

From Street to Stage: Hip-hop, the History of an Artification through the Example of Farid Berki



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This essay follows my interests in questions of otherness and the relationships of the performing arts in the West with the Arab world. In pursuing a study of the dancer and choreographer Radhouane el Meddeb,[\[1\]](#) I became interested in the French dance scene where the Tunisian artist developed. And inevitably, given my considerable interest in anything that directly or indirectly involves Arab artists or artists of Arab origin, I was struck by the clear and strong presence of artists emigrating from the Maghreb within this artistic world. Indeed, some of these artists occupied important and prestigious positions at the center of French cultural institutions: Kader Attou has been the director of the national dance center of La Rochelle since 2008, Mourad Merzouki that of Créteil and Val de Marne since 2009. I was intrigued by this circumstance since, except the field of comedy and stand-up comedy in particular, very rarely have artists from Maghreb gained such visibility.



Au temps où les Arabes dansaient... / Radhouane El Meddeb - La Compagnie de SOI © Agathe Poupeney / PhotoScene - Mention du copyright obligatoire

Radhouane el Meddeb. Photo: Agence Poupeney

The first factor in common among all these cultural actors, in addition to their ethnic origin, is that they all belong to the same part of society: they grew up in the cities and suburbs of France. Secondly, they all have come out of hip-hop culture, and their creations share a common and marked tendency toward hybridity and blending. Their works occupy a space of interaction and exchange where different disciplines and artistic genres interact, and theatre, of course, is among these. I thus decided, with considerable hesitation, since dance is a field with which I am not very familiar, even if I am not a total stranger there, to undertake a study of this artistic and social phenomenon. The present article represents my preliminary thoughts on this subject.

The argument of this essay is divided into three sections. First I will attempt to lay out the social and material conditions out of which emerged hip-hop cultures in France, the loam which nourished all the artists whose work I shall discuss. Next, I will attempt to explain how a popular culture, that of the suburbs, which had its own special identity, rebellious and anti-establishment, was able to gain access to the legitimate spaces of creation and dance distribution in France. Here, I will invoke the concept of artification and the theories put forward by the theorist Roberta Shapiro. And finally, in the third part, I will attempt, using one of the most representative figures of this art, Farid Berki, as an example, to explain how this aesthetic of blending has developed and how these “author-choreographers” think about

their artistic endeavors and the artistic world in which they are developed.

In the Beginning was Hip-Hop

Hip-hop first saw the light of day in the mid-1970s in New York. It was a cultural movement which, according to the sociologist Passeron, brought together definitions of the word “culture”: “a collection of works, a style of life and an ideology.”^[2] It gathered a number of different artistic expressions developed around music, rap, texts, painting, tags, graffiti, dance, break dance and hip-hop. Thus, hip-hop brought together different practices traditionally separated into a relatively unified style, united in practice.

The history of hip-hop in the United States began when two young African-Americans, Afrika Bambaataa and DJ Kool Herc, coming from Bronx, decided to confront the scourge of criminality and violence, which most closely affected the most dispossessed youth, primarily Afro-Americans. Bambaataa and Herc put forward an artistic alternative inspired by the practice of deejaying which had been developed in Jamaica. In order to launch his idea, Afrika Bambaataa organized the first neighborhood festivals, block parties, in which, as Passeron reports:

Using two turntables, he spun two vinyl disks simultaneously, moving from one to the other, modifying and cutting the sound moment by moment in order to create original instrumental pieces. On a stage improvised on the spot, he connected two microphones that allowed young gang members - almost exclusively boys - to settle their differences by means of a verbal competition. Then some members of the public developed dance steps punctuated by this music and displayed these before the spectators who then collectively selected referees to determine who the better dancer of the two was. At the same time, others began to cover the dark walls of the neighborhood with colorful frescoes painted with banal aerosol paint bombs.^[3]

