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Deviant-Leisure Nexus in Late-Capitalist Urban Space*

THOMAS WILLIAM RAYMEN

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# **The Paradox of Parkour:**

## *An Exploration of the Deviant-Leisure Nexus in Late-Capitalist Urban Space*

**Thomas William Raymen**



**Thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the award of PhD Sociology  
and Social Policy**

**Durham University**

**School of Applied Social Sciences**

**October 2016**

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## Material Synopsis

The cultural lifestyle sport of parkour maintains an ambiguous position at the nexus between deviance and leisure. It conforms to consumer capitalism's commodified norms of 'cool individualism', risk-taking, and the creation of 'deviant' identities, whilst remaining a spatially transgressive practice that is continuously excluded by the spatial guardians of the hyper-regulated city. Drawing upon ultra-realist criminological theory and a critical rethinking of leisure, consumerism and urban space, this thesis explains parkour's ambiguous position by suggesting that there is a fundamental paradox at the heart of parkour's spatial practice that is a product of late-capitalism's own making.

As Post-Fordist Western societies shifted toward a consumer-oriented economy, consumer capitalism had to stoke the desire for cool and alternative identities such as parkour that tapped into subjectivities increasingly oriented to socio-symbolic competition and individualistic distinction. Simultaneously, deindustrialised cities were regenerated through the commodified urban leisure economy, prompting a renewed reliance upon hyper-regulated urban spaces to harness and direct desire and identities and consumption into these commodified spatial contexts. Consequently, this thesis argues that the paradox of parkour is a dual-product of late-capitalism's cultivation of subjectivities geared to the pursuit of unique and culturally relevant identities, and a consumer economy that is reliant upon the hyper-regulated specificity of central consumer spaces. Consequently, consumer capitalism is caught in the double-bind of simultaneously promoting parkour whilst attempting to prohibitively direct it into approved and commodified spatial contexts. This is a paradox that has been entirely neglected in the academic literature on parkour, due in large part to the fetishisation of parkour as a form of 'resistance'.

This thesis challenges this fundamental assumption, drawing upon 28-months of in-depth ethnography among a parkour community in the North East of England. It accesses the wider life-worlds of traceurs, following them not only through their illicit practice of parkour in the city, but through their attempts to 'make it' in the commodified and professional world of parkour, cultural lifestyle sports, and social media fame. It explores the desires and motivations at the heart of the traceurs' practice and their attempts to preserve a sense of culturally-relevant identity while navigating the precarious waters of early adulthood in late-capitalism. Additionally, the thesis utilises walking interviews with security guards to supplement ethnographic observations around spatial governance, systemic spatial violence and the amoral economy of late-capitalist cities. As such, the thesis provides a critical rebuke to the romanticisation of parkour as a mode of proto-political resistance, and instead attempts to explain its ambiguous position in the deviant-leisure nexus through an in-depth analysis of urban change, consumer culture, and identity in late-capitalism.

## Acknowledgements

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Ethnographers aren't usually thankful to those who sit on ethics committees, but special thanks must go to Helen Charnley. You were an enabler rather than a barrier during the ethics process. You also had the miraculous ability to turn deaf when I mentioned things about my fieldwork that I perhaps shouldn't. Thanks for being in my corner.

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A lot of people say they have the best parents anyone could ask for, but I like to think in my case it's true. Mum and Dad, you've let me meander into my mid-twenties without ever getting a proper job. I dedicate this entire thesis to you. You always find the right thing to say and you're the kindest and most selfless people I know. I don't like to think about where I'd be if I didn't have your indefatigable love, support and enthusiasm for what I do...even if I do bang on a bit.

Thanks to my friends along the way for making this whole experience far more bearable. Most of all though, thanks to my partner, Sam. Thanks for helping me create a life in Plymouth, encouraging me not to cut and run, and for being my best friend. You pushed me over the finish line and I can't wait for what comes next. I hope I don't take you for granted.

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## **Author's Declaration**

This is to certify that I am responsible for the work submitted in this thesis, that the original work is my own, and that neither the thesis nor the original work therein has been submitted to this or any other institution for a higher degree.

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# 1

## **Introduction**

*“For me, the biggest question is why we always get moved on? I’ve never really heard a good answer for it. Most of the boys will say it’s because people think we’re like anti-social, bad lads hanging around. I don’t buy that though. Look at us. It just doesn’t add up. Plus, they’ll let us do it up Mill Lane. They’ll let us perform at Pride [the Northern Pride Festival]. They’ll let us do stuff in schools. Some of the security even let us train and none of them give us any stick about it or get nasty really, only the coppers do that. It’s a proper sport, so what’s the deal? I think that’s part of the answer, but nobody else seems to agree”*

**(Ross, 23 years old)**

After two-years of ethnographic immersion among a parkour community in the North East of England, there seemed to be an unavoidable question which spoke to the heart of parkour in the contemporary context and its existence within the late-capitalist city. Why is parkour excluded from urban space despite its hyper-conformity to the central values of consumer capitalism and its increasing celebration within mainstream media, advertising and commodified sport and lifestyle markets? Drawing upon original qualitative data, the fundamental objective of this research is to untangle this paradox of parkour and explain its ambiguous, contradictory and ever-shifting status as illegitimate ‘deviance’ and legitimate leisure. I attempt to answer the most fundamental questions such as why is parkour excluded from urban space and why is it governed by spatial authorities with such inconsistency and ambiguity? When is it considered ‘deviant’ or legitimate and in which spatial contexts does this occur? Is parkour ‘deviant’ at all, or is it simply ‘transgressive’ of particular spatial rules? What implications does this have for some central criminological concepts and how does this change the discipline’s approach to issues of leisure, space and harm? Together, these questions (among many others) help provide answers to parkour’s position at the nexus between deviance and leisure. In doing so, I hope that these explorations also reveal something more generalizable about political economy, leisure, urbanisation and spatial control.

At the surface level of first appearances it would seem that a criminological analysis of parkour is relatively straightforward and bereft of any new insights into contemporary society and the landscape of deviance and the city. Traceurs, the name given to the practitioners of parkour, are a group of predominantly white, male and, in some areas, middle-class young people clad in baggy hooded jumpers, jogging bottoms and trainers. They wander around the city, subversively re-appropriating urban space as yet another form of alleged urban anarchy and resistance that would not be out of place in Jeff Ferrell's *Tearing Down the Streets* (2001). Their exclusion from urban space would appear to be the usual story, rooted in a misunderstanding of these young people and their transgressive practice; yet another unfair moral panic that inaccurately demonises young people (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Wheaton, 2013). Moreover, when situated in a wider context of the troubles which face contemporary society, it would appear that the study of parkour would be of little concern to criminologists. We are still recovering from global economic collapse as liberal capitalism precariously bumps along on life-support. Both globally and domestically we are witnessing rising levels of social harm and poverty. Harmful financial practices pervade, while a broader culture of indebtedness plagues a generation of 'millennials' and generations before that (Horsley, 2015). Despite official statistics alleging a meaningful 'crime decline', we cannot extend this to a reduction in meaningful harm as crime mutates, evades prosecution or recording, and global and regional recording of crime is inconsistent as harms are becoming normalised (Parker, 2008).

Therefore, what is the point of a thesis on parkour? Critical criminologists have argued that in order for our discipline to tackle the harsh realities of our times, we must move away from a focus on the nebulous social constructions of crime and deviance and return to a firmer ontological conceptualisation of *harm*<sup>1</sup> (Hall and Winlow, 2015). More specifically, they have argued that there is a need to distinguish between *core* and *peripheral* harms in contemporary society. This is in order to take advantage of harm's 'one foot in reality' (p.89) and avoid it becoming so broad that it incorporates a vast range of inconsequential behaviours. This has been a critique made of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> See also Hillyard and Tombs (2004); Honneth (1996); Pemberton (2015); Smith and Raymen (2016); and Yar (2012a) for discussions on harm and zemiology.

criminologists. This theoretical perspective has often taken an interest in activities similar to parkour and been accused of a disproportionate and romanticised focus upon minor forms of youthful transgression such as skateboarding, graffiti, BASE jumping and street-racing, among other forms of 'edgework' (Ferrell, 1996; Ferrell, 2001; Ferrell, Lyng and Milovanovic, 2001; Lyng, 1990; Vaaranen, 2004). As Hall (2012a: 146) has lamented:

"It is appropriate to question why the otherwise very interesting sociological work of these edgework theorists is brought into the criminological debate. On the whole these adolescent consumer adventurers are not criminals, and in many cases not even miscreants and nor on the whole, are they criminalised"

Hall's frustrations would certainly be applicable to parkour. Is this thesis yet another 'edgy' urban ethnography on the informal criminalisation and spatial exclusion of some obscure mode of urban transgression that is peripheral to the core concerns of criminology? When studied in isolation, parkour's provisional inclusion and exclusion from various spatial contexts could only be described as a peripheral inconvenience to a group of young people who are by all accounts socially *included*. However, contextualised against other far more harmful leisure activities that dominate 'regenerated' UK city centres, the paradox of parkour is reflective of broader political-economic, social and cultural issues that I argue can only be considered as *core* harms and issues we face today. Issues such as what forms of leisure we wish to promote, embed and reify in our culture and those we wish to exclude. Issues regarding the harms of existential anxiety and insecurity that stem from the precariousness of existing labour markets and the even more fragile landscape of consumer-oriented identity. Questions around how harm is legitimately embedded and normalised within our central urban spaces through the realm of mainstream commodified leisure. Our 'public' commons are rapidly becoming spatialities of exclusivity, aggressively commandeered as part of neoliberalism's urban land-grab and demarcated down existing fault lines of social inequality. What kind of politics can truly challenge and address the realities of capitalism and its exploitation of the city as a means of resolving the systemic necessity to dispose of over-accumulated surplus capital?

Therefore, while its consideration as a doctoral topic is niche to say the least, a closer look at parkour and freerunning in a wider cultural and political-economic context renders an analysis of this form of urban leisure far less simple and, consequently, far more interesting. In more ways than not, parkour and other similar forms of urban transgression are hyper-conformist to the values of neoliberal consumer society. They embody a creative risk-taking, rule-breaking, entrepreneurial ethos of neoliberalism; whilst also embracing the 'cool individualism' of edgy, transgressive cultural identities which have become commodified norms and that consumer capitalism thrives upon to sustain its existence (Heath and Potter, 2006). The spectacle of parkour has been incorporated into mainstream consumer capitalism through advertising, appearances in feature films, and the creation of clothing lines, fashions, and style accessories. Nor, contrary to left-liberal beliefs (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013), has parkour been aggressively co-opted *away* from the traceurs by corporate behemoths who take it with force despite widespread protestations from the parkour 'underdogs'. Rather, freerunners all over the world (including those in my sample) have actively solicited<sup>2</sup> parkour's drift into the mainstream as the line between work and leisure becomes increasingly blurred (Stebbins, 1995; 2007).

For the traceurs in my sample, this was partly born out of a combination of age, geographical location, cultural pressures and the particular historical moment into which they were born. Many of the traceurs in this study started their own clothing lines and professional parkour coaching companies. A small band of about a dozen traceurs were actively involved in running a fee-paying gym called 'Mill Lane' through a deal made with the local council for a low-cost indoor space. The others who were not key players would often join in and perform in exhibitions or help out for a bit of money on the side; getting their coaching badges from parkour's governing body, *Parkour UK*. As we will see in later chapters, the majority of the traceurs were in their early twenties. They were all trying to negotiate the increasingly difficult transition into adulthood, the challenges of which are exacerbated by living in a region such as the North East and suffering the misfortune of going through this life stage in an era of austerity, economic

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<sup>2</sup> For more, see Hall (2012b) on the 'solicitation of the trap' and the acceptance of life in consumer capitalism's surrogate world of meaning which symbolically organises identity and self-esteem. This is done in the absence of a more stable and coherent symbolic order, as the subject misidentifies with the imaginary sign-value system of consumer capitalism to avoid risking a traumatic encounter with the Real.

precarity and shrinking opportunities of job satisfaction, financial stability and genuine fulfilment (Cederstöm and Fleming, 2012; Lloyd, 2013). Many of the traceurs welcomed parkour's commodification in hope of stemming the anxiety-inducing insecurity and indignity of monotonous zero-hour contract work which saps the soul without filling the pocket. For many, parkour was a way of abiding the 'cultural injunction to enjoy' (Žižek, 2002a) and avoiding the 'dog's life' of nine-to-five anonymity that doesn't chime with the immediate gratification, dynamism and sense of *lack* cultivated by consumer culture. For others, it was a culturally relevant form of identity and 'cool individualism' which is more stable than most consumer identities, situating them within a community of like-minded people with shared identity.

Even in parkour's free practice in the city, away from its more commodified aspects, there was rarely a tone of deviance and transgression. Parkour undeniably transgresses the arbitrary and spatially-specific rules of contemporary hyper-regulated cities. However, the 'resistant' and politically conscious individual concerned with social justice and critiques of the late-capitalist city appears to be a fiction imposed upon these young men through the left-liberal social scientist's political and intellectual imaginarium (see Atkinson, 2009; Bornaz, 2008; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Lamb, 2014. See also Hall and Winlow, 2015; Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014 for more general commentary). Out in the pseudo-public realm of urban space the traceurs would move carefully throughout the city to avoid visibility and maximise training time. They even developed good relationships of understanding and spatial compromise with particular security guards on particular beats (see chapters 7 and 8). The traceurs spoke politely and deferentially with spatial authorities, they were cooperative and sought to distance themselves from the anxiety that pervades the wider parkour community that they are perceived as 'troublemakers', 'hoodlums' or anti-social youth (Wheaton, 2013). The overall tone of proceedings was, as Franny so eloquently put it, "*don't fuck it up*". The message was 'we've got a decent thing going here', and the traceurs wanted to maintain what precious little pockets of temporary spatial legitimacy they found in Newcastle's city centre and surrounding areas. In the early days of our fieldwork after being moved on from a spot after five minutes, I asked EJ if it annoyed him. He shrugged, responding, "*Nah, no sense in getting pissed off and rowdy. Nothing's gonna change. Besides, we actually know some of the security and they're not all bad. Best just say 'no bother' and*

*pack up and move on. If you start trying to show people up then nobody's having any more fun".* The traceurs I met had no interest in unsettling the status quo in any meaningful sense. In so many ways they wanted to be a part of it, and in so many ways they were.

When viewed through a more zemiological lens of harm, parkour presents further contradictions and inconsistencies. These are contradictions which raise important questions about contemporary society and culture and the principles on which urban spaces are organised and governed. In addition to parkour's ever-increasing cultural legitimacy, it has the added benefit of being an activity of low-level harm with pro-social possibilities for forms of collective and inclusive leisure (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; Mould, 2015). Yet it is excluded, albeit inconsistently, while other forms of extremely harmful leisure such as the night-time economy and gambling are culturally embedded and normalised into the urban leisure landscape. This is despite their close associations with violence, sexual violence, anti-social behaviour, acquisitive crime, intensified mental health issues, and financial indebtedness (Smith and Raymen, 2016). Having already spent some time training with the traceurs<sup>3</sup>, I was well-aware that while being an increasingly popular form of sporting leisure, it was also responded to in urban space as an unwanted presence. During my very first day out with the traceurs, we were consistently moved-on and displaced to the next spot by seemingly endless waves of private security, police, council authorities and even the general public. The young traceurs spoke of having had cameras and memory cards confiscated and destroyed by police, being threatened by private security and being arrested by police on 'suspicion of criminal damage'. At the same time, we were also given time to train by security guards, and even when we were moved on instantly it was all dealt with in a rather anti-climactic manner of non-confrontation and tacit acceptance.

While this initially surprised me, upon reflection such contradictions within contemporary culture and political-economy began to make sense and click into focus. Parkour is a marketing dream in the sense that it's iconography is spectacular and dynamic (Angel, 2011; Mould, 2009), it's image is distinctly urban and gritty and I can attest it is a great deal of fun. But within the context of an increasingly privatised city in

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<sup>3</sup> I was familiar with the Newcastle parkour community prior to this becoming the focus of my research. See chapter 5.

which all space must be purposeful, disciplined and, if possible, profitable (Hayward, 2004), it is a practice which is both aligned and at loggerheads with the larger cultural and political-economic context of urban space. Parkour appeared to be situated at a curious, uncertain and ambiguous position in a nexus between deviance and leisure.

Nor was parkour the lone activity occupying such a nexus. As I looked around the city and the various scenes of contemporary leisure and culture, contradictions such as the ones mentioned above began appearing everywhere. The binge-drinking scene of the irrepressible night-time economy is continuously celebrated as the primary arena of youthful exuberance, hedonism and leisure; acting as a foundational yet harmful industry upon which a consumer economy of the post-industrial city could be built (Hall et al, 2008; Hobbs et al, 2003; Smith, 2014; Winlow, 2001; Winlow and Hall, 2006). In the virtual worlds of pornography and gaming, one can act out and consume the most intensely harmful desires of rape, torture, murder and criminality in simulated photo-realistic environments which are increasingly based upon real cities; blurring lines of morality between the 'real' and virtual worlds of cultural exception (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2015). The distinction between 'graffiti' and 'street art', between Banksy and the outlaw artists of Jeff Ferrell's graffiti writers (Ferrell, 1996), is the arbitrary-yet-crucial distinction between illegitimate crime and legitimate 'art'. Gambling, once policed as an illegal vice, has now become an enormous leisure industry which has extended from the casino and race-track to an ever-present leisure outlet on one's smart-phone (Banks, 2013). In contrast, and more akin to parkour, activities with low-levels of social harm such as skateboarding and urban exploration are also closely policed and prohibited within the hyper-regulated city (Chiu, 2009; Garrett, 2013). The swirling contradictions and ambiguities were so numerous and pervasive that it seemed pointless to treat the realms of deviance and leisure as separate realms at all. Rather, the themes of deviance and leisure seemed to underpin and reinforce one another in an increasingly inextricable relationship in late-capitalist consumer society. Parkour, therefore, appeared to offer a fascinating ethnographic opportunity to explore my original themes<sup>4</sup> of interest around young people, 'risk' and deviance, while broadening

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<sup>4</sup> This doctoral journey began with a vastly different focus within youth justice (see Chapter 5, page 122).

out to unveil the underpinning influence of neoliberal capitalism in muddying the boundary between deviance, leisure, and harm.

Consequently, the initial question of explaining parkour's position at the nexus between deviance and leisure once again becomes far more complex, requiring new questions to get us closer to an answer. It requires questions not just about parkour, but questions that critically probe and situate parkour within the broader nexus between deviance, leisure and harm in a late-capitalist consumer economy. Therefore, it is the argument of this thesis that the paradox of parkour cannot be understood by looking at parkour alone. It looks at what forms of leisure are being promoted and solicited in contemporary society, the city, and their relationships to harm and deviance. It explores the particular forms of leisure that are becoming culturally embedded and normalised, the social relations and subjectivities they are engendering, and how they can be understood within the larger structural context of shifts in the global economy. This contributes to the end point of this thesis, which questions the role of these forms of 'deviant leisure' (Smith and Raymen, 2016) in the larger urbanisation process of post-crash cities and where parkour fits in this urban deviance-leisure nexus. Finally, with all of these issues in mind we can hopefully attempt a more comprehensive answer as to why parkour is excluded from urban space.

Due to this broader focus outlined above, an important distinction must be made without any ambiguity before progressing any further. *This is not a thesis just about parkour.* Rather, the burgeoning cultural lifestyle sport of parkour and freerunning should be thought of as the vehicle or the ethnographic *lens* through which this thesis will attempt to elaborate a deeper and more contextual understanding of 'deviant leisure', its causative underpinnings and how it manifests itself within the city. After two-years of ethnographic research and four years of study, parkour's practice and prohibition from urban space brings to the foreground some of the contradictions that lie at the heart of deviant leisure and global capitalism more generally. These contradictions prompt serious sociological questions about political economy, leisure, crime, exclusion and harm in contemporary society and culture.

Therefore, this thesis intends to avoid the pitfalls of existing perspectives on parkour which have consistently eschewed one side or other of parkour's fundamental paradox, or simply failed to acknowledge the paradox altogether (Brunner, 2011; Fuggle, 2008; Kidder, 2013; Saville, 2008). Even when such a paradox has been fleetingly confronted, a commitment to the naïve and romanticised ideas of parkour as resistance or the victim of outdated 'moral panics' actually deepen and obfuscate the contradictions they are allegedly attempting to explain (see chapter 4; Atkinson and Young, 2009; Bornaz, 2008; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Wheaton, 2013). This thesis seeks to move beyond these regurgitated accounts which fail to acknowledge the realities of our times through a thorough-going critique of political economy and culture.

With this in mind, it should be made clear that the reader will not find a plethora of in-depth postmodernist discussions of parkour's performative masculine body (Wheaton, 2013). Nor will they discover lengthy considerations of fear and emotion and its allegedly 'transcendent' impact upon traceurs' experiences of space (Saville, 2008). These academic interests have been explored abundantly by sociologists of sport, youth studies scholars and cultural geographers. It is my contentious argument that very little of this enquiry has helped to untangle the most unavoidably central aspect of parkour's existence: the paradox of parkour itself. Such approaches to parkour's academic study are rooted in a palpable concern to represent its practice in *appreciative* and celebratory terms (Fuggle, 2008; Lamb, 2014). As such, they have arguably become too attached to the descriptive realms of the empirical and the actual; rather than establishing the relationships between the micro-level of traceurs' lived experiences and the macro events in global political economy, leisure markets and urban space. Therefore, this thesis does not make any concerted effort to be appreciative of parkour's practice. Indeed, in many places the tone of commentary may appear extremely critical. It should be noted that this is not a critique of parkour's practice or a judgment of the participants who feature in these pages. It merely seeks to provide an account of parkour and its practitioners which acknowledges the reality of late-capitalism's pervasive influence over the physical environment and the late-modern subject's solicitation and embracing of its logic (Fisher, 2009; Hall, 2012b). As Harvey Cox writes in the preface to Richard Sennett's *The Fall of Public Man* (1977: xv), "Great macrosociology must be great microsociology at the same time" and it is in this spirit

that this thesis hopes to use ethnographic enquiry and sophisticated theory in order to make intelligible both the large and more humdrum aspects of parkour's practice and control.

Situated within this wider theoretical consideration of leisure, space and consumer capitalism, the central argument of this thesis is itself a paradox which inspired the title of this thesis. As globalised neoliberal capitalism irreversibly changed Western economies, society and culture through the shift from production to consumption, it also created the conditions for a consumer society which required the liberalisation of desire and the cultivation and promotion of unique cultural identities such as parkour. These identities are fundamental for consumer capitalism's continued self-reproduction, a 'real economy' that is now driven by the advertising, selling and consumption of commodities, lifestyles and identities. Simultaneously, as a result of its own changes to global and local economies, this 'real economy' has developed a renewed reliance upon central, concentrated and sanitised urban spaces of consumption. Consequently, contemporary capitalism must simultaneously promote desire for lifestyle sports such as parkour whilst also harnessing and directing these energies into particular spatial contexts, prohibitively if necessary. In relation to parkour, capitalism has created a complex double-bind for itself which mirrors its broader internal contradictions (see Harvey, 2014). It is therefore impossible to divorce an understanding of parkour from a wider consideration of the evolution of leisure markets, consumerism and urban spaces, as indicated by the focus of the individual chapters that make up the whole of this thesis.

## **Chapter Outline**

This thesis can broadly be understood as divided into two parts. The first half of this thesis is predominantly theoretical, with excerpts of interview data and ethnographic fieldnotes scattered throughout in order to provide tangible empirical examples to illuminate the more complex and seemingly abstract theoretical ideas. It offers theorisations of leisure, socio-economic change and subjectivity, in addition to presenting critiques of existing theoretical perspectives that have informed the study of parkour for the specific purpose of making way for a new and improved theoretical approach. The second half of the thesis is more heavily ethnographic, operationalising

the ideas presented in the early chapters and exploring how they operate within the real lived experiences of my participants, the parkour community and urban space more generally.

After outlining the broad progression of the thesis here, Chapter Two offers an introduction into the 'Parkour Scene'. This chapter gives the reader an ethnographic induction into the cultural lifestyle sport of parkour and freerunning, in addition to a brief review of its origins to act as an historical precursor to understanding its growth, development and current form. Chapter Two also provides a brief history of Newcastle upon Tyne, the city which served as the ideal research site for this study. Neoliberalism, deindustrialisation and the shift to a consumer society is a central theme that runs throughout this thesis, particularly as it pertains to the issue of urban space and changing spatialities. While other chapters discuss these global economic changes in more depth, Chapter Two looks at how this process manifested in Newcastle specifically, how it irretrievably altered labour markets and the nature and function of its central city space (this is expanded upon in chapters 7 and 8).

Chapter three offers a broad theorisation of leisure. Drawing upon Thorstein Veblen's original treatise on the 'leisure class' as a departure point; this chapter explores the *nature* of leisure under the various stages and social relations of capitalism. Specifically, chapter three explores Veblen's (1965) notions of pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption as the driving heart of a leisure society, in order to look at how these underlying energies at the core of leisure have been harnessed, cultivated and liberalised according to the needs of different modes of capitalism. Situated against the backdrop of the shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism and the drastic socio-economic changes in work, leisure, culture and identity, the chapter charts the evolution and mutation of leisure to its current position of primacy in 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer capitalism. It also challenges the 'triumphalist tones' (Rojek, 2010) with which leisure is often analysed in the social sciences (see Jayne et al, 2008; Riley et al, 2013 for examples), questioning the narratives of 'freedom' and autonomy which are at the heart of a consumer capitalist leisure society. While there appears to be a buffet of 'off the peg' identities available in late-capitalism, the threat of cultural irrelevance looms large. Charting the decline in more stable and collective identities and the absence of

alternative political ideologies, this chapter follows Adorno (2005) in the argument that beneath the veneer of 'choice' in late-capitalism there is no choice but to choose, rendering the 'freedom' of leisure a *forced* choice. Therefore, a real economy predicated upon consumption requires the continuous cultivation of dissatisfaction and lack which can only be assuaged by the consumption of pre-packaged and stylised 'lifestyles'. Parkour is just one of these, pre-emptively shaped by the logic of a consumerism organised around individualistic identities of style. Related to the larger argument of this thesis, chapter three offers the historical and theoretical context to understand how capitalism has liberalised leisure markets and intensified the desire for cultural lifestyle identities such as parkour.

Chapter Four of this thesis critically engages with criminological and sociological theory and their *domain assumptions* about human nature, subjectivity and the relationship between structure and agency (Hall and Winlow, 2015). These fundamental domain assumptions implicitly and explicitly underpin the predominant (and flawed) conceptualisations and theorisations of parkour's practice and control. These revolve namely around parkour as 'resistance' (Atkinson, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008), parkour as 'edgework' (Kidder, 2013; Lyng, 1990; 2005); and that parkour's exclusion is the product of a 'moral panic' (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Cohen, 1972; Wheaton, 2013). This chapter argues that none of these perspectives can cope with both sides of parkour's paradox within the same analytical frame. Both 'resistance' and moral panic arguments can explain, albeit incorrectly, parkour's exclusion from urban space. However, they cannot explain parkour's celebration within contemporary media, films, video games and advertising. Nor can they explain its growing popularity in schools, the traceurs own attempts of capitalist entrepreneurship, and its growth as a form of mainstream sporting exercise (see chapter 6 of this thesis; Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011; NPR, 2014). Conversely, edgework perspectives can partially explain the attraction to parkour's practice, albeit through a flawed disavowal of the unconscious which retains the notion of the conscious, autonomous and 'resistant' subject who is naturally drawn to transgression (Bornaz, 2008; Ferrell, 2006; Ferrell, Lyng and Milovanovic, 2001). However, edgework cannot explain its exclusion from urban space. It is the domain assumptions of all of these perspectives and their attachment to a fully reflexive

Cartesian subject which precludes the ability to comprehensively deal with the parkour paradox.

This chapter therefore applies ultra-realist criminology theory (Hall and Winlow, 2015) and its appropriation of transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity (Johnston, 2008). It is argued that this theoretical approach can conceptualise the attraction to and motivation for engaging with parkour in a way which can cope with both sides of parkour's paradox. Most crucially, this chapter explores the sense of *lack* and *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012a) at the heart of the late modern subject, both of which are cultivated by consumerism (Baudrillard, 1998) and the systemic precariousness of identity created by late-capitalism. This manifests in the active *solicitation* of cultural lifestyle identities such as parkour which are pre-emptively shaped by consumer capitalism's cornering of transgression as a cultural norm (Heath and Potter, 2006) and its logic of individualistic and competitive identity construction (Miles, 1998; 2015). Consequently, ultra-realism's conceptualisation of subjectivity enables it to cope with parkour's hyper-conformity and cease describing parkour as 'deviant' by rethinking and reorienting the concept of social deviance (Hall et al, 2008; Horsley, 2014). Through deviant leisure's notion of 'spatially contingent harm' (Smith and Raymen, 2016), later chapters go on to explain parkour's exclusion from urban space in such a way that maintains an understanding of its underlying conformity.

Social deviance is a term generally applied throughout the social sciences to describe behaviours which contravene socially-established values (Downes and Rock, 2007). However, in a pluralistic society dominated by liberal capitalism, not only is there a lack of consensus or symbolic efficiency around the social values which determine social deviance; but it is the capacity for norms and values to be manipulated by liberal capitalism which positions what might have traditionally been thought of as 'deviant' behaviour as steadfastly conformist to dominant mainstream values (Raymen and Smith, 2016). As Hall et al (2008) lament, it is the conflation of *norms* (rules) with *values* that leads criminologists to misidentify many forms of 'edgy' and 'transgressive' behaviour as 'deviant', a distinction which is vital to the arguments of this thesis. Thus, ultra-realist criminology and a deviant leisure perspective can cope with both sides of parkour's paradox. Firstly by acknowledging parkour's cultural conformity; and

secondly by offering an in-depth theorisation of the relationship between urban space and political economy and how this translates to the lived experience of central city spaces at street-level.

Chapter Five presents a description and defence of my methodological approach. While this chapter certainly addresses the necessary methodological question-marks of justifying my methods, exploring my sample, negotiation of access, ethics and researcher reflexivity, it is not merely a regurgitation of bland methods textbooks. In fact, this chapter is deliberately written to be of great theoretical benefit to this thesis, for the sole reason that some of the methodological dilemmas that I encountered during fieldwork also provided significant theoretical revelations about parkour, deviance and leisure. The chapter is replete with fieldnotes which exemplify some of these issues and provide the reader with a further 'flavour' of the parkour scene. Therefore I urge the reader to read this chapter as closely as any other, rather than assuming that its status as a methods chapter renders it bereft of theoretical or empirical insight.

Chapter 6, 'Movers and Shakers', moves into the more ethnographic part of this thesis. This chapter operationalises the theoretical ideas outlined in chapters three and four to contextualise the role of parkour within the pressures and realities of the traceurs' lived experiences of post-crash consumer capitalism. More specifically, it looks at parkour as a crucial form of 'identity work' and the 'labour' of parkour as work and leisure. Situated against the conflicting cultural tensions embedded within the traceurs' early transitions into the precarity of adulthood, this chapter looks at how many of the traceurs set up parkour companies, engaged in stunt work, set up clothing lines or, quite simply attempted to achieve greater status within the British and global parkour scene through the industrious commitment to their social media accounts. As the traceurs attempted to achieve even the most basic forms of independence and traditional markers of adulthood, they were also presented with the dilemma of conceding immediate gratification, leaving behind their 'cool', 'youthful' and culturally relevant identities which conflicted with Žižek's cultural injunction to enjoy and the 'forever young' obsession with youth (Hayward, 2012b). In the absence of meaningful opportunities for fulfilling employment (Lloyd, 2012), the most obvious solution for many of the traceurs was to make work more like leisure by using leisure as a means of work.

This is reflective of the increasingly obsolete distinction between work and leisure (Berardi, 2009; Stebbins, 1995; Winlow and Hall, 2013). However, this chapter builds upon these arguments to situate the 'labour' of parkour as work and leisure and its growth within an updated account of present modes of capital accumulation. In an era of Web 2.0 and the decline of industrial employment, the traditional production-consumption-profit nexus is being displaced by the 'productive consumer' (Marazzi, 2010) and *life itself* is being extracted as a form of valuable capital (Cederström and Fleming, 2012). It is vital that we understand how cultural lifestyle sports such as parkour, which exist predominantly through social media and user-generated websites, work perfectly with these reconfigured methods of capital accumulation; an observation which has never appeared in any of the existing parkour literature. Therefore, Chapter Six builds upon the arguments in chapters three and four in two ways. Firstly, it provides empirical evidence of how global capitalism's changes to labour markets, leisure markets and cultural cultivation of identity crises have created the conditions in which the traceurs actively embraced parkour's commodification and the 'forced choice' (Žižek, 2002c) of further immersion in capitalist markets as a means of resolving their existential and material anxieties. Secondly, it builds upon the theoretical criminological arguments made in chapter four to de-bunk the notion of parkour as resistance in order to move onto the spatial arguments surrounding parkour's control in the following two chapters.

While previous chapters deal with issues of identity, Chapter Seven, 'The Parkour City', moves into the more embodied and spatial arguments of this thesis. It looks to how the traceurs engage with the city in their spatial practice, specifically how they move throughout the city in accordance with the spatial and temporal rhythms of flows of urban consumer centres. Much like the dumpster divers in Jeff Ferrell's (2006) *Empire of Scrounge* (who themselves occupied an uncertain status of legitimate recycler of consumer goods and illicit 'scrounger'), parkour exists in the *interstices of urban space*. It seeks out those spatial and temporal gaps in the physical landscape of consumption, not out of any sense of resistance, but more simply to steal away more training time. The consumer economy of urban centres is not static. On the contrary, it is very much 'alive', fluid and moving; always there, but with the focus shifting to different parts of

the city in accordance with time, seasons, and even the term times of universities. Therefore this chapter looks at how traceurs 'map' the city, producing their own alternative cartography according to the dominant spatio-temporal rhythms of consumption (Kindynis, 2014). In doing so, it takes the *body*, and the non-representational or more-than-representational relationships between body and space as its starting point (Farrugia et al, 2015; Lorimer, 2005; Thrift, 2008). It argues that parkour is more than just a violation of the diktat to 'keep space to its specificity. Rather, it is a spatio-bodily transgression, as the political-economy of urban space encourages a *passive* consumer body which accepts the de Certeau's (1984) 'concept city' of urban space as it is presented to the individual, contrasted against the traceurs *active* body and active cartography of the city. This should not be mistaken as politicising the traceurs' bodies and therefore the imaginary idealism of parkour as a consciously politicised act. On the contrary, it looks at how consumer capitalism has 'precorporated' these authentic embodied experiences through the symbolic bastardisation of the 'passion for the Real'. The chapter merely begins to outline how parkour's conformist qualities of creativity, adventurous risk-taking, and the alternative construction of self begins to transgress the spatial and corporeal qualities demanded by the dominant political-economy of consumer space.

Chapter Eight builds upon the spatial discussions in Chapter Seven. Drawing upon original observations and 'walking interviews' with over a dozen security guards in Newcastle upon Tyne, the chapter introduces one of the core concepts which contribute to the overall argument of this thesis: *systemic spatial violence*. Returning to some of themes around global economic shifts and changes in leisure and consumer markets, this chapter discusses these changes in the spatial context of capital's 'return to the centre' (Smith, 1996). It re-evaluates the nature and function of the *entirety* of space for post-industrial municipal economies in order to offer a critique and revision of 'revanchist' urban theory (Atkinson, 2003; Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 1997; Smith, 1996). Revanchist theory both implicitly and explicitly underpins many of the academic and popular narratives which aim to explain parkour's exclusion from urban space. While the chapter will deal with urban revanchism in more depth, for now it suffices to say that many of these arguments rest on a rather simplistic notion of urban revanchism that, to a certain extent, ritualistically reproduces and misrepresents Smith's (1996)

original thesis. This is the notion that as the white middle-classes have followed capital back to the urban centre, they have also engaged in a moral crusade of vindictive and highly emotive ‘revanchist cleansing’ of the city; targeting and excluding of groups such as ethnic minorities, the homeless, young people, feminists and even the LGBT community. This is the narrative given to explain parkour’s exclusion, driven by an underlying fear and alleged ‘moral panic’ surrounding young people.

Chapter Eight applies Žižekian notions of ‘objective’ or ‘systemic violence’ to the spatial context by arguing that we need to step back from the seductive allure of these most visible forms of spatial exclusion and arguments which assume that there is any kind of moral energy underpinning the governance of social space. Rather than becoming too entangled in a focus upon bum-proof benches, homeless spikes, and the forced dispersal of groups such as skateboarders, traceurs, and loiterers, this chapter critically analyses the *urbanisation process* under late-capitalism. It returns to Neil Smith’s (1996) often neglected systemic analyses of capital’s move back to the redeveloped inner city (Smith, 1996) and how this has influenced the function and nature of urban space and its impact upon parkour and similar spatial practices. In doing so, it identifies that far from there being any moral or emotive underpinning to the governance of urban space, there is a distinct *amorality* to the governance of space. It applies Polanyi’s (1957) well-known argument to the spatial context. As free-market capitalism transformed, the functioning of political economy became entirely detached from moral regulation. Similarly in the spatial context, as global capitalism altered the urban centre’s relationship to capital, the rules which govern it also became entirely detached from moral regulation; purely driven by the interests of spatially-invested capital and the situation-specific rules of the little other that govern space, the chiefs of a thousand kingdoms. This was a realisation which unveiled itself to the security guards interviewed in this chapter. Far from engaging in an emotively driven spatial cleansing, the security guards in this chapter were acutely aware of the conformist and harmless nature of parkour’s practice. In their governance of urban space, they were more often engaged in the enforcement of the arbitrary bureaucratic rules of the urban ‘little other’ (see Winlow and Hall, 2012 on the ‘little other’). Not only does this argument bring together the paradox of parkour’s conformity and exclusion, but it also explains through the security guards’ own narratives why parkour is governed and prohibited with such

inconsistency in urban space. Therefore, this chapter brings the central argument of this thesis full-circle. It details in explicit theoretical and empirical detail the complex double-bind that late-modern liberal capitalism has created for itself. At once cultivating the energy and desire for lifestyle identities such as parkour whilst also having to harness and re-direct them, at times prohibitively, into particular spatial contexts in accordance with consumer capitalism's renewed reliance upon the an inherently competitive and territorial 'symbolic economy' of urban space (Zukin, 1995).

This thesis is the first explicitly criminological study of parkour and the first to attempt an explanation of the contradictions surrounding parkour's conformity and control within one holistic theoretical framework. However, it should be emphasised that the arguments that follow are not limited to criminological theory alone. Issues of deviance, transgression and control do not operate in a vacuum, and in the pages that follow I will attempt to create an 'intellectual mosaic' which draws upon everything ranging from criminology, sociology, leisure studies, cultural geography, economics, continental philosophy and Lacanian psychoanalysis. The goal is to take a step back and theorise, question and reconceptualise some of the fundamental assumptions about human nature, the relationship between structure, agency, urbanisation and spatial practice. The thesis endeavours to depict the ways in which macro-level socio-economic shifts and pressures exert themselves upon groups such as the traceurs in ways which appear to be increasing and intensifying for young people in the UK (Smith, 2014; Winlow and Hall, 2006). It aims to look at how these socio-economic shifts have changed urban spaces and how this conflicts with the pressures experienced by the traceurs in their arguably futile quest for existential security and fulfilment in their fragile world of individualistic consumer capitalism. It should be noted that the traceurs in this study are not the socially 'excluded' and impoverished young people which so often feature in criminological studies of youth (Contreras, 2013; Fraser, 2015; Ilan, 2015). While they all experienced the precariousness of late modern employment, holding and losing several jobs, living almost exclusively out of overdrafts and having spells in and out of labour markets; they could all be described as socially *included*. They were capable of procuring 'go-pro' head cameras and scraping together money for a cheap trip to Europe to train in foreign cities. On the whole the traceurs possessed no sense of class identity, reflective of the parallel rise of individualism and decline of collective identities.

As such, they can be positioned as representative of wide swathes of the UK population in their early/mid-twenties and thus the 'millennial' generation. Therefore while my study is highly 'particular' in relation to sample size, geographical location and indeed the shape and make-up of Newcastle as a city, my hope is that the thesis is more generalizable. Generalizable to the extent that the existential pressures and anxieties to which the traceurs are subjected are present throughout young people in the British mainstream; and that the global trends in capital's return to the city have changed the nature and function of space in similar ways across cities in the global North. Indeed, throughout my ethnographic study with the traceurs we visited over a dozen different towns and cities, all of which held similar spatial dynamics. To look at the literature on space, economy and consumption—both past and present—suggests that the spatial trends discussed in this thesis are far from particular to my research (Atkinson, 2003; Augé, 1995; Davis, 1990; Kindynis, 2016; Mould, 2015; Smith, 1996; Zukin, 1995). While there is still much work to be done in understanding the relationships between political economy, space and desire, and control and deviance, it is my hope that this study can make a small contribution to this process, potentially serving as a point of departure for more sophisticated understandings of this complex spatial milieu in our present historical moment.

## 2

### *The Parkour Scene:*

#### *A brief history of parkour and Newcastle upon Tyne*

##### **Meeting up at Discovery**

It was a sunny but bitterly cold afternoon in the autumn of 2014. Ziplock, who had been a primary gatekeeper into the parkour scene just a year earlier, had already text me in the early morning to ask if I was coming out. I'd checked the NEPK Facebook page and there was no discussion of a change of plan, so I assumed the traceurs would all be meeting at the usual spot. I threw on some loose jogging bottoms and my trainers with thinning soles and headed down to 'Discovery' at midday for the Saturday jam. Discovery was the usual meeting spot, the spiritual 'home' of the local parkour community and they had been coming here for years. While over the course of the research the traceurs would moan and argue about an over-attachment to the Discovery spot, it maintained its place at the heart of the community and for good reason. It would come to be sorely missed at the end of my ethnographic fieldwork when it would be flattened by a construction crew for good and cease to exist as a point on the map of the parkour city. I always enjoyed the familiar walk up to the Discovery spot. It evoked a certain familiarity and comfort as you round the corner of the small art gallery that obscures its view to see the traceurs standing atop the Discovery walls. A lot of the usual lads were there: Sonic, ZPK, TK, Franny, Chez, Dee, EJ, Walker, Ty, Magic, Huse and Vase.

The traceurs were an entirely unthreatening lot. They had innocent faces and fashionable floppy hairstyles which bounced around as they'd jump between the Discovery walls. They were all relatively young, skinny looking kids; looking more like they should be studying for their GCSEs or asking for pocket money rather than working and living through their early twenties. Not armed with a sociological eye, the traceurs often mused that they would get moved-on because their parkour 'look' would get

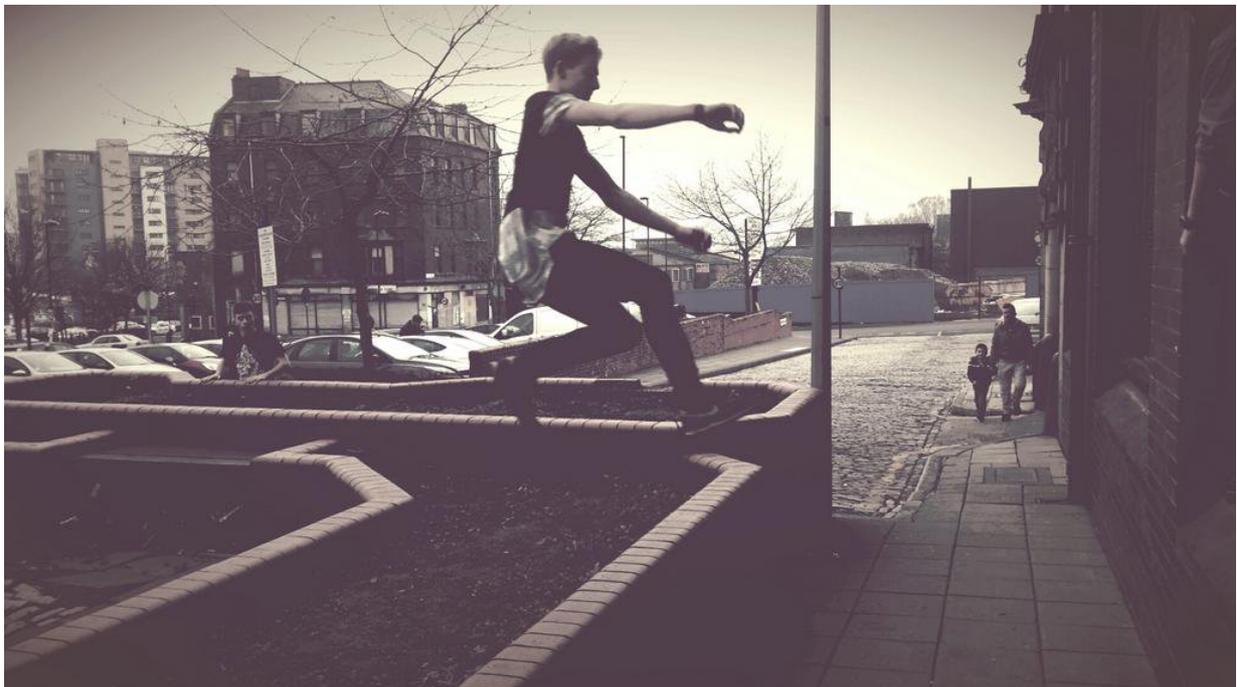
confused with a 'gang' look: baggy jogging bottoms, loose t-shirts or vests, and heavy hoodies with graffiti font styles on them. For this reason, they'd never wear their hoods up at a parkour spot. Of course, I knew the story was far more complex than a simplistic 'moral panic' argument (see Atkinson and Young, 2008; Wheaton, 2013). Besides, to anyone who gave even half a look, it was quite clear that they were not the stereotypical 'troublesome' and intimidating kids who have become the 'folk devils' of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, making most people walk quickly and avoid eye contact. They were polite and considerate to other passers-by, adhering to parkour's rarely-spoken 'code of ethics' to not disrupt any spot they were using. They would wait for passers-by to go before doing a particular line or move, saying hello to people and interacting with their small children who looked on bemused as one of the traceurs somersaulted in the air. They were polite and deferential to spatial authorities, calling security guards 'sir' and were eloquent in their attempts of spatial negotiation for more time on a particular spot. Unlike the characters in Ilan's (2015) recent ethnography who occupy a much different form of 'street habitus' (Fraser, 2015), they were not interested in the performance of muted and dismissive non-engagement with authorities. They certainly weren't the kids I ran with in my teens and encountered during a previous life in Youth Justice; hanging around outside the local shops armed with small knives, drinking cheap beer and spirits, smoking 'solid' and looking for confrontations with strangers over sleights real or conjured. In contrast, this group of young men were armed with DSLR cameras and preferred to swig coconut water and eat bananas. Instead of getting blazed or opening a can of beer when they would first meet up, they would start stretching before embarking on a day of training in the parkour city.



Group shots of some of the NEPK traceurs at the annual Airborn jam in Liverpool (above) and in Amsterdam (below)



Anyone with the most basic understanding of parkour could immediately see the traceurs' attraction to Discovery. There was a vast array of low walls and ledges, all on different levels with varying gaps between them offering a multitude of possibilities for movement. The spot was bordered by the outer-wall of the museum, and the windows were intersected by drainage pipes and covered with window-bars, both of which helped with grip as you jumped toward them. EJ was using these to try and do a long circling line around the whole spot. The windows had slanted stonework beneath them which allowed for solid foot-placement, well within leaping distance of the low walls and ledges. EJ could stride between each wall and finally leap onto the slanted stone, touching it only for a moment to push back off, twisting his body to leap back onto the walls again and do a series of moves and vaults off in the other direction. The low walls were made of an exceptionally smooth orange brick which had its virtues and failings. This brick surface was almost impossible to navigate effectively or safely if wet. On the plus side they would dry very quickly which, in Newcastle where it rains predictably, is a priceless attribute. This is the kind of corporeal knowledge the traceurs developed around the intermesh of flesh and stone, mapping the parkour city accordingly across the seasons. The spot was compact, low-risk and central—perfect for a meeting spot to warm-up, get loose and start the day.



Discovery. 2014



To describe it with less sentimentality, the Discovery spot is situated in the middle of a car park. To anyone but the traceurs, there is nothing special about it. Situated on the fringes of a dense and compact city centre, the central train station is less than a quarter of a mile away and it is encircled by an array of consumer possibilities. The Discovery spot is located in the midst of the NE1 Business Improvement District and this spot served as the 'home' of this research and the local parkour community. There is a Holiday Inn Express immediately across the street where you would always see large groups of drunken out-of-town revellers who have come to experience a weekend of pre-packaged risk-taking and hedonism in the city's now-infamous night-time economy (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002; Hollands, 1995). In the same privately-run plaza as the Holiday Inn is a towering building of luxury apartments where I lived for one year of this research. As you enter the lobby there is a memo on the notice board from the building committee regarding a petition to the council about increasing the controls, restrictions, and policing of people entering their privatized bubble within the city centre. The notice implores residents of the building to join them in their activism

against “young people loitering and skateboarders in the car park area, excessively loud music, screaming and shouting in the street and other loutish and anti-social behaviour”.

Adjacent to Discovery is a long stretch of takeaway restaurants where people line up for food and taxis at the end of their nights out. Directly across the street to the right is a popular nightclub in Newcastle’s burgeoning LGBT nightlife scene which, if one follows the road down, is the beginning of a buffet of pubs, bars and clubs of all varieties. To my left, about 200 yards away is a Dance gym that organises and hosts dance classes in a variety of genres for some controlled, fee-paying leisure and creativity. Further beyond that, if one looks closely between the apartment complexes, cranes and hotels, you can see the top of St James’ Park—Newcastle United Football Club’s iconic home stadium. Given its location and its status as the ‘home’ of the local parkour community, the Discovery spot is arguably symbolic of the tensions around ‘public’ space, legitimate leisure and freedom in contemporary post-industrial city centres with which this thesis is concerned.



After we’ve all warmed up and trained a little at Discovery, we pick up our bags and head-off through the city centre toward Haymarket, getting ready to hit some of the spots toward the North end of town. We only walk for about a minute, crossing the main road from Discovery and into the plaza area of the hotel and luxury apartment buildings.

TK spots some disused scaffolding on the side of the apartment block. Linked up to a cool set of walls which run down the ramp to an underground car park, the scaffolding makes for a pretty cool spot, with plenty more to do. Nobody seems to be here, so we set our bags down and the traceurs start climbing all over the scaffolding. TK picks out a line *through* the scaffolding, quickly using a series of swings and vaults to run the gauntlet through the scaffolding. Ross, EJ and Ziplock go over to the ramp, testing out the best possible lines across. The other traceurs start looking for lines to do, telling Ty and EJ to see if they can get from one spot to another in only two or three moves. We've used this plaza spot before, but never with the scaffolding. It makes for a whole new spot, and the usual spots up toward the university and Haymarket can wait for a bit after we've explored a little. Rest assured we won't be able to stay here for long.

After snapping a few shots I start to train, touching the stonework to feel its texture and to judge the height of the various walls. I stand in front of the first wall of the car park ramp and leap vertically off two feet to land on top. The balls of my feet touch the wall and I quickly jump again to clear the metal handrail running through the middle of it. I precision jump onto the wall in the middle of the ramp which divides the lanes, then leap again diagonally and catch myself on the far wall. My foot is pressed against the face of the wall as my hands grip the top ledge with my knuckles whitening. I push myself up and run toward the top wall emblazoned with 'Grainger Town' and run up it, catching myself on the top hand rail. I pull myself up, swinging my legs up through my hips and over the handrail in one smooth motion, dropping down onto the other side and rolling-out. I do this line three or four more times, seeing which moves work best and getting it 'smooth', avoiding any stutters or hesitations. EJ likes it and tries it himself with the aplomb of a more experienced traceur.



Less than 10 minutes go by and a security guard rounds the corner, while a restaurant worker comes out from across the street, both telling us to move on. The traceurs do not protest, gathering their bags and cameras saying 'no problem'. Huse asks the security guard politely if he minds giving us just 'one more minute' in order to film Ross's line across the ramps. He almost sounds like a child asking their parents to let them stay up just a little bit longer.

This is the urban cultural lifestyle sport of parkour and freerunning. The traceurs move throughout the city finding spots and constellations of physical structures which, combined with the bodily movements of parkour, make for spaces of play, enjoyment and exploration. Most simplistically, it is a physical training methodology in which one uses only their body to overcome physical and mental obstacles in urban space and travel from point A to point B in the most direct and efficient way possible, irrespective of what is in one's way (Angel, 2011; Belle, 2006; Mould, 2009). Traceurs saturate the full volume of spaces, thinking about movement and space and how to utilise the body and all of the physical structures within the urban landscape together as one to connect space through creating direct and efficient 'lines of flight'. This can involve running, striding, vaulting, jumping, climbing, balancing or any other physical movement to move from one point to another. Nothing is off-limits, and oftentimes traceurs derive most pleasure from touching those parts of the city which otherwise go untouched.

## Parkour: A Brief History and Where We Are Now

Primarily described as a physical ‘discipline’, parkour has also been considered as an art form, a sport, a culture of movement, a lifestyle, a form of urban activism and resistance and, for some, even a spiritual activity (Angel, 2011; Atkinson, 2009; Bornaz, 2008; Fuggle, 2008; Lamb, 2014; Mould, 2009). The ethos that emerged from the ‘origins’<sup>5</sup> of parkour was one which advocated freedom and expression. This is an ethos which, as we will explore in future chapters, has been capitalised upon by the consumer industries and is perfectly captured in the slogan of the popular parkour video game *Mirror’s Edge*: “Fight oppression. Claim your freedom”. Parkour, therefore, is an open-ended and unregulated discipline. It has few genuine rules or definitions for what is ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ parkour; prompting rifts and battles for essentially false subcultural authenticity within the community on parkour forums and websites (Wheaton, 2013)<sup>6</sup>. Consequently, the discipline has developed several ‘styles’ and cultural variations through its ‘subculturalisation’ and subsequent offshoots such as freerunning, which includes flips, spins and reflects elements of break-dancing for *traceurs*<sup>7</sup> to move not only efficiently, but stylistically, through space. Despite these variations and changes to parkour’s commodified and sportified landscape, parkour is about overcoming physical, mental, and emotional obstacles to ‘smooth out’ the striated urban landscape and move through space based upon the physical and imaginative

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<sup>5</sup> Many practitioners of parkour would argue that parkour was never ‘invented’. They would argue that parkour was always here, the first original ‘sport’. See Mould (2009: 747) and the *Youtube* video: “Parkour: The Chosen Few” available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk9nLKx6KwU&feature=share>

<sup>6</sup> All of my participants, despite moaning about particular traceurs ‘styles’, claimed to despise these arguments. For them, the people who care and argue about these issues are those who live parkour through forums rather than getting out there and training themselves. In many ways, however, this distinction of themselves from the ‘forum crowd’, while perhaps accurate, is indicative of the competitive individualism (see Hall, 2012a) which pervades the parkour community and society more widely.

<sup>7</sup> ‘Traceur’ is a term for those who practice parkour. ‘Freerunner’ has also been used since freerunning’s popular emergence. ‘Traceur’ refers to a practitioner who adheres to the more traditional ethos of purposeful movement from point A to point B, eschewing the aesthetic flourishes of freerunning such as flips and spins. Freerunner reflects this more creative practice, where practitioners include ‘tricking’ and will often do circular lines in space rather than their movement being purposeful to ‘get somewhere’. However, these distinctions are essentially false and rarely hold as dichotomous identities. The practitioners in my sample displayed both purposeful and aesthetically-driven movement, and within the community the terms traceur and freerunner are used interchangeably. Therefore, while this thesis will occasionally use these terms interchangeably, for the purposes of consistency ‘traceur’ will be the term predominantly employed.

capabilities of one's own body, rather than being guided by constrictive "fixed paths in well-defined directions" (Mould, 2009: 741).

Parkour and freerunning appears to be a distinctly late modern practice, reflective of the wider attraction to other forms of urban risk-taking and creative spatial practices (Chiu, 2009; Garrett, 2013; Lyng, 2005). However, its historical roots run much deeper, and over the years it has developed from a strict and purposeful form of movement to blend with other creative physical practices such as gymnastics, capoeira, martial arts, breakdancing, slacklining, buildering, urban exploration and 'tricking', to form a broad smorgasbord of physical and movement-based activities with which the contemporary traceur or freerunner identifies (Witfield et al, 2010). Throughout my study, these various elements featured in the traceurs' practice. A number of the traceurs' specialised or had a personal history in a variety of creative practices; part of a broader lifestyle of movement and the development of a creative cultural identity. Ziplock, for example, was a competitive breakdancer in addition to being a traceur. Sonic was a 4<sup>th</sup> degree black belt in Taekwondo, while 'Huse and Ty were accomplished gymnasts in their early teens prior to picking up parkour. Franny, for reasons I never quite found out, held a deep fascination with Brazilian culture and was a knowledgeable practitioner of Capoeira. Magic, as his nickname would suggest, was a talented magician who ended up getting Ross a gig as an acrobatic performer in the travelling circus, resulting in his declining and intermittent presence in the NEPK community. Similarly, Dee began to fall away from the parkour scene toward the end of my fieldwork due to his entry into the armed forces; inspired in part by parkour's own historical relationship to the military.

It is widely accepted that parkour's origins are rooted in the ideas of the 'natural method' which was generated and advocated by Georges Hébert, a naval officer in the French military (Atkinson, 2009; Witfeld et al, 2010). Hébert espoused a belief in life-long physical training; believing that all people, especially military personnel, should be physically *useful*. He began developing physical training methods which taught running, jumping, climbing, lifting, self-defence and swimming. These activities were not taught separately, but were combined with one another and practiced in a variety of physical

terrains over a 5-10km course (Witfeld et al, 2010). This is where parkour<sup>8</sup>, a variation on the French *parcours*, derives its name which literally translates to ‘the course’. The emphasis on *useful* physical bodies and purposeful movement was also a strong influence on parkour’s modern-day beginnings and one of its originators, David Belle. Belle was taught the basic movements of the natural method by his father, who served in the fire brigade where these principles were taught. Upon moving to Lisses, a heavily deindustrialised and ethnic *banlieue* on the outskirts of Paris, Belle applied these principles to the urban environment, bringing into being the now famous *Yamakasi*<sup>9</sup> group in the 1980s and 1990s. This emphasis upon purposeful and efficient movement of straight lines from point A to point B became the benchmark against which parkour’s offshoots of freerunning and tricking are compared and defined, shaping the modern pluralisation and diversification of parkour.

This pluralisation is best encapsulated by the divergences between the two most prominent members of the original Yamakasi group: David Belle and Sebastian Foucan. While these divergences and rifts are arguably overstated, Foucan wished to incorporate more aesthetic and expressive elements into parkour, focusing less on purposive straight-line movement and more on what creative movements and combinations could be accomplished within a particular space. This introduced artistic flourishes such as somersaults, spins, wall flips and general tricking; opening out parkour’s practice to a wider creative base in addition to its traditional disciplined and ‘philosophical’ practitioners. Arguably, it is this more aesthetic and spectacular element which popularised parkour, emerging in conjunction with the rise of user-generated video sites such as YouTube to spread parkour’s reach and intrigue. Despite the varying philosophies of the early Yamakasi practitioners, it is worth noting that all of the original nine members went on to feature in films, TV shows and commercials and making a living from parkour’s commodification (Angel, 2011).

Parkour’s commodification and popularity (and thus its ambiguous ‘precorporated’ position at the nexus between deviance and leisure) began quite early in the late 1990s

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<sup>8</sup> The K in parkour was allegedly introduced as a stylised variation on the French term ‘Le parcours’ to make it more attractive to the English speaking world. Exactly where, who or when this occurred has never been irrefutably verified.

<sup>9</sup> This is where the world’s first ‘parkour’ film *Yamakasi: Les Samurais des temps modernes* derives its name. Director Luc Besson approached the Yamakasi traceurs with an offer to do a feature film, following the usual plot narrative of noble traceurs fighting against the authorities for social justice.

with Luc Besson's film and the rising prominence of the Yamakasi's in France. However it exploded when it hit screens in the UK. This began with a Channel 4 documentary, followed by two more widely viewed documentaries, *Jump London* (2003) and *Jump Britain* (2005). It is argued by certain scholars of parkour that this is where Foucan popularised the term 'freerunning' for a British-speaking audience (Angel, 2011). As Stapleton and Terrio (2010) observe, this documentary followed the usual narrative, depicting the traceurs as the loveable 'bandit outlaws' critiquing capitalist hegemony over contemporary city spaces with their subversive movement. The documentaries drew on subcultural theorists to add an intellectual and 'critical' flavour, despite the flaws of subcultural theory in assuming that the value-system of the traceurs is distinct and different to the rest of mainstream consumer society (see chapter 4 of this thesis; Hall, et al, 2008 for lengthier critiques). As this thesis will consistently show, the reality is the exact opposite.

The spectacular footage of athletes effortlessly traversing the cityscape, combined with the underlying narrative of transgressive urban subversion, captivated British audiences. In this regard, it was just 'transgressive enough to be cool' (Fenwick and Hayward, 2000). All of my participants mentioned *Jump London* and *Jump Britain* as either propelling them into parkour, or confirming their commitment to its practice. Indeed, even Angel (2011) mentions *Jump London* and its veneer of transgressive politicised spatial practice as piquing her filmmaking and academic interests. Franny (22 years old), described it perfectly:

*"I didn't see Jump London til after I saw Jump Britain. But when Jump Britain hit, it just had everything I was looking for at that time. I was a teenager, trying to kind of find my place. Not finding my place in the sense of just fading into the background, but just kind of being something...having a crowd you know? The worst thing that could happen to you at school is when nobody knows what you're about. That's worse than being a fucking geek. It was just something so cool, so different, but at the same time it's not different in a bad way like the nerdy kids at school who are into **Star Wars** and that. It was something different which tapped into all the same cool stuff. The image, the moves...the music that went with it. Guys were just doing something that nobody else was doing, but they were doing it to Jay-Z music. It was awesome and I was like, 'I've gotta get on this'"*

Franny's words are a perfect reflection of some of the developments within leisure, identity and youth friendship over the past forty years. These will be discussed in more depth in chapters 3, 4 and 6. However for now, it is enough to note that previous analyses of youth culture discovered profound experiences of kinship, belonging, mutual ambitions and a definite desire to 'fit in' and become socialised into the existing 'Symbolic Order' (Corrigan, 1979; Parker, 1974). Existing social research in the contemporary context has found that, as a result of profound socio-economic change, the same youth groups are characterised by division, fragmentation and competitive distinction. The challenge is no longer as simplistic as merely 'fitting in'. As Franny notes above, one has to navigate the double-bind of 'fitting-in' while simultaneously 'sticking-out' (Winlow and Hall, 2009).

For these reasons, the transgressive iconography of these practices proved to be incredibly popular. While numerous chapters will deal with this issue in greater depth, for now it is enough to say that these two documentaries arguably contribute to the fetishistic disavowal of the political impotence and cultural conformity at the heart of parkour, albeit rarely acknowledged within the academic literature. While such accounts espouse a critique of consumer capitalism's hyper-regulation of 'exclusionary' urban spaces, other critical scholars have acknowledged the remarkable alacrity of consumer capitalism to incorporate a critique of itself as a popular form of cultural production (see Heath and Potter, 2006; Winlow, 2012; Žižek, 2002a).

It does not take much time or effort to find numerous examples of popular movies or cultural products positioning the big, bad capitalist corporation or entrepreneur in the role of villain. Similarly, Hollywood and advertising often employ revolution, rebellion and anarchy as popular marketised identity motifs. Such appropriations strip back political substance to a superficial exterior in which politics constitutes a 'do-it-yourself' fashion (see Hebdige, 1979 on the 1970s 'punk' movement). In *The Hunger Games* series, which is based upon a story of revolution, stylist Effie Trinket is preparing to 'dress' protagonist Katniss Everdeen for war. As the rebels' iconic 'Mockingjay', she is to shoot propaganda films in an underground bunker in front of a 'green screen'. In a particularly stirring moment, Trinket assures Katniss: "*We will make you the best-dressed rebel in history*" (Lawrence, 2014). Is this moment in the film not a perfect characterisation of today's 'rebellious' politics of identity? It is a stylised politics based upon fashion and

image; propaganda eviscerated of substance and constructed in a sanitised arena. To quote Žižek (2002c: 10), it is a politics without politics. Similarly, I always wondered what Ché Guevara would've thought about one of my participants, Cal. His favourite shirt to train in was a loose vest emblazoned with the familiar face of the iconic revolutionary. Ironically the vest was from Primark, a company with continued allegations of labour exploitation and sweatshops (BBC News, 2009; Rustin, 2014).

A system such as consumer capitalism which is predicated upon differentiation and the veneer of diversity and transgression cannot function when the underlying *homogeneity* of its practice is explicitly acknowledged or followed too closely. It relies on the quiet obedience to a 'subterranean set of accompanying unofficial commandments' (Johnston, 2008: xvii) that appear to subvert, but in reality bolster capitalism's official rules:

"what the subject effectively wants is a command in the guise of freedom, of a free choice: He wants to obey while maintaining the semblance of freedom and thus saving face. If the command is delivered directly, by passing the appearance of free choice, public humiliation hurts the subject and can induce him to rebel." Žižek (2002b: 112)

This can be seen at the early stages of transgressive subcultures such as parkour, when a traceur is seen to 'sell-out' and go 'too mainstream' too quickly. Winlow (2012) has written on the collective political effect this has had on life in contemporary society and culture:

"Contemporary capitalism's self-critique has a soporific effect and functions to prevent genuine political opposition. There is no need to make the personal sacrifices necessary to drive social renewal: Look! The system is being held to account, and is subject to constant gradualist democratic rehabilitation. The problem is of course that the system is being held to account by its own institutions and cultures, and that this image of constant political critique and dialogue exists in order to ensure that the current order continues" (Winlow, 2012: 30)

The *Jump London* and *Jump Britain* documentaries are a perfect example of this politically castrating 'soporific effect'. While social scientists who have taken an interest in parkour have been quick to explore its politically emancipatory potential, the documentaries were produced within and perpetuated the political economy of consumer capitalism. It is therefore unsurprising, though strangely ignored,

downplayed<sup>10</sup> and treated as a side issue, that those young budding traceurs who were inspired by these documentaries have gone on to set up parkour 'teams', companies, clothing lines and fee-paying gyms all over the country. This is not to mention the fact that, prior to any form of commodification or co-optation, parkour and freerunning was, at the level of aesthetics and cultural values, completely aligned to consumer capitalism's most cherished principles as an example of capitalist 'precorporation' (Fisher, 2009).

Andy (33 years old) recalls the impact these two documentaries had on UK parkour. Andy was unquestionably the most experienced participant I had. Self-admittedly, Andy is not the most prolific practitioner. However, he has been at the heart of the UK parkour scene since it first arrived on British soil. He continues to work closely with prominent traceurs as a photographer, and participated in what was arguably the first major inter-city parkour jam in the UK back in 2003:

*"I was working for a tiny TV production company up in Birmingham. Wasn't really that happy working there. And I heard that Jump Britain was being made. Jump London came along and suddenly the forums went nuts and the website crashed and everything else and parkour just **exploded**. All of a sudden there were parkour teams springing up everywhere, in the most random cities and little towns. I mean, back when it first started, that's why everyone travelled down to train in London so often because London was where most people were and people from Coventry or wherever wanted to train with more than 2 or 3 people. But then Jump Britain was rumoured so I got in touch with the production company and asked if I could scrub toilets and make sandwiches or whatever and I was given the job of researcher which was coordinating the talent, and errmm...helping to liaise with locations and recycling and all manner of stuff. And then I moved to London on the back of working on Jump Britain and that was 10 years ago now. The amount of people who are involved in the London parkour scene on the back of that is crazy."*

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<sup>10</sup> Angel (2011) has looked at the 'spectacularisation' of parkour but focused more upon the visual spectacle, rather than attempting a theorisation of traceurs' subjectivity and their relationship to the ideological and cultural-economic value systems of consumer capitalism. Similarly, Wheaton (2013) has looked at the 'sportification' of parkour but, again, attempts no theorisation of subjectivity or conformity and instead focuses more on how it can be integrated into youth work policy. Stapleton and Terrio (2010) is a rare exception of a critical appraisal of parkour's historical relationship to consumerism, albeit not rooted in a depth-ethnographic study and empirical data from the present.

