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## Parkour Fails and Hébertisme: Laughing at the New Man

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### ABSTRACT

"Parkour Fails" represent a genre of comedic YouTube videos consisting primarily of compilations of failed stunts by practitioners of the extreme sport of parkour. Parkour originated in the suburbs of Paris and involves creative reappropriation of urban furniture. In mass media, it is usually coded as a defiant challenge to urban norms and a symbol of multicultural France's growing social mobility. However, it was inspired by Hébertisme, a training system embraced by eugenicists and the Vichy government as a way to cultivate the New Man, an idealized figure incarnating fascist values. While parkour athletes do not endorse fascism, many promote their practice with a rhetoric of decadence and decline, return to nature, and masculine power that echoes Vichy's New Man ideology. This article explores the extent to which parkour fail videos humorously problematize that rhetoric.

**KEYWORDS** Masculinity; slapstick; Vichy; YouTube; MTV's *Jackass*; *The Office* (NBC)

The sixth season of the NBC version of *The Office* opens with Michael Scott, Andy Bernard, and Dwight Shrute (played by Steve Carell, Ed Helms, and Rainn Wilson respectively) trying their hand at parkour, the "internet sensation of 2004" ("Gossip"). Like caffeinated kindergartners whose souls have been transplanted into 40-year-old dad bods, they parade through the workplace, tumbling over desks and leaving a trail of broken staplers in their wake. The scene culminates on top of a truck in the parking lot. Andy proposes a sick line: "truck to refrigerators to dumpster, 360 spin onto the pallets, backflip, gainer into the trash can." But the cardboard refrigerator box is empty, and Andy plunges straight through. The scene ends with some faint, pained moaning.

Michael, Andy, and Dwight's version of parkour is a long way from the Spiderman-esque wall climbs that *The Office's* Jim shows to the audience as examples of serious parkour. With that said, their terrible video—in particular, Andy's foolhardy leap into the cardboard abyss—would be

perfectly at home in a compilation of “parkour fails.” These failed stunts constitute a subgenre of YouTube parkour videos. Depending on the severity of the injuries incurred, the clips straddle the line between laugh-out-loud slapstick and snuff-film revulsion in a way that recalls MTV’s *Jackass*. While parkour has attracted critical attention both as an extreme sport and for its representation in mass media, the brutal comedy of parkour fails has not. That is a shame because, as the ten-year-old boy I saw run face-first into a wall yelling “PARKOUR PARKOUR” to make his friends laugh can attest, embarrassing failure is as much a part of parkour’s mass appeal as death-defying success.

While critics have tended to focus on parkour’s countercultural dimension, inspired by its origins in the Paris *banlieue*, parkour has become increasingly institutionalized. There are now official clubs and dedicated gyms, including one in the recently renovated Les Halles in Paris. Parkour has, both spiritually and geographically, moved from the periphery to the center. What might have once seemed a transgressive approach to urban space is settling into life as an extreme sport like any other, with padded practice areas, safety protocols, and a standardized competition format. This casts parkour in a different light, and it should draw our attention to the ways that parkour’s transgressive reputation has always been at odds with its roots in Hébertisme, a training regimen that was beloved by French eugenicists and adopted by Vichy as part of the national fitness program. While that does not make parkour fascist, parkour practitioners, known as “traceurs,” frequently use language that echoes the fascist cult of the “New Man”. My contention in this article is that parkour fails offer an important—if ambivalent—counterweight to parkour’s Hébertiste heritage, undercutting traceurs’ appeals for a return to nature and their valorization of masculine power.

## Parkour and Hébertisme

Parkour was created in the Parisian suburb of Lisses in the 1990’s by David Belle and a group calling themselves the Yamakasi. It entered the mainstream thanks to films produced by Luc Besson’s EuropaCorp, which helped shape its image as a countercultural challenge to the urban hegemony. Ariel Zeitoun’s 2001 *Yamakasi* portrayed traceurs as Robin Hoods, burgling houses to pay for a child’s heart transplant. In Pierre Morel’s 2004 film, *Banlieue 13*, and its 2009 sequel, *Banlieue 13: Ultimatum*, both starring David Belle, Paris’s suburbs have been walled off from the city after falling into the hands of warring drug lords. Over the course of the two films, Belle’s character and a multiethnic team of marginalized martial arts masters save the *banlieue* from corrupt officials and property developers. In all three films, traceurs challenge the authority of wealthy

white power figures from the city center. Similar themes are present in other mass media depictions of parkour. In the video game, *Mirror's Edge*, the player-character uses parkour to combat an authoritarian regime, with parkour symbolizing the agility of the game's dissidents.

