DRJ | **Book Reviews**

A PHILOSOPHICAL LOOK AT THE

ASIAN MARTIAL ARTS

STRIKING BEAUTY

BARRY ALLEN

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Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts

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Martial arts have long held an intimate connection with dance. War dances and dances with weapons presented opportunities for nations to impress and intimidate visiting dignitaries with the discipline and athletic prowess of their armies in ostensibly nonconfrontational settings, while rehearsing such dances functioned as a kind of cross- or off-season training for combatants. The influence of kung fu films on hip-hop is recognized as fueling B-boy/girl power moves and the battle mindset (Kato 2007; Holman 2004; Hoch 2006). Aikido's influence on contact improvisation is also well-known (Novack 1990, 64–65, 184), and tai chi's principles of qi in the bones and effortless movement are central to Klein-informed, release-based techniques (Klein 1996). Contemporary dancers and choreographers, including Cloud Gate Theater and Rootlessroot, draw heavily from martial arts for qualities, including a sense of urgency, multi-focal presence, and precision, in addition to associated somatic, aesthetic, and health benefits. Martial arts have been treated topically by a few contemporary dance choreographers (notably Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui, *Sutra*), while the presence of a stylized fight scene is a staple of many ballets. While direct contact between dance and martial arts has received some scholarly attention (van Orden 2005; O'Shea 2018), there is a dearth that should be addressed, as they are mutually informing, parallel bodily practices.

Barry Allen's *Striking Beauty: A Philosophical Look at the Asian Martial Arts* makes some contribution to the fledgling discourse, and his treatment of the titular concepts of beauty, philosophy, and violence provides unique perspectives for dance studies. As Allen attests, Asian martial arts are already deeply philosophical in a manner in which the theories are nurtured, informed, and interrogated by the physical practice. *Striking Beauty* provides comparison and some dialogue between these somatically oriented philosophies and Western philosophy, which has historically neglected this corporeal source and resource. The first two chapters of *Striking Beauty* center upon themes from Chinese and Western philosophies of the body, respectively. Chapter 3 examines aesthetics, while chapter 4 considers ethical concerns and physical constraints surrounding what bodies can do both alone and with other bodies.

Chinese martial arts, and the forms that have descended from them, feature the "dual cultivation of the spiritual and the martial, each through the other, each perfecting the other, with the proof of the perfection consisting in a kind of effortless mastery of violence" (1). While the Buddhist roots of Shaolin external martial arts are historically sourced, the origins of internal arts such as tai chi are mythologized. Documentary evidence considering tai chi as a physical practice of Daoism goes back only to the middle of the nineteenth century, and Allen follows scholars who argue that its origins were placed into the mythological past by neo-Confucian scholars in order to legitimize this gentler, philosophically dense martial art as originally Chinese during a time when they were under Manchu rule. Thus, while Allen regards the narrative of tai chi as the embodiment of Daoism as a conservative, nationalist mythologization (in a move that has a number of parallels in dance histories), he contends that Buddhist-influenced and originally Daoist concepts nonetheless reflect, inform, and/or articulate Chinese martial training (41ff.). The martial artist cultivates the Buddhist concept of a flowing mind that is never fixed or fixated (5–6). Daoism seeks the related state of *wuwei* (not doing): the effortlessness that arises from and accompanies emptiness (10–12; 32ff.). Rather than combat forms that meet strength with strength or calculate strategies, emptiness is not encumbered by thought and responds immediately by gravitating toward the weakness inherent in any strength, the yin in the yang: "Untrained people fight the force, not the emptiness" (10).[1]

Allen's treatment of *wuwei* is relevant historically as postmodern and release-based dancer-theoreticians were (and are) seeking conceptualizations of effortlessness and ease outside of

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industrialized, capitalist discourses of efficiency formulated by Rudolf Laban. Likewise, the Buddhist "repudiation of attachment and avoidance of lingering on anything" are equally applicable for contemporary improvisation and as mindfulness for performance (6).

Dance studies scholars and students may be particularly interested in Allen's readable, concise overview of the body in canonical Western philosophy in chapter 2, "From Dualism to the Darwinian Body: Themes from Western Philosophy." Literature addressing sports (as adulated by Homer and Pindar and ridiculed by Euripides and Xenophon), medicine, and the pre-Socratic and Stoic materialist philosophies, contextualize and decentralize the anti-corporeal Platonic idealism that should not be viewed as the indominable voice of classical Greece. The chapter is pointed toward the corporeal turn in Western philosophy, with concise presentations of relevant thinkers from the twentieth (e.g., James, Dewey, Mauss, Merleau-Ponty, Latour, Deleuze, Gibson) and twenty-first centuries (e.g., Maxine Sheets-Johnstone, Mark Johnson, and Shaun Gallagher). A useful comparison is made between Spinoza's affective idealism, where "the soul of the soul is the body" (88) and Nietzsche's notion that "the value of knowledge is the instrumentality with which it endows the body" (89). The synthesis of these lies in Deleuze's notion that thought is only embodied; as Allen writes, "life calls thought into being and is the only thing thought thinks" (90). Allen's treatment is remarkable for its clarity and breadth, though some comparison with the previous chapter is curiously lacking (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari's "unused" and "not-doing" with *wuwei* and Nietzsche's condemnation of sickly priests, and a call to corporeality with Bodhidharma's martial arts to Shaolin monks who were physically unfit for meditation). Allen may be viewed as less than charitable in his treatment of boxing, which he does not consider a martial art, but "an athletic competition, a game with rules" with "the purpose of violence," yet this territorial claim introduces an interesting opposition to the philosophy of sports as well as the previously outlined Greek praise of the competitive body (107).

