

Breakin' and Ballet

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In the early '80s a number of popular films emerged that contrasted "street" dancing, hip hop and breakin', with "studio and art" dancing, ballet and modern. The trend has continued. An extensive review of these films would be fun and insightful, but here I'll just review a few to help us understand how different *image schemas* or *body concepts* as developed in the previous lecture can be illustrated and understood in terms of these popular films.

Let's begin with a quick look at a film of 1983 titled "Breakin'" which was followed shortly by a second film "Breakin' 2: Electric Boogaloo." The dance in this film is West Coast Break Dancing, often contrasted with East Coast Breakin' associated with the rise of rap, graffiti, and breakin' in the South Bronx in the late 1950s. In California breakin' in this period featured parachute pants, Adidas brand gear, and pastel colors. The film focuses on two young male break dancers, Ozone and Turbo, who, practicing in their little garage apartments, are aspiring street dancers. A young female studio trained modern/jazz dancer from the burbs connects with these guys and the dynamics of the drama are set. First, the chick has to gain some training in breakin' from these guys. They take her to a club battle where they are humiliated. She keeps the faith in them and wants them to enter her world by auditioning for parts in an upcoming dance show. Her manager is concerned and offended by her move to the streets and to connections with untrained dancers. Yet, the teacher is partially won over by attending the second club battle where this group ends up victorious. Let's take a look at some of this scene. The street boys come to audition and are dismissed based on appearance, yet they insist on showing their stuff (certainly not an actual audition) and, of course, become victorious entering the show. The audition scene is highly predictable, yet demonstrates the contrast between the values of street dancers and those of staged art/entertainment dancers. Let's look at this scene.

The values associated with these contrasting dances is clear and persists through a good 30 years of this genre of films (it actually extends much beyond this). The obvious ones: studio trained art dancing is art and stifled and stuffy and refined to the point of losing its energy and excitement and relevance. It is focused on formal rules, bodies trained to conform to specific movements, and boring. Street dancing however is fresh, edgy, confrontational, energetic, improvisational, strong, unpredictable, and exciting.

It is not difficult to see how these values are inseparable from the image schemas and body concepts that distinguish these contrasting dances.

Hip hop and breakin' are dances that are strongly in contact with the "street." This is where these dances emerged in the South Bronx in 1950s And they were not only performed in street and parking lot settings, but they also literally take the dancer down on the street to spin and connect. This dance tradition has strong influences of African and Latin American (itself with strong African influences) influences, yet it takes on the postures and gestures of battle and combat. Dancing is done in a posse or crew (resembling if not actually a gang), yet each dancer dances on his own. Only recently and then in stage or formal competition settings have groups performed coordinated choreographed routines.

Hip hop and breakin' movement is forceful, masculine, confrontational, combative, aggressive, individual, improvisational, and virtuosic. It requires extensive physical strength and, perhaps unusual to dancing, particularly in the upper body (this may have some influence from capoeira a Brazilian form of combative male dancing that arose a century ago and has spread throughout the world). It involves extensive inversions in head spins, hand stands, etc. with the head closer to the street than the feet a goodly portion of the time. Training for hip hop and breakin' involves individual repetitive efforts in one's kitchen or on the street corner or in actually dancing in public. Dancers learn from one another perhaps stealing moves more frequently than learning them in a friendly exchange. Learning this sort of dancing is not done in studios; yet, of course, as with so many dances and musics (including rap) it eventually does become commercialized in this way.

The image schemas or body concepts are rather straight forward. Horizontal is the predominant plain of movement corresponding with values of confrontation and combat. The movement is heavy and masculine. It is down on the street. It is "in your face" and confrontational and full of "attitude." There is a circular image schema that includes the surrounding crew and opponents as well as the spinning on head and back. The circle and circular movement is dynamic and moving (spinning as a demonstration of strength). Yet the circle is closed and is a container, which in social terms is exclusivist and one of camaraderie. Improvisational movement and demonstrations of brute/physical strength are fundamental to winning and surviving.

The contrast with the modern/jazz/ballet trained art based dances that enforce quite different image schemas. Control, conformity to a long tradition of highly defined movement technique, verticality, feminine dancers and feminine values, orientation to a defined perspective (originally the king, now the audience in a theater with a proscenium stage), the conflict of good and evil yet it is not resolved through battle and competition but through magic kisses or cleverness, the color codes that correspond with the good/evil values and the associated elements of movement (where down is clearly associated with evil), and so on. These image schemas support hierarchy, aristocracy, conformity with and mastery of established rules and expectations, the power of ascendancy both perhaps culturally and spiritually. These dance movements are considered "high culture" and performed in glamorous venues on proscenium stages for well-dressed affluent audiences.

