Walking through Ruins
as Practice of Re-Signification Territories

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ABSTRACT

Starting from the perspective of Tim Edensor (2008), who describes the aesthetic-perceptual possibilities of walking through ruins, an attempt will be made here to respond to the twofold criticality of contemporary reality: on the one hand the political control over bodies that are inhibited in the act of walking, and on the other the progressive impoverishment of the perception of the body in the surrounding environment. The intention is to verify the possibility of walking through ruins as a practice of re-empowering the body and re-signifying territories, understood as a place of experimentation. The methodology is divided into two phases. First, the act of walking through ruins will be considered in opposition to tourist walking, thus highlighting the break with linear and sequential logic, and opposition to the mechanisms of oriented-consumption of places. Second, walking through ruins will be compared with the practice of parkour, thus demonstrating the possibility of creative, free and anarchic movement improvisation offered by this particular type of walking.

KEYWORDS

Walking through ruins, Inhibition of bodies, Industrial archaeology, Parkour

RÉSUMÉ

Partant de la perspective de Tim Edensor (2008), qui décrit les possibilités esthétiques et perceptives de la marche dans les ruines, on tentera ici de répondre à la double criticité de la réalité contemporaine : d'une part le contrôle politique sur les corps inhibés dans l'acte de marcher, d'autre part l'appauvrissement progressif de la perception du corps dans l'environnement proche. L'intention est de vérifier la possibilité de marcher à travers les ruines comme une pratique de réactivation du corps et de re-signification des territoires, compris comme lieux d'expérimentation. La méthodologie s'articule en deux phases. Premièrement, l'acte de marcher à travers les ruines sera considéré en opposition à la marche touristique, soulignant ainsi la rupture avec la logique linéaire et séquentielle, et l'opposition aux mécanismes de consommation orientée des lieux. Deuxièmement, la marche à travers les ruines sera comparée à la pratique du parkour, démontrant ainsi la possibilité d'improvisation de mouvements créatifs, libres et anarchiques offerte par ce type particulier de marche.

MOTS CLÉS

marcher à travers les ruines, inhibition des corps, archéologie industrielle, parkour

According to Richard Sennett *Flesh and Stone*, the experience of walking through Western cities has been progressively weakened particularly through control over bodies as an expression of political power (1994). In fact, walking is constrained by regulatory procedures: while CCTV[1] cameras monitor pedestrians' activities and routes –making them feel under surveillance and preventing them from loitering practices or playing in the street– there are behavioural conventions internalised by pedestrians themselves. "These conventions govern how and where one may walk […]. People wandering through cities are expected to walk at moderate pace and to progress in a linear fashion […]. Not only is deviation from normative modes of walking met with disapproving glares and comments; these modes are also cultivated by self-monitoring, through an embodied self-awareness which delimits the range of potential manoeuvres, gestures and styles" (Edensor, 2008).

Another expression of political power, according to Sennett (2014), concerns the sensory flattening of bodies in the environment: in order for people to be focused on functional movement from point A to point B, their wandering in the city becomes a rapid transit without arousal.

Lastly, today the bodily perception of the environment is even more mortified by the advent of technology, and we are in danger of being only half-awake in our ambling: "Increasingly, we are transforming ourselves into technomads –wanderers *via* the prosthetic eyes, ears and limbs of technology as opposed to those of the walking body. Further, we are courting the risk of becoming technobodies where the body-environment relation is entirely reconstructed *via* the medium of technology, or where the body itself is greatly eclipsed" (Macauley, 2000).

With respect to this overview, Edensor introduces walking through industrial ruins as an experimental practice aimed instead at destabilising the body (2008). This scenario, through a particular type of contemporary ruins, opens up articulated perceptual possibilities, due to the fact that they can be walked through, and not only contemplated like romantic ruins. It offers possibilities of improvised movement to the body that walks through them. These places also boast special sensory characteristics, because they are made of unusual materialities that constantly generate afforances. Finally, the industrial ruins represent the outcome of disused production mechanisms and show assembly lines and gears chained together in rigid sequences; for this reason they can easily be traced back to the automation of bodies, impoverished in their perception.

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1   Closed-circuit television.

According to these premises, the article intends to demonstrate *walking through ruins* as an aesthetic practice of experimentation, but also of re-signification of territories. In the first sense, in fact, the practice is aimed at the exercise of new perceptive modalities capable of reawakening atrophied bodies, with a view to a pedagogical approach to territories aimed at learning from them. In the second meaning, *walking through ruins* is understood as a practice that enacts a creative and anarchic re-signification of territories, in the pedagogical perspective of being able to teach territories to let themselves be transformed by new, unusual, free modes of use.

The methodology is divided into two phases: Firstly, an attempt will be made to outline this practice as opposed to tourist walking; secondly, the potential of this approach will be demonstrated by comparing it with parkour as a practice of creative re-signification of space.