In the contemporary context, parkour is one of the fastest growing cultural lifestyle sports in the UK. It has a governing body, *Parkour UK*, which employs nearly 500 people and works in collaboration with the Sport and Recreation Alliance, the Association for Physical Education (afPE) and the Youth Sports Trust (YTS) which have attempted to bring parkour into schools and youth policy ([www.parkouruk.org](http://www.parkouruk.org); Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011). Indeed, my own participants have started their own professional parkour coaching company and clothing lines, providing beginner and intermediate lessons at their own parkour gym in addition to going into schools to teach and promote parkour. Corporations such as MTV have gotten in on the act, running competitive reality TV shows, and here in the UK the most prominent and talented traceurs have featured in TV shows such as *Ninja Warrior UK*. There are now dozens of parkour 'teams' throughout the country and around the world such as *Parkour Generations*, *Storm Freerunning*, *Storrer*, *3Run*, *Airborn*, *Apeuro*, *Verang*, *Tempest*, *Lachette* and *Etre-Fort* among many others. All of these 'teams' release their own videos, DVDs, photo albums and clothing lines and run indoor and outdoor events and jams for a nominal fee. Moreover, many of these 'teams' and individually recognisable traceurs in the parkour community compete with one another for prominence, resulting in rifts and 'beefs' between individual athletes or entire teams.

Throughout my research, my participants would often distinguish between 'community-based' parkour brands and more profit-driven teams, and it would be unfair to suggest that the parkour community is entirely devoid of a community and pro-social ethos. NEPK, the parkour company run by my participants, would be considered a 'community-based' brand. These are organisations which 'give back' to the community, providing coaching sessions in schools, or running fee-paying gyms in youth centres. However, to take a more critical standpoint, it could equally be viewed as a small-scale microcosm of what Žižek (2009) describes as a universalised 'cultural capitalism', in which the act of consumption and one's anti-consumerist pro-social and ethical duties are built-in to the same gesture. Žižek (2009: 53) uses the example of Starbucks and their 'Shared Planet Programme'. In this, Starbucks claim that the coffee-drinker is purchasing more than a cup of coffee, but buying into an entire 'coffee ethics', as the proportion of the money spent in Starbucks goes to charity and tackling social

inequalities<sup>11</sup>. Arguably, the same can be said of the traceurs' rationalisation of their entrepreneurial efforts, building the 'pro-social' into their own efforts of capital accumulation. This is not to equate community-based parkour companies with the vast environmental and financial harms caused by Starbucks. It is simply to draw parallels and show how the ideology of cultural capitalism filters into and metastasises throughout the social structure. As a result, this thesis has a general unwillingness to refer to parkour in terms of 'subculture', with all the intellectual and value-implications this carries with regards to parkour's distinction from the parent culture of consumer capitalism. As we shall see in later chapters, the financial demands of running a parkour company have meant that Chez and TK—the founders of NEPK—have risen prices in order to cover costs and also satisfy their own needs and desires. In chapter 6 and the conclusion, I reflect on the implications this has for making what is supposed to be an inclusive, low-cost practice into one which is potentially more financially exclusionary.

This brief history highlights the strange contradictory position that parkour currently occupies. Despite all of this success and parkour's drift away from the periphery and toward the mainstream of contemporary consumer capitalism; it remains excluded, prohibited and policed in urban and residential spaces. This is a contradiction which, as this thesis intends to show, has yet to be adequately theorised and explained. The left-liberal interpretivist and constructionist perspectives which are the orthodox positions for the allegedly 'critical' social sciences have never been able to account for this paradox. Moreover, as parkour and its practitioners have become increasingly mainstream and reflective of consumer capitalism, they certainly cannot explain why this spatial exclusion has *intensified* in some ways and become more inconsistent in others. In the five years since Julie Angel (2011) published one of the earliest doctoral theses on parkour, the use of anti-climb paint and threats of ASBOs which featured in her innovative thesis have now escalated to arrests (BBC News, 2013; Daily Mail, 2016), prosecutions (ITV News, 2016), council bans on parkour (Murphy, 2011), and the destruction and redesigning of popular parkour spots in cities throughout the UK.

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<sup>11</sup> This is despite the fact that Starbucks was recently found to have only paid £8.6m in corporation tax in 14 years, less than 1% of their overall revenue (BBC News, 2012).



A 'no freerunning' sign, recovered as one of the last remnants of a demolished popular parkour spot in London. Courtesy of an anonymous London-based traceur, 2015.

This is precisely because of the *domain assumptions* these theoretical positions hold about human nature, subjectivity, resistance; the relationship between structure and agency and how it manifests in late-capitalism (see chapter 4 for an in-depth look into these domain assumptions; see also Hall and Winlow, 2015). What is required is what will feature in the chapters that follow: an in-depth and holistic exploration of the evolution of leisure, transgression and cities within the context of global shifts in politics, economy, work, leisure and social life over the past four decades.

### **From Coal to Culture: Newcastle upon Tyne**

It would be misleading to suggest that my choice of Newcastle upon Tyne as a research site was entirely deliberate and strategic. Indeed, there are many larger parkour communities. Judging on my two-year ethnography in which I followed the NEPK community throughout the UK and beyond, Newcastle's parkour community is of a middling and respectable size to other cities. It pales in comparison to that of London, where the parkour scene is less centralised and more fragmented with a number of different groups. More opportunistic than strategic, Newcastle afforded the opportunity to engage consistently rather than sporadically with a strong and centralised parkour

community in a distinctly urban context that was right on the doorstep of where I was living at the time.

However, in many ways I could not have 'chosen' a better city than Newcastle in which to conduct this research. From the earliest stages of my fieldwork I was already contextualising the practice of parkour within consumer culture and the evolution of leisure and transgression in contemporary Western society. However, my experience of present-day Newcastle, contrasted against its rich urban history, cemented my spatial and criminological theoretical perspective. Newcastle and the North East of England have been described as a 'textbook' example of deindustrialisation, urban renewal and the contested transitions of Fordism to Post-Fordism, modernity to late modernity, and industrialisation to consumerism (Robinson, 2002). In this regard Newcastle, along with the other post-industrial cities visited by the NEPK community such as Glasgow, Leeds, Sunderland and Liverpool, perfectly encapsulate the profound shifts in global capitalism and the attendant changes to work, leisure, culture and urban space; all of which act as the contextual backdrop to this entire thesis. While these themes will be dealt with in broader depth in chapters 3, 7 and 8, it is worth looking at the history of my research site in order to understand its present and the traceurs place or lack thereof within it.

Newcastle upon Tyne is an archetypal post-industrial city which has been eviscerated in a multitude of ways in the departure of traditional forms of industrial employment. Primarily, this has stemmed from the shift in global energy markets alongside capital's need to 'discipline' a strong industrial labour force and move production elsewhere as a means of avoiding capitalism's embedded inclination to crisis (Byrne, 2001; Harvey, 2014). The departure of industry from many cities in the North of England has effectively re-written the entire character and reality of the urban experience along with class, work and leisure as these cities struggle to move from industrialism to post-industrialism. This underpinning historical context has been a feature of many studies around crime, criminal markets, leisure, youth and the city (Fraser, 2015; Hobbs, 1988; Hobbs et al, 2003; Hayward, 2004; Winlow, 2001; Winlow and Hall, 2006; Hall et al, 2008; Smith, 2014). As Robinson (2002) has pointed out, it is impossible to talk about Newcastle without talking about its industrial history and its long drawn-out decline.

While wishing to avoid historical simplicity, the North East's natural endowment of coal is central to any understanding of the North East. Coal became a vital resource for Great Britain's world-leading industrial economy as collieries sprang up all over the North East coalfields, shaping the vast conurbation of neighbourhoods and communities in Newcastle and North Tyneside. As Byrne (1989) points out, it would be a mistake to think of Newcastle in dichotomous terms of the central districts as being urban-industrial and the peripheral communities of North Tyneside as rural and agricultural. A significant proportion of the peripheral areas (now wealthier suburbs to the city centre) were in fact coalfields. It was this coal that powered the myriad related 'staple industries' of 'carboniferous capitalism' such as iron, steel, shipbuilding and engineering which relied heavily on the banks of the Tyne as central docks (Robinson, 2002). Newcastle struggled with issues of housing to cope with the increase in population as industry demanded more labour, resulting in an undeniable reality of urban poverty. However, for the most part, the organised capital and labour up until the 1920s meant that Newcastle and North Tyneside was a place of rising prosperity, characterised by "high wages and rough and ready urban conditions" (Byrne, 1989: 43). While this declined with the 1930s depression, the industrial sector recovered in the post-war era, peaking in the early 1960s. As Byrne (1989) points out, in 1966 71% of the Newcastle and North Tyneside population worked in the manufacturing and industrial sectors such as mining, metal manufacturing, engineering, shipbuilding, construction and transport. This declined to 63% in 1976 and even more steeply to 52.4% in 1984. Mining declined by over 50% between 1966 and 1976, steadily declining after that through 1984. After 1976, manufacturing fell by over a third and continued to steadily decline in accordance with the emergence of neoliberal economics and the Thatcher government (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002). This is a shift born in part out of the switch in energy markets to what was then relatively cheap imported oil (Byrne, 1989). But as Harvey (2014) observes it was also part of a larger crisis that emerges from the internal contradictions of capital; in which there was an excessive power of labour in relation to capital accumulation.

The story of neoliberalism has been well-rehearsed elsewhere (Harvey, 2005); acutely detailing the rise of Thatcherism, Reaganism, the offshoring of industry, the disciplining of labour and the West's shift to a post-industrial economy based upon debt (renamed

credit) and consumption (Horsley, 2015). It is unnecessary to rehearse these discussions here, particularly when chapter 3 does so in significant depth as it pertains to the evolution of leisure markets and the real economy. What this meant for Newcastle, however, was a drawn-out urban and regional crisis. Issues of economic decline, unemployment, social decay, crime and homelessness have been the key characters; the coping with which Robinson (2002) argues has been the theme of the region over the past four decades. The answer for Newcastle has been to regenerate and remodel the city as a buzzing metropolis in which to live, work and play (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002). This is part of the broader 'Creative City' model which invests in cultural institutions, the arts, the beautification of public spaces and massive consumption centres through a need to attract large sums of finance capital under the buzzwords of 'creativity' and culture (Mould, 2015). This is a pattern that many British cities such as Sheffield, Birmingham and Leeds have followed (Harcup, 2000; Webster, 2001) in addition to cities around the world. Urban development corporations have transformed Newcastle's Quayside from a desolate industrial wasteland to a thriving life and leisure hub, with luxury flats alongside popular vertical drinking establishments such as the Slug and Lettuce and Pitcher and Piano. The Metrocentre, the out-of-town shopping mall just a quick train ride away, has been described as quintessentially British in late-capitalism (Winlow and Hall, 2013). It was once the second-largest in Europe and still attracts numerous tourists, visitors as well as hometown consumers. The Baltic Centre for Contemporary Art, the Sage building which holds a number of concerts and cultural events and the city's booming and now-infamous night-life all make up a city of surface-level diversity contributing to Newcastle and Gateshead being anointed as a European 'Capital of Culture' in 2008.



Completed in 1928, The Tyne Bridge (above) is a testament to Newcastle's industrial era. It is now used to market global cultural and sporting events such as the Rugby World Cup and Olympic Games; accompanied by a backdrop of the Millenium Bridge, the BALTIC Centre for Contemporary Art (previously a disused flour mill) and the Sage concert building (pictured below) upon which Vase, one of my participants, is performing a handstand for a photoshoot. Situated along Newcastle's regenerated Quayside, they are arguably a material and symbolic representation of Newcastle's profound cultural and economic change.





Tourism in Newcastle brings in approximately 2 million visitors every year, with 69.4% of jobs in Newcastle in the professional, administrative and service and leisure economies (House of Commons, 2010). Compared with the statistics on industrial and manufacturing employment given earlier, these statistics, in addition to the pictures shown above, are a clear indication of Newcastle upon Tyne's shift from coal to culture. This has been part of a wider 'return to the centre' of cities and the changing function and nature of urban space (Zukin, 1995).

This is clear evidence that space is more than just an inert material backdrop, but that modern capitalism has survived in part through the (re)production of urban space (Smith, 1984). As we will see in greater detail later, Winlow and Hall (2013) argue that post-industrial cities made the shift from municipal socialism to municipal capitalism, in which space, housing, development and entire urban economies and budgets were thrown into the competitive arena of the market. The effects of this urban shift and its influence upon changing spatialities and the governance of urban space will be discussed in greater depth in chapters 7 and 8, specifically in relation to parkour. However for now, it suffices to note that the regeneration of Newcastle around the leisure, culture and consumption industries is reflective of the wider evolution and primacy of leisure and desire in the contemporary political, social and economic context. It is this evolution of leisure, in accordance with wider socio-economic change and a shift in worker-consumer subjectivities, with which the following chapter is concerned. This forms part of the wider backdrop to explain the emerging attraction to cultural lifestyle sports such as parkour not as part of a timeless and seemingly natural desire to

seek thrills; but as a clear and coherent consequence of shifts in the global economy and consumer capitalism's liberalisation of desire.

# 3

## ***Leisure in Context:***

### *Socio-Economic Change, Leisure, and the Liberalisation of Desire*

*“In the nature of things, luxuries and the comforts of life belong to the leisure class”*  
(Veblen, [1899] 1965: 70).

*“[O]ne may hardly dare speak of leisure in anything other than celebratory or triumphalist tones”* (Rojek, 2010: 1).

## **Introduction**

It is not an unfair statement to say that in the contemporary West we now live in a ‘leisure society’. As politics and the economy have mutated over the past four decades, with capitalism shifting Western society’s basis away from the industrial production of modernity (Hobsbawm, 1996), leisure has been a central driving force in maintaining a real economy largely predicated upon consumption. Of course, consumerism, leisure, and the contemporary emphasis on identity have not arisen out of thin-air in the post-war era. Changes in the global economic landscape have enabled a democratisation of leisure beyond the privileged elites of the ‘leisure class’ (Veblen, 1965). A consumer society relies upon the democratisation of the ability to spend ‘time off’, consume, and engage in leisure in ways which transcend the basic levels of necessity to such an extent that they become a socially and culturally internalised set of practices and values (Galbraith, 1999). The ability of all citizens to consume, indulge in luxury commodities, and be ‘free’ to liberally spend their leisure time enjoying whatever tastes, fetishes or desires they please has arguably become a marker of the advanced and privileged position of Western society.

It is within leisure that we are culturally, economically, and even politically represented to be living in a state of voluntarism and exercising the freedom of our individual

agency<sup>12</sup> (Rojek, 2010). While leisure is of significant economic importance for the maintenance of consumer capitalism, the idea of leisure as voluntarism and freedom of agency works for and has been championed by both the left and right sides of liberal thought that dominate the social sciences and political-economic arena. For the liberal-right, the leisure industries and their associated freedoms are the product of a wondrous free-market. For the liberal-left the individual's creative leisure lifestyles are an example of the hard-won freedoms of a tolerant, progressive, and non-judgmental society. It is the realm in which the individual is free to construct her true self and identity, or even an arena of opportunity to express social and political resistance<sup>13</sup> and subvert the existing social order from the inside (Ferrell et al, 2008; Hebdige, 1979; Jayne et al, 2006; 2008).

Consequently, the study and analysis of leisure has been overwhelmingly one-sided. Broadly speaking, leisure and recreation are viewed as fundamentally positive in their pursuit and ends, leaving little room for a consideration of how harm, transgression and deviance are constituent features of leisure (see Franklin-Reible, 2006; Rojek, 1999; Smith and Raymen, 2016 for exceptions). This relative lack of acknowledgment of harm within leisure studies is a significant oversight in the contemporary context, particularly for criminologists. As the chapter progresses, we will see that many of the most popular forms of contemporary leisure have significant links to an array of interpersonal, socially corrosive, environmental and spatially contingent harms. Thus, it is the argument of this chapter and thesis that the political-economic liberalisation of desire, designed to fuel a consumer economy predicated upon dissatisfaction and 'neophilia' (Campbell, 1987), has resulted in a 'moral relativism' which has muddied the waters of what constitutes 'social deviance'. This, it is argued, is reflective of a broader decline in *symbolic efficiency*. Later chapters will look at how parkour's practice is governed and responded to in urban space in relation to other leisure activities which, while culturally embedded and normalised, are far more harmful. It is here that we see the problems with this moral relativism come to the foreground, which makes a significant

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<sup>12</sup> Issues of subjectivity and the relationship between structure and agency are dealt with in-depth at the beginning of chapter four, where this thesis outlines its use of a transcendental materialist conceptualisation of subjectivity.

<sup>13</sup> This thesis offers a full critique of criminology's use of 'resistance' in the following chapter.

contribution to the ambiguity and inconsistency with which parkour is governed and thus its ambiguous and inconsistent position at the nexus between deviance and leisure.

One of the central arguments of this thesis is that parkour's position at the nexus between deviance and leisure is, in part, created by an internal contradiction within late capitalism. First, the liberalisation of leisure and desire for identity in consumer capitalism; and second, the neoliberal reorganisation of the post-industrial city to greater serve the interests of a consumer economy and spatially-invested capital (see chapter 8). Moreover, traditional readings of parkour which have situated it as a form of 'deviance' or resistance (Atkinson, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Lamb, 2014) have done so based on the misguided conflation of cultural values and regulatory norms (for more, see chapter four). The following two chapters will display that the practice of parkour is entirely conformist to the values, behaviours, and identity formation of the individual in late modern consumer capitalist society and culture. The risk-taking and potentially self-harmful *jouissance* of its practice is not 'deviant' in and of itself, but is bound up with attempts to formulate the unattainable 'ego-ideals of alternative and individualistic lifestyle identities that actively solicit the narcissistic individualism of consumerist ideology. This has occurred at the same historical moment that global capitalism has not only made more collective, stable and enduring forms of identity more difficult to establish, but also increasingly at odds with the contemporary neoliberal logic of individualism<sup>14</sup>. Like parkour, the excesses of mainstream leisure practices of binge drinking, gambling, fast food, shopping beyond one's means are all tied into attempts of identity formation in the precariousness of late-capitalism and beyond what is necessarily 'pleasurable'. The increasing desire to engage in risk-taking lifestyle sports such as parkour is a product of global economic and cultural developments which have unleashed leisure *desire* in order to obey the 'cultural injunction to enjoy' and the 'stupid pleasures' of consumption (Žižek, 2002a).

The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to theorise leisure in such a way that it clearly outlines the first half of this aforementioned contradiction at the heart of parkour's practice and control. This requires a theorisation of leisure that can explain the

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<sup>14</sup> This language and broader theoretical argument is borrowed from Steve Hall's (2012b) article discussing 'the solicitation of the trap'.

relationship between leisure, identity and political economy; how it has manifested in the contemporary context; and how this applies to parkour and can explain its emergence, growing popularity and ever-quickenning move into mainstream leisure markets. This requires an interrogation of the *nature* of leisure<sup>15</sup>, taking the seminal work of Thorstein Veblen (1965) and his ideas around the ‘barbarity of leisure’, pecuniary emulation and conspicuous consumption as a point of departure. This enables us to critically analyse the underlying energy, drives, and rationalised irrationality that lies at the heart of leisure. Consequently, tracing global shifts in politics, economy and culture over the last four decades we can begin to tease out how these fundamental aspects of leisure have been harnessed and intensified by a contemporary consumer economy, unshackling the powerful libidinal energies that underpin leisure to enable it to rise to unprecedented primacy and importance to both the late-capitalist subject and the consumer economy.

To reaffirm a statement made in the introduction to this thesis, the discussions in this chapter relate to a theorisation of leisure and consumerism more generally, rather than a narrow and exclusive focus upon the emergence of parkour alone. The emergence of parkour’s popularity is not distinct from the wider evolution of leisure and consumerism; and the ‘creative city’s’ reliance upon the symbolic economy of shopping, restaurants, coffee houses and bars, considered alongside parkour’s spatial exclusion, means that we cannot divorce parkour from wider considerations of more harmful leisure practices. This is crucial in understanding observations later in the thesis surrounding the uncertainty and inconsistency with which parkour is governed in the city, in addition to later arguments regarding an *amoral* economy of space and spatial

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<sup>15</sup> At this early juncture I feel that I should qualify my position when discussing the ‘nature’ of leisure. I cannot state strongly enough that I am not claiming that leisure is negative or socially corrosive *per se*. Rather, when discussing the excessive, symbolically competitive, and status-related nature of leisure (Veblen, 1965), my comments relate to the commodified forms of leisure *under the social and cultural relations of capitalism*—particularly consumer capitalism. Leisure has the capacity to be an unqualified good for developing community ties, strong social bonds, and developing cross-cultural understanding in a society absent of the symbolically competitive and anxiety-inducing relations of consumer capitalism. This can be paralleled with the well-noted distinctions made by Baudrillard (1970) and many others between ‘consumerism’ and ‘consumption’. In any society, individuals and groups will consume resources, materials and goods. However, consumerism is about symbolism and the *symbolic* display of consumption, rather than utilitarian and purposeful consumption of goods. It is the symbolic and ‘reified’ power that such symbols possess—be they physical items or consumed identities—that have the “capacity to mediate relationships, create new forms of distinction and encourage people to feel inadequate or incomplete” (Winlow, 2015: 638). It is for these reasons that, early on, I have consistently phrased sentences discussing the nature of leisure with the nature of leisure *under capitalism*, or some other variant (see above).

control (see chapter 8). Not only does this contextualise the emergence and attraction of parkour in late-capitalism, but it also begins to situate it within a wider field of 'deviant leisure' which can explain how harmful forms of behaviour have become culturally accepted, embedded, celebrated and normalised within contemporary society. This refers to those forms of leisure which involve exploitation, competitive individualism (Hall, 2012a), self-harm, environmental harm, financial indebtedness and real and symbolic violence. The liberal moral relativism that has become normalised and incorporated into consumer markets goes a long way to destabilising our understandings and social consensus on what constitutes 'social deviance'; often in ways which are not only problematic for criminological enquiry, but also for the street-level policing of parkour (see chapter 8). These discussions flow directly into the crucial insights of chapter four, which build upon this chapter to critically analyse how existing criminological theory and its domain assumptions have provided flawed conceptualisations of urban transgression such as parkour. They obscure accurate and critical explorations of parkour which can coherently and comprehensively explain the paradoxical cultural embracing and spatial prohibition of parkour and freerunning.

## **The Barbarity of Leisure**

Writing at the turn of the century, Thorstein Veblen in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1965) penetratingly analysed and theorised the social functions, characteristics, and relations of leisure. Veblen's thesis was embedded in an historical approach which looks at the role and function of leisure and the 'Leisure Class' in denoting the stratification of society. In doing so, Veblen (1965) sought to understand the underlying nature, drives and motivations of leisure which, for him, were oriented around the symbolic competitiveness of 'conspicuous consumption' which metastasised throughout society through his notion of 'pecuniary emulation'. In more simple terms, individuals contextualised their wealth, happiness and position in society in relation to others, with leisure playing a key role and offering an arena in which to enact this differentiation. As we shall see in this chapter, this is an argument that is arguably more pertinent in the contemporary context than ever before. In a society of heightened professional, financial and cultural competitiveness, the display of cultural competence and social inclusion through the realm of leisure and consumption is ubiquitous; in which the

individual solidifies their own status by inspiring envy in. Numerous studies of late-modern consumerism have made this observation (Contreras, 2013; Hall et al, 2008; Raymen and Smith, 2016; Smith, 2014), encapsulated quite succinctly by what Yar (2012b) refers to as the 'will-to-represent' oneself and lifestyle on social media websites. As Smith and Raymen (2016: 11) have written:

“Social media provides another space and opportunity for the competitive and comparative display of lifestyle, cultural and consumer competence. From carefully framed images of a plate of food, to a snapshot of foregrounded tanned legs with a beach and azure sea in the background, the everyday producer and disseminator of social media material is selectively presenting *who they are* through the visual publication of an idealized self-image. This is...indicative of the competitive individualism of contemporary society and culture which fragments and atomizes users not as 'friends' but as individual competitors in the display of cultural capital.”

Tracing the history of leisure back into the feudal period and its development into the modern era, Veblen sees leisure best described as the 'non-productive consumption of time'. It is a signifier of status and privilege most available to the highest stratum of society: the leisure class. Leisure, according to Veblen, denoted the economic power and freedom to be exempt and abstain from the tedious, repetitive and degrading life cycle of work. He notes this trend in the relationship between the 'non-productive consumption' of time and the upper echelons of the social ranks in such diverse historical periods and places as feudal Europe, feudal Japan, the Icelandic communities of the Saga Age in the 10<sup>th</sup> Century, all the way up to his contemporary period of writing. Veblen argued that such differentiations between the 'leisure class', the lower social orders, and the emulation of the practices of the leisure class among the lower social orders increased as 'subsistence became sufficiently easy to admit the exemption of a considerable proportion from steady application to a routine of labour' (Veblen, 1965: 8). In more advanced societies, the leisure class would not avoid 'work' entirely, but rather held a strict aversion to any industrial or manual labour; preferring roles in management, military, or the clergy. This is a feature that, Veblen argues, has filtered throughout society:

“it persists with great tenacity...as is shown, for instance, by our habitual aversion to menial employments. It is a distinction of a personal kind—of superiority and inferiority” (Veblen, 1965: 8).

Indeed, situated in a more contemporary context, Veblen could be talking about the aversion to the zero-hour contracts in call centres (Lloyd, 2012), or the ‘dead-end’ ‘McJobs’ (Ritzer, 1993) in coffee houses and hospitality which, as more contemporary studies have found, are a taxing mode of affective labour described by today’s young and ambitious entrepreneurs as a ‘dog’s life’ (Hall et. al, 2008; see chapter 6, this thesis). Thus leisure and the symbolic display of wealth through excess became signifiers of status, signifiers which would also become emulated throughout the rest of society and culture.

Instead of being economically productive with their time, the leisure class would engage in the conspicuous wastefulness of hedonistic leisure pursuits. To make his point, Veblen uses activities such as the mastering of dead languages; the consumption of lavish food and alcohol; hunting and riding for sport rather than as food or transport; and adorning fashions which restricted the free and comfortable movement required by that of the worker. Indeed, one of Veblen’s more peculiar examples was the corset, which restricted women’s movement to render them virtually useless. Such fashions, Veblen argues, were displays of monetary wealth and power for men who were able to afford to ‘keep’ women as beautiful yet entirely unproductive ‘trophies’ or objects. The woman who wears such items is displayed as “incapable of useful effort and must therefore be supported in idleness by her ‘owner’. She is useless and expensive, and she is consequently valuable as evidence of pecuniary strength” (Veblen, 1965: 148-149).

Veblen, therefore, viewed the ‘conspicuous’ consumption of leisure as inherently wasteful and hedonic. The more hedonic one could be, the greater the evidence of the wealth, strength and status. This is what Žižek, (2008) would today describe as the ‘stupid pleasures of consumption’. Those behaviours which, with a rationalised irrationality, go beyond the neoclassical ‘pleasure principle’ and into the realms of *jouissance*—such as extreme sports, purchasing of niche and relatively useless luxury commodities, or the excessive consumption of alcohol, drugs, or pornography. This is using *jouissance* in the Lacanian sense in which it is a transgressive and excessive

indulging of pleasure where the individual involved feels compelled to constantly move beyond any prohibitions set on one's pleasure and leisure (Fink, 1995). Consequently, according to Lacan, *jouissance* can be conceived of as a form of suffering, making its place in leisure curious when one considers that the vast majority of the literature on leisure has framed it within the language of enjoyment, pleasure, satisfaction and freedom (Stebbins, 1997; 2007; Jayne et al, 2006; 2008).

Moving away from a depiction of leisure and its participants as rational-economically motivated agents seeking to maximise their pleasure, Veblen looked to the *meaning* of leisure, its symbolism and how it emerged from the economic order and the stratification of society. Veblen rejected the idea that the practice of leisure and the consumption of goods was done to consume and enjoy the goods as ends in themselves or simply satisfy basic human needs. The practice of leisure and the consumption of goods were about *experience*, but an experience which showed, displayed, and carried a symbolic meaning which separated the leisure citizen from the rest of society. This is akin to Baudrillard's (1970) later distinction between 'consumption' and 'consumerism':

"In order to gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence. And not only does the evidence of wealth serve to impress one's importance on others and to keep their sense of his importance alive and alert, but it is of scarcely less use in building up and preserving one's self-complacency." (Veblen, 1965: 36-37)

Within this set of social relations, Veblen saw a motivational energy running through the practice of leisure and conspicuous consumption that was driven by an irrational economic logic: a rationalised irrationality. This was a rationality based on status, 'esteem', and prestige. Moreover, this was a logic that was not restricted to that of the leisure class, but a deep societal *value* which metastasised throughout the various divisions of the socio-economic ladder. This is best encapsulated by his observation of 'pecuniary emulation', specifically the 'pecuniary emulation' of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure. To attain greater social status and prestige *within* one's class, the people in the lower socio-economic bands of society *emulated* the 'respectable', high-class members of society by, when at all possible, purchasing and

consuming goods and commodities which were beyond one's means. Veblen pointed out that one of the primary forms of pecuniary emulation was the excessive consumption of economically non-productive goods such as alcohol or drugs:

“The ceremonial differentiation of the dietary is best seen in the use of intoxicating beverages and narcotics. If these articles of consumption are costly, they are felt to be noble and honorific...Drunkenness and the other pathological consequences of the free use of stimulants therefore tend in their turn to become honorific, as being a mark, at the second remove, of the superior status of those who are able to afford the indulgence. Infirmities induced by over-indulgence are among some peoples freely recognised as manly attributes.” (Veblen, 1965: 70)

Consequently, Veblen argues, leisure is not predominantly motivated by satisfying one's desires to obtain pleasure and happiness. More often it is done in the pursuit of status, distinction and social prestige, irrespective of how these practices might impinge upon one's long-term happiness or financial security. We can see this in the widespread 'culture of indebtedness' (Horsley, 2015) which characterises life in the twenty-first century. In Smith's (2014) ethnographic study, one participant named 'Rob' took out a loan not for any purposeful, long-term investment; but in order to continue his immersion in the immediate gratification of hedonistic leisure markets from which he was become excluded in contrast to his friends. Similarly, in the context of this thesis, the traceurs featured in these pages made the jump into the 'professional' world of parkour or toiled tirelessly over their social media pages in order to attain a more prominent position in the parkour community. As we will see in chapter six, this was driven by their own experiences of envy through witnessing others' lives on social media, and thus endeavouring to inspire envy in other traceurs and display that they were a 'somebody' to their non-parkour followers. This was often to the detriment of their own enjoyment of parkour (see chapter 9) as the 'labour of leisure' (Rojek, 2010) demanded by consumer capitalism sapped the pleasure from its practice.

Veblen's eclectic range of examples and his suggestion that a distinct 'leisure class' set the standards and tastes of society can appear antiquated and obsolete in relation to today's modes of leisure. However, as we have seen from the above examples, in many ways they are ideas that are uncannily transferable when slightly adapted to today's social relations, ostentatious consumption, and the anxious precarity of the late modern

condition. In particular, Veblen's ideas around the pecuniary emulation of conspicuous consumption are extremely salient for our times. As Rojek (1995: 47) argues, "[Late] Modern society perpetuates a psychology of emulation". The powerful forces of marketing and advertising are inescapable in the unremitting mediascape of late capitalism. Objects within this cultural sphere take on almost mystical qualities. Marx refers to this process as reification, but this concept does not quite convey the extent to which consumer objects have the ability to act as reflective mirrors of identity and distinction. We see 'cool', young, attractive, and confident individuals wearing a certain brand of dress; drinking a 'cool' or 'masculine' brand of tequila; or driving a particular car and we want the same confidence and style, misidentifying with these one-dimensional caricatures of identity as constitute a whole and coherent self. Indeed, as Zukin (2005) argues, many people shop and purchase consumer commodities to "feel part of public life" (*ibid*: 7); while research by other criminologists and sociologists have found that to be seen to have shopped in an expensive or culturally reified store is a more potent status symbol than the ownership of the goods themselves (Hall et al, 2008; Miles, 2000). Obsession and emulation of celebrity (the wearing of celebrity brands being but one example) would suggest the persistence of a 'leisure class', albeit it less rigid and stratified.

Veblen's thesis has been severely criticised by certain commentators, such as MacCannell (1976) and Williams (1982), who question this notion of a distinct 'leisure class' who set the tastes and desires of the rest of society. When one looks at how changes in political economy have democratised leisure and consumption through the reduction of price in consumer goods and the ready availability of credit and loans (Bauman, 2007; Horsley, 2015), such questions are valid. However these concerns miss the point entirely. The 'who' of the leisure class may have changed, but the driving motivations and underpinning energy of leisure has not. Today, we are arguably all members of the 'leisure class' along with the powerful marketing industries and celebrities. We ostentatiously display our own leisure lifestyles, fashions and commodities as we emulate others and others emulate us in a relationship of *symbiotic emulatory consumption*. As members of the lower socio-economic echelons covet and desire prestigious designer brands as an expression of cultural competence—an updated form of Veblen's 'pecuniary emulation'—they simultaneously become

associated with these 'lesser' socio-economic groups and are thus used as a symbol of differentiation which drives the need for new commodities, brands and style that continue to stratify the leisure society. As Winlow and Hall (2013) have written, these brands and individuals provide the 'negative symbolism' against which other individuals and brands can display their differentiation and superiority.

The brands of Burberry and Stone Island are perfect examples of this, associated with 'tasteless chavs' (Martin, 2009) or football hooliganism (Treadwell and Ayres, 2012). Similarly, within the 2011 riots, rioters were found to sell their looted goods in order to purchase the very same, or similar, goods they looted for free in order to distinguish and differentiate themselves from those who could only buy 'knock-off' (Treadwell et al, 2013). Within the hyper-masculine subcultures of urban exploration and parkour (Chen, 2014; Garrett, 2013), individuals post pictures to their blogs and social media accounts with the most daring and high-rise pictures, or highlight reels of freerunners on a 'pilgrimage'<sup>16</sup> to famous parkour locations. As Chen (2014) argues in regard to the increasingly image-based practice of urban exploration and the emergence of 'outlaw instagrammers':

"They [outlaw instagrammers] compete to capture the gritty cityscape from unexpected — often aerial — angles while garnering as many likes and follows as possible in the process... For them, photography is more performance — or competition — than visual art... Urban explorers take photos mainly to document that they've been there, while for Deas [an outlaw instagrammer] the image is the *whole* point."

Such practices of display (no doubt an emulation of others' experiences) are still at the core of leisure. The kinds of behaviours outlined above are driven by a particular form of egoism that should be understood specifically in terms of Rousseau's *amour-propre*, a particular form of egoism which entails contextualising the success of the self in terms

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<sup>16</sup> Every year, a small group of the *traceurs* would arrange a trip to Lisses, in France, which is commonly accepted as the 'birthplace' of parkour. The *traceurs* would keep this trip quiet and highly selective, with the older and more experienced traceurs inviting along a select few other members of the local parkour community to keep the trip small in number and, therefore, more 'special' and exclusive. They would describe this trip as the 'pilgrimage'. This further shows the way in which these young men embraced parkour as an entire way of life, describing their annual trip not in terms of a 'holiday' or a 'trip', but as a 'pilgrimage', a deeply spiritual and sacred journey, making parkour resemble a form of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2007), which has typically been ascribed a higher value than that of casual leisure or 'dabbling' in serious leisure (see Stebbins, 1997).

of the relative downfall of others (Hall et al, 2008). As Rojek (1995) and Winlow and Hall (2012) observe, this is why there is a generalised sense of dissatisfaction with our leisure. It is a perpetual existential anxiety that:

“life was being lived by others somewhere out there, that their immediate experience of social reality was somehow ‘less than life’, and that, if things continued in this vein, their lives would count for nothing because they would fail to receive the forms of external recognition whose symbolism makes life ‘real’” (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 406)

Therefore, it is not merely objects or commodities that are to be bought, consumed and displayed to elevate the self by inspiring envy in others. Individuals can show themselves and others that theirs is not an ‘unlived life’ (Bauman, 2007) through the identification with and ubiquitous display of entire lifestyles or world outlooks. This can be seen in those who always seek to travel and become ‘citizens of the world’; the explosion of ‘shelf-help’ and life-coaching books (Csíkszentmihályi, 1980); and indeed through entire ‘*lifestyle* sports’ like parkour (Wheaton, 2013). In this regard, parkour consists of more than the simple ownership of commodities. Rather it becomes an entire way of life and a way of seeing the world which is distinct from ‘everybody else’ and their homogeneous ‘easy’ consumption.

This moves us into the realm of what Robert Stebbins (2007) describes as ‘serious leisure’: those forms of leisure that require a level of commitment and specialised knowledge and skills. These forms of leisure which seep further into various aspects of the individual’s lifeworld are often seen as a ‘higher’ form of leisure. Stebbins openly admits, albeit regrettably, that he has been guilty of this within his own project (1997). This is highly prevalent within the parkour community. In one video clip interviewing a prominent UK traceur, the practitioners of parkour are even described as ‘*the chosen few*’ and the ‘*enlightened*’, further emphasising the intrigue and distinction that such leisure and lifestyle can bring to the individual<sup>17</sup>.

This is displayed by a conversation I recorded with two traceurs, Franny and EJ. It was a bitterly cold February night after a training session at Mill Lane, the indoor parkour gym

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<sup>17</sup> For the full video clip, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yk9nLKx6KwU>

run by Chez and TK. EJ's car wouldn't start, and considering he was giving us both lifts home, Franny and I started hung around and started chatting about life and parkour while we were packing away the gym equipment. In the excerpt below, both of the traceurs articulate the importance of forms of serious leisure and lifestyle identities such as parkour:

*TR: So what's so special to you about parkour then, if anything?*

*Franny: [Are] You having a laugh? 'If anything'...this guy...[looks in astonishment and laughs]... It's freedom, pure freedom, man. You know that you have a freedom that nobody else does. People move around like robots. Like sheep. Just all herded in the same direction. I didn't want to be like that. I always knew I didn't want to be like that. Then I found parkour.*

*[EJ comes in and joins the conversation].*

*EJ: What are you two going on about?*

*Franny: Just talking about parkour. About how people move around like sheep and why parkour's good and that.*

*EJ: Ah yeah, man. Any freerunner will tell you that. Parkour is freedom. People do move like sheep. Just look at around the station at rush hour. Between 8 and 9 in the morning you have loads of people all moving in the same direction, all dressed more or less the same. Same cup of coffee. They probably walk at the same speed every day, get that same cup of coffee from that same person every day. Then at 5[pm] the same people do the same walk. Stop off in the same pub. Have the same drink, with the same people. It's the same trip, down the same streets and in the same way. In everyday life our bodies are so limited. We're told how to move.*

*Franny: Yeah, exactly. So for me, parkour is just that freedom to move how you want and how your body is supposed to be used man. And you see. It's like your whole world changes, the way you look at the world. You see differently. It's difficult to describe really, only freerunners would understand because it's like inside you, you know? Inside your body and*

*your whole vision. So it becomes part of who you are, it gets in your body and your mind. It completely takes you over. And once that happens, you can't give it up. You have that freedom. So then you just want to go deeper into the [parkour] world and leave the rest behind. The life, the people...leave that.*

**February 2014**

What's most important to observe from the discussion above is not just the importance and value of parkour as a lifestyle identity, but the way in which the traceurs contextualise this identity in relation to others. The traceurs differentiate themselves from 'everyone else', denigrating the repetitive monotony of their lives by describing them as 'sheep' and mindless worker-consumers caught up in 'the system', failing to realise their full potential. Moreover, they describe their distinction in deeply embodied, affective, non-representational terms as an ineffable way of seeing and being (Farrugia et al, 2015; Thrift, 2008; Saville, 2008). While parkour is certainly a deeply embodied practice (see chapter 7), the use of this non-representative language arguably serves another purpose when read in light of Veblen's arguments and applied to the contemporary context. The description of their experience in such affective and ineffable terms also serves to render it *inaccessible* and exclusive in a way that protectively differentiates their practice and lifestyles thereby maintaining their distinction from 'the herd'. One cannot understand simply by watching parkour or passively buying some cool parkour shoes. One has to *become* a traceur through a long period of deep, immersive practice in order to achieve the nirvana-like 'realisation' and way-of-seeing that are the conditions of membership.

This aspect of an ineffable, embodied distinction from the masses of worker-consumers can be seen across other edgework disciplines as well which, as Lyng (1990) observed, assume an allegedly 'innate' quality that allows them to do edgework. This is evidenced by Stephen Lyng's (1998) own challenges and methodological breakthroughs in gaining acceptance into the high-octane world of skydiving and motorcycle riding. Upon consistently pushing the 'edge' in motorcycle runs, Lyng discovered that his research participants:

“[N]ow regarded me as a member of their tribe, as someone who could be trusted with the secrets of the marginal reality to which they were drawn. They assumed that anyone who was not a regular visitor to this place could only understand their actions in terms of the irrational behaviour of half-wits or insane individuals. Hence, they would share their interpretations of the experience only with someone they knew had also danced to the siren’s song at the edge.” (Lyng, 1998: 232)

When critically analysed, this methodological breakthrough in fieldwork actually reveals a great deal theoretically about ‘edgeworkers’. It does so in a way which doesn’t romanticise them and their ‘anarchic’ and ‘alternative’ daredevilry (Ferrell, 2005), but actually reveals their insecurities and conformity to the values and principles of *symbiotic emulation* and distinction in leisure. Much like the traceurs in this study, the skydivers and motorcyclists in Lyng’s work elevate their own status and identity through the denigration and active exclusion of others. The skydiver or the traceur cannot be ‘cool’, ‘different’ or ‘enlightened’ unless the masses ‘out there’ are viewed as ‘square’, ‘generic’, ‘sheltered’ or ‘closed-minded’. Such behaviours are there to distinguish themselves from the ‘herd’ they so despise, when in fact the practice of such differentiation and competition is a common cultural practice so vital to the on-going vitality of consumer capitalism. Heterogeneity and the diversity of identities is therefore quite a thin cultural veneer which belies the homogeneity underpinning mass-marketed consumption and leisure.

When one sees how these trends have existed both during, before, and after Veblen’s time of writing, it is suggestive of an underlying energy of competitive emulation coursing through the activities of leisure and conspicuous consumption. Rather than notably changing, these energies have merely been intensified, sublimated or harnessed in different ways at various points of history in relation to changes in political economy. The moral and normative restraints of different cultural contexts—acting as a ‘centripetal force’ and keeping individuals following a given path (Hall et al, 2008: 90)—exists in tension with the tendency towards emulation, excess, and the desire to distinguish oneself from the homogeneity of normative order. Each side of this dualistic tension has been emphasised to greater or lesser degree in accordance with the needs and structure of capitalism; reinforced by the social institutions, physical organisation of society, and cultural contexts of the Big Other that are shaped by political economy.

This is, at the broadest conceptual level, similar to Steve Hall's (2012a) theory of the *pseudo-pacification process* to explain interpersonal violence throughout history. Hall (2012a) discusses how an underlying energy of violence and systemic violence were constituent elements of the development of early capitalist and industrial capitalist economies, harnessed in different ways and intensified and sublimated in relation to political economy. Consequently, Hall remarks, focusing upon this underlying 'current', we must explain changing rates of violence and the nature of violence within the context of this energy's relationship with changes in political economy.

"The historical evidence does not point to a general 'civilising process'...but a complex psychosocial process in which direct and unashamed violence and intimidation were gradually sublimated into a multitude of criminalised and legalised forms of exploitation, deception, and appropriation, which ran alongside and in tension with what can only be described as a sort of insulating sleeve of ethico-legal restraints, like the thick but flexible insulation around an electrical wire carrying a powerful current." (Hall, 2012a: 32)

This thesis argues that a similar 'powerful current' of emulation (pecuniary or cultural), conspicuous consumption, and engagement with leisure and lifestyles is running through the heart of leisure. While the way in which it is intensified, sublimated, and democratised has shifted over time, the same core principles of leisure have not qualitatively changed. The value, quality, and engagement with leisure are consistently viewed in relation to others and the other's view of the self. It is simply harnessed, sublimated, or intensified in varying ways in accordance with the social, ethical, legal and cultural structures that buttress the political economic interests of capital.

The seeking of status and prestige through emulation, conspicuous consumption, and conspicuous leisure has almost exclusively been associated with the ostentatious display of wealth and commodities (Hall et al, 2008; Zukin, 2005). A counter-argument to this might be the observation that at certain periods in history there was a distinct frugality and conservatism associated with leisure. However, Veblen's use of the word 'conspicuous', particularly as it is applied to *leisure* rather than consumption, is not necessarily limited to wealth exclusively. While perhaps an unlikely example, we can actually see the same core energies and motivations when we look at the way in which the Puritan 'Protestant ethic' guided the individual's engagement with leisure (Weber,

1976). The concerted *abstention* from leisure was driven by a desire to *display* and to *emulate* the virtuous characteristics of an individual chosen by God. As Rojek (1995) observed, “You must show to others that you are one of the chosen by hard work and abjuring the enjoyment of wealth with its temptations of idleness, pleasure, vanity and enjoyment for enjoyment's sake.” Moreover, such ‘virtuous emulation’ was engaged with to the same levels of excess as the hedonistic, ‘non-productive’ leisure practices which Veblen discusses and that we see today as signifiers of cultural relevance and status. Therefore, while there was an *inversion* of the way in which leisure’s underpinning energies of emulation and excess manifested, we can still see that the *principal* drives of excess, emulation, and the conspicuous engagement with leisure still holds firm. These drives were simply harnessed and utilised in different ways for the purposes of an industrial capitalism which needed a functional, physically-hardened and highly productive labour force in which work was deeply embedded into class-based habitus (Weber, 1976; see Winlow, 2001 on masculinities in industrial capitalism).

Therefore, key to understanding the landscape and importance of leisure in late modernity is an appreciation and incorporation of the political-economic and cultural backdrop against which the lives of many of the respondents of this research are set. Most important for our purposes here is to trace how changes in political economy—specifically shifts from industrial modernity to late-modern consumer culture—have contributed to an intensified emphasis upon ‘cool individualism’, identity, and the cultivation of a powerful sense of *lack* which reproduces the energies of desire, excess and competitive symbolic display that have been argued to be constituent features of leisure (Veblen, 1965). In exploring these developments we can begin to formulate two important points which are central to the overall argument of this thesis. The first is to understand how the underlying energies of leisure, contextualised within these structural changes, have created the conditions which are ripe for the desire and popularity of transgressive lifestyle sport identities such as parkour. Secondly, we can see how this liberalisation of desire has created a politically and economically necessary moral relativism. Harmful forms of leisure such as the night-time economy and gambling which are vital for late-capitalism’s consumer-based ‘real economy’ have become culturally embedded and legitimised as positive, life-affirming leisure activities.

This contributes to the confused nexus between deviance and leisure and thus, parkour's equally confused and inconsistent governance in urban space as security guards acknowledge its cultural conformity and low levels of comparable harm.

## **From Fordism to Post-Fordism**

“Now that leisure no longer fulfils the mere function of periodic refreshment but has become a crucial profit-making cog in consumer capitalism's machine, we must consider the possibility that it actually offers little more potential freedom and creativity—possibly even less—than it did in capitalism's industrial heyday” (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 75)

This section aims to examine the epochal shift from Fordism to Post-Fordism that occurred across the Western world from the 1980s onwards (Amin, 1994). It is vital to understand the magnitude of economic change that occurred in this period which some have argued are of similar consequence to the agricultural and industrial revolutions (Hobsbawm, 1996; Smith, 2014). These changes in global capitalism precipitated a move away from the stability, comprehensibility and structure of modernity, and toward a more pervasive and perpetual sense of liquidity (Bauman, 2000). Such reconfigurations in the labour market and the associated structures of class, family, and community altered the attitude and narrative towards these 'older' forms of collective identity. In doing so, they also reconfigured the balance and cultural importance placed upon work and leisure (Winlow and Hall, 2006). While this may be uncomfortable for a liberal-left who tenaciously forget history in favour of an autonomous subject who freely utilises leisure to mould and remould their identities unburdened by capitalism's grasp, it remains important to understand the ramifications and connections between these structural changes in global capitalism, culture and their influence upon the primacy of leisure.

### *Fordism*

With regards to the organisation of social structure, cultural meanings and values, the period of Fordism or 'industrial modernity' could perhaps be best summarised as a period of relative stability (Bauman, 1992). Driven by the dynamic of mass production,

mass employment and the reliance upon a relatively specific division of labour, life under industrial capitalism in the UK was characterised by a relatively rigid class structure and stratification of society. Bauman described this period as the ubiquitous world of “universality, homogeneity, monotony, and clarity” (Bauman, 1992: 188). The existence of industries that were based on seemingly permanent and immovable physical work sites such as shipyards, dockyards, coal mines and factories also resulted in the emergence of ‘single-industry communities’ which can be seen in the association of entire cities or regions with certain industries of manufacturing, mining and shipping among others (Byne, 1989; Dennis et al, 1969; Robinson, 2002; Winlow, 2001). These industries often came with surrounding class-based communities<sup>18</sup> which emerged in relation to the local industry, and would thus internally reproduce themselves and forms of class-based *habitus*, cultural meanings and values in line with the demands industrial capitalism (Cohen and Robins, 1978; Williams, 1961; Willis, 1977; 1979).

Within this stratified and relatively rigid set of class structures, people possessed relatively clear, achievable, and comprehensible life-biographies. As Willis (1977) and Corrigan (1979) have observed, members of these working class communities lived in the same neighbourhoods (Parker, 1974), attended the same schools, entered into the same workplaces and industries and transitioned into adulthood relatively unencumbered. In the Fordist era, there were clear demarcations between youth and adulthood, with readily identifiable symbols and markers of youth, adolescence, and adulthood to help the individual situate oneself in each life stage. For men and women, there were clearly delineated and unambiguous gender roles which structured one’s life-goals, values and personal characteristics (Corrigan, 1979; Roberts, 1993; Walby, 1986), all of which emerged from the needs of capital during industrial modernity. For men, a ‘muscular christianity’ valorised hard labour and physically-hardened men as breadwinners for the family. Sons would tend to follow fathers and grandfathers into the local industry or ‘trade’ (Willis, 1977), while women fulfilled the traditional roles of domesticity (Goldthorpe, 1980). Undoubtedly, this period was characterised by injustice, inequality and social tensions (Feree and Hall, 1996). It is for these reasons that it is

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<sup>18</sup> As we will see in chapter 8, the diminishing presence of these industries also resulted in capital and people moving back to central urban spaces rather than suburban neighbourhoods as local economies became organised around leisure, tourism, consumption and real estate.

often depicted negatively as a time of deep oppression and closed-mindedness<sup>19</sup> by the liberal left who are in favour of an autonomous individualism that feeds into contemporary consumer capitalism. However, as Winlow and Hall (2006) have pointed out, none of this precluded the existence of individual divergences or unique traits that differentiated people from one another. It simply acknowledges that while alternative forms of masculinity and femininity were present (Beynon, 2002), there was also level of certainty, confidence and safety derived from the stability of employment and the fluency in localised meanings and values which held a clear sense of cultural capital and how it could be accrued. This is unlike the youth transitions today which are fraught with a general sense of *incomprehensibility* and systemically imposed interruptions, stoppages and reversals on the transitions to adulthood (Hayward, 2012b; Smith, 2014). It is no surprise that the extraordinary rises in mental health issues have accompanied the dawn of neoliberalism (James, 2010), with many writers exploring these issues of objectless anxiety (Hall, 2012a), ontological insecurity (Young, 2007), and infantilisation (Hayward, 2012b; Smith, 2014). As we shall see in chapter 6, this is certainly the case for the traceurs in this study, who equated the ‘achievement’ of adulthood with death in which anything ‘beyond’ the individualism and immediate gratification of youth was somehow less than life. Equally, these young people anticipated failure as an expected and routine aspect of this transition<sup>20</sup>.

Throughout capitalist history leisure has been shaped significantly by the needs and structure of political economy, and the Fordist era was no exception. Gendered forms of ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’ leisure supported and bolstered the social institutions of family and community, in addition to reproducing the forms of masculine *habitus* which cultivated the solidarity and communality necessary for men to endure the often debilitating, monotonous, and physically demanding routines of everyday labour

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<sup>19</sup> This is evident in popular culture through films such as *Pride* (2014).

<sup>20</sup> It should be noted that my own participants held no sense of class identity that carried any substance. This is significant in the regional context of Newcastle and the North East, where class relations structured life significantly. In a society of widening socio-economic inequality and social exclusion, it would be reckless to claim the ‘death of class’ (Pakulski and Waters, 1995). However, it is less controversial to claim a death or decline of class *identity*. When asked about his class identity, Sonic responded: “I don’t know really. I guess I’m working class. But for me, working class is like my Granddad. He used to work down the mines and that and lived in the same little village his whole life. We’ve moved around a bit more, Mam got a decent job and we moved to a nice little suburb [on the outskirts of the city centre]. We don’t know anyone there or anything. So I guess my family’s working class but I dunno if I am. Doesn’t matter these days though.”

(Charlsworth, 2000; Clark and Critcher, 1985; Willis, 1977; 1979). Men would drink excessively with colleagues as a reprieve from work, a 'time out of time' in which the hard realities, frustrations and challenges of everyday life could be put onto the backburner. As Winlow and Hall (2006) have written reflecting on the 'ghostly landscapes' of industrialism's former epicentres: "the ribald voices of men in bars echo in the memory just as loudly as the jackhammer or the goods train" (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 75). However, they also warn that one should not confuse these redeeming qualities of masculine Fordist leisure with the autonomous and creative ability of these exploited groups to 'resist' through leisure. As they point out, one must acknowledge the way in which these forms of masculine leisure actively aided the on-going reproduction of the Fordist social structure and, subsequently, the evolution of new modes of capitalism.

Therefore, the act of consumption and the attachment of social significance to particular commodities and leisure pastimes are not distinct to late-capitalism, but has been an ever-present feature of society (McKendrick et al, 1983). What is of concern with regards to leisure and conspicuous consumption in the contemporary context is not consumption and leisure itself, but of consumerism as a set of *cultural practices*. It is a concern with the prominence of consumerism in the lives of individuals. Objects and commodities have the capacity to carry such powerful and illustrious meanings that they act as referees in social relationships, and have the power to engender a fragile sense of self-esteem and make people feel inadequate, unsuccessful or culturally bankrupt of value (Winlow, 2015). What differentiates the consumption of post-war Fordism from today's advanced consumerism is that the seductive allure of these commodities, leisure and lifestyles did not constitute the primary basis of one's identity or social value. In this period, a secure sense of self was derived from more formal, durable, and collective forms of identity through work<sup>21</sup>, family, community and class identity. To return to the dualistic tension between the 'centripetal' forces of normative order and the 'centrifugal' forces of individual distinction through leisure and consumption (Hall et al, 2008); this was a period of industrial capitalism which

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<sup>21</sup> While there are some individuals who derive their identity primarily through their occupation, as Stebbins (1995) has observed, this is a luxury in late-modern times. As we shall see in chapter 6, the vast majority of work in late-capitalism is precarious, devoid of fulfilment and characterised by a sense that the worker is dispensable in a society which has resolved 'the labour question' (Byrne, 1989), precluding forms of class and occupational solidarity.

benefited from the valorisation of homogenised class-based cultural traits and collective identities of ‘providing for the family’ and ‘getting a trade’ (Roberts, 1993), and the willingness of the individual labourer to be satisfied with an element of indistinction and homogeneity. This is in stark contrast to the contemporary context which mirrors neoliberalism’s fundamental ethic of intense individualism.

### *Neoliberalism*

For the purposes of this thesis it is unnecessary to go into the excruciating social and economic details behind the ‘stagflation’ of Keynesian economics—this has been comprehensively explained elsewhere (Harvey, 2007). It suffices to say that in Western society, various socio-economic crises opened up the avenue for discussions around the need for wholesale, ideologically-based economic reforms. Namely, this was the neoliberalism of the Thatcher and Reagan era (Keen, 2011; Klein, 2008) which has since come to dominate political-economic thought to the extent that there is little scope for thinking beyond the horizon of neoliberal capitalism (Fisher, 2009). The demise of industrial modernity and the social democratic state crumbled in the 1970s and 1980s, most poignantly visible in the closure of British coalmines after the 1984-1985 Miners Strike. This was experienced not just as a loss of employment and industry, but the death of an entire *way of life*. As Harvey (1989; 2007) and others have observed, the triumph of neoliberalism irrevocably altered the nature and organisation of all the social and cultural institutions that make up the individual’s private orbits, penetrating the attitudes and orientation of subjectivity, and how one structured their life, family, goals, values and identity.

The emergence of neoliberalism in the UK was effectively a complete reversal of the social and political structures of the social democratic Keynesian state. Neoliberalism is characterised by the ideological belief that social well-being is best achieved by liberating individual entrepreneurialism by scaling back the welfare state and throwing the economy and sectors of the public services into a deregulated free-market<sup>22</sup>. This is

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<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that the traditional vision of the ‘weak’ neoliberal state is far from accurate in our current political-economic juncture. On the contrary, in the wake of numerous financial crises free-market capitalism required a strong state to bail out banks and impose the financial and economic policies to keep late-capitalism alive.

the view that by introducing increased competitiveness into society breeds positive personal responsibility and initiative (Harvey, 2007). The political-economic policies of Thatcher and Reagan emerged during a perfect storm of shifting factors: the rise of a technology boom received heavy investment which saw the application of information technologies to the manufacturing and service industries. This resulted in the subsequent decline of manufacturing industries and the reorganisation of the labour force. Such changes displaced routine manual and managerial jobs (and the skills and cultural capital that accompanied them), whilst requiring a re-skilling of the labour force and a higher level of skill by even lower-level workers (Castells, 2000). The increase in globalisation and new global markets compounded these effects, outsourcing traditional industries around which entire regions and communities had structured their lives.

In the UK, this prompted the 'flexibilisation' of labour (Amin, 1994; Young, 2007). Broadly speaking, this entailed the rise of short-term or zero-hour contracts, the expectation to move between jobs and industries, and also the concentration of work in particular regions of the UK. One effect of this was for people to move away from familiar close-knit locales and even entire regions in the search for work or careers. This made it more difficult to establish the more stable and enduring social institutions of family, community and collective class identity that defined much of British life under modernity. Moreover, with a slight increase in social mobility, neoliberalism nurtured a middle class spirit through the seductive allure of mass consumerism and growing 'embourgeoisement' in the post-war years (Galbraith, 1999; Goldthorpe 1980). As Harvey (2007: 61) notes:

"Thatcher forged consent through the cultivation of a middle class that relished the joys of home ownership, private property, individualism and the liberation of entrepreneurial opportunities. With working class solidarity waning under pressure and job structures radically changing through deindustrialisation, middle class values spread more widely to encompass many of those who had once had a firm working class identity."

Cut adrift from the traditional anchors of identities, and subject to a growing neoliberal individualism which was combined with an intensifying democratisation of

consumption, we can see how these political-economic shifts made way for an identifiable neoliberal subjectivity which identified heavily with the individualism and identity work of leisure and consumerism. This is encapsulated most poignantly in Margaret Thatcher's famous refrain that there was 'no such thing as society, only individual men and women' (Keen, 2011). As Western capitalism's real economy became increasingly predicated around consumption, the leisure and consumer industries moved into the void left by these obsolete structures of modernity as the primary bases around which the subject could construct a coherent sense of self. Postmodernist scepticism abounded towards old forms of collectivism, which were viewed as archaic and oppressive to the pluralistic worlds of identity (Winlow and Hall, 2012).

Indeed, one can see how Frederic Jameson's famous refrain that postmodernism constitutes the cultural logic of late-capitalism is undeniably correct. More stable and enduring identities were a burden upon the subject's unique individuality and the myriad of exciting opportunities offered by leisure markets and consumer culture that appeared to give the subject an autonomous freedom to construct and reconstruct their identities as they wished (Jayne, 2006; Miles, 2015; Riley et al, 2013). Life became a creative project in which there was a new cultural command to know oneself, enjoy oneself and construct a free and unique identity rooted in individualism by staying detached from the oppressive and homogenising social structures of modernity. As society fragmented, with the emphasis being upon differentiation rather than commonality, the underlying energies of leisure and consumerism outlined earlier were harnessed by the neoliberal ethic of individualism. Leisure and consumption became key arenas in which the individual can distinguish themselves from 'the herd'.

Furthermore, Žižek (2002a) argues that this precipitated a significant shift or 'reorientation' of the cultural superego. Drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis, previous symbolic orders were characterised by a strong cultural superego that counter-balanced the libidinal and thymotic desires of the id. Individuals were more likely to feel guilt or shame for over-indulgence. In the contemporary context of individualism, immediate gratification and the 'culture of now' (Hayward, 2007), individuals are more likely to feel guilt or shame for *failing* to indulge their desires (see

Raymen and Smith, 2016 for examples). Thus, the emphasis upon individualistic indulgence and identity enabled the subject to satiate their deepest desires in the absence of modernity's repressive rules and symbolic order. The late-capitalist neoliberal subject could perhaps aptly be described as a 'neophilic' (Campbell, 1987), or what Bauman (1997) describes as a 'sensation gatherer'—that which is constantly in search of the 'new'. In the following section, we will explore how this relates to the rise in popularity of parkour and how it affects our understandings of parkour as 'deviant' which builds into the following chapter. In addition, we will consider how the importance and primacy of leisure in a neophilic late-capitalism has destabilised collective social definitions of 'deviance'; and its significance for understandings of parkour, its status as 'deviant', and its control in public space in later chapters.

## **Moral Relativism and Deviant Leisure**

As Rojek is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, rarely are these developments in leisure discussed in anything other than triumphalist tones (2010: 1). It seems logical that increased freedom can only be viewed as a social good, and a supportive appraisal of consumer and leisure markets have been adopted by a large number of postmodernist social scientists advocating resistance or liberation at the point of consumption (Nicholls, 2016; Riley et al, 2013). However, as deviant leisure and ultra-realist perspectives have suggested, it is worth casting a more critical eye over this alleged 'freedom' and the attachment of identity and existential security to the fragile and ever-shifting nature of consumer markets.

Under contemporary social conditions, the involvement with leisure in all its guises becomes far more than a mere respite from the labours of work, the demands of family life, or about the intrinsic relaxation and pleasure derived from the practice itself. Leisure, lifestyle and consumerism, far from spheres of relaxation, can become looming sources of anxiety as they move to a more central podium as the key playing field upon which the worthiness and measure of one's life is played out. Consumerism creates desire, a sensation positioned by psychoanalysts and social scientists as relating to a sense of *lack*; a void and a feeling that something is missing (Winlow and Hall, 2016). Within the fluidity of late modernity it is the void created by neoliberal capitalism's

systemically-induced ontological insecurity that consumer items and lifestyles promise to fill, replete with their attendant sign-values and seductive imagining of identity. However, true satisfaction is not only impossible but *detrimental* to a consumer capitalism which must perpetually uncover new markets and stoke new desires. Contrary to the surface appearance of indulgence and satisfaction, consumer capitalism must cultivate a periodic sense of *dissatisfaction* with what one has (Baudrillard, 1998; Winlow and Hall, 2016).

Therefore in the absence of stable forms of identity, the subject's search for a coherent set of symbols through which to make sense of their lives doesn't dissipate but *intensifies* as it becomes increasingly reliant upon lifestyle fads subject to the ever-quickenning 'velocity of fashion' (see chapter four and six of this thesis; Appadurai, 1986; Hall, 2012b). Applied to the traceurs, as we see in chapter 6, parkour as a *lifestyle sport* provides them with a culturally relevant identity predicated on youthfulness, excitement, transgression and creativity which have become valuable commodified norms (Heath and Potter, 2006). This is in contrast to their wider lives which are characterised by the neoliberalism's systemic uncertainty labour markets, repression of wages (Harvey, 2014) and the inability for a smooth and sustainable transition into adulthood; prompting a deeper identification with parkour's identity opportunities as it becomes further immersed in mainstream leisure markets. A deviant leisure perspective considers these harms associated with the primacy of commodified leisure, drawing upon the ultra-realist concept of *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012a). This is a broader and more pervasive sense of lack and anxiety which has no direct object of fear, but emanates from a competitive consumer culture that is an intensified late-modern version of Veblen's (1965) original theorisation of the relationship between conspicuous consumption and pecuniary emulation. This has vital implications for the concept of 'freedom' in which self-interest and individual distinction through work, leisure, and lifestyle is not a choice but a compulsory characteristic of life in late-capitalist consumer culture:

"The idea that 'you can be anything you want' ... has come to mean that identities can be adopted and discarded ... But if choice no longer implies commitments and consequences ... the freedom to choose amounts in practice to an abstention from choice" (Lasch, 1985: 38)

The very fact that we have no choice but to choose from a diverse yet essentially restrictive set of consumer identities suggests that making choices has become mandatory (Žižek, 2006); which is a peculiar form of freedom to say the least. Therefore, to ally consumer choice so closely to freedom is a gross misrepresentation. The choice is simply to choose from one of a set array of options, rather than the unfettered freedom that is implied through much of the literature and rhetoric. However, such an unfreedom is masked through the endless proliferation of 'new' experiences, commodities, and leisure opportunities. In this regard the ubiquity of the endless recycling or repackaging of similar leisure experiences creates the image of pluralism and diversity that masks the common underlying ethic and process beneath them. The 'everyday neoliberalism' of capitalist realism means that, in the words of Žižek, we only "feel 'free' because we lack the very language to articulate our unfreedom" (Žižek, 2002c: 2). This can be seen quite clearly in chapter 6 of this thesis, which details the realities of the traceurs' lived experiences of late-capitalism. As outlined in the introduction, this explores their attachment to parkour as a form of lifestyle identity in the wider context of their precarious socio-economic positions and crises of self. Additionally, it explores the unfreedom of their 'choice' to further immerse themselves in their parkour identities by actively soliciting its commodification by those very capitalist markets which are the source of their existential unease.

The constant search for the new has become a vital component of a consumer economy and a feature that actually enables its own reproduction. It is also a feature of a *competitive consumerism* which possesses socially corrosive harms (see Smith and Raymen, 2016) emblematic of Winlow and Hall's (2013) notion of a *reserve army of consumers*. Winlow and Hall counter Bauman's notion that those socio-economically excluded from acquiring consumer culture's symbols of distinction can be conceived of as 'flawed consumers' (Bauman, 1997). Rather, akin to the Marxist ideas around a reserve army of labour, a reserve army of consumers constantly provide "the negative symbolism against which the economically included can demonstrate their social distinction from the poor" (Winlow and Hall, 2013: 91). While Winlow and Hall are primarily discussing the issue of social exclusion, I argue that such an argument can be made within leisure markets as well. As the neophilic subjects of late-capitalism have

become increasingly sensitive to the homogenisation of leisure experiences (Ritzer, 1993); new markets, lifestyles and identities are created phantasmagorically out of the old. We explored this issue earlier with regards to clothing and fashion; however it is equally pervasive within other leisure markets. The night-time economy has seen the emergence of the micro-brewery or alleged ‘real ale’ pub, which offers the drinker to display their sophistication in comparison to the tasteless patrons of homogenous chain bars or ‘vertical drinking establishments’ (Smith, 2014). Within Bradley Garrett’s work on urban exploration, we can see the formation of break-away ‘infiltration crews’. These groups decided to distinguish themselves from the predictable fetishisation of industrial ruins (a typical UE exploration site) and trespass upon ‘live’ urban sites and post the pictures, despite the consequential wrath of the wider urban exploration community (Garrett, 2013). More recently, we have seen the emergence of ‘buildering’ which takes the risk-taking of UE to a whole new level.

