

At the interface of gladiatorship and neo-gladiatorship: humanistic perspective in the diachronic and synchronic terms

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Abstract

The motto of this scientific essay is the statement that “since man has not transformed himself in a positive sense, he systematically – and to great effect – reinforces what is negative both in himself and outside”. The aim of the essay is expressing the view of the authors on the recurring phenomenon of bloody gladiator fights under a camouflaged name of mix martial arts.

Ave, Imperator, morituri te salutant ('Hail, Emperor, those who are about to die salute you'). To this day, this motto is a shocking salute, once uttered by gladiators aware of their doom. Gladiatorship has a long and infamous history – bloody and deadly battles were fought in amphitheatres and circus arenas in front of the gathered audience. In ancient Rome, gladiatorship served two purposes, namely entertainment and politics. It gained notoriety among commoners. Gladiators were recruited from slaves, captives, prisoners, and former soldiers. They practiced their skills in gladiator schools and special barracks.

Decadent Rome and the beginnings of Christian communities became the plot of the novel 'Quo Vadis' (1896) by Nobel Prize winner Henryk Sienkiewicz, and a bestseller translated into numerous languages. The novel was filmed in many countries (Italy, USA, France, and Poland) by Jerzy Kawalerowicz in 2000. One of the most spectacular scenes is the heroic struggle of the athletic Ursus (in the Polish film adaptation this role was played by Rafał Kubacki, a two-time world champion in the open judo category) against the strength of the German aurochs in the circus arena. Lygia, the beloved one of Vinicius, was tied to the beast's neck and horns.

In the modern history, a Korean-born master, Masutatsu Oyama (1923-1994) – actually Choi Yeong-eui – became famous for bullfighting and founded his own karate school. Gichin Funakoshi (1868-1957) 'father of modern karate' – under whom Oyama also practised – famously said: 'karate ni sente nashi' ('no first attack in karate') and 'karate wa kunshi no bugei' ('karate is the martial art of intelligent people').

Meanwhile, in a civilization of unprecedented technological progress, those who share responsibility for arranging spectacles where neo-gladiators massacre each other in cages, have nothing positive to offer to more (or less) intelligent people. Neo-gladiators who accept the extremely instrumental treatment of themselves and their opponent, together with the promoters of these bloody spectacles and the global audience (due to their availability via the Internet), bear witness not only to the degradation of the humanistic agon. Participation in this global phenomenon in any role is evidence of strengthening the negative within and outside. Thus, there are some open questions: what part of the human population is affected by this phenomenon? what are the dynamics of this phenomenon? is the prospect of effective counteraction real?

Key words: agon • father of modern karate • innovative agonology • 'Quo Vadis'

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Diachronic – diachronic linguistic, also called **historical linguistics**, is the scientific study of **language change** over time [22].

Praxiology – science about good work. *A Treatise on Good Work*, a fundamental lecture of praxiology by T. Kotarbiński (first edition 1955) has been translated into majority of the so-called congress languages (English, German, Russian) and as well: Czech, Japanese, and Serbo-Croatian.

Dense social environment – people linked to each other with various technological information measures and highly dependent on each other due to mutual connection of their interests; more precisely: impossibility of achieving satisfaction without participation of people from one's own family circle and even satisfaction of basic needs [8].

Tauromachy – bullfighting.

Neo-gladiator – a person who trains mix martial arts (MMA) and similar forms of hand-to-hand fighting that do not meet the definition of sport according to the Olympic Charter [21].

INTRODUCTION

The motto of this scientific essay is that 'since man has not transformed himself in a positive sense, he systematically and with great effect reinforces the negative within and outside himself' (this maxim was uttered by Roman Maciej Kalina in May 2008 during a discussion with the first author of this essay before the idea of creating innovative agonology as an applied science was born). The aim of the essay is expressing the view of the authors on the recurring phenomenon of bloody gladiator fights camouflaged under the name of *mix martial arts*.

Historical background

Ave, Imperator, morituri te salutant. ('Hail, Emperor, those who are about to die salute you'). This motto is a shocking expression of greeting to this day, uttered by gladiators aware of their fate.

