MARTIAL ARTS STUDIES

EMILY FITZGERALD

IMAGINING EMBODIMENT IN KARATE KATA

ABSTRACT

A growing reliance on virtual technology emerged in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, including for martial artists. This paper is an exploration of how a particular moment in time created a paradigm shift that both has, and has not, affected the way martial artists train. I argue rethinking the concept of virtuality beyond the bounds of technology provides a lens through which to better understand certain aspects of embodied existence that both reinforce and are not limited to the physical. I primarily discuss the virtual effects on training in terms of a phrase I call *embodied imagination* through a phenomenological analysis of three primary thinkers: Gilles Deleuze, Edward Casey, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I focus on karate *kata* as prime examples of the kind of adaptability and creativity that can emerge with spatial fluctuations. Kata serve to exemplify how embodied imagination is always already both virtualized and actualized in senses individual and communal. I end with a description of a combination of techniques that utilize creative interpretations of limited and liminal spaces.

CONTRIBUTOR

Emily FitzGerald is an Assistant Professor of Humanities at Utah Tech University. Her research deals with questioning and complicating dualisms that have historically dominated conversations in Western philosophy and religion. She is publishing on topics such as embodied imagination, personhood, and spectacle, as well as on how to incorporate embodied practices in the college classroom. Current and future projects include interdisciplinary approaches to martial arts studies and movement arts from phenomenological perspectives, social and environmental considerations of 'flesh' and fascia, and embodied pedagogies.

KEYWORDS

Embodiment; imagination; karate; kata; phenomenology; virtuality.

Accepted for publication on 1 June 2024

FitzGerald, E. (2024). Imagining embodiment in karate kata. *Martial Arts Studies*, 15, pp. 42–50.
doi.org/10.18573/mas.178

Imagining Embodiment in Karate Kata

Emily FitzGerald

The concept for this paper developed from a moment during a karate lesson held via Zoom in mid-2020. The COVID-19 pandemic had forced my friend to close the New York dojo where we had been training since the early 2000s. The loss of our space was palpable even as classes continued virtually from her new home across the country in Oregon. During this session, my friend was running a class in which we were practicing *kata* – series of techniques performed in sequences against absent opponents. All students were familiar with *taikyoku shodan*, often the first kata learned in many schools, but our task for this activity was a bit different. We were to break down each movement one by one and perform them in all directions rather than just the standard start to the left. This kind of variation fits into the grander scheme of *bunkai* – the deconstruction and application of techniques – in that it requires intentionally learning to adapt to a wide variety of circumstances and not simply relying on absent-minded muscle memory.[1] Though this sort of exercise was something we conducted often in person, students in the Zoom room were having trouble understanding the directions in which they were supposed to perform their techniques. Simple verbal cues like 'left' and 'right' become more difficult to understand through the screen due to mirroring, and getting one's whole body in view of the camera can be a challenge. My friend came up with a clever solution to this problem. She told the students which way to move based on the physical orientations of our now-absent dojo: flags in the front, mirrors behind, gear to the right, windows to the left. When she said 'Gear!', everyone instinctively moved to the right in their own space, as if pulled magnetically through our shared spatial memory of a place that was no longer 'there'.

Why was this evocatively imagined cue, conveyed in a virtual setting, more effective than a simple verbal command or visual mimicry? How was it that my friend, teaching from her home 3000 miles away, was able to sync everyone in different living rooms or bedrooms or basements by invoking the image of a training space that was no longer physically present? Was our training experience fundamentally changed due to the virtual nature of our classes, or were certain previously hidden aspects of our practice being revealed in different ways? In thinking about these questions throughout the quarantine periods that forced us to train using virtual spaces, I came to realize that certain forms of martial arts training *always* have a virtual element in *any* spatial possibility, even when they are not conducted in a technologically-mediated virtual setting.

'Virtuality' here is not solely the kind conducted online through the use of computing technology. When techniques are performed virtually, I also mean they are performed *potentially, almost, or non-actually.* This virtuality is carried out in what I term 'embodied imagination' – a non-binary approach to sensory perception and action that is not based on physicality alone. Embodied imagination exists regardless of spatial realities, though different realities necessarily mean different approaches to training. In addition to the case shared above, I discuss another example at the end of this essay of how limited physical space provides an opportunity to train creatively through embodied imagination. Though the two cases I describe both took place on Zoom, I am not attempting to make a case for online training being better than, or even equivalent to, training in person with others. Rather, having to train online helped me consider what aspects of that virtual training I could take with me in my training elsewhere, turning these lessons into a creative process. I point to the ways in which virtual training through embodied imagination showcase the potential creativity, communal activity, and multivalent applicability that kata training can offer in a variety of spatial settings.

