

THE MARTIAL ARTS AND AMERICAN POPULAR MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the representation of martial arts within American popular media with particular attention to the recent popularization and development of the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). In its earliest form, the aesthetics, rules, and marketing of the sport were heavily influenced and borrowed from the martial arts film genre. Although the growth and popularity of the sport can be attributed to its “new-ness” factor or the way it might separate itself from other popular sports, I argue that MMA’s mass appeal is due in large part to the ways it utilizes aspects and expectations from the martial arts film and television genre. This use of genre conventions and iconographies in early MMA events helped to establish a sense of familiarity for audiences, while at the same time, promoting itself as a unique sporting competition, the result of which is the creation of both a new sport and a new niche category in the larger martial arts universe. This study provides the cultural and historical context needed to understand the significance of the sport of MMA as an extension of the larger world of martial arts and as a phenomenon that goes beyond the fighting arena, speaking to contemporary discussions on globalization and the media industry. The different sections of this study map out the history of the martial arts genre in America from the 1970s to the present by examining various representations in film, television, and video games. In doing so, this study reveals the multifaceted and widespread nature of the martial arts with the inclusion of mixed martial arts as a sport designed and created from popular film and media. This is important for two reasons: it underscores the strong visual nature and component of contemporary sport and it provides a template for the examination of sport and media together.

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Introduction and Background

This dissertation examines the representation of martial arts within American popular media with particular attention to the recent popularization and development of the sport of mixed martial arts (MMA). Although MMA is a relatively new sport, it is part of a longer history of the interest in both eastern and western martial arts as forms of sport, popular entertainment, and recreation. Currently, the sport itself integrates and allows the use of techniques from a variety of martial arts traditions. Yet, in its earliest form, the aesthetics, rules, and marketing of the sport were heavily influenced and borrowed from the martial arts film genre. Although the growth and popularity of the sport can be attributed to its “new-ness” factor or the way it might separate itself from other popular sports, I argue that MMA’s mass appeal is due in large part to the ways it utilizes aspects and expectations from the martial arts genre in film and television. This use of genre conventions and iconographies in early MMA events helped to establish a sense of familiarity for audiences, while at the same time, promoting itself as a unique sporting competition, the result of which is the creation of both a new sport and a new niche category in the larger martial arts universe. This study provides the cultural and historical context needed to understand the significance of the sport of MMA as an extension of the larger world of martial arts and as a phenomenon that goes beyond the fighting arena, speaking to contemporary discussions on globalization and the media industry. The different sections of this study map out the history of the martial arts genre in America from the 1970s to the present by examining various representations in film, television, and video games. In doing so, this study reveals the multifaceted and widespread nature of the martial arts with the inclusion of mixed martial arts as a sport inspired from popular film and media. This is important for two reasons: it underscores

the strong visual nature and component of contemporary sport and it provides a template for the examination of sport and media together.

The term “martial arts” can be defined broadly as a set of combat systems, yet its applications, representations, and cultural traditions can be specific and vary depending on the country of origin. Thus, apart from its physical elements, it is also a cultural system or a “vehicle utilized to embody and perpetuate a particular culture, philosophy, or ideology.”¹ In other words, examining a particular martial art would yield insight into a society of interest. The martial arts are also entrenched within many societal institutions such as military, religion, education, and communications/media. It can be also difficult to define the term itself due to its inclusion within various parts of culture. In addition, research in the martial arts can be daunting due to a historical record dating back to ancient civilizations, and difficulties inherent in separating myth and fiction from reality; nevertheless, I would like to provide a brief background on the martial arts in order to underscore how their widespread use is embedded in the fabric of our society.

The popularity of the martial arts as a form of sport has been recorded since the days of the ancient Greek civilizations and continues in the present day as both amateur and professional endeavors. For the ancient civilizations, combat sports such as boxing, wrestling, and pankration served as ways to sharpen martial skills required on the battlefield. Yet, more importantly, the combat sports of the ancient world served as more than practical military training by creating an outlet for competitive and individualistic impulses that Ancient Greece developed during the seventh to fifth centuries B.C.E.² This is evident in the both the nature of the competitions and the way in which rewards and recognition for the victors were institutionalized.³ The

¹ Donohue, John. *Warrior Dreams*, 4

² Poliakoff, Michael. *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*. 115

³ Poliakoff, Michael. *Combat Sports in the Ancient World*. 115

⁴ Cuddeheir, Allen. *From Ritual to Record*. 16

transformation of Asian martial arts into sport such as Judo and Taekwondo can be seen as products of modernity and have so risen in global appeal that they are now part of the Olympics. In fact, the Olympics now contain six different forms of the martial arts both eastern and western in origin: judo, taekwondo, boxing, wrestling, archery, and fencing. This speaks to a worldwide interest in combat sports as a legitimate competitive endeavor.

Modern sport can be examined as a cultural form that became subject to change depending on societal factors and technology. In his study of modern sport, Allen Guttman outlined seven characteristics of modern sport that separate it from its more ritualistic past: secularism, equality of competition, specialization of roles, rationalization, bureaucratic organization, quantification, and the quest for records.⁴ He used basketball as an example of a sport that was consciously created out of circumstance and, within a few decades, became an organized sport with standardized rules and regulations.⁵ Its inventor, James Naismith took elements from American football and lacrosse with the philosophy that a “judicious combination of elements that made various existent games popular should produce an enjoyable new sport.”⁶ Basketball was strategic in its invention and has now become a sport of its own. The game itself and cultural attitudes towards the sport have also reflected the zeitgeist of the time. In chapter two, I discuss the invention of MMA and how it also was a reflection of American culture at that particular moment. MMA’s origins are similar in approach to basketball, but are also heavily shaped by popular views on violent media.

As a sport, MMA has evolved since its beginnings as a no-holds-barred fighting contest to an organized professional sport with regulations and commercial interest. Similar to the creation of other modern sports, MMA was a consciously created sport and has evolved over the

⁴ Guttman, Allen. *From Ritual to Record*. 16

⁵ *Ibid*, 41

⁶ Webb, Bernice Larson. *The Basketball Man: James Naismith*. 58

course of the last two decades. The first UFC (Ultimate Fighting Championship) event took place in November of 1993 and, in its early years, there were hardly any rules put in place to ensure fighter safety, drawing backlash from critics for its display of violence. To many of its detractors, this was seen as the resurrection of gladiatorial combat or, in some instances, a de-evolution of human civilization in the form of “human cockfighting.” The first UFC events were partly inspired by open challenge, no-holds-barred matches that were popularized by Rorion Gracie and his family of jiu-jitsu practitioners. He and his family would issue a \$100,000 reward to any martial artist who could beat him in a fight. The purpose of these challenge matches were to showcase how dominant the Gracie family’s style of jiu-jitsu was over other styles of martial arts. Early UFC events were modeled after the style-versus-style matches. Yet, over time, athletes began to draw upon and learn multiple disciplines in order to be more effective in the fighting arena. Backlash against the UFC events eventually led to regulatory changes that mirrored boxing rules - such as timed rounds, gloves, weight classes, and a ten-point scoring system. In recent years, the growth and popularity of the sport have enabled the UFC to take huge steps towards recognition as a mainstream sport by partnering with network television and thereby broadcasting its events to a much wider audience. Many athletes have now found success starring in Hollywood films and television and procuring lucrative sponsorships.

The sport of MMA can be included within the context of action and extreme sports that gained popularity during the nineties. The X-Games were a collection of competitive extreme sports meant to appeal to a younger audience not interested in traditional American sports.⁷ In 1995, the 24-hour sports network ESPN produced the first X-Games event in order to capitalize on the recent shifts in the sporting world. Events consisted of what were once considered to be leisure activities such as skateboarding, BMX biking, and inline skating. The appeal and

⁷ Pickert, Kate. “A Brief History of the X-Games.”

pleasures of extreme sports tend to be more intimately linked with the body such as “stress, pain, and panic coupled with an adrenaline high, bliss, and an intense fusion of actor with action.”⁸ This is similar to the appeal of MMA insofar as the unpredictable outcomes are also linked with bodily pain. MMA was closely related to the thrills and spectacle that televised extreme sports presents, yet it separated itself by not being supported by a mainstream television network that was able to shape its public perception. MMA in the nineties was relegated to pay-per-view and home video, making it an easy target for its critics. In recent years, however, MMA has followed the extreme sports model by gaining wider acceptance through marketing and branding strategies that are examined in the following chapters.

Within the institution of religion alone, we can see the difference in meanings that the martial arts provide, whether it is for combative efficiency, cultural expression, or spiritual insight and growth. Various Asian-based philosophies and spiritual practices such as Taoism, Buddhism, and Zen have utilized the martial arts as ways of achieving spiritual enlightenment. However, recent studies have suggested that the relationship between religion and the martial arts is clouded in myth and is rather closely aligned with military and political history. For instance, the Shaolin Monastery in China is associated with specific styles of boxing and weapons-based martial arts and has often been celebrated in kung fu movies. However, studies on the Shaolin Monastery have indicated that these combat styles were born through the military protection of estates and temple property, native Taoist influences, and conflict with state regimes.⁹ Yet, nowadays Shaolin monks are probably more inclined to claim that their martial regimen acts as a type of spiritual training, a tool for the cultivation of religious awareness.¹⁰

⁸ Stahl, Roger. *Militainment Inc.* 57

⁹ Shahar, Mier. *The Shaolin Monastery*, 2 and Henning, Stanley. “Academia Encounters the Chinese Martial Arts, 321.

¹⁰ Shahar, 2

Other religious aspects include the use of martial arts in exorcisms and funerary rituals.¹¹ The martial arts can also be used to seek or show divine favor where religious motivation generally includes the belief that victory will be granted to the side that is divinely guided. Examples of this include zealots, crusaders, and jihadists.¹²

The martial arts have also been used in educational settings as components of physical education or extra-curricular activities. Since April of 2012 in Japan, judo, kendo, and sumo were made compulsory for all middle school students as part of their physical education curriculum.¹³ Up until that point, the Japanese martial arts existed as a club activity and participation was voluntary. Although not without some controversy and trepidation,¹⁴ the implementation of martial arts in Japanese middle schools were meant as a way to expose students to traditional culture and “nurture a sense of empathy and the spirit of starting and ending interactions with formal greetings.”¹⁵ In other words, Japanese martial arts are used as vehicles to teach history, as well as cultural and interpersonal values to adolescents. High schools and universities in the United States have also integrated Asian martial arts instruction in the form of club activity and for-credit courses in kinesiology and theatre departments. In addition to the Asian martial arts, boxing is an intercollegiate club sport and wrestling has been part of the college sports landscape since 1903.¹⁶ The popular existence of martial arts and combat sport in the education sector seems to suggest that they play an integral role in self-cultivation and could promote an interest in national history within individuals.

¹¹ Green, Thomas A., Joseph Svinth. “Social Uses of the Martial Arts” *Martial Arts of the World*, ix

¹² *ibid*, xxi

¹³ Sakasegawa, Ryosuke. “Judo/Supply of Instructors Cannot Meet Sudden Demand.” *Asahi Shimbun*, April 05, 2012. http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/sports/AJ201204050059

¹⁴ Kudo, Ryuji. “Lacking Proper Teachers, Girls’ Schools Struggle with Martial Arts Classes.” *Asahi Shimbun*, March 23, 2012. http://ajw.asahi.com/article/behind_news/social_affairs/AJ201203230003

¹⁵ Sakasegawa, “Judo/Supply of Instructors Cannot Meet Sudden Demand.”

¹⁶ Hammond, Jairus. *The History of Collegiate Wrestling*, 1

Compulsory martial arts instruction also takes place in the military, yet is more important for physical discipline and construction of a martial identity rather than lethal efficacy. In countries equipped with military services, basic training consists of fundamental hand-to-hand combat techniques. Yet, the techniques learned serve a different purpose than the practical. In his comparison between military combat systems and martial arts, anthropologist John Donohue finds that the martial arts are “grossly inefficient.”¹⁷ Moreover, compared to other military methods, the martial arts are anachronistic and tend to neglect technological developments in arms and armor, and more importantly, few martial artists ever use their learned skills outside of competition or practice.¹⁸ This is particularly evident in the United States military’s use of more advanced technological forms of warfare such as nuclear weaponry and the use of computer-controlled drones for surveillance and bombings.

The use of martial arts weapons in law enforcement is currently being tried in a handful of regions to help change the recent public perception of aggressive and lethal police intervention. And, unlike the military, the martial arts in law enforcement serve a more practical purpose. Beginning in the 1920s, US police departments began to codify and tailor their martial arts and physical training to assist in arresting and restraining suspects.¹⁹ Today, police academy courses provide roughly forty hours of instruction on martial arts and physical training tactics to use in the field,²⁰ with different municipalities utilizing different training methods and weapons. For example, in Anderson Country located in northern California, police officers have recently

¹⁷ Donohue, John. *Warrior Dreams*, 27

¹⁸ Lohse III, Frederick W. “Self-Transformation and the Martial Arts in the American Cultural Environment” 12

¹⁹ Green, Thomas, A., Joseph Svinth. “Police Defensive Tactics Training in the United States,” *Martial Arts of the World*, 593

²⁰ Green and Svinth, 596

adopted the use of traditional martial arts weapons such as the nunchaku in order to “more compassionately gain compliance” from suspects.²¹

The martial arts as a film genre can be traced back to the beginning of silent films and were popular as both fictional narratives and sporting events. In America, boxing, in particular, formed a symbiotic relationship with early cinema in which the exhibition and distribution of matches modernized and legitimized the sport, while the popularity and demand for these pictures functioned as a catalyst for technological development.²² In China, the martial arts film began in the 1920s in Shanghai with Ren Pengnian, who utilized kung fu choreography in his films.²³ Many Shanghai studios during the silent period also produced martial arts films, often adapting stories from classical literature. However, the Shanghai film industry collapsed due to military invasions from Japan and later with the communist led People’s Liberation Army forcing many filmmakers to flee to Hong Kong and Taiwan.²⁴ It is in Hong Kong where many Mainland Chinese filmmakers and producers such as the Shaw brothers established the popularity of the kung fu film across the Chinese diaspora. The Shaw studio’s vertically integrated system made it easier for its films to travel transnationally within the Asia region and eventually reach America in the 1970s. In Japan, what we now consider the samurai, or swordplay film also has roots to the early history of cinema. Early Japanese films were derived from two theatrical genres: *kabuki* and *shimpa*. The *Kabuki* genre consisted mainly of historical pieces and often represented the samurai class as noble, sagacious, and blessed with Confucian morals. The cinematic samurai inherits this specific male characterization, called *tateyaku*, which

²¹ Jamieson, Alastair and Christopher Nelson. “Cops Armed with Nunchakus to Offset ‘Aggressive’ Image.” October 27, 2015. <http://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/cops-are-armed-nunchucks-offset-aggressive-image-n452061>

²² Strieble, Dan. *Fight Pictures: A History of Boxing and Early Cinema*, 3

²³ Lukitsh, Jean. *Electric Shadows: The Secret History of Kung Fu Movies*.

²⁴ Glaessner, Verina. *Kung Fu: Cinema of Vengeance*, 30

actors such as Toshiro Mifune made famous in samurai films in the 1950s and 60s.²⁵ However, in the post World War II period, swordplay films began to splinter off into their own subgenre, the *chambara* film, in which the weapon of the sword and the swordsman's skill replaced the nobility and moral code of the *tateyaku* to become the fundamental icons of the genre.²⁶ These various examples indicate the rich and diverse origins of the martial arts in cinema. And, as a genre, we can see from its inception that subgenres are a prominent aspect of the larger genre that work to define national issues.

The martial arts film is unique in that it uses hybrid elements from other established genres and has a history of cross-pollinated influence with other countries. The Hong Kong martial arts film of the 1960s was influenced by the Japanese samurai and gangster films, which themselves were influenced by American westerns and gangster films. Yet at the same time, the Hong Kong martial arts film exists as its own definable genre with roots in Chinese tradition and cinema.²⁷ In contemporary American action films, there is still a legacy of Hong Kong inspired fight choreography with the use of wires and even with the bringing in Hong Kong actors and stuntmen for specific scenes.

The martial arts genre stands out as unique hybrid of established genre characteristics from the western and the musical. In 1984, Rick Altman proposed a unifying theory of genre criticism that examined genres into two related components: semantic and syntactic.²⁸ The semantic components include the smaller discreet elements of a film's mise en scene, cinematography, and editing patterns. The syntactic components are how the semantic

²⁵ Sato, Tadao. *Currents in Japanese Cinema*. 19. The *Tateyaku* is often contrasted with the *nimaime*, who is handsome, yet not as physically strong, and whose character falls in love with the heroine. The *Tateyaku* is not permitted romantic love due to his loyalty to his lord.

²⁶ Silver, Alain. *The Samurai Film*. 42

²⁷ Desser, David. "The Martial Arts Film in the 1990s." 81.

²⁸ Altman, Rick. "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre." 11

components work together to construct thematic patterns and the narrative design of a genre. On the semantic level, the martial arts film is closely related to the western, which is no surprise given the back and forth circulation of influence between the two genres. Both genres often contain dangerous landscapes and settings, clearly defined heroes and villains, and chivalrous acts that help to establish the binary of good/evil and civilization/savagery. Syntactically, the martial arts film has very little in common with Hollywood genres such as the boxing and swashbuckler film as they have different narrative and thematic functions. “The boxing film is almost always concerned with issues of the sport’s corruption or the physical damage it may do to the fighter (or both), while the swashbuckler is essentially a romance.”²⁹ The martial arts film is more closely related to the musical, which is star-driven, contains plotlines structured around the specific talents of the star, and features highly choreographed, intricate fight/dance sequences that serve to advance the narrative.³⁰

One of the more prominent themes that run throughout the martial arts film genre is the relationship between fathers and sons. This is primarily seen through the absence of paternal fathers and their replacement by surrogate fathers in the form of highly skilled martial arts teachers or as retainer/lord figures. This relationship also informs the representation of masculinity through the teachings of the surrogate father and his philosophy of the martial arts. In Marsha Kinder’s *Playing with Power*, she examines the transmedia and cultural phenomenon of the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle* franchise and how masculinity is constructed through “their costuming, weaponry, behavior, and names, which are bestowed upon them by their patriarchal

²⁹ Desser, 94

³⁰ Ibid, 94. Comparing the star driven performances of musical and martial arts, Desser cites the soft-shoe style of Fred Astaire and the acrobatic feats of Gene Kelly as analogous to the Aikido style of Steven Seagal and the kickboxing style of Jean Claude Van Damme

master.”³¹ This framework extends throughout the genre and acts as a motivation for other prominent themes to emerge such as revenge of and loyalty to the father figure and also can influence other themes such as the importance of training and self-cultivation.

My study explores the ways that the martial arts film genre has influenced the development of MMA. Beginning with the genre’s introduction to American audiences in the 1970s, the martial arts genre, to the surprise of Hollywood, found popularity with urban audiences. The genre also had a unique relationship with the Blaxploitation film movement of the early 1970s as many of the imported martial arts films shared double billings with Blaxploitation films. By the mid-seventies, Blaxploitation filmmakers were using the martial arts in their films, and Hong Kong studios were also casting black martial artists in their films. This not only speaks to the transnational nature of the genre, but is also significant in the construction of an audience for the genre. The legacy of this relationship is evident in early UFC events, which featured some of these crossover stars such as Jim Brown as a color commentator and Ron Van Clief as a competitor. During the eighties and nineties, new archetypes such as the ninja and kickboxer began a new cycle in the martial arts genre, which also contributed to the creation of the first UFC events.

The world of professional wrestling in the 1980s and 90s was a big influence on MMA and the two sports hold a lot in common with each other. Professional wrestling in America can be traced back to the post-Civil War era in which traveling carnivals would feature wrestlers who would perform either a “shoot,” (a non-scripted match) or a “work” (a scripted match with the outcome pre-determined).³² Corruption and fight fixing led to a split within these types of performances and more competitive-based wrestling separated itself from its more staged and

³¹ Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power*. 147

³² Shannon, Jake. *Say Uncle!*, 6

dramatic sibling, which would become what we now call professional wrestling. The biggest contribution of professional wrestling to MMA would be the constructed narratives that aid in the marketing and promotion of events and fighters. Professional wrestling first exploded in popularity during the early 1950s due to its exposure on network television and then again in the 80s with its presence on cable and pay-per-view. In its early years, the demands of televising a wrestling match forced promoters to create storylines and wrestlers to adopt charismatic personas that would be able to hold audiences throughout the broadcast and keep them interested on a weekly basis.³³ This compulsion to create narratives that provided a deeper and more invested viewing experience and character archetypes can be seen in early MMA events, which shared pay-per-view space with professional wrestling.

The sport of MMA represents a logical culmination of the visual style and themes present in martial arts entertainment since the 1970s. In a way, MMA can be read as a form of pastiche, in which many of the popular tropes and trends in combat sports and representations of martial arts in film and television have been borrowed and used to create a seemingly new sport. In this regard, MMA as pastiche is able to inform us about how audiences have viewed the martial arts through its legacy in film and popular media. The martial arts have a ubiquitous quality to them, as they appear throughout many of the institutions of our society in different forms yet can be often overlooked as a foreign sport or a cult film genre. In a similar way, early critics of MMA saw it only as a barbaric spectacle. However, closer readings of the influences that have contributed to its visual and thematic aesthetics indicate its place within the larger world of the martial arts.

³³ Beekman, Scott. *Ringside*, 82.

Methods and Archive

This study employs a media studies and cultural studies methodology to understand and contextualize the meanings within the martial arts film genre and the various ways in which audiences have interpreted and responded to those meanings. I analyze films, television programs, and interactive media such as video games and social media with separate chapters devoted to specific mediums such as film, television, and new media. Since my archive consists of popular and commercial texts, my analysis recognizes the polysemic nature of these various media and explores a variety of potential meanings. One of the limitations of traditional approaches to textual analysis is that it has “concentrated on recovering from the depth of the text the final, ‘true,’ ideological, latent meaning.”³⁴ In other words, the dominant, homogeneous meanings have traditionally been favored through textual analysis. This approach has been contested through the influence of cultural studies on the field of film and media studies, which has explored the subjectivities and cultural and economic backgrounds of audiences. For instance, Janice Radway’s *Reading the Romance* examines the genre of the romance novel and ways in which readers interpret the genre according to their own identities and beliefs. What is significant about this is Radway’s study of an audience and their relationship and influence on romance novel publishing houses. This concept of audience/producer negotiation has been taken up in more recent media studies scholarship such as Henry Jenkins’ *Convergence Culture* in which he explored fans and audiences of *Survivor*, who worked together to spoil the outcome of the competition, as well as subsequent cat-and-mouse games with producers of the show who have tried to out-smart its fans. Exploring the audience and industry components of media texts provides a richer cultural, economic, and political context. It can illuminate negotiations and

³⁴ Fiske, John. “Popular Television and Commercial Culture: Beyond Political Economy.” *Television Studies: Textual Analysis*. New York: Praeger, 1989. 31

conflicts between the media industry and fans, which in turn affects the media text. I bring in audience data where possible in order to provide a more balanced view of possible meanings that arise from media texts. Film and television archives possess an array of production materials such as notes, correspondence, and other physical artifacts that work as a supplement the textual components. Popular magazines, newspapers, and novels could also provide a glimpse into how audiences made sense of the martial arts. In my discussion of MMA, online media news sites that are dedicated to following the sport also maintain an important role in providing a more recent historical record.

My archive of martial arts films is limited to a selection from the 1970s to the present day. Although the martial arts film genre has been around since the beginning of film technology and many Hollywood actors such as James Cagney and Elvis Presley were proficient in and used the martial arts in films prior to 1970, the wave of Hong Kong imports in 1973 signaled the beginning of the kung fu craze in America. The week of June 20, 1973 is cited as the high point of the martial arts dominance of the US box office charts as five Hong Kong kung fu films appeared in the top 50.³⁵ Many of these Hong Kong imports resonated with black audiences and were often paired in double billings with Blaxploitation films at theatres. As a result of this mixing, many Blaxploitation films also featured the martial arts in their action scenes and collaborated with Hong Kong film studios. As the popularity of martial arts films increased over the course of the decade, Hollywood and European film studios also began to work together with Hong Kong studios in creating co-productions. The Asian martial arts film ventured into American cinema on the heels of the Blaxploitation film movement. In my chapter on the 1970s martial arts film, I explore the textual and industrial relationship between the martial arts and Blaxploitation film and underscore the influence that the martial arts began to have on audiences.

³⁵ Desser, David. "The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema's First American Reception" 23.

In the 1980s, the martial arts film was tied to the image of the ninja and rose in popularity through the films of the Cannon Film Group. My archive and chapter on the 80s focuses on the story of Cannon Film's impact on the genre and their influence on the creation of the first UFC events. The image of the ninja that permeates popular culture is wholly American-made. I trace the development of this image and its use in the American martial arts films of the 80s in order to demonstrate the ways that it influenced the visual design and marketing of early MMA events.

For my chapter on television, I examine how the martial arts morph through genres and how audiences have made sense of these various representations. The presence of the martial arts in genres such as sitcoms and dramas provide another insight into how audiences and the entertainment industry viewed the martial arts. My television archive spans multiple periods in television history from the Classic Network Era (1950s – mid 1980s) to the present day. The reason for this is because of the sporadic presence of the martial arts on television programs. With the exception of a handful of series that have the martial arts as the main focus such as *Kung Fu* (ABC, 1972-1975), the martial arts in scripted television have been used as plotlines and situationally in comedies and crime dramas. In the domestic sitcom genre, the martial arts have been used as a form of self-defense from bullies or robbers. For example, in an episode of *The Lucy Show* (CBS, 1962-68), Lucille Ball's character learns judo after fearing that her home will be broken into by thieves, then teaches some moves to her son after he is bullied at school. In other television genres, such as the talk show and news magazine, the performance and display of celebrity martial artists or current news and events that are related to the martial arts are usually the focal point. Sports and competition is also a major part of the martial arts on television and dates back to the early years of the medium with the first boxing match airing on

NBC in April of 1939.³⁶ Boxing was a prominent fixture on early American television and early prizefights served to highlight the possibilities of the new technology. The 1946 heavyweight championship between Joe Louis and Billy Conn was meant to initiate the relationship between boxing and television, and many network executives expected Louis to do for television as Jack Dempsey did for radio.³⁷ In chapter three, I examine the UFC's network television debut and the strategies they used to procure its target audience.

Television has become one of the most important forms of communication due to the digitalization of its content that can be accessed through a variety of media platforms. The sport of MMA exists in many forms and genres within television such as the exhibition of live fights, reality television programming, and promotional documentaries that are used to sell tickets and pay-per-view buys. My television archive on MMA consists of examples from each of these genres. Moreover, I consider genre analysis as a key tool to understand how audiences, producers, and texts interact with one another. Traditional genre studies have tended to focus on the textual and formal properties of film and television in order to categorize certain stylistic and thematic patterns. However, in *Genre and Television*, Jason Mittell argues that television genres are broader "cultural categories" in which the textual elements of a program represent only a small portion of the way that shows become categorized as genres. He argued that "genres do run through texts, but also operate within the practices of critics, audiences, and industries,"³⁸ making the circulation of the text within these realms subject to a larger cultural context. This broader approach to genre analysis, one that takes into account multiple areas and institutions that help to shape genres, informs my analysis of MMA as I argue its importance within the martial arts universe.

³⁶ Gems, Gerald. *Boxing*. 41.

³⁷ Wolter, Larry. "Television Pins Knockout Hope on Louis Fight." *Chicago Tribune*. June 17, 1946.

³⁸ Mittell, Jason. *Genres and Television*. 13

Since television content exists on multiple digital media platforms such as mobile phones, tablets, and personal computers, another useful analytic lens for this study is the concept of media paratexts. Originally from literary theory, paratexts examined the textual elements that readers encountered before the first word of the first chapter. This included things such as the cover art, table of contents, preface, and introduction, all of which contributed to informing the reader of a book's content, style, and genre. Transposing this same idea to films, television, and new media, Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately* argues that peripheral material such as movie trailers, press reviews, DVD bonus features, and licensed toys not only exist to provide an intermediary gateway into a text, but also create new meanings and function as a text itself.³⁹ What Gray suggests is that it is almost impossible to study a media object through one specific medium or platform due to the many transmedia variants that are created either through industrial synergies or user created content. The concept of media paratexts informs both my theoretical and methodological approach to this project. I am interested in the ways in which media paratexts discards traditional binaries between old/conventional media and new media. I explore this relationship in chapter four where the UFC's television broadcast utilized an assortment of media paratexts in order to generate interest in its main event.

Theoretical Overview / Literature Review

With this study, I suggest that it has become increasingly harder to separate sport from its media representation. In doing so, my approach to this study underscores the importance of media studies methods in the consideration of sport by highlighting the synergies between film and media studies, sports studies, and the martial arts. As a result, my study contributes to a growing interest in the study of MMA as a recent sporting and cultural phenomenon.

³⁹ Gray, Jonathan. *Show Sold Separately*.

One of the main influences on this project is *Fight Pictures* by Dan Strieble, which looks at how the sport of boxing and early cinema supported each other's growth in popularity and helped to develop one another. By examining the sport of boxing within the context of early cinema, his study revealed much about the criticism concerning female spectators, censorship, and the intellectual property of the films during this particular time period. My study is similar to *Fight Pictures* in its pairing of popular media with sport in order to better understand their development in relation to each other and their impact on cultural attitudes towards the sport and vice versa. This approach is also similar to that used in the existing literature on professional wrestling, which attributes its mainstream success to its presence on television. Scott Beekman's *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America* and Shaun Assael's *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks* both consider the saturation of wrestling content in the 1950s as a key component to pro wrestling's success in America. "Between 1948 and 1955, each of the three major television networks broadcast wrestling programs at one time or another."⁴⁰ Wrestling, along with boxing and other arena sports were perfect fits for television at a time when the technology was limited to stationary cameras and also fulfilled a need for exciting programming.⁴¹ One of the noteworthy themes within this small body of literature on sport and media is the symbiotic relationship that boxing and professional wrestling have had with their respective mediums. Because of the contemporaneous and varied nature of this study's archive, my approach utilizes a variety of different media (film, television, video games) in order to map the significance of MMA as part of a larger martial arts context. It also illuminates and acknowledges the relationship between combat sports, the martial arts, and popular media.

⁴⁰ Assael, Shaun. *Sex, Lies, and Headlocks*, 10

⁴¹ Beekman, Scott. *Ringside*, 81

This study can be placed within the historiography of combat sports. One of the major themes within this area of literature is that physical, hand-to-hand combat can often highlight greater social issues and conflicts of a time period, particularly pertaining to class, gender, and race. As Elliot Gorn puts it, “how men fight – who participates, who observes, which rules are followed, what is at stake, what tactics are allowed – reveals much about past cultures and societies.”⁴² Gorn’s study of rough-and-tumble fighting in the Carolina backwoods and bare-knuckle prizefighting in the nineteenth century highlights the ways that historians could extrapolate subjects such as masculinity, class, and ethnicity within the context of fighting. *The Manly Art: Bare-knuckle Prize Fighting in America* chronicles the origins of boxing, illustrating how bare-knuckle boxing exemplified a particular type of masculinity in the Victorian Era that appealed to the lower classes and contrasted with the mild-mannered masculinity of the bourgeoisie.⁴³ In addition, Gorn presents a history of how boxing was able to evolve from an underground and unregulated activity to a sanctioned sport with the inclusion of the Queensberry rules. This is noteworthy as it mirrors the evolution of MMA over the last two decades as rules and regulations were added in order to legitimize the sport for a broader audience. The next major historical work on prizefighting was Jeffrey Sammons’ *Beyond the Ring*, which argued that boxing in the twentieth century reflected important social trends with an emphasis on race and nationalism. The focal point of the book is on the careers of black heavyweights Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Muhammad Ali. For Sammons, each of these boxers was symbolic of larger American attitudes towards race. For instance, Jack Johnson “reflected the racism, nationalism, xenophobia, and petty jealousies that were part of the Progressive movement,”⁴⁴

⁴² Gorn, Elliot. “Gouge and Bite, Pull Hair and Scratch: The Social Significance of Fighting in the Southern Backcountry.” 18

⁴³ Gorn, Elliot. *The Manly Art*. 31

⁴⁴ Sammons, Jeffrey. *Beyond the Ring*. xvii

whereas Ali and the varying reactions to him exposed the shifting attitudes of public tolerance with regard to race and American involvement in Vietnam.⁴⁵ In these cases, the trends and attitudes are not confined to the boxer himself but also reflect what he represents to the sporting audience and the general public.

Despite his work on rough-and-tumble fighting and boxing, Gorn expressed concern about and opposition to early UFC events. In a 1995 interview with the *New York Times* he states that, “It’s the whole esthetic of violence that’s really disturbing,” and that “people have to be taught to be violent; it’s learned behavior. And this sport might be the sort of thing that contributes to that behavior.”⁴⁶ This reaction mirrors many of the journalists, critics, and politicians at the time who were shocked by the selling of violence on television and in video games. Yet, despite the opposition to the events at that time, I strongly believe that an examination of MMA in the nineties offers valuable insights into the conversations and attitudes surrounding violence in popular entertainment through the representation of the martial arts in combat sports. This is one of the main points in chapter two in which I examine MMA’s place within the cultural war of the nineties.

The martial arts film has been an area of interest in film and media studies since the genre first came to American theaters in the seventies. The first English language academic study of the martial arts film is Marilyn Mintz’ *The Martial Arts Films* published in 1978, which examines the genre through a binary approach. She analyzes mainly Hong Kong kung-fu films and Japanese swordplay films within a framework of dual modes such as comedy/tragedy and action/philosophy. This focus on the contrasting dualities of the genre helps to differentiate the martial arts film as a unique genre and establishes a recurring theme in subsequent studies of the

⁴⁵ Sammons, xix

⁴⁶ Barry, Dan. “Not Sweet, and Not a Science.” *New York Times*

genre. David Bordwell's study of Hong Kong popular cinema entitled *Planet Hong Kong* is also organized in a binary manner. Although Bordwell extends his focus beyond the martial arts genre, his approach towards Hong Kong cinema is organized through sites of contrasts and exchange. His overarching argument is that Hong Kong popular cinema has a distinct artful quality to it and analyzes the form and style of filmmakers operating in the martial arts and gangster genres. Bordwell considers the transnational dialogue that Hong Kong films have constituted between the regional Chinese diaspora and Hollywood, highlighting local/regional/global exchanges. He also highlights stylistic contrasts between directors and stars. For example, he compares and contrasts the different cinematic styles of Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan as embodying and symbolizing aspects of the contemporary Hong Kong spirit.⁴⁷

Yet even more noteworthy is Bordwell's analysis of movement and rhythm in Hong Kong kung fu films. He coins the term "motion emotion" in order to describe the way that Hong Kong filmmakers have used motion to yield emotion in ways that are unique to the action genre. For Bordwell, the Hong Kong martial arts film has refined the craft of visualizing movement that pursues maximum emotional effect while Hollywood approaches action in ways that engulf and overload the audience's senses. This is demonstrated through rhythmic patterns of editing, framing, and sound that make the action more legible and emotive, or in the words of famed Hong Kong filmmaker Yuen Wo Ping, "I want to make the viewer *feel* the blow."⁴⁸ In this section of the book, Bordwell underscores the aesthetic and cultural value of popular entertainment that otherwise goes unnoticed by scholars. As Bordwell states, "if we want to understand the full range of what movies can do, we do well to pause over even a despised genre

⁴⁷ Bordwell, David. *Planet Hong Kong*, 60.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 244

like the chop-socky or the gunfest.”⁴⁹ Considering my archive consists of B-grade, low-to-mid budget, exploitation, and popular films I take inspiration from Bordwell’s firm stance on the importance of studying popular fare. I argue that the martial arts film, particularly with regard to its artistry and achievement in capturing movement, lies at the core of what makes MMA such an interesting and captivating sport for audiences. Martial arts films and pro wrestling have borrowed movements from real-life techniques for dramatic purposes and “motion emotion.” Often, these movements and choreography are exaggerated for visual effect to aid in advancing the narrative. Similarly, the sport of MMA, which employs various martial arts techniques, can also be read in the same fashion as its cinematic counterpart. Although the techniques are used in a more practical sense, there is still an emphasis on the emotive thrills of the sport caused by specific movements, perhaps even heightened by the un-choreographed nature of fights. In this way, the “motion emotion” of the choreographed fights in film and the unpredictable nature of an MMA fight is dictated by how these fights are won and how the distinct movements are utilized.

Chapter Summaries

This study contains four chapters that examine and provide cultural and historical context for the media driven phenomenon of MMA. Beginning with the introduction of the Hong Kong martial arts film in the US, I underscore the genre’s openness to transnational and global exchanges. I have split the martial arts film into two chapters to examine the decades of the seventies in chapter one and the eighties and nineties in chapter two. The next chapter examines the martial arts on American television by first providing some background and context and then doing a case study of MMA and the reality television genre. Finally, I conclude the study by

⁴⁹ Bordwell, 247

looking at the role that media convergence and interactivity have had in the development of MMA and its current state.

