

CAPOEIRA, A PHILOSOPHY OF THE BODY

Camille Marc Dumoulié
University of Paris Ouest-Nanterre-La Défense
France

Art of resistance and aesthetic of power

Capoeira is today the second most widely practiced sport in Brazil after football. That said, its reach is worldwide. In Paris, for example, there is not a single gym that does not offer capoeira lessons. The fashion extends to all age groups, races and both sexes. In short, capoeira is considered the best expression of the cultural miscegenation on which Brazil prides itself.

However, it must be remembered that capoeira was created by slaves as a response to white oppression. Not that it was a weapon of war used against the whites; quite the contrary, in fact, it was something practiced exclusively within black communities. Nevertheless, it expressed a “worldview” and experience of life, an ethics and philosophy antagonistic to white culture. Prior to becoming a sport or martial art, this fighting dance is a philosophy in motion, a thought of the body that ran counter to the white system of thinking. It is a musical counterweight that follows a whole other score, with its own rhythm and physics, inventing a new affectivity.

As the São Paulo master Almir das Areias, author of the book *O que é capoeira* [*What is capoeira?* (1983)], used to say to his pupils: “in your

every movement, you must be like the stream that flows round the rock”. This is as clear an expression as one could wish for the paradoxical nature of the resistance in capoeira, as in all true art. It is never the work of art or the player that opposes or resists a force, rather it is a certain world order or given social structure that, like the rock, pits itself against the flow of life. The artist and capoeirista fight against such barriers, inventing moves and pitching forces that allow the currents to run and find lines of escape that are channels of life and aesthetic expressions of power.

This supposes that there is a true capoeira poetic, understood in the dual sense of practice and bodily activity, and as an aesthetic. If capoeira is an art of resistance, it is not one that measures forces against the world of the whites (the latter being the stronger), but rather revolves around a certain *will to power* in the Nietzschean sense (*Wille zur Macht*), the manifestation of a desire of power that, in its will to live, invents its own new conditions of existence. In fact, there is a strange connection between the Nietzschean philosophy of power and the way the body is thought in capoeira, but it is certainly a logical consequence of Nietzsche’s own prediction that philosophy would inject new vigor into its concepts in the tropics and especially by taking the body as its guide. Indeed, after Nietzsche, some philosophers who strove to topple the metaphysics of Being in favor of a philosophy of Becoming, such as Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, forged connections with the “outside thought” embodied in capoeira. Following this approach, we can enumerate seven planes of resistance in capoeira, which are, therefore, seven planes of poetic and philosophical invention.

A physics of vital becomings – becoming-animal, becoming-black versus the white ontology of Being

While the western ontology represents the ideal before the static perfection of the sphere, after the *Sphairos* of Empedocles; while it lauds the immutability of the Forms, the autonomy and autarchy of the individual, as in Plato; while it rejects affects that imply a becoming, the black ontology grounds itself in the dynamic of becomings in connection with nature, with *physis*. In this sense, ontology is *physis* developed through vital becomings. This brings us back to the Nietzschean will to power as the expression of an authentic physics. “We, therefore, *want to become what we are* – the new, the unique, the incomparable [...] And, to this end, [...] we must become physicists, so that we might be *creators* in this sense” (*The Gay Science*, IV, § 335). According to two other formulations of Nietzsche, *physis* entails “becoming what one is” with “the body as a guide”.

The philosophy of Being characterizes white thought insofar as Being belongs to those who hold the power; the masters dictate the conditions of Being, both for mankind and the animals and plants. It is, to a certain extent, a technical domain that opposes the vital power of *physis*. The slave, in this case the black slave in Brazil, snatched from Africa without hope of return, excluded from the presence of whites, had to invent for himself not a being in itself, but a becoming for itself. This gave rise to new social structures in the *quilombos* (maroon colonies), new relations among men and between men and women, inventing a new image of the body. However, in capoeira, the route to this was via a singularly animal-becoming.

Its origin can be traced to African dances, such as the zebra dance, a

mixture of mimed warfare and sexual parade. And it can be explained, in part, by the fact that the slaves in the *quilombos* had to invent an identity for themselves out of nothing, or from the *tabula quasi rasa* they found in nature. It is thought that the term “capoeira” comes from the Tupi *caa-puêra*, which means a scorched forest clearing. We might even think of the cock fights capoeira sometimes resembles. In fact, the meaning of the word in Portuguese *capoeira* — which means a cage where are *capões* [capons] = a chicken coop — could be explained by the fact that slaves in Rio de Janeiro used to practice capoeira in an old chicken market (Rego, 1968).

