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Parkour as Acrobatics
An existential phenomenological study of movement in parkour

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to pursue a novel understanding of parkour. Through an existential phenomenological analysis based on the phenomenology of embodiment and spatiality found in Merleau-Ponty and drawing on Sloterdijk's philosophical account of acrobatics, we will examine the bodily experience of practitioners in parkour and analyse their process of practising and performing tricks as an acrobatic movement phenomenon. The practitioners use three central terms to describe this process: challenge, break and clean. We use these terms to frame the analysis of how the practitioners are bodily related to what is not yet possible (challenge), how they repeat towards making new tricks possible (break) and how they perfect their bodily experience of moving (clean). Parkour as acrobatics describes the circular and vertical process of revising and refining one's bodily relation to the world, through which practitioners are continuously attracted to new challenging moves and carve out new possible movements for themselves and others.

Keywords: parkour, acrobatics, phenomenology, motor intentionality, embodiment

Introduction

In parkour we see human beings perform a great variety of movements and tricks such as swinging, jumping, balancing, running and vaulting to pass over, under or through all kinds of obstacles. Parkour as a movement phenomenon has its origins in the French suburbs where it evolved as a subculture in the 1900s. Since the turn of the century parkour has evolved on a worldwide scale and is today practiced in various forms, contexts and cultural variations. It can take place both in self-organised and institutionalised settings (Larsen, 2015). The literature on parkour often distinguishes between 'original' parkour, rooted in the French military training system Methode Naturelle and guided by values of functionality and utility, and a more expressive version, also sometimes referred to as 'freerunning', where aesthetic values and spectacular performances are the mainstay (Ameel and Tani,

2011, p. 1, Angel, 2011, pp. 37-38, Atkinson, 2009, p. 173-174, Brunner, 2011, p. 144, Gilchrist and Wheaton, 2011, p. 144, O'Loughlin, 2012, pp. 193-194). The latter has in some cases developed into commercial uses of parkour and competitive parkour events such as Barclaycard Free-Running World Championship and Red Bulls Art of Motions, which have been criticised for corrupting the core values of the original version (Angel, 2011, pp. 199-204; O'Loughlin, 2012, p. 193-194).

In this paper we will focus on parkour in a self-organised setting and propose that an acrobatic understanding of parkour can help describe and promote an understanding of central aspects of the practitioners' experience. This is a new approach to analysing parkour. To show the relevance of this approach in relation to existing literature we will begin with a brief review of two dominant positions.

On one hand, academic interpretations of parkour have described it as a discoursive phenomenon related to *social and cultural critique*, where practitioners with their transversal movements corrupt the original uses of spatial structures and architecture in urban spaces (Archer, 2010, Bavinton, 2007, Daskalaki *et al.*, 2008, Fuggle, 2008, Geyh, 2006, Gus, 2011, Marshall, 2010, Mould, 2009, Mörtenböck, 2005, Ortuzar, 2009, Thomson, 2008). The philosophical thoughts of Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau and Deleuze & Guattari are popular theoretical frameworks for understanding parkour in this perspective. Ortuzar, for example, uses de Certeau's (1984) identification of walking in the city as a rhetoric form, where walking becomes a creative act of choosing or refusing the paths given by the text of the city (Ortuzar, 2009, p. 64). She argues that practitioners in parkour refuse the given paths and engage in a rather extreme version of creative reading, with divergent movements and routes and a constant editing of the urban space. In line with this Geyh (2006, p. 7) and Mould (2009, p. 742) both draw on Deleuze and Guattari's (2009) theorisation of capitalistic, grid-like urban space to describe how the practitioners reappropriate the urban environment from a striated space to a more fluid smooth space. What is prevalent across these analyses is that parkour is interpreted on a symbolic and discursive level. It concerns the body and movement as representation, for example as a form of critical revealing of and comment on the capitalistic and social constitution of urban space. Other researchers have paid more attention to the practitioners' own understanding and interpretation of their practice (Ameel and Tani, 2011, Angel, 2011, Atkinson, 2009, Atkinson, 2013, Clegg and Butryn, 2012, Kidder 2012, O'Grady, 2012, Saville, 2008). Atkinson has, for example, analysed a small gathering of free running practitioners from Toronto, who understand their practice as a way to highlight the constraining social-political dimension of the urban space, as well as the instrumentality

of competitive sport, to bring forth instead an underlying aesthetic-spiritual reality of human being (Atkinson, 2009, pp. 170-178, Atkinson, 2013, p. 367). He proposes that parkour is a 'post-sport', understood as a physical culture of poetic athleticism that subverts modernist ideologies and practices outright, and values human spiritual, physical and emotional development. He also interprets parkour through Schopenhauer's understanding of ascetic lifestyle and Heidegger's romantic understanding of poiesis, as an artistic, aesthetic, emotional and public method of revealing different human truths and values in the pursuit of authentic being or 'dasein' (Atkinson, 2009, Atkinson, 2013). Thus understood, parkour is an ascetic and aesthetic form of self-exploration in opposition to modern society and sport, where practitioners use their ascetic practice as a way of getting rid of external and socially learned desires to accumulate social power and material goods (Atkinson, 2009, p. 189).

