Original Article

Parkour, Graffiti, and the Politics of (In)Visibility in Aestheticized Cityscapes

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Abstract

In the past decades, urban scholars have discussed at length how the production of aesthetically pleasing and consumption-enticing cityscapes has become the core of postindustrial urban economies. Critical analyses have underlined how the "dictatorship of the visual" characterizing these urban processes implies the expulsion from public life of "unacceptable" differences and conflicts within. While fundamental, these perspectives have not fully engaged with a variety of urban practices and groups that are simultaneously addressed by urban leaderships as *visible* assets and threats for image-based redevelopment processes. Drawing on two ethnographic studies in Turin and Bologna, Italy, this article contributes to address this gap by focusing on parkour and graffiti's ambiguous and controversial positions in these rebranding cities. By addressing how traceurs and writers reconciled and negotiated their positioning within image-led urban redevelopment processes, this article expands existing discussions on the nexus between (in)visibility, publicness, embodied geographies, and aestheticized cityscapes.

Keywords

parkour, graffiti, (in)visibility, embodied geographies, aestheticized cityscapes, Turin, Bologna

Introduction

In the past three decades, urban scholars have discussed at length how the production of aesthetically pleasing, leisure-oriented, and consumption-enticing cityscapes has become a key driver of urban growth and transformation. With the image of cities increasingly playing a crucial role in attracting investors, tourists, and taxpayers, power has not only manifested through the production of (urban) space, but also through the capacity "to impose a vision on space" (Zukin, 1997, p. 226). Several authors have thus underlined how managing cities as aesthetic landscapes of leisure is a highly excluding process, even when framed through urban agendas that celebrate (multi)culture, the arts, and urban diversity (Binnie et al., 2006; Deutsche, 1996; Mould, 2015; Zukin, 1997). Further contributions underlined how the strategies of spatial and moral ordering

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that govern contemporary beautified cityscapes do not simply hide and displace "unacceptable" differences and conflicts from public life. They often *make them visible* through enhanced surveillance practices aiming to sort both the desirable and abject bodies in urban spaces; the latter being usually identified as those who cannot, or will not contribute to the symbolic, cultural, and aesthetic capital of a city (e.g., the homeless and urban poor, undocumented migrants, political activists, and "disruptive" youth; Coleman, 2009; De Martini Ugolotti and Silk, 2018). Contributing to these discussions, scholars have focused on the far-from-linear relationship between visibility, agency, and surveillance in urban spaces (Brighenti, 2013; De Backer, 2018; Langegger & Koester, 2016; Tonnelat, 2008). These analyses have underlined how social recognition and control constantly feed and blur into each other when relating to issues of visibility in contemporary cities.

The academic perspectives here briefly addressed have been important in highlighting how visibility, as "the practice to see and be seen" (Brighenti, 2007, p. 324) constitutes a crucial domain to understand contemporary, unequal experiences of urban life. Yet at present, scholars have mostly addressed this topic by unpacking the exclusive implications of urban leaders' visions over space, or by engaging with marginal groups (e.g., the homeless, street vendors, disenfranchised youth, and undocumented migrants) who daily navigate them. While needed, these discussions have left to explore how urban practices and groups that are more ambivalently positioned within image-based processes of urban development address the "dictatorship of the visual" (Broudehoux, 2015) characterizing most contemporary cities. Aiming to address this gap, this article focuses on two urban practices that occupy rather ambiguous and controversial positions in urban debates and regeneration processes: parkour and graffiti. These urban practices imply different forms of engagement with the city, with the literature highlighting how *traceurs* (parkour practitioners) and graffiti writers often adopt different attitudes toward urban authorities and legality. However, in this article, we focus on some important and so far under-explored resonances across traceurs and writers' attempts to negotiate their "ways of doing" in cities increasingly managed as "a spectacle to be seen" (Garrett, 2014, p. 4).

By exploring these practices' ambivalent positioning across definitions of what is (il)legitimate, (un)desirable, and (extra)ordinary in contemporary cityscapes, this article offers a unique perspective that complements and complicates existing analyses surrounding parkour, graffiti, and their cultural politics in regenerating cities. The following sections will address existing academic debates on parkour and graffiti and will provide an overview of the research contexts and methodological approach; the article will then turn to discuss the data and their relevance to address the nexus between publicness, (in)visibility, and power in aestheticized and uneven urban contexts.

