The semiotics of parkour

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The present article is part of a vast research and publication project whose main purpose is to reveal some of the essential characteristics of the phenomenology and semiotics of belonging in contemporary societies and cultures. Such purpose is pursued through the analysis of the way in which these characteristics are manifested by various kinds of physical and conceptual (dis)placements across identity frontiers. The article, in particular, proposes a phenomenological and semiotic reflection on the dialectics between two opposite agencies. On the one hand, the agency of political power as it is expressed in the utopia of controlling the frontiers of belonging through centralized urban and architectural planning. On the other hand, the urban phenomenon of parkour as sum of individual agencies that seeks to defy political power, its utopia of centralized control, and the urban frontiers of belonging that it brings about. Such challenge is undertaken by means of a practice (and performance) of physical (dis)placement through space, which systematically defies its urban and architectural structure. The abovementioned dialectics also embodies a confrontation between the utopia of artificially recreating the ‘natural’ conditions of development of the urban space and environment of belonging (for instance, through the urban and architectural planning of French new towns in the 1960s and 1970s) and the opposite utopia of recuperating the feeling of ‘natural’ movement through space by defying the matrix of both motor possibilities and constraints offered by the urban fabric. These opposite utopias wind up revealing each the contradictions of the other: on the one hand, parkour unmasks urban planning and architectural utopias, showing that they are nothing but a travesty for the need to perpetuate an exploitative system of material and symbolical production and re-production; on the other hand, the liberating trend of parkour is soon cannibalized by media, show, and business trends that turn it into a stereotype of itself. As a result, parkour can be considered both as the urban trend that, invading the environments of belonging created and entrenched by centralized political and planning power, brings about new paths of nomadic identity in the urban fabric; and as the urban fashion that, invaded by the logics of media, show, and commercial exploitation, turns those same liberating movements into routines, into new confirmations of the political and spatial status quo.

1. An artificial lake

*Le Parc du Lac* ['park of the lake'] is a lake-park stretching about twenty hectares around an artificial basin built in 1974 to collect the rainwater of Courcouronnes, a French town whose population is currently around fourteen thousand. Situated to the west of Évry, it is part of its hinterland, together with the towns of Ris-Orangis (North), Lisses (South-East), and Corbeil-Essonnes (South). Évry, in its turn, with a population of about fifty thousand, is part of the huge hinterland of Paris, about twenty-six kilometers South-East.
A typical move of 1970s French urban planning, the creation of the *Parc du Lac* was meant to remedy some of the effects of the very rapid urban development of Évry and its hinterland. Turned in little more than two decades from rural village on the banks of the Seine into *ville nouvelle* ['new town'] with more than fifty thousand inhabitants – the seat of a prefecture, an Episcopal diocese, an economic, educational, and research pole, and several companies and administrative offices –, in the mid-1970s, Évry and its hinterland looked like an urban fabric severely incoherent in both aspects of urban and architectural planning, a hotchpotch of old and new, art nouveau *meulières* and HLM [subsidized housing] (Ass. Mémoire de la ville nouvelle 1998 and 2001; Guyard 2003; Mottez 2003).

2. An artificial city

In 1965, the *Institut d’aménagement et d’urbanisme de la région Île-de-France* ['Institute of urban management and planning of the Île-de-France region'], established in 1960, adopted the *schéma directeur d’aménagement et d’urbanisme* ['directing scheme for urban management and planning'] of the Parisian region, a sort of town-planning scheme [in the USA, ‘zoning regulations’]. It provided for the creation of five *nouvelles villes* in the surroundings of Paris, including Évry and its hinterland (Basdevant 1979; Steinberg 1981; Merlin 1991). The 1971 inauguration of the Prefecture building – the first of the *nouvelle ville* of Évry – in the midst of a field of beetroots is quite telling of the conception behind the urban planning schemes that many European countries, stimulated by the exceptional economic and demographic growth of the post-IIWW period, embraced in the first half of the 1970s. They did not consider the city as a ‘natural’ organism that develops ‘spontaneously’ through interactions among citizens and is subsequently regulated by a centralized political power. On the contrary, they conceived the city as an ‘artificial’ organism, stemming from the volitional project of a centralized political authority, not limiting itself to regulating interactions among citizens but seeking to predetermine them. This is why, in Évry, the building of the Prefecture – the architectural embodiment of the planning political power – was built first, followed by the residential areas of Parc-aux-Lièvres and Champtier-du-Coq (1972), Aguado and Pyramides (1974), the commercial and cultural area of Agora (1975) with the shopping mall of Évry 2, and finally the train stations of Évry-Courcouronnes and Bras-de-Fer (1978) (Le Moal and Pelissier 1988).

However, already at the end of the 1970s, an issue arose: the *nouvelle ville* of Évry, artificially created, had a political center – the first one to architecturally materialize in the Prefecture’s building – and a commercial center – ‘embodied’ only few years later by the gigantic shopping mall of Euromarché (Carrefour since 1991) – but not a civic center. In most *‘vieilles villes’* ['old towns'] – whose urban fabric ‘naturally’ evolves through centuries of dialectics between spontaneous urban interactions and centralized regulation by the political power – the city often grows around an empty space – the center, the square, the agora – that somehow embodies, precisely by its emptiness, the point of equilibrium among the various social forces that compete to secure the city’s economic and symbolic resources. Hence, the empty space in the center of the city is a space of laity, abstractly meant as possibility of equilibrium in the exchange and sharing of common resources (Darmagnac, Desbruylères, and Mottez 1980).

In Évry, on the contrary, as well as in most *nouvelles villes* – whose urban fabric is artificially planned through decisions taken in a short period of time by quite a centralized
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political power – such empty space of equilibrium and laity is replaced by an ‘artificial’ empty space (L’Agora), which is soon occupied by a predominant economic agent (the shopping mall) (Mottez 2007). In the late 1970s, urban planners realized that the main problem of Évry – an ‘artificial’ city stemmed from a political project more than a ‘natural’ city stemmed from interactions among citizens – did not only consist in its being an urban fabric without a city center. Its problem was even more serious: Évry was simply not an urban fabric. Having developed not as a ‘natural’ organism but as an ‘artificial’ construction, it contained all the elements that appear in most ‘natural’ western cities (a government building, a series of residential settlements, a commercial area, etc.), but not the nervation connecting them. Deprived of both a city center and a connective tissue, Évry was a simulacrum of a city, where the only common symbolical space citizens could rely upon was the commercial one and where, moreover, they encountered serious difficulties in moving between different areas.

Hence, from 1978 on, urban planners sought to inject in this ‘artificial’ city, where several elements had already excessively developed through a hypertrophy guided by the political project, some components that according to the ‘organic’ evolution of the city should have characterized the initial phase of the urban development: a city center and some passages among the neighborhoods (1978), the pedestrian areas of Épinette and Aunettes (1980), the University of Évry-Val d’Essonne (1990), the city hall (1991), and finally the cathedral (1995). This is an urban planning progression that seems to trace backwards that of medieval western cities. In other words, an effort was made to bestow an aura of ‘natural’ city upon the simulacrum of the ‘artificial’ one. The creation of the artificial park-lake of Courcouronnes was part of this project of re-writing of the urban palimpsest of Évry and its hinterland, aiming at the ‘re-naturalization’ of the ‘artificial’ town.