On the other hand, researchers have also argued for understanding parkour as a *playful practice* (Ameel and Tani, 2011, Angel, 2011, Bavinton, 2007, Brunner, 2011, Clegg and Butryn, 2012, O'Grady, 2012). In these analyses parkour is analysed as a certain playful way of interacting with objects, which is meaningful in itself. Angel (2011, p. 177) describes how parkour is to be understood as play incorporated into the fabric of everyday life. In several studies the concept of 'flow', which originates in the psychological studies of Csikszentmihalyi (1990) and describes a state of optimal experience and absorption in one's activity, has been influential in descriptions of the playful aspects of parkour (Angel, 2011, Atkinson, 2009, Clegg and Butryn, 2012, Saville, 2008). In their phenomenological study Clegg and Butryn (2012) have related this to other phenomena in parkour, such as momentum and flight, and they argue that parkour can provide an open space for innovation and exploration, which they relate to a feeling of play. Ameel and Tani (2011, p. 7) describe parkour as playful curiosity and a child-like attitude to one's environment and Saville (2008) has argued that the playful movements in parkour develop a 'parkour body'. The core movements and techniques become an embodied knowledge that in creative and imaginary ways produces new possibilities when encountering spatial forms and textures. In line with this scholars have emphasised that parkour presupposes and develops a cognitive shift or change in perception, which has been described as 'parkour vision' and 'parkour eyes' (Ameel and Tani, 2011, Angel, 2011, Atkinson, 2009, Bavinton, 2007, Brunner, 2011, Chow, 2010, Clegg and Butryn, 2012, Fuggle, 2008, Gus, 2011, Kidder 2012, O'Grady, 2012). The 'parkour vision' and 'parkour eyes' describe how the practitioners develop a

certain perception where material objects in their surroundings are bound together by routes of movements that are invisible for the non-skilled.

Though far from exhaustive, this brief review can illustrate an apparent tendency in the literature to analyse parkour as a discursive and/or playful practice. In the following we will outline an alternative and supplementary approach through an account of acrobatics informed by existential phenomenology, with a special focus on embodiment and spatiality. After describing the theoretical background for approach, we will present an ethnographic field study of practitioners in a self-organised parkour environment. This theoretical and empirical work will be brought together in our subsequent analysis, which will seek to enlighten our understanding of the practitioners' experience by analysing it as acrobatics, with a focus on their ways of practising and performing tricks. We will discuss possible implications of an acrobatic understanding of parkour towards the end of the paper.

Theoretical approach

In general terms a phenomenological approach involves describing the general structures of subjective experience. When one goes beyond this point of general agreement, however, there is an ongoing debate how phenomenology should be understood within academic disciplines e.g. philosophy, sociology, cultural studies, qualitative studies and psychology. The present study will seek an existential phenomenological approach (see Aggerholm, 2015b, pp. 9-26 for a clarification of this), where we will combine phenomenology understood as a philosophical analysis and a qualitative method. To account for the general structures of subjective experience we will draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty´s (2012) existential phenomenology of embodiment and spatiality, and Peter Sloterdijk's (2013) analyses of verticality and acrobatic existence.

Embodiment and spatiality

The theoretical approach can be introduced by an important and influential distinction that Merleau-Ponty (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 100 ff.) drew between *spatiality of position* and *spatiality of situation*. The former indicates an external and objective spatiality, the experience of which can be described as either spatial sensations in objective space (empiricism) or positional consciousness of location in a space of representation (intellectualism). The phenomenological argument of Merleau-

Ponty is that prior to these ways of objectifying the experience of space, it is lived rather than known; we are pre-objectively situated through our lived body in a *spatiality of situation*.

Central to understanding this latter spatiality is the notion of *body schema*. Against physiological and psychological understandings of this, Merleau-Ponty argues that it must be understood as a pre-reflective and indivisible possession and knowledge of the positions of one's limbs as well as one's body in the world. The experience of space is, thus, 'already sketched out in the structure of my body, it is my body's inseparable correlate.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 143) This lived and embodied relation to the world implies that the body *inhabits* space and exists towards tasks in the world: 'my body is in and toward the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 103).

To say that the body inhabits space points to the central role of bodily *habits* in Merleau-Ponty's account of embodiment and spatiality. Between understandings of habit as a form of knowledge (c.f. intellectualism) and an automatic reflex (c.f. behaviourism) he argues for a phenomenological understanding of habit as 'a knowledge in our hands, which is only given through a bodily effort and cannot be translated by an objective designation.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 145). This is of course not to say that subjects cannot have explicit aims and goals. But with reference to the classic figure-background structure of spatial perception, Merleau-Ponty argues that such aims are figures that can only be conceived and exist against a background, which he also describes as a horizon, a zone of corporeality and an original signification, that colours and makes possible the experience of points and figures (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. 103-105).

Learning is in this perspective understood as a reworking and renewal of the body schema, whereby refined bodily habits can grow. This can occur in many ways, for example by incorporating new instruments, learning new techniques or seeking to perform new tricks. In each case it involves a grasping of a signification and, as Merleau-Ponty stressed, this is a 'motor grasping of a motor signification.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 144)

Motor intentionality: concrete and abstract movement

The spatiality of situation is important for understanding how practitioners in parkour are bodily situated and oriented in their environment. It is a central phenomenological insight that consciousness is always consciousness *of* something; it is directed and thus intentional. Merleau-Ponty drew on this to describe a particular embodied understanding of motricity as an 'original intentionality', which he

analysed through the notion of *motor intentionality*. In relation to this bodily directedness he stressed the importance of acknowledging that there are '*several ways for the body to be a body, and several ways for consciousness to be consciousness*.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 125, his emphasis) This can, he argued, only be comprehended by existential analysis. Through this he analysed two fundamental movement phenomena: *concrete movement* and *abstract movement*. This is an analytical distinction that describes general ways of experiencing and expressing motor meaning, which can be illustrated through the existential difference between the acts of grasping and pointing. In the first case the background of the movement is the actual, certain and given world. In the latter case the background is a projection of a free space of human possibilities. Concrete movement is centripetal and related to real objects in the world. Abstract movement is centrifugal and related to imagined or virtual objects. Due to the motor intentionality we can be bodily situated in and directed at both the actual and virtual aspects of movement. Thus, the projection involved in abstract movement is not detached from our corporeal existence. It is enacted as a kinetic or motor projection, rendering the body 'a natural power of expression.' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 187. See also Aggerholm, 2013, Aggerholm, 2015b, pp. 120-145 for analyses of abstract movement in sport)