KATA AND BUNKAI IN CONTEXT

Some context will be helpful before delving into the theories and issues I raise below regarding the virtual qualities of kata. I have been training in various martial arts for over eighteen years, and my experiences have provided the framework through which I approach the interweaving of virtuality and embodied imagination. Most of my training has been in the New York karate school mentioned above, which is influenced by Shotokan, Kyokushin, Goju, and Isshinryu styles, and I have also trained in both Shotokan and Kyokushin in Japan. The hybrid karate school in New York is what I consider my 'home dojo', though our branch remains extant only online, with occasional seminars and testing held in person. I have also trained in Muay Thai, Jeet Kune Do, and Krav Maga in New York. This cross-training is relevant insofar as my interpretations of traditional karate kata are necessarily not 'pure' either in the kata I practice within my style of karate or in my interpretation of how kata can be used in karate training more generally.[2] My martial arts background lends itself

1 There are disagreements among karate practitioners regarding the use of the terms bunkai (分解: dismantling, deconstruction), *bunseki* (分析: analysis), and *ōyō* (応用: application/s). As many practitioners outside of Japan have little to no knowledge of Japanese, all three are often conflated into one blanket term to refer to the deconstruction of techniques, the analysis of those techniques, and their practical application. To avoid confusion I follow suit here and use bunkai to refer to the applications of elements of a given kata as well as the whole process of breaking down, understanding, and utilizing kata. Part of this process is contingent on the fact that advanced bunkai are generally not revealed to practitioners until after they have sufficiently embodied the movement in a variety of ways. This process of revelation is performed by teachers to students, providing structure to a particular school's training and lineage. There are often considered to be three levels of bunkai: *bunkai omote*, or the surface-level, relatively obvious connections in the deconstructive process; *bunkai ura*, the hidden or secret alternative possibilities; and *bunkai honto*, the 'true' meaning.

2 Kata have various interpretations not only in terms of their usage and applicability but also when it comes to the techniques of individual kata themselves. Patrick McCarthy (2016) has detailed the complex history of the 'Bubishi', handwritten *gongfu* manuals of combat possibly dating

to the kind of creative interpretations of kata I describe below. Though my claims regarding virtuality and embodied imagination are relevant to my own experience, I believe they can be applied to other forms of martial arts and kata training as well. Though kata is not exclusive to karate, it is particularly useful for my purposes here because of its ability to be practiced both with others and alone and its components can be used in a variety of training exercises and scenarios.

Kata, often translated into English as 'forms', serve several purposes, including but not limited to: demonstrating techniques while incorporating flow and style; combining basic and advanced movements that build muscle memory and endurance; embodying one's lineage as represented in the variations devised in different schools and interpretations; and practicing the breakdown of performed techniques through the simulation of possible combat scenarios. Markus Schrenk (2014) points out that the performance of kata may serve purposes other than the goal of self-defense; 'artistic pleasure', for example, is another possible goal, along with general proprioceptive development. Cynarski et al. (2017, pp. 34-35) add: 'Generally speaking, practicing kata… teaches us precision, dynamics, rhythm, spatial orientation, responsive memory, mobility, neuromuscular skills…, controlled breathing… We learn to combine these skills in diverse ways. They improve the efficiency of our imagination and uniqueness. The frequent repetition of traditional technical forms benefits us throughout our daily life'. Numerous sources cite the potential for moral and spiritual growth through martial arts practice as well (Croom, 2014, 2022, 2023; Cynarski, 2022; Holt, 2023; Lloyd, 2014).

In my school, kata are not emphasized more than other aspects of training but are balanced with partner drills, fitness challenges, practical self-defense, and sparring practice. We learn to think of kata holistically, as a part of training that has obvious and not-so-obvious applications to other aspects of our practice. When we perform kata in person, we learn short sequences individually from our teachers before fitting them all together. We then practice these sequences with a group of others, ideally performing the movements in sync. This resonance is emphasized because practicing with others contributes to one's own performance, something that is certainly lacking when it comes to online training when physical nuances are easily missed. Techniques from kata are incorporated into partner exercises outside the sequences as well in order to both interpret the possible bunkai and to understand how particular moves could be applied in sparring or self-defense.

At the highest level, bunkai from kata are freely used in drills and sparring, and expertise gained from these are incorporated back into kata practice. We share our interpretations with each other, developing conversations about possible applications that encourage incorporating our own personal styles into our forms. Being able to instantly visualize, in a tactile manner, the efficacy of techniques against another person is crucial; without it, the movements lose their meaning. Advanced students are able to do this in their kata training online, but this ability is only possible after performing the bulk of practice in person with others in order to experience tactile feedback before being able to convincingly incorporate it into one's own embodied imagination. Honing this skill is key to understanding how kata training can be understood as a kind of virtual training, with or without a screen.

In the following, I utilize theoretical and phenomenological grounding from three main thinkers. After defining virtuality via Gilles Deleuze, imagination via Edward Casey, and spatial embodiment via Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I use 'embodied imagination' to explore the ways in which virtuality is expressed in kata when practiced in both virtual and physical spaces. To do this, I highlight how kata and related exercises can provide a more nuanced understanding of what virtuality might mean beyond its technologically mediated presence in our lives. I then discuss ethical and practical implications of simulated, non-actualized violence in the context of virtuality and embodied imagination and what the goals of kata practice might be. My final case study showcases how creatively interpreting and breaking down kata movements can lead to innovative combinations with increased applicability to spatial restrictions involving virtuality through embodied imagination.