But none of that matters. It is all purely anecdotal. The essential point is that capoeira supposes a true animal-becoming. The names or many of the moves testify to the fact: *a coxa da mula* (mule’s thigh); *o vôo do morcego* (bat’s flight), *o rabo da arraia* (stingray’s tail), *o escorpião* (the scorpion), *o macaco* (the monkey)... As Deleuze and Guattari argue, it is not merely a question of imitating the monkey, nor of copying the mule or snake, but a matter of a becoming through the connection with the intensities, forces and movements of the living that informs the flesh and spirit and unifies them as gesture. The capoeirista may even become like a leaf falling from a tree or water running over or round a rock in a stream, but whichever the case, the important thing is to forget, to abandon the rigid body of civilization. In his celebrated *Pequeno manual do jogador* [*The Player’s Primer* (1981) 1999], Master Nestor Capoeira describes the first lesson he and the other masters give to their students, entitled “The Animals”:

“Walking on all fours awakens memories of infancy and the toddler’s play. Perhaps it stirs up even older memories, from our animal

origins. It also puts the individual in a very vulnerable position – ass in the air – as opposed to in an upright ‘rational’ and ‘civilized’ position” (*Ibid.*, p. 109)

To be on the side of *physis* as becoming is to be, as Nietzsche said, on the side of “life in ascendancy, of will to power as the principle of life” (*The Case of Wagner*, “Epilogue”). This distinguishes the moral of the masters and their forts from the true moral of the slaves, as the former impoverishes the value of things and life. In capoeira, the joyful affirmation of power and the experimentation with extra-human becomings works an inversion of values that reveals the essential relationship between white society and weakness and slavery. The technique, this tireless harnessing of nature, is a system of generalized slavery of which the purported masters are the first victims.

Space of escape versus the space of the block

At the root of Greek thought lie the circle and the sphere, both encapsulated in their static perfection. At the root of capoeira we have the *roda* (ring/wheel), a circular ritual space in which gyratory movements blossom and spread, as the human body draws open, dynamic circles in movement. These are moves flung so suddenly, as if made up on the spot, but which appear to follow a rigorous geometry in which hyperbole and invisible arabesques slice through the space. The movements are repeated, dispersing infinite lines of escape, paths beaten by the old slaves that went before. In the *roda*, the dancer is at the center of these escape routes, which run through the most heterogeneous places. The continuity of these

lines shoots through the quadrangular space of the *blocos* (blocks): racial, social, urban blocks, or even the horrible “*blocos*” of the putative carnival in Salvador de Bahia[1], or the blockhouses of the German army during the Second World War.

Born among runaway slaves and fulfilling a role of resistance, capoeira knows none of the codified combat series and segments of the martial arts. That said, it is true that the regional capoeira created by Master Bimba in Salvador de Bahia between the 30s and 50s did come close to a martial art. Bimba supplemented the traditional capoeira called *Angola*, codified by Master Pastinha at around the same time, with certain moves borrowed from white and Asian forms of combat. He prioritized an upright attacking posture, while capoeira Angola favored duck and dodge maneuvers and floor-based swirls. While some would say Bimba picked the Black up from the floor [*levantar o negro*], others would say he whitened capoeira. Capoeira Angola reflects resistance in the artfulness, cunning and negotiation specific to the black slave. Capoeira Regional illustrates the demand and direct struggle of the black community in modern society. These are two political strategies that tend to merge in what we call today capoeira *Atual* [actual capoeira][2].

Master Bimba invented a series of type-sequences for the learning of capoeira. However, even so, much of the essence of the practice remains a matter of improvisation, of *malícia* [cunning] and evasion. Effectively, capoeira is, above all else, the art of dodging, like the stick combat *maculelê*, which shares similar origins to capoeira and has movements said to imitate slaves trying to avoid lashing whips. A vital, non-technical art of resistance, of warlike conquest, this fight becomes all the more effective insofar as it hinges upon the player’s being able to dodge the adversary’s blows. Thus nothing proved more disastrous for capoeira than

the Paraguay War of 1865, which was engineered by the British to preserve their interests in the region. All the imprisoned capoeiristas and slaves were sent to the front line on the illusory promise of earning their liberty. Something similar occurred when they were enlisted to serve the monarchists during the instauration of the Republic in 1890, or even later when used as gun fodder by the mafia and politicians. Hence capoeira is, to draw once again on Deleuze and Guattari, a war machine that does not and cannot want war; which it could only ever lose, because war pertains to the apparatus of the White State. The purpose of this war machine is not to make war, but to destroy the codification and structure of the State. Armed bands, roaming nomads, warriors in a state of perpetual becoming, a fundamental indiscipline, but with a scrupulous sense of honor, a conjuration against the State apparatus, these are just some of the characteristics of the war machine found in capoeira.

Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that there are some connections between capoeira and the martial arts and especially so in the way the latter function along paths of affect, the best model for the war machine in the eyes of Deleuze and Guattari (1980, pp. 497-498), for whom martial arts do not adhere to codes, but follow ways. Under such a regime, affects are weapons in themselves, such that real weapons become useless. Used as projectiles, affects pit themselves against the introspective character of sentiments, being connected with the world of work and tools. But, above all, affects presuppose accelerations and decelerations that run from the petrification of the gesture to the precipitation of movement. The temporality of the war machine, the martial arts, and capoeira is eminently paradoxical insofar as extremely slow movements, given the intensity they contain, fire off affects at lightning speed, whilst other movements are so fast that they almost seem to stand still. This centrifugal space of lines of

escape, this nomadism of the war machine, which found its origin in the revolt of black slaves, corresponds to a specific temporality that constitutes the third plane of resistance.

A temporality of grace or of Kairos that dodges the present and chronological time

Many masters say that the player must completely forget the past and future in order to be absolutely present to the dialog of combat. But make no mistake, this has nothing whatsoever to do with the time of the subject in itself, nor with the individual's attunement to the everyday world. The time of capoeira is pure instant, not Chronos, but Aeon, the fleeting infinitely divided instant of Occasion. The Greek *kairos* means "grace", which is precisely the hallmark of the good capoeira dancer. Animated by a divine lightness, all is his due. In the words of an old capoeira song, with a mischievous play on all the meanings of "*ligeiro*" (light/nimble/fickle/shifty):

Esse nêgo é ligeiro

Dá, dá, dá no nêgo

[This Nigga is "light"/Give, Give, Give to the Nigga]

But *kairos* also designates this point of unbalance and absolute velocity that constitutes the greatest power of resistance of those possessed of grace. Kairos, as in the Greek representation, is a young man who balances magically upon the globe on the tip of his toes. Whoever hopes to attain grace must abandon strategies of force in order to become

as undulating as life, striving for that glorious instant of power while teetering over the brink. Incidentally, this was precisely the point at which Machiavelli located the propitiatory divinity of the man of *virtù*.

Nestor Capoeira writes: “Each move in the game is unique, and the player ducks and dodges, counter-attacks, tumbles depending on the circumstances of the moment” ([1981] 1999, p. 133). However, the hardest part of all is to know when such a degree of simplicity has been reached. For the Greeks, the grace of *kairos* is associated with *Mêtis* or cunning intelligence. Let us quote at length from Marcel D  tienne and Jean–Pierre Vernant’s definition of *M  tis*, which fits perfectly with capoeira:

“The *m  tis* bears on fluid situations which are constantly changing and which at every moment combine contrary features and forces that are opposed to each other. In order to seize upon the fleeting *kairos*, *m  tis* had to make itself even swifter than the latter. In order to dominate a changing situation, full of contrasts, it must become even more supple, even more shifting, more polymorphic than the flow of time: it must adapt itself constantly to events as they succeed each other and be pliable enough to accommodate the unexpected so as to implement the plan in mind more successfully. It is thus that the helmsman pits his cunning against the wind so as to bring the ship safely to harbor despite it. For the Greeks, only like could be affected by like. Victory over a shifting reality whose continuous metamorphoses make it almost impossible to grasp, can only be won through an even greater degree of mobility, an even greater power of transformation.” (D  tienne & Vernant, Trans. Janet Lloyd. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991, 1-54)