These general structures of human embodiment and spatiality can be interpreted to comprise the fundamental dimensions of experience in existing studies of bodily experiences in parkour, resembling both the 'parkour body' (Saville, 2008) and the 'parkour vision' (Clegg and Butryn, 2012), which Larsen (2015) has used to describe ways of moving in parkour as a playful directedness towards one's surroundings. Based on our study (presented below) we will, however, argue that they do not exhaust the ways that practitioners in parkour relate in bodily ways to their surroundings. In what follows we will therefore seek to extend Merleau-Ponty's existential analyses by means of Sloterdijk's philosophical treatise on practising life (das übende Leben). This can contribute a vertical dimension that is congruent with, but at the same time adds to Merleau-Ponty's account of bodily existence and spatiality.

The vertical movement: acrobatics

Central to Sloterdijk's analysis is the basic claim that humans are inescapably subjected to a *vertical tension* in all historical periods and all cultural areas (Sloterdijk, 2013, pp. 12-13). In religious cultures the sacred is for example considered more attractive than the profane, and in athletic cultures

excellence is more attractive than mediocrity. The elementary vertical tension between up and down has been analysed as a most basic aspect of human comportment, expressed by the way human beings strive for an 'upright posture' (Straus, 1952). The experience of verticality has also been interpreted as a transcendent aspect of existence related to religious experience (Steinbock, 2009). Encompassing these and many other dimensions of upwards striving, Sloterdijk analyses verticality as a fundamental existential condition. But importantly, he analyses it as a de-spiritualised and somatic phenomenon through the ancient concept of *askesis*. Sloterdijk's overall ambition is to show how religious verticality is only one amongst other ways of practising. This follows and draws heavily on Nietzsche's (1999, 2001) aesthetic and artistic account of heightening and strengthening (see also Aggerholm, 2015a). A central part of Nietzsche's account involved an ambition to remove the ideal of asceticism from the moral and religious aim of denial, renunciation and obligation, represented by for example Schopenhauer's account mentioned earlier, which Atkinson's (2009) analysis draws from. In contrast to this, Nietzsche described how 'I also want to make ascetics natural again: in place of the aim of denial, the aim of strengthening; a gymnastics of the will ... an experiment with adventures and arbitrary dangers' (Nietzsche 1967 483). This ambition is taken up by Sloterdijk, as he points to the original meaning of *askesis*, which was exercise, practice and training (see also Aggerholm, 2016). It is on this basis that he argues for a de-spiritualisation and re-somatisation of *askesis*, through which he analyses the practising life (das übende Leben). This involves a bodily verticality that transcends the bodily relation to the actual (grasping) and possible (pointing), as it is related to improvement, excellence, completion and perfection. It implies a new understanding of spatial dimensions:

> For the pedagogical, athletic, acrobatic, artistic, and ultimately any symbolic or 'culturally' mediated interpretation of the words 'above' and 'over' obviously addresses a second spatial meaning overlying the primary orientations in the physical or geographical space. (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 113)

In relation to Merleau-Ponty's account of spatiality this can be interpreted as a vertical spatial meaning related to the spatiality of situation. In Sloterdijk's account orientation in vertical space can both be centripetal and centrifugal. That is, the vertical movement can involve both an experience of admiring and being attracted to, for example, the tricks of others, which can be experienced as being drawn upwards (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 247), and an experience of effort and resistance, which can be experienced as defying obstacles in a movement 'nonetheless' (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 46). In either case it

is a bodily grasping of motor significance, and is in that sense in accordance with Merleau-Ponty's account of motor learning. But it adds an element of verticality to describe an elementary aspect of bodily existence, which can be interpreted as a vertical dimension of motor intentionality (for an extended analysis of this, see Aggerholm, 2015b, pp. 95-96).

It is in relation to this vertical dimension of embodiment and spatiality that Sloterdijk analyses *acrobatic existence*. Again, this draws on Nietzsche's aesthetic and artistic account of heightening (see also Aggerholm, 2015a) and the figure of the acrobat incarnates both the artistic and naturalistic aims of Nietzsche; it is the artistic 'overman' (Übermensch) who, like the tightrope walker in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, walks on a line above the heads of the crowd (Nietzsche, 2006). In Sloterdijk's analysis this is an existential condition and, as he puts it, 'whoever looks for humans will find ascetics, and whoever observes ascetics will discover acrobats.' (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 62) The analysis of the vertical dimension of existence thus leads over an understanding of de-spirtualised ascetics to the discovery of human beings as acrobats, situated in relation to attractive forces acting from above. Human beings are in this light best understood as an 'upward tending animal' (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 13), or as he also presents this claim: we are 'condemned to perform tricks' (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 61). This positing of a vertical dimension of developing and improving tricks is reinforced by the etymological roots of 'acrobatics': 'The word 'acrobatics' refers to the Greek term for walking on tiptoe (from akros, 'high, uppermost' and baínein, 'to go, walk').' (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 125). Hence, acrobatics literally describes a class of people who walks in the height. Acrobatics is thus a movement phenomenon that represents, and the acrobat is a figure that incarnates, the vertical tension of existence.

This existential dimension of vertical movement can, we will argue, fruitfully complement and add to the existential analysis of movement in Merleau-Ponty, and it is by analysing this dimension of embodiment as it is expressed by practitioners in parkour that we will seek a refined understanding of their bodily experience of performing tricks.