EMBODIMENT, NOT BODY

Embodiment is the literal incorporation of space and time within the body. It is multiple rather than singular and must be considered in the context of social practices rather than solely through the subjective perspective of an individual. Wherever possible, I prefer 'embodiment' over 'body' to avoid the risk of perpetuating mind/body dualism. 'Embodiment' implies physical states that are co-emergent and co-constitutive with mental, emotional, spiritual, and other states, and leaves room for cultural signification (see Hayles, 1999, particularly pp. 196-197 and Varela, Thompson, and Rosch, 2000, p. 27). Kata are physical, but they also involve deep thinking and great effort over time. Mind and body, in addition to cultural and other factors, cannot be separated when considering the role of embodiment in martial arts. In their introduction to the collection *Martial Arts as Embodied Knowledge: Asian Traditions in a Transnational World*, D.S. Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge (2011, p. 1) specify that embodiment necessitates 'understanding martial arts through cultural and historical experience; these are forms of knowledge characterized as 'being-in-the-world 'as opposed to abstract conceptions that are supposedly transcendental'. Embodiment, then, is not *solely* physical nor *solely* subjective.

back to the 17th century that were passed down from teacher to student (see pgs. 123-126). These may be some of the first depictions we have of certain kata still practiced in karate schools today. The fact that these books were copied by hand meant inevitable changes were made along the way due to individual interpretations (or mistakes) and this is no different from how different styles evolve through lineages. The 'right' way to perform a particular kata is often determined by one's individual school, even by individual teachers.

Embodiment enables us to learn from, interact with, and be influenced by our environments. It is the amalgamation and conduit for everything we experience. Since 2020, the global pandemic has forced us to reassess what being embodied means with a shift away from life conducted in person. Though there are valid concerns that our embodiment and its various enactments have been compromised, I argue that increased virtuality has the potential to reveal other perspectives on embodiment. Virtuality should not be seen as a *replacement* of physicality or materiality but rather as a complement that allows for different kinds of perception and experience.

VIRTUALITY TWO WAYS

I employ a two-fold definition of the virtual. The first is the familiar technologically mediated form we see today in the form of software and hardware that enable interactions with virtual, online environments and systems. Here, I am specifically referring to Zoom and similar real-time video conferencing technology as a mode of virtual training that is not gamified. Notably, I am not talking about martial arts as practiced in a technologically mediated virtual reality world that requires a headset or other similar equipment. Martin J. Meyer (2022) discusses future possibilities of headset-VR training, but this is still in the realm of speculation, particularly as there is not yet a way to virtually replicate or imitate tactile feedback. The data he mentions through survey responses from several hundred martial artists are useful in terms of considering how practitioners feel about virtual versus in-person training. His conclusion is similar to mine: virtual training in the form of Zoom rooms, online seminars, etc. can help to supplement training and provide increased access but cannot replace in-person training with fellow practitioners.

The second usage of the virtual is inspired by Gilles Deleuze's (2004) understanding of it as a form of potentiality. As he puts it in his book *Difference and Repetition*: 'The virtual is not opposed to the real but to the actual. The virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual…' (p. 272). Manuel deLanda (2013, p. 24) elaborates that virtuality in this context is 'a *real virtuality* forming a vital component of the objective world'. Deleuze goes on to say that virtuality points to an *ideal*, an aspect of reality that is in some ways *imaginary.* To put it another way, virtuality is an ideal but not actualized potentiality of materiality. If it becomes actual, it is no longer virtual, just as the actual loses its potentiality.

I agree with David Ekdahl (2018; 2022a; 2022b) in proposing that virtual experiences have the potential to reveal innovative ways of interpreting and experiencing embodiment. The kind of virtual simulation inherent in karate kata is similar in nature to some forms of technologically virtual simulations, and simulations of both kinds can potentially assist in preventing actual bodily harm in addition to providing other embodied benefits. There is thus a cross-pollinating relationship between the potentiality of the virtual and the actuality of human embodiment both within and beyond the context of martial arts training.

Applied to kata, Deleuze's theory means that the performed techniques remain in the realm of the virtual by not performing them to actually harm another person, even though kata require fully embodied participation. Practicing kata thus creates a liminal space between the virtual and the actual insofar as the movements, which require both physical and mental effort, are enacted *without* violence being done to an opponent. If we read technologically-mediated virtuality through Deleuze's virtual as a kind of *potentiality*, then those technologies can be seen as ways in which we may increase possibilities in other areas, of course *including* embodied ones. This is key – I am not proposing that technologically-mediated virtuality is a solution to so-called 'real-world' problems, nor do I wish to ignore the serious issues raised by things like social media predation and potential pitfalls of AI. Rather, I contend that the ways in which we understand 'the virtual' as disconnected or oppositional from 'the real', including embodied reality, are misguided. Investigating technologically-mediated virtuality through the lens of virtuality-as-potential, particularly in the case of kata, can help us to overcome that troublesome binary that separates the virtual (incorporeal) from the real (physical).

My term 'embodied imagination' thus refers to this play of presence and absence that karate practitioners (literally) incorporate in their training through their ability to imagine that which is not there – an active and actual opponent – in order to practice, perform, and enact techniques in a simulated manner. In the case of kata, the virtual quality is inherent in the practice through the absence of an opponent. For martial arts classes that shifted to Zoom during the height of the pandemic, the virtual component is operating on two levels: in the communal practice through virtual screens as well as in the performance of the kata in terms of the non-actualized techniques being performed. Through these virtually practiced combat techniques, it is possible to read embodied imagination as a kind of potentiality. Viewing virtuality in this light can lead to creative embodied processes that may not have been possible without these non-actual instantiations.

Bunkai in particular is relevant to how the concept of Deleuzian virtuality can help to clarify how kata is performed as a kind of combat simulation. Bunkai is a process of deconstruction that builds the practitioner's potential knowledge of applying techniques. As kata practice is frequently supplemented with sparring and other combat drills to better understand how to apply certain techniques against actual rather than virtual bodies, it is important to recognize that the virtual (non-actualizing) quality of kata practice is not a substitute for other aspects of training. If the practitioner is hoping to increase their knowledge and capacity for self-defense outside of a safe training space, kata alone is likely insufficient. For those who seek a fully embodied but less injury-prone combat *simulation*, however, kata is a good option; through bunkai, it facilitates this form of training while bearing less risk for bodily harm to oneself or one's training partners. The virtual quality of kata and bunkai training, therefore, provides physical engagement that maintains the need for mental, creative, and communal participation.