We can identify a few points of correspondence here: (1) the fluidity of *mêtis* and the capoeira dance according to the shifting nature of reality – which brings us back to the image of the rock in the flowing stream and the verb *gingar*, which refers to precisely this characteristic ducking and weaving in capoeira, and also to its maritime connotations of sculling and sway, the basic determinant of the dance and all its moves; (2) the power of metamorphosis and transformation: this has already been evoked in relation to becomings, but this mimetic capacity may even stretch to “becoming-imperceptible”. Hence the hypnotic aspect of *ginga*, the snake-like writhing, the differing speeds of swirling bodies; (3) adapt, attune to the circumstances: in this we can return to the greater psychosocial aspect of capoeira, namely the manner in which the black slaves, unable to tackle white power head-on, invented a whole system of evasion and deflection; pretending to work, running about and laughing, mocking the choleric master. Fundamentally, capoeira is an art of contra-power; (4) becoming “even more supple, even more shifting, more polymorphic than the flow of time”: the temporality of Aeon, the time of *kairos*, which, consigned to the chronological flow of events, eternally eludes the presents. Aeon, says Deleuze in *The Logic of Sense*, is “the instant with neither width nor length that subdivides each present into past and future” (1969, p. 193), it is the “ideal player” (p. 81). This is why it is the time of the Divine Mime that folds the event into a never-ending counter-time, which Mallarmé (1945) describes as follows:

“Preceding here, remembering there, with the false appearance of present, thus operates the Mime, the play of which is limited to a perpetual allusion that breaks no windows” (Mallarmé, 1945, p. 310)

Likewise, the capoeira player does not shatter the glass that separates him from his opponent, but sticks to the perpetual allusion of the gesture.

Capoeira belongs to this regime of the war machine whose ideal model is, for Deleuze and Guattari, the martial arts. However, they provide the very criterion that allows us to distinguish one from the other when they state that the martial arts never cease to invoke the center of gravity and the rules of its displacement. This constitutes a certain limit to the martial arts, whose ways remain bound to the “domain of Being”. Hence they resist absolute movements of another nature, which Deleuze and Guattari describe as “those effectuated in the Void. Not in nothingness, but in the smooth of the void where there is no longer any goal: attacks, counterattacks, and headlong plunges” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980, p. 498).

Now, capoeira is precisely this art of pure dynamics and pure power, which eludes the center of gravity, which only uses codes to improvise all the better and plunge head-first into the void. As goes an old capoeira song: “*Não é karate nem também kung-fu*” [“It is not karate, and it’s not kung-fu”]. It is said that Master Bimba’s roda was influenced by jiu-jitsu, but might it not have been the other way round? One great karate master, Mitusuka Harada, who lived in Brazil from 1956 to 1962, mainly in São Paulo, before moving on to Paris and London, once said in an interview: “In the beginning I thought the technique they had taught me would stand me in good stead, but then I came to Brazil and discovered capoeira. It was then that I realized that the practitioner of karate remains way too static, incapable of quick movement. That’s why I study the possibility of being at once mobile and solid, free as a whip but with the punch of a hammer” (apud Bachmann, 1990). This cunning intelligence so close to

mêtis and which passes through the paradoxical temporality of gestures, through an art consummated in pretense and acrobatic movements – the *floreios* – is called *malícia* (a craftiness based on experience) – something essential to all movements of unbridled flight.

An anatomy of the Body without Organs versus bodies whose organs belong to the master or some such servility

In the vibrant and musical space of the *roda*, the body is gripped by a trance that forces it to dissociate from organic anatomy as if from some servile doppelganger, submitting to the weight of a consciousness wrought from lashing whips and *ite missa est*. Taken by grace and divine lightness, the player makes himself exist as pure body. This inventive liberty, as in the theater of Antonin Artaud, supposes the exercise of cruelty, albeit a vital cruelty that, again as in Artaud, breaks the chains and psychological or social commitments to “invent a new body”. A body of escape, on the limits of the possible and on the brink of unbalance, which converts the cruelty leveled against the black slave into a virtual power to transcend the organic body en route toward the glorious body of the Black.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the Body without Organs is a principle of anti-production, but also an intensive power of connection, of delirium, of contagion. It is called the Body without Organs “because it is opposed to all strata of organization, whether of the organism or of power”. The black body treated first as flows of flesh into the infinite and then as a tool in the service of imperialism was a vast body without organs or functions of its own. Through capoeira, it frees itself from all forms of alienation, including earthly gravitation, in order to re-encounter its

genesiac power and build itself anew out of the void into which it has plunged.