Parkour is far from exempt from this trend. Within parkour there are battles for what Wheaton (2013) refers to as ‘subcultural authenticity’, displayed by the disputes between Belle and Foucan around parkour and freerunning (chapter 2; Mould, 2009; Stapleton and Terrio, 2010). The practitioners of more traditional incarnations of parkour claim that modern ‘freerunners’ have, in the words of Dee and ZPK, “*No tech*”, “*No respect for the philosophy and origins*”, and are “*just showing off for girls or social media followers*” (see this also in Wheaton, 2013). Similarly, freerunners who are more interested in the aesthetics of movement claim that traditional ‘traceurs’ have no imagination and are oppressing parkour’s underpinning philosophy of freedom of movement by placing limits upon its practice. These off-shoots are a form of ‘subculturalisation’ (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013) which are explored and critiqued in chapter four. Such an ethos leads to the further atomisation and fragmentation of such leisure experiences. Traceurs begin to affiliate themselves with certain athletes and teams and ‘beefs’<sup>23</sup> between athletes begin and different factions compete for authenticity or distinction in the search for the new.

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<sup>23</sup> Revisit chapter two for a discussion of this in the broader national and international parkour community. However, in more recently there were arguments and disputes between Kie Willis and Adam Dunlap of ‘Take Flight’ over issues of plagiarism of other parkour brands and allegations of the illicit redirection from domain names to his own website (for full video, see: [https://www.reddit.com/r/Parkour/comments/24kvfj/kie\\_willis\\_dishing\\_dirt\\_on\\_take\\_flight\\_and\\_adam/](https://www.reddit.com/r/Parkour/comments/24kvfj/kie_willis_dishing_dirt_on_take_flight_and_adam/))

However, it is necessary to explore how this cultivation of desire is also compounded by a liberal imperative for freedom and the tolerance of pluralistic tastes and desires which manifests in other more problematic ways which impact upon parkour. This process reveals several things which are important for our understanding of leisure more broadly and, thus, parkour's position at the nexus between deviance and leisure more specifically. Firstly, it displays consumer capitalism's detachment from moral regulation which results in the subsequent uncertainty around what constitutes 'social deviance' and, thus, parkour's ever-shifting position between illegitimate 'deviance' and legitimate leisure.

As committed consumers become tired of that which they have already experienced; the 'pursuit of the new' results in the intensification of desire for more extreme experiences and content in the real and virtual worlds of leisure (Anderson et al, 2010; Wood, 2011). Placed in the context of a consumer economy that must be in constant forward motion and needs to legally and legitimately satisfy the late-modern 'sensation gatherer'. This has required the cultural embedding, normalisation and even celebration of harmful or extreme leisure forms (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2015; Banks, 2014; Smith, 2014). This is the mainstreaming of harm; leisure which under a different symbolic order may be considered 'deviant', but as Smith and Raymen (2016) acknowledge, is now steadfastly part of the mainstream of commodified leisure:

In this sense, what could under a more ethical social order be conceptualized as deviant behaviour is harnessed, pacified and repositioned as a very specific form of dynamism that propels desire for symbolic objects and experiences—desires which are translated into demand within the circuits of consumption dominated by the leisure economy. (Smith and Raymen, 2016: 2)

Undeniably assisting this process is the postmodern scepticism toward metanarratives that attempt to provide a symbolic order or moral framework to act as a final adjudicator. While there have been calls for more ontologically grounded notions of harm rooted in discussions of morality, recognition, or a 'duty to the other'<sup>24</sup>, the liberal-postmodernist preference for 'moral relativism' has consistently won-out. This is the

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<sup>24</sup> See Bauman (1989); Hall and Winlow (2015); Honneth (1996); Pemberton (2015); Smith and Raymen (2016); and Yar (2012b) for more on ontological principles of harm.

notion that morality is exclusively dependent upon one's standpoint or perspective; a position that has worked quite effectively on behalf of both the liberal right and left in enabling the growth of commodified leisure with little acknowledgement of harm. Peter Dews has argued that these pluralistic notions of moral relativism are problematic in their paradoxical universalism. Liberalism's reluctance to promote particular notions of the Good, Dews argues, always reaches certain 'breaking points'. He writes that "an approach to moral theory which established such a strong equation between freedom and moral autonomy was bound to have difficulties in accounting for the imputable, and so presumably free, choice of immoral courses of action" (Dews, 2008: 8).

To provide a few examples, we see physical violence erupt with metronomic predictability as a product of individuals' manufactured desire and desperation for symbolic consumer commodities. This is dismissed by police, retailers and even shoppers as an annual occupational hazard (Raymen and Smith, 2016), counter-balanced by its powers of wealth-creation and its value to the fragile consumer economy. Within the night-time economy, individuals seek more extreme experiences of intoxication, danger, and hedonistic sexual indulgence (Briggs, 2012). The pervasive underlying sense that "life was being lived by others somewhere out there" (Winlow and Hall, 2012: 406) has resulted in a heightened hedonism in which incontinence, extreme physical violence, and the sexual degradation, humiliation and violation of others have become imperative and normalised features of a 'good night out' (Collington, 2013; Smith, 2014). The NTE is responsible for over a million hospital visits a year, a somewhat conservative figure which is likely to underestimate the reality of the number of assaults (IAS, 2015). Within video games and pornography, simulated rape, torture, exploitation and senseless violence become more extreme forms of entertainment for consumption which Atkinson and Rodgers (2015) describe these forms of leisure as 'cultural zones of exception' based upon human harm, domination and subjugation. Popular media outlets are often disproportionately distracted by the overtly violent and politically incorrect tropes that dominate game narratives; or dismiss the concern around video games as sensationalised conservatism based upon flawed notions of causal 'media effects'. Both perspectives miss the point. More concerning is the steadfast adherence and promotion of neoliberal ideology woven into the fabric of the gamescape (Atkinson and Rodgers, 2015). Throughout the *Grand Theft*

*Auto* franchise for example, the player advances through the game by aggressively elevating the self through multiple property purchases, successful navigation of sexual conquests and the accumulation of wealth and power: a microcosm of the competitive individualism of neoliberal society. Similarly, as Presdee (2000) has recognised, this is also visible in the proliferation of reality TV shows which offer humiliation and degradation as sensation-products to be consumed and enjoyed. Reality dating shows and conflict-based talk shows such as *The Jeremy Kyle Show* are predicated upon distinguishing the self through denigrating others. Seymour (2014) describes such shows as a cathartic expression of lower class hatred—a form of entertainment for the upper and lower-middle classes and a televised example of the ‘negative symbolism’ discussed by Winlow and Hall (2013) mentioned earlier. This is the sharp-end of what Veblen describes as the competitive ‘barbarity of leisure’ which, under the liberal-postmodernist message of freedom and tolerance and the liberal-right’s economic stance of deregulation, contributes to a range of socially corrosive harms.

Furthermore, these forms of real or symbolically violent leisure practices are not the strict preserve of the ‘dark’ and illicit corners of leisure that are hidden away down back alleys or on the deep web. This is mainstream violence, subjugation and humiliation which are embedded in extremely popular and central forms of leisure which are quite visibly present and celebrated within our city centres and a large proportion of people’s homes. These deep desires of violence and subjugation that are overcome according to Elias (2000) through ‘the civilising process’, are not overcome at all. Rather, they are subjected to a process of pseudo pacification (Hall 2012a), in which these sublimated libidinal energies occasionally breach the surface. A post-industrial ‘real economy’ that is reliant upon the neophilia of consumerism economy is also dependent upon a more flexible liberalism of moral relativism to the extent that the boundary between deviance and leisure becomes so blurred that it is rendered all but imperceptible. The intensification of a liberal ‘moral relativism’ within the late-capitalist evolution of leisure has thus contributed to a significant amount of inconsistency, uncertainty and a destabilised *symbolic efficiency* regarding what constitutes ‘social deviance’. Rooted in the highly malleable notion of ‘norms and values’, rather than in firmer principles of harm, this has had significant impact for confused criminological understandings of

conformity and 'deviance' and, consequently, the realities and understandings of parkour as well.

The conceptualisation of deviance has always been a problematic task for criminology. Social deviance and its evolution, Durkheim argued, was a socially productive process in that it continuously assessed, re-assessed and affirmed the moral boundaries of society. It has long been accepted that social deviance is a concept based in social, cultural, and moral relativism. What is considered socially deviant in one society or culture may be viewed as completely legitimate in another; and similarly, that which constitutes social deviance within the same society changes over time along with more general social change.

What has gone relatively unchallenged, however, is whether the concept of 'social deviance', in the contemporary context, continues to be a useful one for criminology<sup>25</sup>. As a concept it is dependent upon a belief that there remains a relatively strong and coherent *symbolic order* and a high degree of *symbolic efficiency*, in which there is a high level of collective agreement over what is 'right' and 'wrong'; moral and immoral; and what are legitimate forms of leisure behaviour and illegitimate forms of deviance. However, the rise of postmodernism and its 'incredulity toward metanarratives' (Lyotard, 1984) would suggest that it is now more difficult than ever to settle on a broadly agreed upon understanding of what constitutes 'social deviance'. Moreover, as we have seen in the brief exploration consumer capitalism's need to create new and niche markets; we're living in a cultural era in which we are normalising, culturally embedding and celebrating undeniably harmful forms of leisure precisely because they do not contravene but *conform* to the norms and values of competitive individualism, immediate gratification and narcissism that characterise neoliberal capitalism<sup>26</sup>.

This has significant consequences for the lived reality of parkour's governance in urban space, but also for academic misunderstandings of parkour and what its exclusion from urban space is rooted in. Rather than looking at parkour and other 'deviant leisure' forms within the wider cultural and political-economic evolution of leisure; sociological and criminological theory has, confusingly, continued to look at these practices through

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<sup>25</sup> See Sumner (1994); Hall et al (2008); Horsley (2014) and Smith and Raymen (2016) for exceptions.

<sup>26</sup> Again, the issue of conformity, deviance and resistance will be dealt with fully in chapter four.

the lens of 'social deviance'. Consequently, as appreciative and romanticised left-liberal perspectives fail to deal with the harm associated with deviant leisure more broadly, they are instead positioned as symbolic forms of youthful proto-political 'resistance' (Ferrell, 1996; 2001; Jayne et al, 2006; 2008; Millington, 2011; Nicholls, 2016; Riley et al, 2013). As we shall see in the following chapter, this perspective has been popularly applied to parkour as well (Atkinson, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Daskalaki and Mould, 2013; Lamb, 2014). This is despite the conceptual problems with resistance more broadly (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014; Hall et al, 2008), but particularly resistant identity politics which actually work with the logic of late-capitalism. Furthermore, this has contributed to the employment of other flawed theoretical frameworks to explain parkour's practice and control such as 'edgework' or moral panic theory (Angel, 2011; Atkinson and Young, 2008; Wheaton, 2013). In the following chapter, these perspectives are addressed, critiqued and corrected using ultra-realist criminological theory.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this chapter was to look at the nature of leisure under various conditions of capitalism. This would outline its underlying drives and energy and trace how the role and primacy of leisure has evolved in accordance with shifts in the global economy and Western culture, contributing to its blurred relationship with harm and deviance. This aids in revealing and untangling one side of the contradiction surrounding parkour's inconsistent position at the nexus between deviance and leisure. The liberalisation of desire and the leisure industry under consumer capitalism has resulted in many mainstream leisure activities to carry the appearance of, or a previous relationship to, 'deviance'. However, by reaching back through history to Veblen and applying his ideas to parkour and the contemporary context more broadly, we begin to see a slightly different story. We can see how this underlying nature of leisure has been harnessed and intensified through the social changes of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism and thus how, at the crucial level of values, many of these leisure forms, including parkour, are undeniably *conformist* to the central tenets of neoliberalism and consumer culture. We can begin to see how the structural changes in global capitalism have created the conditions which are ripe for the popularity of lifestyle sports and identities such as parkour. Moreover, we can observe how the cultivation of desire and

the moral relativism necessary for a liberalised consumer economy has contributed to an uncertain collective understanding of what constitutes social deviance. Consequently, this chapter has served as the theoretical foundations for the remainder of this thesis which brings in discussions of parkour's governance and the role of leisure in post-industrial urban space under late-capitalism. This enables us to tease out the contradictions involved in consumer capitalism's cultivation of desire for lifestyle sports and identities such as parkour, and its simultaneous need to prohibit and control parkour in urban spaces due to the crucial relationship between the city and capital.

However, the chapter has also provided the building blocks for a critique of criminological theory which, due to the destabilised concept of social deviance, has obscured such critical insights which can explain parkour's paradoxical position. Due to the destabilisation of 'social deviance', criminology has maintained the confused idea that parkour and other leisure activities are forms of deviance. Moreover, the liberal-left's fetishistic attachment to appreciative rather than critical stances toward leisure has meant that by maintaining parkour as 'deviance' they can also continue to position it as a form of *resistance*. This has had the knock-on effect of perpetuating flawed theoretical frameworks such as edgework and moral panic theory, neither of which can explain parkour's practice or control in a way which properly brings the true cause of parkour's exclusion—neoliberal capitalism—into their crosshairs.

# 4

## ***Parkour, Theory and Subjectivity***

### *A Deviant Leisure Perspective*

*“Political? We’re not political. We’re just a bunch of lads jumping off stuff and trying to have a good time mate. You get some people who try to put it like that to try and make it sound more than is, like we’re doing summat proper noble and meaningful. But if we’re honest they’re just being pretentious. That’s not why we do it.”—Franny, 22 years old.*

### **Introduction**

This thesis is the first specifically criminological study of parkour and freerunning. Typically, the study of parkour and cultural lifestyle sports has been left to the fields of cultural geography (Daskalaki et al, 2008; Lamb, 2014; Saville, 2008), sociology (Brunner, 2011); and urban studies and leisure studies (Atkinson, 2009; Mould, 2015; Wheaton, 2013) despite its association with issues of ‘deviance’, control and exclusion from urban spaces. Criminologists and sociologists have dealt with certain extreme sports and leisure pursuits such as BASE jumping (Ferrell, Lyng and Milovanic, 2001), skydiving and high-risk motorcycle riding (Lyng, 1990; 2005); but on the whole these areas of scholarship have been the preserve of other disciplines. However, this general criminological absence from the cultural lifestyle sports literature is not to say that criminological theory has nothing to contribute to the matter. On the contrary, only a brief scan across the parkour literature reveals the *implicit* and *explicit* use of a variety of criminological theory such as cultural criminology, left idealism, moral panic and ‘culture of control’ perspectives (Atkinson, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Mould, 2015; Kidder, 2013; Saville, 2008; Wheaton, 2013). The implicit presence of these theoretical perspectives is identifiable by their relationship to broader intellectual paradigms within the social sciences such as postmodernism, risk theory, cultural pluralism,

symbolic interactionism and their underlying 'domain assumptions' about structure, agency and subjectivity.

For the purposes of this thesis it is imperative to critically interrogate these implicit theoretical perspectives and their underlying domain assumptions. It is these domain assumptions about structure, agency and subjectivity which act as the foundational building blocks for understandings of parkour and aid the persistence of allegedly radical perspectives which continue to provide flawed, uncritical and culturally reductionist perspectives of parkour as a form of 'social deviance' and 'resistance'<sup>27</sup> which have been briefly discussed in previous chapters (Atkinson, 2009; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Daskalaki and Mould, 2013; Fuggle, 2008; Lamb, 2014). Moreover, as Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) have argued, the non-reflexive assumption that these perspectives constitute a 'critical' or 'radical' social science fails to acknowledge how their underlying politics works to maintain and reproduce the objective social structures, orthodox centrist politics and the systemic problems they allegedly oppose. The purpose of this chapter, therefore, is to problematize and deconstruct these intellectual paradigms and how they've been used in the study of parkour in order to reveal the flaws in their conceptualisations of subjectivity, the relationship between structure and agency, and consequently their misguided conclusions about parkour and freerunning.

In doing so, this chapter hopes to make clear the need for an alternative theoretical perspective with radically different conceptual foundations. The chapter makes the case for an *ultra-realist* approach to parkour, deviance and leisure by outlining its *transcendental materialist* theorisation of subjectivity, agency and how structure and ideology operate through the subject (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Johnston, 2008; Žižek, 2006). Ultra-realism and transcendental materialism serve as the intellectual foundations for this thesis' central and original theoretical perspective of *deviant leisure* (Smith and Raymen, 2016), which suggests a need to invert the traditional interpretation of deviance which positions behaviours such as parkour as contravening contemporary social norms and values. This is not just the simplistic and well-rehearsed argument around parkour's commodification and co-optation by consumer markets, but explores the deeply embedded *conformity* of the traceur by going further

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<sup>27</sup> See Brunner (2011) and Stapleton and Terrio (2010) for exceptions.

into issues of subjectivity, structure and agency to analyse *motivation* and its emergence from broader objective cultural and economic structures.

It is here that ultra-realism and transcendental materialism arguably make their most crucial contribution. They offer a reconceptualised approach of human nature and subjectivity that seeks to escape idealised notions of a natural human drive to shake off systems of authority and ideology. Instead, this chapter looks at how this altered perspective on the human psyche and subjectivity renders the motivation to participate in parkour as indicative of an *active seeking and solicitation* (see Hall, 2012b) of the fragile and imaginary symbolic order of consumer capitalism. In the previous chapter, we explored how shifts in the global economy prompted the dawn of a fragmented neoliberal society of individualistic consumerism, thereby placing a new premium upon 'cool individualism' and identity, harnessing the desire to paradoxically 'fit in' while 'sticking out' (Miles, 1998; Winlow and Hall, 2009). In this chapter, we build upon these discussions with a more in-depth discussion of psychoanalysis, subjectivity and the relationship between structure and agency to provide a better foundation for understanding issues of transgression, conformity and 'deviance'. The chapter argues that in this wider cultural context, to transgress or identify with 'alternative' or 'deviant' identities is in fact steadfastly conformist; carrying only the veneer of politicised 'resistance' which, since the 1960s counter-culture, has worked with rather than against a do-it-yourself form of identity-oriented consumerism (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014; Heath and Potter, 2006; Miles, 2015). The desire for distinction in an individualistic consumer society, in addition to the fetishisation of the autonomous political subject, is the very energy of consumer capitalism which is channelled and redirected through the 'precorporated' (Fisher, 2009) transgressive iconography of parkour advertising and home-made videos and its associated air of edgy and proto-political 'resistance'.

This alternative theoretical perspective opens up a series of *parallax views* which have significant implications for our understanding of parkour; some central criminological concepts; and sets the scene for future chapters which apply and operationalise these more abstract ideas within the specificity of the traceurs lives and their practice of parkour in urban space. At the broadest criminological level, it challenges the fundamental conceptual principles of social deviance to revive arguments about its

ongoing utility in the current cultural epoch (Horsley, 2014; Sumner, 1994) in a way that resituates issues of criminalisation and exclusion firmly in terms of political economy. Applied more specifically to parkour, transcendental materialist perspectives offer alternative viewpoints on *why* traceurs practice parkour and how this motivation is related to political economic structures and consumerism's ideology. However, in doing so the discussions of transgression and conformity also present significantly altered and confusing understandings of how and why parkour is excluded from urban space. As we shall see in future chapters, these realisations force us to move beyond simplistic 'moral panic' or 'revanchist' arguments to explain parkour's exclusion (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Smith, 1996; Wheaton, 2013) and toward a more systemic understanding of the relationship between space, consumption and political economy. By positioning parkour as essentially conformist to the mainstream values of consumer capitalism, in addition to recognising the spatial legitimacy of other more harmful yet equally conformist leisure practices, parkour's exclusion forces us to recognise the *amorality* underlying the organisation and governance of late-capitalist urban spaces. This builds upon the broader discussions in the previous chapter about the moral relativism of leisure in the contemporary context which, applied to the consumer-oriented urban realm, prompts more critical questions about the spatially violent and socially corrosive amoral economy of urban space<sup>28</sup> and, thus, reveal more about the paradox of parkour.

This chapter sets the vital theoretical foundations for the thesis and an understanding parkour's inclusion and exclusion from urban space and its more general position at the nexus between deviance and leisure. It will begin by offering an overview of a transcendental materialist subjectivity and how it applies to parkour, contextualising it in contrast to other theoretical positions and problematizing their roots in fundamental intellectual standpoints of postmodernism, symbolic interactionism, cultural pluralism and risk theory. The chapter will then cast its gaze across the existing parkour literature to see how and where these perspectives have been used to draw false or incomplete conclusions around parkour and other cultural lifestyle sports. The chapter will consistently refer back to previous chapters' discussions around changes in the global economy and society, as such broader structural reference is vital for transcendental

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<sup>28</sup> The amoral economy of space will be dealt with in more depth in chapter 8.

materialism; in addition to alluding to issues covered in future chapters around urban space.

## **Transcendental Materialism and Subjectivity: Confronting the reality of our times**

This chapter begins with a couple of simple and perhaps rather bold statements. The first is that the most prevalent theoretical perspectives in the social sciences and their most basic assumptions about human nature, subjectivity and the operation of ideology through the subject are fast-becoming revealed as incapable of confronting the reality of our times (Hall and Winlow, 2015). The second is that if there is one undeniable reality in contemporary society, it is that capitalism is the driving force and bedrock of everyday life.

These have been points that ultra-realism has been at pains to stress throughout its development over the past decade (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Hall et al, 2008; Winlow, 2012; Winlow and Hall, 2013). As capital has continuously reconfigured itself over the past 40 years, it has globally transformed and influenced politics, labour markets, culture, consumption habits, subjectivities, interpersonal relationships, and even the built and natural environment (Augé, 2008; Hall, 2012a; Lloyd, 2012; Smith, 1984; 1996; Raymen, 2015; White, 2013; Winlow et al, 2015; Zukin, 2005). At the time of writing, eight years removed from the worst economic crisis in eighty years, ‘capitalist realism’ appears more embedded than ever, occupying the ‘horizon of the thinkable’ (Fisher, 2009). As Harvey (2010; 2014) has observed, despite being at the root of the economic crisis, neoliberal capitalism plods on undeterred, demonstrated by two UK general elections which have voted in Conservative-led governments who are the political embodiment of neoliberal capitalism (see also Winlow, 2012 for more). Our collective love and solicitation of consumerism—the driving cultural-economic machine of late-capitalist consumer economy—remains equally undeterred. On the whole, pressure groups lobby MPs and businesses not for wholesale political or economic change, but for lower prices. Events such as the Black Friday sales (Raymen and Smith, 2016) and the widespread looting which came to characterise the 2011 riots (Briggs, 2011; Treadwell et al, 2013) have shown that individuals from all walks of life are willing to harm others and communities in order to obtain their much-desired consumer items.

Simultaneously, genuine anti-capitalist movements such as Occupy tend to fizzle out by failing to form a political *dissensus* (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014; Winlow et al, 2015). There is more than ample evidence to suggest a clear influence of ideology within the subject; and a deeply rooted and depoliticised commitment to consumer capitalism. Despite this inescapable evidence, a number of curious theoretical perspectives of subjectivity and deviance persist and plague both the parkour literature specifically, but also criminology and the social sciences more broadly.

Postmodernist and liberal-interpretivist perspectives—rooted in a firm commitment to social constructionism and a focus on symbolic meaning—engage in a culturally reductionist form of reality in which meaning is decontextualized from its historical, political, economic and cultural contexts. The human subject is entirely free to reflexively act and (re)construct meaning whilst strangely unburdened or unaffected by the influence of dominant ideology. This is the Kantian subject who possesses a seemingly natural orientation toward resistance as an instinctive reflex-response to power (see, for example, Millington (2011) who positions the 2011 riots as a form of righteous anti-capitalist resistance). Subcultural theory positions these alleged ‘urban subcultures’ as bounded entities which are consciously or performatively political and possess values that are quite distinct from the ‘mainstream’ parent culture, embodied in the parkour literature by the likes of Atkinson (2009), Bornaz (2008), Daskalaki and Mould (2013), Daskalaki et al (2008), and Lamb (2014) among others. Upon closer inspection, we can observe quite easily that many forms of urban leisure such as parkour are entirely aligned to the mainstream values of consumer capitalism in late modernity. Therefore, subcultural perspectives are flawed in their gross conflation of norms with values, failing to identify the underlying motivational homogeneity of parkour with other forms of mainstream leisure and, furthermore, failing to identify that, in our current cultural epoch, to transgress and differentiate oneself from the herd is culturally conformist in itself (Hall et al, 2008).

Other perspectives such as ‘moral panic’ tend to gloss over subjectivity or motivation entirely. Rooted in labelling theory, these perspectives simplistically reduce all forms of criminality to a large conspiratorial discursive meaning system which sees all criminalisation as a product of disproportionate media response rather than acknowledging the harms associated with criminality and deviance (Cohen, 1972). At

the other end of the spectrum, structural Marxists are no better. As Hall and Winlow (2015: 98) point out, this position depicts a 'reluctant subject' who has a hegemonic order imposed upon them, creating a world of 'structural dopes' that are seemingly incapable of any active form of agency.

This insistence on either a naturally resistant subject or a reluctant one who has capitalism's order imposed upon them cannot account for the overwhelming *success* of a system as ubiquitous and powerful as capitalism. This is a system which increasingly makes the lives of its subjects more tenuous, more precarious and poisoned by systemically-engendered inequality and a persistent sense of *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012a). Despite this, the capitalist system endures and does so with seemingly greater love and commitment from its subjects than ever before, as indicated by the intensifying desire for consumer commodities which reproduce highly successful consumer markets. As Hall (2012b) argues, no system which has achieved the success, longevity and enduring ubiquity of capitalism does so through totalitarian force exerted over a civilisation of structural dopes.

These perspectives are an example of Johnston's (2008) notion of *deaptation* at work in academia, wherein obsolete ways of thinking are continuously reproduced in contexts and conditions to which they're no longer relevant. Transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity adheres to none of the perspectives discussed above, all of which present what Hall and Winlow (2015) argue to be simplistic conceptualisations of the relationship between structure, agency and how it shapes subjectivity. For Hall and Winlow (2015), these perspectives cannot produce comprehensive accounts of subjectivity and the power of ideology because they "either ignore unconscious drives and desires, or at the least assume that human beings are always in control of these powerful forces" (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 6). For ultra-realists, by working through a Žižekian reappropriation of Lacanian understandings of the psyche, human essence, the unconscious and how it relates to social structures and ideologies, a transcendental materialist approach to parkour can avoid the pitfalls of the perspectives discussed above which, as we have already established in the introduction, cannot account for both aspects of parkour's paradox. By bringing psychoanalysis into criminological theory and theorising the influence of deep unconscious drives, their relationship to conscious thought and how consumer ideology intervenes in these processes, an ultra-

realist approach to parkour maintains an *active* rather than passive or reluctant subject. It retains a firm attentiveness to the cultural symbolism and iconography of parkour and an appreciation of how objective global, political and economic structures operate in relation to the traceurs as subjects in order to theorise the motivation for practicing parkour in late-capitalism. This can explain both its hyper-conformity in addition to its misconceptualisation as 'deviance', thus taking a step toward a more holistic explanation of its position at the nexus between illegitimate deviance and normalised leisure.

Transcendental materialism's fundamental starting point revolves around Žižek's appropriation of the Lacanian structure of the human psyche: namely the Real, the Imaginary and the Symbolic. While building upon Freud's triad of the ego, the superego and the id, the three Lacanian structures of the psyche are better conceived of as *orders*; situating subjectivity within systems of perception rather than rigid mental forces such as Freud's triad. Lacan (1997) suggests that all subjects are in a process of aspiring to wholeness and coherence, attempting to pass through the orders of the Real and the Imaginary in order to be socialised into stability and coherence through the Symbolic.

It therefore makes sense to start with the Lacanian Real, the most basic and primitive of Lacan's three orders that exists at the heart of the human subject. A Lacanian perspective conceptualises the Real as a void: a pre-symbolic, pre-discursive realm of the human psyche filled with conflicting stimuli and perpetually disorienting drives and primal needs. The subject is inflicted with unrelenting feelings of danger, anxiety, conflict, tension and most of all an urgent sense of *lacking*. As Badiou (2007) and Smith (2014) explain, the closest we can get to understanding the Real is through imagining the feelings of a baby who is besieged by raw stimuli, needs and desires which it cannot articulate or put into words. The Real lurks beneath and prior to all the symbolism that permeates social and cultural life and acts as organising structures and systems which make sense and coherence of our world. The subject is desperate to escape the trauma of the Real and identify with a symbolic order which offers a coherent and structured set of socio-cultural signs, norms and values which can organise, order and, when necessary, repress the primal and libidinal energies of the Real through a healthy superego.

Thus, the subject must pass through constant misidentifications of the imaginary order before it can enter the symbolic realm of coherence. For Lacan, the imaginary order is characterised by the formation of the ego in the 'mirror phase' where the ego identifies with an ethereal 'specular' image in the external world. The subject erroneously recognises its specular image as a stable and coherent self that does not correspond with their reality, thereby being impossible to attain. This is extremely pertinent in relation to the contemporary context and some of the arguments raised in the previous chapter around political and socio-economic change, the rise of consumer culture and the decline of collective identities and a coherent symbolic order. Arguably, consumer capitalism thrives off the persistence of the Imaginary order and the subject's constant misidentifications with the imaginary lifestyle identities of consumer culture which, being impossible to fully realise in a way that offers a coherent and stable sense of self (particularly considering the 'velocity of fashion' (Appadurai, 1986) of consumer culture), results in the imaginary order being the source of alienation.

While seemingly complex and abstract, the notion of the Imaginary order is perfectly exemplified by one of my participants, Cal. He discussed the frustrations of shooting parkour images that truly captured 'who he is'. With every picture, he experienced dissatisfaction and a frustration that is reflective of the Imaginary's mistaken identification with a lifestyle identity as constituting a stable and coherent wholeness of self:

*"When you get good like [at parkour], you want pictures that kind of capture all that. All the work and that. You dedicate so much time to it. It just becomes part of you, who you are. It's your whole identity and you want to get pictures that just bring all the training and effort and time together. But they're always a bit...I dunno...just a bit fake. When I think about parkour and that I think about how I'm a bloke who has a kid and that, who works and all that but I haven't packed it all in and just become some fat slob despite all that. That's not a life. I still have that. I go to the events all over the place, the jams and that. But when I see pics...I dunno I just look at it and think that I could be any 20-something freerunner lost boy just fucking about. It's like it's not me. I guess it's good though. Because that frustration makes me work harder so that I can get there you know."*

Cal's words are a textbook example of how, trapped within the Imaginary order, his attempts to construct his identity according to the fictitious image of 'the traceur' in consumer culture becomes a source of frustration that does not reflect his lived reality. The consumerised image of 'the traceur' provides him Cal with a fleeting sense of identity and wholeness, only to be destabilised and become a source of alienation when his own photographic image, the specular mirror, appears detached from himself. The essential falsity of the image of 'the traceur' can never be achieved as it does not encapsulate or correspond with his true reality, therefore being impossible to materialise. Consumer capitalism's identity-oriented individualism that, unlike earlier forms of capitalism that were built on functional and collective Symbolic Orders, hijacks the development of the subject, steering it towards consumerism's objects and signs of micro-identity construction and enjoyment. In Cal's case, the failure to realise his imagined identity as 'traceur' merely prompts him to return to the pursuit of this image that can never materialise, thereby keeping him trapped within the Imaginary, unable to socialise into a collective Symbolic Order.

The Symbolic is the third of Lacan's three orders. This is a psycho-social construct without a material reality, but provides meaning, coherence and a sense of comprehensibility through which we can orient our lives and make sense of social reality as the symbolic becomes ritualised through the institutions of the Big Other (Winlow and Hall, 2013). Having no material reality, the Symbolic Order, as Žižek (1997) observes, exists only because we *act* as if it exists. However, as Winlow and Hall (2012) argue, the necessity of a coherent symbolic order has been challenged by postmodernism and the evolution of liberal capitalism, thus hijacking the development of the subject and its socialisation in the symbolic order; instead keeping it trapped within the Imaginary order which, as Lacan argues, leads to narcissistic individualism which ultra-realists contend is a feature of late-capitalist subjectivity (Hall, 2012a; Hall et al, 2008).

It is important to explain how this conceptualisation of subjectivity drastically differs from that of other social science perspectives that have positioned the individual as "in a control system of signs, imbued with the freedom to reinvent themselves through the myriad opportunities proffered by the benevolence of consumer capitalism" (Smith, 2010: 125). The discussions of symbolism and identity, would, without proper

explication, seem to lend itself to symbolic interactionist approaches of the cultural left who, assuming fully conscious and autonomous subjects, see 'resistance' everywhere and semiotically reassign meaning and value to symbols which have no objective reality (Ferrell, 2007; Hebdige, 1979; Mason, 2012; Young, 2011). This is a gross misrepresentation of the consumerist dynamic that remains attached to a raw Cartesian subjectivity that ignores the unconscious roots of desire that are proven to exist, thereby resulting in a failure to explain how, in a society of allegedly resistant subjects, individuals become enmeshed and committed to the seductive allure of consumer society. The crucial element for transcendental materialism and ultra-realism is the unconscious and its powerful drives, how these can be used to explain the roots of desire, and how they can be harnessed and intensified under different political, socio-economic and cultural conditions that are heavily shaped by changes in global capitalism. The subject, driven by unconscious drives, desires, fear and the constant evasion of the Real, *actively solicits* the ideological trap of the symbolic (or Imaginary) order. Thus, in the contemporary context of post-political capitalism realism in which there is no genuine political alternative to liberal capitalism, this active solicitation simply leads to the reproductions or minor piecemeal revision of the dominant and ubiquitous *Imaginary* order of consumerism.

This is perhaps transcendental materialism's most crucial insight. It identifies that Foucauldian 'governmentality' perspectives or the idea of 'manufacturing consent' is entirely incorrect. The dominant social order does not have to *impose* its norms, values and socio-cultural symbols onto a reluctant and subordinate subject with hegemonic force. The subject's desire to escape the Real means that it is in a constant state of seeking and soliciting the coherence of a symbolic order; willingly subjecting itself to and working with the symbolic order's ideological structures. This is precisely how a transcendental materialist conceptualisation of subjectivity can explain the undeniable *success* of a capitalist system which is oppressive and harmful to large swathes of the population. It can explain why the allegedly rational subject does not rise up and escape capitalism's clutches but appears to embrace it (Hall, 2012b). Of course, this would appear to make the mistake of assuming the subject is a 'structural dope' that is merely a puppet to the Symbolic Order on the one hand, or their unconscious drives on the other. According to Adrian Johnston's (2008) work outlining a transcendental

materialist subjectivity, this is a common error which underestimates the terror of freedom itself that lies at the heart of the Žižekian subject:

“The place of freedom in psychoanalysis—analysis is typically and erroneously viewed as a discourse of determinism articulating narratives in which individuals are reduced to being mere puppets of unconscious influences operating beyond their control—is radically reconceived here. The veil of repression cordoning off the unconscious conceals not only the heteronomy of hidden determining forces but also the true extent of one’s defensively obfuscated autonomy, *a freedom that people surprisingly often find frightening and unsettling*” (Johnston, 2008: xxv).

To bring this into the contemporary context, we can see quite clearly how a society of increased precariousness and individualism elicits an exaggerated commitment to the specular Imaginary order of late-capitalism. In the previous chapter, we outlined how the structures and social institutions which constituted modernity’s stable symbolic disintegrated as capital reconfigured itself under the banner of neoliberalism. The subject was allegedly ‘freed’ from these oppressive structures and symbols that came to be viewed as oppressive and socially unjust burdens upon individuality. However in being ‘freed’, with postmodernism precluding the establishment of any socially-rooted symbolic order in its place, the subject was also untethered from any sense of fixity or comprehensibility, meaning this seismic social change was actually experienced as a *loss* and an *absence*<sup>29</sup> (Lloyd, 2013; Smith, 2014; Winlow and Hall, 2012). The detached ‘freedom’ from a symbolic order makes the task of avoiding the real more difficult and, stuck in the unstable order of the Imaginary, the subjects specular image is constantly destabilised and unrealised thereby *intensifying* rather than eliminating the need for a coherent symbolic order to avoid a terrifying encounter with the Real. Thus in a neoliberal society which, as we saw in chapter three, prioritised *individualism* over the social, there is a heightened misidentification with and commitment to the illusory order of consumer commodities, lifestyles and their associated identities. Consequently, in soliciting the insecure symbols, norms and values of consumer capitalism as a substitute for a more stable and permanent symbolic order, the subject constructs a coherent sense of self on the fragile and ever-shifting ground of consumer markets and lifestyle identities (Appadurai, 1986), contributing to a deepening, more pervasive and

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<sup>29</sup> A crucial insight of Roy Bhaskar’s critical realism, upon which ultra-realist criminology builds, is the causative potential of *absence*.

harmful sense of objectless anxiety (Hall, 2012a; Raymen and Smith, 2016; Treadwell et al, 2013).

But what relevance do these discussions have for parkour? Firstly, by establishing this transcendental materialist conceptualisation of subjectivity, we can build upon discussions in the previous chapter to see how global political-economic and social change manifests in the wider lived experiences of the traceurs. This aids in explaining their motivation and desire for parkour as a cultural lifestyle identity and, more importantly, its unavoidable *conformity* to the dominant values of ‘cultural capitalism’. This will be outlined in greater ethnographic depth in chapter six. More immediately in this chapter, we will explore how this more sophisticated understanding of subjectivity and the conformity of parkour undermines arguments about the naturally ‘resistant subject’ which form the fundamental basis of existing academic perspectives on parkour. This has the knock-on effect of problematizing other arguments around ‘edgework’ and ‘moral panic’ which, while not discussing parkour as ‘resistance’ *per se*, continue to rely on the depiction of parkour and its practitioners as ‘deviant’ or holding a radically alternative set of subcultural values to that of mainstream ‘parent’ culture. The argument of parkour as hyper-conformist and pre-emptively ‘precorporated’ (Fisher, 2009) by capitalism’s logic is the key that unlocks alternative systemic accounts of the ‘Creative City’ (Mould, 2015), political-economy, leisure and spatial governance which can explain both aspects of the parkour paradox.

## **Resisting What? Rethinking Parkour as ‘Resistance’**

“Whereas genuine political resistance co-ordinates ‘otherness’ into a political ‘sameness’ *against* the system, cultural micro-resistance is an atomized, sublimated and eminently domesticable form that works *with* the system, and becomes the inevitable road to tighter incorporation; which is why, with a bit of cautious monitoring, it is allowed to flourish” (Hall and Winlow, 2007: 84; original emphasis).

To theorise transgressive youth ‘subcultures’ such as parkour as a form of rebellion or anti-capitalist ‘resistance’ has been extremely popular within academia and popular culture. Endless examples can be found within the criminological, cultural and youth studies literature in which everything from graffiti, busking, punk fashion, street gangs,

rioting, looting, skateboarding, binge drinking and even watching television soap operas have been described as 'resistance' (Brotherton, 2004; Brown, 1994; Ferrell, 1996; 2001; Hebdige, 1979; Millington, 2011; Nicholls, 2016; Young, 2011). The internet-sensation and increasingly popular 'cultural lifestyle sport' of parkour and freerunning is no exception. As a practice in which one uses only their body to re-appropriate the physical environment and move through urban space efficiently and aesthetically, parkour has been depicted as a rich form of spatial politics and a performative display of resistance against the hyper-regulation of consumer-capitalist urban space (Bavington, 2007; Bornaz, 2008; Mould, 2016; Lamb, 2014). There are innumerable quotes, passages and examples of this perspective, with Atkinson (2009) and Daskalaki et al (2008) providing perhaps the most explicit examples. They argue that "parkour is a tactic the disempowered employ in order to misappropriate and corrupt these consumerist and dehumanising spaces" (Daskalaki et al, 2008: 58), and that "*traceurs* despise suffocatingly organized...and consumer-based cultural experiences and spaces" (Atkinson, 2009: 179).

The concept of resistance, particularly as it pertains to the urban spatial realm, has been a central concept within cultural criminological theory with its early symbolic interactionist underpinnings. Viewed through this lens, the traceurs are exercising their 'right to the city' through the practice of parkour (see Iverson, 2013; Lamb, 2014). For these scholars one can enact the right to the city simply by temporarily re-appropriating urban spaces through cultural and micro-spatial practices such as parkour, graffiti or 'guerilla benching'. However this concept of 'the right to the city', originally coined by Lefebvre (1991), has turned into an intellectual and political buzzword which has ritualistically used, re-used and distorted to the extent that it rarely resembles its original meaning (for critiques, see Harvey, 2008; 2012; Marcuse, 2009; Raymen, 2016). The right to the city, as certain scholars recall, is not merely a right to access services or individualistic interests. It is a much broader concept which involves the right to change ourselves and our society by changing the *larger urbanisation process itself*. As David Harvey (2012) remarks, the right to the city is an 'empty signifier'. It is defined by who controls the urban, how it is designed and governed at a political, economic and cultural level, and thus, who gets to fill this 'empty signifier' with meaning. As Marcuse (2009: 193) writes:

“The homeless person in Los Angeles has not won the right to the city when he is allowed to sleep on a park bench in the centre. Much more is involved, and the concept is as to a collectivity of rights, not individualistic rights.”

The ambiguous reduction of this broader political concept to the level of micro individualistic urban politics is emblematic of what Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) observe as the remarkable paucity of consensus on the parameters of what constitutes ‘resistance’. As they argue, there is little conceptual basis for how we discern what is genuine resistance and what is not, nor is there much rigour or clarity to the term as an analytical concept—particularly concerning considering its frequent use (see Hollander and Einwohner, 2004 for an exception). As Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) and others have argued, what is more common is that a somewhat controversial or unusual subject matter (ironically usually noticed through popular culture) is described ethnographically with great richness, coated with a dense sheen of resistance and simply upheld as an edgy form of cultural politics. While these ethnographic studies offer rich descriptive accounts of youth subcultures, it is often done without effective critical analysis of how these forms of resistance operate within and actively disturb the dominant social, cultural, political and economic relations they allegedly oppose. This process is evident in a recent academic blog post on parkour’s ‘playful politics’ by cultural geographer Oli Mould (2016). Here, Mould actually acknowledges, albeit simplistically and inaccurately, parkour’s commodification and ‘co-optation’ into advertising and business. However, he stills reverts to the safe and comforting narrative of parkour as a form of ‘playful’ or ‘soft’ form of politics and a politicised reaction to the hyper-regulation of cities. He does so without any critical consideration of issues of identity, subjectivity, or a systemic account of the attraction to the contemporary stylisation of individualised identity politics (Epstein, 1991; Heath and Potter, 2006). It is simply stated as true despite so much of the evidence pointing in the opposite direction, and without any attempt at situating parkour within a wider or more holistic consideration of broader leisure markets, consumer economies and how they function through contemporary urban spaces. After acknowledging some of these more rudimentary points, Mould simply dismisses them with a caveat that Hall (2012a) describes as the *baseless optimism* that is characteristic of the fetishistic disavowal of the liberal-left:

“But for all this, parkour is no less politically potent: it offers a way to highlight the city’s systems of control, by creatively navigating the urban environment.” (Mould, 2016)

This mimics cultural criminological utilisation of resistance in urban contexts, which has often been framed as context of disrupting, subverting and transgressing the taken-for-granted rules and mechanisms of control which permeate everyday life. Ferrell (1996) argues that ‘systems of domination’ operate ‘within structures of knowledge, perception and understanding’. In this framework systems of power and domination are set up as merely discursively formed objects which can be damaged by acts of resistance which use language and subversive symbol inversion to poke holes in the discursively formed logic of the resident systems of power. With deep intellectual roots in symbolic interactionism and anarchist politics (Ferrell, 2001), cultural and critical criminology has long been interested in the back and forth tussle over cultural meaning; manifested in the subversive methods of *détournement* and the hijacking of forms of subversive behaviour for the purposes of dominant culture and leisure industries. The Situationists were among the first to see the possibilities for cultural subversion through mediated meanings, searching for ways in which they could “‘seize the familiar and turn it into the other’, [and] if they could ‘turn the words of [their] enemies back on themselves’” (Marcus, 1989: 178-179 cited in Ferrell et al, 2008: 152).

Parkour is an activity that is undeniably (but arguably not intentionally) entangled in the practice of *détournement*. For example, traceurs often use the stuff of situational crime prevention—various barriers, bushes, fences and window bars—to enhance rather than inhibit their practice. At many spots, these are the very features most crucial in making a parkour spot ideal or memorable. At the Discovery spot for instance, the window bars on the side of the museum building afforded the traceur the chance to use the window ledge in lines and moves, grabbing onto them for stability before quickly leaping off again. Similarly, a great deal of parkour involves finding new and multiple purposes for taken-for-granted objects and spaces and altering their dominant meaning; in the process transgressing the late-capitalist concept city’s purposeful diktat to ‘keep space to its specificity’ (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006). According to this highly romanticised conceptualisation of politicised resistance, scaffolding on a construction becomes a weapon for politicised objection rather than a tool of real estate

development for a finance economy reliant upon speculative housing markets (Harvey, 2010; Lamb, 2014). The disabled-access ramps and rails at the players' entrance to the city's Premier League football ground are reclaimed as a free space for young teenagers to have fun rather than merely the protected preserve of millionaire footballers.

However there are a number of shortcomings within this loose conceptualisation of politicised urban resistance which seems to project an imagined political consciousness onto actors who are, for the most part, politically apathetic. Least problematic among these flaws is that the spirals and loops of meaning which are used by those allegedly subverting the dominant order can, in-turn, be folded back and co-opted by the dominant cultural and socioeconomic order to satisfy its own means. Indeed, more recently, *détournement* is being employed in the world of parkour and freerunning in ways the Situationists might not have approved. In a bizarre twist with one professional Parkour and Freerunning Company, the actual method of *détournement* has been co-opted from the less powerful and employed against them, albeit with their active and willing participation. A company called *Parkour Generations* now offer their services to private companies, warehouses, universities, or any other owners of private property to 'security test' or 'penetration test' their properties. Traceurs, using their abilities of parkour and freerunning to access hard-to-reach areas and move over and across the urban environment smoothly, attempt to infiltrate the client's property in order to identify security weaknesses and enable their clients to fortify them. It is a strange turn of events in which parkour is being used as an active tool for situational crime prevention; assisting the very methods, private companies, and land developers which intend to secure private and public property and preserve them as exclusionary sanitised spaces (Hayward, 2012). To quote from their website:

"A facility is only as secure as its physical barriers are impenetrable. Whether it be looking to keep people in or prevent people from gaining access, security measures are often inadequate for the task and do not take into account the physical capabilities of individuals committed to either escaping or gaining access."  
(<http://parkourgenerations.com/tactical>):

Not to mention the traceurs' commitment to capitalist profiteering, the language used sounds like it could feature in Clarke's (1980) 'situational crime prevention' article, or

Newman's (1972) *Creating Defensible Space*. Furthermore, they also offer parkour training to police services and the armed forces. Such training will enable these services to "mobilise and deploy efficiently within any terrain; access critical areas or positions; operate effective pursuits... [and] overcome any physical obstacle impeding the progress of an operation". Here we can see how the commodification of parkour and its subjection to capitalism's fundamental exchange relation means that a practice with roots in Eastern philosophies of peace and well-being (see Angel, 2011) is employed by institutions of war and violence for training purposes, bringing the loops of *détournement* full circle. These developments seem to be taking commodified 'deviant leisure' to its logical conclusion of deviant crime control; much in the same way in which property owners or city councils commission street artists and graffiti writers to throw up more aesthetically pleasing and authorised murals to prevent illicit 'tagging'. A question that must be emphasised is how and why these actors are de-politicised to the extent that they're willing to engage in these legitimised opportunities despite the inevitable negative impact upon the rest of the parkour community?

However, there are three far more concerning elements to this purely discursive conceptualisation of 'resistance', which operates only at the interpretive surface level of the empirical rather than exploring, at a systemic level of the real<sup>30</sup>, the roots of parkour's attraction, prohibition, and edgy and politicised cultural appearance. Firstly, there is a lack of appreciation for how capital's influence over the neoliberal consumer city is more than just a symbolic form of power which can be undermined by re-appropriating such symbols. It is rooted in *real*, material and tangible political-economic and cultural structures which design and organises the city in such a way that perpetuates and maintains the ideological commitment to the political-economic system of neoliberal consumer capitalism (Harvey, 2012; Mould, 2015). As we will see in chapters 7 and 8, it is not farfetched to argue that capitalism has survived in the late-twentieth century in-part due to the reproduction of space (Smith, 1984). As Western real economies became based around consumption rather than production (Hobsbawm, 1996), capital flowed back to central urban areas and became invested in land

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<sup>30</sup> For the purposes of clarity, it is necessary to distinguish this use of the term 'real' from the Lacanian 'Real' discussed earlier with regards to the human psyche and subjectivity. This is a critical realist use of the 'real' which, for Bhaskar (1997), simply refers to those *real* forces which structure and shape our experience of the empirical world of observations, sounds and senses, but which are not tangibly and empirically accessible to us.

development, real estate and the leisure-consumer industries of shopping, restaurants and the night-time economy to create spatial conditions of density conducive to heightened consumption (Smith, 1996). Cities made the shift from *municipal socialism* to *municipal capitalism*, giving over to the free market as evidenced through the increasing privatisation of space and the proliferation of Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) (see Minton, 2012; chapter 8 of this thesis for more).

Secondly, these perspectives which maintain parkour as a form of politicised resistance fail to acknowledge how the shift to this form of new cultural identity ‘politics’ actually emerged from shifts in the global economy and their attendant social and cultural impact. Thirdly, they fail to observe how such a shift to identity politics actively works *with* and benefits capitalism’s reconfigured global consumer economy. In reality, in an era of individualised ‘do-it-yourself’ cultural politics (Epstein, 1991; McKay, 1998), the premium upon individualised identities—particularly ‘new’, ‘cool’ and ‘rebellious’ and identities at the socio-cultural margins—simply provides the socio-cultural energy and new niche consumer markets of identity that consumer capitalism requires to drive itself forward. It is the contention of this thesis that the tension between rebellion and conformity in the commodification of parkour is *not a tension at all*, but rather a *vital* and *deliberate* component of consumerism’s cultural-economic apparatus (Hall et al, 2008).

Hayward and Schuilnberg (2014) provide more rigour to resistance as a political concept and process. They argue that, by necessity, effective political resistance must transcend or transform the existing *doxa*—those common sense beliefs, ideas, politics and ideals which have ceased to appear political or ideological. Therefore, while much of ‘resistance’ is conceived of in negative terms as merely opposing or defying, Hayward and Schuilnberg (2014) therefore argue that resistance should be conceived of as a three-stage process. Stage one of this process are inventive cultural forms of anti-authoritarian, anti-capitalist and rebellious sentiment. Stage 2 is *imitation*, in which these cultural forms and sentiments become more ubiquitous and form the default position in liberal post-modern society. Stage three is the *transformative* phase which acts as a positive force for real change in political-economy, urbanisation, finance and ecological policy through organised political action rather than fragmented and

atomised interest-group expressions of disillusionment. Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) argue that resistance is 'hijacked' prior to the third stage. The fragmented and identity-based nature of cultural politics is co-opted through Hollywood movies, profiteering music stars such as Bono or, at a smaller scale, through the commodification of parkour.

This notion of resistance as a three-stage process is useful and certain brings more rigour, clarity and the need for a transcendence of capitalist political-economy to the foreground. However, its argument that resistance is hijacked and aggressively 'coopted' prior to the third stage is flawed and inaccurate, failing to account for the powerful and insidious nature of ideology and how it actually shapes and co-opts these forms of inventive cultural resistance at its 'stage one' origins. Applied to parkour, Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014) depict a situation in which parkour previously held some politically subversive potential that has been snatched away by the predatory corporations looking to cash in on the next popular thing. This scenario, as cultural criminologists have described (Ferrell et. al, 2008), maintains the illusion that just as consumer capitalism can co-opt culturally resistant practices, such practices can be undermined and co-opted back in an endless back and forth tussle reflecting the 'spirals and loops' of cultural meaning. With regards to parkour, it would perhaps be more accurate to use Mark Fisher's (2009) notion of *precorporation* in which, at the level of aesthetic and cultural values, parkour was pre-emptively shaped by consumer identities and logic:

"What we are dealing with now is not the incorporation of materials that previously seemed to possess subversive potentials, but instead, their *precorporation*: the pre-emptive formatting and shaping of desires, aspirations and hopes by capitalist culture" (Fisher, 2009: 9)

Fisher uses the example of Kurt Cobain and Nirvana, who offered a despondent voice of a generation who seemed desperate to (providing another musical reference) 'rage against the machine', but knew that "nothing runs better on MTV than a protest against MTV" (Fisher, 2009: 9). Arguably, the same is true of parkour. Nothing sells better in hyper-regulated capitalist cities than an alleged critique of hyper-regulated capitalist cities; an example of the 'soporific effect' described in chapter 2 which preserves the

illusion that the system is being held to account and that we are still politicised in a post-political era (Winlow, 2012; Winlow et al, 2015). This is visible in parkour's almost immediate commodification through films and advertising in its very earliest days (Stapleton and Terrio, 2010).

Fisher's (2009) notion of *precorporation* arguably chimes with earlier sociological works into issues of subculture, leisure, youth identity and a sense of differential authenticity. Sarah Thornton's (1995) work, *Club Cultures*, deals with this precise issue through the term 'subcultural capital', exploring and problematizing the distinctions within 'club cultures' between 'authentic' and 'phoney'; 'hip' and the 'underground' versus the 'mainstream' and the 'media'. As Thornton observes, while these battles for subcultural authenticity are seemingly diverse, "they are all unified by an unbroken concern with the problem of cultural status" (Thornton, 1995: 15-16). Here, Thornton expertly critiques notions of cultural 'youth resistance', problematizing classic accounts such as Hebdige's (1979) obsession with the 'bourgeois mainstream' as the yardstick against which romanticised working class leisure and style can display their proto-political rebellion. As Thornton points out, such an ahistorical orderly ideal crumbles when one observes how the advance of a consumer culture predicated upon differentiation has resulted in hedonistic and transgressive leisure becoming a democratised norm. As she argues, if one observed the social demographics of 'club cultures', they would find a population that broadly constituted the 'bourgeoisie' which, in Hebdige's account, serve as the mainstream opposition who are shocked and appalled at the working class rebellion.

This is an argument that transfers quite nicely to parkour. In many ways, the socio-economic and class profile of the sample who are the focus of this thesis are far from representative of the broader UK parkour community. This is in part due to the region in which this research was conducted. However, as one London-based participant, Andy, points out, parkour is a predominantly white middle-class leisure activity. Making reference to the campaign to save the Southbank 'Undercroft' in London—a popular spot for skateboarders, traceurs, and graffiti artists—he argues that the 'transgressive' and resistant veneer of the activity was successful precisely because of the 'mainstream' social profile of its activists:

*I think that the Southbank and the Undercroft and the skateboarders is an example of that. Where...I mean if it was...the reason the Southbank was saved isn't because skateboarding is valuable. It's because the people who engineered that campaign are middle class white people. If that place was being used by anyone else, pretty much any other social group, that wouldn't have happened. And you've gotta...I mean parkour is like the most white middle class activity ever created! With the exception of rock climbing [laughs]. And I can say that as a white middle class person who does both! [Laughs]*

Here we see how transgression and rebellion have become a commodified norm and a core driving energy for a consumer culture predicated upon socio-symbolic competition and differentiation. While Thornton draws heavily on a Bourdieusian framework in her notion of 'subcultural capital' to make sense of the distinctions made between cool youth groups; discussing this as 'subcultural' is arguably her greatest mistake. Her fundamental argument offers great insight and an opportunity to depart from the standard resistance-oriented theories of transgressive leisure. However, the underlying implication of the notion of '*subcultural capital*' is that the battle for cultural status, authenticity, and a sense of unique identity and differentiation is a practice which *deviates* from the parent culture, rather than being the very driving energy and life-force upon which the parent culture of identity-based consumerism depends. Indeed, the contemporary night-time economy that Thornton (1995) discusses in her ethnographic research is made on the back of an era of transgression and rave culture that has been largely co-opted into the legitimate, alcohol-oriented night club scene and spatially domesticated into the legitimate and commodified spatial contexts of post-industrial city centres. When one looks at the proliferation of indoor parkour gyms and parkour's formal recognition as a legitimate sport in the UK, we can see an almost exact parallel with the rave scene and evolution of legitimate club cultures which formed the basis of Thornton's research. Much like the illegal raves of the 1980s which were a form of *spatial* transgression as much as anything else, parkour is increasingly becoming domesticated within legitimate, licensed and commodified spatial contexts (see chapter 2, 6, and 8).

However, it is not just around issues of commodification, subversion and capitalism that 'resistance' has been used as a theme for describing parkour. In Turin, Ugolotti (2014) argues that parkour carries the power for resistance to fight against issues of racially-based exclusion and marginalisation which the immigrant population of Turin experience:

"the focus on capoeira and parkour illuminated how participants enacted such negotiations using the same sites through which they were daily objectified and marginalised in Italian society: their bodies and the urban spaces they daily lived and crossed. The insights provided by this paper suggest, therefore, that leisure practices, and the active body, can thus represent unique sites where to observe and understand identity negotiations enacted by groups of children of immigrants in early twenty-first century Turin...The identity negotiations enacted by participants practicing capoeira and parkour in Turin public spaces took place through a complex reinterpretation and redefinition of their bodies and of the spaces they daily lived and crossed" (Ugolotti, 2014: 21-22).

Ugolotti's (2014) narrative follows the same pattern of performative symbolic *détournement*, as she draws upon the same core texts from the CCCS Birmingham School from which cultural criminology draws much of its intellectual roots (Hall and Jefferson, 1993; Hebdige, 1979). Moreover, Ugolotti's discussions about race and the rise of the far-right are dismissed as a 'moral panic', rather than stemming from legitimate but misdirected anger as a consequence of structural economic changes. Hate for immigrants is paradoxically accepted as a *fait accompli* whilst also being susceptible to resistance and change simply through the practice of parkour and the reappropriation of bodies and space. There is limited discussion about how the rise in racial hatred is a result of the death of collectivist leftist politics, alongside global economic shifts described in chapter three which contributed to both a decline in industrial manufacturing and employment in Turin and an influx in immigration as part of the broader need for cheaper and flexibilised labour (Dunford and Greco, 2006; Prat and Mangili, 2016). As Winlow et al (2015) have observed in other national and regional contexts, the recent rise in right-wing nationalism parallels these global economic shifts and mutation of the left away from discussions of political economy and into fragmented liberal metropolitan identity politics.

The development of academic perspectives organised around the 'resistant' subject suits, and is partially a product of, left-liberal, postmodernist humanist notions of human nature which depict a fully reflexive, autonomous and agentic subject. However the development of these perspectives also emerged parallel to historical political and economic shifts and their attendant socio-cultural effects as the Left moved away from collectivist class-based politics and towards a new 'cultural left' of individualised and fragmented identity politics (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014). This is perhaps best characterised by the 'countercultural' politics of the 1960s which were academically reflected in the work of the Birmingham School Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) in the 1970s. Capitalism was no longer the main enemy. Progressive movements for civil rights were in full-swing as people were beginning to break free from the slowly crumbling structures of modernity. Society was becoming increasingly flexibilised and individualised as the late-modern subject was becoming scattered into farther corners of regions and countries, leaving behind the old and repressive identities of class, community, gender or profession. Lifestyles were actually rapidly improving through the consumer market itself, which offered people the chance to reinvent themselves and smash traditional notions of gender, race and class through a range of consumer commodities (Winlow, 2012).

Current displays of 'resistant' gesture politics—political statements which are designed to attract attention without any real effect—owe much of their origins to this often-celebrated 'counterculture' of the 1960s. In its failure to collectively overthrow the capitalist state, the counter-culture became an era which reduced 'politics' to the level of the individual in which 'being political' was about self-expression and identity in everyday life through music, leisure habits, consumer habits and style (Echolls, 1994; Epstein, 1991; Hebdige, 1979). As Echolls (1994) notes, politics was no longer about the sacrificing of oneself to larger political causes, ideas and social change. Instead, the 'political lifestyle' became a vaguely dissenting and individualised way of forming a 'cool', unique and self-fulfilling identity. To appear, through one's image and lifestyle, to be resistant to the 'establishment' became not a means to larger change, but an accomplished end in itself. As Hayward and Schuilenberg (2014: 32) explain: "In sum, what really took place in the counter culture was a change in culture and lifestyle rather

than a revolution in politics. The changes that took place occurred through pleasure rather than power”.

The celebration of ‘resistant lifestyle’ identities fails to acknowledge the alacrity of capitalist markets to incorporate dissent into its own cultural-economic system. Hollywood blockbusters often have the evil corporation at the centre of its plot narrative. In the case of the traceurs, far from engaging in cultural identity politics with the critical reflexivity of Situationist *détournement*, their identities do not threaten capitalist markets but overwhelmingly reinforce and reproduce them. As we will see in chapter 6, parkour has become another niche market in which traceurs bring together a variety of consumption habits around technology, music, fashion and fee-paying gyms as part of its cultural lifestyle—all of which are becoming more specific and expensive. As Holt (2002) describes:

“But rather than a revolutionary vanguard, such consumers are more accurately theorised as participants in a countercultural movement that, working in concert with innovative firms, pursued market-based solutions to the contradictions of modern consumer culture. Consumers are revolutionary only insofar as they assist entrepreneurial firms to tear down the old branding paradigm and create opportunities for companies that understand emerging new principles. Revolutionary consumers helped to create the market for Volkswagen and Nike and accelerated the demise of Sears and Oldsmobile. *They never threatened the market itself*. What has been termed ‘resistance’ is actually a form of market-sanctioned cultural experimentation through which the market rejuvenates itself” (Holt, 2002: 89, emphasis added).

Consequently, this results in a strange loop of cultural meaning in which to *transgress* and *deviate* from ‘the norm’ and be different from the mainstream is to conform to the central tenets of late-capitalist consumer culture. As Hall et. al (2008: 124) describe, at the heart of consumer capitalism’s logic of identity and lifestyle is that of ‘cool individualism’: the need to elevate and differentiate oneself from ‘the herd’. We can see this idea of differentiation, identity and transgression as a central feature of several advertising campaigns, most notably Apple Inc.’s 1997 ‘Think Different’ campaign. To quote Apple’s television commercial, it famously advertised to ‘the crazy ones’, ‘the misfits’, and ‘the troublemakers’ who are “not fond of rules” and “have no respect for the status quo” (see the advert here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TM8GiNGcXuM>).



It is useful to see how these ideas can be expressly found in the words of Huse, a 20 year old traceur who discussed his initiation into parkour and freerunning:

*"I suppose what I like about parkour is that it feels like you're doing summat. You hang out with your mates like everybody else does and it's all fun and that. But they're [other young people] wasting their money. Boozing, drugs, whatever. It's just pissing it away. Being a freerunner, you're not a tosser like everybody else. You look at them and they could be anybody. Whereas we're freerunners. My mate got me started and he was showing me videos on YouTube of these lads doing parkour. Balaclavas on, always at the edge of things. Like they're on a rooftop and the lights are down there and that's where the action is, where everybody should want to be. But they're up there doing their own thing, at the edges of it all, free from all the other bullshit. It was just me and something none of the other tossers were doing."*

Similarly, a traceur in Atkinson's (2009) study of parkour speaks about his connection to the city compared with others:

"I'm around millions of people I never talk to or care about. . . . How can you have a strong [spiritual] connection to a place like that? My neighborhood in Toronto was not constructed to be ours. It's just somewhere I live. . . . Houses, and like apartment complexes, are just boxes people seal themselves in every night after school or work. But even in that sense, I need to connect with the space around me so that I can understand its rhythms and realities" (Ben cited in Atkinson, 2009: 180).

In both quotes by traceurs from different studies and different continents we can see some commonalities. Most crucially, we can see the desire to elevate (and differentiate) the self by explicitly or implicitly denigrating others and their lifestyle. For Huse, it's about having an identity as a traceur which is distinct from the other mindless 'tossers' who waste their money on hedonistic indulgences within the night-time economy. For Ben, it's about living an active and adventurous lifestyle distinct from the unidentifiable mass of others who 'seal themselves' in their homogeneous houses and apartments. While such quotes would appear 'resistant' to the mainstream, at the core level of values they encapsulate perfectly the ethos of individualism and identity which characterises cultural and social life in late modern consumer capitalism. As Hall et al (2008) argue, this has been the criminological conflation of norms with values; the notion that by doing things differently and defying the 'norm', the individual is transgressing the values of contemporary cultural and political life when in fact it is a form of cultural conformity *par excellence*. In movies such as Luc Besson's *Yamakasi: Les Samurais des Temps Modernes* or *District 13*, parkour is popularly and romantically depicted as a transgressive urban movement. This couldn't be clearer when we look at Huse's attraction to the transgressive iconography of the parkour videos on YouTube and indeed this very iconography features in both mainstream advertising of urban lifestyle commodities and the traceurs own images (Angel, 2011).

To bring this discussion of resistance back to earlier discussions in the first half of this chapter, this is where transcendental materialist subjectivity makes its most crucial impact. The late modern subject is 'cut adrift of its moorings' (Young, 2007) as the older symbolic order of modernity vanished, with postmodernist culture and its economic partner of consumer capitalism placing an emphasis on identity, individuality and differentiation. Thus, in an attempt to avoid descending into the disorganised and disorienting realm of the Real the subject willingly solicits the ideological trap of consumer capitalism through a variety of identities and lifestyles. While on the surface there is an appearance of diversity, difference and resistance to authority, at the underlying level of motivation there is a homogeneous pursuit of consumer capitalism's Imaginary organising logic. As Jock Young (2007: 3) wrote of life in late modernity: "At no stage in history has there been such a premium on identity, on constructing a narrative of development and discovery, yet where the materials to construct it are so

transient and insubstantial”. As we shall see in greater ethnographic depth in chapter six, among my research participants parkour is primarily a means to form unique and enduring leisure and professional identities in the increasingly precariously hostile social, cultural and economic landscape of late modernity.

Therefore, what is also lost on those who find resistance everywhere is that while soliciting the ideological trap of consumer capitalism, forms of micro-cultural practices of spatial ‘resistance’ such as parkour cannot perform the crucial task of transcending what Bourdieu referred to as the *doxa*. Phrased differently, the challenge is to “move from a dogmatic image of thought to a new image of thought” (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014: 27). Notwithstanding the fact that all of the traceurs interviewed for this study effusively denied parkour as a conscious form of politicised resistance; micro-forms of cultural and identity-based resistance continuously falls short through its lack of Hayward and Schuilenberg’s (2014) necessary element of creativity. Not creative in the sense of being artistically and aesthetically novel, but in the sense of moving towards something new and better rather than mere cultural expressions of discontent. Practices such as parkour cannot transcend this *doxa* precisely because their motivations for participating in lifestyle sports are pre-emptively rooted in consumer capitalism’s own *doxa*, relying upon its logic of individualised and fragmented lifestyle identities as the basis for gestures of dissent and transgression. The expression of discontent with the ambiguous ‘status quo’ through individual identity and cultural politics of music, style, fashion and lifestyle fads is merely a form of reactive gesture politics; offering the *appearance* that the system is being held to account, that change and dissent is forever occurring and present. Put simply, it is what Žižek (2008) describes as the fetishistic disavowal of identity politics’ inability to push beyond Fisher’s (2009) ‘capitalist horizon’.