3. An artificial mountain

Also the installation of one of the symbols of Évry, the monumental sculpture known as ‘La Dame du Lac’ [‘the lady of the lake’], created in 1975 by the French-Hungarian sculptor Pierre Székelny, was part of this project. (Musée de la Monnaie 1981; Conservation des Musées de Mâcon 2006) (fig. 1).
An article in *Le Figaro* of October 23, 1975, preceding the inauguration of *La Dame du Lac*, described the expectations of the planners as regards the interaction between the citizens of Évry and this monumental sculpture:

> With the *Dame du Lac*, the first sculpture meant for climbing, which will be inaugurated in November, the administrators of the new town of Évry have found a method to conciliate art and sport. Perhaps it will set an example. There have already been monumental sculptures or fake rocks for escalading (USA, Japan, England, etc.), but they were never merged together. This one is due to the collaboration between the sculptor Pierre Székely and the well-known alpinist Guido Magnone, entrusted with making sure that the reliefs allow climbing in full security. “With an overhanging North façade and paths with various difficulties, this 15-meter-high sculpture will be an excellent training ground,” says Guido Magnone, “Escalade is a sport, in the same capacity as athletics or swimming, and not only a technique whose finality would be the mountain. Children are born climbers. They will be the first ones to attend this vertical stadium.” The school of Évry, with an in-service instructor, will be open to school groups, clubs, various associations, individual climbers…and art lovers.

Therefore, *La Dame du Lac* was not only the monumental sculpture of a female body reflected in the mirror of the artificial lake of Courcouronnes. It was meant to achieve the project of re-naturalization of the artificial city of Évry, providing the citizens of the *nouvelle ville* with what those of many old towns were given in the beginning, and not at the end, of the process of urban foundation: a mountain. The administrators of the town of Évry, indeed, were sure that – thanks to the cooperation between the artist and the alpinist, between the sculptor’s artifice and the athlete-naturalist’s knowledge – an artificially reproduced nature would have been within reach of citizens – few steps from the shopping mall –, a nature where children, to whom this sculpture was specifically dedicated, would have been able to exercise with movements for which they were thought to be ‘naturally’ gifted: those of climbing. The press release diffused by the city hall of Évry on November 15, 1975 – day of the monumental statue’s inauguration – entitled ‘*La montagne viendra à toi*’ ['the mountain will come to you'] is even more explicit in indicating the ultimate goal of *La Dame du Lac* as a (artificial) re-naturalization of the ‘urban landscape’:

> If building mountain-cities is a catastrophe, if the first problem to solve is providing citizens with on-the-spot entertainment, why not build city-mountains instead? It is what is being done in the new town of Évry, where a ‘sculpture for climbing’ is about to be completed. […] Contrarily to what happens in nature, it is the climbers who have indicated to constructors where to place the one hundred and fifty grips.

Paraphrasing the famous proverb about Muhammad and the mountain, here it is the mountain that goes to the city and not vice versa. Building mountain-cities is, indeed, difficult, as the city hall press release points out, but the citizens of Évry – who in 1975 had already realized to be living in a simulacrum of a city without any center or connective tissue – needed to be entertained: here comes the brilliant idea of an artistic and artificial mountain, where children could live the experience of the mountain within easy reach of the city. What the press release did not say is that the artificial mountain, as well as the artificial lake mirroring it, were ideal especially for the inhabitants of the numerous HLM buildings populating Évry and its hinterland, inhabitants for whom the cost of taking children to climb a natural mountain would have often been too high.
4. From artifice to art

The administrators of the town of Évry could not imagine that some of the children who began climbing the walls of La Dame du Lac from the mid-1970s on would become protagonists of a global cultural phenomenon, bearer of a rather explicit critique of the type of urban planning conception that had led to the creation of both the new town of Évry and La Dame du Lac meant as artificial mountain in the first place. Some of these outcomes, though – totally unpredictable for those who, like the administrators of the new town, considered La Dame du Lac simply as substitute for a mountain within reach of the city – were prophetically foreseen by Pierre Székely, the visionary artist who had conceived the monumental sculpture. Interviewed in 1977 on La Dame du Lac by the art journal Leonardo, Székely said:

I have constructed a large sculpture for alpinists, whom I call piétons de l’espace (walkers in space), at the edge of a lake in a ‘new city’ development south of Paris. Sculptors and alpinists, in their particular ways, contend with space. Their physique is guided more by imagination than by mechanical devices and tools. This analogy was a source of inspiration for me when undertaking the work. […] This large work will be touched by many hands and feet and it will not envy those ‘nonutilitarian’ sister sculptures that must be viewed only from a distance. I hope that its climbers will be influenced deeply by the aesthetic qualities of its major form. (Székely 1977: 225)

Far from considering La Dame du Lac simply as an artificial mountain and therefore as a mere support for the exercise of ‘urban alpinism’, Székely – faithful to the assumptions of a long artistic career – conceived this monumental sculpture as capable of embodying a parallel: just as sculptors explore the space they come across through their creation, alpinists explore the space they encounter by means of their path. Although an artificial space is explored in the first case and a natural one in the second, this parallel shows two fundamental elements: first, both sculptors and alpinists explore space not through distant vision but through direct contact; second, neither alpinists nor sculptors limit themselves to finding space by touching it, but somehow they ‘invent’ it: the sculptor invents new forms by shaping a material with his hands; the alpinist ‘invents’ new ways by choosing a path through the ‘natural’ space.

Proposing to the children of Évry and surroundings a sculpture for climbing meant, for Székely, inviting them to abandon the position of those who receive, through vision, a space created by others and adopt the position of those who invent, through touch, their own space. Furthermore, it meant encouraging them to become alpinists-sculptors, or sculptors-alpinists, capable of inventing and re-inventing space through the movements of their climbing, just as Székely had invented and re-invented space through the movements of his sculpting. This parallel becomes even more pertinent considering the sense of limit, and fatigue, and overcoming of the limit, and further limit, and further fatigue, and further overcoming, intrinsic to both the practice of climbing and that of sculpture.

Some young inhabitants of Lisse were among the habitués of La Dame du Lac: David Belle, Sébastian
Fucan, Yann Hnautra, Charles Perrière, Malik Diouf, Guylain N’Guba-Boyeke, Châu Belle-Dinh, and Williams Belle, names that manifest the great ethno-cultural variety of the hinterland of Évry. From the late 1980s on, these teenagers began to give rise – first in a little programmatic and almost spontaneous way – to a cultural phenomenon that within few years would become global under the name of ‘parkour’ (fig. 2).

