

Breakdance from Street Performance to Olympic and Art Stage

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Abstract

Breakdance appeared, like hip-hop, in the 70s in South Bronx borough (New York) and was an energetic dance with acrobatic elements alternating with complicated and fast footwork. In the next decade several new acrobatic moves, never practiced before, were introduced in breakdance performances: head spins, back spins, or hand glides. Breakdancing has its own unique culture, history, and jargon, but within the breaking community there have always been those who focus on the artistic and creative side of it, and others who thrive on competition and contests. Nowadays breaking is inspiring many modern and classical form of performances and dance. Furthermore breakdance will be the only dance style in the 2024 Olympic program. The best 16 B-boys and 16 B-girls will compete for Olympic medals, being judged on criteria like: performance, creativity, technique, variety, personality, and musicality.

Keywords: street performance; hip hop; urban culture, Olympic Games

JEL Classification: I10, I13, I19

DOI: 10.24818/mrt.23.15.02.05

1. Introduction

Adapting to the living conditions in the large agglomerations of the urban space, the communities were divided into smaller formations, the so-called "urban tribes". This division can be considered as a reaction to the feeling of alienation and isolation that contemporary society, through the values it promotes, induces at the individual level.

Urban tribes are groups of people (officially or unofficially composed) united by the same lifestyle, common interests and activities that they practice together. Within them, respect for a certain set of values, to which group members adhere either deliberately or by tradition. These subcultures (in the sense of component parts of a culture as a whole) are assembled in the term urban culture.

2. Urban culture includes cultural elements and behaviors that distinguish it from other cultures. The anthropization of the environment has determined a series of changes in the perception and use of the urban landscape. These new perceptions and utilities brought with them greater cultural variety. The imprint of the lifestyle

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will be recognized in the productions of urban culture, clearly distinguishing them from naive art, the pop-art trend or the impressionist style. In the US, as in England, the term "urban" is linked to hip-hop culture and subsidiarily to its roots in afro-american culture. The term urban culture can also refer to the scale of events and cultural institutions in a large city, compared to suburban or rural areas.

However, we are talking about the culture of the young generation in big cities. The most visible and present means of artistic expression in everyday life are hip-hop music, which is associated with breakdancing as a dance style, and the graffiti technique so present on the walls, bridges or subway cars of big cities. In addition to graffiti and break dancing, DJing, MCing and self-knowledge complete the five elements of hip-hop [1].

Hip-hop music has its roots in black culture and appeared under this name in the 7th decade of the 20th century in the New York neighbourhood Bronx. In those years, this neighbourhood was going through a severe deterioration of the quality of life, becoming a landmark of poverty, unemployment and the urban crisis in the USA. The majority population was representative of Hispanics and African-Americans and in small proportions, there were residents of Italian, Irish, German, and other origins. In this social and multicultural context, this new musical current emerged and became a vector of a lifestyle. This music style, being of popular origin, was propagated especially orally.

Once the building blocks of a new music genre came together, it continued to exist and assert itself in the music industry as rap. As a community slogan states: „hip hop is what you live rap is what you make”. If rap was the voice through which the disadvantaged classes could express themselves, dance was the way to discharge their physical energy.

There is an opinion that graffiti, further developed in street art [2], is the most impactful form of contemporary art. It has the advantage of exposure on large surfaces, mass dissemination, and colors the grey and dull landscape of cities' concrete walls by covering them with messages, symbols and images in vibrant colours.

3. Breakdance appeared, like hip-hop, in the 70s in South Bronx (New York neighbourhood) and was an energetic dance with acrobatic elements alternating with complicated and fast footwork. Initially, the dancers were members of neighbourhood crows who practised on the streets or basketball courts, in public spaces and then faced each other, demonstrating their mastery. In 1979 and 1980, several new acrobatic moves, never practiced before, were introduced in breakdance performances. All those moves are still popular today: head spins, back spins or hand glides.

Demonstrations of this kind have replaced physical violence between gangs, affirming the validity of the idea that a positive channeling of youth energy into physical and cultural activities is an alternative to delinquency. Competitions called



„battle” recall the original meaning of this dance style. Those fierce dance battles between b-boy and b-girls [3] are the origin of today’s regulated competition.

The street being the place of practice and performance of these bands, it is understandable how breakdance and its variants, developed latter, are known today as street dance. Street dance is a global phenomenon today, being present in shows, international demonstration and competitions worldwide. Young people embrace this form of physical activity, the combination of which with music mobilizes significant energy resources and especially creates the willingness to use this energy for the benefit of body and soul.

4. From street to art stage

Breakdancing has its own unique culture, history, and jargon, but within the breaking community there have always been those who focus on the artistic and creative side of it, and others who thrive on competition and contests. Breakedance is nowadays inspiring many modern and classical form of performances and dance. One of the most inspiring combination is between breaking and baroque music. Operas and ballets composed in the 17-18th siecle received a bust of energy and modernity.