Gladiators have a long and infamous history. Athletes fought bloody and deadly battles in amphitheatres and circus arenas in front of a gathered audience. The custom originated with the Etruscans, who offered sacrifice and honour to the dead. Wrestling in Rome had two purposes: it served entertainment and politics, through which publicity was gained among the plebs [1]. Gladiators were recruited from slaves, captives, prisoners and former soldiers. They trained in schools and special barracks under the guidance of teachers experienced in the use of weapons. They were resold or hired to officials organising fights. In imperial times, wealthy people had their own gladiators. Before a fight, the participants took an oath not to spare themselves in the confrontation. They fought with a variety of weapons: blunt weapons, sharp swords, restraining nets and tridents. Opponents were armed with a sword and a shield. A knocked down wrestler could beg for mercy by raising his index finger upwards. As a sign of mercy, spectators raised their thumb upwards; when they pointed it downwards, it signified a death sentence. The winner

received a monetary reward and a palm branch and was exempted from further participation in the fights; the slave could be granted freedom.

Gladiators also used lassoes and fought on chariots. In imperial times, spectators were also entertained by fights involving wild animals. There were also gladiatorial struggles between dwarfs and women. Enormous spectacles in ancient Rome held on water were called *naumachia*. Fights in the form of sea battles took place on artificial pools and bodies of water [2, 3].

The Romans were enthusiastic about gladiatorial fights as an important part of social and political life and only a few, such as Cicero and Seneca, expressed opposition to them. For many years, attempts were made with the help of laws to restrict the organisation of gladiatorial fights. This was all the more difficult as the wealthy were able to win the applause of the people when running for public office. The process lasted for nearly 350 years. Finally, the gladiatorial games were abolished in 681. The influence of Christian humanism played an important role in this.

In history, one of the most famous gladiators was Spartacus. A Roman slave from Thrace and instructor at a gladiatorial school, he organised a great slave uprising (73-71 BC). Despite their defeat, it was a testament to the struggle for human dignity and the bravery and courage of the participants in the rebellion, with the Greek philosopher and disciple of Socrates Plato stating many years earlier that bravery (*arete*) cannot be taught.

Ursus' fight with the bull – 'Quo Vadis' by H. Sienkiewicz (gladiatorial parallels and martial arts in bibliotherapy)

In the year of Henryk Sienkiewicz (2016), 'Quo Vadis', his extraordinary 1896 novel about the time of Emperor Nero, a Rome in decline and the persecution of Christians, was mentioned more than often, as European culture draws its

inspiration from antiquity and the biblical tradition. Decadent Rome and the beginnings of the Christian communities which were the novel's plot focus, made it a worldwide bestseller translated into numerous languages [4]. The novel, for which the writer was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, has been adapted for the stage many times, has been the basis of opera librettos and oratorios, and has been filmed in many countries (Italy, USA, France) and Poland, by Jerzy Kawalerowicz in 2000.

One of the most spectacular scenes in the account of the twilight of the ancient world is the heroic struggle of the athletic Ursus in the circus arena against the strength of the wild beast to whose back and horns Ligia, the beloved of Vinicius, was tied. The monstrous Germanic aurochs, representing the bestiary, was among the animals against which an unarmed man would remain on the losing end. The abbreviated but nevertheless comprehensive description of the spectacle quoted below, inspired by the imagination, talent and perceptiveness of the Polish Nobel laureate, is only meant to highlight what, in the authors' opinion, has probably been the underlying basis of the appeal of direct combat involving humans for centuries.

"The Lygian held the wild beast by the horns. The man's feet sank in the sand to his ankles, his back was bent like a drawn bow, his head was hidden between his shoulders, on his arms the muscles came out so that the skin almost burst from their pressure; but he had stopped the bull in his tracks. And the man and the beast remained so still that the spectators thought themselves looking at a picture showing a deed of Hercules or Theseus, or a group hewn from stone. But in that apparent repose there was a tremendous exertion of two struggling forces. The bull sank his feet as well as did the man in the sand, and his dark, shaggy body was curved so that it seemed a gigantic ball. Which of the two would fail first, which would fall first,—that was the question for those spectators enamoured of such struggles; a question which at that moment meant more for them than their own fate, than all Rome and its lordship over the world. [...]"