This problem is encapsulated within Daskalaki and Mould’s view of ‘rhizomatic urban social formations’ (USFs—of which they use parkour as an example) which emerge as off-shoots from ‘subculturalised’ practices. To put it simply, subculturalisation is the process by which one is able to talk about something as ‘a thing’ in and of itself—in essence, naming and loosely defining what ‘is’ or ‘is not’ parkour. The same would apply to urban exploration or graffiti versus street art. Daskalaki and Mould (2013) argue that

it is this formalisation of subcultures—and their inevitable susceptibility to becoming a cog in the profit-making machine of consumer capitalism—that results in the desire to create offshoots such as freerunning, buildering or ‘infiltration’ (Garrett, 2013). Consequently, they view such leisure practices or, as they more broadly term them, ‘urban social formations’ as “part of wider rhizomatic territories that remain open fields for urban engagement, inviting fluid urban identities and creative states of becoming” (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013: 1).

Daskalaki and Mould’s (2013) conceptualisation of parkour USFs as *rhizomes*<sup>31</sup> is not incorrect whatsoever. Urban practices and other leisure activities evolve and find new ‘lines of flight’ out of the old ones in which social life continuously remains “in flux, unpredictable, and capable of inspiring creative forms of engagement’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987: 13). For Deleuze and Guattari, there is always a “line of flight”: a line of escape from any fixed and stable order or identity. However, while Daskalaki and Mould (2013) acknowledge the co-optation of practices such as parkour into mainstream consumer markets, they maintain the dream of parkour possessing politicised possibilities of resistance by looking at how they reconfigure themselves in ‘alternative’ urban practices such as ‘freerunning’ or ‘buildering’ as a response to the original practice’s adoption into the mainstream. This is despite the unavoidable absence of an broader alternative socio-political conditions or movement which can offer the political space for this to develop (see Winlow et al, 2015 for more). While Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) promises of rhizomatic ‘lines of flight’ away from any fixed order is viewed as a politically liberating potentiality, it is also just as emblematic of the ethos of neoliberalism and consumer capitalism which also emphasise a flight from collectivism and the continuous reiteration of one’s unique individualism.

Quite simply, Daskalaki and Mould (2013) fail to ask the root question of *why* these USFs have rhizomatic tendencies beyond the assumption of an innately resistant subjectivity. The individuals who engage with these leisure activities—traceurs, urban explorers, theatre directors, graffiti artists, and gallery owners—are the ones sustaining the rhizomatic nature of urban social formations, continuously finding new

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<sup>31</sup> This is Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) concept that describes a multiplicity of fluid, interconnected and open-ended formations.

combinations and formations which distinguish themselves from the subculturally formalised and ossified forms. This thesis argues that postmodernist consumer capitalism, with its preclusion of a stable symbolic order and cultural imperative to be individualistic and 'different', is itself *rhizomatic*. Thus, USFs such as parkour and freerunning draw their rhizomatic nature from consumerism's logic of *emulative differentiation* seen in chapter three. This results in the continuous reformulation of these USFs as the desire of the narcissitic subject who, in the absence of a symbolic order, misidentifies with the symbols of the consumerism's Imaginary order—itsself the realm of narcissism—and is driven not to seek solidarity but distinction. Much akin to the niche leisure markets discussed earlier, it is reflective of the desire to distinguish themselves from the “nether regions of the herd they so despise” (see Hall et al, 2008: 124), creating new leisure practices out of the old. The motivation to differentiate is motivated by neoliberalism's fundamental values of competitive individualism and thus, in the absence of alternative political conditions, is endlessly co-opted into new markets.

Consequently, and as evidenced earlier in chapter two, we can see how the popularisation of parkour and its associated offshoots of freerunning, 'rooftopping' and 'roof culture' could arguably be theorised as part of the broader 'cool individualism' of a neoliberal consumerism oriented around market-generated symbolic images of style and fashion—something which has slipped into parkour with the emergence of clothing lines and the parkour 'look' (Wheaton, 2013). Parkour is arguably the latest among a long line of gritty, 'transgressive' urban practices from street dance, to skateboarding, or graffiti which have either fizzled away, mutated, or become successfully 'subculturalised' only to be part of the energy creating new forms of urban practice (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013). This spirit is captured by Hall and Winlow (2015) perfectly in the quote below; an example not of transformation but of radical liberalism's *adaptive conformity*:

“One minute something is forbidden, the next permitted, the next celebrated and normalised. This constant bending of the rules is what passes for 'transformative praxis' in late-capitalism. Once feeding on resistance to the *Ancien Régime*, liberal-capitalism's pursuit of freedom and enjoyment now feeds on innumerable disconnected moments of fleeting resistance to its own rules, and this incoherent

resistance becomes hyper-conformity and, more importantly, motive energy” (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 129)

Therefore, at the heart of parkour’s practice, and indeed late-capitalism more generally, there is not a homology but a purposeful dynamic tension between values and regulatory norms, transgression and conformity. This realisation and rethinking of parkour as resistance has significant implications for other theoretical approaches to parkour’s practice and control as well, namely ‘edgework’ and moral panic perspectives. It is to a consideration and critique of these theoretical perspectives which we now turn.

## **Parkour as Edgework**

Whether the traceur is atop a building to jump a roof-gap or closer to the ground diving over a wall that is ready to inflict pain upon hands, knees, faces and elbows, they are always engaging in a form of voluntary risk-taking. As we shall see in more depth in chapters 5 and 7, parkour involves the unrelenting investment of bodily capital; experiencing a constant set of cuts, grazes, bruises, sore joints, jammed fingers and rolled ankles. These are an expected feature of the life of a traceur; a consequence of the contradictory negotiation of the boundaries between pushing oneself to progress as a traceur and adhering to parkour’s internal rules of health and safety: the ‘principles of progression’ (Kidder, 2013). Within parkour and undoubtedly other risk-taking lifestyle sports the scathing of one’s body is a recreational hazard.

While the roof-gap presents the most mortal danger, any traceur will tell you that feelings of discomfort, anxiety, and fear of physical pain and injury are more pervasively present during simpler jumps, lines and runs. Sometimes, it is the combination of moves and physical structures closest to the ground that can make one most uncomfortable. Often, these are the lines with the smallest margin for error. A jump with a strange angle, a diving vault descending from one level to the next, an unforgiving metal barrier or the sharp knife-like corner of a brick wall that seemingly glints with malevolence can become the focus of their fear and attention. Fear and desire are registered at the most visceral, affective and embodied levels and at this moment the traceur experiences a strange set of contradictory sensations (Saville, 2008). Standing atop a wall preparing to

do a jump or a line, the traceur can often hesitate, feeling simultaneously drawn to the wall and repulsed by it. You bend at the knees, you swing your arms backward ready to propel yourself off the wall, but your body remains fixed. There is a strange disconnect in the mind, the constant fight between fear and desire. Indeed, as Saville (2008), Kidder (2013) and others have noted, fear and affect are not to be rejected but embraced within parkour. They are to be fully understood and become familiar in order to be managed.

Therefore it is unsurprising that parkour has been theorised as a form of 'edgework' (Angel, 2011). Edgework is the theory of voluntary risk-taking developed by Stephen Lyng (1990; 2005) and employed widely by cultural criminologists, sociologists and other scholars who study practices of voluntary risk-taking. It is a psychosocial theory of risk-taking behaviours, resting on a synthesis of the work of Marx and Mead to understand how voluntary risk-taking and sensations of a 'controlled loss of control' (Ferrell, 2005) have become an increasingly embedded feature of a wide variety of leisure pursuits.

Edgework in its most extreme form is about the physical and emotional negotiation of boundaries between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, and sanity and insanity. Edgeworkers derive self-esteem, identity and pleasure from being able to manage the risks encountered at 'the edge' with skill, possessing an allegedly innate quality which is honed over time and which the average citizen does not possess. This is why many 'edgeworkers' will not only engage with edgework in one area but a multitude, displaying the ability to navigate the edge with skill in a variety of different arenas. In Lyng's (1990) own study, sky divers were also high-risk rock climbers, BASE<sup>32</sup> jumpers or motorcycle riders. Traceurs will also often engage in urban exploration and 'buildering'<sup>33</sup>. The term draws its roots from the 'gonzo journalist' Hunter S. Thompson who coined the term when writing about experimentation with various drugs and high-risk motorcycle riding with the infamous Hell's Angels. It is precisely these roots, embedded in Thompson's own politics, which have allowed

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<sup>32</sup> BASE jumping is parachuting or wingsuit flying off a fixed structure. BASE is an acronym, standing for the four categories of objects or spaces from which one jumps: Building, Antenna, Span (between two pieces of architecture) or Earth (usually a cliff, mountain-top or canyon).

<sup>33</sup> Buildering is the act of free-climbing on buildings or other man-made structures such as bridges or cranes.

academics to situate edgework as ‘anarchic human experience’ (Lyng, 1990: 855); a mode of kicking-back against the workaday monotony and institutional controls of everyday life.

While Lyng’s (1990) theory of edgework<sup>34</sup> adopts a psycho-social approach which attempts to understand the mind as it relates to social and economic structures, it is nevertheless based on some flawed assumptions and conceptualisations. Lyng’s (1990) Marx-Mead synthesis looks at the relationship between the ‘I’ and the ‘me’ within the internal psychology of the individual. The ‘me’ is the constrained and socialised dimension of the self which acts according to the attitudes and expectations of others and the rules of society. This can be seen as the internal ‘voice of society’. On the other hand, the ‘I’ is the dimension of the self that *actually* responds to situations and scenarios to act and take the self forward. The ‘I’ is the spontaneous, creative aspect of the self which exists purely in the moment. The fundamental argument within edgework theory is that the desire to engage in forms of edgework is a product of ‘alienation’ and ‘oversocialisation’ within the institutions and structures of capitalist society. The ‘I’ is perpetually frustrated with the constraints of structure upon its immediacy and, as Lyng (1990: 870) describes, “[f]or many members of capitalist society, the central dynamic of day-to-day existence is an incessant search for the self”. It is this dichotomy, framed as an incessant internal battleground that allows edgework theorists to preserve the idea of edgework as anarchic, resistant and rebellious against the ‘Me’ and thus the structures and institutions of society.

This returns us to discussions in both the previous chapter and the first half of this chapter regarding conceptualisations of subjectivity, specifically the existence and role of the *unconscious*. Within edgework theory, the ‘I’ is reluctantly repressed by the hegemonic structures of society which are aggressively imposed upon and internalised by its subjects. To repeat earlier arguments, this perspective fails to acknowledge the subject’s *solicitation* of the symbolic order (in this scenario the ‘me’) in order to escape its primal fear of the Real. Indeed, this can be seen in Lyng’s (1990) own words above, in which the daily lived reality of late-capitalist existence is an incessant *search for the self*.

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<sup>34</sup> This has become a widely adopted theoretical perspective. See Lyng’s (2005) edited collection, *Edgework: The Sociology of Risk-Taking* for more.

Lyng misidentifies this as the 'I' kicking-back against the homogenising power of capitalist structures and institutions. Therefore, edgework theory assumes that voluntary risk-taking is bound up in an inherent desire for transgression, rule-breaking and resistance. In reality, this *incessant search* is the subject seeking authentic identity in the sanitised world of late-capitalism, seeking, soliciting and consequently misidentifying with the ideology of late-capitalism itself which edgework theory assumes the subject is trying to escape. The overwhelming message in consumer capitalism is that the individual must know 'oneself', must possess a unique and individual identity and express this identity through lifestyle, leisure and consumption habits. Consequently, Lyng's (1990) conceptualisation of the 'me', the 'voice of society' also requires re-evaluation.

For Lyng (1990), the voice of society is the voice of constraint. It is the set of external social forces that feel beyond the subject's control, repressing them into the mundane, risk-averse and oversocialised monotony of post-industrial capitalist life that demands a certain level of restraint and deferred gratification. However, Lyng has entirely failed to identify what the 'voice of society' is saying in contemporary times. Using Freudian terminology, Žižek (2002a) argues quite the opposite from Lyng (1990) and instead suggests that there has a *reorientation of the cultural superego*. In Freud's terminology, the superego (Lyng's 'me') was able to induce a crippling guilt associated with the wanton pursuit of pleasure and giving in to the Id. However, in a consumer society geared towards hedonism, indulgence and consumption, the superego has reversed, resulting in a shift in the balance between the commands of constraint and hedonism. Put simply, individuals are more likely to feel guilty at their *failure* to avail themselves of opportunities—*missing out* is likely to provoke the feelings of guilt and shame that we would more traditionally associate with giving in to the desires of the Id. Therefore, to return to Lyng's terminology, the 'voice of society' and capitalist ideology is encouraging indulgence, risk-taking and the experience of new sensations. We can see this reorientation of the cultural super-ego not only within parkour, but other criminal and normalised forms of behaviour such as the 2011 riots (Treadwell et al, 2013); Black Friday shopping and violence (Raymen and Smith, 2016); the rise of gambling in contemporary society (Smith and Raymen, 2016) as part of a broader culture of risk-

taking and speculation on housing markets, stock markets and the ‘casino’ of finance economy (O’Malley, 2010).

Within this study, nowhere is this exemplified better than when speaking with Vase after performing a move which made him extremely uncomfortable. Standing atop a wall, Vase (22 years old) had to jump backwards over a metal bar, allow himself to fall before catch a metal bar and using his momentum to swing through and propel himself toward another wall which he would ‘catch’ and climb up:

*“Ah man, the entire thing was **grim!** I didn’t want to do it. The whole jumping backwards thing, not being able to see your target, ahhh [Shakes his whole body like he has the shivers]. I can’t explain it. It’s not actually that bad, just feels weird. You just don’t know how to judge it. You overshoot it and you’re dropping and falling on your arse. But you could also mess it up and chin yourself on the metal bar as you drop. But it looked so cool when everyone else had done it. I had to do it, had to know how it felt because it looked like it had so much flow. If I hadn’t done it, it would’ve just been on my mind until we hit this spot again and then I’d be the little bitch worrying about it when everyone else had done it. So I just kind of jumped back and hoped I caught the bar. I didn’t mind if I didn’t get it first time, I just wanted to make sure I caught the bar.”*

However, this quote is also indicative of deep thymotic passions of the unconscious which also undermine some of edgework’s domain theoretical assumptions about subjectivity. Vase’s comments are arguably an example of what Žižek (2002c), drawing on Badiou, has described as the ‘passion for the Real’. This is the argument that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a synthetic society of the semblance (Baudrillard, 1994) which paradoxically places an emphasis upon *authentic* experience and identity, society and its subjects went in a constant search for ‘the real thing’—to access the Lacanian Real of which the subject is so terrified in order to have a real, unmediated and authentic experience of Lacanian *jouissance*. This is arguably another viable explanation for the attraction to parkour’s embodied practice in late-modernity; specifically as cities become more sanitised and asocial non-places (Augé, 1995). This will be explored in more ethnographic depth in chapter 7. For now, however, it suffices to say that this

'passion for the Real' has been argued as present in other leisure arenas as well, such as the vomit-inducing hedonism of the NTE. Of course, as Smith (2014) points out, the subject often goes in search of the Real through the commodified, symbolic and inauthentic realms of commodified experience, therefore having to find *traces* of the Real within our symbolically-mediated society. Therefore, in a contradictory fashion, the subject ends up actively soliciting late-capitalism's inauthentic imaginary realm of symbols which obfuscate the Real. In denying the undeniable presence or role of these unconscious desires and situating edgework within a rational, conscious and 'internal' conversation between the 'I' and the 'Me', Lyng's notion of edgework helps to maintain edgework's false relationship to 'resistance' by depicting it as a conscious retaliation and reaction to the oppressive structures of late-capitalism.

Edgework's theoretical perspective is valuable in advocating a psychosocial framework for understanding voluntary risk-taking and subjectivity in relation to social structures. However, it's conceptualisation of this relationship needs re-working through a transcendental materialist perspective in order to provide a more critical and accurate approach of the attraction to risk-taking pursuits in late-capitalism which incorporates the unconscious. Most importantly, this requires an abandonment of a perspective which desperately attempts to maintain the anarchic and 'resistant' subject. Only then can we begin to understand the contradictions between the popularity of risk-taking lifestyle sports among both practitioners and capitalist markets and its tight regulation and exclusion from the urban context.

## **Where's the Panic? Parkour and Moral Panic Theory**

Since the 1970s criminology has consistently and predictably reverted to the discourse of moral panic theory in order to explain the policing, exclusion or furore around particular events or groups of people. Indeed, as Hall (2012a) has questioned, when climate change is dismissed as merely sensationalised 'moral panic', is there any representation of a social problem that cannot be reduced to a moral panic perspective?

However it is not just within criminology that moral panic perspectives have been employed. Moral panic's simplistic theoretical basis and its widely applicable 'catch-all'

nature have resulted in its application across a number of social scientific disciplines. Yvonne Jewkes' perceptive analysis argues that this has produced work which "frequently relies on 'ritualistic reproductions' or misrepresentations of Cohen's original conceptualization" (2015: 93), reducing complex social issues to the status of 'just a moral panic'. As one might suspect, this includes leisure, sports and cultural studies which have used moral panic to explain the policing and exclusion of parkour, skateboarding, urban exploration and other lifestyle sports from urban spaces. According to Wheaton (2013: 78-81) there exists a problematic moral panic surrounding parkour which is rooted in a deeper demonization and criminalisation of youth. To provide a more global perspective, Atkinson and Young (2008: 68) have argued that in Canada there is a moral panic toward parkour in which traceurs are demonised for their baggy clothing style, loitering presence in public space and for displaying 'disruptive' and 'aggressive tendencies'; while in Turin, Ugolotti (2014) contextualises parkour's exclusion in terms of a wider 'moral panic' around issues of race and immigration (p.20).

Moral panic theory is flawed both at a root conceptual level, but also with regards to how it is applied to (and negatively hinders understandings of) parkour's policing and control. At its most basic, the rhetoric of folk devils and moral panics simplistically reduces everything to one large conspiratorial discursive meaning system. As Gadd and Jefferson (2007: 186) point out, such rhetoric fails to even attempt to address the reality of what people have done or theorise and explain their motivations. By remaining within the limited realm of discursive meaning systems, the moral panic 'theorist' argues that fairness in society can merely be achieved by labelling people differently, being kinder, more tolerant and simply attributing different labels to such criminalised groups. It fails to adequately address the cause of these alleged 'moral panics' by tracing the roots of criminalisation to the systemic, objective and very real political and economic structures which render attempts at constructing alternative discursive meanings obsolete. Indeed, when writing about young people in a US city, Silk and Andrews (2008: 409) acknowledge the influence of (non)consumption and the 'neoliberal city' which has created new and pervasive forms of discriminatory surveillance and spatial governance. However, quite curiously, rather than tackle these issues in any greater depth, Silk and Andrews instead argue that these forms of

surveillance have emerged from the “discursive constitution of a moral panic about youth”, rather than more systemic political-economic causes which have irrevocably altered the function of the entirety of central urban spaces (see chapter 7 and 8 for more).

However, more problematic is that moral panic perspectives are consistently used in an inappropriate cultural context which is entirely at odds with the fundamental tenets of its thesis. The original conceptualisation of moral panic theory (Cohen, 1972) argued that moral panics were sensationalised public and media responses to a particular group or event which threaten the mainstream norms and values of a society or culture. However, Cohen’s (1972) initial mistake when looking at the Mods and Rockers was to conceive of them as ‘non-conformist’ and a threat to mainstream values despite the fact that, as Hall (2012a: 135-136) correctly observes, “they were conforming to the master-signifiers of edgy coolness and youth tribalism constructed around consumer objects that had been propagated by the fashion industries since the late 1950s” (Frank, 1998; Heath and Potter, 2006). This has been a consistent error by left-liberal scholars when dealing with any minor, transgressive behaviour. Scholars studying parkour have made similar errors, lazily employing the idea of a moral panic surrounding parkour despite the fact that, as we have established here, it is entirely conformist to mainstream values. As we have seen in this chapter and previous chapters, parkour has been thoroughly embraced in many arenas of contemporary society and culture; with its own governing body, a proliferation of fee-paying parkour classes and gyms, and an increasing presence in commercial advertising, films, TV shows and video games. In chapter six, we explore in more depth how the traceurs within this study were, on a small scale, entrepreneurial capitalists themselves. They successfully set up their own professional parkour companies and clothing lines, featured in commercials and adverts, established a gym, taught parkour in schools, and performed various exhibitions at events such as Northern Pride and the Sainsbury’s schools events.

This leads us on to one of the most glaring flaws with moral panic theory: the overwhelming absence of any identifiable ‘panic’ drawing a disproportionate media response. Where are the media stories suggesting parkour is threatening a normal way of life or our shared cultural values? Indeed, parkour is excluded from urban space, with some city councils even setting up bans on parkour and freerunning and certain areas in

London posting 'no freerunning' signs and other SCP measures to prevent parkour (see Angel, 2011). However, as we shall see in chapters 7 and 8, the policing and exclusion of parkour is more ambiguous, uncertain and inconsistent than it is vengeful and panicked; simply part of the mundane and dispassionate enforcement of the arbitrary rules of contemporary urban space. The use of moral panic perspectives masks the more interesting and accurate observation that late-capitalism has created a contradiction for itself in late-capitalism. While a consumer culture dependent upon the promotion of individuality, identity and new niche markets through the aptly named 'lifestyle sports' such as parkour; it also requires a strict control and regulation of urban space in order to do so. Parkour is caught in this contradiction, conforming to the values created by consumer capitalism whilst simultaneously transgressing the arbitrary, situation-specific regulatory norms of urban space which the new post-industrial urban economies are reliant upon.

The purpose of the various critiques seen in this chapter has been to carve out the intellectual space occupied by this thesis and confirm the need for an ultra-realist theoretical criminology and a transcendental materialist conceptualisation of subjectivity. Therefore, what remains of this chapter is dedicated to not just what this thesis argues *against*, but what it argues *for* in place of these theoretical perspectives. Bringing together chapter three's theoretical focus on leisure and this chapter's focus on criminological theory, the following section will be dedicated to outlining the value of appropriating ultra-realist criminological theory through a deviant leisure perspective to provide the underpinning theoretical perspective of this thesis and why it is important to parkour.

### **Situating Parkour within Deviant Leisure**

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the numerous theoretical perspectives that have attempted to tackle explanations of parkour's practice and control cannot adequately explain its contradictions to a unifying theoretical perspective that can cope with parkour's undeniable cultural conformity and the reasons behind its spatially-contingent prohibition present with any analytical coherence or consistency. This is precisely what this thesis and a 'deviant leisure' perspective *can* achieve. First through its appropriation of ultra-realism's more sophisticated conceptualisation of subjectivity,

its tendency to look beyond the existing criminological canon for intellectual inspiration, and by situating parkour within the wider evolution of leisure and urban change within one coherent and unifying analytical lens. This is an historical exploration of shifts in global capitalism which can theorise how this has altered subjectivity, politics and cultural practices to render parkour as essentially conformist, whilst also detailing how these same shifts have changed the nature and function of urban space to make it highly regimented, purposeful and exclusive<sup>35</sup>. Moreover, it can do so in a way which highlights the paradoxical harms associated with parkour's exclusion from urban space, bringing late-capitalism's dual-role in both leisure and the city to the foreground as the true locus of the problem.

The explicit intention of ultra-realism<sup>36</sup> has been to strip away the distortion and appreciative romanticism of much left-liberal work and provide an analytical account of the harsh realities of our time in order to identify and move beyond capitalist realism's post-political trap (Fisher, 2009; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Winlow et al, 2015). To do so, ultra-realism's starting point has been to offer a thorough reconceptualization of subjectivity from a transcendental materialist perspective as outlined at the beginning of this chapter (Johnston, 2008). Rigid structure-agency dualisms and dichotomies either preserve the notion of the autonomous and 'resistant' subject or, in contrast, depict a powerless 'structural dope'; both of which dismiss the role of the unconscious in understanding how ideology operates through the subject. Ultra-realism's use of transcendental materialism points to a complex psycho-social process in which the relationship between the individual and capitalism's objective structures and ideological value systems is better viewed not as a dichotomy but as a dynamic *force* or dualistic tension (Hall, 2012a). The unconscious and chaotic primal drives and desires of the human subject meets the ordering logic of the symbolic order (or in this case the absence of one and instead is only left with the Imaginary symbols of consumerism) as the subject solicits late-capitalism's ideological trap in order to escape the Real.

This enables the discipline to move beyond criminological studies which ignore the hyper-conformity at the heart of much crime and 'deviance' and make a return to the

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<sup>35</sup> While briefly alluded to earlier in this thesis, future chapters deal with this in more explicit depth.

<sup>36</sup> Ultra-realist criminological theory derives its name from Francis Bacon's ultra-realist art. Bacon was attempting to strip away the distortions of abstract symbolism and return to sometimes brutal considerations of reality and what might be behind it.

theorisation of motivation which moves beyond conservative individualisation by situating it within the primacy of capitalism as the bedrock of everyday social life (Winlow, 2012). In reconceptualising subjectivity, ultra-realist criminology traces complex global historical processes in politics, economics, society and culture to understand how they relate to the micro-level of individual lived experience through the use of ethnographic methods. Through deep ethnographic study, ultra-realism understands the impacts of these macro structural shifts on the everyday minutiae, lived experiences and values of the post-industrial late-capitalist subject to create *parallax views* regarding crime and deviance (see Smith, 2014 Winlow, 2001; Winlow et al, 2015 for good examples of this theory-ethnography dynamic).

Indeed, this is precisely what this thesis has been doing over the last two chapters: presenting a transcendental materialist perspective of subjectivity and tracing how historical-economic and cultural processes have influenced the daily lived experiences, desires and subjectivity of contemporary individuals. The last two chapters have explored how these processes have contributed to the evolution of leisure, the primacy of identity, lifestyle and individualism in the cultural life of late-capitalism. Both of these chapters have considered the problems and contradictions associated with this evolution and how it relates to parkour's muddled position between conformist leisure and transgressive 'deviance'. This requires an acknowledgment of how the ideological values of late-capitalism have liberalised and unleashed desire for its economic value within a consumer economy, whilst also needing to harness such desire and control into semi-ordered activities and contexts. This is the dualistic tension discussed by ultra-realists in action (Hall, 2012a), reminiscent of Rojek's (1995) notion of 'dual modernity'. Rojek (1995: 36) discusses leisure in modernity and post-modernity as driven by parallel and conflicting forces of chaos and order; control and fragmentation. Arguably, this thesis is characterised by this precise tension. Late-capitalism's consumer economy is dependent on the somewhat chaotic, libidinal and fragmented desire for individualistic and unique lifestyles and identities such as parkour; but also needs to sublimate and direct them into particular economic and spatial contexts.

This is where cultural criminology's noted focus upon issues of urban space, place and control come in useful for the development of deviant leisure's notion of 'spatially contingent harm' (Smith and Raymen, 2016). This term refers to those leisure activities,

such as parkour, that appear to elicit a degree of regulation, criminalization and control that seems disproportionate to the identifiable harms that they pose. Furthermore, the intensity of policing and the public outrage they invoke appears to invert depending on the cultural, physical and economic space in which it is practiced. Capital has the privilege of defining and redefining the legitimacy of a particular practice and space, thus continuously redefining the status of these activities as illegitimate 'deviance' or legitimate leisure. As we have noted throughout the past two chapters and as we shall see in chapter 6, parkour is celebrated and embraced in particular spatial, cultural and economic contexts. However, when this form of leisure is practiced outside of its commodified form within or near the spatial realms of private property or designated zones of consumption, it requires the arbitrary rule-making of the hyper-regulated city to sanitise the post-industrial consumer city and 'keep space to its specificity' (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006). This is what cultural criminologists have referred to as the 'semiotic disambiguation between place and function' (Hayward, 2004: 140), taking the neat and purposeful grids of the 'concept city' and producing them in lived reality; sanitised of the natural messiness of urban life. Cultural criminologists have been adept identifying issues of spatio-behavioural control and the 'regulation of conduct through space' (see Hayward, 2012). They have been attuned to the exclusion and sanitisation of urban spaces from spontaneity and forms of leisure not immediately oriented around consumption such as graffiti, busking and skateboarding (Ferrell, 2001); drawing upon the work of Mike Davis and others to discuss the securitisation of the consumer city.

However, cultural criminology has traditionally looked at these practices such as parkour through this lens of resistance, as a response to the securitisation of public space. An ultra-realist perspective which identifies the conformity at the heart of parkour and the traceur's solicitation of consumer capitalism's value system, blended with cultural criminology's focus on urban space begins to produce a potent theoretical explanation for parkour's conformity and exclusion. Moreover, this reveals the purpose of the thesis' discussion of a deviant leisure perspective more broadly, and approaching parkour in relation to other forms of leisure which would appear irrelevant to parkour.

This thesis has already provided innumerable examples of more harmful leisure activities which are positively sanctioned and embedded within our urban centres. All of these practices emerge from the cultivation of the subject's chaotic and unconscious

primal desires. Where they differ from parkour is in the other side of Rojek's (1995) dualism of chaos and order. Chaotic as they may be, they are ordered in the sense that they have been harnessed and directed within legitimised and commodified spatio-economic contexts. Those fighting and clawing their way to the check-out at Black Friday sales are doing so to *pay* for items. The vomiting revellers of the night-time economy and gambling industries spend billions of pounds which are vital for cities confronted by a harsh post-industrial reality dependent on consumer and tourism industries. As we shall see in chapter 8, the atmospheric management of the entirety of space is important for the ongoing vitality of urban consumer economies. Thus, we begin to realise the amorality with which contemporary urban cities are policed and governed. This is why it has been so important in these previous two chapters to discuss forms of deviant leisure as a *collective* and in relation to one another, specifically as they manifest in the urban context in a way which brings the true causes of parkour's exclusion of urban space to the foreground. It allows us to look at the commonalities between these seemingly disparate forms of leisure in order to identify where they differentiate and ultimately, the cause of parkour's exclusion. This sets up the second half of the thesis perfectly, in which we see these theoretical insights play out in the reality of first-hand ethnographic data with traceurs and security guards, in addition to a critical exploration of the complexities of contemporary urban space.

# 5

## ***Methods***

Unlike some ethnographic studies which are blessed to utilise one methodological approach which naturally incorporates observation and unstructured interviewing, this study used a number of qualitative methods with a couple of different participant groups. Primarily a participant ethnographic study which incorporated unstructured impromptu interviews with a core group of approximately 30 traceurs, it also employed semi-structured interviews, collaborative visual methods, and ‘walking interviews’ with security guards. All of these methodological approaches need to be addressed, their use justified and their dilemmas and ethics discussed. The following chapter charts a course through these methodological choices as smoothly and coherently as possible, explaining how this project came into being and how the methodological approach emerged from the fieldwork itself. It begins by detailing the ethnographic element of the research, before progressing onto my use of visual methods, walking interviews and the ethical issues and considerations which underpin all of these approaches. This chapter does not intend to produce an essentially false story of the research which depicts a smooth and linear evolution. In reality, the methodological approaches taken emerged out of a combination of necessity, personal epistemological preference, the ‘jams’ and challenges that emerged during the research (Kane, 1998) and a general ‘logic of appropriateness’ (Greener, 2011). However, as will hopefully be outlined in the pages that follow, these methods were the ones which could most effectively achieve the objectives of the research and reveal the full complexity of parkour, the deviant-leisure nexus and how it manifests in urban space.

### **‘Choosing’ Ethnography**

“[Y]ou damned well better not pretend to be one of them, because they will test this out and one of two things will happen: either you will...get sucked into ‘participant’ observation’ of the sort you do not wish to undertake, or you will be exposed, with still greater negative consequences” (Polsky, 1971: 124)

## **Authors Fieldnotes**

*Standing atop a ledge trying to figure out a line to do, I feel frozen. I feel like I'm in Sonic's way as he's below me and directly across from me. I stand to one side as a gesture for him to do the line he wants while I figure out what to do. He gestures back with his palms up as if to say 'No, go ahead'. It appears that his positioning there is not to do a line, but to watch me. I've felt slightly tentative all day after recovering from three broken toes on a jump gone very wrong only a couple of weeks before. For most of the traceurs, though, this is no excuse. Sonic merely does it more passive-aggressively. I can't figure out something to do from this particular spot. He notices my reluctance and for some reason seems to revel in it. He smiles at me with a smug grin:*

*"Go on. Do something", he says in a daring tone.*

*This isn't playful banter. It's more of a test. I've only been out with the traceurs a half-dozen times and my technical abilities are far from solid. They're likely to be even less so under pressure. I feel his distaste for me. I feel it deep in my body and I feel my chest and legs tighten with a reciprocated anger that's more out of feeling threatened than it is offended. **'Fuck you'**, I think to myself. This is certainly not the best example of the welcoming, inclusive and supportive community they all claim it to be. I feel panicked, pressured and uncomfortable. My mind locks up. I can't see. I can't see what to do, can't see any good line of structures and movements. I know they're there, but I can't see them.*

*"Come on then! Don't be soft." He continues to jeer.*

*He suggests a particular line that is way beyond my current abilities and he knows it. He does the line himself smoothly and effortlessly as a bit of 'show and tell', although he himself nearly slips on a slightly wet rail. The rail he wants me to 'precision' onto first is still slightly damp and slippery after a down-pour the night before, and there's a wall directly behind it just waiting to bludgeon me if I were to misjudge the line and fall into it face-first. I'm not losing any teeth for this bloke.*

*I want off this ledge. I want no part of it. But I can't just drop down off it without doing anything. There's a narrow wall off to the side and just below me with a rail beyond it. I dive towards it hands-first and do a simple dive-kong over it, lazy vaulting over the rail in feeble retreat. I feel stupid. I feel humiliated and soft. What's worse is that I feel like a bad*

*researcher. I've pissed off one of the participants and made it pretty clear I can't stand him. I'm clearly angry and I've failed to do the line and instead brought attention to my temporary inability to immerse myself in the ways of parkour. This in itself feels like a failure.*

*I overhear him moan to TK, "May as well get back behind his desk and read some books". Realising I can hear him, he turns to me:*

*"You're a fit, healthy bloke. Look at you. You're a bloke who's in as good a shape as any of us and you won't do 'owt. It's not like you haven't trained with us before". He shakes his head, emphasising the 'bloke' both times. TK tells him to shut up, and reminds Sonic that he only felt comfortable doing that line on this spot six months ago, and he'd been doing parkour for three years.*

**September, 2013.**

The fieldnotes above would appear to be a confirmation of Ned Polsky's (1971) warning that "you damned well better not pretend to be one of them". As the following pages will reveal this is a warning which, when applied to this research and this researcher, simply does not apply. When reading criminology and sociology, ethnographic studies captured my imagination most and appeared to reveal the greatest depth of understanding, texture and nuance of the relationship between macro socio-economic structures and their manifestation in the micro-context of everyday life (Adler, 1993; Armstrong, 1998; Bourgois and Schoenberg, 2009; Contreras, 2013; Corrigan, 1979; Ditton, 1977; Ferrell, 1996; 2006; Hobbs, 1988; Parker, 1974; Winlow, 2001). Moreover, the ethnographic method held the greatest 'logic of appropriateness' for achieving the objective of this research (Greener, 2011). This immersive approach gave me the opportunity to *feel* parkour in an embodied sense, but it also gave me the opportunity to speak to security guards and observe how the traceurs were inconsistently tolerated and excluded from urban space. In the words of Whyte (1959), it revealed insights and lines of questioning that "I would not have had the sense to ask if I had been getting my information solely on an interview basis." Insights into the lived spatial dynamics of parkour's practice and control, how the flow of a parkour jam interacts with the 'rhythms' of the city, dancing around its ever-shifting and 'alive' consumer economy, contributing to its spatially and

temporally negotiated legitimacy and illegitimacy (see chapters 7 and 8). As Pink (2008: 193) writes:

“Following Casey’s (1996) argument that place is central to our way of being in the world and that we are thus always ‘emplaced’, the task of the reflexive ethnographer would be to consider how she or he is emplaced, and her or his role in the constitution of that place...By attending to the sensoriality and materiality of other people’s ways of being in the world, we cannot directly access their ‘collective’ memories, experiences or imaginations. However we can, by following their routes and attuning our bodies, rhythms, tastes, ways of seeing and more to theirs, begin to make places that are similar to theirs, and thus feel that we are similarly emplaced” (Pink, 2008: 193).

In the early autumn of 2013 I gained access to the NEPK parkour community not as a researcher but as a budding traceur. A complete novice to parkour and its community, my desire to get involved with parkour was initially undertaken purely as a leisure interest, a new sport which was engaging, different, relatively free of expense and a seemingly excellent way to stay in shape and socialise as my time demands and the cost of gym membership both increased. At the time I had no idea that it would be the sole focus of my doctoral thesis, but I quickly discovered that it could be. I initially began doctoral study with a view of pursuing a more policy-oriented thesis. My broad focus has always been upon young people, crime and deviance, with the initial intention to offer a critical appraisal of issues of crime and risk in the youth justice system. In some of my initial conversations with my fellow traceurs about what I ‘do’, I had mentioned that I was a doctoral student doing research on young people and risk. These discussions were brief and deliberately vague—at the time even I wasn’t sure of what I was ‘doing’. Nevertheless, many of them seemed intrigued by having a ‘researcher’ in their midst and they suggested that if I wanted to study young people and risk I was in the perfect place to do so.

With this level of pre-existing access, a participatory ethnography was overwhelmingly the most sensible option. Therefore, the ‘choice’ of research method was never open to much debate. As a matter of fact it was never much of a choice at all. Despite all of the academic arguments in favour of ethnography and my own epistemological leanings, the decision to engage in an ever-shifting role of *total researcher, researcher participant*

and *total participant* (Gans, 1967) was actually dictated to me by the traceurs themselves.

For example, 'Ziplock' (henceforth known as ZPK) was a senior figure within the NEPK community who warmed to me earliest and with whom I became closest throughout the ethnography. When I first discussed the possibility of doing research on parkour and freerunning he was enthusiastic and eager, prompting discussions while we were out on jams and engaging the other traceurs in discussion. In many ways his actions took a lot of pressure off me as the ethnographer in that I didn't have to be as conscious of negotiating that fine line between getting meaningful data and worrying about disillusioning the traceurs by asking a curiously high-volume of questions. How much of this was due to his general excitement to talk about parkour, and how much of it was a conscious effort to help me out, I'll never know. What I do know is that despite his warmth and generosity, his conditions were clear and uncompromising from my first outing with the traceurs as 'a researcher': "*We don't carry any passengers*", he told me. "*You've got to do what we do and train as we train. You don't get to just stand around and watch now that you're doing research. You've got to be a traceur, a freerunner*". This was a view firmly held by the rest of the NEPK community as well. When I first met Franny, a Yorkshireman, in October of 2013, he was astounded that a sociologist would be alongside him atop a building doing a 'roof mission'. After a moment's consideration, however, he saw the basic sense in the method, albeit without any discussion of epistemology or methodology: "*I guess you can't know 'owt about it unless you've done it though can yer? How can you write about it and understand it if you don't know what it feels like?*"

Moreover, everything about me and my own 'social script' (Coffey, 1999) demanded this total participant approach to my ethnography of parkour. To refer back to the fieldnotes that opened this chapter, on the day in question I was wearing shorts, trainers and a loose-fitting vest. Putting it as modestly as possible, as someone who still goes to the gym, works-out and lifts weights regularly, I possess a muscular physique which, in this attire, is observable to all. To Sonic, like the other traceurs I am clearly equipped with the physical tools to do the line and the hardened body capable of absorbing any physical punishment. The characteristics Sonic pulled out are notable: young, male and

in-shape. At this early stage of the research, I was still attempting to follow the orthodox lessons of methodological how-to textbooks which imbue ethnography with a warning toward that unfortunate phrase of 'going native' in reverence of the myth of 'objectivity' (Hammersley, 1992; see Ancrum, 2012 for a critique). In my mind I was the researcher-traceur, but certainly researcher first. While I was figuring out how to navigate the messy array of participatory roles (Adler and Adler, 1987; Gans, 1967), I came to realise that the traceurs did not care about my professional or research identity one bit. Nor would they give me the time to figure it out. When I was out with them, I was out as one of them. Contradicting Polsky (1971) and drawing on the words of Winlow (2001:17), if I wanted the research to have any chance of success "*I damned well did have to pretend to be one of them*".

This precise statement was expressed by Winlow when considering the methodological quandaries of his research on crime, bouncers and his use of violence. Ferrell (1996; 1998) found it necessary to avoid hiding behind the label of researcher when confronted with arrest with other graffiti writers in a back-alley, spray paint in-hand. In Treadwell's ethnography into football hooliganism he had to draw upon his natural physical and cultural capital and respond to situations of confrontation just as any participant would (Williams and Treadwell, 2008: 64-65). Similarly, Wacquant (2004) discovered that in order to develop any respect and gain analytical depth to his study of a Southside Chicago boxing gym, he had to get in and 'glove up' amongst the other fighters. It would appear that the immersive participation and willingness to sacrifice one's body and safety is a fairly common necessity for researchers studying hyper-masculine environments. This seems to particularly be the case for those involving risk and significant amounts of 'bodily capital' (Wacquant, 2004), especially among young male researchers who share a certain amount of biographical and physical congruence with their participants. The willingness to fully participate was vital for the ongoing viability of the research and, as we shall see in later chapters, its epistemological value was significant. Notwithstanding these methodological positives, it was also important for my ongoing health and safety. The research was always going to demand a certain level of participation and as any traceur will tell you, to practice parkour half-heartedly is the quickest way to serious injury.

## The Research Environment

The City of Newcastle is a natural location for this study and perfectly encapsulates some of the themes addressed by this thesis around the shift from industrial modernity to post-industrial late modernity and consumer culture. As we have already seen in chapter 2, while once an industrial hub of Great Britain, Newcastle has regenerated around shopping centres, restaurants, an infamous night-time economy (Hollands, 1995) and a general culture of consumption. As such, it provided an ideal public site to look at issues of spatial confrontation and how parkour collided with the guardians of the urban consumer economy; with the research site of the city itself providing a broader historical, political and economic backdrop to these encounters. This required a short move up the train line from Durham to allow my research to be less structured and more natural in which I could respond to a text message or group Facebook chat organising an impromptu jam, roof mission or exploration of a new spot. I rented a small flat a mere thirty seconds away from the Discovery spot and got on with the research.

Throughout the course of the research I conducted unstructured interviews and amassed copious fieldnotes well in-excess of 300,000 words. Of course, the research setting itself was often entirely unstructured, allowing me to gather data simply by turning up and generally 'being around'. This had the benefit of providing me with surprising data or data I would have never received or had the sense to think about had I been conducting structured interviews. But it also allowed me to avoid the methodological pitfalls of leading my participants or pressuring them to say things that were not really their own words or thoughts. Ideas or questions often came up in the late nights and long days spent writing up fieldnotes and these could quite easily be followed up on more naturally at the next meet-up rather than pestering to arrange another interview. For the most obvious reasons it was impractical to take notes in this research setting, and unlike Ditton (1977) there were never any lavatories at parkour spots to which I could sneak off and write down fieldnotes. The best I could do on the long days out was to use the 'notes' app on my phone to quickly type down any keywords or notes whilst pretending to send a text; or shoot as many videos and pictures as I could. As we will see, this latter tactic was a surprisingly reliable and effective aide-memoire. Due to parkour's highly visual culture, it was not unusual for

someone to shoot still and moving images, images which provided evocative multi-sensorial embodied, spatial and tactile recollections of particular spots, moments and events. Therefore, in this sense, I feel confident positioning this as a more traditional ethnography of immersion, rather than mere participant observation.

Ethnography undeniably has its shortcomings and more questionable aspects around validity, 'objectivity' and issues of generalisation. These debates have been discussed in-depth elsewhere; therefore I don't intend to re-hash them here in an argument that will never be resolved (Ancrum, 2012; Bryman, 1988; Cicourel, 1967; Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Pink, 2008). All research methods have their situated utility when applied to a particular topic or study, or when the relationship between theory and method is appropriate (Pink, 2013). To borrow from Greener (2011), my view on the matter is to justify the ethnographic method according to its 'logic of appropriateness' and how it epistemologically aids in achieving the objectives of the research.

A number of studies on parkour have explored various embodied, affective, emotional, political and spatial aspects of parkour's practice (Angel, 2011; Brunner, 2011; Lamb, 2014; Saville, 2008). However no study has attempted a comprehensive criminological explanation of the contradictions within parkour and the deviant-leisure nexus in urban space. Due to parkour being the predominant preserve of geographers, sociologists and leisure scholars, a criminological discussion of parkour and the relationship between deviance and leisure, transgression and conformity has often been left as an appendage or side-issue. Within the literature there appears to be an accepted assumption that parkour is 'deviant' simply because it transgresses the spatial rules of the hyper-regulated late-capitalist city. This was something which, after only a few outings with the traceurs, I felt it necessary to problematize and re-examine. As we shall see throughout this thesis (particularly chapters 4 and 6) the traceurs engaged with parkour as a form of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2007) and often drifted across the line from amateurism to use parkour as a form of lifestyle work or 'devotee occupation' (Stebbins, 1995). To me, examining this side of parkour as much as its practice out in the city could make for a far more interesting and critical project which could theorise and explain the unavoidable contradictions within parkour and, more broadly, within

leisure, identity and the flow of capital back to the inner city in late modern consumer capitalism (Smith, 1984; 1996).

In order to accomplish this, I quite simply had to find out at the deepest cognitive and subconscious levels what the traceurs wanted from their practice of parkour and what parkour *meant* in the lives of these young men in the late modern milieu. Combined with ethnographic experience of parkour's spatial exclusion from the post-industrial city, and armed with a theoretical exploration of the cultural and political-economic structures of late-capitalism, this thesis could theorise and explain both sides of the contradictions surrounding parkour and its fluid position between deviance and leisure. Why is parkour so important to them? Why do they do it? What can this reveal about parkour's relationship to conformity and deviance and how are they responding to the very real macro social structures which shape their lives? To me, it was clear that in order to give a more critical and in-depth account of parkour and the deviant-leisure nexus, I could not limit and isolate the study of parkour to my participatory ethnographic experience of its practice in the city. It could not be divorced from the wider orbits, challenges and desires in the traceurs' lives. I needed to provide "a clear, firsthand picture", of the wider life experience "of ordinary people, on their grounds and on their terms" (Liebow, 1967: 5-6).

This, therefore, necessitated not just practicing and observing parkour and understanding the 'taste and ache of action' (Wacquant, 2004). It required going deeper into the lives of my participants outside of the parkour jams, training sessions and exhibitions. In the course of this research I went to birthday parties and met their families and girlfriends. I went training or got beers with them when those girlfriends became ex-girlfriends. I travelled with them, helped them prepare for job interviews, helped them move house and, for all intents and purposes, was a regular feature in their lives as much as any of the other traceurs. In the countless interviews and conversations I had, I asked them about all of these issues and in doing so I gained an insight into the role parkour occupied within the wider orbits, struggles, challenges and anxieties of their lives. This pervasive presence in their lives made it difficult to know what aspects of my interactions with them were pertinent and ethically suitable for research and which were off-limits. I was living in the field, with one of the participants living on my sofa for a longer period than I would have liked during the course of the research (see

Ancrum, 2012 on living in the field). As a sociologist everything was of interest and as Polsky (1971) has written, ethnographers should be fully immersed in the research culture. Blumer (1969) notes that empathy with one's participants is a critical aspect of ethnography, and all of the trials and tribulations of my participants' lives were of value to the research. However unlike a journalist, I could never ask if this was 'off the record' or not. The method I employed when it came to the traceurs personal lives was a rather simple one, but one I maintain to be ethical and effective. The things they said whilst being recorded, or out training with other traceurs with full consent was fair game for direct inclusion to the research. Personal trials and tribulations that were of value, but observed or discussed in the more ambiguous areas of my ethnography could inform the research, but never referred to directly or explicitly. These valuable aspects of my fieldwork would be discussed generally and vaguely without any specificity to individuals.

No matter the challenges it presents, the value of this 'inside view' far outweighs its dilemmas. As Liebow (1967: 8) has written, it "makes it easier to avoid structuring the material in ways that might be alien to the material itself". My broader ethnographic approach made it easier to avoid retarding the study of parkour in ways which might misrepresent the crucial motivational aspect of the traceurs' practice. An exclusive and disproportionate focus on parkour's transgressive practice in urban space would inevitably lead to what this thesis argues is an ill-theorised account of parkour itself; one which over-emphasises parkour's deviance and eschews its more conformist role in aiding the traceurs' navigation through the difficult transitions into adulthood and the pressures of late-modern society and culture. As Pink (2013: 7) writes, the relationship between theory and method is vital for any research project, and this approach resulted in a perfect marriage between theory and method as my foray into the lives of my participants provided insights that were invaluable in shaping the theoretical perspective.

What the reader must appreciate when considering these epistemological discussions is that in many ways, despite being a complete novice within parkour, the traceurs and I were more similar than we were different. Indeed, in many ways I am a product of the same cultural milieu and historical moment that the traceurs depicted here occupy. Ethnography could arguably be described as the on-going process of moving from the

self to the other. That is, understanding the self and one's own position in the research and how age, race, gender, social class, cultural capital, political beliefs and even theoretical inclinations affect the research site (see Coffey, 1999). The past couple of decades of criminological ethnography have seen widespread calls for a 'reversal of the ethnographic gaze' (Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Kane, 1998). An increasing analysis of the self and embracing how emotions and biographical congruence or incongruence with one's research participants can not only make ethnography more methodologically robust, but also offer theoretical insights into the social phenomena under study (Wakeman, 2014). I constantly engaged in this process of moving from the self to the other. However, it was the similarities of my own social script and personal biography that enabled me to gain the significant levels of access and closeness with the traceurs described above with relative ease.

I completed this research in my early twenties, and when I joined the NEPK community and began training with its members, there was a small number of traceurs that were significantly younger than me, still in their mid-teens and attending secondary school. The ethnography drew predominantly on a core of approximately 30 traceurs who were a consistent presence throughout the research, but I came into contact with hundreds throughout the research as we travelled to different cities, events and even countries to practice parkour. Membership in the NEPK community, like any community, wasn't rigidly set in stone. Various traceurs drifted in and out of the group as their interest fluctuated, some were only around outside of term times as they came home from university, and some I only saw a handful of times. However, with the vast majority of participants I shared extremely similar social scripts. Like me, they were all male (with the exception of one), all white (with the exception of two), and from a similar class background to my own with similar cultural interests. Also like me, they were predominantly in their early twenties ranging between 20 and 25. They were all navigating the increasingly difficult transitions into adulthood of trying to find jobs and hold down stable relationships. Just as I was, they were attempting to figure out a career and lifestyle that could pay the rent, but wouldn't bore them and eviscerate any sense of self-esteem or plunge them into cultural obsolescence (see Smith, 2014 on 'extended adolescence' and contemporary transitions into adulthood).

Even where there were apparent divergences there was a great deal of similarity. I am a Southerner and was a doctoral student pursuing a budding career into academia, while they were traceurs engaging in a form of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2007). However, many of the traceurs hoped and did develop this amateur 'serious' leisure pursuit into a career and means of making a living as a form of 'devotee occupation' (Stebbins, 1995). Many of them became stunt workers, professional parkour coaches, community youth workers or started clothing lines, while others dabbled in these areas and were paid for doing so as a form of supplementary income. As chapter 6 reveals, they did so to avoid working longer hours in monotonous jobs they hated and to have an entire lifestyle geared around a passion they loved. Almost all of the traceurs had, at some time during the research, a low-pay insecure job that sapped the soul without filling the pocket and impinged upon the late-modern cultural imperative to live a lifestyle of freedom, fulfilment and identity. Similarly, academia is often seen as a form of 'devotee occupation' (Stebbins, 1995), providing satisfaction and a sense of identity, esteem and enjoyable lifestyle. Put simply, we were both groups of young people seeking legitimate transitions into adulthood which could help us escape spending 40 hours a week in a job we hate and avoid the cultural irrelevance of a life unlived.

I was also blessed with a certain congruence in my personal biographical history that went beyond sharing a similar age and gender with the majority of the traceurs. This was a kind of raw cultural capital that cannot really be mimicked or developed through a preparation for fieldwork (see Wakeman, 2014; Winlow, 2001: 12-19). I am naturally athletic and was in good physical condition at the time. However, I was also previously an elite level basketball player; playing professionally and representing my country at the international level for many years. This may seem irrelevant but in fact came to be extremely beneficial in a number of ways. Basketball is an explosive sport and the physical requirements of agility, balance, leaping ability and the muscular endurance for plyometric bounding also happen to be a lot of the physical qualities required for parkour. Moreover, this previous experience provided me with more than just raw physical ability to aid my ethnography of parkour. While basketball is one of the most popular mainstream sports in the world, it is also undeniably a 'lifestyle sport'

(Wheaton, 2013). Clothing style, music, and attitude<sup>37</sup> all make basketball not just a game to be played but an entire lifestyle to be lived, replete with all the accessories typical of a lifestyle sport and the embracing of basketball as an entire identity: being a 'baller'. I had a pre-existing understanding of what it meant to be involved in a cultural lifestyle sport and how important it was to keep up with the style, the parkour news and the latest developments in the parkour world. Just as basketball has famous 'runs' at hallowed 'street courts' around the world; the parkour scene has notable places and events such as the Lisses 'pilgrimage'<sup>38</sup> or annual 'mega jams' run by various parkour teams in which traceurs gather from around the country to train together. This prior experience of how participation in a cultural lifestyle sport goes beyond its mere practice provided me with a situated knowledge which was immediately transferrable to my academic research and invaluable in cementing my legitimacy with the traceurs. I instinctively subscribed to Twitter feeds and particular YouTube channels; watching parkour documentaries and related films not out of a conscious decision as a researcher, but out of the habit of being involved in a cultural lifestyle sport. This gave me things to talk about with the traceurs and made them more certain of my authenticity, commitment, and status of being 'alright'. Sociologically, the topic was interesting with a more potentially broad-ranging impact for criminology. Ethnographically, it was a perfect fit with my own biography and social script. It felt like a piece of research just waiting to be done.

## **Against Autoethnography**

As Bradley Garrett (2013) has acknowledged, because ethnography is a process of observing, interpreting, analysing and portraying another culture or set of activities, all ethnographic research carries a degree autoethnographic qualities (Garrett, 2013: 46). The idea of an 'objective ethnography' has been roundly rejected by some (Young and

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<sup>37</sup> *And1, Nike, Adidas, Air Jordan* and others are all well-known as basketball brands which sell not just basketball sporting gear, but clothes, shoes and accessories to be worn off the court when one is not playing. Basketball magazines such as *SLAM! Magazine* are essential reads for basketball players wanting to keep up with the latest style and events. Online forums such as [streetball.co.uk](http://streetball.co.uk) have parallels with lifestyle sports such as parkour or urban exploration forums like [americanparkour.com](http://americanparkour.com); [worldwidejam.tv](http://worldwidejam.tv) and the 28 days later forum.

<sup>38</sup> Lisses, in France, is considered the 'birthplace' of parkour. It is where Sebastian Foucan and David Belle first began training together with the Yamakasi parkour team. The traceurs would make an annual trip to Lisses, described as a 'pilgrimage'. There was also other events such as the Airborn Academy Jam and the annual NEPK mega-jam.

Lee, 1996), with others suggesting that emotions and the self is not a problem to be resolved but an element to be explored reflexively as to how it can affect the production of knowledge or indeed actively unveil understandings of the social world under observation (Coffey, 1999). As Hochschild (1979) and Fleetwood (2009) have suggested, to do fieldwork is to do emotion-work, and ethnography is a constant dynamic process of negotiation between the researcher and the researched. Other studies of parkour (Brunner, 2011) and similar urban lifestyle sports such as Brad Garrett's ethnography of urban exploration (2013) have taken an almost exclusively autoethnographic approach. However, throughout the research I attempted to avoid becoming too embroiled within an autoethnographic approach and allowing the research to spiral into the narcissistic study of "me". As Delamont (2007) has vehemently argued, I was not of enough sociological or criminological significance to be the sole focus of the research; nor would such an approach help achieve the objectives of the research. As mentioned previously, in order to understand parkour's relation to deviance, transgression and conformity I had to look at the lives of my *participants*, who they were and what was happening in their lives to understand the full scope of parkour and the deviant-leisure nexus.

This is not to say that autoethnography has no place in this research. As we shall see in chapter 7, autoethnographic vignettes can reveal the more transgressive aspects of parkour and how it engages with urban space. Furthermore, the autoethnographic and the 'carnal sociological' (Wacquant, 2004) aspects of this fieldwork can offer powerful insights into issues such as *jouissance* (Fink, 1995) which are of significant interest to ultra-realist, transcendental materialist and deviant leisure perspectives. In order to understand the motivations, desires and sensual allure of parkour I had to conduct ethnography not just *of* the body, but *from* the body (Wacquant, 2015). This is to understand issues of affect and the unconscious, requiring aspects of this ethnography to start not at a symbolic level of meanings and words, but at the base level of "the brute fact that the human agent...is a sentient and suffering being of flesh and blood" (Wacquant, 2015: 5) and working out from there. In doing so, these autoethnographic moments which describe experiential practice assist in understanding parkour's *jouissance* through its subconscious, embodied and libidinal drives and energies in

order to explore how these are situated, cultivated and contextually prohibited within the social, economic and cultural context of late-capitalism and the city.

This last point is vital for making the autoethnographic elements of this research meaningful. Criticisms of autoethnography have noted how much of it is based around cultivating an evocative and emotive relationship with the reader (Anderson, 2006; Delamont, 2007). Even Wakeman (2014: 708), an advocate of the autoethnographic approach, writes that in much of autoethnography “its goal is emotional resonance over and above any analytical utility”. Therefore, what he and Anderson (2006) propose is not an *emotive* autoethnography, but an *analytic* autoethnography which avoids self-absorbed accounts and instead attempts to analyse the emotive and experiential value of autoethnography within its wider socio-structural settings. This study attempts to use autoethnography in the same vein. To use the fieldnotes above as an example, my own emotions around Sonic’s testing and taunting are of analytical value in understanding how the neoliberal characteristic of *competitive individualism* (Hall, 2012a) seeps into parkour despite the community’s self-espoused ethos of support, non-competitiveness, and a focus on individual progress and development that is not contextualised in relation to others. It has value in triangulating this experience with observations of other traceurs who have experienced similar taunting and passive-aggressive competitiveness which we will explore in greater depth in chapter 6. For the objectives of this research, this is a more preferable use of autoethnography than merely an illustrative tool for the ‘cowboy ethnographer’ (Contreras, 2013) to tell tall-tales about their edgy and exciting research and show off their street-savvy ethnographic credentials (see Hall, 2013; Hobbs, 2013 for examples of these critiques).

## **Collaborative Visual Ethnography, Theory and Method**

Of course when undertaking a participatory ethnography of parkour, avoiding a disproportionate amount of autoethnography is challenging. Quite simply this is because training and jumping off walls and between buildings requires absolute concentration in order to avoid injury. The more I progressed in training, the more the traceurs encouraged me to train. Needless to say, it is unwise to attempt analytical observation of one’s participants as you’re about to jump off a building comes. This is a

health-hazard to say the least. During one brief period of the research reading back over my fieldnotes, I noticed how immersed I was becoming in my own practice. My fieldnotes were almost exclusively about my own practice. This was certainly useful and I was still conducting interviews and spending valuable time with the traceurs outside of training. But during our crucial time out in the city I was finding it increasingly difficult to get outside of myself and dedicate more time to observing others. I had to find a way to naturally step back from training and observe more without drawing the ire or suspicion of the other traceurs.

Fortunately, one can take on a wide variety of simultaneous roles during a parkour jam: the dedicated trainer, the jokester, the coach, the photographer. While for the traceurs these roles gave them the opportunity to take a break when they couldn't be bothered to train, as a researcher these were highly useful in helping the careful negotiation of training the appropriate amount whilst also stepping back and occupying different roles within jams in order to focus my attention on the wider ethnographic events unfolding around me. The role I opted to take on more frequently to assist this process was that of the photographer. At each new spot I would often be the first person to do a series of lines, runs and moves, training with intensity for a while, only to then dial it back, grab the camera and fade into the background. This turned out to be a pretty useful tactic which I employed often, enabling me to still participate in one of the normal practices that accompany any parkour 'jam session' whilst also being able to more keenly observe the interpersonal, social and spatial dynamics on display without being viewed as a strange 'passenger' keeping an 'unusually close eye' (Winlow, 2001) on the traceurs' activities. Eventually, it occurred to me that more than just being a ploy to facilitate more observation, this would be a useful method in and of itself. The visual representation of parkour and other similar lifestyle sports is central to its practice (Garrett, 2013; Raymen, forthcoming). Therefore it made sense to immerse myself in this practice as well and understand parkour's 'spectacle', the traceurs' self-(re)presentation and visual dissemination. Moreover, it could provide ample opportunity for a visual commentary on issues around conformity, display, deviance and masculinity. While this may appear like a rather haphazard way to conduct research, McGuigan (1997:2) notes that "as most good researchers know, [in ethnographic research] it is not unusual to make up the methods as you go along".

Similarly, Sarah Pink (2013: 49) argues that “[i]n practice, decisions are best made once researchers are in a position to assess which specific visual methods will be appropriate or ethical in a particular research context, therefore allowing researchers to account for their relationships with informants and their experience and knowledge of local visual cultures” (Pink, 2007: 40). Photography can be a highly invasive method (Wiles et al, 2008) and, quite understandably, is applicable to relatively few criminological research projects. However, parkour has a strong visual culture. Taking pictures, recording video, cutting and editing it is a fundamental part of its wider practice. All of the traceurs had multiple social media and YouTube accounts geared largely or even exclusively to this purpose. It seemed to be a methodological choice that made perfect sense, so I purchased a Nikon DSLR camera similar to those used by the traceurs and began shooting still and moving images.

I first approached this initial foray into visual ethnography from what could be described as a ‘documentary photography’ position (Ferrell and Van de Voorde, 2010). Drawing from cultural criminology’s methodological ideas, I attempted to perform what Ferrell et al (2008) describe as ‘instant ethnography’, a seemingly contradictory term in which the slow, time-consuming depth of understanding gained from ethnography is used to capture powerful thematic moments ‘as fast as the close of the shutter’ (Ferrell et al, 2008). This seemed perfect for a visual ethnography of parkour which could capture the decisive moments of space, place and spatial control. Overall, I wanted to use visual methods as a means of capturing ‘non-representational’ ways of knowing space and place (Rose, 2007; Thrift, 2008). I noticed how the traceurs imbued seemingly unremarkable spaces with meaning as a place-making practice. I quickly observed how they actively connected with the city in an embodied way of ‘sensuous knowing’ (O’Neill, 2004), developing a tactile knowledge and relationship to the built environment. With regards to my understanding of the relationship between deviance and leisure in parkour, such observations were vital. I therefore wanted to take pictures which captured this tactile knowing of hand-on-brick; the active relationship between the body and city as a site of play and adventure; and the traceurs’ relationship to modes of spatial control.

For example, as seen below, I took pictures of the ‘Discovery’ spot at various stages throughout the ethnography. To anyone other than the traceurs, the Discovery spot is a frankly unremarkable walkway to the entrance of a museum. However, this space was the central meeting point and spiritual home of North-East parkour where dozens of like-minded friends would come together at the same time every Saturday in a comforting and familiar routine. When the Discovery spot was all but demolished to make way for the ‘Challenger 2’ tank to memorialise the North-East’s industrial manufacturing history, the traceurs memorialised this place and their sense of loss in their own way; placing flowers on temporary metal fencing much in the way loved ones present flowers at the site of a tragic and sudden death.





In other solo-efforts, I aimed to capture instant ethnographic moments that went beyond the spectacular but essentially false visual productions of parkour that one saw on YouTube and Instagram (Angel, 2011)—what could be paralleled with Garrett’s (2013) notion of the ‘hero shot’. My early pictures endeavoured to show the flow of bodies in space, a tactile ‘learning’ of space and the decisive moments which capture the ambiguity of legitimacy that surrounds the traceur’s practice in urban space.

However, the traceurs were largely disinterested in the pictures I was taking. When I would share my images they would nod and offer a polite ‘cool’, but the pictures were not exciting or intriguing them. Moreover, I appeared to be taking pictures *alone*. This is a problem within a visual culture which engages in a highly collaborative and iterative process which always involves several people. As Harper, (2012) notes, when researching within highly visual cultures it is good practice to understand and align

oneself with the visual practices of participants. Irrespective of who the cameraman is, the parkour shot is a team effort. It involves collaboration between the athlete and the cameraman, while other traceurs pitch-in with ideas on how to make the shot better, how to get it in a way that's better for the cameraman or the athlete. They look at previous takes and make suggestions. My relative exclusion from this process was a problem in itself, not to mention how I intended to marry these methods to a developing focus on the deviance-leisure nexus within a growing commitment to an ultra-realist perspective (Hall and Winlow, 2015).



This lack of collaborative engagement was partially because I was trying to take more 'candid' images at times when the traceurs did not know they were being photographed. But more influential than this was the fact that within the visual culture of parkour there was a shrinking 'ideological space' for such images (Sontag, 1977: 18). As Sontag (1977: 17) writes of the ideological space of the image: "A photograph that brings news of some unsuspected zone of misery cannot make a dent in public opinion unless there is an appropriate context of feeling and attitude". Parkour has become increasingly commodified and mainstreamed, with the entire scene holding a close relationship to 'brand presence', Instagram followers, and YouTube channel views (Batty, 2016). Like many other traceurs and freerunners around the world, my participants were

attempting at starting up several different brand opportunities such as clothing lines, gyms, or coaching clubs (see chapter 6).

Consequently, the lived reality of everyday training in parkour has come to play an increasingly limited role in the spectacle of its visual production. As Angel (2011) writes of her observations from public performances of parkour; the greatest audience appreciation comes from the spectacular, the acrobatics and the daring leaps: “Very few parkour specific moves such as catleaps or precisions warrant such celebration due to a lack of understanding of the skill needed to skilfully execute them” (Angel, 2011: 163). I brought this topic up again with Vase who was shooting a promo for his new clothing line. We did several shots, all of which were at night. One shot captured traceurs dashing through an abandoned warehouse in all black, wearing balaclavas like ninjas in the night. Another was in a dimly-lit underground car park, where Ross was doing a series of acrobatic flips and spins. The emphasis was on the atmosphere, the gritty and grimy surroundings and the spectacular movements. However, none of these images represented the reality of a day out training with the traceurs. These were separate events, concerned with spectacle and image. This problem went on for a couple of months. Stephane Kane (1998) has discussed the ‘jams’ that arise in ethnographic fieldwork; those problems and contradictions that appear to be difficult to resolve or simply unresolvable. Kane (1998) advocates an embracing of these ‘jams’. Not avoiding or artificially working around them but fully entering their complexity and instead opting to “stop and look at what the jam itself might mean” (Kane, 1998: 133) and what it could illuminate about the world of parkour.

