# Mediating Profundity Beyond Knowledge

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## Abstract

In my essay, I explore a matter at the intersection of philosophy, East Asian studies, and adaptation studies. I introduce a model that emphasizes the role of intrapersonal dynamics (that is, the dynamics occurring within a person among their own mind, body, and spirit) within kinesthetic spiritualized practice. More specifically, I emphasize the metaphysical and epistemological "leaps" one must make in acquiring and developing the subjective culture of the martial arts. I assert that these leaps may be better understood when likened to the negotiation of "intersemiotic equivalences" (that is, necessarily approximate transpositions from one sign system, e.g., words, to another, e.g., images) as described by Linda Hutcheon in her presentation of adaptation theory. Of particular interest to my model are the qualities and concessions of kinesthetic media adaptations (e.g., those involved in theme parks, video games, role-play reenactments, etc.) as they relate to the kinesthetic medium of the martial arts. I argue that this comparison provides insight into kinesthetic spiritualized practice. While the insight that can be gained through a theoretical treatment of spiritualized experience is limited, models such as the one I provide may specify the means by which this profound experience is realized.

## Introduction

Of immediate philosophical interest to the philosophy of martial arts are the mechanisms that may "spiritualize" a practice, as evidenced by numerous models available in this area in philosophy that seek to elucidate the connections between East Asian spiritualized practice and its reputed physiological and spiritual benefits (e.g. inner peace, meditative focus, sapience, integration[1], and "co-extensiveness" or embodied being[2]), consistent with the spiritual ideals of that particular practice. I intend to introduce a model that emphasizes the role of intrapersonal dynamics (that is, the dynamics occurring within and among one's own mind, body, and/or spirit[3]) within kinesthetic spiritualized practice. This model emphasizes the metaphysical and epistemological leaps one must make in developing the subjective culture of the martial arts.

To make such leaps, one must negotiate necessary interpretive equivalences, compromises, and allowances in applying enigmatic metaphysical frameworks to the context of one's own mind, body, and spirit. I assert that the negotiation of such interpretive concessions may be better understood when likened to the negotiation of intersemiotic equivalences[4] made in adapted media, taking particular interest in the concessions inherent to shifts to the kinesthetically interactive mode of engagement (e.g., theme parks, video games, role-play reenactments, etc.). Such negotiations represent the hermeneutic gauntlet within which the capacity for both disorientation and growth, trauma and transcendence lie.

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[1] By integration, I mean physiological and social-ecological reconciliation within/among one's mind, body, spirit, and external world; see the CDC's four-level social-ecological model.
[2] By ``co-extensiveness" or embodied being, I mean energetic oneness/equilibrium with one's surroundings; the experience of undifferentiated particularity. See Hunter and Schubert's discussion of the "Hinge of the Way" in *Winning, Losing, and Wandering Play: Zhuangzian Paradox and Daoist Practice* (2014).
[3] Within Western trauma-informed modalities, see the Structural Dissociation or Internal Family Systems models, as for example in van der Hart's *The Haunted Self: Structural Dissociation and the Treatment of Chronic Traumatization* (2006).
[4] By intersemiotic equivalences, I am referring to necessarily approximate transpositions made in shifting from one sign system, e.g. words, to another, e.g. images, as defined by Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Adaptation* (2013).

## Structure

First, I will define subjective culture and describe its individualized development within the kinesthetic medium of the martial arts. Next, I will define and discuss adaptation studies and the applicability of its theoretical framework to conceptions of spiritualized practice. I will then discuss the qualities and concessions of kinesthetic media adaptations in particular, and how they provide insight into the kinesthetic medium of the martial arts. Finally, I will address the conclusions and limitations of this essay, as well as opportunities for further philosophical investigation relating to these topics.

## Kinesthetic development of subjective culture

In an account that enters the literature of philosophy of the martial arts but that originated outside of it, George Simmel characterizes subjective culture as "personal growth that comes about through the internal appropriation of cultural forms" (Nelson, 1989, p. 312). Within the martial arts, according to Donald N. Levine in "The Liberal Arts and The Martial Arts" (1989), subjective culture may refer to "the competences of bodily movement [perceiving, moving, responding] that enable one to defend oneself in certain stylized ways." Levine proceeds to suggest that the martial arts' basis in subjective culture[5] provides a unique "model for a kind of liberal training in which the principle of the learner's capacities is unmistakably and unavoidably at the center of attention" (Nelson, 1989, pp. 312-313).

