

CULTURAL ANTHROPOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY

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Martial Arts and Contemporary Dance. Rhythmic Convergences of the Human Body

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Abstract:

Problem Identification. According to the famous sinologist Marcel Granet, the concept of the world expressed by the Yin/Yang theory, is based on the universal efficiency of rhythm. The concept of rhythm is also fundamental to the new scientific paradigms which, in recent decades, have been discussing new theories of complexity, in order to go beyond Cartesian-Newtonian reductionism. Dance and martial arts are the two human experiences where individuals most experience the whole sense of rhythm. In recent decades increasingly frequent encounters between Western contemporary dance and Eastern martial arts have been developing.

Methodology. Analysis of classical and contemporary dance meeting combining with Eastern martial arts and meditation techniques. Different currents of contemporary dance produced four shows containing clear references to the techniques, philosophy, situations and scenarios of Asian martial arts. These performances are analysed by relevant literature and pictures.

Results. The experiences of the fusion of martial arts and dance that we analysed seem to re-discover the primal tie between play, drama and ritual, that was a characteristic of ancient societies. The aesthetic pleasure saves the reality of the object, which is, at the same time, under the influence of the subjective action; the result is an experience of artistic creativity which involves the human body as a whole.

Conclusion. Asian martial arts are based on the universal efficiency of rhythm expressed by the Yin/Yang theory. Dance re-discovers the artistic component of martial arts, thus starting again the search for harmony, beauty and peace which are the basis of the philosophy of martial arts.

1. The universal efficiency of rhythm

According to the famous sinologist Marcel Granet, the concept of the world expressed by the Yin/Yang theory, is based on the universal efficiency of rhythm. The Yin/Yang dialectic teaches that things work in relation to one another and to the universe, in a continuous process of change where nothing can be understood except in relation to the whole. This is not a logical system, such as those formulated by the Greek philosophy, but it applies to the symbols which evoke real phenomena. Considering it only in terms of rationality, and by operating abstraction and cataloging procedures that separate the reciprocity of opposites from the sensible world, it is the wrong way to analyze this

theory. It is instead more useful to improve the ability to perceive the change through the concrete experience, without abandoning the rational use of intelligence but also enriching it without sacrificing the universal efficiency of rhythm. One can thus take an effective approach to find practical solutions to problems that one could face in lifetime; at the same time it is possible to find solutions by taking our own responsibilities, toward ourselves and our present and future social and environmental context, in a mature and conscious way. Yin and Yang are perceived as a whole in a continuous change not as fixed entities, expressed by the conjunction of two rival but complementary entities. Yin and Yang alternate in unlimited combinations that are in a continuous transformation, thus attesting the

persistence of universal unity [Granet 1971].

The constant pursuit of adjustment between opposing complementary Yin-Yang, within the existence, is achieved by maintaining physical and mental elasticity, and this is the inspiration of the philosophy of martial arts. It is therefore developed the plasticity inherent in every individual, especially in the brain, which allows the individual to incorporate new states, as demonstrated by modern biology [Boncinelli 2006]. In result, the concept of rhythm is also fundamental in the new scientific paradigms which, in recent decades, have been discussed, new theories of complexity, in order to go beyond the Cartesian-Newtonian reductionism. This systemic approach, which has been revolutionizing for over thirty years chemistry, biology and physics, has shown that the dynamics between process and stability is, in fact, an inherent characteristic of living organisms. However the two poles are compatible only in the presence of rhythmic patterns – fluctuations, oscillations, vibrations, waves – which are therefore at the base of the order of the living world, that is to say, ordered structures are derived from rhythmic patterns [Capra 1982; Prigogine, Stengers 1978].

Moreover, this notion of rhythm may well represent a “non-social principle that regulates human behavior” which Alain Touraine [1993] indicated as a possible antidote to the increasing influence of technical apparatus, markets and States on the individual. In fact, modernity needs rationalization, but it needs as well a subject able to take responsibility both to himself and the community.