What became apparent was that the power, influence and presence of the objective structures and ideological systems of consumer capitalism (see chapters 3 and 4) were quite plainly present in the *falsity* of the image and its production. As Phil Carney (2010) observes, Western society has long been accustomed to conceptualising the image as a *flawed reproduction*. It is illusory, misleading, and leads us down the seductive but problematic route of analysing the image with culturally reductionist readings. Carney, therefore, urges a theoretical reorientation of our understanding of the image, its meanings and symbolism not in terms of a re-presentation of reality, but as a process of production which is imbued with reality itself:

“[A]nother perspective on photography is possible: it *produces* more than it reproduces. It is no longer a deficit but a surplus. It is less a pale symbol and more a social force. What *really happens* occurs in and through the photograph. Understood in this way, we are now obliged to relegate the logic of meaning and simulation to its proper place and appreciate the social practice of photography as *production*. Instead of thinking of the photograph as a deficient image of something else, what if we think of it as a social process of producing images in the real, or images in fantasy?” (Carney, 2010: 18)

Therefore, I extended Carney’s words to a *methodological* reorientation in order to incorporate realist perspectives. Rather than explicitly producing images as a lone researcher, I took Carney’s (2010) lead and opted to get behind the image and cast a methodological and analytical gaze toward the collaborative *process* of visual production. For the purposes of a more theoretically nuanced understanding of parkour and contemporary culture, it seemed that rather than ignore such images because of their falsity, it was logical to immerse myself in the reality of the collaborative process through which these false images of parkour came into being. In doing so, I began to observe and ask questions of what the traceurs were photographing or filming; how they’re shooting it and why; where they’re sharing and using these images and for what purposes? Furthermore, by focusing on the motivations, meanings and process *behind* the images, I could situate this process of visual production within the wider context of contemporary visual culture and consumer capitalism.

Of course, such an approach is not entirely new. Bradley Garrett’s (2013) research on urban exploration involved a collaborative visual ethnography with other members of the UE scene. Other creative approaches to collaborative visual methods have been O’Neill’s (2004) participatory action research (PAR) based on the concept of ‘ethno-mimesis’. However, where the approach proposed here differs is the crucial relationship between theory and method. O’Neill (2004) employs ethno-mimesis as a phenomenological, hermeneutic approach of understanding the ‘multiple realities’ of the world in a way that remains uncommitted to a metanarrative. While I continued to take pictures which captured some of my interests, I spent more time asking the traceurs if they wanted me to shoot any pictures or videos. Quite quickly I became more involved in the iterative visual process described above and quite often this had nothing to do with shooting images or lines which had any resemblance to ‘real’ parkour. One of

the first instances was shooting a few images for TK, EJ and Walker, all of whom were developing reasonably sized social media followings. TK wanted a new profile picture for his professional parkour page, while EJ and Dean wanted some action shots to capture them as freerunners and athletes.

### ***Author's Fieldnotes***

*We all got down to the Quayside spots early in the day to get some training in and maximise daylight. EJ and Walker got warmed up and immediately started training and we began figuring out different lines, runs and movements which I could shoot. Some were precisions, others were vaults and catleaps. None of them satisfied EJ or Walker. They were too boring, too 'ground level'. "I want to get something where people are gonna be like 'SHIT, look how high he is'", EJ said, "or something with a cool angle or light, you know?"*

*I suggested that if they wanted that then we should do a roof gap or something similar, but neither agreed. Both of them said they needed something that was relatively simple to do so they could do it over and over and pick the best shot out of a number of them. Jumping a big roof gap 10 times was just asking for something to go wrong. 'Huse weighed in pretty quickly, asking why we were trying to shoot full lines. Instead, he suggested doing one thing that was really easy to get big height where you didn't have to worry about the landing or what came after and then shoot it from a good angle which could amplify its spectacle. EJ picks out a spot. It's a diagonal leap off the top of the steps and toward the railing running down the sides. There's a slight drop, but the jump is so simple it's almost comical. Nevertheless, EJ can get big height and tells me and 'Huse to start looking for angles which can disguise the simplicity of the jump. We find a spot looking at the jump head on, lower than EJ's landing spot which makes the angle look better and where we can crop out what's below the run-off wall to make the angle more deceiving.*

*After EJ's done it the first time, 'Huse suggests placing someone directly behind his flight-path who would be visible in the shot. I'm not so sure. I argue that it might ruin the shot and make it look messy, but 'Huse argues that's the entire point. He reckons it has the double bonus of making it look less staged and more like a real training shot, plus it enhances the height and angle. We pick Sonic, the shortest guy among us, and stand him next to the pillar. It works perfectly. EJ always gets good height anyway, but his form is great as it looks like he's sitting down in mid-air directly above someone's head, with what*

*appears to be a big drop off below. All that's left is for EJ to make some cosmetic touches. He grayscales everything and colour's himself in; making the image more stark and centring attention on him.*

*June, 2014*



Such moments were not uncommon with the traceurs. The shot I did for Walker later that day was also quite a simple jump. It was a small 8-foot gap crossing the water between the Gateshead millennium bridge and the Quayside pathway. I climbed over the bridge railings and sat on part of the structure with the camera pointed up just as the daylight was fading. Walker was going to do the gap above me, while I shot off a series of pictures and we'd choose the best one after adjusting for lighting. It was a 'hero shot' if I ever saw one. The entire point of the image was for it to be taken in a place that he absolutely shouldn't be. In Walker's mind, there was no question of the illegitimacy of the traceurs presence in and around the bridge as opposed to other spots where our legitimacy was more ambiguous and spatially negotiated (see chapters 7 and 8). It was for this precise reason of transgression that Walker wanted the image taken here. Moreover, the bridge wasn't even a parkour spot. Besides the gap Walker was clearing, there was very little to do parkour-wise in and around the bridge. The image was even better than expected. The angle of the photograph made the gap appear much wider

than it was, with the light and later editing providing a faceless silhouette. However the photograph and, more pertinently, the image and identity this would portray for Walker as a transgressive, risk-taking, and creatively artistic young man was far more important than taking images that depicted the reality of parkour.



The issue of transgression was a common theme in the traceurs visual productions. When TK and the other traceurs were trying to get some profile images for their social media pages, not only did the pictures have nothing to do with parkour, but they wanted to shoot them in an abandoned dilapidated warehouse—an old vestige of industrial modernity—which was covered in graffiti, rubble, and dirt. As Franny emphasised, the image had to be grimy, had to be ‘urban’. By urban, the traceurs didn’t mean the city, but the transgressive iconography of the ‘streets’; dimly lit, graffiti-covered places at the ‘edge’ of the bright lights of the mainstream city. There would often be a scene of a traceur running through the city, with some rap and hip-hop music which culturally popularised and commodified street cultural tropes and associations with criminality (Ilan, 2012), something common to movies based around parkour such as *Les Samurais des Temps Modernes* (Besson, 2001) and *District 13* (Morel, 2004).



What is most important for the purposes of this chapter is that these theoretical insights (among many others) emerged from this methodological reorientation toward my visual ethnography. By relinquishing a certain amount of power and democratising the visual ethnographic process, my participants were at the heart of the visual ethnography, encouraging the traceurs to 'direct' me as a photographer and engage in the dialogic digital production of images. This ethnographic approach prioritised the way my *participants* wanted to produce images; whilst being able to move past their essential falsity and instead employ such falsity to say something real about the social world, the cultural milieu of lifestyle sports and the broader visual culture they occupy.

### **Walking Interviews**

Considering that I was studying both the practice and control of parkour within urban space, it made sense that I access and speak to those guardians of urban space who moved the traceurs on and maintained spatial specificity. I had encountered numerous private security guards during my time out with the traceurs. Therefore, half-way through my ethnography I opted to speak with some of them and try to use the existing contacts I had to snowball more interviews with other security guards around the city. It was the security guards with whom I was most concerned, primarily because they were the spatial authorities with whom we had the most frequent and sustained encounters. However, it was also because they represented the ambiguity surrounding

parkour's shifting legitimacy within the public urban realm. As we shall see in chapters 7 and 8, the combative 'battleground' language commonly used by criminologists and revanchist theorists to describe deviance, transgression and urban space didn't hold to be entirely true<sup>39</sup> (see Campbell, 2013; Ferrell, 2001; 2006; Ferrell et al, 2008; Mullins, 2006; Smith, 1996). While the traceurs carried a perpetual looming status of illegitimacy, their relationship to spatial authority was from a dichotomous or confrontational one. Rather, the traceurs were excluded from urban space at times and allowed to train for periods in others with great inconsistency. Moreover, many of the security guards appeared to have a significant amount of uncertainty around whether they could or should move the traceurs on; often doing so almost apologetically or with an apparent reluctance or confusion as to why they had to move them on.

This seemed of significance to understanding parkour's confusion position between deviance and leisure and I wanted to explore their narratives and perspectives to develop a more nuanced understanding of parkour's inclusion and exclusion from urban space. I visited a couple of the most familiar security guards and asked them to put me in touch with others who worked other parts of the city. I eventually ended up conducting 'walking interviews' with 11 private security guards on their beats. These interviews tended to last between 90 minutes and two hours and were all recorded with the permission and consent of the security guards. They merely asked that their names were changed and that any references to identifying aspects of space were fictionalised or obscured from the finished text.

While 11 walking interviews may seem too scant a sample from which to derive any legitimate insights into the governance of urban space, they in fact served as a more focused form of data collection which built upon the existing insights into the governance of urban space I observed during the fieldwork. During the course of spending time with the traceurs training throughout the city, we became familiar with security guards at a variety of spots where we were both welcomed and quickly excluded. Consequently, the fieldwork is rich with 'instant ethnographic' moments (Ferrell et al, 2008): impromptu conversations and observations of interactions and

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<sup>39</sup> Campbell (2013) perceptively observes this use of aggressive or combative spatial language in criminological titles such as *Holding Your Square* (Mullins, 2006); *Tearing Down the Streets* (Ferrell, 2001) and *Place-Hacking the City* (Garrett, 2013).

spatial negotiations which yielded significant organic insights into the social and cultural power dynamics and their spatializing effects. The 11 walking interviews merely built upon these ethnographic observations and discussions, while allowing for other more in-depth narratives and perspectives which didn't necessarily surface during the more spontaneous interactions in the field and which I may not have had the sense to consider (Whyte, 1993).

The decision to conduct 'walking interviews', as opposed to the more commonplace sit-down semi-structured interview, was informed by both practical and epistemological considerations. Practically, it was an easy and a relatively non-intrusive use of the security guards' time to join them during their working hours rather than cut into their time which they would rather spend with families and friends than speak to a researcher. Such an approach would likely yield disinterested and dismissive accounts of their practice. However, detached from the emplaced immediacy of their job and their beats, it would also likely render pre-structured narratives which would not reflect the realities of their jobs, their processes of decision-making and how they police public space (Hubbard and O'Neill, 2010). Considering that I was interested in exploring how they navigated the ambiguity around whom or what is allowed or not allowed in public space, it made epistemological sense to join them in the very sites which produce such ambiguity. Lee and Ingold (2006) have argued that there is a deep resonance between walking and ethnography. The immediacy of place but also the pedestrian aspect of talking whilst moving through the connective spatial tissue of these places allows for a detailed and textured understanding of space and place. Security guards often went into 'story-telling' mode, describing particular incidents or recalling specific encounters which helped illuminate a point they were making. This is what has been described as 'sensuous knowing' (O'Neill, 2004; O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010; Pink, 2008b) in which the places themselves actually evoke thoughts, ideas and opinions which would remain absent or wouldn't be encountered during a private sit-down interview. This thesis draws on Lefebvre's ideas around urban rhythms (1991; 2013) and the relationship between representational and non-representational understandings of space which are concerned with pre-symbolic emotional, affective and embodied experiences of space through parkour (see Farrugia et al, 2015; Thrift, 2008). This method was a perfect fit in this regard, achieving the mutually beneficial relationship between theory and method. I

got the opportunity to observe the security guards and watch them check something out, move people (not traceurs<sup>40</sup>) on and ask them about their reasoning and rationales for doing so. However, more importantly, this walking interview approach often made the security guards stop and say “See, look at this space here, this is what I mean” and use the qualities and characteristics of the various spaces we occupied to explain how and why they govern different spaces in different ways and their ambiguity, confusion and uncertainty around how they moved traceurs and other groups on from particular spaces.

## **Ethics**

Issues of ethics are of significant importance within any piece of research. They have always received significant criminological attention, specifically within ethnography, considering the legally, ethically and morally dubious subject matter and scenarios with which criminological ethnographers are concerned. This has particularly been the case in more recent years, as Institutional Review Boards and university ethics committees have, in the eyes of some, become more concerned with institutional and liability protection than it is about the ethical qualities of the research in question (see Ferrell and Hamm, 1998; Garrett, 2012; Winlow and Hall, 2012). Smith (2010: 31) has argued that social research ethics appear to be regarded as similar to medical research ethics which are deterministic and prescriptive. Similarly, Ancrum (2012: 113) contends that “the ethical frameworks imposed upon us by our institutions and discipline increasingly transform ‘ethics’ from an emotional concern with what is right to a mere restrictive framework of control that must be negotiated”. This is problematic to say the least, considering that the ethical dilemmas that arise during social science research are often highly specific to a particular situation, culture or context. Adherence to a universal set of ethical rules and frameworks can have a negative effect on the issue under study and, in certain cases, make it impossible to conduct ethnographic research at all (Punch, 2002). Consequently, as Ancrum (2012: 113) writes: “In unpredictable research environments the engaged ethnographer has no choice but to marginalise the formal

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<sup>40</sup> It should be noted that I ran this idea of doing research with the security guards by the traceurs before I began. Unsurprisingly they had no objections to this. While perhaps surprising to the uninitiated reader, their relationships with security guards was, overall, non-combative. Jokingly, they merely asked that I come back with some ‘tips’ and ‘inside knowledge’.

world of ethics committees and methodological guidelines and proceed under the somatic guidance of his or her own ethical code as it interacts with the ethics and values of the researched community”.

My own ethical position in relation to this research is similar to what Wiles et al (2008) observe is the deliberate ambiguity in the British Sociological Association’s statement of ethical practice. This is an approach which does not “provide a set of recipes for resolving ethical choices or dilemmas, but recognises that it will be necessary to make such choices on the basis of principles and values and the (often conflicting) interests of those involved” (Wiles et al, 2008: 3.1). While there are a multitude of ethical dilemmas that arise in any research, the ethical issues with this research are dominated by three main issues: how and when I opted to reveal myself as a researcher and gain informed consent; what I did and did not include within the research; and the issue of illegal trespass.

I did not reveal my status as a researcher to every single person I met during my ethnography who contributed to this thesis. As stated earlier, the parkour community is quite fluid with people coming and going. As we travelled to different cities for one-off jams with other parkour communities, I felt that such direct revelations from a complete stranger would be more detrimental than ethically beneficial to the other traceurs enjoyment of the day, serving to ‘chill the scene’ (Polsky, 1971). With the 30 or so traceurs who make up the core participant base of this thesis and anyone with whom I conducted an interview, I was completely open and honest about the scope and purpose of the research and gained their official informed consent. However, even a large majority of the peripheral figures with whom I did not directly reveal myself eventually became aware of my role as a researcher through off-the-cuff comments and conversations I had with other participants. When they asked me about my research, I would explain the research, the methods use and offer an interview in which I could gain their formal consent. This seemed like the most natural, organic and ethical way of going about this process. While some might find this approach ethically unacceptable, I was comfortable in the belief that my presence within their occasional parkour jams would have limited impact; while changing names, fictionalising certain locations and other defining elements of the research would be enough to protect them from

unwanted identification. Moreover, it would be entirely destructive to the entire ethnographic enterprise and, I maintain, unethically invasive to hold the traceurs to what Bell and Newby (1977: 59) describe as the “sociological equivalent of the familiar police caution of ‘anything you say or do may be taken down and used as data’”.

The invasive nature of the image to be able to visually identify people and identifiers of place presents problems for researchers surrounding consent and how to maintain anonymity and confidentiality without ruining the power and integrity of the image. The use of the visual—particularly when employed collaboratively—poses challenges to the normal and accepted ‘basic principles’ of standardised ethical guidelines provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2012). Again, the self-regulatory approach adopted by Wiles et al (2008) to make choices on the contextual basis of the principles and values of the group being researched is informative, and the parkour community’s strong culture of public visual dissemination was vital in how I ethically approached my use of images. For the most part, the images I took which feature in this research were requested by the traceurs for their own use on their social media pages and are therefore already publicly available. Furthermore, I asked every traceur who features in the images featured here if they were comfortable with their publication in the thesis before using them.

The second ethical issue relates to what is and is not included within this thesis. This predominantly relates to the traceurs talking about other parkour teams, communities and prominent traceurs. Despite the espousal of a non-competitive philosophy, with the increasing interconnectedness of a small but growing UK parkour community through social media and the rise of ‘celebrity’ traceurs and freerunners, there is a growing palpable competitiveness. As parkour has become more commodified and parkour ‘teams’ vie for authenticity, popularity and prominence within the UK scene, the respective merits, shortcomings and style of particular communities or individuals often features in private (and public) discussions about parkour. While this is of significant interest, I have opted to omit most of these comments from this thesis or, when they are included, the identity of the individual making comments and who they are commenting on is so heavily masked that it would be extremely difficult to identify who is speaking and whom they are speaking about. As many of the traceurs in this

thesis are attempting to establish careers in parkour, developing networks, friendships and collaborations with other communities and individuals is vital to their success and it is for these reasons that this research has omitted these discussions to avoid hampering any participant's future success.

The third and perhaps most controversial ethical issue discussed here is that of participating in illegal trespassing on private property. During the process of negotiating approval of this research from my university ethics committee, one stipulation was that I would engage in the civil (not criminal) offence of 'knowingly trespassing on private property'. However, in the field such distinctions are not as clear-cut and easily demarcated as they are in ethical application forms. Unlike other ethnographies on the illicit recreational use of urban space (Garrett, 2013; Kindynis, 2016), during most of my time out with the traceurs neither I nor they were entirely sure of when we were on public or private property. Indeed, this is a feature of the contemporary nature of pseudo-public urban space. In the vast majority of the spots the traceurs would train, anyone could freely access these spaces, walk through them, stand a have a chat on them without being ushered on or told 'this is private property, you can't do this here'. It was only when parkour transgressed the informal and arbitrary 'rules' of urban space that this ever became an issue. This is one of the foremost aspects of the deviant-leisure nexus in urban space that this research endeavoured to explore. Nor is this an ethical issue restricted to this research. In *Empire of Scrounge*, Jeff Ferrell experienced similar difficulties in negotiating the invisible boundary between public space and private property. In many regards, this research could be viewed as a critical appraisal around the very ethics of this ambiguous and pseudo-public character of contemporary urban space and the ethics surrounding neoliberal protection of the capacity to selectively and arbitrarily exclude particular groups from certain spaces despite the absence of harmful behaviour.

This is not to say that I did not encounter one or two ethical dilemmas during the research about knowingly trespassing on private property or the legal and physical safety of my participants. One such incident arose a couple of weeks after a half-dozen of the traceurs were arrested on a bogus charge 'suspicion of criminal damage' and spent a night in the cells when caught doing a roof mission at night atop a prominent

building and landmark in the city centre. This is not an uncommon justification for the arrest of traceurs, no matter how unsubstantiated. It is an example of how the public police are used to unjustly preserve the neoliberal protection of private property and maintain the dominant political economy of space; a matter which poses its own broader ethical questions which rarely feature on university ethics committees. While the case can be made for transgressing the standardised rules of ethics committees for larger ethical purposes, this argument has been excessively restricted to issues of institutional racism, corruption or corporate illegality, despite existing codes of ethics extending it to the protection of wider human rights (British Society of Criminology, 2015). As day turned to night on one of our usual Saturday training sessions, there were only six or seven of us still out training and some of the traceurs decided they wanted to head up there again and explore a little more considering their last mission's abrupt ending. I had a difficult decision to make, particularly considering that some of the traceurs there were relatively new and with whom I was unfamiliar. If I decided to go I would be breaking the 'ethical' promises made to my university. If I didn't, my research and my status within the parkour community would be significantly jeopardised. Ethical considerations for the well-being of my participants were at the forefront of my mind throughout the research. I was more than willing to sacrifice my research to protect my participants from harm or legal scrutiny not out of loyalty to my university ethics committee but, similar to Ancrum (2012: 124), due to the friendships I had developed with my participants and the natural ethical commitments bound up within these relationships. For these reasons, I voiced my concerns that punishment might be more severe if they were caught again in the same spot so soon after being arrested only a couple of weeks previously. This was echoed by most of the traceurs resulting in a moment's hesitation and thought. Nevertheless, they decided that they still wanted to go and that it was safer for us to go in numbers than only a small group. I agreed, opting to take on a limited risk of a minor civil transgression to serve the interests of the group more widely. We went and we trained, photographed and descended without incident.

### **An Emergent Methodology...**

The overall methodological approach to this research could be described, much like the project itself, as emergent. While I do not deny that this thesis is imbued with a strong

commitment to ultra-realist theory (Hall and Winlow, 2015) and a deviant leisure perspective, in reality I entered the field an avid cultural criminologist. However, the more time I spent with the traceurs, the more I observed and learned about its practice in urban space and the more I learned about the traceurs themselves, the more that the theoretical perspectives of similar cultural criminological works failed, in my eyes, to stand up to scrutiny or apply to the world of parkour (see for example Ferrell, 2001). I therefore went in search of something different and found, re-worked and developed a theoretical underpinning to this work which better matched my empirical experiences.

Similarly, the methods described above came into being through the needs of the research project and the challenges and specificities of the research environment itself. Arguably, when properly conducted, all ethnography is a process of *becoming*, rather than opting to bend the research to a pre-set theoretical or methodological framework. This was frustrating at times, and several months were spent feeling like the research was stalling or plateauing, needing an extra element or additional way of seeing which couldn't be accessed through a purely ethnographic participant-observation approach. However, the final product of this research is better for the employment of all the methodological approaches outlined above which were geared to achieving the objectives of the research and adapted to the lines of question which naturally emerged from the ethnography. At its best, ethnographic research is supposed to communicate the realities of everyday life. The methodological process of becoming experienced in this research arguably reflects this as it developed in a non-linear fashion but one which makes this a stronger thesis in the long run.

# 6

## *Movers and Shakers*<sup>41</sup>

### *The Labour of Parkour as Work and Leisure*

*Parkour's my whole life mate. It's my social life, it's my livelihood. Basically it's who I am. It's on my mind 24/7. It's not like other things. I don't turn up once a week to train the way a few lads turn up once a week for a 5-a-side. If I'm not out training, then I'm setting up bookings. If I'm not doing that, I'm managing the Facebook and Instagram. I'm editing videos, thinking of new ideas, working on my body. I try to read something that's gonna make me better every week...It can be a bit knacker like, but that's what you've gotta do (Chez, 24 years old)*

### **Introduction**

In attempting to understand parkour's inconsistent and ambiguous position at the nexus between deviance and leisure, the core argument of this thesis rests on one central paradox. This is the contradiction that consumer capitalism has liberalised desire and created conditions which have intensified the need for symbolic identities of 'cool individualism' such as parkour which are vital for their demand-side value; whilst also having to harness and direct such desires—prohibitively if necessary—into particular spatial contexts due to its reliance upon the hyper-regulation and privatisation of central consumer spaces. Of course, this requires an exploration of issues of identity, leisure, work and youth transitions in the lives of these young people. This is particularly pertinent in the contemporary context in which there is an overwhelming sense of precariousness, instability and fluidity within young people's lives and youth transitions (Miles, 2000; Lloyd, 2012; Smith, 2014), exacerbated by consumer capitalism's intensifying emphasis upon the formation of unique and distinct cultural identities in which individuals can paradoxically 'fit in' whilst 'standing out' (Miles et al, 1998; Winlow and Hall, 2006). Jock Young (2007) observes that these

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<sup>41</sup> To see how the schemes and entrepreneurial efforts of the traceurs eventually panned out, see the end of chapter 8. This is an epilogue of sorts, displaying what happened to the parkour scene one year on since I left the field.

tensions are aggravated by the paradoxical nature of our contemporary social and cultural milieu in which there has never before been a greater emphasis than ever upon identity, whilst never having less upon which to build it. While Young identifies the malady at the heart of the ‘vertigo’ of late modernity, he is not entirely correct in this regard. While he refers to the deafening absence of the certainties of collective, class-based and community identities, he is wrong to suggest that there has never been less upon which to base identity. Arguably the plethora of pluralised cultural and consumer identities within the infinite buffet of consumer markets means that there has never been a greater volume of potential identities available to young people. The problem is that these identities are fragile and transient, and as global capital has all but eviscerated the more stable and collective identities to which Young (1999; 2007) and others<sup>42</sup> refer, the individual’s security in identity is attached to the ever-quickenening life-cycle of consumer commodities, fashions and fads.

Curiously, however, this kind of focus upon leisure, identity, youth transitions and anxiety in consumer capitalism has been conspicuously absent from the parkour literature. This is perhaps unsurprising considering that the study of parkour has been dominated by cultural geographers and sociologists of sport who have been overwhelmingly interested in the phenomenological and embodied experiences of parkour (Brunner, 2011; Fuggle, 2008; Saville, 2008), or its spatially performative potential as a mode of politicised resistance (Atkinson, 2009; Bornaz, 2008; Daskalaki and Mould, 2013; Daskalaki et al, 2008; Lamb, 2014). Nevertheless, it appears that what has been eschewed in analyses of parkour is a comprehensive understanding of its lifestyle as a form of identity work which is properly contextualised within the precarious conditions and lived experiences of life under late-capitalism as the young people of this study attempt to make sense of their lives as they try to assuage their underlying *objectless anxiety* (Hall, 2012a). Furthermore, to push beyond this empirical and descriptive level in order to theorise its deeper causative roots, these lived

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<sup>42</sup> The work of ultra-realist criminology is rooted in Lacanian psychoanalysis and understandings of subjectivity which position the individual as wracked by a sense of lack—the void of the Real—from which the subject is trying to escape. Consequently, ultra-realism has always positioned these ideas around the decline of collective identities, the death of the symbolic order and the decline of symbolic efficiency at the heart of their theorisations around a range of social issues such as entrepreneurial criminality, leisure, relationships, consumerism, violence, masculinities and social exclusion. For more, see Hall (2012); Hall et al (2008); Hall and Winlow (2015), Lloyd (2012; 2013); Raymen (2016); Raymen and Smith, (2016); Smith (2013; 2014); Treadwell and Ancrum (2016); Treadwell et al, (2013) Winlow (2001); Winlow and Hall (2006; 2009).

experiences must be situated within the last forty years of global capital's tectonic reshaping of society, culture, work, leisure and identity.

This is precisely what this chapter attempts to achieve. Up to this point, the previous chapters have been dedicated to sketching out how this has occurred through a broad macro theorisation of political-economic, social and cultural change and its relationship to the evolution of deviance, leisure and, by extension, parkour. Moving from the abstract to the particular, this chapter operationalises these theoretical ideas by exploring and contextualising the role of parkour within the pressures and realities of the traceurs' lived experiences of contemporary post-crash capitalism. More specifically, it focuses upon parkour as a crucial form of identity 'work' and 'serious leisure', and how many of the traceurs' involvement with parkour drifted between work and leisure, amateurism and professionalism (Stebbins, 1995; 2007).

As the quote above suggests, a significant number of my participants set up professional coaching companies, indoor fee-paying gyms, clothing lines and fitness companies, or used their parkour skills to become stunt-work athletes. This is reflective of a few trends, first among which is the increasingly obsolete distinction between work and leisure. For the present-day worker-consumer, leisure and work bleed into one another through networking, social media and after-work drinks (Berardi, 2009). For the traceurs, parkour could be conceived as both a form of 'serious leisure' and 'occupational devotion'. They would constantly be involved in activities surrounding parkour as a form of leisure, but also as part of their livelihood and efforts to scrape together a living and propel themselves into a more prominent position of status within the parkour scene. Secondly, this is an example of a broader trend of what Hayward (2012) describes as 'life-stage dissolution', a bi-directional form of adultification and infantilisation in which youth and adulthood blur into one another in ways which are vital for the on-going renewal of consumer capitalism. Parkour, originally a simple form of childish and leisurely urban play, has undergone a process of 'adultification' as it is increasingly professionalised, whilst simultaneously infantilising 'work' and adulthood in a socio-historical moment which is obsessed with youth and its economic value in consumer society. Thirdly, parkour and its followers are a prime example of Marazzi's (2010) notion of the "productive consumer" or 'prosumer', which has been vital in the evolution of contemporary capital accumulation in an era of reduced labour and

production costs. These trends contribute to the scarcity of work and the precariousness of late-capitalism which have intensified the need for 'cool', youthful, edgy and exciting leisure and work identities (Barber, 2007; Heath and Potter, 2006; Miles, 1998; 2015). Therefore, we cannot divorce the rise and popularity of parkour from these wider developments in life-stage dissolution, the evolution of technology, its impact upon 'the social' and its roots within new modes of capital accumulation which reduce labour and delegate the work of production to its consumers.

The young men who are the focus of this thesis entered the early stages of adulthood in an era of post-crash capitalism which, in almost all facets of social and cultural life, can be characterised by precarious instability, anxiety and uncertainty (Lloyd, 2013). All of these young men laboured under the unattainability of traditional ideas about the trajectory of the life course as they tried to navigate the transitions from education into adulthood (see Smith, 2014). These are the echoes of the bygone Symbolic Order of modernity which, while once holding significance in the North East, has since vanished (Lloyd, 2012). Now, these narrative remnants are passed down through stories and expectations from older relatives who enjoyed a comparatively stable and comprehensible life-course (Byrne, 1989; Robinson, 2002; Winlow, 2001); perceived and heard by the traceurs as almost a mystical fairy-tale of a world that, for them, has never existed. Simultaneously, they wrestled with a conflicting cultural obsession with youth, extended adolescence, individualistic identity and 'the cultural injunction to enjoy' (Smith, 2014; Žižek, 2002a), all of which are a fundamental feature of consumer capitalism. This demands the delay or eschewal of more adult responsibilities or stable and permanent identities which could be a burden upon their individuality and opportunity for self-expression (Smith, 2014; Winlow and Hall, 2006). The work and employment opportunities available to these young men were few, insecure and poorly paid, along with being monotonous and requiring particular forms of cultural capital and reconceptualised notions of masculinity. Furthermore, these work opportunities did not chime with their desired and idealised lifestyles and identities; offering little satisfaction, gratification or sense of identity as labour once had in years past (Lloyd, 2012; Willis, 1979).

These challenges, conflicts and anxieties were brought to the foreground as soon as I began to spend time with the traceurs away from the parkour scene. The demeanour

and attitude of many of the traceurs during training was in complete contrast to their outlook away from parkour. During a parkour jam, the traceurs were ostensibly the carefree, happy-go-lucky young people with the world at their feet. In more reflective moments away from the parkour scene, their underlying existential insecurity and depressive apathy about the future was palpable and, at times, crippling to their own relationships and aspirations. They were far from the free souls of a flexibilised society of worker-consumers, but instead toiled under the precarious conditions of late-capitalist labour which conflicted against the demanding cultural injunctions of consumer culture. Franny, recalling how he abruptly quit his job at a call centre without any financial security or plan for the future captures this perfectly: "I was just at work staring at the ceiling. I knew I was near the sack anyway. I'd been taking long lunches, wasn't hitting my targets and that. I was just thinking: *This 'int how I thought it were all 'gan turn out*".

Overall, the traceurs experience of the transition into early adulthood could be conceived of what Smith (2014: 106) describes as a 'psychosocial tug of war'. The demands and responsibilities of adulthood were seen as inevitable and inescapable. They would arrive eventually in the forms of bills to pay, desired or enforced independence from parents and families<sup>43</sup>, and the intensified need for commitment in romantic relationships that needed to be 'going somewhere'. However the traceurs were intent on staving off cultural obsolescence and maintaining a youthful identity of style, adventure and exploration to preserve a semblance of self-assurance and an aura of 'cool'. A number of the traceurs would attempt to resolve this tension entirely and have the best of both worlds by utilising parkour as a livelihood and capitalising on the popular markets for cultural and aesthetic forms of transgression (Heath and Potter, 2006); thereby drifting across the vanishing line from amateur to professional (Stebbins, 1995). In many ways, the traceurs' manoeuvrings around the internal contradictions and conflicts of life under late-capitalism mimic the manoeuvrings of capital itself. In the *Grundrisse*, Marx (1973) describes how capital cannot abide and does not recognise the limits to its own growth and accumulation. Instead, capital works to turn such limits into barriers which are then overcome or circumvented (Harvey, 2010). The same could

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<sup>43</sup> Several among the traceurs experienced tense family relationships due to their parents' frustration (and lack of understanding) around their difficulties in holding down stable work and becoming financially independent. 6 of the traceurs who were living at home or moved back in with relatives would be kicked and told to fend for themselves.

be said for the behaviour of the traceurs. The inevitable responsibilities and burdens of adulthood were not treated by the traceurs as a limit. Rather, they were anticipated early and turned into a barrier which could be circumvented through the market with the adoption of a professional identity within a youthful, leisurely and culturally relevant arena. In the absence of symbolic efficiency and a more stable and collective symbolic order the traceurs had no choice but to become further embedded within those very capitalist markets which had been the systemic source of their anxieties in reshaping the world of work and leisure.

Consequently, this has challenging implications for popular understandings of leisure as a form of autonomous voluntarism. It instead suggests a certain 'labour' to leisure (Rojek, 2010) which must also be understood in relation to the nature of 'work' available under late-capitalism; specifically the forms of work available to the young people who participated in this study (see Ritzer, 1993 on 'McJobs'). Therefore this chapter draws upon original interview and ethnographic data to provide detailed understandings of these young people's attitudes to work as it pertains to their leisure, social lives and cultural identities in the contemporary context. Moreover, these trends must also be looked at within an updated account of postmodern capital accumulation and the 'immaterial exploitation' (Winlow and Hall, 2013) of what has been described elsewhere as 'intellectual labour' in a new cognitive and cultural capitalism (Lazzarato, 1996). This will all be brought together to explain how and why the traceurs in this study were actively involved with, and supported, parkour's ongoing commodification. For a group of people who were actively excluded from urban spaces due to capital's hegemonic control of central city areas, why would they aim to perpetuate and participate in the economic system which marginalises them? What does this mean for alternative arguments which depict parkour as a mode of performative anti-capitalist 'resistance'? By answering these questions, building upon the theoretical discussions in the first half of this thesis, we can begin to outline some of the complexities and paradoxical contradictions of parkour's position at the nexus between 'deviance' and leisure that are created by the internal contradictions of consumer capitalism.

The significance of this chapter for the criminological argument of this thesis is two-fold. Firstly, it identifies how developments in global capitalism have created the conditions in which groups of young people such as the traceurs feel no choice but to choose

further immersion in capitalist markets as a way of resolving their existential and material anxieties. This is an example of 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009) operating at the micro level of the individual. While the chapter will consistently draw upon data from across the whole range of my participants, it will also provide some more focused individual biographies in order to offer in-depth ethnographic understandings of how the forces of global capital operate in the lived realities of individuals. Secondly it offers empirical data to marry with the arguments made in chapters three and four to debunk the notion of parkour as a form of performative 'resistance'. Rather than resisting the infrastructure and ideology of contemporary capitalism, the traceurs actively *solicit* its ideological trap in an attempt to resolve their underlying objectless anxiety (Hall, 2012b). In doing so they conform to and perpetuate the political-economic system of globalised consumer capitalism that is the source of their difficult position. This is vital in understanding the causative roots and origins for parkour's inconsistent status as 'deviant'.

## **Road to Nowhere? Youth Transitions, Work and Leisure**

In the fluidity of late modernity it is not at all controversial to suggest that the notion of a distinct and linear 'youth transition' into adulthood is most conservatively, contested, and more provocatively, entirely obsolete. As Smith (2014: 83) suggests, 'growing up' appears to be associated with stability, making the transition from the impulsive, childish and adventurous hedonism of youth to the more sedentary and responsible 'goal' of adulthood in which gratification is deferred in favour of longer term life-plans. However, as numerous commentators have observed this term 'transition' is misleading, particularly in the contemporary context, suggesting a linear step-by-step progression in which adulthood is 'achieved' as an accomplished end-point (Barber, 2007; Calcutt, 2000; Furlong and Cartmel, 1997; Hayward, 2012b; Smith, 2014). In reality, contemporary transitions into adulthood are characterised by interruptions, reversals, and a general theme of 'extended adolescence' or a crisis of adolescence (Currie, 2005). If there are traditional markers of 'growing up' such as moving out, getting a job, becoming financially independent and 'settling down', none of these are particularly permanent or static checkpoints of adulthood. Throughout the course of this research, all of my participants experienced the transition into adulthood less as a steady ascent and more akin to a 'yo-yo' or pendulum-like experience; swinging backwards and

forwards between markers of adulthood and adolescence. In doing so, the years of early adulthood were branded by the traceurs as consisting of permanent transience or 'drift' (Ferrell, 2012), impermanence and failure:

*"The older generation just don't get it. They think it [early adulthood] easy like it was when they were young. You move out and that and start living on yer own and it's like 'ah grand, growing up at last'—never give you any credit like. It's always 'finally', y'kna? Got a job and that, pay yer rent, bills. It's like right, this is it here we go. Then you lose your job, or you just get sick of it or whatever. Your rent goes up or house mates move away. Then you have to move back in, tail between your legs to yer Mam. It just feels like you've gotta do something to get out of all that, even if it's just getting one thing down. That's why I got in with Chez and NEPK. Just to have one thing." (Sonic, 24 years old)*

*"I think that [failure] is why I like parkour to be honest in some small way. In parkour you fail over and over and over again. You fail more than you succeed, like. Not to get all philosophical or shit like that, but you do. You're constantly failing before you achieve something. So it kind of prepares you for it [life] in a way I guess. Yer gonna lose yer job at some point. Yer gonna be unemployed for a bit, feel shit. Yer gonna have to move back in and just feel like yer going nowhere. Parkour is good because you just get out there and focus on the moment, what's right in front of you. You've got your mates and you're just doing your thing." (Franny, 22 years old)*

*"I stopped making long-term plans really. Like with [clothing company name], I'm not thinking long-term really. I don't have a five-year plan or 'owt like that. It's just making a few hoodies and that, selling them, making a bit of money just to keep doing what I'm doing. Nothin' lasts forever. A year ago I were working in a dealership, in December [2 months previous] I were working in Tesco, now I'm sort of 'working' but not really. I'm happy just doing this really. If I could keep this going forever, that'd be fine by me. I know it won't, I'm not stupid like. But for the moment, I'm a'reet." (Vase, 23 years old)*

What is palpable from all three of these comments is a pervasive sense of nihilism. Periodic failure in the form of regression in the life trajectory is not only seen as inevitable but something to be embraced in order to survive and cope with the

impermanence and insecurity of life under late-capitalism. However, more interestingly, woven into all three accounts is how this transient state of precariousness fosters a mentality which focuses the horizons of the future down to an 'extended present' (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002). The vast majority of the traceurs worked in a series of jobs with few prospects, low-wages and the looming threat of unemployment or limited hours (and pay) through zero-hour contracts. To give a handful of examples which are illustrative of the experiences of the wider sample, Magic (19) worked part-time in a Sports Direct retail store which was constantly seeking to downsize its staff. Due to staff cuts, followed by other people leaving their job, Magic lost and regained his job at Sports Direct at least four times throughout the course of this research. Sonic (24) worked a series of part-time, casual cash-in-hand jobs which just about cobbled together a living wage. ZPK (24) worked on a couple of zero-hour contracts in a hotel and restaurant before 'packing it in' for an even more insecure but ultimately more enjoyable living as a stunt athlete and professional traceur with the NEPK team. Tone and Walker (both 23) were both unemployed for the first 7 months of this research, before going to a temp agency together. They both got a series of one-off jobs for events in the hospitality sector, before Walker got the chance for what he described as something more 'long term': a 3-month contract doing admin for a local Probation office.

By describing his 3-month job contract as 'long term', Walker exemplifies the extent to which the political-economic restructuring of Western labour markets distorts and compresses the notion of 'the future' in late modernity. Consequently, the idea of making plans for the future not only seemed undesirable—more on this later—but completely unachievable (Southwood, 2010), requiring time, money and what Magic (19 years old) referred to as the 'head space' to think beyond the weekly worries of material and social survival. This is reflected in Lloyd's (2012) participatory ethnographic work among call-centre employees in Middlesbrough's insecure labour market. Drawing on Orwellian (1933) notions of how poverty annihilates a vision of the future, almost all of Lloyd's participants instead immersed themselves in the pseudo-comforts of hedonistic consumerism as a means of maintaining a semblance of cultural success, competence and ability to dip in and out of consumer markets. Mirroring the outlook of the traceurs of this study, for Lloyd's participants "dimming horizons and putting one's future on hold is more appealing than facing the harsh reality of the future"

(2012: 629). This is an example of what Fisher (2009) describes as 'reflexive impotence'. Individuals are fully aware of the magnitude of the task of making a genuine push toward adulthood and instead limit their goals to holding down a job and 'working to live' within the exciting immediacy of consumer markets and cultural identities. Lloyd's (2012) participants, along with the traceurs in this study, are reminiscent of the Nietzschean 'Last Men' of history: tired, accepting of capitalism's bleak and incontrovertible existence, and taking no risks for something *better* but merely seeking comfort and fragile threads of security in what already exists (Cederström and Fleming, 2012).

In the case of the traceurs, however, the attitude to work was not what Lloyd (2012) describes as 'working to live'. Undeniably, the 'dimming of horizons' and maintenance of an extended adolescence of youthful identity was present throughout my sample of traceurs. However the key difference was that, as described earlier, the traceurs often utilised parkour as a means of both 'working to live' and *living to work*. In a society in which there is a cultural injunction to enjoy, drudgery and monotony must be avoided at all costs. Work, therefore, must become more like leisure. We see this in after-works drinks which are less optional and more a vital part of work beyond work; the imperative for employees and businesses to 'network' and have a presence on social media sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter and Facebook (Berardi, 2009; Marazzi, 2010; Roberts, 2014). We see it in the barista in a coffee shop or the waitress in a restaurant who is expected to add pieces of 'flair' to their uniform as a mode of 'immaterial' or 'affective labour' in which workers are told to be 'authentic' (Fisher, 2009; Winlow and Hall, 2013). Nevertheless, the most obvious and direct solution in making work more like leisure is to make leisure more like work, specifically in forms of 'serious leisure' which are more susceptible to the shift from amateurism to professionalism as a mode of 'occupational devotion' (Stebbins, 1995; 2007). A number of the traceurs drew on parkour to extend the pleasure and satisfaction of leisurely enjoyment into the world of work. While it was just as poorly paid, insecure and inconsistent as more established labour markets, the dimming of horizons and expectations of the future meant that for the young traceurs attempting to carve out a living within the broad field of opportunities within commodified cultural lifestyle sports was a far more attractive prospect than continuing with long hours at call centres and bars in jobs which

provided them with no satisfaction or sense of meaningful identity and pride. When I asked TK (23 years old) why he started NEPK when it paid so poorly, he responded quite succinctly: *“If I’m gonna have to work and be paid next to nothing, constantly broke and having to scrape together the pennies, it may as well be doing something I like”*.

This is precisely how NEPK<sup>44</sup>, the community’s professional parkour company came into being, along with other traceurs’ entrepreneurial start-ups. Chez and TK started building the company in 2011, finally launching it in 2012 a couple of years after leaving their local sixth form college. They began to employ friends from the Newcastle parkour scene to help out with coaching classes, exhibitions and invited performances at events such as Northern Pride and the Sainsbury’s school games. I knew this much after only a few weeks in the parkour scene. However the details on how and why Chez and TK opted to drift across the narrowing line between work and leisure was quite hazy, and after a few months I decided to ask. Chez, TK and I were walking home from an intermediate class that ran every Thursday evening at Mill Lane, the indoor gym they set up in the West End of Newcastle. Chez invited me back to his place to chat about it over a beer. TK joined us, needing to swing by Chez’s anyway to pick up a hard-drive with some recently-shot footage he needed to edit for the NEPK website.

## **Parkour Biographies: Work, Identity and Competitive Life Projects**

I enter Chez’s flat, a small upstairs studio in a row of terraced houses in which he lives with his girlfriend. Various lamps light the room as the overhead bulbs have blown out and neither he nor his girlfriend has bothered to replace them. Trainers, shorts and t-shirts are littered everywhere, along with various left over parkour equipment from Mill Lane. On a small dining table are piles of unopened bills from his energy company along with a couple of high-end Nikon DSLR cameras and a go-pro head camera. The building is old, with high ceilings and old wooden floorboards with small gaps emerging in them. It’s generally quite dusty, unkempt and on the whole feels like a student’s flat. The most prominent thing in the room is his Mac all-in-one desktop computer, which sits at the far end of the room in front of a small window which lets in a little light, illuminating the floating dust in the room. It’s a 27-inch screen Mac and its pristine, smooth silver finish and well-kept condition stands in stark contrast to the rest of the

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<sup>44</sup> I would like to emphasise once more that this is a fictitious name and not the real name of Chez and TK’s parkour company

flat. It's almost gawdy in its size, too big for the room it's in. Chez is clearly proud of it and when he sees me looking he launches into a long story about how and when he got it and how he's still paying it off. 'It pays for itself though', he claims. The video editing technology available on a Mac is far superior and easier for editing videos, pictures and teaser 'promos' which he uses for his personal and company YouTube and Instagram accounts, along with the website. He got it a couple of months ago and according to Chez it is the bane of his girlfriend's life. His parents laid out the initial £1500 for the Mac under the persuasion that it was vital for his parkour company. He pays them back £100 every month which is the reason, among other things, that he can't afford to live in a nicer place, much to his girlfriend's dislike. He spends hours on the Mac, piecing together videos and clips, touching up the images and layering music or voice-overs into his videos. However, as the quote at the opening of this chapter suggests, "that's what you've gotta do".

He falls into his swivel chair and reaches into the mini-fridge that sits next to the Mac. He reaches in and passes me a bottle of Stella, commenting on how his girlfriend had pilfered them from an event she was working through the same temp agency as Tone and Walker. He opens one himself and begins opening photo albums on the computer to show me pictures of some of the first events and coaching sessions he ran with NEPK. TK stands next to me peering over Chez's shoulder, reminiscing about the beginnings of NEPK and when he and Chez first had the idea of starting up a parkour company. To TK's surprise it wasn't even Chez's idea. Lee, another traceur, had suggested it to Chez in an off-the-cuff remark when watching Chez, TK and some of the other more experienced traceurs 'coaching' Ty during one of his first Saturday jams. Ty was by far the youngest of the traceurs, being only 14 when he joined-up to the parkour community and nearly 17 when this research began. With a background in gymnastics, he was a fast learner and simply needed to be taught the basic moves, techniques and develop the mental capacities required of managing fear and danger through 'committing' and focusing on technique (see Kidder, 2013; Saville, 2008). It's a common practice for the group to mentor a newcomer, particularly one who willingly takes advice and is ready to learn. The more experienced traceurs 'coach' the newcomers, motivating them to push their boundaries, judging their technique and making suggestions for how they can do things more smoothly. Chez recalls how Lee jokingly said that they should be charging for it:

*Chez: Well at that time we were all kind of on the same level weren't we?*

*TK: Yeah I suppose. We all kind of started out at the same time I guess.*

*TR: How did you all find one another?*

*TK: **We** knew each other from school. Same as Sonic. But like Franny and Vase, ZPK, EJ all them, we didn't really know. There was a generation before us who started up the Facebook page and we started going along to Discovery and Cat Alley<sup>45</sup> and that and got to know them there. So we all kind of started parkour at the same time like.*

*Chez: Aye, so it wasn't like coaching really. Because we were all on the same level. So it was more like just helping each other out, not me as the coach and you the student. I guess Ty, Huse and Dean and that were the first lot to come after we'd been doing it for a fair few years so we could like properly coach them as we was more experienced. Then Lee said that and I basically went to TK asking if it was completely mental or not.*

Both Chez and TK had a quick google search around to make sure that there was nothing else happening like that in the North East. They were pretty sure, knowing there was a much smaller parkour community over in Durham but nothing particularly organised. They didn't really know where to start. Chez was just out of sixth form and TK had attempted to go to university, but dropped out early into his first year because he didn't like it and the schedule of studying and working full-time proved too challenging. According to Chez and TK, this was a period of deep dissatisfaction experienced not only by them, but by their friends as well. They couldn't find work which was satisfying, fulfilling or made use of the skills and qualifications they had developed during sixth form. Chez spoke of being turned down for a job at a Londis corner shop, while TK spoke of how he felt depressed at the realisation that he was excited about securing a part-time role in a large chain-store bakery. As TK said, "You're 19 and you find yourself asking like, 'Is this it? Is this all there is?'"

The scarcity of any employment, let alone jobs which provide some satisfaction, is linked closely to the parallel changes in labour markets and the wider changes in subjectivity and attitudes to work and leisure discussed in earlier chapters. At best, the

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<sup>45</sup> Spots in the Parkour City (see following chapter).

tedious drudgery of work should be circumvented at all costs. At worst, it should be mitigated through a more steadfast commitment to consumer markets and leisure. This is precisely what happened for Chez and TK. Chez argues that his near-8 month spell of unemployment following sixth form—described by him as his ‘lost days’—were precisely what motivated him to kick on and start up NEPK. He and TK borrowed vault boxes from their old school along with any other materials that could be useful and started doing free exhibitions and mini-coaching sessions at festivals, trying to gauge interest and see if they could receive any advice along the way. As they both said, ‘every penny’ they made in the early days went to buying and making their own vault boxes and jumping pallets. Finally, they managed to negotiate an agreement with a local youth centre through a charity and development trust which was interested in reviving the West End of Newcastle. NEPK could use a space in the local youth centre for free, provided they advertise and run some free classes for the community. The West End is one of the more deprived areas of the city but one which has been ear-marked for significant regeneration. When one walks through the West End, the absence of any consumer outlets or productive social and leisure facilities is unmissable. Chez, a life-long resident of the West End said to me:

*“Look around. Litter everywhere. There’s nothing here. There’s not even many pubs. Just takeaways and offies [off-licenses]. Know why? People can’t afford to go out. They’re not gonna put ‘owt here that people can’t afford to use. People can afford a £5 bottle of wine to stay in, not £5-a-glass to go out. There’s no parks, no sports spaces really. Fuck all.”*

With the help of other traceurs in the Newcastle parkour scene, Chez and TK regenerated a small space in the local youth centre into a small parkour gym. They re-used scaffolding poles to construct structures for swinging from, vaulting over, and precision-jumping onto and even went ‘dumpster-diving’ (Ferrell, 2006) to scrounge discarded timber to build jump-boxes at various levels. They started running fee-paying classes multiple nights every week, ranging from £3 to £8 for two-hours in the gym, depending on the age and skill-level of the class that was running. As TK explained, once this small enterprise was up and running, it was a case of simply ‘getting their name out there’ and charging people, be it schools, coaching courses, exhibitions or even ‘team-building’ company away-days, for their services. All of the traceurs who did one-off

work for NEPK—namely ZPK, Magic, Sonic, Walker and Tone—got their official coaching badges and accreditation and NEPK soon became a recognised company member of Parkour UK. At this point Chez and TK began expanding into schools as an innovative form of exercise and sport as parkour has increasingly come to be utilised in various youth policy initiatives (see Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011). They also drew upon various funding initiatives such as ‘Sportivate’ that emerged from Sport England’s timely influx of funding from the London 2012 Olympics legacy initiative. These funding streams paid their fees directly, rather than forcing them to rely directly on the participants.



A mid-week beginner’s parkour class at the Mill Lane gym, 2014.



Private training at Mill Lane during a rainy Saturday, March, 2015

This provided a more stable and steady source of income, however they were far from comfortable financially. Neither Chez nor TK could afford to leave home during the early stages of NEPK's development. While Chez had yet to leave home, TK had to move back in with his Grandmother during this period due to having no money whatsoever. NEPK was constantly working at a loss (albeit an ever-decreasing one) and both were reliant upon crowd-sourcing 'allowance' from various family members. Nevertheless, it was the identity, sense of cultural relevance and recognition that they were 'doing something with their lives' that was enjoyable and satisfying as occupational devotees which was the driving motivation. As Jock Young (2007) keenly observed, at the current cultural juncture to *have* nothing is humiliating. But to *be nothing* is even worse. This returns us to the transcendental materialist conceptualisation of subjectivity outlined in chapter four (Johnston, 2008; Hall and Winlow, 2015). In the scramble to construct a coherent sense of self and identity in a period where there is a fragmented Imaginary order and few stable foundations upon which to build one; traceurs such as Chez, TK and many more experience an *intensified* need for the unique identity of 'cool individualism' provided by the commodified identity markets of cultural lifestyle sports, despite the

fact that they were financially worse-off for doing so. TK knew better than Chez the realities of working life under late-capitalism. It was precisely these realities which prompted him to further immerse himself in parkour with greater commitment. Then, when the opportunity arose, he took parkour on as a form of work and leisure:

*“TK: You’re just not appreciated anywhere. They [employers] know they can just take the piss, give you no notice for work and you’ll be there because you need the money. They’ve got a thousand other people out there more than willing to take your job, and they ‘int shy to remind you of it. It makes you feel...what’s the word?...Anonymous.*

*TR: Did working make parkour more difficult? Like not being able to train or not having the energy?*

*TK: Sometimes, but on the whole it was the opposite mate. I was **clinging** to parkour more than ever. Training all the time, watching videos at home, getting properly into making videos and putting them out [on social media]. It was like parkour was the opposite to work, y’kna? Especially when I went to Airborne<sup>46</sup> the first time that year. I turned up and guys were coming up like ‘Ah yeah I’ve seen your pics’ or ‘Ah you’re TK, I follow your account’ or whatever. It was nice. It was the opposite of how I felt at work. It was cool. Not long after that Chez came to me with the idea [for the company] and I just jumped at it. I needed to do something with my life, I knew that. Parkour gave me that.”*

What is being described here are some of the consequences of the severed ‘master-slave’ relationship in late-capitalism and the decline of ‘recognition’ (Honneth, 1996). As Hall (2012a) points out, in previous historical and political-economic eras the masters needed the slaves and were reliant upon their recognition. This is the principal social dialectic of class-based societies in which the global industrial economy’s reliance upon labour compromised the elite’s power and prevented them from elevating to an autonomous position of special liberty. However, today’s global capitalist system has severed this relation. The flexibilisation, globalisation and off-shoring of labour; the cost

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<sup>46</sup> The Airborne Academy is one of the largest and most prominent parkour gyms in the country. Each year it hosts an annual jam which is a significant date on the parkour calendar. Traceurs from around the country attend and there is even a ‘wall of fame’ which accomplished traceurs are invited to sign. TK, Chez, ZPK, Sonic, Tone and Vase were all asked to sign the wall during the second year of my research.

and labour-reducing effects of advanced technology (Castells, 2000), the primacy of abstract finance capital to the global economy (Horsley, 2015) and the parallel decline in the real economy has meant that capitalism no longer needs labour in the masses and social formations of communities that it once did. Consequently, there is now a massive 'reserve army of labour' (Byrne, 1999) or, as Winlow and Hall (2013) describe them, a 'reserve army of consumers'. In the knowledge that an entire workforce is dispensable and easily replaced, employers can place workers under more exploitative and precarious conditions with little need to invest in the employee to ensure their happiness, satisfaction and general sense of recognition (Lloyd, 2012). Moreover, the 'socially excluded' and precariously 'included' are more than just a looming threat at the individual's job security. They provide, as we have mentioned in earlier chapters, the 'negative symbolism' from which the precariously included can be distinguished (Winlow and Hall, 2013: 91). This can be seen in TK's feelings of *anonymity*. When read in conjunction with the rest of the excerpt, this sense of anonymity was not restricted to work but extended to the wider cultural, leisure and identity spheres of his life. For TK, in an era in which individualistic and youthful identity is everything, going to work and earning a wage was equated with 'doing nothing with his life'; similar to those participants in Hall et al's (2008) ethnographic study who described this lifestyle as a 'dog's life'. Here we see how global capitalism has created the conditions in which the desire and intensified need for these forms of identity are cultivated in ways which serve to perpetuate its own existence.

While the last several pages have been dedicated to TK and Chez's biographies, their experience was far from exceptional. When the other traceurs spoke about Chez and TK's company, it was often followed by an expression of envy, contextualising their envy through their own dissatisfaction with their working lives. The other traceurs realised that *they* were the negative symbolism against which the culturally relevant, cool young people who were 'doing something' with their lives could distinguish themselves. For those who did not engage in parkour as a form of *paid*<sup>47</sup> work, it was enough to contextualise their pursuits against other leisure or consumer groups, as we saw in Huse's earlier comment in chapter four (page 101) along with the YouTube video of

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<sup>47</sup> The emphasis upon *paid* work is important here. As we shall see later in the chapter when discussing the role of 'prosumers' in contemporary capital accumulation, it would be an erroneous and crude method to distinguish work and leisure exclusively through the lens of financial compensation. As the title of this chapter suggests, there is a certain 'labour' to leisure which belies this distinction.

'The Chosen Few'. However for Vase and Franny, who started up a clothing line, the apparently free, youthful and unburdened lifestyles of Chez and TK were the triggers which drove their motivations to quit their job and make a genuine effort to capitalise on the aesthetic fashion markets of cultural lifestyle sports. The following excerpt from one of my several interviews with Franny is so illustrative of these themes that it's worth quoting in full:

*"Franny: You just think "what's the point" [in work] y'kna? **There's no point.** None. Not in any of it. I got all me A levels, did a couple NVQs before that. Had jobs while I was doing those. Then I done 'em, and I was struggling even more with work than I was before. It's a bit demoralising like, just properly pointless. Then you look at them [Chez and TK]. And you know they're not raking it in, like. Not stupid. But neither am I having to work in a fuckin' call centre putting on a phone voice all day and get hung up on or told to piss off for something which I've no fuckin' clue about.*

*TR: So it's a 'grass is greener' thing then?*

*Franny: Well yeah. But the grass **is** greener. When you do that, you don't realise how depressed you get. Every morning you **dread** waking up. Properly dread it. You just don't get out from under the covers. [In] Winter it's shite because you can't afford to put heating on so your clothes are all damp like. It's horrible, everything is utter shite.*

*TR: Isn't that just the realities of work though?*

*Franny: I guess. But thing is, nobody who's there ever wanted or pictured themselves being there. When you're in school, you're not really thinking about the future like, you're just a kid. But it's not like you ever picture yourself working in those places and living that life. I don't know why you don't, because that's what most of me mates are doing and so are the lads who were ahead of me in school. It's just never how you pictured your life going. It's like, that's just not me. The 9 to 5 miserable fucker. Not who I've been ever. Just felt like I'd lost a bit of meself y'kna? With Chez and TK you just knew they had a reason to get up every day. Work with yer mates. You earn nowt. But I reckon one of us will break through. They're all hooked up to Parkour UK now, we've got our own site and [parkour team in London] are promoting it.*

While the chapter will explore some of the themes within this excerpt in more theoretical depth later, Franny's story is an example of the objectless anxiety and competitive (or comparative) individualism (Hall, 2012a) discussed in chapter 4. Franny's identity, his means of constructing a coherent sense of self, was based upon a fragile and intangible sense of youthful exuberance, enthusiasm and an aura of 'cool' which was inextricably entangled within late-capitalism's individualistic injunction to enjoy. Franny's style could be described as nothing else but eccentric. He had a drastically new stylish bold hair-cut every couple of weeks. He always had new little flair accessories in the style of piercings, wristbands or other small nik-naks, along with the freshest trainers and latest bottoms which were marketed toward traceurs. In general he 'had style' and was highly accomplished in being able to navigate the fine line between blending-in while also 'sticking' out (Miles, 1998; Winlow and Hall, 2009).

However, what is more interesting are the terms in which Franny psychologically describes his sense of identity and idealised lifestyle 'slipping away'. This was experienced in terms of shock or surprise, the fact that "you don't ever picture yourself working in those places" or living the lifestyle of a "9 to 5 miserable fucker". The certainties of previous labour markets in industrial modernity meant that the life course, future employment and lifestyle could be foreseen, anticipated and coped with through preparation, high levels of symbolic efficiency and occupational solidarity (Willis, 1977). While the pluralisation of identities and lifestyle opportunities in the late-modern field of cultural capitalism would appear to offer a positive freedom and liberation from this seemingly pre-determined life; in reality the opposite seems to be true. The requisite changes to conditions in labour markets and socio-economic life means that preserved adherence to the 'cult of youth' (Barber, 2007; Hayward, 2012b) and the idea that you can 'be anything you want to be' comes with the side-effect of anxiety and perpetual dissatisfaction. Consequently, Franny's persisting reality of employment in late-capitalism's hyper-exploitative fields of immaterial and affective labour was experienced as a trauma; a violation of consumer capitalism's fragile Imaginary order from which he had to escape. Call centre work is not 'real work', but merely a stop-gap on the journey to better things (see Lloyd, 2012 for parallels). In witnessing Chez and TK make their own 'big break', Franny was wracked with the sense that life was being lived more fully by others (Winlow and Hall, 2012), prompting his own withdrawal

from more formal labour markets and into the world of parkour's entrepreneurial commodification.

Cutting deeper into the wounds of existential insecurity faced by the traceurs was their almost total immersion within the inherently competitive realm of social media. Social media can arguably be conceived as a funhouse mirror into others' lives, providing another space and opportunity for the comparative display of lifestyle, cultural and consumer competence. While the content displayed on individuals' profiles is always a distortion of mundane reality and selectively distanced from the daily minutiae and inner anxieties of everyday life, the extent to which we live on social media has valorised it as a Master Signifier<sup>48</sup>. Running with the mirror analogy, social media also serves as a reflective mirror of our own lives. The consumer contextualises the quality and richness of their life in relation to the lives of others presented on social media. The traceurs often spoke about friends and other traceurs around the country and how wonderful their lives seemed on Facebook and Instagram accounts. As EJ (23 years old) once said to me:

*"You see your mates go on trips away on holiday with their missus' or like [prominent UK traceur] on Instagram in some TV studio or off to some country to train. You're scrolling through it on Facebook and you're too knackered to go out and train because you've just spent 12-hour stacking fuckin' shelves. Not only that but you couldn't go off to some other country if you wanted to because you can barely pay the rent. I can't afford the Metro sometimes mind, let alone a trip to fuckin' Bulgaria. It does make you stop and think that you ought to be a bit braver or something and just say 'fuck it' and go and do summat else...Something more rewarding".*

As Smith and Raymen (2016) have suggested, the everyday producer and disseminator of social media is selectively presenting *who they are* through the visual publication of an idealised self-image. This is underpinned by the 'will to represent' (Yar, 2012b), indicative of the competitive individualism of contemporary culture which fragments

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<sup>48</sup> The Master Signifier is a Lacanian term appropriated by Žižek. As Winlow and Hall (2013: 176) explain, "the Master Signifier refers only to itself. It is a powerful organising abstraction—such as nature, commodity, and money or, in pop culture, 'cool'—that structures our immediate understanding of the symbolic order and its content. Arguably, the same is true of social media. Its pervasive presence in our daily lives fixes identities in place in such a way that the reality presented on social media is arguably more 'true', more important than reality itself in a strange Baudrillardian simulacrum.

and atomises users not as ‘friends’ but as competitors in the display of cultural capital and inspiring envy in others. Oliver James (2010) suggests that the opportunity for self-expression that forms the backbone of consumer markets—magnified on social media—has innumerable effects that appear to be deleterious to mental health. These have the capacity to exacerbate subjective insecurities and delineate vicious social divisions that arise in societies dominated by relentless social comparison and competitive individualism. It is no mistake that the numbers of 18-24 year olds struggling with some form of mental health issue has increased by 70% in the last 25 years (Bedell, 2016) in correspondence with the dawn of neoliberalism and the intensification of consumer capitalism.

Chez, TK, Franny, Vase, ZPK, Ross, Sonic, Andy and Dean were among the core participants in this research who opted to make the ‘big break’ from the depressing world of ‘dead men working’ (Cederström and Fleming, 2012) to ‘chance their arm’ in the plethora of markets in commodified lifestyle sports. This courageous and entrepreneurial decision could be looked at in extremely positive terms: the value of myriad consumer markets to reinvent one’s life and have the freedom and risk-taking spirit for self-exploration (Arnett, 2004; Riley et al, 2013). As stated at the outset of chapter three, this is what Rojek (2010) argues to be the orthodox ‘triumphalist tones’ with which leisure and consumption is approached within the social sciences and leisure studies. However, in many ways their ‘big break’ is not a ‘break’ at all. Their lives were still characterised by insecurity, precarity and an existence which constantly flirted with the poverty line. The traceurs still had no vision for the future. As Vase put it, ‘it can’t go on forever’. Their ‘big break’ was not a resolution or cessation of the ‘extended present’ discussed above, but a continuation of it in a way which more effectively preserved (or reclaimed) their own youthful lifestyles and identities. In this regard, the sale of and engagement with youth culture is clearly far from the preserve of teenagers (Hockey and Hall, 2010; Smith, 2014).

### **Life-Stage Dissolution and the Commodification of Lifestyle Sports**

The systemically induced ‘extended present’ (Brannen and Nilsen, 2002) of ‘adult adolescence’ which has been discussed over the last several pages dovetails perfectly with what Hayward (2012b) theorises as a broader ‘life-stage dissolution’ in late-

capitalism. This notion of life-stage dissolution will be explored in the following section. However it will also discuss how cultural lifestyle sports such as a parkour are, in many regards, 'precorporated' (Fisher, 2009) to serve contemporary and updated modes of capital accumulation (Marazzi, 2010). This further illustrates one side of this thesis' central paradox around deviance and leisure: how changes in global political economy, society and culture have cultivated the need for leisure and lifestyle pursuits such as parkour.

Life-stage dissolution is the erosion of intergenerational boundaries through the bi-directional processes of the adultification of the young and the infantilisation of adults (Hayward, 2012b). It amounts to the arresting of time and progression through the life course and it is a process which is vital for the consumer capitalist project; particularly the commodification, advertising and consumption of cultural lifestyles and identities such as parkour which revolve around consumerism's obsession with youth. Hayward's (2012b) starting point is to recognise that in order for consumer capitalism to continue to function, new markets must be discovered and opened or existing ones must be extended. Hayward argues that in order to achieve this, there has been a rise in marketing and advertising campaigns across Western culture aimed at "undermining and eroding established stages of the life cycle in the search for corporate profit" (Hayward, 2012b: 214). Similar arguments have been made by the likes of Barber (2007: 7)), who focuses on the importance of the 'infantilist ethos' in over-producing and hyper-consumerist capitalist societies: "Inducing them [consumers] to remain childish and impetuous in their taste helps ensure that they will buy the global market goods designed for indolent and prosperous youth".

We can see this infantilisation in a range of adult products and services. The childish sweet-flavoured alcoholic beverages (Smith, 2014), the use of cartoon tropes within energy drinks to keep over-worked and underslept adults going through the day, or silly schoolboy office pranks in recent Carling adverts. All of these advertising and lifestyle imagery is obsessed with 'childhood nostalgia' which involves a 'conscious abdication of adult responsibility' (Calcutt, 2000). However, where Hayward's (2012b) argument differs is that infantilisation does not stand alone, but rather works in-tandem with the 'adultification' of youth products and lifestyle in a bi-directional process which, in many ways, makes adulthood increasingly indistinguishable from youth. Hayward (2012b:

217) draws upon the advertising tropes of the ‘Midriff’ and the ‘Mook’ to explain his argument:

“Consider, for example, advertising constructs such as the ‘Midriff’ and the ‘Mook’ (*Merchants of Cool*, 2001). Familiar to advertising executives the world over, the ‘Midriff’ is all about aging (adultifying) pre-teenage girls prematurely. Female clichés have always moved product, but advertisers now use the nymphet ‘Midriff’ as a key advertising trope: the prematurely adult, openly sexual teen figure as a ‘new form of feminine empowerment’ – think Britney Spears and Miley Cyrus. Likewise, the ‘Mook’ is a fabricated ‘demographic profile’ and stalwart of focus-group proving grounds. Crude, loud, hedonistic, and unashamedly based on the concept of ‘arrested adolescence’, the ‘Mook’ has emerged as a ubiquitous figure in contemporary advertising, reflecting the cultural logic of TV shows like *Jackass* and *The Dudesons*...The ‘Mook’ is interesting because it is the embodiment of the process of ‘marketing to the inner child’ via the themes of play, fantasy and hedonism (Calcutt, 2000).”