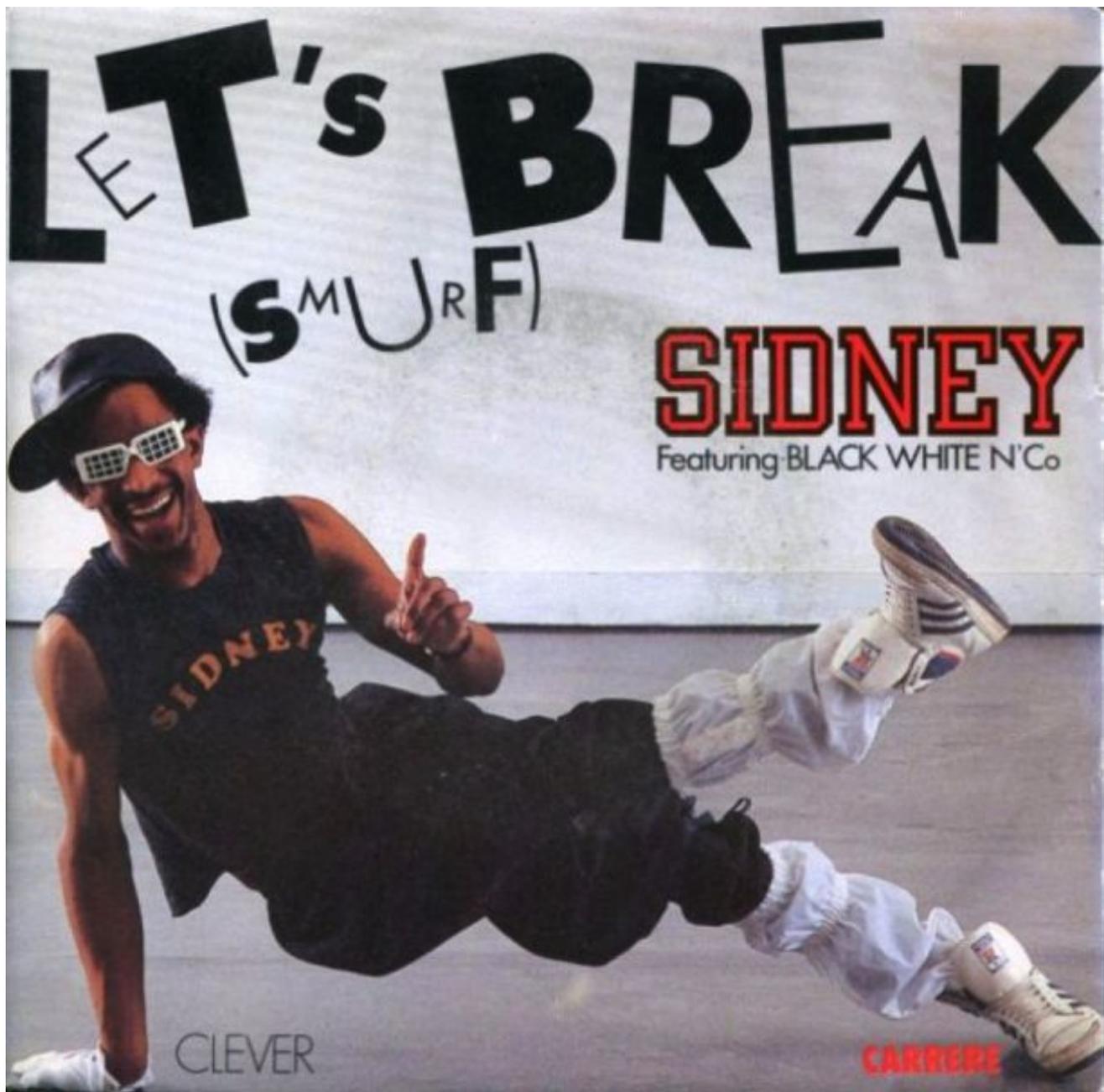
This is how hip-hop culture was born.

In response to the enthusiasm aroused by this initiative, Afrika Bambaataa organized the Zulu Nation, an informal structure with an aim to promote this “hip-hop movement” by gathering a large number of gang members, involving them in the organization of these block parties and by setting up twenty “laws” that each zulu must respect.

The “hip-hop ideology” given form by Afrika Bambaataa can be summarized very schematically, according to Vincent Dubois, who asserts that: “It proceeds from the affirmation of black Americans in the face of white domination, calling into question the so-called universality of culture of European origin and promoting alternative cultural values and forms. It also consists in making the collective energy of gangs positive and creative. These two orientations gave rise to the ‘Zulu Nation’, the dream of a vast community based on the values of love, peace, respect and dignity of oppressed minorities.”^[4]

This culture began first in the large industrial cities of the United States, then spread to a few European countries, including France, in the early 1980s and finally to the rest of the world in the 1990s. The symbolic act of the implantation of hip-hop culture in France was the creation of the association “Zulu nation française” in 1984 when Afrika Bambaataa, passing through Paris, entrusted certain practitioners with the mission of gathering the hip-hoppers of France into an organization similar to the one he had created in New York. It must be said that France is considered, after the United States, as the second

homeland of hip-hop. This autonomous culture has known and is still experiencing a phenomenal rise in the French state.