2. A compendium of possibilities

The human body itself embodies the best example of an ordered structure resulting from continuous dynamism between process and stability. The intuitions of Michel Foucault (1926-1984) about this subject are very actual. Michel Foucault suggested shifting the focus toward the contemporary configurations of being and considered obsolete the problem of metaphysics and related questions about the foundations of knowledge [Foucault 1984]. From this point of view, the being is not a stable – immobile – structure, but instead incarnates a condition of possible. In other words, the being is not an object but a phenomenon capable of accommodating any possible manifestation of objectivity. Moreover, while inside contemporary society the changes follow each other at great speed, it is very difficult for anyone to ascribe his/her own identity to something persistent. Modernity has

exalted the change and its speed so much that the sense of civilization itself, in many cases, has been lost or has become difficult to maintain. Sigmund Bauman refers to this argument talking about liquid identity in relation to the contemporary man [Bauman 2003, 2006].

If Foucault taught that the human body is a social construction, a condition of possible, one may well think of it as a table of contents from which to extract specific skills through diligent and intensive exercise. Anyway such an exercise remains necessary because, even though human body shows a remarkable ability to adapt to surrounding environmental conditions, this ability remains limited: swimming like a fish, jumping like a cricket, running like a gazelle, fighting like a tiger, climbing like a lizard ... these metaphors underline the distance between the possibilities of human anatomy and the specific capabilities of the animal one. Animals' body immediately appears in the perfection of its peculiarity, while human body is a compendium of possibilities, something imperfect to which it is necessary to apply a will (rational or visionary) able to extract from the body a precise ability. The body becomes a project aimed to build our own identity, which means researching our own identity by practicing a psycho-physical technique. The technique itself is an instrument for this research to build an identity, because it involves mind, body, emotions on an equal level and because it maintains, in its implementation, the primeval tie between game, ritual and drama, that already existed in primitive human communities.

3. Primal ties

Dance and martial arts are the two human experiences where individuals most experience the whole sense of rhythm. In ancient societies the primal tie between play, drama and ritual was often manifested precisely with the performance of dances and fighting techniques, both frequently inspired by observation and perception of nature [Lenoir, Standaert 2005].

These manifestations could be performed individually by a shaman, who transmuted his body into a communicative medium and so interpreted natural phenomena and animal language to create movements where borders between dance and fight scenes seemed very thin or non-existent. These manifestations could be performed also collectively, as a representation of the story of the community with the mimetic power of dancing bodies, which could be both love and war metaphors. In this sense, one can just think of the famous tradition of the

Haka dance, which is traditional among the Māori, the ethnic group of New Zealand. Performed before every game in the style of Ka Mate by the All Blacks – the legendary New Zealander rugby national team – appears to the general public only as a war dance, in order to intimidate the opponent, but it is actually designed to freely express feelings of joy or pain.

Another interesting example is the Dragon Dance, often represented in demonstrations of Chinese and Vietnamese martial arts, which originally served as an exhibition of power performed by a community towards neighboring rivals, as a surrogate of unwanted war acts [Tu Chuan-fei 2011]. This dance was already very popular at the time of the Sung dynasty (960-1279), and it still takes place during certain festivities, for example at New Year celebrations, as an evocation of good fortune, peace and prosperity, but in martial arts meeting usually takes on the traditional meaning of “encouraging fighters”. Its connection with the community of martial arts is still due to the fact that its execution is difficult as it requires a considerable physical preparation.

In contemporary society, which is urbanized, opulent, sedentary and often overfed, both dance and martial arts contain all the ingredients to improve our own personality thanks to an exercise that can strengthen the body and pacify the mind. Trials after trial, practitioners build a strong character that is the result of the mix between mental relaxation, control of emotions and physical efficiency.

Considering this background, it is not surprising that, in recent decades, increasingly frequent encounters between Western contemporary dance and Eastern martial arts have been developing. The ancient fighting disciplines have left more space to research of psychophysical equilibrium, expressiveness and aesthetic gesture more than effectiveness in fighting, while modern dance absorbed influences both from Asian traditional theater and dances – with particular reference to Indian dance and theater, Japanese theater and Balinese dances – and Asian martial arts. Especially in dance, this meant a radical reworking of the fundamentals of classical ballet which resulted in the creation of a “vocabulary of unique and revolutionary movements” [www.elicoides.it/?page=taiji_e_danza, 2012].

