

Rebeca Cardozo Coelho, Lev Kreft, Teresa Lacerda

## **The aesthetic experience of the *Taekwondo* athlete**

**Keywords:** Aesthetic Experience, *Taekwondo*, Athlete

### Introduction

*Taekwondo* is a fighting sport on every continent and is practiced by a large number of individuals. It was included as an official Olympic sport at the Sydney Games in 2000. The word *Taekwondo* is composed of the following elements, *Tae* which means “feet”, *Kwon* “fist” and *Do* “the way”, so *Taekwondo* can be literally translated as “the way of the feet and hands”. Today, we find in *Taekwondo* hand techniques (punches), feet techniques (kicking), attack and defence. These techniques, which are practised individually, in pairs, or against a larger number of opponents, can be used in combat, *poomsae* (a sequence of predetermined movements), self-defence, a combined fight (combined movements of self-defence) and also in breaking objects (usually tiles and pieces of wood).

In *Taekwondo*, we witness the confrontation between two opponents – in some ways, before a duel. Their bodies are challenged to find the way of the feet and hands, the specific time, the sequence of technical perfect movements that will allow one of them to make a successful hit and perhaps win the combat.

This confrontation between opponents may be *literal* or even *imagined* when, in *poomsae*, performing individually or in sync with co-fighters, a number of techniques of hands and feet in attack and defence. The athlete experiences subjective emotions in a virtual combat against one or multiple opponents.

In seeking to attain the goal of beautiful movement, in the interaction with a *real* or *imagined* opponent, we assume that the *Taekwondo* athlete is able to express his emotions and achieve the sublime.

This study will focus on combat athletes and *poomsae* athletes, however, in this article, in common with each of these groups of athletes, we also consider the breaking of objects, which can be practiced both in demonstrations and when conducting the graduation exams.

## Objectives of the Study

This study is part of a wider research project we are developing in the Doctoral Program in Sport Sciences, in the Faculty of Sport of University of Porto, Portugal.

The overall objective of this research is to study the aesthetic experience of *Taekwondo* athletes from the Portuguese national team, linked to their body and their loving and aggressive dimensions, in which they are involved during the practice of combat and *poomsae*.

The research project comprises three methodological studies, whose specific objectives are:

Study 1 (Systematic Review):

- a) To list the literature on aesthetics of sport and on general aesthetics relevant to the job.
- b) To link this with the specific literature on *Taekwondo*, attempting to characterise it both as a risk sport and as a game, real and imagined, that calls for an aesthetic experience.
- c) To reflect on the meaning of aesthetics in understanding the sport.

Studies 2 and 3 depart from the framework and foundations established in Study 1, and the collection of information will be obtained through interviews with the athletes, identifying their subjective and reflective thought (Bardin, 2009; Denzin, Lincoln, 2000; Giorgi, Giorgi, 2008; Smith, Osborn, 2008; Wengraf, 2001).

The objectives of studies 2 and 3 are to describe and interpret the aesthetic experience of the combat athletes and *poomsae* athletes, answering the following questions:

Study 2 (Referring to Combat Athletes):

- a) How do you explain the aesthetic experience experienced by combat athletes and what elements contribute to our understanding?
- b) At what time or times, in interaction with the real adversary, does the combat athlete achieve the greatest aesthetic fulfilment?

Study 3 (Referring to *Poomsae* Athletes):

- a) How do you explain aesthetic experience experienced by *poomsae* athletes and what elements contribute to our understanding?
- b) At what times or moments in the imagined interaction with the opponent does the *poomsae* athlete achieve aesthetic fulfilment?

## Aesthetic Experience and Taekwondo

Kant in his analysis of the beautiful, states that judgments of taste are an aesthetic judgement based on subjective criteria, precisely because its basis is not a concept, but a feeling created by a game of faculties of the mind, something which can only be felt (Kant, 2010, 74). For the author it becomes something beautiful as it relates to the representation of the imaginative faculty of the subject and its feeling of pleasure.

