
Amanda du Preez

THE CONTEMPORARY SUBLIME

AND THE CULTURE OF EXTREMES:

PARKOUR AND FINDING THE

FREEDOM OF THE CITY

BIOGRAPHY

Amanda du Preez completed her Doctoral studies at the University of South Africa in 2002 with the title *Gendered Bodies and New Technologies*. The thesis has one founding premise, namely that embodiment constitutes a non-negotiable prerequisite for human life.

Over the past 15 years she has lectured at the University of Pretoria, University of South Africa, the Pretoria Technikon, and the Open Window Art Academy, on subjects ranging from Art History, Visual Communication, and Art Therapy to Open and Distance Learning. She is currently a Senior Lecturer at the University of Pretoria, in the Department of Visual Arts, and teaches Visual Culture and Art History. In 2005 she co-authored *South African Visual Culture* with J. van Eeden (Van Schaik: Pretoria). The following publications are forthcoming: *Gendered Bodies and New Technologies: Re-thinking Embodiment in a Cyber Era* (Unisa Press) and *Taking a Hard Look: Gender and Visual Culture* (Cambridge Scholars Press). Her field of expertise includes gender and feminist theories, virtual and cyber culture, bio-politics, new technologies, and film and visual culture.

→ **The aim is to explore** and probe the possible ways in which the discourse of the sublime, as a modern aesthetic category, has mutated and morphed into the postmodern contemporary visual culture of extremes - extreme sports, extreme adventures, and extreme entertainment. The extreme activity of *Le Parkour* or obstacle-coursing, described by David Belle, its ‘founder’, as finding new and often dangerous ways through the city landscape – scaling walls, roof-running and leaping from building - to building, is identified as an interesting prospect for teasing out the postmodern contemporary visual culture of extremes. *Le Parkour* appears to fit with the working premise, namely that the sublime as discourse figures as *leitmotiv* in the representation and mediation of these extreme activities. In what follows, no in-depth critical engagement with *Parkour* and the sublime is proposed. Rather my exploration serves merely to articulate and propose a possible analogy between the discourse of the sublime and contemporary visual cultures of extremes as manifested in *Parkour*.



TOP:
Mark Madeo
Andrey Pfenning,
hand spin
Courtesy of the artist

LEFT:
Mark Madeo
Victor Laforte,
cat balance
Courtesy of the artist



Finding one's way in the city has been a negotiated act of combined skill and the necessary aloofness, if the modernist *flâneur* is anything to go by. As the modern city changed, so the city walker had to find other ways of dealing with the concrete jungle than did the *flâneur* strolling the arcades of the late 19th-century metropolises "demand[ing] elbow room ... unwilling to forgo the life of a gentleman at leisure", while mixing ambivalently with the crowd and remaining acutely aware of "their essentially inhuman make-up" (Benjamin 1982:174). Walking the city these days and pertinently the 'city in crisis', requires different skills more akin to the gravity-defying agility of a Neo or a Trinity in *The Matrix* or the amazing swiftness of *Spiderman*. This is where the almost superhuman or rather the "high risk leisure" (Stranger 1999) activity of *Parkour* leaps into view. In this extreme activity the urban city becomes the backdrop which requires acute agility and the ability to interpret the surfaces and obstacles of the urban jungle with precision and grace. The cityscape is now turned into an obstacle course, an exciting maze and conquerable jungle. The *Parkour* activist dangles and jumps with the skill of the circus acrobat, balancing and carefully assessing each situation like a tightrope walker.