Sidney. Photo: Larrer

Some researchers explain the easy and fast implantation of hip-hop culture through its various components in France by the very tense situation experienced by young people in French cities, especially young people from immigrant backgrounds. This precarious social situation was due partially to the mass unemployment of which the early 1980s marked the beginning and by which the lower classes were the first to be affected and hardest hit, and partially to the various manifestations of racism, exclusion, and

rejection from which they suffered. Some young people opted for political modes of action such as the Marche des Beurs, which saw hundreds of thousands of French young people of Maghrebian and African origin marching in the streets to express their anger at the injustice to which they were subjected. Whereas other young people from disadvantaged neighborhoods chose hip-hop because they saw an original, accessible means of expression that suited them perfectly, expressed the same anger and said in their own way that they existed.^[5] During the 1980s, hip-hop benefitted from a large audience, because this new phenomenon quickly attracted the interest of the media, who saw a novelty and an urban expression in it, representing a very specific social category, that of the urban neighborhoods and the children of Afro-Maghrebian immigration. Exclusive hip-hop programs were presented by the biggest national networks. The most emblematic of the programs which played a major role in popularizing this culture was “H.I.P. H.O.P.,” designed and hosted by Patrick Duteil, alias Sidney. This program, which was broadcast beginning in 1981, was the first worldwide program devoted exclusively to hip-hop. The print media in both its generalized and specialized forms also took an interest in this new phenomenon, devoting a number of articles to it. The academic and critical world, too, was not left behind. It should be noted at the outset that the first studies devoted to the movement were almost all sociological. The first critical article on the subject in France was “Junior becomes very involved, or the smurf as symbolic mobilization,” published in 1985 in the review *Langage et Société* by the sociologists Luc Basier and Christian Bachmann. The latter tried to link the practice of the dancing of the smurf to questions of identity and saw in it a kind of double reaction—both to the discriminations which a fringe of the French society suffered and to the cultures of origins. “In the creation of the smurf,” the authors wrote, “they would find a double rejection: that of the family community from which they came, and that of the society with which they live side by side but which cannot and will not integrate them.” And, faced with this situation of rejection, “the path of the smurfer aims at the tearing apart of the great natal ensemble and the magic appropriation of the city and the media.”^[6] In 1995, Hugues Bazin produced a study on hip-hop considered nowadays as a standard reference on the subject. In it he described hip-hop as “inseparable from the urban context. It is conceived as a response to a more or less hostile environment, that of large urban centers marked by crisis or disintegration. It belongs to the ‘cultures of the street’ which involve a reaction against the living conditions imposed by this environment.”^[7] Studies on the aesthetic aspects of hip-hop did not appear until the 2000s, when some of its aspects, especially dance, were legitimized and reached the status of artistic work.^[8] Nevertheless, it must be said that the media coverage and interest that benefitted hip-hop soon faded. Journalists did not hesitate to call this imported culture a passing fad and to announce its demise. Thus, in *Le Monde* of April 1984, the journalist Alain Wais wrote: “The smurf is the new panacea that everyone imitates [...] The merchants have not wasted time. The commercialization of a movement is a classic phenomenon, it is the best way to propagate it but also to destroy it. How can the artists exploit their contributions without themselves being exploited? For the smurfers, they had to move quickly. In six months the lemon would be squeezed dry and they would be used up.”^[9]



Smurf Dancer in Paris. Photo: photomakers

Thus, French hip-hop experienced a desert crossing that only a few activists and buffs, gathered in small groups, who considered this culture as a way of life and not just a fad, managed to survive before the movement aroused a renewed interest, this time from state institutions. According to some researchers, the end of massive media coverage of hip-hop led to the development of autonomous forms of mediatization, allowing practitioners to stay in contact with each other and to support each other. This disappearance of media forced the “pioneers” who survived “the end of the hip-hop fad” to engage in a process of collective redefinition of this culture based upon its practice. And it was mainly through the practice of dance that hip-hop survived the withdrawal of the media during the year 1984.[\[10\]](#)

Those who continued to practice and spread hip-hop culture, because of the gap between their practices and the dominant cultural norm, were aware that for their art to continue to exist, it was imperative that it be accepted and above all that it gained legitimacy. Despite the enthusiasm that hip-hop aroused among some people, it remained confined in a limited environment, that of the youth of the suburbs. From an artistic and technical point of view their art remained in the eyes of the establishment quite rudimentary and basic, because, many of the artists involved were convinced, of the origins and social class of its “subculture” practitioners.



Hip-hop Dance in Paris, 2016. Photo: douman

To achieve legitimacy, it was necessary that this urban culture should undergo a process of artification that would make it an art and give it access to the places of legitimation. This took place thanks to a combination of political circumstances that saw the election of a socialist president, François Mitterrand, and the access of the French left to power. Beginning in the 1980s, the new leaders set up public action mechanisms and a policy aimed at the democratization of culture and “integration through culture.”

