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The Aesthetic Experience of the Combat Athletes in Taekwondo

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Citar este artículo como: Coelho, Rebeca C.-Kreft, Lev- Lacerda, Teresa (2014): The Aesthetic Experience of the Combat Athletes in Taekwondo. *Fair Play. Revista de Filosofía, Ética y Derecho del Deporte*, 2:2, 81-104.

* Funding: The primary author, Rebeca Cardozo Coelho, was supported by Foundation for Science and Technology, Portugal (FCT)

BARCELONA

RECIBIDO: 13/9/2014

ACEPTADO: 27/8/2014

Abstract

The research on the aesthetic experience may be focused both on the athlete's perspective and on the observer's. Although some studies have already emphasized the importance of sportsman's aesthetic experience, it is exactly in this domain that large gaps in the literature can be perceived. The aim of this study is to understand the aesthetic experience lived by *Taekwondo* Portuguese National Team athletes, in the combat practice. The research of qualitative nature, with a phenomenological approach, has an exploratory and a descriptive character. The speech of fourteen athletes was collected in semi-structured interviews, and the information was treated from a mapping of the athletes' speech contents. It was concluded that the combat athlete, in search of the beautiful and accurate technical-tactical execution, in the face of the most diverse opponents, with an aggressive and an assertive attitude, and at sometimes surpassing risky situations and showing his/her inner energy through *kihap* (yell), is able to overcome, to win and to live an aesthetic experience.

Keywords: Aesthetic Experience; Athlete; Combat; *Taekwondo*

Resumen:

La investigación sobre la experiencia estética puede centrarse tanto en la perspectiva del atleta como en la del observador. Aunque algunos estudios han hecho hincapié en la importancia de la experiencia estética de los deportistas, es exactamente en este campo donde se pueden percibir grandes lagunas. El objetivo de este estudio es comprender la experiencia estética vivida por los atletas de la Selección Nacional Portuguesa en la práctica del combate. La investigación de naturaleza cualitativa, con un acercamiento fenomenológico, tiene un carácter exploratorio y descriptivo. La declaración de catorce atletas se recogió en entrevistas semi-estructuradas, y la información fue tratada siguiendo los esquemas de las declaraciones de los atletas. Se concluyó que el atleta de combate, en busca de la ejecución técnico-táctica precisa y excelente, enfrente de los más diversos oponentes, con una actitud agresiva y asertiva, y en algunas ocasiones sobrepasando las situaciones de riesgo y mostrando su energía interior a través del *kihap* (grito), es capaz de derrotar, para ganar y vivir una experiencia estética.

Palabras clave: Experiencia Estética; Atleta; Combate; *Taekwondo*

1. The Aesthetic Experience of the Combat Athletes in Taekwondo

Sports is a space of performance that allows the exhibition of bodies in a confront between teams, among several athletes in an individual competition, or even in a duel between two opponents, as in *Taekwondo* combat. According to Bento (2004: 66) "the sport is a stage where the representation of the body, its possibilities and limits, the dialogue and relationship with our inner and outer nature with life and the world comes

into scene". It is in this dialogue, in other words, in the relationship of the athlete with himself/herself and the athlete with the other, that the aesthetic experience which is naturally mediated by the sports movement is founded. Through the movement, the athlete experiences the sports world, having the possibility to recognize its aesthetic qualities and, thus, to reach the aesthetic experience.

The aesthetic experience, provided by the sport, was treated by several authors (e.g. Arnold, 1985, Kirk 1986; Lacerda 2004; Maivorsdotter & Lundvall, 2009), being described by the content of the phenomenon of cognition that is presented in our perception, as well as by its own value, which is singular (Matrevers, 2003), because each individual feels the aesthetic pleasure where he/she finds it, and the variety of tastes is presented as a wide-ranging of possibilities (Huisman, 2008; Kant, 2010).

The sport is, like other cultural domains, a fruitful space for the aesthetic experience. The study of this sensible universe favours its better understanding, allowing to articulate more fully the different ambits of sports reality.

Research has been reflecting more about the spectator's aesthetic experience, being necessary to extend the focus also to the *feel* of the athlete, the protagonist of the game. *Taekwondo* can highlight the pleasure of performing a technique accurately, of choosing the best strategy to be applied, to win or be defeated by the opponent. In the body-body fight, the athlete is integrated in his/her performing area, the mat, making the body-place relationship a space of realization of fantasies, time to overcome difficult and risky situations, enjoying the feelings arising and accessing, therefore, the aesthetic experience.

This present study seeks, precisely, to describe and interpret the aesthetic experience of combat athletes, trying to identify at what moment or moments, interacting with the most diverse adversaries, the athlete meets his/her aesthetic pleasure. This objective still unfolds as we intend to highlight which elements contribute to the understanding of this type of experience.

2. Methodology

The study is qualitative, comprising a phenomenological approach (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008) characterized by a descriptive and an exploratory character (Thomas & Nelson, 2002). To the extent that the athletes who participated in the search were asked

to describe their experiences, feelings and thoughts relating to the practice of combat, we can say that we have adopted a phenomenological posture (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2008).

For the data collection we have chosen the semi-structured interview (Thiollent, 1985). The interview script was developed through information taken from the literature review, the consideration of object peculiarities, the realisation of six pilot interviews, and the discussion of the subject and the contribution of four external researchers.

