

## CONTRIBUTOR

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# HISTORY IN THE MAKING

MARTIAL ARTS BETWEEN PLANET  
HOLLYWOOD AND PLANET HONG KONG

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## ABSTRACT

In virtually all existing scholarship on martial arts cinema, what is indicated in the invocation of such an ostensibly vast cinematic realm (temporally and culturally) is the specific and narrow martial arts cinema of Hong Kong from the 1960s to the 1980s. Scholarship has ignored, dismissed or written off many of the threads which have come together to form the unique cinematic patchwork known as martial arts cinema; even more problematically, they have all-too-easily dismissed the American thread as quasi-racist orientalist opportunism on the part of Hollywood filmmakers. Against this deeply problematic view, this essay reviews two important recent contributions to American martial arts cinema scholarship in order to highlight problems in previous work and to create space for a new position from which to better understand and appreciate the American inheritance of the martial arts.

## INTRODUCTION PASTS AND FUTURES

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as a discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community is the wish and search for reason.

– Stanley Cavell [1979: 20]

The renowned film historian Tom Gunning once remarked that ‘history is never simply the surviving records of the past, but always a creative and imaginative act of trying to understand the past, a belief that it says something to us’ [Gunning 1991: 2]. As it relates to martial arts studies and the efforts of scholars to bring to light historical and theoretical issues on the basis of cinematic representations of the martial arts, this sentiment is important to keep in mind. This is so not only as one pours over various films, but also, in the metatheoretical spirit espoused by D.N. Rodowick [1988; 1991; 2014; 2015], as one pours over various scholarly accounts of films. Operating according to the belief that previous scholarship on martial arts in the cinema has something to say to us, I plan to explore the American legacy of martial arts cinema through an interrogation of two important investigations into this largely neglected – and unfairly castigated – area of film history.

This inquiry will proceed according to the ‘key methodological questions’ in historical research signaled by David Bordwell: first, ‘what phenomenon is the [scholar] trying to explain’; second, ‘what are candidates for an approximately adequate proximate explanation’; third, ‘what rival answers to the questions are on the table’; and fourth, ‘from a comparative perspective, what explanations are most plausible?’ Bordwell acknowledges that it would be naïve to assume that scholars across the broad range of academic disciplines could easily come up with single answers for any and every historical question, but at the same time, he is quick to point out that scholars’ efforts should nevertheless be ‘to weigh the pluses and minuses of each alternative’ without shrinking from interdisciplinary conversations and debates [Bordwell 2005].

In the interest of stimulating scholarly exchanges, I wish to emphasize the need for martial arts studies to tackle head-on its ‘dialectical responsibilities’ so as to prevent the ‘ever-present danger’ averred by Noël Carroll of ‘theoretical premises [being] taken as given – as effectively inoculated from criticism’ [Carroll 1996: 57]. As Carroll makes clear:

Present theories are formulated in the context of past theories. Apprised of the shortcomings in past theories, through processes of continued scrutiny and criticism, present theories try to find more satisfactory answers to the questions that drive theoretical activity. Sometimes advances involve incremental improvements within existing paradigms; sometimes new paradigms are required to accommodate the lacunae made evident by the anomalies that beset previous theorizing. Sometimes the driving theoretical questions need to be redefined; sometimes they need to be broken down into more manageable questions; sometimes these questions need to be recast radically. And all this requires a free and open discursive context, one in which criticism is not the exception, but the rule.  
[Carroll 1996: 57-58]

Conceding the point sagaciously observed by Stanley Cavell that ‘criticism is always an affront’ [Cavell 2002 (1969): 46], I nevertheless wish to encourage scholars inspired by the possibilities of martial arts studies to embrace the ‘value of being disagreeable’ with the goal of transforming through dialectical argumentation the epistemological and axiological commitments that have been entered into either tacitly or explicitly by scholars interested in cinematic representations of the martial arts [Rodowick 2015: 79].

For the sake of time and space, I will not discuss each and every extant account of martial arts in the cinema. Instead, I will focus on two recent accounts, each of which, for the sake of clarity and rigor, I will discuss at some length. My hope is that this might serve as a way, first, to highlight problems in previous scholarship on the American legacy of martial arts cinema, and second, to create space for a new position from which we can begin to better understand and appreciate this dynamic cinematic realm in the hopes of achieving a more comprehensive understanding of the American inheritance of the martial arts.

GARY J. KRUG  
AT THE FEET OF THE MASTER

The first piece of scholarship from the 'prehistory' of martial arts studies that I would like to examine is Gary J. Krug's essay, 'At the Feet of the Master: Three Stages in the Appropriation of Okinawan Karate into Anglo-American Culture' [2001]. Benjamin Judkins considers Krug's essay to be 'mandatory reading' for martial arts studies scholars due to its unique historical placement as one of the first attempts to 'seriously investigate the spread of the martial arts from a cultural studies perspective' [Judkins 2014]. Given the emphasis Krug places on American movies in particular over the course of his generally insightful and inspiring exploration of the ways the martial arts have tended to travel across countries and time periods, his essay is especially worth exploring in an effort to flush out the assumptions subtending his engagement with the cinema and the implications of the historical claims he makes on its behalf.