5. The art of displacement: speed and obstacles

Parkour can initially be defined as a new way of moving through space, but also as both the physical and mental training needed to develop the capacities for such movement. This new way of moving through space has two main characteristics: 1) speed; 2) relation with obstacles. As regards the first, it would be difficult to imagine parkour done at walking speed, although some of its passages in both training and performances are executed slowly. Nevertheless, parkour’s typical movements through space are done with the pace of someone running at breakneck speed. Underlining this characteristic is important mainly because, as it will be pointed out later, one cannot fully understand the meaning of parkour without taking into account its ties with the idea of flight and with the practices of movement through space that this idea entails. As regards the second characteristic, it would be difficult to imagine parkour executed in a desert or in a prairie. Indeed, parkour consists in developing the physical and mental abilities necessary to move through space independently from the obstacles that hamper the movement and in turning them instead into as many opportunities for further movement.

Let us consider, for instance, an HLM building built in the early 1970s in Évry (e.g., the famous ‘Pyramides’). Typically, the apartments are connected with the common spaces, and through these with the public space of the street, through a complicate labyrinth of stairs, landings, overpasses, footbridges, etc. A subject wishing to move from her apartment to the street, for instance, could do it only through such labyrinth. But all these architectural elements hamper a rapid, fluid, and rectilinear movement through space and force the body to instead move through space from point A to point B in an indirect, fragmentary, and zigzagging way.

Nevertheless, whereas the mainstream individual considers these stairs, landings, overpasses, footbridges, etc. as elements that help her to move from point A to point B, parkour considers them as obstacles, as impediments of a straightforward movement through space. The training of parkour therefore consists in acquiring the physical and mental capacity to turn these obstacles into the material support for a rapid, fluid, and rectilinear movement through space. Practically, a parkour through the space of an HLM of Évry would entail such a series of bodily movements that one jumps stair-flights in a single bound, moves from landing to landing by climbing stair-wells, leaps directly into streets from overpasses, crosses footbridges by running on their railings, etc. (fig. 3).
6. Socio-cultural context and meaning of parkour

The global diffusion of this cultural phenomenon prompts two questions. First: what is the socio-cultural context in which parkour originates, develops, and spreads? Second: what is the meaning of parkour? The two questions, the first pertaining to the history of culture, the second to the semiotics of culture, are intertwined.

6.1 Residential density and sentiment of the obstacle

One of the fundamental structural elements of the socio-cultural context that gave rise to parkour has already been identified in the beginning of this section: the urban and architectural planning of most of Évry and its hinterland. Parkour could have hardly originated and developed in the 16th arrondissement of Paris, with its long, wide, and rectilinear Haussmannian boulevards, its harmonious, homogeneous, and equilibrate Second Empire buildings, its elegant stair-flights, its sober landings, etc. On the contrary, parkour was born and developed in the incoherent labyrinth of neighborhoods, streets, buildings, and landings typical of the new towns built in France from the mid-1960s on. Indeed, the plastic models of the residential settlements planned for the first seven thousand inhabitants of Évry already indicated that the proxemics of this artificial town would have been characterized by an extraordinary residential density (Fouchier 2000) (fig. 4).

The logistic-economic need of concentrating many inhabitants on narrow surfaces and in restricted volumes as well as the utopia of generating the spontaneous human interactions typical of ‘natural’ cities by simply reducing the distance among inhabitants brought about a suffocating urban and architectural structure,\(^9\) in which individuals feel constantly besieged by both other individuals and their apartments.\(^10\) The choice of avoiding tower-cities by spinning out the verticality of buildings into pyramidal structures,\(^11\) hence, multiplied the mass of volumes crowding together and gave to the first residential settlement of Évry the look of artificial mountains.

Whereas Székely had deliberately planned a sculpture for climbing, in the case of the pyramids of Évry, instead, the mountain-effect stemmed from a planning ‘accident’: the urban and architectural communication – the dialogue between the plan and the experience of the residential structure – escaped the control of planners and laid itself open to the deconstruction of parkour; meant to avoid the vertigo-effect of skyscrapers and tower-cities, the first buildings of Évry were interpreted by its young inhabitants as artificial mountains to climb. In this urban and architectural context, characterized by excessive density of inhabitants and volumes, citizens perceived the urban space as something that did not facilitate but hampered body movement. The feeling of isolation that gripped the first inhabitants of Évry also contributed to this claustrophobic sentiment of the urban space: sort of urban pioneers, unwilling explorers of a new urban frontier, they inhabited a place that the political discourse called ‘new town’ but relied entirely on the ‘old town’ for both work

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**Fig. 4**: Model of a residential settlement of Évry (‘les Pyramides’)
and entertainment opportunities. This feeling of distance from the real city, along with the
difficulty of urban and extra-urban transport, chipped in to generate a depressive perception
of the urban space, a perception in which such space was not an ally but an enemy in the
narrative project of daily displacements among different points of the city.

6.2 Entertainment scarcity and sentiment of play

A second fundamental structural element in the socio-cultural background of parkour is the
social dynamics of the urban and architectural context of Évry and its hinterland, which
interact with the sentiment of space described above. First of all, the socio-economic structure
of many of the households of Évry and its hinterland has long been such that the spare time
of local teenagers was scarcely organized, either in the private or public environment. The
teenagers’ modalities of study and entertainment were rarely monitored by parents, both for
lack of time – also because of their need to work in Paris\(^\text{12}\) – and habit,\(^\text{13}\) and were poorly
structured by the heterogeneous social fabric which provided teenagers with very few possi-
bilities for a shared organization of their time. In simpler words, for quite a long period,
spanning from the genesis of the new town until the mid-1980s, local teenagers had very few
resources to fill their free time. It is exactly in these conditions that parkour manifested itself
as the desire to turn the entire city into a huge entertainment park, where all the elements of
the urban and architectural infrastructure – from windowsills to parapets, from sleeping
policemen to bus stop shelters – are re-signified and re-functionalized in the frame of urban
entertainment, deprived of their practical functionality and attributed a playful one.\(^\text{14}\)

6.3 Urban criminality and sentiment of emergency

Another social dynamic that exerts deep influence on the genesis and development of parkour
is the quite high criminality rate of Évry and its hinterland. Explaining the reasons for such
characteristic exceeds the purposes of the present article. However, it should not be ignored
that, among the urban centers of the same size, Évry is still considered one of the five least
safe cities of France, that rival gangs of often very young age frequently clash in the hinter-
land of the city\(^\text{15}\) – mostly in Courcouronnes\(^\text{16}\) –, and that these fights have provoked several
episodes of bloodshed and murder (Barthe 2000).\(^\text{17}\) Such episodes provoked the indignation
and protest of the citizenry as regards the safety of Évry\(^\text{18}\), attracted the attention of national
media, and pushed politicians to adopt drastic control policies, among which the placement
of security cameras in the commercial area.

