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Jump City: Parkour and the Traces

Thus, one of my plebeian philosopher’s essential budget headings was “shoes,” for the emancipated man is a man who walks and walks, moving around and conversing, putting meaning into circulation and promoting the movement of emancipation.
—Jacques Rancière, On the Shores of Politics

Introduction

What could be more unsafe than moving across, over, between, or under the city’s structures with what seems to be a joyous and blatant disregard for their intended use? Parkour, an urban practice of rapid on-foot movement that follows the maxim “keep moving forward,” seems, with its spectacular running and jumping, disconcertingly unsafe. It is, in fact, dangerous, both for the practitioner, who risks being hit by cars, breaking bones, and irritating security guards, and for the logic of the city itself. Downtown cores are arranged so as to assist flows of transaction and consumption, and local ordinances seek to restrict tangential activities that could disrupt that flow. Parkour is not so much a manifesto as an instance of the unruly intersection between capital flow and the flow of human

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bodies; instead of coinciding, they may intersect at angles of varying and appositional intensities.¹

This essay engages the figure of the wanderer (in parkour terms, the traceur) in the urban landscape. I want to call this space “capital city”: the urban concentration of transnational capital flow and consumption. As Guy Debord has argued, the city is a spectacle, and it is a physical manifestation of a hankering for democracy. In its public spaces and its government buildings, it suggests a history of a dream of collective consciousness fully present to itself. Civic and commercial structures are the two sorts of buildings that traceurs are most likely to push off from and move across.

Parkour traceurs move against the backdrop of capital city, putting into relief what is there. Glimpsed against the rectangles of the buildings of the business sector, parkour is art set in its frame. This contemplation is as much about the city as about parkour and unruly wandering.

The quirky, off-piste body involved in capers and high jinks downtown—often in privileged, relatively safe Western cities—might seem ephemeral. Depending on the definition of urban, in 2007, about half of the world’s people lived in cities. Worldwide, capital city is at the tipping point and about to become slum city, as Mike Davis continues to warn us.² But that is my point—capital city seems so solid and present that people can literally climb on it, yet the city is absent in the sense that it ceaselessly refers elsewhere. Parkour is an aesthetic that, though lacking any particular politics of dissent, helps the viewer see a significant feature of the city, its tendency to allude.

Arcade City

“Dream City” (Walter Benjamin), “Situationist City” (Anthony Vidler): Paris has been called various names, as writers and artists have sought to depict its modernity and the movement of people on foot.³ Benjamin’s 1935 and 1939 exposés, both titled “Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century” (Arcades, 3, 14), demarcate the ways in which capital city was clearly going to be a time as well as a space. Benjamin’s particular interest was in the juxtaposition of two emergent technologies: ironwork, and magasins clustered into arrangements that were effectively department stores. The significant thing about the ironwork was its ability to suspend glass and to form arcades. The specular economy was born. “These arcades, a recent
invention of industrial luxury, are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings, whose owners have joined together for such enterprises. Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the passage is a city, a world in miniature” (Arcades, 2). Benjamin was interested in the figure of the stroller, the flaneur, in these arcades (and by extension in the European city). He quotes Balzac on the “perfect flaneur” for whom “it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude” (Arcades, 436). But the flaneur cannot be neatly set in artistic opposition to capital, for in one of his personae he is “the observer of the marketplace. His knowledge is akin to the science of industrial fluctuations. He is a spy for the capitalists, on assignment in the realm of consumers” (Arcades, 427). And although the tempo of the flaneur can be judged, Benjamin tells us, by the fact that “in 1839 it was considered elegant to take a tortoise out walking” (Arcades, 422), the flaneur is certainly not a dandy, or a traveler, or a tourist for that matter, and even the stroll has a certain vertigo. For the flaneur, “every street is precipitous” (Arcades, 416).

In Situationism, a version of the stroll with a good deal more explicit antagonism to capital than that evinced by the flaneur is called the dérive or drift. Debord defined the dérive as “a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances.” If we draw a line from the flaneur to the dériveur and then to the traceur, clearly there will be many exclusions, most notably that of the surrealists. The city today includes flash mobbers, sewerers, and other hipsters together with old-fashioned skateboarders (including the more prosaic longboarders), mobile petty criminals, grocery cart pushers, streakers, hitchhikers, car fighters, unemployed messengers, lowbaggers, in-line skaters, builderers, culvert kayakers, through-bikers, and their ilk. So the filiation of flaneur to traceur may not be a direct one, fraught as it is with detours, but clearly the stroll in capital city has gained some momentum from Debord’s “rapid passage.”