The main idea promulgated by Krug is that 'karate is not a thing' [Krug 2001: 395]. Those familiar with the unwieldy histories of the various martial arts practices that have proliferated around the world will be aware of the difficulties of corraling difference for the sake of an easy definition of, and lineage for, any individual style. For his part, Krug endeavors to reorient the scholarly understanding of martial arts styles as historically-specific and mutable practices which exist within various and varying frameworks of ideas, knowledge, and beliefs. Armed with this understanding of martial arts styles, he undertakes an exploration of the ways karate in particular was introduced into American culture at different periods throughout the 20th Century [Krug 2001: 395-396].

Following his introduction, Krug spends the first portion of his essay detailing the fractured 'origin story' of karate, which he describes as 'a creole of practices that were combined together on the island of Okinawa' [Krug 2001: 396]. On the basis of the events in Japanese history which occurred over the course of the next several centuries – including the unification of the three kingdoms of Okinawa under King Sho Hanshi in 1492 and the banning of weapons stockpiling, which stimulated interest in unarmed combat techniques; the invasion of Okinawa by the Satsuma Clan in 1609, which intensified the cross-fertilization between Japanese and Chinese martial practices; and then, in later centuries, the constant turbulence of Japan being occupied by and then occupying other countries, which ultimately led to the Sino-Japanese wars and, of course, to World War II – Krug argues that, 'from its inception, karate was never a single thing but an evolving set of practices linked to local knowledge as well as prevailing cultural beliefs. It was, as well, actively evolving in many directions and idiolects or styles' [Krug 2001: 396].

It is clear that, based on the way Krug frames his anthropological/ archeological exploration, *history* is a signal concept. Over and above everything else, Krug's is a historical study which seeks to trace across various regions [another key term for Krug] the multifarious 'transmissions' of karate, and only after identifying key moments in the American appropriation of karate does Krug attempt to theorize the significance of these moments. What is worrisome about Krug's analysis is the uneasy marriage between history and theory which is awkwardly mediated by his understanding of orientalism, which both skews the timeline of American cinema that he proffers and which calls into question a number of the theoretical assertions he makes on the basis of that skewed timeline.

Krug's discussion of the 'cultural blending' of karate from an Okinawan context into an American context proceeds according to three stages. The first stage is said to run from 1920-1970 and to be characterized by 'discovery and mythologizing' through media representations, most notably film and television [398-401]; the second stage is said to run from 1946-1980 and to be characterized by an increased presence of karate in the actual personal histories and lived experiences of Americans [401-403]; and the third stage is said to run from 1980 to the present and to be characterized by 'appropriation and demythologizing' by virtue of the shifting signs of authenticity and legitimacy in the teaching and the practice of karate [403-405].

Readily apparent is the lack of a rigorous historical account of transmissions of karate in America during the first half of the 20th Century, particularly in American film and television. Krug is scrupulous with his historical research of karate as it moved through its various Okinawan incarnations, yet he is less so when it comes to the history of martial arts in the context of American film and television. Consider the 'historical record' he provides for pre-1960s cinematic representations of the martial arts:

**The early, simplistic view of martial arts in general ensured that their appearance as cultural markers in Anglo-American cinema would perpetuate commonly held beliefs. Few Westerners had direct experience of martial arts, and the common knowledge of it derived from mass media representations in film and books and later in television. The martial arts that first appeared in American cinema were in films of the 1930s, although they became much more common after the 1960s. *The Hatchet Man* (1932) depicted parts of Chinese Tong wars in San Francisco, whereas other films might occasionally show judo techniques. In general, martial arts in mainstream American, English, and Australian cinema showed only parodies of the practices, lifted out of all cultural**

and historical contexts. Throws from judo appeared now and then, but wushu, jujitsu (unarmed combat techniques from the samurai tradition), karate, and other traditional martial arts were largely unknown as coherent sets of practices outside of their geographical areas and cultural traditions. [Krug 2001: 399]

This sketch illuminates by virtue of its paltriness an area in need of attention from martial arts studies scholars. An initial problem with this historical account is the confusing circularity in Krug's attempt to argue that early American cinematic representations *perpetuated* commonly held beliefs about the martial arts while at the same time claiming that the beliefs about the martial arts commonly held by Americans at the time were *derived* from those same cinematic representations.<sup>1</sup> More troubling than this problem of the chicken or the egg, however, is Krug's claim that all American representations of the martial arts before the 1960s showed 'only parodies' of the martial arts depicted. Sacrificing historical accuracy for theoretical convenience (and in the process offering a negative value judgment under the guise of theoretical objectivity), Krug hurtles past several decades worth of 'simple' (read *bad*) American representations of the martial arts in order to discuss the 1960s spy vogue.