Chapter One: Blaxploitation, Kung Fu, and the Seeds of Mixed Martial Arts

This chapter focuses on the introduction of the Asian martial arts film in America in the 1970s and its relationship with the blaxploitation genre. In the 1970s, the genre made its way to America through the films of Bruce Lee and the Shaw Brothers, captivating grindhouse theatre audiences and influencing Blaxploitation filmmakers and black audiences. Hollywood studios also took notice of the popularity of kung fu films and began to incorporate martial arts choreography into their action films. This chapter examines the inter- and extra-textual exchanges between the Hong Kong imports and blaxploitation films. This is significant because of its impact on each genre. For blaxploitation, the introduction of the martial arts prolonged the life cycle of the genre. And for the Hong Kong film industry in the post-Bruce Lee era, blaxploitation elements offered a fresh look to the martial arts genre in need of a change. The legacy of this relationship can be seen not only in subsequent decades, but appears in the early years of MMA as well.

Chapter Two: Ninjas, The Nineties, and No-Holds-Barred Ultimate Fighting

This chapter explores the martial arts genre in the eighties and nineties and the shifts that take place during these two decades. Technological innovations such as the videocassette tape created a new direct-to-video market where low budget action films could easily find distribution. The martial arts film genre was able to create a new niche in home video, where coincidentally, early televised UFC events also prospered. This chapter begins by examining the shift from the kung fu hero to the image of the ninja and the meanings that this image

constructed during this decade. The decade of the nineties saw an increase in public debates on violence in the entertainment industry. Popular music, video games, television, and the UFC were under political attack as part of the 90s “culture war” between conservatives and liberals, the result of which was a moral panic surrounding the circulation of violent entertainment. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of the attacks on the UFC’s portrayal of violence within the larger political climate that blamed the entertainment industry for the perceived prevalence of violence in American society.

Chapter Three: The Martial Arts on Television

This chapter provides an overview of the history of martial arts on American television by examining three different eras: the classic network era, the multi-channel transition, and the rise of reality television. Due to the large viewing demographic and limited channels of the classic network era (1950s-mid 1980s), it is often noted that martial arts choreography on television became toned-down and domesticated for family consumption. This adjustment of televised martial arts continues in programming geared towards children and in the animation genre. While at the same time, adult-themed programming thrived on pay-per-view and later in the reality TV genre. The focus of this chapter examines the cultural and industrial factors related to how the martial arts were represented on television. In the classic network era, I focus on *The Green Hornet* (ABC, 1966-67), which was one of the first programs to depict the martial arts during this period. During the multi-channel transition, televised sports and made-for-TV sports became an important genre that targeted niche audiences. I examine the rise of “extreme sports” during this time period as context for the rise of the MMA. The chapter concludes with a case study of two different MMA-themed reality TV programs and their cultural implications and

impact on the development of MMA. I argue that the properties of television and its genres altered not only the perception of the sport, but also impacted the sport itself, from the cultivation of television personalities to the creation of new myths about “ultimate fighters.”

Chapter Four: The Martial Arts and Media Convergence

This chapter examines two main areas: the impact of media convergence on the martial arts and the multifaceted ways that MMA has utilized elements of new media and video gaming in order to grow its audience and fan-base and solidify itself as a legitimate sport. This chapter begins with a historical overview of the martial arts video game genre, which was an area of contentious debate in the 1990s for its depiction of both realistic and exaggerated violence. I also look at the ways in which the UFC and its fans have used social media in ways that are different than their mainstream sports counterparts. The main theme of this chapter is the increasing corporatization of the sport and its growing global audience. I also examine the ways in which everyday people use MMA outside of the cage and in the comfort of their living rooms and for purposes other than combat. The main takeaway of this chapter is how MMA utilizes new media in ways that are alternative to more mainstream sports and the strategies and policies that continuing to shape its representation.

CHAPTER 1: BLAXPLOITATION, KUNG FU, AND THE SEEDS OF MIXED MARTIAL ARTS

In the 1970s, martial arts films from Asia made their way to American screens through the films of Bruce Lee and the Shaw Brothers studio, captivating grindhouse and urban theatre audiences and influencing blaxploitation filmmakers and black audiences. Hollywood studios took notice of the popularity of kung fu films and began to incorporate martial arts choreography into their action films, a practice that is still prevalent in the action film genre. At the same time in the 1970s, Hong Kong filmmakers capitalized on the blaxploitation trend and brought over actors to star in their own version of the black martial arts film. The interest in martial arts by African Americans continued throughout the films released during this decade and its legacy appears in the early years of MMA through the career of Ron Van Clief. Given the nickname “Black Dragon” by Bruce Lee, Van Clief starred in three Hong Kong martial arts films during the 1970s. At the age of fifty-one, he made his MMA debut at UFC IV in 1995 and was also employed as the commissioner of future UFC events. His career as a martial artist, film star and MMA competitor encapsulates the importance of the Blaxploitation movement to the popularization of martial arts in America and vice-versa. This chapter outlines the African American martial arts experience through popular film and highlights the links between the 1970s kung fu film and the creation of the Ultimate Fighting Championship. This link is interesting because early UFC events sought to solicit the same working class male interest in the martial arts in the same way that blaxploitation and the kung fu film did in the 1970s.

AFRICAN AMERICANS AND THE MARTIAL ARTS

In North America, the black (particularly male) experience is tied to the practice of the martial arts as a way of asserting identity. Before the blaxploitation movement borrowed the

elements of the martial arts film, African Americans have always had a prominent relationship with African martial arts. In the Caribbean and South America, there are a number of martial arts such as *mani* (Cuba), *capoeira* (Brazil), *pinge* (Haiti) that were influenced by both European and African martial traditions.⁵⁰ These martial arts, unlike their parent forms, were not part of the dominant culture and were forced to adapt and change as a result of the migration across the Atlantic during the slave trade. Although partial elements of these martial arts might have changed, they have remained one method by which African Americans have historically asserted their identity and sought empowerment.⁵¹ For instance, in his study of African martial arts traditions in the Americas, TJ Obi Desch recounts the three ways in which North American slaves used the martial arts in their everyday lives. Self defense was one use of the martial arts for marooned African slaves. Obi Desch describes maroonage as a “permanent condition of individuals who liberated themselves from bondage or temporary state in which an enslaved person left... with the intention of returning after a brief respite.”⁵² For these individuals, their martial art abilities helped to defend against patrollers consisting of white men and overseers of other plantations. Performance rituals were an area where the martial arts also thrived. Plays involving song, dance, and competitive games were commonplace on plantations. The combative potential of the displays of some martial arts could be disguised within dance, while also providing a stage to showcase the African slave’s prowess and individual mastery. The third sphere in which the African martial arts were utilized was in the service of plantation owners, who exploited the martial skills of slaves as soldiers, gladiators, and strongmen.⁵³ Additionally, imprisoned African Americans developed their own distinct martial arts used in penitentiaries in

⁵⁰ Green, Thomas. “Surviving the Middle Passage,” 129

⁵¹ Obi Desch, TJ. *Fighting for Honor*. 3

⁵² Obi Desch, 89

⁵³ Obi Desch, 97

the US called jailhouse rock or 52 hand-blocks. Not much is known about this clandestine martial art other than its techniques were taught and passed down through black fraternities within prisons. Some believe that jailhouse rock is the diluted remnants of African-descended martial arts that survived during slavery in the South. Others contend that it originated from New York City's Rikers Island prison facility in the 1970s.⁵⁴ Regardless of origin, their existence speaks to the function of the martial arts as a form of self-expression and as a symbolic and physical protection against oppression from within the American prison industrial complex.

The use of both Asian and western martial arts had a significant role in the development of social programs associated with Black Nationalism in the United States. The African American religious group, The Nation of Islam, originally discouraged its members from participating in sport and recreation. Its leader, Elijah Muhammad proclaimed that sport and play caused "delinquency, murder, theft, and other forms of wicked and immoral crimes."⁵⁵ However, in February of 1964, Cassius Clay (later Muhammad Ali), who had recently converted to The Nation of Islam, defeated Sonny Liston for the world heavyweight boxing title. Suddenly, Elijah Muhammad changed his stance slightly on sport and recreation as many young black Muslims began participating in both boxing and Asian martial arts.⁵⁶ Many members of the religious group trained in karate, taekwondo, and Chinese arts. The Nation of Islam's military arm currently remains active in providing security for high profile events, reportedly using "stone cold stares and martial arts training."⁵⁷ Black self-defense groups, such as the Deacons for Defense, predate the better-known Black Panthers and were often comprised of working-class black men who utilized their experience with firearms and Asian martial arts derived from

⁵⁴ Green, Thomas. "52 hand Blocks/Jailhouse Rock" *Martial Arts of the World*. 28

⁵⁵ Smith, Maureen. "Muhammad Speaks and Muhammad Ali," 54

⁵⁶ Green, Thomas. "Freeing the Afrikan Mind" 237

⁵⁷ Johnson, Akilah. "Miami Beach prepares for hip-hop awards, downplays chance of problems," *Sun Sentinel*, August 14, 2001

military service during WWII and Korea.⁵⁸ What is significant about this is that many working class men black men gravitated towards the martial arts because it was accessible to those of limited means. This is a theme that carries over into the blaxploitation and martial arts films.

Asian and African theatrical traditions share similar characteristics that may also help to explain the receptiveness within African American communities to embrace Asian popular culture. Both theatrical traditions are based around percussive instrumentation that is paired alongside physical movements that are quasi-acrobatic and gymnastic in nature. When film theorist Sergei Eisenstein visited Japan and viewed a kabuki performance, he was surprised by the fluidity between movement and sound, stating, “we actually ‘hear movement’ and ‘see sound.’”⁵⁹ Similarly, drum and dance are also paired frequently together in traditional African performances. In Yoruba, located in the South-western region of Nigeria, drum and dance are inseparable with ensembles serving as the lead roles in traditional performances.⁶⁰

Charles Johnson’s short story “China” (1983) illustrates the prominent avenue that Asian martial arts presented to African Americans as a means of an alternative masculine identity. The story takes place in the midst of the kung fu craze of 1973, which has a profound impact on a middle-aged black postal worker. The protagonist Rudolph Jackson is described as a fifty-four year old with high blood pressure, emphysema, flat feet, skinny legs, a big belly, and a “pecker” that shrinks “to no bigger than a pencil eraser each time” he sees his wife undress.⁶¹ His life changes once he sees the film *Five Fingers of Death* at the local theater and decides to join a kwoon where he begins to practice kung fu. In a short period of time, he improves his physique, begins to meditate, and adopts a lifestyle change that his wife is reluctant to accept. From her

⁵⁸ Chong, Sylvia Shin Huey. *Oriental Obscene*. 201

⁵⁹ Eisenstein, Sergei. “The Unexpected.” *Film Form: Essays in Film Theory*. 22.

⁶⁰ Ojuade, Jeleel. “African Dance in Diaspora: The Examples of Nigerian Yoruba Bata and Dundun.” *Trends in Twenty-first Century African Theatre and Performance*. 396.

⁶¹ Johnson, Charles. *The Sorcerers Apprentice: Tales and Conjurations*. 63, 69.

perspective, she views the changes in her husband as a longing for a new ethnic and national identity, saying that “You can’t be Chinese!... I think it’s strange! You didn’t grow up in China.”⁶² However, for Rudolph, kung fu serves as a vehicle for masculine exploration that is predicated upon the global distribution of media.⁶³ Rudolph exclaims, “I don’t want to be Chinese. I only want to be what I *can* be, which isn’t the greatest fighter in the world, only the fighter *I* can be.” The short story ends with Rudolph competing in a fighting competition, while his wife views his match and accepts his chosen identity. African American involvement with Asian martial arts served to separate itself from European-American culture at a time when the African American community grew increasingly dissatisfied with institutions that were not designed for their participation. Additionally, and what is especially interesting throughout “China” is how the martial arts helped to re-masculinize African American men through alternative performances and rituals. The marriage between the martial arts and African Americans in popular culture begins with the blaxploitation film movement.

BLAXPLOITATION SAVES HOLLYWOOD

As the decade of the 1970s began, Hollywood studios were on the brink of bankruptcy and desperately needed to find a solution that would net them profits. Part of the studio’s financial losses came as a result of television. By the 1960s, theater attendance was declining, as television became a more popular entertainment option in the home. “Demographic studies showed that middle aged Americans, especially women, were turned off to the movies. Social unrest, the lure of color TV, other leisure activities, and, according to some, the smut factor in

⁶² Ibid, 90

⁶³ Brown, Bill. “Global Bodies/Postnationalities: Charles Johnson’s Consumer Culture.” 24

movies were the culprits.”⁶⁴ In addition, the studios would lease their films to television networks after their initial theatrical run, which proved to be a profitable secondary market.⁶⁵ Yet, by 1968, the television networks were saturated with feature films and suddenly stopped buying from the studios, forcing a restructuring of the industry. As a result of this, studios reduced branch overhead, combined studio facilities, and distributed jointly in foreign countries. Most importantly, studios could not afford to produce blockbuster pictures.⁶⁶ Instead, studios focused their assets on distribution by contracting independently-made features, which provided opportunities for younger filmmakers and opened the market for foreign imports. During this time, studios distributed Hong Kong martial arts films such as *Five Fingers of Death*, Distributed by Warner Bros in 1972 to American screens. Additionally, a new crop of young, independent filmmakers were able to get their films distributed such as Francis Ford Coppola, Melvin van Peebles, Gordon Parks Jr. and Sr., and Peter Bogdanovich. All of these changes in the industry played against a backdrop of a national fiscal slump that reached recession levels between 1968 and 1970, further reducing the amount of dollars earmarked for entertainment.⁶⁷ Working with reduced resources and a shift in business practices, Hollywood studios at this time were desperate to find something that would be cheap to produce and/or distribute and popular with audiences.

The solution to Hollywood’s financial woes was the black action film and a growing urban audience. In 1971, Melvin Van Peeble’s *Sweet Sweetback Badasssss Song* was made independently for \$500,000, shot in nineteen days, and grossed 10 million. The film features the hero, Sweetback, attacking and nearly killing a pair of police officers who have begun to

⁶⁴ Casper, Drew. *Hollywood Film 1963-1976*, 48

⁶⁵ Londoner, David. “The Changing Economics of Entertainment,” 607

⁶⁶ Londoner, 608

⁶⁷ Casper, 48

brutalize a young black revolutionary. From this central narrative act, the film follows Sweetback as he goes on the run from the police with help from members of the black community. The film is blunt with its militant rhetoric from the opening credits. Van Peebles dedicates the film to “All the Brothers and Sisters Who Have Had Enough of the Man,” and informs the audience that the film is “Rated X by an all-white jury.” The imagery of violence against law enforcement and the hyper-sexuality of Sweetback on display functions to challenge viewers out of their complacency regarding black characters in film. For instance, in the pivotal scene in which Sweetback assaults the two officers, he uses the officer’s handcuffs against them, which can be read as applying the master’s tool against the master. The symbolism of handcuffs as modern-day slave chains are used by Sweetback as a weapon for escape and liberation.⁶⁸ In addition to its content, Van Peebles approach to the production of *Sweetback* was influenced by his experience living in Europe and studying the style of marginal European filmmakers in the 1960s.⁶⁹ This can be seen in the editing of the film. A discontinuity editing style is used throughout the film, which temporarily disorients the viewer in time and space. For example, in a montage sequence, which depicts Sweetback on run from law enforcement, there are three main shots that are utilized in a discontinuity format. The first shot is a tracking shot from the right side of Sweetback showing him running on the side of the road. This is interspersed with close-up shots of an oilrig with a superimposed image of an outline of a human running. Next, a long shot of Sweetback running from his left side is shown. This sequence breaks continuity by violating the 180-degree rule, presenting an image of Sweetback that confuses the viewer as to where in three-dimensional space his character is located. This editing style fits the narrative of the film by disorienting the audience alongside Sweetback’s disorienting journey on the run from

⁶⁸ Cha Jua, Sundiata Keita. “Black Audiences, Blaxploitation and Kung Fu Films, and Challenges to White Celluoid Masculinity,” 209

⁶⁹ Tweedie, James. *The Age of New Waves*. 304.

the law. This editing style worked to separate the film from the classical Hollywood style.

However, the success of the film led to imitations by studios that helped define the blaxploitation genre.

The iconography and themes in *Sweetback* serve as the foundation for the blaxploitation genre. One of the defining characteristics of the genre is the theme of black pride and identity. This is usually asserted through characters that “stick it to The Man,” displaying their defiance of the white male establishment. Sweetback’s narrative arc of escaping from the law encompasses this theme, and, at the same time, the use of pejorative language to describe white men as “crackers” and “honkey” work in similar fashion within the film. The language used is certainly aimed to provoke the black audience in attendance that works to either jolt their viewing experience as a shock or act as a call to arms. Another characteristic of blaxploitation was its low budget aesthetic. The frequent use of handheld camerawork, coupled with 16mm film stock was important in separating the film from its commercial counterparts at the time. However, the studios replicated the use of grainy, handheld cinematography as they worked to merge the racial sensibilities of *Sweetback* with a more broader, mainstream appeal.

Costuming plays a vital role in the blaxploitation genre, often with colorful and elaborate clothing. In *Sweetback*, our titular character wears a gold-colored suit with a navy blue dress shirt throughout the majority of the film. This costume is meant to contrast with flashback scenes of his adolescence that are shown in the beginning of the film. In the opening sequence, a young Sweetback is dressed in a torn, dirty, dark brown, shirt and pants as he works as a servant in a brothel. This costume connotes Sweetback’s background as an orphan and from the working class. The use of the gold suit later in the film conveys his success and a higher social standing. The depiction of vice, which is another trait of the genre, includes Sweetback’s occupation as a

stud in a brothel. The genre correlated the setting of the ghetto with activities such as prostitution, gambling, and drug addiction. Initially, the reason why Sweetback is a stud is because Van Peebles wanted to draw an audience by presenting a unique protagonist.⁷⁰ In subsequent blaxploitation pictures made by studios, representations of vice and crime would be embellished and romanticized. This would lead to the controversy surrounding the genre, as groups such as the NAACP would criticize the representation of urban life in blaxploitation pictures.

Critical reception to *Sweetback* ranged from celebratory to distasteful. Huey Newton devoted an entire issue of the Black Panther party newspaper to the film, hailing it as “the first truly revolutionary Black film made” and as a reflection of the ideological position of the Black Panther party.⁷¹ On the other hand, opponents of the film argued that it romanticized the poverty and misery of the ghetto through its recurring images of prostitutes and drug pushers.⁷² For the struggling Hollywood studios, the controversy surrounding this film only incentivized them to emulate the formula that *Sweetback* provided. Hollywood would replicate and exaggerate the visual and thematic design of *Sweetback* to astounding success in films such as *Shaft* (MGM, 1971) and *Superfly* (Warner Bros, 1972). Beginning around 1974, audiences had started to grow weary of the endless re-workings of the genre. But by this time, Hollywood was able to get back on its financial feet due in large part to the profitable success of its blaxploitation films. In addition, new modes of exhibition such as the multi-screen theaters in malls, and blockbusters like *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* (1977) had the studio system thriving once again.⁷³

⁷⁰ *Classified History X* (Melvin Van Peebles, 1998)

⁷¹ Guerrero, Ed. *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*. 87

⁷² Guerrero. 89

⁷³ Boyd, Todd. 20

Another reason the blaxploitation film found success was due to a growing urban and black audience. That particular demographic had their sensibilities shaped by the media coverage of the civil rights movement and the “ebony saint,” celibate image of Sidney Poitier, who by 1967 was one of the biggest box office stars.⁷⁴ Poitier’s characterization “did not speak to the aspirations or anger of the new black social consciousness that was emerging.”⁷⁵ Thus, black urban audiences were desperate for a more authentic and genuine representation of the themes and people that they were familiar with. In addition to the change in audience desire, Hollywood recognized the consumer power of the black audience. In a 1967 issue of Hollywood’s trade journal *Variety*, it notes that although blacks made up 10 to 15 percent of the entire population, they made up more than 30 percent of the audience in first-run, major-city theaters.⁷⁶ This rise in black movie-going audiences can be attributed to patterns of African-American migration to northern cities after World Wars I and II and of white families heading for the suburbs.⁷⁷

Although Hollywood’s interest in the blaxploitation film was purely financial, this short-lived movement played an important role in providing opportunities for black filmmakers and actors in the future. By the end of the 1970s, the genre cycle had played itself out. A new wave of black filmmakers in the 1990s such as Spike Lee and John Singleton would take up some of the themes and aesthetics that blaxploitation filmmakers had pioneered. Contemporary Hollywood has also on occasion reverted to the blaxploitation formula and its tropes. What is noteworthy about this short period in American film history is the perspective and use of the word “exploitation.” For critics of these films such as the NAACP, the exploitation they saw was through the on-screen representation of sex, violence, and drug use. However, for black

⁷⁴ Landry, Robert. “Films, Poitier and Race Riots.” *Variety*, 1968, 12

⁷⁵ Guerrero, 72

⁷⁶ Lee, Beupree. “One-Third Film Public: Negro. *Variety*, November 1967, 3

⁷⁷ Guerrero, 84

filmmakers and actors, many of who would not have had an opportunity to make films in Hollywood if not for blaxploitation, saw themselves being exploited by the studios. As Jesse Algeron Rhines describes, “most of the financial benefits from films featuring Blacks in this period, however, went to the white directors, producers, writers, distributors, and exhibitors.”⁷⁸ Blaxploitation reflected the experiences of urban, working class African Americans and was used to help Hollywood out of a financial hole. However, once back on their feet, the studios quickly reverted back to their established habits of exclusion towards black filmmakers and actors.

HONG KONG CINEMA

Hong Kong’s history can be viewed as a site of dichotomies: east/west, capitalism/communism, and modernity/tradition. Many of the issues and qualities that result from these binaries carry over into its cinema. The unique characteristics of Hong Kong cinema are directly tied to its history of colonialism and its relationship to Mainland China. Hong Kong became part of the British Crown Colonies in 1841 after China had lost the first Opium War. In 1997, Hong Kong was handed back to China, where it is now labeled as a Special Autonomous Region of the People’s Republic of China. From the perspective of its citizens, the handover to China “was the end of one colonial era, and the beginning of another.”⁷⁹ Historically, Hong Kong had been a refuge for mainland refugees during the Civil War between Mao Zedong and Chang Kai-shek (1927-1949) and the subsequent Cultural Revolution (1965-1976). Thus, to the people of Hong Kong, and specifically at the time of the handover in 1997, China was seen as less of a mother country and more of an oppressive state looking to re-claim its refugees.

⁷⁸ Algeron Rhines, Jesse. *Black Film/White Money*. 50.

⁷⁹ Yau, Esther. *At Full Speed: Hong Kong Cinema in a Borderless World*. 16.

The cinema of Hong Kong has developed rather unique characteristics in relation to other regional cinemas of the Chinese diaspora. Many qualities of the classical Hollywood studio system such as genre filmmaking, vertical integration, and star marketing were strategies used by Hong Kong studios. On the other hand, Hong Kong also developed unique industrial practices in its use of cheap labor, brief theatrical circulation of its films, quick production times, and a patriarchal production system.⁸⁰ From the 1920s until the Communist seizure of power in 1949, the center of Chinese film was in Shanghai. In the years following Mao Zedong's takeover, Mainland Chinese filmmakers and actors fled from Shanghai to Hong Kong as well as other parts of Asia including Taiwan, Singapore, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia. The martial arts film, or *wuxia pian*, was one of the imports that came to Hong Kong within the film professionals that fled from Shanghai. The emigrants who fled to other parts of Asia played significant roles in Hong Kong cinema as developers of viable overseas markets. Part of the success of the Hong Kong film industry was through the distribution of films in the regional market. This characteristic plays an important role in the transnational circuit of kung fu films to America and blaxploitation films to Hong Kong during the 1970s.

Another quality of the Hong Kong film industry that is unique is that they actively pursued co-productions with other film industries including Japan and South Korea during the 1960s. Swordplay films made by the Shaw Brothers studio drew inspiration from spaghetti westerns and Japanese *chambara* (historical swordplay films) genre. Even further, Shaw Brothers staff members were sent to Japan "to study production methods and began to hire Japanese directors and cameramen."⁸¹ These collaborations resulted in a change in narrative, choreography, and style. For instance, one popular narrative trend during this time was the

⁸⁰ Fore, Steve. "Golden Harvest Films and the Hong Kong Movie Industry in the Realm of Globalization." *Velvet Light Trap*.

⁸¹ Bordwell, David. *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment*. 206

conflict between Chinese and Japanese martial artists (kung fu vs. karate). The endings of these films were often changed depending on the country where the film was distributed. In *Zatoichi and the One-Armed Swordsman* (1970), a co-production between Japan and the Shaw Brothers studio, the film ends with Zatoichi winning the final duel in the Japanese version, while the One-Armed Swordsman is victorious for Chinese markets.⁸² Also, South Korea's influence on Hong Kong cinema and the martial arts film is relatively unknown, yet plays a crucial role in establishing the genre in America. In 1973, *Five Fingers of Death* (1972) directed by Chung Chang Hwa became a surprise box office hit in America. Chung, a Korean filmmaker who had previously made action films in Korea, was approached by Run Run Shaw to work for the Shaw Brothers studio. Entranced by the magnitude and scope of the Shaw studio, Chung made the decision to bring his talents to Hong Kong in the hopes of contributing and influencing the South Korean film industry from abroad.⁸³ Over the course of his career, he had made a total of sixteen films in Hong Kong before returning to South Korea to head his own production company. Chung is an important figure in that his transnational sensibility, which inevitably seeped its way into his films, was part of the first wave of kung fu films in America. The Shaw Brothers' studio emulated the vertically integrated system of filmmaking of early Hollywood and proved their model to be successful in overseas markets. However, former Shaw Brothers employee, Raymond Chow would create an equally successful, yet different model in Golden Harvest studios.

Raymond Chow's approach to the global distribution of his films was more frugal and pragmatic compared to the Shaw Brothers. Chow utilized what Steve Fore labeled as a "satellite

⁸² Morris, Meaghan. "Transnational Imagination in Action Cinema: Hong Kong and the Making of Global Popular Culture." 185

⁸³ Kim, Dong Hoon. "The Making of Transnational Action Genres: An Interview with Chung Chang Hwa."

model of production,”⁸⁴ which allowed quasi-independent production teams creative autonomy while ownership belonged to Golden Harvest. Chow would also be aggressive in leasing studio facilities and movie theaters in Taiwan, Malaysia, and Singapore, which were the biggest markets in the Chinese speaking diaspora. The laissez-faire capitalism that post-colonial Hong Kong had adopted also allowed Chow to develop relationships with international banks, including Bank of America, which allowed him to secure foreign capital and more freely pursue co-productions.

Hong Kong cinema, by the 1970s, had all of the necessary ingredients for the overseas success of the kung fu craze in America. The Shaw Brothers studios had established an overseas distribution network and had experience in intercultural exchange and co-productions. Raymond Chow and his Golden Harvest studio had also taken advantage of international venture capital. Pioneered in Shanghai and mastered in Hong Kong, the kung fu film genre became a vehicle for exploring the complex identity of the Hong Kong people that had been shaped by the British Empire and Mainland Chinese culture. When the kung fu film genre took off in the 1970s, a number of co-productions between Hollywood and Hong Kong emerged, initiating a dialogue that would speak to the economic hardships that would impact the decade.

ENTER KUNG FU: 1973

1973 marks an important year for the martial arts film in America. During the week of May 16, the top three films at the box office were *Fist of Fury* (Lo Wei, Golden Harvest), *Deep Thrust* aka *Lady Whirlwind* (Huang Fung, Golden Harvest), and *Five Fingers of Death* (Chung Chang Hwa, Shaw Brothers). One month later, the week of June 20, 1973 is the high point of the

⁸⁴ Fore, Steve. “Golden Harvest Films and the Hong Kong Movie Industry in the Realm of Globalization.” *Velvet Light Trap*. 44

martial arts dominance of the US box office charts as five Hong Kong kung fu films appeared in the top 50.⁸⁵ The fact that three Asian films of the same genre reached the top of the US box office is remarkable and certainly took the film industry by surprise. By the end of 1973, 38 Hong Kong films were purchased by US distributors, grossing \$11 million altogether.⁸⁶

The kung fu craze was not exclusive to film. Before 1973, other forms of popular media anticipated the kung fu movie craze such as comic books, television, magazines, dime novels, and schools of “oriental self-defense.”⁸⁷ In October of 1972, ABC premiered *Kung Fu*, starring David Carradine, which followed the adventures of a half-Chinese Shaolin monk wandering the Old West of America in search of his half-brother. 1973, however, marks the turning point in the explosion of kung fu’s popularity across mainstream entertainments, primarily in film. It is important to note that Americans had been interested in the Asian martial arts long before the arrival of Hong Kong films. However, the popularity of the kung fu films put a spotlight on the ways that the martial arts have existed and functioned in America and sparked mainstream interest in the practice of Asian martial arts. Faubion Bowers called it “America’s obsession with the martial arts,” and describes it as:

“In America, practice of these imported exotica has spread everywhere – to college campuses, police academies, prisons, drug rehabilitation centers, and well beyond the expected health clubs and physical culture institutes which offer private tuition in fighting arts from Asia. The clientele is no longer limited to the sports-oriented heavyweight or body-beautiful cultist. Nowadays, you find classes cross-sectioned with doctors, lawyers, merchants, and architects.”⁸⁸

Many Hong Kong imports resonated with black audiences and were often paired in double billings with blaxploitation films at theatres. For example, in an ethnographic study of an

⁸⁵ Desser, David. “The Kung Fu Craze: Hong Kong Cinema’s First American Reception” 23

⁸⁶ Bordwell, David. *Planet Hong Kong*. 84

⁸⁷ Flanigan, B.P. “Kung Fu Crazy: Or the Invasion of Chop Suey Easterns.” 10

⁸⁸ Bowers, Faubion. “Ah, So! Karate or the Monkey Wrench?: An Orientalist Investigates America’s Obsession with the Martial Arts,” *Esquire*, August 1973, 72.

inner-city theater in New Brunswick, New Jersey, 32 blaxploitation and 27 martial arts films were screened between May 1974 and June 1975.⁸⁹ As a result of these pairings, many blaxploitation films began to also feature the martial arts in their action scenes and a few American production companies collaborated with Hong Kong film studios. As the popularity of martial arts films increased over the course of the decade, Hollywood and European film studios also began to work together with Hong Kong studios in creating co-productions. I argue that the Asian martial arts film ventured into American cinema on the heels of the blaxploitation film movement. In 1973, the blaxploitation movement was facing harsh criticism for its representation of drug use, violence, and sexuality. The constant themes taken from the crime and gangster genres were becoming stale for audiences, and the kung fu film provided a new visual component for the blaxploitation genre.

The iconography and prominent themes of the kung fu genre resonate deeply with American audiences in 1973. *Fist of Fury* exemplified the characteristics of the kung fu genre, which I argue is the reason for it being the number one film the week of May 16th, 1973 and regarded as the most defining film of the kung fu craze. The plot of the film is relatively simple. Chen Zhen (Bruce Lee) returns to his old school in Japanese occupied Shanghai to find his teacher dead from mysterious causes. He investigates the death further to find that a spy from a Japanese dojo poisoned his teacher and Chen single-handedly takes revenge on the dojo's head master and his accomplices. The revenge narrative serves as the impetus to explore the themes of anti-colonialism and the representation of the working class hero.

In *Fist of Fury*, Chen is depicted as a working class hero fighting against a foreign, colonizing threat represented by the Japanese. The representation of the Japanese as an occupying threat is made clear from the beginning of the film. At the funeral of Chen's teacher, a

⁸⁹ Cope, Demetrius. "Anatomy of a Blaxploitation Theater." *Jump Cut*, no. 9, 1975. 23.

group of Japanese martial arts students interrupt the ceremony in order to give the remaining Chinese students a framed sign that reads “Sick Man of Asia.” This is a reference to China in the late 19th century in which they were forced to sign unequal treaties that culminated in the Japanese invasion of China during World War II.⁹⁰ The purpose of this sign in the film functions in two ways: it is a reminder for Chinese audiences of the Japanese colonial rule, and it acts as a narrative cause for Chen to return the sign to the Japanese dojo and prove he is not a “sick man of Asia” by beating up all members of the school. Another example of the colonial threat is when Chen attempts to enter a fenced garden, but is not allowed entry because of another sign that reads “No Dogs or Chinese Allowed.” Furthermore, Chen is angered that dogs are allowed entry to the garden if they are on a leash. A Japanese onlooker sees this situation and condescendingly tells Chen that if he acts like a dog, he will accompany him inside the garden. In response, Chen kicks the sign into the air, and with another kick, breaks the sign in half. The metaphor equating Chinese with dogs, and the symbolism of ownership as demonstrated by the image of a dog on the leash work to further illustrate the colonial themes present in the film.

One reason why the theme of colonialism and the film’s explicit anti-colonial message resonated with audiences both foreign and domestic is because of the negative views of colonial regimes worldwide. The civil rights movement in America helped to bring attention to the resistance of Apartheid in South Africa. African American civil rights leaders empathized and worked in solidarity with South African resistance leaders who saw the same parallels of institutional racism abroad. America’s involvement in the Vietnam conflict also heightened the awareness of colonialism in Asia. The arrival of the kung fu film on American screens also coincides with the U.S. troop withdrawals in Vietnam in 1972 and 1973. The failure of American forces in Vietnam was a bitter pill for many Americans to swallow. And, unlike World War II,

⁹⁰ Scott, David. *China and the International System*. 2008. 9

Hollywood did virtually nothing in support of the military intervention. David Desser argues that the immediate appeal of the kung fu imports was to mainstream audiences that were struggling with the legacy of the Vietnam War and “those subcultural, disillusioned, disaffected audiences who had opposed the war, or, who were more radically and generally alienated from mainstream culture.”⁹¹ It would seem that the audience in 1973 gravitated toward the strong anti-colonial theme of *Fist of Fury*.

The use of kung fu in *Fist of Fury* serves as a metaphor for the working class. As Stuart Kaminsky points out in his study of the kung fu film, working class heroes have narrative motives that are either personal or familial. “The tools available to him are never guns and seldom swords (which are a class above him) but, instead, his own body.”⁹² The revenge narrative in *Fist of Fury* propels Chen to use his expertise in kung fu against the Japanese dojo that poisoned his teacher. The use of hand-to-hand combat in the kung fu film also works to distinguish this particular genre from the Japanese samurai film, where the figure of the samurai is coded as middle-class in attitude, costume, and action. The samurai is motivated in service of his retainer and usually acts in the interest of the greater common good.⁹³ The kung fu genre’s interest in representing lower social classes fighting against oppression is one reason that the kung fu film was so attractive to urban audiences, compared to the Japanese martial arts films being offered to American audiences at this time. Furthermore, the black nationalist tropes and codes related to themes of resistance and violent retribution preconditioned the African American audiences for the coming of the kung fu craze.

The *Nunchaku* makes its cinematic debut in *Fist of Fury* and is featured in the majority of Bruce Lee’s films that support working-class themes. The weapon is made of two hardwood

⁹¹ Desser, David. “The Martial Arts Film in the 1990s.” 104

⁹² Kaminsky, Stuart. “The Kung Fu Film and the Musical.” 77

⁹³ Kaminsky, 75.

cylindrical pieces connected by a silk cord or metal chain and is used to ensnare weapons or limbs, to poke or strike an enemy, and for defensive parrying and deflection. The origin of the weapon derives from Okinawa, yet the actual object from which it originates from is steeped in controversy. Some historians have suggested that the *nunchaku* descends from an agricultural flail used by rice farmers.⁹⁴ Others believe that it was either derived from a horse bit, or a tool for barking banana trees, or was once used as a night watchmen's rattle.⁹⁵ Despite these differing points of origin, the *nunchaku* is an Okinawan weapon, which can be located within its history of colonial struggle and class oppression. Lee's wife, Linda Lee Caldwell notes his extensive research done before filming, stating that "his library contained many books about weapons, both ancient and modern, Oriental and Western, and he saw the *nunchaku* as historically justified."⁹⁶ Okinawa, formerly known as Ryukyu, shares similar characteristics with Hong Kong in their shared history of cultural exchange with China and colonial conquest by Japan. In the late fourteenth century, China's Ming court established a tributary relationship with the three kingdoms of Ryukyu and as a result of this interaction, the Chinese martial arts was one of the cultural assets introduced to the Okinawan people.⁹⁷ In 1609, Japan invaded Okinawa and subsequently colonized the islands, imposing a strict ban on weaponry and prompted the Okinawan people to develop a system of self-defense by assimilating the Chinese martial arts that had been in Okinawa for two centuries and would form the basis for modern karate. The *nunchaku* would be created during this time of Japanese colonization as a weapon that could be

⁹⁴ Draeger, Donn, Robert Smith. *Comprehensive Asian Fighting Arts*. 64

⁹⁵ Levitas, Alex. "The Real History of the Nunchaku." http://www.nunchaku-do.com/histor_e.htm

⁹⁶ Lee Linda. *The Bruce Lee Story*. 116

⁹⁷ Kato, M.T. *From Kung Fu to Hip Hop*. 42

hidden in plain sight and used by the laboring class against the samurai in self-defense situations.⁹⁸

In *Fist of Fury*, Bruce Lee transfers the historical legacy of the *nunchaku* to the context of Chinese anti-colonial resistance against the Japanese. The first scene in which the *nunchaku* is used is when Chen visits the Japanese dojo for the first time to return the “Sick Man of Asia” sign. The fight scene begins with hand-to-hand combat against twenty-four Japanese students. The students form a circle around Chen and then attack him one by one and two at a time. He fights the opponents off successfully in the beginning of the fight, but realizes he is outnumbered when he is kicked in the back. This is when he pulls out the *Nunchaku* from his waistband. In a low angle shot, Lee twirls the *nunchaku*, which forces the group of students to jump back in surprise and confusion. The students begin to attack from all sides, to which Chen swings the *nunchaku*, hitting the students in back of him. During another standoff in this scene, attackers again surround Chen. He rolls to the ground and in a sitting position, swings the *nunchaku* horizontally, attacking the ankles of his opponents. The direction and movement of this swing recalls the weapon’s origin as an Okinawan rice flail.