We might also think of other films that fit this pattern. The 1983 Film "Flash Dance" is an interesting example. A girl living in a warehouse environment aspires to become a ballet dancer. Clearly she is untrained, yet eventually obtains that sought after audition. In a famous audition scene that ends the film is very similar to that of "Breakin'." A tiny bit of background. Earlier in the film there is a seemingly incidental scene where the principal character played by Jennifer Beals comes across a breakin' crew performing on the street. This is the Puerto Rican group "Rock Steady Crew." Apparently this "street" dance correlates with her sensibilities as an untrained dancer and she then incorporates breakin' in her eclectic audition piece. Here is the audition scene late in the film. Oh, to make this more enjoyable you should know that while Jennifer Beals is the actor playing the dancer, the dancing is done by Tamara Rawlings, and the back spin is done by "Crazy Legs Hirsh" a member of Rock Steady Crew. So look closely for this.

Okay, we can clearly see that the image schemas differ and that these image schemas establish basic bodily concepts upon which quite different views of value, society, relationships, authority, propriety, behavior, discipline, etc. are all involved.

A key point however that is rarely noted is that in every single one of these films, the most confirmed set of image schemas are those associated with the formally trained dancers and the art/entertainment venues. And, while none of these films offer any insights into this, this inevitably requires these "street" dancers to learn choreography, to be trained, to dance together, to perform on a stage before an audience, to show up for rehearsal, and to leave the street. We see that the art/entertainment image schemas are capable of absorbing inspiration from and aspects of these street dances, yet transforming them into the image schemas and the accompanying body concepts and values.

My friend Kenny Jemenez, who taught me hip hop many years ago, always talked about taking hip hop to "a new level." The very verticality of this statement indicates an awareness that the horizontal values of the street dance become, at some point, not adequate. Rennie Harris did the same with his hip hop as you'll see in this video of his recent show "Pure Movement." You'll notice that it is done on stage oriented to the audience and choreographed. The battle or competition elements are gone, yet the individual performances in the circle, now a circle of light, are retained. The music is an upbeat electronic score rather than rap or hip hop. One of the dancers even hesitates in the midst of his performance to perform a religious gesture. The influences of capoeira are present as well as loads of standard breakin' moves.

Since the 1960s hip hop and breakin' have moved to more formal battle scenes like international break dance competitions drawing dancers from all over the world. These dances are standard in such competition environments as the TV show "So You Think You Can Dance?" where hip hop has developed to incorporate complex psychological dynamics in polished highly choreographed set dances.

While girls have been enrolled in ballet (and also modern and jazz) classes and programs for a very long program to learn, in an embodied way—that is, by acquiring the image schemas and body concepts—appropriate to western high and refined culture. Increasingly, boys are enrolled in hip hop and break dancing classes (an alternative to martial arts I suppose) to learn the traits of masculinity in an embodied way. I'll have more to say on this in the following lecture.

Finally, let me just quickly remind you of a number of other popular films that follow the same patterns of the films I have mentioned. The important point in this lecture is to appreciate that these films as well as the dances they present contribute to values and concepts by means of establishing image schemas and embodied concepts that underlie the whole life of the cultural groups represented by these dances and dancers.

As for battle scenes that are danced we'd think immediately of the nine minute street battle between the Jets and the Sharks in "West Side Story." In the Spanish flamenco films by Carlos Saura flamenco dance battles are also fought. I think immediately of the fight scene in "el amor brujo" and the female fight in the tobacco factory in his film "Carmen" (1983).

We can then jump to the more contemporary period with films like “Center Stage” and “Turn It Up.” The self-trained dancer cannot get accepted in a prestigious ballet school so she takes a job as a bartender and hip hop dancer at a club. She eventually is encouraged to audition for a modern ballet show being cast and, of course, wins a major role in the show. The message is that the self-trained street or club dancers have the soul and spice needed for great entertainment. The other message is that you aren’t successful as a dancer unless cast in a major show. Neither is accurate, yet they carry the values and ideals of our society.