4. Contemporary dance and martial arts meet

It is difficult, if not possible at all, to determine precisely the date and place of the first meeting between modern dance and martial arts.

Nevertheless researches agree that the 1970s New York City is the cradle of this phenomenon [Novack 1990; Tufnell, Crickmay 1999; Pallant 2006]. Certainly American modern dance, since its origins at the beginning of the twentieth century, has been completely opposed to classical ballet, considered too strict in contents, roles, clothing and body building. Its pioneers, Isadora Duncan (Dora Angela Duncan, 1877-1927), Ruth St. Denis (1879-1968) and Ted Shawn (1891-1972), were all influenced by the theories of the French musician François Alexandre Nicolas Chéri Delsarte (1811-1871). This musician had created an acting style through observation of human social relationships, thus formulating a code of gestures and expressions aimed to help actors and singers to effectively represent their feelings. It is therefore probable – as shown through some tales reported and rarely written by different American and European artists [see also Delza 1985, 1996] – that during the 19th century Western dancers came in contact with martial arts, even though for a long time, this blend had just regarded the technical background of the individual instead of being a public representation.

In this regard, the story of the Iranian-Armenian Grant Muradoff (Herand Murad Daviud Khan, 1910-1985) is enlightening, even though it has not been deeply analyzed. Muradoff was a particular character, considering that first of all he had been a well appreciated ballet dancer in Paris and New York and subsequently had become teacher, choreographer and eventually Taijiquan master. In 1935 he started practicing Yoga in Paris and continued until the end of his life. In 1944 in New York he became also interested in Taijiquan under the guide of Jia Fu Feng (1919-1985). Early in the 70s he moved to Italy where he became a pioneer in the introduction of the Chinese discipline. He taught it in Rome, Florence, Genoa and Turin to many and affectionate students. Muradoff should be remembered also for having published the first books translated in Italian about Taijiquan [Muradoff 1977-1985], thus starting an editorial branch that has grown over the years.

Therefore he was a pioneer of the Taijiquan in Italy and he deeply influenced the perception that the public opinion has of this discipline. Taijiquan (literally, Supreme Ultimate Fist) is in effect a lethal fighting system, an extraordinary technique of longevity and well-being and an instrument of expressiveness at the same time. Muradoff removed the martial element because he probably had learned Taijiquan without this component from his master Jia Fu Feng who is considered one of the most important people for the diffusion of

Taoism in Western World [Wilson 2009]. In this regard, just consider that his translation of the Daodejing, pillar of Taoism, has sold more than a million copies. Jia Fu Feng – Alan Watts’s coworker, friend of Jack Kerouac and other authors of the Beat Generation, friend of the psychologist Abraham Harold Maslow who created the *Theory of the Self-actualization* – was considered one of the most important supporters of the hippie counterculture in the 60s and 70s California. Considering this background one can easily imagine that one of the promoters of the peace-loving movement could neglect the martial element of Taijiquan, especially if he had to pass his knowledge to a professional ballet dancer. So it is not so strange if nowadays in Italy there still are schools of Taijiquan, some of which are headed by Muradoff’s students, that teach this discipline without its martial component, but instead emphasize the artistic expressiveness element just like in a dance.