In the climactic battle between Lee’s Chen Zhen and the Japanese dojo leader Suzuki, Chen uses the *nunchaku* against the long sword (*katana*) of Suzuki. During this moment in the battle, Chen uses the *nunchaku* to block the sword attacks of Suzuki and offensively strike at his opponent’s head and legs, while also effectively disarming him of his sword. The symbolism of each combatants weapon does not only help to distinguish between nationalities, but also works to distinguish the difference of social class between Chen and Suzuki. The incorporation of the *nunchaku* in this film illuminates the historical relationship between the Chinese and Okinawan people and their shared past of colonial oppression from Japan. Furthermore, the double identity

⁹⁸ Kanazawa, Hirokazu. *Nunchaku*. 11, and Ed Parker. *Ed Parker’s Guide to the Nunchaku*. 11-13

of the *nunchaku* as a farming tool and weapon is evocative of other instances of struggle against Japan's colonial conquests in Korea, the Philippines, and Vietnam.⁹⁹

The popularity of *Fist of Fury* and the *nunchaku* changed the iconography of the martial arts genre. Before *Fist of Fury*, traditional Chinese and Japanese weaponry had been featured in the genre. Examples of this include long swords or spears. After the success of *Fist of Fury*, Okinawan weapons were often featured in the genre such as the *tonfa* and *sai* in lieu of traditional Chinese and Japanese arms. The significance of these weapons is that they are smaller in size and are often used defensively against longer weapons such as swords and spears. Also, they do not have sharp, metal edges, which can be used as a lethal device. The symbolism of social class is evident in the iconography of weaponry in the martial arts genre. Long swords and spears represent the upper classes while shorter, defensively crafted weapons are symbolic of the working and oppressed classes. The popularity of *Fist of Fury* and Bruce Lee would propel the *nunchaku* into popular culture. While the martial arts genre shifted to utilize this new iconography, it did so without its historical significance. As a result, it became more of a gimmick and novelty than symbol of the working class.

American audiences gravitated toward *Fist of Fury* because of the film's depiction of an oppressive government and economy. In the film, Chen takes lawless action against the Japanese because he is aware that local law enforcement work on behalf of the ruling Japanese class. When a Chinese detective shows up at the kung fu school asking about Chen and the recent attacks on the Japanese dojo, the detective states that the Japanese Consulate is demanding action from the police department and that he is feeling pressured by them to arrest Chen. Later on, the same detective visits Suzuki, who states that it is difficult to arrest Chen because there is no evidence that he committed any crime. In response, Suzuki states, "proof or no proof, I want

⁹⁹ Kato, 45.

him! Or, I'll report you to the consulate." Here we can see a clear power dynamic between the Japanese and the Chinese government. The Chinese detective is beholden to the Japanese. In America, Richard Nixon's domestic policies explicitly worked against the working class in America. During the winter and spring of 1973, the economic picture began to darken through Nixon's systematic dismantling of the social programs headed by his predecessor, Lyndon Johnson. Nixon's proposed 1974 budget, released in 1973, included cuts and eliminations to education spending, hospital construction, and urban renewal. In addition to these cuts, Nixon proposed an overhaul of the nation's criminal code and asked Congress to restore the death penalty.¹⁰⁰ The rhetorical reasoning behind these budget cuts and proposals to Congress seemed to be assaults on the perceived pathologies of welfare: dependency, a decline of personal responsibility, and the breakdown of the moral fabric of American society. Further depressing the welfare state was a greatly diminished version of the GI Bill waiting for returning troops from Vietnam. The gap between the working class and the rich increased as government spending shrank. The result of this led to reduced municipal budgets that could not alleviate the increasing problems of the inner city.¹⁰¹ For minority groups living in the urban areas, it would seem that the US government had turned their backs against them. Like the depiction of the Chinese in *Fist of Fury*, they felt powerless which would further solidify the bond between the kung fu film and its representation of the working class hero fighting against oppression.

Across the Pacific, the economic picture mirrored that of America. When asked to define their audience, a Shaw Brothers employee stated, "There are a lot of poor people, a lot of illiterate people in Hong Kong... they go to the films."¹⁰² The gap between rich and poor is evident in the central skyscrapers of the city and the 300,000 people residing just outside of the

¹⁰⁰ Killen, Andreas. *1973: Nervous Breakdown*. 207-208

¹⁰¹ Killen, 209.

¹⁰² Glaessner, Verina. *Kung Fu: Cinema of Vengeance*. 15.

city in squatter huts, temporary housing, or resettlement estates that had degenerated into slum blocks ruled by gangs. Singapore, Taiwan, and other areas of the Chinese diaspora were also in the midst of similar economic depressions.¹⁰³

Fist of Fury also served as a vehicle for Bruce Lee's personal politics. No other martial arts star represented the plight of the working class better than Bruce Lee himself. Born in 1940 in San Francisco, Lee and his family moved back to Hong Kong where he became a successful child actor. Throughout his childhood, Hong Kong experienced a series of political upheavals: the Japanese Occupation (1941-1945), Mao Zedong's communist takeover of Mainland China (1949), and the resulting influx of refugees to Hong Kong. The politically unstable setting of Hong Kong played a crucial role in the development of Lee's identity as Chinese and it also provided the impetus for his parents to send him back to the U.S. to opt for American citizenship. Traveling between Hong Kong and the U.S. led to him being fluent in both Cantonese and English, a skill that would become useful in launching his career in both Hong Kong and Hollywood. With American citizenship in one hand, and superior martial arts skill in the other, he would be able to traverse both Hong Kong and Hollywood film industries and appeal to both sides of the Pacific as a blend of East and West.¹⁰⁴ In Hong Kong, Lee was persuaded by Raymond Chow to join Golden Harvest studio for a two-picture deal. His films would reflect a strong sense of Chinese nationalism, while, at the same time, demonstrating a peculiar sense of his transnational, multicultural, and postcolonial identity.

Throughout Lee's filmography, the representation of the working class and the theme of revenge against the ruling class took center stage. In his first film with Golden Harvest entitled

¹⁰³ Glaessner, 15

¹⁰⁴ Balling, Fredda Dudley. "Bruce Lee: Love Knows No Geography." In *Little Words of the Dragon Interviews*, 38

*The Big Boss*¹⁰⁵, Lee fights on behalf of Chinese immigrant factory workers in Thailand against gangsters and an evil Chinese capitalist. As mentioned earlier, Lee's second film, *Fist of Fury*, deals with the Japanese occupation of Shanghai in a remote past. In Lee's directorial debut, *Way of the Dragon*, the plot is similar to *The Big Boss* in that it depicts the hardships of expatriate Chinese life. Lee's character defeats Italian gangsters in order to restore peace and safety for his Chinese immigrant family. Since the communist takeover of Mainland China, many Chinese people have been displaced abroad and could easily identify with the sense of nationalism invoked by Lee's protagonists. Stephen Teo notes that this is a particularly abstract brand of nationalism that appealed to the Chinese diasporic audiences.

“The nationalism Lee's films invoked is better understood as an abstract kind of cultural nationalism, manifesting itself as an emotional wish among Chinese people living outside China to identify with China and things Chinese, even though they may not have been born there or speak its national language or dialects. They wish to affirm themselves and fulfill their cultural aspirations by identifying with the ‘mother culture,’ producing a rather abstract and a political type of nationalism.”¹⁰⁶

Lee's multi-racial cast added to the nationalist and ethnocentric messages in his films. According to Lee's wife, he purposefully cast westerners for both aesthetic and commercial reasons. Commercially, he believed that his films would appeal more to Chinese audiences if their hero conquered people of color. Aesthetically, Lee wanted to work with professional martial artists rather than actors or dancers in the hopes of choreographing more authentic and realistic fight scenes.¹⁰⁷ This last reason is also tied to Lee's own style of martial arts that he created, called jeet kune do, which borrows elements from a variety of martial arts. In creating

¹⁰⁵ Bey Logan notes that American distributors wanted more exploitative titles and often renamed films to make them more attractive. *The Big Boss* was retitled to *The Chinese Connection* after the success of William Friedkin's *The French Connection* (1971). *Fist of Fury* was deemed suitable, but ‘fist’ was replaced by ‘fists.’ While in transit, the labels for *The Big Boss* and *Fist of Fury* were switched and so *The Big Boss* is called *Fists of Fury* and *Fist of Fury* is called *The Chinese Connection*. This can be quite confusing so I have used the original titles for these two films. From Bey Logan, *Hong Kong Action Cinema*. 31-32.

¹⁰⁶ Teo, Stephen. *Hong Kong Cinema: The Extra Dimensions*. 111

¹⁰⁷ Lee, Linda. *The Bruce Lee Story*. 124

jeet kune do, Lee befriended martial artists across disciplines and nationalities such as Dan Inosanto, Jhoon Lee, Taky Kimura, and Chuck Norris. He was also one of the first Chinese in America to openly train people of other races. His friendships across races and nationalities opened more opportunities for Lee to cast foreign martial artists in order to improve the quality and authenticity of fight scenes in his films.

Ironically, foreign audiences responded enthusiastically to Lee's films despite the nationalist tones of his films. The racial conflicts present in his films (Sino-Japanese, Sino-Italian, Sino-Russian) partially explain Lee's appeal among third world nations whose audiences had felt scorned by western imperialism. At the thematic level, Lee represents the working class struggle through a binary approach. As Hsiung-Ping Chiao observes, "Lee's films contain only two opposing classes – blue collar workers and capitalists (sometimes transformed as imperialists)... the leisured middle class, which has no use for kung fu, is missing from the universe."¹⁰⁸ The disappearance of the middle class in Lee's films not only highlights the power struggle between the ruling and working class, but also helps to justify the use of the martial arts as the only option available to fight back against class exploitation. Alex Ben Block, writing for a special issue of *Esquire* on the martial arts echoes Lee's appeal to foreign audiences:

"Not just Asians but also young black African Americans or young minorities of all kinds, even for Caucasians who came from lower economic backgrounds, Bruce Lee was a hero. He represented someone who was able to break out of all the things that seem to bind us in society and keep us from becoming a success."¹⁰⁹

However, it was not only the representation of the working class, underdog hero that spoke to foreign audiences. Lee's distinct brand of Chinese nationalism depicted resistance to western culture, which was similar to the logic of the black arts movement, part of the black power

¹⁰⁸ Chiao, Hsiung-Ping. "Bruce Lee: His Influence on the Evolution of the Kung Fu Genre." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*. 36

¹⁰⁹ Ben Block, Alex. "The Hong Kong Style: Part I," *Esquire*. August, 1973, 77

movement that began in the 1960's. In conjunction with this movement, blacks identified with their African mother culture through folk literature, music, and art. Lee's strong nationalist sensibilities most likely resonated with the sentiment of black people who had been deprived of racial pride.

Although Lee was a worldwide star throughout his life, his death in July of 1973 created opportunities to cash in on his image. Within months of his passing, Hong Kong filmmakers would churn out dozens of loosely based bio-pics and films that purportedly show Lee back in action starring actors under pseudonyms such as Bruce Le, Bruce Lai, and Bruce Li. In Hollywood, studios would also search for way to continue to capitalize on the kung fu craze that was sweeping the nation. Rather than casting clones of Bruce Lee, American film studios instead used Lee's co-stars. Chuck Norris, who starred alongside Lee in *Return of the Dragon* (1972), would go on to find success in more action-oriented martial arts films in America. By the end of the decade, Norris would take on starring roles, often in law-enforcement-based action films and in the 1980's in multiple war-themed action films. Jim Kelly, who co-starred in *Enter the Dragon*, would continue to work with Warner Brothers studios to make martial arts films set in urban America and with plots that emulated *Enter the Dragon*. The success of Chuck Norris and Jim Kelly in American films would be a sign that the martial arts genre was transitioning away from Hong Kong. By 1974, it seemed as though the height of the kung fu craze in Hong Kong had passed. Hong Kong theaters were losing money as a result of rising land values and a steady decline in attendance. In the Chinese-speaking diaspora, things were not going so well either. In Taiwan, television was proving to be a serious rival. Thailand had instituted a quota system for foreign imports, and censorship began to increase in Singapore, which significantly lowered the

number of films that Hong Kong could import.¹¹⁰ Also, the South Vietnam market was lost completely as a result of the Communist victory in 1975.¹¹¹ During this period of stagnation in the Chinese diaspora, American-made martial arts films would take the baton and present a new perspective on the genre, while preserving some of its original themes.

CROSSING OVER: THE BLACK KUNG FU GENRE

By the mid-1970s, the blaxploitation and kung fu film would merge together to form a sub-genre that would result in Hong Kong and Hollywood co-productions, parodies, and the end of the kung fu craze. The peak of this cross-cultural relationship might be summed up by Carl Douglas' proclamation that "everybody was kung fu fighting," in his 1974 disco hit single. As Amy Abugo Ongiri also contends, "images of Bruce Lee were at least as popular in many black homes as were images of Martin Luther King, possibly even more so."¹¹² Furthermore, black audiences viewed the portrayal of "the body as a raw tool for the articulation of violent retribution against societal inequities and personal wrongs."¹¹³ Both Hollywood and Hong Kong studios were keen to the increased interest from black audiences. In this section I will outline how Hollywood studios and filmmakers made sense of the kung fu craze while also folding in elements of blaxploitation into their films. At first glance, one would think that the merging of blaxploitation and the kung fu film would be prosperous considering the shared audience and sudden interest in both genres. However, the films that would emerge under what I will refer to as the black kung fu genre would demonstrate an incomplete understanding of certain integral

¹¹⁰ Glaessner, 125.

¹¹¹ Teo, Stephen. "The 1970's: Movement and Transition." *The Cinema of Hong Kong*. 93

¹¹² Ongiri, Amy Abugo. "He Wanted to Be Just Like Bruce Lee': African Americans, Kung Fu Theater, and Cultural Exchange at the Margins," *Journal of Asian American Studies*. February 2002, 33.

¹¹³ Ongiri, Amy Abugo. "Bruce Lee in the Ghetto Connection: Kung Fu Theater and African Americans Reinventing Culture at the Margins." 256.

facets of the martial arts film. For instance, having skilled martial artists either in the starring role or designing the choreography was a staple in the Hong Kong films. Also, fight sequences would also play a distinctive role in advancing the narrative. The black kung fu films lacked the experienced talent that Hong Kong had fostered for decades. This, coupled with a saturation of the market, would eventually lead to the black kung fu genre's demise.

The earliest depiction that would anticipate the black kung fu genre was the film *Superfly* (Gordon Parks Jr., 1972). The film tells the story of Youngblood Priest, a low-level cocaine dealer looking to escape the life of drug dealing, who needs to make one last big drop in order to do so. In a scene roughly halfway through the picture, Priest is shown sparring in both judo and karate as a yellow belt, displaying his beginner status. Priest and his instructor are practicing in a dark, empty gymnasium with weightlifting equipment in the background. During this scene, the only dialogue occurs near the end in which the instructor remarks "You are getting better, Priest. Let's try it again." Priest responds with "Okay. But this is it. I got to meet Georgia." The scene itself stands out within the narrative of the film because it is abrupt and happens without any reason or cause for why Priest would train in the martial arts. The editing between this scene and the next foreshadows the physical confrontation that Priest will have with the police. The next scene depicts Freddie, one of Priest's dealers, being interrogated by the police. In this scene, he betrays Priest by providing information about Priest to the police officers. The transition between the martial arts scene and this interrogation scene is a graphic match, which is used to signify a relationship between two objects that are being matched. The martial arts sequence ends with Priest's instructor, located on the left side of the screen, throwing a kick, and Priest beginning to throw a punch back. This cuts to a police officer, located off-screen right striking Freddie in the head. The relationship of this edit suggest that Priest is striking back at Freddie for ratting him

out to the police and it also positions both Priest and the police as fighters that represent different moral take on their violence. Priest is shown as using the martial arts as a form of recreation, while the police are shown striking a prisoner for a confession. The climax of the film features Priest confronting the corrupt cops that have double-crossed him. He engages in a slow-motion hand-to-hand combat sequence in which he utilizes a few of the martial arts moves that he had practiced in the training sequence earlier. For example, he uses a block and punch combination and a shoulder throw that was also shown in the previous training sequence. The small use of the martial arts in *Superfly* exemplifies blaxploitation's embrace of the Asian martial arts months before the kung fu craze.

At the thematic core of *Superfly* is Priest's desire for individual freedom and to escape the life of the ghetto and from the people who benefit from his occupation. Thus, Priest's martial arts skill is arguably a vehicle for his journey for liberation. While this film is similar to *Sweetback* in its theme of freedom, *Sweetback* relied on the efforts of the black community and his sexual prowess to achieve his goal of escaping across the Mexican border. As a drug dealer, Priest is on the fringes of the black community and demonstrates self-reliance by way of his profession. With the exception of his girlfriend, every character, friend and foe, tries to dissuade him from quitting, arguing that being a drug dealer is the best he could possibly achieve in his life. Although the release of *Superfly* would spark controversy from critics who complained that the film glorifies drug use (Priest snorts cocaine in every scene wearing a pendant that doubles as a cocaine spoon) and the profession of drug dealing, yet, it also highlights one of the fundamental principles of the martial arts that have been used for centuries. *Superfly* would act as the precursor to the full merger of blaxploitation and kung fu in the coming years.

Jim Kelly and the blaxploitation films that he starred in would expand upon the iconography that Priest and *Superfly* generated. His co-starring role alongside Bruce Lee in *Enter the Dragon* would jump-start his acting career and in the wake of Lee's death, Kelly would be groomed to be his successor. In *Enter the Dragon*, Kelly plays Williams, a black martial artist summoned to compete at a deadly tournament hosted by a suspected criminal. On his way to the airport, two white policemen confront Williams and attempt to beat him up with batons for no reason. In a scene reminiscent of *Sweet Sweetback*, Williams knocks them both out and steals their police car and drives away. Throughout flashbacks, the audience learns that Williams is a black nationalist. In one flashback, he is training at an all black dojo, which is hanging a flag of red, black, and green, with the silhouette of the continent of Africa with a cobra emblem, suggestive of the Symbionese Liberation Army, a left-wing revolutionary organization. His political consciousness is clearly established through the film as he comments on the poverty stricken shanties surrounding the Hong Kong harbor by saying: "ghettos are the same all over the world; they stink." His character in *Enter the Dragon* is partially modeled off of Muhammad Ali. While his character associated with the black power movement, he is quick-talking and witty. When asked if he is prepared to face defeat at the hands of the main antagonist, he replies in typical Ali fashion, "I'll be too busy lookin' good."

After the death of Bruce Lee, Kelly would team up once again with the production team behind *Enter the Dragon* in *Black Belt Jones* (1974) starring in the leading role. This partnership was certainly meant to cash in on the Bruce Lee fandom and popularity as plots were modeled after *Enter the Dragon* and intertextual references to the film are spread throughout each of Kelly's subsequent films. Although Kelly would never be able to replicate the success of *Enter*

the Dragon in his films, his iconic image, which features a martial arts uniform and Afro hairstyle would be synonymous with black martial artists to this very day.

Black women were also actively involved in the blaxploitation movement and, like their male counterparts, embodied a new and alternative representation that captivated urban audiences. They were also at the forefront of the crossover between the martial arts film and blaxploitation. Actresses such as Pam Grier, Tamara Dobson, and Jeannie Bell starred in films that featured black heroines enacting revenge and participating in fight choreography involving the martial arts. These films include *Foxy Brown* (starring Grier), *Cleopatra Jones* (starring Dobson), and *TNT Jackson* (starring Bell). These films remain significant in the history of black female representation because they depart from the stereotypical image of the mammy and exotic other, which were prevalent in Hollywood pictures prior to the blaxploitation movement. In particular, 1973 marked the first time that American audiences saw a black woman in a non-servitude role.¹¹⁴ In the kung fu genre, Chinese women have been performing in the starring role since its inception, sometimes even cross-dressing as the male hero. When the blaxploitation movement picked up elements from the kung fu genre, the legacy of Chinese heroines did not go unnoticed. The main female stars of blaxploitation, particularly Grier and Dobson, would inject martial arts stunts and choreography into their films. For example, in the sequel to *Cleopatra Jones* entitled *Cleopatra Jones and the Casino of Gold* (1975), a co-production between Warner Bros. and Shaw Bros. studios, the majority of the film was shot on location in Hong Kong. The production team employed Hong Kong stuntmen and choreographers for this co-production.

The blaxploitation heroine's use of the martial arts in their films acts to further distinguish their performances as non-western and parallel to their Chinese counterparts. This can be seen in the way that these heroines are not only proficient in their martial abilities but

¹¹⁴ Sims, Yvonne. *Women of Blaxploitation*, 8

differentiate themselves from their opposition through their abilities. The types of roles that these women portrayed were generally revenge-driven and served to protect a family or community, so there is a strong thematic element of sisterhood and maternity. While progressive in its representation of black femininity, these films also came under scrutiny by its critics for the gratuitous depiction of sexuality and nudity, which was par for the course relative to other exploitation, low-budget films of the time. This contradiction was often hard to maneuver in this sub-genre as heroines required physical strength and brawn as well as sex appeal in order to gain access and information to rid the community of drugs.

A decade later, in the mid 1980s, a new generation of Chinese heroines would find success in blending the thematic and urban elements of the blaxploitation film genre with the Hong Kong action aesthetic in what would be known as the girls-with-guns subgenre. This is a significant example of the cross-cultural, transnational influence of the Hong Kong martial arts genre coming full-circle. As I have noted earlier, blaxploitation films were heavily influenced by the kung fu films that were screened beside them in urban movie houses, borrowing thematic and stylistic elements while injecting their own social and political context into their films. Years later, blaxploitation's influence would impact Hong Kong with the girls with guns subgenre, featuring martial arts heroines in urban settings. There are stark similarities between these two groups of films such as the theme of sisterhood and the protection of community and civil order. However, in the blaxploitation films, heroines were objectified and sexualized, while the Hong Kong heroines were most often chaste and not sexualized. On the other hand, the martial arts choreography is much more intricate with the added gun shootouts amplified with automatic weapons loaded with infinite rounds of bullets.

The blaxploitation movement provided opportunities in front of the camera that would not otherwise been available to people of color. For instance, since the late 1960's, more black athletes were allowed to attend major universities and the professional sports leagues also began seeing an increase in the numbers of black athletes in their respective sports.¹¹⁵ When the popularity of blaxploitation films began rising just a few years later, Hollywood was in need of talent to fulfill the roles required by this burgeoning genre and looked towards the sports world. This is not new ground as Hollywood has cast top black athletes in the past including Woody Strode in the 1940s and 50s, and Jim Brown in the late 60s. However, during the blaxploitation movement, more black athletes were cast in starring roles and would parlay that into careers as actors. Fred Williamson, Carl Weathers, and OJ Simpson are all examples of former professional athletes who have found success in Hollywood as a result of blaxploitation creating more opportunities for black talent. In addition to athletes, fashion models such as Tamara Dobson and Jeannie Bell would find success as blaxploitation heroines. Martial artists such as Jim Kelly would also make a name for themselves in Hollywood. Yet, the career of Ron Van Clief, also a decorated black martial artist, would follow in a different path to star in black kung fu films made in Hong Kong.

RON VAN CLIEF AND THE LEGACY OF BLACK MARTIAL ARTS

On December 16, 1994 at the Expo Center Pavilion in Tulsa Oklahoma, a fifty-one year old Ron Van Clief, dressed in American flag shorts, participated in the fourth UFC event entitled "Revenge of the Warriors." Although he would lose his match to the twenty-seven year old and three-time returning UFC champion, Royce Gracie, Van Clief would fondly reminisce about his

¹¹⁵ Boyd, 168.

last full-contact fight as a wonderful experience.¹¹⁶ The early life of Ron Van Clief mirrors that of many African Americans growing up during the Civil Rights era and involved struggling with racism in all aspects of daily life. His career in both Hollywood and Hong Kong is emblematic of the intertwining relationship between the two industries in the 1970s. He was the first black actor to star in a Hong Kong film and later on, became a stuntman and choreographer for Hollywood films. Additionally, his participation in the Ultimate Fighting Championship in 1994 and subsequent employment by the company as its commissioner illustrates the UFC's strategy to appeal to the blaxploitation-era audiences in their early years. By tracing through some key biographical events, I argue that Ron Van Clief's life is emblematic of the enduring relationship between the philosophical ideals of the Asian martial arts and the African American cultural movements. It was also this connection that early UFC events and marketing materials were trying to evoke.

Ronald Van Clief was born in 1943 in Brooklyn, New York and grew up in a working-class household. From a young age, he started to practice a variety of different martial arts, notably from ex-military members who studied and brought their knowledge of Asian martial arts from overseas.¹¹⁷ Van Clief enlisted in the US Marine Corps at the age of eighteen where he experienced racism from his superior officers and fellow soldiers. However, it was upon finishing basic training and after a night out near the basic training base in Parris Island North Carolina, when he experienced a moment of true hatred in which members of the Klu Klux Klan captured and hanged him. In *The Hanged Man*, an interesting memoir that is about two-thirds biography and one-third autobiography of Van Clief, the event is described in detail:

¹¹⁶ Van Clief, Ron, and Sparky Parks. *The Hanged Man*, 208.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 22

“His face was mangled and blood gleamed from the light reflecting on his face as he twirled and they stretched him. The rope pulled his neck against the weight of his body until it collapsed and only a crooked eye could see the light. God did not come and the devil said nothing as the marine and the group of Klan members spun his body around taking turns with the shovel on the African piñata.”¹¹⁸

Miraculously, he survived the ordeal after being hospitalized and in a coma. In 1963, Van Clief was deployed to Okinawa, where he immersed himself in his continued study of karate and kung fu. Two years later, he would be transferred to Vietnam where he would become a helicopter gunman. His experiences in the Vietnam war and from the attempt on his life by the Klu Klux Klan resonated after he was discharged from the Marines and began to abuse drugs as a way to bury the horrors he had witnessed and experienced. Van Clief admits that training in different styles of martial arts alleviated the post-traumatic stress disorder suffered from his past.

Van Clief’s film career in Hong Kong would be a turning point in his life and it provided an opportunity for him to gain experience and exposure to the film industry. During this time, Van Clief, like Bruce Lee, created his own signature martial arts style, which fused Chinese and Japanese martial arts called Goju Ryu. As Van Clief points out, “Together these styles brought forth the most proficient methods of self-defense ever known to man.”¹¹⁹ With some convincing from Bruce Lee, Van Clief auditioned for an acting role as a black martial artist in Hong Kong.¹²⁰ At this time, the Hong Kong film industry was cognizant of the blaxploitation genre and its strong interest in the kung fu genre. He would play the leading role in three films: *The Black Dragon* (1974), *Revenge of the Black Dragon* (1975), and *The Bamboo Trap* (1975). These three films were independent productions made on a low budget for a quick profit. *Revenge of the Black Dragon* can be considered a bruceploitation genre film in which Van Clief’s performance references both Bruce Lee and Jim Kelly in a charismatic performance. For

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 5

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 125.

¹²⁰ Van Clief. 124.

instance, Van Clief's costuming and makeup is similar to Kelly's in *Enter the Dragon* and *Black Belt Jones*. He is outfitted with bellbottom jeans, sideburns, and an afro hairstyle. Similarly he also channels the same type of arrogance and swagger as Kelly in his confrontations. The plot of *Revenge of the Black Dragon* is typical of the bruceploitation genre in which the specter of Bruce Lee is used as the driving force of the narrative. Van Clief stars as himself who is hired by a Chinese Millionaire to investigate the death of Bruce Lee. He travels to Hong Kong and through his investigation disproves many of the theories surrounding Lee's sudden death. These theories include a drug overdose, heart failure due to sexual activity, and "the touch of death," all of which were actual conspiracy theories being floated around during this time. In this regard, the film capitalizes on the death of Bruce Lee, specifically the subsequent media storm that tended to sensationalize the events of his passing. And, like many bruceploitation films, mixes fact and fiction with Van Clief investigating the death of Bruce Lee in a fictional world.

In Hollywood, Van Clief would find success behind the camera. Most notably, he choreographed the fight scenes for the 1985 film *The Last Dragon*. This film, produced by Motown Records executive Berry Gordy, pays homage to the blaxploitation kung fu genre and Bruce Lee. *The Last Dragon* is about Leeroy Green, who goes by the nickname Bruce Leeroy, who seeks out a martial arts master in order for him to master the ultimate martial arts move, "the glow." The film also capitalizes on the music video craze of the 1980s, showcasing artists from Gordy's Motown Records. Van Clief choreographed the fight scenes in the film and also served as the martial arts instructor for Taimak, who plays Leeroy in the film.

Van Clief's career in the UFC octagon was short lived, yet continued to have an influence on the sport behind the scenes. His fight with Royce Gracie lasted four minutes long when he submitted to a rear naked choke. At fifty-one years old, participating in the UFC seemed like a

natural challenge. “There was no way I could no do it. How could you be a serious martial artist and not try the Octagon? There’ve been guy who ragged on me ever since I went into the octagon, guys like (karate legend) Joe Lewis who said ‘you’re gonna get your ass whipped.’ That’s not important.”¹²¹ After his loss in the UFC, Van Clief was offered a role within the promotion as the commissioner. Due to his age and experience within the martial arts and film industries, one aspect of his role as commissioner was to serve as an ambassador for the sport during a time in which the UFC was facing an uphill political battle. “I was appointed by Rorion and Helio Gracie, they wanted someone that was a real statesman in the martial arts... I went to court, I faced McCain, and he called me a pit bull. I represented the UFC in all those cases to get events going.”¹²² In addition, Van Clief also had a hand in the overall visual design of UFC events, restructuring them to make it more entertaining and telegenic. Using his experience in both Hong Kong and Hollywood in addition to his martial arts background, Van Clief was able to advise this new sport that would fuse together sport, entertainment, and the martial arts film genre.

The blaxploitation film movement was crucial for the success of the kung fu film in America. Likewise, the kung fu film was an integral part of blaxploitation’s evolution in the seventies. The themes and iconography of the kung fu film resonated with the African American and working class experience during this period. This audience would be targeted again when the UFC makes its debut in 1993, tapping into the same interest in the martial arts by the working class. The legacy of blaxploitation and the kung fu film is that it illuminated the importance of a working class movie going audience. The relationship between blaxploitation and the kung fu genre was both symbiotic and dialogical, creating sub-genres on both sides of the Pacific and

¹²¹ “Ron Van Clief: Where is He Now?” <http://www.sherdog.com/news/articles/ron-van-clief-where-is-he-now-18699>

¹²² Ibid

influencing one another in unique ways. Yet, as the decade of the seventies came to a close, the kung fu craze in America faded, and in its place, the genre turned to the image of the ninja.

CHAPTER 2: NINJAS, THE NINETIES, AND NO-HOLDS-BARRED ULTIMATE FIGHTING

This chapter explores two shifts within the martial arts genre that immediately impacted the arrival of no-holds-barred fighting on American television. As the blaxploitation film movement died out towards the end of the 1970s, so, too, did the kung fu genre. In the beginning of the 1980s in America, the martial arts genre shifted towards a new type of hero: the ninja. And, by the end of the decade, the ninja gave way to the kickboxer. The popularity and life cycle of the kickboxer film subgenre overlaps with the first UFC events and takes on similar qualities that are based on arena competition. However, the importance of the ninja subgenre to the development of the UFC is often overlooked, due to its often-exaggerated representation in many films and television programs. The characteristics of the martial arts genre during this decade impact the visual design and marketing of the first UFC event in November of 1993.

THE MARTIAL ARTS GENRE IN THE EIGHTIES

During the 1980s, many social and political changes were occurring in America and the martial arts genre tended to reflect the paradigm of Reaganism, which refers to the political, cultural, and ideological influence of Ronald Reagan's two terms as President of the United States. Reagan's administration fulfilled the conservative dream of repealing economic and political reforms of Roosevelt's New Deal, leading to tax cuts that favored the wealthy.¹²³ In addition, he affiliated himself with the Christian Right, fusing religion into politics, pushed to deregulate business, and also invoked fear of Soviet expansion, returning the country to the hard lined anti-communist attitudes of the 1950s.¹²⁴ This Cold War revival can be found in the action

¹²³ Prince, Stephen. *American Cinema of the 1980s*. 12.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* 12

and war film genres such as *Red Dawn* (Milius, 1984), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (Cosmatos, 1986), *Top Gun* (Scott, 1986), and *Rocky IV* (Stallone, 1985). These films reimagined American military strength and prowess that lay dormant in the post-Vietnam years. Alternatively, the science fiction genre during this decade reflected and critiqued Reagan's economic policies, which sought to reward the wealthy and corporate sector, while cutting welfare and the social safety net for the poor. Sci-fi films such as *Escape from New York* (Carpenter, 1981), *Aliens* (Scott, 1981), *The Running Man* (Glaser, 1987), and *Robocop* (Verhoeven, 1987) feature dystopic societies with corporate power controlling the state, police, and military.

Although American cinema in the 1980s differed in tone and aesthetics from the 1970s, the two decades shared a similar turn towards independent film. However, the reasons why independent films flourished were vastly different. In the early seventies, independent pictures thrived due to Hollywood studio's fiscal woes and the challenges that television posed to the cinema. In the eighties, the deregulation of the Federal Communications Commission and the Federal Trade Commission resulted in a handful of mergers between studios and multinational companies. This consolidation of the media industry allowed for bigger incentives for big-budget blockbuster pictures that created profits for the film's ancillary markets.¹²⁵ On the other hand, consolidation created spaces for alternative and independent films to thrive. Feature film productions during this decade were at all-time highs, increasing steadily from 335 in 1983 to 550 films by 1987.¹²⁶ The major Hollywood studios could not take on additional feature film productions because "they had a fixed amount of working capital in any given year... the

¹²⁵ Lewis, Jon. *American Film: A History*. 352

¹²⁶ *Variety*. February 24, 1988. 66

expansion of production and distribution in mid-decade, therefore, occurred largely outside the majors.”¹²⁷

Under independent production companies, the martial arts genre continued to prosper and shift towards the archetype of the ninja and kickboxer. One change that occurred to the genre was a conservative shift where protagonists possessed a more physically aggressive on-screen presence, often working on behalf of government or corporate interests. This new type of hero is different from previous representations of anti-establishment, rebellious heroes fighting on behalf of the working class. This shift can certainly be read as a reflection of the core values and rhetoric of Ronald Reagan’s eight-year presidency. During his 1980 presidential campaign, Reagan emphasized America’s potential to outlast and overcome tyrannical systems such as Communism and to spread American democratic virtues throughout the world.¹²⁸ The American martial arts heroes of this decade took on small and large threats, from drug dealers to terrorists and Communists.

The impact of changing video technologies also shifted the genre during this decade. One of the more widely believed myths of Hollywood during the eighties is that blockbusters took over the industry, beginning a shift in filmmaking where more attention was given to high budget summer entertainment. While the films of George Lucas (*Star Wars*, 1977) and Steven Spielberg (*Indiana Jones*, 1981; *E.T.*, 1982) epitomized this style of filmmaking and influenced a generation of subsequent filmmakers, the decade’s most significant development was the explosion of independent filmmaking outside of the major Hollywood studios. By 1985, the major studios had released 138 films that year whereas independents put 251 films into

¹²⁷ Prince, Stephen. *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electric Rainbow 1980-1989*. 44.