BEYOND VISUAL CONSUMPTION AND SEQUENTIAL LOGIC

Walking through ruins as an aesthetic practice can be better understood especially if analysed in opposition to tourist walking in industrial sites, for at least two reasons. The first is related to a visual and controlled consumption of places; the second concerns the non-sequential organisation of these devastated territories, which generates a particular emotional value.

Before the 1970s, industrial wastelands were considered landscapes to be erased, so much so that landscape projects envisaged the dismantling of the old devastation. Thanks to Smithson's work *A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic*, the strange objects of a suburban industrial landscape in Passaic have been elevated to the rank of "monuments": these living presences of a dissolving spaces or almost natural elements that have become part of the landscape. The author's narration ironically juxtaposes with the accounts of 19th century travellers' experiences in discovering faraway lands (Careri, 2006), thus triggering a real process of transformation of industrial ruins into new icons of the contemporary sense of the sublime –the object of an evocative semantic potential equal to that aroused by the effigies of Bomarzo or the ruins of landscape parks such as Fountains Abbey (fig. 1).

Figure 1. New icons of the contemporary sublime. Diptych of two works in comparison. On the left *Landscape with Ruined Tower* by Thomas Cole, 1832-36; On the right *Pozzo Faina, Montevecchio, Sardinia, Italy* by Sardegna Abbandonata, 2022

As Latz argues, there is a different semantic and figurative value to be attributed to such removed landscapes: The new ruins are remnants abandoned by production processes that configure an environment in which "instead of mountain peaks, technological mountain ranges serve as a reference point in orientation within chaotic urban spaces. Their peaks create a visual and aesthetic control of space that has never seemed possible in these environments" (2004). Through this new aesthetic awareness, industrial ruins become identifying objects and landmarks of the territory and, for this reason, are now recognised as pieces of cultural heritage. To prove this, we need only to think of the many tourist routes developed to upgrade the material heritage of the territories that host these "monuments" of contemporaneity.

Against this attitude, *walking through ruins* as a practice or experimentation does not intend the industrial heritage as an object of tourism. This is because the tourist space is designed to eliminate extraneous and chaotic elements and reduce the visual and functional forms of the ruins to a few key images. Tourists take possession of the objects and the environment, even from a distance, and are led to a precise visual, oriented consumption of the place (Edensor, 2008). Conversely, ruins not only predispose the body in an attitude of movement freedom by exposing it to the possibility of improvisation, but they also bring the body which passes through them into a condition of global sensorial listening.

At the same time, against the landscape project or tourist trail aimed at reevaluating the industrial archaeological heritage, walking through ruins as a practice offers the possibility of experiencing spaces governed by a non-sequential and non-linear, chaotic, and labyrinthine logic. Non-linearity depends on the historical organisation of industrial sites. All this, by requiring the hierarchical and sequential assembly of spaces to accommodate production lines, follows a precise linearity that is now fragmented and destroyed. The circuits are broken and due to the fractured production lines "in the face of collapsing walls, doors, the choice of path is arbitrary and open to different solutions" (*ibid.*). Secondly, since the regulatory system of production remains largely unknown and unfamiliar, former industrial sites are perceived as cluttered, a profusion of information that cannot be decoded. The chaotic appearance of industrial areas, the confusion of elements and hierarchical grids contradict the traditional expectations of urban environments, rendering industrial sites devoid of comprehensible patterns of orientation.

If, therefore, the post-industrial landscape is read as chaos and a lack of spatial directions, in the symbolic imaginary, it implicitly refers to the labyrinth archetype, "the rationality of which remains in the hidden sources of myth" (Latz, 2004). And so a new emotional meaning of this kind of place also emerges, linked to its specific contradictory nature that engenders a feeling of reverence and fear: "The fear of not being able to see the end, of not knowing the way out, can be both fascinating and a challenge in terms of mental penetration of the system, similar to the concept of finding the path within the mythical forest" (*ibid.*). Ruins, to this effect, would also predispose bodies to an emotional or affective listening to surroundings environment.

AFFINITY WITH PARKOUR PRACTICE

We have highlighted the labyrinthine character of former industrial sites, dwelling on how, in the act of walking through disorienting spaces, the body is free to choose paths, diversions or different modes of relationship with space. Not far from this, one can note an initial parallelism between the practice of walking through ruins and parkour or "art du déplacement".

In this regard, an example could be the urban context of the discipline's birth and development: the disorganised labyrinth of neighbourhoods, streets, buildings and landings typical of the *villes nouvelles* built in France since the second half of the 1970s. Housing units are often connected to common spaces and then, only through these, to the public space of the street system, thanks to a complex apparatus of staircases, landings, raised walkways, etc.

If, on the one hand, an individual wishing to move from point A to point B uses this labyrinth characterised by a linear and sequential logic, the *traceurs*, on the other hand, considering stairs and walkways as impediments to a direct crossing of space, transform them into material support for a more rapid, fluid, creative crossing of space (fig. 2). Thus, because *traceurs* have the ability to creatively read urban context to turn obstacles into resources, at the core of parkour is not the goal to be achieved, but the movement through the environment as a goal in itself (Ferrero Camoletto & Genova, 2017), just as in the practice of walking through ruins.