Street arts, including, of course, the arts of hip-hop, were the primary beneficiaries of this public policy, which was sometimes described as a “public policy of hip-hop.” This policy took place in two phases: initially it was confined to the field of social or socio-cultural action and in its second stage it undertook the process of artistic legitimation and artification. The first phase coincided with the appearance of the first established actors of hip-hop, when educators and social workers saw in this practice both an aesthetic and educational value and a resource for social action. As Virginie Milliot has shown, they accepted it, in a triple dynamic of exposure, socialization and recognition, triggering the first steps of institutionalization. Some former dancers, rappers or artists were recruited to supervise the young people of the cities and participate in their symbolic rehabilitation. Associations promoting hip-hop culture also benefited from public support. Nevertheless, this action was far from the traditional public channels for financing and disseminating culture in France (The Ministry of Culture, The Office of Cultural Affairs, the public stages, the media, the general public, etc.) The second phase, the actual artification, which marked a turning point in the history of hip-hop, especially dance, began during the 2000s.

Hip Hop Dance: from Street to Stage

As Roberta Shapiro has pointed out in her various studies of the hip-hop discipline,[\[11\]](#) dance, originally designated by the term Smurf, was institutionalized during the late 1990s and early 2000s. This artistic expression benefited from an institutional context favorable to emerging choreographic forms. Dance even became synonymous with the accession of hip-hop to official recognition and the object of study par excellence for all those who wanted to understand and explain the process of artification of an art and a culture once considered as a fad and a product which did not deserve the qualifier of art. In order to understand the process of artification that was at work in the field of hip-hop dance, let us begin by defining this term.

Artification is a neologism from English which means “the process of transformation from non-art to art.”[\[12\]](#) This theory emerged during the 2000s in France and is a new field of investigation for the sociology of art from the point of view of social and cultural change. It is a theory of action, which focuses on what people do, and its goal is to analyze the displacement of boundaries in order to make possible the emergence of new forms of art. In her article “From the Smurf to the Ballet. The invention of hip-hop dance”, Shapiro analyzes and exposes the process of artification. She explains how hip-hop dance, long associated in the collective French imagination with "dangerous classes" and a frightening youth culture, became today, almost thirty years after its introduction into France, an artistic form and an accepted element of contemporary dance.[\[13\]](#) One of the first signs of the acceptance of hip-hop dance was the change of name, that is, the shift from smurf, which designated that intuitive and improvised expression based on play and performed by young men in the suburbs, to the term “hip-hop dance.” This repackaging of this activity as dance allowed its recognition as an art, by integrating it into the great family of “contemporary dance.”

As Shapiro observes:

This renaming was a calculated strategy, claiming for the activity which it names a superior institutional, professional and aesthetic status. It is institutional, since the phrase unambiguously places this activity in the world of dance with an established connotation, which the hip-hop movement now shares. The construction of this locution links these two cultural and social worlds. It is professional, because the expression emphasizes the serious: hip-hop dance is not a game, but an activity that engages; it is a discipline, in every sense of the word. And it engaged aesthetics, finally, because the analogy makes hip-hop dance an artistic genre in its own right, the same as contemporary dance and classical dance. These are two dominant genres in France and, along with jazz dance, are recognized and regulated by the Ministry of Culture through the dance State diploma instituted in 1989. All these semantic operations contributed toward constituting hip-hop dance as an artistic genre, which has been stabilized by thirty years of institutionalization.[\[14\]](#)

This semantic shift is largely due to a discursive standardization to which the media, the press and academic works all contributed. According to Shapiro: “in the press, both general (Le Monde, Libération) and specialized (dance reviews, hip-hop reviews), we see emerging [...] a structured critical discourse. Journalists stop focusing on the socio-demographic characteristics of practitioners to turn into art critics. [...] They no longer speak of young people but of artists, star dancers, interpretations and works, which are now analyzed through the categories of the history of art.” The second step in the process artification of hip-hop is, according to Shapiro, “extraction or contextualization.”[\[15\]](#) During the 1980s the hip hop

dance became autonomous in relation to other activities such as rap or graffiti in defining its own artistic and aesthetic contours. Unlike other disciplines who have claimed a kind of purity and resisted any transformation outside their home culture, dance has experienced an opening to other forms. This opening was promoted from the beginning by educators, who became mediators to the world of theatre and dance and arranged for young people to work with contemporary choreographers. They sometimes become the first company directors. This opening inevitably led to important changes in the way in which the young dancers approached their art, since they gradually forsook individual performance in favor of the construction of a collective dramaturgy, and passed from demonstration to representation, and from improvisation to objectification. For Virginie Milliot this is a matter of the passing from a dance of orality to one of writing (choreography). Hip-hop dance legitimation and artification could not be accomplished without the mediation of cultural capital owners at the head of legitimate cultural institutions, those who have the means of dissemination, programming and financing, who have chosen to support hip-hop dancers and choreographers. Their role as cultural intermediaries is therefore an intermediary role in gaining social legitimacy. According to Milliot, “It is they who make hip-hop an object worthy of interest for the intellectual factions of the ruling classes and the middle classes, from among whom the usual public of cultural institutions are recruited, and who are the architects of the metric standards of cultural legitimacy and good taste.”^[16] Festivals also are important and effective agents of hip-hop dance in structuring the cultural environment as a whole. According to Shapiro, these are “formidable machines in the making of art, helping to stage, shape and organize the dance.” In the early 1990s, hip-hop dance was presented at various dance festivals, and a few years later, festivals devoted exclusively to this form of dance took place. The first such event was the “Urban Dance Encounters in Ville franche-sur-Saône” in 1992. Such festivals not only contributed to the spread of hip-hop dance but played an important role in the evolution of this dance. Among these defining festivals, as the Ministry of Culture calls them, were “Rencontres de la Villette” and “Suresnes Cités Danse” which gave legitimation to a significant number of choreographers and dancers who have become today icons of the hip-hop dance.