A dynamic of the gesture that unfolds ad infinitum versus a logic of action proper to the functionality of the white world

The act wraps the body and life in a utilitarian functionality. Each act must further the work, production, optimization of the white capitalist world. To avoid the actualization of the gesture, to keep the dynamic unfulfilled in act, and therefore as pure potentiality, is the supreme resistance of capoeira. Hence the essential continuity of the fight and dance, which takes a movement initially configured for conferring a blow and turns it into graceful arabesque. Contrary to the common misconception that the fighters, when caught training by the slave handlers, would pretend to be dancing, capoeira is, first-off, a dance, like the African war dances. In fact, it is a synthesis of fight and dance; the gesture of combat is always one of dance, and vice versa. However, going back to Deleuze's expression, it is a "disjunctive synthesis". Fight and dance, inextricably linked, do not cease to avoid each other on the same line, in the same movement. The gesture of death is one of life, it is aesthetic and creative, a truth underscored by the fact that the *berimbau* was originally the African hunter's bow, which, with time, transformed into a string instrument that used its mouth as a sound box. Later, Master Pastinha would attach a bayonet to the tip of his *berimbau* to change it back into a weapon.

This double-play, this two-way stream, this non-coincidence of a single gesture creates a vibratory movement that we can define as the

timbre of the gesture as it assumes a musical dimension. Because timbre, as of a voice, for example, comes from vibrations that do not precisely coincide. Thrown into the circle of the *roda*, the gesture that dodges the blow resounds to infinity. Plucked from the *berimbau*'s string, the gesture becomes the projection of spiritual matter.

The dance of capoeira, which harks back to all the symbolism of *candomblé* (the primitive afro-brazilian religion), is a great cosmic game whose force of gravity moves bodies, stars and galaxies outside the circle of the *roda*.

An ethic of the game [o jogo] against the spirit of gravity and seriousness. We could also say the ethic of the virtual versus the determinism of the real

“Aeon is a child who plays gammon”. This famous aphorism of Heraclitus’ leads us to an ethic deriving of the ontology and temporality of capoeira. Above all else, the grand Masters agree, its fundamental characteristic is the gratuity of the game. The goal is enjoyment, not victory, though this spirit of play won’t stop the best from winning. The ethic of the game is that of the event grounded in virtual power; the power to resist, through play and evasion, being dragged into the doing, into the functionality of the white world, where the Black has nothing to gain. It is about refusing to debase the power of the gesture in the utility of the act.

Master Valdemar da Paixão, born in Salvador in 1917, used to say of his opponent: “Don’t touch me, don’t dirty me; when I leave here, the only thing I want to have to wash is my hands”. Nietzsche affirmed that he had only one pathos, and it is the same as in capoeira: “the pathos of distance”. The white garb of the old capoeiristas is proof of this.

Without having studied quantum physics, the capoeirista knows that creative energy comes from the void, and that life is born of the virtual power that contains, for its part, all becoming in potentiality. So the art of eluding consists in giving way to the blow that is frustrated in air, the kick that will never hit its target. In this effort spent by the opponent, the player finds his own negative energy. Like black holes that suck up the energy of the stars, the capoeirista finds in the blow that escapes his adversary the empty space from which to draw the energy for his gesture. This brings us to the last plane of resistance, but one into which all the others fold.

Black humor that inverts the hierarchies and combat techniques of the white world

Everything I have just said serves the purpose of rendering apparent the fact that the power of resistance of capoeira stems from the force of contra-effectuation. It is the power of the Happening, of Divine Mime, but also of Humor. Nestor Capoeira ([1981] 1999) makes this clear in the context of a philosophy of capoeira, defining humor as:

“...an understanding that allows the capoeirista to see the darker sides of humanity and society without losing the joy of life. Good humor does not come automatically, but has to be cultivated. One way of doing this is by spending time with masters and capoeiristas who possess the quality”.

This brings us back to the original conception of philosophy as wisdom attained through dialog among friends. Yet it is a wisdom bent, as

in Spinoza, Nietzsche and Deleuze, on joy. This humoristic and joyful dimension is deeply linked to the ontology of vital becomings and is expressed in the ethic of *malícia*, so essential that Nestor Capoeira goes so far as to declare that even the most virtuous individual can never become a true capoeirista “*se não sabe brincar*” [“unless he knows how to play/joke”]. Even the names for certain moves transmit this humorous character: *cocorinha* (little hunkers), *benção* (blessing: a strong kick to the chest), *telefone* (telephone: a slap on either ear), and the game-within-a-game: *apanha laranja no chão tico-tico* (pick oranges from the ground), which consists of snatching a bill with one’s mouth while walking on two hands, feet in the air.