Despite the significant passage of time and the substantial cultural shifts in America (to say nothing of the rest of the 'Western' world) between the 1930s and the 1960s, it would seem that little had changed in American representations of the martial arts inasmuch as even the spy films and television shows Krug discusses are deemed 'politically and morally suspect' due to the alleged opportunistic orientalism of their utilization of the martial arts as mere 'window dressing' to highlight the 'exotic' elements of the stories. Even where actual martial arts techniques were used, they were allegedly 'caricatured' as a result of

<sup>1</sup> As Judkins astutely observes, 'change is a critical element to consider in Krug's paper [seeing as] he basically attempts to provide us with a theory about how certain types of cultural change happen ... yet at the end of the day we are left with no explanation for why [changes in the knowledge about and the practices of the martial arts occurred] the way[s] that they did. ... His theory does not attempt to predict or explain [any changes]. They are taken as given ... [they are] assumed rather than clarified' [Judkins 2014].

their being 'nearly always in the hands of Anglo-Americans' [399].<sup>2</sup>

For the sake of the development of martial arts studies, it is worth pausing here in order to consider the implications of such irresponsible, ostensibly historically-informed scholarship on the cinema. Even though Krug does not position himself within film or media studies, he is nevertheless positing an authoritative and comprehensive account of a historical period in American film and television, and the fact that his account is neither authoritative nor comprehensive combined with the fact that he did not consult any historical scholarship conducted by any film or media scholars should be cause for alarm. In lieu of an actual argument supported by scholarship from relevant disciplines regarding the awfulness of American representations of the martial arts, martial arts studies scholars should studiously avoid equating Krug's slipshod historicizing and flippant dismissals with rigorous argumentation. Simply referencing with no argumentative support the alleged 'simplicity' of arbitrarily chosen films [evident in which films, compared to which other films, on the basis of what criteria?] is an all-too-familiar tactic whereby scholars claiming to be unconcerned with value judgments nevertheless enable themselves to denigrate large swaths of film history on the strength of *idées reçues* which are mistakenly believed to be universal and incontestable.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, given Krug's characterization of American film history, there would appear to be nothing left to say for present-day martial arts studies scholars interested in the history of American representations of the martial arts. Against this position, I believe that the history of American cinema has far more to say to us than Krug's perfunctory, gap-filled timeline would have us believe. For example, is there anything to be said [and, if so, what is there to be said] about the appearance of jujitsu and judo in the respective James Cagney films *'G' Men* (1935) and *Blood on the Sun* (1945), or about the fight scene between

<sup>2</sup> I would also like to point out the tactical shift discernible in this portion of Krug's essay upon his arrival at Bruce Lee's celebrated role as Kato in the American television show *The Green Hornet* (1966-1967). After excoriating all of the other American film and television products he has occasion to mention, Krug merely catalogs Lee's appearance in *The Green Hornet* without the expected follow-up denunciation. Perhaps Krug considers *The Green Hornet* a rare 'authentic' representation from the era, given that the featured martial arts expert was (part) Asian. This kind of theoretical tap dancing foregrounds the relevance of Bowman's critique of the conceptualization of culture 'as the **particular property of a particular group**', an especially problematic position with respect to martial arts practice which begs the question that Bowman pragmatically and pointedly asks: 'Which is the more problematic position: the one that shows **anyone mastering anything** or the one that implies that only ethnic and national specimens can master ethnic and national practices?' [Bowman 2015: 141].

<sup>3</sup> For more elaborate critiques of this tactic in scholarship on action and martial arts movies, see Barrowman [2012; 2013a; 2013b; 2014a].

the American boxer and the Japanese judoka in *Behind the Rising Sun* (1943), or about the sparring session between Humphrey Bogart and Teru Shimada in *Tokyo Joe* (1949), or about Katharine Hepburn's self-defense showcase in *Pat and Mike* (1952)<sup>4</sup> While I grant, of course, that Krug could just claim that these films are exceptions that prove the/his rule, the problem is that this is exactly the kind of argument missing at this crucial point in his discussion, an absence all the more disheartening considering what a laudable achievement this essay is in virtually all other respects.