¹²⁸ Patterson, James. *Restless Giant*, 200.

distribution.¹²⁹ This proportion of studio and independent production has actually remained relatively the same since 1985 until the 2000s. In 1988, independently produced films accounted for seventy percent of the US market, which was a twenty percent increase from 1983.¹³⁰ One reason for this is the advent of the videocassette and home video technology such as the VCR. By mid-decade, the revenue of home video surpassed the box office, which also led to an increase in the output of films both theatrical and for home consumption. The high demand for content resulted in the growth of independent production companies and the major studios creating subsidiaries that would produce more alternative content. Independent production companies were able to cater more to audience trends because they were produced for a cheaper budget and shot at a quicker rate than their Hollywood studio counterparts.

One example of the change and shift to independent production and distribution during this decade is the meteoric rise of The Cannon Film Group. Cannon's two main executives, Menahem Golan and his cousin Yoram Globus, immigrated to America from Tel Aviv after being successful in Israel making teen comedies. When they arrived in Hollywood, they began to aggressively put out films from a variety of different genres, attempting to tap into the cultural zeitgeist of the decade. For example, some of their quick hits were *Breakin'* and *Breakin 2: Electric Boogaloo*, which capitalized on the break dancing fad, and their adaptations of novels infused with gratuitous sex that mirrored successful exploitation studios of the past such as American International Pictures. The most profitable and perhaps the most memorable films from Cannon were those starring Chuck Norris, who at this point in his career, was just beginning to break out into mainstream popularity.¹³¹ Norris picked up the Korean martial art of Tang Soo Do, which is a derivative of Karate while serving in the Air Force in Korea, and, upon

¹²⁹ Prince. *American Cinema in the 1980s*. 21

¹³⁰ "23 Production Pulse." *Variety*. June 26, 1991. 78

¹³¹ West, David. *Chasing Dragons*. 217

finishing his service, began competing in tournaments. Norris brought his karate style martial arts background to the action genre, starring in Vietnam revisionist films such as the *Missing in Action* trilogy of films for Cannon. He was an ideal movie star for the Reagan era due to his military record, conservative politics, and “preference for simple stories in which down-on-their-luck Americans defeated foreigners, communists, and drug dealers, as part of a larger trend of reinvigorated American action heroes that also included Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger.”¹³² However, Golan and Globus’ main contribution to American cinema would be their introduction and appropriation of the ninja, spawning many imitations and creating the ninja craze of the eighties.

The ninja stands out as a new type of heroic figure in American film of the 1980s. Genre theorists have noted that one of the reasons why certain genres or character archetypes resonate with audiences is that they function to alleviate or perpetuate certain social fears and anxieties. In the previous decade of the 70s, the dominant trend was the use of Chinese kung fu popularized by Bruce Lee and other Hong Kong imports. These films featured heroes that rebelled against the establishment and influenced the Blaxploitation movement of the early 70s, which portrayed similar themes of rebellion and used martial arts choreography in their films. In the 80s, there is a more conservative rhetoric being established by the Reagan administration, particularly in regards to the Cold War and foreign threats. The concept of the romantic warrior, soldier of fortune, superhero, mercenary type was more appealing to audiences during a time of conflict and fear. This is one of the reasons why the superhero film genre has been growing in popularity since the events of 9/11 and subsequent conflicts in the Middle East. The martial arts and to an extent the larger action genre begin to move more conservatively to the right, showing heroes

¹³² Thrasher, Christopher David. *Fight Sports and American Masculinity*. 204

working within the system instead of against it. In other words, there are fewer anti-heroes, and more clearly defined good guys and bad guys.

Stephen Hayes offers a different reason why the ninja appealed to moviegoers at this particular time. In an article published in September of 1984, he states that:

In the entertainment industry, I think people were looking for something new. Also, there was a growing feeling in the U.S., where people are a little more open to new ways of doing things, of acceptance of the supernatural, so the mysterious element of the ninja, its association with the occult and so forth may have played a part in it. A third element might just be timing. People are in a phase right now where there's an acceptance of the romantic warrior. And, of course, the ninja would be the real epitome of that idea, a single person taking on whole armies.¹³³

Hayes touches on the relevance of certain hero archetypes and mythologies in times of fear and conflict. The action genre, especially the image of the romantic warrior, speaks to the sentiment of the eighties in which the Reagan administration bolstered its image of the military.

The ninja craze in the 1980s is also related to the increasing interest in Japan and its booming economy during this decade. In the early 1980s, Japan experienced economic growth stemming from their global exports in the automotive and consumer electronic industries. In 1982, American automakers relinquished twenty-five percent of the American market to Japanese manufacturers, prompting auto executives from America to adopt Japanese labor-management techniques.¹³⁴ This booming export economy, coupled with strict fiscal policies, resulted in a cash surplus in Japanese banks, which led to more lenient lending. Between January 1985 and December 1989, the value of the Nikkei 225 stock price index tripled.¹³⁵ In 1985, the Plaza Accord sought to depreciate the US dollar against the Japanese yen and German deutsche mark. The non-American countries, including Japan, pledged more liberal trade policies. This

¹³³ Tajiri, Lucille. "The Ninja: America's Sinister New Hero." *Inside Kung Fu Presents The Master Ninja: Warrior of the Night*. September, 1984.

¹³⁴ Schweisberg, Dave. "The Japanning of America." *The Durant Daily Democrat*. October 17, 1982

¹³⁵ Barsky, Robert. "The Japanese Bubble: A Heterogeneous Approach." *National Bureau of Economic Research*. Working Paper #15052. 2

agreement might have worked too well as Japan commenced a buying spree that would last the rest of the decade. Japanese conglomerates and investors acquired valuable real estate such as the Mobil Building in New York¹³⁶ and US made supercomputers.¹³⁷ The apex of this buying spree came in 1989 when Mitsubishi bought the Rockefeller Center for \$846 million dollars.¹³⁸ Pundits and critics decried the invasion of Japanese investors buying American property, even going as far as to call it “an economic Pearl Harbor,”¹³⁹ drawing upon the enemy image of the Japanese during World War II to invoke fear and mistrust. However, the Japanese economic bubble was about to burst by decade’s end. All of their spending drastically increased inflation, which in turn increased interest and exchange rates causing a crash in their stock markets.¹⁴⁰ The aggressive buying of properties might have boosted the interest in Japan and its culture. And, the Japanese investors and conglomerates were, for the most part, faceless, added to their mystique. They were agents of sabotage, espionage, and assassination. This image, especially as demonstrated by their representation in western and Hong Kong made films, works as a metaphor and stand-in for the corporate takeover of American automotive and real estate industries.

THE NINJA ARCHETYPE

In April of 1980, the ninja craze officially swept America and the figure of the ninja became the major archetype of the martial arts genre. Eric Van Lustbader’s novel, *The Ninja* (1980), became a national bestseller, staying atop the New York Time’s bestseller list for five months. By mid-decade, the ninja craze spread to other areas of popular culture such as comic

¹³⁶Menezes, Bill. “Buying Spree: Japanese Investors Purchase U.S. Commercial Real Estate.” *The Albany Herald*. September, 21, 1987

¹³⁷“Japanese Firm Buys US Computer.” *The Milwaukee Journal*. April 1, 1987

¹³⁸“Mitsubishi Buys Half of Rockefeller Centre.” *The Age*. November, 2, 1989

¹³⁹Harvey, Paul. “Japan Buys US With Our Money.” *Kentucky New Era*. September 3, 1988

¹⁴⁰Associated Press. “Exchange Plummet in Tokyo.” *Eugene Register-Guard*. March 20, 1990.

books. This can be seen in the character of Elektra in the *Daredevil* series, which was inspired by the ninja films of Cannon. Ninjas also appear in the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* comic book by Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman, who combined elements from *Daredevil* and other popular comic book tropes to create a transmedia franchise phenomenon that resonated with younger audiences.¹⁴¹

The mise-en-scene and iconography of *Enter the Ninja* establishes its place within the martial arts genre. The film is about Cole, the first ethnically white ninja of a clan who visits his war buddy's farm in the Philippines and ends up protecting the estate against an oil tycoon, utilizing his ninjitsu training in the process. The oil tycoon hires his own ninja, Hasegawa (Sho Kosugi), to battle Cole in a final duel to the death. The twist is that Cole and Hasegawa were once colleagues in the same ninja clan. The plot is similar to the Hollywood western, notably the 1953 film *Shane* (also Clint Eastwood's *Pale Rider*). The comparisons to the western genre go further with the casting of Franco Nero as Cole, who became famous in the west as Django from the 1966 spaghetti western of the same name. Since the film's narrative structure is loosely borrowed from the western genre, the film also uses similar iconography. For example, the two ninjas, Nero and Kosugi, are each individually dressed in black and white, identifying them as good and bad from the outset. The opening sequence of the film is an elaborate test of skill for Cole. He is dressed in an all white costume from head to toe. A white mask also covers his nose and mouth making it so that only his eyes are visible. He traverses a jungle and takes out opponents, dressed in the same full body uniform but in red, using a variety of martial arts techniques and weapons. Interspersed throughout this sequence is Hasegawa, dressed in the same style uniform but in all black. What is interesting to note about Hasegawa's costume and makeup

¹⁴¹ Rosenbaum, Richard. *Raise Some Shell*. 7

is that he is wearing black eyeliner, which surrounds the entire shape of his eye. Since his costume covers his entire body, mouth, and nose, his eye shape accentuated when Hasegawa is shown in close up. This particular style of makeup and especially its use on an Asian male is reminiscent of Sessue Hayakawa in Cecile B Demille's *The Cheat* (1915), which is used to code him as both a villain and Asian. Hasegawa's appearance in this opening sequence works to surprise Cole in his initiation test to become part of the ninja clan and their sparring would foreshadow their confrontation later in the film.

The settings in *Enter the Ninja* work in conjunction with the theme of corporate threat against the wealthy landowners in order to render the working class as disposable and replaceable. Cole's war buddy, Frank, and his wife, Mary Ann, are the owners of a plantation in the Philippines that is situated on a large oil deposit. This leads to the main narrative conflict in the film between Frank and the oil company CEO named Charles. The plantation is depicted as both a place of luxury and poverty. Frank and his wife live in a mansion with Spanish architecture with green grass and trees that surround the house. The interior of their home is decorated with lavish paintings and antiques. This is contrasted with the living quarters of the plantation's farmers and workers, who consist of local Filipinos, that live in straw huts surrounded by dirt. The relationship between Frank and his Filipino workers are amiable as Frank states, "this is where I spend most of my time," when giving Cole a tour of worker's side of the property. This scene is meant to demonstrate Frank's friendly report with his workers as he participates in an impromptu cock-fighting match betting alongside his workers. When Charles attempts to harass Frank and his wife, he targets this living space first by sending henchmen to rough up the workers. Frank, Mary Ann, and Cole all come to the rescue, which then sets up the conflict between the oil tycoon Charles and Frank. Filipinos and the working

class are used to motivate and push the narrative forward as the conflict between Frank and Charles advances throughout the film. This is evident in the final act of the film when Hasegawa infiltrates Frank's plantation, murders Frank, and sets the straw huts of the workers on fire. Cole notices the straw huts on fire and Frank's dead body and pursues Hasegawa in his white ninja costume. The emphasis on the conflict between corporations and wealthy landowners is a departure from the sympathetic view of the working class in *Fist of Fury* and the politics of Bruce Lee. However, this coincides with the economic policies that cater to both corporations and wealthy elites that are beginning to take shape in America during this decade.

The fighting style depicted in *Enter The Ninja* uses a variety of hand-to-hand techniques and weapons that work together to create a new cinematic mixed martial art style at the expense of historical accuracy. Weapons that are depicted range from long, Chinese spears, Japanese swords, Okinawan *sai* and *nunchaku*, and other props such as smoke bombs and throwing stars. Unlike the use of the *nunchaku* in the films of Bruce Lee, which symbolized and transferred the historical legacy of Okinawa, the use of the *nunchaku* in *Enter the Ninja* is brief and functions as a training tool. Cole is shown practicing with the *nunchaku* in the morning on the plantation. This functions as the narrative cause for Mary Ann to ask him to join her for a ride into town. This short interlude also acts to display Cole's skill and participates within the current popularity of the *nunchaku* that the kung fu genre helped build. The martial art of karate is influential in the hand-to-hand fight choreography. Both Sho Kosugi and fight choreographer Mike Stone were renowned sport karate competitors. They used karate punches and blocks mixed in together with the weapon choreography. The film's weapon iconography and choreography mixes martial arts styles together and grafts them upon the image of the ninja. The film promotes the notion that the ninja is a master of multiple martial arts styles, weaponry, and lethal skills. As the press kit for

Enter the Ninja exclaims, “each single ninja was like a one-man army.”¹⁴² However, the mixing of styles obfuscates the legacy of each individual style. This idea is similar to how MMA is thought of currently. MMA is considered a combination of martial arts used together, but it called “mixed martial arts” with each individual component erased from the name of the sport altogether.

In recent years, historians have suggested that since the myth or cult of the ninja as mystical, invincible, secret warriors/superheroes has been built up and exaggerated to a point where it is very difficult to discern its roots. The folklore and cult of the ninja has been solidified over the last 300 odd years, particularly through works of fiction. The main takeaway from recent scholarship is that the identity of the ninja is more aligned with a wide-ranging skill set rather than a warrior class.¹⁴³ Dress and weapons also reflected a more practical purpose, so they would dress to blend in and camouflage themselves rather than the all black or elaborate costumes seen in popular entertainment.

The mythology and image of the ninja entered Japanese film during the silent era and quickly became a popular film genre. This can be seen as the first of three “ninja crazes” of the twentieth century. The ninja was a popular character archetype during the silent film era and this is where many of the magical, superhero-like qualities started to take shape. One of the most popular and earliest of these films is the *Jiraiya the Hero* or *Goketsu Jiraiya* (1921) films, which features *Jiraiya* harness the magical power of a toad in order to battle other ninja sorcerers. From the early silent era of Japanese film, we can already begin to take note of the shift away from its historical roots. However, in the 1960s, the image of the ninja shifted to a more authentic treatment in popular film. This era describes the second of the “ninja crazes.” The *Shinobi no*

¹⁴² *Press Information for “Enter the Ninja.”* 1

¹⁴³ Turnbull. 1

Mono series of eight films made between 1962-1966 consisted of plotlines revolving around political espionage during the Tokugawa Shogunate period in Japan (1603-1868). The visual style of these films have noir-ish qualities to them, heavily contrasting light and dark colors through low-key lighting and providing a sense of danger and mystery working in the shadows. The *Shinobi no Mono* films are concerned with anti-heroes subverting feudal authority. This can easily be seen as a metaphor against capitalist greed and a reflection of the changes in post-war Japanese society. One of the distinguishing features of the *Shinobi no Mono* ninja was the unique stances and movements as to separate themselves from the samurai class. And for the first time on screen, the ninja lifestyle was portrayed as difficult and unforgiving rather than more romantic representations that were featured previously. This representation of the ninja is more similar to kung fu hero in the 70s than to the American ninja archetype in the 80s.

On American television, the ninja makes periodical appearances in a variety of genres throughout the 1970s. To my knowledge, the debut of the ninja on American television was on October 4, 1973 on an episode of *Kung Fu* entitled “The Assassin” in which a climactic showdown between the Shaolin-based kung fu of David Carradine’s character, Caine, is showcased against the ninjitsu of the villain played by Japanese Canadian actor Robert Ito. A second noteworthy television appearance of the ninja occurs in the medical procedural *Quincy M.E.* in December of 1977 in which the coroner protagonist and his assistant, coincidentally played by Robert Ito, investigate a mysterious death involving a ninja using “dim mak” or the “death touch,” which kills a person through certain pressure points on the body. Throughout this kind of transitional period in which the Japanese ninja archetype transfers to the West, there are some recurring patterns such as the black-veiled costuming that were influenced by the Japanese ninja film genre. In the 1980s, popular film, television, and graphic novels will use ninjas as both

heroes and villains and begin to explore and extend the mythological possibilities of the ninja. This period in the 1980s can be characterized as the third distinct ninja craze of the twentieth century.

KICKBOXING IN AMERICA

Although American kickboxing began as a sanctioned sporting event in the 1970s, it peaked in popularity during the late eighties and nineties, primarily through the organizing efforts of married couple Judy and Don Quine. The Quines both have ties to Hollywood: Don was a former television actor who appeared in *The Virginian* (1962-71) and *Peyton Place* (1964-69) while Judy was the daughter of Barney Balaban, who served as the head of Paramount Studios for thirty years. This background in the entertainment industry was an important factor in promoting and shaping the sport of kickboxing. The Quine's interest in the martial arts sounds very much like a plot from a television show. In August of 1973, three young brothers were playing alone on a beach in Malibu, California when a stranger threatens them with a German Shepard. They begged their father to let them enroll in a karate class so they could learn self-defense. The father, Don, agreed and soon became addicted to the martial art himself. One year later, along with his wife, they created a brand new sport, professional full-contact karate, using their own money with no help from outside investors.¹⁴⁴ As Judy Quine states, "We would talk to black belts who complained about the lack of money in competing... they would go to tournaments and get no more than a trophy and daily expense money."¹⁴⁵ Besides providing karate practitioners a way to make a living, the Quines were able to partner with sporting goods

¹⁴⁴ Klemesrud, Judy. "Karate's Unlikely First Family." *The New York Times*. October 13, 1982.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid

and apparel manufacturers for licensing deals that would help to grow the sport.¹⁴⁶ The PKA (Professional Karate Association) was the first organizing and sanctioning body for full-contact karate and their first event was held in September of 1974. This event was also broadcast on ABC's *Wide World of Entertainment*, scoring high ratings.¹⁴⁷ Under the direction of the Quines, full-contact karate began to slowly morph into an amalgam of both karate and boxing, and the Quines used their Hollywood connections to gain more visibility for the new sport on television.¹⁴⁸ They implemented reforms such as standardized rules, competitions held in boxing rings instead of karate mats, and requiring fighters to compete bare-chested instead of in the traditional karate *gi*.¹⁴⁹ Due to these rule changes, especially in the types of striking allowed during competition, full-contact karate became what is now known as American kickboxing.

In 1979, two similarly named events, The Tough Guy and The Toughman Contests, emerged from the professional kickboxing scene to resemble one of the earliest forms of MMA and no-holds-barred contests. The Toughman contest was the creation of Art Dore, which was, as *The Wall Street Journal* described it, “the boxing equivalent of karaoke: Toughman contestants – often out of shape and in poor medical condition – climb into the ring and slug it out.”¹⁵⁰ Dore’s strategy for evading state regulations involved a number of strategies including adding kicking and grappling in order for the event to be out of a boxing commission’s jurisdiction, calling the event an “amateur” fight, or holding events on Indian reservations. This was a quick grab at the rising popularity of combat sports during this period and Dore admits that he targeted the working class, a group that has always been interested in the martial arts and

¹⁴⁶ Ibid

¹⁴⁷ Ottum, Bob. “Not Just a Lot of Kicks.” *Sports Illustrated*. January 24, 1983.

¹⁴⁸ Wallace, Bill. “The Rise and Fall of the PKA Empire.” *Black Belt*. October, 1988.

¹⁴⁹ Ottum.

¹⁵⁰ Hallinan, Joseph. “Fancy Footwork: How Impresario of Fight Events Evades Regulation.” *Wall Street Journal*. August 25, 2003

combat sport.¹⁵¹ The Tough Guy competitions, created by two martial artists, Bill Viola and Frank Caliguli, had rules such as weight classes, protective headgear, and a boxing scoring system. Although this was created more than a decade before the first UFC, many of its rules resembled what MMA would eventually look like.¹⁵² By 1983, both events would be banned due to a death in the ring from a Toughman competition, and because of the likeliness of their names, The Tough Guy contests were also put under scrutiny by legislators. These two brief contests demonstrated both the interest and reaction to no-holds-barred competitions that would anticipate the UFC. Its existence also demonstrates the popularity of kickboxing as a sport during this time period.

In the 1980s, American kickboxing reached its peak in popularity. In 1982, the PKA held 196 events in 100 cities around the world, with 32 events being televised.¹⁵³ PKA sanctioned events were televised on ESPN until 1986 while also airing some events on CBS, and in total accounted for roughly 1,000 hours of television content.¹⁵⁴ However, due to the increased attention that this sport received, it also attracted both criticism and new commercial ventures. The controversy of the sport stemmed from a divided attitude in the martial arts community towards the commercialization and sportization of this new form of kickboxing. The traditionalists argued that this new sport lacked the components that attract those to the martial arts in the first place such as spirituality, cultural insights, and esoteric knowledge.¹⁵⁵ On the other hand, more entrepreneurial-minded martial artists saw kickboxing as an innovative and fun

¹⁵¹ Ibid

¹⁵² Cartey, Richard. "MMA's Forgotten Forefathers." *Fighters Only Magazine*. 76.

¹⁵³ Ottum.

¹⁵⁴ Corcoran, John and Emil Farkas. *Martial Arts: Traditions, History, People*. 317

¹⁵⁵ "Which Martial Art Will Be the Fad of the '90s." *Black Belt*. October 1994. 55

exercise program, which capitalized on society's obsession with health and fitness.¹⁵⁶ This debate between the function and role of the martial arts in modern society continues to this day.

The popularity and visibility of the sport on television contributed to the kickboxer archetype in the martial arts film. Champions such as Bill Wallace, Joe Lewis, Don Wilson, and Dennis Alexio starred in films that featured kickboxers as the main protagonists. Many of these kickboxing champions were successful in their movie careers in the direct-to-video and B-movie markets. However, Jean Claude Van Damme, a Belgian-born karate champion, would be the subgenre's biggest star. One reason why Van Damme was able to break out within the kickboxer genre was because his films "remained largely apolitical, instead featuring him as a man plagued by personal loss and inner demons, while playing up his sex appeal to the ladies."¹⁵⁷ Van Damme's most noteworthy film, *Bloodsport* (1988), is similar to Bruce Lee's *Enter the Dragon*, in which Van Damme's character enters a tournament where martial artists gather from around the world. In his next film, *Kickboxer* (1989), his character enacts revenge for his slain brother by entering in a Thai kickboxing tournament in his place. Both of these films and their success pumped new life into the martial arts tournament film by showcasing the sport of kickboxing. The portrayal of a number of martial arts styles in *Bloodsport* such as tae kwon do, judo, and muay thai, also anticipates the tournament model of the first UFC event. Also, the ways in which the sport karate evolves into American kickboxing mirrors the ways in which the UFC strategically strived to be more telegenic and palatable to audiences.

The kickboxer archetype firmly plants itself within the arena subgenre of martial arts film, utilizing its generic iconographies and themes. The arena subgenre can be defined as plots that are based around a tournament or competition of some kind. Revenge plotlines are also used

¹⁵⁶ Ibid

¹⁵⁷ Lott, Ray. *The American Martial Arts Film*. 105

to heighten the final confrontation between protagonist and his chief competitor. However, one aspect of this revenge narrative that skews away from the kung fu revenge narrative is that the protagonist does not kill his opponent. He is either bound by the laws governing the competition or shows mercy to the villain. This is demonstrated in *Kickboxer*, in which Van Damme's Kurt Sloane beats his opponent who paralyzed his brother in the beginning of the film. However, Sloane stops short of maiming his opponent, throwing a kick that stops inches from his face, illustrating his mercy. The act of winning the tournament replaces vengeance in the arena subgenre.¹⁵⁸ Training sequences are also important to this subgenre and work to produce mini-narratives that show the heroes progression throughout the film, making the ultimate payoff of the hero's victory at the climax a more satisfying experience audiences.

THE DIRECT-TO-VIDEO MARTIAL ARTS BOOM

The rise of home video as a mass medium is an integral aspect in the change of the entertainment industry, opening up new markets, new modes of viewership, and an increased demand for non-mainstream genres. The impact of video revolutionized the production, distribution, and exhibition of films. The American film industry before World War II relied on a tiered system of distribution and exhibition. First-run movie houses, usually outfitted with lavish decorations, showed the newest studio releases for audiences willing to spend more money on a ticket. Smaller, third-run theaters accommodated audiences unwilling to spend money or travel far from their homes.¹⁵⁹ After World War II, the media landscape began to slowly change as television gained popularity with more diverse and live content. Technological innovations such as home video offered audiences more choice and agency over their viewing habits. This

¹⁵⁸ Dessler, David. "The Martial Arts Film in the 90s." 98.

¹⁵⁹ Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video*. 5

eventually led to the video revolution in the 1980s, a period which is marked by independent, “direct-to-video” releases. These are films that completely bypass theatrical distribution and are specifically manufactured as a video rental or purchased in home video retail stores. While the Hong Kong kung fu craze lost its steam at the end of the 1970s, it regained its cult popularity as a direct-to-video genre. As Man-Yip Fung points out in his study of English language Chinese martial arts films, the video revolution of the 1980s was strongly associated with the working class and as a result, action movies and specifically martial arts films were in high demand in video rental stores.¹⁶⁰ Secondly, many direct-to-video films were produced on a low budget, which spoke to “quantity over quality” model of video distributors and the market demand required of retailers to fill their shelves with product. As Cannon Film’s Menahem Golan once told the press, “Theatrical is not the only mouth to feed. If Hollywood produced five times as many films as it does now, it would still not meet the demand. There is space for the mediocre!”¹⁶¹ And, as it turned out, there was also space for low budget, quickly made films in the new retail spaces for home video.

IFD Films & Arts Ltd., a production company that specialized in English language Hong Kong martial arts films and headed by Joseph Lai and Godfrey Ho, is an excellent example of how the direct-to-video revolution created new production and distribution models in a burgeoning, new market. IFD, founded in 1974, lived up to the “quantity over quality” mantra by churning out as many inexpensive films for the ravenous video market. Over the course of the 1980s and into the early 1990s, IFD produced over one hundred English language martial arts films, and at its peak, released about fifteen to twenty films a year.¹⁶² One technique that Lai and Ho popularized and are perhaps best known for is the “cut and paste” style of filmmaking. IFD

¹⁶⁰ Fung, Man-Yip. “Martial Arts Cinema and Minor Transnationalism.” 92.

¹⁶¹ Yule, Andrew. *Hollywood A Go-Go: An Account of the Cannon Phenomenon*. 85

¹⁶² *Ibid.* 92

would buy the rights to cheap, out-of-print films, usually from Taiwan or Korea and then splice that with footage they shot themselves. Then, they would dub the entire picture with English audio that would provide somewhat of a cohesive storyline. This method of production was cheap and quick, allowing IFD an advantage over other direct-to-video models. IFD also capitalized on the ninja craze of the 1980s, utilizing the cut and paste style to create and recreate hundred of ninja themed films for the American market. Many of these films featured B-movie veteran Richard Harrison as the leading ninja. Although Harrison would only shoot a few ninja scenes, in Ho's cut and paste style, Harrison's few scenes would be edited and re-combined in a variety of different ways, which would be used in the over sixty IFD produced ninja films. This is significant because the quick production and prolific output of ninja films suggests that there was high demand for this genre that would continue into the 90s.

IFD, along with Golan and Globus' Cannon Films, represented a new breed of production companies whose business plan was a direct response to the new home video market. Film markets became an important sector of the industry in the post World War II years when the Cannes Film Festival opened in 1946.¹⁶³ International film festivals became sites where distributors would buy unsold rights from film producers in addition to film competitions. In 1981, the American Film Marketing Association (AFMA) was formed with its annual film market held in Los Angeles. By 1984, AFMA reported that home video accounted for one-third of its sales.¹⁶⁴ The following year, AFMA reported that home video represented sixty percent of the total market activity.¹⁶⁵ Production companies like IFD and Cannon would sell their unfinished or in some cases, not yet made films to distributors in a practice called pre-buying. At the height of Cannon Film's reign in 1986, they were able to secure \$50 million for twenty-three

¹⁶³ Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video*. 122

¹⁶⁴ *Variety*. November 26, 1986. 24

¹⁶⁵ Melanson. "Homevideo Bucks Fuel AFM as Labels Add theatrical Rights." *Variety*. March 20, 1985. 38

future films.¹⁶⁶ IFD, Cannon, and the martial arts films they produced demonstrate a turning point in the genre. Not only did they help to popularize the image of the ninja as a cultural icon, but they also carved out a lasting space for the martial arts film genre as a popular home video genre.

As a whole, home video helped to reinvigorate marginal film genres and create new genres, which benefitted early UFC broadcasts that were repurposed as video rental fare. Genres that had gone extinct with the decline of the urban grindhouse theaters such as the martial arts film and pornography found success on home video. The direct-to-video market embraced low-budget martial arts and action films made by producers who took advantage of the demand by video retailers and audiences. New genres such as the “how-to” video also found success. The first breakout video in this genre was *Jane Fonda’s Workout*, released in 1982.¹⁶⁷ This success of *Jane Fonda’s Workout*, would help to shape the home-fitness industry, with imitators borrowing the formula of attaching a celebrity to a trending style of exercise. Home video allowed audiences access to more varieties of products, varying in both quality and genre, as well as more control over time and place in viewing these products. The following decade of the nineties would take these new aspects associated with film and amplify them.

Films and the film-going experience in the nineties went through some significant and unique changes from previous decades. As Jon Lewis points out in his study of this decade, there was a lingering feeling of both nostalgia and anxiety.¹⁶⁸ The sense of nostalgia stemmed from cinema’s centenary, a celebration and self-congratulation of the medium’s first one hundred years of existence. From mid-decade on, the Y2K anxieties towards the new millennium began to take shape in the form of questions surrounding new technologies and new beginnings at the

¹⁶⁶ Yule. 42

¹⁶⁷ Wasser. 125

¹⁶⁸ Lewis, Jon. *The End of Cinema as we Know it*. 2

end of a century. In addition, new technologies changed the production, distribution, and exhibition of films. Computer-generated imagery was used more often, replacing location shooting and live productions. Multiplexes also became equipped with high definition video and sound systems.¹⁶⁹ Yet, despite improvements to the image and sound quality of the theaters, home entertainment technologies made it possible to view films in a more convenient way. Digital cable, home-TV satellite dishes, and cheaper big screen TV's made "going to the movies" more of an event.

Perhaps the biggest innovation during the 1990s was the digital video disc (DVD), which had a significant impact on the media industry and the way audiences consumed media. The DVD consisted of digital file embedded on a small, plastic disc and was relatively cheaper to produce and purchase. Its small size also allowed for it to be sold at big-box stores and through the rent-by-mail system of Netflix.¹⁷⁰ The DVD changed viewer and shopping habits by increasing the geographic convenience of movie shopping whereby films were no longer located at the local video store. Netflix, founded in 1997, innovated the rental experience further by integrating online shopping with the portability of DVD's.¹⁷¹ What is apparent throughout the 1980s and 90s is that the film experience is becoming increasingly more personal with more accessible genres and viewing technologies. The video rental store in the 1980s worked as a physical site to "disperse, localize, and particularize movie consumption."¹⁷² At the end of the 90s and into the next decade, the means and methods of access expand and intensify with online choice and streaming video. These helped fragment and specialize media taste, allowing for newer genres to form as well as established genres to reinvent themselves.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 3.

¹⁷⁰ Herbert, Daniel. *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store*. 40

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 44.

¹⁷² Ibid 48.

Because of trends in home video consumption, the martial arts film genre survived at the cost of its domestication within home video culture. While the martial arts on television attempted to appeal to both a larger audience and to children, the film genre would attempt to appeal to working class men. Within the two decades of the eighties and nineties, the martial arts genre had splintered off into the many different areas of home video. There were narrative films that varied in quality that catered to adult males. These included the low budget IFD films and the mid-budget Cannon films. Kid and fantasy films were also big component of the martial arts genre during the decade of the nineties.¹⁷³ Fitness and how-to genres also began to incorporate the martial arts with instructional-based videos. The early UFC events would capitalize on these different home video trends by offering many genres in a single package: a sporting event, an instructional and introduction to unseen forms of martial arts, and, with its tournament narrative, a real-life martial arts movie.

DESIGNING THE ULTIMATE FIGHTING CHAMPIONSHIP

The origin of the Ultimate Fighting Championship began a long time ago with the Gracie family in the early 20th century Brazil and the martial art of judo. The founder of judo, Jigoro Kano, in an attempt to promote and globalize judo, sent out his students as ambassadors around the world to demonstrate its efficacy and philosophy.¹⁷⁴ These ambassadors traveled to North and South America as well as Europe and often had prolonged stays. Mitsuyo Maeda, one of Kano's prized students, traveled throughout Europe and South America challenging boxers and wrestlers in no-holds-barred competitions. Eventually, he made his way to Brazil in 1914 where he impressed the wealthy landowners who awarded him with property. While associating with

¹⁷³ Desser, David. *Martial Arts Films in the 1990s*. 99

¹⁷⁴ Krauss, Erich. *Brawl: A Behind the Scenes Look at Mixed Martial Arts Competition*, 24

the upper class of Brazil, he met Gasteo Gracie, a wealthy scholar, who helped Maeda establish a colony for Japanese immigrants. In return, Maeda taught Gasteo's son, Carlos, jiu-jitsu and judo.¹⁷⁵ This relationship eventually led to the development of a new style of martial arts called Brazilian jiu-jitsu, which focused on leverage and technique rather than brute strength. Within a few years, this style of martial art became associated with the Gracie family as both Carlos and his brother Helio began to teach and spread their brand of jiu-jitsu. In order to demonstrate the effectiveness of this new martial art, Helio Gracie entered no-holds-barred matches against fighters of different martial arts disciplines. These no-holds-barred fights, which featured different martial arts styles competing against one another, gained popularity in Brazil. The largest Brazilian newspaper, *O Globo*, dubbed these competitions *Vale Tudo* (Portuguese for *anything goes*), covering many of the matches that the Gracie family members participated in, which helped to solidify their style of martial art and their name in Brazil. These *Vale Tudo* fights found their way to television in the 1960s and would be one of the many influences on the development of the first UFC events.

In 1978, Helio's oldest son, Rorion emigrated to the United States and brought the Gracie jiu-jitsu system along with him only to find that the martial art was slow to catch on in the states. In order to spread the word about Gracie jiu-jitsu and advertise to students, Rorion made fifteen videocassettes of members of his family competing in *Vale Tudo* and underground fights. He eventually condensed this into one video compilation, entitled *Gracies in Action*, which he showed to potential students and advertised in martial arts magazines. This also led to Rorion's students challenging instructors at local martial arts studios to fight Rorion, who put up \$100,000 to anybody who could beat him. In the September, 1989 issue of *Playboy*, journalist Pat Jordan published an article chronicling Rorion's \$100,000 open challenge and Brazilian jiu-jitsu. The

¹⁷⁵ Krauss. 24

publishing of this article gave the Gracie name and their style of jiu-jitsu a wider recognition in America leading to Rorion teaching more high profile students, who would help him take the next steps in creating the UFC. Two of Rorion's students, Art Davie and John Milius, would form the creative team behind bringing the first UFC tournament to life.

Designing a televised martial arts tournament proved to be a difficult task. At first, the tournament was called *War of the Worlds* and was based on the pankration events of ancient Greece. This visual design was based off of imagery from the ancient Olympics and Greek mythology, connecting the present to the past through this re-creation.¹⁷⁶ Eventually, with the help of John Milius and some of Rorion's students, more ideas were thrown around with both the practical and the theatrical in mind. Ideas included a mesh enclosure suspended from the ceiling that would be dramatically lowered to the fighting mat and locked in place, or a Plexiglass box that would surround the fighters. Other gimmicky ideas were to enclose the fighting area with electrified copper fencing that would discourage participants from fleeing, or creating a moat filled with sharks and piranhas.¹⁷⁷ Eventually Jason Cusson, a film set designer, was called in and created the final design of the chain-linked fence octagon. A more practical and visually appealing cage replaced the original imagery of Greek and Roman gladiators.

The original designs and ideas for the fighting ring might seem farfetched, but they have their origins in the martial arts film. Notably, the ninja and kickboxing subgenres that were popular in the previous decade influenced the initial and official design of the fighting cage. In the climactic fight scene at the end of *Enter the Ninja*, the setting takes place within a Plexiglass enclosed arena, which was similar to one of the ideas that was discussed by the creative design team of the UFC. In *Enter the Ninja*, which was filmed on location in the Philippines, the

¹⁷⁶ Davie, Art. *Is This Legal?* 88.

¹⁷⁷ Davie. 162.

Plexiglass arena was actually a cock-fighting ring in Manila yet it also featured eight walls. Another octagonal shaped arena was used in the 1980 film *The Octagon*, starring Chuck Norris. In the film, Norris plays a retired kickboxer who infiltrates a terrorist/ninja training camp. The octagon depicted in the film is a large, sand-covered area that acts as a maze and obstacle course for the climactic fight sequence. The octagon in the film functions as a spectacle for audiences to view a uniquely designed arena that presented traps and hidden doors for any perpetrator. The final design of the UFC octagon, created by Cusson, had both a theatrical and practical design in effect. Its eight sides functioned to contain the men in the cage, without any corners for contestants to become trapped in, while also protecting the camera operators who would be shooting on the opposite side. The octagon also worked thematically, with the many equidistant sides representing the many fighting styles on display that night. Additionally, the image of the chain link fence stirred images of back-alley fights.¹⁷⁸

The next big obstacle after designing the fighting arena was finding the event location and recruiting willing and able fighters. After researching locations, Colorado became the logical choice to hold the inaugural UFC event. In July 1977, a law passed in Colorado that repealed all state statutes governing boxing and wrestling matches except one: participants must be 18 years old to compete.¹⁷⁹ This was all that was needed to move the event to Denver, Colorado. In order to recruit big names for the first UFC event, martial artists film stars were contacted, yet few agreed to participate. Celebrity martial artists who could bring in their fan base and attract audiences to the UFC would be ideal but would prove difficult. Art Davie, working for Sephamore Entertainment Group, which helped broadcast the first UFC event, attempted to

¹⁷⁸ Snowden, Jonathan. *Total MMA*. 462.

