On the Run – Contesting Urban Boundaries

by Lukas Feireiss

"It will be the seventh wave that takes us to the point of no return." (Henrie "Papillon" Charriere)

Up Against the Wall

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A wall is usually a solid structure that defines and sometimes protects an area. Thus, most commonly, a wall divides space. More to the point, a wall marks a defined space against an otherwise open space and provides protection against intrusion. From ancient to modern times, walls have been erected around settlements to defend the inhabitants from potential aggressors. Such walls were essential to the constitution of a city. Beyond their defensive value, city walls also had important symbolic functions, representing the status and independence of the communities they embraced. However, walls can also turn against those who live within their limits. The inverted fortification can also prevent the crossing of the city's boundaries by its inhabitants, creating a prison-like environment of restriction and surveillance. These new frontiers within the city do not necessarily need to be manifested as walls, barriers and other physical obstacles to be experienced as an incontrovertible fact of every day life.

Breakout

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Numerous visible and non-visible borderlines run through every city. These lines of spatial confinement rigorously segment the urban environment and trace a patchwork of natural, geo-metric, economic, political, cultural and ethnic territories. In this process, architecture and urbanism act as a means of dissolving territorial boundaries within the city as well as strategic weapons at the level of the built environment. Such involuntary spatial-social militarization and insulation naturally generates a culture of resistance and upheaval. An Edmond-Dantès- esque-will to "break on through to the other side" and escape the secluded system becomes the main driving force for those trapped in an enclave.

Battle Mode

Trans-boundary ambitions can be channeled in very different ways. The 1992 Los Angeles riots following the Rodney King trial verdict and the civil conflagration across France after the death of two teenagers near Paris in 2005 are perfect examples: they indisputably mark the social frontiers of inequality within urban areas in the moment of their violent trespassing as well as demonstrate the destructive potential of inner city uprisings. Urban areas around the world are not only targets of international terrorism but are also targeted from within. The violent clashes, looting of businesses and burning of cars and public buildings in LA as well as in Paris finally led to military operations on urban terrain to quell the disor-der. In both cases, the violence predominantly occurred in underprivileged neighborhoods. It is especially in these areas that the demarcation lines are felt most powerfully within the city and it is exactly in such areas that the counterstrikes usually hit-hardest.

Relentless Rhymes

The extraordinary commercial success of hip-hop music since the early 1990s until now illus-trates another form of traversing borderlines within both city and society. Yet it is not the action but the explicit lyrics that rampage against social frontiers. Poverty-stricken inner city areas with their brutal housing blocks are the natural backdrops for the rap game. Hip-hop music is an essentially urban phenomenon that draws its credibility from being embedded in merciless cityscapes. Another basic requirement is an almost tribal affilia-tion to a certain city, district or gang. "Gangsta" rap, with its blatant lyrical focusing on sex, crime, violence and gang life, has proven to be the most popular and lucrative sub-genre of hip-hop by far - particularly across a predominantly white teenage audience. The triumphal procession of ghetto codes and inner urban modes of behavior manifest in almost

every household with a TV or radio across the world, can not be hold back anymore. As Ice-T put it in his 1993, when he released his album Home Invasion: "I'm takin' your kid's brains, you aint getting'em back /…/ I'm gonna fill'em with hard drums / Big drums, bitches, hos and death, come on and get some"

Ghetto Superstar
Poor urban areas, where people — usually from specific racial or ethnic backgrounds — live more or less in seclusion from the other inhabitants of the city are commonly called "ghettos". The term historically refers to the Venetian ghetto of the early 16th century, where Jews where required to live and work. Around the ghetto stood walls, which its residents were not allowed to leave without special permission. A genuine ghetto superstar who breaks the containment walls and threatens the established barriers of segregation is the legendary Golem in Jewish folklore: an animated being crafted from inanimate material by Rabbi Judah Loew in the 16th century to defend the Prague's Josefov ghetto from anti-Semitic attack.