Krug (or someone sympathetic with Krug's position) may wish to point out that film history was not the primary concern in his essay and that, by pedantically pointing out the existence of films which he failed to include in his timeline, I am missing the point of his argument. Yet, in the interest of productive interdisciplinary scholarship, is this really a valid defense? My suspicion is that such a wet noodle argument – which attempts to rely on disciplinary shielding as soon as criticisms are leveled at such self-proclaimed 'interdisciplinary' arguments – accomplishes nothing other than reducing the notion of interdisciplinarity to a superficial rhetorical gesture. After all, just as approaching the question of how to determine, for example, the sources of the differences between the teaching and practice of Eddie Bravo's 10th Planet Jiu-Jitsu system compared to Gracie Jiu-Jitsu may, depending on the perspective from which the scholar is operating, require a consultation with sociological and cultural studies scholarship in the interest of gleaning salient connections between the different cultural contexts in which each style of jiu-jitsu emerged and is currently taught and practiced,<sup>5</sup> so approaching the question of how to assess the appearances of the martial arts throughout the history of American cinema may require a consultation with film studies scholarship in the interest of gleaning salient connections between representations of the martial arts and different filmmakers and/or filmmaking practices.

In short, if martial arts studies is to rely on interdisciplinary scholarship, then scholars must show respect for and engage substantially with work from relevant disciplines in the interest of producing the most pertinent, accurate, and productive scholarship available on the martial arts. Krug's essay is an important landmark on the path that has led to the present moment in which martial arts studies is poised to open myriad new pathways for scholarship on the martial arts, but just as

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed discussion of these films and the implications they present for studies of martial arts cinema, see Barrowman [2015]. I have also attempted to elaborate a principle of aesthetic construction which I have termed **martial suture** on the basis of the action aesthetics in *'G' Men* and *Blood on the Sun* [see Barrowman 2014b].

<sup>5</sup> I am relying for this hypothetical investigation on the exemplary work of Adam D. Frank [2006; 2014], D.S. Farrer [2009; 2011], and Dale C. Spencer [2011; 2013; 2014].

important as recognizing the virtues of such pioneering scholarship is recognizing the limitations in order that we may improve upon such heraldic and salutary scholarship.

## SEAN M. TIERNEY THEMES OF WHITENESS

While the problems identified in Krug's essay focused on his treatment of American films from what is known as classical Hollywood cinema, problems with interdisciplinary research on the martial arts in American cinema sadly do not cease with the dissolution of the Hollywood studio system.<sup>6</sup> In a discussion of 'the speed and narrative [re]orientation with which white western martial arts stars emerged' in American cinema following the 'kung fu craze' of the 1970s [Bowman 2010: 24], Bowman offers a consideration of the argument made by Sean M. Tierney in his essay, 'Themes of Whiteness in *Bulletproof Monk*, *Kill Bill*, and *The Last Samurai*' [2006]. While Bowman believes Tierney poses valid questions for future research, he judiciously calls attention to a number of problems in Tierney's analysis which are endemic of additional problems in scholarship on martial arts in American cinema [Bowman 2010: 28-32; 2015: 141].

Tierney begins his essay in a way that recalls Krug's reliance on a simplistic notion of orientalism for the sake of calling into question the validity of American martial arts movies before the discussion has even started. Indeed, the very first line of Tierney's essay states in no uncertain terms that 'the martial arts film originated in Asia' [Tierney 2006: 607]. In a fashion similar to the consideration of the uneasy marriage between history and theory in Krug's essay, I would like to consider the uneasy marriage between criticism and theory in Tierney's essay as a way to highlight another problematic aspect of prior engagements with American cinematic representations of the martial arts.

Following his proclamation about the origins of martial arts cinema, Tierney launches a full-scale assault on the 'strategic rhetoric of whiteness' according to which the 'supraethnic viability of whiteness',

<sup>6</sup> In film studies, classical Hollywood cinema refers to the period of time from the late-1920s/early-1930s (when synchronized sound replaced the practices of silent filmmaking) to the late-1950s (when the fallout from the infamous 1948 Supreme Court case known as the 'Paramount Decree' led to changes in the way films were produced, distributed, and exhibited) when the major Hollywood studios controlled all aspects of the filmmaking process and filmmaking efforts were conducted in accordance with a standardized 'mode of production'. The canonical text on this period in the film studies literature remains *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* [1985] by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, although scholars such as Andrew Britton [1984; 2009 (1989); 2009 (1992)] and Thomas Schatz [1981; 2010 (1988)] among innumerable others have also conducted important investigations into this foundational period.

the ‘necessary defeat of Asians’, the ‘disallowance of anti-White sentiment’, and the ‘presence of at least one helpful and/or generous Asian cohort’ led to the standardization of a distinctly American [a label which is, for Tierney, interchangeable with ‘racist’] brand of martial arts cinema in violation of [Tierney’s vague conception of] *the* martial arts film [Tierney 2006: 607, my emphases]. Tierney’s language throughout his essay indicates a hostile and adversarial position taken up against American martial arts films, as evidenced by his choice of words in such claims as how he is using his chosen theoretical framework to *expose* the *strategic* rhetoric of whiteness in American martial arts films and how his framework allows for the *deconstruction* of that rhetoric [Tierney 2006: 608]. He even goes so far as to place quotation marks around ‘martial arts’ when he describes Chuck Norris, Jean-Claude Van Damme, and Steven Seagal as “‘martial arts’ stars” [Tierney 2006: 607]. And the conclusion to his broadside features the expected, inevitable anti-orientalist condemnation about how ‘it is especially troubling, in light of the original, indigenous function of the martial arts film as an outlet for nationalistic expression ... that the ascension of the White martial artist to mastery is so deeply resonant with a colonialist framework’ [Tierney 2006: 622].

