Essay title: Considering the interaction *between different art forms* at a specific point in the long twentieth century and what this means for specific examples of theatre and performance.

Introduction.

This essay will consider the interaction between parkour, otherwise known as Art du Déplacement (the art of movement), and several other art forms - theatre, television, cinema, and live commercial performances - between the years 1997 and 2019. The essay will be split into five key sections, with particular focus on the third section, 'The French film industry and parkour', due to its importance in defining parkour's role within other artforms. A key text that will be referred to throughout this essay is Julie Angel's *Breaking the Jump: The Secret Story of Parkour's High-Flying Rebellion* (2016). Online reviews of performances that include parkour will also be referenced when examining what the interaction between parkour and other art forms means for specific examples of theatre and performance, as they offer a critical viewpoint of parkour's inclusion in said performances.

There has been debate about what parkour actually is since its founding in 1982. Whilst parkour's roots are found in parcours du combattant, a style of obstacle course training utilised by the French military and firefighting service, parkour's original name was L'Art du Déplacement, a term coined by Sébastien Foucan in 1997 (Angel, 2016, p.90); Foucan was one of the original nine founders of the discipline. His reasoning behind the name was that "*Déplacement* [translates to] 'the way of movement' and if there were martial arts then there could be 'arts' of movement as well" (Angel, 2016, p.90). For this reason, this essay takes the stance that parkour is an artform.

The early days of parkour and performance (1997-1998).

Whilst parkour was founded in 1982, it wasn't until the late 1990s that it interacted with other performance arts for the first time. Jean-François Belle, the older half-brother of another of the founders, David Belle, took it upon himself to "put together a demo tape of the most impressive moments of his brother and friends" (Angel, 2016, p.84) and shared it with the senior staff of the Parisian fire service. Although the Yamakasi - the chosen name of the group the nine founders had created - cared little for filming their training themselves, Jean-François' tape opened up a world of performance opportunities for the group.

In 1997, at the open day and performance of the special gymnastics unit of the Paris Firefighters, the Yamakasi took to the stage for the first time in front of an audience of over a thousand people. Admittedly, their stage was a metal water tower at the Villeneuve-Saint-Georges fire station, but "for the Yamakasi it was the best day of their lives" (Angel, 2016, p.88). They were able to show off the skills that they had been practicing since the early 1980s in front of an audience that had never seen anything of the sort, and they were able to do it together.

Jean-François also shared the tape with a local television station, and the Yamakasi were asked to perform on the French TV show Stade 2. The group performed a series of movements across their hometowns of Lisses and Evry, showing off their superhuman abilities, whilst Yamakasi members Chau Belle and Sébastien Foucan were interviewed live in the studio. The Yamakasi and their new discipline were described by the presenter as "the future of France" (Stade 2, 1997), and it took less than a day from broadcast for the group to be contacted by Claude Zidi, who would go on to direct the 1999 *Astérix et Obélix* film. The Stade 2 report threw the Yamakasi into the spotlight and it wasn't long before they were in high demand from newspaper reporters, TV presenters and film directors for further performance opportunities. Parkour was the future of performance and the Yamakasi were the group that could offer it.

Parkour in the theatre (1998-2006).

Although "there was no agreed direction in terms of [the Yamakasi's] practice being orientated towards sports or its artistic potential for performance" (Angel, 2016, p.92), French-Canadian choreographer Gilles Maheu and musical theatre lyricist Luc Plamondon saw the Yamakasi and their unique skillset as an opportunity to create a "new and more exciting" show choreography to "match the spectacle and success of musical shows such as […] *Riverdance*" (Angel, 2016, p.93). Plamondon approached the group following their appearance on Stade 2 and invited them to perform in a new show he was working on, titled *Notre Dame de Paris*. He chose not to audition the Yamakasi, instead choosing to visit them in the suburbs of Paris to see them in action for himself. For Plamondon and Maheu, the interaction between the art forms of parkour and musical theatre offered the chance to choreograph unique movement sequences that mixed parkour, dance and aerial acrobatics for a stage musical, the likes of which had never been seen before.