TEMPORAL IMAGINING

In his book *Imagining: A Phenomenological Study*, Edward Casey (1976) emphasizes the essential role of the imagination in a similar manner as Deleuze with virtuality. An ambiguity resulting from the *non-actualizing* process can be seen in both. This comes with an important caveat that Casey elucidates: 'by imagining, we ascertain nothing that we did not know beforehand in some respect. What we take to be *in* the imagined object or event is only what we already, explicitly or implicitly, know *about* it. Imaginative experience is inherently circular in this regard, with the consequence that in imagining we cannot claim to confront anything radically new' (p. 8). Through the performance of a kata, one enacts various techniques despite the absence of the feedback required to properly perform them thanks to the strength of the imagination. This is accomplished much more easily, however, by a seasoned practitioner who has developed the 'muscle memory' of embodied imagination. This skill, like the body itself through physical training, is honed through practice. Utilizing spatial memory, as we did in the first case study, can help to develop this skill by exploring the ways in which our embodied techniques can adapt to different spaces and, eventually, different opponents. As Casey puts it, 'the imaginer can draw on memory just as he can enact imagining in the context of anticipating' (p. 33).

Temporality is an important factor here. The strength of one's imagination, as pointed out by Casey, depends on prior experience in some fashion. This means incorporating techniques that have been learned in the past to project onto present practice, which in turn affects how these techniques are performed in the future. Bunkai meanings change depending on experience, even if the movement looks the same. A simple punch can easily turn into a grab, and a turn into a block can easily become a throw – but the former techniques are basics while the latter are often only clear to more advanced students.

What we are capable of imagining has to have been, *or has the potential to be*, incorporated into our embodiment. In this way, embodied imagination can be seen as a temporal bridge between what is virtual (potential, imagined) and what is actual (manifested, corporeal). Importantly, however, that temporal bridge is not unidirectional. In other words, it does not move through past, present, and future in a straight line progressing left to right. Rather, the temporal bridge is necessarily flexible, allowing our imagination to project memories (or learned techniques) from the past on to potentialities from the future. This is why my friend's spatial cues from our now-imagined dojo worked better than simple directional commands.

Since an 'imagined object is *inherently* indeterminate and can *never* be apprehended as perfectly definite', much like Deleuze's virtual object, the moves of a kata practiced without a sparring partner are limited to what already makes physical sense to a practitioner (Casey p. 106, italics in original). Embodiment in kata practice remains tied to what (or, rather, whom) is necessarily not physically present. Its performance as seen through the lens of embodied imagination therefore marks a liminal space *between* virtuality and actuality that allows these modes to affect one another while still maintaining their differences. Enacting the imaginative bunkai of kata means creating a space where that which is concealed in the imagination is revealed through its material instantiation and back again in a process of playing with the line between the virtual and the actual.

SPATIALIZING

A major focus for Merleau-Ponty in *Phenomenology of Perception* (2014) is that when it comes to spatial orientation, the body is necessarily tied to its surroundings and understood through perception of phenomena:

> What counts for the orientation of the spectacle is not in my body, such as it in fact exists, as a thing in objective space, but rather my body as a system of possible actions, a *virtual* body whose phenomenal 'place' is defined by its task and by its situation. *My body is wherever it has something to do.* (p. 260, emphasis added)

A space provides possibilities and limitations in terms of what one can do within it. Contrary to the belief that virtuality in the technologically-mediated sense is or will eventually be limitless, we must remember Casey's important point regarding what is possible for the imagination. When putting on a VR headset, for example, that newly perceived world does not replace or make disappear the space outside the newly virtual space but rather exists alongside. When doing kata on Zoom in one's bedroom as opposed to in a shared gym space, it is necessary to take into account the actual spatiality relative to, say, the camera and screen. In person, adjustments still need to be made, albeit in accordance with the space of the gym and the other people in it. Doing kata virtually, in either the technologically-mediated or Deleuzian sense, does not mean the relevance of spatial constraints disappears.

Techniques must be adapted to a particular situation and where it is happening. In the virtuality of the kata practitioner's imagination, embodiment remains contingent on actual spatial situations insofar as a sequence of moves must be already familiar to the practitioner in some way. This is one reason why virtual training alone, without physical feedback from partners, cannot suffice when it comes to a practitioner understanding the efficacy of particular techniques, especially when first learning them. Imagination can only take us so far, just as a *lack* of imagination can limit our progress.

A space is thus itself a means of possibility, sometimes through its very limitations. Merleau-Ponty explains it thusly:

> Space is not the milieu (real or logical) in which things are laid out, but rather the means by which the position of things becomes possible. That is, rather than imagining space as a sort of ether in which all things are immersed, or conceiving it abstractly as a characteristic they would all share, we must think of space as the universal power of their connections. (2014, p. 253-254)

Consider both the virtual space of a karate Zoom class as well as the actual space of a *dojo* – both manage to connect participants to their practice and each other through the virtual combat that is kata. In the process of spatializing a kata, one passes from 'spatialized space to spatializing space' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 254). Karate practitioners spatialize spaces on multiple fronts: their virtual screens (if practicing online), their actual place of practice, and the non-actualized virtual space that doing kata creates through embodied imagination.