In the amphitheatre were men who had raised their arms and remained in that posture. Sweat covered the faces of others, as if they themselves were struggling with the beast. In the Circus nothing was heard save the sound of flame in the lamps, and

the crackle of bits of coal as they dropped from the torches. Their voices died on the lips of the spectators, but their hearts were beating in their breasts as if to split them. It seemed to all that the struggle was lasting for ages. But the man and the beast continued on in their monstrous exertion; one might have said that they were planted in the earth.

Meanwhile a dull roar resembling a groan was heard from the arena, after which a brief shout was wrested from every breast, and again there was silence. People thought themselves dreaming till the enormous head of the bull began to turn in the iron hands of the barbarian. [...]"

Duller and duller, hoarser and hoarser, more and more painful grew the groan of the bull as it mingled with the whistling breath from the breast of the giant. The head of the beast turned more and more, and from his jaws crept forth a long, foaming tongue.

A moment more, and to the ears of spectators sitting nearer came as it were the crack of breaking bones; then the beast rolled on the earth with his neck twisted in death.

The giant removed in a twinkle the ropes from the horns of the bull and, raising the maiden, began to breathe hurriedly. His face became pale, his hair stuck together from sweat, his shoulders and arms seemed flooded with water. For a moment he stood as if only half conscious; then he raised his eyes and looked at the spectators.

The amphitheatre had gone wild [4].

The human-animal struggle described is an example of the brute force clash that characterised Roman games and gladiatorial clashes. The devastating agon (mutually destructive combat [5]) results in the death of one of the subjects (assuming that the animal is the subject in this clash). Actually, man is in a lost position as far as rational prediction is concerned, not having the tools to defend himself and kill. He can only defend himself against the gigantic force of the wild aurochs with his bare hands (the rules of *taumachy* provide for other means, but the cunningly prepared duel did not take this into account).

Sienkiewicz's literary description surprises us with an optimistic variant (and mythological references) and has a heartening message. In this

clash – in which a man is seemingly doomed to defeat – he becomes the victor, giving readers a happy ending as a positive perception. Ursus, having unparalleled physical strength, performs a great deed. The rivalry between man and animal ends with the death of the bull as a result of a twisted neck and broken bones.

The fight taking place in the Roman arena is spectacular. The power of the forces invested in this duel is evidenced by the legs of Ursus submerged above the ankles in the sand and the bull plunging into it. Man and animal were a monolith in the inhuman effort. The passage of time and the forces expended proved to be the human being's ally, and the final roar of the aurochs preceded its agony.

The most famous and admired fight scene from the novel, which has circulated the world, is part of its ethical and moral message. The clear polarisation of values (bravery/valour) and anti-values serves to highlight precisely this ethical content. Nobility, love and goodness are contrasted with cruelty, crime and hatred. It is also a reference to the Greek tradition of *kalokagathia* representing the unity of goodness and beauty in the form of moral perfection and physical beauty (projection and identification).

In modern history, bullfighting was actually made famous by a Korean-born master, Masutatsu Oyama (1923-1994) – actually Choi Yeong-eui – who founded his own school of karate. As the inscription on the obelisk dedicated to Funakoshi, considered the father of modern karate, says: 'Karate has never been a technique of aggression'. At the same time, it is another example of how modernity has distorted the sacredness of an ancient tradition (see the Bushido Code [6]). Thus, the book as a fragment of culture accompanies the martial arts, which are constantly present in culture and civilisation. 'The Art of War' by Sun Tzu [7], a Chinese general, from 25 centuries ago – regarded as the first manual of praxeology in human history – is not an isolated example.

The visual aspect of the literary presentations and the scenes of the film adaptations serve an emotional intention and cathartic therapy. The expression of the dramatic struggle (supported by courage, physical prowess, fortitude) is memorable. What wins, in accordance with the reader's expectations and the ideological (ethical) pronouncement of the novel, is the good (and

beauty) embodied in the Christian attitudes of the positive characters: Ligia, Ursus, Vinicius. The evil, symbolised by the figure of Nero, passes with his death, "and Peter's Basilica so far reigns from the heights of the Vatican to the city and the world" [4].