According to Schiller (1991)'s discussion of aesthetic contemplation, our sensitivity and harmonic imagination plays a game with our intelligence. This harmonic play within our mental functions, the interaction of "all" the capabilities of the man lead to aesthetic pleasure. The beauty that immediately makes us experience the feeling of pleasure, is never entirely pure, because the man, in action, will always involve himself in the practice according to his emotional state at that moment (Schiller, 1991).

Each individual feels his aesthetic pleasure where he finds it and the variety of aesthetic judgments made span a wide range (Kant, 2010; Schiller, 1991; Huisman, 2008). It has been argued that the aesthetic experience does not only exist in the sensitivity of the individual, but also in artistic imagination, in that the artist can savour the enjoyment of aesthetic qualities which he creates during the creation of his painting (Mitias, 1986), or in our case, in the enjoyment of aesthetic qualities that an athlete create in sports.

Iseminger (2003) says that the degree of complexity, intensity and unity (in short, the magnitude), the aesthetic pleasure of aesthetic experience, although directly related to the complexity, intensity and unity of the aesthetic object as it is directed, cannot be reduced to them, but is a characteristic of the experience itself. The aesthetic value, then, lies in its ability to produce such experiences; these experiences are, in turn, valuable in many ways to those who enjoy, for example, the heightened awareness of the self in refining and developing awareness of their imagination.

We have observed that the *Taekwondo* athlete can experience aesthetic pleasure several times during his practice, depending on his emotional state at that precise moment, and also how he is involved, interested or disinterested, letting the interaction of the movements of his body flow during practice.

The ludic impulse, which drives an engaged in sport, takes him, in face of the beauty, to a state of freedom where he masters the spirit both physically (sensible) and morally (formal). In the ludic impulse, reason and sensitivity are united, allowing the man a moment full of freedom, when he exploits (Schiller, 1991). For Schiller (1991, 92), the man "is only fully man when he plays".

*Taekwondo* is a game that allows interaction between the athletes' bodies, the athlete and his imagination, and also between the athlete and objects such as tiles and pieces of wood. It also allows the athlete to be free and reflective, and experience the ludic impulse.

In simulated combat, *poomsae*, just like in real combat, it is possible to practice concentration, body control, rhythm, speed, range, aggressiveness, elegance, and accuracy in the execution of movements that allow the athlete to display a style in the search for perfect punches and a win. In addition he will show creativity, since, as in life, waging a struggle is real, but mostly imagined. Thus, it becomes possible to contribute to human creativity (in other words, to the creative dimension of the body). It's worth noticing that combat, since it is not a sequence of predetermined movements, requires great ability to improvise on the part of the athlete and also to aim to improve his body, when looking to exploit the weaknesses of the opponent and guard against his own, in a state of readiness for attack and defence.

In order to achieve a breakthrough, it takes a long journey of learning and maturing in *Taekwondo*, since the needs of the body, not only physical, but mostly spiritual, are great. Beyond the need for the attainment of perfect technique, amplitude, position, strength and elegance, which enable fluidity of movement, a lot of concentration, confidence, courage, aggression and energy are necessary to destroy the objects in focus.

The athlete, in the pursuit of excellence through discipline and rigour in the process of concrete transcendental objectives, sacrifices pleasures and opportunities, masters pain, developing the ability to turn this pain into creative and dynamic strength (Uppal, 2009). In this sense, the athletic performance leads us not only to the dimension of beauty, love and social achievement of every human being, but also to the dimension of aggressiveness, conflict and combat. The aesthetic dimension is the one par excellence which unites both sides of the performance, highlighting its dramatic potential.