In his book *Imagining Bodies* (2004), James B. Steeves points out that Merleau-Ponty utilized the virtual-as-potentiality in terms of bodily motility as well as imagination. 'The virtual body', he writes, 'is an imaginative ability to consider alternative uses of the body and to assume different perspectives from which to observe a situation… It allows a person to consider new possibilities for action and to establish a plan of action to acquire those skills' (p. 22). The imagination, he writes later, 'is more specifically that of the virtual body which enables the subject to maintain a balance between real and imagined space, an essential balance for the consideration and application of alternative modes of embodiment' (p. 102). The more varieties we experience – spatial, virtual, physical – the more capable we will be of extending and expanding the possibilities of our embodied imagination.

Notably, Merleau-Ponty also considers the virtual in the context of bodily spatializing in what he calls 'kinesthetic residues' (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 111). He writes that 'each bodily simulation' awakens 'not an actual movement, but a sort of 'virtual movement'.' The 'thickness of being', as he describes the relation between the body and its surroundings, is contingent on both virtuality and actuality in what I would describe precisely as embodied imagination (see pp. 111-115 in particular). These 'residues' affect the ways in which we spatialize but also the ways in which we interact with each other.

VIRTUAL ETHICS

One of the problems with the faculty of imagination is that it is indelibly personal. In Casey's analysis, 'pure possibility' is limitless within its own bounds but can be difficult if not impossible to fully convey to others. Merleau-Ponty's points about spatiality are similar insofar as every embodied being necessarily experiences its environment from its own perspective. The imagination in kata practice, however, is necessarily communal insofar as the techniques are taught, learned, and practiced within particular groups. When bunkai are imagined for kata, the absent opponents' virtual presence necessarily refers to the possibility of actual, physical encounters with future combatants. At what point might this imaginative mimesis ride the line between safe simulation and dangerous encounter? How might embodying this aspect of imagination affect one's embodiment in reactive ways that may be physically detrimental to the self or others? Furthermore, can kata, as simulations of combat techniques, prepare practitioners for actual violence?

While others have written on the subject of how or whether it is truly possible to train for violence (Staller et al., 2017; Miller, 2008; Boe, 2015), my primary concern here is rather to consider whether kata is geared more toward virtual than actual training, and what the significance of this might be. John J. Donohue (1993) refers to karate as 'a type of physically demanding play-acting' (p. 116). This is an apt description in terms of the ways in which it puts practitioners in dangerous imaginary situations in the hopes that if such a situation is actualized in a physical confrontation outside the training space, practitioners will know how to avoid or at least shorten a confrontation. Donohue stipulates that we cannot forget the violence inherent in the practice (they are *martial* arts, after all), even if this violence is in the hopeful service of non-violence. This, too, is a liminal space that hovers between restraint and escalation.

Martial arts training points to the underlying violence that it teaches practitioners to both wield efficiently and avoid. Mentally and physically preparing for events that may be prevented in part by the very act of imagining their possibility speaks to this play of liminality between the virtual and the actual. Embodied imagination means riding the line between potentiality and manifestation. In this case, the possibility of violence is, ideally, left to the virtual aspect of training. Barry Allen astutely addresses this juxtaposition:

> Hence an ethical paradox: Training in the martial arts is training in weapons avowed to violence, which is usually illegal and immoral except in a narrow range of special circumstances. How can something so respectfully trained, so ethically serious, so philosophical in conception, so elegant in demonstration, so challenging to master, and so exhilarating to perform, with so venerable a tradition, be vested in the vile purpose of violence? The answer is that these martial arts are not vested in violence. They are vested in life and address the ethical problem of a response to violence. We train *for* it without *training* in it. (2015, p. 206)

This subtle prepositional difference from Allen is indicative of the *shared imagination* of practitioners. The act of imagining violent scenarios gives martial artists the potential to grasp the severity of possible altercations and to try to avoid their actuality outside of the training space. Practitioners are expected to understand that the violence they are training to be capable of has serious potential consequences for self and other. As Tamara Kohn (2010, p.121) puts it, 'You *are* the Other when you are receiving a technique in any paired practice'. Further, she notes:

> I have to look after my partners because, at the very least, I want to train with them again tomorrow and next week. But there are deeper reasons to look after them in my training, and these relate to a more general ethic of care, something philosophers have talked about in all sorts of contexts – not surprisingly, often with reference to situations of conflict. (p. 120)

Kata practice should not be mistaken for a virtual replacement of actual conflict. Kata is, in many ways, a 'tame' version of training

as it focuses more on imagining opponents than unleashing techniques on actual people. In her discussion of psychological barriers in martial arts training, here karate in particular, Gillian Russell writes, 'There is much about training in the average dojo that insulates students from the chaotic, hard to control reality of violence and replaces it with a hygienic, less disturbing counterfeit' (Russell, 2014, p. 39). Though techniques can be applied in real-life scenarios with much practice and serious interpretation of bunkai, applicable skills for those looking for *actual* combat training are likely better acquired through a practice more obviously focused on self-defense. Rules in martial arts sporting events, competitions, and even in regular everyday training do not apply in situations on the street where one's safety may be in jeopardy.