Indeed, even the other performers had never seen anything like it. Angel recounts the moment that the cast realised what the Yamakasi were capable of:

> Once the pair started moving, some of the cast began to understand and appreciate their abilities. Now it made sense. Theirs was another form of physical yet artistic expression […]. There was a level of agility to the movements that Chau and Charles performed which other cast members had never seen before. (Angel, 2016, p.100)

The audience put their own take on it too:

> Some interpreted the movements of the Yamakasi as akin to 'release technique' in contemporary dance whilst others saw it as a new form altogether. In some ways their stage performances were no different to that of the other physical artists on stage. (Angel, 2016, p.104)

For this specific example of theatre and performance, the interaction between parkour and musical theatre assisted with the creation of a theatrical sensation and introduced parkour to a brand-new audience who were able to compare the artform to contemporary dance. The show "[broke] box office records in France and afterwards in Belgium, Canada and Switzerland" and "moved the heart of musical theatre from Broadway to Paris" (Angel, 2016, p.105). The show was listed in the Guinness Book of World Records as "having the most successful first year in the history of musical theatre" (Angel, 2016, p.106) following its 1998 opening, and went on to tour as far away as Quebec, Canada and Las Vegas, USA. It was in Las Vegas in 2000 that Yann Hnautra and Laurent Piemontesi, two of the original Yamakasi members, met the creators of Cirque du Soleil and started the next stage of parkour's interaction with theatre and performance.

It was in 2004 that the Yamakasi officially joined forces with Cirque du Soleil. They produced a short video for an episode of Cirque du Soleil's *Solstrom* (2004) TV show, featuring a parkour foot chase through an airport in an episode titled *Gone with the Winds* (2004), and assisted with the devising of parkour sequences for the live shows *Ká* (Cirque du Soleil, 2004) and *The Beatles LOVE* (Cirque du Soleil, 2006). *Ká* has been described as "the most innovative and thrilling stage production on the planet" (SoulOfAmerica, 2018) whilst critics described *The Beatles LOVE* as a "treat to experience" (SoulOfAmerica, 2019). It is a testament to the work of the Yamakasi, particularly Piemontesi, who worked closely with Cirque du Soleil for a number of years, that both *Ká* and *The Beatles LOVE* are still playing in Las Vegas seventeen and fifteen years (respectively) after they opened. In this specific example of theatre and performance, the interaction of parkour with Cirque du Soleil's unique mix of circus and performance arts created two incredibly successful shows that continue to amaze audiences to this day.

The French film industry and parkour (2000-2004).

Another performance medium that parkour interacted with in the early 2000s was cinema. The Yamakasi were still giving TV interviews regularly during their time performing in *Notre Dame de Paris* and one such interview caught the eye of Luc Besson, director of hit French film *The Big Blue* (1988) and *The Fifth Element* (1997), the latter of which starred Bruce Willis as the protagonist. Besson contacted the group because he had seen what they were capable of and "wanted them to perform their moves in the next film he would produce, *Taxi 2*" (Angel, 2016, p.149), seeing parkour as an opportunity to expand what was possible in the stunt world. Much like Plamondon and Maheu in *Notre Dame de Paris*, Besson saw the interaction between the artforms of parkour and cinema as an exciting opportunity to create unique stunt sequences that had never been seen before on the big screen.

Although *Taxi 2's* critical reviews were poor – James Travers of frenchfilms.org described the film as "frustratingly unsatisfying and ultimately empty" (2002) – *Taxi 2* was the biggest box office success in France in 2000, bringing in an audience of over 10.5 million people (Angel, 2016, p.149). The Yamakasi made little impression on the critics, with David Parkinson of RadioTimes naively describing the group's parkour-based chase sequence as "effectively staged martial arts action" (2001), but Besson felt that their performance in the film had earned them the opportunity to create a film of their own, focused entirely on the Yamakasi and their ability to perform incredible stunts. Whilst "the Yamakasi [never] thought of what they did as stunts", Angel admits that "performing their particular style of 'stunts' was what […] opened the door to [further] filmmaking opportunities" for the Yamakasi (2016, p.149). The interaction between parkour and cinema in *Taxi 2* was a successful one as it led to an entirely parkour-based film.