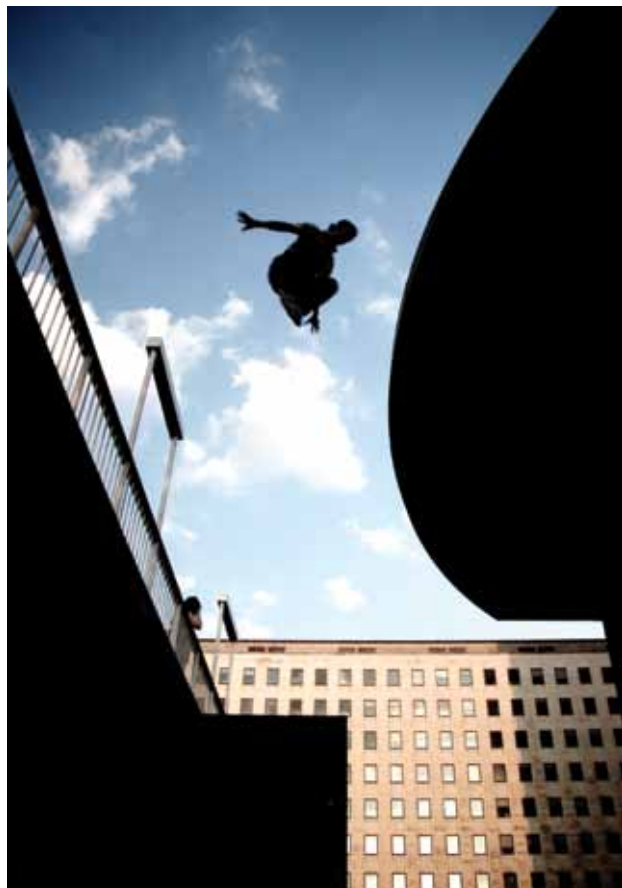
Parkour has its roots in combat, as it is named after obstacle-course training in the French army. The founders of the movement, David Belle and Sébastien Foucan, developed this new obstacle-tracking through the city and suburbs of Paris during the 1980s, and decided to name it after the army training called *parcours du combattant*. The term can be translated into 'line', 'course', 'circuit', 'road', 'way' or 'route' as a noun, and as a verb into 'to travel through', 'to run over or through', 'to traverse'. In English-speaking countries, *Le Parcours* has been adapted into *Parkour* or PK for short. The interest in *Parkour* globally was sparked by the BBC documentary *Jump London* in 2003, which also sparked my interest in the topic. In South Africa, and specifically Johannesburg, *Parkour* has a steadily growing popularity, especially among campus populations. South Africans were introduced to it in the recent Glassfit advertisement entitled 'Jump'. Shot in the inner-city of Johannesburg, the advert gave one of the leading South African experts, Emile Sievers, a chance to show his 'rubber'.¹

Parkour can be said to be inspired as much by the computer gaming industry as the ways in which space is effectively virtualised through new media. As Francois Penz (2003:362) contends: "Clearly a most dangerous (and illegal) activity, this new form of urban *flânerie* has been inspired this time, not so much by films ... but by a whole generation of computer games (*Ninja* series, *Deus Ex Machina*, *Counter Strike*) where contenders chase

each other across roof tops." Penz (2003:362) traces the development of *Parkour* from 'computer screen' to 'life' and finally onto the silver screen. In this regard, Luc Besson's cult film *Yamakasi – Les samourais des temps modernes* (2001) immortalised *Parkour*, as did the latest Bond film, *Casino Royale*.

But what are the characteristics of *Parkour*? The following terms are often used when describing it: 'urban or street gymnastics with a spiritual side', 'free running emphasising speed, flow and grace', 'precision running', 'serious play' and 'treating urban obstacles as athletic challenges. It has been called a 'discipline', 'self-discovery and self-improvement' and a 'lifestyle'. The practitioners are called *traceurs*, derived from tracer bullets (a bullet or shell whose course is made visible in flight by a trail of flames or smoke, used to assist in aiming), which already indicates something of the philosophy and movement behind it. In order to participate in *Parkour* one requires no special equipment except "a pair of trainers" and "a free mind" (Bryan & Nyland 2003:46). *Parkour* also differs from the skateboarding culture in the sense that although "the sport may be about reclaiming the city streets ... it's done without leaving a mark" (Law 2005). In other words – *Parkour* does not leave traces in the form of graffiti, for instance. It is also geared at creating a "sense of community" (Law 2005). In the words of a Toronto *Parkour* participant, 'Ferret' (his nickname) (cited in Law 2005): "There is no competition at all, nobody makes fun because you can't do something". In other words, the participants of this uniquely new, serious yet uncompetitive sport can, in some ways, be considered to be the 'saintly bullets of the streets', since they also do not participate in illegal activities unless they accidentally trespass or damage property. However, *Parkour* does have a punch and in fact demonstrates "a resistance to the city's disciplinary functions, particularly as they manifest in the urban street 'grid'" and the "gridlocked traffic, the flashing tail-lights, the 'STOP' light and 'WAIT' sign[s]." (Geyh 2006:3) With its emphasis on flow, *Parkour* creates a movement against the "conformity, regulation, and confinement" of urbanised space. (Geyh 2006:3)