Knowing this distressing aspect of the socio-cultural context in which parkour has
originated and developed means being capable of understanding parkour not only as an ‘art
du déplacement’ [litt., ‘art of displacement’], as it is poetically described especially by its
Francophone practitioners, but also as a martial art, to be interpreted as the art of either
fleeing or chasing. Parkour’s connotation not only as aesthetic deconstruction of the urban
space but also as alternative (or introduction) to urban fight is evident in many details: the
repertory of body movements from which parkour draws to construct the syntagm of its
movements across the city includes several bodily figures that are typical of Oriental martial
arts and especially of their cinematographic imaginaire (the movies of Bruce Lee, those of
Jacky Chan, etc.). Moreover, those who practice parkour often define it as a way to move
across space in a situation of emergency, so as to gain the greatest possible distance from a
potential chaser or to reduce the distance from a potential prey as much as possible. That
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parkour might have originated predominantly as a form of escape from the criminals of Évry or from its police is more of criminological than semiotic concern. What matters is the indication that in both cases parkour is characterized by a narrative structure in which movement is triggered by a compelling desire to either attain an euphoric object of value by eliminating the distance between the subject and the object (as it happens to the climber when she seeks to reach the peak of a mountain), or to distance oneself from a disphoric subject for whom one represents, vice versa, an euphoric object of value to attain (as it happens to the thief who seeks to flee from the guard). In simpler words, parkour might be defined as a particularly spectacular evolution of the classic childish game of ‘cops and robbers’ – or analogous games of chasing and fleeing –, with the difference that parkour does not involve any personification of either the cop (in the case where one imagines to flee) or the robber (in the case where one imagines to chase). In parkour, the cop and the robber have both been interiorized. One flees from something without knowing what: getting ready for a potential flight; one chases something without knowing what: getting ready for a potential chase.

This connotation of parkour as training for a potential emergency can be interpreted in various ways: as a symptom of an urban context in which both fear and desire have lost their object, respectively turning into angst and idle aspiration, and as a symptom of an urban context in which both the objects of fear and desire have been transmogrified into the urban space. For parkour devotees, imagining to flee from something or someone, or else to chase something or someone, would merely be a fiction that allows them to confront what hampers the fulfillment of the flight or the chase: the urban space, on the one hand, and the human body, on the other.

Whereas in the canon narrative path studied by Algirdas J. Greimas and others (1970) performance is the foremost narrative step – the narrative step at which one attains the object of value –, in parkour the narrative path stops at the step of competence – the one in which the narrative subject acquires the skills that are needed to accomplish the performance. It is also for this reason that parkour cannot be considered simply as a sport: in sports, competence has meaning only in view of a performance, training has an end only in view of a competition. In parkour, instead, training is an end in itself.

7. Socio-cultural context and meaning of parkour

As in every narration in which the accomplishment of the performance becomes secondary in relation to the acquisition of competence, parkour, perhaps exactly because of the social context in which it has originated and developed, is connoted as both an aesthetic and a mystical discourse. Both connotations stem precisely from the denial of parkour’s practicality. Parkour might be useful for fleeing or chasing, but as a matter of fact the chaser and the prey remain abstract, a fiction that allows one to concentrate on the beauty and spirituality of moving across the city. It is certainly not accidental that, in French, the practitioners of parkour are defined ‘traceurs’ and ‘traceuses’ [litt., ‘tracers’]. Their intention, indeed, is using the dialectics between the moving body and the urban space to ‘re-write’ both (Leone 2009b).

Hence, as regards its aesthetic connotation, parkour is a sort of combination between graffiti and dance: like graffiti, parkour seeks to re-write the urban space, adding traces of its own existence and creativity to it; like dance, parkour carries on this re-writing through its body movement in space. As regards its mystical connotation, parkour is a sort of ascetism, similar in this regard to most Oriental martial arts: what is at stake in parkour is not a final
performance – there is no equivalent to a goal in soccer –; what matters, a little like in the physical and spiritual ascetism of alpinism or other forms of climbing, is the dialectics between obstacle and overcoming. Nevertheless, whereas in alpinism and other analogous activities the peak represents the highest point of such dialectics, beyond which one cannot push oneself (unless one seeks to ‘conquer’ the same peak through more difficult ways), in parkour there is no such ultimate overcoming, and there cannot be, since given the absence of a goal, the valorization of the path-parkour (the acquisition of indefinitely refined competences) is the only possibility (the roofs of Évry are certainly not the peak of a mountain).

8. Contingent factors and meaning of parkour

8.1 Military education

Suggesting that parkour entails both an aesthetics and a mystics of the urban space is not enough to understand what the predominant values of this re-writing of the urban palimpsest are. In order to tackle this question, other than considering the structural elements in the socio-cultural context of parkour, one must also reflect on some contingent elements that have nevertheless exerted deep influence on the process of elaboration of this urban practice’s ideology. The most important of them all is undoubtedly the family milieu of David Belle, considered by many as one of the main founders, if not the founder, of parkour (Wilkinson 2007). His grandfather, father, and older brother were all firemen, and all impregnated with a certain military education à la française. The father Raymond, in particular, born on October 3, 1939 in Indochina (now Vietnam), was practically raised by the French Army in Dalat, having lost his father during the Indochinese turmoil of the early-1940s and his mother during the division of Vietnam in 1954. Repatriated to France after the French defeat at Dien Bien Phû, Raymond soon became an exceptional gymnast and athlete and was, therefore, destined to an elite brigade of French firemen, employed for the riskiest operations. It is in this family context that the young David Belle absorbed both the awareness of how the movements of the body through space must modify in a situation of emergency and the knowledge of the so-called ‘Hébert method’, a method of training that constitutes the theoretic and ideological foundation of parkour.

8.2 The Hébert method

Born in Paris on April 27, 1875, about one century before the young founders of parkour, Georges Hébert became famous especially as the inventor of the homonymous method, also known as ‘the natural method’ (Hébert 1912; 1941–2; 1942; 1943a; 1943b). This is not the most suitable occasion to sketch a socio-cultural history of the Hébert method and of the so-called ‘Hébertism’ (Schlemmer 1962), but some of the circumstances that contributed to the genesis, development, and diffusion of the Hébert method should be mentioned, especially considering that they are echoed in the new life given to the method by the phenomenon of parkour.

First of all, the Hébert method stemmed from a reflection on body, space, and emergency: an officer of the French navy at St Pierre, Martinique, Hébert coordinated the rescue of the survivors who had escaped the 1902 catastrophic volcanic eruption (Bui-Xuân and Gleyse
2001). As a consequence, he arrived at the conviction that physical preparation is indispensable in cases of emergency. Second, the Hébert method stemmed from the desire to elaborate a training program for French navy soldiers, especially in the aftermath of the substitution of sailing boats with motor boats (Dumas 2005). Given the necessity to exercise the bodies of soldiers – no longer subject to the fatigue of sailing – in narrow spaces, Hébert developed the idea of a training that turned the boat itself into an ‘obstacle race’. Third, the Hébert method originated as an opposition to both the contemporary idea of sport, which began to spread between the late-19th and the early-20th century (Hébert 1925), and to other concurrent methods of training, such as remedial exercises or the Swedish method. From his journeys around the world, and above all from the observation of how young Africans in the French colonies trained as well as from a personal interpretation of the Greek statuary and Rousseau’s philosophy (Delaplace 2005), Hébert arrived at the contention that nature was the best place to train both the body and the soul, and that every ‘artificial’ method of training – not to speak of sport competitions – were unable to shape the body and, most importantly, turn the physical training into a moral one. Fourth and last, the Hébert method stemmed from the ever keener interest of Republican France toward the theme of hygiene and mass psycho-physical health (Spivak s.d.), with special consideration for women.20

Training for emergency, training as a path taking advantage of the characteristics of the training ground, ‘natural training’ for toughening both the body and the soul, mass training: many of these ideological characteristics of the Hébert method migrated, thanks to a contingent circumstance (David Belle’s tie with the French military tradition), into the practice of parkour.