Hip Hop at Suresnes Cite?s Danse. Photo: Suresnes Cite?s Danse

After reaching artistic and social recognition and legitimation, came the no less important process of professionalization, which allowed certain major actors of this dance to have a comfortable material situation. The final stage of the hip-hop dance is, according to Shapiro, “the emergence of the figure of the author.” In order to understand the emergence of this all-powerful figure, says Shapiro, we must “distinguish, in the history of the hip-hop dance companies, four typical ideal choreographic situations. During 1980 to 1990, groups often began under the direction of an educator choreographer. Then came the work with a contemporary choreographer, a stage of learning the conventions of stage dancing. Subsequently, almost all groups underwent a period of collective choreography. Finally, a few years later, this phase was followed by a split at the end of which choreographers as individual artists, who logically separated to assert themselves by forming their own companies. The press kits began to describe hip-hop as an ‘author’s dance’.”[\[17\]](#)

Hybridization, Crossbreeding: Injunction or Aesthetic Bias

Nevertheless, what Shapiro does not mention is that this artification of hip-hop dance is subject to a logic of selection. Since it involved a sort of recovery by legitimizing bodies, were the selected artists not compelled to fill a sort of regulation book of artistic criteria concocted by these same decision-makers which would involve transforming this urban, rebellious, and anti-conformist dance into a normalized art, obeying the same rules as the other “official” arts? And would not hybridization and crossbreeding be the

means to achieve this naturalization? Was this the logical approach in marking the evolution of an art form open to other artistic expressions whose actors aspired to more diversity? Indeed, some researchers like Louis Jesus have claimed that the institutionalization of hip-hop has been accompanied by “injunctions to aesthetic hybridization” with more legitimate cultural forms, as the only way to achieve lasting institutional recognition. And it is in the field of dance that this intercultural practice is the most notable. “Those which are most likely to be the object of this institutional consecration,” he wrote, “are forms of dance hybridized with more legitimate choreographic forms or which rest on more noble musical genres than funk, electro, breakdance or rap.” These are works that align with the formal criteria necessary to be able to claim to fit into the networks of legitimate institutional broadcasts, especially theaters and operas. This is generally the case with stage performances (scripted works organized in “scenes,” wearing costumes, ad hoc decorations, articulation of the choreography with a luminous and musical framework organized by a director, having a duration between one and two hours, etc.). From an aesthetic point of view, these are usually movements that borrow from legitimate choreographic genres such as contemporary dance or traditional dance. They dance almost always standing, and the ground movements characteristic of breakdance are generally absent. Moreover, practitioners of this type of dance almost always organize themselves into companies (bringing together from a few to some twenty dancers), which again corresponds to the modalities of the practice of dancing followed by the legitimate cultural institutions, but which also recalls the choruses which originally appeared as dancers in battle scenes. Well-known examples of this type of dance in contemporary France are the works produced by the companies Accrorap, Käfig, Montalvo-Hervieu, etc.”[\[18\]](#)

This evolution of practice engendered a new aesthetics and deeply transformed the practice of hip-hop dance, the young followers of which had to conform to the taste of the theatre public, to use the expression of Virginie Milliot, which implied going beyond the figurative and expressive logic of their first mode of expression, and to “get out of the social.” That is to say, to detach their *signified* from their creation out of their own experience, to extricate themselves from their “individual appurtenances,” to open their work to a formal logic, and to accept it as universal.[\[19\]](#)

However, some pioneers of this discipline, such as Farid Berki, while aware of the risk of a recovery that would distort the art of hip-hop and empty it of its social charge, have not hesitated to follow the paths of mixing and creolization because he considers that hip-hop is in essence a hybrid art and that it is a real way to open up to other arts and other publics in order to de-compartmentalize an art long restricted to an urban elite.