It bears mentioning that none of the themes adduced by Tierney as damning evidence of the ‘inherent arrogance’ [618] of American martial arts films, neither individually nor taken together, are capable of guaranteeing a priori a racist film. As Yvonne Tasker perspicaciously observed, if all action and martial arts movies look the same to scholars, then they ‘may well be viewing them through an inappropriate framework’ [Tasker 1993: 60]. In Tierney’s case, his framework entraps him within a ‘finalistic vortex’ where, as described by Tzvetan Todorov, ‘it is foreknowledge of the meaning to be discovered that guides the interpretation’ [Todorov 1982: 254]. Indeed, railing against American cinema with an essentialist axe to grind, what Tierney misses in his crusade is what Cavell, with his characteristic equipoise, registered as the impossibility of such essentialist denunciations inasmuch as the ‘possibilities of variation and inflection’ in the ‘automatisms’ of American cinema can either be ‘its stupidities or its glories’ depending on the specific film at hand [Cavell 1979 (1971): 186].<sup>7</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Space does not permit a full exegesis of Cavell’s rather unwieldy notion of ‘automatism’, but for a brief explication, Cavell uses this term to describe anything in our experience of watching films that seems to be happening of/by itself; as he explains, ‘in calling [aspects of films] automatisms, I do not mean that they automatically ensure [either an artistic success or failure] but that in mastering a tradition one masters a range of automatisms upon which the tradition maintains itself, and in deploying them, one’s work is assured of a place in that tradition’ [Cavell 1979 (1971): 104]. The most important insight of Cavell’s with respect to automatisms is that, while automatisms contribute to how we understand and the way we experience films, they are not inviolable. Indeed, the magic of the cinema for Cavell is the ability of filmmakers to innovate within traditions, to give ‘new wrinkles to old formats’ [Cavell 1979 (1971): 69]; as he postulates, ‘one might say that the [filmmaker’s] task is ... the task of establishing a new automatism ... it follows that, in such a predicament, [automatisms] are not given a priori’ [Cavell 1979 (1971): 103-104]. For more thorough articulations of the concept of automatism, see Stanley Cavell [1979 (1971)], William Rothman and Marian Keane [2000], D.N. Rodowick [2007; 2015], Lisa Trahair [2015], and Daniel Morgan [2015].

In the interest of applying pressure to Tierney’s claims regarding American martial arts films, I would like to work through the four themes identified by Tierney and the claims he makes regarding the way they allegedly function. The first theme Tierney discusses is the supraethnic viability of whiteness. He begins his examination of this theme’s presence in American martial arts films by stating that, ‘for white martial artists in American film, ethnicity is not preventative of mastery; there is nothing ethnically salient or even incongruous about a White person learning and mastering Asian martial arts, often with great speed’ [Tierney 2006: 610].

It does not take very much effort to detect Tierney’s incredulity and disapproval, yet I am hard-pressed to understand why this is so unfathomable for him (especially if one takes to heart Bruce Lee’s emphatic assertion that ‘a martial artist is a human being first [and] just as nationalities have nothing to do with one’s humanity, so they have nothing to do with martial arts’ [Lee 2011 {1971}]). After all, to not only expect but demand that every person with white skin necessarily stink at martial arts goes beyond being merely illogical to being racist, while evidence beyond the fictional worlds of the films under consideration – such as Chuck Norris’ documented track record in martial arts competition, the fact that the first champion of the famed Japanese Mixed Martial Arts [MMA] organization Pancrase was the white American wrestler Ken Shamrock, or the fact that Matt Damon went into the *Bourne* trilogy not knowing martial arts yet was able to pick up the necessary skills he was taught by Jeff Imada with great speed and efficiency – should have been able to assuage his fears of imperialist intentions.