¹⁷⁹ Gentry. 34

contact any and all martial arts organizations asking for both support and fighters.¹⁸⁰ One of the strategies that worked well was an advertisement in *Black Belt* magazine. The event was listed as “World’s Best Fighter,” with the \$50,000 prize stated in bold lettering above the title. What is noteworthy is that the advertisement mentions that entrants would “compete in a pit designed by famed film director John Milius (*Conan the Barbarian*, *Red Dawn*).”¹⁸¹ This incentive added to the distinctive media influence on the creation of the sport. The strategy worked, and Davie was able to secure seven fighters from a broad range of fighting styles for the first event.

Sephamore Entertainment Group, in charge of finding and hiring television commentators, wanted the on-air personalities to be a “classic All-American tough guy.”¹⁸² Their first choice was Chuck Norris, who had experience as a color commentator for many televised kickboxing broadcasts. However, he refused to be involved in the event, citing its controversial status with local law enforcement.¹⁸³ They eventually found the former NFL running back turned film actor Jim Brown to do the play-by-play commentary. Before his acting career, he was a highly decorated and hall-of-fame football star. Upon retiring, Brown entered the film industry in 1964, just a few years before blaxploitation took off. When the blaxploitation filmmakers needed talent, Brown was already a marketable actor. He starred in four blaxploitation films:

...tick...tick...tick (1970), *Slaughter* (1972), *Black Gunn* (1972), and *Three the Hard Way* (1974).

Although Brown was not a martial artist, his image as an athlete and blaxploitation star could attract a broader audience. His blaxploitation legacy, together with that of Ron Van Clief’s a few years later, would reinforce the intimate relationship between the martial arts and blaxploitation genres.

¹⁸⁰ Davie, Art. *Is This Legal?: The Inside Story of the First UFC by the Man Who Created It*. 124

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.* 126

¹⁸² Davie. 176.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.* 176.

The UFC's first broadcast in 1993 came at an opportune time in combat sports. Coincidentally, both boxing and professional wrestling were going through scandals, which created a void for the UFC to fill. In boxing, Mike Tyson, who was the sport's biggest pay-per-view draw lost his belt and was convicted of rape and served three years in prison from 1992-1995.¹⁸⁴ Professional wrestling at this time was in the midst of a steroid abuse scandal that ended with the owner of the WWE, Vince McMahon facing three indictments for conspiring to distribute steroids to his employees. McMahon was successful in court, yet his reputation and company suffered. He had publicly admitted to personally experimenting with steroids and the scandals led to a decrease in company revenues.¹⁸⁵ While the UFC's first broadcast could not have come at a better time in the world of combat sports, it also debuted at a time when the public debate over violent media was reaching its boiling point.

BACKLASH AND THE CULTURAL WAR OF THE NINETIES

Much of the public and political discourse about violence on television stems from the landmark speech entitled "Television and the Public Interest," given by newly appointed FCC chairman Newton Minnow in 1961. This speech, given to the National Association of Broadcasters, is perhaps most famous for coining the term "vast wasteland" in reference to the state of television at the time. "You will see a procession of game shows, formula comedies about totally unbelievable families, blood and thunder, mayhem, violence, sadism, murder, western bad men, western good men, private eyes, gangsters, more violence, and cartoons."¹⁸⁶ Minnow underscored the amount of violence on television in addition to mindless entertainments

¹⁸⁴ Boddy, Kasia. *Boxing: A Cultural History*. 367.

¹⁸⁵ Beekman, Scott. *Ringside*. 132

¹⁸⁶ Minnow, Newton. "Television and the Public Interest."
www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/newtonminnow.htm

and advocates to the executives at the three national networks (ABC, CBS, NBC) that television has a responsibility to educate and inform the public. He went on to state that “it is not enough to cater to the nation’s whims; you must also serve the nation’s needs.”¹⁸⁷ This landmark speech captured the anxieties about the impact and effect that television might have on the public. As television has become more diverse in its representation and types of content, Minnow’s words resonated in subsequent decades whenever the topic of violence and sex in the media is discussed.

The impact of Minnow’s speech had lasting effects. What we might call the “wasteland” mythology is often brought up in debates on the depictions of vulgar language, violence, and sexuality on television. In our age of the Internet, Minnow’s rhetoric is mirrored on the discourse about having an open, free, world-wide-web where access to vast amounts of information are part of its appeal. However, we can also look back in history to find that oftentimes, new forms of public entertainments and media have been a scapegoat or lightning rod for fears about juvenile delinquency and immoral behavior. The advent of motion pictures at the turn of the twentieth century sparked similar controversy, while the same could be said in the nineteenth century about public theater and vaudeville.

At the beginning of the 1990s, a new moral panic about violent entertainment emerged, led by social conservatives. Television, video games, and music were all subjects of criticism that utilized the same language and methods as the critics against the UFC. The debate and battles over violent entertainment during this decade is part of a larger political and cultural divide known as the culture wars. As James Davison Hunter describes it, this cultural conflict is “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding.”¹⁸⁸ This

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Hunter, James Davison. *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America*. 42.

eventually developed into polarizing views from progressive and conservative standpoints on “hot-button” issues such as gay rights, gun control, affirmative action, and abortion. The debates on popular culture took hold in the form of political movements and grassroots campaigns.

Minnow’s “wasteland” mythology was tapped into during debates on ways to censor violence on television. The 1990 Television Violence Act was a compromise between broadcasters hungry to expand their range of content and politicians who wanted to reduce the amount of violence on television. The act gave broadcast networks the legal right to collaborate with each other, lifting antitrust laws, in order to come up with a solution to curb television violence.¹⁸⁹ Although no agreed upon solution was found, these talks eventually led to the implementation of the V-chip, which allowed parents the ability to block programs that were coded as violent. In the Telecommunications Act of 1996, the V-chip became mandatory for all newly manufactured television sets. However, new forms of home entertainment, such as video gaming consoles were not subjected to policies regulating violent content.

The rhetoric throughout this decade mirrored that of the media effects paradigm, which is a methodological approach most commonly found in the discipline of mass communications. The media effects model argues that media have a direct effect on its audience, a kind of monkey-see-monkey-do transmission of messages. This model is popular among politicians that need to justify regulatory policies or condemn specific programs.¹⁹⁰ However, it does not take into account the multiple meanings that a single representation is capable of over an audience whose diverse backgrounds create multiple interpretations of single representations. The political debate over the impact of violence on television has been around since the medium’s founding. However, in the 1990s, that debate gained traction as competing ideologies collided over popular

¹⁸⁹ Stossel, Scott. “The Man Who Counts the Killings.” *The Atlantic*. May, 1997.

¹⁹⁰ Mittell, Jason. *Television and American Culture*. 358.

culture. This moral panic was ultimately misguided and misunderstood as demonstrated by the debates over video games and popular music.

Mortal Kombat was a fighting video game that was at the forefront of the debates on violent entertainments and single handedly created a new ratings system specifically for video games. The game, which was released in arcades in 1992 and then for home consoles such as the Sega Genesis and Super Nintendo in 1993, sparked controversy surrounding its graphic and exaggerated depictions of violence. *Mortal Kombat*'s creators, Ed Boon and John Tobias, wanted to make a game based on the popular kickboxer subgenre of martial arts films. They wanted to make a game attached to either Jean Claude van Damme or Steven Seagal, two martial arts stars of the late eighties and nineties.¹⁹¹ However, these proposed partnerships did not go through, and Boon and Tobias created an entire universe of their own. They based characters on martial arts icons such as Bruce Lee, the ninja, and Jean Claude Van Damme. What made this game stand out among other fighting genre games of the time was that *Mortal Kombat* used digitized versions of actors as characters in the game. This improved the graphics quality and also made the violence more realistic. Before *Mortal Kombat*, video games were cartoonish and marketed for children. Despite the popularity of the game (four million units sold in 1993), there was outrage by parents, journalists, and politicians.¹⁹² The backlash against *Mortal Kombat* gained political support from Senator Joseph Lieberman. In a press conference in December of 1993, he condemned violent video games saying that they “glorify violence and teach children to enjoy

¹⁹¹ Kent, Steven. *The Ultimate History of Video Games*. 462.

¹⁹² Verespej, Michael. “Violence is Violence. It’s NOT Entertainment.” *Industry Week*. February 7, 1994.

inflicting the most gruesome forms of cruelty imaginable.”¹⁹³ News articles were written with provocative headlines such as “Violence is Violence. It’s NOT Entertainment.”¹⁹⁴

Mortal Kombat’s story and game narrative is closely related to the kickboxing subgenre. The single player story takes place on a fictional island where a fighting tournament is being held. Players choose a single character and progress through the tournament in one-on-one fights. The settings of the fights are in arenas that are inspired by the arenas in the kickboxing film. For example, background graphics for these stages include dimly lit dungeons that provide a sense of taboo and mystery to the battle and other settings within a castle. This is similar to the use of exotic locales in both *Bloodsport* and *Kickboxer*, in which tournaments are held in clandestine, exotic settings. Another interesting aspect of the game that relates to the kickboxing and martial arts film genre is the use of a mini-game called “test your might,” which occurs between levels during the single player campaign. Players would rapidly press a button to fill a meter in order to break blocks of varying materials with each successive material requiring more of the meter bar to be filled. This mini-game mimics the training narratives in the kickboxer and martial arts genre in which characters are involved in a side quest that acts as its own mini-narrative. It also anticipates future games and technology that utilize the physical movements of the user. However, the only difference between the kickboxer subgenre and this is that the outcome of this mini-game has no impact on character development over the course of the single player narrative. Its purpose is to provide a break from the combat with a brief, button-mashing experience.

The game’s controversy and popularity spurred the video game industry to develop more games for an older audience, while establishing its own self-regulated rating board known as the

¹⁹³ Pisik, Betsy. “Video-game Sex, Gore Spur Senator to Seek Ratings Label.” *Washington Times*. December 2, 1993.

¹⁹⁴ Verespej.

Entertainment Software Ratings Board (ESRB). The political resistance to *Mortal Kombat* pushed the video game industry to adapt its marketing strategy and content for a variety of audiences. The video game industry learned that violence and controversy sells. The number of units sold of *Mortal Kombat* reached its height during the congressional hearings.¹⁹⁵ The newly implemented ratings board actually made it possible to make more violent video games. “The age ratings system identified violent or controversial games as for adults not children, helping game publishers defend themselves against future accusations of peddling violence to children.”¹⁹⁶ This ultimately resulted in a new category of games designed for an older demographic.

Another campaign against violent media was directed at the music industry. Conservatives targeted rap and rock ‘n’ roll music genres, blaming the perceived growth of societal problems on the emergence and popularity of music associated with youth culture.¹⁹⁷ Politicians and parental groups were outraged at the growing amount of sexually explicit music in heavy metal and fought for censorship in the name of protecting children. The most successful group to achieve this was the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC). This was a group of politician’s wives, led by Tipper Gore, who pushed for legislation to warn potential listeners and consumers about the obscenities in music. In a 1985 congressional hearing on this topic, rock artists such as Frank Zappa and Dee Snider made passionate arguments in behalf of freedom of speech in art. However, the PMRC was able to force the Recording Industry Association of America to put parental advisory warning labels on album covers.

In the late 1980s, a new subgenre of hip hop, gangsta rap, rekindled the debate on the censorship of music. The lyrics and music of gangsta rap reflected the violent and crime-ridden

¹⁹⁵ Donovan, Tristan. *Replay: The History of Video Games*. 234.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 234.

¹⁹⁷ Winfield, Betty. “Because of the Children: Decades of Attempted Controls of Rap and Rock Music.” 10.

lifestyles of the black urban youth. Many social conservatives were shocked and outraged at the descriptions of violence and the criticism of police attitudes and behavior towards the black community. Continuing into the 1990s, the controversy surrounding gangsta rap music continued to be featured in the media and on the political floor. On February 11th 1994, the House Subcommittee on Commerce, Consumer Protection, and Competitiveness held its first of many hearings on rap lyrics. The purpose of these hearings was to investigate the “production, sale, and distribution in interstate commerce of music that is alleged to contain lyrics that are violent, misogynistic, and homophobic.”¹⁹⁸ Two weeks later, on February 23rd, another hearing was held, this time in the senate, within the Juvenile Justice Subcommittee.¹⁹⁹ At this hearing, it was suggested that the music industry give ratings to music in the same way that the MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) rates our films. In addition, senators, such as Joe Lieberman voiced their concern, seeing rap music as part of a “moral decline in society.”²⁰⁰ The congressional hearings on violence in music affected the artistic integrity of musicians. They began to suffer the financial consequences of not having their songs that featured explicit material on the radio or sold in major retailers. In order to get their songs featured on the radio or sold in stores, many artists released alternative and edited versions of their songs, which removed explicit lyrics or offensive content.²⁰¹

The debates and discourse on violent video games and music came to a head in April of 1999 when two students murdered thirteen people and injured twenty-one at Columbine High School in Colorado. This tragedy shocked the nation, sparking discussions on school security and gun reform laws. Additionally, this event increased the moral panic on violent media. After

¹⁹⁸ Holland, Bill. “House Panel to Examine Rap.” *Billboard*. February 19, 1994.

¹⁹⁹ Basken, Paul. “Rock Music Before Congress.” *United Press International*. February 23, 1994.

²⁰⁰ Merida, Kevin. “Pop Culture Takes Rap as Congress Battles Violence; Lawmakers Cite Concern for ‘Moral Decline.’” *Washington Post*. May 10th, 1994.

²⁰¹ “Wu Tang Clan Readies ‘Clean’ Version of Album.” *Billboard*. March 12, 1994.

the shootings, reports emerged that the two killers were avid players of *Doom*, a first person shooter video game, and listened to the music of Marilyn Manson.²⁰² Although investigations into the shooter's lives proved that the two shooters were in fact not fans of Manson's music, the past debates and concern over Marilyn Manson created a backlash against him, which connected his music with the school shooting.²⁰³ Just days after the shooting, Denver Mayor Wellington Webb canceled a Marilyn Manson concert in Denver citing the band's influence on the two shooters.²⁰⁴

The Columbine Massacre as well as the debates on music and video games highlights the moral panic surrounding violent entertainments, positioning popular media as having a direct influence on real-world violence. Gangsta rap was not advocating violence, but was an artistic and cultural expression of the environment that these particular rappers grew up within. Video games, on the other hand, indulged in the world of virtual fantasy. Yet, as a result, several federal policies were put in place to alleviate the fears and anxieties about violence.

According to communications scholar George Gerbner, regulatory policies such as the V-chip and the "wasteland" rhetoric on violence on television completely misses the point. Gerbner's main contribution to the study of violence on television is the cultivation theory, which looks at the larger picture of violence throughout the television landscape and the increasing amount of time viewers spend watching television. As opposed to the media effects paradigm of "monkey-see-monkey-do," Gerbner argues that the more time viewer's spend in the world of television, the more likely they are to believe that world as reality. This would result in heavy viewers of television believing that the world is a far more dangerous place than it actually

²⁰² Montgomery, David. "Fantasy World of Outcasts Obsessed with Hitler and Occult." *The Scotsman*. April 22, 1999.

²⁰³ Cullen, Dave. "Inside the Columbine High Investigation." *Salon*. September 23, 1999.

²⁰⁴ Harden, Mark. "City Wants Manson Concert Cancelled." *Denver Post*. April 22, 1999.

is. This counters the media effects paradigm because rather than creating violent individuals, the cultivation theory suggests that television breeds fear and anxiety among individuals.²⁰⁵ Gerbner refers to this fear and anxiety as the “mean world syndrome,” a mis-conception that draws parallels between real-world and television violence. The effect of the “mean world syndrome” appears in regulation and policy on violence. For instance, in the nineties, the numerous congressional hearings on video games, music, and television are examples of the consequences of the “mean world syndrome.” Bigger pieces of legislation during this decade include the 1993 Brady Bill, which increased the waiting day period for the purchase of firearms and expanded background checks, and the 1994 Crime Bill which outlined mandatory minimums for federal offenses and expanded the use of the death penalty. These bills, aimed at reducing the amount of violent crimes are ironic given some claims that the actual crime rate was decreasing before these bills were enacted.²⁰⁶

When the Ultimate Fighting Championship premiered on pay-per-view in November of 1993, the political and cultural environment was fully prepped and hostile towards violent entertainment. After the first UFC event in Denver, there was an almost immediate outcry to condemn this new sporting spectacle. Although the first event was successful with 86,000 viewers tuning in from their homes and grossing over one million dollars, the subsequent political backlash put future UFC events in jeopardy. Arizona senator John McCain became the main spokesman for the abolishment of the UFC. Although McCain was an amateur boxer in the navy and avid fan of boxing, he had serious objections to the UFC. At a congressional hearing on the health and safety in professional boxing in September of 1994, McCain hijacked the conversation away from boxing to address the UFC. He stated during the hearing that “recently

²⁰⁵ Gray, Jonathan and Amanda Lotz. *Television Studies*. 10

²⁰⁶ Kessler, Glenn. “Bill Clinton’s Claim That 100,000 Cops Sent the Crime Rate ‘Way Down.’” *Washington Post*. September 26, 2014.

there has been a phenomenon which has arisen in America, and I do not call it a sport, this tough-man style, no-holds-barred boxing.”²⁰⁷ McCain then played a short sixty-second clip of the first UFC event and urged the committee to take regulatory action against the UFC. Additionally, McCain wrote to all fifty governors, asking them to prevent and prohibit this type of event in their respective states.

What is interesting about McCain’s involvement is that he never pushed for reform, but rather, he advocated for the complete eradication of the UFC altogether. It would seem that McCain had personal and political motivations for his statements and actions against the UFC. His wife, Cindy McCain, is the daughter of James Hensley, owner of the biggest distributor of Anheuser-Busch. When Hensley died, she inherited his stake in his company and since then, Anheuser-Busch, one of the biggest sponsors of boxing around the world, began to support John McCain’s political aspirations.²⁰⁸ Anheuser-Busch’s political action committee once donated so much money to McCain’s campaign that the FCC ordered McCain to give some back.²⁰⁹ The sport of boxing and its financial supporters were very much in the pocket of John McCain and it would also seem that boxing was threatened by the UFC. So, it used its political hand in John McCain to outlaw and put a halt to its rising popularity. Furthermore, McCain’s crusade against the UFC gained followers. States began to ban the UFC from holding future events, the American Medical Association recommended banning the sport due to safety concerns, and lawsuits blocked or delayed events from taking place.²¹⁰ Comparing the UFC to other barbaric sporting forms, Dr. George Lundberg writes in the *Journal of the American Medical Association*

²⁰⁷ US Congress. Health and Safety of Professional Boxing: Hearings Before the Commission on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, 103d Cong. 2, 1994.

²⁰⁸ “Wife’s Fortune, Connections Boost McCain.” CBSnews.com. April 3, 2008.

<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/wifes-fortune-connections-boost-mccain/>

²⁰⁹ *ibid*

²¹⁰ Plotz, David. “Fight Clubbed.” *Slate*. November, 1999.

“just as they do not telecast ‘underground’ dogfights from Georgia or cockfights from Arkansas, legal bullfights from Juarez, Mexico, or human executions from prisons, they should not telecast these human fights.”²¹¹ McCain’s objections to the sport were a success in constructing the UFC as inhumane and immoral. This led to public and political outcries to ban the UFC from promoting and televising live events, making it difficult for the UFC to recruit fighters and produce their product.

To make matters worse for the UFC, in 1997, McCain became the chairman of the senate commerce committee, which oversees the FCC and cable industry. He used this position to put pressure on the networks and service providers, and by the end of May 1997, it was announced that all cable providers would no longer offer the UFC on pay-per-view. The National Cable Television Association President Decker Anstrom argued that the UFC events were not up to the service provider’s standards, even though professional wrestling, boxing, and soft-core pornography were still broadcast on pay-per-view.²¹² This effectively drove the UFC underground as the number of potential pay-per-view subscribers dropped from 35 million to 7.5 million.²¹³ Between 1998 and 2001, the UFC struggled to put on shows and pay its bills, which now included an assortment of legal fees brought on by many of its political opponents.²¹⁴ As a way to circumvent the pay-per-view ban and state regulatory bans, the UFC held events abroad in Japan and South America. Much like how the video game and music industry shifted its marketing, tone, and content to conform to social standards set in place by way of the culture wars, the UFC was in need of an identity change if it wanted to be back on television.

²¹¹ Lundberg, George. “Blunt Force Violence in America – Shades of Grey or Red: Ultimate/Extreme Fighting.” *Journal of the American Medical Association*. 1996. 21.

²¹² Henderson, Rick. “Ultimate Wimps.” *Reason*. August/September, 1997.

²¹³ Plotz. “Fight Clubbed.”

²¹⁴ Varney, Geoff. “Fighting For Acceptance.” *West Virginia Law Review*. 273.

With not enough revenue to put on events or to pay its fighters, the UFC had no other choice but to adapt and make itself more acceptable to American audiences. This included new ownership, a unified rules system, and the integration of the sport into established television genres. The addition of rules borrowed heavily from boxing, but was necessary in order for events to become sanctioned through state athletic commissions. These rules included gloves, weight classes, timed rounds, a strict zone for strikes, and a ten point scoring system. Through the genre of reality TV, the UFC gained a new audience and began to grow itself from the ashes of the 1990s.

The image of the sport also changed from something previously seen as barbaric to palatable for a more general audience. One thing the new owners, Zuffa LLC, did to reach out to a newer audience was to use music of nu-metal as its theme song. Nu-metal became a popular sub-genre that mixed in elements of rap and funk in the late nineties and is seen as part of heavy metal's adaptation from its controversy-laden past to fit a wider demographic and become mainstream.²¹⁵ The UFC's new theme song, "Face the Pain," by indie group STEMM, features all the trappings of the genre: detuned electric guitars, an aggressively sung chorus with rapping, and fast drumming. Nu-metal would slowly fade away by the end of the 2000s, yet "Face the Pain" still remains a fixture on all of the UFC's broadcasts. Although the song is outdated, it is a snapshot of the transitional time period in which the UFC tried desperately to become an accepted mainstream sport. However, the biggest hurdle that the UFC would face during this time period would be the need for a presence on cable television.

²¹⁵ Baker, Trevor. "Why It's Worth Celebrating Nu-Metal's Anniversary." *The Guardian*. February 6, 2008.

CHAPTER 3: THE MARTIAL ARTS ON TELEVISION

This chapter outlines how television played a key role in shifting popular conceptions of MMA and its fighters. I first examine the history of the martial arts genre on television, beginning with the classic network era and ending with its inclusion in the reality television genre. I argue that as the martial arts genre enters the medium of television and as it progresses through the historical eras of television, it binds to established television genres such as the sitcom, procedural, reality TV, and sport. This is important in considering the rise of mixed martial arts as an accepted and popular sport. *The Ultimate Fighter* reality TV series, which fuses the sport with the drama of reality television, created a different vision of the MMA fighter that audiences could relate with on a weekly basis. In this chapter, I contrast *The Ultimate Fighter* with *Bully Beatdown*, which uses the conventions of reality TV in order to construct stereotypes about bullying and the martial arts. Both programs work to produce positive images of MMA, which is important in gaining fans and changing the perception of the sport from the 90s, yet they produce different meanings and images of the MMA fighter.

THE MARTIAL ARTS AND CLASSIC NETWORK-ERA TELEVISION

The Asian martial arts have always had a presence on American television dating back to its infancy in the 1950s. Many early depictions of the martial arts on television took place within a teaching context in order to introduce these unfamiliar and exotic traditions to American audiences.²¹⁶ They have been sporadically featured in a variety of genres such as crime procedurals, sitcoms, and westerns. During the 50s and 60s, American foreign policy expanded with diplomatic relations with South Korea and Japan. Many Americans, including World War II and Korean War veterans were also exposed to the Asian martial arts during their military

²¹⁶ Chan. 539

service overseas. Both of these circumstances worked to increase the fascination with the martial arts, predating and anticipating the kung fu craze of the 1970s. Honolulu-born karate practitioner Ed Parker, Jr., and judo champion Gene LeBell were two of television's first martial arts ambassadors. Parker guest-starred on programs such as *The Lucy Show* (ABC 1951-57), *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC 1952-66), and *The Courtship of Eddie's Father* (ABC 1969-72). In many of his appearances, he played an instructor teaching karate or judo to one of the main characters. LeBell, who was mainly known for his stunt work in Hollywood, made appearances as the villain in *Adventures of Superman* (ABC 1952-58) and *The Green Hornet* (ABC 1966-67). The martial arts themselves occasionally appeared in sitcoms such as *The Andy Griffith Show* (CBS 1960-68), detective and procedurals like *Longstreet* (ABC 1971-92) and science fiction programs such as *Star Trek* (NBC 1966-69).²¹⁷ In the case of *Star Trek*, the science fiction genre allowed for different races of aliens to each have their own fictional martial art. Examples include the Klingon martial art of *Mok'bara* and the Vulcan martial art of *Suus Mahna*, which features the deadly Vulcan neck pinch. The point of entry for the martial arts was through popular television genres and due to its depiction within a teaching context, it did not offend its audience.

The classic network era (mid-1940s to the mid-1980s) in American television is considered to be a defining period in which many of the standards for television programming and advertising were solidified. One characteristic of this era is the network system, in which three national networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) broadcast nearly all programming. Since viewer choice was limited to three national networks, the FCC heavily regulated their business dealings and their content can be described as "least offensive programming," catering to a wide demographic of audiences. Because of this, the representation of martial arts and its

²¹⁷ Chan, Vera. "The Martial Arts on Television." *Martial arts of the World*. 539

choreography became toned-down compared to its cinematic representation, and as a result, eventually became aligned with the genres of cartoons and fantasy. The legacy of the martial arts on television today has been significantly impacted by its initial representation during the classic network era. Many scripted programs that prominently feature the martial arts cater to youth audiences, whereas the sporting component of the martial arts such as MMA, explicitly caters to an older, male demographic. *The Green Hornet* (ABC 1966-67) and *Kung Fu* (ABC 1972-75) are two popular series of this era that have had a long lasting impact on the martial arts on television. I argue that *The Green Hornet* exemplifies the representation of the Asian martial arts in the classic network era to varying degrees. On one hand, *The Green Hornet* represents an attempt to transport the realistic and physical components of the kung fu genre to the television screen, mainly through Bruce Lee's talents. On the other hand, the industrial constraints of television actively worked against producing an authentic portrayal of the martial arts and of Asian Americans at this time.

Before the kung fu film became a phenomenon on American screens, *The Green Hornet*, starring Van Williams as the Green Hornet and co-starring Bruce Lee as Kato, would generate a small swell of interest in kung fu. As mentioned in chapter one, in the early 1970s, the kung fu craze swept American popular culture including film, television, novels, comics, and music. However, a few years before this, Bruce Lee created a mini-craze through his appearance in *The Green Hornet*, which brought him widespread recognition in Hong Kong, where the show was renamed "The Kato Show." The recognition that Lee received from his role as Kato opened doors for him to train celebrities as well as jump started his film career in Hong Kong.

The Green Hornet, much like a lot of the popular superhero television programs of the classic network era, began as a serialized radio show. The idea of *The Green Hornet* came from

George W. Trendle, who is also credited with the creation of *The Lone Ranger*. He wanted to contrast the appeal of *The Lone Ranger*, which targeted kids, with *The Green Hornet*, which attempted to appeal to young adults who were around the voting age. He stated that, “I want to put something on the air to interest young people who are about to vote. I want to do something to show young men how crooked an office holder can be, and what they have to do to stop it... that they have to get out and vote and see what’s going on in the world.”²¹⁸ The radio broadcast of *The Green Hornet* premiered on the Michigan Radio Network on January 31, 1936. The radio broadcasts quickly spread throughout regional radio networks and established the series’ format that would later be adapted for television. Britt Reid is a happy-go-lucky young millionaire who manages his father’s newspaper, *The Daily Sentinel*. By night, he is the Green Hornet, fighting crime is perpetuated by a racketeering syndicate. Kato, his chauffeur, also provides assistance, usually when the situation becomes too dangerous for the Green Hornet to act alone.

The character of Kato is significant because of his Asian background and the ways in which the character was eventually influenced by Bruce Lee’s martial arts skills. In the radio version of *The Green Hornet*, Kato is described in a stereotypical subservient and exotic manner. The radio announcer’s opening remarks state “Kato himself was something of a trophy, brought back from a trip to the Orient by Britt Reid. Kato seems to serve Britt in every capacity; valet, cook, chauffeur, and handyman.”²¹⁹ Although he was described as an “oriental” in the first two radio broadcasts, he was specifically referred to as Japanese beginning with the third episode and further episodes mention his expertise in the martial art of jiu-jitsu. However, Kato’s ethnicity was put in question not long after the program’s initial broadcast due to Japan’s imperial and militaristic aggression overseas during this time period. Beginning on June 21, 1941, Kato was

²¹⁸ Grams, Martin and Terry Salomonson. *The Green Hornet: A History of Radio, Motion Pictures, Comics, and Television*. 9

²¹⁹ *ibid.* 73

explicitly referenced as a Filipino in the radio broadcasts, months before the US entry into the war overseas.²²⁰ This change was made in order to not offend listeners. Raymond Toyo, also known as Tokutaro Hayashi and Raymond Muramoto, voices Kato in the radio series. The initial decision to make Kato a Japanese valet in the third episode of the radio program was more out of convenience because Toyo himself was Japanese. In 1941, *The Green Hornet* film serial was distributed to theaters across the country with Keye Luke, a Chinese American, in the role of Kato. His ethnicity in the film serials is ambiguous and never mentioned throughout the thirteen-part series. In the television adaptation of *The Green Hornet* in 1966, Bruce Lee plays Kato. Although Kato's ethnicity was never referenced on the television series, paperwork found in producer William Dozier's archive stated Kato was supposed to be Korean, yet press releases and publicity for the series claimed he was Chinese.²²¹ The ambiguous racial coding of Kato speaks to the fluidity of yellow peril, or the concept of an invading Asian presence.

When Bruce Lee took over the character of Kato on TV, he used his background in kung fu mixed with more generic and exaggerated fight movements and ended up creating a wholly different character from the radio series. Lee was aware of the stereotyping of Asian males in Hollywood at this time. Initially, he was offered the starring role in a Charlie Chan TV spinoff entitled *Number One Son*, where he would be the titular Charlie Chan sidekick. However, that show never materialized, and Dozier shifted his efforts to get Lee a role in *The Green Hornet*. During this time, Lee was adamant about his own portrayal on television, stating "I wanted to make sure before I signed that there wouldn't be any 'ah-so's' and 'chop-chops' in the dialogue and that I would not be required to go bouncing around with a pigtail."²²² In this statement, Lee is specifically referencing the racist history of Asian male stereotypes on screen, including the

²²⁰ Ibid. 77

²²¹ Ibid. 79

²²² Pollard, Maxwell. "In Kato's Kung Fu, Action Was Instant." *The Legendary Bruce Lee*, 41

mannerisms and costume design of popular yellow-face characters Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, and of the Asian coolie stereotype. Additionally, Lee was aware of his Cantonese accent when he spoke in English. When he first moved to Los Angeles from Oakland, he hired acting coach Jeff Cory, which was the only formal training in acting that Lee received.²²³ In promotions for *The Green Hornet*, he would joke that he got the part of Kato because he was the only Chinese actor who could pronounce “Britt Reid.” Because of Lee’s inexperience in acting for American television, Kato’s dialogue was limited and after a few episodes, Lee was unhappy with the depth of his role. In one interview, Lee went so far as to say “I can tell the producers of *The Green Hornet* how to improve their show, even before it’s on the air. What they should do is let the Hornet’s sidekick, Kato, write his own dialogue. He’s bright and he’s funny.”²²⁴ In a personal letter to Dozier, Lee writes “it’s true that Kato is a house boy of Britt, but as the crime fighter, Kato is an ‘active partner’ of the Green Hornet and not a mute follower.”²²⁵ Limited dialogue aside, Lee’s take on Kato was a different representation of Asians on television. The different interpretations of Kato, from Raymond Toyo and Keye Luke, to Bruce Lee can be an asterisk of sorts to the popular representations of the Asian male. Kato was athletic and equally capable as Britt Reid in dispensing with criminals, which was why this character was more popular than the Green Hornet.

The only concession that Lee made in regards to his minority status in Hollywood was taking a significant pay cut in his salary. He was the lowest paid actor on the program, being paid \$400 per half-hour episode. By contrast, Van Williams, who plays *The Green Hornet*, was paid

²²³ Lee, Linda. *The Bruce Lee Story*. 73. It is important to note that Lee was a successful child actor who appeared in eighteen Chinese-language films in Hong Kong before he moved to the US at age eighteen. His father, Lee Hoi Cheun, was also a very famous actor in the Cantonese opera. So, although he received formal training in the states, Lee was already a screen veteran by the time he auditioned for *The Green Hornet*.

²²⁴ Lee. 74

²²⁵ Grams. 320

\$2,000 per half-hour episode. The three other supporting actors listed on the show were also paid more than Lee despite having as much if not less screen time as him: Lloyd Gough (Mike Axford) was paid \$1,000, Wende Wagner (Miss Case) was paid \$850, and Walter Brooke (District Attorney) were paid \$750 per half-hour episode.²²⁶ The reasons for his low salary are not explicitly stated, but it can be assumed that this was because of a combination of his inexperience and race. Although Lee was the lowest paid actor on the program, the pay was much needed at the time for the Lee household. At this time, he was only working sparingly providing private lessons with his kung fu kwoon. His popularity in *The Green Hornet* would only escalate, especially in Hong Kong where it was a huge success in syndication. Asians being paid less than their white actor counterparts is a situation that has existed in Hollywood since the silent period. Sessue Hayakawa and Anna May Wong, the two most visible and famous stars of this period, both encountered salary discrepancies in their early careers. In the case of Hayakawa, he was able to start his own studio during the burgeoning years in Hollywood, which allowed him to have more control over his own representation and salary. Anna May Wong was able to find work abroad in London, Germany, and France in addition to Hollywood, which provided more working opportunities for Wong to hone her craft. Bruce Lee would take a page out of both Hayakawa's and Wong's books by moving back to Hong Kong to make films and by asserting his own independent vision for his film, *Way of the Dragon*, once he gained more popularity and trust from Golden Harvest Studios.

Lee insisted on realism when it came to the representation of Chinese kung fu in *The Green Hornet*. However, he learned quickly that he needed to change certain movements to make it more conducive for the film cameras to capture and to increase its dramatic effect. As Lee explains, “some of the techniques used are not what I practice in kung fu. For instance, I

²²⁶ Grams. 338

never believe in jumping and kicking. My kicks in actual kung fu are not high but low, to the shin and the groin.”²²⁷ In this statement Lee references the particular style of Wing Chun, which he learned at the age of thirteen, and features a more compact, defensive fighting style. The modified version of kung fu on *The Green Hornet* is geared towards flash and fanciness with fight scenes either performed at a slower speed or the film cameras shooting at a higher frame rate.²²⁸ At the time of the television broadcast in 1966, kung fu was virtually unknown in America. Lee introduced this modified kung fu, which featured exaggerated movements coupled with traditional Wing Chun techniques and also added the use of traditional Chinese weapons. This included weapons such as the three-section staff, which is an antecedent of the Okinawan nunchaku, in perhaps the only appearance of this weapon on American television. New and flashy weapons, and the introduction of kung fu techniques on television helped to ignite the kung fu craze. Yet, at the same time, the martial arts portrayed in *The Green Hornet* are indicative of the characteristics of the classic network era. The choreography is toned down to minimize the number of strikes and hits shown in a fight scene. Balancing fight scenes with crime-fighting drama helped appeal to a broader audience tuning into the program. Having shorter, quickly edited fight choreography was a good way to hide the impact of punches and kicks. In addition, Lee’s modified kung fu, a mix of Wing Chun and stage combat, fell in place with the tradition of fictional and hybrid martial arts made for television consumption.