Literary classics with timeless and universal values, including the works of Nobel Prize winners [8], constantly present in compulsory reading lists and appreciated by successive generations of readers, acquire unexpected and surprising interpretations and connections in new cultural discourses. The search for original meanings and senses in reading, according to the experience and intellect of the audience, is the result of the vitality of works even those from many years ago. The literary history and the tradition of works of art provide an important context that facilitates comparative research, since the past always exists in the present and projects into the future. The correspondence and interpenetration of cultures in the global world of electronic media domination facilitates communication and connects distant fields of knowledge, which should be used for the benefit of modern man.

The literary messages of the sender-author of a communication (message) to the reader (recipient) are decoded primarily on the basis of the principles inherent in his reading intentions. However, the conclusions are not straightforward. Literature, like culture, bases its foundation on archetypes, symbols and myths. The patterns functioning in the consciousness of the recipient, which are activated by reading, shape the reception (reconstruction) to the measure of his reading mentality (competence). Contemplation and experiencing frame reception strategies with limits that are difficult to predict. This is why the selection of texts (fragments) in bibliotherapy becomes so important. The interpretation of martial arts-related texts as a relatively homogeneous and readable message, and one that arouses readerly credibility, confirms their usefulness in psychotherapeutic and culturotherapeutic treatments and methods.

A book 'written to gladden the heart', and therefore in a therapeutic function, replaces the old philosophy. Heroes of literature, film, comics, computer games, etc. become modern gladiators. The fantasy genre resurrects heroic figures and builds role models who become inhabitants

of the mass imagination and mythology, inscribing themselves in the sphere of ludicity. Cultural anthropology, among others, has much to say in these intentions. Literature has for years played a role in reconstructing the understanding of man and the world.

Writers have a broader (and freer) view of struggle than scientists. It is important to remember that the human being as a multidimensional (biological, psychological, social, cultural, etc.) entity can never be fully described. Psychologists, for example, attempt to do so (particularly through surveys), but this knowledge is never definitive. Nowadays, the battle takes place in the space of communicative ranges and information overload, that is, in a dense social environment (see glossary [9]). We live among various symbols and cultural texts, subject to constant reinterpretation. The media of the cyberspace have the most to say about this, building a parallel world of simulation (simulacra, hyperreality). They are the ones that largely impose a sphere of values (ludicity, consumption, the syndrome of freedom and multiple truths). As competition to the texts awaiting insightful reading, they eliminate reading that builds intellectual space, inspires creativity and enriches the imagination.

It is different with the language of agonology [10], in fact with the innovative agonology [11, 12] that has been created for several years in the global scientific sphere. It is a precise language, although it includes the phenomenon of 'negative co-operation' (a praxeological synonym for struggle [13]) taking place in principle in human relationships. 'In principle' because the well-known phenomenon of the stubbornness of the donkey is still cognitively intriguing: at one time the donkey co-operates positively with a human, but at another time refuses this co-operation.

Nevertheless, "The word is a power. Fixed in writing, it acquires an incalculable or predictable power over the thought and imagination of men. It rules over time and space. Only thought caught in the web of letters lives, acts, creates. Everything else is carried away by the wind" [14, p. 283].

Neogladiatorism

Contemporary neo-gladiatorism in its various forms and methods refers to that of centuries ago by resurrecting its aura (see 'Historical outline', e.g. spectacular scenery, destructive combat,

various forms of aggression, including instrumental, participation of women, rewarding winners, emotionality of spectators, entertainment, etc.). Compilations of martial arts (in practice martial arts confrontations) inherently contradict their humanistic and educative qualities and the great authorities who used them for worthy purposes. They also contradict the ideals of the Olympic movement. The bestiality, cruelty (the term animal cruelty would be insulting to animals) of cage fighting makes one reflect on humanity and a world devoid of empathy. A historical account of almost all varieties and styles of Eastern martial arts points to certain common characteristics and goals. These are namely the refinement of one's character, the achievement of a state of balance and harmony with nature and the activation of inner life energy. They were fashionable because of their exoticism and their closeness to the globally known code of knighthood. In contrast, the aggression, desire and need to compete underlying the sporting varieties of martial arts emerged as a secondary factor (sumo is an exception). The whole must therefore take into account the realm of axiology.