Parkour was formalized as a discipline by David Belle: “[It] is a natural method to train the human body to move forward quickly, making use of the environment that’s around us at any given time.” This movement is the “art of displacement,” by which one site refers and links to the next across the city. The corrupted French spelling is a hint that deviation is likely. Parkour (or PK) is an excellent training regimen for outrunning the police, and
it functions potentially as a low-tech answer in a world of helicopters and gadgets to the perennial question for bad boys, “What you gonna do when they come for you?” That its roots lie in the imaginary space of outrunning Vietcong soldiers in Indochina should give pause to anyone who wishes to link the movement in any simple fashion with protests against capital. The most direct trace (or genealogy) from Belle to Vietnam is through his father, a Vietnam veteran and an adept at obstacle courses. That ability, in its turn, can be traced to Georges Hébert, the twentieth-century physical fitness guru. Hébert had been stationed in St. Pierre in Martinique in 1902 when the town was subject to a volcanic eruption. In accounts of the event, Hébert features as a sort of antithesis of George W. Bush in the latter’s response to disasters in Manhattan and New Orleans. Hébert heroically organized the city and, more important, developed a lasting impression that the physical fitness of the citizenry is crucial.

Parkour’s enlistment in politics recalls Slavoj Žižek: “One should radically reject the notion that discipline (from self-control to bodily training) is a ‘proto-Fascist’ feature.” Of kung fu gangs who watched Bruce Lee movies three decades ago, Žižek asks, “Was it not obvious that we were dealing with a genuine working class ideology of youngsters whose only means of success was the disciplinary training of their only possession, their bodies?”

There is a lot of talk in parkour about seeing the city in new ways. Toronto traceur Graham, for example, did an ad hoc reading of a glass bus stop that had an advertisement for a backpack on one side. “The bus stop is considered for its physical properties, and the product is ignored,” he said. “You don’t want to make a mistake and crash through all that glass.” Flaneurs in arcade Paris might well have had similar thoughts about the fragility of glass.

On the other hand, traceurs and traceuses, even when spurning products, are likely to become products themselves. Despite recent “gains” in miniaturization, cameras bearing heavy wide-angle lenses are the best for making athletes look like they’re flying. And they are flying. Where there’s parkour, there’s usually a camera not far behind. In addition to YouTube and documentaries with a fairly wide international distribution such as Jump London and Jump Britain, parkour dominates the opening sequence of Casino Royale, the 007 movie, and appears in Live Free or Die Hard and other feature films. A new generation of photographers is learning to shoot the city with traceurs in the foreground.
Capital City

From the roofs of tall buildings, cities resemble motherboards, the insides of computers. Seen thus, urban physical movement can be said to be conducted and semiconducted in rectilinear fashion (in computers, even circuits tend to be rectangular), variously without impedance, with partial impedance, or with full stops. In fact, the display is probably less a symbol of computation than an instance of it, since the city is quite literally, day and night, in the midst of an infinity of local tallies, reckoning its total share of global capital. Angel Rama has written concerning the cities of the Americas in their historical situation, arguing that they exist on both a physical plane and a symbolic one, though his book *The Lettered City* suggests that the features arise together as one.10

The symbolic order acts not so much in superimposition as a key that can deconstruct the meaning of the city. Rather, the city comes into being as a symbolic order. It is not as if the city has been an organic formation that is later subjected to the protocols of reading, though to be sure the city has a grammar. Instead, the city is formed as an embodiment of an originary rhetoric, even without direct machinations such as Le Corbusier drawing plans for Rio from an airplane. The computer analogy could be extended to make anyone on foot that moves against the grain of the city into a sort of bug in the machine. But there is not a single aerial vantage point for consolidating this perspective, since the city is a cluster of superimposed grammars, discursive overlays, and intertwined systems and sets of systems, such as electrical grids funneled through subway tunnels. The individual in such a milieu has access to so many perspectives that these tend to be bundled, just like systems of systems.11 Simply going for a walk can be a challenge.