Parkour, Graffiti, and Urban Assemblages

In its essence, parkour can be described as a way to cross urban spaces in unexpected and non-prescribed ways using a dynamic bodily engagement with the urban environment (Loo & Bunnell, 2018). Traceurs traverse uneven urban terrains by running, jumping, climbing, and vaulting across, through, and beneath obstacles in the urban landscape. This form of urban movement, that in a couple of decades transformed from an obscure discipline practiced in French urban peripheries to a global phenomenon, have stirred as much awe as controversies since its inception (Kidder, 2017). As such, traceurs' spontaneous, and at times spectacular transformation of urban spaces in open-air playgrounds have been met by widespread concerns over risk, safety, and "acceptable" uses of the city (Gilchrist & Osborn, 2017).

Interestingly, whereas parkour represents an urban practice that aims to "leave no trace" on urban surfaces (Ameel & Tani, 2012), graffiti writing basically consists in the production of legal or illegal drawings and writings in public places, mainly but not limited to using acrylic spray

cans (Brighenti, 2010a). Moreover, while traceurs have been generally described as proactively seeking legitimacy and social acceptance (Ferrero Camoletto, Sterchele & Genova, 2015; Kidder, 2017; Loo & Bunnell, 2018), writers have been consistently addressed as "members of a generally defiant urban subculture" (Romero, 2018, p. 4). Historically, urban leaderships have thus approached graffiti as a "transgressive invasion into the normative patterns of urban living that will have pernicious effects if it is left unchecked" (McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011, p. 131). In this sense, although traceurs have often been labeled as deviant, reckless, irresponsible, or "antisocial" in urban contexts, the regulation of parkour has been generally less stringent than the zero-tolerance approaches usually enacted upon writers (Gilchrist & Osborn, 2017; McAuliffe, 2013; Mould, 2015).

Despite their differences, both parkour and graffiti constitute embodied and emplaced practices that are concerned with the (temporary) redefinition of urban spaces. For this reason, traceurs and writers have been generally described as challenging in diverse ways the status quo inscribed in cities by urban planners and developers (Atkinson, 2009; Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Iveson, 2010; Mould, 2015). However, more recently, city-leaders' growing appreciation for creativity as a means of place-branding unveiled a much more collaborative relationship between traceurs, writers, and urban elites (Kramer, 2010; Romero, 2018; De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). Apart from calls to discuss graffiti and parkour beyond binary categories (e.g., crime/art; commodity/resistance, see McAuliffe & Iveson, 2011, De Martini Ugolotti, and Silk, 2018), the ways traceurs and writers negotiate and reconcile their ambiguous positioning within processes of image-led urban (re)development have not yet been fully explored in the literature. We contend that addressing these questions can shed some significant light on the less-than-coherent constitution and negotiation of beautified, creative, and decor-oriented forms of urban regeneration.

In addressing this discussion, this article engages with Turin and Bologna as cities constantly (re)assembled by urban policies, everyday practices, technologies, and materialities (Farías, 2011; McFarlane, 2011). We put into dialogue these perspectives, with Low's conceptualization of *embodied space* (Low, 2017), to address how the entanglement of everyday practices, embodied intensities, meanings, and urban infrastructures and materialities produce social relations, places, and landscapes. The notion of embodied space underlines the importance of bodily movement and everyday practices as "mobile spatial fields" (Low, 2017) that shape the creation of localities and become sites of intimate yet trans-local urban experiences and politics. We draw on and expand these conceptualizations in this article through the thick and sensuous domain of the (in)visible, as a register of urban life through which "the denial of recognition and the possibility of resistance" (Brighenti, 2013, p. xix) are always ambiguously played out. Therefore, we focus on the politics of (in)visibility that unfolds at the intersection of relations of perception and relations of power (Brighenti, 2007) in urban spaces to explore what spatial and social relations and what kind of places and cities emerge when traceurs' moves and writers' marks are not visible, or at least, *not by everyone*. In this way, this article makes a dual contribution that expands current debates on graffiti and parkour's spatial politics, and addresses (in)visibility as a constitutive element of urban life through which traceurs and writers participate in the making, remaking, and unmaking of dominant, aestheticized, urban visions.

Research Context: Turin and Bologna

The cities of Turin and Bologna in Italy represent meaningful sites to explore how concerns regarding the construction (or maintenance) of an attractive city-image have widely shaped urban life, politics, and governance in the past decades. Therefore, while focusing on two Italian cities, the issues discussed here resonate with international contexts and processes (Vanolo, 2017).

Turin, in Northwest Italy, is a postindustrial city that since the 1990s has engaged in a process of rebranding as an international hub of culture, innovation, and tourism (Capello & Semi, 2018).