Scholars have tended to inscribe parkour in the French tradition of walking as a contestation of urban space. Michel de Certeau's reading of jaywalking as a tactical challenge to the authoritarian strategies of urban planners is a frequent reference, as are Situationist International's theorization of the *dérive*, and Walter Benjamin's interpretation of *flânerie* as anti-capitalist resistance. For Michael Atkinson, parkour "destabilizes and disrupts technocapitalist meanings of a city's physical and social landscape" (169). However, parkour can find itself very far from that tradition. Bill Marshall argues there is an underlying conservatism to the EuropaCorp parkour films (171), and many traceurs reject their counter-cultural reputation. Jeffrey Kidder notes a desire to distance the practice from skateboarding, with its connotations of adolescent ennui (79). Many want parkour to be seen as a legitimate sport (Audebrand 65), and it is undergoing a process of "sportification" (Lebreton et al. 295). Parkour clubs have been sponsored by corporations like Nike and Ubisoft and endorsed by municipal governments. All of this belies the image of an anti-capitalist or anarchist mode of resistance.

Which brings us to parkour's problematic roots in Hébertisme, a training regimen created by the French naval officer, Georges Hébert, in 1910. Hébert had observed colonial subjects in Martinique and found them fitter than French whites. He concluded this was because they were shaped by "natural" activities like hunting and running in the woods, rather than gym workouts. Hébert theorized a training regimen based in natural environments to combat the atrophy of French men. His promise to restore white European males to athletic supremacy through a return to the land appealed to French fascists. It fit with their ideology of *l'homme nouveau*, or the New Man. The New Man, though a contradictory figure, was central to the fascist myth. He (the New Man was essentially masculine) would be youthful and courageous, devoted to the common cause and guided by religious values. He would be in touch with nature, with an animalistic toughness. In the Vichy imagination, this messianic warrior hero would restore France to glory (Lackerstein 163–176). Vichy latched onto Hébertisme as part of its eugenic project to cultivate new men (Tumblety 208–209).

After the Second World War, Hébertisme remained prominent in French fitness education. David Belle learned the principles from his father. Neither Belle nor other traceurs openly embrace Hébertisme's fascist side, and it is likely that most are unaware of it. However, parkour is

philosophically indebted to Hébertisme, and many traceurs use rhetoric that echoes Vichy's New Man ideology. Hébert's concern that office jobs were sapping French manhood and Vichy's invocations of decadence and decline resonate in Atkinson's interviews with traceurs: "We live like gluttonous slob, so the body becomes that. Most people's goal in life is to have more of everything, cruise around in an SUV, and get shit the easiest way possible. That's not human nature deep down" (181). Like Hébert and Vichy, traceurs appeal for discipline. Hébert's natural training and Vichy's *retour à la terre* are refigured as a break with the simulacra of late capitalism and a re-engagement with the real (Raymen 110). Parkour is heavily male-dominated and borrows Hébert and Vichy's belief that national decline can be combatted through virile "manhood acts" (Kidder 72). Just as with Hébertisme and Vichy's sports culture, the valorization of virile masculinity elides with militarism: "parkour" comes from the Hébertiste phrase "parcours du combattant." Parkour Paris, a major club, foregrounds masculine power when advertising the benefits of parkour, and promises training will unlock untold physical capacities: "L'entraînement au Parkour permet au corps humain de réaliser des performances physiques que l'on ne soupçonne pas" ("Le Parkour"). Such a promise, read with New Man rhetoric in mind, carries eugenic undertones. In sum, while traceurs do not embrace far-right ideologies, many reproduce the discourses of masculinity-in-crisis and demographic decline that attracted French fascists to Hébertisme. They depict a society made slovenly by consumerism, and fetishize the athletic male, returned to its natural state, as its savior.

### **Parkour Fails as Counter-Discourse**

My thesis is that parkour fails counter, to an extent, parkour's Hébertiste inheritance. How? A simple answer is that they do what it says on the tin: they show supposedly heroic men failing. To leave things there, however, would be to miss the complexity of the affective response the videos provoke. Parkour fails are often cringe-inducing or disgusting, but they are also funny. Their humor is key to the challenge they present to parkour's New Man rhetoric. A starting point for thinking about that humor is slapstick. One of the most enduring reflections on slapstick comes from Henri Bergson's *Le Rire*. He argues that laughter is a form of collective censure directed at departures from the natural "élasticité" (18) of life. We laugh at clowns because they show us "du mécanique plaqué sur du vivant" (39). Their rigid gestures and mechanical actions betray our sense that the body should be organic and flexible. Bergson's essay is flawed, but his idea regarding the relationship between the organic and

mechanical has been taken up by critics including Alan Dale, Alex Clayton, Muriel Andrin, and Tom Gunning. They nuance their engagement with Bergson in different ways but agree that blending the mechanical and organic is key to slapstick's humor.