In developing the subjective culture of the martial arts, it is necessary that one make metaphysical and epistemological leaps in understanding. Having successfully done so, according to Carl S. Becker, one finds their world "enriched and transformed," the practitioner herself transmuted in the process (Nelson, 1989, p. 106). While contextualization within a dōjō[6] and the assurance of a master-student relationship may assist in facilitating exposure to, or acceptance of, such hermeneutic frameworks, as well as in instilling authentic or "right" practice insofar as spiritual harmonization is outwardly discernible, these metaphysical and epistemological leaps are primarily navigated via a kinesthetic medium. Markus Schrenk's "Is Proprioceptive Art Possible?" (2014) and Ross Barham's "A Sublime Peace" (2014) make clear the significance of proprioception[7] and interoception[8] in the spiritualization of a practice. The latter goes so far as to state that the "localized physical connection between *tori* and *uke*[9] serves as a conduit, spiritually connecting *tori* with the universe at large" (Priest, 2014, p. 123). Even the potency of these interpersonal dynamics ultimately depends on the internal sensitivity of either practitioner: a sensitivity that is cultivated by the individual in the development of subjective culture.

## Adaptation studies and spiritualized practice

To summarize Linda Hutcheon, author of *A Theory of Adaptation*, the word adaptation refers to both product and process in the composition and experience of autonomous creative works that are at once original and familiar at the same time. As a product, an adaptation is an "announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works" in which transcoding may refer to a shift of medium (or genre) or a change of frame (or context). As a process of creation, adaptation represents a (re-)interpretative and (re-)creative act of

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[5] Curricula dependent on objective culture meanwhile rely on externalized representations of reality/meaning throughout human history (e.g. the humanities, natural sciences, etc.).
[6] The dōjō, literally "place of the way," is the traditional martial arts training hall.
[7] By "proprioception," I mean internal perception or awareness of the body's position, motion, and equilibrium.
[8] By "interoception," I mean internal perception or awareness of physiological sensations related to internal organ function, e.g. "heartbeat, respiration, satiety, as well as the autonomic nervous system activity related to emotions" (Price, 2018).
[9] Within Aikido, the *tori* (defensive partner) works to nullify the attacks of the *uke* (offensive partner) through harmonious blending. Barham (2014) goes on to argue that the *tori*'s function meets the necessary and sufficient conditions for potentially experiencing kinesthetic sublimity, which ultimately resides within one's own mind.

appropriation or salvaging. As a process of reception, it represents a "form of intertextuality: we experience adaptations… as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation," or in other words, "an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (Hutcheon, 2013, pp. 7-8). Adaptation can be likened to translation in that it involves an act of both intercultural and intertemporal communication and transaction between texts or languages. It represents a re-mediation between mediums, as translations occur in the form of intersemiotic transpositions from one sign system (e.g., words) to another (e.g., images).

Already, the experience of kinesthetic spiritualized practice can be likened to the composition and experience of adaptation by nearly all of these definitions and characterizations. Practice is both autonomously original and prescribed at the same time, as expressed by Carol R. Murphy in her account of t'ai chi as moving meditation:

> But just as you give up out-there-ness, you realize that you are still shaping yourself to an objective requirement… with no room for private self-expression. Yet this form derives from the inner meaning of the body's true movement–another paradox. 'I live, yet not I,' as long as I yield to the movement of the Tao. In so doing, I experience something of the ultimate structure pointed to by both mystics and modern physics of 'a harmonious, unified field of dynamically balanced stresses' (Nelson, 1989, p. 158).