A substantial feature of this process regarded the revitalization of the city's industrial heritage and peripheries through the promotion of a range of creative urban practices and industries (Bertacchini & Pazzola, 2015; Bertacchini, Pazzola & Puletti, 2022). These efforts usually mobilized public–private support in hosting open-air street-art museums, events, and cultural/social projects, such as *Murarte*. The latter has been promoting from 1999 the presence of legal graffiti in Turin as a way to "support the interaction between youth creativity, cultural production and urban re-qualification" (Città di Torino, 2021). The *Murarte* project promotes the "legitimation of *some* youth artistic practices as low-cost initiatives of urban re-qualification" (Città di Torino, 2021, emphasis added), and the development of a public awareness on "the deep difference between the *vandalistic* writing/tag and the *artistic* graffiti/street art" (Città di Torino, 2021, emphasis added). This distinction enabled local authorities to capitalize on graffiti's cultural "edge" as a place-branding *asset*, while increasing penalties for unauthorized writers and enhancing efforts to identify and remove unsanctioned graffiti. The city's relationship with parkour has arguably followed a comparable trend. The municipality has supported official events organized by the local parkour association (Parkour Torino) in "creative hubs" such as *Parco Dora* and, in 2017, the city's Tourism Office featured vaulting traceurs in its promotional videos (De Martini Ugolotti, 2017). Nevertheless, parkour trainings outside of sanctioned spatial-temporal frames (e.g., events/demonstrations, parkour gyms, and "creative hubs") continue to stir concerns around public decorum and the questioning/removal of traceurs from public spaces (De Martini Ugolotti and Silk, 2018; Ferrero Camoletto and Genova, 2019).

Different from Turin, Bologna did not have to reinvent itself as a cultural and touristic hub due to a well-established global image as a city of history, academia, and (counter)culture (Giovanardi & Silvagni, 2021). Nevertheless, at the start of the 21st century, Bologna's urban leaderships addressed the deindustrialization of its peripheries by increasing their investment in the city's attractiveness for international tourism. This coincided with escalating concerns regarding the "urban decay" of the historic city-center and peripheral areas as detrimental to the city's image as a global tourist destination (Bergamaschi et al., 2014). Public discussions on the distinction between "art" and "graphic vandalism" thus converged with the policing and removal of political activists, the urban poor, and informal youth gatherings from urban spaces to preserve urban order and image (Lupoli & Miniato, 2018). Concurrently, Bologna's urban leadership espoused graffiti and street-art's "museification" to maintain the city's (counter) cultural edge and touristic appeal; in 2016, the ticketed exhibition "Street Art: Banksy & Co." included iconic graffiti works that had been physically removed from walls to be "preserved and transmitted to future generations" (Mazzucchelli, 2017, p. 35). Having had some of his pieces "preserved" in the exhibition without permission, Bologna-based street artist Blu covered with gray paint all his remaining works in the city with the support of local activists. This intervention sparked citywide and international debates through an "iconoclast" gesture (Mazzucchelli, 2017) that denounced Bologna's leadership's hypocritical approaches toward urban (sub)cultures and activism.

The city's relationship with parkour could only apparently seem less ambivalent. Since the 2010s, Bologna's municipality included the discipline as a tool of urban re-qualification and youth inclusion through partnerships with the local parkour association (Eden Parkour) and other third-sector organizations (Comune di Bologna, 2019). In this period, Eden Parkour secured a loan-for-use agreement with the owner of a dismissed warehouse to open and manage one of the largest indoor parkour and urban sports park in Europe: Eden Park. Bologna's center-left municipality repeatedly praised the park's presence and social activities as key elements in the regeneration of one of the city's "infamous" peripheral neighborhoods. However, the neighborhood re-qualification to which the traceurs arguably contributed eventually translated in their displacement from the indoor park. This happened when a corporate actor bought the building hosting Eden Park (now located in an "up and coming" neighborhood) and evicted all the organizations that animated the place.

Overall, this section highlighted how Turin and Bologna's urban leaderships approached parkour and graffiti as part of wider and ongoing processes of city-branding and concerns regarding urban image and decorum. The remainder of this article will now turn to address how traceurs and writers' engagements with these urban visions can enrich existing discussions surrounding (in)visibility, power, and aestheticized processes of urban renewal.

Method

This article draws on a corpus of qualitative data produced through two sets of ethnographic studies in Turin and Bologna between 2014 and 2019. The authors engaged with traceurs and writers in both cities through a range of qualitative methods, including participant observation and interviews with traceurs (30 in Turin, 15 in Bologna) and writers (30 in Turin, 15 in Bologna). Whereas the lead author's research employed also participatory photography and video-making (see De Martini Ugolotti and Silk, 2018; De Martini Ugolotti, 2022), this article only focuses on the participants' narrative accounts of their practices. Moreover, whereas the participant observations with writers only referred to legal walls, the vast majority of the writers who participated in the study made both legal and illegal pieces. Therefore, whereas in the literature "illegal" graffiti and "legal" street-art are often discussed separately, this work will not differentiate between the two, as most of the writers in the study mixed elements of both domains in their practices. The authors accessed the traceurs and writers' communities in Turin and Bologna through a range of different avenues, including involvement in informal parkour groups (lead author), attending parkour and graffiti events, and contacting local traceurs and writers through social media and through snowball contacts that emerged during the research.