9. A semiotic parkour

After describing the main elements among those composing the socio-cultural context of parkour and after mentioning the contingent circumstances that most influenced its genesis and development, it is necessary to ask a typical semiotic question: what is the meaning of parkour? What do traceurs and traceuses communicate (according to their intention)? What do they signify (even beyond their intention)? What generative semiotic path can account for the meaning produced by a session of parkour? And, most importantly, what does parkour reveal about the meaning of belonging in contemporary urban societies and cultures, which are a sort of theatrical stage for the movements of traceurs and traceuses?

9.1 Parkour as communication

As regards the first question (what do those who practice parkour communicate?), it can be answered only through considering the entire phenomenon of parkour as a communicative phenomenon, in which the movements of the body across the urban space are used as sign to express something other than the movements themselves. Arguably, at least at the origin of parkour, traceurs and traceuses did not have any explicit communicative intent, or else they did not have one besides that of communicating to themselves a certain relation between, on the one hand, body and soul and, on the other hand, the urban space. At the origin, indeed, like alpinism and unlike ballet, parkour was not a show and did not need an audience.

This characteristic, however, radically mutated when parkour ceased to be a niche phenomenon and became a mass practice or even a trendy phenomenon and as a consequence,
inevitably, opened to the rise of commercial dynamics. When solitary *traceus* abandons her anonymity and become famous, as it has befallen David Belle, Sébastian Foucan, and others, it is inevitable that the spectacular and therefore the mediatic dimension of their parkour be magnified to the detriment of the ascetic one.

The industry of the imaginaire, and particularly that of the audiovisual, has been the first to seize the commercial opportunities of parkour. Understanding the relations between parkour and audiovisual language would require an in-depth reflection, but it is sufficient to imagine the freshness of the energies that this ‘art of displacement’ donates to an art of the moving image for which the representation of flights and chases has always been an aesthetic cornerstone. It is also sufficient to imagine the tempting challenge, for a video-artist or for a filmmaker, to represent, through the audiovisual language, a body movement that constantly expresses a feeling of emergency; a challenge in which the representation of the city seized as both obstacle and handhold of the flight/chase plays a central role. Nowadays, movies that involve parkour scenes or even focus on this phenomenon are countless. The synergy between parkour and cinema is so steadfast that currently it is unthinkable for most filmmakers to film a chase scene without resorting to parkour experts, handsomely remunerated to play the roles that used to be of stuntmen. Parkour is about to become the new grammar of the filmic representation of urban chasing.

However, if the industry of moving images needs parkour to inject trendy adrenaline in its representations, parkour needs the industry of moving images to become a show and, as a result, a trendy and consumerist phenomenon. Indeed, turning parkour from asceticism into a show would be difficult without the help of audiovisual media and their techniques of representation. Observing a *traceur* at work is not like observing a soccer player during a match. Not only the gaze but also the body must move. Ideally, the spectator of a *traceur* or a *traceuse* is another *traceur* or another *traceuse*. But as soon as parkour wishes to become a mass practice, a trendy phenomenon, and a commercial tendency, it needs to turn into show also for those who do not want or cannot participate in such flight and chase. It must turn into a show above all for those who are no *traceurs* or *traceuses*, and instill in them the desire to become one, and it is indeed this very desire that generates commercial occasions and dynamics. Hence, every famous *traceur* knows a trustworthy cameraman who, with effective takes and crafty editing, will transmogrify a session of parkour into videos meant to circulate mostly through the Internet. Nevertheless, this mediatic turn of parkour, which is functional to its show business turn and therefore to its commercialization, is not neutral. The editing of moving images, the addition of visual effects, the creation of a soundtrack, etc. deeply transform the aesthetics of parkour, not only for those who watch these videos, but also for the *traceurs* and the *traceuses* themselves.

First of all, the parkour sessions of the most famous *traceurs* and *traceuses* are planned so that they can be represented and turned into a show through the audiovisual media. What ensues is the loss of that improvisation of body movements through the urban space that is perhaps one of the salient elements of the aesthetics of parkour (considered by many as a sort of ‘jazz of urban ambulation’). Second, the neophytes of parkour draw inspirations from these media representations in order to learn and improve their own movements. Such mass imitative phenomenon has two consequences: on the one hand, the desire of parkour neophytes to emulate the movements of the experts turns dangerous, all the more since their representation has been constructed through the artifice of the media and in view of their being sold as show. On the other hand, a certain standardization of parkour, in which the invention of ‘kinetic idiolects’ is supplanted by the diffusion of a ‘kinetic Koine’ globally
spread by the media. In other words, the audiovisual representation of the urban chase is about to become the new grammar of parkour.

Parkour becomes communication not only through the texts produced by the industry of the imaginaire, but also through those created by the commercial industry, the latter being strictly related to the former. Bearer of a certain ‘surplus of value’, of an alternative point of view on the relation between the body, the soul, and the urban space, parkour has been quite rapidly parasitized – like many other ‘new’ phenomena of the urban culture (the whole hip-hop trend, for instance) – with the aim of turning this surplus into a lever for the generation of consumption and, as a consequence, profit. Currently, advertisement campaigns seeking to sell shoes, clothes, drinks, or even cars by resorting to the visual imaginaire of parkour are countless.22

Finally, and here a space of self-critique must be opened, parkour becomes exhibition and turns into show also when it becomes object of study for the academic discourse, as it is the case in the present article. The idea that the academic discourse tackles phenomena like parkour uniquely for the sake of understanding their social meaning is frankly quite hypocritical. On the contrary, like the industry of the imaginaire and the commercial one, the industry of thought too, perhaps just in slightly more sophisticated ways, seeks to exploit the corpus of values of parkour in order to produce show and desire (that of reading an essay on parkour, for instance), often projecting on this phenomenon aspirations and ambitions that are in reality unrelated to it.

9.2 Parkour as signification

The second question implicitly refers to the first. If parkour in itself is not an explicitly communicative phenomenon, but if many discourses (that of the media, the commercial one, the academic one) make it such so as to turn its ‘surplus of value’ into an occasion for desire and profit, then one should wonder what this surplus is about.23 In other words, one should wonder what the meaning of parkour is, independently from the communicative interactions of those who practice it or observe it.