Joy, lightness, ability to pretend, these are the three pillars of *malícia*. Beyond this essential lightness of spirit and body, or this permanent counter-effectuation of functional acts, the humor of capoeira consists in inverting the codes and techniques of white combat: legs versus arms, feet versus hands, high versus low. “You have to think with your foot”, goes Nietzsche’s famous aphorism, rather than with the head, which should supplant the feet in *cabeçadas* (head butts). This inversion of the body and its functions is part of the carnivalesque view of the world that, as Bakhtin showed, incites a revolution of dethronement and a total inversion of values. The physical revolution of the *auê* [the wheel] is an aesthetic, ethical and political gesture. In grotesque fashion, it turns the world inside out, ass to the air, exalting the low and demeaning the high. And yet, from that laughter comes a revelation and unveiling of hidden truths.

To evince the world through a revealing deformation, this is the function of art and its power to resist stereotypes that pigeonhole life. As we have seen, the *roda* figures the world through a revelatory inversion.

We find the first sign of this in the fact that the expression for stepping into the *roda* is “*sair no mundo*” [stepping out into the world].

The *ladainha* [the litany] that precedes the players’ entrance into the ring traditionally culminates in a *chula*, a dialog between a soloist and a chorus:

- *É hora, é hora*
- *iê, é hora, é hora, camará*
- *vamos embora*
- *iê, vamos embora, camará*
- *pelo mundo fora*
- *iê, pelo mundo fora, camará*
- *que o mundo dá*
- *iê, que o mundo dá, camará*
- *dá volta ao mundo*
- *iê, dá volta ao mundo, camará.*

[It’s time, it’s time/ Hey, it’s time, it’s time, companion/ Let’s go/ Hey, let’s go, companion/ Out into the world/ Yeah, out into the world, companion/ Where the world is at/ Where the world is at, companion/ Go around the world/ Yeah, go around the world, companion.]

Another form of inversion lies in the fact that the capoeirista never enters the *roda* face-first, but always with the *aú*, the *macaco* [monkey] or even a back flip. Finally, we could say that this humor in capoeira works on three different planes and through three different ways of figuration.

The first plane is the *roda* as a physical space in connection with the whole living world. The dynamic circle of the *roda* is therefore a *metonym of the cosmos*. With the inversion, this part encompassed by the whole

ends up swallowing the whole. To leave the *roda* is to enter the cosmos and find oneself in connection (metonym is a form of connection) with a living infinity. And when the singer leads the refrain “*vamos embora pelo mundo fora*” [let’s go into the world outside], shouldn’t we really understand it to mean “*vamos embora pelo mundo afora*” [let’s go into the world beyond]?

The second plane is the *roda* as the corporeal space in which the Body without Organs and this affective athleticism of black body are invented. This second space is therefore *a symbol of Black resistance* to the white world. The symbol is the domain of analogies and correspondences. What we have are two bodies that correspond and dialog more than clash; two black bodies that would have no symbolic reason to fight each other. They exercise their power and keep it pure by holding back from contact. This elastic, resistant vacuum persists between them, this blank space like a page on which they scribble the signs that trace the movements of their bodies. The white man, the white world, has become a neutral space, a malleable difference between two bodies and between those bodies and the cosmos. From this feat, resistance to the life of the white world is broken by this black power and becomes the poetic material from which the player’s virtual blows are cast.

The third and final plane is that of power relations strategy, which makes the *roda* an agonistic space, *a metaphor for social power relations*. The metaphorical revelation of capoeira is to show that the supposedly civilized, moral and policed world is a permanent state of warfare in which cunning and might-is-right prevail. Capoeira reveals what society hypocritically hides. It evinces the rules of social functioning, but this first mirror play that inverts also conceals a second that is expressed at certain moments of the game within a game.

In other words, one of the two players will suddenly and abruptly interrupt the game with a codified calling [*a chamada*]. Here is an example called “*a volta ao mundo*” [trip round the world]... One of the players opens his arms and lets down his guard, showing, by so doing, that he is breaking the rules of the game. He then runs or walks around the roda and the other player follows him as if oblivious to the fact that he might, at any moment, turn and level a treacherous blow against him. The follower knows very well that this will happen, but he must pretend that nothing is going on. The pinnacle of elegance and feigned distraction responds to the peak of the *mandinga* [the guile].