The participants' age ranged significantly (between 18 and about 40 years), as did their occupational status (ranging from students to unemployed or precariously employed, self-employed professionals, school teachers, and office workers) and background (with 20+ traceurs being children of migrants, see De Martini Ugolotti, 2015). Age, background, legal status, and occupation thus differed significantly among the participants across both practices, as did the participants' viewpoints on what each practice was, meant, and did. These elements of (peaceful) contention in relation to the participants' engagement with parkour and graffiti enabled us to address a diversity of practices and experiences that is rarely addressed in the literature (see Kramer, 2010; De Martini Ugolotti, 2019).

Despite these elements of diversity, the groups we met in both cities had in common the lack of female participants. During our research, we rarely encountered female *traceuses* and met only one female writer in Bologna. These missing research encounters reflect how parkour and graffiti are still male-dominated practices, despite a growing number of female practitioners (Lombard, 2013; Stagi, 2015). Therefore, it is fundamental to underline that this article offers a gendered perspective on the nexus between publicness, (in)visibility, and power as the discussion (mainly) addresses the practices and negotiations of *male* traceurs and writers in Turin and Bologna. Participants' names in this article are anonymized to protect their privacy as per ethical protocol.

Traceurs and Writers as Regenerators: The Bittersweet Ambivalence of Aesthetic Urbanism

> The fact that in Turin there is an office that gives spaces to writers is not usual. . . I tell this to people in Milan, in France and they can't believe it. . . and the whole thing is booming now. . . because art-galleries are getting too into this and are starting to provide walls for writers. . . (Macko, writer, Torino)

> We have often collaborated with local associations and the municipality. . . *they asked us if we could train in a specific urban area, to improve its image*. . . there are some run-down areas where people go, use substances and drink, but with some guys jumping all around, maybe with some local kids joining, they stop hanging around there. . . *and in this way we have kind of regenerated that area.* (Marco, traceur, Bologna, emphasis added)

The above excerpts meaningfully resonate with emerging urban trends that have seen practices such as graffiti/street-art, parkour (but also skateboarding) repositioning themselves as positively contributing to urban and community redevelopment (Beal et al., 2017; Berglund, 2019; Romero, 2018). Within urban regeneration narratives increasingly conflating economic and social outcomes (Binnie et al., 2006; Mould, 2015), the social relevance of these practices have often been highlighted in two related ways: as providing positive outlets and means of social inclusion for urban (or "troubled") youth, while contributing to the artistic, cultural, and commercial valorization of urban areas. Academic readings on these urban trends have tended to frame writers and traceurs as "losing" their original subversive stances, mainly due to their inability or unwillingness to question unequal processes of neoliberal, image-based urbanism (Berglund, 2019; Pavoni, 2019; Raymen, 2019; Schacter, 2015). However, several traceurs and writers in Turin and Bologna highlighted more complex and ambivalent relationships with the array of actors, institutions, and processes that legitimated their practices in often contradictory ways:

> Turin, I guess it's generally quite good [for graffiti], but it's becoming more and more about differentiating between "good graffiti" and "bad graffiti," so people say "if you do it in the proper place, if you do something beautiful. . .," but I don't like to do graffiti only in the "proper" place, with the "proper" design, and those without legal permissions are the bad guys. . . there are much more nuances to that. . . another thing people say: "as long as you do a graffiti that looks good," you know, none of the guys whose work you say it's amazing started doing amazing, they all started doing shit. . . (Mano, graffiti, Torino)

> We have been collaborating with the municipality and some private funders, at the start they treated us mainly as a "fair attraction" and with time we have learnt not to be exploited too much by them (laughs). . . With the first Eden Park we were the poster-boys of the area's regeneration, but when the buyer told us to pack, all of a sudden everyone vanished. . . Still, I don't think collaborating with these actors [e.g., to set up indoor-parkour-spaces like Eden Park] is domesticating parkour. . . people take what they learn at Eden Park and do it outside, we have a map for spots to train around the city. . . Regardless of all the ways parkour is seen by those who don't practice it, traceurs always find the way to do things in the city. (Greg, Parkour, Bologna)