The group of participants/volunteers in the study was composed of all athletes in the Portuguese National Team of Combat, a total of fourteen athletes, being ten males and four females, aged between 18 and 31 years old, and an average of 11,35 years of practice.

The information gathered was worked based on the content analysis (Bardin, 2009) and on phenomenological interpretation (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Wengraf, 2001). The analysis was performed using the software NVivo (Qualitative Data Analysis), version 9 for *Windows*. In addition to the deductive approach which led to the construction of the interview script, an inductive approach was used to access the categories generated from the information gathered. Thus, we have identified the thematic categories: technique, tactics/game, affection/taste (affection by modality and companionship), aggressiveness, risk, transcendence/overcoming, victory and *kihap* (yell). Through a process of reflective and subjective interpretation (Bardin, 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Wengraf, 2001) these categories allowed a better understanding of the combat athlete's aesthetic experience.

In order to be possible to dismember and describe the different meanings of the *kihap* associated with the aesthetic experience of the combat athlete, this subject was discussed in an article which was especially dedicated to it (Coelho, Kreft, & Lacerda, 2012). Thus, in the present work, this category is not developed.

3. The framework of the aesthetic experience of combat athlete – Description and interpretation

3.1. Technique

The technique is presented as a relevant element to understand the aesthetic experience of the combat athlete. Kupfer (1975: 88) states that some characteristics of the technique as “the timing, the fruition, the lightness, the harmony of execution attest to the aesthetic ideal of the competitive sports”. In this course, the combat athletes claim that a movement to be considered beautiful must have some essential characteristics such as explosiveness, speed, strength, power, flow, harmony, amplitude, flexibility, skill, agility, coordination, precision and be dynamic.

But besides these aesthetic qualities, the athletes also highlighted the need of the movement to follow the correct biomechanical patterns, more specifically with the right use of the hip and the knee:

“First it has to comply with the principles that are, raise the knee, put the hip, stretch the leg and be well executed (...). It’s to perform with each step of the action itself, perform the right steps and in convenient time.” (I.10)

Vanden Eynde (1989) considers sport as a creator of beauty when conceiving human movements, which develop themselves in time and space, pursuing technical or biomechanics perfection. It takes a long training journey to perform biomechanical’s criteria of the movement, and this journey becomes more attractive depending on the difficulties encountered. The greater the difficulty and complexity of the technique, kicks on the head, with rotations (*mondollyo*), combinations of techniques, for example, the greater will be the beauty and the pleasure in its correct execution:

“What I like most is to hit kicks on the head. It’s spectacular ... then if it’s a *mondollyo*, it’s spectacular.” (I. 3)

“To be beautiful, first it has to be difficult, it has to be a movement that almost nobody can make, this makes it special, it has to be fast and preferably it has to make possible to score many points. The *mondollyo* can even lead to KO if it is made right, and this is a beautiful movement.” (I. 2)

“The fact of making a correction to the chest-head, in which we send to the chest slowly and then fast to the head, to deceive, it’s very beautiful.” (I. 7)

In sport practice, despite the exigency and the difficulty of the technique, the athletes must be able to transmit the idea of ease, of absence of visible effort (Lacerda, 2002). This aspect is significant in fighting in *Taekwondo*, so the athletes try to perform the hardest kicks with all the necessary aesthetic qualities.

In this part, we also observed that a technique can be considered *perfect* when it is performed quickly, accurately and intelligently, leaving the opponent without reaction:

“In a combat, a movement is beautiful when I almost do not move the body, I only move the leg. I only move the body when I am so close to the other that he doesn’t even move. I just move the leg and immediately hit, the other doesn’t even see me.” (I. 14)

For Kupfer (1988) excellence is achieved when the body moves perfectly, being this the main criterion for aesthetic appreciation. The difficulty level of the elements performed may, according to the author, increase the aesthetic qualities of the movements, although it is not the difficulty itself that is valued from the aesthetic point of view, but, through it, it is possible to appreciate a *performance* that highlights the agility, the amplitude, the grace, the strength of the human body. In this way, the athlete, combining each of these particularities, can approach the excellence in the technique domain. This achievement, worthy of a nice feeling to anyone who observes (Lacerda, 2004; Masterson, 1983) and for those who perform, (Coelho, 2004; Fernandes & Lacerda, 2010; Kirk, 1986), comes out from his/her own experiences and also from the fact that the athlete knows that he/she is being admired:

“Beauty is in those daring techniques which make the combat unique and show *Taekwondo’s* spectacle. (...) Those techniques that involve rotation or two techniques in the air, one of them towards the head; techniques that involve head blows are always more noticeable, people always think: ‘hammmm, it hit him, did it hit him?’” (I. 9)

These athletes look for excellence in the technical domain with the objective of fulfilling themselves, to be champions, powerful, worthy of admiration. For this, they need these techniques to be valid, in other words, score points:

“When I score, sometimes we can hit and not score, (...) we feel a, it’s not a frustration, but we think: ‘It’s not this time’, but we have to continue. (...) But when we score, we hit, so to say, an opponent, we feel the joy of getting the point, and we feel happy because it’s something that we train.” (I.13)

“It’s a great joy, it’s almost a feeling of fullness... so if it’s in the end of the combat it’s something that endures, it’s very good.” (I.14)

Thus, it is evident that one of the elements that contribute to the athlete's aesthetic experience is the capability to perform kicks with high technical domain in a combat, in which the difficulty, the perfection and the excellence express themselves through movement. In sport, the whole movement is intentional and the execution of the movement appears to function as a catalyst for aesthetic pleasure: hit the opponent, hit him/her and score, help defining the configuration of what are, for the *Taekwondo* athlete, the beautiful moments of this sport.

