

## **Is *Wirkungsgeschichte* ( or Reception History) a kind of intellectual *Parkour* (or Freerunning)?**

[A Paper given to the Use and Influence of the New Testament Seminar Group at the British New Testament Conference, September 2005 by Dr. Rachel Nicholls]

### **Introduction**

*Le Parkour* and *Wirkungsgeschichte* appeared as startling European innovations at about the same date. *Le Parkour* is the art of crossing an urban landscape in original, daring and elegant ways, using jumps, leaps and turns to scale walls, cross rooftops and even move around fences and bollards. It emerged from the childhood games of a group of friends in the Paris suburb of Lisses in the late nineteen eighties, and gained public attention in the nineteen nineties when Sébastien Foucan appeared in advertisements for Nike and Toyota.<sup>1</sup> *Wirkungsgeschichte* (at least in New Testament Studies) is the art of reading a text while being conscious of the different ways in which it has been interpreted through history. It became known through the work of Ulrich Luz, who published the first volume of his innovative commentary on Matthew in 1985.<sup>2</sup> Both these disciplines have their roots in earlier practices: *Parkour* owes a debt to a variety of martial arts,<sup>3</sup> *Wirkungsgeschichte* owes a debt to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical work, *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, which was published in 1960.<sup>4</sup>

This paper is an attempt to take a sideways look at some of the issues involved in *Wirkungsgeschichte*. I have used aspects of a new physical discipline (*Le Parkour*, also called Freerunning) as a metaphor for aspects of a new intellectual discipline (*Wirkungsgeschichte*, also called Reception History). This has involved describing a discipline of historical awareness in terms of a discipline of spatial awareness, or, in other words, describing thought in terms of movement. Like any metaphor, this one restricts discussion as well as stimulating it. The issues which I will explore are more hermeneutical than technical, and involve a discussion of Gadamer's philosophy rather than the practical problems of interdisciplinary work. I hope that reflecting on *Parkour* will stimulate discussion about the possibilities and the limitations of *Wirkungsgeschichte*.

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<sup>1</sup> See Channel 4's *Jump Britain* documentary (2003).

<sup>2</sup> Luz, 1985.

<sup>3</sup> See <[www.parkour.com](http://www.parkour.com)> According to Sébastien Foucan: "Nobody ever invents anything - you're inspired and sometimes you can improve!"

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, 1975. For English translation, see Gadamer, 1989.

## What's in a Name?

The discipline of making elegant jumps and movements through an urban landscape has two names - 'Freerunning' and *Le Parkour*. Each of these names is associated with a key practitioner; 'freerunning' is favoured by Sébastien Foucan and *Le Parkour* by David Belle. All agree that *Le Parkour* is the original name. David and Sébastien were childhood friends, and it seems likely that the pattern of movements which became *Parkour* was developed by both of them and by their group of friends. Sébastien is content to be called one of the originators<sup>5</sup> but David, according to French websites about him, is called *the* originator of *Parkour*.<sup>6</sup> As teenagers, they both belonged to a clan which they called the Yamakasi, which practised these movements together in the Parisien suburb of Lisses, where they both lived. The Yamakasi were then asked to star in a film called *Yamakasi - Les samouraïs des temps modernes* in which they played the part of cat burglars who robbed the rich to provide for the poor.<sup>7</sup> David Belle was unhappy with the finished film, because he felt that it could mislead people about the purpose of the discipline and because it was a first step on the road to commercialisation. The Yamakasi split. David Belle set up his own clan called 'Les Traceurs' and Sébastien also formed his own group, and coined the term 'freerunning' to make *Le Parkour* more accessible internationally. Sébastien says that there is no difference between 'freerunning' and *Le Parkour*, it is just a practical issue of understanding: people have no idea what *Le Parkour* might mean, whereas the term 'freerunning' makes immediate sense to them. David maintains that there is a difference - 'freerunning' is a debased form of *Parkour* - an exploitation of *Parkour* movements, reducing them to a series of showy stunts done for commercial gain. Witness the damning judgement upon 'freerunners' on a *Parkour* website:

“ Many are concerned that the commercialisation of freerunning could bridge across to Parkour, but this seems unlikely as freerunning continues to be the activity favoured by those with commercial interests.”<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See <[www.parkour.com](http://www.parkour.com)> “Sébastien Foucan developed the discipline of Parkour with his childhood friend David Belle.”