5. Magnesium, New York 1972

In New York, in 1972, with *Magnesium*, a show created by Steve Paxton (1939), the mix between martial arts and contemporary dance was finally complete. Paxton and other young dancers had started practicing Aikido and Taijiquan and eventually they created a new form of couple dancing, the so-called *Contact Improvisation*, which soon became a new artistic form well known also in Europe. Dancers are inspired by gestures and situations of everyday life in metropolis and they create a continuous improvisation that they transmit to their partners through touch. But dancers communicate with their partners using their entire body, not only their hands, thus developing “a physical dialogue in which all the senses are involved” [De Maio 2009: 19]. The diffusion of *Contact Improvisation* had also facilitated its evolution, because it assimilated other different techniques like Capoeira. Capoeira is a very special fusion of dance and fighting techniques; it originated in Brazil and was performed by African slaves who developed its lethal fighting techniques like they were dancing a sort of acrobatic samba, with the rhythm produced by drums and by birimbao – a string instrument – in order to hide their ability in fighting. In Capoeira two fighters-dancers start moving as if they were swinging, thus showing their extraordinary flexibility; then they start a series of attack and defense techniques that are extremely fast and acrobatic, and thanks to music and to the participation of other people – who surround the fighters-dancers and create the rhythm by singing

and clapping their hands – the result is much more similar to a dance than to a fight.

The concept of Danceability was inspired by a key theme of the Contact Improvisation, according to which every human being can dance “no matter where they come from, what is their social status, what are their capabilities or incapacities” [De Maio 2009: 12]. In 1987, American dancer and choreographer Alito Alessi developed an improvisation technique, thanks to which able-bodied people and physically-challenged people can dance together through “a research based on the interconnection of individual physical and psychic abilities” [De Maio 2009: 40].

After these first experiences – in which the meeting between martial arts and dance was meant to promote the improvisation of dancers, whether they were professionals, able-bodied or physically-challenged – in 1990s and in 2000s were performed some shows in which techniques, philosophy, situations and typical scenarios of martial arts were represented by choreography, staging and elaboration itself. We decided to analyze four of them – as they regarded different schools of contemporary dance – which were staged for the first time in Taiwan in 1994, in Stockholm in 2000, in Ravenna in 2004 and in London in 2008.

6. Songs of the wanderers, Taiwan 1994

In 1994, the Cloud Gate Dance Theatre of Taiwan performed *Songs of the wanderers*, with the choreography of Lin Hwai Min. The opening night was staged in the National Theatre of Taipei and involved the public throughout the 90-minute performance in a choreography that aspired to be a great ritual of purification. In result the show recalled the journey made by the author to Bodhgaya in India, a place where, according to tradition, around 530 B.C. Siddhartha Gautama reached the Enlightenment, thus becoming the Buddha. The 24 dancers of the company not only had studied classical ballet and modern dance, but they had also studied Taijiquan and other martial arts, postures and gestures of the Chinese Opera and calligraphy. In this way they obtained a particular expressiveness in which typical movements of the Chinese Opera and the slow, yet powerful, movements of Taijiquan and other martial arts had blended together, so dancers seemed to fluctuate on the stage. This show is about the search for quiet through estrangement from the world; this is a show where mystic suggestions meet the Yin/Yang and the Five Phases (or Five Elements) philosophic concepts, which are the basis of martial arts and traditional Chinese medicine.

7. Polarities, Stockholm 2000

For many years Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer had been working with a team of dancers and illustrators living in London in order to re-design the original production of the ballet *Le Sacre du Printemps*, which was choreographed in 1913 by immortal Vaslav Nižinski (1890-1950). This work led to the creation of a show performed in 1987 by the Royal Ballet of London; the show was subsequently staged in twelve other countries, like the U.S.A, France, Italy, Germany, Russia and Japan. Hodson and Archer, in a second time, created a new show of contemporary dance, named *Polarities*, based on the union of the 1900s Russian Ballets with Chinese culture and martial arts. *Polarities* was presented to the public for the first time in Stockholm in 2000; it is a dance about differences and attraction between opposite and complementary energetic forces Yin and Yang. Four couples of men and women danced on the stage and, through physical contact, made every polarity slip toward its opposite; dancers moved along the perimeter of a circle or moved along eight lines that went through the circle, according to a Chinese traditional octagonal scheme called Ba Gua. The eight dancers all studied classical ballet, but for the occasion they also studied the Baguazhang – a Chinese traditional martial arts which is based on the scheme Ba Gua – in order to create four couples intertwined in a pas de deux which is particularly virtuous thanks to the contribution of this martial discipline. In effect the exercise of Baguazhang implies the developing of a particular relation between foot and ground, as if one should take a step in the mud, while the upper body works in torsion, thus letting hands free to move.