Methodology

Research design

The second author collected the empirical data for the analysis during a period of four years (2011-2015) as part of her Ph.D. project. Based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and understanding of

learning as 'motor grasping of a motor signification'(Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 144) and inspired by a growing field of sensory ethnography (Pink, 2007, Sparkes, 2009, Sparkes and Smith, 2012), as well as various phenomenological studies focusing on the lived bodily and sensory experiences in different sports (Allen-Collinson and Hockey, 2011, Downey, 2008, Hockey and Allen-Collinson, 2007, Wacquant, 2004), she participated in the daily practice of parkour practitioners with a focus on the self-organised bodily practice and the lived experiences. The second author has former experiences with parkour, which opened up for a unique practical engagement and for combining participant observations and interviews to obtain first-person accounts of the lived experience (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 102, Thorpe, 2012). The aim of the participant observations and following interviews was to describe and understand the bodily practice of parkour. Unstructured and explorative participant observations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 2, Kristiansen and Krogstrup, 1999, p. 47) were used to identify and grasp the lived experience and the concrete movements and meanings that constitute the practice.

Participants

In parkour the practitioners are constantly moving in different places. Because of that, the participant observations were organised by following practitioners in their movements in and between different places. These tours were arranged with help from four experienced practitioners working as gatekeepers to their training peers and group trainings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007, p. 49). The gatekeepers were selected by their ability to inform the analysis with in-depth and detailed knowledge about their practice. They were also selected by their willingness and ability to engage in on-going contact and dialog about the research and participate in following interviews. Further inclusion criteria were: 1) *Expertise in parkour*, which was defined as mastery of the core movements and fundamental techniques in parkour and ability to communicate and reflect upon these. 2) *Active participation in the community of parkour in Denmark*, which was regarded as an important aspect of the practice of parkour. 3) *Affiliation with different parkour groups with different ways of training and of understanding parkour and its core values.* The last inclusion criterion was important in order for the analysis to reveal general aspects of the bodily practice across the different fractions in parkour. In total 15 Danish practitioners aged 19 to 30, all male, were included in the study. The exclusion of female

practitioners was not intended, but a consequence of the four gatekeepers being all male and training in groups with males only. All participants were offered anonymity, but all declined. They are therefore presented with their real names.

Data collection

To be able to grasp the lived experience of practitioners, as well as the concrete movements and meanings that constitutes the practice, the second author's bodily engagement was vital. But it was also a challenge in relation to complying with the methodological principle of the *phenomenological reduction,* which describes an attempt to suspend or bracket our ordinary and common sense conceptions of reality (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 22, Aggerholm, 2015b, p. 9-18). The phenomenological reduction is, in Merleau-Ponty's (2012, p. xxiv-xxviii) existential account of it, an attempt to reflect on the lived experience without withdrawing from the 'phenomenal field', and it implies taking a phenomenological attitude that 'loosens the intentional threads that connect us to the world in order to make them appear' (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. xvii). To achieve this the training sessions were continuously transcribed into detailed descriptions with an on-going attempt to maintain complexity and attention to the sensory, bodily and lived experiences, which developed the second author's phenomenological attitude towards the practice. Further observations were made without participation in order to strengthen and foster reflections. To be able to participate and still document the participant observation a GoPro video camera was used (inspired by visual ethnography) instead of conducting traditional field notes (Evers, 2016, Pink, 2007). Screenshots from the participant observations were used to support and illustrate the empirical descriptions and quotes and the videos further made it possible to return to the situations later in the research process. The participant observation and informal interviews in the field were supplemented with semi-structured interviews (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2012, p. 45). The questions were derived from themes and experiences from the participant observations, and the interviews aimed at making the participants reflect on their practice and put words on non-verbalised aspects. To strengthen the phenomenological anchorage the interviews' themes and open questions departed from concrete situations from the training session (Thorpe, 2012, p. 70). One example was the practitioners' descriptions of successful movements as 'clean'. In the interviews the practitioners were asked to elaborate on how they experienced such

movements, as well as reflect on the feelings and meaning related to striving for clean movements. The interviews were also used for validation of the analytical assumption about general aspects in the bodily practice derived from the training sessions.

Analysis: Parkour as acrobatics

The results of the study have been thoroughly analysed and presented in the second author's Ph.D. dissertation (Larsen 2015). This supported the findings in other studies of an interplay of concrete and abstract movements (Clegg and Butryn, 2012, Saville, 2008), where objects and configurations in urban space have a functional value and invite practitioners to engage in a variety of new potential movements (Larsen 2015, p.155). In addition to this, Larsen paid special attention to how practitioners in parkour cultivate an engaging material consciousness, which she interpreted through Richard Sennett's (2008) notion of craftsmanship. Thus understood, the bodily practice of the practitioners is characterised by a focused attention on the relation between the phenomenal sensory input of their movements and the physical objects (Larsen 2015, pp. 238-239).

In the following we will seek to extend these analyses by revisiting the empirical data and analysing key findings through the phenomenological understanding of acrobatic embodiment and spatiality presented above. The analysis will focus on the lived experience of the practitioners in order to interrogate how a phenomenological understanding of acrobatics, especially with its focus on the existential dimension of verticality, can complement and add to the existing analyses of movement in parkour, by offering a refined understanding of the practitioners' bodily experience of performing tricks. In practice their ways of practising and performing tricks occur in a circular process involving three key aspects, for which the practitioners in parkour use the terms: 1) 'challenge', 2) 'break' and 3) 'clean'. We will use these three dimensions of their practice to structure the analysis of the acrobatic dimension of their bodily experience.
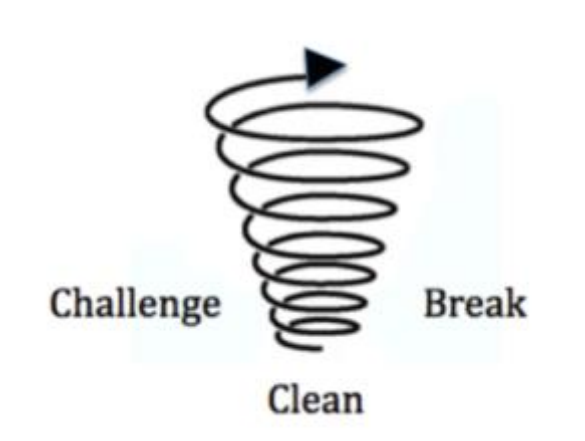
Figure 1: Practical terms for describing three central dimensions of practising and performing tricks in parkour