The participants' accounts resonated with the "bittersweet ambivalence" of street-artists who reflected on their role in gentrifying Austin's neighborhoods (Romero, 2018). Both Mano and Greg welcomed the recent institutional enthusiasm for their disciplines as opening social, professional, and economic opportunities. Yet they also remained aware of the consequences of reducing parkour and graffiti as *functional* to objectives defined by institutional and/or commercial actors external to the disciplines. Rather than ignoring or justifying the unequal urban processes that unevenly legitimated their practices, several participants clearly considered the implications of traceurs and writers' increasing "cultural relevance" in image-based rebranding processes (e.g., enhanced scrutiny and crackdowns on unregulated parkour and graffiti). Significantly, and notwithstanding traceurs and writers' different attitudes toward urban authorities and legality, participants across these groups navigated and negotiated the often contradictory legitimation, regulation, and policing of their practices in remarkably relatable ways. In both cities, the participants' negotiation of these

asymmetrical relationships did not rely *only* on leveraging strategies (Beal et al., 2017), nor took place through oppositional responses to the urban powers to be.[1] For most traceurs and writers in the study, navigating the uneven dynamics of the aestheticized city seemed to center around the negotiation of their visibility, "as the practice to see and [not] be seen" (Brighenti, 2007, p. 324) in the urban landscape.

The Discrete Charm of (In)Visible Urban Spaces

> I don't train parkour for people to watch and clap for me, I do it to become invisible. (Jair, traceur, Torino)

> Of course, when you can, you avoid risking getting caught, paying a huge fine or going to jail, but it's not just that. . . There are a lot of walls in *less visible* places that are technically illegal, but where nobody bothers you, you can chill and do your pieces even during the day. (Melo, writer, Bologna, emphasis added)

If visibility can be considered an important and widely discussed element among practitioners in both disciplines (Kidder, 2017; McAuliffe, 2013), a much narrower consideration has been given to traceurs and writers' relationship with invisibility, the latter being mainly discussed as a way for writers to escape authorities' scrutiny and repression (Ferrell & Weide, 2010). However, as hinted by Jair and Melo, the participants' viewpoints on the significance of not-being-seen highlighted experiences and practices across the two disciplines that expanded existing discussions on the topic. In fact, if responses to informal parkour gatherings in public areas would not *usually* generate the same amount of repression reserved to writers, the experiences of racialized traceurs in the study suggested otherwise. Widespread anxieties and scrutiny surrounding (post)migrant men, security, and urban decorum in Italian cities made the presence of traceurs who happened to *look* or *sound* "foreign" to be often perceived as damaging the order and image of urban spaces, and usually resulted in heightened and proactive policing and harassment (De Martini Ugolotti, 2022). As a result, while often claiming their public presence in the city through their engagement with parkour (De Martini Ugolotti and Moyer, 2016), racialized traceurs also valued less visible spots for their trainings for several reasons:

> Being dark "and handsome!" (adds Raheem laughing) attracts quite some attention when we train around, and not all of it is good (laughs). . . We still do our things regardless, but places like abandoned factories, underground-parking. . . they give you possibilities that other places do not. . . there are no families, shop-owners, police. . . *just us and the walls*. (Alex and Raheem, traceurs, Turin, emphasis added)

Significantly, such quest for (in)visibility was widely shared with other traceurs and writers. Furthermore, even among the participants who bore the brunt of security forces, shop-owners, and passersby's scrutiny, the penchant for less-visible urban sites was as much about discovering the city than avoiding undesired attentions. Instead of being about *asserting and/or escaping control* over space (Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Kidder, 2017), the participants' redefinitions of the contours and boundaries of their cities seemed to emerge through their *relationships* with urban spaces, and from the pleasure of discovering what these could afford them to do. For many, the intimate engagements with their cities was strictly connected to ways of seeing and experiencing urban spaces that parkour and graffiti facilitated in different ways:

> That's what happens with parkour (laughs). . . I have started seeing places differently, the rails, the distances, paying attention to different surfaces and materials, and started to see how many things I could do with these places rather than judging on, you know, how they look for example. . . For most

> people these places are meaningless or ugly. . . *or they barely see them*. . . (Paz, traceur, Bologna, emphasis added)

> I'd say most people live the city as a background for what they do. . . work, meet people, a pleasant scenario to take photos. . . For me the city is something you can touch, breath and mark. . . a city always shows traces of who lives it. . . I think [graffiti] writing simply makes this interaction more immediate. . . (Nina, writer, Bologna)

Resonating with Paz and Nina's accounts, studies addressing traceurs' parkour vision and writers' approaches to urban walls (Ameel & Tani, 2012; Brighenti, 2010a; Saville, 2008) highlighted the productivity of bodily practices that take on urban spaces as "involved, practical and engaged" (Loo & Bunnell, 2018, p. 4), instead of inert backgrounds for action. These analyses meaningfully resonate with Low's (2017) work on *embodied spaces* that highlighted how sensory and affective ways of engaging with the city are always embedded and responding to asymmetrical urban and scalar politics. Articulating further these discussions, in the following sections we explore how the traceurs and writers' creation and engagement with (in)visible traces and spaces can shed a unique perspective on Turin and Bologna's aestheticized and decor-oriented processes of city-making.