3.2. Tactics/Game

This category is linked to the different ways of playing the game itself. To Lacerda (2002) the tactics used in the different kind of sports represents the development and the appropriate use of the means that enable, within the rules framework, to obtain the best results, to reach victory. Kuntz (1985) considers that in sport, although there is no script or text, as in music or theatre, there are game plans that can be considered approximations.

In *Taekwondo*, the tactics used during a combat go through collection and interpretation of information which lead to future actions. This process occurs several times during the same combat with the purpose of scoring more points than the opponent, and so, there are choices to be made, and the athlete must have the necessary skill to adapt and readapt her or himself constantly.

Even before the beginning of the combat, from the information about the opponent, the athlete plans his/her tactics. This strategic organization can become an imagined game where the athlete imagines/visualizes himself/herself attacking and counter- attacking his/her opponent, trying to anticipate events:

“Before the combat, if we already know the opponent, we may foresee, framing scenarios in our heads and train to test, in other words, I think ‘If he does this I’ll do that’, to prepare.” (I. 3)

“In a competition, I always try to preview the podium, to imagine myself in the first place on the podium. Before the combat, we always have the athlete on our side and I try to watch him moving, performing the tactics, and that’s how I’m in a competition, always with positive thoughts against the different athletes.” (I. 6)

This imagined game falls into the *Mimicry* category approached by Caillois (1990), because the athlete searches, through pre-organised technical movements, the intellectual and physical harmony to overcome his/her opponents.

Subsequently, already in the combat itself, we see that the athlete endeavours all the time to evaluate his/her opponent, trying to identify which his/her tactics are and which the techniques he/she can perform. This perceptive skill over the opponent's technical-tactical evaluation is essential to determine your own strategy, to make the technical choices and know the exact moment to attack. In this game, as in any other, it is necessary to have a good knowledge of the modality, which will be determinant to read the small signs that are projected by the opponent, allowing the athlete to anticipate, to think ahead of him/her and enjoy this circumstance:

“In a combat what I like more is to (...) be fully aware of the game that's going on, it's to analyse the match itself. When I'm preparing the next move, the next action, it is the most memorable moment because it's more lived, it is when we're more at peak of tension, anyone can do anything and it is one tense moment, that feeling which is not easy to explain, a good tension, positive.” (I. 10)

“It's a very tactical game. We are looking for the posture of the athlete we are able to perceive, or at least guess, a possible technique that he'll do. It's to predict what the athlete will do and try to cancel it, try to make first or not let him perform the technique, make another. The combat goes through the athletes' intelligence.” (I. 2)

The athlete can develop his/her perceptive skill, therefore being more sensitive to the game, to his/her own reactions and to the actions of his/her opponents. This competence is one of the essential qualities for an athlete to live an aesthetic experience (Coelho & Lacerda, 2012).

But, for the process, which goes from perception to technical action, occurs in a harmonious and precise way, the athlete has to control the distance between him/her and his/her opponent. This is one of the most important characteristics to perform a good game, a winning and beautiful game:

“Keeping the distance from an opponent, moving a foot two inches to the front, everything is calculated, it's a sport with so much precision, so fast that everything is calculated, even a small step, we make a step with an intention, nothing is done without intention and because of this, *Taekwondo* becomes beautiful. (...) I think this limit that exists, this sensation of control of an imaginary line that exists between me and the opponent (...) we're in a danger zone. We have to find out the most appropriate action when noticing

the opponent's slightest gesture or slightest action. This limit movement, this moment of limit is what I like best." (I. 13)

"With a good control of the distance, we are able to perform those more beautiful movements that are, normally, more difficult, more spectacular to perform, and, in this sense, we are much more able and, definitely, this contributes to my pleasant experiences." (I. 3)

We have identified in previous statements that the combat is characterised by anticipation and speed. It is necessary to be able to read the game and to react to the opponent's actions; the distance control, a minimal movement is calculated and strategically thought in order to deceive, score and prevent the opponent to score. This is the tactic of *Taekwondo*, the game that exists in the confrontation between two opponents, the game which fascinates, seduces and satisfies these athletes. But sometimes, their strategy also involves yielding in front of the opponents, sometimes you have to let a point go in order to win two, three or four points. As these athletes develop their sporting abilities, their sensibilities, physical and intellectual capabilities, the game becomes more aesthetically attractive (Boxill, 1988). The capability to adapt and readapt facing an adversary becomes increasingly sharp, showing that the *Taekwondo* game can have almost the characteristic of a *puzzle*, as pointed out by one of the interviewees, in which it is necessary to assemble and disassemble the parts (technical and tactical), or a chess game, in which the anticipation of the opponent's actions is determinant.