As stated by Kreft (2010), in sport, performance is an ability to give your best at the decisive moment. This strategic feature of sport, the conflicting strategies and the conflicting tactics of bodies-in-space is what *drama* (action) means. To play is always dramatic, because you never know what will happen, but it is not necessarily a complex drama; quite the contrary, a complex dramatic structure rarely happens. Drama in sport is not just about the final result or about the twists and turns of the players' fortunes during the game. It lies also in the game's staging just as with the aspect of aesthetic pleasure involved, such as the joy of playing the game itself.

In experiencing this free play of his own inner nature with the unpredictable nature of his opponent, the *Taekwondo* athlete finds his state of freedom, experiencing the feeling of an athlete in the fullest sense, because athlete beholding beauty, engages in play and increases the satisfaction of his ludic impulse.

In the case of *Taekwondo*, the aesthetics developed through passion and feeling is what civilizes in the body the aggressive spirit which seeks to push at the limits, holding the man back from self-destruction.

It is through the game that the body creates beauty and sublimity, it is the time and space for recreation and for the body as aesthetic object. Athletes tend to struggle, overcome their limitations, in search of most beautiful movements and of challenges, where the fulfilment and self-recognition are sources of aesthetic inspiration.

## The Game and the Risk of Combat

For Caillois (1990), the game is a nice fantasy, a distraction. The game is not only a specific instance of play, but also all the images, symbols or instruments required for its recreation and so is a complex set. According to the author, the player has the freedom to invent and create, faced with novel situations.

In the game, the athlete must assess the available resources, calculate contingencies and make the most of their unequal resources. Thus he will know the choice between prudence and boldness and to what extent he is willing to invest more in what evades him than in what he can control. In this sense, *Taekwondo*, while game, combines in itself the ideas of limit, freedom, risk, among others.

With each stroke, the athlete encourages and confirms their physical and mental capacity. Pleasure and persistence can make easier what once could be difficult and exhausting. The *Taekwondo* athlete must also learn to deal with the enemy, watching him learn and gain confidence, and only then “fight it” and “beat it”.

Caillois (1990) states that the games move between two poles, *paidia* and *ludus*. The *paidia* represents fun, turbulence, improvisation and reckless expansion. *Ludus* is the complement of *paidia*, and is linked to behaviour, discipline and the subordination to the rules. In order to understand the game fully, the author suggests that it is divided into *Agon*, *Alea*, *Mimicry* and *Ilinx*. In the *Agon*, the role of competition dominates, in *Alea* the lucky, in *Mimicry* the fictitious and in *Ilinx* vertigo.

Thus, taking into account the reference cited by Caillois (1990), we identified that *Taekwondo* is framed in the category *Agon*, by its competitive edge; in *Mimicry*, the player's imagination labours in real combat and in conducting the *poomsae* to fight

a imaginary opponent; in the category *Ilinx*, it is very demanding physically and technically for the individual to experience a fulfilled moment of transcendence and freedom in performing movements.

In pursuit of vertigo, the player “satisfies the desire to see stability and temporarily disrupt the balance of the body, to escape the tyranny of his perception and disturb his conscience” (Caillois, 1990, 66).

The practice of the *Taekwondo* routine refers the athlete to prepare physically, psychologically and socially, especially when entering a match against an opponent of a similar (or indeed superior or inferior) technical level, or when the athlete faces a novel situation, an element of surprise, living in a state of pure adrenaline.

The fight seems to have a fascination for men and holds secrets which entices a man to seek to decipher them. In this context of daring, adventure *Taekwondo* has always charged with risk and uncertainties.

According to Gumbrecht (2007), the main attraction of boxing, another combat sport, is the proximity of the fighting with death. This author, citing the victory of an athlete with narrow advantage, physically and mentally, says it means suffering almost to death, then, if possible, back from a near-death experience to master a decisive physical domain. Experiencing such a situation, a painful win, is often the greatest victory and glory that an athlete can achieve, and which is marked forever in his memory.