Farid Berki: A Boundary Artist

To provide a face for hip-hop dance and to illustrate the remarks made earlier, I have chosen among the different figures representative of this art. Farid Berki is considered by many researchers and historians of the hip-hop movement in France as the one who, thanks to his creations, brought this dance out of the cities for the country at large. This French artist, who claims to be a half-breed since he is the fruit of the union of a European Christian mother and a Muslim Kabyle father, belongs to the first generation of young people who discovered hip-hop thanks to the broadcasts of Sidney.

“Originally, I wanted to do cinema and I regularly watched the cine-club on TV,” he recalls. “I loved at the time auteur films, but also those about martial arts and spaghetti westerns. When hip-hop appeared, I was 17 years old. With friends, I listened to soul, reggae, local music in the neighborhood... The feeling of

this movement made me want to dance.”^[20] This dance would be for the young artist a revelation and an art into which he threw himself with great passion. A self-taught street dancer, he gradually acquired an eclectic training following hip-hop classes from Doug Elkins, Pierre Doussaint, Koffi Koko, and Joseph Nadj and studying different artistic approaches—classical dance, jazz, contemporary dance, African dance, tap dance, etc. He created the company Melting Spot in 1994. The first production of the company, *Fantazia* (1995), used 200 square meters of painted canvases and strove to break the dance codes long associated with physical performance and battles scenes. He showed great daring by bringing together hip-hop and flamenco. As a dancer and choreographer, Farid Berki is an artist who reclaims the individual act of creation and aspires to renew the genre by creating new movements and exploring new universes. He has succeeded brilliantly, and earned the praise of his colleagues and professional critics. His website quotes Agnès Izrine, a dance critic, who wrote: “A creative artist of hip-hop, Farid Berki makes it an original technique by retaining its essential nature while building an inventive and elaborate choreography that renews the genre. This is not a demonstrative prowess but a true writing in space from which emerges new movements.”



Farid Berki, *Petrouchka*. Photo: Melting Spot

Three years later, in 1998, he repeated this experiment with *Petrouchka* (1998), which he presented in his press kit as a “choreographic misappropriation for five dancers from a picturesque plot inspired by Russian folklore by proposing a singular reading of classical ballet.” Berki thus set his sights on one of the most emblematic Russian ballets, created by the famous Diaghilev. The latter also aspired to renew the romantic ballet by opening to other art forms and trying to bring about creations in which art, music, choreography and scenery were harmoniously associated. *Petrouchka* is also considered one of the masterpieces of the Russian choreographer Fokine who chose Stravinsky's music to accompany the work.

It is apparently the very contemporary theme of manipulation through the character of Petrouchka's puppet that inspired Farid Berki to imagine correspondences between the gestures of the puppet and the robotic tendencies in hip-hop. As for the play or ballet, he mobilized a whole team of artists, mixing lighting and scene designers, graffiti artists, musicians and dancers—three dancers came from the ballet of the National Opera of the Rhine, and three from the company Strasbourg Magic Electro. The originality of his creation

and perhaps also the fact of integrating into his pieces legitimate forms of dance widely recognized by the general public, opened to him the doors of the most prestigious ballet houses and theaters. Thus, the following year he was able to push his exploration of classical music further, still confronting it with hip-hop dance, by creating for the festival of Avignon *Le Vif du Sujet*, a solo for the star dancer Kader Belarbi with whom the musician André Minvielle is associated.[\[21\]](#)



Farid Berki, *Soul Dragon*. Photo: Melting spot

Farid Berki's openness, however, is not only limited to other music and dance styles, but also to other forms of art in general. In 2004, the French choreographer decided to create a dance, *Soul Dragon*, from the world of martial arts that has always fascinated him. He has explained: “Having been a fan since the age of ten of the martial arts films produced by Hong Kong cinema, of Chinese circus arts and more recently of the cinema of authors such as Chen Kaige (*Farewell My Concubine*, *The Emperor and the Assassin*), I realized that since my first work, *Fantazia*, sequences inspired by the martial arts have been present in my work. So, now, I would like to take the time to develop a whole play around a fantastic universe in which one would find activities such as the art of juggling, magic, the arts of the circus, especially aerobatics, such as can be found in the choreography of Yuen Wo Ping, from the Beijing Opera which is based in Hong Kong.”[\[22\]](#)

For this “choreographic fable,” he chose an old Chinese legend according to which an emperor asks each of his six sons to a trial of 600 days to determine which will succeed to the throne. For the martial arts, Berki appealed to one of the great Chinese martial arts specialists, Yuen Wo Ping—who designed the fight scenes for the *Matrix* films. The show took place in a fantastic setting created by cartoonist François Schuitten. In order to fully absorb Chinese culture, Berki and his nine dancers even moved to Shanghai, where they were welcomed at the Theater Academy.[\[23\]](#)