When applied to this thesis however, parkour can arguably be conceptualised as encapsulating *both* of these processes. As a ‘pure’ leisure practice, parkour is the traditional preserve of the young. It is something that ‘kids do’—climbing about, jumping around, exploring and being adventurous and risk-taking. However, through its commodification and professionalization through gyms, coaching badges and governing bodies, it becomes ‘adultified’ as a lifestyle sport through its formalisation. Older adults feel more comfortable engaging in such youthful practices by doing so formally through parkour’s positioning as a form of well-being and ‘fitness class’. Simultaneously, as is the case for the traceurs in this study, the adult notion of ‘work’ becomes infantilised and associated with fun, leisure and play. A large number of the traceurs could be described as ‘the Mook’. Indeed, associated with Franny and Vase’s clothing line was also a YouTube channel which, while not being named here, carried the slogan ‘*Never Grow Up, Never Give in*’. Huse, who along with Vase and Franny was perhaps the biggest prankster or ‘jokester’ of the bunch, was the driving force behind the channel. It was used to both advertise their brand by depicting the pair of them, along with other traceurs, using parkour to perform pranks and coordinate awkward and humiliating encounters with members of the public in ways reminiscent of television programmes such as *Impractical Jokers*, *Jackass* or the now-famous social media personalities such as Arron

Crascall. To quote Hayward further (2012b: 219): “as kids hurtle at full speed towards adulthood, what awaits them when they arrive is something remarkably familiar”.



Vase trying to startle someone sleeping in the park for the video's amusement. March, 2015.

This works perfectly with the existing labour markets discussed earlier which do not allow for a vision of the future. Thus, life-stage dissolution and the systemically induced ‘extended present’ exist in a symbiotic relationship which preserves the ‘forever young’ syndrome which is vital to the immediacy and youth-oriented nature of consumer capitalism. For the traceurs, on the one hand it is increasingly difficult to develop matured transitions into adulthood due to existing labour and housing markets. On the other hand, it is entirely undesirable to do so, except through the bi-directional adultification of lifestyle sports and the infantilisation of work which encourages the evacuation of a ‘viable sense of adult agency’ (Calcutt, 2000) in favour of youthful drift, immediacy and extended present. Thus, the young millennials who are the subject of this study remain in a static limbo phase of ‘adultified adolescence’. Their youthful practice of parkour is ‘adultified’ through its professionalization or ‘sportification’

(Wheaton, 2013), whilst their professional and adult livelihoods are forms of infantilised work reminiscent of the 'Mook' described by Hayward (2012b).

## **Parkour, Capital Accumulation, and Productive Consumers**

When looking at parkour and other lifestyle sports as forms of work and leisure it is also imperative that we situate their commodification and professionalization within the present and updated modes of capital accumulation. As we have already identified, the relatively simple argument regarding parkour's underlying conformity to values and behaviours in consumer or 'cultural' capitalism are already scarce within the existing literature surrounding lifestyle sports (see Stapleton and Terrio, 2010; Daskalaki and Mould, 2013<sup>49</sup>; Kindynis, 2016 for exceptions). However, even rarer are considerations of how parkour as a form of work and leisure operates perfectly to suit capitalism's reconfigured methods of accumulation which revolve around 'productive consumers' (Marazzi, 2010) and where the plundering of "life itself is now the most lucrative kind of capital being put to work" (Cederström and Fleming, 2012: 14). This is crucial for an understanding of how changes in global capitalism has created the conditions in which parkour can thrive as a popular cultural lifestyle sport and another form of lifestyle consumption which are vital to the economy. Orthodox Marxist approaches to labour, production, consumption and profit can no longer exclusively provide sufficient understandings of capital accumulation. Therefore, we must explore what is often neglected within social scientific accounts of leisure, work and culture: the methods through which capital is accumulated and profit maximised in post-Fordist Western economies.

In their polemic *Dead Man Working*, Cederström and Fleming (2012) make the argument that in late-capitalism, the most prominent area of contention and exploitation is now not between capital and labour, but between capital and *life*. In order to circumvent its periodic crises (Harvey, 2010; 2014) and maximise its potential for profit, capitalism seeks to extract value from every corner of life. Under Fordism,

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<sup>49</sup> This inclusion comes with a caveat. Daskalaki and Mould acknowledge how what they term as 'urban social formations' are *co-opted* by consumer capitalism. However, they stop short of a full critique and maintain that such urban social formations have the potential for progressive political resistance. They maintain what Hall (2012a) has termed 'baseless optimism' even under present political conditions which dismiss collectivism in favour of individualised identity politics which plays into the hands of the existing political-economic order.

leisure and the weekends were relatively free from the world of work, serving as a mode of relaxation and recharging the industrial worker who was primarily exploited for the physical capacities of the body, its muscles and energy (Berardi, 2009). It mattered not if labour was estranged from their work, however in an economy reliant upon 'affective labour' in a wide range of fields, Berardi (2009) argues that the buzz of life had to be imitated or 'mainlined' into the veins of work. Cederström and Fleming (2012) draw on a wide range of examples of this imitation of life within the office-world of work. Team-building exercises, ice-breakers, being friends with colleagues on social media, 'casual Fridays' and the general commandment to 'be yourself' in the work place are all examples.

However, as Cederström and Fleming also observe: "this displacement of non-work into the office also entails the obverse, the shift of work into all pockets of life" (2012: 17). Capitalism's reach extends far beyond the office or one's contracted hours, but "seeks to exploit our very sociality in *all spheres of life*" (*ibid.* 2012: 7). As Roberts (2014) acknowledges, profits are enhanced by cutting down on costs inside the production process such as the managerial role. The Fordist managerial and supervisory role which was supposed to maximise efficiency and therefore profit was actually incredibly wasteful. Better to maximise efficiency by displacing the managerial function into labour itself. The value-creating capacity of workers is enhanced by the developing of a symbiotic relationship between life and work in which our being, our very existence *becomes* the job entirely voluntarily (Berardi, 2009). This can be seen in the centrality of work to identity, its prominent position on our social media profiles (see also Marazzi, 2010; Roberts, 2014), and its staple feature within small talk: 'So what do you do for a living?' The university lecturer performs tasks such as writing, which is vital to their career progression, at home; performing the 'day job' of teaching and administration during their contracted hours. The intern stays late at social drinks to network, then goes home and networks some more on LinkedIn.

In the case of this study, Chez's quote above is example enough, and Wheaton's (2013) description of parkour as a 'lifestyle sport' could not be more appropriate. Parkour is arguably the quintessential example of the 'dead man working'. As mentioned earlier, parkour is an entire way of life which never ceases. As Ty (19 years old) said, echoing Chez's quote at the outset of this chapter:

*“It’s not like when you’re out training you’re a freerunner and when you go home you’re not. It’s more than that. It’s like all-consuming. The shit you watch on YouTube, the accounts you follow. You’ll hear music on the radio and think ‘ah that’d be sick to train to or that’d make a proper good soundtrack to a video’. It’s all the time.”*

Therefore, it is misleading to suggest that parkour as a ‘lifestyle sport’ is something which is ‘coopted’ and turned into something different after its commodification. If anything it is ‘precorporated’ (Fisher, 2009), pre-emptively shaped by cultural and consumer capitalism’s logic. As it becomes commodified and subculturalised (Daskalaki and Mould, 2013), its underlying precorporated values are not changed but *intensified* as it becomes more entangled within social media, professional lifestyle sport markets and a range of other lifestyle opportunities.

Parkour and the traceurs who ‘live it’ are arguably perfect examples of the ‘productive consumer’ or ‘prosumer’. Scholars such as Marazzi (2010), Berardi (2009) and Winlow and Hall (2013) argue that this is an evolution within capitalist processes of accumulation. There has been a shift away from the traditional production/consumption/profit nexus of capital accumulation and toward a situation where consumers are the foremost producers and distributors of the product as well. The various aspects and tasks entangled with consumption are drawn upon to add to the value of a particular product or help corporations maximise the extraction of profit. User-generated websites such as YouTube, eBay and TripAdvisor rely on this kind of energy as the consumers of the sites are also implicitly involved in producing its content. However, social media websites such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram are the textbook examples of the ‘productive consumer’. Users mostly engage in what Winlow and Hall (2013: 115) describe as ‘low-level immaterial labour’. The photos, statuses, videos and re-tweets—the core content of the sites—are essentially free labour, made up of the everyday lives of users which is voluntarily provided. Thus, users are actively consuming and producing them simultaneously for corporations which are valued at over 100 billion dollars (Cellan-Jones, 2012). Arguably, it is on social media where parkour and other cultural lifestyle sports ‘live’ and grow. One of my participants, Andy (33 years old), is a London-based traceur who has been involved with UK parkour since

its first official 'jam' in the UK in 2003. He has observed parkour's media-savvy evolution in conjunction with the rise and prominence of social media:

*Andy: It [social media] has definitely made it more individualistic. You see guys who brag about training with this person or that person. But that visible kind of competitiveness dates back to its earliest origins over here [in the UK]. At its earliest stages with Urban Freeflow it was about we need to do this to be central to the parkour community and sell more t-shirts. It's not a new thing it's just become more refined. Now, Instagram, Facebook and YouTube—the internet basically—is where parkour makes its money and keeps itself growing. The levels of media savvy has kind of...you see guys who years ago were kind of breaking through and producing amazing videos and now they own clothing brands and they have to keep producing content. They have to be very conscious of how and when they release that content. So it's all kind of look-books, and then there's teasers for look-books, there's teasers to season launches and clothing lines and new apparel and all sorts. So these guys have learned to exploit the media stuff that they use. But it does massively change how you shoot things. I mean, it's an advertisers dream. And for people who watch it, that's why social media is great for it...[pauses]...and actually why parkour is great for social media. People can watch that and it inspires them. Put some inspirational quote next to a video post and people go apeshit. Just project themselves onto it.*

*TR: What benefit does it have for traceurs?*

*Andy: Ah man...On social media, you can feel like you're a **somebody** in the parkour world. Just somebody in general, even though you either live with your mum or in some dingy flat—I mean look around you [laughs]. You get so many followers, or you get posts with loads of likes and shares and you can put 'Professional Freerunner at wherever' on your page without having to actually achieve or work for anything.*

Andy's comments at the start of the interview excerpt indicate how parkour and its relationship to social media work perfectly with these forms of late-modern capitalist accumulation. As we have explored earlier, parkour and other cultural lifestyle sports such as urban exploration are pre-emptively shaped by the late-modern 'will to represent'. As Kindynis (2016: 8) has written, "any architectural, historical or political

interests or motivations are, I suggest, largely subordinated to the *production and consumption of images*". This is the desire to publicly display one's identity, lifestyle and accomplishments which, as Andy himself admits, is underpinned by a narcissism which is characteristic of consumer capitalism (Hall et al, 2008). Andy describes photographs and videos of oneself as 'medals' or 'trophies':

*It is bound up with narcissism for sure...It's about all of your training, all of the hours you invest, all of the scars, the blood, sweat, tears and all those clichés, whatever. It all goes into producing a version of yourself that you want and then trying to express that through a photograph that captures all of that... once you've got it it's like OK: this is a version of who I am, it's a medal almost.*

However, Andy's comments at the end of the excerpt regarding the notion of 'being somebody' are equally applicable. Among my own participants, it is interesting to peruse their individual Facebook pages or Instagram accounts. The vast majority of the traceurs have other 'real' jobs working in cafes, restaurants, call centres and retailers. However, in the 'employment' section of their Facebook pages they all describe themselves as 'Professional Freerunner', despite perhaps having never been paid to do anything related to parkour and freerunning or if they have, only very sporadically. This is perfectly clear from Walker's description of the 'labour' of remaining relevant within the parkour scene of Facebook, YouTube and Instagram:

*"Let's be honest, us freerunners generally don't have a lot of money. We're all twenty-somethings, living at home, waiting for Nike to recruit us for their next advert. You can't take up or go for anything too serious, like a proper job because it gets in the way. That means sometimes you can spend quite a while unemployed. I was unemployed for god knows how many months a while back before I got onto this 3-month temp contract. Hate it. I think I could be training. I could be doing video edits and getting my [social media] pages going'. Mam sees that as a waste of time. She thinks I look like a lazy bum. But I'm not, that's just what you've got to do to make it in the parkour world. Chip away at it.*

*TR: Can that get frustrating at times?*

*Walker: Aye, it does a bit. It's just a bit tedious and hopeless sometimes. But it's a slow thing. It's a slow thing that can explode quick like. You just need the right people to see you, get the right gig and bam, all of a sudden you go from having a couple thousand followers to bloody tens of thousands.*

*TR: Do you ever feel the pressure [to give it up]?*

*Walker: Me Mam leans on me a bit sometimes, like. They'll [his parents] get frustrated when I haven't got a job and they think I should be looking for all these big grand jobs. They see me spend hours after training, editing videos and putting it all together like. But that's what you've got to do!*

*TR: How do you mean, that's what you've got to do?*

*Walker: It's what you've gotta do to stay in the lifestyle, you know? Parkour means so much to me. I don't want to do it as just this thing that I kind of half-arse and flit in and out of, you know? I want it to mean something, I want people to look at me and be like, 'that's a proper freerunner right there'.*

Walker's comments display how being a 'proper freerunner' is validated not by one's training and intrinsic progression but by its recognition and formalisation on social media. As Smith (2014: 40) acknowledges, the cultural identities are only 'real' and legitimate if they are acknowledged by the Big Other—Lacan's term for the social and cultural institutions, customs and signifiers into which the subject is socialised. Smith (2014) gives the example of a musician who is not a 'proper' musician until they get a recording contract or attain a certain number of followers on social media. In this case, it is the will to represent and be externally recognised through the forms of productive consumption such as social media which constitute the Big Other. This aside, Walker's comments reflect one of the core facets of Cederström and Fleming's (2012) argument about present-day forms of work and capital accumulation. They write that "Capitalism has always destroyed the thing it needs the most" (p.9) which in the contemporary context is life itself. Thus, even within the world of parkour as a form of leisure, the 'life'

of parkour—the content upon which capitalism is so reliant—is continuously sucked out of its practice as a form of autonomous leisure. Capital’s relentless exploitation of life does not amount to a ‘frictionless capitalism’ in which life and capital no longer conflict with one another. This is precisely because of the coercive nature of this form of ‘leisure-work’ in which there is a systemically created ‘labour’ to these late-modern forms of leisure. This was far from restricted to Walker’s comments but was more pervasive throughout the NEPK community, with traceurs often not coming out for ‘just fun’ training sessions because they needed to rest their bodies for upcoming exhibitions, stunt-work jobs, or because they ‘just didn’t see the point’. This is a far cry from the origins of their interest in parkour, which many of the traceurs stated was rooted in the simplistic and ‘natural’ childish urges to climb, play and explore. ‘Huse and Ty, both gymnasts, were tired of the formalised and ‘uncool’ nature of the gymnastics environment having hit a ceiling through which they could not break. Ross and Cal both claim that they were doing parkour before they were ‘doing parkour’. Both living on estates where there was little to do, they would jump about, climb and engage in a general childish dare-devilry. One day, Cal found videos on the internet of this thing called ‘parkour’, which had a distinct subculturalised aesthetic and a more technical aspect which introduced an element of identity, but also skill, to their general ‘larking about’. However, as they became dissatisfied with the anonymity of early adulthood and the drudgery of work, their instrumental use of parkour drained the buzz, excitement, adventure and camaraderie that initially underpinned its attraction.

## **Conclusion**

The angle this chapter has taken is perhaps an unusual one, using the wider context of the traceurs lives and the precariousness and anonymity of employment within insecure labour markets as a departure point. However, it is this wider context that has been entirely neglected by every published scholar of parkour who have been too narrowly focused on the seductive allure of its transgressive practice in the city. This thesis of course deals with this vital aspect of parkour’s practice in the following chapters, however to neglect this wider context is to deny oneself the ammunition for understanding the attraction to its practice and within its global and structural context of socio-economic change. Moreover, the discussions made here are not limited to parkour, but apply to all forms of cultural lifestyle sports, ‘serious’ and ‘casual’ leisure,

and devotee occupations which rely upon the existential insecurity of the late-capitalist subject in its plundering of life as a lucrative form of capital (Cederström and Fleming, 2012; Stebbins, 1995; 1997; 2007). The data represented here would not be considered 'generalisable' by even the most sympathetic statistician. However, limited to parkour, the discussions I had with my core participants were reflective of traceurs I met and interviewed in other parts of the country as well. Furthermore, contextualised in relation to other criminological and sociological ethnographies on work, leisure, crime and deviance which have looked at similar issues, it suggests there is a level of generalisability to the arguments that extends beyond Newcastle, and beyond parkour (Lloyd, 2012; 2013; Smith, 2014; Treadwell et al, 2013; Winlow and Hall, 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this chapter has been to build upon the arguments in the first-half of this thesis surrounding socio-economic change and abstract conceptualisations of subjectivity to see how they manifest and operate in the lives of the traceurs and their attraction to parkour. This chapter has dealt firmly with the realities of traceurs lives in the post-industrial North East and how the desire to engage in the labour of parkour as work and leisure is quite clearly connected to these changes. In conjunction with understandings of how parkour serves updated modes of capital accumulation, this has hopefully convinced the reader that we can finally sweep arguments around parkour as a do-it-yourself form of stylised politics onto the intellectual trash heap. In breaking free from this intellectual paradigm we can recognise parkour's conformity and thus, acknowledge the paradox of parkour itself. This allows us to spend the remainder of this thesis dealing with the other side of parkour's paradox: the spatial realm of its practice and transgression, control and exclusion.

# 7

## *The Parkour City*

### *Spatio-Bodily Transgression and Negotiation in the Late-Capitalist City*

#### **Introduction**

Any study of the practice of parkour must deal with a study of the body. More accurately, it requires a study of the social relationships between the body and space. It must understand the traceurs' personal embodied experiences of space, how they move throughout the city, map the urban according to parkour and, of course, how this relates to and conflicts with late consumer capitalism's shaping and dominance of contemporary post-industrial cities. The previous chapter spoke a great deal about issues of conformity and the traceurs' navigation of identity in late-capitalism through parkour as work and leisure. While highly influential, to reduce the traceurs motivations for practicing parkour as a practice in external and aesthetic identity formation would be unfair and inaccurate, as the embodied and experiential practice of parkour informs this identity as well. Much like other transgressive urban and spatial practices (see Kindynis, 2016; Garrett, 2013; Ferrell, Lyng and Milovanovic, 2001), the corporeal sensations, affective experiences and intimately embodied connection with space and place is undeniably at the heart of traceurs motivations. Indeed, this tension between internalised embodied sensations and the externalised and instrumental use of parkour as identity, spectacle and career can be conceived of as a *tension* running through parkour, reflective of the wider tension within the deviant-leisure nexus it occupies. It is with these parallel and competing spatial imaginaries and embodied experiences that we are concerned in this chapter.

Therefore, while the previous chapter focused on identity and the following chapter will focus on parkour's control and security guards' narratives; this chapter will look at

parkour's more transgressive<sup>50</sup> facets in the attempt to achieve a few of the following objectives. First, it will explore parkour's embodied and 'more-than-representational' (Lorimer, 2005) experience of urban space in order to establish a more comprehensive understanding of the motivation and attraction to parkour's practice in late-capitalism. While seemingly irreconcilable positions, it will be suggested that there are potentially rich relationships to be established between non-representational theory and ultra-realist criminology that, properly adapted, can assist an understanding of parkour's practice and control within the late-capitalist city from an embodied spatial perspective. It will do so by understanding the embodied and affective sensations of parkour's practice as driven by a desire to push beyond the muted artificiality of everyday life and experience something raw, authentic and 'real', summarised by Badiou's (2007) notion of 'the passion for the Real'. This would appear in contrast to previous chapters which situate parkour as an instrumental form of identity construction through its artificial commodification. However, this chapter argues that the simultaneous desire to experience something 'Real' and the pursuit of external recognition through social media platforms which feature spectacularised and artificial visual productions is a *functional tension* for late-capitalist leisure industries which runs through cultural lifestyle sports and leisure more broadly (Smith, 2014). In an artificial society of the spectacle, late-capitalism feeds off bastardised reproductions of the 'Real', fuelling desire for it by co-opting its raw authenticity and thus denying access to those who seek it.

Moreover, continuing with this theme of embodiment, the chapter outlines how the traceurs move throughout the city according to a tactile *knowing* of the city's physical materiality. It aims to communicate how traceurs' engage in an alternative cartography of the city according to their embodied knowing of particular spots in addition to their immersive understandings of the temporal rhythms and flows of its consumer economy. It intends to understand how this contributes to its transgressive status, with the suggestion that parkour is not just a spatial transgression, but a *bodily* one. Better yet, it is a *spatio-bodily* transgression. The desire to establish active and intimate bodily connections with space run contrary to the encouraged *passive* bodily reception of the

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<sup>50</sup> The use of the term 'transgressive' is extremely important for this thesis. It is a term used in distinction to 'deviance', for it refers to the breaking of rules and (in this context) spatial norms, rather than a deviation from social values (see chapter 4).

city as it is. It is argued in this chapter that the consumer city encourages a sedentary consumer body which passively *receives* and accepts the dominant consumerist cartography of the city rather than actively engaging with and creating its own. Considered in the context of a late-capitalist subject who appears obsessed with escaping the sanitised artificiality of everyday life and urban existence (see Lyng, 1990; 2005; Garrett, 2013; Smith, 2014; Žižek, 2002c), we can again see how consumer capitalism has created a contradiction for itself in needing to cultivate and prohibit its own neophilic subjects at the spatial and embodied level. Throughout, the chapter will draw upon observational, interview and autoethnographic data to give the reader a sensuous understanding of the centrality of these embodied non-representational experiences of space and how they're transgressive, but not 'deviant', within the hyper-regulated city.

## **Embodied Spatial Practice and Non-Representational Theory**

After a few months of fieldwork I'd managed to hit all of the favoured parkour spots in the city many times along with doing several 'roof missions'. I'd become familiar with the multi-sensory connectedness that traceurs experience with particular spaces. For the traceur, the physical materiality of spaces is no longer external to the body, but rather internalised and embodied, learning spaces through the body and developing an intimate tactile 'knowing' of particular spots (Saville, 2008). No matter how hard one tries, these sensations always escape description. This ineffability is not uncommon for intensely embodied practices, much in the way that Lyng's (1990) sky-diving 'edgeworkers' could never quite articulate the experience of the 'edge'. This is precisely because of its embodied quality. It is affective, pre-discursive and pre-symbolic in which:

“the relationship between space and subjectivity cannot be captured by the discursive representation of a cognitive subject that appreciates space and place at a distance. Rather, bodies and spaces are two dimensions of a single ontological plane and are folded into one another” (Farrugia et al, 2015: 4)

These sensations are quite effectively captured by the work of non-representational theory (NRT), which privileges the embodied relations of space and has prompted criminologists to call for and draw upon NRT and its emergence from the cultural turn in human geography (Campbell, 2012; 2013; Hayward, 2012; Kindynis, 2016). NRT wishes to go *beyond* or, perhaps more accurately, *beneath* the representation and

meanings of socio-spatial relationships to instead focus upon embodied, pre-cognitive and affective spatial relationalities. This is what Massumi (2002) describes as the ‘visceral sensations’ and spatial experiences in which space is registered affectively<sup>51</sup> in the body before it is representationally interpreted or processed through language.

Non-representational theory’s emphasis upon embodiment and how individuals understand space through the body spoke to my own experiential practice. This is the comforting familiarity of feeling the cold dusty texture of a smooth grey concrete wall under your palms as you vault it; swinging your legs up through your hips and *knowing* in your body, in the feeling of bounce and lift, that you’ve cleared it before your legs have passed the wall’s threshold. As you climb scaffolding or a fire-escape ladder to a roof spot, you know how far you’ve climbed from the ground through the most minute and usually unnoticed sounds of the city’s street-level—the pedestrian crossing’s bleep or the shuffle of footsteps—dimming to a muffled hum. Embodiment and affect have been addressed by almost every scholar to discuss parkour (Angel, 2011; Fuggle, 2008; Saville, 2008), whilst geographers studying urban spatial practices such as UE have described in extreme detail the exhilarating and spatially reorienting experience of navigating the multiple layers of the city (Garrett, 2013; Kindynis, 2016). During interviews and days and nights out in the city with the traceurs, almost all of the participants discussed these multi-sensory and affective spatialities as a central aspect of parkour’s practice, as exemplified by the words of Walker (21 years old):

*Walker: What I like about it is how you just know certain spots. You know them better than anyone. You know them better than the people who built the place. You know the exact distances, you know the brick, which parts of the wall are good and which are loose. You just feel it...It’s like...it’s like your body and the spot aren’t separate? It’s like they’re the same thing? The spot is almost like an extra limb...it’s really hard to explain.*

*TR: Is there anything else like it? Can you give an example of something similar that other people could relate to seeing as most people don’t do parkour?*

*Walker: I mean nothing really compares to it because it’s so different... [Pauses to think] I guess it’s kind of like how you know your own house. That’s the closest*

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<sup>51</sup> See Young (2014) on the distinction between ‘affect’ and emotion.

*example I could give. It's like you walk back into your own house and has its own smell that's just you and everybody else's house smells kind of strange? [Laughs] That's such a shit example. But you know how you can walk around your own house in the dark and you know where the furniture is, where the stairs are, everything. You just know it. The spots we hit are like that. It's like an extension of you. It's nice.*

*TR: Why's that nice?*

*Walker: It's just quite comforting really to have a connection to anywhere like that. They're real places you know. They feel real. Me Dad gets it. I've said this to him before. He's got his local [pub] and he goes in there to get away from it all and it's just familiar. When I want to relax and just kind of unwind, I come out here*

Here Walker is talking about spaces as they relate to his body; an internalisation of the physical materiality and 'connective tissue' of the spaces between physical structures. However, he also discusses these spaces in embodied terms as they relate to an emotional 'connection' and familiarity which he equates to an affective sense of belonging. This proprietary sense of connection is extremely important within the contemporary city. Parkour is often discussed as a means to feeling a sense of belonging to a city which has, in many ways, been sanitised, plucked and planned in a way which has turned it into a 'non-place' of mass consumption (Augé, 1995; Raymen, 2016; Winlow and Hall, 2013).

However this active bodily engagement with the city is also an important aspect of its *control*. Therefore, it is of significant criminological interest here in understanding the relationships between embodied place-making, transgression and spatial prohibition in the contemporary city. Cultural criminologists have long-asked for an embodied 'criminology of the skin' (Ferrell and Sanders, 1995). However, criminology as a whole has been relatively reluctant to bring the body to the fore not just at an empirical or methodological level (see Kane, 1998 on reflexive understandings of the researcher's body), but at a theoretical one. Discussion has tended to focus on the body in a representational sense, a site of symbolic meanings and power-relations (Kane, 1998) rather than deeper pre-cognitive, pre-symbolic affective bodily experiences of crime and deviance. This is what Wacquant calls a 'carnal sociology' of 'flesh and blood' (Wacquant, 2015). As Kindynis (2016) and others have argued, the suggestion that the

'unconscious' and pre-cognitive aspects of the body could be explored to understand criminality, deviance and transgression has been received with great scepticism as a doorway to biological or psychological positivism (Lyng, 2004: 360). Rarer still has been criminology's interest in situating a serious theorisation of embodiment (rather than external bodily representations) within space, place and spatial control (see Halsey and Young, 2006; Hayward, 2012 for exceptions). This chapter, therefore, brings together non-representational theory (Thrift, 2008) with ultra-realist perspectives to explore potential avenues for understanding the body and the city and issues of spatio-bodily transgression.



Feeling Space. January, 2014.

At first appearances, NRT would seem entirely irreconcilable with ultra-realist criminological theory upon which this thesis draws. NRT is heavily influenced by post-structuralist thought and phenomenology which were significant features of the cultural turn in geography and a number of other disciplines (Hayward, 2012). Such work seems to encapsulate everything that ultra-realism is against (see Hall and Winlow, 2015

chapters 3 and 5), an exemplar of the valid critiques directed at Katz (1988) in over-emphasising the foreground of phenomenological experience deracinated from a larger objective, structural and representational context (Hayward and Young, 2004). Advocates of NRT have also been sceptical of this issue, with Barnett (2008) and Campbell (2012) questioning the extent to which NRT overstates the political currency of an 'ontology of affect' and the agentic power of individuals to use non-representational and affective experience as the mainspring of progressive politics. While Hall and Winlow (2015) do not discuss NRT directly, these concerns fit within their broader critiques of the 'domain assumptions' of liberal idealist positions which overstate the extent to which individuals have agentic control over their own embodied, unconscious and pre-discursive desires:

“the primacy of reason or conscious understanding in classical thinking either ignores unconscious drives and desires, or at least assumes that human beings are always in control of these powerful forces. Basically, it is an avowedly idealist position with only a passing interest in contextual reality” (Hall and Winlow, 2015: 6)

Despite these problems, NRT's primary desire is to go beyond representation and instead understand deeply embodied and affective spatialities and “the processes that operate before conscious reflective thought” (McCormack, 2005). This aspect of NRT ties quite neatly into ultra-realism's roots in transcendental materialist philosophy, and the desire for criminologists to return not just to a theorisation of motivation, but an exploration and appreciation of the unconscious and its relationship to the contemporary structures and ideological forces of late-capitalism (see chapter 4, this thesis; Hall and Winlow, 2015; Hall, 2012b; Smith, 2014; Winlow, 2014). As Adrian Johnston (2008: xxiii) has written:

“the subject described by late-modern (especially transcendental philosophy) is emergent in relation to the body—that is to say, such “immaterial” (or, more-than-material) subjectivity immanently arises out of a material ground. And...this body as material ground is, from the very beginning, shot through with various antagonisms, conflicts, and tensions”

Consequently, the experiential foreground of parkour's corporeal spatiality and why it is deemed transgressive can be better understood when contextualised against ultra-

realism's interest in the 'Passion for the Real' in late-capitalism (see Smith, 2014; Smith and Raymen, 2016 for examples).

### **Parkour and the 'Passion for the Real'**

"David Belle, a man heralded as a founder of parkour, and now international celebrity, runs towards a solid wall that cordons off an underpass. His movement is purposeful and practised. All eyes are turned towards him. As he closes on the barrier and jumps, his calloused hands reach out, pushing off the top to propel him over. His trailing foot does not clear the wall; it hits. It pulls his body out of alignment. Travelling at speed and out of control David Belle's back makes contact with the far wall of the underpass and he falls...He was pleased and excited. After the 'fakeness' of Californian media-appeasing performances, the Frenchman said he felt more 'real'" (Saville, 2008: 891).

It is far from novel to question the authenticity and artificiality of our shared social and cultural life. *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), arguably Jean Baudrillard's most famous work on the society of symbols, signs and their relationship to reality, was published in English over thirty years ago. To say, as Marc Augé (1995) has, that our contemporary cities are increasingly ahistorical non-places of consumption and capital flows appears to be less a controversial statement and more common-sense observation (Minton, 2012; Smith, 1996). As Winlow and Hall (2013: 121-125) have argued, it has become difficult to differentiate one city experience from another. The landmarks of history that give a place its regional and cultural specificity are no longer a natural and pervasive part of a city's spatial fabric, but instead reduced to separate exhibits to be seen. City centres are often far from organic places. They are carefully maintained as they become populated by the big name high street retailers and littered with artificial aesthetic features to present carefully managed and sanitised sites of mass urban consumption. Capitalism's society of spectacle has resulted in exotic palm trees inexplicably featuring on the streets of Northern British cities; while restaurants, cafés and pubs attempt to cultivate a diverse array of cultural atmospheres through artificial décor. Žižek (2002c) and Badiou (2005) suggest that this has prompted a yearning 'passion for the Real', intensified by the postmodern 'passion for the semblance':

"On today's market, we find a whole series of products deprived of their malignant properties: coffee without caffeine, cream without fat, beer without alcohol...the

contemporary redefinition of politics as the art of expert administration, that is, a politics without politics, up to today's tolerant liberal multi-culturalism as an experience of the Other deprived of its Otherness" Žižek (2002c: 11-12)

The 'Real' in this sense does not refer to what we experience as 'reality' on a daily basis, which is mediated through symbols, signs and language. Similar to NRT's focus on pre-symbolic, affective and deeply embodied experiences of space and movement, the Real refers to a psychological experience that exists prior to all symbolism. It is an intense psychological experience of something authentic and more 'real' than the reality of our social world. Aspects of the Real are therefore sought after through a variety of mechanisms, all in a pursuit of pushing beyond the banal, toned-down monotony of the consumer spectacle and an increasingly artificial world. The traceurs get closer to experiencing the 'Real' in their practice of parkour in public space, away from the risk-averse comforts of indoor gyms or when they're staging lines and moves for visual productions (see chapter 5). As exemplified by the above quote about David Belle, the consistent looming threat of pain and injury makes the connection with urban space feel more real and unmediated and, as described by Walker earlier in the chapter, contributes to the development of a 'metaphysical oneness' (Kindynis, 2016) with space. It is a heightening of senses, corporeality and a physical and mental connection in which spaces are *felt* before they are made symbolically meaningful. This has been described by a number of my participants:

*"It's like everything is turned up a notch, y'kna? It's like if you've ever been in a fight, you're so much more awake. Your body is just operating at a higher level. You feel your movement clearer, your reactions are quicker, you can see things and react just so much quicker than in real life and you do it all without ever thinkin' about it like. You just feel it. You can't describe it really. It's like the spots and that just come alive y'kna? Especially when you see a new spot. All the signs and that fall away. You don't even see whole buildings it's almost like it all breaks up into little pieces and you just see little ridges and rails and things and then you get up on the walls and start moving and your movement is piecing it all together again. It's like you see what it [the spot] should **really** be used for. I know that's a shit answer like, but it's the truth"*

**(Cal, 24 years old)**

*“Man, when I first came back [from a serious ankle injury], all my timing was off, I couldn’t do the things I used to do and that. Had no flow. And it was just like ‘Ahhhh!’ it was so frustrating because I just felt trapped by the space like. It’s kind of nice feeling like there’s nothing in your way. All this stuff, the walls and that, they don’t matter. But when I couldn’t move about it just felt really...I dunno...claustrophobic. It was like a video game when you want to go somewhere but the boundary of the game, the boundaries of the game world like stops you. It wasn’t like real life. That sounds stupid. It doesn’t make sense but it does. It does to anyone who knows what that feels like.”*

**(Dee, 23 years old)**

The analogies, contrasts and language that both Cal and Dee use are of interest here. Both speak of space in terms of the performative movements of their body in ways which reflect non-representational experiences of space. They feel and experience space not as external to the body, but *from and through* the body. Dee’s discussion around the claustrophobia of striated urban space is reminiscent of work done by Farrugia et al (2015) exploring the non-representational experiences of young people from low-population rural areas moving to high-density urban areas. Much like the young people in that study who discussed the enjoyment of living in rural areas in regards to open spaces, Dee and several other traceurs discussed the satisfaction derived from parkour as a ‘smoothing out’ of striated urban space (Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987). Cal, on the other hand, experiences parkour in terms of an ‘unveiling’ of space. The symbols, signs and representational meaning of particular places and spaces fall away as the artificiality of urban space succumbs to Cal’s ‘parkour vision’<sup>52</sup>.

However, both articulate this affective kinaesthetic sensation by contrasting it against ‘real life’. Cal describes the physical practice of parkour as raising one’s senses in a way that is distinct from the more sedentary body of normal, ‘real’, life. Spoken in the context of Cal’s life, these words take on even greater significance. A traceur in his teens long before my research, Cal came back to the NEPK community after several years away from practicing parkour. He became a father in his late teenage years and to support his

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<sup>52</sup> Parkour vision is a term often used by traceurs and freerunners in discussing how they see spaces differently. Rather than seeing inert and absolute physical spaces as a whole, traceurs see the potential of spaces and their physical structures for movement (see Angel, 2011).

young family he took up several jobs in a variety of areas ranging from labouring, retail work and basic administrative roles. During this time his social life revolved predominantly around the hedonistic carnivalesque pleasures of the NTE in which he attempted to 'make up for lost time' and find fun, friendship and existential satisfaction within the hyperreality of the NTE:

*Cal: It's not just 'cos I was a teenager when I had her [his daughter]. I think anyone who has kids feels like they're maybe missing out on something. You love 'em, but none of my mates had kids. You're sitting on yer arse night after night, lookin' after the bairn, watchin' telly and you just want a bit of excitement in your life rather than feeling like you're living in this fishbowl doing the same route back and forth to work and home every day. I started going out a lot more. I made a deal with me missus actually. I got to go and have a few pints once in the week, and then I got to have a proppa massive one on one day of the weekend, Friday or Saturday. But it was shite really.*

*TR: Why was it shit?*

*Cal: It was fun for a bit, but then you just go to the same places in the same order and everyone pretends they're having a good time but they're not really. You end up just getting more fuckin' battered just to try and get summat' out of it, otherwise you'll end up having a really shit night and you'll still have spent thirty quid. I prefer what we do now [with NEPK]. When you're up on a roof and you've got to do a gap...even though you know you can make it, you still know that if you fall you're fucked. I dunno, it's just a different experience. It's like you just get outside of it all. To most people, I just sound like a mental person with a death wish.*

The satisfaction derived from parkour, contextualised by Cal against the seemingly carnivalesque 'Real' of the NTE is a perfect example of the 'passion for the Real' and its unattainability within the symbolic artificial world of consumer culture. As Smith (2014) acknowledges, the consumer in the NTE remains frustrated and unsatisfied by the experience, compelled to go back, drink more and become more immersed in the pursuit of genuine existential passion. In contrast, parkour is experienced, to use Cal's

words, 'outside of it all', outside of and 'more real' than what is experienced as everyday reality.

Dee appears to take this contrast a step further, comparing 'normal' movement to that of the virtual world of video games. Once one has practiced parkour, there is a feeling of mastery over space but also a connection to one's own body and movement that is more 'real', more natural and less contained by the ways in which the physical layout of the city and 'normal' movement directs the body. What Dee is implying in his video game analogy is that, after practicing and developing a broader range of physical faculties through parkour, the movements of a 'normal' pedestrian feel constrained, unnatural and even *scripted* by the physical environment and the norms of urban movement. Traceurs come to experience their practice of parkour and mastery of the body and space as a peeling away of the layers of reality; or rather peeling away the layers of *artificiality* of social space with its rules and norms to get closer to the 'Real Thing'.

This is notable in how traceurs frequently refer to their skills in the context of a 'zombie apocalypse'. This is an analogy not only used by my own participants, but one I frequently encountered through online parkour forums and as I travelled to new cities and met other parkour communities. Ampisound, a bespoke 'parkour and freerunning' production company, have even filmed a series of mini-movies of parkour in the zombie apocalypse. These short videos depict a 'film-like' chase in which the protagonist, filming through a 'first person' lens, uses parkour to evade zombies (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lQHlZoB1Yjw>). While a playful analogy, the imagery it uses should be taken seriously in understanding the experience of parkour as reflecting a 'passion for the 'Real''. In the zombie apocalypse as it is imagined, the customs and norms of movement and everyday life, including the rules of the city and patterns of movement and space, would cease to remain relevant in an incoherent world of pure survival. Thus, the analogy of a zombie apocalypse implicitly refers to the disintegration of the rules, laws and customs that constitute the Big Other—the networks of institutions, rules and signifiers into which the individual is socialised and that ritualises and affirms the existing Symbolic Order (Lacan, 1997). Thus the death of these customs amounts to the disintegration of the Symbolic Order, that which enables the subject to escape the Real and live a coherent, peaceful and harmonious existence

(Fink, 1995). In a hypothetical zombie apocalypse, the Symbolic Order would break down and humanity would be plunged back toward a genuine encounter with the Real. For Gaz (23 years old), traceurs spatially reorient themselves in this way, getting 'outside' of the customs of movement. This is done not out of genuine anticipation and preparation of a zombie apocalypse, but through a 'Passion for the Real' that is beyond the banality of the consumer spectacle and the artificiality of everyday life:

#### *Authors Fieldnotes*

*I set out with Gaz from Durham. I only just met him the other day, but he was keen to do a bit of training over in Newcastle now that he knew someone there. The Durham parkour scene is small and limited. He knew of the Newcastle traceurs, and saw this as his opportunity to hit a few spots and train with a larger group of people now he knew someone in the NEPK community.*

*It's warm and it's pissing it down. Heavy, straight rain sheeting down as I step outside my flat. I don't have a mack on me and I know the Discovery walls are going to be unusable in this weather, being notoriously slick in the rain. I meet him at Central station and suggest that we make our way to a preferred spot of mine, St.James'. It's an undercover spot that requires cutting through the heart of town, and I take the opportunity to show him a few other good spots along the way. Quickly, we get chatting about parkour seeing as it's the only thing we have in common. I show him some of the popular spots and he finds a few of small ones of his own, eyes alert imagining how different physical structures could be pulled together with a few short movements. This 'parkour vision' gets Gaz going on a strange rant. He reckons that if there was an alien invasion or some kind of zombie apocalypse, traceurs would be among the people most likely to be able to survive. He looks at a wall that led up to a roof and laughed, pointing: "See there? Everyone else would be running around screaming and getting killed. We'd be over this rail, couple of climb-ups and we'd be on that roof and safe....for a bit". He jokes that most people would still be using car parks and waiting for the lights to turn green, following the normal patterns of pedestrian movement. As ridiculous as it all sounded, I understood his point.*

**September, 2014**

While this would seem like a form of ‘resistance’ against the artificiality of a consumer society, in reality the opposite is true. This is where Mark Fisher’s (2009) previously discussed notion of ‘precorporation’ is useful, in addition to acknowledging the alacrity of consumer capitalism to incorporate a mocking and denigration of itself into its own means of reproduction. As Smith (2014) has identified, consumers are often fully aware of the homogeneous nature of late-modern existence, evident through Huse’s earlier comments around the ‘tossers’ of homogeneous consumers. Thus, consumer capitalism ‘precorporates’ this image of the Lacanian Real and actively markets its raw, seductive power through a range of leisure avenues. Indeed, the plethora of movies and TV shows on the theme of a zombie apocalypse is evidence alone, depicting ‘state of nature’ like social relations. However this is also exemplified in the popularity of the vomit-inducing and violent realm of the NTE, where the possibility to witness or participate in violence, engage in carnal passion and experience mind and body-altering intoxication through alcohol and recreational drugs is sold as part of a ‘good night out’ (Smith, 2014). The passion and ‘atmosphere’ of football matches is an enormous part of its allure, with many who do not necessarily wish to engage in real and harmful violence but remain at the ‘edge’ or the periphery enjoy the bubbling undercurrent of violence that characterises such atmospheres as away fans walked ‘mobbed up’ in a police escort. The adventure tourism industries are also a prime example. They promise a closer and more intimate experience of the ‘Real’ or the ‘edge’ but as Holyfield et al (2005) describe, these industries train employees in emotion management. White-water rafting guides act as entertainers to try and heighten the sense of risk and danger when they sense the ‘adventurers’ are getting flat, and calming consumers down when they begin to feel too close to the ‘Real Thing’.

Of course, as Smith (2014) observes, the subject in search of the Real often finds themselves caught in consumerism’s trap. Desperate to experience genuine existential passion, they find themselves trapped within the artificiality of the consumer spectacle, “forced to find traces of the Real *within* our artificial world” (Smith, 2014: 46). Applied to parkour, this can be seen in those artificially constructed videos and images which market themselves on the spectacular athlete hanging mid-air in the void between two buildings, all of which are disseminated through multi-billion dollar social media corporations in which ‘the image is the whole point’ (Chen, 2014).



Magic's (19 years old) rooftopping pictures capture this perfectly. Looking to bolster his Instagram accounts which were crucial to the development of his status in the parkour scene, he was keen to shoot some spectacular images to circulate through social media. He decided that he wanted to shoot less parkour images, but more spectacular 'rooftopping' images with an iconic urban skyline as a backdrop to capture the

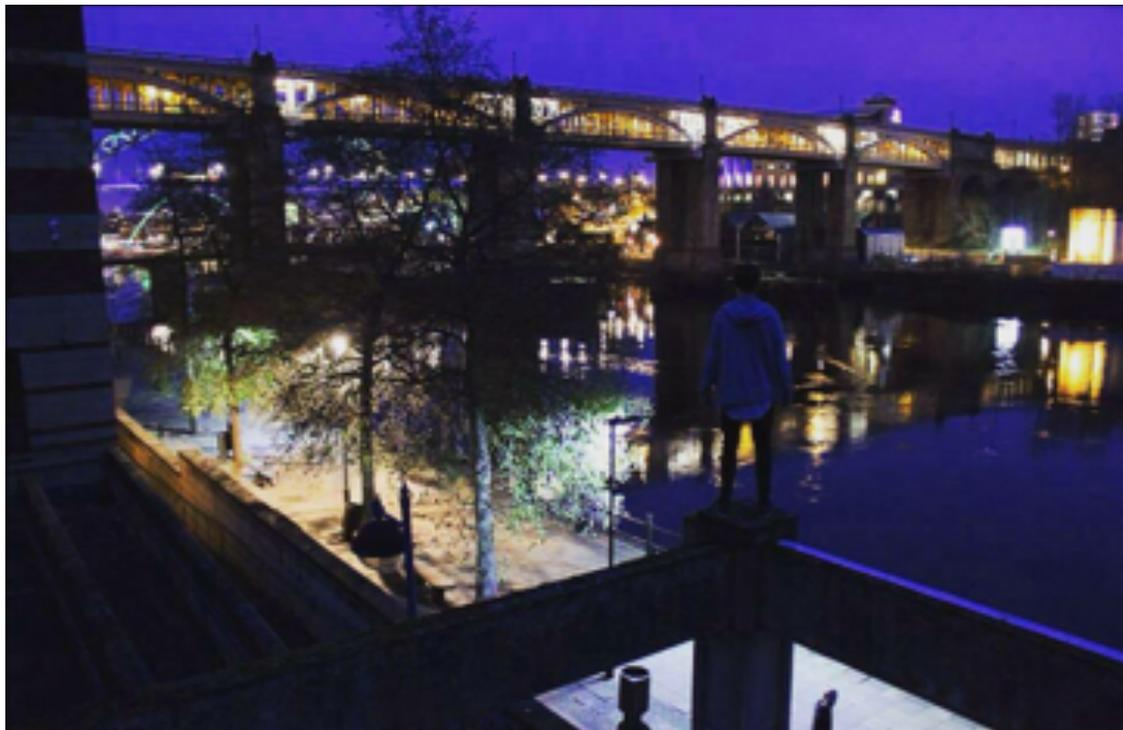
imagination of his followers (see below). In discussing what we would shoot, he said he wanted images that depicted him 'getting above it all'. To use his words, *"People respond to that. Everybody wants to escape themselves. Escape their lives. They want to look at something different from the everyday"*. While he wanted to visually depict the embodied sensation of 'getting above it all', as we saw in chapter 5 this involved shooting images that never quite captured these sensations. He'd found a great spot near his flat, a few roofs down with an old sculpted top that likely hadn't been touched in years. We climbed out a window in the corridor to his flat and worked our way out onto the roof, moving a few roofs down so he could pose atop the moulding:

*"On Instagram you're a con-artist, an illusionist. You're doing things that aren't real. I've shot and posted images of regular parkour jams and stuff and people just shrug, like its nothing. That's why I want to shoot images that have something iconic in the background that everyone can relate to. So they're like 'FUCK, that's cool'. You're a poster. That's it."*

**(Magic, 19 years old)**



The result, however, was that this eviscerated the practice of parkour and exploration from the very qualities that made it attractive. In the image above, Magic was getting bored and frustrated as he had to hold a particular pose while I adjusted my position in order to get the famous Tyne Bridge in the backdrop, get the focus right and shoot. He repeatedly yelled out that he ‘felt like a tit’ standing there like a statue. Once we finally caught the shot and came back inside, he was pleased with the result and amazed at the view, but lamented the fact that he was concentrating so hard on staying still and holding the pose that he forgot to enjoy the experience of being up there. Thus, as Sontag (1977) suggests, the search for the photogenic displaces immediate experience, and ‘prosumer’ capitalism’s cultivation of ‘the will to represent’ (Yar, 2012b) bastardises the Real through symbolic representation.



Another ‘hero shot’ for a traceur’s social media profile

However, these discussions about the Real and the artificiality of contemporary cities are also extremely important for our understanding of how parkour is ‘encountered’<sup>53</sup>, ‘witnessed’ and prohibited by both security and public citizens. The common sense reading would be that parkour is the ‘Real’ intruding upon and shattering the illusory sphere of urban space. However, in actuality the ‘spectatorship’ of parkour is

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<sup>53</sup> See Young (2014) on the affective ‘encounter’ with urban transgression.

experienced as quite the opposite. When out in the city, those individuals who did object would often lament the 'reckless stupidity' of the traceurs, commenting on their practice as a childish re-enactment of that which they see in films and saying 'you can't do that here', 'that's not what this place is for'. This was a relatively common reaction, with one gentleman who was watching the traceurs and shaking his head blaming 'the media'. It was their fault, he argued, putting images of people jumping between buildings and making it seem cool and OK. Similarly, those who were fascinated with it often asked if we were shooting an advert or if the traceurs did any stunt work for films or commercial purposes. As we will see in the following chapter, one of the security guards during a walking interview commented, "Everyone thinks it's great when it's in an advert".

This could be seen as merely the griping of the public around young people and the attention-seeking 'stunts' and imbecility of mass media. However, read more theoretically in conjunction with the discussions about the Real and the Semblance, these comments are revealing. Consumer capitalism's 'precorporation' of parkour and other similar urban practices (see chapter 4; Fisher, 2009) results in the witnessing of parkour being experienced not as the Real which penetrates the illusory, artificial sphere of urban space. Rather, parkour and indeed other practices like urban exploration are experienced and witnessed as the illusory image, the semblance that occurs in the fictional realm of films, TV shows and adverts. We see elements of parkour in numerous action films and adverts. Far from being a niche feature, the movements of parkour are more pervasive than one might recognise, all situated within 'unreal' scenarios and plotlines which are too ludicrous for real life. Martial arts and action films such as *Lethal Weapon 4* (1998) feature several scenes depicting climb ups, cat leaps and precision gaps. Sebastian Foucan, perhaps the most famed freerunner in the world, is involved in a chase scene with Daniel Craig in *Casino Royale* (2006). Other films feature parkour such as *Live Free or Die Hard* (2007), *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (2011) and *The Bourne Legacy* (2012). The list is endless, not to mention advert campaigns such as BBC One's *Rush Hour* and the recent Sure antiperspirant and Samsung Galaxy S6 adverts.

Therefore, while parkour is experienced by the traceurs as a profound experience of the Real penetrating the sanitised and controlled artificiality of urban space; it is not unreasonable to suggest that those who observe and witness parkour experience it as the exact opposite. It is parkour that represents the illusory, the images of cinematic screens intruding upon the normal reality of everyday life. Žižek (2002c) suggests something similar with regards to the attacks and collapse of the World Trade Centre. He notes that the scenes witnessed on news broadcasts were eerily familiar, reminiscent of catastrophe movies such as *Escape from New York* and *Independence Day* while mass tragedies of televised death and suffering were the domain of Third World countries rather than a Western superpower:

“We should therefore invert the standard reading according to which the WTC explosions were the intrusion of the Real which shattered our illusory Sphere: quite the reverse—it was before the WTC collapse that we lived in our reality, perceiving Third World horrors as something which was not actually part of our social reality, as something which existed (for us) as a spectral apparition on the screen” (Žižek, 2002c: 19).

Thus parkour and the traceur’s bodily movements are experienced as ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas, 1966). More than just transgressing the spatial diktat of ‘keeping space to its specificity’ (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006), the traceur’s active embodied interpretation of space is also out of place. The contemporary post-industrial city that is geared towards mass consumption privileges and encourages a more sedentary and *passive* body-space relationship, an acceptance and submissive receiving of the city as it is currently constructed and presented to the consumer. This becomes clearer when one considers the forms of leisure and consumption around which city centres are increasingly organised. Restaurants, pubs, night clubs, cinemas, high streets and shopping centres are the primary consumer industries upon which post-industrial cities such as Newcastle have based their ‘regeneration’ (Minton, 2012). These are all forms of leisure that Robert Stebbins would describe as ‘casual leisure’ (Stebbins, 1997). These forms of leisure are characterised by immediacy; relatively short-lived and fundamentally *hedonic* activities of pleasure which require no special training or knowledge for enjoyment. Above all, they are *passive* forms of entertainment which do not have to be sought out with great difficulty or especially prepared for in contrast to

other forms of 'serious leisure' (Stebbins, 2007). In relation to the individual's engagement with space, they do not require any active interpretation of the city whatsoever, but rely upon the passive acceptance of what is presented to the consumer. This is evident in the dominant cartography of the city, how it is mapped and places of significance identified for and presented to the individual (Kindynis, 2014). This is quite the opposite to the traceurs' active cartography of the city and it is to these alternative cartographies and spatialities that we now turn.

## The Parkour City

*Discovery, Sandman, University, 'Cat Alley', St James's, Civic Centre, St James's undercover, Deerfield Estate<sup>54</sup>, Quayside, Waterloo Square, Law Courts, Bridge Hotel, St Mary's, College, 'Solicitors', The Keep, Pope spot, Fat Buddha, 'Trolleys', 'The Centre', Temple Park, Eldon Square, Benfield.* This is a brief list among a collection of notable landmarks and spots in The Parkour City. By 'The Parkour City', I am referring to the city as viewed through parkour's embodied spatial lens, which perpetually and fluidly engages in the cartographic reshaping of the city according to parkour. Parkour in Newcastle (arguably parkour anywhere) has its own map of the city Parkour's spatial practice and de-purposing of urban space exists parallel but constantly subordinate and in competition with other conceptualisations, meanings and purposes of space which are closely related to the political economy of neoliberal consumer capitalism.

Cultural geographers have argued that we need to better acknowledge and understand the 'neglected spatialities' and 'strange maps' of urban life (Amin and Thrift, 2002; Cloke et al, 2008). Academics have attempted to chart some of these alternative urban cartographies among marginalised and 'drifting' (Ferrell, 2012) urban populations such as sex workers (McQuiller-Williams, 2014), the homeless (Cloke et al, 2008), dumpster divers and urban scroungers (Ferrell, 2006). These are the 'strange maps', the non-consumer cartographies of the city which are built upon "the intermesh between flesh and stone, humans and non-humans, fixtures and flows, emotions and practices" (Amin and Thrift, 2002: 9). The Parkour City is one example of this cartography, emerging from the street-level *experiential dimension* of urban life. The traceurs map the city in

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<sup>54</sup> This is a pseudonymous estate name

accordance to their embodied, non-representational experiences of particular spaces and parkour spots, but also through their immersion in the rhythms and flows of the city; a deep situated knowledge of where things are happening and how that impacts where they train from days to nights, from weekdays to weekends.

This is in contrast to the 'concept city' as it is 'viewed from above' by landowners, architects, city planners and capitalists (de Certeau, 1984; Hayward, 2004). For cultural geographers this interest in the 'strange maps' of urban life are obvious. However, for criminologists they are also of significance for going beyond superficial discussions around parkour and the privatisation of public space. Understanding the parkour map of the city aids in a better understanding of how the traceurs engage with urban space which has significant implications for understanding its 'deviant' or 'resistant' status. However, it also sheds light around how this influences the inconsistency with which they're controlled and prohibited from urban space and why. This builds into the following chapter which discusses the security guards policing of the traceurs and urban spaces.

In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre (1991) wrote that "social space is a social product" (p. 26). The physical space we occupy, the way it is designed, organised and represented is reflective of our society. To make such a statement that the physical environment reflects human spatial practice would appear so obvious that it borders on the inconsequential. However, it is a fact worth taking seriously, particularly when one considers that the maps of the city we create are a reflection of our collective conceptualisation of and embodied relationship with space (Kindynis, 2014). They are a depiction of the places and spaces in which we live, work and consume and, as critical cartographers have observed, privilege and reproduce dominant ways of seeing and organising space. They guide our social, cultural and political interests and that which is noteworthy in cities; implicitly informing how we are supposed to engage (and the ways we are prohibited from engaging) with the urban cosmos (Harley, 1988; Wood, 1992). One can see this in the maps we use on our smartphones to help us navigate the city, such as Google Maps. These are populated with little symbols such as a cocktail glass for a bar, a knife and fork for a restaurant, or even named shopping centres in enlarged lettering all depicting the places of interest in the city. Moreover, as the narcissistic

individualism of late-capitalism has rendered us the centre of our own universes (Hall et al, 2008), this is also reflected in our smartphone maps that depict us, the moving blue dot, as the focal point on the map. We type in directions from our location to the cocktail bar of interest and the map produces a route, showing us which streets to walk down, where to cross and how to get there fastest. This is reflective of the dominant bodily engagement with the city: a purposive and efficient consumer movement which passively receives the city as it is presented.

Moreover, these maps appear to suggest that there exists a collectively homogeneous understanding of any given city and what is significant and what is not (Schuurmann, 2000; Crampton and Krygier, 2006); whilst also depicting a vision of cities as spaces of permanence, singularity and continuity. Broadly speaking this is entirely accurate. As observed by many academics interested in the evolution of urban space, the interests of capital maintain a stranglehold over the 'right to the city'. It dictates the urbanisation process, the physical appearance of our cities and, in an increasingly urbanised world, our society more generally (Atkinson, 2015; Davis, 1990; Harvey, 2012; Hayward, 2004; 2012a; Smith, 1996). In this regard, while the appearance of cities change and their function evolves, there is an underlying permanence, singularity and continuity to such developments as they change and grow in a generally predictable fashion according to the evolving interests of capital. Indeed, as we shall see in chapter 8, as the needs of capital have changed so have the function of central urban space. As Keith Hayward (2004: 141) writes, hyper-regulated space "rests on the morphology of form and function; a space that is continuous, gapless, and utilitarian; a purposive and semiotically unambiguous grid that maps onto social and economic hierarchies".

While Hayward (2004) is absolutely correct in discussing the semiotic disambiguation between place and function, too often the 'gaplessness' of cities have overstated the *coherence* and *consistency* with which space is policed by a myriad of spatial authorities. This chapter and the one that follows will theorise the contemporary city as one of *fragmented*, incoherent and inconsistent control, in which the control of increasingly privatised urban space is actually dictated by a range of atomised, fragmented interests. This results in the arbitrary, situation-specific rule-making of atomised 'urban bureaucracies' in which space is governed according to individualised spatial interests of capital accumulation divorced from more general principles of social harm or

morality. The fragmentation of spatial interest introduces an element of uncertainty, inconsistency and confusion as to the grounds on which parkour is included or excluded from urban space.

It is necessary, therefore, to understand ‘The Parkour City’ and how it interacts with and is shaped by the dominant consumer-oriented cartography of the city. While few studies have dedicated significant amounts of time to the traceur’s urban cartography, the general tone surrounding parkour’s relationship to and perception of urban space is one of politicised resistance and performative critique of urban space. As seen in chapter 4, this is the image of the traceur defiantly training in the urban consumer-scape, claiming their own ‘right to the city’<sup>55</sup>. However, as I found out during my two-year ethnography, this is far from the case. In reality, the traceurs are accepting and deferential to the consumerism’s domination of the city and the subordinate, illegitimate status of their parkour-oriented spatiality. As we shall see, the traceurs would work *with* this dominant consumer cartography, developing a keen and acute understanding of its flows and movements for the very logical and practical reasons of wanting to maximise training times on each spot.

### *Urban Rhythms: A Parkour Guide to the City*

The Parkour City is never settled. This is the first thing to understand about parkour, traceurs, and the way they move not just in one spot using the movements of parkour, but the way they move around the city for their spatial practice. While other more conventional maps of Newcastle may remain the same (or vastly similar) across years and even decades, the traceurs maps of the city are in constant flux. Some spots in Newcastle are perennial features of the Parkour City, existing as relatively permanent fixtures whose ‘official purpose’ is unlikely to change or be demolished. Moving from the Pope spot to the Keep, down to the law courts and onto the pavilions spot by the Millenium bridge offers a usually reliable ‘route’ through the town with several other spots along the way, all with their own features and virtues.

Other spots are destroyed as the ‘official purpose’ of the space is changed or deemed irrelevant. For example, the ‘spiritual home’ of Newcastle’s parkour community, Discovery, was partially demolished half-way through my fieldwork to make way for the

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<sup>55</sup> For more on ‘the right to the city’, see Harvey (2012); Marcuse (2009).

‘Challenger 2’ tank to be displayed in Discovery’s car park (Henderson, 2014)<sup>56</sup>. Several walls were removed, a tree was cut down, and space was cordoned off by high metal fences. Here we see just one instance where competing visions and biographies of space and place collide, bringing to the foreground the parallel and competing cartographies of the city. Whereas the Discovery spot held a particular significance in our personal biographies as traceurs and as a parkour community, what was put in its place was also symbolic and significant for another kind of memorialised regional history. Now sitting inside the cordon of temporary metal fencing, the tank had previously sat outside ‘BAE Systems’ who design, engineer and manufacture defence systems and military equipment. Changes to the BAE site precipitated the moving of the Tank to outside the Discovery Museum to symbolically display the role of armaments manufacturing in the rich industrial history and heritage of Newcastle (Dickinson, 2016). Two meaningful histories and biographies of region and ‘subculture’ meet in the same space, an example of how post-industrial consumer cities instrumentally reduce history to memorialised exhibits in a clinging effort to maintain a semblance of history as the city becomes increasingly homogenised (Auge, 1995; Miles, 2005; Winlow and Hall, 2013).



The ‘double kong’ wall is the first to go down. September, 2014

<sup>56</sup> It has since been demolished entirely and is being reconstructed with a new open-plan outdoor plaza with the ‘iconic’ Challenger 2 tank as its focal point. This is being designed with the plan to host more outdoor activities and to facilitate a more aesthetic and natural flow in and out of the Discovery Museum (The Chronicle, 2016: <http://www.chroniclelive.co.uk/news/north-east-news/newcastles-discovery-museum-closes-car-11208267> ).



New plans for the Discovery spot area (Chronicle Live, 2016).

Other spots can emerge or disappear within a week or a month as scaffolding or temporary structures go up, volleying a spot onto the map out of nowhere only for it to disappear just as quickly. The relations of production for the conventional city produce spaces for parkour, too, albeit for alternative purposes and reasoning. This is at the heart of parkour's perpetual acceptance, albeit begrudgingly, of its own subordinate 'right' to the city. The purposive building of space and the temporary structures and spaces for play that emerge from it remain just that—purposive. During the winter of 2014, the scaffolding around the Waterloo Square plaza offered a new spot on the route from Discovery up to St James's through the heart of town. Unfortunately, the scaffolding was often a 'live' site, with daytime workers making it difficult to be on there for more than a few minutes before getting moved on. Within a few weeks of discovering it, the scaffolding was gone, emphasising the transient nature of the parkour city. Similarly, the refurbishment of the central train station resulted in the emergence of some scaffolding which, in conjunction with more permanent physical structures, offered a good spot for parkour. On my first day out with the traceurs we came across this spot, only for a passing police car to pull-over and move the traceurs on with accompanied threats of arrest based on 'suspicion of criminal damage'. Such an

incident shows how the right to remake the city is not just about who has access to simply occupy public spaces in different ways, but is dictated by a more powerful urbanisation process closely related to political economy (Harvey, 2012; Marcuse, 2009).



The Parkour City is in constant flux in accordance with the temporal flows of the city. Newcastle city centre's dominant purpose as a hub of consumption and a central transport node gives the city a relatively predictable rhythm (Lefebvre, 2013). The traceurs have a keen sense of these urban rhythms and the relationship between time and spatial flows; much in the same way a commuter knows when to take certain roads to avoid traffic, or when they'll be able to get a seat on the train. The traceurs use this specific situated knowledge of the urban sphere to guide their movements and routes through the town. If the city's football team is playing away from home, a spot opens up for the weekend. Saturday afternoons and late-night Thursday shopping rule out a series of spots in the heart of the city centre. During these times and in these spaces there isn't much chance of doing anything beyond a quick vault or precision before being moved on, displacing traceurs to other spots outside the city centre as they move around the periphery of the city's core 'action' areas of shopping, eating, and the revellers of the all-day night-time economy. The traceur's map changes from hour to hour, weekday to weekend, between months and seasons as weather, building sites and temporally-dictated flows of people change the parkour city. During term-time, for

instance, the university spot is relatively off-limits, particularly on weekdays. On weekends or outside of term time, it is fair game; convenient for a few weeks during the Christmas break where the university's plethora of undercover spots offers dry spaces to train during the wet, winter months.

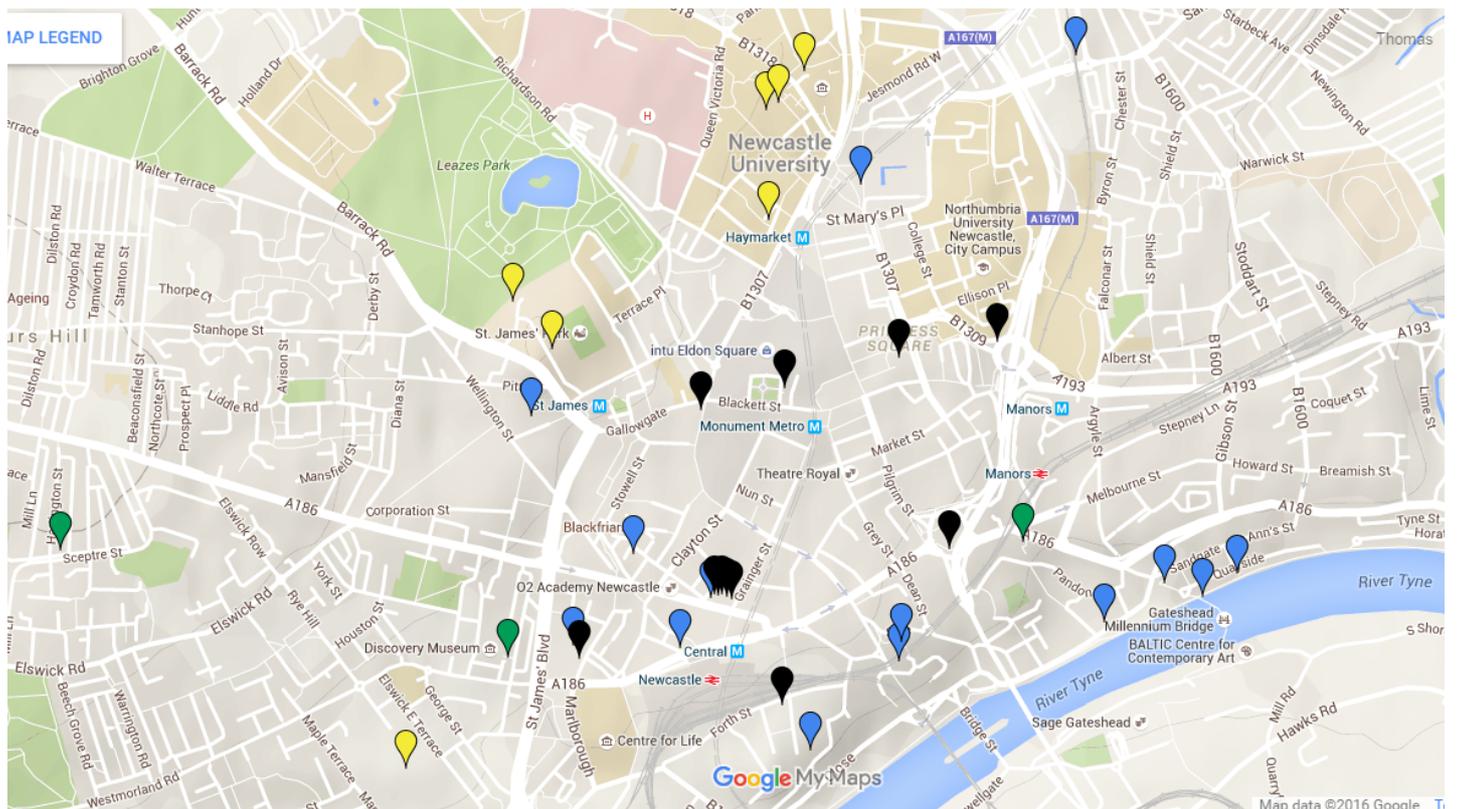


One of the University spots. September 2014.