Like Bergson, traceurs valorize the organic and elastic body, but in parkour fails, what we see instead are clunky, out-of-control bodies. We might laugh at traceurs hurtling towards the ground for the same reason Bergson laughs at "Sancho Pança [...] lancé en l'air comme un simple ballon" (59): because the vital subject has turned into mechanical object. Some of the most-viewed parkour fail clips are recorded in video games like *Grand Theft Auto V*; their humor derives from the uncanny appearance of virtual bodies "ragdolling" in the game's unrealistic physics engine. Parkour's engagement with urban environments generates opportunities for Chaplin-esque "gags," which Gunning defines as self-destructive machines that "suddenly and comically assert a counter-will of their own" (138). Many clips involve urban furniture that refuses to cooperate, like a seemingly solid metal railing that crumples under the traceur's weight. We expect to see the body in awe-inspiring harmony with its environment, but instead it becomes a cog in a recalcitrant machine. This "*raideur de mécanique là où l'on voudrait trouver [...] la vivante flexibilité d'une personne*" (Bergson 10) elicits laughter that challenges parkour's rhetoric of a return to our natural suppleness.

One aspect of Bergson's theory that doesn't describe parkour fails is his assertion that slapstick is funny when no one gets hurt. Many parkour fail videos show teeth being knocked out, bones breaking, and blood on the pavement. Clayton notes that while early slapstick films depicted characters immune to harm, more recent comedies have mined humor from pain. They exploit spectators' voyeuristic fascination with pain. "We want to see the injury and we do not want to see; [...] when we see it, we laugh, or wince, or both" (171). Clayton's examples include MTV's *Jackass*, a television program to which parkour fails bear a strong resemblance. *Jackass* follows a group of male friends who do dangerous stunts, and who laugh, and invite their viewers to laugh, at the pain that ensues.

*Jackass* helps us articulate two meanings for the laughter provoked by parkour fails. The first of these is an anti-authoritarian or anti-disciplinarian meaning. As both Clayton and Sean Brayton note, many of *Jackass*'s stunts are anti-bourgeois, both in that they act out working-class revenge on the rich and in that they challenge political correctness. While *Jackass*'s anti-bourgeois ethos chimes with traceurs' revolt against late capitalism, the show is animated by a spirit of cavalier contempt for proprieties, including safety, that is at odds with parkour's Hébertiste valorization of safety, discipline, and knowing your limits (Kidder 115).

Parkour fails are more like *Jackass* than Hébertisme in their insouciant disregard for self-restraint. Many of the failed jumps are so joyfully stupid that they could not have been undertaken by a person who knew their own limits. Repurposing Clayton's reading of *Jackass*, parkour fails, in their sheer misguidedness, serve "as a nose-thumbing challenge to the cotton-wool culture of department stores, risk management, safety regulations and healthy eating" (175). We can add: the ascetic discipline of the New Man.

The second meaning concerns gender. *Jackass* follows a male group and the pain it turns into laughter is male pain. Clayton's examples of pain-oriented slapstick center on male pain, and specifically genital pain, from Ben Stiller's mangled testicles in *There's Something About Mary* to the shocking of Chris Pontius's testicles in *Jackass the Movie*. *Jackass* is preoccupied with masculinity. The group's banter is dominated by discussions of effeminacy and homosexuality, and several stunts involve performances of gender that incite Mary Pagano to compare the hosts to drag kings (137). This might suggest "that their ridiculous antics and abuse of the male body subvert dominant cultural conceptions of white masculinity and patriarchal authority" (Pagano 142), and that parkour fails, in turn, destabilize parkour's rhetoric of masculine empowerment. That reading works to an extent, but the gender politics of *Jackass* are complicated. While maintaining that the show has a burlesque side that subverts gender norms, Brayton positions it in the "white male backlash" that arose in the late 1990's as a response to the advances of the civil rights, gay rights, and feminist movements. He compares *Jackass* to drama films like *Fight Club*, in which white men "dis[play] their wounds as evidence of disempowerment, and [find] a pleasure in exploitations in pain" (Sally Robinson, quoted in Brayton 58). Paradigmatic of this dynamic is the stunt in which Ryan Dunn, wearing a sports bra, enters a kickboxing match with women's world champion, Naoko Kumagai, and, borrowing the title of the segment, gets his "Ass Kicked by a Girl." The sequence shows us "an athletic masculinity asserted at the expense of the feminine [...] sardonically subverted," but it also "presents a literal assault on the white male subject at the hands of a multicultural feminism" (61) that neatly encapsulates the victimhood narrative of the white male backlash. Simon Lindgren and Maxime Lélièvre read *Jackass* as neither "'for' [nor] 'against' the category of hegemonic masculinity" (408), but rather as a dialectical renegotiation of it. And Pagano ultimately concludes that "for all their irreverence [...] the jackasses still hold tight to the keystone of acceptable masculinity: heterosexuality" (142).