In his reading of Plato and the modernists, part of his larger project of assigning values to the aesthetic and the political, Jacques Rancière seems to have convened the elements for an elegant model of the footloose within an urban context. Modernist discourse, he says, bestowed on itself the discovery that pictorial abstraction could come home to two dimensions: “By revoking the perspectivist illusion of the third dimension, painting was to regain the mastery of its own proper surface.”12 The modernist claim is understandable, given that perspective thus rendered is a fiction that hints at the third dimension. If you are going to refer to it, why not just produce it? Conversely, there does seem to be a certain honesty about producing nonillusory art as paintings simply in two dimensions on a flat surface. It
is not hard to imagine an ascending series of accommodations in this direc-
tion, from painting to statuary to theater. Such an ascent can be an increase
in verisimilitude, but it also begins to look rather like a parable about pres-
ence: “For Plato, writing and painting were equivalent surfaces of mute
signs, deprived of the breath that animates and transports living speech”
(Aesthetics, 15). Any time a theorist writes “living speech,” a warning flag is
clearly going to be raised about false claims to presence. Without consid-
ering Rancière’s critique, however, there is still the endpoint of this progres-
sion. If two dimensions can be the backdrop for a perspectivist illusion,
three dimensions might be the backdrop for a temporalist illusion, which
would make available that fourth dimension, time. Can we posit parkour
tracings as inhabiting the authentic end of a continuum with abstraction
at one end and authenticity at the other? It certainly works schematically,
with the artists leaping out from the urban concrete planes, away from “the
‘planarity’ of the surface of depicted signs” (Aesthetics, 17). And the unpre-
dictability and danger of street theater seem to correspond with the vitality
of Plato’s tragic theater, over against the uninspired letter of flat depiction.
What Rancière calls “optical depth” plays a large part in the story (Aesthetics,
16), and depth perception is what keeps traceurs alive. The question about
visual art that parkour seems to ask implicitly is one the psychogeographer
is likely to pose as well: If you’re going to depict it, why not act it, live it?
Only those who truly see the city can truly render it. Does this not make
parkour the supreme urban visual art form? Do we not have all the tran-
scendence we need from the moment the feet of the traceur “loose the surly
bonds of earth”?13

An obvious problem with this is that as a YouTube phenomenon, not to
mention an opener for a 007 film, parkour reinscribes the old illusion of
a plane referring beyond itself. Even out there in the city of the real, there
isn’t much time. Is there any? The traceur working a wall several stories
above street level is not in any useful sense progressing through time. Time
collapses in a measure corresponding to the effort of concentration. In fact,
mortality hectoring time into an ever-smaller pinprick might serve as a
definitive measure of parkour event, a sort of distillation of the psychologi-
cal part of a jump sequence. By contrast, one might say that to the extent
the traceur (or traceuse) experiences time, he has been outside the moment
and thus outside the trace.14 With no time in which to exist, the traceur as
traceur does not exist, and it will be difficult to deploy the traceur politi-
cally. Yet the dream of a city of jumpers working outside the flow surely
persists as an evocation of political possibility. It’s a bird. It’s a plane. No, it’s the traceur, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound. As urban dwellers that are likely to catch glimpses of the traceur in his or her “transports,” we shall have more leisure eventually to consider where this figure coincides with, or diverges from, the police and with the social structure of the city.

The polis is the center of economy and democracy and is thus the nexus of an extreme ambivalence about abstraction and presence. If we were to define economy as a cluster of moving abstractions that stand in for our varied desires, we could find a counterpart in democracy as the dream of ourselves being subjects present to ourselves. Economy as absence and democracy as presence. The couplet is a little too neat, but perhaps at the least we should have a provisional sense of the urban medium—just what is it that the traceurs are leaping through, on top of, around? When people are jumping on and off buildings in the city, they are trafficking in an evocative set of binarisms: inside/outside, public/private, here/not here. Traceurs need not be clambering onto the roof of the Palais de Justice for us to get the general sense that they are onto something. Whether democracy and economy are in collision or collusion, the architecture of the city has already traced the history of this interaction. This is true not only because of the particulars of urban configuration—arrangements of buildings that serve to manage and control dissent—but for a more formal and no less important reason, what we might call the hardness of cities.

Imagine a soft city, one that might conform more readily to the whimsical nature of the psychogeographer’s trajectory: buildings with sails so that the structures weathercock into the wind, buildings with permeable sides so that citizens amble through even where there are no product displays, buildings that serve breakfast but are not there at lunch, no buildings at all, save a compensatory city hall in a set of labile see-through bubbles to ensure maximum transparency. This is probably an overly literal version of what Lisa Robertson would call “soft architecture.”15 Hardness, by contrast, denies contingency and suggests that the city we have is the city we were always going to have, that it has been set in stone because it was always going to have been set that way. Cities of steel and mortar may in fact be soft in the sense that there are likely to have been many cycles of decay and renewal, but to the person in the street this truth is dissimulated by the brute fact of the pitiless material of the city. The subject in capital city is thus asked to submit not so much to the police as to submit to time, to a certain version of retrospective temporality. Life is hard.
Absent City

Paper money’s slyly allusive rectangles conjure multiple elsewheres, from Fort Knox to the gestural infinities of product lines. Money is a crinkly vicarious atonement for absence. Abstract, it rephrases the concrete. Is there anything money doesn’t mean? As a counterfactual, I could tender Robertson’s version of John Ruskin, applauding a whitewash that “shows itself for what it is, and asserts nothing of what is beneath it” (*Soft Architecture*, 140).

