes value or power to ‘more mobility’ at the cost of losing real-life human experience (Bissell 2007).

When we consider the emotional content of mobility, each and every movement (and indeed stillness) begins to gather significance. Emotion is entirely necessary to bring contrast to the differentiations, say between the movement of a passenger on a long-haul flight, and the movements of a parkour practitioner over a meandering set of walls outside a council office. When emotion is engagement with the
world, it is itself mobile as new contact is made
with configurations of materialities, which are
themselves (re)formed by virtue of their
continuing movement.

Parkour always involves the mobility of
other materialities, be they living, inanimate,
or intangible ideas or knowledge of tech-
niques. From the carefully selected footwear,
the bag and clothing, to the arrangements of
concrete, brick, metal and grass that make
possible any form of parkour, the term
‘traceur’ must always refer to more than the
individual body. The movements and actions
of the traceur are totally dependent on (though
not determined by) material objects that are
relatively permanent. This raises the question,
at what scale do we consider the prosthesis?
Or in other words, just how far do we de-
centre the subject?

In considering this Spinney (2006) presents
to us his feelings of being a ‘cyclist’, the
combined unit of body and bike. In this vein he
also talks to other cyclists in the saddle, to
keep the context of riding (Spinney 2006), the
moving place; the heat, pain, rhythm, posture
and richness of cycling are not lost, and retain
the potential to evoke. As with all others, this
account bears the problem of representation,
in that we will never feel the emotions,
complexity and depth of the reality that the
text attempts to portray. Neither, for that
matter, will the author when it is being written
and edited. In the words of Latour, ‘there is no
in-formation, only trans-formation’ (2005:
149). None the less, in the effort to be
‘truthful’ (or to try hard not to lie) we can hope
to create, with the reader, more ‘real’ accounts
based on empathy for the emotional contact
with place.

It is a similar affective empathy that I take as
a starting point, towards de-centring my
account. Or to rephrase, I see no need to
emphatically ‘de-centre’ an account that is
only possible by virtue of its immersion in the
world. Research undertaken in a spirit of open
vulnerability, and research that is happy to be
touched and moved, and to engage and play
with materialities and imaginations, need not
be doubt-ridden with questions of how to
‘write’ the more-than-human world. When we
hold out our experience as our ‘truth’, we go
well beyond the ‘I’ that takes responsibility for
the narrative.

We are necessarily in and with worlds rich in
affect. One way towards building new
configurations within this world does not
require a determined shift toward ‘anti-
humanism’ or even ‘trans-humanism’, but
rather an aspiration to engage the ‘language
of human experience’ (Entrikin and Tepple
2006), including their withness to the world as
well as imagination, emotion, and the wild
flights of fancy therein. It seems that methods
exploring the haptic (e.g. Obrador-Pons 2007;
Paterson 2006) and the rich sensuousness of
touch (Crouch 2001; Hetherington 2003;
Lewis 2000), but also those exploring what
might be considered less traditionally ‘empiri-
cal’ or tangible (e.g. Anderson 2004;
Holloway 2003; Latham 2003) begin to do
just that. Here by exposing our experiences of
togtherness and our openness and contact
with the world it is becoming clear that
‘humans do not act as subjects in an object
world but are constituted as perceiving beings
at the interface between subject and object’
(Hetherington 2003: 1938).

Emotions play a crucial part of this ‘inter-
face’. They are a vital element of the
connections we have to the world. They are
between, in motion and animated by the
movements and contact the body has with its
surroundings. But emotions also encompass
other times and places as they negotiate an
engagement with the world. An unforeseen
cue, a remembered caress, a painful fall or a
harsh word, and we are emotionally moving in a way that brings past movements and materials into the places we inhabit. Emotion can comprise of a baffling complex of overlapping events that always have affective potential beyond the time and space in which they once occurred. What is clear is that parkour makes absolutely obvious the need for a consideration of an emotional basis of action. Aside from the (misleading) high-profile media activity, parkour befuddles any attempt to describe a rational, economic or disembodied decision-making actor.

As Tony Wolf demonstrates well in all his parkour workshops, a bench becomes much more than an object for sitting or resting on. As participants are encouraged to find as many ways of moving over, around, across and even under the bench as possible, it takes on a whole new feel. Through continued contact and movement with the bench, the traceur slowly becomes more adventurous, attempting grand leaps and inverted vaults—their familiarity with the form takes on a new life altogether. In this instance the bench facilitates exciting and as yet inexperienced bodily movements and postures in the world. Emotional disposition toward the bench changes as traceurs watch others, and experience first-hand movements over and about the bench.

Emotions in parkour, as in many social and cultural practices, are not things that simply occur or ‘happen to’ the body as in James’ theorisation. Neither, though, are we in complete control of our emotions, the way we feel and act is not as a sovereign subject, rather places can express more than their human inhabitants might wish from them (Hetherington 2003).