<sup>6</sup> See <<http://perso.wanadoo.fr/le.parkour/france>> “Le Parkour c’est un discipline fondée par David Belle, inspiré par son père.”

<sup>7</sup> *Yamakasi - Les samouraïs des temps modernes*. 2001. Directed by Ariel Zeitoun and Julien Seri, produced and co-written by Luc Besson. For further details see <<http://www.europacorp.com/dossiers/yamakasi>>

<sup>8</sup> See <<http://www.parkour.org.uk>>. Also <<http://www.parkour2005.blinkz.com>>

Thus those who call the discipline *Le Parkour* claim the status of pure-hearted amateurs.

What lies behind this conflict over a name? Is it a personal rivalry between Sébastien and David, or is there more to it? What about the accusation that Sébastien and his friends are mainly interested in making money? It is true that it was Sébastien who appeared in advertisements for Nike and Toyota, and it is Sébastien who has links with the London-based group Urban Freeflow, who have set themselves up as a limited company. However, David Belle is famous in this country for appearing in the trailer film 'Rush Hour', made to promote BBC 1, for which he presumably received a fee. How would he claim that this was a work with integrity, whereas Sébastien's involvement with the documentaries 'Jump London' and 'Jump Britain' was somehow tainted? This question is frustratingly difficult to answer, because the two sides have not engaged in a constructive public debate, so we can only imagine the arguments. David might claim that 'Rush Hour' was an authentic portrayal of a *traceur* making a journey from the office to his home. Although it must have been filmed in segments, it was conceived and portrayed as a single journey. There were no backward movements or overly complex actions to block the smooth flow from A to B. Similarly, I imagine that his objection to 'Jump London' and 'Jump Britain' might be that the conceit of a single journey breaks down in the concentration on set pieces at famous landmarks, and that some of the freerunners put too much emphasis on complex turns and jumps which actually impede their journey, rather than enhance it. Sébastien, in fact, has himself expressed some dissatisfaction with the range of movements favoured by film makers. Personally, he said, he would much rather do longer runs with correspondingly less spectacular jumps but he was willing to show the more complex movements of freerunning in order to get publicity for the new discipline.<sup>9</sup> I imagine that David would feel that the price for this publicity was too high. One senses that David would rather have a name which people do not immediately understand, so that they are forced to ask its meaning and its significance. Sébastien, on the other hand, wants a name which instantly appeals. I have some sympathy with both of them. The preference for different names does reflect different priorities, even if their approaches are not as different as *Parkour* purists would claim.

Does this conflict over names have anything to say to us? The process of collecting and examining interpretations of the Bible made in different historical eras and in a variety of media is described by at least three names in the UK at the moment: *Wirkungsgeschichte*, 'Reception History', and 'the Use and Influence of the

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<sup>9</sup> See the DVD of 'Jump London', (Channel 4, 2004) the additional interview with Sébastien Foucan.

Bible'. Do these similarly hint at a range of priorities, or can they be used interchangeably? Will one of them eventually win out and become the standard description for what we do? Will it make a difference which one it is? Will the name settle the issue of how we relate to other subdisciplines in New Testament Studies? Will we become another form of 'criticism', a pigeon-holed alternative, much like form criticism and redaction criticism before us?

'Use and influence', although rather long for an everyday name, has both clarity and breadth. It is couched in non-technical language and defines the field for study as everything which comes after the composition of the text. It also makes it clear that the Bible has both influenced people's thinking and actions, and also been used to justify words and actions already undertaken or already chosen for other reasons. This highlights the idea that both the text and the reader have an active role in interpretation - sometimes the text 'influences' the reader, and sometimes the reader 'uses' the text. This is a helpful insight. I am concerned, however, that in highlighting this issue it might be implied that we can reliably distinguish between an influence and a use, or that such a judgment is key to what we do. We will only be able to judge categorically between an influence and a use if we have already decided the range of influence which a text is likely to assert; in other words, if we have already decided, by the use of some other critical method, what the text says and means. This does raise the question - why bother to investigate a range of interpretations only in order to pass judgment on them? Of course, the insight that the text can both influence and be used does raise the much more interesting question of whether (and when) my own interpretations are influenced by the text or are uses of the text - and how I am going to be able to tell the difference.

