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## The Aesthetic and Philosophical Integration of Parkour with Bartenieff Release-Based Modern Dance

Rhett Spongberg

Loyola Marymount University, [rspongbe@lion.lmu.edu](mailto:rspongbe@lion.lmu.edu)

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Rhett Spongberg

Professor Jill Nunes Jensen

History of Dance Theatre

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The Aesthetic and Philosophical Integration of Parkour with  
Bartenieff Release-Based Modern Dance

*Deep breath in; deep breath out. Do a little jump up and down to get comfortable.*

*Adrenalized, you adjust your hat, prep, and then ... run! Full speed. 1, 2, 3, as you count out your strides in your head. You reach the first low wall, then jump off the right leg, left hand down on the wall, kick the left leg out in front of you, and land still in a full sprint. “1, 2, 3,” before reaching the edge of the wall and jump!*

*The lights are streaming in from the right and from a slight angle you can see one or two of the people sitting in the first aisle. Making eye contact with your opposite across the way, the two of you bounce up and down and throw out the gestures of an inside joke you made up in class when this set was taught. Thud, thud, thud, as the bass of the music fills your chest, “5, 6, 7, 8,” run. You meet your partner halfway. Do the handshake that you’ve practiced so much, and turn to face the front. Then one step, another, and leap!*

These first two paragraphs illustrate, respectively, how the techniques of parkour and release-based modern dance (heretofore RBM dance) are indistinguishable when not described using their specific languages. Despite two distinct histories of development, there is great commonality between these two styles of movement. After more than seven years of physical training in these practices, this research project seemed a logical extension. The first section of this paper, provides readers with an understanding of what parkour is and its historical

development. This historical research was done through reading journal articles, watching documentaries, and reviewing online articles centered on parkour. From there, parallels between the foundations of RBM dance and parkour were made after consulting books, text books, encyclopedias, YouTube and Instagram videos, and finally, with dancers through interviews. All of these sources, and the variety of research methods, triangulated a clear conclusion: certain philosophies and aesthetic movements are nearly identical between parkour and RBM dance.

Parkour is a physical and mental discipline that uses one's surrounding environment to train in the smooth and efficient navigation of obstacles. The goal is to get from point A to point B in the most efficient way. For an example of this definition animated, view 6:20 to 6:26 and 8:34 to 8:40 of *People in Motion* ([link here](#)). More than just physical movement, the philosophy behind parkour can be broken down into three categories of thought: (1) progression, (2) knowing oneself, and (3) knowing obstacles. The first facet of parkour's philosophy is progression, which is the ability to take on any obstacle, physical or mental, with incremental, controlled, and confident steps until the obstacle has been overcome. *People in Motion* (Dahl 2012) beautifully describe and demonstrate progression from 10:41 to 10:51 of the film. Parkour's second philosophical concept of knowing oneself is rooted in the Mark Johnson's theory of body-mind (Johnson 279-280); it is about understanding what your body is capable of, how it can work with the environment and other bodies, how to control it, and listening to what it needs. The third category of parkour's philosophy is knowing obstacles. Knowing the obstacles that you face allows you to break them down into manageable steps and how to think critically in any situation. Knowing obstacles is vital in making parkour safe to participate in and safe in the eyes of the community.