In the case of *Taekwondo*, even if the rest of the body is protected, the face of the athlete is exposed and ultimately be the main target of the opponent. The will and desire to hit his opponent with a sharp blow may make him go straight to the ground and suffer a knockout.

These athletes seem crazy to a prudent observer, because they do not understand how individuals derive pleasure from physically attacking one another and putting their themselves at risk of injury integrity at risk. The detached observer values safety, balance and control over their practices, while for the brave value, uncertainty and the unknown, because the emotions in these practices are sustained by risk (Costa, 2000).

In the bipolar concept of beauty described by Keenan, the aesthetic value of tragedy requires pain. “When the displeasure is perceived as a means to foster development and cultivate an experience, it can be seen as aesthetic, pleasant and delightful” (Keenan, 1972, cit. by Kuntz, 1985, 504).

Sportsmen display courage to overcome the risks and their possible limits and derive pleasure and satisfaction of being able to destroy objects with skill and get it right in their opponents with a perfect kick in the head during a fight.

The fascination and desire to achieve a *poomsae* perfectly, breaking objects using increasingly complex techniques and achieve a victory during a hard fight, are things that satisfy the individual, as well as the feeling and power in fulfilling that are so challenging practice.

In this context, the *Taekwondo* athletes enact experiments in which they become the action itself. It is perceived that the forces of the practitioners in the action come from a complex body, where imagination, fantasy and the biological dimension of the body are intertwined. The completion of this brave man's fantasy, which is capable of overcoming obstacles, coming to grips with their fears, anxieties and desires, shows a complicity and harmony with the practitioner's own body. This harmonious experience is beautiful, it is ludic, it is fun, it is emotional: it is an aesthetic experience.

## Conclusion

In conclusion we found that the *Taekwondo* athlete, delivering a precise blow to the head of his opponent during a match, performing a sequence of harmonic techniques in the development of *poomsae*, or even performing a precise technique that will allow him to break a piece of wood, seems to experience an unmatched beauty that both fills and gratifies him.

We consider that the aesthetic pleasure experienced by a *Taekwondo* athlete comes from a relational complexity that is experienced bodily amidst feelings of fear, grief, uncertainty, risk, victory, elegance, grace and aggression, amongst others, creating sensation of deep attraction and awe, and *Taekwondo*, with all these features, in addition to allowing the athlete to experience a sublime moment, an aesthetic experience, only in practice, civilizes the man as a whole, giving him the opportunity to experience a kind of harmony and enjoy this feeling also for sake the practice itself, as an extension of that experience.

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## **Estetska izkušnja taekwon-do športnika**

**Ključne besede:** estetska izkušnja, taekwon-do, športnik

Članek je del širše raziskave v okviru doktorske disertacije s področja športnih znanosti na Fakulteti za šport Univerze v Portu na Portugalskem. Omenjena raziskava proučuje »gibanje telesa« in estetsko izkušnjo taekwon-do športnika med borbo in izvajanjem tehnike *poomsae* ter estetsko vrednost, lastno temu športu. Telo skozi igro ustvarja lepe vzvišene oblike, v času in prostoru za rekreacijo deluje kot estetski objekt. Športniki si prizadevajo preseči svoje omejitve, da bi izvedli čim lepše, zahtevnejše in natančnejše gibe, njihova izpolnitev in športnikovo samopriznanje pa postaneta vir estetske izkušnje. Trdimo, da estetski užitek, ki ga doživlja taekwon-do športnik, izhaja iz celovitega prepleta odnosov, ki združujejo med drugim občutek strahu, žalosti, negotovosti, tveganja, zmage, mehkode, miline in agresije in ki vzbujajo hkrati privlačnost in navdušenje. Članek se sklene s trditvijo, da se taekwon-do športnik, ko med tekmo udari po glavi svojega nasprotnika, ko izvaja skladno zaporedje *poomsae* ali precizno tehniko, s katero bo prelomil kos lesa, sooča z izjemno lepoto, ki ga vključuje in izpolnjuje.