Moreover, Tierney’s belief that American martial arts films put forth ‘specific ideological constructs of whiteness’ [Tierney 2006: 607, my emphasis] would seem to require careful criticism of films according to the terms of the specific narratives. Yet his operating procedure indicates instead a preference for what Robin Wood once referred to as ‘plausible falsification’ [Wood 2006 (1976): 238-245], a critical shortcut characterized by Andrew Britton [following Wood] as betraying ‘a tension between what [a film] is saying and what, from a certain perspective, [it] can be *maneuvered into saying*’ [Britton 2009 (1979): 418, my emphasis]. We can take, as an initial example of plausible falsification, Tierney’s discussion of *The Matrix* (1999). Tierney is aghast at the ‘speed, efficacy, and unorthodox yet highly efficient means’ [Tierney 2006: 611] by which white protagonists become proficient in the martial arts. However, I find it strange that he does not find it pertinent – neither in his discussion of *The Matrix* nor in his supplementary discussion of *The Fifth Element* (1997) – to point out that there is a significant difference between average white spectators of such films (allegedly being brainwashed with regards to their inalienable

omnipotence) and the very special (technologically special in the case of *The Matrix* and biologically special in the case of *The Fifth Element*) white protagonists of the films in question.

In *The Matrix*, the fact that Neo (Keanu Reeves) is able to become such an exceptional martial artist so quickly is precisely what is being highlighted in the narrative as explicitly unbelievable, as indisputable proof of Neo's exceptional status as 'the one'. If Neo's ability to so quickly become so proficient was as insidiously normal(ized) as Tierney's thesis makes it to be, then the sequence where all of the other characters excitedly huddle around the computer screen to see if Neo can beat Morpheus (Laurence Fishburne) – who, it bears mentioning, Tierney for some reason (because he is black?) has no problem with despite his non-Asian and technologically-enhanced proficiency in the martial arts – in the training simulation would not have had the dramaturgical weight it so memorably possesses. The same is true for *The Fifth Element*. The fact that Leeloo (Milla Jovovich), referred to in the film as the 'supreme being', is able to become an unbeatable fighting machine 'in the time it takes her to do a comical imitation of Bruce Lee' [Tierney 2006: 611] is an indication not of how normal this phenomenon is but exactly that it and she are exemplary.

Believing he has sufficiently explicated the pertinence of the first theme of whiteness, Tierney moves on to the second theme and claims that, along with the first theme of whiteness/non-Asianness *not* being an obstacle to martial arts proficiency for the protagonist, the Asianness/non-whiteness of the antagonist is 'a salient and *necessary* element in establishing White mastery' [Tierney 2006: 613, my emphasis]. While there are a number of films which indulge the orientalist idea that Asians have a claim to martial arts mastery and therefore an Asian antagonist must be defeated to secure expert status for the white protagonist, Tierney's interrogation is problematic on two fronts. First, Tierney tries to both have his cake and eat it. On the one hand, his explication of the first theme of whiteness denounces the very idea of a white person being able to become proficient in the martial arts with any kind of speed or efficiency – and certainly not with greater speed or efficiency than an Asian character. Yet his explication of the second theme of whiteness includes a chastisement of American filmmakers for pandering to the orientalist fantasy of Asian mastery on which the first theme relies for whatever perceived sting Tierney believes it possesses.

Second, even if Tierney still wanted to persevere with such a flimsy argument, he should have been dissuaded by the enormous amount of American martial arts films that would have to be excluded. A short list of American films requiring exclusion for not featuring a white protagonist's 'necessary' defeat of an Asian antagonist would include the early Chuck Norris films *Breaker! Breaker!* (1977), *A Force of One*

(1979), and *Lone Wolf McQuade* (1983), the three of which are merely choice examples; nearly every Steven Seagal movie, from *Above the Law* (1988) and *Marked for Death* (1990) through *The Glimmer Man* (1996) and *Fire Down Below* (1997) up to *Born to Raise Hell* (2010) and *Maximum Conviction* (2012) among many others; lesser-known and lower-budget films such as *Bloodmoon* (1997) and *Champions* (1998); and the many recent MMA movies including but not limited to *Never Back Down* (2008), *Fighting* (2009), *Warrior* (2011), and *Here Comes the Boom* (2012).

Finally, the third and fourth themes deal with the frequency with which Asians in American martial arts movies either resent white martial artists or help them. Beyond the banality of this binary, the implications of these positions for Asian characters are not as convincing as Tierney seems to believe [and, as one may begin to be expecting, they often contradict other claims made by Tierney earlier in his argument]. For example, Tierney is annoyed by how often Asian characters are shown to be hostile to The Bride (Uma Thurman) in Quentin Tarantino's epic revenge saga, *Kill Bill* (2003/2004), yet their annoyance is the exact same annoyance with which Tierney tries to bolster his first theme of the supraethnic viability of whiteness. How can his position against the arrogance of white people being depicted as better martial artists than their Asian counterparts be noble in the first theme but an indication of pernicious racism in the third theme?