"The search for points, the interpretation, the attempt to assemble and disassemble the puzzle, assemble again, disassemble once more. During the combat, I do this a thousand times and I think this is the most interesting. It's planning strategies, interpret the opponent." (I. 9)

"For me, there's beauty when I know that my opponent will do *x* and I do *y*, and I know that I'll do *y* and that works perfectly, for me this is very beautiful because it's something that comes out of my head, it is a move, it is like a chess move (...) because it's a smart move. It's like a colleague uses to say, 'it is a high-speed chess', and that's true." (I. 12)

In *Taekwondo*, the tactical competence is presented with highlighted relevance. The fastest or strongest not always wins; the wisdom to determine the best way ahead is essential.

"For me the greatest beauty is really the intelligence in the game, the intelligence in the techniques. The fact of being fast is very good, but having a peak of intelligence and strategy make it even more beautiful." (I. 7)

“It’s a game with a lot of strategy. Not always wins the strongest, the fastest, but the most intelligent.” (I. 11)

As we identified, the unpredictability of the opponent’s actions during a combat requires from the athlete a great capability to (re)adapt him/her to the situation in a short time, being creativity crucial. To Lacerda (2002), the presence of creativity in sport shows that there is place for exploration, for the invention, for the composition, for the construction, aspects arising from athletes and coaches’ imagination and originality that are capable to create new orders from existing orders. This author argues that creativity often results in added value to aesthetics, as stated by one of the athletes:

“It’s not always the same solution for the same case and it’s beautiful because there’s always this capability to adapt, and also the question of creativity, especially nowadays with electronic vests. It’s very difficult to define what a point is; we just have to touch there with the foot regardless what we do. And this is the question of creativity, we can score points as we want and we can always invent, and it is a very beautiful game because it’s always reinventing itself.” (I. 12)

In a good game, the creativity can be evidenced, and the concentration and the intelligence are indispensable and determinants for its manifestation.

The tactical balance also contributes to the attractiveness and the beauty of the game, i.e., when the athletes have very similar qualities and when they conduct a combat where anyone can come out with the victory:

“A good game is when he annuls me and then I annul him and there’s a mixture of annulations, where I can do something once but cannot do it twice. I think this is a good game because we both evolved, and it’s necessary much tactical level and thought. I think this is honestly a good game, both for the coach who had said it and for me, because I had thought about it.” (I. 7)

In this way, we have found out that the coach plays an important role in assisting in the opposing strategy identification and in determining their own strategy during the combat. At the same time, the athlete’s pleasurable experiences establish a direct relationship with the successful strategies.

“From this game comes out the pleasure of everything. If I make it well, there is the pleasure of making well, but I can also ruin things, I can be aware of that, and next time perform it well, and get a double or triple pleasure.” (I. 12)

“It’s an authentic world, there’re so many possibilities, and so many things happening at the same time... our head has to be 10.000 per hour because (...) there’re 10.000 different ways to make it. (...) Being able to decipher everything is... a great happiness. Reach the end of a combat and say that I

could see what the other wanted to do, I could annul him, I could make everything perfectly, it's very good." (I. 14)

The tactic is then presented as being of essential importance for the development of a beautiful and attractive combat and for the aesthetic experience of its protagonists.

3.3. Affection/Taste

This category is related more emphatically to the subjective grounds, to the sensitive dimension of the human being/athlete during combat, whether in training or competition.

The taste is a faculty itself, individual, linked to the idea that human beings have a subjective principle which is determined by the feeling (not concepts), or by something that delights or not, that pleases or displeases. In other words, the taste for an object, the aesthetic judgment, regards the relationship of your representation with the feeling of pleasure and displeasure (Kant, 2010).

The athlete is a human being that lives throughout his/her personal and sportive life a variety of feelings, and there is a reciprocity because his/her taste judgment is being constantly stimulated, on both sides. In this way, we have found that the training of combat holds a very special meaning for these individuals, as it allows them the opportunity to follow a way where they may experience different feelings.

"The moment of the training, our entire life goes by evolved in a variety of feelings,(...) It's a mix of huge emotions, there are good moments, there are bad moments, and our feelings will be different too. (...) It's like a long life in which the *Taekwondo* is always present and we've the opportunity to see everything linked to *Taekwondo*." (I. 5)

"The training is usually fun. When the workouts are harder, there is some suffering, of course, but basically it's always fun. Sometimes it is necessary a lot of sacrifice. For example, if your workout is too early or if you are tired, to start training is a bit painful, but then tends to be always fun." (I. 14)

The training is part of these individuals' everyday life, it can be considered a daily ritual in their lives, and their time is sacred. Although, in practice, athletes experience bad situations, beyond those good ones, it is something that they do for pleasure, for the feelings and emotions that they experience.