The name 'use and influence' was perhaps chosen for the British New Testament Conference seminar group for a different reason, however. It does have a dimension beyond past history. The 'use' of the New Testament in its broadest sense implies an agenda which includes the presentday use of the Bible, and would also embrace proposals for its future use. This takes us further into the application of the text than New Testament Studies is normally willing to go, and refreshes the connection between biblical interpretation and the wider world.

The term 'Reception History' has come to prominence through its use as a description of the focus of the new Blackwell series of Bible Commentaries. It, too, has the advantage of breadth - 'reception' implies every kind of way in which the text has been welcomed, whether these are uses, abuses, influences or something else. The term 'history' implies a focus on what has already happened and evokes the sense of an ordered and descriptive account. A 'history' is not only a compilation of facts but an interpretation of their inter-relationships and their relative

importance. Perhaps the name “Reception History” is most valuable because it sets what we do firmly in an interdisciplinary context. Many scholars are involved in analysing history, whether that be social and political, folk history, the history of art or music, and so on. The use of an umbrella term like “reception history” welcomes all these people to the table on equal terms.

The Series Editors’ Preface to the Blackwell Bible Commentaries states that the aim is that,

“- readers should be given a representative sampling of material from different ages, with emphasis on interpretations which have been especially influential or historically significant.”<sup>10</sup>

The intention here is descriptive - to provide the reader with an authentic taste of the way that a biblical text has been received in a particular era. This is a tall order, since large numbers of the ‘receptions’ of a text probably remain obscure and uncatalogued, in the way that nine tenths of an iceberg remains below the surface of the water, inaccessible to the shipside observer. But to be fair, the authors of the commentaries which have been published so far have not remained on board a comfortable ship to do their research but have donned aqualungs and done some underwater exploration, turning up ‘receptions’ in English Literature, for instance, where works are rarely supplied with a Scripture index and so the researcher’s knowledge has to be extensive; and also ‘receptions’ from many previously unpublished sources tracked down in a variety of archives. The descriptive task itself concerns me, however. The Series Editors’ Preface makes it quite clear that the task of choosing which receptions of the text are “valid, valuable or moral” must be for the reader of the commentary to decide.<sup>11</sup> Although I suppose this is always true for the reader of any commentary, I would like to feel that the discipline we are involved in is more than laying out an orderly description of alternatives. I hope that we will not just describe or even evaluate the interpretations of others, but that we will also be making interpretations which are somehow informed by principles which are inherent from the implications of our activity. Personally, I do not want to be a historian, even though I am involved in a task with historical dimensions.

The third alternative name, like the name *Le Parkour*, is the oldest and the most obscure. For native English speakers, *Wirkungsgeschichte* is difficult to pronounce, difficult to spell and nearly impossible to translate. Yet I have held stubbornly to the German term because of its links with hermeneutics. The term was originally coined by Gadamer in *Wahrheit und Methode* to describe the way that

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<sup>10</sup> Kovacs and Rowland, 2004:xii.

<sup>11</sup> See Kovacs and Rowland, 2004:xii.

history works on and within interpretation. The English translations, “history of influence” or “history of effects”<sup>12</sup> have quickly become phrases to describe the sum total of varied interpretations and appropriations of a text which have been made through history. Although the use of the German term for this purpose gives a passing nod to Gadamer and his ideas, it risks losing the philosophical force of what he is saying. It is salutary to remember that Gadamer’s whole discussion of hermeneutics is not primarily about understanding texts but about understanding in general. *Wirkungsgeschichte* is not simply the sum total of interpretations of a text through history. It is not even the influence which past interpretations have on our present day work, whether we are aware of this or not. *Wirkungsgeschichte* is a description of our whole relationship to history which forms both the boundaries and the possibilities of interpretation. It includes the notion of our own historicity so that interpretations are not only made about history but within history:

“A hermeneutics adequate to the subject matter [the humanities] would have to demonstrate the reality and efficacy (*die Wirklichkeit*) of history within understanding itself. I shall refer to this as *Wirkungsgeschichte*. Understanding is, essentially, a historically effected event (*ein wirkungsgeschichtlicher Vorgang*).”<sup>13</sup>