Some teachers seek to find ways to simulate scenarios that could occur outside the safety and care of a mutual training space to assist students in understanding the weight of the techniques they practice (see Staller & Abraham, 2016). Such realistic simulations have the potential to be effective examples of why Gichin Funakoshi, founder of Shotokan Karate, famously says there is no such thing as a 'first strike' in karate (Funakoshi, 2012b, p. 23). What he means by this is similar to what Allen wrote above – that we train *for* it rather than training *in* it. Though kata cannot fully prepare anyone for a violent encounter, the *virtual* quality of training may help us to imagine, and thus avoid, the weight of *actual* violence.

Practitioners in a training space simulate rather than enact violence, as evidenced in the mutual care shown to training partners and the relative lack of injury experienced when compared to actual combat. The specter of actual violence, however, is always lurking and is potentially ignored to the detriment of practitioners. Without acknowledging actual practical applications, kata training may not manifest into actual self-defense and bears the risk of remaining in the realm of 'play-acting'. I argue, however, that this 'play' of virtuality has a valid role in encouraging mutual care in martial arts, on top of other benefits such as physical fitness, mental acuity, development of imagination, and creative adaptations to spatial limitations. Training with others provides a space in which people are necessarily supporting each other's progress rather than seeking to provide actual situations in which people's safety is threatened. This means that despite the potential realism in a given enacted simulation, there is an additional layer of actual violence that practitioners still hope to avoid and can never adequately prepare for through martial arts practice alone.

MUTUAL EMBODIED IMAGINATION AS THE GOAL OF KATA PRACTICE

Much of kata training thus necessarily remains in the realm of the virtual, reliant on embodied imagination that martial artists hope will not become actualized in the form of bodily harm. Practitioners do not always consider the physical and psychological realities of their techniques; often, they are training for more than one reason at a time, and those reasons are not always tied to the potentiality of violence. Kata practice does not always have to be hyper-practical – it can be understood in multiple ways simultaneously. Virtual simulations can be fun and playful (the best training sessions are often the ones where everyone leaves the room smiling), just as they can imply danger. Those capable of utilizing bunkai from kata practice into other realms of training benefit further by applying their practiced embodied imagination to better predict possibilities and react to a variety of situations in sparring and partner drills. Reducing kata to either pure play or pure self-defense is not doing justice to their potentiality and tends to ignore the communal aspects inherent in training that go beyond the virtual/actual binary. 'Play' does not necessarily imply a lack of seriousness, but can in fact lead to innovative solutions to problems such as how to deal with an opponent's superior strength or skill level as well as certain spatial constraints.

The inability of kata practice to be adequate preparation in the face of actual violence – something which cannot be perfectly replicated or simulated – is established through the theorists presented above. For Deleuze, the virtual and the actual point to each other but do not collapse into one another, just as the performance of kata does not collapse into combat against an actual opponent outside of training. For Casey, what one can imagine must be tied to what one has already experienced. For Merleau-Ponty, the process of spatializing involves playing with embodied imagination to further explore and acquire knowledge, even if that process of play does not result in actually carrying out what is imagined. A main goal of kata practice, along with bunkai training, is honing one's embodied imagination, hovering in the liminal space between the virtual and the actual.

Funakoshi insisted that 'Karate-dō is not only the acquisition of certain defensive skills but also the mastering of the art of being a good and honest member of society' (Funakoshi, 2012a, p. 101). Perhaps in this way, too, the shared embodied imagination of karate practitioners can inspire a certain ethics that carry into actuality thanks to the kata performed in virtuality (Croom 2022, Rosenberg 2022). I agree with Steeves when he argues that the virtual body with its embodied imagination offers the potential for an 'inter-corporeality', one that 'introduces a unity-in-difference that embraces without eliminating the alterity of the Other' (Steeves, p. 119). The virtuality – potentiality – inherent in embodied imagination can thus open a door to mutual recognition *through* the practice of kata and their various invisible, virtual, never-to-be-actualized applications of violent techniques. In other words, through the acting out of violence in the form of virtual embodied imagination, a paradoxical non-violence can emerge in actuality. It is worthwhile to consider how training of this sort may deter actual violence through its emphasis on *non-actualized embodied imagination* enabled by respect for the mutual embodiment of others.

Embodiment does not disappear into the ether of the internet, disconnected from physical training; it is conjured, felt, and experienced through embodied imagination that is both personal

and social, virtual and actual. Again, virtuality cannot *replace* materiality. As I suspect any martial artist would agree, online training cannot compare to in-person training regarding elements such as partner drills, physical feedback from techniques, and the general energy of fellow practitioners in a shared training space. Likewise, practicing kata may necessarily be more virtual than actual while nonetheless remaining embodied. As a supplement to training, or as an alternative for those who cannot attend in-person training, technological forms of virtual practice can offer novel ways of approaching spatial constraints, creatively applying previously learned techniques in unideal settings, and forging and maintaining communal ties across time and space through an archival lineage manifested through practice. Utilizing such technologies can put the Deleuzian sense of the virtual on full display, which can in turn highlight the embodied imagination of martial artists. In practicing kata in a technologically-mediated virtual setting, we might consider the virtual aspects of kata to be always already a process of creatively imagining the potentiality of embodiment.