Spiritualized practice is both a distinctive product to an audience (when there is one) as well as a necessarily (re-)interpretative and (re-)creative process to the practitioner herself given intersubjective and intrasubjective variance in every instantiation of practice. As further explained by Murphy:

> At times [when practicing t'ai chi] I feel physical and disciplined, at times romantic and creative, at times inward and meditative; t'ai chi has room for them all…[10] [The spiritual master] can give hints, he can show you an example, but the listening to your own bodily feelings in practice is up to you. As Buddha said to his disciples, you must be lamps unto yourselves (Nelson, 1989, pp. 156, 160).

Each time equilibrium or harmony is re-mediated in practice, it is strengthened, "resonating through repetition with variation." Furthermore, the practitioner initiates intercultural and intertemporal communication and transaction[11] between texts or languages not only when first learning a martial art, but in every personal instantiation of spiritualized practice. Translation must be made beyond "knowing that," "knowing how," and "having the physical ability to do,"[12] in order to apply the spiritualized execution[13] of a technique to one's own mind, body, and spirit, respectively. Markus Schrenk clarifies the receptive process within martial arts in arguing that its practice represents "an entirely novel way to perceive artistically: to feel and perceive our bodies from within [as] positive affirmation of being embodied creatures" (Priest, 2014, p. 112). As Schrenk sees it, martial arts are a proprioceptive and interoceptive artform with an audience of one: the martial arts practitioner themselves (Priest, 2014, p. 112).

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[10] Beyond differences in attitude or focus, "intrasubjective variance" also accommodates more subtle changes in interoception as well as the subjective phenomenal properties of experience not bound by functionality, physicality, or qualia.

[11] Regardless of a practitioner's country, language of origin, or temporal proximity to the foundation of a martial art, such communication and transaction inherently occurs not just due to shifts in context, but also due to shifts in subculture/one's immersion within a subculture.

[12] Schubert (2010) provides the following examples to showcase this distinction: every martial arts movie buff "knows that" when they know that a spearhead is a strike with the fingertips; only those who've received instruction "know how" to actually throw a spearhead; and only those who successfully execute a spearhead "have the physical ability to do." Note that "knowing how" does not entail "having the physical ability to do," and vice versa.

[13] By "spiritualized execution" I mean not only physically demonstrating a technique, but demonstrating it in such a way that is consistent with highest praise in the tradition of spiritualized practice, e.g. showcasing pure spontaneity, *wei wu wei* ("to do without doing"), or connection with Dao/universal flow.

Returning to adaptation studies, Kamilla Elliott notes that adaptation commits the "heresy" of showing that form, or expression, can be separated from content, or ideas; Hutcheon spends a majority of her analysis discussing which content is thus transferred or transmuted through adaptation, and which content is lost (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 9). Predominant theories in adaptation studies frequently assert that the core of the story is what is transposed "across different media and genres, each of which deals with that story in formally different ways and… through different modes of engagement [narration, performance, interaction]." By this story-argument:

> 'Equivalences' are sought in different sign systems for the various elements of the story: its themes, events, world, characters, motivations, points of view, consequences, contexts, symbols, imagery, and so on… either a story can exist independently of any embodiment in any particular signifying system or, on the contrary, it cannot be considered separately from its material mode of mediation (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 10).

Other theories argue that the tone, style, or invoked "spirit" of a work or artist are retained: each mode of engagement (telling, showing, interacting) has its own specificity or "essence," and one is not inherently better, more creative, or more suitably faithful[14] than another despite having different means of expression at its disposal (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 24).

Within spiritualized practice, form or expression is necessarily separated from content or ideas as a default, given long-standing social programming[15] that compartmentalizes mind and body as independent of one another (entirely dismissing spirit on the basis of its intangibility); in fact, secular society is more suspicious of the notion that connections between mind, body, and spirit exist at all. Technically, anyone who "knows that" could mimic the forms and pith of the martial arts, and it can be argued that everyone is somewhere on the path to spiritualization. The precise distinction between spiritualized practice and non-practice is nebulous at best[16]. This said, the latent potency of the mind/body/spirit connection applied to oneself lies somewhere in the earnest undertaking of some form of spiritualized practice or otherwise therapeutic or revolutionary frame of mind.