Challenge

Parkour consists of a range of core movements and techniques, which are part of the practitioners' embodiment and which open up movement possibilities in their surroundings. Practitioners develop a special kind of perception through which objects are experienced as configurations that invite different ways of moving. When the practitioners in our study arrived at a new place they were sometimes immediately attracted by possibilities for movements and routes of movements. At other times they started exploring the place, they started jumping, climbing and balancing around the location in order to find and build up routes of movements. In this process it was noticeable how it was often not the easiest, but the more difficult ways of performing or putting together movements, that were most attractive to them. They continuously challenged their ways of moving in situations or sought new and challenging situations. In practice, the term *challenges* is an expression they used for movements that were not yet possible for them to perform.

'Challenges' describes a perception of a certain quality of their bodily space. Perceived as a challenge, the situation does not invite habitual performance or the performance of possible moves. It invites practitioners to make attempts towards what appears as not yet possible in the situation. In relation to the figure-ground distinction they perceive figures (i.e. configurations in space) that are challenging relative to their ground (i.e. habitual body). For less experienced practitioners a small rail can be perceived as a challenge whilst the more experienced will look for more difficult configurations that invite testing and developing their repertoire.

Figure 2. The practitioner Ilir working with a challenge.

The figure can also be an image of a particular move that they are not yet able to do. In this situation the practitioner (Ilir) jumps over the first wall and tries to land on the second one with both feet. He is perfectly able to reach the wall, but he keeps splitting his legs and lands in a more secure position with one of his feet pushing on the side of the wall. He tries over and over again, but can't stop splitting his feet. He gets very frustrated. 'I don't understand it. I can't get that foot up', he notes. This can illustrate how practitioners in parkour express a way of moving in relation to challenges, which can be described as movement on the borderline between what is possible and not yet possible; between 'I can' and 'I cannot'. Such challenging movements resemble a basic feature of acrobatics, which Sloterdijk (2013, p. 123) argues to be 'a doctrine of the processual incorporation of the nearly impossible.'

Figure 3. Practitioners discussing an impossible movement.

In this picture practitioners are standing on a roof and discuss the idea about jumping from the roof and down to another roof. It is an impossible movement and none of them actually consider doing it. Later in an interview a practitioner (Ilir) described the perception of impossible movements:

> It's funny. Sometimes we live in a fantasy world. If you cannot do a particular movement physically, then your fantasy will cover your need to do it. It is kind of silly, because you think: Are we not to old for that? And we joke a little about that. It is just fun... but then sometimes it happens that you have been thinking "wow imagining if you could swing from there to there. That is impossible!", but then suddenly someone does it!

The practitioner here describes how the border between the possible and impossible is attractive - and also how it is always dynamic and temporary. What seem to be an impossible movement can suddenly be brought into the horizon of a possible movement if someone else does it, which then functions as a catalyst for the future perception of other movements that are not yet possible.

In this way the quote above also points to how the moves of other practitioners can provide an intersubjective source of challenge. When 'Suddenly someone does it', that is, when another performs what appears impossible, a sense of one's own inadequacy can arise. When training in different places the practitioners spend a great amount of time looking at each other and talking about what impossible movements other practitioners have done there before.

Figure 4. The practitioner Niclas pointing out a place where an experienced practitioner has performed a difficult movement.

In this picture Niclas introduces a location for newcomers by pointing at a place where someone performed a difficult movement (precision). In this way practitioners tacitly or explicitly give each others challenges as they perform or look for new tricks. In phenomenological terms this can be interpreted as a kind of intercorporeal verticality that can be found in parkour, where others incarnate masters and exemplars. Their tricks inspire and seduce the practitioners who observe them, and move them towards pursuing the not yet possible moves.

Whether they are rooted in spatial configurations, images of not yet possible moves or the tricks of others, challenges are thus an essential part of parkour. To do parkour is to continually perceive and push yourself to greater challenges in order to expand the movement possibilities. The kind of perception involved with seeing challenges renders their surrounding an acrobatic and vertical space. To use the words of Sloterdijk (2013, p. 196) 'every achiever acrobatically comes under tension.' The practitioner Ilir put it this way: '*I like pushing myself and becoming aware of what I actually can do. It is about testing what you are able to do, and how far you can push your limits. I think that is why I do it.*'

Pushing and challenging your limits is, of course, not without risk and danger. Acrobatic walking in the heights has, as its natural experiential counterpart, the experience of falling down. Since many of

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the moves in parkour can be risky, the performance of them takes a certain amount of tolerance towards the feeling of the falling body, which normally creates panic. It can be described as a form of playing with fear (c.f.Saville, 2008), which describes an experiential aspect of movement that was very evident in our study.

Figure 5. The practitioner Bjarke swinging into a horizontal position in a rail.