So what is the meaning of this rupture with the rules of combat? On first sight it would seem to show that the social order is grounded on less solid rules than those of war. At any moment the adversary might infringe against the established power relations and social order he himself created. But there is an even deeper lesson hidden away in all of this. In society, the irruption of pure violence, outside of any particular context, leads to anarchy, homicide and ethnic extermination. In the world of capoeira, this breaking of the rules of engagement does not put the game in danger, because it resumes without anyone feeling obfuscated by the betrayal. After all, and this is the final revelation, the civilized world of power relations and the master/slave dialectic are based on hatred, on pure violence and barbarity. *Homo homini lupus* is the true bedrock of the social struggle. Inversely, if the infraction does not undo the game of capoeira and the moment of joyful, playful *malícia* is preserved, it is because capoeira is grounded upon camaraderie, solidarity and mutual trust. The earliest forms of capoeira were branded “barbarous”, but it was the white world that was truly barbaric.

One last word on this subject: at the heart of the art of cunning,

negotiation and the eschewal of power that reflects the impossibility of head-on slave resistance to white hegemony, the game of *chamadas* illustrates a hidden desire for a shift toward more direct and offensive resistance. In similar fashion, the agonistic character of capoeira Regional, in contrast with capoeira Angola, reveals the Black's desire for an open fight in modern society. But it also expresses the confidence in the values of individual performance proper to capitalist democracy in the 50s. Today, the return to the playful, collective forms of capoeira Angola in the synthesis that is Atual capoeira is a sure sign of the pessimistic lucidity that followed that age of grand illusion.

Miscegenation and cultural connections

There aren't many combat sports that have joy as an end and humor as a means. Fewer still are mass, media-molded sports that nourish identity and nationalist reflexes. But why are football and capoeira the two national sports of Brazil? Perhaps it is because, in both cases, you think with your foot. Just like in samba. In fact, there is one other link between samba and capoeira: the shimmy in the hips that produces *ginga*, the only physical impediment to the wider spread of the capoeira fad among whites. But just as capoeira is and always has been a Black art, it is also currently an incarnation of a culture and philosophy of miscegenation. Therein lies the paradox.

On one hand, the capoeira fashion in Europe and the United States is an example of cultural anthropophagi on the part of the whites, who, having lost all genuine culture of their own, and having exploited the Black and pillaged all the riches of Africa, now feed off black bodies like

true cannibals. And this is no mere metaphor. A passage from the novel *Jubiabá* (1935) by Jorge Amado tells of the suicide of an old Black who was fired from his job because he was too weak. During a discussion among the Blacks at the port, one of the men says of the whites: “They eat our flesh but then don’t want to chew on the bones. At least during the slavery years, they chewed the bones”.

On the other, the success of capoeira shows that it is more than just a nomadic war machine, but also a desiring machine that obliges us to enter and invent our becoming. Therein lies its true power: not just that which fights force with force, but the one that gives the adherents of force and power the desire to escape whilst also escaping from themselves. It is this desire to escape and escape from oneself that animates the strangely intellectual capoeira I’m playing in these pages. Being a white European with little suppleness about the hips, I try to find in the vital energy and aesthetic power of capoeira the gust to make the old concepts that dwell in my mind dance a little.

However, it is true that my words insist more on the Black specificity of capoeira than on the power of miscegenation. But my goal is not to conduct a sociological study of capoeira from the perspective of the miscegenation of contemporary Brazilian culture. To do so would first require an investigation of the part of the myth that espouses the ideology of miscegenation. What I purport to do here is examine the invention of a corporeal practice, linked to a “worldview”, that constitutes a counter-culture, a counter-nature, a counter-aesthetic, a counter-philosophy. But the affirmative power of life and the becoming of this inversion of values awaken a desire for another culture, another nature, another philosophy. And so there is an overflowing of values: resistance proves a generous sire of collective values, the thinking body sows abstract conceptual lines of

thought to be reaped by the philosophers of tomorrow.