Many emotions are performed; very often habitually acted out without prior consideration. Before we consciously realise it, we can be angry at a driver that pulls out in front of us, or sombre upon entering a quiet churchyard. As with much ethnographic research, doing parkour was a departure from the more routine emotional interactions in daily life. Different and new socio-cultural settings call for a re-examination and to some degree bring into conscious thought the negotiation of emotional relations (Blee 1998). Similarly, parkour as a relatively new phenomenon, and by its very nature, encourages the practitioner to begin this process in earnest. During my research, emotional stances within place shifted rapidly. Engagements with benches, walls, fences and lampposts became charged with complex emotional play. For the first week or so of meeting and practising with parkour groups, the hours spent doing parkour could be characterised by an almost engulfing range of fears. Here, emotional repertoires and bodily possibilities for movement are exceptionally fluid and interconnected. Emotions are ‘done’ with our surroundings. In this sense, any talk about emotional experience is a call for the contact between those people and things involved. No discrete or tidy theory of emotions can do justice to their continual emergence without attending to the mobile environments with which they engage.

Breaking and making movements and fear

The pink wall. When I approach the edge this time it is quite a lot smaller. Even the large steps below look less edgy, less sharp and less likely to do damage. It is in those first instants that I know I will jump the gap, that the fear intensifies somewhat, whilst at the same time changing its character dramatically. Much more excitedly now fear is almost pushing me toward the pink wall, rather than holding me back. I run. Must get the takeoff right; near the edge but not too close,
there cannot be a chance of my trainer slipping over the edge when kicking off. But as I approach I cannot look down to check, for I need to focus on the far wall to make sure my hands find their mark and grip well. I have to let up and hope my legs will take off from the right place, and this trust is accompanied by a new surge of fear, a last intense bolt that hits me in the leg as I jump. The first time around, the moments spent in the air are too brief and intense to recall, a haze of adrenaline and fears and pink. After making it once, twice, five times, the fear begins to lessen, back down to ‘background levels’, but it has made a permanent mark on my body, which is now in love with flying toward the pink wall. (Author’s diary, 1 March 2006, see Figure 1)

The practitioner of parkour is encouraged towards ‘freedom’, to have vast possibilities for movement before them, from which they may playfully select and string together new improvisations in a flowing dance across the urban landscape. Yet the paradox of parkour is that to have a sense for these spatial possibilities, as anything but terrifying dreams, one must drill particular moves repeatedly. In general, the social sciences have considered similar processes of re-iteration, as productive of distinct and often negative performativities (Butler 1990). Such spatial practice leads to habit, and to cycles of repetition that dull and numb our relations with space. Over time it has the capacity to make ‘normal’ the strange and unconscious our bodily comportment (Edensor 2007; Seamon 1980; Young 1990).

We have been warned of how easy it is to become complicit, to begin to narrow the
focus of our attention to what we already know and are comfortable with (Harrison 2000; Thrift 2004b). To attain complete maturity is to forget the wonder that drives genuine creativity. If performativity is body-training or the contraction of habit, then to what degree does it afford us ways to understand the possibility of creatively manipulating space and time? We are called to ‘let go’ of regularly repeated relations/representations of space and to attend to the spark of newness that marks a life as enchanted and lived (Thrift 2004c). Of course, the difficulty is deciding: of what to let go, and of what to keep a hold?

Me: Don’t you get bored of doing the same move many times?

James: Well you know it is just practice, that’s why you’re here right?

Me: Yeah.

James: It’s good to train. Each move is never the same anyway. You do it again and again and again, but trying different things. And then it starts getting easy, then suddenly you will see this thing over here, and it might be really scary, but it is a possibility now. (Author’s diary, 2 April 2006).

Parkour is not always the super-mobile practice one might imagine. Hours spent in a relatively small area slowly ‘getting to know’ the space is the norm. Embodied knowledge and familiarity of place is gained as place is tried. Here the body, while repeating similar movements many times, is slowly building embodied knowledge of itself and its relation to spatial forms. Yet the doing of this knowledge is always provisional, and not repeatable with perfect accuracy. The parkour body is creatively encountering spatial forms, producing new possibilities as it experiences textures, meets heights, distances and shapes (Figure 2). As it playfully tests, the body is closely intertwined with places as a sensuous moving subject (Crouch and Desforges 2003).