This suggests that the spectacle of male injury that we find in parkour fails does not unambiguously challenge parkour's rhetoric of masculine

power. Parkour fails invite us to laugh at putatively strong men in moments of helplessness. The emasculating side of our laughter is underscored by how many clips involve injury or near injury to the traceur's genitals. In one clip in "Ultimate Parkour and Freerunning Fails Compilation," an off-camera voice intones "you almost took your nut off" after a traceur lands straddling a brick wall. Faceplanting in the presence of bemused women is another recurring trope. But while these clips make a mockery of male pride, they don't necessarily destabilize hegemonic masculinity. Lindgren and Lélièvre reference Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's discussion of homosociality to explain emasculating stunts in *Jackass*: "a certain degree of dishonour and degradation can be accepted" and "some boundaries can be allowed to be blurred somewhat, as long as the end result is a strengthening of the social solidarity among men" (408). Moments of emasculation in parkour fails are normally followed by laughter and concern from male friends. The group coalesces around the threatened phallus. The traceur might "almost [take his] nut off," but, crucially, he doesn't, and homosocial bonds emerge intact.

Returning to the sequence from *The Office*, we can see how the aspects of parkour fail humor we've discussed play into its comedy. These bodies are not supple and powerful, but, like the Bergsonian slapstick artist, exaggeratedly rigid. As in *Jackass*, masculinity is tested when Dwight mounts Andy like a rodeo bull and their homosocial play briefly tips over into homoeroticism. But the sequence draws out another side of the relationship between the humor of parkour fails and a crisis of masculinity as well. A 2007 *Newsweek* editorial called *The Office* exemplary of a shift in mainstream American comedy towards "Beta Males." Two of its stars were at the center of that shift. Carell played the titular *Forty-Year-Old Virgin* (2005), and this episode of *The Office* was the first to air after the release of *The Hangover* (2009), which starred Ed Helms as a submissive boyfriend. "Beta Male comedies" center on men who "refuse to grow up, get jobs, get out of their parents' house, get wives, get lives" (Greven 405). Like films characteristic of the white male backlash, they "emphasize the masochistic suffering of the male characters" (406) as a way to visualize a crisis in masculinity, but the manhood that obsesses them is as much about maturity as it is about gender norms. *The Office's* parkour sequence shows us men caught in a state of arrested development. They are adolescent boys playing at adulthood, or adults playing at adolescence. Watching parkour fail compilations after *The Office*, one cannot help noticing how many involve adult men injuring themselves on playground equipment.

Beta Male comedies are generally more progressive in tone than media characteristic of the white male backlash. However, despite these films'



critiques of traditional masculine values, Greven argues that “the anxieties that shape them only impel their ideological efforts to maintain, however fractured, an ultimately coherent and sustainable image of hetero-masculine, white identity” (418). This leads to our conclusion. Parkour fails offer a counterweight to parkour’s Hébertiste inheritance: they problematize the image of the traceur as New Man by showing out-of-control, rigid bodies brutalized by the urban machine they sought to master, and by making the traceur appear emasculated or childlike, rather than a warrior hero. The traceurs in parkour fails evidence a contemporary crisis in masculinity, rather than promising a solution to it, like the supermen doing successful stunts. However, parkour fails fit within a constellation of turn-of-the-century comedies that demonstrate how ambivalent the laughter generated by masculinity-in-crisis can be. As the white male backlash and Beta Male comedies show, such laughter can easily reinforce, rather than destabilize, hegemonic masculinity. It is therefore too simplistic to view parkour fails as simply opposed to the sport’s dominant discourses. That parkour fails are recuperable by the sport’s Hébertiste side is evidenced by the fact that many serious parkour videos incorporate fails (Kidder 177), not for humor or as proof of the traceur’s acceptance of his frailty, but as stages on his path to mastery.

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