A good point of departure to answer this question is Jean-Marie Floch’s semiotic square of valorizations (1988). For Algirdas J. Greimas and his school of semiotics, every phenomenon of meaning consists in a narration that recounts – although at times very abstractedly – the way in which a subject separated from an object of value seeks to re-attain it, having been moved by an instance that bestows the obligation and/or the desire to do so upon the subject, and that sanctions such re-attainment once it takes place through the acquisition of the necessary competence and the accomplishment of the final performance, which the subject often carries out to the detriment of an antagonistic anti-subject (Greimas 1970; 1983). For Greimas, moreover, the value of the object attained by the subject is always differential: a value is such because it is opposed to another value contrary or contradictory to the first (Greimas 1966). Hence, understanding the meaning of a phenomenon means comprehending the relations among values that it ‘puts on stage’ through narration. The semiotic square is a diagram – elaborated by Greimas tapping into a logico-philosophical reflection that goes back at least to Aristotle – that allows the semiotician to visually explore the relations of value ‘put on stage’ by narration.

Floch’s semiotic square of valorizations specifies Greimas’s semiotic square. In every narration, one can distinguish between ground-values and usage-values. Ground-values are those embodied by the objects that subject must- or want to attain. Usage-values are those
embodied by the objects that subjects must- or want to attain in order to be able to attain the objects that embody the ground-values. On the basis of both Greimas’s semiotic square and the opposition between ground- and usage-values, Floch conceived the so-called square of valorizations: a subject wishes to attain an object because it embodies either a ground-value (utopian valorization) or a usage-value (practical valorization). By denying the utopian valorization, one obtains, in the semiotic square, the so-called critical valorization, according to which a subject seeks to attain an object of value because she brackets its utopian character and critically evaluates its usage-value. By denying the practical valorization, instead, one obtains, in the semiotic square, the ludic or aesthetic valorization, according to which a subject seeks to attain an object of value because she brackets its practical character and aesthetically evaluates its ground-value (fig. 5).

As it was pointed out earlier, the narrative structure of parkour implies a desire for flight or chase, but also that this narrative structure does not personify either a sender (nobody explicitly encourages the traceur\textsuperscript{24} to flee or chase), a receiver (nobody explicitly sanctions the accomplishment of the flight or chase), an anti-subject (there is nothing one flees from), or an object (one chases nothing). In parkour, indeed, the traceur must simultaneously impersonate all the attantal positions of anti-subject, sender (it is the traceur who promotes the flight or the chase), receiver (it is the traceur who sanctions whether the flight or chase have been successful), and even object of value, which like in many ascetical practices consists in considering oneself as an anti-subject to surpass. The body of the traceur and the urban space through which it moves can be helpers or opponents, depending on whether they facilitate this process of ascesis or frustrate it. If in the well-accomplished leap the body and the urban space are helpers, in the disastrous fall they are opponents, manifestations of an anti-subject that is intrinsic to the limits of the body and to those of the urban space. The traceur will, therefore, react to a fall by either abandoning the narrative program (the anti-subject embodied by the limits of the body and the urban space wins) or by seeking to modify the body (through further training) or the space (by changing path), so that they might turn from opponents into helpers.

Given this attantal structure as well as the other structural elements that compose the phenomenon of parkour, there is little doubt that it signifies a practical valorization of the relation between body movement and the urban space: parkour is meant to develop a movement across such space as effective as possible in view of a situation of potential emergency. At the same time, many manifestations of parkour, and especially that variant of it known as
free running, deny this practical valorization and express a clearly ludic-aesthetic valorization of the same relation between body movement and urban space: especially in free running, traceurs show off somersaults and pirouettes that embellish the movement across the urban space, characterizing it as an acrobatic path, but make it less effective in view of a potential emergency. The critical valorization of parkour is also evident, and is related to the practical one. What step, what railing, what windowsill will be more useful to traceurs in order to win the competition against themselves and develop a better capacity for flight or chase? Every portion of the urban space, and every movement of the body across it are evaluated depending on whether they contribute to the ascetic of the traceur; certain urban ‘spots’ are, therefore, valorized as a truthful ‘temple’ of parkour, whilst others are abandoned because they are considered as incapable of providing the obstacles that traceurs need. Finally, the utopian valorization is connected with the ludic-aesthetic one. It may be the main valorization of parkour. All in all, even when traceurs measure the urban space and the movements of the body through it so as to evaluate their efficacy, they refer to Hébert’s ideal of ‘being strong in order to be useful’: at least in the rhetorics of parkour, learning how to move across the urban space in a rapid and effective manner is tantamount to being capable of helping others in difficulties (a rhetoric that, as is evident, parkour shares with French Scouting, also quite influenced by the motor philosophy of Hébert).

10. Two kinds of monkeys

From a certain point of view, parkour perfectly embodies the idea of ‘invention of everyday life’ and ‘re-writing of the urban text’ (whence the concept of traceur) theoretically prophesized by Michel de Certeau (1990). In other words, the ultimate meaning of parkour resides in the traceur’s very strong desire of individual affirmation in relation to the system of motor options that the contemporary urban society and culture imposes on her. Considering what has been pointed out as regards the structural elements that compose the socio-cultural context of parkour, such idea of affirmation of the individual body in relation to the urban-architectural space of the city means nothing but a desire of revenge vis-à-vis de political logic that is behind the construction of new towns.

Whereas a central political power has inflicted on new town citizens the construction of the simulacrum of a city, of an artificial city, traceurs implicitly react to such imposition by putting into practice what they have learned as children by climbing Székely’s artificial mountain. As scrambling over the Dame du Lac meant rekindling both the freedom of the climber and the creativity of the sculptor – although in the artificial context of a political project – so, twenty years later, clambering through Évry and its hinterland means deconstructing the political project of the artificial city in order to retrieve a ‘natural’ movement through it.²⁵ It is by keeping this aspect in mind that one should interpret the pride with which traceurs compare their movements to those of monkeys, and it is from this point of view that one should understand their referring to the utopia of a ‘natural’ movement elaborated by Hébert.

If traceurs are able to resist their being turned into an asset of the media, commercial, and also intellectual business, maybe they will really succeed in ‘rewriting the urban text’ with many hands,²⁶ or at least in emphasizing the contradictions that power introduces in it when it cultivates the arrogance of an urban text written by a single hand, or by few hands.²⁷ Should it not be the case, parkour will be nothing but a fleeting trend, the nth ‘invention of urban
daily life’ that power appropriates only to turn it into a source of further profit and then discard it as soon as it has transformed it into the stereotype of itself.28

In the first case, traceurs will be like the monkeys of Swayambhunath, proclaiming their partaking in the sacredness of the temple by scrambling over it as they please (Willis 1978). In the second case, they will be like the monkeys of a zoo: caged, clambering through desperately automatic paths, exposed to the paying curiosity of free animals.