On occasion, people would not want to leave an area until they felt they had mastered a certain movement with an object. Practitioners developed attachments to things and the movement possibilities they allow. As I was told by many of the traceurs I researched with, after and during each parkour session, my vision changed. New features popped up in unexpected places: an electricity box to vault, a ‘grippy’ wall to run up, a handy-sized barrier with soft grass on the other side to try flipping over. Of course none of these ‘new’ objects were really new. Rather they materialised into the consciousness as parkour practice permeated the body. Such objects were inspected, tested, felt, rolled over, pushed off of, jumped on, vaulted over. My parkour practice brought to the environment unexperienced transience; where success or partial success at moving in a specific way with a certain object, could lead to a sudden shift—new mobile possibilities unfolded—and more playful options arise. ‘The impossible recedes, like a horizon, never sets, like a sun. But as it recedes other regions of the world appear’ (Massumi 1997: 761).

Thus, a certain level of maturity of the body to know a certain sequence of movements in relation to space leads to a type of immaturity, as the body in its excitement and playfulness finds new mobile relations with materialities. These new relations are unsure, untested and sometimes unrealistic. Traceurs focused on in micro-detailed aspects of movements, trying again and again. In trying, and being open to space, here ‘trying’ denotes the uncertainty, the imminence, through which the kinetic play of bodies in space are bringing about something new. A tricky balance then: imaginative
and playful becoming of mobility that is both ‘allowed’ and threatened by bodily maturity. A degree of embodied maturity is needed to enable the imagination to take a hold of spatial forms. Bodily maturity, in parkour, is put to play, immediately searching out new possible movements with space. To practise parkour at any level is to be open and vulnerable to space which in turn requires the blurring together of bodily maturity and habit with play and spatial immaturity; neither maturity nor immaturity ever being complete.

You develop what I call parkour vision, you know. Round here people might see just a pretty rundown backside of a building, but it’s actually a great playground of rails and pipes, steps—it’s got it all. That’s what parkour does to you. I can’t go many places without seeing some nice-looking obstacles. (Josh, in conversation while showing me round one of his favourite practice areas)

In parkour, while successful practice (trying, trying, trying and doing) might make place more ‘certain’ for a time, the new perspective—accompanied by an immature playfulness—leads to greater subtleties and reveals further depth to emotional relations with place. As I practised, I discovered never before noticed architectural features, which came alive with a potential that lent them new emotional intensity. This carried over into my life well beyond my research remit, and my parkour began to radically affect my emotional engagements with place. In Figure 3, for example, as I began to consider the jump between the walls as a real
Figure 3  Roof gap (author’s collection).
possibility, I also began to cultivate quite a complex array of fears towards this roof gap. During my research I passed this particular gap several times a day (it being right by the front door of the flat I was living in). After first noticing it (in a parkour way), it would not leave. At times, like an unwanted spectre it haunted my being in that place. Fear laced every movement I made in its sensorial vicinity. Such fear did not simply repel me though, nor in fact did it remain static for any length of time at all. Here fear was not entirely unpleasant and unwelcome. On occasion I would stand for long periods on the edge looking down, contemplating consequences, where fear helped to sketch out scenarios, some of which made me feel quite sick. Other times I would focus solely on the far edge with a sort of excited expectancy, or I would try to ignore it completely, walking past with a kind of deliberate anger.

Whilst parkour talk is often superficially about doing battle and overcoming a fearful alter ego, it seems that fear in parkour is more complicated than that. It is dynamic and mobile and it can be layered with other times and spaces, but also other emotions. Emotions like anger, excitement and joy can all be accompaniments to the fears encountered in parkour. Such emotional layering cannot be totally contained by time or space. And while fear usually proceeds unconsciously it can also be reflected upon, considered, compared and thought through. On one occasion, for example, a traceur wanted to go straight to a very specific location because he had been thinking, and getting excited and anxious about, a ‘gap to step to ledge’ move/architectural form, all day whilst at work.

This makes understandable the zeal with which parkour practitioners declare their dedication to parkour—evidenced by signatures in parkour internet forums that so often take forms like: ‘Parkour for life!’ or ‘Parkour is the art of movement. It is not a hobby, it is not a sport, parkour is a way of life’. Like many other sports involving risk (see for example Le Breton 2000; Lewis 2000), fear, at least certain types of fear, can be enjoyed and can become enmeshed in everyday mobile relations.

Rather than close the book on fear as a fairly simplistic survival mechanism that is relational to danger (produced or otherwise) or some ageless aversion to our own death, in some circumstances, as I argue here, it is useful to think about the way we try to cultivate different ‘types’ or layerings of fears. Differences in fear are more than just variations in intensity. They can have fundamental and quite subtle differences which are crucial to the way we engage in contact with the world. Emotions are a multiplicity of relational judgements, not just reducible to spatial simplicity (e.g. wanting to be distant from some dangerous object). Through intimate play with place, the practice of parkour is a good example of how people can begin to explore, refine and even enjoy fearful emotions. They become a key through which place can be engaged.