The most gentle of all martial arts (however, the proper name is defence arts [15]) is aikido, in which the most important thing is to incapacitate the opponent (without hurting him) in such a way as to deprive him of the will to continue fighting. The ultimate goal is to convince him that fighting is pointless. The founder of judo (which historically preceded aikido), Jigoro Kano, adhered to the principle of the so-called 'gentle way', i.e. a concept of fighting based on using the strength of an opponent's attacks and his mistakes in one's own defence. As a great authority, he combined tradition and modernity in an extremely skilful way: 'maximum efficient use of energy' (*seryoku-zenyo*), but also forged the principle of 'mutual prosperity for self and others' (*jita-kyoei*) [16].

In a world with increasing terror, use of chemical weapons and sophisticated forms of violence and aggression, countermeasures are being sought. Hence the numerous appeals and speeches and the search for ways to counter (neutralise) their negative effects. This is particularly true of the younger generations. Under the mask of civilisation a jungle is often hidden, where an individual can easily get lost. It is worth preparing for the monstrous dangers in advance.

Neo-gladiatorism, including the mutual massacre of opponents, insults human dignity, which in fact man can only deprive himself of. As the great Nobel laureate E. Hemingway wrote in *The Old Man and the Sea*: “Man can be destroyed, but not defeated” [17, 18]. By bringing profit to the organisers and applause, neo-gladiatorism denies humanity. Man – despite the revolution of civilisation, the development of science, technology and technology – has not changed psychologically for centuries, for he is born with an instinct to fight (*homo agonisticus* [19]), which is necessary for survival. This trivial truth about man seems to be overlooked in the modern media, which are geared towards sensational and awe-inspiring reporting. Existence and survival are constantly under threat. This phenomenon was synthesised by the innovative agonologist Roman Maciej Kalina, and the authors of this scholarly essay again recall these words: *Since man has not transformed himself in a positive sense, he systematically and with great effect reinforces the negative within and outside himself.*

It is above all the media, including PR specialists, who, by creating virtual worlds, deform the realities of human existence and complicate their perception. By manipulating man, they make him dependent. The world reduced to aspects of ludicity is a space that is filled with great fun, and the incapacitated human being, treated instrumentally, becomes an object. The deficit of ethics in all areas of the functioning of the global world threatens to dehumanise and degrade the human individual (promotion of aggression and violence), despite the fact that the philosophies of the great religions universally contain unquestionable canons of non-harming the human being. Of the many examples is Buddhism as

a religion based on the ethics of love of neighbour, brotherhood and equality of people in terms of race, nation and society.

At the opposite end of the spectrum are activities that bring enjoyment and satisfaction, but which do not harm others. In practice, however, they are not a counterbalance and are marginal in popular perception. Consuming an excess of information breeds indiscriminateness and slavish addiction, which can cause people to exhibit symptoms of anaesthesia, dullness and insensitivity. This trap breeds a vicious circle of the presence of negative behaviour. “Man begins to appear as an insignificant part of a total machine, properly nourished and entertained, but passive and lifeless, almost devoid of feeling” [20].

CONCLUSIONS

In a civilisation of unparalleled technological progress, those who share responsibility for arranging spectacles where neo-gladiators [21] massacre each other in cages have nothing positive to offer to more or less intelligent people. Neo-gladiators accepting the extremely instrumental treatment of themselves and their opponent, together with the promoters of these bloody spectacles and the global audience (thanks to the availability of the Internet) bear witness not only to the degradation of the humanist agon. Participating in this global phenomenon in any role is evidence of the reinforcement of the negative within and outside oneself. The questions are open: what proportion of the human population is affected by this phenomenon? what are the dynamics of this phenomenon? is the prospect of effective counteraction real?

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