If the hermeneutic frameworks (metaphors, models, themes, principles, etc.) of spiritualized practice can be likened to the core of an adaptable story, and the progressive development of subjective culture approaching spiritualization can be likened to the success of an adaptation, then the story-argument of adaptation theory could be loosely applied to the martial arts, as long as some technicalities and major differences in both form and content are recognized. All the same, practitioners further immersed in such hermeneutic frameworks are loath to accept such intellectualized conceptions of what they view as the unknowable Way (or its equivalent spiritual ideal). More accommodating, accessible, and fittingly vague is the notion that the tone, style, or otherwise invoked "spirit" of a spiritualized practice, or obedience to the Way[17], marks the content transposed in a successful instantiation of spiritualized practice.

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[14] Within contemporary adaptation studies, fidelity criticism is discouraged, as fidelity is not the ultimate determinant of the success of an adaptation. Despite the protests of uncompromising fans, an adaptation can succeed as an autonomous work without remaining strictly faithful, and vice versa.

[15] Donald N. Levine's *The Liberal Arts and the Martial Arts* (1989) documents the homologous development and later perversion of a mind/body/spirit ideal with respect to contemporary liberal training in both Western (Greek) and Eastern (Chinese) predominant thought.

[16] In the words of Zhuangzi: "There is a beginning. There is a not yet beginning to be a beginning. There is a not-yet beginning to be a not-yet beginning to be a beginning… Heaven and earth were born alongside me, and the ten thousand things and I are one" (Ivanhoe & Van Norden, 2007, p. 268).

[17] In Daoism, such harmony is denoted as "*wu wei*," nonaction (meaning one does only what is authentic to one's particular nature, in harmony with Dao (the Way), nature, and the natural order). Buddhism likewise emphasizes authenticity, interconnectedness, and *ahimsa* (avoiding harm).

As in the many media or genres of media adaptations, there is great diversity in the spiritualized practices or arts that serve as mediums for the apprehension of the hermeneutic frameworks of spiritual doctrine. These practices, or *dō* (literally: "ways," or spiritual paths), may take many forms, ranging from garden design and pottery to Japanese Noh theatre[18] and swordsmanship[19], corresponding with the various modes of engagement (telling, showing, and interacting) but especially emphasizing physical "doing" or kinesthetic interaction. All of these modes are technically degrees of "doing" that, when mastered, may provide "freedom from… egocentricity, desire, and fear… the void [becoming] a free and creative 'space' for the body/mind" (Priest, 2014, p. 150); however, they are not necessarily equitable, at least in facilitating apprehension of the Way (understood in this context as universal truth), as the modes of engagement within media adaptations are. Across East Asian spirituality, dependence on intellectualism is discouraged and it seems that the kinesthetic medium is granted primacy[20], as illustrated by Murphy:

> One breezy day I tried to keep my hand in contact with the swaying branch of a hemlock tree. I began to see how firm and yet how light my touch should be, what concentration would be needed to follow its motion with wordless intimacy, and how a sense of oneness with the tree could result. The sense of touch, with its nonverbal immediacy, is less likely than sight to let concepts slide in between perceiver and perceived (Nelson, 1989, p. 165).

## Intersemiotic equivalences and the kinesthetic interface

Of particular interest to the philosophy of martial arts are the qualities acquired and concessions made in shifting to a kinesthetically interactive medium (e.g., theme parks, video games, role-play reenactments, etc.). According to Hutcheon:

> What gets adapted here is a heterocosm, literally an 'other world' or cosmos, complete… with the stuff of a story… it is the *'res extensa'*... of that world, its material physical dimension, which is transposed and then experienced through multisensorial interactivity (Grau 2003:3). This heterocosm possesses… 'truth-of-coherence' [plausibility and consistency within context] ... [as well as a] kind of 'truth-of-correspondence'—not to any 'real world' but to the universe of a particular adapted text (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 14).

This interactive mode struggles to adapt "what novels portray so well: the *'res cogitans,'* [or] space of the mind" which even screen or stage and other "showing" mediums struggle to "make manifest in the material realm [for] perception by an audience" (Hutcheon, 2013, p. 14).