In the third chapter, "Power and Grace: Martial Arts Aesthetics," Allen argues that, while the actual presence of violence differentiates Asian martial arts from Western boxing, the perpetual preparation for violence distinguishes Asian martial arts from dance. Lucid and precise as he distinguishes between the neighboring concepts of art, aesthetics, beautiful, and ugly, Allen also makes use of Paul Souriau's *Aesthetics of Movement* (1983) (in considerations of exertion, economy, and purpose in dance and sports). While beauty is possible but ancillary in sports, and competition is inherent, Allen finds that the opposite is the case for dance. Sports events are more likely to have viscerally engaged fans whipped into a ritualistic fervor due to the pervasive atmosphere of competition, whereas, Allen states, "There will never be ballet hooligans" (131). While perhaps true, the statement indicates an unfortunate tacit identification of dance and ballet that weakens the work and its relevance for dance. Crowds in B-boy cyphers are not to be bested by football fanatics, and a thorough sense of competition abounds there (and the same can be said for ballet) without reducing its status as dance. Curiously missing from the discussion is a consideration of capoeira, which would complicate these neat divisions between sports, dance, and martial arts. And while Allen argues that performing for an audience is an essential quality of dance and only accidental to sports, it can be argued that performing for an audience rather than remaining solely focused on one's partner effectively ends the dance in forms like contact improvisation.

Allen warns that, without a continued sense of an enemy and violence, "the martial art will decline into—dance!" (134). Yet, as Allen himself states, there are long-standing critiques of Chinese marital arts as being "theatrical but combatively vacuous 'flowery boxing'" (51); moreover, contemporary competitions' awarding points for pointed feet and musicality, but not knowledge of martial applications of the movements, indicates a prioritization for the aesthetic over martial effectiveness. To the extent that there are aesthetic qualities of marital arts, "the artfulness comes from enhanced combative effectiveness" (140). Beauty and spiritual growth are incidental, but not accidental.

Chapter 4, "What a Body Can Do: Martial Arts Ethics," trades upon the ethical and physical issues around "can." Allen's narrow definition of violence as "assault, physical, body on body, with the intent to destroy the other's will" depends upon a subject and is

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intentionally distinguished from harm (or, although Allen avoids the term, "objective" violence), which may include ramifications of "capitalism and hate speech" (161). The chapter explores how "the space of violence is non-Euclidian." Distance makes political violence easier, and technological inventions increase physical distance while pointed psychological conditioning and political propaganda can produce the emotional distancing that make violence easier (171). Allen follows Foucault in attributing to power a modality which, rather than direct acts of violence, "acts upon their actions" through the control of knowledge (Allen 2015, 176–177; Foucault 1983, 220). However, given the martial principle of avoiding a direct confrontation and attacking weakness rather than strength, why should it not hold that overpriced medicine, for example, is as legitimate a form of violence as a direct attack upon some group? The deleterious repercussions of Allen's narrow definition of violence registers in statements like the following: "There has never been less violence in the world, more peace for more people, than at the beginning of the twenty-first century" (197–198). The chapter concludes with the notion that, unlike dance, the execution of martial arts movements are not ends in themselves, but the practice of them may increase one's sense of self within community and foster spiritual growth (so, perhaps akin to dance after all).

Striking Beauty will be of interest to dance researchers of the 1960s and 1970s, contemporary Chinese dance, and philosophy of the body, as well as topics both central and peripheral to dance studies, including notions of violence, aesthetics, competition, interdisciplinarity, and sociology. The book produces excellent analysis and to some degree juxtaposition of Western and traditional Chinese philosophies and martial arts, although more mutual interrogation and partnering among the approaches would be welcome. In particular, martial insight with identifying, evading, and countering violence could be pointed to systemic violence rather than regarding it as a somehow less nefarious harm. *Striking Beauty* is punctuated by a continuing impulse to differentiate martial arts from dance, though a wider and deeper understanding of dance would be a source of mutual benefit for the two arts.

Brandon Shaw

Note

1. Allen analyzes *wuwei* more thoroughly in his *Vanishing into Things: Knowledge in Chinese Tradition*, chapter 2, "Daoists".

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