(In)visible Marks and Secretly Public Spaces

> Parkour is about leaving no trace. . . but we actually leave *non-visible traces* that we can recognise. . . we have been training for years in some spots and we have such a physical relationship with them that we leave marks and signs there, other traceurs will pass and recognise them, but other people will just not notice. (Xis, traceur, Bologna, emphasis added)

> Graffiti on the walls that face the train tracks *are messages left to those who can get them*. . . to those who can decipher a certain type of lettering. . . it's like a gift you leave for someone who can get it, it might the 1% of people who notice and appreciate, but you do it for that person. (Yeti, writer, Torino, emphasis added)

As mentioned earlier, research on the spatial politics of parkour and graffiti in contemporary cities mainly engaged with these practices' visible expressions, with most analyses focusing on subversive uses of public spaces (Atkinson, 2009; Ferrell & Weide, 2010; Mould, 2015) or on their co-optation in spatial commodification processes (Berglund, 2019; Pavoni, 2019; Raymen, 2019). Although more nuanced analyses of both practices have been provided (Bertoni, 2018; Brighenti, 2010a; De Martini Ugolotti and Silk, 2018), the prevalent conflation of *the visible and the public* in existing discussions of parkour and graffiti's spatial politics left unexplored a number of issues, namely, what kind of spaces and what spatial and social relations emerge when traceurs' moves and writers' marks are not visible, or at least, *not by everyone*? As Xis and Yeti's accounts showed, the participants' engagements with the city opened urban spaces for the possibility of other type of (inter)actions, but "only to the extent that individuals perceive[d] these possibilities" (Kidder, 2017, p. 61). Therefore, if *by taking place* the signs of graffiti (and, we add, traceurs' moves) make themselves public (Chmielelwska, 2009), the participants' engagements with Turin and Bologna's urban spaces often complicated linear associations between *publicness, accessibility, visibility*, and *openness*:

> In an abandoned building, you find a wall and you can focus on it. . . because every building won't have the same walls, there are always different colours, materials and the combined effects of weather, time, use. . . and there you have the chance to work with it. . . *then you take a photo and people are still able to see your piece. . . it's a different feeling from the street* which implies you have to be fast. . . (Fran, writer, Torino)

> There is this place that we call "the cockroach," it's below a building that is more-or-less abandoned. . . it's a great place for us with lots of stuff to do and the funny thing is that while for traceurs this is a well-known spot that you can find easily on our [digital] maps, most of the people in Bologna ignore it exists. (Gallo, traceur, Bologna)

As the aforementioned excerpts showed, the participants' intensive and extensive engagement with Turin and Bologna's cityscapes interrogated static and abstract oppositions between public and private spaces, usually defined around issues of property, accessibility, and visibility (Bertoni, 2018; Brighenti, 2010b; Iveson, 2007). Urban scholars have argued at length how, rather than existing in a binary opposition, public and private spaces operate at a variety of scales that overlap and intersect, creating a mosaic of spaces with shifting degrees of access, openness, and visibility across intersecting lines of exclusion (e.g., racialization, legal and economic status, sexuality, gender, age, and physical ability; Amin, 2008; Brighenti, 2010b; Iveson, 2007).

Resonating with these considerations, the ways in which parkour and graffiti made visible movements, spaces, and traces only to those who could see or "get" them can be understood with Bertoni (2018) as producing neither public nor private, but "secretly public" spaces. Following Bertoni (2018), through the idea of "public secrecy," it is possible to consider publicness not as a static characteristic of space, but as a domain continuously and contingently constructed through practices and encounters emerging through different ways of seeing and engaging with the city (see also Brighenti, 2010b). In this sense, the publicness of space appears when a certain urban site is turned into a venue of "public address" (Iveson, 2007), as an attempt to reach a dispersed public of unknown, yet significant recipients; something that the participants' accounts indicated in different ways (e.g., through marks, "messages," and digital means). Therefore, the participants' practices did not open urban spaces to everyone, nor aimed to contribute to a *public sphere* constituted through interpersonal, rational exchanges and universal claims (see Amin, 2008). Rather, traceurs and writers' practices imbued leftover, marginal and (in)visible spaces with an *atmosphere of publicness* (Anderson, 2009; Bertoni, 2018) constructed through, mediated by, and holding together physical perceptions, affective intensities, urban infrastructures, and materialities. Such a perspective enables us to address the participants' engagement with urban spaces not simply as the projection of individualistic forms of prosumption and commodified transgression (Pavoni, 2019; Raymen, 2019), or as practices enabling to reclaim a non-commodified city (Atkinson, 2009; Mould, 2015). Rather, through this lens, we could consider the participants' production of (in)visible traces and secretly public spaces as *emerging* from an assemblage of social processes (parkour and graffiti's institutionalization and concurrent concerns over urban aesthetics and "indecorous" bodies/practices), traceurs and writers' embodied and material geographies, and the affordances provided by available technologies and urban infrastructures (e.g., digital cameras/phones, social media, postindustrial "ruins," parking lots, staircases, and passageways). Our point here being that if we refrain from associating the spaces created through parkour and graffiti to specific intentions and outcomes, it can be possible to consider instead what they have to say about *and to* wider, image-based processes of city-making.