For example, in movements that involve swings, like the one in this picture, the task is to have the courage to swing into the horizontal position, where the body is for a second weightless, in order to acquire the optimal force for the next swing and time to change the grip. A practitioner (Bjarke) described how in the beginning, this and many other movements in parkour 'must feel like you are going to die!' Fortunately, this rarely happens in parkour, but falling down and getting hurt is an ever present risk and facing such challenges, the practitioners often do a strict and comprehensive analysis of the involved risk and the skills required to execute the nearly impossible movements. If the risk is too high, that is, it holds a danger of injury or the move is genuinely impossible, they have no problems with resigning from the challenge.

But if it is only perceived as nearly impossible, or not yet possible - and if they sense that it is only unnecessary fear (that there is an mismatch between the 'real' danger and the one spontaneously perceived) that is holding them back or stalls their movements - it leads to vast frustrations, and is accompanied by a sense of deep attraction; indeed, a need and urge to make the trick possible:

Second author: "Is fear an important factor for you and how?

> Ilir: Yes… it… (pause for reflection). Well it is an important factor… because sometimes you just experience a mental block. You cannot make yourself do it and that kills you… (…)… It can ruin the rest of my day, because it is not just a movement. And people, I mean ordinary people, they don't understand that. It is not just any movement that you can't break, it is so to say… you see something that you just can't solve… That is you are just not good enough. And that ruins your day…(…)… it is worse than love sorrows.

In such cases, the most significant way in which they attempt to overcome this kind of fear is by seeking to build up the required bodily abilities to accomplish the trick. In other words, they engage in the acrobatic process of incorporating the moves and tricks they perceive as nearly impossible.

Break

This incorporation is what practitioners refer to as 'breaking the challenge'. It mostly takes many attempts and it involves the experience of frustrating and yet captivating resistance. The process of breaking a challenge can be described as a bodily anticipation of the movement they cannot yet perform. Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 112) described how a subject in abstract movements reckons with the possible, which thereby acquires a sort of actuality. But in practising new tricks it appears that practitioners also reckon with the not yet possible in order to actualise the intended move. This requires effort and struggle, and in attempting to break the challenge the bodily resistance related to the risk and danger can be hard to get rid of. It feels like, they say, the body has got a will of its own. But at the same time many practitioners described it as accompanied by a sense of urge to disprove and defeat the not yet possible tricks.

Rinaldo puts his hands on the wall, leans against it while he stares at the next wall. He wants to land on the top of the second wall with both his feet. He walks backwards, around in circles and forward to the wall again. He puts his hands on the wall, stares at the next wall and walks away backwards again. He finally runs with high speed towards the wall, jumps over it and land on of the second one, but only with one of his feet on the top. Frustrated he jumps down, turns around and kicks the first wall.

The practitioners have different ways in which they try to overcome or pull the resistance out of their movements in order to break the challenge. One thing is certain: it doesn't happen by itself - it requires repeated efforts.

Saville (2008, p. 900) has highlighted the role of trying again and again, 'through which the kinetic play of bodies in space are bringing about something new.' Based on our study, however, it appears that the description of trying must be complemented with descriptions of effort, as well as a refined understanding of repetition. In fact, only through a proper understanding of repetition is it possible to understand the experienced meaning and value of making an effort. Just as muscles can develop a higher level of strength after heavy strains if they have time to recover (c.f. the principle of supercompensation), good bodily habits can grow through repeated challenges (Aggerholm, 2015b, pp. 179-184). Learning new tricks in parkour is a good example of this. It involves an active process of practising through which the habitual comportment can be refined and expanded. Practitioners in parkour incarnate this active and bodily self-formation through repetition. Thus, they can be interpreted to represent acrobatic existence, which 'de-trivializes life by placing repetition in the service of the unrepeatable.' (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 207)

Figure 6. The practitioner Ilir performing repetitions on a rail.

In this picture Ilir is sitting on a rail. He is trying to swing back around it and come back to the sitting position. It is difficult. He is trying and trying and gets more and more frustrated. After what seems like a hundred times he loudly announces that he will not leave the place before he has done it.

This illustrates how a central part of coping with the resistance involved in conquering the improbable is performing repetitions, through which one comes closer to achieving the goal. Breaking a challenge requires an ability to tolerate the frustration, dwell in it productively and at the same time commit oneself to the challenge by performing repetitions in the service of breaking it. It is not a static repetition, but a movement forward that involves a repetition of difference and improvement (Aggerholm, 2015b, pp. 173-190).

An intersubjective dimension of overcoming challenges involves making use of other practitioners as examples and models. One aspect of this is when practitioners actively engage in each others' challenges - and help each other overcome the obstacles by showing an example.

Figure 7. The practitioner Ilir performing repetitions on a rail.

In this picture Lavdrim had built up a challenge. He wanted to jump over the rails. In half an hour he kept moving back and forth and tried to make the move. After some time, another practitioner asks if he should 'take it for him'. The other practitioner breaks the challenge - with the result that Lavdrim does the same right afterwards. In this situation the example provided by the other practitioner can be interpreted as revealing the challenge as possible for Lavdrim, which helped him overcome the resistance and break the challenge. In phenomenological terms the other practitioner opened up a new possible move for Lavdrim and, importantly, helped establish a faith in Lavdrim that he could transcend the current horizon of ability. Hence, exemplars can ease the break for others. In other situations practitioners posed questions and engaged in other ways in each other's movements and

challenges. In either way it is a way of facilitating and helping, tacitly or explicitly, each other's process of testing in the quest for breaking the challenges.

Another dimension of this phenomenon is when practitioners upload videos (samplers), where they show their novel accomplishments. Here the break of one person gains significance that transcends the particular situation. In an interview Ilir said:

> The practitioners are so much more skilled today, because they got a lot of possible movement served. They already knew it was possible when they started. What we struggled with earlier, has now become basic movements that everybody can perform.