As much as the athlete seeks to reproduce in practice what he/she will experience in the competition, it is not possible to anticipate the feelings, or at least not in the same way as will be experienced in competition. For Bento (2004) the

competition game is not a mere exercise, or just looking for motor skills, it is a man's interior configuration, to highlight the diversity of his condition. In competition the *Taekwondo* athlete searches for a greater understanding of himself/herself, his/her capabilities and potential, experiencing feelings of different valence (more positives or pleasurable, and more negatives or displeasure), because the combat competition can be exhausting. There may be many combats during a competition day, combats with different characteristics that require the athlete's different skills and abilities:

“It's a great emotion, I cannot explain very well, (...) but it's great when we get into the pavilion, everyone is nervous because there'll be a combat, and it is a great feeling to be there.” (I. 2)

“During a competition, I activate and relax, activate, relax, this occurs if I'm passing through combats, and it generates thousands of emotions, from feelings of anger, sadness, joy, all during the same combat, strength, perhaps a psychological fall because he scored a point or I was at a big disadvantage, but then I turned around and there's already a great joy. This is a very large game of emotions.” (I. 9)

It is evident in the athletes' discourse that the moment before the combat is of greater nervousness and anxiety. The wait for the combat is a time for reflection and preparation; in this place, it can also emerge out the apprehension and fear if, for example, the athlete is going to face an unknown opponent:

“We may have the sensation of pain, if we're already injured, fear, sometimes there's fear of the unknown, and we cannot know the opponent. What will he do? Is he good? Is he going to surprise me? The nervousness is there, of course.” (I. 3)

It is in the course of the combat that the athletes live their more intense and unforgettable emotions, after they have overcome these initial feelings and reinforced their desires, their wills. It's worth highlighting that the will is, in itself, a feeling of pleasure (Kant, 2010).

“In combat, we can interpret the game, score good points, be very fast, hit the opponent, everything, only those who have combated, know that's an adrenaline that I don't know if you can achieve elsewhere. It is in combat where I get more emotions than in any other place, I don't know anything that conveys the same feeling.” (I. 5)

“I think it's a mix of emotions [at this point, the athlete takes a deep breath]. It's satisfaction, it is the enthusiasm, excitement in scoring points, it is to get, it is... [deep breath here again, which allows us to glimpse, in a sense, the attempt to rescue something that's profoundly marked], it's very difficult to explain and it is also because of this that I think *Taekwondo* is so beautiful. When I score a point I feel really a pleasure. (...) There're many

points and this makes the combat very exciting... the athlete is always celebrating, it is a feeling of great pleasure.” (I. 12)

The ludic impulse handled by Schiller (1991), in which man is complete, leads him/her to a state of freedom in front of beauty. When these athletes manage to interpret his/her opponent's game, to deceive them, hit them with precision and score points, by being creative, free to show their own style, we can say that they are in front of beauty, experiencing the aesthetic pleasure.

“It seems that in some combats I was not in me. There was always a feeling that chased me (...). Once, in an Open I combated an opponent that fascinated me a lot, and in this combat it seemed that I got out of my body and I was really, I wasn't in me, I was really combating, seemed that I looked things from above, it was something like... at that time I hadn't so much tactical knowledge, because it was a moment of shock, I didn't know what I was feeling, because I won a person that had got repeatedly medals in European Championships, and when I entered into combat, I saw that was a great opponent, and I entered that combat with a strong emotional charge, and perhaps it made me distorting my reality a bit. It was something that I saw and that lead me to overcome myself.” (I. 13)

In this speech, when the athlete says he had a great emotional charge, that he was not in himself and that he saw things from above, we realized that it was as if he was in a higher level, spiritually elevated, consecrated, away from any social illnesses, in a fusion situation, of truth, of contact with the movement, with the immensity of his sensitivity. Caillois (1988) tells us that this sacred moment appears as a category of sensitivity, capable of attracting fascination and provoking a state of consecration. It is the moment to join sensibility and reason, necessity and freedom, it is the full moment, aesthetic, quoted by Schiller (1991).

Thus, we identified from the taste, the desires, and the sensitivity, that the athlete is able to experience feelings of pleasure and displeasure, allowing him/her to access the aesthetic experience.

a) Affection for the modality

Following this understanding of taste developed by Kant (2010), we also recognize that the group of athletes who participated in the study expressed a very special feeling upon the experience of the sport itself, for its martial characteristics, for its inherent values and for the principles that are taught (courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and 'indomitable spirit'):

“I like to practice *Taekwondo*, it is like something that is inside here, that was born inside me. I like martial arts, I experienced *Taekwondo* and I enjoyed a lot, I always liked because of the movements when I watched the martial arts movies, all those movements in the air, and rotary kicks here, there.” (I. 4)

“*Taekwondo* gives us values that later, in the future, we will live, because these values will follow us throughout our life. The persistence in *Taekwondo* leads us to always try to have goals in life, I think this is one of the greatest values, never give up in the face of misfortune; this is something that *Taekwondo* gives us and inspires us in practice (...). For many years, out there, at international level, I did not win much, but then a phase began that I was already at the top, but until you get there it took many years. People always have to persist in the face of adversity and try to always follow your dreams, never giving up.” (I. 13)

Through the statement of the athletes, we can perceive a body movement in favour of developing potentialities, absorbing values that have followed the philosophy of this martial art throughout the ages. As suggested by Sugai (2000), “the martial arts contribute to a sincere proposal on the formation of the whole man, the man of a beautiful and promising future” (p.30).

These individuals, before being national athletes, are practitioners of a sport that is part of their lives, which helps them to create an identity and adopt a certain lifestyle. This sporting activity configures itself in the same way Bento (2004) characterizes the sport: bearer of a multifunctional character able to awaken and develop in man the art of living, the health, it teaches how to play and compete, it cultivates principles and values, it is the stage of sensitivity and also a place to the dream and the creation.