11. Theoretical conclusions

Defining the city as text is tantamount to considering it as a matrix of possibilities and constraints, as a rizomatic network where possible writings (the planning of the city) and readings (the experiencing of the city) meet. This article has sought to demonstrate that the frontiers of belonging characterizing the everyday urban life are part of this matrix too: they predetermine the environments of belonging and those of non-belonging that affect every citizen’s daily experience of the city. Yet, the article has also emphasized that it would be foolish to believe that this urban matrix, and the structure of frontiers of belonging it entails, always originates and develops in a neutral way, like a biological organism. On the contrary, such structure of frontiers of belonging, which results in a homologous pattern of regimes, paths, and rhetorics of belonging, is generated by spatial enunciations brought about according to a precise hierarchy of power. This is evident especially in the case study analyzed by the present essay: the new towns planned and built in France and elsewhere from the 1960s on. The idea of artificially predetermining human interactions among citizens through the imposition of a centralized urban and architectural planning has created cities to which individuals feel they do not belong, impossible cities where urban life as it has been ‘organically’ developed in the West throughout the centuries is virtually impossible: lack of urban space of socialization, absence of urban connective tissue, scarcity of work and entertainment opportunities, absurd density of people and volumes masking a socio-economic exploitative rationale with the utopia of generating a lower class ersatz of urban feeling.

The children of these impossible cities came up, as a reaction, with entirely new ways of moving through the urban space: parkour. Stemming from the synergy between several structural and contingent factors (the urban and architectural context, the socio-economic conditions, the motor philosophy of Hébert, etc.), parkour consists in a systematic challenge to the established matrix of the urban fabric and its structure of regimes of belonging. Constantly crossing urban frontiers and invading environments of non-belonging, the marginalized youngsters of new towns seek to re-write the city,29 to open up possibilities of urban reading that are different from those predisposed by the centralized power.

Hence, the elegant anarchy of body movements through the urban space becomes the sensible metaphor of a rearrangement of the hierarchy of power manifested and embodied by the city. And yet, unaware of its disruptive and liberating potential, parkour often becomes the stereotype of itself, entrenched into a new routine by further logics of power: media, show, and commerce entrap the movements of parkour into a cliché to be bought and sold for purposes that are diametrically opposite to those of its genesis: reproducing the hierarchy of power in the urban culture and society.30

As it has been indicated, the academic discourse is not immune from this exploitation. It too hijacks the anarchic charisma of parkour in order to empower its own intellectual allure. And yet, despite the dangers of such exploitation, the dialectics between academic discourse
and parkour remains fundamental if it is reversed. Parkour must be, for the intellectual, not only an object to crystallize, paralyze, and, as a result, defuse through theoretical analysis, but also and above all a heuristic model. Intellectuals too must move through the material and symbolic webs of present-day societies as traceurs and traceuses do in the labyrinths of contemporary cities, opening new possible readings of space by the same movements that explore it.

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Notes

1 An early version of this paper has been presented at the symposium “Luogo del consumo – Consumo dei luoghi”, Sapienza University of Rome, 26–27 June 2009, as well as in the frame of my course of Semiotics of Culture at the University of Turin, 2008–2009; early versions of this paper have been published in Italian as Leone 2009a and 2010. I thank the organizers of the Roman symposium, those who have offered suggestions and criticisms both after that first presentation and during my course, and the editors of the collective volumes where early Italian versions of the present paper were published.
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2 Literature on the linguistic and semiotic study of space is abundant. Among the most recent contributions, cfr Cavicchioli 1997; Hess-Lüttich, Müller, and Zoest 1998; Cavicchioli 2002; Hammad 2006; Schönle 2006; Lussault 2007 (as well as the other works of this “semiotic geographer”); Marcos 2007; Auer and Schmidt 2010 (esp. chapter 1); Jaworski and Thurlow 2010; Leone 2012.

3 Cfr the silent video ‘Les Nouvelles préfectures de la région parisienne’ ['the new prefectures of the Parisian region'], filmed by ORTF (Office de radiodiffusion télévision française, ['office of radio-broadcasting French television']) and broadcasted during the 8pm TV News programme on November 18, 1971 (26 secs). Available at www.ina.fr.

4 Cfr the TV report ‘Ville nouvelle Évry’ ['new town Évry'], filmed by ORTF and broadcasted during the 1pm TV news program on October 15, 1972 (2mins 29secs). It shows the gigantic HLM buildings of the nouvelle ville surrounded by huge dusty open spaces, in the middle of which groups of children play with the only play-facility available, a sort of empty concrete pond. Some of the inhabitants, interviewed, complain about the inefficiency of transports for Paris.

5 The feeling that Évry is a city ‘sans centre et sans âme’ ['without any center and without any soul'] persists in the TV report ‘Villes nouvelles: Évry’ ['new towns: Évry'], filmed by the French TV channel FR3 and broadcasted during the TV program Trois premières on October 2, 1989.

6 “Avec la ‘Dame du Lac’, première sculpture d’escalade, qui doit être inaugurée en novembre, les responsables de la ville nouvelle d’Évry ont trouvé une méthode pour concilier l’art et le sport. Peut-être fera-t-elle école. Il y avait déjà eu des sculptures monumentales ou des faux rochers d’escalade (États-Unis, Japon, Angleterre). Jamais les deux à la fois. Celle-ci est due à la collaboration entre le sculpteur Pierre Székely et l’alpiniste bien connu Guido Magnone, chargé de veiller à ce que les reliefs permettent la ‘varappe’ en toute sécurité. ‘Avec une face nord en surplomb, des voies de toutes difficultés, cette sculpture de 15 mètres de hauteur sera un excellent terrain d’apprentissage, dit Guido Magnone. L’escalade est un sport, au même titre que l’athlétisme ou la natation, et pas seulement une technique dont la finalité serait la montagne. Les enfants sont des grimpeurs nés. Ils seront prioritaires au ce stade vertical’. L’école d’Évry, avec moniteur de service, sera ouverte aux groupes scolaires, clubs, associations diverses et aux grimpeurs isolés… amateurs d’art.”

7 “Si construire des villes à la montagne est une catastrophe, si le premier problème à résoudre est de fournir aux citadins des distractions sur place, pourquoi ne pas construire des montagnes dans les villes? C’est ce qui se fait à la ville nouvelle d’Évry, où l’on est en train d’achever une ‘sculpture d’escalade’. […] Contrairement à ce qui se passe dans la nature, ce sont des varappeurs qui ont indiqué aux constructeurs où placer les cent cinquante prises.”

8 Cfr Clarke, Hall, Jefferson, & Roberts (2006: 4): “A culture includes the ‘maps of meaning’ which make things intelligible to its members. These ‘maps of meaning’ are not simply carried around in the head: they are objectivated in the patterns of social organization and relationship through which the individual becomes a ‘social individual’.”