Contrary to the aggressive and physical representation of kung fu as demonstrated by Bruce Lee in *The Green Hornet* and his Hong Kong films, *Kung Fu*, an ABC prime-time hit, offered a strikingly different approach to representing the Chinese martial arts. The series starred David Carradine as Kwai Chang Caine, a half-Chinese, half-American, Shaolin monk who

²²⁷ Pollard, Maxwell. “Was ‘*The Green Hornet*’s’ Version of Kung Fu Genuine?” *The Legendary Bruce Lee*. 32

²²⁸ Skreen, C.J. “Actor is Gung-Ho For Gung-Fu.” *Seattle Newspaper*, 1966. *Bruce Lee: Words of the Dragon*. 54

wandered the Wild West. Much like Bruce Lee, Caine stood on the side of the weak and oppressed. However, Caine was a pacifist rather than a fighter and delivered a message of peace and forgiveness to those who suffered from social injustice. There are numerous reasons for this different representation of kung fu. Primarily, this was due to the concept of least-offensive programming, which could not feature violent martial choreography week after week. Additionally, once the cinematic kung fu craze hit theaters in 1973, *Kung Fu* offered a softer, more philosophical side to the Chinese martial arts.

It is widely believed that Bruce Lee was the progenitor of the initial concept for *Kung Fu*, but was ultimately cast aside for Carradine, demonstrating Hollywood's ingrained racism. According to his wife, Lee was rejected for the main role because he was "too small, too Chinese, that he wasn't a big enough name to sustain a weekly series, and that he was too inexperienced."²²⁹ Darrell Hamamoto, in his study of Asian Americans on television, simply states that at this time, America did not want an Asian star on national television. He quotes Lee's friend and frequent training partner, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar saying that Lee "would have been perfect, a master working his art before a national audience, but whoever it was that decided such things made it clear to Bruce that they didn't think a Chinese man could be a hero in America."²³⁰ However, it is important to note that Bruce Lee was bi-racial. He was seventy-five percent Chinese and twenty-five percent English by blood quantum. His bi-racial background was one of the reasons why his kung fu schools in the US were racially integrated at a time when the Chinese American community restricted its knowledge of the martial arts to only Chinese persons. In many scholarly studies of Lee, and by his own wife's word, he was often referred to as either Chinese or Asian, but never bi-racial, Chinese-English, or *hapa*.

²²⁹ Lee Caldwell, Linda. *The Bruce Lee Story*. 97.

²³⁰ Hamamoto, Darrell. *Monitored Peril*. 60.

Logically, it would be fitting to have a bi-racial actor play a bi-racial role on television rather than a Caucasian (Carradine) play a bi-racial role in yellowface. This lack of bi-racial acceptance in film and television was part of Hollywood's construction of homogenous color lines and worked against Lee's intention of realism. This racial constraint could be one of the reasons why Lee departed for Hong Kong and tended to portray more of a Chinese identity in his films rather than a more authentic bi-racial representation.

Kung Fu offered a striking contrast to the cinematic and personal philosophy of Bruce Lee. The image of Lee did not fit with the theme of the show and the characteristics of Caine. Kwai Chang Caine was a pacifist who projected inner peace, while Lee's own personality and his film personas were outwardly dynamic and projected a sense of power and fury.²³¹ Thus, *Kung Fu* presents an odd paradox because the series delivers the message of peace and forgiveness through violent action. This paradox might be confusing to a viewer, yet it falls in line with the classic network era approach to televised violence and the martial arts. Violence that is expressed through the Asian martial arts was a new type of representation on television, and it was tempered in *Kung Fu* by the philosophical and spiritual aspects of the martial art. Conversely, the violent actions in Lee's films were not filtered through pacifism nor Chinese philosophy, but, rather, portrayed a more universal and visceral need for vengeance. Lee's characters were quick to take action against those who had done wrong against him and often relished the act of revenge. *Kung Fu* demonstrated a successful blending of the martial arts with the established genre of the television western. It also offered a formula for the martial arts on television in which on-screen violence is filtered through the positive and widely accepted aspects of the martial arts.

²³¹ Anderson, Robert. *The Kung Fu Book*. 20

At the end of the 1970s and into the mid 1980s, English-dubbed Hong Kong martial arts films flourished on television. As the theatrical market for kung fu films slowly diminished, a new mode of exhibition opened in television. As mentioned in chapter one, the blockbuster concept of filmmaking dramatically changed film exhibition. The urban grindhouses, where the martial arts genre flourished, slowly became extinct as suburban multiplexes and the wide-release strategy of blockbuster films started a new trend where studio pictures were exhibited. In 1979, World Northal, a company that previously distributed art-house films, acquired the rights to thirteen Shaw Brothers films and brought them to the television market under the programming block “Black Belt Theater.”²³² They edited out the excessively violent scenes and added in English dubbing to make it more “TV friendly.” At the same time, Metro-Media, which would later form the Fox Network, was actively programming grindhouse and exploitation films on all of its affiliate networks on Saturday afternoons. Metro-Media picked up the Black Belt Theater library in 1981, marking the first time that Hong Kong martial arts films were broadcast on American television.²³³ Other distribution companies followed the success of World Northal by purchasing the syndication rights to martial arts films and selling them to networks and local TV stations. By 1983, Hong Kong martial arts films were featured prominently on weekends in urban markets such as New York City. Metro-Media’s New York affiliate, WNEW-5, went from airing one Black Belt Theater film a month to airing a double feature every week at 1 and 3pm.²³⁴ This time slot is significant because it gives us a sense of who the audience was. A weekend, afternoon, network televised feature film will had a much bigger demographic range than this very same time slot on a weekday. Similar to the kung fu craze on the big screen, by the

²³² Yip, Man Fung. “Martial Arts Cinema and Minor Transnationalism.” *American and Chinese-language Cinemas*. 90.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Poggiali, Chris. “Drive-In Movies on WNEW Metro-Media Channel 5.”

end of the 1980s, kung fu films slowly lost their television appeal. However, the larger impact of this television phenomena can be seen in the sparking of interest in younger, urban audiences that may have missed out on the initial kung fu craze and witnessed these films for the first time on television. As Mel Maron, head of World Northal, states, “kung fu movies were really enjoying their success with downtown, urban audiences, primarily African Americans... My rationale was that a lot of the kids were hungry to see those pictures, but they could not because their parents felt uncomfortable letting them go the downtown theaters.”²³⁵ The movement of the kung fu genre, from the grindhouses to television, indicates that urban and black audiences were still gravitating towards martial arts films. This is significant because it demonstrates that a particular audience was still identifying with the genre despite the changes that it underwent by its transposition to television. The decade of the 1980s would also create more variety in programming content and viewer choice, especially for martial arts and sports fans.

DEREGULATION AND THE RISE OF “EXTREME SPORTS”

The period in television history called the multi-channel transition is responsible for providing opportunities for niche content, such as alternative sports, a space to thrive. This era in American television is a direct result of the deregulation of the media industries during the 1980s and is characterized by the proliferation of television channels, including cable, satellite, and pay-per-view. As opposed to the least-objectionable model of programming that was prolific in the classic network era, the multi-channel transition era is defined by the segmentation of audiences and more viewer control of content.²³⁶ This change in the television landscape dramatically transformed the access and presentation of professional sport and offered new

²³⁵ Ibid.

²³⁶ Lotz, Amanda. *The Television Will be Revolutionized*. 14

spaces for non-traditional sports to thrive. Since the beginning of television broadcasts in America, sport has always been an important sector for the industry. As Steven Barnett puts it, “television has now become the medium through which the vast majority of people now have access to their favorite sports.”²³⁷ In many cases, the telecast of a sporting event is preferable and more convenient than viewing the sporting event live and in-person. Exclusive coverage of marquee events, such as the Super Bowl or The World Series has garnered millions in advertising revenue and audience ratings.

Sport on television also attracts a very prized demographic: the 18 to 36 year old male. Advertisers covet this group because they will eventually earn more money than their female peers, have not yet developed brand loyalties, and are difficult to reach through other media.²³⁸ Prices for the broadcasting rights to the major American sports have increased as a result of their popularity with young men and competition between advertisers. Between 1986 and 1996, broadcast rights to the four major sports leagues – the NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL – increased by 142 percent.²³⁹ When the 24-hour sports network ESPN launched in the early 1980s, there was some skepticism, with some wondering “if there were enough sports addicts to keep the network afloat.”²⁴⁰ It turned out that, not only was the appetite for sport in this country insatiable, but its high demand created spaces for alternative and new sports.

Sports programming became more diverse in the 1990s as a result of new channels needing airtime to fill and the rising licensing costs of the major American sports. For example, European soccer leagues, rugby, beach volleyball, and roller derby were some of the sports that found a home on television during the expansion of networks and media outlets. Made-for-TV

²³⁷ Barnett, Steven. *Games and Sets*. 1

²³⁸ Downey, Greg. “The Information Economy in No-holds-barred Fighting.” 112

²³⁹ Downey, Greg. 113

²⁴⁰ Rader, Benjamin. *American Sports* 136

sporting events and shows were also created such as *American Gladiators*, *Battle Dome*, and *Celebrity Boxing*. These TV shows contained elements of sport but were created as a television product above all else. For example, *American Gladiators* featured contestants competing in athletic competitions against other “gladiators” for prize money. Thus, it was part of the long-standing television genre of the game show in addition to being a sporting contest. The types of athletic games on *American Gladiators* were seemingly new and creative, yet were actually amalgams of well-established sports. In the game called “Break Through and Conquer,” contestants must rush a football past a tackling gladiator, then get in a small ring with another gladiator, and, in imitation of sumo wrestling, attempt to displace the other gladiator from the ring.²⁴¹ Audiences would be familiar with many of the aspects of each game, which would require less explanation about each event from the commentators and allow them to focus on the contestants themselves. Another interesting aspect of this program was its representation of nationalism and martial identity. From its opening title sequence, and the obvious title of the show itself, the program attempted to hybridize ancient Roman imagery with a 1980s brand of nationalism. The brass inflected theme song, written by Bill Conti (composer for both the *Rocky* and *The Karate Kid* films), was reminiscent of the fanfare in the Olympic games and the Hollywood sword-and-sandal film genre. The opening sequence featured a stars-and-stripes-laden logo with split screen, slow motion images of past and present contestants and gladiators. The main host, Mike Adamle’s on air diction was also indicative of a martial contest with phrases like “welcome to our arena,” and “let the games begin.”²⁴² *American Gladiators* lasted seven seasons from 1989-1996 and has since become a cult show that has walked the line between sport and entertainment. The significance of *American Gladiators* is as an antecedent

²⁴¹ Rinehart, Robert. “Sport as Kitsch.” 30

²⁴² Ibid. 31

for MMA in its combination of sport, iconography of Roman imagery, and monetary reward. Its success also indicated that made-for-TV sport can attract and sustain a fan base.

Additionally, during this period, another made-for-TV sports phenomenon called extreme or alternative sports found mainstream success. ESPN, owned by ABC, lost the bidding war for the broadcast rights of the Olympics and needed content for its sister cable network ESPN2. In 1995, Ron Semiao, ESPN2's programming director put together *The eXtreme Games*, now referred to as the "X-Games," as an alternative to the traditional sports of the Olympics.²⁴³ Events included both obscure and popular thrill sports such as skateboarding, bungee jumping, street luge, mountain biking, skysurfing, snowboarding, and motocross. The process of normalizing extreme activities to mainstream sport has an ironic twist. Robert Rinehart notes in his study of extreme sports that their practitioners did not envision their activities as sport. "They were *lifestyle* choices; they were self-expression; they were artistic and non-conformist... and decidedly a way for teenaged kids to be active, to transport themselves, to hang out with other kids, and to grow up independent of adult supervision and guidance."²⁴⁴ ESPN executives were faced with a daunting task of taking new, experimental, and alternative activities and giving them a shelf life and a mass-market appeal. They ultimately needed to transform the attitudes associated with these activities and re-create them as sport. "They brought in young, hip announcers... they historicized the activities and gave them origination myths... They attempted to create 'superstars' in order to increase fan identification."²⁴⁵ This formula turned out to be a major success.

Growing and sustaining a fan base is a crucial aspect to any new, televised sport. In the case of X-Games, the conglomeration of media outlets in the 1990s played a significant, yet

²⁴³ Downey, Greg. 114

²⁴⁴ Rinehart, Robert. "Exploiting a New Generation: Corporate Branding and the Co-opting of Action Sports." 77

²⁴⁵ Ibid. 77

quiet role in the popularization of alternative sports. One of the most important characteristics of the multi-channel transition was the consolidation of the media industry, resulting in the mergers of Hollywood studios, networks, and multi-national corporations. In early 1996, ABC merged with Disney, combining cable channels, newspapers, and other media outlets for a price of 19 billion dollars, which was the second largest corporate takeover in US history.²⁴⁶ ESPN was one of the cable channels that fell under the ABC/Disney corporate umbrella, and it was not uncommon to see extreme sports depicted on Disney channel's original programs. This more corporate strategy to appeal to a younger demographic through benign programs such as teen sitcoms softened the dangerous and "extreme" label that critics used to delegitimize these activities. This also helped to increase fan identification across the ABC/Disney family and increase its visibility. There is a certain type of invisible synergy with ESPN and Disney working together to build and perpetuate an audience base for extreme sports. J.P. Telotte describes this in his study of the Disney empire as "the many media outlets, the multiple voices and image producers that Disney can call on... that solidify this presence, attest to Disney's appeal, and ensure that audiences view Disney as a necessary and natural element of their world."²⁴⁷ This naturalization of extreme sports could only be possible with the help of other cable channels that could use genres and programming to synergistically change the popular perception of alternative sport.

The sudden rise in the popularity of extreme sports is similar to that of mixed martial arts. The way that extreme sports athletes describe their activities as lifestyle choices or artistic endeavors mirrors that of the martial arts. Whereas the western martial arts have had a strong sporting tradition in boxing and wrestling, the eastern martial arts played a deeper role in the

²⁴⁶ Telotte, J.P. *Disney TV*. 89.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 91.

everyday lives of its practitioners. What the UFC did was to combine east and west martial traditions into a televisual package that tapped into the traditions of the martial arts film genre. This package of the early UFC events was also a global one as competitors were from a variety of places around the world. Similarly, the X-Games drew interest from around the world where extreme sports were practiced. At the 1997 X-Games, there were five hundred competitors from over twenty countries. This also drew the interest from corporate sponsors, which helped in growing and sparking interest in alternative sports.²⁴⁸ Although the UFC had global appeal with the representation of a variety of western and eastern martial arts, they were still not a strong presence on television and had many political opponents, which made sponsors wary of investing in the burgeoning sport.

THE ULTIMATE FIGHTER, BULLY BEATDOWN AND REALITY TELEVISION

The evolution of the reality television genre, from being considered a passing fad to a staple genre of almost every network, is important in understanding how the struggling sport of MMA found mainstream success. Television has a history of blending different genres and elements to great success. This strategy is called creating recombinants, and it helps television producers manage primarily the financial risks of new programs by balancing the demands of originality versus familiarity.²⁴⁹ By its very name, reality TV combines fiction with non-fiction documentary genres, often blurring the lines between reality and the stage. The genre pulls from successful fictional television genres such as the soap opera and sitcom in addition to non-fiction television genres such as the game show and talk show. Predecessors of the genre date back to the classical network era with *Candid Camera* (1959-67), a program including staged pranks,

²⁴⁸ Rinehart. "Arriving Sport: Alternatives to Formal Sports." 506

²⁴⁹ Mittell. *Television and American Culture*. 46.

which function as a sociological experiment to gauge one's reactions to social situations. Beginning in the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the favored non-fiction genre were daytime talk shows such as *Phil Donahue*, *Ricki Lake*, and *Jerry Springer*. In many ways, the daytime talk show was an extension of *Candid Camera*, transposing the sociological experiments into a more controlled discursive format. The genre featured a forum-like structure in which controversial news topics were discussed and debated. Yet, perhaps the most iconic moment in reality television history was the broadcasting of MTV's *The Real World* (1992-present). The characteristics of this program would create the docu-soap sub-genre of reality TV: young adults intentionally cast to instigate conflict and editing that creates a serial narrative.²⁵⁰ It could be argued that this particular blending of fiction and non-fiction genre conventions and aesthetics work to amplify the drama and personal conflicts, which heightens the emotional appeal to viewers.²⁵¹ One aspect that is pertinent to my discussion of MMA is how this genre commodifies bodies and emotions. The relationship between emotion, bodily spectacle, and reality TV is best described by what Laura Grindstaff calls "the money shot," a term that references the ejaculatory climax in hardcore pornography. In the world of daytime talk shows, the money shot is the visible and bodily expression of sorrow, rage, or remorse.

This is the moment when tears well up in a woman's eyes and her voice catches in sadness and pain as she describes having lost her child to a preventable disease; when a man tells his girlfriend that he's been sleeping with another woman and her jaw drops in rage and disbelief; when members of the studio audience lose their composure as they listen to a victim recount the lurid details of a crime.

Contrary to the requirements for procreation, the money shot in pornography is deployed on the female partner's face or body for maximum visibility. Similarly, in daytime talk shows, private conflicts become publicly visible and their reactions and emotions are a form of tangible proof of

²⁵⁰ Ouellette, Laurie. *Reality TV*, 3

²⁵¹ Edwards, Leigh. *The Triumph of Reality TV*, 48

reality. The success of this genre is dependent upon these moments, in which producers intentionally create situations that heighten conflict and tension. Tears trickling down the face of a guest or contestant, the suffused blood in an angry face, the spit flying out of the mouth that is screaming profanities make regular appearances in this genre but has also compromised its respectability in the eyes of media critics. Grindstaff argues against the negative criticism, claiming that the genre inverts key hierarchies that encourage emotional and bodily displays over rational discourse. When sport and the athletic body are combined with reality TV, this concept of the emotional body presiding over the rational mind is amplified. This concept can also be applied to the representation of MMA in reality TV. Over the course of twenty-plus seasons of *The Ultimate Fighter*, the representation of the body gradually changed from the conventional reality TV “money shot” to a focus on athleticism and the dramas associated with sport.

Although the American television audience was not ready for conventional MMA programming, it was open to reality TV. Zuffa, the UFC’s parent company signed a thirteen-week deal with cable network Spike TV, which catered to the 18-36 year old male demographic, offering syndicated and reality programs, branding itself as “the first network for men.”²⁵² Spike TV began its cable broadcasting in 2003 and quickly established its programming to target a male demographic by acquiring syndication rights to shows such as *Baywatch*, *The A-Team*, *Star Trek*, and the James Bond series of films. Spike TV also broadcasts professional wrestling, first with the World Wrestling Entertainment, and now currently broadcasting Impact Wrestling. The programming of Spike TV could not be a more fitting environment for MMA to make its cable network debut. The executives at Spike TV were, however, skeptical about broadcasting MMA on their network, especially considering the backlash it received in the 1990s and the foreseeable

²⁵² Gentry III, Clyde. *No Holds Barred*. 282.

hardships the network might face with attracting potential advertisers. Consequently, the UFC was forced to fund their entire first season out of its own pocket.²⁵³

When the inaugural season premiered in 2005, it was unclear to both the contestants and viewers what the show was actually about. In the show's most iconic moment in the first season, a visibly upset Dana White (the UFC's President), barks to the cast "Do you want to be a fucking fighter!?" in response to contestants thinking they would not actually be fighting in sanctioned bouts, which would also result in taking no pay for their match. This was an odd moment during the taping of the show because the confusion between contestants and producers over the format of the show was aired to viewers at home. Some contestants thought that the extent of their participation was that of a typical *Real World*-esque docusoap, whereas the producers wanted to combine that with actual mixed martial arts tournament. Sixteen fighters were cast in the first season, consisting of both veterans and up-and-comers. The fighters, similar to the cast of *The Real World*, lived in a house together without any outside distractions such as books, televisions, internet, or any other access to the outside world. The setting of the house itself, filled with sixteen prizefighters, cultivated the tension and drama that the UFC had hoped for. Fights between cast members, pranks, excessive drinking, and lewd behavior were prominent fixtures on every episode during this first season. Spike TV helped bring in an audience by airing *The Ultimate Fighter* after *WWE Raw*, a weekly professional wrestling show²⁵⁴, which was consistently one of cable television's most popular shows. Spike TV's strategy was to target professional wrestling fans and get them to stay on the network an extra hour, which turned out to be successful. "The first episode did a 1.42 rating, including a 1.49 in the extremely coveted 18-49 year old male demographic. In the cable industry, a 1.0 rating is a success, a 1.5 is a hit,

²⁵³ Snowden, Jonathan. *Total MMA*. 214

²⁵⁴ *WWE Raw* has the distinction of being the longest running weekly episodic television program in the US.

and a 2.0 is a tremendous success.”²⁵⁵ In addition, statistics have indicated that 57% of *WWE Raw* viewers stayed on the channel to view the debut episode of *The Ultimate Fighter*, which was double the usual rate for Spike TV.²⁵⁶

Like many other reality programs, the first season was experimental in trying to find its tone and format. The first season of *The Ultimate Fighter* tested out different situations and settings to bring out the best and worst in its cast. In other words, there was a conscious effort to display a different type of “money shot,” due to the show’s portrayal of athletes. One way that the show attempted to do this was by borrowing tropes from other popular reality TV programs to give a sense of familiarity to new viewers. Craig Piligian, who was the co-executive producer for *Survivor* was brought in to help shape the program into a reality television model.²⁵⁷ Some of the contributions that he made included team-based competitions taken from *Survivor* challenges. For instance, the two teams would compete in physical challenges unrelated to martial arts skill or combat, in order to determine which team would choose the next fighters to compete and advance through the tournament. These included games such as tug-of-war or carrying teammates on their shoulders and racing the opposing team. As seasons progressed twice per year, changes both subtle and big were made that experimented with the show’s main format. Subsequent seasons nixed the team physical challenges and celebrity host, sometimes added in gimmicks such as making national teams in season nine, entitled “Team USA vs. Team United Kingdom,” or shooting the entire season as a live broadcast. These changes have not

²⁵⁵ Ibid. 218

²⁵⁶ *Multi channel News*. “Spike’s Ultimate Fighter Pins Ratings.” New Bay Media.
http://www.multichannel.com/article/85966-Spike_s_Ultimate_Fighter_Pins_Ratings.php

²⁵⁷ Ibid. 215

seemed to have a significant impact on the show's ratings as they have continued to be steady²⁵⁸, indicating that the viewer's expectations have evolved alongside the shifts in format.

Despite one-off gimmicks and tweaks to the format, *The Ultimate Fighter* adhered firmly to the conventions of the reality TV genre, where the depiction of emotion is one of the key components. Larger-than-life cast members attracted viewers with emotional outbursts, conflicts, and melodramatic resolutions.²⁵⁹ Leigh Edwards describes this aspect of the genre as “character narratives,” which disrupt traditional fictional TV tropes. “Instead of trying to make characters seem real, it [reality TV] turns real people into characters, using predictable and repetitive narrative frames.”²⁶⁰ The first season of the show was an example of this as it highlighted the conflict between Chris Leben, a fighter with a troubled past, with the rest of the cast. In the pilot episode, Leben is depicted as a bully, making fun of Jason Thacker, a cast mate from Canada, and urinating on his bed. In the penultimate conflict of the season, another fighter, Bobby Southworth, redundantly called Leben a “fatherless bastard.” Leben, who became visibly irate, which is understandable since he had recently reconciled with his father who had abandoned him as a child, demonstrated a cool head by choosing to sleep outside the house. However, in an act that mirrors Leben's previous prank on Jason Thacker, Southworth and another fighter approached Leben in his sleeping bag and doused him with a hose. In retaliation, Leben punched through several windows and doors expressing his anger without taking it out on his perpetrators. This heated conflict led to a grudge match on the show where Leben and Southworth eventually settled their differences in the octagon. Leben, throughout the first season, is portrayed as a stereotypical jock: arrogant and a bully. Yet, unbeknownst to the casual viewer, Leben was

²⁵⁸ Kim Seungmo, Christopher Greenwell, et al. “An Analysis of Spectator Motives in an Individual Combat Sport: A Study of Mixed Martial Arts Fans.” *Sport Marketing Quarterly*. 109

²⁵⁹ Edwards, Leigh H. *The Triumph of Reality TV*. 18.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.* 17

actually a sympathetic figure on the show due to his history with drug abuse and his troubled youth. More screen-time was dedicated to showcase his personality as it was a perfect fit for the reality TV genre; he was an obnoxious and vocal character that audiences tuned in to watch on a weekly basis. He was featured so prominently on the first season of the show that hardcore fans would refer to the program online as *The Ultimate Leben Hour*.²⁶¹

Jason Thacker's presence on *The Ultimate Fighter* was short yet played an important role in distinguishing what it means to be a mixed martial arts fighter. Although the main goal of the show was to bring the sport of MMA to the masses through television, one of the underlying motivations of the program was to demonstrate how demanding, dedicated, and ruthless a professional prizefighter's life can be. In order to do so, Jason Thacker was cast on the program to illustrate the disparity between the everyman and the fighter. Thacker had a martial arts background, but was not as seasoned as his fellow cast mates. As Craig Piligian notes in his casting of Thacker, "you know what got me on his tape? It was that he was working out of a barn up in northern Canada, some fucking place in the middle of nowhere. This guy was looking for a shot. And that's the kind of guy we were looking for. This guy loved MMA. He was kind of quirky, but then he was hitting hay bales and smashing bags of sand... so we gave him a shot."²⁶² In the first episode, Thacker is picked on by fellow cast mates for his thick Canadian accent and for not having the same type of martial arts pedigree that the majority of the cast had. His only experience came from smokers, unofficial amateur bouts, in rural British Columbia. His appearance on *The Ultimate Fighter* lasted only two episodes, in which he was depicted as weak and not able to handle the rigors of MMA training. In the second episode, Thacker remarked that he should "cut his losses," and quit. He refused to participate with his team in a training

²⁶¹ Snowden, Jonathan. *Total MMA*. 218

²⁶² Mindenhall, Chuck. "In Search of Strange Brew."

session, which led to some of his teammates coaxing him and talking him out of quitting. The camera crew juiced this moment for dramatic effect, emphasizing Thacker's feebleness with close up shots on his pained face, alternating with wider shots of his teammates hovering over him. It was at this moment that the viewer knew Thacker's time on the show was nearing an end and he was eliminated at the conclusion of that very episode. Thacker's short narrative on the program made it clear that fighting was not for everybody. This argument, it turns out, was consciously constructed in a way that benefited the producers of *The Ultimate Fighter* by providing visual contrast between Thacker and the rest of the cast, yet it ruined Thacker's life. In the months after the show aired, he was constantly harassed and got into fights for his representation on the show. Yet the editing of the show did not reveal his true backstory. He was cast at the very last minute due to other contestants failing drug tests and having problems being cleared by the athletic commission. He was also flown down to Las Vegas from Canada on a whim, giving him no time to prepare, even to tell his family of the news of his casting, or to pack clothes and training gear. More importantly, Thacker had been prescribed anti-depressant medications, and was unable to retrieve them from home.

As soon as I signed the contract, they took all my clothes, because they had labels on them. They just gave me what they could find, ratty old clothes they found in wardrobe. I didn't actually bring my medication. I told them about that, and they said, well, we can't do anything, we need to have some legal forms filled out. I arrived to the house cold turkey off all these medications. So I was going through harsh withdrawals. It's horrible getting off that stuff.²⁶³

Forced into the show at the last minute, Thacker began the competition at a disadvantage. Picked on and pranked for being different multiplied with physical withdrawals from prescription medications, one cannot help but feel sympathetic for the guy who was only cast to be fed to the

²⁶³ Ibid.

wolves of the sport. This side of the story was never presented to the viewer, who only saw what seemed like an everyman attempt to compete in a professional MMA setting.

The Ultimate Fighter changed the public perception of the sport of MMA. Contrasting the polar personalities of Jason Thacker and Chris Leben and filtering their characterizations through the reality TV genre, the spectacle of MMA was humanized. Thacker and Leben represented the two ends of the spectrum of MMA fighters. On one end, Thacker represents the martial arts enthusiast with aspirations to compete in the sport. On the other end is Leben, the stereotypical jock with a strong propensity for violence. The majority and rest of the cast in the first season of the show fell somewhere in the middle of that spectrum created by Thacker and Leben's edited footage. The so-called "barbaric warriors," it turned out, were everyday people. They had families, idiosyncrasies, dreams, and pet peeves that could relate to the average viewer.²⁶⁴ As Craig Piligian notes, "people thought it was a blood-sport, that these guys were savages... Turns out they were normal guys. They were college grads, they had personality problems, they cried, they yelled, they were funny, they told jokes, and you thought, wow, this guy could be my next door neighbor."²⁶⁵ *The Ultimate Fighter* attempted to create a new image of the prizefighter that contrasted the one-dimensional representation of competitors during the no-holds-barred phase of the 1990s.

As *The Ultimate Fighter* gained popularity and the sport of MMA gained more credibility, the format of the show changed into more of a training documentary of professional athletes. In later seasons of the program, the behavior of the contestants shifted to a more serious approach to the competition. This is due in part to the sport attracting more athletes seeking to make a career out of MMA, and this changed the ways in which participants behaved within the

²⁶⁴ Ibid

²⁶⁵ Ibid

show. For instance, rather than spending the first half hour of the show depicting contestants living in the house, which originally functioned to showcase the pranks and drunken antics, the program documented fighter's preparations, strategies, and training for their upcoming bouts. This change in tone seems to also parallel the mainstream acceptance of the sport of MMA. However, there was always the unexpected deviation from traditional archetypes to keep things "fresh." Past seasons featured a handful of drunken outbursts and heated exchanges within the house, yet they never really reached the heights that the first season hit with the conflicts between Leben, Thacker, and Southworth. Current television broadcasts of *The Ultimate Fighter* and live events on television draw better, if not equal ratings, than the NHL, NBA, and MLB.²⁶⁶ This indicates the changes that have occurred in the program's format have accommodated the shifts in audience expectations.

If *The Ultimate Fighter* worked to humanize and change the public perception of MMA fighters, *Bully Beatdown* unintentionally fought against that particular notion. *Bully Beatdown* premiered on March 22, 2009 on MTV with a relatively simple premise. In each episode, victims of bullying reach out to host and professional MMA fighter Jason Miller to enlist his help. Miller then calls out the bully in question and offers him or her an opportunity to fight a professional fighter for a cash prize. The episodes conclude with the professional fighter usually winning in convincing fashion and the bully leaving without having won any money. "For the bully, its giving him the real experience of what it's like to fight someone who is more than capable of fighting back... For the victims, it's giving them the satisfaction of seeing their bully finally meet someone who can make the bully suffer for his past actions."²⁶⁷ The program lasted for

²⁶⁶ Kim, Seungmo, Christopher Greenwell, et al. "An Analysis of Spectator Motives in an Individual Combat Sport." 109

²⁶⁷ *MMA Fighting*. "'Bully Beatdown' Premieres Tonight on MTV."

three seasons, and was not without controversy surrounding its depiction of realistic situations and the nature of bullying.

Producing a reality show based on providing comeuppances for bullies proved to be difficult and challenged the assumptions of the reality TV genre. Participants for *Bully Beatdown* would not be your typical everyday teenage bully, but rather, paid actors and stuntmen. According to some reports, both the bullies and the victims were amateur, non-union actors or stuntmen who have never met each other prior to the taping of the episodes.²⁶⁸ After these accusations surfaced a few episodes into the first season, host Jason Miller responded confirming that the format of the show is indeed based upon scripted situations. As he states, “*Bully Beatdown* is completely fake. Everyone on it is actors. Everyone involved with the show knows that it is fake and we script pretty much everything that comes out of their mouth. I have not yet got an executive producer credit, or a writer’s credit – but I write the bully’s dialogue myself.”²⁶⁹ This is a cause for concern because although the bullying situations that were presented to the audience were faked and scripted, the fights between professional MMA fighters and paid actors were authentic. It is borderline criminal and dangerous to put an actor or stuntman, somebody who may not have trained in the martial arts at all, in a live fighting situation with a professional. In this situation, the roles are ironically reversed. The bullies are in fact the MMA fighters who are taking advantage of actors and stuntmen looking for a simple paycheck and risking their lives in the process. With this in mind, the situation also raises the question of whether or not this should be considered an actual MMA fight due to the discrepancy of skill between fighter and actor/stuntman. Modern sport is based on the assumption of an equal contest, and, thus, either competitor could win the contest. This is certainly not the case in the fighting segment of *Bully*

²⁶⁸ www.cagepotato.com/scandal-day-bully-beatdown-may-be-totally-staged/

²⁶⁹ Wilcox, Nate. <http://www.bloodyelbow.com/2009/4/17/842873/from-mayhem-i-have-a-confession-to>

Beatdown where an amateur competitor at best is asked to compete with someone else for whom it is a profession and way of life. Before each fighting segment, the bully receives some instruction on how to grapple and strike. It is unclear if this last-minute training is the only instructions the bullies receive before competing. For every episode, the professional MMA fighter is expected to win handily, while pleasure is derived from watching a (fake) bully get physically beaten and publically humiliated.

Additionally, the bullying represented in the build-up to the fighting segment of the show misrepresents the actual data on bullying in America. The most prevalent forms of bullying are social and verbal. Physical bullying happens less often, and cyber-bullying occurs least frequently.²⁷⁰ In *Bully Beatdown*, the majority of victims are physically bullied and bullies are then beaten physically in an MMA match as retribution. In the US, bullying occurs most often in school classrooms, outside on school grounds, and on the school bus. Middle school students are also the most at risk for being victims of bullying.²⁷¹ However, this is not the case in *Bully Beatdown* where all victims and bullies are adults, and the locations in which bullying occurs is either in the home, workplace, or neighborhood community location. For example, in the pilot episode, the victim, Alan, claims that his younger brother Ryan bullies him. Alan states in the opening segment that his younger brother is able to get away with this because he is their parent's favorite son. He also states that in the past Ryan has pushed him down a flight of stairs and put his head through a wall at their home. The type of bullying and the age of bully and victim are atypical of national trends. The misrepresentation of bullying and its resolution brought about calls for the show to be banned in Canada. National anti-bullying group, BullyingCanada, responded to the syndication of *Bully Beatdown* on Canadian television by

²⁷⁰ Bradshaw, C.P., Sawyer, A.L., & O'Brennan, L.M. "Bullying and peer victimization at school: Perceptual differences between students and school staff." *School Psychology Review*, 36(3)

²⁷¹ *ibid*

calling for its ban. “They need more positive messages and making sure that they have prevention as well. So I think it’s something that they need to prevent and really need to re-evaluate.”²⁷² Prevention and non-violent resolutions are an aspect that the program lacks, yet BullyingCanada and the National Center for Education consider this to be important aspects in alleviating the problem of bullying.

Bully Beatdown works more as a bully fantasy than representing any aspect of the realities of bullying. It imagines the bully outside of its relevant age and behavior, providing a wider range of representation and creating a myth of what is considered to be a social epidemic. The show also challenges assumptions about the genre in which characters in the genre are non-professional actors, heightening the sense of realism. Using paid actors and stuntmen as fodder for professional fighters is certainly unethical at the very least, which might be one of the reasons why this show left the airwaves abruptly. This show also works as one of the many MMA television products that Viacom, MTV’s parent company, had experimented with in response to the growing popularity of the sport.

Viacom is an important factor in the televised success of MMA. Spike TV, another Viacom subsidiary, first aired *The Ultimate Fighter* in 2005, attracting mainstream attention to MMA. In 2006, MTV aired *Final Fu*, a tournament reality show that featured different styles of martial arts in a similar fashion to early no-holds-barred competitions. In 2008, BET (Black Entertainment Television), another subsidiary of Viacom premiered *Iron Ring*, a clone of *The Ultimate Fighter* in terms of format, yet explicitly catered to African American audiences by featuring hip hop artists as celebrity guests. In 2011, Viacom bought a controlling stake in Bellator MMA, a promotional company and has since acquired many UFC fighters at the end of their contracts. Taking a bird’s eye corporate view of Viacom and its MMA properties provides a

²⁷² *CBC.ca*. “Anti-bullying Group Wants MTV Canada’s Bully Beatdown Banned.”

strategic picture of their increasing interest in this sport as well as who they consider to be their target demographic.

TELEVISION AUDIENCES AND MMA

The transmission of martial arts through telecasts of UFC events fostered knowledge and sustained a fan-base during the sport's darkest years. In early broadcasts of the UFC, viewers and ringside announcers did not completely understand the spectacle they were seeing. For example, in the inaugural UFC event in 1993, one fighter had tapped out, which signals to both the opponent and referee that he could not continue. For the next few minutes and only after several replays at different angles could commentators discern exactly how that fighter submitted. On other occasions, fans and casual viewers would grow impatient as fights dragged on, displaying their discontent with booing and loud jeers. Broadcast announcers, especially in the early years of the sport, struggled to educate and communicate to the viewers the subtleties and vocabulary of grappling submissions. This approach by announcers was not unprecedented. As Steven Barnett describes, television played an important role in educating and transforming public opinion on American football. Football was a game which, "to the uninitiated, appeared violent and virtually incomprehensible."²⁷³ Yet television transformed the sport from a "fringe pastime into a national obsession"²⁷⁴ through its visual presentation of the game and the explanations provided by its announcers. Technologies such as more mobile cameras, microphones, slow motion playback, and instant replay facilitated the learning curve for audiences. Additionally, football executives also changed their sport to make it more explicitly suitable for television by adding large numbers on player's jerseys to make it easier to distinguish on television screens

²⁷³ Barnett, Steven. *Games and Sets*.35

²⁷⁴ Ibid. 35

and changing the use of time-outs to facilitate commercial breaks.²⁷⁵ Early televised UFC and other no-holds-barred contests served a similar function with early football broadcasts. They served to educate other martial artists by providing insight into foreign, unknown styles as well as provide entertainment to casual viewers. UFC broadcasts also employ slow motion and instant replays as a strategy for explaining techniques to audiences.