The discipline of parkour was established in the 1980s, in a neighborhood of Paris, by a group of kids that eventually became known as Yamakasi. Yamakasi translates from the French influenced Congolese to “strong body, person, and spirit.” (Belle & Perrière) This group included athletes David Belle and Sébastien Foucan. At first, parkour was simply their childhood game in elementary school. Their neighborhood did not have much in the way of entertainment or playgrounds, so the kids would make obstacle courses with the concrete that surrounded them. In an interview with Foucan in the movie *Jump London* (Christie 2003), he said that he would play after school with his friends, jumping and chasing each other around and even playing on the rooftop of the school. As the kids grew and entered their teenage years, they began developing techniques for their games and would teach each other what they discovered on their own. The discipline began to take shape largely due to Belle. Belle was inspired to shape the discipline by his father who had received military training by the French Army in Vietnam. Lieven Ameel, a writer who published in “Everyday Aesthetics in Action,” wrote about how Belle’s father received training in George Hebert’s “natural method,” which uses obstacle courses to train soldiers in efficient physical practice (Ameel 164). This natural method strongly influenced the movement of parkour and lead to Ameel’s definition: “parkour is a discipline in which the aim is to move as smoothly and quickly as possible from one point to another, overcoming obstacles on the way by using them as stepping stones” (Ameel 164). Athletes from the film *People in Motion* (Dahl 2012) put it this way, “parkour is the discipline of overcoming obstacles in one’s path using only the human body. In general, it’s an art of movement, or the art of movement. Learning how to master your body and learning how to master the obstacles in your environment [...] learning how to express yourself with movement.” It is all about smooth and efficient movement from one place to the next, and it was George Hebert’s method that

brought that into the forefront of the minds of these young athletes as they jumped around having fun in the schoolyard.

The discipline continued to take new shape as Foucan provided his input with the group. Foucan's emphasis began to shift to the aesthetic values in the movement and he connected it to Asian philosophies of martial arts, specifically drawing from the teachings of Bruce Lee. Bruce Lee was a San Francisco native, who studied *wing chun gung fu* (a form of martial arts) under Yip Man from the age of thirteen and also received a degree in philosophy from the University of Washington. Foucan's new take on parkour added more expressive tricks into the movement while traveling from point A to point B and tied in focused philosophy to the physical training, thus creating what is known as freerunning. Freerunning is "the method of learning based on autonomy, play and positive energy and is used to connect body, spirit and environment" (Ameel 164). Please view 1:10 to 1:50 of the video by Team Farang ([link here](#)) for a visual depiction of freerunning. Considering the phrase, "to connect body, spirit and environment," an example of how Bruce Lee's philosophy is infused in freerunning and parkour along with his statement, "In order to control myself I must first accept myself by going with and not against my nature." (Lee 17) Freerunning differs from parkour because it requires self-expression in relation to the spaces where it is practiced, similar to what Bruce Lee said about water flowing through its environment, "It has no shape of its own but molds itself to the receptacle that contains it." (Lee 9). While parkour prioritizes getting from one place to the next, freerunning prioritizes the expressive journey in between and the interactions between us and the environment, our container. Parkour and freerunning commonly go by *l'art du déplacement* (the art of displacement) or are referred to collectively as parkour and so, from here forward, parkour will refer to them both.

Although the general public saw Yamakasi's physical movement as new, Yamakasi claimed it was not. They claimed that it has always existed. Even today, the only thing that is new is the urban environment in which they live (Ameel 166). Foucan himself said in the film *Jump London* (Christie 2003), "Freerunning has always been there and has always existed, we just never put it in a box. It is an ancient art." Many people ask me when I started training in parkour, and my response is always, "When did you stop?" As children, people play on structures and are unaware that they are doing parkour; people stop practicing parkour as they get older. In my own experience, it is around junior high school that kids stop jumping around. Notice that there are no playgrounds on many junior high school or high school campuses. Also considering what kids are physiologically going through at that age, they could likely stop because they are embarrassed, which would connect with their current stages of puberty. During puberty kids are physiologically unfamiliar with their fast growing bodies, becoming continually lengthy and larger than their mind remembers, thus making them uncoordinated. For these kids, it would be life changing to adopt parkour because it is much more than just going as fast as you can and jumping around—it is about training yourself to be the best that you can be at what we were naturally designed to do. To continue training in parkour would mean gaining control over an out-of-control body much faster for a preteen student. As I mentioned about my own experience, the movement has always been present in my life, but what I realized in reflection of my development is that there is a clear starting point in my life when I consciously adopted parkour and began training in the discipline. As a young child, I had my try at baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, and a handful of other sports. Then after studying parkour throughout high school, and modern dance in college, I see that parkour is neither a sport nor an art but a

discipline. It includes aspects of traditional athletic sports, which separates it from modern dance as an art, while also going beyond the characteristics of a sport by integrating philosophy.

