

Approaches to Understanding a Martial Art

Recently I was watching a DVD on the history of European art in which the instructor William Kloss outlined 5 aspects of perceiving visual art: (1) subject, (2) interpretation, (3) style, (4) context, and (5) emotion. Understanding a martial art is not so different. The last aspect of which Kloss speaks is the least applicable, but if you allow for a minor change, you have the following ways to go about understanding a martial art: (1) subject, (2) interpretation, (3) style, (4) context, and (5) effectiveness and efficiency.

Where as a kata may have a specific **subject**, it is clear that, for the most part, martial arts have the common subject of combat. What kind of combat is not unimportant: if a martial art's subject is pitting a *sai* against a *bo*, it probably will not use the same tactics or techniques as an art that is attempting to arrest an unarmed drunk without detaching one of his body parts. This view of **subject** overlaps, of course, with **context**. If you try to understand an art outside of its intended context, you will go to unnecessary lengths explaining how it is ineffective.

By the way, understanding an art does not mean you agree or embrace that art, but understanding it will go a long way to shedding the ego surrounding your own "superior" art. That might make you at least tolerable at a multi-art seminar or on an internet chat site.

If we take our five approaches and rearrange them a little, we come out with a simple but functional discipline for appreciating the martial arts we see: (1) Interpretation, (2) Context, and (3) Efficient efficacy, or ICE — easy to remember and easy to apply, if one has the objectivity to do so. Let's give it a whirl.

INTERPRETATION & CONTEXT

No martial art can exist in the mind only (except with those heroes-in-their-own-minds who are also founders-in-their-own-minds). A martial art must perforce take a physical form, a recognizable shape with recognizable characteristics. Let's say you theoretically punch Mr. Badinov in the proboscis. Did you start your punch at your hip, chest, face or somewhere else? Were you standing in a short stance, a long stance, a front weighted or evenly weighted stance? Did your non-punching hand guard, pull, counterbalance or signal for a taxi? The form reveals your training and your training tends to reveal the art/style/school.

So far, nothing has to be interpreted except the source of your training. However, let's say you are alone in the gym between games of HORSE and you decide to put the basketball aside to practice a kata, one that contains the exact punch you had used on Mr. Badinov. Your acquaintance Dunkin McHoops strolls in and catches you mid-form. He knows you are practicing karate, but thinks that your turning south with a quick nose-punch is pretty silly since he would just walk up to Badinov and bang him on top of the head. "No," you explain, "I'm not turning south with a quick nose-punch; I'm throwing my last opponent into a new one."

"Sure," he smirks, tossing a left-handed 3-pointer that never touches the rim. Dunkin lacks the ability to interpret karate. His inability to interpret is not a genetic deficiency, but a failure of context. He sees the world

of Badinovs as creeps he can easily crush. You see the world of kata as training for more than just one short Mr. Badinov.

CONTEXT & EFFICACY

If you had tried Dunkin's hammerfist to the head of Badinov, it might not have been so effective since you are not 6' 11" or 273 pounds. Even if you were, a hammerfist to the Badinov-sized bullies does not cover every situation. An art cannot be judged without a context. Just as you can't expect Bach to have the beat of the Beatles, you can't expect the Beatles to have the mathematical structure of Bach – two different types of music from two different eras. If a martial art was designed to combat unarmed bullies attacking from the bushes, do not expect it to function fabulously in the ring with rules and padded fists. In some contexts, power is effective. In some contexts, superior range is effective. In others, speed is the deciding factor. You can't measure efficacy without context, and you have to assume a context to apply an interpretation.

EFFICACY & EFFICIENCY

Can a person be martially effective if inefficient? Sure. You can blow up a mountain to get to Osama bin Laden. Not efficient, but job done, nevertheless. In personal self-defense, however, efficiency may mean a saving of energy, which may mean a safer you. Efficiency also saves time. If you spend all day pounding Mr. Badinov, you may squash his head into the soil, but you've left plenty of opportunity for his main squeeze Nasty Natasha to sneak up behind and pummel yours. In fact, because of your inefficiency, she can take a break between lunch and teatime collecting cohorts to help her out.

Efficiency means you get the job done as quickly and effectively as possible given the circumstances—pretty difficult to argue with that.

So when you see another martial art and you have the tendency to evaluate it, being the rational and observant martial artist that you are, try understanding the context in which the art was intended to be applied (not simply practiced), try to interpret how it would be applied in that context, and then how efficient is its application for the intended results. Any other type of evaluation would be subjective and less than fair—you know, as if you were misinterpreting my comments out of the context of this efficient, and I hope effective, essay.