‘Contact fear’ and plastic concrete

He has just made the jump. It is a strange realisation; a ‘what am I doing here’ moment, when my stomach speaks up telling me this must be a madness-inspired misadventure. What I have seen looks impossible; it is genuinely shocking, it strikes at me and rocks the body all over. In an instant that person and that place take on a horrifying tint, a wrapping of coarse fear that grates away any bravado or rosy talk about what was planned or the risks involved.

And now it is my turn. The distance shrieks at me, shouts mockingly. Two-facedly it beckons me to the edge, seduces me onward, only to smack
back. Eyes water, visual inputs begin to confound my other senses, just how far is it? Can my legs, arms and torso feel a jump of this distance as a possibility? Uncertainty twitches in muscles. The harmony between kinaesthetic and visual experience begins to falter, instead I am made whole precariously, like overly elastic threads holding my ‘seeing’ and ‘feeling’ together. Can I trust their communication? This will literally be a leap of faith, a moment that takes fear, hope and uncertainty so close that they blur into each other, even as my everyday senses seem to be coming apart. (Author’s diary, 16 February 2006)

When Merleau-Ponty (1968) talks about the intermingling of the senses, he suggests that we can see, understand and be with our environments in a haptic way. Similarly and to varying degrees, touch can become a visual experience. Either way, it is always the case that our visual perception is experienced primarily in connection with the rest of the body. Before a linguistic understanding has a chance to take shape we are already feeling our environment through our eyes, as well as through our more proximate attuned sensory organs. In this way solidity, texture, surface and depth can all be felt at a distance. Spatial forms have a haptic presence, and can ‘touch’ you long before you have come close enough to lay hands on the brick, grass, wall, rail or whatever.

It is the past that comes at the body from the environment. A fence or wall can be ‘felt’ before the hand makes contact; rather the fence is involuntarily remembered. Yet there is uncertainty and misconception between place and memory. Multiple temporalities inhabit the present (Crang and Travlou 2001). The place and the intent of the presence in it can stimulate a metaphorical riot of memories jostling about the body, each demanding different perspectives on the same section of space. Riding on the back of memory, fear can lurch up at the sight of what would otherwise be quite benign space. At times this fear can drive me forward, experienced as an exhilaration, an enlivening of my body that expands forth and shrouds place in new and playful colour.

Just as new technologies and computer interfaces that work upon the haptic senses can distort and elongate our capacity to ‘feel’, be touched, and essentially to make contact at a distance (see, for example, Paterson’s 2006 analysis of the first ‘transatlantic handshake’), so also do augmentations to our bodies—our weight, flexibility, strength, co-ordination. While new technologies highlight well our changing capacities to feel the presence of virtual and distant objects or people, it is still the case that similar presences can be at least as intensely mutated, enchanted and refigured through decidedly ‘low-tech’, raw experiences as described above.

Here the experience of the senses do not always ‘join up’, rather it is left to the body and a ‘skilful coping’ (Dreyfus 1991) to make sense as best one can of a kinaesthetic experience that might fit jaggedly with the corresponding visual one. In each moment ‘the feeling of how things are going motivates behaviour’, rather than any solid or complete idea, image or representation (Dreyfus 2005: 141). Yet the notion that the body is only ever ‘coping’ can tend to neglect the important role of imagination, creativity and playful interaction. With fear as an engagement with space, in parkour our emotions can be considered less a ‘coping’, and more a playmate. While I do, to an extent, ‘cope’ with the disjointedness that can afflict my senses, it is a disjointedness that is sought, fought, rolled around, tugged about and quietly contemplated.

There is a paradoxical element of freedom in this play with fear. While fear moves me on, unsettles, prompts, calls and inhabits place, its callings make possible an answer. ‘Freedom becomes a form of embodied awareness: a
choosing to sense and, more specifically, to feel and touch an environment’ (Lewis 2000: 58).

Yet there can be a profound ambiguity to the fear. It can protect the body, discouraging positions or movements that will result in injury or death, but for parkour practitioners this type of fear can have quite the opposite effect. It can cloud the senses and form a separator between body and environment leading to unnecessary error and a lack of commitment. It can and does jeopardise the success of movements. This has led many practitioners to suggest that one of the most dangerous aspects to parkour is fear itself (and of course here we are talking about a very specific type of fear). This sentiment was repeatedly expressed by traceurs.

Duncan: The thing is I know I can make that, I have done stuff much bigger before ... It’s so annoying! There’s just something funny about the jutting out lip.

Me: Yeah, the height doesn’t help either.

Dunc: No! Haha. If it was on ground level I would jump it straight off, no problem. It’s so hard to just get over it and give it 100 per cent up here, that’s the problem. (Author’s diary, 24 April 2006).

