

PERFORMANCES ON PLANET BREAK¹

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1. This work is a result of my PhD research on Anthropology (Raposo, 2013), which also produced the documentary "A galera" (2016). It was funded by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT) and developed at University Institute of Lisbon and Centre for Research and Studies in Sociology.

Bodies sway to the rhythm of funk and breakbeat. Dancing is joined by clapping hands and attentive gazes, revealing closeness among those taking part. Snapback caps, designer trainers and colourful t-shirts bearing symbols connected to “hip-hop culture” predominate among the young people, visual fronts that embody their adherence to the same lifestyle (Pais 2004). After all, it is not enough to do breakdancing² to be a b-boy or b-girl, you need to show that you are one. Both actions (doing and showing) are part of a dancer’s performance (Schechner 2002) and are compulsory in embodying that identity.

As music begins to fill up the space, the number of cyphers multiplies, where b-boys and b-girls contend for the privilege of dancing. The performances are no longer than thirty seconds. For each “entry”, they must display a range of varied movements while others watch, waiting for their turn to enter the cypher. Displays are individual and follow the formula toprock – footwork – freeze.³ But there is no obligation to adopt that pattern. Many start the dance with some acrobatics or a spin (power moves), which can also happen in the middle or at the end.

Unlike battles which, as the name suggests, simulate fights, cyphers favour socialisation among dancers through dance. However, intense competitiveness transforms some of them into lively “battle fields”. Attitudes become defiant, with no shortage of faces and other facial expressions pulled to simulate aggressiveness one minute and taunting the next, fundamental components of the performance to unsettle adversaries and achieve the status of best dancer.

From this moment on, complex networks of alliances and rivalries among b-boys are revealed, marked by encouraging some and censoring others. In one of the cyphers, the provocation moves up a gear. Young people from the same crew⁴ defend each other, supporting their performances in the cypher: they applaud, make encouraging gestures and shout out praise. When anyone else challenges one of their own during the dance, using gestures or expressions to intimidate them, they come together to exclude the common adversary. A huge repertoire of imitations, mockery and head movements come into play as a way of signalling mistakes and disqualifying rivals’ performances: fingers pointed, sarcastic smiles, cries and several forms of derision.

2. Breakdancing or breaking is the dance component of hip-hop, an urban movement that also includes another three forms of artistic expression: rapping, DJing and graffiti. Dancers are called b-boys or b-girls.

3. Toprock is the part of the dance done in a standing position in a stylised funk rhythm; moves done on the floor, using the hands as support, are called footwork or downrock; freeze is when the dancer freezes a specific movement in a demanding pose.

4. Influenced by hip-hop, crews are groups of young people who identify with common practices, in this case, breakdance.

At a certain point, two b-boys go into the cypher at the same time. In an attempt to mark his territory, one of them dances uprocks⁵, in a rhythmic struggle simulating punching and stabbing. The other young man motions for him to move out of the middle of the cypher, and he is supported by friends who say it is time for “one of theirs” to dance. After he retreats, the young man faces up to his opponent with gazes displaying mockery and disapproval. Crouching down, he points to his right ear, meaning that the other one dances off beat. The atmosphere in the cypher was heating up, but it reached boiling point when one track in particular, famous among dancers, began to play. The dance becomes more intimate, and the young people use several stunts to disparage the quality of the competing group. They play out a dramatised violence where anything goes except touching adversaries to interfere in their performances.

This battle, and those that followed, staged symbolic confrontations where bodies were the favoured means of expression. These were not merely gestures: they communicated feelings and claimed values – such as solidarity within groups, originality, determination, respect, love for dance – in elaborate performances. They were rituals that celebrated friendship, socialising and belonging to the same urban culture. Even at the tensest moments, the dancers’ faces displayed genuine joy, showing that the violence dramatised by many of their gestures in the cypher was essentially theatrical, a way of having fun and celebrating affinities in the context of a party paying tribute to hip-hop.⁶ There are spectacular performances where aggressiveness was part of a specific ritual situation operating in the context of the same “province of meaning” (Schutz 1979).

The set of codes, aesthetics, attitudes, gestures and movements followed in the cypher places the body at the epicentre, and a common understanding of these aspects meant that, after all the challenges and provocations, dancers hugged each other and fights were rare. Sharing feelings and experiences was fundamental to being able to join those interactions (Agier 2011), when liminal moments are experienced – outside time, structure and routine – that are unforgettable and are able to transform a mass of dancers into a sense of community (Raposo 2014), an integral part of a renowned, global culture.

TRANSLATION
Thomas Williams

5. Inspired by the first b-boys, uprocks emerged in the 1960s and 1970s. It uses gestures and imitations that represent attacks on opposing dancers.

6. Filming was carried out in December 2010 in São Paulo at one of the most prestigious breakdancing events in Brazil: Master Crew.

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DOCUMENTÁRIO

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ABSTRACT

The "cyphers" are the privileged places of experiences exchange between the breakdancers, when young people of different crews and territories socialize through dance. From the filming of these cyphers in a break dance event I problematize the performances of b-boys and b-girls, composed of a rich repertoire of movements, aesthetics, gestures and facial expressions. Experienced as liminal moments, these performance simulate sometimes symbolic confrontations of dramatized violences, sometimes feeling of belonging to the same urban culture, transforming a mass of dancers into a sense of community.

KEYWORDS

Performance; dance;
breakdancing;
liminality; video.

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