The show, bringing together a variety of ingredients that might appeal to different audiences—the martial arts, dance, sumptuous decors, a simple and comprehensible plot—was a great success. Brigitte Lemery wrote in the newspaper *La voix du Nord* under the title “A Singular and Aesthetic Combat”: “From the outset, the extremely beautiful setting, emerging from the darkness, captures the gaze and imposes

silence. The amazing scenery of the cartoonist François Schuitten is a work of art! [...] Choreographed by Farid Berki, master of hip-hop, this struggle for power by singular combat, sumptuous and austere, serious and comical, is a sumptuous artistic manifestation, lightly mixing different performance styles (hip hop, modern jazz, capoeira, martial arts), different cultures, different sounds, different symbols.”[\[24\]](#)



Farid Berki, *Deng Deng! Leda*. Photo: Melting spot

The success of this piece earned Berki another commission that allowed him to explore further the Asian universe: *Soul Dragon*, a creation for thirty dancers and actors (15 dancers of the Shanghai Opera Academy), was presented as part of “Lille 2004 European Capital of Culture.” Farid Berki continues to blend his art with other modes of expressions from different geographical areas as in his *Deng Deng! Leda* where he worked with dancers from Chad. As mentioned earlier, Farid Berki’s works were among the first of their kind to find a place in the legitimate art spaces. The stage also influences the spectacle by imposing on the choreographer a well-defined space with constraints and limits. This constraint, in the context of hip-hop dances, will push the choreographers to integrate the codes of theatrical representation such as sets, costumes, lights and a well-defined field of action and a precise playing time. One can even speak of a certain dramaturgy which recalls that of traditional scenic representations. The place can also, and this is the case with Farid Berki, stimulate artists to integrate into their shows purely theatrical forms. In *Oud!* (2005), “a duet for an actor and a dancer,” both are mimes, one using burlesque gestures and the other rhythmic dance and movements that both punctuate and set the tone for this burlesque spectacle of “An extravagant comedy that makes one think in certain ways, especially the simplified scene and the absurd situation of two characters waiting for an improbable event or a signal from the sky, the public or the outside world, as in *Waiting for Godot* by Beckett. The duo was made up of the choreographer Farid Berki and the actor Christophe Jean Christophe Jean, a follower of the “three Ks” of cinema—the American Keaton, the Finnish Kaurismaki and the Japanese Kitano.” *Oud!* is a delicate encounter between two characters who have been skinned alive and two passing enthusiasts of the performing arts. Theater and this time, using words, is invoked by Farid Berki in one of his latest plays, *Hip-hop Aura* (2009), an illustrated and unbridled lecture about the unlikely history of hip-hop. It likely refers to the non-academic lecture created by Rabih Mroué, performed by an actor and illustrated by two dancers (Patrick

Sourdeval, Johnny Martinage and Olivier Lefrancois). This play is a plunge into the history of hip-hop through the subjective gaze of Farid Berki. Deconstructing the clichés of this discipline, Berki gives us another, almost utopian story of this urban dance form. In his version, different arts, cultures and geographies mingle, intersect and blend to create a hybrid, mestizo art that does not recognize the boundaries imposed by some of these varied expressions.[\[25\]](#)



Suresnes Celebration of Berki, 2017. Photo: Franc 3 Culturebox

Recently, in 2017, the world of hip-hop paid tribute to this early pioneer of the early hours who played an important role in the artification and evolution of the discipline, entrusting him with the organization of a dance party to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the legendary Suresnes Cités Danse festival. During the evening Berki, now 53, staged a bouquet of extracts from emblematic pieces of the hip-hop dance tradition with twenty-five star dancers representing three generations of work.[\[26\]](#)

Farid Berki remains one of the artists who have fashioned hip-hop dance in their own way by making it a full-fledged artistic work and giving nobility to this street dance, long considered the under-developed product of a marginalized and discredited social class. He gave hope to a whole generation of artists. His art is, as we have illustrated and explained, a hybrid one, open to its own world and to others. His artistic approach is original, based on a permanent search and a desire for overcoming his own limitations and established codes, to reach out to others and to established hip-hop culture definitely in the French and world artistic landscape. This inclination to crossbreeding is part of the very DNA of Farid Berki, who describes and summarizes his artistic approach by saying:

“I am a half-breed, I myself had natural dispositions at the crossroads of cultures. I love theatrical hip-hop, which I mix with other registers, such as traditional Chinese opera. This gives surprising things, new forms of writing. But there is also a hip-hop love of display, of conflict. This all forms a very rich whole, which has integrated many cultures, as it has done from the very beginning. It is this brew that we wanted

to share in Villeneuve-d'Ascq in 1994, and that we continue to convey in France and abroad.”[\[27\]](#)

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Footnotes:

[\[1\]](#) This essay was published in three languages, Arabic, French, and English. See Omar Fertat, “*Quand Radhouane el Meddeb investit le genre: Esquisse d'une nouvelle dramaturgie du corp*,” *Horizons/Théâtre*, n° 6 (2016): 26; and “Radhouane El Meddeb’s Experiments With Gender: In Search of New Bodies,” *Arab Stages*, vol. 1, (2014), <http://arabstages.org/>.