Likewise, while a master of a spiritualized practice can in theory attempt to describe or explain enlightenment, understood in this context as "unmediated perception of reality" or "apprehension of the highest truth,"[21] they generally refuse to do so, offering instead only hints and other cryptic indications that evade a student's understanding until that student is able to experience the truth firsthand[22]. Within kinesthetic spiritualized practices, most significantly the martial arts, the potency of certain truths depend on one's own immersion in

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[18] Zeami Motoyiko applied the Zen concept of *mushin* (no-mind) to his conceptualization of acting as a means of "[helping] an audience transcend their egos and connect with the Universal," according to Kevin Krein and Jésus Ilundáin (Priest, 2014, p. 152).

[19] According to D.T. Suzuki: "What makes swordsmanship come closer to Zen than any other art that has developed in Japan is that it involves the problem of death in the most immediately threatening manner… Everything he does must come right out of his inner mechanism... He must act instinctually and not intellectually" (Priest, 2014, p. 151).

[20] Despite this apparent kinesthetic primacy, there is documentation within the mythos of spirituality as a whole on which much spiritualized practice is based, namely Zen Buddhist stories (Reps, 1957), in which one may be enlightened by a variety of means, e.g. through direct transmission (pondering a white lotus), meditation, Zen Rinzai koans, dharma combat, or even through overhearing an exchange in a store.

[21] I owe this characterization of enlightenment to a presentation by Dr. Rick Schubert, delivered in the course of his Honors Seminar in Philosophy of the Martial Arts at Cosumnes River College, Sacramento, during Spring Semester 2021.

[22] See the description offered above by Murphy.

the abstract *res extensa* of that practice, represented by the relationships, themes or principles, metaphorical frameworks or mythos, rituals, etc. of that practice. As explained by Carl Becker:

> The martial artist is creating a new, invisible world, if not of faith, at least of commitments and relationships in the dojo, which only become fully comprehensible and meaningful to him once he has placed himself fully within their hermeneutic framework (Nelson, 1989, p. 106).

This secondary approach of viewing kinesthetic spiritualized practice in general and the martial arts in specific through the lens of adaptation theory and intersemiotic equivalences provides insight into the kinesthetic interface through which spiritualization is transmitted.

## Conclusion

It could be argued that the notion of immersion in the "*res extensa*" of the martial arts is antithetical to the aforementioned "unmediated perception of reality," or that the development of the "*res cogitans*" or explicit intellectual awareness of hermeneutic frameworks is antithetical to concepts of "no-mind" or, more generally, opposition to conceptualization within the spiritual philosophies that inspire kinesthetic spiritualized practice. This is a topic that could be further investigated. In the context of Zen Buddhism in specific, Yagyu Munenori maintained that:

> When you have exclusively learned the various practices and techniques and made great efforts in disciplined training, there will be actions in your arms, legs, and body but none in your mind… With successful training, training falls away. This is the secret principle towards which all Ways progress (Priest, 2014, p. 146).

Further exploration could consider the potential harm of immersion in such hermeneutic frameworks or metaphysical and epistemological leaps. Such exploration might consider the induction process into a cult in which one is brought further away from spiritualized ideals as a result of the required conformity to one's role in a greater structural hierarchy. One could also investigate the mechanisms and intrapersonal dynamics of spiritualized practice in relation to religious ideals in more individualistic cultures, as those without the ecological framework of Asian martial arts might place less emphasis on oneness, kinesthetic connection, and interoception.

In this essay I have discussed the kinesthetic cultivation of subjective culture within the martial arts, and how this stimulates the spiritualization of practice. I have introduced adaptation theory as a theoretical framework providing insight into the mechanisms or equivalences of spiritualized practice. I have also examined certain similarities between the qualities or limitations acquired in shifting to a kinesthetic medium and the inaccessibility of enlightenment or mastery beyond firsthand kinesthetic experience. These comparisons provide insight into spiritualized practice, particularly kinesthetic spiritualized practice and especially the martial arts, as a medium for internalizing spiritualized ideals. Ultimately, the insight that can be gained through the theorization of profundity beyond knowledge is limited, however models such as these may specify the means by which this profundity is realized.

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