Despite confusing and in some instances annoying the practitioner, fear is still ‘contact fear’—it is being and moving with entities that are termed ‘other’. Configurations of materialities and the spaces between them become meaningful when they are jointed with emotions. They orient people’s movements, and perception. As I have suggested, with an engagement that is, over time, more or less immature and open towards space, in parkour it is possible to unsettle, change and even wilfully modify this emotional contact.

I had seen my friend jump the gap, and now replayed it churns up my emotions towards the place. The point here is that place is evocative by virtue of its ability to stretch, jump and scratch temporal lineage. With fear as playmate, moments are exploded into games that span large swathes of time. As an ongoing project, an epic that plays with architecture and contact, parkour brings into awareness our capacity to cultivate types of emotional engagements. The contact itself is often motivator, but it is one that can be playfully and consciously focused upon and reworked.

Parkour is full of events, where the world expands and shakes with intensity. This is the manipulation of affect. I do not use that term lightly, the danger is that ‘affect’ becomes a vitalist philosophy that posits an unchangeable, amorphous and atemporal field (Kraftl and Adey 2008). Rather affect emerges, and is made malleable by virtue of the continuous movement in the world. In other words, affect is mobile along with the materialities of the world and not at all essential. Presupposing emotion, as a type of potentiality, there is a sense in which the continued practice of parkour calls forth certain strands of affect and weaves them into the emotions that connect the traceur to place.

Thus it is possible for parkour to become a way of retrieving fear from an abstracted, dispersed phenomena. Of wresting emotionality away from bureaucratic controls and complex systems, and placing it within reach, as something immediately ‘touchable’, that can be slowly and intimately worked upon. As an artisan works with base material to shape something new, the traceur works with the environment to help cultivate their emotions. There is a concerted effort to move away from the view of emotions as something that happens to them. Instead they are in a playful process of negotiation, between place and the body. Immature practice produces new fears that connect body to textures, shapes and...
objects. Such forms are touched and touch back. The practice of parkour encourages an immaturity that allows that touching.

With this immature engagement the body is free to re-interpret space from many different mobile perspectives. Parkour and emotional play with space makes architects of its practitioners, who can demonstrate well their emotional attachments to configurations of space, and the movements (imagined or otherwise) between them. Figure 4 shows several designs made by practitioners for ‘parkour parks’, which they hold little hope of ever seeing realised, but relish in the imaginative play of its virtual construction, whether with pen and paper or three-dimensional CAD packages.

The traceur’s experience of place can be of a concrete, solid and brutal materiality, that at every turn betrays them, alarming the body and

Figure 4  Designs and sketches.
confining its playful aspirations. Yet those same scars can animate the parkour practitioner’s engagements, making walls into flow-full mobility, and rails into spinning leaps.

It was a fantastic sensation; I moved from one object to the next, uninterrupted, my focus was all about (I didn’t want to bang into a passer by) but never holding on to anything in particular for any period of time. I moved from concrete posts, to the strange looking outdoor kitchen [Figure 5], up a wall and along some, through the higher narrower part of ‘the kitchen’, and slowly jogged out of flowfull steam. It felt amazing. My hands touched, my body crumpled up small, expanded out, bent around. The contact I had with things was precious, but it never lingered, it was always letting go, moving from texture to texture, revelling in the roughness on hand, the shininess of the ‘kitchen’, the power of the leg, the frightening position of the body. Looking back, it is a feeling that becomes surprisingly sharp when I turn my focus to any part: the first vault over the kitchen; legs push off, body extends fully like superman flying for a split second. The padded bits of my palms go down, the stainless steel makes that noise that only thin sheet steel does, there is an only just perceptible slip on the smooth surface before my hands grip firm, this is unexpected and comes with a pang of panic but is somehow pleasant, knees tuck, hands lift off, fingertips pushing until the last, and I’m running again. (Author’s diary, 25 February 2006)

While I completed much longer ‘runs’ between and through street furniture and buildings, this experience stuck out as a flash of effortlessness.

Figure 5  Kitchen vault (author’s collection).
The kind of feeling that often comes, but is soon undermined as I attempt to latch on to it. It was a moment of improvised movement that brought with it a new and welcome place, without prior contemplation and at a running pace. Every part of the environment moved together in an emotionally charged continuum of shapes, textures and sensations.

Flow becomes the moment in which there is no longer any discernible ‘I’ that negotiates or plans paths around objects, rather there is a body that knows at each moment what to grasp, how to slide through space unhindered by obstacles (Sudnow 2001).