Thresholds of Visibility in Aestheticized Cityscapes

> There's Staveco [previously a factory for combat vehicles]. . . abandoned factories, you find a way to enter and you have all sorts of surfaces and materials to work on. . . and a place like this become part of your own city-map you know. . . *It's doesn't look like, but it's still Bologna*. . . (Dee, writer, Bologna)

> It all depends on how you look at the same thing, if you focus on the moves only, then you will probably see the sport or the performer, if you look at the space that challenge but also facilitates the move, then you see parkour. (Naso, traceur, Torino)

The previous sections highlighted how in different ways traceurs and writers ambivalently understood their visibility in Turin and Bologna as enabling at the same time recognition and control, with the boundaries between the two often blurring and overlapping (De Backer, 2018; Langegger & Koester, 2016). Relatedly, the participants' relationship with (in)visibility, the negotiation of where, when, how, and by whom (not) to be seen, could not be simply understood as intentional and oppositional responses to citywide processes of co-optation, surveillance, repression, and selective inclusion. Instead, the participants' accounts highlighted how this relationship constituted a "territory of forces" (Brighenti, 2010b, p. 36) continuously emerging from policies and discourses on urban aesthetics and decorum, the participants' practices and urban engagements, and Turin and Bologna's urban infrastructures.

The materialities of the city thus played a central, yet so far marginally explored role in relation to traceurs and writers' navigation of the wider processes that shape urban landscapes, and defined what bodies, practices, and spaces matter within them. In this sense, the traceurs and writers' embodied and material geographies (Low, 2017; McFarlane, 2011) constituted relevant sites of articulation from where to address Turin and Bologna's urban visions and reveal their fissures, leaks, and unstable composition.

Therefore, it is important to consider that whether or not they were literally at the margins of Turin and Bologna's cityscapes, some of the participants' favorite spots were not simply unused, unusable, and "unsafe" vacuums in the urban fabric, but were often sites that made possible the functioning of Turin and Bologna's beautified cityscapes. Parking lots, passageways, and train yards were instrumental to daily urban flows of people, commodities, and services, and abandoned buildings were often earmarked for urban regeneration and capitalization processes. The traceurs and writers' engagements with invisible or unseen parts of the city meaningfully resonated with other urban disciplines, such as urban exploration, that highlight the complex relationship between secretive, yet increasingly commodified practices, aestheticized and securitized cityscapes, and (in)visible urban infrastructures (Garrett, 2014; Kindynis, 2017; Klausen, 2017).

Similarly to what was discussed in relation to urban explorers (Garrett, 2014; Klausen, 2017), the negotiation of different thresholds of visibility (Brighenti, 2007) in the city was fundamental for the participants' encounters with and shaping of "minor" yet existing urban landscapes: as Dee put it, city-maps that *didn't look like* Bologna (or Turin), but nevertheless *were* Bologna (or Turin).

In this sense, what informed the traceurs and writers' engagement with leftover and in-between urban spaces was not an ideological critique of the late-capitalist commodification of city spaces; rather, it seemed to be, in most cases, a "search for porous encounters [. . .] between body and city that inscribe the urban environment with new stories" (Garrett, 2014, p. 5).

Relatedly, the (in)visibility of the maps, encounters, and stories carved with(in) Turin and Bologna's cityscapes was in many ways rhythmic, shifting, and undulatory, rather than absolute, endured, or fought over. It implied an attunement with the temporal flows that shaped the city (e.g., to have parking lots and passageways without cars and people) and with "sites that were [for now] out of time with the city as spectacle" (Pinder, 2000, p. 379). It was often bypassed by the *ways of seeing* (Brighenti, 2007, 2010a) of those who could "get them" (as per Naso's excerpt) and by digital technologies that allowed to reach dispersed publics (Kidder, 2017; Klausen, 2017; McAuliffe, 2013; Ferrero Camoletto, Genova & Marcelli, 2023).