In opposition to the critical relationship with American martial arts films preferred by Tierney – viz. presuming to know beforehand what the films will reveal (that all American martial arts films are racist, orientalist garbage) and then proceeding to force the films to show exactly what had been presumed through plausible falsification – a film, as Britton has strenuously and convincingly argued, 'is not something simply available to be constituted at will by the discourse of criticism but a historical object to which criticism aspires to be adequate' [Britton 2009 (1989): 435]. Speaking in a similar register of critical adequacy, Gunning has mandated that scholars interested in film history must not only watch and document the existence of films but 'must also *respond* to them, uncovering the questions they address [Gunning 1991: 289, my emphasis]. My emphasis on Gunning's sense of *responding* to films rather than *deconstructing* them is an effort not to repudiate poststructuralism *tout court* but rather to apply pressure to some of the typical overextensions of the positions on textuality espoused by the likes of Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida of which Tierney may be considered representative. Contrary to Tierney's mode of (pseudo-)deconstruction, I would like to underline the commonsensical contention that, inasmuch as 'the desire to avoid (quite rightly) any simple subject/object relation (the myth of "presence") is perpetually in danger of denying the object altogether', then, 'unless we prefer doodling to reading ... we must be concerned with "the integrity of the

text” since, ‘Barthes to the contrary ... *the text always precedes the reader*’ [Britton 2009 [1979]: 425, my emphasis].

For his part, Derrida stated in no uncertain terms that, ‘in asking if [an] interpretation [of a text, filmic or otherwise] is justifiable, [we are] therefore asking about two things’:

(A) Have we fully understood the sign itself, in itself? In other words, has what [the author of the text] said and meant been clearly perceived? This comprehension of the sign in and of itself, in its immediate materiality as a sign ... is only the first moment *but also the indispensable condition of all hermeneutics* ... when one attempts, in a general way, to pass from an obvious to a latent language, *one must first be rigorously sure of the obvious meaning*. The analyst, for example, must first speak the same language as the patient. (B) Second implication of the first question: once understood as a sign, does [the author’s intention] have with the total historical structure to which it is to be related the relationship assigned to it? [Derrida 1978 (1964): 32-33, my emphases].

Here, the distance between what Tierney is doing in the name of deconstruction and what Derrida actually advocates could not be greater. In a spirit decidedly more Derridean than Tierney’s self-proclaimed deconstruction, Britton emphasizes the importance in analyzing films of posing such critical questions as, ‘What do its makers think of [the film] as being? What do they want [the film] to do? What is the significance of their wanting [the film] to do this?’ He goes on to say that, in the interest of producing an adequate critical account of a film, one must then proceed to an account of what that film *does*, ‘which may well be very different from anything grasped by its project’. Most interesting in Britton’s discussion of critical method is the claim, all-too-frequently disavowed by scholars, that *all* discussions of films are ‘already implicitly evaluative’ insofar as every scholar ‘writes from a point of view, one which ought to be as conscious and as explicit as possible’ [Britton 2009 (1989): 435].

The Derridean position from which Britton argues a critical account of a film must take place – one which considers each individual film ‘an intervention in a culture’ the nature of which it is one of criticism’s aims to understand and explicate and the value and significance of which it is another one of criticism’s aims to determine [Britton 2009 (1989): 435] – is, as posited by Derrida, merely the first step on the road to providing a critical account of that film. What makes the scholarship on the American legacy in martial arts cinema so remarkable, however, is the inability of most scholars to take even this first preliminary step, preferring instead to deny *by definition* the possibility of positive,

productive, and progressive representations of the martial arts (and, by extension, non-American cultural identities/practices) in American cinema. Such posturing is both anathema to rigorous historical scholarship and stifling to progressive political theory, and an important step for martial arts studies on this front will be to develop from these earlier efforts to find a way to produce responsible interdisciplinary scholarship on the martial arts between and beyond American cinema and culture.

## POSTSCRIPT ARTFUL CONVERSATION AND THE VALUE OF CRITICISM

Having discussed the work of Krug and Tierney at length, I would like to pick up the discussion of critical method with which I ended the previous section. In particular, I would like to consider in greater detail the centrality of film criticism in academic scholarship on the cinema. Criticism is an unavoidable aspect of writing about film in any academic context, yet most scholars proceed as if what they are doing has nothing whatsoever to do with criticism, as if their assertions are value-free and as if establishing and expounding on their relationships with film(s) is irrelevant to ‘proper’ scholarship. In response to this rather strange view of academic film writing, William Rothman once decried:

**Too many academic film critics today deny their experience ... [of films and] refuse to allow themselves to take instruction from them. Predictably, the resulting criticism reaffirms an attitude of superiority to the films ... such criticism furthers rather than undoes the repression of these films and the ideas they represent ... we [as scholars] cannot play our part in reviving the spirit of the films we love without testifying, in our criticism, to the truth of our experience of those films.** [Rothman 1986: 46]