Traceurs are not in agreement, however, as to whether *Parkour* can be defined as an extreme sport or not. Trying very hard to defy all rumours that it is a dangerous sport/activity, they seem to steer clear of the extreme label. *Parkour* does nevertheless subscribe to forms of extremism in my view, firstly, by putting an unlimitation on limitation itself. Statements and affirmations by *traceurs*, such as: 'If you want to run up a wall, you can'; 'I can go anywhere' and 'We believe that anything is possible for those who are willing to try' only emphasise the unlimitation associated



ABOVE
Jonathan Lucas
Shell Jump
Courtesy of the artist



TOP
Mark Madeo
Austin Gall,
jump over gap
Courtesy of the artist



ABOVE
Ben Ellis
Fly-over Hang
Courtesy of the artist



TOP
Ben Ellis
Tea Factory roof jump
Courtesy of the artist

ABOVE
Jonathan Lucas
Crossings
Courtesy of the artist

with it. Secondly, the regular connotations made between *Parkour* and freedom, such as ‘free play’, ‘free run’ and ‘fluid like water’ further confirms the link. As Paula Geyh (2006:3) articulates this freedom: “One might see parkour as an overcoming of social space through the interplay of body and material barriers. The body becomes the instrument of freedom.” In fact, *Parkour* is even related to a ‘heroic’ activity in its quest for freedom from urban obstacles and impediments.

Parkour does result in injuries regularly, although it tries to avoid these at all costs, and has even resulted in the odd fatality.² Nevertheless, Jaclyn Law affirms (2005) “parkour may be dangerous, [but] it isn’t reckless or random.” *Parkour* adheres to the goal of connecting “several moves in a fluid, unbroken string while running as if your life depends on it” (Law 2005). This ‘as-if-your-life-depends-on-it’ factor is explained by David Belle as “getting over all the obstacles in your path as you would in an emergency situation” (Glasfit website 2008). In fact one is emulating an escape from danger: “As martial arts are a form of training for the fight, Parkour is a form of training for the flight” (Glasfit website). *Parkour*’s link to the culture of extremes is affirmed through the underlying impulse to overcome all boundaries and obstacles ‘as-if-your-life-depends-on- it’.

Parkour, through its unlimitation of limitation (although only play-acting) asserts the contemporary culture of extremes or what Dave Boothroyd (2006:277) recently referred to as a “widespread fascination bordering on obsession with all things extreme.” Contemporary visual culture is drenched with consumer activities based on the principles of extremes and unlimitation. (Even hair gel promises ‘extreme hold’). The culture of extremes feeds on the flow of images dealing with extreme experiences. From *Extreme Makeovers* – a programme that turns ugly ducklings into beautiful swans – to extreme workouts, extreme ironing (ironing while hanging suspended from a cliff) – nothing dares to occur at a normal pace and rhythm anymore. ‘Live X-treme, everything else is a wasted time’, urges the copy of a Nissan four-wheel-drive advert. In other words, life not lived to the extreme is not worth living and subsequently, each experience must be weighed against the measure of the extreme. *Parkour* tests and shifts those ordinary experiences of boundaries in urban spaces constantly, by turning the controlling limitations of the city into a “smooth space”, and “space of uninhibited movement” (Geyh 2006:3). Tracing different routes and crossing the cityscape with almost impossible nimbleness, *traceurs* invent a new space or trajectory, one that appears to overcome the limitations of materiality and gravity. Through the simulation of the effortless movement on