If flow is such a joining it is inlaid with emotional engagements, which go between movement and space. While ‘consciously’ we may not be aware of our movements within a given space, during such moments we have for guidance an emotional engagement. For most of us this engagement never ceases and while becoming and emergent, it is not haphazardly so. ‘Emotions, which have so often been treated as opposed to thinking, are paradoxically self-reflexive actions and experiences. But the self-reflection in emotions is corporeal rather than a matter of discursive reasoning’ (Katz 1999: 7). There is a sense in which the emotions themselves are a stance towards space that can be evaluated. It is precisely our ability to look back and reflect upon our emotions that gives them a degree of malleability. We can choose to practise or ‘train’ certain emotions. In parkour the emotional connections undone and formed through its embodied actions create new kinds of fear along with new modes of inhabiting place.

Play with fear

I have been one and a half hours on this one sheer grassy/rocky bank in the middle of the countryside. I have gotten to know it well. I shall call it ‘Tree-drop’, for it has a small ash at its highest point. It is kinder than concrete, it has encouraged me to try more. Twice though, I have fallen, the second time resulting in dirt getting in my mouth . . . For a time Tree-drop is all there is, just me and Tree-drop. I feel I know it, better than most banks or trees. I have felt its height rise and fall, been upside-down from low branches, spun off the top lip, gotten caught by the protruding root bit, then used the same root to push off and reach the second branch . . . I am alone and playing with Tree-drop and my fear is part of the play—we are juggling it between us. It keeps me going, taking small risks by trying new configurations until I am exhausted sweaty and getting cold. (Author’s diary, 20 December 2005)

The practice of parkour has emotional purchase. As an idea, or ideal, it engages. With fear as playmate, emotion continually shifts in linguistic evading style, as something that moves us on, a craving, an asking, a demanding, a loving and a hoping. Fear can become a familiar link to space, a riddle to solve. In parkour the answer is not to dispense with fear but is found in process, trying, testing, working out, and becoming fluid.

My vulnerability, my existence as a corporeal being demands this development be made in contact with the world. As the terrible and awesome things we are capable of flash before us, what takes hold? How does affect become manifest into emotional engagement? My contention is that by encouraging practitioners to find new ways to experience and move in places, parkour begins to render this process open to revision. The way we build knowledge of these movements (as discussed in the previous sections), can bring depth and intimacy to our fear, rendering it an engagement that has the possibility of play with space.

If thinkers like Bauman (2006) argue that fear has become less touchable and no longer
an engagement with the world, it is still the case that practices like parkour can connect the practitioner in a quite direct way, where the solidity of walls, rails and floors and movements of jumping, vaulting and rolling become, through subtle and ‘refined’ fear, something less shadowy, formless and diffuse, and more something that can be worked upon, played with and examined. ‘Doing’ these emotions, as an engagement with place give the traceur what has been considered by Lefebvre (1991)—and many others who have taken inspiration from him—a ‘productive’ capacity.

Borden (2001), in writing a history of skateboarding and architecture, for example, shows how through skateboarding movements architecture can be ‘compositionally quite distinct from the ordered hierarchies of architecture-as-object, architecture-as-drawing, or architecture-as-idea; [instead] it is a rhythmical procedure, continually repeated yet forever new’ (2001: 262). Here the movement re-produces anew, the body, skateboard and the space.

Architecture is at once erased and reborn in the phenomenal act of the skater’s move. Space, then, is produced dialectically—both outward from the body, and in relation to skateboard and skateboard terrain, each of the last two being erased within the process. (2001: 108)

Yet, for the scientist, the physical space actually changes very little during parkour—there may be some small traces of rubber sole deposited on the walls or a few grains of material dislodged, but, depending on the surface, such changes are often microscopic. But such small molecular changes can drastically influence a person’s contact with space. Rubber scuff marks on the wall can tell a profound and mobile story for those that have learned to ‘read’ them. While we might casually refer to this as ‘productive’ of space, actually it is the nature of our engagement with space that changes. When I attempt for the first time, but fail to vault a rail, the specifics of that event will cause a radical mutation in my perceptions, and contact with space. My fear forms a very important part of that mutation, as it is my emotional engagement with things that envelopes my perceptions of them.

In experimentation and play there are breaks, fissures and interruptions in the seeming smoothness of emotional engagements with the world. Play in parkour has the potential to destabilise both the emotion of fear (folding into it feelings of movements that can entice and draw one towards certain special forms) and certain styles of mobility. Through my parkour practice I move around an environment in which fear, as engagement, leaps and bounds before me teasing, questioning, and exposing gaps, textures, corners, crooks, railings and drops.