If we look forward from the origins of parkour in the 1980s to the release of the film *Yamakasi: Les Samourais des Temps Modernes (The Samurai of Modern Times)* in 2001 (Zeitoun 2001), we can see the movie was a turning point for parkour. It showed Yamakasi jumping on rooftops and doing apparently crazy stunts. Many viewers of the movie missed some vital points of the discipline of parkour, and only saw what they thought were reckless stunts. It was because of that public misconception that a major split took place in the parkour community during the time immediately following the movie. The split was between two subgroups of athletes: those in it for the adrenaline rush, who were quick to attempt the daring and sometimes dangerous feats, and those who followed the discipline's original intent (Parkour Generations 2016). The second group of athletes was still welcomed by Yamakasi and Belle into the discipline. It was during this split that the name for true practitioners became *traceur*, which translates to either bullet or tracer in French. More than athletes, traceurs get their name for their efficient and speedy movement and from the tracing of urban terrain that they do while training. The name traceur also differentiates disciplined practitioners from adrenaline junky athletes. The traceurs of the film *People in Motion* (Dahl 2012) said, "When you're doing parkour properly, you're not creating risks, you're eliminating risks." While traceurs are often perceived to be reckless youngsters—because of movies like *Yamakasi* (Zeitoun 2001) and various television commercials—these films positively altered the development of parkour by getting it a spot on the global stage and helping it grow around the world.

Parkour was not alone growing up from the 1980s onwards. Release-based modern dance reached its adolescence in the 1980s after its conception in the previous decades by Irmgard

Bartenieff (Hackney vi). The two disciplines, parkour and RBM dance, have the same movement qualities and aesthetics while also having similar philosophies. The movement foundation of RBM dance and parkour is rooted in Bartenieff's Fundamental and the six Patterns of Total Body Connectivity. (Hackney 14) The difference is that RBM dance was explicitly codified with these six fundamental patterns of movement, whereas parkour codified the same patterns of movement implicitly. Because these six fundamental patterns of movement exist naturally in all humans, it is not surprising to find them used to their maximum potential in this art and this discipline that train in full human movement. Hackney presents Bartenieff's explanation of how this natural development of movement occurs in the book *Making Connections*:

We confirm our relation to the life-giving basic flow of the breath as we lie in bed and yawn, taking in large amounts of new oxygen, filling us with energy (Breath patter). We stretch out away from our navel and come back into it with our whole body (Core-Distal patter). We explore our spine, as we push to sit up. We reach our legs to the floor and push to stand (Upper-Lower pattern). Or perhaps we dip down with one side to assist in putting on slippers (Body-Half patter). And then we walk (Cross-Lateral pattern). All of this we probably do without even being consciously aware of it. (Hackney 15)

The significance here is that parkour and RBM dance have foundationally the same movement patterns, but they are derived via different means. Because parkour's movement was codified out of the natural movement of the teenagers of Yamakasi, it makes sense that the movement reflects what is considered fundamental movement. To get a clear idea of what the fundamental movement patterns look like in RBM dance, look at the video "Movement Research: Floorwork



and Libertango” (Weksler YouTube) by following [this link](#). When this video is studied and compared to the movement of traceurs, there are clearly similarities; the only difference is that in this video there are no obstacles for the man. [This video](#), “Down @marianhillmusic | Choreography by @IaMEemiliodosal & @erica\_klein” by IaMEemiliodosal, also demonstrates the fundamental movement patterns, but in choreography instead of improvisation. This video has the added benefit of demonstrating how dancers can use each other as obstacles like traceurs use the environment.

As mentioned in the introduction, three dancers from Loyola Marymount University’s dance program were interviewed served to augment my research. Dancers Emily Pavelka, Michaella Yarnell, and Abby Miller were all interested in discussing the topic of this research and helped solidify the connections between parkour and RBM dance. These three were asked to compare the aesthetics of parkour to RBM dance. They were shown several Instagram videos from Team Farang as well as 8:25 to 9:06 of *People in Motion* to help them better understand the aesthetics of parkour. The dancers noticed very quickly how the traceurs used momentum to propel them over and around objects and during the preparation for a big jump. Emily, Michaella and Abby noticed that, just like dance, the movement often looks effortless but that they can appreciate the strength it takes to do certain moves because they understood what might go into that movement.