screen, in *Parkour* we are witnessing what Paul Virilio (1997:134) explains as “the *space-world* giv[ing] way to ... the *time-world* of an instantaneous trajectography bearing no reference to the ground or to the surface”. Even though *traceurs* (cited in Law 2005) confess that they know the architecture and urban planning of their cities intimately, “we can actually call this our home because we’ve explored the whole thing” ; they know the city in terms not of a sense of place or “time-matter” (Virilio 1997:123), but as a time-world or “time-light” (Virilio 1997:123). Real space is negated, deterritorialised and in effect transcended. *Traceurs* move like flaring bullets over hostile terrains. They do not hesitate or stop to marvel - they flow in one uninterrupted movement, like water spilling over the rails and into the pavements cracks, as they re-map the urban territory.

The contemporary sublime and the receding landscape

In terms of *Parkour*, what type of sublime figures here, if the sublime can at all be utilised as a concept to hermeneutically unravel this extreme activity? It is definitely not the Kantian sublime that is at work here, nor the Lyotardian postmodern sublime. Perhaps *Parkour* can in part be described as the so-called techno-sublime. In the techno-sublime or American sublime, nature is substituted by technology as the humbling source of the sublime experience. Richard Nye in *The American Technological Sublime* (1996) demonstrates how the concept of the sublime changed drastically during the 19th-century, especially in America. The aesthetic dialogue between man and nature as theorised in the classical Kantian sublime was substituted by a dialogue between man and his own creations: “the vocabulary of the sublime has migrated from configurations of natural power and symbolic immensity [...] to ones recentered in technological power, mass mediation, and urban energy” (Wilson 1991:200). As Nye (1996:60) phrases it: “While the natural sublime is related to eternity, the technological sublime aims at the future and is often embodied in instruments of speed, such as the railway, the airplane, and the rocket, that annihilate time and space.” In the case of *Parkour* the instrument of speed is the human body. Paul Crowther identifies the so-called artefactual sublime to account for the role of architecture and human events in the contemporary evocation of the sublime. Crowther (1989:164) explains:

This displacement of the sublime has carried over into the twentieth century albeit with a change of emphasis. The burden of the aesthetic spectacle has shifted somewhat from revolutionary politics to the products and epiphenomena bound up with technological innovation in the



ABOVE
Jonathan Lucas
Fly Boy
Courtesy of the artist

OPPOSITE
Mark Madeo
Albert Kong,
precision jump
Courtesy of the artist



capitalist and state capitalist systems. Military parades and mechanized warfare exert renewed fascination, the image of the twentieth-century city as a vast anonymous domain of mysterious and violent multitudes figures large in the subject-matter of literature, painting, and the cinema. Images of space travel and science fiction likewise enjoy enormous popularity. In all these examples we find a fascination with vastness and power that transcends any immediate practical relevance for us. We experience the sublime.

Rarely in the classical sublime were human artefacts deemed fit to produce the sublime experience. Although Immanuel Kant mentions the aesthetic sizing-up of pyramids as part of the mathematical sublime,³ while Edmund Burke includes buildings and structures that due to their sheer size and magnitude may inspire the sublime, it is only in these rare occasional instances that the manmade could evoke the sublime. The contemporary sublime or techno-sublime is situated in a context where “natural environments are being replaced by technological environments that take on the awesome and difficult-to-represent features of nature” (Kellner 1999:167).

Flow and becoming one with the moment

In the case of *Parkour* the natural landscape has receded and disappeared altogether. It is the manufactured and constructed, plotted and remapped urban environment that inspires awe. Whereas both Burke and Kant in their analysis of the sublime allowed for a healthy distance between the ominous object and petrified subject, that distance implodes in the extreme experience. Whereas the 18th-century aesthetic discourses of the sublime called for contemplation and passive reflection, the contemporary version plunges into the event with exhilarating results. Proximity to the sublime now entails full-bodied immersion. As part of the experience culture, the closer the subject moves to the sublime the more it is deemed an authentic extreme experience. In this regard, Mark Stranger’s ‘The Aesthetics of Risk: A Study of Surfing’, in which he links the risk-taking leisure sport of surfing with “the emergence of a postmodern appreciation of the sublime” (1999: 267) has been helpful. For Stranger (1999:273) “The postmodern nature of surfing’s sublime