Negotiating the thresholds of visibility of their spatial practices thus enabled traceurs and writers to situationally become, borrowing from Merleau Ponty (1968, in Brighenti, 2007, p. 328), "what is here without being an object" in the aestheticized city; in other words, it allowed

thick, sensual, and meaningful engagements with the city that, while not opposing, and at times contributing to their practices' asymmetric inclusion in aestheticized urban visions, exceeded their narrow legitimation as "fair attractions" in beautifying cityscapes. Whereas scholars addressed how the creation of urban aesthetics, atmospheres, and experiences (Garrett, 2014; Pavoni, 2019; Thrift, 2004; Vanolo, 2017) shape processes of city-branding and governance, the participants' accounts indicated what (in)visible urban practices *did* by taking place and claiming space through specific ways of *seeing and feeling* the city. In the following final section, we outline how this perspective can enrich and complicate existing discussions on aestheticized cityscapes beyond the contexts and practices discussed in the study.

Conclusion

Drawing on in-depth ethnographic engagements with traceurs and writers in Turin and Bologna, this article discussed the participants' politics of (in)visibility within image-based processes of urban rebranding that made parkour and graffiti visible and (il)legitimate in often contradictory ways. Despite the widely discussed differences between these two practices, this article focused instead on some under-explored resonances between traceurs and writers' attempts to negotiate and reconcile their ambiguous positioning in aestheticized and uneven urban contexts.

Whereas most of the literature addressed traceurs and writers' redefinition of urban spaces by focusing on their most spectacular features, this study considered what the more opaque manifestations of parkour and graffiti could tell us about city-branding processes heavily investing on urban aesthetics, image, and decorum. In doing so, this article focused on how the participants' physical, sensual, and affective relationship with urban spaces and materialities, facilitated, structured, and impinged on forms of public address, encounters, and (in)visible presences in Turin and Bologna. The discussion expanded analyses that either focused on traceurs and writers' emotional geographies and phenomenological experiences *or* on their more-or-less disruptive relationship with the spatial organization of late-capitalist cities.

In this sense, the politics of (in)visibility addressed in this article related to the participants' temporary subtractions of parkour and graffiti from a pervasive gaze that *tied together* the aesthetic and pro-social value of their practices. Yet the negotiation of the participants' thresholds of visibility in Turin and Bologna's cityscape was less of a planned form of opposition to asymmetric power dynamics than the result of sensory and affective engagements with urban spaces and materialities. Addressing the "public secrecy" (Bertoni, 2018) of the participants' spatial practices pointed to the relevance of articulating how *ways of seeing* and *feeling* the city speak to and interrogate the visual and experiential economies of place in contemporary cities (see Pavoni, 2019; Thrift, 2004; Vanolo, 2017).

Just to be clear, there is no blueprint of a more just and equal city to be found in the participants' practices and politics of (in)visibility discussed here. Yet the relevance of the considerations and questions raised by the participants' spatial practices goes beyond traceurs and writers' communities in Bologna, Turin, and/or other urban contexts.

Established trends toward the creation of iconic architectural landmarks and the use of arbitrary aesthetic criteria (e.g., urban image and "indecorous behavior") in curtailing and proscribing a wide array of practices[2] in urban spaces highlight two related processes taking place in Italian cities and elsewhere (see Coleman, 2009; O'Sullivan, 2017). First, in aestheticized cityscapes, the politics of (in)visibility (increasingly) represent a constitutive domain of urban life that does not shape only the experiences and practices of those expelled at the urban margins and/or explicitly contesting the political order. Second, the application of aesthetic criteria in determining the legitimacy of a variety of urban bodies, spaces, and practices redefines not only policies and discourses regarding what is public, how it should be used, and by whom, but shapes

(and curtails) also specific ways of seeing, feeling, and ultimately making urban spaces, relations, and cities. Although this study offered some original entry points to address the politics of (in)visibility in aestheticized cityscapes, a number of questions could not be addressed in detail here and warrant further exploration in future studies: How social media platforms, and digital technologies/infrastructures are shaping mediated forms of visibility and publicness in aestheticized cityscapes? How intersecting social positioning across gender, class, sexuality, physical ability, and racialization assemble with mundane, sensory, and practical engagements with the city in shaping various forms of public address and (in)visibility? In calling researchers to consider these and further related questions, this study underlined how sleek urban visions fissure and leak not only when dented by straightforward opposition and/or survival necessities, but also through largely dispersed, uncoordinated, mundane ways of seeing, feeling, mobilizing, and inhabiting the city.

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Notes

1. Although some of the participants were aware of antagonistic voices challenging a range of urban issues (e.g., gentrification, securitization of public spaces), several did not frame their involvement with parkour and graffiti in direct continuity with these forms of activism.
2. From street-based sociality to political demonstrations, passing by trash rummaging, backpackers' tourism, and ethnic commerce in historic centers.

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