Jean Grondin, a French Canadian philosopher, translates *Wirkungsgeschichte* as “un ‘travail’ de l’histoire”<sup>14</sup> One may feel that he is stretching the interpretation of the compound German word a little too far, presumably trading on the relationship between *wirkung* (impact or effect) and *wirten* (which can be translated as to work or to weave). Yet, in the context in which Gadamer uses the term *Wirkungsgeschichte*, ‘un travail de l’histoire’ works surprisingly well. Gadamer is not talking primarily about the history of a work, but the work of history, and this is his distinctive contribution to hermeneutics. I hold onto the German term for what we do, for all its disadvantages, because I want to explore the practical implications of this view of history for the interpretation of Scripture. We are obviously involved in a different task from Gadamer - he was writing philosophy about the nature of understanding, and we are trying to understand Scripture - so therefore we are bound to be more concerned than he is with the practicalities of collecting and analysing the ‘effects’ of

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<sup>12</sup> See Gadamer, 1989 (trans. revised by J. Weinsheimer and D.G. Marshall) and Luz 1990, (trans. Wilhelm C. Linss).

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, 1989:299-300. Gadamer, 1975:283.

<sup>14</sup> See Grondin, 2003:92 and 165.

the text. Nevertheless, it is a noticeable failing of New Testament scholars in general to want to get down to practical detail before they have given sufficient consideration to the fundamental principles of what they are doing. I would suggest that this is evident in the areas of literary criticism, social-scientific criticism and rhetorical criticism in particular. I should hate it if the significance of what we are doing was to become lost in the detail of doing it. Yet the German term, in and of itself, obviously does not protect us from this erosion of understanding, and may be a disadvantage because of its obscurity.

I have been deliberately provocative on this issue of a name, separating the implications of each suggestion as if they were mutually exclusive. We are not, as far as I know, in the position of *Le Parkour* and freerunning, afflicted with rivalry and mutual suspicion. However, just as David Belle and Sébastien Foucan would enrich their understanding of what they are doing if they only discussed it,<sup>15</sup> I think we might too. The issue of a name only flags up the deeper issue of why we do what we do and why it might be important.

### **The Importance of Commitment**

At the heart of *Parkour* is movement and at the heart of movement is commitment. It takes the commitment of one's whole being to launch into space with the aim of making an accurate landing. During the filming of 'Jump London', the Channel 4 Producer and Director came to realise the level of commitment and concentration involved in making even a relatively short sequence of freerunning moves. The freerunners negotiated with the production team that at any particular site, once all the discussion of the camera angles and so on was over, they would be left alone for ten minutes of complete silence in which to prepare themselves to run from A to B. They were not even cued to begin their actions, they moved in their own time.<sup>16</sup> Their fluid movements recorded on video, so apt they appear inevitable and effortless, are actually the hard won fruits of years of physical training and repetition, and concentration on the task in hand.

Perhaps the hermeneutical implications of *Wirkungsgeschichte* have some similarities. In *Wahrheit und Methode (Truth and Method)*, Gadamer stresses the involvement of the interpreter in his or her interpretation<sup>17</sup> in a way that could be described by the metaphor of movement. As Gadamer puts it, "Horizons change for

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<sup>15</sup> Please note that my perspective on their different approaches and their current divisions is gleaned only from secondary sources and I apologise if it is inaccurate.

<sup>16</sup> See DVD Jump London, the Director and Producer commentary.

<sup>17</sup> See Gadamer, 1989:304-305.

a person who is moving.”<sup>18</sup> Understanding involves the interpreter as a person and so involves the context of that person in culture and tradition. This is not just some weary assertion that we can never be free of our own prejudices and limits, it is a positive celebration of our own human identity, our human finitude, as the arena in which we seek (and potentially find) understanding. Prejudice is not only unavoidable in interpretation but often helpful, asserts Gadamer. He claims that the only prejudice which is always harmful to interpretation is the prejudice against all prejudice!<sup>19</sup> This prejudice is the a priori suspicion of all preconceptions and pre-understandings. It has its roots in the nineteenth century myth of the rational interpreter of history, whose impartial application of a reliable method would lead to the discovery of all objective truth, in the human sciences as well as in what one might call the exact sciences. We know that, in our own discipline of biblical interpretation, this image of the impartial and omniscient interpreter is a myth, but many still hold this to be the ideal we should strive for. Yet the postmodern genie is out of the bottle, and shouts at us that we only ever see things from our own point of view; and no methodological manoeuvre is ever going to silence him completely. The best that can be done, some scholars feel, is to work on smaller topics in greater detail and make more modest claims for their interpretative results. Many cling to this kind of *ursatz* historicism, because the only alternative seems to be a flood of complete relativism where every interpretation is only a reflection or a game.