The athletes’ strong connection with the modality is particularly evident when they claim the passion, the affection, the pride by practicing *Taekwondo*, as training contributes to their days to be complete, and the practice of *Taekwondo* becomes an addiction:

“*Taekwondo* is already in my life for many years and I never had a break in practice for one simple reason, I like what I do. Who runs for taste never stops, and this is what is happening to me. I feel that when I miss a training day, I already miss it.” (I. 3)

“*Taekwondo* has many meanings for me. (...) For me it’s an addiction, every day, in every practice, there is a new challenge and this is a habit to me. And the fact that *Taekwondo* is a passion for me, and that every day is fed, and the fact of being an athlete, demonstrates my desire for challenging myself and the will to evolve.” (I. 7)

This interest, affinity and love for combat, for modality, how Kant (2010) clarifies, is connected to the compliance of the enjoyable, because everything that pleases is precisely because it is pleasant, gracious, charming, delightful and joyful, thus determining the desire, the will of each individual. It is exactly in this sense that we find the relevance and the significance of *Taekwondo* for these athletes.

b) Companionship

During the interviews, we have found that, despite the competition of the combat being done individually, the companionship, the friendships and the spirit of mutual help are essential because they contribute to a harmonious and joyful environment, propitious for learning, for the development; in short, these aspects contribute to the experience of pleasurable feelings:

“Despite being an individual sport, the entire support team, all the friendship we have for others, I think this is the most special in *Taekwondo*, the spirit of mutual help.” (I. 2)

“We’re almost like a family. Although there are ranks, that hierarchical structure, we are all very close to each other, and if at any moment one of us is not in a good shape, having problems, he or she comes here and puts the problems aside focusing only on sport, and I think this is one of the *Taekwondo* surplus.” (I. 3)

The importance of the group was clear in the athletes’ discourse, the companionship, the affection, the friendship (among athletes and coaches), the feeling of belonging to a large family that supports and encourages in training, in competition, in good and bad moments, in victories and in defeats; a family that helps them to identify their flaws, so that they can triumph.

As Ramirez (2002) identified in the study of “Canaries Fights”, fighting sports express a social dimension which includes the values of the individual’s relationship with others, and we can indeed realize that *Taekwondo* athletes participate in a social group. In other words, these individuals are, in fact, connected by a defined set of social relationships that form an integral whole (Bernardi, 1974).

“Maybe because of being a martial art, in addition, strengthens us physically and psychologically, it is above all, a place of relaxation and creation of family, because I always say that this here is my second family. I think *Taekwondo* is beautiful in all its techniques, in every relationship we have between coach-athlete, athlete-athlete, that is, the whole is what makes the beauty.” (I. 9)

“What I like most in *Taekwondo* are the competitions, for all the sensations that come out of them, all that ... the whole environment ... I not only have brothers, as I have all my friends of the team, and I like to see them win, then this feeling of pleasure is multiplied by the number of us.” (I. 3)

In this sense, we can say that the athletes' feelings can also be configured as representatives of the collective result, because it is not just about the action of each one, but it is about the dynamic and the systematic cooperation of a whole (Bernardi, 1974). Each athlete lives intensely each sporting actions of his/her companions, every mistake and every hit; experiencing the victory of one is experiencing the triumph of all, of the group, of the hard work executed together that made each of them aiming and dreaming about 'fly high', about the fulfilment of the ultimate sport motto 'citius, altius, fortius'.

3.4. Aggressiveness

The aggressiveness in combat appears to be a category oriented towards the attitude, towards the athlete's posture carrying out his/her performance. Samulski (2002) sustains that the aggressiveness in sport can be called assertive behaviour, the athlete plays the rules with high intensity and activation. This athlete's dedication, that makes him/her present the attitude and the necessary behaviour, should be trained, because at some moments of the combat it is necessary aggressiveness, while in others not:

“We must be aggressive, fierce in the way we see the combat because it's a combat sport, it is a sport but it's still a combat, and if we aren't aggressive, we're an easy target.” (I. 3)

“The importance of aggressiveness is great because being a martial art, a contact sport, there's always aggressiveness involved, either in touches or when we're closer. (...) The aggressiveness can be too much and hinder, will make us lose our goal, because we'll be motivated to hit him and it's no longer a game, it's a fight. That's why I say that aggressiveness is good when controlled in order to drive us to combat with our adversary with intelligence.” (I. 9)

“With aggressiveness we make the techniques faster, with more strength, we intimidate more the opponent, we don't let ourselves sink when we're losing. The aggressiveness is essential in a *Taekwondo* game, but at the same time tranquillity, there has to be a mix of both.” (I. 5)

The nature of this assertiveness is described by Vagos and Pereira (2010) as multidimensional and has been linked to several social domains in which the individual

moves, such as expressing positive and negative feelings, taking the initiative, recognizing and managing personal limitations. Thus, we have identified that this assertive behaviour and attitude contribute to the expression of the athlete's feelings and emotions:

“Being aggressive I feel that I can do much more than not being aggressive, I feel I can win more combats and reach higher levels.” (I. 6)

“When I am aggressive I feel superior, and when I feel superior I feel better.” (I. 3)

“The aggressiveness is a way, it's not the end, it's the way I get to pleasure.” (I. 12)

It is obvious how this aggressive attitude, in the sense of being assertive, should be valued, because it does not hold an end in itself, but it is something that contributes to the quality, perfection and excellence of the athlete's performance, broadens his/her spectrum of feelings and reaches the aesthetic experience.