Much of the research that has shaped this paper, has been an experiment with a vulnerability that allows new ways of connecting, and of making moving contact with architectural forms. This is more than a parkour-specific point, or even a methodological point. More broadly it is an issue that permeates most of our attitudes and precognitive interactions. It is a call to be open to play, as a practice that can enrich and redefine our existence, one which encourages contact, wonder and the willingness to place a hope in fear. That is de-centring oneself for the purpose of playful interaction. Letting things, stones, walls, trees, bars, grass, ledges, lips, kerbs, grit touch and reshape you, and thus become themselves ‘alive’ in the process. Direct honest feedback is learned, through the senses, in an involved way that demands fear be a type of contact.
Although openness and vulnerability must involve degrees of ‘letting go’, this is always a partial affair. We may not make a pure or atemporal type of contact. The flaw in phenomenological reduction perhaps: that the ‘stripping away’ (epoche) can never be complete—we exist because we have a past. Body-knowledge or maturity is not easily cast off. What is called an ‘immediate’ inspection of a situation, one that does not enrol prejudice (Zaner 1975), is hard to conceive of. Yet as I have argued, here this need not subtract from the possibility of play with fear. Indeed, parkour is a process that deploys maturity and immaturity together and inseparably in its questing.

What then does play with fear do to our understanding of the word ‘fear’? Should we be looking towards new words to describe multilayered emotions? Must a specific emotion include the place in which it has arisen, as well as the sensations it entails? I have argued here that the emotion is itself a type of contact with the world and that description of it only makes sense when we account for both the feelings and the place. I leave the question of exactly how we go about describing emotions, what words we use for ‘fear-enchantment’, ‘fear-pain’ or ‘fear-enticing’, for example, as an open one. Only to suggest that words like ‘fear-pain’ will mean most when they have a context with which we can attempt to empathise.

While fear as playmate has been the focus here, equally one could look at the opposite; that is, fear which craves repetitive safety. Acting without openness is to give no potential to place. It is to kill play with fear outright. It fosters a specific fear that closes down human experience with a dullness that describes only one path, only one future which gains empowerment through disenchanting. Towards this passive spectator, fear’s hold can become so routine, its way or touching so familiar it becomes invisible. It hides the possible, masks the fears that can beckon, spin, illuminate and animate places. In this instance retrieving one’s multiplicity, re-engaging with fear as playmate requires that fear be larger than an embodied phenomena. Instead it is mobile amongst the kong vaults, cat leaps, palm spins. In this sense, for some people parkour can be a way to re-enchant their relations with spaces and ideas. Certainly my parkour and play with the environment have gotten lost together and lead me towards exciting and enlivening engagements with place.

Conclusion

I have made a preliminary attempt to run with our widely held understanding of ‘fear’, towards something not quite so static, singular or dishearteningly negative. Through an immersive engagement with parkour, I found fear taking on an array of different textures and colours, many of which were not as unpleasant as has hitherto been theorised. In the spirit of the practice which I have been studying (and practising), I have attempted to think about and articulate these types of fear with a kind of mobile playfulness.

Indeed, it may be that it is in play, and play not just amongst young children, that we can find ways to break out of iterative performances, not only of mobility, but of emotionality as well. Specifically, certain types of unpleasant fear can be supplanted, experimented with and reflected on, through practices like parkour that attempt to cultivate more ‘enjoyable’ kinds of fear. These fears are not always totally direct engagements (i.e. physical pain=a fear) and can come from
playful imaginings and various time-spaces. More often though they emerge in the moments of action, when engagements with place shift and are remade ready for a new ‘trying’ and another round of ‘getting to know’.

The plasticity of a place that is under construction by traceurs can be frightening in many different ways. The intimate contact practitioners have with place ties their fears tightly to distance, texture, surface and form. Playing with such contact is a risk that, for many, is seen as unacceptably high: not only does such play have the ability to reshape radically the body’s emotional engagement with place; it has the risk of permanently injuring the body itself. For the experienced practitioner though, who has known pain and possibly injury, parkour has led them to new spatial awareness, and most importantly of all, has given them the ability to participate more deeply in the formation of their emotions and the experience of the places they move through.

But there can be no doubt: there is danger in this path. On my computer screen I see David Belle fall. My thoughts cannot be disjointed from the tension I feel in my arms and legs. It is my contact that responds to these images and sounds. I have looked down and seen the danger. A danger that is part of me, for it is I who considers this jump or that; it is a possibility of freedom that fuels my fear.

It is the possibilities and the emotional engagements that connect us. David Belle runs at a hard concrete wall. I know he will fall and I feel slightly sick, for I too have that wall, that void of space to cross or disappear into. In this way our play extends down screens and wires, until it meets, and I am standing before a wall, any wall, contemplating, feeling slightly sick. But I get up, excitedly—a safe journey is not always a good one.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to all those who shared with me the pleasure and pain of parkour practice. Thanks also to Tim Cresswell for kick starting this research and Pete Merriman, Gareth Hoskins, Samantha Saville, Peter Kraftl and other friends and colleagues for their insightful comments and encouragement on earlier drafts and presentations of this work; and for the feedback of the three anonymous referees. This research was gratefully undertaken with funding from the ESRC.