For MMA fans during the late 1990s, televised UFC and other no-holds-barred competitions served an educative function. Videotapes of fights provided an introduction to various, unfamiliar styles and techniques of martial arts. In some cases, videotapes were explicitly made as instructional, how-to material. As Jason Walls, a four-time champion in the *Hook 'N' Shoot* promotional tournament explains, “basically we went out in the backyard, rolled around and would try different things that they were doing [in UFC videos].”²⁷⁶ Videotapes and DVD’s of fights could replay, pause, or slow-down movements and techniques, which serve as a virtual instruction manual for martial artists and aspiring MMA competitors. The availability of these types of videotapes were made possible by the boom in home video rental and sales during this decade, which fostered marginal genres such as the martial arts. For practitioners and aficionados, these videotapes blurred the boundary between information and entertainment. Although “infotainment” carries a negative connotation in our current vernacular, usually associated with journalistic stories that exploit public interest, in the case of these videotapes, knowledge is extracted from the violent spectacle of no-holds-barred fights.

As MMA emerged from a marginal attraction to athletic genre, changes in the regulation and televised presentation of the sport mirror a change in audience demographics. In her 2009 study of more than 2,700 MMA viewers, Nancy Cheever notes that consistent viewers watch it

²⁷⁵ Ibid 35

²⁷⁶ Downey, Greg.

for the skill and technical aspects of combat as well as its unpredictable nature instead of its violent qualities. Additionally, her study found that males in the target demographic of 18-35 year olds found viewing the sport had a beneficial positive impact on their lives, stating that it promoted social bonding between men.²⁷⁷ In another study that took gender and viewing motives into account with one quarter of the study's participants being female, it was concluded that women's interest in the sport was motivated by drama associated with close fights. The notion of vicarious achievement was reported as the second most important motive for males, but did not predict media consumption by females.²⁷⁸ The results of these two studies indicate some of the audience motives for viewing MMA, which are probably in line with the motives for viewing sport in general.

Although MMA fans are associated with young males, roughly 27% of those who watch MMA on television are female. A 2012 study done by Scarborough Sports Marketing found that female viewers are diverse and significant. Female viewers are racially diverse with 41% considered to be a minority; "compared to the average female US resident, female UFC/MMA viewers are 18 percent more likely to be Hispanic and 40 percent more likely to be black."²⁷⁹ They are also in the same age demographic as male viewers, with over half (53%) within the ages of 18-34.²⁸⁰ The study also shows that female fans are active online, as they are more likely than the average female adult to use the Internet to shop for various products and services.²⁸¹ This statistic is also evident in the advertisements and sponsorships that are presented during live broadcasts of events. Typical ads that are featured are similar to other sports broadcasts, which

²⁷⁷ Cheever, Nancy. "The Uses and Gratifications of Viewing Mixed Martial Arts." *Journal of Sport Media*. 50

²⁷⁸ Kim, Seungmo, Christopher Greenwell, et al. "An Analysis of Spectator Motives in an Individual Combat Sport: A Study of Mixed Martial Arts." 118.

²⁷⁹ Scarborough. "UFC 154 Audience Demographics: Spotlight on Female UFC/MMA TV Viewers."

<http://dialog.scarborough.co/index.php/ufc-154-audience-demographics-spotlight-on-female-ufcmma-tv-viewers/>

²⁸⁰ Ibid

²⁸¹ Ibid

include trailers for an upcoming action genre movie, Annheuser-Busch, and Harley Davidson motorcycles. This statistic is also significant in that it echoes Cheever's study, which states that female interest in the sport is guided more by the dramatic narrative present in combat sports.

While these recent studies of MMA female spectatorship demonstrate diversity and online activity, women have been significant spectators of combat sports since early boxing films. Although boxing was almost entirely a male centered sport, the nickelodeons and theater houses in which recorded films were exhibited did not discriminate against gender. Many of the commercial theaters and opera houses in which boxing films were played in catered to the working class, but as film became a more popular form of mass entertainment, theater managers sought the patronage of the middle class, recruiting not only women but also entire families. The male dominated standing-room-only main floor was transformed to accommodate female audiences by adding seats and scheduling Saturday matinees for women.²⁸² In 1897, the heavyweight championship between James Corbett and Robert Fitzsimmons was the first feature-length boxing match that was recorded live and distributed for exhibition. Due to the highly publicized fighters and a controversial ending, the reproduction of the match and its repeated exhibition became an instant attraction for audiences. In Dan Streible's study on the reception of this specific fight, he finds numerous newspaper reports by female journalists describing both awe and embarrassment while watching the match.²⁸³ This event is significant because it creates a shift in the dominant view of the Hollywood model where films were constructed for a male audience with women as the object of a male gaze. Additionally, the Saturday matinee screenings of boxing matches created a legitimized social space for the female spectator, especially allowing for the middle class woman to indulge in the pleasure of perusing

²⁸² Streible, Dan. *Fight Pictures*. 87

²⁸³ *Ibid.* 88

semi-nude male bodies with other female viewers. The Corbett-Fitzsimmons fight film was more than just a sporting spectacle but a sexually charged viewing event. However, this genre was short lived as laws that prohibited the distribution and exhibition of these films in 1915, mainly as a response to the success of African American heavyweight Jack Johnson, whose victories incited race riots. In the 1920s, radio broadcasts of prizefights displaced the fight film, which was then replaced by television.

Professional wrestling and its inclusion on television also impacted female spectatorship. Wrestling on television changed the nature of performances in order to attract viewers and keep them interested. Distinctive character traits that could relate to audiences helped to create specific fan bases, including women.²⁸⁴ Storylines that featured good versus evil appealed to both male and female viewers, especially during the Cold War climate of the post World War II era. Furthermore, wrestling on television and live events in the 1950s gave American women “a chance to demonstrate freedom, sexuality, and assertiveness at a time when increasingly restrictive societal pressures reduced women’s ability to express themselves.”²⁸⁵ The trend in professional wrestling to create more sensational, melodramatic televised spectacle continues as a proven method for sustaining audiences. It is also this trait that ties it to the reality television genre.

Another sports marketing study done on MMA audiences suggest that the sport attracts young adult males with purchasing power and who are tech-savvy. This speaks to the strategy of the UFC, which entered multiple media platforms in an effort to gain more mainstream appeal and spectators. The study on MMA fan’s financial status indicates that they are more likely than the average American adult to have a household income of \$75,000 and are above the national

²⁸⁴ Beekman, Scott. *Ringside: A History of Professional Wrestling in America*. 82

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.* 83

average for ownership of high-tech household items such as HDTV's, video-on-demand service, and video game systems.²⁸⁶ While noting that the martial arts film genre has historically appealed to working-class men, this study seems to suggest a shift in the social demographics of the martial arts fan. It is important to note that the sport of MMA is available in multiple media platforms and the UFC has transformed itself into more of a brand than a singular sport. This could be why newer fans of the sport are arriving from different backgrounds than what the genre has historically attracted. Current appropriations of MMA in other forms of popular media such as video games as well as other areas of popular culture now represent the ways in which the sport has grown. What started off as a quasi-legal, underground spectacle has evolved into a corporatized, legitimate combat sport. This is partially due to its presence on television. As a result of this evolution, the new media representations of MMA have merged with the martial arts genre in unique and significant ways.

²⁸⁶ Scarborough Sports Marketing. "MMA Attracts Young Adults with Purchasing Power." <http://www.scarboroughsportsmarketing.com/>

CHAPTER 4: THE MARTIAL ARTS AND MEDIA CONVERGENCE

The relationship between new media and the martial arts genre is significant in understanding how the sport of MMA has evolved alongside shifts in audience behavior and the use of social media in sport. In *The Matrix* (Wachowski Brothers, 1999), the character of Neo (Keanu Reeves) learns that the world that he once thought was real, is actually a complex computer simulation meant to pacify humans while simultaneously enslaving them. Upon learning this, he joins a crew of resistance fighters and downloads and acquires the skills necessary to conquer the creators of the virtual world and free the human race. In one sequence, Neo sits in a chair and downloads different martial arts styles in a matter of seconds directly into his brain and is able to use them instantly. “I know kung fu!” Neo mutters as he sits up in his chair with a mixture of astonishment and pleasure. This moment in the film speaks to the ways that the representation of various martial arts has been disseminated in popular culture as a result of the globalization of the martial arts. At that moment in the late 1990s, Hong Kong filmmakers, actors, and choreographers were active in Hollywood, blending their unique kinetic style with the Hollywood action blockbuster. In Hong Kong, the film industry rapidly declined due to an economic anxiety over the 1997 handover to China and expedited the transfer of Hong Kong talent to Hollywood. The success of *The Matrix* engendered a new martial arts craze in Hollywood. *The Matrix*'s choreographer, Yuen Wo-Ping, found instant success choreographing for action films such as *Charlie's Angels* (2000), *Mission Impossible: 2* (2000), and *X-Men* (2000). However, it was Yuen's fourth film of 2000, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, that resurrected mainstream interest in the martial arts genre as the film took in around \$128 million dollars to its US distributor, Sony Pictures Classics. *The Matrix* also reflects the interactive and educative qualities of video games and their ability to transform users into “knowing kung fu”

through the immersive activity of playing video games. In addition to video gaming, other mediated forms of immersion such as online social media function similarly. Social media offers new pathways of interpersonal communication between athletes and fans that provides intimate and unfiltered access to information. This chapter examines the ways in which video games and new media have adopted the martial arts genre and explores how the UFC has transformed itself into a lifestyle brand. This is important because as a new sport, MMA has been more adoptive of new media than traditional sports, and this relationship could also bring negative consequences to its future and longevity as a sport.

THE MARTIAL ARTS VIDEO GAME GENRE

The classification of video game genres has similarities and differences as to how genres operate in film. Video game genres are complex in that they can sometimes use the cinematic and literary framework of genre classification, while also using other classification categories in other cases. Visual iconography such as costume design and setting are crucial in distinguishing film genres. This framework can work well in describing the content of the genre of a video game. However, games like *Tetris*, for example, are abstract games with minimal or no literary or cinematic content such as narrative, and consequently are poorly defined by this framework.²⁸⁷ Other elements of visual style such as point of view, which is a narrative technique that is not tied to any particular genre, is an important aspect of video game genres. For example, first-person action games are considered separate genres from a side-scrolling, third person platform action game. While both genres might contain the same visual iconography, the difference in point-of-view, and, as a result, the difference in playing experience, makes them different video game genres. Video game genres have also been

²⁸⁷ Konzack, Lars. "Video Game Genres."

historically compared with the classification of game types. For example, Roger Caillois, in *Man, Play, and Games* defined four kinds of games: competition, chance, vertigo, and mimicry.²⁸⁸ An example of competition might be a game of chess. Chance games would be similar to gambling and card games. Vertigo is defined by an altering of perception such as a roller coaster ride or playing on a seesaw, while mimicry games would be akin to role-playing games. This approach is defined by the participant experiences rather than the content of the game itself. This is an important concept when looking at newer modes of video games in which the user experience is the selling point of technologies and games. Examples of this concept at work include virtual reality and motion-capture technology, which caters to the user experience. Mark J.P. Wolf, in his exploration of video game genres outlines forty-two genres which are based on the various types of interactivity that the video game player or user experiences. He compares this approach to genres of dance (foxtrot, waltz, ballet) in which genres are defined by how dancers move and the sequence of movements rather than how the dancers look visually.²⁸⁹ He further states that games that usually have specific objectives utilize specific interactions that cannot be categorized by conventional cinematic and literary genre methods. He defines the fighting genre as “games involving characters who fight usually hand-to-hand, in one-on-one combat situations without the use of firearms or projectiles.”²⁹⁰ While this is a general definition of the fighting game, a historical approach to this specific genre exposes its relationship with the martial arts film genre.

The martial arts and fighting video game genre has been a dominant staple since the early years of the medium. While most early games indulged in fantasy concepts such as piloting spacecraft or adventuring through science fiction worlds, the fighting genre attempted to explore

²⁸⁸ Caillois, Roger. *Man, Play, and Games*.

²⁸⁹ Wolf, J.P. *The Medium of The Video Game*. 115

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.* 122

and digitally recreate the human form.²⁹¹ Players experienced the human condition of combat without consequences through a digital avatar. The first game in this genre is Sega's 1976's arcade game *Heavyweight Champ*. This black and white boxing arcade game featured boxing gloves as controllers in which the players move the glove up and down for high and low punches, and push the glove inwards to throw a strike. The format of *Heavyweight Champ* helped to shape future fighting games, usually with the one-on-one tournament narrative. Other games experimented with different points of view. *Warrior*, from 1979, featured two knights battling each other from a top-down perspective. This game allowed players to control the swing of their sword with a joystick, providing access to a variety of attacks.

Beginning in the 1980s, two new subgenres emerged that would solidify the genre's narrative and visual iconography. The beat-em-up genre employed a side-scrolling point of view and multiple adversaries. The tournament subgenre featured one-on-one fights, which lasted usually three rounds. While these two subgenres consisted of different formats, they have similar narrative arcs. The beat-em-up is closely related to the platform shooting games in which single characters progressed through increasingly more and more difficult stages and bosses. As Spanner Spencer states in his article on the subgenre, "platform games and shooters were in abundance and, desperate to fathom new and imaginative ways to present these increasingly tired concepts to the jaded gamer, considerable liberties were taken that closed the gulf between shooting and punching."²⁹² The tournament subgenre came of age at the end of the decade in 1987 with Capcom's *Street Fighter* and would feature the template for mostly all future fighting games to come. The game utilized opponents with different fighting styles, life bars to represent

²⁹¹ Spencer, Spanner. "The Tao of Beat-'em-ups."

²⁹² Ibid

health, and allowed players to discover hidden techniques.²⁹³ *Street Fighter* was also similar in its narrative structure to the beat-em-ups in that players could only choose one fighter, who would travel around the world and prove his strength in combat. Its sequel, *Street Fighter II*, would again revolutionize the fighting game genre insofar as popularizing the “versus mode” in which players would compete against one another. This format contributed in forming a gaming community: “If you were one of the kids that knew how to do something crazy, like combo, or even better glitch the game, it felt like you had a hidden treasure of knowledge. You’d share this knowledge with other players, and soon a community of strategy was born.”²⁹⁴ *Street Fighter II* also allowed wider and more diverse character and setting choices. Fights occurred on a Brazilian fishing dock, an Indian Hindu temple, a Chinese street market, a Soviet factory, and a Las Vegas casino.²⁹⁵ This variety of locales paid homage to the different style of martial arts associated with each setting. It also worked to distinguish itself from other fighting games that relied heavily on East Asian martial arts styles and iconography borrowed from the martial arts film.

The martial arts video game genre has had a symbiotic relationship with the martial arts film genre. Video games have often referenced the iconography of the kung fu film and likewise, popular video games have been adapted for feature films. In *Bruce Lee* (1983), a platform beat-em-up game, the user plays as Bruce Lee, returning to Hong Kong in order to destroy an evil wizard. On his journey, Lee must defeat waves of ninjas and sumo wrestlers in order to reach the game’s main boss. Players did not seem to mind the borrowed film iconography from the kung fu and ninja craze as the game received enthusiastic reviews stating that “it delivers all the foot

²⁹³ Dargenio, Angelo. “The History of Fighting Games Part I” <http://arcadesushi.com/the-history-of-fighting-games-part-1>

²⁹⁴ Ibid

²⁹⁵ Fuller, Mary and Henry Jenkins. “Nintendo and New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue. 63

kicking, fist jabbing, quick ducking, action packed adventure you would expect from a good, grade B, martial arts movie.”²⁹⁶ 1985’s *Way of the Exploding Fist* borrows Bruce Lee’s signature vocal sound effects from his movies in addition to alluding to his style of martial arts, jeet kune do, which translates to “way of the intercepting fist.” These titles can be viewed as a revision of the bruceploitation film genre, which capitalized on the image and memory of Bruce Lee to market and sell tickets. In the case of these two video game titles, rather than having an actor miming the movements and mannerisms of Bruce Lee, his likeliness is digitized and transported into a medium that is capable of indulging in fantasy-driven narratives.

The characteristics of the martial arts video game genre can be more easily adapted to film, but work at the expense of the gameplay and specific user experience found in gaming. In David Desser’s study of the martial arts film genre in the 1990s, he locates the various subgenres that begin to emerge during this decade. One of the main subgenres is the video/cartoon fantasy, which Desser describes as “attempts to narrativize what is essentially nothing more than the constant, nonstop combat of the videogames.”²⁹⁷ The only main difference between the video game and the film adaptation would be the interactive component of the player. Yet, even without this, fans of the video game are the intended demographic that these film adaptations hope to attract. The video/cartoon fantasy is similar to its video game counterpart in that its narrative structure relies on a series of more difficult opponents and protagonists must undergo training or self-determination in order to defeat the growing threats.²⁹⁸ Due to this similar narrative, audiences who are familiar with the video game will have more expertise in identifying and expecting the shape of the film’s story arc. For the most part, video game adaptations have been received negatively by critics that claim these films lack story depth or

²⁹⁶ Stone, David P. “Bruce Lee.” *Computer Gaming World*. June, 1984. 32

²⁹⁷ Desser, David. “The Martial Arts Film in the 1990s.” 95

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.* 97

pander too much to their niche and small fan base. However, the video games that these films are based on have simple storylines and archetypical characters because the emphasis is on gameplay and the user controlling the avatar through button combinations and hand-eye coordination. This is perhaps the defining element that is left out when video games are transposed into a different, non-interactive medium and what is usually missing from the discussion of video game films.

Video game genres tend to follow the cyclical patterns of television genres rather than film genres. In *Hollywood Genres*, Thomas Schatz outlines four phases that film genres tend to go through. First, the innovation phase is when genre texts offer a high degree of experimentation with their visual styles or merge with other genre conventions. The classical period is when the experimentations in the innovation phase become established as convention. The next phase, named the parody/self-reflexive stage, is when genre texts take advantage of the audience's familiarity with genre conventions, drawing attention to their form and style for comedic effect. Audience pleasure is derived from their knowledge of the genre and the exaggeration or humorous use of genre conventions. The last phase in the Schatz cycle is the deconstruction/revisionist phase in which genre texts begin to challenge its generic elements by reformulating, ignoring, or altering the established forms and styles. This revision can usually lead to the genre re-entering the cycle once again.²⁹⁹ Television genres follow a similar genre cycle to film but are more motivated by the economic structure of the television industry. Television programs have an extra incentive to attract either a wide array of audience demographics or a smaller, yet profitable, niche audience group in order to generate advertising revenue. In order to manage the risks of uncertainty and audience taste, experimentation with genre conventions appear at a much slower pace. Instead, television producers rely on the use of

²⁹⁹ Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres*. 36-41

formulas in order to capture audience desire at a certain point in time. Jason Mittell outlines the three-stage programming cycle that is usually triggered by a hit program. The first stage is innovation, and it is similar to the Schatz genre cycle. This phase is defined by a spark in audience attention as a result of a new or experimental type of program. The next stage is imitation, whereby producers will mimic this success, resulting in the third stage of saturation.³⁰⁰ This three-stage cycle of innovation, imitation, and saturation can be seen throughout many television genres such as the reality TV genre in the 2000s. Mittell further states that this imitative logic of television creativity takes other forms such as the spin-off, in which one character is relocated in a new, original program. Another strategy is to create a branded franchise, which features new characters under a shared label such as the multiple incarnations of *Law & Order* or *Crime Scene Investigation (CSI)*.

The television programming cycle is more closely aligned with the genealogy of the fighting game genre insofar as the high amount of cloning and imitation that are featured in games. For instance, after the success of *Street Fighter II* in 1991, many other game developers began imitating visual tropes such as exotic locales, the health bar indicator at the top of the screen, and similar button combinations for special moves. Soon, the genre became saturated with *Street Fighter* clones until *Mortal Kombat* (1993) reinvigorated the genre again by using digitized real-life fighters and featured over-the-top violence and gore. This stood in contrast to the cartoon-like visual style of the *Street Fighter* series and kicked off a new era in the genre. The fighting game genre also uses the spin-off and franchise strategies in similar ways to television. Successful games such as the *Street Fighter* and *Mortal Kombat* series have become game franchises that continue to produce sequels to this day. In each successive sequel, the gameplay and visual style adapt to new technologies and update their game mechanics to make

³⁰⁰ Mittell, Jason. *Television and American Culture*. 46

use of newer hardware specifications. Spin-offs games are also common among popular game titles whereby popular characters get their own game that explores their history. For example, the *Mortal Kombat* series released *Mortal Kombat Mythologies: Sub Zero* (1997), which featured a side-scrolling beat-em-up style instead of the one-on-one tournament format of the series. The game's story acts as a prequel to the original *Mortal Kombat* game and focused on the history and backstory of Sub Zero, a mystical ninja with the superhuman ability to summon and control ice. The similarities between television genres and video game genres, as evidenced by the patterned cycles of their genres, illustrates the dependency of these mediums on formulas to minimize the risks of new ideas and how important audiences and fan bases are to franchise game titles.

In the early decades of video game history, the fighting genre targeted primarily a white, male, and middle-class audience. This demographic was also the primary market for personal computers, which home video game consoles were closely aligned with in offering home entertainment. Marsha Kinder's *Playing with Power* argues that there is an Oedipal dimension of home video games as evidenced by their marketing and textual elements. She observes the strong male orientation in video games that has shaped a bias in gender representation citing a comprehensive study of the 1980s showing that "as early as kindergarten, boys and girls viewed videogames as more appropriate to boys."³⁰¹ A 1989 *Newsweek* article describes the Nintendo craze as "madness that – like most – strikes hardest at adolescent boys and their young brothers; 60 percent of Nintendo players are males between 8 and 15."³⁰² The article further makes a distinction between American and Japanese games stating "in Japan - where Nintendo games are... even more popular than in America – the story themes tend toward cuteness over heroics

³⁰¹ Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power*. 102

³⁰² *Newsweek*. "The Nintendo Kid." March 6, 1989. 67

and gore.”³⁰³ This distinction between Japanese and American video games further clarifies the gendering of the medium in its early years. Kinder notes that the Oedipal pattern of video games includes male heroes who advance into manhood and eventually replace father figures. More notably, this pattern is on display in fighting games in which predominately male characters challenge increasingly tougher and bigger male opponents. Females, on the other hand, have been marginal characters in early video games, usually figured as objects of the male quest.³⁰⁴ These early findings in video game history seem problematic because of the potential social danger in targeting males since video entertainment is becoming a key entry point into the world of computers for most children.³⁰⁵ However, a newer study from 2015 indicates a shifting pattern in gender where 56% of video game players were male and 46% were female.³⁰⁶ One contributing factor to this growth can be attributed to more games having mobile and social characteristics. “The [video game] industry is producing a steady stream of games that continue to expand their nature and impact – they can be artistic, social, and collaborative, with many allowing massive numbers of people from all over the world to participate simultaneously.”³⁰⁷ These characteristics have made participation within video gaming more accessible now than in the past. The key takeaway from these studies of video game users is its contrast with the kung fu genre’s resonance with an urban, working class audience. We can trace an incremental change of the consumer’s identity as the genre moves into video games.

The fighting game genre can also be considered an original martial art in of itself. Chris Goto-Jones’ *The Virtual Ninja Manifesto* argues that fighting games such as *Street Fighter* contain some of the performative and embodied possibilities for personal transformation and

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid. 106

³⁰⁵ Ibid 103

³⁰⁶ *Entertainment Software Association*. “Essential Facts About the Computer and Video Game Industry.” 3

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

self-cultivation that are closely associated with traditional martial arts forms. This argument is based on the suggestion that the playing of video games can have a positive impact on the lives of players outside of the world of gaming. There have been multiple empirical studies that demonstrated video gaming as having potential educational and therapeutic value for adolescents, athletes, and medical patients suffering various diseases and disabilities.³⁰⁸ The argument that Goto-Jones outlines is that the physical and cognitive benefits that video games provide can also lead to spiritual and moral cultivation. Training in fighting games includes mastering the special moves that are made up of highly complex combinations that are performed on a control interface. The commitment needed to master the control schemes of these games produces a form of engagement that produces positive social and psychological outcomes. One study suggests “length of game engagement moderated the links observed between type of game and aggression; that is, aggression was lowest for players of high violence games when they were assigned to play these games for long periods of time.”³⁰⁹

The martial arts or fighting game genre continues to develop alongside new technologies that expand the degrees of interactivity and gameplay mechanics. One trend in the genre is the use of three-dimensional motion tracking technology that inputs the bodily movements of the user into the game itself. This deep immersion and relationship between user and image can be used for fitness related gaming and can also have a profound effect on questions of identification. The UFC has implemented this technology into their game entitled *UFC Personal Trainer*, which features fitness and exercise routines of professional MMA fighters. They have also branded their own simulated fighting game, utilizing button sequencing and combinations that correspond to fighting techniques. Motion tracking technology in gaming has given way to

³⁰⁸ Kinder. 112

³⁰⁹ Przybylski, et al. “A Motivational Model of Video Games Engagement.” *Review of General Psychology*. Vol. 14, Iss. 2. 154

virtual reality, and it will not be long until game developers will be able to allow players a chance to compete in combat sports virtually. As a relatively newer sport, MMA has been on the forefront of accepting and embracing technological advancements. In other areas such as online social media, the UFC in particular has gone against the policies of traditional sports in favor of allowing its use for promotional purposes.

PARTICIPATORY CULTURE AND WATCHDOG FANDOM

As the variety of uses of communication devices expands, its regulation has become an issue, particularly in sport. Twitter, founded in 2006, is a free online social networking application that enables its users to send and read short messages called “tweets.” One benefit of this application is that it allows for athletes to directly communicate with the public, rather than going through traditional media sources. In some cases, this circumvention of press and public relations has led to unfiltered and sometimes offensive tweets by athletes, causing negative backlash to teams and team owners. In other cases, sensitive information regarding business transactions or game strategies could be accidentally leaked. “Fearful that the casual nature of Twitter could inspire players to inadvertently disclose privileged information ranging from game plans to injuries,”³¹⁰ in 2009, the NFL and NBA prohibited the use of cell phones and other devices prior to games until all media interviews have been concluded.³¹¹ Other organizations such as the NHL and MLB have also begun to regulate the use of electronic devices. In judicial courts, instantaneous reports made by either jurors or media reporters have been an issue that courtroom judges have had to grapple with in regards to its impact on producing a fair trial.³¹²

³¹⁰ Thomas, Jaia. “Twitter: The Sports Media Rookie.” 116

³¹¹ Ibid 116

³¹² Ibid.

With the ability to directly communicate with the public at a quicker rate, Twitter has been an important social tool for disseminating and acquiring information.

The UFC's embrace of Twitter has constructed a younger, more tech-savvy image of its athletes that are able to communicate directly with their fans. While traditional sports and institutions have limited the use of Twitter and online social networks, the UFC is the only sport to date that, for a protracted time period, offered cash incentives for using Twitter. The UFC contracted Arizona based company Digital Royalties to track the accounts of its fighters and using that data, the UFC paid bonuses to fighters for either gaining the most followers or for posting the most creative tweet; designating \$240,000 in total bonuses for 2011.³¹³ One criticism that this policy has faced is that it might motivate more irresponsible and reckless tweets in order to gain notoriety and a bonus check. For example, during this period, a handful of fighters were either fired or reprimanded for offensive and inappropriate tweets that made light of things like rape and sexual assault.³¹⁴ It is not known how long this incentive program lasted or the exact reasons why it has since ceased. However, in its wake, the UFC has experimented with other methods of social media monetization. In 2014, sports media firm Sqor Inc. began recruiting UFC athletes for its platform, which pays its athletes for using a variety of social media applications and for promoting themselves and their fights.³¹⁵ CEO of Sqor Inc. Brian Wilhite argues that professional athletes should be rewarded for social media use, stating that "the value that pro athletes brought to social media was greater than the value they were getting out of it, Wilhite suspected, and he set out to create a platform geared specifically towards sports fans as

³¹³ Helwani, Ariel. "UFC to Offer Bonuses to Fighters for Tweeting."

³¹⁴ Bastone, Joe. "UFC: Analysis of the Miguel Torres 'Rape Van' Tweet and Firing by Dana White." *Bleacherreport.com*

³¹⁵ Fowlkes, Ben. "For UFC Fighters, Social Media Brings Extra Payday."

well as one that rewarded athletes for participating.”³¹⁶ What these developments and experiments in paid social media usage between UFC athletes and social media apps indicate is the unique self-marketing strategies that MMA athletes use in ways that contrast with traditional team sports. It also highlights the embrace of new technologies of the UFC in building and attracting younger and new audiences.

While having an incentive to promote your team or company can be beneficial for all parties involved, recent studies have shown that athletes use social networks for personal, rather than professional purposes. Two case studies, published in the *International Journal of Sport Communication*, analyzed and categorized professional athletes’ tweets in order to better understand their potential in the media landscape of contemporary sport. “Twitter provides an unfiltered forum where the athletes can let their proverbial hair down and wax poetic about whatever suits their fancy. As such, the tweets provide fans unique and unrestricted insight into the personal lives of professional athletes.”³¹⁷ One might assume that this direct line of communication between athlete and fan would be an effective means of advertising and corporate branding. However, the studies would suggest otherwise. “Athletes are not capitalizing on this audience of consumers... as the power of Twitter grows, this could be a potential new area for product-endorsement revenue.”³¹⁸ From this perspective, it is clear why some team owners or organizations might enforce strict social media policies: reckless or offensive tweets could have serious financial ramifications. For example, sponsors might be reluctant to support an athlete with strong political views in fear of alienating its consumer base. Or, as Michael

³¹⁶ Ibid

³¹⁷ Hamrick et al., “Understanding Professional Athletes’ Use of Twitter: A Content Analysis of Athlete Tweets.” 466

³¹⁸ Pegoraro, Ann. “Look Who’s Talking – Athletes on Twitter: A Case Study.” 511

Jordan famously put it, “Republicans buy sneakers too.” The conflict between personal and commercial use of social media is an issue that is currently being debated.

Recently, online social media platforms, such as Twitter, have grown in popularity and use with athletes, journalists, and media corporations, which have increased the lines of communication for fans and consumers. While many critics and sports fans view Twitter use by athletes as a possible avenue for marketing and increasing one’s fan base it also marks a new avenue of participatory culture, which is part of what Henry Jenkins has called “convergence culture.” Jenkins aims to describe the contemporary media landscape, documenting the changes occurring between media producers and audiences and how their negotiations and conflicts shape the meaning of a media text. “Convergence” is a blanket term used to define technological, cultural, and industrial changes in our current media-scape, where new media and traditional media converge in a consumer, audience driven economy. Jenkins states that “sometimes, corporate and grassroots convergence reinforce each other, creating closer, more rewarding relations between media producers and consumers. Sometimes, these two forces are at war, and those struggles will redefine the face of American popular culture.”³¹⁹ Media producers rely on fan participation, especially as it serves the interests of producers and at the same time, fans are seeking out ways to own and become closer to the media texts, using them in ways that resonate with their own subjectivities.

One of the strengths of social media is that they can be used as a voice of resistance and negotiation between media producers and audiences. For example, in 2015 the UFC partnered with sports apparel brand Reebok to create uniforms for its fighters. This eliminated the older model of fighters wearing sponsorship logos and apparel by having all fighters wear Reebok apparel. While the reasoning behind this shift was to have a more professional and uniform look,

³¹⁹ Jenkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture*. 18

it came at a cost to many fighters on the roster who had lucrative sponsorship deals with outside companies, some of whom were Reebok's direct competitors in the sports apparel industry. The payout structure was also changed so that the pay rate was based upon seniority, or how many bouts the fighter has participated in. Before the uniforms were unveiled to the public, Reebok was drawing the ire of fighters who were vocal on social media about the low payout structure and how there was no communication with fighters about the details and structure of the deal.³²⁰ Analysts found that only two percent of the UFC roster would be eligible for the top tier payout based upon seniority, making it seem as though the deal between Reebok and the UFC was deliberate in keeping fighters from earning higher pay. Furthermore, once the uniforms were available to the public, fans criticized Reebok for not understanding the nuances of the sport. For example, some uniforms featured the nicknames of the fighters alongside their name. In some cases, the nickname precedes the full name, such as "The Notorious" Connor McGregor, while for others, the nickname is between a fighter's first and last name such as Chuck "The Iceman" Lidell. In some of the uniforms available for purchase, the nicknames were featured incorrectly on the jersey, causing fans to post misspellings of names and inconsistent nicknames online. These examples demonstrate the learning curve by Reebok to understand some of the unique aspects of MMA and also highlights the labor issues that fighters face without union representation and bargaining rights.

Perhaps the two biggest blunders by Reebok so far tapped into deep-seeded geopolitical tensions. In October of 2015, Reebok created a t-shirt with a map of Ireland without the six counties that comprised the country of Northern Ireland. This sparked outrage, particularly by Irish fans that were angered by the confusion of terminology used (Ireland and Republic of

³²⁰ Fowlkes, Ben. "The UFC's Reebok Era has Begun But Off To a Rocky Start."

Ireland), and how it ultimately undercut a wider view of Irish identity.³²¹ The “Republic of Ireland” refers to the independent democratic country whose capital is Dublin, while “Ireland” is considered to be both the “Republic of Ireland” and Northern Ireland, which is one of the four countries that comprise the United Kingdom. Prominent Irish MMA coach John Kavanaugh called for a boycott of Reebok, stating, “The reason I was so annoyed by that t-shirt was because of the tag line ‘show your territorial allegiance.’ My girlfriend is from Belfast, a city that has experienced a lot of senseless killings on both sides. This type of rhetoric only serves to fuel negative emotions and brings out the worst in us.”³²² Within a day of its release and due in most part from the backlash on social media it received from the Irish MMA community, Reebok immediately pulled the shirt from its website and issued an apology on Twitter, stating, “We sincerely apologize for the offence caused by the UFC Ireland t-shirt. This was a design error and has now been removed.”³²³ Similarly, another offensive symbol emerged on a UFC uniform only weeks after the Ireland t-shirt mishap. The sleeve of a Polish fighter’s uniform featured the coat of arms of the country, the eagle, in black instead of white. For Poles, the color of their eagle has important historical connotations. In the late 18th century, three land-hungry empires (Russia, Prussia, and Austria) formed a secret alliance in order to control Poland’s government by influencing elections and to divide Poland’s land for themselves. This was known as the “Alliance of the Three Black Eagles” because all three countries used the black eagle as their coat of arms.³²⁴ To make matters worse, in Russian-occupied Poland, the white eagle of Poland was displayed on the chest of the double-headed, black eagle of Russia that explicitly and mockingly displayed their ownership of Poland. For many non-Polish fans, this small mistake in

³²¹ Thomas, Luke. “Reebok claims ‘design error’ for Controversial T-shirt.”

³²² Ibid.

³²³ Ibid.

³²⁴ Steves, Rick. *Snapshot: Krakow, Warsaw, and Gdansk*.

color would not have been caught. Fortunately, Polish fans noticed this error, posting screenshots of the sleeve on social media and informing the public that the color of the Polish eagle must always be white. In response, Reebok quickly changed the color of the eagle to white for future Polish fighters. While it seems as though these two design mishaps by Reebok were done without malice or intent, it highlights both the global reach and popularity of MMA and the power of social media to bring attention to and affect design choices. It might have been the case that at Reebok, the team in charge of designs does not have a world history expert or a representative for every country on staff to double-check the accuracy of design choices. It is up to the fans to act as a watchdog for historical and political inaccuracies that are specific to their countries and cultures. Yet, as the sport of MMA grows more diverse as it gains global popularity, the cycle of producing a product with an offensive or inaccurate symbol, social media backlash, pulling the product, and concluding with a stock apology can only be detrimental to the brand of Reebok and its business relationship with the UFC in the long run. The significance of this example illustrates one way that MMA fans have voiced their dissatisfaction with recent attempts of the corporate branding of their sport. While this relationship only represents the apparel component of the UFC brand, the company has expanded its media presence outside of television broadcasts to incorporate multiple forms of media and where participation by fans is the norm rather than the exception.