We might well take Ruskin’s architectural plans, like the self-referential art rectangles of the modernists, at their face value. But when cashiers in Calcutta take orders in real time from McDonald’s customers in London, there is a sense in which London *means* Calcutta. Town and countryside have always mutually implicated each other like a pair of “I’m with Stupid” T-shirts, and late capital’s urban matrix hardly has time to be itself in the haste with which it hums a threnody of global evocations. Is the city even here?

Politically, the traceur works in no time. Spatially, he or she works nowhere, lofted out in the inner space of the city. Keeping in mind that utopia is literally no place, it is tempting to establish a binarism between the grave, crusty persistence of the city and the ephemeral jinks of the traceurs. But if the city itself isn’t there, then, Houston, we have a problem. For their part, traceurs have a faithfulness of correspondence with their host buildings, and this trustworthiness can be calibrated on a mortal scale. “Scaffolding is analogy,” writes Robertson. “It explains what a wall is without being a wall” (*Soft Architecture*, 163). Of the explanatory value of traceurs, we shall be able to say more once we can assure ourselves of what a city, to use Robertson’s word, “is” (*Soft Architecture*, 163).

Cities appear to be geometric shapes that ought to have a center that could serve as a focal point around which the structure could be organized. But we hardly need to appeal to theories of the uncanny to be spooked by the way in which the center of the globally connected city is elsewhere, making of the city the impossible, a structure without a center. Benjamin considers the possibility of “Dream City”: “Paris the dream city—as an aggregate of all the building plans, street layouts, park projects, and street-name systems that were never developed” (*Arcades*, 388, 410).

In *The Shores of Politics*, Rancière says pragmatically, “Utopia is not the elsewhere. . . . It is an intellectual construction which brings a place in thought into conjunction with a perceived or perceptible intuitive space.”

But intuition frees a lot of space for elsewheres. Parkour inventor Belle’s three-story drops seem unbelievable. As a movement, parkour is insistent on being the good face of urban movement, a movement about movement, self-consciously distancing itself from skateboarding, for example, which has been more confrontational with the police, and parkour theorists speak of reimagining the city in terms that are frankly utopian.

The traceur trains in such a way that his or her body becomes an instrument by which many urban constraints can be reconsidered. At such moments, Belle works in a part of the city’s space-time that has never been previously visited. Urban theorist Jane Jacobs’s interest in “infilling,” increasing urban density by revisiting the empty internal spaces of metropolitan areas rather than consuming more space external to the city, seems of a piece with these vibrant once and future activities (especially to the extent that Jacobs’s practical utopias do not come without political risks for their adopters). The city ceaselessly refers elsewhere, yet surely one of the most significant elsewheres is, unfailingly, inside city limits.22

How is a city absent? Ricardo Piglia misplaces the absence that is crucial to his version of the city even as he seeks to explain it, as if the need to lose the city rehearses something vital to the urban experience. “The central quality of narrative is this flow, this apparent fleeing movement toward another story line. I have tried to narrate this feeling,” he claims, reasonably. “I believe it is the origin of The Absent City.”23 Yet it is possible to forget in reading Piglia’s summary that the essential and dynamic absence in the book is after all that of a woman, a lover. Her absence is forgotten here, absence itself leaching out even from the privileged authorial summary of urban loss. Henri Lefebvre enacts a similar absence of an absence (to the third degree, in fact) in his reading of the Roman architect Vitruvius, who may have been the first to transpose quasi-omniscient perspectives acquired from sea voyages back onto the urban context. Psychogeographers, too, might well be sympathetic to his project. “The work of the Roman architect contains an elaborate attempt to establish term-by-term correspondences between various elements of social life in the context of spatial practice.”24 Yet Lefebvre calls our attention to a prevailing irony of the work, that the elephant in the room of such spatial chronicling is the city itself. “Though he is speaking of nothing else,” Lefebvre writes, “he never addresses it directly.”25 For their part, readers who labor diligently through the esoterica of the “Spatial Architectonics” chapter of Lefebvre’s The Production of Space (169–228), on the body and its capacity for “occu-
pation,” might find relief at a sudden extended and very corporeal quotation from Norman Mailer’s Why Are We in Vietnam? The quotation itself is not relevant here, but the appearance of it in Lefebvre’s book confirms a suspicion that his philosophical considerations have been naming a certain political absence in the French/American context of the occupation of Indochina. This is not to say that this is the “real” focus of the book. But absent city might be a useful rubric for a range of urban affects, occupations, international references.