Escape from New York
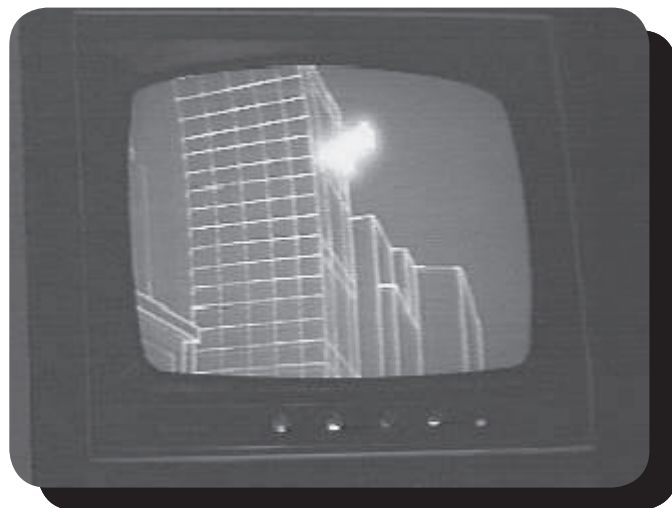
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The urban imprisonment idea is taken to the extreme in John Carpenter's 1981 science fiction cult movie Escape from New York. In a bizarre perversion of Albert Camus' 1947 novel La Peste, in which an entire city is placed under quarantine because of an epidemic, the government in Carpenter's movie turns the whole of Manhattan Island into a maximum-security prison by building a wall around it because of an overwhelming wave of crime plagued pre-Guiliani New York. Set in the dystopian future of 1997 in the midst of World War III, three million convicted criminals live inside the city walls without any guards. All escapees are ruthlessly shot on sight. A crisis arises when Air Force One is hijacked by suicidal terrorists who crash the airplane inside the city in a disturbing anticipation of the 9/11 attacks. In return for a full pardon the dangerous convict and highly decorated Special Forces veteran "Snake" Plissken agrees to enter the city and retrieve the President. To assure the completion of the mission, explosives are lodged in his arteries and will detonate if he fails to rescue the President within 24 hours. A hazardous passage through the city's means streets sees him fighting battles and encountering numerous obstacles before he finally returns to safety. The various confinements within the city are painfully felt.

Urban Free Flow

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Whereas "Snake" Plissken's tour-de-force through the anarchic city is marked by a rather brutish engagement with his surroundings, the main protagonist of the newly released French action movie District B 13 moves fluidly through an equally menacing urban environment consisting of brute concrete housing blocks. In Philip Morel's B-13, Carpenter's storyline of a metropolitan detention zone is transposed to the near future, in which the government builds a massive wall around the Paris suburbs due to the out-of-control crime rate. An undercover cop and an ex-thug infiltrate the detention-ghetto in order to defuse a neutron bomb. As in Escape from New York, the protagonists are under the pressure of a deadline at which time a bomb detonates. In the wake of the aforementioned violence in France, B-13 has become unexpectedly topical as a social commentary. The movie stands out for its ingenious depiction of the struggles over boundaries across the city's surface through the practice of Parkour. Parkour or Free Running is characterized by the running, jumping, vaulting, twisting and climbing of the Traceur engaged in Parkour across a given urbanscape, taking architectural obstacles as opportunities and actively redefining the built environment as a concrete playground of enormous potential. With this experimental access to the city, certainties of how to perceive and use the urban space are put into question and the hidden potentialities of the invaded spaces are played out. The Traceur's confrontation with the city dissolves all its boundaries and establishes an alternative understanding of space as a form that facilitates movement.

Marvelous Ways

A similar approach can be noted in the way superheroes engage with the urban environment. Thanks to their numinous powers they move free from any gravitational restrictions through the city -their favored play-and battleground. Superheroes are generally depicted against a city skyline resting high above the streets on some cornice watching the urban terrain below, ready to launch into the urban canyons anytime. Superhero-action almost unexceptionally occurs in urban areas. Just imagine Batman without the infamous Gotham City or Superman without Metropolis. The ultimate supernatural contester of city limits and urban boundaries however is Peter Parker, the timid suburb teenager who balances his personal struggles with his heroic exploits as Spiderman. By performing agilely over, under, around and through all obstacles in his way and adapting his movements to any given situation the city discloses itself to Spiderman and he becomes the true apotheosis of the Traceur.

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