TRANSMEDIA STORYTELLING AND MMA PARATEXTS

In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins describes the term transmedia storytelling as multiple texts of a story world existing and unfolding across multiple media platforms. He states that “in the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best – so that a story

might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics.”³²⁵ In other words, transmedia storytelling weaves together individual strands of a story into a larger and richer tapestry by offering multiple ways for the audience to participate. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins uses *The Matrix* as an example of transmedia storytelling. Jenkins explains that while the main narrative of *The Matrix* is self contained and enjoyed on its own by the casual audience member, for the enthusiastic fan, their experience can be enriched through *The Matrix* related transmedia properties such as graphic novels, video games, and film sequels that offer more information about characters and the universe they inhabit. Information is spread across different media properties that encourage fans to invest in its properties in order to fully comprehend and immerse themselves within that particular media universe. In American sport, transmedia storytelling can take several different forms that drive narratives and enhances the viewing experience for fans. For any given sporting competition, there are multiple storylines being told such as the history behind the teams competing, injury and personnel updates, trade speculation, etc. These multiple narratives can be accessed through multiple mediums that provide the broadcast and analysis of the event mainly through different television programs

The concept of transmedia storytelling is derived from what Marsha Kinder calls a media supersystem and can be used as a marketing and storytelling device. She describes a media supersystem in *Playing with Power* as a “network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either fictional or real.”³²⁶ The example that Kinder uses is the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise as a multiple medium network of texts. *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* was originally a comic series in 1984, then a Saturday morning cartoon in 1987, which was primarily created to promote their action figure line, and a separate

³²⁵ Ibid. 98

³²⁶ Kinder. *Playing with Power*. 122

film franchise beginning in 1991. This specific example is intriguing because of its immediate appeal to American youths and its amalgamated use of a variety of martial arts styles. Because of the multiple media forms, the franchise could be accessed by all ages and economic backgrounds. An example of a combat sport-based media supersystem is professional wrestling, which extends its fictional world across a variety of media. What is significant about professional wrestling is that it also uses social media to enhance feuds between performers. This is done to both increase viewership and the emotional investment of fans. In MMA, this is also a significant component to promoting events in which fighters might engage in public social media feuds to construct a narrative for the fight. In this example of MMA and professional wrestling, social media functions as a free promotional tool for a paid televised broadcast. It also functions to augment and create narratives that accompany the fight itself, which in-turn increases fan engagement with individual athletes.

For the martial arts and action genres, toys and action figures form an important intermediary between text and viewer. In Japan, the *tokusatsu* (translated as “special effects”) genre and its subgenre, *henshin* (transformation) or *Super Sentai* series of television programs features live-action superheroes that morph into machines and fight monsters. The first of this series, *Himitsu Sentai Goranger*, premiered in 1975 and still remains a prominent fixture on Japanese television and popular culture today. The basic premise of every *Super Sentai* series is the same with few major changes: a team of youths wears color-coded costumes, a central motif (past series have included elements such as motorcycles, pirates, and dinosaurs), conflict with an invading force, and fighting robots that combine to form larger robots. The series is a solid early example of transmedia storytelling as it is primarily a television series, but also includes feature length films, live-shows, and video game adaptations. The boundaries between mediums are not

enforced but blurred in order to maximize product synergy. For example, toy ads are staged as action scenes using the same actors in the television show making the transition from program to commercial virtually seamless.³²⁷ Furthermore, battles and fighting sequences are the main selling point for toy manufacturers. “Using battle and transformation scenes as the trigger for toy merchandise – a proliferation of bodies, body parts, costumes, weapons, and vehicular *mecha* – toy companies promote this in programming and are less likely to sponsor those programs without battle scenes.”³²⁸ Thus, the accompanying toys and accessories are able to replicate the martial arts moves featured on each episode. Children are encouraged to purchase the figures of the heroes and villains in order to be able to act out what they have just viewed on television or simultaneously during the broadcast. However, as Se Young Kim points out that within the *Super Sentai* toy lines, the focal point of toys are directed at role-play and robots rather than individual heroes and villains.³²⁹ This is different from how toys are marketed in the US. “If the war play in US toys requires a protagonist and antagonist, then the play in *Super Sentai* does not require a target. More importantly, what becomes evident is how *Super Sentai* does not animate the child to mimic the heroes’ violence through toy figurines. Instead, it encourages the children to *use their own bodies*.”³³⁰ Kim emphasizes the use of bodily play as an important method of engagement children have with television texts. The martial arts moves and fighting sequences that appear in every episode serve two functions: to sell more licensed merchandise (to parents) and as a form of mimetic play for children. This example of *Super Sentai* also extends beyond typical transmedia relationships that are text based such as films, novels, comics, television, etc. to encompass physical interaction with texts. What is significant about this example is that it

³²⁷ Allison, Anne. *Millennial Monsters*. 111

³²⁸ *Ibid.* 113

³²⁹ Kim, Se Young. “Children of the Atom.” 67

³³⁰ *Ibid.* 67

anticipates technology such as virtual reality and 3-D motion capture in which bodily movement and screen narratives are combined. This is also important in considering future video game consoles such as the Nintendo Wii use a similar relationship between user and game for the purpose of fitness.

Media paratexts have a similar intermediary function as transmedia storytelling by inviting audience participation in the creation of narratives. Jonathan Gray's study of media paratexts looks at movie trailers, DVD bonus materials, licensed merchandise, sequels, and fan-made creations in order to understand the role that they play in creating meaning for its consumers. Since our media landscape has grown in content, paratexts help consumers decide which texts to consume and in many cases, audiences consume more media paratexts than texts themselves.³³¹ One interesting observation that Gray makes is that media paratexts not only function as an intermediary or pathway between texts and audiences, but can also be independent of the host text. Examples of this include fan fictions as well as licensed merchandise such as toys and games. Although these paratexts might lack the capital or infrastructure of industry-created paratexts, they create alternative pathways through media texts. This could include something as common and simple as "water cooler" chats or as labor-intensive as creating a fan fiction and independently distributing it online through online communities and forums. The prevalence of fan-made content demonstrates that there is an interest in the creation and ownership of texts. This has the possibility of conflicting with the intent of media producers, or, in some cases, could yield beneficial results for both producers and fans. Gray writes that "the industry usually has considerable interest in trying to set its own textual parameters and it will at

³³¹ Ibid. 26

times reinforce this semiotic act with legal ones, literally closing off opportunities for its texts to grow in certain directions”³³²

Promotional material for the first UFC events hyped the realism of the combat and promising bloody mayhem while simultaneously added a sense of mystery. For instance, the poster for UFC I featured a grainy image of two men grappling that was actually taken from a screenshot of a VHS copy of a filmed *Vale Tudo*³³³ fight between two fighters.³³⁴ Since this was the first event and the roster was filled in last minute, there were no pictures available to use or could be printed in time for the event. The right and left margins of the poster listed each of the eight fighters, their height, weight, hometown, and martial arts style, and professional record. The biographical information on the margins tells the viewer these are real athletes and the image conveys the message of a bare-knuckle brawl. The details, and the way they are listed matter because it helps to heighten the sense of realism. The overlapping text on the central image lists each of the competitor’s martial arts styles: “THE ULTIMATE! SUMO VS. KICKBOXING VS. KARATE VS. JIU-JITSU VS. TAE KWON DO VS. BOXING VS. SAVATE VS. SHOOTFIGHTING. Who will be the ULTIMATE FIGHTER?” the grainy image of two men brawling with one of the men lying on his back while the other stands over him with one of his fists in the air calls attention to a raw, back-alley brawl-like atmosphere. For some, this image might even evoke memories of the Rodney King tape, whose subsequent trial against LAPD officers and their acquittal in April of 1992 led to the Los Angeles riots. The home video tape of Rodney King’s beating at the hands of officers was taken by George Holliday and was not only used and analyzed in the trial, but also replayed on television for months before the trial

³³² Gray.173.

³³³ *Vale Tudo* was a mixed martial arts match popular in Brazil. It was similar to early no-holds-barred fights, but focused more on the style vs. style matchups and took place within dojos and gymnasiums in Rio de Janeiro.

³³⁴ Davie, *Art. Is This Legal?* 140

began. For viewers of the UFC I poster, the grainy image of two men in combat is evocative of the same raw footage, visual interest, mystery, and feelings of shock that Holliday's tape had on the American public in 1992. This was the best type of advertisement for the first UFC event because there were elements of both mystery and realism. The realism of accomplished martial artists and athletes on the margins, while in the center, the mysterious nature of a bare-knuckle, no-rules brawl.

In the world of televised sports, media paratexts can serve as an important indexical purpose since on any given weekend there might be a number of games being broadcast live on television. For instance, promos, previews, and news programs allow the sports fan to schedule their media consumption patterns according to their interests and may even provide a personal value for each event. While on the other hand, programs such as ESPN's *Sportscenter* only show paratexts in the form of highlights and exciting moments from the day's sporting events. Clips and highlights of sporting events function in the same way as a movie trailer does by providing requisite information such as important moments without having to view the entire sporting contest, which can be time consuming for the fan. Sports media paratexts that surround the broadcasting of events can also be called "shoulder" programming that function as a companion to the live broadcast of the sporting event. Examples of this include pre-event and post-event programming. As Randy Grant points out, shoulder programming serves two purposes: "first, it helps stimulate demand for the main event by educating and exciting fans with everything from player injury reports to analysis of intriguing match-ups... The second purpose is to generate additional revenue by essentially expanding coverage of the actual sporting event."³³⁵ The existence of shoulder programming illustrates the economic power of a sporting event to attract both advertisers and viewers so much so that hours of a station's airtime can be dedicated to

³³⁵ Grant, Randy and John Leadly. *The Economics of Intercollegiate Sports*. 337

analysis and promotional content. ESPN's *Monday Night Football* is one of the most consistently popular televised sporting events on network television. Even though the game starts at 8:30 PM Eastern Time, the pre-game show begins five hours earlier at 3:30 PM Eastern. Coverage immediately resumes following the conclusion of the game, extending its broadcast and maximizing the amount of advertisers willing to buy ad space. This was one of the main reasons why ESPN was able to take over the *Monday Night Football* franchise from its sister station, ABC, which could not commit to the hours of shoulder programming needed to maximize advertiser revenue.³³⁶

Televised programming for the first UFC event on FOX Sports utilized a combination of paratextual shoulder programming and transmedia storytelling. In 2011, the UFC signed a television deal with FOX Sports, which moved all of their programming including *The Ultimate Fighter* (from Spike TV) and included live fight cards exclusive for FOX Sports. This move also meant that they were able to spread their content throughout the FOX network of channels in addition to their own streaming services on other media platforms. This added platform created a unique viewing experience that was transmedia in nature yet shifts the original definition to encompass a singular narrative event. For instance, in order to view the entire fight card for a single event, the experience begins with a live streaming fight on Facebook.com, an online social media website, then the undercard is broadcast on FOX Sports, and then finally, the main card is broadcast on Pay-Per-View. The transmedia component to this experience varies as one could view both the Facebook stream and the television broadcast on a variety of devices, even switching between multiple mediums in the process. From the perspective of the UFC, having broad coverage across multiple mediums helps to reel in viewers for the paid Pay-per-view card, where the UFC will not have to share the revenue with networks. This type of transition is

³³⁶ Deninger, Dennis. *Sports on Television: The How and Why Behind What You See*. 100.

reminiscent of Raymond Williams' definition of flow, which he considers to be the defining characteristic of broadcasting. Williams' concept of flow examines the strategies of networks that would keep viewers locked to their channel.

The UFC's model of flow guides and directs audiences to their paid Pay-per-view card by broadcasting and streaming free content to hook in viewers. In addition to pre- and post-event shows, most events also broadcast behind the scenes and biographical programs that highlight the fighters involved in the fight card. When the UFC made its FOX debut on November 12, 2011, there was more than seven hours of shoulder programming to draw in viewers across the FOX family of networks. The programming lineup was as follows.³³⁷

Friday, November 11, 2011:

7PM: Weigh-ins airs live on FOX Sports I

Saturday, November 12, 2011:

3PM: Cain Velasquez: Brown Pride Part I on FOX Deportes

4PM: Cain Velasquez: Brown Pride Part II on FOX Deportes

5PM: Cain Velasquez: Brown Pride Part III on FOX Deportes

5:30PM: Weigh-ins re-airs on FOX Sports I

6PM: UFC Primetime re-airs on FOX Sports I

7PM: Pre-fight show on Fox Sports I

9PM: Live fight card on FOX

10PM: Post-fight show on Fox Sports I

The seven hours of shoulder programming included a biographical special on the main event fighter, Cain Velasquez, who is of Mexican American heritage and aired on FOX's Spanish language network, FOX Deportes. It also included a rerun of the weigh-in ceremony in which fighters are weighed in front of the state athletic commission and ticket holders as well as a promotional program, *UFC Primetime*, which featured behind-the-scenes footage of the fighter's training and lifestyle. All of this shoulder programming functioned to draw an audience, pulling

³³⁷ La Monica, Mark. "UFC on FOX Programming Schedule." *Newsday.com*. November 9, 2011. <https://www.newsday.com/sports/mixed-martial-arts/ufc-on-fox-programming-schedule-1.3302345>

in 5.7 million viewers.³³⁸ Furthermore, this was the most watched event in UFC history at that time and was the most viewed program by males 18-34 years old, out-performing college football, which was also broadcast at the same time.³³⁹ The combination of paratexts in the form of shoulder programming and the transmedia nature of the UFC on FOX broadcast helped the UFC to achieve its goal of generating enough interest and capturing an audience.

MMA OUTSIDE THE OCTAGON

One successful strategy that the UFC implemented for its mission to gain mainstream acceptance was to emphasize the sport's healthful and practical applications. In February of 2011, twenty-three year old Maskim Gelman went on a twenty-eight hour stabbing spree in New York City, killing four people and wounding many others. Beginning in Brooklyn and working his way up to Manhattan within the subway system, Gelman prompted a short-lived hysteria around the city. While attempting to force his way into the driver's car of the one of the subway trains, he was subdued by Joseph Lozito, an "average Joe" who just so happened to be a fan of mixed martial arts. Lozito used a single-leg takedown he had seen in many MMA fights and held him down while waiting for the assistance of police officers. In an interview with *Good Morning America*, Lozito modestly stated in regards to MMA that, "I guess you watch it for twenty years, you just pick up some things through osmosis."³⁴⁰ While Lozito was hailed in the media as a hero, this event also worked to create a more positive image of the sport of MMA, which, even in 2011, still sustained some stereotypes of its barbaric image of its no-holds-barred

³³⁸ Holland, Jesse. "UFC on FOX (revised) Ratings Reflects 5.7 Million Viewers for Velasquez Vs. Dos Santos." November 14, 2011. <https://www.mmamania.com/2011/11/14/2560714/ufc-on-fox-ratings-revised-reflects-5-7-million-viewers-for-velasquez>

³³⁹ MMAweekly.com Staff. "New Ratings Released: FOX Debut Most Watched UFC Event Ever." November 13, 2011. <http://www.mmaweekly.com/new-ratings-released-fox-debut-most-watched-ufc-event-ever>

³⁴⁰ Hubbard and Hopper. "Joseph Lozito Used Martial Arts Tactic He Saw on TV to End Alleged Stabber's Spree."

past. This positive image of the sport through an act of civic heroism was also used for political purposes. In 2011, and up until 2016, MMA competitions were illegal in New York State. Lozito's use of the leg sweep, a common technique used in freestyle wrestling, on a subway car in self defense is legal to use, but not in front of a paying public audience due to the laws that restricted the sanctioning of MMA events. The Lozito story was one of the first highly publicized uses of MMA and the martial arts outside of its prescribed location in the ring, sparking discourse in the practical and beneficial uses of the sport for purposes other than prizefighting. Coincidentally, this incident involving Lozito also occurs two months before the UFC released *UFC Personal Trainer*, which was a groundbreaking video game in its use of motion tracking technology and its combination of fighting and fitness genres. What I will focus on in this section is how MMA has been used outside of the octagon and how the sport has been branded as a lifestyle and, in particular, used as a form of physical fitness. The release of *UFC Personal Trainer* can be read as a significant moment in two regards. It exemplified the UFC's vision of mainstream acceptance by branching out into other business ventures besides prizefighting, and it was one of the first video games to combine the emerging technology of 3-D motion tracking with the home fitness video game genre.

In 2006, the video game company Nintendo launched its newest console, the Wii, which ushered in a new physically interactive gameplay style that used 3-D motion sensor technology. The handheld controller used a combination of accelerometers and infrared detection to sense its position in 3-D space when pointed at the console's sensor bar.³⁴¹ This design allowed the user to control the console and its games with physical gestures and button pressing. At its launch, the Wii mainly focused on sports games that utilized the new controller system such as tennis, golf,

³⁴¹ Wisniowski, Howard. "Analog Devices And Nintendo Collaboration Drives Video Game Innovation With iMEMS Motion Signal Processing Technology." Analog Devices, Inc. March 9, 2006

bowling, and boxing. The Wii impressed parents because it offered a more active game-playing experience than other consoles and also appealed to seniors who had difficult exercising.³⁴² As David Carter writes, “The Wii made its way through retirement homes as a low-resistance but high-excitement workout.”³⁴³ This technology was key in designing games that emphasized human motion.

The Wii console also marked the first time that video gaming was conceived as a device that promoted health and fitness. A study done by the British Medical Journal indicated that Wii players used 2% more energy than players of regular computer games, adding that, “although this figure is trivial, it might contribute to weight management.”³⁴⁴ Additionally, in 2008, a clinical study was performed on a teenager with cerebral palsy using the Wii as a rehabilitative method. The study found that the Wii complemented traditional physical therapy methods and was the first published study of its kind to integrate a popular video game console into its research.³⁴⁵ In 2010, Nintendo partnered with The American Heart Association to promote the Wii. Nintendo would be able to brand its Wii products with The American Heart Association logo and, in return, Nintendo donated \$1.5 million to the health advocacy group as part of its partnership.³⁴⁶ Clyde Yancy, the AHA’s President stated “we can keep beating the drum on traditional exercise and make small changes to the obesity epidemic, or we can try something that is really provocative and new.”³⁴⁷ This partnership is significant because it helped to solidify the video game console as a piece of equipment that can be used for health and fitness. It also created a new, hybrid market for innovative games that utilized physical gestures as its main

³⁴² Carter, David. *Money Games*. 49

³⁴³ Ibid. 49

³⁴⁴ *BBCnews.com*. “Wii Players Need Exercise Too.” <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/health/7155342.stm>

³⁴⁵ *www.newswise.com*. “Research Shows Rehabilitation Benefits of Using Nintendo Wii.”

<http://www.newswise.com//articles/view/544616/>

³⁴⁶ Schectman, Joel. “Heart Group Backs Video Games in Obesity Campaign.” *The Daily News*. May 22, 2010

³⁴⁷ Ibid.

control scheme and games that combined home workouts with gaming. Rival video game console makers Microsoft and Sony saw the success that the Wii was having and began to create their own 3-D motion sensor controllers to their existing platforms in order to cash in this new, burgeoning market.

In an effort to extend its brand outside of the octagon, the UFC ventured into personal fitness arena. The company's journey into the fitness market came as part of a move towards mainstream acceptance and visibility. As previously mentioned, the UFC's first move was to enter television, first through cable (Spike TV) and then through the networks (FOX). The UFC also negotiated deals with Anheuser-Busch and Harley Davidson, which secured the company as a sports business leader while also demonstrating the targeted audience for its brand. According to Lorenzo Fertitta, one of the owners of the UFC at the time, the "UFC has spawned a certain type of lifestyle. There is a distinctive sense of community that's around the UFC, which is a bit like surf, skate, and snow."³⁴⁸ It is interesting that he points to the extreme sports as examples of lifestyles that became sports through the X-Games and the corporate strategy to commercialize alternative recreational practices. The UFC, compared to extreme sports, went in an almost opposite direction, creating a sport and then extending that sport into a lifestyle brand. In considering brand extension, Lorenzo Fertitta looked at the usual offerings such as restaurants and retail stores but turned them down because they were not a natural fit for the company.³⁴⁹ The UFC partnered with Mark Mastroy, the founder of 24-Hour Fitness in creating the first UFC branded gyms and fitness centers and its first major brand extension.³⁵⁰ The creation of these gyms was aimed at the blue-collar crowd and, according to Mastroy, "the idea is taking the

³⁴⁸ Carter, David. *Money Games*. 35

³⁴⁹ King, Bill. "UFC's Health Club Venture is Working Out." *Sports Business Daily*. April 21, 2014. <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2014/04/21/In-Depth/UFC.aspx>

³⁵⁰ Carter. 35. A year later, in 2010, the UFC began publishing its own magazine, entitled, *UFC 360*, which is published six times a year. Carter, 35.

neighborhood dojo and merging it with a state-of-the-art gym.”³⁵¹ In other words, it took the familiar aspects of a gym with free-weights, machines, cardio equipment, and integrated that with the options to participate in martial arts classes. The targeting of the working-class is another significant component to the UFC branded gyms because of the resonance that the martial arts film genre had with this demographic in the 1970s. During the home video craze, the home fitness genre also flourished alongside other marginal genres including taped UFC broadcasts repurposed for home video. Additionally, the home fitness market was also on the UFC’s sights as another way of becoming a lifestyle brand.

UFC Personal Trainer was one of the first games to use the 3-D motion tracking systems for each of the three major video consoles made by Microsoft, Sony, and Nintendo and its emphasis on training relates it to the martial arts genre. It was the first video game to collaborate with NASM, the National Academy of Sports Medicine, which is one of a few associations that provide professional personal training and fitness certifications as well as accredited bachelors and masters degree programs.³⁵² The game itself is similar in design to the brick-and-mortar UFC gyms in that they offer a mix of MMA style workout programs, taught virtually by famous MMA coaches and features virtual workouts with UFC athletes. “Users will learn over 70 MMA and NASM approved exercises, including moves from disciplines such as wrestling, kickboxing, and muay thai that are designed to improve strength, endurance, and conditioning through use in a variety of routines.”³⁵³ *UFC Personal Trainer* provides a more intimate relationship between the user and screen by adding 3-D motion sensor gestures as both a home workout and

³⁵¹ Marrocco. Steven. “UFC Gym’s Mark Mastrov Says New Training Centers target “Blue-Collar Types.” *MMAJunkie.com*. October 19, 2010. <http://mmajunkie.com/2010/10/ufc-gyms-mark-mastrov-says-new-training-centers-target-blue-collar-types>

³⁵² *Businesswire.com*. “*UFC Personal Trainer: The Ultimate Fitness System* in Development on Kinect for XBOX 360, Playstation Move for PS3, and Wii.”

³⁵³ Ibid

interactive gaming experience. Additionally, it also recalls the themes of training and self-cultivation that many martial arts films depicted. In *UFC Personal Trainer*, the use of martial arts as a tool to improve one's health and learn self-defense skills mimics the narrative progression of martial arts protagonists.

The interactivity and types of participation between spectator and screen is an important factor in how individuals identify with images. A cartoon from the British humor magazine *Pick Me Up* in 1896 expresses the association between screen and spectator using boxing as its central focus. The first panel shows a man looking at the projected image of a boxer in a crouched stance ready to strike while the second panel displays the boxer leaping out from the screen, surprisingly punching the spectator in the face. In addition to illustrating the attraction and popularity of boxing at the movies, the cartoon also foreshadows the direction of televised sports, which attempt to transform the spectator to a participant. In viewing this interactive shift, Lev Manovich notes that the spectator identifies and follows along with the camera eye while the body of the spectator remains in their seat within the theater.³⁵⁴ However, in virtual reality or 3-D motion sensors, the screen is the virtual representation or avatar, and the human body and consciousness controls the image. Thus, the body of the subject is split into two: the physical component of the human body and the virtual component of the image on screen. "This requires the viewer to move in order to see an image and at the same time physically ties him/her to a machine... the virtual world is synchronized precisely with the physical one."³⁵⁵ In *UFC Personal Trainer*, this idea is paramount to the game's narrative and progression system. Even though there is a sense of freedom when this synchronization occurs, players are still confined to the algorithms of the program in which specific goals are put in the game in order to achieve

³⁵⁴ Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media*. 108

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.* 110-111

narrative progress. *UFC Personal Trainer* tracks the user's performances throughout the fifty-one available workouts, awarding progress and specific achievements. This can trigger more personal satisfaction as a player and as a health-conscious individual.

The main narrative for *UFC Personal Trainer* emphasizes the repetition of movements that are intrinsic in both gaming and exercise. In Torben Grodal's "Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles," the first-person gaming experience is tied to the learning process. He divides this process into three phases: challenge, mastery, and automation. At first, the virtual world of the game is new, posing different challenges and mysteries, which force the user to figure out the control scheme and level design. Upon repetition, the game becomes familiar with a "trance-like immersion in the virtual world, because of the strong neuronal links that are forged between perceptions, emotions, and actions."³⁵⁶ The last phase, automation, describes the players' sentiment toward the game as predictable and losing it salience. In each of these phases, repetition is the key to progressing within the narrative of the game, yet at the same time, the player must experience agency and free will and not feel as though they are enacting stimulus-response patterns. This is achieved through having options and different paths that yield various outcomes. Another interesting facet about this narrative of repetition is that it relates back to the martial arts film genre in which training sequences within films functioned as character development. Protagonists would undergo rigorous physical training in order to progress to a higher level that is required to beat their opponent in the climax of the film.

Exergaming, an amalgam of exercise and gaming, is a genre that emerges from and also demonstrates the close relationship between gaming and physical exercise. Ian Bogost writes that video games have always involved elements of physicality within their gameplay such as vigorously jostling a joystick or rhythmically pressing buttons in sequence. This element of

³⁵⁶ Grodal, Torben. "Stories for Eye, Ear, and Muscles." *The Video Game Theory Reader*. 148.

physicality also extends to things like the required transportation such as bike or foot traveling to the space of the arcade itself.³⁵⁷ Exergaming games are specifically designed with the intent of physical exercise, merging the spaces of the arcade with the gym. An example of this is the exerbike in which players sit atop a stationary exercise bike while in front of them is a screen with a racecar whose speed is determined by how fast the player pedals. For the more leisurely workout there is an optional course that offers a bike ride through nature trails.³⁵⁸ What is interesting about exergames is how they motivate and encourage physical activity through the manipulation of spaces in which exergaming takes place, particularly the use of a public space and the combination of gym-like equipment and video game-like consoles and screens. Currently, newer technology such as augmented reality has integrated the concepts of exergaming. For example, in 2016 *Pokemon Go* became a hit mobile phone game, which used augmented reality, a superimposition of digital graphics onto real-life images, to simulate capturing *Pokemon*. Here, the exercise is hidden behind the narrative of the game as “players might not even feel like they’re exercising, in part because the game is providing them with novel goals – to catch *Pokemon* characters – rather than setting a specific amount of activity to work toward.”³⁵⁹

UFC Personal Trainer simultaneously promotes participation of its users within the sport of MMA and conforms to the genre conventions of home fitness and exergaming. The repetition of in-game workouts develops mastery of MMA techniques within the privacy of the home. And at the same time, the game uses similar narrative progression of a role-playing game in which characters level-up skills and traits. In this case, the skills are based on fitness goals. In an

³⁵⁷ Bogost, Ian. “The Rhetoric of Exergaming.”

³⁵⁸ Ibid.

³⁵⁹ Rettner, Rachel. “Pokemon Go Catches High Praise From Health Experts.” <https://www.livescience.com/55373-pokemon-go-exercise.html>

attempt to re-brand itself from their past image of primal brutality, the UFC has successfully created a lifestyle out of MMA through licensing and branding. Entering into the home fitness and video game markets marks its cultural and economic viability. *UFC Personal Trainer* signals a shift from the private consumption of spectating MMA fighting to an interactive engagement with its techniques. The game is also significant in that it represents a literal domestication of MMA as techniques enter the space of the home and the routines of daily life. MMA tactics have become more socially acceptable for the purpose of fitness, and if need be, for self-defense. Whether at an UFC themed gym or in the virtual world of *UFC Personal Trainer*, MMA has increasingly become less of a spectacle of brutality, and more of a cultural practice; one that can be translated and mutated into various forms.

CONCLUSION: A NEW ERA

The sport of MMA has changed dramatically since the first UFC event in 1993 and its changes demonstrate the UFC's successful strategy in gaining mainstream acceptance and appeal. In July of 2016, WME-IMG, a Hollywood talent agency and investment group purchased the UFC for 4.2 billion dollars, which is the single largest sports property transaction in the history of American sport. With its high price tag, the new owners of the UFC have displayed acts of financial self-interest that have undercut matchmaking and merit-based competition between fighters. In order to understand how this sale has undermined the sport of MMA, it is important to understand the context of the historic purchase by WME-IMG. In order to acquire the four-billion-dollar loan, WME-IMG went to Goldman Sachs and Deutsche Bank, both of which were reprimanded twice by Federal Reserve regulators because their valuation of the UFC at 4.2 billion dollars was considered far too speculative. In some areas, they over-estimated the

projections of future income.³⁶⁰ Nevertheless, the deal continued, with both banks classifying their loan as “substandard,” meaning that it is highly unlikely that the borrower, WME-IMG, will be able to completely pay back the loan for some reason. The high debt-load and increased interest rates due to the substandard rating means that WME-IMG will be looking to repay its loan as quickly as possible, impacting aspects of the sport such as matchmaking. This is evident more recently with questionable “money fights” being promoted by the UFC between popular fighters. “Money fights” can be characterized as matchups that have no impact on championship belts or lack any competitive aspect such as having champions defend their belt against a deserving opponent on merit. An example of this was the August 2017 fight between UFC lightweight champion Connor McGregor and boxing’s Floyd Mayweather Jr. in a boxing match. Because these two men compete in two different sports, there was no competitive component to this matchup and it was clear that this fight was a cash-grab for all parties involved, including WME-IMG. On paper, this was an odd matchup as McGregor had no professional boxing matches in his career, which, for any other fighter, would be enough evidence for the Nevada State Athletic Commission to not give McGregor a boxing license for this match. The fight was a co-venture between Showtime Sports and the UFC and harkens back to the early years of MMA where fights were between individual martial arts styles. Matchups that are similar to this are occurring more frequently in the WME-IMG era, which is cause for concern for the roughly five hundred fighters on its roster. The precedent that is currently being established is that rankings and skill do not matter. Popularity and marketability has taken priority in the advancement of one’s career and is a strong factor in receiving a shot at the championship belt. In addition to matchmaking, WME-IMG, which is also a talent agency, has a clear conflict of interest in representing its athletes. For WME-IMG, they have a financial interest in promoting and

³⁶⁰ Cruz, Jason. “Feds Give Second Reprimand to Goldman Over UFC Deal.” *MMApayout.com*

marketing athletes that are signed to their firm, while a fighter who might be represented by CAA (Creative Artists Agency), might not be as heavily promoted. The WME-IMG era, especially through its matchmaking will unfortunately be defined by its 4.2 billion dollar loan and its financial interests rather than improving upon the sport itself. These recent changes to the sport indicate a corporate and financial interest, which is a striking contrast to the mediated history of the martial arts that serve as the sport's origin and main influence. The expensive price-tag of the UFC property indicates that it has achieved mainstream acceptability through its strategic use of television and new media and its marketing of MMA as a lifestyle.

In early 2017, H.R. 44 was introduced in the House of Representatives, which seeks to reform MMA and curb the “money fight” matchmaking practices that WME-IMG is guilty of committing. The bill looks to amend the Professional Boxing Safety Act of 1996 to include all fighters of combat sports such as MMA within its safety provisions.³⁶¹ The original 1996 Act, nicknamed the Ali Act after Muhammad Ali, established more federal oversight of state athletic commissions and promotional companies such as the UFC in order to protect athletes from coercive contracts, establish an objective ranking system, and to have promoters and sanctioning bodies disclose financial information. Currently, the bill is being heard in the Energy and Commerce Committee and is expected to get a vote on the House floor before the 2017-2018 session ends. The debates surrounding this bill are reminiscent of the hearings that took place in the nineties regarding early UFC events. On one hand, supporters of the bill argue that this will lead to higher salaries for athletes and a fair determination of title contenders. On the other hand, the bill's opponents, mainly the UFC³⁶², have argued that this will prevent the UFC from putting

³⁶¹ H.R. 44 Muhammad Ali Expansion Act

³⁶² The UFC has spent an estimated \$210,000 in lobbying expenses in order to prevent H.R. 44 from being passed on the House floor during the 2017-2018 session. Bissell, Tom.

on fights that fans want to see and makes MMA more like boxing than its own unique sport. This is similar to the congressional hearings in the nineties where no-holds-barred events were compared to human cock-fighting with very little oversight or regard for the safety of the fighters. However, in this case, the bill acknowledges MMA as a combat sport, and asks for its inclusion in existing legislation that protects the wellbeing of fighters. One of the main points of the bill is concerned with the corrupting influence of money deciding title fights. Former MMA fighter Jon Fitch wrote an op-ed arguing that the UFC sets up matches in its own self-interest by applying their strategy to a hypothetical situation in baseball:

Imagine that the Houston Astros were the top team in their division at the end of the regular season and reach the final round of the playoffs. But unfortunately for them, they don't have a very big fan base, so the MLB decides they don't get to compete in the World Series. Instead, they pick teams in bigger cities, with higher ticket prices, and more fans. MLB decides they can make the most money off of a New York Yankees versus Los Angeles Dodgers World Series. So that's the World Series they put on, and the MLB rakes in millions in ticket sales, television contracts, and apparel sales.³⁶³

Another former fighter, Randy Couture, testified during the committee hearings on H.R. 44 arguing that there is no competitive architecture in MMA and ranking are not based upon merit. "In sport, competition and result in competition determines merit – not how loud you complain, how much you insult or how many people you offend (those are entertainment concepts)."³⁶⁴ Here, Couture alludes to the entertainment and spectacle aspect of the sport that has been ingrained into it since the early no-holds-barred days.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the development of MMA has been shaped by its relationship with the martial arts genre. The kung fu craze and in particular, the

<https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2017/11/15/16655926/ufc-muhammad-ali-act-bellator-viacom-lobbying-2017-mma-politics-mullin-congress-government-news>

³⁶³ Fitch, Jon. "Welcome to MMA, Where the Rankings Are Made Up and the Titles Don't Matter." *Washington Examiner*. November 9, 2017.

³⁶⁴ Couture, Randy. "US House of Representatives – Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Digital Commerce and Consumer Protection Hearing entitled 'Perspectives on Mixed Martial Arts'" November 9, 2017

films and philosophy of Bruce Lee, instigated an interest in the martial arts film genre that had a strong impact on the concept and formulation of MMA as a contest to determine the most effective martial arts style. The genre shifted considerably in the eighties due to technological innovations that have impacted both production and reception of films and television. As a result, the martial arts genre began to disseminate throughout popular culture, entering television, home video, and video games, while also reaching a wider audience in adults and children. This would be a crucial intermediary for the cultural and political response to MMA in the nineties. Early UFC events during the nineties fit within a broader cultural shift and interest in authenticity and information. These no-holds-barred matches promised information about other fighting arts and raw, unscripted excitement. Even early promoters of these events preferred using terms such as “reality combat” and “reality fighting” as potential names for the sport.³⁶⁵ However, much like the reality TV genre that would follow not too long later, the depictions of violence were largely illusions. Half of this illusion was created borrowing elements of the martial arts genre, while the other half was its clever marketing campaign. In reality, boxing was a far more dangerous sport than MMA. During the 1990s, eleven fighters died in boxing rings around the world, including six in the United States.³⁶⁶ Yet it was the UFC that drew the ire and criticism from politicians and journalists. This perception slowly changed as the UFC adopted new rules and a new approach to market itself as mainstream sport and lifestyle brand. It seamlessly found success in reality TV through *The Ultimate Fighter*, which renewed interest in the sport, and it has been growing in popularity since. MMA also embraced newer forms of entertainment such as social media and video gaming in order to expand its storytelling capabilities and reach a wider

³⁶⁵ Thrasher, Christopher David. *Fight Sports and American Masculinity*. 222

³⁶⁶ Svinth, Joseph. “Death Under the Spotlight: The Manuel Velasquez Boxing Fatality Collection: The Data.” *Journal of Combative Sport*. 2007.

audience. Now, the sport is much different from its renegade beginnings and its future is now tied to corporate interests, which perhaps was the goal of the UFC all along.

The growth of MMA as a sport is connected to the growth and shifts within the martial arts genre over the last four decades. And, in many ways, MMA now straddles the line between sport and entertainment. The sport has borrowed aspects from the martial arts genre, and in its infancy, was a violent spectacle; a martial arts film set in reality. Over time it has morphed into an accepted sport, mainly due to its presence on television and branding strategies, which shares a similar history with the extreme sports, another recent sporting phenomenon. MMA is a unique sport in that its relative newness allowed for it to become shaped by current trends in media technologies while at the same time can be placed within the larger picture of the martial arts genre as a culmination and hybridization of generic archetypes. As the UFC moves forward with financially motivated interests, it is important to acknowledge that the reason why it has attained widespread acceptance is due to the sport's ability to merge with and alongside the visual design and consistent themes of the martial arts genre.

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