This kind of virtual intercorporeality reveals an interesting phenomenon in parkour. When one practitioner has performed a so far impossible trick, it soon becomes a new norm in the field, a new standard that others perform with ease. The same goes for their own experience of breaking a challenge. This is often accompanied by a sudden shift from resistance and effort to ease. As the practitioner Bjarke said:

> (...) often when you break something very demanding, something which has been killing you... then you realise how easy it is and it is just like: Shit that was stupid. It is no big deal at all. Why didn't I just do it right away?

In this way the broken challenges become what Sloterdijk (2013, p. 272) calls a 'stabilized improbability' where 'the acrobat, both in the literal and in the figurative sense of the word, takes centre stage as the carrier of a long-term near-impossibility'. What appeared earlier for the practitioners as an improbable trick (i.e. 'I cannot') has now become part of the habit body and transforms the experience of it into an experience of 'I can'.

Clean

This transformation and the following sense of equilibrium between spatial configurations and bodily abilities is often accompanied by excitement. However, for practitioners in parkour it is not enough to be able to do it - it also has to be perfect. This is what the notion of *clean* describes. When the practitioners have broken the challenge by making the nearly impossible possible, they (so to speak) clean it up. This is a matter of perfection, or rather self-perfection, which is related to the bodily experience: the movement must feel absolutely right.

Figure 8. The practitioner Oliver landing on tiptoe on the edge of a roof after performing a precision jump.

In this picture we see two practitioners, who have created a challenge where they have to jump over the gap between the two roofs and land on the edge. Finally, one of them succeeds, and the other one celebrates him. The practitioner who made it is, however, not satisfied. During the move he didn't have the feeling of control and ease that he was striving for. This can illustrate how perfection and making a movement clean is not just an image - it is related to a perfect bodily experience of making it just right (for example with ease).

In an attempt at learning a difficult movement, the practitioner Bjarke describes his experience of learning it in the following way: *'It is an extremely weird movement. But now I begin to experience it as natural.'* This points to how the challenge that appeared improbable is now experienced as natural. In the literature this kind of experience is, as mentioned earlier, often described as flow or peak experience, where there is an equilibrium between challenges and the ability to cope with this, which gives a joyful sense of control and mastery. This can, in phenomenological terms, and to use the words of Merleau-Ponty (2012, p. 109), be interpreted as an experience of 'optimum equilibrium' where the body is experienced as 'the power of a certain world'. Here the practitioners experience what was formerly not possible as easy and natural due to their refined bodily habits. This can furthermore be interpreted as a case of acrobatics since, as Sloterdijk (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 196) puts it: 'Acrobatics is involved whenever the aim is to make the impossible seem simple.'

In this light the activity of parkour is not a question of going 'back to nature'; it is about practising to create a 'second nature'. Through practising the movement, Bjarke in the example above has refined his habits and the new trick has become part of his habit body and now seems like a second nature. Sloterdijk (2013, p. 184) describes this in the following way:

> Second natures are dispositions of ability that enable humans to stay on their level as artistes of *virtus*. They perform the near impossible, the best, as if it were something easy, spontaneous and natural that virtually happens of its own accord.

This rather precisely describes the experience of making a movement clean. When the practitioners succeed in this - they also describe their moves as delicate and nice. When questioned about what that means, the practitioner Bjarke answered: '*It is because it is a move you can throw in many places. It is the kind of move that was really difficult in the beginning and didn't make sense to me - and suddenly it is really easy - then you are happy about it.*' Another practitioner, Oliver, can add to this, that it is also a matter of experiencing control and self-knowledge in the performance of a trick.

> If you can land and, like, just stand there, then you have more control than if you have to go fast, and just get over there and then continue to run. It is like... you need a certain understanding of what you can do, to do that. If you don't know how much power you need in a jump, you often undershoot or overshoot it. If you can do it perfectly and land so you just stand there, then you know exactly what you can do, and what it takes single jump… so it is like a judgement of whether or not you can control the jump. It is not like you can't do it, if you cannot stand after landing… it is just, like, a level of control over that if you can do it… and then, perfect every time… it is rare that you can do that because, well, it can be anything. A little wind blow, perhaps it sounds stupid, but then you get out of balance, but you have to be able to compensate for that as well, so it's like… yes.

This describes how perfection in parkour is about achieving bodily control in and through movement. The purpose is not just to overcome obstacles and make the improbable tricks possible, and neither is it simply a matter of demonstrating abilities and superiority in relation to others. It is a meaningful bodily experience of control and perfection. It has an actual and functional component (the ability to do the trick) but the level of perfection when 'making it clean' is purely a subjective and bodily sense of doing it just right.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This study and analysis has sought to analyse the experience of practitioners in parkour through an existential phenomenological account of acrobatics. The analysis was structured by three central dimensions (challenge, break and clean) expressed and experienced by the practitioners, and we have argued that a closer look at these can reveal acrobatics as an inherent and essential aspect of the self-organised practice of parkour. This, we believe, can contribute to expanding the existing understanding of movement in this field, and in the following we will briefly discuss how this can supplement understandings of parkour as either an expression of playful activity experienced, for example, as flow, and/or as a representation of social and cultural critique of modern, for example, life and sport.