8. Danse du sabre, Ravenna 2004

The Festival of Ravenna in 2004 hosted the show *Danse du sabre*, created by the famous Belgian choreographer and director Micha Van Hoecke, who directed his company – which has been well known on an international scale since its foundation in 1981 - in a performance where martial arts and dance were intertwined. This new creation was accompanied by the music composed by Joel Grare, Eitetsu Hayashi, Haino Keiji and Pierre Henry; the show was also accompanied by the soundtrack of Gajaneh, written by Armenian composer Aram Khachaturian (1903-1978) – one of the most famous composer of soviet music along with Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953) and Dmitri Shostakovich (1906-1975) – and by Japanese traditional music.

There always has been a component of martial arts in scenographies and choreographies performed by the company, but in this show martial arts were exalted by the participation of two important figures in the world of fighting sports: Keiko Wakabayashi and Francesco De Donato. Keiko Wakabayashi descends from a family of samurai, she masters Ju Jutsu Kashima Shin Ryu – she studied it with the last headmaster of this discipline – and Aikido – she learned it from Kisshomaru Ueshiba, son of the creator of this discipline – and she was 77 years old when the show was staged. She was also a well-appreciated opera singer in Japan; since 2001 she has been living in Cecina with her daughter Yoko – who was a member of Micha Van Hoecke's company – she teaches self-defense to paratroopers of the Brigata Folgore (the Thunder Brigade) stationed in Livorno, and she also holds lectures about her disciplines in different Italian regions. Young Francesco De Donato, who is from Ravenna, had been a European champion of Kick Boxing in 1990, but he teaches also Thai Box and Full Contact.

The intertwining between martial arts and dance of the show was completed by the presence on stage of Sayoko Matsuse, who is an expert of Japanese traditional dance and mother of another member of the company, Miki.

9. Sutra, London 2008

In 2008 in London, one of the most famous choreographer of contemporary dance, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui – who is Belgian with Moroccan origins – staged *Sutra*, a show which was performed by himself and eighteen monks from the famous Shaolin Buddhist monastery, (RPC, Henan province), who master the martial discipline known all around the world as Kungfu Shaolin. The study of this discipline is part of the rigid religious doctrine followed by these monks, it consists of the acquisition of a perfect acrobatic ability and a millimeter precision in movements. This technique had a huge scenic impact on the show, which was created by Cherkaoui in 2007 when he was studying and meditating in Shaolin. The plot of the show – a co-production of important cultural institutions in London, Athens, Barcelona, Avignon, Luxemburg and Brussels – is about the spiritual research based on the respect of our own body, which can be obtained through hard physical exercise supported by meditation, thus reaching a balance between body and soul, which the very root of creation.

Conclusions

The experiences of the fusion of martial arts and dance that we analyzed seem to re-discover the primal tie between play, drama and ritual, that was a characteristic of ancient societies [Lash 1979]. These experiences project this tie in contemporary metropolitan society where it can become, for the lost inhabitant of the global village, an artistic way to find psycho-physical equilibrium. In this case the aesthetic pleasure saves the reality of the object, which is, at the same time, under the influence of subjective action; the result is an experience of artistic creativity which involves the human body as a whole.

Asian martial arts are based on the universal efficiency of rhythm, which is inherent in the succession between opposing complementary forces and so many schools of contemporary dance are so interested in martial arts for this reason. Dance re-discovers the artistic component of martial arts, thus starting again the search for harmony, beauty and peace which are the basis of the philosophy of martial arts. In this way we are reminded that Asian martial arts are techniques for self-defense not created to start a fight.