is such that the distinction between the appreciation and the experience becomes blurred.” Surfing as high-risk or extreme sport differs from *Parkour* as it is quite obviously immersed in nature and in the waves. The two activities are similar, however, in how the distance between subject and object is overcome, in what he terms an “experience of self-transcendence” (1999:267). Stranger (1999:268) notes: “Accounts of the nature of the thrill in risk-taking leisure activities often emphasize ecstatic feelings of oneness with the environment, the loss of self in the activity, and an intense awareness of the moment.” High-risk activities, such as surfing and *Parkour* seem to verge on a mystical experience and also evoke a religious sublime where the boundaries between self and other, form and the formless dissipate. One may even ask what the liturgical and ritual nature of *Parkour* consists of. The transcendence or ecstatic oneness with the moment occurs through the flow of the activity or “a harmonious match between challenge and skill” (Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi 1988:33).

In the *Jump London* (Christie 2003) video, the *traceur* Jerome Ben Aoues, describes *Parkour* as “a Zen-like harmony between you and the obstacle” and as a “state of flow, a seemingly effortless immersion in an activity with a concomitant loss of self-consciousness” (Geyh 2006:4). In the words of Foucan (Christie 2003): “The art of moving from one place to another with fluidity allows you to see your environment differently. The quest’s goal is to become a part of the environment in order to develop your mind and body.”

The aesthetics of *Parkour* are also very important, in fact, almost as important as the skill. “It is not enough to pull off a move – traceurs try to do it with grace, originality and style” concludes Law (2005). Through their graceful scaling, climbing, vaulting, descending and ascending the everyday is aestheticised.⁴ Here *Parkour* provides an opportune instance of showing how the form and content of the activity creates a new sensibility and experience (Featherstone 1991:266). Not only is *Parkour* wrestling with the sublime, the formless, by pushing the boundaries; it also gives a unique form, thus providing stylised beauty to the activity. The formless experience, or the sublime experience, is given form and takes shape beautifully through *Parkour*’s remarkable combination of the two aesthetic categories. I conclude with the words of Foucan (Christie 2003): “Following a path can bring with it new opinions and thoughts, both obvious and those that are not obvious. You must always follow your own intuition. You must always do what you feel. Rather than what others think.”



Endnotes

1. In the advert, Sievers vaults, plummets and skips out of his office on the 40th floor of the building, taking a *Parkour* route to the ground floor so as to arrive in time to put a coin in the parking meter's slot. Just in time before a meter maid writes out a ticket.
2. Mark Stranger (1999:267) notes that surfing is a risk-taking leisure activity not because of the fatality rate but because it is pursued primarily for the thrills involved.
3. In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, (1952) Kant refers to Savary's *Letters on Egypt* (1786) wherein he suggests that if one really wants to take in the full emotional effect of the Pyramids one should not stand either too close or too far. According to Malcolm Budd (1998:234), the difference between Kant's mathematic and dynamic sublime can be phrased as follows:
The mathematically sublime is concerned with the estimation of nature's size; the dynamically sublime with an awareness of nature's might; in the mathematically sublime the imagination figures an 'aesthetic' estimation of magnitude, in the dynamically sublime in an appreciation of force ... [N]othing in nature that can be 'given' to perception, nothing that can be an object of the senses, is properly characterised as (mathematically) sublime.
4. *Parkour* is furthermore linked to play – child's play. Foucan even urges to play again through *Parkour* since we forget to play when we get older.

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<http://www.flickr.com/benellis>

All photographs by Jonathan Lucas appears courtesy of the artist
<http://www.jonathanlucas.com> and <http://www.flickr.com/photos/jonlucas>

All photographs by Mark Madeo appears courtesy of the artist
<http://www.markmadeo.com>

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