But it is at this point that Gadamer offers us a different path, every bit as bold as when a freerunner hurls himself across the gap between two buildings. His claim is that the notion that we are faced with a dilemma - a choice, on the one hand, between claiming that there is a knowable objective foundation for historical truth (that we can do history in a similar way to the way we do science) and, on the other hand, claiming that there is no such thing as truth at all - is a false one. Gadamer asserts that absolute relativism is only the flip side of absolute foundationalism. If it were true that truth relied on an absolute, objective discernible foundation - then the removal of the absolute foundation would result in complete relativism.<sup>20</sup> But what if (within the human knowledge of history, at least) there never was such a foundation? What if the true conditions for discerning the truth in history - the true arena for hermeneutical activity - is something (or somewhere) else? This argument of Gadamer's is a bit like the action of a freerunner on being told that he can only either go down the stairs, or stay at the top; to the amazement of onlookers, he vaults onto the handrail and uses the momentum gained to jump out of the stairwell

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<sup>18</sup> Gadamer, 1989:304.

<sup>19</sup> See Gadamer, 1989:271-273. Gadamer, 1975:256-257.

<sup>20</sup> See Gadamer, 1985:103.

altogether!

But is this just an intellectual stunt? In what way does Gadamer's argument provide a genuine path forward? He is arguing, in effect, that historical method took a wrong philosophical turn in the nineteenth century and needs to be corrected in the light of a fuller understanding of the nature of history and historical truth. This reminds us that people did pursue the truth in history before the great postenlightenment project of objective and rational understanding, and so a criticism of that project does not automatically lead to a meltdown in all concepts of truth. If we acknowledge that the impartial interpreter of history is a myth, then we can equally repudiate his *doppelgänger*, the postmodern bringer of chaos. We can reframe our relationship with both rationality and tradition, engaging in a more nuanced relationship with both, which is neither pre-critical nor postmodern.

### **Perspective**

The *traceurs* or freerunners are intensely aware of making their movements in relation to the urban landscape which they travel through. Jerome, one of the freerunners in the documentary 'Jump London' speaks of having a relationship with the obstacle he is facing, understanding it so well that he can use it to move with grace and beauty. This kind of movement involves an intense and three dimensional understanding of the obstacle and of its spatial relationships with the objects around it. Some have described doing *Parkour* as an experience which alters permanently their whole perception of the world around them:

"There are amazing things happening when you start to do free running .. You realise how limited your movement patterns in relation to the city are. Your perspective on the environment shifts ... This effect hit me as soon as I had tried out a few improvised moves and started to imagine how I could move in the cityscape. These thoughts set me free, though I never knew I was imprisoned."<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps *Parkour* and *Wirkungsgeschichte* are significant activities because it is only through making apparently eccentric and sensational moves from one perspective to another that one is able to get a better grasp on the nature of the material which one is dealing with. The nature of the landscape (urban or hermeneutic) only becomes apparent when viewed from a number of positions. This is because it is

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<sup>21</sup> Posted by Simulacra (<<http://www.barbelith.com/topic/19444>>).

impossible to gain a high enough position to be able to see everything. There is no method which can open up an absolute perspective for us, as Gadamer reminds us (in the words of the oracle at Delphi) we are human beings, not gods.<sup>22</sup> But the fact that we are finite historical creatures means that we have an affinity with the texts and artefacts we are studying, because they, too, share historicity. Just as the freerunner can have a relationship with the obstacle because they share the common property of being bodies in space, perhaps we can have a relationship with a historical artefact because we share the common property of being historically effected. As Gadamer puts it,

“Real historical thinking must take account of its own historicity (*eigene Geschichtlichkeit*). Only then will it cease to chase the phantom of a historical object that is the object of progressive research, and learn to view the object as the counterpart of itself and hence understand both. The true historical object is not an object at all, but the unity of the one and the other, a relationship that constitutes both the reality of history (*die Wirklichkeit der Geschichte*) and the reality of historical understanding (*die Wirklichkeit des geschichtlichen Verstehens*).”<sup>23</sup>