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Sztuki walki i taniec współczesny. Rytmiczne zbieżności ludzkiego ciała

Słowa kluczowe: pierwotne więzi, gra, dramat, rytuał, efektywności rytmu, dialog fizyczny

Streszczenie

Koncepcja świata wyrażona przez teorię Yin / Yang opiera się na uniwersalnej skuteczności rytmu, według której wszystko działa w stosunku do siebie i do świata, w ciągłym procesie zmian. Stałe dążenie do regulacji między elementami Yin-Yang w codziennej egzystencji, osiąga się przez utrzymanie fizycznej i psychicznej elastyczności, a to jest inspiracją dla filozofii sztuk walki. Dynamika tych procesów jest nieodłączną cechą organizmów żywych. Jednak dwa bieguny są zgodne tylko w obecności rytmicznych wzorców pochodzących z natury: wahań, drgań, wibracji, fal - pochodzących z natury.

W archaicznych społecznościach pierwotny związek między sztuką, dramatem i rytuałem często objawiał się w wykonywaniu tańców i technik walki, często inspirowanych podczas obserwacji i postrzegania natury. Nawiązywały też do historii, zawierają metafory wojenne np. nadal wykonywany przed wydarzeniami sportowymi tradycyjny maoryski taniec wojenny służący do zastraszenia przeciwnika, wyrażania bólu lub radości czy też Taniec Smoka wykonywany w chińskich i wietnamskich sztukach walki, który pierwotnie służył jako pokazanie władzy w wykonaniu wspólnoty wobec sąsiednich rywali, jako substytut niepożądanych działań wojennych.

We współczesnym zurbanizowanym i bogatym społeczeństwie, prowadzącym siedzący tryb życia, zarówno taniec i sztuki walki zawierają wszystkie składniki, które mogą poprawić naszą osobowość, wzmocnić ciało i uspokoić umysł. Ćwiczący budują silny charakter, który jest wynikiem połączenia między psychicznego relaksu, kontroli emocji i sprawności fizycznej. W ostatnich dziesięcioleciach następują coraz częstsze spotkania

między zachodnim tańcem współczesnym oraz wschodnimi sztukami walki.

Precyzyjne ustalenie daty i miejsca pierwszego spotkania tańca współczesnego i sztuk walki jest raczej niemożliwe. Pionierami tańca współczesnego byli: Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis i Ted Shawn, wszyscy byli pod wpływem teorii francuskiego muzyka François Alexandre Nicolas Cheri Delsarte.

Autorzy pracy wymieniają sztuki zawierające wyraźne odniesienia do technik, filozofii, sytuacji i scenariuszy azjatyckich sztuk walki. Osobą, która jako jedna z pierwszych wprowadziła do tańca elementy sztuk walki, był Grant Muradoff. W Nowym Jorku, w 1972 roku powstało przedstawienie *Magnesium* stworzone przez Steva Paxtona (1939). Była to mieszanka sztuk walki *aikido* i *taijiquan* oraz tańca współczesnego.

W roku 1994, Cloud Gate Teatr Tańca z Tajwanu wykonał *Songs of the wanderers*, z choreografią Lin Hwai Mina.

Hodson i Archer stworzyli nowy pokaz tańca współczesnego, nazwany *Polarities* i zaprezentowana publicznie po raz pierwszy w Sztokholmie w 2000; jest to taniec o różnicach i siłach przyciągania Yin i Yang.

Na Festiwalu w Rawennie w 2004 r. odbył się pokaz *Danse du sabre*, stworzony przez słynnego choreografa i dyrektora belgijskiego Micha Van Hoecke.

W 2008 roku w Londynie jeden z najbardziej znanych choreografów tańca współczesnego Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui przedstawił pokaz zatytułowany *Sutra*, wykonany przez siebie i osiemnastu mnichów ze słynnego buddyjskiego klasztoru Shaolin.

Te artystyczne doświadczenia wydają się odzyskiwać pierwotną więź między grą, dramatem i rytuałem, charakterystycznymi dla archaicznych społeczności. Taniec ponownie odkrywa artystyczny element sztuk walki, a tym samym ponownie rozpoczyna poszukiwanie harmonii, piękna i spokoju, które są podstawą filozofii w sztukach walki.