CONCLUSION

Deleuze demonstrates that without the need to replace one with another, virtuality and actuality coexist and provide valuable perspectives that may allow for a reorientation away from restrictive binary descriptors. This is demonstrated clearly in kata practice, which necessarily incorporates both realities into embodied imagination. Thanks to Casey, we have an understanding of imagination that depends on temporal specificity. Though what we can imagine is limited by what we can experience, our imagination can likewise enrich, affect, and drive experience. Merleau-Ponty provides us with a roadmap for how to understand what it means to be spatially embodied and how to consider embodied imagination as a form of play and exploration. Space, in its limitations and possibilities, enables us to connect to our surroundings, virtual and actual, as well as to each other.

Here, I would like to offer my own bunkai, so to speak, to ways in which martial artists can embrace restrictions as a means to progress when training in the world of online virtual classes, or simply practicing on one's own without the presence of training partners. Invoking a communal space to spark coordinated movement across time zones and in various individual spaces is a prime example of this possibility. Participating in and helping to run karate classes on Zoom during quarantine periods of the pandemic meant I had to get used to practicing techniques from the small space of my bedroom through the medium of my computer screen. While this hindered my ability to perform kata to their full effect due to spatial constraints, various physical obstacles, and the lack of in-person feedback from training partners, these spatial limitations better enabled me to break down the moves, analyze them more closely, and put them together in different combinations. Participating in real-time virtual classes provided many ways to reframe the limitations of the situation as opportunities. This form of reorientation can lead to changes beyond kata and martial arts training.

If kata are meant in part to simulate combat, then the imaginative aspect of training must include a variety of possible settings, such as close quarters. For me, the most striking example of this took place during an advanced karate class on Zoom in 2020, taught by my original teacher. During this session, he closed his eyes while preparing his lesson to better imagine how the combination he came up with would play out against an opponent. He would do this during our in-person classes as well, when testing techniques on one person was insufficient in terms of imagining if they would work against a wide variety of embodied opponents. This form of visualization, which necessitates not seeing with one's eyes or relying on tactile feedback, is an example of the non-technologically-mediated sense of virtuality that is closer to *creating* a simulation rather than being a passive part of one. As Merleau-Ponty would say, this means *spatializing* rather than being spatialized.

This process of visualization, however, includes *tactile imagination*, which advanced practitioners develop over time as we practice, dissect, and apply bunkai both with and without the physical feedback of partners. My teacher asked us to imagine using these techniques and combinations against opponents who were taller, shorter, bigger, smaller, stronger, and weaker than ourselves. This meant adjusting our stances and turns to accommodate absent bodies felt only in our embodied imagination. Notably, this exercise likely would not have worked for beginner or even intermediate students as they would not have had enough actual experience in sparring, combative drills, and kata that would include in-person training with people of various shapes and sizes. This, again, demonstrates the necessity of actual practice being able to filter what is possible in virtual practice, as Casey tells us with imagination.

During this particular lesson, my teacher wanted us to play with restricted lines. We performed the combination in a block that, in my room, measured about six feet long and two feet wide. On this line, left side in front, we performed five movements in succession: left hammerfist strike in cat stance (to break a grab); left jab (to stun); left clinch pulling into horse stance from right foot (to throw off balance and gain control); pull back all the way around with the left foot (to throw); rear low kick to opponent's face (to incapacitate). These movements are all separate parts of various kata but putting them together in this fashion was new for all participants that day, including my teacher who had just created it during class.

What I took away from this exercise was an appreciation for creativity and ingenuity that comes with combining various techniques from kata into novel combinations that fit a particular situation. This kind of flexibility is a welcome lesson to be applied to both virtual and actual spaces, and involves the skills already extant within kata practice. As we were all wearing our *gi* and belts in our personal spaces, there was also a clear communal link as we practiced together through our screens. This example is compelling because the technologically virtual nature of Zoom

practice showed us something about the virtual nature of kata itself: that our individual and communal embodied imagination allows us to creatively and adaptively spatialize our practice to include myriad potentialities *through* actual limitations that force us to re-think what is possible to imagine and do.

The kata practitioner holds a virtual intangibility against an absent opponent that nevertheless always already marks embodiment. Techniques and bunkai are performed in the hopes of never using them with the intention to harm another person. Kata is most real, therefore, where it is most virtual, and yet takes place entirely in temporal, spatial, and communal embodied imagination. Understanding kata as exploring and creating simulations that bear the potentiality of violence while also encouraging the avoidance of it provides the opportunity to see this form of training as playing with what is possible for embodied imagination. Embodied imagination, in turn, may offer new lines of thought regarding virtuality in both online and in-person spaces within and beyond martial arts training.

Acknowledgements and Competing Interests

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviewers who greatly helped to improve this paper.

Excerpts from this paper can be found in expanded form in chapters two and three of the author's doctoral dissertation (FitzGerald, 2024).

REFERENCES

Allen, B. (2015). *Striking beauty: A philosophical look at the Asian martial arts.* Columbia University Press. https://doi.org/10.7312/columbia/9780231172721.001.0001

Boe, O. (2015). Does practicing close combat improve the perceived ability to perform better? *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 190*, 409–415. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.05.018

Casey, E. S. (1976). *Imagining: A phenomenological study*. Indiana University Press.