Gadamer’s wider description of the process of understanding uses the example of one attempt to understand a historical object - one act of interpretation. In freerunning terms, this might represent one jump. In terms of expressing philosophical theory, the example of one ‘jump’ is enough, but when the theory is put into practice, more than one jump may be required. It could be that the best way to explore the historicity, both of oneself and the text being interpreted, is to view it from a number of different historical vantage points, provided by a range of its interpreters who belong to different times and places. This is not a suggestion that Gadamer makes, but it is one practical response to his assertion that we are shaped by tradition. If tradition so conditions our thinking, perhaps we had better plunge into it, experience it, jump about in it from perspective to perspective until we are able to see it more fully. Perhaps we need to experience the disorientation of finding ourselves in a totally different place in relation to the text, so that we can understand our own position more fully through the shock of being somewhere else. The link of the text between ourselves and other interpreters gives us an opening for dialogue,

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<sup>22</sup> See Grondin, 2003:111.

<sup>23</sup> Gadamer, 1989:299. Gadamer, 1975:283.

the opportunity to try to see through others' eyes. And this only becomes possible when we sense our own finitude, and so are willing to move, willing to commit ourselves to jumping so that we can see open our eyes on a new perspective and experience detail invisible to the stationary observer.

## Fear

For freerunners, such a commitment to movement is not without danger. Many of their movements could kill them if they fail to land properly. Interestingly, although *traceurs* suffer the normal range of soft tissue injuries which are common to any sport, major traumatic injuries to the head or spine or even broken bones seem to be very rare. The most severe injury sustained by any of the French *traceurs* has been a broken ligament in the leg - serious, but not permanently debilitating - the kind of injury sometimes sustained by professional footballers. Part of the reason for this relatively low level of serious injury seems to be the nature of the commitment involved in *Parkour*. It is difficult to commit yourself to doing something which your body tells you is beyond your powers to achieve. If you climb onto a motorbike, or even a skateboard, you can, quite literally be carried away, but if you are on top of a high wall with only your own energy to transform into movement, the choice is entirely yours to make. Provided you are not intoxicated, the instinct for self-preservation is very powerful. Not allowing others to tease you into making a bad jump is an essential part of the self-possession necessary to pursue this discipline.

Although their movements require considerable nerve and poise, freerunners do not achieve this by ignoring their fears, but by learning from them. The documentary "Jump Britain" includes a sequence where some English freerunners go over to France and meet their hero Sébastien Foucan. They are surprised to learn that Sébastien recommends practicing freerunning alone, since they have always found it helpful to practise in a group or clan. Sébastien responds that it is only when you are alone that you are able to concentrate on what frightens you and to work out what it is that you need to do in order not to continue to be frightened. Fear is a physically intense experience of the limitations of mind and body; it is an experience of human finitude that springs from the deepest instinctual knowledge of our limitations, the knowledge of our own mortality. Only those who are aware of these limits can make such physical poetry by working at the very edge of them. There is a freerunning clan in Devon who have given their website the rather colourful name of "screwgravity".<sup>24</sup> Yet the movements they perform do not so much defy gravity

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<sup>24</sup> See <[www.screwgravity.com](http://www.screwgravity.com)>

as depend upon it. Without gravity and the other forces described in Newtonian mechanics, there would be no free-running. The very forces which limit movement also enable it. This reflects something of Gadamer's description of our relationship to history: we experience our own historicity as a limit on our potential understanding, but it is also the means by which understanding is possible at all. There is no point in trying to deny our own historical finitude, any more than there is any point in defying gravity - the wise path is to work with it, not against it.

Perhaps the way that freerunners deal with fear might point to the way that we could deal with our own involvement in the process of interpretation. Freerunners think very carefully about what they feel. They neither ignore their feelings nor just go with them, they analyse them and learn from them. The process of self-questioning over a jump leads to rational decisions about appropriate courses of action such as further training in a gym, further practice at ground level, or the decision that this particular move is inappropriate.