The scholars discussed in this review essay foregrounded some of the problems stemming from this mode of ‘criticism-free’ scholarship, and the point of putting pressure on scholars’ readings of films is to consider the modes of ‘artful conversation’ [Rodowick 2015] most conducive to insightful criticism. Inspired by Cavell’s long engagement with philosophy and film, the seed for what Rodowick has termed artful conversation was planted in one of Cavell’s most lucid and spirited arguments on critical method:

**The philosopher appealing to [artful conversation] turns to [his interlocutor] not to convince him without proof but to get him to prove something, test something against himself.**

He is saying: Look and find out whether you can see what I see, wish to say what I wish to say ... [the] implication is that [artful conversation], like art, is, and should be, powerless to *prove* its relevance; and that says something about the kind of relevance it wishes to have. All the philosopher, this kind of philosopher, can do is to express, as fully as he can, his world, and attract our undivided attention to our own.  
[Cavell 2002 [1965]: 95-96]

Taking the baton from Cavell on the honest expression of one's relationship to films, Rodowick argues that 'the pursuit of knowledge, in whatever context or through whichever method, unavoidably involves interpretive activities', and he therefore endeavors to 'restore the maligned concept of interpretation as a central aspect of human and intentional activity', included among which, of course, is scholarly activity [Rodowick 2015: 77]. Far too many scholars disavow criticism as unmitigated subjectivism, if not complete irrationality, with no place in 'proper' academic discourse. Rodowick, however, frames artful conversation as our wanting to ask for universal assent in expressing our opinions while being willing to settle for 'arriving at and better understanding mutually held contexts' [Rodowick 2015: 194] and he postulates that, rather than demonstrating a *lack* of rationality, artful conversation more radically provides a different picture of rationality [Rodowick 2015: 192]. In effect, the inherent paradoxicality of artful conversation showcases a capacity for disagreement which 'is also the capacity for conversation and sociability', indeed, for community [Rodowick 2015: 193].

By embracing artful conversation and the value of being disagreeable, martial arts studies can create a community of scholars *working with* films as opposed to *making use of* films, a change in register which has the potential to allow the *art* of film to be acknowledged rather than sacrificed in the interest of 'deconstructing' evil imperialist American movies. As well, the emphasis on criticism is not a surreptitious effort to arrive at a 'scientific' model of interpretation where competing interpretations are stamped out for all-time and the 'one true meaning' of a film is discovered. Instead, following Cavell, we must avoid allowing the realization of the constitutive dissonance of critical discourse to lead to extremes of relativistic dilettantism on the one hand or the anarchy of infinite polysemy on the other, and proceed instead towards the completion of our own unique interpretations of the films that mean the most to us, the films that have the most to say to us and that we believe have important things to say to others. As Cavell explains, the completion of an interpretation 'is not a matter of providing *all* interpretations but a matter of seeing one of them *through*' [Cavell 1981: 37]. The benefit of this is the way it 'leaves open to investigation what the relations are' between a film, an interpretation of a film, and competing interpretations of a film [Cavell 1981: 38].

I will end on this optimistic note of imagining scholarship on the cinema becoming 'a diagnosis of values' [Rodowick 2015: 95] where 'learning to value is a question of adding to one's cognitive stock, amplifying one's perceptual sensitivity and openness to new experience, acquiring new frameworks or contexts for judgment, and developing the potential for imaginatively applying or creating concepts' [Rodowick 2015: 103]. In response to her fear of the 'academic idea' that 'every film can be usefully "read" for its performance of social issues', Meaghan Morris sought to call attention to the double-edged sword of interdisciplinary cultural studies of the cinema with their potential to be 'creative' but also 'blinker and narrow' [Morris 2001: 184]. Rather than reducing films to cultural commodities emptied of the human inspiration that elevates them to the status of art and resorting to an 'armchair way of seeing or not-seeing films which first views them as evidence of some social or political mess [and] then treats them as guilty stand-ins for that mess – and wages a war of attitude on other viewers' [Morris 2001: 171], artful conversation entails a constant process of critique of the various concepts one uses as well as the various perspectives from which one seeks to use those concepts in the hopes of cultivating an imaginative capacity to see in different cinematic practices [such as the history of American cinema] not a single [orientalist] essence but multiple, fractured histories all of which have myriad insights to offer those capable of hearing and willing to listen to what they have to say.

Following Krug, I am inspired to say that American cinema is not a thing. Like karate, American cinema has always been 'an evolving set of practices'. Moreover, it has always been 'actively evolving in many directions and idiolects or styles' [Krug 2001: 396]. Upon realizing that the 'history' of 'martial arts cinema' with which martial arts studies has been saddled is merely one exceedingly problematic and largely uninformed timeline, claims like Krug's about the 'politically and morally suspect' American cinema or Tierney's regarding *the* 'origins' of *the* martial arts film will become what, in all honesty, they have always been – wrong – and martial arts studies will find itself in a position to do something quite extraordinary: make history.<sup>8</sup>

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