3.5. Risk

This category is related with the exposure of athletes to uncertain situations, including the imminent threat of receiving blows and suffering with the techniques of his/her opponents. We identified that *Taekwondo* can be seen as a risky sport, like so many other sports, depending on the injuries, the blows and the accidents that may occur:

“It's a risky sport because it's a martial art. A person can kick unintentionally (...) a *dollyo* [name of a kick] by side and hit the eye and still piercing the eye... break noses. (...) We've colleagues here that have already broken the arm and had to undergo a surgery, I broke my hand in three places, and I've broken both big toes of my feet.” (I. 7)

“It's a combat sport. We can hit with the strength that we want, in fact, we've to hit with strength, that's the purpose. It's a risky sport like all sports are (...). Sure we're more likely to have injuries. I've broken my hand, I've had some serious injuries, but I don't think much about it, I think it comes with this sport.” (I. 12)

“We've various protections (...), but of course, worst of all, no doubt, are the kicks to the head. Despite the helmet, that... kicks in the head, because otherwise we're well protected. A kick to the head can lead to faint, some broken teeth if not used the correct protections.” (I. 3)

The athletes know the peculiarities of this sport and the risks they face, to be hurt, be injured, feel pain, and they also know the need to be warriors, demonstrating audacity to overcome the threats and dangers, the risks, which are imminent. The athlete

needs to work hard and gain the confidence to choose the right moment to execute a technique, and because of that “risk requires conscious decisions that indicate the probabilities of success and the balance of benefits” (Costa, 2000: 9).

Even with the use of protections, athlete’s face and neck are exposed, making them a principal target for competitors. The desire to hit the opponent with a beautiful accurate blow on the head is very large, because these kicks are of highest score, and yet can cause the athlete’s inability to continue combating, or suffering a knockout (KO). It is an uncertain practice; however these athletes have a strategy, an objective, cannot predict what will occur when entering a mat to combat, they know that they may be surprised by an opponent, be injured, get hurt or suffer a KO.

For Le Breton (1995) the uncertainty is a matter of risk, and the surprise, the challenges, facing death, daring and anxiety before the unknown, give the constant possibility of re-creating practitioner’s own body and life. The same author states that, facing the danger involving the practitioner, he/she persists in his/her conduct for the pleasure that he/she takes from practicing and also for nothing to fear, which is perceived in the speech of some respondents.

“The greater the risk, the greater will be the pleasure that we take from our action. If we make a combat without risk..., for example, an easy training, on that I don’t have to push myself very hard, there’ll be no great positive experiences there, maybe I’ll not feel so accomplished as a training with higher risk.” (I. 2)

“If we don’t take risks we’ll never score points, target the head, make those movements that give us pleasure, kicks to the head and the rotary kicks.” (I. 8)

“Our opponents always try to hit us on the head and every time we escape is good, it’s like scoring a point, dodging it’s also quite good. It’s good to know that he could touch, but he didn’t.” (I. 9)

So we have spotted that risk is necessary in some moments and helps to understand the athlete’s aesthetic experience. The higher the risk, or the amount of risk situations, the greater the pleasure experienced when the athlete surpasses it successfully, because having the ability to escape to a dangerous blow on the head and know the best moment to risk a kick to the head are situations that deepen the athlete’s sense of accomplishment and the sequent satisfaction and delight.

3.6. Transcendence/Overcoming

The athlete's transcendence/overcoming is connected to surpassing his/her limits in the competition when he/she exceeds the boundaries set and achieves, for example, a new record. It is also possible that the aesthetic emotion emerges from the achievement of this unique moment, unrepeatable (Lacerda, 2002). Based on this understanding of overcoming, we have found that these combat athletes, on several occasions, experience moments like these, having to achieve and maintain a state of superiority until the end of the combat, trying to carry on with a performance of excellence and obtain success:

“A moment of overcoming occurred when I was at the limit of my physical capabilities, I couldn't make it, but I searched deep inside and I got it, I got to surpass it.” (I. 1)

“Every day I overcome myself. For example, ten repetitions, if I get the eighth and I'm dying and I say 'it's necessary to do two more' and our body is telling that you cannot do two more but our mind keeps on saying: 'no, I'll do two more and I'll still do better than the other eight'.” (I. 14)

So we have identified that the ability to overcome might emerge associated to fatigue, suffering, and a natural wearing out arising from combat. To Gumbrecht (2007), this moment of suffering is mental as well as physical. Therefore, the inner strength, the desire, the will, the wish to go further is something implicit and a hallmarked characteristic of human nature that contributes to the moment of achieving the overcoming, representing personal fulfilment. White (cited Osterhoudt, 1991) sustains that the personal fulfilment is closely linked to the universal impulse of overcoming, because the athlete carries the past, the present and the future stages of his/her athletic development in a unified expression of his/her possibilities as a sportsman.