Perhaps we can learn from our own preunderstandings and gut reactions as they occur during the process of interpretation, rather than to try to bracket them out. These would include not only our own psychological disposition, but also our cultural and educational makeup and the communities which have formed us as a reader. Which one of us has not felt annoyance or disgust at a particular interpretation of a Bible passage at one time or another? Or a sense of relief or satisfaction that historical research seems to support a conclusion that we have always wanted to make? It would be much more constructive to think about these gut reactions, as a *traceur* thinks about his or her fear, than to pretend that they never impose themselves into our work. To paraphrase a saying of Jesus - it is always easier to see the speck in someone else's work than to see the log in one's own. What if we accepted that we are finite, and that the conditions in which we find ourselves and the tradition which we inherit do shape the way that we interpret Scripture? If we are freed from the absolute foundationalism/absolute relativism dichotomy, then we are freed from the dichotomy that either our own limits are irrelevant to interpretation, or alternatively, that they are the only thing that governs it. We are freed to be both rational and historical - in other words, to use our reason without requiring it to sustain the illusion that we have transcended our own historicity.

It is one of the ironies about presuppositions that the ones we know we have (a certain theological approach, a preference for certain types of answers) have less effect on us than the ones we are unaware of, but which shape our view of reality so powerfully that conclusions drawn from them appear to be self-evident. It is these unseen limitations which we need to catch sight of, so that they do not operate

unchecked and unconsidered. Movement helps us to catch sight of what was previously hidden from us. It is through a willingness to question ourselves, and not just the texts or artefacts we examine, that we will begin to have a clearer historical understanding and so make a more adequate job of interpretation.

What else does the experience of fearing to move have to say to the discipline of *Wirkungsgeschichte*? Perhaps we should be more afraid before we commit ourselves to interpreting Scripture. If we believe anything about the power of Scripture (regardless of whether we would want to ascribe divine agency to it) surely we believe in the power of ideas to take hold of people and transform them - for good or ill. I well remember a quiet comment made by Professor Newport at a British New Testament Conference a few years ago, when he pointed out that sometimes differences in Scriptural interpretation make the difference between life and death; and who could doubt that after the London bombings or even recent events in the Gaza strip? If we are going to make an interpretative jump, it will involve commitment and risk and it will have consequences - at least for ourselves, and possibly for others who emulate it. The only way to avoid this is to turn interpretation into a spectator sport. This would be a bit like a cameraman claiming that he was an expert on freerunning because he had captured so many different jumps and moves on film. I think that Sébastien would retort that until you have been on top of a wall trying to work out how to jump off it, you know nothing about freerunning. Perhaps until we have understood Scripture in a way that the commitment involved frightens us, we have not begun to interpret it at all.

## **Conclusion**

Comparing the physical discipline of *Parkour* with the intellectual discipline of *Wirkungsgeschichte* has given the opportunity for a variety of reflections. Both these disciplines have more than one name, which raises the possibility of differing priorities among practitioners. Both disciplines involve making a journey by unorthodox means. I have tried to use the movements of freerunning as an extended metaphor to describe some of the key factors in the hermeneutical understanding which might undergird *Wirkungsgeschichte*. These include the value of acknowledging our own historical finitude and the creativity and commitment involved in interpretation. It is our human finitude which provides both the limits and the possibilities for historical interpretation. We need to reframe our relationship with both rationality and tradition, engaging in a more nuanced relationship with both, which is neither pre-critical nor postmodern. I have said little about what this might involve in terms of practical techniques. I have not, for

instance, discussed what might, in our discipline, be the equivalent of the intensive training undertaken by freerunners; nor whether there is a hermeneutical equivalent to the 'drop and roll' which enables freerunners to jump off walls of more than 2m without breaking their legs. Such practical questions are crucial, but not primary. My hope is that the answer to *how* we should practice the art of *Wirkungsgeschichte* will be based on *why* such an approach is important. If our discipline becomes solely a technique for recovering historical 'effects', it would deserve to be ridiculed as a series of intellectual stunts, much like freerunning done only with the motive of showing off. But if we can move through tradition with the kind of sensitivity and accomplished elegance which true freerunners display as they move through the urban landscape, then we will be able to make a valuable contribution to the overall project of interpreting the Bible; a contribution that is not just this season's novelty, but which makes a lasting difference to the progress of understanding. Is *Wirkungsgeschichte* a kind of intellectual *Parkour*? I hope so.

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