One of those examples is *Les Indes galantes*, an opera-ballet by Jean-Philippe Rameau, composed in 1735 and premiered with a breakingdance ansamble in 2019 à l’Opéra Bastille. This fusion between baroque and hip-hop pulled the opera into a contemporary seting. The energy and strenght displayed by the urban dance ensemble have contributed to the success of this opera performance, which won a European distinction for Best Performance in 2020 [4].

Another example is the Parcell’s opera *The Fairy-Queen* performed by Les Art Florissants, a baroque music ensemble uniquely completed by Mourad Merzouki’s choreography. *The Fairy Qeen* was first produced in 1692 [5], while Merzouki, a major figure on the hip-hop scene since the early 90s, established his own company Kafig 300 years later, in 1996 [6]. The Kafig dance company’s ambition is to continue showing the aesthetic landmarks and to document the codes and values that define hip-hop culture: belonging, a bratherhood, a way of living, moving and feeling [7].

5. Breake dance – Olympic sport

In the program of the 2018 Youth Olympic Games, several new sports and events made their debut. Braking, speed roller, and BMX freestyle are among them, aiming to include more urban places where people naturally gather [8]. Breaking had an oustanding success in Buenos Aires and was appreciated by IOC President Thomas Bach. Furthermore, breaking received acceptance from the Organising Committee for inclusion in the 2024 Paris Olympic Games program.



The best 16 B-boys and 16 B-girls will compete for Olympic medals and their performances will be assessed by a panel of minimum three or more uneven number of judges. The competition will have the form of a one-to-one battle, with breakers performing alternative routines in two or three sets of around 60 seconds [9]. The remarkable character acrobatic series and tricks, along with the swiftness of execution, demands a substantial volume of practice. This training sharpens all forms of physical abilities and particularly balance, spatial awareness in unusual positions, speed reaction and agility [10].

The judges score comparatively, voting which of the two competitors was superior to the other in a battle. For comparison, in other sports like skating or gymnastics, the performance is scored in absolute values, and the final result will be expressed in numbers. There are also similarities with these sports, because all incorporate, acrobatics, strength, athleticism, music, and costumes or specific sportswear.

The main judging criteria in break dance competitions are creativity, performativity, technique, variety, personality, musicality, but with different weightage; the first three count 60 per cent, while the last three score 40 per cent in the final result [11].

Creativity. Competitors aim to surprise judges by showcasing original and creative twists on well-known moves or original styles of combining steps, tricks, freezes, power moves and transitions.

Performativity and technique. Judges assess a high-level movement by evaluating the ability of a breaker to execute difficult moves and complex sets or combinations, through intricate footwork, patterns, and flows. Another assessed criterion is a breaker's foundation, which includes Top Rock steps, Go Downs, Footwork, Power Moves, Freezes, and Transitions, by evaluating their clean and sharp structure, shape, and overall appearance [12]. Every unfinished move or crush lowers the chance that the competitor will win a battle.

Variety means unrepeated sets of moves in one round of the battle, besides the foundation, style, and composition of the rounds. The very philosophy of hip-hop encourages artistry and creativity.

Personality. Judges assess a breaker's ability to add personality and character in combining highly difficult moves. The personality criteria requires a unique, personal flavour distinguishing the breaker performance from the opponent ones.

Musicality. Breakers must follow the rhythm and tempo of the music, staying on time with the snare drum and hitting the floor. They must also demonstrate their ability to play with different layers of music, expressing sounds and lyrics, and adapt their footwork to the music features, in other words „to be on beat”.

Judges make their vote at the end of each round and the breaker declared winner progress to the next stage of the Olympic competition.

Breakdance entered from streets into studios, veterans breakers teaching children and youngsters how to move their bodies creatively and express themselves



through movement. However, the proficiency required for qualifying in major competitions also requires specialization in breaking teaching and coaching. And so we return to the dilemma, is break dance primarily art or sport? Breaking specialists should attend an art or a sports university? Further research and practice will separate the two sides of this dance genre and will define pedagogical methods for each.

6. Conclusion

Breakdancing, also known as breaking or B-boying, is a style of street dance that originated in the Bronx, New York City, during the late 1960s and early 1970s. It evolved from the hip-hop movement and is the most widely known genre of all dance styles blending art, sport and culture. Break dance entered from streets into studios, veterans breakers teaching children and youngsters how to move their bodies creatively and express themselves through movement. Nowadays breaking has evolved into a proper, creative sport with a wide young and urban public. In 2024 breaking will make its debut on the Olympic stage placed in Place de la Concorde, which temporarily will be transformed into an urban park.

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