Miscegenation is an alibi that allows the dominant culture to commercialize and consume exotic products. In any case, it is exploitation and the whitening of black culture. For better or worse, miscegenation is the buzzword of politically correct nationalisms. Miscegenation is everything we want, except for this hybridization. Miscegenation is always a yet-to-come, it is never an act of making the other over, or of a supposed integration of differences so as to eradicate them more fully. “Blacks must blacken”, writes Jean Genet in *The Blacks*. “One is not born a woman, but becomes one”, wrote Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. And there is no surprise, then, that Freud referred to women as “the black continent”. Capoeira, the blacks, the mestizos, women and homosexuals are the first agents of cultural miscegenation, because they must become what they are against the grain of the white man’s model, the global power norm. Close to them in this strange zone where difference is always gloriously in relief, one and all can partake of a becoming-black, becoming-woman or becoming-other, as in this interzone, no-one is ever Black, or Woman or Other, but always in the throes of collective becomings – unless, that is, one chooses to persist in being-a-white-male. If miscegenation is the desire to become other, animated by this deterritorialization that is the power of desire, then capoeira possesses the power of miscegenation. As Deleuze and Guattari write in *Thousand Plateaus* (1980, p. 334):

“That is because becoming is not to imitate or identify with something or someone. [...] Starting from the forms one has, the subject one is, the organs one has, or the functions one fulfills, becoming is to extract particles between which one establishes the relations of

movement and rest, seed and slowness that are *closest* to what one is becoming, and through which one becomes. This is the sense in which becoming is the process of desire.”

Effectively, without desire there can be no miscegenation. And there is only miscegenation when the desire to become other is expressed anew, the deterritorialization at the heart of that desire. Which is why, from a social, cultural and political point of view, we might prefer the notion of “connection” to the more biological and ideological notion of miscegenation. Thus the Africanist ethnologist Jean-Loup Amselle, having earned renown with a study of miscegenation, asserts the need to renounce this notion in favor of that of “connection”. He shows that the affirmation of Black or African culture in the globalized world is one of the greatest forces of cultural connection against identity demands, but also against the colonization of the world by US culture. He writes:

“In this context, and more than ever before, Africa should be conceived as a deterritorialized entity. Africa as a fluid meaning is a concept, the variable geometry that pertains to both the French outpost and the North-American ghetto, to both the Brazilian shantytown and the African village. [...] the Africa concept belongs to whomsoever wants to grasp it, connect with it” (2001, p. 15).

A philosophical toy

Thoughts are gestures, Nietzsche said.[3] Capoeira is the art of thinking the pure body, the Body without Organs that superposes itself

upon our leaden bodies like a thunderstorm sky. How much thought in the gesture of a capoeirista, how much mental gesticulation in the discourse of a philosopher!

To finish, and to return to this power of vital and joyous resistance inherent to capoeira, I would like to quote Master Pastinha, who after a long moment of silence, gave this reply to the question “what is capoeira?”:

“Capoeira is a game, a toy [...] It is the pleasure of elegance and intelligence. It is wind in the sails, the moan in the slave quarters, a body that shudders, a *berimbau* well played, the attack of a serpent coral. [...] It’s the laugh in the face of the enemy [...] It’s picking oneself up from a fall before even touching the ground. [...] It’s a small penitent’s boat, abandoned and endlessly adrift”.

And if, from all of this, we could make a philosophy!

NOTES

1. In Salvador de Bahia, the carnival degenerated into a gigantic techno-parade where American and European tourists come to get drunk and use drugs. *Blocos* consists, each, of two gigantic trucks, the first one being used for the sound system and the band, the other one used as bar and toilet. Between both drags the troop of the kicked down tourists who paid an entrance fee. Every block is defended by a cohort of black young men who hold an immense rope surrounding this gigantic set, and who walk according to the speed of trucks - humiliating slavery paid a derisory salary. Guards, inside every block, repel violently the intruders, specifically the black and half-blood Brazilians who cannot pay the entrance and who are compressed on pavements.
2. 1. On the history of capoeira, see J. Lowell Lewis, *Ring of liberation*, The Univ. of Chicago Press, 1992; in Portuguese, see Leticia Vidor de Sousa Reis, *O mundo de pernas para o ar*, Publisher Brasil, 1992.

3. “Our thoughts should be considered gestures [*Gebärden*] corresponding to our instincts [*Trieben*] like all gestures”; Translated from the French: *Œuvres complètes*, Gallimard, Paris, v. 4, p. 503. And: “Thoughts are signs [*Zeichen*] in a game and a conflict of affects [*Affekte*]: they are always connected to their hidden roots”, v. 12, p. 36).

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