Therefore, parkour can be understood as existing in the *interstices* of the late-capitalist urban grid. It 'drifts' through urban space (Ferrell, 2012), stopping within pockets of the city that are spatial and temporal gaps in the dominant consumer economy. Traceurs are perpetually negotiating the periphery of spatial, cultural, and economic urban boundaries while simultaneously negotiating their legitimacy with security guards, police officers, and the general public. This peripheral spatial negotiation can be physical, where they find little spaces that are tucked away but close to the central sites of consumption, always just at the edge of where the 'action' is happening. The traceurs

live off of those seemingly purposeless ‘parafunctional’ spaces which have little or no purpose of meaning within the ordered city, having ‘given up’ the task of being ordered by time and function. However, the city’s consumer economy not only shapes maps and physical space, but time as well. Parkour negotiates the peripheries of urban space-time, as the traceurs choose certain spots to train on in accordance with the temporal rhythms of the city.

This involves knowing the shift patterns of those security guards at particular spots with whom the traceurs have good or bad relationships. More importantly, it involves an acute feel for the informal, fluid, and ever-moving boundaries of the consumer economy. In understanding parkour’s movements and fluid cartography of the city, it is helpful to think of the city centre’s consumer economy not as a static, rigid place where consumption happens. When one practices parkour and moves around in the interstices of urban space, it is quickly learned that the consumer economy itself is ‘alive’, fluid and ‘moving’; opening up and closing down good parkour spots as its point of emphasis shifts and changes. During the daytime, for example, the hub of the city centre’s shopping mall and surrounding high streets are alive and busy with perpetual pedestrian foot traffic, making any training difficult without being swiftly moved on. For a period during my fieldwork, the mall had an enormous set of scaffolding up which, in combination with some nearby walls and benches, made it a perfect spot, with the added bonus of also being undercover. Training in the day down on the Quayside, we’d often move up to Eldon square as the evening approached. As the shops closed up, the focus of the urban consumer economy shifted toward the Quayside and Bigg Market which boasts a smorgasbord of restaurants, pubs, and late-night bars as part of Newcastle’s infamous night-time economy (Hollands, 1995). We can see this in the ‘parkour map’ of Newcastle below, which pin-point a few of the most prominent central spots within the parkour city.



A snapshot of the most prominent parkour training spots, colour-coded<sup>57</sup>

When looking at this map, what is quite obvious is how the most central parts of the city centre are relatively bereft of prominent parkour training spots, with Monument, Grey Street and Bigg Market having no such spots, being areas of both day-time and night-time consumption and casual leisure. Where there are parkour spots in these spaces, they are mostly night-time spots either around prominent shopping areas away from the popular spheres of the night-time economy; or roof spots which require the cover of darkness in order to not be seen. Often these roof spots were quite spectacular at night, particularly as many of these buildings would be illuminated by lighting for aesthetic effect, providing the dual-benefit of providing us with some light up-top whilst also shielding us from view below. However, for the most part the parkour spots are distributed like a perimeter around the most central consumer areas of the city centre, always at the edge of where things are happening, ready to move. The typology of markers here are, of course, a crude reduction. The reality of the temporal legitimacy of these spots was far more complex, inconsistent and nuanced. For example, on Bank

<sup>57</sup> Green markers: almost always fine to train on; Yellow markers: weekends or out of term-time spots; Blue markers: Daytime spots; Black markers: evening/night-time spots. This map only includes the most prominent and permanent spots.

Holiday weekends or hot summer days, the Quayside turns into a popular spot for all-day drinking, with the River Tyne and the glinting Sage arts building providing a picturesque backdrop. This made many of the day-time spots off-limits on these days, emblematic of the difficulty and complexity of reducing the experiential reality of an active bodily cartography of the city to a two-dimensional birds-eye view.

Much like other urban practices such as urban exploration or graffiti (see Garrett, 2013; Ferrell, 1996), there is also an added element of verticality to the parkour city. Garrett's (2013) exploration of London from above and below suggested that the map of London itself becomes very different when one accounts for its verticality. Garrett suggests that in any given place in London, with the complex network of sewers, underground waterways, Tube stations and fibre-optic cables, there may be five or six 'layers' to the city. Similarly, Jeff Ferrell (1996) discusses how a graffiti writer's map of the city incorporates those high, hard-to-reach and seemingly inaccessible places in an effort to 'tag the heavens'. These are spots that are perhaps highly visible but rarely touched, seen daily by urban dwellers as they commute in and out of the city along train lines, making them ideal places for writers to tag or do throw-ups for maximum visibility.

The traceurs would often go 'rooftopping' or on 'roof missions', finding a way of climbing up or gaining access to the roof of a building and then moving from roof to roof, using the skills and movements of parkour to traverse what seems blocked, or to access another roof that seems inaccessible. Upon my first roof mission, what surprised me was how 'matter of fact' these roof missions were, to the extent that it didn't even feel like we were doing parkour. As a novice, I imagined the traceurs running quickly across the roofs, moving swiftly across the various obstacles and between roofs at a fast pace, much alike the famous traceur, David Belle, in his famous 'Rush Hour' advert for *BBC One* (see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3xR0smB1V58>). However, the roof mission often involves a more deliberate and less conspicuous use of parkour which is more closely related to the original underpinning ethos of 'moving from point A to point B' as efficiently as possible using only one's body. It was only upon reflection, when writing up the field notes and describing my first roof mission that I realised we were constantly using dash vaults, lazy vaults, climb ups, precisions and dive rolls in order to move from roof to roof. By less conspicuous, I mean the use of parkour for the purpose

of getting from one place to another in the city. As Kidder (2013) observes, while one may imagine the traceurs using parkour constantly as they move throughout the city, in reality they practice parkour in one spot, then walk to another when they're done and train again there. The roof mission is an exception:

### ***Authors Fieldnotes***

*Vase, Franny, Huse, and Jake decided they wanted to go on a 'roof mission' and see if they could get to the Black Gate spot via the roofs. Franny was sick of the solicitors spot and wanted to head down to Black Gate as well, where last weekend he was trying out something he'd never done before. Franny pats me hard on the shoulder and asked if I was coming. I was hesitant. I hadn't been on this kind of long roof mission before, but he insisted that I had to learn the quickest way cross-town.*

*They were cautious to go up in small numbers to prevent detection. Franny told me to wait and come up with Cal and a few others in about 5 minutes. This is the first time I've seen them be cautious to prevent being seen, but with the solicitors being located on a busy street of bars and restaurants, with police officers on the beat about 100 yards down the road, I could easily see why. According to Cal, this is what people get really funny about. Just as often as the traceurs get berated and moved on from 'normal' spots, they also get a bit of leniency and understanding from security guards and police. Not with roof missions. Everybody always gets more agitated, worrying about damage, vandalism, graffiti, or even theft. Just a couple of months ago a bunch of the traceurs were arrested and spent a night in the cells on suspicion of criminal damage when someone saw them going on a late-night roof mission.*

*We head a few buildings down and cut down a side alley, looking up to see the traceurs emerge while TK hangs on the street looking out for the police. The narrow alleyway is directly beneath the first narrow gap we'll have to cross. Once we see Franny and the others go across and scope out the first few stages of the route, then we'll go up.*



*After about five minutes, we see the traceurs signal to come up and we head back behind the solicitors building where a quick climb of the fence leads you to a fire-escape ladder on the other side and we quickly climb-up to the roof. I get up top and it feels strange. I didn't really know what I thought would be up here, but it's more intricate than I expected. I imagined flat, smooth and clear roofs. There are more obstacles, more difficult angles, and narrower surfaces than I expected. There are big extractor fans and sky-lights dotted all over the place, with high narrow ledges dividing connected buildings or parts of the roof with big drops down either side. I realise that I've never really been up on any roofs before. I've been under thousands of roofs, but rarely, if ever, on top of them.*

*We all slowly move across a narrow concrete ledge which leads onto another roof. The ledge divides two parts of the same roof and has about an 8-foot drop on both sides, one of which has a pile of discarded metal poles, construction materials, and debris which would cut you to shreds if you lost balance. I concentrate on my feet, one carefully in front of the other as I keep my arms out for balance. The ledge leads on to another roof that is slightly elevated, requiring a climb-up to get onto it. The roofs are so uneven with certain buildings higher than others, and the next roof requires a run-up in order to climb-up the wall and get onto it. I run and jump toward the wall, placing my foot on it for elevation and literally run up the wall and grab the top of the ledge to pull myself up. We move across and drop-*

*down to a lower roof, the drop being big enough to require a roll-out. We're not moving quickly, but not slowly either, never held up or pausing to see what to do or how to do it. I can see from the famous Tyne bridge and Church tower ahead of us the direction we're going, heading toward the Black Gate spot. We come to two rails in front of a wall that leads to a higher roof. We vault the first rail and use the other to stand on as we reach for the ledge of the higher roof.*

*At the end of this roof is the first gap, and we all approach the edge, stop, and do a quick jump across. The gap is narrow and I know we can all make it, but somehow being up here makes it that much different. In reality, it's literally a stride across, but I can't go too big as the run-off on the other side is very short, leading to another gap between the buildings that, at this angle, is too wide to jump. You have to jump across and stop before the drop-off and turn left along the ledge to a point where the gap to the next building is narrower.*



Roof mission: Out of sight on one of the busiest streets in Newcastle. March 2015

*We all make the jump across, barely stopping before the ledge. We walk along the ledge, finding a spot where the gap is narrow enough to leap across with no run-up. We clear it, and at the end of this roof is a wall that is high enough to require a bit of speed to the run-up in order to catch the top of the wall. We can't tell if the top of the wall has a smooth run-off, or if it's just a narrow ledge with a big drop on the other side. I quickly realise that on a roof mission, when you climb a wall or vault it you never really know what's beyond it until you've gone over the obstacle. A big drop off could be on the other side of the wall, or a rail to clatter into. We climb the wall, which is actually only a narrow dividing wall which drops back down to another roof on the same level. The roof is slanted with old slates. They're too loose to walk on, sliding beneath our feet just enough to make us nervous, so we get down and carefully edge our way along the ledge until we reach another small gap and get off the slates. On the other side of this gap, however, is another narrow brick ledge which drops down to the roof. We have two choices. We can try to land with precision<sup>58</sup> on the narrow ledge, risking a loss of balance on the precision jump and falling down the gap to the street. Or we can use a vault as we jump toward the ledge in order to clear it and ease our way down the drop to the next roof. We all decide to use a vault rather than risk the precision and Franny dive-kongs it like an absolute lunatic. Leaping towards it face first, suspended horizontally in the air and fully stretched out, his hands touch the wall first and his knees come through over the wall and under his body. He clears the wall, and rolls-out on the drop. I go for the dash vault, jumping toward the wall feet-first, letting my feet clear it first and then touching my hands on the wall behind me to ease the drop as I roll-out of it. Cal and the others seem to prefer my approach as well.*

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<sup>58</sup> A 'precision' or 'pre' is one of the most fundamental parkour jumps. It usually involves leaping onto a narrow surface and landing on two-feet with precision without any forward or backwards moment. It is much like a gymnasts' precision landing at the end of a routine.



*A few simple roofs, gaps, and crossing later and we're actually one roof away from being atop a building directly across the street from the Black Gate spot. Franny said you can get through a door on the roof of the building and just take the stairs down. All that's required now is carefully climbing up another slanted roof, a quick precision jump onto a ledge and a drop-down to the other roof which is flat and empty, besides a few big fans. The building*

*itself is an apartment complex of luxury buildings and once we're inside, we head down the stairs, walking past residents who are none the wiser and out toward Black Gate, all in only 5 or 10 minutes.*

**April 2014**

As roof missions became more frequent, being the popular thing we became obsessed with for a while, the traceurs and I learned how to traverse certain parts of the city from above quicker and more efficiently than we did at street level. This is similar to how Bradley Garrett (2013) and his crew of urban explorers learned the catacombs of Paris and the Tube and sewer systems of London just as well, if not better, than they knew the street level routes of the city. Certainly, as people moved on the streets below, having to stop for traffic lights, crowds of people or find a pedestrian crossing, the 'roof mission' was the ultimate 'smoothing out' of striated urban space (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Mould, 2009). If we wanted to move from a spot up on St James's down towards the Quayside, or between any two spots either side of Monument; we'd have to pass through the heart of the city centre and one of the busiest streets in Newcastle which at the weekends was filled with shoppers, drunk all-day revellers, football fans, police, and traffic of all kinds. Oftentimes, it was quicker to take the roofs toward the other side of town, and it was certainly more interesting as we got to know the network of roofs and the best routes between them. It was like flipping the city upside-down, our own inverted metro-map for traceurs.

Equally as often however, the purpose of the roof mission is just to get up there and see the city from a different vantage point and take a cool picture. As Vase once said to me in an interview:

*"Sometimes it's just cool to touch brick and parts of buildings that never get touched. When I walk past summat I've gone rooftopping and I have a cool picture of it up there or something, I always smile you know? Like some place that nobody give a second thought to, I smile and think 'that's my roof'. You'll never walk past it and not sort of notice it and make note of it in your mind. Like how you can't walk past your old school and not kind of...I dunno...acknowledge it."*

While the traceurs do not penetrate the layers of the city in the same way urban explorers might, going deep underground into the sewers and underground rail systems; the verticality of the city is just as important, and well-navigated, as the horizontal plane on which most people spend the majority of their lives. The traceurs attempted to saturate the full spatial *volume* of the city—above, below, and at ground level.



These are ‘strange maps’ and ‘neglected spatialities’ indeed. It is a cartography of the city which always possesses an underlying inferiority and illegitimacy, but one which is never quite permanent and settled. As Henri Lefebvre wrote when discussing social space as a social product:

“[t]he space thus produced also serves as a tool of thought and action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence domination, of power; yet that, as such, it escapes in part from those who would make use of it. The social and political (state) forces which engendered this space now seek, but fail, to master it completely” (Lefebvre, 1991: 26)

Rather, what occurs within parkour’s mapping and re-mapping of its own urban space is one of the key features of mapping: the provisional drawing and negotiation of boundaries. These are boundaries of legitimacy and illegitimacy, informed by understandings of time, place, and arguably an acceptance of one’s own perpetual

spatial illegitimacy, in which the traceurs accept and work around, rather than against, the dominant consumer cartography and spatial practice. As Jeff Ferrell discusses with regards to urban scroungers and the spatial approach to the 'private' trash pile:

“At residential curbside trash piles, the homeowner’s property line borders and invites the life of the street, the homeowner’s discards turning from private trash to public disposal problem, or for others a public resource. And at all of these social and spatial margins, legal boundaries are likewise negotiated, with Dumpsters and trash piles offering daily situations for deciding between private property and public access, for distinguishing scavenging from theft, if only provisionally” (Ferrell, 2006: 3)

To offer a more explicitly theoretical foundation, what is occurring in these incidents of spatial negotiation is the interaction between Lefebvre’s (1991: 38-39) three types of ‘social space’: spatial practice, spaces of representation, and representational space. Lefebvre’s terminology for these spaces is unimportant, what is important is what these spaces represent and how they can provide a foundation for understanding the multi-faceted reality of the urban realm. The space of ‘spatial practice’ is physical; it is a *real*, material space that is built, used, and empirically observed and perceived. Lefebvre (1991: 16) uses the examples of a room, an apartment, a street corner or a marketplace. These are descriptions of places that correspond with a particular *spatial practice*. Spaces of representation are ‘mental’ spaces; spaces as they are imagined in the mind. More often than not in the production of space, this mental realm of conceived space is closely tied to the relations of political economy. This kind of space would parallel what de Certeau (1984) describes as the ‘concept city’, the space of urban planners, architects, engineers, city councils and landowners. It is an abstract space which is conceived of on plans, maps, and blueprints. Non-representational or ‘more-than representational’ spaces are *lived* spaces which are produced and modified over time as space is imbued with embodied experience, symbols, images, and meaning by human actors. A city is *conceived* of in the urban planners folder (Hayward, 2004), but it is also *perceived* and *lived*. Non-representational spaces, therefore, are spaces both materially lived and imagined.

However, as Lefebvre’s argument outlines, what we must understand is the unitary nature of these spaces. In the reality of everyday life each of these spaces “involves, underpins and presupposes the other” (Lefebvre, 1991: 14). That is, spatial practice is

dictated by how the space is conceived, and how the space is conceived is shaped by what spatial practices need to occur there, and how they are lived-in through meaning and practice can certainly influence how the space is reconceived—both inclusively and exclusively. What we are seeing with parkour—indeed with a variety of marginal urban practices—is a negotiation between the spatial practice and lived spatial meanings of the traceurs, and the mental space of the city as it is imagined by private property owners, city councils, and the authorities they use to enforce their conceptualisation of space.

Keith Hayward describes this as a “semiotic disambiguation between place and function” (Hayward, 2004: 141). This attempt to link space and spatial practice into what he describes as an “unequivocal functionality” is the attempt to unambiguously turn the mental ‘conceived’ spaces of urban planners, into the material *reality* of spatial practice—how we see and use urban spaces. As the mental space becomes material reality, the vague multiplicity of alternative spatial meanings and spatialities is rendered absent. Space is stripped of its meaning; it’s only meaning being its imagined function in the minds of property owners, city councils, and the urban planners who developed the space. This is a sort of ‘hyperreality’ (Baudrillard, 1994) of ‘public space’, in which the mental conceptualisation of urban space has become more important and more true than its reality when filled with people and groups who seek to utilise the space for alternative meanings. This is hardly a new aspect of urban design and living. Sennett (1970) observes this hyperreality of urban planning and real space over three decades prior to the concerted ‘spatial turn’:

“Over and over again one can hear in planning circles a fear expressed when the human beings affected by planning changes become even slightly interested in the remedies propose for their lives. ‘Interference,’ ‘blocking,’ an ‘interruption of work’—these are the terms by which social challenges or divergences from the planners’ projections are interpreted. What has really happened is that the planners have wanted to take the plan, the projection in advance, as more ‘true’ than the historical turns, the unforeseen movements in the real time of human lives” (Sennett, 1970: 7).

Consequently, parkour’s status as legitimate deviance and illegitimate leisure is *spatially contingent*, dependent upon capital’s privilege to define and shape space and spatial conduct. As space is kept to its specificity, so are the people, the bodies and movements

within the ‘container spaces’ of consumer-driven city centres. It is the ‘regulation of conduct [and bodies] *through* space’ (Hayward, 2012: 454), as consumer capitalism attempts to cultivate and solicit consumer desire as discussed in chapter 3, and then harness and direct it into particular spatio-behavioural practices.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to approach parkour from a spatially embodied perspective in order to reveal insights about the motivation for its practice, and to better understand both the public objections to its practice and some of the inconsistency of its exclusion. As seen in the outset of this chapter, the traceurs undeniably experience satisfaction through their embodied, non-representational experiences of practicing parkour and moving around the city in an urban game of cat and mouse. They spoke of the visceral sensations of tip-toeing along narrow ledges and feeling the slightest adjustments in balance; and the ‘sneaky thrills’ (Katz, 1988) of eluding security guards and then coming back through buildings and onto the street, past people who have no idea what they’ve just been doing. Overall, these embodied sensations felt more ‘real’ than ‘real life’, and as stated at the outset to this chapter, it would be a mistake to reduce their motivations to a conscious and instrumental form of identity practice.

However, it would also be inaccurate to compartmentalise their practice and situate the embodied sensations of parkour in a dichotomous opposition to the more conformist, identity-based and commodified features of their practice. It is the contention of this thesis that the traceurs’ embodied and transgressive spatial practice can be better conceived of as an extremely delicate *symbiotic tension* in late capitalism. They exist in the obsolete boundary between conformity and transgression, characterised by the artificial precorporation of the authentic Real’s seductive allure. While the embodied sensations themselves were enjoyable, pushing past the artificiality of everyday life and urban space; these affective, pre-discursive more-than-representational experiences of space were also translated into constructed transgressive identities through the symbolic images of ‘cool’ urban iconography and transgression. This what Majid Yar

(2012b) describes as the 'will to representation' in contemporary society and culture; the desire to communicate this 'real' embodied experience through a visual medium.

Among the traceurs, several discussed privately that while they enjoyed the feeling of practice parkour and doing roof missions, they also enjoyed the self-image of themselves in the space:

*"Nobody would ever admit it, but you do feel really fucking cool when you're up doing a roof mission or whatever. The feeling is good in and of itself. Even if it was completely allowed, I'd still do it. But the image and that, especially the roof missions, it does make it even better. You're up there, it's dark, you see the street lights below, you hear the sounds of the city and that. The graffiti is everywhere. You've gotta stop, wait and look to see if anyone is coming. Hoods up, all that [Laughs]. That's definitely part of it. I'd never tell anyone else that though"*

**(Franny, 22 years old)**

*"Ty: Ah mate, it's definitely part of it. We're little white boys climbing round buildings but when we do roof missions we wear balaclavas to cover our faces like we're fucking bandits or something? Why would we do that? Nobody cares that much about us. Because even if we get caught, we can talk our way out of it[...]When people find you and that you can see they're not quite sure what to make of it. I just mean we're all white, young kids. We're all pretty smart, we can speak respectful to coppers or security, kind of know how to be all humble and that. As soon as we open our mouths they know we aren't trouble. So you know you're never gonna get into 'owt serious.*

**Ty (19 years old)**

Ty and Franny's comments are quite instructive here. As the traceurs attempt to make coherent sense of their Real affective experiences, precisely because they are incoherent, pre-discursive and experienced prior to any symbolic process, become associated with the existing symbolism of urban renegades and the popular cultural iconography of the transgressive urban sphere (Ilan, 2012). The traceurs thus go through a constant and almost instantaneous cycle of affective embodied experience and symbolic processing and translation; registering the non-representational experience of the 'urban' in their

bodies and then as, Ty describes, wearing balaclavas like they're bandits or outlaws. In this regard, while the embodied experience of parkour is indeed enjoyable, they also revel in the symbolically processed self-image. In a paradoxical cultural period in which to transgress is to conform, parkour is a practice which is "transgressive enough to be cool", but not enough to get them into any genuine legal trouble.

Equally important, however, is how the traceurs' movement throughout the city is influential in the inconsistency with which they are excluded from urban space. While other ethnographic studies of spatial transgression depict the relationships between transgressive actors and spatial authorities as permanently combative (Ferrell, 2001), this set of relations did not apply to the traceurs I studied. The traceurs developed relationships of spatial compromise with private security guards, being allowed to train for periods of time on particular spots before being moved on, or being told to come back at particular times when the area quietened down. As Kindynis (2016) and Mott and Roberts (2014) have observed, this is in part due to the traceurs' being predominantly white and eloquent, often speaking to security guards in calm, compromising and deferential tones. As Mott and Roberts (2014) observe, the risks of rooftopping and training in pseudo-public or explicitly private spaces are more severe for those of different ethnic backgrounds. However, it also due to the way the traceurs move within the spatial and temporal interstices of urban space. Rarely, but never intentionally, would the traceurs practice parkour in spaces amidst the peak hours of consumption primarily because to do so would ensure their swift exclusion and moving-on. Similar to Mott and Roberts' (2014: 233) discussion of recreational trespass, the traceurs were far more concerned with the individual embodied experience of space and movement than they were with any broader critique of contemporary space or politics of urban social justice. The traceurs acute embodied understanding of the spatio-temporal flows and rhythms of the city which informs their movement does not directly challenge the post-industrial consumer-scape but actively accepts its dominance and works *within* it.

By training within the spatial and temporal gaps in the consumer city, the traceurs were able to maximise time on particular spots. Moreover, they also developed unspoken and spatial relationships of familiarity and compromise with security teams at various spots which, exacerbated by the security guards' acknowledgment of its low-levels of harm

and cultural conformity, resulted in their prohibition and governance being characterised by inconsistency, ambiguity and uncertainty as to their position between legitimate deviance and legitimate leisure. Outlining the traceurs embodied engagement with space and their spatial and temporal mapping of the city is imperative for the following chapter. Chapter 8 will focus upon a consideration of the changing nature and function of central urban centres in late-capitalism which, in conjunction with an exploration of these spatial relationships and the security guards' narratives of policing, will assist in a nuanced understanding of parkour's control which will bring to the foreground late modern consumer capitalism's underpinning role in parkour's complex position between deviance and leisure.

# 8

## ***‘Sorry Lads’ (But I’ve got to move you on)***

### *Parkour, Security and the Systemic Spatial Violence of the Late-Capitalist City*

#### **Introduction**

*Authors Fieldnotes*

[...]

*Dee, standing atop the wall with a camera where I’m about to do a climb-up, stops filming and looks up as a white van approaches our training spot—a small little undercover spot on the university campus. I turn around and see a tall, balding man get out, wearing a high-vis jacket as he slowly strides over to us. Short quietly announces that the ‘fun’s over’, and we all start to grab our bags and pack up before the security guard even gets over to us. He has a weathered but kind face, and he moves with a plodding rhythm like a metronome, as if it’s all a bit too much effort today. He certainly doesn’t seem like the aggressive type who’s going to want any aggro or tells us we’re stupid. He actually has a look of inevitability on his face, as if he knows that we know what he’s about to say, and that he feels bad for even doing it. He cocks his head to one side, offers an apologetic smile and a shrug of the shoulders with his hands turned towards the sky. ‘Ziplock’ looks at the time on his phone and says “Yeah fair enough, it’s about that time”. The security guard comes over and says ‘Sorry lads’, which we all knew translated to the often-repeated refrain of ‘I’ve got to move you on’ or ‘You can’t do this here’. Despite being 22 and a grown adult, Ziplock quickly feels the need to defend himself with a somewhat childish deference and make sure the security guard knows we’re ‘alright’:*

*ZPK: “Just so you know, sir, we’re not damaging or defacing anything here. Not changing it at all—”*

*The guard interrupts him with a reassuring hand gesture and says that he knows all that. He says 'I know who 'youse all are', and that the only reason he's come along is because he 'has to move us on'. No explanation is forthcoming, and we don't ask. He explains that he's seen us here before, saying that he "always tries to give youse a bit of time", waiting until the foot traffic gets busier or until someone asks him before moving us on. We gather up our bags and cameras while he chats with Ziplock and he thanks us all and plods off again, back to his van.*

**September, 2014**

During this two-year ethnography with the NEPK community, similar interactions with spatial authorities such as police, security guards, or property owners were far from uncommon. Of course, the traceurs would also encounter a more hostile reception with threats of arrest and derisive comments that their practice was 'stupid', 'reckless', and even individuals who exclaimed that they hoped the traceurs would one day seriously injure themselves and see the reckless misguidedness of their risk-taking practice. However, they would also establish positive relationships with security guards or owners of property which, as we saw in chapter 7, would change with the spatial and temporal 'rhythms' and 'flows' of the city (see Lefebvre, 1991; 2013). I frequently observed several security guards and police officers who would move the traceurs on with a similar apologetic reluctance or confused exasperation displayed by the security guard in the fieldnotes above.

As I conducted several depth 'walking interviews' (O'Neill and Hubbard, 2010) with 12 security guards from different areas of the city, some dominant narratives emerged when discussing the moving-on of groups such as the traceurs. These narratives were characterised by confusion, reluctance and an awareness of the cultural contradictions involved in the moving-on of the traceurs. Above all there was a depressive acceptance of the 'rules' of urban space, irrespective of the social 'right' or 'wrong' associated with the traceurs' practice. As the interviews progressed and the guards' narratives developed, it became apparent that the act of forcing the traceurs to move on was experienced as an *unveiling* of the exclusionary nature of urban space. It was an

unveiling that the arbitrary rationale to the 'rules' of urban space were not rooted in notions of 'public good', spatial inclusiveness or a vindictive and 'revanchist' social hatred of particular demographics (Smith, 1996). Rather, the arbitrary exclusion of the traceurs from pseudo-public<sup>59</sup> consumer spaces was less emotive and based more upon mundane and calculative agendas of property protection and spatial sanitisation for efficient consumption and profit; what is termed in this chapter as the *systemic spatial violence* of contemporary cities. The 'rules' of the increasingly privatised city which the security guards were tasked to enact brought to the foreground a harsh reality of the 'unfreedom' of contemporary urban spaces (see de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006; Hayward, 2012) and, to extrapolate the argument more broadly, the 'unfreedom' of leisure (Rojek, 2010; Smith and Raymen, 2016).

Moreover, such realisations speak to some of the contradictions which have already discussed in this thesis surrounding parkour, late-capitalism, and the urban realm. By now, we have firmly established the conformist nature of parkour to the values of consumer capitalism, how it is pre-emptively shaped by the language and logic of consumer culture (Fisher, 2009), and how it works perfectly in an age of precarious labour markets, extended adolescence (Hayward, 2012) and effectively serves contemporary modes of capital accumulation (see chapter 6). However, what remains to be explored is how central urban spaces have been transformed by the shift in the 'real economy'<sup>60</sup> of Western capitalism toward a 'symbolic economy' of consumption (Zukin, 1995); and how this affects parkour's policing and inconsistent status of spatial (il)legitimacy. The ostentatious display of wealth through the consumption of domestic security and exclusivity (Davis, 1990; Hayward, 2004), the fragile 'future capital' of rent, land value and liquid assets of real estate (Smith, 1984; Harvey, 2012), in addition to central city space being increasingly reliant upon public consumption has meant that it has become vital in this new post-industrial urban reality to 'keep space to its specificity' (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006). Thus, late-capitalism has caught itself in a complex

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<sup>59</sup> This chapter will frequently use the term pseudo-public space for the simple reason that, at the street-level experience of city space, it is never quite clear where the boundaries between 'public' and 'private' space begin and end. Much of the private space in the contemporary city does not have visible or tangible borders. Allegedly public spaces were far from free for all to use as they wished, while private spaces were often traversed without permission or for their specific use.

<sup>60</sup> I place emphasis on the term 'real economy' due to global capitalism's primary focus on the 'finance economy' which, in many ways, is abstracted and detached from the real economy of products and goods.

double-bind in which it must simultaneously promote and prohibit the cool spatial practices of parkour which conform to cultural values but transgress the rules of neoliberal space.

If we are to fully understand such contradictions, we require a theoretical approach to parkour and the city which moves beyond the simplistic and inaccurate moral panic theories which suggest that traceurs are excluded because of misguided and ignorant fears around young people or 'anti-social youth' (Wheaton, 2013). Such perspectives cannot account for the numerous relationships of compromise and understanding that arise in the traceurs' experience of the city. However, we also require an approach that can build upon urban revanchist perspectives which have too often become deracinated from its roots in systemic political-economic analyses of capital and the city (Smith, 1984). Revanchist perspectives, based on the original work of Neil Smith (1996), have too often eschewed his more systemic arguments in favour of an over-entanglement in the 'fascinating allure' of the most visible forms of spatial exclusion that appear, on the surface-level of the empirical, to be driven by a seemingly vengeful and vindictive hatred of lower classes, ethnic minorities, and young people (see Davis, 1990; Mitchell, 1997). Instead, this chapter will attempt to dig beneath this empirical level to understand parkour's provisional prohibition and inclusion into urban space by positing an expanded theoretical application of Žižekian *systemic violence* to the spatial realm of late-capitalist cities—that is, a *systemic spatial violence*. Taking the advice of Žižek (2008), this chapter attempts to step back from the most visible manifestations of exclusion such as bum-proof benches, homeless spikes, and the forced dispersal of groups such as skateboarders, traceurs, and loiterers. Instead, this chapter critically analyses the urbanisation process under late-capitalism, the political-economic roots of capital's move back to the redeveloped inner city (Smith, 1996), how this influences the function and nature of urban space and its impact upon parkour and similar spatial practices. In doing so, it identifies the systemically inherent spatial competitiveness and territoriality that prevents our ability to improve issues of spatial inclusivity and spontaneity.

In making such arguments, this chapter will synthesise the work of Slavoj Žižek (2008); Neil Smith (1996) and David Harvey's (2012) forensic political-economic analyses of

the city as a means for absorbing surplus capital; Keith Hayward's (2004) analyses of fear, desire and consumer capitalism in the securitisation and sanitisation of urban space; and Sharon Zukin's (1995) understandings of the role of the 'symbolic economy' in contemporary cities. These will be supplemented by illustrative excerpts of original ethnographic data and 'walking interviews' (Hubbard and O'Neill, 2010; Pink, 2008) with a parkour community and a dozen security guards from which these theoretical approaches to the city emerge. First, however, this chapter must make the argument for the application of Žižekian notions of systemic violence to theories of urban revanchism and exclusion in contemporary urban spaces.

## **Systemic Spatial Violence and Revanchist Urbanism**

In *Violence* (2008), Slavoj Žižek offers a broadened conceptualisation of violence which attempts to incorporate two forms of *objective* violence: *symbolic* violence, the violence of words, language and symbols; and more importantly for the purposes of this chapter, *systemic* violence. According to Žižek, in order to truly understand violent fist-fights, drive-by shootings, acts of terrorism, civil unrest and international wars, we must "learn to step back, to disentangle ourselves from the fascinating lure of this directly visible "subjective" violence, violence performed by [and against] a clearly identifiable agent" (Žižek, 2008: 1). Žižek argues that subjective violence continues to mystify us because it is perceived and experienced against "the background of a non-violent zero level" (Žižek, 2008: 2). That is, we respond to visible violence with emotive outrage or mystified exasperation because of the assumption that the normality of everyday life is essentially non-violent. Žižek takes issue with this notion entirely, suggesting that the perceived non-violent zero-sum level is actually incredibly violent, albeit in a different and more insidious way which is not only fundamentally embedded but entirely *necessary* for the on-going maintenance of neoliberal capitalist political economy. This is what he describes as the normalised *systemic* or *objective* violence: "the often catastrophic consequences of the smooth functioning of our economic and political systems". This is not a violence that is performed by any clearly identifiable agent. This is a more mundane and routine violence that is inextricably tied to the entire social system.

Moreover, Žižek argues that a disproportionate focus on *subjective violence*—violence perpetrated and suffered by identifiable social agents—doesn't help but actually *contributes* to the problem. Morally shocked responses and calls for immediate piecemeal intervention to violence, poverty, exclusion or injustice actively obfuscate the true locus of the problem: the more routine systemic violence and injustice that is a normal and functional necessity within liberal capitalist political economy. Such rhetoric either positions such incidents as abnormal, thereby perpetuating the fiction that our collective normality is non-violent; or it misidentifies the true site of the problem and identifies symptoms, rather than the causal machinations of the system itself. As Žižek explains:

“Let's think about the fake sense of urgency that pervades left-liberal humanitarian discourse on violence: in it, abstraction and (pseudo)concreteness coexist in the staging of the scene of violence—against women, blacks, the homeless, gays... ‘A woman is raped every six seconds in this country’ and ‘In the time it takes you to read this paragraph, ten children will die of hunger’ are just two examples. Underlying all this is a hypocritical sentiment of moral outrage...There is a fundamental anti-theoretical edge to these urgent injunctions. There is no time to reflect: we have to *act now*” (Žižek, 2008: 5-6).

Žižek continues with this issue:

“An SOS call sustains such talk, drowning out all other approaches: everything else can and has to wait...Is there not something suspicious, indeed symptomatic, about this focus on subjective violence—that violence which is enacted by social agents, evil individuals, disciplined repressive apparatuses, fanatical crowds? Doesn't it desperately try to distract our attention from the true locus of the trouble, by obliterating from view other forms of violence and thus actively participating in them?” (Žižek, 2008: 9)

I argue that Žižek's conceptualisation of systemic and subjective violence could be applied more broadly to the urban and issues of spatial exclusion. By looking at how capital's structural economic relationship and dependence on the urban has fundamentally altered the street-level nature of city space, we can begin to have a deeper and more contextualised understanding of the inconsistent and almost reluctant spatial exclusion of traceurs from urban space.

The increasing commercialisation and defensible nature of the city has resulted in what has been tentatively described as a 'spatial turn' within criminology: a renewed focus upon the spatial aspects of crime, control, and what Henri Lefebvre (2013) might describe as the spatial dynamics 'everyday life' (Campbell, 2013; Ferrell, 2006; Hayward, 2004; 2012; Kindynis, 2014). One of the most prominent discussions involved in the criminological exploration of the spatial has been that of 'revanchist urbanism' (Smith, 1996). Even when Smith's theory of urban revanchism is not explicitly referred to, it is patently clear how aspects of revanchist theory have provided the conceptual underpinnings of urban space to inform arguments that traceurs and other groups are moved on<sup>61</sup> as a result of a 'moral panic' toward young people or a conscious and designed vindictiveness toward them as a 'rebellious' or undesirable group (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Lamb, 2014; Wheaton, 2013). However, Smith's urban revanchism has often only been selectively appropriated. Too frequently, those who employ the narratives of revanchism eschew the acute systemic and forensic economic underpinnings of Smith's (1984; 1996) theories of the redevelopment and gentrification of central urban areas in favour of the more empirically visible aspects of his work on spatial exclusion. These aspects look at the changing city as a product of the white middle-class' vindictive and vengeful socio-economic cleansing of ethnic minorities, the former working classes, and the homeless from the city.

The term 'revanchism' is an important one, stemming from the French word *revanche*, which translates literally to 'revenge'. Revanchism is a term popularly understood to mean the aggressive reclamation of 'lost' territory; holding its origins in 1870s France regarding the desire to vengefully reclaim the 'lost province' of Alsace-Lorraine in the aftermath of the Franco-Prussian war (Smith, 1996). However, while Neil Smith coined the term 'revanchist urbanism', it is easy to see how strands of revanchist perspectives are present in the earlier works of popular writers such as Mike Davis in the compelling *City of Quartz* (1990) and *Ecology of Fear* (1998). Davis' apocalyptic and hyperbolic vision post-industrial Los Angeles sees cities as organised around corporate greed, fearful militarisation of space, and a distinct segregation and hatred of the ethnic urban

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<sup>61</sup> 'Moved on' is a phrase commonly heard and used by traceurs. It signifies the moment at which the traceurs are asked to leave a particular spot where they're training and go somewhere else.

poor. As Hayward (2004) and Atkinson (2003) have observed, these revanchist urban perspectives which are focused upon the distinct and conscious sanitisation of the 'undesirable' from public space have been powerful and influential 'models' for conceptualising how and why the built physical environment is armed with such socially exclusive and hyper-regulatory methods of spatial control (Davis, 1998; Mitchell, 1997; Sorkin, 1994).

Driven primarily by a humanist Marxism, discussions of the revanchist city have a variety of strands (see Atkinson, 2003). Nevertheless, the commentary of the liberal left has overwhelmingly focused upon the vindictive and 'vengeful' nature of gentrification and urban revanchism which, according to writers such as Davis (1990; 1998), Mitchell (1997) and Smith (1996), are concerted and targeted attempts to socially cleanse late-capitalist cities of a variety of 'undesirable' minority groups such as the homeless, ethnic minorities, the working class, women and feminists, homosexuals, young people and many more. As indicated by Smith's (1996) definition of urban revanchism:

Revenge against minorities, the working class, women, environmental legislation, gays and lesbians, immigrants became the increasingly common denominator of public discourse. Attacks on affirmative action and immigration policy, street violence against gays and homeless people, feminist bashing and public campaigns against political correctness and multiculturalism were the most visible vehicles of this reaction. In short, the 1990s have witnessed the emergence of what we can think of as the *revanchist city*" (Smith, 1996, p. 45; italics as in original).

Revanchist spatial policies of exclusion which remove young people, the poor, ethnic minorities, and the homeless are experienced with shocked outrage. Without Smith's more systemic critiques of how capital operates through the city, they are experienced as a spatially violent departure from the 'norm', a discriminatory, vengeful, and exclusionary departure from the idea of a 'public space'. Although, as Atkinson (2003: 1830) has noted, if by public space we mean a space to which 'normally people have unrestricted access and right of way', it is debatable as to whether such a utopian public space has ever existed (see also Fyfe and Bannister, 1996). Nevertheless, such policies are experienced in Žižekian terms as *subjectively* violent—a violence perpetrated by clearly identifiable subjects and victimising clearly identifiable groups and responded to with condemnation. In 2014, there was a brief buzz of media reporting around the

implementation and proliferation of 'homeless spikes': little metal studs placed in areas popular for those sleeping rough whilst being too close to a superstore or retailer, making it impossible for any homeless individual to sleep there (Quinn, 2014). Similarly, while getting less mainstream media attention, Mike Davis (1990) rants with outrage at the existence of 'bum-proof' benches in which the individual simply slides off when they sit on them, or public benches divided by armrests to prevent homeless sleeping. In Norwich, skateboarding was banned in the city centre (BBC News, 2014) and in London a popular parkour spot was demolished with signs up 'banning' parkour and freerunning (one traceur actually recovered the sign as a keepsake before the site's demolition). The media response, in addition to academic responses to similar cases around parkour and skateboarding has been to characterise their exclusion as emotively driven by a spiteful and malicious disdain of young people and a 'moral panic' toward what is an allegedly deeply subversive, 'rebellious', and deviant practices (Atkinson and Young, 2008; Lamb, 2014; Wheaton, 2013).

While this is certainly a feature of Smith's work, it would be a mistake to misunderstand this as the central premise of his thesis. Smith's revanchist urbanism is grounded in an acute political-economic analysis of the movement of capital in and around the city. In fact, Smith actively opposes the argument that the revanchist gentrification of the city has occurred as a result of changing middle class consumer desires to move back to the city. Summarising his application of Marx's 'uneven development' to his theory of the rent gap and the city, Smith writes about gentrification as driven by the flow of *capital* rather than *people* back to the city; a result of a changing and de-industrialised global economy which forced capital to move back from the suburbs and reinvest in the city:

"Gentrification is a structural product of the land and housing markets. Capital flows where the rate of return is the highest, and the movement of capital to the suburbs, along with the continual devalorisation of inner-city capital, eventually produces the rent gap. When the gap grows sufficiently large, rehabilitation (or, for that matter, redevelopment) can begin to challenge the rate of return available elsewhere, and capital flows back in. *Gentrification is a back to the city movement all right, but a back to the city movement [driven] by capital rather than people*" (Smith, 1996: 67).

Revanchist theories of urban space have made welcome strides in refocusing attention on the spatial and the way in which the influential demand of capital gentrifies and reshapes the physical urban environment. However, revanchist perspectives have been employed in ways which have arguably fallen into the trap which Žižek (2008) warns against; in this case becoming too entangled in the fascinating allure with the most visible forms of spatial exclusion. Consequently they fail to adequately consider the other side of Neil Smith's (1996) work—the more objective and systemic spatial violence of how capital flows in and out of the city in accordance with changes in the global economy and, in doing so, fundamentally changing the urbanisation process and the fabric and cultural-economic *function of space* under late-capitalism (see Mould, 2015 for an exception). An analysis is required of what Keith Hayward describes as “the more mundane and prosaic outcomes” (Hayward, 2004: 113) of the relationship between capital and the city. This must look at the purpose of cities in post-industrial late-capitalism and how strictly controlled, regimented, and exclusive urban spaces are not just an unfortunate aberration and manifestation of vindictive contempt but an absolute *economic necessity* in the context of hyper-competitive neoliberal cities reliant upon what Sharon Zukin (1995) describes as the ‘symbolic economy’ of urban consumption.

### **The Function of Space in a ‘Symbolic Economy’**

David Harvey has long argued that urbanisation, and therefore the city, has always been a key means for the absorption of surplus capital (Harvey, 2007; 2012). This is particularly pertinent in the contemporary context, where capital, as Smith (1996) observed, is increasingly flowing back to the central urban areas of the city. For cities like Newcastle, this is partially a result of the deindustrialisation of Western economies and the degradation of central urban areas and therefore their land values (Smith, 1984). As industrial production moved elsewhere due to the pervasive new orthodoxy of neoliberal capitalism's disciplining of labour and resolving the issue of the labour question (see Harvey, 2007), post-industrial cities like Newcastle had to make what Winlow and Hall (2013: 124) describe as the shift from municipal socialism to municipal capitalism. This involved local authorities fleeing from social democratic municipal governance and throwing their hopes into the bosom of consumer markets.

The inter-competitiveness of cities and the governing logic of ‘creative cities’ (Mould, 2015) rich with opportunities for consumption meant that there was a need to ‘regenerate’, ‘redevelop’ and ‘rehabilitate’ city centres as commercial spaces of consumption<sup>62</sup>. Theoretically, this would enable these cities to appeal to affluent young professionals and therefore remain competitive and economically viable in a new post-industrial reality (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002; Minton, 2012; Robinson, 2002). Sharon Zukin (1995) observed this two decades ago when she talked about culture displacing politics in defining the direction of cities:

“As cities and societies place greater emphasis on visualisation, the Disney company and art museums play more prominent roles in defining public culture...In this sense, culture industries and cultural institutions have stepped into the vacuum left by government. At least since the 1970s debacles of Watergate and the Vietnam War, through Irangate in the 1980s and the confessions of politicians in the 1990s, government has lacked the basic credibility to define the core values of a common culture. On the local level, most mayors and other elected officials have been too busy clearing budget deficits and dealing with constituents’ complaints about crime and schools to project a common image. The “vision thing”, as George Bush called it, has been supplied...by those institutions whose visual resources permit or even require them to capitalise on culture” (Zukin, 1995: 10-11).

Zukin is unerringly right in observing the withdrawal of state and municipal forces from having the strongest hand in directing the state of cities. However, she misidentifies the root causes of this withdrawal, situating them in the localised causes of scandal and discreditation which do not explain what is undeniably a more globalised or at least a broadly Westernised trend. The withdrawal she identifies is a trend rooted firmly in the ideological singularisation of neoliberal capitalism—what Mark Fisher (2009) describes as ‘capitalist realism’ which manifests in what Žižek (2008) describes as ‘post-political biopolitics’. Indeed, it is no coincidence that she traces the beginnings of this to the 1970s as the politics of Thatcherism and Reaganism were gearing up in the neoliberal laboratory of Chile, before hitting the US and the UK at the end of the 1970s (see Harvey, 2005). When discussing the time-consuming processes of clearing budget deficits and George Bush’s scepticism toward the ‘vision thing’, what Zukin is describing is a perfect encapsulation of Žižek’s (2008) *post-political biopolitics*. He describes this as:

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<sup>62</sup> See chapter 2 of this thesis for how this occurred in Newcastle specifically.

“an awesome piece of theoretical jargon which, however, can be easily unpacked: ‘post-political’ is a politics which claims to leave behind old ideological struggles and, instead, focus on expert management and administration, while ‘biopolitics’ designates the regulation of the security and welfare of human lives. It is clear how these two dimensions overlap: once one renounces big ideological causes, what remains is only the efficient administration of life...*almost* only that” (Žižek, 2008: 34, original emphasis).

Nevertheless, looking at cities in purely political-economic approaches does not do justice to the issue of visual culture and its relationship to the ‘symbolic economy’. Politics, economics and culture must all be read in collaboration with one another to look at how they collectively shape, produce and re-produce the urban environment and thus influence the response to and governance of practices like parkour. This can be seen in the push for Business Improvement Districts (BIDs—see Minton, 2012 for more) in which local businesses in a demarcated central urban area pay a levy to an independent limited company (for Newcastle it is ‘NE1’ [www.newcastlene1ltd.com](http://www.newcastlene1ltd.com)) to collaborate in responsibility and maintenance of the area to maximise commercial interest. As Neil Smith observed over a couple of decades ago:

“Uneven development at the urban scale therefore brought not only gentrification in the narrowest sense but the whole gamut of restructurings: condominium conversions, office reconstructions, recreational and service expansion, massive redevelopment projects to build hotels, plazas, restaurants, marinas, tourist arcades and so on. All involve a movement of capital not simply into the built environment in general...but to the central and inner urban built environment in particular.” (Smith, 1996: 83)

This is what Zukin (1995) would refer to as the ‘symbolic economy’ of cities. As Mould (2015) notes, when neoliberal urban strategies sell off land to private real estate investors who accumulate capital through land rent from hotels, restaurants, high street retailers, bars, and urban shopping malls; such spaces also become increasingly securitised. Space is ‘kept to its specificity’ (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006) in an effort to protect these investments and ensure that consumption and engagement in consumer practice—even if it is only window shopping—is the collective price of admission. Consequently, these ‘public’ urban spaces are actively shaped and formed

first by the flow of capital back to the city and then through their intertwining with cultural symbols of consumption. Discussing cities in purely political-economic or street-level visual terms of white middle class bourgeois consumption—‘pacification by cappuccino’ (Zukin, 1995)—are both flawed approaches. Rather, one must look at the relationship between the street-level visual structure of the symbolic economy of urban consumption and the grand political-economic shifts of deindustrialisation and the rise of neoliberalism.

Therefore, when thinking about the political-economic *function* of space as a space through which capital can operate through the symbolic economy of consumption, one must also think about the visual, sensual, and affective spatialities of the symbolic economy. In a symbolic economy of consumption (Zukin, 1995) or residential spaces of exclusivity (see Atkinson and Smith, 2012; Hayward, 2004), the entire affective and experiential atmosphere of space itself is imperative to its on-going viability and success. Retail stores, coffee shops, restaurants and malls do not work and exist independently of one another. Arguably, they work *in relation* to one another, not operating in a spatial vacuum but as constituent parts of the greater physical, multi-sensory and emotional experience of urban consumer spatiality. ‘Going shopping’ is not merely an instrumental matter of walking into a shop and buying commodities (Hall et al, 2008; Smith and Raymen, 2016). It carries with it an assortment of associated consumer activities of going for lunch, coffee or drinks, as well as the nonchalant pleasure of smoothly strolling through the city in a clean, sanitised, and uninterrupted consumer paradise. ‘Going shopping’ or spending a day in town operates less as a specific act and more of a broader experience of indulgence and pleasure.

It is no wonder then that buskers increasingly require permits to play, having to audition and submit to rules as to where they can play, for how long, and that they must cease playing if requested by a member of the public (Ferrell, 2001; Raymen, 2016). The busker can collect money, but only if they positively contribute to the manufactured atmosphere of organic consumer space. Similarly, it is entirely unsurprising that there has been a widespread objection and disdain to ‘charity muggers’ who stand on busy high streets employing ‘stop and sign-up’ techniques. In the UK, over 100 towns have signed up to a scheme attempting to ban charity muggers from high streets and

shopping spaces or place extensive limits on when they can try to collect (Telegraph, 2015). Conservative MP Chris Grayling was quoted describing the collection techniques of charities as “wholly inappropriate” and that they should operate in such a way that is “acceptable and frankly consistent with the role they’re supposed to play” (Telegraph, 2015). ‘Charity muggers’ are a rude and traumatic invasion of the carefully cultivated ambience of the shopping centre ‘non-place’ (Augé, 1995), disturbing the fetishistic disavowal of ubiquitous disease and global poverty perpetuated by globalised liberal capitalism. To once again return to Žižek in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real* (2002c), it is wrong to view the presence of charity muggers as a rude intrusion of reality upon our Baudrillardian artificial semblance. Rather, the artificial semblance of urban space *is our reality*, in which the horrors of pot-bellied malnourished children are the semblance, something which happens elsewhere. This is akin to how Winlow and Hall (2013) discuss the way in which we ‘zig-zag’ our way through spaces, avoiding the homeless beggar here and the *Big Issue* seller there for fear that they might penetrate our micro-spheres of spatial sovereignty (Sloterdijk, 2011).

This, therefore, changes the *entirety* of space. Not merely the storefronts and high streets or the luxury apartment buildings, but all of the in-between spaces, the ‘connective tissue’ of the consumer city that Richard Sennett (1977) describes as ‘pedestrian traffic nexuses’. All of this space contributes to the collective ambience of the city and the inherent spatial competitiveness it engenders. Whilst consumers shop, eat, and drink they also wander throughout the city between these consumer activities with faux-flâneur nonchalance. So much of space in the central part of post-industrial cities is built on a symbolic economy of ‘visual delectation’ (Zukin, 1995) to serve as a functional atmospheric backdrop to indirectly contribute to the accumulation of capital. This spatial sanitisation and exclusivity must be read as a purposeful economic function of the urban ‘symbolic economy’ upon which the broader economy has become so reliant. Again, Zukin is informative in discussing the “interrelated production of symbols and space” (Zukin, 1995: 10):

“The symbolic economy recycles real estate as it does designer clothes. Visual display matters in American and European cities today, because the identities of places are established by sites of delectation. The sensual display of fruit at an

urban farmers market or gourmet food store puts a neighbourhood ‘on the map’ of visual delights and reclaims it for gentrification” (Zukin, 1995: 10)

Keith Hayward (2004; 2012) discusses this as the ‘semiotic disambiguation between place and function’; in which any given place must be characterised by its singular purpose and design. This is the realisation and maintenance of the ‘concept city’ in its street level reality (de Certeau, 1984). When thinking about this, however, it is important to keep in mind the temporal nature of such investments of capital into the built environment. The accumulation of surplus value is generated through long-term investment that requires the maintenance of the land and space into which capital is invested. However also, in the case of land, the promise of future rents and the need to maintain not only the quality but the image of high-value real estate—residential or commercial—is vital in a market in which spaces are viewed competitively against one another (Harvey, 2007). Consequently, we see how specificity, sanitisation, the purposeful cultivation of atmosphere through space and the auxiliary consequences of spatial exclusivity are *systemically embedded features* of the contemporary relationship between capital and urban space. While there is, to return to the language of Žižek (2008), an undeniable ‘subjective violence’ to the pervasive spatial exclusion of particular groups, this subjective spatial exclusion is rooted in more objective and systemic relations of geography and capital which shape and produce the very nature of urban space in ways that are far deeper and enduring than a subjective disdain of ethnic minorities, the poor, homeless, feminists or the LGBT community. On the contrary, as the city continues to develop and expand through the endless need to dispose of over-accumulated capital, spaces are developed to try and incorporate some of these groups into the governing consumer logic of the symbolic economy. At the street-level of urban governance by security teams and police officers, the exclusive governance of these spaces can often be more mundane and therefore structurally and symbolically exclusive, rather than primarily vindictive. As Atkinson (2003) writes when asking whether we can see revanchism in UK spatial policies:

“It is likely that part of the reality behind these programmes is mundane; organisations and people simply doing their job and trying to make places safer for their users, even if this means the exclusion of certain groups on the utilitarian grounds that doing so enables the majority to use those spaces” (Atkinson, 2003: 1830).

This is not to say that the emotional landscape of urban life has nothing to offer analyses of the urban. On the contrary, Atkinson (2015) incisively identifies the way in which objectless anxiety (Hall, 2012), the 'fear of falling' (Young, 2007), and public sentiments of social and class resentment are effectively harnessed as socially cathartic means for obfuscating the harm generated by spatially, socially, and economically marginalising urban policies. Similarly, Hayward (2004) astutely examines the connection between the emotions of fear and desire in the increasingly sophisticated, expensive, and exclusive securitisation of the domestic sphere. Hayward approached domestic securitisation through the lens of contemporary consumer culture, situating it as a marker of status in a culture of consumerism predicated on symbolic displays of individualistic distinction from the masses. Both of these examples are indicative of the broader competitive individualist neoliberal subjectivity that we can see becoming the new norm in late modern society and culture (Hall, 2012). However, these arguments have been ill-applied to topics and situations such as the exclusion of parkour. While the exclusion of parkour ostensibly demonstrates a contempt and alleged 'moral panic' around young 'deviant' traceurs, such arguments cannot explain the relationships of spatial compromise between traceurs and private security personnel, or the reluctant confusion with which security guards ask the traceurs to move on. This requires an analysis which interrogates the nature and function of urban space in the systemic relations between capital and the city such as the one seen above. However, it also requires a more nuanced understanding of security guards and their governance of urban space.

## **Narratives of Security and Spatial Governance**

As the fieldwork of this study progressed, it became apparent that the interactions between the traceurs, security guards and other spatial authorities were vital to unpicking the fundamental question of this thesis (see introduction). Not just in the sense that providing security guards' accounts of parkour's policing and governance contributed to a more rounded study and argument. More crucially than that, these encounters were the moments in which the ambiguity and paradox of parkour was played out and most explicitly *emerged* into view. Parkour's central paradox has been its simultaneous cultural conformity and illegitimate status. However as alluded to

earlier, it is an over-simplification to suggest that, outside of its commodified forms, parkour was treated with disdain as a troublesome example of anti-social youthful 'deviance'. Rather, security guards were often uncertain of why they had to move-on the traceurs; sympathetic to the traceurs plight and frustrated at their impotence to do anything other than enforce seemingly arbitrary 'rules'. Consequently, as we have already seen, relationships of spatial compromise grew between some (but by no means all) of the security guards and the traceurs as they were allowed to train in certain spots according to the spatio-temporal rhythms of the city, adding another layer of complexity to parkour's paradoxical existence. In keeping with the theme throughout this chapter, the security guards' exclusion of parkour was performed with less aggression and authoritarian territoriality, but with a more mundane acceptance and apathetic acknowledgment of the arbitrary 'rules' of urban space. As we shall see in the security guards' narratives, it was this paradox—parkour's conformity, yet the need to prohibit its practice, harness its energy and direct it into particular spatial contexts—that underpinned the security guards' inconsistent and ambivalent stance towards its governance. Consequently, these narratives went a long way into bringing into focus and proving the central argument of this thesis.

The following section, therefore, draws upon data from walking interviews with security guards, and explores the mentalities, sensibilities and meanings the security guards applied to their occupation. This thesis is not concerned with whether private security is an effective form of privatised policing, nor does it intend to question the morality of private security as an industry. It is interested in how the systemic spatial violence of the late-capitalist city operates and underpins the security guards' governance of space. It explores how this systemic spatial violence revealed itself to the security guards in ways which often uncomfortably conflicted with their own occupational identities; and how it influenced their responses to the spatial governance of parkour and explains what we have already identified as parkour's *inconsistent* and provisional inclusion and exclusion from urban space. In short, what are the driving motivations underpinning the security guards' discretionary practice, and how can we understand these discretionary rationalities in relation to the notion of *systemic spatial violence* outlined above in this chapter?

In many ways, this thesis conceives of security guards as ‘street-level bureaucrats’, what Michael Lipsky (1980) would describe as the human face of public and, in this case, pseudo-public spatial policy. Public policy, Lipsky argues, is in many ways shaped and realised by the discretionary interpretations and applications of those by whom it is implemented (Lipsky, 1980). Lipsky’s original thesis of street-level bureaucracy arguably overstates the autonomy and discretionary power of public policy workers such as teachers, social workers, police officers and, indeed, security guards. While it is undeniable that the security guards whom the traceurs and I encountered did exercise professional discretion in their dealings with the traceurs, it is worth noting that the ‘rules’ of urban space always won out. Indeed, these bureaucratically-generated and faceless ‘rules’ often served as a safety net when the security guards could not, or were unwilling to provide any other justification for moving on the traceurs. They were an unassailable yet essentially absent higher authority onto which the security guards could pass the buck, albeit one that could never be accessed and interrogated (Fisher, 2009; Winlow and Hall, 2012). The traceurs never achieved an absolute legitimacy in any of the pseudo-public spaces in which they trained. Their legitimacy was always provisional and conditional, underscored by their looming illegitimacy within the cultural-economic specificity of urban space. Nevertheless, the security guards would often exercise discretion as the front-line of the neoliberal governance of space; only to, in a contradictory fashion, retreat behind the already-existing ‘rules’ of urban space over which they hold no long-standing discretionary power. In doing so, however, the security guards revealed several narrative themes to their governance of space and the traceurs.

The various elements of security guards’ narratives broadly fit into four narrative themes. While this is arguably a crude typology, it should not be considered exhaustive or absolute. There are consistent overlaps and blurring of themes producing an often confused and mixed rationality of urban governance. The first of these themes explores the security guards’ identification of parkour’s adherence to, and embodiment of, many social and cultural values and how this affects the ambiguity with which they approach and respond to parkour. The second theme is characterised by the security guards’ identification of the contradictions of harm, leisure and exclusion within the city’s central urban spaces. This theme recognises parkour’s pro-social potential in contrast

to other more harmful, yet more 'legitimate' leisure practices within urban spaces. Security guards questioned this seemingly illogical situation and what seemingly underpins it, referring to consumer markets and the changing nature of home ownership. This prompted their conclusion that the governance and control of space and exclusion is not driven by an underlying societal morality, but by more morally vacuous and individualistic forces. This leads us into the third theme, which can be summarised by the often-repeated mantra of 'it's just the rules' and a vision of the governance of particular urban spaces as not grounded in notions of 'right' or 'wrong', but by the situation-specific bureaucratic management of urban space (see Fisher, 2009; Winlow and Hall, 2012 on the bureaucracy of the 'little other'). Finally, the fourth theme refers to the security guards' own occupational insecurity and legitimacy and the role this had in the provisional allowance of parkour in particular urban spaces. This theme explores security guards' concerns about the 'tainted trade' of private security and how the requirements of their job often conflicted with their idealised occupational self-image as a public servant—itsself arguably a form of fetishistic disavowal of their role in perpetuating the hyper-regulated neoliberal urban project.

However, these themes should not be considered mutually exclusive. Rather, they all presuppose and underpin one another, operating together to make up the entirety of the complex and contradicting security narratives which are the basis of parkour's inconsistent inclusion and exclusion from urban space. These narrative themes were selectively and situationally drawn upon by security guards as they consistently mixed rationalities to defend their own practice. Nevertheless, irrespective of the agentic discretion displayed by security guards, all of their narratives are underpinned by parkour's underlying illegitimacy in urban space that emerges from the objective and systemic spatial exclusivity of contemporary cities.

*i. 'A Tainted Trade'? Rationalities of 'Public Good' and the Occupational Image of Security*

While this was the fourth theme listed above, it is arguably one of the most important. The security guards' occupational self-esteem and concerns about their self-image, reputation and credibility were pervasive among the dozen security guards with whom

I conducted walking interviews. Moreover, this reputational insecurity served as the general underpinning for the four other themes listed above and the security guards' individual actions and malleability with regards to the 'rules' of urban space.

A popular argument in academic writing on policing and security is the 'transformation' thesis (Jones and Newburn, 1995). The transformation thesis argues that as the ratio of policing increasingly shifts from public state policing to private security firms, the rationales governing such policing also shift from notions of the 'public good' to that of more economic market rationalities (White and Gill, 2013). As Zedner (2007) points out, the UK security industry has boomed over the past 20 years into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, showing an annual turnover of £5billion in 2004, let alone the decade since then as private security companies such as G4S and Serco have become increasingly involved in the delivery of public services through payment by results schemes (Travis, 2012). Moreover, the use of private security has expanded from the preserve of the super-rich to being more pervasively woven into the policing the public sphere (Hayward, 2004; Raymen, 2016).

Nevertheless, as White and Gill (2013) argue, one cannot simply conflate a shifting ratio from public policing to private security with a shift in the rationalities of policing and security practice. Rather, White and Gill (2013) observe a blurring of rationalities, particularly with increased relations between police and private security as state police are increasingly imbued with market rationalities and private security displaying rationalities and justifications of their work within a narrative framework of a 'public good'. That is, serving the public and policing in a way which is positive and beneficial to the community through enhanced relationships with the police both in practice but also in training. This provides private security actors with a reputation of professionalism, legitimacy and credibility which other research studies have revealed is a source of anxiety and insecurity among private security firms<sup>63</sup> (Thumala et al, 2011). This crisis

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<sup>63</sup> It should be noted that the world and job requirements of 'public' private security—those security guards who patrol large swathes of pseudo-public space—is very different to the world of another form of private security, namely bouncers. Bouncers have been discussed by criminologists at length and have contributed to this insecurity about a 'tainted trade'. Ethnographic studies by Simon Winlow and others (2001; Winlow et al, 2001; Hobbs et al, 2003) found that bouncers and door firms were often closely connected to criminal markets and subcultures. As they write, "You are unlikely to see a 'Bouncer required' advert in the Job Centre or your evening paper. The vast majority of bouncers...were recruited by word of mouth, usually through extensive and powerful friendship

of image under which the security industry labours is rooted in concerns about private security being a 'tainted trade' which lacks professionalism, legitimacy to govern and enforce order, and has close associations with organised crime and deviance (Gibson, 2007; Thumala et al, 2011). :

Why is the security industry's self-understanding marked by bullishness about its growth and prospects (which one may expect), coupled with unease about its credibility and reputation (which is perhaps more surprising)? What does the coexistence of confidence and doubt tell us about the legitimacy of selling security and the activity that is required to legitimate it? (Thumala et al, 2011: 284)

Such was the case with the security guards, who often invoked the notion that their job was about public service and 'public good'. As a few of the security guards describe:

*"I don't do this job for no reason. I don't do a lot, I know that. I spend a lot of the day sitting on my arse doing 'nowt. But I like to think that what I do has a bit of value y'kna? Nobody wants to think they do a job for no reason. So I like to think that when I'm here, I'm making the experience a bit better for the people staying here. Keeping this place nice, tidy, clear of anyone kicking off or some pisshead wandering in here making it unpleasant. I like to think I do a small bit of good, yeah."*

**(P', 54 years old)**

*"We're an extension of the police really. We even get some of the same training. Police it's expensive. And it puts people off y'kna [you know]? People don't want police about all the time. I always think we just quietly keep an eye on things and then if anything happens, we can call the police y'kna? But they don't have to spend money flooding the streets with bobbies making it feel like a police state. But there's still someone keeping an eye on things"*

**(Tina, 38 years old)**

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networks" (Winlow et al, 2001: 539). In many ways a bouncer or door firm's reputation for involvement with notable local criminals is an occupational asset. Therefore, beneath the surface of professional and bureaucratic accreditation, there is not the same existential crisis regarding its status as a 'tainted trade'. The security guards I spoke with were often older and the companies and organisations who recruited them were firmly committed to maintaining at least an image of legitimacy and professionalism. While there were a couple of former and current bouncers, none were involved in this form of private security in order to propagate criminal or 'hard man' reputations (Winlow, 2001).