It seems likely that cities are multiply absent from themselves, like parallel universes in a Borgesian library. Money is a “concrete abstraction,” says David Harvey, and we could say that cities are “abstract concretions,” reference-rich agglomerations that are also capable of, incidentally, keeping the rain off and providing some shelter.26

Attuned to the city’s cross-referencing potential, the practical psychogeographer might thus find a certain satisfaction in a mildly dangerous practice like attempting to navigate Toronto with a map of Saigon or Baghdad, which would have affinities with the non sequitur use of buildings implicit in parkour. A map of utopia would serve as well but ought to be strictly adhered to. Could there be a map of the city that is the same size as the city, as in Jorge Luis Borges? Maps work not by reproducing the city but by deleting all of it except a trace. The trepid Toronto traveler might take note of the unused subway stops in the phantom subway tunnel of the old Bay Street line and either see it on YouTube or take advantage of the occasional subway rerouting to film his or her own version. Check out Infiltration, the Toronto zine “about going places you’re not supposed to go,” where you can discover how to negotiate subway tunnels and sewers in the spirit of a gambol, and in a hilarious discussion of the semiotics of warning signs find all the license you will need for your adventures. The founder of the zine, incidentally, died from undisclosed causes.27 Tour guides that conceptually link the sewers of Toronto with those of, say, Canada’s trade partners in the developing world are undoubtedly on the Internet or will be shortly.

What isn’t the city? Traceurs are even now scaling the walls. Scaling is the mapmaker’s prerogative, putting the city at his or her disposal. We will have an information age when we have the means to rid ourselves of most information, and the search for a search engine commensurate to the task is ongoing. The traceur narrows tumultuous plenitude to a single wall, a single moment. The city is everything else.
Notes

1. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin quotes Edmond Jaloux:

   A man who goes for a walk ought not to have to concern himself with any hazards he may run into or with the regulations of a city. If an amusing idea enters his head, if a curious shopfront comes into view, it is natural that he would want to cross the street without confronting dangers such as our grandparents could not have imagined. But he cannot do this today without taking a hundred precautions, without checking the horizon, without asking the advice of the police department, without mixing with a dazed and breathless herd, for whom the way is marked out in advance by bits of shining metal. If he tries to collect the whimsical thoughts that may have come to mind, very possibly occasioned by sights on the street, he is deafened by car horns.


7. Ibid.


13. On two and three dimensions, Harvey paraphrases Stephen Kern (*The Culture of Time and
Space, 1880–1918 [London: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 144–52), on the cubists, “whose tensions between ‘the world of three dimensions that was their inspiration and the two-dimensionality of painting that was their art’ generated canvases that were as fragmented and shattered in their appearance as the urban social landscapes that they often sought to depict.” Harvey, The Urban Experience, 179.

14 “The trace is the appearance of a nearness, however far removed the thing that left it behind may be” (Arcades, 447). On the question of tempo, compare the following: “Poetry and art . . . derive from a ‘quick inspection of things’ . . . velocity is introduced as an essential feature of artistic intuition: ‘that “mind’s eye” whose rapid perception can engender within the soul, as on a canvas, the most diverse landscapes of the world.’” Ernst Robert Curtius, quoted in Arcades, 436.


16 Globalization is still a rough sketch, however. It takes twenty-one business days for funds to clear from a check cashed in Toronto drawn on a London bank, and this is between countries whose currency is denominated by the blandly reassuring face of the same queen.

17 In 2007, for example, certain strata of the American working class have been off-shored so quickly they have not yet had time to mourn, and only practiced pessimists have been quick enough to chant the loss. See Joe Bageant, Deer Hunting with Jesus: Dispatches from America’s Class War (New York: Crown, 2007). “The contradiction between town and country” is a phrase from Marx and Engels quoted by Benjamin in “The Flaneur,” Arcades, 432.

18 Houston is fifty feet above sea level, and New Orleans is ten feet below. New Orleans thus adds the ontological to a long list of ways in which the emerging city of late capital will not be there.

19 Other phrases from Robertson’s scaffolding that seem to more or less directly invoke parkour are “directional lability” and “the negative space of the building” (Soft Architecture, 165).


25 Ibid., 271.

26 Harvey, The Urban Experience, 167.