As a junior at Loyola Marymount University, I took a RBM dance class from Haleey Nichele, who taught in great depth about the use of momentum in modern dance, which the interviewed dancers brought up when they noticed this concept of efficiency in the videos. The traceurs in the videos were opening and closing their bodies in order to maintain energy as they moved. During a big jump, the traceurs would go from being very stretched out in midair to

being tightly rolled into a ball after landing so that they could land on their feet, roll completely and then open up into a full sprint again thus keeping the speed they had in midair. In Modern it is common practice for dancers to be extended lying on the floor, roll to one side in a tight ball, and then open up again in a different direction in order to redirect their energy and motion. As important as this concept of efficiency is to parkour, it is also very common for viewers of parkour to be amazed by the athleticism of its practitioners. In fact, former dancer from the Royal Ballet, Darcey Bussell, was interviewed in *People in Motion* and was “amazed at how strong and supple the body [could] be at the same time.” Bussell said that parkour athletes had mastered the ability to make a movement look impressively easy and also exceptionally powerful at the same time.

The movement patterns of parkour and RBM dance can be best understood by using Laban Movement Analysis, especially since Bartenieff depicts the six fundamental movement patterns with Laban Motif Notation. The dancers that were interviewed eluded to the effort that dancers and traceurs appear to be investing in their movement. Articulating “effort” in Laban Movement Analysis is an attempt to answer, “What is the dynamic quality of the movement—the feeling-tone, the texture?” (Hackney 239) Parkour and RBM dance fit under what is known as free flow effort, instead of bound flow effort. Free flow effort can be summed up in four words, outpouring, fluid, released, and liquid. Bound flow effort is summed up as controlled, careful, contained, and restrained. Being the continuously expressive disciplines that parkour and RBM dance are, they are assessed as free flow effort.

The categorization of free flow effort is also the perfect articulation of one of the philosophical connections between parkour and RBM dance. Recall that Bruce Lee influenced the parkour philosophy, particularly that traceurs are encouraged to be fluid and “formless like

water.” (Lee 19) RBM dance and parkour both entwine free flow effort in their mental training as much as in their physical training.

Dancers that develop that mental and physical free flow effort of RBM dance are likely familiar with Bartenieff Fundamentals. “Bartenieff Fundamentals is an approach to basic body training that deals with patterning connections in the body according to principles of efficient movement functioning within a context which encourages personal expression and full psychophysical involvement.” (Hackney 33) Bartenieff Fundamentals are at the core of training in the discipline of RBM dance. As a reminder of previous comments, parkour includes pure parkour and pure freerunning and thus by extension, parkour includes freerunning’s expression. Bartenieff Fundamentals, by definition, “encourages personal expression,” (Hackney 33) making parkour and RBM dance immediately connected in a technical sense long before any movement even happens.

Once the movement does begin, parkour and RBM dance can be as fun as it is emotional for the traceur or dancer. There is as much to feel when participating as there is to move. This is actually one of the most indistinguishable components of parkour and RBM dance: the feeling. When the dancers were first interviewed, they were initially asked to listen to 1:36 to 2:15 of *People in Motion*. When asked about what they just heard, they all agreed that it sounded like the person was talking about dance. The traceur was actually talking about how there is nothing like parkour, about how he needs to move just like he needs to eat and sleep. The dancers for the most part all feel the same way about dance in general, not just RBM dance. There is something about dance that is like nothing else and that a huge part of their life would be missing if they were not dancing. The dancers and the traceur from the film would not be happy if they were not moving. After informing the dancers that what we were going to be talking about was parkour,