*"I'm never gonna be a copper, like. Couldn't be doing wi' that. But I like it when you've got to go and check something out, big group of lads or summat. And you think I might get a bit of bother here, but you kind of go up and you're not as intimidating as a copper. You're not there like bold as brass saying 'what's going on here then?' You just kind of deal with it quietly, politely like. And more often than not you know people respond to it. There's a downside to not being a copper as well. But I think it's good. We're kind of that in-between you know? We work with the police and they know that. We can call them. But we're not standing there trying to nick 'em either. So I think it works for everyone."*

**(Doug, 49 years old).**

Other concerns about perceptions of the security industry heavily influenced how security guards approached their work from a 'public good' perspective. Typical narratives that arose under this theme were that of being seen as someone who was 'bullied at school and on a power trip', a 'toy copper', 'muscle for hire' with associations to crime and deviance; or someone who has 'no sense and just blindly does what he's told'. Many of these narratives of insecurity have featured in other studies (Thumala et al, 2011); but rarely have they been connected to how security guards attempted to negate them through their policing of urban space. Geoff, who works the Grainger plaza area which has a set of luxury apartments, a Holiday Inn, a restaurant and a multi-storey car park, explains:

**Geoff:** *You get a fair bit stick sometimes like. You're always aware of it...*

**TR:** *Aware of what exactly?*

**Geoff:** *Just the usual lines... 'Jumped up nonce.'; 'bet you were bullied at school'; 'Playing cops and robbers are ya?' All of that shite. So I tend to be more friendly with it, y'kna? Not walking over like I'm on a power trip. Just calm. Friendly. Because fact is, they're right. All you can do is ring the police if they won't clear off, which makes that whole thing worse. So you kind of need people to help you out a bit and move 'emselves on. That's why I quite like those lads [the traceurs] and I talk to them y'kna?*

*I always try to explain, not just tell 'em what's what and move on. Then people get all radge [aggressive] and you're doing yourself no favours.*

Similarly, 'Wojo', explained his ideas around security as a public service. Wojo was a large and very muscular man by anyone's standards who was previously a bouncer for night clubs back in his home country of Poland. Here, 'Wojo' (34 years old) works security around the outdoor drinking section and surrounding area of one of the major chain bars on the Quayside:

*"When I was a doorman in Poland, I just wanted people to have a good time. People think you're always looking to fight. Some did, some loved to fight and show off for the girls who they knew and come in every week. But me? No. I'm the same here [near the Quayside]. They look at me and think 'Oh, here we go'. But I'm just here to make sure everything is OK and everybody can enjoy themselves. So I give people space. I'm not up-tight. If they're not doing anything that's bothering anyone, I let them be. When it gets busier then yes, I'll ask them to go. But that's OK"*

It is clear from the quotes above that the security guards in this sample quite obviously mix 'public good' narratives alongside market rationalities, viewing private security as a cost-efficient extension of the wider 'policing family' (White and Gill, 2013: 87). These quotes show the extent to which neoliberal ideology around the reduction in state policing expenditure and the protection of private property can penetrate and shape the way in which individuals can reframe their own practice in a positive light. These narratives of 'public good' were particularly re-emphasised when the requirements of their job, underpinned by the spatially exclusive reality of neoliberal space, conflicted with their positive self-image of fair and ethical spatial governance. The security guards were often fully aware of the spatially exclusive reality of neoliberal space and their own role in perpetuating such exclusivity, followed quickly by rationales which served to disavow this reality.

*"It's all about the money. It's like, people hire out security firms for their own agenda. That's why the police should never go private. Then you just get people hiring the police for their own interests. What you do in this job isn't always about right and*

*wrong y'kna. It is sometimes, like. But sometimes you think about what they [the proprietors of the property or employers] would want and you do what you do based on that"*

**(Don, 58 years old).**

*"Best policy is not to think too much about it, just see what looks out of place and go over and look at it. It's wrong really, but usually it's right [for the job]. It has taken time with those lads [the traceurs]. First time I saw them I was out there fast, 'Get off', y'kna? They've been coming here for years now though, so I let 'em be for a bit and then all I have to do is show me face and usually they start clearing off. Kind of unspoken I guess."*

**(Geoff, 53 years old).**

Mick talks about having to patrol the gardens area just outside one of the entrances to the city's main shopping centre, which are filled with freshly cut grass and park benches. This space is often used as a commons for groups of people to hang out in the area, along with a cut-through route to the mall itself for shoppers. Along the sides of the gardens there's a small set of walls which often served as a nice little spot to train on as we pass through town to other more secluded training spots:

*I'm not naïve. I know why I'm here and I know I'm not here to make the world a better place or nothin' like that.*

**TR:** *What do you see as the purpose of your job then?*

*To keep the young lads from getting loud, the homeless lot from begging near here. Nobody likes going in there [points to the shopping centre behind us] when you've got them about. When I was a lad we used to do the same. Climbing stuff and that, messing 'bout. It's nothin' new. And we weren't bothering anyone, so I always feel bad when I have to move 'em on 'cos why should they [shoppers] have more of a right to this when they don't even use it. They just walk through. In there?[The shopping centre] then yeah they're spending money and that, that's what it's for. But this? Nah.*

*So it gets on me nerves sometimes, but that's what yer gotta do. But when they're closed, I just leave it, it's not an issue.*

**TR:** *You're still here when they're closed?*

*Aye for a little while. Just while they close up the shops and that, make sure nobody new comes in hoping to get summat last minute. Otherwise it's a nightmare. So on a Sunday when it's closing early and those lads come down I tend not to bother too much. I stay here while everyone's closing up, make sure nobody comes in. But when there's no customers coming in I leave 'em to it.*

**(Mick, 46 years old)**

Mick's quote above is reminiscent of a passage in Richard Sennett's (1977: 12-13) *The Fall of Public Man*. Sennett describes the artificiality of a courtyard space at the ground level of a skyscraper which, ostensibly, appears to be a meeting place for sociality and interaction, but actually serves as a visually open and aesthetically pleasing 'pedestrian-traffic nexus' through which people merely access the interior of the building. Moreover, the systemic spatial exclusivity and purposeful efficiency of urban consumer spaces is built-in to the physical architecture of the city. Sennett (1977) uses open-plan office floors, in which the walls and barriers to visibility within offices were torn down to increase worker-efficiency. While open, safe, highly-visible spaces would appear to encourage public sociability, research suggests that increased visibility actually decreases sociability (Drucker and Grumpert, 1991). As Sennett (1977: 15) writes: "When everyone has each other under surveillance, sociability decreases, silence being the only form of protection". Criminological commentary on the urban has suggested the effect this has when transferred into the public urban realm is to create asocial spaces and public subjectivities which are geared toward individualism and the singular purpose of the space (Raymen, 2015)—within this example, shopping and consumption. For Mick, it was a realisation of the artificiality of 'public' space. Far from being a democratised space of free access and sociability, the greens outside the shopping area was an urban commons that was entirely subjugated to the accumulation of capital. Note his tentative questioning of who had more of a 'right' to the gardens, mimicking

the line of questioning found in Lefebvre's (1968) essay 'the right to the city' and raising questions about who holds the right to the urbanisation process more broadly.

It was in these moments that the systemic spatial violence of urban space *revealed* itself to the security guards, prompting them to become more reflective and acknowledging their own role in the perpetuation of these systemically exclusive spatial relations. I use the phrase '*reveal*' to depict a more dynamic *affective encounter* (Young, 2014) with the objective violence of the city which traumatically disturbs the security guards' own images of being a 'public good'. This is rooted in the collective fetishistic disavowal that the 'norm' of everyday life (and in this case space) is essentially non-violent and inclusive (Žižek, 2008). As Alison Young (2014: 162) argues, the notions of 'affect' and 'encounter' denote a more dynamic experience which is distinct from 'emotion', in which the spectator pre-symbolically and corporeally registers what they are observing in terms of their own subject positions. In the case of the security guards, they corporeally register the systemic spatial violence of the city and their exclusion of the traceurs in terms of their subject position as spatial authorities of urban spaces. In the quotes and fieldnotes above, observe the common thread of a lack of meaningful control, agency or power running through their narratives, with phrases such as: "*It's all about the money/Best policy is not to think too much/I know why I'm here*". This phraseology denotes an acknowledgement of this objective spatial violence. It is a subjugation of ideas and the personal construction of positive self-images to the desires of employers or even larger social forces such as the flow of capital. Invariably, however, as fast as these acknowledgements occurred, they were negated by invoking the four other themes discussed below which consider issues of cultural conformity, relative harm, and the 'rules' of urban space to justify their own position.

ii. *'Everyone thinks it's great when it's in an advert'*

In my walking interviews with security guards, the cultural conformity of parkour was one of many key features in their narratives when discussing moving the traceurs on to new locations and their encounters with the parkour community. While they did not put it in the language of 'cultural conformity', the security guards I spoke with did not view the traceurs as deviant, particularly disruptive, or dangerous to others. Nor did they

exclude them based on a vindictive disapproval of these young people. Rather the security guards' response to parkour was more mundane and driven by a sense of helpless and simplistic enforcement of the spatially specific rules of urban space. This encapsulated the realisation that despite parkour embodying all of the values of neoliberal late-capitalist culture, the regulatory norms of urban space that the security guards were tasked to enforce could not be conflated entirely with the values of contemporary society and culture (Hall et al, 2008). Vic is a security guard whose job included patrolling 'The Keep', a historic site in the city with plaques for tourists explaining the history of the Castle Keep. She describes:

*"I don't see what's wrong with it meself. Everyone thinks it's great when it's in an advert. I saw an advert for deodorant the other day and I thought, 'ah that's what those lads do'. They don't do it anywhere here that's getting in the way of the places where people are milling about and that neither. But if I get seen doing nothin' about it, especially if there's people about, I'm in for a bit of stick"*

**Vic (35 years old)**



'The Keep'. January, 2014.

*Thing is, right...I don't think anybody has a **problem** wi' it. I don't think anybody would think it's **wrong** or anything like that. Y'kna? Like you compare it to drugs or summat, some people get a bit tetchy about it. But what those lads do? [Shakes head]. It's just **where** they're doing it. But I'm not up on me high horse like 'Oh you shouldn't be doing that'. My lad is right into the X games and all that. BMX and skateboarding. It's all the same stuff and they make video games out of that kinda thing. You see it in movies and that. I just think people want 'em to do it at like, a skate park or whatever the equivalent would be like. Y'kna what I mean? It's a tricky one because they're not doing 'owt wrong, but at the same time you're asking 'em to clear off like you would a bunch of troublemakers. But they're not, so that's why I try to be nice because they probably think I see them as a bunch of little scallies or summat. But I don't.*

**(Don, 58 years old)**

Don speaks to the heart of the contradiction surrounding parkour—an activity that is simultaneously culturally legitimate and spatially illegitimate in its practice in public space. He begins to identify what Ferrell et. al (2008) identify as the 'loops and spirals' of cultural meaning that surround crime, deviance and leisure in the contemporary cultural mediascape. Don is right to speak of the X Games, with parkour having its own corporately-sponsored competition of the Barclays World Freerunning Championships, along with other television shows featuring prominent traceurs such as *American Ninja Warrior* and *Ninja Warrior UK*. He is also right to observe parkour's cultural conformity and legitimacy through its presence within the virtual world of video games, with parkour featuring heavily in games such as *Assassins' Creed*. These contradictions are deepened by parkour being practiced within public space in such games and adverts, but run even further when scenes from the game are recreated by traceurs in 'real life' through their production in slick YouTube videos, albeit with the appropriate permissions from spatial authorities (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S8b1zW0gOKA>). The twisting loops of cultural representation bend back on themselves even further when the images of parkour in these forms of legitimised, mainstream media content are associated with crime and

deviance, as seen in *Assassins Creed*, *The Bourne Identity*, *Casino Royale*, *District 13* and *Yamakasi: Les Samurais Du Temps Moderne*, to name a few.

It is here where cultural criminology can offer an understanding of these 'halls of mirrors' and 'spirals and loops' of cultural meaning around issues of crime, deviance, and control (Ferrell et al, 2008). Any distinction between the real-life event and its representation is confounded through the swirling spirals and thus destabilises any solid understanding of its legitimacy or illegitimacy, confusing any who encounter it. Nevertheless, the underlying reality of the forces of capital renders parkour's status as legitimate or illegitimate contingent on the spatial meaning and context in which it is practiced. In the public realm of urban space, parkour possesses a perpetual underlying legitimacy, which only makes the job of moving them on more conflicting, confusing, and destabilising to the occupational identities of security guards like Don and Vic above.

iii. *'I can allow pissheads staggering about, but not a group of lads jumping about': Pro-social leisure and harm*

Delving further into issues of cultural conformity, spatial inclusion and exclusion were the contradictions involved with regards to other more culturally embedded and accepted forms of leisure in the city. While the focus of this research was parkour, as I walked with the security guards around their 'beat' it became apparent that one could not understand their responses to parkour and freerunning independently of the other forms of urban leisure they encountered. Rather, in their more reflective moments, a key aspect of the security guards' narratives was an implicit, and sometimes explicit, comparison of parkour against other forms of urban leisure, namely, the night-time economy. As Geoff explained, allowing rude, loud and 'anti-social' all-day drinkers whilst having to move on the traceurs seemed, to him, entirely illogical:

*Authors Fieldnotes*

*Geoff got called back inside the apartment buildings to check on something. He soon emerges and we go back outside to the courtyard plaza. Directly across from us is a*

*Holiday Inn Express. It is a popular hotel for out-of-town revellers coming to experience the city's infamous night-time economy. I point across to one of the higher levels of the car park, just above the entrance ramp to the car park and explain how it was always a popular spot for the traceurs.*

*I'm interrupted by a loud roar of male voices which makes us both look across to outside the Holiday Inn. There's a large group of lads who are clearly staying at the hotel, loudly yelling out at what can only be a Hen party of women emerging from the hotel. The men are drunk, with cans in hand, dressed up in their best with carefully-coiffed hair, ready for a night out. Geoff chuckles to himself and remarks that there's going to be some sore heads in the morning. His mood changes slightly as the lads get louder and begin recklessly staggering further out into the courtyard just as a small group of schoolchildren, are cutting through the plaza, probably up toward the estate on the outskirts of the city centre.*

*"See this is what I mean. It doesn't make much sense. If I went over to them and told 'em to clear off, people would be like 'you havin' a laugh?' It's not just because there's lots of 'em and they're pissed. It's because it's just normal. Nobody bats an eyelid really. But I do have to move those lads on [the traceurs]. I don't have anything against drinking like, I love a drink meself. But when it gets later and that, you see people being sick in the street, loads of noise, fighting. It doesn't make a lot of sense".*

**February, 2015.**

Similarly, Alan describes the different 'thresholds' for moving people on or intervening in various leisure scenarios:

*There's a different standard for everything. Time of day, what they're doing, who they are. That kind of thing. So, like I can have a bunch of pissheads staggering about, but I can't have a group of lads jumping about on things in the middle of the day. I think of it like a threshold. For people in the pubs and bars and that, especially in summer when they're drinking outside a lot, the threshold is so much higher. They've basically got to be sick in the street or properly kicking off to do anything. So it's not the same level.*

This is the question of *harm* that a deviant leisure perspective takes as its foundational lens for a critical analysis of leisure. Parkour falls prey to what Smith and Raymen (2016) have termed ‘spatially contingent harm’ in which the traceurs are moved on due to the cultural-economic demands of the symbolic economy and neoliberal space. In contrast, the subjective harms of the night-time economy such as violence, anti-social behaviour, vandalism and sexual violence—which cause millions of pounds worth of damage and expense to cities, the police and the NHS—are accepted as part and parcel of the culturally embedded and legitimised activity of a ‘good night out’ (Smith, 2014). This returns us to earlier arguments made in chapter three about leisure more generally, in which the leisure industry itself has maintained a position at the centre of the neoliberal project, ascending to unassailable dominance in terms of economic value across the West. Consequently, there has been an overall lack of critical analysis of culturally embedded forms of leisure, specifically as they pertain to the exclusion of other less harmful forms of leisure such as parkour. One security guard, Mitchell, 39 years old, took this idea further by observing not just the *lack* of harm surrounding parkour, but the potentially positive aspects of its practice:

*“I understand, right. People don’t want young lads all around the building where they live. But at the same time, I always think that this is the kind of stuff we tell our kids to be doing, you know? Be active, have a good group of friends, do something creative and healthy. I always think, what would you rather? There’s lads round here getting pissed and sniffin’ glue. Or kids who just never leave their room, let alone the house, and just play Xbox all day. We’re always moaning about how kids don’t play outside anymore. But they can’t anymore because as soon as they do people call us.*

*TR: Why do you think that is though? Why do people call the police in these situations?*

*Well...I dunno. I think part of it is how people think about their flats and houses nowadays. Nice apartment block like this, nice little courtyard and gardens like this. People want it a certain way, that’s kind of what they pay for you know? Owning your own place is such a big deal nowadays. People get a bit over-protective.*

*Especially here. When you think of kids playing you think of a street or a cul-de-sac don't you?*

*TR: Sorry, what do you mean by that?*

*Well like when I was a lad, I lived on a street. And you knew most of the people on the street y'know? I knew the kids. Me Mam and Dad knew all the other parents. You knew people. But when you get people living in apartment blocks like this—I live in an apartment block—nobody knows one another. So you don't think about things like letting young lads use this area for fun or whatever. You just think about yourself because while you're surrounded by people, you just think about your flat being **yours** kind of thing?*

In the excerpt above, Mitchell is describing parkour in terms of what a deviant leisure perspective has identified as *pro-social leisure*. As explored in chapter three, many forms of normalised, accepted, and culturally embedded forms of leisure are associated with a wide range of social, economic, interpersonal and environmental harms. Elsewhere, Smith and Raymen (2016) have developed this into a typology of harms associated with commodified leisure. However, as Mitchell observes, parkour presents very few of these harms, whilst actually possessing the potential to be seen as a form of *pro-social* leisure which can<sup>64</sup> contribute to meaningful social relationships that extend beyond the facile and instrumental relationships of other leisure activities. This is a form of leisure which, under different political-economic and attendant social and cultural relations, has the potential to foster a sense of community, healthy living and creativity, and a reading of the city which encourages inclusive accessibility and democratisation of space. As we saw in chapter 6, parkour has been used within social policy around young people, being employed in schools and local youth clubs and councils (Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011)—with one participant, Andy, splitting certain parkour companies into 'community-based'<sup>65</sup> and commercial-oriented categories. As exemplified by the quotes

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<sup>64</sup> It is important to note, as seen in chapter 5, that individualistic and competitive relationships are equally present within parkour, albeit manifesting in less harmful ways.

<sup>65</sup> NEPK would arguably fall into this 'community-based' category, along with organisations such as *Parkour Generations*. In contrast, companies such as *Storror* or *Tempest Freerunning* would be considered more commercial. In reality however, these dichotomies are false. Chez and TK, the

above, the comparative harm between parkour and other forms of urban leisure (and the contradictions surrounding their respective cultural acceptance and normalisation) is an undeniable aspect of the uncertainty surrounding the security guards' approach to parkour.

Furthermore, Mitchell also identifies a second interesting point which is more pertinent for the arguments regarding a more mundane *systemic* spatial exclusion discussed above. This revolves around, to use Mitchell's own words, "*how people think about their flats and houses nowadays*" and the sense of protectionism, territoriality and exclusivity that arises around domestic property ownership. This is a trend fundamentally connected to consumer culture and the housing market: one of the foremost markets which attempts to stabilise and prop up a finance economy that is prone to crisis. As Mike Davis (1990) and Keith Hayward (2004) have observed, the rise of personal security and the 'domestic fortress' is driven not just by *fear*, but the conflation of *fear and desire* in consumer markets. The sanitisation of the domestic sphere creates spaces of exclusivity which serves not only as a form of protection, but an emulative display of pecuniary status. As Davis writes in a memorable passage:

"Security' becomes a *positional good* defined by income access to private 'protective services' and membership in some hardened residential enclave or restricted suburb. As a *prestige symbol*—and sometimes as the decisive borderline between the merely well-off and the truly rich—'security' has less to do with personal safety than with the degree of personal insulation in residential, work, consumption and travel environments" (1990: 224, emphasis added).

This is reflective of the broader 'retreat from the social' (Raymen, 2016; Sennett, 1977) in a contemporary 'capsular civilisation' (de Caeter, 2003). One might associate such images of the 'residential enclave' with carefully plucked and sanitised suburban 'Disneyland' towns such as Celebration, Florida. However, as identified earlier, this trend is reversing as capital moves back to the city (Smith, 1984; 1996). As Atkinson (2015b) has noted, there has been an emerging trend among wealthy urban elites not to move out of the dirty, dangerous city but to remain both within the city and separated from its street-level reality. The wealthy now live in central urban areas but live a 'nodal'

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founders of NEPK, were still driven by the profit motive, seeing schools' outsourcing of innovative exercise programmes as a viable and stable money-making opportunity.

existence in 'plutocratic clouds', moving about the city with 'shielded mobilities' (Atkinson, 2008). Thus, the useless artefacts of technology which are a consequence of over-producing consumer markets are employed in innumerable imaginative ways, just as the traceurs reinterpret the potential uses of social space (Ferrell, 2001).

This is part of how contemporary debt-based economies have encouraged people to think about the economic utility of home ownership. As Harvey (2014) has observed, individual home ownership has become a form of speculation, driven not by its singular use value, but its *exchange value*. Thus, with an increasingly urbanised society and people moving back to central urban areas, the securitisation and sanitisation of luxury apartment blocks, residential streets and other domestic areas contributes to the *value* of property and the general price-range of its surrounding area. Home ownership, therefore, becomes predominantly individualistic rather than concerned about building a sense of community and inclusiveness. In this regard, we can see home-ownership and the attitudes toward groups such as parkour as a micro-spatial exercise in what Hall (2012a) describes as *special liberty*, the ability of powerful 'wealth creators' to transcend ethical codes and negate the harms they inflict upon others because of their incomparable value to the economy. In the case of this study, the security guards who patrol luxury apartment blocks with their carefully groomed plant beds can exclude the traceurs on the grounds that, as Mitchell says, the home owners and tenants want "what they've paid for". The absence of harm, deviance or illegality is irrelevant, as is the identity of the traceurs as young people in baggy clothing. This was evident from an encounter with another security guard at the Sandgate spot, a block of luxury apartments in the heart of the city centre. When asked to move, the traceurs politely protested that they weren't any trouble. The security guard laughed and responded "You could be an absolute Saint. But if you're not a resident of the building then you can't be here". It appears that the exclusivity of space is driven by a more indiscriminate disdain for public lingering that is inextricably related to the systemic territoriality of space under current urban housing markets.

iv. *“I don’t make the rules, I’m just trying to do me job”*

*Author’s Fieldnotes*

*The traceurs are dotted around the disabled ramps of the undercover St James’ spot. It’s a tidy little spot with lots of rails and walls at all different levels. There are various obstacles at different parts of the spot for climb-ups and vaults. The brick work is good too, not smooth or slippery like the Discovery walls, but without the loose and jagged brick work at so many spots. Plus, all of it is undercover, serving as protection from ominous grey clouds looking ready to pour. As the security guard predictably approaches, I start to gather my bags only to see that the most of the traceurs aren’t doing the usual routine of pre-empting their moving-on and gathering their bags to go before the security guard even arrives. For the traceurs, this routine is important. It marks them out as non-hostile and accepting of the security guard’s duties. As many of them have told me before, it does no use to be hostile or aggressive. You’re more likely to develop a good relationship with them and maybe get to train a little longer somewhere by accepting what they’ve got to do and moving along quietly.*

*But today, the traceurs were pissed off. Since moving-on from Discovery, we’d probably been training for about 25 minutes and have already been to and been moved on from three spots. We’d get warmed up and start training on a particular spot, and within minutes someone would come out through a gate or from around a corner and move us on. It’s the Easter bank holiday which means the Quayside spots are off-limits as it’s crawling with all-day drinkers and police; and during the day the spots in and around town are always limited. There’s no football on at the stadium and there were no staff or personnel moving in or out. Usually, security could move us on with the excuse that tours of the stadium came through this spot where we would train, but there was a sign up clearly stating there were no tours today.*

*The traceurs’ sigh as the security guard ‘shoos’ them along with an exasperated hand gesture. “Come on lads, time to go you know you can’t do this here”.*

*Franny shoots back, "But why though?" and the security guard looks taken aback, uncertain of what to answer. Franny makes his case, saying that the place is dead, nobody is here, and there are no tours and no football on. So why can't we be here? Unable to come up with any legitimate justification, the security guard resorts to the standard 'you just can't do this here'. Strangely enough, nobody seems able to argue with this. He puts his hands up defensively, sympathising with the traceurs and simply says 'Look lads, I don't make the rules. But you just can't do this here. I've got to move youse on.' The traceurs grumble and slowly gather up their bags as another security guard comes out from the office just above the spot to help supervise. We all move out the other end of the spot, heading up to another spot atop the multi-storey car park adjacent to the stadium.*

**April, 2014**

This is perhaps the most common reasoning provided by security guards when dealing with the traceurs. They would often play the 'don't shoot the messenger' card, making reference to the already and always-existing 'rules' of particular urban spaces which are made by others and merely enforced by them as street-level bureaucrats. However, rarely could the security guards outline the exact 'rules' they were enforcing or the reasoning behind them. They only made reference to the instructions they had received from superiors in what to do when discovering a gathering of people 'loitering' in a particular space, merely surmising as to the reasoning behind the need to move them on. As Doug, the security guard at the St James' spot described:

*"It's just not allowed. I've been told that whenever I see a group stopping here or whatever, that I should go and check it out, see what they're doing, and if they're not supposed to be here then move them on. "Keep the traffic moving, keep the space clear" I was told. So that's what I do. It's pretty clear when there's a tour going on because they all wait over there [he points to a waiting room beside the St James spot with all-glass windows]. On match days, the players and team staff come through here so we really have to keep it tight then. Other than that...[pauses]...I don't really know why they can't be here on a quiet day when there's nowt on. I'm just doing my job and doing what I've been told. I guess it's health and safety and that, especially with those lads. They [his bosses] just say that they want to keep the*

*space clear, keep people moving on through so they can get to their cars [points to the car park around the corner] or get in the building or whatever.”*

Geoff, a security guard who has to supervise a courtyard plaza in the city centre which serves as the connective hub of for a block of apartments, a restaurant, a Holiday Inn hotel and a car park, similarly remarks:

*Geoff: Quite simply, this just isn't the place to be doing this. It has nothing to do with them being young kids or us [security] thinking they're bad lads. They're not being too rowdy or anything, it's just that that's not what this place is for. It's not the place to be jumping off and around on things. People pass through this space every day, people who aren't using the hotel or the restaurant or whatever. But you can't just **stay** here. Even if they're not doing nowt wrong, it's not a place to socialise. You go into that apartment building and see the rules about the courtyard. It's quite clear.*

*TR: Do you know who makes those rules?*

*Geoff: I'm not sure to be honest. The building? I don't know. I know it's not the council, it's one of these lot round here [points to the apartment building, hotel and restaurant] But the rules are there and it's our job to make sure they're followed.*

Here, we see how the 'rules' of urban space—a form of urban bureaucracy—achieve a strangely incontestable status of authority that is peculiar to contemporary cities in late modernity, perhaps best characterised by the array of 'no ball games allowed' signs. As the neoliberal urban land grab of privatised space has increasingly fragmented the city, dividing it up into separately owned micro-jurisdictions of private landowners, there has also been a degradation of any broader guiding values for city space that are grounded in more universal principles and values of open, democratic, and sociable space. The city has become characterised by a spatial individualism, in which these micro-jurisdictions of the symbolic economy are to be kept to their specificity through the privately made 'rules' of the space, buttressed by strong private property laws under neoliberalism. While neoliberalism ostensibly despises and disavows the constraints of top-down bureaucracy (see Fisher, 2009), contemporary neoliberal space

actually relies heavily upon the anonymity of urban bureaucratic ‘rules’ as the replacement for any broader guided vision of ‘public space’. Consequently, the absence of more universal values and principles by which urban space can be governed results in their replacement with situation-specific rules which have no human or personified authority (or at least a highly obfuscated one). There is only an abstract policy or memo—*the little other*—which acts as the final adjudicator of urban space to which the innocent individual bureaucrat can refer<sup>66</sup>. Since the creators of these situation-specific spatial policies are never encountered directly, the governance of urban space becomes a matter of satisfying the rules of a particular space that have always-already existed. This is something that Don, a retired police officer turned security guard who works down on the Quayside has noticed with groups other than the traceurs:

*Authors Fieldnotes*

*Don and I turn down a road just off the Quayside and it opens up into a little square. On opposite sides of the square there’s a Tesco and a cosy pub serving craft beers, real ales, and nice food—I’ve been there before. Don works this spot for a small security firm who are hired by the local BID company. As we arrive at the spot, he starts to speak about the frustration of the ambiguity of private security work.*

*Don: When I worked in the police, there were always laws you could refer to. And you knew why those laws existed, you know? ‘You’re under arrest for x, y, z, under section whatever of the something or other act 1990-something’. And some, some you knew were ridiculous and could never be enforced and so there was a kind of professional discretion as to what you prioritised or focused on. But with this, you’re getting people to move on and they look at you confused, like, ‘Why are you bothering me?’ And I think to myself, ‘Don’t ask me, mate. I don’t know’. Because I really **don’t** know! All I know is that if I don’t then the landlord in there will get arsey, the security lot in Tesco will come out and ask why I’m not*

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<sup>66</sup> Winlow and Hall (2012) discuss this in terms of the proliferation of ‘little others’ in the wake of the post-modernist death of the ‘Big Other’. As postmodernism displays an ‘incredulity toward metanarratives’, it makes belief in broader collective identities or values such as science, religion, political ideology, or philosophical principles of justice impossible. Consequently, we scramble around to find some source of authority that can act as the final symbolic adjudicator of our social conventions, customs, rules and traditions. This is why, despite the death of the big other, we live in a world full of rules and protocols. These are the series of ‘little others’, arbitrary situation-specific rule-making which attempt to replace the ‘big other’.

*dealing with it. Before you know it I've got some supervisor down me neck. All I do is say that they can't loiter here, and if they don't move I threaten to call the police and threaten a public order charge. But they can't be done for that, they're not breaking the law.*

*TR: So what are they breaking then?*

*Don: I don't know, really. But this is it right. You've got all this private space and because someone owns it, they can get people to supervise it, right. The Police are to serve the public and public spaces. So they can't really get involved unless there's an issue of criminal damage or trespassing or whatever. But when you kind of own an area, you can make up your own rules. Don't ask me who's making 'em or how they decide though.*

**March 2015.**

The urban bureaucracy and governance of privatised post-industrial urban non-places work in exactly this way. The security guards who move the young traceurs on are often not the crusaders of the moral panic, nor the self-interested defenders of public space. They are simply the spatially-bureaucratic custodians of the 'little other' (Winlow and Hall, 2012). More often than not, outside of vague and abstract references to 'you're not supposed to be here' or the broad church of 'health and safety' (itself a bureaucratic category) security guards could never give much explanation for why they had to move the traceurs on. It was often with a sympathetic—almost apologetic—shrug of the shoulders in which they either said (or implied) "it's not me, I'm afraid, it's just the rules" (Fisher, 2009: 49). The creator of these rules, these urban bureaucratic protocols, could never really be encountered because neoliberalism's disavowal of anthropomorphised top-down bureaucracy has removed or obscured any individual human figure, committee, or authority from this process. Rather the bureaucratic rules and regulations themselves were the highest figure of authority and were thus impervious to repeal or challenge. Here, Mark Fisher's (2009) analysis of bureaucracy and post-Fordism is informative enough to quote in full:

"We are all familiar with bureaucratic libido, with the enjoyment that certain officials derive from this position of disavowed responsibility ('it's not me, I'm

afraid, it's the regulations'). The frustration of dealing with bureaucrats often arises because they themselves can make no decisions; rather, they are permitted only to refer to decisions that have always-already been made (by the big Other)...

...As an example of this syndrome, let us turn once more to Further Education. At a meeting between Trade Union officials, college principals and Member of Parliament, the Learning and Skills Council (LSC), the quango at the heart of the FE funding labyrinth, came in for particular attack. Neither the teachers, nor the Principals, nor the MPs could determine how particular directives had generated themselves, since they are not there in government policy itself. The answer was that the LSC 'interpreted' the instructions issued by the Department for Education and Skills. These interpretations then achieve a strange autonomy peculiar to bureaucracy. On the one hand, bureaucratic procedures float freely, independent of any external authority; but that very autonomy means that they assume a heavy implacability, a resistance to any amendment or questioning" (Fisher, 2009: 49-50).

Is this not the exact scenario of de-responsibilisation and autonomous elevation of bureaucratic memos and mandates under which security guards, the front-lines of street-level urban bureaucracy, govern city space? They absolve themselves of responsibility, referring only to the 'rules' which have no ostensibly recognisable figure of authority. Or, perhaps, the security guards are not *absolving* themselves of responsibility but, as Fisher suggests, have no ability to exert any lasting responsibility and can only refer to the rules that have already been made by the little other. The elevation of the bureaucratic protocols of urban space to the level of 'final adjudicator' castrates the security guards of any lasting agency in governing urban space, leaving only the capacity to allow traceurs to train temporarily, moving them on at the first sign of authority. Rather than actually determining, qualitatively, the harm or legitimacy of particular actions within urban space based upon principles of morality, social deviance, or illegality, the work of the security guards was more about satisfying the desires of the situation-specific rules of the particular space they were supervising—themselves designed to serve the interests of those in their micro-jurisdictions of power.

### **Towards an *Amoral* Economy of Space?**

The 'exclusion' of parkour from 'social space' raises important questions about the nature of public life in contemporary cities. Indeed, perhaps 'exclusion' is the wrong

word to use, for it suggests that there is a real and actually-existing organic social space from which one can be excluded—a notion that many scholars interested in social exclusion and the urban have called into serious question (Atkinson, 2003; Augé, 1995; Raymen, 2015; Winlow and Hall, 2013).

This chapter has been at pains to stress that analyses of spatial exclusion pay more attention to the systemic political-economic roots of urban space in order to make sense of the prohibition of practices such as parkour. The overwhelming narrative within the parkour literature, and indeed the wider ‘revanchist’ literature which dominates various topics of spatial exclusion, is that there is a conscious moral crusade against particular social demographics of cultural groups which seek to drive them out of the white middle-class city. However, this chapter has argued that these arguments make mistakes when identifying causative forces, misidentifying symptoms (the actual patterns of inequality, exclusion and social degradation) as causes, rather than looking deeper to the real forces which underpin the city. On the contrary, this chapter has argued theoretically and displayed empirically that at the *systemic level* there is a distinct *absence* of morally-based rules in the late-capitalist city. Notions of justice, fairness, love or harm do not form the basis of spatial legitimacy. Rather, spatial legitimacy is determined more by political economy, the profit motive and what is best for the current or future accumulation of capital. This is true of mainstream consumer and leisure markets more broadly, as explored in the introduction to this thesis; and it is these markets which are embedded within and vital to the maintenance of post-crash cities. As Polanyi (1957) argued, as free-market capitalism transformed, the functioning of political economy became entirely detached from moral regulation. This is equally true of the spatial context. As the spatial context’s relationship to capital transformed, the rules which govern it also became entirely detached from moral regulation. This is not to say that capitalism is *immoral*. This thesis argues that capitalism is neither inherently moral nor immoral. Rather, capitalism is blind; amorally interested only in its own reproduction and perfectly willing to inflict harm upon individuals, groups or the environment in order to ensure its own growth. Equally, we have seen the market shift toward other forms of ‘green’ and ethical markets. However, as Smith and Raymen (2016: 14) write, “we are not witnessing the conscious awakening of an ethical heart of

capitalism. Capitalism morphs and changes, not because of any moral quality, but only that it may circumvent crises, obstacles and blockades in its path to growth”.

The evacuation of morality from the governance of social space has resulted in an air of confusion over what is ‘right’ and ‘wrong’, ‘deviant’ and ‘legitimate’ in urban spaces—particularly parkour. This confusion played out in the security guards’ narratives above in which the inherent competitive territoriality and *systemic spatial violence* of the late-capitalist city revealed itself. This often prompted an inconsistent and sympathetic governance of parkour, in which security guards allowed traceurs to train on the provisional condition that they wouldn’t turn up to certain spots at certain times and move on without fuss when asked. To draw upon the term of Marxist historian E.P. Thompson (1971), this set of relationships between security guards and traceurs could arguably be conceived of as a small ‘moral economy’ of space. As Wakeman (2015) has observed, moral economy hinges upon a normative-instrumental nexus in which moral economies are organised around what is considered ‘proper’ conduct in market exchanges according to normative values, but also more instrumental concerns among what is needed by a population as well. This notion of ‘moral economy’ and its violation formed the basis of his understandings of uprisings, riots and resistance by the poor. Therefore it might be tempting to discuss the relationships between security guards and traceurs within this understanding of ‘resistance’.

However, things are not quite so simple. In a society in which our collective values are so closely attached to liberal capitalism, it is the capacity for normative values to be shaped and manipulated by liberal capitalism which render these ideas around ‘moral economies of resistance’ to be quite problematic. Rather, parkour’s provisional inclusion *and* exclusion operate within (a)moral economies of space which speak to the heart of the paradox of parkour’s conformity and exclusion around which this thesis is based. Its inclusion is underpinned by the normative recognition of its conformity to consumer capitalism’s cultural values of identity, risk-taking and individualistic creativity and display; in addition to the more instrumental desire for occupational convenience by both the security guards and the traceurs. The hassle of moving people on and engaging in exchanges of confrontation were an annoyance that was gladly avoided by both groups. As Doug once put it, *“If giving them a little time means that they*

*don't give yer hassle when y'ask 'em to shove off, I'd gladly make that deal*". When it was more convenient to move the traceurs on due to more powerful sources of 'hassle'—such as bosses or clients—the security guards did not hesitate in asking the traceurs to 'shove off'. In contrast, parkour's morally baseless exclusion from urban space fits equally well into Thompson's normative-instrumental model of moral economies. In what Winlow and Hall (2013: 130) describe as an 'asocial atonal' society in which there is a disintegration of the social, individualistic and self-interested spatialities pervade as normative values. Simultaneously, as global capitalism's relationship to and dependence upon the city has changed, so has the *function and nature* of urban space, resulting in a *systemic spatial violence* in which there is a pragmatic instrumental reliance upon fragmented and hyper-regulated spaces which are sanitised of the social. Therefore, parkour's exclusion exists in a slightly different moral economy: an *amoral* economy of space.

The purpose of this chapter has been to exemplify the paradox of parkour within its spatial and prohibited context. The hyper-regulation and exclusionary governance of urban space is not driven by moral crusaders or a revanchist fear or hatred of young people. Rather, it is driven by its instrumental need for carefully crafted, sanitised and privately owned urban consumer spaces which seek achieve the spatial 'grail' of a 'semiotic disambiguation between place and function' (Hayward, 2004). This economic requirement for spatial prohibition of non-purposeful spatial practices brought the systemic spatial violence of the city—and thus the paradox of parkour—to the foreground in ways which confused security guards and destabilised their own occupational narratives. As a result, this chapter displays both theoretically and empirically the second half of its central argument outlined in the introduction. Despite parkour's cultural conformity, the 'rules' established from neoliberal political economy's 'right to the city' meant that such desires had to be redirected, prohibitively if necessary, into different spatial contexts.

# 9

## ***Conclusion***

This thesis has attempted to theorise and explain the paradox of parkour's conformity and exclusion. This is a paradox that has either been entirely unidentified by the existing academic literature, or ignored, downplayed and ill-theorised in an act of fetishistic disavowal of parkour's cultural conformity (Žižek, 2008). This is a feature of parkour that has been intellectually masked by a left-liberal sociology which has continuously espoused the doctrine of 'performative resistance'; swallowing and reproducing the individualised do-it-yourself politics of the 1960s counter-culture and failing to identify how 'politics' changed parallel to and in compliance with the rise of 'cultural capitalism' (Epstein, 1991; Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014). This thesis has gone to great lengths to point out that such a paradox does in fact exist, and to contextualise its emergence by tracing tectonic shifts in the global economy to explore how they have influenced leisure markets; politics; individual subjectivities and desires; attitudes to work and leisure; the built environment of our 'regenerated' urban centres and, of course, the traceurs themselves.

In order to open up *parallax views* on parkour and dispute the notion of parkour as 'resistance', large sections of this thesis have been dedicated to the discussion of motivation. Not only what the motivations were for the traceurs' engagement with parkour, but explaining and theorising where these motivations have come from, how they've been shaped and influenced by consumer ideology, global economic structures, and their wider lived experiences of late-capitalism. The return to motivation and *why* people engage in rule-breaking behaviour is something that ultra-realist criminology has argued to be a vital component for revitalising criminological theory (Hall et al, 2008; Hall and Winlow, 2015); moving beyond highly descriptive accounts rooted in symbolic interactionism which focus on discursive meaning over drives and motivations.

I found ample evidence to *observe* the paradox of parkour during our practice in the city. However, in order to understand these tensions and explain them, I found myself equally drawn to the analytical value of the traceurs' wider life-worlds. Deeming it necessary to engage in ethnography in the traditional sense (rather than merely participant observation), I lived in their neighbourhoods, went to birthday gatherings, met their families and girlfriends, hung out with them at their houses and got pints with them when they lost jobs, gained a job, or left 'regular' employment altogether. As we saw in chapter 5, I even lived with a couple of them for a period. All the while I listened to their frustrations, anxieties, and visions for the present and the future. This thesis is informed by this material just as much as it is informed by our time together hitting parkour spots and doing roof missions in the city.

As we saw in chapter 6, the motivation to engage in the 'labour' of parkour as work and leisure was closely connected to the cultural imperative for 'cool individualism' and identity. So often in the traceurs' narratives, this desire was contextualised in relation to the overwhelming precariousness and sense of anonymity that builds within the late-capitalist subject as they make the transition from adolescence to early adulthood. This was experienced through the drudgery, low-pay and 'drifting' forms of temporary, insecure and affective labour that is characteristic of neoliberal late-capitalism. The rise of consumerist individualism and the emphasis on youthful identity, outlined in broader historical context in chapter 3, clashed against the need and desire to begin these early transitions into the financial independence of adulthood. These were frustrations and uncertainties that often had nothing to do with parkour, but were more generalizable problems experienced by an entire generation, and indeed even the one before it (Smith, 2014). To read over many of the transcripts, I could have been speaking to any contemporary adult, whether it was Anthony Lloyd's call centre workers (Lloyd, 2012; 2013), Oliver Smith's committed consumers of the NTE (2014), or Hall et al's (2008) entrepreneurial criminals who occupy the North of England's post-industrial wastelands. With regards to the specific tensions around parkour's spectacle and attempts to access the Real, I could have equally been speaking to Kindynis' (2016) urban explorers. Therefore, while only the most sympathetic statistician would say that the data presented here is 'representative' of the global parkour community more generally, I would also be quick to make the argument it is not unrepresentative of the

experiences of a growing number of young adults (and traceurs) in the UK attempting to find passion, satisfaction and a sense of identity under late-capitalism's 'liquid' foundations. This is evidenced by similar findings and experiences across diverse samples and topics for ethnographic research (Miles et al, 1998; Raymen and Smith, 2016; Winlow and Hall, 2006).

These considerations of motivation are relatively absent from the existing literature on parkour. Where they are present, the motivations of 'resistance' or 'thrill-seeking' are simply asserted, assumed and empirically observed rather than theorised and explained (Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014), revealing domain assumptions about human nature and subjectivity that were dealt with in explicit depth in chapter four. As such, many ethnographies of parkour have maintained a disproportionate focus on the seductive allure of its practice in the city. The actual participants with whom these researchers trained are shadowy figures who are given little attention, broader biographical context, or really understood in any depth, doing little to give the reader a sense of who the actors in their studies actually were beyond being practitioners of parkour (Atkinson, 2009; Lamb, 2014; Brunner, 2011; Saville, 2008; Fuggle, 2008; Kidder, 2013; Wheaton, 2013). While fascinating and artfully-written ethnographies, they *describe* the emotional and aesthetic foreground of urban transgression more than they *explain* and theorise the core *motivations* for its practice. There was seemingly no need to look at their biographies, personal histories, or wider experience of life in late modernity. For these studies, there was a seemingly natural 'elective affinity' (Rojek, 1995) between deviance and leisure; a timeless desire to seek thrills, pleasure and excitement (Katz, 1988). This is a criticism that could be directed more broadly at the ethnographic research conducted on parkour, cultural lifestyle sports, 'edgework' and urban resistance (Ferrell, 1996; 2001; 2006; Garrett, 2013; Kidder, 2013; Lamb, 2014; Lyng, 1990).

For this thesis, a much more complex story loomed in the background, rooted in issues of neoliberal political-economy and its impact upon culture, subjectivity and urban space. A central claim of ultra-realism, drawing upon Bhaskar's (1997) critical realism, is that the empirical world exists suspended above a maelstrom of deeper forces, processes and structures which contribute to and influence our interaction with the

social. To fully understand the origins of transgression, we must uncover the deep-rooted human drives and actions that contribute to the reproduction and perpetuation of the dominant social order. It is for these reasons that it was necessary to 'set the stage' through a historical perspective and rethinking of leisure and subjectivity in chapters three and four. This is also the reason that the motivations for parkour were not studied in isolation from other forms of leisure and lifestyle consumption. In a diverse world in which pluralism and variety *appears* to pervade at the surface level of the empirical (Winlow, 2012), it has been the suggestion of this thesis that there are actually some commonalities between forms of leisure such as parkour, the NTE, white-water rafting or fighting at football matches that we can contextualise and understand within changes in political economy and socio-economic conditions.

This involved exploring the underlying energies of leisure through the work of Thorstein Veblen and conceptualising how these have been harnessed and intensified under different socio-economic conditions up to the contemporary context of consumer capitalism. Neoliberalism fundamentally altered the global economy and its associated social institutions and identities, becoming increasingly reliant upon a consumer economy that espoused individualism and freedom in the wake of modernity's crumbling structures. The magnitude of the socio-economic changes that have impacted the UK over the last four decades cannot be underestimated. Left-liberal sociologists who have paid attention to leisure have continuously made the mistake of assuming that these historical changes are progressive ones that enable resistance and autonomy (Jayne, 2006; Millington, 2011; Brown, 1994; Riley et al, 2013). Despite this rhetoric these changes have intensified rather than transcended the need for a coherent symbolic order which no longer exists, forcing the late-capitalist subject to seek security in the increasingly fluid, tenuous, and imaginary identities generated by consumerism's symbolic imagos. This is perfectly evident in chapter six, which outlines the wider lived experience of the traceurs. Specifically their anxieties around the transitions into adulthood and the looming cultural obsolescence associated with the precarity, anonymity and poor wages of insecure work in late-capitalism; the overwhelming sense that life was being lived more fully by others elsewhere (Winlow and Hall, 2012). This is part of consumer capitalism's unleashing of desire, cultivating the sense of *lack* and dissatisfaction that exists at the heart of the Lacanian subject. Under these conditions,

the commodified markets of parkour and cultural lifestyle sports arrived on their doorstep of their lives like a loan salesman. Not resolving the root of their problems but merely extending them while offering a temporary reprieve that could maintain what appeared most important and achievable—cultural relevance and identity. All that was required was that their life became their source of labour (Cederström and Fleming, 2012), both in terms of livelihood and leisure in ways which perpetuated the very economic system that was the original source of their frustrations. As we shall see in the epilogue, this has not always ended well for the traceurs.

Identity has formed a key theme of the preceding pages of this thesis, but it is not to say that the emotional and aesthetic foreground is unimportant to parkour's study or this thesis. On the contrary, chapter seven dealt with these issues in-depth. The moments of autoethnographic description of parkour's non-representational and tactile practice are arguably some of the most vivid aspects of this thesis. However, it would also be inaccurate to divorce these affective and non-representational experiences from the issues of symbolic identity formation and their relationship to capitalist structures. These embodied aspects of parkour's practice do not exist in a cultural, political or economic vacuum, and indeed it is the *tension* between these aspects of parkour and what I have termed the 'bastardisation of the Real' that is of crucial interest in this thesis. The traceurs hit the walls and rooftops of Newcastle upon Tyne and numerous other cities in search of authentic passion and embodied experience, driven by a desire to push beyond and distinguish themselves from what Huse described as the 'other tossers' who were the mindless homogeneous consumers that provided a negative symbolism against which they could elevate themselves. Often they found it, with parkour frequently being described as more real than real life, only for it to quickly slip through their fingers as they became caught within consumer capitalism's 'precorporating' trap. The will-to-represent in the individualism of late-capitalism is a force that should not be underestimated (Yar, 2012b), and nor should capitalism's ability to incorporate self-critique as a method of its own reproduction. In an artificial society of the spectacle, consumer capitalism is constantly convincing subjects to push beyond the dull and sanitised mundanity of everyday life in search of the Real. Thus, in an act of competitive cultural display, the traceurs attempts to visually reproduce the Real merely fuels consumerism's precorporation of it. Being a 'real' or 'proper' traceur

or freerunner became validated by the various symbolic signifiers of the Big Other. Signifiers such as the number of followers on social media; appearances at prominent parkour jams; subculturally famous gyms; or the global display of spectacular yet frequently staged images and videos. This is a tension that runs through parkour, reminiscent of Sontag's (1977) observation that the camera and search for the photogenic is displacing real experience. However, this tension is not limited to the camera and the visual production of parkour that was discussed in the chapter 5. Rather, it extends to the broader translation of affective, embodied and non-representational experience into the *symbolic* display, construction and consumption of cultural lifestyles and identities; effectively displacing the Real by attempting to represent the non-representational through the Imaginary symbols of consumer capitalism. We can see quite clearly how the desire for parkour's cool transgressive identities has been cultivated, feeding into social media platforms which are emblematic of a mode of capital accumulation which have fused production and consumption into the same act.

Moving toward the spatial, chapter eight rounds out the paradox of parkour by focusing upon its exclusion from the city's central and surrounding urban spaces, rooted in a similar historical analysis of how the function of space has changed for post-industrial cities such as Newcastle. However, this spatial perspective is not disconnected from but thoroughly intertwined with previous discussions about the evolution of political economy, consumerism and commodified leisure markets. Rather, parkour has been situated throughout the thesis within a wider exploration of 'deviant leisure' and harm in urban space, prompting important questions about the wider significance of this work and the questions it poses about some of the core harms in our society.

Despite arguments surrounding 'moral panic' or a consciously vindictive 'urban revanchism' (Atkinson, 2009; Atkinson and Young, 2008; Ugolotti, 2014; Wheaton, 2013), there is an overwhelming need to acknowledge that parkour's exclusion and the governance and prohibitions imposed within urban space are not underpinned by any moral or humanistic principles of harm, 'justice', or fairness. As the likes of Polanyi (1957) and Žižek (2008) have observed, a free-market economy is necessarily detached from any moral regulation, with the smooth functioning of our political and economic order being more important than any harm that it generates. This is evident from the

bite of austerity on the poor in order to save a neoliberal economy, the environmental harm and impending ecological catastrophes that stem from the global economy (Hall, 2015; Parenti, 2011). It is also true of urban space and its systemically exclusionary nature as a crucial vehicle for consumer activity and capital flows. Parkour's exclusion, contrasted against the normalisation and celebration of the night-time economy and gambling despite their myriad harms is proof alone; returning us to the arguments surrounding the necessity of moral relativism toward leisure in a consumer economy that dominates our 'regenerated' city centres.

Without over-estimating the scope of this thesis, some of these questions and concerns around leisure and urban space implicitly speak to the flaws that exist at the fundamental heart of our political ideology. Namely, consumer capitalism's close association with pluralised notions of the good, liberal individualism, and the right to pursue whatever life we see as best. However, this liberal and pluralised relativism has a paradoxical *universalism* (Winlow, 2012), which inevitably leads to problematic 'breaking points' in which its flaws and contradictions are revealed. In *The Idea of Evil*, Peter Dews has written:

"modern liberalism...often has a bad conscience about its own implicit universalism. It is reluctant to put its cards on the table, for fear of promoting some particular notion of the good. But there always comes a breaking point."  
(Dews, 2008: 3)

Arguably, the paradox of parkour, contextualised in relation to other forms of harmful and legitimised urban leisure, suggests that we are nearing such a breaking point in which the contradictions of a liberalised moral relativism, fuelled by its demand-side value to a consumer economy, becomes unavoidable. Harm has become legitimately embedded within our city centres through reified forms of commodified leisure which prolong and intensify the *objectless anxiety* that is cultivated by the insecurity of labour markets, consumer culture and late-capitalism more generally. Parkour's comparatively low levels of harm and pro-social potential amplify this seemingly nonsensical order of things; particularly as we see its most positive aspects being eviscerated from its practice through its relentless commodification (see epilogue below). The relationship between freedom and moral autonomy, as Dews (2008) questions, always has a

difficulty with immoral behaviours. While this seems obvious, it speaks to the stubborn horizons of capitalist realism that such arguments are received negatively within academic circles; instead confusingly viewed as a right-wing conservatism that inevitably results in totalitarianism (see Winlow et al, 2015 for broader discussion). Therefore, as suggested in the introduction, in speaking about the paradox of parkour this thesis hopes to have also spoken to some of these core harms and issues that face late modern Britain. Harms that pose difficult questions as to what forms of leisure we want to promote and reify, what kind of cities we want to build, what kind of politics we want and on what principles of social relations or morality? As capital attempts to extract value from every inch of urban space, our public commons are becoming more starkly characterised by exclusion, harm, individualism and prohibited movement that is set down existing fault lines of inequality.

This is a product of capitalism's never-ending need to dispose of over-accumulated surplus capital. There is a need for the political left to do more than be satisfied with symbolic gestures of transgressive 'resistance' (which this thesis has taken significant lengths to undermine). One of the most prominent moments of in urban leftist political history was what Henri Lefebvre described as *'The Irruption'* of May 1968. One of the most famous slogans of this brief anti-capitalist resistance was *'Sous les Plavés, la Plage!'* meaning 'under the cobblestones, the beach'. This was a literal slogan, as students and protestors tore up cobblestones from the street to throw at oncoming police, finding the sand underneath. More symbolically, it came to signify the possibility of escaping from a regimented life of the industrial cobblestones and find freedom from the oppressive social stratification of society in the freedom of the beach. However, are our lives any more 'free' and less regimented? In a world in which there is a cultural imperative for 'cool' consumer-oriented identities, beneath the surface-level diversity there is an underlying homogeneity and an 'unfreedom' of leisure (Rojek, 2010). Are our cities any less dictated by the forces of capital flows and the hyper-regulation of public space as it uses the physical environment to build, regenerate and dispose of surplus capital?

In some ways, parkour achieves Lefebvre's much-celebrated notion of 'heterotopia'—the creation of liminal social space and alternative spatial relations in which 'something different' is possible (Lefebvre, 1970). However, as Harvey (2012) observes, what is

often forgotten is how Lefebvre's utopian imagining of heterotopic space crashes against his understand of capitalist reality. Lefebvre kept heterotopia in tension with isotopy—the 'concept city' of capitalism's rationalised and pseudo-regimented spatial order. Lefebvre writes, "The isotopy heterotopy difference can only be understood dynamically...Anomic groups construct heterotopic spaces, which are eventually reclaimed by the dominant praxis" (Lefebvre, 1970). Arguably, beneath the veneer of the beach remain the cobblestones of capitalist political-economy's hold over the right to the city. In some spaces, this can be taken quite literally, as the artificial maintenance of a luxurious atmosphere of pleasure and paradise is introduced to the city, with fake sand beaches and palm trees introduced into an increasingly exclusive urban context (Raymen, 2016).

Parkour's 'subculturalisation' would suggest that this isotopy-heterotopy tension is still playing out in favour of capitalist isotopy; a product of parkour and freerunning's precorporation by the logic and values of identity-oriented consumer capitalism. Parkour is not excluded because it 'deviates' from social values. The contemporary field of parkour wholeheartedly embraces and is pre-emptively shaped by the values of consumer capitalism; but does so in a way that is transgressive of the bureaucratic rules of a fragmented and privatised urban space. This is why we have seen the rise in fee-paying parkour gyms and its formalised 'sportification' (Wheaton, 2013). Parkour is a new urban lifestyle sport that with highly lucrative possibilities that are only in their infancy. As we have identified, parkour is already being utilised by advertising, while neoliberal competitiveness is seeping into its practice with myriad competitions springing up globally. More advanced possibilities involve the recent discussions between leaders of the parkour world and the International Olympic Committee (IOC); with parkour potentially following the route of BMX into the summer Olympic Games (NRP, 2014). This relentless harnessing of parkour's energy and its redirection into appropriate spatial contexts has exclusionary potential which would run contrary to its roots in principles of inclusivity and non-competitiveness. Arguably this is already well under-way, too far gone to be reversed without a more politically-conscious and pro-social off-shoot. As it stands parkour is becoming increasingly oriented around indoor gyms, television shows and competitions. Rather than democratising space, these trends are essentially exclusionary at their root, organised around systematic exclusion of

those who are not competent enough, do not have memberships to particular gyms or the money to purchase them; once again orienting parkour down existing fault lines of inequality and intensifying the pecuniary emulation that underpins leisure in capitalist societies as the best gyms, coaches and parkour teams begin to price those from lower socio-economic backgrounds out of the developing market place.

## **Epilogue**

We are already beginning to see the effects of the aforementioned redirection of parkour's energy and desire into specific market-sanctioned spatial contexts, particularly among the NEPK community. One of the downsides of the PhD process is that the finished product is, more often than not, at least a year removed from one's fieldwork. However, having kept in touch with many of my participants since leaving the field and moving to a new city, I have stayed abreast of what's been happening in the parkour scene, specifically in Newcastle and the surrounding areas. From what has happened since, the arguments I have made throughout this thesis appear to have been quite prophetic. Therefore, as this piece of work draws to a close, it is useful to contextualise the arguments made within this thesis by looking at the state of the NEPK community and the fortunes of the traceurs, one year on. Times appear to be changing for the Newcastle parkour scene and the community that featured in these pages. Since leaving the field, I've checked back in with several of my participants and kept track of the NEPK Facebook page. Sadly, it appears that the NEPK 'community' that remains is becoming increasingly less recognisable from the one that I left. The traceurs now meet up to train in the city far less often than during my fieldwork, and for reasons which relate to several chapters and themes raised during this thesis.

In late 2014 making a day-trip to train just down the road in Durham, one of my participants, 'Gaz' and his fellow traceurs were (wrongly) accused of 'freerunning' on the Cathedral. The traceurs were threatened by local police with charges of criminal damage and ASBOs, and the story made it into local and regional newspapers and broadcasting news (Northern Echo, 2014). This is entirely unsurprising considering the Cathedral's status as a World Heritage Site, easily the most prominent tourist attraction in Durham's limited consumer economy, and one of the foremost attractions for visitors

in the North East<sup>67</sup>. This is an example of what was discussed in chapters 7 and 8 around the sanitisation and semiotic disambiguation between place and function. A few short months after this incident, *Infinite Air* announced that it would be opening just outside the city as the UK's largest multi-purpose trampoline, parkour and freerunning centre. This is a fee-paying, market-sanctioned indoor centre which has been promoted by the local council, police and, of course, the NEPK community. This is now one of the primary locations in which the traceurs train—willing to travel from Newcastle to Durham to use its facilities and 'check-in' via Facebook rather than train in the city. The vast majority of videos posted by the traceurs on Facebook are now shot at Infinite Air and other existing indoor gyms such as Mill Lane and Temple Park. Dee, a participant who periodically comes back from the Army and is more of a purposeful and technical traceur, recently posted complaining that nobody 'trains out' anymore, moaning about the decline of the community and thus, his ever-diminishing ties to his hometown.

On the Facebook page, requests to go training in the city frequently go unanswered, or are responded to by suggestions of 'indoor' sessions. Increasingly among my own participants, we are seeing parkour's movement, spontaneity and risk-taking essence corralled into legitimised, risk-managed and predictable-yet-spectacular commodified spatial environments. Consequently, as the exploration and connection to the city dwindles, the narcissism that underpins the will-to-represent parkour's visual production through social media becomes a more central feature of its practice. The trampoline parks and indoor gyms are functional non-places rather than the 'alive' and ever-changing urban landscapes of the parkour city explored by the traceurs in chapter 7.

Nevertheless, in terms of business these changes have been quite beneficial to the likes of Chez and TK. With the introduction of Infinite Air, there has been a spike of interest in parkour around County Durham and Newcastle. Their company is thriving and to quote Chez, 'things have never been better'. Schools have become more interested in Chez and TK's services, hiring out Infinite Air, Mill Lane or other facilities for some regulated parkour practice. Unlike the traceurs in this study, the 'new breed' of traceur or freerunner is being inducted into the cultural lifestyle sport through the gym rather

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<sup>67</sup> If memory serves correctly, it was also a pretty slow news week.

than the city. While TK and Chez are pleased about this increased interest, it does have a downside. In the gym the spectacular dominates, and Chez and TK both insist that novice traceurs are not learning the essential skills and community principles necessary to practice safely and effectively in the city. Moreover, when they do attempt to practice parkour in the city, their exclusion comes with greater shock, frustration and misunderstanding. The 'new breed', according to Tone, who often helps out Chez and TK with coaching, "haven't had to learn what we did". They have not learned the rhythms of the city from their older predecessors. They have not had the opportunity to watch how older heads negotiate spatial compromise with security guards, how they handle the police or manage their community image. These are what the traceurs referred to as a parkour version of 'street smarts'; a situated and experiential knowledge of how the city works at street-level. The 'new breed's' inability to navigate the city in the absence of this situated knowledge is experienced as a barrier and source of significant frustration which, quite understandably, sends them back into the gym in their search for fun. Quite clearly, the re-direction of parkour's energies into legitimised spatial contexts is becoming increasingly successful as its practice creeps further into the mainstream.

Things have changed in other ways for Chez, TK, and others who have attempted to make the jump into parkour as a profession. Those scattered few who remain committed to training as a community in the city often find themselves training alone. Most of the other traceurs are less interested, while the likes of Chez, TK, ZPK and Sonic often can't because they have to 'save themselves' for coaching sessions, exhibitions and performances coming up a few days later. Chez and ZPK confess that they are quickly burning out, admitting that their bodies are over-worked and poorly cared for as their emergent position does not afford them the necessary physical care required by professional athletes. Chez's knees are entirely shot, while Sonic experiences a nasty intermittent case of tendinitis. ZPK has chronic shoulder and hand issues which, just prior to this thesis being submitted, required him to call it quits. Unable to bring himself to return to the world of 'regular' work, ZPK has taken out a second loan and escaped to Thailand for an indeterminate amount of time. All of this means that the 'pros' can't just train 'for fun' anymore, even when they want to. As the exchange of money and physical labour has been put at the heart of their parkour careers, it has extracted the 'fun' and 'leisurely' element from their parkour lives. While the parkour body is supposed to be

free and unbounded by constraints, as capitalism has commodified parkour it has also commodified and taken control of the body of the traceur, regimenting it as with any other worker under late-capitalism. Thus, as work takes precedence and the community dwindles, so does the 'social' aspect which makes it a positive force for these young people and which Mould (2016) maintains to be such a fundamental and politicised aspect of its practice. Moreover, parkour's free practice in city space also diminishes. As Sonic told me, "I can't remember the last time I went out to train".

Vase and Franny's clothing line fell flat amidst a plethora of more established competition and they finally gave up approximately 6 months after I left the field. Franny has since drifted away from the parkour community, albeit not entirely, having lost sight of 'the point' of still dedicating time and energy to its practice if it doesn't 'lead to anything'. This acts as further confirmation to other criminologists' assertions around the instrumentality of leisure and friendships under present conditions (Smith, 2014; Winlow and Hall, 2006; 2009). He has switched into an alternative world of 'lifestyle exercise', starting up an independent personal training company that caters to young men who aren't interested in 'getting hench' and 'being meatheads' but want to, in his words, "get ripped, lean and muscular while still being able to get into a normal shirt and skinny jeans". It appears that despite failure, the entrepreneurial spirit of marketing to alternative masculinities and fashion hasn't faded for Franny. Vase, on the other hand, very abruptly told me that he's quit parkour altogether. He's back at the call centre and didn't seem keen to talk. The others haven't heard much from him either. 'Huse, Magic, Cal, Lee and Ross are now seen only intermittently. They were drawn into training through the organisation of older, more committed traceurs such as Sonic, TK, EJ, Dee and ZPK. Without their organising drive, their commitment to the community has faded. Yamakoto, who was always very silent, is apparently still seen to be training out and about in some of the old spots, although he now trains alone. Consequently, the community I left only a year ago now appears more fragmented and scattered than ever.

At this late juncture, I feel obligated to defend what may be considered an overly pessimistic view of life, leisure and political 'resistance' under post-industrial late-capitalism, or indeed of parkour and its practitioners themselves. This thesis has endeavoured to contribute to existing academic literature that supports the contention

that much of crime, deviance and low-level transgression *conforms* to the values and subjectivities of consumer capitalism (Downes, 1966; Hall et al, 2008; Hayward and Schuilenberg, 2014; Miles, 2015; Raymen and Smith, 2016). This has been spurred on by the global economy's systemic evisceration of stable forms of identity from much of social life. Allegedly liberating the oppressed subject from these shackles, in reality it has only created the cultural and socio-economic conditions which have intensified the need for them, allowing the pluralistic identities of lifestyle and consumerism to swoop in as the hero who provides a sliver of temporary relational security.

This has been largely ignored by a liberal social science that, Hall and Winlow (2007: 83) argue "followed the prevailing trend in radical liberal philosophy and decided it was no longer hip to posit the capitalist economy and its relations as the bedrock of social life". For decades, forms of transgressive urban leisure have been posited as keeping a politicised spirit alive, holding the system to account, and claiming back some vague and ill-defined notion of the 'right to the city' that is divorced from its original context (Ferrell, 1996; 2001; Millington, 2011; Garrett, 2013). But for all this resistance, where are we? Our public spaces are dwindling as capital continues to seek out urban nooks and crannies that have still escaped its colonisation. Even where one might argue that the traceur is temporarily 'subverting' capitalism's dominance over space, this form of 'politics' does not amount to any significant change. As we saw in chapter 8, the demands of capital always win out, and do so with limited protest and often compliance from the traceurs. This is the horizon of politicised action in late-capitalism. It is a politics without politics, an empty gesture in which, as Echolls (1994) has noted, the 'political lifestyle' or veneer of politicisation is the goal in itself; making it highly susceptible to commodification. This is the concrete and obdurate reality of parkour, lifestyle sports and our post-industrial cities. Recently in London, the notion of what constitutes 'affordable' housing for a one-bedroom flat has spiralled to £595,000 (ITV News, 2016). In relation to parkour, popular and famous spots are disappearing around the country. The Discovery spot in Newcastle has been completely destroyed, London traceurs no longer have the famous 'Vauxhall Walls' (Parkour Generations, 2015), and freerunners in Liverpool are being systemically excluded from popular parkour spots. No doubt, the community is disappointed. However in Newcastle at least, it does not appear that the traceurs are finding new spots in the constant ebb and flow of urban

development. ZPK once described parkour as the little Mole in the Arcade game that pops up and gets whacked by the mallet, only to pop up in a new place. For this reason, he claimed, parkour could never be controlled or excluded from urban space. It would always pop up somewhere new. However, it appears that the traceurs are no longer popping up out of their little holes. They've popped up in the fee-paying gyms, parkour classes and television shows, and there's no sign of a mallet. Quite paradoxically, while the 'urban' sport of parkour has grown and is ostensibly more popular than ever before, according to several of my participants it is also more conspicuously absent from the urban than it was previously. Therefore, at the surface level of appearances, the reasons for the breakdown of the NEPK community above are diverse, owing to the various paths the traceurs have taken and forces beyond their control. However, they hold a commonality in that they are all connected to both the *successes and failures* of parkour's commodification. Therefore, it appears that the central argument at the heart of this thesis appears to be coming true. As the desire and energy for parkour as a form of lifestyle identity continues to be cultivated by consumer capitalism, it is simultaneously being harnessed and directed into market-sanctioned spatial contexts.

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