Our description of the process of practising in parkour can challenge and expand descriptions of experience in parkour that focus on aesthetic self-exploration or playful practice related to an experience of flow, where the goal of participation is understood as the development and effortless experience of creative routes of movements. For example, Atkinson has described how a central experiential part of parkour for the traceurs in his study was to move effortlessly and naturally, like water flowing over rocks which 'effortlessly pass across, under, over, or around any environmental obstacle it encounters.' (Atkinson, 2009, p. 190). To be sure, these elements of flow experience were evident in our study when practitioners performed clean movements. But if flow, understood as a harmonic match between demands of the environment and one's ability, was the primary aim and source of meaning in the self-organised practice of parkour, one would expect the practitioners to dwell in this state of fluent movement. They don't. Rather, they tend to dwell in the process of breaking challenges and tolerate frustrations as they return to the productive experiences of altering the relation between bodily capabilities and spatial configurations. Challenges are not just sought with an aim of 'getting a kick' or experiencing excitement. They provide a source of meaning because the process of breaking them gives a sense of bodily transformation and change. Our study has also shown how the experience of flow related to the clean movement is not an end in itself for practitioners in parkour. It can thus contribute to a more processual understanding of flow than can be found in much parkour literature. The sense of flow and equilibrium is only temporary, because even if the aim of movements in parkour is to make new tricks part of the habit body, this is only a launch pad in the process of creating and breaking new and more difficult challenges. Thus, the primary value of new clean

movements is not just the experience in itself, but the use-value of the movement as they open up new movement possibilities that allows for engaging with new and not yet possible tricks.

Thus, the bodily and non-instrumental verticality involved in acrobatics can help expand existing phenomenological descriptions of parkour, which tend to pay little attention to the continuous process of refining skills and movements that create these experiences. The acrobatic understanding of parkour that we have tried to advance here indicates that the process of practising towards new movements and tricks is governed by a sense of refinement and perfection. This can inform an acrobatic understanding of practising and performing in parkour, where flow is constantly disrupted by new attractive challenges in a circular process where the vertical tension remains. Our analysis of the practitioners' active process of refining and expanding their bodily habits drew on Sloterdijk's ascetological account of humans as acrobats of *virtus,* which:

> (...) explains how precisely that which is already carried out fairly successfully feels the pull of something better, and why that which is performed with great skill stands in the attraction field of an even higher skill. (Sloterdijk, 2013, p. 185)

It is this attraction field that the practitioners in our study moved in. It was prominent in the practices of all the practitioners included in the study, where clean jumps, moves or tricks became the take-off for practising new and more challenging tricks. It expresses the circular and acrobatic process in which practitioners in parkour are continuously walking in the heights.

The analysis of this acrobatic dimension of parkour can at the same time highlight the limits of interpreting parkour as a resistance to modern life. The experiential aspects of acrobatics can describe a way of transcending norms and habitual ways of moving that need not be a social or cultural critique. Our focus on parkour as an embodied phenomenon, rather than a discursive phenomenon, is not to neglect that parkour can be seen as a contrast to ordinary ways of moving and interacting with people and places in modern society. Rather, it has highlighted an experiential layer of meaning prior to, but not necessarily separated from, the socio-cultural interpretations of bodily representations, which can contribute to our understanding of the experienced meaning and significance of performing tricks. This also implies an understanding of acrobatics as an existential phenomenon that is not contingent upon the socio-cultural context. In the literature the formalisation and regulation of parkour into competitive and commercial versions of it has been criticised for focusing too much on the spectacular and acrobatic aspects of movement, and thereby corrupting the core values of the original parkour (Angel,

2011, pp. 200-203, O'Loughlin, 2012, pp. 193-197). The acrobatic dimension of the bodily practice is thereby interpreted as less important, as something contaminating the movement phenomenon and something used for personal, material gains and dreams about becoming famous (Angel, 2011, p.199). But to understand acrobatics as a dimension limited to (and exploited in) the commercialised and competitive versions of parkour reflects a socio-cultural understanding of the phenomenon. By revisiting the notion of *askesis* and taking a closer look at the existential meaning of practising, our study has highlighted the acrobatic as an elementary and edifying part of refining and performing tricks in parkour, which is not necessarily restricted to practitioners in more sportified, competitive, and sometimes commercialised versions. In this light, and in contrast with for example Atkinson's analyses (2009, 2013), parkour doesn't have to be opposed to modern life or sport. Rather, the efforts of refining movements and developing tricks can be seen as a more general and existential aspect, which can be prominent across different versions of the bodily practices.

Though the scope of this analysis was restricted to a self-organised case of parkour, we believe that the analysis of parkour as acrobatics can inform our understanding of parkour in other contexts as well, and in terms of experience it can possibly challenge the distinction between original parkour and later competitive variants of it. There are important differences, but also a special field of attraction, a striving towards refining and performing tricks, that binds them together. A broader conception of human existence, with attention to the bodily and non-instrumental vertical dimension related to acrobatics, can help understand the experienced meaning of overcoming challenges and refining ways of moving and performing tricks in different cultural variants of parkour. Similarly, our analysis of this acrobatic dimension can have wider applications for qualitative studies of practitioners in other sports and leisure activities. If Sloterdijk (2013, p. 13) is right in claiming that whoever goes in search of humans will find acrobats, then the analysis of acrobatic endeavours should not be restricted to parkour or other activities that involve tricks in the common sense of the term. Rather, the bodily verticality expressed by the practitioners in our study could throw interesting new light on the experience of practising to refine movements in a variety of other contexts, from self-organised activities to elite sport.

In addition to this we hope that the analysis of practising and performing tricks in parkour can contribute to the phenomenological understanding of bodily existence and spatiality. The practitioners in our study expressed a particular acrobatic way of experiencing and engaging with their surroundings.

We have highlighted central experiential dimensions of this with a focus on subjective and intersubjective aspects of perceiving challenges, the efforts of repeating towards breaking the challenges, and the process of perfecting one's bodily experience of performing tricks to make them clean. These, and possibly other dimensions of experience related to acrobatic existence, can potentially inform future studies of bodily practices and expand the phenomenological repertoire to assist analyses of not just concrete or abstract movement, but also vertical and indeed acrobatic movement.

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