Until this point, the interaction between parkour and other artforms was limited; parkour was not the focus of any of the specific examples of theatre and performance listed, but rather a commodity that added an extra element of excitement to pre-existing performances. However, as Besson had promised, the time had come for the Yamakasi to work on their own film, titled *Yamakasi: Les samouraïs des temps modernes* (2001). The premise was simple: the Yamakasi would play a group of friends who practiced parkour in the suburbs of Paris and would need to use their parkour skills to steal money to pay for a young boy's heart operation. Parkour would be the heart and soul of the film – without it, the film wouldn't possible. For this specific example of performance, the interaction between cinema and parkour created the world's first parkour-based film, wherein

parkour was a requirement of the narrative rather than an aesthetic practice that brought increased excitement to stunt sequences. Parkour as an artform had grown hugely since the Yamakasi's appearance on Stade 2 in 1997 and was still at the forefront of new and innovative performances across multiple artforms.

Although the interaction between parkour and cinema was a positive one for the film industry – "the film was an overnight box-office success in France", said Angel (2016, p.156) – it was a challenging, even negative experience for the film's main characters, and therefore for parkour. In Angel's book, Yann Hnautra described the Yamakasi's experience working on *Yamakasi: Les samouraïs des temps modernes* (2001) as follows:

> I think we embarked on something we weren't ready for. We hadn't done anything prior; we didn't know how to handle money. We thought everyone was nice and friendly; we thought they were all people of their word (Hnautra, 2016, p.148).

The 'everyone' that Hnuatra was referring to were the film's production team. The Yamakasi and their artform were not respected by the film's production team during their first seven weeks on set, even though it was the art of parkour and the Yamakasi's unique physical skillset that formed the backbone of the film. Angel recounts how when the Yamakasi weren't sleeping on the streets "like homeless bums" 2016, p.153), they "had no dressing room of their own and instead shared one with the costume department and extras which was busy and noisy all day" (2016, p.154). For the stars of a blockbuster movie who were regularly performing incredible acts of strength and physical prowess, this was not the treatment they deserved; indeed, Williams Belle saw the fact that the Yamakasi were capable of these incredible physical and mental feats as the excuse used by the production team to treat them poorly:

> It seemed to [Williams] that just because [the Yamakasi] were strong mentally and had the ability to create something from nothing, it was assumed that they wouldn't expect to be given very much (Angel, 2016, p.155).

Once Williams had realised this and complained to the production team, the Yamakasi were given star treatment in the form of "a dressing room, better food and even massages" (Angel, 2016, p.155). Even though he had been given a hard time, Angel goes on to quote Williams' recollection of his time working on the film: "it's taught me to respect what I do, the art I practise and the person I am" (Belle, 2016, p.155). In this specific example of performance, parkour was effectively

disregarded as a valid artform due to the extraordinary abilities of its participants, and its founders were treated in a manner entirely inappropriate for the stars of a blockbuster movie. It is, however, a testament to the spirit of parkour and the people who founded it that Williams Belle was able to find a way to grow as a result of it, both as a person and as a practitioner of parkour. This growth would not just affect Williams but would also affect the way parkour interacted with other artforms from that point onwards.