Croom, A. M. (2014). Embodying martial arts for mental health: Cultivating psychological well-being with martial arts practice. *Archives of Budo Science of Martial Arts and Extreme Sports, 10*, 59–70. https://philpapers.org/rec/CROEMA-6

Croom, A. M. (2022). Muay Thai, psychological well-being, and cultivation of combat-relevant affordances. *Philosophies, 7*, 65. https://doi.org/10.3390.philosophies7030065

Croom, A. M. (2023). The impact of shadowboxing on the psychological well-being of professional martial arts. *Discover Psychology, 3*(4). https://doi.org/10.1007/s44202-023-00064-8

Cynarski, W. J. (2022). New concepts of *budo* internalised as a philosophy of life. *Philosophies, 7*(5), 110. https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7050110

Cynarski, W. J. (2021). Fighting arts: Between formality and spontaneity. *Ido Movement for Culture, 21*, 47–52. https://doi.org/10.14589/ido.21.4.7

Cynarski, W. J., Yu, J., & Borysiuk, Z. (2017). Technical forms in teaching karate and taekwondo. *Journal of Combat Sports and Martial Arts, 8*(1), 31–36. https://doi.org/10.5604/01.3001.0010.4619

deLanda, M. (2013). *Intensive science and virtual philosophy*. Bloomsbury.

Deleuze, G. (2004). *Difference and repetition.* (P. Patton, Trans.). Bloomsbury.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia.* (B. Massumi, Trans.). University of Minnesota Press.

Donohue, J. J. (1993). The ritual dimension of karate-do. *Journal of Ritual Studies (Winter), 7*(1), 105–124. https://www.jstor.org/stable/44398891

Ekdahl, D. (2022). Both physical and virtual: on immediacy in esports. *Frontiers in Sports and Active Living, 4*, 1–13. https://doi.org/10.3389/fspor.2022.883765 PMid:35615346 PMCid:PMC9126049

Ekdahl, D., & Ravn, S. (2022). Social bodies in virtual worlds: intercorporeality in eSports. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive*

Sciences, 21(2), 293–316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-021-09734-1 PMid:33935609 PMCid:PMC8075606

Ekdahl, D., & Ravn, S. (2018). Embodied involvement in virtual worlds: The case of eSports practitioners. *Sport, Ethics and Philosophy*, *13*(2), 132–144. https://doi.org/10.1080/17511321.2018.1475418

Farrer, D. S., & Whalen-Bridge, J. (2011). *Martial arts as embodied knowledge: Asian traditions in a transnational world.* State University of New York Press. https://doi.org/10.1353/book12668

FitzGerald, E. (2024). *Empty hands: embodied imagination in non-duality* (Order No. 31236768). Available from Dissertations & Theses @ Columbia University; ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global. (3060355486).

Funakoshi, G. (2012). *Karate-dō: My way of life.* Kodansha USA.

Funakoshi, G. (2012). *The twenty guiding principles of karate: The spiritual legacy of the master* (J. Teramoto, Trans.). Kodansha USA.

Hayles, N. K. (1999). *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature, and informatics.* University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226321394.001.0001

Ihde, D. (2012). *Experimental phenomenology: multistabilities.* State University of New York Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781438442877 PMCid:PMC3256690

Lloyd, H. M. (2014). The martial arts as philosophical practice. In G. Priest & D. Young (Eds.), *Philosophy and the martial arts: engagement* (pp. 68–86). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315780788-5

McCarthy, P. (2016). *Bubishi: The classic manual of combat*. Tuttle Publishing.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of perception.* (D. A. Landes, Trans.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720714

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968). *The visible and the invisible.* (C. Lefort, Trans.). Northwestern University Press.

Meyer, M. J. (2022). Martial arts training during the pandemic and beyond: towards practices of virtuality. *Theatre, Dance and Performance Training*, *13*(3), 496–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/19443927.2022.2043423

Miller, R. (2008). *Meditations on violence*. YMAA Publication Center.

Roberts-Thompson, S. (2014). The promise and the peril of the martial arts. In G. Priest & D. Young (Eds.), *Philosophy and the martial arts: engagement* (pp. 13–27). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315780788-2

Rosenberg, D. (2022). Friendship as a moral defense of mixed martial arts. In J. Holt & M. Ramsay (Eds.), *The philosophy of mixed martial arts: squaring the octagon* (pp. 105–121). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003122395-10 PMid:34871581

Russell, G. (2014). Practicing evil: training and psychological barriers in the martial arts. In G. Priest & D. Young (Eds.), *Philosophy and the martial arts: engagement* (pp. 28–49). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315780788-3 PMid:25524362

Schrenk, M. (2014).'Is proprioceptive art possible? In G. Priest & D. Young (Eds.), *Philosophy and the martial arts: Engagement* (pp. 101–116). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315780788-7

Staller, M. S. & Abraham, A. (2016). 'Work on your problem-solving': Krav Maga experts' views on optimal learning environments for self-defense training. *International Journal of Coaching Science*, *10*(2), 91–113. https://www.dbpia.co.kr/Journal/articleDetail?nodeId=NODE07227556

Steeves, J. B. (2004). *Imagining bodies: Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of imagination.* Duquesne.

Varela, F.J., Thompson, E. & Rosch, E. (2000). *The embodied mind: Cognitive science and human experience.* MIT Press.

MARTIAL
ARTS STUDIES

Imagining Embodiment in Karate Kata
Emily FitzGerald

ABOUT THE JOURNAL

Martial Arts Studies is an open access journal, which means that all content is available without charge to the user or his/her institution. You are allowed to read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of the articles in this journal without asking prior permission from either the publisher or the author.

To submit a paper please visit:
mas.cardiffuniversitypress.org

Cardiff University Press | Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

Martial Arts Studies is an imprint of Cardiff University Press, an innovative open-access publisher of academic research, where 'open-access' means free for both readers and writers.
cardiffuniversitypress.org