9 According to the 1999 INSEE census (‘Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques’) ['national institute for statistics and economic studies'], the residential density of Évry is 6,231 inhabitants per squared kilometer. Cfr also the TV report “Évry ville nouvelle” ['Évry new town'], filmed by ORTF and broadcasted during the TV program La France défigurée ['disfigured France'] on April 29, 1973: some children ‘interview’ the architect and one of them asks him: “Porquoi les bâtiments sont-ils si serrés?” ['why are buildings so close?']. The answer of the architect is: “On peut faire des choses plus intéressantes en mettant beaucoup de gens ensemble” ['many interesting things can be done by putting many people together'].

10 This feeling is also due to the insufficient sound isolation of French HLM apartments, which especially from the early 1970s on were built less and less with concrete and more and more with lighter materials, in order to both reduce the costs of production and follow the utopia of ‘industrialization ouverte’ ['open industrialization'] (in particular, the idea of expressing creativity in residential architecture by conceiving apartments as a sort of Meccano, to be built from a small number of standard components assembled in various ways). This utopia too betrays the desire of artificially reproducing, through a centralized project, the architectural variety on ‘natural’ cities. Cfr the TV report ‘Pour un habitat nouveau’ ['for a new habitat'], filmed by ORTF and broadcasted during the TV program La France défigurée ['France disfigured'] on January 21, 1973 (15 mins 18 secs).

11 The interview with one of the architects of these pyramids, included in the TV report mentioned in the previous note, is enlightening and ironically prophetic: the young architect, on the background of the pyramids of Évry, claims that the privacy of the inhabitants will be provided by the plants that they will grow in the ferroconcrete flowerboxes of their balconies. The architect adds that “on ne peut pas à moins de faire un petit peu de gymnastique plonger sur l’appartement du voisin” ['unless one does a little of calisthenics, one cannot jump on
the neighbor’s apartment’); in all evidence, the architect was unable to foresee parkour, whose young practitioners train exactly in the kind of calisthenics that emphasize the hypocrisy of privacy in HLM buildings.

Cfr the interviews mentioned in note 3.
13 According to the last INSEE census, in 19.5% of the households of Évry, there is only one parent; 28.1% of the population of Évry received no diploma.
14 With 27% of the male population and 25.5% of the female population between 15 and 29, Évry still is one of the ‘youngest’ urban realities of France.
15 Cfr the TV report “Évry: bandes rivales” [‘Évry: rival gangs’], filmed by Antenne 2 and broadcasted during the 8pm TV news program on January 20, 2001 (2 mins 56 sec). It is quite paradoxical that the only real communities created by the urban and architectural utopia of the early-1970s pyramids are exactly teenage gangs, whose identity is often related to the neighborhood where they belong. The socio-cultural situation of the members of these gangs (often issuing from French families of recent immigration and, as a consequence, often in search of a definition of their identities) is a determinant factor of this phenomenon. However, the boundaries of gangs are not so much ethnical as ‘urban-architectural’, the identification of the gangs with the various neighborhoods of Évry’s hinterland being probably favored also by their relative isolation (the parallelepipeds of the late-1960s, the pyramids of the early-1970s, the pedestrian and ‘human dimension’ neighborhoods of the late-1970s, etc.). Cfr the TV report “Évolution de l’architecture dans les villes nouvelles: l’exemple d’Évry” [‘the evolution of architecture in the new towns: the example of Évry’], filmed by FR3 and broadcasted during the Actualités régionales Île de France on December 28, 1982 (3 mins 52 secs).

16 The town of Courcouronnes is identified as ZUS, ‘Zone Urbaine Sensible’ [‘problematic urban zone’].
17 Cfr the TV report “Le Meurtre d’Évry: meurtre bande rivales” [‘The murder of Évry: murder between rival gangs’], filmed by FR3 and broadcasted during the TV programme Soir 3 [‘evening 3’] on March 9, 1998 (1 min 49 secs). In 1998, a teenager of the neighborhood of Tarterêts – a complex of HLM buildings built in Corbeil-Essonnes in the late-1960s and significantly nicknamed ‘Zoo’ – was killed with a rifle by a young resident of the neighborhood of Pyramides. At the trial, during which the fight between rival gangs was avoided only thanks to the prompt intervention of the police, none among the members of the bands was able to explain the origin of the rivalry. Cfr the TV report “Off carte/procès Tarterêts” [‘Off carte/Tarterêts trial’], filmed by Antenne 2 and broadcasted during the 8pm TV news program on December 20, 2000.
18 Cfr the TV report “Tout images: manifestation à Évry suite meurtre” [‘all images: demonstration in Évry after murder’], filmed by FR3 and broadcasted during the TV program Soir [‘evening’] on March 10, 1998 (48 secs).
20 Hébert was a forerunner in recommending training according to his ‘natural’ method for women too.
21 Yamakasi (2001); District B13 (2004); The Great Challenge (2004); Casino Royale (2006) and its sequel Quantum of Solace (2008); Breaking and Entering (2006); Live Free or Die Hard (2007); The Bourne Ultimatum (2007); American Pie Presents: Beta House (2007); Ayan (2009), to quote only the most famous ones.
22 Nike, MTV – Barrio 19, Excite, Virgin Soft Drinks, Go Fast Energy Drinks, BBC, etc.
23 Cfr Murdock and McCron 2006 on “decoding style”.
24 From now one, the term ‘traceur’ will be used to designate every practitioner of parkour, independently from their gender. Despite the athletic feminism of Hébert, however, the female gender is definitely under-represented in parkour. This characteristic would deserve further reflection. Cfr McRobbie & Garber 2006: 186: “Some of what has been conjectured above may lead us to the conclusion that the majority of girls find alternative strategies to that of the boys’ subcultures” [‘teeny bopper girls’].
25 Cfr Hall & Jefferson 2006: xvi, where subculture is defined as “spontaneous expression of shared structural contradictions”.
27 Cfr Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 2006: 35: “[Subcultures] serve to mark out and appropriate ‘territory’ in the localities”.
28 Cfr Clarke (2006a: 158) on “the defusion of style”: “By ‘defusion’ we mean that a particular style is dislocated from the context and group which generated it, and taken up with a stress on those elements which make it a ‘commercial proposition’, especially their novelty”.
29 Cfr Powell and Clarke 2006.
30 Cfr Clarke, Hall, Jefferson & Roberts 2006: 35: “There is no ‘subcultural solution’ to working-class youth unemployment, educational disadvantage, compulsory miseducation, dead-end jobs, the routinisation and specialization of labour, low pay and the loss of skills. Sub-cultural strategies cannot match, meet or answer the structuring dimensions emerging in this period for the class as a whole”; cfr also Clarke (2006a: 161) on the
‘limits of subcultural style’: “These limits of working class subcultures can perhaps best be shown by comparison with the relatively long careers in the middle class subculture of the Hippies. These stem from the fact that although there, too, leisure appeared as the main focus of attention of the subculture, there were also attempts (however limited) to generate alternative strategies for work, production and sexuality. This is not to say that the Hippie subculture did not have its own contradictions and limitations: only that its attempts to create alternatives over a wide range of life-areas gave it greater viability as an alternative cultural form”.