Following Besson's success with *Yamakasi: Les samouraïs des temps modernes* (2001) and its sequel, *Les fils du vent* (2004), he decided to write and produce another parkour-based action movie. The success of Besson's previous two parkour-based films and the fact that he wanted to make a third showed just how successful the interaction between parkour and cinema was at this specific point in the long twentieth century – the genre had even been given a new name, "parkour cinema" (Pulver, 2009). David Belle, one of the original Yamakasi members and the person many consider the founder of parkour, had left the group several years before filming had started on *Yamakasi: Les samouraïs des temps modernes* (2001) but was keen to be involved in films, so Besson approached him with a new project, titled *Banlieue 13* (2004). When the film came out it was praised for its stunt work: stars Belle and Cyril Raffaelli rarely used wires or mats for their parkour-heavy action sequences, and the critics rated it highly. Robin Clifford of reelingreviews.com, a well-established (founded in 1995) film review website ran by American TV station MATV, had this to say:

> I haven't seen such innovation and mastery [of physical stunts] since Jackie Chan's younger days, making me hope that this is a renaissance of physical stunts instead of computer gimmickry (2006).

Once again, parkour was at the forefront of cutting-edge developments in other art forms, and was pioneering a "renaissance" (Clifford, 2006) of stunt-based "parkour cinema" (Pulver, 2009). Further examples of parkour cinema (Pulver, 2009) will be reflected upon in Section 5.

Parkour on UK Television (2003-2020).

Parkour's potential to create gripping action sequences was not just utilised by the film industry; the TV industry saw parkour as a performative opportunity to sell new ideas and products to its consumers, or to add extra excitement to a TV show with a pre-existing format (e.g. Top Gear). Whether it was the BBC trying to capture the "new spirit" of BBC One in 2002 (Angel, 2016, p.252), Nike trying to sell their new Presto trainers in 2005, or Canon's #liveforthestory campaign with

popular parkour group STORROR in 2018, television's ability to capture and present dynamic shots of bodies in motion has assisted in the marketing of multiple TV campaigns and programmes.

In a similar manner to parkour, there has been debate about whether TV is an artform. Rudy Bretz asked the following question of what defines TV as art in a journal article titled, 'TV as an Art Form':

> How much of the good program material on television is something which the audience would rather see on the television screen, and how much would they rather see in person at the actual event or performance? (1950, p.160)

Although there is an argument for parkour being best experienced in real time, negating its interaction with TV as an interaction between different artforms, Bretz points out that "exception must be noted in the case of television pick-ups where cameras get a better or closer view than most of [a live] audience" (1950, p.160). It would be incredibly difficult for a live audience to follow a parkour athlete across a complex urban environment (such as the streets of Paris), whereas "the multiple eyes of television" (Bretz, 1950, p.160) allow for seamless viewing of the spectacle. Therefore, as parkour is something which the audience would better see on a television screen, its inclusion in the following example of television validates TV as an artform.

In the early 2000s, extreme sports (previously categorised as lifestyle sports, adventure sports, and action sports) saw a surge in popularity (Raggiotto, 2017) and became a multi-billion dollar industry (NFS-Sport Management, 2017), prompting an increase in marketing and advertising investments in extreme sports (Raggiotto, 2019). The iconic footwear manufacturing company Nike were the first to include parkour in their advertising campaigns in 2003, creating three separate parkour-based videos to sell their Presto trainers: David Belle and Sébastien Foucan each starred in their own video, and David's new team of parkour athletes (known as 'Traceurs') would feature in the third. Although the campaign was comedic in nature and seemed not to take itself seriously – Foucan was chased by an angry chicken in his segment, whilst the Traceurs attempted to catch a scary cat – it "hit gold for Nike" (Angel, 2016, p.231), with the angry chicken segment winning gold at the Cannes Lions International Festival for Creativity in 2003, along with several other awards (Angel, 2016, p.231). In this specific example of parkour interacting with television to create performance, it is clear that the inclusion of parkour within the advertising campaign contributed to its success. Parkour was quickly proving itself to be as adaptable as its practitioners in terms of performance opportunities.