Notes

1 Though I will not dwell on it here, it is interesting to consider how parkour might be understood as a utopian practice. Common to recent work on utopia (see Kraftl 2007; Parker, Fournier and Reedy 2007), parkour is an ongoing process that can be unsettling in its re-imagining of movement and landscape.
2 During this immersive participation, I practised parkour on a daily basis, with several different groups and individuals, and occasionally on my own. As an observant participant, I kept a research diary of my experiences. I also conducted semi-structured recorded interviews with some traceurs.
3 Talk about one’s ‘Way’ in parkour is almost wholly borrowed from Japanese forms of Budo, which prize certain bodily practices and disciplines (archery, martial arts, etc.) which come to possess spiritual significance. While ‘The Way’ in Japanese practices is normally quite prescribed, master to student, in parkour this is much less the case.
4 Parkour practitioners often refer to the philosophy of parkour. This philosophy is espoused variously by different traceurs across the globe, drawing on a variety of cultural references, particularly from what can be broadly identified as Eastern philosophies.
5 During my research I attended a ten-day parkour workshop, run by Tony Wolf as part of the ‘Stomping-Ground’ dance festival in New South Wales. Before the term ‘parkour’ was coined by David Belle, Wolf and others were supplementing their professional stunt work by practising very similar movements under the guise of ‘Urban Shugendo’. Of course, the physical practice of parkour-type movements has been with us.
in many different incantations, well before the term ‘parkour’ became popularised.

6 Here my vulnerability is very much a condition of my corporeality as with Paul Harrison’s (2008) paper. Yet the context is quite different and this is more a type of ‘active’ and even ‘sought after’ vulnerability.

7 ‘Kong vaults, cat leaps, palm spins’ are all loose definitions of types of parkour movements.

References

Adey, P. (2006) If mobility is everything then it is nothing: towards a relational politics of (im)mobilities, Mobilities 1: 75–94.


Abstract translations

Jouer avec la peur: le parkour et la mobilité de l’émotion

Cet article ouvre des débats sur la géographie émotionnelle et la théorie non-représentationnelle en abordant la peur sous l’angle de l’engagement mobile avec notre environnement. Aujourd’hui, le public est fortement sensibilisé au parkour, qui est une sorte de course libre, par l’intermédiaire de représentations médiatiques commerciales et cinématographiques. Celles-ci le décrivent comme un sport urbain des plus spectaculaires auquel on peut ou ne peut pas se livrer. En reprenant les résultats d’une recherche ethnographique menée auprès de groupes qui s’adonnent au parkour, une série d’éléments écartés de ces représentations sont abordés, dont les émotions suscitées par la tentative, l’expérimentation et, en dernière phase, l’apprentissage d’être dans les lieux de manière différente. Les lieux, dans le parkour, sont « réussis » ou investis de façon provisoire, aléatoire, maladroite et peut être vu comme une expérience ludique de l’architecture. Il est avancé que ce jeu repose sur toutes sortes de peurs qui n’ont pas seulement un effet négatif, mais qui constituent également une voie importante par laquelle les participants établissent un lien avec le lieu. Les peurs se manifestent ainsi de manière différente et constituent autant un obstacle à la mobilité qu’un encouragement, dans certains cas, à des formes de mouvement imaginatif et enjoué.

Mots-clefs : peur, parkour, course libre, géographie émotionnelle, mobilité, lieu, jouer.

Jugando con el miedo: parkour y la movilidad afectiva

Este artículo entra en debates sobre la geografía afectiva y la teoría no representacional por considerar el miedo como una forma verdaderamente transportable de interactuar con nuestro entorno. El Parkour, o ‘freerunning’, es bien conocido por parte del público gracias a las representaciones y películas comerciales de los medios de comunicación. Es representado como un deporte urbano espectacular que, o se puede, o no se puede hacer. Mediante un estudio etnográfico con practicantes del parkour considero que ha sido excluido de estas representaciones: las emociones involucradas en el acto de intentar, experimentar y, poco a poco, aprender a estar en un lugar de forma distinta. Los lugares del parkour están ‘hechos’ o movilizados de forma indecisa, insegura, torpe e inacabada, que puede ser caracterizada como un tipo de juego con la arquitectura. Sugiero que este juego depende de toda una serie de temores que, en lugar de ser totalmente negativos, constituyen una manera importante en que los practicantes interactúan con el lugar. Aquí los temores pueden manifestarse de forma distinta, no sólo limitando la movilidad sino, en algunos casos, impulsando formas de moverse que son imaginativas y traviesas.

Palabras claves: miedo, parkour, freerunning, geografía afectiva, movilidad, lugar, juego.