Figure 2. Non-sequential motion diagram
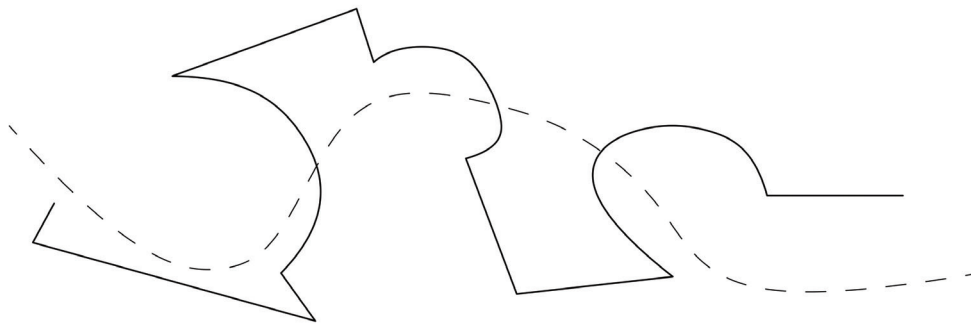
To this effect, *traceurs* act as if "urban space were re-embodied" (Geyh, 2006). Thus, their performance results in a sensory re-socialisation that stages an embodied competence, generating a different, more instinctual relationship with the environment (Ferrero Camoletto & Genova, 2017). This mechanism allows them to develop a more immediate relationship with space, i.e. less conditioned by mediations. Similarly in the ruin, "an awareness of physical dangers develops a more sensually attuned body which takes account of, and learns how to negotiate, risky space. […] In the gloom, tentative progress is facilitated by sudden awareness of a delicate, improvisational balancing of the body, movement that needs to feel its way across unpredictable space, keeping in touch with surroundings" (Edensor, 2008). Walking through ruins and parkour both foster an increased sensitivity to matter and space: a deeper, non-cognitive, sensual appreciation relationship that takes shape through a greater sense of bodily balance (fig. 3).

Furthermore, parkour makes the relationship between body and space more dynamic, converting the latter into a playground. The expressive and playful movement of the body, typical of childhood, is reactivated through a renewed motor and expressive awareness. That triggers a primitive reappropriation of space, which is experienced through unusual and free dynamics of movement (fig. 4). Similarly "ruins are alternative playgrounds for children and adults outside the over-determined, narrow, striated orders of adult being, adult spaces and adult assemblages" (*ibid.*). Parkour sites are thus spaces of play, capable of revealing power dynamics present in architectural and urban spaces, reflecting social and cultural patterns imposed by authorities. The same can be said of the traversed space of ruins. These unsupervised spaces, full of risk, clash with the regulated, recreational spaces of the more ordered world outside –that is with officially designated playgrounds, but also with industrial heritage enhancement tourist trails or purpose-built parkour sports parks, which impede the mode of exploration, re-signification and appropriation of space typical of these practices.

Therefore the fundamental aspect of this parallelism between the two practices lies in the potential for creative resignification of territories. In parkour, bodies move through space while generating space, in the instantaneous act of creating new potential connections between objects and portions of architecture. In a broader sense, according to Michel de Certeau's idea of "invention du quotidien" (1990), i.e. about *rewriting of the urban text* –from which the term *traceur* also derives–, it exists a desire for individual and collective affirmation, and a participatory action in public space through tactics which opposes the imposition of a system of choices derived from above.

Figure 3. Sensitivity to matter and space due to an increased sense of body balance. Diptych of two photographs showing the parallelism between practice of walking through ruins and parkour. On the left photo by Alberta Piselli, on the right by Alexandre Chamelat

Figure 4. Primitive reappropriation of space. Diptych of two photographs showing the parallelism between practice of walking through ruins and parkour. On the left photo by Alberta Piselli, on the right by Alexandre Chamelat

CONCLUSIONS

Re-signifying the territory means attributing new modes of use to a space, thus freeing it from certain predetermined constraints and institutional patterns of use. It means being open to the idea of being able to transform territories thanks to a new body of spontaneous practices and revitalise certain "weaker" places that appear as residual.

What we intend to support is the possibility for the practice of *walking through ruins* to implement a reinterpretation of space, so that it takes on connotations, meanings and possibilities of use different from the ordinary. This resignification of space is strongly associated with the desire to reaffirm the body –in its freedom of movement and capacity for sensory perception– with respect to the system of motor choices imposed by the contemporary city.

The practice, therefore, could become a model potentially exported in the context of urban public space, where action is needed to counter the process of anaesthetization of pedestrian environments. "Making body, taking body and giving body", suggests Rachel Thomas, where by "taking body" she means precisely keeping the body in training through exercises of destabilisation, disequilibrium, exaggeration of gestures, generators of greater awareness (2011). If in fact the atmosphere modifies the

behaviour of bodies, which in turn modifies the environment, then there is a potential for project: through the adjustment of our attitudes, in small steps, we can perhaps modify the environment of our streets as well (Thibaud, 2015).

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