and then being shown section 7:55 to 8:15 of the movie, all three of them connected with the therapeutic aspects that were discussed in the movie. For the traceur in the film, parkour makes him feel very at peace. He described it as going out and exerting energy and emotions into something positive instead of exerting that energy by punching a wall when becoming very frustrated. It is a way of exerting your power over something, but instead of causing mayhem or damaging property, it is done in a positive and safe way. Michaella, Emily, and Abby all related to this scene when they thought about times when they were having a bad day or were frustrated and they go to the dance studio. They can let off steam and pour their energy and emotions that are built up into their movement in a way that can only be accomplished with dance, especially the expressive and free flow BRMD, turning their entire day around. "It is a feeling that is only accomplished with activities that move you," Michaella said, and there really is not a better way of saying it. There is something about physically moving that soothes the mind. As dancers and traceurs observe parkour and RBM dance find their own appreciation for the movements, they will hopefully jump in and partake to explore the same expressive movement in a new way.

At the heart of parkour is a philosophy of progression. Foucan describes parkour as a discipline that extends into all aspects of one's life. If the progressive nature of parkour is totally embraced, it will help a traceur overcome many obstacles beyond the physical ones in their life. If a traceur takes the obstacle and breaks it down into manageable pieces that can be taken on one at a time, the traceur will find soon that he or she is over that obstacle. Connecting to the Bartenieff Fundamentals once again, RBM dance includes "full psychophysical involvement" (Hackney 33) which expands RBM dance to more than just dance itself but into as many aspects of the dancers' life as parkour's progression. During another point in my interviews I had the dancers watched excerpts from the film *People in Motion* and then provide a general response.

The section of 10:21 to 11:00 in the film presents a discussion on the progressive nature of parkour and also visual demonstrations of a traceur using progression to complete a long distance jump. Michaella commented on how she has used progression to build strength and flexibility. It takes a long time and commitment, but by breaking down a challenge such as doing the splits into smaller pieces, it is manageable. Michaella shared with me that there is a “mental game” when doing tricks or big moves in dance. Very challenging moves can be more mentally challenging than physically and just like parkour’s progression, she broke down the move into pieces that she can practice and then puts them all together for the final movement. Abby and Emily compared the progression that they saw in the video clip to turns. Starting with, and perfecting, a single pirouette and then moving on to doing a double and even a triple is just like the young man in the video clip, who jumps a shorter, six-foot distance, and then attempts eight feet, and finally gets to the long ten and even twelve-foot jumps. The three dancers all do some kind of tricks in their dancing and note that there is a kind of progression that is needed to accomplish these challenging and sometimes dangerous tricks. Progression is so important because as the dancer gains a larger vocabulary of movement they are freed from any physical limitations that had once hindered personal expression. As noted earlier from *People in Motion* “when you’re doing parkour properly, you’re not creating risks, you’re eliminating risks.” This seems to be true for modern dancers as well, when they prepare, learn, and perform the tricks in their dances. When progression is properly used, it makes very difficult and dangerous stunts much easier and safer to do while simultaneously training the mind to control the body one step at a time.

The most powerful part of the video clip for the dancers was when the traceurs talked about fear. The traceurs said that fear is your body telling you there is a risk and to be aware of

it. It is your body's friendly reminder not to be reckless or rash. This is vital to share with any community that does not understand parkour and sees it as reckless jumping. The fact that parkour does have a progressive philosophy means that, for the most part, practitioners are not adrenaline junkies, who are constantly at risk of being seriously injured. Rather they are trained professionals who are challenging what the human body can do and how personal expression can be acted out in this modern, and often urban, environment.

Coming full circle, parkour and RBM dance have undeniable similarities in their movement qualities and philosophical foundations that are strongly rooted in the expression of movement through free flow Effort, progression, and Bartenieff's six Fundamental Patterns of Total Body Connectivity. With the exploration of parkour's history and brief acknowledgement of RBM dance's origins in the 1980s, a great deal of research remains to be done. Why are these two disciplines so similar? While there has been no evidence found yet that individuals throughout history have cross trained between parkour and RBM dance; thus sharing movements, concepts, and altering the others development; the movement characteristics and philosophies that the two train clearly exist naturally in all humans. So it can be expected, and with this research concluded, that parkour and release-based modern dance seek to elevate the same naturally occurring movements and philosophies to their fullest potential.

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