Overcoming can also be linked to the moment of surprising a strong opponent, facing a difficult and a risky challenge:

“One outstanding moment, of overcoming, occurred in a training with a colleague who was very good, very fast, had an incredible flexibility, and I managed to get a kick at his head. I was so happy, I couldn't stop laughing because I really did it and he was upset (...), but it was a moment, it was very good. I was completely fulfilled.” (I. 2)

“One outstanding moment, occurred when I was world's vice-champion, I wanted to be, it was indescribable, I dreamed of getting there, but at the end of the day I was a little surprised, and I overcame myself at that competition. (...) In overcoming we've to face each combat, each risk as a challenge, and when we overcome the challenges, it's always satisfying, very satisfying.” (I. 10)

Gumbrecht (2007) states that to seek excellence it is necessary to take some kind of performance to its individual and collective limits. Triumph in front of a difficult opponent requires a great knowledge of him/herself, his/her limitations and potentialities, imposes the necessity to reach or get closer to perfection. This situation will allow the athlete to test his/her limits, his/her physical and subjective capabilities.

The overcoming experiences will be stored forever in the memory of these people, because they were highly significant moments in emotional terms. Overcoming represents experiencing varied feelings, of pleasure, of personal achievement, of fulfilled dreams:

“In fact, the overcoming is something that comes from inside, because I always wanted to be better than I was yesterday, and I didn’t have the objective to be better than anyone else, I wanted to be better than myself. I had many dreams of reaching the Olympics, and I thought it was impossible, at that time I thought it was unthinkable because no Portuguese had gone to the Olympics, and I looked to the top athletes and I saw that it still took long to get to that level. (...) When I qualified to the Olympic Games I was in a state, I had no reaction, I was so, I don’t know, so... inside of me, there was only that, there was nothing else, it was a very intense moment. I think that it was the most memorable moment in *Taekwondo*. In my experience as an athlete it was the most memorable moment.” (I. 13)

We have found that the transcendence/overcoming is confirmed as one more significant and representative category to describe the aesthetic experience lived by combat athletes, because it allows these individuals to experience unique moments, of surrender, of fulfilment, almost of ecstasy, or, in the expression of Maffesoli (2002), of *out of themselves*.

3.7. Victory

The combat is one side of *Taekwondo* that allows a dispute, a confrontation, a duel between two opponents, putting to the test all the athletes’ skills and capabilities. Gumbrecht (2007: 61) argues that “the chance to win and the risk of defeat produce a narrative, an epic sense and a drama, (...) transfigures the bodies and their movements, making them shine in the singular light of the triumphant victory or the tragic defeat”. In competition, what is at stake is the opportunity to lay the body on this challenge and for this reason the athletes train hard, because they aim to keep getting better to win, and always, if possible:

“What makes me train is the pleasure to get better, to become faster, stronger, and to win competitions, of course. My main goal is to train and then be able to win competitions.” (I. 2)

“I train every day to get to these competitions and achieve my goals. Then if I win [laughs], when I win it’s a lot of happiness, if I lose it’s a little sadness and I focus on the mistakes I made in the combat to improve that part.” (I. 6)

The desire for victory, to show his/her qualities in order to overcome the other is the desire of every athlete, but the defeat is something present, that can contribute to the identification of his/her weaknesses and, thereafter, building potentialities aiming future conquests. To Lacerda (2002) the dual victory/defeat does not devalue the aesthetic character of sport, on the contrary, the desire to win enhances the quality of performance; it contributes to the excellence of sporting performance, which is reflected in the elevation of its aesthetic qualities.

The feeling of being in a competition and be able to win is a wonderful and indescribable feeling. The athletes are even without words when they are trying to describe it; the moment the referee raises his/her arms to show who emerged victorious from the confrontation is special:

“(…) A great joy. Apart from the joy, I do not know what I felt, it’s an unexplainable feeling, is... [deep breath] is already beyond joy, beyond the satisfaction, is another level that I could never qualify and that only in those moments a person feels; gratification, much gratification for the work a person does for 12/13 years.” (I. 9)

“What I like most in a combat is the feeling in the end, when the referee stops the combat, raises the arm for us, we know that we won and that all our efforts were rewarded, is much more, is the most important.” (I. 8)

“The feeling of winning and combating is indescribable, when we won the feeling is indescribable, it is a feeling that you can’t describe very well (...), and when I take the *dobok* [equipment] to go to a competition it is a good feeling, a feeling of doing what we want to do, what we like to do and what we look forward to do.” (I. 10)

Vanden Eynde (1989) claims that the victory, for its character of transcendence and timelessness, can cause an aesthetic emotion. That’s precisely what was stated by the athletes of this essay for whom the victory comes as a main element for the comprehension of the aesthetic experience of combat.

4. Conclusion

Based on a phenomenological and hermeneutical methodology applied to the corpus of the study, that is to say, the discourses of *Taekwondo* athletes, we have concluded that the combat athlete, in search for the best technical-tactical execution, facing a variety of opponents, with the unconditional support of his/her companions, adopting an aggressive/assertive posture, surpassing risky situations, externalizing his/her energy through the *kihap* (Coelho, Kreft, & Lacerda, 2012) transcending/overcoming, winning, is capable to live harmonious, beautiful, ludic, affective experiences, in other words, aesthetic experiences.

Finally, we emphasize the importance of the reflections tested throughout this study, especially when we consider that different elements and moments may be contributing to the understanding of aesthetic experience coming from the sport, and, in particular, experienced by combat athletes. Thus, we think that this study includes information that can be translated into instigator questions for those who seek to understand the aesthetics of sport and, more broadly, the vast and complex domain of sport.

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