Parkour also made two appearances on the popular UK car show, *Top Gear*. The first was in 2006, when 2 parkour athletes raced James May, who was driving a Peugeot 207, across Liverpool to the

top of the Liver Building. May's goal was to test the Peugeot 207, branded a "city car" (May, 2006), against the "latest French development in urban transport solutions" (May, 2006), commonly known as parkour. In this specific example of performance, parkour was being used to add an extra element of excitement to a show whose audience was long-familiar with the format. This was a tactic that a number of viewers seemed familiar with, sharing comments such as, "Ah yes the Parkour fad of the mid 2000's when every TV show was including parkour even the Bill [sic]" (J.J., 2020).

Parkour appeared again on *Top Gear* in 2013, with London-based parkour athletes Timothy Sheiff and Paul Joseph racing motorcycle trials champion Dougie Lampkin to the top of the former BBC Television Centre. Unfortunately for this example of performance parkour, the "parkour fad of the mid 2000's" (J.J., 2020) had all but died out at this point, and parkour didn't return to TV screens again until 2020, in the forms of *World Chase Tag* (Channel 4) and *Ultimate Tag* (Fox). While both shows utilise parkour to bring excitement to the traditional playground game of tag/tig, the focus is on the competitive capabilities of parkour rather than the performative aspects. Parkour (or a comedic imitation of it) also famously appeared in a 2009 episode of US sitcom *The Office*.

The interaction between parkour and television was the first time that parkour's potential for performance had failed. Although parkour helped Nike achieve commercial success in 2003, once the "parkour fad of the mid 2000's" (J.J., 2020) had died out parkour simply didn't hold the attention of television audiences – they were bored of it, and wanted something new. This is best evidenced by further episodes of *Top Gear* that included races against a mountain climber, an Olympic hurdler, and a team of BMX riders; the UK television industry simply presented whatever was in fashion at the time and moved on to the next fad once the last once had died out.

Mainstream films and conclusion (2006-2019).

Parkour's brief stint interacting with television assisted in cementing parkour's rightful place within the sphere of performance; that place was in the world of cinema, particularly "parkour cinema" (Pulver, 2009). The action-heavy parkour sequences that had won awards for Nike and added extra excitement to a car show were not suited for television, but rather the big screen. Indeed, Clifford's 2006 prediction that the film industry would see a "renaissance of physical stunts" (2006) came true that same year with "the coolest thing anyone in the stunt world had seen for years" (Angel, 2016, p.277), which consisted of Sébastien Foucan being chased up, through, down and across a building site by Daniel Craig in the parkour-based opening chase scene for the new James Bond film, *Casino Royale* (2006). The standard for this new style of parkour-based stunts had come from David Belle's

iconic opening chase scene (Angel, 2016, p.278) in *Banlieue 13* (2004). Belle continued his career in "parkour cinema" (Pulver, 2009) with the films *Babylon A.D.* (2008), starring Vin Diesel of *Fast & Furious* fame; *District 13: Ultimatum* (2009); and *Brick Mansions* (2014), starring the late Paul Walker, also of *Fast & Furious* fame. Amongst the other big names involved in "parkour cinema" (Pulver, 2009) are Michael Bay, director of the *Transformers* movie franchise, and Ryan Reynolds, specifically for their work with the popular parkour collective STORROR on the 2019 film, *6 Underground*. It was Michael Bay himself who approached STORROR for the project, having seen one of their viral POV (point-of-view) parkour YouTube videos and realising that this style of parkour would continue to be the future of action cinema.

Interest in the interaction between parkour and other artforms has only grown since the Yamakasi's performance at the 1997 open day for the special gymnastics unit of the Paris Firefighters. Whilst the interaction between parkour and television was short-lived, the interactions between parkour and theatre and parkour and film continue to draw in audiences from around the world, cementing parkour as an artform based on carefully-measured risk that can be used to keep an audience on the edge of their seats. Parkour's future within the world of theatre and performance seemingly lies mostly in stunt work for action movies, perhaps with the occasional TV commercial and the ongoing Cirque du Soleil shows *Ká* (2004) and *The Beatles LOVE* (2006).

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