[\[2\]](#) Jean-Claude Passeron, “*Figures et contestations de la culture. Légitimité et relativisme culturel*,” *Le raisonnement sociologique*, (Paris: Nathan, 1991), 291-334.

[\[3\]](#) Louis Jesus, “*L'élite artistique des cités. Métamorphoses de l'ancrage du hip-hop dans les quartiers populaires en France (1981-2015)*,” Dissertation, Université de Lorraine, Nancy, 2016.

[\[4\]](#) Vincent Dubois, “Hip-Hop,” *Dictionnaire des politiques culturelles de la France depuis 1959*, (Paris: Larousse CRNS, 2001), 314-16. <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00491298>

[\[5\]](#) Other explanations related to the political and intellectual context have been put forward to explain the easy implantation of hip-hop in France, such as the development in the mid-1970s of a certain “Americanophilia,” in reaction to the totalitarianism of the Soviet regime. In the areas of ideological production in France, intellectuals and artists promoted certain artistic expressions from overseas, including rap music. Others point to the migratory history of France and more precisely the existence of a large Caribbean community that was more receptive to Afro-American music and which would have contributed strongly to the emergence of hip-hop culture in France. Moreover, several mythical figures of this culture come from this community, especially in rap music as developed by MC Solar or Joey Starr.

[\[6\]](#) Christian Bachmann et Luc Basier, “*Junior s'entraîne très fort, ou le smurf comme mobilisation symbolique*”, *Langage et société*, 34 (1985).

[\[7\]](#) Huges Bazin, *La culture hip-hop*, (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1995).

[\[8\]](#) One might cite as an example the chapter devoted to hip-hop by Jean-Louis Bischoff in his book *Tribus musicales, spiritualité et fait religieux: enquête sur les mouvances rock, punk, skinhead, gothique*,

hardcore, techno, hip-hop. (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007).

[9] Alain Wais, “*L’esperanto du smurf*”, *Le Monde*, (7 April 1984): Supplément “*Loisirs*”.

[10] Jesus, “*L’élite artistique*”.

[11] She co-edited with Nathalie Heinich a very interesting work devoted to the process of artification. See Nathalie Heinich and Roberta Shapiro (eds.), *De l’artification. Enquêtes sur le passage à l’art*, (Paris: EHESS, 2012).

[12] Roberta Shapiro, “*Qu’est-ce que l’artification?*,” *Seventeenth Congress of the Association Internationale de sociologie de langue française "L’individu social"*. (Tours: July 2004).<https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00010486v2>

[13] Shapiro, “*Du smurf au ballet. L’invention de la danse hip-hop*,” in *De l’artification*, (Paris: EHESS, 2012).

[14] Shapiro “*L’émergence d’une critique artistique: la danse hip-hop*,” *Sociologie de l’Art*, 3, (2004).

[15] Shapiro “*L’émergence.*”

[16] Virginie Millot, “*Vers une intégration pluraliste*,” *Les cahiers millénaires*, 19 (Lyon: February 2000).

[17] Shapiro, “*Du smurf au ballet*”.

[18] Jesus, “*L’élite artistique.*”

[19] Virginie Millot, “*Vers une intégration pluraliste.*”

[20] “*Farid Berki, l’artificier de Suresnes cités danse*”, *Le Monde*, 1 May 2017

[21] Luc Riolon created a documentary about this work, produced and distributed by France 2.

[22] From the press kit for the production called *Six fous en quête de hauteur*.

[23] *Six fous* was co-produced in 2004 by the Cie Melting Spot, Le Bateau Feu-Scène Nationale de Dunkerque et Lille. It also received financial support from the Caisse des Dépôts et Consignations.

[24] From the press kit of the production.

[25] In 2010, this creation was the subject of a remix version contained within a project entitled *Des légendes du Hip Ho à la danse d’aujourd’hui* presented by Kader Attou, from the CCN de La Rochelle/Poitou Charentes.

[26] This event is an important part of Farid Berki's life, because it is there that this self-taught hip-hop

artist, already converted to the cause since the 1980s thanks to the TV show "H.I.P. H.O.P." discovered Elkins, whom he decided to follow during his tour in France. Berki founded his company, Melting Spot, a year later.

[27] <http://www.lavoixdunord.fr/region/farid-berki-le-danseur-chercheur-qui-a-importe-le-hip-hop-ia28b50417n2428357>



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